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Working with single fathers in Western Siberia: a new departure in Russian
social provision

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Abstract

The collapse of the Soviet system has led to the loss of social ‘safety nets’ and a widespread assumption that a viable alternative system will need to be based on western models of social policy and welfare practice. This article takes as its focus an example of innovative social work provision which has been developed within Russia itself in response to local needs. The Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men, based in the city of Barnaul, Western Siberia, is unique within Russia and one of only three such centres in the world. In addition to providing a range of much needed services to local men and their families, the Centre is also actively challenging popular attitudes to gender. The Centre’s programme of support for single fathers and their families is an excellent example of both these aspects of its work. This article is based on interviews with the staff of the Centre, representatives of local government bodies and social service providers and includes a case study of men’s responses to the Centre’s programme based on interviews with clients.

Since the collapse of the Soviet system, considerable emphasis has been placed in both academic studies and media reporting on the loss of welfare and social provisions and what have been termed the 'torn safety nets'¹ of the post-Soviet era. Processes of change which began before the demise of the USSR have severely disrupted previous securities and have raised a range of social policy issues and concerns. Since the early 1990s numerous studies have examined the failings of Soviet provision and yet have repeatedly pointed out that whatever its shortcomings there was at least some sort of coherent system in the past². Much of this work has led to assertions that, with the Soviet system gone, no viable replacement has been established in the intervening decade³. This in turn, has been interpreted in some studies as contributing to a loss of social cohesion and damage to the social fabric, resulting in a generalised picture of Russian society foundering in the grips of an apparently interminable and ever deepening crisis⁴.

A more positive picture has emerged out of research focused on the development of informal networks and strategies at the local level, where numerous examples of resilience, ingenuity and the development of innovative forms of formal and informal support and security have been found⁵. However, it has been argued elsewhere that informal approaches and horizontal networks are not necessarily conducive to interaction with administrative bodies and policy-makers and therefore have little impact on the development of government-led social policy at the local, regional and national levels⁶. In making such arguments, some authors have resorted both to rather simplistic and perhaps overly optimistic models of policy-making and consultancy processes in the 'democratic west' and to essentialist notions about the 'nature' of Russian society, questioning its capacity for progressive change and the sort of flexible and innovative thinking deemed crucial for the development of a

‘modern’ and ‘democratic’ society⁷. In keeping with such representations of Russia, the stance of many international policy making and funding bodies throughout the period since 1991, has appeared to be based on an assumption that this situation can only be rectified by the importation and implementation of western models of good practice⁸. This view of Russia has been questioned by academic researchers and practitioners in the field, who have called for a more culturally sensitive approach to the study of post-communist societies and a deeper understanding of the complex strategies, frameworks and approaches to dealing with problematic issues which have been developed locally⁹. As Twigg and Schecter point out, ‘while foreign assistance has offered a critical helping hand for many of these efforts, by and large ... successes spring wholly from the ingenuity, sweat and community-mindedness of the Russian people themselves’¹⁰.

Recent studies focusing on specific aspects of Russian social provision have discovered examples of excellent practice in areas such as work with long-term drug users¹¹, locally based services and support for the families of children with learning disabilities¹², or the development of programmes for homeless children¹³. Many of these examples have developed with minimal input from the west. Whatever the ‘bigger’ picture of under-funding, overburdening, and infrastructural decline in the provision of social services, healthcare and other welfare facilities to the population, these snapshots of positive practice also deserve attention. Indeed they must be recognised, not least because they pose a significant challenge to essentialist assumptions about Russia and its incapacity to develop progressive and innovative approaches and solutions to problematic issues. Whilst each local study in isolation may be dismissed as simply an exception which proves the rule of a deteriorating and disintegrating ‘norm’, the ever increasing number and variety of ‘exceptions’ suggest

that the 'norm' itself, or at least the generalistic premises on which it is based, must be called into question.

This raises a particular set of dilemmas for those of us who are privileged to be able to engage in such research and thus to gain detailed local insight through our academic work. Firstly, there is a question of the broader significance and implications of detailed, locally-based and often issue-specific research. The findings of such studies frequently challenge existing theoretical stances and assumptions about the nature of the region or society in question. Although they focus on a wide variety of issues, and potentially quite different geographical and cultural contexts these studies often share key concepts and raise similar concerns about the imposition of overly prescriptive or generalistic models. There would appear therefore to be a need for the development of broader comparative frameworks and approaches within which to reflect on the meanings and significance of such local studies. Secondly, there is a question of audience. If such local insights and findings have a significant contribution to make to broader understandings of the developments taking place, then how do we bring this knowledge to a wider audience and in particular to those in a position to influence policy-making and practice? Questions such as these have been a matter for intense debate within certain sections of the academic community for a number of years, particularly amongst scholars engaging in qualitative research with a detailed, local focus¹⁴. Whilst this article is not able to offer a specific answer to either question, it does seek to contribute to this debate and to bring it to a wider academic audience at least.

The case study on which this article is based, forms part of this collection of 'exceptional' snapshots which, I would argue, challenge some of the premises of the 'bigger picture'. This is a case study of the Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men, an

innovative centre working on a broad range of social welfare issues, targeted in this instance at supporting men. This Crisis Centre, located in Barnaul, Western Siberia, offers a range of support services and access to advice and facilities for men which is unprecedented locally and has very few international equivalents. This case study therefore aims to do two things: to present an example of good practice emanating from Russian academic research and practical experience and to challenge some of the views which have become established of men's experiences of and responses to post-Soviet change.

Demographic developments in Russia since 1991 suggest that men are experiencing substantial difficulties as a result of Russia's socio-economic transformation. Problems of alcohol and drug abuse, an abnormally high incidence of violent death and stress-related illness have contributed to a considerable reduction in male life expectancy¹⁵. The overwhelming majority of research on gender issues in Russia, which has been carried out during this period, including my own previous work, has focused on an analysis of women's experiences of post-Soviet change¹⁶. The results of such studies have tended to portray a situation in which, whilst women strive to cope with the impacts of Russia's ongoing transformations and to ensure the survival of their families, men sink ever further into a state of apathy and inertia. Men are seen as frequently incapable of dealing with the consequences of unemployment and changes in their social or economic status and are often accused of withdrawing from full involvement in their families' concerns as a result. As discussed in more detail below, women whom I have interviewed in earlier studies have made these points quite explicitly when discussing the contributions men make to family life. Overall a picture emerges of male inability and reluctance to adapt to change.

