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Russian lesbian mothers: Between “traditional values” and human rights

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Russian state ideology has turned towards instituting “traditional family values,” an official turn that increased legal and social discrimination against queer families. The concept of “traditional family values” in the contemporary Russian state discourse refers to the “naturalness” of the heterosexual family, consisting of two parents and their biological offspring. This discourse eliminates the possibility of public lesbian parenting. Following the idea of the conceptualizations of queer temporalities in different geo-cultural contexts, I examine the impact of recent oppressive legal changes in Russia on reproductive choices, everyday parenting strategies, and social interactions among lesbian mothers. In this work, I seek to show more than the obvious harm caused by the “anti-gay law” in terms of its effects on lesbian-headed families. To do so, I analyze the strategies applied by Russian lesbian mothers to tackle the rapidly changing state ideologies and legislative landscapes. I do this by discussing the ways in which lesbian mothers in Russia “manipulate” their social status to avoid possible official or unofficial homophobic actions directed towards them and their children. For example, they may come out selectively, carefully choosing the people to whom they openly present their identity. I argue that to adhere to “ordinary” or “normal” family life, lesbian mothers in Russia use several survival strategies. One of these strategies relates to speculation about immigration to the “West.” That is, some lesbian families prepare all of the necessary documentation, secure valid visas, and attend special workshops where they receive legal and informational support on asylum seeking and emigration from Russia. Another set of strategies for maintaining family identity relies on the decision to come out as a co-mother during interactions with official institutions or to choose other identities; for example, godmother or sister of the birth mother of a child. An additional important strategy for lesbian mothers relies on drafting documents that maintain their rights in severe circumstances. This set of actions focuses on legally supporting the parental rights through the use of loopholes in the Russian legislation and drafting documents that maintain their rights to child custody and their partner’s property.

KEYWORDS

Anti-gay law; Russian lesbian mothers; lesbians’ survival strategies

Recent changes in Russian legislation

The Russian federal law on “propaganda related to nontraditional sexual relations among minors,”¹ also known in the English-language media as the “gay propaganda law” and the “anti-gay law,” enacted in 2013, gained the attention of researchers from the fields of legal studies, human rights, political studies, and gender studies among others. Before the “anti-gay law” passed at the federal level following a title change, individual regions passed legislation penalizing the dissemination of material promoting homosexuality and pedophilia among minors.² At the federal level, the title of the law was amended, whereby the term “homosexuality” was changed to “nontraditional sexual relations,” because no legal definition for “homosexuality” existed in the legislation of the Russian Federation. Elena Mizulina, one of the authors and promoters of the “anti-gay law,” explained that they amended the term “homosexuality” in the title of the law in order to avoid promoting it through enactment of the law (Pronkina 2016). These recent changes in the legislation also represented crucial milestones in the development of a “traditional values” ideology in Russia, and influenced various areas of social life, including family life and parenting.

The impact of the “anti-gay law” on various spheres of life remains underresearched. Nevertheless, some important research has been carried out on this topic. Among others, the most crucial pieces have examined the connection between legislative changes and homophobia (Buyantueva 2018; Gulevich, Osin, Isaenko, & Brainis 2018; Johnson 2015; Wilkinson 2014), human rights and sexual citizenship (Kondakov 2014; Stella & Nartova 2015; Davidson & McDonald 2018), and the shift towards “traditional values” (Muravyeva 2014; Pecherskaya 2013). My article aims to add to this emerging literature by analyzing the peculiarities of the everyday lives of lesbian families impacted by this legislation. While other studies have focused primarily on the general outcome, I seek to highlight the first visible results that have already been deeply rooted into the interpersonal relationships and daily practices of Russian queer communities. In this article, I aim to expand upon analyses of the consequences of the “anti-gay law” on the lesbian community in Russia.

On a broader social scale, the significant impact of this legislation towards lesbian families may remain somewhat invisible. As a researcher and fieldworker during that period, however, I noticed the anxiety among lesbian families, which rapidly expanded in time immediately after the “anti-gay law” was passed at the federal level in Russia. When familiarizing myself with work on this topic, it became clear that a similar climate emerged during that period in almost all spheres of everyday life in the queer communities in Russia. An online survey I conducted, together with the Russian LGBT Network, showed that the “anti-gay law” quite

profoundly impacted the different spheres of life of Russian queers, such as individuals' financial stability, working life, family relations, relationships with friends, and society in general. In addition, the "anti-gay law" represented a turning point in my research, splitting my fieldwork into the period "before the law" and "after the law," much as it split the lives of my informants.

