

**POLITICAL EFFICACY AND THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE: THE ROLE
OF LANGUAGE IN POLITICS**

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by

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ABSTRACT

Political Efficacy and the Russian Language: The Role of Language in Politics

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Literature Review

While linguistics has historically separated language from speech and defined language as a structured system of linguistic signs, psycholinguistics has reclaimed speech acts and their psychological and neurological effects as an important object of study. A project such as this utilizes both frameworks to study the *structure* of the Russian language as well as the psychological effects of *speaking* Russian.

Linguistic research has analyzed the function of the reflexive ending -ся (“-sya”) which can make a transitive verb passive or anti-causative. Research has also been conducted on the omitted они (they) when using an active verb, which is always translated as a passive construction. Russian speakers also use past perfective participles to emphasize the object, rather than the subject of a sentence (passive). Models of subjectivity indicate that the mere existence of multiple passive forms may be demonstrative of a passive, inefficacious collective consciousness.

Psycholinguistic studies of the Russian language suggest that there is a link between category words and the ability to differentiate between categories, particularly with color

categorization, thus linking language and perception (and thought). Some cognitive scientists characterize languages as distinguishing “cognitive universes.” This paper explores the idea of cognitive universes using the term cultural logics. Literature in cultural anthropology has posited that only information which makes sense within the cultural logic can alter behavior (i.e. cultural practices). Political efficacy is an important aspect of cultural logics. It describes what citizens perceive their role in the community to be and predicts how they will behave. This series of links may supplement our understanding of recent polls which indicate that Russian’s desire for socioeconomic change is not accompanied by a belief in their own ability to bring it about.

Thesis Statement

Low political efficacy in the Russian Federation is linked to the frequent use of (or copious ability to use) passive linguistic constructions in Russian. Low levels of political participation, however, are not as clearly related to passivity due to election abnormalities.

Theoretical Framework

This paper operates within linguistic and psycholinguistic frameworks, building specifically on language and thought theory. I rely heavily on a structuralist approach to linguistic analysis and draw from the well-known work of Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of structuralism. I also take a cultural-anthropological framework in my study of human behavior and systems of meanings.

Project Description

This paper examines the relationship between passive language constructions and political efficacy. First, I analyze concepts of subjectivity and passivity in existing literature on the Russian language. Second, I develop a framework for understanding culture and language as a function of meaning. Third, I assess the status of political interest in the Russian Federation as

reported in national surveys from the Levada Center. Finally, I examine political participation in the Russian Federation by evaluating the stability of voter turnout, the neglect of party affiliation, and the decline in protests.

Understanding how the Russian language frames ideas of responsibility and agency is vital to understanding current political culture in Russia and predicting possible outcomes for a Russia after Putin. Research has not yet connected the powerful influence linguistic constraints have on personal agency to political efficacy in Russia. The intricate connection between these two concepts should be the timely focus of future scholarship.

DEDICATION

This thesis project is dedicated to my dad, Jonathan Stokes, who hates fluffy academic writing and needless, non-functional words. Hopefully this long, fluffy academic article on the function of words – on what the structure and style of language teaches us about a culture – makes you proud.

Or at least makes you laugh.

A healthy aversion to long and unnecessary but beautiful ramblings is a good reminder to us all that: *Не все то золото что блестит*. Some of it is pure garbage. Hopefully this is not.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to first of all thank my fiancé for his unending patience, support, and healthy skepticism of my work. There is no universe in which I could have completed this without him. Secondly, I want to thank my faculty and departmental honors mentor, who agreed to read forty-some pages of thoughts I have been slogging through for quite some time. I also want to thank Dr. Maddalena Cerrato of the International Studies Department, who is a constant encouragement and steadfast believer in my ability to succeed and write well-ordered, interesting ideas. I cannot thank you enough. Finally, I want to thank my family – my parents in particular – for their commitment to supporting my education and cheering me on day after day.

INTRODUCTION

The question this thesis asks is an involved one: What is the nature of the link between passive linguistic structures in the Russian language and political efficacy and participation in the Russian Federation? This paper is accordingly divided into five discrete sections. The first section provides an overview of basic terms and linguistic and psycholinguistic frameworks. The second section presents the broad strokes of the interplay between language and thought. The third section addresses language and culture as functions which describe collective systems of meaning. The fourth section discusses political efficacy: what it is, how it is measured, and how it is connected to language. The final section evaluates political participation in three areas and posits explanations for the incongruity between reported efficacy and reported participation.

With the increasing ability to measure neurological responses (ERPs, eye-tracking studies, etc.), the intricate link between language and thought has become a subject of greater interest. The effects of passive voice have been studied extensively in several languages, exploring concepts such as guilt and blame, the passage of time, and political framing. This paper brings this investigation to another domain: the politics of the citizen. Although this analysis takes place at an intranational level, it potentially has international implications for understanding and (I hope) revising our earnest, but dubious policies of democratization.

SECTION I

BASIC TERMS AND GENERAL FRAMEWORKS

This section is comprised of a basic discussion of theory of language, linguistics, and psycholinguistics as well as a detailed look at three passive forms specific to Russian and their effects on passivity and subjectivity.

The Study of Language

It is prudent in every discussion of complex human experiences to first define key terms: What is language? What is the object of linguistics? What is the object of psycholinguistics? These three terms – especially the seemingly innocuous concept of *language* – must be properly understood in order to lay the groundwork of this paper.

Language

Language is a fundamental aspect of human interaction. Many animals make sounds and some even use such sounds to signal to fellow creatures a variety of key information about the present environment. No other creature, however, exhibits such elaborate, diverse systems of conveyed meanings as found in human languages. Human language allows individuals and communities to express and make sense of twisted sufferings, unravel the physical and metaphysical composition of the universe, and create both imaginative and practical works. What language is and what language allows us to do are indeed very important questions that numerous scholars have attempted to address. This paper utilizes the definition of language put forth by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. Language, “not to be confused with human speech,” is both a product of the human ability to speak and a “collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body” (Baskin 9). This collection of

conventions allows individuals to use their faculty of speech in a meaningful way to convey messages and complex thoughts to other members of the social body. Language as such belongs to both the individual and society and “lies astride the boundaries separating various domains” including the physical, physiological and psychological (Harris 10).

Saussure argues that language is first of all a “structured system,” both “a self-contained whole and a principle of classification” (10). Language has rules and patterns that produce words and sounds in an organized fashion. These rules dictate the breadth and capacity of the language in a moment in history *and* provide guidelines and predictability for how changes and shifts within the language will occur. Language is a system of conventions that maps arbitrary sound patterns onto concepts such that ideas can be conveyed between individuals. Saussure terms the connection between sound patterns and concepts a *linguistic sign*. A language is made up of disparate linguistic signs. Importantly, Saussure distinguishes speech (*langage* or *parole* in French) as a physical phenomenon and language (*langue*) as something of a more psychological (mental) nature. A linguistic sign is not merely the linking of a thing to a spoken name, but the linking of “a concept and a sound *pattern*” (66, emphasis added). In this way, *language* can be studied in the absence of speech (i.e. the audible production of sounds). Saussure notes, “Without moving either lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite silently a piece of verse” (66). This means that language is more than just the *physical act* of speaking, of forming particular shapes with our mouths and producing particular detectable sounds aloud. Language involves some mental conceptualization of the patterns of sounds which is accessible even in the absence of speech. In this manner, assessing a language through its written iterations is equally as valid as assessing real-time instances of speech.

Secondly, language is an inherently social, rather than a solely individual phenomenon. Every instance of language activity by an individual is in fact a representation of the larger system of meanings which has been handed down to the individual by the collective. Language thus exposes vast facets of the culture within which it arises. Saussure writes, “The associations [of sound patterns and concepts], ratified by collective agreement, which [...] make up the language are *realities localized in the brain*” (15, emphasis added). The structures of a language express the reality which speakers of the language perceive and operate within. Language as the product of collective agreement, “is never complete in any single individual, but exists perfectly only in the collectivity” (13). In a similar vein, the *word patterns* of a particular language are characterized as a “fund accumulated by the members of the community through the practice of speech, a grammatical system existing potentially in every brain,” though only perfectly in the collective of brains which make up the specific society (13).