However my more recent work which has focused specifically on investigating the ways in which men themselves describe their experiences of and responses to post-Soviet change has revealed a very different picture. This research is based upon an analysis of shifting media and social discourses about what it means to be a man, the impact of change upon men's position within the family, the workplace and society, and men's understandings of and responses to these developments. Ethnographic fieldwork has been carried out in two provincial centres: a small district town and its surrounding villages in Kaluga region, south-west of and bordering Moscow region, and the city of Barnaul in Altai region which lies beyond the Urals and borders Kazakhstan and Mongolia.

Post-Soviet discourses on men, the family and fatherhood

Since the collapse of the USSR there has been a significant exacerbation of problems pertaining to social stability and the physical health of the Russian population. The effect of these on men has been most visibly reflected in the dramatic drop in male life-expectancy and the accompanying rise in premature deaths¹⁷. Against this background, both the Russian and the western media have highlighted the negative repercussions of forms of behaviour, seen traditionally as male, for example, heavy drinking, involvement in violent crime, domestic violence and desertion of the family¹⁸. Within Russia there has been an increasing tendency to portray men's problems as primarily self-inflicted and men themselves as the primary contributors to broader processes of social and demographic decline. Men are habitually portrayed as drunk, unreliable, selfish and these images are reflected in the ways in which women talk about issues related to marriage and family life. Women whom I interviewed during earlier research, have expressed such opinions:

For a woman, the husband is problem number one. There are very few families where the woman has a good life. For the most part either the husband is an alcoholic, or he is a tyrant, or a skirt chaser, or something else like that.

Our men have stopped being men and everyone knows that. So really a man in the good sense of the word is a great rarity. Even if they exist they are not capable of being men in a family context.¹⁹

This is not to suggest that such forms of behaviour do not exist amongst Russian men, nor that they have not given rise to immense social problems and dislocation within Russian families. However, as with any stereotype there is a problem around assumptions that such forms of behaviour are inherently male and therefore universal amongst the male population.

Soviet ideologies and policies with regard to sexual equality and the ‘emancipation of women’ never seriously challenged assumptions that men’s roles and concerns would ‘naturally’ be focussed almost exclusively in the public sphere. Indeed Soviet emphasis on production and the duties of citizens towards the nation-state further reinforced these roles for men. From the 1970s onwards, concerns about the falling birth rate, particularly in predominantly Slavic and European areas of the USSR, prompted a re-evaluation of policies and a repackaging of the ‘emancipatory’ ideology. As a result new emphasis was laid on the significance and necessity of ‘sex role differentiation’²⁰. This shift in state-led rhetoric and policy served only to strengthen persistent cultural understandings of the home and family as a predominantly female domain, which had survived previous more radical ideologies and approaches to ‘equality’.

With the collapse of the Soviet system in the early 1990s essentialist attitudes to gender and assumptions about a biologically determined or ‘natural’ division of male and female roles, skills and character attributes were given free reign and came to dominate media and public discourses virtually unchallenged²¹. As Russian sociologists Zdravomyslova and Arutiunian observe, ‘Despite 70 years of emancipation, there is a widely held view in Russia that men’s role in society is grounded in their self affirmation in their professional life, whilst for women the same is true of home and children’²². Simultaneously, the introduction of market capitalism has both placed new burdens and constraints on household budgets and provided new opportunities for consumption and acquisition of material wealth. The upshot of this has been, if anything a heightening of expectations on men to prioritise public sphere roles in order to provide for their families. Meanwhile, assumptions about the ‘natural’ division of attributes and abilities between men and women, have led to a tendency to dismiss fatherhood, and what might be described as ‘involved’ or ‘caring’ fatherhood in particular, as an important part of men’s lives.

Such is the strength of these images and their quasi-scientific basis that in earlier research the majority of my women respondents presented what they saw as men’s incapacity to care for small children as an incontrovertible, biological fact:

Men simply aren’t capable of bringing up the children. You need patience for that which men simply don’t have and women are just a lot wiser. A lot wiser!

I know of cases where fathers have stayed home, but it is very rare. They don’t know when to feed a baby, they don’t feel this. A woman feels when her child’s condition is changing. They know what to do. A baby is better off with its mother, at least to begin with.

Alongside this conviction that men are incapable of fulfilling nurturing and upbringing functions within the family there is an insistence that the proper role of a man is as provider. The image of what it means to be a 'good father' therefore is restricted almost solely to that of breadwinner and of being able to ensure the material well-being of wife and children. In the words of one female respondent:

A man should be responsible for his family. He should be a wall, a support for the family and provide for its material needs.

However, successfully fulfilling virtually the only positive role prescribed for men in the family is deeply problematic for a large proportion of men in the current Russian economic climate. As a result the 'value' of a man's very presence in the family may be called into question. Russian scholars and specialists working in this field note a worrying tendency within public opinion which neglects the father's role almost to the point of seeing men as necessary only for conception and thereafter as irrelevant, if not unnecessarily burdensome²³. According to family sociologist T. Gurko, 'The exclusion of fatherhood from social discourse in Russia is a plain and simple fact'²⁴.

The findings of the empirical research upon which this article is based suggest that whilst men certainly do not refute the idea that a man's key role in the family is that of provider, they also do not necessarily feel that this role alone is enough, either for them personally or for their children. Respondent after respondent in this study expressed the vital importance of a deep and caring relationship with his children or grandchildren and several spoke out specifically against what they viewed as the exclusion and/or self-exclusion of men from such relations within the family.

I also think that fathers have been a bit pushed out into second place. Just in terms of time, well, from what I have seen, amongst my friends, because I do spend time with other people and so on, I have seen that, yes the men really

have moved out into second place. Men are seen as like a provider of money, and I don't know why, but that is all.

Building on the evidence they have gathered over six years of intensive work with Russian men and, at least in part, on their own convictions, the staff of the Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men have also come to the conclusion that such attitudes are detrimental to the well-being and personal development of men themselves, to the stability and contentment of their families and to the needs and desires of their children.

The Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men

Within the Russian Federation, the Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men is, at present, unique. The Centre is highly innovative, working with men in a variety of ways which are constantly evolving and expanding as the staff build on existing experience, feedback from clients and their families and collaborative links to similar centres internationally. The Centre itself is housed above a hairdressing salon, on the first floor of a small block of shops and offices, in a residential district to the west of Barnaul city centre. Despite the rather austere and desolate feel of the building externally, once inside the Centre the atmosphere and surroundings have been carefully designed to be at once friendly, welcoming and professional. An entrance lobby with plants, a sofa and low table is used as a reception area where staff meet visitors and initially assess their requirements. An open plan office area beyond the lobby provides both a communal working space for the Centre staff and a large area which can be used for group activities. Smaller rooms offer privacy for individual or group consultations and counselling.

One of the negative legacies of the Soviet system has been the continuing tendency to restrict public access to official buildings and institutions and to expect users of services to negotiate complex bureaucratic procedures. These difficulties are frequently compounded by a culture of rudeness, condescension and refusal to respond to requests for help by those in positions of authority. Evidence of the widespread nature of such attitudes and the extent of the problems they create for people attempting to access services or benefits to which they are entitled by law, can be found on the letters pages and in the advice columns of national and local newspapers and magazines. Some of these publications continue to describe their defence of the individual against these forms of bureaucratic resistance as part of their editorial policy²⁵. In contrast, the accessibility of the Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men, the complete lack of bureaucracy awaiting the first-time visitor, the relaxed and open attitude of the staff and their flexible approach to dealing with both regular and drop-in clients are immediately striking.

On my second day working at the Centre I was able to witness these various elements of the Centre's ethos and design in action and their impact on the staff's ability to deal with clients in a crisis situation. A 76-year-old man had arrived at the Crisis Centre, entirely unannounced, complaining of serious and clearly traumatic problems with his family. Whilst a counsellor took details and offered reassurance and emotional support, other staff members leapt into action behind the scenes to attack the problem from every possible angle, drawing in local social services, lawyers and health care providers. The Centre's counsellors also began immediately to set up a series of counselling sessions both individually and for the family as a group. This occasion demonstrated the efficiency, professionalism and care with which staff treat a new case and their ability to do so as a team and without prior

notice. It was also clearly illustrative of another key element of the Crisis Centre's work, one which various members of staff described to us as crucial to the Centre's entire philosophy: the emphasis on a holistic approach to dealing with crisis, encompassing practical, emotional, psychological and social support for a client and his family. A key feature in the Centre's ability to provide such support is based on the existence of broad collaborative networks with local social services, administrative bodies and other experts. For the individual client this means that a range of support from different agencies is entirely coordinated by the Centre itself. The client is not required to embark on a long, difficult and not necessarily fruitful obstacle race around the range of agencies in their attempt to achieve the desired result.

The origins of the Crisis Centre lie in an academic interest in the situation of men in Altai region and research carried out at Altai State University, Department of Sociology, Psychology and Social Work. In 1995 this interest developed into practical experimentation with the establishment of a working model for a regional crisis centre for men. This model was developed building on co-operation between three institutional and interdisciplinary bases: social services; healthcare and education²⁶. In February 1996 the Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men was founded with the support of the Social Services Committee of the Regional Administration. The establishment of collaborative links with colleagues in Gothenburg, Sweden, and a study visit to a men's crisis centre there served as further inspiration. Yet from its inception the fundamental principles on which the Centre's development has been based have emphasised the necessity of sharing and adapting international experience rather than importing models wholesale. As the Crisis Centre's Director, Maksim Kostenko explained,

In the development of a system of social support for men a number of factors must be taken into account. Some of the most important amongst these include: the level of resources available within the region; a locally acceptable combination and integration of traditional and innovative methods and forms of social support; the socio-economic situation in the region; the adaptation of foreign experience²⁷.

The Crisis Centre's founders and staff have always been keen to pursue and develop international contacts and see no advantage to working in isolation from existing experience. However, they prioritise ongoing locally-based research and evaluation, much of which is embedded within the Centre's projects and practice. In this way, although the Centre retains ongoing international links to similar projects both in Sweden and in Boston, Massachusetts, the model which has developed in Altai is uniquely adapted to the specific social and cultural context and the findings and working methods developed there.

This adaptation is grounded in a deliberate policy of identifying the specific concerns and needs of both existing and potential user groups in the local community. This is achieved both through ongoing academic research and by the organisation of events, often in collaboration with local authorities, other social service providers and regionally based social organisations, designed to attract participation and feedback. In turn events of this kind may well produce policy recommendations and practical outcomes in the wider community. For example in February 2003 the Crisis Centre organised a round table meeting for leaders of social organisations and clubs, who are also fathers. This meeting was organised in co-operation with the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Development, the Altai Regional Committee for Social Protection and a regional voluntary organisation called 'Men's talk'. One of the outcomes of this

meeting was the publication of a booklet, including a list of recommendations for strengthening fatherhood and family life in the region²⁸.

Despite functioning now as a clearly distinct and separate entity, the Centre continues to maintain close ties with Altai State University. This academic slant to the Centre and its staff, the majority of whom are graduates of, or final year students at the Department of Sociology, Psychology and Social Work, produces an approach which combines ongoing research with practice, continuously contributing to the refinement and evolution of both theoretical understandings and their practical applications. Each of the staff members interviewed during a research visit to the Centre in August 2002 described their work as a combination of research and practice. Several had initiated new projects within the Centre as a result of research undertaken during their final year of study at the University. These projects run initially on a temporary basis as part of the students' final year placements, but have in several cases proved such a success that they have continued beyond that period, with student volunteers becoming paid staff members where possible. As always a major stumbling block to this pattern of growth is linked to funding. Prospective staff work hard to secure support either from the local administration and social services or through applications to international funding bodies. Nonetheless, the constant influx of new staff and volunteers and the ideas they bring with them, facilitated in this way, has ensured a dynamic structure to the Centre's work.

The provision of counselling, psychotherapy and a holistic approach to crisis support is at the heart of the Centre's philosophy, which states:

Any person can face life crises and problems. Any person needs solid family and societal support to realise their potential in life. ... We believe that integrity

and professional standards will help us to provide the best quality service to our client and his family²⁹.

