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0521372569 - An Algebra of Soviet Power: Elite Circulation in the Belorussian Republic
1966-86

Michael E. Urban

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1 Method, model and historical background

This chapter aims to locate the method, model and object of this study within the field of research devoted to the analysis of Soviet political elites. The first section examines the matter of setting or context with a basic theoretical question in mind; namely, how might we conceptualize the set of sociopolitical relations extant in the USSR which both defines the system's elite(s) and structures their activity? Here, our concern is to probe the characteristics of the Soviet form of organization and, in so doing, to highlight some of the issues associated with elite analysis in the Soviet case.

The second section covers much the same ground from a methodological perspective. It presents an outline of the method and model heretofore employed in Soviet elite studies, and argues that the conventional approach, which focuses on individual actors and their attributes, is hampered by some important limitations on the questions that it can pose and the conclusions that it can reasonably draw. In order to overcome these shortcomings, a method is introduced which directly incorporates into the analysis the relations among actors in the system as they circulate through the array of elite positions. This method, vacancy chain analysis, and a revised model for the study of Soviet elites are then explicated in some detail.

Finally, the third section places the object of our study, political elites in the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), in an historical perspective. It takes up those national, socioeconomic and political features of Belorussia's development which bear upon the empirical analysis of elites in the contemporary BSSR.

Bureaucracy, personnel and the Soviet form of organization

Bureaucracy, as Max Weber appreciated so well, is a highly refined and singularly effective system of power. In contrast to the

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tendency in much contemporary scholarship to interpret the concept of bureaucratic power narrowly, as the enlarged influence displayed by formal organizations in the political life of this or that nation state, Weber's concern was to understand bureaucracy itself as a form of life whose logic worked in the direction of rationalized social control through an impersonal mechanism that represented the last word in both task accomplishment and human domination.¹ The adjective 'impersonal' is of particular importance to the issue of bureaucratic power as Weber saw it. On the one hand, the empirical characteristics of modern bureaucracy – the location of authority in offices rather than in individuals, the organization and gradation of such authority according to written rules and so forth – emerged out of deep changes in the structure of social relations which accompanied the passing of traditional society.² Foremost among these was the introduction of commodity relations endemic to the capitalist market economy.³ As Marx understood, relations of this type are in fact social relations which appear as relations among mere things.⁴ But it was Weber who pursued the implications that this insight held for human organizations in the modern world. In modern bureaucracy, in which individual action transpires through the medium of an impersonalized, rule-bound structure of authority, he discovered the human embodiment of thing-like relations. Individuals operating within the bureaucratic mode of organization find that their activity always reduces to something outside themselves – the job description, the work schedule – epitomized in the balance sheet of the capitalist firm and its celebrated 'bottom line'. Relations of this sort enable the thinking parts of bureaucracy to think in characteristically bureaucratic fashion, calculating costs and benefits for the organization (rather than for the individuals who comprise it) and improving its performance (but not necessarily the performance of individuals *qua* individuals) by means of an ongoing rationalization of the extant set of relations and routines within it.⁵

On the other hand, this impersonal form of power ensures at least the appearance that the power to command, and the content of the commands themselves, are not the product of some individual(s) will(s), made, and susceptible to being unmade, by the action of individuals. Rather, power and the commands which mediate it brook no (rational) argument; they appear to flow out of the objective logic of the situation. And well they might. The point, however, is that the 'objective logic of the situation' is itself constructed upon a power relationship, one that functions all the more effectively because it

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presents itself in impersonal, naturalized forms that are beyond the control of the individuals who occupy roles within it.⁶ Through the control mechanisms inherent in modern bureaucracy – each actor's potential for upward mobility in the hierarchy of offices, the role of letters of recommendation in transfers to other organizations, the promise of pension benefits on retirement, and so on – individual motivations are brought into agreement with organizational objectives, producing thereby a relationship of domination in which, at its apogee, a command of the dominators is received by the dominated as if the latter 'had made the content of the command the maxim of their conduct for its own sake'.⁷

