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Reproductive Choices of Lesbian-Headed Families in Russia

From the Last-Soviet Period to Contemporary Times

RUSSIAN LEGISLATION CONCERNING LGBTQ issues in general and lesbian families with children in particular, changed profoundly during the period from November 2011 to June 2013. Several laws that influenced the situation for same-sex parented families in Russia were passed, including a regional and federal law penalizing the dissemination of material promoting homosexuality and pedophilia among minors (hereafter "antigay law"). Further, a law that defines sanctions against US citizens, involved in violations of the human rights and freedoms of Russian citizens, stops US citizens from adopting Russian children. This law is of particular concern for lesbian-headed families because it also bans adoption of children from Russia by Russian same-sex couples, as well as by people from all foreign countries in which gay marriages are sanctioned. The socio-legal landscape where reproductive choices are made is thus rapidly changing for the worse for lesbian-headed families in Russia. At the same time, the antigay legislation has opened up the issue of queer parenting both in Russia and in foreign media, as many people have fled the country or have been interviewed by Western TV and newspapers.¹ While the legal and social situation changes very rapidly,

almost on a day-to-day basis, making it difficult to assess the long-term effects of these changes, it is clear that the new, oppressive legislation has both significantly influenced the psychological well-being of lesbian mothers and changed their everyday behavior and patterns of social communication, which also affect parenting practices.

This article traces the rise of modern, lesbian families in Russia and seeks to explain why they have become the target of political and legal oppression at this time. The focus is on the reproductive choices of three different "generations" of Russian lesbian women, drawing on Ken Plummer's (2010) idea of "generational cohorts," which stresses the importance of certain turning points of each era in the construction of a generation. I will identify how three different generational cohorts of Russian queer women come forth and face divergent historical turning points, which influence their identities, self-presentations, and reproductive choices.

By presenting these three "lesbian generations" as distinct generational cohorts, positioned within different gender contracts I will show how their experiences reflect larger trends, rather than merely individual stories. Their range of choices are not only shaped by historical time but are also integrated into the complicated system of political ideology, social expectations, and available resources in Russia. Drawing on empirical data collected between 2009 and 2013, I will discuss how the political and social situation have influenced the everyday life choices of queer women of different generations, how they managed their social and private lives, and what strategies they used with the resources they had available.²

Gender Contracts and Family Policies Influencing Russian Lesbians

Anna Temkina and Anna Rotkirch (2007) have identified three different "gender contracts" in Soviet everyday life in Russia: the official (legitimated), the everyday, and the illegitimate gender contract, all centrally concerning the question of women's sexuality and reproduction. According to Temkina and Rotkirch the official (legitimated) gender

contract was formed and kept by state policy, ideology, and the social institutions, which provided combinations of working mothers' roles for women; the illegitimate gender contract refers to gender norms and practices that were oppressed, hidden and/or criminalized, for example prostitution and gay male sex (Temkina and Rotkirch 2007, 185). Importantly, while male homosexuality was criminalized, lesbian sexuality was not because it was considered being nonexistent (Essig 1999; Healey 2001b).

Russian historian and gender researcher Natalia Pushkareva (1996) argues that the Soviet concept of motherhood defined the woman as functioning in the family, including the task of raising children. At the end of the 1920s, USSR family policy transformed; mothers and their children became objects of state policies. As a consequence, the mother's status actually improved because the state directed attention to the problems of women who were mothers. From the 1930s onwards, women shared the function of child upbringing and caretaking with the state. At the same time, control over the family and parenthood got stringent. The responsibility for child rearing fell more and more on women, as men were deemed to be more suitable to work on other tasks in building up and developing the Soviet society. Motherhood became *the civic duty* of the woman at this period, Elena Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2003) argue. Soviet time promoted the gender contract of the working mother, but this contract highlighted the necessity for combining professional, familial, and maternal duties (Temkina and Rotkirch 2007).

The historical specifics of the postwar Russian family policy model aimed to organize proper conditions for the demanding and demanded combination of professional and maternal duties for women.³ Stalin's eventual successor Khrushchev conceived and implemented a series of family policies even before the end of World War II to replace the populations losses; a law of July 8, 1944 on increasing government support for pregnant women gave single mothers state support for the first time, and led to a surge in single motherhood – as a consequence, almost nine million children were reared by single mothers within the ten year period after the war (Healey 2014, 97). The state provided support for

this by opening kindergartens, comprehensive schools, and boarding schools from the 1920s to 1960s – but the basic care still fell on mothers' shoulders. The term "family" had become equal to motherhood because the main object of the state was the mothers' task to produce and raise children (Chernova 2008, 191).

Women's sexuality in the Soviet time was directly linked to motherhood. Lesbian sexuality was deemed ideologically "wrong" since it was not thought capable of producing children and thus not participating in the reproduction of the workers' society. Lesbianism was therefore conceptualized as abnormal and deviant (Kon 1997). It was deemed an illegitimate sexual practice that needed to be treated in mental hospitals, to where queer women sometimes were sent by their heterosexual families and relatives (Essig 1999; Healey 2001a). As Temkina explains, "the cultural scenario of sexual life in last-Soviet period did not strictly determine everyday life but it has been defining the so-called main standards of the society, heterosexuality, connections between marriage and children, and gender differences" (2008, 19). Strict control of sexuality and reproduction practices was, however, an important part of the Soviet ideology (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2003).

I argue that both legitimated and illegitimated gender contracts have shaped the lives of lesbians in Russia, representing the network of everyday interactions in social reality. In "public reality," the lesbians I interviewed were successful (or not so successful) workers, Russian (USSR) citizens, good mothers, daughters, and sometimes wives. In the "hidden reality," they were having lesbian relations, same-sex lovers, raising as stepchildren⁴ the children of their same-sex partners, dealing with donor sperm, or having sex with a male friend to conceive.

