The Late Soviet Informal Public Realm, Social Networks, and Trust

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Preamble

The division between the official and informal public realms in late Soviet society had a moral dimension. This structural split presumed a moral split typical of hypocrisy. The master norm of double standards (double morality) was the organizing principle of late Soviet everyday life: While institutional distrust was typical in the official public realm, trustworthy bonding dominated in the informal public sphere, which was penetrated by diverse, mainly personalized social networks (нсовки).

The master norm of double standards or hypocrisy was the legacy of the Soviet past. Despite Petr Stomppka’s (2003) claim that trust culture underwent serious changes in post-Soviet societies, we can see a quite obvious path dependency of moral order in the case of post-Soviet Russia. Trust culture is resistant to radical changes, and needs generations to change. In the course of radical transformation, personalized trust accumulated in late Soviet social networks was invested in new initiatives, and served as the structural opportunity for diverse coping strategies. The institutional distrust typical of the Soviet official public sphere was also reinforced by ongoing institutional instability. However, because of the multiplexity of social networks and class-formation processes, certain social networks (in the entrepreneurial classes) were destroyed, while others (in the lower classes) became reinforced. New institutional consolidation is gradually bringing about new rules of trust based on formalized contracts, and new networks as reactions to economic stimuli.

The main focus of this article is on conceptualizing the informal public realm of the Soviet period. We then look at the structural changes caused by transformation. In both parts we focus especially on the moral dimension of societal changes and its consequences for trust.

The Divide between Official and Informal Public in Late Soviet Society

The concept of ‘informal public’ is used here to designate the diversity of state-independent initiatives and relevant interactions in late Soviet society. Segments of this informal sphere, which was different from the official public sphere, increasingly developed from the end of the 1950s. Unlike previous decades of Soviet history, when communication was either totally officially controlled or took
place in the private setting of the kitchen, the era of stagnation under Leonid
Brezhnev provided public spaces for communication that escaped Communist
Party and state control.

Researchers have identified two public realms in investigating late Soviet so-
ciety: official and informal (see also Voronkov/Zdravomyslova 2002). Official
public life and relevant practices were controlled by Communist Party and state
ideological norms, and regulated by the relevant rules of communication and
social integration that were fixed in official circulars. Informal public life was
regulated by diverse routine rules that will be referred to here by the terms ‘un-
written’ or ‘common’ law (see below).

The Official Public Realm and Kollektivist Practices

The official public realm in Soviet society was the sphere of life regulated by
official rules and controlled by Party and state bureaucracy. In everyday life,
these were the rules of proper conduct and interaction in the Soviet kollektiv
(plural kollektiva). For Hannah Arendt, the concentration camp was the model
for totalitarianism; for us, the Soviet kollektiv is the model (ideal type) of the
Soviet official public. The Russian researcher Oleg Kharkhordin (1999) specifies
the following rules of the game for Soviet kollektiva: mutual surveillance,
collective correction, and self-denunciation. These practices can be conceptu-
alyzed as techniques that produced a true kollektiv as a unit of Soviet society and
the relevant type of ‘Soviet individual’ (Homo sovieticus). Practices of social
control in the communist kollektiv were aimed at the socialization of the Soviet
individual, and employed mutual surveillance and admonition. Reports on com-
rades’ everyday life, discussions of personal life at the comrades’ assemblies,
and control over privacy were at the heart kollektivist activities and practiced as
important procedures in the construction of the Soviet individual. It is worth
mentioning that in Soviet social sciences the category ‘socialist kollektiv’ was
used to designate the specific type of social integration that deliberately fol-
lowed the ideologically approved goals (Sentebov 1962). The pedagogical and
socio-psychological theories of the Soviet kollektiv were developed by the So-
viet intelligentsia from the 1920s onward. The official organizational principle
of the Soviet kollektiv was copied from the Communist Party, and was based on
democratic centralism, which presumed the subordination of minority to major-
ity and lower organizational bodies to higher ones, electivity from bottom to top,
and accountability from top to bottom (Gershberg 1962). Working practices,
however, were often based on clientelist principles. The family was conceptual-
ized as the primary social unit that had constitutive similarity with a working
kollektiv. Thus, in Soviet social science the working unit was conceived as the
extended family, and the family was a proto-kollektiv penetrable by Party and
state regulations.

