

Parenthood in Russia: from the state duty to personal responsibility and mutual cooperation¹

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Abstract: This article represents a study of parenthood in contemporary Russia. It presents analysis of the characteristics of the Soviet type of parenthood when the state occupied the dominant position in the sphere of gender relations as well as in forming and assigning parental roles. However, in contemporary Russia, in spite of the pronatalist character of family policy, oriented towards support of the well-to-do problem-free family, parenthood becomes the platform of meaning on the basis of which new collective identities are built and new practices of parenthood appear. Parents not only bear personal responsibility for the wellbeing of their children but are ready to cooperate in order to help each other in solving everyday problems.

Keywords: Parenting, parenthood, gender, social movements, Russia

In Russia, the study of parenthood has its specificities which are defined by the specificities of the Soviet and post-Soviet society. When looking at contemporary Russian parenthood, we cannot escape paying attention to the Soviet experience of gender relations. Several Russian researchers defined the Soviet gender order as “etat-cratic” since it was to a significant extent defined by the state policies setting the possibilities and barriers for people’s actions (Zdravomyislova and Temkina, 2003: 303). The characteristic trait of such a gender order is that the primary agent of formation and control of gender relations was the state. The hegemonic position of the state defined the structure of gender composition. Instead of the binary masculinity/ femininity model which characterized the gender culture of the Western societies, where hegemonic masculinity occupied the dominant role in the gender hierarchy (Connell, 1987; 1995), here we have the so-called triangle in which the state occupied the dominant position in relation to both masculinity and femininity, setting and confirming the gender norm. “Etat-cratic” gender order included two gender contracts which differed in their content for the male or female citizens. The female version was the working mother gender contract in which the stress was put on combining professional and family maternal responsibilities and duties which the woman was ordered to fulfill by the state and which represented the civil duty (Rotkirch and Temkina, 2007; Ayvazova, 2001). The male version, or the builder/defender of communism contract, which presupposed exclusively fulfillment of the civil and the military duty before the country, practically did not take into account the family responsibilities of the man (Chernova, 2007). The male contract, unlike the female one, did not presuppose accentuation of the father’s role. The state mobilized the father to serve the fatherland, and defined the role and function of a man in the family, enacting, in the first place, the socio-economic mechanism (for example, setting the size of alimony for the child), as well as establishing court responsibility for the failure to pay it.

The question of who is to have the primary role in child rearing – the state or the parents - was put on the agenda in the 1920s. The Soviet-period family model in fact represents an alliance of a woman and the state from which the male father is excluded. Soviet family policy in the first place was aimed at supporting motherhood and childhood when the state, declaring its readiness to substitute the real father, accepted the bulk of the material and moral responsibility for education and upbringing of the young citizens.

Normative statements produced by those in power at the time defined parenthood primarily as the function of mothers and the state, recreating on the level of every day practices polarization of gender roles. Motherhood, defined as the civil duty of women, was realized in the traditional care and upbringing of the child which was carried out primarily by women. Mothers could count on the help of the state and could accumulate their familial and social connections receiving support from their mothers, female friends and colleagues in fulfilling housework duties as well as functions of childcare.

Fatherhood was primarily represented as the economic duty of the father before the family, which made the father a marginal figure in the private sphere. This period marked the beginning of the tradition of fatherhood alienation which is supported by state policy (Kukhterin, 2000). Absence of possibilities for men to attend the birth of their children in the medical institutions of the USSR, of legal possibilities of taking advantage of paternal leave, or of joint custody of the child after the divorce, and of other practices of responsible parenthood, make the Soviet fatherhood, on the one hand, similar to the traditional model of parenthood (Zdravomyislova and Arutyunyan, 1998). On the other hand, the impossibility of fulfilling the role of the only breadwinner in the family turns the Soviet model into a special type of parenthood.

Therefore, the specificities of the etat-cratic gender order not only defined the content of the institution of family and parenthood but also determined paternal and maternal roles. Motherhood was to a large extent connected with essentialist ideas about predestination and the ability of a woman to be a mother, and therefore explained the large involvement of women in childcare, whereas fatherhood was defined in terms of economic responsibilities. Unlike the situation in Western countries, where the changes in the conjugal family behavior were connected with the personal choice of men and women and were happening under the influence of changes in gender ideology connected with second wave feminism, in the Soviet society the transformation of family and parenthood was to a large extent determined by the state policy which varied from liberalization of family and sexual relations to strict regulation of marriage rate and birthrates.

Tendencies of democratization of the private life which led to the separation of conjugality and parenthood can also be found in the late Soviet society, in which they acquired their own logic of development and were defined by structural conditions of the everyday life of that period. Liberalization of the family code (primarily the simplification of the divorce procedure) and preservation of state supports for single mothers were factors that contributed to the higher level of divorces, an increase in the number of single mothers, and a decreasing birthrate. The one- or two-child family became the norm for the late Soviet period in the European part of the USSR. Mass housing projects of the 1960s were conducive to nuclearization of the family. Rehabilitation of the private sphere during the "Thaw" (from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s), together with politicization of the public sphere, made the familial and friendly relationships one of the central life priorities for "the simple soviet person" and the most important sphere of her self-realization (Shlapentokh, 1984; 1989). In this context, Soviet sociologists registered the appearance and spread of the child-centric family type whose characteristic traits were "glorification of the role of private life, intimacy and value of the child" (Golod, 1998: 118). The very name of this type of family tells us that the relationships between children and parents were the focal point of this type of family, when the interests and well-being of the children became the central priority for parents, who were ready to sacrifice their professional realization (as a rule in the case of the mother) and preserve the nuclear family (i.e. stay married) even in cases of high level of dissatisfaction with the relationship between the spouses. The increase of the quality of the child-parent relationships, which is characteristic of contemporary parenthood, is found in this Soviet variant of parenthood.

