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HOUSING, NETWORKS AND MONEY: A STUDY OF WORKERS IN ST. PETERSBURG

ABSTRACT

This article examines housing in the Soviet and post-Soviet era drawing from interview material with fifty factory workers in St. Petersburg studied in 2000. While the Soviet era is often characterised by lack of choice, I argue that people were in fact able to influence their housing much more than is usually considered, although the choices available were certainly limited and action was tactical rather than strategic by nature (to borrow Michel de Certeau's concepts). I argue that money was far more important than is usually acknowledged, and many respondents emphasised that they earned decent money and were able to purchase housing in the Soviet era. Networks played a role too, for instance in attempts to influence the authorities in charge of housing or to manipulate the rules of allocation. I also show that various steps in the Soviet family's life course (e.g. marrying or having a child) were important in order to obtain housing. The post-Soviet era, in contrast, is characterised by lack of money and few opportunities to improve housing. For many respondents, then, it is the Soviet era that looks as an era that made action possible, whereas the opportunities to act have now been severely reduced. This, and not just pure nostalgia, explains why most respondents long for the Soviet times.

INTRODUCTION

When the Soviet Union collapsed, housing became the first social policy area scheduled for comprehensive reform (Cook, 2002: 110).¹ The privatization of the housing sector began in 1991 when the housing stock that had

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1. Many thanks to Risto Alapuro, Laura Assmuth, Anna-Maija Castrén, Markku Lonkila, Thomas Maloutas, Rosa Vihavainen and the participants to the Urban Sociology stream at the 7th ESA conference in Torun, September 9-12 2005, for valuable comments on a previous version of this article.

formerly belonged to the state was transferred to the municipalities, and individual tenants obtained the right to privatize the flat they were occupying free of charge (UNECE, 2004). Judging by the numbers, the program was a success, since in 2004, approximately 70% of the housing stock had been privatized, making Russia truly a “homeowners’ society”. However, the intended deep structural transformation and reallocation of financial responsibility were not achieved (Cook, 2002: 111). There were two implicit assumptions behind the privatization, namely, that the new owners would be *both willing and able* to manage and maintain the property which they became owners of. It turned out, however, that neither was realistic. Since privatization was free, ownership does not correlate with income, and many new owners are financially unable to meet the rising costs (UNECE 2004). Many Russians also have difficulty in thinking of housing as a market commodity and continue to regard it as a right (Cook, 2002).

Thus, more than a decade after the transition in housing began, it has become clear that it did not proceed as envisioned by Western advisors, but followed a “path-dependent approach” in which “embedded institutions, inherited norms and expectations have shaped the transition process” (Cook, 2002: 121). It is obvious that current attitudes, expectations and worries about housing have not emerged out of the blue but have their roots in the Soviet past. For this reason I will examine how the past looks from the present vantage point as experienced by a group of ordinary Russians – factory workers in St. Petersburg studied in 2000.² My main interest are the parameters of action that were available to so-called ordinary people, and I will examine whether the Soviet past really was so *devoid of choice* as it is usually considered.³

2. My research is funded by the “Russia, Finland and globalization in a micro perspective” research project, funded by the Academy of Finland and directed by Dr Markku Lonkila.

3. In general, housing as part and parcel of everyday life has been a largely neglected topic, with some notable exceptions such as the magnificent studies of communal apartments by Boym (1996), Gerasimova (1998; 2002) and Utekhin (2001), Paadam’s (2003) interesting study of homeowners and their housing histories in Soviet-era and post-Soviet Estonia or Rotkirch’s (2000) fascinating study, which details sexuality but is also illuminating reading for anyone interested in housing. The bulk of research on housing centres on privatization and its problems (Alexandrova, Hamilton, Kuznetsova, 2004; Bater, 1994; Cook, 2002; Kosareva, Puzanov, Tikhomirova, 1996; Lee, Petrova, Shapiro, Struyk, 1998; Renaud, 1995a, 1995b; Struyk, 1996; Struyk, Puzanov, Kolodeznikova, 2001, UNECE 2004) and new forms of social, economic and/or residential stratification (Andrusz, Harloe, Szelenyi, 1996; Buckley, Gurenko 1997; Borén, 2003; Gdaniec, 2001; Kulu, 2003; Lee, Struyk, 1996; Lehmann, Ruble, 2002; Ruble, 1995; Ruoppila, 2004; Trushchenko, 1995).

Briefly, the Soviet housing system had four distinctive features. First, the housing market was limited, most housing being owned by the state. Second, allocation of housing took place through waiting lists that belonged either to municipalities or enterprises. The system was plagued by shortages and waiting times were long, but once the residents finally got apartments, their tenancy rights were very strong: occupancy was for life, flats could be passed on by inheritance and eviction was virtually impossible. Third, rents were stable and did not essentially rise after 1928. Fourth, the system was heavily subsidized by the state, which meant that rents were nominal and comprised only an insignificant portion of the family budget (Andrusz, 1990: 556; Cook, 2002: 110).

It would not then be difficult to see the system as one characterized by lack of choice and passivity: in the absence of alternatives, citizens could only sit and wait until allocated a flat, while after obtaining it, the flat was secure almost no matter what people did or failed to do. The Latvian writer Pauls Bankovskis recently claimed that *the possibility of making choices* is what fundamentally distinguishes the post-Soviet era from the Soviet one: if contemporary life enables, even compels choice-making, in the Soviet era there was nothing to choose from, which made choice-making unnecessary and life, in a sense, quite simple.⁴ While this may be taken as poetic licence, it is, nonetheless, interesting that to find similar ideas in the scholarly context of housing is not difficult. For instance, Lehmann and Ruble argue that “[w]hereas *once average citizens were largely at the whim* of the enterprise or municipal housing placement systems, *today they have genuine housing choices* with respect to location, cost, size, amenities and neighbourhood” (1997: 1086, emphasis added), or, in the provocative words of one Soviet housing expert, the discretionary housing system was one which engendered “infantilism, social apathy, inability to act and resignation” in the face of the debauchery of bureaucrats (Bessonova as cited in Andrusz, 1990: 562).

That Soviet citizens were clearly constrained in choosing and improving housing is an indisputable fact. This does not, however, mean that they had no choice at all or that action would have been impossible. Rather, the term *tactics* used by Michel de Certeau (1984) nicely captures the parameters of action in a given situation where although the rules are imposed from outside and cannot be changed or rejected, they can be bent and manipulated. In this article, after introducing the data used, I will first briefly sketch the Soviet

4. In *Helsingin Sanomat* 18th June 2005, p. C1.

housing system deriving from Göran Therborn's (1995) idea of social steering, and then explain how tactical action relates to this concept. I will then analyse the role of social networks as one important example of tactical action and then proceed to another means –money– and its role in housing in the Soviet era. I will then look at the respondents' present housing situation and consider social networks from another angle as threats to housing. Although most respondents were housed as they were before the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were also respondents who lived in worse housing conditions or smaller flats than before. This was not caused by economic difficulties *per se*, however, but changes in their family constitution. In the Conclusions, I will discuss the possibility of action in the Soviet era in contrast to contemporary Russia.

DATA

The respondents in this study are factory workers from the Kirov tractor factory in St. Petersburg, one of the most famous metalworking plants in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. The data were provided by 50 workers –38 men and 12 women– interviewed in one of the factory's six departments in winter 2000.⁵ Basic information for each respondent was obtained, including age, occupation, work duties, marital status, length of residence in St. Petersburg and their current flat, length of employment at the factory and information on the members of the respondent's household, his or her parents and children.

