Russia's Economy of Favours

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Chapter 5

Blat Exchange: Between Gift and Commodity[1]

Ty – mne, ya – tebe.
(One good turn deserves another)
A folk saying.

5.1 *Blat* and Reciprocity.

An instruction from a recent American handbook for barter deals in the contemporary United States says:

> Do not ask for money. You are supposed to trade your skill in repairing the sink for eggs from someone else's chickens. Such behaviour (asking for money instead) injures the noncommercial image of the exchange or cooperation and undermines people's faith in its integrity... Whether you join a barter club, swap with a cousin, or use a network, most of your trade will be part of an ongoing relationship. In effect, this is what separates bartering from cash sales. Since mixing business and friendship is a delicate matter at best, you may need some general guidelines. Remember you want to keep the door open for the next swap. Besides you may meet your barter partner at the pool, or be invited to the same party [Matison and Mack, 1984: 99 cited in Humphrey 1992: 6].

There is no need to learn this skill in the former Soviet Union; it was known, practised and, in fact, so widespread that people sometimes preferred to reduce their obligations by means of monetary exchange.

> "I would prefer to overpay, 'for a service' as it were, because you pay and feel free from obligations. But money was not what people needed, especially tradespeople. Everyone could repay with money but this did not count. If you were given a privilege to buy something in short supply paying its state price, it meant that you were supposed to provide some access to other things in return. I never paid extra money but occasionally helped someone, arranged bookings in hotels, passports for foreign trips. These exchanges were inseparable from good relationships. I suppose one could actually arrange something formally, but the habit of using contacts was so strong that one always asks acquaintances first. It was a specific psychology, I always rang a friend to ask him to ring another friend about me, about appointments or whatever. First, because formal procedures were and still are inefficient, while we, Russians, are too disorganised to apply in time. Everything becomes urgent because we remember about it in the last minute, and in a hurry, we surely go by *blat*. Second, it was a form of socialising, if you want. Like at an oriental bazaar, where they do not put price

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labels because they do not want to be treated instrumentally. They want to be asked, to talk, to bargain. Not for the sake of price, price is not that important, they want to be treated socially. For them it is socialising and they hate arrogant people who pay and go. Even though sometimes this is just what you want: to pay and go" [13].

Reciprocity is based on gift-giving[2]. In his study of the islands of the western Pacific, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski pointed to the existence of a circular system of exchange. Shell armlets traveled in one direction, shell bracelets in the other. As he observed, the exchange had no economic value, but it maintained social solidarities [1922]. In his classic work, *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss argued that the obligations of giving, receiving and repaying are not to be understood simply in terms of rational calculation. Gift-giving is a form of non-immediate reciprocity where reward is neither discussed nor consciously calculated at the moment the offering is made. In the long run, however, one expects gifts to be reciprocated. This creates the contradiction between the intersubjective definition of a gift transaction, as a ritual act that is independent of all other acts, and the objective fact that it is one element in a succession of reciprocal transactions [Mauss 1957]. Bourdieu has further argued, as mentioned earlier, that this contradictory structure is a necessary feature of gift exchange, and that the defining characteristic of gift exchange is the temporal separation of gift and counter gift in an indefinite cycle of reciprocity. It is because of the separation of gift and return gift that the actors can deny that there is in fact an obligation to make a return. According to Bourdieu, the symbolic negation of economic calculation in gift exchange serves the requirements of strategic interaction. He conceived the gift as a form of capital in which individuals invest in order to carry through their projects.

"Gift exchange is an exchange in and by which the agents strive to conceal the objective truth of the exchange, i.e. the calculation which guarantees the equivalence of the exchange. If 'fair exchange', the direct swapping of equivalent values, is the truth of gift exchange, gift exchange is a swapping which cannot acknowledge itself as such" [Bourdieu 1979:22].

As discussed earlier, *blat* exchange is even more distant from direct swapping. Psychologically, culturally and practically direct exchanges were not possible. Rather, *blat* exchange can be characterised by a reciprocal dependence, which engenders regard for and trust in the other over the long-term. Gregory claims that such reciprocal dependence is characteristic of the 'gift' as opposed to the 'commodity'[3], but I would see it as equally present, in a different form, in *blat*. *Blat* is an intermediary form of exchange to be associated neither with 'the gift' nor with 'commodity exchange'. In gift exchange, inalienable objects of the same kind pass between people already bound together by social ties, whilst in commodity exchange, alienable objects of different kinds pass between people acting as free agents. Gift exchange underwrites social relations and is concerned with social reproduction; commodity

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[2] Polanyi distinguished three basic systems of economic organization [1925]: alongside the 'reciprocity' system, based on the gift, there is the 'market system', subject to the laws of classical economics and the 'redistribution' system. Whereas gifts are exchanged between equals, redistribution depends on a social hierarchy. Leaders (or patrons) like the Pathan *khans* distribute to their followers the goods they have taken from outsiders. The followers (or clients) are not expected to give the goods back at a later time, but to offer some other forms of 'counter-prestations' [Burke 1992: 70].

[3] Whereas Gregory counterpoises gift and commodity as a binary pair, Sahlins places them at the opposite ends of a scale: from the positive altruism of what he confusingly calls 'generated reciprocity' to the 'unsociable extreme' of 'negative reciprocity'. According to Sahlins, reciprocity is "not a single relation between incomings and outgoings, but a 'continuum', a 'spectrum', ranging from the pure gift ... to barter and theft which are each an attempt to get something for nothing with impunity. In between are those balanced reciprocities in which social conventions stipulate returns of commensurate worth or utility within a finite and a narrow period". See also Davis, J. *Exchange*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992.

exchange establishes relations between things and ensures reproduction of the latter [Gregory 1982]. Although *blat* certainly does transfer alienable objects, it does so on the condition that social relationships already exist. 'The other' is not only functional but is regarded personally and in this sense becomes irreplaceable. The favours therefore bear, as it were, a non-alienable character. They are marked by the personal stamp of the donor. This can be best imagined as the occasional borrowing of one's access (*dostup*) but the access itself is never alienable. Just as in gift exchange, where debt cannot be returned by a different kind of gift, a received favour is never equivalent to that which the recipient can provide in return. The original favour leaves a 'memory' even if an unlike return has been made. I prefer not to use the term 'debt', for *blat* favours are not so deeply rooted in codes of honour as an anthropological concept of 'debt' would imply. Even though gifts and *blat* are both non-monetary exchanges which derive from and create relationships, it is important to see the distinction. What differentiates them is the compulsion and 'contrived asymmetry' of the gift, as opposed to the relative freedom and balance of *blat*. The compulsion of the gift, as Marilyn Strathern emphasises, lies in forcing others to enter into debt[4]. It is here that the 'contrived asymmetry' lies: one has to accept a gift and thus a debt. *Blat* also does not entail the reciprocal independence of the transactors. Indeed, it takes place within a given community between people who interact on a regular basis. But as it happens upon request, *blat* is protected from imposed generosities, even though some implications of 'debt' or 'honour' may occur. The specific character of *blat* as an exchange of 'favours of access' falls into neither the category of gift nor commodity exchange. Embedded both in private relationships and access to the public resources, *blat* implies certain difficulties in the analysis of reciprocity.

Reciprocity in *blat* relations is created and preserved by a mutual sense of 'fairness' and trust, in which each side takes responsibility as the recipient both for his/her satisfaction and that of the other. People trusted each other because they knew one good turn deserved another and this was in their mutual interest. Because *blat* tends to be repetitive and often operated with known partners, and because of the absence of any sanctions outside the relationship, it is possible to speak of balance in *blat* relations. This is in spite of the fact that objects always had a different status in the micro-systems of each of the transactors and the two sides had to agree that their transaction was fair. 'Exchange rates' are subordinated to the social relations between actors [Sahlins 1972] and therefore there is no criterion by which a general value may be established.

