The NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy, Vol. XIV, No. 2, Winter 2021/2022

10.2478/nispa-2021-0017

Leadership Discourses on Bureaucracy: Continuity over a Century

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Abstract

Politicians in all types of regimes require bureaucracy to extend their rule over society. To prevent administrators from becoming too powerful and publicly signal independence, they seemingly arbitrarily criticize public officials. But when and how do political leaders blame bureaucracy – and when do they praise it? This study uses Russia as a case to illustrate the complex and ambiguous politics-administration relationship in non-Western regimes. We argue that public statements about bureaucracy accommodate two different legitimation strategies. We provide a content analysis of 311 public statements, from 1917–2017, on the role of administration in the country's development. We find that attention to administrative affairs coincides with major political changes and periods of political instability in the history of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Over a century, the rhetoric of Russian leaders oscillated between blaming and praising bureaucracy to secure stability and overcome obstacles in implementing governing strategies. The strategic interplay between assertive rhetoric and praising bureaucracy is part of an effective political leadership survival strategy.

Keywords:
administration-politics relationship, public statements, Russia, content analysis, discourse analysis, civil service

Acknowledgements

We thank Caroline Schlaufer, Alasdair Roberts, Jan Matti Dollbaum, Heiko Pleines, Ulla Pape, Gulnaz Isabekova, Stas Gorelik, Esther Somfalvy and Pete Fish for very helpful comments and remarks on earlier versions of this text. Part of this work

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was conducted while Dr. Tim Jäkel served as an Assistant Professor in 2015-2021 at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation. This article benefited from the proofreading services offered by the Academic Writing Centre (AWC) at the National Research University Higher School of Economics.

Introduction

Leaders in all types of regimes require bureaucracy to implement their strategies on how to govern the country and advance critical national interests (Roberts 2019a). Politics-administration relations in non-Western regimes typically follow a symbiotic model of power-sharing and mutual dependency (Acemoglu et al. 2008; Egorov and Sonin 2011; Glazer 2002; Myerson 2008). Rulers require loyal public officials to survive in office and to extend their rule over society (Bai and Zhou 2019; Geddes et al. 2018, 15; Magaloni 2008; Xi 2018). The privileged access of public officials to administrative appointments, policy impact or government revenue depends on regime survival (Geddes et al. 2018, 133). Public servants may value these benefits because of pecuniary or ideological reasons (Geddes et al. 2018, 16; Slovik 2012, 102). To prevent administrators from becoming too powerful and to publicly signal independence, rulers in non-Western contexts seemingly arbitrarily criticize and purge public officials (Slovik 2012, 80). But when and how exactly do political leaders blame bureaucracy – and when do they praise it? Despite extensive scholarly interest in the interaction between appointed and elected officials in the Western democracies (Aberbach and Rockman 1994; Krause and Meier 2003; Mouritzen and Svara 2002; Peters and Pierre 2004), the interaction between politics and administration, in post-Soviet contexts, has only recently been addressed (e.g. Gel'man 2015; Schlaufer and Jäkel 2022).

Our study empirically investigates leadership discourses on bureaucracy by Russian political leaders from the early 20th to the early 21st century (1917–2017). Our case selection is motivated by the great importance of bureaucracy in Russia, given the country's tremendous size, in geographical terms, and its vertical system of government. In a turbulent 20th century, Russia experienced fundamental changes of its formal political system twice; from a monarchy to a socialist republic in 1917, and to a presidential republic after 1991. This allows studying the peculiarities of leadership discourses on bureaucracy across different political regimes within a similar national context. Our empirical part shows that, over a century, the rhetoric of Russian leaders oscillated between blaming and praising bureaucracy to secure political stability. We have used the term "continuity" over a century. Attention to bureaucracy coincides with major political changes, leadership transitions, and periods of political instability in the history of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, respectively. Our findings suggest that the strategic interplay between assertive rhetoric

and praising bureaucracy is part of an effective political survival strategy (Geddes et al. 2018, 124) in non-Western regimes.

Public administration in Russia

This section provides an overview of the historical context of public administration in Russia to empower the reader for the subsequent analysis. Tsarist Russian bureaucracy was a key component of the imperial state from the 18th to the early 20th century. It backed the autocracy, but suffered from a lack of efficiency and was dominated by informal institutional structures serving private rather than public interests (Goncharov and Shirikov 2013, 30). The personal relationship between the tsar and servants implied that the service ethos is tied to the ruler, not to an abstract concept, such as "the state" or "the public interest" (Pipes 1995, 283; Richter 2014, 56, 61).

