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Active Ageing and Social Services: The Paradox of Empowerment in Russia

DARIA PRISIAZHNIUK & ARTURS HOLAVINS

Abstract

The essay describes the adoption of an active ageing policy framework in Russia. Based on semi-structured interviews with elderly Russians, the essay provides evidence of confusion and uncertainty on how to perceive one's own ageing. Research participants understood that the 'paternalistic' view of old age as a time of troubles was now largely viewed as obsolete, yet the new 'optimistic' view of old age as a time of freedom and opportunities often did not reflect their experiences. This mismatch in discourses and practices reflects how participatory empowerment rhetoric, which promotes active ageing, is becoming a justification for more modest state social service provision.

THE ROLE OF ELDERLY PEOPLE IN SOCIETY HAS BEEN changeable and fluid throughout time and space. One of the main trends in postindustrial societies is a more inclusive view of older people. This means that attitudes towards the elderly as passive beneficiaries are being replaced by a discourse of seeing older age as a continuation of adulthood, with the ability and opportunity to maintain the same level of participation. In accordance with the United Nations Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing (UN 2002), the elderly are invited and expected to keep being active in social, economic and cultural spheres. This rhetoric and a corresponding ageing policy framework, called 'active ageing', have been adopted and supported by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU) and other international actors.

This international policy framework proclaims the rights of older people to be active members of their communities, to stay empowered and to be able to contribute to society. As the proportion of elderly people in a population grows, the discourse about empowered and active elderly becomes a solution to the burden on social services and pension and health-care systems: a healthy, economically and socially active older person is assumed not to need overly comprehensive social support. In this way, the empowerment discourse fits the neoliberal agenda of welfare state regime liberalisation. Thus, active ageing has shaped social policy programmes for the elderly in line with

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other neoliberal reforms: basically, a dismantling of welfare state regimes in Europe, the Americas, Asia and Australia, as the private sector becomes a more prominent and active participant in social service provision.

Russian social policy had been liberalising since the collapse of the USSR (Cook 2007). In the past decade, as indicated by the adoption of the Federal Law ‘On Social Service Provision’ in 2013, the non-state social service providing sector has been growing. Thus, the incorporation of active ageing into social policies for the elderly in Russia, which has been underway since the 2010s, fits the wider global neoliberal trend in welfare provision. Considering the neoliberal ideologies of the elite (Matveev & Novkunskaia 2022), the scale of the ageing of the population,¹ weak social support infrastructures and limited economic resources, the Russian case is an indicative example of how the ‘empowerment’ intention of active ageing has become part of top-down neoliberal reforms.

The adoption of active ageing meant changes not just in policies but also in discourses on ageing and older people. In Russia, the government, the private sector, NGOs and activists were and still are searching for ways to redefine ageing in an ‘inclusive’ way. This creates uncertainty for key actors, but also among the wider population, on how older people in Russia are to be viewed and what social services are to be provided (Grigorieva & Bogdanova 2020). Crucially, older Russian people are also confused by contesting discourses on ageing, such as calls for empowerment, the neoliberal project of the independent aged person, and the still widely popular paternalistic ‘traditional’ ageing approach. Thus, what discourses prevail, and how exactly the identities, biographical trajectories and social practices of the Russian elderly are shaped by the recently adopted active ageing policies, is still largely unknown. In response to this research problem, the essay analyses active ageing discourses at the level of the social service receivers, that is, the elderly themselves. Specifically, we explore the inclusion process, the motives of older people to participate in non-state social programmes. Based on a series of semi-structured interviews ($N=19$) with participants in programmes promoting active ageing and educational, cultural, social and civic engagement, we discuss how rhetoric and policy implementation collide with the requests, expectations and meanings that elderly people themselves connect with the presumably inclusive social, recreational and educational practices in which they are involved. Specifically, we took as case studies two programmes that promote active ageing. One of them operates in Moscow, the federal capital, while the other operates in Saratov, a relatively large regional capital situated in the European part of Russia.

For contextual reasons, we begin with a review of active ageing policies in Russia at the macro-level, including discussion of selected policy documents, legislation and social policy programmes aimed at the older population. To that purpose, we reconstruct—both theoretically and, in the case of Russia, empirically—the conceptualisation of and the main approaches to active ageing. Then, a short overview of the organisational-level discourses of active ageing follows. Finally, we proceed with the presentation of active

¹A population of 48.6 million aged people in 2018 was expected to grow to 82.7 million by 2050 (Scherbov *et al.* 2019); see Scherbov *et al.* (2019) for more details on the Russian demographics and ageing population statistics.

ageing discourses at the level of the elderly, based on an analysis of the key empirical data, namely, interviews with older people receiving social services in the framework of the above-mentioned programmes promoting 'active ageing'.

Active ageing: background and critique

A paradigm shift in the understanding of ageing and old age in gerontology and the social sciences has largely coincided with tremendous changes influencing social attitudes and practices towards ageing in postindustrial and postmodern societies (Marsillas *et al.* 2018). Social constructivism has taken the place of biological determinism, with scholarly interests shifting towards identity transformation in the process of ageing, management of these identities, and individual biographical trajectories depending on intersectional inequalities (Vincent 2006). The discourse about older age as a happy continuation of adulthood reflects longer healthy age and the availability of more social, economic and cultural resources for at least some of the elderly in some postindustrial societies. The values of agency and participation in the process of ageing have been reinforced by the growing societal and academic critique of medicalisation (Mol 2008) and expert knowledge (Deegan & Drake 2006).

As a result, by the end of the 1990s, active ageing had started to dominate professional and policy discourses in the West. The 2002 UN Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing summarised these discourses by naming pluralism, independence, participation, dignity, care and self-fulfilment as rights and the 'ideal' for all older people in the world (UN 2002). Since then, active ageing has come to connote a shift of focus from needs to rights, from objectified beneficiary to empowered participant. The WHO adds to the definition of active ageing by pointing out the importance of a sense of belonging to the community and feelings of safety, which are the result of participation in the civic and cultural life of society (WHO 2002). The European Commission policy documents add intergenerational transfer of knowledge to the list (Council of the European Union 2012).

