

Mass Consciousness and Political Development Scenarios

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Introduction

Problem definition

Methodology of scenario-based forecast provides for the decrease of virtual number of possible development options to a relatively small amount of appreciable paths. In this case, elite groups determine trends and it is mass consciousness that becomes the factor that determines the possibility of movement along a certain political development path.

Taking into consideration the fact that political development variations are primarily governed by the processes running within elite groups, and that the downward communication flows prevail in Russia, one of the targets of the mass consciousness research is to reveal its readiness for mobilization by elite groups, acceptance or opposition of the decisions providing by such groups.

The description of the Study

In terms of the focus-group research, carried out by us, we have interviewed 249 respondents from eight regions of the Russian Federation. We have chosen two groups of participants: average people aged at 18 to 35 and 35 to 50, and young leaders – members of youth political organizations and political parties.

Our focus-group research was based not only on classical methods of group discussion but also projective ones. That allowed us to identify the mass preferences not only at a rational level of mass consciousness but at the unconscious one as well.

Russian people's idea of the future

The mass' vision on the future political authority, their expectations on what it will be like and what they want it to be are significant factors of the further political development. The accomplishment of the survey has allowed us identifying a number of key positions, which determine people's expectations for the future.

Rational components of the images of power

In order to identify the people's rational ideas on the political authority we have used the method of group discussion as well as the incomplete-sentences method, in terms of which respondents are offered to complete the following sentences: "I see the political future of my country as...", "To my mind, the political future of my region is...", "I see my future as...". The obtained results have undergone quantitative and qualitative analysis.

1. First, it ought to be noted that the Russian politics and authority is and remains to be **highly personalized**. Thus, for many people the term "Russian President", as the survey results show, is associated specifically with Vladimir Putin. The high degree of personification originates from the cultural and political traditions, whose inertia most likely will not be

overcome within the period of 10-15 years, despite of more “functional” ideas of young respondents. Simoultaneously, the positive change expectations are closely connected with the hopes for the emergence of **a powerful and respected leader** both at state and regional levels. However, this person’s image is unreal and subject to stereotypes. There are no real prototypes for it now. The only politician, whose image is close to the “ideal”, is the incumbent Russian President Vladimir Putin.

2. Today Vladimir Putin symbolizes **stability but not changes**. People don’t link expectations for future *changes* with the incumbent president.

3. The respondents noted that **radicalization** of the population, especially a nationalistic wave, becoming stronger in the Russian society, is mainly supported by mass media, especially television. Meanwhile, they repeatedly voice an opinion that nationalistic ideas are quite promising in terms of voting (namely, 2007-2008 elections). But such ideas are dangerous for long-term strategies of social stability maintenance. At the same time, the nature of such relations, according to the respondents’ opinion, is grounded mainly on economic problems of the local population and is connected with living standards, employment status, and unemployment rate.

The social protest sentiments are a certain threat, which might be aimed at the incumbent authority. The purpose of these sentiments is to promote the forces, controlled and guided from the abroad, into authority. According to the respondents’ opinion, the danger of such scenarios is conditioned by the experience of our neighbors where so called “color revolutions” took place.

4. The regions of the *Central Russia* (Voronezh, Moscow, Saratov) are characterized with their perception of their own as an integral and nonseparable, both physically and psychologically, part of the state in general. All changes undergone at the federal level are immediately reflected in these regions, but not vice versa. There is an explicit **downward vertical system of authority relations** in the answers of the respondents from the Central Russia. At the same time the regions that are *remote from Moscow* can be characterized with a higher psychological self-sufficiency. Thus, the Siberian and Uralian respondents are rather optimistic over their respective region’s future. In their opinion, the geographic position and ample resources make them quite self-contained players. And the development of their regions is likely to be mainly influenced by foreign-economic and foreign-policy factors. Such a position might strengthen centrifugal trends.

5. **The respondents are more optimistic over the future than the present.** It ought to be noted that the expectations are of unreal character and not connected with the up-to-date political actors, trends, and processes. There are two points in the consciousness: “the future” and “the present” that have no relation between each other due to the age of respondents

(some 66% of them are under 35) and infantile hope for the best. On the other hand, this witnesses that within past eight years the mass consciousness has changed dramatically. And the people's hopes are now connected with positive changes in the country.

6. People are very optimistic over **their future**. This is an important tendency that might determine the mass reaction to political changes in the country.

Most of the respondents are ready to do their best to make their future happy and interesting. A high level of optimism over their future and its relative independence from the future of the country and region (the respondents say about traveling, evenness, pension), especially among the youth, witness that they are distant from each other. Besides it shows their passive support of the changes that are underway in Russia. Although people concede a possibility of mass consciousness radicalization, they see not internal (for example, popular frustration rise), but external ones (provocation by elite group, «orange revolutions» organized externally, etc.) reasons for that.

