

Promoting Active Fathers

The Birth and Development of a Civic Initiative in Contemporary Northwestern Russia

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Introduction

Russia has experienced significant demographic problems with a population decline of around 0,5 % annually for the last twenty years (in total a decline of about 8 Million individuals since 1991). The Russian state has chosen to primarily combat this issue by attempting to increase fertility. In post-Soviet state discourse, as manifested in population and welfare policies, focus has mostly been placed on the mothers whereas fathers and fatherhood are marginalized (Rodin & Åberg, 2013; Rotkirch, 2000). If a fatherhood image is portrayed at all, it is that of a traditional breadwinner whose relation to the children is not emphasized. This is a legacy of the Soviet fatherhood discourse that emphasized men as workers and defenders of the Motherland and women as the mothers and the primary care givers (Chernova, 2007).

However, elements of a counter-discourse can be identified. While child-rearing continues to be a primarily female task, fathers are today more often present during delivery and are also less inclined to domestic violence (Asonova, 2010; Kay, 2006; Maiofis & Kukulin, 2010). In 2007 in Saint Petersburg, interested individuals also started working on educating fathers-to-

be in parenting, providing a space for fathers to meet, discuss and learn about being a father. This initiative led to the creation of so called “daddy-schools” (*papa shkoly*) in most of the city districts as well as in other parts of North-Western Russia.¹

The main aim of this paper is to analyze the establishment, development, strategies and outcomes of the daddy-schools and their activities. The daddy-schools are here seen as cases of civic engagement, or more specifically, the daddy-schools are a manifestation of male parental activism. The paper is hence linked to two theoretical themes: civil society and social activism, on the one hand, and research on fatherhood as a social institution and on currently prevalent discourses on fatherhood in the Russian context, on the other hand. The paper thus complements previous research in several ways. It adds to existing research on Russian civil society and civic initiatives in the Russian context. It also addresses the nexus between the public and the private as well as the gender dimension of civil society activities. Finally, it contributes to so far understudied issues of fatherhood in Russia.

The study is based on documentation from the organizations and interviews performed primarily with the initiators of the daddy-schools in Russia and current moderators (i.e. those leading and managing the daddy-groups). Before turning to the analysis of this material, we will elaborate on the conceptual lens used to further our understanding of the Russian daddy-schools as well as the context in which these activities exist.

Civil society and civic engagement

Civil society, social activism, civic engagement, active citizenship, social movements and other related concepts are complex and there is no consensus concerning how they should be

¹ Creating and developing daddy-schools has, however, not been performed by civically engaged Russians alone. There has been a long-term cooperation with Swedish partners which, although interesting, will not be the main focus in this text. It requires a separate analysis where theoretical and practical aspects of the dissemination and translation of ideas and practices can be investigated in-depth. Thus, this will be left for future research.

defined or how they relate to each other. This paper does not have the ambition to bring clarity to this debate, but it is necessary to relate to these discussions to some extent in order to present the theoretical perspective applied on the Russian daddy-schools, the development of which I argue should be understood as part of a civic initiative, i.e. an initiative that came into being through the civic engagement of individual citizens in a bottom-up fashion.

Civil society is often understood to be a public sphere entailing voluntary organizations and informal networks and the actions undertaken by individuals within these organizations and networks. Civil society is often negatively defined, being demarcated against the state and the market. An issue rarely addressed is the relation between civil society and the intimate sphere of the family and household (Ginsborg, 2013). For this particular text that dimension is, however, of importance given the overall topic of this paper. For many researchers, civil society is treated as separate, not only from the state and the market, but also from the family sphere, arguing that civil society relations are built on a different rationality than the other spheres (cf. Alexander, 2006; von Essen & Sundgren, 2012; Jeppsson Grassman & Svedberg, 2007; Nautz et al, 2013). In this text, this view is used as a point of departure. Thus theoretically, society can be divided into four different spheres: the state, the market or business sphere, civil society and the family or private sphere. Each sphere is based on different logics or rationalities. For instance, the market sphere is based on a calculative rationality where relationships are exchangeable. Civil society, on the contrary, is based on an ideal-based rationality where actors and relationships are not easily exchanged since they are based on shared identities and ideologies (Sjöstrand, 2000).

