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Freelancers in Russia: Remote Work Patterns and E-Markets

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Self-Employment in the New Economy

Since the beginning of industrialization, self-employment had been steadily declining and was commonly viewed as an obsolete form of economic organization, withering away under the pressure of capitalist accumulation and mass production. However, the last four decades have revealed the so-called “partial renaissance of self-employment” (OECD, 2000; Luber, Leicht, 2000, Arum, Müller, 2004). Apart from its increasing size, the nature and forms of self-employment in the post-industrial society had fundamentally changed. This ‘counter-evolution’ had structural, technological and cultural dimensions. The economy became more involved in the service sector and knowledge-intensive industries, whilst the traditional practices of small proprietors and craftsmen, involved in the family-embedded “moral economy”, continued to decline (Arum, Müller, 2004). At the same time, new forms of self-employment have been rising, including those inspired by the information revolution (Ruiz, Walling, 2005).

The overall rhetoric on self-employment has also substantially changed. Today self-employment is treated not as a facet of the old-fashioned petty bourgeoisie but rather can be viewed either as a part of a marginalized precarious workforce or as successful solo entrepreneurs. The most optimistic scenarios proclaim the devolution of large corporations, the decay of permanent employment and the rise of independent contracting. They criticize organizational bureaucracy, glorify the “free agents” and new types of “portfolio” or “boundaryless careers” (Handy, 1989; Arthur, Rousseau, 1996; Pink, 2001, Malone, 2004). An ideological shift to neoliberalism also promotes self-reliance, enterprising self and marketization of talent (Peters, 1999).

In 1998 Thomas W. Malone and Robert Laubacher illustrated/discussed the possibilities of “e-lance economy” provided by the Internet. They argued that:

“The fundamental unit of such an economy is not the corporation but the individual. Tasks aren’t assigned and controlled through a stable chain of management but rather are carried out autonomously by independent contractors. These electronically connected freelancers (e-lancers) join together into fluid and temporary networks to produce and sell goods and services. When the job is done – after a day, a month, a year – the network dissolves, and its members become independent agents again, circulating through the economy, seeking the next assignment” (Malone, Laubacher, 1998: 3).

The ideal model of electronic freelancing assumes that all stages of the business process are done remotely via the Internet. These include finding clients, communicating with them, negotiating contracts, transmitting final results and getting paid. The authors reflected on the infrastructure that would facilitate the new business model.

A year later the first online marketplace for freelance services was established. It was a major landmark in the institutionalization of electronic self-employment. The founders of *Elance.com* confessed that they were inspired by Malone and Laubacher’s vision. Today there are numerous websites where freelancers can offer their services and customers post projects (jobs) for which independent professionals can bid. Not only individuals and small enterprises but also large corporations use online marketplaces to outsource required skills. The number of global talent market participants has run into six figures. For instance, *Freelancer.com* reports having about 3 million registered users from 234 countries.

Table 1: Leading online marketplaces for freelancers

	Year of foundation	Working language	Registered users
Freelancer.com	2004	Eng.	3,000,000
Desk.com	2003	Eng.	1,500,000
Guru.com	2000	Eng.	1,000,000
Free-lance.ru	2005	Rus.	1,000,000
Elance.com	1999	Eng.	700, 000
Worker.com	2001	Eng.	500,000

The Russian story

Electronic self-employment is a very new phenomenon in Russia due to historical reasons and as a result of the information and communication technology (ICT) lag. In contrast to some other former socialist countries (e.g. Hungary, Poland), that permitted a limited form of small entrepreneurial activity, in the Soviet Union independent contracting (as well as entrepreneurship in general) was completely illegal (Szelényi, 1988; Róbert, Bukodi, 2000, Smallbone, Welter, 2001.). Even moonlighting (i.e. having a second job) was largely restricted. All people were supposed to work for state-owned enterprises and not independently. It is well known that the famous Soviet poet Joseph Brodsky (a future Nobel Prize winner) was charged with social parasitism in a 1964 trial for avoiding his duty to work “for the good of the motherland”. As a result, there remained only tiny niches for moonlighting, which was entirely informal. Working on individual land plots predominantly for providing a means of subsistence was a noticeable exception.

