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Work in the Lives of Russians

The economic downturn that began in 2008 increased the risk of unemployment in Russia for workers of middle and low qualifications, mainly those employed in physical labor, and also increased the workload of qualified workers. Research data show that the downturn only worsened the problems that existed before it.

For successful economic and social development, our country needs a special type of worker. An understanding of the way that Russians relate to work, what role it plays in their everyday lives, and which aspects of it are important to our citizens, are of interest to contemporary researchers as well as to practicing politicians.

Our study provides some understanding of the place that work holds in the lives of Russians,¹ what it primarily represents, and the extent to which they are satisfied with the situation that has taken shape in this sphere of their everyday lives. According to the study data, *Russians rank work second in importance in their lives, after family*. At the same time, they devote much more of their time to work than to their families. Almost half of the population (47 percent) works overtime. Significant

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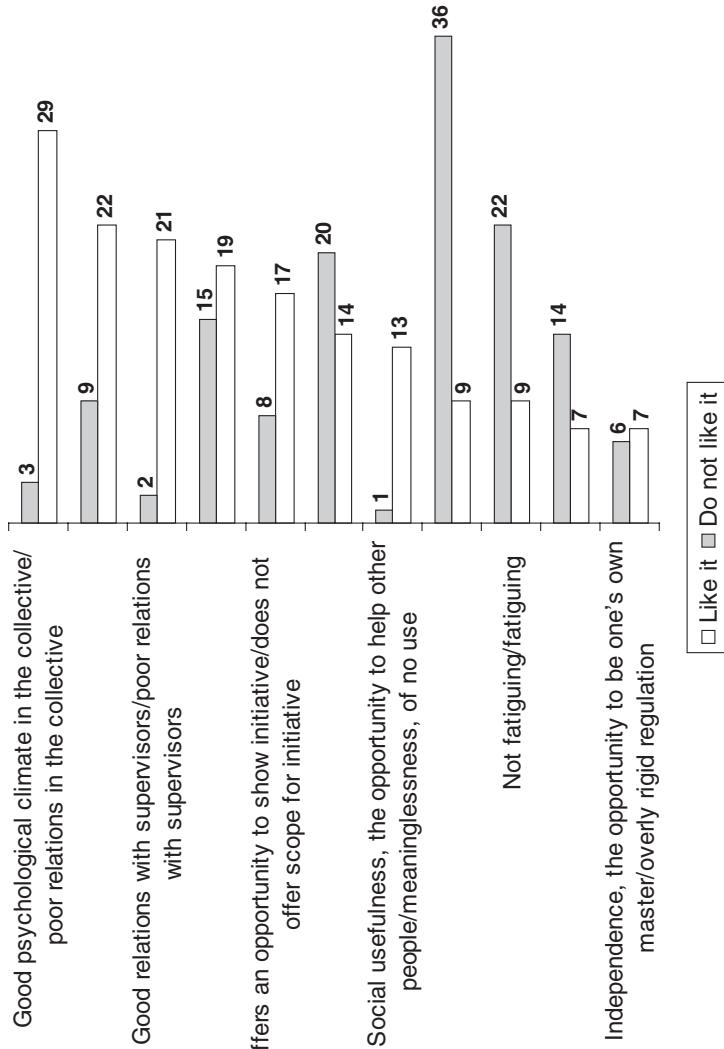
overtime work (fifty or more hours per week) in Russia is often a sign that a person, as they say, “works for himself” (working overtime characterizes primarily entrepreneurs and the self-employed). In almost one in five cases, working in their main jobs does not enable Russians to provide their families with a decent living, and this forces them to do extra work for money.

