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Bread and circuses: shifting frames and changing references in ordinary Muscovites' political talk

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Abstract

The debates around the course of the Russian transformation, intensified by the sudden collapse of the Russian economic system in August 1998, typically deal with phenomena and issues involved by analyzing the structure and functioning of political elites, parties and institutions. While all of these provide interesting and revealing data, they fail to pay sufficient attention to everyday lives of the ordinary Russian people who face increasing hardships with endurance and ingenuity. This paper is a part of an ongoing project which focuses on the adaptive strategies developed by ordinary Russians in response to a drastically changing societal environment. This paper presents some early findings pertaining to the shifts adaptive strategies of Muscovites underwent after the economic collapse, and suggests that these shifts may start to explain why, despite the dramatic worsening of the economic situation, no major public protest actions have occurred so far. © 2001 The Regents of the University of California. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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As the August 1998 crisis of the Russian economy demonstrates, the political and economic situation in Russia is far from being stable and predictable. From the very first days of the crisis, attention of social and political analysts has been drawn to macro-societal causes and consequences of the sudden collapse of the Russian economic system (see Robinson, 1999; Simon, 1999). In the meantime, millions of Russians continued to live their lives in the context of unpredictability and incertitude,

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perceiving and reacting to macrostructural events and to the changing social environment through the prism of their everyday lives and experiences.

This paper is the first account of the beginning of a project in which I aim to trace societal change not as it transforms larger social and political structures, but as it is continuously reflected and framed on the micro-social level, in the milieu of the everyday life of the Russian people. “Strategies of adaptation” are interpreted in this inquiry broadly: as ways of framing and interpreting the ongoing social change, as well as the behavioral orientations they entail, which the actors develop in response to the ever-changing social surroundings and which they incorporate into their daily practice.

Projects addressing issues of everyday life in contemporary Russia comprise only a fraction of the cumulative research conducted in the field of post-socialist studies by sociologists, economists and political scientists. However, while cumulative aggregate factors, such as per capita income, or dynamics within political elites and institutions (“Yeltsinology” and “Kremlinology”, in Rose’s (1994) formulation) are frequently favored as more accessible and obvious indicators of societal change, they may also be misleading. The former, to quote Clifford Geertz, is “but one highly visible resultant of a complex process which they reflect in only a broad and imprecise fashion, so that a simple identification of the pattern of change in per capita income with the pattern of social change which produces it is highly misleading” (Geertz, 1963, p. 2). As for the latter, fascinating and fruitful as it may be, analysis of political leaders and institutions does not help us much in understanding either the impact their actions have on the lives of ordinary¹ Russians, or the source of the latter’s silent consent continuously endowing the politicians with the power to rule.

A bottom-up perspective on the lives and attitudes of the ordinary people is especially crucial in times of rapid societal change. While the traditional job of the social scientist is to examine and describe the functioning of the social system, concentrating on the recurrent patterns within the social structure, this task takes a different form when the social structure is undergoing profound transformation (Pirainen, 1997). Instead of waiting for the new social system to fully crystallize (which, as the pessimists profess, may be a task requiring many more decades; see Sztompka, 1993), it may be worthwhile for social scientists to concentrate on the agents of change and to examine their ways of accommodating and managing the rapidly changing societal environment. For it is such seemingly unstable and elusive phenomena as the ever-changing adaptive practices of the ordinary people that may contain the seeds of their future resistance or compliance with the social order to come and, therefore, affect both the course and the outcomes of the social transformation.

The focus of the proposed project on strategies of adaptation, therefore, is not dictated merely by ethnographic interest in “how the other half lives”. Rather, by

¹ By “ordinary” people I mean lay people who do not have a specialized knowledge of politics or economics and who are not professionally involved in the processes of policy-making, but are affected by these processes as constituents.

posing the research problem in this manner, I seek to gain insight both into the practical question of how Russians are getting by in the conditions of instability and constant change and, more importantly, into a more profound issue of the time-specific nature and flexibility of adaptive techniques which allow social actors to accommodate to the macrosocial environment, influencing it at the same time by their collective adaptation.