The Soviet work kollektiv was seen as a patronizing system of social integra-
tion; its educating, enlightening and supportive roles for the individual were
ideologically emphasized. The Soviet kollektiv could be called a quasi-family: It
was entitled not only to produce goods for the Soviet economy, but also to con-
trol individuals’ private lives, and moreover was a conveyor belt for state family
policy. Family conflicts (especially in the period of high Stalinism) were issues
for ‘discussion’ by the kollektiv’s ideological bodies. According to official decla-
rations, divorces should be avoided, sexual relationships should be exclusively
intra-marital, and spouses in conflict could apply to the working kollektiv in or-
der to ‘normalize’ family life. This was practiced basically by wives, who thus
controlled their husbands’ private lives by means of work kollektiva and their
Party and prosoyuz (trade-union) committees. Thus, work and family kollektiva
were subjected to the rules of the official public sphere (as well as to the rules of
the informal realm, as we shall demonstrate later). The penetrability of family
life by state and Party control was partly conditioned by the Soviet gender con-
tract, which presumed the patronage of women by the state as a condition for
the citizenship duties of working mothers (Tyomkina/Rotkirch 1997; Zdravomys-
lova 1999). The moral order relevant for official public rules was fixed in the
official circular Code of the Builder of Communism1, which included a long list
of commandments that could not in reality be followed by sinful Soviet citizens.

Identifying the Informal Public Sphere

Total control over privacy was never achieved in Soviet society, and multiple
examples of state-independent activity are evidence of this. ‘Places of individual
freedom’ are mainly discussed in the context of late Soviet society (from the
1960s to the early 1980s). The so-called period of political stagnation was in fact
a time of informal activity, shadow initiatives, privatization of public life, and
personalization (see Ross/Rotkirch 1999; Shlyapentokh 1989). Here, in the pri-

tate and informal public realms, new individual and group strategies developed
that made it possible for the further reforming of Russia. This sphere of infor-
mality is often presented as quite separate and rigidly divided from the official
public. An imaginary borderline between formal and informal is drawn quite sharply by researchers of late Soviet reality. Informal activities were seen
as those that were never totally controlled or suppressed by the Party and state,
and escaped the rigid regulations of Soviet kollektiv.

1 Kodeks stroiteyla kommunizma.
We see such activity as differing from the private realm in two ways:

At first glance, informal activity and social networks could be conceptualized as private, since they were supposedly invisible to official scrutiny: They were hardly ever mentioned in Soviet media, which were subject to strict censorship. If they were discussed, they were basically treated as deviant from the authentic Soviet way of life, and called (in the official idioms) 'residues of the pre-Soviet past' or 'results of the spoiling influences of the corrupt West'. Officialdom pretended not to see this 'other social life' (or 'under-life'), the rules of which were very different from ideologically confirmed and recognized rules. This 'closed-eyes policy' in the late Soviet period allowed for niches of under-life to develop and even flourish. However, we consider these informal activities to be public, because they were observed, discussed and recognized by Soviet oral culture: in songs, verses, anecdotes and talks, as well as fiction and poetry. We consider them to be public because they belonged to society's everyday coping routine, based on social networks. We see them as public because they took place not only in the family but also in public settings, such as certain clubs, cafes, salons, exhibitions and concerts. Again, in discussing this informal public, we can see how ambiguous and even misleading the classic divide of public and private that we find in political and social theory is (see Weintraub 1997).

