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Social Impact of the Global Economic Crisis in Russia

Hiroaki HAYASHI *

* *The University of Shimane, Japan; h-hayashi@u-shimane.ac.jp*

Abstract: This paper explains the impact of the global economic crisis on Russian society after the latter half of 2008 focusing on the labour market function and the response of various economic actors. It is indicated that in Russia unique labour market adjustment exists and still functions in the current economic crisis, the crisis had a certain impact on the life of ordinary Russians and that the response to the crisis mainly involves reduction of expenses and increase in savings. Thus, unique adjustment function of the Russian labour market suppresses the impact of the economic crisis on the workers and they did not express their discontent in the form of strikes.

Keywords: labour market, economic actor, response, crisis, Russia

JEL Classification Numbers: D21, J21

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explain the impact of the global economic crisis on Russian society after the latter half of 2008 focusing on the labour market function and the response of various economic actors. To clarify the matter, I will first describe the unique labour market adjustment mechanisms in Russia and explain the role of the labour market in the economic crisis after 2008 on the basis of research studies in Russian enterprises. Next, I will show how the crisis affected the life of ordinary people and how they perceive the crisis and react to it. Finally, I will portray Russian society against the backdrop of the economic crisis from the viewpoint of labour and summarize the social impact of the crisis.

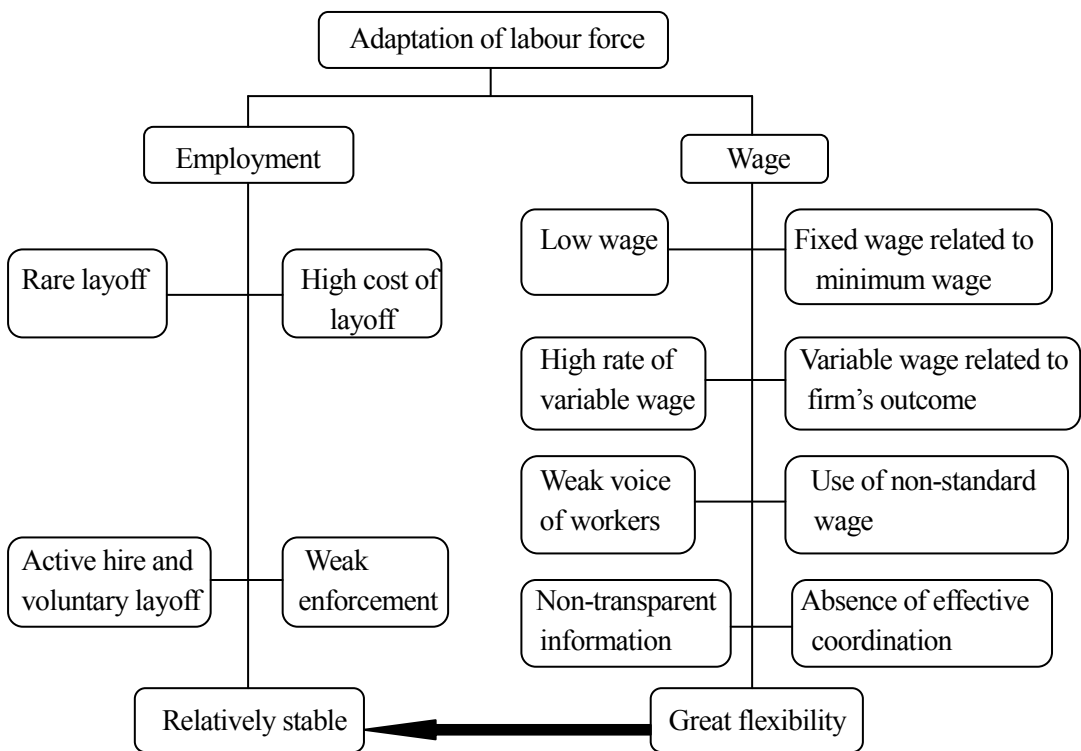
2. Economic development and labour market adjustments in Russia

The Russian labour market reflects the political and economic systems and social institutions of the country. Generally, elasticity of wages in developed countries is low, and wages do not decrease during an economic depression; however, employment slows down and the number of unemployed increases. However, the Russian labour market shows a unique adjustment behaviour, mainly characterized by a combination of stable employment and flexible wages.

