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OVERHAULING RUSSIA'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: INSTITUTIONAL AND IDEATIONAL FACTORS BEHIND THE PARADIGM SHIFT

This article studies the causal factors behind the major overhaul of Russia's system for children in substitute care that has been taking place since the late 2000's. A series of reforms have promoted fostering and family-like care in contrast to the large residential homes used in the Soviet period and 1990's. We highlight the fundamental change in the 'ideal of care' represented by the move to 'deinstitutionalise' the care system by promoting domestic adoptions, increasing the number of foster families, creating early support services for families as well as restructuring remaining residential institutions into smaller, home-like environments. These are all key elements of the global deinstitutionalisation trend that is taking place around the globe. We look at the evolution of the related policies and ask why this policy shift happened during the 2010's even though the issue of reform had partially been on the Russian policy agenda for some time. Building on an explanatory approach to family policy changes by Magritta Mäztke and Ilona Ostner, which incorporates material and ideational driving forces, we explain that the 'political will from above' behind these major reforms was shaped by a range of other societal and political factors. Multiple factors drove Russian political actors to adopt new ideas about care for children left without parental care. For

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instance, the increasing conservative turn in policies towards children and families, which are driven by the severe demographic decline in the country, work alongside the influence of international norms around children's rights and changing socio-economic circumstances. In the 1990's Russian NGOs had considerable input into the reforms as 'epistemic communities' in policy formation thanks to the high level of expertise that they developed in international networks and the increasing number of cross-sector consultative platforms at governmental bodies in contemporary Russia. We conclude that ideational factors were necessary preconditions for the reforms, but that political forces were ultimately the key driving force. The recentralisation of power and prioritisation of social policy under President Putin allowed new ideas to gain concrete policy realisation.

Key words: Family policy, child welfare, substitute care, deinstitutionalisation

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Introduction

Following a long period of policy inaction, activist campaigning and international criticism, the Russian government is now radically reforming the state system for children in substitute care, both family-based and institutional. The recent initiatives strive to 'deinstitutionalise' Russia's care system by promoting adoptions, increasing the number of foster families, creating family support services to prevent children from entering the care system as well as restructuring remaining residential institutions into smaller, home-like environments. These moves are all key elements that will bring Russia into line with the deinstitutionalisation trend that has taken place around the globe (e.g. Ainsworth, Thoburn 2014; Holm-Hansen et al. 2005).

In this article, we seek to understand the evolution of policies in this sphere and to explain why these major reforms finally happened in the 2010's. The scale and speed of the child welfare reform make it an excellent case for analysing the drivers of such fundamental policy change in Russia, especially given the country's longstanding history and internationally high rates of institutional care. The reform took many experts by surprise given the overall view that 'macro-scale changes to the Russian orphanage system ... appear unlikely to happen soon' (Disney 2015: 22).

The reforms are based on the idea of every child's right to grow up in a family. Russia inherited a network of large residential institutions for children from the USSR in which 'care' was collective and generally defined as meeting material and educational needs in a rather strict, regimented fashion rather than focusing on relationships, societal inclusion and life skills (cf. UNICEF 2010; Phillips 2009). Residential care was long-term and often in large, geographically isolated institutions with little return to biological families or contact with local services and communities. The outcomes for young people who had been in state care

were generally very poor, leading to high stigma of the children living in state care homes (Khlinovskaya 2010). A number of local and regional projects – often with NGO and international support – aimed to improve the situation in the 1990's, but policy action at a national level was limited until the 2010's.

This situation is now drastically different with a shift to the placement of children without parental care in foster families instead of residential institutions: the number of children placed in families is now tenfold in comparison to the early 2000's (Biryukova, Sinyavskaya, this issue p. 371–372). The Russian Government has set a goal that 90% of children in substitute care will live in families (Russian Government 2013), preferably in biological ones when possible, but, if not, then in adoptive or fostering ones. This wholesale change in the care system has been underpinned by a series of government strategies and decrees addressing both fostering and the restructuring of large children's homes into 'family support centres' with small-group homes, where children can temporarily live whilst awaiting family placement. The changes shift the ideal of state care from collective, institutionalised and often impersonal care to personalised care with biological, adoptive or foster parents or in family-like institutions. New ideas and organisational principles have been introduced to a system that shapes the lives of over 600,000 children who do not live with their birth parents. In sum, the reform can be regarded as a 'paradigm change' in the underpinning ideals and institutional design of the child welfare system: a 'fundamental revision of the broad ways of thinking about the aims and means of policy' in a particular field (Khmelnitskaya 2015: 16).

