
Babushkas between Lesbian-Headed Families and the Russian State: Making an Intelligible Model of Extended Mothering

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Abstract

This article focuses on a significant kinship character, *babushka*, the grandmother, in Russian lesbian-headed families. Based on an original empirical multi-method study, the research analyses the building of relationships with grandmothers in lesbian families in contemporary Russia. As the core element of Russian kinship – marriage – is missing from this kinship scene, blood relations between the biological mother, the maternal grandmother, and the child seem to become a central, although a highly complex element, in building supportive relationships in lesbian-headed families. Grandmothers from the non-biological mother’s side remain less visible in everyday negotiations and decision-making than biological grandmothers. The argument here states that blood relatedness becomes meaningful in situations where the grandmother’s role in lesbian-headed families is recognised and challenged in the officially anti-lesbian state context. Extended support mutually provided by grandmothers and their lesbian daughters creates *an intelligible model of female-maintained family* in current Russia, even when the legal landscape (i.e., the enforcement of the ‘anti-gay’ legislation in 2013) is not in the favour of such families. Consequently, *babushkas* become a “shield” between the state and the lesbian families as they provide a socially and

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culturally legit “traditional family” surface, required for survival in the state which promotes women’s reproduction as a core value in the society.

Keywords

Lesbian Families, Kinship, Grandmothers, Queer Parenting, Russian Mothering

Introduction: Legal Repression and Lesbian Families in Contemporary Russia

In this article, I open a discussion on the role of grandmothers within lesbian-headed families in Russia under the recent oppressive societal and legislative changes, on their place in the communication between lesbian families, the legal sphere, and the state after the enforcement of the so-called anti-gay laws in 2013 (see below for details) as well as in the broader context of the larger history of Russian family developments. I am looking at how the current alliance of lesbian mothers and grandmothers is attached to and becomes seen by the Russian state as an intelligible, culturally rooted model of the so-called female-maintained family (Buvinic and Gupta 1997) with extended mothering, where *babushka* – the Russian grandmother figure – is providing crucial help for the mother, sometimes along with another female kinfolk. This transformation influences the visibility and legitimacy of lesbian-headed families, providing a certain “shield” from the anti-lesbian state and from the negative societal attitudes against lesbian-headed families in Russia.

However, the transformation from an independent lesbian family to the complex alliance with grandmothers did not happen without obstacles inside the discussed union. It connects to the broader history of the extended family in Russia, in particular to extended mothering within the Russian family history (e.g., Rotkirch 2004), to female-maintained families, and to the drastic legal, political and ideological changes during Vladimir Putin’s autocratic regime, along with the strong support from the highly influential (socially) Russian Orthodox Christian Church. I will further

explore the relationships of grandmothers in lesbian-headed families, based on my original empirical research in Russia. In doing so, I will give examples from my data on how the relationships between lesbian mothers and the babushkas are organised and imagined by different parties, what the building of these bonds requires and consists of, and what strategies lesbian mothers apply to coordinate grandmaternal care in their families as smoothly as possible. I will conclude by discussing the disturbing situation of such “outlaw” families and the “chosen” kinship in an oppressive post-socialist legislative and social context where the actual parenting must rely on legitimate kinship roles in order to survive. In these situations, I argue that the blood ties between the biological mother, the child, and the biological grandmother may become a strong argument for hierarchies as to who counts as a proper relative, or from whom family support is primarily expected.

Russian Law, Kinship and the *Babushka*

Russian law operates around kinship by drawing on the category “kinship by origin” that is stated in the Article 1147 of Russian Federation Civil Code (RFCC)¹ (Kirichenko 2007: 25). This category in RFCC extended the category “kinship by origin” from only “kinship by blood” to “kinship by social origin” which Kirichenko defines as “the bond emerging owing to the origin of people which has not biological but social character” (ibid: 25).²

To open the grounds for my discussion on the complex support and communication relations of

¹ Russian Federation Civil Code (part 3) from the 25th of November 2001 № 141-FZ (eds. from the 18th of March 2019), article 1147, clause 1: “In case of inheriting by the law the adopted person and his/her offsprings from one side and the adoptive parent and his/her relatives from other side equate to relatives by the origin (blood relatives)” (Rus: “При наследовании по закону усыновленный и его потомство с одной стороны и усыновитель и его родственники - с другой приравниваются к родственникам по происхождению (кровным родственникам)”).

² However, Kirichenko (2007: 23-24) claims that the contemporary Russian Law (and society) attaches importance only to those bonds that take place in practice. She calls this “biological-volitional kinship. Kirichenko follows Palastina (1973), who states that to establish the kinship of a child, its biological relatedness to the mother and the father is taken as proven if they are married. If they are not married, then the child’s relatedness to the father is established through biological understandings of kinship, that is, relying on the validation of the mother (to prove his paternity). This validation character of relational bonds appeared in the 1995 Russian Family Code, clause 3, article 52.

lesbian mothers and babushkas in their families and between the Russian state, it is important to note that while the Russian word “babushka” literally translates as grandmother, the research shows a bigger variety of meanings and reference fields of babushka in Russian families. For example, Sternheimer (1984) claims that babushka in the Soviet Union could either be a grandmother, a child minder, or a housekeeper. To contrast and to further complicate this view, Shadrina’s (2019: 66) recent work discusses the babushka as a resourceful female kin identity category in Russia, arguing that the social position of the babushka has “institutionalised expectations and norms in relation to older women in Russia”. This refers, among other issues, to the provision of help for young mothers, as well as the care of grandchildren.

My discussion is not only about the complexity of cultural or social attitudes and expectations around the babushka in lesbian-headed families, but also inherently related to an important recent change in the Russian legal landscape. By this, I refer to the 2013 enactment of the Russian Federal Law on “Propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors” (known in the English-language media as the “gay propaganda law” and the “anti-gay” law³), that bans the representation of a positive image of lesbians and gays to minors, and therefore making the raising of minors in lesbian families potentially illegal (see Zhabenko 2019).

