SWP 36/90 THE ROLE OF PERSONAL SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS IN SOVIET TYPE CENTRALISED COMMAND ECONOMIES: SOCIAL NETWORKS AT WORK IN SOVIET GEORGIA

DR YOCHANAN ALTMAN
Cranfield School of Management
Cranfield Institute of Technology
Cranfield
Bedford MK43 OAL
UK

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Dr Yochanan Altman

Cranfield School of Management
Cranfield Institute of Technology
CRANFIELD
Bedford
MK43 OAL
England
Tel: 0234 751122

For quotation please advise author.

1. INTRODUCTION

Personal social support networks (thereafter PSSN) are a key to understanding the working of Soviet Georgian society and its notorious informal (alternative) economy.[1] The phenomenon however is not limited to Georgia but it reverberates throughout the USSR in a process which Shliapentokh labelled 'the Georgianisation of the Soviet Union' (1985:29), which is essentially the spread of the Georgian type network.

An examination of the structure, dynamics and operation of PSSN in Soviet Georgia, where they are highly developed, should allow us to understand the role of PSSN in centralised command economies. Since it is the PSSN - the informal network of friends - which subvert the system, making the PSSN a principal instigator of the present upheaval in the economies and societies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.[2]

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1 Soviet Georgia is considered to have the most developed informal (alternative) economy of all Soviet republics : Altman, 1983; Grossman, 1977; Wiles, 1980. Other common synonyms of the informal (alternative) economy are: second; black; hidden; underground; illegal; parallel; shadow; illicit.

2 Altman, 1989.

2. THE STRUCTURE OF PERSONAL SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

Frame

Ego is the focal point of his network.[3] Ego's network is kinship-based: Georgian families trace decent on both sides but stress the male line and within it an emphasis on agnates - on the solidarity and mutual obligations of brothers. The network extends beyond one's core family to include intimate friends: since in Georgia's structure the peer group is second only to the family in importance as a source of social ranking and support. The **core personal social support network** therefore consists of a *personal cell* and an *intimate zone*.[4] That is a minimal, not a maximal definition. And it assumes a stable network, since kin are ascribed and close friends have to endure tests over time.

Extent

Even by its minimal definition the scope of a network is considerable. Let us examine the following examples (figure 1). Ego has a father, a brother and two uncles - father's brother and mother's brother, and a wife (who has a father and a brother). He has also two close friends[5] and so does each of the other males in the network. This again is a conservative estimate since quite often one will have more than two Megobarebi and some people even have Dzmobilebi (meaning "like brothers").

However, even this conservative estimate suggests that Ego has eight members at the heart of this network and 26 more as close 'friends of friends'[6], that is, people who are as committed to Ego's core of eight as the latter are committed to him. This means that Ego has a 34-man strong legion at his disposal, which is his Core PSSN.

But, in essence, networks will have an ever expanding tendency as each member of the network, serves as a 'link-pin' in a Likert type organisation where society is conceived of a matrix of interlocking groups (Likert, 1961).

The difference between the Core PSSN and the much expanded network depends on the services the network is called upon to perform (see following).

