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Studies of political elites in Russia: issues and alternatives[☆]

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Abstract

Studies of political elites have emerged rapidly in post-Communist Russia. This state-of-the-art article reflects on various developments in the field, analyzes research projects and frameworks, and focuses on two major issues of elite research: stratification studies and transition studies. The formation of an academic community in this field is close to completion. Russian scholars commonly accept different theoretical and methodological approaches from those employed by Western social scientists, but the lack of value-free work and comparative studies makes Russian studies of political elites somewhat isolated from the mainstream of social research. © 2000 The Regents of the University of California. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Until the late-1980s, the field of elite research—both theoretical and empirical—was still a kind of taboo in Russian social sciences. Although the field itself was recognized among scholars, and, for example, C. Wright Mills' classical *The Power Elite* (1956) was published in Russian as early as 1959, the use of elite theories was limited to the so-called “critique of non-Marxist concepts” (see Ashin, 1985; Burlatskii and Galkin, 1985). Recently, the situation has looked completely different. Since 1989, when a section on elite research was established at the Institute of Sociology

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of Russian Academy of Sciences (Steiner, 1997, p. 118), studies in this field have expanded rapidly. “Elite” has become a key word in political science and sociological discourse. Dozens of books and hundreds of articles on elites have appeared (for a bibliography, see Kukolev and Stykow, 1996, pp. 109–113; 1998, pp. 132–137; Steiner, 1997, pp. 125–132), dissertations on elites have been written, conferences on elites have been held, lecture courses on elites have been taught, and even the first Russian textbook on “elitology” has been published (Ponedelkov and Starostin, 1998).

So, from a quantitative point of view, elite research as a new subdiscipline became a distinct area of Russian social science studies—relatively more developed, than, for example, comparative politics or political theory. But what about the qualitative evaluation of this growth? Did the new theoretical frameworks provide new methodologies to be applied? Did the new findings stimulate a research agenda relevant to contemporary international standards? This article focuses on these issues through an analysis of current trends in elite research in Russia. It is primarily concerned with the studies of political and, partially, economic elites—and not with cultural or academic elites, even though some scholarly works have appeared on those topics. We shall start by discussing the emergence of elite studies in Russia and their features, and then turn to two different dimensions of research—stratification and transition studies. Finally, we shall discuss some achievements and shortcomings of Russia’s elite research.

Developing research: scholars, institutions, and works

The early 1990s were a period of a major turn on the part of Russian scholars toward research on elites as well as different aspects of elite influence on political, economic, and social developments in Russia (see Steiner, 1997). The reasons for such a turn combine some academic and non-academic developments. First and foremost, elites became a major actor in the process of transition in Russia, especially after the decline of the wave of social movement mobilization in 1988–91. Thus, Russian social scientists began to focus their attention on the elite, rather than the mass level of politics (Gel'man, 1997, p. 70). Meanwhile, changes in academic infrastructure—that is, the lack of state funding for social research and the emergence of opportunities for collaboration between Russian scholars and Western foundations and researchers—increased the value of elite research on the academic market. The demand for data and analysis on elites (such as directories, reference volumes, databases, etc.) also expanded. At the same time, the Russian academic community was, and still is, highly influenced by overpoliticization, and then overcommercialization. A large number of scholars served as political observers, advisers, political campaigners, and so on. Their writings often expressed either political preferences or self-reflections. Finally, as one Russian sociologist noted, “elite research is the best way to become a member of the elite” (quoted in Gel'man, 1996, p. 19).

The infrastructure of elite research in Russia reflects the complexity of social science developments in general. Research teams and individual scholars vary greatly

in their background and institutional affiliation. They can be classified in the following way: (1) standing groups and regular members of institutions of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) and universities; (2) project teams, carrying out their research within institutions or groups of scholars from different institutions; and (3) non-academic groups and individuals from think-tanks, the media, and government working in this field. Although special divisions of elite research within the RAS system are limited to the section of elite research in the Institute of Sociology (led by O. Krystanovskaya) and the group of political sociologists at the St Petersburg branch of the same institute (led by A. Duka), individual or group projects dealing with elites have been established at the Institute of Employment Affairs, the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, the Institute of Scientific Information in Social Sciences, the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, the Institute of International Economic and Political Studies and some other RAS Moscow-based institutions. For universities, research was not the primary focus in the Soviet period as they specialized mainly in teaching. However, individual research projects have been launched elsewhere across Russia's provincial universities, even though most of them were limited to their "own" regions. Scholars from the Russian Academy of Civil Service and its provincial branches have also produced some work on elites.

