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The “Ideal” President Through the Eyes of Russian and French College Students

Research on the opinions of Russian and French college students reflect different national views as to the qualities of personality that are necessary for the head of a modern state.

Presidential elections are to be held in both Russia and France in 2012. The first terms of presidents D. Medvedev and N. Sarkozy, who became the heads of their respective states as a result of very

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dissimilar election campaigns, are coming to an end.

In March 2008, Medvedev received the overwhelming majority of the votes in the first round of the elections then, largely thanks to the status of his predecessor V. Putin along with powerful administrative and media support. On the eve of the presidential elections of 2008, according to data of the Levada Center, 30 percent of Russians said that one of Medvedev's strongest features was his closeness to Putin (see www.levada.ru/press/2007022001.html). In spite of his high ratings over the entire span of his presidential term, Medvedev was usually either seen as one of the members of a ruling tandem or else he remained a secondary figure. According to public-opinion surveys by VTsIOM [All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion] in March 2010, about 80 percent of the Russians surveyed were satisfied with Putin's performance as president; more than half of the respondents agreed that in his two presidential terms Putin had managed to create a stable political system in Russia, one that was able to withstand crises and upheavals, strengthen democracy, form a genuine multiparty system, ensure that the law was the same for everyone, lift the country's economy to a higher level, and lead Russia to the status of one of the leading economically developed countries (see <http://wciom.ru>). According to the Levada Center's data, in February 2011, that is, almost one year prior to the presidential elections, Putin continued to be perceived by Russians as a more mature and brilliant political figure, superior to Medvedev in terms of his overall positive qualities (see www.levada.ru/press/2011022109.html). Russians thought that it was Putin who was the most able to deal with the country's economic problems, maintain order, and ensure that Russia occupies the position in the world that it deserves. All of this was reflected in the decision announced in September 2011 that Putin would run for a new presidential term.

Nicolas Sarkozy became the president of France in 2007 as a result of a fiercely competitive election campaign, having beaten his competitor Ségolène Royal with a rather small percentage edge in the second round. Over his presidential term, Sarkozy remained a prominent media figure and was frequently the target of public criticism for his excessive self-promotion and for putting his per-

sonal life on exhibit. According to Conseil Sondage Analyses, in August 2011 President Sarkozy's rating, and that of his policies, was 36 percent, 22 percent lower than in August 2010 (see www.csa.eu/multimedia/data/sondages/data2011/pi20110810-1-observatoire-politique-csa-les-echos.pdf).

Despite the differences between the political conditions under which Medvedev and Sarkozy won their elections and became presidents, they have at least one feature in common: in the opinion of many citizens, neither can be called a national leader who enjoys the support of a majority of the population of their countries. In our opinion, on the eve of the presidential elections it is of interest to ascertain what kind of president citizens would like to see if the sitting president is not considered a reference figure by the nation. The citizens' normative conceptions concerning the qualities of the "ideal" president are not only of decisive instrumental value for the image makers' task during election campaigns, but they also make it possible to judge the specific characteristics of a country's culture as a whole. Studies on this set of topics in the past few decades can be divided into several areas. Some of the works devoted to the ideal leader note the concept of charisma. In particular, Shamir et al. (1993) offer a review of empirical studies that analyze the influence a charismatic leader has on the motivations, values, and preferences of his followers. Another group of studies has to do with determining the relation between people's demand for particular qualities in a leader and the political preferences of those who represent that demand. One example is an article by Shmuel and Nadler (1996) that analyzes the image of the ideal political leader through the eyes of left-wing and right-wing constituencies. The researchers conclude that to a large extent, the assessment of a leader's qualities depends on the political values of the people and their adherence to a particular ideology. A number of studies are linked to people's assessment of a specific political leader and their perception of his character qualities. Thus, for example, Lewis (1973) examines the image of R. Nixon, Mitchell (2008) looks at the image of the second President George Bush, and Doctorow (1992) and Shenkman (2000) analyze the images of several American presidents together.

