# Suspicion and Mistrust in Neighbour Relations

## A Legacy of the Soviet Mentality?

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In Russia, according to data from 2014,[1] excluding actual police officers, 1.4 million people were employed as security officers, among whom one third were contracted by the state, while the rest were employed privately as guards and watchmen. If we add their managers, accountants and other people who work in private security firms, this number comes to around three million. At the same time, the number of people employed in police is around 1 million, which puts Russia rather high in the rating of countries according to the ratio of policemen to population. As of 2014, there were 634 policemen for each 100,000 of population, more than twice the ratio in Germany. Private guards and watchmen mostly sit all day in shops and offices with little to engage them during this work. In Russia they are omnipresent; they can be found in almost every shop, school, or institution (not only those institutions which are run by the state, but private businesses, too).

The demand for these security services can partly be explained by the serious crime situation in the country and inefficient work of the police. For example, the number of murders in Russia is one of the highest in the world (in 2010, it was 14.9 for 100,000 people in comparison to 0.86 in Germany).[2] Business and the population buy the services of security to protect themselves. However, this is not the whole story. These days, most institutions with free

**1** | Olesia Gerasimenko, Vyacheslav Kozlov. 'U okhrannikov sotsial'nyy status chut' nizhe uborshchitsy'. Pochemu v Rossii tak mnogo okhrannikov, kons'yerzhey, storozhey i kontrolerov ['The Status of Security Staff is Lower Than Cleaners': Why are there so many security, concierge, watchmen and check-takers in Russia?] See: http://kommersant.ru/doc/2543130

**2** | Data quoted in Report published by EUSP Institute for the Rule of Law, published in September 2010 Reformirovaniye upravleniya vnevedomstvennoy okhrany v kontekste razvitiya rynka okhrannykh uslug [The Restructuring of the Commercial security department of the Russian Interior Ministry in the context of private security market evolution].

public access – such as clinics or big libraries – have a guard at the entrance, just in case. In the USSR, many of state institutions had free entrance and no guards. This is not to say that cities became more dangerous since the Soviet time. Street delinquency rose considerably in the 1990s, but has since then dropped. Neither is it possible to explain this with reference to the danger of terrorist attacks.

When I was a student during Perestroika years, entrance to the university building in Leningrad was not protected. Some years ago, however, the administration of St. Petersburg State University decided to restrict access to university buildings. When the new regime of access was introduced, long waiting lines appeared in the morning as the guards checked the passes produced by the students and professors. The guards (women guards, in this particular case, although this is usually regarded as a male profession in Russia) knew, of course, all the professors as they had been working there for many years. For many of the professors, some of whom were the classic absent-minded type, it was not easy to keep their pass on their person. Moreover, many could not understand why they should have to produce this pass to security staff that knew them personally. Often acquaintance was enough and Gemeinschaft-logic did work, but sometimes for some mysterious reasons the guards referred to formal rules and resorted to law enforcement procedures done in terms typical for Russia's unfriendly service personnel who enjoy exercising authority wherever possible.

I once left my pass in another jacket and at the entrance to Philology Department found that instead of the head security guard that I would usually greet, there was another woman on duty who also knew me well. She greeted me and asked to produce the pass. I told her that to my distress I had forgotten it, and asked her whether she recognized me. Despite this recognition, her reply was: 'Yes, but what if they already have fired you and you have no right to come here anymore?'

This episode might have more to do with the fear of losing one's job for appearing lenient than with the detection of masked enemies. On the level of rhetoric and argumentation, however, the guard's answer is curiously reminiscent of an old movie from the mid-1930s, when Stalin started to actively consolidate his power by means of show trials. Revealing the 'true face' of covert enemies was a point of concern for zealous Soviet activists who traced enemies in the form of spies, 'former people' (those from disenfranchised classes), and all kinds of foreign elements. These alleged 'enemies' were being revealed in real life and judged in show trials, but also abounded on the movie screen in the films of all genres. The movie I am referring to here was specifically promoted by Stalin, who overruled the initial rejection of the film by the censorship committee. This is 'The Party Card' by Ivan Pyr'ev (1936). The protagonist of the film is a treacherous enemy who is married to an honest, Soviet-minded woman. Although Pavel and Anna look like a model Soviet family, Pavel's true

identity is uncertain. At some point he is forced to confess to Anna that he is a son of a 'kulak', former rich peasant and thus a 'class enemy'. Later on in the film, Pavel steals his wife's party card, so that some other woman spy might use it as a pass to gain access to secure Soviet institutions. However, the woman is arrested and Anna, who did not notice that her party card was missing for five days, is expelled from the Party for negligence (for a close reading of the film, see Kaganovsky 2005).