After the so-called “anti-gay” law had passed on the Federal level in 2013, for a long time, lesbians were very worried about their families and future reproductive decisions. They thought that this law would work against them because they were (or would be) raising minors in their families, and thus potentially seen as ‘guilty’ for influencing the positive representations that these minors would gain

³ Article 6.21 Federal Law No. 195-FZ of 30 December 2001: ‘Code of administrative offences of the Russian Federation’ (as amended on 12 February 2015) [Rus: Федеральный закон от 30 декабря 2001 г. No 195-ФЗ «Кодекс Российской Федерации об административных правонарушениях» (действующая редакция от 12 февраля 2015 г.) (see also Johnson 2015).

on the “image of lesbians” (Zhabenko 2019). This means that since the initial shock, the 2013 oppressive legislation has continued to influence the lives, perceptions and future expectations of Russian lesbian parents. Further, after the 2013 law change, and significantly because of it, it has been a common feature amongst Russian lesbian mothers to continuously consider immigrating to Europe, the United States or Canada (Zhabenko 2019).

After a period of a more liberal atmosphere from the early 1990s to 2010s, a turn towards more anxiety caused by this 2013 oppressive legislative turn was evident among those Russian lesbian mothers that I worked with while conducting fieldwork between 2010 and 2017 on Russian lesbian mothers. In light of my field research experience, it seems fair to say that Russian lesbian mothers rapidly moved ‘back to the closet’ following the 2013 anti-gay law enforcement (Zhabenko 2019). My interviewees became much more cautious in terms of their willingness to share any family information in the context of the increasing social hostility towards lesbian families in Russian society. They were also more worried than before the 2013 law about dealing with and renegotiating their everyday family contacts with the outside world, particularly in relation to the role of the non-biological mother in situations such as regular visits to the paediatrician or picking up their child from school.

What is more, the 2013 change in the legal and social climate around lesbian families in Russia impacted the parental families of lesbian mothers. In this sense, the law also placed *babushkas* in lesbian families both socially and practically in an ‘illegal’ position, since they could have been thought to participate, in the law’s terms, in the “spreading of homosexual propaganda amongst minors” if they openly helped their lesbian daughters to raise their minor children. In this way, through the existing Russian kinship patterns, that is, through the culturally intelligible and assumed grandmaternal support model in woman-maintained families, the 2013 law came to concern a much

larger group of women kin folks in Russia than just lesbian mothers – in particular, middle-aged and elderly women with lesbian daughters.⁴ In this precarious situation, the significance, status and position of those grandmothers who did not have a blood connection or a legal bond with their grandchildren, also became an important – and so far under-researched – issue.⁵

Russian Family Constellations Through a Late-Soviet Historical Perspective

During the Soviet era, elderly people occupied a symbolical function as mediators between what was perceived as a ‘traditional society’ and the Soviet Union with its radical project of modernisation (Lovell 2003). Given the highly intense political changes in the Soviet period, expectations towards and the (self)presentation of babushkas in the Soviet Union shifted. Not unlike the discussion about the reference field of the term babushka in modern time has many diverse views, also research on the role of babushkas after the revolution provides us variegated views. For example, Romashova (2015) claims that in the 1920s and 1930s, the women who were active as babushkas during the early Soviet period were considered by the state as emancipated and somehow rebellious. To contrast this, Tiainen (2013) and Kelly (2007) state that the role of babushkas was quite the opposite: they were the providers of traditional and conservative social values. Generally, the discourse on the babushka changed before the Second World War because of the needs of the new Soviet state under Stalin’s regime: Stalin’s revised family policy required babushkas to assume a role as active family members and family care providers. During the mid-Soviet era, influenced by the Pension Reform of 1956 (Baskakova and Baskakov 2001), babushkas also became the

⁴ For clarification: Russian women give birth quite early, approximately at the age of 20 to 25 years old (Scherbakova 2017); consequently, the babushkas that my interviewees referred to were at their 50s.

⁵ In this article, I am following the ethnographic and queer/feminist scholarly works of Sarah Franklin (2013) and Jenny Gunnarsson Payne (2016) and their discussion of blood connectedness as biogenetical connectedness. Franklin (2013: 292) notices that “blood continues to be a paradigmatic substance for kin connection in Europe.” In my own research, my interview-partners did not talk about “blood”, but expressed the blood connection implicitly as the relatedness that matters: they used the word “relatives” (*rodstvenniki*) and assumed that a biological mother is a person who gave birth and conceived from her own egg.

providers of financial help: their pension money was used for young families' needs, which in rural areas was often the only money available.

The role of the babushka thus became an important part of the state's professionalised stance, a part of the official discourse, and a supportive tool for installing the "working mother" gender contract (Romashova 2015; Clarke 2000; Shadrina 2019). This 'contract' meant that the Stalinist Soviet state expected mothers to combine their working duties with parenting (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2003). The shortage of housing in the 1950s and 1960s influenced on the stabilisation of the extended families living arrangements: babushkas often lived together with their children and grandchildren and were involved in the everyday family care duties (Shadrina 2019; Semenova and Thompson 2004). Later Khrushchev's housing reform radically changed the housing situation: between 1972 and 1979, the number of young couples who lived with their parents declined by almost eight times (Šlâpentoh 1989). However, in the early 1980s, still 41% of babushkas cared for their grandchildren under 3 years old, and 61% helped their children with domestic chores (Šlâpentoh 1989, 170; Ruzhzhe et al. 1980: 53, 57).

The former nuclear pattern of the Russian family that started in the 1930s was "the side product of Stalin's industrialisation and related tendencies of the individualisation of private life" (Rabzhaeva 2004: 93). As such, some household types were separated, although the care and economic networks remained (or returned to be) shared between households according to the blood logic of kinship. This appears to represent a steady trend, since the level of co-residence remained quite high in Russia: in mid-2000s, around 30% of all households were multigenerational (Prokofieva 2007). This trend correlated well with the official neo-traditional ideological turn in Russia and with the growing state propaganda of "traditional values" (Pecherskaya 2013; Pronkina 2016; Sorainen et al 2017).