Special project teams that include scholars from different institutions (or from the same institution) are a relatively new phenomenon in the Russian social sciences, related to major changes in the system of funding social science research. First, the participation of Russian scholars in some comparative cross-national research teams sometimes requires attracting scholars with different specializations. This was the case with the elite research in Poland, Hungary and Russia conducted by Ivan Szelenyi.¹ The Russian project team was organized by VTSIOM (the most renowned Russian center for public opinion research), which carried out a large-scale elites survey and an in-depth analysis (Ershova, 1994; Golovachev et al. 1995, 1996). Some groups were organized around Russian-funded projects, such as the project based on elite interviews conducted in 1992–93 by a group of scholars from the Institute of Employment Affairs and the Institute of Sociology RAS (Mikul'skii et al., 1995). However, the lack of regular funding and other organizational problems made such teams quite fragile: according to our information, none of them survived as a group after the completion of those projects.

Finally, the non-academic groups and individuals in the field vary widely with respect to their tasks and organizational forms. Some of them are well known, such as "Panorama", a Moscow-based think-tank that collects very detailed data, including biographies of national and regional elites in Russia. While Panorama products are mainly commercial, an alternative is represented by the "Vox Populi" expert surveys, which are public-oriented. Starting in early 1993, this group, led by the well-known Russian sociologist Boris Grushin, has provided monthly surveys of about 50 Moscow-based political scientists, journalists and other experts, as well as analysis of the degree of influence of politicians and other prominent figures on current Russian

¹ See *Theory and Society* 1995, vol. 24, no. 5 (special issue).

political issues. The results of such surveys have been published monthly in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* and serve as an interesting source for analysis (see Lysenko, 1994; Rivera, 1995). In 1999, however, this group split and some of its former members launched a new project with the same method of polling of regional (rather than Moscow-based) experts, which was published in *Literaturnaya gazeta*.

The number of conferences and seminars, either on Russian politics in general or specifically devoted to elite research, has increased dramatically in the past few years. The major cycle of conferences and seminars on post-Communist political elites, focused on Russia but with some reference to other CIS countries, was launched in 1996 by the Moscow Public Science Foundation with the support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Five meetings were organized with the participation of scholars from different regions of Russia and CIS countries, as well as some Western specialists (Na Putyakh, 1997; Mel'ville, 1999b). Some local conferences on elites have also been organized across Russia (Kugel, 1998). Major Russian journals in political science (such as *Polis*, *Vlast'*, *Pro et Contra*), sociology (*Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniya*, *Sotsiologicheskii Zhurnal*), as well as interdisciplinary journals (*Obshchestvennye Nauki i Sovremennost'*, *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya*, *Mir Rossii*), frequently publish articles of Russian authors on elite research and some translations of modern Western authors, such as Dogan, Higley, Sartori, and Lane, and even classical works by Mosca. However, while well-known writers on Communist elites have been widely published in Russia (Voslenskii, 1991; Djilas, 1992), recent Western elite research is still not well known among Russian scholars since most of them either have no access to English-language literature (especially in Russia's provinces) or do not know English well enough to read it.² Although the most widely used Russian textbook on social stratification includes a special chapter on elite research (Radaev and Shkaratan, 1995, Chapter 7) that briefly summarizes contributions by Pareto, Mosca, Michels, Laswell, Mills, as well as Djilas and Voslenskii on Communist elites, it ends by discussing theoretical developments in the field in the 1950s to 1960s, and American elitist–pluralist discussions on community power like Hunter vs. Dahl and others. (For an overview of these American debates in Russian, see Tarusina, 1997).

Themes and perspectives

The thematic diversity of elite research depends on both academic and non-academic factors. The latter, including a shortage of funding, priorities of sponsoring bodies (such as the Soros Foundation or the Russian Science Foundation for Humanities), opportunities for career promotion, poor information on theoretical and methodological achievements in the field and the lack of literature, have played an important role in recent developments in research. For a very rough classification,

² According to some estimates of the Ministry of Education, only 5 percent of university lecturers in political science in Russia know English well enough to read and communicate (see Shestopal, 1999).

in our analysis we use three thematic categories: (1) historical elite research; (2) research on national elites; (3) regional elite research. These three directions overlap poorly with each other due to the different backgrounds of the specialists in the respective fields. The first is still a primary area of interest to historians, the research on national elites is conducted mainly by sociologists,³ and regional elite research usually attracts a limited number of Moscow-based specialists (mainly in geography) as well as scholars who live outside of Moscow in their “own” regions (Gel'man and Ryzhenkov, 1998). Each group of scholars uses its own concepts and methods and rarely borrows or exchanges ideas either between or within such “camps”. No wonder that in the short term these three sources of elite research have not become converted (at least yet) into three component parts of a common area and instead resemble what Lenin called “three sources and three contentious parts of Marxism”. It is hard to say as yet whether this phenomenon is a consequence of the infancy of the field or whether it will be a long-term feature of Russia's political science in general, or whether it is simply waiting for its own Marx as a discipline integrator.

