

# Child is the fruit of love On the Russian tradition of early first births

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## **Introduction**

Europe is currently struggling with an ageing population and below-replacement fertility rates. The number of children born has been a constant source of concern for policy-makers in the Russian Federation. President Vladimir Putin's family policy, as first presented in the State of the Nation Address in 2006, encouraged larger families (Kuzmina 2007; Rotkirch, Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2007). President Medvedev has continued his predecessor's efforts to raise fertility levels. By contrast, Western European countries tend to be less explicit in their fertility propaganda (Isola 2008). They are also more concerned with the later timing of parenthood, which may lead to higher involuntary childlessness and lower overall fertility.

Compared with other European countries, Russian childbearing patterns combine early entry into motherhood with low overall numbers of children (Avdeev 2001; Perelli-Harris 2006). Here we will analyse this phenomenon in the city of St Petersburg with the aid of in-depth interviews and demographic statistics.<sup>1</sup> What is the ideal number of children and age of becoming a parent? What practices and attitudes support the tradition of having a first child early? We detect signs of desired later timing of first births, but also attitudes that value early parenthood and spontaneous family planning.

## **The Russian tradition of early childbearing**

During the twentieth century birth rates decreased in all developed societies. In Russia and particularly in St Petersburg, the birth rate was especially low in the 1990s (Figure 1). Compared with Russia as a whole, St Petersburg is characterised by an older and more highly educated population and an excess of women compared to men. Owing to its location and history, St Petersburg is also often described as culturally more 'European' city than other major Russian cities.

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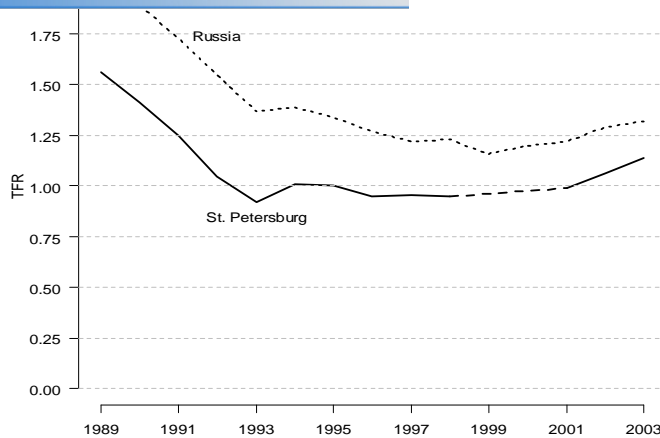


Figure 1. Fertility rates (TFR) in Russia and in St Petersburg 1989-2003. Source: Naselenii Rossii 2003-2004; Katja Kesseliø calculations based on data specified in the Appendix.

Throughout history, Russia and Eastern Europe have been distinguished by early marriage and early birth of the first child in connection with marriage (Therborn 2004). In the 1990s, childbearing in Western, Northern and most of Southern Europe peaked among women between 25 and 29 years old. By contrast, in Eastern Europe and Russia, childbearing peaked among women between 20 and 24 years old. (Vishnevskii 2006, 184-194; Zakharov and Ivanova 1996.)

The tradition of early births has been so strong in Russia, that the average age of family formation remained virtually unchanged for more than a century. In 1897, the average age at marriage was 24.2 years for men and 21.4 years for women; in 1989 it was 24.4 and 21.8, respectively. Traditionally, the proportion of Russians who remained unmarried throughout their lives was also traditionally low, allowing demographers to speak about quasi-universal matrimony in Russia and Eastern Europe. (Vishnevskii 2006, 108; 97; 103; Therborn 2004.)

Russia underwent a strong decline in the number of births in the 1990s. Some demographers thought that this was related to increased postponement, with Russian women having their children later in life. Thus we would be witnessing a convergence in reproductive timing between Eastern and Western Europe. A similar tendency to delay childbearing is today strong in many former socialist republics. (Vishnevskii 2006; Therborn 2004.)

To what extent does Russia follow the fertility behaviour of other European countries, and to what extent does it continue with an alternative path of development? Leading Russian demographers have forcefully stressed that social modernisation generally reduces the number of children, and twentieth century Russia is just a part of this global process (Vishnevskii 2006). This emphasis is basically correct. It is also part of a political debate where extreme nationalists blame Russia's demographic catastrophe on external influences such as Western sexual education, while liberal forces voice a less dramatic and more scholarly and pragmatist approach.

for Soviet and Russian society still appear to shape them may further our understanding of fertility tance, women's entry into high education and participation in public life are usually understood as contributing to later entry into motherhood (Sobotka 2004). Russia, however, casts doubt on this theory. Not only was the average marriage age comparatively low throughout the twentieth century, it declined in the 1970s and 1980s. During these last decades of the Soviet Union, women also become mothers at younger ages than before. Western countries witnessed an opposite trend, where high education and low birth rates were connected with a preceding and indisputable reduction in early childbearing (Ivanov, Vishnevskii and Zakharov 2006, 191).

