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Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia,
by Samuel A. Greene (book review)

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Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia. By Samuel A. Greene. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014, xii +276 p. \$25.95 paper

Statements about the patience and passivity of post-Soviet citizens and the weakness of civil society after Communism are nearly ubiquitous in the literature. For good or ill, political changes over the last quarter-century in Russia were by and large driven by elites, while society at large played a secondary role at best. Despite visible public disapproval of the government in the 1990s, the scope of economic and political protests was fairly limited, and the newly-emerged NGOs (largely funded by foreign donors) demonstrated a poor capacity for mass mobilization. The aforementioned statements, however, were challenged during the “winter of discontent” of 2011-2012, when tens of thousands of Russians across the country attended numerous rallies and meetings against unfair elections, debunking the myth of their passivity and apathy. This was the starting point for Samuel A. Greene, who changed the research question from “why Russians appear to be so patient” to “in which circumstances they tend to lose their patience” (p.20). His answer to this question, greatly inspired by Sidney Tarrow’s well-known book, *Power in Movement*, deals with the re-assessment of post-Soviet civil society and the in-depth analysis of the rise and fall of social movements in Russia prior to the 2011-2012 wave of protests.

Greene offers a short but sharp and dense theoretical overview of multiple streams of scholarly discussion on civil society, and proposes his own definition of this phenomenon: “civil society is the nonviolent means by which individuals collectively seek sovereignty vis-à-vis the state” (p. 54). Such a definition considers civil society as the major instrument of collective action, and effectively merges the study of civil society with research on social movements. Although social and political theorists may differ in their evaluations of Greene’s approach, one must admit that it is well-suited for solving his research tasks. Greene goes beyond the narrow research agenda which emphasizes the numerous vices of post-Soviet civil society, and refocuses on the causes and effects of societal mobilization and activism, which enables him to demonstrate why social movements emerged in Russia in the 2000s and why they successfully advanced in certain ways but never reached their goals. Based on first-hand empirical observations, Greene analyzes three case studies: the legal defense of victims of lawless violence from the police (human rights activism), housing rights movements, and various instances of movements created by Russian car drivers. Despite many differences, all three instances of Russian civil society emerged in the mid-2000s out of the self-organization of various milieus of the urban middle classes, ranging from professional lawyers to housing investors and car owners, which proceeded to “quickly... rise above the ground-level issues to much loftier considerations of rights and their relationships with the state” (p. 165). The state, in turn, “plays a dual game with the movement, being at once confrontational and accommodating” (p. 201). While some of the protesters’ individual demands were satisfied, the state, using a combination of the tactics of cooptation, localization, and intimidation, prevented sustainable large-scale coordination of the emerging social movements and the formation of alliances with the devoted anti-regime opposition. This mode of relationships between civil society and the state changed to a certain degree during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, who initially sought engagement with civil society as part of his agenda of limited political liberalization. But just before the 2011 parliamentary elections these maneuvers on the part of the regime were explicitly abandoned, and the sudden shift in the political opportunity structure became a trigger event which contributed to the politicization of Russian civil society and to mass mobilization around a loose anti-regime coalition.

The book ends on a cautiously optimistic note – the protests gave rise to new developments in Russian civil society and an inflow of new activists and supporters, and civil society’s entry into the electoral arena resulted in a relatively successful electoral campaign in the Moscow mayoral race in 2013, when the opposition leader Alexey Navalny gained more than 600,000 votes from city residents. However, since Greene’s book was published the political opportunity structure of social movements in Russia has been shifted once again. After the annexation of Crimea and the

commencement of a major confrontation with the West, the Russian state has pushed civil society into a narrow ghetto, stigmatizing its activists as “national traitors” and labeling its organizations as “foreign agents”. It is no wonder that the scope of civil activism in Russia has been reduced, cooperation between social movements faces severe obstacles, and some of the characters described in Greene’s book have even been forced to flee the country after harassment from the security services and/or threats of criminal prosecution. While at the time of writing of this review, the actual picture of Russian civil society looks different from that portrayed by Greene, the time is ripe to evaluate his analysis in the light of state-society relations under electoral authoritarianism (Russia may be considered one of the prime examples of this regime type in the contemporary world).

The experience of civil society in post-Soviet Russia demonstrates that electoral authoritarian regimes may tolerate organized activism and low-profile public discontent as long as it is not perceived as a major threat to their existence. Moreover, the state’s approach to civil society is often ambivalent and inconsistent, thus enabling various forms of societal self-organization. But the equilibrium of the co-existence of an authoritarian regime and collective action by organized autonomous groups within civil society is partial, and can be easily broken if and when civil society rises from the underground to the central stage of politics and state actors feel themselves becoming vulnerable vis-à-vis societal actors. Judging from this perspective, Greene’s well-written and thoughtful book on the experience of Russian civil society in the 2000s and early 2010s may be well-placed within the framework of cross-national comparisons. One may perceive this experience similarly to that of the protracted battles between authoritarian states and civil societies in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1950s-1980s, as well as in post-Communist countries from Serbia to Ukraine. In all these instances, strong coercive states lost to presumably weak civil societies, and there are no grounds to believe that the outcome for Russia will be completely different. Greene’s analysis deals only with certain episodes in these ongoing battles but it also provides some reason to hope that at a certain point Russian civil society will win.

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