

TV AND MASS MEDIA: CONSTRUCTING A NEW RUSSIAN CONSUMER

(ADVERTISING IN 1989-1998)

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Introduction. The end of a period.

Background

The crisis that hit Russia in late 1998 seems to mark the end of what can be termed the second period of post-Soviet history. The first period was characterized by the destruction of the Soviet power structure and economic system by the so-called 'democrats' who took office after the collapse of the USSR. Their stated wish was to destroy the Soviet/Communist bureaucracy hoping to release 'the natural potential of the nation'. The second period of this process turned out, however, as we now see it, very differently from all expectations. The political control and the dominant positions in the economy were taken over by a new interest group that managed to profit from the ideology-driven liberal reforms undertaken in post-Soviet times.

This interest group was of mixed origin and it included former Soviet industrial and party bosses. These people established a very effective system of exports and imports of goods and services and put it under their control. The logic of this new system was that all that could be sold outside Russia was to be exported, and in like fashion, all that could be sold inside Russia, was to be imported. First this logic was applied to high tech products, then to industrial equipment, then to the "brains", and finally to all other human resources that were also made items of export. The biggest profits, however, were to be made from the sales of gas and oil.

Part of the returns resulting from this economic model were deposited or invested outside Russia. The remaining portion was directly used to finance consumption inside the country. In turn, the redistribution of this money from primary consumers to secondary, tertiary and so on within the country itself led to the creation of a new market,

a market for consumer goods and services, specifically, the segment of up-market brands, premium and high quality goods, luxury items and the like.

Another wide segment of the market was the result of the re-channeling of the wealth formerly spent for the military-industrial sector for the purposes of the massive import of inexpensive goods to be in huge quantities all over Russia. Initially the importers of such goods were numerous petty traders ("shuttles") who worked at their own risk. Later more conventional import-export operations were established. Finally, the local production of Pepsi-Cola and Smirnoff, Marlboro and Mars and other global brands was launched. Incidentally, the latter brands are still called 'imports' by the Russian mass consumers.

The recent development of this economic process took the form of the local production by international companies of new original 'domestic' or even 'traditional domestic' brands aimed at the Russian new, but conservative/patriotic mass consumer. Such brands were the Baltica beer and, the Peter I and Golden Java cigarettes if only to mention the brand names that enjoy an immense degree of success in the Russian domestic market.

The massive importation of consumer goods as well as their local production by international companies made marketing and advertising necessary. Advertising in the Russian media became one of the chief new industries in the country. The related field of market research, in which the author of this paper often took part, made steady progress in the country.

All in all, the pattern of consumption in Russia changed dramatically in the last decade, bringing with it a transformation in the lifestyle of virtually all the Russian population.

The changes, however, were of a very different kind in different segments of the population. (In this paper, two types of the new Russian consumers will be discussed).

The crisis

All categories of Russian consumers were instantly shaken by the sudden fall in value of the local currency and the economic instability and price increases associated with the downfall of the ruble. How long it will take Russia to overcome the crisis is anybody's guess: the country is full of speculation in this respect.

According to opinion polls conducted in late September 1998, Russians were not very optimistic about the imminence of a prompt solution. About 34 percent of respondents estimated that the time necessary for recovery would be 'two years or less', while 43 percent thought it will take 'five years or more'. (Even among the most optimistic age group of the under 25's, not less than 37% of respondents expected to wait until they turned 30, or even longer, to see the end of the crisis). (©VCIOM, N =2400)

(Here and in other cases we refer to the nation-wide opinion polls, conducted by the Russian Centre for Public Opinion and Market Research (VCIOM). 'N=2400' shows the size of the representative sample of the adult urban and rural population. The qualitative interviews and focus groups to which we also refer in this paper were conducted with the direct participation of the author as head of the Qualitative Research Dept of VCIOM)

The levels of consumption among mass social groups, as their members themselves feared, was bound to decrease. About 60% of the adult population in Russia (©VCIOM Sept. 1998 N=2.400) expected a shortage in food products as a result of the crisis. Three quarters (76%) of adult Russians reported in September that their families' standard of living had deteriorated in the last 12 months, and more than half (55%) expected the same to happen in the near future. (The data for March 1998 were 52% and 36% respectively) (©VCIOM Sept. 1998 N=2.408, March 1998 N=2408)

