

The “Hard” 1990s vs. the “Stable” 2000s: Framing Memory about the Post-Soviet Transition in the Russian Political Discourse¹

A paper for the conference “Regime Evolution, Institutional Change, and Social Transformation in Russia: Lessons for Political Science”, Yale University, April 27-28, 2018

As soon as politics is a matter of agency, it depends on how people make sense about social reality. This is particularly important in a case on unprecedented transformation that Russia experienced after the collapse of the USSR. The collective memory about the first decade of post-Soviet transition, as “a social framework through which nationally conscious individuals can organize their history” (Müller 2004: 3), is a significant factor of the political process in present and future. It shapes identities of current political forces, plays important role in legitimization of Putin’s regime, and affects public’s attitudes towards future social transformations.

The opposition between the “hard 1990s” and the “stable” 2000s became an often-used trop. Its connotations seem “self-evident”: the “weakness” of the state and *bespredel* vs. “strengthening” of the state and maintenance of “order”, the economic instability vs. stabilization and economic growth, the total crisis of social welfare vs. reliable welfare payments, the uncontrolled decentralization vs. establishing the “vertical” of federal power etc. Here we deal with binary constructions that “divide things into two opposing, often differently valued extremes” (Kotilainen, Vuorinen 2014: vii). Of course, the actual political and social development was much more complicated. A thorough analysis of sociological surveys demonstrates that in the mass opinion the qualification of the 1990s as the “hard” decade took shape retrospectively. In the 1990s surveys registered a higher level of dispersion between positive and negative attitudes towards ongoing social transformation than in mid-2000s, when negative assessments of the 1990s became prevailing. According to Alexei Levinson,

For a brief but significant time [in the beginning of the 2000s – O.M.] the 1990s were homogenized, colored to one color, and revised. The opinion that it was a decade of historical break changing destinies of perhaps a half of humanity for better has gone away. The same events were reinterpreted in an opposite way, as the catastrophe of the twentieth century. However, it was not this historical conception but painful remembrance about the 1990s as years of total crisis and failure, troubles and disaster based on everyday experience that became dominating at the mass level (Levinson 2007).

¹ The research is done with support of the Russian Foundation for Basic Studies, grant no. 17-03-00322.

Of course, this newly established social framework of memory about the 1990s reflected the actual experience of many people, even if rather selectively. But memory suggests forgetting. And what is remembered or forgotten is in a sense a matter of social construction. There is some theoretical ground for considering the above-mentioned binary constructions as a dynamic outcome of the discursive process that is essentially political. According to the theory of social memory, individual remembrance is framed by available symbolic resources – public discourses, narratives, images of the past etc. (Halbwachs 1980; Irwin-Zarecka 1994; Olick 1999 etc.). A particular configuration of their repertoire should be considered as a result of ever-going struggle for domination between different interpretations (Bourdieu 1992).

This suggestion is supported by the theory of symbolic politics that urges against reducing the changes of mass attitudes to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current policy. As soon as politics is not a part of life experience of the ordinary citizens, expectations about the new political course could not be based on true “evidence”, rather they should be a reaction to the cues (i.e. words, acts, and even performance of institutions) coming from political actors and leaders of opinions (Edelman 1972: 5). According to Murray Edelman, “government affects behavior chiefly by shaping the cognitions of large numbers of people in ambiguous situations. It helps create their beliefs about what is proper; their perceptions of what is fact; and their expectations of what is to come” (Edelman 1971: 7). So, instead of taking the opposition between the “hard 1990s” and the “stable” 2000s for granted, it makes sense to explore how it was constructed and established by interactions of various public actors, including Putin himself.

This paper is a part of a research about construction and transformation of the frames of collective memory about “the 1990s” and “the 2000s” in Russian political discourse. It is focused on competing interpretations of “the 1990s” by different political/mnemonic actors.

The analysis of the politics of framing social memory about the post-Soviet transition could be insightful for the field of Russian studies because it helps to explain some political outcomes and to reveal an important mechanism of ideological performance of Putin’s regime. In particular, there are good reasons to argue that the binary opposition between the “hard 1990s” and the “stable 2000s” 1) played a great role in legitimization of Putin’s politics since his coming to power in 2000, 2) facilitated marginalization of the liberals in the process of political reforms of the 2000-2010s, 3) was conducive for consolidation of the conservatives, 4) is an important argument in the discussions about political and economic reforms.