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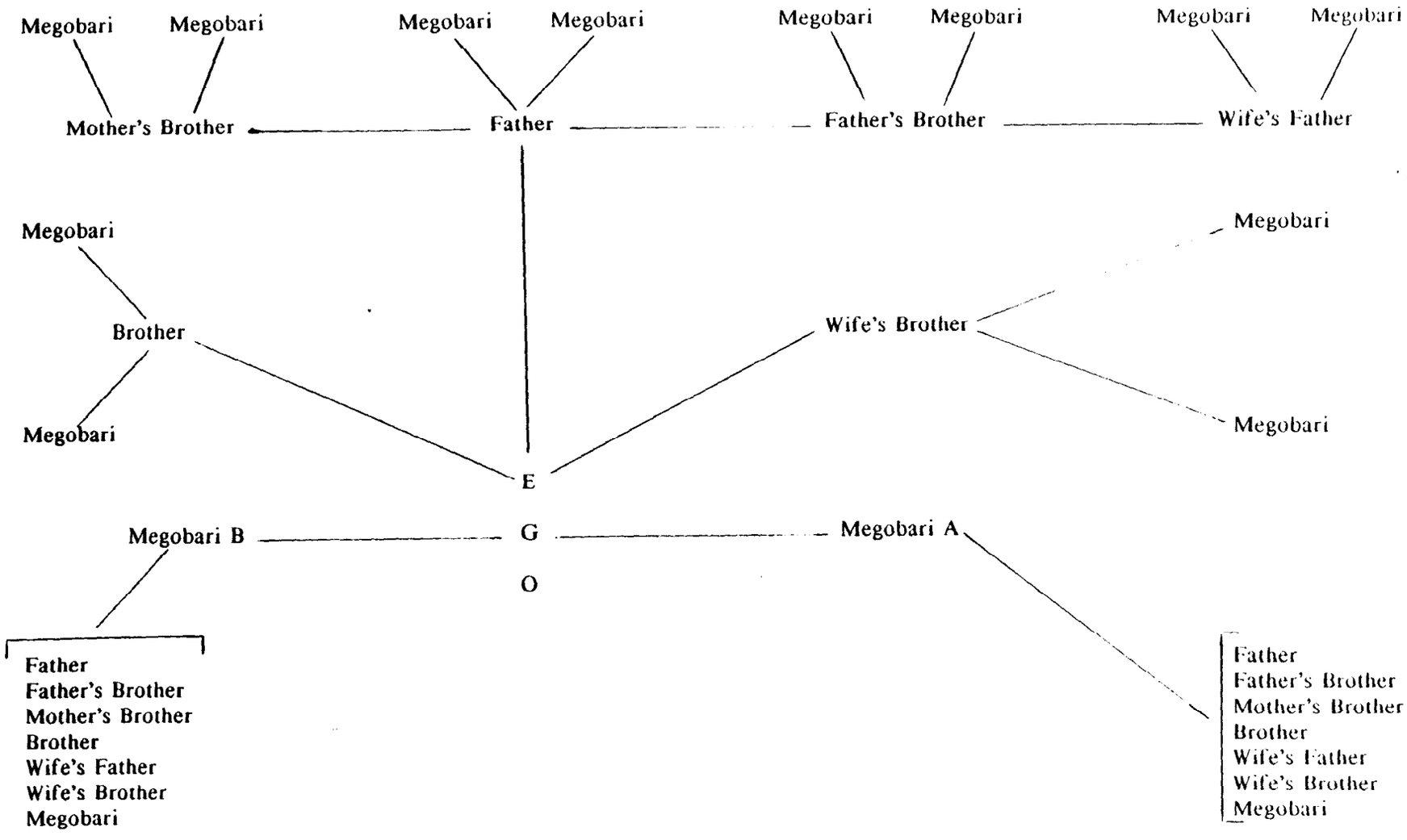
3 Although PSSN are applicable to women as well as men and women will have their own PSSN, women's networks however will be heavily influenced by the networks and opportunities created by the male PSSN. While analysis is generalised to the Soviet Georgian society as a whole, its focus is on men's PSSN.

4 Terms taken from Boissevain, 1978.

5 Close friend is known as Megobari (Megobarebi - pl) literally, one who eats from the same plate.

6 Boissevain, 1978

Figure 1



Spread of Ego's Core Personal Social Support Network: A Conservative Estimate (n=34)

3. INTERACTIONS IN NETWORKS

Social/Economic Transactions

Any transaction will normally be initiated by Ego to a member of his network and if necessary through him to another member - and so on - until the required service is obtained. To illustrate this point, let us consider a simple interaction involving a trio: myself, a colleague[7] and a friend who was one of my key informants.

When my colleague (B) came to visit me in the field he was the honorary guest at a feast organised by my friend (C). As is the normal practice with Georgians, the feast involved masses of food and drink, and (B) for who it was a first experience - was most impressed. In case he was fooled into thinking that the honour was purely his, (C) enlightened him "it's not really you we are honouring, but Yochanan". In other words, he emphasized the fact that by honouring my guest (B), he (C) was really paying his respects to me (A).

