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 Gradations of proximity in contemporary Russian friendship¹

(paper for the volume, which was never published in the end and exists as

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The initial idea of our sub-project within PICS dealt with a very important phenomenon of friendship in Russia, considering it as a specific regime of proximity, situated in between the regime of familiarity and regime of planned action, in terms of Laurent Thevenot.² Indeed, friendship is one of those types of relationships, which are habitually captured in social science under the heading of “informal relations” and which make analytic use of the conventional dichotomy of public and private largely meaningless. That is, this regime of proximity finds its place somewhere along the spectrum of gradations of relationships that start from the most “private” ones and end up as the most “public” ones: intuitively one feels that it is closer to the private side of this spectrum, but there is a lot of coordination and common activities involved here as well. Judging such relationships with the help of the public-private spectrum gives us little discriminating power.

Thus, the initial objective was to analyze in finer detail forms of pragmatic coordination of activities – or a specific *mode d'engagement*, to use another term of Thevenot – that would shed light on the phenomenon of friendship, on the one hand, and on the theory of practical engagement with the world, on the other. In order to do so, we supposed that friendship can be studied through situations that subject it to a growing tension or lead to its eventual breakdown, following an engagement over some shared or lent material object. This approach seemed to be most illuminating since in situations of breakdown one would expect to see those endangered key aspects of friendship, which people usually overlook in the quotidian functioning of this relationship, first, and because this type of the analysis of pragmatic situations could reveal the role of simple objects that were involved in coordination of human conduct, second. The second focus of our attention was of course inspired by the works of Botlanski and Thevenot on the regime of justification, where the reality of access to a given world of justice is proven through referral to shared objects, and by the works of Callon and Latour where objects are granted agency along with humans in techno-scientific networks they constitute together. Studying the role of objects in establishing, maintaining and coordinating friendship was one of the initial temptations of our research.

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² See e.g. Laurent Thevenot, «Pragmatic Regimes Governing the Engagement with the World,» in Karen Knorr-Cetina *et al.*, eds., *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, London: Routledge, 2002.

However, after a first dozen interviews it became clear that the phenomenon under study actively resisted proposed research methods.³ Respondents were generally reluctant to talk about small practical details of situations that endangered their own friendships or friendships of their friends and acquaintances (about which they may have heard, or of which they may have been witnesses) for two principal reasons. First and foremost, contemporary Russian friendship is a relationship of active forgetting, which reminds of the model of *agape* in Boltanski's *L'amour et la justice comme competences*.⁴ In order to maintain a relationship of friendship, people tend to suppress the calculations that would have otherwise revealed the inequality of partners' inputs into it. This curious suppression develops as an unintended result of monitoring of the equality of inputs into an exchange of gifts and services among potential friends: at some point, when monitoring becomes habitual and demonstrates time and again the equality of these inputs, it is easier (and perhaps cheaper) to suppress a stray thought that your friend might be cheating on you than put into question the whole relationship, which was established with such care and diligence over a long period. Conversely, our interviews, tried to force the respondents to revive the suppressed memories and thus could unintentionally reactivate the perception of a possibly unequal balance of calculations that would put friendship in question once again. Therefore, asking to account for the small pragmatic details of former tensions and conflicts worked against the grain of the very fabric of friendship: it threatened a social tie that could have been established with so much effort and cost.

The second feature of contemporary Russian friendship that resisted our initial research program was a shared feeling of a certain moral dubiousness of recounting in public of one's own calculations concerning the equality of inputs into a relationship, or accusations of a friend, based on these calculations. (Even with the guaranteed secrecy of the identity of the interviewed, respondents took the interviewer to be an example of a relevant other that potentially introduced them into a quasi-public situation.) That is, normative statements on friendship that respondents habitually made during an interview cast it as a relationship of altruism, mutual help and sharing something higher than just a common pragmatic endeavor. Against the background of such statements it was very difficult for a respondent, if not outright impossible, to give an account of one's grievances in friendship, recounting the mundane details that would seem petty and morally base, given the alleged elevated character of the discussed relationship. How could one, say, calculate the amount of offered cigarettes without a following reciprocation, or cite not returning a borrowed CD in time as a pretext for breaking friendship – if these calculations and charges seemed in such contradiction with the elevated status of friendship? Thus, the relationship of active

³ Interviews very carried out by Kovaleva in October 2003 – December 2004. In overall, there were 17 interviews taken, after which the initial research plan was put into abeyance, and this article sums up the reflections on results already obtained. Respondents included Russians living in St. Petersburg, 19 to 29 years old, who covered in semi-structured interviews their experience of friendship. Attempts were made to interview people of different gender, from different educational and occupational backgrounds. However, the initial planned set of interviews was not carried out in full, so we cannot speak of the representative character of our small sample – this article is just trying to articulate some hypotheses for future work, based on the pilot study.

⁴ See this feature of friendship discussed in Oleg Kharkhordin, *Main Concepts of Russian Politics*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005, chapter 6.

forgetting can be interpreted here also as a relationship of active suppression of the public airing of petty claims in disputes of friendships. This suppression works through the threat of a subsequent denunciation of the moral character of an individual who chose to engage in articulating such claims in public. Summing up, one can say that whether people actually actively forget committed injustices in friendship, or are just forced by social mechanisms to claim they did, is an analytic distinction important mostly for a scholarly article. In practical situations the observed conduct is the same, and it is unnecessary to distinguish between the two, given the absence of practical consequences in the majority of everyday life situations.