The respondents are typically middle-aged people in their forties and fifties. A majority were either married (31 respondents) or cohabitating (two respondents). Eight men and five women were divorced or widowed, and four men had never been married. Many respondents –all female workers and 28 male workers– had migrated to St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) from other parts of the former USSR in the Soviet era (on the impact of migration, see Lonkila and Salmi, 2005). In terms of housing, most respondents, 26 men and six women, lived in separate or self-contained flats (often, however, sharing it with parents or adult children – the term separate flat simply denotes that it is not a communal one). Seven male and four

5. The data were collected in the course of the "Civic culture and nationality in North-West Russia, Estonia and Finland" project, which was financed by the Academy of Finland and the Universities of Helsinki and Joensuu, and led by Ilkka Liikanen from the Karelian Institute at the University of Joensuu.

female respondents lived in communal flats (flats with shared kitchen and bathroom). Three men lived in a dormitory, and information about the housing of four respondents was not known or remained unclear. Male respondents more often lived in separate flats than did female respondents. Two things probably explain this: less men than women were divorced and ten men were originally born in Leningrad and had thus access to their parents' flats (only one native respondent lived in a communal flat).

The data consist of two parts. *Thematic interviews* were conducted in order to get a picture of the life course of the respondents depicting significant events (place of birth and childhood, school, army service, changes in residence and migration to Leningrad, work and marriage). Questions were then asked about various themes: housing and living conditions, work, social relationships, participation in social and political activities, leisure time, and worries and expectations for the future. Since housing was one question only and not the one that primarily interested the research group, the information available is not as detailed in some cases as would ideally be the case, and many interesting aspects of housing were not covered. For instance, no information exists about the privatization of flats, which is maybe telling in itself, given that several other housing-related topics unsolicited by the researchers, such as burdensome relationships with communal neighbours, were discussed.

A second data source consists of structured questionnaires containing information about the workers' *personal networks*. Networks were constructed with the help of ten "name generators", focusing on different forms of support and sociability in daily life adapted from Claude Fischer's (1982) network survey (for further information, see Lonkila and Piipponen, 2000; Lonkila and Salmi, 2005).⁶ In this article, however, the main emphasis is on the interviews. The study is a qualitative one based on a small number of respondents among

6. The workers were asked with whom they talked about work (name generator 1), whose opinion they would listen to when making an important decision (ng2), with whom they shared a common hobby (ng3) or spent free time with (ng4), who could help them with things such as repairing domestic appliances or fixing a car (ng5), who could offer them help in baby-sitting or lend kitchen utensils (ng6), from whom they could borrow a large sum of money (ng7), to or from whom they had given or received favours during the last three years (ng8), and with whom they had participated together in meetings, demonstrations or strikes (ng9). To complete this list, they were asked whether there were any important people who had not been mentioned (ng10). The total list of names given by each respondent in reply to these name generators constitutes his personal network. Detailed information was requested about each network member mentioned, including age, occupation, place of birth and residence, type and duration of relationship between respondent and network member and how they got acquainted.

whom generalization in a statistical sense is not possible. Occasionally, however, I have drawn on examples from other studies, which would suggest that the phenomena I am describing are not limited to my respondents. Further studies are obviously needed, especially to see how class, gender and migration and their possible interconnections influence housing opportunities.

SOVIET HOUSING: SOCIAL STEERING AND TACTICAL ACTION

Building socialism in Eastern Europe was, according to Göran Therborn (1995), one of the world's grandest attempts at *social steering*, "a concept for designating attempts at deliberately directing social processes towards a certain goal over a significant amount of time". Using his ideas, I will sketch Soviet housing as an example of social steering even at the risk of stretching the concept too far. My point is not to investigate whether Soviet housing really was social steering or not, but simply to use it as an illustrative device so as to highlight certain important aspects of Soviet housing.

To begin with, Therborn argues (1995) that social steering has *two sets of actors: the directors and the directed*. In the case of Soviet housing, we can discern political leaders from Stalin to Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Gorbachev as directors with different housing policies. During Stalin's time, massive industrialisation was the first priority and investments were made in heavy industry but not in housing for the population (including the millions of peasants migrating to the cities who were needed for the purpose of industrialisation). Khrushchev, on the other hand, launched a massive building programme in the late 1950s, one of the largest government-sponsored programs ever undertaken (Morton, 1980: 235; Buckley, Gurenko, 1997: 21). The result was the infamous four- or five-floor *khrushchevki*, which, as they were "poorly designed and shoddily built", have now become a serious social problem (Alexandrova, Hamilton, Kuznetsova, 2004: 117). Later, when construction technology improved, high-rise 10- and 12-storey buildings were built in the Brezhnev era, usually in remote *microraiions* far from the centre (Lehmann, Ruble, 1997: 1088; see, also, Borén, 2003). One estimate is that two-thirds of the population were housed between 1960 and 1975 (Bater, 1980: 102 in Lehmann, Ruble 1997: 1088).

More generally, however, we can discern the "state" as an actor, because the "total dominance of the state was the central attribute of the Soviet housing system" with the state deciding on "how much and what type of housing would be built, where it would be built ..., who would build it, who would occupy which units, and which organizations would maintain the

housing once it was completed” (Struyk, 1996: 4).⁷ Those who were directed, on the other hand, were in principle citizens of the USSR. In practice, the “policy of government paternalism” was limited to urban dwellers, and the rural population was more or less left to its own devices (Kosareva, Puzanov and Tikhomirova, 1996: 264). Further limitations will be discussed below.

Social steering requires four components (Therborn, 1995). The first is a *goal and goal-setting as a process*. In housing, the official goal was equity or, as guaranteed by the Soviet constitution, “fair allocation under public control”.⁸ According to the law, the right to housing should be based on need, not on financial status or the ability to pay (Alexeev, 1988a: 414). Cheap housing was something the Soviet regime boasted about, and low rents were used as testimony to the achievements of socialism (Andrusz, 1990: 565). Indeed, it has been generally concluded that housing was far less stratified than was generally the case in the west, even if income and privilege played a far greater role than the Soviet leaders would ever have liked to admit (see, Bater, 1994; Kulu, 2003; Morton, 1980; Ruoppila, 2004; Smith, 1996).

Housing thus became a right that citizens could *make claims* on (Therborn, 1995), an “entitlement for which public authorities bear responsibility” (Cook, 2002: 112). A more practical goal was providing each Soviet family with a separate flat. For instance, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, he solemnly proclaimed the goal of “providing each family with a separate apartment by the year 2000”⁹ (*World Affairs*, 1989: 100).

The second component of social steering is the *steering media* “by which means the goal of the directors is mediated to the directed” (Therborn, 1995: 334). In Soviet housing, the steering medium was political allocation through the housing waiting list. Soviet citizens wanting to obtain housing could try to get on a waiting list. These were of two basic types: municipal ones and those

7. There was much diversity within the socialist bloc in tenure patterns before the transition. Some countries like Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovenia had home-ownership rates higher than the United States, whereas the Soviet Union in general and the Soviet Republic of Russia in particular were extremely state-dominated (Struyk, 1996: 9).

8. Obviously this is very schematic and disregards variations in time as well as other goals (such as the revolutionary housing ideas immediately after the revolution; see, Buchli, 2000). Moreover, the reality was always much more complex. As Smith points out, although housing was considered as every citizen’s right based on need, it was also treated as a privilege and reward for certain categories, especially the elite (Smith, 1996: 80).