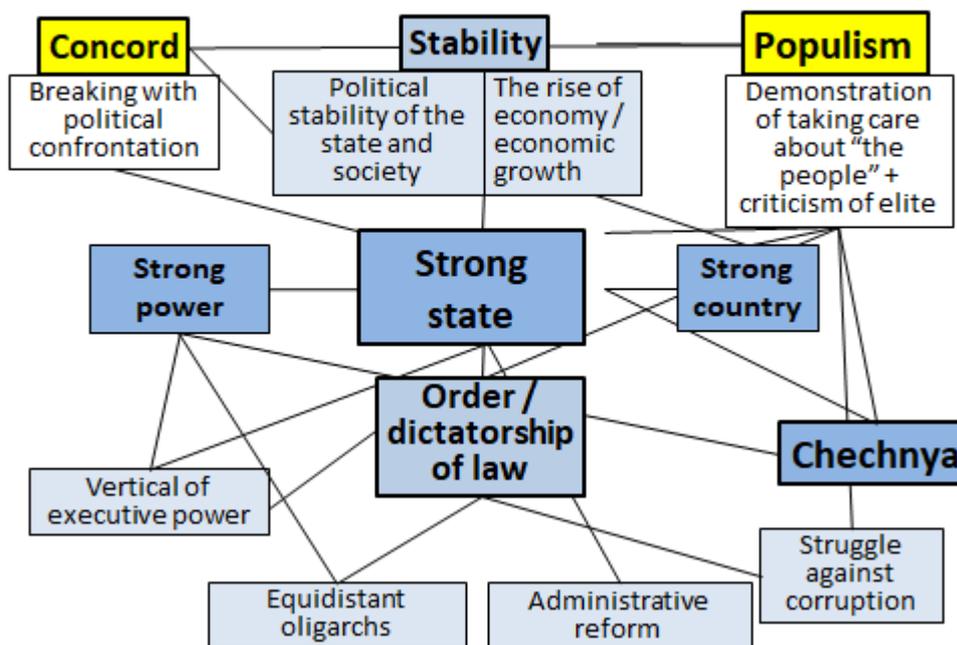
A study of framing social memory about the 1990s also could contribute to the discussions in various fields of political science varying from discourse analysis to identity politics and political culture. The latter deserves a particular accentuation as soon as the theory of collective memory is sometimes considered a vivid amendment to the behaviorist theory of

political culture that largely neglects the historical dimension of the concept. By the words of Eric Langenbacher, “collective memory is a predominant way that history comes to life to affect the political culture of the present” (2010: 26-27). So, “scholarly work on collective memory can be seen as part of the field of political culture research insofar as it is concerned with the cultural constitution of political identities and activities” (Olick 1999: 336-337).

This paper presents the preliminary results of a study of Vladimir Putin’s rhetoric in January, 2000 – May, 2004, when after Boris Yeltsin’s resignation he ran his first electoral campaign being at the same time the acting President, and later performed his first term as elected President. According to Levinson, it was in this time that public attitudes about the experience of the 1990s had changed. A study of Putin’s rhetoric reveals symbolic mechanisms that facilitated this change. In this paper I focus on two of them (but hope to add some more observations till our meeting in April).

The data for analysis was collected from the web site “President of Russia” (www.kremlin.ru). I have selected transcriptions of all public speeches and interviews that addressed somehow topics related to experience of the 1990s (N 121) and conducted a conventional content analysis in MAXQDA 2018. The aim of the analysis was to find out the main topics in Putin’s discourse about his own political course, as compared and opposed to political practices of Yeltsin’s period, and to reveal the discursive instruments he used to construct meaningful oppositions between the present and the recent past.

Coding was done in inductive manner. It started with highlighting the key words in the relevant segments of texts; the codes were derived from the most often used key words and topics; they were sorted into categories based on their links and relations. As a result, a tree structure of categories and subcategories was created. Development of the operational definitions of categories allowed to refine initial coding (this work has not been finished yet). At this stage of analysis one important thing was revealed. In some cases, the codes named in-vivo, by the key words used by speaker, came as categories; they were frequently used and assigned various meanings which came as subcategories. In the other cases, categories had no clear verbal markers, and were derived analytically, according to characteristics ascribed by the definitions of categories. On pic. 1 describing the relations between the most often used categories the first group of categories is colored blue, and the second is colored yellow.



Pic. 1. Connections between the most often used categories in V. Putin's discourse about the previous and the new political course, 2000-2004.

As I try to demonstrate by two cases described below, these two groups of categories point to different mechanisms of framing the experience of the 1990s. By using recognizable words Putin created a set of verbal signs that described his policy as distinctive from Yeltsin's political course. In Putin's discourse, as well as in another discourses, these signs were loaded with various meanings thus becoming an element of shared symbolic repertoire. As the authoritative interpreter, Putin had good position to control the discourse flowing around these words/signs. On the other hand, a lack of clear verbal markers in the case of my analytic categories allowed to make implicit claims which none the less effectively contributed to construction of oppositions between the recent past and the present. In the following part of the paper I shall demonstrate these patterns addressing to the cases of categories of "stability" and "populism".

