# Been there, done that? Social and environmental implications of shared-property models in the post-Soviet context

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# Been there, done that? Social and environmental implications of shared- property models in the post-Soviet context

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> "The sharing economy…is neither the exclusive domain of altruistic givers nor full-stream-ahead capitalists…. The sharing economy, although not politically neutral, is creating a new economic model—an interesting middle ground between capitalism and socialism—that also appears to lend itself to fulfilling the desires and needs of people who identify with extreme ends of both economic and political spectrums. More importantly, it has developed as an economic model that appears to lend itself to fulfilment of desires and needs of people who identify with neither of those extremes" (Sundararajan, 2016a, p. 44).

***Abstract:*** *With symbols and historic references in mind, one does not wonder that ex-Soviets are almost expected to produce a unique response to the sharing economy. Western experts debate whether the sharing economy in their region is more likely to yield utopian outcomes of universal empowerment, efficiency, and lower carbon footprint, or dystopian results of predatory and exploitative economic self-interest, but the ex-Soviets seem to have already resolved the issue. As they debate the question "Have we done that already?," followed by "Why would we go back to that?," their sharing economy continues to proliferate. This paper shows how the "we've been there" approach might overlook the diversity of the sharing economy. The paper explores priorities and motives in the post-Soviet sharing economy, ranging from longing for human connection to willingness to save money and the planet. From using the Russian analogue of Task Rabbit to find life-partners to using online classifieds for subtle political satire, post-Soviets embrace the sharing economy in distinctive ways.*

***Keywords:*** *Sharing economy, share economy, access economy, collaborative consumption, collaborative economy, gig economy, crowd-based capitalism, platform-enabled capitalism, post-Soviet, post-communist, trust economy, social, environmental, mobile applications, Russia, Kazakhstan, ex-communist, technology-enabled sharing, uberization*

## 1. Introduction: Back to the future?

### 1.1 Rapid expansion of shared property worldwide

The contemporary model of capitalism that revolves around shared "property" by favoring temporary access over permanent ownership (Sundararajan, 2014) is taking over the world. The revenues that this economic model generates are projected to rise to $335 billion by 2025 (Thierer, Koopman, Hobson, and Kuiper, 2015). As of 2017, 75% of the people surveyed believed that they would be sharing physical property and spaces in the next five years (Sehnaoui, 2017).

In 2014 alone, two sharing-economy platforms, AirBnB and Uber, grew by 69% and 155% (Todisco, 2015). Even lesser-known niche companies seem to generate big revenues; for example, users of Rent the Runway rented $300 million of clothing in the first six months of 2014 (Wosskow, 2014). The number of guest stays arranged through AirBnB exceeded those of Hilton Worldwide by 22% in 2014 (Thierer, Koopman, and Mitchel, 2015).

It's no wonder that as of September 2017, five of the 10 most highly valued unicorn companies [1] revolved around sharing, with Uber occupying the top spot thanks to its estimated value of nearly $70 billion. (That was 9.1% of the global total by valuation, as far as the world's 214 unicorns are concerned.) Together these top five sharing-economy unicorns were valued at $185.8 billion, which made up over 61.2% of the total valuation of the top 10 unicorns, or nearly a quarter (24.9%) of the global total valuation of unicorns (Desjardins, 2017).

The number of sharing-economy companies of all shapes and sizes keeps growing. There were over 600 car-sharing providers in the world by 2014 (Cohen and Kietzmann, 2014). Another 200 startups that specialize in peer-to-peer sharing of physical assets were reportedly backed by funding of around $2 billion in 2014 (Teubner, 2014). The nature of the ever-expanding sharing economy is perhaps best illustrated by *The Economist* newsweekly with the title "There is an app for that" (2015). Whether one needs to collaborate on product ideas (Quirky), rent a toy for 15 days (MonJouJou), get a loan (e.g. Zopa), or find an available parking space, chances are that there is, or was, a sharing-economy solution.

PWC USA (2015, p. 28) concluded that the sharing economy is here to stay. It reckons that the only viable choice for incumbent companies is to embrace changes instead of resisting them. Not only do BMWs of the world embrace it with such business-to-peer initiatives as DriveNow; so do governments. UK Minister for State Business, Enterprise and Energy Matthew Hancock (HM Government, 2015, p. 1) stated that "the sharing economy is maturing, moving from early adopters to the mainstream, and we in government are committed to ensuring the UK is the best environment in the world for these entrepreneurs to flourish."

Yet while such an advanced economy as the UK is set to take advantage of the sharing economy, the opportunity that this economic model represents is especially apparent in the Asian experience. As of late 2017, Asia had 75 unicorn startups that accounted for over 40% of the global total by valuation. This was primarily achieved by the rise of such sharing-economy startups as the Chinese ride-hailing app Didi Chuxing Technology with valuation of over $10 billion, the bike-sharing giant Beijing Mobike Technology, and China's answer to Airbnb—Tujia. Moreover, such economic leaders as Japan do not compare favorably to emerging Asia (Watanabe, 2017), which might indicate that the opportunities presented by the sharing economy are not necessarily tied to a highly developed economy as much as to effectively disrupting existing industries.

Recognizing that, the government of Ecuador launched Buen Conocer, "an initiative to radically reimagine the nation according to principles of sharing—open networks, open production, and an economy of commons" (Schor, 2014, pp. 1-2).

Ecuador and Emerging Asia are not the only spots on Earth to recognize the potential of sharing-economy and platform-enabled capitalism. Nigeria's first unicorn startup, Jumia, might not be a part of the sharing economy, but its example is curious. First, its operations aren't just similarly disruptive; they also mimic the logic of the

[1] Any privately-owned startup that is valued at over $1 billion and hasn't gone public is a unicorn.

sharing economy in certain ways (e.g., in the way that Jumia's motorbike fleet aims to solve the last-mile delivery challenge). Most important, Jumia's example particularly applies to this paper because Nigeria (like many post-Soviet states) relies heavily on natural resources. Crude oil accounts for 90% of Nigeria's exports and 75% of government budget revenues. None of that stopped the unicorn startup from securing such backers as Goldman Sachs and AXA or from growing 265% between 2014 and 2016 (Knowledge@Wharton, 2016).