The transformation into a socialist political regime following the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 demanded the state exercising functions previously not inherent to Tsarist governing strategies, from state planning to public-health policies. In theory, Marxism-Leninism was unkind to the cadre bureaucracy. The Bolsheviks dismantled the tsarist system of the *civil service* and created a new one called the *Soviet service* – a term close to the *public service* of Western countries. Employees in all public institutions, from physicians over teachers to engineers, were considered to be the *Soviet servants*. The legal status of Soviet servants was regulated by the common Labor Code. A special legislation on state service, outlining its supposed relationship to policy-making, was never adopted. The civil service of the USSR is best regarded not as a counterweight to communist political authority, but as its instrumentality. The Soviets wanted professionalism, but still not autonomous public servants. Lenin explicitly proclaimed a symbiotic relationship between the party and a working-class apparatus. Employees were encouraged to become politically active, not neutral, as in Weber's rational bureaucracy model. Since 1923, all appointments to leadership positions were made by party bodies according to the nomenclature lists. Executives from the nomenclature managed economic and state affairs (Breslauer 2017, 2019).

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the Russian Federation began to build a sovereign democratic state; its civil service became an essential part of managing a market economy. Financial market regulation, competition policy, and the need to manage a digital economy replaced the former functions of the socialist period, such as centralized supply of goods, and a monopoly on foreign trade. Boris Yeltsin's political strategy consisted of upholding the country's territorial integrity, depoliticizing the state apparatus and creating institutions of a market economy (Colton 2008). Organizational and personnel instability in newly, however often unclearly, defined branches of government were the main peculiarities of Russian civil service

in the 1990s transformation period. The 1993 Constitution of Russia introduced the separation between the federal, regional, and municipal civil service. Presidential decrees became the main source of law also in the field of the civil service. To reduce government spending, employment in the party apparatus and budgetary institutions (e.g. schools and research institutions) ceased to be considered a civil service. The abandonment of party control and the lack of funding for civil institutions resulted in the growth of corruption. The legacy of bureaucratic paternalism easily survived halfhearted attempts for democratization in the 1990s (Goncharov and Shirikov 2013, 25–26). The Soviet symbiotic power-sharing relationship between paramount leaders and civil service carried over into the Post-Soviet administrative reality (Barabashev and Klimenko 2018; Barabashev and Straussman 2007).

Table 1
Governing strategies and administration in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

Period	Soviet Russia 1917–1991	Post-Soviet Russia 1993–
Name of the state	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (since 1922)	Russian Federation
Political regime	Soviet Socialism	Federal state with a presidential system of government
Political strategy	Formation of a socialist classless society	Territorial integrity, population growth and social stability
Priorities for civil service	Implementing the program of the ruling Communist Party in all areas	Equal access to public service for all citizens
Legal framework	Constitutions (1924, 1936, 1977) Labor Code (1922, 1971)	Constitution (1993) Public Service System Act (2003) Federal Civil Service Act (2004)
Public employment covers…	Employees of all government bodies and state institutions	Employees of ministries, agencies, and services of the federal and regional executive branch of government
Distinct features	Communist ideology; absence of a Public Service Act; rotating the employees within the entire public sector	Three types of public service (civil, military and law enforcement). The public service is legally separated from the public sector.

Notes: Authors' table.

Under presidents Vladimir Putin (2000–2007, and since 2012) and Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2011), the governing strategy also shifted towards technological development and active social policy, aimed at population growth and social stability (Miller 2018). Contemporary Russia displays complex relations between politics and administration (Barabashev and Klimenko 2018; Noble 2020). Since 2001, President Putin launched several concepts, plans, and long-term strategies for administrative reforms: The 2001 civil-service reform concept, implemented in 2003–2012, intended

to develop Russia's civil service into an institution based on transparency, clear regulations, and well-developed infrastructure. As part of the program, public employment was split into three types of services: civil, military and law enforcement, the civil service being divided into two levels, the federal and the regional levels. The second stage of the program put a focus on corruption control and reducing the number of government agencies by functional reorganization within the federal executive branch. A follow-up plan, "Main directions of improving the system of public administration", implemented in 2012–2015, successfully put efforts into both digitalizing public personnel management and public service delivery (Schlaufer 2021; Zherebtsov 2019). The development of the civil service after 2016 has been taking place in the form of three-year plans, introducing competitive elements into professional development as well as the Russian system of personnel reserves. A revision of the remuneration scheme (cf. Jäkel 2019), and annual reports on the state of the civil service were on the official "to-do list" for the 2019 to 2021 period. Table 1 summarizes the distinct features of governing strategies and administration of the Russian state and its civil service in its Soviet and Post-Soviet period.

