A COMPETENT PARENT, A LOVING PROFESSIONAL:

A Case Study of Foster Parenting in Russian Children's Villages

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

The 2010s have witnessed increasing political and public concern over child and family-related issues in Russia, with child welfare and family policy being elevated to the top of the state's political agenda. The Russian conservative government has prioritised the protection of traditional family values and family as the mainstay of Russian society and thereupon introduced major policy and welfare reform programmes, one of which works towards deinstitutionalising the country's entire child welfare system. Building upon the idea of every child's right to a family, this child welfare reform aims at dismantling the existing system of institutional care for children, replacing placements in institutions with community and home-based, family-like forms of alternative care, including foster care. Service provider responsibilities are hence being transferred from the state to private and third sector stakeholders operating in the field of child and family welfare. Among these agents providing alternative care are the so-called Children's Villages. These Villages, as the name suggests, are largely NGO-run communities of foster families, caring for children left without parental care in a non-institutional setting.

This thesis takes a range of Russian Children's Villages as its case study in an attempt to investigate foster parents' perceptions of parenting and thus shed light on the present-day development of the alternative care system in Russia. The aim is to bridge together bottom-up narratives and top-down political ideology via qualitative analysis of micro-level constructions of parenthood and government-promoted ideas on family. The ongoing process of deinstitutionalisation of child welfare in Russia provides the larger political context for our inquiry that fosters a social constructionist approach and, through thematic content analysis, seeks to answer the following research questions: How do foster parents perceive parenthood/parenting in the context of Russian Children's Villages? How do their perceptions intersect with government-promoted ideas on family? The primary data consist of focus group and expert interviews with foster parents and child welfare professionals conducted on site in six Children's Villages in Russia in 2017. The altogether nine interviews, with a total of 58 respondents have been conducted by two other researchers in the 'A Child's Right to a Family: Deinstitutionalisation of Child Welfare in Putin's Russia' research project that our thesis is also part of.

Our findings suggest that parenting takes multiple, concurrent and reciprocal forms, whereby it is largely a cyclical process and a jointly constructed and negotiated experience in the social context of the Children's Villages. The Villages and the individuals therein are not merely care deliverers assuming service provision responsibilities from the public sector, but they carry considerable innovate potential and valuable ideas on family and parenting vis-à-vis the desired development of systems of alternative care in today's Russia. Yet, the political arena in Russia remains ambivalent, enabling and coercive at the same time, introducing policies that are often either contradictory or incompatible. Alongside ambitious liberal tendencies and reformist programmes we may observe illiberal and restrictive political and legislative processes that undermine the sustainable fruition of the more progressive reforms amid structures that hold onto authoritarian traditions. While the traditional value base of the conservative government fails to fully embrace the plurality of family systems in modern Russia, the family structures in the Children's Villages demonstrate that family diversity is very much a contemporary reality in Russian society – and foster families one of its emerging forms.

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 Kompetentti vanhempi, rakastava ammattilainen: tapaustutkimus sijaisvanhemmuudesta venäläisissä lapsikylissä

Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Venäjän poliittinen johto ja yleinen mielipide ovat osoittaneet viime vuosina kasvavaa huolta lapsista ja perheistä, minkä kautta lapsi- ja perhepolitiikka on nostettu valtion poliittisen agendan kärkeen. Venäjän konservatiivinen hallitus on priorisoinut perinteisten perhearvojen sekä perheen yhteiskunnan perustana suojelun käynnistäen merkittäviä lasten hyvinvointia koskevia uudistuksia. Yksi valtion suurimmista kärkihankkeista on lastensuojelun deinstitutionalisaatio, jonka keskeisenä ideana on jokaisen lapsen oikeus perheeseen. Lastensuojelureformi pyrkii purkamaan Venäjän massiivisen lastenkotijärjestelmän ja kehittämään sijaishuoltoa korvaten lasten laitossijoituksen perhehoidon eri muodoilla, jolloin palvelujen tuottaminen ulkoistetaan laajalti yksityisille ja kolmannen sektorin toimijoille. Yhtenä kolmannen sektorin tärkeimmistä sijaishuollon tuottajista toimivat niin sanotut lapsikylät. Nämä usein eri kansalaisjärjestöjen pyörittämät kylät ovat nimensä mukaisesti sijaisperheiden muodostamia kylämäisiä yhteisöjä, jotka tarjoavat perhehoitoa huostaanotetuille sekä orvoksi jääneille lapsille.

Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma pyrkii kartoittamaan sijaisvanhempien käsityksiä vanhemmuudesta venäläisissä lapsikylissä ja näin ollen valottamaan sijaishuollon kehitystä nyky-Venäjällä. Tapaustutkimuksemme tarkoituksena on myös tutkia missä ja miten alhaalta ylöspäin kumpuavat teemat vanhemmuudesta sekä Venäjän valtion ajamat perhekäsitykset risteävät. Laajemman kontekstin tutkimuksellemme muodostaa Venäjällä käynnissä oleva lastensuojelun deinstitutionalisaatio. Tutkimuksellisena viitekehyksenämme toimii sosiaalinen konstruktionismi, ja teemoittelevan sisällönanalyysin kautta pyrimme vastaamaan seuraaviin tutkimuskysymyksiin: Miten sijaisvanhemmat hahmottavat vanhemmuuttaan venäläisten lapsikylien kontekstissa? Miten heidän perceptionsa risteävät valtion ajamien perhekäsitysten kanssa? Tutkimusaineistomme koostuu sijaisvanhempien ja lastensuojelun ammattilaisen kanssa tehdyistä fokusryhmä- ja asiantuntijahaastatteluista. Haastatteluaineiston ovat keränneet kaksi muuta tutkijaa 'Lapsen oikeus perheeseen: Lastensuojelun deinstitutionalisaatio Putinin Venäjällä' -tutkimushankkeesta, johon tämäkin työ kuuluu, kuudessa eri venäläisessä lapsikylässä vuoden 2017 aikana.

Tutkimustuloksemme osoittavat, että vanhemmuudella on useita samanaikaisia ja vuorovaikutuksessa keskenään olevia muotoja, jolloin se on pitkälti syklinen prosessi sekä yhteisöllisesti rakennettu ja neuvoteltu kokemus lapsikylien sosiaalisessa kontekstissa. Lapsikylät ja niissä asuvat yksilöt eivät ole ainoastaan hoidon tuottajia, joiden tarkoituksena on ottaa palvelujen tuotantovastuuta itselleen julkiselta sektorilta, vaan nämä toimijat omaavat myös valtavan potentiaalin sekä arvokkaan ajatuspääoman sijaishuollon kehittäjinä Venäjällä. Tästä huolimatta Venäjän poliittinen kenttä näyttäytyy ambivalenttina, samanaikaisesti mahdollistavana ja rajoittavana, laatien poliittisia ohjelmia ja linjauksia, jotka ovat usein keskenään yhteen sovittamattomia tai ristiriitaisia. Kunnianhimoisten liberaalien tendenssien ja uudistusmielisen politiikan ohella näemme joukon illiberaaleja ja rajoittavia poliittisia sekä oikeudellisia prosesseja, jotka pitäytyvät autoritaarisen vallankäytön traditiossa ja näin ollen vaarantavat edistysmielisempien uudistusten pysyvän toteutumisen. Vaikka Venäjän konservatiivisen hallituksen perinteinen arvopohja ei itsessään vaali nyky-yhteiskunnan monimuotoisia perhesuhteita, lapsikylien edustamat perherakenteet osoittavat, että perheiden monimuotoisuus on osa tämän hetken todellisuutta Venäjällä – ja sijaisperheet yksi tämän todellisuuden kasvavista perhemuodoista.

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Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title – Название

Компетентный родитель, любящий профессионал: кейс-стади приемного родительства в Детских деревнях в России

Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract – Реферат

Начиная с 2010 г. в фокусе общественного внимания и внимания российского правительства оказались проблемы детей и семьи, при этом вопросы благополучия детей и семейной политики стали приоритетными политическими задачами государства. Правительство России уделяет приоритетное внимание сохранению традиционных семейных ценностей и защиту института семьи как основа российского общества. В связи с этим в сегодняшней России проходит крупномасштабная реформа политики государства по поддержке и защите семьи и детства, включая в себя деинституционализация детей-сирот и детей, оставшихся без попечения родителей. Основной идеей реформы является право каждого ребенка на семью. Таким образом, реформа направлена на перестройку существующей системы институционального ухода за детьми и вместе этого развитие семейных форм альтернативного ухода, включая приемную семью. На фоне этого процесса оказание социальных услуг передается от государства к частному и третьему секторам. К числу учреждений, обеспечивающих альтернативный уход, относятся так называемые Детские деревни. Детская деревня – это сообщество приемных семей.

При анализе рассматривается российские Детские деревни в качестве кейс-стади. Цель исследования – провести расследование восприятий родительства приемных родителей, и таким образом, пролить свет на развитие одной из форм альтернативного ухода за детьми в современной России. При анализе сочетается подходы «сверху - вниз» и «снизу - вверх», когда путем качественного анализа конструкции родительства на локальном уровне сравниваются с государственными идеями о семье и политическими идеологами на высшем уровне. Продолжающийся процесс деинституционализации защиты детей в России обеспечивает более широкий политический контекст этого исследования, которое способствует социально-конструктивистский подход и посредством тематического анализа стремится ответить на следующие исследовательские вопросы: Как воспринимают родительство приемные родители в контексте российских Детских деревнях? Как эти восприятия пересекаются с идеями о семье правительственного уровня? Материал данного исследования состоит из интервью с фокусными группами приемных родителей и индивидуальными экспертами по социальной защите детей, проводимых в шести разных Детских деревнях в России в 2017 году. Всего девять интервью были проведены двумя другими исследователями в исследовательском проекте «Право ребенка на семью: деинституционализация системы обеспечения благосостояния детей в путинской России», частью которого является также это исследование.

Результаты исследования показывают, что формы родительства множественные, параллельные и взаимодействующие. Следовательно, родительство является циклическим процессом и совместно построенной и согласованной деятельностью в социальном контексте Детских деревень. Эти Деревни и их жители не просто обеспечивают уход и берут на себя ответственность за предоставление услуг, но и имеют и значительный, инновационный потенциал и ценные идеи в отношении желанного развития систем альтернативного ухода за детьми в современной России. Однако, политическая обстановка в России остается двойственной – одновременно стимулирующей и принудительной, так как правительство проводит политику, которая часто является противоречивой и несовместимой. Наряду с амбициозными либеральными программами реформ существуют и нелиберальные, и ограничительные политические и законодательные процессы, которые подрывают устойчивость прогрессивных реформ на фоне структур, придерживающихся авторитарной традиции. В то время как традиционные консервативные ценности правительства не в полностью охватывают множественность семейных форм в нынешней России, семейные структуры в Детских деревнях демонстрируют, что разнообразие семей является современной реальностью в российском обществе, и приемные семьи – одна из его возникающих форм.

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1 INTRODUCTION

'Family is a structural unit of a stable, healthy society – the primary element of a solidary society. The preservation of nation, culture, language and state are all realised through the family, since it is precisely the family to which the mechanism of cross-generational transmission of experience is connected. Viewing this process from a distance, we may be able to call it by its proper name: tradition. Instead of being anything tangible, tradition acts as a link between generations serving a common cause.'

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow[1]

1.1 Overview

In the twenty-first-century Putin era, the Russian state has undeniably fostered a strong nuclear-family-centred ideology, with conservative underpinnings and policies saturated with traditional family values (Cook 2011, 14–15). At the same time, however, the country hosts one of the highest rates of orphaned children in the world in relation to its total child population, with 2.1% of all children in Russia living outside of parental care (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya 2017, 368–371, 381). In these conditions, Russian policymakers and other conservative social actors, including the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), alongside public opinion, have shown increasing concern over child and family wellbeing since the mid-2000s, with burgeoning attention being paid to child and family-related issues not merely in political rhetoric and public discussions, but also in the form of major policy and social welfare reforms introduced by the state (Kulmala, Rasell & Chernova 2017, 358–360).

Thus, family continues to prevail in the value base of official Russia, much like it has done in the past. Prioritising the protection of traditional family values and the social conservative institution of the family on the national political agenda, the government has placed the traditional heterosexual nuclear family with reproductive potential at the very centre of Russia's family policy in the 2010s (Kulmala & Tšernova, 2015). Yet, appreciating the changing family patterns in contemporary society, we ought to recognise that top-down-initiated constructs of an ideal family represent but one reality within an actual world of diversity and multitude of family structures across the globe and in

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[1] Our own translation from the original Russian (Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' 2017).

modern Russia. The official, conservative rhetoric in Russian political circles dubs family 'a basic unit of society', but what often remains overlooked is that this 'basic unit' is neither univocal nor stationary, rather a spectrum exhibiting great fluidity and a wide range of family systems and childcare arrangements.

The current plethora of domesticity indicates that foster care represents one of the emerging forms of family life and alternative care in today's Russia. Scholars use various terms to refer to non-institutional forms of care for orphaned children and children out of parental care, including alternative, custodial, substitute and out-of-home care. We have chosen to use alternative care as our umbrella term under which foster care – as a system wherein a child is placed with people who are not her own parents, but licensed foster parents – also falls. Now, foster families as a phenomenon are hardly new, however, the surge in the volume of alternative types of non-institutional and family-like care, including caring for foster children in community-based Children's Villages run by myriad non-governmental organisations (NGOs), is a relatively recent development within the contemporary Russian context, connected to the large-scale child welfare reform the country is currently undergoing (see, e.g. Bindman, Kulmala & Bogdanova 2018; Bogdanova 2017; Kulmala, Jäppinen & Chernova, forthcoming).

Russia has faced some turbulent times in the twenty-first century, with the bulk of international focus directed towards its economy, foreign policy and defence and security sectors. Yet, the domain of Russian social policy has remained somewhat under the global radar, despite it being permeated with much commotion over the last decade. The magnitude of changes in child welfare and family policy, for instance, has been significantly greater than the actual media or academic attention the twists and turns in these realms have received. One the major reforms introduced by the Russian federal government in the 2010s is the still ongoing process of deinstitutionalisation of child welfare that builds upon the idea of every child's right to a family, thereby striving to dismantle the mammoth system of institutional care for children by closing down orphanages and large residential institutions, developing forms of alternative care, promoting domestic adoption and creating more support services for families to prevent 'social orphanhood' (*sotsial'noe sirotstvo*) (Jäppinen & Kulmala 2015; Kulmala 2017; NSIC 2012). Due to the scale and recency of these reforms, their effects and consequences

are yet to be thoroughly reported and analysed, particularly in the regional and local contexts.

Child welfare and alternative care in Russia have long been neglected in academic inquiry, especially with respect to social policy-making under President Vladimir Putin. With our work as part of the international research project 'A Child's Right to a Family: Deinstitutionalisation of Child Welfare in Putin's Russia', hosted by the Aleksanteri Institute of University of Helsinki, we wish to contribute to the hitherto inadequate pool of knowledge on Russia's current child welfare reform and diverse forms of organising alternative care. The need to examine more closely the local and practical levels of implementation of the new national programmes for child welfare in order to build a comprehensive understanding of the modern evolution of the Russian welfare state is beyond dispute. Such bottom-up investigation is also vital, given the political economy of Russian regionalism wherein the federal government, whilst marked by authoritarianism that gives most reforms a top-down design, outlines national principles and objectives, whereas the onus of policy implementation falls on regional and local actors. In this connection, viewing the micro-level development of the Russian alternative care systems, where increasing emphasis is being laid on NGO-run community-based and family-like arrangements, as a concomitant process of the nationwide reform of child welfare policies and programmes, we deem it necessary to study in more detail the local-level stakeholders in child welfare, particularly the practical realities and perceptions of the foster parents themselves.

Today's Russia portrays an array of community-based alternative care arrangements for children, especially in the form of the so-called 'Children's Villages'. These Villages, despite being one of the main facilitators of the national objective of developing and increasing non-institutional care and thus contributing to the officially proclaimed decline in the total number of children out of parental care in Russia in recent years,[2] remain vastly unaccounted for in academic inquiry. The Children's Villages, to put it simply, are communities of foster families generally run by different civil society agents or third sector operators, namely, NGOs and nonprofits. In the Russian context, the families often reside in a particular area, forming a village-like community within a

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[2] According to official government data, the total number of orphans in Russia has been annually declining over the past six year (The Russian Government 2018).

town, city or municipality. The families in the Villages are provided accommodation – usually their own house – benefits as well as access to professional support services, including help from social workers, psychologists, and other child welfare experts. The core idea of the Children's Village operations is to provide long-term family-based alternative care for children without parental care contra residential child care institutions. According to Zhanna Chernova and Meri Kulmala (2018), the spatial localisation, social and community structures as well as the individual characteristics of the foster parents themselves, including relevant expertise and specialisation, are properties that render the Children's Villages distinct from other forms of non-institutional care for children.

The most internationally renowned Children's Village organisation is the SOS Children's Villages International founded in Austria in the late-1940s. Operating in some 135 countries across the globe, the NGO is the world's largest non-governmental organisation focused on supporting children without parental care and families at risk (SOS Children's Villages International 2018). The NGO has been active in Finland, among others, since the 1960s and began its work in Russia in the late-1980s, now running six regional programmes in the country (SOS Children's Villages Russia 2018). While the SOS Children's Villages continues to be one of the biggest actors in this field of child and family welfare, the overall spectrum of Children's Villages in Russia today is yet much wider, with dozens of such Village operations run by different civil society organisations now scattered across the country. Consequently, whilst the central idea of providing support for children and families in need via alternative forms of care – to wit, foster care for orphaned children – remains the same, the operational concepts and principles, along with the variety of activities and practical arrangements of care may vary from Village to Village rather extensively. It is likewise important to note that the Children's Villages are not a consequence of the ongoing deinstitutionalisation reform, but have been forerunners in the field of alternative care, providing community-based and family-like care solutions in Russia already prior to the most recent round of child welfare reforms (see, e.g. Bogdanova 2017).

Hence, this thesis takes a range of different Children's Villages in Russia as its case study in an attempt to investigate the characteristics of the phenomenon of foster parenting within these communities and thus shed light on the present-day development of the alternative care system in the country. The aim is to bridge together bottom-up

stories and top-down government ideology via qualitative analysis of micro-level perceptions of parenthood and government-promoted ideas on family. We foster a multilayered approach in our study, since understanding the mechanisms of the Russian welfare state and service provision therein requires one to recognise the tripartite separation of power in Russian society and acknowledge all three levels of governance in the country: the federal, the regional and the local. In fact, most of the welfare-related responsibilities in Russia are left in the hands of the regional governments and local actors, not the federal administration, whereupon the successes and failures in service delivery and policy implementation are best detected by going local, thus looking beyond Moscow and the Kremlin (Kulmala, Kainu, Nikula & Kivinen 2014, 547).

1.2   Research Questions, Aims & Findings

This thesis takes foster parenting in Russian Children's Villages as its case study, aiming to explore foster parents' perceptions and practices of parenthood/parenting in the local context of the Children's Villages, taking shape against the backdrop of a larger, ongoing process of deinstitutionalisation of child welfare in Russia. The primary data consists of semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with foster parents and child welfare professionals, conducted on site in six Children's Villages in Russia in 2017. The altogether nine interviews have all been done in the interviewees' native of Russian, recorded and then transcribed into some 250 pages of text. Two other researchers[3] in the 'A Child's Right to a Family' project have been in charge of organising the interviews and collecting the data, whereupon we have been working with the transcribed interview scripts.

While we make efforts to explain and understand the Russian state and its government's position vis-à-vis the family domain, primacy is given to the bottom-up narratives from the Children's Villages in our qualitative inquiry that fosters a social constructionist position. We have adopted thematic content analysis as our principal method for investigating the primary data. Recognising the jointly constructed nature of

our reality, while allowing both the data and the constructionist thought to yield structure to our analysis, we ask the following two questions from the primary data:

1. *How do foster parents perceive parenthood/parenting in the context of Russian Children's Villages?*
2. *How do their perceptions intersect with government-promoted ideas on family?*

The first question will be the navel of our analysis, steering analytical discussions in the latter part of the thesis, whereby Chapter 6 is wholly devoted to exploring the narratives from the ground up. The second question engaging both the local and state levels will be addressed in the subsequent Chapter 7 which ushers the discussion further into the macro–micro tensions in Russia. Whilst aware of the variety of exploratory approaches to examining non-numerical data, we have opted for thematic content analysis, considering the commonness of the method in qualitative research and its suitability for analysing both interview transcripts and policy documents (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick 2008, 429). Our social constructionist inquiry has identified seven major themes of parenting prevailing in the case study Children's Villages, details of which will be reported later on.

Our findings suggest a multitude of perceptions of parenthood arising from the Russian Children's Villages. These different forms and modes of parenting in the Villages can and do exist coevally, with the foster parents exhibiting multiple, parallel and interactive experiences of parenthood. The Children's Villages present a unique environment wherein the communities of parents jointly construct and articulate their collective experiences of shared parenting realities. We have also found that, while much individual and organisational agency lies within these collectives in Russian civil society, in the midst of the sweeping nationwide programme of reforms in the field of child and family welfare, local realities remain in constant negotiation with the largely authoritarian institution of the state that continues to operate as the dominant executive over all policy.

1.3   Relevance

Viewing from afar, it might seem more beneficial for any outside inquiry to focus on the foreign policy aspects of another country. After all, foreign affairs should matter the most for external onlookers of any state or political entity, correct? Perhaps not.

Observing Russia from the outside or as foreigners in Russia does not mean the mere study of its foreign relations vis-à-vis our given native country and the rest of the international community will suffice in bringing about a comprehensive understanding of it. Foreign policy is but one aspect of a country and alone seldom enough to explain state activities in the global arena, since no domain of politics exists in a vacuum from other fields of policy-making. Instead, there is always an interconnectedness between a country's foreign policy action and its internal state. In other words, the domestic affects the foreign and vice versa. Correspondingly, the Russian domestic sphere – in terms of policy and societal structures – should not be overlooked if and when the ultimate objective is to form a thorough comprehension of Russia, no matter if the researcher is an outsider looking in or an insider looking out.

Whilst Russian foreign policy remains an important field of research, the pre-existing scholarly focus on Russia's state-level action on the international stage is overbearing to say the least. Moreover, the concurrent fixation on the personage of the Russian President has translated into equally narrow and predisposed interpretations which, on too many occasions, have reduced the country into no more than an allegory of 'Putin's Russia'. While admitting both the historical significance and contemporary salience of the image of the Russian leader in relation to the country as a whole, we wish to avoid overemphasising this kind of strongman personification of Russia, since such a unilateral, often securitised, reading fails to encompass the intricacies and multilayeredness of Russian society. Needless to say, the state as an institution continues to occupy a central role in today's Russia, however, the locus of research need not reside within the walls of the Kremlin. Therefore, in any national or international context, an examination of political decision-making processes and policy formation should always be accompanied by the study of policy implementation and social praxis at regional and local levels.

Thus, we consider a qualitative micro-level inquiry into the practices, perceptions and concerns of foster parenting in Russian Children's Villages pivotal in accumulating our overall knowledge of Russia, since only via vigorous political, social and historical analysis covering as much ground as possible both horizontally and vertically can we begin to form a comprehensive understanding of the country. Research into Russian civil society actors and activities will undoubtedly enrich our understanding of the broader

political and democratic processes in Russia as a whole. Yet, there is only ever so much one particular study can achieve on its own in terms of encompassing the entire societal spectrum, which means that a truly holistic comprehension of Russia, or any country for that matter, effactually constitutes a mosaic of voices and interpretations. Knowledge is a patchwork – individual pieces of information sewn together to form a diverse whole. Yet, that quilt of knowledge is never finished, but forever riddled with holes and blank spots that need filling.

One of such research gaps may be found in the field of Russian family policy and child welfare, due to the recent and ongoing nature of the reform measures and programmes adopted nationally to facilitate the dismantling and deinstitutionalisation of the existing systems of child welfare in Russia. We believe that via studying these processes and analysing one of the emerging forms of alternative care in modern Russia we will be able to not only shed light on the contemporary face of the Russian welfare regime but also reveal some of the practical implications of the neo-conservative and family-oriented state ideology in relation to micro-level experiences of building foster families and communities. There is thus a reason why we have brought our disciplines of Social Work and Peace and Conflict Research together in this study and that is to produce in-depth socio-political analysis that will not only scrutinise the Russian welfare state, but also shed light on the nature of governance, democratic processes and the state–civil society relations in Russia particularly through the role and capability of the third sector and its agents amidst these trajectories.

We deem it necessary that parallel to quantitative, macro-level data and policy analysis focusing on the power and instrumentality of the state, the academic community continues to constantly produce qualitative information on micro-level manifestations that reflect the organisational, collective and individual agency of local actors. Descriptive first-person accounts and stakeholder analysis allow us to, not necessarily broaden, but deepen our scope of research and provide a more nuanced reading of our case studies than bare numerical data. True, individual case studies cannot yield universal generalisations or axiomatic truths, but the value of information acquired through individual human experience, whilst statistically feeble, rests in its explanatory potential of providing meaning to mere numbers. Therefore, it remains crucial that scholars across

the field of social sciences continue to employ both quantitative and qualitative methods of scientific investigation, which are inherently complementary rather than contrary.

Study of Russia, its history and society is hardly alien to the research community in Finland, and an inquiry into the Russian domestic should require little justification as such in Finnish academic circles. In many respects, Russia occupies a unique position vis-à-vis Finland and vice versa, as the two neighbouring countries share far-reaching historical, geographical and diplomatic ties, with today's Finland also hosting a significant and gradually growing Russian minority. We may observe that, for instance in the context of the Finnish social services, it has become a standard part of their day-to-day practice to work with Russian-speaking families and clients. What is more, a 2017 survey commissioned by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Embassy of Finland in Moscow to investigate the attitudes of Russians towards Finland clearly elevates questions related to child welfare and family law into an essential component of public diplomacy and nation branding amid Finnish-Russian bilateral relations (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2017).

Thus, despite our primary focus on the Russian side of the spectrum of family life and policy, the issues of child protection and welfare are, by no means, unknown to the Finnish public. As recently as in spring 2017, Anna Kuznetsova, the Children's Rights Commissioner of the Russian Federation, met with her Finnish counterpart, Tuomas Kurttila, in Helsinki to discuss potential avenues for cooperation in child-related issues as well as problems of disinformation and propaganda surrounding the child custody disputes that had previously sparked diplomatic polarisation between the countries. In the aftermath of their meeting, the representatives concluded in unison:

> 'We are happy to discern that the Representatives for Children and Youth in Russia and Finland have this opportunity to share constructive ideas and positive experiences. This is essential for maintaining mutual trust and interaction between [our] countries' (Anna … vizitom 2017).

In connection with this, we believe that, through our research on the topic, we are likewise able to both investigate and maintain such channels of communication, thus contributing to the reciprocal exchange of ideas, views and experiences between Finland and Russia.

Consequently, while not presenting a comparative study as such, we will continue to draw occasional examples from our native Finland to accompany our analysis of Russia.

1.4 Breakdown of Structure

Excluding the introduction, this thesis is divided into a total of six main chapters, accompanied by some concluding remarks and a bibliography. The study begins with a theoretical discussion on the key concepts central to our study, which include: parent/parenthood/parenting, foster families, professionalisation, family policy, family values and deinstitutionalisation.

Chapters 3 and 4 will then provide a wider background review that explicates the historical and political context of the Russian state along with Russia's child welfare system past and present. Ergo, Chapter 3 will focus on the nature and characteristics of Russian political power and governance, inter alia, authoritarianism, regionalism and conservatism, which explain the government's policy-action, while Chapter 4 centres on the structures of the country's child welfare system by examining child protection and the developments of alternative care, family policy, the deinstitutionalisation reform and the concept of Children's Villages in Russia.

These parts are followed by a discussion on our chosen methods of analysis in Chapter 5 which presents a more comprehensive description of our theoretical approach, methodology, primary data and case studies. By clarifying our social constructionist orientation and introducing the interview data and Children's Villages selected as our case studies, along with justifying our choice of the qualitative method of thematic content analysis, the chapter will guide the reader towards the primary analysis. The section finishes with some important ethical considerations.

Chapters 6 and 7 will cover our analysis of the primary data, thereby answering the two research questions established earlier. Chapter 6 will present the research findings to the reader, delving into the seven major themes produced by our thematic content analysis of the interviews. The chapter thus answers the first of our question concerning the foster parents' perceptions of parenthood in the context of the Children's Villages. The following Chapter 7 deals with the macro–micro tensions and relationship between the state and civil society in more depth, bringing together all previous sections on the

Russian Political and the study findings from the Children's Villages, whereby the chapter attempts to answer the second of our research questions apropos of points of intersection of government-promoted ideas and local perceptions.

Finally, the concluding chapter will summarise the results, recapitulating our findings and presenting our suggestions for further inquiry.

1.5   Division of Labour

The thesis has been completed as pair work, and, as a team, we have committed ourselves to sharing the workload evenly. From a teamwork perspective, we are in a fortunate position in that we have over twenty years of cooperative experience with each other, by which we have managed to polish our dyadic communication skills to perfection. Thus, dividing and balancing the tasks fairly and equally have come all but naturally to us, requiring relatively little negotiation. In fact, the research process, including the final stage of writing up the results, has been a symbiotic one in its entirety, with both of us contributing to each section. Whilst brainstorming the main points, outlining the structure and planning and editing the content of our thesis have, in theory, been a mutual exercise, in practice, we did have to allocate some separate responsibilities amongst ourselves, since no work needs to be done twice; therefore, we agreed that both of us had our portion of research, secondary sources review and writing to do. That said, we have been using an interactive online platform throughout the writing process, where, despite physical remoteness from each other, we have been able to edit the work in progress simultaneously, while communicating and sharing our ideas in real time. This method of online collaboration has enabled our proverbial symbiosis regardless of physical distance.

The split of of roles, whilst a line drawn in water, was essentially determined based on our individual strengths and expertise. In this way, Anniina has been the head writer of sections examining the larger political context in Russia, while Oona-Maaria has taken the executive power over the parts focusing on Russian family policy and the child welfare system. Nonetheless, we have consulted each other's notes and expertise in every occasion to maintain consensus. The chapters discussing the key concepts, methods and data as well as the main part of thesis, that is, the primary source analysis, have been written in tandem as they form the marrow of our study. Needless to say, the final editing

and proofreading of the work have likewise been collective efforts, aim of which has been to produce a final product that equals a two-woman job in its comprehensiveness, but appears to be written by one. Therefore, although concerning ourselves with unveiling the multiple voices of our research subjects, we wish to merge ours together, making it ultimately impossible for the reader to tell where the writing of one author ends and that of another begins.

All things considered and despite the fact that one of us comes from the discipline of Social Work, while the other majors in Peace and Conflict Studies, we identify ourselves as first and foremost a dual of researchers with a focused regional specialisation and a desire to contribute to the field Russian Studies which is where our nominally different degrees coalesce. Given that this is essentially a work in social policy reform, the child welfare system and the institution of the family in Russia, the theoretical connection to the field of Social Work is relatively easy to make. Yet, the discipline of Peace and Conflict Research presents an equally natural starting point to our inquiry, since the study of democratic and political processes and the macro–micro tensions, including everyday social conflicts, is at the very core of creating a broader understanding of the socio-political conditions and institutions that administer social justice, stability and welfare in society. It goes without saying that many of the broad themes of peace, negotiation, conflict and reconciliation are also as applicable and relevant in the domain of interpersonal relations at community level as they are in the study of inter-state affairs in the political arena (see, e.g. Quinn 2009).

Furthermore, our disciplines share an exploratory appreciation of civil society, its social agents and the bottom-up narratives that arise from third sector stakeholders – something that we will continue to honour in our thesis as well. In this connection, we see great potential in amalgamating our individual experiences, knowledge and educational backgrounds, whilst capitalising on the intellectual possibilities generated by our differing area concentrations. It could likewise be argued that the idea of multidisciplinarity permeating both of our degree programmes is concretised via our cooperation. Regrettably, we recognise the adverse Eurocentrism so often appearing within the academic tradition we reside in and thus consider it essential to steer the locus of research outside the Western world. Instead of adopting an exclusively top-down or state-centred approach, this study takes civil society and its active human agents and their

multiple voices as its point of departure. This unique inter-university collaboration annexed to the international nature of the 'A Child's Right to a Family' research project enable us to fully embrace not only integrated and holistic, but also innovative and policy-relevant ways of conducting research that hopefully echo through.

2   KEY CONCEPTS

In this chapter, we wish to elaborate on the following concepts we hold central to our analysis: parent, parenthood, parenting, foster families, professionalisation, family policy, family values and deinstitutionalisation. Besides reflecting upon the terms at an abstract level, the concepts will all be contextualised to fit the purpose of this study as to lay the groundwork for the discussions to come. Now, we accept that, ultimately, all conceptualisations remain equally debatable and conditional. Thus, what actually matters are our interpretations and understandings of the analytical tools and terminology we employ in our investigation of the given topic. While the commentaries in this section are far from exhaustive, the clarifications of the study's key terms are above all meant to foster comprehension that will both accompany and assist the reading of the entire study.

It often happens that the language we use to refer to family life and power structures within family relations lacks precision in popular discourse. While 'family talk' tends to recycle a rather limited (and ostensibly familiar) vocabulary, it is not uncommon that the words used to classify and determine family concepts remain vague at best, labile for the most part. Thereupon we may observe that popular notions about family systems, albeit mundane, are anything but uniform in meaning and interpretation that remain contingent upon historical, social and contextual processes. Thus, it is worthwhile to establish some definition to important concepts that recur in our text. Although theorising terms like 'parent' or 'family' might seem banal to the reader – after all, these notions are hardly learned borrowings, but very much part of our everyday lexicon – common words in everyday life often lack definition, whereupon their use as analytical concepts might, indeed, call for some clarification in order to avoid too much ambiguity and confusion – even at the risk of creating a bit more ambiguity as we go.

