

Bonds, Bottles, *Blat* and Banquets

Birthdays and Networks in Russia

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The birthday is one of the most important celebrations in Russia, yet neglected as a topic of scholarly study. The article will focus on the birthday as a nexus of social interaction by analyzing structured diaries of twenty-seven teachers from St. Petersburg, Russia. The birthday is a highly valued celebration time with important ritual events (birthday presents, a sumptuous table, bottles and toasting, singing and dancing etc.). Celebrating the birthday, however, constitutes only one part of the myriad meanings of birthdays. In fact birthdays mirror a distinct type of Russian sociability, molded by larger social and economic constraints and opportunities. Thus, the birthday has a significant role in building and maintaining social networks that can be further explained by the context of trust. Birthdays also illustrate the importance of informal exchange relations for daily survival in contemporary Russia and show how celebrations are connected to networks, sociability and exchange.

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The annual birthday is one of the most important celebrations in Russia; for many Russians, it is the primary holiday of the year.¹ Many celebrations lost their popularity along with the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the birthday remained fervently celebrated. However, in striking contrast to the popularity of the birthday, there is hardly any research on the subject.² The purpose of this paper is to fill this gap at least partly. However, the main emphasis in my article is not on the ritual aspects of the birthday. Rather, I will examine the birthday as a nexus of social interaction by analyzing structured diaries of twenty-seven Russian teachers. I focus on the building and enlarging of social networks from the point of view of birthdays and analyze the role of trust in this process. I will also show that birthdays have a role in various informal exchange practices between teachers.

The data corpus consists of structured diaries of secondary school teachers in St. Petersburg who kept a diary of their social relations

during a two-week study period in April 1993.³ The teachers recorded daily all encounters they considered important for them and they described briefly the content of each encounter in free form (e.g. whom they met, what they did or talked about). After the study period they then added the persons whom they had not met during the study period, but considered important. The data collection was not carried out in order to study birthdays;⁴ in fact quite the opposite is true, because, rather unexpectedly, only the amplitude of the material on birthdays in the Russian diaries suggested that the birthday is a central component of social interaction in Russia. This became even more convincing when this material was compared with similar Finnish data, where the birthday had a far more marginal meaning.⁵ Altogether twenty-seven teachers from St. Petersburg (from research data consisting of forty teachers' diaries) reported on various issues relating to birthdays⁶ and in the following I will analyze these in detail.

The Birthday Ritual

“Moses said that God is all, king Solomon said brain is all, Jesus Christ said heart is all; Karl Marx – stomach is all, Freud – sex is all, Einstein – all is relative. As we can see, there are as many people as there are opinions. But we will say – good people are all, especially those who gathered us together and made this celebration. Let’s drink to the health of the hosts!”

Model for a toast in the guidebook *Tosty i zastol’nye rechi* (1998: 102).

The birthday is a must in Russian culture, independent of age and gender.⁷ This means, first of all, that one is obliged to note a person’s birthday, and, secondly, the one whose birthday it is, the *imeninnik*, is obliged – though to a slightly lesser degree – to celebrate his or her birthday.⁸ Remembering a person’s birthday implies offering congratulations by calling, sending a card, giving a gift and/or attending the birthday party – sometimes all of these. The range of people whose birthday one is obliged to remember is relatively wide, including even rather distant people (e.g. colleagues at work and acquaintances). Birthdays, whether they are one’s own or someone else’s, demand a significant amount of labor. For instance, finding a suitable gift – satisfying one’s pocket and the other’s taste – is often not a simple task, and giving a birthday party requires also careful and intensive planning. The first question is to decide whom to invite to the birthday party. As Kharkhordin has noted, intrigues flourish when “some are invited and others are not: exclusion of the non-desirables is one of the rules of the successful birthday party” (1999: 218). On the other hand, the number of guests attending the party might have been recently reduced due to economic difficulties (Jyrkinen-Pakkasvirta & Poretzkina 1994). The second problem is how to provide a – relatively, at least – sumptuous table under difficult economic situations. Valery, a 49-year-old teacher of handicrafts, talks over the phone with his 72-year-old mother for an hour: “I talked with my mother about her birthday, the first one in many years she will arrange at her home. We talked about the number of guests, what food products are needed, what I

and my wife should prepare.”

The burden of preparing the birthday, however, is rather often the task of the women – the wives, mothers, and daughters (in-law) – in Russia as well as in many other countries (e.g. Skjelbred 1990). Giving a party often measures the capability of the woman as a party-giver; this holds true for the “West” as well as the “East”, for the Soviet Union and present-day Russia. Hospitality was very important in the Soviet Union and great pains were taken in order to obtain food for the festive table (Ledeneva 1998). In the scarcity of the Soviet economy it was precisely the women’s “sorcery” which made possible the “magic” of generous meals when the stores were empty (Pesmen 1995).⁹ As Pesmen writes, a meal condensed “time, work, creativity, opportunism, debt, and power”. Work and time, at least, are still very much needed: Vladimir is a 32-year-old teacher of French. He is having lunch at school with his colleague Vera: “Vera told me her husband is having his birthday on Saturday. He has invited some guests and gave Vera some money. Now Vera has spent the whole week running through the shops in order to find food for the table. She looks very tired and worried.”

The diary data suggest that a major part of the responsibility for the *prazdnik* fall to women. However, the diaries also show quite clearly that in order to have a successful celebration the interaction of many members of the network is highly important. Often many persons are involved in obtaining food products, preparing the banquet, and buying gifts; not only wives and husbands, mothers and mothers-in-law, but also fathers and brothers, friends and acquaintances, even colleagues and neighbors can be mobilized to participate in birthday activities of various kinds.¹⁰

Alla is a 36-year-old teacher of Russian literature and language. Her birthday is getting close and the diary abounds in references to the preparations for the two birthday parties Alla intends to have (one at home and the other at work):

Day one: Alla discusses her birthday with her friend Ira and gets a new recipe.