Historical elite research has focused mainly on interpreting the experiences of Soviet ruling elites in terms of patterns of authority and social mobility. Historians have analyzed details of the background of the Soviet “nomenklatura” (Gimpel'son, 1998) and the circumstances of its emergence and development (Korzikhina and Figatner, 1993; Korzhikhina, 1995). Other historical research has concentrated on the dynamics of the composition of ruling groups in Soviet society in the late-1930s (Bonyushkina, 1995) and in the period 1960–80 (Mokhov 1998, 1999). Although these studies contain many interesting quantitative and, sometimes, qualitative data, the authors pay less attention to causal socio-political explanations of the rise of the Soviet elite and to the prerequisites for its continuity and/or change in the post-Soviet period, save for some commonsense notes. Historical elite researchers usually base their studies on documentary analysis and archival materials, but some works on the late-Soviet period have used oral history, such as the study of former district Communist party leaders in Moscow based on in-depth interviews conducted by Kudeyarova (1995).

While data-based historical research tends to be too descriptive, some macro-historical speculations on the role of elites in the history of Russian society have appeared as well. First and foremost, they are rethinking the Soviet experience using different interpretations. Dmitrii Badovskii analyzes the division of late-Soviet elites into “political” (that is, Communist party apparatus) and “administrative” (that is, state bureaucracy and top managers) categories and traces the sources of differentiation that undermined Soviet elite unity and forced the Communist leaders to main-

³ Russia has very few scholars with a political science background. Political science as a discipline was officially recognized in 1989, and most of the people who call themselves “political scientists” were educated mainly in other social sciences or completely different disciplines. Although the situation has changed gradually in the past few years, it is difficult to talk about well-developed academic schools in Russian political science (Shestopal, 1999).

tain a balance of interests among the competing ruling subgroups (Badovskii, 1994).⁴ These complicated intra-elite relationships, according to Badovskii, played a significant role in post-Soviet elite transformation in terms of the emergence of intra-elite conflicts during the perestroika period and in the survival of informal intra-elite networks and elite–mass connections. These interpretations come close to some other scholarly observations (for example, Shkaratan and Figatner, 1992).

Some scholarly attempts to trace patterns of elite development throughout pre-Soviet history also deserve attention. The work of Oxana Gaman is typical in this respect (Gaman, 1998). She defines the main peculiarity of elites throughout Russia's history as their close relation to the state and sees it as a kind of vocation (in the Weberian sense) rather than simply as a service, whether civil or military. This emphasis on state orientation is connected with her general framework of the “mobilization” model of Russian development and seems to be an attempt to explain the continuity of elites and their inheritance of traditions of autocracy, etatism and collectivism. Gaman, however, does not draw a line between the elite as a social group and people who perform governmental functions (for a similar view, see Kalugin, 1998). Mikhail Afanas'ev (1997) has provided an alternative historical explanation of the non-democratic character of Russia's elite in an interpretative study of Russian clientelism. The author has not only applied such an analytical concept to the Russian history of elite–mass relations, but has also developed his view on the role of patron–client relations in the Soviet period as a mechanism of adaptation of social groups to the late-Soviet political and economic system. According to Afanas'ev, both local communities and large enterprises functionally provided the ground for local-based or sectoral-based mass clienteles, thus developing the “hidden” background for the emergence of the future post-Soviet elite. This form of “nomenklatura quasi-corporatism” still survives even in the post-Soviet period as the only model of the political structuring of society based on vertical elite–mass linkages and networks. This concept, widely accepted by most Russian scholars, is a rare example of a successful interdisciplinary integrative approach to the interpretation of the role of elites in modern Russian history.⁵

Research on national elites in Russia (and, probably, the general field of elite research in transitional societies) includes two different but overlapping dimensions. The first might be called *stratification studies*, which focuses on the analysis of elites per se as a distinct social group (or strata) in terms of their characteristic features, such as composition, mobility (background, recruitment, and career), relations with other social groups, and values and attitudes. In other words, the different sociological theories and methods were applied here to provide answers to the complicated classical questions: “Who governs?” and “Who gets what, when, how?” The second dimension of elite research concerns the impact of elites on the political regime in terms of transition from communist rule. Thus, we might consider this dimension

⁴ As one can see, these arguments closely resemble the works of Western revisionist scholars on Soviet elites and interest groups.

