

# Devolved Corporatism: Fictive Kinship at the Nexus Between Paternalist and Neoliberal Labour Relations

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## Abstract

Historically, corporatist arrangements have been seen as a way of representing interest groups — in both democratic and non-democratic contexts. Furthermore, social cohesion can be thought of in terms of supply and demand side resources and mechanisms for which corporatism represents a possible vehicle of expression. While the Russian state has generally only paid lip-service to corporatist forms, this article explores the generation ‘from below’ of ersatz work-place incorporation of citizens — attempts to address their needs for representation through the dramatic front and back-stage work within enterprises short of trade unionism. After sketching the history of paternalistic, enterprise relations, the article focusses on the post-2022 context. Based on long-term ethnographic evidence, the author proposes a variety of types of quasi-incorporating moments in contemporary waged work in Russia. Three case studies reflect a desire among workers to evoke fictive kinship with their enterprises and the differing stances of employers. These are categorized as possibly generalizable types, from ‘supplicant incorporation’ in new workplaces after 2022; Neoliberal paternalism as ‘fictive kinship’, and ‘realist scepticism’ about corporatist offerings. Articulation of devolved corporatism via metaphors of, or approximating relations of fictive kinship is strongly inflected by paternalist

models of interaction extant from the Soviet period. The particular labour paradox in Russia (structural strength yet associational weakness) may lead to the emergence of a devolved corporatism. The paradox, understandable to both workers and employers alike may provoke further the articulation through symbolic interaction and affective modes of fictive kinship.

*Keywords:* corporatism, Russia, fictive kinship, sociology of work, enterprise paternalism

## **Децентрализованный корпоративизм: фиктивное родство на стыке патерналистских и неолиберальных трудовых отношений**

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### *Резюме*

Исторически корпоративистские соглашения рассматривались как способ представления групп интересов — как в демократических, так и в недемократических контекстах. Кроме того, социальную сплоченность можно рассматривать с точки зрения ресурсов и механизмов спроса и предложения, для которых корпоративизм представляет собой возможное средство выражения. Российское государство, как правило, только на словах поддерживало корпоративистские формы, и в этой статье исследуется генерация «снизу» эрзац-инкорпорации граждан на рабочих местах — попытки удовлетворить их потребности в представительстве посредством драматической прямой и закулисной работы на предприятиях, за исключением профсоюзного движения. После краткого изложения истории патерналистских предпринимательских отношений в России статья фокусируется на ситуации после 2022 года. Основываясь на лонгитюдных этнографических данных, автор предлагает различные типы квазиинкорпорационных элементов в современной наемной работе в России. Три тематических кейса отражают желание работников вступить в фиктивное родство со своими предприятиями и различные позиции работодателей. Другие классифицируются как обобщенные типы, от «инкорпорации просителей» на новых рабочих местах после 2022 года; неолиберального патернализма как «фиктивного родства» и «реалистического скептицизма» в отношении корпоративистских предложений. Артикуляция децентрализо-

ванного корпоративизма через метафоры или аппроксимирующие отношения фиктивного родства сильно подвержена влиянию патерналистских моделей взаимодействия, сохранившихся с советского периода. Конкретный трудовой парадокс в России (структурная сила, но ассоциативная слабость) может привести к возникновению децентрализованного корпоративизма. Парадокс, понятный как работникам, так и работодателям, может спровоцировать дальнейшую артикуляцию через символическое взаимодействие и аффективные режимы фиктивного родства.

*Ключевые слова:* корпоративизм, Россия, фиктивное родство, социология труда, предпринимательский патернализм

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One of the tasks for observers of state-centric governance such as in Russia is to both understand and map enduring sources of 'social cohesion' despite the puzzling lack of elite interest in genuine corporatist institutions on a national level. Many focus on public opinion as a barometer of approval but this is perhaps even less enlightening given the very low political expectations of the population and their realistic evaluation of weak state capacity in Russia. These observations provoke the main question of this article: Can social satisfaction or consent be generated at the base-level, in material compacts emerging in work and labour environments since 2022? We could call this a devolved corporatism — one that activates tectonic, as well as surface structures in the body politic.

Social cohesion can be thought of in terms of supply and demand side resources and mechanisms. We can think of socially-connective satisfaction with a polity as arising from three possible sources. The first would be political voice, representation and incorporation. But this is not relevant in the current case: the elite project of depoliticization, demobilization and wholesale exclusion from Politics with a capital 'P' has been rehearsed endlessly in scholarship. The second source of connectiveness would seek a substitute for socialist-era state paternalism where associational refuges sponsored by the state are offered. This second source, perhaps modelled on Scandinavian social democracy would comprise a universalistic welfare state-society contract with redistributive mechanisms and stabilizers, and a more active fiscal state. As detailed by scholars such as Linda Cook (1993),

such a model is also hardly realistic today in state-centric societies, despite half-hearted efforts to create groups under state patronage in Russia and China. Thus, two out of three sources of connectivity have been unavailable for over 20 years, if not more, in Russia. So, that leaves incorporation into a community via the world of waged work — sometimes glossed as ‘enterprise paternalism’ (Ashwin 1998, Clarke 1996).