One central finding in my research is also that there is a significant generational gap between the family strategies of lesbians born before and after the 1980s. This may be explained by the differences in socialization⁵ of these age cohorts, and by the lack of information about homosexuality and proper resources before the 1990s, compared to the abundance of these after the liberalization era. There was no public discussion, popular literature or any positive research on homosexual desire

or lives before the 1990s (*Istoriya* 2011). A strict censorship of any mention of "deviant" sexuality existed at this time (Stella 2014b). The subject was a great taboo in Soviet media (Stella 2007; 2014b). The difference between the lesbian generations is thus probably based on the amount of information that was available for them. My older respondents referred to the fact that there was no discourse on lesbians or homosexuality before the 1990s; no open clubs, newspapers, magazines or official information. Activist work, as it is commonly understood, began during the latter part of the 1990s when several LGBTQ organizations were launched in the biggest Russian cities. These provided literature on the topic, and a safe space for queer people to meet and share information (Stella 2007). From Soviet times until now, lesbian women have thus lived in two different realities that have influenced different parts of their lives.

Queer Lives and Queer Research in Last-Soviet Russia

In 1993, homosexuality was decriminalized in Russia. This led to an expeditious blooming of more visible queer lives in Russian society. In 1994, the queer community actively started to create public space for LGBTQ people (Essig 1999; Healey 2001a). Further, Lesbian and Gay Studies and Queer Studies appeared as new fields in Russian academia. Discussion about LGBT and queer issues started from the topic of homophobia (Kon 1997; 2006; Omelchenko 2002a; 2002b). Research first focused on this problem through the lens of gender theory, trying to connect homophobia in society with the prevailing gender order, the dichotomy between two oppositional genders, the feminine and the masculine. These early studies on homophobia attempted to understand what is it that makes the Russian society so intolerant of homosexuality.

This academic discussion created a normalizing discourse around homosexuality and LGBTQ issues in the Russian academia. Only recently, homosexuality has been taken out from its deviancy position and the focus in research has moved to the analysis of social attitudes. Through the homophobia debate, intolerance has been reconstructed as the "abnormal" reaction. This has enabled the birth of a more profound socio-

logical debate on the problems for homosexuals in the Russian society. Studies on coming out (Nartova 2004; Parfenova 2010; Zhabenko 2010) became one fruitful route to establish the LGBTQ community as an important research field in Russian social sciences. Recent topical issues concern, for example, citizenship and law (Kondakov 2014), the history of homosexual sexuality in Russia (Muravyeva et al. 2012; Muravyeva 2014), and – of particular interest for this article – homosexual families (Nartova 2004; Zhabenko 2014).

Several recent academic conferences on LGBTQ studies in Russia have shown that LGBT and Queer Studies have been growing, and that there are a lot of new researchers who bring fresh issues and create important discussions to the field. The queer studies field is very vulnerable, but the fact that it exists – and has been redescribed in many significant ways – allows me to present the Russian specifics of developing lesbian reproductive cultures in a rather short period. My own research was conducted from November 2009 to June 2013. I will first present, briefly, the details of my empirical study and then discuss my findings and results.

Russian Lesbian Mothers: The Respondents

The main materials collected in my study consist of thirty-five semi-structured interviews with self-identifying lesbian mothers in Russia. I also conducted a number of lengthy expert interviews with Russian LGBTQ activists and researchers on the topic of motherhood. Participants in the interviews were lesbian mothers who lived in couple relationships and raised children together with their woman partner. In addition, I conducted research in online social media forums.

All my respondents had been in a couple relationships for more than one year. In eight cases I interviewed the couple together, and also interviewed both partners separately. Further, my sample consisted of twenty-nine birth mothers, including fourteen women who were both biological and social mothers, and four social mothers who raised children with a same-sex partner and had made the decision to have children together. I also interviewed four lesbian "stepmothers." Almost half, fourteen of

the interviewed twenty-nine birth mothers, had previously been in a heterosexual marriage. Nine women had used alternative reproductive strategies; three had had sex with a man in marriage, six women had used assisted reproductive technologies (two biological mothers had succeeded with home insemination, two women had carried out assisted insemination at a clinic, and two had used in vitro fertilization).

The age scale of my respondents varied from twenty-seven to fifty-nine years. Among the thirty-five interviewees thirty-one had graduated from university and four from college, so basically all respondents had a high level of education. Of those fourteen respondents who had experience of a previous heterosexual marriage, almost all (thirteen) had divorced their husbands, and one woman was a widow. Children of the research participants ranged from the age of six months to thirty-three years. Grandmothers were also included in the sample, as five of the women had grandchildren.

Most of the respondents were interviewed in Saint Petersburg, but there were also respondents who lived in Moscow and Rostov-na-Donu, which lies near the Ukrainian border and is a kind of center of the south of Russia. Data was collected mostly from these three big Russian cities because in these sites there are significant LGBTQ organizations and communities that could provide lesbians and lesbian families with social space for communication, and support from experts and activists. Moreover, like in other countries (cf. Weston 1995), Russian LGBTQ people often move to big cities to get away from the persistent high levels of homophobia and antigay attitudes of small regional towns.⁶

To complement the interviews additional data – especially on more sensitive topics around lesbian parenting – was collected from Internet sources. A number of groups in the Russian social media network Vkontakte (which is similar to Facebook) provided personalized stories and vivid debates on reproductive strategies and conceiving. Among the groups I followed were groups entitled *Iskustvennaya Inseminaciya* [Artificial Insemination] and *2 mami* [2 moms]. Access to these groups was gained through direct contact with the administrators of the groups, after filling out required forms including detailed personal information

and an explanation of the aim of my entrance. In each of these forms, I highlighted the fact that I was a researcher. However, the single most important factor of me getting access to those groups was my background as a volunteer in the Russian LGBT organization Coming Out which is widely known in the Russian queer community, and which supported homosexual parents in practical and legal matters. This organization is now banned as a "foreign agent" by a court decision in 2014, under the new antigay legislation.

