

Government-Citizen Dialogue in the Republic of Buryatia

An academic and a public manager from one of Russia's national republics share insights on involving citizens in government policy making and program oversight.

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As a visiting research professor in 2000-2001 at The George Washington University, one of the co-authors of this article participated in the preparation and celebration of Public Service Recognition Week (PSRW) while interning with the Public Employees Roundtable (PER). It was an excellent chance to gain valuable experience for further research and comparison in the fields of public administration, philosophy of communication, and public relations.

In democratic Russia, too, there are opportunities for citizens to learn more about public service and government programs. Local governments have established a variety of effective and original methods of getting feedback from citizens. Here as elsewhere a government-to-people dialogue is not easy to establish, because the majority of people are not seeking more contact with their government and they are inclined to ignore the opportunity to participate in democratic reforms and changes. However, different segments of society respond in different ways if they are encouraged to participate in a dialogue with government. On the other hand, government is not always ready for equal dialogue, a two-way communication, although it very much wants to increase positive awareness.

The President of Buryatia

The Republic of Buryatia is situated in East Siberia, part of the Russian Federation. As a democratic republic, it has its constitution, law, citizenship, state symbols, territory, state official languages, system of power, and local governments. The head of the republic is President Leonid Potapov (www.buryatia.ru/buryatia/gov). The president is also the head of the government in the republic. According to the constitution, the president is the guarantor of civil rights and freedoms and provides for the functioning of all governmental agencies in the Republic of Buryatia. In the

early 1990s, for purposes of the democratization process, developing democratic institutions, and establishing the high level of credibility, President Potapov originated public councils: the Council of Stareyshins (old wise men), the Political Council, and the Council of Women.

These councils work under the supervision of the Committee on Public Relations and Mass Media. The committee organizes technical support and provides organizational assistance to support councils in their preparation for meetings. The mission of the committee is to assist senior leadership in understanding community needs and to establish relations with the media and civil society institutions by means of personal interviews with individuals or responding to letters. Committee members are responsible for governmental public relations (PR) and developing PR structures in governmental agencies and local administrations. This structure provides the president with information about public opinion and the reaction of the public to specific government decisions. Using extensive background research, the president fulfills his communication obligations for public participation in policy development and implementation.

Messages must pass through a variety of communication channels, which become no less important than the messages themselves. Communication channels can alter the content of the message, with some channels restricting access to key individuals and others encouraging interaction. The public councils created their own communication channels, suc-

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cessfully combining different kinds of channels—e.g., traditional dialogue of nomadic civilizations, active verbal interchanges in meetings, written ways of passing information, and electronic mail. In this context, the president can pass on information both directly and indirectly about his trips to Buryatia's regions, to Moscow, and to foreign countries. Old veterans are eager to know all the details. This is the main benefit of the face-to-face encounter.

The Council of Stareyshins

What is the Council of Stareyshins? The general conception of this public organization is connected with the counseling function. It consists of 20 pensioners and veterans who have tremendous managerial experience, most having been top executives in governmental structures and organizations. They meet the president quarterly and debate the most burning issues. Members of the council inform the president of major issues and the most difficult problems, express their opinion on these matters, and help maintain programs and plans. They know what the people need and very often criticize the president, who in turn tries to use their advice and suggestions as he rolls out major initiatives.

The Council of Stareyshins symbolizes a specific form of collective public counseling of the president. Members make trips to the regions of Buryatia for gathering information, they try to take into account public opinion, and their analysis of facts provides the basis for negotiations with the president. The council members are absolutely independent and totally free citizens and can express the people's will, as they perceive it.

The institution of this council reflects old traditions in society—respect for old, wise representatives of the nation. It is not an innovative approach or a new method, but rather a widely accepted axiom from the history of mankind that old people's advice is valuable and important.

The Context of Historical Traditions

The importance of dialogue with different segments of the population can be found in ancient times. The only way to understand the phenomenon of the nation is to study its history. This allows for an understanding of how archetypes and codes of civilization are reflected in modern political conditions. The past of political culture and its historical foundation make it possible to interpret archetypes and codes of culture. One is able to understand the evolution of thought, when the past speaks in its own language and contemporary time opens new possibilities and dimensions.

Specific characteristics of Central Asian civilization were anchored in the principle of natural coexistence, combining nomadic and sedentary ways of living—cattlebreeding with agriculture and handicraft production. Buryat-Mongol culture evolved in the Central Asian setting and was shaped by great events of the 13th century. Following ancient cultural and political traditions, this civilization was tempered by the rich experience of nomadic statecraft, a unique value system and spiritual life,

and an ethics and law that regulated international communication in Central and Eastern Asia, including negotiations and the search for consensus.

The Political Council

Since 1996, the president and the Committee on Public Relations and Mass Media arrange quarterly meetings with the Political Council, which consists of 20 leaders of all political parties and public organizations in the Republic.