The trend towards the denuclearisation of Russian families (Zaharov and Churilova 2013) indicates a return to extended families, given that different generations of relatives are once again becoming tightly connected, even if their households are separate (however, see Avdeeva in this issue on how certain Russian heterosexual resourceful families choose mothering tactics which suggest a simultaneous reversal of nuclearisation). In this context, Russian grandmothers continue to provide practical help as well as important care and support of different kinds to their daughters' families. Specifically, they stay with the children to give the mothers some free time; they help with some parenting duties and at times also support their daughters' families financially (Sorainen et al. 2017).

Generally, in the sphere of Russian motherhood, there exists a shared cultural memory and a collective understanding about the history of how to distribute care-related duties between the members of extended families. Grandmothers in recent Soviet history served as the almost primary caretakers and the exclusive childrearsers in the family, since mothers worked, and many fathers were absent (Semenova 1996). But if we think about the expected participation of men in the family, we have to keep in mind that the "absent father" has a long history in the context of the Soviet family (Kon 2003; Klecina 2009; Khitruk 2013).⁶ The term "absent father" in Russia refers to a father who was not practically involved in a child's everyday life or who lost contact with his child(ren) following divorce (Klecina 2009). An absent father, thus, implicitly refers to a man who has no psychological nor social contact with his child(ren). Kon (2003, 271) adds to this definition a pedagogical incompetence of fathers, as well as a disinterest and an inability of a father to parent, particularly in terms of caring for babies and small children. Despite the variegation of its

⁶ More about the influence of absent fathers on Russian families and mothering, see Avdeeva in this issue; for more information on the topic of contemporary fatherhood in Russia, see Lipasova (2016).

definitions, the concept and history of the absent father in Russia diminishes the pressure to have a father in the family.

Grandfathers have also not represented active caregivers under the cultural tradition whereby men in Russia might have served as the primary breadwinners in the family, but still stayed away from the actual childcare (Lipasova 2016). Also, since the liberation era, the early 1990s, grandmothers remained more involved in caring for grandchildren than grandfathers in Russia, given the cultural tradition and legacy of the intergenerational female-maintained family, working mothers, the insufficient state day-care system, and men's high rate of alcoholism-related mortality (Utrata 2008, 2015; Saburova et al. 2011). Parenting practices in Russian extended families, thus, have a long history of being run by women of different generations – that is, by mothers and grandmothers, and sometimes also with the help of other female kinfolks.

As noted above, lesbian-headed families as families with matrifocal connections (see Härkönen in this issue) enjoy a degree of cultural and social legitimisation through the repetition of or a certain attachment to the socially recognised care practices, which involve only mothers and grandmothers in the family. The Russian state also positively views and recognises the sharing of care relations between the mother and grandmother in the family, a model that enjoys societal visibility. Within this framework, relationships with grandmothers in Russian lesbian-headed families are the most crucial area of negotiation regarding support and assistance in everyday parenting. However, the perception of what forms the grandmother's legitimate role in the care of children has shifted throughout history, along with significant contingencies related to other political and discursive developments in family values and reproduction in Russian society.

Grandmothers, Lesbian Mothers and the State

In general, Russian society, including during the post-Soviet era, has a long history of extended families with divergent relationships and care constellations within it. A rich literature exists on this family type and the kin relations attached to it (Golod and Klecin 1994; Semenova 1996; Rabzhaeva 2004; Vishnevskiy 2008; Sivak 2018). The specific Russian historical construct – a legacy of a family that is not nuclear but run intergenerationally by women – influences the current social, cultural, and legal conditioning of lesbian-headed families who needed to construct new survival strategies under the oppressive law in Russia.

Extended mothering in Russia is a culturally and socially legitimate practice where grandmothers and their daughters parent together (Rotkirch 2004). The idea of intergenerational mothering includes transmitting family and parenting values from generation to generation and implies the reproduction of a tradition between women (Harper & Ruicheva 2010). It is noteworthy that ‘extended mothering’ and ‘intergenerational mothering’ represent slightly different concepts: while extended mothering refers to mothers and grandmothers parenting under the same roof together, intergenerational mothering refers to a more general idea of handing over the knowledge, experience, and practical resources from a grandmother to a mother, aiming to help the mother with parenting.

From the state’s point of view, Russian babushkas, together with their lesbian daughters, officially represent and fit the cultural and historical family form of female-maintained families, which provides extended intergenerational mothering. However, to this background, Putin’s autocratic and patriarchal state incorporated its official “traditional values” ideology (Sorainen et al. 2017)

together with the 2013 “anti-gay” legislation to encompass extended female-maintained families.⁷

As a result of these two integrated state ‘desires’ – the wished-for existence of exchanging care between reproductive women and supportive babushkas, and the social disapproval of lesbian mothering that is socially entailed as a part of “homosexual propaganda” reaching children (Zhabenko 2019) – the culturally valued women’s tasks of mothering and grandmothering get linked to the historically and socially approved model of extended mothering in lesbian-headed families. However, grandmothers face confusion and even difficulties in building relationships within their lesbian daughters’ families, which lack legitimate cultural roots and are legally or societally not fully supported.

In the contemporary, legally, and socially largely ‘anti-lesbian family’ scene of Russia, with the existing extended female-maintained family model, grandmothers may come to occupy an ambiguous position as an important support for parenting but also as crucial intimate transmitters of cultural and traditional values in society. In this role, they are mobilised (and perhaps mobilise themselves) as gatekeepers for their lesbian daughters – who run lesbian-headed families where minors are reared – into an apparently adjusted role in the Russian society. One background aspect for this complex constellation is that the Russian state does not provide sufficient day-care services to working mothers (Chernova 2010). At the same time, women’s salaries remain lower than men’s. Thus, the state obviously counts, much in the same manner as it did during the late Soviet period, on the grandmaternal help and also on their pension money within families (Sorainen et al. 2017; Baskakova & Baskakov 2001; Clarke 2000).

⁷ In his address to the Federal Assembly in 2013, Putin stressed the importance of protecting “traditional values”. His speech referred to the protection of the traditional family, the “true values” (*istinnie tsennosti*) of human life, and religious life, among others. The same year, the ‘anti-gay’ law passed at the federal level. The key term for this move, *Duchovnie skrepi* (spiritual bonds) was introduced already in Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly in 2012, in the context of preserving the national identity, when he referred to the characteristics of the spiritual order of the nation, the “moral compass,” or the “spiritually moral foundation of society” (Zhabenko 2019).