Couching the concept of bureaucracy in terms of a Weberian ideal-type and specifying its social basis enables us to draw some important distinctions with respect to Soviet organizations on an abstract level. These, in turn, find their utility in framing the more concrete categories by means of which we study these organizations empirically. It is perhaps too often the case that the word 'bureaucracy' has been employed by Western analysts of the Soviet system in a rather indiscriminate fashion, oriented to the appearance or outer shell of Soviet organizations – which, after all, share certain of the characteristics of modern bureaucracy (Soviet organizations, appear to be ordered hierarchically, to operate on the basis of written regulations, and so forth) – without tapping their internal structure and dynamics. When the latter is our concern, however, we notice the absence of a number of elements which are central to the bureaucratic phenomenon in capitalist states. The calculability and rationality for which bureaucracy is known depend upon the commodity forms (especially, monetization) of a market economy and either appear in truncated fashion or disappear altogether in the Soviet context.⁸ Accordingly, as Jerry Hough's well-known work showed some 20 years ago, Soviet organizations do not evince a legal-rational basis for the organization of authority such as we find in bureaucracies in advanced capitalist systems.⁹ Soviet officialdom, too, seems to be organized around certain non-bureaucratic or even anti-bureaucratic norms¹⁰ and displays orientations, such as a tendency toward the personal appropriation of public office,¹¹ that are at odds with modern bureaucratic practice as we know it. With such things in mind, some scholars have preferred to think of Soviet organizations as variants of Weber's (pre-modern) patrimonial bureaucracy.¹² Terminological questions are, however, of less interest to us here than is the matter of how Soviet organizations structure the action of their members.

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In an earlier study, I have drawn the conclusion that the Soviet pattern of organization rests on 'weak structures' which, relatively speaking, are ill-suited to sustain domination in Weber's sense of the term. In sharp contrast to the impersonal relations of a bureaucratic order, the ensemble of personalized relations extant in the Soviet form of organization tends to structure the action of officials around immediate and commonly identified incentives that have little if any connection to honouring the commands issuing from nominal superiors.¹³ In the language of contemporary sociology, we can distinguish the strong (impersonal) structures and weak (personal) ties¹⁴ associated with bureaucracy in advanced capitalist states from the weak structures and attendant strong ties found in Soviet organizations. These inject a powerfully *personal* element into Soviet personnel systems and lead to two important considerations for their study.

First, the relative weakness of formal Soviet organizational structures in shaping the concrete activity of those within them cautions us against making assumptions about the relations among actors who occupy various organizational roles. Unlike our experience with Western bureaucratic systems in which such roles tend to be reasonably well defined and are related one to another in specific ways, those who enter Soviet organizations do not step into ready-made relations of a bureaucratic type. Rather, the roles and relations among them are infused with a largely personal element that sets the stage for a considerable amount of negotiation among the parties concerned as to the content of the roles themselves and how relations among them are to be organized.¹⁵ The student of Soviet organizations, then, is above all a student of the personnel who comprise them, for it is at this level, rather than at the level of formal organizational design, that so much of the basic determinants of organized activity are set in motion.

Secondly, the student of personnel is necessarily engaged in a project that goes beyond the issues associated with personnel administration in a bureaucratic setting; personnel studies in the Soviet context spill over into the area of power relations far more so than would be true, *ceteris paribus*, for advanced capitalist systems. When we consider the question of how power is organizationally deployed in the USSR, how the policy mechanism functions (or fails) to ensure that subordinates implement the decisions of superiors, it becomes apparent that the main gear in this mechanism is the placement of personnel. Unable to offer positive inducements such as substantial salary increases, stock options, the promise of a partnership and so forth, and lacking as well anything resembling the major negative

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sanction found in capitalist countries, the threat of unemployment, those who head Soviet organizations must rely primarily on the exchange of appointments and promotions in return for compliance with their substantive directives. In studying elite mobility in the Soviet context, then, we are at the same time studying the concrete operation of this singularly important mechanism of power.

Thirdly, the design of our study should benefit by taking these points into account. A survey of the literature on Soviet elite studies would point up the influence of certain background assumptions rooted in the bureaucratic experience which seem largely out of place in the Soviet milieu. The methodology that informs the present study can be explicated by contrasting it to (a) the basic model which has underpinned the great bulk of Western studies in this area and (b) the specific methodology which they have employed.

Models and methods

The basic model relied upon by Western analysts of Soviet elites¹⁶ might be described as the 'turnover model'. It utilizes individual level data, considers one-to-one turnover in jobs (i.e., the number of individual jobs that changed hands, often for specific time periods) and employs such variables for incumbents and recruits as age, education, nationality, sex, career history and so forth.¹⁷ The turnover model of mobility is designed to tell us (1) the rate at which jobs change hands, (2) the characteristics of incumbents as an aggregate profile, and (3) those attributes among recruits which are likely to be selected for as replacement occurs. Studies of this type have produced a series of pictures that change over time, enabling analysts to make certain empirical statements about elite composition and to forecast trends by extrapolating from changes in elite composition. However, as Bohdan Harasymiw has pointed out, 'we still have not explained the phenomenon epitomized by the classic theorists' notion of the "circulation of elites" . . . namely, "how do they circulate?"¹⁸

The reason for this persistent lacuna in studies of the Soviet leadership is simple enough; in the turnover model there is neither a concept of, nor an empirical referent for, circulation. The turnover model in fact does not concern itself with elite circulation as a process but deals instead with the personal attributes of officeholders. These are two quite different things. By establishing turnover as the focus of attention and treating the attributes of individuals as the primary concern, analysts employing this model tend to frame their basic