That is to say, labour market adjustments are mainly based on wage changes, and employment fluctuation is not severe¹.

Unlike East European countries that have implemented relatively radical economic reforms, Russia is characterized by slow-moving reforms and a lack of determination to accelerate economic restructuring. This implies that enterprises and workplaces with low productivity did not go into bankruptcy but continued to exist. Thus, although the transition caused significant wage cuts, employment stability was maintained, and large-scale retrenchments avoided.

Figure 1 Portrait of Russian-model labour market adjustment



Source: Gimpelson and Kapelyushnikov (2007) p.71

This unique labour market adjustment is rooted in various social institutions in Russia and is considered to be quite stable, well balanced, and sustainable in the long run. Figure 1 presents the mechanism of the Russian-model labour market adjustment, relating it to social institutions in Russia. A stable employment level is maintained as follows: First, the costs of employment and layoff are high because of factors such as relatively longer periods of advance notice and employment protection legislation. The higher the cost to reduce employment in crisis and the

harder to do so, the more cautious the enterprise would be when it employs workers. Therefore, not only is the level of employment suppressed, but employment does not react to production quickly. Second, weak enforcement is encouraged. Because of the high cost of discharge, dismissals are rare. However, enterprises downgrade employment conditions to induce undesirable workers to leave of their own choice. Actually, many workers quit their jobs voluntarily; thus, surplus labour force is released with no significant costs. Accordingly, Russian enterprises are able to reduce the transaction costs of maintaining a stagnant labour force, and are willing to employ new workers. Active exit and inflow of labour promote stable employment.

However, some factors must be considered to design a flexible wage system. First, the minimum wage is quite low, and labour regulation is not strong enough to ensure that the enterprises obey the rules. Second, the fixed wage is extremely low in relation to the minimum wage. Third, the ratio of variable wage to total wage, at least 25%–30%, is quite high. Fourth, as the variable wage is closely related to the outcome of enterprise, wages decrease at the time of poor business results. In addition, we can point out factors such as the prevalence of informal wages, weak voices of workers, and the absence of a wage adjustment mechanism.

This type of unique labour market adjustments could be seen in Russia since 1991. In the period 1991–1998, the unemployment rate was highest in 1998 at 14%. Mass dismissals did not occur, except in some individual enterprises. Enterprises gradually adapted to their production level, inducing their workers to quit voluntarily. The number of employed individuals gradually decreased, weakly reacting to the production level. During the period 1991–1998 the number of the employed decreased by 13.5% (from 74 to 64 million), while the GDP decreased by 40%.

On the other hand, the GDP of 2006 was 1.7 times that of 1998, but after the crisis started, the unemployment rate decreased to 7%. The number of the employed increased by 8% (from 64 to 69 million). Despite rapid economic growth, the number of the employed did not increase significantly.

Thus, during the transition period, the employment dynamics in Russia were relatively stable against external shocks, and decreased consistently. On the contrary, wages reacted quite sensitively. Next, we shall examine how the unique labour market adjustment model functions in the current economic crisis.

3. The 2008–2009 economic crisis and the role of the Russian-model labour market adjustment

In general, enterprises have three strategies to adjust their labour force to the production level: reduction of employment, reduction in working hours and wage cuts. What was the main strategy of Russian enterprises? We shall examine the responses of Russian enterprises to the

economic crisis based on research carried out jointly by the Higher School of Economics and the Levada Centre. A survey was conducted among 800 manufacturing enterprises in February–April 2009².

As far as strategies to deal with the crisis are concerned, 46% mentioned decrease of working hours, 40% indicated reduction of personnel, and 39% favoured wage cuts. It is obvious that each strategy was implemented by almost the same number of enterprises, but the level of employment was the same as before the crisis in 60% of the enterprises.

