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Transformation as the Source of a New Mythology

Viktor Voronkov

Introduction

This article is, on the one hand, a reflection upon the public discourse on the quality of life as experienced by the population of Russia, and, on the other hand, a meditation on the research conducted by my colleagues (Fedorova & Pomin), presented in this report. There appear to be two significant reasons for such a reflection, related to the specific nature of the interpretation of the results of studies carried out in Russia while it is undergoing transformation.

One of these reasons is the idiosyncrasy of the Russian field of discussion, in which all sociologists rely upon a body of claims about Russian reality that is shared by the professional community, i.e. claims that are regarded as axioms (e.g. 'impoverishment', 'anomy', etc.). However, the axiomatic nature of many of these postulates is doubtful, since people's observed real behaviour does not always correspond with the conclusions drawn from the studies.

The other reason is the fundamental lack of comprehension, experienced by Western sociologists when reading articles by their Russian colleagues. This incomprehension is not related to the content of the text, but rather to the way in which information is presented and systematized. Moreover, it is linked to a lack of knowledge about the (post-)Soviet context in which both persons being studied and the Russian sociologists carrying out the studies are socialized.

It is precisely this kind of understanding that the Western reader lacks, as he/she usually attaches his/her own meanings to the reality of a different society. In this article I will dwell on the problems that must be considered by any reader who wishes to form a
sober opinion of the reality of the transformation in Russia. If we examine the countless articles in Russia’s leading newspapers and journals, analyzing the situation in the country, we see a catastrophic scenario of the development of Russian society. The mass media, with its passion for such visions, supercharges social hysteria, while ignoring the positive changes that are taking place.

A certain dimension of sociological reality, which is only remotely related to social reality, has evolved. Here, established myths and artifacts provide the foundation for the development of discussion, which is based on cross-references to published articles and papers. The huge volume of analytical material, written by authoritative Russian sociologists, political scientists, and entire institutes, leaves a powerful impression.

Although the period of confusion in society, resulting from the loss of established points of reference, ended long ago, and most people have developed new and effective strategies for survival, the catastrophic perception of the world continues to prevail in the professional sociological community. This community is inclined to agree with certain hypotheses that exist, either overtly or covertly, in social and political journalism. This leads to prejudiced evaluations of the process of transformation. New behavioural strategies are not to be seen from the well-worn paths of the discourse on transformation, since political and normative appraisal prevails over scientific and theoretical evaluation.

Topics related to the quality of life and standard of living of the Russian population are particularly fertile soil for speculation. Many writers develop such themes as starvation, and even the extinction and degradation of the whole nation. By way of illustration, it is possible to cite the headlines of articles from the ‘Independent Newspaper’, one of the most authoritative liberal papers: “The Population is Dying Out, But Not Fast Enough” (18.04.1997), “The Land of Universal Mortality” (30.09.1997), “The Threat of the Degeneration of the Nation is Becoming a Reality” (02.06.1998), “Soon We’ll Be Extinct. This Is an Answer, Not a Question.” (02.06.1998).

‘The Russian Newspaper’, published an extensive article entitled “Thirty Old Men for Each Newborn Child” (23.05.1997) containing references to scientific authorities. The subtiles were enough to make one’s blood freeze: “The Depopulation of the Russian Ethnos”, “Horrifying Growth Rate”, “The Nation is Losing its Intellect — Two Thirds of Teenagers Psychologically Handicapped.”

The impression is being created that Russian megalomania assumes inverse forms: “If we cannot be the strongest, the richest and the happiest — characteristic of former Soviet discourse — we shall at least win the fight for the right to be the poorest, the sickest and the unhappiest”. Positive changes are disregarded, e.g., the increase in the average life expectancy of men by four whole years within the space of three years. This is highly reminiscent of the competition between some Russian and German specialists for the right to claim the greatest number of deaths as a result of Stalinism or fascism. Although catastrophic discourse dominates the field of communication, the observation of daily life in Russia shows that the majority of the population is quite successfully implementing new economic strategies without expressing anxiety over the problems that are discussed in public discourse. Has the quality of life experienced by the people in Russia really deteriorated in the past few years? In terms of changes in the objective conditions upon which the quality of life depends, the population has adapted relatively quickly to fundamental changes.

In his analysis of the demographic processes taking place in Russia, the Russian demographer, Anatoly Vishnevsky, notes that the typical explanations for the increased rates of mortality and sickness (impoverishment, deterioration of public health, environmental pollution, etc.) do not always correspond to the real changes. It is not the weakest and most vulnerable who have suffered, instead, the rise in mortality has mostly affected men between the ages of 30-60 years. This is related to the syndrome of adaptation to sudden changes in social and economic conditions. The greatest psychological burden has been borne by those who must support and ensure the survival of their families (Vishnevsky 1998).

The population, however, has long since recovered from the shock of the early 1990s, and demographic processes have resumed their previous course. On no account does this mean that everything is fine. On the contrary, things are as bad as they used to be in the USSR. The fact is that the Soviet situation in terms of health and mortality was a horrifying one for a developed country. The picture was distorted by the peculiarities of the age structure of the population, and the censorship imposed on negative results of demographic analysis.