The elderly guard at the entrance of Philology Department used the same logic of mistrust and suspicion exemplified by the plot of 'The Party Card'. While it seemed outlandish for her to suspect me of being a masked enemy, this was a very convenient way for her to account for her actions. Even if this behaviour itself seemed strange to me, it was consistent with the logic of suspicion that has its roots in Soviet mentality. After all, the Party called on citizens not to relax their vigilance, as enemies were always close enough and had to be unveiled and the threat neutralized. Contemporary Russian legislation on so called 'foreign agents'[3] directed against NGOs is within the same line of mobilization of Party line followers against all independent civil initiative.

Over the last twenty years, several studies have appeared dedicated to Soviet subjectivity that also touched upon the forms of systematic mistrust and suspicion that were practiced in the Soviet society, with purges, imposture, denunciations, public self-criticism and confession among them. As Sheila Fitzpatrick says in her study of individual identity practices in successful revolutions, they, first, 'invalidate the conventions of self-presentation and social interaction that obtained in pre-revolutionary society', and force people 'to reinvent themselves, to create or find within themselves personae that fit the new post-revolutionary society' (Fitzpatrick 2005: 3). The title of her book – 'Tear off the Masks!' – quotes a prominent Bolshevist slogan that was frequently heard during some periods of Soviet history, particularly, those when purges took place, when the hunt for double-dealers, spies and other masked enemies of the Soviet system who were trying to hide their true identity, was especially active. At the same time, self-identification and also self-understanding with reference to accepted categories of social being involved concealment and editing, that is, selection and rearrangement of the elements of personal life-story and the stories of the relatives, the origin or class identity, and of a public face. All of this was to be reflected in numerous forms (*anketa*) and narrative curriculum vitae (*avtobiografiya*). To construct a suitable mask became a second nature to Soviet citizens, as did the counter-practices of unmasking and denunciation (ibid: 5).

**3** | The bill 'On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent' was adopted by Russian legislators and signed by President Vladimir Putin on July 20, 2012.

After the collapse of the USSR, there was no need for citizens to even symbolically adhere to state ideology, but the rise of state-sponsored patriotism and anti-Western rhetoric in Russian propaganda starting from 2010s has exploited discursive constructions that recognizably appeal to the stereotypic image of the masked enemy.

On another occasion, in the largest lecture hall of the Philology Department I saw something that immediately attracted my attention: four small padlocks, attached to both sides of a piano. Obviously, the purpose of those who performed the uneasy task of attaching lugs and padlocks to the piano was to prevent students from playing it except when sanctioned by some authority possessing keys. After my lecture, on my way back, I asked the head security guard about the piano. She told me that if I liked I could play anything I wanted, because the padlocks did not actually work even though they looked impressive. The lock's fixture broke immediately and the padlocks remained in their places even though they could no longer be secured.

I soon recalled the padlocks I often met during my fieldwork in so-called communal apartments (CA) in St. Petersburg during the 1990s and early 2000s. Everyday life in CAs, where dwellers share kitchen, toilet and washroom with a number of other tenants, reveals that the practices of everyday life in CAs are indicative of a variety of behaviours and attitudes typical for Soviet society (Utekhin 2004; Utekhin et al. 2006). Envy, mistrust and suspicion toward neighbours that could be observed in CAs in the USSR – and can still be observed in contemporary Russia. This can be accounted for in terms of their functions, in such a paternalistic Soviet 'culture of poverty', goods and resources (and, particularly, housing) were in shortage, and housing was neither owned by the residents nor chosen by them to rent, but rather distributed by a housing authority. Hence the term communal that has to do with commune as administrative unit, not with commune as a voluntary assembly of like-minded people for working and/or living together. In the Soviet *kommunalka*, all kinds of people belonging to a variety of ages, social, ethnic, religious and professional backgrounds, found themselves forcibly accommodated in cramped and compressed quarters, where living space is allocated according to per capita sanitary norm and a system of privileges.