Unconscious components of the image of power

The study of the deep layers of mass consciousness was based on the projective drawings analysis method. We offered our respondents making three following drawings: an image of a real authority, an image of a future authority and an image of the future in general. In the course of this analysis we took into consideration cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics, as well as repeatability of elements and symbols, used in the drawings.

1. Among the unconscious images of the country's future we have observed almost an equal number of positive, negative, and neutral ones. In the tables one can see the basic distribution of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral evaluations. In general, the image of future authority concerns almost a half of the respondents and is characterized by a cognitive simplicity. It ought to be noted that in spite of a low interest in politics, that can be revealed at the rational level, people do acknowledge the importance of authority and give weight to authority (this is evidenced by such a series of drawings' components as filled density, drawing size, level of detail, etc.).

2. In the most of the **positive drawings of the future** the respondents showed their emotions but not contents. For example, they use the images of balloons, flowers, beautiful landscapes. Among the informative symbols the most popular one is the 'light' and various sources of it, such as the Sun (being also a symbol of authority), candles, electric lamps, as well as stars, firework, etc. Yellow color is one of the most popular ones in the image of positive future. Probably, it originates from the traditional archetypes. A belief in the superhuman origin of authority is laid in the basis of this image.

However, it should be remarked that in most of the drawings the Sun (or other liminaries) is either penciled solely without any objects, lighted by it, or there are no people or their symbols (for example, houses) among such objects. Thus, although the authority is shown bright and complete by itself, is loosely connected with people even in the images of positive future.

Only one-fifth (1/5) of the positive images contains people's figures, and if yes, they are: either a person representing the authority or an image of the family treated kindly by the authority (father, mother, and a child in the sunlight). And only appr. twelve per cent (12%) of positive drawings contains images of interaction between people and the authority. Simultaneously half of these drawings shows people and authority, separated by barriers, fences and borders, and in the other half of the drawings people and authority are not opposed to each other.

3. Among the **negative images of authority** two-thirds of the drawings (38%) contains images of *interaction between the people and authority*. At the same time the relations are mainly expressed either as a pyramid (authority is at the top, and people are at the basis) or a puppeteer guiding people. On some of these pictures people are standing under the Kremlin walls, and in all of them the authority is bigger than people and separated from them. One of the activists of "Yabloko" youth movement has suggested an image, where the Government flew to the Mars, and the people stayed on the Earth and lived under their own law.

Sixteen per cent (16%) out of the negative images were about the future of the Russia in terms of it's territory alterations. The respondents' fears are caused by China's expansion from the East and US (or NATO) influence from the West. Thereat Russia might lose a part of its territory from all sides or even its integrity due to its dissolution into many states or by falling under the Chinese, Japanese, European, or US governance. Five per cent (5%) of the drawings have death and prison as their subject. The future in these pictures is shown either as a cemetery with crosses or a fence with barbed wire walling about the society. And this wire is under voltage being controlled by Mr. Chubais. Another five per cent (5%) of the drawings contains the Black Square of Malevich, that according to the respondents symbolizes the ostentatious openness of the country, which is in fact a police state.

The rest of the negative drawings (forty four per cent (44%)) contains *singular images* that represent such emotional attitude as fear, misunderstanding, contempt and cannot be joined in clusters. This proves irrational unconscious fear and mistrust of one-sixth of all the respondents towards authority.

4. There are thirty five per cent (35%) of drawings containing **ambivalent characteristics**. Twenty one per cent (21%) of them is somehow connected with the situation of uncertainty and decision making. This is either an interrogation mark (fifty per cent (50%)) or a situation of making a decision between two options (twenty per cent (20%)): a Unity or a Dissolution, a Brutal force or an Infirmity. The drawings (thirteen per cent (13%)) containing the year 2006, when the drawings were made by the respondents, as a bifurcation point, are also of some interest. These drawings emphasize the gap between the ideas of the future and of the present day. The future is broken up into alternatives. Thereat the negative images are clear and evident, and the positive images contain just very general characteristics. Another thirteen per cent (13%) contains the image of a tinted glasses without any face, which symbolizes an unknown person – «Mister X» and connected with the elections of 2008.

A quarter of all ambivalent drawings is various patterns of interaction of the authority, political institutions and people. At the same time over a half (sixty one per cent (61%)) of these drawings pictures a downward system of interaction between the authority and people. In fact, it is a pyramid, similar to the above, with the authority at the top and people at the bottom. However, in one-third of such ambivalent drawings the President is penciled outside the pattern and above it. The intermediate links are represented by either authority branches in various positions or a party. And only eleven per cent (11%) of the drawings contains another schema where the people or society are at the top and the authority, army, president, state дума and court serve their interests.