This kind of differentiation, not least concerning the division between a public sphere and a private sphere, has implications for a discussion that has been central to feminist writing for about two hundred years, i.e. the dichotomy between the private and the public as part of a critique of liberal thinking and the patriarchal elements in that strand of thought. Several

feminist thinkers argue that the dichotomy between the public and the private only serves patriarchal interests since, in liberal theory, men are the ones related to the public sphere whereas women have their “natural” position in the private sphere, which also leads to a devaluation of women’s work. This leads some to argue that the private sphere of domestic life is a central part of the public sphere and civil society (cf. Pateman, 1983). However, as discussed by Ginsborg (2013), merging these two spheres is theoretically problematic since, as noted above, the spheres are built on different rationalities and the type of relations between actors are different. In the private sphere of the family, relations are intimate to an extent that is not shared by civil society. And, we cannot choose our family, meaning that these relations are not voluntary, which is an important trait of civil society relations.

As already noted, civil society and the state are generally seen as separated, hence the term non-governmental organizations that is frequently used to refer to one form of civil society organizations. However, there is no consensus concerning what the relationship between the state and civil society is, or should be. Some researchers see civil society and the state as separate but mutually complementary and many agree that a civil society cannot develop in isolation from the state and the market since the spheres influence one another (Diamond, 1999; Evans Jr., 2002; Keane, 1988). Some take a more conflict-oriented approach, emphasizing the function civil society can fill in challenging the state when this is necessary. This more confrontational view has its roots partly in the fact that civil society came into prominence again in the context of the oppositional movements in Eastern Europe. Here, the relationship was very much construed as civil society *against* the state (Howard, 2003), a view that has also lived on through the transitional years from the end of the 1980s onward. Thus, even though there is a widespread consensus in the research community about the distinction between civil society and the state as two separate societal spheres there is

disagreement concerning how they are related to each other and whether this relationship is dominated by conflict or cooperation and compromise.

One approach to the issue of how the different societal spheres relate to each other is to emphasize the interrelation of the spheres. The spheres should not be understood as completely separated. On the contrary, they are constantly interacting and also tend to overlap one another. Thus, the boundaries are blurred (Åberg, 2008; Nautz et al, 2013).

The Russian daddy-schools, which are in focus in the empirical analysis, move in these borderlands, as will be shown below. There are relations between the daddy-schools and the Russian state but the focus of their activities, and indeed the issue of parental activism as such, speak directly to the issue of how we should understand the relations between the public and the private and between the private sphere and civil society.

Fatherhood in the nexus between the public and the private

In recent decades researchers have generally studied fatherhood from the perspective of social constructivism. From this perspective fatherhood is a politicized social construction, located in the intersection between the public and the private sphere. Discourses on fatherhood are the expression of a struggle between different normative pressures from political, religious and social authorities and institutions as well as from more personal and private relations (Hobson & Morgan, 2002). Thus, there is no fixed truth about what fatherhood is, rather its meaning changes over time. What is considered to be "good" or "appropriate" fatherhood, and how individuals live up to those ideals is bound by history and socio-political context, or more concretely by the ideologies and practices associated with being a father (Doherty et al, 1998; LaRossa, 1998; Marsiglio et al, 2000).

Previous research has generally argued that in many countries, fatherhood has changed over time. The predominant role for the father in many contexts has been to act as the breadwinner, i.e. being the provider and decision-maker in the family but not being especially

involved in childrearing or other tasks in the household. This also implies that the father's/man's primary role was in the public, not the private, sphere (Lamb, 2000; Kimmel, 2008). Today there is, in many contexts, an alternative notion where the father is more active in all aspects of family life, taking on also a nurturing and caring role vis-à-vis the children. This is sometimes called the "new" or "responsible" fatherhood and is based on a more equal relationship between man and woman in the family where both partners are also expected to have the opportunity, and the obligation, to balance work and family life. Thus, the father takes on a greater role in the private sphere (Eränta & Moisander, 2011; Williams, 2008). More active fathers is not only deemed to be a good in itself but it is also discussed as a contributing factor in reducing domestic violence, improving the health of both mothers, fathers and children and promoting improved gender equality, among other things (e.g. Kimmel, 2008; Rossi, 1984). Thus, active fatherhood, although intimately connected to the private sphere, is connected to various public and societal goods as well.

