

A “Sexual Revolution” without Effective Contraception. Youth Sexuality, the Gender Gap and Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Russia (1970s – 1990s)

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Abstract : In Russia, the mid-1960s – mid 1970s cohort came of age during perestroika and became sexually active earlier than the previous cohorts had; their heterosexual initiation was less connected to the expectation of marriage and motherhood. Do they constitute a new “sexual generation”, shaped by the liberalization of public discourses on sexuality? Previous literature points to contradictory answers. This article offers a refined analysis of the specificity of this cohort, based primarily on interviews with women and men born between the 1950s and the 1990s, and second-hand statistics. It shows that regarding the use of the most effective contraceptive methods, changes were still slow and limited in the 1990s. The sexual debuts of the perestroika and following years share important similarities with those of the “stagnation”, namely a gendered double standard and a high risk of unplanned pregnancy. However, these sexual initiations differ from the earlier ones in that the high probability of unplanned motherhood was no longer compensated by the predictability of pathways to adulthood. A similar lack of effective contraception thus takes on different meanings in the recollections of the “stagnation” and perestroika generations: while the former tends to display a selective nostalgia for simpler times (when love and spontaneity, rather than cautious planning, ruled), the latter produces more bitter narratives. It often experienced a painful gap between its primary socialization and its path to financial and residential independence.

Introduction

The normalization of heterosexual relationships devoid of expectations of family formation, during increasingly long transitions to adulthood, for both men and women, are among the most important changes in sexual behavior that took place in industrialized societies in the past decades¹. Some researchers have

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interpreted these changes in terms of a “sexual revolution”² and a “second demographic transition”³. Others have favored more nuanced conceptualizations in terms of “individualization”, “destandardization”, new norms, and a shift from an external to an internal locus of control⁴. In both cases, scholars have drawn attention to the connection between the spread of “modern” / technological contraception⁵ and a narrowing gender gap. They have stressed the crucial significance of these changes for women in particular, since the possibility of dissociating sexual initiation from family formation during youth used to be the prerogative of men. While in Western societies, such changes can be traced back to the 1960s-1970s, in most Eastern European post-communist countries, they are more recent. Approaches in terms of “sexual generations”⁶ constitute useful lens through which these changes can be examined⁷.

In Russia, women and men born in the mid-1960 – mid 1970s experienced (part of) their transition to adulthood during perestroika, when mass media discourses about an ongoing “sexual revolution” were spreading, and they had their first heterosexual intercourse earlier than the previous cohorts had. The existing literature suggests divergent answers to the question of their generational belonging. According to Anna Rotkirch, “the ‘sexual revolution’ in Russia happened in two distinct stages”: first, a quiet, “behavioral revolution” in the 1970s (when sexuality outside of marriage was officially condemned) then a “discursive revolution” that started with perestroika⁸. Based on quantitative and qualitative data collected in Saint Petersburg, she has argued that men and women born circa 1945-1965 (who came of age during the “behavioral revolution”) are part of the “generation of personalization”, for which “the gap between the official ideology and private behavior widened”, whereas those born circa 1965-1975 (who came of age

² Hera Cook: *The English Sexual Revolution: Technology and Social Change*, in: *History Workshop Journal* 59 (2005), no. 1, pp. 109–128; Dan Healey: *The Sexual Revolution in the USSR: Dynamics Beneath the Ice*, in: Gert Hekma, Alain Giami (ed.): *Sexual Revolutions*. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2014, pp. 236–248; Igor Kon, James Riordan, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1995; Anna Rotkirch: *The Man Question*. University of Helsinki, department of Social Policy, Helsinki 2000; Anna Temkina: *Novyi byt, seksual'naia zhizn' i gendernaia revoliutsiia*, in: Elena Zdravomyslova, Anna Rotkirch, Anna Temkina (ed.): *Novyi byt v sovremennoi Rossii: Gendernye issledovaniia povsednevnosti*. Izd-vo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, Saint Petersburg 2009, pp. 33–67.

³ Ron Lesthaeghe: *The Unfolding Story of the Second Demographic Transition*, in: *Population and Development Review* 36 (2010), no. 2, pp. 211–251; Sergei Zakharov: *Russian Federation: From the first to second demographic transition*, in: *Demographic Research* 19 (2008), pp. 907–972.

⁴ Michel Bozon: *La nouvelle normativité des conduites sexuelles ou la difficulté de mettre en cohérence les expériences intimes*, in: Jacques Marquet (ed.): *Normes et conduites sexuelles. Approches sociologiques et ouvertures pluridisciplinaires*. Bruylant, Louvain-la-Neuve 2004, pp. 15–33.

⁵ So-called “modern” (condom, pill, IUD, etc.) or “traditional” (withdrawal, periodic abstinence) methods will be referred to as “technological” or “non technological” in order to avoid the misleading evolutionist connotations of the “modern” / “traditional” terminology.

⁶ Elina Haavio-Mannila, Jeja Pekka Roos, Osmo Kontula: *Repression, Revolution and Ambivalence: The Sexual Life of Three Generations*, in: *Acta Sociologica* 39 (1996), no. 4, pp. 409–430; Ken Plummer: *Generational Sexualities, Subterranean Traditions, and the Hauntings of the Sexual World: Some Preliminary Remarks*, in: *Symbolic Interaction* 33 (2010), no. 2, pp. 163–190.

⁷ The generational approach adopted here focuses on shared norms and practices, rather than on collective consciousness.

⁸ Rotkirch, *The Man Question*, p. xvi.

during the “discursive revolution”) are part of a “generation of articulation” that made a decisive step towards dissociating sex from marriage and reproduction⁹. Her analysis focuses on evidence of “earlier onset of sexual life”, “a higher number of marriages and sexual partners”, and “more varying kinds of sexual techniques”, without a specific focus on youth¹⁰.

However, other surveys, more concerned with reproductive practices, including Rotkirch’s own subsequent research, have come to partly contradictory conclusions. Qualitative surveys conducted in several Russian cities (Saint Petersburg, Chelyabinsk, Perm) have shown the persistence of normalized unplanned first births (experienced in terms of “fate”, for example), among the 1960s and 1970s cohort women¹¹. Sergei Zakharov’s quantitative research has shown that in terms of “fertility postponement”, “in Russia, no changes were observed before the cohorts born in the first part of the 1970s”¹². He has stressed that “unlike that in the Western countries, the [quiet] sexual revolution in Eastern Europe was not accompanied by the parallel process of the contraceptive revolution”¹³. Indeed, in the USSR, at the time, pill use was extremely rare, and condom use was quite low. Limited use of technological contraception during sexual initiation remained true throughout the 1990s¹⁴. Focusing on contraceptive practices during youth therefore highlights the resemblance between the mid-1960s to mid-1970s cohort and the previous one, rather than their differences.

Building on these divergent surveys, the present article reexamines the boundaries between late Soviet and post-Soviet “sexual generations”, focusing on women and ordinary heterosexual behavior¹⁵. It is based on semi-structured biographical interviews, in which informants were asked to tell the story of their “first times” (first love, first intimate relations, first marriage, first pregnancy, first birth), and more generally of their transitions to adulthood¹⁶. Interviews were conducted in Moscow and Saint Petersburg in 2012–2016 with 30 women and 9 men born between the 1950s and the 1990s¹⁷. Most of the informants belong to the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Elina Haavio-Mannila, Anna Rotkirch: Generational and gender differences in sexual life in St. Petersburg and urban Finland, in: *Finnish Yearbook of Population Research* 34 (1997), pp. 133–160.

