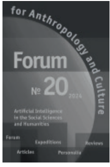

FROM THE PHONE CALL TO THE CARD: IN SEARCH OF DISCRETION AMONG THE OPERATORS OF THE EMERGENCY NUMBER 112

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Abstract: One of the classic questions in research into street-level bureaucracy is that of discretion, i.e. the employee's freedom of action in taking decisions. The discussion of street-level bureaucracy has undergone changes during recent decades. Researchers' attention has been concentrated on its new forms, in particular "screen-level bureaucrats" — the various call handlers, dispatchers and operators who answer calls and contacts from the public. It has traditionally been considered that such employees are almost entirely deprived of any possibility of acting independently, and that their work is reduced to a strict algorithm. Using data from interviews and participant observation at two municipal call-handling centres for the 112 emergency number, the article attempts to show how the dispatchers' everyday life is organised and how they succeed in attaining a greater freedom of action while remaining within their formal limitations. The call handlers' discretion is presented as twofold. The nature of their work — constant contact with representatives of other emergency services — is dictated by frameworks of procedural discretion (regulations and instructions). However, in certain cases, as they work on an incident, they may reclassify the situation from "routine" to "emergency", thereby extending their possibilities. Moreover, the existing frameworks may be transformed when there is a relationship of trust between the call handlers of different services. Then, when in contact with representatives of other agencies, the call handler's actions are limited not so much by the rules as by an unspoken convention, which will differ in different interactions according to the degree of trust between the interlocutors.

Keywords: discretion, street-level bureaucrats, screen-level bureaucrats, dispatcher, 112 systems.

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From the Phone Call to the Card: In Search of Discretion among the Operators of the Emergency Number 112

One of the classic questions in research into street-level bureaucracy is that of discretion, i.e. the employee's freedom of action in taking decisions. The discussion of street-level bureaucracy has undergone changes during recent decades. Researchers' attention has been concentrated on its new forms, in particular "screen-level bureaucrats" — the various call handlers, dispatchers and operators who answer calls and contacts from the public. It has traditionally been considered that such employees are almost entirely deprived of any possibility of acting independently, and that their work is reduced to a strict algorithm. Using data from interviews and participant observation at two municipal call-handling centres for the 112 emergency number, the article attempts to show how the dispatchers' everyday life is organised and how they succeed in attaining a greater freedom of action while remaining within their formal limitations. The call handlers' discretion is presented as twofold. The nature of their work — constant contact with representatives of other emergency services — is dictated by frameworks of procedural discretion (regulations and instructions). However, in certain cases, as they work on an incident, they may reclassify the situation from "routine" to "emergency", thereby extending their possibilities. Moreover, the existing frameworks may be transformed when there is a relationship of trust between the call handlers of different services. Then, when in contact with representatives of other agencies, the call handler's actions are limited not so much by the rules as by an unspoken convention, which will differ in different interactions according to the degree of trust between the interlocutors.

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"Today, a more true-to-life vision of the term 'bureaucracy' would be a room filled with softly humming servers, dotted here and there with a system manager behind a screen." So Mark Bovens and Stavros Zouridis characterise the headlong digitisation of a significant part of the functions of "street-level bureaucrats" [Bovens, Zouridis 2002: 175].[1] In recent years there has been a significant growth in the amount of research into such "digital" bureaucracy [Zouridis et al. 2020], but at the same time it has ignored another kind of officials who has daily contact with the public. These are the *screen-level bureaucrats*,[2] the various dispatchers, call handlers and operators[3] of the state services. In comparison with other low-level bureaucrats their work appears to have a rigid format and

[1] By "bureaucrats" here we shall understand only lower level officials, i.e. those who receive and register various information from the public, or representatives of the emergency services who are in constant contact with the public, in which they represent the state.

[2] Originally this term described the new generation of officials of the 1980s, who received applications from the public and entered them into computer databases, which were replacing the bureaucrats' accustomed paper. Unlike their predecessors, they ticked boxes and filled in forms on the screen, and had less discretion. (They also received applications by telephone.)

[3] Here and henceforth "dispatcher", "duty officer", "call handler" and "operator" will be used synonymously.

to involve minimal discretion, i.e. the freedom and variety of actions within which a bureaucrat can take decisions independently [Lipsky 2010: 14]. Managers usually tend to limit the discretion of such operatives so as to prevent abuses of power. The obverse of this is that the work becomes extremely formalised, and it is difficult to get round the rules (even when this is necessary), that is, the working process is bureaucratised. However, there is reason to think that behind the excessive bureaucratisation of such workers' everyday life there lurks a constant improvisation and avoidance of the rules [Popova 2021].

