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## Policy and Governance in Russia: Ideas and Discourses in Social Policymaking and Governance

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### Abstract:

The article focusses on policy ideas as explanatory variables for understanding policymaking and governance in Russia. Following Schmidt's definition of the ideational process as a 'discourse' in which actors promote their preferred policy ideas in competition with their opponents, the article argues that in Russia the character of discourses varies between three state levels: the President, ministerial bureaucracy and the regional & local levels. This variegated landscape of policy discourses involves the intensive communicative discourse of the Russian President, which seeks legitimation of main policy approaches with the public and provides signals for the lower level officials. The middle level of policy bureaucracy is characterised by a vigorous coordinative discourse in which officials and non-state experts defend their ideas and seek agreement on policy details. Finally, at the local level political communication and technical coordination of policy ideas coexist and involve, apart from the officials and experts, members of the public. The benefit of the ideas-based perspective on policy and governance in Russia is that it allows not only tracing the origins and evolution of various policy initiatives, but also seeing the sources of presidential popularity and regime flexibility associated with the accommodation of different ideational positions. The argument is illustrated with examples of policymaking in the social sphere, the Maternity Capital programme and the Moscow programme of housing renovation.

### The Power of Ideas

Ideas are treated as important independent variables in the public policy, comparative politics, and political economy literatures (Beland and Cox 2010). Yet, they are drawn upon less frequently for the analysis of Russian politics. The reason for this may be that ideas often erroneously appear as unconnected to actors' interests. Because of this, ideas as explanatory variables can be treated as too soft to be factors in motivating actors' behaviour in the context of Russia. Take the current example of President Putin seeking to amend the Constitution to allow him to continue in office. Ideas may appear hardly influential in the context of authoritarian leaders wishing to preserve their power. Nonetheless, comparative scholars working with ideas argue that actors' motivations are complex and multidimensional and involve material and non-material components (Berman 2013). In this perspective, ideas are not objective facts but are historical, social and political constructs. Therefore, actors' motivations comprise the calculation of their utility within a given institutional setting, and their policy-specific beliefs. The former can be referred to as institutionally determined ideas, and the latter as policy ideas.

We can bring these insights to bear on the problem of policy and governance in Russia. In a non-democratic system, success in policy is important as the basis for political legitimacy. In Russia as elsewhere, the policy process and governance involve a wide range of actors

working at different levels of the state hierarchy. Besides the political leadership, these include state officials and non-state experts from research institutes and academia, whose contribution to policymaking has been encouraged in Russia since the Soviet period. In addition, following a more recent trend in public administration, also promoted is the participation of other civil society actors—citizens groups, councils, committees and NGOs—to assist the development and implementation of policy at different state levels, from federal to local.

The motivations of these diverse state and societal actors involve ideas about how different policy issues should be addressed and problems tackled. They also include actors' understandings about how to survive and thrive in a given institutional position. The Russian President's motivations in the policy process, while involving a wish for the preservation of power, include specific policy beliefs, noted by existing research, such as fiscal conservatism, concern for demographic issues, and the belief in the strong state. State officials at lower levels may be after the preservation of their rents and privileges, while at the same time they also hold preferences for specific policy solutions and approaches. As to civil society actors, in Russia as in other nondemocracies, their contribution to policy and governance is controlled and limited, and the links to state structures are key for them to have any influence. Yet, these actors feel that they can make a difference, often for the most vulnerable social groups.

How do actors promote their preferred institutional and policy ideas? Vivien Schmid (2008) defines the process of conveying, adopting and adapting ideas by actors in interaction with their opponents as *discourse*. Actors explain policy, usually to the public, to generate support for their policies in a *communicative* discourse. They also defend their ideas and seek agreement on policies with other policy actors in a *coordinative* discourse. In the Russian context, where policy outputs are an important source of the overall regime legitimacy, both intensive policy communication and vigorous coordination coexist. These processes vary between three levels: the top level of the presidency, the middle level of the federal government and the regional & local level.

Below, I illustrate how policy ideas are communicated and coordinated by different actors in Russia, focussing on the three levels of government and using evidence from the social policy sphere. The benefit of this perspective is that by looking at the origins of policies and their evolution, it allows us to see the sources of the systems' flexibility associated with the accommodation of different ideational positions, as well as the mechanism for preserving the president's popularity.