### 1.2 What's in a name?

So why was such a resource-dependent economy as Nigeria able to bag its first unicorn startup at the same time when Forbes Contributor Vitaliy Polekhin (2016) started dubbing Russia "the country of unmaterialized unicorns" despite his own recognition that Russia's tech students frequently take international coding competitions by storm?[2]

It's certainly not for the lack of trying. Another Forbes contributor, Nikolay Dobrovolsky (2017), claims that Russia's current startup environment can only be compared to the infamous DotCom Boom. Kazakhstan is also following suit, as the number of newly registered startups reached decade-high levels of more than 40,000 in 2017 (*Kapital*, 2017) (although it remains unclear how many of them actually belong to a sharing economy).

Olden Russian wisdom states that "the way the ship sails starts with the way it's named." That might be the case with the sharing economy in Russia and the post-Soviet region. This economic model that hinges on technology-enabled sharing of property has been called different things by different experts. It largely depends on the expert's vantage point. Examples:

- Arun Sundararajan (2016b) calls it "crowd-based capitalism" to emphasize the way that economic activity is shifting away from a centralized system towards the one that still has an intermediary but "draws on resources from the crowd."
- Lisa Gansky (Stokes et al., 2014, p. 10) dubbed it "mesh" to emphasize the innovative ways it uses technology to provide participants with goods and services.
- Then there is the "access economy" to emphasize the importance of access to goods and services over ownership. The "gig economy" stresses the flexibility that it provides to its peer "labor force." The term "collaborative consumption" indicates economic collaboration by peers (Ibid., pp. 9-10).
- The term "trust economy" emphasizes the trust that enables participants, otherwise known as peers, to transact (e.g. Stan, 2016; PWC, 2015).

But the economic phenomenon is most commonly referred to as the "sharing economy." The term's adjective directs attention to the adoption and proliferation of corresponding practices in post-Soviet republics. Mugar (2013) applies Bourdieu's embodied or objectified modes of practice production to the sharing economy. The embodied mode implies that individuals refer to memories or references to inform present action. The objectified mode implies that individuals refer to a symbolic object to inform present action.

[2] NB: With regard to unmaterialized unicorns at the time of writing, neither Russia nor any other ex-Soviet republic, apart from Estonia with its TaxFry, has a unicorn (CB Insights, 2018a). Moreover, the only other two startups from former Soviet countries that ever made it to unicorn status were Russia's Yandex and Avito (CB Insights, 2018b).

One might argue that both of Bourdieu's modes apply uniquely to adoption of the sharing economy in post-Soviet countries. After all, on a superficial level, most dictionaries treat "shared" and "communal" as synonyms. This is curious in terms of producing a symbolic object needed for Bourdieu's objectified mode, since the *Oxford Dictionary* reminds us that popularization of the word "communal" goes back to the Paris Commune and the early 19th century (*English Oxford Living Dictionary*, 2018).

The word "communal" is defined as "shared by all members of a community; for common use…involving the sharing of work and property" and "relating to or done by a community" (id.). This definition is reminiscent of the "sharing economy" definition given by Investopedia (2017): "an economic model often defined as a peer-to-peer (P2P) based activity of acquiring, providing, or sharing access to goods and services that are facilitated by a community based online platform." One could argue that it is, effectively, a definition of "communal" in the era of big data.

Maxim Karakulov, a founder of a popular Russian sharing-economy platform, DaruDar,[3] which enables peers to exchange unwanted goods as gifts, was even quoted as saying: "We need to nurture the new collective tradition not to collect things and not throw them away, but to gift them the first chance we get. *What is universal gifting? It means that everyone will do whatever s/he can, while getting whatever s/he really needs"* [Emphasis added] (Chestina, 2016). If one doesn't bother to scratch the surface (as the average consumer possibly wouldn't), this last statement sounds a lot like a Karl Marx slogan popularized in his "Critique of the Gotha Program" (1875, Part 1): "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

These rather superficial definitional and discourse similarities might alarm some who are familiar with Marx's works. After all, "…for Marx, [t]he whole trajectory of the development of modern society…is towards large-scale cooperative labour. This may be masked by forms of property that treat vast corporations as private owners, but eventually this carapace will be abandoned and collectivist economic relations will emerge and be celebrated as such" (Waldron, 2004). This thinking might evoke modern parallels in some consumers, especially since Schor (2014) acknowledges that some sharing-economy peers are openly critical of capitalism and are ideologically motivated.

Former Soviet countries are almost expected to respond to the sharing economy in a way that seems quite different from that in the West. While western experts debate whether the sharing economy is more likely to yield utopian outcomes of universal empowerment, efficiency, and lower carbon footprint, or dystopian results of predatory and exploitative economic self-interest (Schor, 2014), the post-Soviet space seems to have this part all figured out. The questions asked here instead are: "Have we done that already?" closely followed by "Why would we go back to that?"

It was perhaps best put by the Chief Analyst of the Russian Association for Electronic Communications (RAEC), Karen Kazaryan (Omidi, 2014): "We lived in a 'sharing economy' for so long that now we desperately want to be owners. Owning a car is a status symbol but not in the way that you probably think. You have to go back to the Soviet Union when quite a lot of people had the money to buy cars but couldn't because there weren't enough. So a car became not just a symbol of wealth but of connections. It's the same with flats. After living in communal flats, getting even a

[3] DaruDar literally translates as "a Gift to a Gift" from Russian.

small and cheap one that was yours seemed like a miracle. So to be willing to share it with a stranger, well, people think, why would we do that?"