The movement of this interaction is graphically presented in Figure 2. It shows the transaction going from (C) to (B) via (A). That is, (A) was both the direct object of this interaction and the axis that deflected it further. The figure also indicates that by honouring my guest (B), I (A) owe (C) a favour, and that by the same token my colleague (B) owes me (A) a favour, since it was through me (A) that he obtained a service.

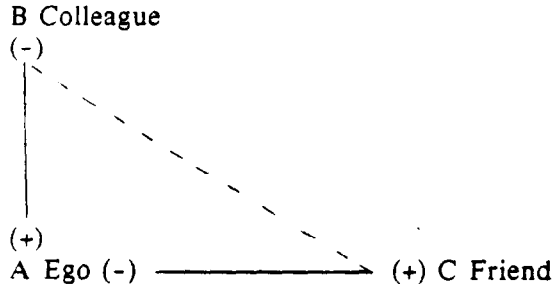


Figure 2 - A simple transaction of 'give and take'.

This pattern of movements does not rule out the establishment of a direct bond between (B) and (C), but at this stage this is only a potential bond. (B) presented (C) with a present (an expected courtesy), but it was ascribed to (A) as well and both of us ((A) and (B)) were thanked for it by (C).

When after a time my friend (C) went abroad and paid me (A) a visit, my colleague (B) reciprocated by inviting the two of us out. The movement reversed in the same pattern. By Georgian standards (B) repaid (A) the favour he owed him by honouring his guest (C). This time (C) presented a gift to (B) and was rather anxious to know whether (A) considered it appropriate: after all the gift was addressed on (A's) behalf.

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7 Gerald Mars with whom I collaborated in several studies on the Soviet informal, alternative economy, and who was at that time my doctoral supervisor.

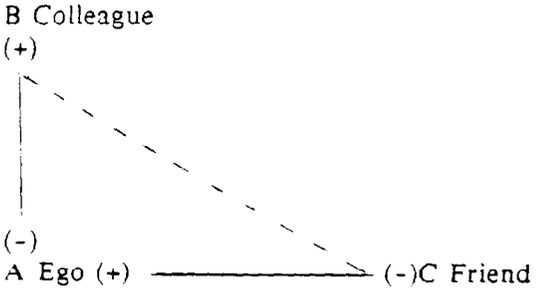

Figure 3 - A further transaction of 'give and take'.

The above are examples of perfectly matching 'give and take' relationships, in the direction of movements, the subjects involved and the objects of transaction. They need not be so, indeed in reality they rarely are. It is in the nature of 'give and take' relationship that they'd do better not form a close and finite pattern of interactions, as Mauss (1970) noted long ago. It is the open ended quality of 'give and take' relationships which allow the mutual obligations to role on and which sets the whole network into motion.

Thus, at the end of the transaction depicted in Figure 1, the 'give and take' relationship between protagonists is that (A) owes a favour to (C) and (B) owes a favour to (A). (C) is in credit to (A) and (A) is in credit to (B). But, as stated earlier there are two separate accounts here, one is between (A) and (B), the other is between (A) and (C).

A common way to further develop these accounts (in way of a settlement) is to reciprocate by doing services to other 'friends of friends'. That is, (A) will do a service to (D) on behalf of (C) and (B) will do a service to (E) on behalf of (A).

Thus, for example, (A) helped (C's) sister-in-law to find a place in the local College of Further Education. This meant that (A) repaid him with a favour of a different kind and possibly of a greater value. This suggests that the transaction between the two has stayed open-ended and a new member is now involved. What's more, it calls for the relative advantage of specialisation. If someone has a specialist niche would it not be wise to take advantage of it? In a centralised command economy, where goods and services are in short supply and in high demand, such as is the case in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, expert niches become a natural power base for transactions.