It is most telling that tenants were always concerned about the fairness of distribution, their mentality being dominated by the logic similar to what George Foster once described as the 'Image of Limited Good' (Foster 1965, 1972), a conceptualization of social relations explaining integration in a community permeated with envy. Studying a Mexican village, Foster was struck by the abundance of fences and by the fact that windows had thick wooden shutters shut close by heavy bolts, so to protect the home interiors from view (Foster

1948).[4] Based on his prolonged fieldwork, he built a theory explaining cultural forms of envy. Within the worldview of those Mexican peasants, when a person or a family appeared to possess greater means of subsistence, prestige, love, beauty, power, or influence than the average, that used to cause all the others to feel that they were suffering from a scarcity of those means. This is as if all the good things in the world were allocated in certain limited amounts for that village community, not being enough to satisfy everyone.

In CAs, in a similar way, not only the allocation of housing, but almost every aspect of neighbours' lives in CAs might provoke envy or hurt the feeling of justice, due to the high sensibility towards a fair sharing of resources and equally dividing the costs invested into the minimally sufficient maintenance and cleaning of the premises. This means that everyone's share is the matter of everyone's concern. In the conditions of transparent environment where one cannot build high walls to protect oneself from view and where the life takes place under the watchful eye of neighbours, who see, hear, and even smell what all the other tenants do or have, the lack of resources for privacy leads to an oversensitivity to violations of privacy and its symbolic substitutes. This situation is eloquently described by Mikhail Zoshchenko in his short story 'A Summer Breather'.[5] In the story, electric power is disconnected in an apartment because everyone refused to pay, as one meter for nine families makes it impossible to accurately determine each family's share of the expenditure, a fact that turns out to be unacceptable because people mistrust their neighbours.

Actually, many tenants easily transcend the border between overhearing and eavesdropping: even though a certain degree of awareness about neighbours' activities and belongings is unavoidable in CAs, it is also a common practice to deliberately monitor neighbours' life. Among the reasons for such monitoring is a continuous concern about one's belongings in the public space. Neighbours keep their salt in the kitchen, soap in the washroom, toilet paper in the rest room, and they are anxious about the possibility that other people can use their unattended resources or belongings. The point of concern, however, is not the material value only, but a symbolic dimension, too: pilferage is also a violation of privacy, which has its rather particular configuration in the partly transparent everyday world of CA.[6]

**4** | One might recall the surprising abundance of high non-transparent fences in Moscow downtown areas, to protect mansions and gated communities from the gazes of passersby.

**5** | The English translation of the story is available in the section From Books of the Virtual Museum of Soviet Life (Utekhin et al. 2006). Andrei Siniavsky discusses the story in his book on Soviet civilization (Siniavsky 1990, 165-169).

**6** | See for details materials published in the virtual museum of communal living (Utekhin et al. 2006).

Padlocks are omnipresent in CA public spaces because tenants suspect their neighbours of stealing and pilferage, and believe that in their absence neighbours are inspecting their property left unattended, including the content of refrigerators in the common kitchen. Why is it so hard for people to agree over sharing resources in this kitchen? One of the possible explanations has to do with so called paranoid disorders whose delirious content is linked to neighbours' relations. This was a most impressive discovery for me, although not for Russian psychiatrists who had studied it extensively before my ethnography of the *kommunalka*. The phenomenon of paranoid disorders concerns a specific bunch of symptoms sometimes observed in elderly people with a long experience of CA life. People accuse neighbours of systematically stealing and damaging their belongings, of persecuting them in order to inflict all kinds of material and moral damage. They denounce their neighbours before authorities and take all sorts of counter-measures. At the same time, intellectual abilities and memory, as well as general competence in everyday affairs remains unaffected – a strange mixture that makes the allegations appear all the more plausible to a stranger who hears them for the first time.

These behaviours are given shape by everyday life in CAs, and they appear perfectly logical and sensible because they reproduce the normal reactions to offences – the only difference being that here the offences are imaginary. They could have been real, however. Misapprehension leads to communicative disorder that disrupts normal communication with neighbours and substitutes it with misplaced patterns based on mistrust and suspicion. It is worth noting that some elderly people who are affected with similar disease but live in private apartments often accuse CIA or KGB or extra-terrestrials of stealing things or controlling their ideas.[7]

Living together in close contact with people whom one mistrusts is tricky: neighbours cannot escape communication even when they are seeking to avoid communication. Involvement in communal neighbours' relations and mutuality of concerns creates a system of relations where victims and perpetrators depend upon each other. People affected with paranoid disorders exchange roles with alleged perpetrators: in this case, subjects start to steal and damage things that belong to their supposed offenders, in order to retaliate and thereby forestall any future offences.