Notwithstanding this embarrassment, we found the set of pilot interviews very fruitful. First of all, respondents were very willing to recount the platitudes on the normative grounds for friendship that somehow explained the failure of our initial project. Second, if they were unwilling to discuss small details of pragmatic situations that endangered friendships, they willingly – and mostly without the interviewer pushing them – made statements about practical situations that revealed pragmatic criteria for distinguishing friendship from other types of relationships. Thus, in what follows we cannot really offer a description of the engaged good that an analysis of the mode of engagement would require us to do (this good is hidden in withheld accounts of what pragmatic goods were the objects of disputes and tensions in friendship). But we can offer a description of contrasts between an engaged reality of friendship and what it is not. This will be done by summing up sets of distinctions between the Russian term for friend, *drug*,⁵ and other relevant categories with which it was contrasted in the interviews, first, and providing, where available, the pragmatic details of situations where these distinctions were registered, second.

The most frequently mentioned categories that were contrasted with *drug* were *znakomyi* - meaning “acquaintance” in English or *connaissance* in French - and also *priiatel'* that can be translated into English as “mate” or “pal” or “buddy”, with no easy French equivalents (perhaps, *copain* would be the closest). Intuitively, all these terms could be situated along the spectrum of “more remote – more proximate,” with relationships of acquaintance being of a more distant kind than relationships between buddies, which in their turn are more distant than relationships between friends. Interpreting them as just different gradations along the same axis of distance-proximity is easy because the word “proximate” itself was part of some other frequently mentioned categories that were linked to or contrasted with “friend.” Thus, a Russian equivalent of the French *proche* – the word *blizkii* - did not figure in the interviews as a noun, but appeared as an adjective in the frequently mentioned phrase that designated a status of *blizkii drug*, “close friend.” Curiously, it was also dangerously related to the notion of *blizost'*, which in Russian has an obvious meaning of a sexual intercourse - next to an innocuous meaning of standing next to something - and that was cited as a condition into which a close friendship between a man and woman could evolve, thus finishing the relationship of friendship and starting the relationship of *blizost'*.

Therefore, while starting to write this narrative, we had in mind a spectrum of different engagements ranging from the most distant to the most intimate, along the line of Russian terms that can be roughly translated as “acquaintance – buddy – friend – close friend – sexual intimacy.” This linear interpretation might be rather

⁵ We follow the transliteration rules of the Library of US Congress. In French the Russian word would be usually transliterated as *droug*, and in English it would be phonetically transliterated as *droog*.

misleading, as the following exposition will try to argue, but it served as a useful heuristic tool that allowed us to point out its shortcomings later and articulate in finer detail the complexity of engaged reality. For a non-Russian reader this linear interpretation is also useful because it helps keep the terms of an alien language in some kind of simple ordered relationship that allows the reader get going.

Acquaintance

Znakomyi is the most distant type of relationship, contrasted with friendship. It is a person that may be said to be just “known,” as the Russian root of this word implies, but the decisive criterion here seems to be the fact that one does not initiate contacts to meet the acquaintances: one just meets them from time to time by accident, in different public places, parties or gatherings. As one respondent says: “An acquaintance for me is such a kind of person, with whom I do not socialize⁶ on intention. For example, it is a person from K.’s entourage, with whom I meet at her birthday party. At her birthday parties I meet the same man, he recognizes me. [He says:] ‘O! *Salut, salut* – how are things?’ [I say:] ‘I have found a new job.’ In principle this is approximately the same [exchange] with boys and girls. Acquaintances are those people with whom I won’t socialize on my own initiative. Whom I meet, well, either at work – which conditions this – or while being a guest of someone.”

Nevertheless, an acquaintance is not a complete stranger that has no chances of becoming a friend by definition. Respondents cited the situations that allowed moving along the proximity spectrum and sometimes even jumping over the intermediate status of a buddy to become a friend. Thus, in the words of one respondent, what allows an initial transformation of the status of acquaintance in the direction of friendship is intense existential communication: “Let’s imagine I have just become acquainted with a person, and it is not possible to say whether he becomes my friend or not. And it is very important whether suddenly for me a very sincere conversation happens. I like how he has conducted this conversation. Consequently, next time or yet another next time it happens once again, and everything goes well. After that this becomes reinforced, and I understand that we have already developed an experience of communicating in such a way ..., very openly. Well, this becomes reinforced, and becomes a habit, besides I have been calling this man an acquaintance for a long time.” However, this sincere and extremely open communication should concern the topics beyond the accidental circumstances that have brought future friends together initially: “Working on a common project makes us closer [*sblizhaet*] to such an extent that a person ceases to be just an acquaintance, with whom you might go out for lunch [during work], but not more. That is, either a person ceases to be a close acquaintance [*blizkim znakomym*], and a mere acquaintance [*prosto zankomyi*] becomes rather a friend [*skoree drugom*], or this does not happen. A percentage of those who become a friend is small, perhaps

⁶ Here, and elsewhere, the English verb “socialize” is used to translate Russian *obschatsia*. This most generic and widespread term does not have a ready equivalent in French, because it cannot be translated as implying just *communiquer*. The Russian term historically was used in church discourse to designate partaking in some higher things, and though this usage looks very archaic for contemporary colloquial Russian language, the archaic connotation reveals: when friends *obschaitusia*, things are involved, and not only words.

5 %... This happens, because during work, some common interests are revealed..., or on the contrary, something that is different among us but that is interesting to discuss further... Because, if we do not have other things to talk about but just our project, well then... this is in some way,... perhaps this is not friendship at all [laughter].”