Accordingly, this article will review the analytical value of studying enterprise paternalism in Russia and the USSR, contextualizing it within the broader literature on corporatism in state-centric polities. In the second part, I present new data from ethnographic fieldwork covering the period from 2014-2024 comprising case studies of ‘typical’ blue-collar employment biographies beyond the metropolitan core of Russia, focusing on recent supply and demand side articulations of paternalism. The conclusion proposes a more serious and sustained interrogation by post-Soviet social scientists of fictive kinship relations.

Corporatism refers to a political system which provides for the separation and negotiation of professional or sectoral interests — in which conflict is acknowledged but the idea of formal concord under the auspices of the state is possible. Class identity or guild association incorporate individuals into identifiable bodies-within-the-political-body that then are afforded legitimacy, even in highly authoritarian contexts such as in China (Unger, Chan 1995). Corporatist solutions tend to be sought during wartime or by regimes under pressure due to rapid economic development, guided and spurred by a government simultaneously dedicated to enforcing political and social stability. While in countries like China, the state turns to labour associations to replace some of the functions of ‘missing’ civil society institutions — especially since Deng, in Russia, state corporatism has no historical or organizational ground to emerge on. China’s attempt to substitute legalism for institutional development was more economically successful for conjunctural reasons — a transition like that of Soviet industrialization yet with massive injections of capitalist investment from the 1980s-2008, a more easily incorporated rural migrant class, and a rigid and effective hierarchy of labour relations under the auspices of the CCP (Morris 2024). Russia, by contrast experienced stunted corporatism. Genu-

ine tripartite bodies were not seriously attempted. A residual labour confederation 'withered' on the vine, while decaying 'paternalist' organisations (Clarke 1995, Bizyukov 1995, Ashwin, Clarke 2002) continue to play a dominant, and detrimental, role to the cause of labour. Indeed, one question for the future is that posed by Friedman (2014) on China (but equally applicable elsewhere) is, why does the particular constellation of labour unrest, failed class compromise, tactical victories and (relatively strong) structural power of labour not lead to substantive institutional change? In the Russian case I argue that we must look to devolved corporatism at the firm level — a state of affairs strongly echoing the enterprise paternalism of the Soviet period.

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Under ideal-type corporatism, diverse interest groups can be represented and their differences resolved for the common good. State-level corporatism was perhaps a hallmark of twentieth-century fascism, but we should remember that almost all polities de-facto implement elements of democratic or authoritarian corporatism. The philosophical basis of corporatism boils down to the idea of fictive kinship — that diverse individuals realise a social relation modelled on a 'biological' one, and that this may dominate political-economic arrangements (Schneider 1984, p. 54). The related aim of recapturing a putatively lost social community comes about in large part thanks to Ferdinand Tönnies' idea of *gemeinschaft*, a revival of the idea of organic communities arising out of various types of fictive kinship which had been disrupted by modernity. This idea in turn was reinvigorated by Naziism and Italian fascism. Corporatist thinking also reflects an echo of anti-market sentiment echoing medieval worldviews via the notion that rulers have a role in promoting social justice and supressing the moral and social chaos of pursuing individual self-interests. Furthermore, this strand of corporatism reflects the idea that only membership of a collectivist (but not socialist) political community allows individual members to fulfil themselves and pursue happiness.

For our purposes, the idea of solidarity based on corporatist identity — or more precisely enterprise identity in a post-class society — has a lot of attractions in anomie-prone Russia (recalling that Durkheim thought of anomie as 'insatiable will' — a desire for moral guidance). Let me make two further observations

that underline why this might be the case. Whether people harbour strong or weak support for the political status quo, social and economic anxiety, ever growing since 2011, translate into the search for some kind of consolidation, and in the absence of concrete options elsewhere, employer or firm-based attachment in expectation of protection and refuge is a ‘natural’ effect. We should also mention the focussing effect for working-age men of the so-called Special Military Operation. The SMO is on the one-hand an abstracted social phenomenon — apart from enlistment there are few ways to contribute to it as part of a social contract. At the same time there is clear evidence that mobilization in 2022 was experienced as socially and politically dislocating, hence the government’s rapid abandonment of wide-scale mobilization in favour of financial incentives. Bear in mind too that much less than 1% of the male working-age population have been mobilized, and perhaps another fraction of 1% enlisted in other forms. Nonetheless, mobilization too, for a very small minority also serves as a source of incorporation into the body of society.

