'To Give Birth or Not to Give Birth?'

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Attwood, L., & Isupova, O. (Accepted/In press). 'To Give Birth or Not to Give Birth?': Having Children in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. In *Handbook on Women and Gender in 20th Century Russia and the Soviet Union* Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.

Published in:

Handbook on Women and Gender in 20th Century Russia and the Soviet Union

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.

Chapter 28

‘To Give Birth or Not to Give Birth?’¹ :

Having Children in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

Lynne Attwood and Olga Isupova

In his address to the Federal Assembly in May 2006, President Vladimir Putin described ‘love, women, children [and] the family’ as the most important matter in Russia, and the demographic situation as ‘the most acute problem’ facing the country.² He told Russian citizens that they were declining in number at a rate, on average, of 700,000 per year. Reversing this trend required a three-pronged approach, he argued: lowering the death rate, establishing an effective migration policy, and increasing the birth rate. Yet he paid by far the most attention to the third of these approaches, both in his speech and in subsequent policy initiatives.

Concern about the family and the birth rate is not new; the so-called ‘demographic crisis’ emerged periodically throughout the Soviet era. There are, however, enormous changes in the ways it has been tackled in different historical periods. This chapter starts with a discussion of these varying approaches, and then looks in more detail at Putin’s understanding of the causes of the demographic problem, how he has attempted to resolve it, and how this fits in with his broader understanding of the

¹ ‘Rozhat’ ili ne rozhat?’ was the title given to several of the web discussion forums we analysed for this article.

² Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly, May 2006, available online:

<http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2006/05/105546.shtml> (accessed November 2013).

family and gender relations in Russia. In Soviet times there were no reliable sources which could tell us how women themselves viewed these subjects, but this is no longer the case. We have carried out a 'netnographic' study - an analysis of discussions on internet sites – to discern how important the family and children are for women in post-Soviet Russia, how they explain their decision whether or not to have children, and how their attitudes differ from those of women in the late Soviet era.

The 'Demographic Crisis' in Pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union:

Concern about the family and demography began at the start of the twentieth century.

The uprisings of 1905 led to a loosening of family ties and moral norms, especially amongst the young, and to a large increase in the number of abortions, which were illegal at that time. This led to a debate about whether birth control should be made available and abortion legal. The arguments put forward against helping women to avoid childbirth by either method focused on two issues: the possibility that it would result in the population not only failing to grow but even failing to reproduce itself, and concern that separating sexual relations from the risk of pregnancy could lead to moral laxity and encourage women to shirk their 'natural function' of motherhood.

Laura Engelstein claims that '[t]he real problem with which abortion confronted physicians [...] was the moral and political crisis - coded in sexual terms - of educated men faced with [...] women challenging established patterns of cultural and civic control in an increasingly less predictable social and cultural environment'.³

³ Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin de Siecle Russia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 358.

The October Revolution did, in some ways, overturn traditional attitudes towards the family. There were differing opinions on what the family would look like under socialism, or even if it would exist at all, but there was a general consensus that the new society would be characterised by gender equality, that women would leave the imprisonment of the home and enter the public spheres of work and politics, and that domestic chores would be taken over by state institutions.

Yet the revolutionaries were conservative when it came to reproduction. They legalised abortion in 1920, but saw this as a temporary measure which would be revoked once the state was able to provide for all of its children. Lenin insisted that the Bolsheviks were ‘unconditionally the enemies of neo-Malthusianism’, the birth-control movement based on concerns about over-population put forward by the Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus in the late eighteenth century. According to Lenin, only ‘unfeeling and egotistical’ petty-bourgeoisie, not courageous workers, would want to avoid parenthood.⁴ Aleksandra Kollontai, the Bolsheviks’ principal theorist on the family and their greatest advocate of women’s equality, still saw having children as an integral feature of the ‘new woman’. She would not have to rear them herself, however. Kollontai insisted that the collective would ultimately replace the family and would take over responsibility for childcare. Financial responsibility

⁴ V.I. Lenin, ‘The Working Class and Neo-Malthusianism’, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, vol. 19, pp. 235-7; originally published in *Pravda*, 16 June 1913. Available online: <http://www.rcgfrfi.easynet.co.uk/ww/lenin/1913-wcn.htm> (accessed June 2015).

would be assumed by the state, paid for by means of a General Insurance Fund to which all working adults would contribute.⁵

With Stalin in power, a more traditional view of the family was revived. His rapid industrialisation programme resulted in social upheaval, a spontaneous drop in the birth rate, and a high incidence of 'hooliganism'. As Gail Lapidus notes, it was hoped that old-fashioned families would provide 'islands of stability in a sea of social chaos'.⁶ In June 1936 abortion was banned; the ostensible reason was that the state was now able to provide for all of its children, but an underlying demographic concern was voiced in a 1935 article in the women's magazine *Rabotnitsa* (*Woman Worker*) that denounced abortion on the grounds that 'the country needs people'.⁷