¹¹ Anna Kruglova: *Between 'Too Young' and 'Already Old': The Fleeting Adulthood of Russia's Split Generation*, in: Durham, Deborah, Jacqueline Solway (ed.): *Elusive Adulthoods: The Anthropology of New Maturities*. Indiana University Press, Indiana 2017, pp. 174–196; Anna Rotkirch, Katja Kesseli: “The First Child is the Fruit of Love”. On the Russian Tradition of Early First Births, in: Tomi Huttunen, Mikko Ylikangas (ed.): *Witnessing Change in Contemporary Russia*. Kikumora Publications, Helsinki 2010, pp. 201–220; Temkina, Novyi byt.

¹² Zakharov, Russian Federation, p. 932.

¹³ Ibid, p. 918.

¹⁴ See section 1.3 below

¹⁵ On homosexual generations, see: Francesca Stella: *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2014.

¹⁶ The interviews were conducted in Russian and translated by the author. Most of them lasted from one to two hours.

¹⁷ Among the 1950s to mid-1970s cohorts’ informants on which this article is focused, almost one third grew up outside of the “two capitals”, in small to large provincial cities, and moved to Moscow or Saint Petersburg when they started university or later.

intelligentsia (but none has an elite, *nomenklatura* background)¹⁸. Among those born before the late 1970s (i.e. the focus of this article), the majority has a higher education (typically, engineers or teachers), whereas several has completed a vocational training (e.g. factory workers or a saleswoman). Living in big cities and being among the most educated meant having access to better medical services, and being more inclined to postpone one's first child, especially after the perestroika¹⁹. Interviewees were recruited through personal informal contacts, and the snowball method. Archive material (medical popularization press²⁰ and family life handbooks) and second-hand statistics²¹ were also analyzed. Revisiting Rotkirch's pioneering work²², I argue that two sexual generations should be distinguished²³.

The “stagnation”²⁴ generation encompasses those born between the 1950s and the mid-1960s. This conceptualization echoes Aleksei Yurchak's investigation of “the last Soviet generation” that “came of age between the 1970s and the mid-1980s”²⁵. In contrast with previous generations, that had been affected by the Revolution, the Terror, the War or the Thaw, the “children of stagnation”, enjoyed unprecedented stability, predictable professional careers and a higher material standard of living. State intervention (in particular welfare policies), kinship solidarities, the economy of favors (“*blat*”), and a thriving informal economy were key features of this way of life²⁶. Access to employment and housing was organized by the State, and transitions to adulthood were highly standardized²⁷. While Rotkirch considers that this generation “[lacks] a common generational experience” (due to the “widening gap” between “official morality” and everyday life)²⁸, I will argue that State-organized transitions to adulthood, the trivialization of shotgun weddings and the romanticization of carefree unplanned first births were, in fact, its unifying experience. In their narratives of first pregnancies, I identified two reproductive frameworks that allowed for the

¹⁸ On class divisions in the USSR (primarily based on social and cultural capital, rather than economic capital), see: Suvi Salmenniemi (ed.): *Rethinking Class in Russia*. Routledge Burlington 2012, pp. 4-7.

¹⁹ Julie Brown, Nina Rusinova: *Lichnye sviazi v sisteme zdravookhraneniia i 'kar'era bolzeni*, in: *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniia* 3 (1993), pp. 30–36; Veronika Kushtanina: *Transition de l'époque soviétique à la période post-soviétique au prisme de biographies singulières*, in: *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* (2019), no. 49, pp. 239–259.

²⁰ In particular, monthly issues of *Zdorov'e* magazine published between 1972 and 1991 were systematically analyzed.

²¹ Unless otherwise stated, all the surveys quoted hereafter are representative.

²² Rotkirch, *The Man Question*.

²³ The gap between Rotkirch's results and mine may result in part from the fact that she collected narratives through “an autobiographical competition about love and sexuality”, whereas the narratives I collected through interviews are arguably more ordinary.

²⁴ Quotation marks are used because “stagnation” was not an official designation such as “perestroika” (it was introduced later by Gorbachev, with negative connotations).

²⁵ Alexei Yurchak: *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005.

²⁶ Kirsten Bönker: *Depoliticalisation of the Private Life? Reflections on Private Practices and the Political in the Late Soviet Union*, in Willibald Steinmetz, Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (ed.): *Writing Political History Today*. Frankfurt am Main 2013, pp. 207-234.

²⁷ Alain Blum, Pascal Sebillé, Sergeï Zakharov: *A divergent transition to adulthood in France and Russia: a cohort approach*, in: *Revue d'Etudes Comparatives Est-Ouest* 40 (2009), no. 3–4, pp. 123.

²⁸ Rotkirch, *The Man Question*, p. 167.

normalization of unplanned first births: the “chance” framework, and the “mistake” framework. They can be analyzed as two “framing rules” (with their corresponding “feeling rules”), in Arlie Hochschild’s conceptualization²⁹.

Similarly to Rotkirch, I identified pivotal years of birth circa 1965³⁰: indeed, turning 22 (the median age at first birth for women) in 1987 (at the beginning of the perestroika changes) or in the following years had very different implications. Some informants born as late as 1967, who had their first child as late as 1989, were included in the “stagnation” generation, given that their transition to adulthood was still characterized by employment stability and access to non-profit housing³¹. Other informants, born in 1965 and 1967, who had their first child as soon as 1987, were included in the perestroika generation, given that their transition to adulthood already lacked these features.

The perestroika generation encompasses those born between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. “Born Soviet children, they were teenagers during perestroika [...], young adults looking for jobs in the ‘chronic crisis’³² of the 1990s”³³. In line with Anna Kruglova’s research, they can be seen as a “split generation”, as “split between Soviet and post-Soviet moral orders”³⁴. Similarly, Raili Nugin’s survey of the 1970s cohort’ transitions to adulthood in post-Soviet Estonia has called it a “threshold” or “intermediate generation”³⁵. Furthermore, I will show that Rotkirch’s claim that the 1965-1975 cohort’s valorization of sexual pleasure for its own sake (dissociated from “marriage or children”) is a “shared generational experience” should be nuanced. First, the persistent gender gap was limiting this trend. In addition, I encountered evidence of a split sexual generation, torn between the previous generation’s normalization of early unplanned parenthood, on the one hand, and rapidly changing sexual norms and material living conditions, on the other hand. It should also be noted that the 1970s cohort is characterized by an unprecedented differentiation between the age at first birth of the least and the most educated women (in comparison with the 1960s cohort, the gap went from two to five years)³⁶. In other words, postponing motherhood was becoming a new way of “doing class” in a context of growing social inequalities. While this aspect surely deserves attention, it will remain beyond the scope of this article. We will rather focus on

²⁹ Arlie Hochschild: *Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure*, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1979), no. 3, pp. 551-575.

