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Russian experts: missing actors of the budget process

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an examination of the role of experts in the Russian budget process. Experts are those whose role is based on specialised knowledge and technical skills, rather than affiliation to an agency, association or political party. Ideally their contributions are impartial. In the first part of the article the channels of expert influence are described, primarily within the executive branch. Features are found in these channels that mean that impartial advice is not always guaranteed. In the second part, on the basis of a survey of experts, the answers to two questions are sought: whether they feel that impartial advice is expected of them and whether they provide it. There are negative elements in the responses on both counts, suggesting that despite some evidence of demand for such advice on the part of policy-makers, expert advice is often not impartial.

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Introduction

The budget process provides a forum for regular competition between a complete set of politically represented vested interests. While a collision of interests within the budget process might be less dramatic than a change of government or legislative conflict, the latter events do not happen often and involve a relatively limited number of actors. Using the terminology of Rhodes (1997), specific issue networks move into the limelight in such situations, whereas analysis and interpretation of the budget process provide a wider view of the policy community, as well as of how it functions.

Researchers of Russian political life traditionally focus on relationships between the key figures in various government agencies and with the business community (Rutland, *in press*; Sakwa, 2011; Yakovlev, 2014). However, as studies of other countries have demonstrated, experts have also had a major impact on policy-making in various areas in recent years. They have acted both as official and unofficial advisers to decision-makers and parties in all sorts of public and private discussions. Often expert bodies (committees, boards, etc.), which do not have decision-making authority, have nevertheless played a key role in seeking a balance of interests (Puetter, 2007). Competition between advisers and officials, of whom the latter should be much more influential according to their formal status, has been the subject of major controversy in the UK and Australia (Rhodes, 2008, p. 334). It is unlikely that such

phenomena and their underlying problems are less important in Russia where, as some researchers believe (Ledeneva, 2013), informal governance factors and issues play a major role.

Experts are those members of the policy community whose membership is based primarily on the acceptance of their knowledge and analytical skills by other participants. Their role is unique in that they are expected, in theory at least, to display the maximum possible degree of independence from ideological positions and private interests in their contributions to political deliberations. This stands in sharp contrast to the expectations of all other participants, who are called upon to act as exponents of value-laden ideas or vested interests and who are likely to be concentrated in political parties, trade unions, business associations, etc. Experts position themselves as the most coherent proponents and mouthpieces of a technocratic approach to politics.

An analysis of the assumptions, conditions and implications of expert involvement in policy-making provides an insight into that side of the process which is not reduced to actions more or less prescribed by the legally guaranteed status of elected politicians, civil servants and official lobbyists. No one occupying any of those positions can be described as an expert in the sense the word is used here, no matter how brilliant an economist, political scientist or whatever they might be. For any other well-qualified specialist the role of expert is in principle available. It need not be the individual's only role, and certainly does not have to be a lifelong vocation. In many countries it is not unusual, for example, that retired senior officials act as influential experts. The same role is played by journalists and academics, if they are speaking on issues that are not directly connected with the interests of their employer. It is common for business people to be members of expert committees. Needless to say, they, like any other expert, must reveal any conflict of interest. But for an expert, as for an official, the possibility of a conflict of interest requires the individual to step back from their role only in specific circumstances, not that they refuse the role altogether.

The fundamental definitional requirement of an expert is, then, impartiality. However, we know from evidence from Western countries that the capacity and willingness of members of the political community who present themselves as experts to act in practice as absolutely neutral 'honest brokers' are far from guaranteed (for example, Pielke, 2007). Whether there is a gap between the assumed and actual behaviour of experts is a question clearly of no less significance for countries in which the functioning of the policy community is less structured and formalised than in the West. This applies to post-communist countries, in particular Russia.

Moreover, a peculiarity of Russian political discourse in the economic sphere is a tendency to avoid explicit confrontation between the ideological positions and interests of various social groups. The chapters devoted to the economy of nearly all political party programmes and the attitude of the country's leadership to economic issues largely focus on economic growth, technological progress, the protection of the national economy from undesirable external influences and structural shifts seen as beneficial to the population at large. Such discourse implies a significant demand for politically neutral, impartial and competent judgments which are free from any lobbying. To the best of the author's knowledge there is no previously published research devoted to the issue of the extent to which and how such demand is met.