Whatever the causes and origins of the crisis, not only is mass consumption expected to suffer, but the whole system of political power and economic control is to undergo a process of reconstruction and deconstruction. The oil and gas trade will no longer bring in huge revenues, for example, and imports of goods will be reduced and restricted. Moreover, according to some observers, the oil and gas revenues will soon become the objects of redistribution in a novel way. The military-industrial elites and some other interest groups that were kept off the power and money centers during this second period of our recent history are eager to make a return and take revenge immediately.

Some tertiary institutions, including the media and advertising may survive the onslaught, however, and be able to function under a different regime. In any case, it is almost certain that those institutions will undergo serious modifications and so will the everyday life of the new Russian consumer. These changes will become apparent even before the arrival of the Third Millennium.

The 'old consumer' and the media

‘The consumer of the Soviet past’, whose shadow was seen by some visionaries in Russia this autumn, was at the same time characterized by a very large number of individuals in the category coupled with an extremely low number of types within it.

Let us address the Soviet patterns of consumption. The upper and mainstream groups were different in terms of the attributed status rather than in terms of their style/semantics. The rich and highly positioned Soviet consumers possessed simply more of the same 'creature comforts' that were available to ordinary people. This, incidentally, fueled the popularity among Soviet social scientists of the Marx/Maslow mix of ideas concerning the universality of 'basic human needs'. Among the consumers themselves the idea of prosperity and material well being of the person, (or the family, or the nation) was expressed in terms of large quantity rather than wide variety of commodities and products.

In Soviet times, the material things of life came in the shape of products, but not brands. While brands and their specially designed semantics were unknown in Russia, some products served as symbolic indicators of status. The status hierarchy was an elementary one (the best and the ordinary: "Stolichnaya" and "Moskovskaya" vodka, "Zhiguliovskoye" and "Ostankinskoye" beer, "Kazbek" and "Belomor" papirosy). So unsurprisingly the price in figures of the products in question eventually became the product name (just “2.87” or “3.62” for vodka, “2.20” or “2.90” for sausages). With the supplement of 'third-rate' versions in every scale (the cheapest drink, tobacco, sausage

etc.) the basic typology of both products and consumers was complete. In other words, the concept of the social structure consisted of

- prime quality/top status layer,
- 'normal' quality/ 'ordinary Soviet man' layer
- low grade/outcast, marginal level

This structure presupposes the existence of a very primitive mobility pattern of status as well as a very simple (and very crude, as we know) principles of social control.

According to VCIOM's research concerning that historical period, the most widespread (over 60%) self-description among Soviet Russians was that of: "open-hearted and simple". The idea of the 'open heart' will be discussed later on, but for now let us stress that the idea of 'simplicity' as a national virtue basically mirrored the simplicity of social life and social structure prevalent in the country.

The Soviet media, to the extent to which they were the means of political/social control, attempted to lend support to this most simple of structures. Nonetheless, the same media (and the more so the non-controlled sources of information from the outside) in their capacity as means of recreation, entertainment etc., could not but inform the Soviet consumers about the totally different idea of consumption that was typical of 'the West'.

The well known shock experienced by virtually all Soviet consumers when they were exposed however superficially to 'western' style shops (in the 1980's while traveling abroad, in the 1990's in the new shops that were opening at home) was caused not by the sheer quantities of the goods on offer but by the variety of brands on display.

The vast array of goods seemed to them not only psychologically 'overwhelming', but also irrational, economically redundant, and the nuance differences between the brands were perceived as serving the non-basic or even the perverted 'needs' of some consumers. It is worth noting that the idea of variety and choice was equally alien to all the main groups of the classical Soviet society, including those in the upper 'well-to-do' elite categories. There was very limited access to the symbols of 'Western' consumption. A few western products bearing brand names such as Wrigley's, Levy's, Marlboro and others were legally imported, while other goods were smuggled or simply brought along from travel overseas. Although some features pertaining to a product itself such as the idea of fashion, comfort, good design or high technology could be conveyed to the consumer by those separate items brought into the country in one way or another from the West, the idea of variety and choice could not. The prevalent notion about the American/Western way of life was made up of these symbols with the addition of the advertisements for them - incidentally, advertising was practically non-existent in the USSR.

