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Peter Meylakhs^a

^a Centre for Independent Social Research, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

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Dangerous knowledge vs. dangerous ignorance: Risk narratives on sex education in the Russian press

Peter Meylakh*

Centre for Independent Social Research, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

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The paper is devoted to analysis of the debates on sex education in the Russian press. 'Risk narrative structure' of media articles on sex education was determined. This structure represents a system of mutually constituting elements, which include object of risk, risks themselves, solutions to their prevention, solutions opponents, and type of society these solutions presuppose. It is argued that analysis of risks with the aid of 'risk narrative structures' can be a useful development of sociocultural theory of risk, as competing risk narratives can be fully grasped only when considered not as discrete claims about different 'risks' but as coherent systems of interrelated meanings. On the basis of this structure, competent risk media narratives of proponents and opponents of sex education were reconstructed. In these narratives different definitions of 'children' as objects of risk were constructed, and so were types of risks, and types of society. It would be oversimplifying to consider debates on sex education as a battle of 'enlightened rationality' against 'dark irrationality.' In each risk narrative the solution (introduction or ban of sex education) is a logically following element in the respective risk narrative. While sex education advocates were concerned about negative consequences of children's sexual behaviour and defence of the 'civilised society's moral boundaries, the opposite side was concerned about retaining children's moral purity and defence of 'traditional' moral boundaries.

Keywords: risk; media; sex education; Russia; framing

Introduction

The demise of the Soviet Union was followed by mixed trends: on the one hand, there was continuing democratisation of society, onset of market reforms, and coming of basic freedoms to the Russian people; on the other, there was continuing failure of the Soviet and nascent post-Soviet institutions to create conditions for the most of the country citizens that would allow them to live in decent economic conditions, security, and good health. Thus, 'unanticipated consequences' of freedom and democracy, to use Merton's famous expression, were, among other things, widespread poverty, rapidly rising crime rate, and profound public health crisis.

Overall, health of Russian citizens deteriorated to the extent that is unparalleled in peacetime conditions (Field 1995). Male life expectancy dropped from 63.8 in 1990 to 57.6 in 1994, which constituted a loss of over six years within just five years. Though for females life expectancy was much higher (71.2 in 1994; drop by two years

*Email: mpeter@indepsores.spb.ru

for the four year period), their lives were often accompanied by poor health, so healthy life expectancy was very similar for both sexes (Tragakes and Lessof 2003). There was a dramatic increase in tuberculosis infection since 1990 (Twigg 2000) and other infectious diseases (Tragakes and Lessof 2003).

The incidence of sexually transmitted diseases also skyrocketed: syphilis incidence increased by 77 times after 1990 (for girls aged 10–14 its incidence rose by 50 times) (Tichonova 1997, Twigg 2000), the rate of gonorrhea rose throughout the 90s (with annual incidence increase of 15%), while gonorrhea incidence rate among adolescents were three times higher than general incidence (Panchaud *et al.* 2000); similar negative trends were observed for other STDs (Borisenko *et al.* 1999). From the second half of the 90s, a rapid growth of HIV was observed (Hamers and Downs 2003, Lowndes *et al.* 2003, Rhodes *et al.* 2004, UNAIDS 2004).

A liberalising society seemed to provide new opportunities to combat these negative trends in the population sexual health. Beginning from the early 1990s, both international and Russian medical and public health experts argued that implementation of sex education in Russian schools was a necessary element in prevention of STDs among Russian youth (Kon 2005). In 1996 there started a pilot project on sex education in 16 Russian regions that was supported by the United Nations Population Fund and UNESCO, on the basis of which a universal sex education course should have been introduced in Russian schools. However, from its outset the project evoked a huge public outcry ignited by the conservative (mainly communist) deputies in the Russian parliament, 'parental committees for morality,' societies of 'Orthodox doctors,' and 'Orthodox teachers,' and the Russian Orthodox Church. As a result of the public scandal, the Russian Ministry of Education shut down the project before its completion. Other projects that contained elements of sex education that were started in the end of the 1990s to beginning of the 2000s were also fiercely attacked by these forces. There was also an intense media discussion of these events, which was characterised by a prominent Russian sociologist studying sexuality in Russia, Igor Kon, as a 'moral panic' (Kon 2005, p. 384). The result of this attack on sex education in Russia was a failure to create and implement a national course on sex education in Russian schools. The article sets out to analyse the print media discourse on sex education, with a special emphasis on the period of the late 90s when the fate of sex education in Russia was decided. Analysis of empirical material allowed determining 'risk narrative structure' of media articles on sex education. Such narratives are made up of mutually constituting elements, which include object of risk, risks themselves, solutions to its prevention, people who make obstacles to solution implementation, and type of society these solutions presuppose. On the basis of this structure competent risk media narratives of proponents and opponents of sex education are reconstructed. It is argued that analysis of risks with the aid of 'risk narrative structures' can be a useful development of sociocultural theory of risk as competing risk narratives can be fully grasped only when considered not as discrete claims about different 'risks' but as coherent systems of interrelated meanings. It is further argued that during these debates much more than prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and other health related issues was at stake; these debates as constructed in the media discourse were about competing definitions of Russian society's moral order and moral boundaries. The social context of the debates around sex education is briefly outlined.

