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## **Putin's Nation: Discursive Construction of National Identity in *Direct Line with the President***

### **Introduction**

On the 18th October 2007, Russians were treated to an annual ritual that became a familiar feature of Putin's presidency — a 'discursive marathon' of three or so hours of simultaneous radio and television broadcast of President Putin's questions and answers session with the general public, known under the title *Direct Line with the President*.

The format of *Direct Line* had been kept unchanged since it was first aired in 2001, however the observers were quick to note the uniqueness of the October 2007 broadcast. This was officially the last meeting of Putin on air with the public in the capacity of their President. The word *рекордный* was liberally used both, in the programme's language and in the meta language of its media description. Journalists closely following the event noted the record of the longest time spent — precisely 3 hours and 6 mins; of the highest number of questions received, 2.5 million, as well as the record number of answers — 69<sup>1</sup>. This discursive act constituting answering approximately 0.003 per cent of the questions that concerned the Russian people was framed as a spontaneous and in-depth conversation with the whole nation. This contact between the President and the nation that had a conclusive note and was labeled by the media on the one hand, romantically, *хождение в народ*<sup>2</sup> and on the other, cynically, *онлайн-политика*<sup>3</sup>, and *замена демократии*<sup>4</sup>, in any case was an intensive exercise in the identity narrative to which both the information seekers and the information givers made their contribution.

The objective of this article is therefore to examine the corpus of this discursive event consisting of 21,695 words of the broadcast transcript and, by analyzing the verbal activity of the three parties: the President, the presenters and the public, to identify the main trends in and linguistic strategies of, the co-construction of meanings pertaining to the national identity as it is seen in the late Putin's era.

As Benedict Anderson persuasively demonstrated, nations are not only invented but also re-invented and re-imagined (Anderson 1983:26). The collapse of the Soviet Union and a change of legitimacies brought about a fun-

damental transformation of the perception of the world in the society, accompanied by the process of re-imagining, re-negotiating and re-constructing a new, post-Soviet Russian identity.

National identity has been seen as a discursive construct (Wodak 1999: 28) which emerges from a multitude of discursive practices. Building on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu 2004: 78-87) and following Ruth Wodak, by identity I understand a complex mental structure, containing what is perceived to be knowledge. It encompasses "common or similar beliefs or opinions internalised in the course of socialisation", including those concerning "certain outgroups distinguished from the national 'we-group'. In addition, identity includes the level of emotional attitudes and that of behavioural dispositions, as well as certain linguistic dispositions (Wodak: *ibid*).

Writing the identity discourse, Martin identifies several dimensions of construction that I find useful to follow in my analysis. In particular, he singles out the fields of power, time, and the reconfiguration of human groups relevant for the re-interpretation of the world: "The identity narrative channels political emotions so that they can fuel efforts to modify and balance power; it transforms the perceptions of the past and of the present; it changes the organisation of human groups and creates new ones; it alters cultures by emphasizing certain traits and skewing their meanings and logic. The identity narrative brings forth a new interpretation of the world in order to modify it" (Martin 1995:13).

### **Co-construction of the discourse**

The identity discourse may sometimes have a main conscious political actor, however generally, identity building is a process of co-production, which involves motivated parties engaged in the reproduction of the identity components (Bourdieu 1994; Wodak 1999). These are objects of knowledge (Foucault 1972: 60) that emerge from co-construction of meanings as a result of interaction and the other-orientation of the speakers (Johansson 2006: 217). Johansson notes that the shared co-produced knowledge is interdiscursive, as the speakers "recontextualize material from other contexts" (*ibid.*), and terms discourse produced in this way as the *represented* discourse (Johansson 2002).

Reading the national narrative of *Direct Line*, it gives an impression of a harmonious and co-operative polylogue. It consists of the three main discursive types: interludes by the presenters who utter introductory narratives to the linked up locations as well as introduce members of the public standing at the mobile cameras; the moves by the members of the public asking questions or sometimes expressing a wish and finally, the President's answers and comments. With all these parties involved, there is no doubt however that the polylogue has a main narrative actor, the President. The question and answer

format, and the types of questions — easy, comfortable and even at their extreme, hardly probing or contradictory — position Putin to be the source of knowledge while the population assume the role of rather passive agents seeking or willing to share and reinforce the offered knowledge.

All collocutors map the co-produced knowledge to similar frames, or 'grids of specification', in other words the similar systems according to which objects of the discourse are "divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified..." (Foucault 1972: 42). An example of such co-production of mental knowledge frames may be seen in the question and answer sequence between the history teacher Kul'kova and Putin. Together, Ms Kul'kova and Putin co-construct the meaning of Russian history in need of correction and putting into it more patriotic sense. The dialogue starts from the two participants sharing a belief with a strong emotional component. Ms Kul'kova expresses concern about the state of people's attitudes to history using the phrase *шокирующие примеры*. In his turn, the President openly agrees with her belief and continues the construction of the frame with the metaphorical phrase *от которых волосы дыбом могли встать* which is virtually rephrasing, or an illustration of her expression.