The country needed even more people after the enormous loss of life in the Second World War, and replenishing the population became women's patriotic duty. Military-style medals were introduced in 1944 ('Medals of Maternity' and 'Hero Mother' awards) for women who showed supreme valour on the reproductive front. There was also a loosening of the strict morality of the pre-war era; since there were no longer

⁵ A. Kollontai, 'The Labour of Women in the Revolution of the Economy', in *Alexandra Kollontai: Selected Writings*, translated and with commentaries by Alix Holt, London: Allison and Busby, 1977, pp. 146 and 148. See also Holt's commentary on this subject, p. 119.

⁶ Gail W. Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development and Social Change*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, p. 97.

⁷ Mariya V. Kimova, 'Ya protiv aborta', *Rabotnitsa*, no. 17, 1935, pp. 12-13.

enough men to go round it was necessary to share, and single motherhood was exonerated.

By the time Brezhnev was in power (1964-82), the one-child family was the norm in urban areas of the European republics, and demographers were insisting that the 'demographic crisis' was one of the major social problems confronting the country.⁸ Accordingly, at the XXVI Communist Party Congress in 1981, it was declared that two and three child families should be promoted throughout the Soviet Union. There was some attempt to boost the birth rate by introducing more economic and social support for families: maternity leave was increased (partially-paid leave was extended from one year to 18 months, then later to three years), child benefits were raised, and there was a pledge to increase the number of nursery places and encourage enterprise managers to allow flexible working for mothers of small children. Yet demographers insisted that material improvements would not automatically increase the birth rate, and that the battle should be fought primarily on the ideological front. As demographer Anatoly Antonov put it, 'it is essential to form in the country's inhabitants, in effect, a new desire for several children'.⁹ This involved persuading women that gender equality did not mean men and women performing the same functions; it meant that their different functions would be of equal value. Hence women should derive their main satisfaction from the traditional roles of wife and mother rather than from excelling in their professions. They should still work (indeed,

⁸ Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990, p. 4.

⁹ Anatoly Antonov, 'Dvukh detei malo', *Meditinskaya gazeta*, 27 September 1985, p. 4.

given the labour-intensive nature of the Soviet economy, it was essential that they did so), but they should devote less time and energy to climbing the professional ladder and more to raising children.

Journalists were in the front line of this psychological offensive. A flood of articles appeared in newspapers and magazines lamenting the loss of 'real' men and women, insisting that this had resulted in serious problems for society and individuals, and urging people to embrace more traditional gender roles. As G. Belskaya wrote in *Literaturnaya gazeta*, under the heading 'Where do bad wives come from?', '[w]hen cultivating in the woman the characteristics so useful in the sphere of business, such as firmness, steadfastness, intolerance [sic], rationality, and a grasp of business, we must be clearly aware that we are certainly reconstructing her emotional balance and contracting her purely maternal qualities'.¹⁰ Men also suffered from the erosion of distinct gender roles. Deprived of the functions of breadwinner and head of the family, they adopted a distorted version of 'female' characteristics: 'Softness becomes spinelessness, attention to detail becomes pettiness, maternal prudence becomes cowardice...'¹¹

The education system backed up this media assault with the introduction, in 1984, of a school course on 'The Ethics and Psychology of Family Life'. This was essentially a programme of gender socialisation. As one pedagogical theorist explained: 'Up to

¹⁰ G. Belskaya, 'Otkuda berutsya plokhie zheny', *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 7 September 1977, p. 12.

¹¹ Yu.B. Ryurikov, quoted by L. Proshina, 'Muzhchiny, beregite sebya!', *Nedel'ya*, 30 May 1977, p. 6.

now, school-children's ideas about the psychological differences of men and women have been formed by chance. With the introduction of the new school subject, teachers will be directed towards the upbringing of children according to the laws of personality developed connected with their sex'.¹² Film-makers also put out pro-family messages; the new *bytovoi* or 'daily life' genre of films was peopled by women who, as film critic Elena Stishova pointed out, were 'emancipated, independent, equal, but all the same, for some reason, not very happy'.¹³ The message was that Soviet women had paid a high price for prioritising work over family.

By the mid-1980s, demographers were claiming that the pro-natal campaign had achieved modest success. In the words of Viktor Perevedentsev, '[e]xperience has shown that it is possible to raise the birth-rate'.¹⁴ Yet this increase was vulnerable, and it did not survive the upheaval brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Putin's Approach to the 'Demographic Crisis':

In his 2006 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin emphasised material difficulties and the problem of combining work and motherhood as key factors in women's decision to curtail their family size.

