

# THE ‘PUBLIC–PRIVATE’ SPHERE IN SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET SOCIETY

## Perception and dynamics of ‘public’ and ‘private’ in contemporary Russia

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**ABSTRACT:** The post-Soviet Russian society produces of a great variety of political parties, newspapers, and TV channels but this is not synonymous with democratic pluralism and/or the formation of a critical public sphere. This public sphere suffers from obstructed communication between the state and its citizens as one result of Soviet political socialization. This is not only a reason for fuzzy interview communication in the frame of scientific research in contemporary Russia, it is an important aspect of impediment to the construction of civil society. In our article we will firstly outline Russian sociological discussion on the specific Soviet division of the public sphere in an ‘official’ and a ‘private’ part. Secondly, we will suggest how to compare it with ‘western’ theoretical approaches to the topic by strengthening any non-dichotomous models. Finally, we consider the actual condition of Russian public which is still marked by a general distrust of the state and its ‘organs’, and recently coloured by false public forums threatening freedom of the press and freedom of opinion.

**Key words:** public and private spheres; post-Soviet societies; Russia; political culture; Soviet public; qualitative methods in sociology

### 1 Foreword on Interview situation in post-Soviet society

In the year 2001, one of the last Russian-wide great TV stations was swallowed up by a semi-state energy trust, or, in other words: with this step state control had been re-introduced over most of the TV programmes. Whereas western public voices warned of an erosion of the independent media, there were only a few activists and journalists in

Russia who maintain protest meetings after the very first indignation. NTV had been one of the most popular TV stations, but after its taming open protest was lame. Moreover, surveys show an impressive vote for more state control over mass media.

Inspecting these proceedings, there are certainly more aspects to consider than we are going to discuss here. But the construction of the public sphere in post-Soviet Russia<sup>1</sup> is without doubt one of the most important ones since its inconsistent surface is part of a decade-long developing political culture. The idea of the 'public' in post-Soviet countries was shaped by the experiences of Soviet society since the Second World War and especially the emergence of a public-private sphere with rather fuzzy boundaries. Many aspects of contemporary post-Soviet society are comprehensible only if we take into account this relationship between public, private and political worlds. We begin with an example of misunderstanding that is possible if we apply western concepts of the public directly to post-Soviet society and then go on to discuss the nature of the construction of what is 'public' and how it developed.

The example concerns the same phenomenon of smooth pro-state expression of opinion as a layer over diverse semi-public viewpoints, as we referred to above. It is a side-effect of our research located at the 'Centre for Independent Social Research' (CISR) in St. Petersburg which provided us with a new insight in sociology of knowledge. Investigating the actual situation in transforming Russian society we use qualitative methods, especially based on biographical or narrative interviews which supply us with more adequate information than any survey can do. Nevertheless, the results of such interviews are very often determined by the assumptions underlying the manual used, especially if the manual invites open-ended answers. The interpretation of the interviews can easily degenerate into a *circulus vitiosus*. This can also be caused by messy interviewing. However, even methodologically rigorous analysis of interviews show that interviewees often tend to pitch their answers toward the interviewer's expectations. There is another peculiarity of interviewing in post-Soviet Russia: interviewees tend not to behave as 'carriers' of narratives that they would repeat in confidential conversations with friends. In short, we often meet the problem that our interviewees give detailed statements on the society in general, and on the specific life conditions of people like themselves. They provide us with textbook phrases, but without any hint at their personal situation.

1. Our empirical examples refer to contemporary Russia. Nevertheless, we present a theoretical approach that might also apply to other post-Soviet societies, and give an idea how to compare diverse concepts of the 'public'. In this respect we would like to focus attention to a recently published volume on this topic (Rittersporn *et al.* 2003) with an earlier German version of this article.

As an illustration of the problem, a research project on Soviet immigrants in Berlin serves. Conducting our interviews we suddenly had to notice that the interview communication turned into an impasse. In short, our interlocutors told us the more or less same story which was, additionally, a common newspapers' version. Being alarmed by this unsatisfying communication we, firstly, replaced the German interviewer by a Russian one who at that time had been living for many years in Germany. The interview situation improved, although the results remained highly standardized. Then our Russian co-leader of the project met an interviewee with whom he was acquainted. He was warmly welcomed, and then surprised by the information that the Russian immigrant only two weeks ago had already given another interview. To his question on the topic of this last interview our new interviewer got the – easing – answer: 'Never mind. We told the story as it ought to be' (. . . 'tak, kak nado').

Of course, also German interviewees variously react on different interviewers, for example would they very carefully weigh their words being confronted with an official of the Labour Exchange or the police. But would the reaction be so cautious in a face-to-face situation with a sociologist who guarantees the anonymity of the interviewee?

The social relation between an interviewer and his or her interlocutor is not the same regarding German (or 'western') actors and regarding Russians or Russian-speaking persons being socialized in the Soviet Union. In the case outlined, the interviewees showed their solidarity with our Russian project leader because he was a stranger in Germany like they were. The Russian immigrants took him less as a sociologist than as one of theirs (one of their like), whereas the other interviewers had been – in a typically 'Soviet' manner – perceived as representatives of an official communication sphere with another discourse.