— *И меня как преподавателя беспокоит небрежное отношение общества к истории, особенно среди молодежи. Масса шокирующих примеров исторического невежества [Kul'kova].*

— *Полностью с Вами согласен. Мы с Вами знаем — а я тоже люблю очень историю, — как еще совсем недавно мы в учебниках читали вещи, от которых волосы дыбом могли встать, особенно при трактовках, скажем, результатов Второй мировой войны и всего, что с этим связано. Но в последнее время все-таки определенные позитивные сдвиги здесь есть [Putin].*

This co-constructed knowledge frame and the sense of shock rendered by both of them, serve as a justification for Putin's further announcement, also presented as common knowledge, that in order to prevent unacceptable historical interpretations, rephrased in his move as *брак*, legislation was passed which gives vetting power over history textbooks content to the state:

*Но для того, чтобы не допускать очевидного брака в этой сфере, Вы, наверное, знаете, принято соответствующее решение и на законодательном уровне, повышена роль и значение Министерства образования и науки, которое уже в состоянии будет давать соответствующие экспертные оценки при подготовке учебной литературы [Putin].*

### Construction of magnitude

Presented to the public as a spontaneous talk, *Direct Line* was in fact thoroughly prepared and had evidence of being scripted. Participants on both sides: members of the public on the ground, journalists and the call centre operators were specially selected<sup>5</sup>. Locations up and down the country chosen for the link-up were kept secret until the last moment so that agitated rumours regarding the places swelled across the newspapers<sup>6</sup>. *Novaia Gazeta*, for example, reported with some feeling of hurt that despite a widespread belief that St Petersburg would be included in the programme the television cameras never arrived there<sup>7</sup>. Questions started to pour in as early as 5 days in advance and the President had plenty of time to look through them and select what he called ‘those most frequent’ that merited an answer<sup>8</sup>.

Apart from the main television and radio channels, the text containing 69 question and answer sequences appeared on the Internet and the majority of the national papers published either full or an abridged version. The magnitude attributed to *Direct Line* by the media was matched by the meaning of a nation-wide participation constructed by the discourse itself. To create the impression that the conversation had a huge national scale, a constructive discursive strategy<sup>9</sup> was used, implemented, among other tools, by lists and numbers. In particular, the link-up conversation was regularly interrupted and the viewers and listeners were reminded by presenters reporting from the call centres on the numbers of questions received so far and on the means of their arrival, listing telephone, SMS messaging and on-line connection: *Пятый день работает наш телефонный центр, работает круглосуточно — так, чтобы было удобно всей стране. И вот к этой минуте мы получили уже 2 миллиона и еще почти 200 тысяч звонков. Это рекорд* [Presenter].

Numerals, in combination with words with temporal meanings such as: *пятый день, к этой минуте, два миллиона и еще почти двести тысяч звонков* are used to construct both, a sense of urgency and the scale of participation. In contrast with a modest real number of people involved, the quoted numerals persuade the public that those 69 participants whose questions were answered were indeed legitimate representatives of the nation. Thus the narrative of *Direct Line* involves what Ricoeur calls “the numerical component of identity”, by which “the notion of identity corresponds to the process of identification, understood in the sense of reidentification of the same, which makes cognition recognition: the same thing twice, *n* times” (Ricoeur 1992: 116). In addition to the reverberation of the national meanings, the discourse constructs a positive and enthusiastic nation. Presenters interpret the high number of questions as an indication of neither of the many concerns of the public nor of the desire to bring the President to account, but only of supportive participation and engagement. The noun *рекорд*

as a reference to the number of the participants described it as an achievement is thus co-constructs a sense of pride in the nation-wide magnitude of participation in the conversation with the leader.

In the example, the adverb *круглосуточно* also serves as a tool of creation of the meaning of immediacy and urgency attached to the verbal contact with the President. This invokes the context of emergency services, such as the ambulance or fire service whose telephones work around the clock. The participants contribute their share in the co-construction of the magnitude of the nation-wide involvement. They usually emphasize the idea of representativeness of their questions and greet the President not only on their own part but metonymically, on the part of the whole region in question, for example: *Уважаемый Владимир Владимирович! Мы сегодня от лица 7 тысяч жителей Русского острова передаем Вам огромный привет.*

### Construction of national space

Among the salient dimensions of the national identity construction, Ruth Wodak outlines the thematic area of a 'national body', in other words, the geographical space and landscape that constitute part of the national mentality. Large expanses have traditionally been important for the idea of Russian belonging (Milner-Gulland 1999: 4-13; Widdis 2004: 30-49) as well as later, for the Soviet 'union' identity. In *Direct Line*, the knowledge frames are delivered from the centre to the periphery: the President and two leading journalists are positioned in the central studio in Moscow while the television bridge links them with a number of locations in the streets and squares across the Russian Federation. The national value of the places is highlighted by presenters' introductory narratives to the local information. For instance, the public learn about Plesetsk that it is the rocket launching facility at the forefront of the military re-equipment of the Russian Army. The demonstration of the practice rocket launch of the military exercise timed specially for *Direct Line* is included in the introduction to the place. It is therefore framed as an event of national significance which is expected to stir up the feelings of happiness and pride for their country: *Е.АНДРЕЕВА: Наша телевизионная камера сегодня установлена в регионе, где сегодня утром произошло важное событие, и, что радует, все прошло на «отлично».*

The strategy of borrowing and perpetuation of the discursive models of the Soviet period positions Moscow in the centre of the proposed mental map of Russia. Thus, the village of Podkolodnovka is linguistically linked to Moscow by its duty to provide it with food. This sense is emphasized by the adverb *исправно* and impersonal verbal sequence with the connotation of approbation, *пробовали, дегустировали: Москва отсюда исправно получа-*

*ет продукты — и овощи, и масло (масло здесь особенно вкусное, **пробовали, дегустировали**)* [Presenter].