However, participation and agency at the level of social policy implementation are often limited to the sphere of economics (Marsillas *et al.* 2018). In other words, in line with neoliberal ideology, active ageing is reduced to opportunities (and, effectively, an obligation) for older people to work and consume. Moreover, definitions of ageing and older age are sensitive to cultural and social contexts (Perkinson & Solimeo 2014). Yet, global efforts to promote an active ageing policy framework, being an optimistic project premised on the relatively healthy, wealthy and otherwise resourceful older people who represent middle- and upper-class, non-minority groups of the population, turn a blind eye to local contexts and the diversity of ageing experiences (Paoletti 2015).

For vulnerable populations in the West, as well as in societies with a lower level of social security and wealth, like Russia, overly positive and inclusive views of older age may be far from their daily life experiences. Yet, active ageing policies fail to acknowledge the diversity of needs and inequalities among older people (Grigorieva & Bogdanova 2020). In this way, active ageing as a normative framework becomes top-down and exclusive despite a proclaimed adherence to the values of participation. Furthermore, a critique of active ageing points out that the ideal of an active older person builds on the idea of 'staying young'. This implicitly means that to 'be old' means to fail the active ageing ideal,

creating a false dichotomy between ‘successful participation’ and ‘unsuccessful passivity’ (Katz & Calasanti 2015). As we show further in the empirical section, this is exactly what was reproduced and felt by the research participants. Some interviewed felt negativity aimed at their ‘active’ lifestyle by ‘traditionally ageing’ peers, a manifestation of ageism, including internal ageism (the ageism of older people aimed at other older people, or themselves), which is widely observed in Russia (Krasnova 2005). This is changing, however, as media discourse has started to promote active ageing as an ‘ideal’ ageing strategy (Nizamova 2020).

As a result, a reverse discrimination becomes common, as ‘actively ageing’ older people can become judgmental towards ‘passive others’, while they are praised and brand themselves as ‘successful’. State institutions and non-state actors criticise ‘non-active’ ageing, too, leading to an ‘empowerment paradox’: some older people might need comprehensive social support or professionalised medical decisions, or might simply not have enough physical, mental, economic, social or cultural resources to continue being active, yet active ageing policies do not take this into account. A neoliberal ideal of an independent, self-caring individual prevails over diverse ageing trajectories and stigmatises those who fail to live by this ideal. With this, the empowerment component disappears, and a new form of paternalism emerges.

Previous studies have shown that this empowerment paradox—the contradiction between the inclusive rhetoric of active ageing and paternalistically objectifying neoliberal policy implementation—exists in Russia (Sinyavskaya 2015; Holavins 2020c). However, so far, little has been said on how active ageing is seen by older people themselves and how they construct ideas about ageing (Boudiny 2013; Mendes 2013). We aim to fill this analytical gap in the following sections by presenting, analysing and discussing discourses on active ageing among some elderly Russians who receive social services.

The gradual adoption of the active ageing framework

In Russia, compared to other welfare state regimes, active ageing is a relatively new concept. Several structural processes determining the Russian ‘welfare mix’ (Ascoli & Ranci 2002; Clarke 2010) have influenced a gradual shift towards active ageing. First, the combination of economic hardship with a rapidly ageing population has led to an inability to fulfil the population’s universal social care expectation (Cook 2007; Kulmala *et al.* 2014). Second, the authoritarian regime’s ideologies, which feed a ‘conservative turn’ (Salmina 2014; Byzov 2015), clash with the drift of an urbanised, educated and postindustrial society away from the ideal of ‘traditional ageing’ within the extended family.

Active ageing is an emerging phenomenon in the Russian regulatory field.² For example, Federal Law 122 ‘On Social Services for Elderly and Disabled Citizens’,³ which entered into force in 1995, classifies the elderly and people with disabilities as a homogeneous group of unemployed citizens, thereby following the Soviet tradition of classifying individuals by

²For a systematic review of policy reforms in Russia related to healthy ageing, see Golubeva and Emelyanova (2020).

³Federal Law No. 122 ‘O sotsial’nom obsluzhivanii grazhdan pozhilogo vozrasta i invalidov’, available at: http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_7370/, accessed 25 May 2022.

their labour status (Harris 2011). By contrast, Federal Law 442 ‘About the Social Services of Citizens of the Russian Federation’, adopted in 2013 and taking force in 2015, articulates the principle of individualisation.⁴ Federal Law 442 is now a cornerstone of social service provision in Russia. It should be noted that in Soviet and post-Soviet social policies, emphasis was put on social protection, pensions, benefits and other socio-economic support tools, but aspects of social development, in particular the socio-psychological problems of ageing, were not articulated (Harris 2011).

At the same time, active ageing (*aktivnaya starost’* or *aktivnoe dolgoletie* rather than *aktivnoe starenie*), in one way or another, was present in the discourses of Soviet gerontologists long before the Madrid Plan policy framework reached Russia as if it were a novel concept. For decades, Soviet gerontologists aimed at extending healthy life expectancy, productivity, and continuous social and civic engagement (Frenkel 1945; Mikulin 1977). Moreover, active ageing as a discourse and strategy appeared in the USSR in the 1950s and 1960s, although they had slightly different content. Maintaining activity after retirement and the participation of older people in public associations and committees were positioned not only as leisure activities or ways of gaining new meaning from life but also as a means for the state to control and supervise elderly citizens (Romashova 2015).

Despite the long tradition of thinking about elderly people’s economic and social productivity, ‘active ageing’ as defined by the Madrid Plan came to Russia at a time of growing social exclusion, economic hardship and short healthy life expectancy. Thus, the idea ‘that persons, as they age, should enjoy a life of fulfilment, health, security and active participation in the economic, social, cultural and political life of their societies’ (UN 2002) was viewed critically by many actors involved in care provision at all levels (Holavins 2020b). It was only from the early 2010s that social service providers, governmental bodies and other policy-implementing actors began supporting active ageing as ‘the only viable’ solution to issues the elderly face in Russia (Holavins 2020b, p. 47).