Good Acquaintance or Buddy

The last excerpt of the interview shows a curious category of a “close acquaintance” or “good acquaintance,” that are sometime also called “buddy” or “dear person”: this is a stage of proximity one passes on the way from acquaintance to friendship, and the common pragmatic denominator to all these designations is some common intentional project or endeavor, which could happen in any sphere of life - from work to common leisure. In distinction with “mere acquaintances” people enter here an engagement intentionally, for many diverse reasons they might have. The example cited above shows that it is an important existential communication, added to communication just over matters of a joint work project, that eventually justifies calling 5 % of people among close acquaintances a “friend”; one should note, however, that it is a common work project that initially transformed acquaintances in the university into close acquaintances.

What brings good acquaintances or buddies – the terms that we use here as synonyms – together? Banding together for a joint work project (or other utilitarian purposes) is not the only reason that makes people closer, and moves them from mere acquaintances to a closer engagement. We have mentioned gain, but a close acquaintance or a buddy is an individual, with whom others might have common endeavors for pleasure as well. The Russian term for buddy, *priiatel'*, retains the pleasure, inherent in this relationship, in the very structure of the word: *priiatno* means “pleasant” in Russian, while the root term is etymologically related to the hypothetical Indo-European root **priyos*, meaning “dear, intimate, next of kin” that developed in English into both “friend” and “free.”⁷ Respondents sometimes directly talk about this pleasure, although the interviews mention more frequently comfort and convenience as a criterion of *priiatel'*. Thus: “Buddies are those people with whom I am comfortable. S. was my buddy [*u menia byli priiatel'skie otnosheniia*] for a long time. It was convenient for me that, for example, we could drive to the countryside during a working day, because he did not have a regular job, that he would drive me in his car, that he ... would not do what was unpleasant for me [*nepriiatno*]... I could take a video with a good action movie, and he would drive me in the car. We could eat something there, something tasty from my standpoint... Or take T. It is also very convenient for me that he goes to exhibitions and calls me to join him.” Sometimes a buddy is just a partner to almost aimlessly pass the time together: “Simply to kill time. To go for a walk. You sit working for a long time, and a headache arrives. There are buddies [*priiateli*] who live nearby. You call someone: ‘Hey, let’s go for a walk’ – ‘Well, let’s go’.” But sometimes the convenience is rather formidable since it allows accomplishing certain tasks otherwise hardly attainable, rather than just sharing small pleasures: “With girls it is comfortable for me to, say, go dancing, to a gym, to shaping (though I have not started yet), or to draw drafts together with someone.

⁷ Emile Benveniste, *Slovar' indoevropeskikh sotsialnykh terminov*. Moscow: Progress, 1995, p. 215. Pavel Chernykh, *Istoriko-etimologicheskii slovar' sovremennogo russkogo iazyka*, Moscow: Russkii iazyk, 1994, vol. 2, p. 68.

Alone it is not very comfortable: well, passers-by interfere or one feels oneself not very easy, drawing in an alien courtyard.”

Pleasure and gain are two main clear motives for intentionally joining this relationship of close acquaintances and buddies. However, from the interviews it seems that people stop here and do not go further: this is a decisive feature of this gradation of proximity. That is, if we follow the classic Aristotelian triple distinction between friendship for gain, friendship for pleasure, and virtuous friendship (friendship for the sake of one’s friend), we will find at the stage of close acquaintance/buddy only the first two types – Aristotelian friendship for pleasure or for gain only. It is only at the stage of *druzhiba*, friendship properly so called in a term derivative from *drug*, that Aristotelian virtuous friendship will be introduced into the picture.

One respondent claimed that it is communication that is “as necessary for life as air” that transforms relationships of “close, dear acquaintances” (does this not sound awkward in English?) into friendship. “And if there is no such communication, then... well this is a good person, a dear person [*milyi chelovek*], a fascinating person... While there is no such communication, I will socialize with this person with pleasure [*s udovolstviem*],... but there is no friendship here really.” A radical example of transfer from the status of *priiatel’* to a status of *drug*, a friend proper, will help clarify this point. An unsuspecting respondent was invited by her buddy into an apartment that belonged to his friend, who had committed suicide not long ago before that. The parents of the deceased wanted to sell the apartment, so the buddy of the respondent used one of the last opportunities to come to this apartment and relate all the details of the bitter story to the startled respondent. The surroundings spoke better than his words perhaps. A respondent after such an existentially shattering experience could not continue calling her former buddy *priiatel’* any more: since he had shared the most intimate parts of his life with her, he became her friend.

Another insight into the mystery of what makes some specific sort of communication as important for life as air is offered by a following statement: “Well, one discusses some problems, some good things with a good acquaintance [*khoroshii znakomyi*]. But the emotional side is involved to a lesser extent. Well, of course, you will listen to the individual and s/he will listen to you, even will say all appropriate words, but in overall... you understand that it was without any specific reason [*prosto*]. Well, this individual might have said all these things to you because of his or her good upbringing, because of some liking s/he has towards you. But, in general, to continue drawing some personal conclusions [*lichnye momenty*] out of this is somehow out of place.”

This quote is interesting because it brings into our discussion “drawing personal conclusions” as a decisive criterion distinguishing the status of a friend from the status of a close acquaintance. This ambiguous expression in Russian can be interpreted in many ways, but in all cases *lichnye momenty* is linguistically directly linked to *lichnost’*, that is, to the key Russian term for personality and individual character. Is it not the case, then, that friendship proper appears in Russia when one starts drawing conclusion for one’s own personality, or perhaps when one goes further than mere liking and well-wishing and enters the sphere of direct access to the personality of the other?

