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Informal Employment in Russia: Why is it so Sustainable?

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Introduction

The problem of informal employment (or employment in the informal sector) has been widely discussed all over the world for more than 40 years. Following the definitions of Keith Hart (1973), ILO launched the concept of the informal sector, and in 1993 the informal sector was included on the agenda of the 15th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS). Initially, informal employment was seen predominantly as a phenomenon of developing countries (Marrick, 1976; Portes, 1994; Saavedra, 1999), but later its importance was also recognised in developed European countries (Portes, Sassen-Koob, 1987; Sassen, 1997; Williams, Windenbank, 1998) and in particular for post-socialist countries (Braithwaite, 1995; Guarigla, Byung-Yeon, 2001; Barnabe, 2002; Gimpelson, 2002, 2006; Lehmann, Pignatti, 2008) where the strict labour laws are accompanied by their non-effective enforcement.

In Russia's case, according to Rosstat (The Russian Federation Committee on Statistics) the number of those informally employed in Russia has been growing since 1999, from less than 2.5 million to about 14 million workers in 2009. Informal employment became a safety net during the shock therapy of the 1990s in Russia (Varshavskaya, 2002; Gimpelson, 2002; Barsukova, 2003; Kubishin, 2003; Sinyavskaya, 2005; Kapelyushinokov, 2006). It was a way to earn money when the country's wage arrears were deepening and was a survival strategy for those enterprises bound by the rigid legislation in the drastically changing economic climate. Interestingly, we do not see a downward tendency for the informal employment rates during the years of economic growth and after the partial liberalisation of the labour laws (2002). Why is the informal sector in Russia so sustainable both in good and bad times?

This paper is aimed at reviewing the existing publications on the informal employment in Russia and investigating the following issues:

- What are the scale and dynamics of informal employment over the last ten years?
- What is the structure of informal employment?
- Why was there no decline in informal employment rates in Russia during the years of economic growth?

Most economists studying Russian informal employment focus upon its scale and scope, the structure and the reasons for informal employment, (Gimpelson, 2002, Varshavskaya, Donova, 2003; Sinyavskaya, 2005; Kapelyushnikov, 2006; Gimpelson, Zudina, 2011; Karabchuk, Nikitina, 2011) whereas sociologists address the effect of informal employment upon the Russian economy and the social mechanisms of its formation (Fadeeva, 2001; Barsukova, 2000, 2003, 2004; Zaslavskaya, 2002; Latov et al, 2005).

This paper deals with the main approaches and definitions of informal employment, data sources and measurement, the scale and scope of the informal employment, and the reasons for its sustainable growth.

Definitions

There is still no single definition of the informal employment. Some researchers refer to the International Labour Office recommendations. According to the 15th ICLS conference resolution, *employment in the informal sector* was defined as employment comprising all jobs in informal sector enterprises², or all persons who, during a given reference period, were employed in at least one informal sector enterprise, irrespective of their status in employment and whether it was their main or secondary job. The conceptual framework endorsed by the 17th ICLS relates the enterprise-based concept of employment in the informal sector in a coherent and consistent manner with a broader, job-based concept of informal employment. The 17th ICLS defined informal employment as comprising the total number of informal jobs, whether carried out in formal sector enterprises, informal sector enterprises, or households, during a given reference period (Report of the 17th

ICLS conference, 2003). According to this resolution informal employees include:

- Own-account workers and employers engaged in their own informal sector enterprises³

- Contributing family workers employed both at the formal or informal sector enterprises⁴

- Employees holding informal jobs, whether employed by formal sector enterprises, informal sector enterprises, or as paid domestic workers by households

- Members of informal producers' cooperatives⁵

- Own-account workers engaged in the production of goods exclusively for consumption by their households (such as subsistence farming or do-it-yourself construction of private housing)" (Husmanns, 2004)

One should not confuse the terms of "informal employment" and "employment in the informal sector". "Employment in the informal sector" and "informal employment" are concepts that refer to different aspects of the "informalisation" of employment and to different targets for policy-making. They are not substitutes, but rather complementary concepts. They need to be defined in a more coherent and consistent manner to avoid the confusion that is often created by their users. The latter are often unaware of the differences in observation units: enterprises on the one hand, and jobs on the other (Husmanns, 2004).