The idea of Russian corporatism as operationalized by solidaristic attachment via employment is not new. We can see at least three strands — self-organization into bands historically — the Russian *artel*, the Soviet *brigade* and more specifically the *zveno* — 3-8 people with personalized collective work responsibilities — see Pospelovsky (1970). What these microstructures have in common is lots of autonomy and even group-level egalitarianism; There are scale-extensions of this structure: Soviet and post-Soviet paternalism as attachment to the ‘island’ of the firm as Finn Sivert Nielsen (1986/2006) put it, or the ‘possessive domains’ of organizational-work identity named as such by Caroline Humphrey (2002); As a middle-range articulation of Soviet corporatism we have Evelyn Moser’s (2016) recent proposal of a logic of dedifferentiation: social inclusion via all-encompassing political addressability, in practice achieved through organizational membership. Finally, there is the literature on professional-associative networks — usually informal and not so long-lasting, but historically important nonetheless given the barriers to class-based association. This literature has a pre-1917 historicization (Lankina 2022), a Soviet focus (Abramov 2014, Lankina, Libman 2021), and a post-Soviet framing (Moskovskaya et al. 2013), even tending towards neo-caste structuration (Kordonsky 2016). The

Soviet *nomenklatura* system itself was examined through a corporatist lens at various junctures (Bunce, Echols III 1980, Willerton 1992).

We can discount labour unions from this picture of bridging identities between power and society, though at crisis junctures groups like coal miners played a role historically (Lebskii 2021, Morris 2024). ‘Social partnership’ after 1991, without genuine corporatist bodies turned out to be both dysfunctional and ‘virtual’ (Kulaev 2020, p. 81-2), I also leave to the side the provocative popular ideas along the lines that Russia is becoming a neo-feudal society. This literature is superficially attractive, but hardly stands up to empirical scrutiny. There is too much complexity, too much diversity and too much social mobility for this to be the case. Russia is not North Korea, nor Baathist Syria. To return to enterprise paternalism, however, we have empirical research on the power of this idea, even if it was never particularly effective from the demand or supply perspective — i.e. workers cleaved to their enterprise in crisis, but did they get much from it? Not usually. Similarly, bosses were able to ask for astonishing sacrifices from their workers and those usually complied; not for nothing is there a specific word in Russian for working flat out to meet a target — *avral*.

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## From Soviet unionism to post-Soviet decaying Paternalism

Unions in the USSR, as handmaiden to single-party rule, could obviously not respond to worker demands that the regime should live up to its own egalitarian rhetoric. Similarly, the repressive state apparatus had no answer to demands from below to make good on the promises of communism (which Khrushchev had promised by 1980). This situation repeated itself across the Eastern Bloc and was investigated by sociologists such as Michael Burawoy in Hungary in the 1980s. He even coined the term ‘negative class consciousness’ to describe this phenomenon (Burawoy, Lukács 1992).

In a similar vein, Hillel Ticktin argued that Soviet workers were profoundly atomized because the system was ‘transparently unequal and exploitative’ (1992, p. 46). Nonetheless, in the period between the 1960s and 1990s, regimes made token con-



cessions to workers (Mandel 2004, p. 3). Union functions were three-fold but with a focus on the administration of social benefits in what were now all more developed and wealthier societies. They retained (at least in the eyes of workers) the secondary role of assisting management. Defending workers was a distant third function. The regimes focussed on the problems of increasing productivity and compliance where there were widespread labour shortages. However, a lack of meaningful wage differentiation, and no unemployment to discipline labour, meant that unions were rarely called on to undertake direct 'defence' of members' interests. Instead, the legitimizing and broad socializing role of the union as the agent of the distribution of the so-called social wage should not be underestimated.

While social benefit administration also fell to unions — including sick and maternity leave, pensions and vacation benefits — the so called 'social wage' was much broader, including faster access to better housing conditions, superior food supplies, as well as childcare and medical care made sometimes more accessible than to white-collar workers. This was even more important when we remember the low value of money itself in a society of shortages and, by the 1980s, rationing. Mandel (2004) draws attention to the fact that while the regimes saw union work as primarily directed towards 'productivity-orientated activity', after 1958 (in the USSR) union agreement was required for any dismissals to occur. At the same time, workers developed structural power despite the lack of organized labour — they were able to vote with their feet, go slow, and even absenteeism became difficult to punish. Clarke et al. (1993, p. 16) undertook 'plant sociology' just before the end of the Soviet Union, finding that 'Soviet workers are powerful, in that managers are unable to impose labour discipline, and have to make concessions to enlist their co-operation, but they are weak in that they are atomized and have no means of collective resistance'.

Overall, the late socialist period saw the strengthening of workers' structural position albeit in a system of decaying paternalism and economic decline. Attempts to improve productivity could not be effective in a system without unemployment and where money had little value. As Ticktin (1992, p. 12) memorably put it, the Soviet worker 'has to alienate his product to the management. He cannot choose not to work, but he can choose



not to work as management would prefer he work'. Ticktin proposes a strong form of worker 'atomization' which is not fully borne out by the sociological evidence. Important legacies that impacted labour relations in the post-socialist period appeared — the delegation of production autonomy to the lowest unit of organisation with inconsistent oversight and even a form of genuine collective identity and even loyalty among workers towards 'their' enterprise. Certainly, debate continues as to nature of class power and workplace relations in this period. These are summarized by Haynes (2006, p. 6), who discusses the degree to which we can consider the Soviet workshop as a unique form which was then 'decisive in determining the overall character of the USSR' as a mode of production. From the 1950s, serious attempts were made to develop a management ideology and normative forms of compliance.