Our article first presents an explanatory framework for understanding these policy changes that incorporates both the role of ideas and institutional/material factors. Separate empirical sections then consider the political and societal drivers of the evolution of ideas on child welfare in Russia and institutional factors that facilitated the top-down reforms. This explanatory approach helps to understand why the child welfare laws were only adopted in the 2010's even though the issue of deinstitutionalisation had been on the policy agenda for a longer period of time (cf. Holm-Hansen et al. 2005). We ultimately conclude that the timing of the reforms was driven mostly by the policy and societal focus on the well-being of vulnerable children in combination with the centralisation of political power from the late 2000's onwards that ensured reforms could be implemented 'from above'.

To study the development of these major reforms, this paper draws on interviews with activists and NGOs conducted in 2015–2017 as well as the analysis of key policy and legislative documents, government briefings and published articles with key actors. This approach tallies with scholarship on the role of ideas in social policy, which suggests that 'a careful and selective use of textual documents, public opinion surveys and interviews with experts and policy-makers helps to provide evidence about the causal role of frames and policy ideas in legislative and policy processes' (Beland 2005: 15).

Conceptual Framework: Why do Family Policies Change?

Our analysis of the reforms is guided by a conceptual framework developed by Margitta Mätzke and Ilona Ostner (Mätzke, Ostner 2010a) to explain change in European family policy. It combines the two main types of explanation for welfare reforms: ideas (from the constructivist paradigm of policy studies) and material-institutional factors (from institutionalist approaches). Both societal dynamics and narrower political factors can be identified within each type of explanation for why new policies are adopted.

Mätzke and Ostner (Mätzke, Ostner 2010b: 474) highlight that policy ideas are 'the crucial driving forces that turn political opportunities into policy innovation.' New ideas have causal power in terms of determining the content of reforms, for example the changes in goals and delivery of welfare services. There are both societal and political explanations for the evolution of new policy ideas. Public opinion – albeit influenced by media and political discourses – can be important in seeking or alternatively blocking change, for example in the case of the public protests in Russia in 2005 over the monetisation of benefits (Wengle, Rasell 2008). Within the political field, considerable attention is often paid to 'epistemic communities' as the generators of ideas. These are specialists from think tanks, politics, academia and NGOs who have expert knowledge in a particular field and who contribute to the development of policy solutions 'in the early policy design stages of the policy cycle where the uncertainty of novel policy problems is at its peak' (Dunlop 2013: 230). Such expert knowledge frequently has a transnational aspect in terms of ideas that are circulating globally or the direct involvement of foreign experts in policy development (Dunlop 2013: 230).

Research in the early 2000s found limited opportunities for advocacy coalitions/epistemic communities to promote family-like alternatives in Russia due to institutional inertia, limited household finances and unfamiliarity with adopting and fostering in Russian society (Holm-Hansen et al. 2005: 77). The fit between expert/NGO messages and political discourses is also an important consideration: Bogdanova and Bindman (2016: 169) write that 'the current discourse of the state social policy has to be taken into account' when analysing Russian NGO involvement in social policy at the regional level because whilst the 'protection of children is legitimated by the current political mood ... not every project for child protection can be promoted.' The ideas of epistemic communities thus need to fit with the thinking and rhetoric from decision-makers on a particular issue in order to contribute to ideational change in policy circles.

