

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE RESEARCH INTO SOCIAL SPACE

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DETERMINING OLD AGE THRESHOLD AS A PHILOSOPHICAL, SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PROBLEM



KONSTANTIN N. KALASHNIKOV

Vologda Research Center, Russian Academy of Sciences

Vologda, Russian Federation

e-mail: konstantino-84@mail.ru

ORCID: [0000-0001-9558-3584](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9558-3584); ResearcherID: [I-9519-2016](https://orcid.org/I-9519-2016)

The article raises the problem of determining the old age boundaries foregrounding its conditions and challenges of the modern world, primarily the trends of demographic aging and the accompanying requirements of socio-economic, cultural and political nature. The aim of the paper is to review and compare the philosophical, socio-psychological, economic and political approaches to the determining of the old age threshold as a search for a single interpretation. The author shows that the problem discussed is characterized by a particular methodological depth. Thus, the very characteristic of “old” is defined in terms of logic as a predicate with fuzzy boundaries, which gives rise to problems of categorization and classification, defined in general as the “Sorites paradox”. Despite the existence of a number of theoretical schemes claiming to solve this philosophical riddle, none of them is recognized as exhaustive. The author comes to the conclusion that the pragmatic conceptualization of the Sorites paradox is appropriate in the context of the problems under consideration, namely, the development of adequate demographic and social policies, programming and ensuring the parameters of a prosperous old age. Although it does not provide prescriptions regarding the boundaries of old age, it provides a valuable descriptive language that allows explaining why certain solutions to the problem of old age periodization have been recognized as true in different periods of humanity. The choice of a particular periodization scheme depends to a large extent on the scope of its application and the objectives set, and therefore should be the result of a comparative analysis of possible alternatives with the involvement of scientific arguments and taking into account political circumstances, which are not always consonant with each other, as the author notes. The practical significance of the results lies in the identification of limitations for the use of certain approaches to the interpretation

of the old age threshold in relation to the implementation of state social programs, including social assistance and pension systems.

Old age threshold, old, age, Sorites paradox, life cycle theory, old age dependency ratio, retirement age, political process.

Introduction

The phenomena of old age and aging are receiving unprecedented attention of scientists, government and business representatives, and all inhabitants of the planet in the 21st century. This is due to a number of reasons, the main of which is the steady trend of population aging due to the enormous success of civilization in fighting deadly diseases, providing people with wide access to benefits and comfortable living conditions, which means that the probability of crossing the age of 65 for a significant part of the population living today is very high. In any case, it is higher than in previous eras of human existence. And this trend is likely to continue. According to UN projections, the proportion of people aged over 65 will reach 16% of the world's population by 2050 (in 2019, the figure was only 9.1%). In Russia, the elderly population is also expected to grow significantly: by 2050, it will reach 23% of the total population of the country, which means that compared to the situation in 2019, when this indicator was estimated at 15%, the increase will amount to 8 p.p.¹ Despite these largely positive trends, the problems they cause have negative consequences and require the development of measures to mitigate or resolve them. Thus, back in 2002, the Second World Assembly on Aging, held in Madrid, adopted the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging, which actualized the need to take them into account in the development of global agendas². In response to current demographic trends, the World Health Organization has launched a global strategy and plan of action to promote healthy aging³. Many governments around the world are forced to forecast demographic aging with special attention in order to assess the prospects for economic growth, labor market

potential and outline the contours of social policy for the foreseeable future. Since this requires an accurate assessment of the sex and age structure of the population, it is necessary to rely on objective demographic characteristics of the population, in particular the number of older persons. This task is complicated by the fact that, first, people "age" at very different rates (Fuchs, 1984; Jopkiewicz, Lelonek, 2014), secondly, the already mentioned trends have been associated with the improvement of physical health parameters of the elderly population (Grignon, Spenser, 2015) and the very possibility to postpone the negative consequences of aging at the individual level (Jopkiewicz, Lelonek, 2014), finally, thirdly, it has caused a distortion of the perception of old age, both in the collective perceptions of residents of countries and regions, and in the consciousness of individual individuals (Swift, Steeden, 2020). According to the aphoristic statement of Chinese researchers, hinting at the importance of taking into account the cultural variable in the practice of age categorization, "a society that is aging in the traditional sense may not be 'aging' (Yu, Wang, 2023).

