

The New Woman is a Fertile One: Public Awareness Advertising and Russia's 'Boost the Birthrate' Campaign¹

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This analysis is part of a larger study of Russia's ongoing campaign aimed at incentivizing motherhood. The campaign was prompted by the 2006 government initiative to fight the country's decline in population by offering women what was seen as incentives to have more children. The study investigates the rhetoric and imagery employed in the marketing of this initiative, connecting it to the historically fraught "Woman's Question" in Russian society and to wider discourses that highlight the campaign's shortcomings and sexism. Because visual texts -such as advertisements- are particularly responsive to cultural and historical context, current Russian public awareness advertising offers a fascinating window into the workings of a new pronatalist ideology. The country known for its historic ambivalence about gender issues now finds itself in the awkward business of selling the joys of procreation.

On February 13th, 2012, in a presidential campaign move, Vladimir Putin published a sixteen page article, "Building Justice: a Social Policy for Russia," in *The Komsomol Truth* (*Комсомольская Правда*) newspaper. The extensive strategic plan piece becomes emotionally charged on the very

last page, titled "The Conservation of Russia." The segment outlines the country's demographic decline and makes a passionate appeal to the country, warning of ethnic and political extinction: "Our territory is home to about 40% of the world's natural resources, whereas the population of Russia makes only 2% of the global population," says Putin. "I believe the conclusion is clear. Should we fail to carry out a large-scale and long-term project for demographic development, the buildup of human resources and territorial development, we risk becoming an 'empty space' in global terms, and then our fate will be determined by someone else, not us" (*KIT*). Projecting that Russia's population-at 143 million in 2012- is bound to shrink to 107 million by 2050, Putin calls for a "comprehensive population conservation strategy" that would bring the number to 154 million" (*KIT*). As the article reaches its crescendo, the President equates passivity with dramatic loss of life, saying that "the historical price of choice between action and inaction is almost 50 million human lives within the next 40 years" (*KIT*).

¹Моим дорогим русским друзьям и коллегам: надеюсь эта статья будет воспринята как часть позитивной и продуктивной дискуссии по вопросам, которые волнуют всех кто любит Россию и болеет за её будущее.

The government's concerns are not without merit. Russia's demographic situation has gradually worsened since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, when the country was devastated by an economic crisis. In 1994, life expectancy for men fell to 57 years. Total Fertility Rate (TFR), the average number of children a Russian woman would bear in her lifetime, fell to 1.17 in 1999 (Rifkin-Fish, 158). To combat the crisis, the State Duma introduced a pronatalist measure, a law establishing government support known as "maternity capital." Beginning with January 2007, women that give birth to or adopt a second or consecutive child are entitled to a "maternity capital" fund of approximately \$11,000 which they can obtain, as a once in a lifetime measure, after the child reaches the age of three. The funds can be used towards acquiring housing, paying for children's education, or investing in the mother's retirement fund. According to Slonimzyk and Yurko's 2013 study, *Assessing the Impact of the Maternity Capital Policy in Russia*, by 2012, 23.9% of the issued three million maternity capital certificates were fully claimed, and, considering chronic housing shortage problems,² predictably over ninety percent of the certificates were used towards acquiring and improving housing conditions.³

Slonimzyk and Yurko cite higher birth rates four years into the program - Russia's TFR rose to 1.58 - but caution against attributing these to the effectiveness of pronatalist policies as the physical effect of maternity capital on fertility came to a mere 0.15 children per woman (36). Slonimzyk and Yurko's study concludes that "much of the increase in birth rates post 2007 is due to rescheduling of births and not long-term increases in fertility" (37). The issue of incentivizing motherhood is problematic in itself. Financial programs have historically proven to be ineffective, as child-bearing decisions, regardless of geography, are determined by a reliable system

of social support and medical care. This paper hopes to steer the conversation towards an issue not addressed by fertility specialists and demographers --the campaign's shortcomings and contradictions as reflected in its message channeled through Russia's public awareness advertising.

