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Social Milieus and Personal Network Growth in the St. Petersburg IT Industry

Sociologist Michael Eve (1998) has remarked that personal networks do not extend haphazardly, but follow socially probable routes. New acquaintances are less likely to be made with previously unknown people on the street, but rather by spending time with people in the same social milieus frequently or for longer periods.¹ These social milieus include, among others, family and kin, neighborhood, school, university, workplace, and hobbies and leisure. A common milieu allows not only for making acquaintances but also for monitoring the character of a new acquaintance, which in the long run may help to create trust and develop the relationship into a more intimate one.²

Scott Feld (1981) refers to these milieus as ‘foci of interaction’, and defines a focus ‘as a social, psychological, legal, or physical entity around which joint activities are organized (e.g. workplaces, voluntary organizations, hangouts, families, etc.)’. According to him, without contextual information concerning foci, conclusions about networks tend to be misleading (Feld 1981: 1016; see also Castrén 2000).

Schools and universities

In addition to the workplace, two of the central milieus for forming networks for St. Petersburg IT professionals were schools and universities. The school system of the Soviet Union/Russia and Leningrad/St. Petersburg contained special schools whose curriculum had a strong emphasis on mathematics or physics. These special schools which carry numbers (instead of names, for example, schools no. 30, 45, and 239) are commonly known and enjoy high reputations within the city. Among the graduates from these schools are internationally well-known mathematicians, such as Grigory Perelman, a graduate from school no. 239,

who won the gold medal in the International Mathematical Olympiad at the age of 16 in 1982. In 2006 Perelman was granted the Fields Medal, which is considered to be the Nobel Prize of mathematics.³

At the special schools, the pupils were united not only because of their mathematical talents but also due to the feeling of belonging to a group of the selected and special. Moreover, the teacher–pupil relationships which even in a common Russian school have a tendency to become closer and stronger than in the West (Lonkila 1998) could be maintained even after graduation. One of the respondents remembered his own teacher at school no. 30:

Everyone loved very much our math teacher, who had worked at several math schools. A circle of former graduates gathered around him, went to congratulate him on his birthday, and got to know each other.

(technical director, p38)

The peer pressure of the mathematically talented pupils led to a competitive study environment, where some of the pupils would voluntarily spend part of their summer holidays at a training camp studying mathematics while their counterparts in common schools were spending the summer at the beach or *dacha*. This kind of environment also nourished the formation of networks, which were later utilized in working life and maintained through annual meetings and/or through social networking sites and Internet forums created for keeping in touch with one's classmates.⁴

One of our respondents moved from a common school near her home to a special school which increased her daily commute to one-and-a-half hours. However, in retrospect she does not regret this move, since it not only gave her a brilliant study environment with other talented pupils, but also extended her networks geographically.

If I had stayed studying at the local school (*v raionnoi shkole*), it would have been quite a small world (...). [Because of the studies in a special school] I know the whole city and I have friends all over the country. Many kinds of people gather in these elite schools.

(programmer, p36)

For the graduates from the special schools, the natural path of studies led to some of the technical universities in Leningrad/St. Petersburg. The abovementioned respondent – who due to having received the highest possible grade in all subjects was awarded the gold medal of

her school – describes the intertwining of the school and university networks in the following manner:

P36: On Saturday I will go to the meeting of the graduates to socialize (*poobshchat'sia*). We keep in touch very closely (*my obshchaemsia ochen' tesno*). My classmate [from school] used to work with me in the firm but now she has left. (...) I keep in touch closely (*ya ochen' tesno obshchais'*) with guys from other [university] faculties, some of them are my classmates [from school], some of them I know from common trips, some just appeared I don't know where from. But there are four–five people from the University with whom I keep in touch continuously.

Q: Did many of your classmates enter the same university? Almost all of them?

P36: My classmates entered the university but in a different faculty. One of my classmates entered the same university faculty with me. But ten guys went to *matmekh* [mathematical-mechanical faculty]. Of my parallel class (...) only two went elsewhere, but the other twelve came to our faculty.

