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Emerging Political Sociology in Russia and Russian Transformation

This article is divided into several parts. We start with a short overview of the status of Soviet sociology on the eve of transformation. In this part of the text we show that sociology in Soviet Russia was thoroughly controlled by the party-state and thus did not meet the requirements necessary for qualification as a democratic social science. Political sociology as a research field did not exist during Soviet rule, because the authoritarian regime prohibited open political participation and public discussion.

The next part of the text shows how in the course of the transformation political sociology emerged. We distinguish several cycles or periods of transformation, ongoing in Russia in the last decade (since 1985). The cycle of perestroika (1985–91) gave birth to various forms of political participation and relevant public and professional discussion. In this period political sociology in Russia focused on social movement and protest mobilization studies. Development of the political cycle brought about new realities, new topics for discussion and correspondingly new themes of research. Social movements, electoral behavior and political preferences, party formation – one topic after another – formed the new research agenda.

The second and the third cycle of transformation – reforms of the Gaidar government (1992–4) and the later institutional stabilization process (from 1994 on) – gave impetus to the stable interest in the field of political elite studies, conservative mobilization, decline of democratic movement and studies in ethnic conflicts and ethnic (or national) mobilization. Simultaneously, the research agenda that had formed during perestroika continued to attract the attention of sociologists.

The next section offers an explanation of the politicized nature of Russian political sociology. In the final section we end with an overview of the institutional changes that have taken place in the social sciences and the current institutional crisis of the sciences and its effect on political sociology.

Soviet Sociology on the Eve of Transformation

In March and September of 1994, two broad discussions of results and achievements of Soviet sociology since the beginning of its history at the end of the 1950s took place. In these discussions almost all the prominent figures of Soviet sociology participated. The majority of discussants shared the following positions:

(1) Khrushchev's thaw brought to the scene the first generation of Soviet sociologists belonging to the so called liberal 'generation of the 1960s'. These sociologists dedicated themselves to fighting against the repressive totalitarian Stalinist political system.

(2) Soviet sociology promoted and brought nearer the collapse of the Soviet regime. According to this argument, emergent sociology in the 1960s gave the public an opportunity for reflection and self-criticism. Sociological discourse introduced the ideas of public opinion, ideological and political pluralism, social change and alienation, all of which did not correspond to the mainstream ideology of the Soviet regime. The development of a democratic discourse within the nucleus of the Communist authoritarian system (the USSR) helped to weaken Communist ideological monopoly.

(3) Soviet sociology made a noticeable contribution to the development of international sociology. However, the contribution of Soviet social science was limited by strong ideological pressure from the Communist Party-state. Thus Soviet sociology can be considered as a part of the Western sociological tradition applied to the Soviet political context.

(4) Discussing the relations between sociology and power, researchers agreed that Soviet sociology had always served as an instrument of social policy. In certain subject areas it achieved important applications, connected with improvement of the conditions of work of certain industrial collectives, work attitudes and relations, etc.

(5) The ambiguous position of Soviet sociology in relation to social change and reforms of the Communist regime was debated. On the one hand, Soviet sociology supported the Communist regime, elaborating ways and means for its reform. On the other hand, the very fact of the formation of a sociological community and relevant research delegitimized the existing regime's declared Communist ideological monopoly (Yadov and Gratkoff, 1995; Leningrad School, 1995).

In our opinion, many of these statements are at least debatable, and we consider it important for the following discussion of the development of post-Soviet sociology to present here our point of view on the matter. It is without doubt that Soviet sociology emerged in the context of political openings enabled by the Khrushchev thaw at the end of the 1950s. Before that
sociology was treated as a bourgeois science, for which there was no place in Soviet reality. However, only in the very beginning of its existence was Soviet sociology reform-oriented. The trajectory of the development of social science reflected political changes of the Soviet regime. Although initially sociology was inspired by the socialist reform ideology, in the period of stagnation it became institutionalized and found its place in the political establishment. In the 1970s sociology was ideologically controlled in a rigid fashion. At that time the main assumptions of the structural-functionalist paradigm were implicitly adopted. The conservative orientation of this macro-theory is well known, and when applied to the Soviet system it became part of an ideology aimed to keep the system functioning.