Concerning future strategies in case the economic crisis would last longer, 42% indicated decrease of working hours, 38% mentioned reduction of personnel, and 35% favoured wage cuts. It is predictable that Russian enterprises would behave the same way in general.

With regard to the combination of strategies, 20% utilize a combination of all three measures, 10% use reduction of employment and working hours, 9% implement reduction of working hours and wage cut, 5% favour reduction of employment and wage cut, 7%–8% indicated just one strategy, and 37% did not take any special measures against the crisis. Thus, it is confirmed that many Russian enterprises adopt several measures against the crisis at the same time and more than one-third of the enterprises do not undertake negative measures regarding employment or wages.

In addition, we can observe two unique measures of Russian enterprises: bonus cut (partly or entirely) and non-payment of wages (wage arrears). Among enterprises that offered bonus, 36% could pay the entire amount to the workers, 19% reduced the amount, and 45% stopped payment. While Russian enterprises often reduce wages as the need arises, a bonus cut might be the first step. Moreover, one-fifth of the enterprises investigated adopted the wage arrears option. This percentage is higher than the official estimate, but much lower than the 1990 figure. This implies that while wage arrears are quite popular among Russian enterprises to cope with the economic crisis, these measures are difficult to adopt because of strict regulation.

What measures enterprises adopt would depend on the extent of the crisis. Many enterprises implement just wage cuts in a low-intensity crisis. As the crisis deepens, other measures such as reduction of working hours or forced leave are adopted. Reduction of personnel is considered as the final step in case easier measures cannot be taken.

On the basis of outcome of this investigation, Kapelyushnikov and Gimepelson maintain that measures such as reduction of working hours or wage cuts, if vigorously implemented, could stabilize the level of employment and control the rise of unemployment, and that tough government controls could affect both enterprises and workers adversely.

These views were based on the unique Russian-model labour market mechanisms. The authors suggest that these mechanisms should be preserved intact during the economic crisis. In support of their view, they point out that the increase in the number of the unemployed was less than proportionate to the decline in production, and wages, especially the variable wage,

decreased significantly.

On the other hand, Roshin (2009) claimed on the basis of a comparison between the 1998–1999 and 2008–2009 crises that the labour market adjustment mechanism had changed (normalization). His analysis was based on labour demand, supply, and institutional framework. The 1998–1999 crisis was a crisis of the Russian economy in transition even as the world economy was stable. The crisis showed the following characteristics: ex. informal employment, existence of second economy, wage arrears and non-payment and very low minimum wage etc. However, the 2008–2009 crisis in Russia is a fallout of the global economic crisis. The following is an outline of the crisis analysis: bare possibility of informal employment, weak possibility of second economy, low possibility of non-payment or wage arrears and increase of minimum wage (4330 rubles per capita, from 1st January 2009) etc. We see here a fast reaction of the labour market: increase of unemployment and decrease of wage. This indicates the end of the Russian-model labour market adjustment, according to Roshin.

Some aspects of the Russian labour market function did indeed change, as Roshin suggested. Changes from wage to employment adjustment can be seen, especially in Q1 2009³. However, the number of the unemployed decreased afterwards (see Table 4 below). The author believes the Russian-model labour market adjustment still functions. Next, we will examine the impact of the economic crisis on the day-to-day life of ordinary people.

4. Impact of economic crisis on life in general

First, we shall examine how ordinary people perceive the economic crisis based on findings of social investigation. Figure 2 shows the evaluation of life in general ('good' or 'bad')⁴. The following points can be observed: First, the graph of the 2000s is in marked contrast to that of the 1990s. Second, in 2009, the 'good' evaluation exceeds the 'bad', though it dropped significantly compared to 2008, when it was the highest in history. These results show that people are not entirely pessimistic about the effects of the crisis.

Let us consider the social problems Russian people are concerned about. Table 1 shows the outcome of social investigation of 1600 people in various areas in Russia conducted by the Levada Centre. We can compare people's concerns before and after the crisis. 'Increase of price' ranks highest in both periods, but we observe changes below the second rank. Concern about 'growth of unemployment' increased rapidly and was ranked second in Jan 2009. On the contrary, concern about 'poverty' and 'economic gap between the rich and the poor' decreased a little. Concern about 'nonpayment of wage, pension, and subsidy' increased in Jan 2009, though the numerical value is not large. This indicates that people fear unemployment seriously.

