Research article

Political Performance in Russia: Carnival Polyphony

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Abstract. The political reality is becoming more and more virtual. The government retains control over the political space. At the same time, the political practices themselves are becoming more approximate. The spectacle nature of politics is increasingly making itself felt. Politics is perceived as a game, a show, a theater, with its own genre of laws and stylistics. This view of politics is increasingly gaining ground in the context of COVID-19, which divides social ties and organizes society in an online reality. In full measure, these challenges are relevant for modern Russia. Similar problems are beginning to arise in Russian regions as well. In this article, the author highlights the carnival element of contemporary Russian politics. The author's goal is to establish a relationship between the polyphony of carnival reality, which is often not in the control of the authorities, and the practices of legitimation of the authorities themselves, which constantly need approval and recognition of their own policies. The purpose of the study was to clarify the association between the carnival element of politics in Russia and the legitimation of power. The research methodology was the author's deconstruction of the political process in Russia using a formal method (M. Bakhtin's theory) that allowed one to see in it the constant constitution of new forms of social activity. As a result of the research, the author concluded that political processes in Russia can be defined in a carnival form, within which various voices and ideas can independently be present. The polyphony of politics, in fact, resembles the polyphony of the carnival itself. The polyphony achieved in the carnival, and in creating a deceptive sense of democracy, creates a whole host of challenges and risks for the authorities. Creative energy and destructive energy are present with each other at the same time. That is why, for the authorities, such a release is always mysterious and indefinite. Loss of form is always dangerous for the authorities, who are accustomed to extreme clarity and determination of possible consequences.

Keywords: carnival, legitimation, political performance, power, polyphony

1. Introduction

The political reality is constantly changing. Politics is becoming more mobile and dynamic. Policy becomes simpler where it is needed. Optimization and economy are also inherent in modern politics. Real interactions in the political space, which are necessary to legitimate political power, are increasingly becoming mediated. These changes, in the author's opinion, are initially associated with the fact that the power,

from which the initiative to reboot the political reality comes, always outstrips society in speed, which, in turn, acts as a source of power [1].

In political discourse, the concept of "distant" is being used. On the one hand, it simplifies communication by making it possible over a distance. On the other hand, it leads to the degradation of the usual communication. The world is witnessing global changes to the same extent that they are carried over to individual states. The Russian case looks no exception. During 2020 and almost half of 2021, the political reality in the country was viewed through the prism of restrictions. Mass events are canceled in Russian regions. The "holiday" is getting smaller. The political authorities call for vaccinations and recommend wearing masks. The effectiveness of Russian governors is complemented by a new indicator to assess the activities of the heads of regions in the fight against COVID-19.

At the same time, it is becoming more and more difficult to really assess the decisions of the authorities. Politics is being transferred to the online space. The authorities report on their achievements in the online space. It is there that the operational headquarters to combat the pandemic are held and demonstrative dragging of the guilty officials is arranged. Power begins to be constantly present in the life of almost every person who has a mobile gadget.

2. Methodology and methods

The comparisons between politics and theater are deeply rooted. Politics and theater are compared in Greek history, passing through the Renaissance and New Age, a period of romanticism, passing through a long, eventful 20th century. Politics always seems to be quite a spectacular phenomenon, as well as theater. Political practices always contain an element of the spectacular. The playful nature of politics does not seem like a revelation. Political passions are simmering in front of society. In every political tradition, embezzlers, corrupt officials, and traitors are exposed, as well as devoted and heroic men are bestowed. Political passions are always filled with a vivid spectacle. Such is the chronicled "momentary weakness on the scaffold all alone to the sound of a terrible drum" Louis XVI, — noted Albert Camus [2, p. 211].

In many ways, it is precisely because of the amazing entertainment that politics attracts attention. Together with incredible plot twists, the political space is always effectively visualized. The outfits of the nobles always amaze with their splendor. The glitter and richness of the decoration of their chambers dazzle the eyes. The official media are well aware that the wealth and splendor of power are always subjects of

reasoning and public polarization, therefore, they are trying with all their might to divert the attention of the audience to other objects of attention. On the contrary, the opposition media can circulate for a long time stories about the mind-boggling cost of wristwatches of certain politicians, or show stories about the flashy luxury of the new nobility. Stories about luxurious apartments and huge spending by the political elite plunge society into a state of shock.