Taking into account internationally recognised definitions, Rosstat adopted a new official methodology of the defining and measuring of employment in the informal sector in 2001. The lack of official registration as a legal entity was used as a single criterion for delineating informal units. The informal sector now includes (Gorbacheva, Ryjikova, 2004):

- Individual entrepreneurs and farmers' households not registered as legal entities

- Individual professionals (doctors, notaries, auditors, etc)

- Individuals providing paid services for housekeeping (cleaners, personal drivers and etc.)

- Employees hired by individual entrepreneurs

- Members of producers' cooperatives

- Individuals engaged in the household production of goods to be sold on the market.

Rosstat also presented a definition of informal employment (or employment in the informal economy) which incorporated the following categories (Gorbacheva, Ryjikova, 2004):

- Employed in the informal sector (listed cases above)

- Contributing family workers in the formal sector

- Employees hired informally by companies of the formal sector

The first paper using official nationwide Rosstat data and the new official methodology was published by Vladimir Gimpelson (2002). The main conclusion was that informal employment had grown from 2.5 million to 8 million workers in the 1990s and played a role of a safety net for the Russian labour market. The better part of the informal sector comprised the individual entrepreneurs and the self-employed. The author argued that it was impossible to formalise the informal sector at that time.

Since that time, two major approaches have been introduced. Most of the authors define informal employment as unregistered employment (hired or self-employed) (Varshavskaya, Donova, 2003; Sinyavskaya, 2005; Karabchuk, 2006; Karabchuk, Nikitina, 2011).

The other authors define informal employment on the basis of the enterprise's characteristics (Gimpelson, 2002; Gorbacheva, Ryjikova, 2004; Gimpelson, Zudina, 2011). This approach stems from the Rosstat methodology and broadly from the ILO conventions.

Data and measurement

The availability and quality of data is an important issue. There are at least five large and representative micro data sets which can be used to investigate the informal employment in Russia.

1. The first data set was collected from the Labour Force Survey, conducted by Rosstat since 1992. It is the largest representative survey with a very detailed questionnaire, and with a sample size of 250 to 500 thousand people per

year. The questions about informal employment are included since 1999.

Four main papers were written on the basis of these data. Gimpelson (2002) focuses on the scale and main features of employment in the informal sector. Gorbacheva and Ryjikova (2004) pay close attention to the measurement of informal employment. Kapelyushnikov (2006) describes household economies and measures their principal characteristics. Gimpelson and Zudina (2011) reveal the factors behind the probability of being employed in the informal sector. Their main results will be discussed in the next sections of this paper.

The following categories of workers are usually attributed to informal employment by the LFS data:

- Privately hired by others
- Self-employed individuals, individual entrepreneurs and farmers without the registration of a legal entity
- Those employed in unregistered farming households or by individual entrepreneurs
- Those employed in households producing goods and services for the market
- Those employed in the formal sector without a written contract (Gimpelson, Zudina, 2011)

2. The second data set comes from the Russian Monitoring Longitudinal Survey of the Higher School of Economics (RLMS-HSE), the annual panel household survey, which collects data from 10-11 thousands respondents in each wave. The questions about formal/informal contract were added in 1998.

Informal employees were distinguished on the basis of the following criteria in the RLMS-HSE study (Sinyavskaya, 2005):

- Working for the family company or hired by individuals
- Hired by the enterprise with no written contracts

One more classification was presented by Karabchuk and Nikitina (2011), including:

- Working for companies with less than 5 workers

- Working out of the enterprises

- Working for companies without a written contract

The detailed information about the data and the methodology of informal employment assessment could be found in the first papers based on RLMS data and published by Braithwaite (1995) and Foley (1997). They evaluated informal employment in the beginning of the 1990s, mostly as casual work and began a flow of publications. Sinyavskaya (2005) provided a very detailed analysis of informal employment. Karabchuk (2006) investigated casual employment as a form of informal employment. Karabchuk and Nikitina (2011) concentrated on casual and informal employment characteristics, including health and social well-being.