The Functions of Networks

The Georgian type **personal social support networks** have two distinct functions. These can be distinguished by the object of their utilisation and by the frequency of their use. For one-off, trivial transactions, the networks are ever expansive. There is a saying in the provincial villages of Western Georgia, from where many of my informants hail, that "one can obtain there even the milk of birds", in other words: practically anything one wishes.

The other case, where the network will tend to be ever expansive is saved for emergencies.

On the other hand, for day-to-day use, the network is finite, as for instance for supporting a particular job.

Let us examine these different functions one by one.

a) **The Movement of Goods and Services**

Figuratively, relations between people encompass a range of goods and services exchanged amongst them, in barter transactions. If we were to replace the social interactions with goods and services exchanged, the network in action will look like in Figure 4.

One surprising outcome of this movement of scarce goods and services, is that it creates a more egalitarian society. After all, even a high ranking official requires a pair of shoes from time to time, spare parts for his child's bicycle and seats on the train for the holidays. Where shortage prevails, belonging to the *Nomenklatura*,[8] is no guarantee to acquiring the necessary life essentials, except for a thin layer of the very top officials of the ruling elite[9] for whom special shops and pass cards have made living comfortable.

Money loses its grip in these circumstances. As a result of the strong parallel economy and the lack of attractive spending routes or investment venues, money is abundant. It alone cannot guarantee purchase[10] : the PSSN, acting as a selective consumers club and buyers and sellers market all-in-one, is the effective answer.

This is an essential difference between the Georgian type network and other similar informal networks in centralised bureaucracies. Latin America, as Lomnitz has shown in her studies, is dominated by circles of friends where **social distance** is of prime importance in determining the nature of services available and the normative conventions for acquiring them (Lomnitz, 1988, 1977, 1971). Where friendship circles become inappropriate, because of incompatibility of rank, patron-client relations will develop (Lomnitz, 1988, 1971). This is by no means limited to the new world, nor to the new African democracies, where this pattern of informal networks prevails (Szeftel, 1983; Riley, 1983). The crime networks of Southern Italy have long been operating in similar fashion.