In principle, nothing has really changed. Developed countries have long since moved over to a new strategy to reduce the risks of illness — a strategy which presupposes that the people themselves take an active interest in their own health. The paternalistic Soviet system wore itself out long before the reforms began. The previous method of implementing public health measures from above has not given way in Russia to active individual strategies for looking after oneself. Alcoholism and the high mortality rate (from violence, accidents, and alcohol-related illnesses) are the consequences of the social situation that existed already in the USSR. The article by Elena Zdравомыслова and Elena Chikadze in this report demonstrates this point.

It is apparent that the lack of a culture of self-preservation and healthy lifestyle-style is characteristic both of previous Soviet times and the period of transformation (Vishnevsky 1998). Some peculiarities of the destructive lifestyle in both the USSR and Russia have been reported by Mille and Shkolnikov: Russia has the greatest rate of alcohol consumption in the world, and it is among the countries that have the highest numbers of smokers (Mille & Shkolnikov 1999).

The Soviet value system, in which health and well-being occupied a low place, is one of the reasons for the current situation concerning health. Stereotyped discussions on the “disintegration of the public health system”
and the "crisis" hinder the search for the roots of social problems (Vishelevsky 1997, 199).

The main sources of information available are statistics and the results of sociological studies, mainly in the form of polls and mass surveys. To what extent do these sources help us to understand the processes of transformation? The authenticity of statistics in the USSR was questionable, and most results were simply kept secret. Serious sociologists were unable to use such information. The situation today is even worse. Although statistics were often invented or distorted for ideological purposes during the Soviet era, the system for the collection and presentation of statistical information functioned quite well. Today, the statistics service in Russia is experiencing economic difficulties. One may ask what is the value of the economic facts, if half of the economy lies outside the realm of statistics?

Some writers have made mention of this (Birman 1997, Voronkov 1998). Statistics clearly worsen the situation, as they bring to light contradictions that are impossible to explain without casting doubt on the sources of the statistics themselves. How do we understand that, during the supposedly continual decline of production and the real income of the population, mass consumption, including the consumption of expensive goods and services, is on the increase? Within five years, e.g., the number of private-owned cars has doubled, and the number of people travelling overseas has increased 20-fold (Birman 1997). On the whole, the issue of the poverty of the Russian people is a favourite theme for speculation, and a myth has been created about the total impoverishment of the population. There is practically no theoretical discussion of the concept of poverty in Russia, and studies are reduced, for the most part, to public polls about income levels. Often the facts are contradictory. According to various sources, anything from 10–80% of the population fall into the category of 'poor'. A number of sociologists show that the reforms are leading to mass impoverishment and that, for 90–95% of the population, the standard of living has actually dropped.

The discourse on 'mass impoverishment' has been reduced to an exchange of ideological blows, and the statistics and the results of public polls are interpreted according to political taste. Thus, formal statistical information is used in those instances in which it illustrates the catastrophic model proposed by the author. If the statistics are unable to do this, they are criticized, and emphasis is placed on some expert evaluations, which are considered more suitable evidence.

An example of this is the question of unemployment. In the opinion of the majority of authors, the official unemployment rates (in St. Petersburg, not over 1%) are far from the truth. Thus, the concealed unemployment, which statistics do not reveal, is exaggerated in the discussion. At the same time, those leading the discussion lose sight of the fact that the majority of the unemployed are in fact illegally employed and benefit from additional income from the shadow economy, the volume of which is estimated at least 40–50% of the total volume of the Russian economy. Russian employment figures lose millions of people who are neither counted as officially employed, nor registered in the labour exchange. Independent of whether people have a formal place of work, almost all of them are successfully implementing new economic strategies in the shadow economy, having realized that the economic strategies of the past Soviet era are no longer effective.

Another source of information on which experts rely consists of the results of polls and mass surveys which are often difficult to interpret and understand. Thus a whole series of circumstances compels us to be wary of published results.

Sociologists usually base their studies on their own constructions of reality, without making sure that these coincide with the notions of reality that are held by the people being interviewed. They believe that their questions and the answers received have been understood in exactly the same way by both sides.

Doubts about the applicability of traditional sociological methods (polls) to the analysis of today's Russian reality increase with each new research report. Let us take, for example, the data derived by VTsIOM from responses to questions on the economic situation (a) in Russia, (b) in the respondent's home-town or village, and (c) in the respondent's own household. The overwhelming majority (about 80%) are certain that poverty prevails in Russia. Less categorical are the claims about poverty in their home-town (about two-thirds of the respondents). About half of the people described their own family as "poor". These facts point out that people's perceptions of the situation outside their own experience is shaped by the mass media, from which information is obtained to "flush out" one's own reality. Thus the dramatization of the situation in the country does not come as a surprise. However, people are capable of giving an adequate evaluation of poverty in their own town, even though they are influenced by public opinion.