Yet, ideational explanations are not sufficient to fully explain policy shifts. Material and institutional forces are important in shaping the prioritisation of new ideas and their translation into concrete legislation and policies. For example, the potential impact of epistemic communities and non-governmental

actors will inevitably be shaped by the openness of a political system and the existence of channels for societal-government dialogue. The recent development of 'partnership' or 'network' styles of governance in Russia thus provides a platform for epistemic communities to present their ideas and proposals (Berg-Nordlie et al. 2017). The nature of a political system and balance of power between various political and societal actors are also important, as Duma and regional opposition to social welfare reforms in Russia in the 1990's clearly demonstrated (Cook 2007). In some cases, organised groups and civil society actors can be important drivers or else obstacles to change, from NGOs to professional and public unions. More widely, contextual factors also affect the impetus and range of options for reform, for example population demographic factors, state budgetary resources and levels of expertise in government circles, all of which have constrained social policy in Russia in the 1990's and 2000's.

In sum, both ideational and institutional factors are important in shaping policy change and indeed cannot be fully separated in practice, for example the knowledge of expert groups and institutional platforms through which they can relay ideas and messages. Table 1 summarises the framework (based on Mätzke Ostner 2010a: 393) that we utilise to explain the change in Russian child welfare policy:

Table 1

Conceptual framework to explain child welfare policy change in Russia

<i>Dynamics and agents of change</i>			
		<i>Societal explanations</i>	<i>Political explanations</i>
Driving forces	Material and institutional factors	Demographic pressures; socio-economic factors; societal groups and organised interests	Political system; institutional actors; policymaking structures
	Ideas	Public opinion, mass attitudes	Epistemic communities, rhetoric action by political actors

In line with the framework, the next section considers ideational factors driving the child welfare reforms in Russia, highlighting the role of global norms, local NGOs, government focus on children's well-being and public opinion. After this, we explore the material and institutional factors in the 2010s that meant these ideas could find realisation in new laws and decrees.

Idealist explanations: global norms, public opinion and epistemic communities

Global norms and NGOs

Debates about the potential reform of Russia's child welfare system were strongly shaped in the 1990's onwards by the international push towards deinstitutionalisation. A range of United Nations and Council of Europe initiatives exposed Russian policy structures to international ideas on children's rights and family-based care, on which Russia has needed to report at regular intervals. These international norms had influence in both societal and political arenas (cf. Holm-Hansen et al. 2005). During the relatively open Yeltsin period, Russian NGOs, activists and reform-minded practitioners co-operated with international charities, organisations and funding programmes, thus receiving the opportunity to apply the rights-based and child-focused approaches promoted around the world. International projects meant that some individual children's homes started reform processes and several regions piloted their own models of family care and fostering. Yet, these projects were rather fragmented and there was no change to the overall model of institutional care, which remained subject to on-going criticism by both local and international NGOs (Levada Centre 2010; Human Rights Watch 2014). The international collaboration of NGOs has been increasingly restricted since the mid-2000s (Johnson et al. 2016; Skokova et al. forthcoming), but they have continued to utilise their professional experience and act as clear advocates and 'experts' in the field of deinstitutionalisation and children's rights through media reports, interviews, adverts, events and continued participation in international networks and events. Crucially, though, they needed adequate policy structures to transmit their ideas and advice, which happened only later, as discussed below.

Increased government rhetoric about children left without parental care

Since the mid-2000's, Russian governments have increasingly prioritised social and family issues, including pro-natalist measures to stimulate the birth rate, the creation of children's rights commissioners at the federal and regional level, funding streams for NGO projects around children and families and a conservative, nationalistically tinged rhetoric about the importance of 'traditional' family values in Russia.

The increasing attention paid to the well-being of Russian children and families has also encompassed children in state care. President Putin's famous 2006 speech on Russia's 'demographic crisis' briefly mentioned the issue of children left without parental care (Rotkirch et al. 2007), but the issue was only directly addressed by President Medvedev in 2010, who stated that children in institutions are 'denied the most important thing – family warmth' (Medvedev 2010). He directed custody officials to focus on 'placing those children in families and helping foster

families' and continued that 'there should be no "un-adopted" children in our country'. Medvedev's speech also referred to social adaptation and support after leaving state care, saying that 'it is not enough to just teach and feed them; we have to help them start a new adult life, be ready for it, be self-confident'.

