

Russian Surrogate Moms Attract Foreigners

By Marina Ivankiva

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When Viktoria, a 29-year-old from St. Petersburg, gave birth to twin boys in June, it was not the beginning of a new chapter in her life. Rather, it was the completion of a job: Viktoria is one of a growing number of surrogate mothers. She was paid to carry and give birth to the twins by the Finnish couple who were their biological parents.

Viktoria, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, is divorced and lives with her four-year-old daughter in her parents' apartment. She graduated from the city's University of Cinema and Television and was quite a successful businesswoman before her husband left her. She says that she adores children and can't imagine anybody's life without "these little angels." Like most surrogates, Viktoria says her motivation is to help people who can't have children. But when asked how she will spend the money, she says that she has a lot of problems to solve and things to buy.

Viktoria is religious, and one of the first questions she asked the would-be parents was: "Have your parents blessed your decision?" She says that before making a decision, she talked to her priest and from time to time during the program went to church to light a candle. Outside of church, Viktoria did not speak to anyone about the surrogacy except her mother and a friend who lives in America. Even her father did not know about his daughter's new job. Viktoria did not see any of her relatives during the program, which she said she found extremely difficult, and tried not to speak to the other mothers at her daughter's playground.

Surrogacy is a relatively recent social phenomenon in Russia. The first recorded example of it was in 1995 when a young woman whose child died a few days after birth had another baby with the help of a surrogate mother. That surrogate was compensated by the woman after the birth with an apartment. At the time, there were no regulatory laws in place for such an arrangement.

Russia is now one of the few countries where commercial surrogacy is legal, along with South Africa, Ukraine and some states in the U.S. In Austria, Sweden, Germany, France and other American states it is illegal, and in Norway, a woman faces five years in prison for donating her eggs. In other countries such as the U.K., Australia, Denmark, Spain, Holland and Canada, sur-



Once IVF is carried out, a surrogate pregnancy differs little from a natural one.

rogacy is non-commercial, which means that the surrogate cannot be paid for her role.

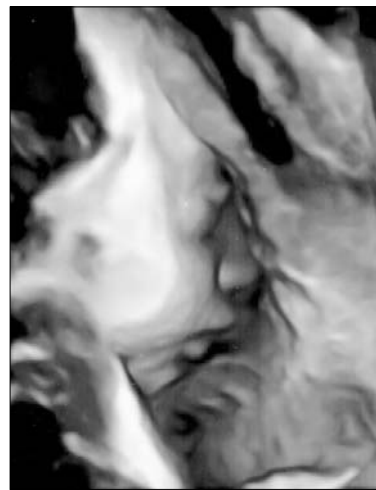
The twins given birth to by Viktoria for the Finnish couple heralded the launch of an international program by Rosyurconsulting, the first company to arrange surrogacy programs in Russia. Founded more than 10 years ago, the company opened a St. Petersburg office five years ago, where 60 surrogate births have successfully taken place. Its Moscow office carries out a staggering 100 IVF treatments every month.

Natalya Kacheyeva, a manager at the St. Petersburg office of Rosyurconsulting, is responsible for the search and choice of suitable egg donors and surrogate mothers. The company currently has about 40 candidates in its database. The main condition is that candidates should already have their own children. When asked to describe the typical social portrait of would-be surrogates, Kacheyeva does not hesitate.

"They are young women of lower or lower-middle class with no higher education. They generally do not have enough money to support their family and no education to find a good job," she said.

Maxim Kiyayev, a lawyer for the company, added that they are typically single, divorced or widowed women from small towns.

Surrogate mothers in St. Petersburg are paid on average 500,000 to 600,000 rubles (\$16,000 to \$19,000) for their services. Would-be parents who want a surrogate mother from St. Petersburg or a woman with a higher education have to pay more. Even though the surrogates inevitably say they do it to help people who do not have children, they are all paid for their help. But is surrogacy a real job? Both Kacheyeva, Kiyayev and their colleague Sergei Bobrov, a gynecologist, agree that it would be ideal if the surrogates treated their pregnancy as a job, but said that in reality they do not, which sometimes leads



An image from a 3D ultrasound scan.

to unexpected problems such as medical complications or even miscarriage.

The social portrait of potential parents is more difficult to ascertain. There are many variants, including single parents of both sexes, couples who need a sperm or egg donor and couples who are able to conceive but not carry a child. The only thing that all clients have in common, according to Kacheyeva, is that they all want children. Kiyayev said Rosyurconsulting's clients are usually successful businessmen aged about 40.

These people have purchasing power, and sometimes think they can buy everything they don't or can't have. Bobrov, the gynecologist, said it can be difficult to work with people who believe that starting a surrogacy program is like going shopping. Until earlier this year, when it was banned, clients could even choose the sex of the child. Some parents even insist on the surrogate mother being a particular sign of the zodiac, Kacheyeva added.

At the beginning of a surrogacy program, once a surrogate mother has been selected but before the contract is signed, Kacheyeva and Kiyayev organize a brief meeting between the parents and the surrogate. With Russian programs, this is usually the first and last time that the parents and surrogate meet. Foreign couples tend to get more involved, according to Rosyurconsulting. The office's entire staff confessed to being surprised to see that the Finnish parents came to support their surrogate, Viktoria, every time she had a doctor's appointment.

After the contract is signed, the process begins. Once an embryo is created and transferred into the uterus of the gestational carrier by in vitro fertiliza-

tion, the difference between natural pregnancy and surrogacy is minimal, and mainly depends on the doctor. Bobrov said that the medical world in Russia is still very closed-minded.

"Most doctors, not to mention nurses, are very judgmental and suspicious of surrogacy, and are deeply prejudiced against it. They do not understand it and cannot accept it," he said. On Bobrov's maternity ward, where he has worked for more than five years, the situation has improved and the staff have become more tolerant, he added.

After the delivery, the surrogate signs all the necessary documents and her job is done. She is advised not to see the child, but if the parents have no objections, as in the case of the Finns, she might pay them a visit and even hold the child in her arms. But nearly always, both sides part forever in the maternity ward without ever seeing each other again.

Before the delivery, Viktoria said she had never left her daughter for more than one day at a time, and that as soon as she was discharged from the maternity ward, she would run home to see her own child.

Although surrogacy is officially legal in Russia and the procedure has been worked out during a number of years, there are still a lot of gaps in the law. There are no regulations on single male parents, and no regulations on using a man's sperm or woman's eggs after that person has died. Kiyayev says that it is essential that the surrogate be obliged to waive her rights to the child. Currently, Russian surrogates may keep the child if they change their mind, and neither the client nor the company can make her give it up.

Kiyayev also cited some extreme situations that have to be allowed for and regulated by the law. "What if the parents die while the surrogate is pregnant? Or the surrogate dies during pregnancy?" he asked.

Last but not least, what if the Russian Orthodox Church, which does not approve of surrogacy and which is visibly becoming more and more influential, instigates a move to ban it? Kiyayev says that surrogacy in Russia is classified as infertility treatment and, in light of the country's negative demographic trend, the church would be unlikely to do anything to oppose it. He cited a priest from Saloniki who, when asked by a parishioner who was desperate for a child and asked the priest to bless her decision to use a surrogate, replied: "If science can make it happen, then God needs it too."