Socio-economic transformations in Russia in the 1990s could not but significantly influence gender relations. While the Soviet gender order is defined by researchers as etatocratic, the contemporary gender order is mainly called neo-traditionalist (See, for example Ashwin 2000; Tartakovskaya, 2000; Zdravomyislova and Temkina, 2003; Chernova, 2008, and others). Ideological and institutional bases of state hegemony in the sphere of gender relations were abolished. Normative examples of masculinity and femininity, characteristic of the Soviet period, stopped being the only possible, exclusive and legitimate gender roles as new examples of real masculinity and femininity appeared, which also aimed at occupying the dominant position in the gender hierarchy. Work and motherhood stopped being defined as the duty of women as a special category of citizens. The traditional family was rehabilitated and the state no longer monopolized the patriarchal role (Ashwin, 2000: 18). Values and norms characteristic of the Western gender culture started penetrating and being disseminated in the Russian discourse and in everyday life. Traditional gender roles of the female housewife and the male breadwinner received institutional support and started being actively reproduced by the media discourse. This led to pluralization of gender relations, which included Soviet as well as Western models of masculinity and femininity. Socio-economic transformations of the 1990s and early 2000s led to the situation in which the state stopped viewing work and parenthood as women's responsibility. It stopped being a guarantor of compulsory professional work for women, which started instead being regulated by market mechanisms and the demand for workforce, which led to a shrinking of the number of working women. Motherhood and childcare have also been redefined and are now viewed as a result of the independent choice and responsibility of each woman.

The change of the position of the state in relation to the family characteristic of this period, and presenting the family with more independence, mean that the parents will bear most of the responsibility for the wellbeing of the family and childcare. The state also stopped fulfilling the role of the main patriarch, expecting that the man will take over the traditional male responsibilities which had earlier been monopolized, but now were abandoned, by the state. The question of the ability of Russian men to occupy the place that had earlier been occupied by the state in questions of provision and wellbeing of the family is solved dependent on the socioeconomic status and individual choice of the man. Aside from that, it is important to note that this patriarchal renaissance, or the return to the traditional roles of the male breadwinner and the female housewife, is perceived differently by men and women. While men aim at the full return of the traditional gender relations and draw the definitive line between the so-called male and female roles (according to which the man works and is the breadwinner and the woman occupies herself with childcare and housework), the women would prefer a modernized version of tradition (Mesherkina, 2000). The model of responsible fatherhood which is spreading among representatives of the new middle class points out one more tendency in the development of the Russian gender culture with the appearing tendency of egalitarianism in the sphere of parenthood (Angelova and Temkina, 2009).

Therefore, in Western society, contemporary parenthood is connected with a redefinition of the role of the mother and the father as well as on giving up the imperative view of the content of parenthood in favor of the contractual character of what each parent can and must do. At the same time, the contract bears a framework character and may be redefined dependent on the age of the child, professional and career situation of the partners, and the will and readiness of each participant to fulfill the responsibilities connected with childcare and childrearing. In Russia, responsible parenthood from the formal point of view appears as a result of a reconfiguration of responsibilities between the state and the family in performing child care, giving up the direct intervention of the state in the private and family life of the citizens. In this scenario, childcare becomes primarily the responsibility of the

parents. Along with this several types of state institutions – school and preschool education institutions, healthcare, and mass media, have lost the monopoly over production and translation of knowledge about the content and ideology of parental roles and practices, childcare and child rearing. Contemporary parenthood started in its content to be filled with new information with the help of new informational sources. The new media such as glossy magazines for parents, the internet, parent forums, etc., as well as the market of goods and services for children including the private sector of medical and educational services connected with family planning, childbirth and early child development, have started playing an active role in the redefinition of parenthood. A plethora of competing actors together with the offered goods and services recreate ideologies and practices of responsible parenthood, constituting parents as reflexive consumers who should make competent choices. Unlike traditional parenthood, contemporary parenthood is multifaceted and is not directly connected with marriage and blood relations between parents and children. It is filled with new values such as aiming at self-realization, mutual understanding, and building of trustful relationships between parents and children. The content of parental roles stops being gender marked, acquires the character of a contract, and includes a multiplicity of behavioral and value examples connected with personal preferences as well as class, ethnic and cultural differences (Bjorneberg, 2001; Billari, 2006; Kon, 2006; Chernova, 2008).

Parenthood is a new type of solidarity

Parenthood in contemporary Russia represents a sphere of social changes and innovations. Parenthood becomes a unifying idea around which a complicated information field appears in which experts, psychologists, pedagogues and doctors, as well as the advertising industry, glossy magazines, goods producers, and specialized publishers, all compete for the consumer. All these information sources give us ideas about how to become the proper parent, how to take care of the child, how to develop and raise him or her while taking into account his needs. One of the characteristic traits of the contemporary responsible parenthood is reflexivity, and informed choice not only of the consumer goods and services but of models of upbringing as well as the values around which child-parent relationships are formed. One of the attributive qualities of the new parenthood is the personal responsibility of parents when, in the situation of systemic distrust of official discourse and government agents, the child's well-being in the widest sense becomes the result of the parents' choice, and their ability to provide him with the maximally comfortable environment for physical intellectual and psychological development.