³⁰ Rotkirch, *The Man Question*, p. 23.

³¹ Either State property or cooperatives. See section 2.1 below.

³² Olga Shevchenko: *Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2009.

³³ Kruglova, *Between “Too Young”*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Raili Nugin: *Constructing a transition generation: the 1970s cohort*, in Anu Kannike, Maaris Raudsepp (ed.), *Generations in Estonia: Contemporary Perspectives on Turbulent Times*. University of Tartu Press Tartu 2016, p. 8.

³⁶ Kushtanina: *Transition de l’époque soviétique*.

shared gendered generational experiences, and on the persistence of mechanisms favoring unplanned first pregnancies among all Russian women, including the most educated.

The first part of the article analyses the health policies, the political and economic transformations, as well as the gendered norms that shaped the ineffective contraceptive practices of both the “stagnation” and the perestroika generations. The second part deals with the destabilization of the Soviet reproductive frameworks, from one generation to the next. It examines how the younger informants dealt with (potential) unplanned pregnancies within the framing and feeling rules inherited from the “stagnation” generation, although in new, uncertain socio-economic conditions.

1. Youth sexuality without effective contraception

1.1 Changing sexual norms and persistent silences

During the youth of the “stagnation” generation, official morality condemned premarital sexual relations. More specifically, it was commonly understood as a condemnation of sexual relations without marriage plans. It concerned both genders, with extra warnings addressed to women – since “nature dictates” them “to be more careful”, as stated in the popular *Zdorov'e (Health)* magazine³⁷. The “everyday morality” was more permissive than the official one³⁸, but its gendered double standard was not weaker: men’s premarital (hetero)sexuality was fully normalized and even expected, whereas women’s, although far from marginal, was less common and potentially shamed. According to a 1983 survey on Soviet citizens who were registering their first marriage, 12% of men and 40% of women stated that they got married as virgins, and among those who did not, 28% of men and 75% of women were marrying their first sexual partner³⁹. In line with previous research⁴⁰, my interviews show that it was becoming increasingly trivial for women to legitimize their sexual activity in the name of “love”, with or without marriage plans.

In 1987 and in the following years, there was a sudden boom of media and cultural content that explicitly dealt with sexuality, and conveyed an unprecedented diversity of stances, including some in favor of a more permissive attitude towards youth sexuality⁴¹. Far from all the informants of the perestroika generation remember this new discourse as an important source of positive identification. Ania, who turned

³⁷ *Zdorov'e* 9, 1989.

³⁸ Rotkirch *The Man Question*, p. 12. She defines “everyday morality” as “the possible, acceptable and typical (although not always the desired, the ideal)”.

³⁹ *Zdorov'e* 5, 1987.

⁴⁰ Anna Temkina: *Litsemerie i liberalizatsiia, udovol'stvie i raschet: zhenskaia seksual'nost' v brake i vne braka*, in: Anna Temkina (ed.): *Seksual'naia zhizn' zhenshchiny: mezhdru podchineniem i svobodoi*, Izd-vo EUSPB, Saint Petersburg 2008, pp. 229–352.

⁴¹ Kon, Riordan, *The Sexual Revolution*.

18 in 1994, remembers that at the time, she felt part of a new, more “honest” generation, that embraced the “sexual revolution”, considered sex without marriage plans normal, and rejected the “hypocrisy” of their parents. A few other women informants also recalled having one or more partners before their first husband (if any), while ignoring (or even actively fighting) their parents’ disapproval, but their narratives do not connect this with the perestroika changes.

The period from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s was a period of changing norms, rather than new, stabilized norms. Young women’s premarital heterosexual relations were becoming increasingly legitimate, especially among peers and, after 1987, in media and cultural productions as well, while their parents’ attitudes remained diverse and often negative. Women’s sexual debut was becoming earlier, less connected with expectations of marriage and motherhood, more similar to men’s. The 1967-71 cohort women had their first sexual intercourse at 19.3 years old on average, and the 1972-76 cohort at 18.5 years old⁴². But this gender equalization process remained limited; in this regard, Russia’s evolution is similar to other Eastern European post-communist countries’, as well as Southern Europe’s⁴³. Only local surveys allow us to compare men’s and women’s ages at first intercourse. In Saint Petersburg, the double standard that was quite important for the 1947-52 cohort (women were becoming sexually active about two years later than men, on average) decreased but did not fade away for the 1957-62 and the 1967-72 cohorts (a 1.2 year gap between men and women remained)⁴⁴. Similarly, a (non-representative) survey conducted among Moscow students born in 1975-78 showed a 1.2 year gender gap in median ages⁴⁵. In fact, while the perestroika generation women’s sexual debut was characterized by changing norms and behaviors, it remained different from the same cohort’s men’s, and similar to the “stagnation” generation women’s, in one crucial aspect: they would still involve a high risk of unplanned pregnancy, i.e. of potential abortions and (more or less welcomed) unplanned births that were both disproportionately women’s burden.

Indeed, their youth was in part shaped by enduring silences on sexuality and birth control. As in the previous generation, parents were very unlikely to provide neither knowledge nor help regarding contraception before or during their sexual initiation. My interviews are rather consistent with statistics collected in Saint Petersburg, showing that if we compare women born in 1960-69 with those born in 1970-79, the proportion of women who state that they received “enough sexual education at home” rose only from

⁴² ROSSTAT: Reproduktivnoe zdorov’e naseleniia Rossii, 2011, Itogovi otchet, Moscow 2013.

⁴³ Michel Bozon, Osmo Kontula: Sexual Initiation and Gender in Europe. A Cross-cultural Analysis of Trends in the Twentieth century, in: Michel Hubert, Nathalie Bajos, Théo Sandfort (ed.): Sexual behaviour and HIV/AIDS in Europe. Comparison of national surveys. UCL Press, London 1998, pp. 37-67.

⁴⁴ Haavio-Mannila, Rotkirch: Generational and Gender Differences.

⁴⁵ Milhail Denissenko, Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna, David Guerra: Sexual Behaviour and Attitudes of Students in the Moscow State University, in: European Journal of Population 15 (1999), no. 3, pp. 279-304.

11 to 19%⁴⁶. Parents would usually avoid the topic of sexuality, except for some mothers who tried to convey to their daughters a vision of premarital sex as shameful and / or risky (especially in terms of out-of-wedlock pregnancies), without giving any specific contraceptive advice. For both these generations, as a rule, school was not a source of information on birth control either. Classes of “Ethics and psychology of family life” introduced in the early 1980s did not constitute a break from the past. An analysis of the content of two handbooks shows that contraception was not part of the official curricula, except for one mention of the harmful side effects of the pill⁴⁷. Later on, perestroika did not entail any systematic reform in the field of sexual education, but it did however allow some partly innovative bottom-up local initiatives, as one of the interviews reveals. Ania remembers a gynecologist giving a conference at her school in a small Ukrainian city, when she was 15 or 16, circa 1990-1991: “They gathered all the school girls, and she told us something about lemon juice and vinegar [douches] as a contraceptive method”, “she talked about condoms as well, but then again, on the whole, the bottom line was that a girl was supposed to get married and, uh... have children”. The extent of such initiatives remains unclear. In Saint Petersburg, among women born in 1970-1979, only 6% consider their received “enough sexual education” at school⁴⁸. In conclusion, the data examined here strongly suggests that being a teenager under Brezhnev or under Gorbachev generally did not make any significant difference, in terms of the almost complete absence of transmission of contraceptive knowledge from parents or at school.