In our opinion, a simple binary scheme of analysis is applicable to the understanding of old age and the definition of its age boundaries, based on the opposition of the role of objective biological assumptions and, on the contrary, the constructivist argument. Let us explain that we use the term "constructivist" by analogy with the term that in modern ethnosociology and ethnology is applied to the understanding of the categories of nationalism and national identity and is considered as an opposition to primordialism. Its essence boils down to the fact that our ideas about aging and age as such are

¹ World Population Aging 2019 (2020). United Nations. New York.

² Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002. UN Official Website. Available at: https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/declarations/ageing_program.shtml

³ World Health Organization (WHO) – 2017. Global strategy and action plan on ageing and health. Available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241513500>

constructed by society, therefore encapsulated in generally accepted age stereotypes, internal representations of who young and old people are and should be (Swift, Steeden, 2020). In the first case, it can be argued that aging is a natural, biologically and genetically determined process, in the speed and depth of which the environment plays a significant, but still secondary, role. Of course, within the framework of modern natural sciences, there are ongoing debates about the source of aging: whether it is the result of fundamental limitations inherent in our nature, or the outcome of insufficient efforts of the organism, or the product of evolution, as advocates of the concept of programmed aging say (Goldsmith, 2016). The existing disagreements on the allocation of drivers and mechanisms of aging in this context are not fundamental. In the second case, it makes sense to argue that even if aging is based solely on the biological nature of a person, its perception by an individual and the community as a whole, delineation of its boundaries are ultimately determined by the prevailing cultural conditions and values shared by community members. Old age can be perceived equally as the most painful period of human life, accompanied by physical and mental suffering, a feeling of powerlessness, irrelevance and approaching death, and as a crucial stage when the acquired wisdom and life experience become a bridge to the younger generation, and the end of this stage is seen as a prospect of transition to a new, better life.

Meanwhile, these approaches are not very suitable for a clear demarcation of old age in the system of periodization of human life, for drawing the line, crossing which an individual can be considered and called old. In both cases, aging will be a gradual, monotonously realized process, and the age scale of “aging” will form continuums of values, within which it is difficult to fix chronological marks that are important for us. However, applied tasks require the definition of clear boundaries of the threshold of old age.

The aim of the study is to provide a theoretical review of studies related to the search for an answer to the question of what

age threshold of old age is relevant in the demographic, socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions of the 21st century. In our opinion, it is necessary to distinguish three fundamentally different approaches to the search for the boundaries of old age, dictated by logical, or philosophical, economic (it can also be called demographic) and political issues. What are their fundamental differences? The economic approach is reduced to the solution of purely utilitarian issues of the country and regions, the political approach – to the search for a compromise between different political forces and interest groups in solving acute socio-economic problems, while the logical approach is associated with the resolution of the general epistemological problem of predicates with fuzzy boundaries, such as the concept of “old”. The essential difference of the political approach is that it is based on the consensus between “society”, or more precisely its electoral asset, and the government, and therefore it can accept economic and social arguments, or it can be implemented contrary to them. The methodological basis of the paper is the analysis of general theoretical provisions and, ultimately, the advantages of applied implementation of various systems interpreting the threshold of old age. The starting position for the analysis is the assumption that there are advantages and limitations within each of the selected variants. At the same time, there are reasons to consider the philosophical approach as fundamental, carrying universal prescriptions for solving the discussed problem in empirical fields. At the time of setting the tasks, this issue cannot be considered as solved, which determines the relevance and novelty of the undertaken research.

Philosophical analysis

Old age is the final stage of a person’s life, which, barring premature death, will inevitably come. But when will it happen? From the point of view of philosophical analysis, it does not matter at what level, individual (“When does a given individual become old?” or, if we formulate the question in logical form, “Is the statement ‘This individual is old’ true or false?”) or group (“Is the statement “The population category

60, 65, etc. are old people” true/false?), we pose the question and attempt to solve the problem, because in both cases, what is fundamental is not who, individual or community, we are trying to identify the age limit of old age, but the existence of a continuum of values that is difficult to categorize.