A nation with an unpredictable future

The interest in the micro-perspective on macro-social events is fueled in this study by the view which is now shared by the majority of scholars on Russia — namely that the society is undergoing a *transformation* rather than a *transition* (see Stark, 1992; Rose, 1994). While the term “*transition*” implies a secure knowledge of the developmental trajectory, as well as of its anticipated outcomes, the events unfolding during the past decade in Russia 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, Russia is still undergoing a *transformative* process the outcomes of which cannot yet be predicted; as put by a prominent 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, as social scientists agree, is 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). Given this concern, it is crucial at each stage of the transformation to critically assess the state of the society, so as to be aware of potential social developments.

Such an assessment has been consistently carried out by Russian and Western sociologists during the past decade, producing grim accounts on a variety of social issues (see, for example, Powell, 1993; Rutkevich, 1999; Golov, 1998), from the sharp decline in the standard of living and increasing social polarization, to the constant threat of ethnic conflicts and growing unemployment. Simpura and Eremitcheva (1997) divide the topics of public and scientific debate around social problems in Russia into two categories. The first consists of descriptions of present-day material conditions and hardships, such as poverty and crime; the second deals with threats of extreme catastrophes at some point in the future, such as the demographic crisis of increasing mortality and decreasing birth rates in Russia.

In the environment of general impoverishment, social disorganization and demographic and environmental crisis, more and more Russians report disappointment with the course of reforms (Leontyev, 1994; Sedov, 1995). Apart from the objective deterioration of the living conditions, this disappointment is partially fueled by what is described by Hirschman (1981) as a “two-lane road phenomenon”, in the course of which those individuals who move more slowly in their transition start losing patience when observing those who happen to move faster, much like vehicles on a two-lane road in a traffic jam.

The challenge that this macrosocial situation poses to a social researcher lies in explaining how, in the midst of chaos and dissatisfaction which could have easily brought about a revolution from below,² ordinary Russian people continue to live their lives and withstand not only the economic hardships, but also the moral and psychological pressures of the time.

With the above question in mind, I have begun ethnographic fieldwork in Russia in the summer of 1997, before the August economic crisis. A few outstanding studies have been recently conducted in Russia with a similar focus, most remarkably, Ries' work on the Russian talk (1997) and Piirainen's analysis of social stratification (1997). However, ironically for explorations of a changing societal context, most of these works limited themselves to giving one-time snapshots of the social situation, without considering the fluctuations and changeability of their subjects' adaptive strategies over time.

In order to reflect the fluid nature of the adaptive strategies developed as a response to the changing political, economic and social situations, this study has been designed as longitudinal. I am following the transformations of my informants' coping attitudes before and after the crisis. The city of Moscow was initially selected as the research site for practical reasons of convenience. In addition, it is known that the range of economic opportunities is substantially wider in Moscow than in the other Russian cities (Dubin, 1997). Since the goal of the interviews is to investigate the developments and nature of Russians' adaptive strategies, it appears propitious to investigate them in a site providing a greater pool of possible variations.

After the first wave of fieldwork which took place in June–July 1998, the second was carried out during December 1998–February 1999. Since the fieldwork on the first stage was largely ethnographic, with eight semi-structured interviews intended to supplement it, the interview sample was expanded during the second wave through snowball sampling to include a total of 33 Muscovites from maximally diverse occupational and educational backgrounds. While such a design does not allow for cross-sectional comparisons, it does enable me to monitor modifications in adaptive strategies of the informants under the influence of the economic breakdown, as well as trace the general dynamics in the ways they framed and navigated the unstable social world around them.