We cannot agree with the statement that Soviet sociology played an important role in the collapse of the Communist regime. There is enough evidence supporting the idea that social science in its Communist appearance promoted and enforced the political status quo. First of all, the very existence of sociology in the curriculum of social sciences gave the regime a more civilized appearance, disguising its anti-democratic essence. Secondly, pragmatic recommendations of empirical studies were oriented to the improvement of social settings and the avoidance of essential political changes. Indicators of satisfaction were improved and efficiency of management could be guaranteed. In conclusion, the critical function of sociology was limited to the shallow criticisms of particular shortcomings of the system, and to creating an illusion of its stability and reformability.

We argue that it is at best an overestimation to argue that Soviet sociology noticeably contributed to international sociological knowledge. In the West the names of Soviet sociologists were known only among Sovietologists, and not in the wider sociological community. Soviet sociologists discussed Western models and paradigms mostly in the framework of the critique of bourgeois social science using a vulgarized historical materialism. In general, the ideological function of Soviet sociology served to justify the Soviet regime.

Although regular ideological purges took place inside the sociological community during the period of stagnation, they didn’t influence the status of Soviet social science. On the eve of perestroika the ‘founding-fathers’ of Soviet sociology were professors occupying rather high positions, despite their personal dissatisfaction. ‘Willy-nilly’ they supported the regime in accordance with the prestige of their chairs.

Before the perestroika brand of political participation, civil society structures were not a significant part of social reality. Those prerequisites for political participation which existed (for example, dissident and/or countercultural groups) could not be studied openly. The authoritarian political regime did not provide a favorable context for political participation and thus there could not be any studies in this sphere and there was no development of political sociology as a specific field of knowledge. The underdevelopment of the public sphere caused the absence of political participation, and as a consequence there were no relevant studies in this area. Hence the absence of political sociology in Russia during the Soviet rule.

**Political Framework for the Emerging Political Sociology**

The first signs of emerging political sociology appeared in Russia towards the end of the 1980s. This was the period of perestroika (1985–91), when ideological control over social research weakened and finally collapsed. Initial studies in the field, which in the West is usually ascribed to political sociology, coincided with the very emergence of relevant forms of political reality, such as open public discussion on political issues, protest actions and social movement mobilization, electoral behavior, formation of political parties, etc.

Public discussion about Russian political history, current events and future development became possible due to the reforms of glasnost and democratization, which gave impetus to two interdependent processes: (1) the rise of independent political initiatives and (2) the first studies and theorizing on this new reality. Thus the period from 1987 through 1995 can be seen as an initial phase of the formation of political sociology. Since 1987, in the ascending phase of the democratic mobilization, public discussion and conceptualization of ongoing processes have taken place in ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ science.

In the course of the Russian transformation three periods or three political cycles can be distinguished, which correspond to certain developments in political sociology. Political opportunities, characterizing these periods, supplied research topics and promoted topical shifts in public discourse, and professional sociological discussion grew out of the public discourse on relevant topics. This statement needs clarification. We start with the thesis of ‘three cycles of Russian transformation’ (Duka et al., 1995; Zdравомыслова and Temkina, 1994). Each cycle has a complex structure of several phases. The first cycle, known the world over as perestroika (1985–91), includes a cycle of reforms and a cycle of protest that developed in parallel interactive fashion, although the protest followed the reforms with some delay. The reforms opened opportunities for the emergence of political realities that became subjects for research and conceptualization. We distinguish three periods of the perestroika cycle that correspond to certain 'openings' in political opportunities for challengers and certain shifts in the locus of opportunities (Zдравомыслова, 1996).