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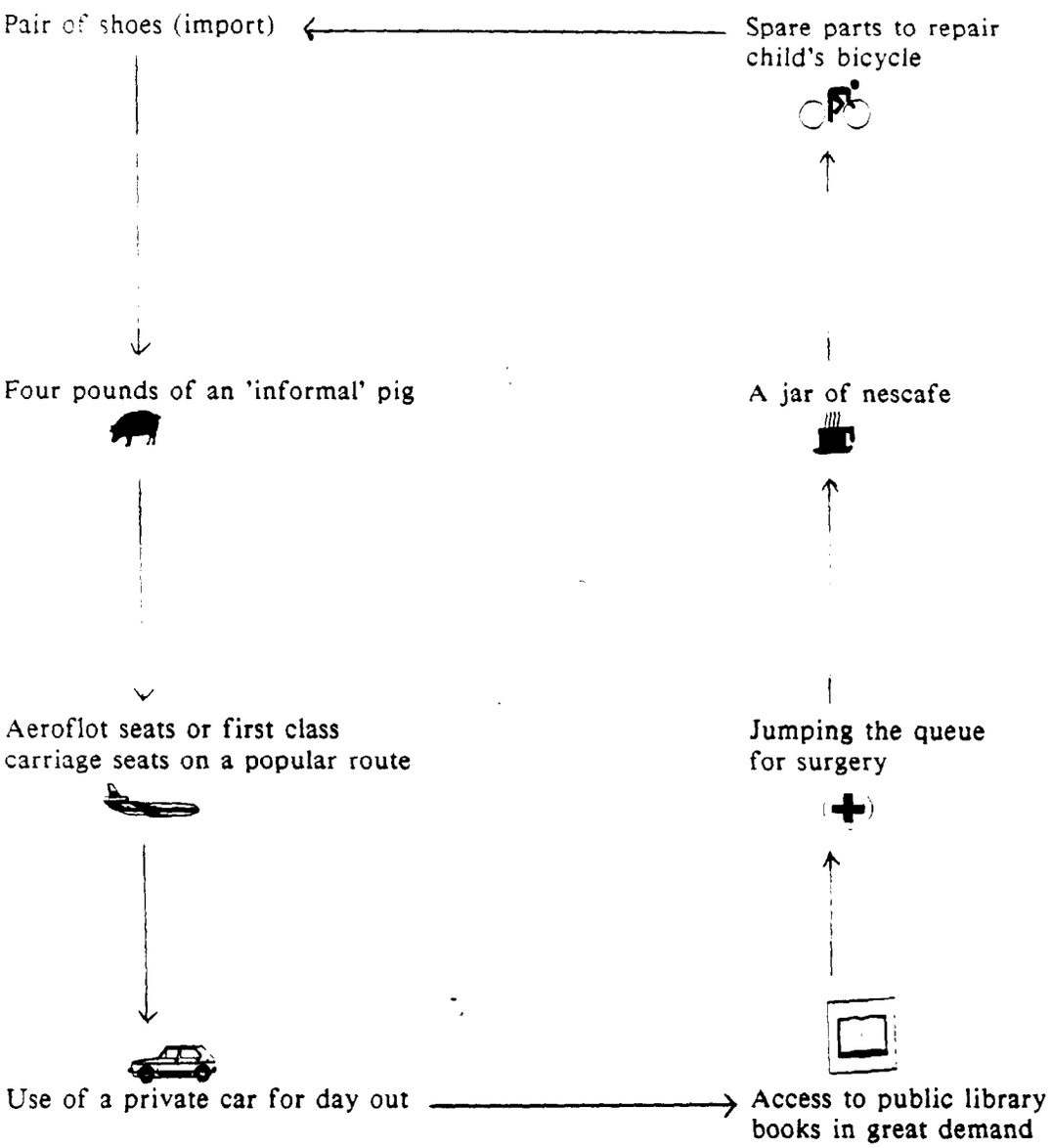
8 The elite administration.

9 The top Party and state *apparat* members, army and security forces generals, academicians and the cultural elite.

10 "It is no longer a currency, it is a lottery ticket" - the Rouble has been branded in muscovite circles (A Nove : Against All Odds New Statesman and Society 19th Jan 1990, p.19)

Figure 4 - PSSN in Action : The Movement of Goods and Services.



While Georgian type networks do incorporate aspects of patron-client relations and of a closed social club ("I am not drinking with anybody" would be a common expression),[11] their emphasis is on mutual reciprocity, based on an honourable association of equals. Where a provision is unobtainable, within the core PSSN, there will always be found the individual 'link-pin' who has a foot in the appropriate network for getting "even the milk of birds". Recall that the Georgian type network has an ever expanding tendency, operating in a Likert-type matrix of interlocking groups.

b) **Emergencies**

The same goes for emergencies. When a member of a Core PSSN is in danger, whether it involves the obtainment of rare antibiotics for a sick child or the sorting out of someone caught operating in the informal economy, the network will expand to its fullest capacity to perform the miracle.

The following is an account of such a case.[12] It is told by an informant who was seventeen at the time it happened. The main protagonist is his father who was running a small shop in a typical Georgian small market town. The events took place at the beginning of the seventies.

"On Monday the traders got warning of a possible raid sometime during the coming week. The warning arrived from a person who was not a trader but had much invested interest in the market. He was 'a silent partner' to some of the shops there. This person had a link to somebody in Tbilisi who would be expected to know of such things. A check with the local officials failed to verify the warning. They did not know anything, but people in the market nonetheless took the warning seriously. After all it came from a highly regarded person. Some of them closed their shops for the whole week - most of these were the more established shopkeepers. Some said they were sick, others had family obligations. You don't need too much of an excuse. The rest, including my father, could not afford to close entirely. So they tried their luck."

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11 On the significance of drinking and networking see Mars and Altman, 1988

12 First published in Mars and Altman, 1983. Other case studies are reported in a forthcoming book, co-authored with Mars on the Georgian-type second economy.

