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Informal Networking as Effective Resource and Sociocultural Traditions of *Homo Sovieticus* Sieci nieformalne jako zasób skuteczny a tradycje socjokulturowe *homo sovieticus*

Abstract: Among various reasons for transformation difficulties or modernisation failure in the former Soviet Union countries there is one that is usually considered the most prominent – corruption, as well as several other phenomena closely related to it, that is informal exchange of favours or patron-client relations. These larger phenomena developed in the specific and favourable sociocultural and historical context. Some elements of this context concern the concept of *Homo Sovieticus* with his attitudes towards informal social networking, reciprocity and group belonging. Informality and informal networking helped and still helps people to “get things done” in easier or mutually beneficial ways representing either facilitation or substitute of formal, institutional action. At the same time informal exchange of favours not only maintains but also reproduces and reinforces longstanding dependencies both among the power elites and middle class representatives making further reforms and modernisation virtually impossible. The paper describes sociocultural traditions that are connected to the *Homo Sovieticus* concept and explains mechanisms of informal networking as an effective resource and social capital of a person.

Keywords: informality, social capital, social networks, traditional personality, post-communism

Streszczenie: Wśród przyczyn problemów transformacyjnych czy też klęski modernizacyjnej w krajach byłego Związku Radzieckiego istnieje jedna, uważana za najważniejszą – korupcja, a także kilka innych zjawisk ściśle związanych z nieformalną wymianą korzyści albo relacjami patron-klient. Te szersze zjawiska rozwinęły się w specyficznym i sprzyjającym kontekście socjokulturowym i historycznym. Niektóre elementy tego kontekstu odnoszą się do koncepcji *homo sovieticus* z jego postawami wobec nieformalnych sieci społecznych, wzajemności i przynależności grupowej. Nieformalność i sieci nieformalne pomagały i nadal pomagają ludziom w załatwianiu problemów w sposób łatwiejszy albo wzajemnie korzystny, który staje się ułatwieniem lub substytutem działania formalnego, instytucjonalnego. Jednocześnie nieformalna wymiana korzyści nie tylko podtrzymuje, ale również odtwarza lub wzmacnia długoterminowe zależności tak wśród elit, jak i przedstawicieli klas średniej, co sprawia, że dalsze reformy czy modernizacja stają się praktycznie niemożliwe. W artykule opisywane są tradycje socjokulturowe, związane z koncepcją *homo sovieticus*, i wyjaśniane mechanizmy działania sieci nieformalnych jako skutecznego zasobu oraz osobistego kapitału społecznego.

Słowa kluczowe: nieformalność, kapitał społeczny, sieci społeczne, osobowość tradycyjna, postkomunizm

Informal networking practices and their corruptive effects are often regarded as a counter-effective mechanism for state institutions and democracy development in Eastern Europe and especially former Soviet Union countries. Despite such negative influence these practices are still actual and sometimes

even vital for everyday life and work performance for the reasons that are deeply rooted in history of the Soviet Union and specifically in its Soviet Man creation policies. Later critics and sovietologists called it *Homo Sovieticus*. Why do his attributes seem to be of interest in the present analysis of informal networking as an effective resource? The Soviet times were full not only with ideological manoeuvring, economic instrumentalism and particularistic allegiances. A Soviet man relied on informality and sought for additional support, routines or even rituals in his social networks. It was not only an informal economy that had developed especially in the second half of the XX century, but the whole informal dimension of life and thinking in post-communist societies that make it possible for a larger part of the Soviet population to live through the hardships of first revolutionary and industrialization years, war and reconstruction as well as political repressions and later transformation.

Homo Sovieticus

The notion of a Soviet man as a unique type of personality, on the one hand, is closely linked to Soviet propaganda activities, and on the other, to the later criticism of intellectuals disillusioned with the regime as well as dissidents. No matter if one was likely to find such a distinctive type of personality in the Soviet Union in the XX c., it still represents a strong idea in post-communist public and media discourses. Exceptional social and ideological totalitarian experiments concerned and influenced everyone both in material and immaterial terms.

In general one can hardly argue that a Soviet man had been “designed” deliberately in advance. But the communist ideas, Soviet ideological education and propaganda certainly contributed much. Here is the way how New Man was in certain terms planned: “Proletarian coercion in all its forms, beginning with the firing squad is.. the way of fashioning the communist man out of the human material of the capitalist era”¹.

