

“This Kind of Thing Does Not Really Exist in Russia”: Russian Fathers Negotiating Shared Care Arrangements

Ekaterina Ivanova ^{1,2} 

¹ Nossal Institute for Global Health, University of Melbourne, Australia

² School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Australia

Correspondence: Ekaterina Ivanova (ekaterina.ivanova@unimelb.edu.au)

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Abstract

This article explores fathers’ experiences of shared care arrangements in Russia after family separation. While shared physical custody has become increasingly normative in many Western countries, Russian legal and cultural frameworks continue to position mothers as the default parents, rendering fathers’ involvement largely invisible. The article draws on nine semi-structured interviews conducted in 2015 and 2022 with fathers whose children spent at least 35% of their time in their care. Using narrative and reflective thematic analysis, this article identifies four strategies fathers employed to navigate the fragility of their involvement, namely by valuing informality and flexibility, not picking fights, gendering child support, and by being a “damn good” father. It also explores how fathers manage the complex emotions associated with their precarious position as carers and how they rely on certain traditional masculine practices to regain a sense of certainty and control. This study contributes to the broader conversation on involved fatherhood in the post-socialist context by examining how Russian fathers not only negotiate shared custody but also challenge the model of marginalised fatherhood, seeking a more active, long-term presence in their children’s lives.

Keywords

divorce; family separation; fatherhood; Russia; shared care

1. Introduction

Fathering is intrinsically shaped by legal and cultural contexts within which it is experienced (Shwalb et al., 2013). Social researchers, emphasising fatherhood as a social, not a biological category, argue that men are

“made” into fathers with the combination of policies, cultural norms, and public discourses (Gregory & Milner, 2008; Morgan, 2002). In a number of Western countries, post-separation fatherhood has undergone significant transformations over the last few decades, which made visible and supported fathers’ involvement in everyday parenting beyond financial support (Collier & Sheldon, 2008; Parkinson, 2011). Legislatively, this trend has been supported by the shift towards shared physical custody, also referred to as shared care or shared parenting (Collier & Sheldon, 2008; Fehlberg et al., 2011; Moloney, 2009; Parkinson, 2011). These changes have offered fathers new ways to experience parenting after separation and invoked the reorganisation of masculinity around new ideals of good fathering (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Bridgeman et al., 2016; Joshi, 2021; Philip, 2013). Feminist scholars, however, point out the complex, and not necessarily positive, outcomes of such a shift towards shared care, which provides new legal means and discursive resources to maintain gendered control after separation (Elizabeth et al., 2012; Fehlberg & Millward, 2014; Natalier et al., 2019).

Family separation is a common experience in Russia, with the crude divorce rate being one of the highest globally: 4.7 divorces per 1000 people as per data from 2022 (Federal State Statistics Service, 2022). Yet fathers’ involvement after family separation has not received the same level of cultural recognition or legal support that characterises many Western contexts (Bezrukova & Samoylova, 2020; Kay, 2007; Rotkirch et al., 2007; Utrata et al., 2013). Historically, Russia was a pioneer in divorce law reform, introducing the concept of “no-fault divorce” in 1918 and shared legal custody in 1969, but it has yet to establish legal provisions for shared physical custody (Antokolskaia, 2020). Consequently, children’s residence can be legally assigned to only one parent, while the non-resident parent is granted visitation rights and expected to pay child support. While the law is formally gender-neutral and leaves an opportunity for parents to negotiate parenting arrangements informally, statistics show that more than 90% of children reside with their mothers following separation (Rzhanitsyna & Kalabikhina, 2012). A more recent study also demonstrates that more than 50% of separated fathers in Russia do not have a monthly contact with their children (Heers & Szalma, 2022). This pattern of involvement aligns with the traditionalist and pronatalist logic of both the Russian and, previously, Soviet state, in which mothers have been constructed as default parents, i.e., primary caregivers and key decision-makers, and continue to be positioned as such in legal practice and by social services (Bezrukova & Samoylova, 2020; Kay, 2007).

Some scholars suggest that limited institutional support impacts Russian fathers’ low involvement in childcare in comparison with fathers from other countries (Kravchenko, 2012; Lipasova, 2017). More traditional gender attitudes remain widespread in Russia, and these have been shown to be associated with infrequent paternal contact with children following separation (Heers & Szalma, 2022). Russian fathers seem to easily embrace their position as non-resident parents who take care of their children primarily through financial support (Ivanova, 2025; Utrata, 2008), which is perceived as a gendered way of showing love and fatherly care (Ivanova, 2025). Some studies suggest that this position benefits fathers by allowing them to disengage from care work without facing moral or social consequences (Ivanova, 2025; Utrata, 2008). While the view on Russian fathers as detached, disinterested, and inadequate carers (Kay, 2007; Utrata, 2008, 2015) remains dominant, some studies make visible more diverse motivations and parenting arrangements, including examples of fathers committed to equally sharing care and instances of them acting as primary carers (Ivanova, 2017; Kay, 2007). Such experiences, however, remain underrepresented in scholarship on Russian fatherhood.

