



ARTICLE

'In Case of Fire Emergency'

Consumption, security and the meaning of durables in a transforming society

OLGA SHEVCHENKO

University of Pennsylvania

Abstract. This article argues that the study of Russian rituals and patterns of consumption reveals the intricate ways in which post-socialist actors deal with economic and political uncertainty, creating and symbolically affirming their identities in a rapidly transforming environment. Far more culturally specific than a simple globalization argument would suggest, and far more creative than simple reproduction of 'Soviet' attitudes, post-Soviet practices of consumption represent a complex fusion of global trends and local cultural patterns. As such, they may tell us just as much about the post-socialist condition as about the attitudes that preceded it. This article addresses these issues by exploring the consumption of household durables, the popularity of which can be explained by the fact that they came to embody some of the most profound cultural trends, expectations and fears in a contemporary post-Soviet setting. Decoding the symbolic significance of these objects may thus yield valuable insights into the cultural processes unfolding in the post-Soviet milieu, but also help us raise more general questions of formation and affirmation of identities, groups and coping strategies through consumption.

Key words

consumption • globalization • identity • post-socialism • Russia

A FELLOW GRADUATE STUDENT recently told me a story about his parents who live in an average-sized town in Western Siberia. Nikolai's mother and father are retired and live alone in the three-room apartment they once

shared with their son and daughter before the children moved out to start their own families. Recently Nikolai's parents surprised their children by deciding to purchase a second refrigerator: an ultra-modern no-freeze model. "We were a bit puzzled, since they live alone, and hardly even use one fridge," says Nikolai. "Plus, our kitchen is not so big, and the second fridge completely crowded it." After a while, the old refrigerator broke down and Nikolai's parents moved it into the empty bedroom, purchasing at the same time a deep freezer which they installed in the corridor. They insisted on keeping the old refrigerator 'just in case' – or, in Russian, '*in case of fire emergency*' [*na vsyakii pozharnyi sluchai*] – therefore it was used as storage for about a year, after which it was mended and then left in the bedroom. None of the cooling devices, however, liberated Nikolai's parents from their life-long habit of hanging frozen products out of their windows during the long Siberian winters. Thus, despite the abundance of refrigerators, the family news Nikolai receives from Siberia is still full of accounts of food spoiled by sudden thaws or frosts. Apparently, his parents never got to the point of actually using their expensive new kitchen equipment to its full capacity. Indeed, as Nikolai quoted his mother, "why overuse the fridge when we have windows?"

This story highlights a number of motifs which make the study of consumption in Russia so fascinating. First, within the context of debates on globalization, one can examine the effects of the global consumer economy on local practices. Second, on a theoretical level, one can question the applicability of certain sociological concepts (such as conspicuous consumption, commodification and sign-value) to a society that has not undergone the long journey of Western capitalist development. There are also issues of self-representation and boundary maintenance by means of signs and objects, and the elaborate interaction between consumption and the constitution of individual and group identities in a specific cultural and social setting.

This article examines the rituals and practices associated with the consumption of goods and services contextually, from within the fabric of culture. Drawing on longitudinal in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation I have been conducting in Moscow over the past two years, I argue that the fascination Russian consumers display with particular types of Western-made products (while being relatively indifferent to others, see Oushakine, 2000) cannot be fully attributable to the spreading phenomenon commonly referred to as 'capitalist consumerism'. Neither should it be dismissed under the rubric of socialist deprivation effects. When interpreted in the context of post-socialist culture and society, these seemingly Western

practices reveal their fundamentally local, yet contemporary, logic, serving as telling examples of what Robertson (1992) called 'glocalization'.

The fieldwork on which this article is based was carried out as part of a larger project dedicated to exploring the various ways in which post-socialist change transforms structures of everyday life in contemporary Moscow. The sample included 33 respondents, aged from 29 to 68 years, from varying educational and occupational backgrounds, mostly average and lower than average income, and all members of the 'lay public' in that they did not possess any in-depth knowledge of the political or economic issues on which they were commenting. Since I was interested in shared public discourse through which social change was experienced, narrated and acted upon, this task called for a diverse, rather than a representative, sample. As a result, I cannot claim that the findings of this article represent the full range of consumer strategies in contemporary Russia. However, my aim was to discover the meaningful universe on which consumption decisions are based in each particular case, as well as the ways in which these decisions are linked to realities that cut through the realm of consumption, such as identity dilemmas, political rhetoric and the quest for ontological security. I hope that, although systematic cross-sectional analysis cannot be provided here due to sample limitations, the intrinsic value of this article will be in suggesting a set of analytical distinctions useful for understanding the formation of consumption choices and preferences in a post-socialist context. These distinctions can also be used as a heuristic device for tapping into the varying strategies and styles of consumption practised by different social groups.

This article first describes the specific pattern of Russian consumption and outlines existing approaches to its explanation. It then highlights the omissions and problematic assumptions involved in these approaches, and makes a case for an ethnographic exploration of practices and discourses associated with consumption. The analysis centres on consumption of the relatively expensive household durables which can frequently be found in otherwise very modest Russian homes. I argue that the importance of these consumer items lies in the role that they play in the identity discourse of contemporary Russian social actors, by embodying the dichotomies between the past and the present, and between the people and the state. As identity symbols, these objects yield valuable insights into the cultural processes unfolding in the post-Soviet milieu.

