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Interviewing Political Elites: Lessons from Russia*

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The past decade has opened up unprecedented opportunities for scholars of post-communist countries. Throughout much of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, scholars can now engage policymakers and other elites directly through interviews—probing their decision calculi and obtaining unpublished information and data. Yet there are gaps in the scholarly literature that would prepare researchers for interviewing highly placed individuals in these countries.

This is largely because most of the related literature discusses techniques for interviewing elites in advanced industrial democracies (e.g., Aberbach, Chesney, and Rockman 1975; Dexter 1970; Peabody et al. 1990). While informative and to some extent applicable, there are significantly fewer works that address obstacles confronted by those working in the post-communist world. Even experience gained in other countries undergoing transitions from authoritarian rule may not be entirely applicable, since the post-communist countries arguably exhibit a number of unique features that set them apart from other instances of authoritarian breakdown (Bunce 1998; Terry 1993). The experience of communist rule and its sudden collapse produced, in varying degrees, a disorganized and often disoriented civil society, poorly-institutionalized political parties, weak and financially strapped states, only partially reconstructed security agencies, and in some regions, suspicion of the West. All of these features can pose unique problems for the elite researcher, examples of which include difficulties in constructing sampling frames due to incomplete information; problems in locating respondents who may work without receptionists or answering machines; a general apprehension towards foreigners and/or interviews; an aversion to advance scheduling; and suspicions aroused by standard demographic questions.

There is now a wealth of English-language studies spanning a range of post-communist countries that rely extensively on elite interviews and/or surveys (e.g., Fish 1995; Hahn 1993; Higley and Lengyel 2000; Jacob, Ostrowski, and Teune 1993; Lane 1995; Lukin 2000; McFaul 2001; Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1997; Miller, White, and Heywood 1998; Remington 2001; Rohrschneider 1999; Sperling 1999; Steen 1997; Stoner-Weiss 1997; Szelényi and Szelényi 1995; Yoder 1999; Zimmerman 2002). However, there are few methodological tools to guide scholars of post-communist countries who either lack the resources to commission surveys by in-country experts or desire to conduct in-depth personal interviews.

Such concerns motivated us to write this article. We offer a few suggestions on interviewing elites in Russia;[1] our advice should also be applicable to other post-communist countries and possibly to other states that exhibit higher levels of political instability than do advanced industrial countries. We base our conclusions on a series of 133 in-depth interviews with top-level bureaucrats and parliamentary deputies which we conducted (in Russian) in Moscow and two regions of the Russian Federation (Nizhnii Novgorod and Tatarstan) in 1996, and which will be replicated in the Putin era.[2]

Selecting an Appropriate Sample Design

The selection of an appropriate sample design is a key decision that affects the type of conclusions that one can draw later during data analysis. In considering various ways of drawing a sample of Russia's national political elite, we initially believed that probability sampling would be impossible. We reasoned that although a sampling frame could be constructed without much difficulty, the polarized political context and general suspicion of foreigners would frustrate our efforts to arrange interviews with the individuals selected for the sample. Hence, we considered nonprobability sampling techniques that tend to rely more heavily on personal contacts and introductions, such as a referral (or snowball) sample.

Yet due to the limitations that nonprobability sampling would impose on our ability to generalize from our sample to the population of Russian national political elites,[3] we chose to employ probability sampling.[4] We used a stratified random sample design, in which the strata were defined by institutional affiliation. The political elite was defined by positional criteria, consisting of parliamentary deputies from the lower house of the national legislature and top-level bureaucrats working in federal ministries. Although Russia's "national political elite" arguably encompasses more sectors than just these two, we narrowed our scope in order to be comparable to the Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman (1981) study of

bureaucratic and parliamentary elites in seven advanced industrial nations. Using their criteria for defining our survey populations, our bureaucrats directed departments, divisions, or bureaus in federal ministries; were situated in the nation's capital; and occupied positions roughly one to two rungs below the minister.[5] The parliamentarians were members of the lower house of Russia's national legislature, the State Duma. Analogous samples were drawn in each of the two provincial capitals as well.[6]

For the national-level sample a sampling frame was readily available for only the parliamentary deputies and consisted of a published list of the 450 deputies elected in the December 1995 parliamentary elections. Constructing a sampling frame for the federal bureaucrats was considerably more problematic, although as Aberbach and Rockman (2002) point out, this is a challenge not restricted to the Russian experience. Over the past decade, government directories of all sorts have proliferated in Russia, but we did not find one that was entirely comprehensive and up-to-date. Consequently, we compiled our own list of ministry department heads (379 in all), using a variety of published directories to draft a preliminary list. We then personally contacted all of the ministries and cajoled them to verify and update the information. (Vestiges of Soviet-era secrecy still live on in Russia's federal bureaucracy: ministerial information centers were often quite reluctant to divulge information on their organizational structures, personnel, or contact numbers—especially to anyone speaking Russian with a foreign accent.) Within each stratum, a random sample of individuals was selected to represent the stratum.

