

The public image of the contemporary Russian police: Impact of personal experiences of policing, wider social implications and the potential for change

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Abstract:

Purpose

– The paper aims to discuss the perception of the police by members of the public in post-Soviet Russia following their personal experiences of policing, identify broader social implications of the contemporary public image of the Russian police and assess the potential for changing the current situation.

Design/methodology/approach

– The discussion is conducted on the basis of findings derived from an empirical study carried out by the author which involved qualitative interviews with members of the public who had personal experiences of policing, and with police officers.

Findings

– Findings indicate a very negative perception of the police by members of the public. Personal experiences of police misconduct appear to affect negatively citizens' general evaluations of the entire institution.

Research limitations/implications

– The study was small, and only those who have had personal encounters with the police were interviewed, so the findings should not be treated as necessarily representing attitudes of the population in general.

Practical implications

– The negative public image of the police revealed by this study has numerous dangerous consequences: people feel insecure and unprotected, lose trust towards legal authorities and refuse to cooperate with the police.

Social implications

– Distrust towards the police generates a situation where citizens have to be self-reliant in protecting themselves against crime. Many of the strategies adopted towards this end are problematic.

Originality/value

– The paper presents a unique insight into public perceptions of the Russian police. It may suggest implications for policy and practice that could help enhance support of citizens for the police, or at least prevent further deterioration of the existing situation.

Keywords:

Russia, Public perceptions, Police, Legitimacy, Ethics

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Introduction

Section:



This paper will discuss attitudes of Russian citizens towards the contemporary police (known as the “militsiya”). It will do so in the light of findings derived from an empirical study carried out by the author, which involved interviews with people who have had personal encounters with the post-Soviet militsiya. The paper will begin with providing the background of the militsiya, which may help explain how the institution has earned its negative reputation during the Soviet regime and then entrenched it further in the post-Soviet period. It will proceed to introduce the primarily US-based literature into police legitimacy and public confidence in the police. The paper asks: can that literature be generalised to the Russian context and help explain some of the findings resulting from the author's study? Based on the author's findings, it will be argued that encounters with wrongdoings by individual police officers (or “militsiyamen”) damage public confidence in the entire institution, triggering citizens' unwillingness to cooperate with it. This is consistent with a body of research which shows a correlation between citizens' perceptions of procedural justice and police legitimacy. The public distrust is also explained by a neo-Durkheimian perspective. A number of negative social implications resulting from the lack of citizen cooperation with the militsiya will be highlighted. The paper will conclude by questioning the potential of recent reforms initiated by the President Medvedev to change the current situation.

Background

Section:



The militsiya was created in 1917, soon after the Soviet revolution, as a non-professional organisation under the control of the local authorities and replaced the tsarist police, or the “politsiya”. In the 1930s it was transformed into a professional police force. During the 70 years of the Soviet rule the militsiya served to maintain social, political and economic order and enforce compliance with the communist ideology (Shelley, 1996, 1999; Pustintsev, 2000; Uildriks and Van Reenen, 2003). Rather than acting as an ordinary law enforcement body, it intruded in many aspects of everyday life, sustaining close oversight over individual activities through both overt and undercover techniques. The militsiya was not accountable to citizens in any real sense, because all state institutions in the Soviet Union were subordinate to the Communist Party and civil society in the country was effectively eliminated. Legal protection against abuses of power by the militsiya were virtually non-existent, since it functioned in an

authoritarian legal environment where the rule of law was not respected and civil liberties did not exist. This situation resulted in the population identifying the militsiya as an authoritarian force, encounters with which are best avoided.

In the 1990s dramatic changes swept Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. They resulted in a high level of social instability, weakness of the state institutions, impoverishment of a large section of population, sharp social inequalities, disintegration of the social infrastructure (including education, health care, cultural facilities), escalating crime rates, flourishing organised crime, mass corruption among state officials, criminalisation of the Russian state itself, and degeneration of ethical values in the society as a whole. Meanwhile, the militsiya had to police the country in the midst of the political, economic and social chaos.