This article seeks to address this gap by focusing specifically on Russian fathers who practised shared care of their children after family separation. Drawing on nine interviews collected in 2015 and 2022 with fathers whose children spent at least 35% of their time in their care during that interval, the article situates fathers' experiences of negotiating shared care within a legal and cultural context that renders their involvement invisible. Using thematic narrative analysis, the article explores four strategies fathers employed to navigate their involvement post-separation—valuing informality and flexibility, not picking fights, gendering child support, and by being a “damn good” father—which will be described in detail in the following sections.

2. Data and Method

This article draws on two sets of semi-structured interviews with Russian fathers who had separated when their children were under the age of 18. The first set of 18 interviews was collected in 2015, and the second set of 25 interviews took place in 2022. The article focuses specifically on a subsample of nine fathers—drawn from both datasets—who practised shared care arrangements after separation.

In 2015, participants were recruited by the author using snowball sampling in two major Russian cities, Saint Petersburg and Moscow. Most had a university degree and above-average incomes. In 2022, recruitment was conducted through a combination of the author's personal networks, snowballing, and the assistance of a professional recruiter, whose help was instrumental in obtaining a more diverse sample. Among fathers interviewed in 2022, sixteen lived in large metropolitan cities with populations over one million (Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Volgograd), five in mid-sized cities with populations of 500,000–600,000 (Irkutsk, Lipetsk, Penza, Yaroslavl), and four in smaller urban centres with populations of 100,000–300,000 (Pskov, Vologda, Cherepovets, Gelendzhik). The majority of participants had incomes above the national average for 2022. Sixteen participants held tertiary degrees, and the rest had secondary professional qualifications.

As no significant legal reforms were affecting post-separation parenting during this period, it was deemed appropriate to combine data from both samples for analysis. While there is no legal definition of shared care or shared physical custody in Russia, guidelines from other countries were used (Fehlberg et al., 2011; Flaquer, 2021). Accordingly, participants were included in the subsample if they cared for their children—meaning the children stayed overnight with them and they made routine decisions about their care and wellbeing—for at least 35% of the time compared with their ex-partners. The socio-demographic profile of the nine participants in the subsample is presented in Table 1, along with a brief description of their parenting arrangements.

In 2015, all interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim by the author. Participants residing in Saint Petersburg were interviewed in person, while participants from other cities were interviewed via Skype. In 2022, all interviews were conducted by the author either in person, by phone, or via Zoom, and were transcribed by hired research assistants. The use of different modes of communication did not appear to differentially affect data quality; participants interviewed both in person and online offered rich narratives and appeared comfortable sharing their personal stories. In 2022, verbal informed consent was obtained and audio-recorded from all participants in accordance with the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics approval. In 2015, participants were informed about the study, its aims, the confidentiality of information, and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw from the study; however, no formal consent was collected, as ethical review procedures were not required for this type of research in Russia at the time.

Table 1. Participants description.

No.	Pseudonym	Year of interview	Age	City of residence	Education	Year of separation	Length of relationship	Number and age of children (in brackets)	Relationship status post-separation	Arrangements (description)
1	Stepan	2015	36	Saint-Petersburg	Tertiary	2012	12 years	1 (8)	Remarried	Son resides primarily with father, staying with mother overnight on an irregular schedule.
2	Daniil	2015	34	Saint-Petersburg	Secondary professional & Unfinished tertiary	2010	13 years	1 (7)	Remarried	Daughter had stayed 10 days with father and 4 days with mother every fortnight for two years post-separation; later changed to one full week with father, followed by two full weeks with mother.
3	Alexandr	2015	45	Moscow	Tertiary	2010	13 years	2 (12, 16)	Single	Both sons had lived with their mother full-time for a year after the separation, then moved to their father full-time.
4	Anton	2022	30	Saint-Petersburg	Tertiary	2021	7 years	1 (6)	Single	Son stays 3 nights every week with father.
5	Timur	2022	40	Saint-Petersburg	Tertiary	2020	6 years	1 (4)	Single	Son stays with father for a few full weeks on an irregular schedule.
6	Alexey	2022	39	Saint-Petersburg	Secondary Professional	2020	12 years	1 (10)	Single	Son stays 5 nights every week with father.
7	Maxim	2022	32	Moscow	Tertiary	2020	8 years	1 (10)	Partnered	Daughter stays 3 nights every week with father.

