

Formation and education of the elderly in Russia

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Abstract

The social attention of today's world, in continuous transformation, is focused above all on the education and education of the elderly. Taking into account the fact that the lifestyles of elders around the world are tuned to European ones, this article aims to shed light on the life of the elderly in Russia, their education and education. Nowadays, having an active lifestyle means - for the elderly - to be strengthened by sport, by the possession of digital skills, by socializing with relatives, friends and peer groups, as well as by travel and work. Creating oneself through curious thought towards all that is information about the world increases one's knowledge and contributes to the maintenance of physical and mental form. The awareness of living life by forming and educating oneself dynamically favours, in the elderly, a constant search for the self and a desire to experience oneself by adhering ever more to new initiatives. Unfortunately, in Russia, there are still many older people whose existential situation could be characterized by the concept of "social closure". This situation is due, for the most part, to the unfavourable climatic conditions, poor health and severe economic conditions. Becoming active pensioners, however, is possible, "bypassing" the obstacles aimed at the destruction of the "critical self". It would, therefore, be necessary to begin to consider themselves as a great Russian "old heritage" so that, soon, the trained eyes of "art lovers" can establish their priceless value.

Keywords: *ageing, russian elderly, education*

“*Anziano*” — headword of 1261 — derives from the lat. *antianu(m)*, from *ante* “forward, before” and indicates the subject forward in years, that is, advanced age, but at what age do you become old? In 2018, 14% of Russians were convinced that old age started at around 50-54 years old, while 16% did not say before 70-74 years old¹, in other words, the average age beyond which one began to become old was 63 years old. Most of the elderly people interviewed loved to spend their time in dacha (49%) cultivating their vegetable garden, 41% were entertained watching television or listening to the radio, 35% took care of household chores, while another 30% preferred to spend time with their grandchildren. The elderly are formed and educated in the encounter with friends, through reading books and listening to music. Some, for the purpose of aesthetic education, prefer, to have a healthier body, walking in the middle of nature, while those more interested in technology, choose to surf the Internet, obviously avoiding fanaticism caused by the “virtual world”. It is curious to think how the Russian elderly (in 2018: 46.07 million, or more than 30% of the entire population²), living in the century of a prosperous digitization of services, also try to “digitize” (statistics about the

elderly who access the Internet record 8%³ of users) by activating, with the help of children and / or grandchildren, profiles *Vkontakte* (the Russian *Facebook*), posting photographs on *Instagram* and writing on *Whats'app* with friends and/or family.

Learning digital technologies helps older people in *virtual socialization* by giving them the opportunity to move away from old age and lead an active and varied life. During the Soviet Union, however, many people were frightened by the Stalinist government (which suspected everything and everyone) and led a “reduced” and modest life in which there was no room for curiosity about the West. Nowadays, however, we are witnessing the formation and digital education of the elderly Russians, who, eager to deal with the ways of life in the West, want to be considered *digital citizens of the global world*, thanks to a fair degree of autonomy achieved in the use of electronic devices such as mobile phones, computers, tablets. In addition, in November 2018, the company announced the need for a new professional figure — *the digital curator* —, which should help the elderly to «work with digital resources: understand how to do with online payments for public services, electronic documents management and much more»⁴. Hopefully in the near future most Russian seniors will be able to learn from the digital curator how to enter in the virtual space without fear and act competently and freely.

Frequently in Russia, alongside the term “old man”, words of contrasting semanticity emerge in the imaginary such as: *value, wisdom, experience, peace, care, tradition, formation and education*. Unfortunately, this term is also associated with *loneliness, poverty, fragility, lack, vulnerability and abandonment*. The loneliness of Russian elderly people is due to a combination of socio-economic factors that contribute to their forced “social closure”: reduced number of aggregation centers for the elderly, poor climate conditions, lack of adequate economic opportunities for social life, precarious health conditions and more. Added to these factors is the fact that urban culture has almost completely eliminated the model of large family, preferring the small family type, separated from elderly parents who, in turn, to feel valuable and useful continuously seek the true affection of their children and the educational encounter with their grandchildren. People who, for various reasons, have been unable to create a family for themselves, as elders find themselves having to spend their time locked in their homes and immersed in the memories of their distant youth trying to escape from the icy and overwhelming loneliness. Currently, the estimate number of lonely elderly people is around seven million⁵. «After the age of sixty, the majority of elderly people dedicate themselves to the home (70%)», and only «one in five elderly people has a hobby: they travel or work (from 17 to 24%)» (*ibid.*). Some, without relatives, find empathy and human warmth in friendly relationships with other elderly people within the walls of a nursing home (in total in 2013