For these reasons Russia could not have a strong and long-lasting freelance tradition. The self-employment rates are extremely low: own account workers without employees constituted 5.8% of the labour force and all self-employed (including employers and contributing family workers) – 7.3% in 2008. In the European Union the corresponding figures are two times higher, producing 10.5% and 16.9%, and in developing countries they are even higher (ILO; Pedersini, Coletto, 2009: 8). The

overall entrepreneurial spirit amongst the Russian population is still fairly weak (Chepurensko, 2010).

There is also some lag in the development of information and communication technologies. At the turn of the new millennium, when global online-marketplaces for freelancers had already come into service, only about 2% of the Russian population had access to the Internet. Now with more than 60 million users, Russia is one of the largest Internet markets in Europe. The total audience of the Russian-speaking Internet (*RuNet*) reaches approximately 80 million, including people from the former Soviet republics and other countries. However, the Internet penetration rate in Russia is still rather low – about 43%. It is only half as high in the most advanced information societies. According to the Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey (RLMS-HSE) only 23% of the labour force use Internet for their work either in the workplace or at home.

Whilst some attempts to create a mediating online-infrastructure for remote work have already been piloted, the first really successful project of this kind *Free-lance.ru* was launched in 2005. Today, with about one million registered users *Free-lance.ru* is not only the largest freelance marketplace on the RuNet, but in Europe and is now one of the largest in the world.

Certainly the figures on website users should be treated with caution. They indicate the overall interest in electronic self-employment rather than the exact number of market participants at any particular time. But in any case, the amount of Russians who try to work on their own via the Internet is growing, and this growth is relatively fast.

At the same time, our knowledge of this expanding group of workers is surprisingly limited. We need to know their socio-demographic status, to find out their work values and attitudes, to see if they are pulled or pushed towards self-employment, and discover how they manage to survive in the market. These are the issues that have been covered in our research project.

Research agenda and data sources

In 2007 we started a long-term research project devoted to the phenomenon of emerging electronic self-employment in the information society. The project was

funded by the Academic Foundation of The Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

We define electronic freelancers as self-employed professionals, who work remotely via the Internet. It is important to mention that they provide professional services and do not produce material goods or resell them. They do most of their work by themselves and do not hire wage labour. They have a very strong identity and call themselves freelancers.

Since 2007 we have collected a great bulk of empirical data, both qualitative and quantitative, observing the development of online-marketplaces, and explored their structure and content. We conducted in-depth interviews with several dozen Russian freelancers and their clients, as well as three online standardized surveys at the largest online-marketplace *Free-lance.ru*.

The core of our data was collected in December 2008 and March 2011 during two waves of the Russian Freelance Survey (RFS) that brought more than 10,000 usable responses each, making RFS one of the largest freelance surveys in the world in terms of response numbers. Additionally, in July 2010 we surveyed 1,275 clients (both firms and private individuals) who use such freelance services. Using our quantitative data, we were able to devaluate some of the speculative claims about freelancers and enlarge our understanding of the group as compared to the qualitative narrative studies (Barley, Kunda, 2004).

An online survey at a freelance marketplace seems to be the most appropriate method for collecting empirical data about our research subjects. Due to the relatively small size of the group in Russia, self-employed professionals working via the Internet hardly ever fell into any nation-wide survey's samples.

Online surveys allowed us to get a large number of respondents within a short space of time and at minimal cost. The RFS questionnaire consists of about 50 questions and involves a wide range of work and life topics, including socio-demographics, professional and employment profiles, work values and motivation, income and well-being, satisfaction and work-life balance, self-management and relationships with clients. Table 2 shows the number of respondents in various subsamples.

Table 2: Russian Freelance Survey, number of respondents (2008 / 2011) see appendix.

Many respondents just opened the survey webpage but did not fill out any data. From overall nonblank responses we excluded those with poor data: scant (less than 30% of the questionnaire answered), careless, and misleading.

