The last couple of months have been a busy time for Russia-watchers. Not for reasons we would necessarily have chosen. It certainly meant a lot of media attention – I made Channel 4 News and Irish radio, talked to Canadian television and New Zealand radio, and did a short piece – the basis for what follows – for the Sunday Post. Not that I know more about Polonium 210 than anyone else, but there were and still are questions about the impact of the poisoning on East-West relations, and on the configuration of power in the Kremlin.

Russia attracts attention for all sorts of reasons. Some good ones, like vodka. But also for other ones. What has been happening over recent weeks is not a particularly happy example. The poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko followed the murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaya at the start of October, and several high-profile killings in the business and banking world. More than a dozen journalists have now lost their lives since Putin came to power six years ago; the killers, typically, are never found.

Litvinenko can now be added to this grisly list. He was a friend of Boris Berezovsky, the Kremlin’s leading opponent, who fled to political exile in the Surrey stockbroker belt in 2001. Litvinenko had claimed that the Kremlin itself was behind the bombings of apartment buildings in 1999 that led to the invasion of Chechnya, and which allowed Putin to ride to victory as a man of action early the following year. He had certainly done the Kremlin no favours. And who, outside a government scientific laboratory, could hope to get hold of Polonium 210?

But there are other theories. Consider, for instance, the Chechen scenario. Litvinenko was investigating the killing of Politkovskaya. The Chechen authorities, particularly prime minister Ramzan Kadyrov (son of the president who had himself been blown up in 2004), had made no secret of their wish to see her out of the way. They aren’t normally very scrupulous in how they achieve their objectives – Kadyrov keeps a tiger in his home, and his irregulars have taken to displaying the severed heads of their opponents on stakes around local villages. If Litvinenko had been making progress in his inquiries, perhaps a lot of progress, wouldn’t they have wanted him out of the way as well?

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they find it hard to get hold of a deadly poison through sympathisers, or just for money, in a government laboratory?

Actually, a murky murder is the last thing the Kremlin wants at the moment. They’re trying to clean up their international image in all kinds of ways – through a sort of Russian CNN, for instance, and by inviting Western scholars and journalists to a country house near Moscow for an extended opportunity to discuss anything they want with the Russian president (very much what Valentina is writing about in her dissertation). And would they have wanted anything of this kind on the eve of a summit with the European Union, and a NATO summit that was being held not far away, in Riga?

So I don’t think the Kremlin is behind it; but that doesn’t mean we don’t need to be worried about where Moscow is going. The most obvious cause for concern is Russia’s new assertiveness on the international scene, and its use of natural resources as a political weapon. Already, more than a quarter of our oil and gas comes from Russia. How could the West maintain an independent foreign policy if not just the supply, but the companies themselves, were in the hands of a foreign country – Russia or anyone else?

There are other concerns about Russian actions in its immediate vicinity. They intervened, clumsily and unsuccessfully, in Ukraine’s presidential election. What if they intervened elsewhere, for instance in Georgia, where a rebel province has just declared its wish to leave and join them? Or in Moldova, where the unrecognised Dniester republic has also voted in favour of a union with Russia? Why, Russians might argue, should these small territories be denied the right of national self-determination that we are so keen about in other cases?

Perhaps the biggest worries are about the direction of travel of the political system itself. As communist rule ended, it seemed Russia was joining the ‘other democracies’. But in all kinds of ways Putin has strengthened central control to an extent that might almost seem Soviet. The regions have been brought into line. The media, above all national television, have been taken over directly or indirectly by the state. And businessmen like Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who looked as if they might challenge the Kremlin and even seek power at the presidential election in 2008 at which Putin must stand down, have been obliged to accept the Kremlin’s direction or (in Khodorkovsky’s case) go to jail.

Many Russians have welcomed what we used to call the ‘smack of firm government’. Putin himself is immensely popular. Living standards have been rising all round, on the back of high oil prices. But central control, if it’s taken too far, can silence other voices. A government that has no risk of exposure in the media has less reason to be honest, or even competent. And a court system that is manipulated by politicians gives no one any guarantee of their personal safety, let alone their property. It’s a lesson we teach our first year politics students. Perhaps we should be telling the Russians as well?