CONSUMPTION AND INCOME: A CONSPICUOUS DISCREPANCY

The difficulty of assessing the material well-being of the populations of transforming countries is a well-known topic, though not always sufficiently addressed. The most apparent problem here is the lack of agreement between the available income and spending statistics; in the first months of 2000, for example, the volume of national expenditure registered by the Russian Statistics Committee (Goskomstat) exceeded the volume of corresponding earnings by more than 30 percent.¹ This is not to say that similar discrepancies between income and consumption do not exist in the West. Access to family resources, savings and (especially among the lower classes) involvement in an informal economy (Edin and Lein, 1997) mean that registered income does not directly translate into social class or consumption category in modern Western countries either. However, in societies with a changing class structure and an unstable economy, these features are not only magnified, but supplemented by a set of additional complications, such as the predominance of a barter economy, extensive use of foreign currency (mostly US dollars and, to a lesser extent, DMs), ease of conversion between social and financial capital (Ledeneva, 1998; Busse, 2000), and extremely fast upward and downward mobility.

Given all these complications, it should come as no surprise that even such a seemingly simple undertaking as the identification of low-income Russians eligible for food aid can become an almost impossible enterprise (Caldwell, 2000), since those who appear to be eligible in conventional Western terms frequently turn out to be not the people who need it most, and vice versa. Aware of these idiosyncrasies, many market research agencies, under the guidance of ESOMAR,² have switched to the policy of asking their respondents not about their income, but about their possession of consumer durables, such as video recorders, automobiles, computers, etc., considering this a more accurate measure of the respondent's social class than a direct question about income.³ Alternatively, Russian social scientists, more interested in charting patterns of stratification than accurately reflecting the population's purchasing power, prefer to ask questions about gross income, specifying separately that the figure should include money obtained from 'moonlighting' (jobs on the side) and the cumulative value of produce grown on garden plots.

Turning from salary and income statistics to consumption makes one aware of the complexities of the social and economic processes unfolding in the former socialist countries. Studying consumption yields fertile ground for asking significant questions, but it by no means produces ready answers. While the data on consumption do highlight inaccuracies and

troublesome assumptions in rather homogenous doomsday assessments of the socioeconomic situation in contemporary Russia, conclusions drawn on the basis of consumption all too often fall into a different extreme. Prioritizing consumption indicators over reported measures of income, commentators are often led to suggest that the 'true' economic situation in Russia is that of prosperity, or at least, economic growth; hence, all reports of socioeconomic hardships are inaccurate or ideologically driven (Shama, 1996; Tishkov, 1999).

At first glance, statistics relating to the purchase of consumer durables in Russia during the past 10 years support this contention, as well as lending credibility to the globalization argument understood in its most simplistic form – as a statement about homogenization of cultural practices all around the world under the influence of American (or, more broadly, late capitalist) cultural hegemony. Numerical indicators of consumer activity are quite impressive for a country conventionally seen as undergoing rapid economic decline. According to market research data, 80 percent of Russian households have purchased at least one television set during the past 10 years, 62 percent have bought a new refrigerator, and 37 percent a new video recorder, with figures somewhat higher in large cities, such as Moscow and St Petersburg.⁴ The obvious commodification of the streets, the ubiquity of advertising in large cities, on television and in the press,⁵ and stories such as that of Nikolai's parents may be easily interpreted as proof that Russian society is growing increasingly affluent, and that Western competitive consumption patterns are slowly taking root there.

Yet, there are at least three problems that are inherent to this type of argument. First, the a priori supposition is that the factors underlying this vibrant consumer spending are the same as those observed in affluent Western capitalist economies: surplus income, financial security and commodification of everyday life. Second, the argument uncritically relies on the dubious category of 'true situation' in discussions of a subjective phenomenon such as quality of life. Maintaining that, despite consistent complaints of financial insecurity, most Russian consumers, in fact, enjoy the stable financial comfort necessary for significant expenditure, this argument masks a different question: what could be the factors propelling many people in post-Soviet Russia to meticulously save for, and invest in, certain products even when their financial situation may not be easily conducive to such consumer behavior. Third, this argument overlooks the fact that, along with heightened interest in obtaining new products, many Russian consumers display a rather sentimental attachment to their old possessions, refusing to dispose of them even at times when they become completely

obsolete – an attitude that does not fit well into the picture of the newly acquired prosperity of the Russian population. This is illustrated by the example of Nikolai's parents.

In order to avoid making groundless assumptions about the motives that drive these not so immediately transparent consumer choices, one would have to observe the ways in which these choices are made, turning to the practices and narratives of the consumers themselves. In what follows, I use the interviews I have collected, as well as the ethnographic data accumulated over two years of fieldwork, as insights into the meaning that consumption of durables may hold for individuals functioning in the unstable context of post-Soviet Russia.

CONSUMPTION THROUGH AN ETHNOGRAPHIC LENS

The purchase of a new durable item is certainly an important event for any household, not just a Russian one. However, in the experience of my respondents, it assumes a planned and concerted character to such an extent that it starts to resemble a Durkheimian ritual.⁶ As a rule, several or all family members discuss the desired product and the comparative advantages of the available brands for several weeks, drawing into discussion friends and acquaintances. Selection of the brand is accompanied by another meticulous discussion of the commercial venue that is to be selected for making the purchase. Comparative advantages of smaller shops, large shopping malls, specialized electronic stores and open-air consumer markets are analyzed and weighed against each other. In this process, stories and personal experiences trigger one another, so that by the end of the discussion prospective purchasers are well informed not only about all instances of similar purchases made by conversation participants, but also about the experiences of their colleagues, neighbors, friends and relatives. Such stories may function both as warnings and as encouragements. Since, as Humphrey (1995) has noted, deception is one of the central images associated with consumption in post-Soviet Russia, stories about fraudulent brands or faulty service encountered by the storyteller or (more frequently) by someone from his or her network of acquaintances are very frequent. Such narrative accounts warn prospective purchasers about potential risks of the purchase, and at the same time, make the entire process look something like a hunt with the same sense of achievement, adventure and pride in outsmarting rivals and obtaining the trophy. Needless to say, the risk is seen as proportional to the amount of money spent, as is the emotional reward of a successful purchase.