3. NOBUS (Household Survey of Social Welfare) conducted by Rosstat and The World Bank is the third nationwide representative data set, giving opportunities to analyse informal employment. This cross sectional study was conducted only in 2003. There were no publications based on NOBUS which would be devoted specifically to informal employment, but we were able to find some information on the temporary employment factors that included the discussion of an oral agreement for employment as an example of informal employment (Karabchuk, 2011).

4. Many scholars use the VCIOM (The All Russia Survey of Social Opinion) data to study informal employment (Perova, Khakhulina, 1997; Maleva, 1998; Sinsyashkina, 1998; Varshavskaya, Donova, 2003). It is based on a sample of more than 43,000 respondents from 1998-2000, when questioned about registered or unregistered employment relations. The informally employed were supposed to evaluate their job as "hired by oral agreement" or as "engaged in individual entrepreneurship without registration as a legal entity".

5. One more data set was collected by the Moscow Carnegie Centre in 2000 with a sample of more than 5000 respondents. Informal employees are identified here as self-employed workers, individual entrepreneurs, or hired workers without formal contracts. Sinyavskaya (2005) demonstrated the advantages of the MCS questionnaire, which enabled the following of both theoretical definitions and Rosstat recommendations. At the same time, Sinyavskaya claimed that RLMS-HSE data overestimated the scale of informal employment.

There are also many small surveys that were conducted specifically for studying informal employment, including experts' interviews and standardized sample surveys (Varshavskaya, 2001; Fadeeva, 2001; Khotkina, 2002; Kurbishyn, 2003; Barsukova, 2003; Latov, 2005). We will turn to some of their results below.

The scale and main characteristics

The rates of the informal sector employment are regularly calculated by Rosstat and published in "Trud and Zanyatost" (Labour and Employment). It demonstrates an overall tendency of a continuous growth of informal employment in Russia from 11% of workers in 2000 to 19.5% in 2009.

There is a significant variance in the assessment of informal employment caused by differences in definitions and approaches used by the authors. Those authors who follow the secondary job approach produce higher numbers of informal employment, (Varshavskaya, Donova, 2003), while those who rely on the official Rosstat data neglect the information on employment based on oral agreement and tend to give lower numbers of informal employment rates (Gimpelson, 2002; Gimpelson, Zudina, 2011). We believe that the most productive approach treats informal employment as unregistered employment at the companies both in formal and informal sectors of the economy (Sinyavskaya, 2005). This approach could be tested by using MCS, RLMS-HSE and VCIOM data.

In early 2000, the rate of informal employment for the population of 15-72 years was 18% and 16% according to the MCS and RLMS data respectively (Sinyavskaya, 2005). According to the Rosstat data, about 10% of the total employment was concentrated in the informal sector (Gimpelson, 2002; Gorbacheva, Ryjikova, 2004). They were predominantly the self-employed and those engaged in household family businesses. Soon, the structure of the informal sector began to change. A decreasing number of people were working in the household economy producing goods and services for the market, whilst the number of individual entrepreneurs and self-employed workers increased. In 2009 almost every third person in Russia was working in the informal sector (Gimpelson, Zudina, 2011). At the same time, unregistered labour relations cover 17.2% of workers, based on RLMS-HSE data (Karabchuk, Nikitina, 2011).

One of the main features of informal employment in Russia in the early 2000s was a large contribution of secondary employment to the informal sector. Gimpelson (2003) and Varshavskaya, Donova (2003) showed that from 65% -70% of informal employees had at least two paid jobs. At the same time, Gorbacheva and Ryjikova (2004) claimed that only in 20% of these cases is informal employment additional to the primary jobs in the formal sector. The difference in figures could be explained by different approaches again. Those who are engaged in the informal sector usually do not have secondary jobs, whilst those who are employed in the formal sector are more likely to have secondary jobs.