Saussure discusses two characteristics of linguistic signs which are pertinent to address before exploring the object of linguistics itself. First, the linguistic sign is an arbitrary connection. The sound pattern chosen to represent the concept possesses no intrinsic rationale. There is no reason why the sound pattern *bird* calls to mind the concept of a small winged creature whereas the sound pattern *tree* calls to mind the concept of a rooted, woody, growing thing with leaves and bark. Secondly, the linguistic sign displays both immutability and mutability. Though the link between sound patterns and concepts is arbitrarily assigned, the individual is not free to reassign linguistic significations at will. An individual cannot readily decide that *bird* signifies instead a tall, glass skyscraper and such a decision change in actuality what concept is pulled into consciousness when the sound pattern is referenced. This is because language is a social phenomenon and belongs to the collective first and foremost. In this way it is

resistant to change. Language, on the other hand, is also subject to adaptation *over time*. Slight mutations over time become established as norms and in this way the linguistic significations of a particular language experience shifts. Thus, the arbitrary connection between sound pattern and concept, which forms the basis of the linguistic sign, is resistant to the individual's interference in an instant but vulnerable to mutations over time (77-78).

The Object of Linguistics

What is the end of linguistics? What aspect of language does it seek to unravel? Language, as a social phenomenon, is an interesting object of study for many sciences. Eighteenth century Prussian philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt remarked that language “transforms the world into a possession of the mind” (Hormann 12). German psychologist Hans Hormann explains, “Community and consciousness, rationality and knowledge are in their human form only possible with the aid of language. Its influence, as Humboldt says, extends over everything man thinks or feels, decides and achieves” (12). This transformation of experience into meaningful, sharable sound patterns is the unique capacity of language.

Language is deeply tied to the human mind and therefore the study of language necessarily involves an individual, psychological bent, but it also exists as a system understood and utilized by a community and is thus necessarily social. Saussure's discussion of the object of linguistics acknowledges both the psychological and social aspects of language study and he defines it as having two essential components: structure and speech, which are social and individual respectively. The structural component of language Saussure calls “purely psychological study,” that is, it is a study of the collective mind of the culture from which it originates. In contrast the act of speech involves “psycho-physical study,” that is, the study of

which physical, cognitive, or neurological processes are effected and affected by language (Harris 19). Saussure sees the first form of language study as linguistics “properly so called,” since it studies the *structure* of language rather than the instance of language (20). He concedes that while one might acceptably call the latter part *linguistics of speech*, the former demonstrates the true object of linguistics, that is, it analyzes, compares, and categorizes language *structures*. Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* consequently focuses primarily on linguistics “properly so called.” Saussure writes that the ends of structural linguistics are twofold: First, to trace the evolution of language and identify or reconstruct the parent languages of each linguistic family. Second, to recognize the factors or “forces operating permanently and universally” in all languages and establish general linguistic rules accordingly (6).

When this paper notes its linguistic approach to the question of passive constructions of the Russian language, it signifies the latter of these two contextualization aims. It attempts to elucidate the general consequences of the operation of passive forces in language generally and in Russian specifically.

The Object of Psycholinguistics

Where Saussure discards speech (*parole*) and the study of language in instances of speech, psycholinguistics reclaims the “genesis of *parole* [as] the central issue” (Hormann 14). Hormann explains that language as a social phenomenon involves a listener and a speaker. The information which is exchanged between them becomes the speaker’s output and the listener’s input. “The activity of the speaker which constructs and edits the message and sends it on its way is called *encoding*; the activity of the listener which, in turn, makes sense out of sound waves is called *decoding*” (18, original emphasis). Numerous studies have suggested that the framework of language affects encoding and decoding processing time.

One such study looked at Russian and English words for blue and the effect of the existence of such linguistic categories on processing time for Russian speakers and English speakers. Russian has two distinct categories and words for blue *голубой* (light blue) and *синий* (dark blue). While English allows for the distinctions of *light* or *dark* blue to be made, both shades fall within a spectrum of colors that can be validly categorized, for the English speaker, as definitively blue. In essence, Russian has two categories of blue (i.e. two *different colors*) while English has only one. Taking such category differences into account, this study administered to its subjects a simple perceptual task. Subjects were shown three color squares arranged in a pyramid shape (one square on top, two on bottom). The subject was asked to identify which of the two bottom color squares was “perceptually identical” to the top color square. The study noted at its outset,

“If linguistic effects on color discrimination are specific to the categories encoded in a speaker's language, then Russian speakers should make faster cross-category discriminations than within-category discriminations, a category advantage. For English speakers, it should not matter whether colors fall into the same or different linguistic categories in Russian, so they should not show any such differences.” (Winawer et al.)

The findings showed that a significant category advantage did indeed exist. Furthermore, this advantage was disrupted only by verbal interference, rather than by mere spatial, dual-tasking interference.

This type of study exemplifies the amalgamation of linguistics and psychology that characterizes this interdisciplinary field. Hormann explains that “*linguistics* is concerned with the structural aspects of messages” but “*psycholinguistics* [makes] use of the structures identified by this linguistics” and analyzes “the states of transmitter and receiver” in delivering or receiving

the message (19). Thus, psycholinguistics often involves the measurement of physical or neurological processes during language-processing tasks. When this paper notes its psycholinguistic approach, it takes into account such language-processing studies – centered especially on the effects of the passive voice in Russian – and incorporates their findings in an overarching theory of language.

Как Говорить По-Русски

This section will review three distinct passive forms in the Russian language and the semantic effect of their use: the reflexive verb, the implied “they” or “it,” and the short form passive participle. Each of these constructions illustrate what linguist Alina Israeli calls the “subjectivity” of the Russian language. Subjectivity is a critical concept in later discussions in Section IV on political efficacy.

Israeli divides subjectivity into two types, which she calls S1 and S2. “Both types of subjectivity result from the fact that language is the product of the *collective national linguistic consciousness*,” she writes, “It is the grid of concepts through which a speaker of a given language sees the outside world and his own inner feelings or states” (Israeli 14, emphasis mine). S1 refers to the way language and syntax shapes outlooks and perceptions of reality. S2 refers to the decision of the speaker when the language offers more than one way of phrasing an idea. S1 then is a kind of map or spectrum of perspectives which language can produce. S2 is the decision-making of the individual to drop their pin somewhere on the map or spectrum when given more than one option.

Subjectivity divided in these two parts importantly straddles the fields of both linguistics and psycholinguistics. Linguistics as it relates to analysis of the passive voice would consider elements of S1, or how the structure of language generates possible views of reality.

Psycholinguistics as it relates to analysis of the passive voice would consider elements of S2, or what the effects of the speaker's decision to use the passive voice instead of active are. Both S1 and S2 evaluate the effects on *perceptions of reality*, thus principally influencing thought.

This paper considers both S1 and S2 for the three constructions mentioned above. It is worth discussing each of these constructions according to their function within the Russian language, creating a proper foundation for the discussion of the connection between these forms of passive voice and political interest and activity.

The Reflexive Verb (-ся)

The reflexive form *-ся* (*-sja*) has many meanings. Sentences with verbs in the reflexive forms necessarily lack direct objects. The suffix *-ся* directs the action of the verb back to the grammatical subject *itself*. For example:

Он **закрыл** дверь

(On zakryl dver')

“He closed the door”

An agent (he) takes direct action on an object (the door). Whereas in:

Дверь **закрылась**

(Dver' zakrylas')

“The door closed”

The patient (the door) is acted upon by an unspecified force. This type of agentless action fosters a sense of *negative responsibility*, a term which Israeli uses to flag expressions which lack a responsible individual or party.