Table 1. (Cont.) Participants description.

No.	Pseudonym	Year of interview	Age	City of residence	Education	Year of separation	Length of relationship	Number and age of children (in brackets)	Relationship status post-separation	Arrangements (description)
8	Kirill	2022	38	Gelendzik	Tertiary	2012	7 years	1 (16)	Remarried	Daughter lived with father full-time for the first two years post-separation, seeing mother on the weekend; later reversed to residing with mother and spending one night on the weekends with father.
9	Karim	2022	41	Kazan'	Secondary Professional	2016	16 years	2 (19, 14)	Single	Both sons had lived full-time with father for several years after separation, seeing mother on an occasional basis. Later, the older son stayed with father, the younger moved to stay with mother full-time.

Fieldwork in 2022 took place during the Covid-19 pandemic; however, unlike in some other countries (Szalma, 2020), no restrictions were in place that would have affected post-separation co-parenting. The only government-imposed restriction was the requirement to present a vaccination certificate to access certain public venues, such as cafés.

Interviews were analysed using a combination of narrative and reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Riessman, 2008). This combined approach makes it possible to identify themes—patterns of shared meaning—within the data, while also attending to how participants narratively structured and conveyed their experiences in culturally meaningful ways. Reflexivity is achieved by making explicit the researcher's interpretive work in generating themes, which do not “naturally” emerge from the data but are developed by the researcher in line with their analytical focus (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For this study, I identified a subgroup of fathers because I wanted to understand how their experiences of shared care—still relatively uncommon not only in Russia but elsewhere—unfold within the Russian legal and cultural context. I developed four themes, which captured the ways interviewed fathers made sense of their post-separation involvement, in relation to the structural position they found themselves in. In the analysis that follows, excerpts from interviews are used to illustrate key themes. Each excerpt is accompanied by brief contextual information, including the participant's pseudonym and care arrangements.

3. Negotiating the Default Parent Norm Within the Institutional Invisibility of Involved Fatherhood

Russian fathers had to negotiate shared care in the legal, institutional, and cultural context that positioned mothers as “default” carers and rendered fathers' involvement invisible. This disposition was clear in fathers' recollections of their encounters with the law and with institutions that exercised—and, to a certain degree, had discretion to interpret—the law. Anton recalled that during the divorce procedure, despite his son spending three nights with him every week after separation, his son's residence was still officially established with his ex-partner, the boy's mother:

A: They have three questions: where the child lives, child support, and the division of property. We didn't have any issues—we were in full agreement.

Q: Was that written into the claim? Or did the judge ask you?

A: He asked us. Maybe we signed something, I don't remember exactly.

Q: So, he was like: “Who's the child staying with?” And you said...

A: With the mom, yeah.

Q: With the mom? So, you didn't mention your arrangement?

A: No, no—because that kind of thing doesn't really exist in Russia. As far as I know, the child stays...

Q: Yeah, legally—no, it doesn't.

A: Exactly, so—with the mom. (#4 Anton, 3 nights a week)

In the absence of a shared physical custody regime, Anton’s parenting arrangement was unintelligible to the law, leaving him and other fathers in this study with the option to negotiate shared care informally. The inevitable informality of shared care arrangements in the Russian legal context made fathers’ position as carers fragile, especially in cases of disagreement or conflict. For example, Daniil described how his ex-partner filed a child support order, claiming that their daughter lived with her permanently, even though, according to Daniil, the child had spent half the time with him for two years following separation. While Daniil tried to contest the order, he was unsuccessful. For Daniil, the lost case was not just about the money; he was particularly hurt by the erasure of his fathering, legitimized by the court’s enforcement of the order:

At first, yeah, I was pretty upset—especially when I saw in the child support claim that it said the child lives *entirely* with the mother. That the child is *fully* in her care. Like, the kid is completely hers, and the dad doesn’t even exist, hasn’t even been around. It was honestly disgusting to read. Naturally, I lost the case—well, of course, in our country. I even hired a lawyer. Shouldn’t have, really—there was no point in that. (#2, Daniil, the daughter lives with him every second week)