1.2 A broadening contraceptive landscape

In parallel of this inertia, the perestroika generation could potentially seize new contraceptive opportunities. On the one hand, part of this generation became sexually active, and sometimes became parents, as early as the mid-1980s, before any important changes had happened, in conditions similar to those of the “stagnation” generation. At the time, gynecologists were a very unlikely source of contraceptive guidance for young women. My interviews, consistent with previous research⁴⁹, show that the first consultation would usually take place only during the first pregnancy, when women were about to become mothers or getting an abortion. The only medical method that was then carefully promoted by the Health Ministry was the IUD, which was to be prescribed to mothers only; the pill was considered harmful, and to be prescribed only for prophylactic purposes. Legal abortion was a very common way of spacing and stopping births, but it was officially considered a threat to future fertility; the press and the doctors would rather successfully discourage women who were not yet mothers from resorting to it. Moreover, early

⁴⁶ Katja Kesseli et al: *Reproductive Health and Fertility in St. Petersburg: Report on a Survey of 18–44 Year Old Women in 2004*. Department of Sociology, University of Helsinki 2005.

⁴⁷ Ivan Grebennikov, Luiza Kovin'ko: *Khrestomatiia po etike i psikhologii semeinoi zhizni*. Prosveshchenie, Moscow 1987; Ivan Grebennikov (ed.): *Etika i psikhologii semeinoi zhizni*. Prosveshchenie, Moscow 1984.

⁴⁸ Kesseli et al, *Reproductive Health*.

⁴⁹ Temkina, *Novyi byt*, p. 50.

motherhood was officially encouraged, with first-time mothers older than 25 labeled as “old parturients”. As state employees, physicians were not supposed to encourage premarital sex or means to postpone motherhood. As a result, young women and men were left with rather scarce official medical popularization, in the form of books and magazines addressed to married couples willing to space or stop births. For instance, in *Zdorov’e*, couples were essentially oriented to the IUD, the condom, as well as the rhythm method (its risk of failure was downplayed)⁵⁰.

On the other hand, part of the perestroika cohort experienced part or all of their sexual initiation after 1987, when two important sets of political changes were taking place. First, the Health Ministry took a renewed stance on contraception. Previously secret abortion statistics were published, and the USSR’s world record in this domain was loudly criticized in the media⁵¹. Government officials admitted to being excessively cautious about the pill (and that condoms were an important tool in the fight against the HIV epidemic that crossed the Soviet borders circa 1987). This new stance was maintained and strengthened until 1997. However, sources indicate that the physicians’ skepticism towards the pill evolved slowly⁵². Second, the government renounced three monopolies that played a key role in shaping the contraceptive landscape of the population, namely the monopolies of healthcare, of control over media and cultural production, and of importation / production and sale of contraceptives.

Some elements of market economy were introduced in the health sector: new “*kooperativ*” and “*khozraschet*” clinics emerged, that facilitated avoiding the free-of-charge local physician automatically assigned by the State. Such practices of avoidance, and strategies to arrange consultations with practitioners chosen through acquaintances, combined with under-the-table payments, were already common before perestroika, but they were illegal, informal and partly uncertain. During and after perestroika, these longstanding practices continued, but more importantly, legal for-profit medicine gave those patients who could afford it unprecedented opportunities to behave as demanding consumers⁵³ rather than captive beneficiaries. It gave women more leeway to obtain medical contraception.

At the same time, the end of State censorship of publications allowed new discourses on sexuality and birth control. In 1991, *Zdorov’e* magazine, for instance, published a translation of a chapter from an American sexual education handbook that recommended the condom and the pill to teenagers⁵⁴.

⁵⁰ Mona Claro: *Ni hasard ni projet. Genre, sexualité et procréation pendant la jeunesse en Russie (années 1970 – années 2010)*, PhD Thesis in Sociology. EHESS, Paris, 2018, pp. 79-118.

⁵¹ Mona Claro: *Dénoncer les maltraitances gynécologiques en URSS : critique ordinaire des patientes et critique féministe (1979-1989)*, in: *Diogène* 267-268 (2019), no. 3-4, pp. 289-308.

⁵² Claro, *Ni hasard*, pp. 163-167.

⁵³ Anna Temkina, Michele Rivkin-Fish: *Creating Health Care Consumers: The Negotiation of Un/Official Payments, Power and Trust in Russian Maternity Care*, in: *Social Theory & Health* 18 (2019), pp. 340–357.

⁵⁴ *Zdorov’e* 6, 1991.

Furthermore, two informants remember the advent of a new magazine in particular, *Spid-Info* (AIDS-Info) (1989), that featured HIV-prevention material along with erotic and yellow press content (Ania, born in 1976, and Aleksandra, born in 1972). As suggested by this example, in the new, abundant media discourses about sexuality, the hedonistic register would compete with the health register, and often outshine it. Interestingly, in the informants' recollections of the end of the Soviet "taboo" about sexuality, the spread of pleasure tips, erotica and pornography seemed more important (whether they were appreciated or not) than the spread of safe-sex advice.

In parallel, the availability of contraceptives stopped depending on central planning only, and more brands, including imported ones, became available. A new generation of condom took over: some informants remember it as an improvement of quality (as they were less thick, more solid), and Aleksandra even considers that "condoms emerged only in 1992". Moreover, this market-driven extension of the contraceptive offer was reinforced by the new *laissez-faire* attitude of the authorities regarding hormonal contraception. The USSR was among the first countries to authorize the sale of emergency hormonal contraception: it became available without prescription in 1991⁵⁵. As for the regular pill, despite the regulations, it became later informally accessible without prescription as well⁵⁶. Furthermore, while the interviews do not mention any underground sales of contraceptives before the perestroika (in contrast to attested underground sales of erotic material), some include reports of a contraband market under Gorbachev, and possibly in the 1990s, when the informal economy was more generally booming. The youth of the perestroika generation could thus potentially have been radically transformed by a new generation of imported condoms, and by the wider accessibility of the pill. Yet, it was not the case, as the next section will show.

1.3 Obstacles to medical methods and condom use

The predominant modes of transmission of contraceptive knowledge and norms were an important obstacle to medical methods' (pill and IUD) use. As shown by Rotkirch, for the "stagnation" generation, "peer groups" and "learning by doing" were key "channels" of transmission⁵⁷. My interviews show that it remained true for the perestroika generation, even as new, more massified opportunities to learn about safe sex were beginning to develop; on this issue, my conclusions are more cautious than Rotkirch's⁵⁸. In both generations, friends, acquaintances and sexual partners were key sources of information and representations on what methods were possible and desirable. Before the perestroika, this informal education would orient

⁵⁵ Zdorov'e 4, 1991.

⁵⁶ Kate Grindlay, Bridgit Burns, Daniel Grossman: Prescription requirements and over-the-counter access to oral contraceptives: a global review, in: *Contraception* 88 (2013), no. 1, pp. 91–96.