Friend

Interviews show that the most frequently stated normative expectation is – not surprisingly, given its multi-millennial history – that friends share everything. To be a friend, one should share resources (particularly when friendly help is largely the only solution available), one should always share information, and one should incessantly share joys and sorrows. This emotional sharing is stressed very often: “A friend is a person with whom one shares almost everything and in an emotional way... Well, communication here happens on a pretty much emotional level.” Pragmatically, of course, the first criterion for judging someone a friend most frequently is “a friend in need is a friend indeed” – here the Russian and the English proverbs coincide: one should be always able to share one’s problems with the friend and to seek unconditional support: “I come, for example, to K., saying that I feel terrible, that I need to share my problems; at this moment I expect support, not [inaudible]. I once found myself in such a situation, which was very complicated for me, I felt very bad, so I called her and simply said - I really need to speak with you as a friend, and I cannot formulate it exactly, but I somehow feel, what I would like to get from you. And K. set herself up for that, and for two hours she did not say much, but simply listened to me. And then she simply took my side in the conflict. She helped me to find a solution.”

An extent of sharing seems to define the intensity of friendship. Thus, an interesting case is mentioned in one interview, when “we were three [girlfriends, *podrug*, a female form of *drug*], there was another girlfriend, but X. decided that she will befriend me more [*bolshe so mnoi druzhit*].” A narrative then recounts how two girlfriends started to share more things than the third one, this “more” being knowledge about deception in romantic affairs, which concerned the poor “less befriended one.” Increasing friendship here meant increasing the amount of things (in a given case – information) shared. However, this movement along the axis of “more proximity, more friendship, more sharing” is not all that happens: one of the overlooked aspects so far is that those who are “more friends” establish a different arena for a construction of personality, into which the less befriended ones are not allowed.

As Kharkhordin argued elsewhere, the long-existing but transformed practice of *oblichenie* – literally: en-personation or endowment with personality – is a background that serves for the construction of personhood in contemporary Russia.⁸ Uniformly imposed on the Soviet populace in the aftermath of the purges of the 1920s and 30s, it became routinized in the late Soviet society. The decisive sense of self emerged through a recurrent communal discussion of demonstrated deeds of a given individual over a fixed period, not through his or her introspective modes of self-cognition, which were only subservient moments in the process of en-personation. But this official mode of the establishment of the sense of the individual self was also adopted and subverted by informal groups and communities to pursue their own goals. In post-soviet Russia mechanisms of official institutionalized en-personation were demolished, while the informal ones remain functioning. Thus, a Russian now habitually submits oneself for a review by relevant others, freely chosen by him- or herself to play this important existential role, in many routinized forms, chief among which is a birthday party. That is, during a birthday celebration (a holiday second in personal significance to New Year’s eve only, according to current surveys) a sense of unique given *lichnost*’ is revealed through toasts, presents and other latent forms of

⁸ See Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, esp. chapter 5

personality evaluation: e.g. toasts directly tell or imply what good or bad things a person did over the year, while presents should be reflecting and fitting the personality of the birthday party holder (otherwise this is not a present at all, but just a nuisance, not to say misdemeanor); variations of the texts of greetings cards add nuances to a sense of the individual self being established.⁹ Of course, even though this individuating procedure would seem rather distant from predominantly introspective practices of self-cognition and self-formation in Protestant or Catholic culture, that's how one frequently learns who one is in Russia up until nowadays.

The sense of Russian *lichnost'* emerges as a result of a joint exercise in consideration of features, constitutive of personality, revealed by the personally-relevant others. The term *lichnye momenty* - "personal aspects" mentioned above - are perhaps exactly those aspects that allow the full sense of *lichnost'* to emerge. Then, one can hypothesize that it is the lack of access to *lichnye momenty* which distinguishes acquaintances from friends. Acquaintances are not allowed into a sphere of communication that would be indicative of features used in identity construction by friends when they reveal the sense of a given *lichnost'* for him or her. By contrast, friends are already within this sphere by definition: these are the very people who constitute the arena for *oblichenie*, and who are granted by a given individual the right to be the main reference group for his or her en-personation, or, in the parlance of conventional social science, personal identity construction.

Consequently, the most close friends are those who know most details of the most intimate character that can be used for a most exacting revelation of the individual's personhood. Two aspects should be stressed here. First, their knowledge of their friend goes deepest and widest, it engages a most minute detail, not available to other people. As one respondent said, "The most personal [*lichnye*] problems..., that is, when a problem of a most personal character arises, and if... the situation is not very beautiful, from the society's point of view, then perhaps I will discuss it only with her [a close friend], and perhaps with my Mom... And something from the sphere of sexual life I will discuss rather with her, and not with my Mom." Second, absence of such friends is detrimental for the sense of personhood of their friend: without such friends the arena for en-personation becomes deficient, and the emergence of the sense of the self might even get thwarted. These friends, who have the right and the obligation to take part in the practices of en-personation, are called close friends, and at the extreme point of their relevance they are, in the words of one interview, "very interesting for me in a personality-related way [*lichnostno*] and close. Very, very close friends [*samye, samye blizkie druzia*] reveal themselves at such moments, when I understand that I need this person very much and he needs me... Because I know that when I leave for abroad for three months, K. will say: 'Will you think of me? You will not see me [inaudible].'"

In other words, our hypothesis is that among friends a distinction between simple friends and close friends, or a distinction between more distant friends and more close friends depends on the character of a friend's involvement in the personality construction of his or her friend. The closest ones are essential for this process, while more distant ones take part in it from time to time or are restricted access to the more intimate spheres of personal life. That is, they are friends, since they have been already admitted by a given person into the process of revealing his or

⁹Olga Kalacheva, *Formirovanie individualnoi i kollektivnoi identichnosti v kontekste neofitsialnogo prazdnika*. Abstract of the Candidate of Science thesis, Moscow: GUVShE, 2003.

her personality, but their admission is neither as fully-fledged nor as demanding as that of the closest friends. For example, some respondents maintain quite a sizable chunk of their life inaccessible to the people they call friends, since their presence in this life could endanger either the individual image the person instrumentally projects into the outside world, or friends would get an opportunity to reveal the sense of personality that the respondent finds dubious. With close friends, it is not detrimental to reveal, as the next paragraph will show, the most unwashed areas of one's life: their care guarantees that they will take all factors into account in gently revealing who one is. Simple friends - who are also friends because they are in a position to influence personality construction - might not be as caring, and hence admitting them at a closer distance harbors dangers.