As ‘care hybridisation’ (Tuohy 2012) in elderly care has grown in Russia, new actors have become actively engaged in raising awareness, promoting and directly lobbying for an active ageing policy framework. The result has been a shift from viewing ageing as the troubled last years of life towards a view of prolonged adulthood and a time of opportunities. This discourse is embedded in key federal-level Russian policy documents such as the umbrella project ‘Demography’ (2018), which includes the federal project ‘Older Generation’ (2019),⁵ and the ‘Strategy of Actions in the Interests of Older Citizens in the Russian Federation until 2025’ (2015; hereafter, the Strategy).⁶

⁴Federal Law No. 442 ‘Ob osnovakh sotsial’nogo obsluzhivaniya grazhdan v Rossiiskoi Federatsii’, available at: http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_156558/, accessed 25 May 2022.

⁵Federal project, ‘Starshee Pokolenie’, Ministry of Labour of the Russian Federation, available at: <https://mintrud.gov.ru/ministry/programms/demography/3>, accessed 26 May 2022.

⁶‘Strategiya deistvii v interesakh grazhdan starshego pokoleniya v Rossiiskoi Federatsii do 2025 goda’, Ministry of Labour of the Russian Federation, available at: <https://mintrud.gov.ru/ministry/programms/37/2>, accessed 25 May 2022.

The Strategy, as well as the national project ‘Demography’, interpret active ageing along the lines of the latest definitions and recommendations by the World Health Organization. The documents focus on the health status of older citizens and increasing the length and quality of life, ensuring participation in social and cultural life and educational and leisure practices, improving social services and creating an extensive network of support for older people consisting of governmental, private and third sector organisations, as well as changing public attitudes towards older age from paternalistic to active and participatory. The Strategy, including the ‘Plan for Implementation of the Strategy adopted by the Government of Russia’,⁷ sketches these goals in general terms, outlining some general aspects of ageing-related social indicators to be increased, while the ‘Older Generation’ project, as part of the national project ‘Demography’, links them to quantifiable indicators, such as the number of older people receiving non-state social services, the number of gerontological hospital beds and the number of chronic diseases identified,⁸ and lays out a road map for achieving these goals at both federal and regional levels.

The documents, especially the Strategy, use ‘democratic’ and ‘neoliberal’ language to underline a new approach to the policy of old age: overcoming stereotypes, non-discrimination against older people, and the full and effective inclusion of older people in society. However, these normative goals are based on a latent and specific task: the active participation of older people is partly a necessary measure in the context of an ageing population, and their exclusion from social life will lead to increasing the burden on the working-age population. In other words, older people are seen as an underused resource in the situation of an ageing population. Moreover, active ageing discourse has clear boundaries, like essentialism—a view of ageing as a biologically determined process—and medicalisation, namely, a growing dependence on technologies, the uncontested expert status of medical professionals and a view of ageing (or any other phenomenon) as a medical issue (such as illness, a malfunctioning body). Older citizens are classified according to their level of health, perceived as a determinant either for opportunities to participate in economic life or for requiring home or institutional care.

Thus, federal-level programmes value the professionalism and expert knowledge of social workers, gerontologists, doctors and health workers. In their turn, professionals support active ageing as a normative approach fitting humanistic medical values of seeing patients as people and the social work ideal of producing knowledge in collaboration with clients (Karvinen-Niinikoski 2016). At the same time, experts and professionals do not see the technologisation of care as a threat to the agency of elderly people. In their view, medicalised, professionally driven institutionalised care is a necessary precondition for healthy life, which, in turn, is a precondition for active ageing. State institutions share this view as well. For instance, the federal pilot project ‘Territory of Care’, initiated by the

⁷Ob utverzhdenii plana meropriyatii na 2016–2020 gody po realizatsii pervogo etapa Strategii deistvii v interesakh grazhdan starshego pokoleniya v Rossiiskoi Federatsii do 2025 goda’, Consultant plus, available at: http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_208189/f62ee45faefd8e2a11d6d88941ac66824f848bc2/, accessed 25 May 2022.

⁸Federal project, ‘Starshee Pokolenie’, Ministry of Labour of the Russian Federation, pp. 3–7, available at: <https://mintrud.gov.ru/ministry/programms/demography/3>, accessed 26 May 2022.

Ministry of Health in the Republic of Bashkortostan and several other Russian regions (Volgograd, Samara, Voronezh, Kaluga and Belgorod *oblasti*),⁹ aimed to develop multifunctional model geriatric centres across Russia. Both the Strategy and Federal Law 442 share this health-centred understanding of active ageing. From a neoliberal point of view, this discourse is a part of service-oriented, client-centred medicine and social work (Mol 2008). It contributes to the commodification of emotions (Hochschild 1983), or use of market logic in expressing affect in a professional environment, and removal of the ‘gift relations’ (Titmuss 2018), or relations based on reciprocity and altruism, component from care relations. Thus, professionalisation in elderly care and social service provision aligns with market logic.

To sum up, the discourses of key federal documents are contradictory, manoeuvring between an empowering participatory intention, a neoliberal commodifying view of beneficiaries and a more traditional paternalism that views some elderly people as inherently incapable of living an ‘active ageing life’ due to their health, social or economic status.

Regional-level discourses of active ageing

The same dilemmas are reflected at the regional level, with documents and specific active ageing programmes navigating between the proclaimed intent to change perceptions of ageing in general and the specific limitations, boundaries and perceived needs of their target group. According to our earlier research projects in northwest Russia (Holavins 2020b) and analysis of regional-level documents in Moscow and Saratov,¹⁰ regional programmes are largely in line with the federal-level policy documents regarding active ageing. Government, third sector and private organisations that provide social services are generally supportive of active ageing. Their discourse on active ageing is highly formalistic, using expressions common in federal and regional-level policy documents, and refers to rational arguments under the umbrella term of ‘effectiveness’. Professionalised language from medicine, the third sector and social work is another common feature.