2.1   Parent – Parenthood – Parenting

Adapting from Jane Ribbens McCarthy Rosalind Edwards (2011, 141–145) suggested conceptualisations, this study uses the term *parent* to allude to a particular status or a category of a person of indeterminate gender, maintaining a special and enduring caregiver relationship to an individual child/ren. The status of a parent generates particular expectations in both the public and the private realms of performing parental responsibilities, that is, the legal rights, duties, authority and role of a parent in the care and upbringing of a particular child/ren. *Parenthood*, on the other hand, may be seen as referring to the identification process of individual adults (parents) and the institutionalised social form of the category 'parent'. *Parenting*, in return, covers the set of practices and actions carried out by a parent in relation to their child/ren. In simplified terms, the trichotomy of parent, parenthood and parenting may be summarised as follows: agent–institution–activity. Now, what ought to be remembered is that parenthood never exists in isolation from the wider societal structures; through social interaction and expectations as well as general provision of resources, the state and ambient society, plus one's surrounding community and immediate environment all have an explicit or implicit impact on individual parenting activities (Crockenberg 1998, 145).

Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (2011, 142) detect that contemporary political and professional discussions often prefer the gender-neutral terminology parent/parenting to the gendered terms mother/mothering and father/fathering. Yet, the writers express due concern over the use of the term parent in situations where its application might risk obscuring the way daily practices of caring for children in societies that lack in gender equality continue to be gendered (Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards 2011, 142–143). On the other hand, employing the term parent, as opposed to its gendered equivalents, in analytical discussions can be seen as means to avoid reproducing certain gender norms and stereotypes amid family structures. Whereas 'mother' and 'father' tend to predicate some form of division of roles and responsibilities within family systems, the preferred use of the term 'parent' makes no such assumptions. That being said, researchers must remain equally vigilant and sensitive to potential gendering of parenting, acknowledging situations where the gender of the parent does, indeed, play a significant role, e.g. in questions relating to the biological aspects of parenthood. For example, Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (2011, 142) annotate that, while it remains relatively easy to

determine the birth mother of a child, historically, it has not been that straightforward for a man to know if he is the father of a particular child and hence what his immediate parental responsibilities are.

Yet, the physical or biological processes of becoming a parent, albeit an elementary part of parenthood in general, are not of primary interest to us in this study. Instead, our focus remains on the perceptions and practices of foster parenting as they are socially constructed and conveyed in the Russian Children's Villages. Thus, in the light of this, we have made a conscious decision to primarily employ the gender-neutral terminology 'parent–parenthood–parenting' in our analytical discussions. Not only does the decision stem from our research objective to investigate the jointly constructed nature of foster parenting in general, but it also finds its basis on the observation that the first-person accounts of the foster parents interviewed for this study are not explicitly gendered or employ the gender-specific signifiers 'mother' and 'father' in a way that would suggest, for instance, a clear gender division of roles. While the interviewees mainly resort to the subjective case, that is, the first-person pronouns of either 'I' or 'we', they seem to favour the terms 'parent', 'parenthood' and 'parenting' whenever speaking at a higher level of abstractions. Of course, we have remained alert to the potential appearance of gendered notions about parenthood within the respondents' narratives and will employ relevant gender-specific terms in our analysis if and when it is deemed essential and explanatory. That said, in our review of the primary data, gender has not emerged as a distinguishing or predominant theme in the foster parent's accounts, whereby treating their stories as reflections of a collective experience of parenthood is justifiable.

2.2 Foster Families

Most societies typically perpetuate the general assumption that a child has two parents of different gender (Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards, 2011, 141–145). The traditional image of the family as a heterosexual unit consisting of a mother and a father (who are preferably married) and their (presumably biological) child/ren is generally referred to as either nuclear, elementary or conjugal family. While remaining the dominant portrayal of family life in popular and political discourse, the traditional nuclear family unit is hardly a fitting, let alone universal, representation of the modern twenty-first-century reality where evermore diversified family structures are gaining prevalence

(McHale, Khazan, Erera, Rotman, DeCourcey & McConnell 2002). The traditional image of the nuclear family as a procreative unit presents family as somewhat of a natural given (Gilbert 1999; Fox Harding 1999). In contrast, a broader and more flexible understanding of the concept of family appreciates that families themselves are essentially of social construct – meaning, they are manifested through language and realised via social interaction and practice – rather than objectively perceived biological systems, whereby the relationships, arrangements and roles they exhibit are dynamic, non-stable, contingent and largely dependent on a given historico-cultural context (Jagger & Wright 1999, 3).

What is more, the majority of children in today's contemporary world are, in fact, raised in families that challenge the traditional construction of a family as a unit of a mother, a father and their (biological) children; these family structures display diverse systems of kinship and co-parenting between various actors, including step-parents, foster parents, ex-partners, grandparents and other relatives, without forgetting extended family members, such as close friends or even neighbours (McHale et al. 2002, 75). That said, it might be useful to pause to ask what constitutes the basic elements of a family. It has been proposed that the family is:

> a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption; constituting a single household, interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, brother and sister; creating a common culture (Burgess & Locke cited in Gilbert 1999, 142).

Now, while we may agree that this definition fails to fully embrace the diversity and complexity of modern-day family systems, the characterisation does grasp one of the most crucial aspects of the concept of family: that it is essentially socially negotiated and constructed. The key element to take from this is that family is not a set or given state but very much a fluid existence contingent upon interpretation. The family then takes varying forms, some more common than others depending on society and culture, and one of today's myriad family forms is a foster family. Generally speaking, *a foster family* may be regarded as a consequence of actions carried out within and by the system of foster care, whereby a child who cannot be cared for by her biological parents or other family members has been placed in a home where the adults are state-certified caregivers, that is, foster parents. A foster family is often extended or blended in the sense that its

structures tend to include, in varying degrees of course, both biological and foster children as well as biological and foster parents.

The legal aspects of the foster care and parenting systems vary from national context to another, but in Russia, the foster parents have made an official contract with the local child protection services (CPS, Russian *opeka*), granting them legal custody of the child. Foster families are generally eligible for certain monthly subsidies and benefits in kind from the state. Russia's new legislation stipulates that all potential parent candidates must go through specific training to become licensed foster parents, and to qualify as parents, individuals are required to meet strict criteria, for instance, concerning their level of income and general housing conditions. (Kulmala et al. forthcoming, 17.)

One of the defining features distinguishing foster parenting from other forms of parenting, as suggested by Jeffrey Haugaard and Cindy Hazan (2002, 314), is the purported temporary nature of the foster parent–foster child relationship. Unlike most families, foster families are usually under constant supervision by the CPS authorities, by which they are expected to interact with the child welfare services and, quite possibly, the child's birth parents on a regular basis. What is more, foster parents may occasionally be seen as agents within the child protection system itself, which adds to the complexity of their role. In any case, parents of foster children often struggle with the inherent dilemma of their situation of how to provide adequate care without showing too much affection so that the caregiver relationship that is designed to be temporary does not grow too close but, at the same time, remains familial enough to positively affect the wellbeing of the child. (Haugaard & Hazan 2002, 314–318.)

Still, we may note that the Russian case presents a range of peculiarities when it comes to thinking about foster families and navigating parenting in the system of foster care. First of all, while the suggested provisional nature of the foster parent–foster child relationship tends to hold true in most contexts, in Russia, a child's placement with a foster family is generally regarded a long-term arrangement working towards a permanent solution – namely, adoption – rather than towards returning the child to her biological parents (Jäppinen 2018). The Russian conservative government, with its recently introduced round of family and child welfare-related reforms, including the ongoing deinstitutionalisation of care for orphaned children, seems to have come to an agreement

on what it considers the best possible environment for a child to grow up in, accompanied by some genuine endeavours – at the policy level at least – of working towards realising a prosperous childhood (*blagopoluchnoe detstvo*) for every child in the country (NSIC 2012). In the government's imagination, home-based and family-like care has become the desired model for arranging care for orphaned children and children left without parental care.

On that account, individual foster families and the NGO-run Children's Villages as communities of foster families providing alternative forms of care to traditional state-subsidised residential institutions have, in many respects, become the enablers of the government's policy objectives working towards long-term care arrangements in the family sphere. What is more, foster care, Elena Yarskaya-Smirnova, Dar'ia Prisniazhyuk and Ol'ga Verbilovich (2014a) suggest, gives means to a type of joint and several responsibility for the care and upbringing the child, as the system is based on the idea of collaboration between the foster family, social services and the state. While individual families or individuals within families are the primary caregivers, foster care remains a formalised system, whereby the presence of and link to child welfare and state authorities persist even when increasing responsibility for the delivery of care is assigned to the individual. Consequently, within the formal structures of the foster care system, foster families may be depicted as operating almost as if they were 'professional families', task of which is to raise and socialise the child, while creating a social environment and sense of belonging otherwise impossible to achieve in an institutional setting (Yarskaya-Smirnova et al. 2014a, 170–171).

Then again, a closer examination of the general discourse that dominates the sphere of Russian politics engaging with the themes of family, desired forms of parenthood and children's issues reveals some concerning properties. To begin with, it remains somewhat unclear – debatable at least – whether the ongoing institutional change in Russian child welfare truly is about a child's right to a family per se, or whether it concerns itself primarily with the promotion of state-induced ideology based on traditional family values and the normative concept of a nuclear family – points we will discuss in more detail shortly. Additionally, the prefix 'professional' attached to foster families is easily interpreted as more a reference to the financial and material assistance the families receive from the government for providing foster care for children and less

an attempt to improve parental competencies and the quality and consistency of support services for the parents to meet the children's varying needs of care and support. It is worth keeping in mind that, whether the children are biological or social orphans – the former refers to children whose parents are deceased and the latter denotes children whose parent/s are alive but incapable or unwilling to care for them – they are likely to experience special healthcare needs due their vulnerable position. This, in turn, may be seen as an indication that the foster parents should meet certain professional requirements to address child vulnerability accordingly.

Indeed, the somewhat regrettable dichotomy between the evident need for more professionalised and diverse forms of parenting, on the one hand, and the Russian state's adherence to promoting conservative policy pertaining to a traditional view of family and parenthood, on the other hand, demands further inquiry. As already touched upon, children taken into the foster care system rarely enjoy favourable circumstances in life; they are more likely to be furnished with varying degrees of disadvantages, from physical or mental disabilities to history of maltreatment, trauma and orphanhood, than fortunate experiences of a safe and stable childhood (Torres & Orfirer 2013). When these 'disadvantaged' children are placed outside residential institutions and with 'ordinary' families – usually in such large numbers that one family unit is forced to host multiple children from difficult backgrounds simultaneously – there is a growing risk of single families turning into 'micro institutions' that operate in isolation without any official status and with insufficient parental resources and competencies vis-à-vis the demanding needs of the children they are fostering. In this connection, it might be reasonable to suggest looking beyond the mere financial or material aspects of foster care as determiners of the parents' status as 'professionals' and see their professionalism as a sum of relevant skills, qualifications and high level of competence to deal with children's problems, aided by an adequate set of tools, resources and support services available to satisfy the manifold needs of both the children and the parents.

2.3   Professionalisation

According to Howard Vollmer and Donald Mills (1966), we are not randomly assigned from job to job, but whatever skills or knowledge we have acquired in one position, we carry to the next. When we become self-conscious of this continuity, we

begin to speak of a 'career', and to protect and enhance this continuity, we likewise start to develop social and cultural mechanisms, whereby we can call the personal internalisation one's skills and competencies the first instance towards *professionalisation* and the subsequent movement towards formalisation its culmination (Vollmer & Mills 1966). *Profession*, then, may be regarded as an ideal type of occupational institution – formalised, organised and licensed (Goode 1966; King 1966). Traditional approaches to professionalisation in health and social sciences often attach a specific cluster of characteristics to a profession, including autonomy; organisation; income; specialised training; service orientation; collectivity; status; formalisation; authority; professional culture; and social function and significance (Abbott 1988; Goode 1966; Greenwood 1966). Some scholars have also identified common elements of individuals' work identification to include: occupational title and associated ideology; one's commitment to task and particular organisation or institutional position; and significance for one's position in the larger society (Becker & Carper 1966).

The above readings suggest a rather canonical understanding of professionalisation that focuses on the formal and organisational, bureaucratic even, occupational structures of work and professional life. While there is undeniable utility in exerting the terms 'profession' (organised occupational category) and 'non-profession' (completely un-organised occupational category) when describing the characteristics of occupational institutions, William Goode (1966) prefers to employ the linear concept of 'professionalism' to the 'professional'–'non-professional' dichotomy whenever evaluating the degree of professionalisation of a certain occupation. Inasmuch as we view professionalisation as a scale where an occupation is placed and moves somewhere on a continuum between increased and decreased professionalism, the rigid 'either–or' juxtapositions – profession or non-profession, status or no status, licensed or unlicensed – indeed appear both insufficient and unsuitable for our analysis where formal occupational structures of foster parenting do not necessarily coincide with its level of professionalism or the parents' work identification. In this regard, Andrew Abbott (1988) has suggested professionalisation best understood through a system of professions that accentuates the link between a profession and its task. Abbott (1988) rejects the monopolisation and stagnation of the term profession, arguing that professions create their work and are created by it, whereupon we should resign ourselves from any firm

and formal definitions, since they are both dangerous and unnecessary, and accept the inter-professional, bipolar, changing and self-defining nature of professionalisation.

Still, if we look at the concept more closely in relevant welfare contexts, social work, for example, we see that the key features denoting professionalisation, as outlined by Idit Weiss-Gal and Penelope Welbourne (2008), are very much founded upon formalised structures of the profession, which include: the volume of laws and regulations that establish specific entrance criteria in obtaining the the title of the profession; the solidity of the knowledge base; professional autonomy to make decisions on the basis of one's knowledge and values without unnecessary external constraints; education; associations formed by organised representatives of the profession; ethical codes reflecting the standards, values and priorities of the profession; as well as prestige and remuneration received. This suggest that a certain trademark of exclusivity persist amongst particular professions. While formalisation per se is not necessarily an issue, it may render some adverse consequences. For instance, attempts at improving service quality and coherence by incrementing professionalisation may, in fact, result in inaccessibility. As regards this conjecture, Bob Maton (1988) has found that, where there might be a presumptive increase in the quality of a service as the level of professionalisation develops, a simultaneous decrease in its availability in society might occur. Credentialism, practice requirements and regulations, Maton (1988) continues, may lead to individual units of professional service gaining in quality, whilst services available to the general public risk a reduction in their overall quality and accessibility.

This takes us back to Abbott (1988) and Goode's (1966) understandings of professionalisation, amid which the formal occupational structures, albeit not entirely insignificant, are not the sole defining factors of one's professional life and identity. While the questions of professional status, organisation, authority and significance continue to carry their importance individually and socially, understanding professionalisation as operating more horizontally than as a hierarchy and being a changing, reciprocal and, in many respects, self-defining system allows much more leeway to its application. If we consider a person's applied skills and competencies (even if unlicensed), the level of difficulty of their work (even if not officially recognised as a profession), plus their own commitment to their task and self-expressed feeling of significance of their position in the larger society (even if merely referring to their

immediate surroundings and community) as adequate determinants of professionalisation as any of the more formal characteristics of a profession, then we may likewise broaden the professional base to include such occupational positions as, say, foster parenting.

That being said, thinking about foster parenting as a professional activity certainly carries a formal component, seeing that parental candidates in Russia – as in Europe in general – are vetted and required to go through specific training and have a licence to actually foster children. In their analysis of foster parenting in Russian Children's Villages, Chernova and Kulmala (2018, 49) propose professionalisation of care to be about parenting extending beyond the private confines of the family–locality nexus as if acquiring a public character and entailing a degree of, not necessarily institutionalisation, but formalisation. Parenting as a professional activity gains its formal element once care itself is predicated by a degree of third-party control and assessment, and parental competencies are viewed more as earned and/or received qualifications and certified knowledge rather than mere natural attributes (Chernova & Kulmala 2018). Yet, our findings, which will be reported later, suggest that foster parents, thus far in Russia, lack legal occupational status and official recognition of their professional qualifications for the job, whereby foster parenting remains very much a 'non-profession' in the public sphere. This, in turn, goes to show that, despite hopes to elevate the status of foster parenting to an official profession in Russian society, the professional attributes and identifiers assigned to foster parents, for the time being, arise from outside the formal occupational structures. We will continue this discussion on the proposed professionalisation of foster parenting in the upcoming analysis chapters.

2.4 Family Policy

According to Sheila Kamerman and Alfred Kahn (1978), *family policy* is a cluster of policies and measures, engaging both individuals and households as its targets. Family policies, as McCarthy and Edwards (2011, 84) perceive, cover government statements, goals and courses of action concerning the provision of welfare and distribution of goods that affect family lives, family resources and family forms, although their implications may permeate a wide range of policy areas. The writers caution that the relationship between family life and social policies outlined by the government remains equally complex and contested, as there seems to be no unanimity of conclusions about how

casual this relationship should in effect be and, comparably, what the appropriate extent of state intervention is (McCarthy & Edwards 2011, 84). Others have also detected common uncertainty in this area, maintaining that ambiguities in the view of the state in relation to family arise from the apparent, albeit discomfiting, need for the state to influence and control personal behaviour. Yet, different governments' positions on this issues, depending on the ruling political ideology, seem to veer between extreme authoritarianism and extreme laissez-faire (Fox Harding 1999, 123.)

On this account, Kamerman & Kahn (1978) suggest three alternatives for family policy: (1) *explicit family policy* which manifests a clear motive and goal of designing programs and policies directly and deliberately regarding the family; (2) *implicit family policy* which yields more indirect consequences affecting families, even though the initial actions and policies of the government had not been designed to address the family domain; and (3) *public policies* designed to offer support and alternative care for dependant and 'defective' family members, including orphans, elderly, disabled people and the homeless. This being the case, the writers acknowledge the evident dilemma that presents itself when family policy is defined in such broad terms, for such vagueness, albeit inclusive, translates into ambiguity, at which point the already fine line between family and social policy becomes even more obscure, making it seem like all governmental policy is essentially family policy. However, they make a valid point, suggesting that by raising issues related to implicit family policy and the unintended results of such policy-making we can uncover and examine a range of government activities and societies that formally deny having any kind of direct family policy agendas. (Kamerman & Kahn 1978, 3–4; 8–9.)

As Kamerman and Kahn (1978, 6-7) continue to propose, families are the primary transmitters of societal values and occupy one of the most important roles in terms of influencing children and acculturating them to new or preferred beliefs and attitudes. In other words, families of various size and form constitute one of the most significant and central institutions in society. This centrality, particularly in countries that profess a strong national identity and nation-building efforts, may translate into state use of the family as a model or metaphor for the nation (Gilbert 1999, 136–137). Consequently, appropriate family policy measures with a designed purpose are of great importance to the state and society, since by establishing a holistic, hopefully, healthy family–state

relationship that operates bi-directionally, both parties can begin to see the utility of the other as 'an agent of social change rather than an obstacle to it' (Kamerman & Kahn 1978, 6–7). Crucial to acknowledge is that, like any organism or organic system, families are not immutable, but go through changes and disorganisation throughout their life cycle, whether it is due to extraordinary and unexpected events or disruption of individual relationships on the course of everyday life (Zimmerman, Antonov, Johnson & Borisov 1994, 193). Especially many conservative governments may find this family fluidity difficult to appreciate, as they tend to support the image of family as a stable and secure social structure, whereby it is not uncommon for them to create family policies that seek to control and regulate (Fox Harding 1999; Gilbert 1999).

Now, in terms of family policy-making, distinguishing hot air from bonafide action plans is important, for the domain of family policy is especially 'prone to the use of rhetoric which is somewhat detached from reality by both government and pressure groups' (Fox Harding 1996, 212–213). '"Family policy" rhetoric', Lorraine Fox Harding (1996, 212–213) asserts, 'is a convenient smokescreen or camouflage for other things'. Indeed, child and family policy-making is hardly a stranger to political programmes and initiatives that have their ultimate objective in something else entirely than family wellbeing, even if purposely masked with 'family' rhetoric. Government family policy and state action in the field of family welfare may have sporadic and ambiguous, even unintended, effects in the everyday praxis of family life. Yet, it would be misleading to suggest that the state's role vis-à-vis the family is simply one of control and coercion. Such an assumption, Fox Harding (1996) recognises, often stems from treating policy-making as an ideologically rather than empirically based activity. Although being 'value-free' is rarely the desire of any politician per se, policy action that would mete out more value to empirical evidence and the reciprocal family–state relationship would ultimately function as means to consolidate the state actors supportive and enabling, rather than repressive, role in relation to family life. (Fox Harding 1996, 228–229.)

As inevitable as the changes in the structures and composition of families are, the responses generated by family transformation are often varying in nature and scope. According to Kamerman and Kahn (1978, 12–15), those who actively seek change view the process of diversification of family functions and roles as promoting equality as well as substantially improving the wellbeing of families, as individual aspirations and

everyday realities become increasingly factored in policies appreciating diverse family forms and their growing adaptability. Comparably, those who view family policy as means to maintain the status quo, profess anxiety and an adversarial attitude towards changing family compositions, as the family as an instrument of traditional socialisation and social control begins to lose its significance, while the changes that occur are increasingly construed as disintegrating family patterns and the very institution of the family itself (Kamerman & Kahn 1978, 6–7, 12–15). The latter position is that of most conservative governments which generally adhere to values promoting traditional ideas about family, parenthood, marriage and sexuality that they see as functioning to support the stability and continuation of society (Fox Harding 1999).

All things considered, family policy remains a unique terrain of social policy due to its location in the intersection of the private and public spheres, while intrinsically coalescing with other political domains, including education, health, demographic and gender policies (Kravchenko 2008, 34, 37–38). This makes family policy a highly attractive and crucial field of policy for state authorities seeking to intervene in the private lives of their citizens, as Zhanna Kravchenko (2008) suggests, since it provides them the best possible means to penetrate the realm of individual agency directly and thoroughly. The family policies of any given government, while nominally concerning themselves with all but family welfare, are also deeply invested in a particular set of values determined by the social actors holding political power in society. Therefore, family policy analysis should always be accompanied by some analytical thoughts on family values which shape family discourse and steer policy-making for specific reasons and in specific contexts (Gilbert 1999, 141).

2.5 Family Values

Values, to put it simply, are a set of common ideas and ideals considered important by an actor or a social group. As such, they may be understood in an Aristotelian sense as a shared agreement of something's worth in term of something else, ergo, what is deemed just and unjust, useful and harmful, right and wrong by a collective (Chilton & Schäffner 2002, 1–2). Values are often taken as all but synonymous with *beliefs*, which is not necessarily something that needs to be challenged in every occasion. However, a few critical distinctions between the two should be established here as to make our

interpretation of values more intelligible to the reader. Karl Scheibe (1970) renders an extremely useful commentary on this, propounding that belief statements answer to questions of fact, referring to what is possible, what exists, what happened in history, what a person is and what they can do, while value judgements answer to questions of value, referring to what is wanted, what is best, what is desirable, what is preferable and what ought to be done. The former are thus framed in terms expectancies, hypothesis, probabilities and assumptions, whereas the latter suggest an operation of wishes, desires, goals, passions, valences and morals (Scheibe 1970, 41–42).

What is more, Scheibe (1970, 43) delineates a crucial distinction between the standards and veridicality of beliefs and values, noting that, whilst beliefs often use external criteria of reality in the form of 'true and false' statements, the standard of values is not that obvious, for values can be disputed, but rarely in terms of their factual accuracy. In fact, rather than making discernible attempts at objectivity, values tend to be – more or less visibly – connected to the preference patterns and ideology of different social actors and groups, upon which they remain alterable, limited and conditional (Scheibe 1970, 51). Furthermore, talking about primary and secondary values, Scheibe (1970, 52) makes a valid point about the bi-directional and largely interactive nature of values, by which originally unvalued items may become valued by association with items already valued. For example, in instances where population growth has been made a major government priority, areas such as the family which have theretofore remained private domains may suddenly become important public concerns.

Consequently, *family values* typify the demarcation of conceptual boundaries in terms of what constitutes a family and how family as an institution should be, what is the moral or social value families produce and which kind of families are worthy of support – quite possibly at the expense of others. Jill Jagger and Caroline Wright (1999, 1–2) suggest 'family values' being something of 'a catch all, cure all phrase in contemporary social life', as a result of which the adjacent attempts to define the term are anything but unequivocal, not to mention precise, but rather vary significantly according to the political and ideological objectives of the actors involved in their conceptualisation. At the very core of the debate around family values are the contemporary changes in family life, gender roles and household compositions and their perceived consequences to society in general (Jagger & Wright 1999). The evolution and fragmentation of these domains is

often treated in negative light as something that allegedly jeopardises the pre-existing social order by the official defenders of social conservatism and the so-called 'traditional' or 'conservative family values', who see the family as a natural unit of human social organisation and, as such, a stabilising cornerstone of society (Fox Harding 1999; Gilbert 1999).

According to Fox Harding (1999, 123), the main concerns of the 'family values' position for conservative governments usually constitute: stable marriage and childbearing; a gender division of roles; the confinement of sexuality to the permanent married heterosexual unit of the nuclear family; and the support of these patterns through government policy. Fox Harding (1999) identifies three essential thematic focal points of conservative family policy: parenthood, marriage and sexuality, ideals and institutions of which the policies aim to define and support. The conservatives, in theory at least, appear to have an appetite for increasing parental responsibility and authority, encouraging motherhood, strengthening and revitalising the institution of permanent marriage as well as normalising heterosexuality at the expense of other sexual identities and orientations. Yet, in practice, the conservative programmes may exhibit inconsistent policies and conflicting results versus their nominal objectives, for instance, by sustaining social structures and legislation amid which divorce is made an easy undertaking and abortion readily available or by failing to provide enough material and social resources, e.g. child support, to make parenthood seem like a desirable option. (Fox Harding 1999, 126–127.) This, of course, goes to show that even policymakers, such as the Russian conservative government, portraying a pronounced political ideology supposedly supporting 'the traditional institution of the family' remain somewhat ambivalent in their relation to the family which remains a hybrid of public concerns and private matters.

Paul Gilbert (1999, 136) has detected that 'much nationalism draws on metaphors of family which is seen as exemplifying the relationship of members of a nation in miniature'. If we consider nation-building as a political strategy to give the population of a state a sense of being a single nation with a cohesive value base and a sense of belonging to one particular state (Kolstø 2005, 8, 19), then we may appreciate the suggested functional relationship between the idea of a nation-state and the family. Gilbert (1999) talks about a specific liaison between right-wing politics – usually standing for social conservatism in some form – and family values that presents family as a 'natural state'

with supposedly 'naturally given' (most times understood as biological) ties and loyalties between members, which translate into natural ties of loyalty between compatriots. The relationship between family and nation becomes thus a natural given as well, and in this view, the heterosexual nuclear family remains the only viable family form as it is the sole natural procreative unit. Gilbert (1999, 137–141) sees the political use of family as a model for the nation as means to legitimise the state and gather its citizens' loyalties by presenting a compound notion of the family/nation as if it were something pre-scientific and pre-political, a naturally arising and inherited national character, not shaped by the state – albeit used by it. Still, whilst governments may present family as a natural fact, the values around it are always socially constructed by those agents who hold political power in society and who shape and transmit these values via family discourse contingent upon specific objectives, ambitions and contexts (Gilbert 1999, 140–141).

2.6   Deinstitutionalisation

As a common global phenomenon witnessed in a number of welfare states across the world over the past half a century, *deinstitutionalisation* of care can be defined as a process of replacing long-term stays in residential institutions with alternative forms and systems of care. Deinstitutionalisation of child welfare then typifies a long-term societal trend wherein fewer children reside in public institutions.

Community-based care units of a smaller scale and, for instance, foster families can be seen as alternatives for traditional institutional care, and scholars affirm that family placement instead of placement in institutions is generally identified as the focus of a deinstitutionalisation reform (Schmidt 2009). Yet, as Richard Lamb and Leona Bachrach (2001, 1039–1042) uphold, the concept of deinstitutionalisation extends far beyond mere measures of downsizing or closing down institutions; it is as much about creating and developing alternative forms of care that are realistic and sustainable as it is about changing the locus of care. Joseph Reid (1974, 295) also emphasises the evident need for pragmatic planning of sensible care alternatives before hastening to 'burn down existing institutions', especially when it comes to reconfiguring child welfare. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that, for some children, well-structured residential treatment programmes and institutional care are the only viable option, whereby we should be wary

of the paradigm according to which all institutions are unequivocally bad and that foster care alone could and should be enough (Ainsworth & Hansen 2005, 198; Reid 1974, 296).

Those sceptical of the institutional change have aimed to protect the existing system of institutions claiming, inter alia, that most of the patients or children living in institutions could never make it 'outside' (Bartenev 2005). The main arguments opposing deinstitutionalisation, as Dmitri Bartenev (2005, 7–8) recounts, maintain that, not only is deinstitutionalisation a movement which suffers from inadequate planning, supervision and insufficient care programmes, but it also sustains a community-based care system that is neither cost-effective nor resource-efficient. Similar to their opponents, the supporters of deinstitutionalisation have also adopted an economic approach, although bringing some social elements to the debate along with it. According to these advocates, the fiscal burden and costs of institutional care are at least as high as in community-based care – if not even higher – whereas the quality of life of the patients, children and people discharged into the community tends to be substantially better than that of those remaining institutionalised. (Bartenev 2005, 8–9; Brown 1985, 171–172.) Alongside cost-efficiency, the potential reduction of stigma and improved possibilities to foster social inclusion have been used as arguments to justify the deinstitutionalisation trend in care services (Bartenev 2005, 9).

At a more conceptual level, deinstitutionalisation provides an opportunity to articulate new kinds of understandings of institutions in general and of people residing in them in particular. In practice, this means shifting the focus from discussing the needs of institutionalised people onto considering their rights (Bartenev 2005, 12). Kelley Johnson and Rannveug Traustadóttir (2005, 17) manage to capture the complexity of the issue of deinstitutionalisation as they hypothesise whether we are witnessing a more fundamental shift in the way we, in fact, perceive and construct images of people living in institutions in addition to mere mechanical or practical changes in service arrangements and provision. While the intentions behind the initial creation of systems of residential care and the establishment of institutions for children in need, the mentally ill or the disabled were likely benevolent and utilitarian – not to treat these people merely as objects to be locked away and 'stored' – in retrospect, it is quite clear that there were some obvious defects in the early systems of care; altruism, albeit a motive for some, was not the only driving force fueling institutionalisation, but in many an occasion, people with disabilities

were effectively excluded and segregated from the larger community, whereupon 'people on the outside' did not have to concern themselves with 'people on the inside' whose existence could very well be forgotten by rest of society. (Freyhoff, Parker, Coué & Greig 2013, 16.)

Therefore, it worth considering Victoria Schmidt's (2009) suggested measures for successfully achieving deinstitutionalisation of child welfare as well as a better care system for children in general. Schmidt (2009) makes special reference to Russia when she proposes that, in order to be durable, a deinstitutionalisation reform must address the following three tasks: (1) prevention of orphanhood that includes intervention with biological families at risk, fight against poverty and prevention of secondary (social) orphanhood; (2) development of alternative care forms, particularly family placement and kinship care; and (3) humanisation of the institutions, that is, providing dignified, rights-based care and de-stigmatising institutionalised children. Echoing some of the points already made, the successful completion of the process of deinstitutionalisation thus requires a comprehensive and holistic approach from the reformers, appreciating societal interconnectedness and the need for multilevel cooperation between state authorities, child welfare experts and specialists as well as regional and local stakeholders. Mere shutdown of institutions and public sector downsizing do not suffice, but change must occur within the system itself, its practice culture and perceptions as well as in public attitudes in general. (Schmidt 2009).

3   MACRO: THE FACE OF RUSSIAN POLITICAL POWER

This chapter will considers some of the historical and political implications of state–society relations in Russia, to wit, the nature and grasp of Russian political power and the trichotomy of governance peculiar to the country. Addressing the multilayeredness of Russia and the defining features of its centralised and conservative political culture allows us to set the larger political context for our study. Despite the principal focus of our analysis orienting towards the micro level, no comprehensive or convincing study of any social phenomenon can exist in a vacuum, separated from the larger political structures and atmosphere in a given society – and the case of Russia provides no exception. Thus, we believe it useful to begin our inquiry from the top and gradually descend towards the bottom where our primary case studies reside. This

approach appreciating the multilayeredness of Russian society, which ought to be seen as operating at three different levels: federal, regional and local, will enable us to set the larger political framework in which to place our primary data. By no means are we making an attempt at comprehensiveness, rather we shall trace some of the key characteristics and desires of the Russian state and its political agents vis-à-vis society and social welfare.

We will address the following three characteristics of the contemporary Russian state: authoritarianism, regionalism and conservatism. These areas are central to our study because: first of all, the very child welfare reform in Russia has been marked by its 'top-down' imposition – a standard of activity typical for an authoritarian regime amid which the state dominates policy-making. Second, while the federal centre does indeed introduce policies, outlining their national objectives, it is the regions themselves that are left responsible for implementing the reform programmes, competing with one another for the centre's attention, resources as well as the result. Also, the process of deinstitutionalisation of child welfare entails that the delivery of social services is outsourced to the third and private sectors, agents of which operate mainly regionally and locally. Third, the traditional value base for Russia's current child and family policy comes from the political imagination of a conservative government. The rise of traditional family values and social conservatism have stirred the increasing concern over child and family-related issues, redefining government priorities and thereby fuelling the initial introduction of new policies and reforms in the field child and family welfare. Hence, it is only by understanding the political makeup of Russia – understanding how the country is or is not ruled and what the guiding principles of society as imagined by those holding political power are – that we can begin to comprehend policy-making and formation, the welfare state as well as institutional and social practice in the country.

3.1 Russian Authoritarianism

Now, it is certainly an abiding challenge to condense the ideological core of any political order into no more than a few words. However, as many would and have argued, such recurrent descriptions as 'autocratic', 'authoritarian', 'patrimonial' and 'imperial' have persisted through time and history as the watchwords of Russian state organisation (Pipes 2005; Lynch 2005). These peculiarities of Russian political rule and system do not

make the country an 'exceptional' case per se, yet, scholars have observed a historical pattern of chronic failure of the Russian state to evolve from a private apparatus to a truly public institution fostering a positive development of functioning societal dynamics (Pipes 2005, 181; Ruutu 2017, 1161). This, in turn, has translated into systematic efforts, most recently, by the post-Soviet political authorities to establish a centralised power vertical and re-consolidate great constitutional powers of the president (Brown 2004; Gel'man 2017; Sakwa 2004; 2015). The modern Russian state – much like its Tsarist and Soviet predecessors – occupies a central and seemingly autonomous position vis-à-vis the nation, with the president as its embodiment protecting 'the Russian mentality and values' (Ruutu 2017, 1157–1158). In this distinctly top-down system, the interests of the state prevail over the interests of the people in all policy domains, including social and family policy.

