

# **Administrative reform in Russia: comparing roles of officials, civil society and expert community.<sup>1</sup>**

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## Summary

The last Russian administrative reform started officially in the beginning of 2000s and since then has been going on. Over time, its aims have changed. There have been some positive results, but in general it has gradually stuck. In this paper we analyze the reform process and some earlier related activities through the concepts proposed by Latour when describing construction of scientific facts (Latour, 1987). Firstly, we shortly present the framework (which actor-network theory has been later built on (e.g., Latour, 1987; Callon, Larédo and Mustar, 1997)) and then explain why and how they can be used to study reforms. Then, we place the administrative reform dynamics into this framework to make some claims about the role played by different actors in the process and its inhibition, in particular.

### **1. Reform process - constructing the black box**

One of the key concepts used by Latour in his work "Science in action..." is the understanding of scientific facts as "black boxes". These "black boxes" are hidden (or "closed") tangles of linkages between old known "facts", opinions of actors, their resources etc. behind a particular statement. Once there occurs a doubt about its "truthfulness", the "black box" has to be opened, its content analyzed and/or changed, new connections established. This is how the new "fact" emerges (Latour, 1987, p.13-17). In the process of constructing this new "fact" scholars strengthen their positions making alliances within worlds of society and technology (opinions of colleagues, citations and references, earlier facts, experiments and laboratories etc.).

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In this paper we trace similarities between creation of knowledge in science and implementation of a reform in policy process. As known, political system can also be presented as a similar “black box” of connections of actors, the well established rules and patterns of behavior, to some extent based on previous experience. Therefore, a reform can be perceived as an attempt to open this “black box”, to re-establish and to change its content, and, finally, to create a new system of rules and practices in a given policy.

Hence, reformers have similar tasks to those of scholar when their ideas become a closed “black box”, that is a fact of societal reality that is taken for granted. To strengthen their positions in their struggle with multiple streams of different opinions on a subject, reformers can apply some strategies of making alliances. Latour calls them “translations” (of interests) and distinguishes five major types of them:

“I want what you want” - presentation of ideas as if they corresponded to explicit interests of a target audience (ibid. p.108-11);

1. “I want it, why don’t you?” - relevant actors have no other way of meeting their needs than to follow proposed ideas (ibid. p.111);
2. “If you just make a short detour...” - persuasion of potential allies, that the best (shortest, cheapest etc.) way to achieve their interests is to support the opinion of reformers (scholars) (ibid. p.111-13);
3. “Reshuffling interests and goals” - displacing, mixing and changing goals of the target actors, hiding other ways to achieve their aims, finding new relevant groups to make them follow reformers’ ideas (ibid. p.113-19);
4. “Becoming indispensable” - construction of the network of allies (both of human and non-human nature: instruments, research results, past and foreign experience etc.) around some concepts to leave newcomers with no other choice than to follow these ideas. Actually, this strategy is being used at the last stages - when the most part of bonds is already established and the “black box” is nearly closed (ibid. p.119-21).

Once the “black box” is closed, the reform provisions become implemented and accepted till the future moment when doubts in their relevance for contemporary situation emerge. This is the time to open the “black box” and reconsider its content again.

We use these assumptions as a framework for our analysis of the Russian administrative reform because this allows to trace the interrelations among different actors and to depict the actions of reformers in terms of described strategies. This, in turn, gives us much better understanding of the roles and results of the activities of reformers and other actors in the reform process.

The concept of “black box” construction as a metaphor for reform process has its own advantages which can be seen more clearly if one compares it to the widespread concept of diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1983). The latter approach presumes propagation and gradual adoption of already complete set of rules and practices. But in social reality content of a reform, its conception is being changed constantly in the course of time.

## 2. Russian administrative reform stages

Since the mid-1990s we can observe the use of described strategies by relevant actors at different stages of the administrative reform. In the following part we analyze the reform process through the lens of theoretical provisions proposed earlier.

The first more or less comprehensive effort to reform state apparatus was initiated by the presidential aide for legal affairs Prof. Krasnov who presented the report “On the weak manageability of government processes” as early as in 1996 (Krasnov, Obolonsky, 2003). In 1997 the expert group was formed, its work was to some extent supported by the presidential administration. But in 1998 the activities of this group were curtailed and terminated due to changes in the cabinet. The other possible causes are the upcoming elections that required current stability and huge spendings (interview with V. Smirnov - one of the members of expert working group, St.-Petersburg, 2012), excessive confidentiality of the experts’ work, lack of political will and allies inside the state apparatus (ibid., p.133).