This paper tries to shed light not only on why post-Soviet citizens of the original sharing economy would do it, but also on why and how they already do it.

## 1. Not quite back in the USSR

### 2.1. Sharing in the eye of the beholder

The sharing economy is not homogeneous around the world. Wosskow (2014, p. 13) broadly defines it as "online platforms that help people share access to assets, resources, time and skills." Sharing-economy platforms can not only represent different industries; more important, they have different modi operandi, different peer appeals, and different value propositions. Schor (2014, p. 2) concludes that "self-definition by the platforms and the press" provides the only reliable way to determine whether the company is in the sharing economy.

To see how diverse the sharing economy can be, consider these global examples:

- Uber might be as much of a peer-to-peer enterprise as PlanZheroes is. Yet Uber is a global giant that, backed by Goldman Sachs (Schor, 2014), charged New Yorkers about eight times more on bad weather days in 2014 (Schneiderman, 2014) and up to 50 times more on New Year's Eve 2015 (Leetaru, 2016). PlanZheroes (2018), on the other hand, is a small charity that, backed by the likes of the Greater London Authority, strives to end food poverty and food waste.

- An owner of a small London cafe that donates its surplus food to a homeless charity using the PlanZheroes network might be as much of a sharing-economy peer as Garthen Leslie. Yet the latter famously earned $400,000 by using Quirky (Silvester, 2015), while the former does not derive direct financial benefit from P2P participation.

- Sharing-economy peers might use AirBnB because it halves the cost of renting a spare room as opposed to staying in a traditional hotel (Priceonomics, 2013). Yet 80% of (elderly) peers, who receive meals through the Casserole Club (2016), reckon that they wouldn't have social lives without the platform. At the same time, peers of Association pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne who purchase fresh produce from local farmers are primarily driven by sustainability concerns (Novel, 2014).

- B-Cycle and NetJets might position themselves as sustainable shared-mobility providers. NetJets passengers, who "share private jet ownership" with other peers, might be enjoying the opportunity to nominally offset their carbon emissions through the Emissions Trading Scheme (Elkington, 2012). However, the real footprint of NetJetters' shared-mobility solution is still much higher than that of B-Cycle bike-sharers, who reportedly offset 2,948 metric tons of $CO_2$ emissions (Maggill, 2014).

Since the sharing economy defies conventional legal classifications, one might feel inclined to see those platforms as something different and not distinctly capitalist. Yet the sharing-economy platforms we hear about in the media resort to business-as-usual under the premise of sharing. These companies are privately-owned corporations backed by venture capitalists (Orsi, 2013).

As noticed by Schor (2014, pp. 4-5), "while some of the platforms present a gentle face to the world, they can also be ruthless." They've been caught in such anti-competitive behavior as recruiting their competitors' drivers, while their representatives employ neoliberal rhetoric about free markets. Uber hired Obama's campaign manager David Plouffe to equip itself with old-fashioned political capital.

Kalamar (2014) dubbed as "sharewashing" the practice of stretching and contorting the meaning of "sharing" in a way that "disables the very promise of an economy based on sharing by stealing the very language we use to talk about it, turning a crucial response to our impending…crisis into another label for the very same economic logic which got us into that crisis in the first place."

The peers also seem to support the notion that many sharing-economy platforms remind one of corporations. One sharing-economy participant interviewed by Ravennelle (2017) states: "I don't see myself as an entrepreneur. I see myself part of a system that helps somebody else make money…. Even though legally as a task rabbit, I am an independent contractor, I see myself as a task rabbit employee…." Another of her interviewees reflects on the reality of the sharing economy: "It sounds like…these sort of like corporate terms that don't really mean anything."

Kalamar (2014) noted that the only thing that is truly shared in the sharewashed economy is risk. Authors like Hoshmand (2015) have stressed that the ultimate risk tends to stay with stakeholders, who are ill-equipped to deal with it, be they tenants, owners, or other peers.[4]

Yet the relationship between sharing-economy peers and the platforms has arguably started to resemble those of an employee and capricious employer even more since then**.** Uber drivers are expected to accept at least 80% of ride requests while maintaining a rating of at least 4.6; AirBnB hosts are expected to reply to requests within 24 hours; and Task Rabbit errand runners are expected to respond in 30 minutes. Not only might failure to comply result in permanent or temporary deactivation; platform managers also feel comfortable changing the rules of the game, be they the algorithms, the fee they charge, or the requirements (Revenelle, 2017).

That enables critics to claim that sharing-economy platforms are nothing but architects of a growing "precariat." This emerging precarious class, it follows, races to the bottom not out of trust but desperation (Schor, 2014). Janelle Orsi (2013) notes that big sharing-economy platforms like AirBnB, Uber, or TaskRabbit are unlikely to turn this business-as-usual capitalism on its head unless they change their business model completely. She suggests that if these platforms were to move to a cooperative model, it would remove any incentive for exploitation, as no one would drive the company for profits.

Such aggressively capitalist platforms appeal to the prosumer's[5] need for cash and strive to create a narrative of entrepreneurial ethos (Ravenelle, 2017). But not all platforms have such a purely capitalist sentiment at their core. An innate sense of responsibility to do good for other people and for the environment by either sharing, helping fellow humans, or living sustainably, as well as altruistic sentiments about openness and freedom of information, are also driving collaborative consumption (Hamari et al., 2015).

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[4] These comments were made before risk got pushed back onto platforms like Uber and AirBnB when they sorted out their insurance policies (Thierer, Koopman, Hobson, and Kuiper, 2015; Thierer, Koopman, and Mitchel, 2015).

[5] Consumers and producers simultaneously, which describes most sharing-economy peers (Demary, 2014).