To represent the reciprocal nature of *blat* exchanges in all their variety three basic perspectives, or regimes, of reciprocity should be distinguished: the regime of equivalence, the regime of affection, the regime of status. I use the idea of regimes for the analysis of reciprocity to avoid the assumptions implied in the usage of the terms 'kinship', 'friendship', 'acquaintance'. It was argued in the previous chapters that *blat* relations cannot be identified with personal relationships. Consequently, the reciprocity of the former should not be considered in terms of the latter. In her analysis of the analogous phenomenon in China Yang [1995] undertook to consider connections providing a more elaborate classification of personal relationships: family and kinship, neighbours and native-place ties, non-kin relations

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[4] As Parry [1986] has pointed out, there are important differences in the ideology of 'the gift' between its classic tribal home (Melanesia, Polynesia) and the regions of Asia dominated by world religions. In India the gift does not constrain a return, but is rather a religious transfer without return, embodying the sins of the donor, a surrogate for sacrifice. The gift is separated from other transactions of the complex economy precisely by its religious connotations. As Parry rightly points out it is only in the Christian, not the Asian, world that the theory of pure utility has developed, making the things of this world antithetical to the person's true self [1986: 486].

of equivalent status, and non-kin superior-subordinate relations. The criteria of status, degree of familiarity and type of personal relations, combined in her classification, in my opinion are to be separated. It would be erroneous to suppose that kin, friendship networks or neighbourly relations do not imply any purposive or calculative interaction, whereas networks of acquaintances imply nothing but calculation of prospective contributions. Neighbours may be closer than kin, friends can also be in superior-subordinate relations, etc. The proposed classification of regimes does not necessarily correspond to types of relationships: friends may happen to communicate in the regime of status, relatives in the regime of equivalence and acquaintances in the regime of affection. It enables us to distinguish transactions of different kinds within a given relationship: *blat* transactions between friends can fall into different regimes according to the type of situation, kind of favour, previous transaction or state of relationship. "They differ depending on characters involved, how people want to view the relationship themselves and, most of all, on the situation in which one helps or denies assistance" [31].

Apart from that, neither the actual character of relations (degree of intimacy or mutual help), nor the fluctuations in their character (cooling down of friendship, separation of spouses) are reflected in general concepts of friendship or kinship[5]. The idea of switching regimes is crucial both to integrate the dynamic of personal relations and to grasp the self-regulating mechanisms and the character of sanctions in *blat* relations. By switching from one regime to another people react to the changes in personal relationships, control and stimulate each other to action. To distinguish different regimes within the same type of relationship is particularly important in monitoring the processes of social change in post-Soviet conditions[6]. Let us consider the ties of reciprocity in these three regimes in more detail.

5.1.1 Regime of equivalence.

The distinctive aspect of *blat* in the regime of equivalence is the expectation of the potential 'utility' of the other. It is taken into account alongside the actual favour, received or provided.

> "For example, I needed to have a coat made, quickly and well. A friend of my friend agreed to help. Naturally, I always helped her to obtain fabric after that, arranged her a credit at our shop, never took extra money. I do not need her services often but I know I can always go and ask her, and she won't refuse. If I obtain goods in short supply for

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[5] Boltanski suggested the distinction of 'affective regime' and 'regime of justice', which the same relationship may undergo [1992]. In the regime of justice the stress is laid on the equivalencies, explicated to manage disputes. On the contrary, in the ordinary course of common actions equivalencies are not subjected to deliberate reflection. In the affective regime, persons actively cooperate in the process of shoving the equivalencies aside in order to make the cumulation and calculation operations which are required to blame and criticize difficult. This regime is described with the stress is on the present moment, and on a form of forgiveness which borders on forgetting. The person who goes on shifting from one regime to another looks back over past events in a disillusioned way: "how was it possible to be such a fool; so naive of me. For the last twenty years I have been making [all these favors]... Now, I realize" But this experience of the moment of truth is not more real than the other. The regime in which one makes calculations is no more true, no more real, than the regime in which people inhibited their calculation abilities, he argues. It is the reshuffle in the perception of the world stemming from a quick shift from one regime to another which gives the illusion of a glaring truth. Luc Boltanski, "The sociology of critical capacity". Lecture at I.A.S. Princeton, March 1992; Boltanski, L. *L'amour et la Justice comme Competence: Trois essais de la sociologie de l'action*. Paris: Metailie, 1990.

[6] The relations of trust will be considered in chapter 6. The study is indebted to the distinction between trust based on belief, characteristic of the 'pre-modern', and 'modern' trust based on mutual self-interest and functional interdependence, introduced by Luhmann [1979, 1988]. The analysis of the transformation of *blat* in post-Soviet conditions can be seen as a testing ground for the role of trust and offers a particularly instructive insight to both the necessity and the difficulty of generating social cooperation based on trust.

someone who is not my friend, one has to settle up immediately or in the short-term. But this is rare. I only get in contact with those who or whose contacts can be useful. For someone who is a good friend of my friend or important person or has good connections I would rather credit my favour, in case I need something from them afterwards" [40].

This statement of an experienced tradeswoman in her forties was supported by a young waiter, who did not have enough connections and spoke resentfully: "One has to pay cash only when one has no possibilities or access to offer and has no proper contacts. If one is a son of someone important, everything will be free for sure. People credit him with favours to repay to his father or to be able to ask for a credit themselves" [8].

Blat relations in the regime of equivalence were most widespread among those involved with trade and services, medicine, those who dealt with a great number of customers, patients, etc. They thus developed a certain cynicism. Customers also happened to cultivate a relationship when they needed a service. This did not necessarily result in a long-term personal or intimate relationship. Rather relationships came to the terms of 'mutual utility' (*vzaimopoleznost'*), often euphemised as 'mutual help' (*vzaimopomoshch'*). But even then, relationships were more important than immediate repayment. Even those running a private practice did not sound profit-seeking:

"People do contact me about repair services. They could go to the repair shop, but my service is known for its guaranteed quality. I make it cheaper for good contacts because I value their assistance in delivering new customers and creating a good reputation for my service. I never serve an outsider, I want clients to be recommended and reliable, so that we always keep in touch afterwards, just in case" [38].

A dentist put it even more directly:

"I do dentistry and never make money out of it. But I make my contacts, I know that my patients will help me, if I need something. I keep these contacts but this does not mean that a long-term relationship cannot be developed from them. If my request gets refused the relationship breaks, but if the contact is good and reliable, we may become friends" [41].

The emphasis on mutual 'utility' is most marked in the regime of equivalence, but the actual balance of favours is not so important. Objects are not measured against one another. It is the relations between subjects, not objects, that are valued most and essential. In *blat*, the question of equivalency arises as a sanction in breaking (cooling down) relationships or switching to another regime. There is also no external criterion for the evaluation of exchange as the value of the object for a donor and recipient is often different. The objects exchanged are dissimilar. Therefore, the values which exchanged objects represent are indicative of the confrontation between ways of life, or, as Strathern puts it, of "the regard in which the other is held" [1992 : 169-188]. The fact that *blat* relations are often mediated complicates the issue of balance even more:

"Mediation is not a favour to pay for. A box of chocolates, a bottle of cognac - maximum, but often not even that. I just introduced her to a proper contact. Who knows what will happen in life, what kind of help I may need. There might be a situation where I ask her to help or connect me to her friends. Everyone is good for something" [40].

"If I ask someone to help somebody else, I never get paid for this, I just reserve my right to ask in turn" [41].

The separation of favour from the return favour through intermediary whereby the return comes not from the person whom the original favour was given is another feature of

reciprocity in *blat* relations which will be considered in more detail in 5.2. In every situation, however, the parties know who is obliged to whom.

"In practice, one values the received favour to one's own standard and reacts correspondingly. If this satisfies the donor, the balance is maintained. On a psychological level, the parties are aware of their obligations. They feel their right to ask or obligation to repay" [41].

"The practical sense of obligation is simply a turn-taking. If I received a favour, I know it is my turn now. It is like in board-game, but the score is never equal. When I did something in return the score is closer to the balance, but not necessarily equal. I may be still obliged, and my partner will ask me again. If I accept his vision of the score I proceed with the game, if not, I quit. If my favour was significant, I'll be able to claim something else. And then, it is his turn to decide whether he proceeds with the game or not. It is impossible to calculate a precise score, but who is due is felt. You either feel it yourself, or they make you feel" [11].

Blat thus generates an in-built tendency to act fairly, that is, in a way which will satisfy the other partner so that a return-favour is probable and the exchange may be repeated in the future. The exchange is fully dependent on the interest which each side has in the 'other' and previous exchanges, which results in stability and reproduction of social relations.

If standards of value correspond, and expectations coincide with an actual reaction (which may be expressed in gratitude or attention, not necessarily a return favour), the relations become routine with no need of probation within the regime of equivalence. "The process of establishing contacts takes time, not just one or two years, because you must know the person well, to know his character and preferences, to know how to socialise, what to offer him and he must know what to expect from me" [40].

Stable relationships based on achieved or *a priori* available standards of value, mutual sympathy and satisfaction, should be considered in the regime of affection.

5.1.2 Regime of affection.

While in the regime of equivalence *blat* is primarily an exchange implying a relationship, in the affective regime *blat* is focused on a relationship implying exchange. Participants are thus bound by the personal ties irrespective of whether they are involved in *blat* transactions or not.

