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From De-Stalinization to New Authoritarianism: Welfare Development in Russia. A Literature Review

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Introduction

The massive increase in individual and collective welfare since the second half of the 20th century is one of the central achievements of modern societies. On the welfare-state development of the democratic, capitalist countries of the West, there is correspondingly extensive research. The welfare development in Eastern Europe however has received thus far relatively little attention from the Western social sciences. Now three books have been published which address this lack and provide together an historical, longitudinal cross-section of the sociopolitical development in Russia, respectively in the USSR, since Stalin's death.

The good 60-year development of social welfare in the post-stalinist Soviet Union and in post-Soviet Russia is divided in social science literature usually into five characteristic periods: After a stage of social welfare expansion under Khrushchev (1894-1964) and economic productivity under Brezhnev (1964-1983), came finally a period of transition (1983-1991), at the end of which the Soviet Union collapsed. In the subsequent social welfare development of Russia are distinguished a phase of liberalization (1991-2004) and (since 2005) a turn to statism (cf. Cook 1993, 2007, 2011; Manning 1984; Manning/Davidova 2009). The books discussed here devote themselves primarily to the beginning of the social policy expansion under Khrushchev and Brezhnev and the transition from the liberal to statist phase in post-Soviet Russia.

Firstly, Galina Ivanova and Stefan Plaggenborg examine in their book *De-Stalinization as Welfare* (*Entstalinisierung als Wohlfahrt. Sozialpolitik in der Sowjetunion 1953–1970)* the expansion of social policy in the post-stalinist Soviet Union from an historical standpoint. A second work, by Lukas Mücke (at Stefan Plaggenborg's department), is an extended dissertation *General Old-age Pension Provision in the USSR, 1956–1972* (*Die allgemeine Altersrentenversorgung in der UdSSR, 1956–1972*), which illustratively deepens the theses of the work of Ivanova/Plaggenborg on old-age social security. In a third work, the political scientist Andrea Chandler in her book *Democracy, Gender, and Social Policy in Russia* brings into focus the relationship between increasingly paternalistic social policies, a growing authoritarianism and gender equality.

Below I shall discuss from a sociological perspective some of the central theses of these books: (1) the interpretation of social welfare expansion in the Soviet Union as an agenda of de-stalinization; (2) the debate about a "socialist social contract"; (3) the question of whether the Soviet Union was a welfare state; and (4) the thesis that paternalistic and nationalistic social policies have contributed to a growing authoritarianism in Russia in the 21st century.

De-stalinization as social welfare

Ivanova/Plaggenborg describe the social situation of the post-WWII Soviet population as catastrophic: Poverty, unemployment, disability (particularly as a result of the war), lack of housing, at best rudimentary old-age pensions and a low level of consumption were only the most pressing of many social problems for large sections of the population. They state that life in "everyday stalinism" was a "struggle for survival" because the Soviet state had not created effective protection against social risks either before or after the War. Widespread social misery was therefore one of the constitutive features of stalinism (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 11, 46-59).

After the ravages of stalinism, say the authors, a central problem emerged: How should the regime bind the population to it, so as to create loyalty and pacify society? To mitigate the opposition between regime and society (which had, however, not existed even in stalinism in such a sharply contrasting form), the regime was looking for a "vital link to the masses", but for that it had to solve two problems: (1) bring terror and violence to an end, and (2) improve the material situation of the population, including security against the social risks of life. Therefore – the central thesis of the book – the in 1956 incipient social welfare policy 'not only stood within the context of de-stalinization, it *was* de-stalinization' (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 9, emphasis in original).

Ivanova argues that at the CPSU's 20th Congress in 1956 it came to a breakthrough on the issue of whether, how much and in what areas social policy (which was not so named, because it was understood to be repair work on the social consequences of capitalism by social policy) was to be carried out. She says this was the first time social welfare policy assumed systematic contours and was presented in the form of a program. It was that Party Congress where Khrushchev gave his historic "secret speech" – "On the personality cult and its consequences" (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 84-93).

Ivanova shows the great importance Khrushchev attributed to social issues and their solution and how persistently he sought to distinguish himself as the social policymaker of the Soviet Union. In particular Khrushchev is said to have counted among the most urgent social tasks the regulation of wages and salaries, the issue of pension provision, the problem of the elderly and invalid homes, and increasing material prosperity of the population. He evidently succeeded at the 20th CPSU Congress in initiating progress in eliminating the worst social evils of stalinism and in liberating social assistance measures from discriminatory restrictions. Into the theme of Khrushchev's social policy is thought to have grown the idea that the state and party should take care not only of heavy industry and defense, but also of the individual who, as Khrushchev said, 'sacrifices to the state more than just a few years' heavy and tenacious work and creates for society more than just a little value' (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 93). This public recognition of social protection as one of the most important tasks of domestic politics is, for Ivanova, a novelty in Soviet history.