What opportunity does a screen-level bureaucrat have to act according to their own lights? In this article I shall attempt to answer that question and examine the specifics of discretion among bureaucrats of this kind, through immersion in the world of the call handlers of the 112 service. This is a "one-stop-shop" system which provides for calling out the emergency services (fire brigade, police, ambulance, rescue services, gas engineers, etc.) on the telephone number 112 over the entire territory of Russia. On the one hand, its dispatchers must receive information about incidents and direct it to the various agencies (at the municipal and regional levels) without interruption, and on the other, they are immersed in the complex system of the joint subordination of various agencies and services within a single municipality. Therefore, the question of their discretion is an important one for study. It allows the tracing of how, in a common institutional field, relationships are ordered at the level of the individual operator.

The data for analysis consists of two cases from the municipal 112 call-handling services in a region of Russia in 2018–2019. At that point the call-handling services being studied had been working for about a year and a half since their inception. In the course of the fieldwork, three sessions of participant observation were conducted during shifts of the call handlers, interviews with twenty informants were recorded and an analysis of the internal documentation of the call-handling services was carried out. The interviews were devoted not only to the topic of discretion among the 112 operators, but also to a wide range of questions connected with the organisational context of the creation and functioning of the call-handling service in the municipality. In one instance, access to the field was obtained through a key informant, and in the other, through an official request to the regional administration. This approach may have influenced how the researcher was seen by the informants, for example, as a representative of the supervisory agencies. However (according to subjective evaluations during the fieldwork), this effect was evident more in conversations with representatives of the administration of the call-handling services than with the operators themselves.

The position of the duty officer may be described by the metaphor of a "setters" at volleyball, since call handlers' job is to receive the call (like the ball in volleyball) and pass it on as quickly as possible to other services, without letting it be grounded in their own court. Every time a player (call handler) passes something on, they must follow strict rules. One of the leaders of the service gave a summary formulation of their activity: "It turns out that we are like a transmission link" (m., CCHS[1] leader, case no. 2). However, often the situation itself creates conditions for the operator to act somewhat differently from what is prescribed. All in all, though all they have is a telephone and information about how the various services function, operators can play a more important role working with various incidents, as they co-ordinate the services with each other.[2]

The basic thesis of the work is that although dispatchers' work is extremely bureaucratised, they have space for independent action. Firstly, they can change their everyday regime of work by transferring "routine" to "emergency". Secondly, their degree of discretion depends on the existence of informal relationships with representatives of other emergency services. Where a call handler does not have the necessary contacts, one may observe procedural discretion, i.e. the use of the existing strict rules to the handler's benefit and attaining desired ends by appealing to the regulations. In a situation of more confidential relationships, informal discretion is possible. In this case, when in contact with representatives of other agencies, the actions of the call handler are limited not so much by the rules as by an unspoken convention, which will differ in different interactions depending on the degree of trust between the interlocutors.

Bureaucrats and the question of discretion

The term "street-level bureaucracy" was introduced by Michael Lipsky to study the "lower" level of the work of the state, those officials who interact with the public face to face every day: social workers, doctors, policemen and so on [Lipsky 2010 (1980)]. Researchers who continued working in this direction realised quite quickly that the everyday activity of such officials was changing because of the introduction of new technology. In connection with this, the aforementioned Mark Bovens and Stavros Zouridis introduced a distinction between different types of bureaucrats. To "street-level bureaucrats" they added "screen-level bureaucrats"

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1 The 112 Combined Call-handling Service, on which see below.

2 In this they approach the working model of the American 911 service, in which the operators have the resources to control the other emergency services [Simpson 2021]. In the Russian design, however, the 112 service is not intended to function as more than a "transmission link".

and "system-level bureaucrats", i.e. developers of the various state electronic systems that replace "ordinary" street-level bureaucrats.

This opened the way to a large amount of research on system-level bureaucrats in digitised state services, since many functions of the state were already being delegated to "humming servers" [Zouridis et al. 2020]. At the dawn of the "system developer bureaucrats" some scholars even supposed that digitisation would lead to the complete exclusion of the traditional "street-level bureaucrat" from the work of state agencies. However, other researchers had and still have a sceptical attitude towards the thesis of the displacement of the old street-level bureaucrats, saying that in a number or areas, such as education and social work, the algorithm could not replace the human being [Buffat 2015].

There are also other reasons why techno-optimism with regard to bureaucracy might lead to false interpretations, for example, because of the dynamics of change of the bearers of information and the transition from paper to computerised circulation of documents. Situations are known when computer systems do not replace the circulation of paper, but, on the contrary, increase it. In this sense, it is important to understand the position of the screen-level bureaucrat not as a bureaucrat who works only with a computer, but as an official who is obliged to fill in strictly regulated forms without personal interaction with his interlocutor [Hull 2012]. Although there are so many bureaucrats whose routine is organised in this way, screen-level bureaucrats have been practically ignored by researchers. At present it is rare to find any works describing their activities, their limitations and, most importantly, their discretion.