“Not as good as it could have been”: disappointment with the present

The first wave of the ethnographic fieldwork and interviewing conducted in Russia in the summer of 1998 prior to the crisis, revealed a peculiar aspect in the respondents' view of reality which we could label the *ethos of discontent*. There was an almost uniform sense that, while the personal and family situation of the respondents

² For a description of conditions necessary to cause a revolution of failed expectations, see Ted Gurr's classical work “Why Men Rebel” (1970). As many researchers point out (Shlapentokh, 1995), practically all these conditions have been met in Russia already in the mid-90s.

was fairly tough and unstable, the overall situation in the country was far worse still. Whatever fortunate recent personal or family developments, respondents insisted these were untypical exceptions, and they emphasized that the general developments in the country were far less positive than their own personal circumstances suggest:

I constantly have the feeling that I was lucky. Fate smiled at me and I found this job. It could have been worse, it all could have been a lot worse ... I can't imagine how most people are carrying on... (Nina, female, 51 years old)

These appeals to the exceptionality of one's own personal and family situation, as compared to that of the rest of the country, may be partly explained by the fact that the standard of living and structure of opportunities for Moscow residents are, in fact, better than those for the rest of the country (Dubin, 1997). However, as the periodic surveys of the National Public Opinion Research Center suggest, evaluations of one's personal and family situation have been uniformly and considerably higher than estimations of the situation in the country as a whole everywhere in Russia throughout the course of the reform (VCIOM, 1998). Several preliminary hypotheses may be suggested at this point of analysis. Firstly, a pluralistic ignorance phenomenon may be involved here.³ Since the judgements of the respondents pertaining to their own condition were made by them on the basis of their own experiences, while the judgements pertaining to the larger picture were drawn from the information available from the media, this inconsistency could stem from the discrepancy between the two. Secondly, an insightful observation by Ries (1997) suggests that the depiction of one's success as highly untypical may also serve among Russians a ritualistic function of "misleading evil spirits" or the spirits of social envy. Lastly, this reluctance to relate success may be rooted in an absence of success rhetoric in the Russian cultural tradition.⁴

Whatever its roots, a drive to understate one's well-being is an interesting phenomenon, and it appears to be almost a rhetorical requirement as far as the discussion of everyday life is concerned. The following quote illustrates the fundamental unwillingness of many Russians to admit that their financial state may be somewhat better than they declared initially:

I'm telling you, ever since 1991 I could only afford the most miserable purchases, like socks and underwear. Nothing major. We have to limit ourselves to bare necessities with my son... Well... (catching me looking at an obviously new computer on an old, worn-out desk and certainly standing out in an otherwise modest layout of the room)... Well, one thing — we did buy a computer for my son. I decided he has to learn how to deal with it. (Nina, female, 51)

³ For more on pluralistic ignorance, or, as it was originally labeled, illusion of universality (Allport, 1924), see Taylor (1982) or O'Gorman (1986).

⁴ I am grateful to Sergei Oushakin for this point.

Further on in the discussion, Nina, rather reluctantly, remembered that two other major purchases — a new refrigerator and a combined TV/VCR system were also purchased by her after 1991. Similar unwillingness to reveal their, however unsystematic, increases in financial fortune has been typical for the other interviews as well. In contrast to the American convention of not revealing the base salary, Russians wore their salaries on their sleeve, but were far more reluctant to unveil what they considered untypical and unsystematic (however, as it turned out, quite regular) financial improvements, as if in disclosing them they may be misrepresenting their true economic state.

This, certainly, is not meant to suggest that the majority of Russians who declare their income to be US\$100 or less are, in fact, underground millionaires. The purchases of foreign-brand domestic equipment are typically laboriously saved for and, once purchased, these items are treated almost like family fetishes.⁵ However, it is important, while taking financial complaints at face value, to realize at the same time their culturally-ritualistic aspect. The cultural expectation of not being well-off, and the ritual of lamenting one's material condition is what comprises what we could call the *ethos of discontent*, and one could easily trace its roots to the long history of material hardships in Russia, which was for a long time combined with an institutionalized persecution of those wealthier than the average. In light of this history, the cultural norm of discontent with one's financial state serves two interrelated purposes — a manifestation of one's position "with the people", or "being like everyone else", and, at the same time, as avoidance of social envy and spite associated with deviations from the norm of financial desperation. As it will be argued below, however, potential consequences of this ethos for analysis are more important than its roots, since the ethos of discontent may make the reported situation sound more critical than it really is, and thus prompt one to expect collective protests in situations where the critical limits of people's tolerance are not yet exhausted.