(programmer, p36)

As a Soviet legacy and because of the needs of the military-industrial complex, St. Petersburg hosts a great number of mathematical and technical universities which not only prepare employees for IT companies but also serve as platforms for forming networks both among the students and between students and teachers.⁵ Several software programming firms originated from these milieus, and some were even established within the university infrastructure, keeping in close touch with their *alma mater* (e.g. company director, p31).

The special St. Petersburg mathematical schools, as similar elite schools in the West, created dense and lasting peer networks based on the sense of being chosen ones, in addition to giving a competitive education. One middle-aged IT manager told of having landed a job in several projects because the recruiting persons happened to be graduates of the same special school he had attended.

The graduates of one of the most prestigious special schools in St. Petersburg, the physical-mathematical lyceum no. 30, for example, have organized websites, groups, and communities for keeping in touch with study mates through the Internet. In addition to several individual pages programmed and maintained by individuals, the graduates of the school have founded a group in the virtual community LiveJournal, and another group on one of the most popular Russian social network

sites, *Vkontakte* ('In Contact') meant for 'all who have studied, study or will study' at this lyceum. The group had 2661 members in August 2009, and in its news column it turned to a fund supported by graduates living abroad to organize, for the ninth time in a row, a collection of gifts for the lyceum teachers.⁶ The graduates of the year 2008 (and most likely of the other years) have similarly organized their own *Vkontakte* group which is closed to outsiders.

One respondent, speaking of the special role of the networks, referred to the Leningrad academic elite as a 'caste' (*kasta*). There were several researchers and professors among the parents, grandparents, and other relatives of this respondent, whose encouragement led the mathematically gifted son first to a well-known special school and then to the technical university. The networks of family and kin were of great benefit in his university studies:

When the department of computer sciences [name of the department has been changed], where I wanted to get in, was opened, one of the employees was our family friend (...) These kinds of acquaintances certainly played a role in my entrance and made studies easier.

(director, p22)⁷

Likewise, Kirill (technical director, p38) commented that his career in the academic and research world was much easier because of the help from his kin, despite the fact that he had already shown special giftedness in mathematics at school.

The importance of special schools and universities as the platforms of network growth and start-up companies is a well-known phenomenon in other countries. However, the case of Leningrad/St. Petersburg is different from similar kinds of network dynamics in, for example, the US, due to the specific Russian constraints on geographical mobility which are likely to result in the formation of more locally anchored networks.

The historical background for the specificity of geographical mobility was the Soviet passport system, which tried to regulate internal migration in the country for the purposes of the planned economy. To settle in Leningrad a migrant needed a *propiska*, residence registration, without which one could not get a permanent job. In Soviet times, both the vivid cultural milieu and the better availability of consumer goods in Leningrad were extremely appealing to those living in the countryside or smaller villages. For them, a Leningrad *propiska* was an attractive but hard-to-get document, and different legal and illegal ways to get it, such as false marriages, were used (cf. Lonkila and Salmi 2005).

Being a Leningrader was a sign of special status in Soviet times, and the unique history and character of the city of Leningrad/St. Petersburg is also a classic theme in Russian and Soviet literature. Today, the appeal of St. Petersburg and Moscow is still likely to influence the migration decisions of Russians: whereas a Russian IT professional living in Moscow or St. Petersburg is unlikely to move to the provincial Russian towns, those from the smaller cities often head for the two Russian metropolises striving for employment as well as entertainment and cultural opportunities. One of the migrant respondents explained his decision to move to St. Petersburg from his provincial Siberian town with one million inhabitants:

To found a company there would have been much more difficult than here. In addition, there is a time difference of plus four hours which would have been a problem. (...) We [Russians] basically only have two important cities, Moscow and Piter [nickname for St. Petersburg]. Then there are of course smaller cities like Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk, naturally, Omsk, well, centres with decent education. But the advantage of Piter is that in addition to education, there are companies in which a programmer can become a professional. If in the city you'd have only one professional software developing firm, where would a programmer gain experience?

