

THE STATE TO THE RESCUE?

THE CONTESTED TERRAIN OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN POSTCOMMUNIST RUSSIA

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Introduction

In the early 1990s, if an average person on the street in Russia was asked about domestic violence (*domashnee nasilie*), (s)he would probably have responded by asking what was meant by domestic violence. The same question today would elicit more understanding. Over the following decade—with links to global women’s activism to stop violence against women—women’s organizations have worked valiantly to bring domestic violence to public discussion, naming and conceptualizing it as a social problem and linking it to gender equality. As of 2014, however, the typical Russian would probably focus the conversation on the vulnerability of children abused by their parents. As the current public debate constructs the traditional family as the nation’s core, violence against women has been eclipsed by a gender-blind discussion of violence in family.

In this chapter, we examine the changing response to domestic violence in the Russian Federation since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The last two and half decades have been tumultuous for Russian citizens, beginning with a devastating depression that left most households on an unending financial roller coaster ride, made worse by the loss of the country’s superpower status. The promise of democracy rang hollow as society became more violent and political elites joined the oligarchs in purloining the state. By the 2000s when

Vladimir Putin came to power, his promise of a more muscular state, even if more authoritarian, seemed liked a good deal for many people, especially as the Russian economy grew phenomenally until the 2008 global economic crisis. We argue that the attempts at liberalization as communist control over society collapsed gave officials more excuses to ignore domestic violence. Building on the global critiques of violence against women, women's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia made inroads just as the state began to consolidate a more authoritarian regime. The result is some limited responsibility-taking by the Russian state, but the response is more about rescuing rather than empowering women. We illustrate these developments with case examples based on our extensive fieldwork in Russian civic and public organizations from our disparate backgrounds in political science and social work .

Unfortunately, while the common wisdom is that domestic violence got worse in the 1990s, there is little credible data to back it up (Johnson 2005; ANNA 2010; CEDAW Committee 2010). The Ministry of Interior has no separate category for either intimate partner violence or family violence, with all violent acts within the private sphere treated under the category of “violence in everyday life.” Even if there was police counts—because of women's rational mistrust of the police in this post-Soviet society, especially when it comes to domestic violence—the vast majority of all domestic violence cases remains outside the official statistics. The statistic that might avoid this problem—the number of women killed by their current or former intimate partners every year—is untrustworthy; officials and activists alike repeat the figure of 14,000, a number at least three times too high.¹

The research and thinking for this project was furthered by our participation in the project Welfare, Gender and Agency in Russia in the 2000s (2008-2010/2012), led by Aino Saarinen, through the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki

(<http://www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/english/projects/wga.htm>). We thank in particular Olga

The best estimates available come from a more than a decade-old survey that found that every second married woman had experienced physical violence from her husband at least once, with almost one out of five experiencing regular or severe violence (Gorshkova and Shurygina 2003). Psychological violence was used in most relationships. Sexual violence in marriage, although common, was not even regarded as violence by most survey respondents. Some thirteen percent of the female respondents reported having husbands forbid them to work or study or refuse (or threaten to refuse) them use of the family money on account of their alleged bad behavior. Anecdotal evidence suggests that violence against women, including abduction and honor killings, are higher in the North Caucasus, shaped by Russia's brutal campaigns in the region and the radicalization of the resistance (ANNA 2010, 37-41). This data, while limited, suggest that domestic violence is widespread in Russia,

Lyapounova [Liapounova] and Meri Kulmala for their participation in our 2013 trip to St. Petersburg and, providing the necessary financing, the Academy of Finland-funded Finnish Centre of Excellence in Russian Studies – Choices of Russian Modernisation coordinated by the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki (<http://www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/crm/index.html>) as well as a PSC-CUNY Award (# 65055-00 43), jointly funded by The Professional Staff Congress and The City University of New York.