At this stage the reformers mostly tried to connect their suggestions to the interests of the Russian political elite. The politicians, in turn, accepted them only if these ideas matched their aims or if they had no other choice (controllability of state really required some changes). The prevalence of state officials’ interests appeared, for example, in the outlined causes of this stage’s termination. Therefore, we can conclude that at that moment the reformers used the first two strategies (“I want what you want” and “I want it, why don’t you?”; mostly first one).

At the turn of the century the third translation – “detour” – occurred. The Center for Strategic Research (Russian think-tank associated with government) actually scaled down the issue of state (re-)building to the need of administrative reform (including the reform of public service) while working to elaborate Putin’s presidential program (Sungurov, Tinyakov, 2016, p.42-43). The development of the reform concept continued with the lack of publicity and with reliance on the political will of one person which often lacked too (Barabashev, 2003, p.174, 179, 209). Though some efforts were made to attract external experts, they were restricted, on the one hand, and most of the non-governmental activists were not ready for this kind of interaction, on the other.

The stages of preparation and adoption of the official Administrative reform Concept (2005) and its implementation present in fact a negative example of the use of the fourth strategy — one of mixing and changing interests, aims, allies. There occurred a substitution of ideas during the search for new allies within the presidential administration, the government and the rest of bureaucracy. This process was destructive to the original plans of the reformers. Some new groups of interests emerged within the reform process. Statists in the federal reform commission (Administrativnaya reforma, 2011) and regional bureaucracies though perceived as potential allies, were in fact, against the most meaningful proposals of the reform: e.g., decrease in government regulation of economy, expansion of civil society’s role in governance, increase in transparency, etc. (Interview with M. Dmitriev, Moscow, 2013). The emphasis was shifted to formal criteria to assess the reform dynamics: quantity of official written regulations for public services and other distracting aspects such as unified multifunctional centers of public services

and e-government (of course, important to some extent (ibid.)).

Besides of that, during the work on the Concept (as in the body of adopted document) the reform's content was not sufficiently substantiated with earlier and international experience, existing knowledge in the public administration studies. For example, M. Dmitriev - the head of the Center for Strategic Research, the deputy minister of economic development and trade and the curator of the reform process - was poorly informed about the previous activity on governance reform in 1990s (Sungurov, Tinyakov, 2016, p.44). A lot of the reform aims were included ad hoc. Instead of grounding on modern trends in the public administration studies and existing practice (the public governance approach (Osborn, 2006)), much has been taken from the obsolescent New public management concept (ibid.), e.g., focus on budgeting according to results. Hence, we can see that allies from the world of knowledge and practice were not sufficiently involved too.

Thus, we argue that wrong choice of strategies and allies (or some restrictions of this choice by a third side - the higher officials), incapability of control their activity resulted in the fail of some reform aims, its inhibition and impossibility of the fifth translation ("Becoming indispensable)". That means that the reform and its content did not become undeniable "black box", what would leave the only goal of widespread diffusion of this innovation.

We think that civil society institutions and expert community could be more reliable ally in the reform process. Experts' involvement in the work on reform was limited. These experts were mostly associated with government though with some exceptions such as the joint task force to ensure the participation of civil society in administrative reform (Sungurov, Tinyakov, 2016, p.46-47). The general public did not receive enough information about reform. Though with sufficient public awareness about it we could expect public support for the administrative reform taking into account widespread dissatisfaction with the bureaucrats. However, the reformers did not used various tactics to bring the public and experts' interests together with their own goals, did not create public interest in the reform, did not "invent" some new groups of actors who could be interested in the reforms' success.

