

## Interview with Prof. Alena Ledeneva: Thriving on the Fringe

INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED EXPERT ON INFORMAL GOVERNANCE IN RUSSIA, PROFESSOR ALENA LEDENEVA, IN CONVERSATION WITH *SLOVO*'S EXECUTIVE EDITOR BORIMIR TOTEV.

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### HOW DID YOU ENTER THE WORLD OF RUSSIAN INFORMAL PRACTICES?

One always tends to concoct conspiracy theories, but very often it's just a cock up. That's what happened to me. I was completing my MPhil in Cambridge at the time and my college tutor suggested I write a PhD proposal. I looked around, I didn't plan a PhD, I didn't even know what a PhD proposal was. As it was in 1992, and the collapse of the Soviet Union had just happened, I thought to myself that obviously I have a competitive advantage in providing an ethnography of the transition – what happens once the Soviet Union ends. At the time, I was very fond of the work by Pierre Bourdieu, who looked into the ethnography of his own society – France – and his own profession – the French academia – through the prism of a classical anthropological approach. That means, looking at your own people in your own country as indigenous people elsewhere, and trying to understand their language – i.e. their system of meanings – understand their perception of time, and understand their forms of exchange. In other words, when we want to know how a tribe works, we as ethnographers live with them, socialise with them, and try to figure out their language, time, and exchange. In the post-Soviet era, I was hoping to work out what was actually happening with language, with attitudes to time, and with attitudes to exchange, as the Soviet centrally planned system had gone. Just like every PhD candidate I was too ambitious and my supervisor, Anthony Giddens, suggested that there are three PhD dissertations in my initial conception, and that I had to cut it down to one.

I picked the latter - attitudes to exchange - because I wasn't a linguist, and I thought time was a bit off my training, which was economic sociology, making exchange the most suitable. When I started doing the ethnography and interviews it just so happened that *blat* – the use of personal contacts for getting things done in Russia - became something that my supervisor questioned. Every time I had a supervision, he would ask me if I was sure *blat* existed. “How could you find the proof for it? You say it's everywhere, you say its omnipresent, but we have no written sources confirming your claim.” That was really a puzzle - how do I prove something so obvious to me to the Western audience, that is not fully happy to see reality through your eyes, and wants some objectified proof.

### **HOW MUCH EFFORT GOES INTO PROVING ‘BLAT’ TODAY?**

Existence of *blat* is an accepted social fact today, which is probably the outcome (and success) of the books I've written. This wasn't the case at the time of my PhD. There's a degree of luck in developing an angle, and a degree of an angle in getting lucky – as it were. In the end of the day, it's just about being in the right place at the right time on the one hand, and being able to work hard, on the other.

### **HOW DO YOU VIEW THE SO-CALLED IVORY TOWER DEBATE?**

It is a huge conversation. One tendency that we see in science is compartmentalisation. This means that people become so narrowly trained, so ‘disciplined’ in terms of methodology and its application, and there's so much niche in terms of their expertise, that it's becoming very difficult to communicate between different tribes of social scientists. For example, political scientists would not necessarily be happy to talk to ethnographers, and sometimes their positions are incongruent. You have a scenario leading to a crisis in communication, even within social sciences, but also in the wider context of sciences, say, in the change of the climate debates. People from different disciplines cannot understand each other because of their terminology – often too jargonish. Historically you could understand why this was the case, as there used to be encyclopedic scholars who were writers, poets, but also natural scientists and philosophers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot. Given the complexity of modern societies, this is no longer possible. Knowledge has become diversified generally, and it looks like that would be the trend with the inner dynamics in sciences.

Within societies at large, exactly the opposite trends exist. People want to get their message through Twitter. They don't have time to handle complexity, and complex narratives do not work in the wider fabric of society. You really need to streamline and simplify, in order to get your message across at all. What you have, therefore, is a certain tension between more specified and technical scientific knowledge on the one hand, and a very limited capacity of receiving complex messages, on the other. That problem has been addressed by the UK government through the idea of impact that academic research should produce. Meaning to say that if tax money funds academic research, then academics have to show how this research benefits wider society. That is essentially the logic of assessing impact in the Research Exercise Framework (REF) - conducted in British universities every seven years. European universities have analogous practices of report writing (and producing deliverables) to account for grants funded by governments and international organizations. Impact is assessed on the basis of 'impact cases' put forward by universities and will generate 25 percent of the REF2021 general assessment. As academics, we used to be able to give four published works for the assessment of research output, but now this is no longer the case. We have to submit four published works, but they only count towards 75 percent of our performance – the rest is about the impact that our work produces. Measuring research impact was first attempted in 2014. For example, the number of publications in the media is not really an indicator for impact, but if your work had been used in producing some policy, or quoted in a white paper, or governmental policy documents, then that can be used as a proxy for impact. My work has been quoted in a judicial ruling and has been viewed as an indicator of impact on the judge generating a ruling in a legal case, but measuring impact is not easy, and it's particularly not easy for arts and humanities. And that is where the idea of FRIGE comes in.

### **WHAT IS 'FRINGE'?**

The idea behind FRINGE was to link arts and humanities expertise with social sciences at SSEES. To work cross discipline, but also to create a possibility of impact for both the art and humanities, and the social sciences. The idea of FRINGE comes from the Edinburgh Festival, where you could actually perform even if you're not registered as a theater, because they really don't have a filter on who could perform. In essence then, you as an individual could go there, perform, and become successful as a consequence. Similarly, the FRINGE Centre facilitate ideas, performances, and audiences that are not yet mainstream. What we were thinking is that maybe there are ideas in the arts and humanities that could be tried and tested in the context of other approaches. Reaching out across disciplines and across areas studies is essential. What we have in the world of these compartmentalised sciences is the fact that academics very often don't even get out from

the comfort zone of their own discipline. If you work in area studies of Central and Eastern Europe or Russian studies, you've never talked to people in Latin American studies or in Asian studies, although there are fundamental similarities in the methodologies of area studies as such. Our FRINGE initiative has aimed at crossing the borders of area studies and crossing the borders of disciplines, in order to identify subjects which are Fluid, Resistant to articulation, Invisible, Neutral, in Grey zones, or Elusive – spelling out FRINGE.

Take *blat* for example. It is an exceptionally fluid practice. It is impossible to qualify the phenomenon clearly. People associated *blat* with friendship, but it was difficult to establish a clear borderline between friendship and *blat* in the Soviet society. *Blat* was really resistant to articulation, because people did not want to talk about it. It was only since the collapse of the Soviet Union that it became possible to talk about *blat*. It was certainly invisible to the outsiders, as so few in the West believed me, when I said it was a ubiquitous practice. It was neutral in the sense that its moral charge was contingent on circumstances (bad when the others did it, but necessary when you did it yourself). This is to say, that *blat* was in a grey zone where the double standards applied, and it was a very elusive subject, until you chase it up and try to flesh out the evidence of its existence. Looking at it post-factum, *blat* was exactly the kind of fringe-y idea we are after. You take something like *blat*, which had a very fringe-y presence in academia, give it twenty years of your life, and it becomes mainstream. That is what we are trying to develop as part of the Global Informality Project. We have already created a website ([www.in-formality.com](http://www.in-formality.com)) where *blat* appears in the wider family of similar practices from all over the world, going across 66 countries and 5 continents. In the process, we have identified a whole new range of informal practices, which are just as interesting, and I think we will have a lot of new PhDs coming out from this.