¹ For example, Interview with Police Lieutenant General M. Artamoshkin, published on the website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs 01/24/2008, www.mvd.ru/news/14047/ (cited in ANNA 2010, 6). The UNDOC (<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/homicide.html>) reports that the total numbers of murder in Russia ranged from 16,617 in 2008 to 13,826 in 2011; women constitute about one quarter of those murdered, suggesting the upper most limit of femicides is around 4,000, assuming (unreasonably) that all murders of women were by current or former intimate partners.

more prevalent than the world average lifetime estimate of 35 percent (World Health Organization 2013).

The Russian history of selective intervention and then privatization

Domestic violence has a different history in Russia than in the United States. In prerevolutionary Russia and then the Soviet Union, the assumption has been that domestic violence was taboo (e. g. Attwood 1997, 99; Beschetnova 2003, 8; also Muravyeva 2012, 56). This is only partly true, as there had never been a private sphere as it is conceived in the West. Court cases from the 18th century show that intimate partner violence, although being a part of the life of Russian families, was not regarded as normal and acceptable by women experiencing it (Muraveyeva 2008; 2012). Both the state and the Orthodox Church responded to severe cases of violence by punishing the perpetrator, allowing divorce, and providing shelter for women in monasteries. In the years following the Bolshevik revolution, wife beating was handled disapprovingly in meetings of the women's sections of the central committee of the communist party and in state-sponsored women's magazines (Gradszkova et al. 2005, 15). Later, when the state reverted to more conventional notions of gender, incidents of domestic violence were sometimes regulated under the criminal statute of hooliganism or addressed by the state as a part of anti-alcohol campaigns (Sperling 1990, 19; Johnson 2009, 23, 25; Muravyeva 2014). Women's councils and comrade courts also handled complaints of "improper behavior of husbands in the family," while local branches of trade unions intervened by criticizing perpetrator's behavior or sending him to coercive detoxification (Zhidkova 2008, 21-22). The Soviet state's commitment to women's employment, equal pay, daycare and universal healthcare lessened women's economic dependency of their husbands and created exit options (Johnson 2009, 24).

Yet, the cases were not named as domestic violence nor seen as gender violence. Soviet police treated cases of domestic violence as “family scandals,” and the goal of police prevention was reconciliation (Johnson 2009, 24). By the 1970s, “difficult life situation” served as a euphemism for domestic violence. As other social problems, domestic violence was seen as a relic of bourgeois morals, which would vanish as the socialist state develops towards communism. Violence was explained by individual perpetrator’s abnormal personality combined with alcohol abuse (Voigt and Thornton 2002, 98). Gender roles emphasizing strong men and vulnerable women and their interconnections to violence were not acknowledged (Attwood 1997, 100–101).

As communism collapsed, people’s lives became more private, and domestic violence was privatized. Entering one’s family life and prosecuting domestic violence under the pretense of hooliganism became less justifiable (Johnson 2009, 30), and the police started to ignore cases of domestic violence or refuse to help victims (Human Rights Watch 1995). The new societal order called for more traditional gender roles, and domestic violence was sometimes seen as a counter-reaction to gender equality, a disruption to “natural” order of things (Johnson 2009, 31; Attwood 1997). All this was made worse by the economic depression and collapse of the welfare state, leaving women newly vulnerable to domestic violence.

The rise and then decline of a NGO women’s crisis center movement

The end of communist control—occurring at approximately the same time as the Fourth World Conference on Women declared the goal of preventing and eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls--also created opportunities for independent women’s groups to raise the issue of violence against women, and it became a key theme of an emerging Russian women’s movement (Hement 2004). The first crisis centers were

established by women's NGOs in the early 1990s, with the assistance of foreign donors and based on collaborations between Russian women's activists and Western feminists (Johnson 2009, 44; Hemment 2004). Transnational collaborations also offered them a model for organizing their activities (Hemment 2004). The goal of the first crisis centers was twofold: to help victims of violence with crisis hotlines and in-person counseling as well as to change attitudes towards the problem in society and the state (Zabelina 1999, 36; Pashina 2003, 77–79).

By the 2000s, there was a respectable network of crisis centers spread around Russia. There were successful NGO crisis centers in Moscow and St. Petersburg as well as in several regional capitals (e. g. Kazan, Barnaul, Saratov, Tver, Arkhangelsk and Murmansk). There were also some public crisis centers, for example in St. Petersburg and Izhevsk, which applied gender-sensitive focus in their work and collaborated with the NGO network.