I will note here that the paradigmatic relationship of the Russian reflexive verb and voice is elusive and highly contested. Most linguists place the reflexive verb in either middle or passive

voice (Israeli 39-47). For the purposes of this paper, I will include *impersonal verbal constructions* (“true impersonal” and “receptive”) of the reflexive type as well as *passive constructions*. There are no real effectual psychological differences for the purposes of this paper.

In the case of true impersonal constructions, “external forces, rather than a human Subject, are either responsible for an action or for the inability of the Subject to perform an action properly at all” (Israeli 141). Receptive reflexive constructions indicate that “the human Subject [is] an involuntary experiencer of [...] his or her own abilities, thoughts and feelings, someone else’s presence, or sensory perception” (146). In this way, both true impersonal constructions and receptive constructions represent *negative responsibility* conceptualizations, which, for our purposes, are extremely relevant.

Passive constructions are, loosely, formulations in which the patient (i.e. the target of action), “occupies the subject position” (158). This project focuses on “agentless passives” due to their more common use and semantic ability to divorce descriptions of reality from *any* identifiable agent. This critical ability is not, however, found in reflexive passive constructions alone, but also appears in the following constructions.

The Implied “They” (Они) or “It” (Оно)

The implied “they” (or “it”) construction typically begins with the object in accusative case followed by a conjugated “active” verb but lacks an articulated subject. It has the effect of making the object of primary importance (the end achieved by most passive or impersonal constructions). Indeed, this implied agent form is thought of as an impersonal construction even though it uses a direct “active” verb. These constructions “present the action as *propelled by an*

outside force, designated by accusative of the noun and third person singular (neuter) of the verb (with no grammatical subject)” (Israeli 18, emphasis mine). For example:

Его отправили в желтый дом

(Yego otpravili v zheltyy dom)

“He *was sent* to the yellow house”

A more grammatical, rather than semantic, translation would be:

“[They] sent him to the yellow house.”

Yet such a phrase is most accurately translated as an impersonal construction, since the intention is to shroud the agent in vagueness. Polish linguist Anna Wierzbicka postulates that this vagueness embedded within Russian’s syntax holds “fate” responsible for these “unexplained” actions (Israeli 18). Israeli argues that this construction also provides a *negative responsibility* formulation because the human “subject” is portrayed as not responsible for – perhaps even a victim of – the actions that target them (18).

The Short Form Passive Participle

Short form passive participles are derived from perfective transitive verbs and function grammatically in the predicate position (Borik 61). This means that while the short form participle inflects for gender and number, it appears only in the nominative case (Babby 82). The short form *passive* participle has the effect of describing processes or actions taken on the object without needing to specify who initiated the processes or who is responsible for the relevant actions. For example, compare:

Эта реликвия **найдена** в 1915 году.

(Eta relikviya naydena v 1915 godu.)

“This relic was found in 1915”

Naydena describes an action involving the relic but does not attribute responsibility to any agent. This construction affords the speaker the ability to describe general facts about the object, but with a peculiar lack of specificity. In contrast:

Исследователи **нашли** реликвию.

(Issledovateli nashli relikviyu.)

“The explorers found the relic”

Here, the active verb *nashli* requires a specified agent. *The explorers* found the relic. The benefit of the passive participle is the ability to describe one’s circumstances - especially unfortunate ones - while not directly implicating anyone as being at fault. This is especially useful in a heavy-handed regime where people are forcibly disappeared (“он исчез”) or imprisoned and identifying the responsible party is dangerous or the responsible party is unknown.

In sum, each of these forms has the ability to remove the responsible actor or, at minimum, decrease his significance. The mere fact that an opportunity exists to describe reality in such a way has interesting cultural effects according to Saussurean theory and would implicate S1. The commonality, frequency, and acceptability of the use of these constructions also present an interesting psychological decision and implicate S2.

SECTION II

LANGUAGE: SHORTCUTS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

A curious question to ask people is whether they consider themselves to think primarily in language, or whether they perceive themselves as having some pure thought form outside of language. This query stems from questioning the extent of language's effects on human experience. What is the nature of the relationship between language and thought? Is language simply the product of thought? Does language limit thought? Does language influence thought? Does it mold it? Can it change it? This section reviews two important works on this aspect of theory of language. The first is a contemporary article published by two cognitive scientists in 2015. The second is an overview of a Soviet Psychologist's theory of thought and word. These works together articulate the argument that language has a framing effect on thought.

Language and Programmability

Gary Lupyan¹ and Benjamin Bergen,² in their article *How Language Programs the Mind*, argue that language creates a capacity of learning not available to other animals. They posit that while animals and pre-verbal children can be *trained* to complete tasks and employ techniques, this method of training and learning is extremely tedious and is characterized by continual trial-and-error (409). Language, however, allows for an altogether different method of learning:

[A]round the age of 2, humans transition from being merely trainable to something qualitatively more powerful—being *programmable*. We can sculpt the minds of others into arbitrary configurations through a set of instructions, without having to go through

¹ Professor of Psychology at University of Wisconsin-Madison.

² Director of the Language and Cognition Laboratory at University of California at San Diego.

laborious trial-and-error learning. We can cause someone to imagine something, to recall a memory, to do (or not do) something. (409, original emphasis)

Lupyan and Bergen argue that language allows for the immediate communication and recognition of the goal, while imitation learning allows only for the incremental establishment of steps toward the goal until it is finally realized. To illustrate this distinction, they use the example of pigtail macaques in Southern Thailand which are trained, bit by bit, to harvest coconuts from trees by spinning the coconut until it falls off the stalk. Such a goal is achieved by first coaxing the monkey to “simply touch a coconut” and then gradually teaching the monkey to spin it (408). The monkey has no idea that the end goal is to remove coconuts from trees and gather them for food and other uses. It only learns each subsequent, repetitious behavior. This kind of learning is altogether different from language-aided learning. Lupyan and Bergen identify four discrete areas in which language “programs the mind.”

The first is *teaching*. In contrast to the trial-and-error imitation method of teaching, Lupyan and Bergen use the example of the simple but useful directive “look both ways before crossing the street” – something which can be taught by non-verbal tutoring but which is achieved much less arduously by communicating and directing the habit through language (410).

The second is *category learning*. Simple directional categories like *left* and *right* illustrate the role of language in recognizing a “shared conceptual space” for Lupyan and Bergen. They argue that “in learning many of the same words speakers of a given language are all guided to become practiced in making the same categorical distinctions” (410). Language gives us the ability to agree in categorical differences and, in that way, operate in a similar reality. While literature is still in contention as to whether language shapes or creates conceptual space, there is copious evidence that language at minimum *influences* concepts, especially concepts which

seems to have no inherent perceptual features. Thus, “words not only carve nature at its joints, but they help to carve joints in nature, reifying conceptual distinctions” (411). This idea is made especially apparent in Lera Boroditsky’s work with an Australian aboriginal community called the Pormpuraaw. “Unlike English, the Pormpuraawan languages do not make extensive use of relative spatial terms like left and right; instead, speakers of these languages rely on absolute direction terms (e.g., ‘north,’ ‘south,’ ‘east,’ and ‘west’)” (Boroditsky and Gaby 1635). The Pormpuraaw have a different shared conceptual space from most of western societies, which is aided by their use of language.

The third area where language assists in the learning process is in *abstract concepts*. This follows from what was discussed in the previous paragraph. Since verbal categories assist in drawing attention to which dimension of an object is of importance (*red cars vs black cars* in contrast to *red trucks vs red sedans*), it is interesting to note that words also help to learn the abstract *relation between* objects. Here we are talking about the abstract concepts of *sameness* and *difference*. Lupyan and Bergen note that “learning words like ‘same’ and ‘different’ *necessitates* learning the appropriate concepts. [...] the active use of the words same and different provides language-learners with the structured experience that ensures the learning takes place” (412, original emphasis).