Examples of studies of the image of the “ideal” president in Russia include the following: a work by E. Shestopal and her colleagues, in which the authors cite the results of analysis of the image of Putin in the minds of Russians, as well as Russian citizens’ conceptions of the kind of president that is optimal for Russia (Shestopal et al. 2004); and our article comparing views of school students and homeless children in Moscow regarding qualities that a president ought to have and which areas of his activity should have priority (Kasamara and Sorokina 2009). Also interesting is a work by A. Rogatchevski, which deals with Putin’s image in fictional literature in various genres, from short stories to complete novels (Rogatchevski 2008).

The present article cites the results of a comparative analysis of the views of students in leading higher educational institutions in Russia and France regarding what kind of person the “ideal” president ought to be. The study cannot pretend to be representative and is not able to reflect the general population in the country as a whole. The work represents a subjective study of political views on the microlevel rather than a theoretical analysis that might claim to be fundamental. This article represents the views of a particular group of respondents, which cannot be considered representative of all college students; they reflect only the ideas of the most “elite” portion of young people in college.

By “elite” we mean that the Russian higher educational institutions we selected are among the top three leading institutions in the country. We suggest, therefore, that the young people enrolled in these universities have from the outset more ambition and opportunity for self-realization. And these are the very students who objectively have more chances of making their way into the ranks of the political elite in Russia.

In analyzing the views of this group it is worthwhile to keep in mind particular factors that influence their ideas. The students enrolled in the top institutions have greater chances of going abroad to study or work; they have unlimited access to the Internet; and they are more fluent in foreign languages than many other young people. For this reason, their views have been influenced to a greater extent by internationalization, and they have become more integrated into

the international educational system. In particular, Russia's Moscow State Institute for International Relations [MGIMO], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has traditionally been and remains the workshop where diplomatic cadres are trained.

It is also reasonable to classify the French study participants as belonging to the "elite" segment of French college students. It is a characteristic of the training of state employees and political officials in France that any person who would like to get a post in the state apparatus and make his way into the political elite has to acquire the kind of specialized education that is provided in the Paris Institute of Political Sciences (Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris [Sciences Po]). Our French respondents are being trained in a higher educational institution engaged specifically in creating a political elite.

At the start of our study we proceeded on the basis that the students in the leading institutions of higher learning of Russia and France would possess a fairly high level of political competence and be involved in issues of domestic and international politics, that they would be able to analyze quite critically the political processes going on in their countries.

In the spring of 2010, 59 men and 41 women enrolled in the Paris Institute of Political Sciences were surveyed. In the winter and spring of 2011, 100 interviews were conducted with students in the three leading higher educational institutions of Moscow (about 30 interviews in each one): Moscow M.V. Lomonosov State University [MSU], the Higher School of Economics National Research University, and MGIMO (50 men and 50 women).¹ The median age of the respondents was twenty-two in both groups being studied.

The 200 interviews revealed characteristics that were mentioned more than five times by the respondents in each group. Their characterizations were systematized thematically in seven groups. We singled out the groups of characterizations mentioned twenty-five or more times, because these, in our opinion, make up the key features (or content nucleus) of the image of the "ideal" president.²

According to the statements of both the Russian and the French students, the "ideal" president ought to be a patriot, that is, he *ought to work for the good of his country and also understand and stand*

Table 1

Characteristics of the “Ideal” President (by number of mentions)*

Characteristics of the “ideal” president	Russian students	French students
Patriotic	<i>41</i>	<i>36</i>
Powerful, strong-willed, decisive	<i>35</i>	<i>25</i>
Charismatic	<i>26</i>	<i>26</i>
Competent, well-educated, intelligent	18	32
Honest, conscientious	14	7
Defender of democratic values	12	9
Good diplomat	6	34

*The numbers in italics single out the characteristics that the respondents mentioned more than twenty-five times, and were designated as “key.” The data have been ranked in the column headed “Russian students.”

up for the interests of the citizens. Second, he should be *powerful, strong-willed, and decisive.* Third, he has to have *charisma and qualities of leadership.* In addition, the “ideal” French president would have two more key characteristics: *a sense of diplomacy, that is, the ability to represent the country in the international arena, and competence, educated good breeding, and intelligence.* In addition to the key characteristics, both the Russian and the French students mentioned features of the “ideal” president such as *honesty and a readiness to defend democratic values* (see Table 1).

However, in spite of the occurrence of identical key features of the “ideal” president, very often the students in the two countries assigned differing content to the same characterization, interpreting it in different ways. Our further analysis will be devoted to a comparison of the characterizations of the “ideal” president.

