ENSURING POLITICAL STABILITY
RUSSIAN NATIONWIDE TREND

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Abstract

Analysis of the practice of securing political stability in Russia shows that it is achieved through the mobilization mechanism. Governmental authorities seek to gain control over the political process and political actors. The state uses a variety of tools, which include the vertical power structure, narrowing of the range of political actors, and policy virtualization. Established mechanism is supported by the population of the country, as evidenced by the data of national analytic agencies.

Keywords: stability, security, power, regime, society

1. Introduction

"Any social system has its entropic border for each vital parameter; transition beyond this boarder means the death of the concerned system as a whole. The approach by the performance indicators of major subsystems to the maximum critical values means that society is in a state of crisis." [1] Hence the "stability represents certain parameters, whose values do not exceed the critical level" [2]. A political system is characterized by parameters, whose relative stability means the stability of political system. This includes political and institutional parameters, as well as indicators of political culture and the parameters of the legitimacy and effectiveness of power in society [2, p. 121]. To that end, the political instability may be considered as instability of political regime or frequent changes of government, as the level of political violence and protest activity in society or the inconsistency of pursued policy [I. Kolstad, *Political instability, indices of... Internet*, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2008, retrieved October 1, 2014, http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3045301969.html].

Society that is considered from a perspective of the system approach has several mechanisms to ensure stability. This is "a set of hierarchically subordinated regulatory institutions for centralized management of society, on the one hand, and self-organizing institutions of civil society, on the other hand" [3]. Accordingly, we are talking about the mobilization and autonomous

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mechanism to ensure the stability of society, and in particular, its political subsystem. Mobilization mechanism is inherent mainly to authoritarian and totalitarian political regimes [4]. It is characterized by the desire of state power to gain control over other areas of public life and all political actors. This is due to the fact that the autonomy threatens the authority of the central government and undermines political stability attained. The second mechanism takes place in case of real democracy [M. Marshall and B. Cole, *Global report 2009. Conflict, governance and state fragility*, 2009, retrieved October 1, 2014, http://www.systemicpeace.org/Global%20Report%202009.pdf], where a significant contribution to the stability is made by various social groups and civil society institutions, whereas the role of the central government is recognized secondary. As a rule, the stability of democracies is associated with the idea of powers separation in a state, the existence of political pluralism and consensus, as well as observance of citizens' rights [5, 6].

2. Methodology

System approach [7, 8] allows one to define the political system as a subsystem of the social system, which is engaged in the multiple connections and relationships with the environment and exposed to its influence, as well as to determine the political stability as a state of dynamic equilibrium of the political system of society. Authors used general scientific methods (analysis, transition from the abstract to the concrete), as well as secondary analysis of the data on empirical studies conducted at the federal level (the 'Public Opinion' Foundation, 2000-2005; the 'Levada-Centre', 2005-2014; and the VCIOM - The All-Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, 2000-2012).

3. Main part

Considering the Russian political practice, one can talk about the dominance of the mobilization mechanism to ensure stability. This is evidenced by the following arguments: "building a rigid vertical power structure, non-competitive system of political parties and elections, suppression of the opposition", abridgment of "the freedom of speech and other forms of political pluralism, the selective application of the rule of law and the use of judicial practice in the interests of the ruling elite" [2, p. 120]. In today's Russia, the "tools to ensure the stability of the political order include: 'strengthening of vertical power structure' and the 'oil needle'. This results in the constant dependence of the employees, retirees, residents of small towns and rural areas of the state on permanently indexed temporary state bonuses, allowances and pensions; elimination from the political process of real political actors such as governors, opposition politicians and opposition parties, independent mass media, and large business structures; the transformation of parliament, the party system and elections into regulated institutions, dependent on monocentric super presidential imperious will; discredit of the opposition, its transformation from

the political actor into the object of pervasive impact of political technology; as well as general virtualization of policy." [9] At the same time, in European countries, policies to ensure stability are implemented in accordance with the principles of devolution, self-empowerment of regions [10], consociation, and parliamentary representation of indigenous ethnic groups.