As already noted, there is a vivid discussion concerning the interplay between the private and the public sphere in theoretical debates about civil society. Similarly, fatherhood is connected to both the private and the public sphere. It is both a clearly private matter, relating to issues of the family, but it is also influenced by what happens in the public sphere as well as having implications for the public sphere. The discussion of the private versus the public also connects to the commonly ascribed roles of men and women. Throughout history, men's role has often been primarily located in or directed towards the public sphere whereas the role of women has been connected to the private sphere. This resonates clearly with feminist arguments concerning the dichotomy between the public and the private sphere.

The new, active, fatherhood, where the father also fulfills more nurturing tasks, is, on a theoretical or ideal-typical level, connected to issues of gender equality and an improved balance between man and woman regarding their positions in both the public and the private

sphere. Hence, feminist thinkers discussing the public/private dichotomy should view these developments of fatherhood models as a step in the right direction. Carol Pateman (1983), for instance, notes that increasing the space for women in the public sphere is contingent on a greater involvement of the man in the private sphere and in family life, which is precisely what the new fatherhood is believed to bring.

Civil society and fatherhood in Russia

There is an immense amount of studies discussing civil society in Russia, historical legacies, the weakness of civil society in many parts of the former Soviet Union, the impact of foreign funding on civil society development, and so on. There is no consensus concerning what, if any, “real” civil society that existed during Soviet times and none to be found concerning what the future may hold or what the status actually is today. However, what is frequently portrayed is that there was an upsurge of civil society organizations and collective action during the late 1980s, followed by a sharp decline in activity in the 1990s and then a new upsurge in the most recent decades (Ljubownikow et al, 2013; Weigle, 2000, 2002). However, one problem sometimes raised concerning studies of Russian civil society is that they have frequently been based on a Western notion of what a civil society structure is. That has, for instance, been advanced as a main point of criticism towards Howard’s seminal work, where it is concluded that civil society in post-communist Europe is weak (see Howard, 2003).

Concerning contemporary Russia, there is for instance research indicating that a Russian-style civil society is emerging, where civil society actors and organizations “maintain strong and dependent relationships with the state” (Ljubownikow et al, 2013: 154). This is also due to political and legislative developments in Russia during the last decade where the state has been strengthened, leading to a current situation where the state also greatly influences civil society development (Ljubownikow et al, 2013).

In the Russian context, the development of fatherhood ideals has been somewhat different than in the Western context (see Rodin & Åberg, 2013). The Soviet system and the gender contract that was part of that system led to certain developments concerning views on family, parenthood and fatherhood. Most prominently was the lack of a clear role for the Soviet father. The model can be described as ‘only mothers have children. Fathers are ignored by societal institutions and by society at large’ (Chernova, 2007: 139, authors' translation). His place was in the public sphere as a worker and a defender of the motherland. In the private sphere of the family he did not really have a purpose since the state had taken over the role as the main provider (Rodin & Åberg, 2013). Also today, despite the already mentioned demographic situation in Russia and following from that the Russian state’s active involvement in trying to promote increased fertility, fathers’ are not present in the state-discourse.

Women in their role as mothers are pointed out as the main bearers of fertility. Fathers are clearly excluded from the discourse, which appears to be part of a cultural legacy that stretches back through Soviet times and beyond (Aivazova, 1998; Rotkirsch, 2000). A search in the main guideline documents² on demographic policy shows that the words for “father” (*otets*), “dad” (*papa*) and “fatherhood” (*otsovstvo*) are not present at all. This pattern is also reflected in the constitution of the Russian Federation. Article 7:2 mentions fatherhood as a protected social institution, but in the section on the rights and freedoms of the citizen, fatherhood is not mentioned, while motherhood and childhood are (see Article 38:1). Thus, it seems as if at least the legislative conditions for absent fatherhood are largely present in post-Soviet Russia and the main fatherhood model encountered in contemporary Russia resembles

² See for example *Konseptiia dolgosrochnogo sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo razvitiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Concept for the long-term socioeconomic development of the Russian Federation]; *Konseptiia Demograficheskoi Politiki do 2015 goda* [Concept for demographic policy to the year 2015] (2001); *Konseptiia Demograficheskoi Politiki do 2025 goda* [Concept for demographic policy to the year 2025] (2007).

that of the breadwinner, mentioned above, and less of the “active father” often presented as the ideal in, for instance, many countries in Northwestern Europe (not least in Sweden).