The president as patriot

To a large extent, the Russian and French college students’ conception of the “ideal” president as patriot turned out to be similar. At the outset, however, we should like to note the different terms in the vocabulary of the Russian and French participants. For example, the

Russian respondents made frequent use of the term “the people,” whereas the French respondents used the word “nation.”

The respondents in both groups thought that the president as patriot should not simply perform his duties formally but also have a reverential, spiritual relationship with his country. “A *genuine president has to be hard-working and go all out for Russia. The president has to be not only a manager, he has to care about Russia with all his heart*” (MGIMO student, age nineteen); and “*The ‘ideal’ president is the kind of person who loves France*” (French student, age twenty-one).

According to the statements by respondents in both groups, the president as patriot has to “*be concerned for the well-being of all citizens,*” “*give priority to the interests of his country and people/nation,*” in other words he has to “*work for the good of his Motherland and people/nation,*” and “*not stand up for the interests of a narrow segment of society*” and “*not work for the sake of getting wealthy and prosperous.*” The respondents also mentioned that the head of the state “*ought to get close to the citizens of his country other times besides during the election campaign,*” which means that he must “*understand the needs of his people/his nation*” throughout the entire term of his presidency.

In the words of the *Russian students*, the essence of the work of Russia’s president as patriot, working “*for the good of his Motherland and people,*” consists chiefly of “*taking care of the social welfare of citizens,*” with the focus on issues of domestic policy. The Russian students also mentioned that a patriotic president ought to be “*just,*” that is, he has to “*act in accordance with the law.*” And so, the respondents interpreted justice as obedience to the laws. In the statements given by the French students, in contrast to the Russian students, the term “justice” did not come up a single time.

The *French students* focused in more detail on the meaning of their requirement that the “ideal” president must “*love France.*” In the words of the French respondents, a head of state who truly loves France “*respects the values of the French people*” and French culture, he acts as “*the guarantor of the basic foundations of France*” and “*consistently and firmly stands up for the national interests of France*”: “*The president has to have a sense of history and the*

ability to appreciate the historical heritage of France. The 'ideal' president must not attempt, at any cost, to borrow all the latest tendencies that might be in conflict with our culture, he has to try to preserve our values" (Sciences Po student, age twenty-two).

For the French respondents, the "ideal" president of France has to be the kind of person who, in addition, "*represents the people of France in all its diversity,*" and so he has to be able to act as "*the unifying force for the entire nation.*" He has to stay with his citizens during difficult times and exert every effort to emerge from a crisis situation with minimum losses to the state: "*The head of the state is the kind of person who is able to patch up and heal the wounds of the state, just as de Gaulle did during the dark period after the occupation*" (Sciences Po student, age twenty-four).

Powerful, strong-willed, decisive

A majority of the respondents in both groups thought that the "ideal" president has to be "powerful, strong-willed, and decisive." As a rule, these characteristics were listed together as a set and were perceived as mutually complementary. The students in both countries said that these qualities are essential for a head of state first and foremost when making political decisions and carrying out his political program.

The *Russian students*, in addition to the characteristics "powerful," "strong-willed," and "decisive," also quite frequently used the term "tough." A distinguishing feature of the statements given by the Russian students was their use, when speaking, of the term "ruler," which they used as a synonym of the word "president." An analysis of statements by the Russian respondents enabled us to reconstruct the image of the "tough ruler" as seen by the Russian students. A *tough ruler* is the kind of state leader who possesses political willpower, thanks to which he can undertake "*decisive actions*" and is "*prepared to stop at nothing in order to achieve his aims,*" because "*the end justifies all of the means that are necessary to achieve it.*" A "tough ruler" is the kind of independent political player who is not susceptible to the influence of any "*outside factors or the opinions of other people, organizations, and countries,*"

someone who is capable of “*saying a stern No.*” A tough ruler, in the words of the respondents, will be able to impose order, meaning that he will “*prevent bribery and looting of the treasury,*” “*ensure the equality of all citizens before the law,*” “*stop terrorism,*” and “*give a boost to economic development.*” In order to do these things the head of the state has to not only “*keep his entourage firmly in line*” but also “*keep all of Russia under a firm grip.*” The necessity of a tough ruler, in the opinion of the respondents, is due to the huge size of the country: “*Russia, after all, is the biggest country, which is why a firm hand is necessary to maintain authority.*” In this connection, sometimes the respondents called up the image of Joseph Stalin, who, thanks to his “*political achievements,*” could be forgiven for his “*numerous shortcomings.*”