Vertical power structure stands the central element of the mobilization mechanism to ensure the stability of Russian society. Its strengthening in the 2000's was a response to the need to overcome the consequences "of the 'heritage' of a freedom parade, governors' claims and activity, as well as to minimize any political conflicts associated with these processes" [11].

To increase the effectiveness of the regional administration system, seven federal districts were established in 2000 (a number of federal districts was increased up to nine in 2014), where the institution of plenipotentiaries was introduced in order to "enhance the effectiveness of the federal bodies of state power and improve the system of control over the implementation of their decisions" [11]. That is, plenipotentiaries began to carry out mediation between the supreme executive authority and the local authority of the subordinate entities of the Federation.

According to the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VTSIOM), in 2000, up to 56% of the population agreed that the establishment of federal districts "will be useful to restore order in the country" [*What do you think about the establishment of seven federal districts headed by the presidential plenipotentiaries?* September 15, 2000, retrieved October 3, 2014, http://www.wciom.ru/zh/print_q.php?s_id=343&q_id=27581&date=15.09. 2000]. The appointment of authorized plenipotentiaries in the federal districts by the President has received a high degree of support as well. Up to 64% of respondents noted that such a measure will "strengthen law and order in the country" [http://www.wciom.ru/zh/print_q.php?s_id=343&q_id=27581&date= 15.09.2000]. It should be noted that under the category of 'order', Russian citizens generally mean the political and economic stability.

The reorganization of the Federation Council was one of the measures to strengthen the vertical power structure. Previously, members of the Federation Council were representatives of regional political elite, namely the governor and the speaker of the regional assembly. According to the Federal Law 'Concerning the procedure for the formation of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation', which came into force on 8th of August, 2000, the members of the body were representatives from the executive and legislative branches of the subordinate entities, appointed by the highest official and the legislative authority of the subordinate entity of the Russian Federation. Thereby, the political influence of the regional elite at the federal level was reduced, and its activity was put under the control of the central authorities. At the same time, up to 44% of Russian citizens thought that it would be 'better' if the governors and heads of regional legislatures were not the members of the Federation Council [*Around the Law on the Federation Council*, retrieved October 1, 2014, http://www.bd.fom.ru/report/cat/power/ pow_law/dd001246].

"The transition to the establishment of the higher officials' institute of the subordinate entities of the Russian Federation together with the presidential power and election mechanism in the regional representative body" was another measure for strengthening the vertical power structure [12]. A new mechanism for electing the heads of the subordinate entities of the Federation led to the fact that "the head of the region has become a person accountable to the President, carrying before him responsibility and depending on the will of the President" [13].

Implemented measures have led to a decrease in the status of governors and strengthening of central control over the subordinate entities of the RF, as well as ensured the dominant role of the federal government in the political decision-making. In 2004, only 38% of respondents agreed that this measure was necessary to ensure the unity of the state, while 48% regarded this measure as a negative [*To elect or appoint governors?* September 24, 2004, retrieved October 5, 2014, http://www.wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=921]. However, as far back as in 2005, up to 49% of respondents rated the attempted move as positive, while the share of negative ratings dropped to 29% [*Election of governors: one year after the introduction of a new order*, September 12, 2005, retrieved October 5, 2014, http://www.wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=1683]. In 2008, up to 42% of respondents noted that the decision to abolish the direct elections of governors more or less justified itself [*The authority of governors: to expand, reduce or leave as is?* July 11, 2008, retrieved October 5, 2014, http://www.wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=10374]. Therefore when in 2012 a question arose about the restitution of the governors' election, assuming, however, the presence of certain filters and barriers, 72% of respondents supported this innovation. Up to 75% of citizens supported the introduction of the president's right to dismiss elected governor from office due to "loss of confidence" [*The return of governors' elections: do we need "filters"?* April 27, 2012, retrieved October 5, 2014, http://www.wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid= 112752]. That is, the population of Russia, as a whole, agrees with the necessity of a certain control over the activities of the regional authorities by the central power.

