

# The Russian “Pseudo-Elite” and its Identity in World and National Contexts

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## 1. Conceptualizing Russian elite

It is well-known that the institutions of power and property were not divided in the Soviet-type societies. Power-property relations of that type caused the formation of the single, integral stratum of etacracy (nomenclature), dominating both in the economy and politics sphere.

During the transformation period, which began in the 1980s, this particular linkage between power and property has started to rearrange itself, although it has never been significantly loosened. This has predetermined the establishment of contemporary Russian ruling elites as well as its origins, which can be traced from the Soviet nomenclature. Although an alternative point of view is provided in [Lane, Ross 1998].

The open privatization, which began in 1992, did not lead to a system of developed private property separated from the state. It only led to a transformation of the state property into various mixed semi-state forms. The goal of the nomenclature remained unchanged during the whole post-Soviet period – to preserve such semi-private relations of property in order to retain incomes it makes without being responsible for the property itself. As a result, both power and property remained in the hands of the former masters of Russia.

In the post-Soviet period Russian authorities took control of entrepreneurs' success by eliminating them either physically or socially disregarding any legal or moral norms. In Russia the oligarchs were usually appointed to run businesses, rather than they made career independently. The youngness of some oligarchs though shouldn't be misleading since nomenclature did not always volunteer to participate in commercial activities directly. For most ventures the members of the so-called 'party reserve' were chosen, i.e. prominent 'komsomols' and lower officials.

The *privatized property* in Russia has never been strictly a *private* one, since it has appeared. It is a completely different type of property. The nature of the true *private property* is productive and creative. In a normal situation production prevails over appropriation. In the post-Soviet Russia the feature of privacy applies mainly to appropriation, while it is not usually a feature of production.

In contrast to the true private property, which is essentially less concentrated in the capitalist societies, privatized property is usually seized by a small group of people – a sort of an estate privilege for the ruling class. At the same time the deterioration of small- and middle-sized business, the constant disregard for intellectual property and weak labour protection are not just random facts. They are organic features of an economic system, which is liberal by its form, but statist in nature, where independence of private businessmen is a relative one.

The author's study of Russian elites in 1993 shows that 60.1% of the higher rank officials have managed to maintain their status since August 1991, while 27.2% have even raised it and only 12.7% went down. In 1994-2000 the role of the 'former generation' personnel has also become more significant on a federal level. The growing influence of secret service workers, the very core of Soviet nomenclature, appears to be quite organic. Today there are many former KGB officers among those, who hold positions of governors, parliament

leaders, heads of major state enterprises, both in raw material and military-industrial sectors [Shkaratan 2009].

Also a large number of the 'newcomers' to the current administration originate from the families, which were a part of elites in the former hierarchies. Yet the older generation of bureaucrats reasonably believes that these 'newcomers' are corrupt in the sense of their commercialization and the attempts to promote their own business interests through the government service [Chirikova 2003; 2008].

By the end of the first post-Soviet decade the top ranks of the Russia's rich list have been occupied by the people, whose wealth was majorly the result of enormous rents gained from the acquisition of the country's natural resources. Unlike most Western billionaires their profits come from purely non-technological kinds of business activities. None of them was known for development of new technologies or products, unlike Henry Ford or Bill Gates. They are *rent-seekers*, who are incapable of market competition and thus cannot be regarded as normal economic agents, since these quasi-capitalists originate from nomenclature and are only familiar with administrative market.

What the scale of resources are in the hands of national governing groups? The profit of the natural resources makes 75% of the total national income. Many Russian analysts think (as well as myself) that the share of rent from the exports of natural resources obtained by the state is enormously small. Before the current economic crisis the state share in the oil industry profit accounts for 70-90% in most countries and only 34% in Russia. Should this make the new Russian administration be so proud of? [Kulikov 2007]. In fact, it has not made a single attempt to increase its share of the rent from other raw industries including metallurgy, lumbering, pulp and paper industry or land supplies. Although it is exactly the rent from all kinds of natural resources, that could be re-invested to create the industrial basis for further economic growth and social progress.

The second important type of the current policy regarding potential resources is a taxation system. The general impression over the Russian tax system is that it completely disregards the necessity to stimulate the growth of the country's domestic markets. The absence of such socially just taxes as luxury tax, estate duties (especially with regard to extremely expensive estate property in Moscow and other megapolises) and progressive taxation scale, could only be explained through an intended policy that favors the richest. In other words, Russian *elites* keep themselves immune to most taxes.