Babushkas and Coming Out: Methodologies of Research

Because of the extreme sensitivity of the topic in Russia, following the enacting of the above-mentioned 2013 legislative changes, I needed to rely on a multimethod approach in my study. As noted above, in the wake of the mentioned “anti-gay” changes in the legal landscape, lesbian mothers became extremely wary of providing any information about their families, even to known and trusted researchers in the field in Russia.

The topic of the grandmaternal support was not the primary focus of my initial research on lesbian motherhood in Russia, but it came up later during the analysis of the 50 interviews that I collected for my dissertational project. This article includes material from 15 interviews where the topic of the involvement of babushkas in lesbian families was discussed. The main corpus of interviews was collected in metropolitan Russian cities with lesbian women aged between 23 and 56 years who raised children in same-sex families.⁸

All interviews were anonymised during the analyses, and I am using pseudonyms throughout this article. Interviews were collected with oral agreement from my interview-partners. Interviews and questionnaires were anonymised with a special care to ethical guidelines provided by the European Research Council to protect the interview-partners and myself as a researcher in a sensitive and politically contested field. Neither names nor private information were mentioned in the transcript. Transcripts were made entirely by myself, following the agreement with my interview-partners.

⁸ Most of my interview-partners had a university education, salaried jobs, and were financially independent. Whilst the understanding of ‘class’ in Russia remains the subject of discussion (Levinson 2008), my interview-partners could, roughly put for the limited space of this article, be considered middle-class mothers (Maiofis & Kuklin 2010; Shpakovskaya 2015).

Analysing materials for my research I have been engaging in sophisticated discussions with the existing literature on lesbian kinship, parenting and motherhood, queer temporalities, queer law and international politics. Narrative and in-depth interviews were analysed by multiple close readings, a thematic reading, and narrative analyses. During the analyses of the came up topics I noticed that the discussion on their parental families with my interviewees typically began immediately after the issue of ‘coming out’ was raised (and vice versa). Here, ‘coming out’ also represented an important issue as the topic of the grandparents’ involvement and coming out emerged as closely connected in these interviews. The additional data from the two online surveys that I conducted in 2013 helped me to construct a wider picture on contemporary Russian lesbian families’ expectations on grandmaternal care, although I will not directly refer to the survey results in this discussion.⁹ However, it is important to note that the survey data shows that lesbian mothers primarily rely on their parents and friends for support and care: 75% of the respondents received help from their parents with parenting; 35% also relied on their friends for help.

To contrast my findings with another post-socialist country with an increasingly hostile anti-queer attitudes, it is noteworthy that Mizielinska’s (2015: 64) study of Polish lesbian families’ relationships with their parental families, shows that in over 50% of the cases, the parents of the respondent, the other biological parent, and the partner’s parents knew about the lesbian mother’s family situation. According to Mizielinska’s (ibid) findings, if the lesbian mothers needed support and wanted to rely on their networks, they primarily sought help from their parental family; biological grandmothers turned out to be the second most helpful persons, after one’s partner

⁹ The first online survey, “Attitudes towards the ‘anti-gay’ legislation in the Russian queer community,” with 1800 respondents, was conducted in October 2013. The second online survey was dedicated to the contemporary needs of lesbian families and was conducted in November 2013, with 94 respondents. In both surveys, the recruiting of respondents was completed with help from Russian activist organizations, whereby surveys were advertised through activist channels. The surveys consisted of 50 and 30 questions, respectively. All data were analysed using the SPSS system. Given the sensitivity of the information and the identity of the survey respondents, ensuring the anonymity of the survey participants was of a great importance.

(spouse), as almost half of the respondents turned to them for financial assistance (48%) or during illness (44%). This situation suggests that grandmothers are rendered as gatekeepers to support and care in the wider (oppressive) post-socialist societal context than just in Russia (see also Härkönen on grandmothers' extended care role in contemporary Cuba, in this issue).

Most of the participants in my own study “came out” to their mothers already during the reproductive process. If they were not ‘out’ before, they would inform their parents or closest relatives about their sexuality or about their family type during the process of conceiving, pregnancy, or the first immediate days after giving birth. Their coming out depended on the expected, desired, and needed caregiving and the financial support they initially wished to receive from their parental families. Disclosing the ‘truth’ about their reproductive and family strategies was, thus, exchanged for the wished-for resources that the parental family – in particular, the grandmothers – could provide to them in their newly constructed family situation.

Studies on Grandparenting in Lesbian Families

A significant amount of research has focused on family relations with grandmothers in heterosexual families in the international field. Such studies have analysed their involvement in parenting, kinship building and intergenerational communication (Rosenthal 1985; Hagestad 1985; Arber and Timonen 2012; Glaser et al. 2013). There is also a vast amount of research on the grandparenting of children conceived from donor sperm (Fulcher et al. 2002; Beeson et al. 2013; Nordqvist and Smart 2015). Fewer studies have examined the communication and involvement of biological and non-biological grandmothers in lesbian-headed families. However, there are some studies that focus on the relationships between grandmothers and their lesbian daughters and children raised in lesbian-headed families in various countries.

For example, Patterson (1998) who studied the contact between the children of lesbian families and their grandparents based on materials from the United States, claims that children raised in lesbian-headed families were more in contact with the grandmother of the biological mother and her other blood relatives than with the grandparents and relatives from the non-biological mother's side of the family. Additionally, Gross (2009) researched relationships between children raised in lesbian-headed families, and their social grandparents – that is, the grandparents from the non-biological mother's side – in French lesbian families. Gross's (ibid.) findings highlight a negative influence from the "heteronormative matrix", i.e., the cultural pressure to privilege the biological connectedness of relationships between grandparents and children, concluding that both the grandparents and the children in lesbian-headed families were more willing to invest in relationships with their blood relatives than in 'social' or non-biological kinship ties.