However, this heyday for women's crisis centers was followed by a period of decreasing funding from abroad as donors were pulled—or pushed—out. In the beginning of the new decade, activist crisis centers were on life support, lacking funding or a sufficient constituency (Johnson and Saarinen 2011; 2013; Saarinen 2009). Like many NGOs in Russia, these autonomous women's crisis centers were also faced with increasing restrictions, most notably a 2006 NGO law imposing new registration burdens and a 2012 law requiring NGOs engaged in political activities and receiving foreign funds to register as “foreign agents” (see also Kulmala 2013; Saarinen, Ekonen and Uspenskaia 2014). In 2014, of the hundred or so centers, only a handful survived, while others have had to significantly curtail their activities or struggle with intermittent funding. In Moscow, the one center (Yaroslavna) that provided psychological support vanished, while a leaner ANNA, funded by the international cosmetics company AVON, managed a national hotline for domestic violence survivors.. In St. Petersburg, Aleksandra had closed while the Institute of Nondiscriminatory

Gender Interrelations Crisis Center for Women (INGI), having been raided as “foreign agent” in 2013, struggled to continue its feminist advocacy, including help in court cases to a small number of individual women. Many strong centers outside of these big cities have disappeared, while others have had to significantly curtail their activities struggling with intermittent funding, and some have found local allies and live on in changed circumstances/found local support and fly under the radar.

The movement’s biggest achievement has been transforming the public consciousness about domestic violence. In the late 1990s to the early 2000s, the crisis centers achieved remarkable media coverage to their cause (Johnson 2009, 101). By the new millennium, surveys show that most, if not virtually all, people see domestic violence as a problem, and most reject the old justifications, such as infidelity (Gorshkova and Shurygina 2003; Stickley et al. 2008, 451; 2008 Gallup survey cited in ANNA 2010, 47). Domestic violence has become a common subject of talk shows and dramas on television and Russians activists express the general sense that the recognition of domestic violence has changed. This is not to say that most Russians see the problem as rooted in patriarchal norms, but the issues has become more prominent and moved toward disapproval.

Evolving response of state welfare services in the 2000s

The Russian activists’ advocacy, reinforced by international pressure, also proved successful enough to get the state’s attention, even as it moved toward authoritarianism. Since 1999, the Russian government has gradually taken responsibility for providing help to violence survivors, setting up crisis departments for women “in difficult life situations” inside public social service centers.² The aim of the crisis departments is “to provide psychological,

² Federal Law No. 195-FZ of 10 December 1995 “On the fundamentals of Social Services for the Populace in the Russian Federation”, see also ANNA (2010).

juridical, pedagogical, social and other forms of help to women and children, whose situation is dangerous for their physical or mental health or who have experienced psychological and physical violence.”³ Women and children experiencing violence are a special target group of the departments, but the departments also address homelessness, health problems, and other difficult life situations. The services differ, but usually they provide consultations of psychologists, social workers and lawyers. As of 2010, there were some 120 crisis departments, 19 crisis centers for women (3 for men), and 23 shelters, which is of great importance to violence survivors (ANNA 2010).

While the largest shelter in the country— with 80 beds—was opened in 2014 in Moscow, the most successful state program is in St. Petersburg (Jäppinen, Johnson and Kulmala 2014). Even before the national legislation, in 1996, feminist activists sought and found government support for a city-wide shelter. By 2005—as a result of pressure from feminist and other domestic violence activists—the city also made a commitment to establish crisis departments for women across the city. In 2013, there was one in all eighteen municipal districts of the city. Six of them included shelter space for women, with the others obligated to create such accommodation in the near future.