The question of discretion is one of the most important in the field of bureaucracy studies [Lipsky 2010: 14]. It is traditionally considered that the main problem with street-level bureaucrats, which leads to criticism of this way of organising work, is that they have too much discretion. Such bureaucrats can take decisions by themselves; they do not depend much on their superiors in their everyday work, and this opens the way to abuses as they carry out their responsibilities [Zacka 2017: 34]. The other two types of bureaucrat do not have this freedom. In the system-level bureaucrat's case discretion is reduced to technical decisions in implementing and maintaining the algorithm. Thus, the question of the possibility of acting according to one's own lights at the lower level is reduced to how one programme or another is technically implemented. Considering that at the level of everyday interaction with clients even autonomous algorithms can display different "styles" of work [Serebrennikov et al. 2023], this conceptual conclusion appears debatable.

The screen-level bureaucrat's work is formalised, it offers no room for deviations from the protocol. As for call handlers, their everyday

work is to "deliver" the details of the incident to the correct address and ascertain that they have been received. From outside it seems that the screen-level bureaucrat must work like a machine, taking calls from the public, but in reality, such a reduction to an algorithm is impossible. The operator is on the cusp between agencies and services with different interests and styles of work (the fire brigade, the ambulance service, the police, the municipal services, etc.). At the level of micro-interactions, the call handlers are constantly forced to resolve the contradictions between observing their internal instructions (and there are penalties for infringing them) and fulfilling the requests that they receive over the telephone. In this context they are like interpreters between different institutional worlds: bureaucracy and the law on one side and the everyday life of the public (which is usually being disrupted by whatever has caused them to call) on the other. Operators learn to understand when and how they can deviate from the rules and regulations, and often approach this question creatively [Popova 2021].

If, instead of the communication in a particular conversation, one considers the overall structural position of the operators, it turns out that with each organisation they use their own methods of conducting communication. These techniques are intended to bring the unique case of each caller onto the "card" filled in by the emergency services in the best possible way [Zimmerman 1992: 459–460]. What precise actions can the duty officers undertake to this end, and is their discretion manifested only in the variation of conversational practices?

From the point of view of institutional interaction, the 112 call handlers' work is the first stage of the "journey" of the information received through various services and agencies. Along this road the employees of each organisation (for example: the 112 call centre — the regional hospital — the ambulance station) have their own stimuli, rules and organisational culture, which do not always correspond to their analogues in the next service along the chain. A clear example of this is the complicated law-enforcement system in Russia. Here the single number service plays the role of a sort of staircase leading up to the great edifice of "the trajectory of a criminal case" [Paneyakh et al. 2018]. Therefore, the operators' task is to produce the "correct" information for the next recipients, i.e. respond to the call quickly, formulate a text in such a way that their counterparts can understand it, and observe the prescriptions of their work algorithms to the letter. It would seem that in this context the duty officer has too few resources, tools and motivations for discretion in interaction between institutions, not only in micro-communications. Does such an officer have any at all? To answer that question, we must examine the context in which the 112 system was set up in Russia.

The 112 system: history and peculiarities

Before the appearance of the 112 system in the middle of the second decade of the present century, each of the emergency services (the fire brigade, the police, the ambulance service, the utility services) had its own call centre, usually inherited from the Soviet system. This office was, and to a large extent remains, the first body encountered by a member of the public when contacting the emergency services. The duty officer's task was to carry out a preliminary categorisation of the call and set in motion the appropriate units to deal with the report. The police control room, for example, operates on such a scenario [Volkov et al. 2015: 18].

Beginning at the end of the first decade of this century, there were attempts to create a single agency for community services, so that members of the public did not need to look through dozens of telephone numbers in order to find the organisation they needed, but could call a single system and make a report of any kind, from a burst radiator in need of repair to a cat stuck up a tree. However, such programmes were a matter of initiative and could be radically different from one municipality to another. Usually, they were created in connection with city administrations' desire to increase their control over the activities of the utility services, but there were other reasons. In particular, the heads of the utility services were often rung up at night by dissatisfied residents who could not find in the telephone directory any other number for call-outs [Bychkova, Popova 2013: 213]. In the next decade, the creation of common control rooms for public utilities was achieved, using the 112 system.

The first attempts at creating a single emergency call-out system for all services (and not just the public utilities) had begun even earlier in Russia, in the middle of the 2000s, after the government of the Russian Federation had, in 2004, issued the relevant decree [Postanovlenie 2004]. However, because of disagreements and problems with the division of powers (primarily between the civil defence force and the Ministry of Communications), the project never really got off the ground [Schetnaya palata 2019: 5–10]. In order to draw up clear rules and a plan for the development of the system, in 2008 the Russian government confirmed the concept of the 112 system, and it began to be piloted in the regions (in the Astrakhan, Kaluga and Kursk *oblasti*) [Rasporyazhenie 2008].