Thus, one respondent distinguishes among her friends on the basis of presence or absence of "common territory," as she proclaims, by which in pragmatic terms she means visits of some of them and not others, to her house: "People get interested in one another... and realize that they are comfortable in socializing with this person... and gradually their relationships flow into something deeper... For me it is very important, whether the person has visited my house or not... There are friends, who have never been there. And it is very important for me that they have not been there... I have a terribly unrepaired house." Many interpretations are possible here, of course, but in line with the one offered above, one would suggest that a respondent did not want to easily endanger the already established personal image of a good housekeeper or a tidy person or a cultured individual, or a wealthy one, by allowing the unscrupulous friend into the sphere reserved only for close friends. A similar example is perhaps given by another excerpt, when a male friend unexpectedly visits his female friend, who is in the process of washing the floor: "I have screamed hell at him, why... does he come without invitation. Why do you want to see this mess [*bardak*] of an apartment, when I could tidy it up? [He said:] 'K., let me take a piece of cloth and wash the floor.' He grabbed a cloth and started washing the floor. It was extremely unpleasant for me. On the other hand, he washed my floor, which is very good [laughter]." Instrumentally, this rather tangible help of a friend in washing the floor is very good; however, it is potentially detrimental for the recognition of a quality - being a good female housekeeper - which the respondent perhaps wishes to be granted in the opinion of her friends, hence the rage.

To give yet another example of this distinction between close friend and just a friend: "I do not consider R. to be such a close friend, and I do not want to share her company of friends. She might like X., and I do not like *gopniki*, uncultured brats [laughter]. But in any case, I consider her my friend." Here the respondent excludes a possibility of sharing an arena of en-personation with R., since the participants of the circle of R. are unacceptable for the respondent as agents of en-personation. At the same time the respondent grants R. a membership in the relevant group that would constitute the respondent's own sense of personality. In other words, R is admitted to an arena of the respondent's en-personation on certain conditions, the most important of which is the distance that the respondent establishes and maintains with R's reference group.

Such distance is also frequently established within friendship by marking the topics open and closed for discussion. Generally, asserts one respondent, "with a friend one should not discuss what he would have never done himself..." Some topics are mine fields, and with non-close friends he could frequently end up in a calamitous situation: "that is, when one starts talking about some topic,... and I think: well, I am about to make some flop, I should think before I say something. One finds oneself in

some kind of tension.” With a close friend, on the contrary, the same respondent “did not feel any border that one might transgress while communicating.” This fear of venturing into terrains that are closed for discussion and thus violating the spheres that are open for close friends only, is perhaps a feature of caring friends, or the ones who suffered rebukes in the past. Other, less caring or less intimidated friends, provide an obtrusive corollary: “There are some girls that like to call me and remind me of the moments, which I find unpleasant to talk about.” Thus, truth-telling employed by simple friends should know its limits. They should observe the range of allowed topics and speak when they are called for. Those who recognize this distance deserve the title of the friend more than others: “now I can call him my friend easier [than before], because ... he behaves himself well and does not behave himself badly [laughter]. That is, he has revealed himself as delicate, sensitive, emotional, and open.”

Reproaches in friendship

In the last quote the interviewed implies that the required qualities of a friend supposedly manifested themselves in observed behavior. Lamentably, we are not given any further examples of situations that would tell us how these qualities were revealed. Such, of course, was a recurrent problem of our research data collection. In interviews on friendship one frequently faced the same predicament: utterances on normative expectations were not followed by examples of situations that would clarify them. Luckily, there were quite a few examples of situations, which were provided in descriptions of a faltering or failing friend. Let us then try outlining the sphere of desirable conduct of a friend by looking at available examples of undesirable conduct.

Situations with undesirable conduct are generally invoked in three types of reproaches for behavior, not appropriate for a friend. One should say from the start that these are acceptable reproaches, which are easy to make in public without blemishing one’s own moral standing, in contradistinction to publicly unacceptable reproaches mentioned in the beginning of this article – e.g. chiding a friend for inequality of inputs into a relationship, based on petty calculations of who paid for what and where, of how many services and favors were given and not returned, and the like.

The first type of acceptable reproaches - very frequently stated in the interviews – are pointed at misbehaving friends for attempts to leave, diminish or totally subvert a sphere of shared existence. Thus, lies between friends are reproached by almost everybody without exception, since they break sharing that allegedly serves as the foundation of friendship. This is an obvious point, and is not very interesting heuristically. More interesting, however, is the rhetoric of this rejection of lying: the terms in which the arguments are made hint at the initial pragmatic situations that had first allowed formulating similar arguments and that are still perhaps recreated in disputes between friends.