In his extensive study of old-age pension provision in the USSR, Mücke demonstrates that pension reforms had a role of particular importance in this new understanding of social policy. More than in the case of other social welfare benefits, pension reforms would have affected a large majority of the population and improved its standard of living. Despite significant shortcomings of the new old-age pension provision, Mücke therefore considers the pension reforms for workers, office employees (1956) and collective farmers (1964) a clear sign of a fundamental change in the relationship between the state and the population (Mücke 2013: 17).

Ivanova/Plaggenborg and Mücke formulate convincingly how the social welfare expansion of the USSR under Khrushchev can be conceived as part of de-stalinization. But with this argument they cannot adequately explain the obvious parallels they themselves repeatedly draw between the expansion of social welfare policy in the post-stalinist Soviet Union and the so-called "golden age" of the welfare state in the West (which admittedly is not their primary aim). They do give some indications, however: The rationale, the regime wanted to secure with the expansion of social security the loyalty of its citizens, we also know from the context of western welfare-state research. It seems therefore not necessarily connected with de-stalinization. In addition, the authors point out that the Soviet Union was not isolated

in its socialist cosmos, but rather, the system competition with capitalism was an important reference point for social policy (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 9, 90). This aspect however is not further elaborated.

The socialist social contract

The authors describe the period of de-stalinization through social welfare as characterized by a relationship between regime and individual Soviet citizen marked by a high degree of reciprocity (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 94-112; Mücke 2013: 468-485).

To characterize this relationship, Ivanova takes up the idea of a social contract, already well known from social science literature (cf. Breslauer 1984; Cook 1993). On this view, the Soviet state acted as guarantor of social protection to the population and financed the essential part of social expenditures, but reserved the right, on the basis of its own economic, ideological and political priorities, to decide all questions of social development (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 109). Similarly argues Mücke, who however rejects the concept of "social contract", since the idea of an agreement between two parties is unsuitable when one of the two sides is denied any rights to openly disagree with the content of the pact (Mücke 2013: 468). Mücke speaks rather of a reciprocity between government and the people, which he divides along two dimensions: (1) a paternalistic dimension and (2) a qualificatory dimension (Mücke 2013: 470 et seq.).

The paternalistic dimension describes the core of the social contract, according to which the communist party attended to the welfare of the people, for which was expected from the people a feeling of connectedness and an increase in individual engagement in the interest of social progress (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 95; Mücke 2013: 468). Mücke, regarding the old-age pension provision, points to the propagandistic intent of this image of the "paternal care" of the state, since redistribution, also in the USSR, takes place between value-producing, tax-paying workers and the elderly or disabled, and pension benefits provision would not have been possible at the cost of the state, i.e. without deductions from the wages of working people (Mücke 2013: 469f.).

Ivanova/Plaggenborg emphasize that this paternalism experienced by Soviet citizens was not solely the product of the all-powerful party and state domination, but also based on traditional relations between "farmers and squire", "workers and owners" and finally, also between the people and "Father Tsar" of pre-revolutionary Russia (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 112). Mücke by contrast emphasizes a fundamentally new relationship between the regime and the population in post-stalinist Russia, as the "paternal care" of the state was now no longer just a mere assertion, but yielded real effects (Mücke 2013: 471).

With the "qualificatory" dimension both Mücke and Ivanova/Plaggenborg underscore that it is wrong to assume that the initiative for such a paternalistic interrelationship between state and society had emerged only from the political leadership. The population did not strive to free itself from the paternalistic tutelage of the state (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 109f). Instead, the regime pursued welfare-oriented policies because it saw itself coerced by the expectations of the population. With regard to pensions meant: the old-age pension was understood by the citizens as the state's appropriate response to the lifelong work activity of individuals and their contribution thereby to social progress in the USSR – and demanded in petitions and complaints to the highest political authorities of the country. Hence the idea should be relativized that the citizens of the socialist states could exert no influence on the form and extent of government social benefits, even though substantial opportunities for political participation remained closed to them (Mücke 2013: 472 et seq.).

Altogether Ivanova and Mücke present quite convincingly, on the basis of official regime statements, letters, newspaper articles, the internal expressions of political functionaries, as well as unpublished letters from ordinary Soviet citizens, the reciprocal relationship between state and society which led to the expansion of social policy in the post-stalinist Soviet Union.

In particular, the argument that paternalism was not a one-sided phenomenon, is set out clearly.

However, both authors also show that, in spite of the new "social contract", the Soviet state until the mid-1960s failed to entirely fulfill its promise in the area of social welfare policy. It was not until the second half of the 1960s that the actual flourishing of the socialist welfare state set in, which moved the Soviet Union closer to the problems of the Western welfare states (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 15, 30). But can the post-stalinist Soviet Union really be described as a welfare state?