President Medvedev's 2010 speech can be seen as the catalyst for policy action because it was followed by several national programmes in the field. Interestingly, these documents were often designed with significant input from activists and NGOs, as we discuss later. One of them is 'National Children's Strategy to Promote the Interests of Children in 2012–2017', established by presidential decree in June 2012. Its primary goal was to overhaul the system of institutional care by reorganising children's homes into 'family support centres' whose primary task was to place children in biological or foster families through support and training services. The National Children's Strategy was important in setting out key ideas about alternatives to residential institutions and contains frequent references to international documents and notions of children's rights, suggesting that global norms were recognised in government circles.

The proposals of the National Children's Strategy were formalised in law through a series of decrees and laws. This started with Presidential Decree No 1688, which was issued on 28 December 2012 and directed officials to begin work on improving fostering and adoption processes. It also added a specific criterion about the proportion of children living in family care to the annual evaluation of the 'effectiveness' of regional governors as a way of stimulating change across Russia. Alongside this government action, the presidential party, United Russia, established a nationwide programme 'Russia Needs All Its Children' in January 2013, which tasked regional branches of the party to develop 'road maps' for preventing children from entering care and promoting family placements. Foster care was also one of the main issues in the 'State Concept for Family Policy in the Russian Federation until 2025', which was adopted in August 2014, pointing to the central priority of the issue for the government.

Finally, Decree RF No 481 from May 2014 introduced mandatory reforms of residential institutions. It is a watershed document that has been described as 'revolutionary' because 'children's lives in orphanages is starting to look like ordinary children's lives instead of life in jail,' as put by Elena Al'shanskaya, one of the most prominent NGO campaigners for the reform. The decree fundamentally altered the goals and nature of care in institutions. It instantiated the National Children's Strategy by restructuring children's homes into 'family support centres' with the primary task of working with biological and foster families. A 'family like' environment for children in state care is explicitly promoted by transforming institutions into small-group homes where children will use local facilities such as schools, kindergartens and local polyclinics to promote their social integration. It is expected that children will live in these new small-group homes on a temporary basis because family placement is the ultimate goal. The decree also abandoned many features of the previous system, including the

separation of siblings and division of children on the basis of age or health. Decree RF No 481 therefore clearly instantiated the strong family discourse emerging from the federal government and made it binding on all regions.

In sum, the attention paid to reforming provision for children in state care arose from the increasing 'family talk' on the governmental agenda. It also resonated with increasing focus on this topic in the wider society, as is explored below.

Changes in public opinion

At the same time as increasing their attention on family welfare, Russian policymakers and other conservative social actors, including the Russian Orthodox Church, created 'moral panics' surrounding childhood, which started to take root among the wider public. Various threats to Russian children have been mooted from foreign adoptive parents to unregulated internet spaces and 'homosexual propaganda'. In particular, the death of a Russian child who had been adopted by American parents was widely reported in the Russian media and prompted a ban on the adoption of Russian children by US citizens in December 2012, thus cancelling a key exit route from institutional care for children. The so-called Dima Yakovlev law received a mixed reaction, enjoying substantial support among the general public but also generating public protests (Radio Free Europe 2013). Importantly, it drew public attention to Russia's own care system and the very poor outcomes for young people leaving residential care. A number of abuse scandals in children's homes furthered media and public interest in the topic.

Concern over 'threats' to Russian children – including those in residential care – was therefore strong in policy circles and the wider society. Public campaigns by government agencies and NGOs have encouraged Russians to enlist as foster parents and recognise the growing professionalisation of both social workers and foster families in the child welfare system. These various dynamics have softened longstanding societal scepticism about fostering and the needs of children in care: in 2016, 81 % of Russians regarded foster placements as the best place for children in state care (Fond Izmeni Odnu Zhizn 2016). There were thus clear societal expectations that the residential care system needed major reform even if they are hard to disentangle from the family orientation emanating from the government and the knowledge of deinstitutionalisation developed in NGOs and epistemic communities (cf. Lough 2003). Yet, the various ideational pushes for deinstitutionalisation could only have force due to the facilitation of several institutional and material factors, as considered in the next section.