there were 1411⁶ facilities for the elderly, in 2018 there were more than 1500⁷) by talking and exchanging funny stories of lived life. Despite the socio-educational animators present in the structures mentioned above, the elderly, unfortunately, focus not on “today” and “tomorrow”, but on “yesterday”, still present in their narratives as the core of the deep melancholy thought. Often Russian elders are described as «without perspective»⁸, that is, as «those who die and not as those who change their way of life» (*ibid.*). In this way, old age is pushed «to the periphery of social life» and the frail elderly person, who is precluded from the path of self-formation and self-education, is led to «social death» (*ibid.*) developing depressive symptoms (one in ten elderly⁹). To prevent this from happening, the elderly person tries to transform himself, thanks to plastic surgery, into the one he is not: the young man with the absorbent mind, that is, into an appreciated working resource, continually sought after in society. Instead, the elderly person should learn to «accept himself in continuous evolution»¹⁰, establishing a new relationship with the future that allows him to continue in the constant growth of the “cultural self” and of the most significant social relationships, including intergenerational ones. The nucleus of the latter could be represented by the enhancement of the experience and knowledge possessed by the elderly and their full acceptance by the younger generations, to give substance to a dialogue of high educational value. Usually, the elderly involved in active social aggregation feel like unique and unrepeatable human beings, full of formative, educational and affective possibilities, to be shared with others. The desire to be formed and educated, still present in some elderly people, does not even matter to their disastrous economic condition: 70% of elderly families live below the poverty line (cfr. *ibid.*). Contrary to the “passive” lifestyle, they participate in numerous educational and formation projects, underlining the great value of being elderly. In 2011, Russian photographer Igor’ Gavar set up a blog «to capture the style of pensioners»¹¹, which in 2016 was transformed into a Moscow-based agency *Oldushka* (from the eng. *old* “engineer”) with exclusive elderly models, with branches in St.Petersburg, Omsk and Čeljabinsk. Gavar says: «In general, [to get photographed] models dress differently from how they dress in real life (...). During the photo session the protagonists live a life they never lived»¹². The perception of “his” elders of Igor’ is opposed to that typical of Russia and, walking through the streets of Moscow and St.Petersburg, he captures in his shots the elderly people who strike his attention: «With this project I want to show the beauty of ordinary people»¹³. Here we must also remember the photographic project *20 again*, realized in 2018 by the entrepreneur Roman Zaripov who gave «to many grandparents the smile and the joy of living, while raising the problem of the widespread loneliness that afflicts the elderly in Russia»¹⁴. This project was supported by the Moscow-based charity *Sofia*¹⁵ (founded in 1998 and aimed at helping the elderly in retirement homes, the elderly alone and the disabled). By inviting the elderly

to take part in this initiative, the Russian entrepreneur wanted to give them «the sensation of distancing loneliness» (*ibid.*) through photography and fashion, offering them a chance to interpret their lives in the form of a singular expression. Contrary to what we think, loneliness can also become formative and educational, contributing to the «“culturalization” of experiences» (Gennari, 2006): first of all, we must begin to build and de-construct the meanings of our own life, interpreting it again in our thoughts and wishing to live it in continuous formative and educational transformation.

Unfortunately, the most common conception of the elderly in Russia is the one opposed to the subject capable of *ontopoiesis* (cfr. *ibid.*), that is, to the uninterrupted creation of his “being” independent of age. The elderly would reach *ontopoiesis* thanks to their most felt inclusion in social life, thanks to their active participation in new public spaces (including virtual ones), in cultural foundations and clubs for pensioners, as well as in the lives of children and grandchildren. Therefore, it would be possible for an elderly person to recreate himself through the feeling of being useful, necessary, loved and desired by his loved ones and by society. There are elderly Russians who do not create themselves, but watch the passage of time without thinking of their being as «being-in-possibility» (*ibid.*) to educate, to converse, to share, to tell, to give, to transform and to love. These vulnerable elderly people perceive themselves as “those who were” and not as “those who are”: this favours the fragmentation of their being, the cessation of their desire to know and to pour themselves into a condition of life that is lacking, of the phantom-life composed only of memories. It is believed that the causes of this passive existence of the elderly are also to be found in the scarce policies relating to old age, in their modest economic possibility and in their sedentary lifestyle. Economically speaking, the elderly are often in extreme need because of their low pensions: in 2016, «45% of retirees could not afford medicine»¹⁶, so the elderly are forced to survive «denying themselves food and medicines»¹⁷, «some are forced to leave their homes or apartments and move into smaller homes to reduce the cost of utilities» (*ibid.*). In short, «the elderly Russians are in a condition of extreme economic precariousness; the value of their pensions does not reach a third of the average salary and this, of course, has serious repercussions»¹⁸ especially on their health. Added to this is the fact that geriatric doctors only appeared in Russia in 1995 and even today their number on the national territory is rather limited. Despite numerous socio-economic problems, the state tries to help the elderly alone (today 7 million¹⁹ people) and today 84%²⁰ of them receive social assistance at home. In 2016, the state adopted an action strategy in the interest of the elderly, which resulted in a document to create a well-coordinated system of care for the elderly in need. However, the average elderly person who lives in a city other than Moscow or St.Petersburg arrives just at the end of the month, managing to buy basic necessities and cover administrative costs, giving up holidays and,

