

Review article

Post-communism and the Russian public

DAVID WEDGWOOD BENN

Dvadsat' let reform glazami rossiyan: opyt mnogoletnikh sotsiologicheskikh zamerov. Edited by M. K. Gorshkov et al. Moscow: Ves' Mir. 2011. 325pp. RUB505.00. ISBN 978 5 77770 529 7. [Twenty years of reforms through the eyes of Russians: the experience of many years of sociological measurements.]

The years since 1991 have seen a vast proliferation of opinion polls and surveys in Russia. The present study does, however, offer a fresh and more complete perspective than most. Published by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, with financial assistance from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Germany, it explores in depth not only Russian opinions on current issues, but public moods and attitudes more generally. Its conclusions are often sombre, as will be seen. But the survey does challenge many of the current images of Russian opinion on such subjects as nationalism, democracy, capitalism and much else. It focuses not on the views of the elites, but on the public at large, whose attitudes are neither pro-regime nor pro-communist.

Research of this kind faces formidable difficulties. Russian attitudes are often disorientated: the book itself refers to 'anomie and the general growth of chaos in mental space' (p. 145). Russian opinion is both fragmented and polarized, and varies according to income group, age and places of residence. Besides that, it has changed significantly since 1991. Yet in spite of all these problems, the book, published in April 2011, does succeed in discerning a pattern, and achieves this by relying on a careful method of ensuring representative samples of the population. The research involved interviews (documented by numerous statistical tables) with 1,750 respondents aged 18 and over, among 11 social groups ranging from the unemployed to employees of the Ministry of the Interior and conducted in 58 regions. In order to ascertain how opinions had changed since 1991, the authors were able to draw on earlier surveys, notably a questionnaire undertaken in 2001.

Russian opinions are highly nuanced—as shown by their perceptions of the outside world. Attitudes could be described as patriotic rather than xenophobic. (The existence of ethnic hatred within the country is a separate problem.) For example, when respondents were asked to choose three ideas relating to foreign policy, a plurality (42 per cent) favoured 'the unification of the peoples of Russia for the purpose of restoring it as Great Power', whereas 38 per cent favoured

‘the strengthening of Russia as law-governed state’. A significant minority (26 per cent) believed in ‘a *rapprochement* between the peoples in order to solve the global problems facing mankind’. These sentiments have been more or less stable since the mid-1990s. On the other hand, only 9 per cent believed in ‘the historical mission of the Russian people’ (p. 146). The authors are not convinced that the yearning for Great Power status implies support for an aggressive foreign policy. Indeed, the survey revealed disagreements as to whether ‘patriotism’ did or did not involve the duty to speak out about one’s country’s shortcomings (p. 219).

The survey revealed little enthusiasm for wars. It showed that the two Chechen wars of the 1990s had become very unpopular (pp. 43–4). The conflict with Georgia in 2008 boosted government popularity only in the short run (p. 49). Most Russians have positive feelings about Britain, France, Israel and China, among others. A notable exception is the United States, where negative attitudes date from the NATO war in Kosovo, which Russians saw as an attack on a Slav co-religionist. In general, Russians are emotionally more attached to the West than to other countries—but nearly 50 per cent believe that the West seeks to weaken the country while over a quarter believe that the West is indifferent to Russia’s fate (pp. 201–5).

The book also challenges the view—sometimes heard both in Russia and the West—that the country’s population supports an autocratic state, and that this explains Putin’s popularity. The evidence, so the authors say, does not bear this out. Only 22 per cent of the respondents claimed that the country needed, above all, a strong leader (p. 169). Two-thirds of the sample were opposed to state control of the media, although 53 per cent stipulated that the media must not propagate pornography or violence (p. 197). The public attitude towards democracy could, according to this book, be described as one of ‘benevolent scepticism’, that is support for democracy as an ideal, coupled with great scepticism, or indeed negativism, in regard to many of its institutions, such as parliament and the multi-party system (p. 183). Russia is not, at present, a place where dissatisfied voters can vote an unpopular government out of office, which essentially explains this scepticism. In 2011, a plurality of respondents—44 per cent versus 20 per cent—agreed that ‘democracy is better than non-democracy’ (p. 183). This represents a decline since 2001 when support for democracy stood at 51 per cent. Interest in high-level politics is at present minimal, although, as will be seen below, the Russian public is capable of its own very strong views. The authors end with a sombre warning that if in the long term democracy fails to deliver what the public wants, then support for the idea could gradually fade. They add, however, that the younger generation and the middle classes are beginning to ‘wake up’ and will, in their own interests, demand democratic reforms (p. 198).