Day two: Alla has a four-hour discussion with her mother about the birthday: “I talked with

my mother about my birthday; we were planning whom to invite. My mother was distressed at the expenses.”

Day three: Alla visits her brother’s family; there they talk, among other things, about the coming birthday, prices and purchases.

Day five: Alla borrows money for the birthday from her father.

Day six: Alla’s sister-in-law Inna comes to help her with the preparation of the banquet.

The preparations are often rather consuming in time, money and effort. Despite everything, seemingly many of the teachers do engage in taking the trouble. The reward comes in the end: the birthday party. The event follows a ritual course, familiar to its participants, where the manner of presentation is also highly important. First of all, the birthday involves ritual exchange; the primary example is of course the birthday present. In addition, the birthday includes a ritual meal (with plenty of food and drink), accompanied by lively conversation around the table. Moreover, a distinct type of congratulation speeches is involved when giving the gift and in toasting; often there is also dancing, listening to music, playing and singing. Tatyana, a teacher of Russian, writes about her friend Natasha’s birthday: “I congratulated Natasha on her birthday. We talked about school, children; we were singing, dancing, listening to music. I sat next to Larisa: we talked about her son, a student of the 9th grade. We laughed, joked, sang Russian songs, romances...”

The core of the birthday is the common meal, mostly rather an abundant one, where everyone should be placed around one table. The birthday meal includes ritual drinking,¹¹ and toasts accompany this. Toasting, as suggested by Kharkhordin, is truly a “revelation of the celebrant’s self” (1999: 218). Indeed, toasting brings about an evaluation of the *imeninnik* (character and categorization) and his or her life (achievements, including the circle one has made and managed to gather together).¹² The form of toasting is often rather rigid and every participant is obliged to propose a toast in turn. Congratulations involve a complex pattern of wishing – health, happiness, joy, success, love etc. The way of wishing is of course ritual and conventional, but despite (or because of)¹³ that

it involves an emotional tone of warmth. Indeed, the ability to tell jokes, to give compliments, and to make toasts is a valued one in Russia.¹⁴

The birthday atmosphere is clearly important to the teachers, and the diaries abound in positive remarks about birthdays – sometimes explicitly contrasted to the hardships of everyday life. Certainly the birthday is seen in contrast to everyday life; as a *prazdnik*, a “time out of time” (Falassi 1987) which differs dramatically from the mundane. But at the same time, the birthday is in many ways present in the flow of everyday life. It is also inscribed in the personal histories and biographies of the teachers, in the ways their networks were built, and the manner they are maintained. The birthday plays a central part in social interaction: it is an important constituent of friendship and, in particular, a major affirmation of it.

In Friends We Trust

“Since trust is a main criterion in selecting friends, Soviet people prefer to have as friends those they know from childhood or at least from their university or college.”

(Shlapentokh 1989: 176–177).

Friendship, as characterized by Barbara Misztal, is a “trust relationship”; a “voluntary bond in which people are expected to be honest, open, affectionate, trusting and trustworthy, sharing and helpful” (1996: 177). Thus, it would seem that the universal cornerstones of friendship would be “trust” and “help”. However, many scholars, Shlapentokh in particular, have argued that the importance of these in the socialist society was manifold compared to Western societies. To the importance of help and birthdays I will turn to shortly, but first I try to show what is behind Shlapentokh’s claim regarding the significant role of trust in socialism, how this shows in the networks of the teachers and in what way it is connected to birthdays.

Ultimately, behind the importance of trust lies the societal and political context where friendship was never a *wholly* private issue, as the state could engage to varying degrees in monitoring, sanctioning and intervening in pri-

vate life. True, in practice this was not often the case, as the post-Stalin state was “virtually indifferent” to persons who did not hold significant positions in society. Nevertheless, friends and family in particular formed a niche of trusted relations where one could express and share one’s sincere thoughts (of politics, private economic affairs etc.), i.e. what one could not utter in public. Moreover, these relationships also formed the basis for the unofficial distribution of goods and services, and this involved a significant amount of trust. (Shlapentokh 1989: 164-165.) For Shlapentokh, the matter is also one of “recruitment”; trust and distrust molded the creation of social relationships. He maintains first of all that friends in the Soviet Union were strictly separated from acquaintances and secondly that these two groups were recruited differently. As the quotation in the beginning of the chapter suggests, the forming of friendship relations involved trust, since old – and thus seemingly trustworthy – relationships were “preferred” (as friends) to others. On the other hand, acquaintances involving trust to a lesser degree were mostly recruited at the workplace, at holiday resorts, on tourist trips and the like (Shlapentokh 1989: 177). Shlapentokh is not very precise in saying how trust is involved and what this implies and all in all his discussion of the subject certainly needs some modifications.¹⁵ The making of relations was hardly a calculated or rational process but more shaped by practical knowledge, where trust, I argue, nevertheless plays a big part. The diaries of our teachers are illuminating for a study of the Soviet traditions of forming networks, as most of the relationships were formed during the Soviet era and many of them well beyond *perestroika*, in the 1970s and early 1980s.¹⁶ A good opportunity to take a look at the network is the birthday, a primary occasion for bringing the circle together.

