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Elite recruitment and state-society relations in technocratic authoritarian regimes: The Russian case

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Russia has a peculiar form of authoritarianism that exhibits pronounced technocratic features. The analysis places in a comparative frame the bases of regime legitimacy and the paths to political, administrative, and economic power in Russia. By locating the Russian state in a matrix that considers the ideology of governance on one axis and the backgrounds of elites on the other, the article highlights areas of overlap and separation between state–society relations in Russia and other regimes in the developed and developing world. It also illustrates the ways in which technocratic elites in Russia differ from their counterparts in other parts of the world.
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One of the shortcomings in the democracy vs. authoritarian framework is that it fails to recognize that elections are only one route to power. By widening the focus of political recruitment to include other members of a ruling class – from political staffers to senior administrative elites to leaders of industry – one can construct a portrait of the governing elite that provides a more nuanced assessment of state–society relations.[1] Although work in this tradition, which often combines policy analysis with an examination of political recruitment patterns, has focused largely on Latin America and East Asia, it is now beginning to penetrate post-communist studies (Colton and Holmes, 2006; Snyder, 2006). This paper seeks to build on this tradition by describing patterns of elite recruitment in Russia and then locating the Russian experience in the comparative literature. Like research into state–society relations in other regions of the world, this analysis does not eschew classification altogether, but it looks for typologies in a more complex conceptual framework. Thus, instead of placing Russia solely on a spectrum between democracy and authoritarianism, it locates it in matrices that consider what might be termed the ideology of governance on the one hand and the backgrounds of elites and the spoils vs. merit system on the other. This exercise not only illustrates that Russia continues to be ruled by technocrats rather than politicians but that the backgrounds and orientations of technocrats in the Russian context differ significantly from those of specialists in other parts of the world.

Who rules Russia?[2]

One of the first conclusions to be drawn from the post-communist Russian elite is that it is almost entirely bereft of leaders whose career path includes elective office. In the case of the last two Russian presidents, Vladimir Putin and Dmitrii Medvedev, elective office has not been a springboard to power but the crowning achievement of lives devoted largely to administrative service. Of the six top members of the Russian Government (*Pravitel'stvo*) in March 2008 – the prime ministers

[1] In the modern era, this effort has been championed by writers as diverse as Karl Marx and Gaetano Mosca.
[2] This section draws in part on material in Huskey (2009,2010).

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Table 1
Elective office as a springboard to cabinet membership: a comparative perspective.

Model of government	Country	Cabinet size[a]	Percent with prior experience in elective office[b]
Parliamentary	Germany	13	81
Parliamentary	UK	18	100
Semi-presidential	France	20	85
Semi-presidential	Russia	27	22[c]
Presidential	Brazil	28	57
Presidential	United States	16	59

[a] The numbers include prime ministers plus ministers in parliamentary systems; presidents, prime ministers (and deputy prime ministers in the Russian case) plus ministers in semi-presidential systems; and presidents and vice-presidents plus ministers (or secretaries in the US case) in presidential systems.
[b] Prior elective office includes any elected post at the local, regional, national, or, in the French case, European level in legislative or executive institutions. Thus, the former British Secretary of State for Transport, Lord Adonis, never held elected parliamentary office but was an Oxford city councilor.
[c] Only one Russian official, First Deputy Prime Minister Victor Zubkov, served in the Duma, the national parliament. The others, save current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who was directly elected as president, held elective office at the local or regional level, in several cases at the very end of the Soviet era. Only slightly over 10 percent of Russian cabinet members held elected office above the local level.
Source: Cabinet members were identified in the CIA World Leaders website on 8/8/09.

and the deputy prime ministers – only A.D. Zhukov came to office with experience in elective office, in his case lengthy service in the Duma, including a period as chair of its budget committee.[3] This pattern continues at lower levels of the Government hierarchy. Only one of 16 ministers had been an elected official in his career: Yurii Trutnev served as mayor of the city of Perm' and then governor of the Perm' region before coming to Moscow to work as minister of natural resources. If one considers the 65 deputy ministers in Prime Minister Putin's first Government, only ten had held elective office earlier in their careers, with half having served in the Duma and the other half in regional assemblies or in mayor's or governor's posts.

The Russian case, therefore, contrasts sharply with patterns of political recruitment found in the democratic world. As Table 1 illustrates, even in democratic countries with a presidential model of government, where the appointment of technocrats to cabinet posts is common, the percentage of members of the core executive without electoral experience is far lower than in Russia. For all their faults, politicians come to executive office with sensitivity to popular demands and an appreciation of the tradition of public accountability, which are often lacking in those with purely technocrat backgrounds (Sakwa, 2008).

If Russia is not governed by politicians, at least not in the Western sense of the term, what are the backgrounds of those in the ruling elite? The research of Olga Kryshtanovskaia and Stephen White has illustrated that an increasing number of officials are drawn from the uniformed services (Kryshtanovskaya and White, 2003, p. 294). Of the 26 members of the Russian Government in 2008, seven – or approximately 27 percent – had earlier experience in the uniformed services.[4] However, we would argue that this number is not unusually high given the structure of Russian administration, in which the "power bloc" accounts for a significant share of the ministries – four of 19, or 21 percent, if one includes the Justice Minister, which now has a significant uniformed presence in its senior ranks.[5] Furthermore, the careers of Russian elites continue to reflect the legacies of Soviet administration, in which a sector like transport, which would have been dominated by civilians in a Western setting, had a significant military dimension. Thus, we code the current transport minister, Igor' Levitin, as a *silovik* because he rose through the ranks of the military transport sector before moving into leadership positions in the transport industry in 1994.

Rather than viewing the ruling class as a militocracy, it is preferable, in our view, to regard it as a technocracy, with the uniformed wing representing only one – though an admittedly prominent – portion of a ruling group whose legitimacy depends less on a popular mandate than on a claim of technical competence and extensive state managerial experience. Besides *siloviki*, one also finds other groups well-represented in the Russian executive, most notably economists, engineers, and lawyers.

An examination of the 86 ranking members[6] of the Russian Government of March 2008 reveals that almost half, or 47 percent, had spent their entire careers in state service. A full 20 percent of the total had reached their positions after a career devoted exclusively to a single ministry. This latter tendency was especially pronounced in the ministries of agriculture, defense, health, and transport.[7] Those who came to prominent posts in the Government with some experience outside of state service or elective office had held academic posts (14 percent) and/or positions in business (20 percent) at an earlier point in their careers, at times in academic or business institutions with close ties to particular ministries. However, political leaders whose business experience gives them deep roots in society are rare indeed. One such biography is that of E.M. Shkolov, a former deputy minister of the MVD who worked for most of the 1990s in international business before becoming

[3] The information in this and the succeeding paragraph is drawn from biographies compiled from the websites of the Russian Government and its ministries on 31 March 2008.
[4] We exclude from this number two persons trained as lawyers who worked as procurators at the very beginning of their careers. We also exclude Igor Sechin, who was alleged to have been a KGB agent in his youth while serving as a military interpreter in Africa.
[5] And the power bloc – MVD, Ministry of Defense, FSB, and the Ministry of Justice – would be even larger if we included the Ministry of Extraordinary Situations.
[6] This group includes the prime minister, first deputy and deputy prime ministers, ministers and deputy ministers.
[7] In a recently presented paper, Atsushi Ogushi argues that technocratic elites only populate a portion of Russian ministries (Ogushi, 2010).

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