This article intends to at least partially fill this gap. It attempts to provide answers to the following questions: does Russian reality provide any indication of an emerging demand for

experts who possess the above qualities? What is the institutional framework of this demand and how effectively does it address the demand? What is the supply of expert judgements and does it satisfy the demand?

A negative answer to the first question implies that economic policy discourse is more likely to be non-transparent than transparent, and therefore not very susceptible to outside analysis. If the answer to the question is positive, however, the answers to the subsequent questions could be quite helpful in determining how adequate the decision-making process is. Indeed, it would make sense to find a way to head off the risk of what could be referred to as comfortable delusion. This is a situation in which decision-makers, while reserving the right to disagree, want to receive carefully prepared and reasonably independent opinion and might believe that they are receiving it. But experts prefer to avoid judgements that they believe might be unwelcome to clients. In these circumstances, an expert discourse on economic growth, efficiency or the like could well distort rather than inform the content of policy, including in the eyes of those who make it.

The involvement of experts in Russian political life has been discussed in a number of publications (Balayan & Sungurov, 2016; Belyaeva, 2013; Belyaeva, Yena, Zaytsev, & Chulok, 2016; Yakovlev, Freinkman, & Zolotov, 2016). However, they are mainly focused not on the characteristics of the experts and the expert community per se but rather on the environment in which they operate. The authors of most studies more or less openly advocate what they see as the corporate interests of the expert community and think tanks by focusing on an assessment of the correspondence between those interests and the reality of the environment in which they work. The analyses provide grounds for a legitimate criticism of experts' work environment, but they devote much less attention to a critical assessment of the qualities of the experts themselves. One such critical assessment is the study by Jakobson (2008), which evaluated the role of experts as 'voices' of civil society. It showed that as many complaints could be addressed to the way experts play their role as to the conditions in which they are required to operate.

Overall, the literature does not provide any substantial analysis of the role of experts in generating Russian economic policies. We do not claim an exhaustive coverage of the issue here, and the three questions above are discussed with two major limitations.

First, the questions are assumed to refer solely to the budget process rather than to the entire range of economic policies. The budget process, owing to its specific nature mentioned in the beginning of the article, is more appropriate for an analysis of the role of experts than any other decision-making process related to the national economy. Here the budget process is examined in both a narrow and a broad sense. The former is a set of procedures explicitly set out in the Budget Code. The latter covers any other actions by members of the policy community capable of significantly, and sometimes critically, affecting decision-making in respect of the budget.

The second qualification is that the opportunities for evidence-based analysis of experts' participation in various discussion platforms are unequal. For example, experts' participation in informal meetings with the President may be perceived as more significant than their membership of ministerial public councils. The available data, however, push us in the direction of the more formalised and more easily recorded forms of expert participation, that is, the latter over the former. Given that, it is important to account for differences in the degree of transparency of the various channels of expert influence on the budget process, broadly defined, now to be described.

Channels of influence

Since the budget provides the forum for the balancing of a large range of aggressively promoted interests, its content is unlikely to be satisfactorily explained if our field of view is intentionally narrowed, for example, to what takes place in the parliament in its autumn budget session. To provide exhaustive answers to the questions that this article purports to answer, one would have to follow the activity of experts through all the various parts of the budget process in the wider sense. The problem is that not all activity is observable to the same degree, and one's focus is inevitably on the most visible components of the process. Nevertheless, to the extent possible it is necessary to draw attention not only to official and transparent channels of expert influence but to those less obvious.

The various forms, forums and channels of expert influence on the budget process are now outlined, before in the second part of the article, an analysis of the expectations and self-assessment of expert activities, based on a survey of experts, is presented.