9. Whether anybody believed him is another thing. People quickly turned the slogan “a flat by the year 2000” into “a flat in 2000 years” (see, Huttunen, 1999: 263).

that belonged to enterprises or organizations (Morton, 1980: 239).¹⁰ Looking at those who in practice were able to join waiting lists, however, the “citizen” quickly fades away and other, narrower categories appear. In large cities such as Leningrad or Moscow, joining the list was possible for those who had a permanent *propiska* (right of residence)¹¹ and needed more space. Need was measured by so-called sanitary norms or number of square metres available per person (exact square metre requirements varied regionally and in time, but joining the list was usually not possible unless the per capita living space was less than 3-7 square metres) (Morton, 1980; Gerasimova, 1998). Moreover, certain groups were preferred or were granted additional square metres above the norm: for instance, “responsible workers”, a “deliberately vague category” (consisting of, for example, those holding awards like Hero of the Soviet Union or Hero of Socialist Labour), World War II invalids and the families of those who died in the war, Leningrad siege survivors, tuberculosis sufferers, those living in housing declared unfit for habitation, and so on and so forth (Morton, 1980: 240-241). Moreover, Party members were given preferential treatment on the housing waiting list; in fact acquiring a flat was the biggest inducement the Party could offer (Ashwin, 1999: 132).

The third component of social steering is *implementation structures* or using the steering media to bring those directed to act in furtherance of the set goal (Therborn 1995: 334). As for Soviet housing, we can distinguish the administrative staff in housing committees and trade unions responsible for municipal and enterprise housing administration. What is particularly relevant is the nature of the system of provision. As pointed out by Sarah Ashwin, in the context of analysing benefit allocation through the labour collective (which includes but is not limited to housing), the system can be characterised as one of state paternalism mediated through the labour collective, which had two key features. First, it was monopolistic in character in that most goods and services could not be acquired readily on the open market. In large cities, there was no alternative to state housing. Moreover, “goods were not perks but necessities”, housing being a perfect example of this. Second, the economy

10. According to Morton, enterprise waiting lists were preferred over municipal ones because they were usually able to provide housing sooner. A “particularly skilful applicant” was able to get on both or try the other if one refused (Morton, 1980: 239). Enterprise housing was particularly important in Soviet Russia, accounting for 42% of all housing in 1991 (Struyk, 1996: 9).

11. This resulted in a Soviet Catch-22, as described by Höjdestrand (2003), where a *propiska* was a prerequisite for a job and a job for a *propiska*. For studies of how people attempted to circumvent *propiska* regulations, see Buckley (1995), Wegren, Drury (2001).

was always plagued by shortages and inadequacy which left space for *discretionary* practices. Thus individual managers and members of the trade union committee administering benefits possessed a potent means of control. All this meant that those applying for benefits were compelled to cultivate individual relationships with authorities. (Ashwin, 1999: 12).

The fourth component of social steering is *feedback mechanisms* whereby information about the outcome of implementation is relayed back to the directors. Feedback, for many reasons, was something which was “always a special problem for Communist regimes” (Therborn, 1995: 340). In housing, the central means of feedback was through *letters from the public*. This was something that leaders from Khrushchev onwards put great emphasis on,¹² and tens of millions of letters were sent each year either to the authorities directly or the media (White, 2002). The topics of these letters varied, but a significant proportion concerned housing (Utekhin, 2004).

Finally, social steering always takes place in a specific social context, in which we should take into account “the ordinary strivings of the directed in all their walks of life and their reactions to the steering efforts”; the reactions of the external environment; and chance events (Therborn, 1995: 340). My focus is on the first as I look at how the directed were or were not able to influence their housing. Therborn’s idea that the directed are nonetheless *actors* in my opinion comes close to Certeau’s idea of tactics. In his famous book *The practice of everyday life* (1984), Certeau makes a distinction between strategies and tactics. Strategies are able to “produce, tabulate and impose spaces”, exemplified by the Spanish colonizers, who were able to impose their own culture on the indigenous Indians. Tactics, on the other hand, can only “use, manipulate, and divert these spaces” (Certeau, 1984: 30). The Indians had no choice but to accept Spanish rule. However, they *made of* the rituals something different to what the Spanish had in mind: “they subverted them *not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them* with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept” (Certeau, 1984: xiii, emphasis added). Soviet housing is a perfect example of tactical action. In the absence of alternatives (the “market”) and since it is a necessity and not a perk (Ashwin, 1999), housing was something

12. For instance, Gorbachev made frequent reference to letters from the public, sometimes quoting them directly. On one occasion, when asked whether letters from ordinary people actually reached him, he replied that they did and that “he tried to read as many of them as possible, and took some home for further study” (White, 2002). Books and leaflets were also published which taught people how to write complaints (Bogdanova, 2005).

that ordinary people could neither reject nor alter. This does not, however, mean that they had no options at all. Instead, we can investigate whether they actively used, manipulated and diverted the resources that were available. If Therborn's steering components are taken as a starting point, Soviet people were certainly not able to influence the goal. The other components were, however, much more open to use and manipulation: the steering media (housing waiting lists), the implementation structures (the officials in charge) and the feedback mechanisms (letter-writing). My argument is that *networks* play a crucial part, in a way that I will detail shortly.

So far it has been assumed that housing waiting-lists were the only means of obtaining housing. But was the situation really so devoid of alternatives? Yes and no. Building private houses was not an option: that was possible in the countryside and small towns but prohibited in large cities with over 100,000 inhabitants (Alexeev, 1988b: 232). Another option was inheriting flats (Roberts et al., 2003: 73); this, however, was dependent on registration rules and was often accompanied by tactical use of them. No housing market in the Western sense existed either. Scholars have, however, pointed out that there was a shadow market in housing (Alexeev, 1988a; 1988b; Morton, 1980) so that it was "subject to market and quasi-market intervention through the robust unofficial economy" (Lehmann, Ruble, 1997: 1090; see, also, Paadam, 2003: 170, 279). Private rents and private flat exchanges existed, usually involving money (Morton, 1980). Through these flat exchanges, people could thus in a sense "purchase" and "sell" state-owned flats; and there are some cases suggesting that money earned from the shadow economy was laundered this way (Alexeev, 1988b). Money was, however, *officially* involved in co-operative housing. This was not a genuine alternative either because it was also based on the waiting list; relatively large inputs of money were, however, demanded from the co-operative members (Andrusz, 2002). It is interesting that many respondents mentioned money as an important means of obtaining housing and this is a theme I will analyse after dealing with networks.

NETWORKS AS MEANS OF OBTAINING HOUSING

If we are to follow Therborn's components, then the first possible option of using networks to obtain housing is through manipulating the implementation structures; that is, officials in charge of housing distribution. As was already mentioned, the provision system left much space for discretionary practices, often forcing those applying for benefits to cultivate individual relationships with the authorities (Ashwin, 1999: 12). In his 1980 analysis of housing,

Morton described Soviet society as a “society of connections” where *blat*,¹³ bribes and pull made a difference in obtaining housing (Morton, 1980). Another commentator on Soviet housing characterised housing allocation system as one of “improprieties, corruption, and the preferential treatment of certain customers” (Alexeev, 1988a: 414), while a third one called it influenced by “ ‘subjective factors’ – that frequently used euphemism for corruption, patronage and nepotism” (Andrusz, 1990: 556). Ledeneva (1998: 30-31) describes housing as one common *blat*-usage context in which good connections provided a flat in less time and often of better quality and in a better location. A *propiska* or residence right in a big city was also often obtained by semi-legal and illegal means, bribes for officials in passport offices and individual influence often yielding the desired outcome (Buckley, 1995: 908). The scholarly conviction that various informal means were crucial is perhaps best illustrated by Alexeev’s study with Soviet émigrés in which he felt necessary to emphasise that, after all, “*not all* apartments are obtained with the help of bribes and side-payments” (Alexeev, 1988a: 418, emphasis added).