Vishnevskii and colleagues (2006, 194) explain the different timing of family formation in Russia and the rest of Europe primarily with Russia's low access to modern contraceptives and the low culture of family planning in Russia. Young people in post-war Europe started sexual life earlier, but in Russia this more often led to unplanned pregnancies, childbirth and marriage (Rotkirch 2000). Today, contraceptive use in general and condom use in particular has increased in Russia during the last 15 years, transforming Russia into a condom-using contraceptive culture. Thus the early advent of the first child is no longer due to lack of reliable contraceptives. (Gerber and Berman 2008; Perelman 2009.) However, condom use is mostly associated with short-term sexual relations and protection from sexually transmitted diseases. Once in a long-term relation, couples have a hard time finding suitable and comfortable contraception. Many men do not like using condoms, and many women are reluctant to take contraceptive pills. (ibid., Meilakhs 2008.)

### **Explanations for low fertility**

Researchers are increasingly interested in variations in the number and timing of children in low-fertility countries. Differences in legalisation and social policy may partly explain contemporary European differences in this realm of life (Sobotka 2004; Billari et al. 2006; Gissler, Hemminki and Kautto 2006). Long-term state policy in support of families with children and the combination of waged work and parenthood appear to promote higher birth rates. From this perspective, the lower birth rate of today's Russia does not seem surprising. Notably, having a second child became less common during the most unstable years of the Russian transition to a capitalist economy in the 1980s and 1990s (Barkalov 2005). However, social and economic factors do not provide the full answer. Were Russia's low fertility only due to the social crisis of the transitional period in the 1990s, the birth rate should have risen to the previous level once the situation stabilised and the level of well-being rose (Kharkova and Andreev 2000).

Another strand of research looks at the decreasing impact of social and religious norms. In societies with a high level reproductive choice, for example in the forms of contraceptive devices and free abortion, intentions and emotions play a prominent role in childbearing. If children in traditional societies were born 'as many as God gives', as the classical saying goes, becoming a parent today is more of a conscious and reflected choice. Instead of asking why birth rates keep falling, we should perhaps ask why people want to have children at all? (Udry 1996; Rotkirch 2008.) With this in mind, the high ideological value attached to maternity in Russian culture is of

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related to family size and social status. Peers heavily influence the perceptions of how many children you can have and at which age. People everywhere appear to swiftly adjust their fertility behaviour to social signals, as if answering questions related to social competition and success – Whom might my children surpass? What do I see my potential rivals providing for their children? (Haaga 2001, 58). In some situations, it may be more profitable to first accumulate wealth but have only a few children, and hope for many grand- and grand-grandchildren who profit from a bigger inheritance. This has been proposed as one explanation for why countries undergoing rapid economic growth often experience a simultaneous decline in birth rates. (Mace 1998; Hill and Reeve 2005; Steelman et al. 2002.)

### It just happened

We now proceed to analyse the changes and continuities in relation to having a first child among women in St Petersburg. In 2004, 68 in-depth interviews about work, family life, fertility intentions and child-care arrangements were collected in St Petersburg. We also gathered demographic statistics (see Appendix).<sup>2</sup>

Are Russian women becoming mothers at increasingly higher ages, as in many other European countries? The number of children born to any particular cohort is certain only after the women of that cohort have passed their reproductive age, which usually means reached 50 years of age. To this date, there is no clear support for large postponing behaviour in Russia (Barkalov 2005; Kesseli 2007). As the following quote highlights, even some of our youngest respondents maintained both the ideal and practice of comparatively young childbearing. Becoming a mother is not presented as something planned, but rather something that kind of happens:

How did you decide to have your child? Now that it is possible to have it later or earlier?

How do you mean?

How did you decide that you wanted to have a child?

Well – how – I don't know, it kind of happened by itself, it was as if each step would lead to the next step. First we started living together, then we understood that we should, that we wanted – not that we should, but that we wanted – to get married. And then we understood that we wanted a child. (24-year-old student, married, mother of a 1-year-old child.)

