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[Voting for a candidate who does not exist](#)



The Levada Center recently [published](#) results of a survey where respondents were informed that Vladimir Putin supports Andrey Semyonov, a fictitious figure who was supposedly nominated to run as a candidate for the presidency in the 2018 election. Survey respondents were asked whether they had heard of the candidate and whether they were planning to vote for the “successor”. Such a technique is often used by sociologists to gauge the perception of a given piece of information; sometimes social expectations distort reality. If respondents accept that the president is ready to make way for his successor and at the same time trust the interlocutor, they will reaffirm the interlocutor’s words by referring to vague recollections, vaguely recollected rumors, etc.

Have you heard that Andrey Semyonov has been nominated as a presidential candidate for the 2018 Russian election? ...or alternatively: “Have you heard that Vladimir Putin expressed his support for Andrey Semyonov as a candidate in the 2018 election last week?”

| | With the mention of Putin's support (Aug. 17) | Without mentioning Putin's support (Sept.17) |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| I've heard of Andrey Semyonov | 10% | 8% |
| I haven't heard of Andrey Semyonov | 78% | 83% |
| Hard to say | 12% | 9% |

The effect of the system

The Levada Center repeated this question in September. This time Andrey Semyonov was a “stand-alone” political figure. His level of recognition remained generally unchanged. An important observation: in both groups, three-quarters of those who had “heard of him” would not consider voting for him. Therefore, Putin’s purported support had minimal effect. By demonstrating the will to consider voting for the unknown politician, respondents declared their trust in the political system. Another element of society has refused to fully accept the lack of an alternative to those in power. Their picture of the world is a little more fragmented and contradictory– the reaction of this sequence of events– bordering on neurotic. The specific nature of Russian reality does not provide a direct answer to the question of what should be done and what one should believe in. Developments can unfold in the most paradoxical and absurd ways. Who would have believed half a year ago, for example, that a melodrama involving the Russian tsar would prompt the emergence of a terrorist organization? The unthinkable becomes reality and truths which were generally accepted one year ago are considered to be out eccentric opinion today. It is only logical that a “politically neurotic” persona will emerge against a backdrop of instability. I do not care to offer an exhaustive definition of this phenomenon in light of more comprehensive scientific research conducted by many followers of the Freudian doctrine. Still, it might be worthwhile attempting to describe the social and political dimensions of this phenomenon. To this end, let us highlight the key mechanisms of its formation: the burden of fear, the retreat into conformism and the inevitability of confrontation with contradictory tendencies, since social norms are changing rapidly. Socially accepted responses are symptomatic of this pattern of behavior. By claiming to possess knowledge concerning the fictitious “Andrey Semyonov”, respondents, whether consciously or unconsciously, effectively engage in self-deception, since no such candidate exists in reality (at least until now). Let us try to define the most prominent characteristics of this social type. The question about Andrey Semyonov serves as an indicator. Those who “have heard” of Andrey Semyonov will be pigeonholed as “neurotic” social types and as those “most susceptible to suggestion”.

Three traits of political neurotics

Firstly, “a political neurotic” assesses their financial situation more favorably than the average citizen. 18%-19% of respondents (as little as 10% on average) claim that their material situation improved last year. The proportion of those who expect their situation to improve in the future is 10% higher than the national average. It can be concluded that the number of respondents who are “satisfied with life” is higher than average in this category. “Political neurotics” follow the news more closely; they follow news stories about Ukraine or Serebryannikov’s arrest 16-18% more often than the national average. Perhaps, this can be explained by the fact that persons belonging to this group typically assess their emotional state as “balanced” less often, admit to suffering from stress and describe the situation in the country as “tense” more frequently. This description sits well with the increased pressure of social expectations and the projection of one’s personal state of mind onto society as a whole. There are several possible explanations for this apparent contradiction. These respondents may intentionally overestimate the financial well-being of their families in order to present themselves as successful people; such people tend to overstate their incomes. However, we have observed no factually significant differences here. Respondents’ replies are determined solely by their subjective views of their statuses. These respondents yearn to feel important and in demand. The description of their mental state as “stressed” sits well with this general picture: individuals who are most susceptible to social stress usually care what other people think and take to emulating mass-media role models. Still, it does not necessarily follow that social approval encompasses political views.