Almost all places in the link-up have close connection with the President himself, reinforcing the meaning of his centrality. For example, Sochi is linked to the bid for the Winter Olympics of 2014, that Russia has won and which is closely associated with Putin's personal effort. Also, the Dagestani village of Botlikh is presented as an advanced post for the beginning of the second war with Chechnya which had a connection with Putin's first election as President and where he paid a personal visit in 1999. The presenters use the strategy of singularization to draw attention to these locations — they linguistically highlight the 'special' quality of the places: *у нас на подходе такой **знаковый город**, который мы сегодня однажды даже упомянули, — это город Сочи. Ботлих — это не географическое название, а **моральная категория**.*

In the construction of national spaces, the idea of national unity and coherence is promoted and the country's size is recast as its strength and achievement. After the period of 'the parade of sovereignties' associated with Eltsyn's rule, when republics and regions demanded more autonomy from the centre, the discourse reaffirms Putin's policy of the 'vertical of power' by foregrounding the positive meanings attached to the territorial vastness, borrowed from the Soviet discourse. In order to achieve this, presenters use in their interludes geographical terms and numerals with the emphatic qualifiers (*самый*) or particles with temporal and special meaning (*уже, от, до*):

*Владивосток — **самая** восточная точка этой «прямой линии»; ...Здесь **уже** темнеет. ...**От нас до вас 9302 километра**. Это **действительно** Подколodновка. **До Москвы 900 километров**, до Воронежа — 250. Космодром Плесецк, где мы сейчас находимся, — это **самый северный** космодром в мире; Это **крайний** запад страны — Калининград.*

Among the tools for the presenters' contribution to the construction of vastness and coherence of the Russian land are the tropes. Traditional metaphors of covering territory fast and effortlessly are used: *мы **перешагиваем** Урал; А мы **переносимся** с Северного Кавказа на берега Волги; Начинали мы во Владивостоке, а сейчас **добрались** до последней, двенадцатой*. In addition, the strategy of cohesivization is achieved by presenters' regular use of metonymy, whereby the toponym is assumed to represent the whole population of the town and, by legitimizing extension, a sample of the Russian population: *до свиданья, Калининград; Вас приветствует Екатеринбург*. This adds to the senses of uniformity and representativeness of the concerns of the public expressed in the questions.

The meaning of commonality is constructed and perpetuated by the implementation of the topos of 'the lovely place' as well as the strategies of definition and redefinition. This is exemplified by the multiple metaphorical use of the noun *столица*:

*Вас приветствует Екатеринбург, город, который часто называют столицей Урала; После 1000-летия Казани к этому городу прикрепило название восточной столицы России; Москву приветствует Сочи. Действительно, теперь это не просто город-курорт, теперь это еще и столица зимней Олимпиады 2014 года; Это крайний запад страны — Калининград. И там, в столице российской Прибалтики, работает Олег Грознецкий.*

Redefinitions of Kazan and Kaliningrad to be the capitals, and in both cases linked by the genitive construction to the words *Россия* or *российский*, affirm the Russian belonging to the contested territories. In the first instance, redefined is the capital of Tatarstan and in the second, the toponym *Прибалтика*, traditionally referring to the territories that are now Baltic independent states, is reclaimed as Russian.

The discourse delineates what is deemed to be the Russian national essence through paying particular attention to the edges and borderline places. At all points of the compass, the link-up includes outposts, producing an effect of a symbolic mental patrol of the territory and of marking the frontier, all taking place under the President's watch: *За моей спиной за горой Грузия. Напротив нее гора, которую вы, к сожалению, не видите. Там начинается Чечня.*

Both themes, of essential Russianness and of the place on the edge, are emphasized in the first question in the programme, that was put from the island with the emblematic name *Русский*, the furthest eastern point of the country. Concerned with the ferry to the mainland and cheaper flights across Russia, the question pertinently relates to the country's cohesion and the participants' national belonging. The meanings are co-constructed and reinforced in Putin's answers promising to bring to the island of *Русский* the summit of countries of the Pacific Region and to build a bridge to the mainland.

Both, inclusion and exclusion from the imagined map, are potent meaning constructors. For instance, involvement of the town of Aktau in the new independent state of Kazakhstan in the discourse centered on the Russian national issues inevitably causes fuzziness and ambiguity of the constructed borders and consequently, identity. Not an obvious place on the Russian map, the inclusion of Kazakhstan required the strategy of justification for which the presenters use ethnic (*русские люди*) and linguistic (*русский язык*) arguments and even the fact of watching this programme.

*Сегодня одна из них [камер — LRC] установлена в Казахстане. И не только потому, что там проживает много русских людей..., не только потому, что в государственных учреждениях русский язык там имеет статус наравне с казахским, но и потому, что мы знаем, что там многие смотрят «Прямую линию с Президентом Российской Федерации».*

References to Kazakhstan used by the participants reinforce the sense of ambiguity regarding the position of this country on the imagined map of the Russian national discursive knowledge, while a ‘wider Russian identity’ seems to be under reconstruction modelled of what Tolz calls ‘the Union identity’ (Tolz 1998: 995). *Direct Line*’s collocutors use the strategy of evasion towards the expected noun *страна* as a reference to Kazakhstan, while often negatively defining it in relation to Russia, as ‘not Russia’, or ‘outside of Russia’: *наши передвижные телевизионные станции работают не только в России* [Andreeva]; *Поскольку мы разговариваем с теми, кто находится за пределами Российской Федерации* [Putin].

Another frequent reference to Kazakhstan as a place in *постсоветское пространство* puts the country into a metaphorical frame of a territory which has not yet been finally shaped, while the definition by the adjective *постсоветское* reminds the audience of the Soviet commonality. Another reference, *республика* used by Putin brings its own ambiguity as it evokes the Soviet title of the land.