### The Top Level

At the top level, we find an active communicative discourse explaining policy to the public and giving cues to the officials at lower levels. To examine this discourse, we may usefully look at the annual addresses of the Russian president to the national parliament.<sup>1</sup> During his first two terms in office, President Putin proclaimed social policy to be among key priorities for policy reforms. This was a popular policy focus as people at the time connected their greatest anxieties to the failures of social provision, healthcare as well as the economy.<sup>2</sup> Putin's communication explained the necessity and usefulness of his preferred neoliberal reform approach in this area. This approach included introducing means-testing of social provision and individuals taking greater responsibility for their own welfare, which would improve service quality and reduce budget costs. The president contrasted these advantages with the wasteful, inequitable and poor-quality social provision under the Soviet model.

Concern for the demographic situation became an important part of the President's discourse. The historically decreasing birth rates in Russia were exacerb-

ated by the transition recession in the 1990s (see Denisenko 2013) and were defined as a threat to Russia's development and state security in the 2005 presidential address. These priorities were translated into specific social policy instruments put forward by Putin in his communicative discourse: the introduction of the insurance principle in healthcare and the reliance on personal saving and mortgage finance in housing.

During the financial crisis of 2008, which coincided with Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (2008–2012), the role of the state in providing a safety net to the citizens was emphasised. Effective social policy, President Medvedev argued, was the basis for economic and technological modernisation, his preferred policy ideas. Yet, the overall belief in the neoliberal approach to welfare reform never waned. During Putin's third and fourth presidential terms, his pursuit of popularity led him to appeal to conservative values, prevalent among a significant part of society<sup>3</sup> which conflated in his communicative discourse with his belief in the strong state. Thus, the new emphasis on traditional family values and a strong Russian state merged with the earlier neoliberal focus on personal responsibility for individual and family welfare. In this way, individual responsibility for one's personal and the nation's wellbeing became interlinked. Yet in parallel, the loyalty to the neoliberal agenda in social policy could be seen in the encouragement of NGOs as social service providers and the use of consultations and participation to solve local conflicts, such as those in the area of territorial development.

The Maternity Capital (MC) programme originally introduced in the presidential address in 2006 deserves attention because this policy blended the central ideas of Vladimir Putin's presidency for social policy: neoliberalism, concern for demography and traditional values in a single initiative. This much-discussed policy was described as the largest expansion of the Russian welfare state since the Soviet period (Cook 2011). Its roots in the traditional understanding of women's role in family and society are also underscored in the literature (see Hornke 2020). The policy offered a large monetary benefit to every mother who had a second child. The money could be invested in pension savings, housing purchases with the help of mortgage credit or a child's education. Housing became the most common usage of this benefit. Around 5 million of the 9 million maternity cap-

1 <http://www.kremlin.ru/>, the search term *poslanie*, accessed March 2020.

2 See for instance: <https://www.levada.ru/2019/10/29/sotsiologi-nazvali-glavnye-strahi-rossiyan/> accessed 20 November 2019.

3 For example, the World Value Survey Wave 6 (2010–2014) demonstrates that a notably larger proportion of the Russians had anti-gay attitudes (66.2%), compared to 39.6% in Poland, 22.4% in Germany and 20.4% in the US. Available at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSOnline.jsp> accessed March 2020. The survey for Russia was taken in 2011, i.e. prior to President Putin's turn to the conservative values rhetoric

ital certificates issued by 2018 were invested in housing. 3.3 million were used to take out a mortgage loan.<sup>4</sup> The inclusion of the pension savings and housing investment options demonstrates that the programme was designed to promote fertility in a very neoliberal way: specifically aiming to create the source of long-term funding badly lacking in the financial sector, popularise mortgage borrowing, saving behaviour and investment. The origins of many of such policy details within the policy bureaucracy are apparent, as also shown below. In this context, policy experts elaborated policy details rather than altered core policy ideas held by the President.

### The Middle Level

The translation of top-level ideas into specific policy measures takes place at the middle level. This involves a process of policy coordination of institutionally determined and policy-related ideas held by ministerial officials and experts. The chief executive also participates in this process but less overtly. The policy coordination surrounding the evolution of the MC programme offers one example.