Now, the finding is nothing but new that we are obliged to interpret interviewees' remarks in numerous cycles of context when doing research with qualitative methods. But by examining the post-Soviet daily life we permanently had (and have) to ask for the stage of process and its adequate context. Accepting that the use of a distinct discourse is not at all a question of style but of power, we should consequently find out who takes part in a given communicative situation. This is necessary, not because we invited the wrong person as an interviewee, but because this person is likely to confuse us by switching between several social roles, and different socio-spatial links of his/her communication behaviour.

In the following we would like to present some theoretical ideas concerning this problem of interviewing. Our experience results from innumerable interviews conducted on different topics, and it has to be emphasized that the example we referred to was outstandingly clear but not a singular case. It points to the fact that it was not the topic itself that

had any disturbing effect, but the 'place of communication' where the interview partners would find themselves.

The situation of interview conducting is a communicative situation, and any interpretation of communicative acts (or interactions) requires sufficient context knowledge. Keeping this in mind, experiences with interviewing in the post-Soviet environment point to the following conclusion. As a rule, interviewees seem either to be unwilling to provide information about their private opinions or they do not expect the interviewer to understand them. In the first case, their response would have the character of standardized, predictable answers, in the second case, the responses would have an 'instructive' character, i.e., interviewees would be attempting to 'teach' the interviewer. Thus, there exists a high communicative barrier that is almost impossible to be broken through by scientists or any other person who does not belong to the circle of the interviewee's friends and acquaintances.

The solution is, that every Soviet citizen had two totally different biographies at hand, each of which could be presented in several versions. They differed from each other in terms of the facts selected, of interpretation and the character of presentation, as well as the sphere of public the person ought to speak in. In order to understand this hypothesis, we would like to discuss the different communicative levels or spaces that had (and have) great impact on persons socialized in Soviet society.

In debating concepts of 'public spheres in Soviet-type societies', one has to deal with the theoretical approaches of related disciplines as well as media-shaped mental images and discourses. Most of these perceive the post-Soviet 'public' as 'deficient'. Two perspectives on this topic are common.

In the first perspective, the 'Soviet public sphere' is contrasted to the type of public that evolved historically in western European bourgeois societies. Whether the latter is always defined as a *political* public in the narrow meaning or not does not matter: if 'the public' is viewed as a medium of democratic control (*Herrschaftskontrolle*), as it is at least implicitly in most cases, any other concept of the 'public' are of a complementary, not competing character. In other words, all current concepts of the 'public' refer to an appreciation of it as *political public* – as the freedoms of assembly and of the press, as a method of societal self-enlightenment, and as a particular form for critical discourse (Neidhardt 1994).

The second perspective is characterized by critical judgements about the societal 'segments' of post-socialist societies in general, and, as detailed below, in post-Soviet Russia in particular. *Glasnost*', which involved the top-down transformation of society, brought about a plurality of opinions and parties. In the beginning, this process seemed to have fostered the kind of pluralism that was supportive for democracy.

Over time, however, it led to a chaotic state of intransparency, de-politization, and resignation.

The article continues below with an overview of the current state of 'public opinion' in Russian society, which we take as an indicator of the extent to which the preconditions of a political public are already in place. Outstanding events, such like the recent re-introduction of state control over the programming decisions of the TV station, NTV, have caused sensations, albeit mostly in the west. A sociological interpretation of such events, however, is lacking. A sociological interpretation requires an analysis of the 'public sphere' in Soviet society. The lingering effects of the Soviet period which block a 'blue print' transformation and make particular paths of development more likely, may be traced directly to the way in which spaces of communication were allocated in Soviet society. In the main chapter of this article, we turn our attention to diverse approaches for explaining the 'Soviet public' that in recent years have been debated frequently among Russian sociologists. In the concluding chapter we re-examine Russian media policy in light of the way in which the post-Soviet public sphere emerged.

## 2 Facing the early end of *Glasnost*?

The fact that an autonomous public sphere could not emerge in the Soviet Union is commonly accepted and need not be dealt with in detail. More important is that the absence of this kind of public sphere constitutes a precarious legacy for the current stage of post-Soviet consolidation. In theories of participative and liberal democracy, the 'public sphere' is regarded as a mediating level between the state and private interests and, consequently, as a major precondition for civil society. In post-communist studies, there is a wide consensus that civil society in Russia is rather underdeveloped, whereby the main causes are widely seen in the insufficient law-enforcement capability of a weak state and citizens' reluctance to participate in voluntary associations (Wagener 2001).

There is, however, no common concept of *the* 'civil society'. The significance of public spaces, in particular, is treated differently in different concepts (Weintraub and Kumar 1997). Nonetheless, the development of a possibly independent public seems to be of central importance for the way in which diverse actors can move and interact in the social space of the contemporary post-Soviet society. One indicator of the current condition of the political public in Russian society relates to freedom of the press and freedom of opinion. The controversies regarding the 'transfer' of formerly independent NTV into the media branch of the semi-state energy trust *Gasprom* in early 2001, illustrate this point.

