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Homelessness in Russia: Past and Present

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3 Homelessness in Russia: Past and Present

Different social systems generate different expressions of homelessness. This paper is a brief orientation in the Russian one; its history, its causes, and the conditions it creates for the victims. It is based upon my ongoing doctoral dissertation in social anthropology and about one year of fieldwork conducted at soup-kitchens, railway stations and similar places in St. Petersburg during 1999 and 2000. The work focuses on the adult street population: street children are thus not included.

3.1 The propiska system

What first and foremost determines homelessness as a social phenomenon in Russia is the so-called *propiska*, the compulsory registration of citizens at permanent addresses (in Swedish: *mantalsskrivning*).⁸ Such registrations are common in most countries and they always complicate life for the homeless, although in varying degrees depending on alternative systems such as social security numbers, personal identity numbers, etc. In Russia, there are no effective alternative systems and the *propiska* also functions as a residence permit *and* regulates the state sector of housing.

In short, this means that basically all civil rights depend on the *propiska*: medical care, pensions, access to municipal housing and employment centres, the right to vote, even local library cards. In Soviet times, the legal right to employment was also tied to the *propiska*. The law (§181 of the Codex About Legal Transgressions) which interdicts employing a citizen without a *propiska* and imposes fines on the employer is still valid, and co-exists with a more recent law (§16 of the Legal Codex About Work) which on the contrary inhibits any limitation of an individual's right to be employed which is not purely tied to professional qualities. In cases of contradiction between the remaining Soviet legalization and new rules, the new ones should have precedence. In this case, however, employers usually stick to the old rules, and the only way to find regular employment without a *propiska* is usually to know the employer personally.⁹

⁸ *Propiska* is the Soviet name of the registration and is still used both by people in general and by administrators, even though the term officially has been changed to just 'registration at a permanent place of living'. For a more thorough description of the legal framework and the housing situation, see Höjdestrand (2001).

⁹ From private conversations with small-scale employers such as shopkeepers I have understood that the main reason for demanding a *propiska* is not fear of fines due to the old legislation as much as the fact that the *propiska* constitutes the only reliable means of control over the employee. As for employers in the public sector or the industry, a special study would be required for an understanding of the practices operating when staff is hired.

The *propiska* is valid only locally or regionally, which means that a registration in Murmansk renders nothing in St. Petersburg. Nor does a *propiska* in Vyborg or the rest of the region surrounding St. Petersburg, as the major cities are administratively separate from their own *oblasty* ('county', in Swedish *län*). The system was invented in the early 1930s to protect the large cities from excess immigration, and throughout the Soviet era it remained an instrument for regulation of migration. A 'Catch 22 situation' made the *propiska* a condition for employment and employment a condition for a *propiska*, whereas a system of temporary jobs and temporary registrations (a type of 'gastarbeiter' system) secured the fluctuating needs of labour in the industries. The major cities, in particular Moscow, still enforce this system strictly, even though it has been declared illegal by superior courts more than once. Temporary registrations for studies or just visits exist, but they do not equal the permanent one and are not given without restrictions.

The *propiska* also regulated the size of households in the Soviet system of housing allocation. Each registered person is entitled to a minimum of nine square metres¹⁰, and if the household wants to register more people in its home, it must have spare space for these people according to the norm, with the exception of children, spouses, and old parents. The chronic shortage of housing usually prevents this; housing was and remains scarce in Russia. The possibility to register with friends or acquaintances is also hampered by the absolute entitlement of each registered person to his/her square metres, which means that it is practically impossible to evict someone who has once registered in the dwelling. Most people are thus wary of registering others in their flats, which means that people who rent rooms or flats from private persons cannot register there. Thus, the only way to register within the municipal housing sector is (for those without very close kin) to have benevolent relatives or friends with unusually large flats. Theoretically, the private housing sector, which now comprises half of the total housing stock, offers two more alternatives. The most obvious one is to buy a place to live, either through legal purchase of privatized property, or through buying municipal property illegally by the same kind of forged exchange which is common in e.g. Stockholm.¹¹ The private sector complies with other laws and is therefore not constrained by restrictions on how many people may register in one flat or how these should be related to each other. Nonetheless I have never heard about anybody who has obtained a *propiska* by registering in a privatized flat without actually living there (as is often done in Sweden), even though this ought to be possible. Anyway, these solutions are seldom realistic for the openly homeless, who usually lack not only money but also effective social networks.

