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SOV. 7.

(U) EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE SOVIET UNION:
WHO GETS WHAT, WHEN, AND HOW^{1/}

Summary

Recent analysis of Soviet citizens' perceptions and behavior in matters involving housing, pensions, access to higher education, job placement, and the police suggests that the Soviet system is not as rigid or monolithic as is sometimes assumed. The Soviet people have evolved understandings and practices that make life more livable for themselves as well as the authorities. The situation suggests the existence of a "second polity" paralleling the "second economy."

Soviet citizens approach those government bureaucracies that seem manipulable as supplicants or with offers of tradeoffs--favors, influence, or money--for favorable action. How an approach takes place seems to depend on the particular organization, the education of the citizen and, to a lesser extent, the region where the interaction occurs. The frequency of contacts, rather than their positive or negative effect, seems to be the key variable in the evaluation citizens make of individual agencies.

^{1/} The principal findings in this paper are based on a monograph titled "Bureaucratic Encounters in the USSR: Styles, Strategies and Determinants," by Professor Zvi Gitelman, University of Michigan. Gitelman's work was commissioned by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, which is supported by funds from the Departments of Defense and State, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, and the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Department of State.

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But even if their encounters have favorable outcomes, Soviet citizens' basically negative perceptions of the overall system remain unchanged. Aware that they can have little or no influence on policy, they seem resigned to grapple as best they can with the "smaller" questions of daily life.

* * * * *

The Sample

Soviet emigrés, most of whom left the Soviet Union between 1977 and 1980, formed the focal point of Professor Gitelman's study. Gitelman used a common questionnaire for interviews of 1,161 ex-Soviet citizens ranging in age from 30 to 87 (the bulk of them 40-50 years old) in Israel, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the United States. He gave 59 of the emigrés additional "in-depth" interviews on the basis of their previous official positions or particular knowledge.

Seventy-seven percent of the emigrés were Jewish. Their residence in the Soviet Union was quite dispersed: 330 in the RSFSR, 247 in the Ukraine, 120 in Moldavia, 174 in the Baltic, 120 in Georgia, and 175 in Central Asia. Sex distribution was relatively even, but blue-collar occupations were dominated by males and white-collar ones by females, despite a similar educational level. Almost half of the men and slightly fewer women claimed higher education.

There were some regional differences: more young people from Georgia and Central Asia; higher educational levels for individuals from the RSFSR, Baltic, Ukraine, and Georgia and the lowest levels in Moldavia and Central Asia. The ethnic Germans in Central Asia had the smallest proportion of communist party members and were the least well educated.

Income distribution data showed those from the Baltic at the top, either individually or per family, followed by those from the RSFSR and the Ukraine. Among Europeans, the Moldavians had the lowest income; the Central Asians were at the bottom of all groups.

How To Work the System

A Soviet citizen's education seems to have a greater effect than the individual's geographic location, sex, or age on the manner in which the citizen actively deals with the bureaucracy. It may be that higher education instills greater confidence during bureaucratic encounters and leads the well educated to prefer a bureaucratic style that deals with issues on a case-by-case basis. Such individuals rely on their greater knowledge to gain an advantage by exercising "pull" on a bureaucrat. Less educated people are more prone to defer to the status conferred on the official's position.

This is not to say that the less educated will meekly accept the verdict of an official, but their tactics will differ. Such individuals are more likely to resort to bribery and not rely on pulling strings.

The Persistence of Old Habits

Such behavior probably has been the pattern in Russia for centuries. The best the peasant could do to gain the favor of a powerful official was to bring him a chicken or some moonshine, whereas the educated and wealthy were more likely to mix socially with the official and perhaps his superiors.

The longstanding impression from perusal of the Soviet press that bribery and corruption are concentrated in the Southern and Central Asian republics may be overstated. On the one hand, Georgians and Central Asians seem more persuaded of the fairness of officials in pressing the citizen's claims. Nevertheless, many more Georgians (75 percent) than RSFSR residents (51 percent) thought it possible to bribe a police officer to forget a minor infraction. On the other hand, there was no significant regional variation in respondents' answers to the question of what proportion of Soviet employees take graft. In fact, there was no discernible variation among regions where respondents had to choose a particular course of action regarded as effective from among such things as legal steps, appeals, looking for connections, and bribery.

Probe Where You Can

An agency's accessibility and the nature of the services it provides, rather than its structure and personnel, determine the manner in which Soviet citizens deal with it.

Respondents generally agreed that housing agencies, most frequently the housing department of the local soviet, were the most difficult with which to deal and that agencies providing pensions were the most accommodating. These findings probably reflect psychological as well as more tangible factors: It is well known that housing in the Soviet Union is perennially and seriously deficient. Hence an agency unable to meet the demands of most of its clients is likely to be thought of as inefficient and biased in favor of some groups.

Official Soviet sources also provide considerable evidence that pension agencies suffer from poorly trained personnel and inefficient procedures. And yet, they were favorably regarded by a majority of the respondents, who saw no need for individuals to resort to special tactics to receive pensions. It may be that older people are more docile in accepting what the state provides

and that most of those entitled to pensions receive them, in contrast to those who are unable to procure housing.