Aside from that, modern responsible parenthood may be viewed as a new type of solidarity which appears not only on the basis of consciousness but on the readiness to accept responsibility for the well-being of one's own as well as someone else's, child. This new type of solidarity, unlike the traditional solidarities described by E. Durkheim, is based on the awareness of common problems, ideas and ideologies of parenthood. It is problematic in character when the community appears in order to solve a certain specific problem, for example those connected with overcoming barriers to acceptance into daycare kindergarten or school, the improvement of a children's playground, and so on. Connections which appear around such a problematic solidarity can be marked as "weak" (Granovetter, 2009), since they are characterized by relatively low intensity and expressiveness of interaction as compared to the "strong" ties which are connected with high frequency of communication, emotional richness and mutual character. Examples of the strong ties are those forged with friends and family. In spite of the fact that the weak ties seem unimportant for formation of communities, Granovetter notes their power and high potential of carrying out collective action (Granovetter, 2009).

Interest towards parent communities in the Russian context is defined first of all by the growing attention from the state towards family and childhood. Beginning in the mid-2000s parenthood becomes a stake in a political game connected with the growth of the influence of the state on the society (Auzan, 2006; Mayofis and Kukulín, 2010; Sveshnikova, 2010). Pronatalist family policy propaganda and support of the well-to-do-family, and introduction of the juvenile justice system, may be viewed not only as declared care but as control of the familial and parental behavior of citizens (Chernova, 2012; Yarskaya-Smirnova, 2010). Secondly, problematization of parenthood is connected with the growth of the birthrate during the 2000s which reveals the systemic malfunctioning of the state care infrastructure oriented to support of families, including the lack of places in kindergartens, dissatisfactory quality of the medical and educational services, and reforms in the budgetary sphere. Inefficiency of the social and family state policy becomes a factor shaping the civil opposition of parents based on the recognition of common problems and possibilities for solving them together. Parents seeking cooperation with each other are ready for mobilizing grassroots charity and mutual help (Gradskova, 2010; Chernova and Shpakovskaya, 2011; Koroleva and Levinson, 2010). Associations of parents may have different degrees of institutionalization (from registered NGOs to informal interest groups), different subject matter (from organizations that defend the labor rights of young mothers to movements against school system reform, to groups that unite the followers of various upbringing and childcare methods), and different degrees of virtualization (from the groups built primarily on “real,” face-to-face communication to internet communities and forums).

The on/offline communities of parents – the strength of the weak ties

Many researchers note the importance of personal networks and personal relations in the context of Russian society. Playing a key role in the socioeconomic and political lives, such networks exist parallel to the official rules of the game, constituting a wide layer of substantive informal exchanges rooted in friendly relationships between households and individuals (Barsukova, 2006; Williams and Round, 2007). An important characteristic of social networks and informal communities is their ability to produce and accumulate social capital, which represents a resource incorporated in the social structure that can be used and/or mobilized in purposeful action (Lin 2001: 29). The presence of social capital makes the actions of actors within the structure easier, and is conducive to reaching certain goals that are either difficult or outright impossible to achieve without it (Kouzman, 2001:124). Social ties that appear thanks to and within the communities are a structural basis of social capital and may be used for translation of information, saving up resources, mutual teaching of rules of behavior, and formation of reputation (Radaev, 2002: 26). It is important here that the social capital does not belong to an individual but is accumulated within the communities characterized by different degrees of closeness connected with the presence of barriers and borders for the strangers, within which certain norms, values, rules, based on trust and reputation function. Like the authors who researched internet resources for parents, we take a look at on/offline communities of parents as institutionalized structures that are conducive to the creation and accumulation of social capital (Drentea and Moren-Cross 2005: 922). Social capital accumulated within the community helps solve specific problems more effectively; here, those problems which parents face in their everyday life. It helps them widen the limited real social contacts and is an effective mechanism for overcoming the failure of official family policy in the Russian Federation.

Participation in the on/offline community of parents may be viewed not just as communication structured according to certain rules; it also allows parents to receive a number of supports and types of help from other participants of the community. In other

words, participation in internet communities of parents is a way of solving practical problems. Young mothers (women who have recently given birth to a child) constitute a group of those who most of all need help from the community. This situation is caused by the gender asymmetry of parenthood: it is precisely women who are viewed on the level of official discourse and social stereotypes as the primary caregivers. They experience a significant change of lifestyle due to motherhood, including social isolation (which is expressed in the degrees of quantity and frequency of real social contacts), and the lowering of their competitiveness and attractiveness for employers as a worker due to their absence in the labor market. These supports have traditionally been feminized; that is, offered by women and to women, and while they used to be provided by women in the framework of the extended family or in geographically localized communities (for example, among neighbors), now various mediated methods of support provision have become widespread (e.g. online forums) (Drentea and Moren-Crooss 2005; Brady and Guerin 2010; O'Connor and Madge 2004).

