"I NEVER HAD A POLITICAL CAREER"

RUSSIAN POLITICAL ACTORS ON POLITICS AND MORALITY

Michael Urban
University of California, Santa Cruz

The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research
2601 Fourth Avenue
Suite 310
Seattle, WA 98121

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Executive Summary

This study concerns political ethics. It is based on 34 interviews conducted over the period from spring 2005 to summer 2006 with prominent members of Russia's political class: government ministers (including a prime and deputy prime ministers), leaders of political parties, deputies of the State Duma, officials in the Administration of the President, and others. Each respondent was asked a series of general, open-ended questions designed to tap his or her basic conceptions of politics in Russia. One of the questions directly concerned "the role of moral principles in politics", but interview subjects themselves introduced moral issues at many turns during the interview process.

The focus on morality, here, represents one aspect of a larger research project intended to map and to analyze the interiors of leading political actors in Russia. The tack taken has been to treat as texts the transcribed recordings of interview narratives and to search for those discourses that inform or structure the texts. The present study begins by juxtaposing two such discourses concerned with constraining the arbitrary use of political power: discourses of law and morality. It then moves to an examination of morality exclusively, inasmuch as that factor was much more thematized by respondents. In this respect, it discovers that, for Russia's political class, morality is not all of a piece. Rather different, even opposing, versions of morality prevail among members of loosely drawn sub-sets in the sample: members of the Gorbachev administration (all of whom are labelled *A*, plus a number identifying each individual); the first (1991-1993) and second (1993-1997) El'tsin administrations (whose members are labelled, respectively, *B* and *C*, each with an identifying number); the democratic opposition (members of the political party, Yabloko, labelled D, plus a reference number); and individuals identified with the Putin administration (labelled E, plus a reference number). In conclusion, an interpretation and a (very

abbreviated) explanation are ventured in order to account for discursive patterns evident in the texts.

Introduction

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Law and Morality

In general terms, the interview narratives identified two means of restricting arbitrary political activity: one presupposes the existence of a formal, institutional order articulated in legal relations; the other references some established moral code. Against each of these is opposed an informal, personalized world often characterized as a Hobbesian free-for-all wherein networks of political associates represent actual political relations while legal or moral structures are, at most, something to be manipulated or circumvented. With respect to legal relations, one respondent contrasted contemporary Russia with: "stable societies that already function according to external principles inserted into their matrices such that the standard rules of conduct play a big role. Therefore, in such places, personal relations may not be so important [as here in Russia] inasmuch as there is some standard of conduct which you are obliged to observe." (*E*2)

Law, as such a standard of conduct, has not enjoyed a particularly commendable reputation in Russian culture. Viewing the matter through the prism of the national literature, Yurii Lotman (1992) has noted that the category, law, connotes a dry and impersonal basis for human relations that exist in sharp contrast to human qualities such as love and compassion. Thus, *law* appears in binary relation with its other, *morality*, while the notion of *politics* is negatively conjoined to *piety*. Within the cultural system described by Lotman, then, both law and politics have historically occupied the space of the alien or the negative, opposed to—rather

than coincident with—society's conception of the good. Taking firstly the role of law, a number of respondents directly referred to its irrelevance in Russian government and politics. Here is a sample of their comments:

- "Our work in the Auditing Chamber showed that in our country civilized institutions for controlling power can work, and work effectively but, for building the [entire] state, one, two or three well placed bricks are insufficient. If all the remaining elements of the legal system—procuracy, courts—don't work, then the information that we produced just disappeared and wasn't demanded by society." (*D*2)

- "I won't name the minister who in his day staggered me by the fact that not only had he not read a law governing his sphere of authority but he didn't even know that it existed. And when he learned of it, he still had no desire to read it and to find out what had been written there…For the minister his legal position was altogether unimportant for his work. For him, the system of personal contacts was enormously more important." (*C*4)

- "We have a state apparatus. If today the law were strictly applied to these *chinovniki* [a disparaging term for a bureaucrat—M.U.] then surely every second one would come in for either criminal or administrative punishment." (*E*5)

- Corruption is born in the normative acts [laws—M.U.] themselves—imprecise rules, the arbitrary power of the *chinovniki* [coded as] "at your discretion." (*B*10)

The only positive comments about law in Russia registered in the interviews came from three individuals involved with the legislative process. One mentioned a very effective law on the mass media passed by the old Supreme Soviet (*C*4); another recounted a number of socially important laws passed by the Duma in which he had a major hand, but noted that most of them were either weakened or cancelled by subsequent legislation (*D*4); a third also referred to his authorship of beneficial legislation but noted how the terms of these laws were often radically reinterpreted in their implementation (*E*2). Given the negligible importance assigned to law by those in the sample for establishing a standard of social and political conduct, this study will

focus on morality as a culturally more resonant route to restraining arbitrary and rapacious political power.