An illustration of how pathological behaviour is similar to what can be observed in normal life is what I refer to as 'virtual thefts', or situations when measures are taken but suspicion turned out to be groundless. Here is an example from my fieldwork. A woman called Olga bought new shoes for her

**7** | A detailed description of how this pathology affects the life of elderly people in communal apartments see in Chapter 9 of my book (Utekhin 2004). For a psychiatrist's perspective on this topic, see Medvedev (1990).

teenage daughter. It was an important event, because the shoes were expensive for their family budget. They were carefully selected and then presented to friendly families, which is a common symbolic gesture aimed at preventing the destructive consequences of envy. Some days later, the shoes disappeared from the girl's room; another pair of shoes was left in their place, similar, but used.

Olga was angry and desperate. She accused a young man living far down the corridor from her of the theft. The man did not belong to her friendship circle and had a somewhat marginal status already; he was viewed as a hippie lacking steady employment who received many visitors on an almost daily basis. Nevertheless, the woman understood that it was be highly improbable that this fellow had stolen the shoes for himself. Never before had he been involved any thefts in the apartment, or suspected of theft by means of a substitution, something known as *podmena* in Russian: the kind of accident that sometimes happens when foodstuffs are left lying about openly in the kitchen. Olga's suspicion fell upon one of the girls who had attended a party in this man's room.

The woman explained that 'it could have even been unintentional', as result of mistake: the drunk girl might have entered the room, in complete darkness, and put on the shoes. This version seemed highly unlikely; why would the supposedly drunk girl leave her own used shoes, of a slightly different size, in their place? In spite of this contradiction, Olga told her version of the story to the policeman whom she called to the apartment. The young man denied the accusations as being absurd, but most of the neighbours, however, were inclined to find them to be well grounded. By the evening of the same day, the guilty person was found out. It was a schoolboy, a close friend of the younger son of the woman. The boys played videogames together until late in the evening, and when the angry parents of the visitor demanded that he came home immediately, the absent-minded player put on the first shoes that he found at the door. Thus, the entire story of theft turned out to be a mistake. Although mistaken shoes story could have taken place anywhere where people cohabitate, what is special about Russian communal apartments is the way in which this case makes visible latent attitude of suspicion within the neighbours' group, as well as the fact that no apologies have been offered to the neighbour who finally proved to be innocent. Life went on as if nothing had occurred.

In the public space of CAs, incidents often occur for which no witness can be found. Everyone pleads not guilty, and each neighbour reconstructs the situation according to her own presuppositions. The problem is that the situation, which can be reconstructed in different versions, does not exist apart from some interpretation. Hence, it becomes difficult to find the objective reality that some versions of events distort with groundless suspicions. This is not to say that all the versions are equally plausible, but the logic of suspicion, however groundless, is a systematic transformation of the rationality implied in the practices of everyday life in CAs.

How to link suspicion and paranoid behaviours to micro-mechanics of social interaction, not only to macro-social features of Soviet society? According to the pragmatic approach to language use, human communication is based on hearer's inference of communicative intent of the speaker (Grice 1975). Paul Grice proposed a model of inference of non-literal meanings that relies on the principle of cooperation: cooperative interlocutors trust in the fact that each contribution to the dialogue advances it towards a commonly accepted goal. Basically, this means that in order for utterances to perform their job of conveying messages, hearers should not take the meaning of the words said by speakers literally but rather make conjectures about what the speaker had in mind, or, in more technical jargon, examine how the most plausible speech act and its meaning fits best into currently unfolding situation. All of these are ascribed to speaker as part of her communicative intent. This operation involves routinely performed mindreading. Without that we would be unable to understand metaphors, irony and all kind of tropes based on counter-factual statements that are, however, perfectly meaningful for interlocutors.

Like any communicative signal, speech utterances have an indexical aspect, reminding of what we do when we interpret the sound of a car horn. When you hear it behind you, you first understand that the signal is addressed to you, and then try to guess why in the world it can be directed to you at this particular moment. A certain degree of mindreading is thus required for what Levinson refers to as the 'human interaction engine' (Levinson 2006). Mindreading is constrained by the understanding of situation that involves its interpretation in terms of this or that rule-governed activity, or language game, as proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1953). To continue the horn example, this means that if I hear the beep of my friend's car and decide that this is not a serious message but just a rhythmic pattern in the way of a greeting, I might wish to join this musical exercise with my horn. This is acceptable if we both agree that we are 'playing the same game'.[8]

The sociological concept of face as it was introduced by Ervin Goffman (Goffman 1955) emphasizes the dramaturgical nature of social interaction and reveals the aspect of cooperation that consists in participants maintaining not only their own, but also each other's faces. More recent theory makes use of the category of face in order to analyse performances of politeness, such as strategies to treat face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1987). The communicative environment of CAs, which may involve or even foster systematic

**8** | It is not by chance that Harold Garfinkel in his treatment of the topic of trust (Garfinkel 1963) departs from experimentation with a game. The game has its constitutive rules that determine the range of participants' expectations and that are supposed to be shared by the participants.

suspicion, presents opportunities to study how interpersonal relations shape politeness patterns.

