

23. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

Societal Transformation in Russia since 1980

Host: Mischa Gabowitsch (Einstein Forum, Potsdam)

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Questionnaire

This questionnaire briefly introduces the central theme of each session and proposes a list of questions that might guide and structure our discussions. The point is not to go through the lists one by one or to try to answer any one question exhaustively. Just like the texts in this reader, they serve merely to stimulate our discussion and help us identify differences and common ground.

Session 1: Continuity and change across political watersheds

Intro: Stephen Lovell

Chair: Mischa Gabowitsch

The end of the Soviet Union is often treated as the ultimate cut-off point in accounts of recent Russian history—either explicitly or implicitly, through the use of terms such as post-Soviet or post-socialist. At the same time, there is a tendency to identify supposedly immutable features of Russian life that are impervious to change or cyclically recurrent. Many of us have tried to steer between those positions, examining processes that span several decades. The purpose of this session is to begin our dialogue between those studying the USSR's final decades and those specialising in present-day Russia by looking at similarities and differences, at continuity and change.

- Are there events or shifts in late Soviet history that can act as meaningful dividing lines on a par with the disruption of 1990-92?
- Is there, and should there be, a fundamental difference in the ways we study late Soviet and post-Soviet society? Are the differences in perspective between historians and sociologists (or geographers) due to their use of different kinds of sources and methods, or is there something more fundamental at stake?

- The period since 1980 is one in which large numbers of Russian men have been near-constantly engaged in military or paramilitary activities outside Russia's borders or on its periphery. What are the effects of this large-scale exposure to violence on Russian society as a whole?
- Can comparisons between e.g. the Putin and Brezhnev periods say something profound about structural similarities between those periods beyond pointing out a similar reliance of natural resources, or are they largely symbolic and superficial?
- Is there a Russian Great Transformation? In other words, what are the most defining social shifts in Russian history that continue to be felt to this day? Serfdom? Collectivisation? Industrialisation? The gulag? The second world war?

Session 2: The structure of Russian society

Intro: Alexander Bikbov

Chair: Klaas Voß

There are several English-language textbooks on “Russian politics and society,” but not a single one on Russian society, full stop. In the study of Russia, politics almost invariably seems to come first, and society is often treated as a dependent variable, one that is of interest only inasmuch as it is shaped by political actors and, conversely, affects them. Let's imagine we were to write such a textbook—not a study of some one particularly prominent or original aspect of Russian society, but a comprehensive overview. How would we go about this? Do we have the necessary conceptual tools and descriptive terms? How can different intellectual traditions in history, sociology, geography and anthropology contribute to this without either ignoring each other or engaging in turf wars?

- Structural metaphors abound in the study of Russia. Russian society has been called atomised, molecularised, a collective of TV viewers, a large gulag or prison. How useful are such metaphors as heuristic tools?
- Those studying Russia often assume a set of stable divides between different segments of society, such as in geographer Natalia Zubarevich's Four Russias thesis. How useful are such divides, especially given that they can seemingly be suspended from above (as Zubarevich has argued the boundaries between the Four Russias have in the post-Crimea era)?

- How useful are concepts initially derived from the study of other societies, such as “middle class,” for making sense of Russia?
- The meaning of terms used by the public and in official Russian parlance to describe society has shifted over time – how should this affect the language employed by social scientists?
- Given the much-discussed role of informal practices in Russian society, what is the significance, and reach, of formal institutions?
- Sociologists such as Alain Touraine have long suggested avoiding the very concept of “society” as carrying too many implicit assumptions that inhibit analysis. The concept has also come under fire as embodying methodological nationalism. What, precisely, is the analytic value of the term “Russian society”? What alternative approaches are there that would not simply replace it with a synonym?
- A disproportionate amount of studies across the social science disciplines still focus on Moscow and Leningrad/Saint Petersburg. What systematic distortions does this generate, and how should our understanding of Russia be altered based on studies of the (economic, geographic, ethnic etc) periphery?

Session 3: Russian society and politics

Intro: Olga Shevchenko

Chair: Martin Schaad

Political science occupies a uniquely prominent institutional place in the study of contemporary Russia, an obvious legacy of the era of Sovietology. This means that even practitioners of other disciplines are often expected to comment on Putin and political decision-making, and to answer questions from the agenda of political science. In this session, we propose to adopt a reverse perspective. How do we talk about Russian politics if our ultimate interest is in other features of society—those we discussed in the previous session?

- What meaningful, non-trivial questions can we ask about Russian society that do not have a direct bearing on politics?
- What is the scope and what are the limitations within which the Russian political elite can shape society and alter its structure? In other words, to

what extent can features of Russian society be explained as results of its political system?

- Could the Russian political system conceivably change in fundamental ways without prior social transformation? Is the kind of transformation that could support such changes perhaps already under way?
- Conversely, to what extent can Russian politics be explained by, or reduced to, wider social phenomena, such as the prevalence of informal practices, the prominence of gangs etc?
- What agenda might historians, sociologists and other social scientists be able to set for the study of Russia that would not primarily answer questions set by political science?

Session 4: Studying Russian society in international context

Intro: Georgi Derluguian

Chair: Bernd Greiner

Serious comparative studies of Russian society are surprisingly rare, as are those that study Russia's global connections beyond the world of international relations. At one end of the spectrum we find works whose authors have a superficial grasp of Russia, drawing on a narrow stock of observations to make some general point. At the other extreme are texts about Russia where other countries are mentioned merely as markers of Russian difference. In between, with rare exceptions, we find studies in which the comparison is with an undifferentiated "West" or specific "Western" countries – or, alternatively, other post-socialist societies, though mostly those in Central/Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union. Often the choice of cases for comparison seems to be based on convenience and authors' institutional circumstances—why else would Germany, the UK and Scandinavia feature so much more prominently than Cuba, Vietnam and Iran? In this round of the discussion, let us think about the ways in which the study of Russian society might benefit from comparative or transnational approaches, and those in which the social sciences in general might benefit from a closer attention to Russia.

- What, for you, is the purpose of studying Russian society—do you aim to understand its specificity, or derive insights about something larger—human nature? the world-system? the effects of capitalism? the range of possible approaches to human behaviour and ways of engaging with the world?

- What is the standard of normalcy that often acts as an implicit basis for comparison when we say that some feature “defines” or “is specific to” Russian society?
- What social phenomena that are specific to Russian society does actual comparative analysis (rather than passing references to other countries) actually reveal? Are these differences of kind rather than degree?
- How useful, in the context of Russian studies, are large-scale country-to-country comparisons (such as global surveys or tables of macro-data about demographics, consumption, the structure of the economy etc) that assume the nation-state as their natural framework?
- What would be the benefits, and possibly the costs, of placing Russia in a more global comparative context than is usually done? How could such a perspective be developed given the Eurocentrism of academic networks, limitations of academic institutions, language barriers etc?
- What are the boundaries—geographic or otherwise—of Russian society? What bearing do processes such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union and migratory flows since the 1980s have on how we delineate our unit of analysis? Looking at the entire timespan since 1980, should our answers to any of the preceding questions be different according to the specific historical period under consideration?

Suggested reading

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

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

Hilary Pilkington, Elena Omel'Chenko, Living with the West, in: Hilary Pilkington et. al., Looking West? Cultural Globalization and Russian Youth Cultures. Pennsylvania State University Press 2002, 201-15

Natalia Zubarevich, Four Russias: rethinking the post-Soviet map, www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/natalia-zubarevich/four-russias-rethinking-post-soviet-map

Natalia Zubarevich, Four Russias: the new political reality, www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/natalia-zubarevich/four-russias-new-political-reality