

# Awful crisis superstar

## Disasters and routinization

New melody, like a spiral, coils in the boulevard  
We all are rock opera characters: Awful Crisis Super Star  
Andrei Voznesenskii, *Zhutkii Kraisis Super Star* poetry collection, 1999.

### 1. Introduction

By definition, crises and disasters interrupt the flow of everyday life, signalling dramatic, and often traumatic, occurrences that are out of the ordinary. This is the sense in which these terms are used in the pages of the press, as well as in much of scholarly literature on disasters. At the same time, as Kai Erikson was the first to note in the closing pages of his classic study of the Buffalo Creek flood, much of modern experience takes place in the midst of what he calls «chronic disasters», ones that «gather... force slowly and insidiously, creeping around one's defenses rather than smashing through them» (Erikson, 1976, p. 255). Such disasters, he suggests, are less visible, yet they trigger the same effects: «a numbness of spirit, a susceptibility to anxiety and rage and depression, a sense of helplessness, an inability to concentrate, a loss of various motor skills, a heightened apprehension about the physical and social environment, a preoccupation with death, a retreat into dependency, and a general loss of ego functions» (*ivi*, pp. 255-6).

This emphasis on the chronic nature of many modern calamities was subsequently both affirmed and challenged by Janet Roitman (2014) in her work on crisis. As Roitman points out, it is important to take crises not just as experiential reality, but also as particular kinds of claims. In other words, the chronic nature of a crisis is the effect of a particular habit of seeing, one that foregrounds and classifies events *as* crises, contributing to the sense of ubiquity and routiniza-

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tion of crises in modern life<sup>1</sup>. Such classifications, she observes, are not innocent, because «when crisis is posited as the very condition of contemporary situations, certain questions become possible while others are foreclosed» (2014, p. 41). Roitman thus rephrases Erikson's injunction to sociologically inquire into chronic crises by suggesting that, first and foremost, one needs to inquire into the effects of the classification itself: «[t]he point is to take note of the effects of the claim to crisis, to be attentive to the effects of our very accession to that judgment» (2014, p. 12, italics in the original).

The thrust of Roitman's inquiry is directed at the conditions of possibility, as well as the political effects of assigning the label of crisis all too liberally across a broad array of contemporary developments (as, she argues, it gets assigned today). As such, her argument is deliberately and consistently anti-essentialist: she is emphatically «not concerned to theorize the term 'crisis' or to come up with a working definition of it». In this aspect, her argument is a decisive departure from Erikson's humanistic inquiry, which does not subject the legitimacy of the term to such scrutiny and which rather embraces it in order to understand the predicament of those caught in the midst of a chronic disaster. For all their differences, however, there is one thing on which both Erikson and Roitman agree: that the fact of routinization of emergencies is significant in and of itself, and deserves scrutiny as such.

This article is an effort to embrace both Erikson's and Roitman's injunctions to take chronic crises seriously. It interrogates one such chronic crisis, one that occurred after the fall of socialism in Russia, as a paradigmatic case that allows insight, not only into the effects that the routinization of crisis has had in that particular locale, but also into the tension between Roitman's and Erikson's approaches to crises. But rather than choosing between Roitman's anti-essentialism and Erikson's humanism, I show that the two approaches are mutually complementary. A chronic crisis is *both* a lived reality and a classificatory label with ambivalent, potentially troubling afterlife. As such, scholars of crises and disasters should take seriously the full array of consequences of routinization of disasters, which range from behavioral to affective and rhetorical.

My analysis draws much of its ethnographic material from my book, *Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow* (Shevchenko, 2009). I approach this material here in the spirit of Michael Burawoy's (1998) extended case method, in which field ethnography is interpreted and extended towards contributing to theory. The theoretical interest in this approach provides the lenses through which the ethnographic data is to be interpreted, so that it contributes not only to our understanding of the population in question (in my case, Muscovites living through the turbulence of the first postsocialist decade), but also to the improvement of the theory in question. The ethnographic site, thus, is used here as something of a test lab for theory, so that, in the course of investigation, theoretical postulates on crisis can be refined, questioned and reconsidered.

<sup>1</sup> I am borrowing the notion of routinization from Weber's writings on the routinization of charisma (1947).

Everyday life in 1990s Russia offered much material for investigating the workings of a chronic crisis. But this does not mean that the symptoms outlined by Erikson were all equally in evidence. Indeed, there was plenty of apprehension about the physical and social environment that one could observe in the Muscovites' behavior, but there was also a pronounced, almost obsessive preoccupation with the beautification of one's personal living environment. There was a sense of helplessness but very little retreat into dependency; if anything, postsocialist Muscovites took a certain amount of pride in their learned self-sufficiency and independence from the state. The scope of reactions to what was unanimously recognized as the «crisis decade» was far wider than the traumatic symptoms enumerated by Erikson.