The widespread, and rather emotionally expressed, frustration with the economic realities of the day was articulated in two forms. On the macro-level, there was a loudly voiced opinion that the transformation has failed as far as people's expectations were concerned. The situation in the country was widely affirmed to not be what the people had expected when the transformation was only starting. On a more micro-scale, the respondents have consistently maintained that while they predominantly have been successful in making ends meet, they have been doing so out of their last resources and with an enormous amount of luck.⁶ At any rate, the powers that be did not receive credit for whatever successes the ordinary people have been enjoying in their private lives. On the contrary, there appeared to be an almost demonstrative and passionately conveyed alienation from the sphere of big politics. Indeed, while the familiar world of everyday life appeared to be the ultimate area of the respondents' interest, the world of big politics was perceived as incomprehen-

⁵ The symbolic role of these pieces of foreign luxury in the Russian households is yet to be explored.

⁶ The term "living day by day" (*zhit' odnim dnem*) is frequently used in describing the complexities of such unstable and accident-prone survival.

sible and, ultimately, alien. The division of the respondents' picture of the social world into immediate and distant, or private and official, was drawn with force and uniformity reminiscent of Bakhtin's depiction of the two-world condition of the Middle Ages (Bakhtin, 1984). However, unlike a Bakhtinian contrast of the seriousness of the official world to the carnival of folk culture, it was the political world of today that was perceived by the respondents to be surreal and theatrical. Theatrical imagery was invoked by those interviewed to emphasize the absurd character of the political life, and at the same time, to help respondents separate themselves from the vicious world of big politics and give them, in this separation, a sense of superiority:

Our political sphere, to be honest, I am sick and tired of everything there ... Whenever you take a look, our upper spheres are fighting and pushing each other from their chairs; you just sit and watch, like in theater. One scene is over, then another, then a third one ... They can't manage to split power between themselves, but the common people just live their lives. (Lyuba, female, 49)

Almost fastidious alienation from the sphere of big politics (which is usually referred to simply as "there", just like politicians are spoken of as "they") marked Russians' world-view even prior to perestroika (Shlapentokh, 1986). In the summer of 1998, this conception has been reinforced by the widely spread notion of complete criminalization of politics and big business. Indeed, crime was seen by the respondents not as the activity of professional criminals, but rather as a loose allegory designating all activities taking place in the public sphere. There was a firm belief among most informants in the absolute impossibility of earning any considerable money outside of criminal structures, and a sense that "all those people there [businessmen], they all have been convicted before". In practice, such a conviction leads the respondents to deliberate avoidance of information concerning the political and economic elites of the country, and hence, to demonstrative depolitization (whether actually true or not).⁷ At any rate, despite the declared indifference and even repulsion to politics, the critical discussion of political themes never failed to be emotional and extensive, and could well measure up to a similarly zealous discussion of the economic troubles and hardships of everyday life.

"Not as bad as it can be": fear of the future

From all the above, it is clear why, coming back to Moscow for the second field-work stage in December 1998, my expectations were mixed. On the one hand, the mistrust and dissatisfaction with the government and political elites had been so prevalent already in the summer that one could expect that further worsening of the

⁷ While practically all respondents insisted that they ignore mass media which "can only give you extra stress", apparent knowledge of current events they demonstrated in conversation suggested that the above statements bore a ritualistic/declarative, rather than factual character.

situation would result in a political uprising. On the other hand, since many respondents, especially those working in the budget sector, consistently complained about material deprivation and impoverishment in summer, the sharp rise in prices could be expected to produce an uprising on the economic grounds. At the same time, since none of the above happened till December, it was obvious that new and non-violent ways were found by Russians for dealing with the situation.