It is illegal not to be registered at an address, but since 1992 this crime incurs only fines.¹² In the Soviet era it could result in a couple of years of imprisonment, just as do now abolished laws against long-time unemployment and vagrancy. Non-registered persons, BOMZH¹³, as they are called officially, were thus more likely to be confined in the notorious labour camps than to be openly homeless. One loophole was, however,

¹⁰ The norm varies locally and according to privileges based on social experience. Categories such as war invalids, may for instance be granted more space.

¹¹ The buyer registers fictively at an address (which usually is provided by the broker) and claims to live there for a while before he or she re-registers in the flat of purchase and pays the seller. The seller, in turn, registers at the address where the buyer was registered (also fictively), to give the impression that a real exchange has taken place.

¹² In Moscow this rule is frequently used to legitimize deportations of undesired people from the city. The homeless are always at risk, and at times people with Caucasian origins are also prey to expulsion from the city (one example is the purges after the purported terror bombings of residential houses in the autumn of 1999).

¹³ *Bez Opredelonnogo Mesta Zhitelsetvo*, 'without fixed abode'.

temporary jobs in the North or Far East such as forestry, geological expeditions, gas exploitation and the like, where the *propiska* was not necessarily a prerequisite for employment.

3.2 Immediate causes

The causes of homelessness in Russia differ from the ones in the West. Failure to pay rent does not lead to eviction, nor does disturbing behaviour. Theoretically the administration can evict on these grounds, but if so it has to provide another, more modest, place to live. Given the housing shortage, this seldom occurs in practice. The intention of the government is to introduce market rents and abolish the housing subsidies (cf. Ambrose, Danermark, Grichel 1998), but (to my knowledge) there are no concrete suggestions about what to do with the subsequent rent evaders. A new form of ‘addressed social security’ is intended to back up poor households¹⁴, but it seems very doubtful that the state would be able to support everybody concerned (c.f. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, February 4th, 2000).

According to statistics made by the local NGO *Nochlezhka* in St. Petersburg¹⁵, and to my own observations, the hitherto most common causes of homelessness during the 1990s are: prison sentences, migration, unexpected effects of the privatization of housing, and family conflicts.

Prison sentences were the most common cause of homelessness also during the Soviet era. The rule is that if the tenant of a municipal flat is gone for more than six months, a court decision can evict the tenant, confiscate the flat and give it to someone else. This is still the only ground on which a registered person can be evicted in the municipal sector, but up to 1995 it concerned also involuntary absences due to imprisonment. Everybody sentenced to more than six months of incarceration was thus deprived of his/her place of living and was, subsequently, homeless upon release. The soviets were in certain cases supposed to support this group, but it worked far from always.¹⁶ In practice, most released ex-prisoners had to rely on their families to secure a new *propiska* and a place to live. If there was no family left, the released prisoner was risking a new imprisonment, this time for being homeless and/or unemployed. Quite a few of my own informants have spent two decades or more in labour camps for petty crimes tied to the homeless condition as such: violation of the passport laws, ‘parasitism’ (unemployment), vagrancy, or petty thefts of food.

The practice of cancelling the *propiska* in case of a conviction was abandoned in 1995, and a special commission was created to compensate the victims of the old practice.¹⁷ The general shortage of municipal housing makes this a difficult task, and given the

¹⁵ *Nochlezhka* has on its own accord registered homeless people since the early 1990s, and these archives also contain information about direct reasons for the loss of the *propiska*. The stated causes and the proportions between them do not contradict my own observations, and they are also relatively congruent with a few surveys conducted by Doctors Without Borders in St. Petersburg between 1997 and 1999.

