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The evolution of policing in post-soviet Russia: Paternalism versus service in police. Officers' understanding of their role

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines two interrelated issues: the role of police as an institution of Russian society and their role during the past 25 years. This research is based on a series of in-depth interviews conducted by the author in 2014–2016 with former and current police officers in three Russian cities. The paper traces changes in the perceived institutional roles of the Russian police by comparing police officers' views during three periods: early through mid-1990s, late-1990s through mid-2000s, and mid-2000s through 2010s. The study reports that, during the early period, Russian police were disfranchised from the state and this abandonment was a source of institutional identity crisis for law enforcement officers who remained on the job. This process was coupled with high levels of job dissatisfaction and the overall feeling of “abandonment” of police by the state. At the same time, it was during this post-Soviet period, when ideas of policing as a service to the society were introduced and sometimes entertained among the professional circles of police officers and other government officials. Furthermore, this period was marked by continuous, though often sporadic, institutional reforms and anti-corruption measures. In the second period, the Russian police were slowly engaging back into the state-building process, which caused increased job satisfaction and better retention rates. At the same time, the second period signified a decline of the “police as service” ideology and the comeback of paternalistic views on policing. During this time, the government's efforts to reform police and anti-corruption measures became systemic and better organized. Also, in the second period, members of the civil society became more active in demanding public accountability and transparency from the Russian police. Finally, the modern period of police development presents a case in which the institutional identity of the Russian police has been clearly connected to the state's capacity. This process is coupled with increased paternalistic views among police officers and a failure of “police as a service” doctrine. In such an environment, the efforts by a maturing civil society to demand public transparency and accountability of the police are often met with hostility and anger. The paper concludes that further development of the Russian police depends on the role that they will play within the modern Russian state.

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1. Introduction and research question

Over¹ the past 25 years, Russia has experienced tremendous political, economic, and social changes. A political transformation began in the early 1990s with the dismantling of the autocratic Soviet state and continued into the late 1990s and early 2000s with the creation of a hybrid political regime that combined elements of democracy and authoritarianism. The mid-2000s to 2010s saw the progressive decay of democratic elements when Russia's political development took a turn toward “competitive authoritarianism.” The current political regime is often described as a stable political configuration in which “democratic institutions are viewed as the principle means of obtaining and exercising political authority, but incumbents violate democratic rules so often and to such an extent, that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy” (Levitsky and Way, 2002).

The introduction of free-market elements into the Soviet-planned economy in the early 1990s created tremendous opportunities for the Communist Party nomenclature and its affiliates to misappropriate and aggregate state-owned assets to create a new social class of “oligarchs” (Favarel-Garrigues, 2002; Volkov et al., 2012).

The 1990s in Russia were marked by a violent redistribution of these assets among competing oligarchs, while the country's economy experienced a lack of real economic gains, hyperinflation, growing internal and external debts, and budget deficits (IMF, 2011; Rutkevitch, 1998).² At this time, the life savings of most Soviet citizens were lost through the significant depreciation of the currency. As a result, over one-third of the Russian population (33.5%) in 1992 was living below the poverty level. These numbers remained at an average of 25.0% through the 1990s (GKS, 2018c).³

In 1998, the Russian economy experienced a serious financial crisis resulting in a dramatic devaluation of Russian currency and the government's defaulting on its debt, which further exacerbated the impoverishment of the Russian population (Pinto et al., 2005). However, by the early 2000s, Russia posted a stable increase in annual GDP rates, which was associated with continuous growth in the industry sector, healthy levels of foreign investments, and growing internal consumption. Much of this growth was attributed to the sharp increase in crude oil prices in the early 2000s and the “stabilization” of the political regime under newly elected President Putin (Cooper, 2009). Russian economic growth was interrupted by the global financial crisis of 2008 and the consequent sharp decline in crude oil prices.

The 2008–2009 period was marked by a significant loss of foreign investments and a dramatic decline in the annual GDP growth⁴ (Aganbegyan, 2010). Further increase in oil prices during 2010–2013 provided Russia with some opportunities for economic recovery and modest growth of GDP. However, the new decline in oil prices in 2014 impeded further economic growth and caused further devaluation of the currency (Gurvich, 2017). Economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. and European Union since 2014 placed an additional burden on Russia's economic development (Gurvich and Prilepskiy, 2016). Since 2014, the Russian economy has been described in terms of recession or even as “stagflation” with a modest outlook of future recovery and growth (Russell, 2015; WorldBank, 2018).

1.1. Research questions and theoretical framework

The dramatic economic and political changes had a direct impact on Russian society, including the police, as represented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). Some of these institutional changes within the Russian police have been documented in the extant literature. A growing body of literature focuses on the issues related to the organizational changes within the MVD associated with various “reforms” of law enforcement in Russia (Beck, 2013; Beck and Robertson, 2009; Galeotti, 2012; Gall, 2011; Kosals, 2010; Paneyak et al., 2012). A number of researchers addressed the role that MVD plays in Russian politics and the state-building process (Galeotti, 2004; Gudkov et al., 2004; Taylor, 2014). A significant number of studies exists on the Russian police's struggles with abuse of power and corruption, and the effect on the police's ability to maintain public order (Borzov, 2006; Committee against Torture, 2006; Dubova and Kosals, 2012; Gilinskiy, 2011; INDEM, 2002).⁵

Finally, many studies explore the issues of public and police interactions and cooperation, public trust and satisfaction with the Russian police, and the role of media in public views on police (Andreev, 2005; Beck and Chistyakova, 2002; Bondarenko, 2006; Cherkasov, 2006; Dzutsev, 2010; Ermolaev, 2009; Reynolds et al., 2008; Uidriks and Reenen, 2005; Zernova, 2012).

What has been missing from the literature is the research on the evolution of the police's institutional identity and an understanding of whether the changes in the Russian political and economic landscape have affected the police officers' understanding of their role in Russian society and the role of police institutions. Most existing literature on police officers' views is focused on measuring the psychological fitness of these officers (Bobrova, 2005; Borisova, 1998; Borodavko, 2005; Brazhenskaya, 2011; Gavrilin, 2001), their views and experiences with corruption (Abdrashitov, 2009; Beck and Lee, 2001;

¹ In this article “paternalistic view” refers to the officers' views that society is incapable of any crime reduction on its own and needs to be supervised and protected by police from dangerous offenders.

² According to the International Monetary Fund, gross domestic product based on purchasing-power-parity (PPP) valuation of country GDP in current international dollars constituted \$900 billion in 1998, compared with almost \$1200 billion in 1992.

³ GKS is an abbreviation for Russian State Statistics Committee; or *Государственный Комитет По Статистике*

⁴ In 2008–2009, Russia lost over \$250 billion in foreign investments, and the average annual GDP growth for 2009–2013 is estimated at 1% based on World Bank's data (World Bank, 2018).

⁵ INDEM stands for Information Science for Democracy Foundation.

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