Tanya is a 32-year-old teacher of history whose 33rd birthday is at the beginning of the study period. During day one, Tanya receives five phone calls due to her birthday from:

- Ira, a teacher by profession, characterized as a friend (*podruga*, prox. 4¹⁷) whom Tanya has known for 16 years, a classmate from the 9th and 10th grades

- Natasha, teacher, a friend, (prox. 4, like Ira), a classmate from the 9th and 10th grades
- Nina, a friend (prox. 4) already from the first school year, whom Tanya has known for 26 years and who is a secretary-typist by profession
- Marina, a teacher by profession, a friend (prox. 4) from the Pedagogical Institute where Tanya and Marina studied together. Tanya has known Marina for 13 years and she is also the godmother of Tanya’s child
- Tamara, a teacher, characterized as *priyatel’nitsa* (indicating intimacy to a lesser degree than *podruga*, prox. 5) whom Tanya got to know six years ago at their dacha. Tamara is the daughter-in-law of an acquaintance of Tanya’s mother.

Next day, Tanya gives a party at home. Tanya’s husband Anatoly and her mother Aleksandra are present. The guests include Tanya’s friends Ira, Natasha and Marina, Ira’s husband Lev (introduced to Tanya at Anatoly’s birthday six years ago), and Marina’s husband Ivan (whom Tanya met for the first time at Marina and Ivan’s wedding). Tanya does not give a party at work, but her “colleague at work” Nadezhda (prox. 5), whom Tanya has known for 9 years, congratulates her with a small gift. A week later, Tanya receives the last birthday-related phone call from her godmother Evgeniya (prox. 4), who apologizes for not having congratulated her in time.

One way to look at celebrations is to view them in a functional perspective, as a means of sustaining social relationships. Keeping in mind the context outlined with trust, it is noteworthy that birthdays give an (annual) opportunity, reason, and even obligation to renew social relations with those old, trustworthy friends, claimed to be essentially important by Shlapentokh. The St. Petersburg birthdays seem, in most cases, to bring the core, *svoi krug*, together. In addition, congratulations by telephone or by post allow for the renewal of the bonds to more distant members of the network. For Tanya, birthdays function as a link to maintain contacts with her old school and institute friends, but even more distant and less frequent relationships remain alive.

The role of birthdays is important not only for maintaining old ties; it is significant also for making new ones. As Michael Eve (1998), studying networks in Turin, has proposed, the network is seldom enlarged in a random way; on the contrary, there is usually a common social milieu (e.g. work) or a strong tie (e.g. a friend) behind the formation of a new relationship. With the increased importance of trust, as in (Soviet) Russia, one could argue that this is even more true. Birthdays give an opportunity to enlarge the network in the way outlined by Eve, since the guests at a birthday party are not a random collection of people, but connected to the *imeninnik*. As a place of making acquaintances birthdays are of course perfect, since “sociability” is precisely what birthdays are about: getting to know people is not only possible or suitable, it is nearly obligatory. The importance of private celebrations in making acquaintances is further increased due to the fact that in socialism societal distrust limited the scope for social contacts (Misztal 1996: 187). For instance, in Hungary – and probably even more in the other socialist countries – an “institutional forum for making friends” was lacking (Bruckner & Knaup 1993: 255). When looking at the St. Petersburg teachers’ networks and their formation, celebrations in one form or another do indeed seem to play an important part. Over half – altogether 15 – of the 27 teachers report that they met at least one network member, but often many, for the first time at some ritual festive gathering, usually a private one: often a New Year’s party, a wedding, or a birthday party. Seven of the teachers explicitly identified network members – often more than one – introduced to them at a birthday party. One of them is Svetlana, a 35-year-old teacher of biology. In her diary she indicates three persons whom she met for the first time at a birthday party. The most important of these is Andrei, identified as a friend (prox. 2) whom Svetlana met a year ago at her brother’s birthday party. The two others are a couple, Boris and Zinaida, originally friends of Svetlana’s husband, introduced to Svetlana at her own birthday party thirteen years ago. Svetlana did not meet Boris and Zinaida during the study period, but, on the other hand, she met Andrei several times dur-

ing the two-week period of this research. To Svetlana, Andrei is closer than Svetlana’s husband is to Svetlana.

If trust holds for the network members in general, one could guess that it is equally or even more true for meeting people of the opposite sex in particular. Shlapentokh insists on the importance of trust even when meeting a future spouse (or lover and the like). He cites a Soviet survey which indicated that over 40 % of married people met their partners either at work or in school. The importance of work is especially significant because “close personal encounters in other places – clubs, cafeterias, etc. – are either totally impossible or else very restrained because of the difficulty in developing a mutual trust” (Shlapentokh 1989: 133). Another possibility is, of course, acquaintance through someone – friends, relatives, acquaintances. Still one possible instance is festive gatherings, in which these two are often combined as, for instance, in work-related birthday parties. Most of the marital relations of the 27 teachers were established either through a common social milieu, for instance, at work (seven teachers), or while still studying at school (two teachers), or through a mutual link, a strong or weak tie (six teachers), thus seemingly supporting Shlapentokh’s claim. Only eight of the teachers had met their future spouse in a “random” way – no link reported or a common social milieu in the strong sense of the word; of these, six had met their future spouse while on vacation.¹⁸ It is interesting to note that altogether four teachers met their future spouse for the first time at a celebration: one when celebrating the New Year, the other at a wedding, and two at a birthday party. Nina, a 38-year-old teacher of Russian language and literature, is married to Gennady. Nina met Gennady 18 years ago at a birthday party of a cousin of her former classmate, Lena.

Judging by the diaries, birthdays can offer a real opportunity to find the significant other. But birthdays are not only about building, enlarging, and reinforcing the network; it is also worthwhile to examine birthdays from the point of view of various exchange relations. True, birthdays are mainly about *ritual* exchange. However, other forms of exchange are also in-

volved, and this has partly to do with trust. The importance of trust is namely not restricted to social relationships. Trust, or more correctly, distrust, has permeated the whole socialist and post-socialist society. An illuminating example of this is distrust in institutions, and in the following I will focus on health care. I will show how birthdays are connected to building trust in institutions and what type of exchange that involves.

