

Abortion Epidemic – The Story

А БЫЛ ЛИ МАЛЬЧИК?

Sergey Slobodyan

On Mar 3, 2009, Russian news sites were saturated with the story of ongoing abortion epidemics with a typical title “В России начинается **эпидемия** «кризисных **абортов**»: в 2009 г. не сможет родиться 200 тысяч детей.” (Epidemics of “crisis abortions” starts in Russia: 200 thousand babies won’t be born in 2009). The story was picked up by several English-language media, [including Russia Today](http://russiatoday.com/Top_News/2009-03-03/Abortions___new_Russian_threat.html) TV Channel, http://russiatoday.com/Top_News/2009-03-03/Abortions___new_Russian_threat.html, and widely reported abroad. So far, the number of births is 3.6% higher than in 2008 (Jan-Aug figures are 1164.3 thousand in 2009 vs. 1123.3 in 2008). The prediction about births, then, was almost certainly wrong. But what about the abortions, which presumably were taking place?

Let’s have a look at the story in backward time. The story took Russia by storm on Mar 3, 2009. Major components of the story were the following:

1. Epidemics of abortions as financial crisis bites.
2. 200,000 less babies are predicted to be born in 2009 (or “next year”), prediction attributed to the Center of Human Demography and Ecology.
3. Number of requests in search engines for “abortion” has increased 10-fold.
4. Calls to crisis phone links have picked up as well as number of women reporting to medical establishments (presumably, to get an abortion).
5. In 2009 very small cohorts born in 90es enter active reproductive age, and thus number of births will fall.
6. New social group has appeared: women making abortions because they cannot repay loans.
7. Some stories allegedly by women who have decided to abort their pregnancy, some with accusations towards government (“they shouted ‘Go-go’, but we aren’t needed to anyone after crisis arrived”)
8. Men are often initiators of abortion as they panic easily and are afraid of shame of not being able to support newborn. Family sometimes puts a pressure and forced girls to make an abortion.
9. Historical references to 1998 crisis, which lead to less births.
10. A story of a woman dying after criminal abortion in illegal clinic.

In one of manifold [discussions](#) of this report, <http://www.nr2.ru/health/222672.html/discussion/>, user alexQ wonders how the statistics in 3 was collected, pointing out the [link](http://blogs.yandex.ru/pulse?query0=%E0%E1%EE%F0%F2&period=20080305-20090305) <http://blogs.yandex.ru/pulse?query0=%E0%E1%EE%F0%F2&period=20080305-20090305> to a graph of number of searches in Yandex blogs on “abortion”. The number does pick up by about 60% bottom to top towards end of 2009, but overall does not exceed the number observed in early 2008. Apparently, the searchers didn’t discuss their problem in blogs, at least not in Yandex blogs. The question remained unanswered and

was ignored as the story spread and was repeated in subsequent months. See below for more on Yandex searches.

The story did not appear out of the blue in early March. On Feb 23, 2009, resource called “Частный Корреспондент” (Private Reporter) published an [interview with Svetlana Rudneva](http://www.chaskor.ru/p.php?id=3472), <http://www.chaskor.ru/p.php?id=3472>, head of the “Family and Childhood” NGO that apparently is active in pregnancy and abortion consulting. This interview was picked up and partially translated into English by J Wesley from Russia Policy Daily [Blog](http://ruspolicy.com/svetlana-rudneva-on-abortion-in-russia/), <http://ruspolicy.com/svetlana-rudneva-on-abortion-in-russia/>. In that interview, items 4, 5, 6, and partially 8 are introduced. A related article published the same day, “Плоды паники и безденежья” ([Fruits of panic and lack of money](#)) by E. Shepilov and D. Okuneva, <http://www.chaskor.ru/p.php?id=3471>, introduces several anecdotes (item 7), statistics of search requests (item 3), historical references (item 9), more evidence on 8 (from an interview with a woman gynecologist, named but not identified further), criminal story 10, again long-term demographic prognosis 5, and forecast 2 (plus “strong decrease in fertility in 7-8 months” from the woman gynecologist). There is also an interview with a deputy head of Duma committee on health who rationalizes item 5 invoking reproductive behavior of minks. His contribution almost drops out of the further story development.

In her interview, Ms Rudneva also a) blames mass media for propagating a belief in inevitability of marriage break-up and fatherless future for a kid, b) offers some analysis of effectiveness of material stimulus for mothers of newborn (she believes that “mother’s capital” is less effective than financial support in the first 1.5 years of baby’s life), c) talks about psychological consequences of abortions, and d) mentions that the decision to make an abortion is very sticky, as only 1 in 10 women seeking an abortion could be persuaded otherwise. In totality of the interview, Ms Rudneva comes across as a person really interested in welfare of future mothers and their offspring. Needless to say, her contributions a)-d) were not picked up as the “panic” story has unfolded.