One of the salient findings of this book concerns attitudes towards privatization. It faces massive public opposition. Initial acceptance of market reforms in the early 1990s was followed by mass disillusionment; and most Russians today believe that these reforms were intended not to rescue the economy but to achieve a share-out of national assets among a small group of people. Certain aspects of the

reforms were of course welcomed by many Russians—such as freedom of speech, freedom of religious worship and freedom to travel abroad, as well as the saturation of the market with consumer goods. These benefits were, however, more than offset by the subsequent mass impoverishment culminating in the financial default of 1998. By the time of Yeltsin's resignation at the end of 1999, his approval ratings had fallen to 3 or 4 per cent (p. 13).

In the post-Yeltsin years, this negative attitude was slightly softened. Russians, despite recognizing the need for change, saw the 1990s as a period of missed opportunities (p. 46). At the same time, the opposition to the unregulated free market was not due just to Yeltsin's unpopularity. The widening gap between rich and poor was deeply offensive to many Russians; and this was reflected in a sharply increased support for 'a return to socialist ideas and values', a view favoured by 21 per cent in 2011 as opposed to only 10 per cent in a survey of 1995 (p. 146). Russians continue to regard the state as having a key role in both economic and social affairs. Very few (no more than 14 per cent) support the idea of a 'minimum state' (p. 162). Some 60 per cent in 2011 believed that it was the state's duty to ensure equality of opportunities (p. 151). This attitude predominates, so the authors say, among virtually all social groups. It does not, however, signify a nostalgia for the Soviet era, when the ruling Communist Party tried to control everything. Most Russians would favour some kind of a mixed economy, though there are differences about what this would mean in practice (pp. 179–80). However, this attachment to the state emerges as one of the big cultural divides between the Russian public and the public in America with its well-known abhorrence of 'big government'.

The collapse of communism resulted in probably the biggest social upheaval in any modern society, affecting not just politics but almost every aspect of life. Here the book provides a wealth of sociological information. New forms of leisure sprang up—such as access to the internet, now used by well over half the adult population. People found satisfaction in family life, personal friendships or new career prospects (p. 61). Society's values were naturally affected, although not as much as sometimes supposed. Most Russians appear to have no appetite for the 'rat race'. According to this survey, 85 per cent of respondents believed that the most important aim in life was to have 'a clear conscience and mental harmony' while only 14 per cent believed in gaining 'access to power and influence over others' (p. 151). Russians—although greatly worried about crime—seem, at least according to their own accounts, to be largely law-abiding. Most would agree for example that it is wrong to avoid paying taxes (pp. 235–6). Alcoholism, contrary to the widespread impression, is a problem mainly confined to the older age groups (p. 84). Another finding—and again a big cultural difference from the West—concerns attitudes to homosexual relationships—to which 87 per cent of Russians are opposed (p. 237).

Most Russians see their problems not in a global political perspective but rather in human terms. Attitudes are to a large extent driven by anxiety: 'fear of tomorrow', fear of such things as increases in costs of communal housing (a major concern), epidemics and terrorism, or of foreign dictatorships such as that

of Saddam Hussein which could produce instability and lead to war. Such fears (which are often volatile) go hand in hand with a sense of grievance—as illustrated by attitudes towards the breakup of the USSR. Most Russians look back on the Soviet Union neither as an ‘evil empire’ nor as a pioneering experiment; but they view its dissolution with resentment, agreeing with the view that ‘people of my nationality have lost a great deal over the last 15–20 years’ (p. 220). Resentment is itself linked with a sense of stress, which in turn has grave consequences. As the authors go on to say: ‘Such prolonged mass stress cannot fail to produce an increase in feelings of aggression—this is the natural reaction of the human psyche to the inability to change unacceptable conditions of life’ (p. 72).