I argue that the reason for this is that chronic social crises, of the kind that Russians have experienced in the wake of USSR's collapse, have an everyday life, and a routine all of their own, and are not reducible to the traumatic symptoms associated with acute emergencies. More specifically, I will suggest that people's day-to-day routines in the 1990s were marked by the experience of the crisis in two ways, which roughly correspond to Erikson's humanist and Roitman's anti-essentialist approaches. First, they were shaped by the profound uncertainty that marked the political, economic and ideological landscapes of the time. In a sense, what you had was a simultaneous shifting of all kinds of social fields and coordinates by which one could measure one's place in them, a purest case of Bourdieu's *habitus hysteresis* imaginable. In this sense, crisis was deeply felt and real, not at all an epiphenomenon or merely an arbitrary classificatory label externally imposed.

But second, the protracted nature of the postsocialist crisis meant that it became a kind of «new normal», and thus central to the evolution of the ground rules of postsocialist life, of the ways in which people defined themselves, and thought about what constituted everyday competence and practical wisdom in this changed world. These new standards for competence revolved around the idea (and ideal) of autonomy and self-protection from the crisis, which remain highly significant for how post-Soviet political and everyday culture continues to operate these days. In this way, claims to crisis became a form of identity, both lasting and constricting of how postsocialist political subjects envisioned the field of political possibilities around them, acting in exactly the way Roitman would expect: «when crisis is posited as the very condition of contemporary situations, certain questions become possible while others are foreclosed» (2014, p. 41).

## 2. After socialism

Turning to Russian developments of the 1990s, it seems appropriate to begin with a brief discussion of the terms in which this decade was conceptualized in the social science literature, not only because this can set the terms for the discussion at hand, but also because, as I will argue later, the way the social scientists made sense of the first postsocialist decade in many ways resonated with popular terminology.

A common way of addressing the period of the late 1980s-1990s in scholarly literature on Russia and Eastern Europe has long been to speak about it as a time of transition – a transition in which some authors emphasize the movement from authoritarian rule to democracy (often with references to O'Donnell, Schmitter, 1986), and others – the evolution from socialist redistribution and central planning to capitalism and a market economy (Lipton, Sachs, 1990; Aslund, 1995). Regardless of the emphasis, the concept of transition in its various uses remained a normative term – the move was being made in the «correct» direction, and while some authors recognized that it encountered problems and complications (see Aslund, 1995), they rarely questioned whether the overall project could be accomplished, not to mention how worthwhile it was.

A view countering the assumptions of the transition paradigm emerged as a reaction to the growing amount of evidence that did not fit into the optimistic simplicity of the transition model. Its proponents argued that the course of the «transition» was unpredictable and uncertain, and that the outcomes of the process were shaped both by the legacies of the past and by the locally embedded reactions to the on-going process of social change. On these grounds, the concept of transition was replaced in many studies with the concept of transformation (see Stark, 1992; Rose, 1994). The proponents of this terminological switch appealed to examples coming from a variety of geographical locales all around Eastern Europe, as well as to results of studies set in various regions of ex-USSR.

Evidence from Russia seems to confirm this view, for the events unfolding in it during the 1990s – the economic recession, political instability and persistent ethno-national conflicts – do not allow one to entertain an optimistic vision of a society moving along a predictable trajectory, and at a predictable speed, towards stable democracy and a modern market economy. Rather, as many would still argue, Russia continues to undergo a *transformative* process the outcome of which cannot be fully predicted. As put by Russian sociologist Igor Kon, «we know where we are coming from, but we are less sure where we are heading and where and when we will get there» (Kon, 1996, p. 205). The major reasons for that could be debated. Some claim that «the state of Russia is a matter of inheritance, not choice; it reflects the legacy of seventy years of communist efforts to build a new civilization by rejecting the market economy and ruthlessly suppressing the institutions of civil society» (Rose, 1994, p. 41). Yet others reject overstatements of the «burden of history» approach, arguing that «what may appear as “restorations” of patterns familiar from socialism are something quite different: direct *responses* to the new market initiatives, produced *by* them, rather than remnants of an older mentality» (Burawoy, Verdery, 1999, pp. 1-2, italics in the original).

Whatever opinion one may hold regarding the factors complicating Russia's postsocialist development, the fundamental indeterminacy of its future was a palpable and frequently voiced concern when Russians themselves talked about their experience of postsocialism during its first decade. I spent several years total in Russia in the late 1990s, engaging in recurrent conversations with a group of 33 Muscovites about their lived experience of the postsocialist transformation, visiting their homes and workplaces, carrying ethnographic obser-

vations in various public sites in the city, from open-air markets (the principal site of provisioning for most residents of the city at the time) to public transport and exploring a number of other venues to which my conversations led me, which included editorial offices of consumer advice publications and headquarters of alternative medicine drug store chains. All in all, I conducted over 110 interviews with Muscovites in 1998-2000<sup>2</sup>; and in the pages below, I will try to convey the spirit of these conversations and connect them to the question of crisis and everyday life from which I began.

### 3. Dimensions of the uncertainty

The uncertainty of the postsocialist condition had a number of interrelated dimensions. Politically, the coup of the communist hardliners in 1991, the subsequent breakdown of the USSR and the shelling of the parliament that took place in 1993 left lasting memories and were often referred to as paradigmatic examples of political instability. The mid-1990s were marked by the rise of conservative and nationalist opposition, and the contested elections of the 1996, which left Yeltsin in power, created lingering doubts about the likelihood of a peaceful power transfer and underscored the increasingly erratic behavior of the first Russian president. The years of my fieldwork, 1998-2000, were marked by evidence of continuous and desperate power struggle around the increasingly ill Yeltsin, media attacks on various contenders to presidency and constant reshuffling in the government (within these two years of fieldwork, four governments came and went).

