

The 90's in Russia:

Attitudes of the Transition Generation

An interview study by the Sakharov Center Moscow as part of the project „Transition Dialogue: Mapping a Generation“ – by **Oksana Bocharova** and **Vlada Gekhtman**

"We are, in a sense, some of the most fortunate. We saw the heyday of that time. Now we are witnessing the decline of an epoch. But we lived when it was in its full blossom. We had the strength to fight, to conquer a spot, to make a successful, acceptable living"

ABSTRACT

The 90s in Russia were condemned and praised. It feels that the arguments about this time are always an argument not about the 90s - rather than an argument about different sets of values. Sometimes, the transition memories appear very raw, the transition itself is not discussed much in families and among friends.

For this research we talked with people who represent different backgrounds who experienced radical changes or emerged in the course of transition period: business people, entrepreneurs and self-employed (11 interviewees); further representatives from science and education (8) and those with a media/creative occupation (9). Their common feature is that they have successfully adapted to the new reality, have managed to fit into it. Thus, the participants represent a metropolitan middle class – that is, the values and attitudes that dominated the 90s, and that, in fact, owe their existence to the transition period.

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WHAT MEANS TRANSITION?

Answers from the Respondents

In the mind of the respondents exists a clearly defined period marked by the collapse of the previous system of values and economic models known as "the Soviet Union". The respondents have no fixed term for this period: it is most often referred to as "the 90s". The name is caused by a number of reasons:

- Chronologically, the period in question almost exclusively falls within the 1990s;
- This term is used to refer to the period in public discussions, in both negative and positive ways ("the turbulent 90s").

It should be noted that the point of departure (the "old ways" that should have been abandoned) is absolutely clear, whereas the goal to be attained is very vague, indistinct, and non-specific, it is some abstract good: transition *"from Sovok* ("Redland", a derogatory term for the USSR) *to the better tomorrow", "to something new", "to good living", "to democracy", "to the ways of life in normal countries"*. The distinct criteria of this "brand new world" in the minds of the respondents were not formed.

Accordingly, the main indication of the transition period was the destruction of the old, established norms:

- Political: The Communist Party and Komsomol are "canceled" and don't play a role in an individual's life anymore; the state no longer controls people's lives;
- Social: An individual owes nothing to the state, at the same time the state also owes nothing to an individual — the state no longer offers its protection. Social, economic, and legal security no longer exist;
- Economic: Abandonment of planned economy.

Key Features of the Transition Period

Respondents perceive the transition period as "ragged", heterogeneous, discordant, controversial, the time of conflict between the old and new. Consequently, the respondents describe the transition ambiguously, both as a superb time because of its novelty, and wild — due to its chaotic and unpredictable character.

Positive features:

- **Enthusiasm and high hopes, both economic and political.** *"Now we begin to live"; "Euphoria. I thought it would last forever. It was such a drive, so many hopes that it would be easy further on, as in a fairytale& Unfortunately, life decided otherwise. We had to go through many hardships. On internal resources. I had such high hopes, enthusiasm about a better future"* (focus group); *"The Soviet Union ended and it seems that now everything will be honest. That step by step we'll be living as people in the*

West, that we'll gradually build democracy and everything will be all right" (interview 8).

- **Euphoria of freedom:**

- **Freedom of operation:** The state no longer governs or pressures, an individual decides what to do.
- **Freedom of speech:** *"It was now possible to say everything not only in the kitchen" — The mass media became important and reputed source of information; the respondents remember themselves avidly watching television and reading newspapers, something they had never done in the USSR era. Previously banned books and authors went to print. Iconic mass media of the transition period —Moskovskiye Novosti newspaper (The Moscow News), Ogoniok magazine, Vzglyad TV program in the Perestroika years, TV channel NTV — in the 90s.*
- **Freedom of artistic expression:** The so-called "hudsovets" (artistic councils that mainly performed censorship functions) were canceled, music began to thrive (Russian Rock), exhibitions were organized, etc.
- **Freedom of self-expression and style:** The school uniform was abolished, policies concerning appearance became much more liberal: *"I feel, when they allowed it, you need to put on bright makeup, gaudy. Kitsch. There's nothing else you can do to distinguish yourself, but this much you can. War paint. Crazy time"* (interview 6).
- **Freedom of choice:** Of work, of means of earning a living, of goods: *"So many things began to come about. Many shops started to open, such wide variety"* (interview 3).

- **Openness:** Opening of the borders after the Iron Curtain is perceived as one of the major achievements of the transition period. Russia became a part of the world, and not just 1/6 of the Earth's land surface.
- **Orientation towards the West** (at least declared) concerning standard of living and values: *"We don't call it "Rotting West" anymore, don't say all is bad there, we now say we want to live like them"* (interview 8).
- **New opportunities:** People got a chance to do a business, to earn money: *"You can make a million every day, what should I busy myself with. Talk to anyone — it's here. Us, we didn't have any government money. And those who start doing something — they all become millionaires the next day. It's this feeling that you want to be here and there and can't figure out what to do first. This crazy feeling that you need to start doing something right away"* (interview 1).