Depending upon the venue selected for the purchase, the transportation

of the household durable may turn into another adventure. While specialized stores include the transportation and installation of the appliance as part of the deal, the open-air markets, which are favoured by many because of their lower prices,⁷ usually do not offer such options. It is for this reason that the anthropologist Melissa Caldwell has labeled Sundays in Moscow 'the take-your-favorite-large-appliance-for-a-ride-on-the-metro day'.⁸ Sizeable boxes containing washing machines, dishwashers, microwaves and even refrigerators can often be seen on the subway, to the great annoyance of the other passengers, especially on the metro lines hosting the major markets, such as Bagrationovskaya, Tushinskaya and VDNKh.⁹ Occasionally, the arguments which erupt among fellow travelers as a result of the inconvenience of being squashed by large boxes and containers may become rather heated, underscoring the risky and adventurous character of the enterprise.

After the desired object is installed, the entire family gathers around to admire the way it works. For a while, the new appliance is actively discussed and demonstrated to guests and, at least for the first few weeks, the purchase officially constitutes the category of 'news'. It is one of the first things to be mentioned in response to general inquiries about the family's well-being and, during social visits, it becomes one of the highlights of the tour of the apartment. Often, it is the guest who initially draws attention to the new acquisition which evokes a detailed purchase narrative on the part of the owners. The attention of the guest is warranted, since these pieces of modern equipment tend to dramatically stand out in the otherwise fairly modest layout of the apartment. The 'standing out' is not only aesthetic, but also physical. For example, in the case of a new refrigerator, in many apartments, the kitchens are too small to house two refrigerators and it is not uncommon for an ultra-modern fridge, or, alternatively, its predecessor, to be put in the corridor or in a living room, thus decorating the interior and being one of the first objects to be seen by a visitor.

In terms of its use, the newly purchased commodity receives a reverence and care that the other household items do not enjoy. It is washed and cleaned more systematically and diligently than the rest, and is 'spared' in all possible ways. However, this special treatment does not mean that the old household item it replaced is immediately forsaken. On the contrary, the relatively high occurrence of ownership of multiple durable goods of the same category (17% of Russian households own more than one fridge and an even higher proportion have multiple television sets) is to a great extent explained by the reluctance on the part of the owners, especially the older generation, to part with the durables which have served their term. Since,

in most cases, the actual needs of the household are not high enough to fully utilize equipment such as two refrigerators, the old devices are often exiled onto the balcony, handed down to relatives, or sent to a dacha where they may or may not get a second life. When kept in the apartment, they may be moved out of the kitchen or be used as storage space, a cupboard, a shelf, or a television or microwave stand. In the latter case, they are sometimes draped, so that their former function may not even be immediately obvious.

Klara, a 45 year-old woman who works as a registrar in a Moscow outpatient clinic, shares a two-room apartment with her retired mother. Klara's kitchen is 50 square feet and accommodates two refrigerators: one tall modern fridge equipped with a no-frost system and an older, somewhat smaller model. The latter became obsolete a year and a half ago when its replacement was purchased, but the original model was still kept in the apartment to be used in the hypothetical 'case of fire emergency'. At the time of the interview, the old fridge stood unplugged and half-opened.

Klara: (about the old refrigerator) And we even fixed this old one, so much money spent on it. So, it works fine. And it works like a beast, like a tractor, you hear it from anywhere in the apartment (laughs). When it turns off, everything on it vibrates, that's how strong its engine is. But we decided not to sell it. I mean, it's a good one, it's not bad. I use it as a kitchen cabinet. (opens the fridge to demonstrate) My pots stand there. Pots, glass jars, all these things. Plus, I can turn it on at any moment. For instance, I may turn this one off (points to the new one), and turn the other one on. I haven't had to, but I can, because it's completely functional. And this one [new one] could just stay around, so I could wash it. Washing is good, I guess on the 1st of May . . . I decided to put a wash on for the May holidays . . .

Klara's comments reflect a sensibility common to many of my respondents: an eagerness to purchase new and expensive household gadgets frequently goes hand in hand with a reluctance to part with the old and obsolescent ones. Both of these attitudes have been acknowledged in the existing literature on Russia, but separately from one another. If the heightened interest in consumption gave rise to arguments of Russian affluence cited earlier, preservation of the old items allowed others to make a case for the persistence of the socialist deficit mentality on post-Soviet times (Vysokovskii, 1993). Yet, it is precisely the peculiarly hybrid nature of post-socialist consumption, allowing for the combination between the rampant

consumerism of a modern capitalist society and the obsessive stockpiling and recycling characteristic in economies of shortage (see Kornai, 1980; Draculic, 1993) that remains undertheorized. In what follows, I attempt to account for this unlikely coexistence, arguing that, far from being antagonistic and mutually contradictory, these two consumption modes appear to be mutually supportive in the context of contemporary Russian society. However, in order to understand the intricate relationship between the two modes of consumer orientation, we need to view them in the context of the profoundly politicized nature of consumption in contemporary Russian society.