"Between friends the requests can be unlimited, but at the same time, I will require from my friend to see why I can't help without taking offense. If I can't, I can't. He is supposed to believe that if I could I would do my best. It is mutual trust in each other. The relationship is based on the belief that we are friends and will do everything to maintain it" [12].

"The close friend will always understand if I can't do something. If I arrange tickets, they might not be the best places. He will understand that the best places I had to hand out to others for some reason. The level of trust is that I trust in him as in myself. We do not have to pretend or to impress each other" [29].

The availability to each other, an understanding of the other's 'standard of value', and willingness to help creates certainty that request will be fulfilled. *Blat* transactions presuppose an ability to understand the others' purposes and interpret the actions of others with regard to the self. Within an 'economy of favours', a set of normative obligations to provide assistance to others so that they can carry out their projects is considered as positive, and collapse of it provokes a sense of betrayal.

Blat relations in this regime are predicated upon belonging to a personal network, that is, a relatively closed social circle. It is one of the most common features of everyday life that individuals routinely construct, and are selectively recruited into, specialised social worlds or networks. These 'micro-universes' [Luckmann 1978: 285], such as kinship networks or company of friends, are the principal social contexts within which, and around which, ties to significant others are organised [Strathern 1981]. Through these social networks, individuals gain not only opportunities for interaction but also access to resources. Moreover, the sense of belonging and feelings of affection disguise *blat* relations and thus contribute to their efficiency. Within circles the potential 'utility' is substituted for personal attitude.

> "I will do a favour to a neighbour not because I want something in return, but because he is my neighbour. It is human relationship. He may, of course, do me a favour as well. He will look after my flat when I am not around. But it is not so important. What is important is that we are on informal terms. It is a relationship, rather than anything else" [9].

Aspects of equivalency are even less marked in this regime. "One can't take money from a friend, we were just brought up like this. Even now that I run my private business I will see my friends in non-working hours and provide them any treatment for free". Reciprocity must not, however, be underestimated:

> "You can help a friend with pure motives, once, twice. But this cannot last on regular basis. The system is still turn-taking. It does not matter what you can offer, nobody wants anything extraordinary, it can be just advice or information ('Sugar will be available in that shop at 6 p.m., go and get it' or 'I am going to queue for sausages, do you want half a kilo?'). It is important to be useful to the other, in other words, to care" [11].

> "Between friends mutual help is natural, but it is mutuality of relationship, not mutuality of favours. Friends do not calculate, friends do things for each other anyway" [39].

Networks of friends are the most efficient and ramified.

> "I have got many contacts who are, in fact, my friends: a car mechanic, all kinds of specialists in medicine, wives of my friends in trade, a dentist (used to be my client, now he has his garage opposite to mine and we often drink together), many friends are from the same plant I worked at long ago, some are in business now. One friend of mine goes to China on business. He brings me spare parts for my work and does not even take money. The spares are not, perhaps, expensive but they are indispensable for my work and he has to look for them on top of his own problems. None of these people are business contacts, even though we all help each other in many ways. We spend our leisure time together, go to sauna and for summer picnics. Our wives are friendly as well. This sauna, for example. It belongs to the plant where I worked. My friend was a master of our shop. Now he is elected a general director of the plant. He books the sauna and we go there regularly. Our wives also go next day. For these friends I repair everything for free, with a quality as for myself. As they do for me" [38].

The moral obligations within such networks are particularly strong, reinforced by affective emotions.

> "For example, my friend helped me with moving to another place, he obtained a car somewhere, carried things etc. Of course, I feel obliged and when he asks me to obtain a medicine or something, I'll strain all my nerves for that. If I can't do it myself, I'll

ask my other friends, my wife's sister, who is a doctor, but obtain it. Friends, however, do not ask for things which I can't do. What I can I offer myself" [28a].

The rhetoric of friendship tends to conceal mutual obligations, as friendship is understood as the refusal to calculate.

"I do lots of things for my friends but I wouldn't like them to feel obliged. I attended all the meetings of a building cooperative, when my friend could not do it himself and expected no obligation on his side. He is a godfather of my girls and does baby-sitting for me when I do my business trip. Why should I feel obliged?" [10].

But in fact, if the balance in the relationship is broken, if one takes offense and feels that the code of friendship has been violated, the relationships are likely to slip into the regime of equivalence. If one does not repay appropriately, a number of sanctions can be applied. "In some cases, I can even demand a repayment, it depends on the person and on the situation. To some people a hint would be enough, some need a straightforward reminder" [41].

As it was mentioned already, *blat* relations are self-regulating, that is, parties are forced to act fairly by the relationship itself. But in cases where someone is considered untrustworthy, sanctions can be inflicted. The cooling down of relationships is a signal for the person to realise it is his turn and to make his move. If this does not succeed, his reputation for untrustworthiness may spread, and relations break, especially if one lets the other down. An untrustworthy person loses his opportunities to be involved in the chains of relationships and thus falls out of the *blat* network. The specifics of the affective regime, however, is that people may forgive violations of rules or sacrifice considerations of equivalence for the sake of the relationship itself. Within close and routine relationships people may forget their favours, and can be reminded of them. Sanctions are 'restitutive', that is, do not necessarily terminate relationship but, re-adjusting the balance, they involve restoration, the re-establishment of relationships. Relations become balanced in the continuous round of favours.

At the same time there is the 'reverse side' of these networks of assistance where the sense of common morality is substituted for by the morality of a selected circle of people. It is therefore important to trace both stabilising and 'corrupting' implications which *blat*, in fact, combines. Affective relations between those involved create a kind of solidarity on the basis of internal, or private, ethics of the circle. The public side of such inner solidarity is a group egoism, when one's own circle is considered superior to any other. Affective relations thus divide as well as unite people. "I will help my sister or brother to get a job, not a stranger. A stranger may fit this job much better, but it does not bother me. I want to help my relative or friend" [30]. The relationship within this regime can be grasped by the metaphor of 'brotherhood'. 'Brothers' will share both good times and personal troubles because they have the desire and the obligation to help one another in times of need. "If I have an access my friend or relative surely has it too" [38]. Actual kinship can play a significant role here, but at times 'the ethic of brotherhood' prove stronger than the bonds between husband and wife or child and parents.

5.1.3 Regime of status .

In Russia, people say 'someone has big connections, protection' and also say '*blat*' in such cases. It is important, however, to see the differences of this regime of reciprocity in comparison to the others. If in the 'affective regime' *blat* favours naturally follow from relationships, in the 'regime of status' they also convey messages about power, status, and authority. In contrast to the other regimes, relations in the regime of status are not symmetrical. This regime comes in operation when one's 'status' is used to refrain or withdraw from engaging into reciprocal deals in affective or equivalent regimes, regardless of

whether a favour is provided or not. The use of status can follow the pattern of patron-client relationships where the superiors are supposed to know the ways, to control them, and to take responsibility, while the subordinate is to be loyal and respectful. In the regime of status the balance is less contingent, as it is often the case that the value and character of favours are such that they cannot be repaid in principle.

"There are favours which cannot be paid off in principle. For example, to connect a telephone line or to provide an apartment" [15].

"Whatever one does for a person who helped with a flat and with telephone, it's never enough" [19].

Such favours are connected with the diversion of state property or redistribution which takes place in patron-client relationships and thus does not imply any equivalent exchange.

"When you deal with 'big men' (*bol'shimi lyud'mi*) they need nothing from you. It was not a relationship even, they just treated me as a 'small boy' with interesting ideas and honest eyes and helped me. It is clear that they see themselves as big bosses able to help the young, Komsomol, me as a representative of the International Festival Committee. Reciprocity between these people is not like *blat* exchange of goods in short supply. Their help is not in exchange for something else. I had nothing to repay with but they always helped" [32].

"It was often the case that I was given a favour but not the opportunity to repay. It happens with people who are not close contacts and who are powerful enough to solve your big problem easily. They help and forget about it, while I felt obliged and awkward because my gratitude would be irrelevant. Sometimes it is done to prevent another request, to keep one indebted or just to feel oneself powerful" [19].

Often bosses expect or pretend to expect nothing in return. One university administrator remembered that they employed the daughter of the deceased rector of university. "It was done in his memory. She was not brilliant, not the best at the faculty, so we had to avoid the formal rules, by *blat*. And we are not going to have any return or gratitude for that" [36]. A favour could be paid off by loyalty, but in practice this may not be the case. Another example given by the same person related to his personal friend.

"I had a good friend in Kuzbass in the regional party committee who used to help us a lot but now lost all his power. His daughter submitted a dissertation which was no good. I helped her and she passed. It was altruistic on my side. She must have been aware that she passed by *blat* but I never had anything from her. I think when you enjoy doing favours, this is the return" [36].