Stephen White

CONFERENCE REPORT

This autumn, Valentina, Katsu, Anke and Stephen attended the UACES Annual Conference, ‘Exchanging Ideas on Europe’, at the University of Limerick, 31 August – 2 September 2006. Katsu and Stephen both gave papers in the panel on ‘Political Values in the New Europe’ while Valentina and Anke sat attentively in the audience. They listened to the presentation by Galina Bogutcaia of the paper that Galina co-wrote with Anke and Giselle Boss. This was followed by Katsu’s presentation on ‘Participation and Protest in the EU and the “Outsiders”’ – this was Katsu’s first ever conference presentation and he valiantly overcame his fears and did a brilliant job in presenting his paper and answering a number of quite provocative questions from the audience! Stephen was last in the panel to present his joint paper with Julia Korosteleva and Ian McAllister entitled ‘Are Russians Europeans?’. A ‘special event’ at this panel was the launch of a special issue of Contemporary Politics (Issue 12, June 2006). As conference students, the participants of this special issue eagerly look forward to the next stage in the publication process of the new UACES journal.

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CONFERENCE REPORT

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Anke and Valentina organised another panel at the conference on ‘The EU and its Eastern Neighbourhood: Visions and Interests in Conflict?’, chaired by Derek, which was well attended and received a good response from the audience – it was even mentioned at the conference dinner by Sir John Kerr of Kinlochard, who professed himself very interested in the issues that had been raised. He particularly praised the paper on ‘Image of an Enemy or Image of a Friend? International Images as a Factor in EU-Russia Relations’ that Valentina co-presented with Sirke Mäkinen from the University of Tampere (who spent a few months as a visiting researcher with us in spring/summer 2005).

Anke Schmidt-Felzman

OTHER CONFERENCE NEWS

Stephen took part in a conference at Cambridge in early September with a paper on ‘communist nostalgia’, using survey data for Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (it will appear in a volume edited by David Lane next year, and in Russian in Mir Rossi). He contributed a paper on Belarusian and Ukrainian international orientations to a conference on Belarus in Warsaw in mid-November (the papers will appear in English, Russian and Belarusian), and presented the same paper to the AAASS in Washington DC in late November. He also attended a conference in Kyiv in early October on ‘strategic elites and European enlargement’; the paper is due to appear in a local sociology journal, Sotsiologiya. He lectured in Dublin and St Andrews, and (as noted above) at the UACES conference at the end of August.

Bill Miller was another participant in the AAASS conference, presenting a paper jointly with Clare McManus-Czubinska of the Department of Central and East European Studies.

Valentina gave another paper at a seminar on ‘Images of Russia in Europe - Voices from Germany, France and Poland’ that was organized by the Stiftung Genshagen and held in the castle of Genshagen near Berlin (Germany) on November 29 – December 1. She also attended a conference on the same topic that followed the seminar.

PUBLICATIONS

Stephen’s new book (with Roy Allison and Margot Light) came out at the end of October, entitled Putin’s Russia and the Enlarged Europe (Blackwell/Chatham House). There was a major launch event at Chatham House with a speech by Lord (William) Wallace, who is the Lib Dem spokesman on foreign affairs in the Lords, followed by questions and answers from a large audience. At their invitation, SW contributed a related op-ed to the respected Russian daily, Kommersant.

A coauthored text, Politics in Europe, came out in August with CQ Press (Chris Carman is another contributor), and Developments in Central and East European Politics 4 (co-edited with Judy Batt and Paul Lewis, Palgrave and Duke) has just gone to the publishers and should be out in the spring. Party Politics in New Democracies (Oxford, co-edited with Paul Webb) should be out later in the year. But Stephen is spending most of his time trying to finish his big more-than-a-textbook for OUP, which should have been delivered in 2003...
Yulia writes: It has been four months since I left Glasgow to embark on a new, challenging and fascinating journey of discovering the professional world of academia at SSEES, UCL. I should admit the beginning was tough. I spent this term teaching 1st-3rd year BA students, supervising and marking final-year BA dissertations and being a student myself, while enrolled on the Certificate of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education course. Teaching is like two sides of one coin - you teach and learn simultaneously! One of the courses that I am teaching - Entrepreneurship and Corporate Governance - has a very practical dimension and among other things covers the main phases of business start-up from business planning to financing and marketing. To make it interesting I have embarked on the 2007 London Entrepreneurs Challenge Competition, jointly run by the University College London, London Business School and Lodestone Innovation Partnership, to go through the whole process from coming up with a business idea to developing a business plan myself. I find it very stimulating and useful for what I teach, as I feel I can share my first-hand experience in this field with students. I very much enjoy my new academic life. I wish I could have 48 hours to spend more time on research, which is currently possible only during the vacation breaks. Using this opportunity, I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