Russia has witnessed a dramatic decline in the average number of children per family – from seven in the beginning of the twentieth century to one at its end. However, as discussed above women have continued to have their first child at quite young ages.

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<sup>2</sup> The in-depth interviews were carried out by the Centre for Independent Social Research in St Petersburg under the direction of Professor Elena Zdravomyslova (Zdravomyslova, Temkina and Rotkirch 2008). We interviewed 45 respondents aged 24–62 years, of whom 15 were career-orientated single women with and without children, 15 women and one man were living in a dual earner relation with small children and 14 were housewives with small children. We also interviewed 10 nannies and 9 cleaners aged 22–61 years and conducted 4 expert interviews. The respondents were recruited through acquaintances, by the snow-ball method and through Internet advertisements.

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and when she was 21 and gave birth at 22; her story is  
n and highly educated women. Interestingly, this  
and the interviewer's question about how it was now  
possible to have it later or earlier. Such perplexity regarding what is possible and  
usual was voiced several times in our in-depth interviews. The following woman, who  
married in 1990, did not think marrying at 22 was early:

ó So tell me, please, well, you were married í how did it happen so early,  
who was your husband?

ó Is it really that early? We studied together in the same class at the institute  
and became friends in the first year. So it turned out that from when I was 17  
until I became 21 he was courting me all the time. From the first year he was  
dragging me towards marriage. And I resisted such a long time. So I don't  
think it was early. (36-year-old housewife, two children.)

Meeting your future husband at school or during the first years of university studies,  
marriage, and a child in your twenties: this is still a typical trajectory for Petersburg's  
women. Today, the wedding increasingly often takes place when the couple already  
has or is expecting a baby. The average length of time between marriage and the birth  
of the first child in Russia in the mid- 1990s was just half a year (Vishnevskii 2006,  
191). Having a child is seen as a normal and suitable thing once a young couple has  
been going steady, or living together, for some time. Whether the couple is officially  
married or not is not of decisive importance in this process (Meilakhs 2008).

Pregnancies that began as accidents are thus not infrequent. It also looks as if  
distinct, articulated decision-making does not often surround the arrival of the first  
child.

ó And when did you have your baby?

ó Once we were married it happened straight after nine months.

ó And how did you decide? Well í

ó We didn't decide.

ó You didn't decide?

ó Mh-mh (shakes her head). (34-year old academic woman, employed,  
married, had her first child when she was 24 years old.)

Respondents sometimes compared their lack of discussions and conscious family  
planning with how people behave in the West, where children are supposedly the  
subject of lengthy and thorough planning.

ó So how did you decide to have the second child?

ó You know, unfortunately we have never decided to have children like they  
do in the West, they just arrived. (Laughs) It's also something that just  
happened by itself.

Several respondents laughed at the very word decision, used by the interviewer,  
apparently because it was so inadequate to describe what happened. This was the case  
also among some women who became mothers at an older age, in their 30s, as the  
second quote below illustrates.

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...case, how did it come about that you decided to have  
... I became pregnant and at the same time I applied for  
a study place. (Former art student, marriage and first child in 1995 at the age  
of 22 years.)

ó No decision was made! (Laughs) (32-year-old economist, mother of 3-year-  
old child.)

ó (Laughing) What, is there a decision involved? No, that, of course was by  
accident. (Woman doctor, first child in 1997 at the age of 26 years.)

### The child as a ðfruit of loveö

The absence of any explicit planning was explained in two ways. Either the transition  
to parenthood was described as part of being a loving couple, when the child was ðthe  
fruit of loveö, or it was perceived as a mistake but opted for as the respondent saw no  
serious objections to having a child.

The ðfruit of loveö explanation saw having a child as a logical step in the relationship  
of the spouses; it was ðabout timeö to become parents.

Well, look, I don't know, just the moment logically approached, we had, like,  
already been living together for two years before [the first child]. In any case it  
seems to me that in the development of the relationship between a man and a  
woman you have to pass some stages. (í ) I don't know how to explain it, in  
terms of intuition or something else, but like, it was ðabout timeö yes. (32-  
year-old economist.)

In a city like St Petersburg, with easy access to abortions and contraception, the  
absence of conscious family planning implies female decision-making  
(Regushevskaya et al. 2009). The woman quoted above proceeds to admit that if  
babies appear ðby themselvesö, this means women decide and their male partners are  
not necessarily consulted at all.