Next, we shall examine who suffered most from the economic crisis. Bondarenko (2009) classified Russian households into four categories based on consumption level, and investigated

Figure 2 Evaluation on life in general (%)

Source: Gorshkov (2009) стр. 45.

Table 1 Public opinion survey by Levada Centre

Social problems you worry about most acutely.

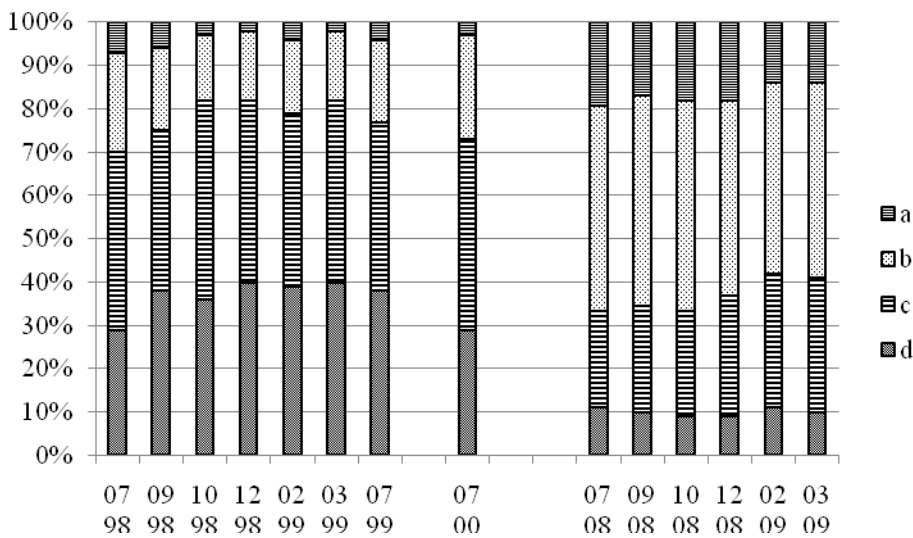
	Jun 2008	Jan 2009	Variation (2009–2008)
Increase of price	82	75	–7
Growth of unemployment	25	57	32
Economic crisis	29	48	19
Poverty	45	42	–3
Economic gap between the rich and the poor	35	28	–7
Insufficient medical service	31	26	–5
...
Nonpayment of wage, pension and subsidy	4	10	6

Source: Levada Centre (<http://www.levada.ru/>)

consumption trends of households in 2008–2009 compared to the 1998–1999 behaviour. Figure 3 shows changes in the trend over a period of 10 years. In the figure, ‘a’ indicates the most wealthy group that can afford to buy consumer durables anytime, and ‘b’ the quite wealthy group that can afford to buy food or clothes, except consumer durables. The group ‘c’ can buy foodstuff anytime, but has some difficulty buying clothes, and ‘d’ does not have enough money even to buy foodstuff. This figure shows, first, that the social structure in Russia changed

significantly in 10 years and the size of the upper strata ('a' and 'b') increased appreciably. Second, while the size of the poor group ('d') increased just after the start of crisis in 1998–1999, that in 2008–2009 changed little. Third, the wealthy strata ('a' and 'b') decreased in size, especially after December 2008. These points suggest that the size of the wealthy strata in Russia increases with economic growth and that the 2008–2009 crisis had a severe impact on the relatively wealthy strata.

Figure 3 Economic crisis and trend of consumption



Source: Levada-centre (<http://www.levada.ru/press/2009041702.html>)

According to Gorshkov (2009), people such as the elderly and the poor suffered most not only during the crisis but even before the crisis. Furthermore, residents of medium-sized cities (population, 100,000–500,000) who had difficulty finding jobs in a restricted labour market and people who do not have wage guarantees (in contrast to public officers, military officials and judicial officers, who have such guarantees) suffered much. By grouping workers according to their qualification we can find the extent of unemployment for workers with medium or low qualification and the increase of burden of work for workers with high qualification. Problem of Russian economy before the crisis becomes radicalized.

