

## PAR Interview

*Part of what makes PAR a rewarding experience is the process of creation, the exploration and debate behind the literature. Each issue presents for readers numerous articles, but each author has a story to tell about their experience. The PAR Interviews are one way to capture some of those stories about exploration and debate, helping us share in the experience and connect with one another. Each issue, we will ask one or more authors to answer a few questions about their contribution to PAR and what it means to them.*

*For this interview, Jim Heichelbech talked to Jeffrey Straussman about his work with Alexei Barabashev on public service reform in Russia, forthcoming in PAR (“Public Service Reform in Russia: 1991-2006”).*

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*Jim Heichelbech: Thanks for taking the time to answer a few questions about your work on public service reform in Russia. First, I'd like to know a little bit about you. How did you come to comparative studies in general and Russian public service in particular? How did you and Mr. Barabashev meet and decide to work together?*

Jeffrey Straussman: I actually studied comparative politics as a doctoral student and I was especially interested in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. While my academic appointments took me away from this interest for many years, I still retained an interest in the region which was rekindled in 1992 when I was a Fulbright Scholar in Budapest, Hungary. From 1992 to the present much of my research has focused on the political economy of transition.

At the Maxwell School I was the Principal Investigator on a contract with the United States Department of State that provided assistance to the School of

Public Administration, Moscow State University. Alexei Barabashev was the associate dean during the five years of the project. (He later became Dean at public administration at the Higher School of Economics.) Alexei and I decided to collaborate on a paper about public service reform that eventually led to the forthcoming article. Alexei is very much involved in the practical dimensions of administrative reform in Russia through service on various task forces and commissions.

*Jim Heichelbech: What should inspire students of public administration to follow you into collaborative, comparative studies? How can this area of work be rewarding for those just starting out?*

Jeffrey Straussman: My own view, which has evolved over the years, is that one's research is enhanced through comparative analysis. I also think that it helps to be broadly familiar with trends in other countries so that theory, hypotheses and the overall research enterprise becomes developed in one's formative years as a scholar. I am constantly surprised about the basic ignorance that graduate students and even faculty have about comparative dimensions of their research foci.

*Jim Heichelbech: That is certainly true. My own studies in ethics tend to remain narrowly focused on public service issues in the U.S., and my understanding of the context of public service in Russia is more on a personal level. For example, I remember the day the Berlin wall came down. For me, it was a pretty fundamental change. Having grown up in the 1970's living in Colorado Springs, Colorado (the location of NORAD), my entire perspective of the world from an early age had been defined by the high probability of the world ending at any moment. What significance did these changes 1990's have for you personally and how do you think your Russian colleagues experienced the changes on a personal level?*

Jeffrey Straussman: Well, for me the collapse of the communist system was a relief. There was some comfort in the Cold War, as many people have noted,

because, in retrospect, it was predictable. But my experience in Budapest in 1992 was important in shaping my views, retrospectively as it turned out, about the communist system. I saw how corrupt it was even though I had experienced its immediate aftermath and, in Hungary, it was less oppressive than in the Soviet Union, Poland, East Germany or Bulgaria. Let's say I became more of an anti-communist in the 1990's than I was in the 1970's. Sounds strange, doesn't it? I really can't speak for my Russian colleagues. I think some adjusted quite well to the collapse of the Soviet Union, others less so. One thing I learned early on is that it was impolite to ask about a person's political position in the previous regime. Some were Party members, but this did not necessarily in itself say how they were adjusting to the transitions of the 1990's.

*Jim Heichelbech: The article talks a lot about transparency as one of the key challenges in combating corruption and transforming the public service. Do you see your work as a contribution to transparency? Do you imagine public servants in Russia reading this article and gaining perspective? Perhaps some are more likely read it and think to themselves, "closing the gap between official responsibility and actual responsibility, and emphasizing procedures over personalities will ruin everything." How much of the challenge is awareness and how much is simply a battle to shift the trend away from seeing the public service as an avenue for personal gain?*

First, I am not naïve about the impact of an article on something like corruption and transparency. These things take a very long time to change and involve many different factors. But, most of all, they require a change in personnel. So, given the demographics of Russia I would be optimistic in the sense that a new breed of public servants is less likely to hold the view expressed in your question. The key point here is time. I think we often forget how long it took to develop a modern public service in the United States.