Organizing to promote active fatherhood in Russia

What kind of organizational animal are actually the Russian daddy-schools? As will be shown below the daddy-schools are not simply a number of organizations that come together in a joint federative structure, neither are they local “offices” of one single organization with a clear governance structure. Rather, their relations to each other are diffuse and varied.

The birth of a civic initiative

The narrative of the daddy-school-initiative begins in 2007 with a then ongoing Swedish-Russian project called “Men in Russia”. This narrative has certain key actors and real enthusiasts. Such individuals are often key to civic initiatives and the formation of new organizations and activities. As has been demonstrated in previous research on similar organizational developments, in many cases the starting point is to be found in haphazard encounters between individual actors rather than as the result of a strategic process (see for instance Åberg, 2008). That was also the case for the would-be daddy-schools. The individuals who became founders and developers of the daddy-schools met each other and representatives from Swedish organizations at a conference dealing with domestic violence. In passing it was mentioned that something called daddy-groups existed in Sweden, for the purpose of having men discussing issues of fatherhood and family life with other men.

Through continued cooperation between Sweden and Russia, although not between civil society organizations but through many of the key actors’ employment at social welfare offices in Saint Petersburg, they got more contacts also with civil society organizations in Sweden working with daddy-groups, i.e. discussion groups for fathers and fathers-to-be.

From that point on, ideas were developed and eventually led to the start of the first activities in the shape of daddy-schools, i.e. where fathers-to-be met and discussed with other fathers-to-be, in Saint Petersburg in late 2007. The first official daddy-school was organized at Nevsky District Center of Social Care for Families and Children in November of 2008. The daddy-schools provide a program where men meet to discuss topics related to parenting from a male perspective, i.e. future childbirth, the baby's first days, the first month of a child's life, and responsible fatherhood. As shown in more detail below, the groups function in a bottom-up seminar fashion, providing the participants substantial influence over the program's contents. The group meetings are led by a moderator.

Those acting as moderators do so on a voluntary basis without any economic or other form of compensation. Thus, this is a clear-cut example of voluntary work, where the aim is to work for a public good and where the activities take place outside of both the state machinery and the for-profit business sphere, which would make any researcher view it as a part of civil society activities. In the introduction the daddy-schools were connected to male parental activism. The moderators could, from such a perspective, be viewed as the first line of activists. The participants cannot as easily be understood as activists, although their participation could be an expression of a wish to change gender roles and, more specifically, what being a man and a father means.

Important to note is that the daddy-schools are not organized as stand-alone organizations, the focus is on the activities and the specific format these groups embody, which will be further discussed below. However, it is described that the postulate that unites all can be described as follows:

We do not work to satisfy the curiosity of men but we have two goals: to preserve the family and the child's right to be raised in a complete family, and the prevention of domestic violence. (Interview, 121122, authors' translation)

Before moving on to the developments once the activities had started, one can of course wonder what it is with these ideas that present something new to the Russian context? First, as has been mentioned above, fathers are not part of the larger discourses of parenthood and family. Second, when the role of fathers *is* discussed, it tends to be viewed as that of a traditional breadwinner, i.e. the “new” fatherhood or the more involved, active father is not yet prevalent in the Russian context. One of the founders of the daddy-schools in Saint Petersburg stated the view on fatherhood and what kind of fatherhood they are trying to promote in terms that clearly connect this initiative to an ambition to promote a father who is more involved in all aspects of family life and child-rearing.

To me everything is very clear. It is all about the man’s active actions in child-rearing. Not formal actions but everyday, practical, ordinary tasks that the wife usually performs – he also has to do the same every day. That is, not just say hello, pat on the head, ask about how the day has been and play... It is important to teach men to talk to other men about their children – that is not commonplace. Men should be actively involved... the involved father is he who takes the child to the doctor, takes the child for a walk – not just on weekends but as she [the mother] does. The involved father performs the same tasks as his wife does. (Interview, 121122, authors’ translation)

As this quote demonstrates, the ideas behind the daddy-schools are different from the mainstream discourses on the role of fathers in contemporary Russia. Hence, they are aiming to develop a strand that is currently neglected by other segments of society, a role frequently addressed by social movements and civil society organizations in various contexts around the world. Some of the respondents express similar attitudes where a connection is also made between a more active type of fatherhood and gender equality.