From there it often took 15 to 20 phone calls to arrange a single interview, whereas a 1959 survey of U.S. members of Congress averaged 3.3 callbacks per respondent (Robinson 1960, 129). Yet sheer persistence paid off. Response rates mirrored and in some cases surpassed rates achieved in other elite studies in a variety of contexts.[7] As Table 1 shows, we interviewed 81.8% of the national parliamentary deputies in our sample, 74.5% of the federal bureaucrats, and between 60.9% and 86.7% of the four regional samples. Moreover, most of the nonresponses were not outright refusals to grant an interview. Most failures to interview respondents stemmed from a problem endemic to all elite interviewing—the extraordinarily busy lives of the respondents. (Respondents were particularly busy at this time because the 1996 presidential campaign was in full swing.) This type of nonresponse was coded as unavailable, meaning either that contact could not be made with the respondent or that a convenient time for the interview could never be arranged.

Although a great deal of persistence was necessary to convince respondents to grant us interviews, accessibility was greater than anticipated overall.[8] Thus, although there are circumstances in which nonprobability sampling is the preferred option, probability sampling is a viable option for many countries outside of the developed world. The key to its success is perseverance in locating respondents and convincing them to grant interviews.

Gaining Access to Respondents

Some of the factors impeding access to highly placed officials in Russia are undoubtedly similar to those faced by elite interviewers in any context. However, those working in post-communist societies confront additional problems in securing interviews. First, the simple process of locating respondents and agreeing on a time for an interview is complicated by the fluidity of the political environment and the newness of various political institutions. For example, deputies in the Russian Duma often worked without receptionists and/or answering machines. Second, some respondents may be less familiar with the interview process than elites in advanced industrial democracies. This no doubt contributed to the greater apprehension about the interviews that we observed among the civil servants than among the parliamentary deputies, a finding also reported by Denitch (1972, 155) in the former Yugoslavia.

Third, respondents in more politically unstable environments may be a good deal more suspicious about the goals and purposes of the research project. As noted earlier, our project coincided with the highly politicized, polarized environment of the 1996 presidential elections, leading several respondents to suspect that the survey was merely a cover for their political opponents to acquire potentially damaging information. Several expressed concern that "someone wanted to learn about their views"—whether it be the Yeltsin administration, their political competitors, state security agencies, or foreigners. For instance, in answering the demographic questions, one regional deputy (D-115) remarked that it seemed as if the information was being collected for the "organs" [of state security].[9] Deputies from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) were particularly guarded since a listening device reportedly had been found in their offices during the presidential campaign.[10]

Hence, the process of gaining access to respondents in Russia and then winning their confidence requires some special attention. We present a few suggestions for surmounting potential roadblocks in postcommunist and other countries in transition.

Have an Institutional Affiliation

All the interviews in our project were conducted under the auspices of the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, with the interviewing responsibilities in Moscow divided between the American (Rivera) and the Russian (Sarovskii). Interviewers were affiliated with either the Institute of Sociology or another institute of the Academy of Sciences, and the questionnaire itself mentioned the institute's sponsorship and listed a contact name and phone number.

Table 1
Reasons for Nonresponse

	Interviews Completed n (%)	Refusals n (%)	Unavailable n (%)	Total Sample Size n (%)
Duma deputies	45 (81.8)	2 (3.6)	8 (14.6)	55 (100.0)
Federal bureaucrats	38 (74.5)	4 (7.8)	9 (17.7)	51 (100.0)
N. Novgorod deputies	11 (73.3)	1 (6.7)	3 (20.0)	15 (100.0)
N. Novgorod bureaucrats	14 (60.9)	0 (0.0)	9 (39.1)	23 (100.0)
Tatarstan deputies	13 (86.7)	1 (6.7)	1 (6.7)	15 (100.1)
Tatarstan bureaucrats	12 (80.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (20.0)	15 (100.0)

Note: Response rates are calculated based on the number of eligible elements in each sample. In total, there were only four blanks (all in the federal bureaucratic sample), since four ministerial departments were no longer in existence. In Nizhnii Novgorod, there was one substitution made for a deputy who refused an interview, and in two cases, deputy department heads were interviewed because the department heads were unavailable. Percentages may not sum to 100.0% due to rounding.