Of great interest is the 2012 *Social Advertising Conference* in the city of Novosibirsk, the capital of Russia's Siberia and third most populated city after Moscow and St. Petersburg (1.5 million).⁴ This event included round-tables and workshops, and culminated in a social ad contest, with two winning shorts selected out of fifty-six submissions. The mission of social advertising was outlined as follows: "to influence perception stereotypes, habits and models of human behavior in order to solve a number of social issues." Attendees were charged with "the production of materials that would advance traditional norms and values in the sphere of demographic politics." In a symbolic gesture the conference's homepage opens with a quote from the Russian State Law which defines public awareness advertising as "information, disseminated in any form and by use of any means, aimed at accomplishing philanthropic or other socially useful goals, and *insuring state interests*" (my emphasis).

² It is still not uncommon in Russia for parents and their offspring with a family of his/her own to share a two-room apartment. The article does call for a special program for improving housing conditions for families with three or more children by way of covering mortgage interest, but close reading reveals that it is the money "left over after the completion of the Sochi Olympic facilities, the APEC facilities in Russia's Far East, and the housing program for servicemen."

³ Slonimzyk and Yurko cite the Pension Fund of the Russian Federation Annual Report 2012.

⁴ All further discussed materials of the Novosibirsk conference are obtained from its official website: <http://www.slideshare.net/filurin/201212-15730507> Translation is mine.

The work of the conference focused on two target groups: 1) “educated urban professional couples in their twenties and thirties” and 2) “financially comfortable middle class couples with two children.”

The conference outlined the problem with the younger demographic in the following way: “young urban professional couples in their twenties and thirties often postpone childbirth ‘till later,’ a decision which sometimes leads to abandoning the idea of childbirth altogether.” The charge was to find “a platform to persuade young families on the issue of the advantages of early childbirth” by employing a “tomorrow will be too late” message that would create an association between delaying childbirth and infertility. The Mad Men of advertising were encouraged to making use of Russia’s bad ecology as Russians are known to attribute a great deal of their medical problems to the environment. The guidelines specified to use “the fear of ‘tomorrow will be too late,’ linked with the idea of looming medical complications” as the main message. While the age-old scare tactics are not entirely uncommon, what is of concern is a much more subtle part of the charge, the cultivation of its key message: “postponing childbirth for too long, you risk ending up altogether childless and socially inadequate.” The association of childlessness with inferiority is quite new for Russia, especially as it relates to professional women, and the conference participants seems to have been aware that they had to tread lightly.

The winner of this category, the short “Stork,” takes the audience through four scenes, each accompanied by a lullaby tune. The first shows a fashionably dressed young woman shopping, her fatigued but willing beau trailing behind her. As the woman picks up a dress hanger from a clothing rack, the gap reveals a stork which gazes into her eyes. Visibly annoyed, she shoves the hanger back and walks

away. It is important to note that the stork is a toy-like figure, something a child might have made out of cardboard for a first grade project. The contrast between an aggressive woman and what appears to be a fragile cartoon-like creature becomes instantly apparent. The second scene has our childless woman, shown with her hair up, in a smart beige suit, in her office. As she enthusiastically types away at the computer, the camera points to a framed picture of her and a boyfriend on her desk. When the stork appears, stretching out his neck and reaching for her, she blocks him with her monitor.

The next encounter takes place while she is on a date in a trendy coffee shop. Here too the stork is angrily dismissed. The ad ends on a snowy night, as the woman is snuggling on a couch, watching TV with a vaguely identifiable male. When the stork knocks on her window, she resolutely shuts the curtains. Visibly defeated, the stork disintegrates into pieces. As we watch, the stork pieces merge with the snowfall, and a gentle male voice sounds an alarm: “While still young, you are strong and full of health. But years go by and, postponing pregnancy, you are decreasing your chances to conceive and give birth to a *healthy child*. Later your stork might disappear forever!” «В молодости ты полна сил и здоровья, но годы идут, и, откладывая беременность на потом, ты снижаешь свои шансы зачать и родить ЗДОРОВОГО ребёнка. Ведь потом твой аист может исчезнуть навсегда!»