What do people think about the causes of the crisis? Table 2 shows the factors of crisis indicated by people in 1998 and 2009. While wrong economic policies of the government were considered to be the main cause of the 1998 crisis, almost half (46%) believe that the 2009 crisis was due to the effects of the international financial crisis, and just around one-fourth (28%) blame

the present government.

Table 2 Causes of financial crisis

1998	%	2009	%
Unsuccessful economic policy of the government under the leadership of Chernomyrdin	56	Unsuccessful economic policy of the past Government	22
Unsuccessful economic policy of the government under the leadership of Kiriyenko	15	Unsuccessful economic policy of the current government	28
Bad activity of Russian financial oligarch	25	Bad activity of Russian financial oligarch	28
Subversive policy of western countries	27	Subversive policy of western countries	24
Activity of Zionist organizations	5	Activity of Zionist organizations	2
Legacy of socialist system	14	Legacy of socialist system	5
Policies carried out by communists in the Parliament	8	Policies carried out by opposition parties	3
Russian people did not know how to work in the market condition	21	Russian people did not know how to work in the market condition	13
Ill-considered financial policy of the Central bank	28	Ill-considered financial policy of the Central bank	18
Result of international financial crisis	7	Result of international financial crisis	46
Others	10	Others	2
Difficult to answer	8	Difficult to answer	13

Source: Gorshkov (2009) p. 47.

Under these circumstances, for many people, the main strategy to deal with the economic crisis is to reduce expenses and increase savings. Investigations carried out in January 2009 revealed that 29% of households on average (57%, 41%, 17%, 10% in each stratum) purchased lower-priced food or necessities during the 2–3 months before the investigation⁵. Rosstat also shows the percentage of income utilized for purchase of commodities and services decreased from 71.7% (June 2008) to 62.1% (June 2009), and conversely, the rate of savings increased to 17.9%. Moreover, we find that the aims of savings have changed during the economic crisis as shown in Table 3. In 2009, the percentage of income spent on ‘housing, automobile, and vacation’ dropped rapidly and that of items such as medical treatment and education rose compared to Q2 2008.

Thus, the economic crisis had a certain impact on the life of ordinary Russians. The response to the crisis mainly involves reduction of expenses and increase in savings, supported by the

Table 3 Aims of savings

	Q2 2008	Q1 2009	Q2 2009
Medical treatment	10.9	29.2	29.1
Own real estate	16.0	24.4	23.4
Education	10.3	13.9	15.0
Housing, automobile, vacation	39.5	15.1	17.4
Old age	15.5	15.6	13.2
Assistance for parents or friends	7.8	1.8	1.9

Source: Rosstat (<http://www.gks.ru>)

increasing size of the wealthy strata with economic growth. In this sense, the economic crisis does not necessarily affect the life of Russians.

5. Russian society under the economic crisis from the viewpoint of labour

In this section, we shall re-examine Russian society under the economic crisis from the viewpoint of labour, observing changes in the numbers of the employed and unemployed and in wages and analyzing people's responses to them.

First, Table 4 shows the relation between economically active population, the employed, and the unemployed. The number of the unemployed was at the bottom (4.1 million) in May 2008, started to increase just after the crisis, and reached the peak (7.1 million) in February 2009. Thereafter, it gradually decreased to 6 million in August 2009. Though fluctuations in the number of unemployed individuals are usually related to the number of employed individuals, in Russia we could see a possibility of movement from the economically non-active population to the unemployed, and vice versa. Gimpelson (2009) argued that the number of employed individuals is fixed (approximately 70 million), except in August 2008 and February 2009, and

Table 4 Correlation of the employed and unemployed (million)

	2008				2009		
	Feb	May	Aug	Nov	Feb	May	Aug
Economically active population	74.8	75.7	76.6	75.9	74.8	75.9	76.6
Employed	69.5	71.6	72.1	70.6	67.8	69.4	70.6
Unemployed	5.3	4.1	4.5	5.3	7.1	6.5	6.0
Unemployment rate (%)	7.1	5.4	5.8	7.0	9.5	8.5	7.8

Source: Rosstat (<http://www.gks.ru>)

that movement from the economically non-active population to the unemployed can be observed during the crisis.