CONFERENCE & WORKSHOP PLANS

Valentina and Anke were busy this autumn putting together a couple of applications for conferences and a workshop. They submitted two panel proposals for the BASEES conference at Cambridge, 31 March-2 April 2007, one on ‘Russia and the West – Difficult Relations in a Changing Political Environment’, where Anke will be presenting a paper on EU-Russia relations and Valentina will be acting as discussant. The second panel will be on ‘New Old Russia? Traditions, Images and Perceptions in Russian Politics’ - Valentina will be presenting a paper on the role of image-making in Russian-UK relations and Katsu will discuss the tradition of having a strong central figure at the top of the Russian political authority; Anke act as discussant, and both panels will be chaired by Stephen.

Valentina and Anke also submitted at the end of October an application to UACES for funding of a workshop on ‘Security of Energy Supply in the New Europe: A Challenge for the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy’ which will take place at Glasgow University in September 2007 and will bring together young researchers from the UK and PhD students based in Spain, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands. They heard in December that their application had been approved; there will also be some support from the Department.

GRADUATE NEWS

Congratulations to Mervyn Bain, whose book on Soviet-Cuban relations (based on his PhD) has just appeared with Lexington Books.

And to Atsushi Ogushi, who has signed a contract for his book on the demise of the CPSU based on his PhD, and has just had an article accepted for Europe-Asia Studies.

Younhee Kang has also had a revised version of her PhD, on the Soviet Communist Party during the period of the First Five Year Plan, accepted by Routledge.

Congratulations to Derek Hutcheson, who has just taken over responsibility for European studies at University College Dublin.

And congratulations also to Ariel, who has had papers accepted for presentation to the Centre for International Politics Postgraduate Conference at the University of Manchester in January 2007 and to the Political Studies Association’s Annual Conference in Bath in April 2007.

Guohui is now revising his dissertation and plans to submit by Summer 2007. He presented a paper to the Department in May and has been also writing a paper that he plans to submit to a Chinese studies journal. He, Tom, Daniel and Ariel are planning a panel on China for the PSA Graduate Network conference in late May.

PERSONAL

Congratulations of a different kind to our PhD Clelia Rontoyanni, who got married in Athens in August and has just taken up a new high-level post at the World Bank in Washington DC.
Sarah was in Kyiv in July to take part in a programme on Establishing Media Literacy in Post-Communist Universities (funded by the Soros Foundation). The programme brought together 25 academics from the former Communist sphere to attend lectures and discuss central issues in teaching political communication. Sarah taught a one-week, intensive course in media and society. The participants, who came from places as diverse as Tajikistan and Bosnia, discussed and debated various concepts in the political communication sphere, ranging from the role of media in post-communist elections to the performance of the media in conflict situations.

Overall, it was both a humbling and enlightening experience to discuss these concepts with people who had lived through so much political turmoil, both as individuals and as academics. The project will continue for the next two years, with Sarah returning to Lviv this summer to lead a seminar on political communication research methods. The Media Literacy programme is a joint project of Towson University (Maryland, USA) and the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, a leading post-Soviet university. One of the outcomes of the project has been plans for the Academy to apply (with Glasgow as a mentor) for European Union funding to improve the Ukrainian university’s post-graduate research programme in the social sciences.

In addition, project participant Danijela Majstorovic visited the Politics department in November to present her film on sex trafficking in Bosnia.

Valentina and Anke have joined the UACES-BASEES network on EU-Russia relations that is run by Professor Graham Timmins of Stirling University and Jackie Gower of Kings College London. They will assist the two organisers with the administration of the website that is soon to be launched and will also be involved in the organisation of the events that are being planned for 2007/8 in the framework of this network.

**FIELD TRIPS**

Tom writes: I obtained funding of £1920 from the Universities China Committee in London. The funding was for my fieldwork undertaken from May to August 2006. I spent last summer undertaking fieldwork related to Chinese environmental NGOs and their interactions with the policymaking process. I was based at Nankai University in Tianjin and undertook interviews with seven Chinese environmental NGOs from Beijing, Tianjin, Nanjing, and Hubei Province. I also met with two government organised NGOs and with several Chinese academics, and was able to collect a large amount of documentary data from NGOs and Chinese language bookshops. In addition, I spent a week analysing documents at the Universities Service Centre for Chinese Studies based at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. I am currently analysing the data gathered from the fieldwork and will begin writing it up very soon. Finally, I am planning to return to China in summer 2007 in order to gather more data that should enable me to fill any gaps that are found during the write-up process.