...we get educated to be allowed to drive a car; we learn in order to manage a profession. But, to become a parent, no learning is required. People seem to believe that will come by itself. To our regret, it does not come by itself. You should work on all of this. We should raise the status of the parents and the status of the father, and in this you should definitely speak of equality. (Interview, 120425, authors’ translation)

Finally, it should be noted that it is not only the aim of developing more actively engaged fathers that is new or different in Russia but the methods and techniques used are stressed as crucial in furthering these ambitions. That is, the active involvement of fathers, not only in the family and the care of the children, but also the active involvement as participants in the daddy-schools is emphasized. To base the activities on the active participation of the participants and on their questions, knowledge and experiences in an atmosphere where the, in many other contexts, would-be teacher or expert is mainly a moderator or facilitator who assists in structuring the discussion is argued to be something very unorthodox in Russia. Several moderators also claim to witness an unfamiliarity with the form of the activities each time a new daddy-group gathers for the first time.

Thus, the originality (in a Russian context) of the daddy-schools does not only concern the contents of the activities or the view on fatherhood promoted, but also the methods employed.

It is not just about making men more consciously aware of their role as a father but to involve the men to actively participate in this [the activities of the daddy-schools; in their own learning]. Without the involvement of the men themselves, it will all turn into an organization arranging lectures for the general public. We have sufficiently competent experts who can, well, make people aware of the scientific point of view. But I would put the involvement of the men in first place and then everything else. Because that is the greatest difficulty – getting the men to become involved. (Interview, 121122, authors' translation)

Development and consolidation

Prior to the inauguration of the first daddy-school in 2008, the actors involved did much information dissemination, or marketing. Coming from employment in the public administration they had many contacts in the fields of health care and social welfare. This meant that they had a network through which information could be distributed. They also readily got much attention from the media since this was a clearly new phenomenon in the Russian context. Previous efforts, for instance parental classes given by maternity care units,

were more or less solely aimed at mothers-to-be. It was a rare phenomenon that fathers-to-be took part in such activities. Hence, the idea of a discussion group exclusively for fathers and based on participant activity rather than distribution of expert knowledge was, in this context, something new and therefore stirred attention.

For the following three years, the schools developed on their own. The Swedish contacts remained, although on a completely individual level. No formal organization existed in Russia but a group of enthusiasts who believed in the idea and the techniques gathered other likeminded people who started up activities in different districts of Saint Petersburg. Usually, the daddy-schools were organized in the offices of different centers, for instance for at-risk families where an individual was interested in becoming the moderator for the activities. How this structuring or placement of the activities came about is described as an organic process.

Those who became and become interested [in running a daddy-school] are usually those people who work with something in the field of social welfare and they work in different places that are connected to social issues. Therefore, it is, in a natural way, convenient for them to gather a daddy-group and understand that this form can be used in their activities... and they do it in their places. That came to be in a natural way. It is understandable that if I work here it is more convenient for me to do it [the daddy-school] here. (Interview, 121121, authors' translation)

The actors starting the daddy-school-activities were there as a resource for those wanting to start-up new groups and, hence, the activities grew.

Even though some of our respondents, i.e. the moderators of the daddy-schools, claim that perhaps the biggest challenge always has been, and continues to be, how to attract participants, the activities grew and so many participants came that in 2010 a voluntary organization called Northern Way was formally registered. This legal status was necessary in order to be able to have a bank account, apply for funding, and take up a more official status. This new status also led to renewed Swedish – Russian cooperation but now in the form of a joint project for which they got funding from Swedish SIDA (the Swedish International

Development Cooperation Agency). The project was in operation from 2011 and throughout 2013.

Regarding the organization of the daddy-schools, the formalization of the field of activities through the founding of Northern Way has not in itself led to greater institutionalization of the daddy-schools in the sense of a development towards centralization. The daddy-schools are not headed or governed by Northern Way. The organization is rather, or at least tries to be, a resource for the various groups of fathers meeting together with a moderator. However, that is not to say that "anything goes". The head of Northern Way, who has also been one of the real enthusiasts behind the development of the daddy-schools from the very beginning, states that:

Most groups that have been founded with our support continue to maintain contact... we support each other and keep the unified direction because we, when new groups are founded, tell everyone who uses our support that the only way for a group to get into our community and call themselves a daddy-school is to stick to the main principles: it has to be a men's group, it should involve men on the basis of the main goals of our operation, that is, the good of the child, the prevention of domestic violence and equal possibilities for participating in child-rearing. It is only through these principles that we unite them. Legally these relations are not registered. (Interview, 121122, authors' translation)

What is emphasized by the founders of the daddy-school-activities, now being involved with Northern Way too, is that they primarily are a support structure when there is a new daddy-school initiative about to start their activities and in the initial stages of development. Once such a group, along with its moderators, has found its footing, they more coexist as equal partners, sharing information, ideas, etc. Thus, what is frequently stressed is a conscious choice of avoiding to build hierarchical institutional structures. Some, however, also consider what the future will hold.