The final area is *imagination*. Lupyan and Bergen argue that visualizing imaginary representations is very similar to seeing the objects themselves. But conjuring such visual representations requires a cue of some sort. This catalyst can be the sound of a bell or other such tone. Language, however, acts as a more complex cue which calls to mind more specific images. This process is made manifest in tasks in which subjects are directed to “draw a person,” which

presumably allows the subject to comprehend and execute the task of depicting the referent representation (413).

These four areas illustrate ways in which language is highly adaptive and dramatically reduces the time and effort that goes into learning new tasks and techniques. In Lupyan and Bergen's view, this makes humans not only trainable, but programmable. Words – artificial sound patterns – can be used to trigger thoughts and understanding. Beyond simply triggering thoughts, language may also shape concepts themselves. The following section explores this interaction further.

The Relationship of Thought and Word

Lupyan and Bergen reference Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky's work on thought and language in their discussion of learning and self-teaching. Vygotsky is known for his work on inner speech and "self-direction." The question of whether thought can exist outside of speech is developed by Vygotsky as follows:

Если внутренняя речь, пусть не целиком, но в значительной мере есть мышление чистыми значениями, то почему она речь? Таким образом, у Л. С. Выготского чередуются оба варианта: свершение и воплощение, хотя предметом его интереса и исследования является именно воплощение мысли в слове — во внутренней и во внешней речи (о чем разговор будет далее).³ (Zinchenko 4)

Such an argument relates to Saussure's argument that the linguistic sign is the relationship of sound *patterns* and concepts and that this is why it is possible to recite poetry or "hear" words

³ If inner speech, to a significant degree, though not entirely, is thinking in pure meaning, then why is it speech? As such, Vygotsky alternates between two variants: accomplishment and embodiment, although his object of interest and exploration is the embodiment of thought in word—in internal and external speech (about which there will be further conversation). [Translation mine]

silently and entirely within your own mind. Zinchenko pinpoints Vygotsky's critical formulation of the relationship between thoughts and word.

Начнем с метафорического описания Л. С. Выготского: «То, что в мысли содержится симультанно, в речи содержится сукцессивно. Мысль можно было бы сравнить с облаком, которое роливается дождем слов. Поэтому процесс перехода от мысли к речи представляет собой чрезвычайно сложный процесс расчленения мысли и ее воссоздания в слове»⁴ (4, emphasis mine)

The metaphor of the interaction between clouds and rain illustrates the interaction between thoughts and words. The clouds of thoughts are transformed into droplets of words. But just as rainfall also evaporates and the water vapor rises and is then transformed into clouds, words too transform and influence thoughts. This dual process describes the relationship that thought and word have on one another in Vygotsky's formulation. It is not the case that words *create* thoughts. The metaphor simply describes the two-way process of transformation and attempts to explain how language affects ideas.

In sum, language, in some capacity, orders thoughts. It organizes thoughts by providing a shared conceptual space and, in this way, lends itself to a specific kind of programmability. This speeds up the transfer of information and makes learning and directing much more efficient. This is because language helps us establish and communicate categorical distinctions and name particular attributes or aspects of experience. In Vygotsky's formulation, this is a complex and twofold process. Thought and experience influences the words we have and use, but our thoughts are also packaged and translated through the lens of the language we speak.

⁴ Let's begin with a metaphor written by Vygotsky: "That which in thought is contained simultaneously, in speech is contained successively. Thought could be compared with a cloud, with which rolls the rain of words. Therefore, the process of passage from thought to speech itself produces an extraordinarily intricate process of dispersal of thought and its recreation in word." [Translation mine]

SECTION III

CULTURE IS THE KEYSTONE

Cultural logics shape cultural practices. Culture is the puzzle piece that connects language and politics. In the previous section, we discussed how language interacts with thought. The structural framework of language in general lends itself to a kind of “programmability.” The lenses of particular languages change, or at least slightly alter, cultural perspectives (illustrated by the example of the Pormpuraaw people). These perspectives are more precisely called cultural logics. This section will provide a general definition of culture, explore its connection with language and politics, and examine the connection between language and politics directly.

What is Culture?

Culture is, at base, a common sense. Philosopher and anthropologist Kwame Anthony Appiah discusses cultural common sense in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, different cultures have different theories of reality. Appiah offers the example of the culture of his kinsmen in Ghana, who believe that witchcraft (rather than microbial organisms) is responsible for illness. Ignoring the temptation to lapse into simplistic theories of cultural relativity, Appiah acknowledges that some cultural logics are more helpful, more adaptive, than others – i.e. the theory of microbial organisms which attack your body’s internal systems might allow us to more effectively treat illness than ritual sacrifices or other sorts of traditional cultural protections might. But the difficulty is in “making sense” to those who see the world differently. Why should the theory of “tiny invisible atoms, strung together to make viruses, particles so small that you cannot see them with the most powerful magnifying

lens, yet so potent that they can kill a healthy adult” make any more sense to Ghanans than the theory of an angry witch (Appiah 37)?

It is in this example that a working definition of culture is illuminated. Culture is a learned system of behaviors and symbols that is shared among members of a community and changes over time. While this definition is quite rough, it nonetheless serves our purposes quite well. Culture is connected to practices. Culture is connected to symbols. This marriage of practices and symbols is the connection between politics and language.

Language and Culture

Language is an important product of culture. Language as a *system of meanings* is at the heart of cultural logics. This puzzle piece is somewhat anthropological in nature: the idea that *logics* (reasoning in a Kantian sense and orders in a Weberian sense) vary by culture and, in that variance, there is some accompanying variation in practices. It follows that only information that fits within the system of meanings – the logic of the culture – will alter behavior. Appiah recounts a story of a medical missionary who was attempting to teach an isolated tribe to stop giving untreated well water to their babies:

The missionary explains that, even though the water looks clear, there are tiny, invisible creatures in it that make the children sick. Fortunately, she says, if they boil the water, it will kill these bacteria. A month later she’s back, and they’re still giving the babies the dirty water. [...] Then the missionary has another idea. Look, she says, let me show you something. She takes some water and boils it. See, she says, there are spirits in the water, and when you put it on the fire they flee: those bubbles you see are the spirits escaping, the spirits that are making your children sick. Now boiling water makes sense. Now the babies stop dying. (Appiah 37-38)

This principle holds true for every culture. Language as a structured system of signifiers and referents has a large hand in shaping our theories of reality. Lera Boroditsky, who studied the languages of the aboriginal Pormpuraaw, gave a Ted Talk on linguistic diversity in 2018 in which she argued that language is tied to a culture's "cognitive universe" is indicative of this cultural variance. She says, "The beauty of linguistic diversity is that it reveals to us just how ingenious and how flexible the human mind is. Human minds have invented not one cognitive universe, but 7,000" (Boroditsky).

Culture and Politics

Politics as a particular component of cultural practice is an especially important area of analysis. Politics is, rightly conceived, a part of every civilization. But certain instantiations of political activities embody relevant cultural practices. My observation here is quite pointed. A liberal world order produces a specific theory of reality and involves ideals and practices such as voting, self-governance, popular representation, etc. International indexes such as Freedom House try to evaluate how "free" or "unfree" various regimes are by evaluating the effectiveness of those same political practices that characterize a liberal framework.

In such indexes, Russia is frequently hailed as the champion of failed democratization ("Freedom in the World"). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many policies of liberalization were implemented. The results, however, were negligible. The Russian Federation emerged with private property consolidated under the ownership of an oligarchical elite, rampant corruption, and power highly concentrated in the executive office, albeit, with a regime which afforded its citizens significantly more freedoms of speech.

