

Fragmented Deinstitutionalization of Russian Child Welfare

Authors: Meri Kulmala, Anna Tarasenko, Maija Jäppinen, Anna Pivovarova

In the early 2010s Russia began to fundamentally reform its child protection and alternative care systems, mainly through dismantling the old system of large children's homes inherited from the Soviet era and developing foster care, domestic adoptions as well as community-based support services for birth families as a measure to prevent the placements in alternative care. These changes can be conceptualised as deinstitutionalisation and they link Russia closely to the international trends of child rights-based child welfare systems (An, Kulmala 2020; Bindman et al. 2019). These moves are all key elements of a global deinstitutionalisation ideology, which bring Russia into line with the global norms (An, Kulmala 2020). The underlying principle in the provision of care is the shift from institutional care to the 'living in the community' model, in other words the replacement of the paternalistic ethic with the interactive ethic and the recognition that human rights, as well as the dignity and autonomy of an individual take precedence over their needs (An, Kulmala 2020). Thus, analysing the reforms – which have fundamentally shifted the ideological premises behind Russian child welfare, is interesting not only as a detailed account of the recent developments in the Russian context, but also from the viewpoint of global trends in child welfare and how they travel transnationally and are adapted locally (An, Kulmala 2020).

Drawing from neo-institutional theoretical framework, in this presentation we zoom into the implementation of the reforms and ask: What kind of institutional change has followed the ideational shift? What are the intended and unintended consequences of the reform at the level of (institutional) practices? What could explain the obvious flaws? We discuss the reasons for this fragmentation with four analytical lenses – 1) political regime, 2) limited child rights perspective, 3) kinship-based understanding of care and 4) low level of societal trust – that in many and multi-layered ways explain the major challenges of the reform in the specific context of Russia.

Drawing on empirical analysis we conclude with several findings.

First, in contrast to the new ideal of family care on show in Russia's DI reforms, residential institutions have proven their durability. Sometimes institutional change is constrained because of these continuities. Many old practices are self-reinforcing, which is why we see even non-transformations and lock-ins due to severe path dependencies both in formal and informal institutions. As we have shown through our investigation, many kinds of changes are nevertheless possible if there is a strong will combined with innovativeness. As this volume shows, institutional change in Russian welfare reform contains several layers, from the rapid change especially at the level of policies to more organic layering and even lock-ins at the level of concrete services and practices. In the Russian child welfare reform, periods of institutional reproduction overlap with moments of institutional creation in partial and often unpredictable ways and with unanticipated outcomes. Thelen (2003) labelled such institutional change as 'bounded innovation'.

Second, the competing interests of the many actors involved translate into scattered practices. The reorganisation of the system according to the new ideas and ideals of care is debated and negotiated among the key actors involved, including regional officials, street-level practitioners, non-

governmental actors, and families themselves. Limited resources at the disposal of different actors produce a battle for resources, which produces fragmentation in the implementation of the new ideas imposed by the reform. This variation in reform outcome is particularly visible at the level of Russian regions. A lack of socioeconomic resources seems to be an important explanation for regions to resist the implementation of the new principles, including the reduction of residential facilities. Such resistance is typical to any institutional change and it was obvious also in many of the analysed cases of this volume.

Third, despite the tensions and challenges, one can witness progress towards the goals of the reform. The number of children placed in foster care has increased significantly, and the number of residential facilities has declined. Nevertheless, despite the key goal of the reform – to prevent children entering the alternative care system – the focus of the efforts of the reform has been on the reorganisation (or faking the reorganisation) of the alternative care arrangements instead of developing preventive measures. Preventive services are obviously still less developed.

Our key empirical conclusion is that the implementation of the new DI ideology and thus the Russian child welfare reform is sporadic and fragmented. The multilevel analysis has revealed unintended consequences that often derive from the mismatch between the qualitative goal of better care and its measurement in quantitative terms. This mismatch gets multiplied in the current political system of Russia. Whereas the goals are set by the federal-level government, the regions carry the responsibility for the implementation of the massive changes according to their existing resources. Often the regions lack proper resources to implement the federal policy. At the same time, with this particular reform, the political pressure to implement the new principles – or to show good results concerning proceeding with the reform – is particularly high. In such situation, regional actors, who are in charge of executing the changes, play with the numbers and invent sometimes rather questionable strategies to imitate the institutional change. Sometimes this ‘massaging of numbers’ is more strategic, although this can be seen more as an unintended consequence of ‘good intentions’, competing interests, and contradicting rules.

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