Our research shows that supports that parents can receive thanks to their participation in various communities circulate as the primary resources which are exchanged by the participants. We can see two general types of supports: emotional and informational. Emotional support is connected with the need to share one's experience and get approval of one's actions from other participants who are more experienced or who are experiencing a similar life situation and have experienced similar problems in the sphere of parenthood. Exchange of information and practical knowledge as applied to each specific problem situation in which parents find themselves represents the second type of support (Chernova and Shpakovskaya, 2011). Information represents an important resource for production of social capital since in the modern world it plays an important role in defining what action to take. Acquisition of information becomes expensive and demands a lot of resources. An individual may decrease his or her temporal and material expenditures spent on receiving information by communicating with people who have paid more attention to these issues and those who have rich life experience, as well as experts (Koulman, 2001: 128-129).

As noted above, modern parenthood is a difficult informational field that demands that the individual reflects on his or her choices and bears responsibility for making this choice. Knowledge and information are important components of contemporary parenthood, and participation in a community may be a way of optimizing acquisition of information and knowledge. Therefore, while emotional supports that circulate within a community are conducive to creation of ties and become the basis of production of social capital and appearance of solidarity, and are conducive to formation of trust among the community participants, the informational supports allow participants to optimize the quite real expenditures they devote to searching for information, and to the formation of effective individual and or collective strategies for solving a specific problem. Let us take a look at ways in which the parent communities deal with overcoming family policy failures in contemporary Russia.

Socialization in the new parental role: dad-school and mom-club

The traditional model of parenthood assigned to the man fulfillment of the instrumental role connected with material provision for the family, whereas the woman-housewife, occupied with childcare, childrearing and doing housework, was assigned the expressive function. The gender asymmetry characterizing this type of parenthood causes alienation of a man from participation in everyday childcare, which leads to formation of the phenomenon of an "absent" father. Functionally, "absence" of the father is expressed in the situation when his primary task is limited to the creation of economic conditions for the well-

being of the family, whereas the social childcare is performed primarily by the mother (Chernova, 2008: 281).

In the second half of the twentieth century in Western countries the model of responsible parenthood started forming. It is characterized by the conscious approach of family planning and child upbringing. Parenthood becomes an important part of the life project of men and women, not the consequence of fulfillment of gender prescriptions. In this case fatherhood and motherhood are characterized by relations of partnership between parents and children. Responsible parenthood is permeated by the ideology of gender equality which presupposes the participation of both parents in child care. As Kon notes, in the contemporary marriage there is much more equality: the idea of the father's power is more and more often substituted with the idea of parental authority, and the just division of housework becomes one of the most important conditions of familial wellbeing (Kon, 2008).

For the contemporary relationships of the private sphere, the question of quality of the relationships between partners--as well as between parents and children--is important (Giddens, 2004). The change in the gender order, the pluralization of relationships, and the economic emancipation of women have led to the appearance of the model of responsible fatherhood which includes the idea of a new, caring father actively participating in the life of the child in equal amounts with the mother, and not only in bringing up and taking care of the child but also sharing the housework duties with the mother. For the new involved father the priority is building relationships of trust with the child. The model of responsible fatherhood is articulated by educated men who are more oriented towards egalitarian gender arrangements in the sphere of parenthood (Chernova and Shpakovskaya, 2010). Realization of the model of responsible fatherhood is possible with institutional supports from the state in organizations oriented towards working with men.

One example of the successful realization of the model of responsible fatherhood is the project of "dad-school"². The idea of this project was borrowed from the family policy in Sweden. Such work with young fathers has existed for around 30 years. The task of both the Russian and Swedish dad schools is the preparation of men for the parental role according to principles of equal participation of father and mother in child upbringing. The important characteristic of this project differentiating it from other state and private preparatory courses for parents is that the group work with future fathers is carried out only by men who have their own direct experience of fatherhood. Participation in the dad school is conducive to socialization of men in the new role of responsible father. Additionally, formation of the special style of fatherhood presupposes investing not only money but also time and feelings in the relations with the child.

Meetings in the dad school take place regularly on the basis of St. Petersburg's district centers of family and child help³. They are free of charge for the participants. New members are recruited through maternal welfare clinics, networks of former participants of the project who have become moderators, and other participants. The format of meetings in the dad school looks like a moderated discussion in which men share their understanding, fears, and concerns about their future fatherhood with other participants who are facing a similar life situation. The groups as a rule are formed on the basis of the pregnancy term of the woman partner. Participation in discussions is for the man a form of emotional support aimed at sharing experiences and striving to normalize problematic situations. One of the respondents describes his experience of participation in the group in the following way.

Indeed, we can call this psychological help in the sense that I need it in order to understand that I am not alone and that I am surrounded by a lot of those who have similar thoughts. There are some adequate ones and there are some... well you know, not very adequate, and you think, 'well I am really not going to be like this.' Every person looks for some sort of confirmation that he is doing something right. (Male, 28 years old, higher education, daughter 1,2 years old)

Group discussion allows men not only to talk through their emotions and fears connected with future fatherhood but also to receive emotional support and advice from other participants of the community, at the same time feeling comfortable in the homosocial community and not being self-conscious about articulating one's feelings and emotions. Respondents know that the experience of participation in discussions makes them more reflexive in questions connected with childbirth and care, which in the end positively influences the family relations. "This (dad group) helps prepare [one] emotionally and morally that these are not some sort of technical skills, but morally to accept this responsibility, [to] understand that this is for the rest of one's life." (Male, 27 years old., higher education, daughter 1,9 years old)

Informational supports are expressed in receiving expert and practical knowledge and advice connected with fatherhood. A number of experts participate in the dissemination of information for future fathers – for example, invited specialists such as doctors, moderators who have personal experience of fatherhood, and other male participants of the group. The format of communication in the dad school is built on the principle of self-help groups. It allows the participants to receive both new knowledge necessary for the new father, and answers to the questions that interest them. Such questions for example might be connected with the choice of a maternity ward, the doctor participation in partner childbirth, or preclusion and solving of possible conflict situations in the family.

