

The Importance of the Politics of Friendship in Contemporary Russia

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Some observers hold that the friendship ties that are so prevalent in post-Communist Russia may prove to be a saving grace for the country. With other resources for ensuring peaceful social cohesion severely depleted, friendship may indeed turn out to be the only extensive resource available. Standard projects for creating civil society as a set of free citizens' associations that (potentially) oppose the state are inappropriate in Russia since the disappearance of the monopoly of legitimate violence. Defending the individual from the encroachment of just one powerful predator (the state) does not make much sense in a country filled with a multitude of similar predators--semi-public and semi-private firms and corporations providing protection services and enforcing business contracts. By contrast, civil, civilized, and peaceful cohabitation may be fostered if one uses the extensive resource (friendship) spread throughout contemporary Russia.

Yet, the topic of friendship in Communist and post-Communist societies is severely understudied, given its ubiquity and salience. In one of the notable exceptions, Vladimir Shlapentokh described friendship as one of the most valued social relationships in the USSR. He cited data from one 1981 empirical study to stress the difference between Soviet and American perceptions of friendship, and to highlight the extraordinary importance that Soviet people ascribed to friendship: 16% of Soviet respondents met friends every day; 32% met once or several times a week; and 31% met several times a month. For the US at the same time, the median was substantially lower--e.g., four times a month for bachelors. However, Soviet official sources never exalted friendship; *Pravda* never ran an editorial on it. The only scholarly Soviet study that directly addressed the subject was more concerned with expounding historical views and philosophical doctrines on friendship from Aristotle to Hegel than with actually examining the peculiarities of Soviet friendship. It hinted, however, that unconditional trust and the opportunity to confess and discuss personal problems at any time made Soviet friendship an unofficial moral value.

My own work on the formation of the basic unit of Soviet society--a self-policing work group of ostensibly equal builders of Communism transliterated as "the kollektiv"--has shown that close interpersonal friendship was always suspect in the eyes of the state due to its potential contribution to creating "false kollektivs" that challenged the official ones. Friendship built informal networks of individuals that subverted collective surveillance and discipline, which explains why it became a suspect value for the Stalinist regime. By definition, a friend was an individual who would not let you down even under direct

menace to him- or herself; a person to whom one could securely entrust one's controversial thoughts since he or she would never betray them, even under pressure. Friendship thus in a sense became an ultimate value produced in resistance struggles in the Soviet Union. Any ascribed category of human relationship could crumble under the threat of terror--children denounced parents, wives betrayed husbands or vice versa, and so on. By contrast, a "friend" was not an ascription but an achievement; it was a definition forged by terror, and thus represented a dearly earned status.

Of course, in later Soviet society, friendship as a moral value was tested in milder but more widespread struggles; still the obligation to withstand pressure in order to be called a true friend persisted. Dyadic and triadic relationships, and even whole networks of friends, constituted the unseen underpinning of everyday life in the Soviet Union. These relationships made life tolerable for Soviet citizens, as well as for the Sovietologists doomed to do research amidst the grayish landscapes of Soviet life. Who would choose to live in a society consisting of obedient automatons, duped into submission by ideology and terror?

In a work written in the 1970s for the underground press, Russian sociologist Ksenia Kasianova dubbed these non-official networks of friends "diffuse groups." She outlined their two main functions as guaranteeing the unquestioned support and defense of the individual and ensuring authentic communication without any need to dissimulate. In other words, a friendly network functioned similarly to a Soviet kollektiv, because it employed all the same admonitory methods of influencing people, but it differed from it in that it did not enserv its members (entering the network and abandoning it was voluntary), and it was not an institutionalized social unit collectively responsible for achieving goals imposed from the outside. Collective surveillance in this case did not result in periodic assemblies to discuss who was to blame (for the loss or punishment imposed on the group as a whole), which constituted the rhythm of work of any official kollektiv and which furthermore unleashed the terror of group denunciation of an individual.

