



**Debate as a form of  
political communication  
in modern Russia**

**DEBATE AS A FORM OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN MODERN RUSSIA**  
**EL DEBATE COMO UNA FORMA DE COMUNICACIÓN POLÍTICA EN LA RUSIA MODERNA.**

**ABSTRACT**

The paper discusses debates in modern political communication as a form of public exchange of opinions between two or more parties on topical issues; the dynamics of the attitude of Russians towards political debates from 2003 to 2018; social and political and cultural prerequisites for their role and place in the political life of modern Russia are also analyzed. The purpose of the research is to reveal the role and place of political debates as a form of political communication in modern Russia. Achieving this goal requires consideration of the characteristics and functions of debates, analysis of the reasons and nature of the audience's attitude to political debate. The methodological basis of the research is systemic and structural-functional approaches, sociological, logical and comparative methods. The empirical base is the data of the participant observation.

KEYWORDS: Debates, Discussion, Political Communication, Elections

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**RESUMEN**

El documento discute los debates en la comunicación política moderna como una forma de intercambio público de opiniones entre dos o más partes sobre temas de actualidad; la dinámica de la actitud de los rusos hacia los debates políticos desde 2003 hasta 2018; También se analizan los requisitos sociales, políticos y culturales para su papel y lugar en la vida política de la Rusia moderna. El propósito de la investigación es revelar el papel y el lugar de los debates políticos como una forma de comunicación política en la Rusia moderna. El logro de este objetivo requiere la consideración de las características y funciones de los debates, el análisis de las razones y la naturaleza de la actitud de la audiencia hacia el debate político. La base metodológica de la investigación son los enfoques sistémico y estructural-funcional, sociológico, lógico y comparativo. La base empírica son los datos de la observación participante.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Debates, Discusión, Comunicación Política, Elecciones.

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## INTRODUCTION

The word “debate” (from French) means “a verbal duel”. A generic concept is a dispute, a specific difference - a clearly structured and specially organized public exchange of views between the two sides on topical issues.

The purpose of a debate is not to reach an agreement between the discussing parties, but conviction, often, the persuasion of a third party, a passionate emotional dispute witnessed by the audience: voters, activists of political parties, the citizens interested in politics.

Debate is also a form of public political communication, the importance of which is actualized during the election campaigns, when in the tandem of power - media the importance of each one increases.

How are political debates perceived by society in modern Russia? This paper is devoted to this issue.

## METHODS

Systemic and structural-functional approaches in the study contributed to the identification of the role of debates in the system of political communication. Comparative analysis allowed us to reveal the problems and contradictions of their use in Russia. Empirical methods used by us were the participant observation made it possible to track the dynamics of the application of the debate in the political process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When analyzing the elections to the State Duma in 2003 it was recorded that 41% of the respondents pointed out to the senselessness of the TV debates; at the presidential election in 2012, 46% of respondents felt that the televised debate does not help voters understand the “face of the party” and its program guide-

lines (Russians have stopped watching the debate, 2011). In the election campaign in 2016 into the State Duma, according to the “Public Opinion” Foundation, 51% of respondents were categorically unwilling to watch the debate, and another 23% have never seen them, but they do not object to viewing it theoretically. According to the poll of the Levada Center, 9% of Russians follow the television battles of politicians with high attention (Russians are disgusted to watch the debate, 2016).

It can be concluded that over the past 13 years (2003 -2016), there has been a trend towards a decrease in the interest of Russians in such a type of political communication as a political debate. But why, if to take the data of 2016, 51% of respondents categorically do not want to watch debates, and another 23% have never seen them before?

The items listed below are the reasons (factors) for that attitude to debates and, at the same time, their characteristic features, a sort of “cross-section for 2016”. In the course of the study, we attempted to group socio-political and cultural causes and the characteristic features of political debates in contemporary Russia that are determined by them.

So, among the socio-political and cultural factors of the attitude towards elections, one can first of all single out a nihilistic attitude towards elections as such, disbelief that they can change something. So, for example, 13% of respondents answered “definitely yes” about the question of whether they are interested in elections (the State Duma, 2016), and 33% answered “more likely”. (Russians are disgusted to watch the debate, 2016). Almost half of the respondents (46%) have an indifferent attitude towards elections and as a result - to political attributes (debates) which characterize them.

The next factor is the condition of public consciousness and the dominant political culture. In the public consciousness of Russians, two contradictory principles are bizarrely combined: the standards of behavior of a subordinate type and the desire for new value orientations of an activist nature. If the former is characterized by the passive and detached attitude of most people toward political processes, the habit of obeying the authorities, the latter calls for political activity, when citizens seek to influence the power, direct

its activities through legitimate means of influence.

In addition, the attitude to debates is directly affected by the activities of the "party of power". The processes of restructuring the public consciousness towards activist culture are sometimes artificially inhibited by the party of power. As the political scientist Alexander Egorov wrote that "it cannot be otherwise, because it is typical for the party of power to build relations with the population according to the "boss - subordinate" scheme. At normal times, a boss is demanding and treats a subordinate rough. And at the time of elections he becomes kinder and throws a little money "on health, roads, kindergartens" (Egorov, 2016).