CONSUMPTION AS POLITICS, POLITICS AS CONSUMPTION

Part and parcel of the immediate everyday reality both under socialism and in times of transition, consumption experiences are interpreted in Russia as fundamentally connected to, and indicative of, general sociopolitical changes. Analyzing post-Soviet subjectivity as displayed in Russian high-school students' essays, Serguei Oushakine (2000) writes:

. . . the two *political* regimes [i.e. of socialism and of post-socialism] are metonymically associated in students' essays with the dominant elements of consumption of the time (queues, grocery-bags, doughnuts, full stores, sales, etc.). The political (as well as the economic) is merged here with the personal, or at least is perceived in personalized terms of everyday practice.
(p. 100)

Confirming this observation, the multiple testimonies of my informants demonstrate that, in the course of their everyday lives, political changes of the past decade were experienced not through ideological rhetoric or civic participation, but through *changes in consumption*. Or rather, changes in consumption were perceived as the *very essence of political change* at the level on which rank-and-file citizens have access to politics in a recognizable and immediately consequential form. Memories of the food queues of the late 1980s, of ration cards and of closed enterprise sales effectively take the place of political judgments when individuals reflect upon that period. References to the freedom of consumer choice and complaints about high prices perform the same function in discussions of the current situation. In the following extract, the tendency to equate sociopolitical changes with changing patterns of consumption are vividly highlighted:

Olga: Lyuba, how would you describe to your future grandchildren, what happened after 1985?

Lyuba: I never gave much thought to it to be honest. . . . One thing, I hoped it would get better. . . . You know, the way we lived before, went to work, *stood in lines*. . . . Of course there were less problems in many ways, but then again, it was *impossible to buy anything*. For any need you had, you had to *queue forever*, and then get on the roster, and then sign in daily, or have a grandfather who was disabled in action in World War Two. . . . *The old TV-set we have – I could only get it through my grandfather*, same with the fridge, I could only obtain it through him. And even then – we had to wait about a year for the postcard to come in the mail telling us that our turn has come. . . . So consider it our luck, – if I didn't have a grandfather like this, what would we do? . . . Now even a thought of this seems ridiculous – *you can just go and buy any fridge, and car you like* – cheaper, more expensive, whatever your soul desires. You do *have to save for a while*, but then you're free to get whatever you want.

Olga: Going back to the 1980s, did you have any clear expectation of how the situation would change, any clear idea?

Lyuba: Very vague. There was this hope, that things would get better. But in which way – that we didn't know. (with animation) At any rate, I still remember this *soap we were buying*, so obsessively. . . . God knows how much time we spent standing in line for soap under these bloody *ration cards*. We stocked for our entire future life, seriously (laughs). And this shampoo, I remember. Later on, I used to wash my dog with it, because it was long after its expiration date, and we still had half a dozen bottles left. Back then, it was like, *I have to buy as much as they allow (Nado kupit', skol'ko dayut)*. And how we were buying vodka on ration cards! (laughs, then turns serious) The only bad thing now, there are a lot of counterfeits, of this very vodka brand, and other products too, although there are some respectable companies as well. I wish they [the government] watched it more closely, so that there's less phoniness out there (*pomen'she levaka*).

(Lyuba, 37 years, a cleaning lady in a private company, emphasis added)

In Russia, the bulk of responsibility for shopping and family finances lay (and still lies) on the shoulders of women (see Humphrey, 1995; Nikolaev, 2000). Their political talk testifies to this role division by

incorporating images of consumption in the most dramatic and verbose manner.¹⁰ However, narratives of many male respondents display a similar pattern of identifying political periods with consumption regimes:

In Soviet times, we had no fears that anyone could get fired from work. We had no idea what unemployment was. But on the other hand, it was much worse in the way of the food supplies. Right now, you can buy anything, as long as you have the money. And the way it was before – some crisis, and you have to stock up food, then something else comes up. I don't even remember which period it was, when they gave out the 'Card of a Muscovite', some or other kind of card. You go to a store – and I used to work in shifts back then – and you can buy a certain amount of butter, some number of grams, but no more. The queue was long, but I could only get the ration for myself, whereas my wife had our kids written in on her card, so she could go and purchase three rations, and I had to take care of mine. And there was nothing we could do about it. That was much worse. Now, if you work, you can live a life, buy whatever you want. But you have to work from morning till night . . .
(Roman, 44 years, construction worker)

In both accounts, the two consumption regimes – one organized around rationing with low prices, and the other built on the basis of a free market with more variable prices – express the very essence of the transformation from socialism to post-socialism as reflected in the speakers' experience. Not all the respondents would have agreed with the evaluations of this transformation. In several interviews, priorities were given in an opposite order and the previous greater affordability of goods was seen as proof of the superiority of the socialist project. This, however, does not alter the general algorithm of reasoning for, in both cases, consumption regimes were discussed not in their own right, but as the ultimate representation of the period to which they belonged.

The fundamental propensity for relating consumption regimes to political processes turns the field of consumption into a powerful rhetorical device for expressing political preferences and identity claims. There are two politicized oppositions running through the consumption narratives and behaviors of my informants, which turn their consumer discourses into acts of identity politics: opposition between the past and the present, and opposition between the people and the state. At a time when most sociological research on the subject of post-socialist identity limits itself to the

affirmations of its deep crisis (Kon, 1993; Lapin, 1994; Evgenieva, 1999), it seems worth investigating the ways in which this crisis is lived through and managed at the level of daily life.

THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

The field of consumption can be easily related to the rhetoric of opposition between the past and the present because social change in 20th-century Russia has often been closely associated with the transformation of consumption practices. In her work on the practices of everyday life in socialist Russia, Boym (1994) quotes lines from Mandelshtam's autobiographical novella *The Egyptian Stamp* (1928):

I propose to you, my family, a coat of arms; a glass of boiled water. In Petersburg's boiled water, with its rubbery aftertaste, I drink to my unsuccessful domestic immortality. The centrifugal force of time has scattered our Viennese chairs and the Dutch plates with little blue flowers.¹¹

For Boym, Mandelshtam's words reveal as much of his own identity as of the fate of his former possessions:

. . . the same centrifugal force disperses the domestic objects and shatters the 'I' of the hero. The fate of things is parallel to the fate of persons. Those Viennese chairs and Dutch plates with little blue flowers exist in the past perfect or future indefinite of literature. (Boym, 1994: 159)

While the Viennese chairs in Mandelshtam's narrative represent the past, the rubbery Petersburg water stands for the present, creating an image of the world split into two: the unattainable past and the meager present. This distinction is not substantially different from the opposition between the 'old' world of queuing up for vodka and the 'new' world of good, albeit expensive, products described by Lyuba. In both cases, the juxtaposition between 'past' and 'present' lives is sharp, and it is acted out by contrasting objects belonging to the two periods.

Associating objects with the historical periods to which they belong gives consumer goods an extra meaning quite different from the one intended by Baudrillard (1996) or Bourdieu (1984). Instead of functioning merely as a means of mapping out class structures, historical associations provide a way of articulating the objects' position vis-a-vis the succession of political regimes. If consumer objects are metonymically associated with historical periods, then strategies of acquiring and manipulating objects

express more than acts of economic optimization or articulation of class differences. They also allow consumers to inscribe their past and present into a coherent narrative and thus create a meaningful story of their lives.

When read through the prism of the opposition between past and present, the simultaneous attachment of many contemporary consumers to their old possessions and to their more recently purchased equivalents gains profound symbolic significance. In a time of rapid social change marked by acute identity dilemmas, this preservation of the fragments of the 'old order', along with the acquisition of new consumer items, appears to be a means of symbolically breaching the gap between the socialist past and the post-socialist present on the level of everyday practice. By displaying their attachment to the old household goods acquired in a laborious and time-consuming manner under the socialist distributive economy, individuals are not necessarily justifying this economic system *in toto*. Rather, they preserve the signs of their own private achievements under this economy and endow them with value and meaning:

I will never forget how I was buying beds for my two daughters, what an epic it was! I ordered them in a workshop on Polezhaevskaya, and they didn't keep manufactured items on their premises at those times. And the day they called us to pick them up, Gennadii [the husband] was at work, I still remember it. So, I rushed there, they brought out these beds, I hailed a truck, and talked the driver into helping me to unload these beds in front of the house. He even helped me to bring one mattress up, in the course of which I was overcome with fear that someone could be filching the other mattress we left in the yard. And then I approached a man who was passing by, begging him to help me with the rest, and I was running in front of him, holding doors. (laughs) *And how do you suppose I can ever part with these beds now?* After the girls moved out, I put the frames together, and made myself a queen-size bed out of them . . . (Lyudmila, 49 years, an accountant, emphasis added)

Hence, the preservation of an old item or, as Russians sometimes refer to it, 'its transfer to retirement' (*staryi ushel na pensiyu*) gains a meaning of preservation of one's past, reluctance to acknowledge it as useless and outdated. This marked unwillingness to part with old household possessions is reflected in the language used, for these items are often referred to as 'veterans' or 'old friends' not only in daily conversations, but even on the pages of consumer magazines.¹² For people whose common criticism of the

government is that it 'threw entire generations into the waste bin', such rhetoric casts their conservative consumer strategies in an almost moral light.¹³

Yet, along with the conservative attitude to 'old friends', today's Russians display a profound interest in acquiring new durable goods, putting the second half of the past-present dichotomy firmly in place. If the preservation of prior possessions allows one to retain a sense of continuity with, and meaningfulness of, the past, the acquisition of something modern makes a powerful statement about one's capacity to 'keep afloat' in the troubled waters of today's socioeconomic transformation. Since the late 1950s and 1960s, domestic consumer durables have acted as potent symbols of the competition between the superpowers, just like nuclear power and the conquest of space (Crowley and Reid, 2000). In this context, obtaining an up-to-date model of a refrigerator or a washing machine could be interpreted by consumers as proof that at least they themselves, if not their country, have succeeded in achieving some proximity to the living standards enjoyed in the developed capitalist countries. This statement is all the more forceful because it addresses what was perceived in Soviet times to be the single most neglected issue in 'group B industry',¹⁴ that of everyday convenience and user-friendly consumer goods. Lyudmila's narrative builds on this motive when she describes her decision to purchase a modern, no-frost refrigerator as a 'treat to myself':

. . . our old fridge was all right, but you know these old fridges – they needed defrosting, and I just felt I was tired of that. I thought, I work, Gennadii works, it's time that we started living, you know what I mean? See, ever since our daughters were born, we have been slaving away making ends meet, and we spent most of our lives doing that. It's time to start spending money on ourselves. I figure – I deserve a high-quality thing, don't I?

