

## **OPEN FORUM**

### **PUBLIC DUTIES AND PRIVATE OBLIGATIONS: NETWORKING AND PERSONALISATION OF RELATIONS IN UKRAINE**

*Alexander Tymczuk*  
*University of Oslo, Norway*

---

#### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The use of personal networks for gaining access to scarce goods during Soviet times is well documented in ethnographical studies. In this paper I show the continuity of such practices in post-Soviet Ukraine, as people still use their personal networks to get better quality service and spend less time in encounters with an impersonal bureaucracy. Further, when such network links to bureaucratic services are missing, relations with an official can be personalised by giving some kind of personal gift. By personalisation of relations I thus mean the effort to expand one's personal network in places where it does not exist, by commencing reciprocal relationships. Being in a reciprocal relationship means that the official must render a service not only according to his or her professional duties, but also according to personal obligations.

The ethnographical data presented here was gathered in Lviv in western Ukraine during a five-month period of fieldwork in 2004. The main locations of the study were a city bazaar and a local NGO that combats trafficking in women. In addition, I conducted informal interviews and had conversations with informants and friends in my own network. I had more or less frequent contact with about 45 informants, mostly employed in the private sector and living in the city. Ten informants, however, lived in rural areas, and our encounters were more sporadic.

#### **Legacies of the Soviet system**

For the framework of this analysis I draw on two interconnected features of the Soviet system: the specific distinction between public and private, and the institution of *blat*. During the Soviet period public space was controlled by an omnipresent state, and characterised by suspiciousness, humiliation and never-ending queues. Political repression and chronic scarcity of goods thus resulted in an elevation of the 'inside' and the private realm as a source of friendship and trust, and also as a means of obtaining scarce resources by the use

of *blat*- or network connections. This system of *blat*-favours, so eloquently described by Alena Ledeneva (1998), enabled people to find a way around structural constraints and formal procedures of allocation in the Soviet 'economy of shortage'. *Blat* relations therefore transcended the public/private boundary by draining resources from the official centralized distribution system into an informal system of distribution based on personal networks.

If we now turn to the contemporary Ukraine, and more specifically to Lviv, we can ask if and to what extent these Soviet legacies are present. Is a strong separation between public and private prevalent in the everyday life of my informants? Do my informants still arrange things by *blat*? As Ledeneva asserts, *blat* was a specific feature of the Soviet system. What happened to this institution after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991? Did *blat* relations lose their central position in society and vanish along with the command economy? The reforms of the post-Soviet transition undermined one crucial condition for the functioning of *blat*; the 'economy of shortage' was replaced by functioning markets for goods and capital. However, whereas there was a scarcity of goods during Soviet times, the 'object' of scarcity after 1991 is money. As one of my informants put it: "Before we had money, but there was nothing to buy. Now you can buy anything you want, but we don't have any money to buy it with". In post-Soviet Ukraine the competition is not for scarce resources, but rather for access to money. Further, the bureaucratic system and public services are still characterised by long queues and officials' total lack of empathy towards clients. Thus, networking and *blat*-favours are still important means of making informal arrangements when formal ones fail or are limited.

#### ***Svoi versus chuzhyj***

An excellent illustration of the continued elevation of the private sphere, as opposed to the public, is the much-used

distinction between *svoi* and *chuzhyj*.<sup>2</sup> *Svoi* means 'ours' or 'one's own', but not only in a strict sense of private property. *Svoi* is also used to describe relations of familiarity and friendship, and even extended to communities of people, imagined or real, who share one's beliefs, profession and so on (Busel 2001). *Chuzhyj* means 'alien', 'strange', or 'foreign', in the sense of property not belonging to oneself, people with other beliefs, aspirations and interests than oneself, or in the sense of a foreign geographical origin, such as nationality (*ibid*). *Svoi* is used about anything that is 'inside' and not harmful, as opposed to that which is *chuzhyj*, or 'outside' and threatening<sup>3</sup>; the trusted and intimate circle of close friends and family as opposed to strangers; the homemade *samohonka* (moonshine) as opposed to *horilka*<sup>4</sup> (brand spirits bought in stores); or food made from home-grown vegetables or domestic animals in contrast to food that is bought in stores and potentially dangerous since you do not know what kinds of raw material have been used.

