

Historical-sociological research RUSSIA

*Irina Trocuk (Peoples Friendship University of Russia, Moscow)
and Alexandr Nikulin (Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences)*

Family policies in the XX century

Throughout the XX century types of family support and its basic components have gone through various changes: in Soviet Russia, the family, on the one hand, inherited the authoritarian-patriarchal style of inner family relations, on the other hand, it was going through quick modernization under the influence of state family policy. This policy can be characterized as limited, non-systematic, closely associated with social policy, and not considering the family's institutional interests. Shortly after the revolution the state policy aimed at bringing up workers without social roots or any interest in continuing their family or class traditions. All social institutions built their activities proceeding from the need to guarantee maximum employment of the whole population. As a result, they focused only on the individual, single person. The family became an "outside" link in the relationship between the individual and the society, a "personal matter".



Family at 1900

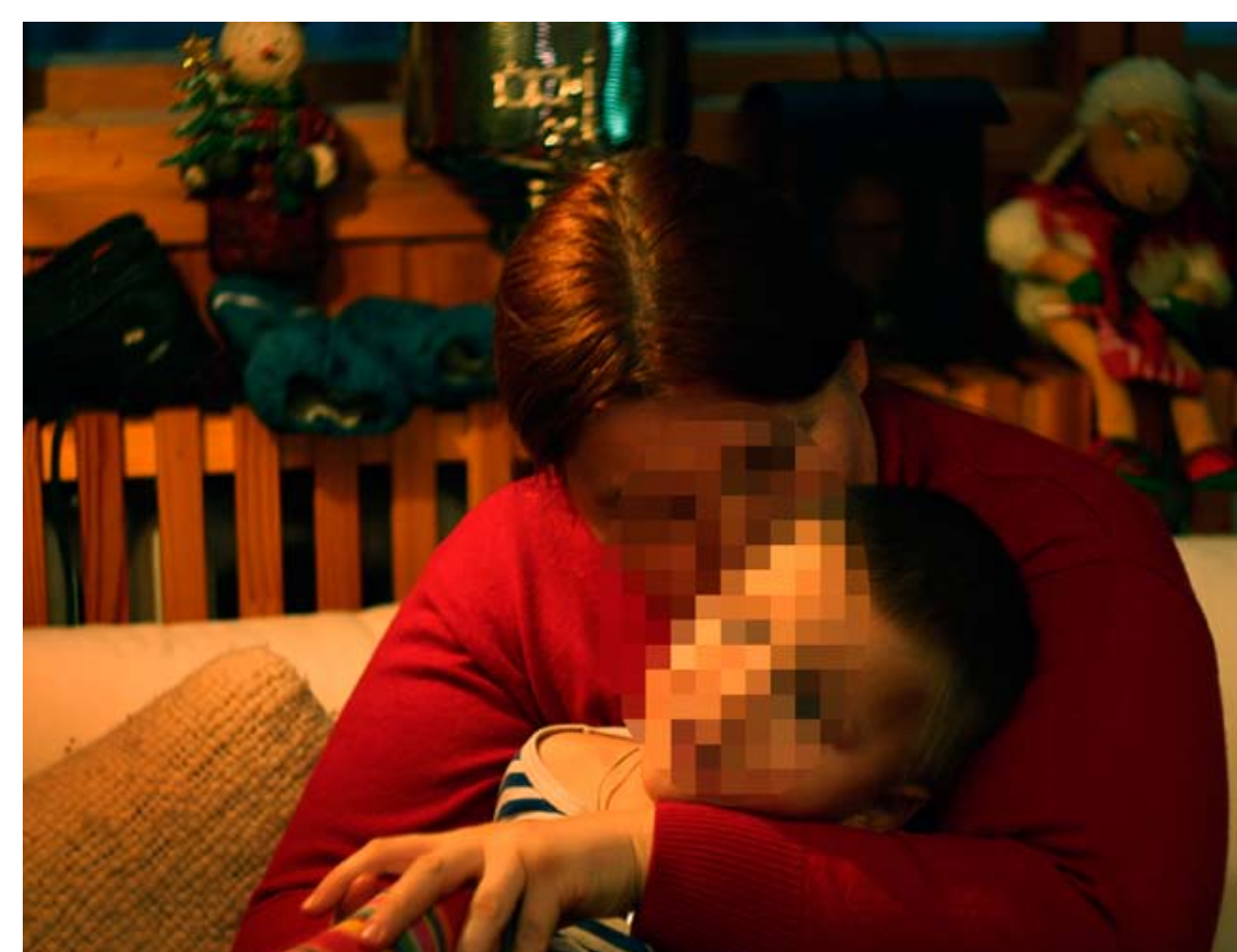
Despite all the experiments made in the USSR in the sphere of marriage and family relations, when the state stopped interfering into private life, the situation with marriage and family in Russia got noticeably closer to that in Western Europe. Nevertheless, a "traditional" intrafamilial role behaviour still exists (husband – the breadwinner, wife – the keeper of the "home fireplace"), but a modernized pattern (both spouses are almost equally responsible for both the financial provision of the family and for keeping the house and bringing up the children) is spreading too.