Material Factors: Resources and Policy Structures

Demographic and socioeconomic factors

Society-level explanations of amendments to family policy often evoke the pressure of socio-economic and demographic change (cf. Mätzke, Ostner

2010a:393). Indeed, the child welfare reforms developed against a backdrop of increasing political, media and societal anxiety about the country's 'demographic crisis.' After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was the scene of one of the most severe population declines seen among peacetime industrialised countries. This led to a statist turn in social policies and associated focus on family issues and population health (e.g. Kulmala et al. 2014.) This has driven policies to increase the birth rate, for example through 'maternity capital' payments (Rotkirch et al. 2007), as well as a focus on the health and well-being of vulnerable children, including those left without parental care.

At the same time, the stabilisation and growth of the Russian economy in the 2000's (Kainu et al. 2017) meant that both policymakers and ordinary Russians no longer had to focus on everyday survival and could therefore pay attention to the fostering and the well-being of children in institutional care. Related improvements to state finances, including the possibility of regular, on-time payments of social benefits to foster parents, meant that major reforms of the child welfare sector could be contemplated even though saving costs is undoubtedly part of the Russian government's motivation for deinstitutionalisation: placing a child in family care is typically cheaper than residential care (Jones 1993, 472–3). In the current economic decline, many family benefits in Russia are subject to ever stricter targeting criteria, but payments for foster families have remained untouched because they are seen to promote the implementation of the top priority, i.e. decreasing the number of children in institutional care (Gorina 2017).

Concerns about the well-being of a large group of children in the population and the availability of state resources from the mid-2000s onwards were thus materialist factors increasing the saliency of child welfare reforms in policy circles. Yet, both they and the ideas mentioned in the previous section only had force due to the increasing centralisation of Russia's political system from the mid-2000s that paved the way for top-down change.

The centralisation of political power

Moves under Vladimir Putin to create a clear line or 'vertical' of power within the Russian state reduced institutional blocks to social welfare reform that were present in the 1990s, for example from individual ministries, the Duma and regional interests (Stoner-Weiss 1997; Cook 2007). Federal authority was thus asserted over regions – including in the field of child welfare – and executive control facilitated by the dominance of the pro-presidential United Russia party along with restrictions on independent media and opposition parties (Gel'man 2014). This is directly relevant to the child welfare reforms given that nowadays 'even modest presidential support helps the adoption of major decisions and their implementation' (Gel'man, Starodubtsev 2016: 109). Deinstitutionalisation and fostering enjoyed support from the highest-level officials with children's rights campaigners emphasising in our interviews that: 'there has been political will from above' (*politicheskaya volya sverkhu*). As explained earlier, references to

children left without parental care in presidential speeches were closely followed by policy responses in 2012–14 in the form of strategies and decrees. Top-level political support for change was also represented by the fact that Deputy Prime Minister for Social Affairs Olga Golodets was placed in charge of implementing the initial Presidential Decree No 1688 on the protection of orphans and children without parental care. The Ministries of Labour & Social Affairs, Health and Finance all broadly agreed on the need for significant change in the child welfare system along with the Duma and federal Public Chamber, meaning there was very little opposition to the reforms. The regularisation of federal-regional relations in the 2000's meant that the reforms could have national impact by creating a uniform system across the country and the decision to evaluate regional governors based partly on the number of children left without parental care undoubtedly prompted regional action to appease the presidential administration. The work to promote fostering by the United Russia party further strengthened the feeling of political pressure for change from above.

Thus, alongside the economic growth and social policy priority, the centralisation of power and strengthening of the power vertical served as a very important facilitator for the child welfare reforms. Crucially, though, the political will for the child welfare reforms was shaped by wider societal context, international norms, expert knowledge, NGO campaigning and Russian public opinion.

NGO contributions to policy making

The Mätzke and Ostner framework acknowledges that organised interests outside political structures can promote policy change, but it is difficult to see this as a significant factor in Russia in the 2010's. As is well documented, the space of Russian civil society was rather open and also the focus of substantial international attention during the Yeltsin era (Kulmala 2013: 122–123). However, the advocacy and policy campaigning activities and international collaboration of Russian NGOs have been increasingly restricted from the mid-2000s with a related reorientation towards state funding programmes (Skokova et al., forthcoming). At the same time, the Russian government has encouraged NGOs to participate in emerging forms of 'network' governance in Russia, especially on social issues (cf. Bogdanova, Bindman 2016; Johnson et al. 2016). This trend provided opportunities for national children's rights NGOs to be heavily involved in designing the child welfare reforms through consultative platforms and committees established under different governmental structures, including the presidential administration, federal government, State Duma, and different ministries (cf. Owen, Bindman 2017). This was mostly possible because the NGO viewpoints fitted with the presidential administration's family-oriented and children's rights ideology and the organisations adopted a consensual rather than oppositional stance to working with government structures.