Thus, the Centre's counselling department is at the core of its work and structure and employs a number of fully qualified, trained and extremely committed psychotherapists and counsellors working a double shift from 9a.m. to 8 p.m, five days a week. They offer individual, couple or family sessions and work both with regular clients and with those seeking an initial or one-off consultation. However, as Russia has yet to develop a culture in which resort to counselling services is regarded as both positive and socially acceptable, especially for men, it is crucial that the Crisis Centre's work also encompasses a thematic and project based approach, in order to draw in a substantial clientele. These projects ensure a broad range of activity within the Centre and extensive outreach to specific groups of men within the local community identified as particularly vulnerable or likely to benefit from the services the Centre is able to offer.

At the time when this research was carried out at the Centre, eight such projects were in operation. These included a 24-hour telephone crisis line, a group helping young couples to prepare for married life, a project called 'Men overcoming violence', a programme of social and psychological support and rehabilitation for men who have suffered from a heart attack and a support group for adolescents with behavioural problems. Finally, there is the project which forms the focus of this article and which will be discussed in more detail below: a programme of social work with and support for single fathers and their families. The Centre's longer standing projects, all of which are run by full-time, permanent staff, have gained considerable standing and recognition locally and are supported financially by the local and regional administration, by working partnerships with local law enforcement and

social services, and through co-operation with schools, health clinics and hospitals. At this level the Crisis Centre sees itself as part of a deliberate local government policy of supporting progressive social policy initiatives both within the city and the region. The programme for work with adolescents achieved national and international recognition and support in 2000 when, following a visit to the Centre by then Russian Deputy Minister for Labour and Social Development, G. N. Karelova, a successful recommendation for accreditation and financial support was made to UNICEF³⁰. This brought the Crisis Centre and its wider programme of work to the attention of government bodies at the federal level. As a consequence, a number of ad hoc initiatives led to the Centre being provided with pieces of equipment and a second-hand mini-bus. However, the decentralisation of social welfare budgets in Russia means that cooperation with administrative structures at the local and regional level are likely to continue to prove more fruitful in terms of providing core funding and long-term support for the Centre's initiatives.

Family, Fatherhood and the Crisis Centre's work with Single Fathers

Whilst the Centre's projects and work are wide-ranging and multifaceted, targeting a variety of groups amongst the male population, a key theme running through many of the projects is that of family. In part this may be attributed to the Centre's philosophy, as cited above, which puts an emphasis on the importance of family support and on working with families as a whole. Nonetheless, even where the Centre's approach or a particular project does not specifically address or relate to a family context the staff assert that male clients themselves raise family issues and look for support and help in dealing with family crises in the first instance. A good example of this client-led emphasis on family issues is provided by the crisis line, a

service designed and advertised as available to all men and without an emphasis on any specific set of issues or interpretations of crisis. A breakdown of the problems raised by callers to the line in the first three months of its existence, provided to us by project leader Liubov' Skovoronskaia, indicates that the largest number of calls, up to 41% of the total, related to family issues. Questions of love and friendship came in second place at 18%, whilst issues of a more general social, personal and sexual nature came much further down the list.

This orientation is not one that would necessarily have been expected, particularly given the development of post-Soviet Russian discourses and attitudes to gender as described above. Nonetheless, in recognition of the concerns expressed by their clients as well as on the basis of their own observations, the staff of the Centre have developed an approach to both individual and project work which seeks to counter prevalent assumptions and stereotypes. The promotion of what they term 'responsible fatherhood' has become a key aspect of their work, not only towards their male clients, but also in outreach and public awareness activities. For example, in 2002 the Centre organised the first citywide celebration of fathers' day on the last Sunday in April. At this event leaflets, brochures and flyers explaining the term 'responsible fatherhood' were distributed, family events and competitions were held and the local media was invited to report on the day's proceedings. In an article written prior to the event, stressing its importance and calling for support from the local and regional authorities and co-operation with local educational institutions, social services, cultural, sporting and business establishments, Natalya Zhabina, head of the Centre's programme for work with single-father families, wrote:

The celebration of fathers' day is an opportunity to encourage men to actively present themselves as caring and sensitive parents and not simply as

breadwinners. It is an opportunity to draw attention to the important contribution fathers can make to their children's upbringing, not only for the good of the family, but for society as a whole³¹.

That Zhabina heads up both the Centre's programme of work with single-father families and its efforts to promote a broader concept of 'responsible fatherhood' in all types of family and in the public domain more generally, is no coincidence. Much of the Centre's focus on families and fathers has arisen out of her four-year experience of working with single fathers and their families, and as she explained, these men, perhaps of necessity, but frequently also by their conscious decision, exemplify a form of deeply involved, caring and extremely responsible fatherhood. When it began, Zhabina's work at the Crisis Centre was an entirely new venture in social policy provision both in Altai region and in Russia as a whole:

At that time no-one was working with them. There was no research or anything. There was only a form of theoretical model and this was what I had to work on. So I worked a whole year, or even more, on that basis, as a volunteer at the Centre. ... There was no-one then in Altai region, or even in Russia as a whole, who considered single-father families as a specific group of socially vulnerable families. They were just grouped together under a single heading of one-parent families.

This lack of prior attention to the issue meant that Zhabina's first task was to establish the size of the phenomenon and the key areas where help or support might usefully be offered. Working through schools, local housing authorities and benefit offices she began to build up a database of families where a man was raising children on his own. What she found was a group of much larger proportions than she had been expecting, over 400 families in Barnaul city alone³². An analysis of 1994 census data has shown

that 6% of single-parent families nationwide are headed by single fathers, however the Crisis Centre's work with single fathers has also led to the view that the numbers of such families may be seriously underreported in statistics based primarily on the marital status and registered residency of parents,

Beyond this, it should not be forgotten that there is a large number of families headed by fathers who are only formally still married, and who are raising their children alone, that is without the participation of the child's biological mother³³.

For reasons which are explored in more detail below, single fathers may be particularly likely to persist in such ambiguous circumstances due to their fear of losing custody of their children if they seek to formalise their status as separated or divorced single parents.

