

23. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

**Societal Transformation in Russia since 1980**

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**Interview**

*Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: »Societal transformation in Russia«—was this about taking stock of transition studies?*

Mischa Gabowitsch: Not at all. The whole terminology of »transition« and even »transformation« tends to evoke an understanding of social change that is dominated by political science, with its focus on formal aspects of political regimes. To a truly remarkable degree, both public interest and academic research on Russia have focused on the political system and its changes. That is exactly what I tried to get away from with this colloquium. It seems that a special effort is required these days to have a conversation about Russia that does not concentrate on the political elite, the capital, the Kremlin, and, often enough, the figure of the president. This fixation on Moscow and Putin is a serious problem. It tends to reduce society to a passive mass, one that is of interest mainly as a bearer of political attitudes, to be measured using the highly problematic tool of opinion polling. At the same time there are historians who have studied Stalinism and assume that this alone gives them a privileged understanding of contemporary Russia. The colloquium was designed as an attempt to develop complex perspectives on Russian society that do not reduce it to politics while also avoiding to explain everything by referring to the legacy of the 1930s or even earlier periods.

*So was it a specialized debate among sociologists?*

By no means. Continuing the time-honored tradition of the Berlin Colloquia, the point was to foster a dialogue between different disciplines, especially history and sociology, but also anthropology and geography. There has been increasing overlap between different disciplinary perspectives in recent years, as practitioners of each of them have come to look beyond the eras they have traditionally been interested in and study the societal transformation that has occurred in Russia over

a period of several decades. In particular, historians, who had long tended to focus on Stalinism, have developed a serious interest in the final decades of the Soviet Union. Sociologists, coming from the opposite direction as it were, have also been paying more and more attention to late socialism, which increasingly appears as a starting point for developments whose effects continue to be felt today, such as the rise of an urban consumer society or the emergence of environmental or preservationist movements. I am at home in both disciplines and have been watching this convergence for a while now, and yet I've noticed that there has not been any systematic dialogue between the disciplines so far. Let me illustrate this point. For the reader that served as a basis for our discussions, I selected a text by a Norwegian social anthropologist who, in the early 1980s, was one of few Western social scientists able to do research in the USSR.<sup>1</sup> He described the late Soviet Union as an archipelago of almost unconnected islands: social positions that people strove to occupy and then expended a lot of effort to defend. Thus the point was not to climb as high as possible in a hierarchy, but to position oneself in an advantageous position in order to gain access to scarce resources under conditions of a corrupt planned economy while evading reprisals. The book has become something of a secret classic among social historians of the late Soviet Union. This was flanked by a more recent essay by a sociologically oriented political scientist who offers a very similar analysis of contemporary Russia and argues—quite aptly—that, instead of perceiving »passivity« everywhere, we should speak of an »aggressive immobility« that provides the best possible protection against arbitrary infringements by the state. Yet he contrasts this with Soviet society which, using a somewhat tired cliché, he portrays as a highly regimented system controlled from above.<sup>2</sup> There is much potential here for a fruitful dialogue, but this is hampered by the dominant fixation on the functioning and transformation of the formal political system.

*And did the dialogue actually prove fruitful?*

At any rate we managed to identify a number of areas where there is significant overlap and need for collaborative work. One example is the metaphors of isolation that keep cropping up in the scholarly literature, be it »atomization« or, as

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<sup>1</sup> Finn Sivert Nielsen, *The Eye of the Whirlwind. Russian Identity and Soviet Nation-Building. Quests for Meaning in a Soviet Metropolis* (1986), [http://www.anthrobase.com/Txt/N/Nielsen\\_F\\_S\\_03.htm](http://www.anthrobase.com/Txt/N/Nielsen_F_S_03.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Samuel A. Greene, *Russia: Society, politics and the search for community*, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2011-12-02-greene-en.html>

mentioned, »islands.« Such terms suggests that Russia lacks social ties, or at least that they are very weak. They make us lose sight of the things that do hold society together: from persistent institutions such as state education or welfare institutions all the way to informal practices that regulate the exchange of services and favors as well as access to certain goods. Between these poles we find a broad spectrum of what French-inspired pragmatic sociology calls »conventions«: rules that structure coexistence in society without having the explicit structure of institutions or being mere unconscious »norms.«

Another point of intense debate was breaks and turning points in Russia's recent history. Of course the importance of 1991 is hard to deny, but from the point of view of social history other moments, such as the late 1960s, when urbanization reached a peak, may well be no less important. Then again, certain structures from the Stalinist period, such as the state's classification grid for professions, do persist well into the post-Soviet period.

At the same time our discussions showed that the road ahead remains long and arduous. Thus for example we talked extensively about what a textbook on Russian society might look like—tellingly, such a book does not exist yet, even though library shelves are filled with introductions to Russian politics. How would we structure such a book? Would we use classic categories such as social inequality, gender, etc.—or rather focus on supposed Russian peculiarities? Actually it is not that easy to figure out what such peculiarities might be—primarily because Russia tends to be measured against a vaguely defined »West«, but only rarely compared with other areas of the world, even though such comparison might make it appear typical rather than exceptional in certain regards.

*What are the prospects for continuing this dialogue?*

I am quite optimistic. There is an increasingly shared sense that we need to get away from the dominant politics- and Moscow-centric perspective on contemporary Russia. This is evidenced by a spate of recent conferences in various countries that were inspired by similar observations. Inevitably this leads us to broaden our historical perspective, not least because historians who work on the 1960s-80s make increasing use of provincial archives. At the same time they are now catching up with a period that has also been studied by sociologists, including those living at the time: after all, some of the empirical research undertaken in the Soviet Union in the 1960s was quite interesting.

My hope, however, is that these developments will not only generate a better understanding of Soviet or Russian society. Another important question is what the social sciences, whose toolkit largely stems from research on North America

and Western Europe, can learn from a more systematic study of societies such as Russia's. There are still too few theorists who take this question seriously. Yet Russia is not merely catching up with modernization, i.e. belatedly going through processes that have taken place before and are well understood. Quite the contrary, what we are seeing in recent years is that Western societies too are now suddenly confronted with phenomena that have long been familiar to observers of post-socialist countries. Neoliberal reforms that were first tried out in Eastern Europe then spilled over into the West. Traditional configurations of political culture are breaking down and being replaced with hybrid constructs and populisms that are highly reminiscent of Russia. Societal reactions to these processes also exhibit some similarities. When I see that parodists such as Stephen Colbert are viewed as prominent social critics and public intellectuals, I am reminded of the late Soviet and post-Soviet culture of ironic *stioib*. Thus the study of Russian society is by no means a niche interest for area studies experts.