

THE POLITICS OF PROFESSIONALISM IN RUSSIA

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Executive Summary

The words “professional” and “professionalism” enjoy an almost magical ring in Russian political parlance. They are often intoned as a panacea setting right any number of enumerated ills. They connote a mastery of affairs and thus are sought-for things commonly regarded to be woefully absent in the world of practical endeavors. They also admit to quite different definitions, sometimes opposing the idea of politics, sometimes coinciding with it.

This polysemic quality of “professional” appears to be of critical import for drawing divisions and constructing group identities in the world of politics. This study seeks to determine how the word “professional” has been used by past and present members of Russia’s political class and outlines two opposing discourses that constitute its meanings. It also has a secondary objective: *viz.*, to frame the results reported, here, within the scope of a dynamic model of change in Soviet, and now Russian, political communication. Because these objectives are analytically distinct, I return to the second one only in conclusion.

Introduction

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Discourses of Professionalism and Politics

If language can be understood as society’s consciousness externalized (Hodge and Kress, 1993), then discourse might be regarded as a system of categories circulating in the social world that structures and gives meaning to that very externalization (Barthes, 1968). Commonly, actors have access to one or more available discourses through which they construct those realities that comprise their respective consciousnesses (Laclau, 2005). For my purposes, it is important to emphasize that discourse analysis—which intends to distill the system of categories particular to one or another discourse appearing in actual narratives, either spoken or written—understands

meaning to belong in the first instance not to subjects who employ discourse but to discourses that inform subjects (Williams, 1999). Thus, on one hand, discourse constrains what can be communicated, just as natural languages constrain actual speech (Hodge and Kress, 1993). As Michel Foucault (1972:44) has put it, “it is not easy to say something new; it is not enough for us to open our eyes...for new objects to light up and emerge.” However, on the other hand, discourse is not doctrine. It represents a system of categories on the basis of which meaningful statements can be made, not those statements themselves. Discourse enables disputation, a condition complicated by the fact that statements may reflect more than one discourse from which they are drawn (Foucault, 1972).

The present study applies discourse analysis to a corpus of 34 texts generated by that same number of interviews conducted between May 2005 and June 2006. The interview subjects were selected from prominent members of Russia’s political class: government ministers (including prime and deputy prime ministers), leaders of political parties, deputies of the State Duma, officials in the Administration of the President and others.

In order to preserve anonymity, they are identified, here, by a code referencing their membership in five broadly defined groups: the Gorbachev administration (all of whom are labeled *A*, plus a number identifying each individual); the first (1991-1993) and second (1993-1997) El’tsin administrations (members labeled, respectively, *B* and *C*, each with an identifying number); the democratic opposition (members of the political party Yabloko, labeled *D*, plus a reference number) and individuals identified with the Putin administration (labeled *E*, plus a reference number). Inasmuch as a given individual may have been associated with more than one group—for instance, someone who held high office in both of the El’tsin administrations, or someone active in politics during the Gorbachev years who later joined the Putin-era cohort—the

five categories are somewhat blurred. Yet, as results here show, they do serve to isolate groups of people for whom one or another discourse appears to be paramount.

The interviews themselves lasted between 45 minutes and roughly an hour and a half. During each, subjects were asked a battery of questions designed to elicit their comments on the questions fundamental to politics. The questions were as follows:

- What are/were the most significant moments in your political career? At which times did it seem to you that you exercised the greatest influence on political events in the country? What helped you realize your objectives? What hindered?
- What lessons could be drawn from your experience? How would you formulate principles for the successful realization of political goals in Russia?
- Which personal qualities help to achieve one's goals in politics? In what measure are these qualities connected with the ability to establish good personal relations with other people?
- From your point of view, what is the role of moral principles in politics? Can you confirm your point of view with examples, not necessarily drawn from your own experience?
- What was your relation to the following events and how do you relate now to the actions of the primary participants in them? August 1991. The Belovezh accords. The events of autumn, 1999.

In most cases, subjects were also asked follow-up questions pertaining to their initial answers in order to elicit more information and evaluations.

In all, some 21 of the 34 members of the sample used “professional(ism)” during interviews. In twelve instances, it was self-referential, connoting their membership in some profession outside of politics. Accordingly, this group is a subset of what can be called “professionals in politics”. In seven other cases, its usage served to include the respondent in a group called “political professionals” or “professional politicians”. In the final two instances, the respondent, while not referring to himself either as a professional politician or as someone who

entered politics from some outside professional career, denoted a class of professional politicians of which he was not a member.

The focus here falls first on those twelve respondents referring to themselves as professionals who had entered politics after establishing careers in other fields. Quite naturally, these individuals emphasized the element of substantive knowledge available to themselves because of their previous careers. Particularly among those who entered politics from academic backgrounds, professionalism represented for them a much needed antidote to a cloistered, bureaucratic culture pervading government, not to mention the reckless ignorance displayed by politicians themselves.

Emblematically, one commented on how his professional background had enabled him to view issues more perspicaciously than could others around him (*D5*). Another went so far as to say that, as an economist, it had been impossible for him to countenance working within the Soviet system—in his professional eyes, “it was simply absurd”. He later resigned from El’tsin’s government for the same reason (*D6*).

Important from this general perspective was the sort of disorder and incompetence that those from professional backgrounds claimed to have noticed when they assumed governmental responsibilities. Along these lines, a third respondent remarked that on joining the Administration of the President, he became “very despondent because of the low effectiveness of the political actions of the authorities, [seeing there] a huge number of complete blunders, an enormous number of ill-considered decisions taken by dilettantes” (*C6*). On becoming a staffer in the national legislature, a fourth found himself doing political work because a great number of the legislators “were not involved in any political activities but were in general occupied with things of which I could make neither head nor tail” (*C4*). Facing similar circumstances, a fifth

prided himself and his colleagues on bringing an anti-bureaucratic cast of mind to the corridors of power. He remarked that “although we didn’t know any bureaucratic games, decisions were taken quickly, operationally and effectively. Although we had to contend with a bumbling bureaucracy—maybe even one intent on sabotaging our program—we made the bureaucratic wheels spin a thousand times faster than they do today” (B9).