It is in this context, according to the authors, that the threat of ethnic hatred has to be seen. Russia has become a magnet for immigration, especially from the former Soviet Union. Clandestine immigration is on a large scale, said to be somewhere between one and 13 million (p. 116). Such immigration can cause a rise in crime and many Russians want to expel certain ethnic minorities from their cities. The implications, as the authors stress, are alarming. But the real target of this anger, so they argue, is the prevalent crime and corruption rather than the ethnic minorities as such. Almost three-quarters of those surveyed said that they had sometimes felt the urge ‘to shoot all those who have made the country what it now is’ (pp. 73–4).

When assessing Russian moods there is a further factor to be taken into account: the attitudes of the younger generations, born after 1985, who are too young to remember the era of Soviet rule. Young people, according to surveys, are of course not homogeneous. However, they are generally better adapted to changes, more optimistic, more egoistic and sometimes more willing to violate moral principles for the sake of career advancement. They could nevertheless be important in the long term because they are the generation most impatient for change.

All in all, this book paints a picture of mounting public dissatisfaction with the status quo, which many people feel undermines the regime’s legitimacy. This marks a sharp change from the year 2000 when Putin became president. After that time living standards greatly improved, largely because of the rise in oil prices, and many Russians felt that the catastrophic period of the 1990s was behind them. The economic crisis of 2008 certainly dented this prosperity, but this crisis was also surmounted. In theory, the new upturn should have restored Putin’s popularity but this does not seem to have happened. The Russian public, the authors argue, is not solely concerned with material conditions: it is increasingly concerned with the quality of life. In the past the main discontent lay in the outlying provinces, while the large cities such as Moscow and St Petersburg were seen as ‘oases of stability’. Today this situation has been reversed: whereas in 2009, 69 per cent of respondents in Moscow and St Petersburg had a positive view of Russia’s prospects, in 2011 only 22 per cent did so (p. 300). In April 2011, the authors correctly predicted the mass protests in Moscow and elsewhere later that year, warning that ‘the social tension still smouldering beneath the surface in society may at any time burst onto the streets’ (p. 72).

The post-communist era was of course a period not only of privations but of new opportunities—where Russians could, for example, set up their own businesses. It seems nevertheless that these opportunities are more theoretical than real. Most Russians seem reluctant to set up their own businesses, despite official financial incentives (p. 123). During the Soviet era, many people were able, through migration to other regions, to advance their careers. Today this seems to be largely impossible. The overall result is that reform is blocked both at the personal and the political levels, owing to the absence of fair elections. None of this means that the Russian public is apathetic or that it is concerned with purely material questions. But it is increasingly inclined to exert leverage in novel ways, such as strikes, appeals to the media and to the courts as well as street demonstrations. Campaigns tend to be focused on ‘single issues’, notably on the prevalence of corruption. Russians also tend to judge their lives not just in personal terms but in terms of how they see their country’s future: only a minority believe that democracy will be established in the near future.

Perhaps the most telling finding of this survey is that only a quarter of the sample felt that they led ‘normal’ lives, while nearly half said they would like to go abroad—49 per cent in order to earn more money and 13 per cent to emigrate (p. 316). Furthermore, when asked to assess the overall impact of the changes since 1991, only 10 per cent of the sample said that they had gained, while 25 per cent said they were worse off, with the rest refusing to answer or saying the changes had made no difference (pp. 93, 310). If that gives a true picture the implications are indeed bleak: the radical changes since 1991 have done nothing to improve the overall sense of well-being.

There remains one major paradox. Given the rise in discontent, why is it that President Putin could, according to all the evidence, win a perfectly free election? There may be several explanations, such as the disunity of the opposition and absence of a pre-eminent opposition leader. But one may suggest a further explanation. Most Russians, however dissatisfied, have no wish for yet another upheaval. Many see Putin as a guarantee of ‘stability’. Though a minority of the public—43 per cent in this survey—say they want change, a majority, 57 per cent are against change or want it be gradual (pp. 303, 305).

It is, of course, possible to criticize this book on the ground that it rests to a considerable degree on inference or interpretation. Statistics can of course sometimes be interpreted in different ways. This reviewer is inclined to suspect that the force of xenophobic Russian nationalism is slightly underestimated. Although a minority phenomenon, it is not directed only against ethnic minorities and seems to be actively encouraged from above. Nevertheless, whether one agrees with this book or not, it is an important work. It addresses, within a single volume, questions never (to the knowledge of this reviewer) so directly addressed before. This book deserves close study by Russian and foreign policy specialists abroad; and an English translation would be welcome.