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Although the ad's focus on a "healthy child" was criticized in the Russian media for its vague Nazi overtones, its anxiety inducing tactics appear to be effective as medical complications due to inadequate healthcare are a known fear among young mothers. It is arguable whether or not the ad quite delivers on the required association between childlessness and female social inadequacy, but it effectively shapes a selfish diva portrait as the fragile, vulnerable, and childlike stork is no match for the sterile, ice queen's decimating stare.

"The Stork" echoes what scholars define as ideologically motivated, "litanous" construction of demographic analyses characteristic of the 1990s when Russia's economic and political decline was directly linked to its failure to reproduce (Rivkin-Fish, 154). Such discussions on women's health characteristically sidestepped socioeconomic problems but framed the issues of fertility in terms of Russian identity and the future of the Russian nation itself. While the rhetoric seems to have gotten more subtle and the nationalistic tinge is no longer felt so strongly, one can observe that the advertising industry has kept the core ingredients of the recipe the same. "The Stork" ad combines the use of scare tactics with dangers of irreversible medical complications, while equating a woman's ability to reproduce with a life well lived.

The second target group for the social ad contest was "financially comfortable couples in their thirties and forties with two kids." The goal was to capitalize on what was identified as an emerging fashionable trend - "having a third child as a symbol of stability, wellbeing, family health, and the woman's social success." "Toy store," the winner of this category, has a textbook family unit -mom, dad, boy, girl-shopping. When the daughter suggestively picks out a toy baby stroller and the boy winks knowingly at his father, the parents smile and a male voice

delivers the message: "Children already read your thoughts. Leave your doubts behind. The third child is happiness you can afford!" In the last frame the now family of four (mom is holding a bundled up newborn) appeals to the audience: "We've got three. What about you?"



[Click Here to Watch](#)

The ad fails on every level due to its utter naiveté, but mainly because everyone involved looks painfully awkward and out of place. Still the conference web brochure brings reinforcements, citing Putin's address to the Federal assembly where he says the following: "Demographers argue that the choice to have the second child is potentially the choice for the third. It is important that the family makes this step. And despite of the hesitations of some experts, and with all due respect, I'm convinced that the norm in Russia must be the family with three children." Conference organizers add that "it is obvious that the Moscow experts, President's speech writers, are with us in their evaluation of the development of the institute of family."

Data suggests that a woman's decision to have multiple children is primarily connected with financial concerns. Putin's own *Комсомольская Правда* article cites research showing income in families with three or four children to be thirty to forty percent less than those with one or two. The

ad industry's misguided attempt to capitalize on the wealthy upper middle class—a mere fraction of the population—echoes the “boost the birthrate campaign” which ignores the issues of quality women's medical care and social services while focusing on the message of reproduction as a means of social fulfillment.

Symbolic of this approach is a 2008 Moscow subway “The Country Needs your records. Three persons are born in Russia every minute” ad (see photo).



In the ad, a young woman, “an every mom,” holds three identical babies on her lap. The outlines of the mom's bra are visible, revealing a healthy bust. She seems to have broad child-bearing hips. One of her legs, a bench for her two boys, is opened to the

audience like a gate, creating a vaguely sexualized, “I'm open for fertility” image. A wedding ring, a necessary wholesome component of a western ad, is not pictured, though the mom is wearing a golden bracelet and earrings. Absent from the picture is another detail – a dad. There is no hint of him in the background making breakfast or leaving for work. The pose mom is made to assume is unnatural. She and the eerily clone-like triplets are stiff, her smile and body language are strained, and as a result the image reads forced.

The choice of noun “records,” “рекорды,” in “The Country Needs Your Records,” is significant. The word is used to refer to the field of athletics and carries a distinct Olympic games connotation, equating motherhood with competition. By implication, since every minute “three persons” are born in Russia, you too can join the renewal process, and help the country win. The plural “you,” “ваши” in “The Country Needs Your Records” (“Стране нужны ваши рекорды”) unifies all women in one class.

The choice of the word “persons” (“Three persons are born...”) as opposed to expected “babies” is also worthy of note. Replacing the more traditional “babies are born” with “persons are born” elevates motherhood to an act of duty in a country that is facing a demographic winter. The sample, the very image of the three “persons,” is right here on the billboard. This is what they look like, if you decide to go for it. Trinity itself carries a cultural connotation here, a biblical association in the Russian psyche, and therefore aims, but here fails to strengthen the image. Our mom looks not only alone, but also somehow abandoned.

