

# PLAYING WITH IMAGES ON THE PASTURES OF RUSSIAN POLITICS

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When I had been invited to take part in the symposium on *Imagining Russia*, I was a little confused by the topic, which seemed to me quite far from my primary research focus, which is public policy and political conflict. But after a short consideration I realized that imaging activity in contemporary Russia is in fact a matter of politics and applied policy, and a matter of political conflict. So I can feel quite comfortable on this ground.

First, let me briefly sketch some conceptual background. By the mid-90es a new professional community in policy analysis and political consulting had formed in Russia<sup>1</sup>. They used to call themselves “image makers” or “political technologists”. First, imaging technologies were understood as a tool for electoral campaigning<sup>2</sup>, but soon more comprehensive approach was formed. This community worked out a specific understanding, - paradigmatic vision of political life, - with it’s own specific lexicon.

According to this vision, modern world is entering an era of “virtual politics”, both international and domestic, which is shaped with manipulative and “information warfare” technologies. The real battlefield is the human mind; the newspapers, TV-channels and Internet-sites are strategic weaponry of main caliber, while rumors, fears and prejudices are tactical weaponry. Creating and imposing the meanings of facts, manipulating semantics of public discourses is key to mastering political reality. On this virtual battleground the winner is one who is able to deploy his values and priorities in a right time and in a right place, to secure his own infrastructure of communication while sabotaging and jamming communication infrastructure of the adversary, and eventually able to position itself in a positive image while capturing the adversary in the trap of the negative image, humiliating and blaming him and depriving of image-making resources which could be mobilized for the future virtual combats.

Needless to say, this virtual combat politics is supposed to be carried out by proper trained professional personnel, - namely, “image-technologists” or “infowarriors”, - while the civil (or, should I say “civilian”) society is relevant to strategic and tactical planning rather as a list of targeting objects or as a terrain with its bonuses and multiplication effects, a “real life” landscape of the virtual combat. In this new era of infowar policy traditional borders between foreign and domestic functions of state are blurring, making

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<sup>1</sup> For a short review of the trends and developments in the Soviet and Post-Soviet applied political science in Russia see: Амелин В.Н., А.А. Дегтярев, «Опыт развития прикладной политологии в России» / «Полис» (Политические исследования), 1998, №3, сс.157-178

<sup>2</sup> Как делать имидж политика. Психология политического консультирования (п/ред. Е.Егоровой-Гантман, И.Минтусова) - Москва., 1995

Цветков А. Управление социально-политическими процессами. Технология избирательных кампаний, лоббирования, общественной деятельности – Москва, 1995

“information security” a core component of national security, and the later a default value and criteria for national policy decision making as a whole.

Off course, this is not to say that Russian political analysts own a copyright for those concepts and lexicon, available in the research papers of RAND’s National Defense Research Institute, NSA’s Information Warfare Support Center, Stanford’s Center for Global Strategic Planning, etc<sup>3</sup>. The significant difference, however, is that Western researches and policy planers regard infowar methods as almost exclusively foreign policy tools, while their Russian colleagues place equal accents on foreign and domestic implications.

I deliberately simplify this comprehensive paradigmatic vision, skipping highly abstract and (in selected examples) sophisticated conceptual constructs in order to highlight it’s applied, policy relevant implications, because in Russia policymakers and analysts had proved to apply ready made tools often without proper understanding of their institutional and socio-cultural context, without estimating their long-term consequences, in other words – without proper sense of responsibility.

As reported, the first “prototypes” of image warfare were tested widely and unsystematically in Russian domestic politics already in late 80-es and early 90-es, just to mention the major testings in August 1991 and October 1993. President elections of 1996 were the first example of strategic nationwide image blietzkrieg campaign, planned and carried out on systematic and professional ground. This campaign is an important landmark for Russian politics in general and for image-technologists community with its infowar-craft in particular. It was the last time when this community acted as a more or less consolidated apparatus on the service of consolidated political elites. With the dissolution of the 96th-year elite pact, image-making community splited and waged a war of attrition with each other.