The initial phase started in April 1985 with the Plenum of the CPSU when Gorbachev, then General Secretary of the party, declared changes in CPSU policy. The phase ended with the beginning of the 1989 election
campaign. At that time reforms of glasnost and democratization brought opportunities for open public political discourse and 'informal' organizational structuring. The second phase of the cycle included two elections (1989 – to the First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR; 1990 – to the Russian and local Soviets). This was the phase of emergent electoral opportunities that legitimated mass mobilization. It was the peak of the protest cycle, marked by the frequency and mass character of contentious collective actions.

The third period opened opportunities for the eventual institutionalization of the perestroika social movements, the decline of protest actions on the part of democratic forces, and the emergence of the political parties or proto-parties as they are still called. The electoral victory of the democrats in 1990 in the central cities of Russia (Moscow, Leningrad, Sverdlovsk) served as a stimulus for the outburst of opposition activity during the August 1991 coup, and for the formation and consolidation of the conservative opposition.

The second political cycle of Russian transformation and corresponding cycle of conservative mobilization started after the beginning of radical economic reforms, launched by the then Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar in January, 1992. It was marked by the developing opposition of the three emergent branches of power: executive, representative and legislative. Their opposition reached its peak in the October crisis of 1993. The end of the cycle was marked by the banning of the parliament and consequent coup, followed by the November referendum and elections of 12 December 1993. The third cycle of Russian transformation can be conditionally called the start of an institutional stabilization process. Starting in December 1994, this cycle is still in process. The main feature is the institutionalization of new political structures and the creation of new institutions.

We concentrate mainly upon the first cycle, because it has fundamental importance for emerging forms of political participation and the formation of political sociology. During the first cycle of transformation ideological demonopolization and unrest made possible the start of protest mobilization. At first politically independent groups were organized in Moscow, Leningrad and other big cities, which rapidly grew in numbers and membership. The first open collective actions (all-city disputes, meetings, rallies) took place, starting the process of mass democratic mobilization.

This was the time when the issues of informal organizations and social movements first appeared in public and later in professional sociological discourse. Informal groups began to be called social (or political) movements and/or social movement organizations. Such terms as mobilization, resources and organizational development entered professional discussion. What are social movements? What is their role in the course of reforms? What is the appropriate frame of their conceptualization? These were the primary questions raised in the budding professional discourse.

Politically engaged researchers were charged with an optimistic prognosis. They discussed the role of social movements in the transition to democracy, the formation of the public sphere and civil society, the establishment of a multi-party system and a state bound by the rule of law in Russia. All of these were viewed as the outcome of democratic movement mobilization.

During the phase of electoral mobilization (1989–90) public discussion addressed new realities and included new topics that later became subjects of research in the field of political sociology. At that time professional interest and the first attempts of research shifted to the sphere of electoral behavior, political attitudes and preferences of the population. These aspects of political participation became objects of studies in newly established research centers on public opinion. The All-Union Center for Public Opinion Research headed by academician T. Zaslavskaya was established in 1988 and the Foundation 'Public Opinion' in 1990. The main goals of these research centers were as follows: to offer analysis of the popular support for the course of reforms, to give ratings of political leaders and to study political and ideological preferences of population. Within the context of the last period of the Soviet system, this was a brand new field of research.

The removal of the sixth article of the Soviet Constitution ensuring the monopoly of the CPSU in political life (at the third congress of the People's Deputies of the USSR, 1990), elections for the President of Russia (May, 1991), referenda on the Unity of the Soviet Union and the sovereignty of Russia, the institutionalizing of democratic social movements, and a decline of protest actions on the part of democratic forces characterized the last phase of the perestroika cycle. The electoral victory and seizure of power on the part of democrats served as a stimulus for mobilization of the counter-reformist forces which attempted the coup of August, 1991, ultimately without popular support. This was the phase of the appearance of legal opportunities for the formation of political parties, and the party-building process turned into an important issue for observation and conceptualization.