The remainder of images, just as the negative ones, falls into into singular drawings that cannot be joined into clusters. They prove that mass consciousness is contradictory and it's ideas are immature.

5. Almost for a quarter of the respondents an image of future authority is inseparably connected with the symbols traditionally associated with state authority and the State itself. One-fifth of these images (twenty one per cent (21%)) are connected with the symbols of monarchical power: throne, scepter, crown and rod. Another one-third (thirty one per cent (31%)) links the authority image with the Russian state flag and Russian state emblem. Only five point eight per cent (5.8%) of the respondents used the symbol of the USSR flag. This proves that although the new Russian national symbols have not taken root in mass consciousness yet, the new generations of the Russian people **do not link their future** with the symbols of the USSR.

6. **Comparison of people's images of personal future and state future** proves that the images of personal future and state future are loosely connected in people's consciousness. An image of personal future is complete and highly optimistic while the future of state is tense and

uncertain. Taking into consideration the fact that projective drawings mainly disclose weakly rationalized grounds and aspirations, hopes and beliefs, we may say that the gap between the images of personal future and state future occurs at all levels and is deep.

Scenarios of political development in Russia – feasibility study

In the frame of the project an expert group has scripted a number of scenarios of political development for the short-term and middle-term periods. As a result the following scenarios were developed: 1) for 2008 Presidential elections in Russia and the first 1 to 2 years of his term; and 2) for 2015 to 2020. On the basis of the mass consciousness research results we have made an attempt to evaluate a possibility of implementation of a certain scenario in terms of mass readiness for its acceptance.

Short-term forecast (2007-2008)

Our expert group has suggested three main scenarios:

Scenario one – «the legitimate competition of the successors». In this case there are at least two presidential candidates from the leading elite groups. And the participation in elections (presidential elections themselves or the preceding parliamentary elections, which play the role of primaries in this case) becomes the main criterion. This scenario requires the real participation of people. However, according to the mass consciousness survey results, this scenario has the lowest probability. In the environment of ultimate viscosity and the amorphism of mass consciousness, the low level of trust in authority in general and quite relative attractiveness of possible candidates, the support of the incumbent President becomes one of the major resources of the campaign.

A low level of mass consciousness involvement into the process of political decisions making does not provide for the increase of political and civic activity. It affects the attitude towards the possible presidential nominees at the upcoming elections. While trying to guess who will probably become President of the Russian Federation in 2008, the respondents considered the alternative with the successor of Vladimir Putin as one of the most probable scenarios. They say: “the decision will be made in our absence, whoever they decide upon will become the President”, “it doesn’t depend on us”, “it will be the one, assigned in the center, but not in the Kremlin”, “whoever is assigned”, “this matter is already decided at the top level”, “the president is being prepared”, “an insider will be assigned”. The young people more frequently refused to discuss this issue– “there is no use guessing”. It is also illustrative that remaining the Presidential title with Vladimir Putin for the next presidential term is a desired scenario, the only fact hindering from it is the Russian Constitution.

Besides, in mass consciousness there is a demand for stability and maintenance of the existing processes and not for changes and reforms. The people's consciousness associates stability with the incumbent President and will associate with his successor. In case such a successor is not appointed or there is a multi-optional choice, the mass consciousness in its amorphous state will not be able to elaborate more or less steady positions and might be subject to the radicalization processes and growth of protest sentiments, which may intensify especially with the participation of third parties.

Considering the fact that people see the near future as the continuation of the existing trends, **inertial and consensus** scenarios are more probable. Besides, the image of the near future is to a great extent influenced by official evaluations, that are apparently or implicitly presented as reliable and trustworthy through the information media controlled by the authority. At the same time it is assumed that the continuation of authority prevents the existing system of institutions and practices from serious reformatting. The personal popularity of Vladimir Putin allows assuming that his image and influence on mass consciousness will preserve until the presidential elections.

Thus, with some certain likelihood ratio we can state that in general the mass consciousness is ready for acceptance of that case scenario, that will be suggested by the elite, as well as people don't expect any radical changes in case the existing social and political development trends preserve and there are no large-scale disasters. These trends of the mass consciousness are the most favorable for the implementation of the **“controlled delegation of authority” scenario** that provides for the actual assignment by the President of his successor, resulting from certain agreements within the elite.

Scenario three – **«uncontrolled delegation of authority»** started its development without competition (in fact the “successor” is assigned). However, key interests turn out to be uncoordinated, and this results in forming of an “internal opposition” either at the stage of the election campaign or within the first year of the new President's governance.