Until the end of the 1980's those western consumer goods remained in the world that existed only 'out there' even when some goods were already imported in considerable volumes. The perception about those products changed as soon as the first commercials made an appearance on television. The proliferation of the TV was well over 80% of the households (the remaining 20% mostly belonged to the remote villages). At that time there was, however, only one all-Union channel in the air in many of those areas. This channel (and other channels if any) was regarded by the public as an official state medium.

A large proportion of the urban and rural dwellers experienced no immediate changes in their social position as a result of the downfall of the USSR. Most of them were still working at their usual workplaces. Themselves and their retired relatives lived in the same houses within the same community. There was one factor, however, which was completely new for most Russians: the much wider selection of imported goods now available in the shops, even in the shop just round the corner, and especially in the virtual space of the TV commercials. In comparison with the 1980's, the average diet started to include more home-made products and at the same time, more modern, imported brands.

At one point, however, social tensions revitalized the archaic opposition of 'us here' and 'them out there', and soon afterwards the government was perceived as the one who had

- a.) 'robbed and stripped' the mass consumer,
- b.) let the Berlin wall and the Warsaw Pact be destroyed,
- c.) proclaimed the US and Germany as friends,
- d.) allowed the 'Western' commercials come into virtually everybody's home.

In many cases the television advertising for a product arrived much earlier than the products in question became available in the local shop. When this happened, the TV advertising acted not as a marketing tool but as a symbol of the betrayal/defeat of all of that used to be embodied in the idea of the 'us here' as opposed to the 'them out there'.

The first public reactions about TV advertising were negative for the most part. The low income/40+/female sector of the population (which represents the highest figures in terms of viewing hours per day) became the epitome of extreme irritation, hostility, and indignation toward advertising. The happy and prosperous life shown,

hinted at or even just implied in the commercials - in stark contrast to life as portrayed in the soap operas from Latin America - did not suggest an escape from the hardships of daily life but on the contrary, it made those burdens even more difficult to bear.

The failed attempt

The first domestic TV advertising campaign that resulted in an enormous marketing success played with the idea of the contrast between the 'us' and 'them'. Instead of 'their' glossy life-style it showed a working class Russian guy (Lionya Golubkov) living in a typical Soviet-type shabby flat. In the commercial, a character with some of the attributes of a folk-story 'smart fool' was involved in an activity which was perceived by millions of his followers as a very new type of 'market behavior'. He was buying securities (!) at a private company (!) just like brokers do at the stock exchange. The participants in the game felt themselves to be 'the new consumers' who, unlike the average Russian brought up with the notion of fixed salaries and fixed prices, had to take the trouble to make calculations and take account of the interest rate on offer and, in a few word, to take some of the numerous decisions required by the management of one's own money in a situation of ever changing conditions.

Unfortunately, the most successful media campaign aimed at 'creating a new consumer' led in the end to immense frustration for its audience. When the so-called pyramid financial schemes collapsed, hundreds of thousands of people lost their money in an instant and then resorted in frustration to the usual Soviet discourse. Although

people knew that they had dealt with a private company, when the critical moment arrived they addressed the State and simply attempted to claim their money back from the Government.

This new and modern 'business' - that of making money by being 'smart' and attentive - proved attractive for all categories of the just-post-Soviet population. There appeared the investment funds for VIPs and for the 'creative intelligentsia', for police officers and for 'babushkas'. Some schemes were widely and successfully advertised in the mass media, while some others reached the same goals by being positioned as 'closed' or 'secret' enterprises. The unhappy result of these schemes was perhaps not as socially destructive in Russia as in Albania. Nonetheless, the collapse of these pyramid schemes prompted the creation of a political movement that still congregates those 'deceived depositors'. The latter are now a marginal type of the 'new consumer' as they are still attempting to apply Soviet values to the post-Soviet business reality.