The key factors of emergence and development of a Soviet man were undoubtedly current circumstances, “the creation of a new Soviet type of man began from the very first days of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917”². However, this does not mean that the Soviet leadership and ideologists, for instance, did everything – including repression or mass executions – in order to anthropologically create a new type of man³. One can see a confusion of cause and effect logic because of the inconsistency between the perfect Communist builder and a real Soviet citizen tired of “the incessant pursuit of goods”⁴. So during the first decades of the Bolshevik regime the new type of society was

¹ M. Heller, *Cogs in the Wheel: the Formation of Soviet Man*, 1988, p. 3.

² N. Popov, *The Russian People speak: democracy at the crossroads*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 1995, p. 27.

³ “Between 1917 and 1959, 66 million people were sentenced to death for political crimes in the Soviet Union. The result was to create a new type of person, just as the leadership had intended – ‘Homo Sovieticus’.” (Camera focused on trained police dogs and drunks) – From the film, “We Can’t Live Like This,” [in:] D. H. Lempert, *Daily Life in a Crumbling Empire*, 1990, p.158.

⁴ C. Wanner, *Burden of dreams: history and identity in post-Soviet Ukraine*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania 1998, p. 53.

created. At the same time, one should remember that it did happen on the basis of the resources of the traditional society of the Russian Empire, long ago Nikolai Bierdiayev stated that “only in Russia could a communist revolution take place”⁵.

Soviet man certainly changed in the course of the historical development of the Soviet Union from its creation to its dissolution. However, one can outline some dominant characteristics that distinguished *Homo Sovieticus* as a certain type of personality “best adapted to this particular type of political organization and the economic reality”⁶. In the early 1990s, in a sociological account on the Soviet people *The Simple Soviet Man* “the product and a focus of an unstable sociopolitical system” was explained as having a complicated set of interconnected meanings: related to the masses (“like everyone”), de-individualized, opposed to everything elite and idiosyncratic, “transparent”...primitive in his/her needs (survival level), created once and for all and immutable, and easily controlled⁷. For instance, modern reflexivity and individualism as opposed to conformism and collectivism were not only part of the Soviet project. It was not only the Communist ideology that restrained a free initiative. It only institutionalised existing conformity, maladaptability and inflexibility of a traditional personality.

The role of the family

The most important social group both in the official line and everyday life terms was the family and the circle of work and sometimes colleagues and neighbours. Harsh circumstances of economic development challenges and a political system of totalitarianism and authoritarianism made the family role even more significant. In addition to the official policy of “a family as a cell of society” it was indeed the last shelter for the average Soviet citizen. The Soviet regime broke its ties with the “pre-Revolutionary” époque and established its own generation count. Then some exception was made during the Great Repression of the 1930s when children of “a people’s enemy” were rarely treated as normal citizens. The connection of generations could only be broken by the use of children to spy on adults and the training of informers.⁸ However, it was preserved in symbolic terms. A strong link existed not only with ancestors but also with descendants. A Soviet Man worked almost all his life with the hope for a better destiny for his children that would certainly see “the bright future.” They said, “we shall not see it but at least our children and grandchildren will.”

Family was also a comprehensive metaphor of the social life, especially in pre-modern society. Similarly, the political regime in the Soviet Union was built to a large extent according to ideas about family connections, mutual obli-

⁵ N. Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, Ann Arbor 1960, p. 114.

⁶ V. Zaslavsky, *Contemporary Russian Society and its Soviet Legacy: The Problem of State-Dependent Workers*, [in:] *Social Change and Modernization: lessons from Eastern Europe*, Bruno Gracelli (ed.), New York: de Gruyter, Berlin 1995, p. 46.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p.194.

⁸ M. Heller, *op. cit.*, p. 173-178.

gations of each member and family “father/children” hierarchy. “We had a Big Daddy who had to think for us and we had to work for him. That Big Daddy was our state”⁹. Adherence to a strong personality can also be explained in terms of family relations and specific interpersonal contacts still observable in post-communist countries. Even if the Stalin cult was supposed to end after the 20th Congress, the country did not become an orphan. First of all, because it kept its first and greatest leader Lenin almost alive. Second, the myth created for Stalin was a great benefit for succeeding general secretaries as well as later leaders in several former Soviet Union countries. To some extent, the whole Soviet authoritarian project was successful because it was placed on the imperial Russian grounds of traditions.

