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Moral Reasoning in the Context of Reform: A Study of Russian Officials

This article reports on an exploratory study of ethical reasoning among public administrators in Russia. Survey interviews and focus group follow-ups with civil servants participating in graduate training programs at the Russian Academy of Public Service provide information about their preferred mode of ethical reasoning; the demographic, attitudinal, organizational, and professional factors associated with that reasoning; and the behavioral choices implied. Using a sample of 113 public officials who represent a broad spectrum of regions in Russia, this study assesses moral reasoning, examines variables associated with alternative models, and compares these responses with findings from studies conducted in Poland and the United States. Based on this exploratory study, we suggest implications for theory, research, and practice.

The Ethical Challenges in Russian Public Service Today

Historians and political scientists agree that Russia's historical legacy of despotism, anarchy, and totalitarianism is directly relevant to future political developments in the country (Green 1995; Dawisha and Parrot 1994; Sakwa 1996). Some analysts contend that Western democracy is alien to Russia's tradition, culture, and national character (interview of Anatoly Lukianov, in Pryce-Jones 1995, 425). One Russian historian provides a counterpoint in his description of the Russian people as having long-standing traditions of political self-management (Simush 1993). Regardless of how one characterizes the past, it is difficult to deny that historically, European-type democracy (and consequently the Western style of public administration) has no roots in Russia. One author suggests that bureaucracy as practiced historically in Russia may be the main reason why Russian citizens are both alienated from the state and cynical toward the law (Kotchegura 1997).

The Russian government has taken steps to create a professional, Western-style civil service, but public skepticism is fed by daily press reports of government employees' involvement in cases of corruption, bureaucratic red tape, abuse of authority, and other forms of misconduct (Kotchegura 1997; Handelman 1994). In the experience of many ordinary Russians, civil service practices seem

unchanged from the Soviet period, with incumbents deferring to the ruling elite or pursuing their own interests and exhibiting little accountability to the citizenry (Kotchegura 1997). In fact, according to studies conducted by Russian Academy of Public Service, the level of citizen alienation from the state apparatus was higher in 1997 than in the last years of the communist regime (Komarovski 1997).

The transition from communism to democracy has been much more uneven and controversial in Russia than in countries such as Poland. As a result, incumbent civil ser-

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vants have developed vested interests in continuing business as usual. With the current civil service populated by individuals who have deep roots in the old regime, some believe that a major obstacle to reform is the resistance of the entrenched bureaucracy itself (Kotchegura 1997). Even if this problem could be addressed through an aggressive decommunization (“de-nomenklatura”) program, another analyst observes that the “new Russian civil servants” do not hold the key to needed reform either. Too often, he points out, these people simply represent the values of the new Russian business community and treat their office as an extension of the corporate enterprise (Murtazayev 1996, 2), leaving little voice for the public interest.

Given the burdens of the pre-Soviet legacy of despotism, the Soviet experience, and Russia’s transition history, there may be little hope for evolution of a professional public service in the near future. This article provides preliminary testing of that conclusion by reporting on an examination of how 113 Russian public servants think about the use of administrative discretion in responding to ethical quandaries in their work lives. Before proceeding, we need to elaborate on why appropriate use of administrative discretion is important in the Russian context and why moral reasoning is the significant arena of discretion for understanding Russia’s road to democracy.

The Exercise of Moral Judgment and Administrative Discretion

If the Russian civil service context is so radically different from that found in Western democracies, or even in Poland, one may question whether it is reasonable to apply an American civil service concept to Russia at all. Our response is that, in democratic societies, the devolution of formal authority to civil servants assumes a cadre of public administrators ready to step into their roles and prepared to exercise administrative discretion informed by the public interest. In fact, “professionalism” in public administration is marked by the capacity to draw on decision-making criteria that reach beyond personal interests to democratically recognized standards. Russia must evolve in this direction to evolve as a democracy.

Casting the current situation in Russia in public administration terms, the challenge is to achieve the proper use of administrative authority and discretion, particularly in resolving ethical dilemmas in administrators’ public roles. But why is this an important feature of democratic government everywhere? Administrative discretion is integral to the practice of public administration in complex democratic systems where administrators must follow codes of personal conduct, interpret legislation, and even propose policies for which they must mobilize support (Stewart 1985; Thompson 1985; Warwick 1981;

Wilbern 1984; Meier 1999). Though the debate continues about how much discretion is appropriate or necessary (Lowi 1993; Wilson 1989), discretion is generally regarded as an essential element in a well-functioning public administration system. Because “bounded rationality” challenges all public administrators, discretion is important (March and Simon 1958).

Although often overlooked, in the U.S. context the founders of public administration as a distinct field recognized the importance of discretion (Goodnow 1900, 61)—indeed, Wilson (1887, 213) called for “unhampered discretion” —and discretion has been integral to the complementary relationship between politics and administration from the beginning (Svara 1999). Given the inevitable exercise of administrative discretion, the quality of judgment informing the decision determines how that discretion is exercised. James Q. Wilson cites a study of patrol officers by William Muir that illustrates this point: “The ‘good cops’ were ‘street-corner politicians’ who controlled their beats in the common interest by selectively enforcing the rules, sometimes letting off people for behavior for which others were arrested. The not-so-good cops were those who either retreated from the confusion and dangers of the street altogether or mechanically applied every rule as the law required” (Wilson 1989, 344). In other words, administrative discretion is made inevitable by the impossibility of anticipating all the circumstances in which policy is applied, the ambiguity of situations encountered, and the “bounded rationality” of decision makers, but it is made tolerable by the quality of their judgment.

If judgment is a central element in administrative discretion, it is important to identify and understand the ethical orientations on which that judgment is based. Some level of public interest is required. Operationally, the capacity to act in accord with public interest can be assessed by examining the models of moral reasoning that decision makers employ. Methodologies for doing so range from case studies of exemplars (Cooper and Wright 1992) to empirical studies attempting to understand patterns of moral reasoning across groups of public officials (Stewart and Sprinthall 1994). In our research, we use an instrument—the Stewart-Sprinthall Management Survey (SSMS)¹—that reveals the preferred models of ethical reasoning in specific public administration contexts. It presents the respondent with a series of dilemmas. While not every exercise of discretion in public administration occurs in the context of an ethical dilemma, by studying the models decision makers use to solve ethical quandaries in Russia, we can understand how a significant arena of the exercise of discretion works in an evolving democratic system.