The age at which a person can be assessed as “old” is a paradigmatic example of the “Sorites paradox” or “paradox of the heap”, which was formulated as a riddle by the ancient Greek philosopher Eubulides, who lived in the fourth century BC. The Sorites paradox is related to the difficulty of operating with vague terms (“vague terms”), namely terms with unclear (“blurred”, “fuzzy”) boundaries of application: there is no clear line separating old people from middle-aged people.

Adapting the example of human growth described by Agler and Åkerman to another human property, age (which belongs to the class of predicates of age, maturation and development) (Agler, 2010), we will show how the problem of uncertainty is revealed here⁴. If we are dealing with a mixed-age group of people or looking at a number of photographs of a person, we will be able to arrange the members of the group or the photo cards in a row according to changing age, from younger to older. By asking the native speaker “Which of these people are old and which are not?” (analogously, “Which pictures show an old person and which pictures show a non-old person?”), we get the following interpretations. Obviously, the two extreme positions in both rows will not be difficult for the evaluator to recognize, while the intermediate variants will cause great problems in classification (Agler, 2010).

Let us imagine, developing the example already given, that we have lined up a long row of men who differ from each other by one year (35...36...37, etc. up to 114 years of age), by age, from the “youngest” (for convenience, let us take an abstract man of 35 and call him X) to the oldest man alive today (at the

time of manuscript preparation, it is a 114-year-old J.V. Pérez). Any two men standing side by side can have such indistinguishable signs of age that they will generally be assigned to one of two categories, “old” or “not old”.

Thus, we have three true and undeniable premises:

- 1) J. V. P. is old;
- 2) X is not old;

3) with respect to any two men in a series differing in age by not more than 1 year, one of the opposite statements will be true: 1. “They are both old” or 2. “They are both not old”.

It follows from (1) and (3) that J. V. P. is old, which contradicts (2), and from (2) and (3) it follows that X is not old, which contradicts (1).

Thus, the paradox is that, given the described scenario, we can derive a contradiction, a patently absurd statement from the labeled assumptions, each of which seems to be flawless (Åkerman, 2012).

Various attempts have been made to explain such uncertainty in a way that would resolve sorites while preserving most of our initial intuitive assumptions, but none of them has been generally accepted. Semantic classification of borderline cases is thus a difficult task (Keefe, 2000).

Much research has been devoted to resolving the Sorites paradox, but in fact they boil down to proposing several types of philosophical interpretations and, consequently, answers to Eubulides’ riddle. These are the denial that logic applies to rhetorical expressions. The opposite is to recognize that the paradox is a legitimate argument to which logic applies, but then to deny its validity. This can be done either by rejecting some premise(s) or by denying its validity. The most radical answer is to accept the paradox and conclude that the vague terms are either incoherent or meaningless⁵.

Defining the age boundaries of old age is both strictly philosophical and purely applied or solved by the narrow tools of a particular academic discipline. As D.W. Agler writes, “Uncertainty is not only a problem for logic

⁴ Age and height, as well as a number of other human characteristics, are considered paradigmatic examples to illustrate the Sorites paradox.

⁵ Hyde D., Raffman D. Sorites Paradox. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sorites-paradox/>

and language; it is a philosophical problem for anyone who uses terminology that allows for borderline cases” (Agler, 2010). Of course, this does not exclude the possibilities of finding specific and justifying alternative classifications.

Since in the future we will be interested in purely utilitarian aspects of setting the threshold of old age for academic research and administrative functions, we will try to bridge the gap from philosophical analysis to practice. Which of the variants of philosophical interpretations will be most applicable here? It is reasonable to assume that an approach called pragmatic contextualism (Åkerman, 2012) will have impressive analytical value and explanatory power in this context. The criteria for classification from the perspective of this approach are formulated within the discourse/talk itself. Perfect speech acts can set a certain tone, character of perception and hence interpretation. J. Åkerman illustrates the process of discovering a conversational standard with an example of a dialogue board displaying statements about the characteristics of an object. To simplify the matter considerably, we will say that gradually, in the process of conversation, a spontaneous selection of elements takes place, while the remaining ones will eventually be accepted by the participants, and therefore will be perceived as true. It would not be difficult to use this terminology and conceptual framework in any organizational, economic and socio-cultural context. Arguments in a political debate, a ballot thrown into a ballot box, a media report, all these can be treated as an utterance, and therefore be described in terms of speech act theory.