- **Feeling of Self-Worth:** both on personal and social level — an individual is shaping his own destiny and can determine the destiny of his country: *"It turns out, I can make money. I don't have to look back on anyone; I don't have to rely on anyone, just myself and my own resources. For me, it was the time of inspiration and confidence. That I can support myself, my mother, and my kids. I can buy an apartment, I can buy a car"* (interview 1).
- **The sense of belonging to history** happening here and now before one's eyes: *"It's a very strong feeling that your life is imbued with challenge and history"* (focus group discussion).
- **Brand new world of consumption:** For a Soviet individual, the abundance of imported goods signified new reality of openness and freedom.
- **Brightness:** The respondents remember this period as devoid of grayness and humdrum, it is associated with vivid colors, sounds, and impressions.

Negative features:

- **Chaos:** Unpaid pensions and wages; the old legislation stopped working (while the new laws were yet to be created), etc.
- **Feeling of insecurity, threat, lawlessness:** Gangland wars in the streets, racketeering, etc. *"I remember shootouts in the streets. Gangland wars. Then homeless people. We used to have none, but then they started to appear. Skinheads, Muslims. Lawlessness. On the one hand, seemingly, everything's available. And the cost of availability"* (interview 5).
- **Poverty and struggle to survive:** Economic hardships, lack of money, food, and medicines. *"In 1991 my son was born. He was born in poor health. I experienced all the perks of the transition period. No medications were available, none at all. To buy medications, I had to go to Moscow (I used to live near Moscow at that time) and pester all sorts of the Moscow and regional health departments trying to wrestle medications for my son from them. Every day in 1991 — did I win or did I not? I hate wandering from one office to another, I detest government officials and communicating with them. But what can I do? It's a struggle for life"* (focus group discussion).
- **Confusion and fear:** The necessity to make decisions on their own was extremely unusual to Soviet people. This, combined with economic hardships, caused confusion and fear. *"Anxiety. There was a feeling that something needs to be changed, a feeling that we need to survive. We need to learn how to sell. We need to go there and buy something, sell it here, when it was allowed. We need to get another strip of land and plant potatoes. Look about more actively to see the opportunities"* (interview 6).

- **The loss of familiar reference points:** The old norms stopped working, while the new ones had yet to be formed. New, unfamiliar and "shameful" (for a Soviet individual) values emerged: now everything was measured by money; its importance, largely downplayed in the Soviet era, started to grow immensely during the transition period. *"It is likely, when constraints were lifted — and previously everyone was constrained — this lack of constraints initially caused confusion. Lack of constraints and confusion"* (focus group discussion).
- **Loneliness:** Old relationship breakups, severance of familiar ties: *"Uncomfortable time, feeling of abandonment, and coldness"*.
- **Uncertainty, unrest, inability of planning:** Lack of rules and norms, necessity to survive made people's life unpredictable: *"lived a day-to-day existence"*.
- **Devaluation of principles of the welfare state:** *"The capitalism that once was condemned in Krokodil (a Soviet satirical magazine) became our reality, without any social benefits"*: the pensions became meager and the payments were delayed; teachers, doctors, workers of government enterprises, etc., also faced delayed wage payment, often calculated in months.
- **Tastelessness and kitsch:** The new "capitalist" world was, according to the respondents, ludicrous and aesthetically appalling: *"all these crimson jackets and golden chains"*.
- **Disillusionment:** The hopes for a better future were dashed, especially in the second half of the 90s.

GENERATIONAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL DIFFERENCES in Approach and Assessment of the Transition Period

Peculiarities of the audience of the current research

It is important to note that opinions and attitudes delivered by the participants of the current research only partially coincide with mass perception and evaluation of this period, known from the data of public opinion polls. In retrospective assessment of the transition period the general population demonstrates predominantly negative evaluations.

The participants of our project demonstrate a more diverse and multifaceted picture. This appears to be determined by the socio-cultural characteristics of the participants and their adaptive experience during the transition.

The majority of the participants in this project come from Moscow or lived and worked in Moscow during the period in question. This undoubtedly affected the "optics" of their perception of the 90s — they were "in the thick" of events and often perceived themselves as

a part of them. Objectively, they enjoyed broader and more diverse economic, cultural and social opportunities. The participants who were born or lived in other regions and/or in small towns usually demonstrate attitudes that are "closer" to the opinions of the general population.

The most important feature of the audience (we are talking primarily about "parents", and, in part, about 40-year-olds) is that the participants in the research, as a rule, have successfully adapted to the new reality, have managed to fit into it. Almost all representatives of the "parents" generation changed their place of work / profession / social stratum — they have gone through the main ordeal of the 90s on their own, "found themselves" and "didn't break" (according to their own definition).

As far as the socio-cultural aspect is concerned, the participants of the study can be referred to intelligentsia, business class and, in a broad sense, to the metropolitan middle class - that is, to the groups that are believed to have shared — or continue to share — the values and attitudes that dominated the 90s, and that, in fact, owe their existence to the transition period.

Discourses and approaches to transition among the audience

The results of the interviews and the focus group discussion allow to single out several types of "discourse" around the transition. These discourses differ in the fundamental "sign" of attitude towards the transition time, their emotional tone and the perception of their own role in the 90s. It is important to note that all of these "pictures" and discourses are consciously built in contrast to the current situation in Russia and, therefore, explicitly depend on the attitudes and evaluations of the] carriers of the discourse of this situation.