Then we divided those respondents into three groups of practicing, former and future (potential) freelancers. We will consider only practicing freelancers in this paper. From practicing freelancers we also exclude beginners, who seek freelance jobs but have not yet implemented any projects so far, and those who have been freelancing for a long time but were not active in the market during the past year. Thus, we get a category of 'active freelancers', who became the main subject of our study. Some results from the RFS-2011 data have been presented below. For comparisons we will use the data from the Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey of the Higher School of Economics (RLMS-HSE, 2010) which is based upon a nationwide sample of the Russian population.

Self-employed professionals in Russia: background and profile

Country of origin. The e-market for freelance services on the RuNet is truly international. Russian-speaking freelancers from 34 countries took part in our survey. More than two-thirds of the respondents (69%) represent Russia, and almost all the rest are from the former Soviet Union republics (Ukraine – 21%, Belarus – 3.0%, Kazakhstan – 1.5%, Moldova – 1.5%, the Central Asian countries – 1.1%, the Baltic States – 1%). Freelancers from other countries make up only 1% of the respondents. A quarter of Russian citizens live in Moscow and about 10% in St. Petersburg.

Gender. Among active freelancers 61% are male and 39% are female. The corresponding RLMS-HSE figures for the Russian working population are 48% and 52%. Males are clearly overrepresented among freelance workers.

Age. Russian freelancers tend to be very young. About 70% are under the age of 30 and only 10% are older than 40. The corresponding RLMS-HSE figures for the Russian workers are 28% and 46%. Thus, we are dealing with the new generation of workers, who are less

restricted by the Soviet legacy and are more advanced users of information technology.

Education. Freelancers are often very well educated. 83% of them have completed or uncompleted university education in comparison to 30% of all Russian workers. One out of ten freelancers has two university degrees, an MBA or a doctoral degree.

Employment status. Following Charles Handy's concept of portfolio career, we take into account various paid and unpaid activities that altogether constitute daily routine (Handy, 1991). We believe that this approach better describes how freelancers balance their work and life activities. The genuine freelancers, for whom self-employment is their full-time activity and the only income source, account for 29% of our sample. Most of the respondents have a regular job besides freelancing (41%), and some people manage their own business with hired employees (8%). Freelancing is also prevalent among students (14%) and women, who have to look after small children (7%).

Skills. The prerequisite for remote work is that results must be produced in a digital form to be transmitted via the Internet. Therefore, the scope of professional skills on e-markets is relatively limited. The main areas of expertise are: websites (29%), computer programming (20%), graphic design and creative arts (38%), writing and editing (28%), translating (12%), audio and video (10%), photography (5%), advertising, marketing, consulting (5%), and engineering (5%). We can observe that freelancers are often engaged in "creative industries" and, to coin Richard Florida's term, represent the so-called "creative class" (Florida, 2002). It should be noted that for freelancers the Internet is not only a new communication tool, but also the object of their work, which is largely associated with creating and maintaining websites. In this respect, the prospects for the future growth of the e-lance economy are promising.

Well-being. On average, freelancers earn more than the Russian workers, although revenues from self-employment tend to be very unstable and volatile. According to official statistics, in 2010 approximately 77% of Russian workers earned less than 820 USD a month, compared to only 55% of freelancers. This picture does not change much when we compare our respondents to a group of Russian hired workers, using the Internet at the workplace (Shevchuk, Strebkov, 2011).

Being a Freelancer: work values and motivation

When discussing work values and the motivation of freelancers, we will consider three points. Firstly, there is a cultural shift in the advanced industrial societies from materialism to post-materialism; from giving top priority to physical sustenance and safety to prioritizing the values of individual autonomy, self-realization and self-expression (Inglehart, 1990; 1997). In terms of working behaviour, people "place less emphasis on high salary and job security than on working with people they like, or doing interesting work" (Inglehart, 1990: 56).