Theoretical framework

Existing research on Post-Soviet politics and policy-making (Dollbaum 2020; Magaloni 2008; Noble 2020; Schlaufer 2021; Snegovaya 2020; Williamson and Magaloni 2020) suggests that public statements about bureaucracy accommodate two different legitimation strategies: *blame* and *praise*. Both legitimation strategies are a creative response to the uncertainties of authoritarian rule (Schedler 2013, 21–22). The blame literature by Hood (2010, 2020) and Carpenter and Krause (2012) demonstrates that the expectation of performing below a certain standard usually motivates a strategy of blame avoidance to evade reputational risks. Hood (2020, 23–24) states that "there is a trade-off between discretion – defined as the ability or duty to exercise judgment – and blame avoidance. … [A]ny trade-off between discretion and blame avoidance is liable to break down, particularly in times of crisis, to the point where officeholders come to incur blame for failing to exercise discretion." Against this background, we hypothesize that economic hardship, i.e. low or negative economic growth, is associated with more criticism of bureaucracy to shift the blame to other actors (*Hypothesis 1*). Our reasoning builds upon the fact that the core components of public administration in Russia are subordination, personalized trust, and a strong sense of hierarchy. At the macro-level (Roberts 2019a), a ruler's main concern is the capacity to mobilize social resources. At the meso-level, efficiency, accountability, equity, and social responsibility in service delivery never constituted the basic principles (Goncharov and Shirikov 2013, 25–26). Bureaucracy-bashing can rally the public around a paramount leader in times of economic hardship, while the administration can be exploited as a "scapegoat" for policy failures (Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020).

We further hypothesize that political leaders who face a low level of public support are more likely to criticize bureaucracy in public statements to secure political stability (*Hypothesis 2*). In contemporary Russia, the increasing living standards of a growing middle class created a relatively stable regime but never translated into a positive perception of public agencies and their employees. There is little belief among citizens that public officials are capable of serving community members effectively (Gel'man 2015; Jakobson 2001). By addressing particular topics such as public-sector corruption (Klein 2020), Russian leaders attempt to disseminate the narrative of a responsive government. This can enhance input legitimacy (Schlaufer 2021, 822).

We finally hypothesize that a high share of Members of Parliament who do not belong to the ruling party (systemic opposition) is associated with a high level of criticism of bureaucracy (*Hypothesis 3*). Praise of bureaucracy ensures political support from public-sector employees and high-ranking public officials who are part of the ruling coalition. This strategy can enhance electoral legitimacy in competitive authoritarian regimes and reduce institutional uncertainty in more closed regimes (Schedler 2013). This legitimation strategy works best when systemic opposition is weak (cf. Geddes et al. 2018, 65), as praise of bureaucracy is more likely to raise unanimous support. In more competitive regimes, strong in-system oppositions make a strategy of bureaucracy-bashing more likely. In-system opposition parties make trade-offs between co-optation efforts and coordination with the more radical opposition, as they "seek to be both a poodle of the regime and a guard dog for their own core constituencies" (Armstrong et al. 2020, 16; Golosov 2014).

Data and methods

To answer the question when and how Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian leaders *blame* and *praise* public officials, we provide a content analysis of public statements from 1917 to 2017 on the role of administration in the country's development. This approach reveals similarities and differences in role assignments and the verbal use of the civil service to secure stability across different periods of Russian history. Political leaders regularly address the role of administration in public statements, speeches, or manifestos at different occasions, such as Communist Party congresses (from 1917 to 1990), and Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly (since 1994). The texts were divided into two historically defined groups, Soviet and Post-Soviet, to examine how the depiction of public administration has changed over time.