The next task facing Zhabina was to make contact with these men in Barnaul, to present the idea of the Crisis Centre and a programme for single fathers which would attract their interest and to research further into their needs and wishes for support. It quickly became clear that this would demand an extremely active outreach policy. Social services departments and local support centres reported problems keeping track of these families due to many fathers' distaste for the bureaucracy and intrusive procedures involved in applying for benefits and a fear that excessive contact with the authorities or evidence of a need for support might lead to the loss of custody of their children. As Maxim Kostenko, Director of the Crisis Centre, explained, the Centre's experience of working with other groups of men had also already indicated a deep-seated reluctance amongst many Russian men to seek help or even to accept it when offered:

This question of the anxiety men feel about asking for help in any given situation [is extremely serious]. A man will tend to look for a way out of a problem himself, that's the way he will see the situation and it gives rise to a purely masculine reaction towards getting help – give me a couple of aspirins and it will all be all right – this affects all of our projects.

In order to overcome this problem, Zhabina embarked on an intensive process of outreach, visiting men in their homes, distributing by hand invitations to attend an introductory session at the Centre, spending considerable time listening to men's stories and developing a view on some of the most crucial common issues they faced. This is a process which continues to this day. The Centre has built up a positive reputation locally and a number of single fathers have now found out about it and its work either via local press and radio reports or through friends and relatives or other clients of the Centre. This is a source of immense satisfaction to Zhabina and one which she describes as confirming to her the usefulness and relevance of her work. Nonetheless, it is a gradual process and for the most part she still has to seek out initial contact with these men herself.

As the testimonies of the single fathers interviewed, described in greater detail below, indicate, the area in which these men are most prepared to accept help is in the provision of practical support and information. It has been possible to help some of those who have ultimately refused to accept any of the other forms of support offered through the Centre, in this way at least. Zhabina does not seek to force these men to become more closely involved with the Centre and its work than they wish, but retains a policy of providing whatever form of help will be acceptable and in this way maintaining a positive relationship with the man and his family, such that the door to further involvement and support should remain open in future.

It happens really often that men don't want to work with us. ... I have one man with 5 children. He came to begin with. Then he started to say that he had no time. I tried for a while, but you can't really push a person when they withdraw and say 'No, no, I have no time'. ... Well he had 5 kids. I went round to see them maybe 3 or 4 times. He was always washing. He was always cooking. ... His washing machine was constantly breaking down and flooding water. I got onto the social services and under my influence they got him a new machine. They gave it to him for nothing. ... He was so happy with it. But all the same he said, 'I'll manage on my own. It is really good that you do the work you do with us, but I don't need anything'.

In other cases men and their families are more receptive to the emotional and social support offered through the Centre and its activities and this has led to the development of various strands to the work of this particular project. Her early contact and interviews with single fathers convinced Zhabina that many of these men were in need of psychological support and help to overcome the trauma of family break up or bereavement. In this area too she encountered a degree of resistance but persisted because of both the positive feedback from those men whom she was able to help and the frequency with which similar tales pointing to this as a crucial area for intervention arose:

We thought of a model, a small programme within our programme if you like, to help men in a situation of acute grief. It turned out that a situation of acute grief could be caused by a divorce [as well as by the death of a man's wife], or even without a divorce, in a situation where a woman simply left: left him for another man, or simply left somewhere. A man gives the impression that he is strong. That he can cope with everything. He carries on with life just as

before, but he simply stops being so attentive to the child. He stops paying attention to himself. He starts behaving aggressively towards those around him. This is something which the fathers themselves commented on.

Finally, Zhabina applies the Centre's holistic principle to her work, such that the entire family and not just the fathers are viewed as the focus of the project and its goal is to improve the emotional, material and social situation of a father, his children and any other family members, grandparents for example, closely involved with them. In the post-Soviet Russian context, those cases where fathers have gained single custody of their child(ren) are almost always where the mother has either left the family of her own accord, died or been found guilty of severe physical and emotional neglect of the child, has been convicted for drug or alcohol related crimes or has been diagnosed as suffering from a severe mental illness. Over the past decade Russian law has been changed to emphasise the rights of the child in deciding issues of custody and access³⁴. Nonetheless, social attitudes assuming the primacy of the mother-child relationship have proved to be so all-pervasive that, in practice, the fathers of children who have actually been abandoned by their mother may still have to face a substantial legal battle to gain custody³⁵. As Maksim Kostenko observed:

We need to say that the majority of these men are not divorced but separated, ie. their divorce is not legally formalised. This is because men often lose the right to bring up a child so they fear starting legal proceedings because legal practice means that the mother will usually get the child.

As a result many of these fathers have to contend not only with the issues faced by any single parent of coping with all the demands of parenting alone, but also frequently have to deal with children who have been seriously traumatised both before and during the process of divorce. The men interviewed described children with

nervous ticks, who found it difficult to communicate, who experienced problems at school or had been in trouble with the police. Whilst not pretending to be able to provide any ‘miracle cures’ the Crisis Centre recognises the importance for children from these families of spending time with others who have a similar experience and Zhabina organises an annual summer camp as well as a knitting circle for some of the girls and a new support group for the adolescent children of single fathers at the Centre. As discussed in more detail below this is an aspect of the Centre’s work of which the fathers themselves are particularly appreciative; many find it much easier to accept help and support in the name of and for the good of their children than for themselves. Once again this stands in stark contrast to current assumptions strongly supported by post-Soviet gender discourses that caring, particularly for small children, is a feminine trait and one which men are unlikely to share. Yet, as Zhabina pointed out, when talking about single fathers:

This is one of the clearest examples of responsible fatherhood. When people see the way these fathers relate to their children they are amazed that men can be so responsible, that they can be as responsible and as efficient at running a home as a woman can, and at the same time remain entirely masculine.

Three single fathers: a Barnaul case study

For the purposes of this article, three of the ethnographic interviews conducted in Barnaul have been selected to form a case study illustrating some of the principal issues facing single fathers in Russia and the impact of the Crisis Centre’s services and support as a significant counterbalance to prevailing attitudes and assumptions. These three men, whom we will refer to as Andrei, Vladimir and Yuri, were all in

their late-thirties to early-forties and had all been single fathers for several years, two as a result of marital breakdown, one through bereavement.