...But not in Institutions

“During the entire week she [Nadia, a patient in a maternity clinic] was in the maternity home, she threw the pills Natalia Borisovna [the physician] prescribed for her out of her hospital room window, convinced that they were not necessary and perhaps even harmful. ‘My mother kept telling me that they give everyone the same pills without even noticing who you are, or what you need,’ Nadia explained.”

(Rivkin-Fish 1997: 370).

The Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka has asserted that a kind of “culture of distrust” exists in contemporary Poland. In such a case, distrust, “widely shared and manifested in all areas of social life, turns into a normative expectation, becomes embedded in a culture and not only in individual attitudes” (Sztompka 1996: 42). Moreover, trust or distrust can be vested in various social objects, including institutions, expert systems, organizations, products, positions or persons (1996: 40–42). Distrust in institutions serves as a good example for the Soviet Union; here the primary example will be health care. In case of an illness the first thing to do was not to search for the solution in a direct random way, but typically to approach one’s own network (Ledeneva 1998: 29–30; Lonkila 1997).¹⁹

Despite the collapse of communism, distrust has largely prevailed. The advent of markets has, of course, provided the solution for many – at least for those who can afford it. In Poland, when the state monopoly on medicine came to an end, a large number of people switched to private clinics in the belief that money is “the only dependable guarantee of good services”

(Sztompka 1996: 50). In a study of maternity clinics in contemporary Russia, Michele Rivkin-Fish has found that almost all of the patients stated that “one cannot trust physicians”. Paying for health care was seen as a way to obtain trustworthy care; another viable way – widely used even with the emergence of private care – was through acquaintance networks. A link through acquaintances often provided the essential: trust, “good care”, proper medicine, and comfort. (Rivkin-Fish 1997: 296, 302, 319.) Tatyana is attending a birthday party of her close friend Natasha (see also the beginning of the article). One of the guests at the party is Evgeniya, a neighbor of Natasha. Tatyana met Evgeniya for the first time six years ago at Natasha’s; however, she remains very distant (prox. 7) to Tatyana, and is characterized accordingly: “we meet seldom, not very open in discussions”. Evgeniya, however, happens to be a dentist by profession, and Tatyana writes in her diary: “We agreed that I will go to her to take care of my teeth.”

Approaching unofficially an acquaintance connected to health care (at a birthday party, as Tatyana above, or otherwise) is an illuminating example of *blat*²⁰, analyzed in detail by Alena Ledeneva (1998); an informal exchange practice where a formal procedure is circumvented through personal contacts. The basis of *blat* lies in a combination of *personal* relationships and *public* resources. Moreover, *blat* essentially depends on the kind of access (*dostup*) to public resources one has, and also on the personal characteristics of the persons concerned. Many of Ledeneva’s informants were rather talented *blat*-users, a lot more competent than the patients at maternity clinics, Rivkin-Fish (1997: 295) notes. First or all, the physicians were keen to maintain distance vis-à-vis the patients, and secondly, many of the patients coming through acquaintance chain networks were not personal friends of physicians. The connections to physicians were established through intermediaries who usually rang the doctors up. Very distant links, however, were often subject to being “forgotten” (Rivkin-Fish 1997: 300, 343, 357). Consequently, merely a mediated link to a physician would hardly suffice, and it seems thus significant to personalize distant links,

preferably before obtaining treatment. As it is improbable that everyone has a physician in one's own network, it is more probable that one of the friends has. For our teacher Tatyana, for instance, the birthday of her friend Natasha serves as a regular (though not frequent, which in this case may be as good), face-to-face connection to Evgeniya, the dentist. In the network of another teacher, Kira, there is one physician whom she met for the first time at a birthday party. Kira, a 33-year old teacher of geography, reports that two physicians belong to her network. One is Misha (prox. 6), who is the doctor of Kira's child. The contact to Misha was established through Kira's husband Nikita. The other physician in the network is Olga (prox. 4) whom Kira met at a birthday party through her son. Kira characterizes her as an "acquaintance, we visit them and they visit us, a nice person to talk with, she, too, grows flowers". Kira does not meet either Misha or Olga during the study period, and it is obvious that they do not belong to her network core. Nevertheless, they are important enough to be mentioned in the diary.

Studying networks and their formation - and as a part of that, festive gatherings - might reveal how the connections to health care providers are established and maintained. Twenty teachers (out of 27) mentioned that one or often several representatives of the medical branch belonged to their network. Some of these physicians were consulted in case of illness during the study period, either privately or in the doctor's clinic. The links to the physicians were originally established in various situations and through various persons.²¹ Sometimes a close relative was a physician, and in that case health care and its providers abounded. Some teachers had physicians as friends, for some others, they were more distant. The original contact varied: acquaintance through someone (e.g. a spouse); at a previous or present workplace, at a holiday resort etc. For some teachers, the physician in the network was a neighbor or a parent of a pupil.²² The role of birthdays seems not to be very significant in the initial formation of ties with medical staff members. In the network data Kira is, in fact, the only one who (at least explicitly) claims to have made acquaintance

with a physician at a birthday party. However, birthdays do give the opportunity to elevate the relationship with distant friends of friends to a personal level, which then makes it easier (and more reliable) to contact them in dire need. In any case, the role of birthdays is very probably a lot more significant in determining the style, manner, and timing of *blat* relations - in the etiquette of *blat*.

Birthdays and the *Blat* Etiquette

"Everybody in the clinic considered me the essential 'blat' person. They told me directly, 'there is nobody who has more connections than you'. They used to say, 'She can do everything' (ona mozhet vsyo). All 650 people. I just laughed. Why me? There were other doctors, but they did not care so much. I always called the patient after an appointment, and asked how they were. People came to see me, not to see others. They were grateful, they knew my birthday and something special always arrived on it."