At the same time, it cannot be said that the nonmaterial aspects of their jobs are not important at all to Russians. In a certain sense, the data of analysis (see Figure 1) conflict with the generally accepted view that inner satisfaction has to be based on ensuring satisfaction with the external aspects of work (for more detail see [1, pp. 704–5]). In Russia, inner satisfaction is manifested as a kind of compensation for very low chances of achieving “external” well-being in work. In our opinion, this constitutes a kind of unspoken social agreement between the employed population and the employer, which alleviates not only the relations of dominance and exploitation in the context of specific work places [8] but also the consequences of exogenous changes in the socioeconomic life of society, such as the financial crisis of 2008–9.

On the whole in Russia, the number of aspects that Russians like about their work is greater than the number of points that they do not like about it. Moreover, the level of dissatisfaction with criteria of external satisfaction exceeds by several times the share of favorable ratings given to the same points: the pay (by 4 times), the workload (by almost 2.5 times), and the prospects for career growth (by 2 times). Low pay concerns Russians more than fatigue and the lack of prospects of their work. Very often, however, low pay *is often compensated for by a large number of favorable factors*. For example, although complaints about low pay characterize primarily the low-income strata (32 percent of the respondents who are dissatisfied with the size of salaries are in strata 4 and 5), the same people are characterized by dislike for almost all aspects of their work not connected with income and career prospects.

The study showed that workers’ dissatisfaction with their pay and also with their prospects for career growth divides the employed population of Russia into those who have the advantage of being able to negotiate with their employers and those who do not have that ability (and, by no means, into the groups of workers employed in mental and physical labor). For example, among the 67 percent of Russians who are dissatisfied with their pay we find representatives of various professions and specialties, including specialists (21 percent), white-collar office

Figure 1. What Russians Like or Dislike in Their Work (%)



employees (15 percent), rank-and-file workers in the sphere of trade and consumer services (14 percent), and blue-collar workers of midlevel and low qualification (17 percent).

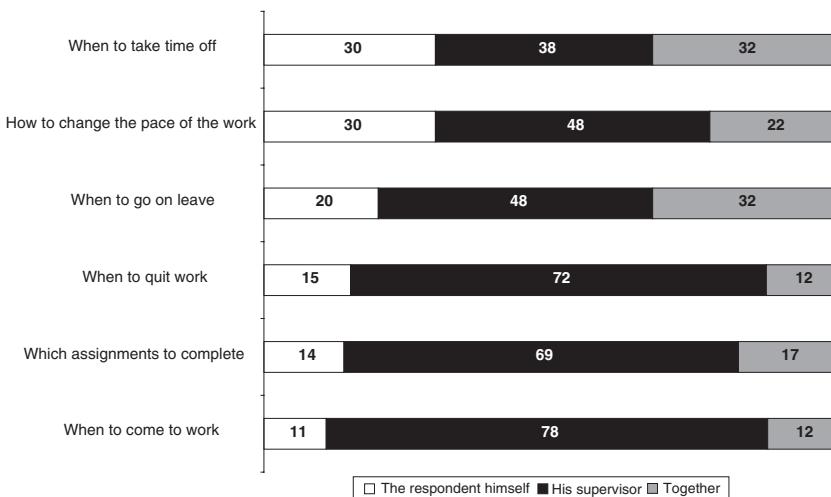
It is hard to say to what extent this is due to the development of the economic crisis, but considering that among Russians who are dissatisfied with their pay we are 13 percent more likely to find those who think that the level of tension in Russian society today is increasing significantly (44 percent of those who are “dissatisfied” with their pay), in this group, the situation at work can act as a catalyst that prompts a protest mood. And the potential of this “flare-up” is 16 percent of the able-bodied population of the country, which is in accord with the data of recent years. In 2008, for example, 15 percent of Russians experienced an acute form of conflict between the owners of capital and hired employees—again, regardless of socioprofessional affiliation (whereas, primarily blue-collar workers mentioned the conflict between the rich and the poor as the main type that characterizes Russian society).

It turns out that *work is not recognized by Russians as the chief factor determining their class situation* [9]. In other words, Russians react to the depth of inequalities and their lack of financial resources of their own, and they do not look at their place in the system of class placement, which is the source of their distress.

