1 Introduction

This book is about political subjectivities. More specifically, it concerns the ways in which political elites in Russia put together themselves and their worlds with words. It proceeds according to two basic assumptions: one, that tabulae rasae do not occur in the sphere of society, and that perception, cognition, assessment and action are fundamentally conditioned by culture; and, two, that an investigation of the political culture of Russian elites can disclose a critical dimension of their politics, identifying both what actors are able to think, say and do, and that which they cannot. Inasmuch as language constitutes the principal medium of culture, it provides a direct line of access to it. Along these lines, political culture is here conceptualized as a particular discursive formation in which individuals appear not so much as originators of their communicative acts but as relays transmitting to one another narrative messages composed and decoded on the basis of those discourses which they have internalized (Foucault, 1972; Torfing, 1999).

Below, I have more to say on the concept of discourse. For the moment, however, it may be sufficient to fix it in general terms by regarding it as a set of deep categories authorizing and governing communication in the way that, say, legal discourse would authorize that which can be said in a court of law or religious discourse, what can be uttered in a church. Consequently, the tack taken here is to investigate those cultures of power informing Russia's political class by tracing the narratives of its members back to the various discursive practices through which those cultures are expressed. Facts, in the usual sense of the term, then, are not much at issue. Nor are the particular beliefs, values or opinions expressed by political actors, although these play a contingent role in working toward an elaboration

of the various discourses at play on the country's political field. By drawing on these discourses, subjects develop maps of their world enabling them to situate themselves, to locate others and to navigate their ways through the thicket of Russian politics in which reliable information is usually scarce, formal relations may not matter a whit, and things are seldom what they seem to be. Taken collectively, extant discourses – in unison or in combination – constitute the world of the subject, the subjective side of politics that is actualized in communication.

This chapter aims to accomplish a few things. One is to specify the concept of discourse as it appears in this work, a concept freighted by two difficulties. The first consists in the fact that while "discourse" has become a common term in the social sciences, its meaning has not been standardized. Some authors use it loosely, as more or less synonymous with verbal communication itself. My intention is otherwise; I wish to deploy it in a particular way, and this brings up the second difficulty: how to elucidate a usage of "discourse" – one that is not unfamiliar to many specialists in this field but one which is nonetheless counterintuitive – without side-tracking the discussion into a long exegesis of the concept itself? In the section, below, on discourse, narrative and politics, I address this issue briefly and abstractly. Accordingly, the compactness of this section – and the model of political communication that I develop in it – may appear rather dense to readers relatively unacquainted with discourse analysis. My hope is that this density will dissolve as readers progress through the body of this study where the concept is put to use and its abstract description gives way to concrete analysis.

This section of the chapter is followed by a discussion of how "discourse" is empirically interpreted in this book as narratives taken from a series of interviews with Russian political actors. This, too, is unconventional – there are not many studies employing discourse analysis on "texts" consisting of transcriptions of interview responses – and requires a little unpacking. The remainder of this chapter summarizes succeeding ones, outlining the results of the analysis as

ordered by the components of my model of political discourse. Finally, in the following section, my purpose is to say a word about how the subjects in this study are constructed as participants in political discourse, a construction that draws on the notion of actors embedded in social networks and a corresponding conception of culture.

CULTURES AND NETWORKS

The present study is not the first to explore the connections between (objective) networks and (subjective) elite orientations in contemporary Russia (Buck, 2007). However, its methodology puts a different focus on the problem. On one hand, it assumes that the interior worlds of political actors do not exist *in vacuo*. Rather, their content is conditioned by context, by the webs of social relations in which actors are embedded. In order to account for this aspect of political culture, social relations among those in the political class are conceptualized as power networks, following the general orientation of those network analysts who have begun to ply their trade in countries emerging from communism (Wedel, 1998; Hughes, John and Sasse, 2002; Stark and Bruszt, 1998; Stark and Vedres, 2006; Schoenman, 2002). On the other hand, however, the standard applications of network analysis to the study of political elites do not fit the contours of my topic. They concern the positionality of actors in social space: Who is tied to whom? How are ties reticulated in network structures? The graphic representations that ordinarily accompany network analyses may offer precise depictions of social relations, yet they would be out of place in a study focusing not on those relations themselves but on the *culture* that informs them. This objective leads me to consider the concept of networks from two perspectives: as spatial-positional associations among members (power networks) that are backgrounded in the analysis; and as symbolic-communicative structures (cognitive networks) that occupy the foreground. In short, the concept of network used in this study refers to the fact that political worlds are "objectively" constituted by power networks and not by individuals per se, just as their "subjective" apprehension

and expression of politics is informed by the supra-individual phe-
nomenon of discourse joining subjects together in cognitive networks
(White, 1992).