*Вас прямо с берега Каспия приветствует казахстанский Актау — город интереснейший, город во многом необычный и единственный на постсоветском пространстве* [Bobrov]; *руководство республики делает все для того, чтобы поддержать такое состояние дел и поддержать развитие русского языка* [Putin].

Strategies of perpetuation of the earlier knowledge frames prevail in the discursive moves of the participants in the link-up with Aktau: they use the topos of assimilation to stress commonalities, for example, refer to the common past and brotherly friendship of the Presidents and make an effort to minimize differences between the countries.

The co-construction of commonality may be seen in the dialogue between the President and the participant Igrikov. Instead of a question, Igrikov expresses a wish to see an even closer friendship between the Russian and Kazakhstani Presidents. Both his move and Putin’s answer overlexicalize the concept of ‘friendship’. The words with the root *друж-* occur thrice in Igrikov’s move: *дружить* (2) and *дружба*, and are amplified by Putin’s repetition of the noun *друг* and the adjective derivatives *дружественный* and *дружеский*.



*ИГРИКОВ: У нас общая история. У России и Казахстана прекрасные отношения, **дружат** президенты, **дружит** народ, нет у нас нерешенных проблемных вопросов... Хотелось бы, чтобы наша **дружба** была еще ближе. Как об этом думает Президент соседней республики?*

*В. ПУТИН: Поскольку мы разговариваем с теми, кто находится за пределами Российской Федерации, в **дружественном** нам Казахстане, то я ответ на свой вопрос хотел бы начать с того, чтобы передать самые наилучшие пожелания всем казахстанцам и самый добрый **дружеский** привет моему и нашему **другу** Президенту Казахстана Нурсултану Абишевичу Назарбаеву.*

In contrast to this constructed unity between Russia and Kazakhstan the United States is seen by the presenter as the common 'other': *Впрочем, не с Америкой — с Россией у Казахстана общая многовековая история.*

Following the strategy of perpetuation of the familiar knowledge structures, the discourse borrows from the Soviet authoritative narrative when it evokes the Second World War as a symbol of the common identity. Construction of collective memories among those who most likely do not possess them is exercised through the use of verb *вспомним* in the inclusive first person plural form. Borrowings from the Soviet discourse are marked by the typical collocates: *многовековая история, легендарная дивизия*, as well as the reductive elliptic reference to the war, *Великая Отечественная*. The centrality of Moscow on the mental map of common memories construction is kept here too: ***Вспомним Великую Отечественную. Именно здесь, на казахстанской земле, формировалась легендарная дивизия панфиловцев, которая защищала Москву.***

Thus the national space emerges from the polylogue as a source of pride and glory, a space with the defined centre, outposts pinpointed and watched but with a rather fuzzy outside beyond which the national essence does not stop. The knowledge frames of the national space are informed by the past discourses with their heroic memories, including salient elements of the Soviet discourse.

### **The construction and reconstruction of time**

Attribution of properties to time periods and the construction of present, past and future is another salient parameter of the national identity narrative (Wodak 1999: 83-105). The participants of *Direct Line* often use the discursive strategies of continuation building on the traditional collective memories of the communist period and reviving the archetypal symbols of the Soviet authoritative discourse, such as the October revolution and the Second World War. An example of this is Putin's recollection of his visit to Dagestan at the

time when the villagers gave resistance to an attack by the Chechen fighters. Praising the Botlikh men, the President uses the positive knowledge schema connected to the October revolution:

*Когда я приехал, то в руках ваших мужчин, может быть, и в Ваших руках, я, честно говоря, видел не охотничьи ружья, а ручные пулеметы, гранатометы и другое автоматическое оружие, а все они были перевязаны пулеметными лентами, как революционные матросы в 1917 году...*

Putin uses the trope of comparison for the purpose of positive assimilation between the two periods, the Chechen conflict and the Bolshevik revolution as well as between their actors constructed as fearless heroes. The comparison with the revolutionary sailors whose image had been part of the Soviet 'myth of origin' (Hall 1996: 615) valorises and glorifies the Russian side of the conflict and emphasizes sameness between the Dagestani villagers and the Russian archetypal men. The President's speech further stresses the Russian essence of the Dagestani resistance and recasts the local conflict as defence shown by Russia:

*Люди просто... взяли в руки оружие и встали на защиту интересов России и своих собственных домов; ...это исключительный пример патриотизма, причем не только местного, дагестанского, — российского патриотизма.*

The Second World War references are another point of positive identity formation. Viewers of the programme can easily make a connection between the ability of inhabitants of Rzhev to ask their questions to the President and his recent award to Rzhev of the title 'the town of military glory'. The presenter introduces the town while standing at the Victory memorial. His interlude has hallmarks of a represented discourse that evokes the war narrative of the Soviet period. The signs of it are the linguistic particularisation of the sufferings endured by the town during the war — the numeral and the temporal expression *семнадцать месяцев*, the cliché collocates *ожесточенные бои*, *воинская слава*, and war related terms *Великая Отечественная война*, *обелиск*, *оккупация*, *ветеран*.

*...за моей спиной — обелиск «Победа». Обелиск «Победа» напоминает, что история Ржева тесно связана с событиями Великой Отечественной войны. Город почти 17 месяцев был в оккупации. Здесь шли ожесточенные бои. И поэтому новость о том, что Ржев стал Городом воинской славы, встречена жителями с радостью, особенно ветеранами [Presenter].*

In his moves, Putin contributes to the valorisation of the Second World War and common memories co-constructing them as the memories of national heroism. He uses high register words typical for the heroic narrative, such as *воины, сражались, веха*, as well as the clichés of the war description (*предотвращена попытка гитлеровских войск организовать второе крупномасштабное наступление на Москву*), which have intertextual resemblance of the Soviet history textbooks.