Although the evidence on the importance of connections seems convincing enough, serious problems remain. Estimating the scope of these practices is difficult, and it is also not clear who exactly (for instance, in class terms) benefited most from networks. No overt cases of *blat* in housing were found in the material with workers. While it is perfectly possible that this reflects actual circumstances –perhaps the workers did not possess the necessary connections or skills to improve their housing¹⁴– a more likely explanation is that some people at least had used connections, but this is simply not reflected in the material because of the typical misrecognition or denial of *blat* described by Ledeneva (1998). It is also difficult to think of a more explosive topic than the discretionary housing distribution practices in the workplace. Thus, it is hardly surprising that references to *blat* were made in the form of explicit denial, as did Yevgeny:¹⁵

13. Roughly meaning access to public resources through personal connections (see Ledeneva, 1998).

14. Industrial workers (especially those working in the construction industry) were also at an advantage compared to those working in light industry in that their industry provided better housing (Kulu, 2003; Lehmann, Ruble, 1997; Paadam, 2003: 159), so that one possibility still is that they were less in need. Judging by the large number of communal dwellers in the material, this, however, does not seem credible.

15. All names used in the text are pseudonymous.

Yevgeny: At that time we got an increase [an additional family member was born], our son was born in 1964. [So there we were:] me, my wife, our son and my father-in-law. We got four rooms in a five-room flat, and they housed still another person [in the fifth room].

Interviewer: How is it possible that you got so many rooms? Four rooms? Did such things happen?

Yevgeny: Well, I don't know. Not by *blat*, at least. It seems it just happened.

Judging by how the majority of respondents lived, such things “just happened” very rarely. That some people were more equal than others was clear to those who had been less successful in obtaining housing. They were often resentful and found their housing situation as insulting (*obidno*) (see, also, Ashwin, 1999). One example is Gennady who as a young man had had high hopes of obtaining housing. Having worked for more than 30 years without “achieving anything except for two spinal hernias”, he was bitter. In 2000, he was still living in the same communal flat which he had obtained in the early 1970s, although now he had two rooms instead of one at his disposal after the neighbouring family had moved to a separate flat. These two rooms he shared with his wife, daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter.¹⁶

A second possibility is tactical action in regard to the steering media, the waiting list. The fact that the criteria were rather ambiguous made manipulation possible. For instance, the category of “responsible workers” left much scope for the employers to decide who was and who was not a responsible worker. Examples of manipulating registration can be found in the literature (although not usually conceived under the rubric of tactical action). One common way was the manipulation of registration rules through being registered in one flat and living elsewhere (e.g., Liborakina, Rotkirch, 1999; Platz, 2003: 119) or making all kinds of family arrangements, for instance, caring for an elderly relative suffering a terminal illness in exchange for a right to become an official resident of the relative's flat and thus inherit it (Rusinova, Brown, 1996: 20). The most extreme example comes from Armenia, where aunts and uncles even legally adopted their siblings' children

16. I have no material to deal with letter-writing, which is another attempt to personalize relationships with authorities. Studies by Bogdanova (2005) and Utekhin (2004) show, however, that ordinary people used letters in a tactical way, as individualized means of seeking solutions to their housing problems.

so as to give them inheritance rights to apartments during the Soviet era (Platz, 2003: 119).

The decision whether to register somebody in a given flat or not was often crucial. In the case of a divorce, for instance, those who had not registered their spouses could thank themselves as much as those who had registered could blame themselves for doing so (as, for instance, Ilya, who will be introduced later). Registration decisions also caused much strain in family relations. Vladimir lived in a separate flat with his second wife Anna whom he had met almost twenty years before. The couple had decided to register Anna's son Aleksey in the flat, but not his wife. "What if they divorce, then this will be just like a communal flat", Vladimir and Anna had thought, a decision that Aleksey, however, was furious about and found difficult to accept.

Networks were also crucial in making as much use as possible of the category of "eligibles". For instance, one is perhaps not a veteran of the Great Patriotic War oneself, but an uncle is, and so on, and so forth. Vitaly's daughter Irina lived with her daughter and second husband in Vitaly's three-room flat, but was still registered with her first husband:

Vitaly: My daughter's queuing [in the housing waiting list]. She's registered at her first husband's. His mother was a *blokadnitsa* [siege survivor], so things looked bright. Now they've buried her, so nothing looks bright any more.

These practices have clearly not vanished in the post-Soviet era. When the privatization of flats began, many Russian families temporarily registered their elderly relatives from the countryside in their city apartments, because households with veterans would be allowed more space and cheaper rates for privatisation (they then returned the relatives to the countryside when the procedure was over) (Lehmann and Ruble, 1997: 1098-1099). Manipulating registration was also one means of coping with the 1998 financial crisis. One family in Liborakina and Rotkirch's study, for instance, had arranged things so that an elderly father, a war veteran, got a fictitious divorce from his wife in order to get registered in his daughter's flat. Now the household consisted of one "veteran of the Great Patriotic War and warrior-internationalists" (the father) and one "mother of a large family" (the daughter) which made it possible to stay on the waiting list and also helped to reduce housing costs (Liborakina and Rotkirch, 1999: 36).

Besides fictitious divorces, other not uncommon examples of tactical action are engaging in fictitious marriages so as to obtain housing, or in making an "additional" child (Rotkirch, 2000; see, also, Buckley, 1995;

Morton, 1980: 250; Platz, 2003: 119). These manipulate the central principle of Soviet housing allocation, namely the amount of space available per person: as flats rarely shrank, the only logical way to affect this people-per-square-metre ratio was to increase the number of people.¹⁷ My point is now, however, that regardless of whether babies were made or marriages established with or without this intention, *family arrangements had important consequences* for “ordinary people’s” housing and thus, in a sense, became tactical. In Lehmann and Ruble’s formulation, the state “established the incentives to which individuals responded” which led to “unusually early marriage and childbearing” (1997: 1103). A family was usually a necessary although not always a sufficient criterion. This means that, other things being equal, without a family the chances of improving one’s housing were slight, as exemplified by those respondents who had never been married. Andrei, a worker in his mid-forties, still lived in the same dormitory where he had lived since coming to Leningrad in 1974. Actually he had improved his housing, but only “within the dorm”, as he put it. Having changed rooms five times, he had obtained one of the quietest rooms in the dormitory, but moving beyond the dormitory was beyond his means. Likewise, the unmarried worker Boris had been living in the factory’s dormitory since 1978. The other unmarried respondents were young boys, all living with their parent(s).¹⁸

Marriage thus improved one’s chances of housing, as Anna Rotkirch (2000) shows. When looking back at our respondents’ housing histories, estimating the impact of marriage alone is difficult because a child usually appeared very soon after marriage (sometimes marriage was prompted by it).¹⁹ Thus, marriage and childbirth was usually a step ahead in one’s housing

17. Also illustrated in jokes: “A couple with nine children are living in a small communal flat. Along comes Brezhnev’s decree that families with ten children must be given big new flats. So the wife says to the husband, ‘Listen, you must have got an illegitimate son somewhere in Siberia. Get on a plane and go and find him and then we’ll finally be able to get a new flat’. So the husband sets off for Siberia, collects his illegitimate son and two days later gets back home with him. But the wife is sitting all on her own and all the children have disappeared. ‘What’s happened? Where are the children?’ ‘Oh,’ the wife says, ‘it’s been a complete invasion. All the children’s fathers turned up to collect them to take advantage of this decree!’.” (in Lissyutkina, 1999: 183).

18. One illustration of the poor housing situation of single households in the Soviet Union is that, according to statistics from the late 1980s, a quarter lived in hostels or private accommodation (Andrusz, 1990: 556).