The infamous triumph of imagemaking and infowar technologies appeared to be the parliamentary campaign of 1999, when confused Russian civil population amazingly observed both brutal defeat of Luzkov-Primakov “Otechestvo” (Fatherland) and the rise and rule of newly-made “Edynstvo” (Unity). Vladimir Putin’s legitimation as a President by popular vote in march 2000 has been by the way far less amazing and spectacular, carried out by inertia in the obvious absence of viable contenders, demoralized and paralyzed by Autumn-99 disaster and Eltsin’s totally unexpected New Year resignation.

The power and effectiveness of imagemaking technologies demonstrated so convincingly in these two campaigns had important and controversial consequences for Russian politics and policy making. First, it greatly facilitated clear understanding of the rising importance and power of relevant technologies and infrastructure by top decision makers and political leaders in Russia. As a result, the wave of initial success elevated numerous professional infowarriors and their fascinated neophytes into key positions in power institutions, making them the dominant policy community within President’s

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<sup>3</sup> Molander, Roger, Peter Wilson, and Andrew Riddile, *Strategic Information Warfare*, Santa Monica: RAND, 1996

John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *The Advent of Netwar*, MR-789-OSD, 1996, pp. 3– 16, 19–24, and 81–82. Copyright 1996 RAND

Richard Szafranski, “Neocortical Warfare? The Acme of Skill,” *Military Review*, November 1994, pp. 41–55. U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.

Administration and Security Council of Russia. Recent policy initiatives are heavily weighted with their lexicon and ideas, just to mention Information Security Doctrine of RF adopted in September 2000<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, this clear understanding of rising importance and power of imagemaking technologies raised a key questions of who owns the basic mass communication infrastructure, who controls “media howitzers” and who actually manages mobilization and application of relevant resources and tools. In other words, who have a proper right to bear infowar arms, and whether the State is and should be able to impose a “monopoly for legitimate infoviolence”. As an answer to these questions an alarming issue of “mass media monopolization by nonstate actors” was raised on top policy level, and it explains much of the current mess about Most-Media, NTV and the “freedom of press”.

Current Russian politics may be characterized as a prolonged “cold infowar” of attrition, which followed the “hot” period of Autumn-99 clash. It includes both domestic and foreign dimensions, with clear domination of the former by now. Nationwide infowar campaigns are being waged by adversaries, each of them working out complex multilevel structure of confronting images. Strategic images deal with broadly defined Russia’s national identity, the meaning of it’s past and present and the prospects for the future, also including positioning of contending political elites and their agendas. Tactical images deal with particular decision makers, particular events (like “Kursk” disaster and Ostankino TV-tower fire) and policy outcomes (Chechen conflict, economy grow, etc.)

Obviously, those confronting strategic images are relevant to the topic of this panel – Russian self-image. With unavoidable simplification, I will outline two confronting images, which dominate current Russian infowar battlefield (the complete picture should also include such marginal “imagined Russia” constructs as Communist, Monarchist, etc)

1. The first “imagined Russia” is well elaborated and well-known for Western audience<sup>5</sup>. It traces it’s roots to the late 80-s and early 90-s, to original democratic wave raised by Gorbachev’s Perestroika and August-91 triumph over communist hardliners. In the first-person speech, this “imagined Russia” may be expressed as follows:

*Russia has made a clear choice for democracy, market economy and liberalism in 1991. Seven decades of Communist experiment had proved to be a violent and tragic distortion of it’s historical development, which severely undermined intellectual, cultural and economical potential of Russia, leaving it in the rear of global progress. Post-Soviet Russia overcomes discontinuity of it’s XX century history and traces it’s legitimacy and national identity to pre-October-1917 Russia.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Доктрина информационной безопасности РФ <http://www.strana.ru/print/969031992.html>

<sup>5</sup> As a paradigmatic example see Егор Гайдар, *Собрание сочинений. В 2 т Т.1.: Государство и эволюция. Дни поражений и побед.* - М.: Евразия, 1997  
<http://www.peter-club.spb.ru/library/Gaidar1.html>

<sup>6</sup> This construction proved to be fundamentally controversial. Significant segments of democratic electorate – just to mention indigenous non-Russian minorities and Jews – regarded identification with the “tzarist prison of nations” as uncomfortable.