Pål Kolstø (2005) recapitulates the kernel of Vladimir Putin's first rudimentary political programme as president of Russia and his vision for the country at the turn of the millennium; the new Russian leader wished to revive his country and see it prosper via a three-point strategy: a strong state, an effective economy and 'a Russian idea'. The latter refers to a distinction made between 'universal values' – which in Kolstø's (2005, 1–3) view might be more aptly described as 'values normally associated with Western-style capitalism and liberal democracy', including free-market system and freedom of speech and movement – and 'primordial, traditional Russian values', such as patriotism, *derzahvnost'* ('great-powerness'), *gosudarstvennost'* ('stateness') and *sobornost'* ('togetherness') or social solidarity closely connected to the idea of state paternalism, amid which the state caters the nation. In the course of the 2000s, this gradually intensifying statist rhetoric has amalgamated with increasing political, societal and media anxiety about family life in Russia and an alleged 'demographic crisis' in the country that have resulted in pronatalist and conservative discourses in family policy that place the family as the basic unit of society (Kulmala 2017, 6; NCFP 2014, 9).

In the context of the 'Russian idea' or 'Russian way', Petr Panov (2010, 92–93) contends that the value of statehood enjoys a special significance in twenty-first-century Russia, upon which the notion of democracy, for instance, has taken a backseat to concepts of unity, accordance and consolidation in presidential addresses. Consequently, it is principally through these value-based imageries that Russia today is being portrayed

by the Kremlin that perceives the nation as an entity consolidated around the state (Panov 2010, 93; Ruutu 2017, 1155). In this relation, Richard Pipes (2005, 9) explains Russia's abiding 'autocratic tendencies' partly via an equation, according to which the stability and liberty of a country stand in inverse relation to its size and external security, whereupon the larger a country and the more insecure its borders, the less it can afford the luxury of popular sovereignty and civil rights and the more it tends towards centralisation of power. As such, the state-centeredness of contemporary Russia, albeit maintaining a strong future-orientation, has largely historical, cultural and partly geographic roots and is therefore not merely a twenty-first-century convention.

The system that modern Russia inherited from the Soviet Union – which itself had once seized one of the largest empires in the world – was that of extreme centralisation of power. At the dawn of the new communist rule, Victor Chernov (1929) already baptised the infant Soviet state a regime of 'caste autocracy by a party' or 'oligarchical absolutism' amid which Moscow as the centre of command of the Soviets' political machinery sought to maintain a stranglehold on the Republics via a system of governance with virtually no political competition. Consequently, the welfare state that the Soviets built was sustained by a pervasive one-party-controlled system of welfare provision that functioned to secure the acquiescence of society to the leadership's authoritarian political controls more than it did to ensure the citizens' social wellbeing (Cook 2007, 31–32). Thus, despite attempts to modernise society, the Soviet state, in many respects, ended up inheriting several of its characteristics from the Tsarist Russian Empire, including the tradition of autocracy. In an equivalent manner, the post-Soviet Russian state, after attempts at democracy and rapid liberal reforms in the 1990s, has followed a largely authoritarian path during the past two decades, which Lilia Arakelyan (2017, 49) observes a Russian tradition of destroying the old to build the old.

Still, Kulmala (2017, 6) notes that, while the 2000s brought about a statist turn in Russian social policy as well, thinking about the welfare state and social services in Russia has, in fact, evolved to and fro since the collapse of the Soviet Union; the Russian welfare state has experiences shifts from wide liberalisation in the 1990s back to state-led welfare policy in the 2000s and again towards new ideals of care in the 2010s, including a paradigm shift in child welfare policy facilitating the deinstitutionalisation and reorganisation of the care of orphaned children. That being said, while the ongoing

reforms are neoliberal in terms of entailing state willingness to engage third sector bodies and local operators in regional cooperation (NCFP 2014, 22; Decree 481 2014), the Russian government continues to assume primary authorship of social policy, defining the core values and objectives of national programmes and strategies, whereupon the interests and ideology of the state predominate in policy documents. The deinstitutionalisation trend is accompanied by political advocacy for childbearing and parenthood as well as the preservation of traditional family values and the heterosexual nuclear family, making Russia's family policy, in effect, a hybrid combination of liberal and paternalistic discourses (NPRWO 2012; NSIC 2012; NCFP 2014).

Considering some of the practical realities of the Russian state, whilst an empire no more, present-day Russia remains the world's largest country in total area. Due to its sheer size, Russia continues to carry a gamut of 'serious natural disabilities' that thwart its overall horizontal development – socially, economically and politically (Brodin 2003, 21–22; Crummey 1987, 1; Etkind 2011, 22). Hence, despite attempts to democratise the political regime and introduce a plethora of socio-economic reforms and initiatives over the past quarter-century, the Soviet legacy of central planning and concentrated decision-making system persists in Russia; poor distribution of labour and capital, economic polarisation as well as asymmetrical development of social and political conditions continue to plague the country and hinder the de facto actualisation of attempts to efficiently and thoroughly marketise and liberalise the economic and social sectors (Gaddy & Hill 2003; Gel'man & Starodubtsev 2016; Lankina 2009; Zubarevich 2009).

It is true that the turbulent 1990s witnessed Russia's 'opening up to the world', with the new federal government expressing political will to Westernise, democratise and bring about a market reform in Russian society under the post-Soviet Yeltsin 'regime of transition' (Sakwa 2004). However, we may observe a gradual shift towards 'a regime of consolidation' in twenty-first-century Russia where the pursuit of political stability and statism as well as the restoration of the centre and power vertical have maintained their prevalence under President Putin's each respective term (Gel'man 2016; Gel'man & Starodubtsev 2016; Sakwa 2004; 2015). Thus, with the consolidation of the political regime and recentralisation of the government as the cynosure of state agenda, the Russian experience in the 2000s may well be described as more a case of authoritarian

modernisation than democratisation, regardless of ambitious programmes to marketise and privatise the economic and social sectors (Gel'man & Starodubtsev 2016).

That being said, some of the reforms have been followed through, but with varying results. For example, recent studies on Russian civil society development show that the Russian government has made attempts to engage third sector cooperation within its welfare reforms – a trend familiar to many European governments – fostering opportunities for state–NGO collaboration and consultation in, for instance, social service provision and policy-making and implementation (Bogdanova, Cook & Kulmala 2018, Kulmala et al. 2017; Tarasenko 2018). At the same, however, the state continues to restrict civil society activity in the country via legislative acts such as the 'foreign agent law' that require NGOs that receive overseas funding and engage in 'political activity' to register as foreign agents, thus subjecting them to increased government control (FLFA 2012). Hence, scholars are yet to agree whether the third sector welfare engagement efforts are a statist attempt to keep the Russian civil society operators in check or a genuine endeavour to improve the performance of the social sector (Bogdanova et al. 2018).

Also, while socially oriented NGOs, as noted by Kulmala et al. (2017, 361–363), have had a significant expertise input on the design of several national programmes in the field of child and family welfare in Russia in recent years, 'family talk' on the government's agenda as well as family-related issues in social policy continue to be framed in pronatalist, statist and conservative terms (Kulmala et al. 2014; Kulmala et al. 2017). The final policy-making remain in the hands of the federal centre that delineates national concepts and objectives, frames the official family discourse and decides which policy proposals are seen through and enacted. Consequently, stimulating birth rate, protecting children, perpetuating 'traditional family values' and 'family as the basic unit of society' have become the guiding principles of Russia's child and family policy, working towards continuation of the nation, and with its consolidation, the preservation of the state as well (Panov 2010; Putin 2013).

Viacheslav Morozov's (2012, 21–24) prognosis on the prospects of transformation (or stagnation) of the Russian political system in 2012 still holds true in many respects; unreformed political system means unreformed economy, usually

accompanied by a restricted space for civil society, and the search for stability is traditionally done at the expense of reform. Now, whether in spite of or due to this realisation, establishing an effective economy has persisted as a state priority for Russia since the turn of the millennium. Alongside the country's economy, the Russian governments have increasingly prioritised social and family issues since the mid-2000s elevating welfare reforms to the top of their domestic agenda (Kulmala et al. 2017, 358). Yet, the country continues to face dire challenges in both sectors that the top-heavy Putin administration has hitherto failed to resolve, e.g. in terms of horizontal equalisation, thereby proving Morozov's speculations, at least partly, accurate. Allen Lynch (2005) has presented a similar juxtaposition, although he sees the apparent tableau of times of troubles in Russia's post-communist transition less pertinent to the relative success or failure of Russian 'democratisation' or 'marketisation' than to the profound shock that has been administered to Russia by the previous failures of the state to function. The capacity of the state to govern thereby correlates with the administration's ability to foster economic, social and political reform (Lynch, 2005, 2–5).

Be that as it may, Richard Sakwa (2004, 23) argues that the 'politics of normality' adopted in the immediate aftermath of the revolutionary upheaval of the post-communist 1990s endeavoured to consolidate the regime rather than democracy itself. Archie Brown's (2004, 13) presents a similar analogy saying that for Putin, strengthening the state has been a higher priority than strengthening the democratic process in Russia. This statist reading remains accurate for what now appears to be maturing into almost two decades of the Putin regime. In many scholars' view, President Putin's extended period in power has generated but a shallow transition to democracy and the rise of increasingly patrimonial forms of governance in Russia (Evans 2011; Ruutu 2017). This, in others' interpretations, has translated into restoration efforts of what can only be characterised as semi-authoritarian government, or 'managed' or 'guided democracy', with strong elements of political centralisation and the ruling elite aspirations to reverse the horizontal leakage of sovereignty from the centre to the provinces by building pyramids of power, upon which political processes within the country can be manually controlled (Gel'man 2016; 2017; Sakwa 2004; 2015).

On this, Katja Ruutu (2017, 1158) notes that the Russian concept of 'sovereign democracy', which was still in common use in the mid-2000s, has all but lost its potency,

with the word democracy more or less vanishing from official discourse, thus leaving a greater focus on sovereignty alone. Meanwhile the Putin administration has been dismantling the elementary structures of democracy, replacing them with an approach to politics that curbs both competition and diversity in government, aiming at the idealisation of the centre's political goals and the personification of the country's political institutions (Ruutu 2017, 1156). In this connection, Pipes (2005, 179–180) reminds us that, especially in the Russian context, the state cannot and has never be viewed as separate from the person of the ruler; instead, the state–ruler nexus has historically been taut, with the country's leader never merely occupying a ceremonial post at the top, but always personifying the principal authority and disseminator of official values. Consequently, it is precisely the Russian president – Putin and Medvedev respectively – who, through his presidential addresses, has become an important mouthpieces for defending traditional family values and stirring policy action in the child and family welfare sector (Kulmala et al. 2017, 358–360; Putin 2006; 2013).

The president does indeed enjoy persistently high approval ratings (Golos 2018) and, as such, remains an important authority figure and value disseminator in today's Russia. Some have suggested that, the time for a systematic and institutional change in Russian social policy is more fruitful now than ever; the effects of globalisation and increased exposure to foreign ideas along with an improved economic situation (at least compared to the beginning of the new millenium) have brought about a gradual shift from the centrally planned economy of the Soviet times towards a more international model of market-based economy. (Kulmala et al. 2014, 528). A surplus budget has enabled the Russian state, Kulmala et al. (2014) observe, to invest more on its citizens' well-being and on social policy expenditure during the Putin era, whereby the president has enjoyed significant popular support due to his administration's ability to steadily improve their citizens' living standards while maintaining political stability in the country. That said, however, since the mid-2010s, Russia's economy has again taken a turn for the worse, which, for its part, has undermined the state's practical facility to continue to invest wholeheartedly in public welfare.

What is more, many remain sceptical about Russia's ability to facilitate truly durable social reforms amid a system in which the parliament and political parties acquire a secondary role, while popularly elected heads of the state are the ones 'hiring and firing'

governments (Gel'man and Starodubtsev 2016). Gel'man and Starodubtsev (2016), among others, suggest Russian governments, in their quest to preserve the political status quo in the country, tending more towards ad hoc policy-making and legislation threatening human rights protection than towards accommodating sustainable and equal societal development across Russia. In the Russian political system, they also remind, the ruling party equals the de facto presidential party, which adds to the patrimonial power of the president to – vicariously at least – govern which policies and reforms see the light of day. (Gel'man & Starodubtsev 2016, 101, 110–112.)

At the same time, however, it is important to be able to separate rhetoric from practice and political endeavours from local realities. While the face of the Russian state and those holding political power remains largely authoritarian, the central authorities are hardly capable of playing upon or manipulating popular sentiment and local behaviour at will (Kolstø 2005, 21–22). Political arenas and official discourse may be marked by exclusivity and lack of pluralism, but a centralised regime, albeit furnished with a patrimonial makeup, does not preclude the existence of civil society. Russia, we know, operates at multiple levels, whereby the realities they portray may not always coincide. The discussions to come will show that, whilst the federal centre attempts to steer, restrict and control, much practical initiative and capability lies in the regions and in the hands of micro-level stakeholders, whereupon we must not hold state-initiated political objectives categorically identical to local and social practice without any further contention.

3.2   Russian Regionalism

While the centre remains characterised by authoritarianism, it would be misleading to suggest that the socio-political face of Russia was unambiguous or that political thought would materialise fully in regional, let alone local and individual praxis. If we considered power as merely a matter of bureaucratic influence, it could be argued that Moscow as the kernel of political and economic power and the seat of the president and his federal government – the heart of the state enterprise, that is – indeed has virtual control over the entire country. However, if we include both the temporal and spatial dimensions – limitations and capacities – of power into the equation, we may see that governance, particularly the central authorities' purported dominion over the whole of

Russia, requires enormous resources in terms of time, attention, human and financial capital, political will, skill, as well as material infrastructure and communications. Inasmuch as these variables apply, the *ability* to influence should not be confused with the *capability* to do so.

According to Tomila Lankina (2009, 230), Putin's re-establishment of the power vertical and authoritarian form of government have made nonsense of the ostensible diversity, pluralism and bottom-up democratic processes exhibited in the political evolution of Yeltsin's Russia, with transmission of regional preferences and interests becoming incompatible with the bureaucratic, hierarchical, uniformity-driven ethos of the Putin administration. Similarly, Cameron Ross (2003) sees the radical overhaul of the Russian federal system[4] devised by Putin when he first came to power as seriously undermining the principles of federalism, whilst sacrificing democracy in order to win unity. Still, considering regional policy as a loose structure of governmental actions aimed at the economic and social development of territorially defined units at a subnational level, as defined by Andrey Starodubtsev (2014, 558), we may note that the doctrine of post-Soviet Russian federal policy de jure follows the Soviet-era ethos of equalising regional differences, whilst redistributing resources between underdeveloped and more developed regions.

Yet, the limited resources of the federal centre apropos of cultivating regional welfare have translated into conflicting political practice, with the state playing a zero-sum game between two mutually exclusive goals: evening out the discrepancies in regional development and supporting only a limited number of growth centres (Kainu, Kulmala, Nikula & Kivinen 2017, 308). Consequently, the ideological axiom of Russian regional policy is playing but lip service to the principles of equality and justice, with federal investment and attention flowing towards big urban centres and regions rich in natural resources, resulting in a vicious circle amid which wealth continues to be distributed between the rich, while the poor become even poorer, and the economic

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[4] As of 2010, Russia has eight federal districts each including several federal subjects which add up to 83 constituents. According to the Russian constitution, however, the state now has 85 federal subjects, since, following the events which took place in 2014, Sevastopol and the Republic of Crimea have been added to the total count.

development of certain areas is continuously done at the expense of improving the social welfare of others (Starodubtsev 2014, 559; Kainu et al. 2017, 308).

The asymmetrical centre–region relations facilitate not only regional disparities in demographic and socio-economic development of the country but also alienation of the regions from the centre (Lankina 2009, 251). Whilst this alienation might not be 'political' in the sense that the United Russia party dominates Russian political system both at national level and across the provinces, it is reflected in the fact that the regions themselves carry the main responsibility for formulating and implementing social policies. Meanwhile, the federal state merely accounts for outlining general and national standards, whereupon federal subjects ought to be treated 'not only as different in terms of inequality outcomes but also as functional regions when it comes to acting in social policy'. (Kainu et al. 2017, 292). Thus, even if the processes of decision and policy-making are generally deemed authoritarian, the regional aspect of policy implementation leaves significant room for manoeuvre for regional and local actors. This, in a sense, generates multiple local realities – or at least the possibility of such diversity – vis-à-vis a single federal vision, and insofar as most of the welfare-related responsibilities are tasks of the regional governments, both successes and failures in service provision are best detected by looking beyond the Kremlin walls (Kulmala et al. 2014, 547).

The interplay between resources and welfare is evident in today's Russia, as resource-rich regions enjoy the ability to invest in welfare infrastructure and social policy, whereas rural regions with lower GDPs are struggling with service provision (Kainu et al. 2017, 298, 307). Needless to say, enormous financial and practical investments are a prerequisite for a full-scale policy of equalisation (Starodubtsev 2014, 559). Even with the country's economic situation improved since the rock bottoms of the 1990s and early-2000s, the Moscow metropolitan area remains the undisputed centre of commerce and wealth, and stimulating policy focusing on a limited number of hubs of regional development appears to have taken primacy on the Kremlin's political agenda (Zubarevich 2009, 162–168). What is more, times of economic hardship seem to have made their return to Russia and rarely provide a fruitful seedbed for equalisation policy. The regions have, to a large extent, autonomous jurisdiction over their own regional budgets and social affairs, whereupon significant disparity between different parts of the country is neither surprising nor unexpected (Lyytikäinen & Kemppainen 2016, 92).

While the country has witnessed a gradual improvement in people's overall standard of living in the 2000s, Russia remains in need of a balancing regional policy that would even out the grave inter-regional inequalities that still prevail unresolved, as individual regional governments portray immense differences in their readiness and ability to react to issues concerning the population's welfare and social services (Lyytikäinen & Kemppainen 2016). It is true that Russia's state finances have improved significantly during the past two decades, which has enabled the major reforms in the welfare sector and increasing attention to be paid to, for instance, child and family wellbeing. At the same time, however, cost saving certainly presents one motive for the Russian government to deinstitutionalise the country's child welfare system, and the regions demonstrate varying preparedness to realise the centre's policy goals in this area. (Kainu et al. 2017; Kulmala et al. 2017.)

Regional policy thus continues to be an extremely important aspect of Russia's social policy, as Kainu et al. (2017) highlight, since reported financial differences between separate regions have proven significant in determining the regional populations' quality of life. Somewhat paradoxically, the already resource-rich and thriving regions receive most additional support from the federal budget due to their lobbying strength vis-à-vis the centre. Moreover, the practical outcomes of welfare policy are more easily made visible in regions that already have certain established welfare structures than in areas struggling with inadequate resources for policy implementation. (Kainu et al. 2017, 310.) These pre-existing conditions, combined with the inherent rivalrous nature of the deinstitutionalisation and outsourcing trends entailed by the ongoing child welfare reform, mean that the regions are forced to operate in an increasingly competitive welfare environment.

All things considered, a disproportionate division of the federal government's financial assets is inevitably accompanied by an uneven distribution of the centre's attention as well. To borrow from contemporary economics, attention, just as money, is a scarce commodity (Davenport & Beck 2001) – a limited resource which in the case of Russia is divided unevenly between, first of all, the regions and, second, local operators. While the state has been intensifying legislative supervision over Russian civil society organisations (CSOs) in recent years, many third sector operators, especially 'socially oriented NGOs' (SONGOs) scattered unevenly across the country, enjoy relatively many

opportunities for their activities, and even those CSOs that are more heavily restricted, researchers have found, portray enormous operational resourcefulness and resilience (Bogdanova et al. 2018; Tarasenko 2018). The Russian government, while legislatively restricting certain NGO activities, has incorporated in its child and family policy clauses for state–third sector partnerships in policy implementation and, as such, acknowledges child welfare NGOs as important agents in the realisation of the ongoing deinstitutionalisation reform (NSIC 2012; NCFP 2014).

Seeing that these NGOs continue to be, by definition, non-governmental actors, they are not all cut from the same cloth, but portray a motley of operational models. The case study Children's Villages, while de jure realising one of the core principles of the Russian government's child and family policy of fighting orphanhood through family-based foster care, de facto reside outside Moscow and the public sector and thus possess a relatively high degree of self-sufficiency and autonomy in how they put such policy objectives into practice. Moreover, inasmuch as one of the welfare reform's main objectives is to deinstitutionalise and not *re*-institutionalise care, we may assume that the state is not only expectedly but also willingly ceding some its responsibilities to civil society actors. That being said, physical or bureaucratic distance from the centre of political power, by no means, precludes the resonance of values disseminated by the state at local or individual levels. Yet, as we will come to see, these Villages as communities and individuals within them wield agency and ideas that are not as much reflective of any state dogma as they might be of the organisational ideology and practice of the given Village operator. Hence, whilst acknowledging the patrimonial power of the Russian state and its endeavours to influence official family discourse across the country, its practical reach is not locally ubiquitous.

3.3 Russian Conservatism

Now, whilst establishing the dividing line between the end of a period of transition and the beginning of a process of normalisation is an ambiguous undertaking at best, it appears that, within every society, the need to consolidate and preserve remains somewhat perpetual. Conservatism, as many readers and observes of modern Russia have undoubtedly gathered, has become something of a buzzword of the millennium in Russian political life. In fact, the country's ruling political party, United Russia, proclaimed

Russian conservatism as its official ideology in 2009 (Laruelle 2016). Consequently, the 2010s have witnessed an excessive increase in the use of the label 'conservative' across the Russian political spectrum. Yet, the substance and utilisation of the word have often proven equally vague and shallow, with anyone, from liberals to socialists, qualifying as a conservative, as long as they have succeed in presenting themselves as preservers of tradition. (Stepanov 2014.) It is, therefore, hardly a surprise that scholars across the field of Russian Studies have found it difficult to pin down what conservatism in its contemporary form actually signifies in Russia.

We certainly acknowledge the awkwardness of the task of summarising today's incarnation of Russian conservatism into but a few paragraphs, given that the intellectual, historical and philosophical debates on the quintessential essence of the ideology deserve no less than a study of their own. Still, we deem it necessary to outline some of the primary conceptual positions and characteristics forming the basis of the officially promoted version of Russian conservatism, since, as a position and thought, conservatism appears to provide, to a great extent, an ideological umbrella under which a range of traditional – and sometimes, although not always, reactionary – sentiments, values and outlooks are placed in Russian political culture. The social conservative element stands relatively strong in Russian child and family policy programmes, especially with respect to the promotion of traditional family values thereof. Thus, this is not a work in the history or theory of Russian conservatism, nor a study of the intellectual thrusts and dogmatics of the ideology per se, but a discussion on the Political and its relation to family discourse.

As an ideology, Russian conservatism may be characterised as more fluid, equivocal rhetoric than cemented dogma. While often presented as primarily concerned with institutional preservation, Samuel Huntington (1957) has suggested conservatism best understood not so much as an inherent theory in defence of particular institutions but a positional ideology. As such, Elena Chebankova's (2016, 28–29) typification of Russian conservatism as a standpoint, a position, rather than an ideology in the conventional sense of the word may be seen as mirroring Huntington's argument. Whilst lacking in terms of a clearly formulated existential value package and meaningfully articulated project for an ideal model of future society, Russian conservatism, in a broad sense, can be understood as 'a system of definite ideological prescriptions derived from religious, national, state, social, cultural, and moral traditions' (Chebankova 2016, 29; Stepanov 2009, 4). Many

of the sources of conservatism in Russia find their footing on the nominally same principles of history and tradition, power and authority, as well as religion and morality that have facilitated conservative thought across Europe in general, although conservatism almost always adopts a national character of sort (Chebankova 2013; Nisbet 2002).

On that, Chenbankova (2016, 29–30) highlights the dynamic and largely future-oriented nature of Russian conservatism, whereby contemporary conservatives select those transcendental values of times gone by that they wish to re-actualise in the future and thereby re-create tradition in a new form, whilst diffusing the dividing line between the past, present and future. Yet, due to the vagueness of its doctrine, the ideology, Valerii Stepanov (2009, 4) notes, remains apt to manipulation by various parties and groups in Russia, who frequently exploit the conservative idea, selectively reviving old myths and introducing new ones, thereby detaching it from its historical and intellectual base. Similar to Stepanov's interpretation, Pipes (2005, xxi) sees conservatism having various meanings depending on a country's political culture, since this culture ultimately determines what it seeks to conserve, and, according to his historical reading of Russia, 'more government' prevails as the primary object of such preservation attempts. Whilst the government, or to put it more aptly, the state does indeed appear as the foci of Russian conservative thinking, the protection and preservation of the nation – particularly in times of unwelcome demographic decline – stand as equally abiding nodal points in Russian political rhetoric.

Consequently, it is through the Russian idea of *gosudarstvennost'* ('stateness') – an understanding according to which citizens obtain individual rights and freedoms from the state's exercise of control and power, as opposed to the liberal thinking of state deriving authority from its citizens – and the parallel concept of *sobornost'* ('togetherness') – referring to a bond between the individual, the family, and society – that statehood is elevated to a national value amid which the collective and individual, physical and spiritual features of the Russian core are imagined to be united as one nation (Ruutu 2017, 1155–1156). Now, despite the theoretical frame of Russian conservatism remaining vague enough for political use and abuse, the largely parallel and complementary projects of Russia's state- and nation-building can be seen as resting upon *tradition* which seems to persist as the core value and ideal for society, as imagined from

above. While Russia continues its modernisation development, and new policies and social reforms borrowing from liberal and global trends are introduced in, for example, the Russian welfare sector, it is the active top-down promotion of values that support the traditional institutions of the family, marriage and (national) kinship that accompanies those processes in both political rhetoric and on the policy agendas. (Kolstø 2005; NCFP 2013; Panov 2010; Putin 2006; 2013; Stepanov 2009.)

In political use, conservatism comes across as an attempt to build the nation via traditions – a process in which the collective can be seen as taking primacy over the individual, whilst the sovereignty of state authority trumps individual freedoms (Antonov 2014) – albeit this process, in principle, may be regarded as less to do with preserving tradition in itself than with recreating it in the present (Chebankova 2016, 29). Chebankova (2016, 31) mirrors Ruutu's interpretation of *gosudarstvennost'*, noting that the officially promoted conservative idea in Russia exhibits a positionist attitude towards the state, with firm support for a strong state machinery capable of ensuring security, territorial integrity and stable development of the country as well as a specific Russian version of modernisation very much focusing on combating economic, social and demographic ills. As previously noted, tackling the pressing socio-economic problems has indeed been raised to a state priority under Putin's two latest presidential terms, with special attention in the sphere of social policy directed towards the family as the basic unit of society (NCFP 2014, 9). Many regard the Russian conservative project as decisively rejecting both globalisation and modernisation in their Western liberal sense[5] and instead deriving power from the allegedly cemented traditions of Russia's 'own' past in order to map out and stabilise an uncertain future (Chebankova 2013; 306; Lotarev 2014, 93).

The Russian conservative government fails to escape ambivalence in its construction of a fairly postmodern collage of historical sources of conservatism as it weaves together – somewhat inconsistently – Russia's imperial past, the Soviet legacy and the Orthodox faith (Grenier 2015; Walker 2018). Regardless of some of the inherent contradictions in fusing Soviet nostalgia with Russian Orthodox values, the ROC as the sole existing pre-1917 institution has been re-establishing its status as an influential

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[5] Whilst such discourse has some anti-Western overtones, Chebankova (2013, 306) suggests its essence more non-liberal, anti-liberal, anti-globalist, and/or anti-interventionist than anti-Western per se.

cultural and social agent as well as an important partner of the Kremlin in twenty-first-century Russia (Fagan 2015). The pro-Orthodox line in Russian politics today, as noted by Alar Kilp (2012, 45–48), was first introduced during Medvedev's presidency, and the cumulative success of the ROC in working towards a closer connectedness of church–state relations and a symbiosis between nationalism, Orthodoxy and cultural identity has been a continuing trend in Russia under Putin. Paul Grenier (2015) suspects that the Church's restored position in the government's good graces is at least partly explained by the Church's perceived potential to act as a moral guide facilitating the ethical formation of the nation. Similarly, Geraldine Fagan (2015, 194) sees the ROC as asserting itself as 'the definite expression of Russian nationhood', marginalising other worldviews. In any case, the converging relationship between the state and the ROC is a likely inspiration, albeit an obscure one, for the incorporation of the so-called 'spiritual-moral values'[6] on the agenda of Russia's current family policy.

Many have observed an ideological hardening of Putin's leadership in the 2010s, reflected in the 'conservative turn' of Russian high politics, whereby the Kremlin has positioned itself as the defender of 'Russian traditional values' as the basis of individual and social life as well as the country's demographic health, assuming the citizens' respect for their Russian compatriots home and abroad, the state and the regime (Laruelle 2016, 627–628). The Izborsky Club – a nationalist, anti-liberal 'think tank' formed by a group of prominent intellectuals close to the Kremlin on the eve of Putin's return to power in 2012, which now produces reports to the Russian government – is a prime example of Russian conservatism as we may see it manifested at the very top level of society today; the Club, as Marlene Laruelle (2016, 629–630) notes, claims conservatism as its central ideology, but instead of being reactionary or backward-looking, the members insist their conservatism being dynamic, seeking to build a new political order both domestically and internationally based on the afore-mentioned credo of 'traditional values', state sovereignty, patriotism and ideological mobilisation of the whole of Russia.

Defending morally sound 'Russian values' against the ethically dubious 'Western values' has become an ideological quest of sort for the Russian conservatives, with the

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[6] The so-called Russian spiritual-moral values harnessed to work towards 'the Russian population's cultural development' include: 'humanity, justice, honour, conscience, will, personal dignity, good faith and the desire to fulfil one's moral duty to oneself, one's family and one's Fatherland' (Amelina 2015).

president emphasising the importance of both patriotism in domestic politics, which he sees as the guiding moral principle and sole national idea of the country (Latukhina 2016), and (state) sovereignty as a way to prevent the disruption of tradition and demoralisation of the society (Ruutu 2017, 1159). The Russian conservative government's attempts to preserve the 'Russian idea' have, in many respects, translated into a range of bans and regulations extending from 'gay propaganda laws' protecting Russian children 'from information advocating for a denial of traditional family values' to 'foreign agent laws' restricting foreign funded NGO activities in the country (FLFA 2012; FLPC 2013). In this connection, Lotarev (2014, 93) sees governmental regulation as the basis of conservatism, providing the only viable means for public consolidation and stabilisation of Russian society. This conservative trend extends its reach to the field of child and family policy; the government has presented a plethora of programmes – directly and indirectly addressing the family domain – assigning a set of moral and normative principles relating to protection of children in society, reproduction and the desired form and function of the Russian family.

In his 2013 address to the Federal Assembly, President Putin (2013) maintained that Russia is defending 'traditional family values' as the basis of the nation's thousands of years of history. He spoke on the behalf of conservatism as it, in his view, ensures the continuity of the society and prevents it from descending into chaos. The President's ideas about the perpetuation of the Russian family–nation union may be viewed as corresponding with Gilbert's (1999) observations on attempts by political agents that uphold nationalistic tendencies and social conservative values to depict a somewhat organic relationship between the family and the nation. Moreover, as noted earlier, changes in the family domain, household compositions and gender roles are themes typically fueling public debate around family values (Jagger & Wright 1999). Conservative governments tend to see changing family forms and systems as something jeopardising and destabilising the pre-existing social status quo (Fox Harding 1999; Gilbert 1999; Kamerman & Kahn 1978). Hence, conservatives often gravitate towards a standpoint that wishes to preserve 'traditional family values' promoting (permanent) marriage, the heterosexual pairing with reproductive capabilities and a gender division of household roles. Naturally, conservatism as a political ideology, seeks to generate and

maintain government policy and structures that support these traditionalist patterns. (Fox Harding 1999, 123.)

Of course, the waters of family values are always muddied, since the political and ideological sentiments of each social agent involved in their conceptualisation as well as the general historical and societal contexts shape the discourse and constructs of family (Jagger & Wright 1999, 1–2). Still, we may observe that the backbone of Russia's official family discourse is cooked in the same stew of tradition as the government's conservative ideology, striving to preserve 'traditional spiritual-moral values' in Russian society. It is, in fact, very much due to the consolidation of conservatism as the government's official ideology and the rise of the traditional family values position during the last decade that child and family-related issues were elevated to state priorities and that the major child welfare reforms with a family-centred ethos were introduced by the state. Thus, dubbing the family 'the basic unit of society', the conservative government presents the protection of children – and parenthood as its derivative – central to social life, hoping to build a Russia without orphans where every child has a right and opportunity to grow up in a healthy and prospering family. (NCFP 2014; NPRWO 2012; NSIC 2012.)

True, promoting family prosperity via attempts to encourage reproduction and protect the institution of the family and the values of childhood and parenthood is certainly nothing extraordinary per se – it is, if not mistaken, one of the conventional objectives of family policy – and there are, for instance, other European countries, including Poland and Ireland, maintaining significantly stricter abortion laws than Russia. However, in the case of Russia, there is a potential risk that family discourse conveying such distinctively conservative, quasi-religious and normative overtones in its promotion of traditional family values may grow into a conceptual Leviathan that confines the family and its members to an equally narrow and uncompromising ideal of family and thereby imposes principled policy on a de facto diverse nation. On this account, our study attempts to broaden some of these normative conventions and illustrate that, despite relatively circumscribed interests and understandings of the Russian government when it comes to thinking about family life, the micro-level stakeholders portray a much wider and more inclusive spectrum of family structures, voicing miscellaneous perceptions of family and the relationships therein.

4   MACRO: THE FACE OF RUSSIAN CHILD WELFARE

This chapter will explain the Russian child welfare system in more detail. Having established the political makeup of the Russian state and its ideological core, we now wish to provide the reader a broader and more comprehensive description of the country's child protection system and trace some of the veering trajectories of Russia's current family policy and its national objectives. The descent towards the micro level continues, however, before going entirely local, we deem it necessary to assess the rudiments of the ongoing process of deinstitutionalisation of child welfare and the development of forms of alternative care, particularly foster care, in Russia. This inquiry will further give context to our upcoming analysis. The observations made here will continue to explain some of the motivations behind the government's aspirations to facilitate a certain type of family policy advocating for more community and home-based forms of family-like care for orphaned children and introduce major welfare reform programmes across the country. That said, we urge the reader to keep in mind everything that has been said about Russia's political development in the 2000s, the nature of the state and its regime as well as the prevailing political ideology in Russian society, as these processes, for their part, explain some the challenges and contradictions that continue to persist in the midst of the attempts to overhaul the country's child welfare system.