Our examination combines conceptual content analysis with techniques of interpretative research (Chilton 2003; Fairclough 1989; Scollon 2007; Van Dijk 2009). Content analysis is a research methodology that identifies the communication trends of individuals and reveals patterns in the communication content by examining words or phrases from an entire corpus of text in a systematic way (Krip-

pendorff 2018; Slapin and Proksch 2014, 127). In other words, content analysis is a message/text-based method of (quantitative) *analysis* (Neuendorf 2002, 17; Prior 2020, 542), that treats "Words as Data" (Slapin and Proksch 2014). To move our research design beyond simple word counts, we use conceptual content analysis on public statements by political leaders, a type of communicative language, as a "preliminary analytical strategy to get a grip on the available data before moving into specific forms of discourse analysis" (Prior 2020, 543). Conceptual analysis is a basic method of content analysis; it determines the existence and frequency of concepts in a text. Our corpus, i.e. sample for analysis, consists of both public and, initially, non-public, but now declassified speeches, and manifestos at different occasions as follows:

- Transcripts of the 7–28th Congresses of the Communist Party (1918–1990, in Russian), a total of 14,700 pages, equaling 5.9 million words, or approximately 36.7 million printed characters,
- 22 messages of the President of the Russian Federation to the Federal Assembly (1994–2017, in Russian), a total of 440 pages, equaling 176,000 words, or 1.1 million characters.

We selected this corpus, because the documents are officially published, appeared regularly over the period of investigation, are politically programmatic, and contain a direct appeal from the country's top officials. Our main point of interest were statements of the top officials of the Russian state, that is, the general secretaries of the CPSU Central Committee and the presidents of Russia during their terms in office. We analyzed statements from the leaders of the USSR for the Soviet period, which included 15 union republics (now independent states of Eastern Europe and Central Asia). For the post-Soviet period we considered only the speeches of the heads of the Russian Federation as the basis of the former USSR. The analysis of statements of the leaders of other former Soviet republics is an area for follow-up research.

The data collection builds on a two-stage process. In the first step, we coded 15,000 pages of text for the frequency of a pre-defined set of explicit words (*bureaucracy*, in Russian бюрократия; *officials*, чиновники; *corruption*, коррупция), or set of words (*civil service*, гражданская служба; *public service*, государственная служба; *state apparatus*, государственный аппарат; *governing bodies*, органы власти; *public employees*, государственные служащие), exactly as they appear, and that are indicative of the research question (selective reduction). All terms are synonyms for administration, or imply the concept "administration". In other words, we coded for how often leaders used words that explicitly state or imply the concept "administration".

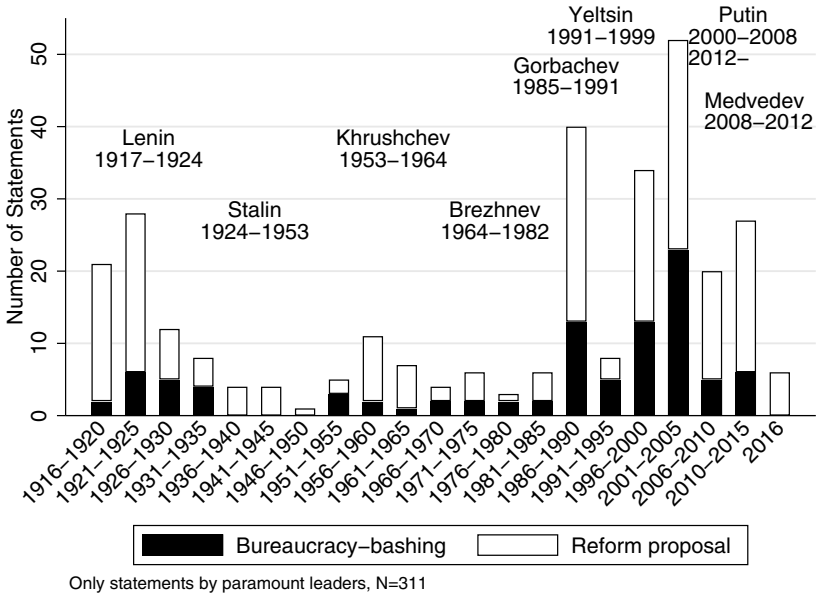
We identified a total of 311 statements on administrative affairs. If a sentence in the corpus contained any of the terms, the entire section in which the term occurs has been examined qualitatively, using methods of discourse analysis (McSwite

1997; Wallmeier et al. 2019). Our examination relates the 311 identified statements to three thematic areas: corruption (a key aspect in societies in transition, including Russia), the number of civil servants (since there are periodic reductions) and the interaction between civil service and politics (Sager et al. 2018; Schlaufer and Jäkel 2022). Existing studies addressed each of the themes separately (Bogdan et al. 2016; Dobrolyubova et al. 2019), but empirical evidence from a comprehensive perspective is still missing. Additionally, all 311 statements were coded as *reform proposals* (containing suggestions for improvements) or *bureaucracy-bashing* (containing only criticism).