Perhaps Russia's continued democratic failure is due to corruption within the system of political authority. Putin's administration might appropriately be called corrupt. But this

democratic “failure” may also be the result of an incompatible theory of reality. Are democratic practices artificially performed on a cultural level in the Russian Federation? Do Russians really see themselves within the framework of the liberal world order?

The Liberal World Order

The liberal world order is, in the western imaginary, the fundamental essence of democracy, representation, and freedom. It is important to note, however, that liberalism is a modern philosophy, and post-dated ancient conceptions of democracy and freedom (Arendt 150-155). The liberal world order, as such, is one expression of freedom and democracy, but not the only one. Such an order rests on a sort of individualism which appears only in modernity, with the dominance of Enlightenment thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu. With burgeoning individualism came a fixation on the internal - ideas of will and desire, culminating in the solidification in philosophical thought of what Hannah Arendt caustically calls freedom as a “phenomenon of the will” (150). This freedom is primarily individual and internal and is a glaring deviation from the ancients’ conception of freedom as communal and public. Liberalism thus rests on a necessity of consent and the supremacy of equal citizenship that was not necessarily present in early iterations of democratic orders.

This conception of political life presents several problems for Russia. First, Russia was not an active participant in the Enlightenment and thus had no opportunity to contribute to the ongoing political-philosophical conversation of the time or become organically acquainted with these ideas. Second, due most clearly to its communist past – and perhaps due also to its rural and agrarian demographic – the collective is an important aspect of Russian politics. Collectivization in the Stalinist era was not simply aimed at state ownership of the means of production, but also at awakening “class consciousness” and invoking the idea of the *народ* (the

people or folk). Finally, and most importantly, in every iteration of the Russian political organization (in Tsarist Russia, in the Soviet Union, and in the present-day Russian Federation), there has always been a strong, dominate figure in a position of power. This organizational norm is hard to topple, especially if the catalytic ideas rest on foreign cultural logics. This begs the question: what then is the Russian cultural logic?

The Russian Idea

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin seemingly emerged on the political scene from nowhere. Few Russians knew of Putin when he became Prime Minister under Yeltsin and few knew what to expect when he took the reins as President. Since then, Putin has become something of an emblem of the Russian consciousness, and today he directs state affairs with an iron fist. Foreign affairs specialist Fiona Hill and economist Cliff Gaddy write about Putin as a Statist (not a sadist, though close in some minds) in their book *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*. They write, “Putin sees himself as someone who belongs to a large cohort of people demanding the restoration of the state” (39).

In their analysis they discuss Putin’s articulation of specifically Russian values at the heart of what he calls the “Russian Idea,” values such as “patriotism, collectivism, solidarity, *derzhavnost’* – the belief that Russia is destined always to be a great power [...] – and the untranslatable *gosudarstvennichestvo*” (38-39). *Gosudarstvennichestvo* conveys ideas of state-centeredness and state restoration which feature prominently in Putin’s administration. Hill and Gaddy’s speculation about a “cohort of people demanding the restoration of the state” closely mirrors ideas put forward by Dmitri Trenin at the Carnegie Moscow Center. Trenin argues that the “primacy of the state” is a key component of the Russian perspective. Due to Russia’s incredibly volatile and precarious history, Trenin argues that American diplomats should not be

“surprised by the near-absolute priority of domestic stability and external security considerations in successive Russian governments’ policies.” These priorities often come at the cost of democratic ideals. In fact, Trenin concludes, as I do, that the “Russian Idea” is based on something very different than western democracy. He writes:

Students of Russian politics and history would probably have to conclude that the roots of Russian autocracy run very deep, and that replacing them with a democratic model cannot be an easy task. The task is not made any easier by the extent to which sheer survival has been the country’s top concern historically and, in light of that, the relatively secondary importance attached to economic and trade issues and even the population’s living standards. This does not close the path to representative government accountable to the people, but it does suggest that *a successful model can only arise indigenously rather than be imported.* (Trenin, emphasis mine)

Trenin hits on the essence of cultural logics in the final sentence above. A successful model of democracy must *make sense* – it must be indigenous – to the Russian population. A model of democracy intensely tied to individualism and Enlightenment ideas will not resonate with existing political frameworks in Russia. It is hardly surprising from a cultural and historical standpoint that Russia is not a model of democracy as the western world sees it.

Language and Politics

Of course, the interplay between language, culture, and politics is very intricate and is comprised of several multi-directional processes. Thus far, section III has addressed the intrinsic relationship between language and culture as well as culture as the bedrock of political practice. This final subsection addresses the important direct influence of language on politics, through processes of *political framing*. Ramona Zmolnig, a public affairs consultant at Communication

Matters, published an article about political framing of corruption in the Austrian parliament.

Zmolnig explains the power of language in politics:

“Activated through language, actors use frames consciously or subconsciously to stress certain factors and perceptions of reality, while neglecting others. Consequently, frames evaluate, interpret, and direct the way we perceive social realities. Beyond ideological selection, frames generally shape the opinion and decisions of political actors.” (181)

Zmolnig references the work of German linguist Elisabeth Wehling, whose research demonstrates the “exten[t] framing influences not only the thoughts, but also the actions of an individual or group” (184). This means that beyond being simply a representation of cultural logics, language decisions can directly affect politics. Zmolnig further summarizes, “Against popular belief Wehling stresses that actor’s political, social, and economic decisions are not based on facts but rather on certain frames. In this scenario, facts are not per se seen as obsolete, but they are insignificant unless integrated into frames” (184). Language as such, is a powerful tool in the hands of political actors.

The use of this tool is seen no more clearly than in Putin’s designation of patriotism, collectivism, solidarity and *gosudarstvennichestvo* as the “Russian Idea,” a branding which frames state power as particularly Russian and a practice to be defended. Not only is *gosudarstvennichestvo* (state-ness, state-oriented society) framed as particularly Russian and therefore familiar, intrinsic, and acceptable, but democracy (and democratic ideals such as human rights) is framed as foreign and therefore unfamiliar, extraneous, and out of place.

In brief re-articulation, culture as a learned system of meanings is intrinsically tied to language as a structured system of symbols and referents. Cultural logics define the realm of acceptable practices and thus only information that fits within cultural schemas will alter

behavior. In the Russian case, democratic ideals do not neatly fit into the Russian Idea and thus democratic practices have not been successfully implemented. Further, the separation between democracy and the Russian idea is widened by the political framing of state-oriented society as inherently Russian and democratic society as inherently foreign and contrived.

SECTION IV

PRODUCING THE SHEEPLE: PASSIVITY AND POLITICAL EFFICACY

Section I of this paper discussed subjectivity in two components: S1 and S2. Subjectivity more broadly is the conception of a person's role in events as defined by (a) language (S1) and (b) individual decisions (S2). Section II explored the interplay between language and thought and found that language establishes shortcuts and has a transformative influence on thought. If language has a transformative influence on thought, then the individual's choice of expression (S2) is not entirely distinct from the structure of the language itself (S1). Meaning, languages may *preference* certain constructions over others. These preferences are the product of collective agreement, established as cultural norms over time by continued use. Section III defined culture and explained how cultural logics affect practices. Linguistic preferences are themselves part of cultural logics, setting the bounds of acceptability and meaning. This relates to politics in two ways. First, passive speech can highlight an acquiescent cultural logic. Passive outlooks are likely to yield inaction, rather than action. Thus, passive speech is related to subdued political behavior. Secondly, language influences politics through *political framing*, or the selection of facts and the style of their portrayal to tell a specific story or highlight an intentional takeaway. Here the institution can elicit predictable behaviors by its representation of events. If a regime wishes to produce a docile constituency, they need to foster a sense of ineffectiveness and passivity. This is where political efficacy comes into play.

Political efficacy is an established term in political theory beginning in the 1950s. It loosely refers how a person perceives their ability to interact in politics.