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As an empirical counterpoint to accounts such as Haynes, we can turn to the limited sociology of enterprise relations in Soviet factories. Morrison (2008) and Collier (2011) argue that incorporation at the firm level was characterized by 'personalized' not 'individualized' labour relations. Negotiations and bargaining on issues which materially affected workers, such as bonuses, piece-work rates, overtime and so on, were decided by brigade leaders and managers exercised a large degree of discretion (Morrison 2008, p. 139) based on personal relations of favour within teams rather than management's assessment or objective measures of value. In addition, Russian workers had some degree of autonomy on the shop-floor (Alasheev 1995). Aleksandr Prokhorov (2011, p. 218) takes this thesis further, arguing for a strong form of 'grassroots solidarity' where management were at the mercy of workers united in feelings of alienation and subordination (*podchine*nie). The planned economy put an emphasis on the spontaneous yet ideologically motivated nature of work at the expense of a lack of the adoption of organizational Taylorism. Communitarian values inherited from the social organization of village life served as a partial substitute for punitive labour discipline. In the late Soviet era, spontaneity and initiative was infused with the 'wit and skill' of workers coping with production in poor working conditions, economic stagnation, and an inferior technological base (Temnitskii 2011, p. 37). This was reflected in the characteristic rhythms of So-

viet work: ‘rush work’ (*avral*) often requiring personal sacrifice from the worker interspersed with much slower periods. Individual workers covered each other within a team and were not subject to the same surveillance and subordinating imperatives of today’s workplace. In a recent summary of the Russian forms of the adoption of neoliberal production regimes, the accent is on increased control over workers, an intensification of the work burden, and a general tightening of the regime (or timetable) (Kagarlitskii 2008; Levinson 2007). At the same time, Clarke (2007) argued that the subordination of production to the law of value means line managers have fundamentally changed from being representatives of collectives (the traditional Soviet role) to agents of management. But does fictive kinship ever really disappear? As Sarah Ashwin noted in her work on paternalism in the 1990s, kinship metaphors remain powerful within enterprises (Ashwin 1998, p. 191).

Moving to the contemporary period, as Crowley (2004, p. 394) observed: ‘labor is indeed a weak social and political actor in post-communist societies, especially when compared to labor in Western Europe’. The watchword became ‘quiescent’ labour and unions. Crowley showed that all post-communist societies attempted some form of social compact at this time to maintain social peace, but that, as Ost memorably put it (2000), the result was ‘illusory corporatism’. In more detail, Crowley argued that labour weakness is accompanied by corporatist co-option constituted by the decaying legacy unions of the communist period which continue their existence through inertia. Morris (2016) focusses on micro-level collective management and organization at the shopfloor level, and nostalgia for an enterprise paternalism now in short supply. In the context of Ukraine, Gorbach (2020a) found paternalistic relations more enduring and, therefore, a continuing challenge to new unions.

Varga (2014, p. 7-8) has argued that ‘loyalty’ was a barrier to contention in the socialist period and that this has structural echo to today. Attachment of workervia feelings of loyalty prevents unrest — an argument of relevance beyond post-communist countries expressed in the phrase attributed to Antonio Gramsci, ‘hegemony is born in the factory’ (in Varga 2014, p. 189). Varga does not argue that this is a legacy of communism, but as a structuring constraint given the insights of various scholars about the

continuing relevance of paternalistic relationships. It might not be the case that employers can really meaningfully offer workers anything comparable to the social wage they received during communism, but as Morris (2016) argued, it is a mistake to discount how the language of paternalism affects the political views, and indeed ‘worldview’ of workers living in extremely difficult material circumstances in states where authoritarian populists can blame others and simultaneously prevent any circulation of discourses of worker solidarity or leftist ideology. Morris, in an overview (2024), concluded that paternalism is still a meaningful language of communication. A number of scholars draw on the concept of ‘moral economy’, arguing that the articulation of entitlements represents a meaningful resource to unions today and a positive legacy of the Soviet period (e.g., Morrison et al. 2012). What is not considered is the dynamic interaction between demand and supply side: the enterprise’s ‘offer’ to workers and their interpretation of it. We turn now to that topic.

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## Rethinking fictive kinship in Russia

The prospect of military conflict leading to broader mobilization reinvigorates the insatiable will towards connective social bonds at work as protective. And the search for occupational niches that extend beyond simple instrumentalization of ‘*bron*’ or reserved work positions against mobilization. There are in fact dozens of ‘reserved’ occupations, particularly in metallurgy, where employees are exempted from the military draft. When I returned to the field in late 2022 just as mobilization was announced, I expected to encounter labour mobility towards such jobs. Certainly, there was much discussion among my informants of such opportunities, but other considerations of a compact between enterprises and workers was more visible in their calculus. I present now some preliminary observations and very rudimentary analysis — to fully appreciate a renewal of fictive enterprise kinship requires more embedded work.