Methodology

During this project, I tracked the legislative changes in 2011 and 2013 through shifts in the narratives of women who agreed to interviews with me. My work relies on 40 in-depth interviews, additional expert interviews, and public discussions on LGBTQ parenting in Russia shared at queer festivals and meetings at various times. Interviews were conducted between 2010 and 2016, mostly in Saint Petersburg and Moscow.³ I interviewed women aged 23 to 56 years who self-identified as lesbians, had a child or children, and raised them in family relationships with a same-sex partner at the time of the interview. The vast majority of my informants had a university education, salaried jobs, and were financially independent. Even though the socioeconomic class issue in Russia is still the object of discussion (Levinson 2008), my informants could be considered middle-class mothers (Maiofis & Kuklin 2010; Shpakovskaya 2015). During the analysis, responses were anonymized.

To illustrate my conclusions, I also use data from two online surveys I designed and conducted together with Russian LGBTQ organizations⁴ in 2013. The first online survey, "Attitudes towards the 'anti-gay' legislation in the Russian queer community," had 1800 respondents, and 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, recruiting informants was completed with help from activist organizations, whereby surveys were advertised through activist channels. In addition, the surveys consisted of 50 and 30 questions, respectively. Given the sensitivity of the information and the identity of respondents, ensuring the anonymity of participants took on greater importance. All data were analyzed using an SPSS system.

In the analysis of my material, I use the idea of "decentralized Eastern time," offered by Joanna Mizielska and Robert Kulpa (2011). This idea occurs as part of the decolonizing knowledge process. As such, Eastern temporalities are "knotted" in general to the specificities of East European history; in particular, to Russian history, society, and the development of the Russian legislative system. This approach brings together the idea of "generational cohorts" put forth by Ken Plummer (2010). These cohorts

are united around specific topics rather than any particular generational eras or period. I focus on the dependence of lesbian mothers' life situations on the legislation that either provides them more freedom of choice (such as that which occurred in 1993 through the decriminalization of homosexuality) or deprives them of freedom (via the "anti-gay" legislation).

"Anti-gay law" and "traditional values"

The turn towards "traditional values" emerged in the early 2000s, led by Russian President Vladimir Putin in his address to the Federal Assembly (Putin 2013), an address delivered annually to Russian citizens on state media channels. As early as 2006, his address to the Federal Assembly included references to the shift towards state control of the private sphere of citizens (Pecherskaya 2013). The key period related to the aims of this article falls between 2012 and 2013, when several important laws supporting the idea of "traditional values" were passed (Muravyeva 2014). Researcher Elena Stepanova (2015) noted that:

[T]he most influential protagonist of the idea of "traditional values" from the secular side—the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin—seems to shift from the initial refrain from the official state ideology toward the promotion of the new national ideological consensus based on the moralistic approach, which includes traditional values⁵ as its core element.

In 2012, Putin politicized the term *Duchovnie skrepi* (spiritual bonds) in the context of preserving the national identity, which became the key concept relating to "traditional values" that emerged in the political and social discourse during that period. Vladimir Putin talked about *Duhovnie skrepi*, meaning characteristics of the spiritual order of the nation, the "moral compass," or the "spiritually moral foundation of society." In 2013, in his address to the Federal Assembly, Putin situated the importance of protecting "traditional values," extending it to include protection of the traditional family, the true ("*istinnaya*") human life and religious life, among others. That same year, the "anti-gay law" passed at the federal level and was signed into law by Putin.