However, the employees of social service providing organisations do not necessarily share an incontestably positive view of active ageing. Rather, the care managers and care providers interviewed as part of our previous research project on non-governmental elderly care in St Petersburg and Leningrad *oblasti* referred to active ageing as imposed on them from above (Holavins 2020b, p. 91). They viewed it as an externality which they had to consider in the course of their everyday work due to the allegiance of their employers to these values. Thus, employees’ discourse referred to active ageing as a competitor of ‘traditional ageing’. In this framework, active ageing was not the best possible solution. However, they had to comply, as neoliberal—market—logic had made

⁹Project ‘Territoriya Zaboti’, Ministry of Health of Russian Federation, available at: <https://minzdrav.gov.ru/poleznye-resursy/proekt-territoriya-zaboty>, accessed 25 May 2022.

¹⁰Strategii modernisatsii politiki v otnoshenii pozhilikh liudei v Saratovskoi oblasti, Kodeks, available at: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/933014677>, accessed 25 May 2022.

them dependent on employers and the dominating governmental discourses. If they wanted to keep their jobs, they had to comply.

A related discourse is common among charities, organisations providing home care, and care workers and volunteers (Holavins 2020a). These organisations and groups of people have one major thing in common: they work, communicate with and care for frail, unhealthy, often terminally ill elderly people. The discourse reflects an apparent disparity between the idealistic vision of retirement promoted by the active ageing proponents and the daily experience of physically, socially and economically vulnerable older social service receivers in Russia. Having witnessed the degrading conditions of some rural nursing homes, dilapidated housing without running water or central heating, social and medical workers as well as volunteers refer to ‘active ageing’ as something suitable for wealthy Western but not Russian pensioners, referring to ageing as ‘painful’, ‘miserable’ and ‘horrifying’ (Holavins 2020b, p. 125).

Perspectives of social service users on active ageing

Regional and local-level care providers who are critical of ‘active ageing’ view their older beneficiaries as being on a track not toward active ageing but rather toward ‘unpreventable’ social, mental and physical decline. In the previous section, we explained that actual care providers implementing governmental and non-governmental social service programmes for older people are often far from being convinced by the ideas and values of the active ageing policy framework. But what about older Russians themselves? How do they view these tectonic shifts in elderly care and attitudes to ageing and older people? What needs, expectations and meanings do older people themselves place on participating in social, recreational and educational programmes? Answering these questions is essential for understanding the underlying neoliberal nature of the supposedly empowering and participatory active ageing policy framework. We answer these questions using case studies of two active longevity programmes and a series of semi-structured interviews ($N=19$) with participants that were carried out in 2019. It is noteworthy that these programmes, consisting largely of educational, socialisation and cultural services, fit into the broader definition of social care, rather than a narrow view of care as being vitally necessary home or institutional care for the frail elderly. For illustrative purposes, some relevant examples are taken also from previous ethnographic study of active ageing policy framework implementation in other regions of Russia.

Most of the research participants were women ($N=17$), which generally reflects, according to our observations, the gender balance of elderly people attending courses. Participants were between 58 and 85 years old; most were between 65 and 70. All are anonymised and referred to by number. In Moscow, the selection was carried out as follows: the researcher attended various sessions, then offered participants the opportunity to take part in the study and talked with those who showed a willingness to be interviewed. The recruitment of research participants in Saratov was carried out by a gatekeeper, an employee of the social service centre involved in the implementation of the active ageing programme. Such strategies may have affected the research sample—the most active and ‘successful’ cases may be over-represented. A potential bias of the sample towards the most active attendees of active ageing courses is a limitation of this study.

Selecting cases for analysis we used maximum variation sampling. The basis for comparison is described in Table 1.

The Moscow Longevity Programme is based at several city locations, including one in the city centre. In addition to the Moscow site—the pioneer of the governmental active longevity programme—interviews were also conducted with participants of a similar programme in Saratov, a regional capital city in the European part of Russia, which launched the programme more recently. The programme in Saratov was called ‘Third Age’ University, a common catch-all name for a variety of social care services aimed at the elderly.

There are many ‘third age universities’ across the country. The majority are non-governmental third sector initiatives. Very few are governmental, although educational courses are common for state and semi-state social service providers. Thus, any governmental initiative of the same name is actually an example of appropriation and adoption of the non-state ‘democratic’ discourse of active ageing. This type of ‘university’ is implemented in partnership with non-governmental organisations, another common practice indicating the neoliberalisation of service provision in Russia. The important role of the non-profit sector in promoting the policy of active ageing in the Russian context has previously been noted in the research (Harris 2018).

The programmes in the two cities consisted primarily of educational services, including lectures, talks, training, and theoretical and practical classes on several subjects and socially significant issues. Despite the significant differences between the Moscow and Saratov cases, there were some similarities: both programmes offered the same types of courses,

TABLE 1
SELECTION OF CASES FOR COMPARISON

<i>Basis for comparison</i>	<i>Moscow</i>	<i>Saratov</i>
Location	Capital Centre of the city	Regional centre Outskirts of the city
Types of services	Class on memoir writing Classes on housing and utilities services	‘Shkola sovremennoi babushki’ (School of a modern grandmother)—Developmental psychology course ‘Sunduchok babushkinikh idei’ (Grandmother’s coffer of ideas)—classes on crafts, modelling from clay and plastic materials History classes Musical and literary evenings Legal literacy Classes in landscape design Classes on housekeeping Volunteer classes
	English classes, IT classes, Pilates/physical training	
When was the programme started in the region?	2000s	2010s
Who conducts the programme?	One of the main universities	One of the state social service centres in partnership with NGOs
What is the position of region in the rating of elderly’s well-being*	Leader	Outsider

Source: *Starost v regionakh Rossii otsenka blagopoluchiya starshego pokoleniya na osnove otkrytykh statisticheskikh dannykh, 2019 g, *Esli byt’ tochnym*, available at: <https://tochno.st/materials/starost-analiticheskiy-otchet#part5>, accessed 30 May 2022.

such as ‘computer literacy’ (internet skills, use of social networks and the public services portal), English and exercise classes. However, the Moscow programme had a greater variety of courses, ranging from ‘beginner’ to ‘advanced’ levels. In general, it offered the basic set of courses found in any active ageing programme in Russia. The active ageing programme in Saratov included a more complex set of courses for the elderly than many cities. Collaborating with other organisations helps in the recruitment of teachers and expands the range of courses. Additionally, the regional active ageing programme included not only educational activities but also training in technical skills. The combining of various types of activities is a trend in regional programmes for active ageing. Again, this is an example of the state’s ‘innovative social services’ being a type of service that has been implemented by dozens of non-state actors for years. From a discourse perspective, it is another example of the state picking up the rhetoric and practice of third sector organisations that promote active ageing.