Another theme for public discussion and research projects was the transformation of the political elite after the local elections of 1990 when new political forces came to power in the central cities of the country. Later, with the failure of the coup of August, 1991 and the collapse of the USSR, elite studies and ethnic conflicts became provocative spheres of interest. What is the role of ethnic nationalism in democratization? How to conceptualize ethnic strain? Under what circumstances does ethnicity become a resource for mobilization? Who are the new power-holders? Are they really new or simply old actors in new clothes? What are the patterns for recruitment and mechanisms of reproduction of the new elite? These were the issues for debate and study.
Thus we argue that in the course of perestroika practically all the topics for the emerging political sociology appeared in public discussion and were picked up by researchers and analysts. Attention to the topics shifted according to the political conjuncture: from social movements to political party formation, from political preferences and electoral behavior to elite formation.

The second cycle of transition was the period of radical economic reforms, democratic mobilization and conservative counter-mobilization, spread of ethnic conflicts on the territory of the Russian Federation (RF), and an open split between the three newly established branches of power (January, 1992–December, 1993). However, while the locus of public attention shifted to the above mentioned features of the political context, issues of party building, electoral behavior, ethnic conflicts and political elites were already the stable agenda for research. On top of this agenda subjects such as electoral absenteeism of democrats and the mobilization of the democratic movements became new issues for investigation; and, in social movement studies, political conservatives and ethnic nationalism began to attract more attention.

Alongside all these topics and topical shifts, the transformation period in general is characterized by one major sustainable theme of discussion. We mean the theme of the ‘Russian path of development’, discussions over the question: ‘What is the direction of Russian transition and what are its essential features?’ The debate within the academic community over the character of the Russian transformation formed a framework in which the assessments and conceptualizations of new political realities, themselves became issues for the research agenda.

Researchers Formal and Informal

As it was argued above, initially political sociology in Russia emerged with the studies of social movements (informal organizations) and contentious collective actions. In the period of democratic mobilization social movements struggled against the ideological monopoly of the CPSU and it was in the movement discourse (in self-published newspapers and bulletins) that politically engaged sociologists started to analyze this struggle.

We distinguish two groups of researchers who initially engaged in the studies of new realities of political participation: ‘informal’ and ‘formal’. The first group were ‘informal’ political sociologists – adherents and members of political movements and initiative research collectives. The second ‘formal’ group of researchers was controlled by ideological CPSU structures under the shelter of established research institutes.

Both groups of researchers were politically engaged. Politicization of discussion and research was inevitable in the time of mass political mobilization during the protest cycle of perestroika. If the first group of researchers was obviously oriented towards the promotion of social movements and justification of their activities, the second group considered the movements at least partially destructive and necessary to control or force out of the public sphere, if they did not fit into official ideological frames.

If researchers from the democratic camp claimed that a multi-party system and civil society are goals of the reforms (Berezovskii and Krotov, 1989; Fadin, 1988; Gribanov and Gribanova, 1991; Lisjutkina and Khlopin, 1990; Olshanskii, 1990; Slavin, 1990; Smolyanski, 1990; Yantsevskii, 1988; Malyutin and Chabanov, 1989), others argued that informal initiatives should be allowed only if they don’t pretend to destroy the single-party political regime (Gromov and Kuzin, 1990; Kaptsov, 1990; Ljeviecheva, 1990). The first group of researchers emphasized the constructive and rational side of the movements, the second emphasized the irrational and disruptive side. Both groups of researchers however were collecting data and mainly giving descriptive analysis of the movements.