The Soviet Union as a "social" planned economy

Both Ivanova and Mücke, as well as Plaggenborg in his preface, turn to this question – in how far the Soviet Union actually was a "welfare state". Today, however, there is a bewildering variety of concepts of the welfare state, which is why the authors limit themselves to a core definition, after which a welfare state takes responsibility for the welfare of the population in its entire breadth and guarantees a standard of living above the poverty line for all citizens of the country (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 21; Mücke 2013: 33, 489).

Ivanova argues that social welfare policy assumed such proportions in the wake of de-stalinization, that a "socialist welfare state" certainly existed. The Soviet social policy model was founded on the postulate that the state was responsible for the social wellbeing of every citizen from birth into old age, which is why the Soviet Union also put a considerable amount of its financial and administrative resources into the service of increasing the material and immaterial wellbeing of the population (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 29, 262 et seq.). Ideas of freedom, democracy, civil society and rule of law – which for Ivanova western theorists and politicians usually associate with the concept of the welfare state – the Soviet Union however completely ignored or gave only a rhetorical character (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 21).

Mücke believes that one can conceptualize the USSR as an "emerging welfare state" because with the quality of the Soviet social welfare production up to 1972 – though not yet at the high level of effective poverty-prevention associated with the idea of the welfare state – the extent of the state's assumption of responsibility for large sections of the population raised conditions significantly above those of pre-industrial, third-world countries. The Soviet Union was moving in the years 1956-1972 towards an ideal level at which the entire population would be supplied with social services ensuring the existential minimum. Therefore Mücke speaks of a marked trend towards a welfare state in the USSR (Mücke 2013: 515f.).

Plaggenborg introduces the thoroughly original concept of the "social planned economy" to describe the social welfare development of the post-stalinist Soviet Union. The term is deliberately modeled on that of the "social market economy" in order to stress a common social welfare orientation of market economies and planned economies in the second half of the 20th century (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 15).

As based on their self-chosen definition, the existence of a USSR "welfare state" is well established by the authors. However, the concept of the welfare state is inseparably linked by many western researchers to granting civil, political and social rights, as well as to a market economy system. Mücke discusses this and concludes that such a western welfare-state concept is hardly capable of being applied to the category of a socialist social policy (Mücke 2013: 485-492).

And because, of course, there "cannot be what may not be", arguments that emphasize an essential connection between welfare-state development, democracy and market economy, are discredited by Mücke as 'cold-war rhetoric' (Mücke 2013: 32) or 'ideologically preconceived perspectives' (Mücke 2013: 492). Also Ivanova claims that western researchers strive not to mention the social achievements of the Soviet Union and reject the concept of "welfare state" to characterize Soviet social policy (Ivanova/Plaggenborg 2015: 242).

This overlooks the fact that different conceptions of the welfare state are not underpinned primarily by ideological beliefs, but by different cognitive interests – at least if the concept of

the welfare state is used as an analytical concept and not as a special qualifier for a high level of social policy development. As far as the national specifics of social welfare regulation in democratic capitalist societies to be focussed on (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 1990; Kaufmann, 2013), then it makes perfect sense to exclude the significantly different case of the Soviet Union from the definition of the welfare state. If on the other hand the obvious parallels between the present capitalist and socialist welfare development are of central interest, the use of the welfare state concept for the Soviet Union can be well justified, as shown by Mücke, Ivanova and Plaggenborg.

Instead, however, of reflecting on their strengths – namely to systematically elaborate on the astonishing parallels between capitalist and socialist social welfare development and interpret them as the consequence of modernizing industrial nations – the authors go on the ideological defensive against an alleged devaluation of the social achievements of the USSR, and thereby weaken their own argument in favor of the Soviet welfare state.

Statism, authoritarianism and social policy in post-Soviet Russia

While Ivanova/Plaggenborg and Mücke deal with the advent of a comprehensive social policy in the Soviet Union, Chandler focusses on welfare development and regime changes in post-Soviet Russia. She argues that after a decade of pluralism in the 1990s, the democratization process in Russia turned into a "de-democratization". What are the main factors explaining the departure from the path of democratization and the move to a new authoritarianism? This is the central question in Chandler's study, and the answer is: the transformation of social policy. Thus she reverses the usual perception of welfare-state research and postulates that variance in social policy is the explanation for regime change (Chandler 2013: 6). She links closely her understanding of social policy with aspects of gender equality.

The main argument of her study is that the social crisis of the 1990s was used after the new millennium to discredit democratic and liberal value. Thereby it became possible to follow a paternalistic and nationalistic social policy and establish an authoritarian regime (Chandler 2013: 170).

