

The Crisis of Consciousness in the Russian Internet: The Experience of Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The crisis poses a specific practice of representation of consciousness. The current situation in the Russian media is characterized by a lack of freedom of speech where the traditional media is controlled by the state. It has made the Internet the only platform where there is a possibility to implement the various forms of expression of the crisis of consciousness. Russian authorities use the crisis in order to demonstrate the correctness of their strategy of social and economic policies. This appears to be a very specific way of constructing social and cultural reality being developed. The Russian Internet provides space for the regularly produced animated film "Mr. Freeman," which is focused on Russian crisis of consciousness. The video shorts were analyzed as "description of discursive events"(Foucault). Discourse analysis provides an opportunity to highlight the discursive elements of two types; these are the symbolic and the semantic, which form the two levels of the crisis consciousness. The symbolic level the series includes images of Napoleon, the Little Prince, a meat grinder, the thinker, Caesar, and finally, a spider. On the semantic level this includes a free man, multiple "fluid" identities, the negation of cultural stereotypes typical of popular culture, the denial of the basic principles of the consumer society, anarchism as a reaction to the totalitarian state penetration into all spheres of social life and anti-hierarchy. The predominance of these images shows the current crisis of consciousness of Russian Internet users, which is expressed and oriented towards symbolic forms of protest. The crisis generates the specific practices of representation of the consciousness (it can be characterised as crisis consciousness), on the one hand, which are hardly revealed by the classic methods of sociology, and, on the other hand, are expressed in particular ways through the unconventional media and the forms of arts.

Keywords: Russia; Russian Internet; Crisis consciousness; Discourse Analysis.

1. Introduction

The lack of media freedom and non-state controlled traditional mass media, such as TV and print media, is typical for the Russian media space. This makes web the sole platform for the public discussions and for framing the various forms of crisis consciousness.

Crisis consciousness is a specific form of the public sentiments. It becomes the main mode of the social sentiments at the current state of the social evolution that is prompted by the present events, as well as is inherent to an individual's existence amid the society of risk and uncertainty. "The risk of events with serious consequences" (Giddens, 1991) is increasing in the contemporary society. "Our society of the residual risk has evolved into the society without any guarantees, it is unsecured, and the paradox is that the safety is diminishing as the risks grow" (Beck, 1992), as long as any measures aimed at reducing risk and ensuring guarantees are focused on the previous stage of the social evolution – industrial – and became therefore ineffective in the era of permanent uncertainty of postmodernity. The feeling of hazard represents the psychological aspect of risk with the phenomena, which are capable of damaging, being considered dangerous. The risk means the likelihood of negative or disastrous developments, i.e. the developments, which can endanger people, damage properties, and destruct the environment. In this case, risk means the probability of a negative development, a potential loss, and the hypothetical probability of damage, undesired results, and the style of social management amid the uncertainty. The understanding of the contemporary society as the society, which permanently anticipates the disaster (with regard either to the global population, which expects the apocalypse, or to an individual, who does not have any clear-cut perspective of the personal development path, and is therefore continuously

choosing the identity), to some extent predetermines all the variety of social practices.

The empirical evidence of crisis consciousness can be found in the survey by Standard Eurobarometer 78. According to it, "after recording a spectacular 21-point rise between spring and autumn 2011 (68%), pessimism regarding the impact of the crisis on jobs remained high, but nevertheless fell by eight percentage points in spring 2012 (60%). Six months later, it has increased again slightly to 62%, close to the level recorded the first time this question was asked in May-June 2009. At the same time, 29% (-1) of respondents are more optimistic about the future" (Standard Eurobarometer 78). Despite some time gaps (the geographical discrepancies – by countries – can be even more significant due to the differences in social and economic situation), starting 2008, the economic conditions in many countries have been viewed by the majority of citizens as poor or very poor with such an opinion remaining largely intact. Most of the Europeans believe the crisis has not passed its peak yet anticipating the worst scenario. Eurobarometer has clearly recorded the pessimistic sentiments in the most of EU countries. As such, around 62% Europeans demonstrate pessimism, notwithstanding in the majority of EU countries pessimism has strengthened compared to the previous survey (in spring 2012). Economic forecasts remain mainly negative, with the key issue for the most of Europeans being price growth.