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research questions in a way which is not especially conducive to asking what seems to me to be the basic question: What does elite circulation tell us about political power in the USSR? Rather, the research interests associated with the turnover model¹⁹ lead to asking the questions set out abstractly in Figure 1.1.²⁰ This approach treats the personal attributes of individuals who have risen to high office in the Soviet Union as factors defining the elite in a given instance. That is, the elite is considered from the perspective of how its members 'score' on the variable of personal attributes. These scores, which in longitudinal studies change over time, are in turn regarded as indicators of change in the policy orientations of the ruling elites or, relatedly, as indicators of change in the Soviet political system. Here the tacit influence of the 'bureaucratic' model is apparent. Whether elite attributes are used as surrogates for policy orientations or leadership statements on policy are employed,²¹ the analysis treats such orientations as meaningful in themselves, assumedly because the Soviet 'bureaucracy' can or will translate them into practice.

As to the second of the distinctions that we are drawing here, Valerie Bunce is correct to point out that the field of Soviet elite studies has relied exclusively on 'methodological individualism' as the principle governing empirical analysis.²² As we have seen in our discussion of the turnover model, this approach regards individuals and their attributes as the basic unit of analysis and attempts to correlate these with mobility in order to analyse policy or systems change. The logic in this method involves a certain leap from aggregated individual characteristics to the characteristics of the system under consideration. Absent, here, is a method oriented to the level of the system itself (however we might define it in a given instance), one in which the *relations* among individuals, rather than the skin-bound individuals themselves, appear as the unit of analysis. Whereas the perspective implicit in methodological individualism cannot but apprehend elite circulation as the product of aggregated individual choices or intentions,²³ a method that gives primacy to the bundle of relations that constitute a system would view it as the result of an interactive set of opportunities and constraints to which individuals, *qua* individuals, react but which they do not control.²⁴

It goes without saying that conventional studies of elite mobility have greatly expanded our knowledge of the individuals who at one time or another constitute the elite(s) in the USSR. Moreover, the changing profile of elite characteristics is not without implication for elite behaviour. The life experiences that shape the outlook of a given

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Figure 1.1 The basic model underlying Western analyses of Soviet elites

generation and the rising educational level of those holding public office in the Soviet Union, for instance, are important factors in specifying the dimensions of leadership change in the Soviet system today. But as much as a focus on individuals might tell us about the orientations of the members of the elite at some point(s) in time, it remains ill-suited to the tasks of examining the set of relations which order the activity of these individuals and of answering the question of how these relations might themselves be changing. In this respect, the foregoing exegesis and critique of the field's conventions have been intended to call attention to certain gaps in our knowledge which issue from gaps in our methods. We can fill some of these by correcting the bias implicit in methodological individualism, by recognizing, that is, that individuals are neither the only nor necessarily the most appropriate unit of analysis that we might adopt. Since we intend to analyse the relations among individuals that structure their concrete activity, we require a method that incorporates the concept of relations into its basic design. Proceeding in this way, we are also led to a reformulation of the conceptual model which frames our empirical analyses of Soviet elites.

Vacancy chain analysis, a method developed by Harrison C. White,²⁵ seems particularly well-suited to our purpose. It begins by abstracting from individuals and focusing instead on positions, particularly on those that have fallen vacant. Once a vacancy has appeared in some position, it can circulate within the system of offices and form a chain in the process of doing so. That is, when a vacancy occurs and is then filled by some incumbent in the system, another vacancy has been created in the job which this incumbent has just left. This vacancy, in turn, might be filled by another incumbent, creating thereby another vacancy until the chain formed by the movement of vacancies has passed outside the system (recruitment of a non-incumbent). Alternatively, this process might be regarded as a replacement chain composed of the actors (replacements) whose movement in the system flows in a direction opposite to the flow of

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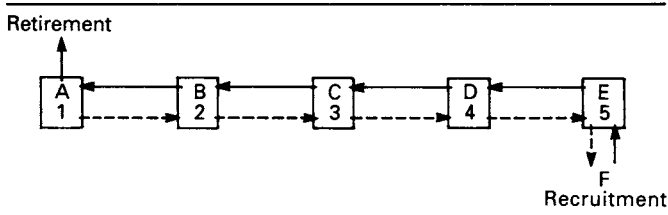


Figure 1.2 A vacancy chain encompassing five positions

* Letters indicate actors, numbers indicate positions. Solid lines denote the movement of actors, broken lines, the movement of vacancies

vacancies. Figure 1.2 illustrates this process by means of a hypothetical example. In this instance, a vacancy has appeared in Position 1, with the retirement of Actor A. Since B then fills the opening in Position 1, the vacancy moves to Position 2 which B has just left. It continues to circulate until a non-incumbent (Actor F) is recruited to fill Position 5, at which point the vacancy has passed outside the system and the chain terminates.