Secondly, “neurotic” respondents adhere to “public policy” on historical issues more often, to the detriment of historical truths. We have already discovered that the responses of “neurotics” lack consistency. Their perceptions are fragmentary in terms of the socio-political dimension. However, with respect to the more or less stable model of relations developed by society (or actually the state), we have recorded relatively consistent replies despite the general disorganization of attitudes held. For example, those who stated that they had heard of Andrey Semyonov often believe that the secret supplementary protocol to the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the USSR is a forgery and that September 17, 1939 marked the beginning of the Great Patriotic War. 37% of the respondents (as few as 24% on average) did not deem Stalinist repressions to be state crimes. Another “litmus test” historical period i.e. the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet in October 1993 completes the picture of respondents’ political preferences; the number of proponents of the Supreme Soviet is 9 p.p. higher among those who have heard of Semyonov. It can be concluded that these individuals consider it important to present themselves as “ordinary citizens” (in the common sense) as well as successful, well-educated and responsible. Partially aware of historical events, these respondents represent what is commonly known as a “patriotic” stance; they are in favor of a strong state and refuse to recognize wrongdoings of the past. Could this be a typical trait of the politically “neurotic” personality type? Perhaps so. In any case, fewer “hard to say” responses were recorded in this regard. When an individual is faced with a question pertaining to a topic s/he has little knowledge about, the first thing that comes to his or her mind is what they are accustomed to or what they face most often. It comes as no surprise that these replies imbue the spirit of jingoism and contain references to the pivotal points of contemporary quasi-ideology.

Socially accepted behavior allows for a higher level of approval of public institutions. This is partly proven by the results of the survey. When Andrey Semyonov is introduced as a person supported by Putin, respondents assess the government and the State Duma more favorably; by 8 p.p and 10 p.p., respectively, higher than the national average. However, this does not translate into the level of the president’s approval rating. In a survey when Andrey Semyonov is introduced with no mention of Putin’s support, the approval rating of public institutions is below average and the number of those prepared to vote for Putin is 13 p.p. lower than the national average. This interesting phenomenon points to a possible reason for the “recognition” of the non-existent politician: readiness to change the incumbent head of state and his policy is above average. In other words, these respondents welcome change. Hence, the emergence of a new politician comes as no surprise to them. On the other hand, let us not overestimate readiness for change; the difference between this sub-group compared to the Russian average is merely 8%-13%. Taking into account the clear, “pro-state” inclination of these respondents, one can make assumptions regarding the type of changes they desire. Incidentally, this inclination is not set in stone as, ultimately, it is also formed in accordance with the variability of events.

This survey allows us to estimate the share of “political neurotics” as 8%-11% of the population; respondents who have heard of Andrey Semyonov, a fictitious presidential candidate. Although this neurotic personality type represents an absolute minority, it would not be an exaggeration to say that this is a landmark in today’s reality. Many people exhibit traits of such behavior although only a tenth of Russian citizens are most susceptible to the pressure of public opinion. This is most typical of citizens interested in politics who confess to having “lost their way” amidst an abundance of information. They cannot distinguish between those who are right and wrong and may interpret given situations differently. One can sense a negative attitude towards the figure of the president as well as to the state. This goes hand in hand with an elevated feeling of emotional discomfort as indicated by the assessment of the situation in the country as “tense” and “marked by an elevated expectation of public unrest”. This apparent contradiction is only visible to those who divide the political space into “good” and “evil” spheres. Neurotics believe that everything is ambiguous and normative borders are blurred, assuming they even exist. The complexity of the global picture is explained by the involvement of the social strata most susceptible to change, the “avant-garde” of public opinion. These individuals are more commonly encountered online and on the streets. They could equally be conservative or liberal. The word “neurotic” has the ring of a medical diagnosis about it but it should always appear between quotation marks. In a system where formerly unconditional norms are no longer valid and alter according to context, a physician’s professional opinion is unlikely to get much of a hearing.

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