*Disintegration of the Soviet Union was inevitable and strategically positive outcome, as far as Russia historically belongs to European civilization and it's future supposes reorientation to and integration into Western political and economical institutions. In post-Cold War world national interests of Russia fundamentally coincide with the interests of Western democracies, which would like to see Russia as a democratic, wealthy and peaceful partner.*

*As far as domestic policy is concerned, economic reforms of the early 90-es were designed correctly but were not implemented properly because of the fierce opposition of social and economical losers, unable to adapt to changing environment, and the lack of political will and consistency of the national leadership. Reformers should be given a second chance, this time provided with proper political support and mobilization effort. Nevertheless, even inconclusive, previous reforms created a basic institutional infrastructure and property allocation necessary for market economy development, and the outcomes, though not perfect, should not be revised in general (in particular the results of privatization). Let market forces sort out effective and ineffective property owners. Liberal-minded democratic elite is self-positioned as a force representing the future of Russia, supported by the most dynamic and creative, well educated young generations, which only can lead their country to the road of progress. In mid-term, this electorate constitutes majority, but in short term it's ideals and policy agendas are being jeopardized by hardliners, speculating on the controversial outcomes of liberal reforms and nostalgic sentiments of elder generations.*

*Current political situation in Russia is described as posing a most serious threat to the future of democracy and liberalism since 1991. President Putin and his supporting elite came to power as a result of a prolonged and sophisticated conspiracy, carried out by the intelligence and military-industrial communities, and facilitated by the lack of cooperation and mobilization among liberal-minded political forces. Policy agenda of new Kremlin administration should be understood as a hardliner offensive on the basic values and institutions of democracy, undermining the roots of the civil society, and aimed at the concentration of power in the hands of a state bureaucracy, control over and monopolization of all resources and means for political influence, and first of all, mass media and mass communications. In long term, new regime is doomed to failure, but in short term it is able to severely undermine political freedoms and human rights in Russia, it's international political and financial credit, and as a result significantly slow down it's post-communist revival and reintegration into the mainstream of global civilization.*

The proponents of the first "imagined Russia" as outlined above represent a rather loose coalition ranging from Soviet-era dissidents and human rights activists to almost forgotten democratic leaders of the early 90-es (Egor Gaidar, etc.) to the oligarchic rulers of the late-Eltsin's era (Berezovsky, Gusinsky). These images are being retranslated daily by numerous newspapers, radio stations and TV channels, controlled or owned by last two persons, just to mention NTV, TNT, TV6, "Radio Echo Moscvy", newspapers "Segodnya", "Kommersant", "Nezavisimaya". This "imagined Russia" - due to numerous reasons which are not subject of this paper, - is being easily adapted into dominant

Western political discourse on Russia and significantly shapes public opinion in these countries as a working hypothesis on “what’s going on in Russia”.

2. The alternative “imagined Russia” is far less elaborated and still under construction, it’s key components can be reconstructed from interviews, speeches, comments and “essays” of Kremlin image-makers<sup>7</sup> as well as indirectly from analysis of policy initiatives and decisions made by President Putin<sup>8</sup> and his team.

The first important difference is understanding of the past.

*History of Russia had been continuous through-ought the XX century. Soviet period was not a black page which should be cut off, rather it was controversial, tragic and glorious epoch, which constitutes the authentic heritage of Russia. One should not be blamed or ashamed (any more) of his past, as far as he served and cared about his nation, community and family, in good faith and in pursuit of common good.*<sup>9</sup>

*August –91 putsch was a tragic mistake, it led to disintegration of Soviet Union, which was negative and avoidable outcome of Gorbachev’s Perestroika.*

*Belovezsky treaty is a shame which has no excuse. Gradual and multi-speed reintegration, at least within Slavonic core of former Union, should be a priority of Russian foreign policy, though not of the first order .*

*At the same time Russia has to break out of the “post-soviet” geopolitical trap, which keeps her foreign policy provincial and limited. The concept of “near abroad” should be abandoned: Russia is a natural-born global power, able to pursue it’s interests on the global scale.*

Post-Soviet period of newest Russian history is portrayed as a second “smuta”,<sup>10</sup> and the treason among political elite and leaders is being highlighted as the most important characteristic of this concept.