The economic situation was equally turbulent, with the exchange rate of the ruble skyrocketing from a little over 6 to almost 30 for a dollar during the economic default of August 1998, and then continuing to fluctuate. This triggered massive inflation, with considerable price increases for staple food items. Many of my respondents have detailed memories of these days, when it was not uncommon for price tags in their neighborhood stores to change up to three times a day. While the exchange rate eventually settled around 21 rubles per dollar, many products ended up costing about three times as much as they had just a month earlier. This development was accompanied by massive layoffs and payment arrears, and the general social atmosphere was routinely characterized as explosive and exceptionally grave (Dmitriev, 1999; Vilensky, Domnina, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> My respondents (16 men, and 17 women) belonged predominantly to the lower and middle income brackets, but came from a variety of educational and occupational backgrounds, which enabled me to trace the commonalities in which these divergently positioned individuals approached, both practically and rhetorically, the complexities of the postsocialist transformation. In accessing the respondent's income, I used the definition of VCIOM (now Levada Center) which identified as low income individuals those whose per capita household income in 1997 was 200-400 thousand rubles a month (about \$40-\$80), and as middle income bracket – those with 400-600 thousand rubles a month (\$80-\$120) per capita (Gordon *et al.*, 1998). I reconnected with nine of my respondents in January 2012 to hear their perspectives on the wave of political protests that occurred in Moscow that winter in response to the publicized cases of fraud during the Parliamentary elections of 2011.

Perhaps even more unsettling was the fact that the social and economic hardships were not accompanied by a widely shared national agenda, so that the sacrifices that they entailed could not be rendered palatable, or at least more sensible in ideological terms, as was the case in the countries of Eastern Europe where the fall of socialism was experienced in terms of national liberation and a return to Europe. In its imperial heartland, the Soviet system not only had a much longer history, but it also could not be easily externalized as imposed from the outside. As a result, the ideological landscape of the decade had a *penitimento* quality to it: the new layers coexisting with the still-visible and powerful old ones (see Zorin, 2000). New holidays, such as Russia's Independence Day marking Russia's exit from the USSR, existed in the calendar side by side with the anniversaries of the October Socialist revolution, and churches dedicated to the last Russian tsar Nicholas II could be found on the same city map as the streets honoring one of his assassins, Petr Voikov.

This ideological hodgepodge was far from a remote affair. To the contrary, it had a number of consequences directly relevant to everyday life, from uncertainty about the meaning of one's own family history and biography (*i.e.*, was the Bolshevik grandfather a hero or a villain? Was one's parent a dunce or a role model for volunteering for the virgin lands campaign?) to the moral confusion about the appropriate ways of responding to the current situation. It also raised important questions about the appropriate standards of behavior in a rapidly changing moral universe<sup>3</sup>. Remembering his return from obligatory army service, Nikolai, a thirty-one-year-old freight operator, put explicitly what many other interviews alluded to indirectly:

I returned [from the Army] in 1987. It was certainly some interesting time. We were drafted in one country, and two years later, came back to a completely different one... All these economic changes started, someone was leaving for business, others stayed. People were somehow trying to earn capital, and for a while it all was like fishing in muddy waters. Some people were still serving sentence for speculation and currency operations, whereas others already conducted these operations in the open. They could be arrested, but they also could be left alone. In the «old» Soviet Union things like that could never be allowed. But the old structure was falling apart in front of our very own eyes.

While the old legal structure was rapidly dissipating, so was the system of professional stratification. The reality of the 1990s amounted to rapid (mostly downward) mobility of specific individuals as well as entire professional groups. Granted, social dislocations were in many ways inevitable, since the system of higher education in the Soviet Union was geared towards «heavy» industry and produced enormous numbers of engineers, planners and other technical personnel who could hardly be painlessly absorbed into postsocialist market economy. But this did not make the shock of one's sudden professional irrelevance

<sup>3</sup> Ries (2002) reflects poignantly on the consequences of this moral ambiguity for the ethical landscape of postsocialism.

any easier to accept. As a result, working biographies of postsocialist individuals contained multiple instances of demotion, loss of status and unpredictable social mobility.

According to polling data from 1998<sup>4</sup>, about 40% of working Russians reported having been forced *by circumstances* to change their field of occupation in the preceding decade (in Moscow, the proportion was 45%). More significantly, only 3% of these people reported having gone through some form of professional re-education, which means that, for a large proportion of working Russians, a disjunction between their educational credentials and the types of jobs they had to perform was a daily reality. Furthermore, rapid inflation added to the feeling of one's professional devaluation even in those cases when individuals retained their former jobs, as was the case with many engineers, teachers and medical workers. The experience was so wide-spread that an entire sub-genre of Russian anecdotes emerged, dedicated to a chance meeting of two classmates, a star student who turned into an engineer, and a failing student who became a prosperous New Russian (one such anecdote lampoons the dramatic distance that had emerged between these «old» and «new» Russians, and the latter's inability to even conceive of this distance, in the following way: «It's great to see you, Vasya! How are you doing?» – «Poorly, Petia. I haven't eaten in three days» – «Really, Vasya, this is not right. You've got to force yourself to eat!»).