Concepts of trust in partner cooperation and the care about face characterize human social interaction universally. However, in some pathological conditions, like autistic spectrum disorders, or paranoia and paranoid disorders, these devices seem to stop working properly, leading to difficulties in communication. Autism and paranoia have something in common: for a variety of reasons, affected subjects fail to grasp what the other person has in her mind correctly enough for communication to proceed normally. They either present no interest (or ability) in taking the partner's mind in account, or arbitrarily ascribe the partner feelings, intentions and attitudes. As soon as we turn to culturally specific genres and situations, we can see how suspicion and mistrust can bring about communicative environments for which paranoia can be a good metaphor.

Denunciation is a good example of how a culture favouring alert and suspicion was embodied in a social practice. Letters, complaints and petitions from citizens to newspapers and voluntary reporting of wrongdoings to the authorities was an important channel of feedback from the population. Encouraging the flow of denunciations, the authorities faced the problem of dealing with that ever-growing amount of questionable information, much of which was driven by clearly non-altruistic motives.

A large share of complaints sent to the authorities, more than a half in some periods, had to do with housing conditions. Although in Stalin's era the denunciations reporting political non-loyalty or a way of life that was not in line with communist moral could be motivated by a genuine belief in the struggle against 'alien elements' and the necessity of unmasking them, people clearly understood the utility of denunciations as a weapon in intra-apartment tensions with neighbours, and a tool that could be used to get the room of a neighbour that was sent to prison. This remained a live practice up to end of the Soviet period.

The documents of the Azadovsky affair recently published by Petr Druzhinin in his topical study (Druzhinin 2016) are very illustrative of the way in which *obshchestvennost'* was involved in the fight against 'foreign elements'. The word *obshchestvennost'* in Soviet language was used, especially since Khrushchev's times, to denote active citizens who were engaged, supposedly by their own will but actually as part of advancement of their career in Komsomol, trade-unions and the Party, in civic initiatives, or *obshchestvennaia rabota*, what roughly translated means 'work in society', or work to the benefit of society. This usually involved activities related with leisure, sports, and ideological indoctrination, but the authorities also relied on the people's assistance in maintaining public order (see details in Matsui 2015). Hence, vigilance and readiness to reporting to authorities were appreciated. Konstantin Azadovsky was

professor of philology who, together with his wife Svetlana, in December 1980 was falsely accused by the KGB of possessing narcotic substances, all these being an organized fabrication that involved police, civilian militia *(druzhinniki)*, and also the participation of a *kommunalka* neighbour who had denounced Svetlana and took an active part in her prosecution, with the obvious interest of occupying her rooms in the apartment. The neighbour succeeded in her plans to better her housing conditions.

Among the exhibits of the Virtual Museum is an item of denunciation showing something of a Dostoyevskian twist: in order to protect a person from eventual slanderous accusations, tenants recur to denunciation. The petition is written by some apartment residents and is addressed to the boss of one of the women with whom they live.[9] Its function is proactive: the residents expect that the boss will get a denunciation against this woman from another neighbour, who is depicted in the letter as a pathological complainer, a type of person well-known to Soviet (and post-Soviet) officials. This letter is their attempt to warn the boss by means of their own denunciation. For some reason (perhaps a cross-out that resulted from attempts to find the right word), this particular document was not sent, and remained as a draft. There were citizens who specialized in sending off complaints about everything and everybody, so that the situation described in this collective letter is completely plausible.

A translation of the document (with additional information provided by me in square brackets) reads as follows:

To the directors and local committee of the department store Gostiny Dvor.
From the tenants of 3 Petrov Street, apartment 20.
Declaration
Bella Markovna Beilin, who works in your department store, has lived in our apartment together with us for more than 15 years. In the apt. Bella Markovna behaves modestly, normally, politely, and all of us tenants respect her a lot. We are sending you this declaration in case you receive a slanderous declaration from Mrs. Romanova B.A., who has done more than once in all these years in attempt to slander and smear respectable people. The truth is that the Romanov family [mother 60, daughter 40 and two children] is the scourge of our apartment—they terrorize all the tenants. They do mean things to all the tenants, they are the ones who make scenes and start fights and they are the ones who write slander-denunciations to different organizations against all of the tenants including children.
Mrs. Romanova even went to school to lodge a complaint against first-graders Sveta and Tanya.