Results

We identified 311 public statements of Russia's paramount leaders on bureaucracy between 1917 and 2017. Figure 1 displays how public statements on bureaucracy and their rhetoric vary over time.

Figure 1
Distribution of leaders' statements on bureaucracy over time



Source: Authors' figure.

Soviet Russia – Figure 1 shows that the first peak in attention to bureaucracy occurred between 1917 and 1923, in the political crisis situation of taking and se-

curing power, civil war, war communism and the struggle for the succession of Lenin, within the leadership clique (Bushkovitch 2011, 321–324). Vladimir Lenin accounts for 10 % of the 311 statements that we investigated, between 1917 and 2017. Unlike other leaders, he wrote several works specifically devoted to administrative issues, including *The State and the Revolution*, 1917, *How We Should Reorganize the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection*, 1923, and *Better Fewer, But Better*, 1923; though he never developed a theory of administration. An overwhelming majority of Lenin's statements (84 %) contained proposals for civil-service reform (Table 2). Lenin introduced two lines of argumentation that would recur in the statements of his Soviet and Post-Soviet successors. The first civil-service rhetoric is that the administration has practically not changed its old, traditional structures. The old structure of the bureaucracy forms an obstacle to the implementation of reforms and governing strategies. An example of this line of reasoning is the following quote:

> *Our state apparatus … is, to the greatest extent, a vestige of the old one … It is only slightly tinted from above (Lenin 1923).*

In 1917, "Bolshevik priority was simple survival" (Bushkovitch 2011, 305). Former tsarist officials assisted the former professional revolutionaries in administering the young Soviet state. "In the 1920s most of the state officials were not Communist Party members … most neither belonged to the party, nor were particularly sympathetic to its goals" (Bushkovitch 2011, 325). At the same time, Lenin introduced the argument that developing Soviet Russia was a long-term task that required endurance from every single citizen.

The next peak in attention to bureaucracy appeared in 1923, when Stalin succeeded in the struggle for the "heritage" of retired Lenin. The third peak appears in 1927, when the forced collectivization of villages was launched, which required establishing a state apparatus. Under Stalin, who established full control over the central leadership of the party (Bushkovitch 2011, 324; Khlevniuk 2008), from 1929 on, the state apparatus turned into a loyal instrument of forced industrialization, collectivization of agriculture, the military victory in the Great Patriotic war over Nazi Germany in 1941–1945, and the creation of a military-industrial complex, all of which transformed the Soviet Union into a major world power. During this period of fundamental change but established authoritarian rule, public rhetoric reminders about the relationship between politics and administration virtually stalled.

In his statements, Stalin introduced the recurring rhetoric that bureaucracy became a tool for corrupt officials. An example is the following statement, made as early as 1923:

> *We want to have a state apparatus as a means of servicing the people, and some persons of this state apparatus want to turn it into a means of feeding themselves (Stalin 1923).*

In 1926, he took up the argument, introduced by Lenin, that bureaucracy became an obstacle to the development of the country.

> *It is necessary … to reduce and simplify, to make cheaper and improve our state and co-operative apparatus … The inflated staff and the unprecedented gluttony of our governing bodies have become a byword (Stalin 1926).*

The same year, 1929, Stalin criticized the bureaucracy for hindering economic prosperity.