There are grounds to presume that the respondents are thus willing to lower their standard of living (e.g. "I can't say that all is well with me, when Russia is starving"). This is a reflection of the Soviet habit of faking poverty at a time when deviation from the material standard that was more or less the same for all provoked suspicions of unearned income. Informants (respondents) who confide in sociologists in open interviews tend to evaluate their situation as very prosperous, whilst at the same time emphasizing that they are probably "an exception".

It seems that the peculiarities of socialization in Soviet society make the researcher question the reliability of information derived from an interview or poll. It is worth noting that the rules of communication in the private and public domain have changed for Soviet people than they do for the Westerners. Sociological analysis, beyond taking into account the rules established in the development of the interrelation of those spheres, gives a distorted picture of the social actions of individuals.

In the strictly public and official sphere, discussions of anything fell under the influence of the rules of custom were taboo. The vast increase
in the diversity of social life in the post-Stalinist era, regulated largely
by such rules, was only discussed in the
public sphere as the fight with the
'surviving elements of capitalism'
(Vite 1996). The public sphere pre-
sented the life of the Soviet peoples as
a utopia, which in no way corresponded
with the day-to-day experience.

On the other hand, in another sphere
— let us call it the 'quasi-public'
— it was possible to discuss almost anything. Every Soviet citizen lived and operated in both spheres, knew the rules and did not confuse the two realms, so different were the public and quasi-public dimensions.

It seems that for any person socialized
in the Soviet society, interaction with a sociologist belongs to the pub-
lic domain. The sociologist always represents the public realm. Thus the person follows the rules that he/she is
used to observing in this sphere: how
and what ought to be discussed. For
the Soviet person the public arena was
never the place to discuss real life is-

Thus, the sociologist who attempts
to investigate the standard of living of
Russian citizens, gains circumstantial information about low wages at the
formal work place, the irregularity of
pay, official benefits or pensions, high
prices, and shortage of money, with
which to maintain the previous stand-
ard of living. However, the subject of
additional income (often the main source of income) earned on the shad-
ow economy, fundamentally alters the
sociologist’s understanding of the per-
son’s standard of living, and is there-
fore passed over. It should be empha-
sized that people under the age of thirty
usually speak more openly on all
subjects, since their secondary social-
ization has taken place under non-Sov-
iet conditions.

The person will give a different ver-
sion of events to a sociologist whom
he/she knows well and who has won
his/her trust. This is the only kind of
research (the narrative interview, linked with participant observation)
that can help us to understand what is
happening to people in reality, to un-
derstand their life scenarios and be-

I have countless examples from my
own experience as a researcher to il-

strate this theme, but here is one that
brings out my point. When I was study-
ing the Russian-speaking (Soviet)
community in the emigrant milieu of
Berlin, my informant (the person I
was about to interview) greeted me
saying that he had just been inter-
viewed by a German sociologist. In
response to my question about what
my friend had told him, I heard the
‘natural’ reply: “Don’t worry, I gave
him the right answers”. This example
illustrates the fact that the respondent
usually gives the ‘correct’ answers to
the sociologist who comes from the
public domain.

Thus, no matter how we measure the
quality of life in the context of Rus-

Notes

1 In this case, the most significant are the annual collective analytical monographs of the Institute of Social and Political Re-
search of the Russian Academy of Scienc-
es, which, judging by its publications, is
opposed to liberal reforms and each year
publishes increasingly gloomy prognoses of
the “demise of Russia”. The last of such
surveys was an evaluation of the situation
in 1998 (Ospov 1999).

2 V镜子 annually.

3 The problem of measuring the quality of
discussion extensively (see for example:
Filipp & Ferring 1992; Glazter 1990; Glazter & Zapf 1984). I would like
to draw particular attention here to the
difficulties facing researchers when inter-
preting data from statistics and inquiries
under the conditions of the rapid transformation
al changes (e.g. Mille & Shkolnikov 1999).
The Quality of Life and Health

M. Fedorova & E. Fomin

Introduction

The empirical part of this study is based on statistical data from a mass survey on the quality of life and the attitude of the population towards their health in three Russian cities (St. Petersburg, Samara and Pskov). The following components of the quality of life are considered: health potential, work attitudes, material well-being, education, and relationships with family and friends. The main focus is on health as an important factor that ensures satisfaction with life. Health is understood as a comprehensive category. The transition-related consequences on people's health and well-being have been presented by Kaisa Kauppinen in her introduction in this report.

One of the aims of the study was to reconstruct the health-oriented strategies of men and women. Special attention was paid to the comparative analysis of the subjective appraisals of health and objective health parameters, and the features of drinking and smoking habits. The effect of stress as a significant factor arising from unemployment, loneliness, failures in family life, poverty, optimism/pessimism, and its influence on health were also evaluated.

Finally, we assess gender equality in employment and equal career opportunities, women's perception of safety in different environments, as well as sexual harassment at the workplace were examined. We made certain methodological assumptions to make our analysis gender-sensitive. With this approach we were able to detect significant differences between male and female perceptions of the quality of life pertaining to gender.

Research methods and materials

We chose three cities in European Russia for our study: St. Petersburg...