Alexandr had challenging and pressing circumstances. A father of two, Alexandr had been living with his younger son soon after he and his partner separated. One day, he learned that his ex-partner was planning to move to another region—and intended to take their younger son with her. According to Alexandr, the boy was strongly opposed to this plan. The move would separate him from his father and older brother and abruptly disrupt the promising start of his musical career. Living in a larger city had given him access to teachers, mentors, and opportunities that nurtured his talent, and leaving would jeopardize all of that. Determined to keep his son with him, Alexandr sought help from social services and even contacted the police. What he received in response, however, was an unexpectedly curious piece of advice:

We went to the child welfare services. They told us it was a completely hopeless situation, because she’s the mother, and she has the right. That was it. It was clear. I realized: Yeah, well, that’s how it’s going to be. Then I decided to go to the police—just on a whim. I thought, what the hell, let me try the police [laughs]....There were two women officers there, and they were in an unusually good mood—probably because no one ever comes to them with stuff like this. I told them the story. I said: “Look, I’m not really expecting help here, but...maybe?” One of them repeated word-for-word what the child services had said: That there’s nothing that can be done, that she’s the mother, and what she says goes. Especially since the older child lives with me. But the other one—she was a bit more feisty—said: “Well, you could just kidnap him.” The first one goes: “Are you crazy? You can’t say that! You can’t tell people to do that! What kind of advice is that?” And the second one shrugs and says: “What? He’s got rights, too. He’s the father, isn’t he?” Then she turns to me and asks: “You are the father, right?” I said: “Yes, of course, I’m the father.” And she says: “Well, there you go.” (#3 Alexandr, sons live with the father full-time)

Alexandr described his experience almost like an adventure—one that, in the end, turned out happily for him, as he succeeded in continuing to live with both of his sons. He spoke with a touch of irony about how powerless he appeared in the eyes of child services and the police. Yet his story also points to a deeper structural disposition: In Russia, fathers who wished to share the care of their children after separation, and to have a say in how that care was arranged, had little legal power to define and secure their involvement.

In Aleksandr's case, although his former partner ultimately accepted the arrangement after their son clearly expressed a preference to live with his father, she retained formal sole custody of both children. The arrangement remained informal, and Aleksandr never considered it feasible to seek a formal revision of custody through the court.

The "default parent" norm underlined fathers' negotiations with their ex-partners, who at times also rendered fathers' care work invisible. According to Stepan, his son had been living with him permanently, with his daily routines, school, and extracurricular activities centred around Stepan's home, while only occasionally spending nights with his mother, and without any regular schedule in place. His ex-partner, however, seemed to see their arrangement in a completely different light, as Stepan explained: "She believed that he still lived with her. And he only stayed with me when it was convenient for her." Similarly, Daniil explained that, although he and his ex-partner had agreed on a "week on/week off" arrangement, in practice his daughter spent most of her time living with him for about two years after their separation. This was until his ex-partner demanded a stark revision of that schedule:

A: Basically, at some point, she came to me and was like: "The kid spends two weeks with me and one week with you now." So it flipped—just like that. Pretty harsh. And then she started with this whole thing: "*The child needs a base.*" Like, very firm about it.

Q: A base meaning—the child should have one home?

A: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. A *base*. And that base—according to her—was with her. It was just so sudden. I mean, we were living like we were, till March, and then one day—bam—that was it. You know?

Q: And did you ever question why the base shouldn't be with you?

A: I did. Well—she's the mother. She had one argument: "*But I'm the mother.*" (#2, Daniil, the daughter lives every second week with him)

In the narratives of Alexandr, Stepan, and Daniil, claims based on motherhood were reinforced not only by legal structures but also by cultural norms, making mothers' position as default parents particularly difficult to challenge. While the law defined fathers' ability to contest and secure parenting arrangements, cultural norms shaped how parents perceived these arrangements. Importantly, they also shaped how fathers themselves felt about their position as carers, as well as about the legal conundrums they found themselves in while trying to negotiate shared care after separation. While expressing frustration toward their ex-partners or concern about their involvement, or presenting it as a story worth telling, Russian fathers rarely communicated a sense of injustice or anger, overall accepting the "default parent" norm. Daniil, for example, somewhere in the interview, reflecting on his ex-partner's claims based on her position as a mother, said: "By nature....Mother is the priority, I agree with that."

The following section will explore the practical and narrative strategies Russian fathers employed to navigate the two systems—legal and cultural—without directly challenging the gendered moral order they were generally supportive of.