Discussions of marriage-partner relationships during that period took on a "homophobic flavor" (Pecherskaya 2013). This neo-traditional innovation resulted in the new "Conception of Family Policy," which promoted the interests of an official heterosexual marital union with children (Muravyeva 2014; Pecherskaya 2013; Kulmala, Rasell, & Chernova 2017). Furthermore, one law defined sanctions against U.S. citizens involved in violations to the human rights and freedoms of Russian citizens, effectively banning U.S. citizens from adopting Russian children (The Federal Law No. 272-FZ from 28 December 2012, "On measures against persons involved in

violations of fundamental human rights and freedoms, rights, and freedoms of citizens of the Russian Federation” also known more popularly as “Dima Yakovlev’s Law”). This legislation was of particular concern to lesbian families, since it banned the adoption of Russian children by Russian same-sex couples as well as by individuals from countries in which same-sex marriages are sanctioned.

It has been five years since the “anti-gay law” was enacted at the federal level and signed as a new juridical and social order. The changes in legislation were used to create instability and fear around the topic of homosexuality. While the law in practice was used primarily against individuals and group of activists,⁶ it influenced ordinary citizens on an everyday level as well. A report from the Russian LGBT Network from 2013 showed that, after the law passed, the level of violence and hate speech against homosexuals drastically increased.⁷ Thus, the law directly influenced the growth of discrimination in society, leaving queer people feeling anxious about their future.

In addition to this, the law served as a starting point to the future development of the legislative situation around same-sex parenting. In June 2013, Elena Mizulina introduced legislation to remove children from same-sex families. While this initiative did not pass, lesbian mothers became understandably quite anxious about their future. LGBTQ organizations, such as “Coming Out” in Saint Petersburg along with others, organized a series of juridical seminars during which legal professionals explained recent changes in legislation. These workshops proved quite popular among lesbian families with children and among those planning to become mothers. What emerged during these seminars, however, was that all lesbians continuously felt anxious about the bleak future for themselves and their children.

Lesbian mothers feared that the law could be used to grant full parental custody to the legal heterosexual fathers on the basis of the sexual orientation of these women, similar to practices in the U.S. during the 1970s (Rivers 2013). While this scenario was unlikely because of the long history of the court’s preference towards the biological mother over the biological father in custody battles, the fear that the new law could alter that preference existed, particularly given that, by law, the biological mother and father have equal rights to parental custody.⁸ According to expert Kseniya Kirichenko (2012), no such court cases were registered. Yet several cases whereby husbands from previous heterosexual marriages blackmailed lesbian mothers were registered by the LGBT organization “Coming Out.”

Based on my interview material and survey data, I highlight several issues that were important for lesbian mothers during the legislative changes taking place in 2012 and 2013. These questions were widely

discussed within Russian LGBTQ communities, as well as by key activists in Russia. These issues are: “coming out” and going “back into the closet”; legal “back-up” by arranging additional documents to share rights, property, and duties with a same-sex partner; and emigration and asylum seeking.

“Coming out” or going “back into the closet”?

The situation in Russia negatively influenced the coming out of lesbian mothers, both in society and in families. The period following enactment of the “anti-gay law” resulted in lesbian mothers “going back into the closet,” which was also highlighted in my interview data. Despite the fact that the consequences of the “anti-gay law” influenced all Russian queers, lesbian families were among the first to act. Informants highlighted that their choice to “hide” was made primarily to protect their children.

I understand that in our country after the law passed I am not sure about my safety... apart from that we had made such a decision for ourselves [to go “back into the closet”], we also made this decision for the child that was born.... We must ultimately protect him from everything that could happen in such a difficult reality. And this directly relates to this country. (Maria,⁹ 1971 yob¹⁰)

In the previous quote, Maria, who is a biological mother from Saint Petersburg, is talking about the consequences of their family coming out and how that had also already influenced her child’s everyday life. Even if mothers had the positive idea to protect their child from possible abuse in future, they understood that this decision would influence their further social interactions. In particular, they would have to always think about what information they could share with other people and teach their child to do the same.

In a situation where they lack rights and face discrimination from society, the act of coming out became a survival strategy for Russian lesbian mothers. If the North American, Australian, and European coming out discourse is firmly associated with human rights, coming out in the everyday Russian reality becomes a tool to organize a safe community, to manage everyday communication, and to determine attitudes towards their family and sexuality within their closest circles.

