Capacity to reform public service in Russia. An institutional explanation from a liberal approach

Alexey Barabashev, NRU HSE
abarabashev@hse.ru
Institutional trap

The Russian state is highly bureaucratic. It is Empire tradition that survived in Soviet times. That is why reform of the Russian bureaucracy is the capstone of any general transformation of the Russian system writ large. Nevertheless, it was the bureaucracy itself that was tasked with launching and implementing this reform.
Research question

Does the existence of such an institutional trap completely preclude the possibility of successful reform of the system of public administration? Even under such difficult conditions, can reform be successful?
There are two opposite theoretical approaches to the conduct of public administrative reform. The first “elitistic” approach tries to argue that successful public sector reform is almost impossible in case of the resistance of the political and bureaucratic elite.

The second approach (“incremental steps theory”) argues that some minor organizational efforts—appearing gradual and insignificant to the external observer—have changed the system of governance in an irreversible way.
Divergence of the approaches: expert-practitioners vs “theoretists”

The technocratic approach prevails in the modern practice of public administration in Russia. Technocrats–reformers, those who follow the “incremental steps” approach, occupy a niche of experts for Government.

In the theory of public administration (in relation to Russian country-specifics) the criticism of reform dominates. Classical liberals and theoreticians became out-of-process critics.
1. Bureaucracy reforms in Russia are cyclic. The main feature of Russian public service reform is its cyclic character.

2. There are political and administrative reasons for the existence of the reform cycles in Russia.

3. The professional Russian expert community in the area of public service reform is weak and dissociated, and it is a main reason of the cyclist essence of public service reform.
The method of "inclusive observation" (not interviews, but direct evaluations of the course of reform from Russian expert group members) will be used. In other words, the reform of Russian public service will be analyzed "from within", from the perspective of the members of the expert community participating in reform, not from the position of external reviewers and “outsiders” who do not participate in the process of reform elaboration and implementation, but simply interview experts. This method is much more effective than semi-structured interviews.
1. Selection of "flexible" (read: malleable, subservient) experts from educational, scientific and analytical organizations.

2. Senior managers from governmental bodies to recruit or advance only those experts who are fascinated by "technologies of administrative work" and are willing to sacrifice the overall goals of reform. The technologies are far more important than the mission.

3. Manipulation of reform financing, whereby funds are granted to the organizations that have repeatedly proved their loyalty.

4. At the last stage of each cycle of reform the disconnection of experts from the preparation of reform effectiveness measurements.
1. Academic experts are invited to participate in departmental meetings as “observers” only, with no right to express their ideas and positions to all participants.

2. Organizational shifts, that halt reform through the redistribution of power, the establishment of parallel, competing government institutions responsible for reform with intersecting functions.

3. to restricting access to information for experts

4. To include the bureaucracy reform as some part of more broad reform is used as a way to frame it as a secondary priority.
Role of experts and of experts community in this conditions of reforming - 1

Initial stages of cycles: enthusiasm, creation of the plans and programs drafts, active participation. Experts from academia and from governmental structures works in a parallel, not coordinated properly.

Second stages of cycles: massive financing of expertise based on program methods with procurement procedures. Price is typically weighted over the content of the proposal and the professional skills of the experts. Secondly, the expert community in Gvt bodies expands as the number of new expert positions in government bodies increases. Unfortunately, experts who became civil servants are immediately faced with a tremendous volume of work, forced to execute a massive flow of administrative orders, mostly situational, immediate and urgent. Quality of expertise is decreased.
Role of experts and of experts community in this conditions of reforming – 2

Middle stages of cycles: the multiplication of control and supervising governmental structures such as anti-corruption departments, prosecutors’ offices, investigative offices, audit chamber branches, etc. This expansion is followed by a reduction of the “external” (i.e. academic) part of the expert community (grant financing is cut, external experts are sidelined or even terminated). The servile part of the expert community extends while "potentially dangerous" (read: critical) experts are eliminated. Administrators of the academic organizations act as a part of this process, participating (as representatives of all top administrative authorities in governmental body meetings). In general, this is called "bureaucratization of the reform of the public service", meaning the complete administrative execution of reform almost without academic expert participation.
Final stage of cycles: reform of the public service is rarely mentioned in political discourse, so it fades into the shadows; administrative mechanisms of reform are conserved, and public service reform starts to be a field for exercises of the control and supervising bodies; the new legislation comes down to a number of "technical" decrees of the president of Russia and resolutions of the government of the Russian Federation; there are no breakthroughs, no strategic innovations.
Role of experts and of experts community in this conditions of reforming – 4

Final stage of cycles (to continue): Under these circumstances, the expert community is split up. Some academic experts are starting to be focused on academic analytics, on writing scientific articles, or on doing research projects. Some experts have moved into business, HR-consulting, or into teaching. Finally, many external experts have simply stopped their activities. It is a real loss of expertise potential, which is hard to renew. Obviously, it does not help to improve public service.

Experts—usually, those at the level of specialists, the heads of sub-units and specialized units—from government bodies face other problems. Their career development is slowed down or completely stops.
Discussion about the results

Capacity for reforming bureaucracy is crucially dependent on the quality of expert community, its ability to insist on professional values, to follow its mission, and to lead the process of interaction with state authorities.

- The commitment to professional views on society and mechanisms of its development is the center of liberal beliefs.
- The core of social liberalism is the groups of professionals in different areas of social sciences, economics, political sciences, jurisprudence, etc., involved into expertise and consultancy for public decision making.
- Without strong liberal community of experts public service reform impossible to realize.
- In Russian case, this community is weak, it cannot to resist.
THANK YOU!