> *The danger of bureaucracy is expressed … in the fact that it binds the energy and initiative of the people, it keeps, under pressure, colossal reserves that are hidden in our system (Stalin 1929).*

Established dictators publicly signal the dictator's independence from his administrators (Slovik 2012, 80). A 1934 quotation, from Stalin, exemplifies such a public signal:

> *People … who believe that … laws are not written for them … How to deal with such employees? They should be dismissed without hesitation from leading positions, regardless of their merits in the past (Stalin 1934).*

After Stalin's death, in 1953, Party Congresses in 1956, 1959 and 1961, under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, adopted the abolishment of sectoral ministries and other major changes in the management system, which put civil-service reform on the agenda again. Khrushchev made relatively few statements on administrative affairs; he accounts for 5 % of all quotations between 1917 and 2017. Khrushchev primarily formulated ideas for reform (88 % of his statements) and *praised* the administration. This comes as a surprise, since the common perception of Khrushchev is that he declared war on bureaucracy, partly to undermine his opponents' power base, during his "crypto-de-Stalinization" (Freeze 2002, 353). Khrushchev "sought to change the mission, leadership orientation, and personnel of the Party-State, but not its privileged political status" (Breslauer 2019, 344). The post-Stalinist ideal of the interaction between the civil service and society is well illustrated by the following 1961 quote from Khrushchev:

> *Every Soviet official must constantly remember that on his attitude to clients … his sincerity and integrity, the Soviet people judge our state apparatus (Khrushchev 1961).*

Khrushchev dedicated himself to the topic of efficiency. Examples of efficiency-related statements are the following quotations:

> *In our state apparatus there are still a lot of redundant links, performing the same work concurrently (Khrushchev 1956).*

> *We need a small but highly qualified staff of ministries (Khrushchev 1956).*

The principle of peaceful coexistence under Leonid Brezhnev resulted in political stabilization and low public attention to the politics-administration relationship. Leonid Brezhnev accounts for 6 % of all statements. Brezhnev is perceived as a conservative politician who avoided bold decisions and sharp judgments. Our content analysis reveals that he acted as a leading critic of bureaucracy in his time. As leaders before and after him, he oscillated between bashing and praising public officials; this is exemplified by the following quotations:

> *We must admit that there are still soulless officials (Brezhnev 1971).*

> *For the most part, employees of the state apparatus are qualified, conscientious, attentive people. Their work deserves high praise and respect (Brezhnev 1971).*

The number of public statements peaked again in the late 1980s during the period of Gorbachev's program of Perestroika. Public attention to administrative affairs reflects both rulers' individual priorities and external pressures. Gorbachev, facing vigorous resistance to economic reform (Miller 2016) paid special attention to public personnel management in 1986–1990. In his 38 statements (12 % of all statements) during his policy of glasnost he often criticized the Soviet bureaucracy. Gorbachev "sided with those who blamed the decline in the Soviet economy on the 'command-administrative' structure – i.e., the central ministerial bureaucracy and the enterprise directors, both of whom preferred the status quo" (McCauley 2002, 384). He broached the number of civil servants (29 % of his statements) and the effectiveness, or the lack thereof (20 % of his statements). In 1988, Gorbachev, for example, publicly announced:

> *We will make a significant reduction of the administrative apparatus (Gorbachev 1988).*

At the same time, he *praises* the administration to gain support for these reform concepts. This, again, illustrates that leaders, over a century, oscillate between *praise* and *criticism*:

> *A coordinated, well-functioning and flexible administrative apparatus is called upon to be an effective working tool of Perestroika (Gorbachev 1988).*

Post-Soviet Russia under Yeltsin – The first president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999), is the author of 13 % of all statements about the civil service. In the early years of Yeltsin's presidency, he made relatively few statements. This comes as a surprise, since Boris Yeltsin made his career on criticizing the privileges of the party

nomenclature before he succeeded in the struggle for presidency in 1991. The number of statements increased only in the second half of the 1990s, when the social downsides of the supersonic transformation became apparent for a significant part of the population. As disillusionment and political instability increased, bureaucracy-bashing inflated. At that time, Yeltsin became a main critic of the bureaucracy again. In 46 % of his 41 statements, Yeltsin criticized the bureaucracy; this is the highest value among all paramount leaders. Because the reforms did not have the hoped-for success, Yeltsin in 1997, for example, complained about the persistence of the administration, a line of argument that we already know from Lenin, Stalin and Gorbachev:

> *Many of the previous principles of building the state apparatus and methods of management are still preserved (Yeltsin 1997).*

The supposedly autocratic and almighty Russian leaders repeatedly complain that the administration is failing to implement reform activities. In doing so, they blame subordinated officials for mediocre policy performance. In his statements, Yeltsin picked corruption out as a central theme:

> *The weakness of state power … has become a breeding ground for corruption (Yeltsin 1996).*

Putin's Russia – The leadership of Vladimir Putin returned a more personalized and centralized form of governance (Gel'man 2015; Koesel et al. 2020; Matovski 2020, 304) that retains elements of its experiment with democracy in the 1990s (Beissinger 2020, 305). At the end of Yeltsin's presidency, a decline in government capacity and extensive corruption were among the most pressing problems. Putin's Russia saw impressive-looking reform legislation. The underlying conception, however, covers the desired principle of effectiveness, but not a dichotomy between administration and politics. The Putin-era conception of the politics-administration relationship is exemplified by the following statement:

> *Responsibility for the country is formed … when people see that power is transparent, accessible and it itself "works" … Power should not be an isolated caste (Putin 2012).*

In total numbers, Vladimir Putin made 65 statements on a wide range of civil-service affairs. There is an absolute peak in the number of statements relating to administrative affairs during the years of Putin's first presidency, during which Putin's rhetoric focused on stability. Remuneration became an issue in the political discourse especially during Putin's first presidential term in 2001–2005, when one in four (24 %) of all statements were made, to ensure electoral support from public-sector employees. After 2005, when his rule was consolidated, the number of statements leveled off significantly. Just like his predecessors, e.g. Gorbachev, Putin blames the administration for the economic misery and the creeping modernization of the economy.

The following two quotations illustrate the recurring rhetoric that an inefficient civil service lacks innovative capacity and hinders economic prosperity:

> *Post-Soviet Period: The system of authorities … is arranged in such a way that it slows down, and in many cases simply stops the transformation [of economy] (Putin 2001).*

> *Soviet-Period: The pace of restructuring [perestroika] … is slowed down by the cumbersome and inefficient administrative apparatus (Gorbachev 1987).*

As with all leaders, praise and criticism alternate. Putin also uses the line of argument that most employees are honest, hard-working people.

> *When we criticize the bureaucracy all the time, I want to note that the overwhelming majority [of officials] are decent and responsible people (Putin 2012).*

Brezhnev had ensnared the administration in 1971 in a similar way:

> *For the most part, employees of the state apparatus are qualified, conscientious, attentive people. Their work deserves high praise and respect (Brezhnev 1971).*

The oscillating rhetoric in contemporary Russia thus provides an excellent example for the mutual dependency between politics and administration in non-Western regimes.

Table 2
Number of statements and bureaucracy-bashing 1917–2017 by the paramount leader

Paramount leader (Period)	Number of statements (% of total)	Bureaucracy-bashing, as % of statements
Yeltsin (1991–1999)	41 (13%)	46%
Brezhnev (1964–1982)	20 (6%)	40%
Putin (2000–2008, 2012–2017)	65 (20%)	35%
Gorbachev (1985–1991)	38 (12%)	29%
Stalin (1924–1953)	51 (16%)	29%
Medvedev (2008–2012)	43 (13%)	28%
Lenin (1917–1924)	35 (11%)	16%
Khrushchev (1953–1964)	16 (5%)	12%
Others	17 (5%)	
Total / Mean	311 (100%)	32%

Source: Authors' table.

To empirically test our hypotheses on the determinants of bureaucracy-bashing and praise of bureaucracy, we use bivariate correlations.

Hypothesis 1 states that low or negative economic welfare is associated with more criticism of bureaucracy. This study uses the share of criticism, as % of total statements in year t, t=1917, …, 2017, to measure the level of bureaucracy bashing. Table 2 presents the number of statements and the share of bureaucracy-bashing from 1917 to 2017 by the paramount leader. Statements were made in n=60 years; on average one third of public statements about bureaucracy contained criticism (Table 3). The per-capita gross domestic product (PPP equivalent) is used to measure economic welfare in Russia between 1917 and 2017 (Harrison and Markevich 2012; Maddison 2001).

Hypothesis 2 states that political leaders who face a low level of public support are more likely to criticize bureaucracy in public statements. We use the President's approval ratings between 1991 and 2017 from the Levada-Center, a non-governmental pollster in Russia, to measure the level of public support for Yeltsin, Putin and Medvedev during their presidencies. The mean approval rate between 1991 and 2017 is 59 %, values range from 8 % of approval for Yeltsin (1998), to 87 % for Putin (in 2007).

