

# Flexible authoritarian governance in Russia: the politics of ideas on family policy

## Data Set description

Authors:

Dr. Marina Khmel'nitskaya  
University of Helsinki  
E-Mail: [marina.khmel'nitskaya@helsinki.fi](mailto:marina.khmel'nitskaya@helsinki.fi)

Prof. Dr. Ann-Mari Sätre  
Uppsala University  
E-Mail: [ann-mari.satre@ires.uu.se](mailto:ann-mari.satre@ires.uu.se)

Dr. Ulla Pape  
Freie Universität Berlin  
E-Mail: [ulla.pape@fu-berlin.de](mailto:ulla.pape@fu-berlin.de)

Date: 28 January 2022

## Background and rationale for the study

The article examines the process of governance in Russia focussing on social policy, and using policy ideas as an analytical lens. Following the definition of the ideational process as a 'discourse' (Schmidt 2008), the article argues that in Russia governance can be seen as a combination of three distinct discursive layers, including the President, ministerial bureaucracy and the regional & local levels. This system, which we term a 'nested model of discursive governance', involves an intensive communicative discourse of the Russian President which seeks to legitimise policy with the public and provides signals for lower level officials. The middle level of policy bureaucracy is characterised by a vigorous coordinative discourse in which officials and non-state experts negotiate their ideas. Finally, at the local level political communication and technical coordination of policy ideas coexist and involve members of the public.

The benefit of the ideas-based perspective on policy and governance in Russia is that it allows not only to trace the origins and evolution of various policy initiatives, but also to see the sources of presidential popularity and regime flexibility associated with the accommodation of different ideational positions. We demonstrate the applicability of this argument with the analysis of policymaking in the social sphere, in particular an array of measures aimed at women with an objective of increasing birthrates and providing family income support, often described as 'family policy'.

## Research objective and research question

The article studies the question how of family policies are negotiated at different levels of the political system in authoritarian Russia. Our analysis is based on the original model of 'nested discursive governance' focusses on policy ideas and two institutional types of policy discourses: communicative and coordinative, and demonstrates the mechanism of governance which balances out different ideational positions across the governance levels.

## **Methods and data sources**

For the study of the ideational processes we use methodological approaches and insights generated by the scholarship on policy ideas within political science. Our analysis draws on the concepts of ideas and 'discourses' as defined by the scholars of policy ideas. Ideas are taken here to mean 'causal beliefs' held by different actors that drive their policy action. Discourse is defined as the process in which policy actors debate and promote their preferred policy ideas to solve what they perceive as policy problems.

In our analysis we use empirical data to illustrate discursive dynamics unfolding at three administrative levels – the presidential, ministerial and local – with representative examples of ideational politics involved in the field of family policy at these three levels, rather than covering all of the issues that appear at each particular level.

### **Data sources**

The empirical data for this study consists of different primary sources that shed light onto the governance processes at the three different levels of governance in Russia. Specifically, our primary data consists of (1) interviews with policy officials, experts and civil society activists on the topic of family policy in Russia as a whole and in the five case regions; (2) the Presidential Addresses to the National Assembly between 2000 and 2021 as a major communication channel at the federal level, and (3) additional primary sources on family policy, including policy documents and information on the websites of different government institutions, surveys as well as reports from the Russian national and local media.

For the study of discursive governance at the local level our regional sample consists of five case regions in Russia: Nizhny Novgorod, Novgorod, St Petersburg, Arkhangelsk and Karelia.

#### **1) Interviews**

Overall, 150 semi-structured, in-depth interviews on poverty, social marginalization and local development were conducted in the five regions (Nizhny Novgorod, Novgorod, St Petersburg, Arkhangelsk and Karelia) between 2010 and 2020. The interviewees were local officials, social work experts and other persons working in local formal and informal organisations, most of whom were women.

As many respondents wished to be anonymous, we do not specify the date and place of individual interviews when referring to them in the text. Likewise, because of confidentiality reasons, we cannot include the interview transcripts nor an overview of the interviews in this data set.

#### **2) Addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation**

The Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly (Послание Президента России Федеральному Собранию) are an important communication channel in which the head of state reports about the most important political developments and defines government objectives. The Addresses are live broadcast and published on the president's official website and the national media. Their messages are then reiterated by state officials at the lower levels.

Our analysis focuses on the development since 2000, as this period is characterized by a renewed emphasis on family policy and increasing authoritarian trends. This period covers Vladimir Putin's first two presidential terms in 2000-2008, Dmitry Medvedev's interregnum in 2008-2012, and Putin's reelection to his third and fourth terms in March 2012 and 2018.

The speeches were researched on the website of the President of the Russian Federation: <http://kremlin.ru/>

Our sample includes all Presidential Addresses between 2000 and 2021, altogether 21 full texts. In 2017, the Address to the Federal Assembly was not given.

### **3) Additional primary sources**

In addition to the Federal Addresses which shed light into the ideas and discourses at the federal level we used a number of other primary sources, including regional development strategies, policy documents, legal regulations, statistical information, and media reports.

For our analysis of the ideas and discourses regarding family policy in Russia, we selected sources relevant to the policy issue we are addressing (family policy) for the country as a whole, in relation to its political significance, different implementation techniques (e.g. civil society involvement), views of other policy actors (apart from the president) speaking about the issue.

For the regional and local level, we selected sources that demonstrate how regional officials speak and act in implementation of Russia's national family policy and how they construct their own approaches to the issue in their regions.

Overall, our sample of additional primary sources includes 26 documents (pdf-files).

### **Data analysis**

We used qualitative content analysis for the analysis of the data sources (Schreier 2012, Kuckartz et al. 2014). Specifically in relation to the analysis of the Presidential Addresses, we searched the official transcripts of the speeches with the Russian-language terms for "social policy", "family", "demography", "demographic development", "birth rate", "health", "socio-economic development", "social assistance", "maternity capital", "traditional values" and "socially oriented nonprofit organizations". This allowed us to identify all text passages that were relevant for understanding the development of the discourses on family policy in the Presidential Addresses. Next, we coded all statement by using a coding frame, consisting of policy measures, policy priorities and underlying public philosophies.

Our analysis of both national and local (regional) sources on family policy reveals the main ideas regarding family policy as part of Russia's social policy. The analysis shows how different kinds of actors shape and implement family policy based on ideas they hold. In particular, we were interested in understanding how different policy actors defined their positions, framed policy problems and how they justified the introduction and/or application of different policy measures by recurring to underlying normative basis of policy, or public philosophies.

## **Data publication**

The Federal Addresses to the National Assembly were researched on the website of the President of the Russian Federation: <http://kremlin.ru/>

Russian law explicitly allows the unrestricted reproduction of official documents (Civil Code of the Russian Federation, Article 1259, Paragraph 6.1).

## **Overview of the data set**

The data set for the case study consists of the following documents:

- 1) Overview of the Federal Addresses to the National Assembly (pdf file);
- 2) 21 full-texts of the Federal Addresses to the National Assembly (pdf files);
- 3) Overview of additional primary sources, used in the analysis (word file);
- 4) 26 full-texts of additional primary sources, used in the analysis (pdf files), including the Rosstat table “Summarnyi koeffitsient rozhdaemosti” (excel file).