While the old professional ethics of the militsiya, which was formed in accordance with the Soviet ideology, became irrelevant, the new one, applicable to the post-communist social order, was yet to be developed. The ethical confusion experienced by the militsiya was aggravated by the lack of controls over the institution. The strict control exercised by the Communist party was gone, and new forms of accountability were (and still are) ineffective^[1] (Uildriks and Van Reenen, 2003; Beck and Robertson, 2005). This resulted in conditions conducive to abuses of power by the militsiya on a massive scale.

In the twilight of communism the militsiya has found itself in a fragile and disorganised state (Shelley, 1996; Gilinskiy, 2000; Gudkov *et al.*, 2004; Beck and Robertson, 2009a, b; Galeotti, 2003, 2010). A large-scale staff turnover took place within the institution since the late 1980s. Thousands of officers have been fired from their jobs as part of campaigns aimed to clear up the ranks from corrupt and criminal militsiyamen, and there have been numerous reshuffles of upper echelons of the institution. Many qualified and experienced officers left the force. Their departure has had a negative impact on the level of professionalism of the militsiya and lowered its morale significantly. Among the main reasons for the high personnel turnover is the low pay^[2], chronic lack of resources, poor working conditions and the fact that the profession of a militsiyaman is one of the least prestigious in contemporary Russia^[3]. These circumstances lead to recruits of questionable quality who lack alternative career options. The training they receive tends to be inadequate, with the consequence that officers do not know – and thus violate – the law and lack professionalism in interaction with the public (Pustintsev, 2000; Gilinskiy, 2004; Amnesty International, 2006a).

Since the 1990s various attempts have been made at reforming the militsiya. Fundamental changes to the institution and its operation were needed to revitalise the force, overcome the repressive legacy of communism and bring the militsiya closer to the democratic aspirations declared by Russia. However, instead of implementing fundamental reforms, changes have been superficial and involved series of confusing reorganisations. Many Soviet trends and traditions continue. One example of that is that the militsiya has a militaristic structure and appearance. Its officers are armed and conferred with special ranks very similar to those of the armed forces. Another example is that the militsiya have traditionally operated within the system where their performance is measured by their ability to meet typically unrealistic quotas of solved crimes.

The militsiya are declared politically-neutral, however its officers have been repeatedly forced to take part in political actions. Militsiya units depend on local, regional and national

authorities for resources and subsidies. This results in close ties, controls and vulnerability of local militsiya to abuse for political (as well as criminal) ends (Galeotti, 2003).

The legal framework within which the militsiya operated at the time of the author's research was provided by the Law "On the Militsiya" 1991. On the 1 of March 2011 it was replaced with the new Law "On the Politsiya", as will be explained next.

The Law "On the Militsiya" defined the legal status, organisation and powers of the militsiya. The institution was divided into the Criminal militsiya and the Civil Safety militsiya. The entire force was under direction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (or MVD). There was a central MVD, counterpart ministries in each constituent republic of the Russian Federation and Main Internal Affairs Directorates (GUVD) in regions and cities. On paper, the system was decentralised. In practice, it was highly centralised and organised on the basis of a strict hierarchy, which led to a situation where centrally determined targets were prioritised and local needs were met poorly (Galeotti, 2003).

The Law "On the Militsiya" gave the institution very wide powers. Some of them had nothing to do with the functions traditionally performed by the police. For example, the militsiya issued passports, residence permits, visas, automobile registrations, various certificates ranging from drivers' licences to work permits. Such extensive regulatory powers provided many opportunities for abuse and corruption by the militsiya.

The Law "On the Militsiya" articulated the principles and values guiding law enforcement, among which are lawfulness, humanism and respect for human rights. Also, basic rights and liberties which conform with the commonly recognised principles and norms of the international law are guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation (Article 17). However, there is evidence that the legislative framework safeguarding citizens' rights has not been translated into practice very well. There have been numerous revelations of violations of human rights and abuses of power by the post-Soviet militsiya. Accounts of arbitrary arrests, illegal searches, unlawful detentions, planting evidence, sustained beatings and torture of suspects by the militsiya have been given, emphasising that such practices are routine (Amnesty International, 2002, Amnesty International, 2006b, 2007, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 1999; Pustintsev, 2000).