## 2.2. From post-Soviet rhetoric to embracing the middle ground of capitalism

A great majority of articles that focus on the collaborative economy in the post-Soviet region claim that it is taking over Russia "little by little" (Chestina, 2016). Similarly, the Russian DW service asks: "Prospects of the sharing economy: Are Russians ready to share?" (Filatova, 2015). *Forbes* correspondent Elena Ganzhur (2018) answers that question unequivocally with her title: "Share and use: Sharing economy is developing in Russia, but Russians are not ready for it."

Yet while most narratives imply the relatively shaky position of the sharing economy, it's being adopted at a steadier rate than the literature suggests. According to a study by RAEC and PBN Hill+Knowlton Strategies-Russia (2017), the sharing economy generates 230 billion rubles (over $3.65 billion). It is unclear whether this number includes the revenue generated by the Russian sharing-economy platforms in other post-Soviet republics, as the methodology is not available. However, it's highly likely that this number includes some revenue generated in other ex-Soviet republics, since Russian platforms like Yandex.Taxi (Yandex.Taxi, 2018) operate throughout the region.

Occasionally, the term and the concept are misinterpreted. For example, the only web directory of Kazakhstan's National Chamber of Entrepreneurs (known as Atameken) (2016) that is dedicated to the "sharing business" («бизнес вскладчину»), in practice talks about cooperation between Chinese investors and Kazakhstani companies and has nothing to do with the sharing economy. Such mishaps are rare, though.

According to the Russian Department of Information Services, 65% of Russian Internet users use Internet platforms for anything from hiring a taxi to hiring a cleaner. Moreover, 4% of all respondents said that they are doing so because they don't know any other way to order goods and services (Savina, 2017).

In fact, the demand for sharing-economy solutions in the region started growing in parallel with the rest of the world. For example, the number of AirBnB stays booked by Russian residents grew 144% in 2014 alone (Filatova, 2015). Moreover, as rightly noted by Dembinskaya (2017), an incarnation of the sharing economy flourished during Soviet times, when people had no issue with giving rides to each other or with sharing goods. Some of these offline sharing practices are still alive and well in remote locations. The CEO of BlablaCar, Nicolas Brusson (Krauzova, 2016), also observed that letting a stranger in one's car is less of an alien concept for a Russian than it is for an Indian, a Spaniard, or a German. Russians don't require long periods of psychological adjustment because they still remember having to hail a gypsy cab on a street.

## 2.3. The landscape of local sharing-economy platforms in post-Soviet countries

### 2.3.1. Market of shared mobility solutions in Russia and roles of Russian IT giants in sharing economy.

Perhaps this familiarity with hailing a gypsy cab is one reason why locally-grown shared-mobility applications represent what is likely to be the most saturated market of the sharing economy in the region. According to the Russian Department of Information Services (Savina, 2017), 45% of Internet users resort to shared-mobility applications.

To illustrate the point, here are popular Russian shared-mobility solutions that are analogous to BlaBlaCar. This list includes only carpooling options and excludes other shared-mobility solutions:

- Dovezu.ru (2018) (literally, "I'll give you a ride");
- Poehali Vmeste (2018) ("Let's ride together");
- DoedemVmeste.ru (2018) ("Let's get there together");
- Logsi.ru (2018): a Russian BlaBlaCar competitor that focuses on Moscow-related routes;
- Poputchiki Rossii (2018) ("Russia's road trip buddies");
- BeepCar (2018).

As for the ridesharing market, it's dominated by Yandex.Taxi (2018) in the post-Soviet countries. The ridesharing options once varied from such global players as Uber to such local ones as Kazakhstani TOUCHka,[6] which is no longer active (Lee and Kaldygulova, 2014), or even the socially-oriented ridesharing option of the invataxi.ru volunteer program (Invataxi.ru, 2018).

After losing $170 million on its Russian operations in just three years, Uber was forced to merge its post-Soviet operations with Yandex.Taxi. The rise of Yandex.Taxi, which is available all over the post-Soviet region (in Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Georgia, to name a few) (Yandex.Taxi, 2018), is hardly surprising. First, it had been operating in Russia for two years by the time Uber launched its Russian operations. Second, the US sanctions on Russia over Ukraine didn't reflect well on operations of the American platform in Russia (Sivashennikov, 2017). Third, Yandex.Taxi is part of the Russian IT giant that also controls a search engine and a mail service and that has nearly unlimited distribution channels. Senior Analyst of Finam Holdings Leonid Delitsyn reckons that access to this kind of distribution channel can make any online platform succeed in the region (Zykov, 2018).

It is not uncommon for the sharing-economy platforms in Russia to be backed by corporate IT giants. Here are examples:

- Yandex's main competitor, Mail.ru, recently launched the carpooling service BeepCar. In a bid to take advantage of an internal passenger-travel market that is worth 300 billion rubles ($4.77 billion), Mail.ru decided not to monetize BeepCar Services at its initial stage (*Forbes* News Service, 2017). In doing so, it mimicked the move that was previously made in Russia by its global competitor BlaBlaCar (Krauzova, 2016).

- Following its success with a ridesharing platform, Yandex is preparing to launch its own car-sharing platform, Yandex.Drive, with which Yandex plans to take full advantage of its existing Yandex.Taxi network. Registered Yandex.Taxi users are to receive 20% of their ridesharing spending as a credit towards their carsharing spending, provided that they register with the same phone number (Baulin, 2017).

  NB: Anyone who remembers the story of Zipcar, which in Schor's words (2014, p. 1), was "[o]nce the face of the sharing economy," would question whether this now sub-brand of Avis is truly part of the sharing economy. But local carsharing brands are already rather plentiful, especially in Moscow: BelkaCar (2018), Anytime (2018), Delimobil (2018) (literally "Share a ride"). Darenta (2018) stands out in this list because it doesn't just offer its peers temporary access to cars; it enables them to rent their own cars out.