"The time of boundless possibilities and economic freedom" — This discourse is usually translated by people who had a successful entrepreneurial experience in the 90s. Their view of the transition is most at odds with the "mass" - they describe is almost exclusively positive, emphasizing its powerful energy, originality and spirit of adventure:

"We got some air. There was a beacon of light and the chance to do what you want. Nowadays you won't find these behemoths that created businesses from scratch. We were five engineers when we organized a business with our partners. We had nothing but brains, not a single dime. And we set up a company. And I know of many such examples from that period" (interview 9).

Firstly, supporters and carriers of this discourse see themselves as active participants and the main "heroes" of transition; they recognize and describe this time as their own — the most important period for their personal and professional development. However, they often exclude, repress (consciously or not) the contradictions, difficulties, and the overall tragic character, which constitute a part of the general picture of the 90s.

"The time of romanticism and hope for a bright democratic future" — The emotional tone of this type of discourse overlaps the previous one; it is shared and translated by the intelligentsia and intellectuals. The main point here is the discussion about the public mood, the atmosphere of political and social freedom in the transition period, the feeling of propulsion, and hope as the main emotion of the general public, especially in the first half of the 90s.

"The faith in the future was incredible, faith of a cosmic scale. And it was a rocket engine that launches you into orbit" (Interview 1).

"We were romantics, we had dreams and ideals of creating a democratic state... We were floating in romantic euphoria" (Interview 5).

Carriers of this discourse also perceive the transition as their "finest hour", because, according to them, it was a unique, unprecedented period in the history of Russia, when the values and goals of the intelligentsia coincided, as it seemed, with the values and objectives of the government, so their voice was audible and significant.

"The period of destruction of the former practices; of poverty and injustice" — This discourse in relation to the transition is now the most popular, widespread and dominant (the so-called "turbulent 90s", sometimes also translated as "dashing" or "tumultuous"). In this research it is translated by people whose own (or whose parents') status and financial situation deteriorated in the 90s. During the transition period these people lived in the provinces, in small towns, where social and economic rupture often occurred suddenly and painfully, while the new opportunities, as opposed to the metropolitan areas, were limited:

"Period of decay, period of full-swing chaos in the country, period of homeless people, the poor, the lame. Period of ration cards, cigarettes in small plastic bags, wage delays. That's what were the 90s" (Interview 6).

"Complete insecurity, iniquity everywhere. The feeling that you will defend yourself with a gun, no other options. No one else in this world cares about you. No one owes you anything" (Interview 3).

The key tone, the leading emotion of this discourse is insecurity, feeling of "abandonment", forlornness, social disintegration, and instability. The carriers of this discourse view their role as forced (not desirable and joyfully adopted, as in the case of entrepreneurs) necessity to earn for themselves and their family, search for additional means of income. At the same time, they perceive themselves more as "victims" of the transition period, their role is passive, historical events and decisions occur far away in Moscow, while they are merely spectators.

Generational differences in views on the transition and its ramifications

The representatives of different generations participating in the study remember the

transitional period in different ways. They also have different views of its role in their own development, its impact and results.

The generation of "children" in our study — people currently aged 27-35 — were in fact born at the turn of epochs. But for them it is important to emphasize that they were, to an extent, a part of the USSR (although at the very decline thereof), and to some degree they learned the Soviet values and norms as children:

"We were born in the Soviet Union, and our parents filled us a bit with those values that were relevant at the time, that they carried through their lives. And in our own lives, in the late turbulent 90s, most of these values had no point of application" (Interview 5).

This does not mean that this generation is particularly nostalgic for the Soviet Union (that it barely knows and remembers), but, apparently, it is important to emphasize that they, too, have gone through a certain breaking point, transition of the value system.

However, they rarely identify themselves with the 90s; as a rule, they do not consider themselves a generation of the 90s. For a generation of "children", the transition period coincided with their childhood or adolescence — in the 90s they went to school or were about to finish it. That is why their memories of this time are rather "dotted" or reflected — through the perception, assessment, enthusiasm, and frustration of their seniors, mostly their parents. The event line in their perception of the transition period is very poor. As a rule, these are the most significant events: August 1991; less often — October 1993; the economic crisis of 1998; the apartment bombings in 1999. It also applies to people — often they only name Yeltsin.

Their own vision of that time has more to do with domestic, social, stylistic features. All these things are remembered with affection and humor — the monochromatic humdrum was becoming saturated with color; the world of things, clothes, and music was changing and filling almost daily. They often describe this period as bright, or even motley and garish.

Another distinctive feature of this time, emphasized by the generation of children, is that their adolescent period virtually coincided with that of the country; that in the 90s the country and the society had the same adolescent and tumultuous character.

The complexity of the 90s as the pivotal period affected their relationship with parents and the educational models: at that time "adults" were often busy looking for a new place in the ever-changing world, trying to adapt and survive, and children were left to their own devices. On the one hand, this model caused the children to harbor a grievance against the adults: *"We were abandoned, they didn't care about us". They remember the adults being confused and uncertain, the atmosphere of anxiety and constant change — "It was the time of freedom and anxiety"* (Interview 5).

On the other hand, these very features of the transition period, as described by the generation of "children", helped them become more independent, self-reliant, individualistic,

capable of rewriting life scenarios, their social and professional roles:

"We are more self-confident. We are able to defend our rights - and it's the last thing that can be said about the generation of our mothers" (Interview 2).