Generally, the influence of the established vertical power structure on stability ('order') is differently rated by citizens. Thus, positive assessments dominated at the beginning: between 2005 and 2011, from 38 to 42% of the respondents claimed that the vertical power structure "does more good than harm", while from 27 to 32% claimed that it "does more harm than good" [*The Russians about the "vertical of power", corruption and bureaucracy*, February 9, 2012, retrieved October 8, 2014, http://www.www.levada.ru/09-02-2012/rossiyane-o-vertikali-vlasti-korruptsii-i-byurokratii]. However, since 2012 there has been a reverse trend: the proportion of those who appreciates the existence of the vertical power structure varies within the range from 30 to 32%, while the number of those who speak about the harms of it has increased up to 35-40% [*The approval of the President and the government, the parties ranking*, May 15, 2013, retrieved October 8, 2014, http://www.levada.ru/15-05-

2013/odobrenie-prezidenta-i-pravitelstva-reiting-partii]. Such a shift in the perception of the power vertical structure by citizens is primarily due to reduction of its effectiveness, the increasing influence of the bureaucracy and corruption in government authorities. With that, factors, such as too frequent changes of government authorities that may affect the stability of the political system, selfishness and corruption of the ruling elite, as well as its deviation from the principles and practices of political changes, inequity in the distribution of administrative functions, capabilities and benefits, according to S. Eisenstadt, may prevent successful political modernization [14].

Increasing the efficiency of public administration, the government has also taken steps towards regulating the composition of policy actors. It is, above all, about the fate of political parties as "authorized organizations of political agents of society, who are associated with the control over government power and who compete for support of the people with another group or groups" [15]. One can point out a number of measures designed to regulate the activities of political parties, such as the prohibition of electoral blocs and regional political parties, increasing the threshold, tightening (and then easing) requirements for the registration of political parties. These and other measures have contributed to "the establishment of formal standards, narrowing the range of actors who could offer an alternative political course in a legitimate way and have access to the distribution of political resources" [16].

Measures towards limiting the number of political actors, namely the parties, were supported by the majority of population. The reason for this is seen in the visions, existing in society, concerning activities of parties and their required number. Thus, at the beginning of the 2000's, up to 52% of the respondents were convinced that political parties bring the country more harm than good. At that, one of the reasons of such attitude of Russians towards the parties was the opinion that "the struggle for power between the parties themselves threatens social stability, causes confusion, chaos, discord, and hinders the executive powers" [*On the harm of political parties*, retrieved October 10, 2014, http://www.bd.fom.ru/report/cat/polit/polypar/of013201]. With respect to a multiparty system, there was no consensus among Russian citizens: in 2001, a multiparty system was supported by 41% of respondents, while 46% of respondents were against it [*Do we need a multi-party system?* retrieved October 10, 2014, http://www.bd.fom.ru/report/cat/polit/polypar/of011501]. In 2005, 29% of respondents were in favour of the existence in Russia of two or three large well-organized mass parties, whereas 25% were for a nation-wide party, 17% were for a number of small parties, and 20% of respondents noted that Russia needs leaders and rulers rather than parties. As a result, the actions of authorities, such as the determination of the required number of parties (at that time 50 thousand people), the threshold for the membership in the State Duma, and the prohibition of electoral blocs was supported by more than 50% of Russia's population [*What is the party system that Russia needs?* January 13, 2005, retrieved October 10, 2014, http://www.wciom.ru/index.php?id=268&uid=2205]. That is to say, the

measures, taken in order to narrow the range of policy actors, were in congruence with the vision of majority of the country's population and thus were supported by this majority. This situation seems to be contradictory, since the party "recruits and socializes new members, elects leaders through the internal processes of representation and elections, resolves disputes and makes decisions on policy towards the outside world" [P. Merkl, *Modern comparative politics*, New York, 1970, retrieved October 10, 2014, http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/__data/ assets/word_doc/0003/90480/FINAL_Comparative_Politics_Course_Outline_20 12-13.doc].