19. A Soviet marriage implied children: For most people having one child soon after the wedding “was an unquestioned, almost automatic expectation. Postponing it for social or professional reasons was unusual and considered selfish; infertility was seen as a tragedy and often a social taboo” (Rotkirch, 2000: 79).

career: this was particularly crucial for the migrant respondents since it meant moving from the dormitory to a communal flat. If no children appeared, this usually meant that the chances of improvement were slight. Viktor was a worker in his mid-forties and a native-born *leningradets* who lived with his wife in a one-room flat, which his mother, a *blokadnitsa*, had obtained in the 1970s. Viktor was married but without children, since his wife had had a miscarriage and was unable to have children. What was a personal tragedy for the couple had also consequences for their housing: he was still living in the same one-room flat with his wife in 2000 “because of the square metres”, as he noted. Having just half a square metre above the norm, he had never been able to join the housing waiting list. Without making explicit reference to his own family situation, he certainly was aware of it in noting that many people got flats from the factory when their families became bigger, when “their children married, grandchildren appeared and again there’s not enough space”.

Children thus provided a realistic opportunity for housing improvement. For the majority, however, it took some time:²⁰

Zinaida was married in 1971 while still living in the factory’s dormitory. Later, the couple rented a room (privately), and then received a room in a communal flat. Their children were born in 1976 and 1983. After having saved money and waiting in the queue for a co-operative flat for eight years, they moved into a three-room co-operative flat in 1988.

Leonid was married in 1975 while living in the factory’s dormitory, but as his wife was pregnant and expected to give birth in a few weeks, they got a room in a communal flat where the baby was born. Two years later, their second child was born, after which the family received two rooms in another communal flat, where they have been living since 1977. In 1995, their neighbours moved away and Leonid’s family got their room as well; hence they had a separate three-room flat at the time of the study.

Ivan was married in 1972 while living in the factory’s dormitory. He moved into his wife’s dormitory room, where they lived when their son was born the same year. Next year, they got a 18 m² communal room from the Kirov factory. Their twins were born in 1980, and in 1981 they got a separate three-room flat.

20. Andrusz (1990: 555) gives an interesting list of waiting times for several Soviet cities. In 1987, a citizen in Minsk who had joined the housing waiting lists in 1976 could at least expect to get an offer of accommodation. But if waiting in Minsk took about 11 years, in Voroshilovgrad (now Luhansk in Ukraine) it took 13-15 years, Dushanbe 14-18 years and Irkutsk 26-28 years!

All three were thus able to move from the communal flat by getting a separate flat from the factory or the city (Ivan), building a co-operative flat (Zinaida) or getting the whole communal flat for themselves after their neighbours moved out (Leonid). Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, those respondents who had separate three-room flats were very satisfied with their housing. The reverse was true for those who still lived communally in 2000. It seems that networks were taken as reference points when people evaluated their housing situation, in that they compared their own housing situation to other people they knew (rather than to the new rich or the West, although this should be read with caution since there is not enough material to clarify this aspect). A survey conducted in the Soviet era suggested that those who were most dissatisfied with their housing were those who had observed close relatives and friends obtain flats while not being assigned flats themselves (Morton, 1980: 236). Gerasimova has pointed out that the communal flats were the norm for a long time, and it is only from the 1960s onwards –when a separate flat became a real and accessible alternative– that communal apartments became “really horrid” (*sovsem uzhasnye*) (1998: 240).

MONEY AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO NETWORKS?

If networks often made a difference in housing, broad consensus exists about networks being vital in virtually all other aspects of everyday life under socialism as well (Ledeneva, 1998; Lonkila, 1999; Morton, 1980; Srubar, 1991; Wedel, 1986). Because Soviet-type economies were characterized by endemic shortages, *money* was a necessary but not sufficient medium of exchange (Srubar, 1991) or was relatively unimportant and “did not function as the main element in economic transactions” (Ledeneva, 1998: 34-35). Money, for obvious reasons (shortage being one of them), certainly mattered less than in market economies; many things could not be bought and “access” was far more important. While the role of money should not be overestimated, it should not be underestimated either (Gerasimova, 2003; see, also Pine, 2002 for an illustrative account of money during socialist-era Poland). It is, at least, quite interesting that the workers talked much less about networks than they did about money in the Soviet era. A recurrent theme was talking about one’s salary:

Grigory recalled a former job of his where he began working in the mid-1970s:

You know, it was just splendid to work there. In those days I earned 450 roubles [a month].

Zinaida, a respondent already mentioned, had “a very good salary” in the Soviet era:

The salary was 300 roubles. That was sufficient, that was very good, we saved [money], bought our first car – now we already have our third. We saved money for a flat, for a garage...” It’s just so fortunate, buying such a great three-room flat now would hardly be possible.

Many others, too, talked of being able to buy furniture and other items (actually using the verb *kupit’*, buy), as did Nina and Yuri:

Nina: Well, I think about ten years ago we perhaps earned slightly less, but we were able to live with that money. Everything that we bought for our home, furniture and the rest, everything was bought in those days. Now we would need to change all the furniture, but there’s no money to do that, to change a cupboard or a sofa. Everything was bought in those days. I think we lived better before.

Yuri: Now you see how much we were able to earn, how much we earned. [Money] to live with, I could afford to drink once in a while. Everything, it was enough for everything... I was able to buy furniture right after I had moved [to a co-operative flat].

Whether the Soviet era really was a land of abundance is another matter. Scarcity and queues were mentioned very seldom, and it would certainly be easy to argue that the respondents take the excess of money from socialism and the availability of goods from post-socialism and make a nice nostalgic combination of it.²¹ Two things are worth pointing out, however. The first is a very obvious one: whether the Soviet era was one of abundance or not is irrelevant. What is relevant in understanding current attitudes to housing is that it looks like one *now*, an era full of opportunities to earn money and buy things. However, there was also something to suggest that the respondents had in the Soviet era *acted* as if money was relevant. Some respondents, for instance, had changed jobs for better-paid ones, either within the factory or changing workplaces altogether. Some also mentioned

21. While the economy was always plagued by shortages, the perestroika period in particular accelerated the problem since household money incomes rose by 50% in five years, unmatched by an increased supply of consumables. This resulted in the accumulation of savings, which were then destroyed by inflation which had been largely suppressed until 1991 (Clarke, 2002: 2).

having worked long shifts and weekends that gave an opportunity to earn “decent sums of money for those days”, as mentioned by Vadim. Gerasimova (2003) points out that Soviet people tried to *increase their monetary incomes* in a number of ways, including moonlighting and having a *khaltura* (extra job for extra money), working in building brigades during summer times, or working in the Northern parts of the USSR where salaries were higher. Why do so if money really was so unimportant?

Housing is a primary case illustrating that money did matter. Unofficially, money was involved in flat exchanges, private rents and bribing officials (Morton, 1980; see, also, Paadam, 2003). Interestingly enough, it was officially involved in co-operative housing as well. Currently at least six respondents were living in co-operative flats and some others had previously lived in them (before divorce). These respondents talked a lot about their salaries and saving for flats. Grigory, the worker mentioned above, started saving for one in the mid-1970s.

Grigory: I still remember it, the first deposit [for the co-operative] was 2300 [roubles]. A lot of money in those days. Well, a two-room flat. That’s how things were.

Interviewer: You could afford it in those days, could you?

Grigory: Well, certainly, what do you think! Four hundred and fifty roubles [his salary at the time] – those days we flew to the south every year. And now, just to send the child to a summer camp or somewhere [is difficult] ...

