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The Language of Russian Political Discourse and National Myth

One of the specific historical and cultural characteristics of the Russian political discourse is its orientation to precedents. It is considered correct to follow the behaviouristic models shown by one of the "heroes" (Peter I, Lenin, Stalin, etc.), to reproduce standard texts, and to compare the present situations with past situations (The Time of Troubles, Weimar Republic, NEP "New Economic Policy" (1921-1928), etc.). One of the peculiarities of the present time in Russia is the deep conflict between different social groups orientated to different precedents. Each group has its own variant of the national myth using the same means of the language for actualisation of this myth. Therefore, it is very important to analyse changes in the national cognitive foundation. Precedential phenomena are the central components of this foundation.

By the cognitive foundation, we mean a special combination of knowledge, notions, and presentations that is known to the majority of members of the lingua-cultural society. During the last years, we can observe the numerous attacks to this foundation. This causes serious changes in the foundation and is reflected by the usage of the words denoting the elements of this foundation (for example, *Ленин* 'Lenin' and its derivatives *по-ленински, ленинский* 'lenin-like, in the style of Lenin', etc.).

The destruction of broad areas of the Russian cognitive foundation determines the necessity of restoring it and introducing new text-precedents, name-precedents, and situation-precedents into it. The contemporary Russian political discourse provides numerous examples of the struggle for the precedential phenomena. Some of these examples are presented in our scientific report.

We will place emphasis on the use of name-precedents (PN). By name-precedents, we understand a specific group of proper nouns relating to either

1) a widely known text, which as a rule belongs to text-precedents (such as the proper names *Mitrofanushka, Khlestakov*) or

2) a situation commonly known to native speakers which appears as a precedent one (*Ivan Susanin, Judas*). The use of PN actualises the nationally determined, minimised notion implied by the name. We will permit ourselves to refer to a very striking example used more than once in our previous papers:

At the 1993 parliamentary election, the *Democratic Choice of Russia* movement adopted the Bronze Horseman image as its emblem: In the minds of the electorate of the election programme within this political movement, it was most likely to be associated with the reign of Peter the Great. Visual and verbal advertisements of the movement contained numerous references and allusions to the Emperor. The example under consideration obviously appeals to the minimised concept of Peter the Great, the notion stored in the cognitive base after which the ruler is perceived as the Tsar-Reformer who converted Russia into a world power in the shortest time. It is notable that *Russia's Choice* presented the programme that may be described as liberal-bourgeois: The programme proclaimed the protection of human rights, economic, political, and spiritual personal liberty, and so on. At the same time, members of this political movement were not in the least troubled by the fact that the man to whom they appealed had never been a man described as a democrat, marketist, or protector of human rights. He was, quite the contrary, one of the most despotic rulers in the world who never took into account individual interests and who roughly violated their rights in every aspect. This paradox, however, was overlooked by both the *Russia's Choice* followers and opponents: The movement replicating Peter's image referred not to a real historical person with a set of rather conflicting characteristics but to a highly reduced idea of this tsar adopted by the linguo-cultural community.

Political discourse, by definition, is suggestive. Suggestion very rarely appeals to rationale: It is much more effective when it appeals to the concepts with a powerful connotative supply. An experienced politician (in particular, a collective politician, such as newspaper, TV channel, etc.) involved in the *leader-masses'* communication is forced directly or indirectly to operate the key concepts of the national culture (*power, conscience, patriotism, honour,*

spirituality, etc. – all these are the key concepts in Russian culture). This is the case provided that he appeals not to the logic of the concept implied by the above words but instead to certain images and notions that provide reification of rather complex and differently understood concepts. The name-precedents are denotations of these notions, which are the concrete realisation of abstract concepts. Thus, Nikita Mikhalkov, full of presidential pretensions, obviously avoided the use of abstract names when he appeared on TV (TEMA programme, ORT Channel, 12 December 1998) and, more than once, resorted to the name-precedents (*Alexander Nevsky, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Stolypin, Sergiy Radonezhsky*, etc.), which became a key map of his political position. And vice versa, Egor Gaidar's appeals to rational discourse reasoning, his logically irreproachable syllogisms, and many abstract notions during TV debates had little force. Therefore, the name-precedents represent in a sense the concrete realisation of the key national cultural concepts due to their suggestive potential that is much more powerful than that of the names denoting such concepts. This is dictated by the above mentioned expressiveness and axiologism of the name-precedents.

