

## Modern Russian Political Discourse and Hyperreality

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**Abstract:** For Russia of 21st century, the problem of forming the so called “Russian identity” is topical. Within the framework of renewing the civil society, the modern variant of the national issue topic enters the discourse. This study considers the problem of “identity” whose definition has undergone significant changes. A comparison analysis is used to explore transformations in the meaning of the concept of “identity”. development of man and would harmonically unite traditionalism with modern post-industrial development trends. For social sciences, the task for renovation of the Russian nation is a serious intellectual challenge. Politicians and authority structures need to regard that the objective of modern “political discourse” should be not the self-assertion of power but development of a future society its cultural and human values. Through hermeneutic and ideographic methods, the researchers reveal the topic of identity in the context of social hyperreality a reality that arises as a result of certain discourse practices aimed at the use and consumption of information flows. Because information subjects humans and their consciousness to total programming and design, the researchers look to ethnomethodology to understand and provide a scientific evaluation of the events and facts that trigger ethnic and social choices in the Russia of today. And finally, a culturological method is employed to analyze modern Russian socio-cultural and political activities with its inherent coercive prescriptions. Choosing an identity in Russia is no longer a personal issue but a political one. The term “identification” has come to be understood as a function of coercive prescription: a person should equate oneself with some social or political entity. The pervasive pressure on people to conform limits personal freedom and alienates people from their creative natures. As a result, individual consciousness is completely dependent upon external imperatives, coercive norms and prescriptions. Thus are the simulated character of modern Russian political discourse and its hyperreality revealed. In Russia, the policy of “identification” is becoming a very important instrument for enforcing control over “strangers”. This approach makes it possible to optimize the process of identity project formation and therefore to address “identity” as an existential problem and elicit its true meaning (the self-consciousness of a person) in current post-modernist culture.

**Key words:** Discourse, hyperreality, identity, identification, post-modernism, Russian identity, simulacra

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### INTRODUCTION

In what reality do people actually exist at the beginning of the third millennium? The answer to this question depends directly on a rational characterization of modern culture which lies at the center of political, social and economic changes. In general, we can say that we are experiencing a crisis in mass culture, now called post-modernism.

By the turn of the 20th century, scientific consciousness in the social and human disciplines in Russia had virtually ceased to discover anything completely new or original. Amateurism is ubiquitous and

reigns unchallenged. The intellectual and cultural spheres have all but stopped fulfilling their main role to produce thought. The Russian internet community is an example of a new Tower of Babel, ready to self-destruct where because of an obvious lack of genuine communication, everyone is separately playing their own games. The governing style of thought orients the individual’s consciousness to repeating instead of changing and imitating instead of creating.

Along with the “end of ideology”, ideologists having lost their initial purpose, now belong to the past; they have been replaced by neutral lexical units (Taguchi, 2009). Consciousness has surrounded itself

with all sorts of verbal clichés, hardly reflecting upon their content. Already in the last quarter of the 20th century, new words and verbal formulae in the social and political lexicon began to reflect the particular format of post-modernism and post-post-modernism (Bennett *et al.*, 2011). Current public discourse employs simulacra as the philosopher Baudrillard (1993) was first to state. In post-modern reality, called hyperreality (another term introduced by Baudrillard) simulacra do not only substitute signs for reality. They also confirm in the public consciousness that simulation is reality itself. The adepts of post-modernism (Eshelman, 2009; Lipovetsky, 2010; Bourriaud, 2009; Kirby, 2009) are in their element when inhabiting the space of such discourse. Simulacra possess both a universal epistemological and an existential status.

Humankind has entered a new phase of development a user society in which a person depends on programs of a different type. Reality itself (along with consciousness) is becoming the subject of programming and design (Baudrillard, 1994). According to Baudrillard (1974) reality is produced by miniature cell arrays and storage devices and by management models and can be reproduced an infinite number of times. In society, the use of programming is a special form of discourse that creates reality by using a particular language. Thus, as modern discourse, it is a language of post-ideological programming and as a people management program it is a kind of analogue of ideology related to characterizing the present (the obscenity of hypersignified existence) (Hughes, 2006).

The literature devoted to problems of “identity” is quite diverse. To date, much has been written about “identity”, “political identity”, “national identity” and so on. This includes monographs and dissertations in addition to articles (Burke *et al.*, 2003; Siebers, 2009). It is well-known that “identity” was introduced as a scientific term by the psychologist Erikson (1994) to mean exclusively individual self-esteem. Prior to the 1980s, the concept was mainly used in the works of social psychologists and sociologists and was considered a feature of the human psyche. Later, the processes of globalization and their reverse processes of localization as well as the accelerating spread of information have significantly affected problems related to identity. In the 1980 and 1990s in researches by Baumeister (1986), Castells (2014), Giddens (2010), Jenkins (2014), Phinney and Kohatsu (1997), Taylor (1989) various models of social identity appear: ethnic, national and cultural, religious and professional.