sometimes, the purchase of clothing (the average pension in 2018 was 14,151 roubles²¹ = 199,61 euros against the minimum monthly income of support, equal to 8,496 roubles²² = 120,28 euros). In order to improve their living conditions, «many retirees, even though they have reached retirement age, choose to continue working»²³. In 2018, out of a total of the 46.07 million pensioners, 9.67 million²⁴ were working with regular contributions. Usually, the decision to work is made with the aim of earning something extra by supplementing the salary with the ordinary pension. «For many Russian pensioners, work is synonymous with life», - says Roman Zaripov²⁵, with visibility, value and strength, and thanks to it, the elderly can afford to travel the world. Thus, in 2010²⁶ about 5% of all Russian seniors travelled abroad. According to sociologist Natalja Tichonova, it is not only money that prevents Russian seniors from travelling, but also their state of health and «the absence of travel habits and culture» (*ibid.*) as was widely used in the Soviet Union.

In 2016, there was much talk about the *Baba-deda*²⁷ site (from rus. “Grandma-Grandpa”) directed by Anastasija Lazibnaja, thanks to which many people in the “silver” age (cfr. *ibid.*) mainly from the cities of Moscow, St.Petersburg, Krasnodar, Ekaterinburg, Ufa, Novosibirsk and Nizhnij Novgorod consulted travel offers for pensioners in Russia and around the world. According to data from *Rosturizm*²⁸, in 2018 71% of the elderly travelled within Russia, 29% travelled abroad. The elderly save money for traveling carefully by setting aside something from their pension, renting property and selling vegetables from their own vegetable gardens (cfr. *ibid.*); someone is often helped by their children.

Obviously, in Russia, the subject of pensions should not be overlooked. The latest reform of the increase in the retirement age (women will be 60 years old, men 65 years old) is due to the phenomenon of an ageing population and the economic need to be able to provide pensions to all pensioners, from the years 2000²⁹ fewer children were already born and in 2035 the number of pensioners will exceed the number of workers³⁰. In 2015, a non-governmental organization, *HelpAge International*, issued «the index of happy old age»³¹ and Russia was 65th on a list of 96 states.

Today, in Russia, «more than 40% of people do not live more than 65 years»³², and considering that seniority begins at 63 years of age, it is possible to note, with great regret, that about 60% of the elderly have access to retirement life. «The life expectancy of men (sixty-four years) is very low and is well thirteen years lower than that of women»³³. Looking at the demographic pyramid³⁴ of the Russian population, it can be seen that out of about 143,101,836 inhabitants of the country, elderly men, in the age group 60-64 years, represent about 2.9% of the population (4,103,070 people), elderly women are instead about 4% of the Russian population (5,754,501 people). The data start to decrease considerably, with the years of the elderly rising: in the age group of 70-74 years, 1.1% of men and 2% of women survive; in the

age group of 80-84 years, we find respectively 0.7% and 1.7%; in the age group of 90-94 years, we see 0.1% of elderly men against 0.3 of elderly women to reach 0% of the over one hundred years old. The presence of the latter in the Russian population is not completely denied, but they are rather a rarity, or rather a news item from Guinness. On May 10, 2019, the oldest man in Russia passed away: Appaz Iliev was 123 years old. Born in Inguscetija in 1896, he had eight children, thirty-five grandchildren and about twenty great-grandchildren, was completely autonomous, went alone to the mosque and handled domestic chores with agility³⁵. On October 25, 2019, the oldest woman in the world and in Russia died: Tanzilja Bisembejeva was 124 years old. She was born in the village of Alča in the Astrachan region, also in 1896. Tanzilja «raised four children and enjoyed the love of ten grandchildren, thirteen great-grandchildren and two great-great-grandchildren»³⁶.