¹² T.I. Yuferova, 'Obrazy muzhchin i zhenshchin v soznanii podrostkov', *Voprosy psikhologii*, no. 3, 1985, p. 90.

¹³ Elena Stishova, *Blizkoe proshloe*, Kiev: Mistetstvo, 1989, p. 82; and Lynne Attwood, *Red Woman on the Silver Screen*, London: Pandora, 1993, pp. 81–94.

¹⁴ V. Perevedetsev, 'Malysh tretii, zhelannyi', *Nedel'ya*, 15-21 January 1987, p. 14.

What prevents young families, women, from taking [the] decision [to have] a second or third child? The answers are obvious and well known: they are low incomes, inadequate housing, doubts about their own ability to provide a decent level of medical care and good quality education for their future child. And sometimes also doubts [...] as to whether they will even be able to feed [the child]. When a woman is thinking of having a child she has to make [the following] choice: either give birth but lose her job, or abandon the idea of having a child. This is a very difficult choice.

Accordingly, he announced the introduction of a programme aimed at encouraging women to have 'at least a second child' by providing them with increased financial and social support. Measures would include an increase in childcare benefits (from 700 rubles per month to 1,500 for the first child and 3,000 for a second child); payment of no less than 40 per cent of a woman's previous salary during maternity leave; a contribution towards the cost of state-run pre-school childcare, from 20 per cent for the first child, 50 per cent for the second, to 70 per cent for a third; an increase in the value of the childbirth certificates which had been introduced the previous year to help offset the costs relating to childbirth; and, most significantly, the introduction of 'Maternal Capital', a new one-off payment to be made on the birth of a second or subsequent child. Putin explained:

In my view the state has an obligation to help women who have given birth to a second child and have to leave the work place for a long time, which results

in them losing their skills. Unfortunately [...] the woman in this situation often falls into a state of dependence, and sometimes, to put it frankly, a humiliating position within the family. And the state, if it is really interested in raising the birth rate, has to support women who have made the decision to have a second child. It must provide such women with an initial, basic 'Maternal Capital' which will raise their social status and help to resolve future problems. And they can use it for the following purposes: either to resolve their housing problem, using [the money] to secure housing with the help of a mortgage or other form of credit once the child has reached the age of three; put it towards the child's education; or, if they prefer, use it to improve their own pensions.

This Maternal Capital should be no less than 250,000 rubles in the first instance, and would increase every year in line with inflation.

Putin's approach is quite different to that of his predecessors. He has not attempted to boost the birth rate by controlling access to contraception and abortion, as was the case in the late Imperial and Stalinist years. Nor has he bombarded women with pro-family propaganda, as happened under Brezhnev. However, this may be because he is unable to use such tactics now that there is some semblance of democracy in Russia.

Family and Children as a Life-style Choice:

Russia is not a democratic society in the Western sense, but it cannot exert the

same level of control over the population as it did in the past. Alternative sources of information are now available (most notably the Internet), and people have much more opportunity both to form opinions which differ from those promoted by the state and to act on them.

Authoritarian attempts to control life style choices are not entirely absent from the pro-family drive, however. There is an evident link between pro-natalism and the clamp-down on homosexuality. In 2012 a hundred-year ban was imposed on Gay Pride marches in Moscow, and in 2013 a new Federal Law prohibited the propagandizing of homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism amongst minors. As Masha Gessen explains, this renders illegal anything which could be said to encourage the ‘perception that traditional and non-traditional relationships are socially equal’.¹⁵ According to Dan Healey, this anti-gay legislation is supported by ‘conservative forces who view the population decline as the gravest issue facing Russia’;¹⁶ and Putin has acknowledged that his own attitude towards sexual minorities reflects ‘the fact that one of the country’s main problems is demographic’.¹⁷

¹⁵ Masha Gessen, ‘Boycott St. Petersburg’, *New York Times*, 19 March 2012, available online: <http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/19/protest-st-petersburgs-homosexual-propaganda-law-by-boycotting-the-city/> (accessed July 2012).

¹⁶ Dan Healey, ‘glbtq: Russia’, available online: http://www.glbqtarchive.com/ssh/russia_S.pdf (accessed August 2015).

¹⁷ Vladimir Putin, Press Conference for Russian and Foreign Media, 1 February 2007, available online: <http://www.usrccne.org/news2.phtml?m=305> (accessed March 2012).