The co-operative system existed between 1924 and 1937 and was revived in the early 1960s (Andrusz, 2002: 135). The tenants paid an initial deposit and monthly payments that were higher than rents for state apartments (Smith, 1996: 79). One estimate is that payments were three to five times greater than those in state accommodation, although the system was heavily subsidized by the state (Andrusz, 2002: 135). Money was never sufficient as such because the right to subscribe to a co-operative was based on need (e.g. sanitary norms).²²

22. The fact that money was involved made the issue ideologically laden and many local authorities “were socially and ideologically biased against the tenure” and feared that this resulted in queue jumping (Andrusz, 2002: 135). Co-operative housing was usually built to higher standards than state housing, and was an important source of qualitative differentiation under socialism (Smith, 1996: 79).

Nonetheless, the way many respondents talked about saving was perhaps not dramatically different from the way workers in Western countries might talk about their housing. Ilya, for instance, had saved for and bought a one-room co-operative flat in the 1980s. He recalled that after purchasing it he had debts and started constantly to think about how to be able to earn sufficient money. Mikhail talked of how he first wanted to find a job, then to earn money and then invest in a flat: “then I could eventually allow myself to marry”.

Money figured in less successful stories as well. Andrei, the unmarried worker still living in the dormitory, had queued for a co-operative flat. This never worked out, however, since after the collapse of the Soviet Union the prices had risen beyond his means. He had had money, but perestroika had destroyed it all, he sighed. The saddest example, however, is Oleg, a worker who still lived in bad housing conditions in 2000, having one 11m² communal room which he shared with his wife and their 22-year-old daughter. Moreover, the room was of the worst kind, having an entrance only through their neighbours’ room. The first thing Oleg regretted about his accommodation was that at some point he had been offered a better, larger room. He had, however, refused to take it because, afraid of being removed from the housing list (that is, because he then would have had more square metres at his disposal than before), he did not want to spoil his chances of getting a separate flat. His decision was by no means exceptional. According to Vysokovskii (2001a: 167), some people refused housing improvements or even worsened their housing conditions in order to improve their chances of going up in the housing waiting list. But there was more regret in Oleg’s account: his personal history was one of constant saving, first saving for a motorcycle but not buying one so as to save for a car, which he did not buy so as to invest in a cooperative flat, which he did not finally do, because his wife’s sister got a flat “for free” and thus, he had thought, “why would I put my money into a co-operative when I can have a flat [for free] in six or seven years?” The saddest thing is that apart from never getting a flat he lost all the money to inflation as well.

What went wrong in his calculations we all know: the USSR collapsed. The end of “free” housing meant that finally reaching the top of the waiting list accounted for nothing. Ashwin notes that in Vishnovka, the end of “free” housing in 1996 was a major scandal in the mining community. People felt it was extremely unjust that had they reached the top of the waiting list one year before, they would have obtained housing for nothing, whereas they now had to pay millions to get one (Ashwin, 1999: 41). That a whole political system collapses is beyond any worker’s control, but what makes

things more complicated for them is that when they look back, their housing history might also appear as one of making the wrong decisions (as they can now, in retrospect, conclude); in other words, it looks like individual not systemic failure.

Money was the central feature characterizing the post-Soviet situation as well. Now it appeared, however, in a negative light. Money was now “demanded everywhere”, but was in acute shortage. Zinaida contrasted a good income in the Soviet era with an insufficient salary now, which was her biggest worry (although she had actually benefited greatly from inflation, which had made it easy to pay for her co-operative flat):

I'm worried, as probably everybody else is [about their salary]. People need normal salaries, stable work, so that they needn't worry all the time... This is the main problem: money, money, money. Material circumstances in general... The problem is that they pay very little, 2500 [roubles]; I think it's very little. I have a three-room flat – I pay 301 roubles just for the flat, plus 60 [roubles] for the telephone, plus lighting, that's already almost 500 roubles, [it's the same sum] as our *avans* [advance of salary]. They pay an *avans* of 500 roubles. That's very little.

The monthly income of Zinaida's family was in the highest range (4500 roubles or more a month, about USD160 at the time), meaning that the proportion spent on housing was 11% or less. This is moderate by western standards but certainly much higher than rents in the Soviet era, which averaged 3% in the early 1990s (UNECE, 2004). Most respondents were deeply dissatisfied with their salaries: “what we get doesn't even count as money”, complained Yuri, summing up the sentiments of many. Ironically enough, the only consolation was that the salaries were at least paid on time (an improvement compared to the situation a few years back) and certainly better than future pensions, which were miserable.

That money was needed in housing was generally agreed upon. Dwellers in separate apartments could congratulate themselves on having “managed” to build a flat “at the last moment” (*uspel postroit*), “when the prices were still affordable”, as had Denis who had bought a co-operative in 1993 (references to good timing were also found in a study by Shurygina, 1998: 237). Those who had not been so fortunate concluded that buying flats was now impossible. Nina, who was mentioned before, lived in very difficult circumstances: her communal neighbour was violent and had actually hit her once. Nina was very distressed about the situation and dreamt of a separate flat, which was beyond her means, however:

There are no possibilities, there's no money. If only there was money, then a change of flats could be made. Five thousand dollars would be needed to change these two rooms into a two-room flat, but where would this money come from? There's no money.

Without money it would only be possible to change the two rooms into rooms in another communal flat, something Nina deemed senseless. Having lost all her savings in the August 1998 crisis (an event she mentioned as one that had changed her attitude to life) the only option was starting saving again; not an easy task, however, with household incomes less than 2500 roubles (about 90 dollars) a month. "Economizing", "saving every penny" and "not buying anything for myself" were the means through which she hoped one day her wish for a separate flat would be realized.

NETWORKS AS THREATS TO HOUSING?

Our respondents were worried in general about the instability of the present and uncertainty about the future. The transition has caused many well-known problems to so-called ordinary Russians: a dramatic decline in living standards; falling wages and social benefits; unemployment, lay-offs and non-payments of wages, etc. (see, Clarke, 2002: 1-9). Logically, one would expect this also to be reflected in the way people are housed but, as Cook points out, despite a severe decline in Russia's GDP, productivity and incomes, most Russians were housed as before whether or not they could pay (2002: 112-113). There is evidence to suggest that housing was in effect used as a shock absorber: when so much else was changing, housing was explicitly kept as a secure aspect of people's lives (Struyk, 1996: 55-57). For instance, eviction has been rarely used and the housing sector is still heavily subsidised by municipalities and enterprises (Cook, 2002: 112-113). For individual dwellers this meant that expenditure on housing was still relatively small – in October 2001 6,5% of average income, still negligible although considerably higher than in the early 1990s (when it was less than 3%).²³ The problem is that while households pay only 20-40% of their housing costs, most is paid by the municipalities but at least 20% of all costs go unpaid. This leads to collapsing properties and infrastructure, wastage of resources, increasing debts and a range of other problems (UNECE, 2004).

23. According to the Russian Longitudinal Monitoring Survey, 2002, as cited in UNECE (2004).

In 2000 most of our respondents, too, were housed as they were before the collapse of the Soviet Union – some of them had even obtained a better flat in the early 1990s (usually co-operative flats that had been finished in the early 1990s). There were, however, also respondents who lived in smaller flats than they had before the transition. This was *not* caused by economic difficulties due to the transition, however, but what could be called *changes in their family constitution*. The first such threat is when a relationship breaks up, i.e., *divorce*. Ilya had saved for and bought a co-operative flat during the Soviet era. It had only one room and a kitchen but was otherwise “ideal”:

A 20 m² room, kitchen – 10m², balcony – 7m², sixth floor, windows facing south.
A very good flat. I was very sad when I got divorced. ... We lived there in this one-room flat, I registered her [his wife] there, and that's it. Thirteen years went by: we separated and arranged an exchange of flats. Now I live in a communal flat.