Two groups of expert and bureaucratic opinion regarding the MC policy were formed. The first group, which centred around the social bloc ministries, including the ministries of Health, Labour and Social Protection, and Housing, considered the policy an important channel to support fertility and improve housing conditions for millions of households. While it pointed to certain limitations of the program, particularly the increased chances of poverty among families who took out a mortgage, the research of this expert community highlighted that access to housing—an important part of social capabilities and family wealth—has improved (e.g. Grishina and Tsatsura 2018). Meanwhile, fertility rates increased from 1.1 children per woman in 2000 to 1.7 per woman in 2015.<sup>5</sup>

Another expert community linked to the Ministry of Economy, although not denying the acute nature of the Russian demographic concerns, argued that MC was hardly responsible for the increase in births. These were instead attributed to economic growth and, more importantly, the fact that a larger cohort of women entered child-bearing age in the early-2000s while the slowdown in births in the late 2010s (to 1.5 per woman in 2018)<sup>6</sup> was linked to the cyclical reduction of women in the fertile age bracket. Besides, it was noted that in many cases the policy encouraged families to shift the birth calendar forward rather than incentivise ‘additional’ children in

families. Following this logic families decided to have their planned second child earlier than they would have, thanks to the programme. Instead of the costly, non-means-tested MC, this community advocated the introduction of smart benefits for families following European practises in this regard (e.g. Kuzminov et al 2015).

The competition between the two viewpoints affected the evolution of the MC scheme. For instance, policy coordination among the two groups was key in deciding the priorities for the critical 2017 budget (Khmelnitskaya 2017). At the time, MC continued to be funded in the budget as advocated by the social bloc of the government, yet its indexation according to inflation was foregone to meet the position of the fiscally conservative part of the government and the associated experts.

Further, in 2018, an element of means-testing was introduced when small monthly amounts for everyday needs were allowed to be paid out from the large MC benefit to families falling below a certain income threshold after the birth of their second child.<sup>7</sup> This option echoed the argument of the first community about the increased chances of poverty among families with children and the burden of mortgage repayments, while also taking on board the proposals of the second community about the need for means-testing.

The President’s role in this policy coordination process was felt indirectly. For instance, the President refrained from mentioning the MC in the 2017 address to the nation when the policy could have been discontinued due to budget pressures. At the same time, President Putin reiterated his commitment to the demographic agenda in his inaugural presidential decree from May 2018. He also announced personally several further developments of the MC scheme, including the introduction of additional lump-sum benefits to families who had their *third* or subsequent children for the repayment of their mortgage loans taken out earlier (address to parliament February 2019) and the extension of the MC programme to first births in the January 2020 address. The latter announcements could again be seen as referencing advice from the first community about the higher risks of poverty among young families when they take out mortgage loans. The decisions also reflect the advice of the second community about the shift forward in birth calendars, and the concern of all experts who observed the reduction in birth-rates and, particularly, in first births since 2016. These announcements were also a way for the President to make popular political statements, as

4 Pension Fund of Russia (PFRF), *V Mosckve problo rasshirennoe zasedanie pravleniya PFR*, 11 December 2018, available at [http://www.pfrf.ru/press\\_center/-2018/12/11/172366](http://www.pfrf.ru/press_center/-2018/12/11/172366), accessed 13 December 2019.

5 See Rosstat, <https://www.gks.ru/folder/12781>, Table: *Summarniy koefitsient rozhdaemosti*, accessed April 2020.

6 *Ibid*

7 Federal Law N 418-FZ, from 28 December 2017, <https://rg.ru/2017/12/29/fz418-site-dok.html> accessed April 2020.

opinion polls demonstrate that an increasing number of Russians consider larger family size as more desirable.<sup>8</sup>

### The Local Level

Finally, the local level displays a mix of communicative and coordinative discourses. Here we can identify the 'official' communication by regional leaders and local officials that echoes the slogans and messages put forward by the President. For instance, this relates to the promotion of public participation in local matters and the involvement of civil society organisations in local governance, particularly territorial development. Policymaking taking place at the local level, at the same time, involves a similar coordinative discourse featuring institutionally determined and policy ideas, held by officials and experts, observed at the federal level. Yet, the coordinative discourse at this level can also involve a contribution from civil society groups and the mobilised public. Local officials keen to underscore the participatory nature of local governance in their territories reference instances of such consultations in their political communication.

To illustrate this dynamic I draw on the example of the programme of housing renovation introduced in Moscow in 2017. Urban development in Moscow was the most contentious issue under the previous mayor Yuriy Luzhkov. Allegations of industry influence and corruption concerning the process of 'chaotic urbanisation' and 'pinpoint construction' in the city were widespread. Protests against these by Muscovites were frequent and bitter (e.g. Greene 2014). House prices in Moscow were least affordable compared with the rest of the country. Luzhkov was dismissed by President Medvedev in 2010 and replaced with Sergei Sobyanin.