⁵ Despite Afanas'ev's academic achievements, he left academia in 1999, and became a senior expert in “Niccolo M” political consulting firm.

of research *transition studies*, which links continuity and change regarding elites to diverse prospects of democratization or other outcomes of post-communist political transformation. Although these dimensions of elite research are closely linked, they are based on different theoretical assumptions and methodological approaches, and deserve special attention (see below).

The largest research projects on national elites have been undertaken in 1993–94 by two groups of scholars. The first, conducted by VTSIOM (as a part of the above-mentioned comparative research), is still the only Russia-wide quantitative study of the elite. This study is based on formalized face-to-face interviews with members of economic, administrative, political, media and intellectual elites in 19 regions of Russia ($N=1812$). The sample was divided equally between the “old” elite (that is, those who occupied elite positions in 1988) and the “new” elite (those who occupied elite positions in 1993). The study focused mainly on elite background and patterns of mobility in the late-Soviet and post-Soviet periods as well as on the economic status and professional activities of elite group members (for results of the study, see Ershova, 1994; Golovachev et al. 1995, 1996; Golovachev and Kosova 1995, 1996). The second project, conducted by the group led by Konstantin Mikul'skii, employed a qualitative approach. This study was based on 67 semi-formalized in-depth interviews with representatives of political, administrative, economic, intellectual, media and local elites, mainly Moscow-based (Mikul'skii et al., 1995). The interviewed elite group members expressed their views on social, economic and political developments in post-communist Russia, and on its prospects. Although this study makes available a considerable amount of evidence about the attitudes of elite group members, it is still deficient in terms of interpretative conclusions.

Other empirical studies focus on distinct elite groups; for example, conducting surveys of members of parliament—both upper (Diskin, 1995) and lower (Makarenko, 1996) chambers. Owing to the weak influence of the military in domestic Russian politics (and the poor access of scholars to the field of military elite research), the classical Mills' triangle “politics–business–military” does not seem to work in Russia's elite research, while research on the relationship between political and business elites has become much more popular in the post-Soviet period (Zudin, 1996; Lapina, 1998; Peregudov, 1998; Mel'ville, 1999b). However, there are only a few empirically oriented studies of the role of elite groups and sub-elites in the decision-making process, including institution-building or foreign policy-making. Finally, research on the political culture of elites is still neglected, although some elite attitudes toward current issues have been analyzed (Golovachev and Kosova, 1995).

Regional elite research has become a rapidly expanding area of research since 1994, following the process of regionalization of Russia. For scholars located outside Moscow (even in St Petersburg), research in their localities became the only way for them to remain within the academic world. Thus, local research on local elites could be seen as a sort of “political science for poor people.” Case studies seems to be the only methodological tool for such regional elite research used by local scholars (for example, Tarasov, 1993; Okhotskii and Ponedelkov, 1994; Duka, 1995; Mel'ville, 1999b) as well as by some Moscow-based scholars (Shubkin, 1995; Kalu-

gin, 1998). Sometimes, the works of local scholars simply repeated the similar findings of Moscow-based colleagues or represented purely descriptive studies, or even demonstrated collections of nonsensical statements⁶ (Gel'man and Ryzhenkov, 1998, pp. 165–179). However, some local scholars have provided interesting observations and conclusions on local elites. For example, Rushan Gallyamov from the Republic of Bashkortostan in his longitudinal reputational analysis found two major trends in regional elite developments, “etatization” and “ethnocratization” (that is, the growth in the shares of state officials from the “titular” ethnic group, the Bashkirs) (Gallyamov, 1998). However, even though the observations of Midkhat Farukshin from the neighboring Republic of Tatarstan are close to those of Gallyamov (Farukshin, 1994), to date no comparative study of the elites of these two republics has appeared.

The lack of funds is not the only cause of the absence of comparative cross-regional elite research in Russia. The other problem is that maintaining research networks between local scholars requires coherent theoretical and methodological approaches as well as the development of a common academic language and research standards among scholars with very different backgrounds and orientations.⁷ But those rare attempts that have been made to provide comparative cross-regional analysis are interesting. Arbakhan Magomedov from Ul'yanovsk conducted a book-length study of political styles and the regionalist claims of local elites from four regions (Magomedov 1994, 1998). He conducted almost 150 in-depth interviews of local political and administrative leaders in these regions using the methodological schemes of Robert Putnam (1973, 1976). His interpretation undermines public stereotypes about “reform-minded” elites in some regions and “conservative-oriented” elites in others. However, Magomedov's conclusions and the implications of his work are limited to the statement that the elites of ethnically-based republics have elaborated their regionalist claims (what he calls the “ideology of regionalism”) in much greater detail than have elites in non-ethnically based regions. Indeed, no causal explanation for these findings is elaborated.