Furthermore, Nordqvist (2015: 497) analysed how parents in British lesbian families "do kinship" with their grandparents, and suggested, that "in some families, new (lesbian) relationalities become intelligible insofar as they fit with the 'old' kinship thinking." More specifically, Nordqvist (ibid.) seems to suggest that genetic relatedness and traditional notions of belonging, and connectedness play a crucial role in the "non-normative" families headed by lesbian mothers. Hence, in all of the above-mentioned studies, the 'choice' of kinship was made favouring biological grandparents and other blood relatives. These studies were conducted at different periods of time, within different legal, national, and cultural contexts regarding same-sex marriage and reproduction. Patterson (1998) conducted her research amongst planned lesbian families living in the San Francisco Bay area in the 1990s, at a time when such families were supported by society and the community.¹⁰ The research was, however, conducted several years before the state of California voted to legalise

¹⁰ In total, 92% of Patterson's United States research participants were white, educated and had a high family income.

same-sex domestic partnerships. Gross's (2009) research was carried out following the legal recognition of same-sex couples in France (in 1999), but before the recognition of same-sex marriage.¹¹ Nordqvist (2015), for her part, conducted her research under legislation that recognised same-sex marriages and parenting in the United Kingdom.¹²

By contrasting these three works, each of which is regionally, historically, and legally somewhat different, I seek to highlight an important argument. Even if the level of recognition, the political situation, and the geographical location (the community-supported early 1990s in the utmost liberal state in the United States, California; the pre-legality France; and the after-legality Britain), are relatively divergent, the findings across these three works were similar. In all the studies mentioned, the grandparents' biological relationships to their grandchildren played a crucial role in establishing care and attachment bonds in the family. I contribute to this previous literature through my novel analysis of the significance of strategies to cope with different grandmaternal relationships in Russian lesbian families under legal oppression, albeit in the specific cultural context¹³ of extended female-maintained families and an oppressive post-socialist state's legal and social framework.

In the Margins of Official Kin in Russia

In what follows, I turn to the position of lesbian mothers in Russian society. I do so to better understand these complex family configurations around biogenetical relatedness, in particular

¹¹ In Gross's sample from France, 88% of the respondents had a university education.

¹² Overall, 85% of Nordqvist's United Kingdom study participants identified as white British, and 77% had a higher education.

¹³ Arguably, the context of mothering in the post-Soviet and even the wider European post-socialist space is quite homogeneous (as we saw above in the Polish case, studied by Mizielinska), especially since the Soviet family policy was extended to all those countries that were included into the Soviet Union.

grandmothers, and their recognition as formative of and for 'kinship' within lesbian-headed Russian families.

The number of lesbian families in Russia has grown since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993, and since the further political changes towards liberalisation (Zhabenko 2014). During one period of liberalisation, from the mid-1990s through the 2013, more information about LGBTQ lives and family formations became available through information flows and the growth of Internet access and travel.¹⁴ This period significantly influenced the choices of Russian lesbian mothers, including their reproductive choices: the access to artificial reproductive technologies as well as to new knowledge about different family types that came from outside of the Russian borders, influenced on the decision of more lesbians to initially and / or openly build lesbian families together. In contrast, the previous generations had reproduced and raised children either in heterosexual marriages or had assumed the legitimate single mother position in society (Zhabenko 2014). However, the ideological and official turn towards neo-traditionalism under the 2013 oppressive law influenced the move in lesbian families to head back to the 'closet' in Russia (*ibid.*). This resulted from the need for Russian lesbian mothers to look for support from their relatives and parental families rather than from the community, as society and the law, turned a cold eye on them.

Simultaneously, non-biological mothers in Russia do not enjoy any rights to children born into their lesbian relationships, even when such children are planned together; instead, by law, all rights and official responsibilities fall on the biological mother (Zhabenko 2019).¹⁵ This situation, in itself, is nothing new, since the precarious position of non-biological lesbian mothers in many European

¹⁴ On the liberalisation of the lesbian and gay movement in 1990-2000s in the wider European post-socialist space, see also Renkin 2007, 2020.

¹⁵ Article 145 of the Family Code of the Russian Federation, comment 3 claims that the custody of minors is established in the absence of their parents, adoptive parents, deprivation of parental rights by the court. There is no possibility to establish the custody rights of a child who has biological and/or legal parents.

countries, Northern America, and Australia has been researched and campaigned against from the 1980s to the current day. Nevertheless, the legal reform to equalise the rights of both mothers (or plural parents) in queer families still has not been completed in all of the so-called ‘liberal’ countries. For example, Hitchens (1986) showed how a concern emerged in the United States in the 1980s regarding the non-biological mother having no legal connection to the child unless she adopts or is allowed to marry her partner legally. Moreover, should the couple ever separate, it was unclear what this separation would mean for the relationship between the non-biological mother and her child. This meant that the absence of any rights for the non-biological mother prevailed, and, therefore, practically *absolute rights* lay in the hands of the biological mother alone. Any possibilities for sharing parenting rights and responsibilities had, therefore, be negotiated, agreed upon and designed at the family level beyond public, social, or legal services. The outcome of such negotiations, thus, ultimately always depended upon the biological mother's views on motherhood in general, and on the power balance and parenting issues between the lesbian mothers in each lesbian family specifically. Similarly, the legal situation in which Russian lesbian families currently raise minors leaves non-biological mothers particularly vulnerable. The cultural and social context is, of course, somewhat different.

In Russian lesbian-headed families, according to my data, the non-biological mother is usually presented as a godmother, a sister, or a distant relative of the child. Such kinship tactics in Russian lesbian-headed families have, arguably, been applied as strategies to gain at least some cultural and social recognition for the co-mother, in the situation where the increasingly dominant rule of the ‘official’ family discourse in the country was introduced by Putin, and strongly supported by the Russian Orthodox Church.

More specifically, the tactic of referring to the non-biological mother as the godmother is enabled by not only the models of extended and intergenerational female-maintained families, but also because the institution of godparenting exists in Russia not only inside the religious borders – though quite influenced by it – but also within the culture in general (Muravyeva 2012).