In the cases of both Andrei and Yuri, the children's mothers had left the family when the children were very young. In Yuri's case, custody proved less problematic as his wife was facing a prison sentence. In Andrei's case, however, the support of his children's school was crucial in ensuring that he was granted custody and not his ex-wife who had become addicted to drugs and broken off contact with the children:

We had to go through several court cases. ... If it hadn't been for the school I wouldn't have done it. With our society I wouldn't have gone through this process, because a mother is a mother.

Without the school's support, Andrei believed, it would have been impossible to obtain this result from the court. Moreover, the moral support he received from the school's staff undoubtedly carried him through the significant emotional stress which the court case brought with it:

When there was the court case and I realised that I might even lose them and that for some reason they might not be given to me in custody, I was very worried. If I had lost that ... well, I don't know.

It is striking, as these men tell their stories, both how engaged they are with their children and how unusual or unexpected they believe such expressions of father love to be.

Although men who become single fathers through divorce provide the most graphic example of men having to fight for their right to custody, it is by no means taken for granted that men who are widowed will automatically either gain or retain full responsibility for the care of their children. At the precise moment of finding

themselves in a distressing personal situation as a result of bereavement, these men are liable to find themselves facing at best the incomprehension or at worst the censure of those around them. As Vladimir described his own experience:

Everyone thinks that if there's a single parent it should be a woman, that there aren't any single fathers, it's not in their nature. I even had some neighbours, ... who used to say, 'why don't you put the children in a children's home?'

They couldn't understand it, they thought a father couldn't bring them up.

A recent letter to *Sel'skaia nov'*, Russia's most widely-read magazine aimed specifically at a provincial audience, echoes Vladimir's experience. The letter, published in the personal columns, tells the story of a single father who sees remarriage as the only way to regain custody of his children. The manner in which he came to lose them provides the most revealing part of the tale:

My wife died suddenly two years ago. I was left with three children, two sons aged 10 and 7, and a daughter aged 9. Hard as it was to cope, we managed all the same. I washed, I cooked, I milked the cow ... But not long ago my mother-in-law came and took them away saying that she could cope with them better, they needed a woman's care³⁶.

Where they take issue with attitudes such as these, single fathers such as Vladimir may demonstrate something akin to a siege mentality, almost a sense of taking on an entire society single-handed:

At the time I said that a tragedy like this doesn't just happen in books or in films and it's come to us, but it isn't strong enough to split us up. ... I'm a man, I'm not giving up my children to anyone, *I'll* bring them up myself.

The sense that a loss of contact with their children could all too easily occur, and indeed does occur in many men's experience, is ever-present in these interviews.

This issue of what is or is not deemed to be natural clearly dogs relationships between these men and the agencies they turn to for assistance. By being different they are seen as being by definition unnatural, attempting to establish a category for which there is simply no provision, becoming a nuisance to well-established routines. Yuri's experiences when his child became ill and required hospital treatment provide a classic example:

I said, 'look, the kid's got a high temperature and more to the point, he's tiny, he's a tiny baby and he's got this,' but they just said, 'no, you have to go to that hospital. Fathers aren't allowed to stay here, it's all mums looking after the children, where are we going to put you?'

Health care, social work agencies and much of the state's legal framework have traditionally operated with the notion that mother and child provide the pivotal bond within the family. This can result in the exclusion of men as fathers from access to vital services and agencies, an exclusion moreover frequently enshrined in the very titles of official bodies which, like their Soviet predecessors, continue to omit men from their remit. For example, the key administrative body dealing with family issues at the federal level is entitled the Department for the Family, Women, Children, and Young People. Against this background, the Crisis Centre's work appears particularly groundbreaking. Both in its recognition of men in a fathering role, and in its ability to act as a conduit between fathers and social service providers the Centre is able to foster increasing access and awareness.

Nonetheless, for men who establish their right to care for their children alone, a mass of practical problems immediately present themselves. The first and most pressing is inevitably the question of income. Just as for single mothers, opportunities to earn are restricted by the need to care and family income is therefore significantly

depressed. Research by staff at the Crisis Centre established that the average per capita income in the single father families they were dealing with in 2002 was between 500 and 700 roubles per month. As Maksim Kostenko remarked, 'it's nothing', at a time when the monthly per capita subsistence minimum set by the state was 1499 roubles³⁷. In the case of the three men featured in this case study, one was in receipt of invalidity benefit in the sum of 1700 roubles per month and supplementing this income by taking on private vehicle repair jobs, whilst the other two had become self-employed, one as a driver of a private hire vehicle, the other as an interior designer. Their major concerns in doing this were twofold – the potential for working flexible hours and the provision of ready cash for their families at a time when formal employment in Russia was collapsing.

In Russia, however, where the concept of self-employment is only just beginning to be officially recognised, working in this way has very significant negative implications. People who are effectively self-employed are still normally viewed as not-employed and, as a result, have limited entitlement to state benefits for themselves. Single fathers who have tumbled out of the state system through their conscious choice of employment are liable to find themselves in a kind of no-man's-land and, as time passes away from the employ of qualifying enterprises, inevitably begin to fear the long-term impact on their pension entitlement. Of more immediate concern, however, is the question of health insurance. In the muddling and chaotic part-privatised health care system which has emerged from the abandonment of the Soviet system, levels of free health care provision vary dramatically from one region to another³⁸. Yet it is an inescapable fact that throughout the country substantial areas of health care are now effectively privatised. Siberian newspapers have commented on the fact that in the absence of a unified federal model of health care entitlement,

clinics and specialists frequently demand additional payments for consultations which are theoretically covered by insurance policies. This is described as a form of 'hidden commercialisation' made possible by the lack of clarity in regulations governing health care practice³⁹. For self-employed single fathers on a less than buoyant income this may well give rise to sleepless nights: 'You can imagine that now I'm working for myself I don't have any medical insurance, so if something happens I'll have to pay for everything. It really frightens me.'

Low income families are entitled to support from local social services and there is evidently concern amongst social work professionals within the city that families such as these do not slip through the net. There is, however, considerable reluctance on the part of single fathers to seek help, as Maksim Kostenko explained:

Men are not prepared to go and say – like a single mother where it's written into the law – 'I am a single father and I want to receive these same benefits.' A father doesn't receive them because he thinks it's beneath his dignity to go and fill in all these forms, have a social worker coming round and assessing your financial circumstances, working out your income and so on.