Galina Semya, a children's rights activist and author of the 2012–17 National Children's Strategy, whom we interviewed, thus characterised the document as

being 'born not in the Cabinet of Ministers, but rather in the expert group' of representatives from major NGOs whose specialist knowledge fits with understandings of epistemic communities. The director of a leading NGO in the field – and strong critic of the former system of child welfare – similarly suggested that it was no coincidence that the topic of children entering care appeared in Putin's 2006 speech given the hard lobbying by children's rights activists. Another activist highlighted that the step-by-step process requires lots of time and encouragement, but can be effective:

Putin will say, soon I hope, that early detection is important. He has already said that work is needed to prevent orphanhood. You see, now these expert channels somehow reach him. It is not too far anymore. <...> Presentations are continually being made there [in the cross-sector platforms] and at some point it goes further and Putin says that one needs to get engaged in early detection (NGO leader, Moscow, 2015).

This quote again highlights the perceived importance of impetus from the presidential office for the reforms as transmitted through the 'vertical' of political control established by Vladimir Putin.

Another research participant explained that the very recent attention to preventive work with biological families appeared on the policy agenda because 'we kept talking and talking about it'. She was closely involved in drafting Decree 481 and described the consultation process as positive from the start. According to her, the relevant government ministries and agencies had convened a group of experts and collected their views before drafting the decree and during its refinement. She highlighted that government representatives were genuinely open to ideas and consultation:

Usually, these things happen in the other way around: pre-written documents [draft laws] are passed to public hearings when there is less possibility for impact (NGO leader, Moscow, 2016).

At the same time she admitted that the final version of Decree 481 was not perfect: 'it's not ideal, rather a compromise – but better than nothing,' alluding to resource issues that constrained the extent of institutional change, particularly around the size of small family-like homes. In terms of impact, the research participants nonetheless broadly agreed that NGO views and expertise had been utilised in the creation of the child welfare reforms. Importantly, institutional structures existed through which individual activists and NGOs could reinforce (global) norms and offer concrete advice implementing deinstitutionalisation once the idea had been endorsed by the political centre.

Conclusions

Despite some individual projects to promote family-like alternatives (cf. Holm-Hansen et al. 2005:76), it was only in the 2010s that Russia's federal government

focused on systematically reorganising and unifying the state care system, launching reforms of considerable scale and speed. Our analysis suggests that the recent burst of policy activity in this field was driven by a range of factors. At the level of ideas, long-term advocacy by NGOs and wider diffusion of [international] norms around children's rights penetrated into government thinking against a background of political and societal concern about the well-being of Russian children and the country's population. Yet, it was the centralisation of power in Russia's political system and prioritisation of social issues due to the demographic crisis that were crucial to the specific timing of reforms in the 2010s. Recently emerging 'network' governance systems in Russia allowed child welfare NGOs with international experience from the 1990s to reinforce messages about the importance of deinstitutionalisation and have considerable input on the content of reforms, even if final decision-making clearly remained with government structures.

We conclude that the Russian government adopted new ideational paradigms and understandings of substitute care in the 2010s due to acute concern about family well-being and the possibilities for top-down change afforded by a centralised political system. The next stage of our research will focus on the implementation and impact of the child welfare reforms in individual regions, residential homes, family centres and children's lives. Early evidence indicates some difficulties in terms of regions failing to understand the family-oriented logic of the reforms and approaching them in a formal, procedural fashion with only superficial changes to the existing system and institutions. Yet, as Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets said in relation to Decree RF No 481 about restructuring children's homes: 'All of our reforms will not work unless people adopt the new ideas' (Kommersant 2016).

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