Partial employment also increases, as the crisis deepens. Table 5 shows the number of partially employed workers forced to leave. Although it is impossible to compare the situation before February 2009 with that after March 2009 because of systemic changes, we could confirm the general trend. The totals peaked in April 2009 and afterwards gradually decreased. In July 2009, the percentages were 2.9%, 3.5%, 1.7%, and 5.5% (in manufacturing they were 5.8%, 5.0%, 4.1%, and 7.1%).

Table 5 Incomplete employment and forced leave

	I. E. (1)	I. E. (2)	F. L. (1)	F. L. (2)	Total
Dec 2008	594600	-	451400	1580100	2626100
Jan 2009	825900	-	515600	1106400	2447900
Feb	1012200	-	408600	991200	2412000
Mar	759300	609100	383800	926900	2679100
Apr	702700	719500	345200	917300	2684700
May	602100	693500	428200	930700	2654500
Jun	586200	629400	307700	845800	2369100
Jul	488600	572900	281800	905600	2248900

Note: I. E. (1) means I. E. initiated by employers and (2) means agreement between employees and employers. F. L. (1) means preservation part of wage and (2) means no preservation.

Source: Rosstat (<http://www.gks.ru/>)

However, we cannot find enormous differences between regular and non-regular workers. R. Kapelyushnikov (2008) states that a regulation mechanism based on collective agreement does not play an important role in Russia. The Russian labour market was neither polarized nor segmented even under severe economic crisis. In the Russian transition process, no one could be securely protected against some shocks. The cost of adaptation did not fall on some social groups, but it was distributed more or less equally among all social groups. As a result, the Russian labour market functioned as a kind of buffer. This protected Russian society from explosion in spite of huge shocks in the 1990s. Taking into consideration the growth of real income since 2000, it is difficult to foresee a high possibility of social explosion.

Table 6 shows changes of real monetary income from Q1 2008 to Q3 2009. We can find the real monetary income decreasing since Q4 2008 along with the GDP and remaining quite stable thereafter. Furthermore, monetary income did not decrease in proportion to GDP or manufacturing.

We shall look at the amount of wage arrears. It started to increase in November 2008 from

3000 million rubles on average to around 9000 in Q2 2009. Afterwards, it dropped rapidly to 5500 million rubles in September 2009. Also, 96.8% of wage arrears in September 2009 are caused by shortage of own funds.

Table 6 Changes of real monetary income (% to the previous period)

	Q1 2008	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1 2009	Q2	Q3
GDP Growth	8.7	7.5	6.0	1.2	-9.8	-10.9	-8.9
Manufacturing	6.6	5.1	4.7	-10.1	-23.5	-18.7	-14.6
Real Monetary Income	7.5	5.7	4.5	-6.9	0.4	3.1	-2.9

Source: Rosstat (<http://www.gks.ru/>)

Table 7 shows the number and percentage of the poor whose income is below the substantial minimum. Both the number and percentage decreased gradually in 2008, increased rapidly in Q1 2009⁶, and again decreased afterwards.

Table 7 Statistics on the poor

	People (million)	Rate of poverty (%)
Q1 2008	23.0	16.3
Jan–Jun 2008	20.7	14.7
Jan–Sep 2008	19.0	13.5
2008 total	18.5	13.1
Q1 2009	24.5	17.4
Jan–Jun 2009	21.1	15.0

Source: Rosstat (<http://www.gks.ru/>)

Thus, it is obvious that the economic crisis had a severe impact on the labour condition of Russian workers. However, it is also emphasized that the process of recovery from the crisis could be seen since the first half of 2009. The impact on labour was restricted compared to the effect on production; wage cuts, increase in wage arrears and partial employment prevent an increase of the number of the unemployed.