4.1   Child Protection System & Alternative Care

In the aftermath of the state-induced purges of the 1930s and the subsequent annihilation of the Second World War, Russia was facing a slew of devastating social and demographic problems, one of the most pressing of which was the overwhelming number of orphaned children in the country. To manage the 'orphan crisis' plaguing an already wounded society, the Soviet leadership had to face the music and forge into the socialist architecture of the USSR a highly centralised, heavily institutionalised child welfare system. (Cook 2007; Cook 2011.) The communist welfare state model, Linda Cook (2007, 31) argues, rested upon a comprehensive, state-controlled and budget-financed system of welfare provision that, in so many occasions, functioned to secure the acquiescence of society to the leadership's authoritarian political controls more than it did to ensure the citizens' social wellbeing. Subsequently, the levels and quality of Soviet welfare provision were quite low by Western standards, yet, the system somehow sufficed

to cover and satisfy the basic needs of the Soviet citizenry for a relatively long time (Cook 2007, 31–32).

Official views on family and domesticity were incorporated into the doctrine of the Soviet family policy asserting that the maintenance of specific gender norms, roles, structures and boundaries – both in the private space of the home and as part of social life amid the public sphere – as well as the preservation and promotion of certain domestic ideals were subsumed under the notion of family (Zimmerman et al. 1994, 190). The concept of a 'Soviet family', regarded as the foundation of society, was central to the Soviet project, for 'it contained in it', Irena Juozeliuniene (1999, 68) writes, 'various dogmatic values in gender roles, interrelations between spouses, child–parent and family–state relations.' Family policy then was designed to enable the successful functioning of the family as a social institution which, in turn, would support the welfare of the larger society (Zimmerman et al. 1994, 190). Correspondingly, we may observe that the now all but familiar axiom 'family is the basic unit of society', readily employed by the Russian conservative government today, is in fact a recycled Soviet catchphrase.

Comparable to the shock generated by the events of the 1917 Russian Revolution that once threw the country into political and social disarray, the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s precipitated a power vacuum and widespread social chaos across Russia, delivering the final blow to the already crumbling state structures. The rapid collapse of the entire Soviet system destabilised and transformed the hitherto prevailing socio-political dynamics of Russian society, provoking a state of perennial societal flux that, in many respects, extends it perpetuation to this day. The scope and gravity of the social and political challenges witnessed by the new Russian state in transition, Cook (2007, 5–6, 45–52) explains, entailed an urgent need to reform what was remaining of the country's welfare system and social policy. The breakdown of the Soviets' socialist welfare system signalled a shift away from state-led welfare policy and towards an increasingly decentralised and market-oriented model of the Russian welfare state. While it was the political turbulence and burgeoning social problems in the domestic realm that provided the principal catalyst for the liberal trajectories in Russia's welfare state arrangements, analogous global trends in liberalisation of social services were emerging in tandem with the Russian welfare reform. (Cook 2007, 45–54, 56–59; Cook 2011.)

Seceding from the top-heavy Soviet system that had been established under conditions of society's political exclusion, the somewhat contrary position of minimum intervention by the state in its citizens' family lives became the basis for a new family policy in Russia, as a result of which state-run institutions began to lose their authority as primary providers of social welfare and care vis-à-vis extensive, and often spontaneous, privatisation of the social sector (Cook 2007, 55–59; 139–144; Chernova 2013, 142–146). According to Cook (2007, 145), the peak of Russia's welfare state liberalisation dawned during the first Putin presidency, however, we may now observe that, in the wider course of the new millennium, Russia has, in fact, experienced a statist and largely authoritarian turn, reverting back to an increasingly state-dominated culture of social policy-making, in the context of which the state has been making attempts to regain control over its citizens' domestic and family lives, thus obscuring the line between public and private anew.

The structures of the welfare state and the child protection system we see in Russia today were birthed in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early-1990s. As Virge Mikkola (2008, 222) reasons, the prevailing societal climate and turbulent socio-political circumstances complicated the realisation of a comprehensive welfare reform in the then infant Russian state. Yet, the years following the complete destruction of the Soviet state brought with them a need to rebuild a system of social work and child protection in Russia, as the social and economic deprivation of families with children, unemployment, child neglect and overall poverty in Russian society increased enormously due to the deep economic and political crisis of the 1990s (Biryukova, Varlamova & Sinyavskaya 2013, 57-58). However, various scholars agree that the Russian child protection system remains heavily institutionalised to this day, with its roots found in Soviet-era practices, upon which placing children in residential care persists as the main operational strategy for child protection. Despite government and civil society efforts to transform this culture of care practice, much of the welfare reform either exists only on paper or simply focuses on giving a decorative facelift to the system rather than changing its core practices and ideas. (Kulmala 2017; Kulmala et al. forthcoming, 3; Schmidt & Shchurko 2014, 447.)

The newly reappeared liberalisation and marketisation trends in the organisation of Russian child welfare are still in their infancy, as these trajectories have only been

featured in the most recent round of welfare reforms and remain to be accompanied by normative and paternalistic overtones in child and family policy. The major developments in the field of Russian child and family welfare have taken place against the backdrop of a dramatic reorganisation of the Russian government's social policy agenda over the past decade; as already mentioned, family policy, the fight against social orphanhood and the bid to overcome the demographic crisis allegedly threatening the country have been elevated – most notably by President Putin himself – to government priorities (Malyshev & Varlamova 2009, 8; Chernova 2013, 148). It is worth bearing in mind, however, that whilst political rhetoric emphasises national unity and togetherness and the state's all-inclusive paternal concern over the welfare of the nation as a whole, the concerns and grievances of the majority of the Russian people remain under the state's radar when it comes welfare-related question, as its de facto interests lie in addressing 'narrowly selected issues with a clear focus on Russian families, especially those with reproductive potential' (Kulmala et al. 2014, 535).

Today's Russia hosts one of the highest proportions of orphans in the world in relation to its overall child population, with recent statistics indicating a percentage of 2.1 of the total number of Russian children living out of parental care and subsequently projecting a relatively high level of institutionalisation among orphaned children in the country. Around 80% of all the children without parental care in Russia are classified as social orphans which refers to children whose parent/s are still alive but incapable or unwilling to look after them. (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya 2017, 368–371, 381.) Nationally aggregated official data on the number of children in alternative care in Russia, Svetlana Biryukova and Oxana Sinyavskaya (2017, 369–373) caution, tend to be incomplete and inconsistent, oftentimes misleading, leaving relevant figures and pivotal processes wholly unrecorded, whereupon any government-commissioned statistics for orphans and children out of parental care, albeit indicative, should always be taken with a pinch of salt.

Nevertheless, some valid observations can still be made based on official aggregate data, graciously compiled by Biryukova and Sinyavskaya (2017) in their most informative article, including the continued prevalence of guardianship or kinship care as the most common placement option for orphaned children in Russia, with 47% of all Russian children left without parental care being placed with guardians in 2015.

Comparably, the numbers show that the share of children in foster families and foster care has increased more than tenfold from 2% in 2005 to 24% in 2015. The drastic increase in the number of foster care placements can be seen as a sum of several independent and interrelated developments in the sphere of social and child welfare in Russia. These trajectories include: changes in Russian society's common values and public attitude towards social orphanhood in general, by which more and more emphasis is being placed on social deprivation instead of individual deviance as the core cause for children being orphaned in the first place; newly adopted views on the temporary nature of institutional care and preference of familial forms of alternative care; visible improvements in recruiting, training and supporting foster families; and an increasing number of adults with an already established guardianship status now seeking to become foster parents in order to gain access to support services and financial assistance that are otherwise made available only to foster families. (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya 2017, 374–376, 380.)

Still, Kulmala et al. (forthcoming, 18−19) assert that, compared to foster care, adoption presents a more favourable option as seen from the perspective of the state, since it is ultimately a permanent solution. Correspondingly, kinship care as an alternative places more lenient eligibility criteria for the parents than foster care. That said, experts in Russian CPS remain cautious about the option of kinship care, as the relatives or family members obtaining custody of the child are usually considered to be part of the same 'unfortunate family' (*neblagopoluchnaia sem'ia)* that the child has been taken away from in the first place (see, e.g. Jäppinen 2018). What is more, both adoption and kinship care are substantially less expensive than financing the foster care system with its monthly subsidies and various in-kind benefits for the families. The most expensive placement solution from the state's point of view, Kulmala et al. (forthcoming) confirm, is patronage family which resembles a foster family, but the placement contract for this arrangement is a three-party agreement where, in addition to the parents and the *opeka*, a residential care institution is also part of the contract. In a patronage family then, the foster parent is an employee of the said residential institution and thus has an official status that grants them a state employee's salary topped up with a benefit package. (Kulmala et al. forthcoming.)

The basic foundations of the child protection system in Russia are, to a large extent, analogous to those of the system in Finland, as the UN Convention on the Rights

of the Child (UNCRC) provides the fundamental basis for both of them. Thus, the interests of the child – a person under the age of 18 – are of primary concern in all actions carried out by and within the system, whether the operatives are public or private actors, social welfare institutions or legal or administrative bodies. The state is responsible for ensuring that children in vulnerable positions will have access to social services, should they need them, and the CPS social workers are responsible for helping children in the system defend their rights and legitimate interests. The rights of the child precede all other concerns, whereby parental interests, for instance, cannot be in conflict with the rights of the child. (Mikkola 2008, 161, 222; Shelyutto 2012, 29–30.)

The main executive authority representing the state regionally and locally is the *opeka*, which, again, is the Russian equivalent to the CPS. The *opeka* gathers information from individuals, schools and health services about families at risk and, after careful assessment of the families' situations, implements decisions to take children into custody. The *opeka,* Kulmala et al. (forthcoming) observe, has generally been seen as little more than a controlling organ, however, the ongoing welfare reform is calling for a change in their work practices towards providing more support services, including rehabilitative and preventive measures, for the families in need. That said, accepting this new 'double function' will undoubtedly be a difficult task, seeing that the general trust in the authorities and their ability to help remains low. (Kulmala et al., forthcoming, 11–12.)

In principle, Russia has no single or exact law on child protection, rather sections related to child welfare can be found in several legislative acts (Kulmala et al. forthcoming, 5). The main legal document outlining the rights and responsibilities of both children and parents as well as establishing grounds for a child's removal from the family is the Family Code of the Russian Federation from 1995 (Schmidt & Shchurko 2014, 451). According to the Family Code, the needs and concerns of a parent are issued a secondary position vis-à-vis the rights of the child (Jäppinen 2018, 104). By law, every child should be guaranteed the right to be brought up and cared for in a family-like environment. This translates into practice amid which the state is prioritising familial forms of alternative care and assigning parents the so-called 'parental rights'. (Lokshina 2002, 9; Mikkola 2008, 161; Shelyutto 2012, 30.) These rights can be terminated fully or restricted through judicial procedures, if the parents are found to be neglecting their parental duties or violating against the rights of their child (Shelyutto 2012, 32–33).

Notwithstanding the possible termination of parental rights, the child alimony remains a responsibility of the biological parent/s, and the child continues to have a de jure right to keep in contact with his or her birth parents and other relatives – although this right is not de facto materialising extensively – provided that none of this acts contrary to the child's interests (Biryukova et al. 2013, 61). While the parents have a right to seek reinstatement of limited or even fully terminated parental rights in situations where notable change has happened for the better, such rights restorations rarely occur, whereby only around 5.8% of children that had entered the alternative care system in Russia were reported to have been returned to their biological parents in 2015 (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya 2017, 378). The restriction or termination of parental rights is, without a doubt, one of the harshest measures taken by the Russian child welfare system and, as such, presents a critical point of difference between the operations and practices of child protection services in Russia and, for instance, Finland.

In Finland, an understanding approach in helping and working with families is seen as the most fruitful way forward, whereas in Russia, adherence to the normative principles of parents' accountability and even 'guilt' evokes a sense of punishment in the service practice (Mikkola 2008, 222). The ethos of the Russian system serves to first and foremost safeguard the child, meanwhile the Finnish model suggest a more holistic focus on the family as a whole (Jäppinen 2018, 95–96). The rights of the child are fairly emphatically articulated in Russian policy documents and legislation, while parental grievances garner a lot less attention. According to Victoria Schmidt and Tatsiana Shchurko (2014, 452) two opposite positions can be identified in the rights discussion, that is, supporting the rights of the child contra supporting the rights of parents. In this connection, the Russian Orthodox Church, along with with parental unions, has taken a stand in favour of the parents' right to control their children, criticising certain international bodies, organisation and their regulations – mainly the UNCRC – for interfering with internal issues residing within the perimeter of Russian national legislation and family sovereignty (Schmidt & Shchurko 2014, 452).

The Federal Law on the Foundations of Providing Social Services to Citizens in Russia assigns priority to efforts to develop a preventive system of social work. The practices of primary and secondary prevention of child neglect, including early interventions, evaluative and outpatient social work, are set as the basis of Russian child

welfare services. (Biryukova et al. 2013, 59; Mikkola 2008, 161-162, 222.) Be that as it may, the legal objectives and procedures of preventive social work and child protection lack comprehensiveness in their definitions, and the welfare system and the services it produces, for their part, remain inconsistent. Many agree that these discernible shortcoming have resulted in heavy corrective measures persisting as the primary form of child protection work in Russia. (Biryukova et al. 2013, 63, 78; Lokshina 2002, 7; Mikkola 2008, 222.)

Nevertheless, one of the conceptual objectives of the ongoing child welfare reform is to establish a more comprehensive and effective system of preventive social work with families, displaying a particular focus on work done with the child's birth parents, while also seeking to dismantle and rebuild the existing system of institutional and alternative care to offer more family-like care solutions. On the other hand, Maija Jäppinen (2018) observes that the Russian CPS experts are rather reluctant to work with the birth parents, even though social orphanhood is seen as the problem to be solved. A small paradox, if you may. Unlike, the foster parents who we have found to usually strive towards cooperation with the birth parents of the child they are fostering, the CPS generally maintain that contact with the biological parents is harmful for children in alternative care, since foster family placements are considered a long-term care arrangement, and continuing engagement with the blood relatives might jeopardises the children's adaptation to their new families. Only in situations where the child's return to her birth parents remains a realistic possibility, the Russian CPS are willing to offer support for the biological parents. In the meantime, when the child's placement in foster care is seen as a most likely permanent solution, the birth parents are quite easily excluded and marginalised from the child's life. (Jäppinen 2018, 96, 99–100, 104.)

In this context, the termination of one's parental rights can be a rapid and oftentimes conclusive procedure resulting in the permanent placement of the child in alternative care. Compared to, for example, Finland where adoption is not regarded as a form of alternative care, but a lengthy and definite process, the Russian model juxtaposes domestic adoptions with other non-institutional forms of care, generally favouring adoption. (Mikkola 2008, 176, 223; Sheljutto 2012, 34.) Especially in the aftermath of the so called 'Dima Yakovlev Act' (FLSIVH 2013) posing sanctions on foreign citizens and denying their entry into Russia, while also banning U.S. adoption of Russian children,

the promotion of domestic adoptions in Russia has intensified, seemingly eclipsing efforts to develop services for the children's biological parents that would work towards reuniting birth families. In fact, Schmidt & Shchurko (2014, 455) confirm that the Russian child protection system as it is offers a very limited set of support services for the biological parents, whereupon children are more often placed from public to foster or adoptive care than back to their birth parents.

So far in Russia, the emphasis has been on developing forms of alternative care as means to help children in difficult life situations, but major efforts in improving the overall status of the biological parents are nonetheless outlined in the current welfare reforms. Policy documents indicate improvements to be made in processes working towards restoring once terminated parental rights and promote every child's right to their birth family, maintaining that priority will be given to seeking care arrangements with blood relatives. Should such attempts fail, the child is still entitled, even encouraged, to maintain contact with the birth family despite being placed outside of it. (NSIC 2012, 8-11, 29.) Yet, parallel to such efforts to, nominally at least, strengthen the status of the biological family, the country's entire foster and alternative care system is being reinforced.

Upon its release in 2015, the so-called Decree 481 – On the Activities of Organisations for Orphans and Children Left Without Parental Care, and the Arrangement of Children Without Parental Care in These Institutions – marked a fundamental shift in how alternative forms of care and the very child welfare system in Russia were to be seen (Kulmala et al. 2018, 14). The now ongoing child welfare reform seeks to reduce the size and number of residential institutions and orphanages, placing children in families instead either through adoption, kinship, patronage or foster care. The remaining care institutions are envisaged to operate as family support centres serving both foster and birth parents. Yet, despite good schematic plans to fight orphanhood, a de facto system that would efficiently, holistically and justly address the problem of social orphanhood in Russia remains to be developed (Biryukova & Varlamova & Svinyavkaya 2013, 76).

4.2 Reforming Child Welfare

Having now outlined the basic structures of the Russian child welfare system past and present, it might be useful for us to consider what constitutes the political steps and

policy-making processes Russia has undergone towards reforming its child welfare. In his famous 2006 'Demographic Crisis' speech, President Putin (2006) called for return to traditional family values, stating: 'love for one's homeland, for one's country, starts with love for one's family'. However, it was the subsequent presidency of Dmitry Medvedev that provided the real 'catalyst for policy action' in the field of child welfare and family policy in modern Russia (Kulmala et al. 2017, 358–359).

Since then, and partly paralleling global tendencies, several social and welfare policies entailing neoliberal features, including the introduction of mechanisms to transfer the responsibility of service provision from state and public sector to the individual, the private and third sectors, have been introduced (Cook 2011; 2007; Kulmala et al. 2017). Whilst the role and activities of NGOs, nonprofits and other civil society organisations operating in the field of child and family welfare have grown in significance, family policy as an area of social and welfare measures remains under state control, continuing to be centred upon nuclear families and their children. The authoritarian tradition of Russian policy-making translates into most policies and reforms being marked by their top-down imposition by the central authorities, even when much of their implementation occurs regionally and locally. (Kainu et al. 2017; Kulmala et al. 2014; Kulmala & Tšernova 2015; Kulmala et al. 2017.)

The Russian government has adopted a stance that relies heavily on value-laden family policy adhering to a strong moral code and national norms as well as social conservatism. Thus, family policy as promoted by the conservative government builds upon the promotion of traditional family values and the preservation of the institution of the family as the mainstay of Russian society. In this regard, it is worth bearing in mind that the Russian state is currently facing what is said to be a 'demographic crisis'. Russia's pressing social and demographic ills translating into low birth rates and high death rates began to unfold during the turbulent 1990s. As a consequence, Russian governments have launched several attempts to reverse population decline in the course of the 2000s, primarily through increasing the country's birth rate and supporting motherhood. (Kulmala et al 2014, 537; Kulmala & Tšernova 2015, 2, 17.) Thus, questions concerning family reproduction are now accompanying discussions about supporting disadvantaged families, fighting against social orphanhood and reforming the heavily institutionalised child welfare system in public debate.

Russian policymakers and other conservative social actors, most notably the ROC that continues to occupy an important symbolic and social position in Russia, along with public opinion have expressed burgeoning concern over child and family wellbeing since the mid-2000s, which has produced a range of major nationwide policy and social welfare reforms over the past decade (Kulmala 2017; Kulmala et al. 2017). Four of the most central political programmes introduced in the field of child and family welfare in the 2010s are: the National Programme 'Russia without Orphans' for the Period 2013–2020; the National Strategy to Promote the Interests of Children for the Period 2012–2017; the National Concept of Family Policy in the Russian Federation for the Period until 2025; and the Government Decree 481: On the Activities of Organisations for Orphans and Children Left Without Parental Care, and the Arrangement of Children Without Parental Care in These Institutions. These documents delineate the practical and ideological objectives of Russia's current family policy and the ongoing child welfare reform.

Enacted in 2012, the *National Programme 'Russia without Orphans' for the Period 2013–2020* (from now on NPRWO 2012) is a nationwide policy programme designed to be implemented in two four-year cycles, 2013–2016 and 2017–2020 respectively. The programme lists the following points as its main objectives: the comprehensive solving of the problems of 'family deprivation' (*semeinoe neblagopoluchie*) and social orphanhood; the improvement of the situation of orphaned children and children left without parental care; the resolution of the root causes of social orphanhood; strengthening the values of family, motherhood, fatherhood and childhood in the national social consciousness; and the protection of every child's right to live and grow up in a family. Additionally, the programme denotes several strategic priorities which include, inter alia, strengthening the social institutions of the family and 'traditional spiritual-moral values' amid the spheres of family relations and child-rearing; increasing the effectiveness of prevention of family deprivation and protection of the rights of orphaned children and children left without parental care with NGO involvement; governmental promotion of adoption and other forms of alternative care for orphaned children and children left without parental care by Russian citizens; equalising the living standards and securing the comprehensive safety, rehabilitation and social adaptation of institutionalised children.

The *National Strategy to Promote the Interests of Children for the Period 2012–2017* (from now on NSIC 2012) that the Russian federal government launched in 2012 sets out to ensure a prosperous and protected childhood to each child in the country. The document elevates the protection of the best interests of the child to one of today's top national priorities for the Russian state – much in line with international human rights standards and principles. The NSIC centralises the idea of every child's right to grow up in a family. The envisaged blueprint for the attainment of this objective is the gradual dismantling and abolishment of the existing system of institutional care for children, upon which residential institutions are overhauled and replaced with home and/or community-based, family-like care units. This deinstitutionalisation process also seeks to engage civil society organisations in service provision, thus fostering opportunities for state–third sector partnerships for care design and delivery. Moreover, the government acts to encourage more Russian citizens to enlist as foster parents, while striving towards improving the overall quality of child welfare services and increasing professional competence in social work and foster care practice across the country.

The *National Concept of Family Policy in the Russian Federation for the Period until 2025* (from now on NCFP 2014) came into effect in 2014, declaring the fundamental objective of Russia's current family policy as to 'strengthen and support the family as the basis of Russian society, further traditional family values as well as consolidate the overall role of families in the society and the role of the parents within the family'. The so-called traditional family values include the ideas of a heterosexual (nuclear) family forms preferably with multiple children, gender division of roles, marriage and childbearing that blend into the ideal of a 'fortunate family' (*blagopoluchnaia sem'ia*). By 2025, the government aspires to have established a system of concrete measures aimed at creating conditions to satisfy the interests of Russian families; increase their economic independence; encourage personal fulfilment of the family members; and educate future generations to value marriage and a traditional family-oriented lifestyle. The document insists that no policy measures taken by the government are effective without a thorough creation of a common and comprehensive atmosphere in Russian society that nurtures spiritual-moral values, while striving to restore the prestige of family life. Following the principles set out in the NSIC (2012), the NCFP likewise encourages cooperation between the state and the third sector. Collaboration between the federal and regional governments

and local actors and organisations in delivering care and social services is propounded as a means to enhance welfare provision available to families in difficult situations and thus support family prosperity.

The Government Decree 481 *On the Activities of Organisations for Orphans and Children Left Without Parental Care, and the Arrangement of Children Without Parental Care in These Institutions* (from now on Decree 481 2015) introduced in 2015 is a significant piece of Russian social policy, for it redefines the very nature and structures of the Russian child welfare system and its institutions providing care for orphaned children. The decree declares orphanages and other institutions of residential care to be first and foremost interagents between the children and their host families, providing but temporary care in the chain towards more family-centred caregiving. In practice, this means cutting back group sizes, whilst downsizing the overall number of internats, as more and more children are placed in family care instead of institutions. According to the decree, the existing care institutions are to undergo a complete restructuring redefining their modus operandi. The government sets quality assurance in care delivery and better monitoring of child protection services as its goals, combining them with a general objective of improving the overall quality of life of orphaned children by providing them a wide range of support services, including education, healthcare, counselling and other activities to ward off the effects of institutionalisation, that is, acclimate the children to 'normal' childhood living instead of facilitating their lives as patients.

The watchwords of 'traditional family' and spiritual-moral values' suggest that there is a set of social norms and a moral code – even some religious connotations – embedded in Russian family policy, pertaining to issues of reproduction, sexual ethics and behaviour, gender and organisation of family life; the policy programmes actively put forward the normative idea of a heterosexual nuclear family unit with reproductive capabilities, encourage childbirth and multi-child families, essentialise the protection of motherhood and children and promote a 'healthy' and 'prosperous lifestyle' for children and parents alike. Combating the social vices of family deprivation – referring to dire social and economic circumstances amid which the family cannot function properly, thus failing to provide a stable, safe and constructive childhood environment – and orphanhood – especially social orphanhood inasmuch as it is considered a consequence of family deprivation – is elevated to the very top of the Russian child and family policy

agenda. While the state remains somewhat ambivalent amid its attempts to cement the values of motherhood, fatherhood and childhood more soundly into 'the Russian social consciousness', stimulating childbearing and parenthood among its citizens are likely related to government desires to reverse Russia's demographic decline generated by falling birth rates and relatively high death rates that are not improving fast enough to compensate the deficit created by perennially low fertility (Rosstat 2018).

All in all, the principal objectives of Russia's current child and family policy appear equally ambitious and utilitarian, advocating a more humane approach to child welfare. Still, in the statist context of modern Russia, the needs of the state can be suspected to outweigh the welfare of the people in a way that is reasonable to contemplate whether the political programmes promoting motherhood and traditional family values, while fighting against social orphanhood and family deprivation, are less about improving the citizens' wellbeing per se and more about maintaining authoritative social control and halting population decline, thus beating the slow-burning demographic crisis allegedly plaguing the country. That being said, Russia has suffered an undeniably dramatic population decline in the past quarter-century, uncommon for an industrialised society in peacetime, with birth rates falling year-on-year after the collapse of the Soviet Union and mortality rates remaining high across the country (Cook 2011, 22; Kainu et al. 2017, 291). Consequently, we may observe great improvements made in mother and child healthcare in Russia, whereby infant and maternal mortality rates have more than halved since the early 1990s (Popovich, Potapchik, Shishkin, Richardson, Vacroux & Mathivet 2011, 9–10, 170, 175–176).

Yet, when we think about it, a demographic crisis, in its very essence, is an interplay between two major issues: high overall mortality rates versus a low fertility rate. At present, however, it seems that women and children are mainly held responsible for solving the population problem in Russia (Jäppinen, Kulmala & Saarinen 2011, 3). In the meantime, the government continues to sideline the pressing issue of men's premature deaths, whilst failing to promote a more visible role for men in welfare-related questions in general, which indicates that the locus of Russian social and family policy measures remains targeted elsewhere than at men and fathers (Kainu et al. 2017, 295; Kulmala & Tšernova 2015, 2 Kulmala et al. 2014, 537).

As solutions for the country's demographic problems are being sought from merely boosting birth rates, while Russian men are increasingly marginalised in welfare discussions, the result is an alarmingly narrow perception of the entire welfare system that hardly seems sustainable. What is more, these tendencies are putting a significant burden on women alone for facilitating human capital and welfare in the country. In this, Russia's recent welfare reforms may be viewed as largely determined by the Putin administration's family policy that, Kulmala and Chernova (2015, 22) argue, echoes past Soviet conceptions of women as 'production units', while supporting their employment, childbearing and child-rearing as means to satisfy the state's needs. As long as such distinct asymmetry between men and women endures unchallenged, both policy-making and design in Russia remain highly gendered and value-laden. (Kulmala & Tšernova 2015, 22–25.)

And yet, bearing in mind the regional makeup of Russia, it would be somewhat misleading to suggest that the domain of family and child welfare were fully controlled by the state. The existing laws and institutional structures in Russia have produced a system where, while the federal government prescribes the general agendas and enacts policies, significant amount of service design, provision and policy implementation in the field of child and family welfare is realised by socially oriented third sector operators (Bogdanova et al. 2018). These SONGOs, at the same time, remain highly dependent on state funds, which makes them subject to increased state control and monitoring that might result in compulsion to 'abide by the rules', which, in turn, may compromise their independence (Bogdanova & Bindman 2016). On the other hand, maintaining a good reputation, collaborative partnerships and close ties with the state officials, Elena Bogdanova and Eleanor Bindman (2016) argue, can likewise generate fruitful opportunities for the very same organisations.

At its best, this cooperation – as opposed to operating solely in opposition – may grant the NGOs and other civil society agents access to the otherwise exclusive political arena wherein they can share their street-level expertise and knowledge and attain some leverage to influence political decision-making (Kravchenko 2008, 152, 164-167, 169-171). We have seen such 'contributions from below', to borrow from Kulmala (2017), amidst the current deinstitutionalisation reform, with certain child welfare NGOs, albeit with limited institutional space, having occupied a formative role in authoring key

documents and ideas to change the child welfare system in Russia. That said, these collaborative opportunities remain dependent upon the political will of the government to foster such civil society cooperation, and the final decision-making power determining which policies and reforms are seen through remains within government structures. (Kulmala 2017, 8.)

4.3   Deinstitutionalisation of Child Welfare

To recap, deinstitutionalisation of child welfare refers to the process of replacing long-term stays of children out parental care in residential institutions with alternative forms and systems of care. Family placement instead of placement in institutions is generally regarded as the main focus of such deinstitutionalisation reforms (Schmidt 2009). What comes to the child welfare reform in today's Russia, seeing that supporting the institution of the family as the basis of society has become an important national pursuit in Russian family policy, the idea of transforming the existing system of care for children without parental care with rights-based standards into a system more closely resembling community or home-based and family-like care has also been gaining ground (Ivanova & Bogdanov 2013, 201). Not only does the reform aim at dismantling the massive system of largely publicly administered residential institutions of care for children, but the transformative idea of the deinstitutionalisation process also includes the objective of shifting the overall emphasis from corrective measures onto prevention in health and social care.

Take the already familiar Finland–Russia juxtaposition as an example: in Finland, taking a child into custody is seen as an extreme measure, the last resort, considered only if no other form of support is sufficient, all the while the reunification of the child and the biological parents remains as the ultimate goal. In Russia, on the other hand, no comprehensive system of social work has thus far existed to offer systematic preventive and after-care support for families. In most instances, the lack of such structures results in the biological parents losing their parental rights for good, whereby the current system is, in effect, creating social orphanhood rather than preventing it. (Biryukova & Varlamova 2014, 103-104; Jäppinen & Kulmala 2015, 58.)

In light of such systemic problems – and borrowing from globally prevailing welfare trends – we may observe a gradual change of mentality towards welfare-related

issues brewing in Russian political imagination. Among others, President Putin (2012) has rallied for a mindset renewal in Russian society, insisting that the entire social climate needs to change so that the interests of those who work in social institutions would no longer be put before the interests of those whom they work for. The current ethos of shifting the overall focus in health and social care from corrective measures to prevention, from the institution to the community, has translated into a flood of new political documents and family policy programmes, including those already addressed in the previous section. Insofar as family care presents a cheaper option than its residential equivalent, we may suspect that cost-efficiency constitutes one motivation for the Russian government to push for a deinstitutionalisation reform in child welfare (Kulmala et al. 2017, 361). On the other hand, the discursive framing of the question in relevant family policy documents seems to emphasise the social and human rights aspects of the proposed welfare changes; all Russian citizens should have equal rights to family life, including orphaned children, whereupon attempts should be made to replace institutional care with alternative forms that are more humane and socially inclusive and work towards improving family prosperity and the quality of life of children and parents alike (NCFP 2014; NPRWO 2012; NSIC 2012).

Placing the idea of every child's right to live and grow up in a family as their guiding principle, the government-initiated efforts to deinstitutionalise the country's system of child welfare present one of the largest social and structural reforms in Russia at present (Kulmala & Jäppinen 2015, 58; NSIC 2012). It is evident that the state has ambitious plans when it comes to its objectives of rapidly replacing the heavily institutionalised orphanage and residential care system with community and home-based alternatives such as foster families. One of the most impressive goals of the six-year NSIC government strategy enacted in 2012 was to have 90% of all the orphaned children and children left without parental care to be placed in Russian families instead of institutions by the end of year 2017 (NSIC 2012, 33). According to official data,[7] this target was met as early as 2015, with the numbers showing an overall year-by-year downward trend. Yet, the reality, we and other researchers in the field believe, remains much grimmer, as many

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[7] Data provided by the governmental statistics agency, Rosstat.

of the inherent shortcomings of Russia's welfare system and social services endure unattended. (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya 2017, 374.)

Only in recent years, Ekaterina Mazurtsuk (2014) notes, have we began to see policy initiatives and genuine improvements in social work engaging the biological parents whose child has been placed in alternative care in Russia. As already touched upon, state institutions and child protection services in Russia have generally been designed to provide support and help for the children in need and to strive towards improving their living conditions, while the parents have been left 'hung out to dry', worst comes to worst, secluded in the margins without any realistic possibilities to regain their parental rights (Mazurtsuk 2014, 58). According to Maksim Kostenko (2014) state activities in in the field of family policy have become more systematic lately, with the Russian government launching a range of national social work campaigns and adjusting social benefits for families accordingly to respond to the actual inflation development. Yet, as Kostenko (2014) continues, regardless of noteworthy efforts to revolutionise the institutional structures, the domain of child protection and family policy in Russia continue to be characterised by an unfortunate duality; despite nominally increased promotion of precautionary and early-stage social work with families at risk and the children's biological parents, the de facto number of parents losing their parental rights permanently remains alarmingly high, while a growing shortage of qualified labour and resources in basic social services continues to thwart the grand objectives of the new social policy programmes.

The ongoing deinstitutionalisation reform together with the economic recession of the late-2000s have placed an increasing burden on the private and third sectors in providing child welfare services in Russia. It is civil society and the organisations and individuals therein that are the intended deliverers of the now preferred alternative forms of community and home-based, family-like care. Jouni Nikula and Nina Ivashinenko (2017) argue that the preconditions for effective cooperation between the Russian state and various civil society agents, including NGOs, plus the existing resources to finance and organise these outsourced social obligations have been largely dependent on chance. According to Nikula and Ivashinenko (2017), governmental initiatives highlighting the third sector's role in service provision have relatively often remained trapped in a top-down approach that has left but little room for manoeuvre for the NGOs themselves. The

scholars continue to assert that the NGOs have been semi-autonomous at best in their implementation of the reform policies, as the main authority, resources and monitoring capacity have remained in the hands of the state authorities. (Nikula & Ivashinenko 2017, 384–386; 392.)