As to the mass post-Soviet consumer, the lesson widely drawn from the 'MMM trick' (the biggest pyramid scandal) was to keep away from all kinds of private financial institutions and their instruments. According to recent VCIOM data, not more than 3 percent of the general population thought it was safe for them to invest their money in private banks, and even less would do the same in investment funds, while almost 40 percent of respondents favored holding American dollars in cash and about 10 percent stayed loyal to Sberbank savings accounts (they think this is still a state-owned bank).

Incidentally, because of the way preferences are organized, the collapse of the state-run pyramid scheme of State Treasury Obligations ("GKO") did not affect the life of ordinary Russian citizens.

The role of the media in constructing a new consumer: the case of the 'new russians'

Differentiation in post-Soviet society was stimulated by several new types of activity (and respectively, channels of mobility) which became socially approved or at least acceptable. As our analysis shows, the key question was that of the legitimization of the new activity and its related way of life and patterns of consumption.

Certainly entrepreneurial type people who had chosen Soviet underground life and who usually found themselves in jail felt that they needed nobody's blessing to start a profit making activity of their own. Some of them made a fortune in the early 1990's, when free market was made legal and some even went on to become media and show-business tycoons. Nonetheless, the majority of contemporary big businessmen and businesswomen who started their new career in the same period almost invariably say when interviewed that with them it was a case of taking an almost involuntary step in a new direction. They all thought that they had violated one or other social norm, and then all of them referred to a 'dead-lock' personal situation which made this violation somehow legitimate. (When I realized that I could not afford shoes for my daughter, I felt I was ready to do anything - to steal, or to sell, or ...)

The retail trade and in general the activity of buying and selling for profit, were occupations treated as improper and degrading by most of Russian/Soviet citizens (the attitude was different only in marginal groups). A situation labeled as 'disaster', however, was able to release an alternative sets of norms: for the sake of some sacred values that were in danger (e.g. the survival of your loved ones) the social taboos were abrogated.

This 'legitimization process' helped millions of people brought up in disgust to any kind of trade, to start what was then called a 'business' (in fact 'business' was the name for any type of self employment from washing cars to running a bank.)

In contrast, the Soviet system of vertical mobility consisted of just a few channels. 'Science, research and education' was one of them. A good part of the Russian financial elite was recruited from the 'ordinary', (sometimes - extraordinary, like Boris Berezovski) 'research fellows' working in Soviet scientific research institutions and universities. Their energy and strive for self-realization therefore found a different legitimate channel. (For these reasons, the average level of education of the Russian big businesspeople is very well above average, a situation that is altogether very different from the one that obtains among foolish 'folkloric' New Russians).

In addition, the Communist Party apparatus used to be another important channel of upward mobility. The 'zastoy'- 'stagnation' is perhaps the best word that could be used to designate a particular phenomenon that of an obstruction to progress toward the upper and medium levels within the party hierarchy. (This 'constipation' was a regular feature of that reality, while the means for release from it were irregular and they often involved purges and shootings). On the other hand, an alternative way into a semi legal entrepreneurial activity was tried out by many young Komsomol leaders in late Soviet times. Although the idea of business must have been ideologically alien to them, some of the most active and successful members of what is now the class of businesspeople come from those ranks.

The criminal world also participated in the new business activity and Mafia-type structures soon came into being. Unlike their American and Italian counterparts, the local

Mafia did not restrict itself to some specific areas such as drugs, gambling and the like. It could be said that the Mafia has now become a universal element present in one form or other in any type of business. The New Russians who come from this sector managed to add the colors of criminal culture to the overall image of the category.

VCIOM performed research on the emerging group in statu nascendi when their ethos was still not established as a complete set. Some of the newly rich persons who were interviewed boasted to our researchers that they kept wearing the same jackets they used to wear while being ordinary Soviet junior research fellows with an income of about six thousand (sic!) times less than at the moment of the interview. The same pattern was repeated as regards their everyday ethics and aesthetics. Their business behavior was radically different from what they used to practice in their 'previous life', while their ways and habits outside their office remained for the most part unchanged. However, this situation could not last for long. What happened then was the best example of 'the construction of the new consumer'.