Then, the focus of identity analysis shifted. At first researchers were very interested in group recognition of

the individual. Then, the question of “political identity” in which the individual is construed as directly subordinate to government and society as a whole gained immense popularity (Burke and Stets, 2009; Wetherell, 2010).

Along with “identification”, the concept of “self identification” is often used (Leary and Tangney, 2003). The 20 years ago the term evoked numerous very sensible and reasonable positions which were treated by opponents fairly gently so as to identify a single guiding principle and resolve this problematic situation. Today however, the situation can be qualified as no other than a tangled intellectual labyrinth (Wetherell, 2010). Indicative of this is the experience of conceptualizing the category of “identity”, claimed by many contemporary researchers. As the researcher Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have justly noted, identities are created, modified and multiply.

In continuing research on the distinctive features of modern identity discourse (Baltovskij *et al.*, 2014, 2015, 2016), we believe that this work to a certain extent draws us nearer to an understanding of the specifics of current post-ideological practices considered through the idiosyncratic prism of Russian reality.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The goal of this article is to use the transformations in the meaning of “identity” as an example to illustrate the process of forming the particular social hyperreality which we call modern user society (Goodwin *et al.*, 1997). The main research hypothesis is that “identity” is gradually changing from individual self-esteem and instrument of self-knowledge into a total coercive prescription into a regulated program of socio-cultural and political behavior (Crome and Williams, 2014). The research subject is discursive social practices constituting the 21st century’s new programmable reality which is a product of post-modern culture. The research object is the post-modern world characterized by simulacra atomic individuals, networking, etc. (Malpas, 2010; Baltovskij *et al.*, 2016).

Insofar as programmable hyperreality in the post modern era is an artificial world of “empty” words purified of thought and meaning, where words replace real events, the authors see their main objective as a criticism of post-modern discourse. We assume that along with a criticism of post-modern, neo-scholastic research programs there should also be the following alternative conclusions and paradigms: the problem of identity is ideological in nature and it hides its prescription as inducement and coercion to fit norms; in the post ideological era self-consciousness as a feature of the

individual is transferred to the area of imperatives and becomes a prescription, resulting in human activity being born beyond the limits of the purely political to post-ideological, programmable hyperreality; ultimately, post-ideological programming and identification have become essential tools for detecting cultural and political differences in order to separate “us” from “them”.

### **The main part**

**The ideological character of identity (between self consciousness and prescription):** It is not enough to witness the crisis in social science; it is necessary to conduct a full epistemological assessment of contemporary notions and concepts. Standard answers should be challenged by reflection that is direct and immediate questioning. We regard “identity” without prejudice as a given that is subject to interpretation. In the vast majority of publications, it is considered a “key” term in the everyday language of modern politics (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Yet most researchers ignore discourse in which there is a question about identity (Bendle, 2002).

“Identity” in its broadest sense is interpreted as a person’s awareness of his or her involvement in society. The well-known fundamental characteristics of sociality are status and role. “Arithmetically” speaking, if you subtract status (assigned position) from role (conscious behavior), the result (certainty) will correspond to the notion of “identity”.

In playing this or that role, a person is also aware of playing and of playing this exact role. Status is independent of consciousness but it is given, prescribed, once a role has been specified. In order to come into being, a role must invoke self-consciousness. At its core, identity is an existential problem. Times change, social institutions, norms and responsibilities change too. Whether we want to or not, we are forced to adapt to changes. Identification, in addition to stable external forms, assumes a constant readiness by the individual to identify with some hypostasis (the latter being a part of the whole of the person) (Hopkins, 2008).

The most elementary definition of identity as ‘identification’ reduces a person to society, establishing a double bond between them. A person is aware of belonging to a social whole (or to a part that passes itself off as a whole) and the whole gives the person the rules of the social game. These actions are called “socialization”, “institutionalization” and so on.

Clearly, there are two universal, diametrically opposed views on identity. One is self-consciousness which turns to the existential principle “cogito ergo sum”

for a complete sense of its existence, the self, its role in life and society. The other is a prescription using the formula “You Are”. In the first case, one is guided by one’s own will; in the second, one is ruled by someone else’s will. If status is independent of consciousness, then a role is completely dependent upon how we see ourselves in one or another capacity. In other words, the most important condition for identity formation is the self-consciousness of the person (Contrada and Ashmore, 1999).

On the other, social, end, those conditions are the institutions and norms. Together, they form the prescription without which identity is also unimaginable. Self-consciousness is guided by the formula of free choice “I am”; prescription places the person before the social need “You Are”. Identity will always function between the self-consciousness of the person and the forced prescription of society, tending toward one “pole” or the other.