"Adjusting to change. Being quick on the uptake. Getting a leg in, organizing ourselves, changing all the plans. We are okay with it. We quickly adapt to anything" (Interview 4).

"In this sense, they are more capable of setting tasks, of achieving their goals. And they are more inwardly organized" (Interview 10).

At the same time, as the formative years and socialization of the "children" fell on the period of the crumbling values system and uncertainty, this generation is often described as apolitical, rather passive, and disconnected — from the point of view of common social objectives and ideas. These traits of the generation sometimes become the targets of criticism of the seniors - mainly the carriers of the discourse that describes the transition period as the time "of romanticism and hope for a democratic future":

"They did not support that momentum that offers them many opportunities. Maybe it's because this is not just one generation. Maybe because their generation is one of the first, trying to live not as "we", but as "I" (Interview 8).

"My eldest children are completely apolitical. Only concerned with themselves" (interview 9).

"Senior" generation — those now aged 50 to 60 — faced the transition period as adults. This generation was born, raised and formed in the late Soviet period and thus they entered Perestroika with a habit for doublethink, typical of the Stagnation period, with cynicism and fatigued with the Soviet fanfare. At the same time, they internalized the norms of paternalism and familiar social track:

"My parents had some minimal Soviet career. I was mentally prepared for it when I was graduating. Maybe, I even feel calmer in a team where everything is clear, where, roughly speaking, other people take responsibility" (Interview 1).

This is the generation that welcomed the new times with enthusiasm, with the highest hopes for a prompt and bright "capitalist future". They have the penchant to perceive the transition time as their own, when their hopes and ideals were brought to life: *"There was a period when it seemed to us that we can find a place for ourselves, that we would have a new life — free, beautiful, straight from the book. Heaven shining like a jewel"* (Interview 3).

In the early 90s the representatives of the "senior" generation were about 30 — and they had to "start anew", to overhaul their social habits, plans, and attitudes. This "reset" — how traumatic, difficult or successful it was — determines their attitude towards the transition and separates them:

"We are a generation divided by the 90s. Very diverse. Some greeted it with hope, others — with horror, as the collapse of the values to which they are accustomed" (Interview 8).

It's important that, as a rule, they were going through the "reset" — looking for a new place

in society, a new profession, earning a living — burdened with responsibility for their family and children. This, of course, complicated their "passage" through the transition — they could not just enjoy freedom and take it as a new reality.

Members of this generation seem to have experienced the most painful disappointment associated with the transition. Our respondents (largely opposed to the current regime) believe that beginning with the 2000s the values and ideals of the 90s have been supplanted, "trampled", and now they are completely forgotten and discredited. At the same time, some representatives of this generation became disillusioned with the hopes and ideas of the transition early on, in the 90s. Some of them attribute their disappointment to the first Chechen war of 1994-96, others - to the 1996 presidential election, some others — to the oligarchic wars of the late 90s.

The middle generation — those who are now between 40 and 48 — seem to associate themselves the most with the 90s; apparently, this is the cohort that deserves the name of "the transition generation".

Their view and perception of the period largely resembles the perception of the "senior generation", but their picture of the 90s is less painful, traumatic and controversial — they had fewer difficulties and frustrations. It can be assumed that they have a more relaxed attitude to the transition due to the fact that they were not burdened with family responsibilities; their knowledge of the Soviet values and practices was quite superficial — they did not have to experience some specific social traumas to integrate into a new life.

"We are, in a sense, some of the most fortunate. We saw the heyday of that time. Now we are witnessing the decline of an epoch. But we lived when it was in its full blossom. We had the strength to fight, to conquer a spot, to make a successful, acceptable living" (focus group).

Their younger years coincided with the transition period; maybe that is the reason why they attribute their perception of youthfulness and unlimited freedom to the 90s. We can say that 40-year-olds are "grateful" to this time for its mood that was unique to Russia: this very generation perceives freedom as the main value and characteristic feature of the transition: *"It is only now that we can realize to what extent our youth coincided with freedom. Freedom that was wild in a lot of ways. Largely frustrating, but all the same freedom"* (focus group).

40-year-olds, perhaps, were the most successful adopters of the "adaptive" model of social behavior, which emerged in the 90s; they learned to be ready to change and — as the reverse side of this model — adapted to the lack of long-range planning horizons and "living for today".

Their picture of the 90s is more vivid, rich, filled with all sorts of details — everyday, economic, political, and cultural.

They feel that they are rightful actors of that historic period and are very well aware of its framework and milestones; they often associate their personal, private stories with the

characteristics of the time.

PERIODIZATION

Landmarks and Turning Points of Transition

The transition period has well-defined confines in the minds of the respondents:

- **Beginning:** Starts from the end of the 1980s, with the first clear signs of glasnost (openness) and freedom:

- Either 1989, the first Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, which was totally different from the perfunctory congresses of the Communist Party. The idea of direct and open "real" election was new and heralded democratic change;

- Or 1988 — an important point for entrepreneurs: The Law on Cooperatives permitted people to earn their living on their own, independent from the state.

- **The end:** Early 2000s, advent of events signifying the "squeezing freedoms." The participants of the research mostly point to the arrest of Khodorkovsky in 2003 as the sign of the end of the transition period.