Militsiya corruption, extortion and involvement in organised crime have been a daily recurring theme in the media in post-Soviet Russia. Media reports indicate that money can be made by the militsiya on whatever activity happens to be controlled by them. So, those in charge of issuing passports sell fake passports[4]; those guarding weapons sell them to criminals; traffic police sell documents legalising stolen cars; beat officers checking residence permits sell to illegal immigrants permissions to stay; those charged with preventing organised crime sell secret information to criminal groups, provide tips or simply look the other way; investigating officers for a payment falsify evidence, fabricate criminal cases or close them.

According to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs' Internal Security Service, in 2009 alone, militsiya officers have committed over 5,000 criminal offences (which is 11 per cent more than the year before). Of these offences, 3,000 involved corruption and abuse of power. In the same year militiamen violated laws and duty regulations approximately 100,000 times (which is a 17 per cent increase compared to the previous year).

It is virtually impossible to obtain reliable statistics on the extent of unethical and unlawful behaviour by the militsiya due to the high level of conspiracy, fear of disclosing information related to misdeeds and regular cover-ups of wrongdoings. Available research data from public experiences, however, indicate that abuses of power by the militsiya happen on a massive scale (Gudkov *et al.*, 2004; Gerber and Mendelson, 2008). There is also some evidence derived from self-reports. For example, in one study 40 per cent of militsiyamen-respondents admitted that they engaged in criminal activities (Kolennikova, 2006).

Wrongdoings by the militsiya have damaged considerably the perception of the institution by members of the public, and public opinion polls conducted in post-Soviet Russia have consistently demonstrated a very low level of trust towards the militsiya (Mel'nik, 2001; Levada Centre, 2004; Gryaznova, 2005; Gudkov *et al.*, 2004; Nevirko *et al.*, 2006; Obschestvenniy Verdikt, 2009). For example, Gudkov and Dubin (2005) report that in a sample of 1,600 respondents only 12 per cent fully trust the militsiya and 40 per cent fully distrust the institution, with the rest expressing incomplete trust. Gerber and Mendelson (2008) found that in a survey of 11,202 respondents, only 3 per cent believe that the militsiya “fully” deserve trust, 23 per cent say they “probably” deserve trust, 36 per cent say “probably not”, and 29 per cent say “not at all”[5].

Impact of encounters with the police, police legitimacy and public confidence

Section:



A variety of factors influence public views of policing (such as personal background, neighbourhood conditions, the media). Yet, a large body of research indicates that personal experiences of policing have a significant impact on citizens' general assessment of the entire institution (Dean, 1980; Roberts and Stalans, 1997; Frank *et al.*, 2005; Tyler and Fagan, 2008; Scaglione and Condon, 1980; Bradford *et al.*, 2009). While there is some debate over the effect of positive contacts with the police, researchers agree that unpleasant experiences tend to increase unfavourable opinions (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Skogan, 2006; Tyler, 2006; Hinds and Murphy, 2007).

The literature (primarily from the US) reports a strong and consistent relationship between people's views of procedural justice and their views about police legitimacy (Tyler and Huo, 2002; Tyler, 2006; Tyler and Fagan, 2008). Procedural fairness enhances satisfaction with the criminal justice system and improves perceptions of legitimacy of the legal authorities. Unfair treatment has the opposite effect and affects negatively perceptions of legitimacy. That in turn is likely to have negative impact on compliance of citizens with the law and the ability of legal authorities to function effectively.

While one route to gaining public confidence in the police is treating people with dignity and fairness, another route may be offered by a neo-Durkheimian perspective. It suggests that public trust in policing is shaped by citizens' assessments of social cohesion and consensus (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). Citizens think about the police in ways that have to do with the values and norms that sustain social life and look to the police to protect and strengthen social values. When the community is seen as morally deteriorating, public satisfaction with the police may be affected negatively. The neo-Durkheimian model further suggests that public trust in policing is shaped by evaluations of the extent to which the police typify community morals and values (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). The key to public support for the police is the

view among members of the public that they share moral solidarity, or a set of common moral values, with the police.