[6] Bilingual people might appreciate this play on words. It sounds simultaneously as "Touch Car" and "Tachka," Russian jargon for a ride or car.

The dominance of the platforms by local IT giants is not always a done deal. Mail.ru launched Youla (literally, a "Peg top"), a classified,[7] where peers can give away or buy and sell used goods (virtually anything from cars and real estate to shoes) as well as offer and request services or jobs. But Mail.ru wasn't the first mover, since Avito, also a regional classified, had dominated this segment of the market by the time Youla was launched. Despite distribution channels available to Mail.ru, nine months after its launch the company reported 2.5 million users against the 72 million users that Avito had at the time (Kharbibrakhimov, 2016). Avito (2018) continues to be a leader in this market segment with more than 39 million ads on the platform. Youla still had just 22 million users as of February 2018 (Ganzhur, 2018). In fact, Avito is now a giant in its own right: It's the third largest firm by market capitalization in Russia, and it has started acquiring other businesses like Checkout (Mudriy et al., 2018).

Mail.ru has recently announced plans to build Pchela ("A bee"). The platform is likely to be built in the ecosystem of Mail.ru's popular Odnoklassniki ("Classmates") social network (Zykov, 2018). It appears that Pchela is supposed to fly and land somewhere between TaskRabbit and e-Lance.

Once again, Mail.ru does not have the first-mover advantage. In fact, a highly demanded YouDo platform (a close analogue to TaskRabbit) is a poster child of the sharing economy in the Russian-speaking region. Much like Avito, the CEO of YouDo, Denis Kutergin, does not envision YouDo crumbling because of Pchela competition anytime soon.

While some platforms are determined to stand their own ground in competition against the giants, Polekhin (2016) notices that some startups are built (read: cloned) to be acquired by corporations. For example, when BlaBlaCar came to the Russian market in 2014, it immediately acquired the Russo-Ukrainian firm Podorozniki, a carpooling service that had been operating on the local market since 2011 (*Forbes* News Service, 2017). Yet not only competitors and new market entrants acquire such startups in Russia. Severgroup has bought remontnnik.ru, a P2P building and renovations platform to take advantage of its competence in the HR field (Gorelova and Goncharova, 2017). Although EdaDeal (Chekudinova, 2015) was not built as a clone of any global platform, its founder Nataliya Shagarina (who is also a Yandex employee) admits that she started talking to her bosses about successes of her startup practically from Day 1. Now her employer Yandex owns a stake in her startup that helps people find good supermarket deals.

### 2.3.2. In CIS, we trust?

While aforementioned developments at a granular level may represent curious patterns, some of the trends require looking at post-Soviet culture as a whole. The possible effects of the Soviet legacy on trust in society is a hot topic in the region. The Chief Analyst of the RAEC, Karen Kazaryan (Omidi, 2014), called this presumed lack of trust "a Soviet hangover." Yet the CEO of BlaBlaCar, Nicolas Brusson (Krauzova, 2016), speculated that it was thanks to that same Soviet legacy that Russians embraced the idea of carpooling so quickly. The co-founder of the Russian carsharing service BelkaCar, Loriana Sardar, mirrors Brusson's opinion: "The sharing model is a good match for Russian mentality. Historically, we got used to frugal spending and it fits well with the established framework" (Ganzhur, 2018).

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[7] *Cambridge Dictionary* [online] defines "classified" as "a collection of small advertisements…on a website, organized, for example, by available jobs or types of things for sale."

But according to the Laboratory for Applied Analysis of Institutions and Social Capital of the Higher School of Economics (no date, p. 16), 77% of Russians believe that people around them are "either never or hardly ever" ready to collaborate and solve common problems. Moreover, only 20% of the respondents believe that "people deserve to be trusted."

Another interesting indicator of the lack of trust in society comes from pop culture. According to the Russian Television Academy Foundation TEFI (2017),[8] nearly a quarter (24%) of all main characters in TV series that are filmed in Russia are either law enforcement officers, special forces officers, policemen, or investigators. Another 3.2% of all main characters on TV are either gang members, prisoners, or thugs. Consider that almost three quarters (73.3%) of all Russian TV series are meant to portray contemporary reality.

At the same time, 81% of RuNet[9] users are open to the idea of renting goods and services directly from other people online (without involvement of intermediaries). Similarly, 78% of RuNet users are open to the idea of offering their own goods and services online to extract financial gains. Moreover, 51% describe their level of trust towards sharing-economy platforms as "satisfactory," even though half of RuNet users have reported negative experiences with sharing-economy platforms. Fifty percent reported receiving goods or services of poor quality, while 7% reported never receiving money for goods and services they had provided (ROCIT, 2017).

A curious case of the Tak Prosto! (2018) project shows that sometimes the presumed lack of trust in post-Soviet societies can inspire a sharing arrangement. Charity workers who started the platform had been frustrated by the fact that people were suspicious of charities. They knew that some people assumed that charities conned people. So they created Tak Prosto!, a platform that connects people who want to learn more about nonprofit work with charities that need their help.

But trust is not the only incentive for people to engage in a sharing economy. Some claim that economic desperation might become as much of an impetus for sharing (Schor, 2014). Russian-language media often emphasize financial benefits (Dubinin, 2017).

This utilitarian sentiment is also supported by RuNet statistics on perceived benefits of the sharing economy. Of RuNet users, 83% list the "opportunity to save money while using one-off goods" as a benefit of collaborative consumption. Seventy percent of RuNet users also emphasize the ability "to temporarily access goods that they would not otherwise afford at the moment." Sixty-two percent focus on maintenance costs that collaborative consumption helps them avoid. Other perceived benefits include "increased mobility" (48%) and "time efficiency" (36%). Only 3% of RuNet users believe there are "other" benefits in sharing (ROCIT, 2017).

