REFORMING CHILD WELFARE IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE. INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE IN RUSSIA

How are global social policies transferred and adopted in non-democratic settings such as Russia? The deinstitutionalization of child welfare as a coherent reform was introduced abruptly across Russia constituting almost experimental settings to study the process and outcomes of such ambitious policy reforms. The interdisciplinary research project on the recent child welfare reform and its implementation, led by Meri Kulmala, PhD in Social Studies, resulted in the book Reforming Child Welfare in the Post-Soviet Space. Institutional Change in Russia addressing three key questions. First, how has global ideology based on the idea of a child’s rights to a family been adopted and applied in the Russian context? Second, how did the new policy alter the institutional design of childcare and grassroots practices in Russian regions; and what factors mediated the policy change? Third, what are the key consequences of the deinstitutionalization reform and what accounts for them? The book embraces sociological, anthropological and political science perspectives brought together by the neo-institutionalist framework to target multi-layered processes revolving around the reform.

Deinstitutionalization as a “paradigmatic shift”

The deinstitutionalization as a policy shift introduced an entirely new principle of care in contemporary Russia. According to Meri Kulmala, it can be seen as a “paradigmatic shift” since it challenged an understanding inherited from the Soviet era of state organized institutional care as being the best for children left without parental care. The deinstitutionalization reform brought the right to live in a family to the center of the care system, seeing residential, collective care as being harmful to children. In practical terms, the reform aimed to diminish a huge system of residential care for children and replace it with community-based services and foster care, short-term temporary placement in home-like units and develop a range of services for birth parents. The deinstitutionalization of child welfare in Russia happened as a result of two evolving tendencies. The Russian expert community had been promoting these principles of care long before the reform was launched preparing the environment and enabling the policy shift. Further governmental programs of support for families and children have been among the most important aspects of social policy in Russia. The political will to restructure the massive system of children’s homes was in line with other family-centered policy measures and reflected the political rhetoric of a caring, paternalistic government. The Dima Yakovlev law (December 2012) served as a “focusing event” (exogenous shock) and opened up a window of opportunities which enabled professional NGOs working with children and families to become involved in decision-making.

Evidence of fragmented deinstitutionalization

The research conducted in this project demonstrates that at the level of ideals of care, the deinstitutionalization has been absorbed by the public system of care and its practitioners, the rhetoric obviously shifted towards a priority of family in contrast to institutions. However, a closer look at the actual institutional change reveals peculiar practices which combine elements of the previous system of care with newly adopted but limited or distorted deinstitutionalization principles. The analysis shows that children left without family and placed in institutional care are mainly “social orphans”, meaning that their parents are alive but deprived of parental rights. Considering the family care as the ideal for children whose parents’ right were terminated, the deinstitutionalization reform triggered placement of children in foster care or adoption. However, little endeavor has been made to reunite children with their birth parents. There are two reasons for this. First, the birth parents are highly stigmatized in society in general and in the residential system of care in particular. This biased attitude produces a barrier between them and social workers who are expected to assist birth parents in finding a job, gaining financial, judicial or psychological support, etc. Second, preventive care and supporting services are marginalized in the reform process having no financial and professional support to be provided at the sufficient level. Moreover, these services are provided on a demand basis so that a family must be already in trouble in order to have a right to apply for them. As a result, the policy goal is mainly achieved by means of placing children from institutional care into foster care which technically reflect the deinstitutionalization principles.

As Kulmala, Shpakovskaya and Chernova demonstrated, the policy implementation became a battlefield for resources among the state institutions and professionals, NGOs
and families (including birth and foster parents). Being subject to the pressure of a new institutional design, public institutions and welfare managers manipulate the figures through “temporary placements” and justification of institutional care for children with disabilities, contributing to the non-implementation of the reform. Most or zero incentives for public institutions to pursue deinstitutionalization is complicated by the fact that the existing infrastructure and social provision legislation do not encourage the restructuring and reorganization of care. On the contrary, they dictate replication of existing rules and practices which partly contradict the deinstitutionalization principles. As Jäppinen and Kulmala showed, the legislative environment still serves the old ideal of care, reinforcing the persistence of old institutions.

THERE ARE TWO dimensions of resistance to the deinstitutionalization reform in the Russian context. First, various regional governments reacted differently to the political and administrative pressure that was created to place children in foster care. As Kulmala and Jäppinen argued, the political demand to raise the number of children placed in foster families and minimize the number of them left in residential facilities as well as decrease the number of existing residential institutions created political pressure for governors who are held responsible. However, not all of them pursued reform goals. According to their study, the number of children placed in foster families and the reduction of residential institutions are not necessarily favorable for the development foster care or the reduction of public institutions. Consequently, there were a variety of regional responses produced, while Siberian and the Far East regions managed to maintain residential facilities, the central regions of Russia promised to comply with the reform goals.