[S]cholars [...] came to recognize that political efficacy contains at least two separate components: (1) *internal efficacy*, referring to beliefs about one's own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in politics, and (2) *external efficacy*, referring to beliefs about the responsiveness of governmental authorities and institutions to citizen demands. (Niemi et al. 1407-1408)

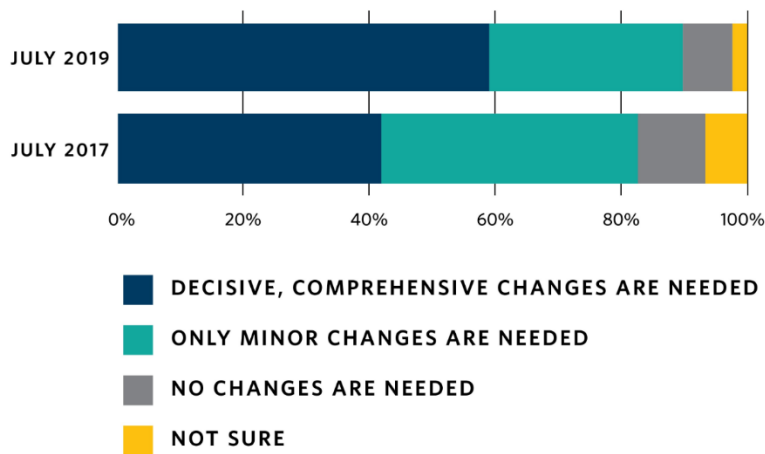
These two components of political efficacy are affected both by the idea of *negative responsibility* discussed in section I and the idea of *political framing* discussed in section III. A person's perception of their responsibility to participate in politics (internal efficacy) might be altered in some way by the ability to remove themselves – their role as subjects – from political events (subjectivity). Further, if the average citizen never sees or hears anyone like them interacting within the political sphere and instead perceives that politics is dominated by an elite sector of society (political framing), they are less likely to see themselves as qualified to enter the political arena (internal efficacy). In the same way, a person's perception of government responsiveness (external efficacy) might be affected by descriptions of events (political framing) – printed in newspapers, broadcast in televised reports or radio shows – as happening without cause (negative responsibility).

This section will present an analysis of Russian political efficacy based on the discrepancy between expressed desire for change and reported political interest. Data showing a strong desire for change but very little interest in politics would indicate *low* political efficacy (i.e. something is wrong by my involvement in politics won't fix it). If Russians express a desire for change and high interest in politics this would indicate *high* political efficacy (i.e. I am interested in politics as an effective method of recourse). Weak or no desire for change would render assessments of political efficacy inconclusive.

Desire for Change

The Levada Center, Russia’s primary independent polling agency, conducted a joint survey project with Carnegie Moscow Center in 2017, 2018, and 2019 that asked respondents to report on their “readiness for change” (Kolesnikov and Volkov). In 2017, forty-two percent of Russians were in favor of “decisive, comprehensive change,” while forty-one percent believed only minor changes were necessary. In 2019, the number of Russians urging massive reform increased to fifty-nine percent (1).

Russian Views on the Need for Change



SOURCE: Carnegie Moscow Center and Levada Center poll of 1,600 Russians, conducted in July 2019.

NOTE: The question was, "Do you think our country needs changes?"

Figure 1. Desire for change in Russian Federation.

Free-response questions in the 2019 poll indicate that Russian primary concerns are socioeconomic issues, such as salaries, pensions, and standards of living. Only 10% of respondents listed democratic reforms such as “holding free and fair elections, maintaining an independent judiciary, and expanding democratic rights and freedom” as a top priority (4). This finding is consistent with the discussion of the contrast between the liberal world order and the

“Russian Idea” in section III. Corruption, however, has increasingly become a source of concern and in 2019 forty-one percent of respondents cited corruption as a major issue. “As economic problems have increased and respect for the regime has declined, the public has begun to express its discontent with the establishment in stronger terms” (4). Another survey conducted by Levada Center showed a similar increase in concern about regime harshness. From 2017 to 2019, “[f]ear of mass repression and the abuse of power increased from 21 to 39 percent and 29 to 50 percent, respectively” (2).

Though the survey shows a significant desire for change, respondents indicated low willingness to become personally involved in effecting changes. “Most respondents do not believe that they can influence the introduction or direction of future changes; the data reveal that 60 percent of the people think in these terms” (8). This sentiment is expressed at even higher rates among poor and elderly demographics. For this reason, most Russian’s favor heavy state intervention in resolving socioeconomic concerns. Interestingly, the report identifies feelings of despair and powerlessness as well as ignorance about alternative solutions as reasons for these passive sentiments. “The Carnegie-Levada polls and other similar research demonstrate that many Russian citizens do not believe that their active participation—for example, in elections, charity and volunteer work, and protests—might help bring about better changes” (9).

In sum, the number of Russians who desire change has steadily grown in the past three years, with more than half of respondents urging for comprehensive reform. This indicates a strong desire for change. The same survey, however, indicated that a large cohort of Russian citizens (60%) do not think their active participation will be effective. The following subsection will further investigate Russian interest in politics.

Interest in Politics

Sarah Oates, a scholar of political communication and democratization, authored a book called *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere* which addressed theories about a “digital revolution” which could awaken a previously dormant political base because of greater access to information. As evidenced in the title of her book, Oates sees this as an unsuccessful or at least incomplete revolution. As part of her analysis she examines whether regular internet users express more interest in politics than non-regular internet users. This paper utilizes Oates’ research to evaluate political interest in 2010 and will compare these statistics to more recent data from Levada Center.

Ten Years Ago

Oates found little to no difference in political interest between regular internet users and non-regular internet users. She presented data from a 2010 survey in which 4.8% of respondents stated they were “very interested” in politics. In the same survey 35.9% of respondents indicate that they were “interested in general” in politics. However, 42.8% of respondents reported being “not very interested” in politics and 16.5% were “not interested at all” (77). Thus, the distribution of political interest as depicted in Figure 2 shows approximately 59% of respondents expressed low interest in politics while 41% expressed high interest. This finding demonstrates a generally uninterested disposition toward politics for most citizens of the Russian Federation in 2010. Interestingly, less than 5% of respondents reported being extremely interested in politics, while the number that reported being extremely uninterested was more than three times that number of those extremely interested (16.5% of respondents). In summary, data from the last decade indicates a generally passive, low interest disposition toward politics and political involvement among citizens of the Russian Federation.

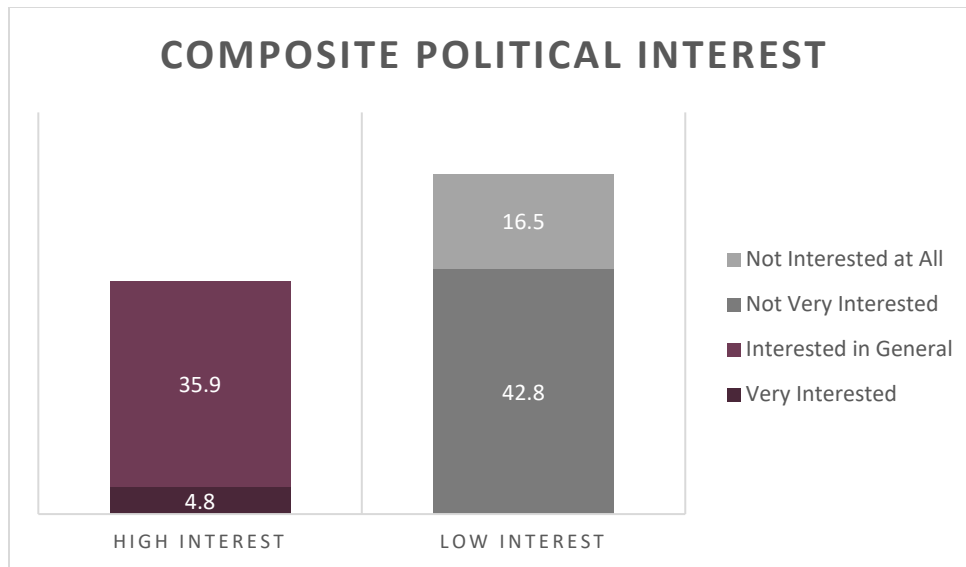


Figure 2. Composite political interest in 2010.