The question of adaptation falls into two parts. On the one hand, there is a practical question of how those who in the summer reported barely making ends meet succeed to do so now that they have become, as many report, “three times as poor”.⁸ In this respect, strategies of dealing with the sudden tightening of the budget are narrowed down further by the fact that, along with the increase in prices, there has been a significant shrinking on the labor market, with many Muscovites losing jobs or supplementary jobs (*prirabotki*) which, prior to the crisis, have supplied their households with additional income. For those few who did change their occupation after the crisis, the pattern of this switch has typically been from an official firm to self employment:

After the collapse, my firm practically stopped functioning, so that we all only receive now our official salary which has always been laughable. As for the percentage from the contracts which used to be the primary sources of income, they disappeared together with the contracts themselves. So now I am taking this time to do things myself. I have friends in Siberia who do business here, and I started to collaborate with them finding them partners, taking them around Moscow and so on. (Nikolai, male, 31)

This type of self-employment, possible primarily on the basis of personal non-official contacts, does not mean that their holders have fully resigned from the official companies they were affiliated with before. Rather, they combine their “official affiliation” which provides them with status and useful network contacts, with a “real job” which grants them their main, although unstable income:

I am still considered to be a geophysicist, but all of us just receive the minimal salary — 80 rubles, and are supposed to take care of ourselves. Of course, with a salary like this, no one expects from you to be at work from 9 till 5, we are simply doing our own thing — sometimes projects if we find a contractor, and sometimes something completely unrelated. (Andrei, male, 50)

⁸ The factual accuracy of this claim could be argued about: while the dollar rate did, in fact, grow three-fold, most of the prices increased only 1.5 or 2 times, and some stayed the same for a long enough period to allow for unexpected savings. This is especially true for those Russians who habitually convert their savings into dollars (which is a very popular saving strategy in Moscow and other large cities). Thus, one of my respondents reported actually saving as a result of the breakdown, since the sum she and her husband have accumulated for a car tripled, while the car prices did not. It would be hard to argue, however, that these rare instances could compensate for the very real loss of rouble purchasing power.

This strategy of holding multiple jobs, typical for survival even prior to the crisis, still holds where the opportunity of combining multiple jobs exists. Frequently, the jobs are selected on a complementary basis: one providing the major bulk of income, another one — status, a third one — stability in (although miserable) earnings.⁹ However, since the job pool, according to the respondents, has shrunk, many have lost the supplementary income they had:

I was working late hours at this confectionery making boxes. But who now has the money to buy cakes? Their volume has fallen, and they didn't have any work for me anymore. (Nina, female, 51)

In these circumstances, the primary strategy has become that of a more economical consumption. On the one hand, this implies consumption of Russian, rather than imported, goods, such as washing powder, cosmetics, food products, and return to the old ways used before the foreign products were introduced to the Russian market. Pampers that had come to replace old sheets were now substituted with the old sheets again, imported processed foods were replaced with local unprocessed products, and foreign brands — with the Russian counterparts.

Another aspect of economizing is what may be called the strategy of differential consumption, which implies that different members of the household have different needs, some of which can be prioritized over others. Thus, children are typically prioritized over adults, and sick — over healthy. This policy frequently had an interesting visualization in practice since at times it resulted in two sections appearing in the refrigerator and allocated for different “consumption categories”:

We switched to margarine from butter, and are now eating Rama. I actually think it's not any worse, and may be is even healthier for people of our age. Only for the little one we still buy butter, and also some fruit, cheese, and so on — a growing body needs all these things, while we can easily get by without them. (Lina, female, 53)

The ease with which my informants put up with a restricted access to certain types of food was partly due to the fact that none of these strategies represented an unknown terrain: in essence, Russians were just returning to the old ways practiced under the time of communist shortages. There is almost a physical memory of doing things under severe financial constraints, and the fact that the older generation possesses and can share this memory with those few who grew up unaware of the practice of washing plastic bags and re-using carton milk cans, supplied this process with a sense of natural continuity:

⁹ An alternative approach is for the same roles to get distributed within the family, so that, for instance, the husband's job provides the household with high income, the wife's — with useful connections, and the grandmother's pension — with stability of earnings. It is in this respect that it may make sense to speak about the family as about the basic coping unit of post-socialism.

