

Political History of Russian Bureaucracy and Roots of Its Power

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The ongoing deep crisis and social hardships in Russia have raised the question, What has led to the major failure of political and economic reforms that were envisioned by the Russian democratic movement? Recent articles in the Russian press, some backed up with concrete data, expressed a concern that the country might end up with the same bureaucratic order it had under the old Communist collective leadership. The “only difference with the former state socialism . . . is that the property will be shared between various bureaucratic groups,” says Oleg Moroz, the deputy editor-in-chief of *Literaturnaya Gazeta* in his recent article published in *Crossroads*. Without going into detailed analysis of Russian governmental structures, we try to raise several ideas on the phenomenon Moroz had defined in his article as *bureaucratic democracy*. Our latest study of the reform process in Russia led us to conclude that:

1. The reforms we observe today in Russia have been developed and implemented by the state bureaucracy and not by the democratic movement of Russia as many Western observers used to believe;

2. The illusions that the contemporary Russian bureaucracy has created about the aims of new Russian reforms are a part of its typical historical make up. The current political leadership promised to institute a civil society, to implement judicial reform, and to promote a free market economy in Russia in order to receive support from the majority of the population and financial help from the West. Almost all of these promises were used by the bureaucracy as a smoke screen to further reform in its own interests.

The two points raised above pose several questions. One question continues to be asked: How and why has the bureaucracy been at the core of Russian reforms and revolutions, which were aimed at restraining political power, but never fulfill this goal? The other question is how, being threatened by common discontent, the Russian bureaucracy promoted its own strategic interest, which it has historically identified with interests of the state: in politics, economics, and foreign relations? In an attempt to answer these questions, we trace the development of leading institutions on which Russian bureaucracy built its dominance from tsarist Russia to Boris Yeltsin’s presidency.

The dominance of bureaucratic institutions and the patterns of behavior its system formed in both the ruling classes and the larger population have led to the development of particular national mentalities or psychological stereotypes, which have become pervasive throughout Russian society and its history. These psychological stereotypes, along with the bureaucratic institutions from which they were formed, gradually became fully integrated

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into Russian culture, surviving several different periods of reform in Russian history and modeling the course of Russia's political and economic development. J. Millar¹ was one of the few to emphasize the persistence of these institutions in post-Communist Russia. Surprisingly, even the most trenchant political analyses of the reforms undertaken by Gorbachev and Yeltsin have failed to note the absence of any significant challenge to the underlying bureaucratic institutions. These institutions and psychological stereotypes, however, predominate all other factors and serve as the principal organizing characteristics of Russian society.

The main reason these institutions and habits usually elude the analysis of Western observers might be addressed by the fact that scientists, brought up on Western ideas on the relations between political power and civil society, including the notions of public service and trust, overlook a critical difference between Russian and Western political experiences. Russian bureaucracy, unlike its Western counterpart, enjoyed extraordinary political power, based solely on Russia's administrative system, whose organizational institutions were unparalleled in the West. These institutions were instrumental for Russian bureaucracy to limit the autocratic power of the tsar and to suppress democratic movements. The state service in tsarist and Communist Russia had been provided with material wealth, authority, and standing in society based on one's position in the bureaucratic hierarchical ladder granted mainly by right of birth.

In theory, the Russian state has viewed theft of property, bribery, and embezzlement as crimes in Russia, but they were viewed as different types of crime than they are in the West. Russian culture has not developed a concept of privacy and respect for private property known traditionally in Western countries. Russia has failed to create effective law enforcement to combat these crimes and has failed to develop social norms able to prevent or rule them out.