Well, somehow it happened that the child arrived, as they say, it came by  
itself. But it was at a moment when I let myself go. Or rather, I allowed myself  
to and I understood that yes, well, why not. (...) At that moment, I decided:  
-Well, I could have a child, if it happens it happens.øI did not even discuss it  
with my husband, kind of. Somehow there is an understanding in our family  
that I am responsible for childbearing, well, for the regulation of it.

This particular respondent did not really favour rational planning of children. This  
attitude to contraceptive use is often found among steady-going couples (Meilakhs  
2008). Second, a possible pregnancy is often welcomed ó or at least not opposed. As  
Nastya Meilakhs (2008, 365) suggests, ðthe birth of a child is seen as a normative  
scenario in the development of the relationship.ö

Spontaneity and trust are sometimes perceived as the opposite of a conscious  
regulation of childbearing. If stable relationships are characterised by a desire for

articulated choices appear as threatening to the couple (Meilakhs 2008, 361663). A 19-year-old man, why he and his girlfriend had not used contraception.

Well, we didn't like it. Well, we thought it was annoying and uncomfortable. (...) Maybe it's common wisdom, that when people are living together, yes, and have a rather serious relationship, then, in principle, you don't have to use contraception. (ibid., 364.)

Also in our corpus of in-depth interviews, a reluctance to discuss the details of contraception between partners was followed by the view that children are also best made spontaneously:

It wasn't like we were longing for a child and had discussed it: "Ok, let's bring a child into the world." Generally, it seems to me that isn't even the right way. You know, often nothing comes out of it when people decide it in advance, and, like, plan it.

However, spontaneity and "love children" were related to the couple's first child only. When the interviewers asked about whether economic considerations were involved when having the first child, the answer could be simple: "There wasn't any." Regarding a possible second or third child, such answers did not appear.

If the first child was really the fruit of love, it was all, all done for love. Then the second child – well, we ought to have one, but first you have to manage to put everything else in order. When that time arrives I don't know. (24-year old mother with 2-year old child.)

### **"I manage on my own"**

In the second version of "unplanned" and early motherhood, becoming a mother is not as self-evident as when the pregnancy presents itself as a fruit of love. In these cases, the pregnant woman has a short period of uncertainty and doubt and then decides to keep the baby – "why not?"

To be honest, it happened by accident – that is, I had had the experience that I didn't use contraception and nothing happened. But then suddenly it did happen. And well – I was generally scared of having him, because we hadn't finished studying at the Institute, we had nowhere to live, we had like nothing, and then a child. (36-year-old woman, employed, first child at the age of 23.)

I had just found out that I didn't qualify for the Institute, and the next day I found out that I was pregnant. I thought, why not, of course. My young man told me that he didn't know how to react to this and generally just said, do what you want. (24-year-old PR-woman, child at 18.)

When the pregnancy is more of a real accident, the woman's relations to her partner and close relatives are crucial. A central criterion for having the child was the feeling of the mother-to-be that she could manage on her own in the case of a divorce. As one respondent expressed this: "That inner choice to keep the child, it came when I understood that I can do it even alone, if needed." Also the advice of experts and

respondent quoted above remembered.

... who said to me, "Look, you're 17 years old, almost 18, your body is almost fully grown, go on and have the baby" (24-year-old PR-woman, child at 18.)

Also planned single motherhood was often judged from the point of view of maternal resources. In the words of one respondent, "It's the woman's choice, if she thinks she has enough strength or simply wants this; she has the right to do so."

In sum, women's intentions are crucial in both pathways leading to early childbearing.

### **Motherhood and femininity**

We have seen how often our respondents, including highly educated women, revealed that they did not plan the birth of their first child. Does this stem from the high value attached to motherhood in Soviet Russia? Do women think that they should inevitably become mothers? Among the oldest respondents, born in the 1950s/60s, womanhood, marriage and motherhood were indeed completely linked. For them, a "normal" woman was a mother.

I think that I'm a normal woman. I think that any normal woman wants to have children, even if just one. (...) God gives the child and he'll also give for the child. (...) That's the most important thing, I think. (46-year-old working-class woman.)

I can't imagine how you can live without children in a marriage. (39-year-old doctor and mother of three children.)

Younger respondents, however, more readily embraced the fact that a woman's life does not have to include maternity. Childlessness did not appear to be a very controversial issue among our respondents (compared to, for instance, induced abortion, about which several women voiced ethical and religious concerns, although the practice is still wide-spread and common in Russia). Women without children were not openly condemned or stigmatised in any of our interviews. On the contrary, to remain consciously childless could be seen as better than having a child for conventional reasons:

Having no children is better, than having a child just because it's time to do so or for some other reasons, and then that child is soon no longer of any use to you. (34-year-old housewife with two children.)