When it comes to the place of work in the lives of Russians, special mention must be made of the problem of the autonomy of their work and the asset of influence that they have in their work [10; 11, p. 88]. The survey results have shown (see Figure 1) that Russians are not very concerned about how independent they are on the job (only 13 percent made a point of this one way or another; 6 percent are “happy” with their ability to be their own master, and 7 percent of Russians “do not like” being subject to overly rigid regulation in their work); this is comparable with what they see as the importance of the social benefit that results from the work that they do (14 percent). It is also worth noting that the level of autonomy of people’s work on the job (which we have interpreted as their freedom to make decisions regarding the various aspects of their individual production activity) is an extremely variegated phenomenon, although in the country as a whole it is fairly low (see Figure 2).

From the data it is clear that 38–78 percent of the employed population take no part at all in decision making that concerns various aspects of their work. For about a third of Russians, making a decision on their own is the norm only in terms of *work pace* or *time off*. Regarding the

Figure 2. Who Basically Makes the Decisions at Work (%)



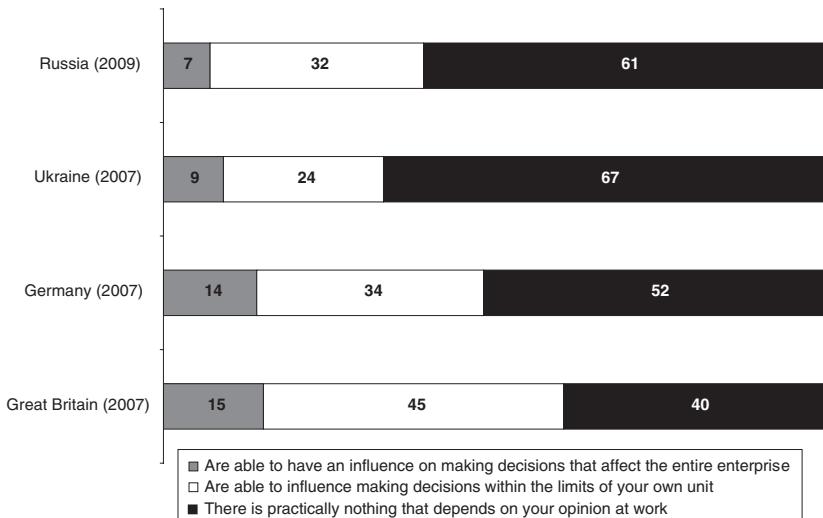
Notes: 100 percent per line; 25 percent had difficulty answering but because they were primarily nonworking Russians, the data show the proportion of the employed population (i.e., not counting the proportion of those who had difficulty answering).

amount of time off, the freedom to make the decision is one and a half times lower (20 percent). Even more overly regulated is everyday work practice in labor discipline. From all appearances, relative freedom in a situation where the individual takes time off is accompanied by rigid regulations governing the current production process.

Autonomy in making decisions concerning both the content and the regulations governing the work reflects inequality between physical and nonphysical workers, and it is an objectively significant factor of inequality in Russia. However, considering that independence in making decisions does not appear to be of any serious concern to the working population of our country, it is reasonable to say that this aspect of their work is not an area in which there is any subjective actualization of inequalities between physical and mental labor.

The study data show clearly (see Figure 3) that Russia is a country of “little people” [i.e., of little importance]. Sixty-one percent of the working population say that almost nothing depends on their opinions at work, and, moreover, a majority of them (73 percent) really are workers who are deprived of any autonomy at all on three or more out of six possible questions (this distribution has hardly changed at all in recent

Figure 3. Workers' Influence Resource, by Countries (%)



Note: The data for Ukraine, Germany, and Great Britain have been taken from the European Social Study for 2006–7 (ESS, Round 3). The ESS uses a ten-point scale, which we have combined as follows: 0 to 2 corresponds to the position “nothing depends on your opinion”; 3 to 8 corresponds to “able to influence decision making within the limits of the whole unit”; 9 to 10 corresponds to “able to influence decision making on the scale of the entire enterprise.”

years). Moreover, this is not simply a specific aspect in Russia alone—it is a post-Soviet phenomenon, as can be seen from comparing the picture for Ukraine and Russia, on the one hand, and for Germany and Great Britain, on the other hand.