The communal flat where he had lived since 1997 was a despised “*khrushchevka*”.²⁴ Many respondents living in communal flats were divorcees, and this is no coincidence. A divorce always had an effect for housing, and, as Anna Rotkirch points out, in the socialist era “the apartment question” (but, she claims, not money in itself)²⁵ was a factor for married couples in deciding whether to separate or not (Rotkirch, 2000: 94). Rotkirch argues that as apartments were among the hardest things to get, it was usually the men who were at greatest risk: a divorced man “usually returned to live with his parents or found a new wife” (Rotkirch, 2000: 94; see, also, Borneman, 1992 for similar patterns in East Berlin). Here one should note, however, that for the migrants (a significant proportion of Leningrad residents and our respondents likewise), the first option never existed. Not even the most

24. The respondents who lived in communal apartments lived as a rule in remote workers' districts such as Kirovskii or Krasnoselskii *raion*, i.e., in houses constructed in the 1960s and later. If many communal flats in the city centre have attracted the newly wealthy, the workers living in the “outskirts” are disadvantaged both by location and period of housing construction (Alexandrova, Hamilton, Kuznetsova, 2004; see, also, Gdaniec, 2001).

25. While money was perhaps not decisive, there is in fact a lot to suggest that it played a role nonetheless. For instance, in Rotkirch's material a woman called Elena had a first husband who in order to “be able to *buy* an apartment ... went *working* as a sailor for two years” after which he had “*earned enough money to buy* a so-called co-operative apartment in 1970”. After divorcing him, “Elena got rid of her husband by *buying him out* of the apartment he had *earned at sea*” with money provided by her second husband's mother. After divorcing him, too, Elena “*gathered enough money* –this time her own– to *buy* a second apartment” (Rotkirch, 2000: 81-82, emphasis added).

desperate divorcee would ever have considered returning to the countryside, having once obtained the right of residence in Leningrad.

Two more options were usually available. One was switching flats, as Ilya did – a practice already existing in the Soviet era although changes were often very complicated and usually involved money (Morton, 1980: 242-7). One more “possibility”, the worst one, was the “classic, embarrassing and cruel situation” where the couple remained living together in the same flat after the divorce, possibly together with new partners (Rotkirch, 2000: 81). What is important to note is that these “options” have not been outdated by post-socialism. Igor was bitter. Having acquired a three-room flat in 1993, his “wife divorced him” the year after. In 2000, Igor still lived there, “in a three-room flat where I occupy one room only”, as he put it with sarcasm in his voice. The situation with his ex-wife was tense and Igor accused her, among other things, of trying to force him to leave, which he refused to do. Having married people who live separately and divorced people who live together (Castrén, 2001: 79) is by no means exceptional in post-Soviet Russia (see, also, Piirainen, 1997: 194-195).

If a divorce usually means that a “Soviet success story” of a three-room flat is ruined, another threat exists as well. This also has to do with networks, now with enlarging ones. One’s children grow up, marry and have families of their own, but have nowhere to live and thus *have to remain at their parents’ place with in-laws moving in*. In 2000, Mikhail had a separate co-operative flat where he lived with his wife and two adult children. He was satisfied with his housing, but added the words “so far”: as long as the children (aged 21 and 19) are unmarried. Irina and her family had obtained two rooms in a communal flat from the factory in 1971. Later their communal neighbours moved away and they got the third room, so that they had a separate three-room flat. But in 2000, Irina, now a widow, complained, “This is a communal flat again! Our daughter got married and lives here with the son-in-law; our son got married, [they] also live here.” Now there are seven people (including two in-laws) and three generations living in her “separate” three-room flat.

Chronic housing shortages made this a familiar pattern in the Soviet era too²⁶ but now the housing waiting list does not provide flats and the market is

26. According to one Soviet-era survey from Kiev in 1975 (cited in Morton 1980: 257), only 5-6% of newly-weds moved into their own flat.

27. A completely contrary view is presented by Roberts et al., who argue that the reforms have not made it more difficult for young people to obtain their own places. On the contrary, “the chances must have improved”, they reason, “due to the rise in mortality and the decline in the marriage rates that would have reduced the number of actual and potential households.

a solution only for a few.²⁷ Inheriting a flat – another typical means of getting a flat in the Soviet era (Roberts et al., 2003: 73) – is again quite unlikely particularly for the migrant respondents. The migrants in our material are usually married to another migrant (Lonkila, Salmi, 2005) and thus their children have no hope of inheriting the flat of their grandparents, which makes these migrants' position very vulnerable. The children may, of course, marry someone with a flat, but even when some managed to do so this usually did not solve the problem for the parents if they had more than one child, since it was unlikely that both or all children were able to move out.

Some respondents had made big sacrifices to obtain a flat for their children (see, also, Burawoy, Krotov, Lytkina, 2000).²⁸ Arkady had lived in a communal flat in the 1980s together with his wife, their daughter, her husband and their child. When Arkady's daughter gave birth to twins, housing opportunities looked bright, because they were supposed to have a separate flat in six months. That actually happened, but Arkady was given a choice: the whole extended family could either have a separate five-room flat or the young couple could have a three-room flat, whereas Arkady and his wife would still be waiting for a one-room flat. They decided on the latter option, not wanting to "disturb the life of the young ones". In 2000, however, Arkady was still living in the communal flat in a 15m² room, sharing it with his wife, who had become a former one. Another example is Fedor who got a two-room flat with family in 1971. When his only son grew up, they changed their two-room flat into a one-room flat for Fedor and his wife, and a room in a communal flat for their son. For many respondents, then, the situation was thus one where either a larger flat had to be changed for a smaller one (flats or rooms), or else the children (with their spouses) remained living at their parents' flat. Both variants destroy the dream of the precious "separate three-room flat", even for those who once were lucky to have one. In 2000, the

Pressure on the housing stocks would therefore have eased" (Roberts et al., 2003: 83). While this may have some impact, it is hard to follow their logic fully, since most housing stock now has *owners* (flats either being privatized already or can be privatised in the future), and it is hard to see how to claim ownership of property if one has no means to purchase or rent a flat, and will not inherit one. As has been pointed out, cheap rents in the Soviet era gave no incentives for "empty nesters" to move into smaller units (Struyk, 1996: 54; see, also, Kulu, 2003: 908). Even after the transition, rents are relatively cheap and vacant flats are rather kept as a good investment instead of being sold (Struyk, 1996: 2, 54).

28. In the republic of Komi, some pensioners had migrated permanently to the village or to the dacha so as to leave their town apartment to their children (Burawoy, Krotov, Lytkina, 2000: 63, endnote 9).

declaration by Gorbachev about a separate apartment by that year was true only for some respondents. Although more than half (thirty-two respondents) had a separate (self-contained) flat, only a third of them (eleven respondents) lived in this separate flat either alone, with their spouse and/or with children under 18. Others shared the flat with adult children, in-laws, grandchildren, parents, parents-in-law, siblings or ex-spouses.