Sometimes self-consciousness takes on the mission of prescription in which case it expresses itself in radical form: “my will be done!” More often, however, social prescription supersedes self-consciousness. The problem of “identity” (“identification”) has its flip-side in anomie (E. Durkheim) which is a condition where consciousness does not find sufficient justification to rely on and follow its self and so it searches for “self” outside itself (Girola, 2005).

It should be noted that the individual is always eager to join society. Thus, the individual legitimates the external right of society to bind the person to prescription, that is to identify. Identification is usually a reduction of a “part” of a whole or of a part posing as a whole (pars pro toto). The mistake is that the desired whole is already inside and that whole is called “I”. Accordingly, all the pragmatics of identification denigrate this whole and its identification with any external parts (totum pro parte).

The process of legitimating prescription in the modern world is therefore, complicated by the fact that people exist in changing social conditions associated with the mass culture of use and consumption and are dependent upon post-modernist discourse on coercion (Trentmann, 2006).

**Consumer society as a programmable hyperreality:** At the end of the 20th century, emerging from consumer society is a new socio-cultural reality user society. Earlier social forms break up, are reformatted and new forms take shape. The previous differences in class (worker-owner) strata and even gender cease to play any noticeable political role. All are united under the status “user”.

The term currently used in discourse is actually a loan word, a 70s era word from the USA that originally meant a person who uses and distributes narcotics. In economic publications and technical instructions, a “user” refers to a person who interacts with some system especially technical in order to perform a particular function.

The main focus of the definition is of course, a system. The user is a person-atom whose social essence reveals itself during the process of implementing some program (a system/function ratio). Its dominant feature is the fact that the user is a dependent being. Dependence in this case is seen not as a mental illness but as a social norm. Economic, social, political and spiritual subjectivity of the person is near minimum. In the role of user, a person fulfills the function of object. The subject that is the basis of the new social relationships is the program. What is obvious is the primacy of the program as being the target function of the system and the secondariness of the person as having turned into an instrument (without which nonetheless, the system cannot function) (Baumeister, 2011).

In other words, a user is one who uses the current system to perform a particular function of the system itself. The current system prescribes a function to the person and the person, respectively uses the results of the system’s function.

Using alienates the creative essence of a person who must delegate personal abilities to the program. Thus, a consumer society is based on programming everything (Wood and Solomon, 2009). After all, a program represents a set of data meant to control concrete components of a system and programming forms reality using a special language. Moreover, at the heart of programming lie both the standards of post-modern discourse and the implementation of these standards. If a program is a kind of analogue to ideology then contemporary discourse is no other than a post-ideological programming language.

In the past, ideology was a product of rational ordering. Now, a program makes order of the irrational because it creates the illusion of dominance for the person. The person seems to be the master of use; however, in fact, the person is the slave of an anonymous program, placed deep into the person by modern technology. In the philosophical language of Hegel in relationships between user and program there is no “interest”, no “desire”, no “passion”. No wonder computer programs are referred to as software which also means a soft product. As a result, a “user” is no more free than a “consumer”: the former is completely dependent upon a program while the latter is dependent upon

money. Consumers, though have somewhat of an advantage: in the end, they are guided by their own wills whereas in relationships between users and programs human will is actually eliminated (Jameson, 1998).

Since, a person can derive some use from a program (in this sense the person is a consumer), there is a sort of exchange of subjectness (Siebers, 2009). The user delegates will to the program; the program and the system behind it provide some sort of use to the user. Usefulness serves as a form of relationship between the system and the user which is actually mutual need. The trick is that in the post-ideological era, self-consciousness as a feature of the individual is transferred to the realm of imperative and becomes a prescription, resulting in the substitution of one thing for another (Lassen *et al.*, 2006; MacKinnon and Heise, 2010).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **On the concept of “Russian identity” as an important instrument of coercion to prescription by the authorities:**

Identity is gradually turning into totality (Donskis, 2009). In truth, this is only a totality in discursive reality or hyperreality. While it is not binding at this point, it could yet become the means for the new post-modernist order (Smith, 2001). A characterization of the legitimation of such discourse was given by Lyotard (2010), one of the first researchers in post-modernity. Lyotard (2010) suggests that the means of legitimating through free will prefers a completely different language game what Kant called the imperative and our contemporaries call the prescription of prescripts. It is important to legitimate not only denotative statements but also prescriptive statements of justice.

This topic is applicable to modern Russia. In November of 2014, the World Russian People’s Council, operating in the Russian Federation under the auspices of the Moscow Patriarchate, held a session on the topic “Unity of History, Unity of the People and Unity of Russia”. Following the session, a document was adopted called the Declaration of Russian Identity. The name alone is a contradiction. The declaration is an official document containing key political principles. The World Russian People’s Council is a social organization that is headed by the Russian Orthodox Church. One might think that national identity is about an individual facing a choice. What does a church organization have to do with personal choice of nationality? It turns out that the choice of identity in Russia is now a political matter not a private one.