(director, p35)

In his comparison of Moscow and St. Petersburg, another director of a small company in the telecommunications sector – himself a native of St. Petersburg – even invoked the tension and competition between the two cities that has long roots in Russian history and culture:

In relation to Moscow, there is less money [in St. Petersburg] and everything is simpler. But on the other hand, I cannot say that the Moscow companies that will come to our market will get the cream of the crop. This is not the case and it has to do with the Peterburgians' dislike of Moscovians. If you have two [identical] offers on the table, one from a St. Petersburg company and another from Moscow, there is an inner negative attitude towards Moscovians. It exists and often you can use it, it works.

(company director, p47)

The relatively little willingness to leave St. Petersburg (except to go abroad or to Moscow) combined with the great mobility of employees

within the city led to the network formation where the central actors of the IT field, at least within the same specialized sector, are likely to know each other at least by reputation:

Piter is a small city. IT specialists do not form that big of a stratum. If someone changes a job two–three times, he already knows about half of all the specialists by name.

(director, p39)

Many of the networks of the special schools and top university graduates have foreign extensions due to the ‘brain drain’ after the fall of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, an academic career in Russia was seen as a dead end. With the crash of the Soviet economy, a great number of research institutes formerly dependent on military orders fell apart. The academic world suffered from the crisis of the public sector, and the nominal salaries of teachers and researchers – if they were paid at all – did not provide a decent living. Consequently, emigration came to be a realistic and tempting option for the best graduates of the Russian top universities. Particularly appealing were the best US universities, which provided study grants for the selected students. One of our respondents (programmer, p40), a graduate of a highly esteemed technical university in Leningrad, recalls how 24 of his 25 classmates emigrated. According to him, an additional factor in the decision was to avoid serving two years in the Russian army, notorious for its practices of hazing and bullying (see Lonkila 2008).

These observations of the brain drain of the brightest Russian students are reinforced by investigation of a list of the graduates of the famed mathematical-physics school no. 239 in St. Petersburg published on the Internet. According to the list 44 percent of the reported graduates of 1985–95 had given an address abroad, mostly in the US (26 percent), Israel (7 percent), or Germany (6 percent).⁸ Still, the new information and communication technologies also allow for the emigrated classmates of special schools to be in touch both with each other and their old teachers.

The university networks were not equally important for everyone. One of the older generation CEOs who graduated from a prestigious technical university and started his firm in the turmoil of the early 1990s stressed the generational difference:

In my case those two cases [school and university milieus] are not important. Sad to say, but in my age group not many people made it to the level to be of professional interest to me. We all are ‘survivors

of perestroika.' My school or University buddies are either drunkards or struggle to make it from salary to salary doing something very low level or – most of them – in the grave.

(general director, p1)

Internet milieus

For IT professionals, computer-mediated and mobile communication constitute one central channel for making acquaintances and maintaining relations. Parallel to the explosion of the Russian mobile phone markets in the 2000s (Gladarev and Lonkila 2008), communicating through cell phone calls, SMS, e-mail, and social network sites has replaced fixed phones, letters, and fax:

Q: Are you often in touch with your friends [in the IT business]?

P18: Today the Internet gives a wide range of possibilities for communication (*dlia obshcheniia*).

Q: You communicate with them through the Internet.

P18: Also in person. Practically every day on the Internet. And roughly once a month we also meet. They are of great help, particularly in cases of technical problems.

(marketing manager, p18)

The Internet is an especially important medium for communication, and many respondents used its various applications (email, discussion forums, instant messaging, etc.) actively to search for clients, orders, technical information, or just for socializing.⁹

Contradictory to the general idea of the Internet as a homogeneous global space where connections may be formed regardless of geographic or other limitations, the Russian language segment of the Internet is often referred to as 'Runet'. This practice dates back to the birth of the Russian Internet which was born among the researchers at the institute for nuclear research in Moscow (see Cooper 2006; Lonkila 2008; Schmidt et al. 2006).