The respondents refer to Perestroika as a pre-transition period, and hold positive opinion of it: it is the time when it became possible to speak openly about the problems and shortcomings of the existing system; it became clear that life will change: *"Because everything was buzzing. It was clear that something was about to happen. There was no spite. But some agitation was constant. It felt like sitting in a beehive right before swarming. Once the spring is here, we all will be out"* (Interview 1).

The respondents spontaneously divide the transition period into two large "sub-periods":

- The end of the 1980s — the first half of the 1990s;
- The second half of the 1990s — early 2000s.

Within these segments, the participants primarily distinguish events that had private rather than historical importance: for example, people are more likely to remember spontaneously about the 1998 economic crisis, which affected their lives, than the signing of historic Belavezha Accords.

Interestingly, the collapse of the USSR as such, in general, falls out of sight of the respondents as a historic event: they remember the breakup of family ties between people who found themselves in different countries, but not the fact of the collapse. People focused on their immediate surrounding — the Russian reality. They practically do not remember the armed conflicts in the former Soviet republics — that is, the Soviet Union as a state composed of different republics, was, to a large extent, "repressed" from their perspective of the transition: *"I remember very well the border post that I would drive by even before the official border between Ukraine and Russia. The disintegration of our family due to the collapse of the*

Soviet Union, a multigenerational family... I was more worried about this post, about the loss of Ukraine. I was not very worried about Moldova or Uzbekistan" (Interview 6).

The end of the 1980s — the first half of the 1990s

In general, this period is characterized by positive and bright emotions: freedom, excitement, and hope. This is the time of overwhelming openness in the press, music, and book publishing; contentious programs on TV; the first trips abroad and the beginning of the modern entrepreneurship. *"Until the mid 90s and a little further. The feeling of freedom, boundless opportunities, and plans. It was in the air" (focus group).*

An important sign of this time was the fact that people were closely watching what was happening in the government, they were actively interested in politics and discussed it.

This period also brought the collapse of the economy, lack of food products in the stores, lack of money and chaos: "We were constantly hungry and constantly free".

The respondents recall: It seemed that the changes would be swift, no one realized that this would be a long, difficult, and gradual process. "The bright future", it seemed, would come "by itself", simply as a result of the destruction of the old models and rules.

These are the most significant events of the period:

- **1991 coup:** Many senior respondents in the project participated in the defense of the White House; for the younger generation this event signified the beginning of the modern history of Russia. It is an iconic event: it is a symbol that society can achieve what it wants.
- **The political crisis of 1993, "the shelling of Parliament".** It was, perhaps the first "point" when people sensed something was wrong. "In 1991, the insurgent people was good, in 1993 — it was bad" (focus group).
- **The war in Chechnya** is relatively rarely remembered; this event had a smaller impact on respondents than one would expect. When it is remembered, it is perceived as the beginning of disillusionment and doubt if the country is on the right track, if the hope of the first years would ever come true. *"The war in Chechnya posed a significant problem for society. In general, the situation was unsolvable. This is not the bright, beautiful Russian to which we aspired. We dreamed not about this. This effectively broke us" (focus group).*
- **The opening of the stock market in 1994** — an important landmark for entrepreneurs: the beginning of a more civilized and legitimate business.

The second half of the 1990s — early 2000s

During this period the people's mood changed:

- This period is perceived as less chaotic, more balanced; life became more relaxed: *"Anxiety was gone. You're fully fledged in this world. You already knew where and how you want to go. There was no more fear for oneself. You've adapted to the situation in the country. You can start*

doing business — something that once was called speculation. You were now standing on firm ground" (Interview 6).

- At the same time, this was the period when hope extinguished and great disappointment came about:

- People were fatigued by the previous, rather difficult years;
- New life "would not take shape, evolve", at least as easy and as soon as expected;
- New disappointing events added up to those from the first half of the 1990s,

including the 1996 election and the economic crisis of 1998.

- Greater calm and frustration caused the people to become less interested in politics, to go into the seclusion of their private lives. In retrospect, they believe that at this point they missed the opportunity to bring their "freedom's cause" to a successful conclusion, missed out on opportunities: *"There were many missed opportunities. If we talk about democratization, we were enticed by democratization, but we never delivered. The name changed, the USSR became Russia, but as for internal processes... until now we are paying for it. In what year it happened is debatable, but this mechanism of transition of power through democratic means never happened. Never formed. This is a very big failure"* (focus group).

In the second half of the 90s the concept of "terrorism" came into life. If the anxiety associated with day-by-day survival subsided, the fear for one's life and the lives of the loved ones probably increased.

Among the important events of this period, the respondents mentioned:

- **The murder of Vladislav Listyev:** *"I was devastated by it, it turned out that if someone simply doesn't like a person, this person can be extinguished"* (Interview 2).

- **1996 presidential election:** It evokes mixed feelings. The respondents, on the one hand, consider this election real and significant — at the time they believed that their vote really affected the destiny of the country. On the other hand, in retrospect the participants of the study evaluated the election as rigged; retrospectively, it was the first point in the modern history when the government would feed outright lies to the citizens and, thus, is perceived as some sort of betrayal: *"At that time, I was aware of everything, but I justified it. I thought that they were doing the right thing. I thought that if they did not do it, then the Communists would be back, and was still very easy to turn back, and they certainly would. I then said that if Yeltsin didn't win, there would be no more elections. I did not understand then that his win meant there wouldn't be any more elections all the same. But honestly, I realized the election was not fair. I well knew it. And still I justified it. This is for me the end of the transition period"* (Interview 8).

