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"I Never had a Political Career": Russian Political Actors on Politics and Morality

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Abstract

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.