Although the 'private' character of these activities could be argued on the basis that individuals engaged in such initiatives were bound by a social network of kin and friendship, informal public activities could also well exist on the basis of teams of colleagues and professional networks, disrupting work kollektiva from inside and consolidating social networks by the glue of shared hypocrisy.

Studies of Soviet everyday life help us to map and designate this informal public sphere. Researchers of the late Socialist society have invented different names - such as 'engendering milieu' (Oleg Yanitskii), 'prerequisites for civil society' (Vladimir Shlyapentokh), 'spaces of freedom' (Leonid Ioinin), and 'public-private sphere' (Viktor Voronkov) - to pinpoint this shadow realm. The names given to the late Soviet informal public realm are umbrella terms that embrace diverse social practices common in Soviet everyday life, such as the shadow (second) economy, clientelle groupings and networks, the limited labor market, retail marketing, dacha (country cottages) and their gardens, certain legal organizations used for illegal purposes, dissident groups, the hard movement, ecological movements, intellectual movements, ethnic societies, samizdat (self-publishing), magnitizdat (home audio recordings), and counter-cultural milieux. We can add to this list of terms the concept of 'social subjects' or 'subjects of innovation' used in Russian activity theory (Shchedrovitskii 1987) or other shadow fields of action (Roos/Rotkirch 1999). These initiatives were in fact major contributors to often non-articulated (shadow) social change during political stagnation.

Below we outline a theory of the informal public realm that will allow us to see the arguments of the proponents of the concept and its proponents. The Russian sociologist Oleg Yanitskii (1993) evokes the idea of the informal public realm in order to explain the emergence of ecological movements in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s. He considers student ecological associations organized in high schools and universities at the start of Khruuzhev's thaw to be social movements. According to Yanitskii, the 'totalitarian system' was disrupting itself from within, creating niches for initiatives and uncontrolled activities: He calls such niches for initiative action 'engendering environments', and defines such an environment as "a legitimate and, in most cases, state organization, which stimulated the emergence of organizations that became a vehicle for social movement activities, provided them with resources, including ideology, and promoted informal activities" (Yanitskii 1996:29). Yanitskii describes engendering environments as both spatial, public settings in universities, campuses or editorial offices, and space-referent social groupings that formed the mobilization potential for ecological initiatives. Students, researchers and intellectuals (innovative Soviet intelligentsia) were the core groups of the ecological movement. Yanitskii names four types of engendering environment: (1) universities and major high schools; (2) research institutes and academic campuses; (3) Soviet professional organizations (Union of Writers, Union of Composers, etc.); and (4) the mass media (especially popular science). This means that he sees the seeds of informal collective action in Soviet institutions organized according to official public principles. In such institutions individuals developed informal activities bonded on the mutual trust of comrades (Yanitskii 1993).

From another perspective, Leonid Ioinin tries to valorize the concept of freedom as relevant to a description of Soviet society, and argues in favor of its non-political interpretation. He claims that Soviet everyday life provided numerous opportunities for individual self-realization - love and friendship relationships, admiration and single combat with nature (alpinism, tourism), literary sentiments, mythological and fairy-tale worlds, scientific work, alcoholic and narcotic trips - that were spheres of identification and self-realization more rewarding to the Soviet person than politics. These social practices formed the realm of freedom, where individuals could pursue their needs and interests. According to Ioinin, political activity was the exceptional sphere of experience, as it was not the most significant for a human being and opportunities in it did not open in late socialism (Ioinin 1997:35). Thus, Ioinin argues that liberated activities took place in specific milieux, both at work and in leisure time, and in liberalized settings.
In describing late Soviet social life, Vladimir Shlyapentokh writes about 'pre-requisites for civil society', in the forms of countercultural movements, dissident groups, the shadow economy, the limited labor market, dacha gardens, retailing, marketing, etc. Describing the private/public divide in late Soviet life, he formulates the privatization hypothesis: According to his argument, the gap between official ideology and private behavior was widening from the 1960s, and people became more oriented toward their extra-official activities, private life and relevant interests (Shlyapentokh 1989).

