



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.

Ekaterina M. Levintova
IARO 2001-2002
Russia

Elite Intellectuals, Political Discourse and Public Opinion in Post-Communist Societies

I. Topic of Research

I began this stage of my research¹ with a series of questions: Why has Russian official discourse recently shifted toward organic statist (conservative) categories² after a long period in which it was decidedly liberal³? What explains this rupture? How is it manifest in actual policies?

My research goals were to 1) explore the shifts in both Russian official discourse and public opinion and the role that Russian elite intellectuals play in articulating discourse; and 2) investigate the political implications of the change in Russian official discourse.

II. Relevance and Contribution to the Field

¹ This report covers the work during the first six months of the first stage of my dissertation field research, sponsored by the 2001-2002 IARO grant. Its second part (September 2002-March 2003) will deal with the Polish case and will provide comparative data on the relationship between official discourse and public opinion in post-Communist countries.

² Organic-statist (or conservative) orientations in the discourse include support of authoritarian political system, strong state, law and order, governed market, revival of national values, and an independent foreign policy.

³ Liberal orientations in the discourse include support of democracy, personal freedoms, free market, pro-Western foreign policy and ethnic tolerance.

Empirical Contributions: The dynamic and dialectical relationship between public opinion and official discourse in post-Communist societies is a theoretically important, but an understudied topic. To date there is no comprehensive and comparative study of this relationship. Rather than updating previous findings or reconciling conflicting accounts, my study analyzes a previously unexamined relationship from a cross-cultural perspective. The findings of this research will be of interest to those in political science and political sociology who study intellectuals, political discourse, public opinion, and democratic transitions and consolidation.

Theoretical Contributions: I extend institutional analysis to the study of discourse and look at both public opinion and elite discourse as levels of analysis. This comparative study⁴ will have broader theoretical implications and its framework can be used for the analysis of other post-Communist countries.

Policy Analysis Contributions: The investigation of political discourse and elite intellectuals' role in its articulation illuminates the mechanisms of policy formation and political legitimization. I also assess the political implications of official discourse. This research also illustrates alternative entry points for the public to influence political process. I demonstrate that public opinion may influence actual policies via discourse articulated by elite intellectuals.

III. Summary of Approach and Methodology, Including Research Sites

Approach

Since I had two objects of analysis – elite discourse and public opinion -- I used two different research methodologies to examine their evolution in post-Communist Russia. Obviously, official discourse and public opinion are organized in different ways. While elite discourse tends to be characterized by ideological clarity and relatively consistent articulation of political, ideological and economic categories, public opinion may be vague, inconsistent, poorly articulated and short-lived. Thus, I used different standards of evidence. I employed statistical analysis of long-term trends in public opinion and content analysis of elite intellectuals' official discourse.

Sources and Research Sites

Sources of Empirical Data and Research Sites: This study utilized 1) public opinion surveys since 1992 at the VTsIOM (Center for Study of Public Opinion, Moscow) archive; 2) public speeches, statements, and declarations produced by Russian elite intellectuals for domestic consumption between 1992 and 2002 available at the library of Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences (INION, Moscow), State Public Historical Library (Moscow) and the Russian National Library (St. Petersburg);⁵ and 3)

⁴ See footnote 1.

⁵ Originally, I planned to work in the Russian State Library in Moscow (Former Lenin's Library), but it is still being renovated and will not reopen at least until the Fall of 2002. The Russian National Library, St. Petersburg was used as a substitute for the Russian State Library. The collections are almost identical.

official governmental policies and legislative acts dealing with the role of state, political system, economic system and international relations available at the above libraries.⁶

I also consulted with the specialists at the Institute for Comparative Politics, Russian Academy of Sciences (Moscow), St. Petersburg Branch of Institute of Sociology, European University and Center for Independent Social Research (St. Petersburg).

Methods

Consultations with Russian Experts: During the first stage of this work I surveyed Russian sociologists, political scientists, economists, cultural studies specialists, political commentators, linguists, historians, literary critics, politicians, and former presidential advisers. I used a snowball method of experts' selection. As one of the questions of my survey, I asked for names and contact information of other specialists in this area.⁷ The survey was conducted either by phone or in person, during pre-arranged interviews. I surveyed the total of 50 experts. However, only 40 gave valid responses. The list of experts and their responses is available upon request. The survey lasted a month and a half.