According to the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (WCIOM), the Russians show virtually no optimism either. However, the problems, which raise concerns, are of completely different nature. The anticipations of a price increase are also among the major issues in the Russians' public opinion. However, these expectations come second following *the views over housing and utilities infrastructure, as well as over housing and utilities services* (WCIOM database). Thus, the Russians fear not so much global transformations, so just upcoming winter with its cold weather, and as a consequence, foresee new difficulties in a daily routine, which are associated with an increase of prices for vital electricity and hot water. Such a situation has remained unchanged over the years, while price growth and other negative developments in economics threatening to the Russians do not relate to the economic crisis in their minds and remain unchanged over the decades.

The changes to the social mind and the display of its crisis forms at the of XX century in Russia are observed by many researchers, which define it as "paradoxical mind", "crisis consciousness", "split/broken conscience", "marginal", "calamitous" or "utopian" mind. Each of these definitions underlines the severity and abnormality, which is verified by polls on social well-being.

The crisis sentiments, revealed by the traditional research polls, have been the characteristic of the Russians' social mind over the years. On the one hand, specifically due to their stability and gained attributive nature, they do not lead to a rise in social unrest. On the other hand, the crisis sentiments offer an opportunity for large-scale manipulations with shaping a certain image of the global economic crisis in the Russians' mind among others.

The reaction to real and potential hazards and experience of them significantly differ from social fears of the population of the other countries. The endurance of the Russians has developed into disregard of hazards, demobilization, the lack of adaptation, and substitution for threat sources (that might result in paradoxicality, duplicity etc.). This leads to the loss of what is happening, to disorientation, and to social maladjustment. The anticipation of the "doomsday", in its turn, results in the collapse of the value system giving a rise to destructive forms of behaviour.

2. The middle class as a proxy of the unique crisis consciousness

The penetration of crisis consciousness is extremely high in the current Russian society. However, the fact of the existing social differentiation in Russia should be considered, which itself is very dramatic. The polls at the country-wide level do not incorporate the groups' of the population, which think otherwise compared to the dominating and entrenched ideological scheme, which has been established in the society. Moreover, according to the foreign pattern of the social stratification, these particular groups are bound to be the basis of the middle class, the presence of which remains arguable in up-to-date Russia. The main contradiction is that the average Russian does not belong to the middle class under the accepted standards in contemporary sociology, as only 4-6% of Russians match the definition. Furthermore, the problem is not only in the quantity, but in the quality when it comes to a high-status, educated, and financially cushioned Russian. Such a Russian could hardly be attributed to the middle class also due to the typical for all the Russians controversy and paradox of crisis consciousness: "Our respondents are not the majority in any respect, not proactive, and more importantly, they do not feel themselves being a consolidated group, which is united by common interests and values and capable of defending them" (Dubinin, 2012).

Hence, the official data on the average Russian deliver the image of an individual possessing crisis consciousness, and having average social, demographic and economic features. The data basically reflect the

information not on the middle class, but on an individual, who is provincially and conservatively minded, concerned about his/her instantaneous problems of the consciousness, socially vulnerable, and with low income. The views of such an individual, collected by WCIO, are in fact the majority opinion amid strong social polarization.

3. The image of the economic crisis in the Russian public media

For an average Russian therefore, the economic crisis exists in Europe only – this view is advocated by the Russian media. The crisis might have hit Russia, but the prompt and effective measures undertaken by the Russian officials helped prevent the dramatic social and economic consequences unlike in most of the other countries. While economic downturn, rise in unemployment, deterioration in social protection, price growth amid overall decline in wages in Russia are still likely, this will be much of the result of the global crisis, which Europe with its improper preventing actions was unable to overcome. This view is shared not only by the public media (which are represented mainly by TV channels, regularly demonstrating social unrest in Europe spiked by the crisis and describing it as an indicator of economic recession, which, in its turn, suggests the future failure of the Europeans' liberal values and democratic political systems). The public media primarily set Russia's stability against the European crisis, using it as a way of the legitimization of authorities' actions in all the areas while explaining that the situation in Russia remains relatively stable due to the balanced measures of the current country's leadership. At the same time, the Russian expert community is well aware of the fact that the economic is slowing down in Russia and the country is facing the budget deficit, unemployment, cost cutting in the social sphere and some other crisis phenomena, which are well-known for the Europeans. All this happens despite remaining high energy resources prices, which are the backbone of Russia's financial welfare.