3.1. Valuing Informality and Flexibility

In the absence of legal regulation of shared physical custody, Russian fathers organised and negotiated shared care arrangements informally with their ex-partners. It was common to (re)negotiate children's changeovers ad hoc. Anton, for example, described that after separation, the process of "figuring out" shared parenting happened on a daily basis:

It went something like: "He's with you today," "alright," "I'll take him in three days," "okay." It wasn't exactly like you were rolling dice, but....It was pretty much like that. (#4, Anton, 3 nights a week)

In their interviews, fathers tended to view such informal arrangements as a normal and convenient way to co-parent—one that offered flexibility to accommodate the changing priorities and life circumstances of different family members. In Anton's case, for instance, decisions about which parent their son stayed with depended on both parents' work commitments as well as their and their son's sports activities and hobbies. Even in cases where fathers took on the role of primary carer—at least for a certain period—and more long-term arrangements were established, a significant degree of flexibility remained. In Kirill's case, for example, his daughter lived with him for two years after the separation, visiting her mother only on weekends. This arrangement changed when his former partner wanted to take on a more intensive caregiving role, after she had secured a stable job and a place to live. At the time of the interview, Kirill saw his daughter only on weekends. He explained that she was very busy preparing for school exams during the week and that she had the freedom to decide when and for how long she wanted to visit him. Similarly, Karim assumed full-time care of their sons when his partner decided to separate and move from Kazan to the small village they originally came from. For several years, she saw the children only about once a month. Later, when the younger son expressed a desire to spend more time with his mother, he moved to live with her full-time, while the older son remained with his father. In both Karim and Kirill's cases, the arrangements were informal, and formal custody remained with the mother.

Such flexibility, however, depended on both parents' willingness to honour informal agreements, collaborate, and adjust, and even more so on mothers, who were legally entitled to be the default parents. The fragility of these arrangements became evident in cases of disagreement or conflict between parents. This was the case for Stepan, whose partner repeatedly violated their agreed schedule:

So, here's how it goes. On Monday, she calls me and says: "I'll pick Vanya up from school on Wednesday." I say: "Alright, fine." A few hours later—maybe three—she calls again and says: "No, I won't pick him up on Wednesday, I'll pick him up from school on Friday." Tomorrow's Friday. So now I'm just waiting for another call to find out when exactly she's going to pick him up. Maybe she won't pick him up at all. Maybe she'll ask me to bring him over. Anything can happen. (#1, Stepan, son spends most nights in his care)

Given the legal and cultural reinforcement of the "default parent" norm, mothers often held a stronger position regarding whether or not to adhere to informal arrangements. In interviews, fathers made sense of this structural disparity by shifting the focus from the legal to the moral dimension of shared care, emphasising trust rather than legal enforcement. Maxim, for example, when asked why he had never considered formalising his shared care arrangement, said: "It's a strange idea—that you shouldn't trust, but

formalise.” Similarly, Alexey, whose son stayed with him most nights, responded to my question about whether he had ever thought about formalising their arrangement:

No, why would I? I don’t need that. You see, I’m just a kind and calm person by nature. I’m used to trusting people. (#6, Alexey, son stays 5 nights per week in his care)

The power of trust, however, had its limits, as mothers were legally entitled to full-time residence of their children in case of disagreement. Yet, by speaking about trust, fathers asserted a sense of agency and control. As Anton explained why he was comfortable with the judge formally designating the child’s residence with the mother:

A: Well, as I said, we have warm relations. If she says it will be this way—fine, I take her at her word.

Q: Ah, so you mean you trust that she won’t manipulate you or anything like that?

A: Yes.

Q: And what if she did?

A: Then it would mean I was mistaken. (#4, Anton, son stays 3 nights a week in his care)

3.2. Not Picking Fights

Having to negotiate shared care in a cultural and institutional context that positions mothers as default parents, fathers’ ability to mitigate confrontation, compromise, and let things go became important for maintaining their involvement after separation. Daniil, speaking about a revision to their care arrangement initiated by his ex-partner—one he did not fully agree with and which was described in more detail in the previous section—said he chose to let things go:

About the whole “base” thing—maybe I lost that battle, but I didn’t lose the war. What I mean is...I told [ex-partner’s name]: “Don’t pick a fight with me”—and I don’t pick fights with her either. It’s easier for me to accept those terms and keep the peace, rather than bang my head against a wall to get week-on, week-off, and have the relationship fall apart. (#2, Daniil, the daughter lives every second week with him)

Anton, who once considered his legal options in contesting the maternal residence order, shared a similar reflection:

What I realised is: For the sake of the kid, there’s no point getting into petty bullshit over this. That helped me cool down much faster and stop...you know, digging deeper into the whole thing—trying to figure out ways to get back at my ex. (#4 Anton, the son stays 3 nights a week)