Content Analysis: To document the shift in official discourse, I used content analysis of elite intellectuals' public documents. The list of Russian elite intellectuals was based on my own knowledge as well as on the results of the survey of experts. Although my respondents named about 120 individuals, many of them did not fit my selection criteria.⁸ As a result, the final group of discourse communicators included 50 persons. Among those, I was able to find published statements of 26 communicators. The final list included Shakhrai, Burbulis, Chubais, Satarov, Sobchak, Gaidar, Mau, S. Vassiliev, Uliukaev, Iasin, Illarionov, Shokhin, Livshits, Krasnov, Salmin, Kaspé, Nikonov, Karaganov, Kara-Murza, Chernyshev, Panarin, Dugin, Bunin, Tsimburskii, Pavlovskii, and Kordonskii. I analyzed 251 publications produced by these authors. The list of textual indicators for every category of content analysis as well as their synonyms is available upon request. This stage of research took two and a half months.

Statistical Analysis: Next, I employed statistical analysis of Russian public opinion, including attitudes to democracy and authoritarianism, mass media, human rights, economic systems, the West, demise of the USSR, ethnic tolerance, etc. The first stage of statistical analysis consisted of transferring and re-coding data into SPSS format (since VTsIOM stores its data using DOS-based program). I then aggregated data according to thematic blocks similar to the content analytic categories (e.g., political, ideological, economic, foreign policy, and ethnic relations blocks) and explored the chronological (longitudinal) evolution of public opinion according to these categories.

⁶ Since I am still working on this project under the auspices of ACTR/ACCELS (RSEP grant), this stage of the research is ongoing.

⁷ See Appendix I "Survey Questionnaire".

⁸ For instance, experts often named political elite proper (Chernomyrdin, Nemtsov, S. Ivanov, etc.), oppositional intellectuals (Yavlinskii, Glaziev, Kagarlitskii), journalists (Kiselev, Svanidze, M. Sokolov, M. Leontiev, Pozner, etc.) or speech-writers, press-secretaries and assistants of acting politicians (Pikhoia, Baturin, Kostikov, etc.).

The total duration of this stage was three months. I plan to finish it by April 15. Then I will begin the final stage of my research – analysis of governmental policies.⁹

IV. Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

Conclusions About Changes in Public Opinion

Political Category: Regardless of the wording of questions, the popularity of the democratic option decreased. The turning point occurred approximately in 1997-1998. Despite the weakening of the democratic orientations and strengthening of more authoritarian attitudes, Russians do not overwhelmingly support authoritarian options.

Ideological Category: Russian public opinion was always conservative and state-oriented. Throughout the research period the share of people who favored order over personal freedoms¹⁰ remained around 75-80 percent. On top of that, the number of people who supported dictatorship (and, therefore, limitations of personal freedoms) as a means to solve Russian problems increased by almost 100 percent. A conservative shift occurred in late 1993-early 1994. The strengthening of statist orientations is attributable to the growing concern about the weakness of state (40 percent of Russians worried about the weakness of state in 1999).

Economic Category: Although originally more pro-market-oriented, eventually Russians changed their economic views. Simultaneously, the anti-market (or pro-state regulation) orientation gained momentum. The shift towards more state regulation occurred in 1994. However, the anti-market sentiment subsided in recent years (2000-2001). The negative attitudes toward market economy are attributable to persistently pessimistic assessments of the economic situation. Throughout the research period the share of those who viewed Russian economic situation as bad and very bad was consistently high (75 percent on average). Only recently the share of people dissatisfied with economic situation decreased to 50 percent, while the share of those who view the situation as average increased to 37 percent.

Foreign Policy Category: The drift toward more independent foreign policy was not the result of strengthening of anti-Western bias. On the contrary, episodes of anti-Western, and especially anti-NATO and anti-US, feelings appear to be very short-lived and are triggered by specific events (e.g. Kosovo, Iraq). In general, Russians remained sympathetic to the West and US. Their self-identification as Europeans increased. At the same time, there are signs of growing regret about the demise of the Soviet Union, a dominant attitude, which only strengthened during the research period. Russians also increasingly favor the pursuit of their own national interests and the creation of defense alliance with other CIS countries to balance Western power. The shift toward more independent and assertive foreign policy occurred in 1999.

⁹ See footnote 6

¹⁰ In the question, “What is more important for Russia today – order or democracy?”, democracy is not a political category, but the Russian synonym for the western notion of unlimited personal freedoms.

Ethnic Policy Category: There is a clear-cut growth of nationalistic and ethnically intolerant attitudes. If in the beginning of the research period the clear majority (55-60 percent) supported the idea of Russia for everyone, today their number is only 20 percent. Simultaneously, the number of people who support the idea of Russia for Russians more than doubled (from 24 percent to 60 percent.) The decline of ethnic tolerance and growth of nationalism among the Russians started at the end of 1993 and was complete by 1998, when nationalistic orientations prevailed.

Conclusions About Changes in Official Discourse

Politically, democracy was steadily losing in popularity to an authoritarian political system. In 2000, authoritarianism became the primary political choice of the intellectual elite. This shift reflects the dwindling popularity of democracy in public opinion (which started in 1998). However, democracy is not totally discredited in public opinion, while there is a complete revision of original democratic orientations among the elite. The elite's preference for authoritarianism appears to be not a mere reaction to anti-democratic tendencies of public opinion (not very pronounced), but a sign of inherent class interests of Russian ruling regime.