Northern Way is not a governing organ at this time and it will most likely not become one either. And no one needs that. If they [potential moderators] find it interesting they will do it in their city districts. Someone does it, someone else takes a break from it, new [initiatives] arise... On the other hand, we think that perhaps we should create something, like a method center, a supporting resource-structure to be placed at Northern Way. (Interview, 121121, authors' translation)

At the same time, respondents also point to the fact that moderating and taking responsibility for a daddy-school continues to be on a voluntary basis without compensation, which means that the activities still rely on the efforts of enthusiasts and volunteers.

When it comes to the various daddy-schools that currently exist, respondents claim that, even without an overarching governance structure, the moderators meet regularly in one form or the other to exchange experiences.

We meet quite frequently on Skype in the form of webinars. We socialize, express our opinions, but the opinions are mostly not about how to moderate but where it is possible to recruit dads [for the activities]. That question is of more immediate interest. (Interview, 120426, authors' translation)

Again we see that the issue of how to reach and attract potential participants is a core issue for those working practically with the daddy-schools. Some claim to have seen a recent decline in the interest in certain districts. This is hoped to be temporary although the cause of the decline is unclear. What we also see here, and even more so in quotes above, is that the organization of the daddy-schools mostly resembles a network.

During the last two years, those who started-up the activities and who are now involved in Northern Way have also started to expand the activities and try to initiate daddy-schools outside of Saint Petersburg. Currently a daddy-school also exists in Novgorod and contacts are underway in Petrozavodsk and Archangelsk.

Several respondents claim to share a group-identity with the other people involved, based on a shared interest and belief in the method used and in the importance of promoting more active and involved fathers.

Strategies and outcomes

As the final section of this empirical part of the paper I turn to what the outcomes of the daddy-school activities so far have been, how potential contributions are viewed by those involved as well as what the future may hold in terms of possibilities and challenges. How the daddy-schools work (i.e. participant-driven, discussion-based, etc.) has already been discussed. In this section we will also analyze strategies in relation to actors and organizations outside of the particular activities.

As we have seen, the issue of recruiting fathers-to-be to become participants is an issue of central concern and has been so since the very start of the activities. That issue is frequently discussed among the moderators, even more than issues of methods and practice. The moderators have also found different strategies for attracting would-be participants. Most of them clearly state that the most common way for fathers-to-be to come in contact with the daddy-school is through their wives or partners. Hence, good relations with maternal care units, where mothers-to-be take part in educational activities but where questions of the fathers' role has not been an issue, have been important for the recruitment of participants throughout the years (cf. Malyshev, 2013).

In these groups [at the maternal care unit] we explained about our activities, that we are here to help you [the mothers], that when we speak to men we emphasize that the man should help you already from the birth of the child and be included already before the birth, he should understand you better... most of the time it was women [that called the daddy-school] and said: "sign my husband up"... Sometimes the man himself phoned and wondered: "have I come to right place? It is supposed to be some form of daddy-school, something for fathers-to-be my wife told me". (Interview, 120426, authors' translation)

Recruitment from the maternity care units is described as the single most important source for several of the daddy-schools. Apart from this the media-interest for the daddy-schools that will be further discussed below has also led to fathers finding their way to these activities.

Several of the moderators and especially those respondents who have been the enthusiasts behind this civic initiative express a firm belief in the value of the activities and the good it can bring to society, which resembles an ideological or at least social mission which is deemed to be at the heart of civil society activity in general and one of the central traits that differentiates them from state- and business organizations (Moore, 2000).