Nowadays, one can become a godparent even without a special church ritual, just by being named as such by the family. This symbolically refers to a special closeness to the parents of a child. For example, in my sample there is one lesbian family from Moscow who lived in separate flats on the same floor in an apartment building. They were in a long-term relationship, and both had biological children, but their children did not know about the intimate relationship between their mothers. They were both godmothers for each other's children and called their daughters "godsisters", thus establishing a kinship connection that is recognised socially and culturally, but not legally.

Queer/y/ing Babushkas in Russian Lesbian Families

As noted, lesbian mothers in Russia are not only left alone with their parenting duties in society, but also targeted by an oppressive law. Since no marriage rights exist for lesbian families, their unions do not count as part of the legal kinship system. In this situation, biological grandmothers as legally recognised blood kin represent the most important and persistent external relationships and care resources. Following the distinction between the biological mother as the sole bearer of legal rights and duties, and the non-biological mother without any externally recognised rights or duties to the child, a distinction could also be made between the grandmothers' position in the family and society, in reference to whether they are from the biological or the non-biological mothers' side. The cultural and social expectations of family support are extremely high for biological grandmothers and remain low or less visible for non-biological grandmothers.

The wider cultural meaning of babushkas influences the distinction keenly given to the perceived importance of blood relations here. For example, Nina, a non-biological mother to three children born into a planned lesbian family in Saint Petersburg, highlighted the power of this cultural assumption regarding the importance of biogenetical kinship hierarchies: “Not everyone understood their role. The relatives of the biological mom thought that they came first and that the co-mother followed them.”

In other words, biogenetical relatedness as the argument for power was imposed by the biological mother’s relatives to create hierarchical divisions inside the lesbian family, in a situation where the two mothers, Nina and her lesbian partner, had mutually agreed to equally share parenting duties. For Nina’s partner’s relatives, however, it was the ‘blood claim’ which reassured the actual parental family agreement as it was not only the grandmother, but other relatives from the biological mother’s side as well who attempted to put such a claim for kinship hierarchy.

Yet, according to my data, the non-biological babushkas quite often intensively participate in care and support practices in Russian lesbian-headed families. However, biological mothers often feel hesitant about whether the non-biological babushkas would actually accept their grandchildren (or themselves) as part of their “real” family. For example, Alina (a biological mother from Saint Petersburg) reflected on her experience as follows: “Karina’s [Alina’s partner, i.e., the non-biological mother] mom helped me when I went to the Russian Far East. I lived in her family’s home. However, I think that Karina’s mom does not view us as a family but thinks that I am Karina’s pregnant friend.”

Alina was frustrated because her partner’s mother treated her as an honoured guest, but not as an actual member of her family. Alina had expected to receive recognition and more attention from the

future grandmother of her child, but her partner's mother did not treat her as the mother of her future grandchild, but as a friend of her daughter's.

In another case, the non-biological babushka, who was intensively involved in the parenting of her grandchild apparently dreamt that she had adopted the biological mother of her grandchild. Polina, the biological mother, the partner of Nika, said:

Nika's mother had a dream in which she met with my mother, whom she had never met, and told her, 'If you do not need your Polina, let me adopt her. Let me have two daughters.' Well, all these years it was that way: I felt like a second daughter to her, and our child is 100% her grandchild.

This non-biological grandmother's dream narrative, transmitted to me by Polina, the partner of the dreamer's non-biological daughter, provides tools to understand how some non-biological grandmothers seek ways to cope with the fact that their grandchildren are not blood-related and not 'legal', and that their own role as grandmothers are not legally recognised. Even when recognised and appreciated as the grandmother by both lesbian mothers, and when intensively participating in the lesbian family's parenting practices, non-biological grandmothers tend to continue to feel insecure about their status in contemporary Russia. In this example, this grandmother found the dream world as a route to try to prefigure her social recognition in a complex situation. That is, she dreamt about a framework where both mothers could be her own children. We could ask whether this dream wish also served as a way to hide the socially unapproved sexual dimension of her daughter's family, or if it served as a means to offer more grandmaternal protection by dreaming about rendering all parties her own legal children, and in that way, imagining a version of the family which would fit the existing model of the intergenerational or extended female-maintained family.

Interestingly, another biological mother from Saint Petersburg, Katerina, provides a case whereby the biological grandmother began participating in childcare only after her daughter's (the biological mother's) divorce from the non-biological mother of children. Katerina explained that her mother claimed Katerina's new partner as her preferred "child":

Babushka [Katerina's mother, the child's grandmother] did not participate before, but now she participates. Babushka very much likes Galya [the new girlfriend, the lesbian 'stepmother'], and I suspect that Galya is similar to my own babushka [Katerina's grandmother]. Galya works near my mom and brings her food.... Babushka visits the philharmonic hall with Galya once a month. Several days ago, babushka literally said that Galya is her favourite "daughter", even though babushka is homophobic.

Galya was a stepmother in a lesbian family, where the child was planned with the biological mother's previous same-sex partner. The biological mother, Katerina, claimed that her mother did not like her previous partner and even influenced their decision for separation. Paraphrasing the previous case, the dream route of building a kin relationship with the non-biological mother, the biological grandmother of Katerina's child viewed the successor of the non-biological mother as her daughter's new partner by likening her to her own biological daughter. Moreover, this "adoption" of the lesbian daughter's new partner allowed the grandmother to step in and assume a stronger role in the parenting practices of this lesbian family where there was a more complex situation than just the daughter and the initial non-biological mother. We are, thus, dealing with an interesting set of dreams and prefigured or imagined "legit" categories in terms of cultural kinship positions and family models, as claims to grandmothing in lesbian-headed families in the context of an oppressive state and female-maintained extended family model legacy.¹⁶

¹⁶ It needs to be mentioned, however, that the daughter-in-law is often (if agreed) called a "daughter" in Russia – but usually only in the context of the heterosexual marriage and its in-law system.

All in all, according to my data babushkas quite often finally end up helping Russian lesbian mothers with care and everyday parenting support, but in divisive ways, within the challenging legal, cultural, and social setting. At the same time, Russian lesbian mothers have different expectations from biological and non-biological babushkas. For instance, they expect biological babushkas to provide practical and/or financial support whilst non-biological babushkas more often merely provide recognition of their position as members of an intergenerational/extended female-maintained family.