*Jim Heichelbech: It seems a little bit like the gap between legislation and implementation mirrors the gap between official responsibility and actual*

*responsibility. Is there a sense in which public service in Russia is “on the fence” about whether their role is to reflect change or effect change? Maybe this relates to the familiar discussion about a politics/administration dichotomy, as it seems that plenty of change can be initiated through the administration side. Perhaps given that the administration side was the dominant avenue for bringing about change during the Soviet era, public service in Russia is now experiencing a paradigm shift as democratic political processes usurp the bureaucratic mechanism for both initiating and implementing change? Or perhaps the struggle in shedding the Soviet legacy has been, in part, a matter of shifting toward an emphasis on rule of law?*

Jeffrey Straussman: Well I think it is more straightforward as we tried to argue in the paper—a gap between law and its implementation. If you notice, there is really no shortage of law when it comes to administrative reform. Implementation simply lags and this is not really surprising when you consider that, again, only sixteen years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Remember that there was not much counterweight to the Communist Party in the Soviet Union, certainly not from the Soviet legislature and the government was controlled by the Party. Civil society, as we tend to think about it in democratic countries, did not really exist in the Soviet Union. Expecting public servants to effect change in the present situation may be unduly optimistic.

*Jim Heichelbech: In the U.S., a social marketing campaign might make sense as a way to get public support for developing public service, particularly in terms of gaining “buy-in” as we implement legislation. But in Russia, I suppose there is a high degree of resistance to “advertising” as the propaganda machinery was in full swing during the Soviet era. Is the public still receptive to the media? Are they at all susceptible to advertising? Does it depend on the source? The purpose? The message?*

Jeffrey Straussman: Right now this would not be very effective since the media is controlled by the government and the current government does not seem to be inclined to use for in the way your question suggests. Now anti-corruption

campaigns have been used elsewhere—China and Vietnam quickly come to mind. Again, I don't think quick fixes aimed at developing a new public service ethos work and the trends are not necessarily linear as recent news from Poland would suggest. Also, trust in government which would be a necessary condition for any such social marketing campaign, ebbs and flows. This is certainly the case of democracies, not just former authoritarian regimes.

*Jim Heichelbech: I found it very interesting that you identify resistance to transparency as one of the most important legacies of the Soviet era. This question has two parts. First, you mention the prevalence of informal rules as a manifestation of Leninist systems and point to Jakobson's two factors – a gap between official and actual responsibility and prevalence of personalities over procedures. I am reminded of the attitudes sometimes found among lower level government employees in the U.S., for whom public service is a job first and a calling second (if at all). Often what is intended as a room for discretion plays out as a loophole to be taken advantage of, with the idea that one should certainly do what is specified in writing as the requirements of the job, but really do as little as possible, only what is necessary. Is there a sense in which shedding the Soviet legacy with respect to informal rules is a challenge precisely because the Lenninist systems hindered goal-oriented thinking among public servants? The second part of the question concerns the connection between transparency and accountability within broader traditions of governance. I wonder whether the transition during the 1990's involved a paradigm shift from a Hamiltonian model of accountability toward a more Jeffersonian, representative/ participatory model – a change from thinking, "I'll do what I'm told, right or wrong" toward "I'll do what's right, regardless of what I'm told."*

Jeffrey Straussman: Well, there is an extensive literature in political science that deduces behavior from the bureaucrat who is not inherently accountable because he or she wants to maximize self-interest. Accountability systems must therefore check this innate tendency. Now the systems occur in different venues—personnel, budget, performance monitoring systems, etc. The challenge for the principal, let's say legislative body, is to come up with

incentive/accountability systems to manage the agent or, in this context, the bureaucrat. If you use this type of formulation, there are similarities across different political systems. Jeffersonian notions simply push the accountability mechanisms down further. Think of public hearings for instance.

Informal rules in Leninist systems were ways, in part, to get things done but they were not, of course, transparent. Medical care in communist countries, with the prevalence of informal payments to get treated, is one such example even though officially there was free access to health care. But this is quite a bit different from the discretion of “street level bureaucrats” who make decisions about, say, enforcement on the ground. There is a big difference between the police officer who uses discretion to give you a ticket or not and the Russian police officer who pulls you over and expects a bribe. The informal rules here come from different administrative mechanisms with the second being opaque and the former being, by contrast, embedded in an accountability framework that is much more widely understood by the citizenry as part of the officer’s job.

*Jim Heichelbech: One very broad definition of “corruption” is “use of public position for private gain,” and this seems to describe what the Russian public service struggles with. Is there a sense in which Russia during this transition is being pulled in two directions? On the one hand, they need to “sell” the public service by doing more for the public. But on the other hand, they need to do less as they narrow compensation to include only what the state can provide (i.e. eliminating outside income). Does this tell us something about a looming danger in the United States as the public sector continues to struggle with providing compensation comparable to the private sector?*