Several of my interview respondents were also participants in these social network groups and they had special forum boards where members could discuss important questions about their reproductive and child rearing experiences. Topics such as how to choose a donor and how to choose a clinic had more than twenty answers each, and included not only practical advice or pondering upon the choices but also individual stories of personal experiences from other birth mothers, who in most cases also referred to their lesbian experiences. Because my possibilities to recruit lesbian mothers as research participants faced a considerable amount of different limitations, I mainly looked for stories that could clarify aspects of lesbian reproductive strategies that were not covered by the interviews in the above mentioned social media groups. While many of these stories were inspiring, this article does not draw on much of this data. For obvious political and research ethical reasons, both the authors of social media stories and interviewees are fully anonymous here.

Because the families of respondents are not socially or legally recognized in Russia and face increasingly pressing homophobia, this research field is extremely sensitive. Indeed, many of the respondents told me that they avoided any communication with social services and state institutions because they knew that often these do not support parenting rights of homosexual families. Recruiting the informants initially started with the help of the abovementioned LGBT organization Coming Out in Saint Petersburg, and eight interviews were conducted with the help of activists from this organization. Later on I also found other respondents via people who had already participated in my research project. These participants advised me to contact their friends – twenty-three partici-

pants were found by this "snowball" method. A few informants were recruited via private invitations from the abovementioned Internet communities, which deal with lesbian parenting (four interviews).

I should mention that I received several refusals from my Internet-recruiting; some people explained that they were not interested in participating or were very busy with work. During the first research period, between 2009 and 2011, they were only three, but during the second phase of the research, between 2011 and 2012, the number of refusals dramatically increased. People started to ignore the letters where I asked them to participate in the research. I argue that the growing refusal rate should be understood in the context of the new law banning propaganda for homosexuality and pedophilia that was passed in November of 2011. Indeed, when I continued my research under the era of the new legislation, my letters in social media groups to people who I do not know personally, were left without any response. I had to reduce my contact methodology to solely personal communications with respondents. This way I recruited a number of people among participants in a workshop I organized. It took place in the community center of the LGBT organization Coming Out in Saint Petersburg, and was open only for lesbians with a personal invitation. The antigay law was at the time widely discussed in the Russian LGBTQ social and activist circles. It has clearly influenced Russian homosexual families, in particular in that it has "closed" lesbian families from communicating socially with people unknown to them. But let me now look closer at the different Russian lesbian generations, based on the analysis of the data I collected.

The Last-Soviet Lesbian Generation

The number of participants in my research from the pre-1990s generation was rather small. Lesbian women who had been socialized during the last-Soviet period⁷ only rarely became activists. Given that activism was a central approach and a form of access, they rarely wanted to participate in any interviews on lesbian or queer topics. At the same time, I would argue that they are in some sense even more sensitive to social changes than the youngest generation of Russian lesbian mothers. This

is because they have been, for the most part of their lives, hidden in mainstream society. In many cases, they are still, or once again, scared of sharing any information about their identity. Even if they identify as lesbians, they have not become active – or even passive – participants in the Russian LGBTQ community.

Some of “the last-Soviet generation” lesbians, however, actively took part in the cultural happenings organized by the community. I tracked some of them through these events, with the help of queer activists and their friends. For example, one of the participants had been organizing musical evenings, where mostly lesbians were invited, in her house. These women, despite of their invisibility in the larger political queer community – they had not participated in activist meetings, flash mobs, discussions or other sorts of queer and lesbian community events – thus created their own hidden space which accommodated their own cultural background. Francesca Stella (2014a), who has researched this group extensively, suggests that it consists precisely of those lesbian women who came of age during the Soviet and early last-Soviet period. She claims that none of her respondents took part in the lesbian community during the Soviet time. The impossibility to socialize as a part of the LGBTQ community during the last-Soviet period rendered it difficult to make bold choices to match their sexual orientation, thus making them search for and design other strategies for managing their lives in satisfactory ways. Before the 1990s, there were no official meeting places for homosexuals. Katya (58), one of my interviewees from this group, said:

There prevailed an unconscious fear. First, it was this law article that was about men but there was no lesbianism in it. Homosexuality existed but there was no lesbianism. My generation I think was less terrified. It was 1950s when we were growing up, when there was no Stalin regime anymore [...] from where was this law [Katya means the time of “Stalin’s terror,” that also produced the law against homosexuality; author’s comment]. We had it [meaning fear; author’s comment] from our parents, we got it with our mothers’ milk, as it is said, nothing could be said loudly.

This Damocles' sword of the 37th year [euphemism for Stalin's repression; author's comment] is still on some people. I don't have the fear personally. Even when I was meeting my partner somewhere – at work for example, or even if we worked together.

Lesbian experience of the Soviet era has not been articulated in the public yet as there is no real research on it, except for my own and that of Stella (2014b). It was a forbidden topic for the lesbian women themselves in their past. In Katya's words: "You see, we did not know lesbians at all, nobody presented anything, nobody talked about herself." Even though lesbian women had some possibilities to find a partner, they often did not have enough resources to realize these options in everyday life. The most common places to meet other women were the workplace, art exhibitions and museums, theaters, parks or just a bench on a street. They often found out about the lesbian desire for other women through personal communication. Lena (52) shared her experience on this:

I worked with a girl, at some places we could talk, eye-to-eye, hint-to-hint and you understand that she is not against it, and it is a reason to talk more openly because you are still afraid that she would laugh at you. [...] The orientation of both of us had been mutually understood according to our behavior. If we liked each other, if the "fellow feeling" was clear, we could continue. Almost everything was hidden, by-touch, but people liked it as these women always existed and always will, and they will always find each other.

Russian women of that period can thus be understood as living under a combination of the illegitimate sexual contract and an everyday gender contract (Temkina and Rotkirch 2007); indeed, the majority of lesbians before the 1990s had heterosexual families. Stella (2014b) noticed in her study that the older Russian lesbian women often contrasted their lesbian present with their heterosexual past, in cases when they had to hide their lesbian desire behind the façade of a "normal" heterosexual family and could not articulate themselves as lesbians. They understood family

as something natural, not as something that the state demanded from them, as Pushkareva (2004) suggests, but as socially necessary. For example, Lida (53) said in my interview: "I felt it was natural that I needed to be married, I did not protest against it. It did not create any negative feelings in me, or feelings that it was violence against me [meaning that heterosexual marriage could feel as a violence against her as a woman with same-sex desire; author's comment]. I wanted a child, I wanted a family."