The kommersant? Initiative

One success story is worth considering. It all started with a purely rational marketing decision made by a young chief editor of a recently launched newspaper The Kommersant?. This editor, whose name was Vladimir Jakovlev wished to attract new readership for his edition. For the sake of this goal he ventured to build a new social group out of the emerging Russian nouveaux riches. At that time this writer had a chance to talk with V. Jakovlev about his plans to bring together many people of high income

from a variety of backgrounds, who were unaware of each other's existence and who almost did not know what to do with their huge incomes.

The process of construction of this new consumer could be said to have started on the very day an editorial in the *The Kommersant*? carried something along these lines: "The normal person begins his day with a glass of orange juice and his newspaper".

Now, for his target audience to have orange juice in the morning was as unusual as to have 'their' newspaper delivered before breakfast (and not just a 'main newspaper'). However, they 'bought it'. As a social group, they understood that the respectable model of 'western' businessman was being offered to them. Soon the paper coined the name 'New Russians' (in English!). Since then, this name acquired many different connotations, including negative ones, but initially it helped to a considerable extent in the process of building a new group. The fact that the name was in English helped to construct the situation as if some important (Western) observer had witnessed all of this and had somehow lend his approval to their emergence.

The paper, as we learned from interviews conducted with its readership, was not so much respected by them for the business and commerce information it carried (the reality of a shadow economy, its distinct rules and ways by which the bulk of the money was made, was not suitable to be covered by the press). However, as a guide and instructor in the realm of everyday life, the paper acquired an absolute authority and power over its readership. Special articles on 'what', 'where' and 'how' people in their position should eat, drink, wear and so on were published on a regular basis.

Research performed in this period revealed the presence of very rigid and powerful mechanisms of group cohesion. Unlike previous times, nobody could risk any

longer to wear an old jacket or to remain in the old flat. The fashion dress as well as the new villas became a must. Since the group was only in its formative stages, when sources of symbols were still very scarce, the hints and ideas borrowed from the newspaper columns were treated as extremely rigid in-group rules. After a single word in The Kommersant?, the very next evening the array of flashy limos was sure to appear at the doors of whatever 'in' shop, club or restaurant had been mentioned in the paper. For reasons that the group was growing in number, the rotation of the symbols of belonging was also extremely fast. The ostentatious crimson and red jackets, the first Volvo cars, then the BMWs, then the Mercedes, then the Audi's became indicators bound to change at a much faster rate than neighboring social groups could notice and reflect them in their folklore.

Now there are no less than 3-4 glossy magazines that cover every possible aspect of the everyday life and leisure of the rich, such as motoring, housekeeping, gardening, fashions and so on. A part of them are from the publishing house Kommersant? - the big deal in the industry that has continued growing alongside the success of the consumer created by it.

Destructing the new consumer: the 'middle class' case

The crisis unleashed in late August in Russia helped to prove to all observers the existence of another category of 'new consumers'.

As soon as several private banks and related institutions closed, quite a number of respectable authors, including, for instance, Mr. Yegor Gaidar, came to the one and the same idea: that the obvious death of the new consumer (they call him the 'middle class'

and 'the primary victim of the crisis') is the best proof of his prior (prior to the crisis, that is) existence, which until recently was doubted by many sociologists.

Though joining neither their funeral chorus, nor their definitions, we can borrow this 'death certificate' as able to furnish us with good evidence of existence, the more so since the deceased seemed 'to buy' the argument the most readily.

The theoretical reasons to call this category a 'middle class' (and thus claiming for it all the attributes attached to this class in Western societies) are nevertheless not very sound. The important point is, however, that at the end of the 1990's there can be little doubt about the existence of a specific new social group in Russia.

Since there is no other name available to designate this group of people we will resort to the expression 'middle class'. We circumscribe the meaning of the expression, however, to two features: that on the income scale this group occupies a midway position and that as a group it is different in consumption from those positioned above and below on the social scale.

Numerous joint ventures were established in the 1990's and more and more Russian citizens were hired by them. Subsequently, modern financial and business institutions started to grow. Investments in real estate were made and some international companies even invested in the industrial sector. Tertiary industries such as information and communications, marketing research and education also came into being or was developed further. The media and advertising were on the list of new investments, too.