⁵⁷ Rotkirch: *The Man Question*, pp. 163-168.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 170-171, 277-280

young people to the rhythm method, withdrawal or condoms. After 1987 and throughout the 1990's, this informal education was evolving, but it would still tend to trivialize non-technological, risky methods and to convey mistrust in medical methods. Interviews with both generations contain rather negative assessments of this informal education: some informants felt they lacked contraceptive knowledge during their initiation, whereas others felt confident at the time, and realized later that they had overestimated the efficacy of non-technological methods. An expression used by Tatiana (born in 1959 in Moscow), could summarize these assessments: "*sarafannoe radio*" refers to a rural style "gossip mill". Similarly, informants of the perestroika generation talked about "learning by trial and error [*na oshchup*]" (Nikolai, born in 1972 in Saint Petersburg), or about a "courtyard education" and discovering the "secrets" of contraception (Aleksandra born in 1972 in a small Arctic city). After 1987, medical methods were theoretically more accessible, but as a rule, physicians were not proactively promoting them to young women. Peers arguably had a more decisive influence, as shown below in the cases of the only two informants of the perestroika generation who used such methods in the 1990's (none did in the 1980's).

In the first case, Aleksandra "wanted to choose a pill" before her first intercourse (at 18, in 1990), but she renounced after "some girls" from the university told her that their assigned women's clinic (in the outskirts of Moscow) would not help her: "They told me: [...] they will humiliate you" and "if you say you're a virgin, they won't believe you". As she was convinced that the "free of charge" healthcare system was too judgmental of women students' premarital sexual relations, she resigned to having her first intercourse unprepared, and her partner used withdrawal. She was also taught by fellow women students to drink chamomile infusion as post-coital contraception. Later on, circa 1991, as she was "becoming crazy" because of pregnancy scares, she heard that several of her friends had IUDs inserted, and she followed their example. She eventually got an IUD from a newly opened for-profit clinic she was recommended, once again, through word-of-mouth.

In the second case, Zoya (born in 1967 in Saint Petersburg) was introduced to withdrawal and the rhythm method by her first sexual partner, whom she trusted as an older medical student (first intercourse at 18, in 1985). In the following years, she received most of her contraceptive guidance from a friend who was involved in the newly thriving industry of sex work with Western men: she taught her how to use lemon juice douches (that turned out to be very painful), and she got her contraband emergency hormonal pills. Zoya resigned to this source of supply because similarly to Aleksandra, she was convinced that she would not have been able to get pills through legal channels "without an engagement ring". Nevertheless, she remained deeply skeptical about the hormonal contraception she was using: "they were of bad quality, they were expired". Later on, she considered turning to the IUD but never did because, among other reasons, "babies would be born with IUDs in their heads". Another example of "*sarafannoe radio*" fueled mistrust

of medical contraception is provided by Sonia (born in 1967 in Moscow): she remembers that circa 1988, a “*razbitnaya*” (boisterous, exuberant) friend considered buying an IUD she was offered “in an underground passage” but renounced, in fear that it would be “full of AIDS”.

The obstacles to the use of medical contraception revealed above are found in other contexts, and are well identified in the scientific literature: “misinformation”, “mistrust” of medical novelties and health practitioners, reinforced by (fear of) “mistreatment” by these practitioners⁵⁹. In Russia’s case, during the perestroika and in the following years, these obstacles appear to have been exacerbated by a very sudden and disorienting shift to a globalized market economy with a massive informal component. Moreover, some narratives tend to cast familiarity with medical methods as the prerogative of unconventional young women, such as a sex worker, or an “exuberant” friend. These representations testify for another potential obstacle to medical methods: associations with promiscuity conflicting with women’s gender assignments. Contraceptive practices were in part shaped by gendered sexual norms. Once again, this phenomenon is not specific to Russia. It consists in “the normative ideal of the serious, innocent young woman, who does not know anything about sex, and leaves the initiatives to men, as opposed to women stigmatized as ‘sluts’ when they are knowledgeable and take decisions”⁶⁰.

Gender norms were also an important obstacle to condom use. Interviews with the “stagnation” generation men and women show that at the time of their sexual debut, the condom was well known, but quite unpopular. I coded discourses on this unpopularity into four categories: first, material obstacles, i.e. shortages and / or low quality; then, three gendered normative obstacles, i.e. embarrassment and shame (when buying or discussing), associations with casual sex, and finally, active / passive heterosexual roles (during intercourse, men are expected to be the ones who offer and decide). While some informants referred to only material obstacles, some referred to both material and normative obstacles, and others only to normative obstacles. During the youth of the perestroika generation, the material obstacles disappeared, but the three normative obstacles were quite persistent, even as the HIV epidemic was beginning to spread.

While some women state that when they young, condoms repelled them as unromantic, others complained of men’s unwillingness to use them. Attitudes such as Igor’s (born in 1965 in Saint Petersburg) seem to have been commonplace among men: “Girls were the ones who were supposed to know about contraception. Boys were supposed to know about diseases”. This meant that men were inclined to use condoms only outside of stable relationships; moreover, interviews suggest that practices were often in

⁵⁹ Sidney Schuler, Maria Choque, Susanna Rance: Misinformation, Mistrust, and Mistreatment: Family Planning among Bolivian Market Women, in: *Studies in Family Planning* 25 (1994), no. 4, pp. 211–221.

⁶⁰ Paola Tabet : *La grande arnaque: Sexualité des femmes et échange économique-sexuel*. L’Harmattan, Paris 2005, p. 66. Translated by the author.

contradiction with this normative script, and casual sex was also far from always protected. Men who one-sidedly decided to use withdrawal instead of condoms, and men who failed to withdraw on time, are leitmotifs in women informants' narratives of both "stagnation" and perestroika generations. As a result, women were inclined to resort to two sets of options, in combination with withdrawal, or in replacement of it. First, they would rely at least in part on the rhythm method, but here again, they could experience difficulties associated with gendered vulnerabilities (cases of women who reluctantly forced themselves to have sex in the name of love, and cases of sexual violence, are far from exceptional). Second, they would attempt to make up for unprotected sex with post-coital methods that did not require men's implication, even if their efficacy or their safety was dubious (e.g. douches).

Once again, only local quantitative surveys are available on contraception during the youth of the perestroika generation. In Saint Petersburg, if we compare women born in 1970-79 with those born in 1960-69, the proportion of those who did not use any contraceptive method at first intercourse decreased only from 63 to 47%; condom use rose from 11 to 22%, withdrawal use increased from 24 to 28%, and rhythm method use stayed at a 7-8% level; only 2% were using the pill, and 5% used post-coital hormonal contraception (several answers allowed)⁶¹. Among a (non-representative) sample of Moscow students born in 1975-78, only 43% used technological contraception at first intercourse⁶². Overall consistent with these statistics, my interviews show that the perestroika generation increasingly turned to technological contraception during youth, but this shift remained quite limited, and complete lack of protection, as well as using methods with high risks of failure, remained frequent and trivialized.