Methodological approach

The empirical base for this study was all articles on sex education that were published in several major mainstream Russian newspapers in the years 1996–2008¹. Year 1996 was chosen as the starting point as it was the year when the first sex education pilot project was launched. Year 2008 was selected as reflecting recent media discourse on sex education. A criterion for selection of an article into the research data was a presence of a lexical item ‘sex education’ in all its inflections. Integrum database and search engine was used for selecting the materials.

A few words should be said about the newspapers selection criteria. *Rossiyskaya gazeta* is an official newspaper of the Russian government. Besides common readers the newspaper had Russian officials as a target audience. *Izvestiya* was (at the time of the most vociferous battles around sex education) a newspaper whose primary audience was Russian intelligentsia. The political stance of the newspaper can be described as ‘enlightened conservatism.’ *Kommersant* was a liberal (neoliberal to be more exact) media outlet oriented, first and foremost, to business community. Both *Obshchaya gazeta* and *Nezavisimaya gazeta* were appealing to the liberal part of Russian society. However, they were owned by different oligarchic groups, which were at the peak of their strength at the turn of the century. Besides, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* had a much stronger emphasis on art and cultural matters. *Trud*’s audience was mainly working class people. Consequently, its primary focus was on the issues of trade unions, working conditions and the like. *Sovetskaya Rossiya* reflected interests of revanchist groups: ultra-nationalists and communists. Finally, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* was one of the most popular Russian tabloids with very diverse audience. Thus, the newspapers chosen for analysis reflected a broad spectrum of political positions, from liberal to ultraconservative. In addition, these newspapers had very different target groups, from government officials to subway passengers. Therefore, the newspapers selected for analysis covered both various political positions and various audiences².

One of the difficulties both in analysing materials and presenting results of this study is related to differences in Russian and English in relationship to terms such as ‘sex,’ ‘sexual,’ and ‘education.’ Depending on context the English word ‘sex’ can be translated into Russian as two different words: as ‘*pol*’ that is, sex in the meaning it is used in questionnaires and forms for designating males and females, and also as ‘*seks*,’ indicating sexual activity (e.g. ‘We had a classy *seks*’). The adjectives of these words ‘*seksual’niy*’ and ‘*polovoy*’ also have different, though in some contexts similar meanings. While ‘*seksual’niy*’ still refers to sexual activity or sexual attraction, ‘*polovoy*’ means both ‘sexual’ in the sense of sexual activity (as in sexual act, ‘*polovoy akt*’) and ‘having to do with ‘*pol*,’ as in ‘*poloviye roli*,’ sex roles. Words ‘*seks*’ and its derivatives were used pejoratively in the Soviet period as referring to one of the manifestations of ‘spiritual degradation’ of the capitalist West, whereas ‘*pol*’ and its derivatives had neutral meanings.

The word ‘education’ in the sense it is used in the combination of words ‘sex education’ is also ambiguous when it comes to Russian translation. Literally, it is translated as ‘*obrazovaniye*’ but it is not used in the Russian expression, designating ‘sex education.’ Instead, in Russian one of the two words are used in the expression: ‘*vospitaniye*’ or ‘upbringing,’ which Rivkin-Fish chooses to translate as ‘moral education’ (Rivkin-Fish 1999, p. 803), or ‘*prosvesheniye*,’ which corresponds to the English word ‘enlightenment.’

Though the word '*seks*' had mostly lost its pejorative meaning in the post-Soviet discourse, the traces of its former pejorative use have remained. In particular, there were some experts that supported '*polovoye vospitaniye*' as moral education that teaches young men's and women's family roles as opposed to '*seksual'noe prosveshcheniye*' that 'enlightens' youth about sex-related issues. While sometimes these expressions were used as opposing each other, in most instances in the media discourse they were used either interchangeably, or, in any case, without regard to subtle difference in meanings. Therefore, when searching newspapers for this study key words I included in my search four combinations containing these words: '*seksual'noye prosveshchenie*,' '*seksualnoye vospitaniye*,' '*polovoye vospitaniye*,' and '*polovoye prosveshcheniye*.' Though first and third combinations were returned most frequently in my search, all of them were used in the newspapers. Throughout the paper I will use the term 'sex education' as an English translation for all of them unless there is significant difference in the Russian emphasis or meaning.