#### 4. Enter Crisis

Perhaps this, admittedly very broad-brushstroke of a picture makes it a bit clearer why the developments of the 1990s were so often referred to and understood under a broad heading of *krizis*, or «crisis». The almost-uncontested crisis terminology, prevalent both in everyday talk and in academic discussions (Dal-lin, Lapidus, 1991; Ryvkina, 1997; Zdravomyslov, 1999; see also Voznesenskii, 1999), framed the developments of the 1990s as abrupt and profound social, economic and/or political dislocations, pregnant with further aggravation of the situation, and marked by the destructive impact they had on the lives of individuals. In fact, the very popularity of the term seemed to stem, at least partially, from its intuitive nature, which made it applicable widely, and for the most part, justifiably, in a variety of contexts<sup>5</sup>. Both the unstable economic condition of contemporary Russia, its macroeconomic causes, the falling living standards of many population groups it caused, the political process of the entire 1990s, as well as the developments in the late Soviet Union which triggered its own demise – all of these processes, each intricately related to one another, were routinely referred to in academic publications as «crises».

The same presumption of an all-embracing crisis was shared in everyday conversations, to the point where any other framing of the situation was con-

<sup>4</sup> See Kupriyanova (1997).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note, however, that while in many cases this label was justified, it was also used more liberally than the situation called for it. See Rivkin-Fish (2006) for a discussion of over-reliance on crisis terminology among Russian demographers.

sidered inappropriate. I could give many examples here, but it would probably suffice to cite yet another postsocialist joke which goes as follows: A telephone rings. «Hello?» – «Hi, how are things?» – «Well, thanks» – «Sorry, I must have dialed a wrong number.»

There are two aspects of the term «crisis», as it was used in the 1990s, that I would like to underscore here. The *first* is the permanent character of what is usually thought of as momentary, but decisive moment (I will appeal here to the etymology of the work crisis, which is derived from the Greek *krinein*, «to decide», designating «a key moment in the development of an illness, in which the patient either recovers or dies», see Koselleck, 2002). This permanence is hinted at in the following two excerpts from an interview with a 37-year-old custodian Lyuba, which were uttered within mere 20 minutes from one another:

You know, nothing global happened lately... The government has changed<sup>6</sup>, but that wasn't anything that I would feel as a change. Nothing has changed in our lives, it's just going as it is, little by little...

It's all changing right now... I can't even figure out how to save money. Even with dollars... well, I hope they aren't going to restrict them right now, but still... There is no stability [...] In our life, you just can't relax, today you have one situation, and tomorrow it's completely different...

Lyuba's narrative here represents a peculiar blend of the two seemingly contradictory messages, recreating by turns images of an increasingly aggravating social and political situation, and of a static, unchangeable routine. The same dual sense of permanence and deterioration was reflected in terms people frequently used to speak about the 1990s: *boloto* (mire) bears an overtone of the permanence framework, while *katastroika* (a merger of *perestroika* and *katastrofa* [catastrophe], authored by the former dissident Alexander Zinoviev), or *razval* (destruction) support the more dramatic vision of deterioration<sup>7</sup>.

If the two themes – that of stability and that of deterioration – seemed compatible to my interlocutors, this was because, first, starting from the late 1980s, change had been so constant in their lives that it seemed like the only reliable thing to expect from the future. Second, this coexistence calls attention to the dramatic gap that existed between the lives that my interlocutors led prior to the late 1980s and everything that followed after. In light of that gap, all of the perturbations that occurred to them since the end of the USSR seemed to blend together. Above, I have used Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) notion of the *hysteresis*

<sup>6</sup> Referring to the ouster of the Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov in 1999 and the corresponding change in the cabinet.

<sup>7</sup> Despite the abundance of pejorative names for designating the period after perestroika, there seemed to be a shortage of neutral expressions. A testimony to this rhetorical deficit were the hedges frequently used in conversation in reference to the past 10-15 years, such as «all these», or «so-called», as in: «When they began, all these changes...», or «When it started, all this... I don't know how it's called... one can't call it perestroika...». This peculiar linguistic suffocation is analyzed by Oushakine (2000) under the name of *post-Soviet aphasia*.

of the *habitus* to illuminate what is at stake here. In a nutshell, *hysteresis of the habitus* is a lack of fit between the individual's internal dispositions (the *habitus*) and the social conditions in which he finds himself. Such a mismatch can happen in a variety of circumstances, both societal – in the conditions of social change, when the logic of the entire social field radically shifts – and personal, as happens in cases of rapid social mobility when a person with the *habitus* and outlooks of, say, a petit bourgeois finds herself in academic circles where the institutional logic and the structure of expectations are different from those to which she is socialized. As a consequence, when the logic of a social field comes in conflict with the dispositions of acquired *habitus*, the ensuing personal experience is not unlike that of wearing a badly tailored dress or wrong-sized shoes, when the discomfort and constraint associated with every move make it hard to notice the variations in the surrounding landscape.