A few stayed open all the week - others closed only on certain days. My dad closed on Tuesday and Wednesday and opened on the Thursday. Thursday, being market day, involved obviously a higher risk - but also a higher chance for earning, especially as some shops did not operate because of the scare. The special control committee arrived on Thursday. It was a central committee on an irregular check mission[13] - and that is why the local officials were not told.

A local boy of fourteen was given some money to buy a few things at my dad's shop. The boy was probably a Komsomalnik.[14] Three men, disguised as customers, watched him. He purchased a pair of trousers and was charged 4.40R instead of 3.60R; a pair of socks for 3.20R instead of 1.20R and an elastic band for underwear of which he got 7m instead of 9m as change. The control men identified themselves, charged my dad with speculation (which is a criminal offence) and ordered him to close his shop, which was thereafter sealed until a formal enquiry was set up. He was taken immediately to the town's police station.

The rumour spread immediately at the market place and details quickly reached our home - though we lived some two hours away by train. At once all our relations and neighbours came in to share the tragedy with us. My father's brothers and my mother's cousin - who happened to visit the town at that time - started to plan how to get him out of the mess. First of all, all the goods we had at home were dispersed quickly to face a possible police raid on our home. They were put, for the time being, at my father's brother's place.

He asked this person to come urgently from Tbilisi and both went to see a senior policeman. Of course they took a lot of risk, since they demanded the release of my father as well as the dropping of charges against him. The charges however could not be dropped though they were much reduced. This was arranged for 5,000 roubles to be handed in, in cash.[15]

My uncles and my mother's cousin made a contact with the head of the police station where my father was arrested. It seemed possible to release him for a considerable amount of money. My mother's cousin proved to be of crucial importance. He was much richer than our family - he ran a factory in Tbilisi and had many contacts with officials there and knew in person the man who had issued the warning to the market traders.

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13 This is a rather common method of by-passing the local authorities. This was an ad-hoc committee, comprised of persons from the commerce departments in some local governments and representatives from the central office of the OBKhSS (the economic police).

14 A member of the communist youth, who help - among other civilian duties - in controlling consumer prices.

15 Comparing this account with other information and discussing this case with other informants revealed that this was not an excessive demand in the given circumstances.

How was sum raised in a short time? 2,000R were given by my family. Part of it we held at home as a matter of regularity for emergencies. The rest was given as a loan by my relatives. 3,000R were raised by the traders in the market.[16]

On his release father went, together with a few others (including me), to empty his shops of the illegal goods he held there.[17]

Luckily, dad was clever enough to have left a window unlocked - through which we managed to get in with the help of the gatekeeper who was given 100R. We dispersed the goods among the other shops in the market - the traders had authorised the gatekeeper to open their shops to do so. But a considerable amount was loaded on a van we bought with us. On leaving, we phoned our house from the gatekeeper's home, saying 'the birds are on their way' which was an agreed code meaning: 'the goods are on the way - be ready to disperse them'.

My mother's cousin was driving. He was a man in his thirties and very tough. Since it was early morning, we were easily detected by the police patrols and ordered to stop.[18]

Of course we could not stop and a chase developed. But we knew the roads very well and managed to get away. On arrival we unloaded at my mother's cousin's place, since our home could already have been under surveillance. Small traders were waiting with cash to buy the goods off us at purchase price.[19]

As emergency pools in times of trouble, Georgian type networks can mobilise vast resources as a member's career, future and even life may be at stake. It is then that a network will spread to its maximum capacity often involving dozens of people most of whom will never meet the protagonist for whose sake they have been mobilised.

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16 The loans were given under no guarantee, without any condition or specified time for their return. It was all done on the understanding that a person's honour commits him and his family to see to it that the loans are returned as soon as possible, In this particular case it took 18 months to return the lot.

17 Instead of the 34 items he was licensed to deal with, he stocked 240.

18 Police patrols are a constant factor to consider when distributing goods. There should be a bill of lading (*factura*) specifying the source and target of all goods in transit, as well as exact composition of these goods. This is why most illegal deliveries are carried out during day-time when their likelihood of raising suspicion is much lower.