We used to be walking around in Pampers, and now we have cloth, right? Our granny knows how to do this, she showed Mommy, and Mommy is now wrapping you, isn't she?... (Kira, female, 29, mothering her baby son)

An important aspect contributing to the respondents' lack of protest was the reference category against which they measure their difficulties. While during the summer the situation in the country was thought of and talked about as a deviation from the norm (the norm being people's expectations and unfulfilled promises of the government), in the first after-crisis winter, the reference point has become the potential depth of the crisis which, as most believed, was still in its light starting stage. This shift of the mental focus prompted Russians to refer to their current situation as "not as bad as it can be", rather than "not as good as it could have been":

Of course it's horrible what's going on, but what can one do? One just has to live. I think we'll survive this — people during the war ate only potatoes and bread and survived, so how come we won't survive? (Lina, female, 53)

World War II, as well as other instances of material deprivation of the past decades, such as GULAGs and the years of the Civil War, served for respondents as marks of the depth to which the situation in the country may potentially sink. These historical periods, used as reference points, made my informants consider the sacrifices they faced in winter minor. The same occurrences served yet a different purpose, that of discouraging them from thinking about resorting to violent measures against the government:

So what should we do, rebel? I think our history is packed with evidence that rebellions never improve the situation, but only make it worse... Anything is better than civil war, and that's what will happen if people get militant... (Andrei, male, 38)

The shadow of the Civil War, making my informants face increasing hardships with stoicism rather than outrage and dissatisfaction, appeared to frame the post-crisis situation as something that was certainly hard, but not unbearable; as one of the respondents put it, "we still have bread and milk to survive". The critical line of tolerance associated with this viewpoint lied lower than the current crisis has placed Russians. This may be one of the important reasons for the absence of direct protests. In my discussion with a young underpaid school teacher who had earlier confessed that she had never been able to afford any clothes and wore whatever her mother gave her, the following statement was made:

Anna: I think, partly, people themselves are to blame for the current situation. If they are unsatisfied, they have to protest, and not just keep working and talking among themselves.

Olga: Why don't you protest then?

Anna: Me? I think my situation is not bad at all. I have food, I work, I do what I like. I would have protested if I was hungry or had any other reasons.

Similar, and perhaps more striking absence of indignation marked the post-crisis Russians' attitude to politicians. It was an almost uniform belief that the government has been responsible for the catastrophic financial state of the country, and was, at the same time, unable to lead Russia out of the crisis. However, this belief was voiced by the respondents without the emotional intensity and outrage which marked their attitude in summer, when, one would think, there would have been less grounds for it. While most discourses referring to the world of big politics during the pre-crisis period not only actively denounced all major actors on the political arena, but engaged into an orgy of lament and accusations which seemed to bring relief and almost delight to my informants, the post-crisis political discourse was fairly unemotional and constituted merely a statement of fact: the government is morally and politically bankrupt and cannot be relied upon.

This shift of attitude, although contrary to what I expected to find after the collapse of the economic system, is understandable nevertheless. While many respondents stated post-factum that they have anticipated the crisis at some time in the future, the political bankruptcy of the government was not a uniformly accepted fact in the times before the crisis, and required a certain degree of zeal in defending. In contrast, the absence of trust in government and the evidence of its complete failure were perhaps the only things that Russians all over the country could agree upon after the crisis. Insistence on this simple and self-evident fact did not seem necessary anymore, for the simple reason of its obviousness.