In the dad groups significant attention is given to the practice of partner childbirth which allows the father to be near his partner during labor. Organizers of this project believe that men must make an informed decision about being present during the labor and the joint experience of this important event in the life of the family, since partner childbirth from the first minutes of life not only includes the father in childcare, but also helps the father build a special relationship with the child. Later, it is hoped, as a consequence of experiencing partner childbirth, the new responsible fathers will be more oriented towards childcare partnership and emotional work in relation to the partner and the child. Many participants of the dad school who are present at childbirth note that this experience positively influences their relationship with their spouse and the building of subsequent relations with the child. "I for example, having lived through it, I understand very well that had this not happened I would have been deprived of a lot of things. I believe that it is necessary to be friends with the child, it's all clear, but the child also needs to be told that he is needed." (Male, 26 years old, higher education, son 2,3 years old) Therefore, dad school represents a unique platform in which men not only get socialized into the new parental role but also discuss diverse questions connected with parenthood and family relations. At their essence dad groups represent the "men's club," although a non-traditional one that provides them an opportunity to share their thoughts, fears and doubts related to their fatherhood without the fear of stigmatization from the society and their closest circle.

This initiative represents an example of realization of the model of "responsible" fatherhood, whose ideology is aimed at stimulating participation of men in the life of the child. At the same time the family policy of contemporary Russia--in spite of the declared gender equality in the sphere of parenthood--is up until this day mostly oriented on

supporting mothers. When trying to enact responsible fatherhood men come across serious barriers on the level of the conservative family policy aimed at support of traditional gender roles, as well as on the level of the mechanisms of its realization. For example, men face difficulties (not so much formal as factual) when trying to get paternal leave, since the man will most likely encounter misunderstanding on the part of the employer and his close circle. This misunderstanding is connected with the gender stereotypes widespread in Russian society. The few cases when the father wants to take advantage of the guaranteed right of parental leave may lead to negative sanctions from the side of the employer, even to firing. One example is the case of Konstantin Markin, whose request for paternal leave was declined and who, having appealed to the European Court of Human rights, won the case. The fact of gender discrimination in using the right to the respect of his private and family life was recognized, and it was acknowledged that the refusal to issue a parental leave, as well as his subsequent firing, violated Article 14 of the Convention of Human rights and basic freedoms. This case demonstrates that the state does not support men in their desire to become more responsible fathers, and therefore the activity of an organization like dad-school is currently actual and necessary. In order to make Russian men “responsible” fathers there is a need not only for such organizations but also for general support from the state, the employer, and the readiness of society itself to accept the new ideas about fatherhood, which include gender equality and active participation of the father in childcare and child upbringing.

The “mom-club” is another example of a community built on the principle of self-help groups and aimed at socialization into the new parental role, as well as overcoming social isolation experienced by young mothers after childbirth⁴. The idea of creating this group to unite young mothers and provide them with a place for communication appeared based on the personal experience of the club organizer. Having led an active professional and social life prior to childbirth, she experienced a decrease in social contacts and involvement in real social networks, and perceived a need to communicate with like-minded people (i.e. young mothers) on topics connected with parenthood, childcare, and the problems of combining motherhood and career. Here is how she describes the reasons that pushed her towards this initiative:

From the start our club was organized like a place of meeting for mothers, since it was in this period that it happened that in the case of everyone who visited the club, the close circle, they did not share the interests of the young mothers. Either they had been mothers for a while already, or... they were not [mothers] yet. And there was no one to communicate with on this topic. And the way of life, it really changed (after childbirth – Z.C.) And the worldview, and the perception changed, and somehow something needs to be done about it... and since I am very resolute and solve all my problems concretely, I started searching for the solution. What kind of solution? If there is no one around you who shares in general and understands, no one to consult, neither with the grandma nor with the mom, then you should somehow find someone.
(Woman, 30 years old, higher education, son 5 years old)

In order to convene the first meeting the organizer of the community published an announcement on the online forum of parents (www.littleone.ru). Offline communication acquired a regular character, and all those who wished to could participate in the meetings. This community is open to new participants. The primary channels of recruitment of new members are online social networks (vkontakte, facebook) as well as parent forums (www.littleone.ru). The group lacks formal membership. Those people who have attended at least two meetings become participants. Friendships begin among those who met in the

organization itself, and the participants subsequently meet outside the formal events and organize joint celebrations (e.g. birthdays, holidays).

The first meetings of the group represented a friendly chat and casual communication between mothers. They took place in parks where one could come with a baby carriage, or in large trade centers with a space (such as a food court or children's playground) which could be freely used for meetings of mothers with small children (for example, MEGA, a large shopping mall). As time went by, the format of the meetings changed. It started presupposing not only interpersonal communication and discussion of various problems, but also acquisition of information and consultations of various specialists (doctors, psychologists, pedagogues). Organizers of the group found children's educational and medical centers that would like to acquaint the parents with the offered services in such a format.