19 That is - not to take advantage of the person's difficulty.

c) **Occupations and Networks**

The day-to-day working of the Georgian type network is essentially limited to its Core PSSN.

This is manifested most clearly in the occupational choice (recruitment, promotion) of network members (Mars and Altman, 1983). There is a direct relation between the extent of one's Core PSSN, the mix of occupations presented in the Core PSSN and one's likelihood to chose a particular profession or to stick to it.

Table 1 outlines the Core PSSN strengths of individuals in some common occupations. There is an almost direct relationship between a job holder's PSSN strength, the remunerations that a job can attract and the risks associated with it.

Just to clarify, in Soviet type command economies, almost no position can be held without some risks, since it is almost axiomatic that in order to do a proper job (as well as to gain some extra money on top of the official meagre income) one needs to circumvent the system, thereby opening oneself to potential charges of misconduct and/or criminal offence (Altman, 1989).

The following are some ordinary occurrences evidenced by ordinary people who lived all their lives in Georgia, prior to immigrating to the West.[20]

A store keeper: "Even a shop-floor worker, if he has some brains and some guts, will take a few items from his workplace so he can enter a shop and exchange them for other goods".

A village general store manager: "One day my old school headmaster entered my office. He took me aside and handed me over a handful of notes. 'These are my savings for the last three years. Take whatever is required but get me a decent suit of import quality'".[21]

A taxi driver: "You always get more than the traffic meter shows. Instead of one rouble, you will expect to be given 1.20R or 1.30R. Instead of two roubles - 2.50R perhaps 3R. Even a government official who calls me on official travel will give me extra".

A young GP: "After you complete a persons check-up and before she/he leaves, she/he will slide 5 roubles into your pocket - sometimes less, sometimes more".

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20 Quotes taken from Mars G and Altman Y - How a Soviet Economy Really Works in M Clarke (ed) Corruption Francis Pinter, Oxford, 1983.

21 The headmaster might not be making illicit profits in his job, but he has to use the illicit economy to provide him with clothes expected of this position (or else his standing in his own Core PSSN may be affected).

TABLE 1

OCCUPATIONS AND THEIR RELATED PSSN SCORES, RISKS AND INCOME

	OCCUPATIONS	NETWORK SCORES		RISK INVOLVED			MONTHLY INCOME
		Occupational Weight	Total Score	Low	Med	High	Formal and Informal Incl
GROUP I Personal Services & Shopfloor Workers	Barber	1+1	2	✓			400-600R
	Shoemaker/Repairer	1+1+1+2	5	✓			400-600R
	Hatter	1+1+1+1	4	✓			300-500R
	Small Snackbar Operator	2+1+1+1+1+1+1	8	✓			300-400R
	Blue-collar Worker	1+2+1+1+1+1+1+2+1	11	✓			250R
		Average	6.0				
GROUP II Middlemen and Small Business Operators	Shop Assistant	1+2+2+1+1+2+1	10		✓		300-500R
	Shoemaker: Foreman and Middleman	2+1+1+1+2+1+1+2+1	12	✓			600-900R
	Taxi Driver	3+1+1+3+2+3+1+1	15		✓		800-1,000R
	Small Shopkeeper	2+1+1+1+1+1+1	8		✓		500-800R
		Average	11.25				
GROUP III Professional and Executives	Supermarket Manager	3+3+3+3+3+3+1+1	20			✓	2,000-2,500R
	Small Factory Executive	3+1+3+3+3+3	16			✓	1,000-2,000R
	Medium Factory Executive	2+2+3	7			✓	1,000-1,500R
	Big Factory Executive	3+3+1+3+3+3+3	19			✓	2,000-10,000R
	Import Warehouse Executive	3+2+1+1+1+1	9			✓	3,000-5,000R
	Physician	1+3+3+3+3+3	16	✓			Starter 1,000R Specialist up to 15,000R
		Average	14.50				