*В.ПУТИН: Во-первых, что касается статуса Города воинской славы. Конечно, такие города, как Ржев, давно этого заслужили. Ведь в 42-43-м годах именно благодаря **воинам**, которые **сражались** на вашей земле, была **предотвращена попытка гитлеровских войск организовать второе крупномасштабное наступление на Москву**. **И это очень важная веха в развитии ситуации на фронтах Великой Отечественной войны.***

While the Soviet references are rather positive and nostalgic, the President negatively frames the recent past — i.e. the period immediately preceding his term in power. The 1990s, the period of Boris El'tsin's presidency, is consistently repositioned into the negative knowledge schema with the utilization of the strategy of demontage. In Putin's moves, memories of Russia's independence, liberation from Communist ideology and democratic freedoms previously associated with the 1990s are suppressed and backgrounded, while the period is described within the new knowledge frame as a time of instability, moral corruption, populism and inefficiency of the government. To serve the purpose of demontage, the President constructs the negative knowledge and attributes to it the property of the shared memories by introducing the narrative with the verb *вспомните*. He follows it by negative referencing, employing liberally the grammatical category of negativity: *недееспособный парламент, невозможно решить, принято не было*; as well as negative expressions from the arsenal of political rhetoric: *популистский, заводит в тупик, обесценили доходы*. Other devices used are: the emphatic litotes *мало-мальски, ни одного решения*, and the ironic colloquialism with the prefix *на-* (*напринимали*); emphatic repetition and rephrasing: *При недееспособном парламенте, при недееспособной Думе*.

***Вспомните** начало и середину 90-х годов. **При недееспособном парламенте, при недееспособной Думе невозможно было принять ни одного мало-мальски выверенного решения. Вот популистских решений, которые заводи́ли и экономику, и социальную сферу страны в тупик, в это время **напринимали** более чем достаточно. Но **ни одного** внятного решения, которое бы находи-***

*лось в струе развития экономики и социальной сферы, по сути дела, принято не было.*

In addition, the period of 1990s is contrasted to the positively constructed present period, seen as the whole term of Putin's power. The President's typical strategy of positive attributions (*miranda*) is achieved by combining figures with comments containing positive characteristics, that are placed either in a separate sentence or parenthesis. Similar to the Soviet discourse, figures are positively compared to plans, suggesting overachievement. The key words used for the construction of success are lexical elements with the interdiscursive markers of the Soviet planned economy reports *положительный, успех, рекорд, рекордный, рост, прирастать, показатель*. On top of that, the new post-Soviet vocabulary of success reporting also seems to be in the process of development: the President uses the loan word *бум*, however here he is in a less familiar territory as he marks his code switching by the metalinguistic comment *так называемый*. The repetition of the key words indicating success is another mechanism of constructing the positive. For instance, the noun *рост* is used in *Direct Line* 15 times, and the words with the root *стабил-* (*стабильный, стабилизационный, стабилизация, стабильность*) — 12 times, all mainly by the President.

*Результаты работы за прошедший год были положительными; Главный показатель успеха — это рост экономики; В прошлом году рост составил 6,7 процента. Очень неплохой показатель; Рост составил 7,7 процента — значительно выше запланированных параметров. Это само по себе уже очень неплохо. Но еще лучше то, что мы начали наконец добиваться того результата, к которому стремились все эти годы; За последние пять лет мы прирастали по 15 процентов ежегодно. Это очень большой показатель; В этом году рост составит почти 25 процентов — 24,4, а ввод жилья еще больше — 34,5 (34,4) процента. Это уже похоже на так называемый строительный бум. Золотовалютные резервы выросли до рекордного за всю историю; Стабильный курс развития нашего государства [Putin].*

The traditional and interdiscursive tools used in the construction of the picture of the present prosperity and achievement are contrasted to the noticeable presence of the informal phrasing in the Presidential speech, used in the argumentation regarding the truthfulness of the statements of achievements, and directed towards the implied doubters: *И мне приятно отметить, что ни одного раза мною не были допущены какие-то натяжки. Ничего не нужно высасывать, как говорят у нас в народе, из пальца*. Similar to

the word *бум*, the code switching to the informal language is accompanied by the metalinguistic comment that his expression is borrowed from the language of common folk.

The national frame of the *future* is constructed by the President with the use of strategies that emphasize continuity and an increase in the positive qualities. The frames of knowledge that President Putin uses for his model involve the theme of stability as the future is seen as continuation of the present:

*Могу Вам только сказать, что эта работа будет продолжена. ...мы будем предпринимать ответные шаги, которые бы, безусловно, обеспечили безопасность граждан России. Уверяю вас, такие шаги планируются, и мы их предпримем.*

Another device used in the construction of positive future is the employment of the superlative language to describe it, often within the implicit or explicit topos of comparison:

*В рамках федеральных целевых программ на развитие Дальнего Востока предусмотрено выделение значительных сумм из федерального бюджета. На ближайшие 4-5 лет это 500 миллиардов рублей. Это очень большие деньги, мы таких денег ни на одну программу не выделяли; Так что у нас планы не просто большие — они грандиозные.*

Positive framing of the future is also achieved through the expression of the President's personal confidence in the achievement of the positive goals. Confidence is keyed by Putin's use of the short participles and verbs in the first person singular (*уверен, считаю*) with the omission of the pronoun, the structure with the overtone of the curt telegraphic style:

*Уверен, что и из-за границы поедут к нам отдыхающие и туристы; Уверен, что их [специалистов — LRC] количество будет увеличиваться. На первом этапе **считаю возможным** увеличить это как минимум в три раза и знаю, где взять деньги [Putin].*

Similarly, speech act of promise, the use of the assuring adverbs such as *обязательно* or short sentences with a verb *быть* in the future tense add to the construction of the overall confidence in the future pictured as the enhanced present:

*Обещаю, мы это **обязательно** сделаем; Обещаю Вам, что **обязательно** мы доведем это дело до конца, **обязательно**. И дорога будет, и туннель будет сделан, так же как развитие социальной*

*инфраструктуры. «Будет ли банковский кризис?» — Нет, не будет [Putin].*

Thus the time dimension of the national identity undergoes revision and reconstruction throughout *Direct Line* and especially in the speech of the main agent of the national discourse construction, the President.

### Construction of ‘the other’

The post-Soviet public discourse has long been associated with ‘liberal language use’, characterised by the engagement of stylistic mixing, lexical novelties and substandard registers (Ryazanova-Clarke & Wade 1999). Interestingly, the contributors to *Direct Line* use the elements of ‘the landslide of the norm’ (Lunde & Roesen 2006) in certain instances of the discourse, where the co-construction of the common enemy, or of the common ‘other’, takes place. For example, Putin realizes the distancing strategy by the using the word *крышевать* which has strong overtones of criminal slang. His purpose for the employment of this substandard lexical item is to frame the corrupt local governments as something he disapproves of and to mark his disagreement with their interference into the market. In addition, Putin borrows the word *перекупщик* from the lexicon of the 1920s to allot this interdiscursive ‘grade of specification’ to the people with undesirable qualities. In both cases the President marks his code switching by metalinguistic comments showing in the latter example his awareness of the stylistic effect of the chosen language tool.

*О чем это говорит? Это говорит о том, что так называемые перекупщики во многих регионах и во многих муниципалитетах действуют монопольно, а в этой сфере должно присутствовать рыночное предложение... они [руководители — LRC] должны создавать рыночные условия, а не, извините за моветон, «крышевать» там тех, с которыми их связывают особые отношения [Putin].*

The liberal language used to distance ‘the other’ may be activated within the interdiscursively revived Soviet knowledge frame. This occurs when the President’s joins in the co-construction of the USA within the ‘enemy’ frame. Borrowing heavily from the discourse of the cold war, the participants of *Direct Line* place the United States of America firmly in the position of the international ‘other’. Mr Sibert, for one, pointedly from the Nuclear Physics Research Institute in Novosibirsk, asked the President to express his opinion about a comment reputedly made by the former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Allegedly, Ms Albright said that it was unfair for Russia to own by itself all its colossal natural treasures. Despite the fact that there has

been no evidence that Ms Albright had indeed ever said this, and despite Putin's admission that he was not aware of such words, this 'unexpected question' becomes a convenient starting point of discursive reconstruction of America as a Russian enemy.

*А.СИБЕРТ: Господин Президент, я Вам хочу задать вопрос, который, пожалуй, интересует многих россиян. Не столь давно в одном из интервью бывший госсекретарь Соединенных Штатов Олбрайт заявила, что колоссальные естественные богатства Сибири несправедливо принадлежат одной России. Отсюда вопрос: какие последствия могут быть после таких заявлений? И как Вы оцениваете такие заявления? Спасибо.*

*В.ПУТИН: Неожиданный вопрос, Александр Карлович. Но я понимаю, что он не может нас не волновать, особенно тех людей, которые непосредственно живут в Сибири. Я не знаком с этим высказываем госпожи Олбрайт, но знаю, что такие идеи в головах некоторых политиков бродят. Это, на мой взгляд, такая «политическая эротика», которая, может быть, кому-нибудь и может доставить удовольствие, но вряд ли приведет к положительному результату.*

The President finds it possible to express sympathy with the concerns of Mr Sibert and all people who live in Siberia — his inclusive pronoun *нас* keys solidarity while the certainty of his double negative *не может не волновать* highlights the emphasis. Borrowing from the liberal code, he uses a sexual metaphor, a tool tested earlier in his dialogues with foreign journalists<sup>10</sup>, as an instrument of the enemy construction. An oblique threat (*вряд ли приведет к положительному результату*) linked with the words with sexual connotation demarcate the negativity and alien quality of the knowledge frame connected to the referent.

### **Construction of the leader**

The format of the talk between one and millions, that the programme boasts, is based on a presupposition of the properties of centrality and singularity attached to that one. The central voice in the nation construction, Putin emerges from *Direct Line* as an unchallenged and unquestionable national leader. He comfortably fits at times within a traditional Russian cultural paradigm of a tsar-like figure, whom the small man desires to reach and confide his problems and dreams. The President is in control of all decisions of the federal and local government and does not flinch from making significant political decisions and meting out justice on-line. For example, in the answers that look spontaneous, he promises to index military pensions and to award a da-

cha ‘amnesty’. Other promises are made even regarding issues that cannot possibly depend on the Presidential will such as the level of inflation, or defaults on debts.

The discourse negotiates and co-constructs the President as an integral part of the Russian national identity and this co-constructed figure has multiple sides and guises. Taken within a broader context of the final months of his term in power, it should be remembered that at the time, Putin’s personal identity was a major issue of the nation-wide discussion. The news that the President agreed to stand as number one in the list of the United Russia party in the December 2007 Duma elections caused the speculations about his future political role to escalate. In particular, around the time of the programme, rumours were circulating about a possibility of the third Presidential term and the country was swept by an orchestrated wave of national expression of public love for the outgoing President. A movement in Putin’s support, *За Путина!*, was created which held mass rallies and meetings requesting him to stay in power<sup>11</sup>. The *United Russia* party leader Boris Gryzlov coined for Putin the title *национальный лидер* which was quickly picked up and replicated by the media<sup>12</sup>.