Individual experts and expert institutions

While in this article I am dealing with experts as individuals, it should be noted that more often than not they work for institutions with expert status. A comprehensive study of expert influences on the budget process would include this institutional element. While that is not attempted here, a few comments are offered. Firstly, policy advice and even whole policy programmes are sometimes presented to the government, whether publicly or in private, in the name of an institution. Secondly, institutional affiliation often but not necessarily says something about the general policy orientation of individual experts. Thirdly, the influence of individual experts often depends on the influence of the institutions which employ them. That in turn is a function of many factors, from the circumstances in which an institution is operating, through who set it up and the nature of its funding, to the personal contacts of its leading figures. When Russia was seriously in debt to international and foreign creditors, representatives of the IMF and other foreign institutions had a significant influence on Russian budget policy. Today one will not find evidence of such influence. Such a change undoubtedly affected the influence of experts working for those institutions, many of whom moved to jobs in Russian educational institutions, government research centres, and policy-oriented think tanks. And while initially independent think tanks in the area of economic policy-making relied on foreign funding or big business, subsequently they came to rely ever more on government support. That included a number of well-established, previously independent organisations becoming structural units of such major institutions as the Russian Academy of the National Economy and Administration or the Higher School of Economics. Other expert institutions deeply involved in the budget process are the Financial Research Institute of the Ministry of Finance and the independent Economic Expert Group.

Personal relationships

A form of relatively non-transparent and informal expert influence derives from contacts between officials and experts with common professional and personal backgrounds. From this perspective, it is particularly notable that in post-Soviet Russia more ministers have come from the expert community than from among members of parliament, although,

having said that, fewer former experts now hold top jobs in the government system than 20 or even 10 years ago. However, there is no doubt that such former experts as Deputy Prime Minister Arkadiy Dvorkovich, presidential economic advisor Andrei Belousov and Central Bank Chair Elvira Nabiullina maintain close links with the expert community. And dozens of people have followed the expert–major decision-maker–expert path. Notable examples include acting Prime Minister in the first years of Yeltsin’s presidency, the late Yegor Gaidar, and the recent Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin. The latter continues to play an important role in economic policy-making, despite his dramatic move from the status of senior official to that of expert. The opinions of such experts undoubtedly remain authoritative for people still in power with whom they worked, particularly those who they themselves recruited. A turn as an expert need not occur only at the beginning and end of one’s career, but can also come in the middle. Former Minister of Economic Development Aleksei Uliukaev’s path was expert–high-ranking official–expert–high-ranking official–minister.

Each person’s biography says something about their personal relationships. In the case of close professional contacts in the area the person was responsible for in government, they will probably have a sizable effect on decision-making.

Public forums

Three channels of influence that are rather more open to public view than the purely informal contacts described in the previous paragraph can be identified, even if despite their public nature their actual impact is not easy to trace. First are articles, including op-eds, by experts or interviews with them in the mass media. Second are the numerous, crowded economic forums which have become fashionable in Russia recently. They are initiated and organised by federal and regional authorities as well as large business associations and corporations. Though designed to promote business development and attended largely by business people, such forums devote a substantial part of their agenda to discussions between government officials and experts. This can be seen in the agendas of recent forums well attended by government members (<https://www.forumspb.com/ru/2016/sections/62/materials/309>; <http://www.forumkuban.org/ru/glavnaya-stranitsa/>). Third are official parliamentary hearings. According to the Russian Federation State Duma website, expert opinions were presented at all hearings relating to the budget and tax issues starting from 2012 (www.komitet-bn.km.duma.gov.ru/site.xp/050048.html).

Involvement at executive level

The bulk of the budget formation process takes place within the executive, and it is there that we find expert involvement of a kind which warrants more detailed attention.

Experts are involved in drawing up the strategic policy documents that inform detailed budget formation. Since 2000, working groups set up on the instructions of the President or Prime Minister to deliberate on strategic issues in the area of economic policy have been regular practice. While often these groups include experts along with government officials, two of the most widely publicised economic reform programmes – the so-called Gref programme <http://www.budgetrf.ru/Publications/Programs/Government/Gref2000/Gref2000000.htm>) and ‘Strategy 2020’ (<http://2020strategy.ru/documents/32710234.html>) – were developed by groups composed almost exclusively of experts operating on the basis of instructions issued

by Vladimir Putin. Both of these documents concentrated on budget policies. However, the recommendations put forward by the experts in these cases were implemented only partially and inconsistently. Thus, the proposal to dramatically raise the wages of teachers, doctors and some other public sector workers in 'Strategy 2020' was included in Putin's 2012 presidential campaign promises and then the so-called May Decrees, in which form they continue to play a major role in budget formation. At the same time the proposal in the same document to increase the share of allocations to education, health and some other items at the expense of defence spending was not supported. This lack of consistency combined with lower budget revenues caused by the recession resulted in major budget policy tension.