An example of the informal political sociological unit and one of the first research groups to declare social movements the subject of study was the Commission for Social Movement Studies of the Leningrad branch of the Soviet Sociological Association (chair-person Vladimir Kostjushch). Mostly, the members of the Commission were researchers, marginal to official social science, who had not pursued a professional career during the Soviet regime. Some of them were persecuted by the regime, and others were highly unsatisfied by their jobs and barriers placed on sociological research by the Communist monopoly. By 1990 the Commission was transformed into a sector of the Institute of Sociology (Russian Academy of Sciences, Leningrad branch). At the same time research on social movements started at the Moscow Bureau of Information Exchange and in the club Perestroika, established as informal voluntary associations oriented to the ‘formation of civil society and a state governed by the rule of law in Russia’.

Informal researchers considered sociology to be an important instrument for the reforming of society. They argued that participant observation and sociological intervention were the most efficient method for research in this field. This was the beginning of action research in Russian social science (Alexeeva, 1990). Thus sociologists assumed the role of movement consultants, helping to write programs and resolutions of meetings and rallies in Leningrad, Sverdlovsk, Moscow and other large cities’ democratic political clubs (Vite, 1993; Korniev, 1993). At the end of the 1980s they often published results of their studies in the editions of democratic organizations and in samizdat journals, because access of informal science to official journals was hampered. Later, in the beginning of the 1990s, their texts were republished in professional journals. Once again we’d like to emphasize that it was among the movement participants that stable and persistent research interest towards social movements was formed.
The end of the 1980s was also the time when the first collections of movement documents were started by the participants, who had research aspirations. The most important of them are: the archive collection of informal press and samizdat (self-published) by the St Petersburg branch of the Institute of Sociology, the archive of the Moscow Institute of Humanitarian Research, and the archive of the Moscow Archive Institute.

Reviews on social movement research in contemporary Russia suggest several typologies of researchers according to their political involvement. V. Gelman distinguishes neutral, official and democratic researchers (Gelman and Torkhov, 1996); G. Vokhmintseva talks of pure scientists, practical ideologists and movement participants (Vokhmintseva, 1990). We consider these classifications as not entirely relevant because they are based on mixed criteria. On the one hand the criteria of political involvement is suggested, and on the other hand an ideological position towards the movements is implied.

We argue that in the initial period of interest in social movement studies (through the beginning of 1992) it is useful to distinguish between two main ideological positions – anti-movement and pro-movement oriented researchers. Official institutional researchers and ideologists of the CPSU mostly shared the first position. Its anti-movement stand was disguised by the so-called ‘differential approach’ toward emerging politicized initiatives. According to this approach movements had to be treated differently in correspondence with their ideologies. Those movements that expressed their readiness to cooperate with the reformist branch of the CPSU or were oriented exclusively toward eco-cultural goals were seen as constructive forces of political transformation (see Zdravomyslova, 1989; Gromov and Kuzin, 1990). On the other hand, the movements that declared anti-Communist positions were called radical and were seen as disruptive social groups, consisting of socially marginalized and mentally unstable individuals.

In turn, pro-movement oriented researchers can be divided into several groups, according to the level of their involvement in movement politics. We distinguish (1) movement intellectuals, that is those movement participants who developed ideologies of the movement; (2) ‘informal’ sociologists, without affiliation to institutional structures and experience in social research and (3) ‘institutional’ social scientists that started the research in the emergent sphere of political participation. All of them were experts and consultants of the movements.

So far political sociology in Russia has been highly ideologized and politicized. The researchers are still inclined to justify actions of different political forces. Their ideological position is expressed not only in political sympathies and ideological preferences, but in the direct collaboration with relevant political organizations and particular politicians. Direct political participation occurs quite often among political sociologists. Thus the current situation is characterized by the close association of political sociology with political participation. The emerging political sociology is a multi-party field of studies, and political preferences have had valuable impact on the theories developed by sociologists.

Institutional Aspects of the Formation of Political Sociology

Changes in the social science institutions is an important part of the formation of a research field. Studies in the sphere of political sociology started both in old institutions and informal research centers which were established during perestroika. After the failed coup of August, 1991, institutionalization of ‘informal science’ immediately took place. New research centers were formed on the basis of informal and established scientific organizations.