Obtaining "stability". As was mentioned, the opposition between "the hard 1990s" (*likhie devianostye*) and "the stable 2000s" (*stabil'nye nulevye*) became an often used trop. It looks like Putin's rhetoric in the beginning of the 2000s could contribute to formation of this opposition. He did not used the term "*likhie*", but he spoke a lot about "stability" as the aim of the new state policy. Transcripts of his speeches and interviews allow to follow how this word/sign was developed in his discourse in interaction with another speakers.

In one of the interviews in February, 2000, in the context of discussion about a lack of foreign investments to the Russian economy, Putin mentioned: “For many years we lurched from one coup attempt to another. *We were short of political stability* (italic is mine – O.M.)”. Mikhail Leontiev, who interviewed Putin, asked him with apparent intention to get some promises to stop this situation: “Are you a factor for stability?” For which Putin evasively answered: “I think the President who will be elected, whoever he is, should be such a factor”. But in the end of the interview, when the talk became focused on some conditions of his personal life, Putin came back to this topic. He said, pointing to the fact that he is living at state dacha:

We live as if we were sitting on our packed suitcases. Over the past ten years the whole country has been living like that. And that brings us back to the problem we started with. The problem of stability... In that sense, we (the political elite – O.M.) are little different from the majority of our people. They have their permanent dwellings, but they don't have an inner sense of stability. Let us hope that we will be able to bring that feeling back to them².

Later Putin often used the term “stability” for describing his policy. He particularly emphasized the connection between the political stability (that he presented as his important achievement) and economic stability, i.e. steady economic growth. As early as in 2001 he declared in the Annual Address to the Federal Assembly: “We have exhausted the potential of transition period measures, but in order to ensure that today's political stability becomes tomorrow's economic prosperity, we must put in a lot more effort and this will take more than one year”³.

In the end of Putin's first term as the president, it became apparent that the word/sign “stability” conceals a hidden trap. It was attractive by contrast to the turbulence of the 1990s of which many people very actually tired. But as soon as “stability” became a characteristic of the incumbent's policy, it got unpleasant connotation of stagnation. Putin speechwriters mentioned it early enough. In 2002 in the Address to the Federal Assembly there was a remarkable phrase: “we should not wait for the stability that has been achieved to turn into administrative stagnation due to the lack of transparency in the state mechanism's work”⁴. In 2004, during his second electoral campaign, Putin made explicit efforts to reject this unpleasant connotation. Now he presented “stability” not as the aim but as a mean. In the day of his re-election he said, making connection between “stability” and “modernization”:

² Putin, Vladimir. *Interview with the ORT TV Channel*, February 7, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24373>

³ Putin, Vladimir. *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation*, April 3, 2001, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21216>

⁴ Putin, Vladimir. *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation*, April 18, 2002, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21567>

Stability, which we have also just talked about, is something that we value today, but it is really just a prerequisite for development, and the aim of development is to make our people more prosperous. To achieve this goal, we must take responsible steps towards modernising our economy and social sphere. But we must proceed carefully so as not to cause damage and not undermine peoples' confidence in what we are doing⁵.

Declaring “stability” as his important achievement, Putin in the beginning of his second term had to be very careful about proclaiming further political tasks. Talking about “modernization”, he particularly emphasized that “no damage” will be caused. So, the paradox of “modernization” that will not threaten “stability” appeared in the official rhetoric much earlier than this term became a word/sign of president Dmitry Medvedev in 2008.

In the case of “stability” the opposition between “the 1990s” and “the 2000s” was created by using the word/sign capable to be filled with varied content. Remarkable that the opposition was constructed without an antonym. In case of this category, there were no established paired word for characteristic of “the 1990s” in Putin’s discourse. They often appeared NON-stable, turbulent in his texts just by the virtue of grammatical constructions that suggested that if something is declared appearing it did not exist before. It corresponds to Matt Davies’ conclusion that oppositions are triggered not necessarily by semantic of words, but also for grammatic forms (2013: 2). Putin was able to construct the opposition between the recent and the new policy even without explicit criticism of Yeltsin.