Despite the dubious truism of Russian atomization, the imperative to stick to one’s own corner (don’t talk back to the boss, don’t organize with co-workers, don’t expect anything from politicians) comes into continual conflict with communitarian

and social drives. This contradiction represents a dialectical relationship in Russian society, perhaps the dominant one today. Beyond household domestication, which can include forms of solidarity within families, extended families and small communities, there are different syntheses. These include fictive kinship relations under new conditions of enterprise paternalism. There are also partial refusals of neoliberalism offered by informal off-the-books work and 'entrepreneurialism'. Only a sensitive ethnographic tracing of the working lives of real people can do justice to the way individuals are thrust into this dialectic and negotiate it. Similarly, the life-ethnographic helps avoid methodological individualism — a reduction of complexity to rational choice alone. This requires looking at people's histories of engagement with work and waged employment from within, holistically and longitudinally. Conflicts between the making of neoliberal subjects and socially immersive drives are synthesized in various ways.

I present three case studies of working-biographies, each of which lives out the contradictions of enterprise paternalism and fictive kinship opportunities on offer today. I focus in particular on these cases over other possible emblematic ones because they allow preliminary theory building to emerge. Methodologically, I base my conclusions on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a mixed rural and urban district in European Russia since 2009 (Morris 2016, p. 215-231). The socio-economic milieu of the field in Kaluga region is decidedly blue-collar and 'rust-belt', with most informants here having significant industrial production experience. The research materials I rely on here were collected in four periods: 2018, 2019, in 2021, and then in late 2022 during research stays of approximately 3-8 weeks at a time. Some conversations were recorded (approximately 20 hours of material). A similar number of conversations were summarised in note form both during and after the meetings. Where presence in the field sites was not possible, phone messenger chats were employed. For the purposes of readability and economy I make use of three composites — that is to say, three 'ethnographic characters' that combine actual interview material in representative and generalizable form. These characters represent the words of actual interlocutors I have known since 2009 (and in one case, before). On the basis

that my interviews had a purpose to explore attitudes towards paternalism in enterprises and were sufficiently focussed and tended towards saturation (repeated tropes across interviews) they can be called internally valid (LeCompte and Goetz 1982, p. 43). While any interpretations remain mainly tentative, composites are a useful technique and tool for compressing diverse yet sample-saturated materials. They also present a solution to ethical issues when representing sensitive materials that require the disguising of participants' identity (Humphreys, Watson 2009, Morris 2016, p. 225).

### **Case Study 1: Anton. 'Khoziain'-supplicant incorporation in new workplaces after 2022**

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Our first composite, Anton was employed by Volkswagen as an electrician for many years prior to the Western car firm leaving Russia. After many months on furlough, he found a similar position with a Russian company closer to home. One of the reasons he had gone to work for Volkswagen in the first place in 2009 was the much better conditions in the plant than in comparable workplaces in Kaluga region. A lot of his talk was about the good 'conditions' of work. Over time it emerged that he valued the 'calmer' atmosphere at the multinational corporation where work relations more formalized, even if it meant that the overall pace of work was higher. It was interesting that while he earned around 50% more than the average regional wage for his type of work, what he valued most of all were the fringe benefits such as a works bus, subsidised food and the like. Despite independent trade unions scoring some success in contesting exploitation at the plant (Hinz, Morris 2016), the majority of workers like Anton valued what they interpreted as a possibility for incorporation in a large sectoral player, even one with foreign owners, as much as good pay by regional standards.

After the exit of many foreign firms, workers like Anton were in no hurry to return to blue-collar jobs with inferior working conditions to the ones they had grown used to. After many months of furlough, Anton agreed to a contract with a new employer to the region, one making ventilation units for industrial buildings. While at Ventilate he is paid less than in his former job, as of 2024 he was satisfied with the 'bargain' as he put it, with

the new employer. Those who wanted to ‘work on themselves’, were able to and gain important career training and skills. He was impressed with what he said was a new breed of Russian capitalists more open to innovation and disruption, partly finding their opportunities widened as a result of the withdrawal of Western firms from Russia. While the marketing videos (on YouTube) of the entrepreneur are clearly slick PR, it’s possible to detect even here the truth in what Anton says about ‘compressed hierarchies’ and a sense of team-work and mutual recognition between management (and capital owners) and workers. Remarkably, Anton said to me in our most recent conversation (November 2024): ‘The gendirector is something like a Russian Elon Musk. A boss [*khoziain*] and an innovator.’ It’s worth reflecting on this choice of word for ‘boss’. As Xenia Cherkaev muses (2023), as a Soviet-era term, it encompasses the sense of a master of a domain, whose role is to order the social and economic reproduction from a hierarchical position of verticality. Her analysis of the use of the term in the Soviet period historicizes it as at once despotic, contingent, paternalist, and collective. Collier also comments on the paternalistic flavour of this vocabulary but which also presupposes stewardship and ‘care’ (Collier 2011, p. 106).