The desire for free or affordable stuff as well as possibly for human connection might be stronger than mistrust of others (Ruchko, 2018). After all, some sharing-economy platforms start out as informal groups on VK (the Russian analogue of Facebook). One is free to create, join, and use these groups, which are comparatively easy to grow. Successful examples of such groups include Musora.Bolshe.Net Eco-Movement (Musora.Bolshe.Net, 2018) (literally, "No More Garbage") and its subsidiary VK groups like StroiSharing (2018) ("Sharing Building Materials"). But while experts like Teubner (2014) rightfully note that trust can be

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[8] Evidently produced by KVG Research in 2016 on behalf of TEFI, though.

[9] RuNet is jargon for both Russian-language and Russian-domain segments of the Internet.

established by such means as a profile pic, Lenta.ru (2012) reported that up to 76% of all VK Group members might be fake accounts or bots.

This means that sharing-economy peers that operate in the realm of VK take leaps of faith when they join the groups. For example, a somewhat unorthodox type of share economy where people look for summer holiday buddies to travel with is popular on VK. A widely-circulated Russian newspaper warned readers about possible risks of such sharing (Ruchko, 2018). It tells a supposedly common cautionary tale of Maxim, who decided to help his travel buddy buy the ticket only to realize that the person wasn't there. However, the stakes might be higher than money. VK user Sacha Legkaya created the Otdam Edu Darom group to enable members to give away unwanted food from their pantries and to donate pots and pans. In her interview with Gracheva (2016), Legkaya explains that the group has rules. Yet one can't help but wonder how those rules are enforced in the ecosystem of a social media website known for its high saturation of fake accounts.

#### 2.3.3. The sharing stigma, not the trust crisis?

As illustrated earlier, people in post-Soviet republics love BlaBlaCar so much that the region has become one of the fastest growing markets for the company (Krauzova, 2016). They eat food from the pantries of strangers whom they've met on regular social media without in-built reputation systems (Gracheva, 2016). They even do something as intimate as wearing underwear that they've rented on rentmania.com (Ganzhur, 2018).

In July 2017, only 16% of RuNet users were ready to provide sharing-economy peers with temporary access to their real estate (ROCIT, 2017). By March, those living in the cities that hosted the World Cup 2018 were so eager to enlist their properties on AirBnB that around 4% delayed selling their real estate until after the soccer event of the year. Furthermore, average daily rent increased by some 47 times in Saransk, one of the cities that hosted the soccer matches (*Kapital Strany*, 2018).

This is one more sign that RuNet peers are ready to share—at least, as long as they see economic benefits in sharing. In her research of the NYC sharing-economy peers, Ravenelle (2017, p. 12) notes that sharing-economy participants often feel embarrassed about their "gigs." They feel stigmatized and describe their work as a "hassle" rather than as "entrepreneurship." In post-Soviet countries, this feeling of shame might be deeper than elsewhere and affect not just those who offer services but also those who receive them. YouDo co-founder Alex Gidirim (Omidi, 2014) comments: "Russians, especially in Moscow, are used to paying…. We still like to be flash and it'll take time before people realize that that's not the purpose of living. A Russian will never tell his friends that he saves money. No one will understand. The answer will be, do you have problems? Don't you have money? Are you sure you're OK?"

Perhaps this is one reason why participation in the sharing economy here is frequently passed off as neither entrepreneurship nor a hassle but as "a hobby." Articles about emerging sharing-economy VK groups and RuNet platforms frequently build a hobby narrative. Anecdotes suggests that quite a few of those stories and smaller platforms concern women on maternity leave. Examples:

- EdaDeal's Natalia Shagarina (Cherkhudinova, 2015) says that when she first started working on her idea, she found other young mums to help her fill in the data. She has discovered that although she paid them peanuts, women were excited: "It was important that they'd suddenly got the right to shut the door and say: 'Mum is working. It's my 3 hours.' Then the woman in question works for two hours and just sits on her own for another hour. Yet, it makes her feel differently."

- 63 Purchases is a collaborative purchasing platform where 84% of the users are female. Its founder, Olga Peshkicheva (Nosyrev and Grishin, 2018), reflects on the time when she came up with the idea: "I was feeling as if my life was slipping away from me, while I was travelling from the 'play dates' with my three-year-old to the kitchen stove. Other women on the forum would join forces from time to time to make a collective purchase from the clothing factory." A few years later, when her husband struggled to expand their business to other regions of Russia, she said she regretted treating it only as a hobby: "We've lost the momentum. All because I was thinking of it as a hobby as opposed to the real business."

At the same time, Kutergin (Mudriy et al., 2018) admits that YouDoers who managed to aggregate a lot of reviews and can no longer satisfy demand for their services on their own become entrepreneurs. But they are obliged to ask clients "if they can send a friend instead" every time, so it remains an open question whether one can expand the scale of the activity. The Head of Moscow's Department of Information Technologies, Artem Ermolayev (in Tyurina, 2018), also says that the share economy can simply signify transition of microentrepreneurs from grey zones to white ones: "Look at those people who are tutoring students. On one hand, they are earning, which is a good thing. Yet they can't get a loan from banks, because they can't prove they have income.… That's why collaborative consumption is certainly a good trend in terms of development."

Thus whether one talks about peers offering goods and services through the sharing economy or peers receiving them, the narrative of "improving one's quality of life" is prominent. As Bulavkina (Mudriy et al., 2018) claims, it is neither about saving money nor about being frugal: It is about being able to afford things that one would not otherwise be able to afford.