The social and demographic profile of the informal workers is rather similar in the reviewed studies, in spite of all the differences in the databases. As Rosstat data illustrated, workers in the informal sector are mostly young men with a low level of education, who tend to concentrate on trade, construction and services (Gimpelson, 2002, 2003). The same results have been demonstrated on the basis of MCS and RLMS-HSE data. The rates of informal employment are rather high in service industry (trade and catering) as well as in construction and transport. The highest rates of informal employment have also been observed amongst the younger generation (15-29 years old). Informal workers are mostly males with low education. They are more mobile; the average tenure in informal sector was 2.9 years, while the average tenure in the formal sector was about 10 years by the mid 2000s (Sinyavskaya, 2005).

A hypothesis implying that informal employment could be a transition stage from unemployment to the formal sector employment has been rejected. The panel RLMS-HSE data showed that only 1.8% of those who were unemployed were able to find their jobs in the formal sector after previous informal employment (Sinyavskaya, 2005).

In conclusion, we have the following typical portrait of the informal worker for the beginning of the 2000s – "it is a man under 30 without tertiary education and living in the urban area" (Varshavskaya, Donova 2003). Russian women tend to have more secure and stable jobs. In 2009-2010 we see a very similar portrait, but the features of the informal workers were specified (Karabchuk, Nikitina, 2011). Amongst workers of the small organizations with less than 5 people, we would most probably find females of between the ages of 26-45 with professional secondary education and those employed in the service sector. Amongst those hired without formal written contracts, we would

see young males under 25 with low qualifications and education levels. Self-employed people are largely recruited from the group of married men under the age of 35 with a full secondary education and who now operate in the service sector (Karabchuk, Nikitina, 2011).

Factors of the informal employment

What does informal employment entail? Both the level of the formal regulation of informal employment and law enforcement play an important role here (Gershuny, 1999). Russia clearly demonstrates the scenario in which a combination of strict regulations and poor law enforcement contributes to the increase of informal sector employment. One of the main reasons why people choose informal employment is the opportunity to receive a regular informal income (Bernabe, 2002; Sinyavskaya, 2005). In the changing environment and formation of the market economy, employment in the informal sector became a coping strategy for the households, given the imperfection of the current legislation; lack of flexibility, low level of compliance with the laws, and restricted legal opportunities which might bring an additional income (Clarke, 1999; Khotkina, 2002; Gimpelson, 2002; Sinyavskaya, 2005; Kubishyn, 2003).

The increasing share of informal workers amongst the younger generation who were entering the labour market was an additional reason for the general increase of informal employment. It was also surmised that the lack of "good" jobs in the economy force people to search for a better use of their energy (Sinyavskaya, 2005). Gimpelson and Zudina (2011) also suggested that the informal employment growth results from the gradual decline of employment in the formal sector, affected by the low quality of the institutional environment.

We observed the following links between the social and demographic factors that affect the probability of becoming an informal worker: Having a family is negatively related to the probability of informal employment, and low-skilled workers and service workers have more opportunities to become informal employees (Varshavskaya, Donova, 2003; Sinyavskaya, 2005; Gimpelson, Zudina, 2011; Karabchuk, Nikitina, 2011).

However, the following factors have a rather positive impact on the probability of informal employment. We found that short-term employment in the private sector, having a

secondary job, the small size of the enterprise, the creation of new jobs in trade and construction industries (Varshavskaya, Donova, 2003; Sinyavskaya, 2005; Gimpelson, Zudina, 2011; Karabchuk, Nikitina, 2011) all increased such a probability.

Conclusions

All the reviewed papers provide more or less similar figures for the rates of informal employment, despite the differences in the applied approaches and data sets. They all emphasise the difference between informal employment (oral labour contracts and unregistered self-employed) and employment in the informal sector inhabiting the enterprise characteristics.

