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DYNAMICS OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATIONS IN THE RUSSIAN PUBLIC SPACE UNDER CONDITIONS OF STRUCTURAL CHANGES¹

***Abstract:** The paper deals with the relations between economic and political dependency as reflected in the mood of the Russian population. In the first part the author explains the concept of economic dependence and compares the way it is understood in the Russian culture and in Western cultures. Further the author provides and outline of the history of Russia with focus on the economic conditions in the country in relation to the mass mood. He argues that the former is not a basic factor determining the mass mood and social and political activities of Russians. The author's ideas are based on data from sociological research carried out by the "Public Opinion" Foundation agency in 2009. In the conclusion the author refers to the consequences of high-speed reforms on the one hand and the favourable assessment of President's Putin politics during the period 2006-2008 on the part of the Russian population as a development that is congruent with that in other transition economies*

***Keywords:** mass mood, index of social optimism, social and political dependence, social and economic development, democratisation, economic culture, political representation, public opinion, public space, the Russian Federation, Russian society, Vladimir Putin presidency*

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Russian society entered the new millennium with new expectations. Change of political elite has brought changes in moods and rebirth of old hopes. However, in comparison with the period of active democratisation, the Russians, being tired of social shocks and endless changes, did not relate the new power to the right of participation in the process of governance and decision making. They hoped for stabilisation and possibility to adapt, finally, to new conditions. Before coming to analyse some existing economic and political representations in the Russian public space, I would like to refer, firstly, to some historical aspects of our country.

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The concept of economic dependence is a traditional feature of the Russian economic culture. It suggests such kinds of relation between social actors which emerge in the process of exchanging economic resources and are characteristic of subordination. Actors who possess lower resources are subordinate to those possessing greater resources. Political, economic and social institutions that have existed throughout the history caused the dissemination of attitudes of dependency as well as of the strategies of dependent economic behaviour [1]. Throughout its history Russian society experienced much stronger limitations of economic freedoms than western societies in the periods of Medieval, New and the Newest Times. State and peasant community who monopolised economic resources of a society were major contributors to these limitations [2].

Legal and economic vulnerability of the population and broad possibilities of controlling them by means of non-economic enforcement were among the most serious consequences of structural limitations of economic freedoms. This accompanied the functioning of authoritarian model of the Russian and later Soviet state. Relations of social and economic dependency and cultural norms as well as features of national character elaborated in their frameworks were inefficient and hampered social and economic development of the country as they did not contribute to the motivation of economically effective activity.

Thus, Western and Russian cultures represent different relations towards economic dependency and freedom of capable population. In the western society values of economic self-sufficiency were the stronghold of economic prosperity of nations while the economic dependency of people was historically linked to “vulgar poverty”. During recent century and a half, the ideology of providing public help to low-income population has passed through the stages of “taming the dangerous classes”, “enforcing social rights” and at present it has come back to understanding the unacceptability of dependency of a person capable to work on public assistance.

As for the Russian economic culture, social and economic dependency is one of its main features. It was formed, as I have mentioned before, in conditions of the centuries-old limitations of economic freedoms implied by the state and peasant community.

As many other periods of the Russian history, the last decade was not deprived of paradoxes. One of the prominent ones, to my mind, is linked to the mechanisms of its formation. Analysis of survey data provided by respectful sociological agencies reveals that stability for majority of the Russian population is weakly determined by the real economic situation. Hence, dynamics of assessments of the Russians of economic situation in the country is not accompanied by the proportional changes in the assessments of general situation as a whole in Russia. In this paper I argue that economic situation is not a basic determinant of mass mood as well as of social and political activities of the Russians. The other more adequate and sensible determinant is the index of social optimism reflecting emotional and psychological condition of citizens.

Analysis of existing research shows that the problem of transformation of the model of population's economic behaviour in conditions of structural changes is not at the centre of particular attention of scientists. The phenomenon of economic dependence at macro-level, i.e. dependence of the Third World on industrial countries, has been studied since the 1950s within the macroeconomic "theory of dependence" by F. Cardoso, T. Dos Santos, C. Furtado [3]. These authors argue that economic dependence inevitably results in political influence causing global asymmetric and unequal relations between rich and poor countries and fixing unfavourable conditions for the latter.

Indeed, the level of nominal confidence given by the Russian population to the first persons of the state reached an extremely high level even in comparison with western democracies, and it significantly differs from assessments of real activities of power. And even in the period of economic crisis the population has continued in expressing their high confidence in political actors and preferred finding their niche and adapting to situation rather than expressing their protest. Thus, subjective relation towards political actors becomes the determining factor of social and political stability in Russia, which weakly correlates with objective conditions of living.