Another such programme – specifically focused on encouraging a higher growth rate – is currently under preparation, in a process being led by Aleksei Kudrin and a number of expert economists who could be described as being in the 'liberal' camp, but with economists from the more stimulus-oriented Stolypin Club also involved.

Once the process moves beyond broad strategy, experts are involved in the preparation of specific budgets. This is the case at the very preliminary stages, including drafting budget proposals for ministries, regional administrations and other government agencies. Each of these agencies has its own pool of experts involved in the calculation and substantiation of funding requests.

Arguably the most used channel for the involvement of experts in the budget process is the activities of various institutions created by the authorities as a kind of bridge between government and society. While some institutions of this sort have existed for some time, their number – as well as the variety of their functions and agendas – has grown exponentially over the last 10 years. As far as can be judged, this development is in pursuit of two goals. One can be called technocratic and the other political. The first is to improve the quality of decisions, using qualified independent expert evaluation. The second is to strengthen the power of feedback from the community. While international researchers have focused mainly on the federal and regional public chambers (*obshchestvennye palaty*) (Evans, 2008; Richter, 2009a, 2009b; Stuvøy, 2014), other institutions – particularly presidential and governmental councils and some other public agencies – equally warrant attention. Some of them have a mixed composition, including experts, government officials and members of parliament. This is primarily true of councils under the President of Russia and regional governors.

Presidential councils exert probably the heaviest clout of all the institutions in question, with their membership approved directly by the President who also chairs their meetings. Experts are present in most such councils, albeit normally in small numbers (<http://kremlin.ru/structure/councils>). Their presence cannot be explained by PR considerations, not least because the debates carried on at their meetings do not receive media coverage. Council meetings result in presidential instructions (*porucheniia*), to be implemented by executive authorities as a matter of priority and invariably supported by the dominant parliamentary faction. In many cases, compliance with instructions will require funding and, therefore, preparation and adoption of the underlying decisions turn out to be a major and integral part of the budget process defined in a wider sense. However, because of the already mentioned confidential nature of the debates, it is difficult to assess experts' specific contribution to decision-making through presidential councils.

The aforementioned Public Chamber (*Obshchestvennaia palata*) at federal level was set up in 2005 under a special law. Leaving aside those aspects of its operation discussed in the

articles cited above, it is worth making two points. First, a good number of its members are experts in our sense, while it also has a wide pool of officially appointed experts who are not part of its structure and who perform the role of external experts. Second, under a 2009 law, all socially important draft laws are to be reviewed by the Public Chamber. While the law does not define the criteria for a draft to qualify as socially important, the draft budget and other laws relevant to the budget process are undoubtedly included. Though the review serves only for guidance, the authorities are required to acknowledge its findings.

Thus, what we see is a legally protected channel for the compulsory involvement in the budget process of the experts associated with the Public Chamber. The most notable use of this channel was the so-called 'zero readings' of the draft budget held by the Chamber from 2011 to 2014. The information published on the Chamber's website (<https://www.oprf.ru/>) suggests a fairly critical approach to budget policies and contains proposals for major amendments, including the reallocation of funds between the federal and regional budgets. Having said that, there is no evidence in the approved budgets that these proposals were taken into account.

In 2015, the Chamber did not hold zero readings on the 2016 budget, though it used its right to do so in respect of 40 other laws. While some of them relate to budget policies, they generally do so only marginally, the approval of tax benefits for donations to endowments and cultural activities being an example (<https://www.oprf.ru/1449/2133/1537/2142/newsitem/30553>). That seems to be an issue of special interest to the Chamber's members, who are predominantly NGO leaders with a wide representation of cultural figures. It could be said that in 2015, there was a shift away from the more general and sometimes critical evaluations of the budget observed in the past towards real but nevertheless narrow, minor and self-interested influence.