Respondents who had come to government service from non-political backgrounds tended rather uniformly to cast themselves in the Promethean role of bringing knowledge to an otherwise fumbling and/or stolid bureaucracy lacking even a trace of intelligent direction. They regularly employed the term “professional”—and its many surrogates: expert, specialist, brains, and so on—to signal their distance from, and their intention to harness, that bureaucracy. For them, “professional” seemed to function in two important respects: first, as an empty signifier enabling group identity and political action; second, as a claim to cultural capital that can exchange for political power.

These two functions of “professionalism” underpin a discourse admitting to internal inconsistency and ambiguity, as well as to a semantic flexibility that enables the term to perform a social function of marking its bearers in two important ways. The first marking tends toward associativity. That is, an “empty signifier”—a term coined and developed by Ernesto Laclau—establishes a discursive horizon, a semantic space shared by a community of speakers. It thus creates an inclusive “we”. This usage—“professional” indexing a (potentially) universal class—is evident among the respondents, one of whom put it very directly by saying that “in any activity it is necessary to be a professional” (B9).

An empty signifier is able to create this inclusive “we” precisely because it is a word voided of significance, emptied of any particular meaning, detached from any signifiers, and

therefore appropriated by subjects who would use it as a pivot around which their discourse can be organized. Laclau emphasizes the fact that the process of emptying the term of its normal significance is critical to this operation, inasmuch as such a signifier is then able to express meanings beyond those transmissible by its (“un-emptied”) counterpart in ordinary language. It thus represents a form of catachresis, a figurative term that cannot be substituted for by a literal one.

In the quotidian world of politics, such terms as “the people”, “freedom” and “justice” would exemplify empty signifiers. Each functions to evoke a political community representing a totality constructed on the basis of equivalence and difference. Within the discourse of “the people”, for instance, each act of signification includes both equivalencies, connoting membership in this construct, and differences between it and anti-popular or opposing forces providing the distinction or boundary necessary to constitute “the people”.

As such, an empty signifier indexes something that is both impossible and necessary: impossible, because it cannot reference a fully inclusive “we”—in our instance, because it distinguishes a group and its activities from others betraying an “absence of professionalism” or those described as “unprofessional”; yet necessary, because the term performs as a predicate for ordering the world, that totality enacted by an through the discourse (Laclau, 2005, Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Torfing, 1999; Howarth *et al.*, 2000). The characteristics associated with emptiness—breadth, ambiguity, opacity and contradiction—are amply present in the discourse of professionals in politics. Their import, again, does not consist in logical coherence but in the nebulous associations that their purveyors want their audiences to think about (Barthes, 1972). In this way, syntagmatic associations encoded in the word “professional” can displace its semantic content in actual communicative practice (Lotman, 1990).

The second marking tends toward distinction. It creates an exclusive “we”, professionals, who have a special claim to knowledge and ethics. It thereby represents a form of cultural capital in possession of some group who can exchange it for other forms of capital—in our instance, for political capital. Because cultural capital is embodied—it cannot be disassociated from its bearer as could, say, economic capital—professionals in politics claim the right to power and influence not because of popular endorsement but simply because of who they are (Bourdieu, 1986).

This claim is advanced in two ways. First, its usage constitutes an imagined beacon in the foggy seas of Russian politics, lighting some visage of direction and destination for the ship of state. It implies that the prevailing situation can be regarded as a set of problems to be solved, and that professionals are required to solve them. Second, this claim to a special knowledge needed to resolve common problems already carries a trace of the term’s other dimension: disinterestedness. Here, the professional symbolically stands aside from the flesh-and-blood struggles of the political world and assumes a purely benevolent posture toward that world. Just as, say, a dentist is not interested *qua* dentist whether she is applying her skills in the mouths of relatives, friends, strangers or enemies, so the professional in the world of politics can be relied upon to lend her expertise where it is needed, owing to no other motivation than a strictly “professional” one (Bourdieu, 1984).

The Russian political world portrayed by many of the respondents—one filled with ruthlessness, duplicity and intrigues—would seem to place a premium on this aspect of the term. Whereas most others potentially mean harm to oneself and associates, professionals imply help. Whereas most others cannot be trusted, professionals can. Thus a discourse of morality is grafted onto that of expertise, inviting the addressee to associate “the professional” with “the

good” (Edelman, 1988; Lazar and Lazar, 2004). Taken together, these dimensions of “professional” as discussed in the present context—that is, expert knowledge plus ethics—constitute the cultural capital of outsiders entering the field of politics. In order to bolster their stocks of this capital, they are given either to denying the term “professional” to others on that field or to denigrating the forms of capital—economic, social and political—that they possess.

If these markers—expert knowledge *cum* ethical code—underpin the discourse of professionalism, how can political discourse proper be distinguished? Here, I rely upon the traits set out by Max Weber in his renowned essay, “Politics as a Vocation” (Weber, [1919] 1946). According to Weber’s conception, political discourse would be state-centered, inasmuch as it expresses, even if obliquely, an interest in power. Power, in turn, must be pursued in order to accomplish some public purpose, but this purpose must itself be tethered to an ethic of responsibility whereby the politician abstracts himself from the political fray in order “to let realities work upon him with inner concentration and calmness. Hence his distance to things and men” (*ibid.*: 115). In so doing, the politician is required to privilege his sense of real, over desired, outcomes, taking a principled responsibility for the actual consequences of his actions and thus avoiding the Sylla of “exploiting ‘ethics’ as a means of being ‘in the right’”, while simultaneously escaping the Charbyrdis of vanity induced by the seductions of power which quashes his sense of social purpose (*ibid.*; 116-118).