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Befitting the image of the paternal ‘boss’-benefactor, concessions were made in the setting up of the new factory in Kaluga region by the firm’s owner to a local boxing club that had use of one of the buildings the firm had bought. ‘We’ll do some [more] social projects here when we’ve restored the building [and moved production to the main facility]. We want to breathe new life into this building... we’re going to develop this city further from the perspective of social projects... the people who work here don’t want to leave the city, they want to work and develop with us’. A follow-up video from late 2024 underlines the ‘social sponsorship’ credentials of the firm with support for sports groups activities with transport, equipment, and rental costs. The general director comments: ‘When people come to us to ask for something it’s difficult... even about ordinary problems for a small town... and when there is a demand for such things one cannot refuse’. While we should take all these performative declarations with a large pinch of salt, the actions of the firm very much resemble the decaying paternalism of previous periods locally (Morris 2016,

p. 42-4). In the early 2010s a prominent entrepreneur undertook analogous visible corporate social responsibility projects in a nearby town. Even in the 2010s locals noted how this echoed the social patron role of the comprehensive Soviet enterprise before 1991 (and from which many of these firms were surviving relics of). As the charismatic general director of Ventilate makes clear, while he may be flattening hierarchies in the name of efficiencies and business ‘science’, it remains for the locals to come to him as supplicants for the provision of social protection and the overall tone is one of power distance.

## Case Study 2: Nikita. Neoliberal paternalism as fictive kinship

Our second composite, Nikita, kicked against the pricks, leaving badly paid and precarious work in local factories for the informal economy in the 2010s. He worked for a few years in an underground cooperative factory making double-glazed windows (Morris 2016). However, after 2018, he moved to Kaluga city and works for a metal fastenings factory in an enormous Special Economic Zone (SEZ) set up by the governor in the 2000s. The SEZ served multinational automotive firms including Volvo, Mitsubishi, Peugeot, VW and many other suppliers. At Zastezhka, he worked his way up to quality control and responsibility for a few metal turners. The firm has expanded and quickly replaced the lost foreign clients with new buyers for its wares, essential for the building of new ‘big-box’ sites which facilitate ‘re-shoring’ lower-tech production.

It is tempting to see Zastezhka as representing an example of ‘decaying paternalism’. It offers a few discretionary benefits that resemble the old Soviet-era ‘social wage’ system in return for much more naked exploitation and self-exploitation (Morris, Hinz 2017, Gorbach 2020b). ‘Bad jobs’ are ameliorated just enough by offering an absence of those ‘negatives’ associated with the worst of the 1990s, and token ‘positives’: no wage arrears, pension contributions, and things like a clean shower room, subsidized canteen and free work clothes. This is hardly the ‘social wage’ that at the height of blue-collar availability in the 1980s, added up to 25 per cent in value of the actual cash wage — things like good quality subsidized meals at work and kindergarten places.



Nonetheless, in the present precarious circumstances, they still have significant cash-equivalent value.

On one level, paternalism attempts to stabilize labour ‘churn’ in small, medium and even large enterprises in Russia today. Here, like in the ‘traditional’ Soviet workplace, relations are highly personalized *and* individualized. Immediate bosses exercise patron-client power and everything depends on being in the good books of a supervisor. At the same time, impersonal yet individual performance on the job is measured by output. On the one hand this looks like a manual control reinforcement of neoliberal rationality: if you are unwilling to not only outproduce others as well as exhibit reflexivity *and* deference, then you’re out. Capitalist realism is written into the most personalized of labour relations. Elsewhere, I have argued that SEZs in Russia are laboratories for diffusing further neoliberal economism (Morris 2021). SEZs (like their deterritorialized counterpart, gig-economy apps such as Yandex) are literal states of exception where foreign (and since 2022, state appropriated and redistributed) capital is granted much leeway in labour relations as well as sovereignty.

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Enterprise paternalism is given a new lease of life in firms like Zastezhka, but on militarized neoliberal terms. Personal and conscious sacrifice by the worker is demanded because of the ‘military situation’, and in return a novel ‘care’-relation emerges at the firm level. This partly occurs by necessity — there are increasing demands to hold on to labour and coercion is insufficient to do this. Secondly, firms suddenly have a strong retention instrument in the form of protecting workers bureaucratically from wartime mobilization. In the longer term, this allows them to ask for more sacrifices and further efforts by employees to ‘work on themselves’. Evidence, however, points to a new affective emergent strand of paternalism based on fictitious kinship. Protection is offered, and loyalty given to the firm, in lieu of patriotic sacrifice at the real frontline. The exchange is hierarchical, encompassing, but quid pro quo.