Friendship as a Means of Civil Cohesion

After the collapse of the Soviet regime, Russia inherited friendship ties as a very important part of its social terrain. Friendship traverses a complicated set of transformed elements of Soviet society and new social entities that together constitute post-Soviet society. For example:

- Old Soviet kollektivs were either destroyed or devolved into a condition of "the post-collective:" in the absence of state oversight, bosses from the old days find it more profitable to directly manipulate the opinion of their colleagues or bully them into compliance than to support the fiction of the collective as a group of equal colleagues.
- Many new groups that have emerged in the business sphere--for example, groups of employees of new commercial firms, banks and so on--do not even care to

- present themselves as collectives, openly proclaiming the individualistic principles of their formation and functioning.
- The bodies of state oversight and repression that mediated relations between the Soviet collectives have either been dissolved or have gradually lost this function. The need to coordinate business relations between small groups of post-Soviet society has been met by the phenomenal proliferation of businesses providing protection and security services. Protection services are now provided by a whole spectrum of suppliers starting from the transformed or privatized parts of the old Soviet repressive apparatus to new semi- and fully criminal structures.
 - Friendly networks that formerly existed as if counterpart to social entities have emerged into the open. On the one hand, they have become an obvious part of the post-Soviet business world and of what some observers call clan politics. At minimum, some friends' networks--transformed and institutionalized to a certain extent in assigning related government or business positions--lie at the core of many power groups: consider networks of friends formed around Anatoly Chubais or Yevgeny Primakov. On the other hand, those friendly networks that withstood the temptations of jointly pursuing wealth or power seem to retain the functions they inherited from the old days: they provide the most fundamental means of social welfare and defense for the individual, and ensure the maintenance of the arenas of important communication contributing to personality formation among their members.

When looking at this terrain of diverse groupings and ties, one notes two curious features. First, the post-collectives and the recently created business groups are tied into a post-Soviet society by means of private and public protection providers that use the threat of physical violence to maintain predictable behavior of civil bodies. Second, the weak state has brought into existence a plethora of entities that use violent non-civil methods to ensure the more or less smooth functioning of businesses. However, all of these bodies, civil and militant, are penetrated by networks of friendly concern, mutual help and non-violent influence. *The central problem of contemporary Russian civil society thus may consist of making relations of uncivil violence conform to the principles of friendly networks.*

In this respect, Russia is paradoxically close to building civil society as it was understood by thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, rather than by contemporary parlance. For example, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson wrote of civil society as opposed to military society (preferring peaceful trade to military conquest as a means for growth), and of civilized society as opposed to barbaric society (enjoying polished manners and fruits of industrial development and high culture). This understanding of civil society as a peaceful and civilized society is a norm shared by many Russians.

Following this vision, instead of revitalizing the agonizing Russian state, one may help further the transformation of a vast contemporary terrain of uncivil life according to civil principles. Russia currently has a very weak state and uncivil society, which employs

military rather than civil methods in solving the problem of its disintegration. Instead of trying to reconcentrate violence in the hands of one person again--a project popular with the current Russian state administration, which may nevertheless be a forlorn hope if one looks at Afghanistan, Lebanon or Somalia--one may counteract this diffusion of violence by the diffusion of a civil way of life. To use Kasianova's terms, the main task of creating civil society in Russia would then be a reconstruction of the bodies of diffuse violence based on the principles of diffuse communication, that is, based on the principles of friends' networks.

Counterarguments

There are a couple of immediate objections usually raised against this argument. The first objection holds that what people most frequently call friendship in Russia is actually just a disguise for obvious relations of gain or patronage. The second objection is that even if we find genuine altruistic friendship in Russia, it is exclusive by definition: it links a few private individuals in an exercise in mutual benevolence in opposition to a broader society. Thus, it would seem impossible to link the whole of Russian society employing the principles of contemporary private friendship. These objections, however, are not insurmountable; recent thinking on friendship may provide us with grounds to adequately address both of them.