Lesbian Mothers and Babushkas: Societal Expectations

In the narratives of the Russian lesbian mothers in my study, the grandmothers of their children were not only unambiguously positive figures, but also often considered troublemakers because they were seen as coming with a ‘baggage of prejudice’ against their lesbian daughters. For example, Masha, a biological mother from Saint Petersburg, says:

I instinctively want to protect her [her daughter] from society by not telling anyone about my sexual orientation. Most likely, my parents will feel differently about her and about myself [would they learn about her sexuality]. It will be worse I am sure, because they strongly dislike any relationships except family relations... I had problems telling them that I was getting divorced [from her previous husband]. I cannot imagine telling them that I am a lesbian.

Masha described her expectations regarding a strong prejudice towards her non-normative family relationships; not only towards her current lesbian-headed family, but also towards her divorcing her previous husband and the father of her child. She fears opening up about her identity to her parents even though they both intensively participate in grandparenting and support her career and other activities.

Thus, asking for parenting help and care from their own mothers makes many Russian lesbian mothers feel a pressure to be ‘normal’, to fit into the social expectations that come from their parents or from other parental relatives. This pressure to gain more acceptance, and, in that way, to secure more support, may even extend to their habitus or personal aesthetics. For example, Lyudmila (from Saint Petersburg), a non-biological mother, and a butch woman in her mid-30s, explained that she needed to change her wardrobe to appear more feminine when visiting her parents: “I used to visit my family once a year, a trip that was very stressful for me. Once a year I had to change all my clothes, so I took some decent clothes that would not make my mother protest.”

The outcome of such pressures (no matter whether real or imagined by the lesbian daughter, or both) leads some Russian lesbian mothers to refuse accepting support from their grandparents or from other relatives. Not everyone who experienced the pressure to appease heteronormative ideas and attitudes from the blood kinship framework accepted it. In doing so, they could also redefine the desired grandmother role in their own terms. For example, one of my interviewees, Polina (the biological mother of a child in a planned lesbian family from Saint Petersburg), explained this by refusing to allow the biological babushka to impose her heteronormative views on her lesbian-headed family via the provision of caregiving. In her case, the non-biological grandmother was also available, granting Polina the resources to refuse: “For some time, my mother visited us and our child had two grandmothers. But, at some point, we realised that it was uncomfortable for us because she again took this position of giving us instructions.”

Eventually, Polina ‘cut ties’ with the uncomfortable relationship with her mother. However, this was only a partial cut since the biological grandmother was allowed to visit her grandchild from

time to time. This situation mimics the result that Utrata (2015) described in her research on the grandparenting relationships in single-mother families in Russia. Drawing on Hackstaff (1999), Utrata (2008: 2) notices that “the conflicts between single mothers and grandmothers do not take place within a divorce culture” and “...when conflicts do flare up, they typically lead to cutbacks in support rather than divorce.” The biological babushka will keep returning to her lesbian daughter’s (current) family.

However, the baggage that grandmothers are feared or perceived to bring with them into the lesbian-headed families does not entirely depend on sexuality. Sivak (2018) mentions ‘the baggage’ in her research on grandparental involvement in parenting amongst Russian heterosexual mothers. In her study, grandmothers brought the “baggage of negative childrearing practices” (ibid). This illustrates that the grandmothers’ expertise is more widely constructed as troublemaking for Russian mothers (see also Avdeeva this issue). By refusing to receive this unwanted baggage, mothers wish to protect and legitimise their parenting style and prove that they can be ‘good’ mothers on their own (Sivak *ibid.*; May 2008). Zdravomyslova (2009) argues that the younger generation generally questions the legitimacy of the babushka’s role, since this role provides more authority for the older generation in the family. But, in lesbian-headed families, this legitimate authority of the babushka also serves to bridge between the illegitimate family type, the autocratic state, and the increasingly disapproving society.

Assuming a new status as a mother in the Russian kin system provides biological lesbian mothers the opportunity to prove to their parental family and the state that they are productive members of a family and of the society, and thus meaningful and important Russian citizens. The state has required the maternal status of women since the Soviet period, whereby motherhood was and remains a state-supported responsibility to counter the demographic crises (Chernova 2010;

Vishnevsky 2009). This represents a proper “traditional value” and a part of the citizen’s duty, both historically and currently (Stella and Nartova 2015; Pecherskaya 2013). Therefore, Russian lesbian biological mothers are highly motivated to gain recognition from their own parental family as well as from the non-biological grandparents.

In this quest, however, they often question their ability to act ‘normally’ in everyday situations as ‘good’ respectable mothers in society (Moore 2011), because of their non-normative and unaccepted identity and sexuality. Here, they highlight the internal dilemma of trying to be ‘themselves’ vis-à-vis trying to please their parents by requiring, and at least partially accepting support, sometimes even for starting, and often for maintaining, their families in a hostile social and legal situation.

Overall, Russian lesbian mothers most often come out to their parental family in order to receive help for childcare and parenting, primarily expecting this from each mothers’ own biological mother. While biological babushkas are expected to intensively participate in parenting practices, they are not always granted assumed trust. Even if the biological babushka does not agree with her limited role as described by the lesbian family, she usually remains in the child’s life as a high-ranking bloodkin member.

Simultaneously, the non-biological babushkas use divergent tactics and strategies to look for similar high-ranking relationships, including dreams and existing cultural images and models. Other relatives from the biological mother’s side sometimes try to manipulate the hierarchical divisions inside lesbian family relationships in the name of blood relatedness to sideline the non-biological mother’s position. These complex kin relations suggest that even in a context where the law is against lesbian parenting and the ‘nuclear’ lesbian-headed family alone is insufficient to protect its

members, blood can and will be claimed as a privileged access point to the family support network. These factors are also important in legitimising biological grandmothers' family roles in intergenerational kinship and care constellations.