Having influence at work is linked not only to the administrative asset but also to the character and complexity of the work that is done: the level of qualification of the workforce, which directly determines the negotiation strength of the worker and his asset of influence. For example, a majority of specialists working in jobs that demand a higher education have the opportunity to influence decisions that are made within the unit, whereas very little depends on the opinions of less qualified workers on the job (see Table 1).

This situation characterizes not only Russia. In Germany, most blue-collar workers, regardless of their qualification level, who are engaged in routine nonphysical labor, are unable to influence decision making within their enterprises, even within their own units; this is partially a consequence of ongoing elements of the command economy of the 1930s and 1940s

Table 1

The Influence Resource of Representatives of the Various Socioprofessional Groups (%)

Socioprofessional groups	Scope of influence resource on the job			
	Within the enterprise	Within the unit	Almost nothing depends on it	For the employed population as a whole
Entrepreneurs and the self-employed	74	15	11	2
Managers on all levels	31	54	15	5
Specialists (including military officers*)	8	59	33	24
Office personnel	2	28	71	14
Rank-and-file worker in trade or in consumer services	4	20	76	14
Blue-collar workers	2	20	78	41
From grade 5	2	28	70	15
Grades 3 and 4	1	19	80	19
Grades 1 and 2 or no grade	4	3	94	7

Notes: Statistically significant results are shown in italics ($\alpha < 0.05$).

*The relative proportion of military officers among specialists does not exceed 21 percent.

(and the partial resuscitation of that system at the end of the 1960s under Karl Schiller after the liberal reforms of Erhard). At the same time, in Great Britain, which has a rich history of the workers' movement, we see that qualifications play a no less significant role than the administrative asset; only unskilled blue-collar workers and unskilled manual workers routinely feel no opportunity to influence the decision-making process in the organization.

Yet in terms of the troubling problems of everyday life, for many people in Russia the lack of independence and freedom in making decisions at work is not a problem because labor autonomy is primarily the privilege of the minority, which does not prompt a feeling of envy or indignation in the majority of workers in our country (see Figure 1). Evidently, this is because one has to pay for autonomy, as many managers and professionals in Russia find it necessary to do a lot of overtime work.

Moreover, at present it is not very important how Russians perceive

their work; the real line of demarcation that divides society is economic security, which we interpret as the ability to have or not to have a job that ensures a relatively decent standard of living. In this connection a question naturally arises regarding the extent to which Russians' labor market positions are solid. The situation turned out to be extremely worrisome in this regard. In any case, according to the survey, 16 percent of able-bodied Russians were unemployed in the past year and this continued for more than three years. Moreover, 40 percent of the working population felt the real threat of being laid off (47 percent thought it was not very likely, while 13 percent said it could not be ruled out). These data cause us to give thought, first and foremost, to the current state of the labor market in Russia. Only a relatively small percentage of working Russians felt confident about their jobs by the beginning of spring 2009 and totally ruled out the likelihood of being unemployed in the coming year. This is despite the fact that a sense of the reality of any prospect of losing one's job, as a rule, often involves feeling despair and helplessness when evaluating the possibility of influencing what is happening, a feeling of injustice and loneliness. This leads to the thought that work acts not only as a determinant of social inequality, as was mentioned above, but also, at the same time, as a sphere of life in which success or failure is equated with triumphs or defeats in life. In other words, to Russians, work is not simply one of the spheres of life, but is often equated with life itself.