Second, residential institutions tend to inhibit policy implementation, inventing ways of keeping children in residential care. The analysis by Jäppinen and Kulmala revealed a number of “status-less children” who are neither officially left without parental care and cannot be adopted nor placed in foster families. They end up in institutional care due to their non-status and actually are in many ways in a very vulnerable situation with a vague perspective to leave the institutional care only once their birth relatives will be capable of taking care of them or they lose their parental rights. As the reform so far lacks real efforts of preventive work, this situation is unlikely to be solved for these children, contributing to an obvious violation of a child’s right to a family and resistance to reform at the institutional level.

The aftercare of the young adults is usually omitted in empirical studies and therefore an analysis of this stage of care and the reform appeared to be extremely valuable. Overcoming the stigmatizing dichotomy “success vs failure”, the analysis reveals two modes of agency, including pragmatic and life course one in terms of educational choices made by young adults. The authors found enabling structures to foster the agentic ability at the macro and meso level. However, their impact depends on the micro-level environment, such as the presence of a significant and trusted adult, an encouraging foster parent or an accompanying teacher, for example.

THE LEGISLATIVE ENVIRONMENT STILL SERVES THE OLD IDEAL OF CARE, REENFORCING THE PERSISTENCE OF OLD INSTITUTIONS.

As demonstrated above, the logic of the policy implementation is driven by bureaucratic and practitioners’ interests and a fight for resources, marginalizing the child’s rights. Due to the pressure from the central government to demonstrate that more and more children have been placed in foster care annually, a child’s right to choose and adapt to foster parents is often neglected. The surveying strategies of residential care, including keeping “status-less” children and those with disabilities in institutions, directly violates a child’s right to live in a family. Even though a child’s rights are expected to be the guiding principle of all actions, our research demonstrates little involvement of children in decision-making regarding their placement in residential or foster care, education or work paths.

Political and societal factors

The conclusions of the book trace four main reasons for the fragmented deinstitutionalization reform, including political regime, limited child rights perspective, kinship-based understanding of care and a low level of societal trust. The four factors impact the deinstitutionalization reform at various levels, reenforcing each other and contributing to the fragmented implementation.

The electoral authoritarianism that has developed in Russia, shapes specific incentives for regional governors who are politically and financially dependent on the federal government. As Jäppinen and Kulmala argued, the federal government signaled the priority of the reform by requiring governors to deliver numeric indicators, including the overall number of children deprived of parental care and not placed in guardianship or foster families, the number of children placed in foster families, and the number of residential institutions after closures, which intertwine with the goals of the reform. Such a purely technocratic approach that lacks various types of support which would encourage the welfare system of care for children to be reformed, translates into manipulation of statistics, falsifying or validating the actual performance.

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is mainly represented with a reference to the concepts of kinship and relatedness, rather than as paid work though paid guardianship is actually becoming increasingly popular. Since foster family care is seen as a permanent solution in many cases it completely replaces the birth family. As a result, children lose their ties with their birth parents and ultimately are deprived of their right to know their family of origin.

A low level of societal trust proved to be a fundamental factor permeating social policy in Russia, displayed at a personal level, as well at the institutional level. Such a lack of trust was found to be a distinctive feature of many interactions regarding the deinstitutionalization reform. As Iarskaia-Smirnova et al. and Shpakovskaya and Chernova showed, the public opinion towards foster parents is highly suspicious because their care is rewarded financially while underlying expectation about kinship relations contradict this practice. Birth and foster parents are mutually distrusted partly due to the stigmatization and distorted expectations. The mistrust of both birth and foster parents by the child protection officials makes them hesitant to seek assistance. Overall, the state institutions are considered as agents of control rather than a potential source of support. Professional NGOs and associations of foster parents only partly assist and restore the miscommunication at both the personal level and at the institutional level, while the overall mistrust persists in all communications.

**Conclusion and discussion**

The systematic and multilayer study of the deinstitutionalization reform in Russia by the authors proved that the shift in the ideal of care is real and has occurred at the levels of policy and programmes. However, the implementation of the new principles and policies remains fragmented and distorted. Challenges in the execution of deinstitutionalization reforms in Russia are not unique. Other contexts, especially the experience of post-Soviet countries, might be plausible to compare and reveal those distinguishing features and factors which account for the policy transfer of global ideas. What are the perspectives and limitations of top-down reforms in autocracies? How has the Soviet legacy, including a lack of trust or managerialism in running a policy, been overcome in other post-Soviet contexts? How do different actors rethink and adopt the deinstitutionalization principles in various local contexts? Are there any universal practices in which institutions persist? These questions obviously deserve scholarly attention and a comparative perspective to this multilayered policy transfer.

### References

3. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
19. See Iarskaia-Smirnova et al., as well as Shpakovskaya and Chernova, 2021.