"I help not because I expect something in return. My contacts are people who would not calculate the provided favours. If somebody asks for a favour I help because I respect this person, normally it is someone whom I know for a long time. Intuitively I know who is a right person to have a relationship with. I feel how respectable or responsible he is. There are mistakes, of course, but one realises them fairly quickly" [34].

Another example of non-reciprocal case was given by the organiser of Youth Festivals:

"In spring 1991 I was organising an International Festival. Many foreign guests and other people had to be brought from Moscow to Novosibirsk. I needed a plane. I knew that Chkalov military plant had its own plane but to approach the director straight would have just spoiled everything. So I went to see the first secretary of the regional party committee. He knew us from the previous Festivals, we used to drink together and he liked the idea of Festivals. We wrote a letter to the director of the Chkalov enterprise from the regional Komsomol committee. The chief engineer of the plant

was a good contact of Komsomol people, he said, 'we are all *svoi lyudi*'. The letter was signed by the secretary of regional party committee and that was it. Even though there was a phrase in the letter 'payment guaranteed', I know definitely that neither the regional Komsomol committee nor anybody else paid anything. Everything was done like that in those times. Connections were important. I did not have connections when I started, I never managed to get an appointment to see the mayor until the former secretary of the party organisation of our University, who was then a secretary of local party committee, took me to his place. But in time I acquired a lot of connections. I remember after Alexander King, the president of the Club of Rome came to our Festival, people started contacting me" [32].

It also happens that the regime of status operates against a potential client. Playing out the duty and commitment to formal targets could be a preventive measure or protective device against *blat* overtures.

"A person might think of himself as my friend and come to ask me about something. He is guided by the image of our friendship, while I am guided by the politics of my business. Whether one receives a favour from me depends on the person, kind of request, situation and the perspective I take in every particular situation. It used to be the case that moral obligations of friendship overweighed other obligations. Now it all changes because business interests become dominant" [6].

5.1.4 Blat Gifts.

The regime of equivalence and the regime of status can be distinguished from the affective regime by the presence of *blat* gifts. *Blat* gifts are symbolic. They indicate that the favour was either too small or too significant to be repaid. In the first case, gifts were given for services which were supposed to be provided anyway, so that gift giving was just an indication of 'personal touch'. In the second case, the favour was coupled with using one's power or influence in decision-making procedure, diversion of state property, roughly speaking, provided at the expense of state or collective pocket. In both cases gifts indicated the appreciation and gratitude of the recipient to the donor.

"It used to be very simple in Russia. The range was never really diverse. Gifts could range from a bottle of vodka or drinking together to a box of chocolates and greetings for festive days and holidays. Russian folk were modest and unpretentious. Used to be like that, and some are still the same" [21].

"Small gifts were signs of gratitude. They were not obligatory, but useful to create a benevolent attitude" [8].

"If you went abroad you normally brought souvenirs for those who helped with the documents etc." [33].

For the most part, *blat* gifts were redundant transactions used for the construction of small social worlds. They did not imply help or redistribution of resources, as in gift-giving in conditions of scarcity within circles of friends or relatives. In intimate relationships birthday presents can be costly, friends know what the person needs, obtain it and share its cost. But gifts are not given for friendly favours.

"I never give presents or anything to friends, they are supposed to help anyway. If I need to go somewhere, I better ring 10 times asking to drive me than go by bus. They will send me a car, will curse me but provide it" [3].

In professions where services can be converted into a personal favour, gifts are more specific and purposive, especially if given in the beginning.

"I had to transfer all the property into my name after the death of my husband. I was in despair and did not even know where to start. If my notary was not so helpful, I would have lost everything. When I first went to see her, I gave her a present. She treated me informally, worked in her non-working hours, helped with her experience and contacts. We became friends. Giving her presents, I wanted to express my appreciation of her cordial attitude" [23].

"If one paid for my service", said a master of hi-tech, "no presents were needed, but they were given as a sign of gratitude. Nice chocolates were most often given to me. I do not drink and people knew this. My wife was given a French perfume for my services once. That person said: 'it has nothing to do with you, this is for the hostess'" [38].

Blat gifts could be French perfume or cosmetics for women and a good cognac for men. Flowers and chocolates did not count. The gift was symbolic, it was not a repayment, just a sign of thankfulness. At the same time, it was symbolic because French perfume and cognac were cheap but difficult to obtain. The cost of a present was not important, what counted was that it could not be bought. "To give such a present one needed to have other connections of which this present was a symbol. It used to be easy those days, everybody knew how to express one's gratitude, while now it is a real problem" [13].

"My mother was a known surgeon. She carried out about thousand of operations a year, brought medicines from abroad, took care of her patients with chronic diseases for years. She saved so many lives and, naturally, people were happy to provide her with everything they had themselves. She was a conscientious character, always embarrassed to accept gifts. Not to accept them was, however, also embarrassing. She ended up accepting self-made gifts (self-baked cakes, self-grown strawberries) and perfume. That time the perfume sets 'Red Moscow', 'White Lilac', 'Red Poppy' were popular to give. I remember in 1958 one woman left money in an envelope, my mother felt very cross and insulted then - sent me to return it" [13].

The embarrassment caused by giving a gift made people give them tactfully, on appropriate occasions: on high days and holidays, on one's birthday or as a treat for children, to bring flowers, boxes of chocolates for Women's Day or New Year.

"I had many acquaintances and always engage in helping-out. Especially if someone needs money urgently. I ring around the city and solve the problem. This is just the way I am. I have nothing in terms of money, but my three daughters always get their 'Snickers'. Everybody knows they love them and learnt to bring them" [10].

Gift giving was cultivated in institutions, especially in big cities.

"It was impossible not to bring cigarettes or perfume to a secretary if I went to see someone important. These gifts were no measure of the favour provided, they were purely symbolic, just an entourage of *blat*. Secretaries and children of big bosses often became targets of such overtures. All this has been transformed now, however. First of all, there are no queues any more. If a firm needs a service regularly [service, not favour], they pay a 'salary' to the cashier who reserves tickets whenever they ring. It can be a normal rate of salary. If needs are not so regular, then again: gifts, chocolates, flowers, cigarettes; money can now be accepted as well. If we talk about more serious things, they also became calculable, because money became equivalent to 'possibility' which was never the case before. Those bureaucrats who used to work and could afford to work for credit became now much more explicit in their requests, expressing them in concrete sums of money. And not in a lump sum, but rather on the permanent

basis. If we collaborate in business, he or she gets a commission, a percentage or 'salary'" [22].

Apart from gifts, sanctions have been revised as well. It used to be taking offense, or cooling down of relationships, while now they are becoming more violent and strict. Time became speeded up and waiting for compensation came to be less possible.

5.2 Etiquette of Intermediaries.

5.2.1 Concealing the reciprocity of blat relations.

In contrast to personal relations and simple barter, *blat* relations are not necessarily dyadic. *Blat* transactions can be circular: A provided a favour to B, B to C, C to D, and D to A, and the last chain might not have taken place. It was a circular indebtedness: "If I helped people with my contacts, I knew they would pull strings for me (*pomogut svoimi svyazyami*)" [30]. What is important is that there should not be an immediate repayment: a factor which is the necessary condition of *blat* transactions. Reciprocity was to be masked by the delayed return. Mediated favours were even more efficient for avoiding practical and social constraints against immediate repayment. Under Soviet conditions, where monetary transactions were not fully functional, *blat* provided a specific system of 'promissory notes' (*spetsificheskaya sistema nematerial'nykh vekselei*) enabling the concealment of the exchange relationships.

"The mechanism supporting *blat* was psychological. If my best friend asked me something, I felt morally obliged and, in fact, preferred to compromise with my formal duties rather than break our relationship. He asked for someone to pass the exams, for example. I understood his fatherly instinct, I am a father myself, and I helped, even though I knew it was not fully legal. To do this I had to ask the teacher of course, who valued relationship with me, and wouldn't refuse for the same psychological reason. Thus I mediated the chain of relationship: my friend - his son - teacher - myself - my friend. All relations in this chain were hierarchical, except our friendship, but all of them were human relations, understanding each other's problems, helping each other without any payment" [36].

Psychologically, mediation was very important because "it was terribly difficult to ask on behalf of oneself. It was much easier to ask for a friend, or for an institution, just to put in a word for somebody" [36]. It did look respectable when an intermediary asked to help somebody 'unselfishly', or when a donor helped an unknown person just for the sake of the relationship with the intermediary.