This article is not a quantitative analysis of media coverage of sex education programmes in Russia; this task would require a completely different study. Only basic information on press coverage of sex education in Russia is provided. The analysis seeks to describe the structure of the arguments of the opposing parties, not frequency of their repetition. The distinction between journalists' position and various claims-makers' positions as presented in the media was not made as journalists positions merely replicated (or coincided with) positions taken by the opposing parties; therefore this distinction would add nothing to the analysis. For analysis of the texts and determination of risk narrative structure structural form of narrative analysis understood in the broadest sense as a method of studying 'how a story is composed to communicate particular communicative aims' (Riessman 2008, p. 539) is employed. In addition, the risk narratives were placed in general Russian socio-political context that existed when they were produced.

Sex education and the media

While this article does not consider the history of sex education or its closest analogues in Soviet or post-Soviet Russia, a few words should be said about the topic³. Although as Temkina (2009) argues, in the late Soviet period there was public discussion of sexuality, this discussion was very cautious, the list of topics was very limited and it was restricted to various professional (medical, pedagogical and other) discourses. The school course 'The Ethics and Psychology of Family Life,' devised for high school students did not include topics on sex but concentrated on teaching youngsters 'proper' sex roles, creating a stable family, and encouraging them to have three or more children (Rivkin-Fish 1999, p. 804). According to Kon (2005, p. 269), the first media discussion of sexuality in Russia occurred during Perestroika in 1987 (when Kon himself gave an interview on the subject to a Russian weekly).

Intense media discussion of sex education started in 1996, the year of the first pilot project on sex education (which was mentioned in the Introduction). Initially, all newspapers included in this study welcomed the project. However, as fierce attacks on the project were launched, some newspapers that had approved of the project took a diametrically opposed position. For instance, on 9 February 1996, *Rossiyskaya gazeta* (which is an official media outlet of the Russian government) published a laudatory article, arguing for necessity of sex education, but already in 1997 there was a flood of materials in the publication, asserting that such

programmes were pernicious. The negative coverage of the sex education programmes prevailed in the newspaper till 2003 when the publication took a much more balanced view on the issue. As mentioned in the Introduction, the period of 1997–2000 was a time when several pilot projects which included elements of sex education were implemented, and it was also a period when the most vehement battles between proponents and opponents of sex education took place on different public arenas of discourse and action, including mass media. These activities of conservative claims-makers resulted in their victory as the project of introducing a universal course on sex education in Russian schools has failed. However, though fluctuations in *Rossiyskaya gazeta*'s position towards sex education were somewhat typical, and similar changes could be observed in other outlets, it was by no means characteristic of most newspapers that were analysed in the study. For instance, as mentioned above, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, a liberal newspaper, published materials, mainly interviews with both opponents and proponents of sex education. Another reputable newspaper, *Izvestiya*, backed the sex education adherents throughout the campaign. Thus, Igor Kon's statement about almost universal media (including liberal media) attack ('moral panic') on sex education seems to be exaggerated. As discussed in the Methods section, the purpose of this study consists not in describing media discussion of sex education in quantitative terms (e.g. what percentage of media coverage was for or against sex education programmes) but in elucidating argumentation structure of the parties. Summarising media discussion of the topic during this crucial for sex education period, two things can be said: first, even though media coverage was slanted towards backing the sex education opponents there was no unified stance on the issue among Russian media; second, positions of experts and other claims-makers from both sides of the debate were presented in the publications under consideration.

In the beginning of the new century the problem of sex education nearly vanished from media discussion. Although the 'universal sex education' project was shut down by the Ministry of Education, there are still sex education projects or programmes that contain various elements of sex education that are implemented in various regions of Russia. However, media attention to them is scarce and incomparable to the one that was observed in the end of the nineties.

Dangerous ignorance vs. dangerous knowledge: Risk narratives of proponents and opponents of sex education

According to the sociocultural theory of risk, which originated in the groundbreaking works of Mary Douglas, risks are socially constructed phenomena that are inseparable from human culture and values (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982, Douglas 1990, 1992, Garland 2003, Hacking 2003, Zinn and Taylor-Gooby 2006). 'Arguments about risk are highly charged morally and politically. Naming a risk amounts to an accusation. The selection of which dangers are terrifying and which can be ignored depends on what kind of behaviour the risk accusers want to stop' (Douglas 2002, p. xix).

We can add to this, that not only identification of risks tells us about values and culture of the risk identifier, but the way these risks are constructed as packages of interrelated meanings, attached to the source, object and consequences of a given risk are indicative of the identifier's values too. As Garland writes: 'risk is always a risk *of* something *for* someone' (Garland 2003, p. 69); risks are always presented in