In other words, it's frequently seen more as a temporary solution than as a lifestyle choice. As mentioned, 70% of RuNet users perceive participation in the sharing economy as an "opportunity to temporarily access goods that *you are not yet able to afford"* [emphasis added] (ROCIT, 2018). This is mirrored by trends observed in China, the region's neighbor that shares its communist legacy. For example, when Uber came to China, it had to move from offering regular rides to offering luxury chauffeur experiences. (Since then, Didi Chuxing has acquired Uber's Chinese operations.) Similarly, Tujia (the Chinese answer to AirBnB) favors high-end, up-market properties where peers can spend holidays (Marquis and Yang, 2014).

At the same time, there seems to be one significant difference between Chinese and post-Soviet peers. Chinese sharing-economy startups create distance between peers. In fact, many such startups aren't strictly speaking about sharing, as shared goods belong to companies (Yan, 2017). Moreover, companies like Tujia have some 3,000 cleaning staffers that not only ensure that properties look like hotel listings (Shu-Ching, 2016) but create distance between peer-tenants and peer-landlords (Marquis and Yang, 2014). On the other hand, peers in the post-Soviet sharing economy seem to value the human connection that collaborative consumption can provide. For example, even the co-founder of YouDo (RuNet's Task Rabbit analogue), Kutergin, admits that he could just as easily participate in matchmaking talks as in sharing-economy ones (Mudriy, 2018). He says the company notices a surge in tasks that are marked "18+" whenever the weekend is approaching.

Moreover, he admits that there have been quite a few weddings between YouDoers (essentially, between Task Rabbits—don't take this analogy literally).

Like China, RuNet has its fair share of collaborative-economy platforms that don't belong to the sharing economy in its most pristine sense (e.g. carsharing services, where cars tend to be owned by the platform). However, the need for human connection is omnipresent in the ex-Soviet sharing economy. For example, it has almost become a venerable tradition to post humorous ads about "selling" publicly controversial pieces of municipal real estate in Kazakhstan. Although these instances generate no real economic activity, they end up on the news, generating even more public discussion. Thus it has been reported that one krysha.kz user posted an ad about "selling" Nur Alem—a controversial EXPO-2017 centerpiece building that *Foreign Policy* correspondent James Palmer (2017) famously dubbed "a Death Star." The premise of the allegedly fake listing screenshot claimed: "We the People need money" (*Sputnik News-Kazakhstan*, 2017). Recently an olx.kz user added another listing to "sell" a controversial 12-meter Squirrel art-piece that was recently installed in Almaty (Olx.kz, 2018).

Yet this need for human connection does not manifest itself only in turning "gig economy" platforms into "dating apps" or using classifieds to inspire public dialogues. It is also evident in the desire to help those who are most in need. Apart from the myriad of charity-shop websites and VK collaborative consumption groups, RuNet has no shortage of local platforms, where peers can:

- Give away stuff they no longer need, e.g.:
  - DaruDar (2018)—literally, "Gift to Gifter";
  - OtdamDarom (2018)—"For Free";
  - OtdamTak (2018)—"Simply Giving Away".
- Ask for things or services they do need, e.g.:
  - SpasiboMir (2018)—"Thank You World"—lets people ask for help or things they need; and
  - Invataxi Volunteer Program (Invataxi.ru, 2018) lets wheelchair users ask volunteers for rides, whether free or reimbursed.
- Swop goods or services, e.g.:
  - YaMenyayu (2018)—"I'm Exchanging"—peers are free to swap anything for anything, "as long as it doesn't break set rules." The platform also lets people give their stuff away to someone in need;
  - SwopShop (2018) helped some 4,000 users enlist over 30,000 lots and exchange 15,000 goods.

#### 2.3.4. A few words on the environment: The last and least.

According to a recent study by RAEC and PBN Hill+Knowlton Strategies-Russia (2017), over 80% of RuNet users value both the ability to save money that collaborative consumption brings and the environmental efficiency that comes with it. Yet a closer look at RuNet's platforms and collaborative consumption habits suggests an ambiguous picture.

First, many collaborative consumption platforms in Russia seem to encourage consumerism rather than efficient use of goods. One notes this in collaborative or group purchasing platforms that are popular among RuNet users. The main reason why one can classify those platforms as part of the sharing economy is that technology enables collaborative-purchasing peers to come together, cut out the middlemen, and buy new goods from the factory. While this can be 5-10% or even

25% cheaper (Nosyrev and Grishin, 2018), this is not about prolonging the life of goods. This could be sustainable only if collective purchases were made at the second-hand stores or factories that use recycled fabrics, which (to the best of my knowledge) is not the case. Group-purchasing platforms gather significant audiences, which means that the environmental impact of the consumerism that they encourage can be just as significant. For example, per month, Sima-land is visited by 9 million people, 100sp.ru by 7.1 million users, and 63 Purchases by 2.3 million peers.

Furthermore, although swapping and gifting websites prolong the life of goods, most of those RuNet platforms emphasize the utility of those goods over the potential environmental efficiency that comes with it. Schor (2014) encourages one to think about what people who save money thanks to the collaborative economy really save money for. She reckons that they might buy high-impact products or book a holiday in a faraway country that they wouldn't otherwise book.

Sharing-economy stakeholders in the post-Soviet region over-emphasize economic benefits of sharing (ROCIT, 2017). Together with the narrative of improving one's quality of life (Mudriy et al., 2018), the question about the ripple effects of saving through sharing might become especially important in the post-Soviet context.