The distinction between *svoi* and *chuzhyj* and their usage on different levels is well exemplified in the conceptualisation of food. As already noted, everything homemade or home-grown is *svoi*, as opposed to food bought in the store or at the bazaar. The food offered at the bazaar is bought only with great cautiousness, because the vendors allegedly lie unscrupulously about the quality of their products, and may even dilute milk with water or honey with sugar, or even worse, sell mushrooms from radioactive contaminated areas. On a higher level, however, food sold at the bazaar, and Ukrainian-produced food in general, is regarded as being more *svoi* than imported food. As one informant explained, "Our [Ukrainian] food is all natural, grown in our nutritious black soil. You see, abroad they stuff their food with lots of chemicals. You never know what you are really eating there". Whenever my main informant Roman<sup>5</sup> poured out the last drops from another of his bottles of homemade wine and told me to take some more of his wife's homemade *varenyky*, even though I was already full two portions ago, he smiled and said with a fatherly assurance: 'Don't be afraid! It is all *svoe!*'

The *chuzhyj* category contains images like 'strangers' and the 'neighbour'. On the most experience-near level, *chuzhi* are people you do not know, and who therefore cannot be trusted. Further, neighbours are still regarded to some degree as being the 'other', not because they are

potential informers as could be the case in Soviet times, but because of their physical proximity. By neighbours I not only mean people living next to each other, but I am using the term in a more expansive sense. Fellow citizens pressing against you on a packed tram or in a never-ending queue at the post office may also be an irritation because of their physical proximity. One way of evading such irritations is by seeking some personal link to public services.

When people interact with *chuzhi*, especially persons with whom they have some kind of business, such as a shop assistant in a public store, or a bureaucrat at the communal office, they tend to have an attitude of indifference, or outright rudeness. I saw this indifference in Roman's treatment of his customers as well, even though he runs a private enterprise selling compact discs and DVD films at the bazaar, and is dependent on sales to get an income. Roman explained this behaviour as a consequence of experience. He knows that a lot of people will ask about prices and different artists and films, without even thinking of buying anything. Standing in his stall from early morning till late in the afternoon in the freezing cold, he saves his efforts and concentrates on keeping warm and mingling with his colleagues on neighbouring stalls.

Interactions with *svoi*, on the other hand, are characterised by mutual trust and affection. As an Ukrainian proverb goes, "One's own shirt is closer to the body" (*Своя сорочка ближче тіла*). This does not only apply to close friends and family, but also to an extended group of people you know. For instance, by keeping to one or two regular stores, you can get to know the shop assistants, and establish a quasi-personal relationship with them. These shop assistants will tell you which cheese has gone out of date, which sausages taste best and even let you buy on tick. Such information and favours are seldom given by clerks you have never seen before, at least this is what many of my informants think. Roman, too, has his *postijni klijenty* (regular customers) and he takes extra care of them and often puts aside new or much sought-after discs for them. He does not even know some of these regular customers by name, just by face.

Next I will give a short description of some different kinds of positively valued categories in my informants' networks; family, friends and *kumy* are all regarded as *svoi*; colleagues and neighbours are two somewhat

mixed groups of *svoi* and *chuzhyj*; while acquaintances belong to an ambiguous group that is neither *svoi* nor *chuzhyj*.

### Family

Family constitutes the foundation of personal networks, and is the archetype of *svoi*. While family members may not necessarily socialise as frequently as friends, they are regarded as an invaluable source of moral and material support, which can be mobilised in difficult situations. Some of my informants even used the terms *brat* (brother) and *sestra* (sister) in an extended manner to include cousins and other relatives in their own generation, showing the affectionate quality of family relations.