Whilst there is validity in Nikula and Ivashinenko's scepticism, our inquiry at the micro level suggests that the overall portrayal of Russian civil society involvement in policy implementation need not be that sombre; the Russian Children's Villages as a prime example of third sector activity in care provision evidence major initiative and self-determination in the modelling and realisation of their operations. In this connection, Eleanor Bindman et al. (2018) present Russian NGOs as 'policy entrepreneurs' whose persistent advocacy throughout the welfare reform process in terms of generating expert knowledge, ideas and applicable practice solutions has had a proven impact on government-level debates on child welfare issues and national priority programmes. The writers maintain that, within this emerging model of network governance, non-state actors have the potential to become active partners of state authorities in policy-making processes as the boundaries between the different sectors of public, private, and voluntary become increasingly blurred. (Bindman et al. 2018; Bogdanova & Bindman 2016).

Bindman et al. (2018) agree that both constraints and opportunities have been bestowed upon NGOs and other third sector actors in Russia in recent years, as the state authorities have tighten the overall control over Russian civil society by presenting such initiatives as the already mentioned 'foreign agent law' and the 'undesirable organisations law' accompanying it, while simultaneously opening new 'windows of opportunities' for certain types of NGOs. Amid the practical framework of the deinstitutionalisation reform, this has resulted in outsourcing a share of previously publicly provided services to a range of SONGOs, granting them varying degrees of institutional space and access to arenas of public influence within the Russian government (Bindman et al. 2018; Bogdanova & Bindman 2016; Kravchenko 2008). For a while now, the Russian state has been in desperate need of practical hands-on knowledge and internationally networked professionals when it comes to reconfiguring child welfare-related issues in the country. In this context, NGOs operating in the field of child and family welfare in Russia have become to 'occupy a middle ground' where, without acting against the body politic, they

have matured into a link between the street level and the state authorities. (Bindman et al. 2018).

4.4   Foster Care & Russian Children's Villages

In conjunction with the recent deinstitutionalisation development in Russia, forms of alternative care have become evermore diverse, growing in number and significance. Preceding and following the reform, a range of publicly, privately and NGO-run professional family homes and community-based care units such as the various Children's Villages have been established across the country. In general terms, the forms of alternative care, e.g. patronage and foster care, with the sole exception of adoption, engage parents in an employment relationship of sort, whereby they receive allowances, monthly subsidies and/or benefits in kind from the state on pro rata basis for the care they provide for the children in their custody. Similar to the trend witnessed in many other European countries, including Finland, wherein community-based family-like arrangements have become one of the fastest growing types of alternative care accompanied by more professional forms of parenting through counselling and training, we may detect signs of gradual professionalisation of parenting in systems of care in child welfare in Russia. (Mikkola 2008, 175–176).

One of the emerging forms of alternative care in Russia today is that provided by foster families. Foster care placements are portraying an annually growing trend in Russian child welfare (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya 2017), and we may observe burgeoning emphasis being laid on the extensive lobbying and consolidation of foster care as one of the preferred forms of care for children out of parental care in Russian family policy outlining the objectives of the sweeping welfare reforms (NCFP 2014; NSIC 2012; NPRWO 2012). Consequently, frequent attempts are made to increase the recruiting, testing, training, financial and social support as well as monitoring of foster families in the system. However, immense regional differences and inconsistency continue to prevail vis-à-vis how the existing resources for such developments and support services for Russian foster families are, in fact, being allocated. (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya 2017, 374–376; Mikkola 2008, 175–176, 177–180, 223.) Still, a plethora of community-based foster care systems in the form of NGO-run Children's Villages have appeared alongside

individual foster families and are likely to continue their proliferation throughout the country as the welfare reform progresses.

The immersion of the Children's Villages in the Russian system of alternative care began as early as the 1980s with the SOS Children's Villages International – the world's largest international NGO providing alternative care and support services for vulnerable families – that erected its first Village in Russia in the mid-1990s. The 1990s also witnessed the birth of a small number of domestic Children's Village operators, and today, Russia hosts altogether six SOS Children's Villages and an array of national and local organisations operating in this field of child and family welfare. Referring to the SOS Children's Villages in particular, Elena Bogdanova (2017, 369, 401) discerns that, owing to their global makeup and internationally operated nature and practices, these Villages have hitherto been regarded as a fairly 'non-standard component' of the Russian welfare and care systems. Part of the explanation may be that the primary family structure in SOS Children's Villages is that of a single-mother and her children, which escapes the two-parent ideal. While enjoying an official status of a children's home from the outset, the SOS-Villages were never considered entirely fitting or customary within the Soviet model of institutional care for children. Hence, the Villages have, in many respects, been unique exemplars and forerunners in their field of family-like alternative care. (Bogdanova 2017, 401.)

Therefore, it is important to understand that the Children's Villages have not emerged in Russia as a direct consequence of the ongoing child welfare reform; instead, they have been providers of alternative forms of care already in times when the rest of the child welfare system has still been operating on an institutional premise. However, with the now progressing deinstitutionalisation reform ushering the diversification of forms of alternative care for children left without parental care and the development of state–third sector cooperation as well as community-based and family-like care models, the spectrum of Children's Villages providing non-institutional forms of alternative care in Russia has likewise expanded. Now, the Russian civil society features numerous of community-based care providers from the internationally operated SOS Children's Villages to Villages run by domestic NGOs, nonprofits, foundations, local agents, individuals and even religious communities.

While the Villages generally form their own distinct collective – usually rather concretely as a detached residential area vis-à-vis the surrounding town or municipality – the fundamental idea behind the concept of a Children's Village is that the foster families residing in them nonetheless try to engage themselves, especially the children, in the everyday activities of the ambient communities. The Villages may offer a range of services themselves, including education, but if they do not have school facilities, the children attend school outside the Village, while some of the parents might also have jobs 'on the outside' in addition to foster parenting. Ideally, immediate peer and expert support as well as social services are available to both the foster parents and the children within the Village premises. Although the entry requirements for parent and family candidates, the required years of experience in foster parenting, the desired composition of the families and the number of children in them as well as the total of number of families in individual Village communities vary, from highly detailed and strict guidelines to more flexible suggestions, all Villages try to avoid social exclusion or excessively isolating the families from 'normal life' outside their structures. Instead, the Villages try to encourage the families' participation in the surrounding community activities, while providing the necessary resources, peer support and professional assistance to the families in times of need. (Chernova & Kulmala 2018, 53–56.)

Chernova and Kulmala (2018) propose that it is precisely the spatial localisation, social and community structures along with professional attributes attached to the foster parents themselves that make the Children's Villages distinct from other forms of alternative care in Russia. The idea of the Children's Villages as if a parallel, yet separate, system for the 'traditional' individual family placements for children left without parental care has been making headway in Russian general discourse on issues related to child and family welfare. Still, the 'ordinary', so to say, individual families taking in foster children are considered to represent a somewhat traditional form of alternative care – alongside alternatives such as adoption – whereas the Children's Villages have hitherto been treated as a system of their own, despite, in principle, providing the very same alternative care for the children as any given foster family. (Chernova & Kulmala 2018.) Be that as it may, these Villages are an equally emerging and promising form of community-based family-like care in today's Russia and are likely to continue mushrooming as the deinstitutionalisation forges ahead.

On the whole, notwithstanding legitimate efforts to transform and further develop the Russian model of alternative care systems in recent years, to facilitate structural change and monitor the results of the deinstitutionalisation process, emphasis in Russian child welfare has generally remained on attempts to reduce the total number of residential institutions and, correspondingly, increase the overall number of children in foster care (Kulmala & Jäppinen 2015). Qualitative evaluation, as Kulmala and Jäppinen (2015) argue, has been superseded by quantitative measuring, resulting in hasty and potentially unsuccessful placements of children in foster care amid bids to 'embellish' the real numbers of children without parental care living in institutions. Some of the already existing residential institutions have, in fact, grown in size due to closings of other care facilities, and the proliferating practice of reckless placing of dozens of children in one single family, Kulmala and Jäppinen (2015) continue, has vastly increased the burden on individual foster families – despite that, in Russia, de jure no more than eight children, the count including biological children, can be placed in one family.

In principle, foster care has become a selling point for the government. In practice, however, the supply does not meet the need, whereby the factual number of parents and families interested in alternative care correlates insufficiently with the number of children placed in family care. (Kulmala & Jäppinen 2015.) In this respect, the Children's Villages may be regarded as not only providing invaluable practical knowledge on foster parenting in Russia, but also as means to alleviate the apparent pressure on the system and thus facilitate the deinstitutionalisation process. Many of the Villages have been engaging in community-based care long before the state-initiated, family-centred welfare reforms, whereupon their accumulated expertise and experience, practical capital and established operational models of arranging non-institutional care carry the potential to become the buttress of Russia's new child welfare system.

5   RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

This chapter will present the approach and methods of inquiry employed in our research as well as the primary data and case studies. Elucidating the methodological hows and whys will aid the reader in acquiring a sense of the nature of our study and the pursued research objective therein. Furthermore, an outline of the study approach and means of data collection and analysis, accompanied by an introduction to the chosen Children's

Villages as well as some ethical considerations, enable us to lay the groundwork for Chapters 6 and 7 reporting and discussing our research findings, thus further corroborating our final conclusions. The primary purpose of this section, therefore, is to clarify the ideational basis of our analysis instead of simply furnishing a mechanical step-by-step review of the data gathering procedures, although a brief description of the data analysis process, along with some critical assessment of the relevance and applicability of our named research methods will, of course, be provided.

5.1   Social Constructionism

This study adopts a qualitative approach for investigating the perceptions and practices of foster parenting in Russian Children's Villages, taking shape against the backdrop of the larger process of deinstitutionalisation of child welfare in today's Russia. The primary data consist of information gathered through four semi-structured expert interviews and five focus group discussions with foster parents, conducted as face-to-face encounters in six Children's Villages across Russia in 2017. In view of the qualitative case study nature of our investigation, our inquiry fosters a largely interpretative micro-level emphasis that allows both the data and our social constructionist position to yield structure for the analysis. While knowledgeable about the variety of exploratory and descriptive approaches to examining non-numerical data, we have chosen to use thematic content analysis, considering both the commonness of the method in qualitative research and its suitability for analysing interview transcripts (Burnard et al. 2008, 429).

As might be expected, given the topic of study, descriptive nature and textual form of the primary data, together with the investigative design of our research questions – which, to remind the reader, are: 'How do foster parents perceive parenthood/parenting in the context of Russian Children's Villages?' And 'How do their perceptions intersect with government-promoted ideas on family?' – qualitative inquiry has presented itself as the most suitable approach to the subject at hand. After all, the pith of qualitative research may be characterised by its objective to understand particular aspects of social life and employ methods which, as a rule, generate words rather than numbers (Patton & Cochran 2002, 2). As a scientific method, qualitative research, Michael Quinn Patton and Michael Cochran (2002, 3) expound, is typically considered to be more occupied with the 'what',

'how' and 'why' of a phenomenon than the 'how many's' of it, thereby coinciding fully with our research objectives.

What comes to our methods of reasoning, we make no attempt at imposing rigorous theory on the data, instead allowing much of the empirical evidence to shepherd the analysis. However, the explanatory considerations accompanying our empirical findings in the discussions to come are informed by a social constructionist view that values the complexity and relativity of one's experience. Acknowledging the socially constructed nature of our perceptions and portrayals of the actual world, our reflections will be based on the assumption of subjectivity of experience and interpretation as well as the jointly created nature of reality. Thus, although remaining inductive amid our navigation through the interview transcripts, we shall utilise pre-existing ideas of the world as of social construct as we seek to examine and, more importantly, explain the kaleidoscopic meaning-making processes of foster parents and child welfare professionals residing in the set Children's Villages.

Social constructionism is generally recognised as having emerged in the social sciences during the late-1960s and 1970s via flagship publications such as Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) introducing the idea that, through social practice, human beings together create and perpetuate all social phenomena. In other words, the world we inhabit is essentially jointly constructed and articulated. Alexandra Galbin (2014, 85) locates the kernel of the thought in the assertion that to say that something is of social construct, is to say that 'this thing could not have existed had we not built it; and we need not have built it at all, at least not in its present form.' Hence, constructionists, as suggested by Charles Walker (2015, 37), concern themselves primarily with what is and can be known about the human world of social experience, thus centring on examining the process by which meanings are created, sustained, negotiated, and modified as a society, thereby seeking to understand the world of lived experience from the perspective of those who live it.

An increasingly greater emphasis in social constructionist inquiry is put on language as the primary conduit by which qualities and processes are modelled and presented, since the construction of reality is principally manifested via language (Walker 2015, 37, Galbin 2014, 87). That is to say, language in its varying forms is the basic

building block of our experience of reality, through which we engage socially and convey a plethora of meanings. In this connection, rhetoric and discourse refer to the use of spoken or written language and the larger social context formed by and around that occurrence of certain utterances. Given the implicit and explicit power of language and the descriptive form of our primary data, we have likewise assigned considerable attention to linguistic details amid our survey of the interview transcripts and will be contemplating the interviewees' use of words in the upcoming discussions. Having said that, we ought to be mindful of our own use of language as well, seeing that we are analysing Russian interview material in another language which is also our principal tool of reporting our research findings. For that reason, we must exercise circumspection in our translation so that the initial meaning of the words and phrases would be conveyed to the reader accordingly, without distortion or extreme contextual loss.

The focus group design of the interviews under study lends itself particularly well for social constructionist inquiry, seeing that the aim and utility of focus group interviews may be defined in terms of purposeful use of interaction in order to generate data (McLafferty 2004, 187). Hence, it is the semi-informal, semi-structured group setting that provides the respondents an opportunity to articulate and share their perceptions and experience via jointly constructed language and understandings of the topic at hand, thereupon allowing the discussion to progress almost as if it were a dialogue where the self meets the other. Yet, it is worth noting that the interviewers' questions remain vital to the interactive process as means to construct shared meaning for a shared experience, as we cannot have experience without asking question, since questions function as our primary medium to encounter the object and the other (Väyrynen 2005, 351–352). So, to borrow from Tarja Väyrynen's (2005, 352) adaption of Hans-Georg Gadamer's thinking, questioning occurs in dialogue that 'is a kind of speech that lets the other person speak as well and shows a shared willingness to question', and only via questions may we forge a structure of openness and true conversation. While absent from the interviews themselves, it is likewise important for us to continue to ask questions from the primary data in order to, first, find the meaningful statements therein vis-à-vis our research questions and thus build an understanding of the topic and our research subjects' perceptions of it and, second, generate scientific knowledge based on our empirical findings.

Nevertheless, it should be taken into account that any knowledge of the surrounding world we as researchers can attain is pertained to a specific socio-historical context. What we regard as 'truth' varies historically and cross-culturally, and, as a mere product of social interaction, the reality is multiple, unstable and dependent on each perceiver in a specific spatio-temporal context (Burr 2015, 4–5, 92). As such, we ought to accept the concepts of pure objectivity and absolute truth as essentially contradictions in terms and something we cannot claim to be able to obtain in our study, since our own conscious or subconscious, intended or unintended assumptions, expectations and worldview inevitably influence the research process in one way or another. After all, qualitative researchers themselves, as stressed by Walker (2015, 37), participate in the construction of a social world instead of re-presenting some independent reality, wherefore any work of research – this study included – is to be viewed as a reciprocal process, to borrow from Vivien Burr (2015, 172), a co-production between the researchers themselves and the subjects they are examining.

To be sure, social constructionism is not without its critics who often dub the perspective relativist, calling to question the usefulness and validity of research findings stemming from constructivist inquiry, which, in the eyes of the realists, values the subjective experience to excess (Walker 2015, 37–38). Also, juxtaposing qualitative research with its quantitative equivalent highlights the underlying issue of the former's verifiability, for the analysis of qualitative data always entails interpreting the study findings, which in practice might translate into different researchers interpreting the same data somewhat differently (Burnard et al. 2008, 431). Subsequently, quantitative researchers may well contest the legitimacy of constructionist accounts by claiming that, when multiple studies produce multiple realities, they fail to represent the social world straightforwardly or objectively (Burnard et al. 2008, 431; Walker 2015, 37).

Where then lies the weight of such findings if everything is relative? Whilst easy to dismiss as redundant, Alexandra Galbin (2014, 90) proposes that the value of qualitative research which adopts the constructionist position is precisely in its faculty to offer new intelligibilities and creatively construct new realities. These constructed understandings resigning from axiomatic truths emphasise the contextual and social import of knowledge production and its practices (Galbin 2014, 90). Walker (2015) supports this argument, maintaining that constructionists primarily concern themselves

with the whys and wherefores of knowledge production in society, upholding the opinion that we need not confuse the epistemological considerations of social constructionism with ontological claims; thus, it is not the existence of reality per se that social constructionist inquiry denies or contests, but its meaning that is believed to be socially constructed and conveyed.

That being said, it remains vital that we understand our own power and involvement in the construction of reality as researchers carrying out the processes of interpretation and knowledge production through this study. It is reasonable to ask what constitutes expert knowledge granting us the executive power to claim authority over a specific subject matter. Walker (2015, 37) contends that the novel status and jurisdiction over knowledge that experts seem occupy come to being through their full-time devotion to a given topic as well as through their interaction with one another. We should not, however, accept scientific authoritative claims and methods unequivocally, but take scientific knowledge as a fluid intelligibility, and social constructionism as means to deconstruct and, subsequently, reconstruct both theoretical and practical contexts as well as critically evaluate traditional beliefs and practices in society and their cultural implications (Galbin 2014, 90–91). Galbin (2014, 90) observes room for narrative progress in science, insisting that the social constructionist perspective may serve to provide alternative, more imaginative, ways of producing and presenting knowledge.

All this considered, we see particular value in the Children's Villages chosen as our case studies in terms of their narrative capacity to exemplify rather comprehensively a larger structural and ideological development in today's Russia. Yet, some observe that, in social sciences, the balance between case studies and large samples remains somewhat biased in favor of the latter, putting case studies at a disadvantage within most disciplines (Flyvbjerg 2006, 241–242). Bent Flyvbjerg (2006) has successfully identified some of the most common, albeit oversimplified, misconceptions about case study research, which can be summarised as follows: (1) theoretical knowledge is more valuable than practical knowledge; (2) one cannot generalise from a single case, therefore the single case study cannot contribute to scientific development; (3) the case study is most useful for generating hypotheses, while other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building; (4) the case study contains a bias toward verification; and (5) it is often difficult to summarise specific case studies. Whilst these misunderstandings clearly

problematise theory, reliability, and validity, it is the role of case study research in the investigation of human learning that renders it valuable, as case studies produce particular context-dependent knowledge which, essentially, equals the sole type of explanatory knowledge existing in the qualitative study of human affairs (Flyvbjerg 2006, 221–224).

In any event, it is not the superiority of one method over another that is at issue here. Instead, by highlighting the utility of case studies in qualitative research, we wish to establish why the Children's Villages as an exemplar carry scientific importance. Flyvbjerg (2006, 223, 241) asserts that social sciences have yet failed to produce wholly context-independent knowledge and arrives to a conclusion that mirrors Thomas Kuhn's words, (1987) insisting that 'a discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and that a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one.' Needless to say, exemplars always need to be projected onto a larger frame of reference, hence the two preceding background chapters elucidating the prevailing macro conditions in Russia, within which we may examine our micro examples. In this connection, we believe that through well-performed and in-depth thematic content analysis of our set case studies, we can utilise the information obtained from the Children's Villages as exemplars to construct a wider reality and generate scientific knowledge that is both valid and valuable vis-à-vis lager disciplinary purposes. Hence, the goal is to find meaningful statements in our multilayered research and embed our empirical findings in existing discussions, thus incorporating new information into ongoing debates.

Moreover, we strive to elevate our analysis from merely describing data to being supported by the evidence, which Pat Bazeley (2002) confirms the as the principal aim of conducting good qualitative research, while also providing the only viable means to satisfy and convince immediate stakeholder and academic audiences. Arranging extensive and occasionally fragmented empirical evidence in a more clear and compact way, without letting it lose any of its significance, is the key for increasing the relevance of one's research. At the same time, being able to derive value and reconstruct a meaningful entity from fragmentary data not only enables others to gain a better understanding of the research topic but also aids them to further utilise the information acquired, as the subject is made more approachable and comprehensible to a miscellaneous audience (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2017). It is equally important to be able to

synthesise specific examples with larger phenomena. In this case, it entails making connections between the information received from the Children's Villages and the ongoing nationwide process of deinstitutionalisation of child welfare in Russia. By identifying and conceptualising general trends – with potentially some universal confluence – from specific case study findings, we should be able to expand the scope and relevance of our study, making our arguments transferrable to other national contexts.

5.2 Russian Children's Villages

We have already established the basic definition of a Children's Village as a village-like community of foster families, and all the Russian case studies used as basis for our analysis essentially match this description, but with slight differences. The Villages under study are all located in European Russia, that is, in the part of the country west of the Ural Mountains, with five of the establishments situated within the northwestern or central districts and one in the south. We have knowledge of the specific location of each Village, however, we do not deem it necessary for our analysis to disclose these details to the reader. In fact, by omitting such information, we believe to be able to better preserve the privacy of our research participants. The Children's Villages in focus virtually all resemble a sort of detached residential community or housing estate within their localities, comprising of several buildings, from 10 to 25 houses built as homes for the foster families, plus other facilities, e.g. schools, parks, playgrounds, even a church, for various forms of social, recreational and educational activities, whereupon they appear – as the name suggests – actual villages in form. However, whilst standalone settlements in principle, these Villages are not self-sufficient in terms of urban basic services, on account of which they remain reliant on the general services and infrastructure of their respective municipalities. Thus, in effect, they continue to exist as communities within communities.

None of the Villages under inquiry are governmental institutions, but operate either on an NGO or on an NPO basis under such umbrella terms as 'charitable' or 'nonprofit organisation', 'charity project', 'charitable foundation' and 'child-focused non-governmental organisation'. Yet, since the Children's Villages, as a rule, are erected either fully or partly on public land, they are required to liaise with regional, municipal and local authorities which, by donating the land or other resources to the Village actors,

can, of course, be seen as supporting their operations in one way or another. Moreover, the Russian government has recently introduced a federal decree formally addressing the 'activity of child welfare NGOs in Russian society, which, in itself, presupposes a degree of cooperation between these Village organisations and federal, regional and local administrative bodies (Decree 481, 2014). However, the individual stakeholders – whether domestically or internationally operating NGOs or local charities – behind each specific Village community are the ones essentially determining the core values and guiding principles as well as modes of operation for their respective projects, thus curating their local activities. Furthermore, while federal legislation stipulates the requisites for becoming a foster parent in Russia (Kulmala et al., forthcoming, 17–18), the Villages themselves are effectively in charge of recruiting, vetting – and, if need be, training – the individuals hoping to live and work in the establishments.

All the said Children's Village projects aim at providing a community-based and family-like alternative to large, traditional residential institutions for children left without parental care. From the six case study examples, two are part to the SOS Children's Villages International network and operate mainly according the principle of single-parent family form, by which the children are fostered by single mothers, with only few exceptions. One of the Villages under study is a distinctly religious community adhering to the Orthodox faith and traditional family values, whereby the foster families all consist of two parents in a heterosexual relationship, that is, a mother and a father, committed to taking in at least eight children. The remaining three Villages are managed by private domestic nonprofits allowing a bit more leeway as to how individual foster families are to be formed, whereupon we may see a range of family forms, potentially from two-parent units to single mothers or fathers with varied number of children, in one Village community.

However, all the Villages of this study, generally speaking, host families with multiple children, with as much as 13 foster children in one family, and the clear majority of family systems have both a mother and a father. Additionally, each organisation tends to set forth strict requirements for hopeful foster parent candidates, calling for discernible motivation and prior experience in fostering, thereby conducting a rigorous selection process for short-listing families aspiring to move into one of the houses in their Village. As such, while the projects appear to be building their foundations on volunteer work by

openly welcoming motivated individuals to participate in their activities, the road to becoming an actual foster parent in one of Villages is not as straightforward an affair.

Now, although there are some distinguishable differences in the operations of the various Villages in focus, we, nevertheless, wish to examine them all together, for our objective is to investigate foster parenting as a social construct within the unique context of Russian Children's Villages instead of reporting on how individual Villages in Russia allegedly differ from one another. As such, an inquiry into the collective ideas and understandings of parenting among Russian foster parents is what constitutes our case study, not an exploration of the Village surroundings per se, wherefore we do not see the utility of treating the Villages separately. Furthermore, being too specific in our description of the Villages might threaten the privacy and anonymity of our research participants, whereupon to ensure the protection of respondent confidentiality we ought to discuss our research findings at a more general level. That being said, if and when certain themes are peculiar to one Village only, we will, of course, make note of that in our analysis. Otherwise, we seek to construct an integrated analysis of foster parenting in Russian Children's Villages, by way of which our case study can be treated and further utilised by others as an all-encompassing micro-level exemplar of the Russian national context.

5.3 Interviews with Foster Parents & Child Welfare Professionals

The data to be analysed consist of information obtained via five focus group interviews with foster parents and four individual expert interviews with professionals residing in six different Children's Villages in Russia. The semi-structured interviews have been conducted on site by two researchers, Meri Kulmala and Zhanna Chernova, in 2017 within the framework of a three-year research project 'A Child's Right to a Family: Deinstitutionalisation of Child Welfare in Putin's Russia', hosted by the Aleksanteri Institute. All the interviews were carried out as spoken, face-to-face encounters with a total of 54 foster parents (36 women, 18 men) and four child welfare experts (one woman, three men) residing in the Villages in the respondents' native of Russian (see Figure 1. for details). The discussions were audio recorded at the times and later transcribed to equal some 250 pages of written interview material in Russian. We have been working with the original Russian transcripts, whereupon all the empirical evidence reported in

the upcoming results section is of our own translation. The data has be processed accordingly to protect the privacy of the interviewees and the confidentiality of their responses. Some of the respondents have revealed sporadic personal information such as their name in the interview situations, however, no such details of personal data will be disclosed in this study, for we wish to treat all the participants anonymously in our analysis.

Village	A	B	C	D	E	F	Total
Parents	11	12	12	8	11		54
Experts		2	1			1	4
Men	4	9	4		3	1	21
Women	7	5	9	8	8		37
Total	11	14	13	8	11	1	58

Figure 1. Number of respondents in case study Children's Villages

It should also be added that the written interview transcripts are formatted so that distinction is only made between the interviewers/moderators and interviewees, with no specific reference to the gender of the respondent, nor is any participant given a pseudonym. That being said, gender is certainly detectable from the texts, considering the fact that past tense verbs usually agree with the speaker's gender in the Russian language. Additionally, whilst no particular mention is generally given to denote when the utterance of one respondent changes to that of another, individual statements are relatively easy to derive from the overall context of the group discussions. Yet, since our research aim is to examine foster parenting not necessarily on gendered or individual basis – albeit these aspects are likely to influence the respondents' answers in one way or another – but very much as a social construct, we prefer to refer to all of the respondents primarily as either parents or experts or both, if and when these roles are merged, and only allude to the gender or parental role (mother or father) of the respondent when it is considered relevant for the analysis.

This being the case, we agree that gender continues to carry considerable social importance in today's Russia, however, exploring the gender ideology or potentially gendered behaviour of foster parents would deserve a study of its own – and it is not this one. What is more, our review of the primary data has not found that the respondents' experiences of foster parenting would vary significantly based on their role as 'mothers' or 'fathers', but that parenthood in the context of the Children's Villages is very much a shared experience between all the parents, mothers and fathers alike. Of course, this does not mean that the gender of an individual would not affect their role as a parent, after all the domain of family continues to be marked by gendered social and normative expectations – a gender contract, if we may – on individuals' differing roles, functions and responsibilities as either mothers or fathers in Russian society (see, e.g. Rotkirch & Temkina 2007). However, our shortly reported findings suggest that parenting may likewise be a collectively constructed and jointly articulated reality between women and men, whereupon individuals may perceive and explain themselves and their agency, not only through the experience of motherhood or fatherhood, but through the shared experience of parenthood. Thus, this inquiry maintains that, while mothers and fathers if treated individually, our respondents are ultimately parents when perceived in the larger social context.

Whilst the design of a semi-structured interview generally allows more flexibility and freedom to the respondents to narrate their position vis-à-vis a topic than a rigidly structured questionnaire, it is not uncommon, as cautioned by Kathryn Roulston (2014, 298), for researchers to generate data that align with their research purposes, paying deliberate attention to references to a specific phenomenon of interest. Now, it could be argued that, since the initial data collection has not been conducted by us, we have not been able to steer the interviews according to our own research objectives. Be that as it may, considering the sheer volume of the interview data, we did draft and formulate the preliminary research questions and study aims before becoming fully emerged with the primary data, which, in itself, directed our course of reading through the transcripts. Yet, we tried to remain open for letting the data speak for themselves and shepherd the thematic categorisation, on account of which we, among other things, revised and changed our second research question to its current form. Still, it is worth bearing in mind that, while we endeavour to produce an all-encompassing analysis of the said interviews,

the data have gone through rigorous reduction and selection processes, at which point all decisions on the 'relevance' or 'irrelevance' of certain pieces of information have been and are governed by our judgement as researchers.

Another issue worth touching upon is our absence from the actual interview situations. While we have already provided some arguments for how our analysis might benefit from us not conducting the interviews ourselves, the fact remains that, by failing to attend the interviews and personally visit the Children's Villages under study, we have not been able to derive meaning from the physical context of the Villages or the respondents' delivery of utterances, which, Roulston (2014, 298–299) supposes, is only possible via face-to-face communication. Also, we have only worked with the written interview transcripts – that is, we have not had any video or audio recordings to aid our interpretations – that do not include descriptions of the way or tone of speech delivery (e.g. whisper, talking with a raised voice, emphasis on certain words), nor do they record non-verbal behaviour or action (e.g. pauses, laughter, overlapping speech), whereupon the sole source for analysis are the transcribed words of the participants. On the other hand, our physical detachment from the Villages, with no personal engagement with the respondents, we believe, has enabled us to better distance ourselves emotionally from the data, therefore aiding us in our quest for objectivity – which, perhaps a myth, still remains one of the guiding principles of scientific inquiry.

Now, aware of the lacking observational dimension of our investigation, we have fixed our attention primarily on the topical analysis of the data. While Roulston (2014, 298) annotates that, when engaging in fieldwork, constructionists may often lay individual emphasis on the interviewees, we have adopted a more collective approach in our perusal of the interview transcripts. Since the interviews with the parents were carried out in a focus group setting, we may observe that the socially constructed nature of their portrayals of foster parenting is particularly strong. The expert interviews, on the other hand, were not collective situations in a similar sense, as they were conducted as individual interviews with one respondent and two researchers. However, since the general subject matter of these interviews is the given Children's Village community, the thematic substance remains, to a large degree, social. Additionally, the expert interviewees, while all enjoying a professional status of sort in their communities, are also either residents of their respective Villages and/or current or previous foster parents,

whereupon the distinction between 'an expert' and 'a parent' is not unambiguous. Hence, instead of dissociating 'the experts' from the ambient parent community, we consider them very much a part of it and their narratives complementary to those of the parents. Consequently, we see no reason for why their accounts per se should be treated separately in the analysis. Instead, we have integrated all interviews into one discussion, amid which reference to the respondent's expert role will only be made if it is regarded an important determinant of the views they are expressing.

As a whole, we believe our sampling size to be agreeable and fitting for such collective inquiry. Of course, as already touched upon earlier, there is ever so much generalisation we can do based on individual case studies, however, treated as illuminating exemplars they can both broaden and deepen our understanding of the phenomenon under study. We believe that a total of nine interviews with almost sixty participants altogether constitutes a good cross-section of the Russian Children's Villages, upon which our reported findings can be further utilised by others as to provide national and contextual insight into the perceptions and practices of foster parenting in today's Russia. In this connection and similar to what has been said about our treatment of gender in this study, we wish to discuss the themes arising from the Villages in a more abstract – or general, if we may – sense, not gratuitously pinpointing specific Village communities. That is to say, we wish to abstain from mentioning in every occasion where certain quote comes from directly. Only in situations where a theme is particularly or only unique to a specific Village do we isolate the example. Otherwise we attempt to make this a case study of Russian Children's Villages, not a case study of individual Children's Villages in Russia. This, in our opinion, allows us to draw more general conclusions that can be further utilised in other academic discussions. We also believe that unnecessary references to the specifics of a single Village community might inadvertently compromise our respondents' privacy.

The still understudied bottom-up narratives arising from the Children's Villages will not only shed light on Russian foster parents' perceptions of themselves and their social position, but also deepen our understanding of the local consequences of the nationwide process of deinstitutionalisation of child welfare. The basic utility of inquiry at the street level is to gain insight; to explore the depth, richness, and complexity of a given phenomenon. With regards this study, the journey towards deeper understanding

has been carried out as a gradual progression from top to bottom, from macro to micro, form state towards the human agent. Nonetheless, the interpretative method typically focusing on a rather limited number of descriptive first-person accounts is unlikely to produce conclusive statements that could be universally applied. This, for its part, necessitates particular rigour and circumspection from our part, to wit, we must accept the inherent limitations of our data, thus avoiding making categorical propositions based on qualitative micro-level inquiry. Yet, the value and benefit of interview-based case study at the micro level lies in its ability to produce in-depth quality insights.

5.4   Thematic Content Analysis

Having established the logic and rationale of social constructionism as our study approach and expounded upon the interview material and case studies, we wish to give some explanation to why we have chosen thematic content analysis as our principal method for analysing the primary data. Our main objective, once again, is to find meaningful statements regarding perceptions of parenthood and practices of family life that stem from the ground up and, subsequently, reflect them back to the government-initiated ideas on family. What we are interested in is not only finding analogies between testimonies made by a range actors from different strata of Russian society, but also detecting moments of disruption of thought and identifying implicit or explicit discourses that may be in conflict with each other. We also seek to give the micro-level stakeholders a chance to express ideas and imageries of everyday realities of Russian foster families, which the state-led policy programmes or official rhetoric fail to convey.

We have chosen to use thematic content analysis, since it is considered a befitting method for analysing open-ended, semi-structured interviews that have been fully recorded and transcribed and thus can be used across a range of epistemologies (Burnard 1991; Burnard et al. 2008). The method is widely-utilised in qualitative research and focuses on identifying and describing thematic elements arising from the selected primary sources. Used with interview data, the principal aim of thematic content analysis, as stated by Philip Burnard (1991, 461–462), 'is to produce a detailed and systematic recording of the themes and issues addressed in the interview material and to link the themes and interviews together under a reasonably exhaustive category system'. A thoroughly performed analysis also includes conceptualisation of the themes, whereupon the named

categories are not merely compared and contracted in relation to each other, but also related to previous literature, which aids the researchers in avoiding too much reliance on mere quotes for evidence (Bazeley 2009, 10, 19). However, the process of identifying patterns or common themes within qualitative data, notwithstanding the topic or study approach, constitutes the crux of the method (Burnard et al. 2008, 429).

