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The Politics of Professionalism in Russia

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Abstract

The words "professional" and "professionalism" enjoy an almost magical ring in Russian political parlance. They are often intoned as a panacea setting right any number of enumerated ills. They connote a mastery of affairs and thus are sought-for things commonly regarded to be woefully absent in the world of practical endeavors. They also admit to quite different definitions, sometimes opposing the idea of politics, sometimes coinciding with it. This polysemic quality of "professional" appears to be of critical import for drawing divisions and constructing group identities in the world of politics. This study seeks to determine how the word "professional" has been used by past and present members of Russia's political class and outlines two opposing discourses that constitute its meanings. It also has a secondary objective: viz., to frame the results reported, here, within the scope of a dynamic model of change in Soviet, and now Russian, political communication. Because these objectives are analytically distinct, I return to the second one only in conclusion.