Based on features currently existing in mass consciousness, e.g. a low interest level, low level of trust to the authority, high level of trust to the President, patriarchal attitudes towards a powerful authority and apathy, this option remains to be quite real. The main requirement for its implementation is preservation of formal publicity, observation of law, and minimum involvement of people in the decision making process. However, the implementation of such a scenario may lead to the imminent protest sentiments first within the elite group, then in mass consciousness.

Middle-term forecast (2010-2015)

Middle-term development scenarios developed by the expert group include the following four alternatives:

The most probable option is “Inertial” scenario that provides for the domination of administrative elite recruiting channels over the political and social ones. The implementation of this scenario is aided by low civic engagement and conformism of the peripheral population (due to lower incomes, educational level, etc.).

People’s ideas of a strong dependence of **the region’s future on the country’s future** empowers us carrying out the initiated by the central authority changes through with minimum obstacles. Such changes are most likely to be accepted by the regions on the basis of the wave effect principle.

An ultimate option of the inertial scenario is the establishment of a **tough regime**. A key difference of the latter is based on the fact that it relies on the full domination of one group at the political arena and not on the non-compete agreement of the elite. The dominating group establishes the so called “rules of the game”.

It should be noted that in mass consciousness this scenario coincides with the images of probable but undesired future. In the respondents’ ideas the authority is always separated from the people it rules over and people don’t play an important role in the system of authority relations. At all, they are social inferior. Simple people are not able to influence the decision-making process exercised by the authority. Although the respondents accept the importance and significance of the authority, their interest in it is tiny. Their ideas of future political authority are subject to stereotypes, immature, and extremely unstable.

Such images, being specific to the bulk of young respondents, increase the probability of this tough scenario implementation. However, young people, being an actor of future political changes, are introverts. Their ideas of the present and the future, of personal future and future of state are disrupted. Their ideas of future authority are not aggressive even in negatively oriented drawings. This proves that any form of violence used by the authority will be quite unexpected to this generation and may lead to its severe radicalization.

Controlled competition scenario provides for the competition among a number of elite groups. Such a competition increases the importance of mass support as a power struggle source. Despite the fact that according to the experts this scenario has taken the premier place, this scenario takes into consideration mass consciousness trends but looks least real. An attempt to rely upon the population is likely to be a complete washout. The existing trends of reduced civic activity, people’s removal from authority and mistrust to the elite makes it quite doubtful that mass consciousness is ready for making decisions in regard to different alternatives. Mass

consciousness is immature and viscous. Therefore in Russia it is so difficult to form any party. And any promotion of the party projects faces people's apathy and mistrust.

Uncontrolled competition scenario is unstable and respectively doesn't have a long-term perspective (although the possibility of its implementation within the middle-term period should not be disregarded). It fully depends on how the contradictions between the competitive groups are resolved: by means of compromise (this may either bring us back to the controlled democracy model or lead to the controlled competition) or suppression of one of the parties by the other one (authoritarian regime is probable).

The above mentioned scenarios are reflected in mass consciousness.

Thus, the optimistic future images resemble a mixture of the inertial and tough scenarios. It can be characterized by a mixture of democratic and socialistic case scenarios. Meanwhile democratic characteristics turn out to be more abstract and blurred and the main emphasis is put on the role of state. A "renewed USSR" is the most radical scenario.

The main characteristics of the forecast are as follows:

- powerful state authority ("central core", "vertical of authority"),
- the regions are governed from the center and their requirements are also met by the center,
- strong and reputable leader,
- "getting the country under control" along with the use of radical methods,
- the role of the Russian Federation at the international level is getting more important.

Moderate optimistic ideas assume a scenario of overcoming hardships after a long and persistent struggle. This option is like a computer game in action style. As a result of the struggle for resources within elite groups and clans one force comes in to authority. This option provides for both revolutionary and peaceful resolutions and transition to a completely new more perfect level". The subject of struggle, revolution and war is very acute for almost one-third of the respondents. This proves the readiness of mass consciousness to hardships and concessions for the sake of a "supreme goal". It was difficult to imagine a few years ago. This can also play into the hand of authoritarian scenario acceptance.

Finally, the scenario of uncontrolled competition may result in **a pessimistic image of the future**. In people's consciousness it is associated with the image of chaos, mess, routine, dissolution of the country, loss of federal status and independence, corruption among the senior officials, criminalization ("in grey colors, there will be a mess among the senior officials for a long time, they will pursue their own interests only", "I see the political future as puppeteers' authority").

Removal of wide population layers from authority makes such a scenario possible. Rather a high level of trust to the incumbent president borders on a very negative image of the political elite, dispiritingly low evaluation of its quality. From the one hand, possibility of protest sentiments increases and from the other hand, political apathy expands in the innovative part of the society.