Despite the interviewers mentioning the goals of the interview and the sponsoring organization when introducing themselves, respondents often asked additional questions about who was sponsoring the research. The fact that the study was being undertaken in association with an authoritative, well-established institution seemed to assure respondents that the research was genuinely intended for academic purposes.[11] In a study of Yugoslav opinion leaders conducted in 1968, the role of having appropriate "legitimizers" is also clear (Denitch 1972, 153).[12] In China, however, interpersonal connections and relationships were found to be more crucial than official channels in obtaining access (Hsu 2000, Ch. 3).

Reassure the Respondent That There Are No Right Answers

Another problem we encountered in securing interviews was that some respondents apparently equated the interview situation with an examination. Some expressed concern that they would not be able to answer our questions; this was particularly true for bureaucrats, who said they could answer questions about the work of their ministries but not about more general themes. One Duma deputy was unconcerned about the confidentiality of the information, but rather wanted reassurance that the interviewer would not ridicule him (D-026). During the interview itself, some respondents became perceptibly guarded and tense, and when answering, they seemed to be searching for words that would demonstrate a certain level of competence and erudition.

Throughout the entire process, we tried to reassure respondents that there were no correct answers to our questions. We also stressed that they were members of a highly select group of individuals, whose task it was to make key decisions in the realm of public policy. As a result, any answers they could provide in and of themselves would constitute very valuable information for us. Such reassurances seemed to alleviate certain insecurities and anxieties felt by some respondents in this regard.

Establish an Appropriate Identity for the Interviewer

One of the issues that must be resolved by each researcher is how to present oneself to the respondents in the study. Some researchers believe that "in the typical interview there exists a hierarchical relation, with the respondent being in the subordinate position." Accordingly, feminist researchers have suggested that a way of responding to these inequalities and minimizing status differences is for interviewers to "show their human side and answer questions and express feelings" (Fontana and Frey 2000, 658).

Yet to preserve our structured interview format, we chose to address these potential inequalities by emphasizing the status and rights of the respondents. For instance, when respondents were deciding whether to grant us interviews, we would remind them that since we were only the "requesting party," they always had the last word. This reassured them that they had the upper hand in the interview and could refuse to answer any question if they so chose.

At the same time, elite researchers emphasize the need for balance when establishing the researcher's identity. One potential pitfall is the tendency for the interviewer to be overly deferential and concerned with establishing rapport, thereby losing the ability to control the direction and scope of the interview (Ostrander 1993). As a counterweight, some recommend conveying to respondents that you've "done your homework" on them so that the extent of preparation for the interview causes respondents to take you seriously (Richards 1996, 202–203; Zuckerman 1972, 164–66). However, we concur with the views expressed by Denitch (1972, 154), whose interviewers in the Yugoslav context gave no indication that they knew anything about the backgrounds of the respondents. Revealing knowledge about the interviewees, he contends, might raise too many doubts about anonymity.

One potential pitfall is the tendency for the interviewer to be overly deferential and concerned with establishing rapport, thereby losing the ability to control the direction and scope of the interview (Ostrander 1993).

Another helpful factor was that the occupational status of the interviewers—by and large professional researchers—was roughly equivalent to many of the respondents. This appeared to foster mutual understanding and convince respondents that their answers and comments would be understood. In much the same way, Alan Aldridge (1993) notes that emphasizing the congruence between his occupational status as an academic and that of his respondents facilitated access, rapport, and high-quality responses. Occupational status seemed to outweigh potential problems created by gender. Despite 95.2% of the Moscow-based respondents being male, this was not a significant obstacle for the female (American) interviewer in any discernible way.[13]

Request Interviews in Person When Possible

In most elite projects (and indeed, in other projects described in this symposium), initial contact is made via an introductory letter explaining the goals of the project. This is usually followed by a phone call to set a date and time for the interview. Outside of the developed world, however, this approach is of less utility for a variety of reasons, both technical and cultural. Technical barriers to advance scheduling of interviews can include an undependable mail service, unreliable reception and delivery of mail in offices, and incomplete—or in some cases—nonexistent directories and phone books. Cultural barriers involve—at least in the Russian case and also in China—a penchant for day-to-day scheduling without much advance notice. As a matter of fact, when requesting an appointment for the following week, respondents frequently told us that it was too far in advance to plan and requested that we call back on the day that we wished to speak with them. Other interviewers working with Russian elites also found that introductory letters were of limited use and that it was necessary to approach potential interviewees by telephone (White et al. 1996, 310).[14] Thus, rather than using an introductory letter, we simply phoned respondents directly with our requests.

