



New problems of Russian families in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The note is concerned with the social and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for the daily life of Russian, and especially Moscow, families, especially in association with the introduction of quarantine-like restrictions as of April 2020. These consequences relate to the organization of the daily work of parents and the study of children from one and the same limited space of home or flat, with a sudden sharp change in the routines of everyday life. Also, unexpected financial problems and restrictions were added in many families, due to the lack of the opportunity to work for those employed in the service sector, which constitutes a significant segment of the Moscow economy.

Keywords

COVID-19, Russia, family, problems of families

JEL codes: J12, J13

At the time of writing this text (April 3, 2020), despite the closed borders of many countries, the coronavirus had managed to penetrate almost all the developed and emerging economies of Europe, North America, South-East Asia. As a result, in a huge number of countries, since health care systems could no longer cope with the inflow of the diseased (primarily due to the lack of space in intensive care), or were afraid of the development of such a situation in the near future, most people were actually “chained” to the house – in France, Spain, Italy, Russia (in Moscow and some other regions) it was actually forbidden to “go out”, that is, to leave the house without extreme necessity. In other countries, restrictions on such “outings” had been imposed. Sweden had hoped for sensibility behalf its citizens in this matter, the United Kingdom and some other countries first tried to restrict the movement of only older people, most vulnerable in case of disease, but then imposed restrictions on everyone. Where quarantine or similar restrictions were imposed relatively late, with the number of cases far above 1000, experts expressed hope for earlier formation of collective immunity and the

possibility of lifting the quarantine. In Russia, there was hope, on the contrary, to avoid the increase in infections and overcrowding of hospitals since quarantine was introduced early enough. But this could mean the possibility of a second wave of infection and repeated quarantine, as collective immunity would not be achieved early.

In Russia at this point, the quarantine restrictions, for some reason persistently not called quarantine, had been in effect for about a week (since March 31), and many people had earlier begun trying to mainly stay at home. Moscow schools switched to voluntary distance learning since March 23, in universities online classes began to gradually be introduced in the week that began on 16.03.2020. And on April 2, by the decision of the President, announced by him in a televised address, “days off” were introduced, which then were extended until the end of April. At the same time, the number of patients, in comparison with the “leading” countries, was not very large yet – 4149 people in Russia as a whole, the majority (2923 people) in Moscow. But the daily number of infections continued to grow exponentially. Anyway, children of school age were at home, their mothers and even fathers (!) too. Families suddenly encountered all their family members face to face on a daily basis, being “sentenced” to intense communication. This means different consequences for different categories of families, although there are common challenges. Let us consider the situation in detail (not in terms of the different consequences for families of different types, but in terms of the consequences that can arise in any family).

First, there has been a change in the usual way of life. There is not only no possibility to take a walk, cafes and restaurants (some work for takeaway and delivery) are closed, so are shops, except for grocery stores and pharmacies. Nearly all the food is now prepared at home, three times a day, because few people are able to regularly pay three times a day for food delivery. There is no way to invite the usual household assistants.

Secondly, children are at home. At first, it seemed that they had to be occupied with something useful, and parents would have to come up with something additional, or at least entertain them. But school-age children are usually immersed in school assignments. And the further, the more in online lessons. And now parents – first of all mothers, who are accustomed to it – have to control children’s completion of such lessons much more often and intensively than before. After all, now it is necessary to explain the content of lessons, delving into details. Much more time is spent, teaching qualifications and knowledge of the relevant school curriculum are not sufficient for many. One might think that it is possible to cope with this increased workload. And what else are moms and dads to do, if they are still at home with nothing to do.

But it is not so, because, thirdly, a huge number of adults are simply transferred to remote work. And for the vast majority it is unusual psychologically and in terms of organization of working hours. And many more have to master “zoom” from scratch as well as other platforms for remote work. Not all professions are equally convenient to be performed remotely, but it is better so, because work is salary.

Fourth, there are many people whose work does not involve a remote format in principle (workmen, service, etc.). Their salary should be paid by the employer, the business owner. But measures to support businesses are late, and many people find themselves out of work and without income, because not in all cases they are entitled to an unemployment benefit immediately – many are persuaded to write a leave application at their own expense or to resign at their own will... But, on the other hand, they have free time. Perhaps such workers will care for children, make long-planned renovations in their apartment (if they find the opportunity to buy materials for it in closed shops), will be engaged in self-development, learn languages, watch TV series. But that is only if they have savings.

However, this is another big problem, since, fifthly, according to RBC from March 31, 2020, over 60% of Russians have no savings. Besides, many mortgages are paid from current income. What is going to happen to all this? The degree of uncertainty is increasing.

Sixthly, the problems of domestic violence are worsening. Nervous tension has increased for everyone (due to fear of the pandemic, as well as due to the risks listed above). Many have got used to seeing each other not more than half an hour a day, including the parents of children, many have lost the habit of doing housework, and modern work is arranged in such a way that assumes a very limited time for it, because there are so many relevant services. And now everything has to be done independently, without leaving the four walls. It is especially difficult for those who have small apartments and lots of people there. Psychologists are available only online. The question is, will the police come to deal with the situation offline? So far it seems yes, but how will everything develop further? It was particularly intense in the first days and in the first week. Then people somehow adapted. Work has become somewhat worse, children are learning online only as well as they manage, there is no room for perfectionism now. Home affairs have also entered a routine rhythm or have been redistributed. Most people have not run out of money and stocks of products yet too.

The question is, whether this “adaptation” will suffice until the end of the quarantine, after all, it is not clear how long the quarantine is for. What will we run out of sooner – places in hospitals, money, patience? And what will happen then? This is an issue of concern to all States now. Some have plans to gradually come out of the situation by testing the population for antibodies in order to allow those who have fallen ill in a light, sometimes invisible form, to leave home and “launch” the work of the economy (as in Germany). But in Russia measures to support business during the pandemic are not yet completely sorted out, so it is not very clear to what jobs people would return from leave after the quarantine and, actually, when.

I would like to add a little optimism. Probably, it is possible to consider the fact that “it is not the plague” as an optimistic side of the events. Mortality is not so great, but humanity once experienced plague, smallpox, cholera, and typhoid. It is also encouraging that now the increased mortality due to insufficient medical care during the pandemic seems unacceptable to mankind as a whole, and extraordinary measures are being taken against such a situation. And the vaccine will be developed any time now... It is an interesting time we live in. How will this end? Carefully, but let’s say it – we will wait and see.

Reference list

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