the form of a coherent narrative with underlying 'risk narrative structure' that includes necessary elements, each of which makes sense only in relation to other elements. As Riessman writes with regards to personal narratives: 'Like weight bearing walls, personal narratives depend on certain structures to hold them together ... Events become meaningful because of their placement in a narrative' (Riessman 1993, p. 18). While structural approach was used for analysis of narratives by various social scientists, each of which proposed his own narrative structure (e.g. Burke 1945, Labov and Waletzky 1967, Labov 1982, Gee 1986, Langellier 1989) with different constituent elements, none of these versions can be useful for analysis of risks. This is understandable as the primary goal of these versions of structural approach to narratives is analysis of human action as told in personal stories. Structural analysis of narratives on risk in the media discourse requires a different narrative structure. One possible approach to such an analysis is proposed in this paper. Elements of this narrative structure include object of risks, risks themselves, ways of coping with risks or solutions, opponents who try to hinder the solution implementation, and types of society these solutions presuppose. Not only are risks socially constructed but elements of risk narrative structures are social constructs too, and construction of other elements of risk narrative structures depend on the way they are constructed. Some elements of risk narrative structures are present as implicit assumptions and can be reconstructed with the aid of other elements. Constituent elements of the risk narrative structure of opponents and proponents of sex education are summarised in Table 1. In what follows, I will try to show that it is indeed 'structure,' that is, interrelated system of meanings, and simultaneously describe how on the basis of this structure different risk narratives were constructed in the Russian media discourse on sex education.

Both risk narratives that are to be found in the Russian media discourse on sex education (for and against sex education) identified one risk object: children. However, differences in the construction of 'children' by opposing parties simultaneously leads to emphasis on different risks that children face and different solutions to confront these risks. Moreover, as was mentioned, it is relations between constructs of risk object, risk, and solution that make each of these elements meaningful. For sex education proponents, 'children' are either already engaged in sexual practices or ready to start sexual life at any moment. 'Girls aged 16–17 are one of the largest youth groups, who choose risky sexual behaviour. Payback for this - unwanted pregnancy, sexual diseases' (*Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 16.06.1998). They are also rational beings that are capable of employing practical and useful knowledge; risks they face stem from lack of knowledge about sexual issues. 'Most often young people make hasty decisions because of lack of knowledge of themselves, their own bodies, laws of psychology' (*Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 16.06.1998). As 'children' are already leading sexual life, and often times lack knowledge that could be used to prevent sex related risks, they face these risks, which are: sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, and unwanted pregnancies. Being accumulated these risks are translated to risks for society as a whole: spread of infectious diseases, growing number of abortions, and growing number of orphans. 'According to statistics, around 60% of Russian young people start sexual relationships before they are 17. For the last five years the number of adolescents that have had syphilis have grown by 31 times. Annually 300,000 young girls make an abortions. For every tenth girl sexual debut is related with violence. At the same time, 1 in 8–10 family couples has fertility problems. Not infrequently their cause is

Table 1. Elements of risk narrative structure of proponents and opponents of sex education.

Constituent element of risk narrative structure	Proponents of sex education	Opponents of sex education
Risk object	Children	Children
Construct of risk object	Rational actors Engaged in sexual practices or ready to do so at any moment	Malleable AND latent sinners Virgin, morally and physically pure
Risks for individual	STDs, including HIV, abortions, unwanted pregnancy	Loss of moral purity, loss of physical purity - sexual activity, perversions, psychiatric pathologies aggression
Risks for society	Spread of infectious diseases, growing number of abortions, growing number of orphans	Moral decline of Russian society and loss of its traditions, depopulation
Solutions	Knowledge (in the form of sex education)	Sex education ban AND Moral upbringing, teaching abstinence before marriage, and family values
How solutions are constructed by the solution's proponents	Empowerment	Keeping purity intact AND Formation of character
How solutions are constructed by the solution's opponents	Useless moralising, ignorance, ignoring empirical reality of adolescents' sexual activity	Corruption and seduction of innocent children
How opponents are constructed	Conservative, clerical, communist, hypocritical, members of international conservative forces	Agents of international pharmaceutical corporations, geopolitical enemies of Russia (usually from the West) with 'alien' to Russia traditions
Type of society constructed	Civilised society (as any 'normal' society)	Peculiar 'Russian' society

an early abortion or self-treatment of sexual sphere disease. Needless to say, that most often it is a consequence of elementary ignorance' (*Izvestiya*, 01.04.1997). A natural remedy for knowledge lacking but ready to act upon it once it is received by individuals is enlightenment ("prosvesheniye"), that is, knowledge about sex issues in the form of sex education that will come to them from professionals: specially trained teachers, psychologists etc. 'Olga Sharapova [Deputy Minister of Health] pointed out that it is necessary to introduce "total sex education." Ignorance in this question led to the situation when the number of pre-14 years old girls who had an abortion exceeded 3000, pre-18 years old girls – 280 000 a year' (*Kommersant*, 03.06.2000). Thus, in this risk narrative knowledge is empowerment (cf. Francis Bacon's famous aphorism 'Knowledge is Power'). We can see how in this 'enlightenment discourse' individuals and knowledge are mutually constructed: it is for risk taking rational individuals that knowledge on risk prevention is both relevant and applicable, and vice versa; knowledge is a natural and logical remedy for individuals constructed this way. If implemented successfully the sex education solution results in physically healthy individuals and a 'healthy nation,' and a society where there are less public health and other social problems than it would be without implementation of sex education programmes. "'Use of, excuse me, condoms is not genocide of the nation, but on the contrary, care of the future generations' health," concluded her talk president of RAPS [Russian Association of Family Planning – one of the leading organisation, advocating sex education programmes]' (*Kommersant*, 03.06.2000).