Writing on large-scale corporate social responsibility (CSR), Douglas Rogers (2015) was circumspect about the applicability of the term ‘neoliberalism’ to his research materials on the oil industry in Russia. His hesitation was based on how the Russian case reveals corporate paternalism. Corporations in the Urals were seen to take over paternalistic functions of the local state

and become major social sponsors. Simultaneously, social provision became disembedded from the local population. Subsequently, Rogers observed that CSR tended towards encouraging narratives of entrepreneurialism, even in the cultural sphere. CSR also entails technocratic responsabilizing of social problems devolved to individuals and small groups on the basis of competitive tender. Social programmes are 'sponsored' by a corporate 'client'. In Rogers' view they serve state building as much as the development of an entrepreneurial reality because projects are integrated with regional administration and governance.

However, in the case of Zastezhka and Nikita, we have a further development of a hybrid corporatism which is also neoliberal. Nikita and others genuinely feel thankful to the firm for protecting them from mobilization, but the hierarchical logic of working on one's capacity to fulfil the capitalist aims of the firm remains central. Workers inscribe 'sincerity' into their self-governmentalizing efforts to 'pay back' the firm loyally. We should see in this type of fictive kinship a dialogue with Russia's combined neoliberal and paternalist corporatism. 'I'm fast, I give myself to the work. But I can get faster', Nikita told me in 2018 when he had just started working at the firm. I had asked him to take time out to watch the football World Cup, taking place in Russia. Instead, he went to bed early because he had a shift the next day, which was unlike him.

Fictitious kinship is extended by the firm as a corporate 'extended family' to whom one 'belongs'. Whether this is 'cynically' calculated by employers and HR departments is beside the point. Both employees and managers have a 'feel' for this relation, as one of the HR managers pointed out to me, expressing surprise at its success, despite his embeddedness in this process. Similarly, the actual degree of incorporation into the 'worldview' of Nikita is not so important because he has learned to be his own best surveyor, regardless of his instincts towards autonomy. Fictive incorporation is one possible future for the so-far failed attempt by the state to find an idea for Russian society to 'defensive consolidate' around.

In Zastezhka the frequent '*korporativ*' is more than just an annual social event at the firm's expense. As part of the PR of the firm and in relation to its CSR work in the Region (see Morris 2025 for more details) people are encouraged to goof off in videos

parodying the latest Hollywood blockbuster. The competition to become a funny worker and a character is itself the other side of the coin of neoliberal subjectivation. Emotional labour invested in acting a part for the marketing department is evidence of the intensity of commitment elsewhere. It also contributes to continual feedback into the fictitious kinship model the firm promotes. This relation challenges a simple distinction between commoditized marketized self (neoliberal subject) and the idea of entitlements and rights recognized by and reified within a neo-collectivist corporatism. Even here we see an elective affinity between 'atavistic' collectivist drives and neoliberal yet paternalist relations which sustain the state-capital compact in Russia today.

### Case 3: Misha the realist sceptic

Misha is a technician in an industry that should have benefitted from spill-over of orders from the military industrial complex since 2022. Yet Misha's enterprise is affected by the shortage of workers. Because there aren't enough workmen, he is not getting enough hours as a technician because not all the equipment can be utilized. Even with a wage increase of 50% since 2022, for many, the job is not attractive enough in comparison to lower-skill/stress/pace work in Moscow or elsewhere.

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There's also the major demographic squeeze in general — the c.1% annual fall in working-people available nationally. Misha talks to me a lot at the moment because even when his plant is up and running, his boss has to meet his demands for more flexible working hours, so sensitive is he to losing more workers. His micro-situation is a good illustration of broader processes — like work to rule on the Moscow Metro because of a shortage of staff there but the inability to improve pay and conditions. This implies something of a negative feedback loop for productivity. The more an employer 'sweats' assets, be they labour or capital, the sooner they meet hard limits on increasing output, and even reversals.

Misha's working biography illustrates the ongoing sense of economic insecurity even for people like him who have good social, economic and other 'capitals' (he has a higher technical education in a good sector). It also reminds us of the limits to

any diffusion of paternalism further. This can be represented by Russia's 'labour paradox' — workers can sense their structurally strengthening position — via falling demographics and specific labour shortages, while at the same time as suffering from the overall marginalized power in bargaining (Hinz, Morris 2016). In Russia, with its sharp hierarchies and power distance (making case study one all the more unusual), one can bargain only with one's feet. This paradox, viewed in aggregate, suggests that workers may be able to demand more where they are in industries serving state demand, yet eventually as the overall position deteriorates further, their bargaining power may prove transient. Whether or not some kind of authoritarian corporatism (Makarenko 2011) where there are real concessions to labour led by political recognition of its need is possible remains to be seen.