Once we were granted a pass to a ministerial building or the parliament for one interview, it proved useful simply to appear unannounced at the offices of other respondents on our sample list who were located in the same institution. In most

cases, a request made in person increased the likelihood that the target respondent would agree to an interview.

Developing a Questionnaire

The methodological costs and benefits of open-ended queries versus closed-ended questions have been discussed in the literature (Aberbach, Chesney, and Rockman 1975; Schuman and Presser 1981, 79–112), and we will not repeat them here. Like several other authors in this symposium, we wish to highlight the importance of open-ended questions for elite interviewing. In our experience, Russian elites strongly resisted the imposition of categories or choices on their reasoning processes. One Duma deputy remarked that "sociologists aren't inclined to understand that it's impossible to answer some questions in the way that they've instructed us to. They are not inclined to make a notation to the effect that a certain answer is not precisely as stated but is rather slightly different" (D-013).

Yet we did not use open-ended questions exclusively; rather, we used a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions (refined through pretesting and back-translation), presented in alternating fashion. The first five questions were very general open-ended queries, followed a couple of closed-ended questions, and so on in a similar fashion. This sequencing had several advantages. First, once the introductory open-ended questions had been covered, it was easy to elicit answers to the more formulaic questions. We had demonstrated respect for the complexity of their views through the open-ended questions and thus had "earned" the right to ask questions posed exclusively from our frame of reference. Also, the closed-ended questions probably allowed respondents to recover a bit from the more demanding open-ended question format. Second, since political elites can expound on their responses at great length, especially in the early stages of an interview, we tried to channel such tendencies toward subjects on which we desired elaboration. Third, although the interview was fully structured, the frequency and format of the open-ended questions (with scripted probes written into the interview protocol) gave it a more semi-structured feel.[15]

The oral interview also included a series of background questions, which we anticipated would be perceived by some as threatening since they included not only standard demographic questions such as age, education, and place of birth, but also questions dealing with past and present political activities, travel abroad, business dealings, and the like. By contrast, elite interviewers working in Austria and France several decades ago encountered an entirely different situation. According to them, asking personal and biographical questions at the beginning of the interview "served to relax respondents and involve them in the interview" (Hunt, Crane, and Wahlke 1964, 68). In the Russian context, however, these types of questions can raise suspicions, and thus we heeded the following advice—to put threatening behavioral questions "near the end of the interview so that the interviewer has a chance to establish good rapport with the respondent" (Sudman and Bradburn 1974, 143). In an attempt to minimize response effects, we asked the background questions after all of the substantive questions and also phrased them in the most general and non-threatening way. For example, when questioning elites about their residence abroad, we formulated the question as follows: "Did you ever happen to live abroad (not including the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltics) for a period of three months or more?" By phrasing the question in this way, we tried to: (1) draw attention away from their reason for living abroad, and (2) downplay their having been in a position to live abroad during the Soviet era, as this was a right granted only with Communist Party approval. This was important because in the post-communist era, some respondents may be reluctant to disclose the extent of their previous involvement with the Party.

Another means of putting respondents at ease during the interviews was to assure them that their identities would remain confidential, be presented only in aggregate or anonymous form, and be used only in academic research. Several other phrases also proved helpful in coaxing answers out of reluctant respondents: asking them to say "something—if only a few words" in response to a question; telling them that there are as many different opinions as there are people (*Skol'ko lyudei, stol'ko mnenii*); and reminding them—if they objected to a question—that they had the last word in deciding whether to answer it.

After completing the oral part of the interview (which was conducted in Russian and, in the vast majority of cases, tape recorded), we asked all respondents to fill out a short, self-administered written questionnaire consisting primarily of closed-ended value questions. Again, building on the rapport that had developed over the course of the interview, most respondents completed this questionnaire on the spot, in the presence of the interviewer. Occasionally, time constraints required that questionnaires be left with respondents; in those cases, we usually expended substantial efforts on retrieving them. In the end, only 7.5% of all 133 respondents (from Moscow and the two regions) failed to complete the self-administered written questionnaires.