However, it is clear that in today's Russia "political development is twofold, i.e. both modernizing and anti-modernizing" [17]. Thus, the trend of law liberalization with respect to political parties seems to be outlined since 2009. Initially, number of people required to register a party was reduced down to 40 thousand, while since 2012 the number was reduced down to 500 people. Some of the changes were intended to simplify the procedure for registration of parties. The passed laws addressed such issues as "the allocation of deputy's seats to parties, which received 5-7% of the vote in the elections to the State Duma; the assurance of equality of parliamentary parties in the coverage of their activities by public TV and radio; reducing the age of passive electoral right (any Russian citizen, who has reached 18 years, is able not only to vote but also to be elected to a representative body at the municipal level)" [18].

Certain contribution to the political stability of the Russian society is made by prevailing model of export-resource-based economy, which gives fast and high profits, dependent at the same time on the prices of raw materials on the world market. The fact is that the current political regime in Russia is legitimized by 'voting majority' (14 million of state employees and 40 million of pensioners), which is paternalistic.

Policy virtualization is a "'reproduction' of 'imaginary' events and processes, as well as artificial images that are not related to actual political practice" [9]. "Constructing of imaginary institutions and events is gradually transformed into a power operating method, a kind of guaranteed stability of the ruling elite." [9] At that, mass media is a key instrument in policy virtualization. Development of contemporary means of mass communication provides the ability to manipulate public opinion, forming, for example, the feeling of having a high level of democratic rights and freedoms, the efficiency of the country's leadership, legitimacy and the most favourable acceptability of existing power. That is, the formation of political stability in today's Russian society "is determined not so much by the real state of affairs in the economic and social sphere, but efficient control over mass consciousness through the impact on the population and the media" [19].

According to the research conducted by VCIOM, in 2012, the overwhelming majority of Russians received information about events in the country and the world from the central (98%) and local (88%) television, press (central- 70%, local-68%), Internet (59%), radio (central-53%, local-46%) and

foreign media (26%) [*Is the whole truth in the TV?* retrieved October 1, 2014, http://www.wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid= 112941].

At that, the Russian citizens have the greatest trust to a national television; 78% of respondents trusted in a varying degree to this source of information [http://www.wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid= 112941]. As for credibility of the main federal channels, such as 'First Channel', 'Russia' and 'NTV', 53% of the population considers them as 'fairly unbiased', while 12% of respondents noted them as completely objective source of information [*Rumors of impending TV death have been greatly exaggerated*, July 12, 2013, retrieved October 10, 2014, http://www.levada.ru/12-07-2013/slukhi-o-skoroi-smerti-tv-okazalis-silno-preuvelichennymi]. That is, a major part of the Russian population believes what is said and shown on TV and almost does not cast doubts on information received. This makes the TV most effective mechanism of the state to influence public opinion. Even with all things considered, in 2014, up to 69% of the Russians agree that the main TV channels undergo state censorship, 28% are sure that in the future it will only strengthen, and 44% think that the censorship will remain at the same level [*The Russians' opinion about the mass media*, February 28, 2014, retrieved October 10, 2014, http://www.levada.ru/28-02-2014/rossiyane-o-smi]. Among the main reasons for the strengthening of state control over TV, Russians note the following: "Power feels that it is losing support among the population, and seeks to improve its 'image' (28%)"; "This is a logical consequence of all of the current policy on 'crackdown' and strengthening vertical power structure" (25%), "This is a response to increased external and internal threats, criticism from the West and the opposition" (22%) [http://www.levada.ru/28-02-2014/rossiyane-o-smi]. Thus, we can conclude that the population feels a certain impact of power through the television, which is used as one of the effective tools for the manipulation of public opinion.

As a result, under the influence of political changes on the way of ensuring political stability in Russian society there was revision of values, attitudes and ideological basis of power. From 2000 to 2013, the percentage of those, who believe that Russia should develop on its own special way, decreased from 60 to 37%, while the number of those, who think that Russia should develop along the "European civilization path, common to the modern world", on the contrary, increased from 15 to 31% [20]. Thus, we can say that the Russians do not have a clear idea of what is currently Russia and where to move on. Besides, in the period of 2008-2010, more than 50% of respondents believed that they definitely cannot influence the political processes, while over 30% noted that they most likely cannot have an impact on these processes [21]. The main reasons for non-participation of citizens in politics can be noted as the following: "we still cannot change anything" and "policy is not for ordinary people, policy is made by power".