¹⁶ The existence of such support is mentioned in Bodungen (1994). The text does not specify the relevant categories of ex-prisoners, however, nor the nature of the expected support. In the Soviet era a job in e.g. a factory could solve the housing problem thanks to the extensive system of staff dormitories, *obshchezhitie*. Employment was thus crucial for released prisoners in order to secure housing, which obviously was complicated by the fact that criminal records were not counted as a professional merit in the Soviet Union either.

¹⁷ In 1995 the constitutional court decided that depriving convicts of their places of living was illegal even according to the Soviet legislation: if the ‘six-month rule’ was to be applied correctly, a separate court case should confirm the confiscation, and that was never the case. (Statement from the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation No 8-11, June 23rd, 1995, according to printed information to released prisoners distributed by the organization *Nochlezhka*, St. Petersburg.)

substantial duration of Russian prison sentences the flow of released would-be clients will not cease in the near future. According to *Nochlezhka*, about half of the homeless population in St. Petersburg lost their registrations due to prison sentences, although the records do not explicitly state whether the ‘six-month rule’ was the immediate cause in all these cases.

Another cause of homelessness is migration. This was the case also before Perestroika: the large cities have always attracted immigrants, and both then and now an unknown amount of people (without or with *propiska* in other parts of the country) live in these urban centres, hoping to receive the valuable registration in some way or another. Quite a few in this category are out-of-town students who became BOMZH when they graduated and lost their rooms in the student hostels, or people who used to live in now abolished staff hostels at the workplaces (*obshchezhitie*), but most of these people have social networks and never reach the street. The conditions in the peripheries of the country have become even more harsh after Perestroika, and when people from Russia (or ethnic Russians from other former Soviet republics) now try to make their way into the centre, they often have little or nothing to return to in case the move to the ‘big city’ proves to be unsuccessful. Migrants have no particular post in *Nochlezhka*’s statistics of causation, but the organization estimates that some 40% of the homeless in St. Petersburg are ‘non-local’.

Frauds and sales are causes that result from the privatization of housing which was initiated in 1991, and also from the subsequent appearance of private brokers. When living space could be privatised and sold on a legal market, each allocated square metre became a potential source of capital. The result was a wave of shady business tied to exchange and sale of housing. Particularly in the early 1990s, criminal groups were known to extort flats by force from lonely pensioners, substance abusers, and similar ‘weak’ categories, just as certain estate agents and brokers systematically organized frauds, sometimes with the help of corrupt bureaucrats. New licensing rules and increased self-organization of the business have reduced such criminality in recent years (cf. Ambrose, Danermark & Grichel 1998). Illegal operations still occur, but now applying considerably more sophisticated methods.¹⁸ In addition there are people who have lost their places of living because of voluntary sale: affairs where the intention was to buy a new place to live with the money for the old, but where the capital disappeared too early. These people may be substance addicts, who literally ‘drink their flats’, but also people who lost their savings e.g. in the bank collapse of August 17, 1998. In all, ‘frauds and sales’ are about a fourth of the homeless population at present, according to *Nochlezhka*.

A fourth major cause of homelessness is vaguely named ‘family conflicts’ in *Nochlezhka*’s files, and includes everything from fraud operations conducted by relatives (which unfortunately is far from uncommon), or members of households literally being thrown out by the others, to divorces, where one spouse (usually the man) moves without claiming his square metres in order to give the children more space. In *Nochlezhka*’s statistics, this group constitutes about a fourth of the homeless total.