One of the Soviet most effective myths on collective action was “One for all and all for one.” It quickly proved to be a myth indeed since the problem of social stratification and hierarchy had never been resolved in that supposedly egalitarian society. Until the beginning of the 1930s the party bureaucracy strata later called *nomenklatura* had been more or less formed. However, the 1930s brought completely new figures to these posts due to the repression wave that cleaned out the newly formed Soviet upper cast. Yet from this time on, it would never be shaken in the same way. Therefore, there was the Russian saying on nepotism and corruption trends that is still effective at the beginning of the XXI c.: “the son of a colonel could not become a general because a general has his own son”, a certain phenomenon described in the studies of social networking and corruption as ‘amoral familism’.

Social networking

Networking, social ties, kinship connections, friendships that form a part of the social capital in terms of Western society in the communist and post-communist countries represented one similar to family, one of the most significant spheres of the Soviet social relations. In order to achieve success a Soviet man had to be an exceptionally flexible networker. Though he was lacking initiative, diligence or honesty at the factory or kolkhoz because of wage levelling or shortages, most his inventiveness and creativity, the ability to risk and discover crucial solutions to overcome numerous formal barriers especially in the period of late socialism was directed to social networking and informal economy.

Social networking and trust based on strong and weak ties were particularly important in the situation of the possible lack of information and uncertain consequences of action that was common in the *Homo Sovieticus* situation. Soviet social networks usually involved close ties, a certain close circle of relatives, good friends or colleagues. All the relations were based on “mutual reliance, trust, and obligation among trading partners.”¹⁰ Partners always ran a risk because effective cooperation depended only on goodwill, unselfishness and reciprocity. However, if someone did something wrong, he simply was excluded from the system that helped in obtaining necessary goods and services as well

⁹ S. Lurye, *Monologi iz „tyurmy” narodov*. Available from <http://psychology.org/Mtn/MtnTOC.htm>, Internet: accessed 13 XI 2014.

¹⁰ C. Wanner, *op. cit.*, p. 51-53.

as a better job. Free-riders were rare. Networks also helped in “cutting through bureaucratic inertia and stonewalling”¹¹, functioning usually according to “the unwritten law”, showing a discrepancy between the notions of justice and legitimacy. State institutions and state officials could also lean on networking as a model of communication or functioning but the formal institutional dimension has become open for such models only recently due to the technological revolution. An informal dimension has been rich in various activities and models since the very beginning of the Soviet state and probably a state in the whole of human history.

Informal connections and networks are difficult to grasp, analyse or reproduce, they are flexible and self-governable. Informal networks consist of “face-to-face relationships between people who know each other and are bound together by kinship, friendship or propinquity”, they are horizontal and dispersed. Informal networks value individual reputation in social relations more than other symbolic means. In informal networks people provide help and information by reason of affection or moral obligation¹². Informality of the Western type empowers employees by stimulation of their productivity and effectiveness in spite of any hierarchical or other barriers. For example, Putnam’s *machers* are the people who are closely connected with the community they belong to in formal terms. They are better educated, have higher incomes and own homes. They organize meetings and engage in politics, making their contribution to civil society support and development¹³. Such activists and enthusiasts were also present in the Soviet society, especially in the public discourse, disappearing almost completely in the early post-transformation times to give place to the networkers of the other type. These Putnam’s *schmoozers* that differ from the *machers* as hanging out with friends differs from participating in community affairs. They have an active social life in informal settings, develop informal communication and networking skills. Modern-day schmoozing takes places in the electronic social networks.

In the post-communist countries and informal economies informality helps people to get things done fast and easy in various situations dealing both with the state institutions and non-governmental organizations as well as larger commercial actors and corporations¹⁴. However, there is a popular opinion that these countries got caught into the “modernisation trap of informality”, because in the long term perspective “informal tactics undermine the fundamental principles of the rule of law, separation of powers and secure property rights”¹⁵. Informal networks and their usage have significant consequences for the state,

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 52.

¹² R. Rose, *Getting Things Done in Anti-Modern Society: Social Capital Network in Russia*, [in:] P. Dasgupta, I. Serageldin, *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective*, D.C., World Bank, Washington 2001.

¹³ R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon and Schuster, New York 2000, p. 93-94.

¹⁴ J. Wedel, *Clans, Cliques and Captures States: Rethinking ‘Transition’ in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*. “Journal of International Development”, 2003, No. 15, p. 427-440.