From an outsider's point of view, the lives of my older informants look quite similar to each other. They all made decisions about marriage in the context of motherhood, and they had had parallel long-term relationships with women during their heterosexual matrimony, but the desire for a child of their own had played the most crucial role in their choices. For example, Lida explained her marriage in quite beautiful terms:

I got married because my husband had been written in the stars [meaning he was a destiny in terms of reproduction; author's comment] for me. I was also in a passionate love relationship with a girl at that time. During this love I got married and gave birth to a baby. My lover took it calmly and took care of me when I was pregnant; there was no jealousy or protest against it since we loved each other. Later she also got married.

In general terms, my informants from this generation had often not told their children about their lesbian desire, at least not before the 1990s. In the late-Soviet period lesbian women felt guilty for what they deemed to be an abnormal sexual orientation in themselves, as they were in danger of being seen as abnormal by the wider society had they come out. They could not divorce their husbands even if they did not feel anything for them, not even in the case of adultery. These women started their own independent life only after the husband died, or if the husband himself wanted to get a divorce. The informants from this group started to come out to their families and children only after 1993, the year when homosexuality was decriminalized and it became possible to talk about homosexuality more openly. The liberalized law thus seems to have had

a direct, positive effect on many aspects of their everyday personal lives (Smart 2007). This is maybe not so different (even though reverse) from how the neo-repressive legislation of the present day seems to be affecting negatively the lives of the lesbian families of the youngest generation, as I will discuss later on in this article.

Liberalization of the homosexual discourse after the mid-1990s made it possible to talk about sexual orientation openly and in public, and it also made it possible to make new kinds of life choices that also concerned the families of the last-Soviet period lesbian cohort. By this time, the children of this older lesbian generation were adults, and in some cases the women had already become grandmothers. For example, Katya (58) explains:

It happened before my birthday. I invited my children to a café and told them that I was divorcing their father and I loved Zhenya [the girlfriend]. They were adults. They told me: "It is your own life." This happened seven years ago, my daughter was 23 and my son 25.

The "the last-Soviet generation" of lesbian women has not been visible in research literature, nor in "queer public," nor in the wider society. However, in my view, they played a crucial role in the formation of the Russian LGBTQ community and also in creating a set of working reproductive strategies for future lesbian generations. They set standards of lesbian life because there was no public space for lesbianism to exist before this generation and thus their experiences gave meaning to the word. Even with a lack of information about homosexuality, these women managed to find their own ways to happiness in between the state policy norms and their own self-presentation, which both insisted that their desire was deviant.

The Border Generation of Russian Lesbians

My second analytical category, what I call "the border generation," refers to women who were in their thirties and forties at the time of my research. This generation had some access to information about homo-

sexuality but had still applied, at least partly, the same reproductive and family strategies as the women of the last-Soviet period described above. These practices had been successful for the previous generations, and in lesbian circles, people "knew" that these tactics had worked.

The period of socialization of "the border generation" women coincided with the general period of liberalization of the sexual discourse in the Russian society, from the mid-1990s and onwards. In this social and cultural atmosphere of "opening up," they could make choices that better matched their sexuality, compared to the previous generation. The social expectations of this period were still attached to, and predominantly influenced by, the Soviet family ideology but the possibility of making less hidden choices than those of "the last-Soviet lesbian generation" still appeared to them. Women who made families during this period actually had quite a wide range of options, which is why it is interesting to have a closer look at what kind of choices they preferred to make in the new societal situation.

Most women from this generation still had experiences of heterosexual marriage, but in contrast to the previous generation, they divorced their husbands when they met future female lovers. Kath Weston has suggested that in the US context, queer "people who equated their adoption of lesbian or gay identity with a renunciation of family [...] had considered 'going straight' or getting married specifically in order to 'have family'" (2002, 25). Similar tactic was adopted to some degree among those "border generation" Russian lesbians who had made the choice to reproduce. They had conceived children with "official legal fathers" in formal heterosexual marriages. In their narratives, "the border generation" lesbians assured that the existence of a father protected their children from homophobic bullying at school. The presence of a father in the family history or practice was enough to create a picture for outsiders of a "normal" family. One of my respondents, El (28) referred to this father figure in her immediate family:

Honestly, having the husband in the anamnesis [El uses the medical term "anamnesis" here as a metaphor of her life history; author's com-

ment] – it is the most useful thing; people usually don't ask stupid questions. [...] I think, that the information "I am a divorced woman who raises a kid, and sometimes I am getting help from a (girl)friend, who is also a single mother" – is quite enough.

Other respondents from this group also claimed positive effects caused by the fact that they had a heterosexual marriage in their personal life history. After the divorce, they could identify themselves as single, divorced mothers, and through this legitimate social status, they were able to avoid questions about their postdivorce and their actual (queer) family, thus also protecting them from the need to come out to society. They have gained a legitimate identity that provided them with official status and an authentic heterosexual life story in relation to social institutions. Most of my informants from "the border generation" affirmed that it had been a very good strategy for them to use the status of a divorced woman in creating a family plot that reflected the heteronormative standards in the society. In Katya's (40) words: "The colleagues think that if I have kids so *a priori* I cannot be a lesbian [lesbians still count as nonreproductive in society; author's comment] because I was married and have kids."

Other women of this generation were, however, more "radical" and created a lesbian family from the start, outside the heterosexual marriage route. As a consequence of this choice, they had experienced a lot of problems in their efforts to hide their nonnormative family structure. Furthermore, they have faced serious difficulty when searching for and finding a donor to get pregnant. Most of them had to choose heterosexual penetration as a way to conceive; often they had asked a male friend to become the father of their children, and had gone through one or several sexual acts with this man in order to get pregnant. This strategy was perceived as technically most convenient, and therefore attractive and most suitable for them. Olesya wrote about this in an Internet forum:

We had decided to try natural conceiving; we really had not wanted to go to many months voyage to hospitals [voyage in order to buy sperm; author's comment]. Luckily everything went quite fast.