Natalia, a retired physician, quoted in Ledeneva (1998: 105).

Blat involves a complex etiquette, a sophisticated and delicate (though unwritten) "technique" of doing things correctly, not necessarily mastered by anyone. At the maternity clinics, for instance, many patients failed to engage in *blat* correctly. The matter is complicated by the fact that bribes and gifts are often precisely the same items, namely chocolate, liquor and flowers, and it is therefore of utmost importance to give the gift in the right manner (so that the item can be interpreted as a gift, not a bribe) (Rivkin-Fish 1997: 350-353). Moreover, the range of items suitable as *blat* gifts was not big. "It used to be very simple in Russia. The range was never really diverse. Gifts could range from a bottle of vodka or drinking together to a box of chocolates and greetings for festive days and holidays," recalls one of Ledeneva's (1998: 153) respondents. As giving a gift was often embarrassing it had to be given tactfully, Ledeneva remarks, on appropriate occasions: "on high days and holidays, on one's birthday or as a treat for children; to bring flowers, boxes of chocolates for Women's Day or New Year" (1998: 154,

emphasis added). Ritual occasions, including birthdays, partly solve the problem of style and timing. When gift giving is highly ritualized, it does not resemble an exchange of commodities (and the expectation of getting something in return). Rather, the birthday is the reason to give. The manner of giving is also conditioned by the ritual ceremony, accompanied with expressions of wishing health and happiness. However, two things are obvious. First, giving gifts on birthdays is not automatic: there are obvious limitations (e.g. the social status of the parties concerned), and not anyone can give a birthday present to anyone else. Rather, and secondly, birthdays imply that some kind of a relationship already exists. However, as the relationship has been established, birthday presents and congratulations help to maintain and cultivate it; in some cases, they might even constitute the relationship.

Lyudmila, a 29-year-old teacher of English, calls to congratulate her acquaintance Yulia on her birthday. Lyudmila and Yulia went to the institute together; Lyudmila characterizes Yulia as “not a very close friend” (prox. 4). Yulia works in tourism, as did Lyudmila before. People working in tourism were and are “important people” for many obvious reasons: they can offer vacation possibilities, and – important especially for teachers with good language skills like Lyudmila, a teacher of English – they might offer well-paid, additional work (as a guide, for instance). Incidentally, a few days after calling Yulia, Lyudmila meets by chance another friend from the institute, Yura, who offers her an opportunity to spend her vacation in a resort place in Karelia. Lyudmila’s calling Yulia might – or might not – hint at *blat*. However, the reason for calling (what the intentions were) is in fact of little importance. What matters is that in case of a specific need (e.g. additional income) it is much easier for Lyudmila to contact the acquaintances working in tourism if the contact has not ceased altogether. Thus, in case of dire need, the issue is one of making “occasional” relationships into “active” ones, a distinction in fact used by Lyudmila in her interview when she recalls the time her father got ill. Then, an occasional relationship with a person “connected to medicine” was activated when the illness

occurred. Ledeneva remarks that it was wise to keep the contacts to useful people, rather than to start to search for them only when the need arose (1998: 170). Ritual holidays help to maintain ties even to rather distant people. Moreover, the symbolic codes in birthdays communicate on different levels: they invoke a message of warmth, caring, remembering, appreciating, and wishing all the best *on a special day* to the person concerned, the birthday. Birthday presents do not refer to *blat* in its negative form (i.e. they are not bribes); but they can refer to *blat*, a favor done, in a positive way, telling that one is grateful for the favors one has received.

Birthdays relate to *blat* practices, but this should not be taken as a functional statement – the “true” and/or only reason for the importance of birthdays in Russian culture – or as a sign of a calculating attitude.²³ Rather, remembering the birthdays of useful persons (and everyone else’s) reveals an important feature of *blat* relations: the relationships and the ways to represent and express them are of essential importance. This is one of the things which distinguishes *blat* from bribery. And though there were according to Ledeneva three different “regimes” of *blat* (with different degrees of intimacy and power relations), the representation of the relationship was still important in all three cases (1998: 144–152). “These relations were not about money, they were very warm. In my understanding this was not *blat*,” remembers Ledeneva’s respondent Natalia, the retired physician (1998: 106). For the majority of Ledeneva’s respondents it was, indeed, difficult to see their own actions in terms of *blat*. This was partly due to the logic of “misrecognition” where an action done by others was grasped as *blat*, but when doing it oneself it was seen as “helping out” relatives, friends, acquaintances, i.e. in terms of intimate relationships. In fact, the difference between *blat* and friendship was often blurred. This was further facilitated by the fact that providing help is an inherent part of friendship in Russian culture.

Getting By With a Little Help from One's Friends

"If you can help one of your friends, you do it. That's most important. – If someone needs something, if we can help out a friend, we'll do it immediately. We'll leave work and run to help."

Viktor, a former psychiatrist, now in business; quoted in Rivkin-Fish 1997: 336).