Longevity is not only about health, healthy food and inner serenity, but also about sport. Unfortunately, few elderly people continue to play sport in retirement (7.3%³⁷): someone plays volleyball on the beach³⁸, someone runs in parks, there are those who swim and those who walk in the woods, often together with the dog. Some elderly people still amaze with their desire to keep fit: on January 5, 2019, in Ojmjakon in Jakutia, a region of eastern Siberia, a marathon was held at minus 50°C³⁹. The glacial race registered sixteen participants, the youngest being twenty-one years old and the oldest being seventy-one. It was definitely a marathon with extraordinary results that allowed all the tourists «from Australia, Taiwan, Japan and India» (*ibid.*) who were there at that time to become witnesses of something never seen before. Russian champion Jegor Abramov described the purpose of this rare sporting event as follows: «Our goal was to make the race more popular at -45°C or even lower temperatures, showing the world that athletes can adapt to extremely low temperatures» (*ibid.*); so, the older athlete Jegor Permjakov took two and a half hours to run fifteen kilometers in the snow. Often, elderly people in Russia are at the same time affectionate grandparents who spend their time helping their children and looking after their grandchildren (22% of elderly women and 13% of elderly men are with their grandchildren daily)⁴⁰.

As far as services for the elderly are concerned, «in the last ten years, for example, a large number of charitable organizations for the elderly have been set up»⁴¹. The most famous charity fund for the care of the elderly and the disabled in Russia is *Starost' v radost'*⁴² (“Old age brings joy”), born from the voluntary movement started in 2006 and transformed into the fund in 2011. Its mission is to assist the elderly in retirement homes and homes for the disabled through numerous initiatives, aimed at making them actively participate in everyday life. Other charitable funds, whose mission is to make the life of the elderly easier and more joyful are: *Serdtssem k serdtsu*⁴³ (“The heart next to the other heart”), *Joint*⁴⁴.

There are elderly people who are not afraid to grow old and choose to increase their cultural level and to live actively, training and educating themselves constantly. To meet their cognitive needs, *active ageing* people (cfr. Amoretti, Spulber, Varani, 2017) go to the University of the Third Age, where, meeting other “ty” students (from “fifty, sixty, seventy”), they learn about the modern world, learn to use the computer and study foreign languages. The most widespread Universities of the Russian Third Age are present in the cities of Moscow, St.Petersburg, Orechovo-Zuevo, Ufa, Samara, Kazan’, Pskov, Uraj (in the region of Tjumen’), Kirov and Belgorod and have been established after an in-depth study of the centres/Universities of the Third Age in the partner countries of the Tempus CTAE project (Kara, Kuznetcova, 2017). In order to keep their minds trained, the elderly choose the formative and educational meeting with the professors and the students, trying to make their time become “culture”, teaching them the «value of life continuity» (Mariani, Musaiò, 2019), the resilience and the formative and educational stretch.

The elderly person with a «complex and problematic identity, multi-level and multifactorial, polymorphous and transformative» (Annacontini, s.d.: 123) should never extinguish within himself the tension towards knowledge, fundamental to his «personal emancipation» (*ibid.*: 129), in formative and educational terms. In addition, the elderly who want to know, represent «old heritage» (*ibid.*: 131) inexhaustible of the Russian world and, in general, of the whole world. The present «plurality of old age and ageing» (Mariani, Musaiò, 2019) educates us to a conscious sensitivity to the condition of old age, leading us to diversify all the elderly recognizing their originality, uniqueness and unrepeatability. The formative and educational growth (or maturation) of the elderly takes place throughout their lives so that each of them can serenely welcome their own aging, in an active and qualitatively positive way, directly from the center of their transformative process.

In conclusion, as well as the concept of «nuanced» (Annacontini, s.d.: 124) of the elderly in Russia, protective social policies are also developing, hoping that in the future old age will not be considered as a «place of absence» (Pennacchini, 2015a) and hoping that the elderly can no longer be approached in terms of *loneliness, poverty, fragility, lack, vulnerability and abandonment*, but in terms of *value, wisdom, experience, peace, care, tradition, formation and education*, which are fundamental to the happy completeness of an inclusive society, that is, a *multi-age society*.

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