- **The 1998 crisis** was a huge blow not only for entrepreneurs, but also for ordinary people: the hopes for a "normal happy life" were shattered: *"Until 1998, there was a feeling that everything was advancing, developing. Prior to that, there was a feeling that we were moving*

towards a brighter future, that everything would get better and better. More money, more freedom, more democracy. Prior to that, there was a sense that freedom was expanding, and then it turned out that it hit some walls. They are endlessly narrowing limits here and here, and here".

- **Yeltsin's resignation in 1999:** Since this lifted Putin to power, this event is evaluated retrospectively, depending on the respondent's opinion of Putin. To many of them it was *"the beginning of the end", "creeping counterrevolution"*.

- **Terrorist attacks:** A series of explosions that hit apartment blocks in Moscow in 1999, the seizure of a theater during the performance of *Nord-Ost* in 2002, the Beslan school siege in 2003. The feeling of fear and strong distrust in the state, up to the idea that the attacks were organized by the state itself.

- **The crackdown on NTV channel in 2001:** The respondents often do not remember precisely when it happened, but they refer the event to the second half of the 1990s; this is the harbinger of the stifling of freedoms, the attack on freedom of speech.

- **The arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003:** The study participants often perceive this event as a full stop in advancement towards new values and a new Russia; a return to the oppressive state: *"We recuperated from the crisis. There was a feeling that the crisis had passed, now the new Pinochet came to us and brought order. Crimson jacket were gone, all the bandits were pacified. Finally, we have the largest companies in the markets. It was 2002 -2003. And then, when the situation with Khodorkovsky started unraveling, it increasingly started to feel like Politburo. Already in 1996 it seemed that the figures of the Politburo members began to show through the wall. In 2004-2005, they became apparent. It took them 10 years"* (focus group).

- **The Kursk disaster in 2000.** Sometimes it is seen as the "beginning of the end" — on the one hand, the respondents associate this event with the cynicism of the authorities, and on the other, the feeling that information begins to be "clamped down" and freedom of speech is disappearing: *"This is the beginning of Mr. Putin who promised to beat the hell out of them all (literally "to cap them all in the toilet"). He divides the country into 7 districts and appoints representatives of the president. Once they're assigned, they are beginning to take over everything. Then there's this awful disaster with Kursk submarine. On the one hand, they are jumping all over this, on the other, the clampdown on media begins"* (Interview 8).

PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF THE STATE

To the respondents, the state means power and power brokers, not institutions.

The government in the transition period is perceived as weak, but not impediment:

- Over the course of the transition period the participants of the project had the feeling that the state did not accost or press the ideology on them: *"It was probably the only period when*

there was no this foul ideology".

- At the same time, the study participants felt they were abandoned the state — it does not help, does not provide protection, etc.

Emotionally, the relationship with the state during the transition was changing over time:

- At the beginning of the transition period, the respondents feel that their country shares with them the commitment to a "bright future"; they also feel that the state is just as confused and helpless as them: *"That state was a naive child"; "Something there is fluttering, doing something. Something will come out of it. Something made me glad — and I joined this. Something was disappointing, and I would roll eyes in the kitchen"* (Interview 2).

- The second half sees the advent of distrust in the state that is incapable to provide security, that is lying and abusing power for its own financial gain. Still there was no sense that the state interferes with, or constitutes a threat to the people.

Currently, many participants of the project perceive the state as hostile: not only is it deceitful, but it also begins to oppress people, tries to revive the Soviet ideology; it interferes and intrudes on private life. Cooperation with the state looks outright dangerous: the state cannot help, it can only harm. All the good things done today can only be done in spite of the state, not because of it: *"One should not get involved with the state"*.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS HUMAN RIGHTS

In general, the respondents have very vague and blurred concept of human rights: they admit that it is something not entirely clear, some abstract good: *"I do not even know what human rights are. We have very different people"* (Interview 5); *"I do not know, it's all very abstract to me"* (Interview 8).

This "abstract character" of the concept often creates the impression that human rights are unrelated to the everyday life of a common man: *"You don't really need these rights until you've experienced some conflict situation. And I have not yet been in a conflict situation"* (Interview 5). (One of the participants of the project admitted that his idea of human rights as "idealistic demagoguery" had changed only after a visit to the School of Human Rights.)

In general, human rights are perceived as "protection of individuals against the arbitrariness of the state": *"Nobody has the right to take my fishing rod that I use to catch fish, or tell me what fish to catch and what not to catch"* (Interview 2). In other words, human rights are respected if there is a feeling that the truth can be defended in court; if there is no danger that an individual will be jailed "for nothing"; if people are able to say what they think and rally. Respondents believe that the state bears main responsibility for the observance of human rights.

Virtually no one mentioned the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights; human rights are often confused with constitutional rights: the right to education, to work, to medical care,

etc.: *"You have a constitution, which says that there must be this, this, and this. If this is done, it is human rights"* (Interview 3).

The attitude to the concept of "human rights" and the perception of their observance changed over time:

Transition period:

- Although the idea was not clear, it was viewed as unconditionally important, the key to a democratic society. It was associated with Andrei Sakharov, who was held in high esteem, and with absolute ethical values.
- Although human rights were not respected during this period, there was no feeling of intentional violation thereof: the failure to observe human rights was regarded as manifestation of the incompetence of the state.