To give an impetus to the creation of a single system, the integrated federal 112 programme was started in 2013. According to this programme, the 112 system should provide for the routing and accumulation of all calls received and of information from activated sensors to combined call-handling services (CCHS), which were most often based on the single "public utilities" call centres mentioned above. The CCHS is a common call centre for all the

emergency services in a municipality, or in several municipalities. In some cases, municipal CCHSs may be controlled by a regional Call Processing Centre (CPC) or some analogue thereof.

The creation of the system was to be controlled by the civil defence services, the Ministry of Transport and the leaders of the constituent parts of the Russian Federation. Accordingly, the project budget was distributed between the federal centre, the constituent parts of the federation and the local authorities. It was supposed that the system would work with common computer support developed by the civil defence services. It was originally planned to roll out the system by 2012 [Schetnaya palata 2019: 7], but its development proceeded exceedingly slowly, and at the time when the fieldwork for my research was being conducted (2018–2019) it was not even being piloted in thirty-five regions of Russia.

This characterises the key peculiarity of the whole state programme. The money for it was allotted to the federal regions, but the state did not propose any common design for the system. As a result, the regions chose for themselves their own models for constructing the 112 system. This led in a multitude of diverse solutions, which sometimes are not very compatible with each other for technical reasons. Thus, in forty-three regions centralised systems were built,[1] and in forty-two, decentralised ones[2] [Schetnaya palata 2019: 35]. There are also differences between the centralised systems: in some places a call is taken first by the CPC, then redirected to the CCHS, while in others it is the other way round [Ryzhov, Aybazov 2021]. Further, about half the regions are at present creating the single number infrastructure independently, without regard for the recommendations of the federal authorities. The emergency services, which are supposed to be connected by the 112 system, are sometimes reluctant to co-operate and criticise the way the programme is being put in place [Schetnaya palata 2019: 40–49]. As a result, CCHS operators find themselves at the focal point of a web of organisational and inter-agency contradictions, and at the same time have extremely limited freedom of action.

Data and methods

The material for the research consisted of two cases from the call-handling services of a certain Russian region, which I studied in 2018–2019. In the region itself one may observe a strictly centralised design of the system, a regional model of financing (the regional authorities are also in charge of creating the system), and a close linkage between the 112 service and the civil authorities of the

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1 When all calls are first taken by the regional call centre, then redirected to the local CCHSs.

2 When all calls are taken at once by the local CCHSs.

municipality and the region (for example, reports of emergencies of a special category are immediately reported to the governor). While I was doing my fieldwork, the 112 system was in transition from the testing stage to full working mode and, moreover, according to a closed state rating, this region is regarded as one of the best in Russia in terms of the system's performance indicators. The duty officers at the CCHS had been working for over a year and had not noticed any alterations resulting from the change in the project's formal status.

In all, twenty interviews were collected at the CCHSs of two districts. The first service (case no. 1) was in a municipality with a large, potentially dangerous works. It had been created on the basis of the control room of the rescue brigade, the operators of which had, among other things, to conduct constant monitoring of the ecological situation in the municipality. As a control room it had existed *de facto* since the end of the 1990s. The CCHS has its own large, separate building and, as the workers of the city administration assured me, possesses authority among the emergency services. The operators who work there are trained in special classes at the CCHS itself. Some of them previously worked at other emergency services such as the police. The call handlers also make active use of the "Safe City" system of surveillance cameras, but not to look for or catch criminals, rather, to monitor the work of the utilities and other services. (An extra duty officer on each shift has been specially hired for this purpose.)

The other call-handling service was created at the beginning of 2018 on the basis of a single utility control room, new functions being added to it (case no. 2). At that time another room was added to the existing service, where a separate working space was created for the duty officer of the 112 system, and the whole thing was called the CCHS. Because the system was being rolled out in a hurry, operators were appointed without any training or experience, and so, as they admitted themselves, the first months of work were very difficult.

Call-handling centres are small organisations, about fifteen persons. A shift of duty operators consists of two persons, who work every fourth day. Their work is extremely stressful (as they themselves admit), both psychologically and because of the risk of criminal responsibility for an "incorrectly processed" incident. At both organisations interviews were conducted with the majority of the workers and there were three sessions of participant observation during the day shift. In addition, in order better to understand the overall structural position of the duty officers of the municipal CCHSs, a few expert interviews were recorded with the leaders of the regional CPCs and with one of the on-call psychologist operators.