As indicated by waning participation rates in protest activities against the 're-nationalization' of NTV and as confirmed by public opinion surveys, citizens' concern tailed off as the process of regaining state control over NTV proceeded. In March 2001, 55 per cent of the population supported the idea of strengthening control over the media by president Putin (VCIOM survey, 3–19 March 2001). At the end of April, people were asked whether the NTV incident indicated a threat to the freedom of press. Almost half of the interviewees said that this was probably not the case. About one-quarter was uncertain.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, 32 per cent of interviewees reported that they saw 'some degree of danger' for the freedom of press. According to another survey, also conducted in April 2001, more than 50 per cent of interviewees pled for media plurality, while 36 per cent favoured the position that the media should propagate only 'correct opinions', i.e., state-controlled or censored information (VCIOM survey, 20–3 April 2001).

What can we learn from such surveys? They deliver a useful depiction of a social climate marked by a lack of information, de-politicization and a cynical retreat<sup>3</sup> from political life. The one conclusion in particular that the survey data do not allow is that the population as a whole is indifferent toward state encroachments on the independent media. Although freedom of press and freedom of speech are not perceived by everyone as public goods worthy of special protection, a significant part of the population values these principles.<sup>4</sup>

Without a doubt, the contemporary Russian media landscape is plural. There are three nation-wide TV stations, almost 100 local TV as well as radio channels, and a vast number of (mostly local or regional) newspapers and magazines. However, those print media outlets which can still be regarded as 'independent', *Novye Izvestiya* and *Obshaya Gazeta*, are hardly available outside of Moscow. They primarily serve the interests of a small circle of well-informed people, and are owned by political entrepreneurs, if not by the state. These are grounds to assume that the political effectiveness of the 'fourth power' of the independent media is as weak as its financial basis.

2. Response in detail: 'yes, sure' – 12%; 'probably' – 22%; 'probably not' – 29%; 'certainly not' – 14%; 'I don't know' – 23% (VCIOM survey, 20–3 April 2001).

3. Soon after the take-over of NTV, innumerable jokes circulated which present the acting persons – politicians, lawyers, domestic as well as foreign businessmen – as cynical and corrupt.

4. This finding is backed by another survey revealing that merely 12 per cent of interviewees plead for strengthening democratic institutions and the freedom of speech. This was the lowest rank among other items such like economic growth, strengthening the defence forces, saving the super power status, and building a competitive market society (see: RFE/RL 98/ 2001).

Thus, the take-over of NTV must be viewed as a significant incident indeed. There is good reason to believe that the room for critical media activities, which had become normal in recent years, will narrow in the near future. On the other hand, it would be rather misleading to talk about a new, Russian *Gleichschaltung* (i.e., the subordination of all media activities to the will of state actors). Despite all the rumors about the 'hostile take-over' in the west, the interconnections between *Gasprom's* media division and the state are anything but clear. Independence of mass media in the western meaning is certainly not guaranteed in contemporary Russia, and state control is broken merely through commercial interests. Nonetheless, some of Russia's most outstanding journalists are still continuing their work, for both private and state-owned companies.

Whether self-censorship and voluntary compliance will prevail or not seems – for the time being – to be a rather open question. Further development will depend in large measure on the society's understanding of the 'public' and on the exact position it takes between the state and the private sphere. Will the public sphere prove itself capable of uniting and protecting those citizens able and willing to confront the state with their own opinions, or will the individuals disperse into numerous small self-referential discourses, isolated from each other? The real question is not only whether there are brave individuals who are able to resist the hidden pressure of censorship, as called for by the journalist Barbara Schweizerhof (2001). A matter of no less importance is the degree to which their engagement will be perceived and appreciated by those to whom it is addressed. Individual heroism is the approach of dissidents. The concept of *political public* is different. It relates to the emergence, articulation, perception and diffusion of political – i.e., independent, controversial and communicable – opinions within society.

In order to approach the above-discussed problems, we will explain our understanding of the 'public' or rather, of 'public spheres' in Soviet society in the next chapter.

### **3 A 'public' in the Soviet Union? Considerations on a sociological concept**

The standard distinction between the public and the private realm, without any doubt, has its roots in the historical development of western societies and a corresponding tradition of sociological and philosophical thought about society. In this article we cannot carry out a detailed discussion of 'western' approaches to the topic which are highly diverse. For our purpose we would emphasize some aspects being 'essentials' for all relevant theories of the 'public': they stress the principle of general



access (to meetings and localities), the principle of transparency concerning matters of general, i.e., 'public' interest, and the totality of an 'audience' consisting of people who meet and feel addressed to in a public discourse (see: Honneth 1992; Taylor 1993).