The content of classes under the Moscow Longevity Programme at the time of our study generally reflected the discourse used by its initiator, the mayor of Moscow, Sergey Sobyenin: to break the typical chain of ‘dacha–grandchildren–medical clinic’ and instead to live ‘for yourself’.¹¹ This logic presumes a move away from the ageing scenario typical for Russia: prioritising the interests of family, children and grandchildren (Shmerlina 2013). The rhetoric of the mayor echoed that at the federal level, reflecting and corresponding to the active ageing rhetoric promoted and supported by the third sector organisations involved in consultative public councils at various levels. By contrast, in Saratov there were programmes that reproduced, including discursively, stereotypes about the typical interests and hobbies of elderly people. For example, the course ‘*Shkola sovremennoi babushki*’ (‘School of a Modern Grandmother’), where educational practices were discussed in the framework of developmental psychology, or ‘*Sunduchok babushkinikh idei*’ (‘Grandmother’s Coffin of Ideas’), with classes on applied creative skills, such as crafts and clay and plastic modelling, first, symbolically reproduced the gap between the elderly and the young, and second, had a clear gender colouration. This was reflected in the speech of research participants from Saratov: they called the participants in such classes not simply ‘women’ but ‘*babulki–dorogulki*’ (‘grannies—the dears’),¹² ‘*pensionerki–starushki*’ (‘pensioners—the oldies’) and ‘*babulki*’ (‘grannies’).¹³ Yet, such ‘traditionalism’, if in fact it reflects the interests and needs expressed by elderly people themselves, is an example of participatory, empowering, agency-driven active ageing practice (Holavins 2020a). In the next section we elaborate on this tension, which has been pointed out by scholars and professionals who are critical of the neoliberal interpretation of active ageing.

Today there is no reliable statistical information on how many older people participate in active ageing programmes in Russian regions, or the socio-demographic and socio-economic description of the programme participants. Partly, this state of affairs can be explained by the

¹¹“Moskovskoe dolgoletie”: itogi pervogo goda raboty. Novii proekt “Trenirovki dolgoletiya”, Sait Sergeya Sobyenina, available at: <https://www.sobyenin.ru/moskovskoe-dolgoletie-itogi-goda>, accessed 25 May 2022.

¹²Research participant 14, Saratov, 22 August 2019.

¹³Research participant 15, Saratov, 27 August 2019.

absence of a unified and centralised system for the functioning and management of these programmes, since, along with the state social services organisations, the non-state sector is also involved in the implementation of the policy of active ageing. The study of Kuchmaeva (2018) based on the all-Russian population survey demonstrates the weak social activity of older people: no more than 5% of citizens over 60 years old regularly participate in cultural and educational events. Possibly, lack of information provided to the elderly is the reason for their low involvement in regional active ageing programmes. By contrast, the Moscow Longevity programme was widely publicised and at the time of our research counted over 208,000 participants.¹⁴

Inclusion in active longevity programmes: class, status and lifestyle

Active ageing as a discourse and as an element of politics has been criticised for its class orientation (Grigorieva & Bogdanova 2020). Some of our Moscow research participants—course attendees—had the same logic: they demonstrated their class and status difference from other elderly people who did not attend courses:

In general, of course, we are Muscovites! From the intelligentsia. ... I looked at the people who are here. They are either former Komsomol workers or workers from the Trade Union; they did not work 'at the factory', as they say, but were engaged in white collar work. That's exactly the sort of person who comes here.

I: And what about those who worked 'at the factory'?

R: Yes, it's not for them! They are sitting at home.¹⁵

Some of our interlocutors use the term 'intelligentsia' in relation to course attendees, meaning that they had a certain kind of profession and higher education, and a certain style of cultural consumption, in particular, attending cultural events. Activity was an integral part of their lifestyle. In the narratives of research participants, those in labouring occupations, as contrasted with the intelligentsia, were characterised as being residents of remote areas of the city, people who were passive, who chose simpler and more trivial forms of leisure. This is a classic example of the empowerment paradox (Solimeo *et al.* 2015; Fook 2016); namely, activism and empowerment are possible only for resourceful, already privileged individuals. Additionally, intersectional theory can be applied here to explain how class differences influence elderly lifestyles and the opportunities—or, for that matter, lack of opportunities—to exercise active ageing. In an interview from the regional centre, the class aspect manifested in a slightly different way. Our interviewee said that, given low pensions, any available material was used for creative activities, and that people continued to follow the typical Soviet practice of repurposing, so that, in conditions of shortage, things are given a second

¹⁴“Moskovskoe dolgoletie”: itogi pervogo goda raboty. Novii proekt “Trenirovki dolgoletiya”, Sait Seregya Sobyantina, available at: <https://www.sobyanin.ru/moskovskoe-dolgoletie-itogi-goda>, accessed 25 May 2022.

¹⁵Research participant 3, Moscow, 31 July 2019.

life (Orlov 2010). Wealthier participants, being in a position to purchase materials, had abandoned the Soviet practice:

And many pensioners ... have a very small pension. We do all the work with materials that they are able to buy. ... We don't throw away scraps, boxes, bottles, we'll use anything.¹⁶

In other interviews, 'we–they' reasoning was applied to attendees of various courses. 'Intellectual' classes, such as teaching languages or technical skills, were contrasted with classes aimed at developing physical skills and handicrafts:

It [Moscow Longevity] suits the intelligentsia. ... The only exception is the physical education courses.¹⁷

Some of these arguments referred to the old–young dichotomy, reflecting ideas about how an elderly person can and cannot behave. When older people behave in a 'younger' way—participate in beauty contests, dance flamenco or learn how to apply makeup—this behaviour is condemned. As Nizamova shows, 'managing' old age by disguising it with makeup and dressing in a more 'youthful' style accords with the massive social preference for youth, which is seen as the normative condition, while old age is an unpleasant divergence and even existential failure (Nizamova 2020). Notably, such criticism is a grassroots reaction against imposed values of empowerment programmes (Eliasoph 2011). In this sense, the 'traditional' social services preferred by the elderly are in fact genuine examples of active ageing, while 'intellectual' and 'innovative' 'anti-ageing' practices imposed from above objectify the elderly and do not take into account their actual needs and interests (Holavins 2020c).