Political Interest in 2019

Levada Center has periodically administered a series of questions about political consciousness since November of 2011. The survey consists of two broad components: trust in politicians and role in politics. This paper focuses on the later component. In the first question, respondents were asked to select which out of five options best described their relationship with political participation. The number of respondents who reported a level of interest in which they actively engaged in politics and supported political parties is relatively stable between 2-3% from 2011 to 2019 (“Политическое Сознание”). This response is indicated in green in Figure 3.

The number of respondents who indicate interest in politics but take no active part has fluctuated between thirty and fifty percent since 2011. Most recently, 41% of respondents reported interest but no activity in June 2019. This response is indicated in purple in Figure 3. The number of respondents selecting this option has steadily declined since April 2017 when it was 47%. The number of respondents who have selected “I do not like politics, and I will not worry about it” has been on the rise since April 2017 when it was 20%. In June 2019, 27% of

respondents reported such a distaste and unconcern for politics. The response is indicated in red in Figure 3.

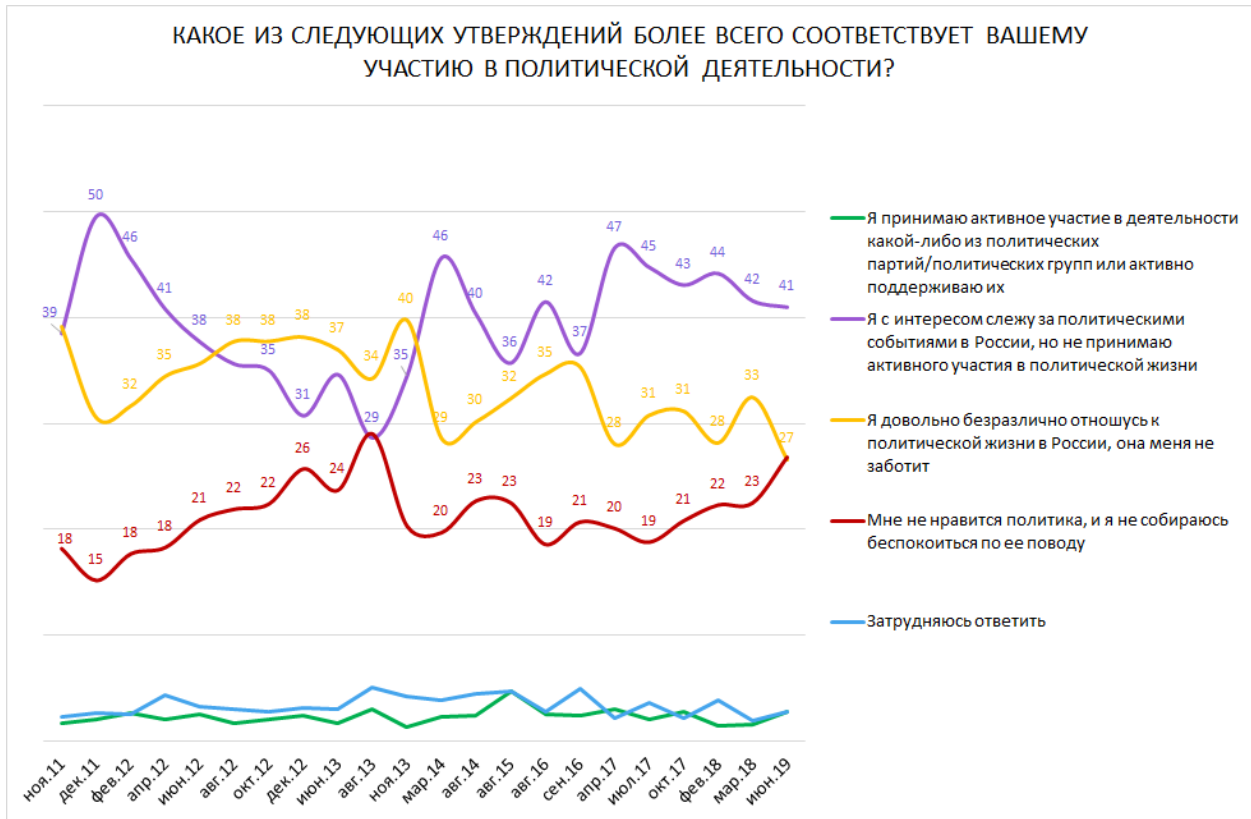


Figure 3. Relationship to political activity 2011 to 2019.

The data reported by Levada Center seems to suggest an almost inverse relationship between indication of interest in politics (charted in purple) and indication of distaste for politics (charted in red). A sharp decline in interest mirrored by a rise in distaste marks data between December 2011 and 2012, coinciding with the Winter of 2011-2012. The graph shows a period of volatility between 2013 and 2016. Since 2017, Levada has reported a downturn in interest in (net change of -7%) and uptick in distaste (net change of 7%). Finally, indifference to politics has fluctuated significantly since 2011 and currently rests at 27% in 2019. This response is indicated in yellow in Figure 3.

The next question asked Russians whether they were prepared to play a more active part in politics. In 2019, only 4% of respondents said “definitely yes” and 17% responded “to some extent,” while 31% responded “probably not” and 47% said “definitely not.” Meaning, *more than 75%* of Russians were not interested in becoming more politically active. Levada asked respondents who were not interested in taking a more active role to indicate their reasons. In 2019, 24% of those who were not interested in becoming politically active said that nothing can be changed anyway. This is a symptom of low *external* political efficacy, meaning that people do not perceive the government as responsive to their actions. Five percent even stated they feared persecution and that it was safer to stay away from politics. Additionally, 22% said that politics is not for the average citizen, and that only political authorities are engaged in politics. Along similar lines, 20% said that they did not understand politics or the operations of political authorities. Five percent of respondents also suggested that they did not wish to stand out among their peers and that most people were not interested in politics. These responses indicate low *internal* efficacy, meaning that people do not perceive themselves as qualified to participate in politics.

In brief, while Russian citizens indicate a strong desire for change, they do not express a comparable level of political interest that might demonstrate high political efficacy. There are clear concerns that citizens have identified, but they do not see their own political action as the solution. Low levels of political interest are consistent between data reported in 2010 and further surveys conducted between 2011 and 2019. Russians have a sense that the political arena is not for average citizens and that the policymakers cannot be expected to make decisions which reflect citizens’ concerns. These findings indicate low levels of both internal and external political efficacy.

SECTION V

PASSIVES AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political efficacy looks at whether people perceive themselves to be effective, yet it does not address whether people actually participate in politics. Although these two variables are related, they do not always perfectly coincide. A person who does not perceive themselves as capable of participating in politics – or the government as responsive to their actions – is not likely to participate in political activities. They have little reason to vote, to protest, to sign petitions or to register as a party member. Yet, this is not always the case. This section examines the unique interaction of Russian citizens with politics and bifurcates two measures of political activity: (1) voter turnout and (2) protest and affiliation.

Voter Turnout

Kolesnikov and Volkov from the Carnegie Moscow Center describe participating in elections as an increasingly “ritual form of expressing confidence or no confidence in the current regime” (10). With United Russia’s steadfast majority, ever-growing barriers for opposition candidates, and Putin’s recent move to reset his terms to zero, elections are increasingly less legitimate (Gershkovich). Voter turnout, however, has remained remarkably stable since the 1990s. Figure 4 shows parliamentary and presidential election turnout from 1999 to 2018. Average voter turnout is around 65%, with turnout generally higher for presidential elections (“Country Profile: Russia”). Turnout was as high as 95% when Dmitri Medvedev was elected in 2008. This degree of voter turnout does not match the reported levels of political interest discussed in section IV. This could be due to a variety of intervening variables.