The ethical component in this generation's reproductive strategy appears here; most women who used "the natural way" for conceiving were in a couple relationship with their girlfriend, which meant that sex with another person could be seen as a betrayal. Therefore, a specific politics of trust necessarily played a crucial role in this situation between the partners in the lesbian couple, and this was often stressed in the interviews. For example, Anya (33) stated that "there was no jealousy, everything was based on trust, calmly. Shared peace, so everything was ok." Similarly, in Internet forums, lesbians from this generation group often highlighted the importance of mutual trust in this situation. Nadezhda, for instance, writes in one of them: "The particularity of this way did not have an effect on our relationship, the most important thing here was trust."

The mutual trust – which many of "the border generation" lesbians referred to – in the highly complicated situation of conceiving, is an interesting further topic for research on lesbian-headed families in Russia. In many of my interviewees' stories, one woman from a couple got pregnant without telling the other woman in the relationship about it. But by "negotiating" (Smart 2007; Matilainen 2012) the matter seemed to be somehow settled between the women. The main building block for trust was that there was an agreement between the two mothers to conceive children this way, even if one of the women then went on to have sex with some man without the other woman knowing about this.⁸

The women of "the border generation" have, in some ways, been more experimental or "daring" in their reproductive choices than the youngest lesbian generation in Russia (which I will describe more in detail below). "The border generation" lesbians, it seems, imagined themselves to have a wider variation of ways to conceive than either the previous generation or the younger one. Women of "the border generation" age group have had more resources to be experimental because they were more informed, when compared to the situation of lesbians of "the last-Soviet generation." Compared to lesbians of "the new generation," they were more economically and socially independent and could thus make experimental choices. At the same time, lesbians of "the border genera-

tion” often followed the previous generation’s strategy in hiding their private lives. According to the 2013 survey, this age group has also chosen home insemination instead of going to a hospital for assistance. For this group, reproductive practices had moved from the illegitimate to the everyday; became practically possible, even though still a form of strictly private everyday, as it was not totally legitimate to have public lesbian families. Therefore, the women of this generation have avoided involving hospitals as state institutions in their reproductive practices.

Lesbians belonging to “the border generation” have also been coming out in other ways than members of the older generation or the younger one. They have been partly open to their family, relatives, children, husbands, and friends, especially homosexual friends who they quite often regarded as their closest friends. Some of them were also open at work. Basically, lesbians of “the border generation” cohort had experiences of dealing with an ongoing variety of coming out difficulties throughout their lives, step-by-step, day-by-day, from one social situation or life sphere to another. The effects of coming out among the respondents of this generation differed, but the choices made around coming out were most often informed by concerns for their children’s safety. Generally, the effects on children seems to matter more to Russian lesbian parents than the public disclosure of their own sexual identity or the political importance of a queer activist position.

The lesbian women from “the border generation” have thought a lot about the meaning in their lives of coming out and they were willing to reflect on the topic. It seems that they have divided the social circles around them in different separate sections according to the level of the trust and openness of each section. They had also created a normative “legend,” a legitimate family story that included the socially recognized status of the partner and her children (if they are part of the family) for presentations in those social situations where they did not deem coming out as safe (Zhabenko 2010).

My research has also found that in most cases the parents of the lesbian women (mostly the parents of the lesbian birth mothers) have eventually accepted their daughters’ choice to have a lesbian family.

Grandparents were often helping with the care for grandchildren, even if there were difficulties in the communication after the initial coming out of the daughter. Husbands, on the other hand, reacted differently than grandparents. In most cases, they were offended when their ex-wives came out. However, they rarely interfered in the lesbian family life of their ex-wives; often they participated in the parenting practices, each in their own way. Only in one case had the ex-husband wanted to take the children through a court custody trial, because of the sexual orientation of his ex-wife. The case was finally solved without a trial, and the mother could successfully start, and go on with, raising the children in her lesbian family.⁹

As the legal responsibility for the children lies with the birth mother, co-mothers in Russian lesbian families do not have any formal legal rights to the biological children of their partner. Birth mothers thus have all the power in determining how co-mothers communicate with the children and can also stop the communication altogether, for example in case of relationship trouble or separation. Women from the two so far discussed "generations," who were co-mothers have faced the potential risk of losing their children, which contributed to a certain pressure to become a biological mother oneself instead of opting to be a social one in a lesbian family. I would argue that this should be understood in relation to the societal, internalized, and culturally inherited expectation of "reproductive failure" in same-sex relationships, and to the feared perspective of losing all connections with a partner's children in the future, in case of relationship problems. The lack of recognition of the role and rights of a co-mother thus contributed to orientating lesbians towards seeking to give birth to their own children. That is, a biologically established kinship works as a guarantee for parenting rights, also in case of a divorce.

The sense of "borderiness" that I have highlighted in this discussion of the realities of the personal lives and reproductive choices of the Russian lesbian women of the thirty to forty years old group is not to meant to describe a generation as consisting of a certain kind of individuals. Rather, the idea to use the term "the border generation" here aims to

show the changing conditions of the social reality for lesbian mothers of this age group. "The border generation" sample is not very large in my research, but it definitely offers specific insights for an analysis of Russian lesbian reproductive cultures from the 1980s to the present. Of the three generational lesbian cohorts I have identified, "the border generation" used the widest variety of routes to cope with the social and legislative situation in the Russia they lived in around the time they negotiated their sexual identities and their social status in terms of family and motherhood. Members of this cohort were mostly well-educated women from big cities, who had access to queer activist organizations, were knowledgeable about their rights and were in a position to get information if needed. Furthermore, by creating discussion forums on the Internet, and by sharing their experiences with the younger generation lesbians on these sites, they have influenced the wider discourse about reproductive choices of lesbians in Russia.