In the shortages of the Soviet economy, friends proved indeed to be "extraordinarily active" in providing many kinds of assistance in everyday life: friends bought each other food, shoes, clothes, i.e. whatever appeared in shops; friends helped to find a job, a place at school, or a bed in a hospital or health resort (Shlapentokh 1989: 174). "The importance of friends is directly proportional to the unavailability of goods or services", Shlapentokh (1989: 174) concludes, "and is inversely proportional to the importance of money in obtaining hard-to-find items." However, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union and despite the increasing importance of money²⁴, the help of the network proved still – in 1993 – to be enormously important, as Markku Lonkila (1997) has shown in his study of informal exchange.²⁵ Lonkila compared teachers in St. Petersburg with teachers in Helsinki, Finland, and found that the Russian teachers exchanged considerably more favors, goods and information than the Finnish ones. Relying on the help of the network was necessary for many reasons: because it was the only way to get some items in short supply (e.g. medicine), in order to get useful or necessary information, or to make cheaper purchases. The exchange in St. Petersburg was often mediated and involved frequently also rather distant people. Lonkila concludes that "the resulting forms of social life can be characterized as *personalized* (since abstract and therefore replaceable relations were turned into personal and unique ones) and *mediated* (since the brokers were often used)". Thus, it seems that the claim of Shlapentokh – and others – about the need of a wide circle of friends and acquaintances in order to cope with daily problems still seems to be very valid. Close friends are vitally important in providing help, but a circle consisting only of close friends

would be insufficient, Shlapentokh remarks. Thus, friends are important also in making their own networks available. However, the connection to the friends of friends (in contrast to one's own friends) is not regular: "contact with them is usually only through communication with the common friend or at certain occasions, for instance, at *birthday parties*" (Shlapentokh 1989: 176, emphasis added). Moreover, a study of Estonian Russians showed that meetings with many friends and acquaintances present were rare; a larger company gathered mostly on special occasions – for instance, at a birthday party (Shlygina & Grigoryeva 1994b: 248).

Alla, a teacher already introduced to the reader, celebrates her birthday twice. The first party takes place at Alla's home, with Alla's husband Igor present. The guests include:

- Alla's brother Zhenya with his family. Alla met Zhenya's wife, Inna, for the first time at a Women's Day party; now she has become a close friend of Alla;
- Svetlana, an old friend, whom Alla has "not seen for a while";
- Misha, originally a friend of Alla's husband, characterized as "a nice acquaintance", a teacher whom Alla met for the first time at Misha's own birthday party five years ago;
- Vika, the former's wife, a "very nice person". Vika is an engineer introduced to Alla at the same birthday party of Misha's;
- Andrei, friend and former colleague of Alla's husband, whom Alla originally met 15 years ago at a party (*vypusknoi vecher*) in Igor's former school;
- Alina, Andrei's wife, engineer, a "very nice person" whom Alla met 15 years ago at Andrei's birthday party.

The second birthday party is arranged at the workplace. This time four teachers from Alla's school are present:

- Mariya, the closest of the colleagues, a teacher of mathematics;
- Katya, a colleague, also the teacher of Alla's daughter;
- Irina, a colleague, contacted for the first

- time on Teachers' Day, through Mariya;
- Larisa, a colleague, who was also introduced to Alla by Mariya.

In addition, Alla receives two phone calls from people congratulating her (the one is an ex-workmate “whom we nowadays seldom meet”; the other is her mother’s neighbor, who helps her family in minor repairs). Besides, two former pupils visit Alla at school and congratulate her with flowers.

Alla’s birthday party at home is illustrated in her diary as a ritual flow of congratulation speeches, with jokes, laughter, and compliments. However, the quotidian problems are not wholly absent: discussion topics include work, children’s studies, and a break-in at Svetlana’s *dacha*. Interestingly enough, Alla’s character as a broker (see also Lonkila 1997) is not absent even at party time. About her friend Svetlana Alla writes in her diary: “My friend Svetlana came to congratulate me. I have not seen her for a while. She told about her injury, about a burglary at her summer house, and about trying to find a new job. I promised to help her.” Keeping her promise, Alla turns next to Andrei: “Andrei told about their trip to Finland, we laughed a lot. Congratulation speeches. I recommended Svetlana to him for a job.” In the birthday party at school, Alla is approached again, this time by Katya: “Katya would like to get married, but can’t find a suitable person after her divorce. She hopes I might introduce her to someone, but I don’t have a candidate either.”

A birthday party gives the invited persons an opportunity to meet with friends, acquaintances and friends of friends; they can create new bonds and establish some useful contacts on an occasion which is particular in constitution and suitable in form.²⁶ The particularity is well illustrated by Alla’s characterization of her guests: Svetlana is a friend “*whom I have not seen for a while*” and Andrei likewise “*a reliable old friend, but nowadays we meet seldom*”. Alla’s birthday party, however, brings them all together, in a most “natural” (i.e. ritual) way. True, turning for help from a “reliable old friend” is perfectly possible in Russia, even if some time

has passed since the last meeting, and the same is also true for the friends of friends: “the bonds of friendship are such that friends of friends can be immediately mobilized to assist a person who is their common friend” (Shlapentokh 1989: 176). However – and here birthdays play a major part – in most cases, the type and nature of the bond (e.g. here between Svetlana and Andrei) is not indifferent. As was clearly illustrated in the maternity clinics studied by Rivkin-Fish, mediating (a favor) was not always enough. The issue at stake is mostly the opposite: subtle techniques of making the exchange relation into a relationship (see Ledeneva 1998). At a birthday party, the giver and receiver of help meet face-to-face and can thus establish a personal bond.

Information is one important part of informal exchange; valued, of course, especially in the Soviet era, but far from insignificant in post-Soviet Russia. A good, rather typical example of this is looking for a job through the network, as Svetlana does. A study done in St. Petersburg by Teela Jyrkinen-Pakkasvirta (1996: 28–30) showed that the respondents did not trust the employment office to provide a job; the most popular channel was contacting the network members – friends, relatives, and acquaintances. If true (trustworthy and reliable) information is best provided by the network, then birthday parties give an opportunity to get information from people one would not necessarily otherwise meet.²⁷ Especially during the Soviet era getting information was absolutely crucial, and it was the most widespread tactic of *blat* (Ledeneva 1998: 169). Information could, of course, be requested directly, but besides that, there was a specific technique, a way of sounding out and searching for information. As Ledeneva writes: “Conversations are all-important, in the neighbor’s kitchen, in the office, *at celebrations, parties, etc.*” (1998: 169, emphasis added). Some of the St. Petersburg birthdays seem still to offer something for guests in need of information. Raisa is a 31-year-old teacher of chemistry. During the study period she attends her friend Lara’s birthday and writes about the occasion in the following way: “I talked with my friend Lara about her family problems, about breeding dogs, about her business. I congratu-