Can the primarily US-based literature which argues that to garner public confidence in the police, the police must be seen as a prototypical representative of the group's moral values and treat people fairly and with respect be generalised to a different social context? Given the significant cultural differences, can the US-based body of research help explain some of the findings resulting from a Russian study of public perceptions of the militsiya? Can it suggest ways how public cooperation with the militsiya could be elicited? These questions will be addressed later in this paper.

Empirical study

Section:



The study, forming the basis of this paper, was carried out by the author in the summers of 2007 and 2009 in Moscow and a provincial town in central Russia which will not be named to preserve confidentiality of the interviewees. It aimed at investigating how ordinary Russians perceive the militsiya following their encounters with it in the post-Soviet period and identifying broader social implications of the contemporary public image of the militsiya. One objective was to see how members of the public interpret their experiences of policing. Another objective was to explore if – and how – those experiences shape people's perceptions of the entire institution of the militsiya. Yet another objective was to identify how citizens' attitudes towards the militsiya affect their everyday behaviour.

There is a body of research conducted by NGOs, journalists and academics in Russia that examines public trust towards the militsiya. Typically, that research uses quantitative methods, designed to produce surveys of attitudes across the population. The author's research was different: it adopted the qualitative approach so as to emphasise the ways in which individuals interpret their experiences and capture unique perspectives of people who have had personal encounters with the militsiya. Such research may offer rich insights into people's opinions and attitudes that cannot be discovered through quantitative studies. In doing so, it may suggest implications for policy and practice that could help enhance support of citizens for the militsiya, and consequently lower crime and create safer communities. Also, by highlighting some of the implications and dangers resulting from the loss of the police credibility among citizens, this research may provide general lessons applicable outside Russia.

An approach similar to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998a, b) was used. The author did not begin the research with the aim of testing a set of preconceived theories. Rather, the aspiration was to generate theory from data. The data collected in this study were analysed for patterns in the way the research subjects interpreted their experiences.

The study involved qualitative interviews with 54 members of the public who had dealings with the militsiya as crime suspects, victims or witnesses. Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling. Some were acquaintances of the author, but the vast majority were total strangers whom the author met in various places and who reacted with interest to this research. The sample consisted of 22 men and 32 women; 39 interviewees were employed

(eight out of whom self-employed), nine retired and six unemployed. In total, 18 respondents were between ages of 18 and 30; 20 respondents between 31 and 50; 20 were above 51.

Additionally, 10 militsiyamen were interviewed. Six of them were senior officers and four were from the lower ranks. Getting access to militsiya respondents proved very difficult. Several times the author was refused an official permission to interview them, so had to use informal connections initially and then the snow-balling technique.

Interview agendas for both, members of the public and militsiya respondents, were prepared beforehand to serve as guides during interviews. Questions were open-ended, designed to enable the respondents to express views in their own words. Militsiyamen were invited to comment on the public image of the militsiya which has emerged in recent years and its social significance. Members of the public were asked to describe their encounters with the militsiya in the post-Soviet period, explain whether their attitudes towards the institution have been affected by those experiences, and discuss the impact of their attitudes towards the militsiya on their everyday behaviour.

It should be pointed out that the small size of the sample of interviewees and the fact that the study was limited geographically does not allow the author to make any statistically significant claims about the perception of the militsiya by members of the Russian public. However, making such claims was not the intention. Instead of attempting to create a survey of public attitudes across the Russian population, the intention was to understand in depth the opinions and concerns of a sample of people who have had first-hand encounters with the militsiya. What interested the author was how these people conceptualised their encounters with the militsiya and how these encounters influenced their attitudes and behaviour towards the institution.