The spectacle is always a source of legitimation of power. Power is objectified in the spectacle, reminding society of its splendor. The element of spectacle is present in politics regardless of historical time. The famous Dutch intellectual Johan Huizinga saw "cunning and ingenuity" in the ceremonial manifestations of kings in the Middle Ages, who appeared before a dumbfounded society [3, p. 11].

The French intellectual Mark Blok wrote about the demonstrative practices of healing people by the English and French kings. Power demonstrates itself effectively and efficiently, while exuding a "charismatic fragrance" [4, p. 82].

These practices strengthen the legitimacy capital for the government. The spectacle can also be seen at the coronation, on the occasion of the birth of the heirs to the throne, during the weddings of influential persons. People are looking for an opportunity to see something supernatural and unusual, different from routine life. The spectacular component is also present in the rituals of power in the period of modernity, when one can see with what touching care the traditions are guarded in the last European monarchies. The spectacle becomes an important part of political life in dictatorships. At that very moment, the number of cars accompanying the political leader may be counted in the stunned crowd. This is how governors or federal officials arrive in the Russian province, accompanied by FSO vehicles and a large retinue of local and regional officials. The influential person is surrounded by numerous bodyguards, recognizable for their appearance and physical condition. Earlier, servants were shown to society in livery. Today, political dynamics can even dress them in tracksuits, as argued by the Italian political philosopher Norberto Bobbio [5, p. 135].

The images of the servants who ensure the life of political power are revealed in cultural traditions. There is a long gallery of images: Truffaldino and Till Ulenspiegel, Savelich and Firs, Sancho Panza and Gogol's Petrushka. The number of servants may vary each time. The higher the political position of the owner, the more diverse the apparatus serving his life. As the German sociologist Siegfried Krakauer rightly noted, "the structure of the employee hierarchy depends on the position of the owner" [6, p. 46]. The discourse of servants is a reflection of the dominant cultural ideas about the total, or about the situational nature of submission [7].

The theatricality of such visits is immediately evident. As a rule, at this moment some important events can take place in the province. Often, higher-level officials set up social, economic, or cultural infrastructure in the province.

The theatrical nature of politics is revealed in its deceptive visualization. What the spectator sees on the stage appears as a deception, fiction. The most interesting thing happens behind the scenes — it is there that the direction is created, the actual plot is invented and the actors are controlled. It must be understood that this feature of politics does not escape the layman. The average person may assume that the real power belongs to the puppeteers. The objectivity of the otherworldly existence of power is also noted by researchers. A complex political intrigue can be controlled by a very inconspicuous person. Let us recall how pathetic Gudionov, sleeping with his old wife, seemed to his former driver in the movie *Servant* (1989) by Vadim Abdrashitov. The hidden existence of power seems to be much more mysterious than the moments of open demonstration of political decisions.

The political concept of "actor" is similar to the word "actor", meaning a person playing a role in a play or movie. The spelling of these words is identical, but as much as possible following the Google conjuncture, it quite symptomatically defines the actor as a "play-actor".

The existing demand on the part of society for intrigue, for a spectacle is fully satisfied by the authorities. Society is immersed in a total performance, where sometimes it is almost impossible to separate one action from another. This is why experts are so quickly disappointed, it is for this reason that there is always an element of unpredictability, an unexpectedly prepared number, which perplexes the previous analytics and explanatory schemes.

3. Results and discussion

The political spectacle in modern Russia is gradually being technologized. Management should be as obedient and easy as possible. A similar logic is present in federal politics and at the level of regional and municipal authorities.

If at the beginning of the long history of event festivals and all kinds of city holidays, there could be some difficult moments, today they are practically overcome. The authorities begin to manage the complex mechanics of the holiday. This machine is undoubtedly political, because it appears at the click of the authorities.

In the author's opinion, the transfer of the spectacle to the online mode at the moment when society began to get used to it is symptomatic. Many festivals and holidays during

the COVID-19 restrictions period are held online. Many sporting events are held in front of empty stands, and somewhere the number of fans is allowed to be so minimal that they look almost invisible.

The space of the holiday is always quite accurately determined by the authorities themselves. Any choice can be called political. The central square of a city or a stadium, a historic quarter, or a manor house are equally chronotopes of a performance legitimated by the authorities. Space should capture society in any state of mobilization — from ceremonial solemnity to carnival, masquerade liberty. As noted by Lotman, parade and masquerade (carnival) are opposite realities of one whole. In space, festive events and festivities usually "require a different place" [8, p. 534].