### **3. Evidence from Karelia**

Case of the Republic of Karelia demonstrates value of community and expert support in the reform process. This Russian region was one of the most successful in dynamics of the administrative reform after start of the regional stage of the Concept implementation (Kulakova, 2009). Semi-structured interviews with public officials, representatives of civil society and expert community resulted in following findings:

- 1) Utmost importance of the Head of the Republic's personality, his origin and ideological views. Respondents distinguished stages of political life in Karelia corresponding with terms in office of the region's heads. Those originated from other areas of Russia and appointed by Moscow were often referred as "aliens" (Interview with E. Tsumarova, Petrozavodsk, 2016).
- 2) Informal relations within to some extent insular Karelian community also play a significant role. Respondents expressed this trend quite explicitly: ("own small politicum" (Interview with O. Reut, Petrozavodsk, 2016), "we use all informal contacts,

of course” (Interview with E. Tsumarova), “My student became the head of the Republic - Katanandov Sergey Leonidovich” (Interview with A. Shishkin, Petrozavodsk, 2016).

- 3) The gradual drift to the less democratic regional political regime was linked by the interviewees among all to the emergence of appointed heads of the republic. This shift expressed above all in decrease of pluralism of opinions on public issues, reduction of civil society and expert community involvement.

The administrative reform in region followed the similar fairway. S. Katandadov - the head of the Republic in the beginning of the reform process - originated from Karelia. His activity was deeply rooted in community and he was connected with many informal and semi-formal relations within it. During his term in office there were more or less vivid and pluralistic discussions around the administrative reform issue. The local experts also participated in its process, first of all, due to these informal ties (e.g., A. Shishkin - the former Katanandov's academic instructor, the member of the presidium of the Karelian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, the member of the presidium of Karelian Science Center of the Russian academy of sciences).

After S. Katanandov's term the heads of the Republic started to be appointed from federal center. This time is connected by the respondents with inhibition of the reform, its reduction to formal criteria ("Artificiality, non-adaptive" (Interview with O. Reut); "Substitution of notions of civil society with the E-democracy / ... / They found / ... /an aspect they understand how to do." (Interview with E. Tsumarova)). This shift to formal measures was also linked with a wish of the appointees to fit the demands of the center without much effort.

This case shows that in time of multiple community-government ties' existence, of inclusion of various groups in the policy process the reforms' dynamics reached its pike (Kulakova, op. cit.). It started to slow down when alliances with these groups had collapsed.

#### **4. Sketch of regional-level factors**

Our preliminary statistical models also to some extent support the argument about usefulness of civil society in the reform process.

Data for models were gathered for 83 Russian regions (excluding Crimea and Sevastopol') from 2002 to 2014.

To measure results of the reform - our dependent variable - we use the data on dynamics of inefficient expenditures on the public administration from 2008 to 2011 acquired from ministerial report (Doklad..., 2012, p.93-94). This choice is based on one of the key reform's tasks - to reduce inefficient activity of the public administration and optimize it, to implement budgeting according the results (and some other constituents of the new public management approach). The dynamics was assessed by comparing share of inefficient spending in 2011 to the figures related to 2008 - the year when the regional stage of the reform started. This index is insufficient to apprise all reform aims, including those that can be hardly measured quantitatively (such as increase in civil society involvement in the policy process). But we assume that it is

suitable for preliminary calculations taking into account difficulties with access to some relevant data and oversaturation of more detailed existing indices with unreliable data.

We also include following independent variables in our models:

- 1) Expenditures on the administrative reform in regional budgets (source: regional budget acts),
- 2) share of transfers from federal center in regional budgets (source: regional budget acts) as an index of dependency on the center (Turovsky, 2009, p. 89-90));
- 3) number of Google queries with keywords “administrative reform” as an index of public interest (source: Google’s statistics);<sup>2</sup>
- 4) relative quantity of regional bureaucrats per 10000 of population (Rosstat...) and regional corruption ranking conducted by the Transparency Int. and the INDEM foundation in 2002 (Regional’niye indeksi...) as indices of the bureaucracy’s informal “power”;
- 5) rankings of regional political regimes in Russia to measure the extent of democracy/authoritarianism in the regions (Petrov, Titkov, 2015).

We conducted preliminary analysis using linear regressions method in R statistical package. Equations were constructed for all the pairs of dependent-independent variables and for some multiple models. The case of the Moscow region was excluded as an outlier.

Table 1 presents the general linear regression including all independent variables. There is only one significant variable - extent of dependency on federal center. Besides, the p-value of model does not allow us to accept it on 95% confidence level.