The Russian higher education system underwent dramatic changes in this context. The 'working student' has now become not a marginal but a key figure in the system. Nowadays the bulk of the student body usually finds temporary or permanent

employment in the new sectors of the economy. As a group, higher education students can be treated as a very promising and dynamic part of this new 'middle class'.

The trade and services industry created a relatively large secondary market for jobs. The Russian staff engaged in joint ventures and in the local offices of international companies, in the new financial and banking sector, in private trading companies, together with the phenomenon of the working students and so on, mainly concentrated in Moscow and other large cities, became a distinct and visible part of the urban population. Since we are following no strict criteria at this particular point, it is therefore not possible to supply exact percentages here, however. At any rate, a good estimate would place between 5% and 10% of the adult Russian population in this category.

Their salaries usually range from \$ 6,000 to \$ 24,000 per year. Although those wages are much more modest than those of their ex-pats fellows, their income undoubtedly allows them to change almost completely their everyday consumption patterns and even 'look' different from those working in the traditional state-run sector with average earnings of between \$ 1,200 to \$ 3,600 per year.

Whenever the origins and the future prospects of this new type of consumer are discussed today, the issue becomes emotionally charged because it quickly leads to a discussion about the "rights" and "wrongs" of decisions taken in the late 1980's and the early 1990's. (The latest data collected for late September (©VCIOM Sept. 1998 N=1714) illustrates the point, as it shows that 77% of respondents were certain that 'we were driven to a deadlock').

Some observers argue that the new middle class consumption models based on the imports of goods, having no basis in the national economy nor in the national

culture/tradition, were from the very beginning doomed to disappear some day (V.Gavel put it as "a casino with no industry").

Others argued that it was in Russia's best interests to create a middle class as this was a prerequisite for 'stable', 'ordinary', 'modern' life in the country. The middle class consumer demands were thought to be, among other things, an incentive for the economy (e.g. the consumer demand for vehicles set in motion the otherwise stagnating domestic car industry, which in turn acted as a stimulus for the economy in general).

Somber prophecies about Russia's future are plentiful these days, but the few optimistic ones link the revival of the nation to the fate of that very group of people, the middle class, 'who benefited from the reforms', in other words, the 'new consumer'.

On the other hand, the role of the media and advertising in relation to this social group is a somehow delicate matter, since the media and advertising people themselves feel that they belong to this new category of the population. For this reason the media has really become a message in itself among the members of the same social group.

One of the effects of this 'auto-communication' was the very fast formation of a group culture. Visitors to Moscow and to some other Russian cities were astonished to see a new style take shape in less than half a decade. The 'New Russian' style became popular in the new magazines, in office buildings, in homemade commercials and in the shop windows, and although it was scorned by many critics, nobody however doubted its existence.

This culture, as translated by the Russian media, is becoming the mass culture of contemporary Russia or the national mass culture. The links of this new culture to the

international and universal mass culture standards are as visible now as its distinct local topological features.

The style in question is at the same time 'cosmopolitan' and 'patriotic'. And so are the consumers. In 1997 (© VCIOM, N=1000) 63% of potential car buyers declared that if they could buy a car that day, they would chose foreign makes (BMW was the leading brand - and the choice of 16% of the respondents) while 37% promised to stay with domestic models (Lada-VAZ was the leading domestic brand taking a share of 22% of the Russian 'dream cars' market).

In Brezhnev times the possession of a private car was viewed by some analysts as a key criterion for the identification of the Soviet middle class. There are good (although different) reasons to make the same point today. According to VCIOM data, between one quarter to one fifth of adult Russians report that there is a car in their families. About half of these cars were purchased after 1992 when the formation of the 'New Russians' as well as 'middle class started'. We can therefore venture a rough estimate of the number of 'new consumers' and place one tenth of the population in this category.

'New Middle' vs 'New Russian'

As we said earlier, other estimates also come to the 10% as the current size of the 'new consumer' group in Russia. The figure also includes the 'New Russians' discussed above. The line between the 'New Russians' and the 'New Middle' cannot be drawn on a strict statistical basis. This does not mean, however, that the border between the two is non-existent. Moreover, this borderline is based on their different consumption patterns. The clash between the two types of new consumer takes place at the heart of the mass

culture, although not in the press or in the electronic media, but in urban folklore, as denoted in jokes.