At the same time, according to the organizers and activists of the group, the personal, informal communication, emotional and psychological support which the participants provided each other still remains the main value for those young mothers who take part in the work of the community. Aside from that, participation in this community helps other young mothers be socialized in their new roles and find a balance between motherhood and career:

We occupy ourselves with harmony, woman's harmony. It is expressed in the fact that you are not getting out of balance. You are not a crazy mommy. You are not a single mother who runs around those dating websites looking for someone, forgetting that you have a child. You are not a business woman who fully dives into business, and your child is with a nanny. Anyway, no need for any imbalance. (Woman, 35 years old, higher education, daughter 5 years old)

Therefore, both examples of the parental communities show that the young parents, both mothers and fathers, experience a significant need for real and virtual platforms in which they may not only communicate with other likeminded parents experiencing a similar life situation (emotional support), but also receive knowledge and share their experience of parenthood (informational supports) in order to socialize themselves into the mother's and father's role more effectively. Making themselves familiar with the new role and aiming at becoming more competent, the contemporary parents--men and women alike--seek possibilities for cooperation, mutual help, and discussion of common problems and interests, which becomes the basis for the appearance of new types of solidarity and civic initiatives. It is necessary to note the *active* role of modern parents, who not only aim at being an object of state care, but are also ready to commit to individual and collective actions for the creation of parental groups, clubs, and communities that could help them in solving everyday problems.

Social isolation and family-unfriendly urban space

The period of active motherhood presupposes that the woman will devote practically all of her time to the child and that the frequency of contacts and intensity of her social life will sharply decline. Social isolation of young mothers is caused not only by "objective" reasons but also due to stereotypical ideas in Russian society about the proper behavior of a mother after childbirth. Here is how one of the mom-club activists describes the situation: "A mom primarily... a young mom, with a small child, lacks an occasion and intentions, to leave the house. One must always make herself leave the house and go somewhere with the child. It is hard, it runs contrary to some social ideas in our society." (Woman, 33 years old, higher education, son 3 years old) At the same time, not only do the societal stereotypes "place" young mothers into the closed space of the home, but the very infrastructure fails to

promote their intensive movement inside the town – “Not even a single child center now has this (the conditions to attend together with a child carriage – Z.C.) A private one. Because to arrive together with a carriage and park there somewhere – is simply not possible. And at the front entrance of the home – [the strollers are piled] one on top of the other.” (Woman, 35 years old, higher education, daughter 5 years old)

The study has shown that the urban space of St. Petersburg is difficult to access and does not respond to the needs of parent with small children⁵. In spite of the fact that St. Petersburg participates in the UNICEF initiative “Child friendly cities” the problem of accessibility of city infrastructure is not viewed as one of the directions of family policy on the level of the city. In the Conception of family policy in St Petersburg in 2012-2022 this problem is not viewed as a separate issue deserving of attention. It is mentioned in the chapter devoted to improvement of the healthcare and disease prevention system, and raising of the quality of social health of families with children. The expected result of the actions of city authorities on this question is the “heightening of the comfort level of the urban environment for families with children, improvement of the planning of yard territories, increase in the number of equipped jogging and bicycle tracks, and accessible yard sports grounds (football, volleyball).” (Conception, 2012) Aside from that, in the chapter devoted to the development, improvement of accessibility and quality of social services, and strengthening of family-oriented resources, it is noted that the key aspect of such a direction is the “improvement” of the system of institutions and widening of the scope of services in the sphere of culture, recreation, sport, trade and dining oriented on the family in general; creation of a family friendly environment raising the possibilities of joint recreation; development of common interests by the members of the family; and creative family activities (Conception, 2012). However, in this case as well the creation of the family friendly urban environment is viewed only as improving the yard territories, increasing the zones of family rest and recreation, taking into consideration the needs of children of different ages, and the development of accessible infrastructure for playing sports.

At the same time the agenda of the authorities interested in the change of urban infrastructure depending on the needs of families with children does not include an array of questions which are actively discussed by the parents themselves in various communities and internet forums. For the young mothers and fathers the following are problems of urban lack of accessibility to which they would like to attract the attention of the authorities: absence of ramps for children’s carriages, lack of elevators in the metro and passages in the public transportation, and the need for swaddling tables in the restrooms and public places and cafes. As the respondents noted, there are few family-friendly places in the city where they could easily go with a baby carriage. Furthermore, the staircases of apartment blocks have no free and accessible space where inhabitants could safely store the baby carriages since due to lack of space and proliferation of stairwells in apartment blocks not everyone has an opportunity to leave them inside the apartment.

In order to overcome spatial isolation and the related social isolation parents work out a number of strategies to increase their mobility. One such strategy is the practice of wearing slings⁶. “Slingomoms” are the mothers who use slings along with a baby carriage and/or instead of it. Giving up baby carriages allows the mothers to stay mobile since they come across fewer problems of moving around the town. One of the respondents explained her use of a sling in the following way:

I had to buy diapers, and my baby was sleeping in the baby carriage. I came in, and he tells me “Where are you going with the carriage?” I say “The baby is sleeping there, where will I put it? Shall I leave him here with you or what?” They say “Here, leave it next to the cashier’s, we will look over [it].”
(Woman, 30 years old, higher education, son 2,7 years old)