Moralists

The perceived importance of morality in the affairs of government and politics was articulated by one member of the sample thusly:

> "Amorality, which ascended the throne in our society after 1991, is one of the basic and most difficult of our problems. The second is absolute disrespect for law. But amorality is even more [important] because morality is seminal, it is fundamental in Russia. In Russia, where the law has never mattered much, we nonetheless have attempted to live according to moral principles. But the basic problem in particular of the reform decade [the 1990s—M.U.] has been a militant, celebratory and licensed amorality." (*A*3)

Morality, then, is regarded as a force that might compensate for the weakness or absence of law. But the problem does not end there. The culture's reception of morality also seems to admit to a binary formation. In the words of another respondent:

> "In Russian politics, we have very strange traditions: there is this strange mixture of extreme idealism and extreme cynicism. In the first place a real politician must be a grand leader [*vozhdem*], he must forget about himself and think about others. But on the other hand [you'll hear] "And what are they doing?! They have all sold themselves out a long time ago. They're all scumbags [*svolochi*]." This is completely absurd and thus it seems to me that there is a lesson here." (*C*5)

As if elaborating on this double-sense of morality in politics—"extreme idealism and extreme cynicism"—another respondent said the following:

> "A working commission was convened by the Supreme Soviet and members of El'tsin's government to overcome legislative resistance to the proposed plan for privatization. The Agrarian Party until then had militantly opposed the government's plan. [Anatolii] Chubais [representing the government—M.U.] said to the agrarians: 'You have wanted us to write something in here for you?' (They had in mind the privatization of the rural reprocessing industry.) 'We'll write that in for you.' After this, the agrarians got up and left. And the majority of

> them who had been backing the Supreme Soviet's position switched sides and joined the government's position on all the other measures in the plan. I was terribly mortified and I swore at them: 'How immoral! We must stick together. You got your bit only because we have all stuck together. You got yours then you just toss off everyone else'…They have this peasant trait. Immoral? Difficult to say. I then understood how they understand their own interests…If you encounter such a thing which you internally perceive as moral, it means that you simply understand poorly why one or another person does what he does. It was you who didn't think it through, who didn't understand. That is, you are the more guilty if you have such problems." (*C*4)

Perhaps the key phrases in these remarks are "such a thing which you internally understand as moral"—a marker for idealism—and "you simply understand poorly why one or another person does what he does"—an acknowledgement of the other's cynicism and a caution to expect just that in the world.

Those in the present sample seemed overwhelmingly to associate political activity with cynicism and immoral behaviour. Indeed, that negative evaluation of politics might explain why twelve of the 34 individuals in the sample—among them, government ministers (including a prime minister and a deputy prime minister), a deputy leader of a political party, deputies in the national legislature, and directors of policy-making organs in the Administration of the President—in one way or another denied that they had had political careers. Moreover, four other respondents, who did not eschew identification with past or present activity, claimed either to have been coaxed into it by others or, in one case, to have entered the political arena because of the death of his mother, a trauma that he linked to the consequences of the economic reform of the early 1990s that propelled him into politics in order to protect the weak.

A characteristic shared by nine individuals denying that they had political careers, and by two of those claiming to have been dragooned by others into one, consists in the fact that they had already established academic careers before involving themselves in government and politics. However, fourteen others in the sample with comparable backgrounds did not reject the

notion that they have/had been politically active, thus indicating that those denying such involvement were signalling more than the fact that they had entered politics through the passageway of the academy. Rather, they explicitly argued that political activity was something that they had shunned because it was dirty, depraved or morally repugnant. To one extent or another, nearly all individuals acknowledged the accuracy of that assessment. In the words of one respondent:

> "At bottom, people who go into politics do not do so to achieve some national or worldwide goals, but do so because they can acquire power over other people. Even worse, some do it just to utilize that power to make money…They go into politics just to use power for large-scale theft. [For instance those from Yukos] paid not only deputies of the State Duma, not only members of the Council of the Federation, not only governors, but members of the government and members of the Administration of the President. And they managed to gain access even to the FSB…This is terrible. For the sake of enrichment, to privatize the state?" (*D*1)

In those of another:

> "As the elite formed [in the mid-1990s], new criteria [for political success] emerged—it became especially important to have the support of politico-financial groups. A politician had to have dirty hands, had to steal and so forth so that his boss could keep a personal file on him in his safe. That way, he would be obedient...All notable posts must be occupied by people on whom—like in the days of [J.E.]Hoover—there is a dossier." (*B*10)

Statements such as these underscoring the venal aspects of politics represent a semantic reversal that might be read as: "I am calling attention to this because things *should not be* this way. Politics *should* be moral." As such, these views locate our speakers within a broader consensus on the essential importance of morality to political life. Although that perspective is certainly not confined to Russian political subjects, the frequency and intensity with which this concern has been voiced by those in the present sample would appear to indicate a relatively low level of cognitive competence in political matters. That is, respondents often tend to substitute other discourses for a political one, in this case, a discourse of morality.[2]