The new mayor's communicative discourse followed that of the President's about the greater openness of local governance to participation by local communities. He was assisted in this by new appointments in the Moscow city administration and advice from a new think tank for urban development and design, the *Strelka* Institute. Yet, the key issue for the city development—providing affordable housing for Muscovites and an opportunity for the construction industry to make profits—was solved based on the ideas of one part of the expert-bureaucratic community. This involved the proposal to extend the official city boundaries to the South-West. The decision was implemented in 2011 by President Medvedev's decree. Plans to develop new technological clusters in the 'New Moscow' aligned with Medvedev's beliefs in modernisation. Muscovites, despite the 'consultative turn' in city

governance, were not consulted on this issue and were less than keen on moving to vast new territories.

The redevelopment of land within the old city borders was a competing idea of another expert-bureaucratic community. Following quick disappointment with the 'New Moscow' idea, the proposals about city densification started being developed by the city planning department in the mid-2010s. The plan for the renovation of Moscow districts containing old low-rise '*khrushchevki*' buildings and rehousing of their residents was presented to the public in February 2017. The programme was presented to Muscovites as a response to public requests to help *khrushchevki* residents be rehoused into better accommodation during a meeting with municipal deputies in early February. Yet, protests sprang up immediately after the announcement. There was a lack of clarity in the programme's criteria and in the terms of rehousing options offered. Importantly the belief that Muscovites 'owned' the city and their *khrushchevki* districts (see Reid 2019) rather than the team of city officials were key points which in the end united the public against the programme.

The city administration attempted to use bureaucratic-expert coordination to offer the public a more acceptable version of renovation in early spring 2017. Yet, that failed spectacularly as the protests only intensified culminating in mid-May with the largest demonstration on 14 May. As a result city officials had to open the coordinative discourse to the beliefs and ideas of the Muscovites. This was done in the form of online voting for or against the inclusion of individual buildings in the programme, public hearings at the State Duma, and the formation of a working group at the Duma including representatives of the mobilised Muscovites and those Duma deputies with experience in dealing with housing issues. These actions allowed significant improvement and clarification in rehousing conditions for those who agreed to be rehoused by the programme.

The Law on Renovation was finally signed by Putin in July 2017 and implementation began in August of that year. Later the city administration in its political communication lauded the consultation with the public, which as this account shows was forced upon the administration during spring 2017, as exemplar of its participatory urban development strategy.<sup>9</sup>

The coordination with the public could be interpreted as only a minor corrective to an otherwise bureaucratic-expert dominated process, which was really about the competition between two ideas of urban expansion and urban densification. We nonetheless regard this coordination as important because it significantly changed the

8 Vnuki v defitzite, *Ogoniok*, N 43, 05 November 2019, available at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4142388>, accessed April 2020.

9 See for instance: <https://www.mos.ru/city/projects/renovation/> accessed September 2019

terms of the renovation programme itself and reasserted the public's 'right to the city' in the relations between Muscovites and the city administration. The polls suggest that the public generally (74%) approved the city's renovation plans.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

Ideas are important explanatory variables in political science and there is little ground to ignore their influence in Russian politics and governance. Ideas, interpreted as a discourse differentiated between three state and administrative levels, help us not only to perceive the origins and changes of one or another policy programme or understand how the President's popularity is constructed through popular but vague messages and shielded from the attribution of failures over specific policy details. The focus on ideas also reveals the flexibility of govern-

ance in Russia with the cues to lower-level officials in the presidential communicative discourse guiding policy at the lower levels, yet, leaving space for interpretation and importantly for the contribution to policy from the ideas and beliefs of other state and non-state actors, including experts, NGOs and public groups. This demonstrates how policy outputs, associated with political legitimacy, are achieved, and how different actors are bound to the political system through the accommodation of their ideas in policymaking.

The current response to Covid-19 as expressed by President Putin in his address on 2 April 2020—although criticised for not spelling out a clearer national strategy for dealing with the virus outbreak—follows the model offered above. It allows for flexible local governance of the crisis including the input from diverse actors and competing ideas.

### About the Author

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<sup>10</sup> *Moskvich o problemakh goroda*, 30 May 2019, *Levada Tsentr*, available at <https://www.levada.ru/2019/05/30/moskvichi-o-problemah-goroda/> accessed October 2019