Ideologically, elite conservatism triumphed over liberalism in 1999 (i.e., much later than among the general population). Public opinion was always conservative – a trend which only grew in prominence after 1993. Despite the present victory of conservatism, ideological liberalism of the elite is not completely discredited. Given more favorable public opinion, the elite's ideological liberalism can be resurrected.

Economically, the elite always preferred the free market model, a preference that stands in marked contrast to an increasingly negative public assessment of market and market reforms. Economic liberalism appears to be another deep-rooted class interest of the Russian elite. It does not depend upon public opinion.

In the area of *foreign policy*, elite discourse supported both pro and anti-Western orientations. This uncertainty parallels the ambiguity of public opinion. Since 1999 both public opinion and elite discourse espouse moderately anti-Western attitudes. As with public opinion, bouts of anti-Western rhetoric in elite discourse are caused by specific events and do not have staying power.

In the sphere of *ethnic policy*, elite discourse drifted toward more nationalistic and less tolerant attitudes. In 1998 both the public and the elite started to prefer nationalistic notions over more tolerant ones. Undoubtedly, the decrease of ethnic tolerance among the elite follows the evolution of public opinion. However, unlike public opinion, which continued to drift in the nationalistic direction, elite discourse rebounded slightly from its nationalistic slide. Thus, nationalism is not an inherent trait of the Russian elite. It emerges in response to growing nationalism of the general public.

Modifications to Hypotheses

My original hypotheses were either confirmed or modified.

Original Hypothesis 1: During the research period, both public opinion and official discourse in Russia changed from liberal to organic-statist (conservative) categories.

Current Status: Confirmed with the following modifications:

- a. The ideological category of Russian public opinion was originally more conservative than hypothesized. There, change occurred toward even greater conservatism.
- b. The economic category of elite discourse did not change and remained liberal.

Original Hypothesis 2: In Russia, the change in public opinion occurred before changes in official discourse.¹¹

Current Status: Confirmed.

Original Hypothesis 3: After the 2000 presidential elections, Russian official discourse started to resemble public opinion.

Current Status: Confirmed with the following modifications:

- a. The shift in elite discourse occurred much earlier than 2000 (sometimes as early as 1993-1994).
- b. Elite discourse resembles public opinion in all categories, except the economy. In marked contrast to public opinion, the elite continues to support free market economic model.

Original Hypothesis 4: The role of Russian elite intellectuals in articulating official discourse changed from independent cultural entrepreneurs who created and supported the post-Communist liberal discourse to a more organic role that incorporated public opinion.

Current Status: Confirmed with the following modification:

- a. The period during which elite intellectuals played a role of independent cultural entrepreneurs was much shorter than originally anticipated. However, they still perform this role in the economic area, where elite intellectuals disregard public opinion.

Original Hypothesis 5: In Russia, the change in official discourse has not always translated into policy change, but some changes did take place.

Current Status: to be investigated.

¹¹ Empirical assessments of the causes of change in public opinion are outside the scope of this project. My point is that public opinion changed first and official discourse followed.

V. Suggestions for Future Research Agenda

Next on my agenda is a comparison of the Russian results with the Polish ones. This juxtaposition is necessary in order to gain more generalizable knowledge about the relationship between official discourse and public opinion in post-Communist societies. Additional empirical data from other post-Communist countries and its analysis can advance our understanding of the ways in which the elite uses public opinion.

Another future direction of the research is the incorporation of the discourse of political elite proper. Such an investigation will both broaden the sample of data for content analysis of elite discourse and will enable future researcher to compare the positions of political elite with that of the intellectual elite. This comparison will shed new light on the relationship between the intellectual elite and their political patrons in post-Communist societies.

VI. Recommendations for the US Policy Community

Official elite rhetoric should be understood as a response to the demands of public opinion. Many of the categories of the official discourse simply reflect the current public opinion, not the class interests or personal attitudes of the ruling elite. In particular, the US should not be excessively alarmed by the elite's negative attitudes towards liberal ideology, ethnic tolerance and the West. These orientations are not entrenched. Rather, they are either a temporary tactical maneuver to pacify Russian public opinion or a reaction to immediate events, not deep-seated elite political orientations. The US policy community should, however, be concerned about democratic institutions, because despite relatively favorable public opinion, Russian elite opted for the authoritarian option. Democracy appears to be the most threatened category of the original, liberal, discourse. On a more optimistic note, the US policy community need not worry about free market ideas and the continuation of the market reforms in Russia, since they are persistently championed by the elite (despite the public opposition). In short, market ideas are not endangered.