As with every visual text there is a set of basic questions to be asked. First, what associations is the reader invited to create? It is obvious that a link is being forged between motherhood and patriotism.

Her emblem of worth is here times three. The mother is showing the evidence and glad to be given recognition for the things done right. The second question involves the audience's desired response. What is it? The ad's implied message regarding a set of things women owe is meant to prompt action. However, considering that an average Russian woman historically has had a very low birthrate and the likelihood of the philosophy of turning personal joy into nationalistic productivity taking hold is low, what is the idea behind the awkwardly, but proudly smiling woman with triplets?

The answer might be found in the analysis of the evolution of the Soviet public awareness campaigns and their corresponding iconic posters. Victoria E. Bonnell, in her *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, demonstrates that the female figure acquires a central place in Soviet visual propaganda at every crucial historical step. When the politics of the 1920s demanded a union between the country and the city, the former was pictured only as a 'baba,' a decidedly peasant, "earthy" voluptuous woman, with her head covered by a kerchief. When it became apparent that the success of the Soviet collectivization campaign and the campaign against institutionalized religion hinged on suppressing an unexpected and powerful female peasants' resistance, a major iconographic shift took place. The new collective farm woman not only acquired unprecedented significance in Stalinist ear posters but replaced the central image of the urban worker and Red Army hero. The preferred rural woman was pictured driving a tractor (a signifier of the new socialist future), shooing away corrupt priests, and suggestively inviting "comrades" to come join her in the collective farm instead of slaughtering their livestock.

In fact, between 1926 and 1957, depending on the needs of the state, in a number of now

famous posters, the woman sold socialist ideology ("Liberated Woman, Build Socialism," 1926), promoted communal canteens ("Out with Kitchen Slavery. Give us the New Everyday!" 1931), spread the awkward message of health and fitness ("Have you taken care of your breasts lately? Strengthen you nipples by washing them daily in cold water, 1930), upheld the moral code ("Out with Hooligans-Womanizers! We'll jam those stallions with Discipline! 1930), and warned others against the dangers of abortion in the country where virtually no other forms of contraception were made available ("Abortion is harmful to your health. It is better to prevent a pregnancy than terminate it artificially," 1957).

Thus the Soviet woman's body becomes an experimental canvas for the changing needs of the state. She either slims down or gains weight, appears with children or without, her chest either expanding or becoming understated depending on whether the politics of the time focus on production or reproduction (Bonnell, 105). What we witness is a pattern of iconography politics with women as passive ground for the nation's political and economic desires. In the past the efficacy of female centered propaganda campaigns was largely irrelevant, as visual texts were not expected to serve as deciding factors in the success of government policies. Politics, poor economic conditions, and mostly lack of options determined the way Soviet woman lived her life. Through history, she carried the nation through times of war, reconstruction, stagnation and all imaginable and unimaginable kinds of political and social turbulence. Nekrasov's iconic 1863 line – "A run-away horse she will master. Walk straight to a hut that's aflame" ("Коня на скаку остановит, в горящую избу войдёт") –

⁵The line is translated from the Russian by Juliet M. Soskice-
<http://forum.lingvo.ru/actualthread.aspx?tid=69871>

continued to define the quintessential image of the Russian woman for a century and a half.⁵ It is time to retire this cliché, as it is hardly the model for the next generation.

The fact that Russia's leaders understand the woman's role in the country's future is witnessed by the not so subtle display at the 2014 Sochi Olympics' opening ceremony, steeped in rich Russian history and culture. The closing image of the spectacular event included dozens of women in red, pushing red strollers in a stylized image of the country's tomorrow. The post-Soviet woman who the ad industry tries to define and invoke is already here. Patronizing social ads won't get her attention. Underwhelming "boost the birthrate" campaigns won't bring her on board either. Nekrasov's über woman she still might be, but she is no longer without choices and is one who is acquiring a distinct voice. An empowered, self-defined woman, one with a strong faith in tomorrow, is the best kind of investment in the future of any country, and this is the strategic plan that Russia should consider embracing.

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