What is then possible to say about the outcome in terms of impact on those fathers who participate? There is no hard evidence on that and measuring effects from this kind of activity for an individual is inherently difficult. From the point of view of the moderators though, they stress how participation has opened up new arenas for the fathers. There are several instances where the men who met in the daddy-groups have maintained contact, both with the daddy-schools but even more frequently with each other. Several moderators have also witnessed a normalization of discussing child behavior and child-rearing issues between men. In that sense, those involved with the daddy-schools argue that a change in attitudes and perhaps norms concerning fatherhood indeed has taken place as a result of the activities.

One of the moderators also stress how men who would most likely never meet in “ordinary life” have come together, which resembles ideas in previous research on civil society (Diamond, 1994; de Tocqueville, 1997). Thus, new social ties can be forged through this participation, something that previous research has deemed important for the creation of, especially bridging, social capital (see e.g. Putnam, 2000).

The daddy-schools in Saint Petersburg may, in numbers, be a quite marginal phenomenon. No official records exist but on average, since the first daddy-school started in 2008, a few hundred fathers-to-be have participated in the activities each year. Currently, there are around

ten daddy-schools in operation in Saint Petersburg, the number can vary somewhat depending on the number of fathers who are interested in participating at a given time.

There is of course also the issue of what groups these activities reach. Even though several moderators claim that there is variation among the participants in terms of socioeconomic background and status, the level of education, etc. it still appears that the vast majority of the participants could be considered parts of the middle-class. Aleksandr Malyshev has shown, albeit based on a rather small sample, that almost 80 per cent of the participants in the daddy-groups have a university degree. Moreover, almost 60 per cent of the participants can afford expensive goods (excluding apartments) indicating a fairly good economic status (Malyshev, 2013: 41). Based on interviews with daddy-group-participants, Olga Bezrukova has shown that they are generally more prone to hold norms of gender equality and “new fatherhood” than the population in general, although actual behavior not always follows suit. In addition, these characteristics of the fathers are a reflection of sorts of those of the wives, who often are well-educated (Bezrukova, 2012: 269). This is hardly surprising since much research has found that progressive ideas most frequently first take root among the middle-class as well as indications of that women often are the drivers behind changes in male behavior.

Keeping the relative marginality of the phenomenon in mind, it is, however, quite surprising what kind of impact and attention the daddy-schools have had over the years, both by the media and by different segments of the state, especially at the regional and local levels.

Already when the first daddy-school appeared, several respondents describe an immense interest from journalists and others.

There was a lot of attention from the mass-media. When the daddy-groups started we had such an occasion. There is a newspaper called “My city district” [freely translated] and I know a female journalist there. And I talked to her once and mentioned that there was a daddy-group. She said: “Wow, how exciting” and wrote an article. Before it was printed it was published on their website. And literally within

one hour, three television networks called me... there were a number of reports on the daddy-schools on different TV channels. (Interview, 121121, authors' translation)

This interest from the mass-media has also remained and there is a belief that in general this has also sparked a more general interest in fatherhood, exemplified by new shows on the radio and on TV, such as the TV-show "School for young fathers" (freely translated) and the radio show "Young dads". The daddy-schools in Saint Petersburg have also been noticed in national media and newspapers and even in a series of stories in the largest Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*.

Representatives of the daddy-schools and Northern Way believe that the Russian media-interest is due to the fact that these activities indeed were something new and original in the Russian context. As mentioned previously, the father has usually not been part of the discourses surrounding parenthood, childcare and other related issues.

Relations with the state

The daddy-schools have gained much attention from the media but also from the regional authorities. Neither the daddy-schools nor Northern Way as an organization has taken on an oppositional, political, role. The relations to the regional and city authorities are described as good. As already mentioned, several of those involved in the daddy-schools also have their ordinary employment inside the state structures, normally in the field of social welfare. One moderator also argues that this in itself is important since it is easier to change things and get access to those in charge when you are on the "inside".

The good relations to the authorities are also demonstrated by how Northern Way and actors involved with the daddy-schools repeatedly have been invited to participate in meetings with state administration, including the city governor. Respondents mean that they have managed to have a real impact on political and legislative developments, exemplified by how

one of their initiatives, that it should be possible for fathers to be present during delivery free-of-charge, now is a reality, even on the federal level.