The strength of these public crisis departments is that they have stable—though scarce—resources for their work that provide for premises and shelters that few NGOs have been able to sustain (Johnson and Saarinen 2013). The shelter capacity is still quite limited, with only 85 beds in St. Petersburg (approximately 0.7 beds per 10,000 people compared to

³ Statute of the Ministry of Labor of the Russian Federation of 27 June 1999 number 32 “On confirming the methodological recommendations for organizing the functions of state (municipal) institution ‘Complex center of social services for the populace.’”

the Council of Europe's recommendations of one per 10,000 citizens [European Commission 2010]).⁴

The challenges these public crisis departments present relate to the wide scope of their work. First, as these departments work with a variety of issues, staff members have not necessarily received specialized training on how to work with violence survivors. In these conditions, domestic violence is sometimes treated through old stereotypes, such as the assumption that women provoke the violence used against them. Second, as typical in public social services in Russia, staff turnover is high. Without specialized training or long-term experience, domestic violence is treated as an issue related to the perpetrator's personal problems or alcohol abuse and viewed as a conflict between spouses with both parties equally responsible (Jäppinen 2014; Jäppinen, Johnson and Kulmala 2014). Gender-sensitive conceptualizations of domestic violence, which emphasize violence against women, are eclipsed by a gender-blind treatment through the lens of violence in family. This broadens the scope from intimate partner violence to include child abuse, and talking about protecting the family is required to justify the services to women survivors of violence. In the gender-sensitive approach, women's safety and right to live without violence is prioritized, while the family-centered approach emphasizes keeping the family together and may treat women mainly as wives and mothers. As state social services do not conduct big informational campaigns to change the society's view of domestic violence, a load of prospective responsibility on preventing future violence is laid on shoulders of women survivors of violence (Johnson and Saarinen 2013; Jäppinen 2014; Virkki and Jäppinen 2014). As government officials have used the existence of public crisis centers to argue that NGO crisis

⁴ Not all other European countries have succeeded in providing enough shelter places, though. In Finland, for example, the figure was only 0.23 in 2009, which is gloomy compared e.g. to 1.64 in Norway or 1.47 in Netherlands.)

centers are no longer necessary, there is little opportunity to emphasize the gendered nature of domestic violence and its connections to gender inequality in the society.

On the other hand, the focus on keeping families together has led to the development of work practices with male perpetrators of violence. In contrast to ambivalence among Western feminists about working with men, Russian activists have long believed that working with men is essential (Saarinen 2004), and they struggle to change the cultural presentation of a Russian man not seeking help from professionals to their personal problems (Kay 2006). Many public crisis departments routinely contact the perpetrator or visit their home to find out his version. Without legislation requiring batterers to get treatment, very few men volunteer even to try to change their behavior (Jäppinen 2014). There are some encouraging examples of successful work with men. In St. Petersburg, a civic organization called Men of the XXI Century works with a handful of self-identified perpetrators (Jäppinen, Johnson and Kulmala 2014). In the small town of Sortavala near the Finnish border, staff members and male volunteers have been trained to work with men, and remarkable informational efforts have been made to reach male clients (Jäppinen 2009; 2014).

No comprehensive legislations on domestic violence, small improvements in law enforcement reluctance

According to activists (ANNA 2010), the biggest problem facing women seeking exit from violent relationships is the lack of comprehensive legislation on domestic violence, which most other postcommunist states have passed (Fábián 2010).⁵ National legislation on domestic violence was proposed twice in the Duma in the late 1990s, but met substantial

⁵ In some regions of Russia, such as in Arkhangelsk, there are regional laws on domestic violence, but as with many such laws in this centralized state, they have little impact.

resistance, with some lawmakers concerned that shelters would be akin to brothels (Johnson 2009). Pressure from the United Nations and agreement from Putin put legislation back on the table in 2012, with the establishment of a working group of lawmakers and feminist activists. According to interviews with those involved in the working group, the draft legislation—built on the U.N.’s model legislation, the legislation of Russia’s neighbors, and the particularities of Russia’s experience—calls for increased services for women and children, mandates the state’s involvement with prosecuting domestic violence, would require batterers to get treatment, and establishes mechanism for collecting good data on the extent of the problem. The plan was to schedule hearings in the Duma in September 2013, but the Russian Orthodox Church and a leading parents group claimed that it would contribute to the destruction of the family (Baczynska 2013). The support of those with conservative views toward the family has become incredibly important to Putin following the protests of 2011 and 2012 from the more moderate middle class.