The application of this model to state-socialist societies is as problematic as it is the case with many other concepts developed in the framework of western social and political science. Contemporary Russian scholars even reject it as tool for describing social reality in Russia (Kharkhordin 1997). Nonetheless, a debate started to emerge in recent years that deals with the relationship between the public and the private in Soviet society, understood as a relationship between distinctive spheres of communication.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, we refer to this debate and suggest some ideas that might go beyond its current limits. We focus our considerations on the post-Stalinist period, the time when social life had started to recover somewhat from war, terror and the harshest machinations of repression. We will further look into the periods of *perestrojka* and post-Soviet transformation, both of which have been deeply marked by the conditions of communication typical of the Soviet era.

A starting point for the distinction between different spheres of communication can be derived from experience with narrative or biographical interviews as we already gave an impression on in the beginning of this article. Thus, we have to refer to some specific modes of socialization.

#### 4 A concept of 'public' in Russian sociology

Despite of all disagreements, a broad consensus exists that the Soviet 'public sphere' has definitely *not* been akin to a forum of private citizens assembling as an audience outside (or against) the state, as it implies the model of Jürgen Habermas (1981, 1990). Whether such a model has been evolving in Western societies and could be maintained over time and in an unchallenged manner, is not the issue of this article. There is no shortage of scepticism in this respect (for example: Sennett 1993).

The crucial point for us is that such a concept of 'public' would – *idealiter* as well as *realiter* – directly contradict the political construction of the Soviet society. No doubt, in the post-Stalinist era, the party-state proved less and less able to maintain its claim of controlling the private

5. In the meantime, the topic has been differentiated into diverse subjects – such like everyday life, socio-spatial dimensions of the public and the private, public opinion, and so on. It is therefore impossible to provide a comprehensive bibliography. Just to get an impression see: Shlapentokh 1989; Boym 1994; Vite 1996; Zdravomyslova 1996; Kharkhordin 1997; Voronkov and Chikadze 1997; Voronkov 2000; Gerasimova 2003).



and exerting influence on the intimate realms of citizens' lives. It was, last but not least, the citizens themselves who increasingly undermined this claim in an astonishingly creative manner. Nonetheless, the distinction between public and private spheres was of a different nature than that we know from the West. This is, first of all, due to the fact that the distinction between private and public spheres was related to social spaces ruled by different concepts of law. The public, or, rather, the 'official' sphere was the realm of society which was ruled by formal law and repression through state authorities. All other social realms were regulated by norms of everyday life which, to a certain degree, can be understood as norms of an informal customary law. Also in Western societies, social spaces can be distinguished according to the different kinds of rules and laws by which they are governed. However, in Western societies, informal customary law is a traditional source of law existing side-by-side with the formal law-making process; customary law does not expand at the expense of formal law-making. Rather customary law has been confined by the latter, at least historically. The opposite was the case in the Soviet Union, where the social spheres governed by norms of everyday life expanded at the expense of the realms where formal law prevailed.

At the same time, informal and formal spheres were completely mutually exclusive. What was allowed to be expressed in the one sphere was – almost automatically – perceived as non-valid in the other one. This phenomenon was often described as a doubling of standards of communication and counts for a reason of the 'social schizophrenia' of the *homo sovieticus*. The official sphere, with its formal judicial norms, became more and more clearly demarcated from the world of everyday life (*Lebenswelt*), with its own ideas of decency, compromise and justice. As these spheres and their distinctive legal norms became separated, informal legal norms became increasingly dominant in daily life. This undermined the legitimacy of dominion of law. In this way, society increasingly estranged itself from the state or 'official' sphere. The Soviet citizens lived their lives by either avoiding contact with the official sphere or interacting with it in a routinized and standardized manner.

An even more interesting phenomenon is that not everything that happened outside the official-public sphere was 'private'. Initially (in the early Soviet era), the private realm was rather undeveloped and hardly perceived as worthy of protection. This became manifest in the ideology of collective life or in facilities such as the famous '*kommunalka*' (a form of coercive cohabitation that forced residents to live under unwritten 'laws of visibility' and subjected them to permanent social control). This is one reason why in (post-)Soviet society, the 'social' – as the socialized realm adjacent to the private sphere – elicits mainly negative associations (Gerasimova 2003).

The socialized space that had to evolve out of the private realm without being fully emancipated must be understood as a specifically Soviet space of communication in *status nascendi*. It subsequently became a sphere sharply separated from the official one. Within this space, which might be called the ‘private–public realm’, almost everything could be put on the agenda because it became less and less subject to official control. This realm, which has been labelled as the so-called ‘second public’, was and is regulated by the informal norms of everyday life. Its typical location in space was the ‘kitchen of the intelligencia’.