What determines the likelihood of being without a job? The likelihood increases significantly if one already has some experience of actually being laid off, and it goes down if one has high qualification (see Table 2). Moreover, when we consider the similarity of educational levels and professional status of married couples it is an especially dangerous situation when 17 percent of families in Russia already include unemployed members or those having difficulties finding a regular job. This means that for the mass of midlevel and low-skilled blue-collar workers and rank-and-file workers in the sphere of trade, a situation in which the family will not have anyone in it is quite realistic; in other groups it is a relatively rare situation.

The analysis shows that by spring 2009 the crisis had its strongest impact on workers with relatively low skills, in particular those employed in physical labor (grades 1 and 2 or no grade at all) and rank-and-file workers in trade and in consumer services. The most-well-off group included specialists working in positions requiring higher education

Table 2

The Likelihood of Being Unemployed Among Representatives of Various Socioprofessional Groups (self-assessments, %)

Socioprofessional groups	Likelihood of being unemployed				Was without work in the past year
	Ruled out	Not very likely	Extremely likely		
Entrepreneurs and the self-employed	18	75	7	7	
Managers on all levels	14	56	30	2	
Specialists (including military officers)	18	54	28	5	
Office personnel	9	62	29	5	
Rank-and-file worker in trade or in consumer services	8	48	45	18	
Blue-collar workers	5	45	51	14	
From grade 5	5	51	44	11	
Grades 3 and 4	7	42	51	12	
Grades 1 and 2 or no grade	—	35	65	29	

Note: Statistically significant results are shown in italics ($\alpha < 0.05$).

who were more likely than others to rule out the likelihood of unemployment in the coming year. Thus, fears of being unemployed, which are widely prevalent in Russia, are largely not situational due to the crisis but are reinforced by actual experience of being laid off, depending on human capital. In this regard, the crisis only served to bring into relief a very painful problem for Russia's economy—that it includes a large percentage of the kinds of jobs that reflect the low level of the workers' human capital and the low quality of the country's human potential as a whole, which is closely linked to the lack of any real effective demand for highly skilled workers.

To some extent, there is also a link between increased threats of unemployment and the consequences of the crisis, and the fact that in 2009 there was a drastic reduction (from 26 percent in 2003 to 18 percent) in the share of Russians who are satisfied with their work situation. As observed up to 2006, the decline in the share of Russians who were dissatisfied with their work situation only reflected the overall stabilization

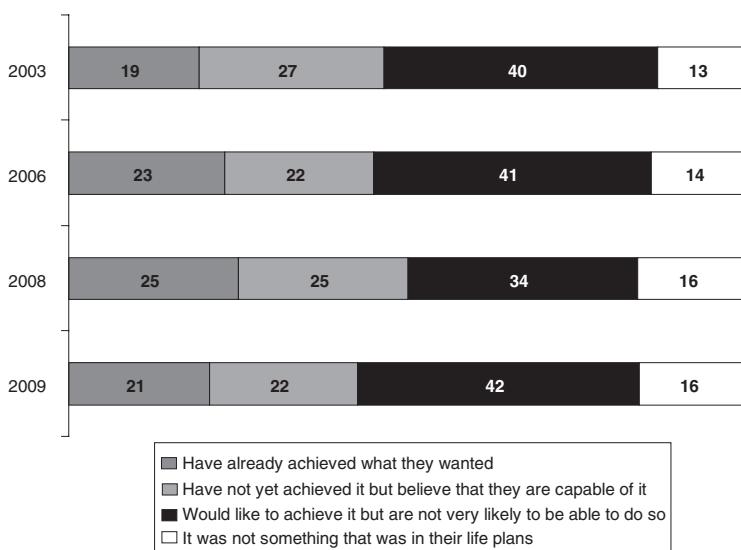
of the situation in the country. At the same time, there were no qualitative changes (and have not been to date) in workplaces in the country: as a result, the share of Russians who consider their work situations good as declined in the past six years, by almost a third (from 26 percent in 2003 to 20 percent in 2009). This is a dangerous trend, inasmuch as the majority of the latter enjoyed a relatively high status, and more than half of them had a higher education. This slump in work satisfaction was a consequence not so much of the crisis as of the lack of a policy to create effective jobs for highly skilled personnel.