In the survey I conducted in 2013 after the “anti-gay law” passed, we asked lesbians about their coming out as an open public practice related to their identity. In total, 47% of lesbian mothers revealed that they opened up to their parents and children. In the workplace, however, only 15% of respondents openly identified themselves as lesbians. Furthermore, only 1% of lesbian mothers indicated that they were out in social institutions, such as kindergartens or schools:

Lesbian motherhood is not legitimate—this is a huge minus. There is no institutionalization, and you have to institutionalize on your own. Sometimes you explain and sometimes you have the “zone of silence,” but people understand everything. (Sasha, 1980 yob)

Sasha, a biological mother from Saint Petersburg, explained that coming out happens in any case, because if lesbians don’t talk about their orientation, people who communicate with them create some understanding of their family. However, being out on one’s own initiative could be dangerous in the contemporary situation where lesbian families lack family rights and given the general negative attitudes toward homosexuals in Russia.

During my fieldwork in Saint Petersburg in September 2016, I found that the patterns of coming out for lesbian mothers had shifted compared to the period before the “anti-gay law” was enacted. As such, 49% of respondents mentioned that they come out less frequently than before in social interactions. These mothers remained open with their families of origin, seeking support and assistance in their everyday duties. In addition, they claimed that they were open with their children. However, they also highlighted the lessons they had given to their children to not talk about their family structure, creating a narrative regarding how to introduce their family to the “outside world.” They were worried about the safety of their children because of the societal changes in Russia. That is, increasing violence against queers became a source of anxiety for the lesbian mothers with whom I spoke. For example, my interviewee Lisa, a co-mother from Saint Petersburg, explained that she and her partner purposely limited the spread of knowledge about their orientation:

Who knows about our orientation? Maybe two to three lesbians, and inside we feel calmer because there is no need to coordinate our stories. There is no need to think about all these at all. (Lisa, 1976 yob)

All of the mothers were specifically talking about the story they use to introduce a co-mother in a social institution. As in many other places and societies, co-mothers are not recognized by Russian legislation and social institutions. Thus, they have no legal rights to their children, since lesbian relationships are not legitimate by law. Therefore, the co-mother’s social position is vulnerable since no legal protection ensures her status. For example, in the case of a separation or other problems, co-mothers depend on the biological mother’s decisions. This means that more responsibilities rest with the biological mother, because she remains the only legal parent. As Sasha mentioned, even if the co-mother wants to share responsibilities, she does not have legal grounds for that:

It [the lack of a co-mother’s rights] can place more duties on the shoulders of one mother because of that. Another mother might want [these duties], but because of the absence of legalization she cannot take these on. (Sasha, 1980 yob)

In my data, 36% of lesbian mothers preferred to present a co-mother as their sister or another relative, 18% presented a co-mother as a godmother, 11% presented a co-mother as a friend, and only 3% openly presented a co-mother as the second mother to a child. As we see here, the stories used to introduce a co-mother primarily position her as a “close kin” to the child. This represents an important issue warranting deeper analysis.

Historically, in the 1930s, the state began supporting single motherhood and the specific position of the mother as the primary caretaker of children. The status of the single mother gained state support immediately following the Second World War, when the number of mothers raising children alone dramatically increased (Zaharov 2010; Healey 2014; Utrata 2015). Lesbian mothers prefer to present themselves to society as single mothers or divorced women (Zhabenko 2014). Furthermore, a strong culture of extended families in Russia exists, whereby several generations of kin live together and share everyday duties. Moreover, the culture of the extended family allows lesbian mothers to explain the role of a co-mother by granting her the nominative position in kinship terms as an aunt, godmother, or another female relative. This narrative provides coverage for lesbian families who can pretend to be relatives so that they appear “normal” to society at large and to social institutions.

“Back up” the family through legal side documents

Another important survival strategy for lesbian mothers highlighted in their narratives consisted of preparing legal documents to share parenting rights between the biological mother of a child and the co-mother. These documents could be considered a side document, since they use gaps and loopholes in legislation granting some rights to a co-mother as a stranger not legally related to a child. For example, lesbian mothers have drafted documents for each other outlining the rights for care in the hospital in case of an emergency.