**9** | The document is published in a slightly modified form in Communal Living in Russia: A Virtual Museum of Soviet Everyday Life, see http://kommunalka.colgate.edu

Most of the tenants in our apartment are older people, we are sick and we cannot cope with this [unclear; crossed out in the text of the letter].
No matter what Mrs. Romanova writes, it is a total lie.
[signatures] Samsonova, Salova, Kuzmin, Stein
5/10/64

This letter dated from more than half a century ago is clearly an example of the denunciation culture that flourished in the Soviet society, but some survivals of this culture are also present in post-Soviet Russia where the denunciations do not work anymore as they did in the USSR. However, the Russian authorities appear to have returned to the old Soviet practice of instigating active citizens to send letters of denunciation in cases when the authorities need to have a formal pretext to neutralize some independent civil initiative.

The communicative environment of CAs is characterized by omnipresent mistrust that is embedded in a distorted geometry of social space. On the one hand, mistrust and the search for masked alien elements were in tone with general ideological orientations of Soviet culture (and are progressively becoming so in contemporary Russia, as of 2017 when I am writing these lines). But on the other hand, mistrust towards neighbours is deeply ingrained in the social interactions between co-residents of shared apartments, and is emblematic for the Soviet way of everyday life.[10] This might be a factor contributing to people's susceptibility to the ideology that pays much attention to the search of all kinds of enemies.

One of the things that attracted my attention when I was collecting ethnographic materials about Soviet everyday life was the fact that the most eloquent of my pieces of data appeared very similar to texts and objects that some conceptualist artists used in their creations from 1980s on. Moscow conceptualist art has brought to an extreme the discovery of the art of mid-twentieth century: any object could become a work of art if put into an artistic frame that emphasizes the object's aesthetic or ideological properties. The poetry of Lev Rubinshtein and the installations of Ilya Kabakov use this discovery as a point of departure. Some of their creations turn out to be ethnographic in a sense that is constitutive for the artistic text: the artists do not invent anything, they just pick up elements of a social milieu, separate them from the context and embed them into a different, artistic frame. However, the elements which are usually singled out in the everyday life of a Soviet citizen and that are able to survive and remain recognizable in a different frame, becoming a piece of art, are those artefacts, or visually expressive pieces of Soviet propaganda or vernacular artistry, or even speech clichés or just utterances overheard that bear the

**10** | This does not exclude friendship, mutual help and forms of quasi-familial relations that might sometimes be intertwined with suspicion.

mark of their initial context. All of them are small atoms of the everyday world of a Soviet citizen, and each of them is illustrative of a typical communicative situation and a social practice.

Actually, this is what an ethnographer usually does in a strange environment; looking for data, that is, for fragments of reality that can be extracted from it in form of descriptions, photographs, narratives by the natives and by the researcher herself. And only those fragments are valid that are able to refer both to a bigger story, that is, to a meta-narrative constructed by the researcher, and at the same time to their context as it was observed by the ethnographer and was being re-constructed in the ethnographic text. Reality is always richer than its verbal description, and non-verbal means are more broadband and more immediate, so to say, allowing one to convey aspects that are difficult to verbalize. That is why contemporary ethnography is so inclined to overcome the limitations that are imposed by the textual form and is often trying to include audio and video recording, visual materials and artefacts as part of data gathering and also as part of presentation of the results to the audience.

Ilya Kabakov explained that in early 1980s he felt 'the attraction of the topic of trash, trash as one of the main metaphors of our life' (Kabakov 2011: 5). At that time, he was collecting an 'Archive of useless things' that consisted of folders and carton boxes where he kept all the daily papers like bills, receipts, written notes, certificates etc. This is an essentially ethnographic approach, if one selects the materials so that to build out of them a picture or a story reflecting the life whose part these objects used to be. Artistic works can explore (and exploit) the materials like these in different ways, and, of course, comparing my collection of ethnographic materials to Ilya Kabakov's installations, I could clearly see where the artist was transforming – 'distorting' is not a proper word here – reality for the sake of artistic effect.