In the statements given by the *French students*, the terms “tough” and “ruler” did not come up a single time. The boldness, decisiveness, political willpower, and firmness of character of the “ideal” president consist, first of all, in his ability to “*remain faithful to his political convictions*” and “*stand up for his position,*” regardless of the ups and downs of the political situation. Second, the “ideal” president must not be a populist and just go along with the public’s opinion for the sake of short-term measures that are not very effective. The president has to have the kind of decisiveness, the kind of “*staunchness and strength of character*” necessary to make “*unpopular political decisions*” and to be oriented toward “*long-term projects of the overall future.*” He must also avoid the temptation to make “*populist short-term decisions*” for the sake of holding on to his high ratings.

The charismatic leader

In the minds of the students of both countries, a charismatic president was associated with being “*an excellent orator*” who is able to do a good job in the performance of the functions of the head of a state and possesses “*a full set of leadership qualities.*” According to the statements given by the *Russian students*, “*having charisma*” means, to them, “*being a strong leader,*” and this, in turn, as a rule, was perceived as synonymous to “*a tough ruler*” (see above). In

the words of the respondents, the qualities of leadership that are characteristic of a charismatic leader “*cause voters to like him*” and enable the president “*to get the people to follow him,*” “*to do things in a way that they trust you*”: “*First of all, he has to have charisma, because the president of Russia, which has such a large population, has to do things that stick in people’s minds and not just be simply some guy who is the president and shows up briefly on the TV screen. Second, he should not be distinguished by his education but rather by having a natural, keen wit. He ought to be quick on the uptake, he has to ‘get it’*” (MGIMO student, age twenty).

In addition, a charismatic leader has to be a good organizer and have a professional team that is able to carry out ambitious political plans: “*There are plenty of brains in the country; the president’s task is to channel the activity of his team in the right direction*” (MGIMO student, age nineteen).

For the *French students*, in addition to excellent public speaking abilities and good appearance, a charismatic president has to be “*a good strategist,*” possessing “*dynamism,*” “*an innovative way of thinking,*” and also “*the ability to engage in dialogue and make compromises.*” At the very least, he has to be respected by French citizens; at the maximum, he has to be the very embodiment of an ideal: “*The ideal is an eloquent charismatic who has a sense of his own worth. For French people, he has to embody an ideal rather than simply be a model to emulate*” (Sciences Po student, age twenty-five).

Competent, educated, intelligent

This characterization was not included on the list of the key features of the “ideal” president of Russia (it was mentioned under twenty-five times). In addition, the Russian students did not once use the term “competent.” In contrast to the French students, they were very succinct in describing the level of education of the “ideal” president: “*He ought to be an incredibly intelligent person who has been educated in a number of fields, the law and economics*” (MGIMO student, age twenty-two); “*The president has to have a high level*

of education: he has to have a general understanding of what is going on in all spheres” (MGIMO student, age nineteen).

In the minds of the *French students*, competence, a good education, and intelligence are the key qualities of the “ideal” president. The kind of person who can be called “*intelligent*,” in the opinion of the French respondents, is someone who is “*a well-rounded, comprehensively developed individual*” who has “*a broad intellectual horizon*” and “*a lively intelligence*,” one who is capable of “*making a sober assessment of his actions*”: “*The ideal head of state has to have a brilliant mind*” (Sciences Po student, age twenty-two).

The French students gave a very high rating to the level and quality of French education. In the words of the respondents, “*to be an individual of great culture means to have an excellent French education.*” A high level of education on the part of the “ideal” president, in the words of the French participants, involves an excellent knowledge of economics and international relations, as well as fluency in a number of foreign languages (English at least).