If we exclude all other independent variables (table 2) the significance of dependency on the center variable remains. Also both the model’s significance and the percent of variance

Table 1. General model				
Coefficients:				
	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	21.16115	49.50577	0.427	0.6718
corr	5.78923	27.13587	0.213	0.8324
bureau_10k	-0.07831	0.24308	-0.322	0.7494
int	-0.09171	0.31225	-0.294	0.7708
dep	-0.72547	0.34579	-2.098	0.0436 *
regime	0.15500	1.11173	0.139	0.8900
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Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1				
Residual standard error: 34.34 on 33 degrees of freedom				
(43 observations deleted due to missingness)				
Multiple R-squared: 0.1684, Adjusted R-squared: 0.04243				
F-statistic: 1.337 on 5 and 33 DF, p-value: 0.2733				

explained increase. (If we exclude the corruption variable, the significance of dependency on the center will be lost. This is due to the fact, that the corruption ranking was conducted only in 40 regions excluding the most part of the national republics, in particular, the Caucasus area. Specific political features of these regions are widely discussed in different studies (Grant, 2009)).

The most explicit interpretation

is not accessible, what made us to significantly from the time of the reform.

of this is that stronger influence of the federal center leads to the decrease in the inefficient

Table 2.

Coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	17.3273	19.3302	0.896	0.3760
dep	-0.7539	0.2838	-2.657	0.0117 *
corr	5.4376	25.7756	0.211	0.8341

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Signif. codes: 0 '\*\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*\*' 0.01 '\*\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 32.97 on 36 degrees of freedom  
(43 observations deleted due to missingness)

Multiple R-squared: 0.1642, Adjusted R-squared: 0.1178

F-statistic: 3.536 on 2 and 36 DF, p-value: 0.03961

public administration expenditures. But with some discretion we can say that indirectly these results can mean that the administrative reform is more successful in the regions where political will of the center is expressed more clearly.

Another model of our interest is a binary regression in the group of dependent regions (transfers make more than 50% of regional budget income) with the democracy ranking as an independent variable (table 3). It shows that in the highly dependent regions the political regime acquires its significance: more democratic ones have better

Table 3.

Coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	105.465	45.443	2.321	0.0258 *
regime	-4.186	1.620	-2.583	0.0138 *

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Signif. codes: 0 '\*\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*\*' 0.01 '\*\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 49.66 on 38 degrees of freedom

Multiple R-squared: 0.1494, Adjusted R-squared: 0.127

F-statistic: 2.634 on 1 and 80 DF, p-value: 0.1085

dynamics of the ineffective public administration spending. Regarding our topic, these figures can be interpreted such as in the dependent regions the more democratic ones have even better performance in the administrative reform process.

It should be noted again, that these models present only preliminary calculations and could not bear rigorous evidence. But they can be an indirect clue for following propositions:

- 1) Political will of the center plays a significant role in the reform process;
- 2) Among the regions where this will is explicitly expressed, the more democratic ones have the better reform dynamics;
- 3) The authors of the regimes' ranking counted as democratic the regions with the free press, the open and pluralistic society among other criteria. Therefore, we could state the positive role of possibilities of the public participation in the policy process for the reform, *having clear political will of officials* for change. Without influence of the center regime's features are insignificant;

- 4) Taking this last assumption into account, it seems that civil society's activity alone can not foster the reform process. This conclusion converges with our earlier theoretical inference about the need for the reform promoters to apply various tactics and strategies to expand the circle of their allies. This means, civil society groups have no direct and clear interest in the reform, or have no information about it and can not grasp that the reform is in their interests. This is the task of reformers - to give information, to explain the reform, to determine groups for which the reform can be of interest etc.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper we analyzed the overall reform process on the federal level through our theoretical assumptions, found some evidence in the case of the Republic of Karelia and in the primary statistical models of regional dimension of the Russian administrative reform.

The general conclusion is that of importance of choice of allies, their plurality, quantity and quality for success of the reform. The tactical mistakes of the reformers and responsible officials are similar on federal and regional stages of the reform. The usefulness of non-governmental actors were not taken into account: reform aims were not publicly explained, representatives of civil society and expert community were not sufficiently involved in the process. Actors within authority and bureaucracy were not put under control, what gave them an opportunity to deviate from initial reform aims and principles.

Another finding is that civil society stays mostly inert in policy process if its groups have no direct interest in a given policy or do not recognize it. The invention and/or revelation of these interests are also tasks of relevant public officials.

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