Secondly, as some enthusiastic promoters of independent employment claim, "free agents" have rather distinct motivational profile when compared to the "organizational man" (Whyte, 1956). Freelancers do not accept the rules of the game imposed by bureaucratic authorities and corporate culture, choosing to develop their own subjective criteria of career success and work-life balance. The desire to be one's own boss appears to be propelled by the above-mentioned values of freedom and self-realization, accompanied by the ethic of self-reliance (Handy, 1989; Pink, 2001).

Thirdly, the need for a new type of worker has been on the socio-economic and political agenda in Russia since the beginning of the market reforms in early 1990s. Although the work values of Russian workers have undergone significant changes in the post-soviet period, they still reflect some negative trends. Most people expect good pay and job security from their employers and the state, but only a small share of them are ready to work hard, have personal responsibility and take the initiative. The post-materialist values of proactive self-realization are rather marginal for the consciousness of Russian workers (Magun, 2006).

In order to identify the most important aspects of work for freelancers, we used a standard question from the "World Values Survey" to compare our results with nationwide representative data (Magun, 2006). Our data revealed that freelancers are less prone to traditional forms of work behaviour.

First of all, freelancers express less materialistic inclinations and more creative values. Good pay is a high priority for almost every Russian worker (96%) compared to just 80% for self-employed professionals. Freelancers

tend to prefer interesting and creative jobs (73%) and seek out opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills (66%).

Secondly, freelancers possess much more enterprising spirit than Russian workers in general. Three quarters of Russian workers are looking for "good job security" while this is appreciated only by one third of freelancers. At the same time, self-employed professionals are much more likely to demonstrate a need for achievement (59%) and initiative (41%). It is no surprise that 42% of them are likely to go into entrepreneurship within the next five years and create their own business with hired employees. Usually freelancers start small firms in area of their expertise, such as software companies, design studios or advertising agencies.

Thirdly, freelancers do not aim at minimizing their work efforts, which is a very common tendency amongst Russian workers in general (Magun, 2006). They do not avoid pressure at work and do not look for longer vacation time. Compared to freelancers, four times as many Russian workers would like to take longer vacations. All in all, freelancers are indeed workaholics. On average they work 52 hours per week, whereas the average Russian worker totals just 43 hours. Every third freelancer reports that he has not got a single day-off in the week.

When asked about the advantages of self-employment, freelancers point to flexible schedule (79%), working at home (65%), opportunities to choose interesting projects (56%) and personal responsibility (50%). One third of freelancers put a high value on freedom from corporate regulations, authorities and control.

One of the most intriguing issues is how people become freelancers. The entry into self-employment is normally discussed in terms of "pull" and "push" factors (Mallon, 1998; Williams, 2008; Rona-Tas, Akos/Sagi, Matild, 2005; Dawson et al., 2009; Bosma, Levie, 2010). In Russia as well as in many developing countries, self-employment has a lot to do with bad jobs and surviving. But the vision of self-employment as an entirely necessity-based activity is not true in the case of freelancers.

A large part of our respondents started freelancing because they required extra earnings (42%), whilst some others were fired (11%) or were obliged to look after small children (8%). The share of freelancers reporting exclusively these push factors totals around 30%. At the

same time, 37% of freelancers are driven mainly by pull factors. What used to be their hobby became a job (36%); they strived for a new professional experience (18%), did not want to be an employee anymore (17%) or even had always wanted to become a freelancer (13%). For them to become an independent contractor is largely a matter of personal decision. The rest of our respondents had mixed incentives, combining push and pull factors (Shevchuk, Strebkov, 2011).

Generally, freelancers seem to be more content than others. 58% of freelancers are largely satisfied with their lives in comparison to 47% of hired employees. The share of dissatisfied people among freelancers is two-fold less than among employees (13% vs. 27%). In this context, it is not surprising at all that only 3% of our respondents consider building up a regular employee career within the next five years. Our results agree nicely with the other cross-national studies, that documented the higher self-reported satisfaction among self-employed in many countries (Blanchflower, Oswald, 1998; OECD, 2000; Blanchflower, 2004; Benz, Fray, 2008).

Freelance e-market: informality, opportunism, and trust

Self-employment in contemporary Russia is largely informal. Many agents have no proper legal status, do not conclude written contracts and avoid taxation (Radaev, 2002). The freelance market is not an exception.