Present:

- In general, this idea commands respect, especially in the democratically oriented respondents: they respect human rights organizations and activists.
- However, occasionally this concept creates distrust; it is perceived as a blind or a justification of dubious political actions — just as emphasized by the state propaganda: *"It seems to me that this is something that's been hackneyed and beaten to death, partly due to certain states that are bombing other countries because of massive human rights violations. They are talking about human rights, but in fact, they want to seize the oil. A muddy manipulative thing that calls itself good, but in fact is god knows what. Used for commercial interests. And it's very disappointing. Because there are people who defend human rights, people who are not indifferent"* (Interview 8).
- Many respondents believe that currently the state not only fails to observe human rights, but deliberately violates them. This is one of the manifestations of the "rollback", "tightening the screws": *"No one <in the 90s> could jail a person simply because he said something. Now it is possible. It's easy, no big deal. I'm not even talking now about "doing" something — just saying. Very soon "thinking" might become punishable. It's not just a question of freedom of speech. It's all over. Take the freedom of conscience, for one. We do not have it, not even close. It's a simulacrum, but in reality, nothing of the kind"* (Interview 9).

THE IMPACT OF TRANSITION

As perceived by the Respondents

The word "transition" itself implies a certain degree of instability and disorder. From this perspective, the transition period, according to the respondents, has ended: nowadays life is more stable, clear, and predictable: *"We hoped that the country would change somehow. For the better. That it would become more European, something like it. Well, more European <...> we hoped that market would emerge. Even then people were saying that it was a chaotic street*

fair, not a market. But we were hoping that somehow it would get normal. That it was just the transition period. That it would get better. And indeed, that difficult period, when wages were not paid — it's all over. Something has improved" (Interview 4).

The transition as a period of time, a stage in development of the society and the state with certain values and objectives is often perceived by the respondents as a "failure" — in a sense that it never met the expectations associated with it and thus was a disappointment. Everyone understands that the last 10-12 years in the history of Russia constitute a new and different stage in terms of guidelines and attitudes (gradual restriction of civil and economic freedoms; enhancement of the role and presence of the state; domination of imperial and conservative values; confrontation with the West). In this respect, the transition period was the opposite of the current time, and that is why it often seems that it simply disappeared, "*sunk into oblivion*". That is why people perceive the collapse of hopes and expectations associated with the transition as one of the results of the period. They also mention among the results the failure to use Russia's historic chance to become a real democracy (as perceived by our participants) — a constitutional state with alternation of power, respect for fundamental freedoms, with a "fair" and transparent economic system:

"We didn't use our chance to become truly free ... The cynical forces are triumphant. But we could have achieved more. We could have walked out of it with great dignity" (Interview 4).

"There were many missed opportunities. We were enticed by democratization, but we never delivered" (focus group).

Retrospective perception of the transition period is subjective and relates primarily to the way the participants assess the current situation in Russia. If a respondent is dissatisfied with the current situation, if he feels the lack of freedom and perceives the current state of events as rollback to the Soviet Union, his perception of the transition period is more positive; he emphasizes freedom, hopes and happiness of that time. This part of the respondents perceives this period as the "unfinished revolution", as a missed opportunity.

Thus, the attitude towards the transition period is an indirect marker of the attitude towards the current government and its policies, leading to splits in the society.

The participants feel that the division is enhanced by the fact that this period has not been reflected upon by the society:

- The collapse occurred too quickly, the society was not ready for it; values that had been instilled in several generations were declared false and incorrect without explanation.

- Currently this period is called officially declared "bad" by the state propaganda - again, without extensive and objective discussion of the results.

However, with deeper analysis and reflection the respondents realize that the 90s formed and reinforced important trends, standards, and events, both positive and negative, which are still visible and important now.

The participants of the research see the diversity of social patterns and scenarios (instead of one and only "correct" reference standard) as the most significant result of the transition period.

"What good comes of it — that many people saw that life is diverse. That this is not just the standard scenario of "school — college — work". There are many other ways to live your life. There are different people in other countries, they have their own experience. That we can do everything very differently. And anyone can choose" (interview 4).

It appears extremely important, because it means individual responsibility and freedom of choice — both in terms of finding one's profession and a place in life, and the choice of values.

The participants also mention the familiar, seemingly self-evident things, such as a market economy and its institutions, private ownership, banks, and, in a broader sense, consumption patterns:

"There were no forms of property other than governmental property. Responsible tenant. This meant that the apartment was still owned by the state. And then we got the opportunity to buy property" (Interview 7).

"Legitimization of entrepreneurship — now it is seen as a normal activity, not as black marketeering" (focus group).

The most important achievement of the transition is the opportunity to travel, the open borders. Withdrawal of this right, potential limitations on leaving the country or introduction of exit visas will be the main signal of the final outbreak of "reaction". This right is so important to everyone, because in the mass perception it represents the literal freedom and the ability to see other cultures and experiences:

"People became a part of the world. To me, the fall of the Iron Curtain is an important result. The ability to travel abroad, the opportunity to go where you want" (Interview 5).

The emergence and the realization of fundamental rights and freedoms — freedom of speech and freedom of information, elections and freedom of assembly, freedom of faith, and so on — is the result of transition period. It is also important to note here that currently these achievements of the transition period are perceived as threatened; the benefits which are now being restricted and violated. The awareness on violations of these rights and freedoms leads to reflection on their significance and importance:

"There was a democracy, at least, the illusion that you can influence the decisions made in the country, in the region" (focus group).