As with the other parent communities we have examined, slingomeetings are open to new participants, i.e. there are no formal barriers for joining the group. Recruiting of new participants takes place through social networks and internet forums for the parents, as well as personal contacts of the slingomoms. Being mobile, compared to mothers using baby carriages, slingomoms arrange and participate in the meetings, which are organized in various corners of the city. However, they also prefer choosing more family-friendly locations. These can be cafes whose owners are acquainted with one of the community participants, present themselves as baby friendly, and are ready to provide a place for meetings of mothers with small children. An active participant of the slingomoms community describes her experience of carrying out a meeting in one of the downtown coffee shops:

Everything is wonderful there, very good, delicious, there is something for the older children. They put up with us until the summer, and then... I cannot say they drove us out. But such a huge number of mothers with slings and their children gathered there that we scared off all the main customers. It would get very hot since a lot of people attended, and it was impossible to air it out because of the children. So we decided not to ‘spoil the statistics’ anymore.
(Woman, 30 years old, higher education, son 2,7 years old)

The most popular meeting places for mothers with small children are large malls since there exists a certain infrastructure of leisure with children. For example, there is a freely (including free of charge) accessible space of the children’s playground, the food court, which provides women with baby carriages with enough space. The place of meetings is also important. Here is how one of the respondents describes the algorithm of choosing a place and time:

We chose the place of course so that there we could locate ourselves with the carriages. So that it would be inexpensive to dine. At some point we understood that it was very nice in various food courts, in a mall on a weekday. In the morning for example there is no one there, there is a lot of room. There we can put the tables together, move them around, and put the carriages. Many malls have the place to change the diapers, those “mother rooms.” The baby can be washed, its clothes can be changed and so on.
(Woman, 29 years old, higher education, daughter 2,2 years old)

Therefore the market--unlike the state--being able to more quickly adapt to the needs of visitors with children, offers them more options and a better infrastructure. In general the city space is perceived by the parents as family-unfriendly, and inside of it there are barriers precluding the intracity mobility of mothers with small children who in this respect are no different from the other social groups with decreased mobility, for example people with disabilities. Personal and collective strategies of overcoming the existing barriers are worked out by the young parents with the use of new practices of childcare (wearing slings), and by means of adapting the existent infrastructure to their needs (personal acquaintance with café owners). At the same time the city family policy is oriented primarily at improvement of the

yard territories and development of sport and leisure infrastructure in parks, which does not fully respond to the needs of parents who seek the opportunity to communicate with each other all year round.

Decrease of young mothers' competitiveness in the labor market and possibilities of overcoming it

Absence in the labor market due to childbirth not only makes the woman a less attractive worker in the eyes of employers but also lowers her competitiveness. "The point is that mothers cannot work – this is true. Why don't employers like them? Moms cannot work from 9 to 6, there are 22 work days in the month, or 10 to 11 months in the year, no, because the children are constantly sick, the teeth, then something else." (Woman, 30 years old, higher education, son 5 years old) Many respondents have noted that they experience difficulties in returning to the labor market after a significant break caused by the necessity to take care of the children. These problems are related to psychological aspects of the adaptation to the role of a working mother, and to the lowering of qualification, "falling out of the working rhythm." On the level of state policy the problem of mothers' employment and their competitiveness is not allocated much attention. So, for example, in Saint-Petersburg, as in the entire Russian Federation, since 2009 the program of "additional measures of lowering the tension in the labor market" has been in place that presupposes professional training and retraining of women on maternity leaves. The goal of this program is to help mothers acquire a new profession and increase their professional skills within six months. The training is sponsored by the state and is free for participants.

For women who have higher and specialized secondary education there is a program of retraining for the profession "Organization manager" with a wide array of specializations (e.g. human resource manager, small-scale business manager, retail manager, advertising manager, tourism manager, hotel management). Those who have successfully completed education for this profession are awarded a diploma of retraining with the right to work as a manager. For those women who have a general secondary education, the training programs include modern information technology (with knowledge of records keeping), and hotel administrator. This category of students receives a certificate upon completion of the training. We may suppose that participation in such a program allows women to acquire new knowledge and competence and improve their professional qualification, and as a result receive a competitive advantage in the labor market. However, if we take a look at the list of the offered professions, one can say that they belong to the managerial professional sphere which has recently experienced an oversupply of cadres and it is unlikely that the diploma in this profession will radically improve the position of these trainees in the labor market. Importantly, the program only concerns those women who had worked before the maternity leave, which means that a significant category of potential participants gets excluded from receiving this form of state support at the initial stages.

During the course of the study we conducted interviews with women who participated in this program in order to find out their evaluation and perceptions of this measure. On the basis of the received data one can discuss both advantages and disadvantages of this program. The respondents positively evaluate primarily the fact that the classes had a flexible schedule with the needs and abilities of the students being taken into consideration. Each group had an opportunity to arrange the schedule with the teacher: "The schedule was very convenient, the instructor set the time taking into consideration that everyone is a mother." (Woman, 32 years old, specialized secondary education, son 7 years old, daughter 1,4 years old) Critical observations of the program participants related to the content of the program itself. They disliked that fact that during the retraining a lot of attention was paid to the theoretical, but

not the practical, knowledge. “So they taught us the paper part of the business, and further on you are on your own.” (Woman, 29 years old, higher education, daughter 1,3 years old) The participants’ perceptions of the program allow us to conclude that this measure of decreasing economic risks of motherhood is not evaluated by them as effective. In general participants in the retraining program did not expect a radical improvement of their position in the labor market, did not lay their hopes on it in terms of future employment, and were rather oriented quite skeptically. However, they nevertheless decided to use this opportunity in order to receive one more educational document.