The trend continued in 2016, although, unlike the previous year, the budget was approved by the Chamber as a whole rather than line by line. However, only two of the recommendations posted on the Public Chamber website (<https://www.oprf.ru/press/news/2016/newsitem/37130>) directly concerned budgetary allocations. One recommended an increase in government support for NGOs, while the other concerned changes in the distribution of profits from the sale of liquor to the regional budgets. Two other recommendations vaguely suggested improvements in the methodology of expenditure planning and the measurement of cost effectiveness.

The government's Expert Council, established in 2012, provides a way for the expert community to participate in preparing and implementing decisions of the government and federal executive authorities, including through both proposing issues for discussion by the prime minister and other government members and the review of issues once on the government agenda (<http://open.gov.ru/event/5598185/>). Coordinating the Council's proceedings is one of the main functions of the Minister for Open Government Affairs. The Expert Council currently has 364 members, with several hundred experts taking part in the proceedings of its 34 working groups (<http://government.ru/department/270/members/>). Judging by its website, the Council regularly provides opinions on issues directly or indirectly related to budget policies and has been charged since 2015 with reviewing the efficiency of budget performance under a special instruction of the prime minister (http://open.gov.ru/expert_sovet/). The published opinions contain numerous recommendations on amending the draft decisions under review. However, a random analysis suggests that only some recommendations are implemented.

Budget policy reviews are carried out by public councils established in 54 of 73 federal executive agencies. Under a Government Resolution, these councils are required, in particular, to review draft government programmes the funding for which accounts for more than half of budget expenditures (http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_134737/). In 2014 and 2015, to judge by the councils' minutes published on their websites, they reviewed 21 draft programmes. In 18 cases, the drafts were approved without recommending any significant changes to funding. In the other three cases, the public councils pointed to the inadequacy of funding if the programme's proposed objectives were to be met. In all these cases – the Health, Housing and Social Welfare programmes – these objectives related to the needs of the population at large. The public councils of the respective ministries responsible for these programmes recommended considerable increases in funding, something clearly in the interests of the ministries. However, the recommendations were not implemented.

While one might expect the most important contribution to the evaluation of budget policies to come from the Public Council of the Ministry of Finance, judging by its 2015 and 2016 agendas it did not review draft budgets either in general or by major revenue and spending lines. The council was more concerned with various draft ministerial resolutions and guidelines, as well as staff work plans and performance reports (<http://minfin.ru/ru/om/os/>). In sum, regarding activities which had the potential to affect budget revenue and expenditure allocations, the public councils were either fairly passive or unsuccessful in lobbying for more funding for their parent agencies.

The experience of the above institutions shows that the existence of official, legally guaranteed channels for expert involvement in the budget process does not guarantee intensive use of these channels. But the fact that they have been created, at considerable cost including the time spent by officials in dialogue with experts as part of the said institutions, suggests that the authorities feel a real need for independent evaluation which is not adequately satisfied. It is true that the demand comes from the top governance level, which is where the decisions are made to create these institutions, while at lower levels cooperation with experts might be regarded as an unpleasant extra duty. As another explanation, the institutions could serve as window dressing for electors. However, if this were the case, they would have been more visible in the media, election rhetoric, etc. There is little such visibility, just as there is no indication that the public at large holds the expert community in high esteem.

We might gain some further clarity as to the current state of affairs, by looking within the community itself and at its perceptions of the demand of government and society for impartial and competent analysis.

Expert advice: biased demand, biased supply

In February and March 2016, a survey of 304 experts from 24 Russian cities was conducted under the author's guidance, in the form of face-to-face interviews based on a questionnaire developed jointly by the author, Irina Mersianova and Aleksandr Kinsburgsky. Glas Naroda, an independent pollster, was contracted by the Higher School of Economics to conduct the interviews. The developers of the survey contacted members of the government's Expert Council, as well as a number of other experts known by their publications in the media. The interviewers then contacted those who consented to participate in the study. In selecting

Table 1. Extent of the authorities' interest in various aspects of expert activities, according to expert respondents (%).