Sex education also simultaneously presupposes and constructs an ideal type of society: it is 'normal,' 'civilised' society, populated with rational decision-makers, where sexuality, as any other activity is openly discussed in rational manner. 'During these years, necessity of high school students' sex education is acknowledged by pedagogues, doctors, sociologists, and psychologists all around the world. Everywhere. Only not in Russia' (*Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 27.01.1998). 'Tradition' with its prudish silence on sexual matters is denounced as detrimental to public health. 'Hélas, we still remain half-savages in all matters, concerning reproduction and sex education ... Meanwhile, the very capacity of the nation to reproduce a healthy generation has long been under threat' (*Trud*, 27.11.1997).

Though the underlying risk narrative structure is the same for sex education opponents, there is a totally different risk narrative that is built upon it. Similar to sex education adherents, their adversaries also define children as risk object. However, their construction of the category of 'children' is drastically different from the one that is advanced by sex education proponents and, as is in the former case, is inseparable from other constructs that constitute risk narrative structure: types of risks and solutions. 'Children' are presented as pure; innocent both in a moral and a physical sense. 'Children have sense of shame, despite all the efforts to kill it on the part of the [sex education] center. To tell parents about what they have heard is shameful, to talk about it with peers is even more shameful. By the way, we have very good, chaste children. What must happen in their souls after visiting the center, to what may lead turmoil in their souls?' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 10.06.1999). They are neither engaged in sexual activity, nor have any detailed knowledge about it (it is completely unclear from this discourse, what these 'children' do know about sex or childbirth). They are also extremely malleable. 'And all this [sex education] comes down on soft and delicate child's soul, leading to creation and cultivation of an artificial need, and even creation of pathological forms of this need, which can

be neither necessary, nor natural in this young age' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 10.06.1999).

One important trait of 'children' constructed in the sex education opponents risk narrative is presented here only implicitly. To make it explicit, we have to analyse a category of 'knowledge' as it is constructed in this narrative. We know from this discourse that knowledge (in the form of sex education) corrupts and seduces 'innocent souls,' not only by depriving them of moral purity but also by making them susceptible to various 'sexual perversions.' 'Hence, medical specialists' conclusion – the [sex education] programme instils in schoolchildren' consciousness the cult of "sex" in all its variations, including psychiatric disorders in the form of sexual perversions, corrupts not only moral and spiritual foundations but also natural foundations of the younger generation' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 10.06.1999). How can an innocent and pure soul be corrupted and seduced to such an extent by simple knowledge? Only on the premise that this soul is a soul of a latent sinner, prone by Nature or God's design to sin and depravity, only waiting for knowledge and skills, necessary for sinning. How else can we explain that 'evil' in the form of sex education almost automatically wins over 'good' (which is taught in the family, in the overall process of socialisation, or in Church for Orthodox families) in the battle for the child's soul? Thus, studying how knowledge functions in this discourse helped us reconstruct a 'missing element' in the sex opponents risk narrative: a Christian concept of human as naturally prone to sin, who can only be held at bay by the system of prohibitions and silencing. Again, different elements of risk narrative structure are made meaningful when considered in relation to each other: knowledge corrupts and seduces children only if they are innocent (otherwise, there is no one to corrupt) and latent sinners (that is why knowledge has the power of seduction), and vice versa; only for innocent and ready-to-sin individuals is sex education useful (in its 'corruptive' sense) as it can give knowledge and skills for realising natural depravity.

The risks that are manifest in this risk narrative are also clear; it is loss of both moral and physical purity. This 'risk portfolio' includes onset of sexual activity, 'sexual perversions,' various psychosomatic diseases, psychiatric diseases, aggression. 'Who will handle all this flood of sexual aggression, that is the result of the conviction that there is nothing shameful, prohibited, and intimate?' (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 18.01.2000). These are risks also translated into the macro-level: moral decline of Russian society and loss of its culture and traditions, decline of the traditional institution of family, and also depopulation, which is presented as a consequence of unbridled pleasure-seeking and taboo breaking on talk about sex. 'Thereby sex education weakens family influence even more, as the barrier between the grown-up and the child is destroyed, and adolescents become even more disorderly, uncontrolled, and cynical ... So if sex education is actively implemented in schools and other similar initiatives are implemented, we will have no population at all' (*Obshchaya gazeta*, 26.06.1997).

