

Françoise Daucé, *Une paradoxale oppression, Le pouvoir et les associations en Russie*

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Françoise Daucé's book, *Une paradoxale oppression, Le pouvoir et les associations en Russie* (*A Paradoxical Oppression, Power and NGOs in Russia*), offers a deep insight into the relationship between power and civil society in Russia. This unique work is certainly the most up-to-date and comprehensive study of this topic in French.

Daucé's work is the result of her detailed research into this topic. She is an experienced researcher in political science, specialising in contemporary Russian studies. She has devoted part of her research to the Russian Army, civil society in Russia and the ideological devices used by the post-Soviet Russian authorities. This book brings together the findings of her long-term research on contemporary Russia.

Daucé sheds light on the relationship between society and power, from the Czarist period to post-Soviet Russia. Her analysis shows how the State, after Vladimir Putin came to the presidency, gradually gained control of a large part of civil society. The study demonstrates that the postsoviet Russian authorities' policies towards organisations, i.e. civil society, are based upon a very ambiguous strategy. Françoise Daucé shows that their political project, which aims at exerting control over civil society, is carried out using highly paradoxical means. By using techniques and rhetoric which were forged in a liberal and democratic context and, largely, imported into Russia in the 1990s, the Russian authorities – especially after Putin's accession to the presidency – managed to lay the foundations of a network of organisations under their control. The author analyses this paradoxical method and its results. By officially promoting the creation, the existence and the development of civil society, the authorities manage to increase their control over it. Throughout the work, the author demonstrates how the Russian State, during the 2000's, has been using legal and financial tools in order to increase its control on the non-profit sector.

The first part deals with the historical legacy of the Czarist and Soviet periods and the challenges of developing civil society during the so-called 'transition period'. In post-Soviet Russia, NGOs and civil society emerged in a hybrid context: since the concept – and image – of Party/parties was no longer attractive, some political energy was transferred onto NGOs.

Françoise Daucé also points out that the non-profit sector developed in Brezhnev's time, reminding us that post-Soviet civil society in Russia emerged from experiences dating back to the Soviet period. By drawing an overall picture of the

situation in the late Soviet years, the author notes that the Perestroika period paved the way for the emergence of a civil society.

In the second part of the work, dedicated to how the Russian power is oppressing civil society in a very “civilized manner” (we reproduce here the expression used by the author), Daucé highlights the lessons of the failed experience of the 1990s and addresses the divide between a Western approach and a more culturally-oriented approach to the relationship between society and power. By confronting both approaches, she attempts to explain the failure of democratic endeavours in the 1990s.

The third part focuses on a concrete case study: the author provides an insightful analysis into the construction of the relationship between Russian human rights organisations and Russian power.

This academic work is based on a large range of sources. The author carried out fieldwork throughout the 2000s in Russia and conducted many interviews with civil activists. This material gives a really interesting insight into civil activists’ own perception of their work. In addition to these interviews, the author uses academic sources, reference works about civil society, published interviews, publications from NGOs, as well as broad analyses elaborated upon by Russian intellectuals and international scholars about how Russia has evolved since the USSR collapsed. One of the most interesting points is the way Russian intellectuals assess the techniques used to promote the development of civil society in post-Soviet Russia.

The author provides the reader with a wealth of detailed, precise and well-documented information about the legal framework, existing laws and the constitutional basis, as well as the financial framework – very useful information indeed for scholars interested in Russian politics, and for NGO activists.

Françoise Daucé offers an insightful analysis into how the funding of civil society has had a deep impact on the general picture of civil society in Russia. As a matter of fact, during the 1990s, the approach which was used was largely inspired by the West. Organisations were invited to respond to calls for grants and fulfil requirements adequately. This strategy provided mixed results. It created new kinds of organisations which interacted with private business. At the same time, as the 1990s were marked by a deep social crisis and widespread chaos in many spheres of public life, the idea of democratisation through NGOs and civil society failed and the very concept of democracy became discredited because of large-scale and unbalanced liberalisation.

A cornerstone of this evolution is understandable: by allocating State funding, the Russian power elite felt more comfortable when exerting its control over those sections of civil society whose criticism of the regime was a potential nuisance. The fact that international funding was gradually replaced by Russian State Funds gives a clear view of the evolution, as it was difficult to raise funds from Russian private donors, especially after potential funding from vocal oligarchs became impossible.

In the part of the book dedicated to the “temptation to co-operate”, the author shows the multi-faceted aspect of the relationship and points out that there is not necessarily a strict separation between society and the authorities. On the contrary, there might be fruitful cooperation between human rights defenders and power at a local level, sometimes at the expense of, or in contradiction to, federal authorities.

In conclusion, the author insists that the Russian authorities consciously decided to use a modern tool of management. Civil society appears to be a tool created for the purpose of modernising post-Soviet Russia.

Beyond this well-documented and highly stimulating theory, I wish to point out several aspects which I think should have been made clearer.

The question can be raised: why did the Russian authorities continue to advocate democracy and the necessity of developing civil society and partner organisations throughout the 2000s while praising the 'power vertical'?¹ This issue may have deserved further development. Why has the rhetoric of democratisation remained prevalent, at least verbally, even as the Russian authorities became increasingly authoritarian throughout the 2000s? Has this rhetoric proved to be more effective for the Russian authorities and given some space to civil society, even if under very strict State supervision and control? The issue of the independence of NGOs *versus* loyalty is the key point of this analysis.

Another topic could be more developed. In the book, Vladimir Putin is himself personally mentioned, as if he and Russian power were the same. A question can be raised: is he personally the architect of this policy? Or can one more precisely indentify the circle of advisers and ideological architects? Finally, who is Russian power when it comes to the policy towards civil society?

Concerning concepts and key-words, the author repeatedly uses general terms such as 'researchers', 'democrats', 'traditionalists', and it seems that such assumptions could be defined more precisely, as it is impossible, from an academic point of view, to encapsulate all researchers, for instance, into a single group. Similarly, the term 'traditionalists' – when referring to the debate on the future of NGOs in Russia – could have been defined more precisely. Furthermore, the author often refers to the notion of 'common sense' to account for the discrepancy between society and power and the alleged apathy of Russian society. When it comes to these references to 'common sense', sources should be cited, all the more so as many academic works have put forward opposite views.

Nevertheless, this work is indeed a tremendous source of information and analysis on this burning issue. One should invite not only scholars and students involved in post-Soviet studies to read this book in order to understand the paradox of the 'post-Soviet transition', but also all readers interested in the interaction between power and society in Russia and the role played by civil society in this hybrid post-Soviet Russian regime.

1 A concept introduced by Putin to define the re-centralisation of the presidency's power and that of the federal state.