¹⁵ A. Ledeneva, *From Russia with Blat: Can Informal Networks Help Modernize Russia?* “Social Research”. Vol. 76, No. 1, Spring 2009, p. 281.

its administration and public sphere, as “one cannot use the potential of informal networks without the backdrop they entail”¹⁶. Among most visible consequence concerns informality as a genuine pattern of governance that supersede formal dimension “even if hidden behind the formal discourses”¹⁷.

A Soviet man and his social networking skills

Social networking activities as part of the Soviet informal economy were called *blat*. It is a controversial term to use and properly explain, in the sphere where researchers use the terms ‘clientelism’, ‘conflict of interests’ or ‘corruption’. However, it was a purely Soviet phenomenon and is still found in the memories of the former Soviet citizens full of nostalgia¹⁸. *Blat* represented not only informal economic practice, it was also a sort of social network capital. It was characterised by reciprocal dependence and trust for other individuals as well as the exchange of so called “favours of access”. So it was based both on private connections and on the public resources at the same time. Because of this last fact, these networking practices could not be considered a civil society characteristic since *blat* parasitized on the state property, public resources and common good.

During the Soviet period *blat* was not regarded however as a conflict of interests case, rather as a way to facilitate relations and exchange in many life and work situations¹⁹. Not everybody though possessed active networking skills, as one would put it in the present-day terms, or practised *blat* actively in economic or other mutually beneficial terms. Active networkers had rich person-centred networks investing much time and effort in them and being an important hub or link for other “poorer” networkers.

Networking stood not only for the way to facilitate certain official activities, it was a means to escape them as well as all types of ideological mobilization, collectivism and loyalties, seeking refuge in private and informal networks. Therefore social networking was used as an effective resource both for coping with official problems and avoiding them. So among the reasons for *blat* to be used, there is structural inefficiency of the Soviet state administration and the public sphere mentioned in the studies on *blat*, social networking and corruption in the communist and post-communist states. Institutional illegitimacy and the failure of the rule of law were also important factors of going into networks and informal connection to get full information, to find reliable advice, to find trustworthy contractors relying on the network possibilities of managing conflict or

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 268.

¹⁸ The results of the research project “Invisible Society of Soviet-era Lithuania: the Revision of Distinction between Systemic and Non-systemic Social Networks” presented at the conference “Disclosing Invisible Society: Informal and Concealed Social Networks under Communism” in December 2014, Vilnius.

¹⁹ See also: K. Novikova, *Where Does the Social Network Capital End and Informal Corrupting Connections Begin? Post-Soviet Practices in the Internet Era*, [in:] *Conflict of Interests in Central and Eastern Europe*, S. Burdziej, J. Szalacha (ed.) Zysk i S-ka 2011.

imposing sanction in the case of any problematic situation²⁰. Informal networking and personal reputation or responsibility represented a sort of guarantee.

Informal networking also represented a hand of alternative to official bureaucratic structures. In fact it personalized bureaucratic clans or later *nomenklatura* and made possible for it to survive and lead a later turbulent transformation processes in the late 1980s and 1990s²¹. Recently researchers even come to the conclusion that "persistent informality" represented an indispensable element of formal organisation and was not "merely a sign of the failure of formal and rational structures"²². Today there is a view that informal networks and practices have taken on the character of "multivector functionality", where there are such important elements as safety nets, sociability and peer support that make informal networking a significant part of the active social capital in many spheres of everyday and professional life²³.

Informal networking as a resource and activity represent a significant part of *Homo Sovieticus* as a general description of the typical personality and respective sociocultural values and traditions in the communist and frequently post-communist countries. During the transformation period formalization processes in some countries made informal networking rather an additional element to the official institutional activities with their impersonal civic trust. The centrality of informal networking in various life spheres unfortunately reveals a failure of transformation and modernisation in the post-Soviet countries where highly personalised and individual reputation-dependent trust and loyalty are more important than competitive professionalism, leadership qualities and education levels especially in government and non-profit sectors.

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²⁰ E.G. Richard Rose, *op. cit.*

²¹ V. Yakubovich, I. Kozina, *The Changing Significance of Ties. An Exploration of the Hiring Channels in the Russian Transitional Labour Market*. "International Sociology". Vol. 15, No.3, September 2000, p. 479-500

²² E. Rindzeviciute, *When Formal Organizations Meet Informal Relations in Soviet Lithuania: Action Nets, Networks and Boundary Objects in the Construction of the Lithuanian Sea Museum*. "Lithuanian Historical Studies", 15, 2010, p. 108.

²³ A. Ledeneva, *op.cit.*, p. 265, 277.

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