"It is still shameful — at least verbally — to attempt to control thought. There still exists a notion of artistic freedom, academic freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of enterprise. This at least is declared and in some cases on a small level is still implemented" (Interview 8).

The participants of the research also see the negative results of the 90s — some negative

trends and phenomena originated at that time.

Atomization, lack of horizontal solidarity, exclusive self-reliance, distrust and cynicism — this is the reverse side of individualism and responsibility that emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union and were not supported and strengthened by development of public institutions and civil society:

"This individualism, that was born and stiffened, didn't permeate the community of individuals. A lot of people in our generation, and probably even more younger ones, believe that we must do everything ourselves. The reverse side of individual responsibility is that I don't need anyone, I can handle anything myself" (focus group).

Socio-economic and regional stratification of society (even confrontation) began to take shape as early as the 90s and continues today. The different standards of living in Moscow (and other metropolitan areas) vs. smaller towns and the provinces ("The two Russias") are perceived as a result of not entirely fair economic and social measures in the transition period.

In fact, we're not dealing with different standards of living (and, therefore, the opportunities of earning and consumption) only, but also with different values models, which began to form as early as the 90s:

"In Moscow, people were going to the barricades, they were ready to go out and do something proactively. And in the provinces people just live. They are busy with their own concerns. There's a feeling that their lives are focused around their families, their narrow interests. And the fate of their homeland doesn't concern them. It is easier to just tick the box in the bulletin" (Interview 6).

Disregard of the laws or cynical and selective enforcement in general — these trends began to emerge in the 2nd half of the 90s, during the "oligarchy" and not quite equitable privatization. This caused disillusionment in the sincerity of the goals declared by the state, as well as further strengthening of cynicism and distrust. Then, in the 2000s, the authorities "*destroyed or subdued oligarchs*", but preserved and spread the practice of law "for its own benefit" and general disrespect of it.

Appendix:

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The Scope and Objectives of the Project

The main scope of the project was to identify, the key features of the transition period in Russia, the effect of the transition period evident at present, and the existing conflicts concerning the transition period in the society. The objectives of the project were:

- Defining the audience's recollection from the transition period; what features, values, and sentiment are emphasized as the key ones;
- Defining the audience's perception of chronological and referential event framework and perception of iconic figures;
- Exploring generational and socio-cultural differences in approach and assessment of the transition period;
- Exploring audience's opinions on the transformation of the role of the state and its institutions;
- Defining the results and impact of the transition as viewed by the representatives of different generations.

Research Method and the Audience of the Project

Research Method: To meet the goals of the research, the following approach was used:

1. *Paired interviews (dyads)* with the representatives of different generations ("parents" and "children") of the strata and cohorts that underwent the most fundamental and representative transformation or that were formed by it.

- "Children" — born between 1980 and 1991;
- "Parents" — born between 1958 and 1966.

Paired interviews in dialog format with the representatives of these two generations allow to obtain information essential to the main objectives of the current research. It provides the opportunity to get a fuller and more complex picture of the transition period; expose potential lines of conflict and discern the "reflection" and "legacy" of the transition in the current period.

Paired interviews were mediated by the moderator. The participation of a moderator is important to facilitate the correct dynamics of the interview within the research, as well as obtain the complete and diverse information to target the main objectives of the research.

Focus group discussion (FGD) with quadragenarians (born between 1967 and 1976). FGD was used to verify and refine the results and hypotheses obtained in the course of paired interviews with the representatives of other generations.

FGD method allows to collect a variety of opinions and attitudes in group dynamics and using projective techniques, and single out the common denominators and key principles in perception of the transition period. Within the scope of the research, 10 paired interviews and 1 focus group discussion were conducted from September 25 to November 2, 2016. Each interview and FGD continued for 1.5-2 hours.

Audience description:

The choice of participants was governed by on their age and belonging to a certain generation based on their "experience" of the transition period:

- "Children" — participants aged 27-36, born and/or socialized in full within the transition period;
- "Parents" — participants aged 50-60. During the transition period they were adults whose family, social, and professional roles underwent the most essential transformation;
- "Middle generation" — aged 41-48. During the transition period they were young people preparing for adulthood.

It should be added that the selection was focused on strata and cohorts that had either undergone radical changes or emerged in the course of transition period:

- Business/Entrepreneurship/Self-employment — 11 participants;
- Science/Education — 8 participants;
- Media/Creative occupation — 9 participants.

ABOUT US

The Sakharov Center

The 90s is the time we have already lived without Sakharov – he died on Dec, 14th 1989. But Sakharov's hopes and fears, about a new world that is to come, still stay with us as challenges and questions unanswered. In our work as an institution, we try to acknowledge the 90s as a multidimensional epoch in the history of our country rather than a black and white narrative that diminishes its significance. This research, however, small still allows the reader to have a glimpse into this strange and exciting world of change.

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*This research was conducted for **Transition Dialogue: Mapping a Generation***

<http://transition-dialogue.com>.

*coordinated by the **DRA e.V.** Berlin, Germany www.austausch.org*

with support of the Federal Agency for Civic Education/bpb, Bonn/Germany