Nataliya Lapina, in her comparative-case study of relations between regional political and economic elites (based on in-depth interviews in four regions and secondary analysis in some others), has developed a typology of modes of business–politics interactions, including the categories “patronage,” “partnership,” “privatization of power” and “war of all against all” (Lapina, 1998, pp. 154–165), which is close to conclusions derived from other research (see Gel'man, 1998). Although some methodological questions, such as the general “small *N*” problem, arise from case-oriented comparisons, the use of qualitative data derived mainly from the positional

⁶ For example, this statement was produced by the authors from Saratov: “Regional nomenklatura has its own internal structure. It is divided between elite and bureaucracy. Elite is the upper stratum of nomenklatura. Bureaucracy is a nomenklatura without regional elite” (Barzilov and Chernyshev, 1996).

⁷ The attempt to coordinate research activities of two research groups on local elites in St Petersburg and Yekaterinburg, sponsored by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, was unsuccessful, because each group used distinct methodology, sample framing, and questionnaires; thus, their conclusions could not be compared (A. Duka, St Petersburg, June 1999, pers. commun.).

(institutional) analysis of regional elites in cross-regional research still provides for poor explanations (for some data and analysis, see McFaul and Petrov, 1998). But, generally speaking, speculative–descriptive works are still more typical in this research area, although conceptual stretching weakens them (Badovskii and Shutov, 1995; Petrov, 1995; Barzilov and Chernyshev, 1996; Lapina, 1997; Mel'ville, 1999b).

Theory and methodology

With regard to theoretical issues of elite research in Russia, we should stress that they are similar to those of the general (mainly classical) social sciences literature and employ a wide range of models and empirical techniques. The functional approach to the definition of elites overwhelmingly dominates Russian scholarship. Some scholars either borrow definitions like “power elite” by Mills (Ershova, 1994) and decision-making criteria by Higley (Diskin, 1995; Duka et al., 1999) or use their own terminology close to these (for example, Mikul'skii et al., 1995, p. 10; Radaev and Shkaratan, 1995, p. 298). Yurii Levada seems to be the only exception as a proponent of the “meritocratic” approach (Levada 1994, 1998). According to Levada, social groups that claim to be “elite” in contemporary Russia in fact only represent themselves vis-à-vis the mass public. He has drawn a distinction between the “public elite” (which demonstrates its desire to be like the “real” elite) and the “social elite” (which may provide new practices, patterns of attitudes and behavior). In this sense, Levada focuses his analysis on professional elites such as top managers, high-level professionals, experts, and others.⁸ The typology of elites is also mainly based on functional divisions such as ideological, administrative, military, economic and political elites and/or elites vs. counter-elites as well as national vs. local elites (Kryshtanovskaya, 1995a; Mikul'skii et al., 1995). As for stratification terms, scholars use different definitions of elites as “stratas” (Mikul'skii et al., 1995) or a “ruling class” (Radaev and Shkaratan, 1995; Ryvkina, 1995). With regard to elite identification, most scholars widely accept the positional (or institutional) approach as the only reliable one for analysis in the transition period (for arguments, see Duka et al., 1999), although the reputational approach was used in studies like *Vox Populi's* and some others. Finally, theoretical models of elite transformation—such as the classic “lions vs. foxes” (Pareto) or modern “elite settlements” (Higley and colleagues) are also applied to scholarly works on Russia's elites (see below).

Methodological issues of elite research are typical for post-Soviet political studies. First, the lion's share of published articles and, sometimes, books still tends to be speculative and heavily dependent on the political or commercial interests of authors and publishers, while scholars here do not draw a clear line between their academic and non-academic activities. Second, the trend towards the dominance of qualitative,

⁸ At the same time, widespread critique of the “power elite” concept in the case of Russia tends to be more journalistic than academic.

rather than quantitative, methodology tends to be characteristic of Russia's social sciences, reinforced by the lack of resources for large-scale projects and the decline in the activities of RAS institutions. Thus, most elite studies fit into this category. Scholars apply in their research respected methods of data collection: the analysis of documents, such as biographies of elite members (Kryshchanovskaya, 1995a; Kukolev, 1997), or in-depth semi-formalized interviews (Duka, 1995; Mikul'skii et al., 1995; Lapina, 1998). However, this tendency poses new problems of research design, case selection, data reliability and interpretation and comparability (King et al., 1994), which are less reflected as yet within Russia's academic community. Third, the poor coordination of academic activities (both within the country and with foreign institutions) has resulted in the absence or commercialization of data archives, and this makes some data unavailable for scholars. Owing to these problems, the academic value of empirical studies can be questioned. Finally, the lack of comparative studies of elites hinders further development of a research agenda.