This substitution reflects a cognitive strategy whereby the unfamiliar and unfathomable are rendered intelligible by translating phenomena relevant to one sphere of endeavors into the terms characteristic of another. In so doing, the subject analogizes while remaining unaware of the fact that s/he is employing an analogy. What seems novel about the Russian case is not that a moral discourse substitutes for a political one. Rather, it consists in the fact that whereas mass publics—without direct knowledge of the political process and with small attention to it—readily make this substitution (Lakoff, 1996), in the present instance this substitution is effected by members of the country's political class itself. Thus the denial of having had a political career appears as a stark example of constructing politics by means of a moral discourse, a discourse that expels politics as morally reprehensible behavior not bearing upon the self but upon *others* who engage in it.

From a cognitive vantage, the implications of this substitution of a moral discourse for a political one are critical. It invites misrecognition in the sense first outlined by Pierre Bourdieu, who regards its socially significant version as collective, systematic, and constitutive of effectively all relations of power in human affairs (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1990). That is, innumerable social transactions—and especially those involving exploitation and domination—depend for their success on at least one party failing to ascertain the significance and import of the transaction itself. Alena Ledeneva has effectively employed Bourdieu's concept in her study of *blat'* relations in the Soviet Union, showing how *blat'*—the illicit appropriation of public resources—required the misrecognition of the parties involved in it.

Blat' would transpire through chains of personal relations in which reciprocity was generalized, rather than specific to particular individuals. That is, individual *A* would approach *B* complaining of some lack that s/he could not fill. *B* could not fill it either, but *B* might then go to

C who had an acquaintance *D* who would have access to the resources needed. *D* would then pass along the required items or considerations through the *blat'* chain until they reached their specified destination, *A*.

Although *blat'* was stigmatized culturally as a theft of public property, none of the parties to this reticulated exchange would regard herself as stealing. All were performing favors to aid a soul in need. Yet, the stigma remained culturally relevant and, accordingly, the perception of others in comparable *blat'* transactions elicited moral censure. Consequently, as an institution based on misrecognition, *blat'* appeared to each as something that others did, others who would be execrated as greedy and unscrupulous people. But as far as oneself and one's circle were concerned, these same relations were consecrated as assistance to those in need, a form of help that conditions, the shortage economy, required them to perform in order to demonstrate their moral character (Ledeneva, 1998).

It appears that a comparable process of misrecognition informs the relation between politics and morality for many of the respondents in this study. Here, not so much individual blind spots but culturally sanctioned modes of expression are critical. That is, all respondents have access to the social code labelling politics as an activity that should represent a moral undertaking, but all around there is evidence in practice to the contrary. In the face of this incongruity, moral considerations offer an explanation—politics has been high-jacked by immoral forces—that enables subjects to distinguish themselves from immoral others, going so far as to deny in some instances that they had participated in politics at all.

Within this discourse of morality the issue of political corruption neither engenders an analysis of this phenomenon on its own terms nor inspires practical measures aimed at altering those conditions or systemic features occasioning corrupt behaviour. Rather, as in the *blat'*

syndrome, blame becomes the central category. Corruption simply references bad people doing bad things. Here are some examples of how this discourse was articulated by respondents:

- "I have come to the view that the kind of person you have tells you the kind of politics he engages in. If he is shit (excuse the expression) then that's the kind of politics he has." (*A*4)

- "In Russia now it is very fashionable to talk about, more precisely, to laugh [at the idea of] morals in politics, at morality in politics. It's very fashionable to say that politics is a cynical business." (*A*1)

- "Who has been successful in Russian politics? People who are able to lay out views that are broadly disseminated [are] those which people easily recognize. People who have no moral principles and who therefore might change their point of view at any moment might easily be liable to corruption, who easily go in for theft and privatization, for murder." (*D*1)

- "[In Russia] there are two or three definitions of "success" in politics. The first and most broadly applicable, I would say, concerns the quotidian: he who doesn't murder, hasn't sat in prison and hasn't grown rich. Second, he who has survived, hasn't sat in prison and has remained an active politician with some influence. And third, he who has remained his own person, has not grown rich and has not become a politician—that's I." (*B*1)

As is particularly evident in this last set of remarks, the immoral other frames the moral self. The reverse moment, affixing moral probity directly to the self, would be illustrated by these remarks:

- "Moral principles for me play a colossal role. Therefore, I am not now [involved] in politics…For a political career [morality] is a brake, some kind of limitation. But without moral requirements, a person, particularly in politics, moves in incomprehensible directions. That kind of politics cannot last long." (*A*2)
- "Morality holds the principal significance, the key. That's all. It is more important than all the rest. It can't be sacrificed. Otherwise, everything else is senseless." (*D*6)
- "I have not striven to be engaged in politics. I have not striven to participate in under-the-rug games. I haven't wanted to buy or sell anything, to be involved with trade (I have in mind the trade of mutual concessions). Of course, I understand that without comprises, generally, no sort of social life is possible. But compromises mustn't take the form of trade." (*B*3)

- "I think that politics can and must be done with clean hands. This does not exclude making compromises…but compromises must have their limits, and these one must never transgress. Politicians are often amoral, but amorality occurs among critics, scholars, surgeons and engineers [too]. It's not an exclusive quality of politicians. Therefore, I think that morality in politics is an absolutely necessary thing." (*D*7)

Aside from indexing one's moral stature, these comments are disrupted in the final two sets of remarks by an acknowledgement of practicality in politics, the need to compromise. But this acknowledgement is immediately negated by an insistence that compromise—as far as the respondents are concerned—must be strictly confined to that which itself is moral.

A variation on this view—one that magnified the intensity of moral claims—involved self-sacrifice. Sometimes the scale of this self-sacrifice appeared comparatively modest, as in the case of one respondent who pointed out that, as a deputy in the Duma serving his second term, he was offered an apartment which he refused. "This was due purely to moral principles", he maintained, arguing that "I didn't have the right to take for myself that which at that time was one of the basic problems of my voters—the housing problem" (*D*3).

However, in two other cases, the stakes were considerably higher. One legislator described a death threat delivered in his presence to the governor of Magadan, a threat made good shortly thereafter and one that by implication included the respondent himself (*D*2). Another legislator described his work verifying the legality of the allotment of housing in a central district of Moscow.

> "I found a mass of violations. And somehow about two or three weeks after this, on my return from my first meeting with my constituents, a car ran into us on Tverskaya Street. It was a head-on collision and I ended up in hospital. They were afraid that they would have to remove my liver but, glory to God, that didn't happen. But here I've got two fingers that still don't work. And the driver who crashed into us was hidden away from the scene. Up to the present day I don't believe that this was an accident." (*D*5)

A few other respondents raised the theme of political martyrdom, sacrificing their careers in politics for the sake of moral principles. In response to a question about his main accomplishments in politics, one incongruously listed his resignation from Boris El'tsin's cabinet, due to his perception that the reform program that he had authored and that had been formally adopted remained a "Potemkin village". Further on, he spoke of how his opposition to the second Chechen War that seemed to cost him some two-thirds of his constituency going into the legislative elections of 1999, and how:

> "Most of my own party criticized me [for this]. The best of them agreed with [my stand] but said that I should say it in other terms. But how do you say it in other terms? In other terms? There are no other terms here! I think that I said it inarticulately. It was necessary to say it even more harshly." (*D*6)

One of his fellow party members commenting on that same decision noted that:

> "I thought that he should have acted otherwise. This cost us a lot of votes. But he was acting more in correspondence with his own internal feelings than with real politics. Unconditionally, this was politically damaging. But because of it we are now able to be the idols among the human rights community. But that's a very small group in society." (*D*4)

Another respondent recounted with pride how he had left his political party while serving in the legislature due to principled differences over proposed legislation, an episode that followed the even more gratifying experience of catching out crooks in regional governments, for which he himself was soon sacked (*D*2). A fourth respondent claimed that he was "too honest to work in the [executive] structure" and accordingly left (*D*5), while a fifth refused a ministerial post in the Russian government in order to maintain his party's principled opposition to it—a decision that he says he has lived to regret (*D*3). A sixth expressed his admiration for Sergei Stepashin for resigning as Minister of the Interior after Chechen fighters' successful raid on Budenovsk in 1995, and for an earlier resignation from another high state office in 1992 when his draft of a new constitution was rejected, a decision in which the respondent joined him at the

time (*B*10). Finally, one member of this group refusing political office because of moral considerations referenced a distant other in order to frame the venality of the proximate ones with whom he could not associate himself.

> "Russian political culture doesn't love gradualness, it doesn't love reflection. It loves ready-made solutions, harsh evaluations and so on. This—and here's the point—is the root deficiency of Russian political culture, in the framework of which there is no feeling of conscience whatsoever.
>
> As a fool I used to think that moral values played some role in Russia. I was very proud that I was opposed to the collapse of the USSR, against the shelling of the White House [location of the old legislature—M.U.] and had refused many ministerial postings offered by El'tsin, because I considered him to be an amoral person. But such things don't upset anyone in this world. There are some politicians who present themselves as patriot-statesmen. They had been with [Egor] Gaidar, with El'tsin and then they switched over to [Gennadii] Zyuganov [Communist leader—M.U.]. None of this bothers anyone! Perhaps in the West morals play a larger role. I know that [Angela] Merkel sold out [Helmut] Kohl on her way to becoming leader…But on the other hand, she is decent. Recently, I was in Berlin and they showed me her home and the shops she goes to. Right there! And no one is assassinating her." (*A*5).