Applied aspects of the uncertainty of the category “old” and the threshold of old age

Who should be considered old in the first quarter of the 21st century is a nontrivial question. Definitions of old age are inconsistent in terms of biology, demography (mortality and morbidity conditions), employment and retirement, and sociology. However, for statistical and public administrative purposes,

old age is often defined as 60 or 65 years or older, which, as experts and researchers often point out, serves administrative convenience rather than objective circumstances. It should not be overlooked that there are no objective physiological norms, and the threshold of old age is most often associated with formal parameters of loss of working capacity and retirement established back in the nineteenth century⁶. In fact, these prerequisites have determined the threshold of old age of 60 years, most often used by WHO experts⁷.

At the same time, the scientific literature has long recognized that old age is not a stable social or economic category and that the threshold of old age is mobile. The main argument in support of this thesis is not only the convincing increase in life expectancy, but also the increase in the average health indicators of the population, expressed mainly in the reduction of disability rates (Grignon, Spenser, 2015). Moreover, a large proportion of the elderly population no longer meets the criteria of “senility” (Schoormans et al., 2004), i.e. they are no longer a burden on the rest of the population, as was commonly believed. On the contrary, the active participation of older people in the labor force has become extremely common and is not only comparable to, but often exceeds, that of younger people. In a sense, this can be linked to the appearance of the category “old age” in the International Classification of Diseases system, which effectively replaced the term “senility”, which no longer met the requirements of political correctness and life itself. It is important to note that the category “old age”, despite its presence in the ICD-11 system, is not classified as a disease in itself, but rather has a clarifying, informative character in identifying the disease or cause of death⁸. In general, it can be concluded that the shift in the threshold of old age is justified in terms of three main aspects - longevity, health and ability to live in the community, the boundaries between which are difficult to define and often not necessary.

⁶ World Population Ageing 2019 (2020). United Nations. New York.

⁷ Ageing. Available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/ageing#tab=tab_1

⁸ “Old age”. WHO. Available at: <https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/frequently-asked-questions/old-age>

It is indeed important to draw age boundaries of old age. And this problem has several thematic aspects, including socio-psychological, economic and political. In each of them we can find private solutions to the general problem we have set.

Social and psychological aspect

Analyses of socio-psychological aspects of the aspects are closely related to the problematic identity, which is formed not only from the same, as a person sees himself, but also as he represents himself as his visionary other (Huntington, 2004). In this regard, the study of the perception of old age by members of the demographic group under discussion, as well as by people from other age categories, provides adequate insights into the categorization algorithms on the basis of which older people are at risk of being viewed through the prism of age stereotypes and, consequently, at risk of encountering prejudice and discrimination (Swift, Steeden, 2020). The process of older people's age identity formation is extremely complex and is not limited to the realization of the number and sense of gravity of the years lived, especially given the accompanying and largely predetermined physiological and social factors that not only shape an older person's overall identity, but also define additional identities associated with new frames (Paniello, 2020).

The first thing that should be discussed here is the ratio of subjective and objective components in assessing the boundaries of old age. It happens that a person feels young and, perhaps, feels himself accordingly, but from the outside observer's point of view there is no doubt that the person in front of him is an old person (remember O. Wilde's famous words: "The tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young"). On the contrary, a person may feel powerlessness, indifference to life and call himself an old man, without having sufficient objective grounds for this and without any external and even physiologically determined signs of old age. There are also more delicate variants of interpreting the experience of old age. Which of these components will prevail? What – the inner voice, which sets the age self-identification limit, or the outside

observer's view – should be given the decisive vote in this case? Liberal ideology asserts the priority of individual preferences of the subject as one of the basic values. It is up to the individual to choose who he or she wants to be. Today we are witnessing the collapse of the dictate of aesthetic prejudices regarding the appearance, occupation, and leisure activities of the elderly. New technologies and achievements of cosmetology and plastic surgery open wide prospects. All this confirms the authoritative opinion of S. Huntington that even ascriptive forms of individual self-identity can be successfully constructed (Huntington, 2004).