Who governs? Continuity and change among Russian elites

The analysis of the circulation and reproduction of elites in a period of radical political change has become a natural priority area for contemporary Russian scholars. No wonder that these studies are highly influenced by current political developments and mainly by the dissatisfaction of most Russian scholars with the emerging post-Communist political regime (for example, Ol'shanskii, 1994; Ryvkina, 1995). One of the explanations of the unsuccessful democratization process was connected explicitly to the high level of reproduction of Soviet elites (or *nomenklatura*) in the post-Soviet period. The low elite circulation in the mid-1990s in comparison with the late-1980s was a common finding of various studies: various estimates of the degree of continuity in the late-Soviet elite differ from a half to two-thirds in the business elite to 80 to 85 percent in local political and administrative elites (Ershova, 1994; Kryshchanovskaya, 1995a; Golovachev et al. 1995, 1996). In the search for explanations for this U-turn in elite reproduction, Vadim Radaev has employed the concept of "revolutionary breakthrough" and its aftermath (Radaev 1994, 1997). He applies the classical Pareto dichotomy of lions vs. foxes to the analysis of two stages of elite transformation: the first stage as a unilateral rise of newcomer office-seekers with different backgrounds and the second stage as a partial return of compromise-oriented former elite members with their professional skills, useful for routine duties in a post-revolutionary period. This view, however, has not become part of the mainstream of Russian elite research.

Alternatively, VTSIOM scholars who have been involved in cross-national elite research have regarded this phenomenon of "political capitalism" as a common feature of post-Communist societies (Hankiss, 1990). At the same time, Olga Kryshchanovskaya independently postulated her model of the domination of the *nomenklatura* due to the double conversion of their previously privileged political status into privileged economic positions during the *perestroika* period and, then, back to political power in the post-Soviet period (Kryshchanovskaya, 1995a,b; Kukolev, 1997).

The “nomenklatura conversion” approach has not only become accepted by most Russian scholars, but has also gained public support among liberal-oriented politicians, journalists and writers. Since Yurii Burtin and Grigorii Vodolazov have described Russian political and economic order as “nomenklatura democracy” and “nomenklatura capitalism,” respectively (Burtin and Vodolazov, 1994), the heritage of “nomenklatura” has been discussed in various contexts. Some authors have even described the post-Soviet Russian elite as an entirely “post-nomenklatura conglomerate” (Cheshkov, 1995; Afanas'ev, 1997). Kryshtanovskaya and her collaborators present evidence of the origins of the new Russian business class from the Communist party and its satellites (Kryshtanovskaya, 1995a,b; Kukolev, 1995), although some other studies do not confirm this conclusion (Bunin, 1994; Radaev, 1998). The close informal networks of the Communist nomenklatura make the transformation of the Soviet elite into a post-Soviet oligarchy easier, based on the merger of political and business groups (Kryshtanovskaya, 1996), although no domination by a single elite financial–political group has been observed. Kryshtanovskaya and other scholars have recognized the merger of the former nomenklatura with some groups of organized crime as another major source for the formation of Russia's oligarchy (Kryshtanovskaya, 1995c,d).

Although Russian scholars commonly accept the notion of the reproduction and high continuity of Russia's elites, the “nomenklatura conversion” approach suffers from oversimplification and poor explanatory power. Yes, this model could show *what* has happened to the Russian elite (and, to some extent, *how* it has happened), but fails to explain *why* these changes occurred, what we might learn from them and what kind of future developments we might expect. Some other features of the “nomenklatura conversion” model have been attacked as well. Iosif Diskin notes that the very thesis of “conversion” is incorrect itself because of open political contestation and the need to acquire legitimacy by electoral means in the post-Communist period. According to Diskin, former elite members, if they get electoral support in a competitive environment, cannot be considered “nomenklatura” at all (Diskin, 1995). Another weak point of “nomenklatura conversion” is that it fails to explain the sources of intra-elite conflicts in post-Soviet period.