During the Stalinist era, when state control was almost unlimited, there was no possibility for a public sphere to evolve outside the official one. This circumstance changed when – in the aftermath of the Great Leader’s death – state control started to weaken. Out of the nucleus described above, numerous socialized spaces started to emerge that increasingly assumed ‘public’ features. Of course, the situation was far away from what we call the ‘freedom of association’ – the essential precondition of a ‘civil public’ in the western meaning. Nonetheless, the state was increasingly less able to control all social milieus or even to prohibit certain undesired groupings of citizens. This experience of socialization had, in turn, an impact on the perception of the private sphere. The realm of those matters that people did not want to lay open to state authorities or even to their neighbours became increasingly stable. In this way, the sphere of the private incrementally expanded although it remained only weakly protected against sudden attacks or inspections by the state until the late 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1 illustrates how the configuration of spaces of communication changed during (Soviet) times. Thus, during the three post-Stalinist decades, a ‘second’ public sphere developed that was clearly divergent from the first public sphere or ‘official–public’ and that can be characterized as the public sphere of ‘real life’. This development was fostered through crucial changes in everyday life. In the early 1950s, the government started to implement an extensive housing programme. For many people, especially those living in the urban areas, modern housing provided for the first time the physical space required for creating a private sphere in the narrow meaning, for a location reserved for their families and closed to neighbours and other uninvited visitors. This new

6. Oleg Kharkhordin (1997) distinguishes between two ‘private’ spheres: the ‘personal’ sphere (*lichnaya zhizn*) which was never completely protected against encroachments of the authorities, and the ‘sphere of intimacy’ (*chastnaya zhizn*) which was totally denied in the early Soviet times. Later on, this sphere somehow survived albeit it remained firmly oppressed. One could say, this is the sphere of ‘discourse-free darkness’. Until now, many topics, in particular those related to sexuality, are still taboo. Beyond the realm of ‘dirty language’ and clinical terminology, there is even no vocabulary available for communicating such topics in an appropriate manner.

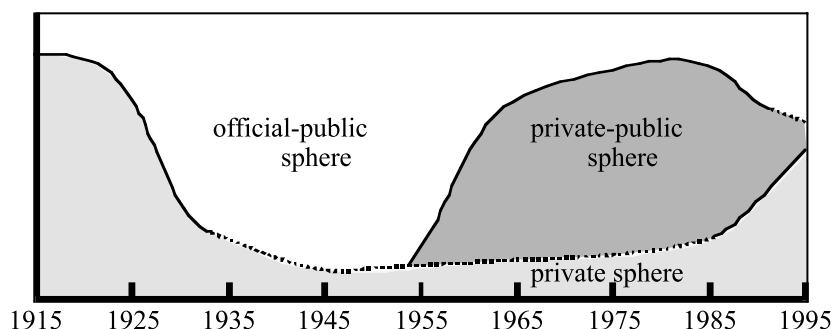


Figure 1. The private-public sphere in Soviet society<sup>7</sup>

possibility of withdrawing into the private, in turn, promoted a cautious but self-determined opening. People started to include friends or other familiar persons into the process of developing and expressing ideas and opinions of a not merely personal but political nature, i.e., opinions that neither resembled official views nor remained within the borders of private talks. Thus, it was, to a significant degree, namely the closed nature of the individual dwellings that enabled the emergence of a private-public sphere which, in turn, can be understood as a space between the official and the purely private realms.

The 'second' public that we have in mind should not be confused with the so-called 'second society' in the literature on dissidence in Eastern Europe. In contrast to the 'second society', the 'private-public' sphere did not have the character of an exclusive field of communication within a particular social milieu. During the course of their lives, all Soviet citizens learned to carefully distinguish between those matters they could discuss with relatives and friends, those they could not discuss at all, and what was acceptable in the official realm. As they did not have any illusions regarding the demarcation lines between these distinctive spaces of communication, they consequently did not confuse the rules regulating them. Depending on the sphere in which one was present in a given moment in time, he/she had to adapt his/her communication behaviour and to assume the role appropriate to the given situation.

The selection of the appropriate roles kept the Soviet citizens occupied for a whole lifetime. It resulted in the above-mentioned 'social schizophrenia' that forced them to permanently choose a variant out of a set of

7. The distinction relates rather to periods than to precise points in time. The penetration of privacy through the official sphere began in the late 1920s, along with the take off of the so-called 'cultural campaigns' and the ideologization of 'public', i.e., socialized housing units which lacked any personal niches (*doma obshestvennogo byta*). The emergence of the private-public sphere coincides with Stalin's death and the subsequent period of Thaw.

standardized modes of behaviour, depending on how they perceived the given social situation. Thereby they had always to be aware of the demarcation lines, as any violation of the rules of the game would likely provoke a harsh response. If one, for example, discussed an everyday life issue within the official–public realm before this issue was officially put on the agenda by the ‘responsible’ authorities, the response was immediate repression.<sup>8</sup>

## 5 The borders of the private–public sphere

In the late Soviet era, Soviet citizens kept themselves distanced from the state. The state continued to claim exclusive and comprehensive responsibility for everything and everyone, but it was less and less able to meet even the most basic needs. This does not mean that citizens intended to retreat or refuse state-provided favours or goods. As a rule, Soviet citizens – in particular those who held a certain position within the *nomenklatura* – never refused to accept the blessings of the state. This phenomenon has often been characterized as the people’s dependency on a paternalistic state.