The second significant experiential aspect of postsocialist crisis is its multifaceted character. Perhaps the most exasperating aspect of everyday life for the people I spoke to was the fact that they could never predict what kind of problem they were to face next, whether the next challenge would have to do with their (or a family member's) employment, or income, or health. The fact of impending problems was usually assumed, but the exact kind could never be foreseen. As a result, to live in postsocialist Moscow implied, according to my respondents, «always [being] ready for everything». «There is no time for strategic planning or even any planning for the future», one of my respondents told me during an interview, «blows come from this direction and from that direction, from all over the place, and all one has time for is petty everyday tactics». «The metro system is in an emergency state», said a 49-year-old female accountant, «I am surprised more catastrophes don't happen». «We are waiting for something bad to happen all the time», seconded Valentina, a 31-year old day care teacher, and continued:

Lately, what Yeltsin has been doing, what's been happening in the country has been constantly hitting all of us on the head, so that one can't even relax or have a break, because I feel like we are constantly waiting for something. Like, aha, right now he's going to do something else, some other folly, and we again will have to suffer, the ordinary people (*prostye lyudi*). Because they always know in advance, and even if they don't, the same Berezovsky,<sup>8</sup> what, will he suffer if he loses some 3 million, I mean if he has 20 or I don't know how many millions he has, but it won't have the same impact on him as it would on a person who has 300 [rubles] and loses 50.

The dilemma of simultaneity, usually discussed by political scientists as a policy challenge (in the sense of the risks posed by efforts to implement changes

<sup>8</sup> Boris Berezovsky was one of the most notorious oligarchs of the 1990s; his wealth was estimated by Forbes in 1997 to be \$3 billion (Dolan, 1997). In 2000, after a dispute with Vladimir Putin (whom he had helped elect) he fled to the UK where he lived in exile until his death, under mysterious circumstances, in 2013.

in the economic, political and social sectors of a given society simultaneously – see Castillo, 1997) receives an interesting twist here. It suggests an avalanche of simultaneous threats that demand perpetual readiness for anything and everything, a kind of permanent mobilization which implies an incessant labor of anticipating future problems, whichever direction they may come from. While everyday strategies of the «weak» are often imagined in terms of resistance, what this framing of a permanent crisis suggested was not pointed resistance against known dangers, but multifarious self-protection from the dangers both real and imagined, current and anticipated, past and future. In my interviews, a recurrent metaphor came to designate this mindset of permanent mobilization – the metaphor of «living on a volcano», which my contacts used to describe the labor that went into their everyday lives.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this metaphor is that it highlights not only the chronic nature of the uncertainty with which my interlocutors had to live, but also the ways in which any experience of protracted uncertainty transforms the most basic ground rules of everyday life and amounts to a revised hierarchy of skills and talents, a distinctive and unique notion of what it means to be a practically competent individual, a different notion of order, safety, caution and responsibility. Indeed, to live on a volcano means to attune one's instincts so that they can pick out the smallest signals of an eruption; it also means that all daily life skills are to be measured, in the final run, by how well they are adapted to a world in which an eruption can happen at any moment.

## 5. Practical competence in critical times

Janet Roitman and Achille Mbembe, in their work on everyday life in Cameroon, suggested that much when they proposed that any approach to a social crisis needs to pay attention not only to its lived everyday dimension, but also to the «regime of subjectivity» that it forms, through concentrating on «a *shared ensemble of imaginary configurations of "everyday life"*, imaginaries which have a *material basis*; and, *systems of intelligibility* to which people refer in order to construct a more or less clear idea of the causes of phenomena and their effects, to determine the domain of what is *possible and feasible*, as well as the *logics of efficacious action*» (Mbembe, Roitman, 1995, pp. 324-5, my italics). It seems important to emphasize the «material basis» of crisis subjectivity here, because this theme gets lost in Roitman's more recent work on crisis. My question consequently becomes: What was the postsocialist «regime of subjectivity,» and how was it connected to its «material bases», *i.e.*, the acutely felt, routinized uncertainty that I have described?

As concerns individual subjectivity, at stake is the topic which, following Berger and Luckmann (1967), I have called *practical competence*<sup>9</sup>. In the spirit of sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann emphasize that social action rests on unexamined consensual foundations of pragmatic knowledge, *i.e.* knowledge

<sup>9</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1967, p. 42) talk about «pragmatic competence in routine performances».

that any competent member of a given society is expected to possess. In the case of 1990s Russia, many taken-for-granted assumptions that comprised the pragmatic knowledge of Soviet civilization were uprooted and thrown into question. However, this period also offered a new consensual definition of the situation, and a new shared understanding of what it means to be a competent citizen in a changed environment. This was all the more significant given that the other grounds for claiming competency, and indeed, other identities, became highly questionable in the midst of social and economic turmoil.

What did the crisis ask of citizens? Because it was experienced in a routinized way, as a permanent backdrop of everyday life, the crisis called for not temporary adaptations, but patterned and stable solutions. Permanence in this context has two aspects: the permanence of unfavourable social circumstances, and the permanence of daily life, which has to be achieved through growing accustomed to these circumstances. As Konstantin, a 53-year old male engineer put it,

I had no panic in August [1998], or any special moods that, you know, I won't be able to feed the family or something. These times, of the Great Depression, or this crisis of 1930s that they had in America, as they showed us on TV – with suicides, and all that – it makes me laugh. Someone went bankrupt. So what, he went bankrupt. I don't know. For Russia... In Russia, [...] we've been living that way for the longest time...