One of the particular features of the Runet is the popularity of the virtual community LiveJournal www.livejournal.ru, in Russian *Zhivoi Zhurnal*, often abbreviated *ZhZh*). LiveJournal was originally developed as a blog publishing channel for American teenagers, but the networking functions added to it, such as the possibility of creating links between personal blogs as well as between personal blogs and thematic discussion groups or 'communities' led to the global spread of the system.

Quite unexpectedly, the well-educated Russian urban intelligentsia adopted *Zhivoi Zhurnal* in early 2000 as its avenue of socio-political expression to the extent that, until recently, *Zhivoi Zhurnal* was considered to be a general synonym for the word ‘weblog’ instead of one particular blogging platform. Though competitors have appeared (see below in this section), it is still a significant channel of expression for Russian urban professionals, as well as an arena for organizing protest actions. For example, the demonstrations of the opposition movement ‘The Other Russia’ were partly organized through the discussion communities of *Zhivoi Zhurnal*.

The personal blogs and conversations in *ZhZh* deal with personal, political, social and professional matters, often mixing all of these. Our respondent Valentina (marketing manager, p15), for example, told of finding a valuable document from a competing company published by the Ministry of Economic Development (*Ministerstvo Ekonomicheskogo Razvitiia*, MERT) through a link published on *Zhivoi Zhurnal*:

You could simply read it [the document] at the website of the Ministry. I remember that I found this link through *ZhZh*, LiveJournal, where there have now appeared many kinds of IT communities, in which people are communicating about IT. In general, *ZhZh* is such a virus, it is spreading quickly. (...) there are also people who are in high positions in IT and they are communicating quite informally (*obshchait-sia sovershenno neformalno*). Somewhere I found this link o MERT.

(marketing manager, p15)

At the time of writing, *Zhivoi Zhurnal* is still a significant part of Russian virtual culture, but several new social network sites are challenging its position particularly among the younger generation of Russian ICT professionals. The two most popular ones are a Russian-made Facebook clone, *VKontakte* (‘In Contact’ – www.vkontakte.ru) and *Odnoklassniki* (‘Classmates’ – www.odnoklassniki.ru) whose origins are found in St. Petersburg and Moscow respectively, whereas the popularity of the original Facebook has been modest in Russia.

The opening page of *VKontakte* seems to be a close copy of Facebook design, and the counter on the page indicating registered users is growing continuously, exceeding 36 million users in June 2009 but already 86 million in July 2010. *VKontakte* was founded in 2006 by St. Petersburg brothers Pavel and Nikolai Durov, the former of whom graduated from St. Petersburg state university in spring 2006. While Pavel is the winner of the ‘Olympiad in linguistics, information science

(*informatika*) and design', Nikolai was a school-time champion of the all-Russian Olympiad in mathematics and information science.¹⁰

Odnoklassniki ('Classmates') was also founded in 2006 by the Moscow-born Albert Popkov and claimed to have 37 million users on June 17, 2009. The opening page of *Odnoklassniki* differs from *Vkontakte*, since it is, as its name implies, designed to find one's classmates. Thus the page contains a long list of Russian regions, asking the user to pick the region s/he went to school in, and further to find the specific school, in, say, St. Petersburg.

Because of great commercial interest, it is difficult to find reliable user statistics corroborating the claims made by the two competing sites. According to the ROMIR survey in summer 2008, for example, *Odnoklassniki* was the clear leader (see Table 5.1).

However, TNS Web Index estimated that *Vkontakte* reaches 13.4 million people monthly whereas the corresponding figure for *Odnoklassniki* was 12.9 million.¹¹ The history of the two sites was still visible in the background of the users: 56 percent of the *Vkontakte* users were from St. Petersburg while the same figure for *Odnoklassniki* was 24 percent.¹²

These virtual milieus and others such as *Moi Mir* ('My World')¹³ and more instrumental and business-oriented networks (US born LinkedIn, www.linkedin.com, and Russian *Moi Krug* – 'My Circle', www.moikrug.ru) are important arenas for the network building of the new generation of Russian IT professionals. At the same time, characteristic of the distrust permeating Russian society, rumors spread among users of the monitoring of these systems by Russian intelligence and security services.