Concern about the demographic situation might also be linked to a broader concern about the state's loss of control over its citizens. Despite the limitations of Russia's democracy, people are able to make choices about how they live their lives which were impossible in the Soviet era. Back then, parenthood was promoted not only through the dearth of contraception (though abortion was famously used in its place after it was again legalised in 1955), but also through housing allocation: almost all housing was owned by the state, and there was virtually no possibility of the unmarried and childless being assigned apartments. Now contraception is readily available, and the privatisation of housing means that family status is no longer a factor in the procurement of an apartment. It is, accordingly, easier to opt out of the norm.

Choosing not to have children at all is now an option, and the 'Childfree' movement, which began in the 1970s in North America to support people who chose to remain childless, has arrived in Russia, largely in the form of an Internet community. There are no statistics on its size, but the Russian media outlet *Russia Today* estimates that it has thousands of on-line members.¹⁸

In June 2011, a Demographic Summit was hosted in Moscow under the patronage of Svetlana Medvedeva, wife of then-President Dimitry Medvedev. Organised by the Illinois-based World Congress of Families, it expressed opposition to sexual

¹⁸ “‘Childless on principle’ gains ground in Russia’, available online:

<http://rt.com/news/principled-childless-gain-russia/> (accessed January 2013).

minorities, radical feminists and the Childfree movement.¹⁹ It also expressed approval of new pro-life movements in Russia such as the Foundation of Socio-Cultural Initiatives, headed by Svetlana Medvedeva, which listed among its achievements an anti-abortion week in July 2008. Russian participants included prominent figures in the Orthodox Church and academics such as demographer Anatoly Antonov who, as noted previously, was an advocate of the pro-natal propaganda campaign of the Brezhnev era. One of the visiting speakers was Steven Mosher, a social scientist from the USA; father of nine children, he is a staunch critic of China's one-child policy and president of the pro-life Population Research Institute, which views overpopulation as a myth. He called on the Russian government to change the Constitution so that life would be guaranteed from conception, to exempt families with three or more children from tax, and - a tactic reminiscent of Soviet days - to introduce pro-family propaganda in school text books.²⁰

¹⁹ Moskovskii Demograficheskii Sammit, 'Sem'ya i budushchee chelovechestva', 29-30 iyunya 2011, available online:

www.worldcongress.org/Special/Moscow%20Demographic%20Summit%20June%202011%20English%20Apr.pdf, p. 5 (accessed July 2013). See also 'Republic of

Gilead, Warily watching the religious right, July 17, 2011: Familiar Themes at Demographic Summit in Moscow', available online:

<http://republic-of-gilead.blogspot.co.uk/2011/07/familiar-themes-at-demographic-summit.html> (accessed July 2013).

²⁰ Steven Mosher, 'How to create a baby boom in Russia', available online:

<http://www.demographia.ru/eng/articles/index.html?idR=80&idArt=1941> (accessed February 2013).

Putin's Understanding of the Family and Gender Relations:

In the discussion of demographic issues in his 2006 speech, Putin referred only to mothers. He did not consider the possibility of paternity leave, nor of part time work for both parents. Indeed, he only acknowledged that fathers had a role to play in family life when he referred to the amount of money which parents, rather than mothers, had to pay for pre-school childcare. The father's contribution to childcare seems, then, to have been seen as largely financial.

In their analysis of this speech, Anna Rotkirch, Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova were fairly positive about Putin's attitudes towards women. They noted that his proposals to stimulate the birth rate were directed almost entirely at women and that he did not refer to a paternal childcare role, but he did not promote 'heterosexual normativity' by 'deplor[ing] the rising number of unwed parents, divorcees and single mothers', nor suggest that women leave the work force in order to devote themselves to their families. He also did not explicitly 'reproduce the strong symbolic elevation of women as mothers typical of the Soviet gender order' by stressing 'specific female values and inborn psychological skills'. They concluded that he accepted that women were entitled to make choices about their lives.²¹

In this chapter, we take a rather less positive view, and would argue that 'heterosexual normativity' is promoted in Putin's speech through the exclusion of any forms of

²¹ Anna Rotkirch, Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova, 'Who Helps the Degraded Housewife? Comments on Vladimir Putin's Demographic Speech', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, no. 14, 2007, pp. 352-3.

family which do not accord with the traditional model. There are no negative references to single, unmarried or divorced mothers because there are no references to them at all. Putin did not actually discuss ways of getting mothers back into work, but implicitly suggested that they be compensated for being out of work. He talked of full-time mothers finding themselves ‘in a state of dependence, and sometimes [...] a humiliating position within the family’, but his proposed solutions seemed to be aimed at enabling them to improve their status within the family by making a financial contribution even if they were not working; this would certainly be the effect if they used their Maternal Capital to improve the family’s housing or pay for their children’s education.