The Russian authorities' attitude towards the crisis, manifested by the local public media, is quite specific and seems to be guided by the remaining constant crisis consciousness. On the hand, the economic crisis itself has not been recognized as the fact by the country's official bodies. Specifically, the Russian officials disregard the hazardous for the local society social and economic indicators of the crisis (lower living standards, marginalization of most of the population, unemployment etc.). On the other hand, having stated that the crisis hardly hit Russia, the officials cast themselves as helpers and rescuers for Russia from the disasters, which widespread across Europe, and seek to use the crisis as a prove of their reliable social and economic strategy (which excludes the commitment to the European liberal values), as well as seek to act as rescuers for Russia and to protect it from the calamities invading Europe.

This determines the specific way of media discourse, which reflects the crisis consciousness, about the crisis. However, the phenomenon of constantly growing pessimistic sentiments as a whole, which prompts various social practices, as mentioned above, is typical both for Russia and Europe. The current situation across the globe is characterized by sluggish consumption, political apathy, radicalization of electoral behaviour, transformation of family roles, shift in career development and education, and other features, which have been caused particularly but not exclusively by the crisis that undoubtedly could be in the meantime their product.

4. The crisis consciousness of the Russian Internet users

The expert opinion in Russia is represented by the media, which are not under the government control. One of them is the Internet. According to the official data, approximately 60% of the Russians are the active Internet users, while their social and demographic characteristics differ from the average across Russia. A typical Internet user is a 30-year-old man with higher education, who constitutes the basis of the middle class in Russia, actively participates in the economic life as a consumer, as well as a worker or a producer. Namely his view reflects the opinion of an Internet user. This is of particular interest, giving the importance of such a personality in influencing the overall climate in Russia, whether economic, political or cultural.

The existing economic crisis has penetrated into the Russians' social consciousness and set afloat the latent elements. The economic slump, which negatively impacted all the population strata in the other countries and exacerbated the situation mainly for the poorest people, hit mostly that 4-6% of the Russians, who reached the certain level of the welfare. The poorest strata were supported at the expense of those Russians. They served as an economic premise for a spike in the citizen advocacy unfolding into the protests and demonstrations at the end of 2011 – early in 2012. The political prerequisite for such an unusual phenomenon (its novelty involves the emergence of the protest moods within the conservative stratum) was parliamentary and presidential elections with officials' shameless attempts to distort the reality and to employ the administrative leverage. Hence, the strong feeling of rebellion among the population rose.

We have described the overall political and economic context, in which the protest moods arose in Russia. However, the most important was the cultural premise. In this case, it could be interpreted as the specific of communicative practices. There is a lack of free media in Russia, i.e. there are virtually no possibilities for a legitimate people alliance via the official communication media. The Internet therefore has developed into a platform to generate protest rallies and accumulate pro-opposition forces. It seems clear that the ways and the forms of the sociality itself, which have developed within the web space, prior to the current financial crisis, are transforming into more concise ones with regard to the instantaneous situation (in this particular case, they turned into the specific view on the economic crisis and protest moods, caused by the breach of the presidential election legitimacy in Russia).

We emphasize that the forms themselves already have the solid shapes. If it were not the case, another peculiarity would not exist – the protest moods have not been limited to online discussions in social networks, blogospheres, message boards, and the other web resources, while this would be enough for the middle class of the Russians, who were raised in the soviet times, accustomed to the dissident-style critics of the political regime, and were inclined to express publicly their discontent – the protest moods, initially derived from the web space, have developed into the mass street protests and the basis for establishing tangible groups of individuals.