Although these problems have not been directly caused by the transition (in that they are not caused by economic difficulties *per se*), obviously they can be derived from the transition in that the housing waiting list had ceased to offer a solution. Still, from the respondents' viewpoint the situation looks –and in a sense, is– like one where housing is affected by their (kin) networks rather than the system, where various “ifs” about their networks determine the future: we have a three-room flat and that will be secured if we don't divorce, if the children don't marry, if they marry somebody with a flat, if aunt Ira dies and leaves a flat, if... A study of homeless people in St. Petersburg by Höjdestrand interestingly suggests that this kind of argument may be widespread: kin or the lack of it, not the state or the improperly working system, was most often seen as the real reason behind homelessness (Höjdestrand, 2003, 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

Housing and networks are connected in many ways. Inspired by Certeau's (1984) ideas, I have analysed networks as tactical action, that is, action that takes place within certain rules imposed from outside and which cannot be changed or rejected but can be bent and manipulated. We can distinguish between two ways of using networks in order to obtain or improve housing. The first is the attempt to *influence the officials in charge*, that is, to personalize impersonal bureaucratic relationships or plead with the authorities (to use Therborn's terms, actors are using implementation structures or feedback mechanisms in a tactical way). The second is when not the people in charge but *the rules of allocation* (or the steering media in Therborn's terms) are used tactically with the help of networks, manipulating registration and the categories of “eligibles” being perfect examples of this. Moreover, as the basic rule for allocating flats was the amount of space per person, to increase the number of persons in a given space was a crucial means of manipulating this ratio; decisions on whether to marry or not, have a child or not, divorce or not making a difference in this respect. As Anna Rotkirch has convincingly shown, each step in the Soviet family's life course

–from dating to marrying, having a child, divorcing, marrying again– was usually both influenced by and had implications for housing (see, Rotkirch, 2000). Lehmann claims that having children was one of the few ways Soviet people could improve their chances of obtaining new housing in the Soviet era (Lehmann, 1992, cited in Lehmann, Ruble, 1997: 1093).

This article has sought to show that although having children was central, theoretically speaking at least far more options of using one’s network were available. How much workers were actually able to draw on their networks (vis-à-vis other socio-economic groups) is a question that nonetheless remains open. Research on housing distribution from Russia (Rusinova, Brown, 1996), Estonia (Kulu, 2003) and Hungary (Bodnar, Böröcz, 1998) suggest that in fact people with *higher education* were better connected and had better access to housing advantages, although many other factors also played a role (e.g. the era when family and working life began, occupation, age, employment sector, place of origin [i.e., whether migrated or not] and ethnic origin) (Kulu, 2003). It is perhaps, then, not just a coincidence that many worker respondents, just like the unskilled respondents in the study by Rusinova and Brown (1996), emphasised the role of *money* in the Soviet era rather than that of networks. Co-operative builders particularly recounted how they were able to earn, spend and save money during the Soviet era. The role of money has been seen as minor in the context of socialist shortage economies (e.g., Ledeneva, 1998; Srubar, 1991), but housing serves as a good case to show that the division between a supposedly non-monetary Soviet era and monetary post-Soviet era is in fact a blurred one.

Although the focus in this article has been on networks and money, it is apparent that not everybody was equally capable of using them. Alexis Berelowitch has characterised the 1970s as an era mixed with paternalistic expectations from the state and attempts to “take from the state what it was supposed to but could not provide –by legal means if possible and by illegal means if not” (2004: 30). If most respondents were prone to both expect and take, it is obvious that some were able to take more and expect less, whereas others took less and expected more– often in vain. The ambivalence is nicely illustrated by Oleg who saved and saved for a flat but then eventually decided not to buy one since his expectation was to get a flat for free just in a few years. Although the parameters of action should not be exaggerated, what seems important to me is that when the transition is considered, for almost all respondents the opportunities to act (whether using networks or money or both) to improve or obtain housing have now been severely reduced. If money is taken as an example, the situation is paradoxical. What

we have on the one hand is active home savers in the Soviet era that was supposedly non-monetary and characterised as one of stagnation. On the other hand, we have a supposedly monetary post-Soviet era where money is acutely needed everywhere but is desperately short, and the prospects for housing improvements are bleak. Purchasing a flat is beyond the means of the workers, and no properly functioning loan market system exists, at least for the time being (UNECE, 2004). The transition wiped away most former, “Soviet” values; and if it introduced anything new, it was the promise of the “market”, that is, of housing as a commodity that can be bought and sold. Given the financial constraints, the transition, ironically enough, not only left this promise unrealised but *abolished* opportunities for many respondents to buy or improve housing.

According to several recent surveys, most ordinary Russians think that Russian life was at its best under Leonid Brezhnev, an era characterised by stability (Dubin, 2004). When the workers grumble and complain about present conditions and long for the Soviet past –as most workers in our material do– it is just too simplistic to label this pure nostalgia.²⁹ Rather, an enquiry into their housing histories suggests that they long for an era that made action possible, even if the opportunities for action may seem limited from a Western standpoint. The respondents, being fully aware of a range of Soviet hardships (having experienced them themselves), nonetheless long for a more “normal life” in a more “normal society”, as the Russian standard expressions go, where “everybody who wants to work can find a job”, where “if you save money, it does not lose its value because of inflation”, or where “there are opportunities for you and your children to improve your living conditions”. These quotes are not from the material (though they sum up the sentiments nicely) but are what were given in a recent survey as the most popular answers to the question of what constitutes a “normal society”.³⁰ In the same survey, more than 70% thought that Russia was not a “normal

29. In Ashwin’s Vishnovka, for instance, the mine was no longer able to provide a social safety net, and savings had been destroyed by inflation. Wages were not paid in time, holiday and sick pay were not paid automatically, unemployment was threatening, and all kindergartens were under the threat of closure. Ashwin (1999: 63) concludes that “the pervasive sense of insecurity and loss of community in Vishnovka therefore cannot be reduced to collective nostalgia for a mythical golden age. It has a real basis”.

30. Source: New Russia Barometer XIII, Fieldwork 18-23 March 2004, N=1602, in www.russiavotes.org, downloaded 8 January 2005. The option “It is safe to go about the streets without being afraid of crime” was, in addition, among the two most popular options, whereas fair treatment from government officials was less frequently seen as needed for a “normal society”.

society” at all or was so to only a limited extent. Whatever one thinks of the value of such categories as a “normal society”, it is nonetheless interesting that to earn money from a job and retain its value, purchase (build a co-operative) or obtain a flat, and hope for a better future for oneself and one’s children³¹ were something that was real for most of the respondents in the Soviet era, but which now for most are crucially lacking.

Against this background, the housing transition looks for many Russians like a change that “can only be for the worse” (Struyk, 1996: 44). Although a large ratio (about 70%) of flats has been privatized, the privatisers were often not aware of the rights and obligations involved and did not consider the financial implications of privatization (UNECE, 2004). Many people feared rising rents and maintenance and utility costs, and were in general worried about the uncertainty of the future (Struyk, 1996: 44). While the transition has brought undeniable benefits, so that people have much to choose from in terms of location, cost, size, amenities and neighbourhood (Lehmann, Ruble, 1997: 1086), the problem for most is that the shortage of flats has shifted into a shortage of money (Vysokovskii, 2001b). For many, then, the benefits of the transition may not have been very substantial compared to the risks. Ownership of flats serves as a good example. According to surveys, most tenants in the Soviet era perceived themselves as owners of their flats (Vysokovskii, 2001a). While legally they did not own them, they actually enjoyed rights of use that equalled or even exceeded in many ways those rights that are conventionally associated with ownership in the West; for instance, they had the right to pass their flat on by inheritance and were almost fully protected against eviction (Marcuse, 1996). Since the beginning of March 2005, a new housing code has been introduced that states among other things that “free” privatization will end by the year 2007 and eviction will be made easier; on the other hand, the aim is also to make mortgage finance accessible to a third of the population (Vihavainen, 2005). What the future will bring to so-called ordinary people, how much will actually change and whether the carrots outweigh the sticks in the forthcoming years remains to be seen.

31. Our material is in dramatic contrast to Post-Soviet Estonia, for instance, where the islanders of Saaremaa were fairly optimistic that their children, at least, had a brighter future ahead (Assmuth, 2001).

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