In any case, the published collection 'Voices behind the door' (Kabakov 2011b) consists of real documents that underwent no modification from the part of the artist who just included them into his work, carefully selecting the most impressive. These include real minutes of a Comrades' Court session, letters of complaint, etc. The other collection published in (Kabakov 1993) and reproduced in Kabakov 2011b, 'In the communal kitchen', is a sort of ethnographic-fiction: it reproduces traces of typical situations well-known from life experience and also from the collection of real documents – in a focused form. Within an aesthetic frame, any detail might turn out to be meaningful. A significant share of the exhibits reveal something that has to do with the strange mixture of suspicion and trust that is inherent to communal everyday life, that is why I dwell here on these ethnographic art objects.

It is the more so as letters of complaint and denunciations by Soviet citizens often include some sort of inherent naïve poetic aspect. As Sheila Fitzpatrick put it, they reflect '[a] delight in the power to use language' felt by authors who

had only recently acquired literacy and for whom writing letters to authority could be 'as much a form of popular culture and an expression of popular creativity as the amateur theatricals and balalaika playing' (Fitzpatrick 2005: 167-8). Such an 'artistic' component is also present in the notes to neighbours and announcements on the walls found in communal apartments. Along with the verbal artistry, there is another and subtler layer of meaning in the texts and stories from communal everyday life. Not only the notes that appear in public space uncover something that is made public, often denouncing or trying to prevent some misdeed. What makes some acts and deeds remarkable, worth of memorizing and telling as a story, is their rhetoric value, or theatricality: they are not just acts but gestures performed on the stage of the communal kitchen. As such they allude to and can be read against the background of the typical attitudes and practices of Soviet life. To put padlocks on a piano or chains on an oven in a public space, or to remove the bulb after using the toilet so that neighbours could not waste electricity[11] – all these are both puzzling and suggestive indicators of the same mentality.

Some convincing instances of it can also be found in an exhibition called the 'Kitchen Chronicle, by V. D. Baranov'. Mr. Baranov was invented by Ilya Kabakov as a protagonist of the exhibition. According to the framing narrative, a certain Mr. Baranov kept a diary of his life in a communal apartment, and also was collecting small pieces of trash as mementos and providing annotations for each object in order to not forget the circumstances to which the object is linked. As Ilya Kabakov describes the exhibits, the collection 'consists of a significant number (approximately 200) of different objects with small scraps of paper the size of a quarter of a page of a notebook glued to them' with a handwritten text of 'notes (...) about what circumstances or events are connected to the inclusion of this or that object in the collection (...). Behind these tiny crumbs of everyday life, in essence ordinary litter, arise, as though alive, all the events which took place in the communal kitchen and around it: fights, arguments, mutual treating, kindness and cruelty, patience and unthinkable anger, generosity and stinginess' (Kabakov 1993; 98-99).

The handwritten comments to the artefacts, ascribed to Mr. Baranov, reflect a tightly-knit mess of human relations with a specific distortion that tells us a story not only about particular persons, but also about the environment where such relations had grown and where they are regarded as normal, and about human nature as a whole. Each item of the collection is a seed of a full-blown story, like stories written Mikhail Zoshchenko or Mikhail Bulgakov. Interestingly, the stories and the situations from 1960s by Ilya Kabakov are ethnographically

**11** | A detail from 'The Guests' (1927), a short story by Mikhail Zoshchenko, available in English in the section 'From Books of the Virtual Museum of Soviet Life' (Utekhin et al. 2006).

representative of the 1990s as well and belong to the same cultural pool as the stories by Zoshchenko from 1920s: all of them they illustrate the same Soviet civilization.

The plausibility of these stories is beyond doubt for people with a Soviet experience. For instance, this one:

> An old wrist-watch with a broken face [tsiferblat]. There is really funny story connected with this wrist-watch. I found it in the bathroom on the shelf – someone was washing and forgot it. And I wrote an announcement in the kitchen. And no one could name exactly that watch which I described. And I kept it. 14.2.64 (Kabakov 1993; 99)

We can guess that the watch had most probably been left by some guest not intending to return and retrieve it. We also can try to imagine the proceeding of presenting evidence to prove the right of property. Several neighbours claimed the watch belonged to them, while the author examined these claims. Claiming property when it does not really belong to you was a commonplace event among people living together in the apartment, and people whose claims had 'proved' to be false felt nothing special about this. This makes us think about the performative properties of the interaction between neighbours. Although played as if it was serious, the act of claiming for the watch is perceived like a funny game, or lottery. And the failure is not taken seriously either. The contrast between claimers' hopes of obtaining a watch and the fact the watch had a broken face adds symbolic value to this story. As we can suppose, the fact that the watch had been broken was certainly not announced by the protagonist. One more example of a revealing mini-drama from the same collection is 'A piece of paper, stained with something black. Again this morning Alevtina found this scrap of dirty paper in the kasha. But there was nobody in the kitchen this morning. Maybe, she's doing this on purpose? 19.VI.64' (Kabakov 1993: 101).