Anton attributed his ability to “not get into petty bullshit” to his own personality, suggesting elsewhere in the interview that this was an unusual trait for a man—and one that perhaps helped him maintain a shared care

arrangement. To the contrary, Daniil narratively framed his ability to keep his cool and avoid petty arguments as a masculine quality, noting elsewhere in the interview: “It’s a bit easier for men in this regard. They don’t need to prove anything. Let her think that the ‘base’ is with her. I couldn’t care less.” Both cases illustrate how fathers narratively negotiated this strategy with the dominant image of masculinity, which may not sit easily with compromising. Some studies demonstrate that in other contexts, being ready to fight for one’s children is interpreted as a manifestation of fathers’ commitment to them (Collier & Sheldon, 2006). In interviews with Russian fathers, the narrative linkage between not fighting and masculinity could help participants reconcile with their lack of institutional power.

Daniil’s interview also makes clear that this strategy was emotionally challenging: While claiming he “couldn’t care less” about his position as an equal parent, Daniil, in other parts of the conversation, carefully counted the time his daughter spent with him, eager to show that he still had her almost half the time despite the revised arrangement. He also stressed that his home was just as organised and welcoming for his daughter as her mother’s—a narrative that also emerged in Stepan’s interview.

Stepan’s experience was different from that of other participants, as he was the one who ended up taking legal action in order to define his son’s residence with him. Stepan struggled with his ex-partner being unreliable in coparenting, often disregarding agreed schedules for changeovers and pickups and, as he put it, breaking off any arrangements whenever it suited her. Despite how frustrating this situation was for Stepan, for some time, he was able to “let things go” in order to make this fragile arrangement work—for both him and his son:

She likes to call me when she’s a bit tipsy and starts throwing her weight around. Before, she somehow managed to get under my skin, but now she doesn’t anymore, thanks to my current wife, who told me: “Don’t worry about it, she’s just got nothing better to do, that’s why she’s messing with you. Just agree with everything.” And I really started to respond that way. (#1, Stepan, son spends most nights at father’s care)

When, in Stepan’s opinion, the situation became too unstable for his son, he pursued legal action. Stepan, however, was still careful to narrate his decision in a way that distanced him from appearing vindictive or motivated by a desire to take the child away from his mother:

Well, if she were to say something like: “I’ve changed the job, I can make it work now, I live on my own, I want [son’s name] to live with me”—then by all means. If all that is in place, and if it would be good and comfortable for the boy, then yes—by all means.

Q: So you would hand him over with peace of mind?

A: Yes, no problem. (#1, Stepan, son spends most nights at father’s care)

Stepan’s reassurance that he was ready to revisit the residence arrangements as soon as his ex-partner became a more reliable carer—a moral judgement that some fathers in this study made about their ex-partners—highlighted the cultural expectation that the default parent should be the child’s mother.

3.3. Gendering Child Support

While Stepan may have challenged the default parent norm, he still fulfilled another gendered expectation placed on fathers in Russia: financial provision. Despite having his son in his care most of the time after separation, he informally transferred 10,000 rubles (the equivalent of a month's rent at the moment of separation) to his ex-partner every month. He explained that, even though all his friends asked, "why are you doing this?" he "somehow felt that it was the right thing to do." Stepan's sense of obligation highlighted that, although Russian law is formally gender-neutral with regard to the financial obligations of non-resident parents, the payment of child support is commonly understood as a gendered responsibility expected of fathers rather than mothers.

Alexey, who—similar to Stepan—had his son most of the time, also paid informal child support after separation. He explained:

I fully understood that a child needs financial support, and I was fine with that. Even when he lived with me—say we'd spend a whole month on holiday together—I'd still send the money. I could afford it back then, so why not? But later, when he started staying with me more often, I stopped paying her. (#6, Alexey, Son stays 5 nights per week with father)

For Alexey, paying child support was a bargaining strategy:

Roughly speaking, as long as I could afford to pay, I did—so she wouldn't have extra reasons to pull the child away from me. As long as there are even some formal levers she can use against me, I'd rather not ruin the relationship. (#6, Alexey, Son stays 5 nights per week with father)

Alexey described that when he stopped paying child support, his ex-partner was "upset, felt betrayed, and offended." Although she did not apply for any child support order, her reaction indicated that informal support was an expected part of their post-separation agreement—regardless of how much caregiving Alexey was doing.