Moreover, reluctance towards seeking an abortion prior to motherhood (because of concerns about future fertility) remained widespread: in 1990-95, the share of abortions involving first pregnancies was only approximately 5-6%⁶³. It is therefore not surprising that the perestroika generation women did not postpone motherhood more than the previous generation. On the contrary, as they experienced earlier sexual debut, they were facing a rather high risk of unplanned birth at earlier ages. For Russian women born from the 1950s to the mid-1960s, median age at first birth fluctuated around 22-23; for those born in the early 1970s, it had decreased to 21. In parallel, for men born between the 1950s and the early 1970s, the median age at first birth fluctuated around 25; for those born in the mid-1970s, it increased to 26⁶⁴. According to a

⁶¹ Kesseli et al, *Reproductive Health*.

⁶² Denissenko et al: *Sexual Behaviour*.

⁶³ ROSSTAT: *Zdravookhranenie v Rossii*. Moscow 2007.

⁶⁴ Blum et al: *A Divergent Transition*.

more recent survey on women, an increased postponement of motherhood cannot be observed in the 1972-76 cohort, but only in the 1977-81 cohort⁶⁵.

In conclusion, during the youth of the perestroika generation, peers continued playing a more crucial role in the shaping of contraceptive knowledge and norms than teachers or physicians. Despite new possibilities, young women were anxious about medical methods such as the pill, and condom use remained limited. The gender double standard was persistent, and women, in contrast with men, had a rather short interval between their sexual initiation and their entry into motherhood.

2. Soviet reproductive frameworks in the turmoil

When women and men informants of the perestroika generation told about the pregnancies they or their partners discovered before they were parents⁶⁶, similarly to the “stagnation” generation, there were (almost) no narratives about pregnancies that occurred after they deliberately stopped using contraception in order to plan their first child. Narratives about how informants of the “stagnation” and perestroika generations reacted to unplanned first pregnancies (emotions, thoughts, discussions, decisions to interrupt or not) were coded into two categories. They were analyzed as evidence of two reproductive frameworks, i.e. two “framing rules”⁶⁷, available at the time in order to make sense of (potential) unplanned pregnancies. According to Arlie Hochschild, “framing rules” imply “feeling rules”⁶⁸. Here, the “chance” framework was identified in narratives about sexual relations in the context of marriage (plans), when unplanned pregnancies were “naturally” welcomed, and in some way implicitly expected, if not awaited. On the contrary, within the “mistake” framework, unplanned pregnancies were not immediately interpreted as happy accidents, and the decision to give birth is described in terms of resignation (usually after abortion was considered); this framework was almost exclusively used in narratives about sexual relations without (unanimous) marriage plans. These two frameworks are consistent with the two “explanations” of unplanned first births identified by Anna Rotkirch’s and Katja Kesseli in interviews with Saint Petersburg women born in 1962-1980: the child as a “fruit of love” or as a “mistake, but opted for”⁶⁹. In line with their conclusions, I found that such a normalization of unplanned births was not true for the second and subsequent births, often carefully postponed or never realized.

⁶⁵ ROSSTAT: Reproktivnoe zdorov’e.

⁶⁶ I am referring to pregnancies that were interrupted (abortions, miscarriages) before one became a parent (if ever), and to pregnancies that ended in the birth of the first child. Further, they will be designated as “first pregnancies”.

⁶⁷ Hochschild: “Emotion Work...”.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Rotkirch, Kesseli: “The First Child...”.

2.1 The normalization of early unplanned parenthood during “stagnation”

During the youth of the “stagnation” generation, the “chance” and “mistake” frameworks were more or less in line with both official and everyday moralities. Becoming parents “by chance” was valued as the “natural” outcome of “serious”, “loving” sexual relations within the context of marriage (plans). Becoming parents “by mistake”, ideally after a shotgun wedding (or when it was impossible, as a single mother), was often pragmatically accepted as a lesser evil than abortion, and considered a reasonable and respectable decision after a mishap. In both cases, getting married during a first pregnancy was normalized: in 1975-84, only 58% of first children were conceived within marriage, but 83% of them were born after a wedding⁷⁰. As for single motherhood, it was somewhat stigmatized, but it received the media’s compassion and some welfare support⁷¹. In the recollections of the “stagnation” generation, narratives about becoming a parent within one of these two frameworks, especially within the “chance” framework, are typically associated with a selective nostalgia for the stability of “stagnation” period, and the Soviet Welfare State. The informants tend to value these aspects, while often being critical of other aspects of the Soviet regime. This echoes what Kirsten Bönker has analyzed as a “synthesising”, “down-to-earth” and “ambivalent” nostalgia for “the Soviet ‘golden 1970s’ ” among former “ordinary Soviet citizens” born before 1962⁷². Such associations can be found in interviews with informants born as late as 1967, who became parents as late as 1989, in parallel with professional and residential trajectories still typical of the “stagnation” generation.

In the “stagnation” generation, the life course was highly standardized, even across social hierarchies. “All the stages in the transition to adulthood [were] enacted within a short timeframe: the stages of leaving the parents’ home, union formation and [becoming parents] were experienced passively rather than decided actively”⁷³. Women usually did not feel that postponing the birth of their first child was necessary or desirable, in terms of their career or standard of living⁷⁴. Becoming a mother during one’s higher education was normalized, and in part facilitated by university and welfare regulations. Upon finishing their education, young people were automatically appointed to stable, full time jobs (“*raspredelenie*”), and fear of unemployment was unknown. Mothers were guaranteed to resume their jobs after a maternity leave, and crèches were quite widely accessible and affordable. The typical way to move into independent housing involved waiting lists: young people would often have a child while living at their parents or in-laws, and only after said household had thus become officially “overcrowded”, they would be granted access to long,

⁷⁰ Brienna Perelli-Harris: Changes in union status during the transition to parenthood in eleven European countries, 1970s to early 2000s, in: *Population Studies* 66 (2012), no. 2, pp. 167–182.

⁷¹ Jennifer Utrata: *Women without Men: Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca et al 2015.

⁷² Kirsten Bönker: *Perestroika and the Loss of Certainties: The Post-Soviet Reevaluation of Soviet Money Practices and Social Equality*, in *Journal of Modern European History* 15 (2017), no. 3, pp. 367–394.

⁷³ Blum et al, *A Divergent Transition*.

⁷⁴ Rotkirch: *The Man Question*, pp. 78-82, 105.

but reliable waiting lists (buying a “*kooperativ*” apartment was another, more exclusive way to access housing). All these social policies would guarantee predictable life courses, and encourage early parenthood.

Most of the interviews with women of the “stagnation” generation feature the “chance” framework⁷⁵, and contain positive, partially nostalgic appreciations of what they remember as simpler times, when young people could be carefree about the timing of entry into parenthood. As a rule, their first pregnancies occurred after either unprotected or poorly protected sex, but in both cases, they were not characterized as a failure or an accident. For instance, Veronika recalls: “We would just think: well, I fell in love [...]. We did not think about where we were going to live, with what money” (first child at 25, in 1983). Similarly, according to Sonia (first child at 22, in 1989):

“Everyone used to live more or less in the same average way, but with the certainty of having behind them a powerful State, that no matter what, would solve your problems”.

“Unlike nowadays, no one would think: well, first, I must make a career, provide for my family, and only then I will think about the fact that I must start a family”.