Pragmatists

A counter-code also surfaces in the interview narratives, one that relativizes moral imperatives and excuses moral lapses on the basis of unfavorable circumstances not of one's choosing. This is the discourse of know-how, one which Ledeneva has recorded in more recent study as central to state and business practices in post-Soviet Russia (Ledeneva, 2006). Here, know-how represents, above all, the ability to break the rules in order to accomplish one's ends. In this study, it has appeared in the interview narratives under terms such as "political professionalism", a designation usually carrying a negative moral valence.

As with Ledeneva's respondents, those in the present sample employing the counter-code demoting the importance of morality would plead their own cases by availing themselves of the

moral escape hatch of necessity. They would blame others for the conditions in which they have been forced to operate and point to others who do even worse (Ledeneva, 2006). This counter-code is in fact a variation on the culturally dominant notion that politics should be a moral enterprise. In either case, the possibility that self interest is a driving motivation is concealed, either behind moral categories or by disclaimers about the impossibility of abiding by them.

It would seem that "self" remains a culturally suspect notion in Russia and that outward manifestations of its negation or sublimation continue to correlate with the professed code of conduct (Kharkhordin, 1999; Lotman, 1990). This condition may be a moment in the larger scope of transitions from communism in which a lexicon suitable to articulating the self within new and unfamiliar circumstances has been largely unavailable to social actors (Verdery, 1996, 2004; Ries, 1997; Humphrey, 2004). Presented with that for which cultural categories make no allowance—in this case, the acceptability of selfishness—social actors may reassert with even greater insistence categories to which they are accustomed (Bourdieu, 1977).

In contrast to those underscoring the import of moral-political principles, other emphasized pragmatism as a consideration motivating their decisions to refrain from resigning political office, despite their moral misgivings. One respondent claimed that he wished to resign his post in the executive when the first Chechen War was launched but was dissuaded by Aleksandr Yakovlev—Gorbachev's architect of *glasnost'* and thus a voice of moral authority—who argued that his replacement would only make things worse (*C*6). Another placed his own principles in the context of political loyalty and realism, noting how he had argued in the national press against the passage of a certain law involving clearly political principles but eventually voted for it due to the importance of maintaining party discipline. "I have developed a formula", he continued "that distinguishes our party from many others: 'preserve and

multiply'…[To do this]:

> "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 the 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! [All this is necessary to take into account] in politics where the main thing is [getting] results." (*E*5)

> One of his colleagues echoed these remarks, but with a certain darkness of tone.

> "A great deal in politics today resembles the film *Ty mne—ya tebe* [Roughly: *You Scratch My Back, I'll Scratch Yours*—M.U.]…And there are two negative sides to this. First, it becomes very difficult to refuse when they ask you to do something. Your flexibility level in these relations becomes higher. Second, in relations with a number of people, you are unable to evaluate them objectively. I therefore solve this problem for myself rather simply: No matter how you ask, I will never criticize a group of acting politicians; I won't give negative evaluations of their conduct even in that case, when it seems to me that they have done extremely negative things. But, glory to God, these people don't do such things." (*E*2)

The persuasiveness of these arguments is not nearly as important for present purposes as the fact that the arguments are made. That is, those who reference episodes in which their moral integrity might be called into question are themselves able to access the moral-political discourse from which it arises, even as they shunt their narratives onto another track.

Versions of Political Morality

Turning to the matter of morality in politics in a more direct sense—that is, putting the question: What is it that can make politics a moral endeavour?—our respondents were split into two groups. One referenced loyalty and trustworthiness in interpersonal relations, while the other tied their notion of morality to faithfulness to abstract principles. This distinction was not lost on some of the respondents themselves, one of whom claimed that:

> "A clan morality functions today, [one involving] faithfulness to one's clan, a moral order within the clan, like in primitive societies. You're a member of a tribe, and among your own there's one morality while with those who do not belong to the clan there is another…Concerning abstract humanitarian values, the Ten Commandments, well, I think that today this isn't working. Moreover, it would look strange in these times, it would conflict with loyalty. Not to steal budget funds when your group is in position to do so would signify disloyalty…Present-day politics is cynical. I have the feeling that there is even pride taken in this. A part of this is that even a term [for it] has been thought up: 'He's a good 'professional'" (*C*6)