### Friends and *kumy*

Friends are a multifaceted category and hold a special place in personal networks; some of my informants quite consciously graded their friends according to intimacy and trust. The closest friendship relations are normally those formalised in the *kumstvo* institution. *Kumstvo* is a close and valued triangular relationship between the Godfather (*khrestnyj tato*), the Godmother (*khrestna mama*) and the parents of a child. Thus, while *khrestnyj tato* and *khrestna mama* are links between the child and its Godparents, *kumstvo* links the child's parents and the Godparents. The Godmother is chosen from the mother's network, while the Godfather is chosen from the father's network.

The *kumstvo* institution not only formalises relationships, but most often strengthens them as well. The bonds between *kumy* are often represented as just as strong as bonds within the closest family. As an old Ukrainian saying goes: '*Kum* should treat *kuma* as his own sister' (Panassenko 2004:250). The relationship thus implies a moral obligation. *Kumy* should help out, not only concerning the child that binds them, but also as mutual help within the triangular relationship.

### Colleagues and neighbours

Colleagues and neighbours are somewhat mixed groups when it comes to placing them within a *svoi/chuzhyj* distinction. My informants considered colleagues and neighbours who are also good friends to be *svoi*. Others would at best be described as *znajomi* (acquaintances), i.e. neither *svoi* nor *chuzhi*, and some, with whom one had a strained relationship, were even regarded as *chuzhi*.

### Acquaintances

*Znajomi*, or acquaintances, is a somewhat ambiguous category, placed between friends and strangers. They are neither really friends, nor really strangers, and the term is often used about friends of friends, and former and current colleagues that are not regarded as being close. This ambiguity can to some degree be seen in the way acquaintances are addressed. Friends call each other by their first names, and sometimes the more affectionate diminutive forms, like *Romchyk* or *Romko* for Roman. Strangers often call each other by first name and *po-batkovi*, i.e. the patronymic. Acquaintances, however, can be addressed with either of these two forms, i.e. first name with or without patronymic.

Social distance is also expressed in the use of *Vy* and *ty*, both meaning 'you'. *Vy* is the polite form, and is used when addressing strangers and acquaintances of older age. *Ty* is used among friends and to address younger people. To address a stranger as *ty* is regarded as rude and *nekulturno* (uncultured). Further, friends greet each other with the informal form *pryvit* (hello, hi), while strangers greet each other with the more formal *dobryj denj* (good day). Acquaintances use either of the two forms.

### Confirming network ties – Celebrating Roman the Salesman

One way that *svoi*-ties are confirmed and strengthened is in social happenings, where friends and family members come together to consume food and drink. During my fieldwork Roman turned 39 years old, and I was invited to a 'small gathering of friends' as Roman called it, to mark the occasion. The host and their guests sat round the kitchen table, which was laden with various small dishes. Roman opened a bottle of *horilka* and a bottle of red wine, and filled the empty glasses. His father picked up his glass of *horilka* and proposed a toast, and the rest of the company followed suit by raising their glasses. He said some affectionate words in his son's honour and wished him happiness, prosperity and a kind wife. He ended the short speech by saying '*za tebe*' ('for you'), and the others joined him and repeated 'for you'. Whenever all the guests were gathered in the kitchen, Roman would pour alcohol into every glass, and someone would make a toast, either to honour Roman, his wife Nadia or his parents. The hosts and guest would then empty their glasses in one swallow.

Alcohol is almost omnipresent in the everyday life of my informants. It is an indivisible part of a whole variety of *occasions*, like celebrations and sociability among friends. It is also a liquid to which a great symbolic importance is attached. Alcohol is most often consumed with *svoi*, and friendship is confirmed by the ritual of drinking.

The emphasis on occasions is important, because the morality of drinking is closely connected to the occasion for drinking. Or more precisely, drinking without a proper occasion is considered negative, and mostly associated with drunks and alcoholics. As one of my informants said, “If you drink without an occasion, you are an alcoholic. So you make an occasion”. In everyday life, there are so many ritualised celebrations that the need to make up an occasion is seldom necessary. In a parliamentary hearing on a new law to fight alcoholism in the Ukraine, Deputy Yevhen Hirnyk said, “During the decade under Kuchma’s rule, a paradoxical situation has taken form, where there are more celebrations in a year than there are days. And all these celebrations and dates are in some way or another marked, starting with birthdays” (Hirnyk 2005).