In studying the cases, an analysis was made of the legal normative documentation connected with the CCHS, the CPC, and the 112 system, as of the internal documentation of certain CCHSs provided by my informants.

The position of the operator: the formal algorithm of work and informal connections

In order to understand the specifics of the CCHS operators' discretion, it is essential to understand the institutional rules[1] by which they work and how their interrelations with the representatives of other emergency services are formed.

In the region being studied, a 112 call first reaches the CPC of the region. There an operator answers the call and opens a card in the combined system of the emergency services. They fill in the primary fields (sex, age, location of the caller, description of the case)[2] and then send it to the relevant emergency services and the municipal CCHS. Moreover, the old emergency numbers (01, 02, 03, etc.) continue to exist, but in fact they are answered by the 112 duty officers. The local numbers of the emergency services (gas, for example), are usually those of the local control rooms, but they too are gradually being transferred to the centralised organisation and integrated into the single number system.

From that point on, the call becomes "a report of an incident" (hereinafter "an incident") and filling in the remaining fields on the card becomes the basic responsibility of the district duty officers. The CCHS duty officer verifies the report that has been received and checks the data, finds out whether the emergency services have received the report and how they intend to respond to it, and also decides which emergency services to involve in the work. In certain cases, the report is first received and acted on by the district duty officer, for example, if the call is made to one of the old emergency numbers, if the various sensors in the region have been activated (say, by a forest fire), or if an incident has been registered by surveillance cameras, etc.

Once work on the incident has begun, the district duty officer's task is to fill in the remaining fields on the card and then to "close" it, i.e. make sure that the relevant work has been completely carried out. At every stage they must exactly follow the regulations, in which it is set out to the second how much time they should spend on each type of work (receiving the call, organising the response, verifying the data, entering information about the work of the other services,

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1 Much of the description of the call handlers' working regulations is given without references to the relevant regional decrees, in order to preserve the anonymity of the region being studied.

2 The fields may be different, depending on the type of incident.

and so on).[1] Nevertheless, they have no key performance indicators for their work that would measure, for example, the speed and fluency of their actions.

Coll.: *Is your work finally assessed statistically?* […] *Or what might you get a bonus for, for example?*
Inf.: *Well... I haven't even thought about it. We haven't had any bonuses. There are no additional rewards of any kind. Only our salary* (f., CCHS operator, case no. 1).

The operators have two basic stimuli to work quickly. The first is the risk of personal criminal liability[2] in the event of negative consequences of the services' work on an incident (there have been instances of this and my informants remember them very well). The second is pressure from their superiors, since there are control indicators regarding the speed and quality of work on an incident, but they are used to evaluate the CCHS as a whole and not individual operators. Once the card has been entered into the overall system, the operators at the CCHS and the CPC can see how the other services are working on it (which fields they use, what comments they leave, and so on).

If an operator considers it necessary to intervene in the process, there arises a curious bifurcation. Formally, contact with a number of services takes place at the regional level (the CCHS operator sends a request to the CPC, they pass it on to the regional control room of the relevant agency, whence it returns to the district level). In this way, the call-handling service is a sort of guide from the caller to a specific emergency service. However, in fact the operators have established contact (often informally) with other duty officers and interested persons: the fire brigade, the police, the ambulance service, the "public utilities", and a number of other organisations (for example, schools and kindergartens). Operators have their own relationships with each of these partners: with one they may have very good contact, with another, quite the reverse.

Thus is the cases studied the duty officers complained most of all of difficulties in interacting with the ambulance service. On the other end of the line there were most often elderly female operators at district hospitals with a heavy workload. Because of their age they are slow at using computers, and this affects how they fill in the card. Further, neither the CPC nor the CCHS formally has any way of influencing the duty operator's speed of work, and so they have to use informal paths, though without much evident success. Thus, a CCHS operator (case no. 2) told me that despite the "one-stop-shop" system, the operators of the regional CPC often cannot get

1 For a typical example of such a "plan" see: [Kachanov et al. 2012].

2 Art. 124б, 125б, 237 and 293 of the Criminal Codex of the Russian Federation.

through to certain hospitals. In such a case, the district call handler must try to find a way of contacting the medical establishment without going through the single number.

The ambulance service also displays a critical attitude to the system. This may be illustrated by a record in my field diary of observation of a session of an inter-agency commission on the work of the 112 system, to which I had been invited by one of my informants: "The representatives of one of the district hospitals, sitting next to me, were cursing 112, saying that it works dreadfully." This reaction was produced by the doctors' opinion that the single number does not reduce the load on their admissions, but, on the contrary, redirects a greater number of callers to them.