Sonia became pregnant with her first child during her last year at the university, very quickly after getting married. She had not “thought of” or “discussed” this timing, but it felt “natural”. After graduation, she was automatically appointed to a stable job, and the fact that she immediately took a maternity leave was not a problem. Her parents and her in-laws bought the newlyweds a “*kooperativ*” apartment in Moscow; a few years later, as speculation became possible, the same flat would have been unaffordable to them. As other informants, she contrasted positive memories about the Soviet era, when “love” and spontaneity would rule, and negative appreciations of the post-Soviet capitalist era, in which young people are forced to think about “money” and to be cautious.

Even Anastasia, who became a single mother at only 17 (in 1984), and then married a man who was not the biological father of her child at 18, somehow adheres to this romanticization of unplanned first births. As a young mother, she benefited from stable employment conditions, as well as free-of-charge crèches and infant food. When I asked her if there were examples of young people postponing parenthood at the time, she stated: “In our, how to put it... system, we do not plan children, like people do, maybe, abroad... [...] I know from the media that in America, for them, everything is planned, so they say”, “We are not robots, right?”. In conclusion, most “stagnation” generation women’s narratives about how they became mothers display an enduring attachment to the Soviet reproductive frameworks and feeling rules.

⁷⁵ Recruiting men of this generation for interviews turned out to be difficult, and one of the only two male informants was reluctant to talk about his reproductive life. Similarly to most women informants, the second male informant used the “chance” framework in a positive key, but without any nostalgia.

2.2 Embracing the Soviet reproductive frameworks in new conditions

When the perestroika generation was facing the risk of unplanned pregnancies before becoming parents, the same two Soviet reproductive frameworks (becoming parents “by chance” or “by mistake”) remained available, whereas the Soviet system that had sustained them was collapsing. Statistically, this generation was most likely to become parents under Gorbachev or in the early / mid-1990s, i.e. in uncertain, difficult times of political and economic turmoil. Among the informants, two women and one man (born between 1965 and 1973) had their first child between 1987 and 1995, and told about their entry into parenthood in a way that clashed with the typical “stagnation’s” narratives: without selective nostalgia, and in two cases, with bitterness, as detailed hereafter.

In the first case, Irina began dating her future husband at 21. In line with her Soviet socialization, she cannot remember having any discussions with him about contraception or the best time to start a family, and she tells the story of her first birth (quickly after her wedding, at 22, in 1995) within the “chance” framework. However, this framework sounds at odds with her unpredictable professional and residential trajectory. At the time of her first pregnancy, she had not completed her vocational training; she hints that in parallel, she was participating in the informal economy: “It was tough, in the country. The USSR had collapsed, and there wasn’t anything new yet. People would buy and resell stuff [...]. People were trying to earn money in any possible way”. The collapse of the Soviet Welfare State meant she did not have access to crèches, and had no possibilities to move into an independent housing through a waiting line or a “*kooperativ*”. Instead, she had to rely solely on kinship solidarities: her parents and in-laws helped her in babysitting the child and building a house in the outskirts of her large Siberian city. Beyond the “chance” framework, her assessment of family planning norms and practices during her youth is ambivalent. On the one hand, she stresses that women should start a family early, and build a “career” only afterwards, like she did. On the other hand, she depreciates the lack of sexual education at school and the fact that she and her peers “wouldn’t go much to the gynecologist” during youth, using terms such as “Sovietness” and “stiffness”. More generally, the way she assesses the Soviet regime clashes with the selective nostalgia of the “stagnation” generation:

“It may be true that inside our Iron curtain, everything was somehow organized. People’s life was organized, but it was organized, well, precisely, by someone who was on top, and would watch carefully after them, so that everyone did what they had to do, stayed in their little cage. And so that there would be just enough food for everyone. You know, like chicken in their enclosure”.

Here, instead of being pictured as a reassuring protection, the Soviet standard life course that Irina was prepared for, but never experienced, is dismissed as a “cage”.

In the second case, Igor had been dating his “first love” for six months when she became pregnant. He asked her to have an abortion, but “she was told that it was harmful, that it could make her infertile...

she just refused”. He tells the story of their shotgun wedding (“*po zaletu*”), and how he became a father during his last year of higher education (at 22, in 1987), within the “mistake” framework: “A son must have a father”. According to the Soviet “*raspredelenie*” system, he was appointed to an engineering job immediately after graduation, but “had to leave” after only two years because he “lacked money”. Indeed, career strategies elaborated before the perestroika could suddenly become ill adjusted to the new conditions. He then experienced a trajectory that became very common during the perestroika and the 1990s chronic economic crisis: he switched to a less qualified, but more profitable job. Both he and his wife continued living apart, at their parents:

“I didn’t want to get married, but as my son was born, I was compelled to [laughs], let’s say. But this marriage didn’t last long, given the fact that we had no apartment, no decent wages, that’s why our marriage fell apart after, I don’t know, three years”.

At the end of the interview, he added: “I think, and many people think, that one must buy an apartment, build a career, buy a car, and then have a child”, “but in my life, it turned out that I faced the fait accompli of my child’s birth, and... that’s it”. This present reevaluation of his past attests to the weakening of the Soviet reproductive frameworks from the late 1980s onwards. Early unplanned parenthood was still commonplace, but the framing and feeling rules that used to make it desirable, or at least respectable and bearable, were losing their material foundations, and therefore their clarity and obviousness.

2.3 Avoiding the Soviet reproductive frameworks

In the perestroika generation, while some informants became parents within the Soviet reproductive frameworks, but in the midst of uncertain times, others avoided or refused such a trajectory. In particular, three women (born between 1967 and 1976) faced the possibility of becoming mothers within the “mistake” framework during their higher education, but eventually experienced a (spontaneous or induced) abortion, and avoided a shotgun wedding (none of them was living with the potential father, and their relationships ended more or less shortly afterwards). They constitute three revealing cases. Aleksandra became pregnant at 19 (in 1991), after she had dated her first sexual partner for less than a year. She had experienced a few pregnancy scares before: “He would reassure me, he would say: It’s nothing to be scared of, we’ll get married, and everything will be fine”. Yet, when she actually discovered a pregnancy, instead of embracing the “mistake” framework that seemed obvious to her boyfriend, she decided to have an abortion. As for Zoya, she had an abortion at 22 (in 1989): she tried to convince her boyfriend to get married and have a child, but “he said: it’s your problem” and she refused to become a single mother. In the third case, when Ania discovered she was pregnant (at 22, in 1998), she and her boyfriend quickly seized the “mistake” framework: “In fifteen minutes, I managed to convince him that we needed to keep this child”. During the same conversation, he proposed her to marry, but demanded that she converted to his religion, and as she refused, they got into an argument; the same night, she had a miscarriage.