Only one out of ten market participants concludes written contracts. Significantly, the persistent level of informality was observed in all three of our 2008-2011 standardized surveys; approximately the same share of freelancers as well as their clients relied upon informal agreements. Small-scale economic activity and an undeveloped legal culture in Russia do not create strong incentives for legalization. Besides, Russian legislators still have not provided a legal frame for telework. It means that the e-market for freelance services is doomed to informality.

Not surprisingly, market participants encounter a high level of opportunistic behaviour. More than 70% of freelancers and clients have reported on cases where the other party broke down their agreements in some way during the last year. In many cases it creates severe problems, including financial losses: 45% of freelancers and

51% of their clients have had such an experience. Distant communications only make matters worse, and a contracting party may suddenly disappear into cyberspace. Consequently, 40% of freelancers and 30% of their clients who had conflicts caused by opportunistic behaviour failed to resolve these conflicts.

Formal enforcement in this market is barely feasible. Only 1% of market participants took legal action against opportunists and reached a success. Online marketplaces make efforts to reduce the moral hazards of opportunism by establishing basic institutional arrangements. Leading websites provide "safe pay" (escrow systems), ensuring that contractual obligations are fulfilled by both parties, and perform arbitration in disputes. However, on the RuNet, these institutions are only emerging. Not more than 5% of our respondents, both freelancers and their clients, assert that a website's authorities have helped them to defend their rights.

How can one survive in such a market, where property rights cannot be protected by formal institutions? As in other similar cases, people rely heavily upon social networks. Facing social uncertainty and a deficit of generalized trust, people seek to stimulate commitment and personalized trust (Yamagishi, Toshio/Yamagishi Midory, 1994; Radaev, 2004). Our data reveals that freelancers most likely get jobs not from the anonymous market but from the people they know in some way; regular customers (68%), referrals from former clients (51%), and friends and acquaintances (40%). Moreover, one third of freelancers relies entirely on his/her social capital, i. e. finding jobs exclusively through established social ties.

Although in Russia the process of obtaining new jobs in the traditional labour market is also very personalized (Yakubovich, Kozina, 2000; Gerber, Mayorova, 2010), in the case of the electronic market we encounter a certain paradox. Almost all freelancers (97%) are registered users of some online marketplace, but only half of them actually obtain clients via these websites. The very idea of an online-marketplace is to bring together spatially dispersed buyers and sellers of remote services. Theoretically, this online-infrastructure is supposed to facilitate arm's-length ties and favour the global spot-market. However, the Russian-speaking e-market is far from the ideal neoclassical model of anonymous buyers and sellers and is largely shaped by social networks. The Russian freelancer is not an atomized global actor surfing the Internet for some jobs. His/her actions are embedded in

interpersonal social networks, more akin to medieval craftsmen.

This reliance on social capital in the job search decreases the risk of financial losses resulting from opportunistic behaviour, reduces the rate of unresolved conflicts with the clients, raises an average project price and consequently brings more overall revenues (Shevchuk, Strebkov, 2009).

Conclusion

Electronic freelancing is a new model of work in Russia. It stands out from more traditional forms of self-employment and other non-standard working arrangements, which predominantly belong to "bad" jobs with primitive technologies and low wages (Gimpelson, Kapelyushnikov, 2006). Despite the contingent nature of electronic freelancing we should not neglect this phenomenon, or consider it to be marginal and peripheral.

Electronic freelancers in Russia are young individuals with a higher enterprising spirit and human capital, offering creative and knowledge-intensive services. Although these self-employed professionals work longer hours than regular employees and often operate under pressure, they have a higher income, enjoy autonomy at work and are more satisfied with their lives. Electronic freelancers represent a part of the "new middle class" and the vanguard of the workforce in terms of the nature of work, ICT-competence and motivation.

Electronic freelancers play an important role in the development of the Internet, e-business, and innovative entrepreneurship. Remote work patterns stimulate the integration of Russian professionals into global talent markets as well as attracting a highly skilled labour force from abroad to the Russian economy.