lated her on her birthday. With Ira [Lara's sister] we discussed the latest fashion, healthy-looking skin, prices of spare parts for cars. With my friend's husband Nikita I talked about his wishes to make some money abroad, also about my husband's possibilities to go abroad..." The description given by Raisa of the birthday is, evidently enough, far from being a "complete" one. It is certainly devoid of some essential ritual aspects which make the occasion a birthday party. Nevertheless, the brief passage by Raisa is an outline in its own right; in a way it is her conclusion, report, or summary of the birthday party, containing the essence of the occasion for her.²⁸ I wish not to claim that giving and receiving help is the main thing at birthdays or that it is even present at every birthday party. Most certainly, it is not. However, passages in many St. Petersburg diaries clearly show that help *can* be requested, mediated, and received at a birthday party. The sphere of celebration does not rule out the solving of mundane, day-to-day problems, and the opportunities birthdays bring can indeed be used to that end.

Conclusions: Birthdays Revisited

What do birthdays mean to the teachers? It would be crude, indeed, to depict birthdays solely as some kind of an additional means of survival in the harsh conditions of (post-)Soviet life. Birthdays are surely not only about building trust and maintaining the network (and vice versa), or solving problems and finding solutions; and in any case, they are certainly not the only (or even the main) way to do so. However, I believe birthdays illustrate a distinct type of Russian sociability where one can both sing Russian romances and have one's teeth checked at the same time – a sociability molded by larger social and economic constraints. It is true that this practice is, perhaps, not wholly contrary to those of the so-called Western countries, but in the West it is far less necessary (and far less possible) to obtain goods, arrange things, search for information, or find people – at birthdays or elsewhere. Traditionally the West has also offered a variety of (public) places for initiating social relationships (clubs, organizations,

hobbies etc.), thus diminishing the importance of private festive gatherings for building the network. Although a detailed comparison of the Russian and Finnish diaries is not possible here, it becomes immediately clear that birthdays do not carry the same meaning in Finland as in Russia. The place of Russian birthdays in social interaction is quite different – and a lot more central – than in Finland, where the annual birthday goes by without anyone necessarily noticing it.

The birthday practices of our Russian teachers belong fundamentally to the Soviet era. However, a great many studies, some of them cited here, have shown that many Soviet practices continue in the post-Soviet era, though perhaps in an altered form and with a lower degree of importance. A lot has recently changed in Russia, but the birthday tradition has remained: it is a habitual ritual in its own right; culturally specific without seeming so (for those who are involved), and its justification need not be questioned. It offers a familiar frame for action, available if needed and if one so wishes. Here the emphasis has been more on bonds and *blat* than bottles and banquets, and a detailed study of the birthday rituals and the personal meanings attached to birthdays is still lacking. However, as I have tried to show, bottles do often help in *blat*, and for bonds it is good to have banquets.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Risto Alapuro, Anna-Maija Cast-rén, Oleg Kharkhordin, Anna Korhonen, Markku Lonkila and Sofia Tchouikina for commenting on a previous draft of this article.
2. The literature is certainly not devoid of studies of celebration and holidays, but most of it is devoted to the analysis of political holidays, e.g. Lane (1981); Binns (1979, 1980); Zdravomyslova & Temkina (1996).
3. The study is part of a larger comparative research project originated and led by Prof. Maurizio Gribaudi in Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris. The Finnish research group was led by Prof. Risto Alapuro, University of Helsinki. The Finnish data corpus includes structured diaries and thematic interviews with 40 secondary school teachers in St. Petersburg and 38 teachers in Helsinki, Finland. The research material for this study incorporates the