Sociological surveys conducted in 11 European countries demonstrate a wide range of ages estimated by respondents as the threshold for entering old age (in 2008/2009 – from 55 years in Turkey to 64 years in Belgium and Poland; the national average is 61 years), while data for the period from 2008/2009 to 2018 reflect changes in the estimates are upward for the population of all countries, with the exception of Germany (in 2018, the range is from 62 years in Germany to 74 years in Spain; the average is 67 years) (Swift, Steeden, 2020). The results of such studies in Asian countries, where historically the perception of old age and the attitude towards the elderly differ compared to the regions of Europe, are interesting and important. For example, Chinese researchers, indicating the cultural determinism of the perception of old age in China, nevertheless get results very close to the estimates of their Western European colleagues. The average age identification of Chinese people aged 60 and over was 70 years old. At the same time, it turns out that the age identity of older Chinese is influenced by such traditional variables as health status, psychological status, lifestyle, socio-economic status and some demographic characteristics (Yu, Wang, 2023). G.J. Westerhof and A.E. Barrett, who studied the role of socio-psychological factors in the age self-identification of residents The United States and Germany concluded that cultural variables play an exceptional role (Westerhof, Barrett, 2005).

The results of similar Russian studies revealed an insignificant, but detectable by

sociological methods of assessment, gap between the normatively formalized threshold of old age and the time when it occurs, in the opinion of residents. In the course of analyzing the obtained data, no significant differences were found in the perceptions of the moment of old age onset for men and women (69.4 and 68.0 years, respectively). The tendency of escapism, avoidance and postponement of the age of onset of old age as it approaches was recorded. The correlation of the actual and psychological age of old age onset allowed us to establish that “premature” aging (when a person recognizes himself/herself as elderly before he/she exceeds his/her own age of old age onset), more than half of the respondents who consider themselves elderly are subject to it (Antonov et al., 2023).

A curious phenomenon of “dual age identity” was described by (Weiss, Lang, 2012), who revealed a dichotomy in self-identification of older people as members of the gerontogroup and as representatives of the generation. The authors show that the age cohort identity of older adults in the study group was more often associated with loss and decline, while generational identity was more often associated with positive characteristics and increased levels of autonomy. The findings also suggest that generational identity may play a therapeutic role and serve as a means of compensating for the negative symptoms of aging, especially in adulthood.

Finally, we should note the dual role of institutional and political factors of age periodization and, in this connection, identity formation. On the one hand, state policy oriented to support needy groups of the population creates an interpretive framework that categorizes people, their life prospects and forms of identity, provides social stability and predictability, which is undoubtedly a good thing. On the other hand, there is reason to believe that pension guarantees and benefits can create a sense of “otherness”, distance and gulf between the people who are entitled to them and those who, by age, do not yet have

these benefits, which directs self-identification in an institutionally constrained direction (Hendricks, 2004). This idea is extremely valuable in linking the socio-psychological aspect of age periodization with the economic and political. This gives sufficient, but not yet absolute, grounds to consider the boundaries of retirement as a threshold of old age from all three positions.

Economic aspect

The importance of age periodization for the economy can hardly be overestimated, especially if we do not focus on old age as such, but study it in the context of a person’s life course or, more precisely, the interaction of different age and gender groups in the general economic space. In the simplest version, this interaction is expressed in the proportion and, consequently, the need to ensure a balance between the young, who constitute the bulk of the labor force, and the elderly, who are less able to work due to age and deteriorating health. It is for this reason that UN experts in their analytical reports rely on one of the most well-known indicators in the practice of monitoring the dynamics of the age structure of the population – the old-age dependency ratio (OADR), traditionally estimated as the number of persons aged 65 years and older per 100 people of working age (from 20 to 64 years). In the context of pronounced trends of demographic aging, it seems relevant, although it does not fully take into account a number of nuances of how the human resource is actually realized, especially in post-industrial society⁹.