Findings

Section:



Many findings from this study suggest the perception of the militsiya by members of the public as professionally inept and ineffective in fighting crime and upholding order. Examples illustrating how the militsiya fails to fulfil its functions were provided by two-thirds of interviewees. They ranged from the militsiya not arriving to a scene of disorder (following phone calls by members of public) to what interviewees interpreted as incompetence in investigating serious crimes. Multiple examples were offered of the militsiya refusing to register crimes that had little potential to be resolved, while putting pressure on victims to withdraw complaints. There was a wide perception that the militsiya are more concerned about ensuring good statistics that demonstrate success in crime control, than bringing the guilty to justice. Respondents often concluded that the militsiya offers no protection to the population and reporting crimes is a waste of time. Only 14 out of 54 respondents said that they would definitely report crimes; six were adamant in their refusal to employ the services of the militsiya; 34 interviewees believed that contacting the militsiya should be avoided whenever possible. To quote one of them, “the militsiya will never find the criminal, and in the worst case they will put an innocent person in prison”.

The findings of this study support other research, which suggests that members of the public view the militsiya as highly corrupt (Mazaev, 1997; Uildriks and Van Reenen, 2003; Gudkov

et al., 2004), with 44 out of 54 interviewees admitting bribing the militsiya themselves or by their family members. The examples offered by interviewees ranged from giving a small bribe to the traffic police for a minor violation (which is a very common practice, engaged in on a mass scale) to a case where for a bribe of US\$2,000 a motorist got away with killing a pedestrian. Frequent examples involved bribing the militsiya to avoid arrests and detentions, prevent an offence from being registered, and acquire various documents which the militsiya issues (such as a passport, a residence permit, a bogus driving licence, an inspection document on one's car confirming that the car is road-worthy, even when it may not be).

Other findings point to a general fear of the militsiya on the part of citizens[6]. To substantiate their apprehensions several interviewees mentioned the system of informants and undercover techniques used by the militsiya[7]. Some respondents cited examples where the militsiya planted drugs or weapons to incriminate people. Cases were described where people were detained in investigation isolation facilities (SIZO) for many months in inhumane conditions and subjected to physical and psychological violence by the militsiya, making the innocent admit crimes they have never committed. The fears of the militsiya brutality were expressed repeatedly, with 34 interviewees giving concrete examples of militsiya beating up arrestees severely. A common attitude is summarised by an interviewee: “[the militsiya] don't even look into the matter: if you got into their hands, they start battering, beating you up”. Additionally, local examples of militsiyamen carrying out a rape, a random shooting and engaging in drug trade were cited. These examples were used to validate the perception of the law enforcement as presenting a danger to members of the public.

A number of interviewees believed that the militsiya collaborated with criminals, and such suspicions strengthened their distrust and fear. These respondents felt that because of possible associations between militsiya and criminals, reporting crimes could endanger their safety and even lives. There was no proof that the militsiya in any of the situations described by interviewees indeed colluded with criminals. However, irrespective of whether or not the criminal collusions actually took place, their perception by citizens is significant in itself, since it considerably damages the public trust towards the militsiya.

It seems that simply seeing the militsiya patrolling the streets has an intimidating effect on members of the public. Some young women felt particularly vulnerable following their experiences of sexual harassment by the militsiya. The majority of other interviewees felt insecure following extortions or physical abuse by the militsiya, which they have experienced directly or witnessed. Interviewees believed that coming into any contact with militsiyamen is unsafe, but if encounters are inescapable, “the militsiya should be treated with caution because you never know what they are up to” (using words of an interviewee). The fear of the militsiya was also expressed in the frequent comparisons between the militsiya and bandits. Militsiyamen confirmed in interviews the existence of the public perception of militsiyamen as criminals and admitted that such attitudes were justified.

Respondents highlighted poor accountability and virtual impunity of the militsiya. The issue of lack of control over its officers came up spontaneously in almost every interview, and 44 members of the public said that they felt defenceless when dealing with the militsiya[8]. Interviewees also believed that there was a correlation between the economic status of a person and the level of their immunity against abuses by the militsiya, with the poor feeling particularly vulnerable. The militsiya was typically presented in interviews as a clan institution, which protects its members, regularly covering up their crimes. The trust that the judiciary will protect the victims of the militsiya abuse of power was not high either[9].

Militsiyamen in their interviews admitted that control over the activities of the militsiya is ineffective, and acknowledged that citizens are afraid to complain about misdeeds by its officers.