Taking these versions of morality as poles, our respondents can be placed along a continuum bounded at one end by group loyalty and at the other by devotion to abstract principles. Starting from the latter pole, a cluster of respondents explicitly disavowed any truck with compromise or pragmatism when it came to moral issues (*D*1, *D*2, *D*6, *D*7). Although some in the sample also spoke about the need for compromise in politics, each embraced the view—noted, above—that compromise could never concern one's moral principles themselves (*D*2, *D*4, *D*6, *D*7). In words that would capture the sentiments of most, if not all, in this group, one respondent offered the opinion that "we would not have had the privatization that we did [i.e., both grossly unjust and economically ineffective—M.U.] if we didn't believe that we cannot get to the 'radiant market future' [parodying communism's perennial—and now, laughably discredited—promise of such a 'radiant future' justifying today's sacrifices—M.U.] over the corpses of others. [Anatolii] Chubais [privatization's chief superintendent—M.U.] would be an example of this cynicism. 'Let them all die [he would say], 'we'll build our radiant future on their bones'" (*D*5).

Notable, here, would be the implication that the absence of moral controls—reaching the "radiant market future" over the corpses of others—unleashes the forces of darkness and ruin. Inasmuch as this discourse of morality references only inner rectitude as a means to restrain these dark forces, it appears to isolate itself from political practice. Indeed, it exemplifies that

dichotomy quoted, above, wherein moral absolutism is housed under the same roof as moral cynicism. Exponents of this discourse underscore their participation in the former by consigning their political opponents to the latter.

Interestingly, all in this study who spoke in terms of moral absolutism belong to the sub-sample, "democratic opposition". At one time or another, they have all been members of Yabloko, whose principle competition and initial *raison d'etre* was provided by the other major group in Russian political society claiming the name "democrats", namely, those associated with the economic reform wing of the first El'tsin administration (White, 2006; Urban, 1994).

Because they have shared a common language, liberalism, disputes between these two groups have been especially intense, reminiscent of sectarian feuds, as the above remarks on privatization and the "radiant future" would suggest. As if mindful of the moral arguments deployed against them by their democratic opponents, two of those responsible for the economic reforms resorted to a sort of hyperbolic pragmatism in order to justify their past actions. One version concerned the timeliness and important of the reforms themselves:

> "I think that the greatest achievement of our government was not even the fact that it laid the basis of a market economy; rather it consisted in the fact that it rescued the country from famine and freezing during the winter of 1991-1992. The main thing was that it rescued a country with nuclear weapons from [a situation which] the nuclear button would turn up in the hands of madmen." (*B*9)

Another involved the constitutional crisis of 1993 and the violent termination of the country's legislature, immediate reasons for the formation of Yabloko:

> "The crisis had to be solved by adopting a new constitution, some specific constitution, any constitution, but one that worked. This was clear to Boris Nikolaevich [El'tsin] and to myself who was working then in the government. We already knew how a crisis of dual sovereignty [*dvoevlastiya*] ended in a bloody mess [i.e., the Bolshevik Revolution—M.U.]. A nuclear country could not have lived long under the situation that existed then." (*B*8)

Both sets of comments quoted, above, trump moral arguments by raising and then vanquishing, the specter of nuclear holocaust. Again, their persuasiveness is not at issue. Rather, it is the fact that both arguments suggest sensitivity to moral criticisms that respondents seem to be unable to answer on straightforwardly moral grounds. Hence, the shift not only from morality but from economics and politics, to a discourse of survival.

Moving by degrees toward extreme cynicism—which, naturally, is always ascribed to the other by respondents, and never used to characterize the self—a number of those in the sample also spoke of achieving some golden mean between principles and pragmatics (*A*1, *A*2, *A*3, *A*4, *B*4, *C*4, *D*4, *E*1). One respondent placed these terms in dialectical opposition, noting how an absence of pragmatism in actual politics emasculated one's moral principles in the practical order (*C*2). Another from the Putin-era cohort noted that:

> "In politics, the main thing is results. Results. If you don't know how to get results, you are a poor politician. Then why are you in politics? You have to know how to listen to you own partners, to your party comrades, to your opponent. In my view, you must find the right compromises. That's the highest acrobatics in politics, [doing this while] preserving your own principled position." (*E*5)

Similarly, another from this group remarked that

> "you can be guided by this principle: absolute honesty in politics can be considered as absolute stupidity. And simultaneously it would also be incorrect to say that in politics you are dishonest, because always in politics you must choose for yourself those qualities unavoidably necessary to yourself. I have tried to think about this because you often encounter those calls to take decisions which make you feel uncomfortable. And maybe from the standpoint of idealism it would be simpler to get up and say "You can all go to the devil". And leave and toss it all aside. But evidently flexibility—which is present in me—won't permit me to do this…As a result there are a great many people who evaluate my conduct in politics as immoral. And there is an equal number of people regarding it as moral." (*E*2)

Some in the Putin-era cohort expressed the view that morality in politics boils down to not telling lies (*E*1, *E*4). But that proposition need not be interpreted as simply telling the whole

truth. One put it this way:

> "[Unlike other professions] politics is a public thing. Its public nature presupposes that you are always expressing your point of view publicly. And if in real life you, being an honorable person, do not lie…Well, a lie is an obscene, unattractive thing, but you can, we'll say, keep silent about something, understanding that if you were to speak about it, this would not be to the benefit of yourself or your position. Therefore, I, as a politician, always say when I converse with my voters, with people [in general], that I will never lie to you." (*E*5)

In a similar vein, one of his colleagues contended that:

> "decency is one of the pivotal things enabling political success. Your views, your principles may not coincide with the principles and views of other people. Moreover, they could be your enemies. But, all the same, it is desirable to designate for others some pivotal point [*sterznevoi moment*] and not to tell it to one person in ways different than those you've used to tell it another…This doesn't mean that you can't conceal information or that you can't distort information. You can do all of that. But all the same you must not willingly lead another person into a pit." (*E*2)

Finally, nearing the other end of the continuum, the notion of morality as loyalty—referenced by one respondent cited, above, as "clan morality" –was voiced by two members in the sample. In one instance, dishonesty in service to the group was combined with the idea of devotion to a higher good:

> "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*] for 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 this because in politics, more often than in other spheres, a situation arises when you must tell untruths for the benefit of a great cause. Even if his objective was strategic—to go down in Russian history—he understood that he was being evaluated then, and not later. If you're concerned with your reputation today, then you won't earn a reputation in history." (*C*5)

The other respondent referring to morality as loyalty spoke more candidly and directly to the issue. After remarking at some length about the necessary relationship between morality and politics—and then qualifying it in a number of ways by giving examples from his own political

experience which required him to forego the demands of conscience—he seemed to salvage the morality/politics nexus by transforming moral concerns into concrete, *personal* relations. Thus, this respondent, whose entire career has been in law and who expressed great regard for legal principles and practices, illustrated the role of morals in politics by referencing Vladimir Putin's assistance to his former superior, the ex-mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatolii Sobchak, when Sobchak was under indictment for extortion and theft:

> "The problem is actually this: if you are to prove your worth, you won't have time to talk about morals in detail. Therefore, in a whole series of actions, it is forgotten, taken for granted, let slip. There are politicians who yield to their friends' requests and those who refuse them. But there is a different example about those who don't refuse their friends about which I will speak openly for the first time to you. Very often when politicians experience difficulties, all the more when these difficulties are of a legal-criminal nature, that's when personal relations in politics appear most clearly. Very often these people's friends disappear.
>
> I had to undertake a legal case connected with the name of the now deceased mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatolii Sobchak. And, certainly, Vladimir Putin, who at that moment had begun to occupy various governmental posts, could have refused him his support. But he didn't do that: he supported Sobchak. I don't know the concrete facts, but in conversation with me Anatolii Sobchak more than once referred to this moral support. And it was very important, although from the point of view of career advancement, it would have been better [for Putin] to refrain from such things…In just the same way an exceptionally touchy [*ostraya*] situation arose for me, when it would have been more advantageous to terminate his acquaintance with me, but he [Putin] didn't do that and in about two months the situation was straightened out." (*E*2)

Conclusion

This study has explored the relation between politics and morality on the basis of interview narratives related by members of Russia's political class. It has illustrated the fact that while neither morality nor politics is conceptualized by interview subjects in a uniform way, all subjects express the idea that politics—to one degree or another—should represent a moral

undertaking. For the majority of them and including those still active in government and politics, this is clearly not the prevailing situation today. Overwhelmingly, past and present political actors regard politics as a very dirty business, indeed. What is the significance of this negative association between politics and morality in Russian political society? I shall attempt to answer this question by, first, saying a word about variations across specific groups in the sample and, then, conclude with a comment on the apparently larger cultural importance of the politics/morality binary.

As the foregoing analysis has demonstrated, that binary takes a variety of forms: politics versus morality, politics as the realization of moral ends, and various permutations of either term in the binary that modify the significance of each. Although the boundaries separating the cohorts in the present sample are not air-tight—owing to the fact that certain subjects assigned to groups politically active at a later time had actually begun their political careers at an earlier date or, conversely, that some included in earlier periods when they held more important posts have continued in politics thereafter—the interview results reported, here, would nonetheless indicate an inverse relationship between proximity to political power and a full-throated conception of morality.

This relationship is particularly evident among members of the democratic opposition for whom morality is framed as an absolute value. Although any imputation of causality in this regard would be purely speculative—we cannot know whether moral concerns hindered their political advance or whether their limited success in the sphere of power politics led to reliance on a self-justifying, moral discourse—it seems clear that their narratives feature a politics consumed by morality. They not only reference with pride the principled positions that they have taken on political issues, despite the practical costs, but they cite political defeats and

refusals of important positions in the executive, or resignations from them, as examples of commendable behavior. They thereby occupy a specific space on the political spectrum, closest to what one respondent described as "extreme idealism".