Only voting in the elections became the main form of political participation of Russian citizens; however a large part of the population quickly disappointed in votes. Scepticism about the results of the elections still remains that may be indicated by the results of surveys of citizens before the regional

elections in 2013. Thus, up to 61% of the respondents were confident that the upcoming elections "will be just an imitation of the struggle, while the victories and the distribution of seats in the legislative bodies will be determined by the decision of the authorities" [*The Russians about the elections to the regional and local authorities*, August 3, 2013, retrieved October 10, 2014, http://www.levada.ru/03-08-2013/rossiyane-o-vyborakh-v-regionalnye-i-mestnye-organy-vlasti]. Inability to defend their interests through legal and legitimate forms of political participation have led to a significant reduction in individuals, who believe that "citizens should not be eligible to mass protests, if this somehow may have a negative impact on social stability" (in 1998, 60% of respondents agreed with this statement, while just 37% in 2012) [22]. As a result, the crisis of participation in Russian policy was vividly manifested in mass demonstrations in the period of 2011-2012.

4. Final part

Political stability plays a primary role in the overall system of social stability that is associated with the guiding and regulating role of the political system towards society. It is treated as a condition of the political system, which is characterized by relative stability of political institutions, the availability of the supporting political culture, legitimacy and efficiency of power in society; the condition, which allows the system to function effectively and to develop in the context of internal and external changes, while retaining its essential nature and parameters.

In turn, the legitimacy of the current power determines the cultural level of the population and the admissibility of the protest moods in society, since "dissatisfaction in the individual is formed due to the contradiction between his personal aspirations, expectations and requirements, and the actual situation. Growing contradictions lead to increased discontent. At some point, such discrepancies become so significant that they lead to the phenomena of frustration nature." [23]

In general, Russia's political development has wavy nature and occurs in cycles of reforms and counter-reforms. Period of reforms is characterized by differentiation and complication of the national political system.

At the same time, this stage is characterized by the growing destabilizing tendencies, which result in the manifestation of modernization crises, the weakening of state control or, in extreme cases, the collapse of the existing political system. In such circumstances there is a risk of emerging the fundamental contradictions arising in the form of questions, "Who rules?" and "By what means?" [24]. The present stage of the national political development is marked by the counter-reforms, designed to stabilize the political system after the modernization transformations of the 1990's.

As of 2013, almost a third of Russians (31%) believe that the political life of Russia is moving towards the development of democracy. When comparing to the similar indicator of 1997, the current index is higher by almost 2-fold (14%

in 1997). Russians' vision concerning the democracy development in Russia can be considered to be stable since 2005, where the opinion about the development of democracy ranged from 31% (minimum value in 2013) to 54% (maximum value in 2008). However, 34% of citizens believe that Russia needs a "very special" democracy, "corresponding to national traditions and specifics", rather than the one implemented in the developed countries of Europe and America [20, p. 196]. However, these statistical data contradict with democracy index, developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit. From 2006 to 2012, Russia's rank in terms of this index has dropped from 102 down to 122 of 167 rankings (i.e. Russia has changed the political vector from transition regime to authoritarian regime), taking place between Jordan and Ethiopia [*Democracy index 2012: democracy at a standstill*, The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2013].

5. Conclusions

In today's Russia, mobilization mechanism to ensure political stability is prevailing; its implementation in one way or another is currently supported by the population, which considers it a quite efficient tool. Between 2000 and 2014, from 71 to 85% of the population believed that presently for Russia more important is "the order, even if this will require some violations of democratic principles and restriction of personal freedoms" [*The order or democracy?* retrieved October 10, 2014, http://www.wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid= 114767].

However, the stability, achieved by the mobilization mechanism, is quite fragile and unstable. Strengthening the vertical power structure, control over the political actors, the discrediting of the opposition - all these are the efforts to ensure stability from 'above', without taking into account the impetuses from 'bottom' due to the lack of effective feedback mechanism. Policy virtualization in the long term leads to the loss of stability due to growing apathy of the population and a sharp narrowing of the social reliance of the current regime.

Acknowledgement

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