Weber cautions that although these aspects of the political might be brought into an imperfect harmony, they individually tend to subvert the enterprise of politics. Just as “it is in the nature of officials with high moral standing to be poor politicians”, so morality’s absence represents “self-intoxication” for the politician, a “sin against the lofty spirit of his vocation” (*ibid.*: 95, 116). Politics thus represents a paradox wherein ethics are required but do not admit

to any universal formulation, wherein truth is mandated but not in any absolute form. Correspondingly, the language of politics is a contingent one that advances strategic interaction by displaying receptivity to difference and conflict while rationalizing their manifestations in ways making it possible to live with these very things (Green, 1987). Political discourse therefore includes elements that are both constitutive and subversive to its enterprise, a tension required to reach decisions taken on an undecidable terrain (Torfing, 1999).

The Discourse of Professionals in Politics

Although discursive strategies built around “professional(ism)” are apparent for that group of respondents entering government from non-political backgrounds, it is particularly pronounced for four members of the sample who worked in the Administration of the President in the mid-1990s under Boris El’tsin. I therefore rely, here, primarily on their responses in order to present a concentrated expression of this discourse, showing how it provides both a claim to cultural capital and, thus, access to the political field and an empty signifier enabling group identity, purpose and action.

Although respondents shifted from one office to another within its various—often reorganized—divisions, I shall treat them all simply as individuals working in the Administration of the President who prepared policy proposals for El’tsin, who were in direct and often daily contact with him, who acted in some matters in his stead while he was ill or otherwise incapacitated (Baturin *et al.* 2001), and who involved themselves directly in the partisan politics of the electoral process.

As described in interviews, their paths to high office were in the main exceptional. One, a

political scientist turned presidential speech writer, joined El'tsin's team during the 1990 election campaign for the Russian Congress of People's Deputies. As described by a member of this group the others were recruited by presidential aides who:

“By the end of 1992 had realized that the situation had spun out of control and that they needed help. From the point of view of career politicians, career *chinovniki*, [a disparaging word for state officials—M.U.] this unstable, unpredictable period required people of another type, intellectuals, to use the Western word, who were able to help reorient [the presidency] in this unstable, unpredictable situation.

In those days there were a lot of public affairs shows on television and I happened to appear quite often on them. El'tsin's people saw me and asked me to join the administration. You see, El'tsin regarded the Seventh Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation [December, 1992—M.U.] as a big defeat for himself and he was unsatisfied with the shape of his team and with the way that they had prepared their moves for this Congress. Hence, the idea arose to form a team of advisors...to put in professionals. So, El'tsin's people began to gather such a team according to the following algorithm: those who appear on public affairs shows on television, those who appear in the press, are publicly acknowledged to be outstanding professionals...They invited such people to the Kremlin for conversations. If the results were positive, they would tell the candidate that they were forming a new presidential team and invite him to join...And they asked these experts if they had someone whom they could recommend...At first, we were simply a council of experts giving advice to the president. But after a while, a number of us took full-time jobs in the Administration of the President....To meet the extraordinary situation, we simply had to gather professionals because of the crisis (C3)”.

Of particular note in these remarks would be the discourse of disinterested expertise underlying the entire recruitment process: the selection of those “publicly regarded to be outstanding professionals”. Placing a premium on such public intellectuals seems to be incongruent with the narrowly political crisis—a legislative backlash, poorly handled, against the government of Egor Gaidar and its policy of “shock therapy”—said to have required the summoning of professional help. Why would this trigger a need to call in outside professionals? What do historians, geographers, economists, ethnicity specialist and so forth know about managing votes in the national legislature?

A second incongruity involves the shifting of positions from experts to *de facto* policy makers in which some in this group reported to be involved. In both instances, “professionalism” refers neither to expert knowledge bearing on matters at hand, nor back to itself as knowledge proper to its own object, because in context such would be irrelevant. Having been thus emptied of content, “professionalism” has become an empty signifier affirming group identity and purpose.

In consonance with the respondent’s emphasis on professionalism, these interviews were peppered with metaphors for the group such as “new brains with new ideas” (C6), a “brain center” and an “intellectual machine” (C5), and a “smart Jew next to the ruler” (C3). They reported being well received by career officials in the government who good-naturedly referred to them as “egg-heads” (C3). One remarked on this by noting that El’tsin would often say to others:

“‘Here are my brains.’ And when he would refer to us as his brains, I could feel this myself. For instance, on one occasion there was a visit by representatives from another state and we were in the receiving line outdoors and it began to rain. Pavel Grachev [Minister of Defense—M.U.] was standing not far from me and came over immediately when the rain started, opening his umbrella. And he said, ‘Please, let me cover you up. We can’t afford to let the brains get wet’” (C1).

Counterposed to these comments on the import of professional knowledge for improving government, a counter-narrative appears in the responses of this group concerning the actual, and problematic, application of that knowledge itself. Although some claimed specific successes, especially on certain matters for which the help of outside experts could also be enlisted to overcome the torpid performances of career officials (C3), a more frequent response suggested a more-or-less constant scramble to try to stay abreast of pressing issues. Rather than working out rational policies for the government to pursue, one member of the group likened himself to a “shoemaker with a lot of clients”. Although he was already overburdened with their orders, he

felt unable to refuse to take on new customers. Thus, he was forced to neglect policy matters and additionally found his efforts hampered by “a deficit of technology in the face of a fantastic number of ongoing problems [that he was required to address. He complained that he] did not have the technology to anticipate them and thus begin to solve these problems before they had created a storm around us” (C3).

One of his colleagues lamented generally the conditions prevailing in the Administration of the President noting that:

“On one hand, the presence of new brains, unburdened by any kind of Communist notions, was a good thing. But on the other hand, it was very bad because these people were completely not organizationally oriented [*ne apparatnye*] and they didn’t know how to write proper documents [*kachestvennye apparatnye bumagi*]. And they were unable to write documents on time. So this machine composed of new people—at any rate, at the top—who were not professional *chinovniki*, was unable to work effectively. At lower levels there were some representatives of the old apparatus. They grumbled, and they would do some things which were organizationally competent. But by their nature they simply didn’t understand what was expected of them” (C6).