If I rang about somebody, it was because I thought the person deserved it. I did it because I really wanted to help the person, not because I expected a return favour or anything. People could say that I did everything by *blat*, but for me it was not *blat*, it was help [34].

Even when helped or helping 'unselfishly', a person entered this efficient (for the command economy) form of relationship called '*blat*' by outsiders. Apart from everything else, mediation in this case was an important mechanism of concealing reciprocity.

5.2.2 Transference of influence.

Many respondents remarked that in the formula 'I am from Ivan Ivanovich' the status of Ivan Ivanovich was of crucial importance. A client was perceived with respect to the status of the person who introduced or recommended him. The status of the intermediary was, as it were, transferred onto the recipient:

> If I get a call from my friend, or from a person whom I respect, I will do my best for someone whom I do not even meet. I do it for my friend rather than for the originator of request. The request will not necessarily be fulfilled, but at least I will do something about it,

said an intermediary, a high-up in former nomenclatura. To be sure that the request would be fulfilled, one had to find an intermediary whose mediation would settle the deal. The intermediary had to have an adequate status either in personal terms, or in terms of his position and influence. Sometimes one needed an intermediary who would be higher in status, sometimes the other way around. "I can't ask someone who is expecting too much from me. It is just out of balance. I will find a person who would ask for me, but then I won't be obliged directly and won't have to repay so much", remarked a respondent of high status [36]. Simply speaking, the contact must be appropriate to the request.

> There are cases that require serious connections and need to be approached from above, as it were, but there are things which are much easier to arrange from below. If somebody asks my boss for a small favour, he won't get involved in it. He will ask me to do it, reserving his right to ask for more significant favours. As an intermediary in this case, I won't get anything from my boss and from the originator of request. The latter will be grateful and obliged to the former, while the former won't be obliged or grateful to me. He is my boss and not supposed to repay. He can use my connections but I cannot use his. My relationship with boss is non-symmetrical, but I can rely on his support and promotion if I am loyal and trustworthy [12].

The repayment to the intermediary depended on personal relations between the parties and concrete situation. In case of advice or introduction an intermediary received nothing except for advice and introduction when he or she was in need. And even the latter was not necessary. Some respondents, however, commented upon recent changes in this respect:

> In the West they pay a fee for mediation, while in Russia this was never the case. People were shy about money, especially with friends. Recently everything has changed radically. People have learned to calculate now. If I introduce one friend, businessman, to another and their business is successful, why can't I have a little something out of it? Now people offer and I do not refuse, even though to claim a cut is still kind of embarrassing. A recent example: business in present conditions is so complicated and corrupt that reliability and really good contacts are highly valued. I was just lucky that two close friends of mine (one is my foreign partner) were looking for each other. I introduced them to each other but not only that. They trusted each other, because I vouched for each of them to the other. They knew I had no decent flat, so they decided I could have a percentage from their contract. This is how I bought my flat [6].

> The form of mediation was itself very important because it conveyed a message about the degree of obligation the intermediary was ready to accept.

> I can give a telephone number of my contact and let somebody I know ring giving my name, for example, but the trick is that I have to ring myself. Because if I ring myself I enter the relationship, and the obligation I am taking is more straightforward. The person will do the same thing in the end in both cases, but it is important for him to do it for me and not for the one who is calling on my behalf,

explained a respondent helping out somebody he did not know out of trouble [19]. To be efficient, mediation had to be personal. But it could also imply different degrees of trust and involvement.

An intermediary can introduce me to other people with whom I will have further relations; alternatively, he can tell me how much or what is needed in return and obtain the thing for me without introducing me; or may represent me so that the person who helps will not even know that the favour is transferred to me. In the latter case, one must think twice before asking for somebody because he is taking responsibility for both parties. If one of them is not reliable, the intermediary runs a risk of losing the opportunity to ask again [6].

With friends mediation occurred more or less routinely. Friends were always asked first, and if they could not help directly they transferred the request so that help could be eventually provided by some donor. In the latter case the recipient had to pay, or give some present, but it was reliable, urgent, efficient. Even with friends, however, there were situations where one could not share one's *blat* connection with another, that is, perform as an intermediary, easily:

Normally, intermediaries are friends of whom I can be as sure as of myself. But some deals require intermediaries who need to be approached themselves. In short, when intermediaries are dependent on me or obliged to me already, then I can rely on them. If it is a one-way favour, one cannot be sure of anything [19].

In mediated relations, indebtedness was embedded within each specific link or dyadic relationship, not diffused all along the chain. That is to say, each person in the chain would only be indebted to the next person to whom she or he made a request, not necessarily to the one who actually granted the favour. The dyadic relations were personal and thus horizontal, but in the long chain they were composed in such a way that the result could be achieved at the very top level.

"If I ask for my friend, she will be treated as I would be, which means that she can actually transcend her own limited social circle and have possibilities which I would have had. But I will only provide this possibility to those I respect or consider as useful" [3].

It is important to see this flexible and enabling aspect of *blat*. It was not simply a static and status-bound system of exchange.

5.2.3 The regulation of blat transactions.

Intermediaries regulated *blat* transactions, particularly in situations which were not routine and habitual for people, where transactions were not self-regulating and ruled by the practical sense of participants. In complicated deals, intermediaries were indispensable to obtain relevant information, to ascertain the donor's competence and willingness to help, to find a diplomatic way of presenting the problem, or to vouch for the recipient's reliability and responsibility. An intermediary who had better personal ties could 'test the channel', for example a cadre, by inquiring into how responsive the cadre might be to his friend. He could ask what kind of gratitude or return would most likely win him over, or whether the position or jurisdiction of the cadre would enable him to fulfill the particular request:

For example, an acquaintance of mine who was a director of one enterprise came to see me. He had problems with privatisation of his enterprise. He came because "he was advised to consult me". Basically he wanted me to ring the regional administration and ask whether or not his enterprise would be given a status of the state enterprise. I knew him as a respectable and reliable partner and I told him that I would call to ask the view of the regional administration, their assessment of his enterprise and their interest in cooperation. I also told him that for his part he had to prepare a concrete and convincing proposal for cooperation. This did not mean that

my call could change their decision. I could introduce a person, test the possibilities but I could not influence the decision-making [34].

Intermediaries were able to put the request in appropriate form, connecting people diplomatically, providing the parties with necessary information about each other - thus, for example, saving one from the embarrassment of receiving a direct rejection and the other from the embarrassment of rejecting the request, or regulating misunderstandings of mutual obligations.

5.3 Ethics of *Blat*

As Yergin and Gustavson remarked in their *Russia 2010,* "the Soviet command economy had a powerful inner logic and language all its own, which made the Soviet system more than just foreign, but rather like distant civilization. Its customs seemed altogether strange, but they did make sense once you understood them in context" [Yergin & Gustavson 1994: 113]. This might be true about any culture - there is always a gap between the unwritten customs and codes and written rules. The distinction of Soviet-type systems, perhaps, was in that the former were followed, in fact, with fewer exemptions than were formal rules. To explain how they acted, the respondents were asked to explicate the rules or principles they pursued in *blat* relations. Curiously, these questions were confusing for the respondents and were constantly avoided. I had to accept that just as the criminal *blat* code had no verbal 'moral code', so the rules governing *blat* relations cannot be reduced to a few *a priori* principles. They are not like logically extracted ethical codes; rather, they are rules of the kind known as 'to be able to go on'[7]. Using the phrase of de Certeau, it can be said that knowledge of *blat* rules is already written in practices, but not yet read. This was noted by one of the respondents:

> The ethics of *blat* are in whether you can use it correctly or not, whether you know how to repay or not, whether you know what is possible to say and what is not, whether you can manage the situation or not etc. They are difficult to instruct in general terms but one feels if something goes wrong [19].

The rules governing *blat* should be thus considered as techniques applied in the enactment of social practices. The awareness of such rules, expressed first and foremost in practical activities, is the very core of that 'social competence' which *blat* presumed. Most Soviet people were highly 'skilled' in this way (even if people did not use *blat* they knew how to react 'appropriately' when others went through the backdoor or obtained something by *blat*). The vast bulk of such knowledge was practical rather than theoretical in character. Knowledge of procedure, or mastery of the techniques of 'practising' *blat*, is by definition methodological. This is to say, such knowledge does not specify all the situations which an actor might meet with, nor could it do so; rather, it provides for the generalised capacity to respond to and to influence an indeterminate range of social circumstances [Giddens 1984: 22]. This can be illustrated by the metaphor of driving: *blat* was an universal alertness for maneuver and capability to find the most effective (surely not direct and formal) way, avoiding the devastating holes of Russian roads, following both formal and informal rules

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[7] The most analytically effective sense of such 'rule' can be transferred by Wittgenstein's example of number games. One person writes down a sequence of numbers 2,4,6,8,..., the second person works out the formula supplying the numbers which follow. The formula of the progression is An=An-1 + 2. But to understand the progression is not to utter the formula. For someone could utter the formula and not understand the series; alternatively it is possible to understand the series without being able to give verbal expression to the formula. The 'rule' is simply being able to apply the formula in the right context and way in order to continue the series. Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1972, p.59.

when needed, following extraordinary curves while moving forward and minding other drivers doing the same.