Still, motherhood remains an integral part of Russian feminine identity. Especially the first child is often referred to as something the woman "does for herself", "in order not to be alone anymore". The expression entails a view that husbands may come and go, while motherhood is forever (cf Rotkirch 2000, 78-114).

### **Benefits and disadvantages of "old parents"**

Russia's post-war trend of family formation at increasingly younger ages stopped in



93). In some social milieus and in the big cities, later ages. Figure 2 shows how the peak of the birth 5-29 years in St Petersburg around the year 2000.

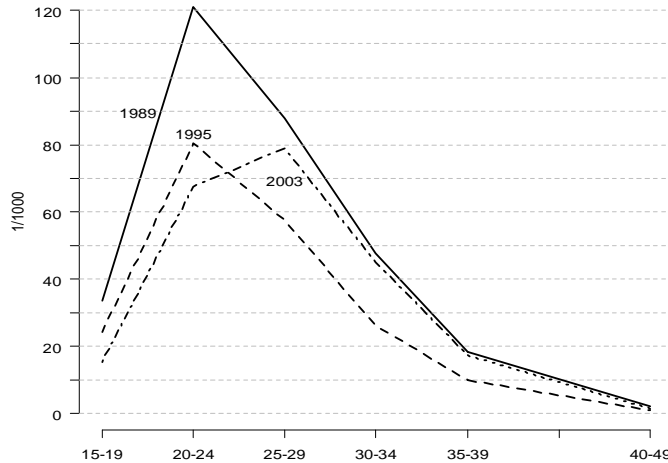


Figure 2. Age-specific fertility in Petersburg 1989, 1995, and 2003. 1/1000 women in each age group. Source: Katja Kesseliø calculations based on data specified in the Appendix.

Childbearing is mostly postponed in big cities and among highly educated women. One respondent, who was working as an economist for a large commercial firm, wanted to have a child considerably earlier, but because the òmaterial situation wasn't promisingö, she had waited and given birth when she was 26 years old. Another respondent, a lawyer who also became a mother when she was 26 years old, said that although the doctors called her an òold motherö, she was the first from her peer group to give birth.

Among my girlfriends I'm the only one. Still, I had my child late. At 26! It's considered late. It isn't 18 and it isn't 20. At the maternity hospital I was an old mother. They explained to me that after 20, everybody here is an old mother. But I said, I had thought how early I was (laughs), how I was so early, early to decide to have a baby! (Laughs) (Lawyer, born 1975.)

When the child was born after the woman had turned about 25, our respondents often referred to òlate childrenö and òold parentsö. These òlateö children of middle-class parents are typically consciously planned. Here we recognize a lifestyle close to that of the educated classes elsewhere in Europe: first an education and a professional career, then an apartment, and only then, by a joint decision of the spouses, a child. The child in such cases is no longer the fruit of passion or an unexpected surprise, but a socially, spiritually, bodily and economically well-prepared project.

The child was planned, he was expected and awaited, because then already, basically, I had made my career and then arose the question of a child, of giving birth to a child, that's why he came into the world. That is, 30 years, I was 30 years old. (33-year-old doctor, mother of 2-year-old child.)

maniac parents (laughs).  
h?

ó You consciously approached the matter?

ó Yes. We saved money, we travelled to the south, we didn't drink anything stronger than wine and well, and actually, it happened after a month. (32-year-old professional woman with a year-old toddler.)

Our respondents were ambivalent about old parents. On the one hand, they are seen as better parents, sometimes also with better children. Old parents are said to have more common sense, they are capable of taking a conscious decision, as a 46-year-old cleaning woman expressed it. One 30-year-old respondent, who herself had a child when she was 23, praised her mother-in-law who had a baby at the age of 40:

Late children are the most ingenious. (í ) Children who were born when the parents are forty, late children, they are more steadfast, more intellectually developed, because the parents themselves are different. (...) They bring them up in a different way.

But such praise is rare. To become a parent after 30 and especially after 35 is generally understood to be very late, often too late.

Based on my own experience my impression is that it's still better to give birth... well, I wouldn't say at a young age, because not all young people are aware of the responsibility they have to take when becoming parents. So at a more conscious age, but still not totally. (...) well, before 35 years, that's for sure. Because after that it's much harder to carry out those same duties of being a mum. It's physically harder to give birth, and you become exhausted more easily than when you're younger. (í ) When parents are older, they also invent problems that don't exist. (...) You should choose the optimal age ó from about 25 years up to 35 years. (40-year-old housewife, children aged 9 and 4.)