This predicament—professionals in charge who lacked the skills to manage their respective situations—was also iterated obliquely by professional economists who had served in the reform government of the early 1990s:

- “You can’t study how the political process is constructed under the conditions of the collapse of one regime and the absence of institutions in another. You won’t read about this in books. My experience shows that books don’t teach everything” (B8).
- “Many things were dictated not by some abstract economic theory or by the Chicago School of [Milton] Friedman—although they had christened us the “Chicago boys”—but simply by concrete situations” (B9).

Despite the fact that three of the four respondents who had worked in the Administration of the President explicitly opposed professionalism to politics, their comments nonetheless gestured toward the necessity of having a “feel for the game” of politics (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984)

that they had not appreciated earlier. One put it this way:

“The work is hard. Very hard. Because every day you must somehow give recommendations on a very big number of questions that you haven’t always sorted out by a long shot. This is inescapable. If these are your duties, you must be not so much an expert in a certain field, but more of a systems expert, *being able to feel intuitively what’s important, what’s not, or to what to direct your attention and what not to*. This is fatiguing. It’s hard particularly when you’re not accustomed to it. Overall, there is this intellectual assembly line [*konveier*] that doesn’t stop for a minute and is impossible to escape” (C6).

The lacuna for the professional in government can be filled, these remarks indicate, by acquiring the same political capacities that the discourse of professionalism itself constructs *in opposition to* the professional’s identity. Two other members of this group reported having similar experiences.

“After [leaving government service], and filling the gaps in my education, I now understand things that could have helped me then. I’ll give you a concrete example. One of my jobs concerned the problem of corruption in Russia. And when I joined El’tsin’s administration, mine was an absolutely common-sense, everyday concept of corruption...So I invited to my office the first deputy heads of all the force-wielding agencies: the Procuracy, the MVD, the FSK (now it’s called the FSB). And I asked them whether they knew about that operation in the USA at the end of the ‘70s when FBI agents, posing as Arab sheiks, caught out a number of senators. A scandal ensued, and a day of reckoning, after which a more-or-less serious anti-corruption policy was begun in the USA. ‘What do you think?’ I asked, ‘Could we conduct a similar operation in Russia?’ They began to huddle together, exchanging glances. Then they began to say that, of course, this would be good, but it would contravene [existing] legislation. And they all looked so dejected, that I quickly began to understand: they are not so much looking for the means to solve a problem as they are arguments not to solve it” (C3).

Similarly, one of his colleagues lamented that:

“We were all creative people but we completely were unable to do the organizational work that would put our projects into some kind of concrete practice... Now I know how I should have conducted myself. I had enormous opportunities. I had a huge, four-window office with a view of the Kremlin. And all the *chinovniki* were very afraid of the Presidential Council, because the president was very closed off, and we often met with him one-to-one. And they all thought we could request apartments from him, pay raises and, the main thing, we could get him to sign a complaint against the Rector of Moscow University or

any other big official like that which would remove him from office straight away...The *chinovniki* thought that we could do this quite easily and so our abilities to influence them were enormous. But I didn't use them...When you go up to a *chinovnik* and say that something is important for the country...well. No, you tell him about his personal place in the project that you're proposing. If you are thinking about the interests of the country, then be so good as to convince the *chinovnik*. That is the direct path to success. And this isn't cynicism, it's right" (C5).

These remarks suggest another notion of professionalism present in the narratives of many respondents: professional politics as know-how, a capacity for political-administrative management and direction. Some, such as B9, in remarks quoted, above, seemed to fuse it with a concomitant emphasis a substantive expertise, but B9 admitted that he and his associates "never understood the rules of bureaucratic play". Nor do they seem to have been much disposed to do so because entering that world would constitute a direct threat to the professional identities constituted by their discourse and the influence—based on knowledge and disinterestedness—provided them in the political world by maintaining that posture. Thus, these political outsiders continued to distance themselves from politics. Adopting a relatively mild version of this discourse, one respondent remarked that:

"Politics is a rather boring profession in normal times. There's nothing interesting about sitting in the Duma from day to day with nothing going on. Or sitting in the government. It's all humdrum. And that's politics in any country—Denmark, Sweden or contemporary Russia...Politics [means] in general from whom to take money and with whom to share it out. Of course, there are people who like to do this, but I myself don't relate to such things" (B5).

Adding a somewhat sharper edge, another disclaimed an interest in present-day politics owing to its bureaucratization:

"Today, the political and the bureaucratic-administrative are indivisible. If two ministers are quarrelling about their spheres of competence—a purely bureaucratic flap—then all the newspapers will be writing about political contradictions. That is, they'll call that political. And against that backdrop real politics has simply gone. It doesn't exist because the institutions are not arguing with one another. [Political] parties more contend over bureaucratic things—who

gets what post? Who pushes himself forward?—and not about the actuality of their activities” (C4).

With yet a sharper edge to his comments, a third respondent regarded professional politics in Russia generally as some prideful cynicism indifferent to any moral limits:

“Concerning abstract human values, say, the Ten Commandments, well today this doesn’t work. Moreover, that would appear strange and at times would come into conflict with loyalty to your own group. Not to steal budget monies when your group is in position to do so—this means to appear before it as disloyal...Politics now is cynical. I have the sense that politicians take pride in this cynicism. Along these lines even a term has been thought up: ‘He’s a good professional’...This is absolutely technological thinking: I see the goal and I don’t see impediments...We have a job to do. I have resources. I effectively deploy them to achieve the goal. And to do that, we’ll say, I lie. But that’s the technology! Today I was saying one thing, tomorrow [it will be] another. The ensemble of these ‘professional’ activities is politics. It means that politics is a dirty thing...And the end results are all dirt” (C6).