These causes are ‘ideal types’ that often conflate in practice. A released convict may upon return home discover that his mother has died and the flat has disappeared, or that his

¹⁸ According to members of the organization *Komitet zashtiti prav potrebitelej na rynke nedvizimosti* (The Committee for the Defence of the Rights of Consumers at the Estate Market), personal conversation, September 2000.

family has become a victim of an unfortunate exchange of flats and is homeless too, after which he takes off to a new and more promising city as a survival strategy.

The particular causation patterns and the total absence of any state support for people in sudden trouble mean that homelessness in Russia is not necessarily the end of a long process of social exclusion. 'Newcomers' in the street can be anybody, but those who remain there for a long time almost always suffer from absence or disruption of the intimate networks of family and friends that constitute the only existing social security in Russia. A released convict, an immigrant, or a fraud victim can usually avoid the street if the family puts him up, but most of my own informants suffered from conflicts, bereavement, geographical dislocation, or just loneliness already before they lost their places to live.

As for the homeless population as such, Nochlezhka and Doctors Without Borders estimate that some 50,000 – 150,000 people in St. Petersburg and 4 million in Russia are BOMZH, and that about half of them are openly homeless. These numbers are vague, however, not least since they exclude numerous openly homeless people who are not BOMZH. These may be non-locals with remaining *propiski* in their home towns, or locals who still have St. Petersburg *propiski* but for some reason cannot live at the addresses in question.

The psychological health of the street population is comparatively good. Even though people are depressed and stressed, those who suffer from serious mental disorders are duly hospitalized and I seldom or never see severe psychiatric problems among my own informants. What could be called 'destructive defence mechanisms' are common, however, in particular alcoholism. I have seen very little of illegal drugs among my informants, which probably has to do with perceived differences between generations and lifestyles. Most middle-aged and elderly people, homeless or not, resent drug use very fiercely, and the average age of the main street population is higher than that of most drug addicts. The latter also tend to keep to themselves even if they lack a permanent place of living, just as street children usually do.¹⁹ As 'the old drinkers' gradually disappear from the street, drugs will probably become far more common among the openly homeless just as they have in most Western countries. The proliferation of illegal drugs in Russia in recent years is extreme, and in particular heroin is, according to local NGO-activists, becoming increasingly common among the vast number of street children.

Former inmates of orphanages seem over-proportioned among the homeless.²⁰ Often they were not allocated places to live after the orphanage as they should be, but they are also victims of a fragile social position. They are not protected by established social networks and are stigmatized and ill-prepared for the society they enter. Ironically, the huge orphanage system reproduces homelessness. There is no special support for homeless mothers or homeless families in Russia, and these are always expected to leave their children at an orphanage if there are no relatives who can take care of them. The children, in turn, thus run an increased risk of becoming homeless themselves.

¹⁹ Two of my younger informants started to use heroin during my fieldwork. Paradoxically, this partly solved their housing problem since the 'drug addict community' in which they became involved included enough people with a place to live to provide makeshift housing also for the others. Street children usually spend their time in locations different from the adult street population, and as I understood from local NGO-activists they tend to regard grown-up homeless people as contemptible failures, not as role models or sources of security.

²⁰ Of the BOMZHs who registered at Nochlezhka in the first half of 1996, 11% grew up in orphanages. The proportion of the entire Russian population who did so is unknown to me, but it would be appalling if it amounted to the same numbers.

3.3 Survival tools

Targeted state or municipal support to the homeless in Russia is a rare phenomenon and the few existing cases are always strictly local initiatives. Since 1998, St. Petersburg gives pensions and medical insurance to 'local' BOMZHs, and non-local ones are entitled at least to emergent medical care. The city also runs three 'halfway houses' for released and homeless male prisoners, where they register and receive assistance in finding jobs. Two similar institutions for 'rehabilitation' of other categories of homeless people are under construction. However modest these steps may seem, they are nevertheless quite exceptional in the Russian context.