The utterance which may be referred to political discourse is always addressed to the masses and not to individuals, whether it is a newspaper report, political speech, or even a remark of an interviewee, expressly addressed to the concrete individual but implicitly catering to a wider audience. In this event, the communicants operate a reduced number of stereotypes that bring the variety of dialectical characteristics of some "cultural object" to a rigid set of several features of the latter. Due to their peculiar properties, the name-precedents provide the best fit for active functioning in this type of communication.

The above mentioned specificity of the use of the units in question is quite vividly manifested in the analysis of aggregate texts of the mass media: These are renowned for their pronounced, political convictions (it will be quite difficult to find a different one in today's Russia, though). In addition, the newspaper interprets itself as a collective leader of the masses ("… not only a collective propagandist and agitator; but also a collective organiser"). Thus, if one looks through the reports in Zavtra, the Russian weekly, one will easily discover that the names of *Kolovrat, Zhukov, Alexander Matrosov, Kutuzov,* and the like, that is, those regarding the idea of sacrificial battle with an external enemy for the sake of fatherland liberation, are the most

common name-precedents. Among name-precedents, the names that actualise the notion of the Kulikovo battle, which is a precedential situation for Russians, are rather frequent: *Where are you, successors of Peresvet and Osliabia? All these years, the Russian architecture waited its time like Bobrok. Who is he, new Sergiy, to give us battle blessing?*, and the like. The passage below from an article by Kuniaev, where the author reminisces about his fraught with the danger in the struggle against Jewish dominance during the Brezhnev era, is rather illustrative. The author had already composed a letter on the subject and was going to place it before the Communist Party Central Committee despite the innumerable troubles he foresaw in the future. Finally, Kuniaev overcame his fears and sent a letter. He writes "*I knew, that the Nepriadva had been crossed and bridges had been burnt.*" It is notable that the native Russian Nepriadva was crossed instead of the alien Rubicon; the author uses this very name despite its rather lower "precedential status" in the Russian linguo-cultural community as compared with that of the *Rubicon*. That is quite in the order of things, since these hydronyms relate to the absolutely different situation-precedents and the proper name Nepriadva is called to actualise the notion of the Kulikovo battle, the fierce life-and-death fight against alien and infidel invaders. The author perceives himself as a warrior of Saint Dmitry Donskoy fighting against the enemy hordes. So, one may easily note the global comparison and even equation of the actualised situation-precedent with the actual speech situation, such comparison being purposely extralogical and non-discoursive. It should be noted, that comicality in the texts of this sort only a stranger may be caught in the universe of the underlying myth, that is, by one who belongs to any other myth (the democratic one, for example).

The latter example deals with the actualisation through the name-precedents of the myth adopted by a certain social community but not, of course, by the nation as a whole. Today we witness an attempt (it does not matter, deliberate or not) to create new and restore old structures of the national cognitive base in place of those transformed or destructed. Under the pretence of the role of collective leaders, newspapers try to structure certain notions, which refer to certain myths. In the circumstances of global polarisation, each party pretends to own the national invariant of "true" notion implied by a name-precedent, the only true mythology, condemning all those that do not match it as heresy and schemes of enemies (of the Fatherland, democracy, human rights, etc.). The operations with the name-precedents, which are quite ap-

parent in the Russian political discourse, vividly illustrate this struggle for the national myth.

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