At the same time, sharing-economy platforms that turn on an environmental issue are starting to appear in the region. But even in those cases, it's hard to talk with complete confidence about the environmental efficiency of the projects. Examples:

- St. Petersburg's FoodSharing platform is working hard to save food: If they receive food that cannot be eaten by people, they send it to farms for animals to eat. Yet Project Manager Anna Kirillovskaya (in Gracheva, 2016) explains: "*If we already have an agreement with the food business, we can't just turn around and say that we don't need this*. It's another thing though if we are regularly receiving food we can do nothing about other than to throw it away. We start reconsidering things. The borough ambassador can offer business owners a suggestion—can we either pick up food earlier on or can you start storing it differently?" [Emphasis added] Since foodsavers are obliged to pick up the food even if it's beyond saving, one can't help but wonder if the very process of picking it up leads to net environmental inefficiencies.
- The Svalka ("landfill") project is also positioned as an environmental initiative. It not only helps people get rid of old goods by organizing a pickup; it pays people for unwanted goods. They clean and fix those things to sell and donate 70% of their proceeds to charity (Dembinskaya, 2017). While it sounds environmentally friendly, the enterprise also offers Debosh, a service where clients get a chance to smash a room full of unsold goods for 2,500-25,000 Russian rubles.

Whether one sees environmental inconsistencies in sharing-economy startups in the post-Soviet region, one trend is appearing. In particular, Saint Petersburg is emerging as a regional hub for the environmentally-minded sharing-economy platforms. Whereas such projects as the recyclemap.ru—a Greenpeace-powered interactive map that shows recycling or collection centers that the public can use—exist in Russian cities (Recyclemap.ru, 2018), it is Saint Petersburg that comes up with unique ideas. In January, volunteers from Saint Petersburg centers collect fir-trees, shave them, and send them to shelters and rehabilitation centers for animals (Fir-trees, Sticks, Five Bisons, 2018). Saint Petersburg residents start various initiatives to make sure that they, in the true sense of the word, share anything from leftover building and construction materials (StroiSharing, 2018) to leftover food (Gracheva, 2016).

## 2. Conclusion: "inbetweener" economic model in "inbetweener" societies

Some might debate whether the post-Soviet region is ready to share (Ganzhur, 2018). Others might worry about the lack of trust that Kazaryan dubbed a "Soviet hangover" and about its effects on adoption of the sharing economy in the region (Omidi, 2014).

Meanwhile, the sharing economy came quietly to the region and felt comfortable enough to stay for good. RuNet collaborative consumption generates about 230 billion rubles ($3.65 billion) a year. In some cases, collaborative consumption never left in the first place. As slightly dangerous but old and familiar gypsy-cabs turned into technology-enabled ridesharing services with trendy names and sleek-looking apps, it simply moved, to use Artem Ermolayev's words, from the grey zone to the white one (Tyurina, 2018).

In this respect, one could see it as an "improvement in one's quality of life," as Bulavkina put it (Mudriy, 2018). Improvement for both a proverbial gypsy cab driver, who can now prove his income and get a needed loan from the bank, as well as for his client who can now feel safer while getting into the car that she wants to buy someday.

But as hypothetical RuNet users get out of their Yandex.Taxi rideshares wearing high-end attire that they've rented on Rentmania to go complete their YouDo tasks, seven out of 10 of them see ownership of these cars and clothes as an end goal (ROCIT, 2017).

In the most unexpected turn of events, some might even want more than temporary access to their YouDo client. Russians seem to enjoy the collaborative part of collaborative consumption so much that YouDo's co-founder Kutergin admits that weddings between YouDo peers are more common than one might think (Mudriy, 2018). Yet this is not the only manifestation of the omnipresent post-Soviet desire to connect (despite the deficit of trust). As examples from Kazakhstan presented in this article illustrate, ex-Soviets even use the listing space of classified ads as a platform for political satire and a mechanism for public engagement (*Sputnik News - Kazakhstan*, 2017; Olx.kz, 2018).

But while former Soviets might enjoy the improvements in their quality of life and human connection that accompany collaborative consumption, the "sharing stigma" is as present in these societies as anywhere else. Some might argue that it runs more deeply in the post-Soviet mentality. It's not just those who offer their services that might feel stigmatized here. As YouDo co-founder Alex Gidirim said, ex-Soviet people still like to be flashy and would avoid telling their friends that they are trying to save money for the fear of being misunderstood (Omidi, 2014).

Perhaps this is why participation in the sharing economy is frequently passed off as a hobby. In fact, many of RuNet's sharing-economy initiatives start out as informal groups, mostly on the VK social media platform. Curiously, hobby narratives can apply to those who are building sharing-economy apps as well as to those participating in the sharing economy in general. This point is apparent when analyzing how Olga Peshkicheva started developing her collaborative purchasing platform (Nosyrev and Grishin, 2018).

One stakeholder group that has always treated sharing-economy platforms as a serious endeavor is comprised of Russian IT giants. Yandex has outmaneuvered Uber out of the region with its hugely popular Yandex.Taxi ridesharing app (Sivashennikov, 2017). It's also looking to repeat its success with its carsharing business (Baulin, 2017). Another Russian IT giant, Mail.ru, has moved into the sharing space with moderate success. With its Youla classified service and BeepCar carpooling service still lagging behind industry leaders, its Pchela service sets out to challenge another industry leader, YouDo.

But while Mail.ru's success can only be described as moderate at this point, one trend is apparent. Whether we talk about homegrown venture-capital-backed platforms like Avito, subsidiaries of local IT-giants, or about subsidiaries of foreign companies, big business often camouflages itself as in the sharing economy.

For the region, this seems a match made in heaven. This economic model is stuck between inherently capitalist and inherently socialist (Sundararajan, 2016a) for people stuck between their inherently socialist desire to be frugal yet social beings, and their inherently capitalist aspiration to flash money.

So far they seem to bite into the purely capitalist side of this sharing-economy pie. The parts of collaborative consumption that most excite ex-Soviets about improving their quality of life through more efficient spending seem to encourage consumerism. At the same time, even those of the local sharing-economy initiatives meant to solve environmental challenges leave questions about their net environmental impact. Yet with Saint Petersburg emerging as a regional hub for sharing-economy startups that encourage sustainable consumption, one could remain hopeful that ex-Soviets will embrace the broader concept of a sharing economy.

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