These remarks reference a graft of moral discourse onto that of professionalism, resulting in a sharp distinction between “real” professionals and “political” professionals for whom *lying* is a part of their technology. However, those relying on this discourse of professionalism sometimes would abandon moral concerns when speaking of actual political events in which they were involved. For example, two respondents who had served in the Administration of the President called particular attention to the political burdens shouldered by Boris El’tsin in protecting them and others from public criticism (C1; C5). As one of them remarked:

“When El’tsin said, ‘If the cost is increased, I will lie on the railroad tracks’, he was sacrificing his own reputation in order to provide protection [*kryshu*] to the unpopular reforms. Having begun with huge popular approval, he left office with an approval rating of almost zero...He shielded them [his government] with his own enormous authority, often simply indulging in direct lies. He was required to do so because in politics, more often than in other spheres, a situation arises in which you must tell untruths for the benefit of a great cause” (C5).

These comments are an instance of code switching. They illustrate how actors sometimes draw on an opposing discourse in order to make sense of things around them. Importantly, here

they are directed toward another actor, El'tsin, and consequently do not impugn the identity of the professional in politics for whom the discourse of professionalism remains central.

As one member of the Administration of the President put it:

“We spoke with the president without a hidden agenda for our own careers, but said what we thought, based on our knowledge and experience. In this respect there is a peculiar effect: there are, for instance, scholarly ethics and a scholar in his own sphere cannot transgress against the principles of scholarly ethics. As a professional, I cannot lie. As a matter of fact, this translates into politics. I am unable to be cunning. I thought that sending the army to Chechnya would be harmful, and I said so. [Respondent then named three colleagues in the Administration of the President who did likewise and referred to ‘others’ there who also did so—M.U.]. And this is not so much [a matter of] political ethics but a continuation of scholarly ethics and their moral principles” (C3).

Remarks such as these might be interpreted as discursive strategies aimed to husband the cultural capital of professionals in politics by valorizing truth-telling, a form of that disinterestedness from which their cultural capital in part derives. They seem to be saying that they care not to advance their fortunes by telling others—especially power—what they might want to hear. They do not disguise the truth because of some interest; they tell the truth precisely because they are disinterested.

The Discourse of Professional Politics

The obverse side of self-described disinterestedness among professionals in politics would be represented, of course, by the imputation of base motives and/or nefarious acts to others, especially to professional politicians. In the sample such disparaging comments on the profession of politics were—with two exceptions—confined to those in the El'tsin administrations and to the oppositional democrats.

One of these exceptions executed a conceptual reversal of the negative stereotype of the

political professional, waxing abstractly but rhapsodically about such an individual's exceptional skills and qualities and thus fashioning him as an imagined replacement for the flesh-and-blood professional politicians of today.¹ The other, who served in the first El'tsin government, had been active in the dissident movement during Soviet times, an experience that had impressed on him the fecklessness of moral rigidity in conducting practical political affairs once he had become a state official. He noted that:

“a politician bears a responsibility other than morality, and people who enter politics need rather different qualities. All the time they are required to take decisions that have no basis in morality enabling them to evaluate and choose. All the time they have to weight things. And it is senseless to evaluate the conduct simply on moral grounds. That's the conclusion that I reached...But there is a threshold that one mustn't cross. In particular, one mustn't apply torture and so on. But what can you do with that theory? Who will listen to you? If a terrorist falls into the hands of the Federal Security Services, and they know that this person has knowledge about a bomb set to explode in two hours, will they torture him? They will. If they didn't, they would be sacked for being unprofessional and guilty for those who perished.” (B2)

Those from the Gorbachev and Putin cohorts tended to see things comparably. For example, one from the Gorbachev group configured professionalism and morality around goals, “not according to the process of decision making [wherein lies are told or personal agendas pursued] but according to the actual results and effects of decisions on the polity”. Drawing on the example of the First Chechen War, he argued that:

“Any war in Chechnya is disgraceful and dishonourable...El'tsin unleashed this war in Chechnya when he could have just tried to understand Dudaev [his opponent, Chechnya's then-president—M.U.]. He could have called Dudaev and said, ‘Listen, you're a mountaineer! You're an honorable man. (A mountaineer is an honorable man, right?). Well, let's get together and think a bit about why you have to leave [the Russian Federation]. What do you think, for what? This isn't necessary. Let's put our heads together.’ He could have solved it all. But instead of healing his nose, he cut it off. And his people said, ‘In two days we'll solve the whole problems with one regiment.’ That's what they did upstairs—well. How to say it?—they took an unprofessional, immoral decision so casually.” (A4)

Another member of that cohort, describing his past self as a professional politician, recounted the Gorbachev team's efforts to undo the "totalitarianism and dogmatism" that had dogged the Soviet Union, only to be pushed aside by El'tsin's reformers dogmatically insisting on their total plan for an immediate rush into a market economy. He then likened the Putin regime to Russia's last tsar who wrote in his diary on the day of the Revolution that swept him from power that

"the sky is blue, the birds are singing and things are fine all around. And at the front, things are likewise more or less okay...Although I am an opponent of the authorities, I would very much hope that they can pass through the terrible ordeal brought about by prosperous times, when the feeling begins to take shape that all is going well. This is particularly [problematic] when all of the mass media—which they've taken into their own hands—are saying the same thing, and with the agreement with the entire parliament and Council of the Federation, with the agreement of all the governors—this is a huge, colossal danger...Who was it who said, 'If it seems to you that all goes well, then there's something that you haven't noticed'? I have just that sense, that the Russian leadership has convinced itself that everything's fine and has created just this situation of complacency, this rot in every crevice...They criticize [the authorities] for not permitting freedom of speech, which is bad for people because they then can't express themselves. And that's all true. But that's not the most terrible danger. The most terrible one lies in the fact that they have deprived themselves of an objective perception of the situation, the one that they're actually in." (A2)

This suspension of the play of politics was emphasized by a third member of this group as necessarily resulting in "stupidity...For a politician must have a strong character and intellectual flexibility." He went on to say that a politician has:

"the ability to calculate his moves, like a chess player, and to find non-standard solutions, like a poet who is having trouble finding the right rhyme...The most paradoxical thing is that diplomacy [the field in which the respondent had worked—M.U.] must be honest, but that doesn't mean that everything gets said or said just so. It doesn't mean to lie, but more like holding back [certain things]. The parties to negotiations must understand one another and one another's goals and interests, otherwise progress is impossible." (A1)

Noteworthy here would be the metaphorical construction of politics distinguishing these respondents' concept of the political from those of the professionals in politics. If the latter's

understanding takes its cues from their backgrounds in the academic world whose discourse emphasizes knowledge and truth, those from the Gorbachev cohort draw on the metaphors of play. This is particularly evident in the remarks of A1, likening a politician to a chess player, or to a poet looking for unusual solutions in his prosody. But it is likewise apparent in A4's remarks about the politician's duty to understand his opponent and to approach him in the most advantageous way, suggesting the critical importance of a "feel for the game". Moreover, A2's emphasis on competition in the political arena as something necessary to avoid blindness and blunders leading to great tragedy also reflects this "feel for the game" characteristic of the discourse of this group.

The comments from the Putin cohort generally tended to dovetail with those in the Gorbachev group with respect to politics as a profession unto itself. But they also had something of a sharper edge to them, perhaps reflecting more the rough-and-tumble world of contemporary Russian milieu rather than the relative refinement of the perestroika era. Echoing the abstract remarks of one in the Gorbachev group that politics is principally a struggle for power (A4), one member of the Putin cohort concretized the "facts of political life" in some detail, mentioning horse-trading, intimidation and the use of raw power, itself. He displayed no apprehension in so doing, regarding these *political* phenomena as "normal" (E4).

Another described politics as "a profession, like a taxi-driver or a journalist" and in vivid contrast to those from the El'tsin sample uncoupled moral principles from professional ones, arguing that it is individuals rather than professions that are moral or immoral. Thus for a professional politician, he allowed that morals may have to be sacrificed in order to accomplish the basic purpose of the profession itself: namely, to get "results" (E5).

Results, in turn, are governed by criteria specific to the profession of politics. As if

echoing Weber's concept of "distance to things and men", he noted that:

"the main thing in politics is the ability to find agreement [with others]. I am two different persons in politics and in [everyday] life. That is, in life I am impulsive, sometimes uncompromising, and often emotions get the upper hand over reason. But all the same in politics for me it's just the reverse. I know very well that you can't give in to emotions, you can't let emotions govern your head...Politics, then, is the ability to walk between the raindrops, to walk through the raindrops and stay dry."(E5)

A third member of this cohort called attention to the importance of abstracting oneself from immediate conditions in order to achieve success in politics.

"It has been my job to advance the causes of very different people: democrats and non-democrats...practically the entire spectrum of actors whose names have been on the first pages of the press. But when representing their interests I have tried to never profit from acquaintance with them nor from the fact that I'm working for their cause...But you can't explain this as altruism, it's just a condition of successful work. And nothing more." (E2)

He went on to point out that politics is a process "entirely transpiring through groups of people, groups of interests". Unlike stable societies where these groups are known to others, in Russia they all function "within closed regimes, and this is well known...Unanticipated groups, unexpected teams or sub-teams might arise [at any time] pursuing their own interests [and thus making] the course of political life unknown and unpredictable" (E2). He noted that this confusion is characteristic of the legislative process with which he is involved.

"My work involves concrete texts, bringing them to life in society, building the Russian state. There is, you see, a closed process of evaluation that goes on, in particular, in this office. While the words only lie on paper, there is a process by which they are interpreted...what, for instance, goes out in the press or what political commentators have to say. Sometimes the thought that you have inserted comes out completely otherwise in public [discussions] of politics...And it is an absolute lie [to assert] that the activity of the Duma is predetermined [by the Kremlin]. I know the activities of the Duma from the inside...Legal drafts are birthed in the Duma, and 723 other people with the right of legislative initiative who introduce them and battle for their drafts. There are a lot of contradictions in these texts and they have to be resolved. The process is interesting...Of course there is an absence of time [for all of this], things, people move very fast with no time simply to sit awhile and think. [Consequently] this very often leads to a

superficial solution to problems and therefore to so many harsh policy decisions that have a negative influence on the fate of many people. And simply legislators have not had the opportunity to speak with others and understand the opposing point of view...So I think that for whatever reason in a given situation [there may be] an absence of flexibility, and you have to search for the reason in yourself...There is an element of self-love that exists in every person: the main thing is how to control it and not to make out yourself to be something great.”(E2)

The construction of a profession of politics by those in the Putin cohort much resembles the discourse of those in the Gorbachev group, just as it sets them apart from the orientation of El'tsin's disinterested experts. On one hand, they portray politics as a tricky process (“to walk between the raindrops”) surrounded by uncertainty and unpredictability, not unlike the “feel-for-the-game” orientation of the perestroika-era respondents. This seems a far cry, indeed, from those coming to politics from academic backgrounds who confess a lack of understanding of these matters and who perceived things through the prism of their own professional life such that the quest for certainty—both factual and moral—structures their narratives.

On the other hand, members of the Putin group, again like those from Gorbachev's time, seem relatively reconciled to the imperfections in the process itself. In contrast both to the opposition democrats and to those from academic backgrounds who had joined El'tsin's government, they do not valorize truth and morality as consummate standards for assessing political action, suggesting their reliance on political, rather than on cultural, capital. They call attention to negative features of the political process and express concern for making improvements in it, but what seems to distinguish them from all others in the sample is that with a single exception², one finds no trace in their narratives of the notion that the state is required to achieve some larger social purpose. Unlike seventeen of their Gorbachev and El'tsin-era counterparts who did so explicitly, they tend not to organize their narratives around the idea of a state-directed project—*perestroika* or reform—whose success can be measured in social

improvements. Rather Putin-era respondents concur only in part. As one member of the Gorbachev team put it, it means a combination of “know-how”, “cynicism” and a conscience guided by “the goal attainment of moral ends” (A1).