It is interesting to compare the title that “Private Reporter” gives to Ms Rudneva’s interview with what she has actually said. The title is: “Svetalana Rudneva. ‘Only one in ten women refuses abortion’”. Ms Rudneva talks about women who already decided to have an abortion, while the title creates an impression that 10% of all women want an abortion. I guess one couldn’t ask reporters, especially ‘private’ ones, to be able to distinguish conditional from unconditional expectation, but the editorial bias is obvious.

On Feb 27, the same resource publishes an emotional plea by another reporter, Yulia Aidel, who talks about her own experience with giving a birth while both partners were still non-working students, “[Кризис – время рожать](http://www.chaskor.ru/p.php?id=3876)” (Crisis – time to give birth), <http://www.chaskor.ru/p.php?id=3876>. Needless to say, this is NOT the material, which would be mentioned in the “abortion epidemics” wave in early March.

Next step down the memory line is “Daily Online” Internet resource, Jan 29, 2009 article titled “[Кризис спровоцировал волну аборт — россиянки не хотят «плодить нищету»](http://www.dailyonline.ru/m/1932/)” (Crisis has provoked a wave of abortions: Russian women don’t want to ‘reproduce misery’), <http://www.dailyonline.ru/m/1932/> The article invokes items 3, naming the search engine (Yandex), 6, several anecdotes (7 and 8), attributed to employee of a chain of Moscow gynecological clinics MedHelp Svetlana Kovaleva, and

items 6 and 9 (attributed to “Family and childhood” NGO, the same as in “Private Reporter” story). There are also several conversations with experts: Nikita Mkrtychan from Institute of Demography expects fewer births in third and fourth quarter of 2009 and argues for higher child support, mentioning that allowing usage of mother’s capital to pay for mortgage is insufficient; Galina Orlova, from Agency of Medical and Social Information, argues against abortions for economic reasons; Vladymir Vigilyansky, press-secretary of Moscow Patriarchy, states usual church view on abortions; and psychotherapist and sexologist Dilya Enikeeva says that abortions shouldn’t be an economic decision, and that only for unwanted babies abortion could be justified. Of course, only the prediction of lower births in second half of 2009 remains from the experts’ comments as the story is picked up by “Private Reporter” and then by everyone else.

Another piece of information in the article: there are no official numbers for abortions because the operations are made anonymously (not true: the numbers are reported to Goskomstat. What *is* true is that finding detailed live data is almost impossible), but in a number of specialized medical centers Daily Online was told that number of abortion clients has increased “by an order of magnitude”. Please note that in casual Russian usage “order of magnitude” could really mean “about ten times larger”, but it could also imply just “significantly larger”.

Daily Online story seems to be the first article that introduces a rich set of anecdotes into the story. I was unable to trace them to any earlier material.

What seems to be the earliest story is here: Dec 24, 2008 [post](#) on Russian Line, Orthodox Information Agency <http://www.rusk.ru/newsdata.php?idar=729742>. No anecdotes but *20-fold* increase in Yandex search results for ‘abortion’. Russian Line talks to previously mentioned Svetlana Rudneva who gives the story of women choosing abortion because they cannot repay loans, and saying that just one in ten among those decided on an abortion could be talked out of it. It quotes head of the Institute of Demography (also head of the Center on Human Demography and Ecology), Anatoly Vishnevsky, who expects ‘lower number of births in 2009-2010’. Head of Institute of Demographic Studies Ogor Beloborodov expects 8-10% less births and marriages and a corresponding increase in abortions. The rest of the article talks about recent fertility and mortality history.

It is interesting to look at some of the anecdotes. An anecdote attributed to LiveJournal post: empty cloakroom in antenatal clinic, cloakroom assistant saying that this is now normal – everyone ran to get an abortion, and no new pregnancies are forthcoming. Google search shows this story is several copycat posts, as in April 2 post in St Petersburg resource Vkrizis.ru (more on this article below). The anecdote seems to be introduced by the Daily Online story, as the original LiveJournal post cannot be found (Yandex, Rambler, Yahoo searches return the same: no original post). The story is so well known that the source is not necessary, it seems. Similar result with the other anecdotes – they are not to be found anywhere but in links to the articles themselves.

What about the 10-fold (notice that this *is* an ‘order of magnitude’) increase in search requests for ‘abortion’? The Russian Line article mentions Yandex search results: 28,005

search requests in Nov 2008 vs. 1,297 in Oct 2008. Curiously, Daily Online story gives different numbers: 560 thousand in Nov 2008 vs 53 thousand in October.