Without such reform, there are few legal mechanisms for addressing domestic violence. There are no restraining, protection, or barring orders. Acts of domestic violence, as any violent crime against a person, are punishable under the criminal code, but there is no consideration of the special characteristics of domestic violence, such as the cycle of violence and appeasement. On the rare event that acts of domestic violence are prosecuted, they tend to be prosecuted under articles requiring private prosecution (Johnson 2005; Open Society Institute 2007; ANNA 2010, 10-11). In such cases, the victim must bring the charges herself, providing the necessary evidence (in contrast, the accused has right to obtain free legal aid); if the victim reconciles with the batterer, the case is dropped. These legal excuses reinforce widespread beliefs among law enforcement that domestic violence is a private matter and that women reporting violence should reconcile with their husbands. These laws and practices not only affect the lives of violence survivors, but signal that domestic violence is condoned.

One of the most important tasks of women's crisis centers has been to assist their client women through the legal process.

The police's attitudes on domestic violence have improved some. In 2006, the Ministry of Interior launched a campaign—complete with posters at bus stops—telling people to contact their beat cop if they experience violence in the family, a symbolic change from previous years when officials declared it not their problem. More meaningfully, several crisis centers (for example, in Sortavala and Saratov) have carried out projects to develop collaboration with the police, to train police officers to work with domestic violence cases, and to create inter-agency models for violence prevention.

Domestic violence under authoritarianism, economic crisis, and militarism

As part of the increased attention to violence against women around the world, a handful of feminists in Russia started women's crisis center activism soon after the collapse of the Soviet system, and during the 1990s, it grew to a nation-wide movement. While the transnational funding dried up over the next decade, the civic organizations were successful enough to bring the issue of domestic violence to the agenda of public social services, which then started to establish services for violence survivors. The state's increased responsibility for helping the victims and thus more stable resources for domestic violence services are remarkable improvements, especially since these public crisis departments often have shelter space to provide temporary housing. These baby steps toward addressing the problem, though, come at a cost. The inclusion of domestic violence into the broader work of the crisis department may blur departments' expertise on domestic violence issues, staff members are not always trained specifically to work with violence survivors, and as state agencies, they do little advocacy work or public informational campaigns.

Over the same period, the focus of public debate has shifted from violence against women to family violence to child abuse. Russia is not an exception in this. Most domestic violence work is done within the tensions between gender-sensitive and family-centered approaches, in societies that do not recognize the gendered roots of the problem. The tension between these two can be sometimes even be fruitful, as their flexible use can help to undermine the traditional gender order (Johnson and Zaynullina 2010). But, the shrinking of the most feminist-oriented NGO part of domestic violence work in Russia runs the risk of leaving only the family talk.

The attention to violence against women by transnational women's activists and donors in the 1990s helped increase the state's responsiveness, but the current response is shaped by increasing authoritarianism, continuing economic crisis, and a resurgent militarism. Regulations on the autonomous crisis centers are part of a broader campaign to coopt and control civic organizations. The blurring of once feminist approaches into family-oriented responses to domestic violence relate to the regime's reliance on conservative family values and traditional gender norms, as manifested in the campaigns to play up Putin's manliness, the severe punishment of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot, and anti-gay legislation. The increased responsiveness of social services is partly a democratic maneuver recognizing people's needs, but more a policy of state paternalism designed to blind people to the increasing repression. The recent global economic crisis has taken a toll on Russia's economy which may not be able to afford its promised social policy. The 2008 war with Georgia and the 2014 conflicts with Ukraine demonstrate Russia's more muscular foreign policy, suggesting further moves away from feminist ways of addressing domestic violence. For women in Russia to live free from domestic violence requires not just more specialized services with trained staff, a legal framework to respond effectively to the problem of

domestic violence, and significant changes in the perceptions of gender roles in family and societybut also marked changes in Russia's regime, political culture, and economy.

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