

THE RUSSIAN STATE STRIKES BACK: THE RELEVANCE OF THE STATE TO CIVIL SOCIETY IN RUSSIA

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A Review of *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia*

By Samuel A. Greene

(Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 296 pages.

Samuel A. Greene, one of the leading British experts on Russia and post-Soviet space, presents a thoughtful and comprehensive study of the evolution of Russian civil society in *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia*.

Greene's book presents a noteworthy reflection on Russia's political regime, elite strategies, and social movement organization. It balances theoretical speculations on the nature of the Russian political regime with a new, refreshing perspective on the acute problems of state-society relations, explored through several case studies.

In his book, Greene endeavors to show how the evolution of civil society in Russia cannot be understood without looking at the state. This "politics-centered viewpoint, rather than the apolitical focus on horizontal social relations," highlights the state's role in the mobilization of civil society and challenges the conventional view of civil society as an independent player.¹ Greene pragmatically investigates the real cases of civil uprisings in Russia and shows that in this game the resources, rules, and even the identities of players are completely dependent on the state. Civil society only becomes a player after the state activates it, and even then it is, at best, semi-autonomous from the state. Contrasting the successes with the failures of the mobilization of civil society movements, Greene demonstrates that the state's engagement with the private lives of citizens in general, and those of activists in particular, shapes the conditions for the creation of collective political identities and implementation of collective political action. Successful mobilization, in other words, is highly dependent upon the state's response. If the state defines the movement as a group, the group develops a collective identity and stays strong; if the state reacts to the movement as a sum of individual cases, then the activist group fails.

This conclusion is the central claim of Greene's piece. With it, Greene seeks to explain the failure of civil society participation in Russia. Instead of positing the classical narratives about the lack of social capital, low levels of trust, or the enduring legacy of the Soviet trauma, he zooms in on the state's disengagement. According to Greene, "Civic activism arises in response to concerted and coherent state engagement, regardless of the nature of that engagement."² This idea has an

unexpected commonality with the literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) participation: The Russian LGBT community tends to remain invisible and downplay its sexual identity until the moment at which the state's regulatory practices affects it.³ This idea of invisibility and deactivated identity of citizens implies an atomized civic space. This atomization persists as a consequence of a deinstitutionalized political space. The bad news for civil activists is that this very deinstitutionalization serves as the most valuable and successful strategy for the regime, offering it a higher level of flexibility in dealing with civil society actors that it does not endorse.


Greene's conclusions are based on a historical narrative he constructs with rich data from 2006 to 2013. The evidence includes reports, interviews, and other qualitative data from high-profile cases of civic movements, including the Soldiers' Mothers, the Butovo Uprising, the Khimki Forest movement, the automotive movement, *dol'shchiki* organizations (an apartment project built on money collected from future homeowners), *l'gotniki* (receivers of social subsidies) protests, the Public Verdict case, and the Blue Bucket Society, which have influenced the agenda of civil society relations since 2006. Tracing the process for the struggle for rights and the fight against abuses, Greene shows that while activists can achieve a considerable level of success in reaching their initial individual, micro-level goals, they may still fail to bring about systemic, macro-level change. The reason is, again, the anti-institutionalization strategy of power: As the state considers and responds to civic claims as individual ad hoc cases rather than systemic problems, the state deprives activists of solidarity and commonality. This, in turn, prevents activists from framing their activity as a source or application of the common good to be used as a unifying call throughout society. In other words, *divide et impera*.

For Greene, grasping the characteristics of pre-protest mobilization and relationships between civil society and the state is essential to understanding the roots of political protests from 2011 to 2012 in Russia. "Faced with opposition, [the state] crystallized still further, pursuing rhetorical and then coercive confrontation of the kind that almost always supports the building of collective identities in social movements."⁴ However, the extent of this change and its consequences for the opposition movement remain unclear. Will political opposition and civil society become further crystallized? It is also not clear whether the political opposition and civil movements in the Moscow protests have actually been unified. Greene limits the analysis of oppositional rallies to the documentary description of protest events in Moscow, neglecting a huge gap between organized opposition groups, non-organized "angry citizens," and civil society in general.

In spite of convincing evidence, the argumentation has a few weaknesses. First, the selection of cases is biased—civil society in the book is artificially reduced

to the cases that received media attention. Outside of these cases are dozens of initiatives that were not as ambitious or received little, if any, media attention. This includes a number of charities and other local initiatives that led to significant changes in local political regimes, creating double governmental structures. Second, though Greene considers civil society a mediator between individuals and the state, in most cases civil society is more of a resource for the state, activists, and opposition leaders. The state legitimizes its public actions through the incorporation of civil society groups to the wide net of clientele. Some former opposition leaders use the popularity gained through their political public activity to earn the privilege to be recruited into the Russian federal political elite. Moreover, the analysis is relevant for the public communication facilitated by media coverage, but the nature of the regional political landscape, especially in areas where the state is traditionally weak, remains unexplained. Third, if we know that deinstitutionalization implies civic atomization, does it necessarily mean that the former will be overcome if, and when, the latter changes? Does the innate link between the state and civil society imply that opposition in Russia certainly needs an authoritarian regime that provides it with a rationale for existence?

Some minor assumptions also call for clarity. For instance, according to Greene, publicity garnered by activists and civil society threatens the regime's image. However, as recent anti-corruption cases revealed, their damage to the regime was minimal, as most people remain indifferent to the revealed "dirty" side of power. The assumption about the formulation of civil society's collective identity by the state overlooks the fact that the state will not react publicly to the groups without a clear collective identity. If there are individual cases that are amenable to a simple solution, why does the state—for the sake of populist strategy—not present these cases and treatments as the solution to the broader systemic problem?

Despite these shortcomings, the book is inspiring and facilitates a fresh look on civil society relations in Russia. Greene provides a formidable investigation of the genealogy of the post-Soviet Russian elite. For new entrants in the field, the book is an excellent guide to the debate on informal mechanisms of Russian political power. Indeed, Greene's book is not limited to the analysis of Russian events; it is also an extremely valuable contribution to the study of state-society relations under authoritarian regimes. 

NOTES

¹ Samuel A. Greene, *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia*, (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 223.

² *Ibid.*, 200.

³ B.J. Baer, *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, (New York: Palgrave

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Macmillan, 2009).

⁴ Greene, 218.