Instead, other views on elite transformation in the late-Soviet and post-Soviet periods focus attention on the causes of patterns of intra-elite conflicts. They have been classified (Kukolev and Stykow, 1998, pp. 118–121) as: (1) inter-generational conflict; (2) the “rebellion” of radicals within the elite; (3) elite vs. counter-elite conflict; and (4) the “rebellion” of managerial vs. ideological elite. The first one started from the process of decay of the late-Soviet elite and the need for younger representatives of the sub-elite groups to gain access to power. Two shifts of powerful groups (under Gorbachev and early Yeltsin) provided a clash between these elite generations (Shkaratan and Figatner, 1992; Ol'shanskii, 1994). Meanwhile, other authors find other cleavage lines among elites more important; these lines involve ideological divisions, such as radical liberals versus gradual reformers (Diskin, 1995), or conflict between technocrats (economic managers and the government bureaucracy) and ideologically-oriented politicians (Badovskii, 1994) or even between “official” and “unof-

ficial” (like the shadow economy) segments of elites (see Zabelin, 1994). These discussions, however, are still present on the research agenda.

Towards democracy? Political elites and Russia’s transition

The distinction between the two theoretical approaches to the study of regime transition—the “structural” (system-based) and the “procedural” (actor-based or “genetic”)—is commonly accepted among Russian scholars (Mel’ville, 1999a). The latter perspective poses new questions on the impact of political elites. Although the crucial role of political elites in the process of regime transition, recognized by most Western scholars of “transitology” (Rustow, 1970; O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski, 1991; Higley and Gunther, 1992), has attracted the attention of Russian researchers, the gist of these discussions is distinct from the focus of debates on the consolidation of new democracies in Latin America and Southern Europe as well as in Eastern Europe. While “transitology” was based on the teleological scheme holding democratization to be the universal and inevitable goal of political development, Russia’s experience with regime transition has cast some doubt on this. Indeed, some Russian scholars have evaluated Russia’s post-Communist regime as a “semi-democracy” (Gordon, 1995), a “hybrid” (Shevtsova, 1995), or have applied various models such as O’Donnell’s (1994) “delegative democracy” (Gel’man, 1996; Tsygankov, 1997) or even “competitive oligarchy” (Elizarov, 1999; Mel’ville, 1999a).⁹ Thus, such different conceptualizations of regime transition require relevant explanations from the perspective of elite research.

Regarding transitological analysis, Russian scholars focus attention on distinct features of Russia’s model of the breakdown of Communist rule and on the installation of the post-communist regime. First of all, Russia has not experienced any kind of pact (or other form of bargaining) between segments of the ruling elite of the previous regime and the opposition (or counter-elites) as happened in Hungary and, to some extent, in Poland. Indeed, using the typology of models of transition provided by Karl and Schmitter (1991, p. 275), Russia’s transition from Communist rule is considered an “imposition” (Gel’man, 1998; Elizarov, 1999), while the whole period of the demise of Communist rule under Gorbachev fits into this transitological scheme as a case of the failure of Gorbachev’s attempts at liberalization without democratization—that is, of maintaining a balance between Communist “hard-liners” and the democratic opposition (Sogrin, 1994; Gordon, 1995; Mel’ville, 1999a). The impact of “imposition” on Russia’s transition has been evaluated as negative, reflecting the non-democratic behavior of “winners” in such a zero-sum conflict, including the rejection of the idea of holding new elections in 1991 for securing their powerful positions, large-scale clientelism and corruption, the dominance of

⁹ We are not concerned in our paper with the issue of public debates on “oligarchs” (tycoons) in Russia due to their little academic relevance.

informal patterns in the decision-making process, and others (Shevtsova, 1995; Gel'man, 1998; Mel'ville, 1999a).

Second, the impact of intra-elite bargains and agreements in Russia after the breakdown of the Communist regime is not always evaluated as the establishing of “democracy by undemocratic means” (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986, p. 38). While some authors explicitly considered the applicability of the model of “elite settlement” (Higley and Gunther, 1992) and discuss possible gains from such a scenario (Diskin, 1995), some opponents either express their doubts regarding the effectiveness of pacts in Russia (Vozmozhen, 1996) or even criticize this as an approach to the study of Russian politics (Kholodkovskii, 1997; Elizarov, 1999). As a co-author of this article has noted, the principal distinction lies between “pacts” as a model of the breakdown of authoritarian rule (nearly the classic O'Donnell–Schmitter's scheme) and “pacts” that occurred after the breakdown of authoritarian rule. While the former serve as a decisive step towards the installation of political competitiveness within the framework of formal institutions, the latter serve instead as a step towards the sharing of power between actors, the limitation (or even elimination) of competitiveness, and the exclusion of political outsiders, and is based mainly on informal, rather than formal, institutions. Thus, these kinds of “pacts” undermine rather than strengthen the transition to democracy (Gel'man, 1998, p. 28).