Official Russian ideologists reduce the idea of self-consciousness to that of prescription. The document

begins with the chief assertion: “the most obvious criterion of nationality is self-consciousness”. Further on, however, the text talks about the decisive criterion as being, not “self” but “con” a person belonging to an ethnic or civil community existing in various phenomenological planes.

The declaration does engage in some mythologizing of the past when bygone days are drawn in blissful tones as for example: “the uniqueness of the ethnogenesis of the Russian people is that for centuries Russian identity was adopted by representatives of other nationalities, not by forced assimilation but as a consequence of individual free will of specific people to bind their lives and destiny with Russia”.

There are some obvious contradictions in the document. For example, there is the assertion that a national language is an extremely important criterion for a nationality and therefore, knowing the Russian language is mandatory for every Russian. At the same time, the converse is stated: it is not mandatory for every Russian speaker to belong to the Russian nation. It is quite possible to speak Russian but not identify one’s self with Russia. Well, that is fair.

The same logic does not, however, work in the case of the Orthodox faith which as stated in the declaration played an enormous role in forming the Russian identity. It turns out that “every Russian shall recognize Orthodox Christianity as the foundation of the national culture.” This says that denying this fact or worse, searching for another religious foundation for national culture would weaken the Russian identity, until it is completely lost. Notice the word “shall”, indicating not self-consciousness but political prescription.

The document further states that the main criterion for “Russian identity” is a connection with the Russian people, solidarity with their fate and sympathetic understanding of the main events in Russian history which include only victories by the Russian and Soviet governments.

Of particular interest is the conclusion where five indications of “Russian identity” are presented: “a Russian is a person who considers oneself Russian; who does not have any other ethnic preferences; who speaks and thinks in Russian; who recognizes Orthodox Christianity as the main national spiritual culture; who feels solidarity with the fate of the Russian people.”

It is easy to see that the document begins with an appeal to self-consciousness, i.e., to a person who considers him or herself Russian and concludes with regulatory, political and ideological prescriptions when it talks about attitude to Orthodoxy and uses ambiguous criteria such as ‘solidarity with the fate of the people’. Thus, a political document important for contemporary

Russia captures a definite contradiction which can be formulated as a question: is identity an individual’s self assessment or social coercion? The answer could be: an analysis of the declaration shows that prescription does not merely displace self-consciousness; it incorporates it into its own structure. Identity converted into politics of identity (Wiarda, 2014). As a result, a person’s behavior is not determined by self-will but by a “nation-state” as in the expression “Russian identity” (Baltovskij *et al.*, 2016). The following is an algorithm for the transformation of self expression: identity political identity identification. The goal of such politics is by using external measures to form an actor with predetermined properties. As a result, there is a substitution in the identity subject (self-expression): from I to we (Berger, 1998).

The paradox is that in contrast to the communist system with its ideological coercion principle “be like everyone else”, now there is a very liberal postulate in action: “I want to be like everyone else”. If the Soviet government was forming a “new person” and the self consciousness of a person could resist this process then a contemporary “nation-state” is forming a proper political identity prescribed to obey society, i.e., all “I”s should recognize the supremacy and power of the “we” side. It is significant that the theme of “identity” is actively implemented in contemporary Russian politics.

The politics of identification (“Declaration of Russian Identity” is a vivid example) is entirely based on prescriptions (prohibitions). These in turn are based on the well-known dichotomy of reward/punishment. Society encourages those who “voluntarily” identify themselves with it and, conversely, punishes all of its opponents (those who do not want to identify with the society) (Stearns and Chaloupka, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

At the end of the 20th century, the issue of “identity” has become extremely popular; however the widespread use of the term has quickly led to its objectification. Addressing “identity” without prejudice as an existential problem, helps to reveal its true meaning in contemporary post-modernist culture: the most important prerequisite of identity is a person’s self consciousness. In terms of mass culture, however, the sense of identity has been emasculated: instead prescription as an inducement and coercion to the norm is preferred. As a result, the creative essence of a person is alienated.

The problem of identity (identification) has its flip side in anomie a condition where individual consciousness does not find sufficient justification to rely on itself and so, looks for “self” outside of itself in coercive norms and prescriptions.

An analysis of the “declaration of Russian identity” leads to the conclusion that “Russian identity” is postulated as the central ideologeme of modern Russian society. Thus, Russian ideologists reduce the issue of self-consciousness to the issue of prescription in order to form an actor with predetermined properties.

In Russian conditions, the politics of “identification” has become an extremely important instrument for identifying and separating “us” from “them”. Society encourages those who “voluntarily” identify themselves with it and conversely, punishes all its opponents those who do not want to be coerced into identification with the society.

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