Still, as with any research method, thematic content analysis also has its limitations, the most obvious of which is the problem of determining whether 'common themes' may really be considered common, that is, to question how reasonable it is to compare one person's utterances to those of another (Burnard 1991, 462). Yet, as affirmed by Burnard (1991, 462), the method, as a rule, takes it for granted that we can generalise first-person accounts − to a certain degree − by linking one person's worldview to the viewpoints of others, provided that we as researchers acknowledge the inherent complications of such generalisation and abstain from conducting thematic content analysis in a 'doing by numbers' sort of way. As such, it is essentially impossible to quantify qualitative data given the epistemological aim of the method − interest in quality over quantity − and the nature and size of its sampling (Burnard et al. 2008, 432).

In the previous discussions, we have already touched upon some of the issues concerning validity when doing qualitative research, and thematic content analysis as a qualitative method certainly calls for vigilance from the part of the researcher. Bazeley (2009, 20) echoes Burnard et al.'s position, suggesting the recipe for good analysis to be, in Lynn Richard's words, 'simplicity, elegance and balance, completeness, robustness as well as relevance'. In practice, the initial data analysis ought to be gradual, beginning with a thorough reading and interpretation of the transcribed primary material, with the final writing-up process typically observing a three-step formula of 'describe, compare and relate'. It is of primary importance that we first familiarise ourselves properly with the primary material; only then may we proceed with the coding of the data into descriptive categories which are then discussed as concepts in a more abstract level and further named and integrated together as common themes. (Bazeley 2009, 6–7, 10–11.) Some researchers, Roulston finds (2014, 303), do not move beyond thematic descriptions in their analysis, while others go on to conceptualise the properties and dimensions of their initial code labels.

Now, in order to avoid the pitfalls of superfluous deduction, producing instead meaningful quality analysis, we must be able to not only name, describe and generalise themes but also compare, contest and connect them (Bazeley 2009, 7–8). After all, interview transcripts alone are but a descriptive account of the study and provide very little explanation per se, upon which the researchers are entrusted with the task of making sense of the collected data via exploration and interpretation (Burnard et al. 2008, 429–430). Keeping in mind that naming the themes is always a thorny exercise, we must be able to offer sound justification for our finalised categories, for we as the main interpreters of the primary data occupy a powerful position with our conceptualisations and thematic constructs (Bazeley 2009, 9–10, 19). Also, Bazeley (2009, 9) urges particular caution when dealing with issues concerning premeditation. Following her suggestions, we agree that it will be beneficial for both the reader and us, if we remain open about which thematic categorisations were somehow anticipated and which were not.

In the actual analysis process, we have followed Burnard's (1991) suggested gradual proceedings, aim of which is to ensure the relevance of the finalised thematic categories and the validity of the analysis as well as to eliminate potential bias. We have passed through various stages of reading and re-reading, coding, surveying, peer reviewing and editing the categories before finalising the seven themes which will be presented and discussed in detail in the next chapter. Additionally, we have found the pair work aspect of our thesis particularly useful for eliminating possible partiality, for working alongside one another, we have been engaging in constant peer review, evaluating each other's work separately and as a team. In fact, describing the multiple stages of the analysis process, Burnard (1991, 462–464) highlights the utility of two or more researchers discussing and comparing their individually compiled lists of categories before the final themes may be tenably established. This process usually requires a single researcher to consult an external party in order to remove bias. However, by drafting our proposed lists of themes first independently before coming to together, we have been able to somewhat autonomously review each other's findings based on our individual interpretations and categorisations, thus revising and adjusting the final list of categories accordingly.

This said, research – no matter the number of researchers – is never fully objective, nor is it entirely inclusive. The researcher's interpretation of the primary

sources is, ipso facto, a subjective activity, and, while the theoretical goal may be to account for all the data, the practical reality is that some elements of interviews are always omitted from the final analysis which, in itself, is a selective process (Burnard 1991, 464). For instance, it is not uncommon that interview projects generate hundreds of pages of data – as in our case – that need to be reduced and interpreted by the analysts in order to present findings in publications that are, as a rule, limited in size (Roulston 2014, 306). Consequently, for ensuring validity, it might be helpful for us to include some examples of the 'uncodable' (or unrelated) pieces of data and sporadic cases perhaps only unique to some or even one respondent in the discussion (Burnard 1991, 464; Burnard et al. 2008, 431). Additionally, Burnard et al. (2008, 431) recommend providing a detailed explication of the data collection process, if and when applicable, to accompany the analysis. In our case, however, such a report cannot be appropriately produced, since the primary data have initially been collected by others, but we are able to detail the operative steps of the data analysis process.

Our analysis has followed a gradual from–macro–to–micro process comparable to the entire structure of the thesis. We see ourselves as having started our research journey with a considerable amount of historical, cultural and contextual information on Russia that allowed us to construct – what we hope to be a relatively comprehensive – general reading of the country and its society. Through the first-person accounts of our primary data, we have been able to acquire unique bottom-up knowledge that otherwise cannot be found in policy documents or achieved via top-down inquiry. Upon reflection, this knowledge from the ground up, in many respects, enabled us to refine our already existing interpretations of Russia, whereupon we could see ourselves transitioning from merely juggling vast quantities of abstract information towards forming an integrated understanding where all dots are more or less connected. By amalgamating secondary and primary data from different levels of society, we believe to have been able to assemble a more nuanced reflection of the Russian context in relation to our topic. Of course, as the topic itself is limited to a specific socio-political domain, our reflections also have their confines and, needless to say, are neither exhaustive nor complete with respect to the whole of Russia, but cover merely one segment of a spectrum that extends yet much further both vertically and horizontally.

In practice, the analysis of the primary data began with multiple rounds of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, together and separately, until we had immersed ourselves entirely in the data. The familiarisation stage was followed by an initial coding process which was carried out manually, with pen and paper, to account for all the data. The exhaustive coding then gradually matured into selective, albeit inclusive, categorisation and finalisation of the now seven major themes of analysis in the following manner:

(1) First, we underlined and made note of everything we considered interesting for our scientific minds. Unsurprisingly, this stage produced dozens of potential avenues to explore.

(2) Therefore, this step was followed by another round of both of us independently highlighting sections we regarded particularly relevant to our research question.

(3) Then, based on our individual suggestions of thematic units emerging from the data, we drafted a mutual list of tentative categories we could both agree on. At this stage, we still had some ten proposed thematic classifications, including parenting as a profession; a calling; a moral obligation; a personal project; an act of patriotism; a service; a natural circumstance; an act of reforming; a channel for social mobility; child saving; and being a Good Samaritan.

(4) Agreeing that the list still needed to be condensed and edited, we consulted the transcripts in their entirety once more to establish which of the now identified categorisations de facto prevail in the data; which of them can be merged together under one category; and which ones are too trivial to support an argument and thus best omitted. Through this conclusive step, we managed to finalise the seven major themes and their headings, ensuring that the reported findings are equally relevant, prevailing and important vis-à-vis our research objective.

Whilst some might regard the fact that we have not collected the interview material ourselves somewhat limiting, we see it, above all, as an enabling factor; not

having conducted the interviews and encountered the interviewees in person and thus being oblivious of the data before commencing our research, we have been able to begin our analysis somewhat free of preconceptions and partial recall, although objectivity remains more difficult a virtue to achieve and maintain. Also, if we consider the added weakness of our position, failing to attend the context of the interviews, we also have no awareness of the gestures and body language of the respondents, tones of voice and possible pauses in their speech amid the face-to-face communication situations. On the other hand, we also have no previous memory of the interview situations to, consciously or unconsciously, steer our analysis, which we consider a potentially mitigating factor in terms of unintended bias. This is not to suggest that primary material collected by the same researchers analysing it would somehow automatically be compromised – avoiding bias is essentially a matter of professional ability, and objectivity but a gift of the few – and we certainly lack in terms of potentially valuable field observations that might enrich the representation of our findings (Roulston 2014, 299), but that we can hopefully approach the data with a set of fresh eyes.

Of course, we are familiar with the work previously done by others in the 'A Child's Right to a Family' research project, including the two researchers in charge of collecting our primary data, and therefore cannot claim ourselves beginning from a tabula rasa. Still, the strength of these type of research projects is, to a great extent, in the possibility they provide for researchers to work separately and in close liaison with one another with the same bulk of data. Inasmuch as it remains impossible to fit large amounts of primary data in one piece of research without any reduction, it is extremely beneficial to work in a research team where one researcher's excess data can be utilised by others, at which point it becomes much more likely that nearly all the data are eventually accounted for. Moreover, the inherent peer-review nature of such research projects is what broadens and deepens the scope of interpretations by each individual, adding to the validity of each of their work's reported findings. As such, we also believe that, ultimately, it is the academic community around us that lends credence to our statements.

5.5   Ethical Considerations

In accordance with the ethical principles of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, we are committed to conducting our research responsibly, while following good scientific practice and seeing through the realisation of the three-step guidelines for ensuring the preservation of respondent confidentiality, outlined by the Board. The said principles of good scientific practice are as follows: (1) respecting the autonomy of the research participants; (2) avoiding causing harm to any participants involved; and (3) ensuring the protection of both the participants' privacy and the data. (National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009.)

We trust in the fact that our two colleagues from the Aleksanteri Institute, Meri Kulmala and Zhanna Chernova, who have been in charge of collecting the interview data, have also adhered to the aforementioned guidelines amid their work. Participation in this study and the interviews has been completely voluntary, and the respondents' have had the right to refuse to answer and terminate their interview at any given time. The interviews have been carried out anonymously without gathering an exhausting amount of personally identifiable information, although some of the respondents have chosen to share personal details in their answers. These data will not, however, be shared to the reader in order to prevent any potential identification of individual responses. In fact, during the transcription stage, any remaining traces of personal identifiers were obliterated so that none of the research participants could be identified on the basis of individual utterances. However, as Pirkko-Liisa Rauhala and Elina Virokannas (2011) perceptively point out, an ethical review of any research process requires much more scrutiny than simply ticking boxes on a list of basic rules of good scientific practice.

When assessing the informational value of one's research, one must factor in that, particularly in disciplines such as the social sciences, where the topics of study are often highly sensitive and intimate, the research subjects may easily be endangered. The reported findings, albeit truthful, may have a stigmatising, even damaging, effect on some of the participants. Additionally, it is not uncommon that research into social or psychological vices may legitimise 'hopelessness' by highlighting the difficulty of comprehensively addressing such ample social problems and the scarcity of professional resources to carry out their resolution. For that reason, ethically sound research ought to

strive towards being beneficial and, above all, constructive. Therefore, personal interest alone, however important a prerequisite it might be for the quality of one's work, does not suffice, but we must always consider the ethical implications of our work. It is thus imperative that our inquiry can be justified by something other than mere interest, to wit, the actual usefulness of it. (Rauhala & Virokannas 2011, 236–238, 246.)

Regarding our own study, a research project that engages a large international team of researchers, transcending state and cultural borders, always presents an array of practical and ethical challenges. For researchers operating in an international context, it is particularly important to acknowledge the fact that the ethical norms of one scientific community might to coincide with the research ethics of another academic tradition. Hence, it is the researchers themselves, to borrow fro Jäppinen's (2010, 140–141) reflections on her own field research in the Udmurt Republic in Russia, who must exercise ethical vigilance in their work. Issues that may rise during the research permit application process can vary significantly between countries. In Russia, for instance, the procedural mechanisms to protect institutional documents seem far more rigorous than those established to preserve the privacy and confidentiality of individual respondents. Another point of concern might be that, given the scope and international nature of the research project, the study results may remain somewhat difficult to reach for the myriad stakeholders, whereby it is our responsibility as researchers to report back to both our partners and the study participants. In this connection, we are happy to confirm that, amidst this particular research project, significant attention has been paid to generating real-time information and regularly reporting back with the findings in multiple languages, including the research participants' native of Russian.

The most important thing to note here is that we are researchers, not a tribunal. It is not our place to judge or excuse, but to analyse and interpret. Whilst remaining alert in our political analysis, this study makes no attempt at criticising – nor appraising for that matter – certain family forms or systems at the expense of others or at passing value judgements on individuals' decisions regarding their family life. Instead, the objective is to shed light on an emerging topic which, despite of its societal weight, remains an insufficiently researched niche in both academic and public discussions. Assuming the the role of a conscientious researcher entails vigilance and sensitivity towards one's research subjects and sources, but, by the same token, it necessitates a certain

informational, if we may, responsibility over the topic itself. In other words, our professional duty enabled by our scientific authority is not merely to produce ethically sound research, but also inform the public. We show respect to our research subjects both by handling information reliably and without manipulation and by sharing that information to a wider audience.

The thing to remember is that, not only are we interpreting sources, but we are also producing knowledge ourselves – knowledge that will remain, whereupon we exercise a significant power over the very topic itself. Therefore, we should not neglect the fine art of self-reflection as we construct our interpretations. Whilst allegedly possessing rather extensive prior knowledge of Russia as a country, a political entity and a society, we should nonetheless avoid making untimely assumptions about its local realities. If prejudice is the companion of ignorance, then it is perhaps speculation that too often accompanies familiarity. True, we cannot erase pre-existing experiences or understandings of Russia from our memory, but what we can do is prevent ourselves from anticipating certain conclusions merely because we *think* we know something about Russia and instead allow ourselves to be surprised by our data. In plain English, we owe it to our research participants to embark on our analysis without unnecessary prejudice.

Amid all of this, we still think that the voice of the child should not be forgotten. Now, we understand that our primary data and secondary literature mainly reflect adults' – policy-makers, parents, experts and scholars alike – images of children. Yet, we try to appreciate the role and agency of the child and seek to listen to the children's voices whenever possible, even though we realise that this voice might manifest itself only somewhere in-between the lines or as second-hand knowledge. Including children into a study is always an academic and ethical challenge for any researcher. However, it is an advisable, necessary even, attempt when the topic of study is family policy, family life and child welfare. On that account, despite maintaining that our primary focus is on foster parenting, we should remember that there really is no parent without a child.

6   MICRO: PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTHOOD IN RUSSIAN CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

This chapter presents the results of our primary data analysis. Our inquiry has produced seven thematic categories which we will now introduce to the reader, conceptualising the findings more broadly in relation to our research question as well as secondary literature. Although distinct from each other in our categorisations, these themes do not exist in a vacuum, nor do they operate separately but in tandem, whereupon we may see considerable overlap and correspondence between them. Yet, due to the binding mechanisms of our chosen method of analysis, the data have been processed, coded and arranged under an established category system that suggests seven major perceptions of parenting arising from the interviews with foster parents and child welfare professionals in Russian Children's Villages. The themes are as follows:

(1) parentings as a profession; (2) parenting as a duty; (3) parentings as child saving; (4) parenting as a natural state; (5) parenting as a personal project; (6) parenting as a collective effort; (7) and parenting as reforming.

While our focus remains firmly on Russia, it is perhaps worth reminding the reader that parenthood is inherently a global phenomenon, whereupon the challenges and facilities of parenting rarely apply to one country or locality only, but transcend state and cultural borders. Of course, national context may prompt cross-national differences and translate into certain domestic peculiarities, however, there remains significant universal points of contact free of national confines, by which we can relate themes of parenting across different country contexts.

6.1   Parenting as a Profession

Recent years have witnessed increasing academic discussion about professionalisation of foster parenting in Russia and elsewhere in the world (see, e.g. Chernova & Kulmala 2018; Kirton 2013; Kulmala 2017; Rymph 2017; Wilson & Evetts 2006; Yarskaya-Smirnova et al. 2014a). The questions addressed in expert debates typically relate to areas such as formalisation and occupational structures of foster parenting; professional and employment status of foster carers; benefits and remuneration; as well as increasing overall professionalism, including relevant skills and

competence, in foster care systems. Consequently, we may identify many of these themes already familiar to us from previous discussions on professionalisation dealing with work identification; organisation and formalisation; income; specialised training and qualifications; service orientation; service quality; status and authority; professional culture and collectivity; and social function and significance (Abbott 1988; Becker & Carper 1966; Goode 1966; Greenwood 1966). To recall from earlier, Villmer and Mills (1966) have suggested professionalisation to be about one's personal internalisation of one's skills and competencies in the first instance and the subsequent formalisation of those skills and competencies in the second instance (Vollmer & Mills 1966). Comparably, profession may be conceptualised as an ideal type of occupational institution that is formalised, organised and licensed (Goode 1966; King 1966).

Somewhat unsurprisingly then, we may observe perceptions concerning the work and professional aspects of parenting emerging from the personal accounts of the foster parents in Russian Children's Villages. While the theme of parenting as 'a profession' as discussed here primarily focuses on the respondents' portrayals of parenting as a professional activity of sort, expounding ideas related to increasing professionalisation, social, occupational and employment status, professional skills and competencies and professional responsibility of foster parents, it also considers some of the concerns raised by the parents themselves over how to reconcile between work and family, between work and love and negotiate the boundaries between parenting as 'work' and parenting as 'just parenting' (non-work). See, while parenting as 'a profession' undoubtedly entails the idea of parenting as 'work', viewing parenting as work – as first and foremost a reference to the perceived laboriousness of the task – does not necessarily translate to regarding it as a formalised and organised professional activity, whereupon this distinction, albeit slight, is worth making.

On that, Kaarina Määttä and Taina Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen (2012) have found that many parents today struggle with balancing the work/family combination, feeling they lack the time and resources to meet all the needs and demands of their life. In their study of parental experiences of everyday life in Finland, Määttä and Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen (2012) discovered that the most challenging areas for individuals with families are concerned with difficulties in adjusting family life to the demands of working life and other areas of life, such as hobbies and social networking. Especially mothers experience

feelings of regret over not being able to spend enough time with their children due to work done outside the home. The writers also note that the problematisation of work/family reconciliation is very much a modern phenomenon and a continuous issue in both public and labour market discussions, particularly in industrialised Western societies. (Määttä & Kyrönlampi 2012, 47–51).

Similarly, Kulmala and Tšernova (2015) have found that many of the legal and employment structures in today's Russia fail to sufficiently support and help citizens in reconciling family and working life, putting the burden for such balancing activities on the individual, particularly women. Considering these challenges, it seems reasonable that the foster parents in Russian Children's Villages, juggling with multiple children and limited time available, would seek this balance between work and family by merging together their parental and work roles. On the other hand, being more than a balancing attempt, not working outside the home and instead making foster parenting one's primary 'occupation' could be regarded as pertinent to an all-encompassing lifestyle choice, as described by one parent in our study: *'I can sum foster parenting, professional or not, up in one phrase – it is a lifestyle'*. As such, if the Children's Villages are to be considered as providers and developers of alternative forms of foster care, as opposed to delivering traditional residential care, they might also be seen as facilitating an alternative way of life that can encompass both the family and work domains.

It is also worth noting that most respondents in this study recount that their decisions to relocate and become foster parents in one the Children's Villages have required them to abandon their old lives altogether – their homes, careers and social circles – and build an entirely new personal and occupational or professional existence governed by their all-embracing and often overwhelming role as foster parents. While it is not necessarily the putative 'unpleasantness' of foster parenting that makes it seem like work in the eyes of some of the parents – after all, this 'career choice' has been a voluntary one – the life they lead is so consuming that it leaves little to no time for anything else, work or hobbies. Therefore, treating foster parenting as 'a demanding job', which it appears to be for many of the respondents, may be seen as an interpretation of the laboriousness of parenting as being equivalent to what would generally be considered work, a coping mechanism and/or the only viable means for the individual to perform all

the tasks and duties of a parent in a satisfactory manner. One of the parents explains: '*I realised, everything seems easier when it is just work*'.

If we then consider the suggested potential of foster parenting to develop into a professional activity, it might be useful to revert to our previous discussion about Abbott's (1988) ideas on occupational self-identification and the reciprocal relationship between a profession and its task. Following Abbott's (1988) thoughts, even if foster parenting does not exist as a formal occupational structure or title in Russian society, the foster parents themselves possess the self-reflective awareness and ability to evaluate the difficulty of their work and, subsequently, define, create and re-create themselves professionally through that work. In relation to this, in one of the Villages especially, foster parenting is presented as a progressive and creative activity accompanied by a certain pedagogical, almost academic, thinking and goal-orientation, according to which the community's adults are not merely providers or caregivers, but also educators whose job alongside helping and caring for the children is to teach them skills for life:

> '*It is true, we are no Oxford or Yale. It is primarily just helping, and it might not seem that academic. Although, we still want to hang onto the academic component*'.

When one of the objectives is to also nurture professional growth in the foster carers themselves, a certain of set of transferable skills, most importantly readiness for self-development, is required from the parents. After all, Vollmer and Mills (1966) affirm that the abilities to acquire and transfer skills amid occupational transitions, apply knowledge as well as develop oneself constantly are important prerequisites for the process of professionalisation in any given field or line of work. One of the respondent statements relates to this position:

> '*When we first began discussing the professionalisation of parenting, it was understood in terms of we ourselves trying to gain more and more knowledge on how to make our actions more effective and gain results.*'

With respect to some of the official views on family, references to professionalisation might be regarded as desensitising parenting, seeing that the major objective of the Russian federal programme of deinstitutionalisation of child welfare may

be interpreted as to promote – at least rhetorically – the transformation of the, in many respects, aloof institutions of residential care into more loving family-like systems and not so much communities of professional parents caring for children. On the other hand, borrowing ideas from past and present professionalisation discussions in the field of social work and foster care (see, e.g. Maton 1988; Weiss-Gal & Welbourne 2008; Wilson & Evetts 2006), increased professionalism – which would mean improved standards of activity and conduct, competency, integrity, accountability and regulation – within the Children's Village communities could be seen as facilitating an increase in the quality of care and services they provide. Viewed as such, a professional parent would be more than an occupational title or status; it would be a reference to this particular individual's relevant skills and expertise as a caregiver and child welfare professional. Those of our respondents who frame their parenting activities through this prism of professionalisation, generally express a suchlike reading of their dual role as a parent and a professional, emphasising that parenting viewed as a profession translates to more than personal prestige or a mark in one's resume:

> *'When and why did we began to consider it [parenting] as a professional status? As a simple mark in our "trudovaya knizhka" (employment record book)? For me, a profession is more than that: skills, expertise, knowledge – that is what it is.'*

This said, many of the parents in this study still seek to highlight that, for them, fostering children is very much a matter of the heart. One parent insists that, while treating foster parenting as a job is *'the responsible thing to do'*, it cannot be perceived as a purely *'professional activity'*, but that it also requires expressions of love. Another parent describes their situation in a similar manner, revealing how the boundaries between work and family are often obscured: *'In terms of difficulty, this is work. As a state of mind, this is family'*. Chernova and Kulmala (2018) dub this dilemma 'a dichotomy between love and work', amid which the understanding of care as love rejects any formal elements of parenting and its bureaucratic control, while the idea of care as work entails a more rational, professional dimension that acknowledges the need for the parents as caregivers to, for instance, obtain relevant education and experience in dealing with difficult child behaviour.

It is worth bearing in mind that role of a foster parent is often more demanding than that of most parents, as noted by Haugaard and Hazan (2002, 314–317), since the foster parent–foster child relationship is traditionally considered to be temporary and, as such, should not grow too close so that the children could be returned to their birth parents without too much emotional difficulty. This suggested provisional nature of the relationship might support a more rational approach to foster care where mutual attachment is not necessarily sought by the parties involved, as it might turn out detrimental to all if the relationship dissolves. However, foster parents tend to engage with maltreated children with difficulties in forming emotional bonds and are thus usually expected to be warm and nurturing, as if the children's attachment issues could be solved with a strong dose of love and devotion (Haugaard & Hazan 2002, 322). The decision to place a child in foster care is never taken lightly, but is usually a case of 'last resort' crisis management in a life of a disadvantaged child. The stories of children in foster care are typically saturated with experiences of early childhood trauma and history of marginalisation, upon which it is unlikely that any child in such vulnerable position would manage their transition phase without some form of professional and/or clinical help (Torres & Orfirer 2013; Thomas 2013).

Now, while the foster parents in our case study Children's Villages are said to enjoy various degrees of support from child welfare experts, it is, nevertheless, reasonable to expect that individual parents should be equipped with some qualifications and preparedness to deal with traumatised and disadvantaged children. In light of this, it is not surprising that one of the expert respondents of this study insists that foster parenting ought to be seen as at least a semi-professional activity requiring training, a variety of relevant parental competencies and skills as well as an overall supporting environment and resources. Consequently, in many the of Children's Villages under study, transferable skills and long-term experience in fostering children has been elevated to one of the highest qualifications any hopeful parental candidates could pertain. Thus, one of the most common characteristics of professionalisation development, professional skills acquisition (see, e.g. Vollmer & Mills 1966), presents itself as an invaluable part of foster parenting within these Village communities.

Of course, foster care in the Russian context is a peculiar case in itself, for a child's placement in a foster home is often intended as a permanent family solution, not an ad

hoc one, with adoption rather than the child's return to his or her biological parents being the ultimate objective, whereupon the foster parent–foster child relationship actually becomes lasting. Even so, we may observe that, corresponding to Haugaard and Hazan's (2002, 323) argument of foster parents having to struggle with roles and relationships that most parents do not encounter, some of our respondents do wrestle with an equivocal duality in their family life, both in terms of their alleged work and familial roles and their part as a biological/foster parent:

> *'I cannot perceive this as a job, because my family also consists of two biological children. I have to treat them equally. If I treat six of of my children as work and two of them as my own, that is not a family'*.

It is apparent that the myriad family systems represented in the Children's Villages do not fit the box of traditional nuclear family. As the above citation suggests, most of the families host both biological and foster children, with often multiple parenting figures as well. Even so, the academic and political communities, as McHale et al. (2002, 75–76) maintain, are yet to become to fully appreciate and capture the diversity of the contemporary realities of modern families. Concurrently, it is hardly surprising that individuals in such diverse family systems struggle to explicitly define themselves and their roles, not to mention pin down the ethos of their families.

This ambiguity of the foster parents' common position extends to their relationship with the authorities, or perhaps more aptly put, the institution which does not appear to share the same understanding of their social standing. Many of the respondents claim some sort of occupational recognition and, from that, potentially professional status for themselves as foster parents, which they now lack in their society. To follow Jack Knight's (1992, 176) equation, uncertainty and ambivalence – that is, the absence of a shared language – in a community translate into discordant expectations in society, which, in turn, generate conflict between various social actors and the institution(s). Thus, while professing at least a semi-professional identity themselves, the parents face considerable problems with describing their occupation in a desirable manner on official documents and attaining formal status amid Russia's bureaucratic structures that do not recognise them, whereupon they are forced to reduce themselves to mere euphemisms;

'Write down "housewife" [on official documents]. Throw everything [your work] away and write there "housewife", even though deep down in your soul you know that you cannot quite condone it.'

What is more, the parents' claims for official employment status may, in part at least, be attributed to the fact that Russians, both women and men, tend to be highly educated, and both sexes accustomed to participating in the workforce as wage earners. The mobilisation of female labour force participation and the dual-earner model are not new conventions in Russia, but date back to the Soviet times when the adult population as a whole was encouraged to work outside the home. (see, e.g. Kravchenko 2008; Rotkirch & Temkina 2007; Rotkirch, Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2007; Temkina 2010.) As a consequence, labour force participation for both sexes has generally remained relatively high in Russia (World Bank Group 2018). Scholars note that particularly women can be seen as having adjusted themselves to carrying a dual burden of paid work outside the home and unpaid work in the private domain (Chernova 2013, 97). In this national context of relatively active culture of labour market participation of the adult population, the idea of supposedly remaining outside working life as a 'housewife' – or 'househusband' – without official status documented on one's employment record book may appear unsatisfactory to some. Thus, whilst foster parenting is not work done outside the home per se, for the majority of this study's respondents it constitutes their primary occupation, line or work and/or professional activity, and many of them feel it should be recorded as such.

It is also the government assistance, essentially, the in-kind benefits and material support the foster parents receive – even if they still end up struggling to make ends meet – that cause friction between the respondents and rest of society, complicating their already nebulous social position. Often the nexus between the foster parents being entitled to certain amount of material support, but remaining without official occupational status remains unclear to outside viewers, which causes confusion, even hostility. With this in view, as Chernova and Kulmala (2018, 63-64) have found, foster parents in Russia generally feel that the lack of formal status and insufficient compensation for their care duties risks translating to altogether low professional authority and prestige. While the job title 'professional parent' is certainly conspicuous by its absence in all official professions databases, the foster parents do continue to enjoy some reimbursement

provided by the government for the care work they do, which, for the time being, seems to be the very crux of the problem for many, as reflected in one parent's anecdotal recountal:

> *'One time, as I was submitting my work documents for registration, I was asked: "How is it possible that you have a specified income but no fixed-duration or weekly working hours listed here?" My reply: "Well, because the profession "beast of burden", unfortunately, does not exist in the official register."'*

It is thus almost as though the foster parents had descended into a sort of occupational limbo, inhabiting a liminal state somewhere between two lives, one personal and one professional – neither fully acknowledged by the ambient society. Foster parenting, albeit licensed, remains a 'non-profession', to borrow from Goode (1966), within the formal occupational structures in Russia. Still, judging from the respondents' accounts, the Russian child protection services have thrust upon the parents the burden of a professional – *'The CPS view us as "professionals", meaning someone who is willing and obligated to take in any given child and just endure.'* By the same token, it is well perceivable that the relationship between the foster parents and the local child welfare authorities is, in many respects, conflictual:

> *'Most of the time they [the CPS] are not our allies but treat us like an employer who has the right to just tell us what to do. And to give; to us they certainly do not give anything – as an institution, that is. The state pays for everything, but the CPS do not cooperate, rather they fight us, one could say.'*

The view regarded as traditional in academic discussion that confines professions and professionalisation in rigid organisational and formalised structures – quite frankly professional exclusivity (see, e.g. Abbott 1988; Vollmer & Mills 1966; Weiss-Gal & Welbourne 2008 – appears to dominate in Russian official thinking as well. Chernova and Kulmala (2018, 49) have suggested that professionalisation of care in the context of the Russian Children's Village should and could be about extending the idea of parenting beyond the private confines of the family–locality nexus, whereby foster parenting would acquire a public and formalised occupational character of sort, as relevant expertise and necessary skills acquisition would be acknowledged as prerequisites for performing that role by the larger society. For now, however, we may observe a lamentable paradox

prevailing, by which the foster parents are, on the one hand, the primary enablers of the institutional change now ongoing in the Russian child welfare sector, while on the other hand, they remain largely unrecognised by the very institution itself, whereupon the dual role of a foster parent/professional remains as contested as it appears challenging.

6.2   Parenting as a Duty

Another way to perceive parenting, partly connected to the previous theme, is to depict it as a duty. In our respondents' accounts, this is not a contradictory position to viewing parenting as a profession, nor is it an entirely corresponding one. Whereas professionalisation of parenting presents a more rational approach to the matter, the narrative of duty suggest a deeper, more emotive connotation. The nuance is slight, but the difference is there; our reading suggests that a distinction can be made between viewing parenting as an occupation (profession) and seeing it as a vocation (duty). That said, both of these perceptions include a moral dimension of sort, although the sources and reasons for the individuals to feel responsible may differ. Now, it is worth noting that, given the pronounced conservative emphasis of the Russian political discourse on family and the value-ladenness of the government's policy programmes promoting every child's right to grow up in a family, we were anticipating a slightly stronger, externally imbued patriotic sentiment in the parents' stories as well. However, the respondents' narratives of moral obligation, it seems, arise primarily from within, thereby making them less a manifestation of loyalty or service to any institution or figure or the state per se and more a demonstration of service to the children they are fostering. The perceived 'vocation' – the purpose – of their parenting is thus generally based on a relatively strongly felt personal need and intrinsic motivation to be there for the children, help and provide for them, whereupon many of the utterances relating to this theme are quite emotional, taking almost a spiritual dimension:

> *'I believe that children have their own lives, while parents can help, influence, well, everything in moderation. That goes for our foster children as well. As much as can, we will give and have given straight from the heart, from the soul.'*

Yet, many of the respondents find it difficult to communicate their objectives and motivation for becoming a foster parent to others, particularly their friends and relatives: *'Some of my relatives think that what I do is strange. That is, why do I have to take in*

strangers' children instead of giving birth and bringing up my own.' To relate back to Knight's (1992) discussion on miscommunication and social conflict, our respondents, having found a shared language and collective understanding between themselves in the Children's Villages, appear to lack that mutual comprehension vis-à-vis rest of society, whereupon they often feel rejected and marginalised by it. In this regard Knight (1992, 176–177) reminds us that, oftentimes, the main obstacle in the way of achieving a concerted understanding between various social actors is the absence of a shared experience between them. In many respects, foster families reside outside the box of traditional nuclear family as presented by the conservative government, and, while they are supported by the state as an alternative form of care for orphaned children as opposed to residential institutions, as a family composition they still remain somewhat unusual contra the conjugal family structures dominant in Russian society. This, we see, translates to the parents having to battle a lot of outside negativity:

> *'You need to be prepared to be met with negativity from various directions: negativity from the general public and negativity from the state authorities who see you as just another headache increasing their bureaucratic workload.'*

Also, it is likely that for many of our respondents' blood relatives who have no personal history with the foster care system in general, the decision for one to become a foster parent comes across alien, as the relatives do not see themselves or their influence in inspiring that decision. Hence, it might be difficult to comprehend the purpose of foster parenting; comprehend where exactly the parents' self-desire and sense of obligation to 'strangers' children', to borrow from above, originates from and see it in a positive light and not as abandonment of old family loyalties. Therefore, some of the hostility might stem from feelings of rejection and betrayal, seeing that most of the foster parents in the Children's Villages, as already mentioned, have almost completely abandoned their previous lives, whereupon their decision to supposedly leave everything and everyone behind on account of their relocation to some unfamiliar and faraway community can be interpreted as burning bridges or betraying kinships within their old social circles. In this context, the respondents' perceived sense of 'duty' entails experiences of external pressure, becoming almost overwhelming for them, as loyalty and accountability are expected from all directions – from old and new family structures as well as the system around them:

'We are treated as if, I don't know...we are duty-bound. We are accountable to everyone. And this is something we hear everywhere, we see everywhere and feel everywhere.'