Meanwhile, the population is not an amorphous mixture of people of different age groups, but a complex system of continuities and ties ordered by the normative environment, experience and practices of everyday interactions carried out by individuals. The most popular theoretical construct from this point of view is the life cycle theory of F. Modigliani, which emerged in the mid-1950s. Its main value lies not so much in the presentation of a descriptive scheme of evolution of accumulation during a person’s life, but in the idea of succession of

⁹ World Population Aging 2019 (2020). United Nations New York. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WorldPopulationAgeing2019-Report.pdf>

generations in the possession of assets. The wealth of a nation, according to Modigliani, moves in a cycle – from the old to the young. While the very young have no wealth, middle-aged people actively accumulate it, and wealth peaks just before retirement. To ensure a decent standard of living, retirees are forced to sell off their assets, which are acquired by younger people who have entered the active accumulation phase (Deaton, 2005).

A number of authors, based on the idea and logic of the life cycle hypothesis, note the importance of a broad view of the resources involved, supplied from both public and private sources. From these positions, a simple system of periodization and unity of intergenerational economic relations is constructed as follows.

1. Youth as a stage of maturation and accumulation of human potential. The costs of education and culture are borne primarily by society, directing public resources accumulated through the taxation system, but individual investors also take part here (payments and voluntary contributions from relatives).

2. Maturity, when the young become productive members of society, engaged in educating the next generation and producing goods and services.

3. Old age – the threshold beyond which people cease to depend on their own current production to maintain their usual standard of living. At this stage, the funds of the state pension system are attracted, as well as their own assets accumulated in the previous period of life and the resources of their children are used (Grignon, Spenser, 2015).

There is no doubt that the definition of old age, that is, the age of eligibility for pensions and benefits, is a crucial variable in the design of viable programs for older persons, but this task is difficult for the same reasons of the lack of clear age criteria. Fuchs emphasized as early as the second half of the twentieth century, on the one hand, the indefinability of the boundaries of old age from a public administration perspective, and on the other hand, the possibility of the co-existence of different definitional options depending on the administrative tasks at hand. Comparing the results of estimates based on

three alternative options for setting the old-age threshold, namely: 1) the proportion of the population over 65; 2) the proportion of persons over 65 who will die within 5 years; and 3) the proportion of persons aged 65 and over who drop out of the labor force, he showed how different demographic trends they capture.

Fuchs also considers a simple model situation in which, in an assumed population, the birth rate is equal to the death rate and all individuals die at age 80. If all members of the population work from age 20 to 65 and then retire, the ratio of workers to retirees will be three to one. However, if the retirement age is 70, there will be five workers for every retiree, which would substantially increase benefits or reduce taxes, or both (Fuchs, 1984).

He concludes that the number of people aged 65 and over who will die over the next few years is most informative because much of the interest in older people is related to their need for health care and other specialized services. This interpretation of the boundaries of old age is echoed by the findings of more detailed studies on predicting the extent of social, particularly medical, care for the older population. For example, old age alone cannot be absolutely informative in assessing the need for geriatric care and predicting its scope (Schuurmans et al., 2004). On the other hand, counting persons aged 65 and over who are not in the labor force is indicative of a different objective, as it covers that part of the population that must live on transfer payments, capital income, or savings. M. Grignon, B.G. Spenser, despite the absolute unity of views with Fuchs on the underlying assumptions and the resulting problems of interpretation, come to the opposite opinion: there is a need not for a flexible approach to determining the threshold of old age, but a complete rejection of the age category in planning the amount of social support of the population and its implementation (Grignon, Spenser, 2015).

The political aspect, as it may seem at first glance, is very close to the economic view of the problem and is even based on it. However, here we fundamentally separate economic and political elements in justifying the age limits of