In subsequent chapters we shall have occasion to develop some of the conceptual and mathematical aspects of the vacancy model as we apply it to the analysis of our data. Here we are concerned with the methodological advantages which it holds for the study of Soviet elites.²⁶ First, it repairs the deficiency that we noted in the turnover model with respect to the issue of circulation. The vacancy model analytically includes the concept of circulation and offers an immediate empirical interpretation for it: vacancies circulate in chains. Secondly, the circulation of vacancies is cast within a relational framework, their circulation in chains reports events within the system that are themselves empirically linked. This is illustrated in Figure 1.2 in which Actor F, for instance, enters the system because of an opportunity which resulted from events having little if anything to do with his/her own intentions or decisions. In the first instance, F's entry into the system is occasioned by E's movement out of Position 5 and into Position 4. Similarly, E's movement is brought about by the opportunity to move to Position 4, an event conditioned by the movement of D and the resulting vacancy in his previous job. Carrying forward this logic, it becomes clear that A's retirement and F's recruitment are in fact related. This relationship, however, would not be noticed were our focus on individuals and their attributes.

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Figure 1.3 Revised model for Soviet elite analysis

Viewing the process of elite circulation in this way allows us also to make some revisions in the conventional model that underlies Soviet elite studies. The model adopted here, as set out in Figure 1.3, links elite mobility to the question of policy outcomes in the context of those variables thought to influence the circulation process:²⁷ centralization, regionalism and patronage. Although a direct analysis of policy outcomes in the Belorussian Republic is beyond the scope of this study, this model highlights the fact that in analysing elite mobility we are simultaneously examining the relative weights of the factors which shape such outcomes. In consonance with our discussion of 'bureaucracy' in the Soviet context, we can regard the presence of effective centralization in the process of elite circulation in Belorussia as an indication of structural strength in the deployment of political power. In this respect, the political centre, whether at the all-union or republic level, would be seen as directly effecting the mobility of elites and thereby controlling inducements (jobs, promotions) which it can exchange for performance. Conversely, regionalism and patronage would influence elite circulation in the opposite direction, contributing to the personalization of relations within Belorussia's formal organizations, fragmenting control over the personnel process and, by implication, over the policy process as well.

Finally, the method employed in this study allows for both a diachronic and a synchronic approach to the category of time and the related phenomenon of the mobility of the actors within the system. Mobility has conventionally been grasped in a diachronic fashion. It concerns those snapshots taken at various points in time which, when compared one to another, reveal certain changes in elite composition that have resulted from changing patterns of mobility. A diachronic approach to mobility is essential when the question of change is under consideration and, accordingly, it is often employed in this study. However, in the same way that vacancy chain analysis enables us to see the links among what might otherwise be perceived as discrete events within the system, it also opens another vista on the category of time which conduces to a synchronic appreciation of mobility and its

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effects. From this vantage, we view events as if they were occurring all at once. Mobility, when placed in synchronic perspective, can then be used in novel ways in order to specify characteristics of the system itself. In the following chapters, a synchronic concept of mobility is employed to determine the hierarchical structure of the system, and the influence of centralization, regionalism and patronage on the circulation of elites within it. Before turning to an empirical analysis of the relative effects of these factors on the circulation of elites in the BSSR, however, a word by way of background on the particular site of this study is in order.

Historical sketch

In discussing the history of any of the East European peoples, one's narrative invariably inclines toward the semantic pole marked out by terms such as 'difficult', 'troubled' and 'tragic'. This is particularly true of Belorussia. The name itself, 'White Russia' ('Belarus' in the native tongue), provides an illustration of this. It first appeared as a political-administrative designation referring to Russian lands outside the zone of taxation during the period of the Tartar yoke. Its official usage in documents dates from 1667 when it was applied by the Russian government to the western lands annexed from the Lithuanian-Polish state. The name, however, did not enter the local vernacular until the nineteenth century, at which time it was simultaneously banned from official administrative language due to the nationalist or separatist nuances which it was believed to carry.²⁸ Belorussia has historically designated a 'land between' and connoted, correspondingly, a relatively 'backward' place governed and exploited by contiguous nationalities.

The long epoch of serfdom in Belorussia was especially cruel, retarding and even reversing the development of the broad masses of the population. The burdens borne by those bound to the land in Belorussia were made the heavier by the fact that more than economic and social differences set masters apart from serfs. The pattern of foreign landowning in which Poles and Russians appeared as masters of the land added national, linguistic and religious differences as well, with the result that enserfed Belorussians experienced conditions of bondage that eclipsed feudalism's paternalistic face and enhanced in equal measure its capacity for brutal exploitation. Some indication of how this particular form of feudalism glaciated the development of the Belorussian people can be taken from the fact that pagan traditions