Hence, reconciling 'old' family ties with the 'new' ones that come with foster parenting presents itself as a point of conflict in the respondents' blended family systems, where old relationships are disrupted by the introduction of new ones. The origins of such family conflicts, Thomas Scheff (1997) maintains, may be found in emotion dynamics and alienation, and, while the intensity of disruption and patterns of behaviour vary sometimes extensively, conflicts in families are essentially interminable. According to Scheff (1997, 216), insecure bonds, unacknowledged shame and dysfunctional communication result in interpersonal conflict, whereas secure bonds, pride and functional communication generate solidarity and cooperation. In this concern, our respondents portray varying accounts of opposition and encouragement from their families (namely, blood relative and friends) in relation to their decision to become foster parents; some contend that they have received unconditional support from family and friends since day one on account of the perceived benevolence of what they are doing – *'my relatives have supported me in every decision. They think that what I'm doing a good deed.'* – while others have faced harsh criticism causing family estrangements:

'She [my mother] doesn't understand at all what I'm doing here. They [my parents] were against [name of the Village] in general and even more so against foster children. Totally against. And now my children have no grandfather or grandmother.'

There are also those who recall having first experienced difficulties in explaining their vocation to, for instance, their own parents. However, by actively engaging sceptical family members in communication as to introduce them to the fostering lifestyle and convey the purport of one's calling to help others, some have been able re-establish old family bonds in such a way that their parents now express understanding – as opposed to feeling betrayed – and take pride in their children for becoming foster parents, as reflected in the following response:

'I was criticised in varying degrees among close relatives. Mum and dad were pretty wary at first. But then they told me: "if you think this is for you, then do it."

And things have developed even further from there on, so that now even dad comes to visit. [He] maintains relations and converses with my comrades-in-arms.'

The idea of parenting as a calling, not so unexpectedly, resonates particularly strong in the Village that identifies itself as an Orthodox community. Many of the parents residing in this particular Village make reference to some divine providence inspiring their relocation: *'Since we are religious, we can say that God lead us along.'* Some also regard their life and work as foster parents in the said community as if part of God's plan – *'Indeed, as if God himself had furnished us with this place – now work.'* – whereupon it is their faith that invests a sense purpose and mission in them. It seems, religion also helps the parents cope with the hardships that come with their chosen lifestyle, facilitating a sense of community and togetherness in the Village, as one parent delineates: *'Tough criteria, tough conditions, but God sent such good, kind people here.'* In a similar vein, in their corresponding analysis of foster parenting in Russian Children's Villages, Chernova and Kulmala (2018, 56) detect an occasional tendency of the parents to search for meaning for foster parenting in their cultural heritage and moral principles of Orthodox tradition. Searching for explanatory factors from religious ethics and cultural values comes close to viewing parenting as a 'duty', as the language used by the parents to describe their actions and choices portrays foster parenting largely as if it were a 'moral obligation'.

Now, it might be so that, 'duty' does not present itself as the best word to describe these more religious viewpoints on parenting, whereas 'parenting as God's work' might seem more applicable. However, according to Kirsti Ijäs (2014, 135–137) writing about Christian values, love prevails as the greatest of God's commands and, as such, constitutes the linchpin of a Christian home, and it is the moral compass of a person that guides them to be kind, do good and love unconditionally. Correspondingly, we see 'parenting as a duty' professing a strong moral agency – as in a 'duty to protect' kind of way – that, in our view, also indicates a degree of unconditionality that is perhaps less pertinent in most of the other thematic categories. Thus, the conceptualisation of duty in relation to the said Orthodox community, refers very much to the foster parents' Good Samaritan sense of duty to care for children in need.

This said, there seems to be some intrinsic value respondents in the other Village communities as well see in foster parenting, steering them towards this type of parenthood regardless of the compromises they know they have to make and occasional hopelessness that accompanies the tribulations they face in their role as foster parents. Many appear to understand that being a foster parent requires them to sacrifice – at least parts of – the Self on behalf of others. While some parents struggle to pin down and explicitly state their motivation for helping the children – whether it is altruism or professional responsibility or something else – they are able to grasp and convey the toils of their current lifestyle and the magnitude of the sacrifice they have had to make to lead such a life:

> *'You are forced to leave behind all your previous family ties and your social status. Here you are no one. You might have been a respected person with good connections, able to spoil your children with all kinds of things without a problem. But now you are a nobody and you have to start your life from scratch.'*

Now, other parents are more vocal in explaining their perceived obligations along the lines of professional responsibility as caregivers, whereby they should receive appropriate compensation for their activity. At the same time, however, the respondents emphasise that there needs to be some other intrinsic motivation guiding their decisions and activities besides money, especially seeing that they are willingly increasing their duties as individuals taking care delivery responsibilities from the public sector and thus augmenting their own personal accountability to the state. In this connection, Chernova and Kulmala (2018, 56) have also found that the care the foster parents in the Children's Villages provide for the children is not solely perceived as 'work' – even if certain claims about increasing the professionalisation of the parenting activities are made – but also as an activity that itself holds ethical value and a deeper meaning. That is, parenting proves very much a primary value per se, to borrow from Scheibe (1970), for many of the respondents, whereby it does not derive its worth from sources like money as if it were but a secondary value. Hence, for instance, the desired financial compensation, instead of being a selfish ambition or an item that renders parenting valuable, is suggested to assist the parents to better perform their obligations towards the children, as one parent utters:

'[...] yes, we need paid care, compensations for foster families in order to competently and efficiently carry out our obligations towards the children. But to take on these responsibilities [of a foster parent], simultaneously increasing our own accountability to the state, we must have a strong motivation for this.'

What is also reflected in many of the respondents' statements is that, alongside intrinsic moral values and motivations, the state and the system are seen as to impose a considerable amount of responsibilities and obligations on the parents. With this in view, the respondents express mixed emotions concerning the gradual professionalisation of foster parenting. On the one hand, gaining a more formal status seems to be a welcome trajectory for many of the foster parents. On the other hand, as Chernova and Kulmala (2018, 58) also observe, others express growing concern over how the state would use and possibly abuse their newly established professional status; the fear is that being a 'professional' would translate to being 'bound by duty' or 'answerable' to state authorities: *'When talking about professional foster families, what scares me is the state, because it fixates on obligations.'* What is more, the potential professionalisation of foster parenting might lower the threshold for the state to resign itself from the lead responsibility for welfare provision, offloading its care responsibilities onto the parents on the basis of professional obligation:

'To me it all sounds like: "If you are a professional, we can give you any child and you are simply obliged to take her." And this rhetoric is what you hear everywhere in the opeka.'

With this in mind, many of the parents question whether the state authorities truly share their sense of moral obligation towards the children. Consequently, one major factor influencing our respondents' feelings of responsibility for the children otherwise left without parental care is the perceived erosion of the current child welfare system and the ambient society's failure to provide for the children, upon which these individuals are left to fill this vacuum of insufficient care. Now, we will revisit the topic in more detail in the next section, however, we consider the alleged failure of the system as also a potential factor augmenting a sense of duty in the foster parents. Once again, this duty is less about pledging allegiance to the institution of the state than about a moral obligation to rescue the children from an otherwise bankrupt system. What is more, it should not be forgotten

that placing a child in foster care, as already established earlier, is largely meant as a permanent solution in Russia, to which end the system is perceived to resign itself from the child at the very moment the placement is made, thereby determinedly transferring the responsibility for the child's wellbeing to the foster parent, or as one parent presents the issue: *'I say this once more, when placing the child in foster care, the state symbolically says: "Goodbye child - for good!"'*

6.3 Parenting as Child Saving

Social programmes and policies devoted to shaping and saving children are, to a large extent, a phenomenon of the modern era. How child-related problems are addressed in society varies depending on the images of children that the predominantly adult populations constructs to guide their responses. In his most informative analysis, Joel Best (1990) distinguishes four common images of children vis-à-vis efforts to save them: (1) *rebellious child* whose ill choices often lead to legal and controlling solutions by the reformers; (2) *deprived child* who herself is not to blame for her ills, rather deprivation is seen as a matter of circumstance, and thus challenges are attempted to be overcome through compensations and minimising damages, that is, through welfare solutions by the reformers; (3) *sick child* whose problems relate to medical condition, and thus by caring and curing they ought to be solved by the reformers often with the help of social campaigns and medical responses; and (4) *victim-child* who, same as the deprived child, is not held accountable for her distress, but seen as vulnerable to harm caused deliberately by others, thus leading to attempts by the reformers to assist the child protect herself or to strike down the ones causing the harm. (Best 1990, 3–6.)

We may well agree with Russian policymakers that their proposed child welfare reforms are as desirable as they appear needed in terms of facilitating social sustainability in Russia. However, the officials' excessive use of 'child-saving' rhetoric that typically favours the image of victim-child in political speech, legislation and policy documents might be regarded as somewhat problematic – counterproductive even – from society's point of view, considering its utilisation not only in family policy, but also in the context of campaigns and laws that seem to hamper the human rights of some, while supposedly working towards protecting those of others, if we take, for instance, the already mentioned laws on 'gay propaganda' and 'undesirable organisations'. Such frequent use of the

discursive images of child victimisation that we may see in operation in Russian politics today raises some important questions about the state's true motives for promoting certain welfare reforms. It is, for instance, reasonable to suspect that, by actively working towards outsourcing social service provision and care responsibilities from state institutions to civil society actors and organisations, the state's alleged attempts to 'save' Russian children are as much about it saving itself from bearing the greatest burden of battling orphanhood in Russian society.

The deinstitutionalisation and outsourcing trends in social welfare are generally justified in terms of efforts to improve the quality and availability of a given healthcare or social service, as actors in lieu of the state with specialised expertise and years of competitive experience in a particular service field take over (Bartenev 2005; Maton 1988). Meanwhile, however, cost-efficiency presents the likely reverse side of coin for these developments (Bartenev 2005, 8–9; Kulmala et al. 2017, 361), and some of the experts in the Children's Villages have sensed that 'money talks' in policy-making and the actions of the government, expressing clear suspicion of the state's motives for the child welfare reform and thus calling to question the genuineness of the its child-saving efforts: *'[In state institutions] money always plays a role. The state has always liked to buy off its way when it comes to orphaned children.'*

Given the Russian government's pronounced rhetoric of child saving, it was not wholly unexpected that our respondents would likewise express similar imageries of children in need of saving. However, it is not entirely clear whether the state is to thank or to blame for the foster parent's use of such images; whether it is the state's frequent utilisation of strong child-victim narratives that resonates with the parents, or whether the parents feel as though they have to save the children from a faulty system. Be that as it may, considering Best's (1990) suggested concerns and rhetoric of child-victims, one prevailing image in the parents' accounts, which interlocks with their perceived duty to help the children, is that of a 'deprived child'. Despite adversities that appear hopeless at times, the parents generally view the children innocent and undeserving of their own misfortune and thus express genuine willingness to fight for them amidst difficult circumstances: *'[The child] has no way out of this sinking ship! I have no intention of returning her, so all that is left to do is to fight.'*

Once the children have been placed with the foster parents, returning them to the system seems unimaginable for the majority of the respondents, whose responses reflect the current statistics; as mentioned earlier, only around six percent of all the children placed in foster care in Russia are actually returned to their birth parents (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya 2017, 378). On a related note, the parents appear to reject a certain cherry-picking mentality whereby they would, in a manner of speaking, 'select the best children' to take into their families. Picking and choosing a foster child would be as incomprehensible as giving the child away once the placement has been made, as one parent recounts:

'They [CPS] asked me: "Do you wish to take a look at him first?" I said: "Why should I?" There is simply no other option; if the child comes to me, then he is mine. And no way am I returning a single child given to me.'

With respect to our previous discussions about the putatively beneficial effects of deinstitutionalisation of care on quality of life in patients (see, e.g. Ainsworth & Hansen 2005, 198; Bartenev 2005, 8–9; Brown 1985, 171–17; Reid 1974), some of the foster parents perceive the traditional institutional setting of orphanages in Russia particularly hazardous, passivating and crippling the children. They worry, for instance, that the status and condition of children with disabilities may be further aggravated by an institutional environment where, instead of rehabilitative stimuli and encouragement to take initiative in their own everyday lives and enjoy life, and the children, their individual freedoms particular, might well be circumscribed by overprotective and restrictive measures. When overemphasised, this 'sick child' imagery, again to borrow from Best (1990), with a vehement urge to protect the children from all harm, the parents fear, may backfire, rendering a situation in which over-accommodating and patronising care practices actually endanger the children's wellbeing rather than 'save' them from anything or anyone. This causes real concern about whether or not the underlying interests of the state coincide with the interest of the children:

'[In state institutions] the most important thing is accountability - who takes the responsibility. And that no matter what, the children should not be damaged. Hence everything is banned: dumplings, scrambled eggs, pirozhki-pies and so on and so forth. This sort of systematic suspicion does nothing but build barriers.'

The parents, for much of their part, thus recognise the common problem that keeps company with the rhetorical saving of children, that is, exaggerating the children's victim status to such a degree that it undermines their agency. The aspiration in the Children's Villages, the respondents' narratives imply, is to au contraire disperse the figurative barriers and institutional fences that might have been controlling and limiting the children for far too long. The emphasis is on social inclusion and cohesion as well as empowerment of the children that recognises their agency, regardless of the children's personal background or the nature of their relationship to the parents, or as one parent verbalises their mindset: *'We only have free children here. True, one might call them foster children (priemnie). To us, however, they all are our own (domashnie).'* That said, while themselves regarding the Villages' operational models beneficial for the children's wellbeing, the parents often find that rest of society might not understand or share this ethos of inclusiveness and familial integration, whereupon the foster children remain confined in their social role as orphans or child-victims in the eyes of others and are therefore treated somehow differently, which is both regrettable and harmful in terms of the children's desired rehabilitation:

> *'Outside the Village not all understand us, but rather say we are not normal. And the children are treated differently, as if to say that, although they are not physically defective, they are orphans (detdomovskie) nevertheless, and that is truly a heavy cross for them to bear.'*

The motifs of love, empathy and sympathy were already touched upon in the previous two themes and may be seen as intertwining with the theme of child saving as well. The power and mobilising effect of child-victim and saving imageries, whether produced by an individual or the state, are typically in their capacity to elicit an emotional response (Best 1990). While many of the parents' do seem to use emotions of affection and love to explain their motivations, foster parenting as mere 'altruism' is not alone sufficient a paradigm to encompass our respondents' perceptions of themselves and their agency as foster parents. See, although love alone may occasionally be the sole supporting force for the parents in times of trouble, the work they do for and with marginalised, traumatised and vulnerable children on a day-to-day basis requires a degree of professionalism and the ability to act and think not just with emotion but also rationally in order to make constructive progress with the children and produce results:

'They go hand in hand: love and professionalism; bearing the responsibility as if at work, striving towards results. In addition to this: love – without it, this would not work.'

Chernova and Kulmala (2018, 60) working with the same primary data note that viewing care merely as a token of love based on altruism and self-sacrifice, without any formalised structures or professional status for foster parenting, is likely to frustrate the parents' hard work, as it risks going under-appreciated and unnoticed by relatives, society and the authorities. Hence, while the idea of child saving may provide a strong moral and emotive spark that translates into a sense of duty or need or compulsion to help children in need by becoming a foster parent, the parenting itself, it seems, in addition to mere urge to rescue others, requires other structures, motivations and purpose – e.g. social, professional, organisational, communal, political and so on – to be a truly beneficial and productive activity that produces constructive results with respect to everyone involved. Too much emphasis on parenting as mere child saving could deprive the children of their agency, which would function contrary to wishes of their empowerment and, as such, undermine the very attempts to save them.

6.4   Parenting as a Natural State

Gilbert (1999) argues that right-wing agents have generally sought to utilise the idea of family as a 'natural state' amid their social and political endeavours, including nation-building through the social conservative idea of family as the basis of society. The family, as such then, is presented as the most natural form of social organisation, where familial ties, kinships and loyalties are given – usually by birth – hence, natural. This 'natural' paradigm of the right-wing imagination, as might be expected, tends to feature a biological dimension that may or may not be framed in ethnic or racial terms, favouring the traditional nuclear family composition as it presents the sole organic family form with reproductive capabilities. (Gilbert 1999, 136–139.) Needless to say, such a description of the family is saturated with values and partisan bias, which might make it a harmful and prejudiced, potentially dangerous, position with respect to diversity in both the family and social contexts. Why is it then that we use the concept of 'natural state' here?

On the one hand, it connects to the perceived normalisation of the traditional – heterosexual – nuclear family by the Russian government and other conservative social

actors, effectively eclipsing other types of family structures in Russian society, and how the foster parents negotiate their parenthood and family systems amid this normative framework of traditional family values. On the other hand, in the context of the respondents' own family lives, it is more than a case of mere biology or genealogy, more than a token of biological determinism, when we – or rather the parents interviewed for this study – imply parenting as a 'natural state'; instead of referring to a state of nature or given by nature, the concept indicates a degree of 'naturalness' or 'natural ease' that the respondents attach to the role of becoming and being a foster parent. In this way, parenthood may be something innate that appears to come 'naturally' to them, but is not necessarily determined by nature – as not all of the parents' children are biologically 'theirs' – rather personally and socially constructed and decided.

The family and community ties, particularly the relationship between the parents and their children, while negotiated and not so much given, are generally articulated as genuine, not artificial or forced, and the decision to become a parent has been a 'natural step' and/or gradual process for many of the respondents, upon which the parents may, for instance, voice such descriptions as already brought up in the previous thematic sections that all the children, biological or foster, have been taken as equal members of the family, adopted as their own. That said, there are those who do not see the process towards parenthood and constructed family relationships as necessarily been easy or without its problems, rather accepting certain idiosyncrasies of foster families has taken some 'getting used to'. For instance, the fact that the foster children might not look like them has initially been difficult for some of the parents to accept, although it appears that, in the end, resemblance or lack thereof has not proven critical, but something that the parents have either learned to accept or realised to be insignificant, as one respondent recalls:

> '*I said: "No, the child is not mine, I will not take her. She is brunette, I am blonde, she has brown eyes...This is not my child. I do not want her." I was told to take her in for one weekend, as if to "test" whether we would get along. I thought that one weekend would not hurt - it would be something different for the child and no big deal for me. I took her in for one weekend only and so she stayed with me.*'

Now, it is evident that a foster family, by definition, escapes the textbook ideal of a traditional nuclear family, and some of the foster parents in this study do acknowledge that their blended families that host both biological and non-biological relationships represent somewhat 'nontraditional' family structures in Russian society. However, while the parents recognise some of the prejudice and problems they as foster parents – e.g. in terms of lacking social and occupational status – and their children as foster children – e.g. in terms of marginalisation and being treated 'differently' or as eternally orphaned – face vis-à-vis rest of society, they do not problematise or question their foster family compositions as such, rather some of the societal attitudes towards them. In this regard foster family per se is perceived neither faulty nor unnatural by the parents themselves, misunderstood perhaps by the wider public, whereby family diversity is generally appreciated by the respondents as the contemporary reality scholars say it is (see, e.g. McHale et al. 2002). Consequently, some of the respondents see foster parenting in the Children's Villages as a way to explore and perform family plurality, with an active aim to expand the range of family systems and recognised norms in their society. Thus, one the respondents describes their efforts in the Village as to *'distance ourselves from the traditional ideas of family forms and values'*.

At the same time, however, the ethos in one of the Villages in particular maintains that their community building upon Orthodox traditions provides an ideal environment in which to reinforce and reproduce Russia's traditional family values. This narrative, instead of focusing on what makes foster families unique or unusual, emphasises the multi-child aspect of the families in the Village, with every family structure including two parents of the different sex, thus reproducing the heteronormative and multi-child family ideals which are regarded 'normal' and 'right' in Russian society. Interestingly, one of the expert statement's from this Village makes reference to the foster families there as 'nuclear families', presenting an adapted reading of the concept:

> *'The idea was to create a Russian version, that is, more 'russified' model of Children's Village, based on traditional family values - which are inherent to Russia - and with nuclear families. That was mandatory and the most important part. Nowadays we have a lot of candidates, such as single mothers, who are all rejected, because according to traditional values, in a family, mother and father*

both have to be present in an equal manner so that the children are provided both
female and male examples. It goes without saying how important this is.'

Contrarily, the single-mother family structure that is openly rejected in this particular Village, we remember, is the primary operational model for the SOS Children's Villages globally and in Russia. This puts them in a somewhat disadvantaged position compared to Villages that offer the two-parent composition as the norm. On the hand, the SOS single-parent families are delivering home-based family care that is the type of alternative care that is currently sought after in policy. On the other hand, the family structures they generally provide are not the desired ones.

With this in view, the predominant family form in the case study Russian Children's Villages - with the exception of the SOS Villages - continues to resemble the conventional heterosexual two-parent model. That said, most of the respondents do not seem to express the need to purposefully perpetuate family conventions in their responses. Instead, many highlight the uniqueness of their foster parenting experience and of their family systems in the Villages; the respondents assign particular value to the social, collective and collaborative aspects of parenting in the Villages, and it appears to be the peer support side of things and the parent collectives themselves that have inspired individuals to become foster parents in the first place. Consequently, the joint construction of the foster family collectives as if they were communal families creating a common culture – coinciding with Gilbert's (1999) suggested idea on family as socially constructed and negotiated communal institution, to which we will come back to in later discussions – is perceived an equally essential and natural part of being a foster parent in the particular context of the Children's Villages:

> *'I never thought I would become a foster parent. However, when I came here [the*
> *Village] the atmosphere, the people and what I was told appealed to me [...] Then*
> *I was suggested that I could take in a child as well. I thought of it, and it felt like,*
> *in this sort of setting, I too, could do it. In a city, most likely I would have not*
> *taken a foster child, but here, where the whole community contributes to the*
> *process, helps...'*

Seeing that the Villages themselves – the collective, the atmosphere, the surroundings – are regarded such a decisive factor in steering people into the domain of

foster parenting, it appears that for the vast majority of our respondents, foster parenting is not solely about some natural inclination or nature having taken its course. Instead, it has very much been either a conscious choice or guided by chance and gradual, albeit often rapid, maturing or growing into this type of parenthood and family life:

> *'I was told that there is a Village, where there are families with foster children, a school, activities etc. – I decided to try it, why not! I came to have a look around, to work. Then, I left once more, came back again, and after that, returned – and this time for good.'*

Many describe a sort of step-by-step process of how their families have come to being, however, apart from occasional mentions of initial hesitation, few voice any hindsight regret or doubt over their decision to pursue foster parenting. Instead, there are utterances of happiness and contentment, of things falling into place with relative ease and feeling 'right' in where they are, which suggests there is a certain naturalness or rightness the respondents have found in their chosen role as foster parents:

> *'[...] the children came into the family step by step. We were asked if we would like to help somewhere, somehow. And now, here we live – happily together with all the dogs and cats and children.'*

Now, there are some parents who seem to imply a degree of parental instincts in operation, pushing individual behaviour towards (foster) parenting as a kind of natural activity or state of being. One respondent, for instance, opines that both children and adults have certain innate aspirations in terms of having a family, and that the Children's Villages thus present a convenient intersection for those aspirations to come together and be realised:

> *'The initial idea of Children's Villages has always rested upon the object of meeting two needs; a child needs a parent. And women have a need to become mothers. And in our Village, these two needs come together.'*

Even if there were some innate, seemingly persistent needs for a family in individuals, most of the respondents in this study echo Jagger and Wright's (1999, 3) understanding of family as dynamic, non-stable and negotiated system, as an organism that changes over time depending on the given temporal and social contexts, whereupon

the evolution and alteration of interpersonal relations, family roles and ties are both natural and inevitable. As a consequence, parenting is also an organic process wherein one must make compromises and constantly adjust oneself, one's attitude and behaviour to new situations and family structures and accept that oftentimes changes in one's family domain cannot be fully controlled, as one respondent explains:

> *'A family is a dynamic organism. When new children come along, new compromises have to be made. You either accept the fluid nature of family life or break under social pressure when trying to control everything uncontrollable.'*

The relationships in foster families in particular may be disrupted quite rapidly and unexpectedly, as they are essentially negotiated and of social construct, rather than (seemingly) given or biologically cemented by kinship. This, however, does not mean that those relationships are not as 'real' or genuine' as blood ties, as perceived by the members of the family. In fact, most of the parents in this study describe the foster children as no less their 'own' as their biological offspring and themselves as no more parents to some than others, aspiring to form lasting ties with all of their children. Whilst it has been suggested that the foster parent–foster child relationship is often marked by temporariness (Haugaard & Hazan 2002), the potential risk of relationship disruption does not appear to lessen our respondents' desire and willingness to work towards forming permanent attachment relationships with the children they are fostering. One respondent explains their objectives for relationship building:

> *'Learning never ends here, because the children teach us one thing and we teach the children another – and that's how we live here. We try to establish humane relationships between the children and the parents, such that never go away [...] That is, with time, people might change, but the ties remain the same.'*

That said, it is generally agreed that the blended foster family systems continue to pose certain challenges in terms of, for instance, where to draw the line between work and love, between parent and caregiver and how to negotiate extended co-parenting practices. However, acknowledging that parenting is indeed a reciprocal learning process between the parents and their children and that genuineness in family systems is not given but can very much be negotiated between the members of the family, the foster parents

may trust in that their family relationships, albeit socially constructed, can last for a lifetime should they so desire.

6.5   Parenting as a Personal Project

It is not uncommon a belief of the Russian public that foster parents are motivated by the financial and material support they receive from the state instead of mere desire to help children in need. '*Some say, we will never truly love the children. We only take them in for money*', one of our respondents describes the unlucky situation. Beliefs, however, may be deceptive, and practical realities far from conventions that exist on paper. Most foster families in Russia are hardly well-off, struggling financially and in terms of resources and support available for them, as Kulmala et al. (forthcoming) among others note. The state's suggested recommendation for a maximum of eight children in one foster family is already a considerable number, comparable to an institutional unit and setting extremely high demands on the parents in addressing each individual child's needs, especially assuming that most children in foster care portray varying degrees of problem behaviour requiring additional attention and support from the caregiver. Moreover, far too often, particularly in the context of the Children's Villages, the real number of children in one family exceeds recommendations, and the benefits, albeit received, simply do not cover all the costs of living. (Kulmala et al., forthcoming, 18.)

As already discussed in the previous sections, particularly in the thematic discussion on parenting as a profession, Russian society and the child welfare system – be it the political and bureaucratic structures of the system in general or the CPS authorities operating within the system in particular – have hitherto failed to give formal, organisational and occupational recognition to foster parenting. Also, judging by our respondents' statements, the general attitude towards foster parenting in Russia seems suspicious at best, dismissive for the most part. In light of this, the suggestions according to which foster parenting as an endeavour provides an advantageous channel for upward social and economic mobility and elevation of one's status in society present themselves somewhat absurd. Still, the respondents recount that, on many an occasion, concentrating on but the 'fancy' housing facilities in the Children's Villages and the state subsidies received by the foster parents translates into third-party reprehension, jealousy even, from those on the outside. Meanwhile, the insiders' perspectives and individual parents'

motivations and grievances are either hidden or eclipsed by adversarial commentary in public debate. Thus, everyday parenting practices and the Village realities of struggling with a scarcity of resources, support and services available, many of the respondents bemoan, often remain far from public notice:

> *'We are all helping children. No question about it. But who will help us [the parents]? [...] As some of those, who know it better than to envy us, note: "You are not the beneficiaries here."'*

The respondents also find and generally reject another – surprisingly common, it seems – outsider's view on their life in the Children's Villages that suspects that these communities represent some kind of remote agricultural communes where people move to escape the demands and hectic pace of modern urban life. Some likewise contest any assertion, that foster parenting in the Villages would be about downshifting and individuals' attempts to somehow live easier: *'City dwellers often have an image of us coming here to downshift and practice agriculture, to lead a more simple life. That's an illusion.'* That said, there are those who admit that foster parenting has not been the sole motivation for them to gravitate towards life in their respective Children's Villages, but that a chance to establish an alternative lifestyle has also inspired their decision, as one parent acknowledges: *'Ecological and alternative way of life began to interest me. That is, something different than conventional city life'.*

Now, the Children's Villages, as already noted, are often located in the hinterlands, detached from larger urban concentrations and residential areas, whereby they, in a sense, have built their own private habitations and secluded existence. In any case, forming an isolated community as something supposedly marked by deliberate withdrawal from rest of society has not been the primary objective of any of the Village operators per se, nor is the narrative of intentional personal or social reclusiveness particularly emphasised by any of the parents. Instead, the general mindset in all the Villages appears to support the idea of social integration not just within the Villages themselves but also when it comes the surrounding communities if and when possible. After all, one of the potential dangers of isolationism – if we compare the separation it creates to the social exclusion of individuals typically viewed as a negative byproduct of traditional care institutions (see, e.g. Freyhoff et al. 2013) – is the further alienation and

marginalisation of the families and especially the individuals from society, which is hardly the aim.

While intentional distancing of the children and the families from harmful influences and social actors that do not necessarily share the same values or understand the fostering lifestyle may play a part in the Village operations, one of the most important and officially proclaimed objectives of such non-institutional forms of care that the Villages also provide is still to support the social adaptation and rehabilitation of the children in care (NPRWO 2012). As it happens, certain practical realities and considerations, such as more affordable land and building lots, regional regulation and permits, cooperative partnerships and better facility to secure a degree of privacy and security for the families, to name a few, have played a far more decisive role in determining the actual locations of the Villages than a mere desire to establish a recluse provincial community. Unlike many traditional residential institutions, the Villages are also not closed-off areas per se, and occupancy is generally based on voluntary participation.

Nonetheless, the physical remoteness of the communities from rest of society is a peculiar feature of the Children Villages, which can create a kind of bubble for the communities marked by a sense of isolation and/or alternative reality when the Village community forms one's whole life circle, personal and professional. Reflecting on some of the points made earlier in our thematic discussions; insofar as that is true that foster parenting in the Villages constitutes the parents' primary and sole occupational and private activity, it may be regarded as the ultimate personal project for them, especially if we consider the remote location and general Village surroundings enjoying a capacity to offer but few other stimuli for the individuals in terms of work and personal fulfilment. On the other hand, the parents generally seem to appreciate the potential and opportunities created by the Village premises and facilities, despite the apparent remoteness of the operations: *'Here, the possibilities are actually far more manifold than it seems at first glance'.*

Some of the respondents' answers do reflect an appetite for self-examination alongside parental activities. There are those who believe that, while investing time and

effort in nurturing and providing for the children, investing in oneself and thus seeking personal growth and change for the better is an equally meaningful part of being a parent:

> *'It seems, that the ones that remain here are those, who are willing to change and improve themselves. [...] Strive towards change starting from oneself and do all this with love and responsibility.'*

This view reflects an understanding of what was previously discussed in relation to the dynamic and organic nature of family systems (see, e.g. Jagger & Wright 1999, Zimmerman et al. 1994); that the family is an ever-changing organism and, provided that the family is, in effect, a sum of its members, the proposed changes stem from and occur within the individuals in the family. As such, the motif of personal development, when taken up in the respondents' statements, is generally framed in terms of the parents themselves having room to grow alongside the children they care for.

Some of the respondents go as far as suggesting that life as a foster parent in their respective Children's Village has given them a chance to 're-establish' or 'reinvent' themselves. These statements, somewhat contrary to the notions of moral obligation or child-saving urges as the catalyst for choosing life as a foster parent as covered in the previous sections, express a more subjective angle on the matter, finding their impetus on the personal ambitions and desires of the parents. In such instances, foster parenting is not merely about self-sacrifice from the part of the parents, but life in the Villages may be seen as offering some additional incentives for the parents as individuals, such as opportunities for personal growth and self-exploration, as reflected in one expert response:

> *'Our project seems to attract people who are socially mobile and those who feel that the years of societal transition [when the Soviet system collapsed] caused a destruction of familiar roles in their everyday life, and they now needed to find a new purpose for themselves and space for personal growth.'*

Clearly at the very core of the question about parenting as a personal project is motive. Now, conceptualising foster parenting in the Children's Villages as a personal project is not an issue per se. If parenting constitutes one's primary occupation, vocation and lifestyle, then, what is it, if not a personal project? The important question concerns

one's motivations and purpose for becoming a foster parent in the Village in the first place. Thus, it is the query about 'selfishness' versus 'selflessness' that is at issue really – are the parents doing what they do for themselves or for others or could it be both? While the previous thematic sections discussing parenting in the contexts of duty and child saving, if treated in isolation, may beckon towards parental selflessness, our reading of the interviews suggests a slightly more complex interplay of several parenting motivations.

It appears that, like Haugaard and Hazan (2002) propose, the pure desire the help children in need continues to be the driving force for the majority of the foster parents. Alongside altruistic tendencies, however, some of the respondents encourage a dose of 'healthy selfishness' in the parents, highlighting the importance of understanding that in order to take care of the others, one also has to take care of and cultivate oneself: *'If you chose foster parenting, you have two options – either you burn brightly like a torch, or you burn out'*. Considering everything said about the generally lacking resources, oftentimes insufficient support and the total numbers of foster children in families exceeding official recommendations (Kulmala et al. forthcoming), burnout comprises a genuine risk for the parents, upon which maintenance of their personal wellbeing and health presents itself vital.

The other side of alleged coin of 'selfishness' of the foster parents has to do with the consequences of their life decisions vis-à-vis their biological children. As stated earlier, alongside foster children, several of the parents in the case study Children's Villages have biological children as well – many of whom are still minors living at home – whereupon the respondents' choices to become foster parents and move into one of the Villages have had a direct impact on their biological children. Hence, besides focusing on the foster parent–foster child relationships, scholars also tend to urge careful consideration of the effects of foster care on biological children in a foster home (see, e.g. Haugard & Hazan 2002). In this connection, a few of the respondents express some doubts over the benevolence of their decision to become foster parents, admitting a degree of selfishness or irresponsibility inherent in their choice to take in foster children with respect to their biological children. Although none of the parents seem to openly regret their decisions to foster children or apologise for them, for that matter, some respondents do sympathise with the biological children, acknowledging their own parental

responsibility in making life-altering decisions for their entire families and the grave consequences such decisions may have on their children, as one parent cautions: *'If you have children of your own before becoming a foster parent, ask yourself, to what are they guilty of deserving this.'*

Mainly, however, parenting if framed as a personal project of the foster parents seems to be about individuals attempting to find the life they lead meaningful. The life of a foster parent in the Children's Village, as by now clear to the reader, can be regarded as a holistic lifestyle, whereby we may expect that alongside goodwill charitable giving and desire to help others, each parent hosts an abundance of personal inclinations and subjective motivations that work towards explaining and justifying the decisions they have made to amalgamate their professional, personal and family lives.