Practical and financial problems which multiplied in the lives of my informants after the crisis may serve as yet another explanation of this moderation in judgements and attitudes. Search for cheaper products, shift to less costly, and consequently, more labor-intensive cooking and housekeeping techniques, and even the emotional labor of keeping oneself and one's family sound and intact consumed incomparably more time and energy, so that people did not have the resources for active criticism and opposition. In such an environment, people's attention seemed to be distracted by logistical activities away from the more global political considerations. To use a wonderful comparison of one of my informants, "you just stop thinking; it's like when someone dies, and you don't feel any pain because you spend all your time doing paperwork and organizing the funeral".

While sincere indignation and outrage were practically absent from everyday political discourse of the post-crisis period, the noticeable trend was for it to become more and more satirical. For many, the politicians stopped being repulsive and became ridiculous. While the metaphor for the pre-crisis political world had been that of a theater, the predominant allegory evoked in post-crisis interviews was that of a circus or, as its variation, a zoo:

I don't know where they find people like this; each Duma member is a clinical case. Listen to how they speak! They are clowns in a circus, not politicians. (Andrei, male, 48)

How can you take our politics seriously at all? For me it's just a collection of idiots and swindlers, and if I ever look at them, I do it like I look at animals in the zoo. (Zhenya, female, 34)

Viewing the political scene as a circus seemed to be reinforced by the media. Weekly satirical TV programs abounded and were becoming increasingly popular; they were typically modeled to parody the news programs and are called accordingly: *Vremechko* (the derisive distortion of the *Vremya* news program), *Segodnyachko* (distorted form of *Segodnya*) and *Itogo*: (modified *Itogi* — another weekly news). The programs mockingly commented on the events of the political life, and several days after their air the particularly successful episodes were still being retold and laughed at with the same delight that earlier in the year accompanied the debunking political diatribes. Partly due to these programs, and partly due to their truly absurd character, selected political scandals were getting incorporated into the popular political discourse as token symbols of absurdity, and were evoked over and over by different people as examples of the circus-like quality of Russian political life. Circulation of such token events was taking place constantly since the supply of new absurd occurrences on the highest political level did not cease; at the time of the fieldwork, such were the various details of acquittal of an odious leader of Solntsevo organized crime group Mikhas', as well as the fact of acquisition of a castle in Liechtenstein by Yeltsin's daughter, Tatiana Diachenko, and several others.

Such framing of politics has good and bad aspects. On the one hand, it appeared to give the ordinary Muscovites a mode of defense from anxiety and pressures of the turbulent time by allowing them to concentrate on the laughable aspects of the undesired situation. At the same time, it clearly did not contribute to increasing participation and civil concern since it removed the sphere of engagement with politics from the field of collective action to the field of political folklore.

To conclude, while the societal situation has clearly aggravated in Russia over the crisis months, it appears that the adaptive strategies employed by the ordinary Russians in coping with it have made collective action even more unlikely than it was before the crisis. This paper has suggested two important aspects in which everyday adaptive strategies have reduced the possibility of broad public protest actions. First and foremost, the social unrest and economic hardships have changed the point of reference used by the ordinary citizens in assessing their economic situation, and created a "not-as-bad-as-it-could-be" syndrome. While earlier during the year, they tended to evaluate the degree of their deprivation by contrasting their current state with a state they expected and hoped for, after the crisis this evaluation mainly involved the potential dangers of the deepening crisis. In comparison with these dangers, the current state of affairs, in absolute figures being much worse than in summer, was subjectively evaluated as more acceptable, quite in line with the relative deprivation hypothesis. Second, the revealed bankruptcy of the government both in terms of social trust and political abilities to deal with the crisis made the high pitch and inspiration of political critique of the earlier period useless. Fueled during the pre-crisis period by the objective difficulties of the transformation, this critique existed in a relatively ambiguous situation susceptible to different interpretations and

forecasts. Ironically, as soon as the diagnosis of current political situation became obvious to everyone, the critics found that they had nothing left to reveal, and seemed to resort to irony and cynical withdrawal which leaves little potential for action and resistance.

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