In the eyes of interviewees, the negative image of militsiyamen was enhanced by their impoliteness. A total of 48 members of the public and four militsiyamen provided examples of the militsiya being rude and employing offensive language when dealing with citizens.

Stories of militsiyamen arriving at crime scenes while drunk came up again and again. Militsiyamen admitted in interviews a high level of alcoholism among their colleagues. They argued that regular drunken parties help create "*krugovaya poruka*", or a clan relationship where members of the unit are tied up by joint responsibility and routinely cover-up each other's misdeeds (Ledeneva, 2006, chapter 2).

Notwithstanding the predominant feelings of despise, despair and outrage generated by militsiya's actions, occasionally attempts to express sympathy with its officers were detected. Some interviewees, having described arbitrary behaviour by militsiya they had been subjected to, proceeded to offer poverty of militsiyamen as a justification for their corruption. In interviews, three militsiya commanders also expressed sympathy with the lower ranks, arguing that the low pay, combined with the negative image of the militsiya as a profession, provide no stimuli for working well.

Despite the nearly universal negative attitudes towards the militsiya as an institution expressed by interviewees, occasional examples were offered of honest militsiyamen who served the public conscientiously. Invariably, such militsiyamen were seen as aberrations and it was pointed out that they did not stay with the force long because they could not work there: the environment was too unhealthy. The lack of positive role models and the abundance of negative ones was frequently emphasised in interviews. Using words of a militsiyaman, "you either have to leave immediately or became like everybody else." This would be predicted by a number of criminological theories (such as differential association, subcultural, learning theories).

Discussion

Section:



Findings of this study present a bleak picture and indicate a perception of a militsiyaman by members of the public as unprofessional, corrupt, brutal, insensitive to legal norms, rude, often drunk, collaborating with criminals and concerned primarily with lining his pockets[10]. As mentioned earlier, these findings should not be treated as necessarily representing attitudes of the population in general. The study was small, and only those who have had some encounters with the militsiya were interviewed. It may well be that had those who never came into contact with the militsiya been included in the study, much more positive attitudes would have transpired[11]. Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that the views expressed by interviewees are atypical among contemporary Russians, thus the findings may help to understand general trends in citizens' perceptions of the institution.

While various factors may influence public perceptions of the police, the stories which interviewees shared suggest that personal encounters with misdeeds by the militsiya are

important and damage public confidence in it. This is consistent with a large body of research mentioned earlier that shows that personal experiences of policing affect significantly citizens' general evaluations of the entire institution (Dean, 1980; Roberts and Stalans, 1997; Frank *et al.*, 2005; Tyler and Fagan, 2008; Scaglione and Condon, 1980; Bradford *et al.*, 2009).

The literature primarily from the US indicates a strong correlation between people's perceptions of procedural justice and their views about police legitimacy (Tyler and Huo, 2002; Tyler, 2006; Tyler and Fagan, 2008). However, it is not certain whether these US findings apply to the Russian context. Russian society is very different, and it is often said that it is characterised by culture of anti-legalism (Newcity, 1997; Hendley, 1999; Kurkchian, 2003). Russians tend to be sceptical, distrustful and often hostile towards the law. In that environment, the concept of procedural justice may be rather foreign to an average person. Besides, the terrible reputation the militsiya earned in the Soviet period and more recently may have undermined citizens' trust in the institution to such a degree that it may be immaterial whether or not a person has experienced procedural injustice during their encounter with its officers. The perception of legitimacy of the militsiya may not have been there in the first place, thus could not be destroyed by a negative personal contact.

Yet, some commentators claim that general attitudes of respect for law or the rule of law in Russia do not differ markedly from attitudes in other Western countries (Gibson, 2003). If so, procedural justice would matter. There is also some research evidence indicating that as in the US, personal experiences of the police misconduct in Russia clearly correlate with low confidence in it, despite Russia's cultural distinctiveness (Gerber and Mendelson, 2008). Therefore, there may be grounds for suggesting that the encounters with abuses of power by the militsiya by the respondents in the author's study injured their confidence in the institution. One finding that supports this suggestion is that after they had described their experiences of the militsiya misconduct, interviewees often indicated that since then they treated the militsiya with caution and whenever possible tried to avoid dealings with it. Six respondents who had had particularly unpleasant experiences (typically involving brutality and extortions) were adamant in their refusal to employ the services of the militsiya in the future.