The citizens’ retreat from the state could rather be described as a lack of, but as an obstructed communication. Both state and citizens defined the channels of mutual communication and interaction in their own way and instrumentalized them for their own particular goals which essentially differ from the state–citizen relationship in western societies. Soviet citizens tolerated a large measure of ideological ‘tam-tam’ in order to better cope with everyday affairs. At the same time, the state subjected them to a large number of orders, taboos, and regulations which it was ever less able to control. Additionally, the state insisted on the illusion of an ‘ideal people’ and preferred to ignore the mass of minor incidents of disobedience that resulted from the public’s permanent frustration. Public debates in which both sides would openly articulate their own perceptions of the issues at hand could hardly occur. The idea of a platform on which citizens could come together in order to pronounce their common interests was not included in this arrangement. In other words, communication in the Habermas’ sense – as an effort of understanding among equally positioned partners for the purpose of approaching ‘the truth’ – did not take place.

However, this does not mean that in the late Soviet era people had to live their lives in niches closed up from the outside world or in secluded subcultural milieus. Such milieus existed, although according to the

8. Even nowadays, it is still impossible to raise questions regarding the shadow economy – a major income source for many interviewees – within a sociological interview. Sure, as a rule, people are not scared at all to talk about their extra-legal activities, but they do it within the private–public sphere.

official ideology they did not. But they were mostly confined to large urban areas,<sup>9</sup> and the ordinary citizen, who had no access to or was even suspicious of these subcultural 'scenes', preferred to enjoy the freedoms of everyday life instead – far away from political matters and goals.

As Leonid Ionin convincingly argues, the Soviet state did not need to create 'substitute worlds' in order to satisfy its citizens' everyday desires – given that the availability of basic goods was more or less guaranteed. As long as the citizens behaved as loyal *Soviet* citizens (or as pre-capitalist consumers of the goods and services provided by the Soviet economy) and not as political actors using other platforms of interest articulation than the official ones offered by the state, they did not have to fear any repression. This kind of mutual ignorance was at least one factor among others by which Soviet society eventually lost its integrating power. However, this discussion lies outside the realm of this article. The point we want to stress here is the following. 'Although, according to standard measures, life in the Soviet Union was not free, subjectively it could be perceived to be free', as Ionin (1995) points out. Due to exactly this kind of silent collaboration between citizen and paternalistic state, a process of de-politicization increasingly undermines each (potential) public sphere – up to the point of destruction, as well in (post-)Soviet as in western societies. There is, however, one difference: in (post-)Soviet society, de-politicization is an aspect of liberalization or, in other words, of the citizens' desire to sweep aside the state's all-encompassing claim of responsibility.

The increasing dominance of the customary law in Soviet everyday life provided a serious challenge to the state and the legitimacy of its claims. Therefore, matters of everyday life – as a realm outside state control – were not allowed to become issues of public debate. This sphere of life became more and more taboo subject in the official discourse. In the official public discourse, the life of the Soviet citizen ('*Sovietskij obraz zhizni*' – 'Soviet way of life') resembled a utopian ideal which was stubbornly defended although it did not have anything to do with everyday experience. Thus, communication between the world of everyday life and other worlds of social experience always remained difficult. Over time, however, people developed certain routines of dealing with the official sphere. One of these highly sophisticated 'techniques' was the culture of joking. The culture of joking can be understood as an attempt to let the idealized official world systematically – although fictitiously – collide with everyday experience, thereby ridiculing the idealized world. This was the

9. Such milieus or scenes were by far not appreciated; they were merely tolerated. Due to their informal character, they have not been considered in local historiographics. For an interesting study on the alternative art scene, the 'tusovka' around the 'Café Saigon' in Leningrad see Zdravomyslova (1996).

only avenue of revenge of the powerless (Oswald 1995). The culture of joking is a good example of how the fragmentation of the private public (the realm in which the jokes circulated) could be overcome on a higher, although officially ignored level. The degree of circulation of critical jokes was hardly lower than that of the news of official press agencies.

Another routine for exercising informal exchange between the distinctive spheres was the practise of *'blat'* – a mode of transfer for the purpose of guaranteeing everyday survival that evolved in the context of centrally planned economy (and was remarkably adapted to post-Soviet conditions). *Blat* is not simply bribery or corruption, although it can be taken as a premature form of the latter. As a rule, it is not money (or direct equivalents) that is invested, but personal connections – manifold links that do not exceed the usual scope of everyday life but are targeted at the 'points of diffusion' into the official sphere. According to Alena Ledeneva, the practise of *blat* involved using personal links in order to get access to public resources: By avoiding formal procedures and 're-directing' officially institutionalized channels of interaction, public goods and resources are 'transferred' into private hands (Ledeneva 1997a,b; Oswald 2002).