If the mere act of asking is seen as demeaning, it is not surprising if becoming involved in the kind of bureaucratic paper chase for which Russian agencies have a well-deserved reputation is seen by these men as a step too far. There is, moreover, as the Crisis Centre's staff point out, an issue of pride at stake here: these are my children, I will provide for them. It might be pointed out, however, that this is more than simply a question of pride. For men who are continually at odds with what are seen as acceptable male roles in Russian society, fulfilling the role of provider is a particularly important way in which they can preserve for themselves what they, as well as others around them, may see as an essentially male role. Yet in spite of this,

they also expressed great pride in their ability to do traditionally female domestic tasks – ‘I do everything. I do the cooking and I do the washing, in fact there’s nothing I can’t do around the home’.

The most significant problems, however, which these men described, were psychological rather than practical in nature. The isolation which they had experienced as single fathers, the sense that they and their children were somehow running against the grain, appeared to have both underpinned and compounded the practical issues they were dealing with. It was in this that the intervention of the Crisis Centre seemed to have been most successful. Whilst men may be very reluctant to seek assistance for themselves, especially any form of counselling which might smack of psychological inadequacy, they are nevertheless more than ready to accept offers of help which can provide much-needed facilities for their children. Amongst a range of initiatives pioneered by the Crisis Centre both as a form of outreach to and a means of support for single fathers and their families, the most popular example is undoubtedly the summer camp for children of single father families. Each year, two of the Centre’s female staff, both psychologists, sometimes assisted on a voluntary basis by one or two of the single fathers, take a group of children camping by the side of a lake renowned for its beauty, south of Barnaul towards the Mongolian border.

Each day of the camp contains an intensive programme of games and activities aimed at helping the children to overcome isolation, become more communicative and talk through common problems and shared experiences. Just as significantly, the camp aims to provide them with an environment in which they can simply feel that, as the children of a single father, their experiences are normal. As Natalya Zhabina observed:

There are lots of women in this situation but for a man it's very unusual. ...

Our groups for fathers and children, including the summer camp, play a very big part in [overcoming] this because the camp is just for children from single father families. So when they talk to each other it's all 'daddy this and 'daddy that', they are all speaking the same language. ... They spend their whole lives hearing that their family is abnormal.

Through the work of the summer camp the fathers effectively receive respite care, whilst their children receive a holiday which their families would almost certainly not be able to afford in other circumstances. It provides an opportunity which is hugely appreciated by these men. Some of the single fathers who have chosen to help with the summer camp may find that this has positive knock-on effects for them long after the camp is over. As they get to know some of the Crisis Centre's staff in a more informal way they may feel far more at ease in turning to them directly for help and advice:

I went to help with this camp in Gornyi Altai. I've got very friendly with the people who work here. ... When you've spent something like ten days looking after the children there you feel more relaxed, so when I come here I feel freer. ... It's easy to talk to people here, I like it.

Some of the single fathers who had not had this experience, however, also clearly felt able to turn to the staff of the Centre as a regular source of advice and support. As Natalya Zhabina commented, men in this situation, like their children, are apt to feel themselves to be so abnormal that they no longer expect to meet with understanding:

Men are often very touched by the concern they encounter at the Crisis Centre and say things like, 'Why do you pay attention to us? How have we deserved

this?’ Men who say things like this have often felt completely alone in the situation they are in.

The three men in this case study each expressed substantial gratitude to the Centre and its staff for the opportunities offered their children and the support they themselves had received, echoing the remarks Natalya Zhabina had made, as in this characteristic comment from Andrei:

Really, in theory, there should be some sort of encouragement or support from the side of society. But no, there is nothing of the kind. And I think that if there weren't this Centre, I have the feeling that no-one would even look at me at all. Nobody even thinks about it, nobody understands it. ... But the Centre, yes, the Centre saw me. ... I am very grateful that the Centre exists.

In each of these interviews the men underlined how positive their experience with the Centre had been. They described how unusual they felt this relationship to be and the extent to which they valued what had become an ongoing source of support. Each of them contrasted this with what they had come to expect from other social service providers and administrative bodies.

Conclusion

One of the most striking features of these interviews was the extent to which these single fathers saw the problems they faced as part of a broader set of issues affecting men as parents in Russia. Similar concerns were raised by other men during fieldwork in Kaluga region as well as Altai: it is evident therefore that these issues are not geographically localised. Much of the negativity which single fathers had encountered was, they believed, not merely about their status as single parents but the fact that they are men attempting to be active parents in a society which has come to

place an exceptionally high value on the role of mothers within the family. In both Kaluga and Altai regions, men, both married and unmarried, with and without children of their own, were keen to talk about the question of men's involvement in parenting. It would seem therefore that this is a topic of general debate which men are concerned about and not one that has been generated purely by the work of the Crisis Centre in Barnaul.

However all-pervasive conservative views on gender may appear to be in Russian society, it is clear that they can be and are being challenged both on a personal level and institutionally. Contrary to what is commonly assumed, there is a growing awareness that rigid attitudes towards gender may be detrimental to men as well as to women. As a result, challenges to such patterns are arising from what may appear to be unexpected quarters, not only through overtly feminist activism, nor exclusively from a female perspective. As one of the single fathers involved in this case study observed:

In our society it's as if the man is a kind of stud, it's in nature so that's all there is to it. ... This is how we are brought up from childhood, I think. It doesn't matter if we're there or not, but the mother, the mother must always be there.

Commenting on the particularly harsh realities of life as single fathers these men were able to make connections between their specific experiences and those which they shared with other fathers who are attempting to play a significant part in their children's lives. Their experiences have therefore fed into the broader perspectives which the Centre now embraces in its programmes of work with men in the wider community and particularly in raising awareness locally of the importance of 'responsible fatherhood'. As Natalya Zhabina pointed out, this broader work on

fatherhood had been initiated by the interests of the single-fathers she worked with and their wish to bring their own 'exceptional' experiences to a more generalised family context,

It is not that long ago that I got involved in the project for responsible fatherhood. In fact you could say that this was something which the men themselves proposed. You know when we were talking, they asked me, 'Natalya Sergeevna, do you do research on other fathers, those who are raising children with their mothers also'. And I said 'No'. And so somehow this theme came back again and again and again, they became interested in it themselves and I got this idea about Father's Day and I wanted to organise it. Really it was the single fathers who were in favour of having a Father's Day.

The Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men is, however, much more than simply a campaigning body. As the examples and arguments put forward in this article have sought to demonstrate it is the innovative approach and the flexibility of its staff and programmes which make the Crisis Centre so significant as a new type of service provider within Russia. Its contribution is perhaps particularly marked given the nature of the predominant gender discourses within this society which largely dismiss men's actual or potential contribution to caring roles within the family. But as an example of innovation within post-Soviet service provision the Centre is not entirely unique either locally or nationally. Indeed the Altai regional administration has pursued a deliberate policy of support for and development of social service initiatives including a range of advice and crisis centres, particularly in the city of Barnaul. The national picture also includes other examples of excellent and innovative practice in different areas of social welfare policy development and provision⁴⁰.

Whilst the policies and models of practice developing in this way are certainly specific to the Russian context, the problems they address frequently are not, nor is an ongoing search for effective solutions. However acute post-Soviet social problems have been, issues arising from male ill-health, family breakdown and post-traumatic stress, to name but a few, are clearly unresolved to date in the UK and many other countries of the world. It might be argued that it is the very severity of these problems in the post-Soviet Russian context, alongside the collapse of previously existing safety nets, which has produced both a space for new developments and a willingness to support unorthodox approaches. Paradoxically, this may be more complicated to implement in, for example, the more controlled and structured west European environment.

As a result of the support it has received locally and the successes of its work, the Crisis Centre has attracted interest and recognition from both federal level administrative bodies and international agencies. This has allowed the Centre to embark on a programme of expansion with the opening of several rural branches in 2003. The possibility of replicating the Crisis Centre's approach across other Russian regions is now clearly a matter for discussion. In 2004 serious plans have begun for the opening of a similar centre in St Petersburg supported by funds from the Swedish government. Initiative groups have also been established in Arkhangelsk and Voronezh with a view to seeking financial and local administrative support for the opening of such centres. In each case the experience of the Altai Crisis Centre has been both a source of inspiration and a preliminary model. Study visits, training sessions and the opportunity to gain practical work experience at the Centre in Barnaul are planned for the staff of the new centres. Yet adaptation to local issues, environments and pragmatic realities also remain paramount. Maksim Kostenko has

pointed out that the model developed in Altai may well have to be reviewed and adapted to suit the circumstances, client bases and locally pertinent issues of centres elsewhere in the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, the increasing interest in the Centre's work which is now being shown by international agencies, such as the ILO, also begs the question as to whether there may be something to be learnt from the Centre's experience not merely beyond Altai region but beyond the borders of Russia itself.

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² Standing, "Social Protection in Central and Eastern Europe: a Tale of Slipping Anchors and Torn Safety Nets,"; Robert Arnot, "Transition or Disintegration?," Proceedings of the Scottish Society of Russian and East European Studies (forthcoming).

³ G. Pirogov and S. Pronin, "The Russian Case: Social Policy Concerns," in Yogesh Atal ed., Poverty in Transition and Transition in Poverty. Recent Developments in Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia, Russia, Mongolia (New York, Oxford and Paris: Berghahn Books and Unesco Publishing, 1999); UNDP, Transition 1999. Human Development Report for Europe and the CIS (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 1999), pp. 52-64; Judyth Twigg, "Unfulfilled Hopes: The Struggle to Reform Russian Health Care and its Financing," in Mark Field and Judyth Twigg eds., Russia's Torn Safety Nets. Health and Social Welfare during the Transition (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000)

⁴ Boris Nemtsov, "Russia in Transition: Social Problems in an Atomized Society," in Judyth Twigg and Kate Schecter eds., Social Capital and Social Cohesion in Post-Soviet Russia (New York and London: M.E.Sharpe, 2003); Judyth Twigg and Kate Schecter, "Introduction," in Judyth Twigg and Kate Schecter eds., Social Capital and Social Cohesion in Post-Soviet Russia (New York and London: M.E.Sharpe, 2003).

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⁶ Richard Rose, "The hour glass society. A constitution without citizens," East European Constitutional Review 4.3 (1995); Richard Rose, "Uses of social capital in Russia: modern, pre-modern and antimodern," Post-Soviet Affairs 16.1 (2000).

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⁸ Marta Bruno, "Playing the co-operation game: strategies around international aid and post-Soviet Russia," in Sue Bridger and Frances Pine eds., Surviving Post-Socialism. Local strategies and regional responses in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); Janine Wedel, Collision and Collusion. The strange case of aid to Eastern Europe (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Michele Rivkin-Fish, "Gender and Democracy: Strategies for Engagement and Dialogue on Women's Issues after Socialism," in Kathleen Kuehnast and Carol Nechemias eds., Women Encountering Transition. (Washington: Kennan Institute, forthcoming)

⁹ Chris Hann and Elizabeth Dunn, eds., Civil Society: Challenging Western Models (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Sue Bridger and Frances Pine, Surviving Post-Socialism. Local strategies and regional responses in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (London and New York: Routledge, 1997)

¹⁰ Twigg and Schecter, "Introduction," 7

¹¹ Erica Richardson, "Health promotion in the field of substance misuse in post-Soviet Russia," doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 2002

¹² Katherine Thomson, "Services for people with learning difficulties in the Russian Federation," doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 2000; Richardson, "Health promotion in the field of substance misuse in post-Soviet Russia,"

¹³ Sapar Kulianov, "Programs for Homeless Children: 'The Road Home' Children's Shelter," in Judyth Twigg and Kate Schecter eds., Social Capital and Social Cohesion in Post-Soviet Russia (New York and London: M.E.Sharpe, 2003)

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- ²⁰ Lynne Attwood, The New Soviet Man and Woman. Sex-role Socialisation in the USSR (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990)
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- ²² O. M. Zdravomyslova and M. Iu. Arutiunian, Rossiiskaia sem'ia na evropeiskom fone (Moscow: Editoriial URSS, 1998) p. 38
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- ²⁵ Viktor Kiriushin, ""I radost', i slezy"," Sel'skaia nov' 7 (2000): p. 5.
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- ³⁹ E. Morozova, "Kto garant besplatnoi meditsiny?," Chestnoe slovo 2002
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