Furthermore, since July 2012 the family policy of Saint Petersburg states that every city district should have a daddy-school. Even the concept of daddy-schools, initiated by the civic initiative here analyzed, has been included in this formal legislative document. Several of our respondents state this outcome with great pride as evidence for how their activities have influenced policy processes. This new-found formal status is, thus, a source of pride and also a future source of funding since it means that public resources will be made available for such activities. However, several respondents also worry about this development. Even though they are proud of the result, they see challenges and potential dangers following in the wake of, not least, public funding. The perceived risk is that with money available new groups may arise, using different methods and not remaining true to the model or ideas developed since 2007.

Here we see a certain risk in that it will be called daddy-schools or daddy-groups but in reality it will not be as it should. Perhaps they will have a symbolic meeting, *call* it a daddy-group but [content-wise and method-wise doing something different]... and then the denigration of the idea begins. (Interview, 121121, authors' translation)

We are worried that a large number of groups will arise that will formally be called daddy-schools... when money becomes available, many may have a more formal attitude and no one is forcing them to maintain any unity. That is why we talk of difficulties. But we fought for precisely this kind of support so that there could be as many groups as possible of our kind that are interested in working with men and getting men involved. (Interview, 121122, authors' translation)

Thus, what is expressed is a fear that the ideas behind the currently existing daddy-schools will be co-opted by other forces and be turned into something that violates the original ambition and practice. This could also be framed as a fear of co-optation of the ideological mission that is the foundation for the daddy-schools and a distortion of that which currently holds the daddy-schools together.

Concluding remarks

What have we learned from this exploration into the development of the Russian daddy-schools? First, there is clearly space for civic initiatives and civic engagement in contemporary Russia. However, we should remember that the organization and the activities studied here have not taken a political, or at least not an outspoken oppositional, role but have nurtured good relations with the state-machinery.

Even though foreign funding and cooperation at some level has been a part of the development of the daddy-schools, they have mainly survived on their own merits and have managed to have an impact on policy, exemplified by the incorporation of daddy-schools in the regional legislation. Although that is an achievement, it is also believed to imply a risk that the ideas, methods and practices will be co-opted or transformed in a negative way.

In relation to the Russian state the daddy-schools are attempting to promote a different normative position concerning what kind of fatherhood that is desirable, or at least to make fatherhood an issue at all. The promotion of active fatherhood in Russia via these civic initiatives may, however, not be a counter-discourse, but rather complementary to the state's, where civil society organizations and citizen initiatives take up parts of issues that are not addressed by the state. The cases studied here are attempting to alleviate similar problems as the state although using a different strategy and focusing on a different target group.

Organizationally, the daddy-schools are quite loosely structured, mostly resembling a network, with the organization Northern Way as a resource in structuring, developing and initiating activities. Such a network is also believed by previous research to be strengthened by, among other things, a strong common narrative, i.e. a storyline that the actors involved share a belief in, and also methods and strategies that are shared between the participants in the network (cf. Cohen, 2007). Our analysis shows that the daddy-schools seem well-developed on these aspects.

To what extent the daddy-schools have changed the attitudes of the participants is difficult to ascertain since it would require a study of the participants before and after having participated in the daddy-schools. In addition, there is also the possibility that the daddy-schools are, at least partly, “preaching to the choir”. As shown above, the majority of participants are what can be described as progressive middle-class, which in many contexts already holds more progressive norms than the general public. Even more difficult is to estimate whether the activities have led to any changes in behavior. To accomplish that is also dependent on many other factors, including structural ones, financial possibilities and also for instance the attitudes of the mother. She is important if the father is to gain a greater space in the private sphere.

Thus, it cannot be claimed that the daddy-schools have actually changed norms of fatherhood or fathering. What can be said, however, is that this initiative has created a meeting place for fathers, which is a very rare thing in Russian society. A new arena for discussing masculinity and male parenting has been created where fathers-to-be can discuss issues that are not on the agenda in other arenas as well as meet people they would otherwise not meet, thus, increasing the number of social ties, which is believed to further the development of social capital. The daddy-schools have also brought media attention to the issue of fatherhood as well as left an imprint on regional legislation. Hence, at a more implicit and general level it seems reasonable to assume that the daddy-schools have played a role for normative change.

As discussed in previous research on civil society and the relations between the public and the private spheres, it is important for the man to take on a larger role in the private sphere and in child-rearing if the woman is to expand her involvement in the public sphere. Thus, initiatives like the one studied here as well as more generally, the new, active, fatherhood, are examples of developments where actors attempt to bridge that very gap.

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