Such occasions are celebrated according to some standard unwritten ‘rules’, which give them the appearance of a ritual. In the same way as at Roman’s birthday, all participants sit around the table, which is covered with different *zakusky* (*hors d’oeuvres* or snacks), plates, glasses for wine, beer, juice or *kompot* (a homemade refreshing drink made by boiling dried berries and fruits), smaller glasses for *horilka*, and forks. The participants thus form a circle facing each other, with food and drinks in the centre. The male host, in our case Roman, or one of the male guests, takes the responsibility for filling into the empty glasses. Then one of the participants, sometimes the host or sometimes a guest, picks up the glass filled with alcohol, looks at the others present while holding the glass over the table and proposes a toast. The others follow by picking up their glasses, and the initiator of the toast says some words, either praising the hosts, the person whose birthday it is, his or her parents, the bride and groom and so on. The toast is often ended by ‘*za tebe*’ or ‘*za vas*’, i.e. ‘to you’ in the singular and plural respectively, or simply ‘*na zdorovya*’ (‘to health’). The other participants repeat ‘to you’ or ‘to health’, the glasses are either slightly lowered as an explicit greeting towards the others or clinked

together over the table, and everyone drinks up. The third toast is reserved for a general toast, ‘to love’, and the last toast is often facetiously made ‘to the horse’ (*‘na konya’*), when it is time to ride home safely.

As Mary Douglas points out, “drinking is essentially a social act, performed in a recognized social context” (1987:4). In our case, the ritualised social act of drinking has a great symbolic value in that it confirms friendships. When friends sit around the same table, sharing food and drinks, the social bonds connecting them are confirmed every time a toast is made in honour of their friends. These bonds are made explicitly visible by bringing the glasses together over the table. Just as a handshake or a kiss on the cheek is a symbolic transcendence of the boundary between the self and the other, bringing glasses of alcohol together marks the communion of drinking. The focal point is therefore friendship and togetherness, symbolised by the act of drinking. To use Erving Goffman’s (1959) terminology, drinking is fundamentally a backstage or private activity. Alcohol is consumed with friends, in an atmosphere in which everyone can relax and be themselves. Alcohol can even be said to make people more ‘themselves’ than they otherwise would be, since it is an elixir that to a certain degree relaxes the need of ‘presentation of self’, and rather makes possible a legitimate expression of emotions that are not usually shown in sober interactions. Drinking is therefore an activity mostly performed among *svoi*. Janine Wedel writes about the same kind of drinking patterns in Poland: “Drinking vodka together signifies intimacy and recognition as *swoj człowiek*” (1986:27).

### **The use of personal networks—Finding a doctor**

Working at the bazaar is far from relaxing. Sometimes there are no customers at all, and Roman complains about the slow sale. At other times, especially on Saturdays and Sundays, there are too many people by the small stall, so Roman has to keep an eye on the discs as well as answer any questions. Perhaps not surprisingly, Roman has high blood pressure. He has been troubled by this for some time, and his wife finally talked him into seeing a doctor. She called her *kuma* Maria, who has a friend that works as a cardiologist at a public hospital in Lviv. Maria made an appointment with the doctor on Roman’s behalf.

The next day Roman went to the hospital to be examined. He had already prepared a black plastic bag with a box of assorted chocolates, and a \$10 note that he slipped under the plastic of the box. He told me he had entered the cardiologist's office, and introduced himself as coming 'from Maria'. The doctor took his blood pressure, and a nurse took a cardiogram. He slipped a 5 hryvny note into the nurse's pocket as she went out. After the nurse had left the room he placed the plastic bag on the doctor's desk, and said it was 'something sweet'. The doctor thanked him, without investigating its contents any further, and then led him to another room where he was to take an EKG test. In the corridor Roman asked the doctor how much he should give the person doing the test. The doctor said 20 hryvny was enough. After the EKG he had an ultrasound test, and popped 20 hryvny in a pocket there as well.