Another way of overcoming the economic problems women encounter after childbirth is to turn for help to the parent communities and social movements whose work is aimed at protecting labor rights of women. One such organization is the Saint-Petersburg movement “Young mothers for just law,” which is occupied directly with the problems of discrimination of young mothers and pregnant women in the labor market⁷. The work of this organization is aimed at giving free legal assistance to women who find themselves in the situation of non-payment of maternity benefits by a specific employer. The leader of the movement (who experienced such a problem personally) describes the situation in the following way:

I had a job, I was not the last person there, I had a good salary and a lot of social guarantees and so on, and each person at the factory knew my face. What else could I dream of, right? Stable enterprise, trade and all that...[but then] like out of the blue... when you call and your yesterday’s colleague tells you that “you are no longer working with us.” (Woman, 38 years old, higher education, daughter, 3 years old)

Having experienced the ineffectiveness of legal mechanisms, the aggrieved decided to unite and demand defense of their collective rights. According to the official data provided by the organizers of the movement “Young mothers for just law,” in Saint Petersburg from June 1 to October 21, 2010 148 women consulted with them, 130 complaints and court references were prepared, and 10 women received the allowances.

Leaders and participants of the movement actively participate in protests, trying to attract the attention of the authorities to the problem. They organize pickets and rallies; for example they organized one on March 2, 2011, a meeting of the free organizations “Voice of a woman,” whose member organization is the movement “Young mothers for just law.” This rally was meant to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of celebrating the 8th of March, under the slogan “Strong woman – strong country!” In January 2011 the movement participants supported the all-Russian protest action of pregnant women which took place on January 18th in a lot of Russian towns. The pregnant women and young mothers rallied against the amendments of the federal law “On the necessary social security in case of temporary incapacity for work and due to motherhood,” which changed the order of allowance calculation⁸. Aside from this the movement sets the goal of achieving the adoption of a new payment system which would bypass the employer, enabling the money to directly reach the employee’s account from the Social Security Fund. Currently as a matter of experiment this system has been introduced in Nizhny Novgorod Region, Karachai-Cherkess Republic, as well as in Kurgan, Tambov, Astrakhan, Novgorod, Novosibirsk Regions and Khabarovsk Territory. The movement leaders are of the opinion that such a scheme of allowance payment will help avoid the situation when young mothers suffer from bad faith of employers who avoid their duties in respect to these women.

Therefore, parenthood in contemporary Russia is a sphere of (re)production of new values and practices as well as of formation of communities, collective identity and appearance of civic initiatives. At the same time the state is more and more actively declaring

its interest in regulation of conjugal and marital relations of citizens. Many problems that young mothers encounter--socialization in the new parental role, social isolation, labor market discrimination, and lowering of the competitiveness of women workers--remain on the periphery of state attention. Additionally, the state turns a blind eye to the problems of ineffective law enforcement regarding pregnant women and young mothers, and does not create a family- and young parent-friendly urban space; that is, the state pays no attention to the socio-economic problems of parenthood. Realizing the responsibility for children's well-being is characteristic not only of the individual project of parenthood, but also leads to the parents uniting to provide each other with mutual help, which includes the necessary help to the children in need, as well as assistance to the parents. The parent communities in contemporary Russia represent the "growth points" of the civil society, which are the subjects of social change and a form of civil activism. The solidarity that appears within such communities carries a problematic character, uniting participants of various socio-economic backgrounds and statuses for the sake of solving a single concrete task, connected with the wellbeing of the child and the family as well as with defense of group rights. Social networks of parents are not only the means of augmentation of the social capital of the participants but are also conducive to overcoming the failures of state policy and market provision of family well-being. Communities of parents represent one of the ways of solving specific problems, a platform for the emergence of various civic initiatives, which are aimed at lowering the socio-economic risks of parenthood in contemporary Russia.

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2. The project has been implemented since 2008. Currently six district dad-groups are functioning in St Petersburg. The official website is <http://papaschool.ru/>

3 The center of social help for families and children is a state institution located in each administrative district of the city. District centers were established in the second half of the 2000s, as a part of the Government of St. Petersburg Decree "On conception of development of the system of social protection of St Petersburg population in 2006-2010". They were established on the basis of centers of social service for the population which operated throughout the Soviet period. The primary task of the center is to provide social services and social support to families with children, to citizens experiencing a difficult life situation, and to neglected children and children left without parental care.

4 The club has existed since 2006, and a significant number of young mothers have participated in its work since then. According to the number of participants on a vkontakte group as well as registered website members (<http://www.mamaclub.ru>), their number amounts to 10,000 participants.

5 This issue of inaccessible urban space also prevents serious barriers for people with disabilities.

6 Special devices, for example, kerchiefs or large pieces of cloth, used for carrying a baby around.

7 The movement has existed since April 2010.

8 From January 1, 2003, the order of pregnancy and birth allowances payment will change. They will be calculated on the basis of the woman's salary. These amendments were introduced on January 1, 2011 but caused mass dissatisfaction among pregnant women, especially those who prior to taking the parental leave did not have work experience, for example, students. Many allowance receivers also claimed that the new edition of the law will worsen the position of mothers – the size of the allowance will decrease by one third in some cases, and even by two to three times in some cases. After women appealed to authorities (the President of Russia, in particular), a moratorium was imposed on the change of order until December 31, 2012, when women could themselves choose the order of allowance payments: according to the old or the new scheme.