Putin insisted that the birth rate could not be raised without a change in attitudes towards family values. ‘Academician D.S. Likhachev once wrote that “love for one’s homeland, for one’s country, begins with love for one’s family”. And we must restore these time-honoured values connected with caring for the family and home’.²² This suggestion is not so dissimilar to the promotion of traditional gender norms in the Brezhnev era. Gessen holds that Russia is presenting itself as the “‘family values’ capital of the world’, and this feeds into hardening attitudes

²² Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly, May 2006. Dmitry Likhachev (1906-1999) was a scientist, intellectual and survivor of the Gulag, who is known as ‘Russia’s conscience’ and ‘guardian of national culture’. After his death a charitable foundation was established in his name to promote culture, education and democratic and humanitarian values in Russia. For more information available online, see <http://beautifulrus.com/> and <http://likhachev.fond.spb.ru/> (accessed August 2016).

towards homosexuality.²³ It might also hinder the expression even of alternative heterosexual forms of the family.

Women's Attitudes Towards Family and Children:

In an attempt to understand women's own attitudes towards the family and children we have analysed discussions on a range of Russian Internet forums. Use of the internet in Russia has grown exponentially in recent years and our target group, women of child-bearing age, is particularly well represented: in 2012, *Moscow News* estimated that 48 per cent of internet users in Russia were between the ages of 25 and 45.²⁴ The Internet provides a rich source of data on personal matters since, as Christine Hine has pointed out, 'the cloak of anonymity can lead people to a frankness

²³ Masha Gessen, 'Over the Rainbow', *Guardian Weekend* magazine, 16 November 2013, p. 44.

²⁴ Evgeniya Chaykovskaya, 'Russia's Internet use surges', *Moscow News*, 18 April 2012, available online:

<http://themoscownews.com/business/20120418/189642926.html>

(accessed December 2013; currently unavailable). See also Maxine David,

'@Russia.com: Online and Offline Protest', *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 134, 30

July 2013, p. 6; Levada-Tsentr, [http://www.levada.ru/15-07-2013/istochniki-](http://www.levada.ru/15-07-2013/istochniki-informatsii-moskvichei)

[informatsii-moskvichei](http://www.levada.ru/15-07-2013/istochniki-informatsii-moskvichei) (accessed January 2014); and A. Karlin, 'Russia is now an

Internet society', *Russian Spectrum*, [http://russianspectrum.com/2013/05/21/russia-](http://russianspectrum.com/2013/05/21/russia-an-internet-society)

[an-internet-society](http://russianspectrum.com/2013/05/21/russia-an-internet-society) (accessed January 2014).

[they] rarely show in face-to-face encounters'.²⁵ Olga Isupova, who provided the Internet data for this chapter and contributed to its analysis, has personal experience of this, having taken part in very frank Internet discussions on IVF treatment, about which there is considerable stigma in Russia.²⁶

We chose to use what Robert V. Kozinets, the pioneer of netnography, terms 'observational netnography', in which 'the researcher does not reveal him or herself to the online community and its members, [...] does not enter or alter the community, and also has fewer opportunities to learn about the community through the lived complexity of actual interactions with the community'.²⁷ In her research on infertility treatment, Isupova participated fully in her online community, but she was undergoing fertility treatment herself and so her participation was appropriate. In the current project we felt that it would have been inappropriate and intrusive.

Using Internet discussions as source material does produce some difficulties. Firstly, contributors rarely provide personal information about themselves. We were always

²⁵ Christine Hine, 'Internet Research and Unobtrusive Methods', *University of Surrey Social Research Update*, issue 61, Spring 2011, pp. 2-3, available online:

<http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU61.pdf> (accessed December 2013).

²⁶ Olga Isupova, 'Support through patient internet-communities: Lived experience of Russian in vitro fertilization patients', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, no. 3, vol. 6, 2011, pp. 1-13.

²⁷ Robert V. Kozinets, 'Netnography 2.0', in Russell W. Belk (ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research methods in Marketing*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2005, pp. 133-4.