Something similar can be found in Bakhtin's reasoning about special chronotopes in which an event occurs. With regard to carnival events, as a rule, these can be the central squares of cities [9].

The holiday should be separated from the other part of the world. This idea can be found in the reasoning of Roger Caillois. The French intellectual noted that the game takes place within a space "carefully isolated from the rest of life" [10, p. 46].

Each society has its own conditions of identification with the political system and ideological course. In democratic systems, a person is free to choose the need for identification. Often, a person is left alone. The absence of coercion forces him/her to make the choice that seems optimal for him/her. In an authoritarian and totalitarian political regime, people are equally involved in directing a performance. Identifying with the system seems like the only choice. Military parades, demonstrations, parades of athletes, and gymnastic pyramids — all this is a political spectacle, possibly involving huge social resources. The performance is supported by loyal media and influential intellectuals. That is why one gets ideas about the properties of the mobilized mass in the USSR from the photographic work of Shaikhet and Rodchenko, from the films of Eisenstein and Vertov.

The play embodies the will of the authorities. This is confirmed in the transformations of the collective body. Power needs legitimation, and the spectacle it invents is an attempt to achieve it. It is possible to define both internal and external resources of legitimation.

Endless masses of demonstrators, beams connecting in the center of cities, streams of banners and banners, phonetic continuity show the possibilities of the internal energy of legitimation. Would it be possible to see this if the government was unpopular? Who would have believed in the sincerity of the crowd's jubilation?

Military parades, the demonstration of the latest weapons — all this has external legitimation effects designed for export. Power always demonstrates itself at such events. Demonstration of symbolic unity with people, equal stay with them in the holiday is important for it. Along with power is "a person who lives exclusively in the public interest, obeying objective requirements" [11, p. 189].

This can be seen at all levels of politics in Russia. A clear hierarchy of significance convincingly demonstrates itself. The military parade on Red Square is received by the President of Russia. The governor can be present at the opening of an important sports facility in the regional center. The head of the municipal district administration is given the first word at the gastronomic festival of potatoes or pancakes. The authorities appear to be the protagonist who always follows a high official style.

In the context of digitalization, the official style somewhat decreases its importance, becoming a part of the online reality. The spectacularity of politics instantly increases at the very moment when one can enter into an equal dialogue with an official on the Web, pull him back, object to him, disagree with him, criticize him, express one's position using ready-made symbols — emoticons. Today, one can increasingly see political leaders of various levels who have accounts on social networks, where one can write with direct questions. It is believed that this form of rapprochement with the people strengthens the position of the authorities. The spectacular component of the activities of the regional authorities is considered as an element of the legitimization of the authorities. Today, this is an important part of the Kremlin's recruiting of governors. The satisfaction of the inhabitants of the region with the performance produced is one of the criteria for the effectiveness of the governor [12].

By creating themselves in online reality, the authorities are trying to convince the population that they are democratic and accessible to everyone.

The total spectacle is presented in some kind of constant stream of noise. At the same time, the noise coming through is an amazing speech — the sum of individual voices and positions.

Polyphony is revealed in each of the three scenarios of actors' interaction with each other.

First, this is interaction in the online space, when polyphony is achieved through a democratically constructed dialogue according to the rules of the global network. As already noted, the authorities can lose to opposition actors who are more popular in the online space. An official's entry into a dialogue can be a losing one. In a networked environment, the spectacularity of politics increases significantly. One can treat officials easily, familiarly, disagree with them, criticize them.

In the context of online politics, such a losing "at the entrance" position must somehow be overcome. The Russian government is trying to seriously regulate the Internet space, suggesting that a cautious user will prefer silence and contemplation, instead of supporting those actors who criticize the government. For those who are overly critical of the authorities in modern Russia, judicial mechanisms have already been launched. It becomes dangerous to criticize the power on the Internet.

The number of government officials' accounts has instantly increased over the past year. In particular, in the Lipetsk Region, all heads of municipalities have Instagram accounts today. This style is adopted even by heads of rural settlements and various institutions in the province. In such a format, which presupposes grassroots contact with the authorities, the administration has a hard time. The reasons for criticism are constantly being found. A certain culture of criticism is emerging. A real spectacle is unfolding in front of a large audience. At the same time, the folding polyphony can be considered quite symmetrical. Voices "for" are mated with those who are "against" in an interesting noise that characterizes the carnival world, a discussion of various styles.