Gendered character of social networks

On the whole Russian social networks have a distinct gendered character: men more often give help to men, and women to women. This reflects the Russian gender culture, proving the dominant position of socially homogeneous groups in everyday leisure and communication practices. Women more often than men receive monetary and material transfers, also mostly from women, because these resources are as a rule at the disposal of women in charge of family economy. Big loans and sometimes even gratuitous financial help are more often provided by men, just because they generally have more resources. In terms of "gender" kinship support, men view the family as the object of social assistance, proceeding from the number-of-children parameter, for women the chief criterion showing the need of support is the family's material situation.



Family in 2006



Mother with child 2006

Mutual helping patterns

Every fifth Russian city dweller turned to relatives for material help, and every tenth person turned to friends, considering such moves as possible ways of survival and strategies of adjusting to the new life conditions. According to city residents' assessment, asking relatives or friends for material help appeared to be one of the most effective ways of adjustment, the least effective way was to turn for help to a social relief agency or other state organizations.

The legacy of the communes

There is an obvious contradiction between the renewal of organizational communal forms and the break-up in commune relationships. At the beginning of the XX century the commune molded a specific sociopsychological type of peasant with steadfast traditionalistic aims, passed from generation to generation. The soviet socialist system of land tenure was to start with destroying the commune and establishing instead of it a new type of public land tenure based on the principle of single economic governance. Nevertheless, in the absence of an effectively running system of land tenure, it was the commune that redistributed the confiscated lands and coped perfectly with the fiscal tasks. Today some elements of communal life are actively restored in a modified form, however, the restoration of the outward collective forms is accompanied by a decay of the collectivist mind, which is usually more rapid in regions with the prevailing Russian population. The Russian man's readiness, discovered by sociologists, "to give gratuitous assistance" is doubtful – in the modern village practically everything is done for money: odd jobs become an important and sometimes the only source of real money, with only very close kinship and neighborly ties making an exception. The population needs kolkhozes and sovkhoses not only because they help the private households – the people are afraid of coming face to face with the hostile outside world.