	Strong interest	Medium interest	Weak interest	No interest
Provision of objective information	16	57	20	5
Advice on how to explain the authorities' actions	38	33	18	7
Advice on ways to implement specific priorities identified by the authorities	32	38	20	7
Offering proposals on strategic change	12	37	36	13

Table 2. The expert qualities most important in working with decision-makers and in promoting one's authority in the eyes of the mass media and general public, according to expert respondents (%).

	Working with decision-makers	Promoting authority in mass media and general public
Ability to understand the specific interests of the client and readiness to take them into account	53	17
Knowledge of the facts, being well-informed	41	51
High intellectual level, analytical skills	33	37
Ability to present one's position clearly and with flair	31	57
Efficient work methods	31	27
High work rate	22	8
Thorough and diligent analysis and presentation	21	12
Knowledge of the literature in one's professional field	12	9
Pursuit of objective truth, independence and impartiality in one's evaluations	11	20
Integrity	7	14
Willingness to be guided by ideals in forming views on specific issues	3	6

Table 3. Respondents' judgements on the frequency of representation of various interests (%).

Interests	Very often	Quite often	Quite rarely	Never	No answer or undecided
Big business	17	51	24	1	8
Small and medium business	4	29	55	4	8
Education, healthcare, science, culture, etc.	4	35	49	7	5
Workers	2	9	47	32	10
Civil servants	4	21	43	20	11
Military personnel	6	38	38	7	11
Pensioners	8	31	45	9	8

the respondents, we took special care to include some who cooperated with opposition parties rather than the government, although the latter prevailed in the sample. While we cannot claim that the sample is representative, since the extent and composition of the overall population of experts is unknown, the presence of opposition-linked experts among the greater number with government links is a reasonable reflection of the composition of the expert community itself. All our respondents had considerable experience in expert review activities and good knowledge of the actors involved and underlying conditions. This allowed us to regard them as in some sense 'experts on experts'. On that basis and without

overestimating the accuracy of the specific quantitative parameters of our findings, we believe them to be fairly informative.

An obvious disadvantage of relying on the survey data is that it is impossible to gauge if the respondents' opinion corresponds to reality. Given the fact that the questions referred to activities in which the respondents were engaged, one cannot be sure that their opinions were not emotion-laden. As we will see, the respondent experts have been quite critical of their colleagues' professional qualities and activities. The advantages of relying on the survey data include the chance to access perceptions of what is going on in the not so transparent channels of expert–government interaction. We did not think it wise, though, to ask direct questions about informal or less obvious channels because the answers may have been unreliable. However, the data presented below provide an insight into how experts fulfil their role, even if it is not possible to gauge the relative importance and effectiveness of formal and informal channels.

The respondents were asked to assess both the demand for and supply of unbiased competent advice. Table 1 shows responses to a question regarding the interest of the authorities in various aspects of expert activities.

As can be seen from the table, the great majority of the surveyed experts perceived that the authorities were interested in receiving what could be described as assistance in pursuing particular actions. However, interest in receiving strategic advice that might question the advisability of those actions is perceived as being much weaker. The respondents were also asked whether they believed that the authorities' interest in expert advice had changed since the mid-2000s. In this regard, 42% of those interviewed answered that interest was greater, 29% asserted the opposite, 22% saw no change and 7% gave no answer. Interestingly, Moscow-based experts and those from other regions expressed fairly diverging views on this question, with stronger interest reported by less than 40% of the former and 59% of the latter. This can hardly be explained by the fact that regions pay more heed to experts than Moscow. Rather, it is because such dialogue is a relative novelty for regional authorities while in the capital it is well-established though not always effective.

Moscow-based and regional experts also differed in their opinion on whether the authorities took the advice of the most competent and impartial experts into account. While 54% of all respondents were positive in this respect, only half of Moscow experts were as compared to 69% outside Moscow. This can be explained, apart from the relative novelty of such activities in the regions, by the following circumstance. Regional experts will not often be involved in issues of a strategic nature due to highly centralised decision-making in those areas. For this reason, the perception of weak demand for strategic advice creates discomfort primarily for experts working in the capital city.