A president’s competence lies in his ability to “*arrive at a consensus*” and utilize his knowledge when making political decisions, engaging in strategic planning, mapping out international relations, and the ability to “*see and evaluate clearly what is going on.*”

A good diplomat

The *Russian students* mentioned only six times the notion that the “ideal” president ought to be a good diplomat, but not a single respondent showed much interest in this characteristic. Neither did a single respondent focus on what role the president of Russia ought to play in the international arena.

In the opinion of the *French students*, on the other hand, it is just as important for the “ideal” president to be a good diplomat, “*a respected figure on the international scale*,” and to know how to represent France in the international arena as to be a patriot and highly educated. The respondents viewed diplomacy and patriotism as two sides of the same coin; they could not say which quality is

more important, but it is obvious that these are the qualities that enable a state leader to have “*a comprehensive vision of policy.*” For example, as a patriot the president is involved in issues of domestic politics, while as a diplomat he “*has an international vision of politics,*” that is, “*he looks at domestic and foreign issues from the European and international angle,*” “*he knows how to engage in international dialogue*”: “*The president has to wield a great deal of influence in the international arena, and along with this he still has to be a master of domestic politics*” (Sciences Po student, age twenty-four); “*The president has to have a good knowledge of international relations. He has to possess international experience, he has to know Europe but also, of course, Africa as well, and the Near East, which are the zones of heightened interest*” (Sciences Po student, age twenty-two).

The French students emphasized that in international politics the “ideal” president, as a diplomat, must never forget the “*special*” place and role of France; it is essential to “*maintain a purely French style in politics, while at the same time adapting to the ups and downs of the international political situation*” (Sciences Po student, age twenty-five); “*The president has to have a sacred belief in the missionary role of France in the matter of European integration and take into account all of the benefits of membership in the European Union*” (Sciences Po student, age twenty-two).

A number of the respondents expressed the opinion that in international politics a special role, still, is played “*not so much by the personal characteristics of the person who occupies the position of the head of the state but rather the policy that he conducts*”: “*The president may be charismatic, big, small . . . that is not so important. What is important is that he consistently and firmly stand up for the national interests of France. The image of France depends on the country’s foreign policy rather than on any single specific personality. Let me cite the example of a speech Sarkozy gave in Dakar, which had a catastrophically horrible influence on France’s image in Africa. But what was the most important thing? The most important thing was the ideas that were voiced rather than the figure of the president*” (Sciences Po student, age twenty-two).

Honest, conscientious

The *Russian students* noted that in the history of the Soviet Union and present-day Russia there has been a great deal of “lying,” which the citizens have not found out about until some time later, when “*archive materials have been declassified.*” It is then, in the words of the respondents, that “*you find out that there was simply some kind of nightmare,*” and that what was “*being broadcast on TV*” did not in any way reflect the reality around them. For this reason what was especially valuable to the Russian respondents were characteristics such as honesty and conscientiousness: “*The president of Russia—and this is the most important—has to be honest and take full responsibility for his election campaign and announce it to the whole nation*” (MGIMO student, age eighteen); “*He has to be honest not only to himself but to his people*” (HSE [National Research University, Higher School of Economics] female student, age eighteen).

The Russian students consider honesty as the foundation of “*the moral stability*” of a politician, one that defines many other human qualities of the “ideal” president: “*It seems to me that if he is honest, all other qualities will be added upon, because they stem from honesty*” (MSU student, age twenty-one); “*He has to be the kind of person who has a very solid moral foundation. Honesty and conscientiousness are the things that a politician ought to have*” (MGIMO student, age twenty-two).

In the words of the respondents, an “*honest*” head of state will set a good example for the people around him and the nation as a whole. It is a quality that will also greatly help him in the fight against corruption: “*The most important quality, first and foremost, is honesty, because if there is one person at the top and he does not steal, then the people who are under him will not be able to steal either, and in fact the people will follow him and draw conclusions*” (HSE student, age nineteen).