Shelters of the western type, 'staying one night and leaving in the morning', do not exist at all, not even in the charity sector. In St. Petersburg, three NGOs work for the homeless: Caritas runs a soup kitchen, and one corps of the Salvation Army does its best to provide food and a sober environment through leisure programs and religious classes. There is also the NGO Nochlezhka, which distributes the street paper Na Dne (comparable to Situation Stockholm or The Big Issue) and runs an advisory centre and a 'halfway house' of the aforementioned type for some 70 persons. It is largely the persistent lobbying of Nochlezhka and Na Dne that has brought about the changes in municipal policy towards the homeless in the city.²¹

For their day-to-day survival, homeless people are totally dependent on social relations and the benevolence of private individuals. Russia as a socioeconomic formation is extremely unregulated if compared to Scandinavia. The ubiquitous presence of informal niches in both the economy and the urban landscape both helps the homeless and exploits and oppresses them. Residential buildings in St. Petersburg are old and neglected, and their basements and attics are often open and unused. If there are door-codes at all, these are easily outwitted. But the general access to sleeping places also means that they are dangerous. Except for cold and dirt, there is a constant risk of violence from irritated 'neighbours', the police, or violent youth gangs. Knowing the janitor in a house, or being acquainted with the tenants, can reduce the risks and yield a relatively comfortable and stable sleeping place, but such acquaintances are hampered by a persuasive social stigmatization of the homeless.

Deposit bottles, in particular from beer, constitute the standard income for both sexes. They yield proportionally more money than in the West, and they are ubiquitous in the urban landscape. (It is ironic that the homeless, who often are alcoholics, survive from the alcohol consumption of others, but this is really the case.) Metal – i.e. aluminium cans from alcoholic drinks – also renders money, and so does lump and paper.

The job market is otherwise, just like sleeping places, characterized by relative access combined with exploitation and risk which only can be reduced by personal contacts. There are fringe jobs in sectors such as construction, agriculture, or forestry, even though these were more frequent and accessible in Soviet times (cf. Stephenson, 2000). The risk of being cheated by the employer is ever-present, and people often prefer work where the wages are paid instantly or day by day. Common methods are 'hanging out' at markets, waiting for an opportunity to unload a truck, or washing cars in parking lots. Such work contacts are often developed into more permanent relations that secure some continuity. Most available work is traditionally male, and women are clearly disfavoured. There are economic spaces where men and women have equal chances, though,

²¹ Na Dne was originally created and issued by Nochlezhka but is now formally an independent publishing house. In practice, however, the two may be regarded as one and the same organization.

like cleaning at cafés and outside kiosks (usually only for deposit bottles in return). At the railway stations homeless people of both sexes clean train wagons, a job the conductor should do but which she often pays an ‘entrepreneur’ to do, just as certain homeless people sometimes perform the job of the regular cleaners of the station.

3.4 Conclusion

The *propiska* system, the upsurge of other social and economic problems, and not least the social stigmatization of the homeless which enforces the idea that they are themselves to be blamed for their problems, are factors that largely make homelessness an ‘invisible’ and overlooked social problem in Russia. The recent reforms in St. Petersburg are promising, however. The fact that most measures to help the homeless or to prevent their number from growing are taken at local levels implies, unfortunately, that cities take responsibility only for ‘their own’ people, i.e. those who used to have a local *propiska*, and neglect the considerable amount of migrants from other parts of the country.

In all, homelessness cannot be seen separately from the *propiska* system, which must be dealt with on state and local levels simultaneously. Even though the *propiska* officially was abandoned already in 1993, the change was only nominal and there will be no practical changes without an alternative system for registration of the population. Personal ID-numbers have been discussed but did not gain much popularity in the *duma*, and it is in any case unclear how such a system would work and to what extent it would replace the functions of the present address-based system. Presently, the Constitutional Court opposes the *propiska* system while the bureaucratic practice reinforces it. Thus an old Soviet legal system exists parallel to the new Constitution and its principles about human rights, but only those people who are affluent enough to make their way to the higher courts may enjoy the freedom and possibilities of the new era.

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