Spatial imagery is very important here. A lying friend falls out from a field of shared visibility and starts acting *za spinoi*, “behind the back”: “when one, for example, tells you one thing in your face, and then you hear behind your back another thing...” Doing things behind one’s back leads to serious consequences when it is detected: “There were several similar stories with her, and I understood that I could not trust her. I do not want to introduce her now to people, since she will strive for [inaudible] and can say about me something bad behind my back.” The same

respondent employs another illuminating spatial expression - *vokrug menia*, “around me” - in the following situation: she invites her female friend to go out together. There is a party (by invitation only), filled with desirable men – a world that a first friend decides to open to the second. The sizable investments of reputational capital on the part of the first friend do not stop the second one from luring – among all the guys present! - the long-chosen potential boyfriend of the first one: “she has obtained the phone number of this guy around me in a cunning way, and was about to go travel [inaudible] with him without me. I have decided that it was an insolent deed. It was very unpleasant.”

Of course, usually it is not a single act that is considered treason. It is only indicative of a potentially more serious situation: building behind the back of one’s friend a whole sphere of exchanges that would leave the former friend effectively out of the new sphere. Here’s a dramatic description of a sequence of events leading to a total break-up: “A rather very strange situation occurred. She decided to marry - on paper only, for legal purposes. She told my husband about that, told my Swedish girlfriend, with whom she was acquainted (but she was not much more for her than that), but she did not tell me and she made everything that I would come to realize that all of them knew about that... In brief, she provoked me to phone her and ask: ‘What’s going on? Is this some kind of game behind my back? That is, if you do not want to invite me [to the formal marriage ceremony] - well, just tell me. You might have different reasons to do so. I can understand.’ Well, in response she has bellowed something, mumbled and grumbled. I said: ‘OK, you decide whether you wish to socialize with me or not. Because after such strange games I am not sure... what you want.’ And she did not call me anymore.”

In this example, it is the whole series of acts that leads to a decisive break: deciding in secret on an important existential decision, then telling it to chosen others, than arranging a whole circle of people in the know so that the respondent would feel excluded, and so on. Of course, the really strange quality of the story is the fact that this circle (that allegedly existed behind the back of the respondent) included the husband and a friend of the respondent. That is, in general one cannot realistically hope to maintain such a circle for long or in secrecy. Hence the villain in the recounted story might have perhaps just made an attempt to push the respondent to initiate the break-up of a relationship that had become unwanted but could not or ought not to be severed on the initiative of the villain.

Still, very often, what is important is not the construction of a sphere of non-shared life (that blatantly contradicts the injunction that friends share almost everything), but the fact that this sphere might simultaneously serve as the arena of alternative *oblichenie* – i.e. en-personation, which would reveal a non-desirable, even despicable image of the personality of a friend. This is the subject of what we would call the second type of acceptable reproaches for unfriendly behavior: they concentrate on processes of personality construction. For example: “An unacceptable thing in a friend for me would be if he, say, once thought something bad about me ... and decided that I had done something not good in relation to him or someone else, and instead of coming directly to me and putting it right in my face – ‘What are you doing, you bastard?’ – he would go telling about this in our circles, well, frankly speaking, would go spreading rumors.” The circles mentioned are circles that matter for the respondent in the evaluation of her personality. Hence the wish to call the detrimental information rumor or slander: it should be branded as a result of hearsay, not as an established judgment on the individual personality, provided by the group whom this individual freely chose to listen to.

Another narrative, on distinguishing between lies and serious lies, also points to the mechanisms of personality construction. A respondent insists that it is only a serious lie that is behavior, unacceptable for a friend: "It is clear that this does not apply to not mentioning some trifle or saying untruth to make some pleasant surprise. But it concerns rather serious aspects." What are those? As it turns out to be, seriousness comes from speaking in and about personalities. A respondent continues with a statement that we have already cited partially, but here it is in full: "When one, for example, tells you one thing in your face, and then you hear behind your back another thing, say, about yourself... Or about some other people." We already know the usual reproach for doing things behind the back of a friend, but here the objects of discussions behind the back are well articulated, which makes these discussions even more disgusting, in the opinion of the pronouncer: it is a discussion of selves, a construction of an alternative sphere of en-personation.

Finally, when not only friends, but even acquaintances are told such things, and this is kept secret from the excluded friend, this is "a game conducted against me." This is a rather exacting expression one respondent used: please note that in this case the game is "against," not "behind" the respondent. The use of the term "acquaintance" is not accidental here: as we remember, acquaintance is distinguished from a friend in that the former is not admitted to the arena of *oblichenie*; judgments and evaluations of moral character are taken as relevant, only when coming from a friend. But in the quoted example an arena for the revelation of personality of the respondent is swayed away from the control of this respondent: not friends invited by the respondent to take part in a game of the revelation of personality, but a self-imposed crowd is assembled by the treacherous game against the respondent. Thus, this is an ultimate menace, perhaps. Lies and machinations behind someone's back are one thing, taking away the opportunity to have his or her personality revealed is another. It is a real game "against me" - or, better - against "me," against the very opportunity for the self to appear.

The third acceptable type of reproach concerns friendship between people of opposite sex in Russia and is pointed at those who risk changing the relationship completely because of potential or actual sexual intimacy (excerpts of interviews that dealt with friendships between individuals of the same sex did not mention this threat to friendship at all). These reproaches suggest that even in a very close friendship a sizable distance remains: alterity is essential for the maintenance of the relationship of ego and alter ego; otherwise they would be the same. In other words, friendship implies proximity, but distance as well. By contrast, love (and sexual intimacy as an important part of it) presupposes an almost total elimination of distance: existences of two individuals risk merging into one.

The threat of this sexual merger adds a special concern for distance maintenance in friendly relations. One would of course expect that habitual distance is maintained in relationships of friends of different sex with the help of symbolic markers in a way similar, to, say, friendship among two males, who intuitively know or have tried out and established a list of topics they should not discuss and the acceptable depth of discussion in allowed topics (close friends, of course, have less limits for discussion than more distant friends). But to this habitual list of limits and prohibitions is added another, and a very specific, prohibition that emerges in discussions between friends of different sex. For example: "I may omit discussing [with a close friend] health problems, purely female problems... This is not a psychological complex, but I do not want it. That is, he is not such a sexless creature

for me, and I am not such a sexless creature to start complaining about... well, I don't know... about totally intimate things."