In interaction with the police, on the one hand, the reverse situation may be observed: it is easy to get through to them, and they have a working relationship. On the other hand, because both sides are aware of the heavy institutional weight of 02,[1] communication with the police turns out to be extremely formal. Moreover, it often goes through the regional level (the regional head office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, known as "glavk"), which is supposed to guarantee a high-quality response to reports by the district police, but in the end results in more complicated and many-tiered communication.

Our MIA office is here [in the town], *but nothing ever reaches anybody if something of the sort happens here. Via the police. The signal comes in. If I ring as a person — for example, somebody is being murdered in the street. I ring 112. The operator asks what it's about, writes down all the data and so on, who has called. Maybe they don't call the district MIA office, but ring up glavk. And they then redirect the information to the district office* (m., head of the municipal civil defence and emergency department, case no. 2).

It should not be imagined that a CCHS duty officer is obliged to communicate only in formal mode. A fine example of the opposite is the interaction with the fire service. The fire brigade is organisationally close to the CCHS duty officers in two senses. Firstly, in 2015 civil defence was given the legal right to create the entire infrastructure and methodological recommendations for the training of the personnel working in the 112 system [Schetnaya palata 2019: 19]. In addition, the ministry published methodological recommendations for the federal regions and municipalities on developing technical projects for the 112 system, in which monitoring all the other call-handling services was a mandatory function of the municipal CCHSs [Metodicheskie rekomendatsii 2015: 25–27].

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[1] [The old number for calling the police — *Transl.*] I have no direct confirmation of this, but am led to this thought by the general attitude of the 112 operators towards the police call handlers.

Secondly, most of the call handlers and managers of the CCHSs studied have experience of serving in civil defence or in the military. The informants themselves described the two professions as very close to each other. All the managers asked were retired military personnel, and the overwhelming majority of the people working in the CCHSs studied were retired military or civil defence personnel. The training of workers and development of state standards for the work of the system is being carried out by civil defence. Considering that civil defence distributed 81 % of the budget for implementing the integrated federal programme connected with 112, it is reasonable to extrapolate a similar close connection to other regions in which civil defence have been charged with creating the system.

A common "military" understanding of their work as defending the municipality from threats (primarily natural ones) brings the 112 duty officers and the fire brigade together. The call handlers are more willing to call 01, to make sure that the tasks connected with an incident are being carried out or to find out whether some other assistance is necessary, and they independently monitor the surveillance cameras installed in the CCHS, looking for fires or emergencies. In case no. 1 this initiative was also connected with the fact that the duty officers had the possibility of dispatching the municipal rescue service to the location of the incident.[1] In case no. 2 the CCHS does not have such a resource, and the operators, despite a similar discourse, do not manifest any special zeal, complaining that in any case nobody will pay much attention to them.

However, in both cases there is one type of "partner" that the duty officers can not so much monitor as supervise. These are the public utility services. In this case, the duty officers not only send a report of the incident to a particular service, but also check the result of the work, not hesitating to ring up the administration of a settlement.

Now my [duty officer] *will ring round several villages, [to ask] whether the snow has been cleared or not* […]. *And we cover distances of up to sixty kilometres* […] *and the tractor might not... well, not go all the way to a village for the sake of a couple of houses. Therefore we do this monitoring* […]. *She needs to know which village belongs to which settlement,* […] *who is the head of the administration in that settlement and how to talk to them. How to approach them. Whether you need* [banging the table] *to apply pressure to them, or whether you need* [speaking softly] *to be like this...* (f., senior CCHS operator, case no. 1).

1 Since the strength of response to fires is divided into various levels, municipal rescue brigades may be directly subordinate to the CCHS, but work together with regional fire fighters from civil defence in putting out fires.

Besides those enumerated, the CCHS may be in contact with municipal organisations unconnected with the emergency services: schools, kindergartens, environmental organisations, etc. Informal contact is established with such institutions, so that a duty officer may ring up, for example, a head teacher to find out the character of an incident that has happened in the vicinity or to one of the pupils. Judging by indirect evidence, when there is such contact the leaders of these organisations may also when necessary get in touch with the call handler directly. All in all, the operators describe themselves as the state agency that is closest to "ordinary people", and best able to assist them.

It often happens that simply nobody hears members of the public. They don't know who to complain to or how to get what they need, and they think that our service is the last resort. And, by the way, very often our service does resolve a lot of questions. That is why... that is why they get the impression that all they have to do is ring us up and the question will be resolved. Because, perhaps, none of the other services take much notice of members of the public, but our service... they do somehow respond to our reports quickly (f., CCHS operator, case no. 1).

When he or she receives a report, a municipal CCHS duty officer must process it as quickly as possible: gather all the necessary information and see that the other services have carried out their tasks. In practice she[1] exists within a complex system of inter-agency relations, where contact with each service is arranged differently.