In sum, in post-Stalinist Soviet society there existed a sphere that transcended the realm of personal or private life and reached out into an expanded socialized space of communication. Whereas its borderline to the private realm was rather diffuse, this private–public sphere was sharply separated from the official–public realm, i.e., the state and its 'organs'. Soviet citizens, as far as they were not state officials themselves, strictly rejected the idea as highly unrealistic that free communication with or within the state without any threat of repression would be possible. Moreover, what was said on officially organized standard occasions was regarded as 'empty' speech, even if 'representatives of the working people' participated.<sup>10</sup> General distrust towards the authorities was reproduced with every encroachment of the state apparatus, especially if the latter penetrated the personal realm, relying on denunciation and spying.<sup>11</sup>

10. Such 'folkloristic' talk reached an audience as large as that reached by the official media. A well known example is the ballad from Aleksandr Galich entitled 'About Klim Petrovich' Speech During the Conference for the Defence of Peace'. A good family man is taken one Sunday to a party conference, where they expect him to deliver a pre-written speech. With fiery gestures he defends freedom as a 'good wife and mother'. When he finally realises that he received the wrong speech, he stops talking, but the audience applauds respectfully. Afterwards as everyone enjoys refreshments, Mr. Petrovich receives congratulations for his inspiring words (see: Galich 1990: 118).

11. Another ballad from Aleksandr Galich ('The red triangle') is about such situations. A man is accused by his neighbour of cheating his wife with a relative from the countryside. The local party committee calls for self-accusation – among other burning problems: 'The first point of the agenda was freedom in Africa! Then, under agenda item 'miscellaneous', they turned to me' (see: Galich 1990: 116).

Whereas the distinctive 'spheres' were separated from each other, they should not be conceived of in an essentialist manner. The structure of social spaces differs from that of organizations. The latter has a clear-cut border between an internal realm and the environment; the peripheral realms of social spaces are always marked by zones of diffusion. Therefore, theoretical models that suggest clear-cut borderlines, especially dichotomous space models ascribing every social phenomenon either to a public or to a private sphere seem to be of little use for understanding social communication in Soviet society.

Jeff Weintraub describes the problematic aspects of dichotomous models although he maintains that they are sufficient for analysing western societies.<sup>12</sup> However, we think that a three-level model is more appropriate. Hannah Arendt (1958) adopted such an approach by introducing a 'social sphere' between the public and the private ones.<sup>13</sup> Jürgen Habermas also tends to a three-level model when he describes the public as an intermediary level between state authority and private interests (Habermas 1990).

In western civil society, the person who is joining an audience with others in order to enter negotiations with the state, stepped out of her/his privacy.<sup>14</sup> The 'public interest', however, does not overlap perfectly with the interests of the state. Therefore, in democratic theories the concept of the 'fourth power' (mass media, public opinion) is *idealiter* seen as opposed to the other three (legislative, executive, and juridical) powers of the state.

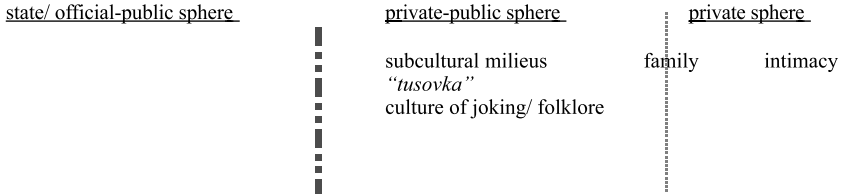
In feminist as well as marxist perspectives on bourgeois society, the peripheral zones of the distinctive spheres (the private, the public, the state) are of special importance because they are viewed as the field of political action targeted at societal change. Despite the political motivations of these views, the typical structure of the space of communication in western societies must be imagined as a kind of continuum, a space where the peripheral zones of the distinctive spheres overlap each other.

12. Jeff Weintraub convincingly describes the limits of the analytical power of the 'Grand Dichotomies'. Different theories come to contrary conclusions with regard to the relative weight of the public and the private. Some theories, for instance, ascribe market economy to the private sphere (mainstream economics), others to the public sphere (marxist feminism). See: Weintraub 1997.

13. Weintraub correctly refers to the (formal) similarity of Arendt's model to Hegel's triad of family, bourgeois society, and state.

14. The assumption that private life must be defined as non-political because it cannot be politicized, seems highly problematic in terms of both theory and everyday life (see: Elshtain 1981). Without going into details, we want to stress that in the Soviet configuration of spaces of communication, the ascription of the private as a particular sphere strictly separated from the others to 'wife and family' does not hold true (see: Schmitt 1997). Typically, the family is located at the point of intersection between the private-public and the private spheres, as will be illustrated in Figure 2.





**Figure 2.** Borders of the private–public sphere in late Soviet society

Thus, the question is: What is the main difference between western and Soviet societies in terms of social communication? For late Soviet society, the structure of the space of communication can also be described as a continuum. But, compared to modern western societies, the constitution of the borders between the distinctive spheres must be characterized differently (see Figure 2).

Whereas in western society the private sphere is strictly separated from the public and protected by law, in late Soviet society the borderline between the private and the private public was rather diffuse and informal, not the least due to the absence of any proper legal idea and regulation. Nevertheless, there existed a clear-cut border between the private public and the state. The Soviet citizen entered the official public only on command, for ritualized political occasions or administrative matters. In contrast to the Soviet case, in western societies the border between the state and the public is more permable, with passageways in both directions.