This study found a general reluctance by interviewees to cooperate with – and report criminal incidents to – the militsiya. Of course, this may be a legacy of decades of witnessing abuses of power by legal authorities and entrenched distrust towards them. But it may also be a consequence of personal encounters with wrongdoings by the militsiya that destroyed the perceptions of militsiya's legitimacy in the eyes of most respondents. The pre-existing strong sense of cynicism towards the militsiya could be compounded by the experiences of procedural injustice.

Another explanation for the respondents' unwillingness to cooperate with the militsiya may be offered by the neo-Durkheimian perspective. As has been explained earlier, it proposes that public trust in policing is moulded by citizens' evaluations of social cohesion and consensus. When people see the community as disintegrating and morally declining, their confidence in the police may be affected negatively. This appeared to be the case in the author's study: interviewees frequently argued that today's Russia is characterised by a moral and spiritual demise, and the perception of the moral disorder was often linked to arguments about distrust towards the militsiya.

As further suggested by the neo-Durkheimian model, public confidence in policing is formed by assessment of the degree to which the police embody and typify community morals and values (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). In the author's study that degree was minimal. When interviewees spoke of moral qualities of militsiyamen, they were described as "having no integrity", "morally impaired", "inhumane", "deriving pleasure out of seeing suffering of others", "beyond redemption" and "leeches, parasites on the society". One interviewee summarised those sentiments when she stated that "ethics and militsiya are incompatible concepts".

The loss of legitimacy by the militsiya and lack of public cooperation with it, which emerge from this study, generate a situation where citizens have to be self-reliant in protecting themselves against crime. It appears from interviews that one consequence is significant costs to individuals who have to invest more time, money and energy into crime prevention than they probably would have done, had the militsiya been trusted by citizens more.

Another consequence is an unequal level of protection among citizens, with those who can afford services of private security firms or pay the militsiya for protection^[12] being in an advantageous position. The problem of the inequality in the level of protection is aggravated by sharp economic divisions in contemporary Russia.

It also emerges from interviews that when people resort to self-help to defend themselves against crime, some of the measures originally taken for self-protection, such as acquisition of guns, have been misused and employed for criminal purposes. Also, some responses resulting from citizens' distrust towards the militsiya present threats to human rights. Cases have been described by interviewees where citizens took law enforcement into their own hands (such as the father of a rape victim shooting the man accused of rape after militsiya had dropped charges). Other examples involved interviewees or people they knew resorting to the help of organised criminal groups to investigate crime and administer punishments. Such substitutes for services of the militsiya seriously challenge the rule of law.

Conclusion

Section:



President Medvedev has vowed to tackle the crisis in the contemporary militsiya head on, and in December 2009 launched extensive reforms of the institution, among which are numerous anti-corruption measures, the revision of the process of personnel selection, raising the level of professionalism, stripping the institution of unnecessary functions, cutting the number of officers, and increasing salaries for the militsiya. As part of the reforms, initiatives have been taken by the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs which aim to raise ethical standards of the militsiya, such as the creation of the Code of Professional Ethics for the militsiya in December 2008, and the introduction of subdivisions in the militsiya responsible for improving cultural and moral standard of militsiyamen. As mentioned earlier, on the 1 March 2011 the new Law "On the Politsiya" came into force. It renamed the militsiya into the politsiya to underscore its professional nature and to remove it further from its Soviet past by returning its pre-Soviet, tsarist name.

It remains to be seen how effective the above initiatives will be in raising ethical standards and professionalism of the militsiya's successor, the politsiya, and improving its public

image. Yet, Medvedev's reforms have already attracted many criticisms. Sceptics believe that the reforms provide no real solutions to the problems plaguing the institution, the most acute of which is the lack of accountability. Rather, the innovations will result in merely decorative changes (giving the institution a new name, a new uniform, conducting more re-organisations and re-shuffles). On this view, the reforms are aimed to appease members of the public who are angry and deeply dissatisfied with rampant abuse of power by the militsiya, and to assure them that the state is serious about tackling the crisis in the institution.