There are several questions emerging in this context. Is it really true that economic factors are not dominant ones for the Russians in their assessments of the situation in the country in general? If yes, why is the situation perceived as stable by them? What are the other factors contributing to such perceptions? I shall try to demonstrate some of the tendencies which take place in modern Russia and provide certain basics for the answers to the questions posed above.

The first glance at the problem makes one suggest that economic characteristics are the basic factors affecting the assessments of the population related to the personal situation as well as to the whole situation in the country. On the one hand, it is so. According to the population's opinion, stability is primarily "worthy, paid in time and gradually increasing salaries and pensions" [4]. On the other hand, the stability in the period of the world economic crisis was significantly undermined. According to the survey's data of one of the leading sociological agencies in Russia – the "Public Opinion" Foundation (FOM) – in April 2009, only 2% of the Russian population assessed economic situation as good, 43% as satisfactory, 45% as the bad one [5]. Almost 90% of the respondents apply negative terms to assess the economic situation in the country.

Indicators of the economic situation in Russia are significantly lower than the indicators of political situation. Assessments of personal economic situation and economic situation in the country expressed by the population are very low and, as was mentioned, slightly correlate with the assessments of key political actors. However, such critical relation of society towards the economic situation confirms certain level of dissatisfaction with existing conditions. It is not a pre-crisis or social conflict condition; yet, it contains the threat of developing into or critically approximating them in case of escalation of dissatisfaction level.

Following the data of the long-term monitoring, the amount of those who assessed the national economy as satisfactory and of those who gave negative assessments was not less than 76% of all the respondents. During the years 2002–2005 negative assessments prevailed, while from 2006 up to January 2009 satisfactory assessments dominated. The economic crisis which directly affected Russian provinces contributed to the increase of negative assessments again. There is an evident paradox: the Russian population is extremely critical of the condition of the national economy, while at the same time much more favourably assessing the country's key political actors.

The economic crisis has led to a significant decline in favourable assessments of the majority of social and economic indicators. According to the Director for Communications of the All-Russian Centre for Studying Public Opinion (VTSIOM) O. Kamenchuk, the crisis caused the decline of five out of six permanently monitored by VTSIOM indicators [6]. These are the indices of satisfaction with economic and political situation among which are the index of social optimism, index of personal economic situation and some others. These indices have permanently been increasing for several years. The economic crisis was followed by the decline of social optimism, of the assessments of the country's development and the assessments of the economic situation in the country as a whole and personal one as well. The only index that did not fall is the assessment of a political situation in the country. What is the reason for this? Why did not the crisis influence the assessments of political situation in the country and the activities of its leaders?

Hereby, I shall refer to the Presidency of Vladimir Putin, as an example, since it was in particular during the years of his presidency that some tendencies I am going to show were formed and continued in later years.

After Vladimir Putin was elected to the post of the President of the Russian Federation, the level of positive assessments of the national economy increased despite of the fact that there were no sufficient reasons for this. And even with the increase of assessments, the national economy is critically assessed by the RF population. Only 10% of the population gave positive assessments of the economy by the end of the year 2007 (the most successful year, according to the Russian population) [7].

Economic realities are negatively assessed. Why, then, is the level of confidence expressed in political leaders stably high, and can the country's general situation be regarded in terms of social and political stability? What is it related to if stability, or rather perception of stability, is only partially linked to economic realities?

The Russian political process during the last nine years can be characterised by common tendencies in governing the publicsphere and methods of forming the public opinion. President Dmitry Medvedev adopted methods of work of his predecessor Vladimir Putin. What are the common factors that determine the political process of the recent decade?

An unsuccessful attempt at democratic modernisation of the 1990-ies has led to the collapse of the structure of social relations. An obvious necessity of its

strengthening resulted in the tendencies of concentration and centralization of power, which inevitably results in a certain limitation of democracy needed for each nation to overcome any system crisis [8]. After the period of “the roaring 90-ies”, the concept of stability has become the most significant one for the society and has anticipated other categories in the system of democratic values. According to the research data, the number of answers “Order and stability” to the question “What is the democracy?” has increased from 20 to 41% for the period 2000–2008 [9].