It was asserted that sex education programmes contradicted 'our Orthodox culture ... the core of our culture.' The following quote from *Nezavisimaya gazeta* illustrates the point. 'There is no more tabooed issue in Russian culture than issue of physical love, this prohibition lies in our cultural core, in the part of our culture and nature that is not liable to transformation. This core can only be exploded. Now, let's imagine that our children, under the guidance of grown-ups, will learn what was traditionally never talked about with children. What can happen when the cultural

core comes under such a barbaric assault? Only nuclear explosion' (*Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 20.01.1998).

The main solution against dangerous knowledge that is taught in sex education programmes, according to sex education opponents, is a total ban of such programmes. However, in the 2000s, mainly due to a growing HIV epidemic in Russia, and forced to propose some 'alternative' programmes to sex education, its opponents advanced programmes on 'Health and Education' which were very similar to Soviet programmes on '*polovoye vospitaniye*' (see the differences in the Methods section), which taught 'how to say no to a potential partner,' that is, abstinence before marriage and family values, while silencing sex related issues. 'Ten years ago various international organisations spread in schools "sexual textbooks of enlightenment kind."' These programmes were of American or Chinese origin. It is clear that they tried to find ways how to reduce population, how to prevent an unwanted pregnancy. This way does not suit us. Children should be taught, how to keep their honor, not how to use contraceptives' (*Kommersant*, 14.10.2003). According to such programme adherents, this solution leads to a formation of moral individuals and a moral nation.

The type of society that this risk narrative constructs is peculiar 'Russian' society, clean from 'alien' to Russian tradition phenomena. As we saw from the quote about the taboo of discussion of physical love, the public sphere in this society is completely purified from discussion of sexual phenomena. Following national tradition is a macro-remedy against all problems related to this dirty word: 'sex.'

Risk narrative structure also includes constructions of 'enemies': opponents and their solutions, sometimes in stereotyped and caricatured fashion, with occasional use of direct lies and urban legends. For instance, there were reports that sex education lessons were conducted at sex shops or that students were taught sexual act techniques in the sex education lessons. 'Almost every day I hear that one or another school is visited by "specialists."' The essence of their activities was perfectly relayed by a son of a friend of mine. "My dear parents, - he said recently, having come back from school. You won't believe what we had in school today! Today we were taught, how to bang and were provided with condoms'" (*Obshchaya gazeta*, 26.06.1997).

Sex education adherents constructed their opponents as 'extreme conservative,' 'clerical,' 'radical religious,' 'extremist clerical,' 'ultraclerical,' 'communist,' or 'hypocritical.' 'Even those moderate efforts on sex education and family planning development that are made in contemporary Russia meet resistance of communist, nationalist, and clerical fundamentalists' (*Izvestiya*, 25.02.1998). They are also presented as members of international conservative forces: pro-Life movement. 'These organisations that have found support of nationalist-patriotic, and extreme conservative forces in Russia, as a rule, work according to programmes and on the money of foreign and international organisations, that are known in the USA under generic name "pro-life movement."' A dubious honor of organising noisy campaigns around sex education programmes belongs to them. As a result, the programmes are shut down, and adolescents have gotten a full and indisputable right to study in "sexual universities" in the basements and in the dark corners' (*Izvestiya*, 13.10.1998). Ironic epithets such as 'custodians of public morals' and the like were also used at their description. Sex education opponents' solutions were criticised as a 'system of total prohibitions.' 'Programmes on sex education don't take root in Russia. And not because they aren't needed. It is just for Russian moral zealots the

right upbringing, as a rule, is associated only with prohibitions. Everything else is declared either depravity or genocide and ruthlessly destroyed' (*Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 16.06.1998). Measures of sex education opponents were criticised as cultivation of ignorance, sanctimony and useless moralising with total disregard to empirical reality of adolescents' sexual activity. 'It is sad but the first ride of the motorcar "Desire" [sex education project] was spoiled by intransigence of people who mix notions of chastity and ignorance. They are convinced that condoms and any contraceptives is a way to depravity ... We have already stumbled over these steps of sanctimony so many times' (*Trud*, 27.11.1997). As we saw from the quote about 'sexual universities,' a ban of sex education programmes, according to their proponents, pushes adolescents to getting knowledge from their peers, which often leads to the spread of myths and disinformation about sex-related issues.

From their side, sex education opponents present their adversaries as agents of international pharmaceutical corporations (who are interested in distribution of condoms and birth control pills) and also as geopolitical enemies of Russia (usually from the West) who want to destroy Russia and/or implant 'alien' to Russian society traditions. 'Such programmes teach our children not how to create family and raise children but how to avoid pregnancy and get pleasure from copulation in the right way. This ideology is implanted, according to the Western plans, in order to influence Russian demographic situation, which is appalling as it is' (*Izvestiya*, 31.05.2003). Thus solutions of sex education proponents are presented as nothing but seduction and corruption of innocent children.