Discussing the behavioral and sexual revolution in late Soviet Russia, the Finnish researcher Anna Rotkirch (2000) refers to the phenomenon of the Soviet 1960s generation, which she compares with rebellious baby-boomers in the West. She observes striking differences between the former and the latter. She argues that the Soviet 1960s generation (shestidesyatniki) can not really be conceived as a totality, but was united by a common drive for 'personalization'.

'Personal values such as family life and leisure became increasingly important for Soviet citizens. The informal networks expanded in full bloom, and it seems that the frontiers between home and workplace became relatively more permeable during this time' (Rotkirch 2000:162). Such life was regulated not by the official rules of Soviet kolektiva, but by other rules of expected mutual support, based on community bonding.

In designating social practices of the informal realm from that visibility in late Soviet society, researchers also meant to indicate that Soviet kolektiva were undergoing essential changes. Official activities were personalized and kolektivnyst practices were, if even followed, fulfilled with hypocritical attitudes. Having described these approaches to the informal public, let’s turn to the reconstruction of the structural opportunities that made these informal social practices possible.

The Emergence of the Informal Public

The boundaries between private and public changed in the course of Soviet industrialization. From the beginning of the 1920s, the private realm was physically reduced to a minimum, if not absorbed by the official public. Such absorption resulted from the kolektivist ideology and the practice of intrusive and abusive Party and state control, including rigid censorship. Soviet practices of everyday life in the housing policy of large industrializing cities led to the mass liquidation of apartments for individual family owners. The redistributive 'density housing policy' resulted in living conditions in which tenants were forced to re-

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2 Rotkirch prefers the term 'personalization' to Shalyapentokh's 'privatization'.

3 For a similar argument see Ledeneva (1998); Lonkila (1999).

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4 In our opinion, this sphere is much more comprehensive than Ariès' demi-prive (i.e., visiting friends, invariant theatre-boxes, limited access clubs, etc. In other words, the public realm, but closed).
were supposed to be controlled by the state and performed in the format of Soviet kollektiva, actually had unintended consequences: They promoted the formation of social milieux centered around common interests that were not imposed but needed to be invested in. Thus, we can see the informal public sphere as a realm of social practices that initially emerged in private and official public settings, but consolidated in the conceivable realm of independent activities based on personalized social networks. In the late Soviet period the informal public emerged from the private sphere per se and from all possible segments of the official public that accommodated diverse informal activities.

Written and Unwritten Codes: Hypocrisy as the Master Norm of the Unwritten Code

We need now clarify our understanding of the rules (codes) that regulated communication and social integration in the two different public realms in Soviet society: These rules constitute the moral order of late Soviet society. Such moral order can be called hypocritical, in accordance with its master norm. This term is used here to designate the adopted principle of double standards according to which Soviet everyday life was organized. Let’s clarify this statement.

We distinguish between ‘written’ and ‘habitual’ codes as two clusters of rules that operated in the official public and informal public realms, respectively, and defined their boundaries. We are far from using proper legal terms here, and are introducing a sociological interpretation of these codes. A ‘habitual code’ is considered here as non-legal conventional regulations objectified in mundane social practices: It basically has the same meaning as common law, understood as based on usage and custom; or unwritten law, as distinct from statute law. In the period of late socialism, habitual informal codes evidently dominated in the regulation of everyday life. The social practices of the private sphere, and the household economy, as well as shadow entrepreneurship, counter-cultural activities, and even the mundane functioning of kollektiva were mostly regulated by habitual codes that worked as unquestioned traditions or cultural patterns and were morally supported. Metastases of multiple informal codes forced out the written code. The dominance of the informal codes during the last decades of socialism implied fundamental shifts in social life. Informal codes originating from stable social bonds were officially unrecognized but deliberately followed by interest-seeking individuals. They were based on collective identities and trustworthy relations developed on the level of everyday life.