able to determine their gender, but few participants revealed their exact ages or whether they lived in large cities, towns or the countryside (though the latter was sometimes implicit). There are also ethical considerations. Isupova was able to discuss her research project on fertility treatment with members of her Internet community, and asked permission to use quotations and information from the discussion threads. We were not able to do so in this project. Arguably an Internet forum constitutes a public space since the material is available for anyone to read; to quote David Jacobson, '[t]here is no reasonable expectation of privacy in these conceptual spaces [...], and messages posted to publicly accessible fora are not private and are not protected by privacy laws'.²⁸ However, in an authoritarian society in which the state has such a strong concern about demography, discussions on whether or not to have children, and why, could be considered sensitive. Accordingly we have ensured that the people posting on these sites cannot be identified. We have referred to contributors by the first initial of the names they used on the site, even if these were humorous nicknames, adding a roman numeral when more than one person had the same initial (for example, A(i)). Some people posted anonymously, or as 'guests'; these we have referred to respectively as 'Anon' or 'Guest'. We have used only brief direct quotations, and have avoided the use of specific terms which could enable contributors to be identified. Kozinets has pointed out that '[u]sing contemporary search engines, many netnographic quotes and verbatim are easily

²⁸ David Jacobson, 'Doing Research in Cyberspace', *Field Methods*, no. 2, vol. 11, 1999, pp. 134 and 135, available online: http://people.brandeis.edu/~jacobson/Doing_Research_Cyberspace.pdf (accessed January 2014).

traceable to other identifiers of a contributor to the research'.²⁹ However, since the posts were in Russian and we have translated all quotations into English, we are confident that this could not happen. To further protect the discussants, we have given only the year in which discussions took place but not the actual dates of the posts.

In an attempt to get as representative a sample as possible, we used a large range of sites and forums. At one end of the spectrum is *Probirka* (test tube) (<http://www.probirka.org/>), the site with which Isupova was involved. Women who take part in discussions on this site are clearly very keen to have children, since they are willing to go through the emotionally gruelling use of reproductive technologies. At the other end is the *Childfree* forum (<http://ru-childfree.livejournal.com/>), used primarily by women who have chosen not to have children. In between are another 12 forums which tackle issues of more general concern to women but have all hosted discussions on women's attitudes towards the family and children. These are *Community.livejournal.com*; *spbgu.ru*; *woman.ru*; *sibarit.ru*; *otvet.mail*; *29.ru*; *eva.ru*; *forum.rusmama.ru*; *kid.ru*; *forum.mamka.ru*; *puzyaka.ru*; and *klymba.ru*. There are occasional posts from men, but the vast majority of contributors to the forums are women.

Material Factors and 'Maternal Capital':

As we have seen, Putin argued that material factors were paramount in women's decision to limit their family size. His concerns were echoed by a male contributor to an internet site in Arkhangel'sk, who explained that women were put off having

²⁹ Kozinets, 'Netnography 2.0', p. 135.

children because they had insufficient money, their accommodation was inadequate, they lacked good jobs, they had health problems, and they had no faith in the future (AM, 29.ru, 2011). The arguments put forward by women themselves were not so straightforward.

This does not mean that material factors were unimportant to women. One of them held that '[c]hildren are a luxury now, and the only people who can have more than two are very rich!' (L, *Otvetmail*, 2007). Another described herself as "'materially childfree'": that is, I want children, but only if I have a sufficient material level' (S(i), *Livejournal*, 2006). A third said she would like a second child, but was waiting until her situation was more stable and she had sufficient income (E(i), 29.ru, 2011).

It was acknowledged that people brought up in the consumerist atmosphere of post-Soviet Russia have a different understanding of material sufficiency than previous generations. 'In the past people lived modestly (or even in poverty), but they still had no fewer than two children, and in even earlier times they had as many as ten! And they managed to live somehow' (CD(i), *eva.ru*, 2011). Women now insisted that they needed 'rivers of money' before having children, while 'during the war they gave birth and everyone was happy' (N(i), *kid.ru*, 2011). One woman pointed out that although we assume people will have more children if they are materially well-off, in fact the highest birth rates are in the poorest countries (PP, *Probirka*, 2007).

Even if women did see their material conditions as a factor in their decision not to have children, they were cynical about Putin's attempts to resolve them. Maternal Capital was derided: if it was used to improve the family's housing, it would fund at

best around '5.5 square meters of living space' (L(i), *Otvetmail*, 2007), and much less in a major city such as St. Petersburg (V(i), *Livejournal*, 2008). If it was put towards higher education, it would pay for just one year of study in a prestigious state university (V(i), *Livejournal*, 2008). If it went towards the mother's pension, it would add just three rubles per month (V(i), *Livejournal*, 2008). In any case, 'the laws in Russia change every week' (V(i), *Livejournal*, 2008), and since parents could only start claiming the money when the child reached the age of three, 'we'll have different legislation and another government [by then], so we're not going to receive anything' (N(ii), *Otvetmail*, 2007). A number of participants saw Maternal Capital as an attempt to manipulate women; it was 'aggressive propaganda about childbearing' (N(iii), *Livejournal*, 2006), a 'PR job' to persuade people to have more children (WV *Livejournal*, 2006). Women with any sense would see through the state's trickery: '[i]ntelligent people understand that there's no sense in having children for the sake of this [money]' (V(i), *Livejournal*, 2008), and would 'decide whether or not to give birth irrespective of these empty promises' (Yu(i), *Otvetmail*, 2007). All the same, the scheme might possibly prove successful because less intelligent or educated women were likely to be taken in (Yu(i), *Otvetmail*, 2007), and there was also a danger that it would 'encourage alcoholics and drug addicts in smaller cities to start breeding like rabbits' (E(ii), *Otvetmail*, 2007). One particularly cynical comment was that women who did what was required of them and produced 'cannon fodder' for the state would just end up living in poverty (A(i) 29.ru, 2011).