Contrary to this, a man whose partner had her first baby when she was older than 35, considered that Russians are wrong to harbour prejudices against old parents.

Well yes, the child was planned. Not at once. We took into account that we were of quite a mature age. For some reason we have in Russia this opinion that a woman after thirty is unable to have a normal child. But she gave birth to a very fine, very healthy boy. And I understood that this opinion is a complete delusion. Many women also told me: "Oh, you don't have children yet, you're pressing your wife too much." A terrible misconception. From our own example, I see that's not the case. One should be mature and have children at the age when one can have them, and not like that, to show off.

### **Why does the early-child pattern persist?**

The timing of the first child in today's Russia appears to be a mixture of cultural values and structural conditions. Our results show the emergence of more flexible and reflective attitudes towards maternity and parenthood in today's Russia. There appear

...ning the timing of children and the necessity for a  
...ssessing what is "natural" and "normal", what is  
...diverged in interesting ways between the respondents,  
her peers, the interviewer (who was mostly a young Petersburg woman herself) and  
experts.

In spite of these cultural shifts, the birth of the first child remains for many women  
and men an almost automatic event. Having a child is the "normal" way to proceed in  
a stable relationship and also an acceptable choice for a single woman. Both  
qualitative and statistical data depict an enduring Russian tradition of young entry into  
motherhood. The reproductive life course in St Petersburg is also extremely short,  
since for the majority of women, their first child turns out to be their last.

Some highly educated women deliberately postpone childbearing and the peak of  
births has now shifted toward the late 20s among St Petersburg women. Children born  
after the woman has turned 25 are often referred to as "late" by our respondents.

Women retrospectively explain the birth of the first child with feelings, particularly  
their love for their partner, the desire to have a child, and their ability to manage on  
their own in case of a divorce.

Anatolii Vishnevskii and his colleagues discuss this pattern in their magisterial book  
"Demographic Modernisation in Russia". They connect the tendency to postpone  
childbearing, which has already rooted itself in most European countries, with a high  
degree of individualism and gender equality (Vishnevskii 2006, 143-4).

If this is so, two different interpretations impose themselves. According to the first,  
Russia preserves traditional cultural elements, while its individualism and  
modernisation lags behind Western trends. This interpretation assumes that  
contemporary Russian youth is less individualistic and has less gender equality than  
youth in, say, Spain and Great Britain. If this is true, early motherhood should  
disappear if there is an increase in gender equality and individualism in Russia (for a  
comprehensive study of the post-Soviet gender traditionalism and modernisation, see  
Temkina 2008).

Another interpretation is that Russia stands for a particular version of the  
demographic transition, combining a low number of children and high levels of  
female education with early motherhood. This explanation predicts that early  
motherhood may continue well into the future. Despite some converging trends in  
fertility behaviour, the world also has different and enduring, distinct family systems  
(cf Therborn 2003).

Finally, several structural conditions support early childbearing in Russia. They are  
distinct from the cultural legacies, although social and cultural factors may obviously  
feed into each other. First, Russia has an early completion of general secondary  
schooling and often of higher education as well. In many Western countries general  
schooling lasts for twelve years, after which young people often dedicate a year or  
two to work and travel before deciding to continue their professional education. In  
Russia, young people finish their general schooling earlier, at 17-18 years, and have  
already obtained higher education diplomas from ages 21-24.

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Early childbearing stems from the emphasis placed on strength and health and the health of their grandmothers. Grandmothers continue to provide much of the care for children in Russia. Postponing parenthood may threaten the availability of this crucial help as your own parents grow too old or infirm. Young Russians are also conscious of the very high demands of the competitive labour market and may think that delayed childbearing could complicate employment opportunities later on. The absence of family-friendly working policies may in such cases encourage early child-bearing: if there is no income-related maternity benefit to speak of, there is no need to postpone childbearing until you get a proper income.

Last but not least, the mere presence of peer examples probably encourages early child bearing by showing that you can have children early and still manage well.

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### Data Appendix

Data on births by birth order and age of mother were obtained from Statisticheskii sbornik 1990-2004: Osnovnie pokazateli demograficheskikh protsessov v Sankt-Peterburge i Leningradskoi oblasti. Petrostat. Sankt-Peterburg. Age structures for the female population were obtained from Institute of urban planning in St Petersburg (courtesy of Semion Sivanshinskii).