Besides Alexey and Stepan, large direct transfers from participants to their ex-partners were rare, as they believed they mostly met their financial obligations through in-kind support when children stayed in their care. Fathers were also reluctant to claim financial support from their ex-partners, even in cases when they took the primary care for their children. Fathers' accounts on child support demonstrated that such money was earmarked as gendered (Natalier & Hewitt, 2014); by refusing the need for financial support from their ex-partners, participants constructed their masculinities.

Anton recalled that, at some point, he and his ex-partner had tried to set up a system to share expenses, but it didn't work for him:

Once I had to go to her with a receipt and...like, give her something back. And I was just like: I don't want to do this. (#4 Anton, the son stays 3 nights a week)

He elaborated:

For me...after the breakup, it started to feel a bit humiliating. Asking her to repay me. (#4 Anton, the son stays 3 nights a week)

Similarly, Daniil dismissed the idea of requesting financial contributions from his ex-partner, even when his daughter stayed with him the majority of the time:

You know, over a few rubles, I'm not going to humiliate myself—well, not humiliate exactly...I don't even know how to put it. It just feels like being a cheapskate. It's a kind of disrespect to yourself as a man, in my opinion. Like, if a man goes to a woman and says, "give me 500 rubles for kindergarten"—I don't know, that's just nonsense. It feels like insulting yourself as a man. I don't know how else to say it. (#2, Daniil, the daughter lives every second week with him)

Stepan, who had to legally include child support in the paperwork as part of his residence order, engaged with a few arguments that justified this decision:

A: We did include child support in the paperwork, but in court, we are going to say that we are not going to ask you for anything.

Q: Why not?

A: Maybe we will. We'll see. I don't want anything. But my wife said: "Think about it—even if she pays 4 or 5 thousand, that's training sessions covered. That's all that would be needed from her."

Q: So why are you leaning towards not asking?

A: [Paused] Honestly, I don't know. At first, I thought, why would I need money from her? But now, with the situation in the country getting worse...maybe she should contribute, actually. (#1, Stepan, son spends most nights at father's care)

Overall, fathers' accounts of child support demonstrated that, while they were willing to challenge traditional gender norms of parenthood by taking on shared or primary care, they remained reluctant to de-gender child support by claiming any money from their ex-partners.

3.4. Being a "Damn Good" Father

In the absence of strong legal mechanisms to enforce shared custody, fathers often turned to moral claims to secure their involvement. Participants consistently described themselves as highly engaged and committed fathers. Many emphasised that their level of involvement far exceeded that of other men in their social circles. By presenting themselves as extraordinarily good fathers—dedicated and present—they sought to legitimise their involvement after separation.

Even imagine a situation where I'd be completely cut off from my child—no, that's just not happening. I mean, come on—when you're a damn good father, it's just...obvious. It's clear the mother won't stand in the way of us having a relationship. And honestly, no one's going to be a better father to him than I am. (#4 Anton, 3 nights a week)

The emotional connection fathers had built through their involvement was foundational to their moral claim for shared parenting after separation. For instance, Daniil traced the foundation of his bond with his daughter back to her birth, a moment he described as transformative: "I saw the child from the very first second. This is probably why I have such a bond with her." Although he acknowledged that being present at childbirth was not typically expected of men—"not something a man is supposed to witness"—he saw himself as an exception, saying: "I've always been different...a bit of a crazy one." For Daniil, this early and continuous presence played a critical role in his ability to maintain a shared care arrangement after separation:

You have to work on it. I mean, for some people it's work, for some it's hard. For me—it's not hard. My daughter is always with me everywhere, now and in the future. And the fact that, right now, roughly speaking, she spends 65% more time with her mom—that doesn't scare me. Because I've built a strong, serious foundation. Anyone who sees us, who knows her, can see it—we have a powerful bond. And that took effort. And breaking that...well, it would be really hard. But it doesn't seem like [ex-partner's name] has any plans to do that. She's even said: "*I have no intention of keeping the child away from you.*" (#2, Daniil, the daughter lives with him every second week)

This form of moral legitimation was also future-oriented. Fathers hoped that, when children reached an age at which they could decide for themselves, they would also like to live with the parent who had put in emotional labour and practical effort in making them settled and comfortable in their home. Alexandr, who had initiated legal proceedings to obtain official physical custody of his son, remained uncertain about the outcome, expressing concern that the Russian legal system might not rule in his favour. He placed his hopes in his son's ability to voice a preference to live with him, a choice he believed would be grounded in the strong relationship and stable daily routines they had already established:

He's at an age where, sooner or later, he'll say: "*Mom, I want to stay with dad.*" And especially now—he's already gotten used to it: He's got his own room here, his own desk, his own bed, his toys. (#1, Stepan, son spends most nights at father's care)