Traces of this public discourse can be seen in *Direct Line*, where Putin with the active assistance and reconfirmation of other participants tries on a variety of linguistically defined roles: a benign ruler, distributing cash on air, a savvy businessman, teaching the farmers to produce biofuel, a father of the nation attending to all human pains. Below I provide more detailed examples of discursive co-construction of three salient Presidential roles: a military commander, a competent technocrat and a superman.

### **A Military commander**

A link-up with the rocket launch facility in Plesetsk is a vivid example in which the construction of Presidential identity is framed as part of the construction of the Russian nation. The link-up evokes the Soviet discourse of the pride in the military might and arms race, as the speaking parties use military terminology: *форма боевого расчета, стартовый комплекс, ракета Тополь, поразить учебную цель, полигон*. Against this discursive background, the President’s code switching to the role of the Commander in Chief is presented as expected and natural. The presenter is first to use the military title of the President: *Пожалуйста, вопросы к Верховному Главнокомандующему. Пожалуйста*. This tone is continued by the participant from the public who addresses Putin following the military formalities: *ПОЛУНИН: Товарищ Верховный Главнокомандующий! Начальник испытательного отдела полковник Полунин*.



The co-construction continues when Putin congratulates the soldiers with the successful launch of the rocket and the 'voices' in the crowd offer a formal military reply: *Служим Отечеству!* This phrase invoking the emotive name of the state, *отечество*, contributes to the construction of the link between the military achievements, pride in the powerful state and the President.

Mr Polunin's request to the President to speed up the military re-equipment taps into the discourse of Russia as the re-emerging confident military power prominent throughout *Direct Line*. Co-constructing this knowledge, Putin linguistically associates himself with the military meaning of the national identity. His answer demonstrates knowledge of many technical details of weapons, new brands of equipment:

*Но мы с Вами хорошо знаем, что сейчас на вооружение поступает уже «Тополь-М». И не только будем уделять внимание всей ядерной триаде — я имею в виду РВСН, стратегическую авиацию и подводный ядерный флот, — но и другим видам вооружения [Putin].*

Putin's technical military language also works as an in-group marker as he expresses solidarity with the group of military at the facility, in particular, he uses the endearing special jargon word *сушки* for the fighter jet SU-34. The use of the inclusive forms indicates the presupposition of the shared knowledge as Putin's answers about the speed of the weapons re-equipment programme are constructed as reiteration of existing knowledge, and not new information: *мы с Вами хорошо знаем; И Вы знаете; я много раз об этом говорил*. This stresses that re-construction of military power as part of Russian identity is founded on the reiterative properties borrowed from earlier knowledge frames of the Soviet discourse.

### **A competent technocrat**

Another guise of the Presidential identity is that of a competent technocrat, with hands on knowledge of and a phenomenal memory for details and figures. This role is linguistically marked in his own speech by the frequent use of numerals, often framing the strategy of particularisation and the forms associated with the discourse of administrative jargon, such as the elliptical attributive use of the dative with the preposition *по*<sup>13</sup>:

*В Европе — а мы оттуда покупаем очень много продовольственных товаров по импорту — произошло событие, которое отразилось на нас: прекращение субсидирования в значительной степени сельхозпроизводства привело к повышению цен в Европе в среднем на 15-17 процентов. У нас это сразу выросло до 25-ти, по*

*некоторым продуктам — до 40 и даже до 60 процентов: подсолнечное масло и некоторые другие виды товаров; ...это только перенастройка механизма функционирования по обеспечению этими лекарствами для государственных органов [Putin].*

On other occasions, Putin uses the language signalling the identity of the ‘competent specialist’ when he faces less comfortable questions or has to give less glorious, mundane information. In such situations, he often rephrases the technocratic term or offers a metalinguistic comment. This strategy helps towards constructing a language persona of someone on top of complex concepts:

*Из этих регионов выехало в последние годы полтора миллиона человек. Происходит **депопуляция** этого региона страны; По моему мнению, это решение должно быть принято публично, **как сейчас модно говорить, транспарентно** и с учетом мнения не только специалистов, но и широкой общественности; Здесь, как вы знаете — а вы это знаете лучше, чем кто-либо другой (люди, которые там живут, понимают), — это **диспаритет** в тарифах на электроэнергию; И только сопряжение усилий федерального центра и регионов может дать необходимую **синергию**, как говорят, необходимый эффект [Putin].*

### **A national leader endowed with super human qualities**

Finally *Direct Line* co-constructs the President as someone who is worth two million questions. On the emotional perception level, the discourse constructs feelings of admiration and love towards the President. The public usually start their speech moves by expression of gratitude for his work and care for the people, which brings the conversation within the socio-cultural paradigm of the paternalistic relations between the power and the populace:

*Вы побывали в Ботлихе в самые тяжелые дни августа 99-го года. Страшное было время. **Ваш** приезд для нас многое значил, мы почувствовали и поддержку, и заботу, тогда для нас это означало многое. Спасибо Вам большое; Меня зовут Наталья Плотникова. Я ресторатор. **Во-первых, хочу Вас поблагодарить за то Ваше участие в судьбе нашего города** [Participants].*