For professional development, however, there seems to be a difference between LinkedIn and *Vkontakte*. In the former, the professional and

Table 5.1 Popularity of the Russian social network sites in summer 2008. Percentage of the respondents registered on the site

Odnoklassniki.ru	72
Vkontakte.ru	44
Mail.ru (moi mir)	38
LiveJournal.com	20
Moikrug.ru	20
MySpace.ru	2
Facebook.org	2
None	12

Source: ROMIR (2008)

instrumental aspect of network use is considered to be the 'default' of the relationship – even though friends can also extend their networks through it – whereas the latter is more oriented toward socializing, relaxing, and having fun than building professionally useful contacts. Nevertheless, as will become evident, forming ties based on socializing also extends one's network reach and may in the future provide bridges to economically relevant resources.

Finally, for the younger generation, social milieus provided by various hobbies offer important opportunities to simultaneously have fun and expand one's contact networks, as formulated by a younger generation IT specialist:

Many IT professionals like mountain skiing, snowboarding, football, dancing (tango, latina), tennis, ping-pong, paintball. Sometimes we have tournaments organized by a company or several companies, with some customers and contractors invited. In more rare case we have tournaments like 'IT football league against St. Petersburg government', when IT guys are playing football with government officials. I believe that such tournaments or relationships started in fitness clubs/ski resorts can be a good start for new professional relationships.

Thus, St. Petersburg IT specialists have a wide variety of options for communicating both face-to-face and through the Internet. These options, particularly the increasingly popular social networking sites, build on the expansion of personal networks and may further contribute to the dissolving of boundaries between professional and personal spheres of life.

The Russian Software Developers Association (RUSSOFT)

The association of Russian software development companies was established in 1999 under the name Fort-Ross. In 2003 it joined the National Computer and IT Industry Association (APKIT), which was accepted the same year as a member of the international 'World IT and Services Association'. In 2004 Fort-Ross merged with the Russian National Software Development Association. The interest and PR activities were continued under the name of RUSSOFT whereas direct marketing events were organized under the aegis of Fort-Ross.

While the original idea of RUSSOFT was to promote Russian software development skills to the Western markets, lobbying the Russian government for the interests of the domestic ICT companies and

recruiting new members to strengthen the voice of the association have recently grown more important.

The activities of Fort-Ross/RUSSOFT have thus included reporting and marketing the activities of the members, including organizing the Russian stand in international exhibitions, arranging the annual 'Russian Outsourcing and Software Summit', and lobbying the Russian government in the issues (e.g. legislation) central to the field. RUSSOFT also publishes an annual review of the evolution of the Russian software development field. The number of RUSSOFT members has grown from the original 10 to over 80 companies from Russia, Belorussia, and Ukraine.

One of the important functions of the association is to lobby the interests of the field vis-à-vis the state apparatus. In this the relations of the president and one of the initiators of RUSSOFT, Valentin Makarov, come in handy. Makarov, born in Leningrad in 1955, worked as an electronics engineer in the defense industry from 1978 until 1985 when he started an administrative career, first as the manager of international relations at the Leningrad Polytechnic Institute, where he was then nominated the deputy-vice prorector. During 1996–2000 he worked as the deputy chairman of the foreign relations committee in the administration of St. Petersburg.¹⁴

In addition Makarov's career also includes business consulting and a diplomatic appointment in the Russian UNESCO delegation in France. This impressive career implies that the IT industry is connected to St. Petersburg and Russian power elites through Makarov, since he most likely also has close ties with the Russian intelligence services.¹⁵