That aside, the survey showed that a majority of fairly typical representatives of the expert community believed that the authorities had a real interest, albeit selective and not very strong, in the use of their competencies. Turning now from the demand side, let us look at the supply side of the relationship between the authorities and experts.

In our survey, respondents were surprisingly open and critical in assessing the capacity and willingness of their colleagues to act as honest brokers. In particular, 80% of all those interviewed admitted that some experts were prepared intentionally and consciously to neglect some details or nuances of the picture in their judgements, as well as downplay the differences between firmly established facts and only partially confirmed hypotheses. Regarding the reasons for these kinds of biased judgements, 49% of respondents answered

that this resulted from a desire to act in the interest of a specific client, while 39% explained it in terms of a desire to ensure support for a particular political orientation. Three more reasons – a desire to impose one's view of the world on the audience, a desire to portray oneself as more competent than one really was, and a desire to put one's point across in the most powerful and accessible way – were each shared by approximately 30% of the respondents. Finally, 19% were more straightforward and said that it could be explained simply by a desire to improve one's financial situation. The responses add up to more than 100%, since in some cases the respondents provided more than one answer. The same applies to the results reported in the tables below.

At first glance, opportunistic behaviour may look risky. Indeed, whilst offering advantages in the short run, it should seemingly in the long term have damaging reputational effects and result in those engaging in such behaviour losing out in what could be described as a form of natural selection. Yet, the survey data show this not to be the case, as can be seen in Table 2. In interpreting the data, we should not focus too much on how appropriate the opinions of most respondents about the success factors are; more important is that the views are widespread, hence serving as reference points for the coping behaviour of many experts. Apparently, experts perceive their field of activity as a competitive environment where success is determined by one's real skills and competences rather than by pure chance. At the same time, the experts who feel that it is their communication skills which are appreciated far outnumber those who believe in the importance of keeping their professional skills up to date, and even more so those who attach value to their integrity.

It could be hypothesised that an expert community ethos might provide a counter to external pressures. Respondents were therefore asked to estimate the extent to which experts are guided by the norms of an expert community. When asked to what extent expert community norms encouraged one to avoid giving insincere opinions, three respondent groups of roughly equal size (from 27% to 30%) selected the answers 'to a great extent', 'to a small extent' and 'do not encourage at all' (other respondents chose not to answer). Views on whether the norms encourage one to attach importance to having a scientific basis for one's statements were only a little better: 37% of survey respondents answered 'to a great extent', 43% said 'to a small extent' and 16% said 'do not encourage at all'. By contrast, the great majority of respondents were convinced that the community's norms encourage experts to offer persuasive opinions to their audience. Since persuasiveness is valued more than solid judgement, the ability to 'sell' an opinion which is not necessarily well-grounded is perceived quite positively. This was believed to be the case by 69% of respondents 'to a great extent', 27% agreed this only occurred 'to a small extent' and only 2% responded 'do not encourage at all'. Hence, the atmosphere in the expert community motivates experts to focus on external success factors rather than generate checks and balances that help resist temptations coming from the demand side.

The survey findings encourage us to take a closer look at whether Russian experts, including those well-known and influential, can be regarded as a single community. Only 13% of respondents agreed that there was an integrated community in Russia. In the opinion of 36% of respondents, boundaries separating experts were more significant than their unity, and 46% were convinced the boundaries were so significant that they ruled out the existence of a community. While 53% of respondents suggested the boundaries related to experts' political views, 44% highlighted the role of belonging to the same social circle and 34% emphasised the experience of working for the same clients. Less significant factors included

belonging to the same school of thought, similar profession, university degree, level of skills, age, etc.