The high level of informality and opportunism holds back the development of Russian-speaking e-lance market. Clearly, the leading websites will act as market-makers to reinforce institutional and generalized trust. Hopefully, a proper legal framework for electronic business relations and telework will be created in the near future.

Electronic freelancers comprise a very narrow and highly specific category of the workforce, possessing the high human capital resources (i. e. professional, organization-

al, communicative skills) and taking advantage of the global Internet era while sustaining their work autonomy. Whilst only a single model, it is still an important facet of the kaleidoscopic world of contemporary working arrangements.

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Appendix

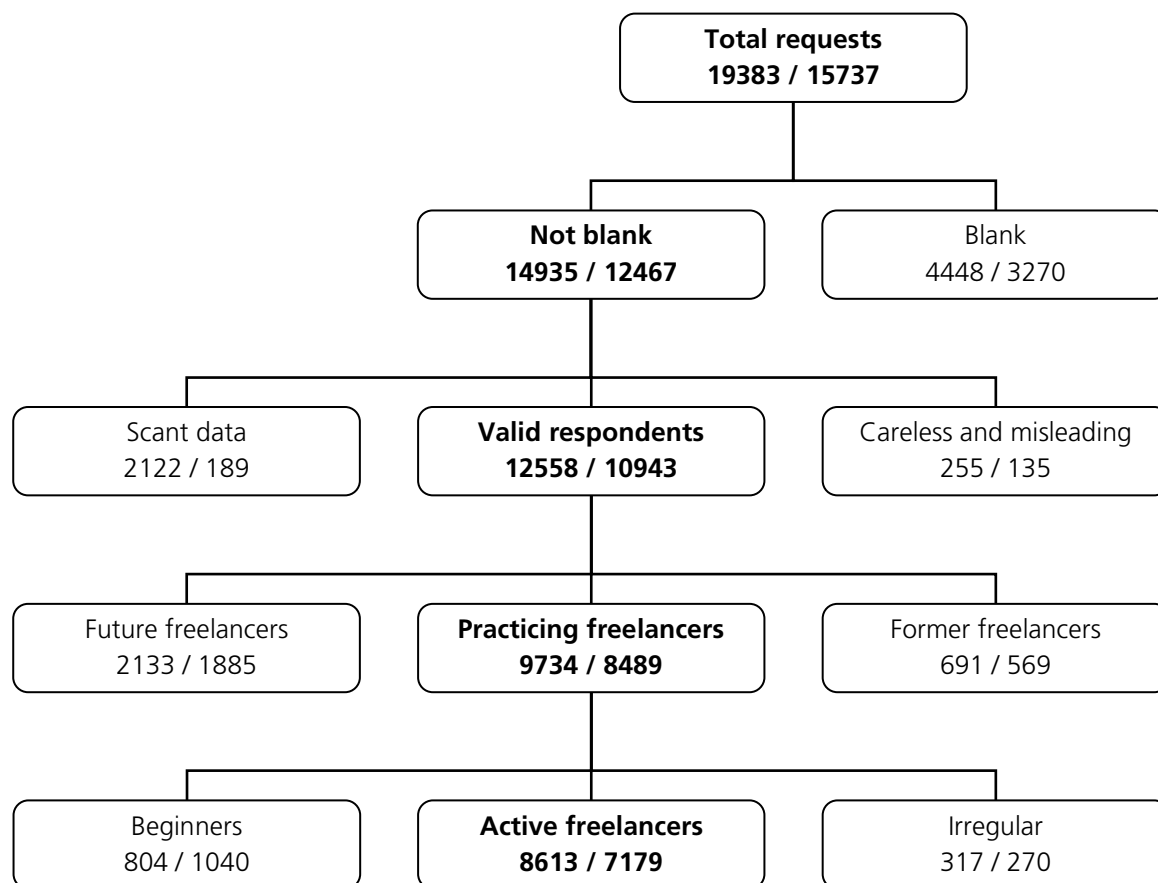


Table 2: Russian Freelance Survey, number of respondents (2008/2011)