The dividend tax has been only 4% until recently (9% since 2007). The poorest wage-worker pays 13% as an income tax, while Roman Abramovich has to give in only 9% from the billions which he receives as dividends. There is no such developed country which provides such favorable advantages to the rich.

Regarding this problem Gzh. Kolodko wrote: "There is no better illustration is pseudo-scientific dispute about the so-called flat tax rate. In fact, it reflects the interests of a small group of the so called "philanthropists" moving the tax burden to the bigger groups with low income (a true goal), but the proclaimed goal (whether it is a lie or a mistake of people, who can't understand the point) is a creation of more favorable conditions for capital accumulation and investment (a declarative goal)". [Kolodko 2007, p.49]

## **2. Compradors as a core of Russian elite**

It is obvious that the most productive groups of Russian society (such as national bourgeoisie, professionals and skilled workers) are sincerely interested in the modernization of their country, its evolution from a supplier of raw materials in the world-system to a modern industrial or even a postindustrial economy. But such project would seem possible only in the

case of a true support from the ruling elites. However, the elite's current interests have little in common with the basic values of a majority of the more advanced part of Russia's population.

The structure of elites are also determined by the structure of Russian economy. 85% of the country's total exports come from oil, gas and other minerals. The share of manufacturing industries accounts for only 12.5%. Therefore the ruling elite is mostly represented by the businessmen who control the export of raw materials. These owners and exporters are fairly referred to as 'comprador bourgeoisie', i.e. entrepreneurs, whose wealth depends on external, rather than internal economic and political factors.

During the 2000s the representatives of businessmen have lost their leading positions as the higher stratum of the society. They are still included into the elite, but their influence decreased strongly. The highest positions were taken by the representatives of bureaucracy. Rent-seeking businessmen have lost the opportunity to participate in the governing process directly. The absolute control over national activities, first of all strategically important industries, including production and export of natural resources was taken by the political administration and the higher state officials – just like in the Soviet times.

The existing relations of authorities and business, where business acts as a social subject depending on and manipulated by the authority, are an organic feature of the contemporary societal system in Russia as neo-etocratic system.

During the recent years we can observe the gradual return of the major part of national wealth from the hands of "executive" proprietors directly under the control of the ruling political elite. In the years of Putin's rule the new patterns were finally shape, which brought a new stage in development of the so-called "privatized property" and "power-property" relations. They were represented by the emergence of large state-owned companies with predominantly state assets with minor private shareholders.

It is a so-called "public-private partnership". The availability of private capital is exploited by those corporations in order to manipulate the enormous assets (usually worth tens and hundreds of billion dollars) without any real control from its true owner – the Russian people represented by parliament or similar state authorities. The complete control over the major part of the national wealth lies in the hands of government officials and their executive directors – managers of these corporations.

The Russian 'comprador bourgeoisie' (businessmen as well as bureaucrats) has many characteristic features, among them: the extensive use of national resources (both, minerals and people), strong dependence on foreign capital and foreign political influence, and at the same time the tendency to move domestic incomes abroad. The general strategy of these compradors is to avoid any costs related to everything that doesn't make big and immediate profits. It is also peculiar how the large exporters of mineral resources, as well as their arm-in-arm colleagues from the financing sector, experience a serious lack of confidence in decision-making due to an unresolved legitimacy of the private property in Russia. No wonder, so many of them are so eager to sell their Russian businesses as soon as possible and move the capitals to the West. That also explains why these major property owners and the higher state officials, who control them, share such ultra-liberal, anti-statist views [Safronov 2007; 2009].

All this describes the Russian ruling elite as a quite exclusive social group, where membership is directly controlled by its representatives. The studies of the higher officials show that the professional qualities and potentials of the higher state officials are decreasing. At the same time, the opportunities of employment are decreasing due to political assignments.

Let me give an example. The studies of the higher levels of Russian bureaucracy, which were conducted by the Institute of Economy (RAS) in 2007, demonstrated the existence of an invisible border dividing the representatives of the real ruling elite from the ordinary officials at the level of department directors and vice-directors. This implies that neither competence,

qualification or other professional qualities are as significant in a bureaucrat's career prospects as his or her social connections and the loyalty to the higher rank officials. No wonder, the officials themselves openly admit these caste-like relations within their community [Gvozdeva 2007, pp.32-33]

It is well known that social privileges are an organic part of an etocratic system and are a part of its social policy. Keeping and extending the scales of a non-market allocation of resources in the form of various goods and services provided by the state to the representatives of the ruling elites also reveals a neo-etocratic, rather than a bourgeoisie or democratic character of the state's social policy. According to their own words: 'The law is for common people, not for ourselves'. And this is the plain truth as well as their major privilege.