The notion of "cultures of power" lies at the intersection of these
two planes, referencing both the "objective" and "subjective" forms
of networks. Cultures of power express themselves as discursive
strategies, rooted in group habitus, by means of which actors on the
field of politics stake out positions yielding access to desired things – or,
to use Pierre Bourdieu's terms, to various forms of capital: symbolic,
economic and social (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991, 1998; Swartz, 2003). In the
present study, the discourses on which these strategies draw are avail-
able to analysis in the form of narratives uttered during interviews
conducted with a sample of prominent actors in Russian government
and politics. Because the objective is to trace narratives back to the
discourse(s) from which they have been drawn, I do not posit any one-
to-one correspondence between a particular actor and the discourse(s)
he or she employs in a given instance. These can change. Nonetheless,
discursive patterns do emerge from the narratives, suggesting that it is
possible to broaden the notion of network to include the medium of
discourse as a tie among individuals (Mische, 2003).

The idea that network ties can take the form of discursive
commonalities is analogous to certain concepts employed by scholars
attempting to tap the particular subjective orientations of identifiable
groups of actors in government and politics. Harold Seidman (1975),
for instance, has used the term "agency culture" for this purpose,
connoting patterns of education, professional training and sociali-
zation, and employment that instill certain habits of mind distin-
guishing those working in and around, say, the US Department of
Agriculture from those in the Department of the Treasury. Similarly,
Ernst Haas (1991) refers to relatively durable patterns of apprehension
and assessment found among "epistemic communities" in govern-
ment and other organizations, communities forged around consensual
knowledge and belief establishing boundaries separating insiders from
outsiders. More recently, Teun van Dijk (2003) has drawn attention to

the social element in knowledge production by observing that the "common mental structures of a group" serve as a model for cognition that is manifested in the group's communicative practices.

Van Dijk's attention to this aspect of group or community – namely, communication – is the lead that I wish to follow, here. In so doing, my tack steers away from the approach of methodological individualism which takes the individual – and, in this case, his/her opinions, beliefs, ideology or whatnot – as the basic unit of analysis and, instead, attempts to view individual expression from the vantage of discursive communities from which individuals draw their identity, ascribe meaning to their practices, and interpret the world in which they act (Epstein, 2008). My objective, in brief, is to analyze the culture(s) of Russia's political class by decoding a set of interview narratives recorded with a sample of its members.

Although something called "Russian culture" is always, however implicitly, at the margins of this work, the concept of culture employed, here, differs fundamentally from the way in which it is rendered in conventional political science. Rather than a collection of beliefs and values held by individuals that are thought to cause some effect in behavior, culture appears here as meaning integral to, or coextensive with, that behavior itself, representing its internal logic or rationale (Geertz, 2000; Wedeen, 2008). It constitutes that symbolic "matrix within which that which we understand as political action takes place" (Chabal and Daloz, 2008: 21). William Sewell (1999) has introduced a distinction that helps to clarify this conception by dividing the concept of culture in two. In addition to culture, in the ordinary sense of the term's usage, as an aspect of life *abstracted* from the material realm and fit for study in its own right, Sewell argues that culture can also be regarded as a more bounded phenomenon *situated at the confluence* of meanings and practices. As an object of study, culture in this second sense problematizes the quotidian, the taken-for-granted, the common sense of the social world. It alerts the observer to the fact that this world – perhaps despite appearances – is not something ready-made but the product

of human investment, an investment of meaning into the practices
that comprise it. Viewed in this way, culture intersects with Bourdieu's
concept of "habitus," an individual's position and way of being in the
world, a disposition replete with distinctions, meanings, strategies
and practices (1977, 1984, 1990, 1993, 2005). Culture, in Sewell's
second sense, flows through the habitus, linking the interiors of
individuals one to another by way of their background understanding
of practices, creating a collective consciousness, enabling discourse.