The New Lesbian Generation in Russia

The last generational cohort I want to discuss is, what I here will call, "the new generation." These are women who were under thirty years old at the time of my research and they had created a lesbian family at once, without thinking about heterosexual marriage or creating a legitimate straight father figure to cover their lesbian family situation. They had initially decided to raise children together with their female partner, chosen IVF as their reproductive strategy, and searched for sperm from an anonymous donor. They were out not only to their parents and close friends but also, at least partly, in relation to the state social institutions. They went together with their lesbian partner to the reproductive clinic to choose sperm, and they stayed together in the hospital during the pregnancy check-ups and the delivery, and acted in these situations as a "normal lesbian family."¹⁰

The women who belonged to this generational cohort had quite clearly articulated for themselves, as well as to the external world what their reproductive choices, personal lives, and family design were. They had several same-sex partners during their teenage years and young adult-

hood. They came out to their parents at the age of fourteen to sixteen, and their parents supported their lesbian family. Through participating in discussions and by their own experiences they understood the complex and contingent political situation around the LGBTQ issue in Russia. If they were not activists in LGBTQ organizations or NGOs within the social sphere, they spent a lot of time in lesbian and queer clubs, or visited LGBTQ themed workshops, art exhibitions, cultural festivals, and other public queer events. They took motherhood very seriously from the start. They started to search for donors well in advance, and made their choices very rationally. The donor was chosen from a circle of friends, or on the basis of other established relationships, good health, the promise of anonymity, or the level of the donor's wished-for involvement in parenting.

The lesbians of "the new generation" also had more faith in the perseverance of their relationships than the women from the previous two lesbian cohorts. Hence, they were planning to have children together, despite the fact that the law has not been changed in regard to the rights of the social mother. The problem with the lack of rights for the co-mother not only remains but has even gotten worse with new legislative trends which threaten to take children away homosexual families. Among the interviewees of "the new generation" lesbian families, there had not been any divorces, so I cannot speculate about how these couples (particularly the co-mothers) might cope in a divorce situation.

At this point, hospitals are the only places where frozen sperm can be bought in Russia and thus all assessments of couples and donors have to be done in hospitals. There are several levels of taking care of pregnant women. The first level is the so-called reproductive centers where couples can get advise about pregnancy and also have different medical tests done. These clinics are mostly private, and they sell sperm for insemination procedures. The second level is the consultation clinics where all women must go to register directly after they find out that they are pregnant. The third, basic level of medical institutions, where pregnant women get obstetrical and gynecological assistance, is the state's women consultation. It works together with either a regional polyclinic or a local

maternity hospital. These clinics are provided by the state and all pregnant women must register there at some point in order to get all the official documents required and also to be eligible for various social benefits and payments in the future (Borozdina 2011). This level includes state-provided maternity hospitals where women finally give birth. This means that a number of choices of hospitals have to be made along the way.

Generally, those Russian families who conceive prepare and choose the hospital in advance. There are several Internet sites and forums that cater to lesbian families. On these sites, lesbian couples that have applied these technologies successfully, share their experience and give information about names and contact details for lesbian-friendly doctors. These are doctors who usually let the couple decide together about the donor. They are also referred to as the ones who "place the catalogue of donors in the co-mother's hands," and show the ultrasonography of the fetus to both mothers. These doctors are aware of the fact that they are dealing with a lesbian couple and not sisters or friends – and they also hide this information from the system. Co-mothers in lesbian-friendly hospitals or clinics get access to all information about their partner, even if they do not have any right to this information legally. At the same time, such clinics quite often are small, and the lesbian-friendly service for them is also (or for most part) a business solution; lesbian couples form a crucial part of their potential clients and are willing to pay for these services.

In addition to lesbian-friendly clinics, lists of homophobic clinics or clinics where couples have faced discrimination are also circulated on the Internet sites. As Galina (36) angrily put it:

I know that in [name of the clinic in Saint Petersburg] they have been writing in the medical history sheet with big red letters – HOMO. It is like a stigma; of course it is at once some "other" person in front of you. Immediately the attitude [of the staff] changes, they could work differently with the person [with such a medical history]. But from the medical point of view, nothing has changed!

Here I should point out that these clinics are not the last step for the

lesbian couple because the final level is always the state maternity hospital. At maternity hospitals, as a rule, lesbians hide their orientation, because the most important thing for them is to give birth without any problems. They are afraid to influence or complicate this process in any way by coming out. The reasoning follows the line according to which the child's health after birth is more important than the disclosure of the mother's identity. This is why most mothers prefer the hospitals with the best medical quality, in spite of the possible homophobic social attitude of the staff. As Anastasiya (29) explained:

We did not say anything because it is this maternity hospital... they even have this logo where the family couple is hugging each other and there is written "Keeping the traditions." Let's not destroy their traditions! People could have error in their heads [means could start doing mistakes because of wrong interpretation of situation; author's comment] but we needed to have our baby boy... because some people start behaving weirdly from the medical point of view. They somehow switch over and start thinking that you are a totally different person.

During the time the wider debate about coming out in Russia changed slightly as the legislation turned oppressive. In the narratives of the respondents from this generation, coming out has become the priority of the social communication. In the workshop that I organized together with the LGBT organization Coming Out in Saint Petersburg in the spring of 2013,¹¹ in the closing discussion all the lesbian mothers who participated in the workshop agreed on the fact that coming out to their children from the start was an important step in their parenting. In accordance, all participants in the workshop (mostly women under thirty) stated that they had been open to their children.