The picture becomes clearer when we turn to the responses relating to existing and desirable structures for funding expert activities. While statistical evidence about the shares of various sources of financing is not available, our respondents offered the following picture based on their extensive experience (the average values of respondents' estimates presented here should clearly be regarded as indicative). The share of contracts and grants directly from the authorities is 40%. Political structures and NGOs actively supporting the authorities account for another 16%. The estimated share of the private sector is 13%, and the share of research, educational and other politically neutral public sector organisations 12%. Further, the average share of funding coming from international and foreign funds is estimated at 7%, opposition political forces and organisations are estimated to give 6%, and the share of politically neutral Russian NGOs is estimated at 4%.

Most of the respondents claimed to want funding sources that have no direct interest in biased judgements to play a far stronger role in financing expert activities. This includes money from universities and research structures, and other public sector organisations and NGOs that represent the non-politicised part of civil society. In other words, on the one hand there is a perceptible desire for a resource base that would make expert activities as independent as possible, and on the other hand there is a clear understanding that reality is far from this ideal. Additionally, as shown previously, respondents recognise the great value of adjusting expert judgements to the interests of particular clients. Taken together, all these factors determine not just a shortage of totally neutral honest brokers, but also a systematic shift in the expert support for specific groups of interests in society at the expense of other groups. This can be seen in Table 3, which presents the distribution of answers to the question as to how often, in the respondent's view, experts give judgements that reflect the interests of particular social groups. Note that the survey question was not asking whether expert judgements reflect the interests of particular government bodies but rather the end beneficiaries of policy outcomes. Having said that, the results should not be taken as indicating that cooperation with the authorities influences expert judgements any less than cooperation with big business.

The comments above should not be taken as implying that, upon obtaining access to channels of influence on economic policy in general and on the budget process in particular, experts use them crudely for the benefit of their clients, much less that they are paid for direct lobbying. Such cases may occur but there is no evidence that they are widespread. Still, the above data convince us that a typical expert is constantly exposed to the 'magnetic field' of their own and third parties' interests. Due to this attraction, a consistent technocratic stance does not provide any competitive advantage over more flexible modes of behaviour, and in the long run the balance of interests does not lead to the position of an honest broker. Understandably, this compromises the capacity to meet the demand for honest brokers when such a demand is totally genuine.

Conclusion

The analysis undertaken in this article permits us to provide answers to the questions raised in the introduction. The first question relates to the authorities' demand for competent judgements and recommendations. The fact that the government has encouraged the establishment of numerous institutions that rely on expert knowledge in policy-making, including

economic and budget policy, indicates that the demand for such knowledge is quite significant. However, it does not mean that the government is necessarily prepared to follow expert recommendations, even if they are perceived as valuable information that might bring a positive benefit if accepted. Having said that, it is unlikely that there is demand for inaccurate information. The conclusion, therefore, is that the authorities want to interact with competent professionals able to make a case for them, but that does not mean that they are looking for 'honest brokers' who will not sell something they do not believe in.

Our second question was about specific expert institutions and their activities in the broadly defined budget process. As shown above, these institutions generally do not intervene in the budget process in any serious way. When such interventions occur, they have little effect.

The answer to the third question derives from the results of the empirical research presented here. The research data have shown that experts tend not to present impartial judgements, in a way that would distinguish them from lobbyist groups. In other words, decision-makers may run the risk of facing the comfortable delusion which was referred to in the introduction. They might feel that they are receiving truly impartial advice, when they are not. Having said that, experts feel that what is required of them is servicing the routine work of various government institutions rather than playing a more independent role.

Finally, both the typical external environment of expert activity and the state of the expert community do not encourage competition in the provision of competent judgements. These factors are beneficial to those who are inclined to conform to the tastes and interests of their potential clients and the media. Overall, this explains the fairly weak and ineffective use of channels intended for expert participation in the budget process.

There is an obvious paradox: to a large extent, the reason why the government's demand for high quality expert activity is poorly accommodated is because there are no other potential demand agents able to act as a counterbalance to established experts. Interestingly, experts themselves express a clear need for such a counterbalance, at least with regards to funding. Another important circumstance that prevents a better response to the demand for competent and unbiased expert recommendations, both on the part of the government and the entire society, is the low level of self-organisation within the expert environment. Ultimately, the evolution of a real expert community with an appropriate ethos is an indispensable condition for bringing the attitudes of experts closer to the honest broker ideal.

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