One interviewee declared a lack of interest in attending several classes at once, preferring to be self-sufficient and pursue cultural interests without external interference:

I, however, do not imagine how it is possible to attend all these classes. ... I'm not interested. I am a self-sufficient person. I love the theatre, I often go to the Philharmonic, so I'm not interested in this communication [with participants of active ageing programmes].¹⁸

So, the class approach does not always work. One of our interviewees gave the example of her friend, who, being 'very educated, with extensive work experience, of social services in general'.¹⁹ According to the interviewee, she had the profile of a 'classic' course participant but preferred other, individual leisure activities.

While some participants saw class and status as factors in participation in longevity programmes, others took the view that there was no common 'cultural code' uniting those who attended classes but rather a certain temperament, view and a generally positive attitude: 'These are all passionate people. There are simply no random people there ... the social circle is expanding, because among the people who work there, I

¹⁶Research participant 14, Saratov, 22 August 2019.

¹⁷Research participant 2, Moscow, 25 July 2019.

¹⁸Research participant 8, Moscow, 9 August 2019.

¹⁹Research participant 15, Saratov, 27 August 2019.

have found like-minded people. We have the same outlook, we have the same tastes'.²⁰ This view goes against 'classist' views of Muscovites and was common in social service programmes for the elderly in other regions; for instance, St Petersburg, where aged volunteering was viewed as shaped by inherent or acquired proactivity rather than the economic wealth or health of the elderly (Holavins 2020b, p. 132). According to some research participants from the current study, these characteristics shape the form of activity taken.

These arguments connected activity with group forms of leisure and their diversity and were contrasted with individual forms, such as reading books and watching television. 'Activity' was also understood as going outside the house and garden, participating in several forms of leisure activities including activities targeted at the elderly:

Everyone is an individual. One person loves teams; another, on the contrary, is an individualist. He doesn't need anyone. ... Plus our lack of skills: as pensioners we are never busy. We have only the tradition of sitting with our grandchildren. And dying. ... It's hard for people to retire now, too. This is a traumatic experience.²¹

This particular interviewee demonstrated a painful realignment of the understanding of what it means to be an older person: the neoliberal concept of ageing contradicts the existing discourses of old age as a phase of withering and social exclusion. In some cases, social expectations of the 'correct' behaviour for an elderly person led to the research participant hiding their participation in the courses from friends and colleagues:

Very secretly, so that they won't laugh at me. ... They will laugh. and say, 'What the hell? To work at her age is not enough, so she decided to do English!?' And all my life I wanted to, but I raised two children alone, I worked three jobs. I was never up to that.²²

In this case, we see how an active lifestyle was criticised by the elderly for not conforming to a traditional understanding of ageing. In other words, this narrative demonstrates the clash of discourses of active and traditional ageing.

On the other hand, many elderly participants of programmes in other regions gradually became critical and disappointed by the objectifying, normative, top-down imposition of active ageing as a 'better' way of ageing, if not the 'only' legitimate one (Holavins 2020c). This was also reflected in interviews with members of veterans' organisations, who contrasted their old-fashioned yet grassroots activities, such as tea-drinking parties, with the 'fashionable' active ageing promoted by professional third sector workers and, lately, by governmental officials (Holavins 2020a). This narrative is common in St Petersburg and other northwest regions of Russia (Holavins 2020a). However, it was not as widespread and common in the two cases specifically analysed within the framework of this study. Reasons for this are a matter for further research.

²⁰Research participant 13, Saratov, 19 August 2019.

²¹Research participant 9, Moscow, 10 August 2019.

²²Research participant 1, Moscow, 25 July 2019.

Typology of motives for participation in active ageing programmes

Attendees of specialised programmes for pensioners interviewed for our study used various entry strategies and demonstrated a variety of motives for participating in them. These various motivations show that elderly people are not a homogeneous group; they respond differently to certain challenges. First of all, for some working pensioners, such classes serve as a free professional development course, offering knowledge and skills that they plan to use in professional activities. This motivation correlates with one of the basic Russian scenarios of ageing: continuation of the pre-retirement lifestyle (Shmerlina 2013). This is how one of our research participants explained the reasons for attending an information technology (IT) course:

Right now I have to go to Vietnam with a certain working group [for work]. ... I was told, of course, that a secretary would be assigned to me to process my data, but I understand that I don't speak English so well, and neither do the Vietnamese. And it will be dreary.²³

Our respondent argued rationally about joining the Moscow Longevity Programme: he compared the content of the programme's IT classes with other courses. Their fundamental similarities as well as the possibility of taking the course without payment even for those who are still working after pension age were his key reasons for choosing the course run by the Moscow Longevity Programme. Only Moscow respondents demonstrated such instrumentalist motivations.

The second group of research participants were involved in volunteer activities or the life of the local community, and the motive for their registration in courses was associated with their civic engagement. The knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom might be needed for organising the front garden or to better understand the process of managing a block of flats and undertaking repairs:

I attended landscaping [design classes] because the building residents are very passive. It was simply impossible to get anything done, no one helped, of course. I went to the building's communal services and got access to water for the yard, planted flowers, went to a friend's dacha and took flowers from there, took the flowers from my daughter's cottage and planted them in front of the house. ... There is another woman who is also active, so I have teamed up with her, and a man from the next building.²⁴

The group of motivations associated with civic engagement and volunteering practices, which are quite common among the elderly in Western European countries, were also found among the participants of both the Moscow and the regional active ageing programmes studied here. It is worth noting that there were special volunteering classes in Saratov, through which elderly people were integrated as volunteers into various social projects. Such classes took place with the cooperation of non-profit organisations, which were the initiators and key actors of such activities. In Moscow, by contrast, civic

²³Research participant 10, Moscow, 7 August 2019.