Jeffrey Straussman: You are raising two issues that need to be kept analytically separate. In the United States one challenge, as you note, is for public employment to be competitive with private employment on the salary dimension. Russia has the same challenge. In the US, corruption does not play into this issue in a significant way but it does in Russia because controls are not firmly in place, plus the value based constraints on corruption are weak. Russia needs to

make public service more attractive on a number of dimensions and, at the same time, tackle corruption which is a big issue. I don't see any analogy here with the US—unless we go back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Jim Heichelbech: Yes, we certainly are in different places, historically. You begin your article by asking the question, "Who is a 'public servant' in Russia?" And you note that given Russia's Soviet legacy, the character of the public service is influenced by a history of being dominated by the Communist Party, making it unlikely that we can graft western experiences and models wholesale onto the Russian administrative landscape. As readers who are familiar with public service in the United States, is it reasonable to see this as similar to wrestling with a "spoils" system of the sort we had in the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> century? If not, what difference stands out in your mind?*

Jeffrey Straussman: Well, this is a big question but I would not compare the spoils system in the United States with the Soviet period. The one-party character of the Soviet Union coupled with the ideological dimensions of the regime make the analogy a forced one. What we can compare, in a broad sense, is the evolution of rules and procedures in a civil service system that develop as a reaction to the past. The specific rules and procedures, of course, may be quite different across regimes and across time, meaning history.

*Jim Heichelbech: The article notes that "individuals are no longer seen as representatives of certain social classes, but they are not yet valued as unique human beings." This is a bit of an irony, given the Marxist influences at the beginning of the Soviet "experiment." Is there any sense that capitalism has its downside in the form of alienation of the working class? Or has that line of thinking faded completely? On the other hand, is there a sense of the value of a free market from an administrative perspective, the "invisible hand?" Or is a free market generally viewed as an avenue for personal gain without any lofty expectations about social goods?*

Jeffrey Straussman: I wouldn't try to put too fine a Marxist twist on this observation in the paper. The point was made by Alexei and it really tries to get at the underlying values that shape people in the public service. For example, the notion of the public interest in the United States is not a precise term but it does shape our thinking about how one should be going about one's job in government. Sure, we acknowledge that individuals are self-interested, but that would not justify stealing from the state so we can separate the two and determine what is, and is not, acceptable behavior. Of course we have formal rules to help us but we also have ethical standards as well. Our point is that this is still underdeveloped in Russia because the previous rules of the game have been discredited but the new ones are still in flux. But, I wouldn't agree that there is anything left—from an ethical perspective--from the so-called Soviet "experiment."

*Jim Heichelbech: In terms of an ethical framework, you mentioned earlier a couple of key considerations: facilitating a change in personnel and building an accountability framework. As you say, these things take time. But it sounds like some key opportunities have been identified. Specifically, Concerning the level of professionalism present in the Russian public service, you refer to a "mismatch between skills needed and the fields of specialization distributed among public employees." What sorts of education are missing and why are they important?*

Jeffrey Straussman: Think about a standard post-graduate public administration and policy program that is so common not only in the United States but increasingly around the world. This education produces young employees with not only some basic skills but, more importantly, a way to think about public problems. Graduates of these programs are really generalists who are problem solvers. This is what Russia needs and, over the next ten years or so, more of these people may enter public service if other conditions such as salary and the ability to be promoted in a fair and competitive manner become routine.

*Jim Heichelbech: Sounds like a good strategy for change. Over that time, it will be interesting to see whether such efforts have an impact. But it sounds like*

*creating a statistical snapshot of Russian public service is a bit of a challenge, if only because there has been limited data available. Is there a concerted effort to collect more data now? Do such efforts meet resistance? You mention this as one of the goals of the Roskadri – “to evaluate the professional preparation of public employees.” But is it a challenge to get even the most basic data to provide a valid description of the public service?*

Jeffrey Straussman: You have to start somewhere! Data are rarely collected for their own sake but, often, serve some purpose. I don't think in the case of Russia it was primarily a case of resistance. Rather, I think it was the non-linear pattern of change that we tried to describe in the article that causes data challenges. The target kept on changing. My guess is that the quality of data on public employment will improve over the next several years.

*Jim Heichelbech: What next? The article ends with, “Much work remains before one can say with confidence that the country has created a modern public service.” What's next on your list of projects? Are you tackling one or more of the specific issues? Is there more work to do in terms of clarifying the challenges? Or is the next task to provide practical analyses and actually make some headway in the reform effort?*

Jeffrey Straussman: The reference to work here speaks to the Russian political decision-makers, not my intellectual work. The work that needs to be done has to do with legislation and, as we noted, the implementation of existing law. As I noted above, observers of any country in transition need to look at historical examples to see how long it takes to get institutions in place. After all, the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991—sixteen years ago. A modern public service takes a lot longer than that to develop.

*Jim Heichelbech: Given the longer timeframe, it is certainly nice to have an update on the progress. Thanks for the great article and for the additional insights here.*

References:

Barabashev, A., and J. D. Straussman. 2007. Forthcoming. "Public Service Reform in Russia: 1991-2006." *Public Administration Review*. 67 (3).

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