According to Zoya's and Ania's narratives, they were both initially quite in tune with the "mistake" framework and feeling rule when they discovered they were pregnant. They resigned to an unplanned birth, and they expected their boyfriends to react accordingly, and to propose: Ania welcomed the proposal, and Zoya was offended that she did not get one (she considered her boyfriend a "coward", and his actions a "betrayal"). However, they eventually avoided the unplanned birth, and later became relieved that they did not start a family in these circumstances. Ania, for example, stresses that couples who got married because of unplanned pregnancies, like she almost did, were "as a rule", "very unhappy" (there were a few examples among her university classmates). Interestingly, Aleksandra, on the other hand, already felt at odds with the "mistake" framework and feeling rule in 1991. She took an atypical decision, in that she refused the shotgun wedding she was offered, and had an abortion. Years after her abortion, she discovered she had become infertile. She expresses regrets about not being able to become a mother, and hints that the pregnancy she interrupted was perhaps a missed opportunity: "I saw so many abortions around me [...]. But the ones who had abortions, they already had children, whereas I had none". She remembers how difficult it was to weigh the pros and cons of welcoming an unplanned birth while finishing one's higher education, precisely when the USSR was about to collapse. On the one hand, she had witnessed some of her university classmates carrying on with "accidental pregnancies" even as "single mothers", counting on their family's and the Welfare State's help (they were granted the privilege of individual rooms at the student residence). On the other hand, "it was those times, the 1990s", and she "felt so fragile". Kruglova's analysis of the professional choices of the 1970s cohort seems relevant here as well: "for perestroika teens, the very rapidity of change in social, economic, and especially moral order was the generational experience. [...] Regardless of what they chose, they were not sure if the choice was right; and they were increasingly not sure if there was a right choice altogether"⁷⁶.

In conclusion, Aleksandra, Zoya and Ania, who came close to becoming mothers "by mistake", do not express selective nostalgia for the rule of love and spontaneity in the late Soviet period. They are very critical of the lack of sexual education and of effective contraceptive options during their youth. In this survey, their interviews feature the most acute denunciation of the Soviet era's sexuality: they describe it in terms of "shaming", "taboo", "prohibition" and "hypocrisy", as opposed to a new era, characterized by a "healthy interest" and more "choice", in this regard. Similar views are expressed by Nikolai, who became sexually active in the late 1980s, and had a planned first child only at 29 (in 2001). He also considers he came close to becoming a father by mistake: "thank God, we didn't have children"; "I had all kinds of disorderly relations... I was lucky"; "I can't say that we were planning, or not planning, [...] naturally, we wouldn't really use protection". When I asked him whether marrying at 29 was considered "normal, late or

⁷⁶ Kruglova: *Between "Too Young"*.

early”, he answered: “Now, it’s normal. Before, it was late. [...] The State would decide everything for you, in short. [...] Before, there used to be a law against parasitism, there used to be a tax on childlessness. [...] It was nonsense”. Instead of praising the Soviet era’s employment security and welfare policies towards families, he condemned the law against joblessness (“parasitism”), as well the 6% income tax that used to encourage young people to become parents as soon as they turned 18.

Such bitter appreciations of the Soviet era’s reproductive policies are found only in the interviews with informants who were socialized in this system, but had to readapt to dramatically different conditions as emerging adults. They criticize what they see as State paternalism and conservatism, regarding sexuality and reproduction in particular, and sometimes more generally. Their narratives tend to depict their young selves not as the main protagonists of a triumphant “sexual revolution”, but as a split generation, disoriented by rapid change.

Conclusion

In a pioneering survey that did not focus on youth, Rotkirch had concluded that Russian men and women born circa 1965-1975 were a disruptive sexual generation, characterized by a dissociation between sex, marriage and reproduction, and more diversified practices⁷⁷. However, subsequent surveys, as well as the research presented here, tend to downplay the changes that affected this cohort. By focusing specifically on sexual initiation, I showed that for young women who came of age during perestroika and in the 1990s, despite rapidly changing norms and an earlier onset of sexual life, contraceptive practices remained rather ineffective, and sex and reproduction remained quite inevitably entangled. The gendered double standard of youth sexuality was persistent: women’s heterosexual initiation was later than men’s, and they would become parents much earlier than them, around 21-22 years old. It appears that the changes that Rotkirch put at the center of her demonstration touched the sexual lives of this cohort’s women not so much during youth, but after they had fulfilled the normative expectation of motherhood (and often marriage)⁷⁸. Indeed, after these women had given birth to a first child, they would resort to IUDs and abortions much more massively.

I thus argued that the mid-1960s – mid-1970s cohort is a split sexual generation. It had to deal with the persistence of the gendered double standard and ineffective contraception, but in new, post-Soviet conditions, in which the Soviet reproductive frameworks were losing their obviousness. Becoming a parent in one’s early twenties “by chance” or “by mistake” was still commonplace, but because of the collapse of

⁷⁷ Rotkirch, *The Man Question*.

⁷⁸ Mona Claro: *Rester mère célibataire ou se (re)mettre en couple. Norme procréative et incertitudes conjugales en Russie (années 1980-2000)*, in: Isabelle Attané et al (ed.): *En marge du couple. Genre et normes conjugales*. Document de travail no. 243. Ined, Paris 2018.

the Welfare State and the chronic crisis, these frameworks had lost their material foundations. In particular, for those who were socially advantaged before the perestroika, had played by the rules and gotten a higher education, the typical intelligentsia lifestyle they were expecting could suddenly become inaccessible. Instead of the romanticization of carefree unplanned first births typical of the narratives of the “stagnation” generation, this split perestroika generation tends to express bitter appreciations of the Soviet “cage” that did not prepare them for the capitalist, sexually more permissive 1990s. I encountered narratives about carefully postponed and successfully planned first pregnancies only in part of the interviews with the 1980s cohort, which I analyzed as the first post-Soviet sexual generation⁷⁹.

Diffusionist interpretations of the so-called “sexual revolution” have claimed that it began spreading from North America and Northern and Western Europe in the 1960’s, whereas “Spain, Portugal, Greece and the Eastern European countries [...] had to wait until the end of dictatorship before a sexual revolution could begin”⁸⁰. However, seemingly similar changes took place in very different conditions. In North America and North-Western Europe, the “baby-boom generation”, which youth coincided with the “sexual revolution”, enjoyed a good economic conjuncture, and conditions for transition to adulthood better than their parents’⁸¹. Pill use has become a key feature of youth sexuality, and has strengthened women’s autonomy. In contrast, in Russia, important changes in youth sexuality took off in difficult times, in the turmoil of the collapse of the Soviet State and the “shock therapy”. Young men, and especially women, tended to be vulnerable, lacking both predictable pathways to adulthood and effective contraception. In fact, to this day, Russia, similarly to most Eastern and Southern European countries, has been characterized by a very limited diffusion of the pill among young, childless women, in contrast with the dominant Western trend⁸². Russia’s case thus stresses the need for more research on the local versions of the “sexual revolution”, in order to further question the too simplistic westernization, “catching up” paradigm.

⁷⁹ Claro: Ni hasard.

⁸⁰ Hekma, Giami, *Sexual Revolutions*.

⁸¹ Catherine Bonvalet, Céline Clément, Jim Ogg: *Renewing the Family: A History of the Baby Boomers*. Springer, Berlin 2015.

⁸² Claro, Ni hasard, pp. 285-287; Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna, Alessandra De Rose, Filomena Racioppi: Low Fertility and Limited Diffusion of Modern Contraception in Italy during the Second Half of the Twentieth Century, in: *Journal of Population Research* 22 (2005), no. 1, pp. 21-48.