All in all, the economic crisis appears in the Internet discourse as a means of expressing the internal opposition. The economic crisis can be found in blogs of political oppositionists, in social networks, on web sites of pro-opposition print media. It was the Internet discourse, which drove the crisis consciousness (that is equally typical for the Russians and the Europeans, as mentioned above) to the active stage and built massively widened social protest of the groups, which are potentially capable of defending their interests.

5. The discourse analysis of the animated web series “Mr Freeman”: theoretical and methodological foundations

Under these circumstances, quite a specific way of social reality construction emerges, which is aimed at expressing the view of “intellectual minority” of the Russia’s population. One of the examples is the animated web series cartoon “Mr Freeman”, regularly appeared in the Russian web space. Here it is considered as the conflux of the Russian crisis consciousness. The choice of “Mr Freeman” cartoon as the subject of research is firstly due to the specific overview of the financial crisis in the Russian media, and secondly, it examples the most popular media product in the country’s Internet space. So far, 19 video series were shot, each of 3-minute playing time only. However, more than 10 mln Internet users watched each of the series. In this case, we consider the discourse analysis the most suitable research tool. It allows examine the most prevalent, albeit latent structure elements of the consciousness. That said the footage was analysed based on the theoretical and methodological prerequisites within the research scheme elaborated by Michel Foucault. According to the scholar, the variety of objects can be interpreted “as a pure description of discursive events as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it.” (Foucault, 1969). In addition, the essential part of the discourse is that what can be indicated as a context, which is cultural, social, and material environment, at the same time externally defining the nature of the discourse and being its substance – the discourse shapes the environment and is its immediate form. M. Foucault defines the discourse as “the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation [...] is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined. Discourse in this sense is not an ideal, timeless form [...] it is [...] a fragment of history [...] posing its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality.” (Foucault, 1969). Consequently, the event line of the cartoon can be investigated through a) the immediate surrounding, that is the social situation, in which the former is constructed; b) formal elements of the images; c) analysis of the informative abstracts of the existing discourse.

The discourse analysis was implemented within the theoretical framework, introduced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe, 2008). Based on it, the empirical discourse analysis implies highlighting the following elements in the examined text:

- Nodal points, meaning signifiers, and myths, which in general can be qualified as the main symbols in the structure of discourse;
- Chains of equivalence, which create the meanings of the main symbols;
- Notions, referring to identity: formation of group, identity, and representation;
- Notions for the analysis of conflict: floating signifiers, antagonism, and hegemony.

The research framework was modified in such a way that the social, cultural, and political contexts, in which the aforementioned discourse phenomenon has been formed, constitute the specific object of the analysis.

6. Context and identity in the text of Mr Freeman

The competitive discourse that stands against Mr Freeman's utterances is the dominating political discourse with its abovementioned characteristics in the Russian modern society. The stereotypes in individuals' consciousness about the most crucial events and facts, their assertion and association with the ideological schemes – metanarratives, – which govern any given society, are reflected in the patterns of the popular web cartoons created by anonymous producers. In this case, the propagated by the public media system of values should be attributed as metanarratives. Such a system of values embraces stability as opposed to the 1990-s radical transformations without any social guarantees, as well as to the uncertainty in the Western countries, which look vulnerable in the face of the financial crisis; the underlined unique development path of Russia with the hallmarks of nationalism; declaration of "sovereign democracy", which suggests no actual consideration of the public opinion, yet exploits it for a purpose of manipulation; construction of authoritarian, semi-feudal, bureaucratic, and corruptive model of polity with unlimited power, which does not have and must not have any counterbalance in the form of civil society and freedom of media, as the participation in ruling the country is supposed to be alien to the peoples of Russia; no necessity in the rule-of-law state with the latter being substituted by the idea of leading existence in all fairness, but not in law.