Among the benefits for software companies joining RUSSOFT, the association lists marketing opportunities (e.g. the possibility to place company information on the RUSSOFT website), discounts on buying licensed software, participating in conferences and other events, and access to nonpublic information of the Association. In addition, the Association has a networking function:

You will have a right to take part in the Board of Directors monthly meetings. At the meetings not only dealing with current issues is important but also informal relationships between colleagues. The meetings take place in the central office of RUSSOFT in St. Petersburg or in Moscow. The Association also organizes parties for its member on occasions of high-days and holidays.¹⁶

The Association thus also functions as a milieu for forming connections between the main players of the field. In its meetings and events the

representatives of member companies can exchange information about markets, new technologies, government plans, and other significant issues.

These kinds of exchanges also took place outside of the association, since the managers of the most important software companies knew their competitors, and met once in a while to exchange opinions:

P3: once in a while we'll meet, for example, with Boris Vladimirovich [a well-known St. Petersburg IT entrepreneur]. 'Boris Vladimirovich, how are you? What do you think about this topic?' (...) And then there are these events organized by FortRoss [RUSSOFT]. The leaders of NewComp [one of the biggest St. Petersburg software companies] were my study mates at the institute, and we meet at times over lunch or dinner to find common interests (...) To exchange some fresh gossip from the industry.

Q: What kinds of gossip?

P3: All kinds. Gossip about employees' moving between firms, clients' behavior, strategic plans on St. Petersburg markets of some well-known Moscow companies, about serious setbacks or problems of companies. Or whether it is time to start hunting for employees. Well, the kind of news that you don't find in the internet media just because they have a dubious character, but which are good to know to understand the hidden meaning of many ongoing official events.

(general director, p3)

In addition to RUSSOFT activities, IT people participate in seminars, trading and training events, and other meetings organized by, say, foreign companies, trade associations, or chambers of commerce. One example is the gatherings of MobileMonday, a community of mobile professionals which fosters cooperation and cross-border business development through virtual and live networking events.

Birthdays as foci of interaction

In Russian business practices, as in Russian culture more generally, birthday congratulations and birthday parties have a particular role as 'foci of interaction' (Feld 1981) anchored around a single individual. They are considered in this section as *rituals* indicative of the central role of personal networks in Russia. These rituals illustrate several central aspects of these networks such as the embeddedness of the

economically relevant ties in social and cultural contexts, mixing of personal and public spheres of life, and the importance of togetherness and communication (*obshchenie*) in coupling the networks of individual people (see also Chapter 7 on *obshchenie*). Therefore they deserve to be discussed here at more length.

One of our respondents, a 35-year-old IT consultant, referred in the interview to her recent birthday, when she had received 40 phone calls as well as the congratulating messages sent to her via other media, and another middle-aged Russian IT manager – probably exceptionally active in terms of social interaction – estimated himself to have received 80–100 congratulations on his birthday. Still another respondent, a middle-aged general director and company owner, describes his birthday in the following way:

On November 22 [date changed] all kinds of people start phoning. Close ones, acquaintances. Young people trying to impress you. It is a pleasure (...) people that you never thought would remember or know you, start phoning. It is twice as pleasant that even distant people remember you. It is fantastic.

(general director, p3)

Birthdays have a central place in Russian culture, in and outside the workplace. They may be celebrated several times, both at work and home and with friends and other network members. Though birthday celebrations at work have likely become less prevalent compared to the Soviet era, one may encounter birthday congratulations for the bosses on the official websites of Russian organizations. The St. Petersburg weekly analytical newspaper *Delo* (Affair) had until the recent closure of the paper a special column devoted to ‘VIP birthdays’ of people in more or less important positions in the private or public sector. These columns were devoted to congratulations not only on round year birthdays (i.e. fiftieth birthday) however, but also contained subtly formulated congratulations by colleagues on, say, the sixty-fourth birthday of the person in question.¹⁷

Similarly, the well-known Russian daily *Kommersant* has a special column devoted to birthday congratulations for significant people in public office, culture, or business. An example is a congratulation by the president of the company ‘Komstar-OTS’ Sergey Pridantsev to Evgeny Yurchenko, the general director of *Sviaz’invest*, on his forty-second birthday:

Dear Evgeny Valer’evich, let me congratulate you from the bottom of my heart on your birthday! You are not just the most talented

manager I have ever known, but also a person who loves life and is able to light up the people around him with his energy. This quality enables you to succeed in any walk of life, and I hope that you will just go ahead and be a guiding star for all – for colleagues and for friends!