*Corrupted elite groups acted as selfish irresponsible aliens, as occupants in their own country, neglecting national interests and pushing Russia to the brink of (nponacmu).*

*Previous political elite actually distorted the very essence of democracy, establishing the rule of oligarchic minority, while depriving the vast majority of Russian people of its wellbeing and basic rights, pushing tens of millions of people to the verge of physical survival. Political elite brutally cheated the democratic majority of the late 80-es and early 90-s, facilitated critical discreditation of the very idea of democracy and market economy.*

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7 Сергей Земляной *О некоторых аспектах политики президента Путина* Русский Журнал / Политика / [www.russ.ru/politics/articles/20000606\\_zemlyano.html](http://www.russ.ru/politics/articles/20000606_zemlyano.html)

Г. Павловский «Россия обретает себя» / *Красная звезда* 07 марта 2001

Г. Павловский Список публикаций <http://www.russ.ru/authors/pavlovsk.html>

8 Главные выступления, обращения и пресс-конференции Владимира Путина (март 2000 - март 2001 г.) <http://vvr.ru/2000/>

Полный текст Послания Президента РФ Владимира Путина Федеральному собранию <http://www.strana.ru/print/986299751.html>

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, that this controversial identity appeals both to the proponents and opponents of *Ancient regime*.

<sup>10</sup> Smuta (“Time of trouble”) in Russian history refers to the first quarter of XVII century, marked by political disorder, social unrest and treason of ruling elites.

*Putin's agenda appeals to this cheated "democratic majority" and promises restoration and rehabilitation of authentic democratic ideals and institutions.* Negative image of adversary is probably the most elaborated component of the whole construction. It rests on the recently coined notion of the "State-2":

*"State-2 is an ultracentralised system of private control over political and economical institutions... A private club of "democratic barons" dominates political process via shadow tools of control over mass communications, regional and state governments and corrupted bureaucracies... They secure those shadow mechanisms with private paramilitary units, practicing espionage and illegitimate violence, what makes them typically equal to organized crime... This is a highly organized, hi-tech instrumental apparatus, which employs almost one million of the best professional personnel available in this country, well paid selected on the basis of personal loyalty... Offensive potential of this shadow power is enormous, consolidated and mobilized much better than one of the legitimate federal government. In the crisis situation it is still able to seize power in Russia... If State-2 is not deconstructed by legitimate government in 2000 year, in the year 2001 Russia may have another President"<sup>11</sup>*

The last conceptual component of this "imagined Russia" refers to the constructive (positive) part of current agenda, and it can be labeled as "Russia under Putin":

*"Smuta", the times of trouble are over. Russia is in the process of self-determination: internally and externally. Russia is concentrating on its basics. Simple questions and obvious answers are in fashion today: people must be paid for their work, there must be electricity and heat in their homes, criminals must be kept in prison, laws must be enforced, etc. One can't erect a roof before basement and walls are in place. Russia will be a democratic polity with market economy, as soon as it can afford and will deserve it. Democratic choice, made in August 1991, must be reinforced and applied into real life of millions of Russian people. It's a peaceful revolution in the authentic meaning of the word, that is "revolve", the coming back to initial democratic impulse of the August-91. And as any revolution, even peaceful, it will necessarily change the established allocation of economic property and political power in certain ways, and certain well-placed groups will not like it*

*at all. That's why it is vitally necessary to mobilize wide democratic pro-Putin support and convert it's potential into political action.*

*But in no way Russia will ever be again a testing ground for experiments, conducted either by domestic or foreign "experts". It will solve its problems itself, in order to regain respect and credit of it's own people and it's foreign partners.*

Two alternative "imagined Russias" as outlined above by no means exhaust the current political discourse in Russia, but they clearly dominate it. I reserve for myself the freedom from judgment concerning their relevance to the "real life". If asked which one matches the reality, the shortest and perhaps the most correct answer is: "neither".

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<sup>11</sup> Gleb Pavlovsky, "State-2", *Rusky Journal* – [www.russ.ru](http://www.russ.ru)  
[http://www.russ.ru/politics/articles/20000601\\_gpavl.html](http://www.russ.ru/politics/articles/20000601_gpavl.html)