In sum, the liberal stage, prior to the new repressive legislative turn, was quite positive for the lesbian-headed families of "the new generation" in that they started to come out as lesbians and as mothers in society. I would argue that this was possible because they had had the opportunity to develop their own support networks on the Internet and

through the Russian LGBTQ organizations. On these sites, they often discussed whether to come out as a lesbian family to their wider social surroundings. Now, the situation around lesbian parenting issues is again increasingly unstable because of the rapidly tightening legislative oppression. Inside the community of lesbian mothers – including all the three age cohorts – family negotiations, not only on parental coming out, but on the everyday parenting practices and the safety of children in lesbian families now take up more and more space.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that in the last forty to fifty years in Russia, lesbian parenting and reproductive culture have gone through significantly different phases. During the Soviet era, in a societal situation with no rights for homosexuals or same-sex families, lesbian parents learned how to manage both their sexual desire and their straight marriages. They created effective strategies, particularly reproductive strategies, to overcome the difficulties they had. A more open atmosphere and a wider array of reproductive and family design choices, both personal and social, were developed in the liberal phase of Russian politics from the mid-1990s until 2013.

Same-sex desire has of course existed in Russia since before the revolution and during the Soviet time (Healey 2001a; 2001b). Lesbians of last-Soviet and more liberal periods have faced constant changes in the dominant sexuality and family ideology. They have managed to find partners, have children, create queer families, and live their lives under the ever-changing, contingent circumstances. Women from "the last-Soviet generation," with a queer desire for their own sex, who were socialized in the Soviet time could not call themselves lesbians¹² because this term came with the media transformation and appeared in the public discourse only after they had made their reproductive and family choices. The ideology of that time demanded that they formed a "traditional family" in which motherhood played the most important role. "The last-Soviet generation" women did not avoid their socially enforced duties; despite their lesbian desires, practices, and relations they

created heterosexual families with children. They suffered because they had "other" desires, and often blamed themselves for the unhappiness in the relationships with their husbands, but did not find external support to leave their husbands on their own, as both society and cultural attitudes were thoroughly against it, and they lacked conceptual, economic, legal, and community resources to act otherwise.

The period of liberalization that started in the 1990s brought a great social relief for queer people in Russia by the decriminalization of homosexuality. This was a starting point for a new life, also for the lesbian women of "the last-Soviet generation" who I interviewed. Most of them changed things profoundly in their lives after 1993, the year when homosexuality was erased from the criminal law. Most of them came out to their, now adult, children, they divorced their husbands or started a more open life that better suited their queer desire.

"The border generation" refers to those women who during the 1970s and 1980s were initially more open in society than the previous lesbian generation. They had better access to information on lesbian topics, and they had more opportunities and could choose from a range of options when making reproductive and family formation choices. They learned how to manage their identity and to exist in the Russian society, which was largely a contradictory place to live as a lesbian parent, and quite unfriendly towards homosexuals. Thus, it is no wonder that a part of "the border generation" lesbian interviewees still continued to make traditional choices that they deemed were "safe." They had children in heterosexual marriages, or had intercourse with men for the purposes of conceiving if they were living in a lesbian relationship. They were not afraid to divorce their husbands, so quite often they ended up creating a lesbian family. Some "border generation" women had made more radical choices as they experimented with family forms or created lesbian families at once, and thus faced problems and obscurities that these relations caused in society and in their personal lives.

"The new generation" of lesbians, those who are now under thirty years old, grew up with liberal ideas in a more open Russian society. The women I interviewed have a good education, they have learned English

and other languages, and have traveled a lot – they have followed European and American trends and research literature about homosexuality and queer studies. Following the “equal rights” discourse, they wanted to make ideal choices that fit their identity as lesbians or queers. But in the situation where they lack rights as homosexuals or lesbian parents in their home country, Russia, they needed to create working reproductive strategies. Until the recent changes in the Russian legal landscape, they have been very successful in that: they have searched for donors, doctors, and hospitals through the activist and friends’ networks and on the Internet. They have used the help of LGBTQ organizations in legal matters and with personal problems. They have participated in social discussions and communicated with international media, thus also successfully presented and introduced the Russian lesbian community to the rest of the world. We need to take into account that these young women are just starting their queer lives, thus the strategy of their choices is very much dependent on the legal, political, and social changes that are going on right now in the Russian society.

This article has shown that lesbian women, of the three different generations that I have described, have faced different but also rather similar problems in their lives. All the interviewed women from the three different age cohorts had the experience of making “ideologically wrong” choices but their relationship to time and (Russian) history made their accounts differ both in content and in shape. “The last-Soviet generation” lesbians translated their experiences into certain wisdom in their stories, as they already had time to reflect on the conditions of their lives; thus their stories were a sort of “result” of their reflections. At times the stories of this “older” generation also lacked much of the details that were provided by the “younger” generations of respondents. The women of “the border generation” and “the new generation” were keener to provide detailed facts of their lives, but they also were very careful in keeping the timeline of their lives in order, and often even checked some names or dates to provide me with the full picture. They offered me their experiences in all their richness, but they had not had the time or the opportunity to reflect on them yet.

The identity issue that I have slightly touched on at several points in this article has had different meaning for different lesbian generations in Russia. "The last-Soviet generation" women did not know the term lesbian for the most part of their life, thus they had constructed their identity through the existence of the law that criminalized homosexuals in Russia. The crucial turning points in the lives of this generation, in one way or another, always concerned this law. Even after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993, "the Damocles' sword" of this law influenced their life choices, in particular their reproductive choices. "The border generation" has had different obstacles with defining themselves in terms of identity. They had to recreate themselves to claim their lesbian identity. As they had made complicated maneuvers in the slowly liberalizing Russian society of the 1990s, they did not want to be scared of the law anymore as they matured. But they have not had enough resources or information to create a "modern Western" lesbian lifestyle, at least not to the same degree as "the new generation" has done. "The border generation" women's identity was not united in the same way around "rights" as the identity of the lesbian cohort who were socialized after them, but it was mobile and thus provided them with a number of possibilities to manage their everyday lives and reproductive choices outside the normative. "The new generation" of Russian lesbians had constructed their identities according to the prevailing "norms" of the lesbian and queer cultures created in liberal Europe and United States, even though the Russian reality has never been very friendly towards homosexuals – and, as we have now seen, was not going to be. Where lesbian families were counted as nonexistent in the past, they are now considered harmful to society.