The participants’ flattering questions reveal assumptions of superhuman qualities attributed to Putin, such as an ability to speak many languages, bravery of going to Iran despite the received threats to his life or a punishing sleep-deprived schedule:

*Вы прекрасно знаете немецкий язык, говорите на английском. И в недавнем своем выступлении в Гватемале Вы говорили уже на французском языке. Так вот как при всей Вашей занятости, в действительно плотном графике работы Вы успеваете изучать языки?* [Participant];

*С.БРИЛЁВ: Владимир Владимирович, Вы не ответили на один из вопросов, который бесконечно там повторяется: «Сколько часов в день Вы спите?»*

*В.ПУТИН: Достаточное количество, чтобы иметь возможность отвечать на ваши вопросы.*

The presenter Brilev stresses that the latter question is ‘endlessly repeated’, producing the impression of an overwhelming concern of the nation about the leader’s pattern of overwork. The strategy of evasiveness in Putin’s answer has an effect of rather confirming than disproving the assumption of sleep shortage and evokes the image of the never-sleeping leader, perpetuated in Soviet mythology (Bogdanov 2007).

All these meanings allow the language of unquestioned adoration towards the leader to be built into the national discourse. At one point, this reaches almost a mystical level of emotions, resonant of religious overtones. Symbolically, one of the 69 participants was a woman who had no question but a desire for some kind of ‘verbal touch’ towards the President, almost like a believer yearning to touch an object of veneration. Verification of the existence of the President and a wish to see that presence permanently on her mental time map (before and now) is enough for her to express happiness and gratitude:

*Н.СЕМЕНИХИНА: Здравствуйте! Представьтесь, пожалуйста.*

*ОТВЕТ: Я не буду с Вами разговаривать, а только с Президентом.*

*Н.СЕМЕНИХИНА: Владимир Владимирович Вас слушает, задавайте вопрос.*

*В.ПУТИН: Слушаю Вас. Добрый день!*

*ВОПРОС: Это Вы?*

*В.ПУТИН: Я. Добрый день! Да.*

*ВОПРОС: Это правда Вы?*

*В.ПУТИН: Правда.*

*ВОПРОС: А раньше тоже были Вы, да?*

*В.ПУТИН: И раньше был я, да.*

*ВОПРОС: Ой, господи, спасибо Вам большое за все, огромное спасибо.*

*С.БРИЛЁВ: Без вопроса обошлось.*

Although some irony may be sensed on the part of the presenter Brilev and although the President's reply contains a strategy of minimalisation when he displays modesty, by and large Putin accepts the anonymous speaker's thanksgiving as a true evaluation of his and his team's work: *Спасибо Вам за то, что Вы сказали, это, собственно говоря, оценка моей работы, оценка работы тех людей, с которыми я бок о бок тружусь за последние годы.* By doing so he in effect co-constructs the frame of knowledge which foregrounds his super-human characteristics.

To conclude, the discourse of *Direct Line with the President* has the notable hallmarks of vigorous national identity construction, to which all the participants make their verbal contribution. The presenters' interludes, questions of the selected public and President Putin's answers altogether construct knowledge about what the Russian nation is today, which the participants share. The *Direct Line* discourse can be called a represented discourse as it demonstrates connections and borrowings from other discourses among which the rehabilitation of the Soviet discursive elements is especially vivid. Identity components such as time, space and a strong leader feature among the thematic elements of the national identity and variety of strategies in the identity discursive construction are employed including perpetuation and de-montage. Altogether, the discourse of *Direct Line* emerges as a well choreographed language product that serves as a tool of production and reproduction of a set of strong ideological messages about what Russians should know and feel about themselves today. Finally, using the words of Guy Debord, *Direct Line*, revealed Putin's Russia as a society of the spectacle, "that... has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that ...was reconstructing it as it was describing it" (Debord 1990:9).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> «Абсолютный рекорд», *Комсомольская правда*, 19.10.2007.

<sup>2</sup> *Московские новости*, No.41, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> *Московские новости*, No.41, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Орех, А. 'Только он и мы', *Ежедневный журнал*, 19.10.2007.

<sup>5</sup> The leading journalists of the programme, Ekaterina Andreeva and and Sergei Brilev featured in all six broadcasts of *The Direct Line with the President* and 1000 call centre operators were vetted to work on the programme (*Московский комсомолец*, 18.10.2007).

<sup>6</sup> *Московский комсомолец*, 18.10.2007.

<sup>7</sup> «С вами говорит автоответчик президента», *Новая газета*, 18.10.2007.

<sup>8</sup> *Российская газета*, 18.10.2007.

<sup>9</sup> On discursive strategies and topoi, see Wodak, 1999:36-42.

<sup>10</sup> In 2002, at a press-conference with foreign journalists during a summit in Brussels, Vladimir Putin famously connected a sexual innuendo with the speech act of threat, borrowing from the criminal discourse:

«Если вы хотите совсем уж стать исламским радикалом и готовы пойти на то, чтобы сделать себе обрезание, то я вас приглашаю в Москву. У нас многоконфессиональная стра-

на, у нас есть специалисты и по этому вопросу. И я порекомендую ему сделать эту операцию таким образом, чтобы у вас уже больше ничего не выросло» (Sukhotskii, 2004; also <http://ru.wikiquote.org>).

<sup>11</sup> *Московский комсомолец*, 16.11.2007.

<sup>12</sup> *News.Ru.com*. 7.11.2007.

<sup>13</sup> The elliptical forms with the preposition *no* with the dative were characteristic of “the Communist Party dialect” while in the post-Soviet period they were not only retained but broadened their use (Shaposhnikov 1998:78).

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