The continuing jokes about 'New Russians' are widely known even outside the country. The New Russians featured in those jokes are mocked for their exuberant richness combined with their childish silliness and ignorance. Their usual opponent is an 'ordinary' and 'poor' man (an old man) driving a Zaporozhets (this was the cheapest Soviet car). The position of the storyteller is actually in the middle of these two characters in terms of income range but above the two in terms of intellectual abilities.

The story-teller position might well belong to the remaining groups of the Soviet-type intelligentsia (high education and cultural level, although with a very low level of income) who would thus stress the values of culture and intellect as opposed to wealth, and show their contempt for the new times as embodied by the New Russians as a social group.

Nonetheless, there are some details in some of the jokes, which suggest that there might be a much shorter distance between the audience and the main characters depicted in the stories. The technical details of the entourage - brands of fashionable cars, of mobile phones, specific slang words, gestures and the like, would hardly belong to the intelligentsia folklore, the group where traditionalistic/feminine/humanitarian discourse is prevalent.

Meanwhile, young professionals, managers and middle level entrepreneurs, although from the most part recruited from intelligentsia families, all are much more conversant than their parents with these attributes of the new times. For them, the New Russians are very important as referents. Unlike the intelligentsia, they might ridicule

the New Russians but not in a defensive manner (since they do not need to protect a traditional position endangered by the new order of things). Their approach is more on the 'offensive', as they affirm their own position next to the New Russians on the income scale, while they also stake a claim for some of their social resources. This is their reason for mocking the New Russians.

Recent focus-groups dealing with new consumers drawn from the 'middle class' have shown that their anxiety is expressed as envy towards the New Russians who, to their minds, are those who could survive the crisis without sacrificing their levels of consumption, while the middle class was thinking about retreating to the models of the past.

The new state of 'disaster'

The idea of coming back to buying domestic products became very popular at some point. One may even discern a kind of consumers' complex of guilt expressed here.

The first visible changes of this kind took place in the advertising market as evidenced in an increase in the number of domestic brands advertised on the main TV channels. These changes were commended by the 'middle class' respondents in the same way as in the case of the involuntary approval.

The real consumer behavior among members of this group during the first days of the crisis was a mix of very old popular national models (queuing up in the shops, making stocks of consumer goods) and very new ones. While mass consumers were purchasing matches, salt, sugar, cereals, those in the 'middle class' scrambled for durable goods.

The media covered this 'destruction of the new consumer' in every possible detail as if paying the last tribute to the 'middle class'. Even more emotional was their coverage of the reactions of the 'ordinary people' to the crisis. The media thus declared the state of 'emergency', which, as previous crises have shown; it is a means of social self-defense.

Russians and vodka. New consumption phenomenon

As was already said, the Russians see themselves as "open hearted and simple" people. The traditional Russian concept of vodka consumption is very close to this idea. Vodka is also a 'simple', non-sophisticated drink. One of main effects expected from it is to 'open the souls' of the fellow drinkers to each other. (In this respect vodka can help the Russians be Russian).

As our studies show this was particularly the case with New Russians. Vodka played an extremely important role in their new business life. The lack of laws and traditions or other institutes to maintain the trust and reliability of the business transactions rendered the ritual of drinking vodka with a business partner a most important function of mutual control. (Violence became the other means of reaching the same goal).

This excessive consumption of vodka became a feature of Russian business life. However, the vodkas consumed were not of Russian origin, as the show-off function of the drink was very important too. The beverage's supreme quality and high price became therefore a must, and only imported premium brands would do. The rotation factor of the

drinks in fashion was very rapid (as was the case with other products destined for conspicuous consumption).

The advertisements in the media tried hard to capture this most promising market, where the high price was not a limiting but a stimulating factor, with all international premium and super-premium brands. First the brand of choice was 'Smirnoff', then it was 'Absolute', then 'Finlandia'. These brands were welcomed by consumers who seemed not conservative in their tastes. In addition, all the 'new' drinks such as whisky, gin, rum, Tequila, Grappa and so on were consumed according to traditional Russian drinking habits, that is, in large helpings and in a short time.