Obtaining housing, therefore, galvanizes the Soviet citizen into engaging in the most imaginative schemes, including string pulling, bribery, and other tactics. Two-thirds of the respondents reported trying to improve their position on waiting lists, through appealing to a higher Soviet authority, having the workplace supervisor intervene, or using illegal tactics including bypassing normal channels and resorting to private deals of all sorts.

Getting a pension, on the other hand, rarely involves such a hassle. But the often low amount of a pension provides an incentive for the individual to seek to increase its size through some "creative" interpretation of the law. According to some respondents, this procedure involves boosting the individual's salary through promotion, even if the person is not qualified, in the last years of employment and thus increasing the average used in calculating the pension.

Education and Job Placement

Admission to higher education is generally difficult because the competition is fierce, particularly in the case of certain schools and for Jewish applicants. Strategies vary, but string pulling and bribery are widely used; and payments of hundreds to thousands of rubles, in the case of getting into a prestigious institution like Leningrad Medical School, are not uncommon. In other instances, again in Leningrad, emigrés knew of instructions to admit no one to certain faculties without a recommendation from the local party office.

Certain institutes of higher learning are completely closed to Jews, and even those open to them frequently require rather indirect methods for gaining access. The most common practice is to hire a tutor, who often is a member of the admissions committee. This method entails paying a fee to the tutor, who obviously shares it with individuals inside the institution, most likely other members of the committee.

Efforts to get a better deal do not stop with graduation but continue with the job assignment process, the goal being to avoid a bad first job in an undesirable location. In 1979, nearly 30 percent of assigned jobs were not taken, and in some rural areas the proportion of those who did not show up for their assignments was even higher. String pulling rather than bribery seems to work fairly well, particularly if an individual can get some big boss to request a specific graduate as an employee.

Use of influence is also widespread in landing nonprofessional jobs. Here, however, payoffs are more common, except that they vary in nature. In the more developed areas money is the common instrument; while in labor-hungry Siberia, scarce commodities, like vodka, are more appreciated.

Still another factor confronting the individual in the job market is ethnicity. Ample evidence exists of people trying to hire others of their own ethnic group. Where official policy aims to increase the number of indigenous professionals--for example, preferring Central Asians for Uzbek dental clinics--it takes considerable scheming for Jews or Armenians to get hired. In some instances, this ostensible exclusion entails no particular hardship, because those who are rejected can earn more in private practice. But such a favorable outcome is not always assured.

Facing the Militia

Finally, in an environment as heavily restricted as Soviet society, the attitude toward the militia (police) is negative but not fearful. People do not hate the militia but view it condescendingly. Both Europeans as well as Central Asians and Georgians overwhelmingly oppose their children choosing the militia as a career. Members of the militia are widely regarded as under-educated country bumpkins trying to shirk factory work and resettle in urban areas. Only a third of the respondents, however, noted unfair treatment in their encounters with the militia.

Most respondents nevertheless felt that the militia would favor party members and others with connections and deal more harshly with the poor, drunkards, Jews, and especially ethnic Germans. The ethnic Germans' attitude toward the militia may reflect the experiences of the war and immediate postwar period and the low educational level of this group. Conversely, it is the highly educated Jews who, though not necessarily mistreated themselves, see the militia as treating people unequally.

The Lure of Political Participation

Decades of regime-inspired participation by the Soviet public in all sorts of institutionalized politics only seem to have widened the gap between the average citizen and the system. Contrary to the belief of those Western observers who appear impressed by the numerical growth of political participation as reflecting rising public influence on policy, the available evidence points to greater individualized politics. The average citizen, aware that he can do little for the common good, is primarily concerned with promoting his own welfare.

This widely prevailing feeling still allows for divergent perceptions regarding the meaning and significance of Soviet formal institutions. In general, people with less education attribute greater importance to the institutions, thereby implicitly accepting at face value claims that participation in them helps to shape the political process. The better educated are more skeptical, suggesting that Soviet education may not progressively socialize people to the myths of the system but may have just the opposite effect.

The Democratic Charade

A certain correlation exists between knowledge about the Soviet system, interest in it, and participation in the form of citizen-initiated contacts--writing a letter, approaching the party, etc. Those who score highest on participation of all kinds also have the lowest expectation of being able to influence the course of politics. Regionally, the European areas have high scores while the Georgians and Central Asians have low participation rates. And yet, the latter groups manifest greater confidence in their ability to affect the system.

If everyday experiences help shape the Soviet citizen's overall evaluation of the system, one might assume the existence of some correlation between the two. This, however, is not the case. There is some indication that the evaluation of the individual encounter--regardless of how positive the encounter--is affected adversely by the generally negative attitude toward the overall system.

One can only speculate about the factors that contribute to an overall evaluation of the Soviet system. Especially for Germans and Jews, discontent deriving from ethnic discrimination and cultural deprivation may play a pivotal role. Another, possibly less obvious, factor was raised by a number of the respondents: their complaint about the falsehood that permeates the system. They remarked specifically on the fraudulent nature of nominally democratic institutions--elections, mass rallies, "voluntary" organizations--as insults to their intelligence. In essence, for these people the facade of mass participation is counterproductive: rather than being taken in, they resent the attempt to deceive them. In their case, the myths of the system have become a source of alienation and disillusionment.

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