Although there are no empirical studies of Russia's national elite that could confirm or reject such an assumption, some evidence from sub-national elite research might be a point of departure for future research in this area. On the one hand, Aleksandr Duka from the St Petersburg branch of the Institute of Sociology of RAS bases his research of local elites in St Petersburg on the use of Higley's model of transition from an ideologically unified elite to a consensually unified elite through the stage of disunified elite (see Duka, 1995; Duka et al., 1999). However, his empirical analysis has shown clearly that even if intra-elite consensus has been achieved, it has not led to local democratization, at least, in the short-term perspective. On the other hand, one co-author of this article provides an alternative framework, influenced by the ideas of Case (1996) that elite consensus might be accompanied by non-democratic features (what he calls a “semi-democracy”). The case study of political development in Nizhnii Novgorod oblast' shows that the pursuit of a strategy of pacts between key regional elite actors limits the frame of opportunities for political competition, pending the development of formal institutions (such as elections, local government, legislature, political parties) in favor of “court” style of decision making and, in general, the emergence of arbitrary rule (Gel'man, 1998; Gel'man et al., 2000).

At the same time, the role of intra-elite conflicts in the transition process in Russia has been reconsidered as well. In the early and mid-1990s the view that those conflicts were an obstacle to the consolidation of democracy in Russia was more or less commonly accepted (see Myasnikov, 1993; Ol'shanskii, 1994; Diskin, 1995), while the idea of “pacts” between old and new elites has flourished (Fadin, 1991; Vozmozhen, 1996). However, since the democratic virtues of the post-Communist elite “consolidation” in Russia has become unclear, an alternative view of the positive role of intra-elite conflict in transition has been provided. As studies of the develop-

ment of political parties in Russia's regions has shown, intra-elite conflict was a crucial political factor in the party performance in Russia's regions (Gel'man and Golosov, 1998; Golosov, 1999). From a broader theoretical perspective, these debates reflect two different macro-theoretical approaches to social and political developments, either from various forms of integration (Parsons) or from conflict (Darendorf, Coser) as the source of the development of society.

As mentioned above, the lack of comparative studies (cross-national as well as cross-regional and multi-level comparisons) leaves these research questions open. However, although the implications of those regional case studies are hard to apply to other regions in addition to the level of national elites, they might be useful for the agenda of future research.

Conclusion: state of the art and research prospects

The first stage of the post-Communist development of elite studies in Russia as a new research sub-discipline is close to completion. The field has become institutionalized in terms of organizational matters and substantive issues. Using Thomas Kuhn's view on the sociology of science, we might mention that an academic community of elite researchers in Russia has emerged, and the pre-paradigm phase of its existence has been exhausted. Although conceptual frameworks that have been elaborated in the past few years by some Russian scholars can hardly be considered fully fledged paradigms, they are being used as convenient among most specialists across Russia. Despite the fact that such a community remains somewhat isolated from the mainstream of contemporary political science and is faced with the lack of common academic standards as well as other academic and non-academic problems, it is seen as the real state of the art in Russia's social sciences.

As to the substantive achievements of elite research in Russia, we should highlight the following:

- a wide array of empirical studies has been conducted on national and local elites; among them are two major research projects on elites that represent quantitative and qualitative research design (VTSIOM's part of the comparative study headed by Szelenyi and the study provided by Mikul'skii and colleagues, respectively);
- the appearance of original interpretative frameworks for understanding Russia's elite in a historical perspective;
- the concept of "political capitalism" or "nomenklatura conversion" has become accepted by Russian scholars and the general public;
- modern Western theoretical and methodological approaches (Putnam, Higley and colleagues) have been applied by advanced scholars to empirical research and theoretical considerations;
- some theoretical problems regarding the role of intra-elite relationships and elite–mass linkage in the post-Communist environment have been discussed.

Nevertheless, the future of elite research in Russia is faced with short-term and long-

term problems. While some of these problems arise from the general organizational and substantive issues involved in the development of the social sciences in Russia, distinct problems with elite research include:

- the lack of value-free research frameworks;
- the lack of well-developed concepts of transformation of elites and of elites in transition;
- the lack of reliable data accompanied by the problem of their validity;
- the lack of comparative cross-national and cross-regional research.

It is now unclear whether these flaws will be overcome as a kind of “growing pain” and, if they are, how long this will take. This task might be solved only with the collective efforts of the Russian and international academic communities, and the solution depends on the general success or failure of Russian social science’s international integration.

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