The implications of these considerations for the present study are
several. First, the object of analysis would not be construed as some
objectively existing world capable of being directly apprehended by the
observer, but as *representations* of the world offered by subjects within
it (Geertz, 2000). Second, representations of the world are collective
projects. They make sense, they are accepted as valid, within the
circumference of one or another discursive community or cognitive
network. For outsiders, they may appear as mistaken or even crazy. But
for those sharing the same habitus informed by the same cultural
practices and participating in the same discourse, they are regarded as
real and, perhaps, as not even remarkable. Finally, representations of
the world are structured by discourses to which individuals have
access. On one hand, this implies a certain lack of ownership on the
part of subjects. They instead borrow from that which is available to
them, representing themselves and their world according to those
discourses in which they have competence. On the other, there is no
reason to suppose that subjects are confined to a single discourse, or
that more than one are not present within a given habitus (Lakoff, 2008;
Edelman, 1988). Individuals may be inconsistent, they may even con-
tradict themselves, owing to the utility present in a particular discur-
sive formulation within one context that might vanish in another.

DISCOURSE, NARRATIVE AND POLITICS

If language can be understood as society's consciousness externalized
(Hodge and Kress, 1993), then discourse might be regarded as a system
of categories circulating in the social world that structures and gives

meaning to that very externalization (Barthes, 1968; Laclau, 2005). In so doing, discourse constrains communication. As Michel Foucault (1972: 44) has put it, "it is not easy to say something new: it is not enough for us to open our eyes ... for new objects to light up and emerge." At the same time, however, it is discourse that enables communication. It provides a set of terms, distinguished one from another by opposition, that inform any meaningful utterance (Greimas, 1983; Barthes, 1968). To take a simple example, Christian religious discourse is commonly structured by binary oppositions such as good/evil, sacred/profane, God/Satan, sin/salvation and so on. Meanings are thereby established not only in a negative sense because of the oppositions contained in each binary – "good," for instance, acquires a meaning by becoming counterpoised to "evil" – but in a positive one as well because of the ways that terms in the discourse are interlinked with one another, such that "good" would also signify "God," "the sacred" and so on (Saussure, [1972] 1983). Thus, intoning any one term immediately activates the others. In this way, the injunction to "reject Satan" simultaneously implies for the believer a whole set of prescriptions – embrace God, avoid sin, seek salvation, and so forth – just as the command "repent" would carry within itself a host of comparable associations. As such, these discursive binaries are actualized in narrative, in the spoken or written expression of individuals, which proceeds – when self-reflection is not active, which is almost always the case – unconsciously. Approached from the opposite direction, it could be said that a discourse informs the meaning of narratives generated by it (Greimas, 1990a; Grace, 1987).

Although in principle a given discourse is bounded, it should not be regarded as frozen, as some sort of doctrine. It represents the system of categories on the basis of which meaningful statements can be made, not those statements themselves. Thus, discourse is synonymous with the possibility of disputation. Within its ambit, subjects formulate and reformulate narratives as part of their discursive strategies. This aspect of communication indexes the fact that

meanings are not intrinsic to particular words but to the associations
that they can be arranged to convey. Spools of such associations
apparent in the act of communication imply that meaningful utter-
ances evince neither closure nor a fixed center (Torfing, 1999). The
relative contingency or openness of a given discourse to usage and
interpretation – not to mention the phenomenon of interdiscursivity
whereby subjects employ a plurality of discourses in their narratives
(Lazar and Lazar, 2004; Edelman, 1988) – is precisely what makes
possible a range of communicative practices, among them, politics
(Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000).