What is implied in this comparison between Russia of the 1990s and the US of the 1930s is that, while a sudden economic breakdown may come as a shock to unaccustomed individuals, such a breakdown will not be able to affect a community which has been exposed to a chain of equally grave developments over a long period of time, and which has developed an entire infrastructure to withstand similar shocks. And since the second important feature of the this critical situation was that its dangers seemed to be lurking in all areas of life, a competent defence was imagined in an equally multifaceted way, not as a targeted strategy of resisting specific mishaps, but as a utopia of a complete autonomy and self-protection from all dangers, current and future, real and imagined.

This psychological autonomy could be achieved in a number of ways that were frequently mentioned in my conversations with Muscovites. For example, many took pride in claiming not to follow the news, so as not to be affected by negative social and political developments. Equally frequent was a proud and unapologetic divestment from politics, and studied displays of scepticism and distrust in public interactions and exchanges. One Muscovite, an accountant in her thirties, for example, told me with a mixture of sarcasm and pride:

I have no fears. I am an optimist. You know why? Because I am not well-informed. I have no interest in getting informed. Those who have information, they may be scared of what's to come, but I make a point of avoiding it.

Far from being apologetic or embarrassed by this professed ignorance, my interlocutor portrayed her self-imposed disconnection from current events as a form of wisdom, the only reasonable strategy for preventing the disorderly environment from exercising emotional toll on her. Another elderly Muscovite echoed the same sentiment by dismissing politics from the range of subjects worthy of attention, let alone debate. Contemplating aloud the political tumult of the early 1990s, she said:

Nothing changed because of the change in government. And now not millions go to these demonstrations, but handfuls, and it's all because people understand the worth of this activity. They understood that politics isn't worth anything. Everyone should take care of their own business. If you elected the politicians, let them think about people, but they don't do it, they only look after their own interests. And people now understood it, and don't even go to vote. Instead everyone started taking care of their own lives. They understood that if they don't take care of their lives, no one will.

It is notable that all of these claims had a negative thrust: one had to *not* follow the news, *not* to believe politicians, *not* to be easily unsettled by economic setbacks, and above all, *not* to trust anyone or anything. Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov (2004) labeled such an attitude *negative identity* (*negativnaya identichnost'*). All of these efforts added up to one desired effect: a laboriously cultivated stance of a hardened crisis subject who does not lose his poise in the face of events that would shatter more sensitive and less competent people<sup>10</sup>. The operative word here is *stance* – a notion missing from Gudkov's book. Based on survey data, Gudkov's argument conflated self-reported claims with ethnographic realities. When examined through the prism of ethnography, this stance raises many questions concerning its reality. People who claimed to consciously avoid the mass media as sources of information ended up citing news stories; skeptics of medical authority followed their doctors' recommendations; on numerous occasions, I saw the veneer of hardened cynicism and withdrawal collapse in a sudden outburst of anger during political disagreement. Yet none of these temporary interruptions undermined the prescriptive power and appeal of the claim to not care.

This distinction between the descriptive level (how people actually felt) and the prescriptive one (how they felt they should feel, and, correspondingly, how they felt compelled to claim they had felt) is significant. It highlights that, contrary to what the term «negative identity» implies, states of chronic crisis can have a positive, or constructive dimension. Besides creating injunctions, they

<sup>10</sup> This is a significant difference from the litanies and laments documented and analyzed by Nancy Ries (1997) during the years of late perestroika. While many of Ries' interlocutors indulged in narratives of suffering, their pleasure was derived from the potential they created for commiseration, whereas a decade later, they were mobilized to demonstrate one's emotional and psychological divestment from the troubles of postsocialist life. In this respect, Ries' later discussion of the «all-delegitimizing cynicism» of the 1990s (2002, p. 277) is closer to the sensibility I describe here, both in time and in substance.

can create prescriptions about how to act and feel. Indeed, these prescriptions were not only affective or psychological (*i.e.* how a competent citizen should feel), but also practical (how one should act in order to ensure immunity from the crisis). This brings us to another, although related, aspect of autonomy. While psychological and emotional immunity from current events was clearly imagined to be the only desirable solution, few would consider it without thinking at the same time about the ideal of practical autonomy. This means that the meticulous work of information-avoidance and skepticism had to be supplemented with a patchwork of practical arrangements which ensured that one's livelihood was as immune as possible to the effects of social instability. And since the dangers, as I mentioned, were expected to come from everywhere, the defenses were to be equally universal. In practice, this often meant an effort to create a sort of protective cocoon around oneself and one's immediate household to shield the family from the effects of the all-embracing crisis, replacing, to the extent it was possible (and this varied between different households), all compromised institutions with alternative arrangements.