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NOTES

1. The most visible Russian "lesbian family immigrant" is journalist and author Masha Gessen in the United States.
2. Joanna Mizielinska and Robert Kulpa (2011, 16) have suggested the concept of *knotted time* as a new term for queer time in former communist countries in Europe. It refers to "an embodiment of sexual desires and pleasures" and "represents the queer experience of CEE." The concept has inspired my thinking as a queerly "knotted time" also influences Russian lesbian lives. It could prove fruitful for the future discussion on the Russian queer experience, but the term needs some further research and is thus not included in the analysis in the present article. See also Dan

Healey (2014, 95–7) on the historical specificities of “the evolution of queer” in Russia.

3. See Healey (2014) on how the wartime contact with “decadent” Europe was seen as threatening to contaminate Soviet “natural” sexuality.
4. Stepmothering mentioned here intentionally to highlight the specific experience of women of “late-Soviet generation.” Amy Hequembourg (2001) has noticed in her research that lesbian stepmothers have an unclear parental role in the family structure. They create the role of second parent through the presentation to the child, given by the biological mother. Lesbians of “late-Soviet generation” participated in parenting practices in the family of their lovers although they had been struggling to find a clear parental role for themselves.
5. Following the Russian sociologist Igor Kon (1999), by socialization I mean the complex of social and psychological processes that help a person integrate into a society by learning the system of norms and values of this society.
6. See, however, Sorainen on the queer flight story’s complexity (in the West), in this volume.
7. The term “last-Soviet generation” was offered by Alexei Yurchak (2005). He argues, “the post-Stalinist period between the mid-1950s and mid-1980s became thought of as a particular period with shared characteristics, which is here called late socialism.” The young generation that was therefore belonging to this period, “people who were born between the 1950s and early 1970s and came of age between the 1970s and the mid-1980s,” Yurchak called “last-Soviet generation.” Following him, I am using this term to name one of the generational cohorts in this article, applying to the common cultural background and experiences that the women, described in this work, had.
8. This kind of decision, to have heterosexual sex in order to conceive in a lesbian couple, is nowadays widely frowned upon in the lesbian community in Russia. I dare to say this based on my knowledge of current attitudes prevailing in the lesbian community, which came forth in my interview data, and which I have perceived also in the activist workshops and meetings in which I have participated between 2010 and 2014. Interestingly, the results from a recent online research that I made for the Russian LGBTQ Network in November 2013, suggest that lesbian women of the age group thirty to forty years have mainly chosen to have artificial insemination and IVF as their reproductive strategy. The online survey was designed differently than the interview questionnaire, and the recruitment was different, thus this explains why the question of trust came forth so strongly in interviews. This question clearly still requires more research. (Online questionnaire of the LGBTQ community in Russia, with 1,800 respondents, was conducted with the support of Russian LGBTQ Network in November of 2013).
9. Trial cases about child custody on the basis of mother’s sexual orientation have

never been as common in Russia as, for example, in the United States (Rivers 2010). The abovementioned case was the only one in the data that I have collected. However, after the recent legislative changes, in my meetings with Russian lesbian mothers I have heard alarming news about an increasing fear that former husbands will be taking women to court by referring to the propaganda law.

10. I refer to a certain "normalization process" that took place in those queer families, which claim not only equality with heterosexual families in terms of their everyday family practices, but also the recognition of the specificities of their particular (lesbian) family. Sara Ahmed notices: "Even when queer families may wish to be recognized as 'families like other families,' their difference from the ideal script produces disturbances that will require active forms of negotiation in different times and places." (Ahmed 2004, 153) By using the term "normal lesbian family" here, I refer to the construct of practices that are known by the society as usual for lesbian families (for example, choosing sperm donor). By applying such generalization, I intend to claim that Russian lesbian families, despite the legislative situation and everyday homophobia surrounding them, somehow have internalized the understanding of lesbian family reality, which is common for those countries where lesbian and gay rights are supported by the state.
11. The workshop "Co-mothers, Step-Mothers, Bio-Mothers in Lesbian Families in Russia," was organized by the LGBT organization Coming Out in Saint Petersburg, Russia.
12. Stella (2014b) explores in her work the terms with which homosexuals, and particularly women with same-sex desire, in Soviet Russia had named themselves. She argues that term "lesbian" does not encompass the variety of women's identifications. Stella addresses Laurie Essig's work (Essig 1999) in which she discussed the usage of the terms *rozovaya* (queer woman, literary "pink"), *tema* (common term for queer circles, literary "theme"), *nashi* (literary "our people"). My informants in their stories also used the naming *takaya she kak ya* (literary "the same as me").

SAMMANFATTNING

Artikeln analyserar de olika val när det gäller reproduktion som lesbiska kvinnor i Ryssland gjort från tiden före Sovjetunionens fall fram till i dag. De reproduktionsval som gjorts av tre generationskohorter av lesbiska – "sena-Sovjet generationen", "gränsgenerationen" och den "nya generationen" – sätts in i en historisk, social och politisk kontext. Mot bakgrund av de ändringar i lagstiftningen som skett under undersökningsperioden, beskriver artikeln skillnaderna i dessa tre generationskohorters reproduktionsstrategier.

Undersökningsresultatet visar att lesbiska ur sena-Sovjet generationen inte hade tillräckligt med information om lesbiskt begär för att bilda någon motståndsinriktad gemenskap. För dem hörde moderskap ihop med den heterosexuella kärnfamiljen och queert begär ansågs förkastligt. De höll sina kvinnliga partners hemliga för sina äkta män och barn. Gränsgenerationens lesbiska hade större social frihet att utforma sina val. Somliga bildade heterosexuella familjer för att få en legitim status i samhället, men andra lyckades queera sina reproduktionsstrategier och inkorporera sina lesbiska familjer i det inte särskilt gayvänliga ryska samhället. Lesbiska ur den nya generationen bildade lesbiska familjer på en gång och de betonar vikten av att såväl göra "rätt" reproduktionsval genom att välja spermadonator, som att komma ut både i och utanför sin egen familj och barndomsfamiljen.

Keywords: lesbian families, lesbian parenting, lesbians in Russia, queer in Russia, lesbian history