Embodying the difference between past self-exploitative, labor-intensive practices and the current capacity of social actors to 'treat themselves as humans', new and modern household durables function as powerful symbols of progression. Yet, while the old equipment may serve as the embodiment of time and labor spent obtaining the goods under the conditions of the shortage economy, the new durable goods are not devoid of association with invested time and labor either. This is because consumption, although less problematic after the advent of the free market, is still perceived as a challenging and risk-laden enterprise which requires special

prudence and know-how. In addition to the time and labor spent researching the market and actually shopping, new durables also signify the labor of earning, achieved through intricate employment strategies and concerted efforts by all members of the household. Thus, both in reference to the past and in the context of present-day realities, durable goods provide a measurement of achievement. In addition, this measurement is more accurate and lasting than the money which over the course of the post-socialist decade has been reformed and transformed so many times that it hardly represents a stable referent. In a world where prices in shops change three times a day, as was the experience of my respondents during the period of the economic breakdown of August 1998, and where '5,000 roubles' could represent the price of an ice-cream or the price of a refrigerator (depending on the year), objects replace the failing currency as a means of establishing value. Hence the ease with which practically every Russian can convert the savings he or she had accumulated prior to late 1980s into the price of 'Volga' cars which functioned as an unofficial benchmark of achievement. Hence, also, the importance of durables as monuments to labors and accomplishments under both the old and new regimes – set not in stone, but in metal and white enamel.

THE PEOPLE AND THE STATE

The importance of consumer durables is not limited to their symbolic role of preserving socialist and post-socialist achievements and identities, and endowing them with value and meaning. The second layer of their significance, which also stems from the tendency described earlier to conflate consumption with political regimes, has to do with the opposition between *us* (the people) and *them* (state structures and institutions).

Since the succession of consumption regimes is seen by individuals as a process identical to political change, it is taken to be driven by political actors and in political interests. Price changes, escalating inflation, growing social differentiation, instability of the national currency – all these and many other factors related to consumption are typically interpreted and talked about not as products of complex multidimensional processes, but as results of subversive and self-interested actions of political elites:

This whole situation (the currency devaluation of August 1998) has ruined our financial bases somewhat, but we're already used to that. It happened before – one, two years ago, when the currency rate suddenly jumped sky high. It's the same thing. . . . They won't allow people to develop sustainably. As soon as

people feel they've accumulated something – they are debased. That's our state policy. . . . They are turning people into automatons, automatons fixated on survival. (Alexei, 46, military engineer)

In the opposition between *us* and *them*, each side is ascribed its own motives, interests and action strategies. While those in power (*vlasti*) are commonly depicted as exclusively interested in pillaging the country of its riches (including procuring ordinary people's savings), the people (*narod*), with whom my respondents actively identified, can resort to tax evasion, double-dealing and other forms of behavior characterized by Scott (1990) as the 'weapons of the weak'. In addition, since the field of consumption is perceived as homologous to the field of power, strategies of shopping behavior are often framed, explicitly or implicitly, in terms of struggle between the power and the people:

We have to – so many times they tried to bring us to our knees, and we got up – we have to get up again. Even now, these prices, they keep rising. . . . For as long as I remember, prices always rose around holidays; I guess they think that it's a good chance to procure people's last savings (*vytaschit' poslednee iz naroda*). Elsewhere holidays mean sales, but not here. Ah! Is this normal: eggs cost 6 roubles, and now they're 18. . . . What happened I wonder that the Soviet [sic] hens started laying their eggs in hard currency?! (laughs)

Olga: Well, why would you say this is happening?

Lyuba: Well, it's someone up there, I guess. A particular store manager cannot come up with that, not on the scale of the entire country, or entire Moscow. No, it's someone higher up. Using all available means to pump out money out of people (*vykachat' lyubymi putyami iz lyudei den'gi*). Take my word – everything will start getting more expensive. . . .

(Lyuba, 37 years, cleaning lady)

There is nothing new in acknowledging the sharp and dramatically delineated division between the people and the powers (*narod i vlast'*) in the Russian (and broadly, East European) rhetorical tradition.¹⁵ What is of interest here is not the mere fact of the opposition, but rather the way it is played out and its consequences for the sphere of consumption. While it is fairly common to interpret indigenous tactics in the face of power as a manifestation of resistance, I would suggest that, at least in the case of

consumption, the opposition between *us* and *them* bears a somewhat different character. It is not so much an act of resistance (which, by definition, is an act directed outwards, in the direction of the opponent), as one of self-protection. Acts of self-protection differ from acts of resistance in that they are less targeted at restoring a balance of power through some form of retaliation (often symbolic) and more focused on minimizing the vulnerability of individuals' immediate lifeworlds to acts of disruption – sometimes before the danger even arises:

I am investing all my money right now, so that at least 10, 15 years ahead I may live more or less decently. We renovated the kitchen, the bathroom, we bought a washing-machine, new faucets, a new refrigerator. You see? Perhaps we may not need all this right now, but I will keep investing all I have into these things. Because I know that when I'm retired, I will not be able to afford them. (Alla, 53 years, office manager)

This past winter, they were talking about some economic reform once again, and I decided with my wife to buy another fridge. You know, before it strikes, just in case. (Roman, 44 years, construction worker)

The distinction between resistance and self-protection is important since it entails a shift of perspective: instead of interpreting every action as a reactive response to an immediate threat on the part of the state, we may regard this action as a part of a larger project of building a kind of protective cocoon intended to shelter individuals and their households from all possible mishaps, including the ones that are only anticipated or imagined. Consumption of durables, from this standpoint, would be but one aspect of a process which includes the installation of fortified doors, the stocking of health supplies, regular renovations of apartments, cultivation of garden plots and the development of multiple informal networks which provide a substitute for or a supplement to the corresponding structures of the state, whether they are banking, education or healthcare. While the actual efficiency of these arrangements may be questioned,¹⁶ they provide individuals with a sense of autonomy from state structures and institutions and thus restore the ontological security otherwise endangered by what is seen as a collapse of all things public.¹⁷