But for the Putin-era group, political identities seem not to hinge on social projects. Commenting on this matter, one respondent argued that currently “we have no image of the future. No one is even thinking about it. Now, more often, we just have images of the past” (C4). Along those lines, the remarks of two respondents from the Putin-era cohort are instructive:

•”...a market economy is a necessity [for Russia]. To make this practical means to adapt it to Russian circumstances which, above all, means to study the experience of our own people—an experience which is certainly filled with prejudices and shortcomings. But we must study that history, not ignore it. The main thing is to understand that we are doing this not for the sake of the West, not for the sake of making America happy, but are following in the footsteps of Peter the First and Katherine the Second who emulated the West for the sake of Russia...[So we must] speak about these things in a way that can form a consensus around Putin’s point of view. Consensus is more important than voting, because in Russia you have *sobornost’* [a mystical communion of the population—M.U.] as a form of democracy. Leaders are not really free but exist within the framework of definite representations. To depart from that framework is to destroy the program.” (E3)

•”One must lean on the old...on the experience of the Soviet Union and a thousand years of Russia. On our traditions such as communalism, mutual aid and collectivism...Even if one wanted to transplant to Protestant ethic to our soil, it wouldn’t work...Our tradition is that the state is mama and papa. That’s good or bad; but it’s our tradition!” (E5)

Thus it seems for exponents that the discourse of politics see themselves as living in the here-and-now, rather than in some imagined future. They are in the game and it is the game that constructs their identities as “professional politicians”.

Conclusion

This discussion of professionalism and politics leads to two principal conclusions: (1) that there appears to have been at least two distinct discourses prevailing among Russia's political class from the *perestroika* period to the present; and (2) that over this same period, a revolution—in the original sense of that term (Arendt, [1963] 1982)—has occurred whereby things, having left their earlier state, have after an interlude returned to it. Taking these points in order, it is possible to identify both a discourse employed by professionals in politics and political discourse proper. The major terms in each, and their mutual oppositions are set out in Table 1. The columns in the table are constructed as binaries in order to illustrate the pure forms of each discursive structure.

Table 1. Analytic Distinctions between the Discourse of Professionals in Politics and the Discourse of Professional Politicians

<u>Discourse of Professionals in Politics</u>	<u>Discourse of Professional Politicians</u>
substantive knowledge	know-how
process-situated ethics	results-oriented ethics
problem solving	problem managing
order bringing	disorder negotiated
social purpose emphasized	social context emphasized
must be oneself	must abstract from oneself

However, as this study has shown, respondents—although relying primarily on one of these discourses—tend to shift on occasion to the other one. That result at the narrative level does not cancel discursive differences. It merely records the fact that at least two discourses are available to members of the political class and that they sometimes draw from both.

The play of these discourses in Russian politics and their predominance among one or another section of political actors reflects the various capitals deployed on the field of politics: cultural capital based on expert knowledge and ethics among professionals in politics, and political capital pertinent to professional politicians according to which know-how and results are paramount. Consequently, those whose claim to, or on, power is based on cultural capital emphasize both the social purpose intended by their actions (disinterestedness) and the embodied aspect of that capital itself. *They must be themselves*, true to their professional standards and ethics.

For professional politicians, however, these same vectors tend to be reversed. Doing politics seems to be uppermost for them and, at critical junctures this requires that *they not be themselves*. These two forms of capital also appear to account for the differing social ontologies pertinent to these discourses. Whereas for professionals in politics the world is composed of problems that they have been commissioned to solve as well as disorder that they have been summoned to set aright, for professional politicians imperfection attends the world around them. Problems can be contained, minimized, managed, but not eradicated; disorder to one degree or another is a constant with which one must reckon.

The presence of these competing discourses on Russia's political field provides ample room for misunderstanding among political actors and tends to amplify animosities among them. Take for instance the question of social purpose. All those who worked in either the first or second El'tsin administration are identified with its principal domestic program, the introduction of capitalism. This reform was legitimized by the cultural capital of the reformers themselves: "professional economics" (Lvov and Leont'ev, 1991; Leont'ev, 1991). But they also appended a paradoxical moral component to it. In the words of an oppositional democrat:

“These people, [Egor] Gaidar and his team, were above all anti-communists. They therefore approached their politics in an explicitly *amoral* way. Why amoral? Because they regarded all the misfortunes and calamities of communism as stemming from its attempt to fulfill a moral program with the use of state power. They would say: “When the discussion concerns morals in politics, it smells of the concentration camp.” (D1)

From the perspective of professionals in power, there is a certain, albeit paradoxical, logic at work here; *viz.*, accomplish a social purpose—the creation of capitalism—which must, for morality’s sake, be pursued outside of any moral considerations. This logic, however, does not translate into political discourse in which contingency, uncertainty and, in the end, morality all enter. Pursuing such an agenda invites others to take umbrage, as the above-quoted remarks would suggest.

At first blush, then, the debilitating problems of communication evident in post-Soviet politics (Urban, 1994b, 1998, 2006) appear to stem from the eclipse of the political by the professional and its incommensurable companion, morality. Not only is communication distorted by the fact that the same signifier—“professional”—is used to connote very different signifiers, but opposing codes induce mutual blame-laying against opponents. “Look what they claim to be doing here [as *I decode* their statements], and then look at what they have actually done.”

Yet as important as it may be to record the results of this eclipse of politics, it would be foolish either to hold culpable those who favor a moral interpretation of the political world or to exonerate those ostensibly employing a purely political discourse in which truth and morality are relative values. Relative to what? Were those in power to set up a collection of rules—however one-sided—and then, out of self-interest, proceed to violate those same rules with impunity, then there would be clear grounds for insisting on accountability and accusing power of illegal actions.³ Those accusations would, in the end, draw on a moral discourse of fairness and, according to Weber, be nonetheless political for it. It may be that the actions of those in power

are sufficiently reprehensible to demand moral censure, in which case one would be speaking the language of politics, too.