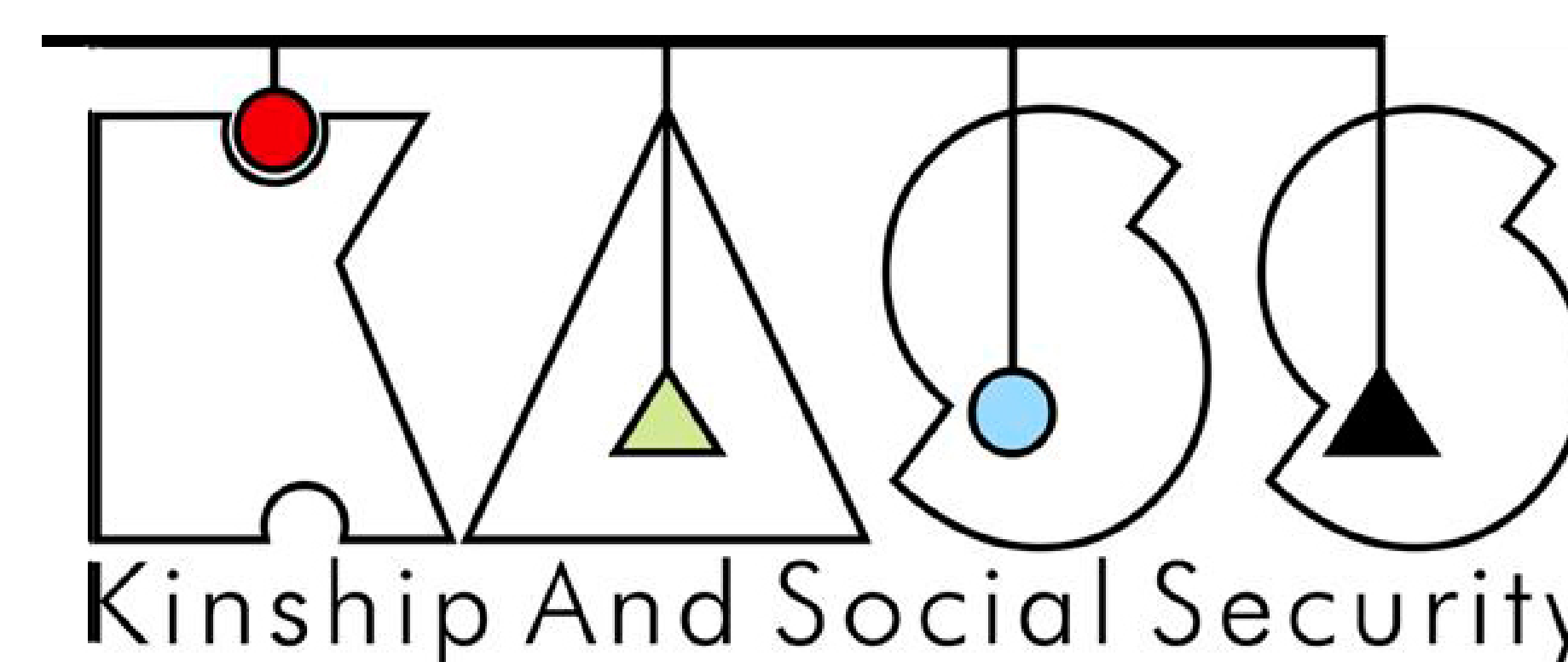
Facing economic crisis and redistribution within kinship networks

The dragged out economic crisis in the agrarian sector conditioned the need for consolidating the inner resources of the rural family: the family farm became more important, its production compensating the family budget deficit. Exchanges and assistance among relatives intensified – more than half of rural families are part of exchange networks, though such exchanges are not usually equal. The rural practices still continue to imply the importance of the "neighborhood" institution. The transparency of the village and the people's intertwined destinies bring together absolutely different grounds for mutual services – collective work, friendly relations, exchange obligations and other accompanying services.

On the whole, the Russian society has not lost the solidity of family ties and traditions of "collective action" that compensate the weakness of the state social policy by redistribution within kinship economic networks, though aid is not based on full equivalence, but on principles of reciprocity and mutuality.

Two opposite trends in informal cooperation

The investigations conducted in different regions of Russia revealed two opposite trends in informal cooperation and people's collaboration: in some cases (usually in town) cooperation does not go beyond the relationship between children and parents, people shut themselves up in their family world (in the country it is the result of poverty, with the family mobilizing itself to survive, severing almost all ties). On the opposite pole we have, for example, the Kuban stanitsa, rich in mutual obligations, where exchanges are conditioned by preserved communal traditions of giving inter-family and good-neighborly aid to "one's close people". Today, when the patronage function of the state is obviously weaker, the kolkhoz-sovkhoz system has disintegrated and the new big economic actors are unwilling to bear the burden of social obligations, networked mutual assistance is working again.



An interdisciplinary project with an anthropological agenda funded by the European Union's Sixth Framework Programme.

Further information:

Heiko Kastner
KASS Coordination
Phone: +49 (0)345 - 2927 211
E-mail: kastner@eth.mpg.de

Layout: Kristin Magnucki, Oliver Weihmann
Copyright: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology 2006