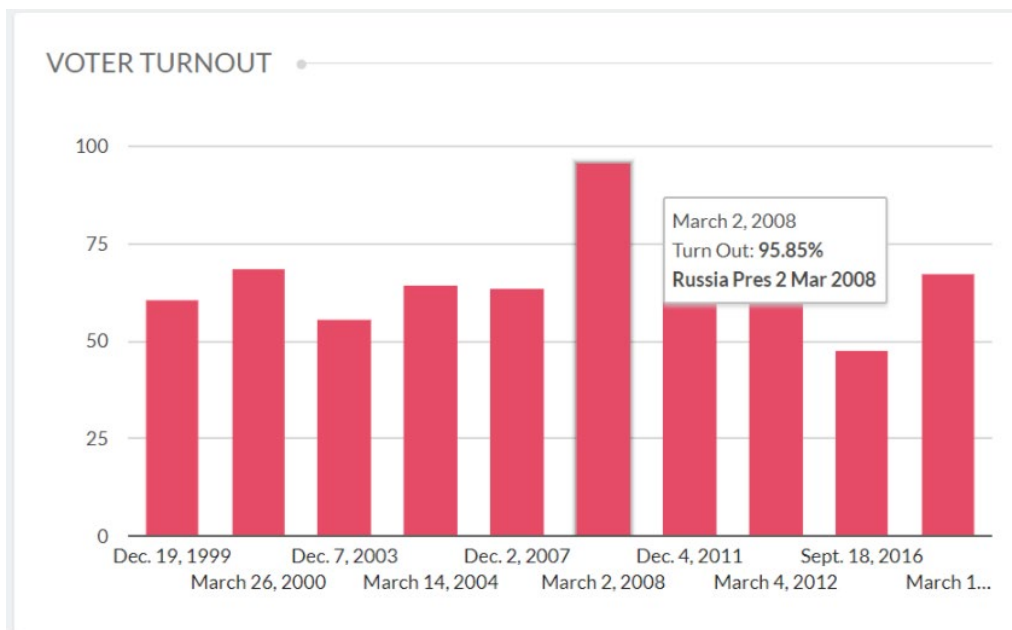


Figure 4. Presidential and parliamentary voter turnout since 1999.

Freedom House scored Russia’s electoral process 0 out of 12. Concerns about treatment of opposition candidate Alexei Navalny were cited as creating a “lack of genuine competition” in the 2018 presidential election reported by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (“Freedom in the World”). The 2016 Duma (parliament) election was also fraught with election abnormalities: “The OSCE and the election monitoring group Golos cited numerous violations, including ballot stuffing, pressure on voters, and illegal campaigning. Some opposition candidates were simply not permitted to register, so the outcome of many races was clear even before election day” (“Freedom in the World”). Failure to hold free and fair elections disrupt the normal relationship between political efficacy and reported participation in elections. Voting is not the only relevant form of political participation, however.

Affiliation and Protest

Party affiliation and protest are two forms of political participation in the Russian Federation which tell a different story than the data on election participation. In the 2010 survey

Sarah Oates examines, only 1.8% of respondents reported being members of a political party (76). Only 3% had taken part in a demonstration and 2.7% had signed a petition or written to a newspaper. Less than 5% had ever consulted with an elected official (77). These numbers depict a remarkably low level of political activity consistent with low levels of political interest. Today, activity levels in these areas are still incredibly low, but are slightly higher than in 2010.

Kolesnikov and Volkov remark that “people do not really see this form of activism as a way to achieve serious changes; rather, it serves as a method of fighting for one’s rights, a technique that can lead to minor improvements in one’s daily life” (10). Kolesnikov and Volkov explain that “Russians lack extensive experience in civic activism. Only one-third of the population appears to take part in such activity” (10). More recent statistics, however, indicate an increased willingness to participate in these forms of political activity.

Vote for parties and candidates proposing reforms	43%
Sign open letters and petitions	21%
Submit complaints and suggestions to government agencies	20%
Work for public and political organizations	16%
Volunteer for public and political organizations or causes	12%
Join protest rallies, marches, strikes, and other initiatives	8%
Run for public office	5%
Donate money to public and political organizations or projects	4%
Not sure	30%

Source: Levada Center

Survey Question: “Which of the following would you personally do to change the situation in the country?”

Note: Respondents were allowed to select one or more answers from the listed options.

Figure 5. Forms of political action to enact change.

According to a 2017 survey conducted by Levada Center and Carnegie Moscow Center, 8% of respondents said they were willing to take part in protests to push for reform, 21% said they would sign an open letter or petition, and 20% said they would submit complaints to government agencies (Kolesnikov and Volkov, “The Perils of Change”). Importantly, protest participation has been on the decline for several years. After the Winter of 2011-2012, a series of large-scale protests demanding “honest elections,” protests dropped off sharply. A 2013 survey of protest participants in Moscow revealed that Russians did not believe such demonstrations “produced any concrete accomplishments” or “obtained concessions from the state” (Evans 96).

Figure 5 shows that Russians’ preferred form of action is still voting for parties and candidates they feel will implement reform, indicating that voting is an established norm and perhaps symbolic action regardless of its effectiveness. Few citizens are willing to work or volunteer at political organizations and only 5% would consider running for public office (Kolesnikov and Volkov, “The Perils of Change”). Participation levels in 2017 are also consistent with reported interest levels, indicating that the positive relationship between political efficacy and these forms of political participation is stronger than it is for election participation.

In short, reported voter turnout may be explained by election fraud, voter intimidation, and aggressive action against opposition candidates. It may also be the case that turning up at the polls is a social norm which many citizens are hesitant to break. Thus, voting remains the primary method of political participation. Other forms of participation are disproportionately low compared to voter participation. These low levels of affiliation and protest more closely reflect reported low levels of interest in politics as seen in section IV.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the existence of the reflexive verb, implied “they,” and past passive participle in the Russian language present Russian speakers with many passive options. The fact that the language, which is always a product of collective agreement, is structured in this way is indicative of a cultural logic in which unspecified agents are acceptable and perhaps even common. Leaving out the responsible party is not only linguistically possible for Russian speakers, but the option to do so is presented to the speaker in multiple forms. The fact that this rendering is a “reality localized in the brain” for Russian speakers accords with historical Soviet practices of forced disappearances and imprisonment. The individual as an effective, independent actor does not feature prominently within the Russian cultural logic. Both Russia’s late emergence from agrarian society and its experience as a communist state for nearly 70 years have a hand in emphasizing the collective in the “Russian Idea.”

This deviation from individualism is starkly contrasted to the liberalism of the Enlightenment, which forms the foundation of western democracy. It is therefore unsurprising that Russia has had very little success implementing democratic practices in the past thirty years. This is, of course, a result not entirely devoid of state manufacturing. President Putin’s continued political framing of democratic ideals as foreign, secondary, and un-Russian motivates undemocratic policy decisions. His framing of *gosudarstvennichestvo* – that uniquely autocratic conceptualization of society – as a critical component of the “Russian Idea” also enforces a state-centered society in which the average citizen is not inclined to seek solutions based on his personal actions.

The effects of this framing are clearly born out by survey data over the past ten years. Russians espouse a strong desire for socioeconomic change but not an equivalent sense of political interest. Russians do not see the citizen as belonging to the political realm. Politics is instead thought to be comprised of an elite strata of authority figures. Many Russians also express despair in the effectiveness of political activity, especially emphasizing the futility of protests. Election participation remains the only form of political activity with any significant levels of participation. Party affiliation, petition, protest, and running for office are forms of political participation which few Russians wish to take part in. Thus, with the exception of voter turnout, rates of political participation in Russia mirror reported low levels of internal and external political efficacy.

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