In Russia, this was the era of fortified doors on one's apartment entrance, charismatic healers and natural medicine fads that promised to compensate for the inadequacies of state-funded medicine (see Lindquist, 2000, 2006 for an excellent discussion of how the uses of magic connected to the lack of institutional mechanisms for the enforcement of contracts), compulsive investments of savings into duplicate, and often unnecessary household items («so they don't vanish in the bank!») and, finally, consumer advice magazines whose claim to fame was that they alone could help consumers detect and protect themselves from fraud. In many of these outlets, the affirmation of general distrust became a cultural resource to achieve precisely a fragile but carefully cultivated trust<sup>11</sup>.

At times, the theme of self-protection from the threatening outside seemed like the only grounds on which any product or service could be effectively advertised, almost to the point of comedy. Here is, for example, the editorial of the first issue of a popular crossword publication, *Russkii Krossvord*, which over the following years became the leading publication in an explosively popular genre of pocket crosswords:

So many factors have appeared these days that negatively affect our health! The tap water is to be avoided since it has some additives in it, breathing is said to be safest in a gas mask, since the air is polluted beyond all limits. Foodstuffs represent a problem as well, so easy it is to bump into a forgery... But is everything really so depressing? Isn't there anything out there that could improve our well-being? Thank God, there is a reliable solution<sup>12</sup>.

The text went on to claim that, according to the latest (unspecified) scientific research, the completion of one crossword added an average of fifty-four

<sup>11</sup> See Lindquist (2006) for an ethnography of how this effect is achieved in the field of magic and healing.

<sup>12</sup> Editorial comment in *Russkii Krossvord*, no. 1, 1998.

minutes to one's life, reduced stress, normalized blood pressure, and could therefore be used as an antidote to all of the negative factors mentioned above. This medicalized self-legitimation is telling, in that it combined many elements of the rhetoric of crisis and autonomy that I discussed, suggesting (seemingly without irony) that crossword puzzles were the best answer to the multitude of diverse dangers inherent in the crisis.

Despite its oddity, the logic inherent in this advertising pitch – the surrounding world is inherently hostile, and should be kept at arm's length to the extent possible – is the same that came across in a countless number of comments I heard in Moscow in the late 1990s. Here, for example, is the voice of a successful manager, Anton:

Basically, I have succeeded, so to say, to protect my family from all impact of these unpleasant circumstances of ours. Me, and my family, we care mostly about some *inner* developments, not the *exterior* problems. I honestly think that, to an extent, it is my personal accomplishment, and I am happy that I proved myself capable to master this situation.

Hidden behind Anton's pride in his ability to protect his family from the crisis was scrupulous work for creating a complete a separation from the context. This work stretched from maintenance, through help from some friends, of a savings account in a German bank, to a full restructuring of his apartment, up to the point where even the water his family used for cooking and drinking was supplied in an office-sized water cooler from a Western company. The art of interior design is inseparable here from the drive to purge all signs of the post-socialist disorder from one's living environment. Testifying to this is the name by which complete apartment renovations were known in Russia at the time: *Evroremont* («euro-repairs»). The «euro-» component of the repair referred to the completeness with which interiors were redone in order to reflect the «Western» residential conventions, from painted, rather than wall-papered, walls to plastic, rather than wooden, window frames and sills. While *evroremont* was rather expensive if compared to standard apartment renovations, it was a prized source of distinction and was widely deemed worthy of a significant investment. While no other family in my sample could afford an *evroremont* as complete as the one Anton had, many families invested into separate components of an *evroremont*, most notably (and noticeably), plastic windows. While some nostalgics (me included!) could argue that the wooden frames were in fact more attractive, the proponents of remodelling countered that «European windows» were not only more practical, but also more beautiful and modern. Regardless of one's aesthetic take on the subject, windows clearly achieved two interrelated goals. They provided their owners with a sense of a more civilized, European environment separated from the decrepit surrounding conditions, and separated these owners from their less fortunate neighbours.

## 6. Crisis between reality and rhetoric

Two points seem necessary to conclude my reasoning on the experience of critical times. The first is that, in my contacts' lives, the crisis was both a great problem but also, perhaps more surprisingly, a kind of a solution to the moral and practical dilemmas associated with the end of socialism. In the dearth of criteria by which one's performance could be measured (given that money was a morally dubious criterion at best, and professional identities remained uprooted and unstable), the competence with which one could navigate the crisis became an important measure of individual ability. In other words, one had little control of whether her enterprise would still be in existence tomorrow, but one could certainly make sure she was adept enough to anticipate this possibility and to make practical preparations for it. In this sense, the crisis could be the backdrop against which one could construct a competent presentation of self, and regain a sense of agency that was so profoundly undermined by subsequent developments. Moreover, the laboriously cultivated autonomy also made it possible for people to conceive of their personal trajectories in terms of personal maturation, as one of my contacts, Zhenia, did when I asked her about her prior political commitments:

I used to have this, you know, the elevated drive to go out into the square, [to resist] and so on... A long time ago. Youth, you know... These things pass with time, and this country, it teaches you all the correct lessons.