In most social theory today, social rules are seen as ambiguous, flexible, contradictory, and inconsistent. They serve as resources for strategies that vary from person to person and from situation to situation [Edgerton 1985: 14]. For example, there was no law against *blat*, but there was an unwritten rule which said that *blat* is amoral, bad, anti-Soviet, as well as an unwritten code which prescribed the ways in which *blat* operated. The very fact that 'implicit principles' or postulates were not made explicit created margins of tolerance and the possibility of setting one against the other. *Blat* practices can be grasped as strategies which 'navigate' among the rules, 'play with all the possibilities offered by traditions', make use of one tradition rather than another, compensate for one by means of another. Strategies do not 'apply' to principles or rules; they choose among them to make up the repertory of their operations [Certeau 1984: 53]. The selectivity of the rules is determined by the conventional system of their exempting conditions, status and the occasions under which *blat* relations are initiated. In what follows I shall focus on the ethical guidelines perceived by my respondents as more or less conventional.

5.3.1 Selectivity of rules

The strategies of 'misrecognition' - when *blat* transactions are seen as friendly help - are the best example of 'navigating' strategies. It is antisocial to obtain something by *blat*, through the back-door - for example, sausages - for which people queue, or to get the best lean cuts of meat for the same price as others pay for fat and bones as a part of the purchase. On the other hand, from the perspective of those involved in it, a *blat* transaction implies sociability, good intentions and friendly help (*chelovecheskoe otnoshenie*): a shopgirl's mother will not be queuing for sausages and a friend will be given good meat. One of my respondents, a journalist, remarked that "if the principles of *blat* were recorded in terms of participants, they would likely coincide with the *Moral Code of the Communist*", the most important principle of which was 'One is a friend, comrade and brother to another'[8] [28a]. These generally moral, humane - even Christian - principles, however, became applied selectively. Under conditions of shortage and the Soviet command economy, they developed into the *blat* system. Being integrally bound up with the conditions of social life, *blat* ethics cannot be considered as those of interpersonal relations (e.g. ethics of friendship). On the other hand, rooted in personal relations, they cannot be seen as simply formed by specific socio-economic conditions (as the professional ethic of fiddling, for example). Rather, *blat* ethics should be seen as deriving from both formal rules and informal codes. *Blat* relations were regulated according to the logic of informal relations, such as not cheating one's neighbour, not letting the other down, keeping one's word, on the one hand, and the logic of 'beating the system' and violating the rules for the sake of efficiency, cleverness and creativity, on the other. Informal codes, however, always penetrated and enmeshed with formal ones, not only in the sense of violating them.

The socialist distribution system was strongly state-regulated and ideologically based on principles of justice and equality. On the other hand, there was always a room for an exceptional case (see chapter 3), meeting each other's personal interests or friendly help. As soon as the principles of equality were reinterpreted in practice of the state distribution system[9], the principles of personal relations echoed these changes in their own way. In

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[8] *Sovetskii etiket*, Leningrad, 1974, p. 72.

[9] To understand the principles of Soviet rationing, one should analyse the genesis of Stalinist politics of distribution. The rationing system was introduced from the very conception of the regime as an emergency

situations of scarce resources, 'friendly help' (*chelovecheskoe otnoshenie*) could only be available for a selected circle of people. Those who did not possess power or privileges to enable them to live according to formal rules were forced to elaborate a network of acquaintances, personal connections, mutual obligations to each other.

> "Ethical principles of *blat* seem to be common human principles. But it is a morality within morality because it is not concerned with everybody, but only with 'the people of the circle' (*dlya svoikh*)", emphasised a respondent with experience in *blat* deals [3].

Moreover, 'morality within morality' implies not only selectivity of rules but also selectivity of people. The 'reverse side' of these networks of support and assistance was that the sense of common morality was substituted for by the morality of a selected circle of people. It is therefore important to trace both stabilising and 'corrupting' implications which *blat*, in fact, combines. Affective relations between those involved created a kind of solidarity and support within the circle. The public side of such inner solidarity was a group egoism, when one's own circle was considered superior to any other. *Blat* relations thus divided as well as united people. Let us consider such inner circle principles guiding *blat* relations in more detail.

5.3.2 The obligation to help.
The unwritten ethical code as formulated by respondents was based on the obligation to help: "Help another and a stranger's help will come to you" [45], or "One has to satisfy the request or at least try to meet the need of the other" [5]. Following this code one initiated contacts and created a kind of reserve to have recourse to in future; established and maintained the relationships; rendered assistance and gave attention to both old and new contacts. This pattern was noted by many respondents.

> Western people, in contrast to us, are very independent. They rely on themselves and do not fancy helping out or accepting help from others. Russians assume that they can always ask for help and will help themselves. I am sure that if I ask I will be helped. And the other way round. If I am asked, I drop everything and help the other person, because I can imagine myself in his place. Indifference or refusal is a psychological trauma. I try not to refuse, giving out everything I can [13].
>
> There are people, of course, who try to clear up their obligations immediately but this is not appreciated in the *blat* relationship. There are people trying to be independent. Their principle is not ask and not to give a favour, which is not social as well [36].

It was socially difficult to refuse a request. In these circumstances, the pressure put on the donor was a moral one - the very fact of acquaintance implied an obligation. The same respondent, a university dean, continued,

> Sometimes I don't even have gratitude or pleasure from helping. It is simply impossible to stop helping out. There were the cases where I knew I shouldn't have done but couldn't help giving a hand. This is my character. It is easier to help than to refuse. I suffer more from rejecting. I have a hard time thinking how to explain that I

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measure against scarcity, starvation and extreme shortages of food supplies. Under Stalin the rationing system became linked to a worker's productive output and was supposed to guarantee supplies for the working class 'vanguard'. It was emphasized as an achievement of the system that the best was provided for the working class, and additional efforts were made to supply central industrial regions while peasants and declassified groups had to shoulder the burdens of this policy. Hierarchical principles of distribution were introduced also within the working class itself. According to their performance workers were allocated different rations. Shock-workers (*udarniki*) shopped at special stores, had cheaper and better food, received extra supplies and additional tokens for boots and clothes when they exceeded their plan tasks. For skilled workers material incentives increasingly displaced moral incentives (See, for example, Andrle, V. *Workers in Stalin's Russia*, 1988, pp. 31-66).

can't help. I do not want people to say that I did not want to help. I always try even if I know it is pointless. I never say 'no' at once, but rather 'let me think what I can do for you'. Psychologically it is very difficult to say 'no' [36].

5.3.3 Orientation towards an indefinite future.

The logic of the obligation to help is clear: you helped people unselfishly, it was just a humane and warm attitude to your close friends, but if you were in trouble, all those whom you helped turned to you. *Blat* was always open-ended. It was not necessarily a calculative strategy oriented towards particular aims, but rather a specific ethics which forced people to help each other. Such an ethic can be called calculative: at every particular moment one helped altruistically but also knew that to help was the condition for being helped.

> When I do a favour I know I will benefit from it. Not necessarily in money but in terms of contacts, support, credibility. One has to work for years in order to understand that there is profit, but it is not so important as relationships which one cannot avoid. Every favour will come back to you in the most unexpected way, just when you are particularly desperate,

concluded a former *apparatchik* [6]. "The more you help, the more people are obliged to you. You may get nothing out of it at a particular moment, but the more people are obliged to you, the easier your problems will be solved in future", sounded as a refrain in many interviews. An interesting aspect of *blat* was that one could do a favour for someone and get a return years later, when it was least expected[10]. There is a folk saying expressing the need for reservations about future: "Do not spit into a well, you might need to drink from it" (*ne plyui v kolodets, prigoditsya vody napit'sya*), which was quoted as another general ethical principle applied in *blat* relations.