I have had experiences with public Ukrainian hospitals myself, like when I was studying Ukrainian language in Lviv, and ate too much *chuzhyj* food in local restaurants. The most striking impression that sticks in my mind is of the endless queues of people, waiting by badly marked doors. Roman thus avoided queuing for different examinations by seeing a doctor he has a 'relation' to (in this case, a friend of his *kuma*). The doctor guided him past the queues without giving the waiting patients any explanation, thereby saving Roman hours of queuing, which meant he did not have to be away from the bazaar for too long.

If we look more closely at this case, the most prominent feature is how Roman used his personal network in interaction with a public service that is supposed to be equally available to all citizens. My informants explained such behaviour from a perspective of getting a good treatment: "You just can't trust any doctor to do a good job". This was not just some unfounded prejudice against one category of professionals, but rather expressed as a negative conception of public employees in general, based on prior experience. The rationale behind such actions is therefore to get the most out of an insufficient healthcare system, by ensuring better quality of the service and spending less time. The key words are *quality* and *time*, both objects of scarcity in the everyday life of my informants. In encounters with impersonal medical care, my informants often felt deprived of both. By finding a personal link to a public service, for instance a friend of a friend, they could ensure

that they would be regarded as being a bit more *svoi* than *chuzhyj*, and treated accordingly.

I received different answers when I asked my informants why they gave money to doctors, when according to Ukrainian law healthcare should be free of charge. The most frequent answer was the low wages doctors receive, and the moral responsibility to give a sign of gratitude. Some informants pointed to the fact that they might need the services of the same doctor in the future. When I asked an informant why he did not just shake the doctor's hand, say 'thank you' and leave, he answered with a question: "And what if you need to see that same doctor again, do you think he will give you good treatment?"

Such actions as described above do have many similarities with the Soviet phenomenon of *blat*. Roman used his personal network to obtain a 'scarce' good, i.e. quality and non-time consuming healthcare. However, informants did not use the term *blat* to describe such actions, and some rather called it *poznavomstvo* (by acquaintance), a term that is interchangeable with *blat*, but not so negatively loaded. There seems to be, however, an aspect of what Ledeneva calls 'misrecognition' in my informants' conceptualisation of their own actions. While they regarded their own actions as something quite normal and moral, they often expressed dissatisfaction and annoyance with being passed in line at public offices, by people who are 'led' by an employee. Their own actions were thus regarded as moral, while the same kind of actions which assisted others were seen as immoral.

I will further claim that the mentality of arranging things by searching for personal links can be found in other situations as well, more specifically, in situations where such links are absent and therefore need to be created. The next case shows what can be done if the link to a public service is lacking, i.e. how my informants *personalise* relations with strangers by giving gifts.

### **Personalisation of relations—Fixing the central heating**

Roman and Nadia's apartment is heated by a central heating system, run and maintained by a communal office called ZhEK. The heating is switched on in mid-October, and switched off in mid-April. During winter temperatures can fall to 25 degrees below zero, so the central heating is a necessity. Occasional power failures which

are quite common during the winter can leave the radiators cold for hours and days, and sometimes the radiators stops warming completely, caused by too much air in the system or by the fact that they are clogged up. This happened to the radiator in Roman and Nadia's bedroom. It just did not warm up, and when the outdoor temperature started to drop, the bedroom was almost impossible to use.

Nadia therefore went to the ZhEK to write a complaint, so that it could be fixed. Some days later two men from the office came to the apartment, looked at the radiator in question, confirmed that it was not working, and left saying there was nothing they could do about it. Roman told me that if they did not contact the head engineer, the problem would probably not be solved until next summer. But since they did not know anyone who worked in that office, or anyone that knew someone who did, they decided to buy the head engineer a bottle of cognac. I went with Roman to one of the numerous *alkomarkets*, and after some consideration he chose a rather exclusive imported cognac that came in rather decorous packaging. He put the cognac in a black plastic bag, and the next day Nadia went to the head engineer. She told me he was just on his way out, and she had introduced herself and the problem with the radiator. He said he would look into the case. She then placed the plastic bag on his desk, saying it was 'something for coffee'. The head engineer tried to refuse, but Nadia insisted, and he said he would do his best, but could not promise anything. "Now he will remember us when he takes a nip of the cognac with his coffee", said Roman, quite hopeful of a good outcome for the problem.