Chandler begins her reasoning with an analysis of the social welfare debate in the late Soviet Union and comes to the conclusion that discontent with the social realities and the unfulfilled social promises of *perestroika* greatly contributed to the fall of the authoritarian Soviet regime (Chandler 2013: 21-33). For Chandler, after the collapse of the Soviet Union political discourse was strongly influenced by liberal-democratic values. Under President Yeltsin and his government the main aim was to introduce market reforms, accelerate privatization and secure their own political power. Social reforms were mainly neglected, though some were enacted to mitigate the social transition and help vulnerable groups cope with the crisis. Overall however, funds would have been lacking to finance the necessary social services. This led from around the mid-90s to a strengthening of the opposition, who blamed the liberal elite for the social problems of the country. In the oppositional discourse 'social welfare problems are interpreted as the result of an elevation of self-interested individualism' (Chandler 2013: 34-46, 65-74, 170).

For Chandler the new century marked a turning point for both social welfare development and the democratization process in Russia. As President from 2000, Putin consolidated his power by means of an anti-liberal discourse. In this devaluation of liberal democratic values, welfare issues played a prominent role, with the social welfare crisis of the 1990s interpreted as the result of a dysfunctional democracy. In vivid detail Chandler shows how, as a result, the understanding of social policy changed. In place of the idea of individual empowerment in the sociopolitical discourse, increasingly appeared the notion that social policies should serve the interests of the state,. In 2006 another turning point in Russia's social policy was initiated with the demographic development starting to be discussed as a central social problem, and pronatalism – the policy of encouraging childbearing – becoming a guiding principle. Since

then – also in the interlude of Medvedev's presidency – Chandler sees the authoritarian tendencies of the regime steadily strengthened (Chandler 2013: 105-145, 170f.).

Two reservations can be put forward about this thesis: Firstly, the confrontation of liberal democratization in the 1990s with the authoritarian development after the turn of the century is not very convincing. Although in the 1990s there was indeed intense political wrangling over social welfare ideas, it was also that decade in which the President ordered the parliament to be fired upon, and oligarchs gained such far-reaching political influence that transformation research today speaks of "state capture". To understand why at the turn of the century Russian social policy took a turn to paternalism and statism – whereby the social crisis was, at least apparently, – seems required a much more differentiated analysis of the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which in the political discourse in Russia is now widely seen as a time of trouble.

On the other hand it seems that Chandler doesn't consistently trust her own argument: that social welfare policies could serve as independent variable and explain the very ways in which democracy is perceived and discussed. She explains that the 'expansion of authoritarian institutions enabled the rapid adoption of sweeping social welfare changes which were intended to help build support for the elite and to bolster the regime's economic policies' (Chandler 2013: 144f.). Elsewhere she says: 'Increased authoritarianism was presented as a solution to the social welfare crisis, for which opposition parties were unfairly blamed' (Chandler 2013: 170). Can the diagnosed regime change in Russia be explained with the help of social welfare policies, or can the growing authoritarianism be traced back to the development of social policy? Chandler apparently cannot resolve this causality dilemma. It therefore seems more appropriate to emphasize the mutual dependence of the two processes, rather than posit a causal explanation.

The major strength of Chandler's study lies however in the impressively detailed description of the sociopolitical discourse in post-Soviet Russia. She shows that much of Russian social welfare reform has been directed towards women and children. The relatively liberal family policy of the 1990s has, after the turn of the century, increasingly encouraged women to do their patriotic duty to have children. And because the paternalistic Russian state according to Chandler feels responsible for the society, at the end of 2006 two laws were adopted designed to encourage more births of healthy children and more domestic adoptions. Also the stigma attributed to abortion and the crackdown on so-called "homosexual propaganda" would have to be seen in the context of promoting the heterosexual, two-parent family with more than one child. Chandler stresses that the idea of women's equality – one that after the Soviet Union had been a central idea in the Russian welfare discourse – has been replaced by the vision of the state's protection of motherhood (Chandler 2013: 107-132). From Chandler's presentation it is very clear that these ideas – social policy, family and gender – are central to understanding the social and political developments in Russia today.

Conclusion

All three books together draw the connection from the welfare expansion of the post-stalinist Soviet Union to the social reforms in today's Russia. They provide an impressive density of details supplied mainly by the analysis of primary sources – letters, petitions, decrees, government positions, political speeches, legal texts and media coverage. The analytical classifications, however, are not always convincing. Nevertheless, it is worth reading all three books – even if Mücke's over 500-page study is far too extensive – because a more comprehensive overview of the Soviet and Russian welfare development cannot be found at present (though Linda J. Cook's: *Postcommunist Welfare States* and other works could definitely be recommended as additional sources).

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