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Title: Business ethics – does it mean something different in Russia?

Many descriptive and comparative studies highlight meaningful differences between the business-related norms and practices in Russia and those of other countries (Spicer, 1997). The tone of the majority of the publications on business ethics is alarming: they questioned the applicability of “western ethical standards” to the Russian economy and suggested “complete agreement among researchers” on the low level of business ethics in Russia (Meirovich et al., 2000). What was qualified as unethical behavior was explained within the paradigms of the “legacy of the past” and path dependency (Meirovich et al., 2000; Randall et al., 1998). Recent publications continue this tradition, providing “empirical” evidence of differences in ethical values, and explaining them through the prism of cultural and historic backgrounds.

The main objective of the paper is an attempt to conceptualize the content of the notion of the business ethics, distilling it from both law compliance and broader system of values in the society.

#### Definitions and methodological framework

Business ethics are believed to occupy “a peculiar position” in the field of ethics (Solomon, 1991). Acknowledging “a dizzying array of projects”, pursued under this rubric (Stanford, 2008), Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy offers a reconciling though very broad conceptual framework of business ethics as “the applied ethics discipline that addresses the moral features of commercial activity” (Stanford, 2008). Ethics are believed to be a large grey area of informal but shared rules that regulate relationships in areas left unregulated by laws and formal agreements. As such, ethics are “the law beyond the law” and they fill up the gaps where the law does not apply.

The paper is based on the interviews with Russian top- and middle- level managers and on the study of available secondary data: codes of ethics, annual reports, IPO reports, when available, corporate web-sites, public talks, etc.

The objective of the interviews is to find out what managers conceptualize as legal, individual moral and business ethical issues. The design of the interview reflects the attributes that define ethics and differentiate them from legal regulations and deep, privately held moral values:

- 1) Limited enforceability, as compared to laws.
- 2) Ability to be observed: ethics can not be just declared, they need to be practiced.
- 3) Emergence in controversial/border areas as a result of deliberately voiced out differences in opinions.
- 4) Transformation from personal initiative into shared social/group values.

The expected results are the classification of the areas of business activities, “reserved” for ethics (employment relations, government relations, commercial activity, marketing) and the better understanding of the grounds for “excusing conditions” and “everybody is doing it” behaviors.

#### References:

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