On the other hand, respondents from the-Putin era cohort—those closest to power when these interviews were recorded—rely upon a political discourse approximating "extreme cynicism", at least in the eyes of others. They do not dismiss moral concerns, but they phrase them in the language of flexibility, opportunity and necessity. For them, politics seems to swallow morality. Because their narratives do tend to reflect a sustained engagement with moral issues in the extant political context, their notion of morality is continually up for negotiation and re-definition. They associate morality with telling the truth, then reduce truth telling to not lying, then to the permissibility of limited deception and, finally, to rendering aid to associates despite legal considerations.

These reductions point up the fact that these subjects simultaneously function within a cultural context in which the display of ethical qualities is of paramount importance—along with the opportunity to affirm one's stature by finding moral fault with other (Ries, 1997; Pesmen, 2000)—and within a political context in which formal rules are no substitute for the assistance available through personalized social relations. It is the insolubility of this contradiction that accounts ultimately for the reduction of morality—but not its outright dismissal—to personal or group loyalty.

This contradiction also sheds light on the narratives employed by those comprising the remainder of the sample which reflect an effort to harmonize moral and political discourses. Like those in the Putin-era group, these respondents stress the import of achieving concrete results through politics, results that admit to some allegedly worthy social purpose. But unlike

their Putin-era counterparts, the process by which these results are obtained also matters to them.[3] The extreme case, involving the economic reform of the early 1990s, might illustrate this point most effectively. In the absence of any morally defensible procedures for enacting market reforms, privatization and the violent termination of the first post-communist republic, respondents reached beyond the horizons of both morality and politics to summon the spectre of nuclear war, thereby justifying their actions by means of a hyper-semiotic construct casting them in the role of saviours of all humanity.

These narratives on (allegedly) rescuing the world from nuclear annihilation reference more than the justification of particular actions. They also underscore the importance of moral discourse in Russian society and politics. This importance would not seem to lie much in practical action aimed at bringing moral concerns into the political world. As has been shown, most respondents claim that morality plays no role in politics today. Rather, the utility of the discourse of morality consists in the fact that it offers a defense of the self within a noxious environment that seems impervious to the subject's efforts to improve it. Consequently, it might be appropriate to refer to an "absent cause" that sets the discourse of morality in motion, an extra-textual condition "which cannot be unknotted by the operation of pure thought and which must therefore generate a whole more properly narrative apparatus—the text itself—to square its circle and to dispel …its intolerable closure" (Jameson, 1981).

The absent cause in this case appears to concern political relations in Russia wherein civic involvement is minimal (Howard, 2003) and informal, personalized networks in state institutions and society generally constitute the major form of collective action (Afanas'ev, 2000; Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Urban, 2003). Although a full development of this point is beyond the scope of the present study, traces of an "absent cause"—the unsuitability of extant social

relations to support some sort of democratic political practice—do appear in the narratives of some respondents.

- "I think that Russia needs European-style social democracy…[But] our society has a big percentage of poor people. And what kind of democracy can there be among the indigent? For an indigent, there is no democracy whatsoever. He is only given to drink, to munch on a cucumber and to sleep somewhere under a fence. He spits on everything else." (*A*4)

- "There is nothing better than democracy for individuals inclined toward self-government. But democracy for a herd of sheep is unthinkable. Democracy in a narcotics, alcohol or gambling den is unthinkable…Society itself has changed, and not for the better. From the point of view of representing their demands to the authorities, even the ability to make demands, society has degraded." (*D*2)

- "What has hindered me from achieving my objectives in politics? The thousand-year history of Russia, that's what." (*D*6)

In the face of these perceptions of the social context, morality in politics as a categorical imperative, as an embrace of impersonal norms, seems doomed from the outset. In its place stands another variety of morality congruent with actual social relations: morality as loyalty to one's confederates—"clan morality". However, this particular moral practice does not expunge the principled or impersonal form of morality from political consciousness. That version of morality remains for many as an element central to their professed identity, one articulated through a discourse invidiously distinguishing the self from the shameful other.

[1] On a methodological note, it would be important, here, to underscore the fact that my approach disregards what are sometimes called individual opinions and values. Rather, I conceive the process of political communication as one in which *existing* social discourses are drawn upon by those with access to them in order to make intelligible statements about politics. Sometimes, elements of more than one discourse are apparent in respondents' narratives; sometimes, respondents shift from one discourse to another. Thus my aim is to locate prevailing discourses within narratives about politics, thereby marking off the boundaries of what can be communicated.

[2] A second discursive substitution that I have investigated involves the replacement of politics by professionalism (Urban, 2008).

[3] A fuller treatment of this question can be found in a previous study (Urban, 2008).

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