Representatives of the "party of power" understand very well that in an open discussion it will be difficult for them to secure the full support of the population, if only because in any case there is always some dissatisfaction with the power of the ruling party in society, and it is aggravated by the many unresolved socio-economic problems. Therefore, members of the "United Russia" party prefer to use other means of influencing targeted electoral groups. Numerous promises, outdoor advertising with the "faces" of the leaders of all levels, cultural events with the participation of famous people are widely used. Of course, they give the effect, but not too much. In addition, the notorious administrative resource is constantly present, about which only the lazy person would not speak.

Another factor is the disunity of opposition, "sluggishness" of opposition political parties. This factor of reducing interest in political debate is due to the fact that the opposition forces have lost time. They did not summon the members of the ruling party to open debates preferring to fight not so much with the "United Russia" party, but with each other. Perhaps, the lack of confidence in the opposition played its role, especially since there are no significant cases behind its back. In this sense, being in the opposition is always easier (Egorov, 1937), since the degree of responsibility for what is happening in the country and in international affairs is incomparably smaller.

Moreover, citizens, and therefore, candidates as potential representatives of interests of

the former in the government do not have the experience of real discussions with the clash of opinions, competition programs and personalities. One gets the impression that candidates for deputies hear only themselves and recognize only the point of view of their party, which are forced to consider the truth in the last instance for ideological reasons. This impoverishes the political life and deprives the electorate of a unique opportunity, while listening to alternative positions and comparing the arguments of the parties, make an informed choice on the voting day.

Another reason is the lack of taste for discussions among the majority of the Russian population, because the discussions themselves suggest argumentation and counter-argumentation, and this, in turn, is intellectual work, mental stress for assessing the weight of the arguments cited by the parties, and in their comparison, in analysis. Willingness to strain is far from everyone.

These reasons have given rise to a number of characteristic features and peculiarities of political debates in modern Russia. As we have already said, political debates are a kind of public discussion among its participants, the goal of which is to persuade the third party, not each other, to attract the waverers to their side, to consolidate the success of the supporters. The goal, as is known, justifies the means. Therefore, in debates there are used not the best means, and the confrontation of ideas is replaced by people's opposition, "demonization" of an enemy, methods of suggestion (appeal to feelings - paraphrase "Vote with the heart"), and not beliefs.

As a result, political debates acquire in many ways the character of a talk show, a conversation program. In principle, there is nothing wrong with that. Participants in the discussion behave extremely emotionally, especially if the topic is serious or dramatic enough. But if such a spectacular or humorous moment does not exist, debates will cease to be of interest to viewers. Therefore, the shocking component is an important moment in the media provision of such a format of political communication. That is why the leader of the LDPR party, V.V. Zhirinovskiy, a scandalous and outrageous person who knows how to work for the public is often welcomed at debates. If he is on the talk show, a spectator sport is ensured.

Another characteristic feature of domestic “debates” is monologues instead of polemical dialogues. Debates as a polemical pointless discussion simply do not exist. Positioned as a “debates”, they often represent the scoring by candidates of their electoral program or its fragments in the format of the sequence of monologues. This is especially true during the pre-election campaign in the regions. And the lower the rank of the elected authority, the more calm is the opposition of candidates.

Lack of a culture of debates between the two sides due to ignorance of the elementary foundations of their conduct, disrespectful attitude to the opponent is the consequence of a low level of general culture as a whole (Sidelnikova, 2016; Tatiana et al, 2003). Shuffling, removing of individual phrases or displeased comments from the context, false accents, emotional “overlapping” is a fairly common practice. It is often completely meaningless to explain a day or more the reasons for a word thrown in the momentary fuse and on the wave of emotions, why it is said so, and not otherwise. Opponents very often actively use numerous tricks of the type of “reading in their hearts” in the debates (You say this, because they must observe party discipline, etc.), or full of suggestion “There is an opinion!”, etc.

But the main feature of the debate in Russia is non-participation in the political debate of the main competitor. In this case, it is a question of public political polemics in the election campaign for the post of President of the Russian Federation that Putin is charged with the refusal to participate in the polemics primarily by the leaders of the systemic and anti-systemic opposition. The last presidential election of 2018 was no exception. There are demands from all parts for mandatory participation in the televised debates of all registered candidates for the presidency. According to supporters of this demand, the refusal of V. Putin, a candidate from the party of power, from the participation in debates indicates that he is either afraid or does not respect other presidential candidates.

At first glance, this argument is weighty, so we need to understand it. To begin with, there is international practice, which shows that in most countries of the West there is no law obliging candidates to participate in TV debates (regardless of the type of elections).