Hypothesis 3 states that strong in-system oppositions make bureaucracy-bashing more likely. This study uses the share of non-communist party deputies (1922–1991) and non-ruling party deputies (1991–2017) in the State Duma (White 2010) to measure the strength of Russia's in-system oppositions.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Share of criticism, as % of total statements in year *t*, 1917–2017	60	0.32	0.28	0	1
1917–1991	35	0.27	0.28	0	1
1991–2017	25	0.36	0.26	0	1
Per capita gross domestic product, 1917–2017	102	4,205	2,116	550	6,800
Share of non-communist (non-ruling) party MPs, as % of total seats, 1922–1991,	70	22.09	5.65	5.9	28.3
1993–2017	26	59.56	24.3	23.78	87.78

Notes: Authors' table.

Bivariate correlations provide no robust empirical support for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. We find that a high seat share of non-communist (non-ruling)

party MPs in the State Duma is associated with a high share of criticism in public statements (r_p=0.23, p<0.1, n=54). However, the correlation is insignificant both for the Soviet period (1917–1991), and the Post-Soviet period (1993–2017).

Discussion

This study advances the understanding of leadership discourses on bureaucracy in several ways: Our analysis shows that attention to administrative affairs coincides with major political changes and periods of political instability in the history of Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia, respectively. The number of public statements referring to the role of civil service peaked in the 1920s, in a period of civil war and New Economic Policy, and in the late 1980s during Gorbachev's program of Perestroika. In the second half of the 1990s, Yeltsin increasingly criticized the bureaucracy against the background of economic malaise, the 1998 ruble crisis, and growing political instability. There is an absolute peak in the number of statements relating to administrative affairs during the years of Putin's first presidency, during which Putin's rhetoric focuses on stability. However, our empirical analysis provides no robust empirical support for the statement that economic instability is associated with more criticism of bureaucracy. Our study further shows that Russian political leaders, who face a low level of public support, do not differ in their tendency to criticize bureaucracy compared to their more popular predecessors and successors. What we do observe is that, by addressing salient topics, such as public-sector corruption (Klein 2020), Russian leaders attempt to disseminate the narrative of a responsive government to enhance input legitimacy. Finally, this study finds some support for the statement that in more competitive regimes, such as Russia, strong in-system oppositions make a strategy of bureaucracy-bashing more likely.

In sum, this study implies that public statements about Russia's civil service need to be put into the broader context of the struggles among the political elite. Talking about public-sector reform in Russia is instrumental in gaining, maintaining, or extending power, in a broader context of elite struggle. On the one hand, criticizing the previous leadership, by pointing to inefficiencies in administrative reality, is easy pickings for an incoming leader to establish and reinforce their own image as a reformer. On the other hand, the promise of downsizing the excessive costs of bureaucracy and bringing the government apparatus closer to people is part of the rhetoric that seeks to gain legitimacy and public support, i.e. maintaining and reinforcing power, especially in times of political instability. This is perfectly illustrated by a recent example from the COVID-19 crisis: In November 2020, at the height of a second wave of the pandemic and facing economic turmoil, the Russian prime minister launched a "reform" to "increase the efficiency of the state apparatus" (http://government.ru/news/40861/, 16 November 2020; last accessed 17 November 2020). Federal agencies will have to cut their staff size by 5 %, regional

offices of federal agencies by 10 %. In a time of economic difficulties, imitation of bureaucratic reforms becomes part of the political program for maintaining the stability of the regime (cf. Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020).

Conclusions

In a democracy, a leader's governing strategy determines the broad design of the administrative system (Roberts 2019a, 2019b). In Russia, path dependencies in structure, staffing, and decision procedures have been confronting leaders over a century as they translate strategy into action. This study establishes that political leaders have been drawing from the same repertoire of arguments when referring to public administration. Political leaders, with different ideological beliefs, over different epochs of Soviet/Russian history, have been criticizing the same defects of the state apparatus in similar words. Despite a century of public-sector reform talk, even omnipresent political leaders were not able to cope with administrative obstacles, according to their own statements.

However, bureaucracy-bashing and strategies of blame-shifting are not unique to non-Western political regimes. The rhetoric of political leaders in Russia contains many things that political leaders in Western democracies do as well. Future research might investigate public rhetoric in a cross-comparative perspective.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.