²⁴Research participant 19, Saratov, 3 September 2019.

engagement was top-down, initiated by the programme managers, and did not lead to the institutionalisation of these practices. The Moscow practice of civic engagement of elderly people corresponds with the Soviet discourse and the strategy of active ageing: the scenario of a ‘socially activist grandmother’ playing the socially significant role of supervisor and inspector in her local community (Romashova 2015).

The third group of motives were ‘rational interests’ and unrealised dreams. This logic corresponded to the ideals of the active ageing policy, with retirement seen as a new beginning and release from work duties as giving the freedom and the opportunity for people to do what they always wanted to do but did not have time for. These motives also corresponded with values of agency and participation.

Our research participants, explaining such motivation, noted that since that their children had grown up and their working career was finished, they had an opportunity to live ‘for themselves’. Respondents used expressions describing their individual biography and stage of life: ‘At 40 years old life is just beginning’;²⁵ ‘We should live a little for ourselves!’²⁶ Such individualistic motivations in the reasoning of our research participants were associated with the possibility of freedom of choice and participation. Taking classes helped people to discover new hobbies or to fulfil the dreams of childhood and adolescence: gypsy dance (*tsiganskie tantsi*), drawing, learning foreign languages.

The second and third types of motivation can be attributed to an ageing scenario which is not typical for Russia: a reorientation towards social and personal realisation in new areas for the individual (Shmerlina 2013). Such motivations are discursively consonant with the ideology of active ageing programmes.

The fourth type of motivation links participation in active ageing programmes with a wealthy lifestyle. Learning English, for example, is explained by the desire to travel or the need to seek medical services abroad. Such motivations appeared only in the Moscow interviews and are seen to be uncommon in Russia. Despite the annual indexation of pensions and some improvement in the standard of living of retired people in comparison with the 1990s (Tikhonova & Karavay 2018), the current socio-economic situation of the elderly in Russia is not good. As studies show, households with non-working pensioners suffered in the crisis that began in 2014, and their situation has worsened ever since (Tikhonova & Karavay 2018). The socio-economic status of elderly people very much depends on the region of their residence, since Russia has significant regional inequalities (Ovcharova *et al.* 2016). For example, elderly people in Moscow, in contrast to those from Saratov, have regional supplements to the pension and an additional social package,²⁷ for instance free city transport benefits, free car inspections, and so forth.²⁸ Our research participants themselves noted that treatment abroad and travel was ‘beyond

²⁵Research participant 5, Moscow, 6 August 2019.

²⁶Research participant 7, Moscow, 8 August 2019.

²⁷Starost’ v regionakh Rossii otsenka blagopoluchiya starshego pokoleniya na osnove otkrytykh statisticheskikh dannykh, 2019 g, *Esli byt’ tochnym*, available at: <https://tochno.st/materials/starost-analiticheskii-otchet#part5>, accessed 30 May 2022.

²⁸Advanced age, or how Moscow supports its seniors, Moscow Mayor official website, available at: <https://www.mos.ru/en/news/item/30192073/#:~:text=Social%20taxi%2C%20free%20transport%20and,are%20available%20in%20the%20vehicles>, accessed 30 May 2022.

the means of most elderly Russians'²⁹ and was only possible with a working husband or children immigrating to other countries. Nevertheless, this motivation again underlines that active ageing is an optimistic project based on the experiences of older people of the middle and upper classes.

The fifth category of motives concerns the lack of routine and a narrowed social circle. Some research participants problematised the severance of social ties with relatives, the deaths of friends and relatives, and the social distance of residents of large cities.³⁰ The situation is getting worse for residents in the centre of Moscow: the deaths of elderly neighbours and the growth of the rental market, with frequent changes in tenancy, is replacing the previous local community with a culture of anonymity. The breaking-up of social networks, reinforced by retirement, often leads to a social death preceding the physical one. For such research participants who professed such motivations, the active longevity programme allowed them to make new connections as well as pass the time in more enjoyable ways:

Loneliness is a terrible thing. I've been living alone for so many years. Completely alone. Why did I run away? I rented out my apartment and ran away to have some company. Here, in Moscow, everyone lives on their own. ... How many times did I invite them [neighbours]—in a huge house, multi-apartment and multi-storey. 'Come and have some tea'— 'No, no'. And then everyone started dying. From loneliness, from everything.³¹

Analysis of the motivations of older people participating in active ageing programmes demonstrates the non-homogeneity of this social group. Elderly people joined the programme for different rational and emotional reasons, just as they described various scenarios of ageing that were somewhat in line with the values and ideals of active ageing. But how do older people themselves understand the reasons for and the nature of the revision of state social policy in relation to active ageing?

In the narratives we found two contradictory ways of thinking about the relationship between the state and the elderly in the context of an active ageing policy. According to the first view, a paternalistic state takes care of the elderly: 'God, what a great deal of thoughtfulness and care for people'.³² The second view suggests a new type of essentially neoliberal contract, where the state develops active longevity programmes and encourages older people to be active, thereby potentially saving the state the costs of medical and social infrastructure:

I feel better, more active, and my goal is to live longer. Does anyone need this? [No] So ... write it like this: the purpose of attending active longevity programmes is as follows: to spend the rest of your life looking after yourself, not employing social workers, to save your budget.³³

²⁹Research participant 5, Moscow, 6 August 2019.

³⁰Research participant 4, Moscow, 2 August 2019.

³¹Research participant 4, Moscow, 2 August 2019.

³²Research participant 1, Moscow, 25 July 2019.

³³Research participant 12, Moscow, 13 August 2019.

Some aspects of the active ageing policy were criticised by interviewees: programmes are aimed primarily at the most active older people, while those who most need to participate in the programme and in social activity are ignored by the state. According to research participants, the active ageing policy contradicted the value of agency because it was impossible for the elderly themselves to participate in deciding on the type of course and their content.³⁴

Discussion

The ‘empowerment paradox’ could play a role here, as respondents were all well-educated people, relatively wealthy and healthy, who were aware of available services and had an interest in joining. However, this is not necessarily true more generally, because many elderly social care receivers, including aged volunteers and students of third age universities, are far from being rich, might have a significant life-changing disease, and could be of any social background. It is, rather, an instance of the ‘deserving poor’ rhetoric (Kay 2011). Research participants distinguished themselves from the ‘passive’ elderly using an ‘inherent traits of character’ argument. In their view, the proactivity of older people was not a contemporary development nor an example of ‘democratic’ ‘empowerment’. Rather, it was a personal characteristic predating the adaption of ‘active ageing’ by international organisations and the federal government. Passion and positivity determine ‘activity’, which can be found in a person of any culture, social background or generation.