The character of state distribution is not the only explanation of the incomes of the officials. Their luxury houses and expensive cars constantly provoke irritation among other citizens. While business-related trials are a frequent practice, the higher officials are securely protected by the system from any obligations to clarify the sources of their enormous wealth. And there is little doubt about where it all comes from – the total corruption.

### **3. Meditocracy of the Russian elite**

In 1993 I regretted the fact that we were about to reform a country that survived 'three revolutions, two wars and Stalin's repressions', a country, where social mobility is based on loyalism and seniority rather than professionalism and intellectuality. There has formed a so-to-say *meditocratic* society, where power belongs to people with medium intellectual capacities who are incapable of managing the society

A well-known Russian sociologist and political scientist V.L. Inozemtsev notes that "Russia is governed... by the united nomenclature group, where there are no people with outstanding talents or abilities". "...Each bureaucrat keeps in mind that he or she has been appointed to this position not through a meritocratic principle, but, generally, by chance... Therefore the contemporary Russian elites are a solid group of average individuals, where new members are recruited based on their similarity to the existing ones". [Inozemtsev 2007, pp.41-43]

It is quite important to remember that the post-Soviet ruling elites are not capable of representing the all-national interests. On the one hand it is connected to their succession of contemporary elites to the Soviet nomenclature, and on the other hand with the absence of traditions of mass opposition activity or alternative elites formation, like in Poland or Czech Republic. Russian elite doesn't think in terms of citizenship or nation, it pursues its own current interests. It is not interested in the solution of the problems of the dramatic poverty of the most part of citizens, it is ignorant to the problems of national science and innovative economy which can be regarded as an ignorance of people, who became rich too fast and who care only for their families and friends and themselves. This set of values defines not only the core of policy but even the ways of governing.

How would possibly such kind of elites shape the moral image of contemporary Russian society? According to a writer and a literature historian L. Saraskina 'the higher class has reached an enormous level of consumption, which has never been seen in Russia before and which has created the demand for the most inferior pieces of culture by substituting it with leisure; religious activities – with attending of various clubs and sects; faith – with occultism, etc... The whole sphere of culture and spirituality have been rearranged to meet the interests of this class by implanting a single simple standard – *glamour*' [Saraskina 2008, p.46].

In fact, many Russian analysts quite often refused to call the Russian ruling groups as "elites". They claim that these groups carry no potential for modernization, since their

members avoid the process social selection where they have to claim their superiority over other members of society [Gudkov, Dubin 2007, pp.76-77; Gudkov L., Dubin B., Levada Y.A. 2007]

It is quite apparent that the core of the Russian elite completely refuses to abandon the paradigm of rent-seeking behavior for an innovative one in order to modernize the economy. In the social sphere they refuse to stop perceiving the population as a renewable resource, excessive in an economy, which exports raw materials in exchange for foreign goods and services, and accept a more civilized paradigm, where population is perceived in terms of its human capital, human potential, in other words, a strategic and resource for creating a modern economy. As for political paradigm, Russian 'elite' continues to regard power and its holders as sanctity, where population is a subject of governing and political manipulation, and rejects the idea of power, whose ethical imperative would be rational self-containment, and which would act as a representative and an arbitrator of the pluralistic interests of major groups of population.

In accordance with the above the contemporary Russian 'elite' faces a lot of difficulties with identification within world, regional and national dimensions. Its economic interests, as well as the economic interests of the whole country call for a better interaction, first of all, with Europe: where, in fact, Russia is facing, perhaps, the most severe tensions related to the differences in value systems with Russia's disregard of human and civil rights. From here follows its permanent uncertainty between the natural attraction to Europe and the striving for its own statehood as an independent centre of global influence.

The preserving of an imperial rather than an ethno-national way of thinking in identifying themselves within a global community follows from here as well. Russian elites definitely wish to be perceived on equal terms with Western elites, while at the same time they reject European and especially American values and principles.

In their humiliating aspiration to conform the representatives of Russian elites share the common interests with transnational corporations, large capital and the state-owned enterprises. Their inconsistency is apparently leading it to a quite tenuous alliance with China and some marginal states (e.g. Iran, Venezuela, etc.). As odd as it may seem, Russia's 'pseudo-elite' experiences greater difficulties identifying itself in the post-Soviet dimension, where one would rather consider it as a natural leader.

Successful modernization of the whole society requires not just a renewal of the ruling elites, but also a set of fundamentally new priorities for social and economical policies that would favor the more advanced elements of the society, such as national bourgeoisie and professionals.