A seminar on the legal opportunities of LGBTQ families, organized in 2014 by the LGBT group “Coming Out”¹¹ in Saint Petersburg, described the limited ways same-sex partners may share property, and several documents were listed to help LGBTQ families in their everyday lives in Russia. For example, one law grants the right to an individual to allow or limit access to medical information about her/his health to specific individuals.¹² For lesbian families, they could limit the accessibility of their health information among their blood relatives, for example, if such family members are homophobic. Similarly, they could share access with their partners and children.

In their article on the response of the LGBTQ community to the expanding homophobic campaign in Russia, political researchers Irina Soboleva and Yaroslav Bakhmetjev (2015) claimed that the handling of legal issues concerning domestic partnerships¹³ was not considered a problem. Among their informants, it was always possible to formalize things legally. In contrast, among the respondents in my study, this formalization process was not as effortless as expected. For example, Maria (1984 yob) described her attempt to create a legal proxy for the representation of the interests of a child. While legal experts from the Russian LGBT Network listed a few possibilities (Kirichenko 2012), my informants claimed that this proxy represented the only possible document that would grant the co-mother some rights in social institutions. One co-mother went to a notary public to register the necessary documents, and faced a hostile attitude (quote as presented by the informant in the first person):

Notary officer: Do you realize what you are doing? Who is this L. to you? You will later have problems with the police! Some strange woman will kidnap your child and move somewhere.

Maria: I have a right as a citizen of the Russian Federation. In my opinion, I am acting within the framework of the law. (Maria, 1971 yob)

Maria expressed strong feeling of complete vulnerability and fear that some actions would follow this dialogue.

Biological or legal lesbian mothers have the right to register a custody document sharing parenting rights with a co-mother in the event of the death of the legal (or) biological mother. Russian legislation provides a variety of ways to share property rights with a same-sex partner and non-biological children. One way to do so includes writing a will. The Finnish researcher Antu Sorainen (2018) conducted an online survey among the queer community in Russia in 2015.¹⁴ In her recent publication, she claims that, in Russia, the legal inheritance institution's logic "puts more duties between the testator and the members of the inheritance family" than those in the Nordic countries. In addition, Sorainen noted that, because of the complexity of the inheritance law limitations, the handling of each inheritance case requires "certain care relations from among heirs." In other words, lesbian mothers must think about and plan the writing of their wills and additional supporting documents to secure against any future transgressions from their estate, ensuring the rights of their partners and children.

Emigration and asylum seeking

Following the enactment of the "anti-gay" legislation in 2013, discussions on the topic of emigration dramatically increased. Such discussions focused

on the possibility of removing children from homosexual families, subsequently increasing anxiety levels among lesbian mothers. These discussions also led lesbian mothers, among other Russian queer citizens, to consider emigrating to or seeking asylum in European countries and the U.S. Migration emerged as an issue for all of the families I interviewed. In addition, in the survey I conducted in 2013, I asked participants if they wanted to move to another country. In total, 14% indicated that they were preparing to emigrate soon, 40% responded that they would like to but their living situation did not allow such a move, and 37% responded that they did not want to move but would emigrate if the need arose. Only 7% responded negatively towards emigrating.

Many reasons surrounded women's hesitation regarding emigrating. While I did not ask specifically for their reasons, during the interviews lesbian mothers mostly mentioned their concern for their parents and other relatives:

We were thinking that if we were toast, if they would create more serious laws like during the Soviet time, then we would think seriously about moving. But, one thing that stopped us included our parents. (Maria, 1984 yob)

In addition, Sasha (1980 yob) explained that her family maintained valid Schengen visas¹⁵ for the whole family:

You cannot trust our state; you also cannot trust other laws. My responsibility is that we have a valid visa. If something happens, we grab our stuff and run. And, we are realistic about this situation in our life.

Russia has a complicated border policy: a Schengen visa is needed if a person wants to cross the border with the European Union. Europe was one of the most desirable destinations for immigration for Russian queers, together with the U.S. and Canada. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Russian citizens have been continuously afraid that the state authorities would establish something similar to the Soviet limitation of migration and bar migration between Russia and other countries. Sasha was not only scared of visa restrictions, but also about getting out to a safe place (Europe) in time, before migration would be banned.