Network scores are computed here from males within the nuclear families of origin and marriage. We thus include father of Ego, father of wife, brother sisters' husbands and wife's brothers. Their 'weight' is then calculated on the basis of a rating of their occupation, classified into: personal services/shop labour = 1 point; middlemen/small businessmen = 2 points; professional/executives = 3 points. Only social active persons are considered. The deceased a young are excluded. Figures are given for Soviet Georgia (the provinces) throughout the 1960's

Adapted from: Mars G and Altman Y, The Cultural Bases of Soviet Georgia's Second Economy Soviet Studies, Vol.XXXV, No.4, 1983, pp.546-560

The day-to-day function of the Core PSSN is to support its members, by reducing these occupational risks. This can be done by members of the network becoming involved themselves (as active or silent partners), by providing crucial (inside) information and know-how or by supplying links with agencies (like the local police) which are necessary to allow the smooth execution of a job. **This is an ongoing operation and therefore has to be supported by an ongoing commitment**, which can only be provided by persons in close relation - the Core PSSN.

4. MAINTAINING THE NETWORK

Honour and Trust

Honour and trust, the universal pillars of informal networks (Lomnitz, 1988) are the foundations of the Georgian-type PSSN as well. Honour and trust are mutually interchangeable. A person who is not trusted has no honour - without honour one cannot be trusted. Naturally, trust is a fundamental requirement in a social/economic milieu where informal economic activity is a matter of routine. Whether a buyer or a seller, the 'give and take' transaction is likely to be illegal, or at the minimum, in contravention of communist ethics (Altman, 1989). In such circumstances it is futile to sign contracts or seek law enforcement,. Necessarily, a man's work has to be his bond. **The sanction of breaking a bond is social discredit - which extends beyond the individual concerned, to include one's core PSSN.** Indeed the Core PSSN members will be expected to honour the commitments of their defaulting member. The Core PSSN acts therefore as *guarantor* to its constituent members. This explains why being accepted into a Core PSSN is rather difficult: you are either born into it, or have to be a close associate of an existing member, positively vetoed by all the others in the group.

Feasts

The building of Georgian type networks is done through the institution of the feast (Mars and Altman, 1988) where members of the **Core PSSN** gather together with their peers, friends and guests, spending their time socialising and interacting. In Soviet Georgia, the feasts are the most favourable and most frequented social engagement. It would not be out of the ordinary for the average Georgian to spend 2-3 evenings a week feasting.

The wider social implications of feasts are manifested through the elaborate formalised rituals (Mars and Altman, 1988) which are designed to link participants - and through them their respective PSSN - in bonds of friendship and exchanges of honours and goodwill.

5. PERSONAL SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS AND PERESTROIKA

The dramatic changes in the USSR initiated by Gorbachev, under the banners of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*, were directly instigated by the challenge of the informal, alternative economy to the formal system. Gorbachev himself said so on many occasions (eg Gorbachev, 1988). At the core of the informal, alternative economy are the PSSN, which have been growing in direct relation to the worsening economic situation (while the rapid demographic changes, in particular increased urbanisation and the expansion in education (Lewin, 1989) probably served as major facilitators).

In Brezhnev times, the PSSN came under attack, as a circumvention of Communist ideology and Soviet mores, sometimes by attacking its ritual manifestation : the feast.[22] For the authorities, the problem is that with *Glasnost* it becomes even more difficult to shun away anti-social behaviour, while *Perestroika* brings the Core PSSN to the forefront of the economy by encouraging officially sanctioned individual enterprise and private co-operatives.

The Georgian-type PSSN, grown and ripened in the ideal hotbed of the Soviet Centralised Command Economy[23], has now matured and looks set to take over the Weberian type communist bureaucracy.

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22 'In Georgia hospitality is under attack'. *Maariv* (Israel evening daily), 6th Sept, 1982.

23 "An international committee of experts charged with compiling a list of conditions that maximise the potential for a large underground economy, would invent the Soviet Union" (Grossman and Tremal, 1987:285).

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