The national bourgeoisie, which is usually associated with purely domestic industries and domestic markets, is, in fact, confronted by a solid class of Russian compradors and higher bureaucrats. Unlike the latter it is not rent-oriented (since it has little power and no mineral resources). Among the most characteristic features of the national bourgeoisie come the following: domestic market orientation, careful and economical use of national resources, higher rates of investments in human and industrial capital, relative independence on foreign investment, etc.

At the same time their true share in the national economy is currently too insignificant (24% of GDP and 12,8% of export according to most optimistic estimations). In fact, the interests of the national bourgeoisie that looks towards the development of more technologically complex industries and the enforcement of domestic market growth, coincide with the interests of the most part of Russians. However, this kind of bourgeoisie is not only a part of elites, but it contradicts them in terms of its interests, values and mentality.

According to other countries' experience (both, to the West and East of Russia) the key problem is the implementation of a meritocratic principle in social selection and the formation of elites, which favors the talented people, who have gained access to high quality education. This feature is key to distinguishing the principles of social and economical organization in postmodern (informational) societies from those, which are inherent to the societies with classic capitalism and contemporary etacratism (i.e. Russia), where fortune and social capital are inherited and therefore people originating from the bottom or middle-class positions face cultural and economic constraints. (1)

In my paper I do not specially regard the problem of the current political regime in Russia. No specialist would call it a democratic one. The problem though lies in the prospect of its development. At this stage of world economy's development the liberal capitalism does not demonstrate strong advantages compared to countries with authoritarian rule. The crisis has only strengthened the legitimacy of such authoritarian regimes. The latter, as it turned out, could provide a successful dynamic to the economy, when it is efficiently governed. For the younger generation of Russians (the generation of 20-year-olds) a mild authoritarian rule could be quite acceptable, if it would support individual success, career, comfort and the quality of life.

Russia's most challenging problem in the nearest future is whether it would succeed in enhancing its authoritarian regime with a more or less developed meritocratic system of vertical social mobility.

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1) Finland is a good example of a society ruled through a meritocratic principle. The state tries as much as it can in providing equal opportunities to all students in getting a high quality education. A belief that diligent studying is a key to successful life is intentionally promoted and has already become a national idea. As a result among the other countries of Europe Finland features the highest rate of students from social bottom. This means that the quality of children's education is less likely to depend on the educational achievement of their parents [Volkov 2009, p.5-13; Himanen, Castels 2002].

Using the European Social Survey data 2006 G. Yastrebov has constructed a "meritocracy-meditocracy" scale for all European countries. The methodology is explained in [Yastrebov 2010]. The rank assigned to each country according to this scale corresponds to their rank our hypothetical scale "late industrialism/informationalism - neoethacratism", which has been developed from the statistical and literature sources.

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## Appendix

G. Yastrebov

The questionnaire of the European Social Survey contained the following question: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?: Considering all my efforts and achievements in my job, I feel I get paid appropriately”. We have calculated the share of positive answers (“Agree strongly” and “Agree”) for each country and have overlapped the resulting scale with our ‘meritocracy’ scale, which has been calculated as a multidimensional measure of matching between occupation, education and income. The results are given in the Table 1.

**Table 1. The correlation between and objective and subjective scales of ‘meritocracy’ according to European Social Survey 2006**

Group of countries	Countries	Share of positive answers to the question on whether respondent’s income is adequate to his/her efforts, achievements and success	The measure of agreement between the dimensions of occupation, education and income (according to results of entropy analysis)
Western European countries	Switzerland	37,6	0,309
	Norway	36,9	0,268
	Denmark	33,6	0,296
	Austria	32,3	0,232
	Sweden	32,2	0,240
	Holland	31,7	0,228
	Ireland	30,9	0,248
	Belgium	30,0	0,201
	Great Britain	27,7	0,230
	Spain	25,3	0,217
	France	23,7	0,211
	Germany	23,0	0,247
	Finland	22,8	0,238
	Portugal	14,7	0,186
Post-socialist countries	Slovenia	22,4	0,220
	Estonia	18,3	0,214
	Slovakia	17,8	0,220
	Bulgary	14,2	0,223
	Hungary	12,1	0,215
	Russia	10,2	0,200
	Ukraine	10,1	0,223
Poland	9,9	0,243	
Spearman’s correlation coefficient		0,554 (0,007)	

The correlation between two scales is an evident one – 0,554 (statistically significant with an alpha of 1%). It has turned out (according to entropy analysis) that the subjective opinion of respondents on how just the resources are allocated within the society corresponds to how these mechanisms of matching between the variables of income, occupation and education work in practice.