Let's take the first objection. On the one hand, the "clan politics" that are often pointed out as the main feature of political struggles in Russia can be described as friendship only with a great deal of conceptual stretching--an exchange of material benefits for personal allegiance and political support is rarely called "friendship" in contemporary Russian parlance. The blatant inequality of a patron-client relationship prevents people from calling it friendship. On the other hand, exchanges between more or less equal partners very often merit the title of friendship. People linked in networks tend to misrepresent their own relationships of equivalent exchange of gifts and services in the normative terms of altruistic friendship. Many human relationships do not employ the critical capacity of a suspicious social scientist who uncovers acts of equivalent exchange allegedly disguised by altruistic language, nor should they if they are to keep these relationships going. What we may call "authentic friendship" may develop out of a regular gift exchange after participants consciously stop monitoring the value of gifts exchanged.

Friendship then becomes sharing in active forgetting, i.e., jointly ceasing critical evaluation of inputs brought into the relationship. Alena Ledeneva's recent work on the informal exchange of favors in Russian society elaborates this idea. She has shown how relations of authentic friendship may arise out of the everyday equivalent exchange of favors in Russia. The Soviet phenomenon of blat--the exchange of access to procuring scarce goods under conditions of economic shortages--may have frequently given rise to genuine friendship when participants in the blat network habitually ceased monitoring the value of services exchanged and thus started acting for the sake of their friend as an individual. Even in Soviet days, the most cynical of relationships may have engendered

the most altruistic. This mass potential for altruistic behavior survives in post-Communist Russia as well.

The second typical objection--that the exclusive character of modern Russian friendship exists at the expense of the broader society--may be challenged on different grounds. Only after the appearance of the impersonal market and bureaucratic mechanisms in the Western world did modern friendship seem to become an exclusive private relationship involving a few individuals. Without the need to procure favors, gifts or services by means of others--since people could now be getting those in the open market--people were expected to be drawn together by genuine interpersonal sympathy.

However, until this great transformation that rendered friendship and enjoyment of interpersonal communication part of the private pastime, there was a wholly different classical tradition that viewed friendship as a public virtue and a common good for the polis. Classic political theory thrives on discussing the issue of friendship. Recent studies have rediscovered this overlooked tradition of theorizing "political friendship" starting from Aristotle and going through Cicero and Augustine almost to Montaigne. Ancient Greeks--and early Christians, to a lesser extent--knew how to befriend each other in the thousands, and this experience can shed new light on our modern problems.

Political friendship was looked upon as a species of friendship for gain (utility friendship), which presupposed the equal exchange of contributions and gifts. That is, among the three types of friendship (for pleasure, for gain, for virtue), political friendship clearly had a very specific transitional status between the second (lower) and third (higher) forms of friendship. Political friendship had one peculiar feature that neither friendship for gain nor virtuous friendship possessed. Although Greeks thought that befriending many was impossible as a rule, in political friendship one could be friends with many other citizens without servility or loss of virtue. According to one interesting interpretation, partners in political friendship banded together for gain, but for gain of a very specific kind--they gained in virtue as a result of this friendship. Equal exchange and common pursuit of the shared goal remained, but these gain-oriented relations contributed to the growth of virtue among everyone involved in political friendship.

Conclusion

These theoretical considerations seem to offer some promising avenues of thought on using the potential of friendship in Russia to ensure public order and develop civil society. However, many questions remain unanswered. How does one in practice reconcile the principles that tie small interpersonal networks at the expense of broader society with the demand to integrate these networks together in that very society? How does one transform the ancient ideal of common undertaking in the pursuit of virtue to fit the realities of present-day Russia, where the word virtue is rarely used? How can one make friendship win over the virtuosos of violence that currently rule the day in Russia? Answering all of these questions requires painstaking study of the classical sources and contemporary works rethinking the classic experience--an objective for future study. This

memo represents a start by drawing attention to a ubiquitous but understudied phenomenon of Russian life--one that may hold solutions to many pressing concerns in Russia today.

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