One additional issue that affected our use of both open-ended and closed-ended questions was the challenge of translating certain concepts into Russian. For example, the phrase "authoritarian rule" can be translated literally as *avtoritarnaya vlast'*. Alternatively, a more commonly used phrase, "strong hand" (*zhestkaya ruka*) can be used, although the latter phrase has a weaker connotation and its meaning is subject to a wider variety of interpretations. In such cases, the American researcher deferred to the judgment of native Russian speakers, aiming above all to capture the spirit of the phrase or concept. Several pretests with "debriefings" by native Russian speakers as to how they understood problematic concepts were also helpful, as was back-translation of the questionnaire into English by a native English speaker fluent in Russian. In cases where conceptual problems arose with the meanings of standard closed-ended questions that had been used previously by other researchers, we retained the original Russian-language wording. We regarded the ability to conduct reliable comparisons with prior findings as more important than linguistic clarity.

Notes

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1. For insights on conducting surveys of the mass public in the post-communist region, see Gibson 1994; Swafford 1992.

2. For details on the interviews, sample, and methodology, see Rivera 1998, 2000.

3. As Judd, Smith, and Kidder (1991, 133) succinctly state, "Probability sampling is the only approach that makes possible representative sampling plans. It makes it possible for the investigators to estimate the extent to which the findings based on their sample are likely to differ from what they would have found by studying the population."

4. We recognize that nonprobability sampling may be the most appropriate vehicle for certain projects where accessibility is much more problematic (e.g., interviewing economic or business elites, as in McDowell 1998) or where the sample size is very small. Nonprobability sampling also has the advantage of convenience and cost effectiveness, which may outweigh the researcher's desire to be able to "specify the chances that the sample findings do not differ by more than a certain amount from the true population values"—a feature of probability sampling (Judd, Smith, and Kidder 1991, 134–136). See also Kalton 1983, 90–93.

5. Following Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman (1981, 27), we excluded (1) the Ministries of Defense and Internal Affairs (though we included the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and (2) departments that "performed obvious staff functions." In the Russian case, first deputy ministers and deputy ministers were considered to constitute one level.

6. We are grateful to Yurii Gapeenkov and his team, Liliya Sagitova, and Guzel Stolarova for their help in the regions.

7. Robert D. Putnam (1973, 15) reports response rates of 85% for British MPs and 78% for Italian parliamentarians. See also Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman 1981, 26; Hoffmann-Lange, 1987, 36; McDonough 1981, 253; Verba et al. 1987, 280–81.

8. In both the Yugoslav and American contexts (Denitch 1972, 146; Ostrander 1993, 9; Zuckerman 1972, 161), researchers imply that the difficulties of gaining access to certain elites have been overstated.

9. These numbers identify the interviewees in the study. "D" denotes deputies and "G" stands for government bureaucrats.

10. Interviews conducted in non-election years should meet less politically charged suspicion. Moreover, if Michael McFaul (1997) is correct that the 1996 presidential race was the last "revolutionary," highly ideological, and polarized election in which the principal divide was between pro-reform and anti-reform groups, even interviews conducted during election campaigns in Russia should be less problematic in the future. On the other hand, a certain measure of secrecy on the part of the CPRF has extended beyond the 1996 elections. Deputies will not say in advance where plenary sessions of the party's Central Committee will be held. As one deputy, Yurii Chunkov, explains: "We want to keep the location secret as long as possible so they won't tape us. They listen to everything. One hour after a conversation, the transcript is on the desk of whoever needs to see it" (Bohlen 1998, 1).

11. In the context of this single study, it is difficult to measure precisely what difference such an affiliation made in terms of access and information supplied to the interviewers. For reflections on the impact of sponsorship by an elite interviewer working in London, see McDowell (1998, 2136).

12. This is also an important factor in Zuckerman's access to Nobel laureates in science (Zuckerman 1972, 162–63). For more on sponsorship, see Dexter 1970, 50–55, and Javeline 1996.

13. In a series of interviews with high-status employees of merchant banks in London, McDowell (1998, 2140–41) expresses a similar viewpoint. To her surprise, most of her male interviewees "seemed to feel surprisingly free to be open with [her]," even when discussing gender relations and respondents' attitudes toward their women colleagues. Similarly, in a study of local elites in Scotland and France, Sabot (1999, 334) concludes that gender "becomes secondary to other positional factors," such as nationality. However, in other contexts (e.g., rural areas in India), interviews conducted by a person of another gender can be problematic in many respects.

14. However, one study of elites in Russia sent prospective respondents an interview schedule and accompanying letter that described the goals and character of the research, achieving a response rate of 70% (Mikul'skii et al. 1995, 35–36).

15. We should note one drawback to this approach. Some elites, especially civil servants, found the lack of specificity inherent in the opening battery of questions disconcerting. They felt that the questions were too general and wide ranging.

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