Many of the women I interviewed already had established a life that they would not want to change without severe, life-threatening justifications for doing so. Even so, the number of individuals negotiating emigration increased substantially following the adoption of the "anti-gay law" at the federal level. Based on my results from the survey and interviews, one in two lesbian mothers wanted to move. Thus, almost every lesbian family was considering emigration:

Our decision is not connected to homophobia; it is just the fucking state we have to move from as soon as possible.¹⁶ (Lisa, 1976 yob)

Lisa does not see a future for her family in Russia anymore. Even though she made the decision to move after the “anti-gay law” had passed, it was simply the last straw. As Mizielinska and Kulpa (2011:18) noted drawing on the Elizabeth Freeman (2007) summarised critique of Lee Edelman’s (2004) work on queer futures, the “... turn to ‘no future’ has some *raison d’être* only in cultures that have ‘future,’ are ‘future-oriented.’” Has the “anti-gay” legislation embodied the turn to “no future” for Russian lesbian families? Was there any future before?

Fear has been always a familiar feeling within Russian queer communities since homosexuality was criminalized during Stalin’s era in 1933. This fear was expressed by one of my informants as the “Damocles Sword of Stalin’s Law.” As Joanna Mizielinska has noted (2011:89), “History is not a linear movement from oppression to liberation.” After a somewhat enlightened period of liberalization from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, the legislation in 2013 changed the situation and resulted in lesbians returning to their closets.

Conclusions

In this article, I have focused on the influence of the legislative turn towards the conservative “traditional values,” including the “anti-gay law,” and how this has impacted the lives of lesbian families in contemporary Russia. I focused on everyday survival strategies for maintaining family identity, the atmosphere in lesbian families as the concept of “traditional values” emerged at the national level. In doing so, I analyzed both the influence of the law on the everyday lives of lesbian mothers and shifts in their strategies in response to those legislative changes. The law had immediate impact on the survival strategies of lesbian families.¹⁷ The “anti-gay law” also brought anxiety to lesbian families. While their lives were already under pressure from the anti-queer climate in society and the lack of important rights for their families, particularly for the co-mothers, the change in the legislation worsened the situation. Just after the law was enacted at the federal level in 2013, lesbian mothers felt precarious before the law and blamed the state for making their lives difficult.

One consequence has been the increasing difficulty of conducting research on the issue of parenting among lesbian families. Mothers are now more reluctant to participate in interviews or surveys, because they wish to protect their families and children who do not feel safe under the new law. Furthermore, the “anti-gay law” rapidly influenced the reproductive choices and family practices of younger lesbians. For instance, in a group of lesbian mothers aged 18 to 24 years old, the number of women who conceived from a sexual act with a man is again—following a drop after the beginning

of the liberalization period—as high as figures among a sample of post-Soviet lesbians over 40.¹⁸ The data discussed in this article clearly indicate that the “anti-gay law” tragically changed the lives of Russian queer citizens, influencing their life trajectories and choices. The recent change in the Russian legislation and its impact need further follow-up and more careful analysis of the various spheres of life affected, including the everyday lives of Russian citizens. It is important to analyze the consequences of the “anti-gay law” and its influence on Russian citizens. More in-depth analyses could open up the possibilities to discuss the local specificities of developing the Russian queer path.

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Notes on contributor

Alisa Zhabenko is a Doctoral Candidate in Gender Studies, University of Helsinki, and a junior member of the Academy of Finland funded research project “Contrasting and Re-Imagining the Margins of Kinship–CoreKin.” Her current research focuses on lesbian motherhood in Russia.