Discussion and conclusion

As I tried to demonstrate, introduction of the concept of 'risk narrative structure' may help develop and add specificity to a more general but at the same time less operable thesis of sociocultural theory of risk; the risks we identify and prioritise reflect our culture and values (Douglas 1990). Not only are risks socially constructed in a way that reflects risk-identifier's values but the whole risk narrative is constructed on the basis of risk narrative structure reflecting these values, whose constituent elements can be properly understood only when considered as a system of interrelated meanings. Thus, we cannot understand why risk is a risk without considering other elements of risk narrative structure: objects of risk, solution to risk reduction, and type of society this solution presupposes. For instance, in competing risk narratives on sex education that were published in the Russian media, different definitions of 'children' as objects of risk were constructed, and so were types of risks and types of society. In my view, radically different constructions of 'children' by the opposing parties, as well as construction of rules that regulate talk about sex between the child and the adult, largely determined why the parties talked past each other during the whole period of intensive battles over sex education programmes.

It would be oversimplifying and even wrong to consider debates on sex education as a battle of 'enlightened rationality' against 'dark irrationality' as is often done by sex education advocates. In each risk narrative the solution, introduction or ban of sex education is a logically following element in the respective risk narrative. Moreover, while the sympathy of most of this article's readers will probably lay with the cause of sex education adherents (which coincide with the author's position) it is necessary to point to naiveté of the 'enlightenment sex education' discourse. Its central assertion that risks are results of simple ignorance to be coped with expert

knowledge is untenable. Informal risk communication systems in communities have been shown to compete successfully with expert knowledge (e.g. Profeta *et al.* 2010). Munro (2010) shows that preventive policies with regards to children 'at risk' in the UK have proved to have limited effectiveness, and can be potentially harmful. In addition, numerous risk behaviour studies have demonstrated the importance of social norms, social structure, and other factors in risk taking behaviour (Bourgois 1998, Friedman *et al.* 1999, Denscombe 2001, Rhodes 2002, Duff 2003, Latkin *et al.* 2003). Risk takers are not isolated rational decision makers but constitute a 'moral community,' with a system of rules regulating acceptable and unacceptable risks where knowledge is only one of the variables. Certainly, no one will dispute the importance of knowledge in risk preventing, although exclusive emphasis on knowledge in prevention programmes is largely misplaced. Equally, it would not be right to accuse sex education opponents only on the grounds that they have made morality and moral dangers the main focus of their campaign. The whole issue of 'racist crimes' and 'hate crimes' that causes moral indignation of liberal and sometimes mainstream parts of society can only be understood in moral terms, as the number of these crimes and its victims is not proportional to public outcry, if considered in purely rational terms. Racism is symbolic pollution of the liberal society, as sex education is symbolic pollution of the conservative one. But unwillingness to make morality a central issue in liberal campaigns and derision to 'moralising' which is often met in liberal (and liberal academic) discourses on social problems (e.g. notions 'moral crusade,' 'moral panic') not infrequently make their position highly vulnerable with regards to winning public opinion. As George Lakoff writes in his book 'Moral Politics': 'Morality is too important to be left to churches ... If liberals are to create an adequate moral discourse to counter conservatives, they must get over their view that all thought is literal and that straightforward rational liberal debate on an issue is always possible (Lakoff 2002, p. 387). In short, it is not debate 'morality vs. rationality' that matters, but what kind of morality and 'good society' we are talking about.

If we recall Douglas's quote about the relation of dangers with the kinds of behaviour that risk accusers want to stop, we can say that sex education advocates wanted to stop possible negative consequences of children's sexual behaviour while the opposite side wanted to stop talk with children about sexual behaviour in the public space (school). Such *purification of public space* from various 'immoral' phenomena was not limited to attempts to get rid of sex education. In the same period (late 1990s to early 2000s) there were intensive debates in press and society about other issues: homosexuality, pornography, and drug use (Meylakhs 2004 & 2009), which rather abruptly waned in the next few years. In all these media battles for Russian society's moral boundaries, the purpose of all claims-makers fighting with immorality was not behaviour per se but its appearance on different public arenas. In this respect, neo-traditionalist (or neo-moralist) discourse, calling for purification of public space without its elimination in the private sphere that appeared in the Russian media was different from totalitarian discourses, whose aim is complete elimination of evil both from public and private spaces.