After some days three men came and installed valves in all the radiators, so as to remove the air. Roman gave them 20 hryvny for the work. This did not make any difference, however; the radiator was still cold. Roman and Nadia were told that the problem was probably located in the main tube, and that it could not be fixed until spring when the central heating would be switched off.

How can we compare this case with the previous case? First, the price of the cognac was about \$10, i.e. equivalent to the sum that Roman gave to the doctor he consulted. Second, the reason for both transfers was to 'speed things up' and get it done properly. In this last case we see how Roman clearly expressed that public employees are not to be trusted to do an adequate

job. Third, the transfer was made before the service was completed, and the transfer was done discreetly and without any prior agreement as to its size. The contents of the plastic bag were not examined, with Nadia saying it was something to consume, exactly the same as what Roman told the cardiologist when he gave her the box of chocolates. Exactly what and how much it cost were not discussed. In contrast to the doctor who did not resist the transfer, the head engineer did not want to take the plastic bag at all.

I will argue, however, that the transfer made in this last case is quite different from the transfer in the previous case. First of all, there is the obvious fact of the different quality of the objects transferred, i.e. a bottle of cognac as opposed to money. Further, whereas the transaction in the previous case were regarded as an act of gratitude or payment for a service, Roman and Nadia did not know what would be the outcome of giving cognac to the head engineer. In other words, whereas the execution of the service in the previous case was already agreed upon when the transfers took place, Nadia gave the bottle of cognac without knowing whether any execution of any service whatsoever would result from it. This point is important, because alcohol is sometimes also used as a direct means of payment, especially in the countryside. I will argue, however, that the bottle of cognac given in this specific case was not a form of payment, nor a sign of gratitude, but rather an effort to *personalise relations* with the head engineer, and thereby be treated more as a sort of *svoi* than as a *chuzhyj*. Whereas a relationship of *svoi*, or quasi-*svoi* if you prefer, had already been established *before* the transaction took place in the previous case, by finding a necessary personal link, such a relationship had to be *created* in this last case. This was done by forcing a reciprocal debt on the head engineer. So, while the transfer in the previous case was more of an unofficial payment for a service, the transfer in this last case can be regarded as a *gift*.

Referring to this last transfer as a gift needs to be explained, since it is not an obvious case of gift-giving. In contrast to market exchange and barter, where transactions are carried out between *free and equal* agents, who are willing to sacrifice something they have to gain something that the other possesses, this transaction was a case of forced reciprocity. Thus, the value of the bottle of cognac was never mentioned; in fact, the contents of the plastic bag

was not even described or taken out to be evaluated. The head engineer did not take part in any bargaining, and he was not acting as a free agent, in the sense that he could not pull out of the transfer, even if he tried to. It was thus an attack on the receiver's freedom by creating a debtor (Bourdieu 1996:80). Secondly, and more importantly, there was no explicit deal agreed upon that the cognac was to be payment for a service. The link between the bottle of cognac and the service was implicit, but not confirmed.

If we use Gregory's model for gifts and commodities (1982), where gifts are *inalienable* objects transacted by non-alien, and commodities are *alienable* objects transacted by aliens, we see from Roman's statement that the gift, or rather the identity of himself and Nadia, were intended to be inalienable, since the head engineer would remember them 'when he takes a nip of the cognac'. However, since the transactors were aliens, their social distance should imply that this transfer actually was a commodity-exchange. But here is my point: a gift was given to a person who was alien (*chuzhyj*) to personalise relations with him, that is, shorten the social distance, and thereby make him more of a non-alien (*svoi*). As Marshall Sahlins puts it, "If friends make gifts, gifts make friends" (1988:186). The gift, far from being altruistic, was used instrumentally to make a connection, and thereby to achieve something.