Notes

1. Article 6.21 Federal Law No. 195-FZ of December 30, 2001: “Code of Administrative offences of The Russian Federation” (as amended on February 12, 2015) [Федеральный закон от 30 декабря 2001 г. No 195-ФЗ «Кодекс Российской Федерации об административных правонарушениях» (действующая редакция от 12 февраля 2015 г.)] [*Federal’nyi zakon ot 30 dekabrya 2001 g. No. 195-FZ ‘Kodeks Rossiiskoi Federatsii ob administrativnykh pravonarusheniakh’ (deistvuyushchaya redaktsiya ot 12 fevralya 2015 g)*]. For more on the topic, see: Johnson 2015.
2. Arkhangelsk region September 2011; Saint Petersburg November 2011; Kostroma region December 2011; Novosibirsk region June 2012; Magadan region June 2012; Samara region June 2012; Krasnodar region June 2012; and Irkutsk region April 2013.
3. I chose Russian metropolitan cities for the interviews for several reasons: firstly, there were activist organizations and queer communities established in these cities that made the search for interviewees much easier. Secondly, there was an intense internal migration of queer people to the big cities during the period of conducting interviews: metropolitan cities were deemed safer than the rural areas. Thirdly, working together with activist organizations of Saint Petersburg and being a member of the queer community there, I established networks with lesbians in Saint Petersburg and Moscow that I used for searching for interviewees for my project.
4. I worked together with the LGBT organization “Coming-Out” in Saint Petersburg and the Russian LGBT Network.

5. The list of “traditional values,” according to the Ministry of Culture, includes honesty, truthfulness, orderliness, love of the Motherland [*Rodina*], unselfishness, rejection of violence, stealing, defamation and envy, family values, chastity, kindheartedness and mercy, fidelity to one’s word, respect for elders, and respect for honest labor (Stepanova 2015).
6. Alternative report by the LGBT Organization “Coming Out” Transgender Legal Defense Project (Rainbow Foundation) Russian LGBT Network, “Implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in the Russian Federation: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Issues,” submitted for the 111th session of the Human Rights Committee, Geneva, Switzerland, 7–25 July 2014.
7. The report, “Violations to the rights and discrimination of LGBT in Russia, September 2012–August 2013,” by the Russian LGBT Network, <https://lgbtnet.org/ru/content/narusheniya-prav-i-diskriminaciya-lgbt-v-rossii-sentyabr-2012-avgust-2013-gg> (accessed 9 November 2018).
8. Children have the right to be raised in a family, but after divorce they must stay with one parent, according to Article 54 of the Family Code of the Russian Federation. In court practice, mothers have an advantage over fathers, whereby 94–95% of cases are decided in favor of the mother. The court decision is often based on the best interests of a child, where the mother is considered to be more psychologically prepared for child upbringing, to have a better emotional bond with the child, and to be the more responsible parent. According to Article 63 of the Family Code of the Russian Federation, both mothers and fathers have an advantage over grandparents in custody cases.
9. All names were changed.
10. For each quote, I indicate the year of birth of my informants to highlight the “generational cohort” to which they belong and during what period of time they were socialized.
11. The official name of the registered LGBTQ non-governmental organization “Coming Out” in Saint Petersburg changed to the LGBT group “Coming Out” in Saint Petersburg after the organization was labeled a “foreign agent” in 2014 and stopped acting as a non-governmental organization. “The Russian Foreign Agent Law” is a package of amendments introduced into the Federal Law on Regulating the Activities of Non-Commercial Organizations, “On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organizations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent,” passed in July 2012.
12. Federal Law No. 323-FZ, “On the Fundamentals of Health Protection in Russian Federation,” dated 21 November 2011.
13. The authors used the term “*sovmestnoe prozhivanie*,” precisely meaning to live together. But, in the LGBTQ community in Russia, I would highlight that this term also includes sharing one’s living space and life. In this article, I primarily discuss lesbian families that live as unregistered civil unions.
14. In total, 106 respondents provided information on will writing and inheritance practices.
15. A Schengen visa is a short-stay visa allowing its holder to circulate in the Schengen area. The Schengen area covers 26 European countries (“Schengen States”) without border controls between them. A Schengen visa (just “Schengen” in Russian) is much easier for Russian citizens to obtain compared, for example, with U.K. or U.S. visas. For more on the topic, see Vassilieva 2013; Hobolth 2011.
16. This quote is from an interview with a lesbian mother who actually emigrated with her family following the interview and who had already received asylum.

17. The report, “Violations of the rights and discrimination of LGBT in Russia, September 2012–August 2013,” by the Russian LGBT Network, <https://lgbtnet.org/ru/content/narusheniya-prav-i-diskriminaciya-lgbt-v-rossii-sentyabr-2012-avgust-2013-gg> (accessed 9 November 2018).
18. Data are based on results from an online survey.

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