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Introduction

Stephen White

One of the defining features of the Soviet system was its virtual elimination of a space for autonomous citizen activity. Everything, it used to be said, was either banned or compulsory. There was a single ruling party, and it dominated the life of the society through its 'leading role'. The party itself was dominated by its top leadership, and above all by its General Secretary. Party rule was subject to no effective challenge, either from the courts, or the trade unions, or the mass media. There was a detailed censorship, whose existence was itself subject to censorship; foreign radio broadcasts were jammed; movements across international frontiers were strictly regulated. If there was a civil society in Brezhnev's USSR, it was an official one: more than 98 per cent of the working population were enrolled in trade unions, for instance, but their leadership was appointed by the party and their primary role was to mobilize support for party policy in the workplace. Women were organized in the Soviet Women's Committee on the same kind of basis; writers had the Writers' Union; and so forth. All of these were 'transmission belts': the term was used without any embarrassment to make clear that it was their responsibility to mobilize support for party policy rather than to articulate the concerns of their members.

All of this had begun to change before the end of Soviet rule. The new watchword, as Gorbachev explained in his *Perestroika* (1987), was that 'everything that isn't banned is legal'. The ruling party abandoned its monopoly, indeed it soon ceased to be a party at all. Elections became competitive, and elected deputies began to hold government ministers to account. Public life was 'destatified', as ordinary citizens were allowed and even encouraged to organize to advance their common concerns. There were anti-government demonstrations, miners' strikes, and calls for independence in the non-Russian republics. Most striking of all were

the developments that were taking place in the cultural world, where *glasnost* allowed all kinds of 'forbidden themes' to be discussed once again. History was transformed, as the archives opened and the boundaries for discussion widened dramatically; literature was enriched by the publication or republication of work that had been banned in earlier years; the social sciences took advantage of new census data, new survey opportunities, and a greater willingness to rethink official orthodoxies and (in some cases) borrow conceptually from the West.

Putin's Russia, for many, was a regression in almost all of these respects. Public life was dominated once more by the Kremlin, operating as an all-powerful presidency rather than a Politburo but from the same buildings and using at least some of the same people. The parties that enjoyed the support of the Kremlin took firm control of elected institutions. The state was subordinated to an 'executive vertical'. State ownership and control began to extend in the media, particularly in national television. Businessmen who showed signs of political ambition found themselves in an increasingly difficult situation; in the worst case, as with Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2005, they were sentenced to periods in prison. A number of the regime's most outspoken critics, notably Anna Politkovskaya in 2006, were assassinated. Bolstered by its oil revenues, the Kremlin became increasingly assertive in its relations with other countries, particularly in former Soviet republics. This, some suggested, was 'managed democracy', or (as some within the regime itself suggested) 'sovereign democracy', or perhaps (some Western scholars suggested) a form of authoritarianism – although it was one in which competitive elections continued to take place and some basic freedoms (such as freedom of conscience) were still respected.

This complex, hybrid but apparently stable and self-reproducing system provides the context for the chapters of this book, which stem from the Berlin Congress of the International Council for Central and East European Studies in 2005 but which have been entirely rewritten, updated and extended for this collection. They focus on three key inter-related themes. First of all, 'civil society': in quotes, because the applicability of the term in contemporary Russia is itself open to question, and in various locations: in Karelia, in the context of Western attempts to engage in 'democracy assistance', and in connection with the discourse that is used to address these concerns in Russia and Estonia. Secondly, the media: in printed as well as broadcast form, and looking at journalists themselves as well as the role of big business and the state, and the coverage of environmental issues. And thirdly, some wider issues of culture and society: whether contemporary Russia is 'capitalist' or, if

it is, what that might mean; how government and society are responding to the challenges of drugs and HIV/AIDS; and how these and other changes have been reflected in the *blokbastery* of the Putin era.

Varied in theme and in conclusion, there are nonetheless some common elements that unite all these chapters and mark out new research frontiers in the study of transitional societies. One of these is the collaborative nature of such research: no longer Westerners pronouncing on a remote society from outside it, but Westerners and their Russian counterparts sharing the primary research, debating concepts, and writing up their results together. Another is the strong emphasis in these chapters on the collection of primary data, particularly of qualitative data drawn from interviews, focus groups and discourse. Perhaps still more important is the strongly comparative orientation of these chapters: sometimes across the Russian regions, but more often across East and West. It is 'not an accident' that northern Europe features frequently among the authors as well as the subject matter of the chapters of this book. The Scandinavian countries, the Baltic republics and the northern regions of Russia share much in common historically and geographically, but have experienced a variety of political regimes in a manner that makes them an ideal research laboratory. The appropriateness of a north European location for research on contemporary Russia was matched by the numbers of scholars from those locations that attended the Berlin Congress, and it will again be matched when the next world Congress convenes in Stockholm in 2010.

Finally, a note on technical matters. We have standardized on 'British' English, except for contributors based in the United States, but have balanced this by standardizing on the Library of Congress transliteration system (except when other forms have become established in English) and the 'Harvard' reference system. We hope these 'mid-Atlantic' conventions will make good sense in a volume that seeks to present the best of the work on its subject that is currently being conducted in North America as well as in Europe and further afield. A special word of thanks is due to Roger Kanet and Sarah Oates, for their thoughtful and constructive comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

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