The current stage in the development of Russia's bureaucratic class could be characterized by dramatic progress in furthering its goals. Any threat to its political and economic monopoly has been successfully illuminated by two Russian revolutions in the twentieth century. In 1917, Russian bureaucracy had destroyed the last remnants of the tsar's control over the state, and replaced it by political hegemony of the Communist Party. In 1991, the bureaucratic elite replaced the CPSU's control over the state by its own

hegemony, and widened its economic base for commissions. Russian nationalism provided the ideological base for the change. It responded to a common desire of the Russian population of the Soviet empire to reestablish Russia as a nation-state, and to return to its "normal" course of development that had been interrupted by the Bolshevik revolution. As a result, the new empire emerged in place of the Soviet Union under the

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rule of the administrative class, made up of high-ranking clerks. The administrative system itself has been reshaped by a redistribution of the political and economic power between the central authorities and the regions. The merger of the official economy and so-called second, or shadow, economy brought about the growth of bureaucratic commissions. It also

created a new class of entrepreneurial bureaucracy that draws its power and authority outside administrative sources. The format of this article does not permit thorough documentation. We limited our discussion by taking out the Communist bureaucratic system, which is well-studied in the West through numerous publications. The latest vogue among Russian political scientists is to use Russia's imperial past as a myth to create a frame of reference to justify current political actions undertaken by Russia. These perspectives distort history, and this is another reason we decided to concentrate our discussion on pre-revolutionary Russian tradition and the modern Russian state. We tried to return historical evidence to the original impartiality that has been lost in the extremely politicized Russian history.² In this article, we will focus on the development of our main thesis that during the formation of the Russian state in medieval times, a system of bureaucratic governance emerged that has played a dominant role in Russian political life throughout the nation's history. This system of governance rested primarily on two bureaucratic institutions: the hierarchical structure of the state bureaucracy (*mestnichestvo*) and the state system of expropriating and distributing public resources (*kormlenie*). Even today these institutions are thriving in the turmoil of change sweeping across Russia and are playing a dominant role in determining the structure of Russia's emerging political system. In this essay, we will describe the formation of Russia's two dominant bureaucratic institutions, discuss how they have managed to survive the treadmill of reforms and revolutions in Russia, and examine how the state bureaucracy has employed these institutions to guide social change in Russia, including the contemporary reform process.

Historical Origins of Bureaucratic Dominance

Russia's bureaucratic system of governance is deeply rooted in the customs of medieval *Rus*. Until the middle of the sixteenth century, Russia maintained an administrative structure by which princes and later tsars appointed *boyars* to certain *votchinas*, or estates. The *boyars* served as governors of their respective *votchinas*, but received no official payment for their services to the state. Instead, in accordance with agreements they made with princes, the *boyars*' compensation consisted of monetary payments, as well as goods and services, delivered by the population under their rule. This system of commissions became known as *kormlenie*,³ which directly translated means "feeding."

Princes, or the tsar, delegated to the *boyars* the authority to exercise monopoly power at the local level. Since the *boyars*, and later the *sluzhilye liudi* or tsar's servants, ran the *votchinas* and the resident populations, they were granted official authority to control peasants' property and tribute, to resolve disputes between peasants and ensure general public order, and to assume the role of military commanders during times of war. In this manner, the ruling class employed the system of *kormlenie* from the very beginning of the Russian state to combine and acquire the administrative, judicial, economic, and military functions of the state. These powers were employed to perform critical public services and to expropriate resources from the population as payment.

In tandem with the evolution of this system of local rule and taxation, a second fundamental component of Russia's bureaucratic system, the bureaucratic hierarchy, developed from early Russian tradition. This hierarchy, or *mestnichestvo*,⁴ originated from the customary Russian practice whereby nobles received a place around the tsar's table and in the tsar's service in accordance with their respective families' rank (i.e., how well established a family was or how old a family's roots were). In the fifteenth century, this custom developed into a system through which the tsar appointed nobles to key positions

within government on the basis of birth, reserving posts in the military or civil service for members of the nobility.