Valentina was in London in December to conduct a series of interviews with British journalists and politicians who have expertise in Russian politics. The interviews will help her to examine Russia’s image in the UK and its role in UK-Russian relations.

Stephen visited Russia for a week of elite interviews in September, connected with his still-continuing project on the implications in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus of EU and NATO enlargement, and visited again in October, as external examiner at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences.

Daniel writes: I received £1860 funding from the Universities China Committee in London. This is in addition to the teaching bursary that I receive from the department, which provided some funds towards the trip. The trip covered the period from the middle of June up to the end of September. Between 15 June and 19 September I visited Tianjin, Xi’an (Shaanxi), Anqing (Anhui), and Hong Kong, collecting documents and conducting interviews. Overall the trip was a success and the information I gathered will keep me busy for the next year or so. At present I would not rule out a second visit as there are a number of resources I did not have time to access at the USC as well as some areas I would like to visit on the mainland.

Above: Environmental pollution in China—Beijing gridlock (from Chinadigitaltimes.net).
PROJECTS

Stephen (jointly with Elena Korosteleva, Aberystwyth, and Christian Haerpfer, Aberdeen) commissioned a survey in Moldova in December using the World Values Survey questionnaire. It will be made available in the near future to the WVS network, which in turn will allow them access to the 2004-6 wave of surveys in other countries worldwide, including many in the Transition Group area.

A series of focus groups was organised during the summer and autumn in Ukraine, conducted in association with Dr Vladimir Korobov of Kherson University, using funding obtained from Leverhulme. The aim was to explore dimensions of political engagement and disengagement along the lines of the Russian project that provided the basis for a paper in Europe-Asia Studies in December 2005. A first version will be presented to a panel at the BASEES conference, jointly organised with David Lane, on ‘The Orange Revolution Reconsidered’.

Funding from several sources made possible two other national surveys during the year: in Belarus, following the presidential elections in the spring, and in Ukraine, following its parliamentary elections, in both cases in collaboration with Elena Korosteleva.

Jane was successful in getting funding from the Universities China Committee for a visit to Glasgow by Professor Yang Tuan of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in relation to their joint project on health services reform in China.

GRADUATE PROGRESS

Katsu writes that he is currently gearing up a final momentum towards the completion of his PhD thesis. As mentioned above, he published his first paper last year: ‘Participation and protest in the European Union and the “outsider” states’, Contemporary Politics, Volume 12, Number 2, June 2006, pp. 207-223.

During 2007 he will be presenting a paper will be presented with the title ‘Strong Leadership, a Russian Ideal? Popular Attitudes in Russia and the West’ at the BASEES conference in Cambridge.

For the future, he is considering two research papers: ‘Perception Gap of Democracy in Eastwards Enlargement’ and ‘Europe, Protest, Democracy’, making use of survey data including World Values Survey.

For future research (presumably after the next summer), if anyone wishes to seek empirical support for their research, he would be glad to consider a collaborative project that would draw upon his data analysis.

PRESENTATIONS

Jane gave a talk on ‘China’s Politics, Economy and Human Rights’ to the Modern Studies Association, 4 November 2006, and on 13 December she talked on ‘Tackling Unemployment in China: Why is it such a Problem?’, to the Seminar series of the White Rose East Asia Centre, Universities of Leeds and Sheffield.

THE TRANSFORMATION GROUP: WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

The Transformation Group was established in 2004 as a framework for cooperation among those in the Department of Politics, University of Glasgow, who work wholly or in substantial part on political change in Eastern Europe, the Former USSR and China. It includes staff members of the Department in various capacities, and research students. Its co-convenors are Professor Stephen White and Dr Jane Duckett and its other members and associates are:

Staff: Professor Bill Miller, Dr Sarah Oates.


Associates and former staff and students: Dr Yulia Korosteleva, Dr Derek Hutcheson, Dr Caroline Hoy.

Dr Sarah Oates (above)
Professor Bill Miller (right)