There are several ways in which consumer durables are implicated in this project of creating a zone of autonomy between individuals and the state. First, the purchase of a refrigerator or a washing machine secures the

household's savings by turning them into something that cannot be subject to inflation and currency fluctuations. It firmly fixes in place what individuals know they earned and what they see as being under constant attack from profit-seeking political structures. It is for this reason that the most often-cited motive for buying a piece of household equipment was not a change in household needs, nor any dissatisfaction with the old model, but the fact that the household had accumulated a sufficient disposable sum of money:

It was all my mother-in-law, she said, listen, some money has built up from my pension, go and buy something. . . . She gets pension transfers, and they accumulate on her account.

Olga: So, was it her idea to get a fridge?

Maria: It was. She was like, let's replace the fridge while I am alive, kept saying this, while I'm alive, let's replace it (laughs), while there still is the money. . . . She thinks we can never have savings without her guidance.

(Maria, 37 years, nurse in a state outpatient clinic)

By purchasing a household durable as soon as there is a financial opportunity for it, consumers see themselves as avoiding two dangers. The first is the danger of their current savings losing their value because of inflation. The second, somewhat more remotely, is the danger that household members may become incapable of earning in the future because of the vicissitudes of the job market, and will not be able to afford the same durable when such a need truly arises. This concern, which seems especially pressing for older-generation households, compels them to run ahead of their current needs, as it were, in order to resolve the problem before it even arises.

Apart from securing the household's savings and thus playing the role of a family's rather strange investment bank, refrigerators have an additional importance – compared to other kinds of household durables – due to their potential for performing the additional role of stockpiling food. In this respect, we may speak of the anxiety of shortages moving one degree of separation deeper. While in previous years, there was a strongly felt need to stock food for security, now the demand for security is satisfied by stocking equipment in which food can be stored in times of need:

Olga: So what did you do with your old fridges?

Victor: One we moved to the dacha, and the other is right there, in Roma's [son's] room.

Olga: Do you use them both?

Victor: Well, the one in Roma's room, that was basically our wedding gift, it's pretty old.... It's turned off right now, but if we want to turn it back on, that's fine – it will work. We haven't had the occasion to, but if, for instance, we are in a situation when we have to stock up for some reason – we'll have to turn it back on and use it.
(Victor, 58 years, lathe operator)

A parallel with the stockpiling strategy typical of shortages experienced under socialist economies seems to suggest itself here, but this is only valid if one keeps in mind the fundamental difference between the two contexts. During the period of late socialism, measures were taken against the possible disappearance of goods, in a social context that was otherwise perceived as rather stable and unthreatening. Currently, the social context is seen as much more erratic and unpredictable, full of risks at practically all levels, from employment to healthcare to social services infrastructure, to say nothing of wider politics and the economy. In this context, the value of objects is often perceived through the lens of their capacity to avert potential mishaps; however, when risks are experienced as pervasive, yet vague, everything can be seen as an insurance against everything else. In these conditions, the new and old items of household equipment represent not just strategic weapons against inflation, impoverishment and food shortages, but also mutual insurance against technological failures. While the new can replace the old in case of the old's final disintegration, the old, tried and tested equipment can be useful if the newly acquired consumer dream suddenly turns out to be faulty. Given the pervasiveness of notions of deceit associated with the field of consumption (Humphrey, 1995), it is hardly surprising that this safeguard plays its part in the repertoire of 'fire emergency cases' which exist, even as remote possibilities, in the mind of post-socialist consumers.

Collectively patching 'Russia's torn safety net' (Field and Twigg, 2000) by making their own private arrangements, Russian consumers reaffirm their notorious anti-public stance vis-a-vis the state. This offers us yet another glimpse into the special importance of household durables in today's Russia. Purchased for exclusive use within the family and in a private setting, they epitomize the primary importance of kinship ties noted by many scholars (Verdery, 1996; Burawoy et al., 2000) in respect to post-socialist countries. They enhance the comfort of one's home (and, most frequently, one's kitchen as a space of ultimate unofficialdom and autonomy from the state, see Boym, 1994) and are of benefit only to the extended community of friends and relatives. Thus, household durables are fully separated from the sphere of state and politics and, at the same time, from

the sphere of egoistic pursuits and individual interests. It has been argued that the household represents the true coping unit in post-Soviet Russia (Burawoy et al., 2000), with individual economic strategies only making sense when taken in the context of the entire household. In this light, it appears only logical that the fruits of these economic strategies should be used to the collective benefit of the family, and not the state or individual. The celebration of the new durable, therefore, revolves around not only the individual achievements of the main economic actors in the family, but also the newly enhanced security of the family as a whole, whose members contribute their time, skills and/or earnings to the collective task of navigating in the murky waters of the contemporary Russian economy.

CONCLUSION

The first thing foreign visitors probably see on their arrival at Moscow by air would be a huge board advertising the Indesit brand of household durables in the entrance to the Sheremetyevo airport terminal. It would also be the last thing they see before departure. The stay itself would be filled with Western advertising, colorful storefronts and international brand names. When exposed to images like this, it is easily assumed that, as brand names achieve prominence, capitalist goods would drag behind them, like a tail, the meanings and tensions they contain in their original context.