This post, http://survival-ru.org/krizis_sprovotiroval_volnu_abortov, includes a graph, which seems to support the number 560,000 for Nov 2008. Dec 2008, however, is just 353,000, and Jan 2009 just 210,000. It is curious that no one bothered to mention January precipitous drop while writing (or, rather, copy-pasting) panic articles in March. However, it gets even more interesting, as the same post includes a link to Yandex statistics, [here: http://wordstat.yandex.ru/?cmd=months&text=аборт](http://wordstat.yandex.ru/?cmd=months&text=аборт). Till Sep 2008, the number fluctuates around 80,000, then shoots up to a peak of 146,855, and remains in region of 120 – 130 thousand since then. Also note that *share* of ‘abortion’ searches in totals remains relatively stable in 9E-5 to 1E-4 range, with the only peak in Nov 2008 at 1.2E-4. Yes, there was a pick-up of interest in November, but it was rather shallow (30%, correcting for higher number of total searches) and short-lived.

The Yandex search results are clearly very suspicious. This was noticed back in December 2008, see a long list of references in this February 2, 2009 story from Free Press, "Abortions On-Line, Pregnancies Finished" (Свободная Пресса, АБОРТЫ Он-лайн, Беременные Закончились), <http://svpressa.ru/issue/news.php?id=3599>. The conclusion was extremely simple: increased number of searches on ‘abortion’ was an artificial phenomenon, requests coming from a robot, not desperate future moms. Incidentally, this story also mentions that MedHelp chain of medical centers *refuted* an idea of increased number of abortions in late 2008-early 2009. This is the same chain whose employee reportedly told several abortion horror anecdotes to Daily Online!

Finally, what about the data on abortions? Live data are hard to find; in 1st quarter of 2009, [Moscow number](#) was 4 703 vs. 6 130 last year, <http://medportal.ru/mednovosti/news/2009/05/12/birthrate/>. This [article](#) from St. Petersburg resource Vkrizis.ru (<http://vkrizis.ru/news.php?news=189&type=rus>) mentions that city Committee on Health actually sees *less* abortions in 2009 than in 2008; nevertheless, it also reports on a ‘survey’ of 17 St. Petersburg medical centers, whereby ‘10 out of 17’ centers told Vkrizis.ru that the number of abortions (including late) has increased ‘significantly’. No numbers are given on both sides of the argument. In [Tambov region](#), <http://www.stop-abort.ru/cntnt/news/n1635.html>, number of registered abortions in first 8 months of 2009 was less than in the same period of 2008. The same story in [Novosibirsk](#) region in the first seven months of 2009, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1201335.html>.

So, what do we see? Hardly an epidemics. The official numbers might not include abortions made in private clinics, though, but it is hard to believe that in crisis women who want an abortion for economic reasons would substitute into a more expensive establishments. It is likely that overall abortions numbers continued to decline in 2009.

Now, the summary.

1. Horror abortion epidemics stories appeared at the end of 2008, and to a significant degree can be sourced to one NGO, a set of untraceable blog posts, and misleading statistics of search requests.
2. As the story progressed, new negative elements were added but actual expert comments were dropped (only negative expert forecasts were retained). “Real

- life” anecdotes introduced into the story seem to be artificial implants and cannot be traced to actual posts.
3. The hard “evidence” that formed the backbone of the story was a total fake. It was picked apart as soon as the story appeared; this information was completely ignored.
 4. Quantifiable predictions by experts turned out to be not exactly correct, as births continued to grow, marriages did not fall, and further news about excessive abortions did not materialize: all later mentions of the issue are reprints of original March stories. If November indeed was a bad month abortion-wise, June to August births numbers were supposed to be horrible. In fact, they are as high as or significantly higher than in 2008 instead. In Moscow (it is almost certain that DAILYONLINE reporters were talking to Moscow clinics) Aug 2009 births are 2.8% higher than in Aug 2008; in St Petersburg the August number is 4.7% higher. Where are all these abortions?
 5. At least two stories, from Daily Online and Vkrisis.ru, claim to have talked to medical establishments, in Moscow and St Petersburg respectively, and have the dramatically increased number of abortions confirmed. Daily Online reportedly talked to an employee of MedHelp clinic chain, the chain which gave completely different information to Free Press a couple days later. Did the reporters talk only to small, specialized (and expensive) clinics that serve only a very small and particularly panicky sector of population? Did they ask about peak numbers to make the story juicier? Did they talk to anyone at all?
 6. If we see reduced number of births starting October and given that we just cannot see traces of November – December ‘abortion epidemics’ (this is the time location of the story that was originally told) in the data, what share of that reduction could be attributed to saturation panic coverage that was unleashed in Russia on March 3, 2009?

I have a gnawing suspicion that inventors of [Lieutenant Kije](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lieutenant_Kije) story, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lieutenant_Kije, would envy creators of ‘abortion epidemics’. Not the first time this happens in Russia, of course – see the story of ‘spam king’ being [killed](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=815199), <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=815199>.

Were we all, including well known experts, taken for a ride? Let’s enjoy some animation: [Smeshariki, Last Rainbow](http://www.doktorpapa.ru/?page_id=2306), http://www.doktorpapa.ru/?page_id=2306.