The CCHS call handlers are expected to co-ordinate the work of the other services, but they can ensure it only through interaction with civil defence. Contact with the other services is established either with difficulty (the ambulance service), or extremely formally with no levers of influence (the police). Only where the CCHS duty officers have the function of supervision and monitoring of the evolving situation do they have a greater possibility of acting according to their own lights while working on incidents. This happens with the utility services and the municipal authorities.

In search of screen-level bureaucrats' discretion

The duty officer in various everyday regimes

From the point of view of the formal regulations, CCHS duty officers have two "regimes" of work, which may be described as two regimes

[1] In the cases studied, all the operators are women (cf. the feminisation of this profession in other countries, e.g. the UK).

of everyday life: the usual routine of answering calls and the emergency situation.

Routine everyday life is to a large extent "algorithmic": the operator "processes" the cards in conformity with certain formal rules and informal conventions of relationships both within the CCHS and with other services. Such specifics of work are not unique. Don Zimmerman has shown how the structures of organisation of 911 operators' conversations change depending on the person they are talking to [Zimmerman 1992: 434]. During my field observations, in one instance (case no. 2), the duty officers would sit, calmly conversing, and only occasionally answering calls or glancing at the monitors. In the other service (case no. 1), they were practically never diverted from their work to talk to me, but worked without interruption with the calls that came in, while also keeping track of the utility services' activity.

Call handlers' work is strikingly different in the case of an emergency, when, as my informants told me, there is no understanding of who should be responsible for working with the incident. When making the recommendations for defining an emergency situation, civil defence classed it as a "complex" incident, i.e. one where more than one emergency service needed to be involved in working on it. Thanks to this approach, with any incident requiring the co-ordination and interaction of more than one emergency service, the CPC and the CCHS have the right to co-ordinate their actions [Polozhenie 2015: ch. 2]. In this situation, the CCHS call handler can decide unaided which additional services or organisations they should call out, and to whom, and in what form, they should make additional reports of what has happened.

The broad definition of an emergency in law [Federalnyy zakon 1994] allows it to be treated in different ways in practice. From the example of the methodological recommendations and the CCHS operators' training programmes in one of the cases studied, one might say that an "emergency" is an extremely vague term precisely from a practical point of view. As one might expect, the category of emergency includes natural disasters (storms, hurricanes, floods, fires, etc.) and man-made ones (explosions, gas leaks, etc.). Besides these, it embraces acts of terrorism, accidents on the railways and waterways and any form of public transport (including the metro), and also attacks by criminals or dogs. Thus, according to the logic of the compilers of the recommendations, all these events may fall wholly or partially into the sphere of responsibility of the CCHS.

As a result, an emergency is quite a frequent occurrence. It does not disrupt everyday life, but is one of its regimes, to which the operators adapt themselves when necessary.

[Conversation about emergencies:]
Coll.: *And in such cases do you activate everyone on the card and keep track of them?*
Inf.: *Yes, yes. For that reason I always put them on monitoring, I ring* [the various services] *and find out what information they have received, and it's not the initial information, that the ambulance gives me right away, that I report* [to the regional centre], *but the complete information* (f., CCHS operator, case no. 1).

One typical emergency situation is practically any road traffic accident, especially where children are involved. A duty officer is obliged to send the information about a RTA involving a minor immediately to the regional administration, and afterwards compile a weekly report for the provincial administration on how the emergency services responded to the incident and what work was done to remove its consequences. The typical description of a RTA is a persistent pattern that is repeated in literally every interview with CCHS workers as an example of an emergency situation.

I need to know what harm has been done to their health, because I report that to [the regional centre]. *So. To the superiors, that we have had an RTA. And specially if it concerns under-age children. Until I get to the end of it, that means* [she gesticulates, showing that she will not have finished her work] (f., CCHS operator, case no. 2).

It is important to remember that the operator has to keep track of all call-outs and, if she considers it necessary, clarify the essential information and supervise the response of the other duty services [Kachanov et al. 2012: 13]. Furthermore, the CCHS operators have an important organisational principle: to know for sure that the work on the card is completed or will be completed in the foreseeable future [Kachanov et al. 2012: 13–15].

The 112 system is so organised that if there is an RTA, the head office [of the MIA] *in* [the regional centre] *takes control of it and until the local* [police] *have processed it, the card will not be closed. They badger them about it too: "Why hasn't this RTA been processed?"* (m., representative of the district civil defence and emergency department, case no. 2).