Even if the reforms solve some of the problems within the militsiya, public may be reluctant to change the deep-seated stereotypes of the institution that have been formed over years. What social psychologists call “confirmation biases”, or tendencies to interpret information in ways that verify existing beliefs and challenge information that disconfirms our expectations and stereotypes (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2002; Skogan, 2006), may make it difficult to alter the existing public sentiments.

Also, it should be remembered that the militsiya is not the only dysfunctional public institution in contemporary Russia. It fits well within, mirrors, and helps to support wider processes in the Russian public institutions at various levels. The degradation of the law enforcement system is merely a part of a system of endemic lawlessness and abuse of power by Russian state officials. So, it is difficult to visualise significant changes in the nature of policing – and a corresponding improvement in the image of a militsiyaman – without simultaneous transformations in other Russian state institutions.

There is a widespread perception by contemporary Russians that the society as a whole experiences social breakdown and crisis of moral values (Shevchenko, 2009). As the neo-Durkeheimian perspective would predict, public confidence in the police correlates with citizens' evaluations of the moral order and cohesion. Therefore, in the absence of broader social and cultural changes that would entail strengthening the moral structure, it may be over-optimistic to expect significant transformations in the public opinion of the militsiya's successor, the politsiya. As long as signs of social breakdown as so obvious, the politsiya are likely to be seen as ineffective in construction and reconstruction of the social and moral order and thus distrusted.

What could be done in the meantime? Perhaps the politsiya could attempt to enhance its legitimacy and public trust and cooperation through following fair procedures and treating citizens with respect and dignity, as suggested by the research into police legitimacy referred to above. This will not guarantee the improvement of the public image of the institution (Skogan, 2006), however may at least minimise further decline in public trust and confidence.

Notes

- The militsiya is controlled externally by the Prokuratura, which is charged with both, investigating and prosecuting a defendant, and protection of the rights of suspects and defendants. This creates a conflict of interests, with the consequence that numerous – and often very serious – violations of rights of suspects and defendants are tolerated.
- At the time of this research and writing a new militsiya recruit earned 7000 rubles a month, which is less than US\$250. After serving in militsiya for 5 years, a militsiyaman earned 8500 rubles (less than US\$300).

- Only 1,2 per cent of the Russian members of public in a sample of 1201 consider the profession of a militiaman prestigious, and only 2,5 per cent in a sample of 2501 see the profession as acceptable for themselves (Gryaznova, 2005).
- There is evidence that terrorists in several terrorist acts had such fake passports.
- By comparison, national opinion polls in the United States show that the majority of Americans hold a favourable image of the police and report either a ‘great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the police, as Gallup polls demonstrate.
- Similarly to findings by Gudkov and Dubin (2005), and Gerber and Mendelson (2008).
- The militsiya has inherited from the Soviet times a long tradition of undercover work and relies on covert policing much more extensively than do police in democratic societies. Russian legislation on police operations gives the militsiya wide powers the use undercover investigative methods and provides only weak legal safeguards for citizens (Shelley, 1996).
- See Gryaznova (2005) for a similar finding.
- Gerber and Mendelson (2008) and Levada Centre (2008) report similar findings.
- Similar findings emerge from other post-communist countries (Beck and Chystyakova, 2002, 2004; Uildriks and Van Reenen, 2003) and other transitional states (Igbinovia, 1985; Botello and Rivera, 2000; Hinton, 2005, 2009; Asiwaju and Marenin, 2009; Davis, 2009).
- Research evidence shows that the police tend to be rated more highly by citizens who had no recent contact with them (Allen, 2006; Skogan, 2006).
- Units within militsiya are allowed to offer ‘extradepartmental protection’ to businesses if the businesses enter into contracts for the provision of security services with Extra-Departmental Protection Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Those interviewees who used this service were satisfied with it.

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