A crucial finding of the research is that the elderly people with an active ageing lifestyle struggle sometimes to legitimatise their own engagement in third age education and participation in other active ageing policies. Ageism—from other generations as well as peers—is still widespread. In combination with a ‘conservative turn’ (Salmina 2014; Byzov 2015), actively ageing elderly people are sometimes mocked and criticised for acting ‘inappropriately’ for their age. This shows that the neoliberal project adopted by the state is contested and not universally shared by the population, or even by actors involved in the implementation of policies aimed at the elderly Russian population.

The essay analysed active ageing discourses in Russia, which reflect a gradual recommodification of elderly care provision and a trend towards non-state social care support for the older population. Like other states around the globe, Russia faces the ageing of its population and struggles to fulfil the still largely universalist expectations of its citizens. Providing the necessary framework for qualitative and good care in line with a conservative care regime is proving difficult.

As a result, active ageing has become one of the few viable solutions for the Russian welfare regime. In combination with a transfer of social policy implementation functions to non-state actors, the neoliberal project of self-sustenance, proactivity and a healthy, independent lifestyle for the elderly has become a point of reference in social policymaking. Key federal social policy institutions have finally taken into


³⁴Research participant 18, Saratov, 3 September 2019.


account the awareness-raising campaigns and direct lobbying efforts of non-state actors. As a result, key federal documents such as the Strategy of Actions in the Interests of Older Citizens in the Russian Federation until 2025 and Federal Law 442 were developed within an active ageing policy framework and used the associated neoliberal rhetoric.

The regional-level policymakers have done the same as Moscow, and the regions of European Russia have joined federal pilot programmes or developed their own regional programmes to promote active ageing. Numerous third-sector organisations, which had been providing educational services to older people for over a decade, now have the opportunity to partner with regional governments. As a result, not only have their services been recognised but so has a positive, ‘democratic’, ‘empowering’ and ‘non-discriminatory’ rhetoric about ageing. As traditional ageing is still widely seen as an ideal by large parts of the population (Salmina 2014), the active ageing approach is not uncontested and in fact receives a lot of criticism from a segment of care professionals as well as many elderly people themselves. At the same time, some aged Russians, usually those with better health and economic circumstances and higher social status, have been supportive of the new ideology, becoming role models for the neoliberal project of a ‘new old’ in Russia. This study has focused on the discourses of such elderly users of active ageing services, receiving educational, socialisation and cultural support in the framework of two active ageing programmes in two Russian cities.

The results demonstrate that class matters: it is a key point of reference and an identity-building element among third age educational service receivers. ‘Active’ elderly people distinguish themselves from the ‘non-active’, explicitly mentioning their own social background as educated intellectuals. This was particularly true in the Moscow case. Active ageing ideology was supported by these elderly people and neoliberal projects seen as superior to the ‘traditional’ ageing approach. Value gaps in the narratives of programme participants, balancing between active and traditional scenarios of ageing, revealed different practices and demonstrated the non-homogeneity of the elderly as a group. The state policy behind programmes of active ageing is also considered ambiguous, encompassing both paternalistic and neoliberal approaches. The motivation of the elderly to embrace active ageing is diverse. On the one hand, rational motives are strong, as keeping up with new technologies and global culture may be necessary for work. On the other hand, there is a gap between the capabilities of older people and their opportunities to continue being useful to the community. Socialisation—in terms of regaining social status, meaning in life, overcoming loneliness—was essential for both Muscovite intelligentsia and regional activists. In this regard, our elderly respondents were well aware of their own social position and the limitations they faced in daily life. Therefore, a positive, ‘empowering’, neoliberal active ageing was not something they fully and blindly supported. Instead, research participants showed a high degree of awareness regarding the political and neoliberal motivation behind the ‘active ageing’ policy framework and discourse. In other words, they understood that the state intended to withdraw from welfare provision and spend less on social policies. Furthermore, they treated active ageing ideology in a very utilitarian way. This was a win-win situation for them: active ageing programmes addressed some of their needs and resolved some of

their issues and so, in turn, a certain type of older person was ready to engage with a top-down, paternalistic, neoliberal project of the state.

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Appendix. List of research participants

- Research participant 1, female, 81, English for beginners, Moscow, 25 July 2019.
- Research participant 2, male, 74, classes on accessing housing and utilities services, Moscow, 25 July 2019.
- Research participant 3, female, 72, IT classes, Moscow, 31 July 2019.
- Research participant 4, female, 85, writing memoirs, Moscow, 2 August 2019.
- Research participant 5, female, 58, intermediate-level English, Moscow, 6 August 2019.
- Research participant 6, female, 70, classes on accessing housing and utilities services, Moscow, 10 August 2019.
- Research participant 7, female, 75, IT classes, Moscow, 8 August 2019.
- Research participant 8, female, 70, English, advanced level, Moscow, 9 August 2019.
- Research participant 9, female, 65, classes on accessing housing and utilities services, Moscow, 10 August 2019.
- Research participant 10, male, 70, IT classes, advanced level, Moscow, 7 August 2019.
- Research participant 11, female, 65, Pilates, Moscow, 13 August 2019.
- Research participant 12, female, 60, Pilates, Moscow, 13 August 2019.
- Research participant 13, female, 78, various courses, Saratov, 19 August 2019.
- Research participant 14, female, 62, various courses, Saratov, 22 August 2019.
- Research participant 15, female 67, various courses, Saratov, 27 August 2019.
- Research participant 16, female, 59, various courses, Saratov, 28 August 2019.
- Research participant 17, female, 62, various courses, Saratov, 29 August 2019.
- Research participant 18, female, 74, various courses, Saratov, 3 September 2019
- Research participant 19, female, 58, various courses, Saratov, 3 September 2019.