From the perspective of labour, what are the responses of the people under these circumstances? We can perceive people’s discontent from the numbers of strikes and participants. Table 8 shows that the numbers of strikes and participants decreased and people did not express their discontent in the form of strikes. It also indicates that people do seek neither radical life changes, such as change of workplace or place of residence, nor radical political changes⁷.

However, we can observe an example of a large-scale strike. The strike in Pilalevo (Leningrad oblast’) in June 2009 offers an opportunity to understand people’s perception of the crisis.

Rosstat's investigation shows the people's answer to the question, 'Why do you think it was such a severe strike?' The results were as follows: 28% indicated irresponsibility of enterprise owner, 19% mentioned some objective reason (economic crisis, reduction in enterprise production, layoff of workers), and 13% pointed to ineffective measures of the Russian government against the crisis, etc. It is noteworthy that 'irresponsibility of enterprise owner' ranks above any 'objective reason'. We conclude that people strongly expect the enterprise owner to act responsibly.

Table 8 Extent of public discontent: strikes (more than 1 day) and participants

	Numbers of organizations	Participants (1000)
Q1 2008	3	1.6
Q2	3	1.8
Q3	0	0
Q4	0	0
Q1 2009	1	0.01
Jan 2009	1	0.01
Feb 2009	0	0
Mar 2009	0	0

Source: Rosstat (<http://www.gks.ru/>)

On the other hand, people's discontent against the crisis situation is dormant and does not appear on the surface, since the official statistics do not include such large-scale strikes as occurred in Pikalevo.

Thus, it is obvious that the unique adjustment function of the Russian labour market suppresses the impact of the economic crisis on the people (that is, the workers) and they did not express their discontent in the form of strikes.

6. Concluding remarks

In this paper, the author has attempted to explain the impact of the global economic crisis on the Russian society, with a focus on the labour market function and response of various economic actors. We found that while the impact of the economic crisis on life and employment aspects is clear, the extent of the impact is smaller than the production drop; further, the impact on life in general is limited on account of the growth in the wealthy strata, which is accompanied by rapid economic growth. With this background, we indicate the existence of Russian model labour market adjustment which prefers wage cut or bonus cut and tries to reserve employment.

We summarize the social impact of the economic crisis in Russia in three points.

The first concerns the special feature of the economic crisis in Russia. From the viewpoint of

daily life, the behaviour of ordinary people and enterprises function as a buffer preventing the negative effect of the crisis from surfacing. This is a unique self-protection mechanism from the crisis in Russia.

The second point focuses on which social groups are affected by the crisis and to what extent. Unlike the financial crisis at the end of the 1990s, the recent crisis severely affected the middle strata, which have accumulated a certain amount of wealth as compared to the poor strata. They were able to survive the crisis by cutting down on expenses and saving money. This is why the Russian society was not badly shaken by the crisis. Moreover, Russian model labour market adjustment continued to function. While the Russian government's anti-crisis measures did help to a certain extent, other factors played a more important role.

The third point concerns the problem with the Russian model labour market. As stated above, although the market succeeded in stabilizing employment during the crisis, employment did not increase with the ensuing economic boom. This has negative effect on the Russian economy after the crisis.

Notes

¹ Layard and Lichter (1995) first presented the functional model of the unique labour market in Russia. In this section, we referred to Ch. 1 of Gimpelson and Kapelyushnikov (2007).

² The description below was referred to Kapelyushnikov and Gimpelson (2009).

³ The reason for the increase in the unemployed in Q1 2009 is as follows. As per Russian Labour Code, employers are obliged to give a notice of at least two months before dismissal (three months in the case of mass dismissal). Therefore, it is considered that enterprises which noticed mass dismissal in October or November 2008 carried out actual dismissal in Q1 2009. See Ohtsu (2009) p. 243.

⁴ See Gorshkov (2009) p. 45.

⁵ See H. P. of Levada Centre HP (<http://www.levada.ru/press/2009041702.html>).

⁶ Ohtsu (2009) indicated that growth in poverty was accompanied by an increase in the number of the homeless and in suicides (33500 in 2008).

⁷ See Gorshkov (2009) pp. 46-47.

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