One's work situation is closely linked to the possibility of achieving professional self-realization, although with passing years this connection becomes less pronounced, possibly because the hopelessness of the work itself comes to the forefront. In 2006 the Russians who favorably characterized their work situation, in the majority of cases (60 percent) belonged to the group who positively rated their opportunities to achieve professional self-realization; in 2009, however, this figure had fallen to 53 percent, and the share of workers critically rated their chances of achieving professional self-realization rose. To a lesser extent, but still on a steady basis, there is a link between Russians' positive ratings of their work situation and their opportunity to acquire necessary education and skills (36 percent), demonstrating a rise in negative assessments (from 23 percent in 2006 to 32 percent in 2009). Considering that assessments of chances to achieve self-realization at work are closely linked to assessment of status in society, then it appears that in the lives of Russians, work continues to play a significant role in the polarization of their chances in life.

What has happened to these chances in life in recent years? The worsening situation in the sphere of professional self-realization basically took place in the past year: in 2009 only a fifth of the country's working population had good opportunities to achieve self-realization in the professional sphere, whereas in 2003, 26 percent of working people had such opportunities.

Russians' opportunities to acquire the necessary education and skills have also declined recently, although here the reasons are more fundamental. While the increase in the share of Russians who poorly rated their chances of achieving professional self-realization was influenced by the crisis, the situation regarding the accessibility of a necessary education began to worsen starting in 2006, and as a result the share of Russians who do not have those opportunities rose from 23 percent to

Figure 4. Dynamics of Russians' Assessments of Their Achievements Regarding Obtaining a Prestigious Job, 2003–9 (%)

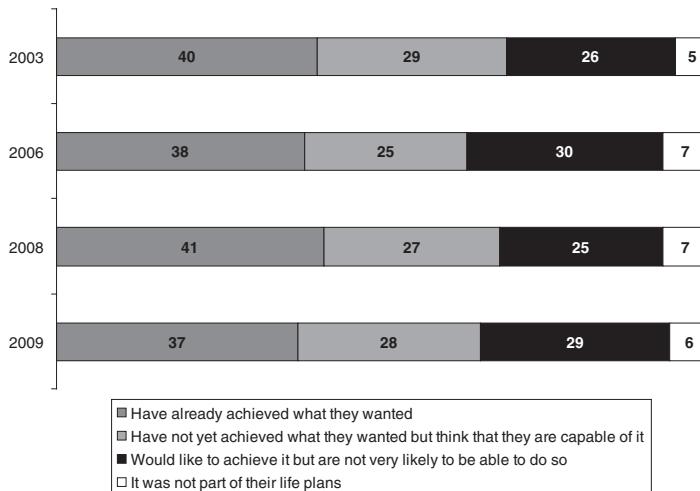


32 percent. This may be a result of the closing down of the “elevators of social mobility” in this period, owing to the completion of the process of economic transformation, and, accordingly, the socioprofessional structure of Russian society.

The limited chances of acquiring an education and achieving self-realization through profession have an impact on Russians' assessments of their work situation. It would be wrong, however, to overly dramatize the situation regarding access to an education and opportunities to achieve professional self-realization. Instead, Russia has gradually lost a substantial portion of the advances that were gained in the period of recent economic growth, and it has almost returned to the 2003 level. Today, however, the situation in these spheres is still better than it was in 1999.

We now turn to whether the situation has changed in terms of work characteristics such as how prestigious and “interesting” it is. The year 2009 had a very serious adverse effect on the optimism of Russian citizens regarding their opportunities to acquire a prestigious job (see Figure 4). For example, the share of Russians who have been able to acquire such a job decreased from one-quarter to one-fifth in the past year. At the same time, the share of those who would like to get a prestigious job increased, but they do not believe it is within their capability.