Not all women were entirely dismissive of Maternal Capital. One conceded (perhaps at least partly in jest) that she might be persuaded to have another child if she was offered an entire apartment rather than just a contribution towards its cost (Anon(i),

Otvetmail, 2007). Another said she would consider taking up the offer since she wanted a second child anyway and the money would make it easier (S(ii), *Otvetmail*, 2007). A third pointed out that many women had fewer children than they wanted because of material problems, and while ‘in Moscow 250,000 [rubles] is equal to five square metres, somewhere or other in the depths of the countryside this is a whole house! If it would help [me] to resolve the housing issue, I’d give birth straight away’ (Yu(ii), *Otvetmail*, 2007).

Other Factors Influencing Women’s Decision to Have or Not Have Children:

While Soviet women were brought up to see having children as their duty to the state and, accordingly, held the state at least partly responsible for their care and subsistence, the women participating in these forums placed much more stress on personal choice and responsibility. Although she was concerned about the low birth rate, one woman insisted that people should not have children if they did not have enough money to ensure the child ‘doesn’t lack anything and feels himself happy’ (CD(i), *eva.ru*, 2011). Another felt the state could not be trusted: ‘It would be ok if the state helped, but at present all our bureaucrats are thieves’ (V(ii), *29.ru*, 2011). A third contributor saw choice and responsibility as paramount: ‘Whether to have or not to have children is each person’s personal choice. Children MUST be born only if there is a huge desire for them, and an understanding of exactly what it means to be a parent’ (Ts(i), *spbgu.ru*, 2007).

The difficulty in combining work and motherhood, one of the issues raised by Putin, was important to many women. Inadequate childcare was a big part of the problem;

most childcare facilities now closed too early, and those that did stay open later charged extortionate fees (F, *Childfree*, 2006). However, Soviet childcare facilities were not remembered with much nostalgia. ‘In Soviet times there was a general blessing – “the kindergarten”. You had a child, put it in a kindergarten, and went to work without having to worry. Everyone was happy (apart from the child). But now it would be very naïve and stupid to think that you can combine children and career’ (T, *Childfree*, 2006).

If the state no longer played a large role in childcare, some felt that fathers should fill that gap. Yet there was little hope that men would be persuaded to play a larger role. A number of women bemoaned the fact that ‘parental duties [...] fall overwhelmingly on wives’ (B, *Childfree*, 2006), but all the same, ‘[i]f you want to do less work for your family on an unpaid basis there is an obvious solution – don’t have [children]’ (N(iv), *Childfree*, 2006). Again, it was down to personal choice: ‘If you have three children, don’t complain that you can’t work as well. If you want to work, then don’t have children’ (T, *Childfree*, 2006).

We suggested earlier that Maternal Capital was intended in part to offset the difficulty of combining work and motherhood by giving non-working women more financial clout and status in the family. This did not tempt many of the women in the Internet discussions to embrace full-time motherhood. Work was not only a source of money and status but also of pleasure and self-realisation.

[When] I went on maternity leave, I had to give up for a time my beloved and profitable business. [...] Now it will soon be two years; my mother has left

work and looks after my son and I've gone back to work. I've become beautiful again, I'm working in business again, I've bought myself some new clothes and shoes, I'M BACK AT WORK!!! HURRAH!!! [...] I don't ever want to go on maternity leave again [...] (Anon(ii), *Eva.ru*, 2012).

Another respondent pointed out, with clear disapproval, that women in republics with traditionally large families, such as the Caucasus, 'don't go to work in stiletto heels and beautiful clothes', and that giving birth to healthy children was their only means of 'achiev[ing] self-realisation, of having social significance' (Anon(ii) *Eva.ru*, 2012).