Pridantsev was joined in these wishes by Boris Belenky, the founder of the theater prize ‘Crystal Turandot’. His congratulation was written on a first-name basis, indicating a particularly close relationship with Evgeny Valer’evich:

Dear Evgeny Valer’evich! Forty two years ago the Creator sent you to the earth, and gave you a wise heart, a kind soul and a courageous intellect. During all these years, in spite of difficulties, you not only did not lose, but increased this richness. Precisely because of this you are a great manager. Thank you for tirelessly saving beauty rather than waiting for beauty to save the world.¹⁸

The ritualized importance of birthdays permeates the whole society up to the highest political and economic power elite. June 16, 1998, the day when a group of Russian oligarchs elected Anatoly Chubais as the representative of the country’s urgent loan negotiations with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, happened to be Chubais’ forty-third birthday. It was celebrated with the oligarchs singing ‘Happy birthday to you’ for Chubais, with Mikhail Fridman, the main owner of Alpha Bank, on piano (Kolesnikov 2009: 168).

In one of the few existing studies in English of Russian birthdays, Anna-Maria Salmi (2000) depicts the role of birthdays in Russian culture. She draws from the teacher network data corpus described in previous chapters, but her results also extend beyond the particularities of the teaching profession. Salmi shows how aspects of sociability and mutual help get intertwined in Russian birthday celebrations, illuminating the fit of the researcher’s notion of *personal* network with the Russian actors’ own views on their social life.

Probably the most detailed study of Russian birthdays in the Soviet and post-Soviet period is, however, written by Olga Kalacheva, according to whom the birthday is one of the most important and popular celebrations in Russian urban culture today (Kalacheva 2003: 9–10, 29). Kalacheva describes in detail the socio-historical roots of the Russian birthday, the organization of birthday practices, and their meaning for the formation of individual and collective identity. Especially

relevant to the current study and the argument for the significant role of personal networks in Russia are her observations about the practices of solidarity formation during birthday celebrations, such as the gathering of guests around the common birthday table to share food, drink, and discussion. Kalacheva also cites the work by Lynn Visson, a translator well acquainted with Russian culture, which demonstrates well the significance of Russian birthday celebrations vis-à-vis their American counterparts:

Adult Americans mostly pay much less attention to their birthdays than Russians. As a rule birthday parties are organized, guests invited and so forth only around round numbers of years. Other birthdays are noticed only by close friends. Besides, Americans do not have a need to use birthday as a good excuse to meet their kin and friends, to have a party.

(Visson 2003: 103, cited in Kalacheva 2003: 8)

The birthday celebrations render visible the significance of the role of the personal network but also the proximity of its members. With the closest ones face-to-face celebrations are a must – forgetting the birthday of one’s family member or close friend is likely to cause a breach in the relationship – but commemorating the birthdays of close acquaintances and business partners is also important. E-mail, mobile phone SMS, and social networking sites offer new technological possibilities both to maintain the connections and regulate the proximities: the inside circle must be encountered personally, for others one may phone and for still more distant acquaintances an SMS or an e-mail is sent. *VKontakte* provides, for example, a reminder of the birthday dates of one’s network members, though an online message may nevertheless be considered a less intimate way of congratulating than a phone call.

In all, birthday celebrations exemplify well the central role of personal networks in Russia. During these ritualized celebrations, personal network ties are maintained and formed, mixing both the public and personal spheres of life as well as economic and social aspects and motivations.