Thus, according to the logic of this – somewhat simplified – model, the structure of the Soviet space of communication was rather the opposite of the western one. The border between the private and the public is strict and clear in western societies but not so in the Soviet case. The borderline between the public and the state is diffuse and permeable from both sides, while in the Soviet case the passageways were either defined unilaterally by the state (official political occasions), or were not officially recognized, i.e., used by ignoring formal procedures (*blat*).

**6 Prospects for the future**

At the outset of this article, we raised the question of whether the state of the freedom of press and the freedom of speech in Russia can be used as indicators for the degree to which a political public has emerged. Thus, we can return to this question as follows. As long as the state is able to maintain a claim of control over citizens, and – *vice versa* – citizens are unable to gain or maintain negative freedoms from state power,

reciprocity (an essential precondition for communication) will not exist. 'Real communication' between state and citizens would require institutions which protect the citizen against both arbitrary encroachments by state authorities and the state's arbitrary retreat from its basic responsibilities. As long as such institutions (an appropriate legal order, independent administrative courts and professional and interest organizations) remain weak, citizens can organize their interests only to a limited degree and in spaces that are far away from the points of political decision-making.

The current situation seems to resemble the former one (in the *glasnost*' era) as the post-Soviet citizen again has to make a choice among irreconcilable options. On the one hand, the state ('the authorities') is subject to general distrust. On the other hand, it is only the state who can deliver the structural preconditions required for modern science, large research centres, general education, and a broadcasting network able to cover this giant territory. Science and education were already highly esteemed in the Soviet era. During the post-Soviet years, new ideas have been added to the catalogue of commonly valued public goods, such as the freedom of travel, general access to information, in short, various 'freedoms' which require not only constitutional guarantees but have to be protected by an interested and politically acting public.

Thus, the aforementioned survey results can be interpreted in the following way. The existence of a free public (freedom of speech and freedom of the press) is commonly desired, but citizens are hardly aware that they themselves have to organize such a public. As long as citizens regard the state as the only protector of freedom but at the same time as a power that tends to limit freedom and not subject to legal regulation, they will hardly perceive 'pluralism' as more than a stage act.

This does not mean that in post-Soviet Russia, all non-private (or possibly 're-privatized') communication would be subject to state control. Without a doubt, today there are non-state actors in all societal and political realms. The scope of their activities is, however, limited and the possibilities of institutionalized and non-confrontative interaction between them and the state are still underdeveloped. During the reform period of the late 1980s, the private-public sphere shrank significantly. The official public sphere became more and more accessible to open public debates, and the private sphere acquired a new quality due to the sudden withdrawal of the state. However, after the end of *perestrojka*, in particular during the late 1990s, the private-public sphere began to expand again. The fact that the space for public communication is undergoing a new shrinking process becomes manifest in the de-politicization of the population, in low percentages of voter turnout, in popular attitudes increasingly marked by indifference regarding major political events.

In post-Soviet Russia, de-politicization as well as abstention from voting have other causes than in western societies. As mentioned above, popular attitudes towards the state are highly ambivalent. On the one hand, citizens confront the state with all-encompassing expectations and demands. At the same time, they distrust the state and refuse to engage in public affairs as they continue to understand the latter not as collective goods but as matters of state responsibility. As a result, the popular perception of the state tends to strictly distinguish between an outstanding 'good' head of the state on the one hand, and a bad administration made up of 'lazy and corrupt bureaucrats' on the other. As Martina Ritter points out, according to the general attitudes of the post-Soviet population or 'electorate', people expect pure moral principles to be the norm in politics, but, at the same time, they commonly regard politics as 'dirty' in practice (Ritter 2000: 81). Such a paradoxical expectation – to hope for moral purity while at the same time being convinced that this is doomed to failure right from the outset – can be reconciled only by addressing the diverging perceptions at different targets. Here, the shining figure of a superhuman 'great leader' who came to 'save' Russia. There, the everyday dirt of politics.

There is no shortage of indications that, with the beginning of the Putin era, a new wave of admiration for heroes has been evoked that undermines the idea of the public as a political voice or as a tool for civil engagement in politics. Aside from the first analytical comments (for example: Stölting 2001), several survey results seem to back the assumption that things are moving in such a direction. While the percentage of citizens who are discontented with the government's policies and its effects on their life is very high (RFE/RL 106/ 2001), according to one analysis conducted by the journal *Kommersant*, for many Russians Vladimir Putin is not merely their president, but also their 'saviour' (RFE/RL 95/ 2001).

However, it is difficult to bargain in practical matters with a saviour. For dealing with the state administration, the old 'Soviet' practices of clientelistic interaction would still be available. If this really happens, Nancy Ries' somewhat melancholic conclusion would appear to be true: the liberation of speech due to the process of *perestrojka* has been followed first by a new ritualization of official public debates, and then by a depoliticized communication of everyday matters within fragmented discourses (Ries 1997: 161). Apparently, the passageways that for some years enabled mutual communication between the official public and the private-public spheres are closing up again.

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