Political discourse can be regarded as a creative synthesis
of elements belonging to other forms of discourse that are not in
themselves political. These elements are set out schematically in
Figure 1.1. In order to show how they enter into political discourse,
how they become constitutive parts of it, I need a concept of politics
that can bind them together in the same way that a quantum of
energy might bind together atoms in a molecule. For that purpose
I enlist Max Weber's meditation on politics set out in his renowned
essay, "Politics as a Vocation" ([1919] 1946). Thereafter, I qualify and
extend his conception by linking it to the discourse theory of Jürgen
Habermas. This enables me to develop an ideal type for the concept of
political discourse based syntactically on the rudiments of language's
organization of the world: namely, the relations among subject,
object, indirect object and verb (action).[1] By building on these syntac-
tic categories, I aim to ground the model in the irreducible elements
of language itself, while simultaneously providing it with a maxi-
mum degree of generality for its application. Here, I follow the
approach developed by Yurii Lotman for whom language, as a set of
symbolic relations and rules for their transformation, functions as

[1] The syntactic aspect of this ideal type follows A. J. Greimas's (1983) actantial model
of narrative. The elements in it constitute discourses in their own right as well as
elements in a larger discourse of politics. In referring to them separately, I call each a
discourse; when viewing them in this second way as components of a larger
construct, I call them "elements" or "dimensions" of political discourse.
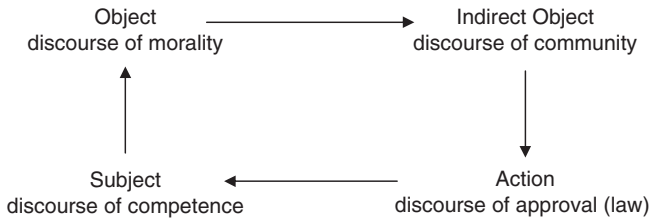
FIGURE 1.1 The elements of political discourse.

the primary modeling system for all forms of culture – art, religion, politics and so on (Zylko, 2001).

On the basis of the four syntactic categories, the model overlays semantic ones: namely, four distinct discourses that are interwoven in political narratives. In correspondence with syntax's "subject," "object" and so forth, these discourses are, respectively, discourses of competence, morality, community and approval (law).[2] Here, discourse concerns the ability, and the way in which, to talk about the subject, object and so on. It does not stand for those things themselves. At this level of abstraction, my argument is that political discourse is instantiated by the identification of some object represented as a good to be secured by a subject (claiming the competence to do so) on behalf of a community constituted by law and approving (or not) the subject's actions through the medium of legal discourse. A certain homology therefore prevails between the elements of syntax and the four discourses represented in the model. In the same way that syntactic rules must be followed in order to make sense, so political discourse is stunted without incorporation of all four of its elements. When full incorporation is not the case, as is generally true of the narratives recorded in this study, distortion occurs (Habermas, 1970).

To illustrate, take the syntactically incomplete phrase "He him." In this instance, communication is distorted inasmuch as the receiver of this message is unable to decode it. There is no verb and it

[2] The substantive side of the ideal type draws on the work of Murray Edelman (1977, 1988).

is unclear whether "him" refers to a direct or to an indirect object. Similarly, with respect to political discourse, comparable incompleteness produces its own distortion. Messages that systematically exclude either who the subject is, the good that he or she pursues, the beneficiary of his/her action or its justification cannot offer their recipient the information required to participate in political discussion. Can, for instance, the purported good, say, public safety, be accepted without consideration of its justification? Would provision of this good include torture? Warrantless detention? Mass surveillance? Similarly, who is the subject securing this good, state officials or vigilante groups? When reference to one or more of these elements of political speech goes missing, messages are garbled.

In the present study, the preponderance of distortion is traced to the negligible role in Russian political discourse performed by the two elements referring to a public – community and approval – along with a concomitant over-reliance on the elements associated with the personal: competence and morality. Speakers show an almost uniform disregard for law, even as some of them lament its absence. Likewise, their statements sometimes include reference to community but, with rare exception, not to a community comprised of legally constituted citizens whose approval or disapproval might represent a standard for conduct. In the following chapter, I show that this imbalance in the discursive structure is consistent with patterns of social relations prevailing in Russia.

At this point, two general observations are in order. First, by conceptualizing political discourse as an ideal type, the model gestures toward the universal: political discourse in any place or time can be analyzed according to its categories. Cautions, rightly, go up in this respect, because of the possibilities of an ethnocentric identification of the ideal type with some actually existing polity that appears to resemble the ideal, against which others, which do not, would appear as deficient or perverse (Chabal and Daloz, 2006). However, this concern neither invalidates the use of an abstract universal to investigate and characterize a concrete particular, nor would it rule