As the institution of *mestnichestvo* became fully incorporated into the Russian political culture, the privileged members of society who were appointed to public service evolved into a social caste, the *nomenklatura*, which played a critical role in determining government policy. Although the emergence of the *nomenklatura* is generally associated with the Soviet Union, Michael Voslensky⁵ has gone so far as to identify the bureaucracy exclusively as the Soviet ruling class. This social caste had actually developed alongside the *mestnichestvo* in the fifteenth century. Since members of this bureaucratic class maintained wide discretion in appropriating and distributing resources through the system of *kormlenia*, and since Russia lacked clear laws governing the limits of this bureaucratic power, the bureaucracy was able over time to usurp substantial *de facto* political power. As this power accumulated in the bureaucratic hierarchy, it became customary in Russia that actions of the government were directed in large measure by unofficial or secret bureaucratic decrees and/or *ukasi*. These bureaucratic directives ultimately became more important in the day-to-day operations of government than official laws and regulations. Eventually, the Russian *nachalnik* (boss or chief) and the rank-and-file *chinovnik* (bureaucrat) become symbols of state power to the rest of the population.

Although several attempts were made to curtail the power of the bureaucracy in Russian history, including the formal liquidation of the *mestnichestvo* system by the Zemsky Sobor in 1682 and the development of the Table of Ranks in 1722, the basic structure of the bureaucratic hierarchy and its power remained undisturbed. These reforms were, in fact, little more than formal changes in government structure that simply exchanged one form of bureaucratic dominance for a more up-to-date form that performed the same functions.

As the bureaucracy usurped political power over time, it was able to maintain its own internal stability, as well as its position of political power, by exercising control over the selection of members of the *nomenklatura*. This system evolved with time into a highly structured system controlled by the bureaucratic hierarchy, ultimately emerging as a center of power in the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, the *nomenklatura* had developed into an independent network that extended throughout Russian society. The *nomenklatura* became a professional governing class, and through the bureaucratic hierarchy, was responsible for selecting virtually all professionals for official positions.

The system of bureaucratic hierarchy violated the tenet of absolute control by the tsar over bureaucratic power. As the bureaucracy usurped political power over time, it evolved into a hierarchically ordered social caste. The Revolution of 1917 ended with the bureaucracy gaining absolute control over the state. The absurd bureaucratic mentality of the average citizen in Russia under Communism is a direct product of a total bureaucratization of society and a result of this bureaucratic culture. Thousands of former Soviet citizens, interviewed about their lives in the Soviet Interview Project (SIP) and later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, showed a satisfaction with the welfare entitlement under the Communist regime.⁶

The stability and predictability of the bureaucratic apparatus gave bureaucrats the ability to secure their positions in the political system. Eventually this hierarchal rigidity led to the degradation of the bureaucratic power system and the partial or complete replacement of old guards by a new staff via reforms and/or revolutions. As a result, Russian history can be told as the story of the exchange of one outdated bureaucratic class

for another. The bureaucracy has been crystallizing from the beginning of Russian statehood, becoming step-by-step the driving force for Russian social development.

Modernization, education, and other progressive factors contributed to the appearance of the institutions of civil society such as free press and self-government. However, their function in society was limited. In actuality, they provided fertile ground for new reforms executed by the bureaucratic management team, sometimes with a sweeping change of staff. The Russian bureaucracy of 1917 managed to mobilize the Russian population to gain overwhelming support for a transition from a bureaucratic agrarian society to a bureaucratic industrialized state. Following the collapse of communism, the bureaucracy similarly controlled the enthusiasm of the unsuspecting democratic believers who supported "the permanent bureaucratic revolution." From this perspective, Russia indeed has an unfortunate legacy.

Russia's political and psychological isolation from other countries provided the necessary preconditions to preserve a strong conservatism within Russian society, including a bureaucratic caste notorious for its stagnation and inertia. Although reforms were intended to achieve fundamental economic and military changes, they were always conceived and implemented from above. As a result, the bureaucracy, for which the implementation of such reforms was critical, could mobilize and channel popular

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enthusiasm for change to meet its own ends. This consistent abuse of social trust has led to the gradual erosion of popular enthusiasm for the liberalization of the state, which has been replaced by widespread disappointment and apathy toward reform.