This article has attempted to show that global phenomena, when transplanted to local soil, are quickly infused with local political agendas and are used, with certain ingenuity, as tools in locally driven identity politics. The two politically charged dichotomies that inform and structure consumption patterns in today's Russia are neither fully global nor fully Russian. They are, however, fully political in that they are embedded in a web of politically relevant beliefs, relationships and memories. The opposition between past and present strengthens consumers' attachment to the older objects of their household possessions but, at the same time, encourages them to acquire more. Representing the different life stages of their owners, these two classes of objects serve as the means through which both the socialist past and the (arguably) capitalist present are endowed with value and meaning. Therefore, these consumption practices forge a sense of distinction – not, as Bourdieu (1984) suggested, between class groups, but between the past and present selves of the same social actors. They articulate the change in one's possibilities and rights, while at the same time bridging the past and the present, imbuing both with value and synthesizing them into a coherent identity. The opposition between the people and the state casts durable consumption as one of the strategies of separating and protecting

private from public. Purchase of a household durable enhances the feeling of the household's self-protection against the multiple risks associated with transition. It fosters household members' sense of autonomy from state structures by symbolically placing control over the household's well-being into the hands of its members. In effect, taking over the functions traditionally associated with banks (investment), food shops (food acquisition) and the social security sector (provisions for retirement), household objects allow their owners to develop a feeling of independence from larger economic and political upheavals, and thus foster a sense of ontological security in an otherwise risk-laden environment. Centered on the well-being and self-sufficiency of the household, these objects embody the emphatically private stance of post-Soviet subjects, turning it into the last island of certainty and protection in the post-socialist context.

Clearly, the ways in which household durables operate in today's Russia contain no less contradictions and ambiguities than the postmodern identities promoted by late capitalist consumer industry. The tensions between achievement and powerlessness, confidence and compromise, conformity and experimentation can be traced in the ways in which Moscow consumers deliberate over their choice of a refrigerator and in the dilemmas American shoppers face when they select a new washing machine. Yet the nature of these tensions is quite different. It would therefore be well worthwhile investigating these consumption patterns and their consequences in their particular socio-cultural context. For it is only when they are analysed in this context that consumption patterns can enrich our comprehension of the global phenomena of which they are a part.

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Notes

1. Reported in *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, 8 April 2000.
2. The European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research.
3. For this information I am indebted to Alexander Novikov, Director of COMCON-Research International-Qualitatif market research company in Moscow, Russia.
4. These data are provided courtesy of COMCON-Research International which has been conducting R-TGI (Russian Target Group Index) surveys of lifestyles

- and consumption patterns since 1995 under the license of BMRB International. In 2000, the data were collected from 14,000 households in 42 Russian cities across the country and explored consumption of more than 400 categories of goods and services and over 3,900 brands.
5. In fact, the first sign one saw after landing in the Sheremet'yevo International Airport in Moscow in 1999 was not a welcome poster, but a huge advertisement for household durables.
 6. For more information on the ritualistic character of consumption in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, see Nikolaev (2000).
 7. At Spring 2001 prices, a high-quality German refrigerator cost about 21,000 roubles (roughly \$740) in a shop, while the same model could be purchased on *Gorbushka* (the market on Bagrationovskaya) for about 16,800 roubles (\$590), i.e. about 20 percent cheaper.
 8. Personal communication.
 9. The VDNKh metro station owes its name to the Exhibition of Achievements of the People's Economy which is located nearby. Now the pavilions of the exhibition, constructed in the monumental manner of Stalinist classicism, and formerly dedicated to different branches of industry and agriculture, are leased to various trading firms and stores, which sell everything from diapers to foreign cars. While not in the way originally intended, the vibrancy of consumer life one can observe in front of its shop displays may still serve as a testament to the achievements of the people's economy.
 10. This may also be connected to a noted difference between male and female speech styles in contemporary culture (Gal, 1991).
 11. O. Mandelshtam, 'Egipetskaya marka', in *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, Vol. 2, p. 5, as quoted in Boym (1994), p. 159.
 12. See the cover page feature in *Spros*, a Moscow-based consumer monthly (*Spros*, 2000, no. 5).
 13. In line with this logic, it seems plausible to expect that some consumers, especially younger and/or more successful ones, would use the same mechanism of association between old possessions and socialist-era lives as a way of asserting their fundamental departure from the socialist mentality by displaying the demonstrative ease with which they part with their old possessions. While there were only two respondents who displayed this kind of attitude in my sample – certainly not enough to draw any conclusions – this possibility seems worth exploring.
 14. In contrast to 'group A' (military and heavy industry), 'group B', which was involved in consumer goods production, was always considered to be of secondary importance.
 15. For more information on this subject, see Shlapentokh (1986), Toranska (1987), Kotkin (1995), Ries (1997), Kligman (1998), Fitzpatrick (1999), and Gal and Kligman (2000).
 16. See, for instance, Alasheev et al. (1999) for questions raised regarding the economic significance of garden plots.
 17. For a somewhat similar argument applied to the context of socialist Hungary, see Pittaway (2000). For a more detailed analysis of this process – which I label 'autonomization' – in the context of post-Soviet Russia, see my dissertation (Shevchenko, forthcoming).

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Olga Shevchenko is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests are sociology of culture, sociology of everyday life, social change and sociological theory. Recent publications include 'Bread and Circuses: Shifting Frames and Changing References in Ordinary Muscovites' Political Talk', in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 2001, 34(1). Her current thesis explores the ways in which everyday life in contemporary Russia is influenced by, and responds to, the political and economic transformations of the 1990s. Address: 3718 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA. [email: olgas@sas.upenn.edu]