Why did Roman and Nadia not just give the head engineer \$10 as Roman did in his consultation with the cardiologist? The value of the cognac was about the same, so why go to the trouble of buying a gift? Roman said he never considered giving money instead of the cognac. It would have been inappropriate, he told me. Why would it have been inappropriate? Why was it more appropriate to give money to the cardiologist? I think the inappropriateness of giving money in this last case is connected to a fact already mentioned. In the former case, a 'deal' had already been settled *before* the transfer was made, through the mediation of a common personal link, whereas in the latter case the aim was to get the very 'deal' in place. The bottle of cognac was therefore a substitute for the personal links used in the former case. Whereas the \$10 to the cardiologist was a *payment for a service*, or an immediate settlement of a reciprocal debt, the bottle of cognac to the head engineer was an invitation into a quasi-personal relationship, where the reciprocal settlement would be personal attention from the head engineer,

ensuring that a service would be satisfactorily carried out. Roman's statement that money would have been inappropriate must therefore be seen in a context that the transfer was not any payment for a service, but rather an invitation to an execution of a service with a personal touch.

#### Personalisation of relations by giving alcohol

A bottle of cognac as a gift to create a relationship is not incidental. It is what I would call an *exceptionally* inalienable gift, since the giver's identity not only clings to the given object, but is also 'consumed' in the gulp. I do not mean 'consumed' in a metaphorical 'the wine is the blood'-sense, but rather in a more mundane and dull sense of use-value. Objects that have a use-value make exceptionally inalienable gifts, because they are often and actively 'consumed', rather than being stuffed away in the garage, and therefore are more successful in reminding the receiver of who gave it. Nadia and Roman thereby forced the head engineer into a reciprocal debt, which meant that they would 'haunt' him every time he fancied consuming some of the precious drops.

A bottle of cognac makes an exceptionally inalienable gift in another sense as well, by having a strong symbolic value, more specifically of sociability and friendship. Whereas an exclusive stapler or a box of folders, both indispensable to any diligent bureaucrat, would please the professional role of an official, a bottle of alcohol delights the private role of that same official. As described earlier, the act of social drinking marks the boundary of *svoi* and *chuzhyj* symbolically, since a person drinks with his or her friends. The head engineer was therefore pulled out of his official and 'front region' role as a state employee and into a personal and 'backstage' relation with Nadia and Roman. As Erving Goffman notes, "By invoking a backstage style, individuals can transform any region into a backstage" (1959:130). This was done in a discreet manner so that the head engineer would not be offended. Goffman calls this 'putting out feelers':

In many kinds of social interaction, unofficial communication provides a way in which one team can extend a definite but noncompromising invitation to the other, *requesting that social distance and formality be increased or decreased*, or that both teams shift the interaction to one involving the performance of a new set of roles (1959:188; my emphasis).

The head engineer tried to stay in the 'front region' by rejecting the gift, but Nadia's persistence forced him into accepting her definition of the situation as 'backstage'. He was now responsible for fixing the central heating not only according to his professional duties, but also had a personal obligation to help out. Janine Wedel argues along the same line when it comes to alcohol, "Vodka facilitates the transformation from an official to an unofficial situation. ...Vodka promotes the privatization of public roles" (1986:29).

I thus argue that quasi-personal relations can be created in meetings between bureaucrat and citizen, where values of the personal sphere, such as friendship and generosity, are transferred into the public sphere of bureaucracy by the act of gift-giving. In our case this occurred by giving alcohol, a kind of gift which even on a symbolic level underlines the private dimension. Bureaucrats are people too, with their own personal networks; they enjoy a glass of cognac in the company of good friends, and are not just programmed robots carrying out their public duties. The line between the public and the private, or the almost coinciding line between the formal and the informal, is therefore not absolute. An official can move between the public sphere of official duties and the private sphere of personal obligations without compromising either too much.