Simultaneously old research institutions underwent organizational changes as old staff were partly replaced by new ones, research programs were changed and new labels were put on the old institutions. Thus the Academy of Social Sciences, affiliated to the Central Committee of the CPSU during Communist rule, became the Russian Academy of Management, and the Institute of Marxism-Leninism – a former department of the Central Committee of the CPSU – reorganized into the Independent Institute of Social and Ethnic Problems.

Institutional crises in the sciences made problems of material resources for research severe. In the period of economic reforms under the Gaidar government, the state budget for research was cut drastically. At the same time new actors interested in political sociology were either weak or highly political. Nowadays empirical studies in political sociology receive support from three groups of sponsors: political parties, power structures and Western research foundations.

Research centers of Soviet origin include institutions of the Academy of Sciences and universities (educational institutions). The Soviet division of labor in science presumed that universities and colleges were occupied with teaching Marxism-Leninism and scientific communism, and not carrying out research. On the other hand, institutes of the Academy were much closer to the state of the art in the field, but were separated from educational programs. This division of functions between scientific institutions shows itself in the institutional crisis of science now occurring in Russia. The shortage of budget subsidies prohibits empirical research in all spheres of knowledge, and the tradition of five-year research planning makes it impossible to correspond to the pace and demands of rapid social changes (Fomin et al., 1995).

In the colleges and universities after 1991 the chairs of Marxism-Leninism and scientific communism were turned into those of political science. Although university professors are involved in professional discussion and teaching of the basics of political theory, they have barely engaged in empirical research, and the curriculum on political theory is still under formation.
Low salaries in the state budget-run institutes have forced social scientists to look for new opportunities of employment. Two main strategies of coping with the institutional crisis of science on the individual level can be distinguished: (1) researchers apply for individual grants – financial support for their studies; (2) researchers carry out studies in joint projects with foreign scholars (often on an informal basis or as employees). These strategies result in the loss of research personnel in the Academy, while independent, mostly commercial research centers have appeared. Although they form their own budgets, they often work under the auspices of state institutions using their infrastructure and titles (Gelman and Torkhov, 1996; Kukoljev and Stykov, 1996).

Research in political sociology is mostly carried out in the state-independent scientific institutions. Among new research structures one can distinguish (1) independent institutions, and (2) institutions affiliated to political actors (Spravochnik, 1994). In both cases politicization of the research is a general feature of the situation in the field. Independent institutions began to appear at the very end of the 1980s. Researchers were recruited either from the old institutions – the Academy and other state-run institutions – or from the informal research groups that had been formed during perestroika. These independent institutions mostly offer expertise to political organizations and carry out political monitoring.

The most vivid example of independent centers that recruit Soviet professional sociologists is the all-Russian Center for Public Opinion Research, established in 1988. It is the largest research center for mass opinion studies in the country, with its main focus aimed at reconstructing the image of the so-called post-Soviet personality in order to make prognoses about political attitudes and electoral behavior. Another example of an independent institute is the Center for Humanitarian Political Research, formerly the Moscow Bureau of Information Exchange (organized in 1988). It was founded by the members of the democratic movement and its primary goal is to collect and mediate information exchange in the movement. Researchers have been active in the political arena as well. Now many of them work regularly as supervisors of electoral committees or run for election as deputies to the State Duma.

Among newly emerging branches of social science in Russia, political sociology in the period 1988–95 was in the initial phase of its development. This starting period is characterized by an accumulation of information for the studies and specialization of the scholars in the relevant field of research, as well as by the establishing of research institutes oriented to studies of political participation. Political sociology is developing together with a repertoire of political participation in the course of the transformation occurring in Russia, and until now research in political sociology can barely be separated from political preferences and political activities.

References


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