5 Webster’s Dictionary (1987:79)

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The written code, on the other hand, consisted of the proclaimed declarative official regulations that were at work at official occasions, such as party meetings, working collective assemblies, and public demonstrations on May 1 and November 7. The written code functioned as a moral canon supported by ideological rituals and purposeful campaigns. By the end of the Soviet era, declarations of the written code worked basically in the form of symbolic objectifications performed at specific official public occasions. The written code was also put to work when sanctions had to be imposed on those who rejected following the master frame of double morality.6

The Russian researcher Oleg Vite (1996) notes that both codes gained legitimacy in Russian society, however inconsistent they were. Legitimization of the habitual code was based on its instrumental efficiency in the regulation of everyday coping strategies of Soviet citizens. If the habitual code was challenged, it would claim a break of Soviet routine and radical change of the idealistic written code. The strict demands to follow the written code could have led to the failure of the system: This is why the mundane breaching of the written code, and thus following the rules of the unwritten code, actually reinforced and reproduced systemic integrity. This is also why a very specific dualism of inconsistent formal and habitual codes was accepted as a master norm of the regulation of daily life, and was seldom challenged.

The official public realm was constructed in such a way that it excluded social practices relevant in the informal public realm. As Vite puts it: “The practical priority of the habitual code was compensated by tabooing the discussion of its practice” (Vite 1996:69). The immense growth of diverse, informally regulated practices was admitted into the official public realm under ‘relics of capitalism’ or ‘influences of the West’ that had to be fought against. The official public presentation of Soviet life looked like a utopia, which was completely inconsistent with everyday experience: outstanding construction sites, heroic labor, cultural achievements, high moral standards, humanistic slogans, kollektivist orientation, etc. The social reality of everyday practices contrasted to what has been officially admitted and/or discussed: Economic deficits, low standards of living,

6 Those were political campaigns of persecution of dissidents, especially in 1964, 1968 and 1982 (see Alexeeva 1992). The claim of political dissidents in the Soviet Union was to follow the written code: ‘to live according to the truth’.

7 The wording of ‘master norm’ is inspired by the term ‘master code’ used by Snow/Benford (1992) to describe the dominant interpretation of the social and political situation and strategies of social change that is shared by SMOs and population. The master frame is the loose ideology of social movement that becomes efficient in its mobilization efforts. Here we use master norm to designate the common, generally accepted, but usually misconceived rule of everyday behavior.
long waiting lines, ideological cynicism, and egoism could be observed everywhere. The written code regulated kollektivist practices; habitual codes regulated the totality of everyday life. However, these habitual codes were unrecognized and silenced in the official public realm. On the contrary, beyond the boundary of officialdom, habitual codes regulated the coping strategies of the Soviet people of different milieux. Only privatized institutions were trustworthy, and one could privatize them by submitting to the regulations of the informal code.

The diversity of habitual codes corresponded to common-law regulations in different social milieux of Soviet society. Socio-economic class, ethnicity, gender, generation and religion are the categories that can account for the particular rules of informal public communication. However, in spite of the variability of habitual codes, there was an essential commonality in their construction. This commonality is structured by the master norm that sheltered and unified the diversity of everyday morality of different social milieux. The master norm of Soviet everyday life was that of 'legitimate double standards', or legitimate hypocrisy. The only way to follow this habitable code efficiently was to misrecognize it on official occasions: i.e., not to articulate it publicly. The essence of Soviet hypocrisy was the shared tacit knowledge and practice of double standards that each individual followed: He or she performed according one set of rules in official kollektivist gatherings, but followed another set of rules in informal public and private settings. In the late Soviet period, alienation from the formal code became larger; loyalty to the rules of official kollektiva was questioned. Without a consistent policy of terror, the state could not force people to follow the written code. Escapist and exit strategies became more and more popular and morally accepted, which meant that the state/official public, with its moral canon, was deteriorating. Institutional distrust was pervasive in the late Soviet period: Trust could be guaranteed by belonging to informal networks. This master norm of hypocrisy revealed itself in widespread bribing and blat (influence or string-pulling) mechanisms and patron-client relations, as well as different forms of corruption.