The *French students* did not focus particularly on that feature of a president. In the opinion of French respondents, a president “*ought to try to tell the truth to citizens, even though that is not always possible,*” he should “*honestly perform his duties*” and be “*uncorruptible.*”

Defender of democratic values

In the opinion of the respondents in both groups, the “ideal” president ought to be a liberal and a democrat—he must “*respect the constitution and comply with the principle of the separation of powers,*” he must “*be the guarantor and protector of the democratic rights and freedoms of citizens,*” “*respect the principles of the rule of law and be obedient to the laws,*” “*heed and give space to the political opposition.*”

The *Russian respondents* expressed the opinion that the “ideal” president has to be “*a genuine democrat*” in order to “*strive to reinforce democratic values in Russia.*” At the present time, in the words of the students, it is only possible to say that a “*deficient democracy*” exists in Russia. In order to have “*a full-fledged democratic regime*” it is necessary to have free elections, freedom of speech, and a political opposition that is genuinely in place: “*The kind of person who is a good president is one who at the minimum understands what democracy is, someone who does not just talk but acts! They tell us that everything is fine here. And since they tell us that we have democracy and freedom of speech here, they should go ahead and do it. They ought to act in ways that ensure that journalists are not afraid to tell the truth openly. It is true that they don’t get killed here anymore, isn’t that great! There are no more contract murders, and that is the first step toward freedom of speech*” (HSE student, age nineteen); “*A president ought not to put down the opposition, he ought not to use police methods to stop attempts to say something, methods that go to the point where people are put in jail just because they say what is on their minds. There needs to be reasonable dialogue. Not to create the illusion of a political struggle between puppets like Ziuganov and Zhirinovskii; there needs to be real dialogue with a civil society and opposition political parties, dialogue that the president should not try to prevent*” (MSU student, age twenty).

In the statements given by the *French students* there was a sense of higher requirements that the “ideal” president ought to meet. In contrast to his Russian counterpart, he should not simply “*build democratic institutions*” but also “*be the embodiment of democratic values and civic solidarity.*” In addition, respondents noted the

importance of efforts to combat “*inequalities of various kinds*”: “*The ideal president of France has to protect the rights of the individual, protect the environment, preserve biological diversity, and fight against all kinds of inequalities*” (Sciences Po student, age twenty-one).

* * *

In our opinion, the students’ views as to the image of the “ideal” president were to a large extent influenced by their attitudes toward the present heads of state, D. Medvedev and N. Sarkozy, and, in the case of the Russian respondents, also their perception of V. Putin, the chairman of the government. In the interviews with the Russian students there were frequent mentions and assessments of Putin rather than Medvedev, so that the Russian students’ requirement with respect to charisma may be conditioned, in part, by a lack of charisma in the current president. A number of the respondents expressed the opinion that “*a powerful, authoritative personality such as Vladimir Putin,*” who possesses “*excellent qualities of oratory and charisma,*” is the very embodiment of the image of the “ideal” president of Russia.

In the interviews with the French students, in response to the question as to what the “ideal” president ought to be like, the following answer was frequently heard: “*He ought to be the total opposite to Sarkozy.*” And so, very often Sarkozy was described as the very opposite of the “ideal” head of state, so that to a large extent the respondents’ requirement of a competent and well-educated president stems from their critical attitudes toward Sarkozy’s level of education—who also attended the Institute of Political Sciences but had a few problems getting his diploma.

The results of the interviews served as the basis for our generalization and reconstruction of the image of the “ideal” Russian and French presidents.

The “ideal” French president loves France, meaning that he “*respects the values of the French people*” and French culture; he is “*the guarantor of the basic foundations of France*” and he

“honestly carries out the duties that are assigned to him.” He gives top priority to the interests of the whole nation, he is *“a unifying force for the entire nation,”* *“he works to ensure the well-being of all citizens,”* and *“he does not serve the interests of a narrow segment of society.”* At the same time, the head of the state remains *“faithful to his political convictions”* and *“stands up for his point of view,”* regardless of the vicissitudes of the political situation. The president must have the decisiveness, *“the staunchness and force of character”* that are necessary to undertake *“unpopular political decisions”* and to be oriented toward *“long-term projects of the overall future.”* The head of the state must be charismatic, have a good appearance, and be an excellent public speaker who has acquired *“an excellent French education,”* and is therefore fluent in several foreign languages; he knows economics and international relations, he knows how to *“see and evaluate clearly what is going on.”* In addition to everything else, he is *“a respected figure on the international scale”* and knows how to represent France in the international arena, and he never forgets the country’s *“special”* place and role. The *“ideal”* French president is a liberal and a democrat, a person who *“embodies democratic values and civic solidarity”* and fights against *“inequalities of every kind.”*