The overall cultural context, in which the web series "Mr Freeman" emerged, and which shaped its aesthetic side, can be called postmodernity (its understanding is rather broad here – on the one hand, it is the theoretical approach to studying the today's situation, on the other hand, it is a set of developed social and cultural practices). From the view of both formality and aesthetics, this predetermines such features of the cartoon, as clip slicing, i.e. the rapid change of screenplays and images; the introduction of historically and geographically various cultural phenomena as symbols; the mixture of ineloquent and grandiloquent genres, which is exhibited in literary arts, as well as in jargon. Postmodernity as a theoretical approach allows utilize the categories and concepts of postmodernism, including the death of the subject and loss of belief in metastories theses, as well as pluralistic universe of identities and imitating nature of the social reality, overloaded with information.

The identity of a discourse's author is also considered in more broad sense. Apart from it is represented as the Self of the cartoons' creators, the social group as the target audience was scrutinized. The target audience of "Mr Freeman" was the Russian middle class in its specific meaning. The consciousness of the middle class, as stated above, has shaped into the distinctive form in the web space.

7. Symbolic and conceptual elements of discourse in "Mr Freeman" web series

The investigation of the chains of equivalency, which are associated with the formation of meanings of the main signifiers, is aimed at uncovering solely the key elements of discourse as being equal. The analysis of meanings indicates that these are the notions to describe an individual, firstly, on behalf of whom the story is told; secondly, whom Mr Freeman addresses to (this is crucially in light of his ambivalence. While Mr Freeman sets himself against the crowd, he does not completely separate himself from it by using pronoun We): *the God, one among many, everybody, a sane man, a red neck, Me, a painted little man, a teacher, billions, you-all, somebody, a cartoon, an egotistic idiot, a puppet, the personality.*

The inconsistency of the semantic set is due to the duality of consciousness in the discourse, as exaltation, self-humiliation, the perception of own capabilities and powerlessness are all mixed together. Such a contradictory is characteristic of the crisis consciousness.

Based on the discourse analysis, the meaningful entities have been identified, which compiled the conceptual elements of the discourse. The subsequent classification allowed figure out two groups of elements – symbolic and semantic – which correspond to two levels of the crisis consciousness.

The symbolic elements incorporate the images of Napoleon, a small prince, a mincing machine as an icon of human being existence, a thinker (a writer, an intellectual, and an artist), Caesar, a spider, a chain, a star, a castle, a cemetery. Overall, the gloomy images prevail, which cast if not the feeling of a doomsday, then the necessity of the dramatic changes to the current situation.

The semantic elements include a free man; diversified floating identity, the rejection of stereotypes, which are typical for mass culture; disbelief in fundamentals of consumer society; anarchism as a reaction to the total government intervention into the all domains of the social fabric; anti-hierarchy. Negativity thus prevails in the evaluations of the developments and individuals' features.

One of the major themes, delivered by Mr Freeman, is the call for withstanding the manipulation on the part of

those, who possess the power, rule the consciousness of an individual, and gain the access to mass media. A TV set is defined as a *zombie-box*, while TV broadcasting is interpreted as *zombieing*. The Internet, which distracts individuals from their real lives, has negative connotations, yet it is the source of distribution of the cartoon about Mr Freeman himself. The painted little man accuses the viewers in that they prefer to express themselves in an online mode and to declare *their civic stances by clicking a Like button* rather than undertaking the concrete steps. Manipulation is possible solely on the basis of unification – *“the system controls all of you unless you are alike! But if everyone starts thinking not by-the-numbers, the system will lack of mechanisms, methods, and rules to punish each of you.”*

The perception of self as an educator is intrinsic to Mr Freeman that has resulted in recurrent images, associated with light and flame, such as a lightening lamp, a candle, a ray of light or of a star, and even an explosion (of a bomb or a nuclear bomb).

Mr Freeman rarely touches the political topics with the exception of the image of the president, who addresses the nation with his New Year speech. The political issues come up indirectly in the cartoon (the favour of rallies in Russia was expressed as follows *“those, who were zombified by the global brainwash, have suddenly tuned in and started working”*) or was displayed figuratively (e.g., the case when Mr Freeman addresses to Che Guevara). Mr Freeman calls for changes, demanding them from himself, while speaking about the revolution of consciousness and the need to eliminate stereotypes, propagated by mass media.

The domination of these images proves the fact that the consciousness of the Russian Internet user resides in crisis, which is reflected via the focus on the symbolic systems of protest nature.

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