The period of Vladimir Putin presidency (2000-2008) is perceived by the majority of the Russians as the period of stability. Its establishment is one of the three most significant achievements of President Vladimir Putin, according to the opinion of the Russian population [10]. By the way, the same tendency was fixed in 2006 in relation to the assessments of the population concerning the activities of Leonid Brezhnev. Free education, free public healthcare and stability as confidence in tomorrow are among the three most significant positive results of his activity [11]. This feeling of social and political stability personally perceived as a confidence in tomorrow is the basic component of the value system of the Russians which consequently determines their assessments of the situation. For the Russian citizens maintaining stability has become much more important than changes or radical reforms.

The nature of stability, as it has been already mentioned, is based on determining the probability of achieving earlier formulated perspectives. That means that perspectives represent somewhat the image of a future filled up with certain expectations. Namely the belief in achieving or fulfilling these expectations creates the feeling of confidence in tomorrow. This justifies the logics of posing the questions: What are the objects of the expectations of the Russians? In what way are they considered by power authorities in governing?

The increase in disproportion between expectations and reality leads to the increase in negative assessments of the population. And the opposite process contributes to the increase of positive assessments and formation of the feeling of stability, predictability and confidence in tomorrow. As assumed, the assessment of a certain situation is based on its coincidence with the expectations. Disproportion between the reality and the expectations determines the character of mass mood influencing, in turn, the assessment of the political institutions without direct referring to existing economic conditions.

One of the important achievements of Putin’s team is turning the elections-based statements into the element of political practice. We can observe purposeful efforts to govern the system of expectations which are important for the majority of the Russians. This is being achieved through making actual certain issues or their groups which are of great importance for the population. In order to reach it, authorities took considerable part of the mass media under their control.

This constitutes the logic of regarding the situation on the basis of significance of separate components of the media agenda for the Russian population. According to results of surveys, the most significant events for the Russians were catastrophes and international affairs, which were covered by the mass media mainly due to political

order rather than to their real significance for the Russians. International affairs have been dominating since 2005. It is worth noting that since then the stable level of positive assessments of the President's activities and the level of confidence to the President have begun to grow. The dynamics of the first followed as 38 % in 2005, 47% in 2006 and 63 % in 2007. As for the level of confidence in the President, in 2005 this indicator accounted for 47 %, in 2006 it was 54 %, and in 2007 it reached 68 % [12]. Meanwhile, there was no adequate increase of the positive assessments of the national economy.

The analysis allows us to suggest that the basic objectives of expectations formed by the power authorities for population are the international issues which have been intensively covered by the mass media for recent years. Due to the mass media, they became important part of the agenda. Through making these problems actual and demonstrating the means for solving them Russia's political leaders show the population the effectiveness of their activities. It is a rather convenient way of performing, taking into account that population does not have possibilities for verifying and assessing the real level of the effectiveness of international activities of Russian politicians.

The effectiveness of the international activities of the RF President (here I should note that the population regard namely him as a main translator of the political will of the country in the international arena) led to the changes in assessments of Russia's role in the international processes. According to the surveys' data, at present 60% of the Russian population consider Russia as a great power. In 1996, this opinion was expressed only by 21% of the population [13]. This subjectively (individually) assessed effectiveness of the activities of President Vladimir Putin in the international arena has become the basis for forming the feeling of stability and confidence that expectations will be realized. The latter are projecting on different vital fields of a person and a society as a whole.

The implemented analysis that is briefly presented in this paper allows concluding that there is a visible gap in mass economic and political representations in the public space of modern Russia. They weakly correlate with each other and can perform as an object of governmental practice. People do assess differently economic situation and the general situation in the country as well as the activities of its political leaders. Political determinants of mass moods come to prominence in comparison to economic ones.

The worldwide practice proves that the priority given to political reforms before economic ones leads to negative consequences and rise of social crisis. In the USSR and other countries of people's democracy liberalisation of political life resulted, finally, in the collapse of the states and increase of conflict potential in the society. High-speed reforms of economics in conditions of totalitarian model of governing lead to contradictory results. On the one hand, they create conditions for political stability and economic progress; on the other, they deepen the objective contradiction between requirements for democratic development and conservation of managerial system. A reasonable compromise in political and economic reforms should be the

basis in choosing the strategy of the state's development in transformational periods. This will make the results of the reforms sustainable and long-term.

Extrapolating theoretical and applied aspects of transformations of political systems that are presented in scientific literature on modern Russian realities allows concluding that many of them are characteristic of Russian society [14]. Meanwhile, transformations in Russia are organically linked to the problems similar to countries experiencing post-communist heritage and to global problems of humankind, as well.

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