5.3.4 Do not expect gratitude in return but be grateful yourself.

Conscious or unconscious expectations of reciprocation not only bring social relations about, they also stabilise already existing relations by making them, to a certain extent, predictable. In his famous essay 'Faithfulness and Gratitude" (1950), Simmel analyzed the moral and social importance of these two feelings in sustaining reciprocity in human relationships. Simmel considered gratitude as a powerful means of establishing social cohesion. By mutual giving, people become tied to each other by a web of feelings of gratitude. Gratitude is the motive which moves us to give in return, and by this, creates the reciprocity of service and counter-service. Gratitude is, in Simmel's words, 'the moral memory of mankind' (1950:388), and as such is essential for establishing and maintaining social relations. An extremely well-connected academic woman remembered,

> My father, who was a *blatmeister* (*blat* dealer), used to tell me 'One has to learn to be grateful'. He never burdened but always helped others. He helped in the ways which were not obvious, elegantly, with no expectation of return. When he died, they finally realised that what he did was costly and burdensome. When I do something to somebody, I never think about gratitude in return. I just do what is appropriate in every particular situation for every particular person and then simply forget about it [13].

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[10] As in the fairy tale about Ivan-the-Fool who, despite his grand mission to liberate Helen-The-Beauty, helped different creatures on his way, sharing food with them and saving their homes or lives. He would have had no chance in his fight with the Deathless (in Russian folklore a bony, emaciated old man, rich and wicked, who knows the secret of eternal life), but because every creature returned his favour, in their small ways in particular moments, in the end with their assistance he managed to kill the Deathless and marry the girl.

It follows that one had to repay for *blat* favours (*ne ostat'sya v dolgu*) on the one hand but not to expect the repayment on the other. There were certain norms of reciprocity not to be violated. For example, money was not to be given or accepted, for it would deprive the relationship of a personal basis, and insult the recipient. Gouldner explored the meaning of the 'norm of reciprocity'. He went further than Simmel, by reflecting more explicitly on the complicating role of power in reciprocity relations, and elaborating it theoretically. Reciprocal exchange relationships may be very asymmetrical, with one party being obliged to give much more than the other. The respective level of resources of giver and recipient should be taken into account, as well as the needs/wants of the recipient and the freedom of the giver to give or not to give. To what extent is one's giving compelled by other people, or by strong normative expectations to do so? The qualitative aspects of the norms of reciprocity - expectations and social pressures stimulating the obligation to help - have already been touched upon. The quantitative aspects - how much can be requested or given - were normally so context-bound and morally induced that they are difficult to generalise about. 'Exchange rates' are subordinated to the social relations between actors [Sahlins 1974] and therefore there is no criterion by which a general value may be established. Some guidelines for such evaluation, however, were provided in the interviews, again with reference to conventions and folklore.

5.3.5 Keep within limits.

The reaction to the 'what can be asked' questions were unproblematic: "The rules are simple, you just know them" [29]. One respondent referred to a commonly known fairy tale 'The Fisher and the Golden Fish', which tells a story of a fisher who, forced by his wife, asked the Golden Fish for more and more favours until she took all of them back. The moral of the story is that one has to keep within limits. The limits are important to know but difficult to explicate. Partly, they are externally normed: to obtain something by *blat* - in modest volume, with discretion, normally in situations of urgent need and within a closed personal circle - is a norm, to overcome limits is theft, corruption etc. Partly, they are interpersonal: the request has to be morally approved both by the donor and by the recipient. The moral limits are flexible though: "to allocate a flat or to enrol a child for a education course through *blat* is not acceptable to me; but I would use my connection to save him from imprisonment" [39].

People differ in their attitudes towards *blat*. For some people to ask about lending support or assistance was the natural order of things. For others, however, favours were burdensome. Depending on personal biography and specific psychological make-up, people reacted differently to this 'balance of debt' (the notion introduced by the social psychologist Barry Schwartz [1967]). Some had great difficulty in receiving help or material goods from the others, because they considered getting around the formal procedures improper or because they could not deal with feelings of gratitude or indebtedness to another person. The balance of debt could be disturbed in several ways. A very effective means of exercising power, for example, was to keep another person indebted by over-reciprocation, that is, deliberately go 'beyond the limits'. The balance was disturbed if someone returned a gift too quickly thus violating the 'orientation towards future' principle. According to Schwartz, the balance of debt must never be brought into a complete equilibrium though: "The continuing balance of debt - now in favour of one member, now in favour of the other - insures that the relationship between the two continues, for gratitude will always constitute a part of the bond linking them" [1967:8].

5.4 The Tactics of *Blat*.

The tactics of *blat* were connected with the form of requests and the form of refusals (whom, when and how). This was a delicate matter, since the request had to be made in such a way that it would be fulfilled or, in the case of refusal, would not jeopardise the whole relationship. It was emphasised in the interviews that tactics "are situational and cannot be explained or generalised. We were brought up here to feel mutual obligations and to know whom and what is possible to ask. It is an inborn ability. It is just clear whether you can ask or not". These criteria are implicit, that is, they can only be inferred from behavioral regularities or from reactions that occur after such rules have been broken. Let me give an example, supplied by an administrator of Youth Festivals, who remembered his unfortunate experience.

An *a priori* call was made: "The deputy of the mayor rang the head of airlines company, at his home number and said: 'Well, Ivan Ivanovich, don't you love our young generation? How about the Festival? Can't you help?'

'Why not, I am happy to help, but *they ask too much*. I understand their situation, but we don't provide such discounts even to our people. We agreed already that the rates for their foreign guests are reduced to the internal rates, but now they want discounts for their Russian guests as well. We can't make it, you know. We are poor themselves'.

'Come on, Ivan Ivanovich, let's help them!' - said the deputy of the mayor in a begging tone.

'OK', replied Ivan Ivanovich, 'Let him come to see me'.

When I came, Ivan Ivanovich was on a business trip. I was told to go and see the commercial director of the company, that is, the person whose position is designed to make profit out of tourist firms etc. He was against any charity in principle. I entered at that very moment when he was discussing the contracts with representatives of tourist firms, negotiating the timing of a stay in Turkey and counting every rouble (a two or three days stay was the point of a hot discussion). And here I am, asking for discounts for the Festival guests. They all looked at me as a complete idiot, and *I felt like one* myself" [32].

It follows from this example that despite the strong support (the deputy mayor) some basic tactical principles were still crucial and had to be followed: one should ask the right person at the right moment about the right thing, that is, the request must be appropriate and relevant. The criteria of appropriateness and relevance are determined by the particular situation and particular person. "The space of the tactics", writes de Certeau, "is the space of the other" [Certeau 1984: 35]. From respondents' responses I came to the conclusion that 'the other' is taken into consideration in relation to:

1) the other's personal characteristics;
2) the other's possibilities provided by a person's status or contacts;
3) personal relations with the other;
4) balance of debt;
5) nuances of situations in which one finds oneself.

Blat tactics were coordinated according to all these characteristics of the other and applied selectively.

For some I lay myself out and even consider it as a pleasure. These are either my friends or those who may prove useful in future. For others I may give out all the information I possess or promise to fulfill the request (without straining my nerves though), but some requests I consider as strange and I won't even promise. It is not a consciously designed strategy, it happens spontaneously [19b].

There are characters who have to overcome themselves in order to ask another but it is also quite common for people repeatedly to ask for information or something with no limits. It was a habit to involve friends with one's problems, asking about minor things, especially information, which one was perfectly able to find out oneself [19a].

The habit of exchanging information was absolutely crucial and the most widespread tactic of *blat.* Conversations were all-important, in the neighbour's kitchen, in the office, at celebrations, parties, etc. One just realised who could do what and then it was easy to get in touch, to find mutual interests.

One should start everything by seeking the advice of one's friends and acquaintances. The practical moments 'where to go, how to ask, whom to approach' are discussed with colleagues at work, with acquaintances in a bus, with friends in a sauna. All information is delivered by personal channels. Imagine someone comes in and asks whether I know a good dentist. If I know a dentist with a good reputation, I tell him where to go. If I know the dentist personally I may ring and arrange an appointment for this person, given that I find this appropriate, of course. I could go myself to the office next door and, having tea, ask whether anybody could obtain brakes for my Lada. Today one can go and buy everything. Then it was important to catch up with information, opportunities, contacts [29a].

Sometimes it was not even necessary to ask, people offered themselves. One did not normally ask friends in the same manner as acquaintances. They helped themselves if they knew the problem. It was taken for granted between friends in Soviet Russia that problems were shared and sharing became an invitation for help.

When help was sought, the recommended tactic was to go through one's address book and list people who could turn out to be useful. An energetic businesswoman remarked,

One shouldn't rely on one particular person. If I am desperate for something I ring everybody and somebody helps. And no problem if others don't. Refusals happen, but it does not matter that much. I'll ring someone else. If there are three variants, one will work out [3, 24].