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Misha is well-educated. He is insistent that the 'situation' of workers has only deteriorated, even as he makes a careful distinction in terms of class (that he's not a worker). He's been monitoring the job boards because in late 2022 he was looking to move into a job to avoid mobilization — perhaps metallurgy (another informant successfully made such a shift). Downshifting of work, after all, is a political strategy that goes back to Soviet times. Misha points out that drawing conclusions based on published wages offered on various recruitment sites is foolish. Nowadays you'd have to look even more carefully at the hidden conditions attached to the discretionary element of the wage. Like others in my sample, he has left jobs where the published wage was higher, but it required much greater self-exploitation at work. He even gives an example of a forklifter in a cement plant. Your 'norm' might now be 50 tonnes a shift rather than 25 tonnes, while your pay has only gone up by 25% since 2022. Working much harder doing forced and unregistered overtime not only wears you out, it's dangerous as the risk of accidents exponentially increases. Overall, Misha's work biography shows a history of contingent mobility between different firms including the use of incomplete labour contracts to avoid full visibility to the state along with his building 'capital' in the informal economy. As I argue elsewhere (Morris 2025), this is emblematic of a history of 'unruly' entrepreneurialism from below which helps explain from the

demand side the failure of incorporating moves. Misha's parting comment was 'I might go to work for the Chinese automotive if they set up here, but only if the conditions are right: a normal "five-two" (five working days per week) schedule, plus lunch, and the proper corporative trinkets (*pliushki*) befitting the scale of production'.

In each case study we can see how factoring in proximate risks was only a part of the calculus. The value of my analysis consists in following each informant's full work biography (since 2009). In the two chief cases here, Anton and Nikita, these were the two informants with the least social or economic capital in my field sample. And perhaps as a result, their decisions and reasoning most reflect a desire to evoke fictive kinship with their enterprises. On the one hand Nikita is remarkably immobile — before 2022 he'd been much more willing to move around — a classic political economy problem for Russia since 1991 (*tekuchost kadrov*). But in Anton's case, the 'special military operation' forced him to move because his car plant no longer existed.

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## Conclusion

Ronaldo Munck (2013, p. 756) argues that labour relations to-day are characterized by 'radical global heterogeneity'. Li and Ferguson (2018) add that 'getting a grip on this heterogeneity requires asking the right questions'. For them it is about the broad category of vulnerable employment, but equally, the demographic transition we are already living through has a stark effect in countries with already obvious labour shortages such as Russia. Further, articulation of devolved corporatism via metaphors of, or approximating relations of fictive kinship is strongly inflected by paternalist models of interaction extant from the Soviet period. Of course, after David Schneider's (1984) broad critique of anthropology's master concept, kinship, it has been easier to see metaphorical familial-hierarchical relations as emerging through all kinds of social concepts and in any societal type. The 'relational' turn, pioneered by Marilyn Strathern (1988) reinforces the idea that the person is always subordinated to encompassing relations: 'a social microcosm'. Despite social science critiques of paternalism, Padavic and

Ernest (1994, p. 390-1) note the enduring Weberian conceptualization of kin-like hierarchy. They point out that the shadow of Weber's 'legitimated authority', has led to a mistaken focus ever since in looking for univocal, unidirectional types of paternalism, when in reality there is always a 'demand' side, and interpretation and rearticulation of relations from below.

Is it meaningful to ask whether Russia and similar states are at the vanguard of 'post-corporatism'? By this I mean, workers, as authoritarian objects of corporatism, experience more than just negative 'compulsion' (adopting a definition of corporatism as a continuum between labour representation and authoritarianism after Colin Crouch (1985). In a recent reading of biopolitics in Russia, Anastasiya Maniulova (2022) argues that sovereign (legal), disciplining (police) or security (biopolitical) power techniques operate in some respects weakly or in faulty ways in the Russian case. What does biopolitical indifference to populations mean for a labour anthropology in post-Soviet countries? The particular labour paradox in Russia (structural strength yet associational weakness) may lead to the emergence of a devolved corporatism. The paradox, understandable to both workers and employers alike may provoke further the articulation through symbolic interaction and affective modes of fictive kinship. Sahlin (2011), attempting to connect diverse literatures on intersubjective relations, seems to point to kinship as expressing inherent connective drives. After Stasch (2009), he proposes kinship as expressing 'intersubjective belonging' and as a striving towards the impossible 'mutuality of being'. While doomed to fail because of the fundamentally exploitative nature of enterprise corporatism and waged labour, we should be attuned to the underlying drive for such relations as more readily activated in societies with historical templates of encompassing orders and dominating hierarchies. The inclusion of the third case study, Misha, is instructive of how global labour heterogeneities can be informed by ethnographic work and show both that relational, yet hierarchical categories are everywhere, and yet are open to challenge, including by organic intellectuals from among dispossessed workers themselves. Nonetheless, the social drive to forms of incorporative belonging via fictive kinship in spaces of production and work must by necessity be strong given the absence of alternatives. Simon Clarke's hypothesis about the in-

complete subsumption of labour under Russian capitalism seems ever less a supposition and more an empirical fact (Clarke 2007, p. 242, in Morrison et al 2023).

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