Throughout Russian history, the bureaucratic apparatus made it impossible to introduce social and legal control over bribery and extortion, to abolish the bureaucratic caste hierarchy, and to end the absolute monopoly of the bureaucracy in the provinces. In addition, the bureaucracy succeeded in channeling state power in the provinces to one person, whether it was the *voevoda*, the provincial governor, the provincial first secretary of the CPSU, or the governor in post-Soviet Russia. In doing so, the bureaucracy consistently blocked attempts by the populace to construct a civil society and exercised effective control of "initiatives from below." Although M. M. Speranski, an advisor to Alexander I, introduced the idea of a parliament in the early nineteenth century, one hundred years passed before Russia's first State Duma was elected in 1906. Even then, the Duma lacked significant power, being assigned only a consultative rather than a legislative role. As one of its deputies stated, the first State Duma's activities were little more than legislative vermicelli. Moreover, Tsar Nicholas II could dissolve the State Duma whenever he found its membership disagreeable or disapproved of its actions. On 3 June 1907,⁷ following the insistence of Russia's Prime Minister Pyotr A. Stolypin, Nicholas II did exactly that, disbanding the State Duma and calling for new elections. Because of its institutionalized weakness, the State Duma was denied the authority to participate in some of the most important elements of state policy, including the national budget, international

relations, and the military. Today's Parliament, similarly, is a façade for an entrenched and institutionalized bureaucracy. For example, many of the latest bills and laws issued by the Russian Parliament had been invalidated by presidential decrees and *ukasi*, which confirm the accumulation of unrestrained political power in the executive branch.

The Institutions of Bureaucratic Dominance in Post-Soviet Russia

In spite of the intra-elite struggle for control of public assets, the political course of the new administration is more coherent than it might appear on the surface. Russia's second revolution logically started with a change of political entourage and led to a restructuring of the Communist mono-organizational state structure. The new political order, however, did not affect the institutions of power the Russian *nomenklatura* had mastered over time. The survey of Russia's ruling elite, conducted by *VCIOM*,⁸ showed that the new ruling class of bureaucratic *nomenklatura* is represented the same as its Soviet predecessor by male population (93 percent), former Communist Party membership (80 percent), higher education (94 percent), with each fifth respondent having a doctoral degree, mainly in Marxism-Leninism, or having attended the Higher Party School. Only 11 percent of old *apparatchiks* were retired, while the majority (75 percent) of the Communist *nomenklatura* held top positions in a new government similar to positions they had under the old administrative structure. The only difference shown by the research data was in the age variable. The new elite was substantially younger: more than half of the respondents were under fifty, and each fifth respondent in the sample was under forty. The survey results presented by N.S. Yershova show that, unlike in Poland and Hungary, Russia's new elite did not come to power from lower classes, but inherited its high governmental positions from or through their parents. N.S. Yershova concludes that the Russian *nomenklatura* has developed into an exclusive caste, that is very difficult for outsiders to enter.

The exclusive rights of the new power elite to rule the Russian state were legalized in the new Constitution. We singled out several articles to illustrate a thesis that the new Russian Constitution was designed to protect the rights of the governmental elite. Articles 83, 84, 87, 90, among others, grant the president and his government practically unrestricted power. There is no accountability of the president and his apparatus to the people or the legislature. The president can legislate without putting his initiative to a vote, and can declare martial law at any time, with a simple notification to the Federal Assembly. Article 111, for instance, has granted the president power to dissolve the Duma. The president needs only "consent" of the State Duma, not a confirmation, to be appointed. This consent can be easily circumvented, because of article 111. With the absence of an effective law code and law enforcement, the new Russian Constitution gives legal authority to a semi-dictatorial regime in the Russian Federation.