On the other hand, this easy-going manner could result in a sense of resentment on the part of those whose efforts were wasted. A donor complained,

It sometimes happens that I drop everything and help people by giving out my 'last shirt'. Afterwards I realise they did not need it. They asked not only me, but many others, and my help turned out unnecessary [13].

The address books and other information sources saved time and provided opportunities. It was always easier if contacts were available before the need arose: to accept an offer was easier than to ask for it and to ask friends or acquaintances was easier than to look for contacts. "One had to keep the contacts, rather than search for them afresh when something was needed" [17]. On the other hand, it was also time-consuming. "To keep *blat* contacts is hard work. One has to be energetic and efficient. It is an unconscious passion to arrange things" [6]. Some people obtained things and arranged problems just to feel useful to others - they valued people's gratitude, greetings, smiles. They wanted to be known and considered their contacts as social capital. As one blatmeister confessed,

Blat made my life-style, it has become my second nature. It is needed to obtain information, to organise my everyday activities. It is convenient to have contacts all around, from a hair-dresser and doctor to business contacts [3].

If relations are not close, it is very difficult to ask. Especially, if a request demands a real effort and engagement of people in power. "These are connections which one can't pull often" [11]. The range of tactics in such relations were explicated to me by the young

administrator of the Psychology Lab at The Cadres Centre, who worked in a close contact with the regional administration. He referred to the following advice on informal relations given to him by his more experienced colleagues.

1. When you make a request, ensure that the person is able to fulfill it. If the request is not adequate, one runs the risk of being refused or even losing the relationship, for the applicant is considered unable to put in a correct request;

2. The adequacy of a request means also that every deal has to be approached on a certain level. Some deals are easier to decide from below, some need a pressure from above, some needs an intermediary who would inquire about my problem. It is also easier to ask an intermediary, because he is not giving anything himself but just assist and facilitate the decision;

3. There are no free favours. To be able to ask I should feel that I may prove useful either myself or as an intermediary. Not necessarily now, but somehow in future. At least I should have an imprint of this favour in my memory. Good memory is an important 'apparat' skill;

4. With people of status it is important to allow no familiarities, even if relations are friendly. If you mistakenly treat as a friend someone who does not treat you as such, it may cause a loss of the relationship. One should not fall into the illusion of warm and friendly relations but keep one's distance. The ability to feel the distance correctly is an important practical sense in *blat* relations [12].

Apart from techniques of keeping contacts, the arsenal of tactics included what could be called *blat*-style, a skill of approaching people in a pleasant or promising manner. One might not know the necessary person but be able to approach them in the way as if social relations existed and to hint that 'we' can rely on each other. It was not *blat*, strictly speaking, for the relationship did not exist in the moment of request; it was *blat* style, the pretension that they existed. This skill did not need much energy, people say, it was rather a social talent. Such a woman spoke with confidence:

I arrange everything without much problem. I go to the person in charge and talk to him. I was told there are no places in the art school, but I arranged a place for my own daughter and then for five girls one by one, daughters of my friends. One just has to see the proper person and say the right things. I don't like bothering friends by asking them to ring about me or something. I know I can arrange everything myself without any chocolates or bottles [10].

This kind of talent was caricatured in the satirical magazine *Krokodil* [1936, No. 27: 2] which described a person who knew 17,342 anecdotes and knew how and which one was to be told to receive what he wanted. These people were perfect brokers or intermediaries, whose tactics were so smooth and cheerful that, as with any kind of talent, they became socially approved.

5.5 Establishing Contacts.

Blat contacts are established in the process of personalising formal channels. They overlap with personal contacts and intimate relations. They derive from the vicissitudes of careers, rest on common hobby and leisure activities, and include all kinds of occasional contacts. Some contacts occur spontaneously, some are reached strategically. Let us analyze some techniques of establishing contacts, as reported in the interviews.

The most routine way to establish contacts is to transform the formal contacts one has at work into informal ones. In this case,

"a familiar face and repetitive contacts are important. I used to order a car for different occasions in the regional administration car park. First time I was desperate and rang straight to the deputy of the mayor in charge with apologies etc. He said, 'No problem'. Afterwards it was enough to ring his secretary who knew me and ordered the car automatically" [12].

A professional career necessarily leads to establishing new relations and making contacts. The person who gets promoted enters new circles and acquires new contacts, acquaintances which allow her or him to solve problems. A party career used to be particularly appropriate for making contacts, because it was part of the cadres' function. One had to have specific personal qualities for this, though. "I had a mate who became very successful in nomenclatura, he was attractive, athletic, ready to compromise. Career-making makes people to acquire a great deal of necessary qualities and practical skills in dealing with people" [27][11]. Let me illustrate the point by two connected life-histories.

"Every enterprise or organisation is first of all a Person and his contacts. D was a go-ahead man with charm and irrepressible energy. His character was a complicated mixture: he was poetic and sentimental, he wrote poems, sang songs, liked theatre, played football; at the same time, he was stingy and delved into every detail. He could 'penetrate walls'. He realised that socialist society is a huge distribution system, and one just needed to find as many wires of this system as possible and stay near the socket. His charm and football skills made his search for the 'wires' much easier. He married the third secretary of the regional Komsomol committee, being just an instructor. It was a unprecedented case, people talked about it for a long time. The story of my contact with D goes back to my failure in the final year of the University. I wrote my thesis on the basis of materials of the party archives which were strictly confidential those days. The work was known as original and the best in the course, but the topic was "not ideologically correct" (that year was the 30th anniversary of the Siberian Branch of the Academy of Sciences, 1987). The grades were predetermined and the only excellent mark was given to a daughter of the secretary of the local party committee. I was hurt and disillusioned and decided to become a professional football player. I had played seriously for the regional team before and decided to drop history altogether. After military service, however, I got married which forced me to find a job in a profession. I worked half a year in a museum, got more and more depressed. Until once I met a person who was a Komsomol secretary at my university and then became a secretary of the regional Komsomol Committee. He asked for my telephone number and in a week I was offered a job which doubled my salary, provided a personal office and all the privileges. This was not a job I wanted, I had to deal with political education (*politpros*), but I acquired a lot of experience through it. For nine months I visited 23 out of the 40 regions of our administrative area, made lots and lots of contacts. Once, for some celebration the regional committee staff went to the international tourist campus. I had not even heard about it before then. It looked like a surrealist picture to me: bars, discos, tennis courts, super-soft furniture, sauna, beach. It was a kind of shock for me. We played football there, just for fun. Nobody knew I was called 'football player' at the university. D approached me asking where I am, what I am. In two weeks he came to my office and proposed a position as his deputy. It was less money, but my predecessor said, 'Come on, you have a state car with a

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[11] A detailed study of nomenclatura careers can be found in Klugman, J. *The New Soviet Elite: How They Think and What They Want*. London: Praeger, 1989.

driver, wonderful nature around, leisure facilities, 5 months a year of intensive work only, and a flat in three years'. I agreed" [6].

"It was extremely difficult to get recruited into the nomenclatura. Marriage could help a lot. I remember one person who was a foreman of a work-shop at the plant, and in half a year became a deputy of the Minister of Industry in such way" [14].

"My sister joined the ballet troop which performed abroad. She was not the best dancer but managed to enter it by the 'marriage of convenience'. She divorced her husband and married the director of the troop. She does not love him, does not want children from him but she has a lot of contacts now" [9].

"One should not say, but it is so common that women enter intimate relations if they need something, a flat, a treatment for a child, a promotion. It is very wide-spread among the military to exempt a son from army service or to promote a husband. I used to give all anonymous letters unopened straight to my husband. Perhaps, it is not *blat*, but it is clearly a channel" [23].

"Football is worth mentioning specifically. It is an extremely effective channel. I played in a combined team of journalists in Moscow and we were in close contact with a team of the Office of Public Prosecutor and many others. Having beer after the game one can solve any problem there" [6].

All kind of hobbies may serve as a basis for establishing *blat* contacts.

"Tours abroad were my hobby. Those days people who went to those tours were the cream in their fields. The head of the group was normally someone from the regional Party committee (*obkom*), 4-5 people from KGB. These contacts lasted, I made friends in such tours" [7].

"It is important to go on holidays to the famous resorts and popular places. I met many of my friends at the sea-coast. Also, people one meets there may turn useful people" [13].

Another *Krokodil* personage, a blatmeister, says "I am a little man, my place is in the Crimea. This is the place for useful people to have their holidays. As I am able to play chess and volleyball, to swim and to remember 20-25 anecdotes, after the season I know numerous people, which opens many doors" [*Krokodil* 1936, No. 31: 10].