The image of the “ideal” Russian president turned out to be quite contradictory. On the one hand, he loves his native land with all his heart and is prepared to *“do whatever it takes”* for the sake of Russia, because he knows all about the problems and aspirations of his people. The head of the state does not sit idly but works for the good of his native land and his citizens and not for the sake of his personal enrichment. He is aware of all of the responsibility that he bears for the fate of individual persons and the country as a whole, which is why he has to be *“a tough ruler”* (virtually synonymous with a charismatic leader), he has to be *“ready to stop at nothing for the sake of his goals.”* His goals are to raise the level of the social well-being of the citizens, to fight against corruption and looting of the treasury, and to promote the economic development of the country. He will use any means necessary to accomplish these beneficial goals: *“he keeps his entourage firmly*

in line” and “*rules all of Russia with an iron hand.*” The main thing is to maintain authority and not to allow any show of weakness. At the same time, he has to be a liberal and a “*genuine democrat*” who is “*honest with his people.*”

In contrast to the French students, hardly any Russians emphasized the importance of international activity, although the participants included some future diplomats. In this case, the Russian students were revealing quite a Russia-centric position, which, as shown by other surveys of ours, is quite widespread in the mass consciousness of Russia (Kasamara and Sorokina 2011a, 2011b). This position is reflected in Russians’ excessive close mindedness and focus on the domestic problems of their own country, in their closed nature, their tendency to wall themselves off from the rest of the world and their unwillingness to engage in partnership dialogue. Excessive domestic functions are attributed to the president, but at the same time one of his main constitutional duties, that of implementing the leadership of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation and representing the Russian Federation in international relations, is virtually ignored. In our opinion, such a position is strategically wrong and not promising.

As we see it, these interviews with students of the leading higher educational institutions of Russia confirmed that although they have quite a good education and level of political competence that enables them to critically evaluate ongoing processes, their political consciousness has been quite traumatized by social stereotypes and attitudes that are prevalent in the mass consciousness of Russia. The mythologeme that the president is “*the father of the nation,*” an omnipresent ruler who protects citizens against lawlessness and helps the socially unprotected strata of the population, who maintains order in the country, can be detected in the views expressed—although perhaps not so clearly as among average statistical Russians. Thanks to the traditional and largely patriarchal and irrational perception of a person who is highly placed, the term “*president*” is replaced by “*ruler,*” even leaning toward the concept of “*Father Tsar,*” who, instead of “*standing up for the national interest*” thinks first and foremost “*about the*

people” while “*holding the country in a grip of iron.*”

Investing the president with superpowers, in our opinion, is linked to the fact that the mass consciousness of Russians has been highly mythologized politically,³ and that habit, in turn, has an influence on their political perceptions and views. The legitimacy of such a president is based, first and foremost, on affective emotional factors and does not depend on the actual results of his performance. And so it is reasonable to talk about the “teflon leader” effect: in spite of all the economic and social and political problems, over the span of many years the ratings of the president and the chairman of the government have remained steadily high.

The present article is an interim report by staffers of the Laboratory of Political Research on the basis of a large-scale, cross-national study, within which interviews are conducted with college students in several countries—Thailand, Senegal, Japan, Romania, and Armenia. In the future we plan to compare our respondents’ views as to the basic qualities of the “ideal” political leader, along with their perception of the image of their native country, and so on. This will help us in our study of the characteristics of the political cultures of the community of “elite” college students, that is, those who are in effect the future political elites of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. The interviews were conducted by personnel of the Laboratory for Political Research: S. Petrichenko and E. Migol’ in Paris, and M. Kniazher, L. Khakimova, and M. Simon in Moscow.

2. In transcribing and analyzing the interviews with the French respondents the authors had the assistance of French-speaking colleagues, enabling them to have a full understanding of the vocabulary and to minimize any linguistic inaccuracies.

3. According to the data of a survey by VTsIOM on 21 December 2008, 80 percent of Russians agreed that the activity of the president of Russia will determine whether our country is going to become a leading world power. According to a survey by the Levada Center on 28–31 January 2011, 58 percent of respondents had a hard time naming any weak sides of Putin, while 50 percent had the same trouble naming any weak points of Medvedev; see www.levada.ru/press/2011041301.html.

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