It is not surprising, perhaps, that a threat to this distance maintenance between friends is frequently stated in spatial metaphors. For example, one respondent said that friendship between male and female was almost impossible, unless - when relationships become more and more proximate - there is an effort to stop moving along the axis of growing proximity at some point: "I think that friendship exists, when one of them does not want that things went further [*shlo dalshe*]. Well, it may be that both do not want that things went further." This "further" is illustrated further with a telling example, where a male directly proposes his female friend: "Listen, friend [*podruga*], I like you so much; why don't you and me have everything?" The story becomes physical in its sentiment: "He visited two times, and my head was breaking from numbing pain [*lomilo*]. He would go around me, would try touching me: 'X., but why? Why? Eh! Eh...' And I would say: 'You are a good friend [*khoroshii drug*].'" Pressed to explain her reluctance to let him stop circling around and touch her, she said: "Do you understand that if we start a light romance with you, this would spoil our friendship... It will start, then end quickly, yes, and then how will we look at each other?"

Circling around but then going over to grab another in one's arms, trying out "everything" among possible interactions between two humans rather than limiting oneself to a subset of them - this is the "further" that is implied in friends' decision not to move further: this movement in physical and symbolic universes might otherwise kill distance and establish a merger and an almost total overlap of experiences, ushering in a new pragmatic regime, an engagement that many Russians would call with the word their language offers for both spatial proximity and sexual intimacy - *blizost'*.

Unclearities and Complications

The last respondent, who was particularly vocal about a physical setting in the scene of temptation, offers a curious account of how things moved further, after all. "Simply, there was such a situation. I won't explain in detail, but I had what might be called ... I thought I had a serious problem in sexual life, and I needed exactly..., urgently..., that there is a very close person [*blizkii chelovek*], who would help me solve this problem. In principle, I could tell it only to a friend... I came to L. and said: '...Listen, I cannot tell this to anybody but you. Because it is such a difficult problem for me. Couldn't you, as a friend and as a male at the same time, help me [inaudible] such a horrible thing?' He was shocked, of course. But well, we were together once, and he really helped me a lot, and after that some unclearities [*neponiatnosti*] have appeared."

A lover of certainty would perhaps say: oh those unclearities - they were surely multiple, since she muddled the clear understandable regime of proximate relationships beyond all recognition. If one believes her account, she called for urgent help - a plea that cannot be turned down among real friends - in a situation that directly threatened the very existence of friendship. It is unclear how her friend agreed to such a plea that could kill friendship in the act of the very execution of friendly duties. Was he a friend, or just a desiring male? Was she really demanding friendly help or simply finally succumbing to a long-standing temptation? Furthermore, immediately after a sexual act the situation called for some way of settling down the interpretation of what was going on between them until now. Was it a slowly

gestating emotional and sexual *blizost'* that passed through different stages of proximity, including friendship, before arriving at a point of final destination? Was it friendship still that lapsed momentarily but will be restored in the future? Or was it just a one-time favor for a friend, given in full accordance with a demand for help when requested among friends? And if the latest interpretation were to stick and prove resilient, how could one prove that the rendered sexual favor was no different from rendering any other service among friends, and effectively changed nothing in the existing regime of proximity?

In the words of the respondent herself: “Well, there was some moment, a difficult one, during our first meeting after all this story. Now, when this meeting has already happened, everything is more or less normal – even though some funny aspects appear from time to time [laughter].” Laughter, according to Nietzsche, signifies that a heretofore present serious threat of overwhelming force or conflict has suddenly disappeared. In this case, a threat (to a reality of friendship that allegedly existed before sexual transgression) has been radically reduced: this transgression was not repeated, and the existence of a clear case of an intimate relationship would be hard to prove. Some funny aspects still appear since the contradictory character of the unclear situation still reminds of itself in minor details of current interactions. But the definition of a current situation has been proposed and could be stabilized through a test of its reality that would employ referrals to durable coordinates like kids and legal obligations: “Well, it is clear that he perhaps likes me quite a lot. Still, he is attached to his family. In principle, I also do not want to tear down relations, he has a kid and a lot of obligations.” We can conclude: assault on the reality of marriage and kids is not a realistic option, so no matter what happened, a radical reduction of distance between friends that lead to a generally unacceptable level of intimacy, still has a limit.

The lover of certainty would, however, be disgruntled to learn that unclarity has not disappeared altogether, “something somewhere is still balancing on the edge,” in the words of the respondent. This points us to a general problem of descriptions like the one we have just supplied: a scholarly account should be clear, while real life is filled with unclarity that are not successfully resolved to a sufficient degree of satisfaction of observers or even participants. Frequently, these unclaritys are resolved only temporarily for pragmatic purposes depending on the context, appealed group, tested reality, the nature of objects chosen as proofs of the reality asserted etc., but these unclaritys may reappear tomorrow. As one baffled respondent has put it: “Friend or not a friend? What a strange way to put it. For two weeks I thought he was a friend, and now he turns out to be not a friend. And the crux of the matter is not in the disappointment, but in the fact that... not that I did not know this person very well: one may know people dozens of years and still not know them. And that’s why there simply are people who are important for me,... but I am also aware that tomorrow it might turn out differently. And that’s why I eschew such classification... it is a lump [*kom*] of socializing.”