We assume that the informal public sphere is associated not only with social practices of identifiable social groupings (which could possibly pose opposition to authorities). We also assume that every Soviet individual (including those belonging to various social strata of Soviet nomenclature) lived and acted in both official and informal public realms, respecting the invisible but efficient boundary between them, and not confusing the different rules regulating behavior in the official public and informal public realms. Such double standards became the essence of 'social schizophrenia', which is fairly attributed to the social-anthropological type of so-called 'Soviet common man' (Levada 1993). The division between official and informal public penetrated the life of every individual, every institution, and every kollektiv, showing itself practically in a modus operandi that was different in kollektiva and in the loose communities of co-habitants constituting a social milieu.

To recap: Double morality as a category describing the moral order of Soviet everyday embraces institutional distrust and reinforcement of trust based upon personalized social networks. The appearance of the private sphere, the development of privacy and clientelism, and systemic mutual favors are conceived here as indicators of double morality combining institutional bureaucratic distrust and personalized trust.

The Differentiated Informal Public Realm and Relevant Social Milieux

Although we have identified a master norm of double standards, we cannot draw any a priori conclusions about the essence of the actual habitual codes that regulated activities in the informal public realm in different social milieux. To identify unwritten codes, we need an in-depth study of late Soviet everyday life, the domain in which tacit, practical knowledge and pre-reflexive levels of articulation are rooted (Rotkirsch 2000; Giddens 1984:336-337). Tacit knowledge is not articulated if life experience does not make a problem out of it: Day to day, individuals follow the routine as though automatically, not paying attention to what they actually do, or how and why they do it. 'Everyday life' here means routine social practices that differ across social networks or social milieux. Although researchers are currently paying more and more attention to Soviet everyday life (Lebina 1999; Ionin 1997; Ledeneva 1997, 1998), empirical evidence of late Soviet everyday life has not yet been collected and lacks conceptualization. There is still insufficient conceptualization of everyday morality as a form of implicit knowledge, as well as of concrete social practices of everyday coping. We assume that different modes of habitual rules operated in different fields of the informal public realm, and that these modes have to be empirically studied and identified. An ethnological approach to late Soviet life would be productive in overcoming this gap.

The research task, therefore, can be reformulated in the following way: to find out the rules of the game operating in concrete social milieux. As researchers of Soviet everyday life we cannot agree with Oleg Kharkhordin, who claims that the rules of the game in informal collectives were quite similar to those in formally organized kollektiva. While his analysis of the social practices of work and family kollektiva is convincing and enlightening, we find that his conclusion on the general rule of denunciation (oblichenie) as a practice of social integration that was employed in informal as well as official collectives needs more scrutiny. The examples he gives to prove similarities between Soviet-era official and informal collectives are bullying and hazing among Red Army draftees, and
Many friendship and collegial relations were ruined in the course of economic and political transformation, as the new rules of the game became institutionalized. We dare to claim that the fragility of old networks has become especially obvious in the new bourgeois classes of Russian society.

In the lower classes, in the depressed sectors of the economy, and among the new poor, on the other hand, old social networks have intensified, providing resources for survival strategies. However, these resources cannot raise the position of those who use them (Clarke 1999; Buravoy 1999; Buravoy et al. 2000; Travin 2001; Tartakovskaya 2003; Yaroshenko 2002). Whereas personalized trust in the lower classes still remains the main currency in survival and small-scale coping strategies, in the entrepreneurial classes new rules of impersonalized contracts are gradually forcing out old practices.

References

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Trust and Social Transformation
Theoretical approaches and empirical findings from Russia