Figure 5. Dynamics of Russians' Assessments of Their Achievements Regarding Obtaining an Interesting Job, 2003–9 (%)



When it comes to having an interesting job, the data become more optimistic. Having an interesting job is very important to Russians: only 6 percent of working citizens are not trying to get one (see Figure 5). However, success in this regard depends, on the one hand, on a worker's qualifications, and, on the other hand, on the character of the work that he does. For example, primarily midlevel and low-qualified blue-collar workers are unable to get an interesting job, whereas those who have been successful in getting such work are mainly in positions as managers, specialists, and white-collar office workers. Here is a clear polarization in their standard of living. Consequently, having an interesting job, as Russians see it, is a kind of indicator of the individual's opportunities in Russia. The poor and low-income strata of the population (strata 1 through 4) are unable to have interesting jobs, even though they very much want to.

When it comes having a prestigious job, the situation is slightly different. This situation does not interest the blue-collar working class and the poor population (strata 1 and 2), although in stratum 3 a substantial number of people aspire to such work but cannot get it. Any optimism about getting a prestigious job starts to appear only in the middle strata (stratum 7 and above) and is confidently present in the most well-off strata, consisting of managers, specialists, and entrepreneurs.

As we see, work represents an extremely important sphere of the

everyday life of Russians, ranking second in importance after the family. In today's Russia, work represents the main field of differentiation of chances in life, but Russians do not always realize this, and this reduces possible tension in this sphere, although on the individual plane tension is only rising, due to the low degree of Russians' economic security, which was shaken in 2008 and 2009. This is because for the majority of workers in this country, the current work sphere strongly affects our fellow citizens' sense of psychological and mental well-being. This is partially compensated for by a trade-off in this country's enterprises, as a result of which, despite the commonly accepted theoretical postulates regarding the primary importance of external satisfaction with the work, inner satisfaction has become established in Russia, and we have interpreted this as compensation for low chances of "external" well-being in the work situation.

Most likely, the "social myopia" that has been portrayed above is due to the fact that Russians' most typical orientation toward work is the utilitarian one, with its focus on the external values of work (for the majority of Russians, the chief aspect of their work is how much they earn), even though external dissatisfaction with their work is dominant among Russian workers. The domination of external values in Russians' orientation toward their work and, at the same time, their dissatisfaction with these values, is linked to workers' weak potential for negotiation, and Russians' utilitarian orientation regarding their work is largely determined by relations of exploitation (which is mitigated by the Russian worker's freedom when it comes to work pace and time off) rather than the division of labor into mental work and physical labor. For example, a third of Russians who say that they are only working for the money do not mean any vital need for money, but a need to satisfy certain requirements related to the specific character of their structural positions. Basically workers of middle and low qualifications actually have problems with their pay, regardless of the nature of their work. In terms of different indicators connected with their work, this share of Russians turns out to be the least well protected.

As a consequence of this, the effects due to the crisis of 2008–9 have manifested themselves primarily in the form of the risk of unemployment for workers of middle and low qualifications, mainly those employed in physical labor, on the one hand, and in the form of an increased workload on qualified workers, on the other hand. And, as the study results have shown, the crisis has only worsened the problems that existed before it.

Note

1. In the sociology literature the most common view of work is activity in the sphere of paid employment. Along with this position, for all the apparent obviousness of this angle of analysis, in the social sciences, other views of work have also been established, which differ depending on the boundaries between the cultural forms of use of this term [2]. For example, in common practice researchers either contrast work and labor [3], or reduce work to paid employment [4; 5], or contrast work and the absence of work [6], or offer the dialectic of work and “nonwork,” in the framework of which work in an industrial society can also be seen as a form of free time [7].

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