For example, in the US, debates are organized by agreement between the two leading parties, a commission on presidential debates. As a rule, only candidates from the two leading political parties (Republicans and Democrats) participate in the debates in the United States. Candidates of other parties are excluded from this process, as it was in 1996 with Ross Perro, despite his ratings and 19% of support in the polls (Dolby, 2003; Goel, 2010).

Many believe that debates are an important aspect of democracy. This is actually so, and not exactly so. Yes, the debate allows voters to some extent assess candidates and their political programs. However, given the very short nature of the debates (the candidates have only a couple of minutes to answer each question, in the US - 30 seconds), they just repeat the memorized general provisions of their programs, and there is practically no discussion of the disputed issues. Of course, during debates, the personal qualities of the candidate are demonstrated, as well as the work of groups of consultants and political technologists who create the candidate’s image attractive for the electorate. But the result can be unpredictable.

Everyone has in their memory the debates that took place in the US between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump. It seemed that the heat of passion was such that it unambiguously engaged in this procedure not only the Americans, but the entire world. But the “aftertaste” of that show can hardly be called pleasant. Although, there is no arguing: formal procedures were followed.

In France, debates are generally held only before the second round of voting between the two main presidential candidates. And that is not always the case. For example, in 2002, the incumbent President Jacques Chirac considered it beneath his dignity to polemicize on an equal footing with right-wing radicalist leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in order not to give her greater respectability and legitimacy in the eyes of the French public.

In addition to international practice, there are other reasons for such “logic of non-participation”:

1. In Russia, there is no law requiring mandatory participation of all candidates in debates. As long as there is no relevant law, the

need for participation follows from the needs of each individual candidate in those debates. This requires at least some kind of stimulus. In the current situation, both in the party political system and in the electoral preferences of the presidential candidates, for example, in the March 2018 elections, it was obvious that the debate is unlikely to significantly improve the electoral chances of Vladimir V. Putin being the candidate from the party of power. He was already far ahead of other candidates in the preferences of the electorate.

2. The purpose of a debate for each of the opponents is to get additional votes. But, when a very strong candidate is arguing with an obviously unequal one, then he draws the latter to his level, and he himself is unlikely to win in this situation. If to use a metaphor, then if it is interesting to see how the World No. 1 in tennis will play with a beginner? The same is with V. Putin: a debate with him is an interview, in one way or another. As the famous Russian TV presenter V.R. Solov'ev noted, "Opponents will ask Putin something. And what will Putin ask them about? If Putin would say: "Gennady Andreyevich, what time is it now?" (Soloviev, 2012).

3. Inequality of responsibility of the parties. Consequences of decisions are not important for opposition: "They easily appeal to the needs of the people and begin to make a promise all in a row". At the same time, the oppositionists barely did something useful: anyone can say that tomorrow everyone should be happy and rich: "Such a conversation is not on an equal footing" (Debate without Putin, 2012). Participation in such unequal "battles" would mean unnecessary desacralization of the supreme power and its bearer. So the obvious loss from participating in the debate is greater than gain.

### SUMMARY

The material considered allows us to conclude that the participation of the first person in the debate is expedient if he is a member of a political party and the party nominates him as its candidate. In this case, it will be the opposition of political parties, but for this it is necessary that the parties themselves be approximately equal in their political weight. Thus, in the USA incumbent presidents are debating with one candidate who is approximately equal to them in terms of resources

and support of the electorate from the opposition party (Rustemovna et al, 2017).

In Russia at the present time, there is no such parity, even a little bit closer, with the existing party of power. Therefore, as the well-known domestic political scientist Andranik Migranyan writes: "In Russia it is necessary to debate with all the candidates whose aggregate rating and resource does not reach even half of the rating and resource of the acting prime minister (at the presidential elections in 2012, Vladimir Putin was the Prime Minister of the Russian Government). In such conditions, no matter what the opposition and other candidates say about refusing to participate in the debates of V.Putin; from the point of view of political expediency, his participation in the debates is only a waste of time and rating. Only a very stupid person can do things that directly contradict his interests" (Migranyan, 2017).

In addition, in accordance with the Federal Law dated 31-12-99 228 "On Elections of the President of the Russian Federation", the alternative to participating in the debate is to participate in the debate of proxies instead, the number of up to 600 people, of a candidate. According to Article 42, authorized representatives of the registered candidate carry out propaganda and other activities that contribute to the election of a registered candidate.

Secondly, the alternative to compulsory participation in the debate is the format of the Direct Line, actively used for 18 years (during the Vladimir Putin's premiership it was "Conversation with Vladimir Putin. Continuation"), that is a direct dialogue of the President with the citizens of Russia. It should also be noted that most of the citizens consider direct lines to be the most appropriate format for communication with the President.

### CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it must be said that full-fledged debate is possible with a developed, at least two-party system and the transformation of political discussions into a political norm, an indispensable tool for inner-party life.

In addition, the analysis showed that political debate in the media space of Russia, ha-

ving a short history of its existence, has not yet become an active tool of the political practice of modern Russia, we are not able to argue and debate.

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