Several fathers expressed both hope and anxiety about their long-term relationships with their children. This strategy thus served as a form of emotional coping, allowing fathers to hold on to a sense of paternal identity and hope, even in the face of limited or uncertain access to their children in the present. While these stories conveyed a sense of resilience, they also underscored the reality of a system that provides little support for fathers to secure and maintain substantial involvement with their children in the here and now.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The impact of social policy on fatherhood and its transformation is well acknowledged (Collier & Sheldon, 2008; Dermott & Miller, 2015; Gregory & Milner, 2008; Morgan, 2002; Parkinson, 2011), particularly in the context of separated fatherhood (Collier & Sheldon, 2006; Elizabeth et al., 2012; Fehlberg et al., 2011).

However, existing research in this area tends to focus on countries that actively support paternal involvement. This article offers a different perspective by examining a context that continues to marginalise fatherhood (Kay, 2007; Utrata et al., 2013). It explores how Russian fathers' experiences of shared parenting are shaped by interlocking legal and cultural norms that position mothers as the default parents and render fathers' involvement in childcare both invisible and precarious.

Drawing on nine interviews with separated fathers who cared for their children at least 35% of the time after family separation, the article identifies four strategies these fathers adopted to navigate the fragility of their involvement: valuing informality and flexibility, not picking fights, gendering child support, and being a “damn good” father. These strategies represent both practical and emotional responses to fathers' limited bargaining power in relation to childcare after separation in the Russian context. While fathers appeared to manage structural uncertainty relatively well and maintained a positive attitude towards their post-separation involvement, a closer examination of participants' narratives reveals the emotional toll of navigating co-parenting. The analysis demonstrates how fathers managed anxieties and frustrations associated with the precarity of their position as carers. In particular, it shows how fathers engaged in interpretive work to frame their continued involvement after separation as an individual responsibility, shifting the emphasis from structural constraints to their personal capacity to manage them.

Involved fatherhood occupies a prominent position in debates on gendered social policy because it is often seen as a mechanism for reshaping the historically unequal gender division of parental and household labour (Andreasson et al., 2023; Bjørnholt, 2014; Dermott & Miller, 2015; Goedecke & Klinth, 2021; Johansson & Klinth, 2008; Morgan, 2002). Previous research has shown that fathers' engagement in hands-on childcare carries transformative potential, as it encourages men to reconsider their gender identities through practices traditionally marked as “feminine” (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Beglaubter, 2021; Johansson & Klinth, 2008; Joshi, 2021). This study shows that, in Russia, fathers' attempts to sustain involvement were accompanied by the active gendering of their experiences. While participants challenged some gendered norms of parenthood, they also drew on more traditional forms of masculinity as sense-making resources. I argue that these resources provided stability and clarity amid the uncertainty and precarity of their fathering within institutional and legal frameworks that rendered their care invisible. In their narratives, fathers tended to emphasise agency, emotional self-control, and financial independence, even when they lacked institutional power in negotiations with their ex-partners. This study thus highlights that, without institutional support for alternative models of paternal masculinity, practices of involved fathering become embedded within more traditional gender arrangements, thereby losing their potential to induce broader gender transformations.

The question of whether Russia should follow other countries in introducing stronger legal and institutional support for shared physical custody should be considered with caution. Since Russian fathers cannot reclaim formal entitlements over their children, they have fewer institutionalised opportunities to weaponize care and involvement in custody disputes—an issue highlighted by feminist legal scholars and practitioners (Collier & Sheldon, 2006; Elizabeth et al., 2012; Fehlberg & Millward, 2014). Yet for those genuinely committed to co-parenting and co-caring, their marginal position made their caring invisible and unsupported. Introducing parental plans grounded in the ideal of cooperative parenting may therefore be a first step towards a greater recognition of paternal involvement in Russia.

This study has several limitations. The sample is small and focuses on a specific group of fathers who were significantly engaged in childcare after separation, which does not reflect the experiences of separated fathers more broadly. Moreover, mothers' perspectives on shared care were not included in this analysis. Understanding how mothers experience and negotiate shared parenting arrangements is essential for developing a more comprehensive picture of post-separation caregiving and for identifying policy responses that could better support both parents.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

The data that has been used in this article is not publicly available.

LLMs Disclosure

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About the Author



Ekaterina Ivanova is a sociologist specialising in qualitative and cross-cultural research on families, gender, and health. Ekaterina holds a PhD from the University of Melbourne and currently works as a Research Officer at the Nossal Institute for Global Health on a project examining the effects of climate change on human health in Kyrgyzstan.