The said drinking model reveals a very important element in the struggle for domination of one drinker over the other or others. To 'overdrink' the partner and to retain one's self-control until the partner is already 'done' by the alcohol was one of the traditional masculine virtues among Russians. However, after you win over the partner/friend/enemy, you let the drink take over yourself. To reach a level of alcohol intoxication is to reach the ultimate simplicity of your soul. The social culture among the New Russians proved very traditional in this respect.

The 'middle class' drinking habits, on the other hand, although they seemed to develop from the same point of departure, then it developed in a different direction. While drinking, members of the middle class also feel that they are in a competition with fellow drinkers, but the control issue is particularly important among them. Since members of the middle class usually belong to bureaucratic structures, the control over oneself and over the situation is the main virtue they attempt to demonstrate and there is no need to dominate or ruin your partner in this environment. The strength of the alcohol

or the quantity consumed become of secondary importance. The vodka, if any, can be sipped and not gulped. At the same time, matters of taste and style become paramount. The simplicity and straightforwardness of vodka are no longer a values to be sought, and in their drinking, vodka is supplemented by new additives like cola refreshments, or it is abandoned altogether when drinkers look for softer beverages such as beer.

The drinking culture of the young 'middle class' seems to deviate more and more from the core values of the vodka-drinking tradition. Traditionally, vodka was viewed as a 'masculine' drink, but among the new consumers a unisex approach to their drinks is more popular.

In addition, vodka in the Russian tradition was a social drink only. Drinking (vodka) alone was perceived as an anti-social behavior, as a pathology. The new 'middle class' drinks, however, that challenged vodka's place, such as whiskey or strong dark beer, may be taken in solitude and if this happens, it is not seen as a sign of despair, but on the contrary, as an indulgence.

And finally, the very basic idea of the reciprocal 'opening of the heart/soul' among the vodka partners is denied: I hate him dumping all this stuff on me. Neither the simplicity of the individuals nor their openness towards each other is the basis of their relationship. Drinking together helps to mediate and reduce the tensions generated by the internal company competition. The drinkers in this group stress the relaxing effect of the drinks. Whenever you see the ad or the commercial depicting an easy-going, cheerful and friendly atmosphere at a drinking party, you may be sure that the young middle class is the target group for this campaign.

Is the new consumer bent on destroying the vodka tradition in Russia and indirectly destroying Russian identity and then even Russia itself? This does not seem to be the case.

What is it that is declining, then? Not the consumption of vodka. Not even its domestic production. Unlike the attitude of the 'New Russians' the seemingly more cosmopolitan new 'middle class' consumers are however very 'patriotic' in their demand for vodka. Then again, their patterns of behavior are different from the traditional Soviet consumer.

As it was already mentioned, the Soviet patterns of consumption included just two main brands of vodka, both of which bore the symbols of centralized political power. Drinking 'Stolichnaya' or 'Moskovskaya' was a means of somehow linking the drinker (together with all other drinkers of the great country) to Moscow in its role as capital of the state.

The new group, which is made up of the managers of private companies or bank executives, and no longer the workers of the state offices and enterprises, feels however no need to participate in the traditional drinking ritual. Their local loyalties if any are more important to them. Local vodka manufacturing has been flourishing in recent years as an answer to increased demand. Many local manufacturers are not producing cheap and low quality products at all (they simply can not compete with smuggled and unauthorized products). The numerous local private distillers instead produce local premium brands which made them very competitive against imported and international Big Brands like Smirnoff and Absolute. The new local vodka brands (as is the case of

wine in wine producing countries) stress their local individual properties, not the imperial-totalitarian values of the past.

The media and the advertising campaigns also follow this new trend. While the number of TV channels broadcasting from Moscow to all the country has doubled, increasing in number from two to three-four, the number of local TV channels offering their own programming has increased in the hundreds. The editions of most of the 'central' newspapers fell from millions to tens of thousands, while the output of the local presses is still on the rise. Advertising is therefore one of the engines of this process as more and more 'new consumers' appear all over Russia.