While Zhenia was clear about her discontents, she also constructed the 1990s as a time of personal progression, in the course of which the naiveté – or, as another respondent put it, *«the pioneer assiduity»* – of the earlier period was replaced with a more hardened and shrewd attitude. The objectification of this attitude took place, among other things, through the practices of consumption: preoccupation with fraud detection, strategic investments into household goods and domestic repairs and other expressions of one's autonomy from the regime. Hence, these practices played an important role in the construction of a new personhood which was juxtaposed, on the moral plane, to the indifferent and inefficient state, and on the temporal plane, to the gullibility and lack of practical competence of the earlier period.

My second, and more pessimistic point is perhaps already apparent here. It is striking how far from contention citizens were led by their efforts to cope with postsocialism. A well-known Russian writer Viacheslav Pietsukh remarked in a recent interview that «the chief life's work of any cultured person, both today and before, is a complete self-isolation from Russian reality» (Alekhin, 2008). While the sense of frustration with the structure of political opportunities is palpable in this statement, it is difficult to imagine a stance less suited to challenge it. But the equation so many citizens drew between practical competence and psychological divestment from politics is not the only problem. Another, related one was that the project of creating practical autonomy from the state was

perhaps too successful. By the end of the first postsocialist decade, Muscovites were quite convinced that, in the words of Igor, a car mechanic in his early 30s,

My only real concern is the health of my parents, well, and the cat, and what else? The rest of it is entirely irrelevant. Because all of these petty movements and squabbling up above [among the elites], they do not reflect on me whatsoever.

Whatever opinion one may hold about the accuracy of this conclusion, it is hard to miss the relevance of the famous Thomas' dictum that «if men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences» (1928). In other words, regardless of how justified people's sense of autonomy was, their firm belief that their lives were already virtually disconnected from politics («the government is on its own, and people are on their own», as it was) was consequential because it allowed for the possibility of further retrenchment of state services and obligations.

Revisiting the analytic distinction from which this article began, one between crisis as a lived reality and crisis as a rhetorical claim, it is easy to see how the two intersect here. As instability becomes a protracted and experiential condition, it begins to reshape the basic notions of practical competence. The individuals caught in its midst then develop their own investments into perpetuating their «claim to crisis», since it is only in that familiar setting that their cultural resources have value and meaning. That these resources and claims may go far beyond what the actual crisis demands is one problem. The other is that they make any resistance to the crisis unthinkable.

It is significant in this regard that practical autonomy has been, and remains, about self-protection, not resistance. In other words, its practices, as well as their physical manifestations (self-installed iron doors, guarded entryways, makeshift car garages, self-contained euro-repaired apartments in dilapidated housing blocks) emerged as «fortresses,» not «weapons» of the weak<sup>13</sup>, and as such fortresses, they were in many ways parallel to similar exclusions and partitions that are employed on a much grander scale by the newly-formed elites, who are in a much better position to implement their visions in durable architectural forms. The entire fabric of cities has been reshaped by the many building projects pursuing the same logic of exclusion, privatization and boundary-maintenance at the expense of openness and publicity – a move that is as much connected to the Soviet as it is to the post-Soviet elevation of privacy as the last domain of personal freedom. Such a transformation of space can be justified even by those who remain excluded. Indeed, they too have unquestioningly pursued the logic of autonomy in their daily lives.

But while the experiential crisis and crisis claims are in a mutually reinforcing relationship to one another, they are not identical. In fact, one striking feature of my case is that the claims to crisis in the public sphere were observably connected to the various political regimes. More specifically, the legitimacy of

<sup>13</sup> See Scott (1985).

Putin's rule was from its very outset in 2000 connected to a pronounced effort to move past the crisis-ridden Yeltsin years, which received the moniker of the «wild 1990s».

Yet, for all the reluctance of Putin's regime to perpetuate crisis claims, this did not have the constructively liberating effect on public imagination. Indeed, many of the manifestations of psychological and practical autonomy that defined the sensibilities of the 1990s remained in evidence. If anything, they became more pronounced. A number of recent analyses of post-millennial Russian culture emphasize the profound cynicism of its denizens regarding the nature of politics, a conspirological imagination and a professed distrust that defined the ideal of practical competence after socialism (see e.g., Pomerantsev, 2014).

When I paid a follow-up visit to several of my respondents in January 2012, twelve years after I last spoke with them, I discovered that even those that defined the post-millennial years as the era of stability, and thus seemed to move past crisis claims in their assessment of the macro-political situation, were as deeply, if not more deeply invested in debunking appearances and professing mistrust. If anything, this sense of conspiracy became more global. Igor, the same car mechanic I cited above, was deeply consumed by the theories of Masonic conspiracies and spoke in full seriousness to me about the existence of a world government with the U.S. Federal Reserve at its helm. Andrei, an insurance manager who was now in his early 50s, dismissed the protests that had just erupted on the streets of Moscow after revelations of electoral fraud during Parliamentary elections, using much of the same language I had heard over a decade prior:

While I agree with some of the slogans they used, it is suspicious to me that the protesters are so well organized. To me, this looks suspiciously like an Orange revolution orchestrated from abroad.

It thus appears that the effects of a protracted crisis may continue to linger well past the period in which crisis claims actively circulate, but these effects include, and are amplified by, the consequences of the claims that were made on their behalf. The two enable, rather than exclude one another. Routinization of chronic crises, in other words, has deep, long-standing, and potentially global consequences. We would be wise to pay closer attention to it.

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