Another example of an emergency situation, which occurred during my observation on a shift of the operators of case no. 1, was a fire at a small dump near the buildings of an oil refinery. In this case the duty officer first received the information through informal channels from the ecologists of the municipality, who were the first to notice the smoke. Then she independently checked a series of sensors and cameras, to get confirmation. Then information came in from other informal sources, after which the duty officer herself took the decision to act in accordance with an emergency situation

and, initiating the relevant algorithm of work, began to ring round different services. It is important to emphasise that the operator took the initiative and acted on the basis of data that had not been formally entered according to procedure (i.e. without a call, a "card", and so on), checking by means of the city cameras and sensors available to her whether there were any signs of a fire. She organised the work outside the set algorithms, changing, in the end, the format of her actions, and co-ordinated the fire brigade, the police, the rescue services and the utility services while the fire was being put out.

Thus, one of the elements of discretion that can be observed among the 112 call handlers is the reset of the regime of everyday activity. After the reset the operator once more works within the prescriptions, but under emergency conditions, which gives them a greater freedom of action in limiting the consequences of the incident.

One "setter" and different "hitters"

As we have said, the everyday life of CCHS call handlers can be described as a game of volleyball, from the position of the setter. And if the direction of the shot is strictly regulated, its character and the various techniques to make sure that it is served may vary. It would seem that, except in emergencies, the CCHS duty officers must only enter the information from the caller into the system according to a special protocol. However, thanks to the common electronic circulation of documents the operator has the additional opportunity of tracking the various services that are working on the situation, inasmuch as they are the only one of the emergency service call handlers who can find out how the incident develops. CCHS operators see more than police duty officers or the fire station, who have access only to the card of their own agency.

[The card is passed on to the services] *in parallel, the information comes to our 112. Our operator takes no part in that. They only see that the signal has gone to a particular service. But that is not their prerogative. They can simply open the card and see what has happened. They press the key and see the card in its entirety* (m., specialist of the district civil defence and emergency department, case no. 2).

Work on the cards is supposed to be completed within a particular time, but because of their heavy workload the duty officers of the other emergency services often fail to comply with the speed of work on reports specified in the regulations.[1] CCHS duty officers have

[1] Even at the CCHSs themselves the regulations are not always complied with, for the most part for technical reasons or because of the operators' heavy workload.

hardly any levers for applying pressure to the other services, which places them in a "weak position" when talking to those services. In such cases, almost the only means of accelerating the work of the ambulance, police or fire brigade is the telephone. When a new card appears in the system, CCHS workers decide for themselves how to check that the task has been carried out. As a result, when they monitor the activity of their colleagues at the other services, they proceed not by the regulations, but according to their own ideas. This is confirmed both by my own observations and by the duty officers' own assertions.

Coll.: *But how can you solve any problems? That is, do you, conditionally, ask them, or some other way?*
Inf.: *No* […] [for example] *the police, we ring them. "Yes, we went out, there's no basis for any of it." After all, they have cars.*
Coll.: *And they have to ring you back, to the control room?*
Inf.: *No, they don't ring anyone back. We ring them back. This is purely for our own peace of mind, to know that the problem has been solved* (f., CCHS operator, case no. 2).

According to the regulations, if the MIA's part of the card is correctly filled in, the operator does not have to check his colleagues' work. However, the duty officer's words show that while she remains within the regulations, which do not allow her to deviate from the formal procedure, she takes the decision how often to ring the various services about each particular case on her own initiative.

With time, interacting with those "hitters" who are more willing to be in contact (in the cases studied these are the fire brigade, the utility services and municipal and social organisations), the duty officers begin to recognise the voices of the people they talk to. With many of them relationships gradually acquire an informal tone, forming a network of acquaintances among call handlers. With each of them a particular approach and style of conversation emerges, and an understanding of what one can ask that person for in what circumstances. This informal network of contacts produces its own kind of discretion, which manifests itself in requests to check the status of the work on some incident, the possibility of hastening the work of a particular service in carrying out its tasks, or (in case no. 1), offering the assistance of the rescue brigade, which is organised within the CCHS.

Conclusion

The operators of the 112 service of municipal CCHSs are representatives of *screen-level bureaucracy*, and exist within a system that strictly regulates their actions as they work with many other emergency services. Formally, they themselves have practically no levers of influence or opportunities to go beyond the established

rules. They could be imagined as a telling example of algorithmised "bureaucracy in front of a screen", but even in these conditions call handlers have a field of variable action.

Firstly, they have the power to switch between regimes of work, changing the everyday routine into the emergency regime. Secondly, since the call handlers' everyday work is connected with communication, their discretion varies depending on the partner they are dealing with. In interacting with those emergency services with whom smooth contact has not been established (the ambulance service) or on whom they have no levers to exert direct pressure (the police), one may observe procedural discretion, i.e. variable use of the existing rules in order to obtain the necessary result. In the two CCHSs studied, this was effected by the number of calls made by the call handler to a particular service about a single event. In the situation of dealing with the fire brigade or the municipal services, with whom close contact had been established, we see informal discretion. In this case, the call handler has a greater freedom of action, based on trust and established informal relationships.

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