Second, this is offline interaction, in immediate reality. Completely different rules already apply here. The political reality is clearly divided into high and low, where the high dictates the low political style. The existing disposition determines the subsequent practices. Political actors perfectly understand the hierarchies that exist in the political space, because, as noted by the German researcher Assmann, any hierarchy is established "by force" [13, p. 184].

In such circumstances, any carnival behavior requires much more courage than being online, when critical arrows do not reach their immediate goal. A rapidly changing agenda, a shift in emphasis, sometimes saves power holders from having to respond to their critics from the people. In this case, the attention of the audience is not at all intent. It, too, is distracted by the rapid change of plans.

At one time, it seems, it was to such people that the famous question of Alexander Galich was addressed: "Can you go to the square?".

In some cases, political actors may, in their own interests, maintain a balance between their own online and offline activities. The case of Navalny, who uses practically the same style both online and offline, is indicative. Navalny positions himself in a trickster manner, because the trickster "breaks the vicious circle of the world where everything is predetermined" [14, p. 16]. He speaks familiarly, "on an equal footing," insulting almost everyone who is the mainstay of the existing idyll. In Russian culture, there is a folk doll — Petrushka. It should be noted that this doll has many sympathizers among the people. The doll speaks the truth that society needs.

A quick glance at Russian politics allows one to find figures in it who use carnival technologies in constructing their own image. Zhirinovsky and Milonov, Rashkin and Fedorov — all of them, in their own way, understanding the importance of the carnival genre in their own legitimation, carry it along with them both online and offline. Increasingly, carnival techniques in their own legitimation are used by Russian governors, who understand the importance of public favors, despite the final decision made by the Kremlin.

If the political reality in Russia is defined using the formal method of Bakhtin, then it will look quite polyphonic. Different voices, positions, opinions are heard everywhere in politics. Politics is represented by constant talking, challenging each other's positions, debates, discussions. Politics is a total, never-ending speech. In this sense, politics seems to be a stable form of speech.

Third, there may be polyphony in the mixing of the formats themselves. Online can interfere with offline. The report can be conducted from the immediate place of the event. Key actors can quickly navigate the space, being in both online and offline formats. The combination of formats can provide the spectacle of the political world that is important for the authorities. As already noted, the importance of the spectacle in the practices of regional power is well understood by the Kremlin [12].

Despite the grassroots energy that disperses human passions, nevertheless, the carnival is a product of the power that carries out the production of a total spectacle. The crowd should be in a situation of constant drive, regardless of what its attention is focused on. As Kara-Murza noted, "a person immersed in a performance loses the ability for critical analysis and leaves the dialogue mode" [15, p. 194]. The mixing of formats can just lead the viewer to somewhat indifferent participation in the carnival action, where reality and fiction are mixed. The passing people Fontanka in St. Petersburg in January-February 2021, as well as the city pond in Yekaterinburg, are perceived as something surreal. One needs to understand that any carnival includes an adventurous beginning. Bakhtin recalled that "the initiative and power in this chronotope belong only to chance" [9, p. 251].

4. Conclusions

The political reality in Russia more and more often resembles a carnival, which has its own genre laws. As Georgy Gachev noted, "the bottom needs tension, effort, repulsion, dropping the cover of the form" [16, p. 34]. That is why the carnival liberates the social energy. The mass seems to freeze below in anticipation of a shock, which is just capable

of providing a carnival animation, a spectacle. The mass "is waiting for the severed head, which will be shown to it, the words with which it will be addressed, or the outcome of the competition" [1, p. 41].

The carnival text is a collection of different voices. The positions of positive and negative characters are mixed in a total polyphony. Carnival as a metaphor for the political process becomes very difficult to understand and analyze. Carnival preferably begins to be understood in terms of the logic of a particular genre. The polyphony achieved in the carnival and creating a deceptive sense of democracy creates a whole host of challenges and risks for the authorities. Creative energy and destructive energy are present with each other at the same time. For the authorities, such a release is always mysterious and indefinite. Loss of form is always dangerous for the authorities, accustomed to extremely clear clarity and determination of possible consequences.

Restrictions on social activity in the context of COVID-19 demonstrate that the authorities may not be ready to immediately respond to the growth of grassroots activity. The decisions made by the authorities cannot contribute to its legitimation.

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