The second conclusion of import that can be drawn from the analysis presented, here, concerns a return to political discourse, proper, after the hiatus of the El'tsin years. That is, the Gorbachev and Putin cohorts distinguish themselves from the other three groups in the sample by featuring in their narratives the discursive elements present in the right-hand column of Table 1, while the other groups employ to a greater degree the elements listed in the left-hand column.

On one hand, this return to political discourse signals a normalization that had been interrupted or suspended by the language of “reforms” in the El'tsin years, and its attendant groups of professionals in politics who had framed their identities and roles as bringers of expert knowledge and professional ethics to the affairs of state. Within the scope of their discourse, citizens appear simply as passive recipients of the presumed benefactions bestowed on them by professionals. On the other hand, however, citizens neither occupy a more prominent space nor are they accorded much agency in the narratives of either the Gorbachev or Putin cohorts. At most, they appear as constituents with whom politicians in the Putin era sometimes converse (*E4*; *E5*), or as an undifferentiated “people” whose welfare is the responsibility of the politician to protect (*E3*).

To be sure, there are other aspects of the narratives of the Putin cohort that speak to political questions: a recognition of conflict as a normal feature of political life, the perception of ethics as situational; a tolerance for ambiguity such that one can continue to pursue goals in the face of resistance and disorder and to expect that those goals will be only imperfectly realized. Nonetheless, the tendency in their narratives to exclude mention of the citizenry and a public purpose toward which they strive would, by Weber's measure, reflect an incompleteness of

Russia's political transition in a practical sense.

This finding would call into question both the conceptualization and empirical results of much of the work on Russian political culture reported in the post-Soviet period.⁴ Guided by the notion of “democratization”, many scholars adopted the view that both elites and masses were learning a new political code and that they were in the process of internalizing democratic values. Richard Anderson (2001:97), for example, has argued that democratization has consisted of “a new elite political discourse [that] converges on the ordinary language of the people formerly excluded from political activity... [D]emocracy emerges when political discourse changes from linguistic cues that isolate the elite from the people to linguistic cues that merge the elite into the people.”

Underlying this viewpoint seem to be two assumptions that distinguish it from the one that I have adopted, here: namely, that the political world is composed of pre-existing subjects who respond to linguistic cues on the basis, in this case, of an ordinary language that they already possess; and, secondly, that change has proceeded as a linear process in the direction of democratization. In contrast to the methodological individualism represented in the first assumption, I have chosen a discourse-centered method whereby subjects are constituted by the discourse(s) informing their “self”-expression. On this tack, it becomes possible to distinguish the idea of social subjects—those employing a given discourse—from that of individuals said to possess certain values or ideas.⁵ As such, a variety of subjects can be imagined depending upon the variety of discourses in circulation. This point, then, would undermine the notion of linearity that has informed the bulk of studies on Russian political culture in the transition period, and open up the possibility of another directionality for the process of change.

In an earlier study (Urban, 1996), I have advanced a cyclical model of change in Russian

political discourse that locates the impetus for a discursive elaboration of “the new” in the thematization of problems associated with “the old”. Accordingly, the communicative blockages associated with doctrinaire communism were to be removed by the discourse of *perestroika* that not only subverted the old order but led to an intolerable discursive pluralism extinguished for practical purposes by El’tsin’s 1993 *coup d’etat*.

Thereafter, a search was begun for a new, uniform, public discourse, an official ideology that would return political life to a state resembling that which existed prior to *perestroika* (Urban, 1998). The closing of this cycle appears to be under way at present in the form of a new doctrine of “sovereign democracy” advanced by the Putin regime. The cycle, itself, appears to be reflected in the interview results reported, here, that show a comparable discourse in use for the Gorbachev- and Putin-era cohorts that distinguish them from the discursive structures employed by the other groups in the sample.

To date, Russian political discourse may not have come full-circle, back to the stifling uniformity and manifest absurdity of an all-embracing state ideology such as Marxism-Leninism. But that seems to be the direction, all the same.⁶ Traces of that tendency appear in the discourse exhibited by the Putin group in this study. Their remarks evince a political managerialism whose subjects have developed exclusionary codes structuring their communication on public matters. There seems to be little, if any, room for the citizenry in their narratives. For instance, although all five of the Putin-era respondents are members of the State Duma, not one interpreted the question about personal relations in politics as having anything to do with constituents. Thus, while some elements of the political are more apparent in their narratives than they are in those of the other four cohorts in the sample, these narratives nonetheless record the distance in Russian political life separating state from society.

Notes

¹ The exception is *B4* who himself had entered politics from an academic background. His construction of the “professional politician”, however, seems to betray that background itself inasmuch as it concerns not the present political class but a new species of political actor required by the conditions of the twenty-first century. For *B4*, then, the professional politician must display “developed, cultured thinking” and have a developed feeling for artistic imagination”. Furthermore, s/he must have “the talent to be liked, to attract attention and sympathy [plus] the ability to take responsibility under conditions in which others would not...[S/he] must be a political sage, a *politosoph*.”

² The person in question, *E3*, may be the exception that shows the rule. Both a background as an anarchist activist and, later, as a labor-oriented politician, provide him with the credentials that he brings to the governing party, United Russia, as the leader of its left wing.

³ Examples of such practices in Russian politics are legion. For illustrations from the first elections to the Duma in 1993, see Urban (1994); for illustrations from the presidential election of 1996, see Urban (1997).

⁴ For a summary of some of this work, see Fleron (1996).

⁵ For a comparable approach applying discourse analysis to post-communist Poland and Russia, see Kubik (2003).

⁶ The new state ideology of “sovereign democracy” is founded on the idea that government officials can, must and increasingly do embody the interests of the whole society in reconstituting Russian statehood. See: Garadzha (2006) and Pavlovskii (2007).

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