The desire for self-realisation, to look good and simply to enjoy life were common reasons for not wanting children. One woman said she did not wish to spend all of her money on children so that there nothing left for herself (V(ii), *29.ru*, 2011). Another acknowledged that: 'Neither I nor my husband want to sacrifice ourselves' (S(i), *Livejournal* 2006). Motherhood forced women into dependence on their husbands or partners, meant they had less money to spend on themselves, and deprived them of the chance to 'experience the [other] tastes of life' (CD(ii), *Childfree*, 2006). Concern that they would become less attractive and desirable was also an issue: a woman who actually wanted children had decided against it as her husband 'doesn't find mothers sexually attractive' (Ts(ii), *Eva.ru*, 2011). A 'Childfree' woman summed up the 'concern for oneself' position: 'My sleep, my plans for the future, and my beautiful body are more important to me' (P, *Childfree*, 2008).

Participants on the Childfree forum tried to understand why they were not interested in having children. The possibility of biological factors was explored: that is, that the

‘maternal instinct’ was naturally weaker in some women than others. However, most respondents claimed to have made their decision entirely on pragmatic grounds, ‘because the plusses of having a child and being a mother are weaker than the minuses of not having [one]’ (CD(ii), *Childfree*, 2006). The consensus was that it should be entirely a matter of personal choice, with no reference to social norms or concerns. Not wanting a child should be sufficient reason not to have one, and one contributor was convinced this was the underlying rationale of all childfree women, even if some felt compelled to put forward other excuses to ward off criticism (TT, *Childfree*, 2006). The expression of negative attitudes towards women who chose not to have children was a common experience, and was universally condemned by the childfree. ‘[E]veryone has a right to their own views. The only people who aren’t right are those who think that there’s some kind of norm and that to deviate from this is bad’ (B, *Childfree*, 2006). This was seen, at least in part, as a hangover from the Soviet era. One woman who now identified as childfree had felt compelled to have children in the past because of social pressure: ‘I never consciously wanted children, [...] but I was a product of Soviet education and believed that I simply had to have children’ (A, *Childfree*, 2012).

Negative references to childless women, and to the Childfree movement itself, did make an appearance across the Internet sites. One of the more vitriolic was posted by a man who condemned ‘the imported movement called ‘Childfree’, which [...] is now widespread in Russia’ and which had resulted in many women openly declaring that they did not want children (AM, 29.ru, 2011). He was challenged by a woman who described herself as childfree and insisted that ‘I’m not going to have children, and neither Putin nor anyone else can persuade me to do so’ (TV, 29.ru, 2011). A

contributor to another forum said she had never had maternal feelings and was tempted to join the Childfree community; not having children was a valid personal decision and women who made this decision should not have to put up with the abuse of others (R, *woman.ru/health* 2012). The pressure placed on women to have children was seen by some, at least in part, as ‘a Soviet inheritance, when children really were the only joy many people had’ (Guest, *woman.ru*, 2012).

In short, then, Russian women are not rushing *en masse* to produce multiple children for the post-Soviet state. Their reasons include material conditions, the difficulty of combining work and motherhood, concern about the detrimental effects of pregnancy and childbirth on their appearance, and the necessity of putting other pleasures and interests on hold. Space restrictions have prevented us from discussing some other issues which received a fair amount of attention, such as the fragility of marriage and the likelihood of being left with sole responsibility for small children; concern that having children might push a modern couple into traditional gender roles; fears about over-population; and a broader pessimism about the future. There were also lengthy discussions on the age at which women were choosing to have children, with some contributors suggesting that some seemingly childfree women might just be postponing childbirth until they had established their careers and settled their financial positions. This has long been the case in the West, and with families receiving far less state support than they did in Soviet times, the Western approach is proving increasingly attractive to some Russian women.

Conclusion:

The 'demographic crisis' has been a cause of alarm for the Russian authorities for more than a century. Attempts have been made to control reproductive behaviour by restricting access to contraception, distributing housing in accordance with family status and propagandising a single model of family life as the norm for all. While there were differences in approach throughout the decades of Soviet power, successive Soviet leaders shared an authoritarian attitude towards women and the family that saw children as a national resource and reproduction as a social duty on the part of women.

The conditions of post-Soviet Russia make it impossible for Putin to impose such a rigid, state-sanctioned model of family life on the population, and his attempts to boost the birth rate have focused more on economic inducements than on pressure and propaganda. All the same, we have argued that he is still promoting a traditional understanding of the family that is not so dissimilar to that of the late Soviet era: it is based on differentiated gender roles, is mother-centred, produces at least two children, and is, of course, unwaveringly heterosexual.

The Internet discussions we have followed make it clear that many Russian women refuse to embrace Putin's model. The most notable aspect of the discussions was the insistence on personal choice and responsibility in relation to family, children and life style in general. This not only stands in stark contrast to the old Soviet approach, but might also be seen as a challenge to Putin himself.