old age. Of course, the level of social guarantees declared by the state largely depends on the state of the country's budget system and its financial capabilities, but ultimately it is at the political level that this decision is made. Political decision-makers may rely on economic arguments, or they may ignore them to a certain extent. The key role of this factor should be accepted a priori if we understand the political process in the unity of two opposing sides – the “input”, which refers to access to political power, and the “output”, which refers to how political power is exercised (Rothstein, Teorell, 2008). The entry side of the political system – the side of competition between different interests, ideologies and political parties, the aim of which is to maximize voter support – is considered in the sense that we put into the term “political”. From the point of view of political choice, the most relevant questions are what retirement age should be chosen and approved, and, given the unity of the life cycle, how the national wealth is distributed: what part of it goes to the needs of the older population, and what part to the needs of the young, children, etc. categories in need of state participation. In both cases, the complexity of the final choice will be determined by which of the stakeholders will be in the majority and, therefore, will be heard. In the current context, the fact that an increasing proportion of the country's population is elderly leads to a disproportionate shift of interests in their direction, and such tendencies will be reinforced. Fuchs warned about this as early as the mid-twentieth century, noting that the increasing weight of the elderly population at a time when economic resources are often allocated through the ballot box rather than in the marketplace increases the likelihood of violent political conflict between the elderly and other groups in society (Fuchs, 1984). Of course, all of the above depends to a large extent on the specifics of a particular country and the prevailing socio-cultural and political conditions. The paradox and contradiction of this problem for Russia lies in the fact that changing the age of old age, which at the moment in terms of social policy can be formalized only as retirement age,

becomes politically relevant only for middle-aged people who have not reached it, and they constitute a moderately electorally active group of the population.

Referendum as an instrument of direct democracy allows revealing the prevailing opinion in the society, but on closer examination it hides the same competition of stakeholders, which are different demographic groups. M. Bütler, using the voting records of Swiss citizens in the 1998 referendum on raising the retirement age for women from 62 to 64, was able to convincingly show how the level of support depended on age and gender (Bütler, 2002). Young people, older people and, to a lesser extent, middle-aged men were in favor of raising the retirement age for women, while middle-aged women voted against it. Differences were found on the basis of the nature of employment, property status of the voters.

Resume

Old age is the final stage in the life processes of an individual. The social aspects of old age are influenced by the relationship between the physiological effects of aging, the collective experience and shared values of this generation and the specific organization of the society in which it exists. The literature review has established that several age boundaries of old age have been recognized in the history of mankind, almost all have retained their relevance in the first quarter of the 21st century. This constancy, or rather moderate variability, in the interpretation of the threshold of old age successfully fits into the framework of the philosophical concept of pragmatic contextualism, proposed by a number of authors to solve the Sorites paradox, where the blurring of the old age boundaries is typical. Probably, today we are witnessing a revision of the usual boundaries of old age, which is caused by a complex of interrelated factors of different nature. Linking the threshold of old age to the age of retirement has become extremely common, but there has been a strong agreement in the research community for quite some time that the chronological criterion for determining

the threshold of old age is unconstructive. On the contrary, the indicator of expected time to death is recognized as the most adequate, as it allows an objective assessment of the need for medical, social and, in general, geriatric care. At the same time, it is not absolute if we take into account the role of the political context. Thus, in a situation where the proportion of the elderly population is growing, and with it its electoral strength (especially given the fact that in Russia the elderly people are particularly electorally active), the state may pay increased attention to meeting their needs and requirements. This is by no means to say that such attention may be undeserved, since the elderly are particularly demanding of assistance from the state. We point out that there are other categories of the population, especially children and the disabled, who need help no less, but due to the current political conjuncture may be somewhat deprived. In other words, the proportion in the

scale of state support may be disrupted to some extent to the detriment of the principles of social justice. Perhaps we should talk about the risk of such an imbalance, among other things, when the topic of revising the boundaries of the retirement age is raised.

The methodological basis of the work was the search for differences and at the same time intersections of alternative approaches to determining the old age threshold. The analysis allowed us to conclude that the philosophical approach is not alternative to the political and economic ones, because, firstly, it provides a general conceptual understanding of the problems of age periodization and interpretation (allowing us to treat the problem of fixing the old age threshold as a particular example of the Sorites paradox), secondly, it has great descriptive and analytical power, explaining both the actual stability and potential mobility of the old age boundaries depending on contextual factors.

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Konstantin N. Kalashnikov – Candidate of Sciences (Economics), Senior Researcher, Vologda Research Center, Russian Academy of Sciences (56A, Gorky Street, Vologda, 160014, Russian Federation; e-mail: konstantino-84@mail.ru)