Suspecting that a neighbour has planned a provocation is a communal routine. Actually, to spoil a neighbour's meal in the kitchen, adding salt in her absence from the kitchen, was quite possible for CA residents, not only in folklore, as was also to put in there some inedible objects, like scraps of dirty paper. Soviet communal dwellers were prepared for such provocations either because they were inclined to doing this themselves, or because they simply regarded this as a normal part of neighbour relations. This made it possible to perceive of many things in life that occurred without any communicative intent as an action purposely directed, that is, performed 'on purpose'. There is a whole series of cases in Kabakov's materials where someone suspects that something has been done 'on purpose', like the car horn signal that I believe is addressed to me.

Paradoxically, Alevtina's provocation in claiming that someone had put dirty paper in her porridge is an attempt to establish a sort of communication with neighbours, however distorted, it is an invitation to scandal. The scandal

might be purely instrumental in some cases, but here it is not, or at least Mr. Baranov believes so, also demonstrating his awareness about his neighbours' lives: he knows that no one appeared in the kitchen that morning. Any scandal has an expressive dimension, an aspect that eventually makes out of it a ritualized form of joint performative activity taking place at the stage of the communal kitchen. This ceremonial confrontation and high spirited competition in offensive rhetoric distracts people from their everyday chores and is appreciated – and even sought for – by some of communal residents, because it also brings a sort of enjoyment. False accusations of the kind Alevtina is addressing to her neighbours are not taken seriously, because in CA, to accuse a neighbour of such actions is commonplace. Not everyone scoffs and teases their neighbours, only some people provoke scandals with false accusations, but we are bound to coexist even with those people who do.

In our 'Virtual Museum of Soviet Everyday Life', we have a section dedicated to messages sent to neighbours, placed in a public space. Unlike in private apartments where residents prefer to communicate in person and do not face situations when they need to inform strangers about the ways of using the place, neighbours in CAs often place notes, announcements, instructions, notices aimed at preventing wrongdoing, and even personal messages. Since such messages usually involve the author's effort at attracting attention, as well as some sort of argumentation, with the vernacular creativity behind it contributing to their use for contemporary art, particularly as in the case of Ilya Kabakov. I have discussed the handwritten rules in some detail elsewhere (Utekhin 2004).

Interestingly, Gert Hofstede considers Russian culture to be high on the Uncertainty Avoidance scale and links the proliferation of rules and instructions to this feature: 'Uncertainty avoidance can (...) be defined as the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations. This feeling is, among other manifestations, expressed through nervous stress and in a need for predictability: a need for written and unwritten rules' (Hofstede et al. 2010, 191). In the Soviet period, people felt that the official rules to which they might in principle recur to resolve disputes, were not sufficiently elaborated to embrace all the potentially conflicting situations, and so they formulated their own rules stating how to use the washroom, how to wash the bathtub, etc. These rules attempted to reduce the amount of ambiguity, precisely because the authors mistrusted other people, that is, neighbours and their guests, who were suspected of being able to disturb the everyday life in the apartment, for instance, by breaking faucets, shower, toilet pan, electric switches, or using other people's belongings. People of trust were supposed to know how to act properly, but some neighbours and all strangers were to be given a warning. In eventual disputes, the rules and notices were used as a resource for argumentation.

This brief consideration of mistrust-related phenomena in Soviet and contemporary Russian everyday life inclines us to suggest that the communist ideology which implied, among other things, mistrust to strangers, the search for enemies, and the idea that one's face presented to public could actually be false, was something that communal neighbours kept in mind and could address to when writing a denunciation or complaint. However, routine suspicion towards neighbours was not imposed from above, but rather deeply ingrained in everyday relations in the apartment and in wider social interactions, even though the other side of these relations could be a quasi-familial lack of distance. This also is at least partly relevant for post-Soviet situation: although contemporary Russia differs much from the USSR in many respects, and dwellers of *kommunalkas* are these days either owners of their rooms or rent the rooms from the owners, still the ways of compulsory cohabitation of a heterogeneous group reproduce attitudes and practices typical to Soviet communal mentality (Utekhin 2015).

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