### Networking or corruption?

Networking and the personalisation of relations, as presented in these cases, balance on a thin line between legitimacy/illegitimacy and morality/immorality. Public services, such as medical examinations or fixing the central heating, are, according to democratic principles, mainly distributed by queuing. By mobilising network links, and personalising relations where such links do not exist, my informants jumped the queue, and got access to 'scarce goods' that were distributed according to social distance. Getting access to a public service by using one's personal relationships or giving gifts is questionable from the perspective of democratic values and bureaucratic professionalism. Such interactions between officials and citizens transcend the boundary between the public and the private, and therefore move in the fringes where ugly *Corruption* lurks. If we employ a formalistic definition of corruption, the acts in the cases will thus be categorised as corrupt, since the officials' actions deviated from the

formal duties of their public roles. The bureaucrats prioritised private obligations or concerns instead of public duties. Subjectively, however, the acts were not valued as immoral or illegitimate, and according to an 'anthropological perspective' on corruption, which takes 'the native's point of view', the acts would not necessarily be analysed as corrupt.

Efforts to delimitate gifts and bribes, *blat* and corruption are plentiful both in academia and in Ukrainian public discourse.<sup>6</sup> When a theoretical perspective or a popular point of view has managed to capture the 'creature', it slips away before our eyes when lifted to a more general level. I therefore avoid going into such a battle of definitions and demarcations, and rather note that different acts seem to be valued according to context, personal perspective, degree of involvement, and so on. The main concern when you need medical healthcare or to have your central heating fixed is not whether your actions can be defined as corrupt or not. If a call to a friend or a bottle of cognac gets the job done, any discourse on corruption seems quite irrelevant.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on findings published in Tymczuk 2005.

<sup>2</sup>*Svoi* (свої) is the plural and nominative case of *svij* (свій), and *chuzhyj* (чужий) is a masculine singular in the nominative case.

<sup>3</sup>This 'inside/'outside' metaphorical distinction was distorted with the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, as the threatening 'outside', represented by the Soviet state apparatus, invaded the private sphere with radioactive contamination (Petyna 2002:73).

<sup>4</sup>While my informants in the city only drank *horilka*, the informants in the countryside drank either *horilka* or *samohonka*. The informants in the countryside claimed that bottles of *horilka* sometimes contain illegally made spirits, sometimes even containing lethal methanol. *Samohonka*, on the other hand, has the quality guarantee of being *svoi*, and is therefore safe to consume (not considering terrible hangovers and hazardous drink-driving).

<sup>5</sup>All persons are fictional, although all data are based on actual events.

<sup>6</sup>See Tymczuk 2005 for some examples.

### References

- Bourdieu, P. 1996. *Symbolsk Markt. Artikler i utvalg*. Oslo: Pax Forlag AS.

- Busel, V. T. 2001. *Velekyj tulmachnyj slovnyk suchasnoji ukrajins'koji movy*. Kyiv: Irpin'.
- Douglas, M. 1987. "Introduction," in *Constructive Drinking. Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology*. Edited by M. Douglas. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books.
- Gregory. 1982. *Gifts and commodities*. London: Academic Press.
- Hirnyk, Y. 2005. *72nd session of the Ukrainian Parliament, 21st January*.
- Ledeneva, A. 1998. *Russia's Economy of Favours. Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Panasenko, T. M. 2004. *Ukrajins'ki prysliv'ya i prykazky*. Kharkiv: Folio.
- Petryna, A. 2002. *Life Exposed. Biological Citizens after Chernobyl*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sahlins, M. 1988. *Stone Age Economics*. London: Routledge.
- Tymczuk, A. 2005. Public Duties and Private Obligations. Networking and Personalisation of Relations in Ukraine, Master Thesis, University of Oslo. Available at [www.duo.uio.no/publ/sai/2005/29265/Tymczuk.pdf](http://www.duo.uio.no/publ/sai/2005/29265/Tymczuk.pdf).
- Wedel, J. 1986. *The Private Poland. An Anthropologist's Look at Everyday Life*. New York: Facts on File Publications.

© 2006 Alexander Tymczuk All Rights Reserved

The copyright for individual articles in both the print and online version of the Anthropology of East Europe Review is retained by the individual authors. They reserve all rights to the text. Please email the managing editor for details on how to contact these authors. Permission is granted for reproducing these articles for scholarly and classroom use as long as only the cost of reproduction is charged to the students. Commercial reproduction of these articles requires the permission of the authors.