Conclusion

The critics sometimes fail to recognize the modifications the bureaucratic structure is now undergoing and the fact that the reform process is continuing within the bureaucracy itself. It includes at least two processes:

1. The restructuring of the old hierarchal system; and
2. Commercialization of the bureaucratic operations, i.e., the change in the system of commissions. The bureaucracy now capitalizes on the privatization of public property and derives benefits from legal and illegal businesses. The criminal economy creates resources for its ongoing reforms. The access to property and money have replaced the old system of

power executed by the professional apparatus of the Communist Party. Status and wealth that used to be derived from state service is replaced by fierce competition for money and property among a multitude of players, old and new, at all levels of society and in all regions.

Peter J. Stavrakis'⁹ case study of Russian foreign economic bureaucracies demonstrates in detail how economic shock therapy was used by state bureaucracy as a cover for the redistribution of former collective public property.

Russia's foreign economic agencies conformed to Soviet practice: intra-elite conflict degenerated into administrative fiefdoms, state resources were commandeered in the course of bureaucratic struggle, and institutional structures mirrored personal interests rather than public mission. . . . The size and ambiguous nature of these administrative structures made them potential vehicles with which corrupt politicians could skim revenues from the private sector for personal gain.

The new chain of command triggers independence from Moscow and *de facto* privatization in the Russian Federation, says Stavrakis. Regional economic bodies, in turn, try to establish independent links to the global economy.

The old stratification system of society is going through a reshuffling process, forming new elites from the pool of old and new actors. New social groups are emerging and building up their own influence. The criminalization of the Russian economy is marked by the rapid proliferation of organized crime, or *mafia*, which has become an influential social power. The major changes in the social structure of Russian society are caused by reform in the system of social values and the supplanting of the USSR's political power status by the power of economic accessibility status. The access to property, capital, and high income is a yardstick of social values and differences. This phenomenon was examined by academician Tatyana Zaslavskaya¹⁰ in opinion survey studies.

The historical perspective, shown here, helps to provide an explanation of how the Russian bureaucracy has gained so much power today, and has become a major force in the modeling of post-Communist development. Looking at the current political structures in Russia, we tend to believe that democratic changes within the bureaucratic culture will be slow, if not impossible, to bring about unless the whole system is remodeled.

Notes

1. James R. Millar, "The Failure of Shock Therapy," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 41 (1994).
2. The detailed discussion on this topic is presented by Edward L. Keenan, "On Certain Mythical Beliefs and Russian Behaviors," in S. Frederick Starr (ed.) *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994).
3. *Bolshaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopedia*, 13 (1973), 181.
4. A.I. Markevich, *Istoria Mestnichestva v Moskovskom Gosudarstve XV-XVI vv.*, Odessa, 1888.
5. M. Voslensky, *Nomenclatura: The Soviet Ruling Class* (New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1984).
6. James R. Millar and Sharon L. Wolchik, "Introduction: The Social Legacies and The Aftermath of Communism," *The Social Legacy of Communism* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1994).

7. T.N. Samsonova and S. N. Tatarnikova, "Stolypinskaya conceptsya dvizhenya k pravovomu gosudarstvu," *Sotsialno-politicheskii zhurnal* (1992).

8. N.S. Yershova, "Transformatsiya pravvyashyey elity Rossii v usloviyach sotsialnogo pereloma," in T.I. Zaslavskaya and L.A. Arutyuniyan (eds.) *Kuda idiyet Rossiya?* (Moscow: I, Moskva, 1994).

9. Peter J. Stavrakis, "State Building in Post-Soviet Russia: The Chicago Boys and the Decline of Administrative Capacity," (Washington, D.C.: Kennan Institute, Occasional Papers, 1993).

10. T.I. Zaslavskaya, "The Business Stratum of Russian Society: The Concept, Structure, and Identification," *Economicheskije i sotsialnye peremeny: monitoring obshhestvennogo mnenia*, 5 (1994).