However, it is not only the contingent character of the resolution of unclaritys that baffles accounts similar to ours. It is the nature of the classification game itself. It is hard and sometimes even expensive to draw borders between classes of events and persons. Furthermore, people do not use the same classificatory scales all of the time, nor is the same scale shared by all people. In other words, the scales or ordered spectrums of phenomena – similar to the one that we constructed (acquaintance – buddy – friend – close friend – sexual intimacy) – is a work of generalization, mostly carried out by a social scientist and rarely by people themselves. People tend to make binary or triple contrasts, which are then grouped by a sociologist into a larger

spectrum or a logical scale on the basis of some allegedly shared or contrasted quality. In order to claim reality for such a construction, a sociologist behaves like a lay person who tries to assert the reality of his or her claims in everyday disputes. That is, a sociologist refers a reader to a more or less durable and tangible set of proofs: in our case, these are the bits and pieces of the set of recorded and transcribed interviews.

But the choice of these bits and pieces and their arrangement in the game of testing and proving could have been different, of course. For example, *blizost'* should not be necessarily seen as a logical consummation of the process of growing intimacy, the ultimate stage in the gradual increase of the levels of proximity, where all other categories of "informal" human relations stated by respondents - like "good acquaintance" or "close friend" - are taken as just steps along the way of a gradual ascent to this height. We could have taken not growing, but decreasing proximity as a logical way to arrange the spectrum of categories used by respondents, and then the resulting scale might have been different: the logic of falling out or closing relationships of proximity is perhaps different from the logic of developing and deepening them. This different logic can be fathomed by looking at the words of one respondent on becoming distant: "We stopped working together. Also, we distanced ourselves [*otdalilis'*] somehow. Initially we phoned each other, we met. Then everybody is somehow more and more busy. And in general, there are fewer topics for communication. And then a person disappears in some way. That is, a phone number exists and one may call him or her. But one starts wondering: is it worth it? As it turns out to be, we did not really socialize for two years already... And some people are so lined up sometimes that I think: wow, what's up with me? This person has a birthday - at least I ought to congratulate him or her. And then with some people contacts are renewed. And with some... they somehow fade, and that's it."

But, more importantly, it is not the direction of the unraveling of some logic - i. e. ascent or descent along the line of some common quality - but the choice of quality that will serve as a common denominator for the scale (or as a core category, to which all other categories of the overall spectrum are contrasted) that makes the game of scholarly proving and testing so ripe with multiple outcomes. Were we not to take the Russian equivalent of the word "proximate" - *blizkii* - as a principle of ordering of our account, then the core metaphors contained in the roots of other main categories of "informal" relations, revealed in our research, could serve as such ordering principles for construction of alternative accounts. Thus, one could expect that if we took the metaphor of knowing inherent in the word *znakomyi* as this ordering principle, we could have reflected on different degrees or different types of inter-personal knowledge involved in relationships between just acquaintances, good buddies, friends, and sexual partners. If we took the metaphor of pleasure inherent in the word *priiatel'* as this ordering principle, we could have reflected on the different degrees or different types of pleasure involved in contacts between just acquaintances, pals or buddies, friends and lovers. If we took the metaphor of otherness inherent in the word *drug* as this ordering principle - *drug* in Russian is historically and etymologically inseparably linked to *drugoi*, meaning "the other"¹⁰ - we could have reflected on the different degrees or different types of being the other, involved in contacts between just acquaintances, buddies, real friends and intimate partners.

Here we should stop this seemingly relativistic account, however. An obvious counter-argument to the heretofore argued unbearable lightness of research is the

¹⁰ See Kharkhordin, *Main Concepts of Russian Politics*, chapter 5, "Friendship: Early History of the Concept."

heavy reality of only certain categories emerging from interviews as key categories, contrasted by respondents with the one that sociologists were offering them. It was the study of *drug* and *druzhiba*, friends and friendship, which yielded key contrast categories of acquaintances, buddies and intimate partners, all intermingled with friends in diverse pragmatic situations. If we were to study the phenomena of *priiatel'stvo* or *znakomstvo*, for example, key contrast categories would have surely been different. For example, one should only once look at *Neznakomka* - the famous XIX century painting by Serov, depicting an unknown beauty passing by on a street – to understand what is a most important contrast term for a category of “acquaintance.” And this contrast category does not matter at all for a category of a “friend.” In other words, the sets of key contrast categories would have been different, given the different pragmatically important distinctions, revealed by differently oriented research. And it is only in research specifically concerned with friendship that one ends up with couples of our key contrast categories: friends/acquaintances, friends/buddies, friends/close friends and friends/intimate partners.

The one contrast that surprisingly did not pop up in respondents' answers, though one could expect it, having read classics like Aristotle and Cicero, is friends vs. political friends. Aristotle famously described *politike philia* that tied thousands of citizens of a Greek polis in a non-hierarchical unity, as he said, friendship without obsequiousness. In other words, what the Greeks called political friendship was essential for the maintenance of the city. Cicero wrote on the problem of choosing between political friends, if one was to apply Aristotelian categories to the Roman life - that is, between patria - and one's own close personal friends. He resolved the issue in favor of betraying friends, rather than patria when the interests of these two types of friends contradicted. Twentieth century mostly opted for the contrary. And Russia was no exception: personal and close friends became an obvious tool of struggle against official camaraderie imposed by the state. This observation offers an important direction for future research. If we are to understand the significance of gradations of proximity for not such mundane situations as the ones we studied - but rather for what is usually called macro-level issues, like state politics – we should next study the role of these gradations among those groups of friends who ended up forming the core of (or found themselves cutting across) the main political coalitions of contemporary Russian power struggles.