The rates of informal employment have been steadily increasing since 2000, and informal employment made up almost 20% of all employed workers by 2009, in spite of the continuous economic growth and its consequent crisis (Gimpelson, Zudina, 2011). The main explanation is that a large part of informal employees still have their primary jobs in the formal sector, which provide them with stability of employment and income. Since the level of income is relatively low in the formal sector, many workers looked for secondary jobs, and three thirds of secondary employment were associated with informal contracts in the beginning of the 2000s (Varshavskaya, Donova, 2003). Their additional work efforts are better remunerated, although their working conditions could be better. Thus, we can see a dominant strategy of balancing work in the formal and informal sectors, which provides complementary benefits (Varshavskaya, Donova, 2003; Sinyavskaya, 2005; Karabchuk, 2006).

It is noteworthy that in spite of the deficiencies of informal employment, informal jobs are positively evaluated by the informal workers who would like to keep these jobs in the future (Barsukova, 2003; Latov, 2005). It means that the institutionalisation of informal practices and the deformalisation of formal employment have occurred in Russia. Gimpelson (2003) points out the impossibility of the informal sector elimination, due to the joint interests of the informal workers and their employers. An additional incentive to obtain informal employment derives from the possibility of tax evasion due to the ineffectiveness of the law enforcement (Gimpelson, 2002; Kubishyn, 2003; Sinyavskaya, 2005).

Most of the authors agree that the impact of informal employment is rather controversial, and the negative ef-

facts of informal employment have been also revealed. Employers of the informal workers feel free to ignore employment legislation norms, and this undermines the effectiveness of law enforcement in the country. It may lead to the deterioration of human capital and a lack of contribution to the social welfare system. Lower state control may lead to the criminalisation of the labour market.

On the other hand, informal employment has some positive effects. It reduces unemployment, increases the flexibility of labour relations, provides extra money for those who have several jobs and finally, raises an effective demand in the economy.

It is striking that informal employment was increasing during the years of both shock therapy and economic growth. It makes the Russian case even more peculiar, when just after the crisis of 2008, the employment in the informal sector declined by 2-3% in 2010 (Rosstat data). However, we need more time in order to determine whether or not this is the starting point of a new trend or just a short-term fluctuation.

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Endnotes

1 Rosstat started to collect the official statistical data on informal employment in 1999.

2 Informal sector enterprises were defined by the 15th ICLS on the basis of the following criteria. They are private unincorporated enterprises (excluding quasi-corporations), i.e. enterprises owned by individuals or households that are not considered to be separate legal entities independent from their owners, and for which no complete accounts are available that would permit a financial separation of the production activities of the enterprise from the other activities of its owner(s). Private unincorporated enterprises include unincorporated enterprises owned and operated by indi-

vidual household members or by several members of the same household, as well as unincorporated partnerships and co-operatives formed by members of different households, if they lack complete sets of accounts. All or at least some of the goods or services produced are meant for sale or barter, with the possible inclusion in the informal sector of households which produce domestic or personal services in employing paid domestic employees. 3) Their size in terms of employment is below a certain threshold to be determined according to national circumstances, and/or they are not registered under specific forms of national legislation (such as factories' or commercial acts, tax or social security laws, professional groups' regulatory acts, or similar acts, laws or regulations established by national legislative bodies as distinct from local regulations for issuing trade licenses or business permits), and/or their employees (if any) are not registered. They are engaged in non-agricultural activities, including secondary nonagricultural activities of enterprises in the agricultural sector

3 The employment situation of own-account workers and employers can hardly be separated from the type of enterprise that they own. The informal nature of their jobs derives from the characteristics of the enterprise.

4 Family workers usually do not have explicit, written contracts of employment, and usually their employment is not subject to labour legislation, social security regulations, collective agreements, etc.

5 The informal nature of their jobs follows directly from the characteristics of the cooperative of which they are members

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