- diaries of 27 Russian teachers which include various forms of information on birthdays. The number of respondents in the study is rather small and involves representatives of one single occupational group – teachers. Moreover, the majority of these are females in their thirties and forties. The teachers have a stable but poorly paid work at the public sector (and thus both the means and necessity to be involved in various informal exchange practices, including *blat*). Consequently, generalization in a statistical sense is not possible, nor aimed at. Instead, I will describe in detail the nature of the Russian birthday; my aim is to clarify how macro-level structures shape micro-level birthday practices. In doing so I argue that the Russian birthday practices reflect a larger cultural framework for action which is not restricted to teachers. Moreover, celebrating birthdays and offering congratulations involve representatives of many occupational groups. The scope of generalization is, however, ultimately a matter of future research.
4. Some disadvantages are naturally due to this. There are faults in covering all relevant aspects on birthdays; for instance, there is no information available on the exact dates of birthdays of the network members, and it is thus impossible to detect *un*remembering of birthdays. Much of the same is true for the remaining thirteen teachers excluded from the study, who did not report anything on birthdays in their diaries; it is not possible to say whether this is due to there being no birthdays during the study period, or whether this results from personal disinterest in birthday activities of any kind. On the other hand, the advantage of the diary data is the opportunity of rather systemically investigating the role of birthdays in social interaction and networks. Perhaps the most powerful argument in favor of using the data, despite the flaws, is that all notes on birthdays are “genuine”, i.e. the respondents provided this information without it being specifically solicited by the researchers.
 5. This is not to say the birthday is insignificant in Finland; on the contrary, there were also many notes on birthdays in the Finnish diaries. However, these were – with few exceptions – either children’s birthdays or major anniversaries (60th birthday, etc.), not annual birthdays of adults.
 6. These included planning birthdays, inviting guests, buying and giving birthday presents, offering congratulations, celebrating birthdays etc.
 7. Though the centrality of the birthday very likely depends on age; for instance, a Soviet-era study by Levada (see Kharkhordin 1999: 217–218) shows that the birthday was the central holiday especially for the younger generation, as older generations valued more communal or family holidays. However, also the older generations celebrate their birthdays, and the *yubilei* (the ten-year anniversary, especially from the 50th birthday onwards) is a particularly solemn occasion.
 8. Certainly there are persons who refuse to do this, but this is rather the exception than the rule.
 9. Moreover, hospitality is crucial not only for the representation of the true (essentialist) woman; I believe it is also important for the representation of Russianness (cf. Verdery 1996: 55 for the meaning of hospitality for the Romanian identity). One indication of this can be found in a study of post-Soviet Estonia where respondents from the Russian minority asserted that the Russian table at special occasions is more varied and plentiful than the Estonian one (Shlygina & Grigoryeva 1994: 229). Drinking is another component of the Russian identity, especially the persistent myths of heavy drinking on the one hand and ritual drinking on the other (Simpura, Levin & Mustonen 1997: 104; see also Simpura & Paakkancan 1997).
 10. This relates also to the Soviet era and the short-ages: celebrations in fact required *blat* (or getting something through someone, a phenomenon mentioned elsewhere in this study). *Blat* was needed for entertaining guests, and products good enough for a celebration had to be obtained, not simply bought in an ordinary shop (Ledeneva 1998: 28–29, 71).
 11. On ritual drinking in Russia see Pesmen (1995); Simpura & Paakkancan (1997).
 12. Very revealing in this sense are guide books on toast making for those who are not imaginative enough, for instance *Tosty* (1996) or *Tosty i zastol’nye rechi* (1998), with models of (rather bizarre) toasts for every occasion.
 13. See, for instance, Bird (1980: 23–24) on the uses of rituals. For instance, rituals facilitate communication by offering a vocabulary for the articulation of emotions. Paradoxically enough, the rigid ritual form often offers a greater opportunity to express emotions than a “free” discourse does.
 14. See Ries (1997: 52–53) on the value of proverbs, jokes, and the like in Russia.
 15. For a critique of Shlapentokh’s rather rigid division between friends and acquaintances see Rivkin-Fish (1997: 290–292).
 16. The diary data corpus covers a wide range of social relations of each teacher and rather detailed information on every alter: for instance, the proximity and the type of the relationship (e.g. close friend, neighbor); the original place of contact and whether the acquaintance was made through someone, the duration of the relationship; sex, age, profession, place of birth and residence etc.
 17. Every relationship is indicated with a value of proximity from 1 to 7, where 1 stands for “very close” and 7 for “not close at all”. Closest friends are usually given the value 2–3; here, Tanya

- seems to be an exception. However, the friends given the proximity value 4 are nevertheless her closest friends reported in the diary; all her colleagues at work, for instance, get the value 6–7 (with two exceptions with the proximity value 5).
18. Nancy Ries writes that for Russians sea-coast vacation resorts were “a favorite site for stories of sexual adventures, pick-ups, drinking bouts with untoward results, fights, etc.” (1997: 67). During many conversations she heard numerous stories of seaside pick-ups ending sometimes in marriages, sometimes in unwanted pregnancies, and sometimes in fights between lovers and angry husbands. Shlapentokh (1989: 200) remarks that “for quite a few people public resorts are the ideal place for romance and love affairs, both licit and illicit, which in some cases end in marriage”.
 19. Note that Lonkila (1997; 1998) is working with the same data as I am.
 20. *Blat* was a quite typical way of surviving in the harsh conditions of Soviet life, reaching its peak in the Brezhnev era. *Blat* was typically used to obtain goods and services in short supply, to avoid queues, or to get products more cheaply and/or of better quality. The range of *blat*, however, was wide and included the most valuable (and scarce) *blat* objects, such as telephones, cars and flats (see Ledeneva 1998).
 21. Ledeneva (1998: 171–174) presents a range of places where one could establish *blat* contacts: for instance, at work or through the professional career (i.e. Party career), through hobbies of all kinds, at tours and vacations, in sea-coast resorts etc.
 22. Markku Lonkila has studied the social meaning of work as a teacher. He concludes that the workplace functioned to a significant degree as a social milieu providing the teachers with, among other things, access to informal resources mediated through work (see Lonkila 1998).
 23. Though there are certainly individuals who calculate (in their *blat* relations, in remembering birthdays etc.), this is not the point here.
 24. The popular Soviet-time saying “Do not have 100 roubles, do have 100 friends” turned into the post-Soviet “Do not have 100 friends, have 100 dollars” (Ledeneva 1998: 104, 175). For those don’t-have’s who still need to cope with scarcity, however, it is still rather useful to have at least some friends. See Ledeneva (1998: 175–214) for the diminishing range and use-contexts of *blat* in the post-Soviet period.
 25. Lonkila (1997) defines informal exchange as the “exchange of favors, goods or important information which exceed the limits of teachers’ official professional activities or family routines”.
 26. In the combination of the guests, birthdays have one particular advantage compared to other main celebrations, such as New Year or Women’s Day. A person’s birthday is the special day of an

individual, and – in principle, at least – it is possible to gather the wanted guests, without taking into consideration other competing parties and party givers.

27. See also the classic text “The Strength of Weak Ties” by Mark Granovetter (1973). Relevant here is the idea that precisely weak ties (what the guests at a birthday party often are for *other* guests) can function as bridges to reach new contacts and new information these contacts (and their networks) have.
28. True, possibly prompted by the instruction of filling the diary, with an emphasis on encounters with “significant information” for the teachers. However, “significant” is mostly understood in the rather broad sense of the word.

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