The socially intelligible and culturally rooted babushka's authority became the 'bridge' to legitimise the illegal and invisible lesbian-headed families as legit female-headed families based on extended mothering in the eyes of the state and the society. Therefore, the 'baggage' of authority becomes a differently negotiable issue in Russian lesbian families than in the heterosexual families. On the one hand, lesbian mothers want to defend their progressive and non-normative families; but on the other hand, the legitimate authority of the grandmother becomes a 'shield' between the Russian anti-lesbian state and the increasingly pro-traditionalist society.

Conclusions: Successful Strategies for Survival in Lesbian-Headed Families in the Legally and Socially Oppressive Society

The 2013 'anti-gay' legislation in Russia endangered lesbian mothers who are raising minors in their families, and negatively influenced the attitudes toward lesbian mothers in Russian society. Grandmothers in Russia are not provided with a stable cultural model of the lesbian-headed family with an intelligible and legitimate babushka's role in it, and the 2013 legal move made their position even more precarious. Babushkas in lesbian-headed families could not receive legitimisation through society, culture, or law, and non-biological babushkas could not relate to lesbian-headed families biogenetically. In this complex legal and cultural context, some grandmothers seek to establish the kinship connection with the non-kin mother in the lesbian-headed family via 'revealed' dreams, or other imaginary or prefigurative narrative strategies. For example, they may claim the lesbian stepmother as their daughter or dream about adopting the non-biological mother, although this is legally impossible in Russia.

Extended mothering and the involvement of babushkas in caring arrangements represent a wider cultural model of female-maintained families that is an intelligible type of family rooted in Russian cultural history. The state understands female-maintained families as a source for the reproduction of new citizens. Thus, lesbian-headed families, if they do not claim rights as specific types of families, become a family form that is 'desired' by the state if it fits the existing models of intergenerational and extended female-maintained family that the state can control. In the new edition of Russian Constitution from 4 of July, 2020, the new fourth comment to article 67 was added. In this comment, children are claimed as the state's asset and the state promises to take parental responsibilities over children without custody.¹⁷ The new edition of the Russian constitution highlights that the Russian state aims to become a "parent" and relaxes certain penalties in a situation that suits the state's parental role: for example, in the case of extended, female-maintained families where the 'missing' father's position could be replaced by the state. This idea that all families should be heterosexual nuclear families is rather patriarchal, and families run only by women could be seen as somehow deficient.

But, still, in the contemporary society, a family with two women raising children creates suspicion. In that situation, the babushka becomes a mediator between the lesbian family and the society: her involvement in the caring arrangements converts the lesbian families not supported in the Russian society or law (if minors get raised in lesbian family) into culturally understandable female-

¹⁷ Article 67, clause 4 (4 July, 2020): "Children are the most important priority of the Russian State policy. The state creates conditions to support the comprehensive spiritual, moral, intellectual, and physical development of children, raising their patriotism, sense of nationhood and respect for seniors. The state provides the priority of family education and therefore takes the responsibilities of parents to children who were left without custody" (Rus: Статья 67, пункт 4 (4.07.20): «Дети являются важнейшим приоритетом государственной политики России. Государство создает условия, способствующие всестороннему духовному, нравственному, интеллектуальному и физическому развитию детей, воспитанию в них патриотизма, гражданственности и уважения к старшим. Государство, обеспечивая приоритет семейного воспитания, берет на себя обязанности родителей в отношении детей, оставшихся без попечения). <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48953/> (accessed 2 June, 2022).

maintained families. Such families thoroughly answer the state's request for traditional families, investing into the model that was inherited from the Soviet period, when women ran the private family sphere and men were often not occupied in family duties, or even present. Therefore, in this situation, where the biogenetical kinship is represented as female-maintained families in three generations, the babushkas become a 'shield' between the lesbian-headed families and the Russian state.

Nevertheless, such family support relations are not easy for any of the actors: neither for the lesbian mothers nor for the babushkas involved. In lesbian-headed families, where there are two mothers, also two diverse babushkas are usually or potentially present: from the biological mother's side and from the non-biological mother's sides. Considering that babushkas from the non-biological mother's side are not biogenetically connected, they are searching for ways to relate to their new position in the family that is not culturally supported nor historically recognised. For example, non-biological grandmothers have to create strategies to connect themselves to the children of their daughters' families. On the one hand, biological mothers, in some cases, seek recognition and support from non-biological grandmothers, to gain resources and wider kinship connections for their children in the hostile society and in the absence of other supportive communities. This happened particularly after the 2013 law made many lesbian-headed families to go back to the closet, and to not disclose their family situation to people outside of their family. On the other hand, lesbian mothers are not ready to sacrifice their way of life, identity, or sexuality, which is why sometimes the negotiations with babushkas proceed with multiple troubles.

In all this, lesbian biological and non-biological mothers alike are often willing to negotiate the everyday practises of their parenting because they depend on receiving support and care from both babushkas in Russia. However, their expectations – and resistance – vary depending on the manner

of babushkas in terms of how normatively they would like to rule, and what other resources are available.

Research results from the European and United States scholars (Patterson 1998; Gross 2008; Nordqvist 2015) show that children generally communicate more with their grandparents and relatives from their biological mother's side of the family. Whilst these studies were conducted at different periods and under varying legal contexts related to same-sex marriage and parenting rights, the results reveal that blood kinship comes to matter in intergenerational care constellations in lesbian-headed families. Also in Russia, biological grandmothers came to anchor the cultural tradition of childrearing and to legitimise their authority. This authority corresponds to the 'traditional values' ideology that the Russian state began transmitting recently in society. For this reason, and given the generational gap, lesbian mothers sometimes negatively perceived the legitimacy of the required grandmaternal authority in their families, as it was seen to bring the 'baggage' of heteronormative prejudice into their families and life. However, once exchanged for family support, this 'baggage' of prejudice and authority creates a connection between the lesbian family and the society. It may eventually help lesbian mothers to cope and build successful strategies for survival as lesbian-headed families in the legally and socially oppressive contemporary Russian society. Meanwhile, the social mother's and the social grandmother's position is open for more variation as their existence and presentation – as godmothers, female relatives etc. – is more ambiguous in the society's eyes. For this reason, they are more vulnerable in what comes to the hierarchy of the extended mothering family's duties and rights with any decisions concerning the children raised in these families.

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