These battles for society's moral boundaries were waged against a backdrop of deep economic, social, and political crises that characterised Russian society in the late 90s. Many Russian sociologists point out that 1998–1999 were the lowest point of the Russian society's transitional period (e.g. Danilov 1999, Levada 1999, Steinberg 2003). If, as Lamont writes, 'boundary work is used to reinstate order

within communities by reinforcing collective norms' (Lamont 1992, p. 11), then the structural conditions for intensive boundary work (acute social and institutional crisis) were clearly visible. Thus, according to this macrostructural explanation hypothesis, the battle around sex education was an instance of the overall battle for Russian society's moral boundaries of the crisis period. That this battle around sex education was perceived by the 'fighters' as something more general is clear from claims of both parties. Thus, in *Rossiyskaya gazeta* appeared an article, where a sex education opponent asserted that: 'Clash between these two people [an opponent and proponent of sex education in Russian provincial city of Vologda] is not just a squabble and mutual offences exchange. In the final reckoning it is a very important for Russia definition, what the growing generation will be, who it will live up to, whom it will follow, whose behaviour it will copy. What will be put by teachers in young heads of those who go to school today, in effect, will be put in consciousness of the nation ... (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 10.06.1999, emphasis added). It turn, a sex education prominent advocate, Igor Kon, writes: "Sexual counterrevolution" is more of a fact of political than sexual culture of society. It is just one of the instances of the battle for restoration of a totalitarian order in Russia' (Kon 2005, p. 398).

Stabilisation of economic, social, and political conditions that started in Russia beginning in the early 2000s seem to have put away public concern that Russian society was in acute moral crisis, or anyway drove it down the public agenda. Despite the growing authoritarianism of the Russian political system, no repressive 'legislation of morality' was introduced. On the contrary, conservative efforts to toughen laws regulating moral issues failed in most cases that were debated in the media. Thus, attempts to ban pornography failed, overture of some politicians to recriminalise homosexuality (which at the start was more of a PR trick than a real effort to reach the goal) also failed. The strict drug laws that had been passed in 1997 (the 'moral crisis period') were partly liberalised in 2004. Only in one moral battle that waged in the end of the 90s the conservatives won: it was the battle for a ban of sex education. While Snarskaya (2009) argues that a 'compromise' was achieved over moral and gender orders of the Russian nation, on the basis of which programmes on sex education started to re-appear, description of these programmes that are provided in her work make them practically indistinguishable from the programmes on '*polovoye vospitaniye*' of the late Soviet period that are discussed in Temkina's (2009) article: in both cases the sexual element is largely silenced. However, some pilot projects with 'real' sex education are present in Russia, although only some of them are approved by the Russian Ministry of Education (Stothard *et al.* 2007, Snarskaya 2009).

It is a matter of separate research to determine why these battles for moral boundaries resulted in such different outcomes. While I briefly outlined the social context in which this boundary-work was performed, specific mechanisms of victory or defeat in a particular struggle need to be determined. For example, resource mobilisation theory may be useful in demonstrating how different groups interested in a ban of sex education have defeated their opponents. A complementary research on media role and coverage of this process would also be illuminating. Understanding the rules of 'risk reporting' (formulated in Kitzinger 1999) and parameters of 'newsworthiness' (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988) would be indispensable for such an analysis.

Even without an elaborate analysis of a ban on sex education from a collective movements perspective, one thing is clear. Contrary to Kon's thesis that the sex

education ban was a sign of returning ‘totalitarianism’ of the Russian state, this ban was actually a victory of the nascent Russian civil society and democracy⁴. It was numerous parental committees, Christian committees for defence of the family, and societies for orthodox culture, that is, civil society organisations, that filed lawsuits, organised demonstrations, made petitions, and wrote to newspapers, that were the major forces that killed the sex education project. When these forces were joined by some of the influential media outlets (whose role in a democratic society is to reflect public concern) and oppositional parties along with some medical and educational experts, the result was unwillingness of the state institutions to be involved in a major public scandal, which resulted in the death of an ‘enlightenment project’: the project on ‘*seksualnoye prosveshcheniye*.’ The ban of sex education was a victory of an emergent Russian civil society and democracy. At the same time it seems to have been defeat for Russian society’s public health.

Notes

1. The newspapers included for these study were: *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, *Izvestiya*, *Kommer-sant*, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, *Obshchaya gazeta*, *Trud*, *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*.
2. It is important to mention that despite quantitative analysis was not executed in this paper, cursory inspection shows that a newspaper’s political stance (with the exception of ultraconservative *Sovetskaya Rossiya*) was poorly correlated with position on sex education. For instance, moderate conservative *Izvestiya* backed sex education throughout the period in question. Other newspapers (including liberal ones) published articles that reflected positions of both proponents and opponents on sex education.
3. See works of Rivkin-Fish (1999), Kon (2005), Snarskaya (2009), and Temkina (2009) for the discussion of the history of pedagogical and medical approaches to teaching and writing about sex-related issues in Russia.
4. While this statement seems controversial, its disputability follows from the wrong perception of civil society organisations as something inherently ‘good.’ Oxford Dictionary of Sociology in its definition of ‘civil society’ says that despite absence of unitary meaning of the concept, ‘most authorities have in mind the realm of public participation in voluntary associations, the mass media, professional associations, trade unions, and the like (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology 1998, p. 74). From this definition we can see that there is nothing inherently good in civil society organisations that is independent from their purposes.

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