Populism. Observations resulting from the analysis of this category point to one more pattern of constructing opposition between “the 1990s” and “the 2000s”. This category was inferred by linking several codes with relative meanings. Finally, it was defined by two characteristics: 1) demonstration of care about “the people” / [true] understanding of their problems / openness for communication with them combined with 2) explicit or implicit criticism of elites. Here we deal with the case when the speaker did not name his attitude. Putin occasionally used the word “populism”, but he never connected it to his own course. This is not a surprise as for him this word has a negative connotation being a synonym for “demagogy”⁶.

Nonetheless, the statements corresponding to this category are numerous and have multiple connections⁷ to practically all other categories. This observation points to one of the

⁵ Putin, Vladimir. *Press Conference at Election Campaign Headquarters*, March 15, 2004, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22382>

⁶ E.g. ““United Russia has shown itself capable of rising above a certain level of populism and not letting itself slip into populist mode, and has proven its ability to take responsible decisions and take on responsibility” (Putin, Vladimir. Interview to Television Companies Channel One, Rossiya and NTV November 28, 2003, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22229>)

⁷ Categories are considered connected if they are ascribed to the same or subsequent fragments of text.

reasons of quick raise of Putin's popularity. He not only picked up topics that corresponded to people's demand but also tended to demonstrate his true understanding of their needs. To do this, he rhetorically contrasted himself to "the others", i.e. politicians who did not mention people's needs, did not pay enough efforts to explain their policy etc. So, the main tenets of his political course came as the answer to people's demand. For example, the need for the "strong state" he explained by the fact that people are "are sick and tired of our laxity and irresponsibility"⁸. Talking about the public reaction to the military operation at North Caucasus he said:

... I believe that the active support of the majority of the population to our operation in the North Caucasus comes not only from hurt national identity and pride, but also from an indistinct but correct idea – an ordinary person may not put it exactly with these words, but it is so, and the idea is right – that the state must be strong, and it has become weak⁹.

Legislation aimed at transformation of the party system was explained by fact the people are "tired of ideological war" and "look to the authorities to display political will"¹⁰ etc. Of course, there is nothing unusual in it. Such rhetorical turns are quite usual for discourse of political leaders. But Yeltsin also used populist rhetoric. Putin needed to distance himself from his unpopular predecessor. It was done, first, by the virtue of logic of the populist frame that suggests contrasting the speaker to "the others" by explicit¹¹ or implicit¹² criticism. Second, the category of *political will* (subcategory of *strong power*) was the instrument for contrasting the previous promises to the new ones. For example, in his first Annual Address to the Federal Assembly Putin claimed:

In Russia today, promises are not enough. Promises have been made many times, and they have all passed their expiry date. Decades of difficult and unstable life are a long enough time to demand real changes for the better. The Russian government must achieve changes soon (2000).

⁸ Putin, Vladimir. *Interview with ORT Channel*, January 15, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24123>

⁹ Putin, Vladimir. *Interview with the RTR TV Channel*, January 23, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24126>

¹⁰ Putin, Vladimir. *Speech at the Constituent Congress of the Unity National Public and Political Movement*, February 27, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24145>

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¹² E.g. from the Televised Address to the People of Russia in which the bills introducing "the vertical of power" were presented: "The time has come to separate party, local and personal ambitions from the urgent need to strengthen the state and enhance authority" (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21440>). Or from the interview in the context of Putin's trips to the regions of Russia: "Our people deserve a better deal than they have had up until now" (Putin, Vladimir. *Interview with the Izvestia Newspaper*, July 14, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24171>). In both examples the very construction of phrases supposes implicit criticism of the other politicians who mixed personal ambitions with state needs, ignored the poor deal of the people etc.

The populist (in the sense determined above) statements allowed Putin to construct the image of a leader who answers to demands of people; and the very construction of such statements that is based on contrasting the speaker to “the others” contributed to construction of the opposition between the resent past and the present.

Let me finish with several general conclusions: 1) framing memory about the 1990s is quite salient in the rhetoric of the first years of Putin’s presidency (N of documents = 121; preliminary N of coded fragments = 743); 2) Putin could not declare his political course without referring to the policy of the 1990s; but as Yeltsin’s successor, he could not be too critical, and the number of explicitly critical statements in his speeches and interviews is relatively small; 3) none the less he needed to create a distance between extremely unpopular Yeltsin and himself, and this led to development of various strategies of creating binary oppositions. The two cases described above represent two patterns of creating meanings of “the old” and “the new”. But this does not exhaust Putin’s repertoire of symbolic distancing from Yeltsin. At the seminar in April I hope to describe some more patterns (in particular, a very interesting case is telling stories about Chechen campaigns that demonstrates how narrative tools could be used for construction of the binary opposition of “the 1990s” and “the 2000s”).

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