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The council continues the historical tradition of the nation. Leaders representing a wide spectrum of views meet the president and discuss the most important problems concerning economic development, social life, and other priority issues. They also can express the specific interests of their constituencies. During these dialogues and genuine meetings, the collective experience and background help in managerial decision making. Questions and answers on current topics, such as unemployment, agricultural production, energy development and management, migration issues, environmental protection of Lake Baikal, and other matters are discussed openly. This is done in the traditional manner, that is a sincere, businesslike exchange by representatives of varied parties and opposing movements, involving pluralistic views. What has value to the public should be valuable for the government to learn more about.

The Council of Women

In 2002, the president established the Council of Women, which also functions as a public organization. The members of the council are 30 politically active, successful women who have the respect of the populace. They engage in meetings with agency officials and discuss issues that pertain to the family, child development and welfare, and other social problems. They typically address complex issues that meet with barriers and obstacles within the bureaucracies of governmental departments and agencies.

Women are clearly a minority in terms of exercising power in public life and the social and political environment. To address this phenomenon, government constructs a bridge to the women of the republic for the purpose of listening to their views, thereby giving them a chance to participate in policy setting and program management. This is an important consideration, demonstrat-

ing that the women of Buryatia have achieved a modicum of recognition through their political participation and involvement in decision making.

Conclusion

President Potapov highly values the public councils' work, because it realizes the principle of two-way communication and the principle of democracy in public administration—direct and indirect connections with the public. Government should support and encourage the development of this kind of council in order to increase the direct participation of citizens in all manner of policy processes. The councils have become true schools of thought and a relevant tool of providing executive level leadership.

As to public relations, the president's practice of working in partnership with the councils is an effective way of getting the feedback and consensus he needs to govern and responds in a culturally appropriate manner to the challenge of democracy in a Central Asian setting.

Postscript

As *The Public Manager* got to thinking about this article, there was more we wanted to learn from the authors. The result of a subsequent e-mail exchange yielded the following additional insights.

TPM: As the two of you now look back on 10 years of change, if it were done over again, are there different or other things you would have recommended be done and why?

Authors: We believe that more could be done to improve customer service, increase citizen involvement in the dialogue with government and local administrators, increase professional development, and partner with a broader spectrum of external entities. Some specific emphases might be:

- Strengthening strategic planning and strategic leadership skills, taking into account the geopolitical peculiarities of Buryatia.
- Strengthening communication skills, taking into account peculiarities of Buryatia (e.g., rural areas sparsely populated by farmers and shepherds, a varied landscape, a multinational, bilingual population—many with a Buddhist cultural background alongside others with a Russian Orthodox or shamanist background, the historically important Eastern-Western Buryat division, traditional tribal family and community psychology, varied local economies, etc.).
- Improved research and evaluation skills with respect to public opinion and improved ability to monitor public opinion and respond in a flexible and timely manner.
- Improved public information capability, including public letter writing and interviewing techniques.
- Increased collaboration among public service organizations—particularly with social services community.

- Improved ability to manage public affairs and government's response to current issues, especially in election periods.

TPM: What experience or skill sets should public officials have that qualify them to engage the public on these issues? For example, what kinds of jobs has Bayar Zhygmytov had as a public manager?

Authors: Bayar Zhygmytov has been in his current position (Chairman, Buryatia Committee on Public Relations and Mass Media) since 1998. Prior to that (1992-1998), he was the chief manager of pre-election campaign activities and editor-in-chief of three newspapers in Buryatia (1997-1998). During this period, he also attended the International American Institute for public relations and pre-election activities (1995) and established a political party in Buryatia (the Buddhist Christian Union in 1994) based on the model of the German Democrats. The party became a branch of "the Christian Democratic Union of Russia."

TPM: What changes have the two of you seen in the last decade as a result of the movement towards greater democratization and multi-party politics and what do you anticipate in the future?

Authors: The democratic voting system was established in the last decade. Deputies are elected by people who go to the polls—as is the case in other democracies—and are accountable to the public for their performance. For the past year, a performance management system has been in place, with public announcement of goals and targets. It should be noted that targets for many tasks of primary importance (e.g., social and economic development) exceed the average for Russia as a whole.

TPM: Is Buryatia grooming and training young people any differently to assume these public functionary roles?

Authors: In Buryatia for several years now, training of future public employees is provided through the department of public administration at Buryat State University. Nowadays, it has a complete faculty and administrative staff and has turned out its first graduates as well. For the most part, however, future public servants and public managers receive their training at the Moscow Academy for Public Service. For students wishing to specialize in public relations, a full-fledged, successful PR department can be found at the East-Siberian State University. And as of this year, the department has already graduated students with a PR major. At present here in Buryatia, students cannot yet combine the curricula of two majors. Although, there are promising signs that soon a program will be offered that integrates public affairs and public administration.

We would add that some PR graduates are eager to pursue careers in public service and seek internships in this area. After the internship, they take a course of study that covers theoretical topics and applied public administration subjects. Entry into public service jobs is difficult—particularly right after graduation—because there are high standards for professional knowledge, skill, and practical experience. ■