6.6   Parenting as a Collective Effort

One of the most distinctive features of parenting in the Russian Children's Villages we have found is its collective character that seems to quite conspicuously embody the proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child'. While the Villages, in principle, may be seen as being built around individual foster families living in their own designated homes and constituting their own private family units of one or two parents and their children, the Village collectives in general seem to nurse a strong communal sentiment and an atmosphere that translates into collaborative co-parenting practices. Gilbert (1999) has suggested that one way to rescue the family from right-wing politics normalising the traditional nuclear family is to draw from communitarianism that sees the family as essentially a communal institution where relationships and ties are not merely biologically or naturally 'given', but socially negotiated and structured. A communal family is thus a collective that extends beyond the conventional confines of the nuclear family. There is a pursuit of common purpose in a family community that is determined collectively, and the relations therein are primarily formed and maintained socially contra biologically. Family memberships are thereupon not determined by blood, but through social engagement and commitment that are jointly negotiated and constructed. (Gilbert 1999, 142-3.)

In many respects, we may see Gilbert's (1999) ideas of a communal family coming into existence in the Children's Villages, where the collective aspects of parenting

seem to form one of the cornerstones of each community, providing the needed peer support and a sense of stability and security for parents and children alike. The respondents portray active willingness to engage in such a collective where conscious endeavours are made to create a sense of community and kinship – a Village that is more socially connected and participatory than an average suburban neighbourhood:

> *'Instead of forming simply a big village, it is more about forming a community with a sense of shared intimacy [...] The aim is to create a safe environment that makes it easy to ask and accept help, something that is very difficult for an average Russian, well, for any person, I guess – to show weakness and ask for help, that is.'*

While social control and the potential risk of individuals losing some of their autonomy vis-á-vis the collective are themes that are debated within the communities, the communal structures and atmosphere of the Villages seem to carry more positive than negative connotations in the respondents' statements. For instance, the respondents make frequent reference to the significance of the social and emotional peer support they receive from the other parents in the Villages, and scholars such as Susan Crockenberg (1998, 133) maintain that peer support often has a positive effect on parenting as it can 'serve as a buffer', reducing stress generated by difficult child-rearing situations, while helping the individual parents construct coping strategies. The collective may likewise have a crucial impact on individual parents' activities, as the direct social interaction with other adults and the commitment to shared parenthood inevitably modify the individuals' parenting beliefs, attitudes and practices. In the context of the family collective, such processes are as much about the parents improving themselves individually as they are about making compromises for the benefit of the community. (Cochran & Starr 2002, 128.)

While the respondents generally regard the collective as an asset, there is also a mutual understanding between the parents that everyone has their occasional need for privacy, even when the initial commitment to the communal way of life has been done on a deliberate and voluntary basis. Even in such tight-knit communities as these Villages are, *'one has the right'*, as one of the respondents depicts, *'to close the door'* and not be available around the clock. The aim of the community is not to invade or forcibly occupy

anyone's private space any more than necessary, let alone strive to create a single 'right' way of performing parenting nor criticise individual parents' differing child-rearing methods. However, many of the respondents agree that they need to accept, to a certain degree at least, that everyone in the Village knows one another's business, and regardless of any attempts to keep some things private, as one parent notes, '*the children will eventually tell and share everything to the neighbours.*' In this sense, the idea of a communal family marked by jointly negotiated relationships, values and parenting practices requires the individual, up to a certain point, to submit to the collective.

Parenting as a joint effort in the community can, without a doubt, generate a sense of stable and secure equilibrium in the Village, but also a sense of anxiety or social pressure if the individuals – be it the parents or the children – feel just as if they were constantly monitored by the collective, that is, subjected to the 'big brother effect' of community surveillance:

> '*The Children in the Village perceive us adults as a collective, one entity. Mostly this is in a positive sense, as if we were one large family. Sometimes, however, this can have negative features. The children protest against collective parenting and uniform standards that seem to be inescapable and encircle them everywhere in the Village. They probably just long for some kind of privacy. That is, they rebel against constantly being surrounded by several guardians.*'

The collective setting, albeit supportive in essence, also calls for individual abilities to receive and accept criticism and adjust oneself to shared practices, as one of the parents observes: '*to give feedback and listen to advice from others without taking offense.*' No less important seems to be the willingness to agree to follow a common purpose, negotiate and compromise, although nothing in the communities is set in stone as they are, in essence, dynamic organisms that can be renegotiated and reconstructed – '*the principle is, that on the one hand, everything must be agreed upon, and on the other hand, everything can be renegotiated.*'

Thus, even though the collective can be seen as something one cannot escape and, as such, overbearing at times, it seems that the supportive, empowering and solidary nature of the collective outweighs its potentially negative aspects. The social structures of the Village communities are, at first hand, meant to support the children's socialisation

and social integration, but they also function to safeguard the parents. Consequently, the respondents do not generally admit second-guessing their decisions to, first of all, become foster parents and, second, join the community. Instead, some appear to agree that, without one, there could not be the other:

> *'If you ask me how I became a foster parent and whether this would have happened if I had stayed in the city – probably not. Because here I got a feeling that it is possible, with the help of a community of experienced and like-minded people it is not scary at all.'*

Of course, presenting foster parenting as a collective effort does not merely refer to peer support expressed by one foster parent to another within the Village. The involvement of a wider social network that furnishes the children with an extended family that, in addition to the members of the foster family and the Children's Village community, may well include the children's birth parents, relatives and other significant acquaintances can be seen as an equally essential part of the collective effort of caring for the children. While the Russian CPS often remain reluctant to do rehabilitative social work and keep in close contact with the children's birth parents, as the alternative care system is generally considered working towards permanent placements rather than towards returning the children to their biological families (Jäppinen 2018), the Children's Villages seem to take a more receptive approach to working with the children's biological families. The foster parents' intention, it seems, whilst the children no longer live with their birth parents, is not to further family disruption, rather, assist the children and their biological relatives in mending old family ties and relationships if and when possible. Such reconciliatory processes and restorative efforts are deemed fair and beneficial for the children, contributing to their social rehabilitation rather than impeding it:

> *'The birth parents should be encouraged to build a relationship with their child, even when she lives here in the Village. A somewhat fashionable word would be - 'reboot' the relationship. That is, to give everything a restart. And in this case, our Village could offer such an opportunity for the whole family.'*

The issue of co-parenting is not generally regarded as a negative aspect of the respondents' family arrangements, although scholars note that, in today's diverse family systems consisting of multiple parental figures, for example, biological, step- and foster

parents, coordinating parenting with and between several people is a common point of interpersonal conflict (McHale et al. 2002). The relationship between the birth parents and the foster parents may present itself as being particularly volatile if the foster parents are seen as part of the system by the birth parents, who, vice versa, might face resentment from the foster parents for having maltreated their children (Haugaard & Hazan 2002, 314). That said, although occasional interpersonal clashes are mentioned in the respondents' account, hostility towards the birth parents does not present itself as an insurmountable long-term issue for the foster parents who, instead, seem to portray attitudes typically associated with reconciliation. One parent explains:

> *'At the beginning, we had difficulties in accepting the children's blood relatives. There was a lot of feelings of blame towards them for putting the children in such a state. But then, our family experienced a sort of turning point, and now all the biological relatives are seen as our allies.'*

Viewed against the backdrop of Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly's (2009, 291–292) suggested five-point list of commons stands related to a reconciliation process, our respondents appear to embrace two of the five points in particular: (1) acknowledging and dealing with the past and (2) building and restoring positive relationships. The former of these stands may generally be seen as working towards acknowledging hurt, losses, truths and sufferings of the past with mechanisms providing for justice, healing and forgiveness, while the latter deals with attempts to renew disrupted relationships by addressing issues of trust, acceptance and understanding (Hamber & Kelly 2009, 292). The respondents, albeit admitting that rapprochement does not come easy, show considerable effort towards treating the biological families of their foster children as allies and not as enemies, thus inviting the birth parents to be part of their parenting collective.

6.7 Parenting as Reforming

Given everything that has been said about the Children's Villages being an essential part of Russia's current child welfare reform, it would be careless of us not to address the practical and visionary capacity of the Villages and their social agents to contribute to that reform process. As such, the final theme of parenting as 'reforming' may be regarded as partly anticipated, although not spuriously emphasised in our analysis, but a genuine topic contemplated by the respondents in their statements. Considering the

recentness and ongoing nature of the process of deinstitutionalisation of child welfare in Russia, the foster parents as well as the experts in the Children's Villages, in many respects, represent the vanguard of developing sustainable community-based care solutions in their society, which gives their projects a somewhat experimental dimension. In any case, the ethos in all the Village communities seems to support the idea that the work they are doing is equally important and meaningful not only locally, but also in the wider social context and structures of the Russian welfare system.

One the most acute problems of the Russian child protection services and the *opeka* and one which presents a challenge to the whole system of child welfare in Russia, is that, instead of qualified social workers as the core of expertise within the system, professionals from other fields, mainly lawyers and pedagogues, form the primary group of experts engaging with issues related to child welfare (Kulmala et al., forthcoming, 12–13). The professional qualifications for individuals in the *opeka,* in general, are not strictly regulated by the law, which results in the actual responses to child welfare issues in the Russian CPS being highly dependent on individual officers' professional competence and respective orientation. It could thereby be argued that the only durable way for the Russian CPS to transform its working practice is through strengthening the professionalism of social work and its status at the heart of the welfare system itself. (Kulmala et al., forthcoming, 12-13.) The issue is also touched upon by one of the expert respondents in our study, who notes that the welfare system has been corrupted by bureaucracy for far too long, and only recently has there been a trend signalling positive change, albeit gradual, in society granting families and individuals themselves more power over and within the system:

> *'Legal representatives are no longer the ones in charge, but parents. This is certainly more right than writing mere lines of legislative text; that, I think, is the wrong way.'*

As the Children's Villages and the form of community-based foster care they provide for orphaned children are a relatively recent phenomenon in the Russian welfare context, many of the respondents perceive themselves almost as if they were pioneers in the field of child and family welfare. Leading by example manifests itself particularly well within the inter-parental relationships in the Village communities, whereby one

parent's actions are said to have inspired others to follow the same path into foster parenting – and thus resembling the mechanisms of peer support considered in the previous section – as reflected in one respondent's comment addressed to a fellow parent in the Village:

> *'We [the other parents] are forever grateful to you for taking in foster children back then. Your example made us all believe that yes, this is possible, this really is possible.'*

One of the undisputed objectives of the Village operations in general and the parents involved in them in particular is to encourage a more positive public opinion on foster parenting. The perceived strategies to achieve this do not limit themselves to mere efforts to raise public awareness of foster care, its practices and the opportunities it provides, or to recruit new foster parent candidates. Instead, the respondents describe how they wish to invite people to view parenting in general in a whole new light; to see the diversity of its forms and practices, to forget traditional and unnecessary hierarchies in family systems and to acknowledge that it is ultimately a reciprocal process equally engaging the parents and the children. What is important is to understand that one need not be afraid of failure or making mistakes, but that parenting may also be a learning experience – an exercise, if we may – for the parents themselves. Hence, some of respondents perceive their form of parenting as essentially experimental in nature, which exempts them from chasing perfection: *'There is no such thing as fatal errors, for this is an experiment in which both children and adults participate simultaneously.'*

While the resources and possibilities for the Villages to influence change in policy and society are fairly limited due to state's restrictive legislative measures, active agency is still sought in relation to contributing to the overall child welfare reform, as one expert respondent assures:

> *'At the moment, the opportunities are limited because of the foreign agent law that restricts our right to put forward any legislative initiatives. Even in issues concerning the rights of children. [...] We do, however, operate on every possible platform we have access to in order to put forward our ideas and such.'*

As noted earlier, the Children's Villages as third sector operators engaging in the field of child welfare are important implementers of the deinstitutionalisation process as imagined in Russian family policy, since they are precisely one of those social agents that are currently developing and providing the desired community-based forms of alternative care for orphaned children in the country. At the same time, however, run by different civil society organisations – NGOs, nonprofits – the Children's Villages are also subject to the state's legislative efforts to monitor and control their operations. That said, as SONGOs engaging in many ways critical social service provision they do not necessarily fall into the category of 'potentially harmful' and 'threatening' organisations that need to be suppressed, but are more likely viewed along the lines of potential state–third sector partnerships in public services. Yet, their place within Russian civil society and vis-à-vis the state remains precarious. (Bogdanova et al. 2018; Skokova, Pape & Krasnopolskaya 2018; Tarasenko 2018.)

The fact that public arenas may offer but little room for manoeuvre does not appear to prevent the Villages or individuals within them from actively forwarding their own ideas, creating new practices and engaging in strategic thinking at the local level. The mindset in many of the Villages seems to be analytical and well-informed, progressive even, in the sense that they try to keep abreast of the situation and any developments in their field, seeking positive change – *'We try to think ahead, create understanding and make progress; we study trends and analyse the current situation.'* There is thus a progressive element in the Village activities. Some discern, however, that innovation and strategic planning resonate neither at governmental level nor within the public sector, instead the system appears largely reactionary in its modus operandi, as one respondent marks: *'Unfortunately, not the case within the state system; They do not engage in strategic thinking. They are simply extinguishing fires.'*

In many respects, the 'reformist' mentality permeating the micro level and attempts made at increasing professionalism in individual and organisational practice in care service provision coalesce in the Children's Villages. Many of the respondents advocate the utility of applying theoretical knowledge – even education, ideas and methods acquired from abroad – to their operations in hopes of improving the praxis of foster parenting and the Villages' standards of activities. As such, the themes of parenting as 'a profession' and parenting as 'reforming' intertwine, provided that, for a reform to

truly materialise – in a durable manner at least – higher levels of professionalism is needed from those administering it. There also seems to be genuine desire to introduce something truly unique to the existing system of child welfare in Russia through the work done at the Children's Villages. The Villages portray eagerness to take a more active role in the reform process and not just remain on the sidelines of development. Occupying their space as agents of change has required conscious decision-making in the Village communities to create ambitious and goal-oriented projects, as one respondent affirms:

> *'A choice had to be made whether the project should just remain a traditional agricultural community, or whether it should evolve into a progressive pedagogical community aimed at teaching and making actual progress in rehabilitating children.'*

Of course, the ideas of micro-level reform and personal growth, that is, individual transformations, are also part of theme of parenting as 'reforming' and closely connected to the previously discussed theme of 'personal project'. In this connection, however, the pursuit for a better version of oneself is perceived as more an expression of a holistic understanding of the interconnectedness of all the rehabilitative and reformative processes; that one's readiness for constant self-improvement enables one's professional development which, in turn, improves one's ability and skills to help, guide and care for others. Thus, it is generally deemed important that the parents are proactive in everything they do as individuals in the Village and, as part of the collective, take initiative and exhibit what one respondent describes '*desire to engage in psychological and pedagogical work, to understand the professional component of this project and to strive towards personal growth and change.*'

Thus, parenting as 'reforming' is essentially a holistic process that can engage the parents individually and as a collective and the Village operators locally or at the higher levels of reform politics.

6.8 The Many Faces of Parenthood

In sum, the seven major themes of parenthood established in this chapter are:

(1) the perception of *parenting as a profession*, which refers to ideas about foster parenting as work and increasing professionalisation of parental

competencies, skills and practices of care in the Russian Children's Villages. The category also entails views on formalising the organisational structures of foster parenting that could potentially serve to elevate the parents' social and occupational status in Russian society;

(2) the perception of *parenting as a duty*, which refers to ideas about foster parenting in the Children's Villages as a vocation, an act of love, a calling and/or a moral obligation. This type of parenting is often perceived as a service to the children. The motivation may be intrinsic or the sense of moral obligation experienced as externally imposed. Parenting perceived as a duty may also take religious connotations, as if the parents were doing God's work;

(3) the perception of *parenting as child saving*, which refers to ideas about rescuing deprived or sick children from further deprivation and harm. Child saving views children as victims usually of unfortunate circumstances, of maltreatment or neglect by others or of a corrupt or failed system, and it often takes the form of altruism or self-sacrifice;

(4) the perception of *parenting as a natural state*, which refers to ideas about the 'naturalness' or 'natural ease' of one's role as foster parent and the perceived genuineness, rightness and potential for durability of the ties and relationships socially constructed and negotiated within the family systems in the Children's Villages. The word 'natural' when attached to foster parenting is generally not synonymous with 'biological', albeit it appreciates the organic and dynamic nature of family structures. The perception may or may not echo traditional family values;

(5) the perception of *parenting as a personal project*, which refers to ideas about parenting in the Children's Villages offering individuals a change to engage in self-examination and self-improvement and pursue an alternative lifestyle. Parenting as a personal project may or may not entail selfish motives, including hopes for socio-economic mobility;

(6) the perception of *parenting as a collective effort*, which refers to ideas about shared and collaborative parenting practices in the Children's Villages, by way of which the Village collectives come to resemble communal families. The perception also extends beyond the Village communities, possibly including the children's birth parents and biological relatives in the blended family systems, e.g. through reconciliation and co-parenting efforts;

(7) the perception of *parenting as reforming*, which refers to ideas about the potential and capacity of the Children's Villages and the individuals residing in them to influence change in Russian society. The perception entails a belief in the social agency of both the parents and the Village operators vis-à-vis the ongoing child welfare reform in Russia. Here, reforming may also mean individual parents' ability to facilitate personal development.

It is worth bearing in mind that the perceptions of parenthood we have conceptualised based on the narratives arising from the Russian Children's Villages cannot and need not be put in a rank order, as if to indicate which modes of parenting are the 'best' and most desirable and which ones, in return, are somehow inferior. What is clearly conveyed in the responses of the foster parents is that parenting is anything but a linear step-by-step series of actions. Instead, parenthood as imaged by its agents themselves resembles a cyclical process wherein the perceptions and the different forms it takes are reciprocal and dependent on the temporal, spatial and situational contexts. What is more, individual parents in different stages of their parenthood may experience changes in their parenting perceptions and practices. As such, parenthood is a continuous flux, and parents may well express multiple different and overlapping forms of parenting simultaneously. The cyclical nature of parenthood implies that no parent is ever 'finished'; one might consider having established a relatively fixed set of child-rearing methods and practices, until a new child, biological or foster, comes along and one has to revise one's views on parenting completely. This does not mean the old parenting systems were necessarily wrong per se, but that, such as a child develops, so can a parent.

7   AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF MACRO AND MICRO

This chapter aims at linking the micro-level perceptions of parenthood/parenting more firmly with government-promoted ideas on family, thus answering our second research question. By comparing the themes that have emerged from the local narratives of Russian foster parents and child welfare professionals in the Children's Villages with family discourse and ideas constructed and promoted by the Russian government, we aim to investigate the intersections, some of the points of conflict and convergence between the macro and micro levels in Russia when it comes to thinking about family and child-related issues. This multilevel inquiry thus brings together all our previous discussions, reviewing empirical findings in terms of secondary literature and observations on the Russian state and child welfare system previously laid out in the background chapters.

The Russian Political, we remember, is marked by authoritarianism, regionalism and conservatism that continue to define and influence the process of deinstitutionalisation of child welfare in the country. These isms work to restrain and control, but they also create possibilities for civil society and local stakeholders. Similarly, they can create possibilities for new policy and reforms in one instance, but counter or undermine the sustainable realisation of the suggested programmes in the next. Thus, it is important to recognise some of the inherent paradoxes accompanying Russia's attempts to reform the child welfare system as well as to acknowledge the points of conflict and concord between political thought and micro-level realities within the family domain.

Victoria Schmidt (2009, 63) reminds us that Russians generally believe that families are the optimal environments for children. The majority of the Russian general public profess a negative attitude to institutional care, whereby family placement is regarded better for children than traditional residential care (Schmidt 2009). With its deinstitutionalisation reform, the Russian government has adopted a corresponding stance; striving to dismantle the system of residential care and shift provision of services from institutional to community and home-based, the policy-makers have likewise assessed family care to be the most desirable alternative care option, and family a basic right for every child in the country. According to Schmidt (2009) political agents believe

that protecting this right of the child to a family is key to improving children's rights in general.

Amid these trajectories, the community-based foster care provided by the Children's Villages presents a welcome alternative for institutional care, whereupon the government has incorporated the objectives of enhancing cooperation with such civil society organisations as the Children's Villages operating in the field child and family welfare as well as bolstering recruitment of new foster parents on its policy agenda. That said, laws such as the 'foreign agent law' and the 'undesirable organisations law' as its follow-up continue to limit the possibilities and operational space for NGOs. Whilst those socially oriented agents (SONGOs), including the child welfare NGOs, that are not deemed 'undesirable' per se may have more room for manoeuvre (see, e.g. Bogdanova & Bindmand 2016; Bogdanova et al. 2018), the mere existence of such legislation functions as a motion of no-confidence for all civil society organisations.

It is also important to note that even if the said efforts were to bear fruit and more and more children would be placed with families or in community-based units instead of traditional institutions, not all institutions can be run down. Some children – sick or with special needs – will always need institutional care, whereby the polarising paradigm according to which all institutions are bad and that family care alone could and should be enough ought to change along with the system (Ainsworth & Hansen 2005, 198; Reid 1974, 296). In this connection, we may see the deep-rooted discourse maintaining two univocal positions of 'bad institutions' versus 'good family placements' having started to change in Russia – at policy level at least – as the deinstitutionalisation development subjects the entire institutional care system to drastic makeovers in its structures, practices and objectives (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya 2017, 380).

These changes are crucial, since the situation for children in institutional care who have not been or cannot be placed in family care, Schmidt (2009) reminds us, has generally been dire; these children in residential care face high risk of marginalisation and drifting into a vicious circle of institutionalisation, crippling their future prospects for growth and development. As such, independent child welfare professionals in Russia have typically mirrored the scepticism of our respondents in the Children's Villages, regarding the system of institutional care in Russia as a sort of 'stairway to hell' for the

children locked in a downward spiral from moving from one institution to another and with little to no chance of climbing back up (Schmidt 2009, 65–66). Thus, a deinstitutionalisation process, as much as it is about deconstructing existing systems of institutional care and replacing them with forms of alternative care, should be about reconstructing and reforming the remaining institutions.

Seeing that the remaining residential care units are largely state institutions, they should, naturally, reflect state-run policies and principles. In Russia, this means that certain operational models and methods of public care institutions have undergone changes towards more home/family-like practices. The urge of the state to rapidly and extensively 'upgrade' its old facilities may be pertinent to the Russian government's desire to prove its readiness and capacity for renewal. It is, however, a different matter whether the systemic changes are tangible and durable, not just cosmetic quick fixes. After all, Kulmala (2017, 8) alerts that, while changes have occurred, many of the ideas and objectives of reform either remain abstractions on paper not yet materialised in institutional practice or focus on decorative institutional renovations, thus risking to obfuscate the underlying issues still persisting in the system.

The endgame of outsourcing service provision and changing the practices and culture of care is not the complete disappearance of the public sector. The welfare state must remain the ultimate professional carrying the main responsibility for its citizens' welfare. While the deinstitutionalisation process entails that the burden on individuals and the private and third sectors as welfare providers increases, the state must continue to be able to meet, for instance, certain institutional care needs of its citizens and, most importantly, operate as the main watchdog authority safeguarding the availability, quality and sufficiency of social and care services in society. However, as our findings suggest, many local stakeholders such as the foster parents in the Russian Children's Villages remain sceptical of the willingness and capability of the state and its welfare system to bear this responsibility. Instead, questions are raised whether the interests of the state in terms of, for instance, cost efficiency are eclipsing the wellbeing of its citizens, the children most importantly. Scholars also remain wary, noting that the current child and family policy of the Russian conservative government continues to be normative and selective, prioritising young heterosexual families and their potential children, whereby

state attention, resources and efforts are, in fact, directed to addressing but a limited number of issues (Kulmala et al. 2014, 535; Kulmala & Tšernova 2015, 23).

Although the foster parents in the Children's Villages certainly share the view that every child should have a right to a family and that family-like living is preferred to institutional care, family placement alone is not enough, but the actual quality of care provided within that family unit needs to satisfy the varying and often demanding needs of the children. Professionalisation of parenting, referring to improved parental competencies and skills as well as more regulated practices and formalised structures of care, is largely regarded as means to ensure that the care provided by the foster families is enough to meet the children's needs and improve their quality of life. Inasmuch as ensuring a prosperous childhood for every child left without parental care is one of the main objectives of the deinstitutionalisation reform, the right for the children to receive sufficient quality care by capable and skilled caregivers is undoubtedly a vision shared by both the foster parents and the state authorities. In this regard, Chernova and Kulmala (2018) affirm that the Russian government has tightened entry requirements for foster parent candidates and now demanding compulsory training programmes for them. The parents, in turn, have shown great interest and a clear need for such programmes augmenting parent qualifications. These programmes, however, continue to lack in uniformity. (Chernova & Kulmala 2018, 48, 62.)

Bearing in mind, with formalisation and regulation comes standardisation of the service and its quality. And with standardisation comes equalisation, as the established standards in service quality function to ensure that all children under foster care receive the de jure same quality service by equally competent and qualified parents. That said, Schmidt (2009) reminds us that creating a functioning system providing quality care is a task that requires also the participation of knowledgeable and helping specialists. While the child welfare reform entails ideas about developing the system of social work towards more preventive and family-focused operational models, the organisational structures in Russian CPS often remain confined in institutional and reactionary practice (Biryukova et al. 2013; Mikkola 2006; Schmidt 2009).

Still, as the forms of care and the role of the caregiver parents change, the social workers in Russian CPS also need to redefine the role of social work amidst these

processes of deinstitutionalisation and service quality improvement (Schmidt 2009, 66–67). Also, given that many of the Children's Villages actually provide care services and preventive social assistance for children and families at risk in more general, meaning families that are not necessarily foster families and come from outside these communities, their professional role and relationship with the child welfare authorities need likewise reconfiguration; with the outsourcing development, the Village operators have the potential to become partners of the CPS, sharing and coordinating service tasks and family work responsibilities between themselves. (Kulmala & Chernova 2018, 54–55.) However, the desired cooperative framework between the parents/Children's Villages and the child welfare authorities remains deficient. As pointed out by Chernova and Kulmala (2018), the gradual professionalisation of parenting has, to some extent, created confrontation between the child welfare officials and the foster parents. This is especially evident in instances where the state authorities' actions appear controlling and arbitrary vis-à-vis the parents (Chernova & Kulmala 2018, 58), treating them as if they were employees rather than equal partners.

The oftentimes rapidly progressing deinstitutionalisation reform, we and others have found, has translated into haphazard placements of the children in foster homes (Jäppinen & Kulmala 2015). For example, some of the parents in our study describe situations where the child welfare authorities have not shown enough consideration to the individual needs and characteristics of the child to be placed, let alone conducted a prior consultation with the host family on their resources and preferences concerning the placement. In these cases, the state system treats foster parents as care workers bound by a professional duty to take in any child given to them based solely on the *opeka*'s decision. At the same time, however, the bureaucratic and occupational structures in Russia fail to recognise foster parenting as a formal profession, rendering a paradox where the parents often have a burden of a professional, but not the status of one.

State actions to support the professionalisation of parenting have hitherto been partial at best. Whilst the on-going reform has undeniably brought about significant improvements in the general child welfare system, introducing the previously neglected topic of foster care to public debate, some obvious shortcomings remain yet unaddressed by the policy-makers; although licensed, the Russian foster parents continue to lack clear occupational and employment status with a fixed salary and recognition as care

professionals, and though entitled to various in-kind benefits and material support, the resources often prove insufficient or incorrectly allocated in terms of the foster families' actual needs (Kulmala et al., forthcoming, 18). Foster parenting, albeit encouraged as an individual choice, remains 'non-work' or 'non-profession' in official registers. Thus, it is almost as if professionalisation of parenting were a secondary goal through which other policy objectives – increasing the volume of family care in lieu of placements in institutions – can be realised, whereby it possesses mainly instrumental value for the policy-makers, promoted as means to an end, but not the desired end goal itself. The parents' contribution and skills as caregivers are needed, but progressive formalisation and consolidation of foster parenting as a regulated profession remain more claims from below than active attempts from the top.

Furthermore, while the on-going child welfare reform has significantly legitimised the position of such organisations as the Children's Villages within the Russian welfare system, the operational environment for the Villages remains challenging and somewhat conflicting. Whilst the care provided by the Children's Villages is de facto community-based and family-like, Bogdanova (2017, 401) observes that, from the state's perspective, the Village organisations, albeit non-state actors, are regarded as providing institutional care. Hence, the Villages – in theory at least – are exposed to the same regulations and inspections as the state's residential care facilities, even though the operational models, core principles and resources of the Children's Villages are oftentimes radically different from those of public care institutions. (Bogdanova 2017.) Thus, the operational environment for the Villages remains precarious, carrying a level of uncertainty in terms of whether or not the Children's Villages remain desirable care providers in the eyes of the state amidst the progressing deinstitutionalisation reform.

The parents in the Children's Villages, advocating for professionalisation of foster parenting, highlight that increased levels of professionalism in foster care practice would translate to higher quality of care that can satisfy the children's needs better. What is more, furnished with relevant skills, competencies and qualifications acquired through appropriate training and education, the parents would be better prepared to deal with even the most challenging child cases transferred to them from the closing institutions. At the same time, however, the Russian government and care providers alike may have a realistic concern – one familiar from other professionalisation contexts (see, e.g. Maton 1988) –

that, if the national objective is indeed to raise the total number of foster parents, a simultaneous process of professionalisation and tightening of the criteria for parental hopefuls as well as generally demanding better quality of care might result in occupational exclusivity and a decrease in the availability of the service of foster care in society. This, in turn, might hinder government attempts to both enlist more citizens to become foster parents and increase the overall number of children's foster care placements.

Of course, one strategy to increase the number of foster parents and foster families and thus the availability of the service of foster care in society is to holistically embrace family diversity. If the heteronormative ideals of traditional family values were rejected and a wider range of 'acceptable' family structures promoted instead, would this not serve to expand the pool of foster parent and family candidates, as applicants would be accepted regardless of gender, sexuality, marital status or represented family and household structures? 'Normalising' the plurality of family forms would also function to normalise foster care and the families who, for the time being, find themselves in the margins of Russian society, largely because of prejudice, ambiguous status and societal structures that fail to meet their needs. Similarly, legally consolidating the social and employment status of foster parents as well as legitimising the operational status of the Children's Villages as alternative care providers would not only work towards gradual professionalisation of foster care and improving the quality of care services, but might increase the public appeal of foster parenting as a career opportunity, making it more approachable and attractive to a wider range of the population.

That being said, the official family discourse in Russia, does not celebrate family diversity, but presents a normative reading of the social institution of the family. If we consider the strong moral and traditionalist overtones attached to the promotion of (re)consolidation of family as the basis of society in Russian family policy as means to rally the masses behind the common cause of the family, we may likewise see it as a state attempt to evoke emotion and a sense of duty in people to take part in its nation-building projects. The Russian conservative government's ambitious bids to resolve the nationwide problem of social orphanhood and create a 'Russia without orphans' by realising the right of every child in the country to grow up in a family as well as reverse the country's demographic decline are activities that directly involve the Russian people

and something that the state cannot achieve on its own. As such, the state needs strategies to mobilise its citizens to contribute to its objectives in the family domain.

The use of traditional family values and framing the solving of social and demographic problems as a common effort certainly present a useful and familiar strategy for conservative actors to excite people's loyalties, first of all, towards the institution of the family and, second, the state and the nation – provided that, through the image of the family as the foundation of society, the government, using Gilbert's (1999) analogy, is creating a nexus between the family and the nation, using the former as very much a metaphor for the latter (see, e.g. Fox Harding 1999; Kolstø 2005). President Putin (2006) has famously stated that 'love for one's homeland, for one's country, starts with love for one's family', and this political rhetoric continues to permeate official family discourse in Russia in the 2010s. Consequently, it is here where one's sense of duty or moral obligation vis-à-vis the family comes along, as many of the parenting narratives arising from the Children's Villages entail distinct moral connotations, whereupon foster parenting is framed along the lines of a vocation or calling or, indeed, duty.

Perceived as such, the foster parents appear to express pronounced feelings of moral obligation, loyalty and commitment towards their families, whereby, for instance, giving up on the children in their care or giving them away present themselves unimaginable options for most. That said, while the influence of political rhetoric cannot be categorically refuted as a galvanising factor, government-generated family values are not generally admitted as motivators behind individual foster parents' beliefs and behaviour. The ROC may certainly be seen as an important religious and moral authority inspiring and guiding the activities of those parents who identify the Orthodox faith as a driving force in their community. That said, Anna Tarasenko (2018) discerns that the ROC continues to occupy a somewhat conflicting position in relation to the entire child welfare reform. The Church has taken a stance alongside parental unions, emphasising parental rights and the autonomy and integrity of families, criticising the CPS for intervening in the lives of Russian families and taking children in custody in a way that blatantly violates against parental rights. Simultaneously, however, it is not uncommon amongst the Orthodox clergy for a priest to serve as head of a large foster family. (Tarasenko 2018, 120.)

Mostly, however, the foster parents' imagined loyalties and urge to help and serve appear to be more akin to some personal or inner sense of purpose, altruistic tendencies and/or self-sacrifice for the children in particular than to any clearly articulated sense of civic duty towards the state and nation. On the other hand, if we take people's participation into the projects of protecting children and the institution of the family as the ultimate goal of the government's policy programmes, the actual motives of individual foster parents for engaging in the welfare reform, fighting orphanhood and developing more community-based and family-like forms of care may be considered of secondary importance. After all, do one's initial motivations to contribute to the project of child and family welfare actually matter to the state, if the end result of individuals providing family care for children in need, while alleviating pressure from state and its care institutions, remains the same?

Of course, in instances where the parents' sense of duty to protect orphaned children stems from their perceptions of the erosion of the current system of child welfare, the relationship between the state and individual agency becomes slightly more complex, as the state and its agents are seen as very much part of the problem society is trying to fight. While such a viewpoint may generate hostility in the parents towards the state, its public institutions and the welfare authorities, they do not appear to diminish the parents' desire to help the children, quite the contrary; this may, in fact, increase the consciousness of moral obligation, urging the individual to take a greater role as the imaginary protector – a function that the state has supposedly failed to fulfil. In many respects, despite the attempts of the government, as earlier identified by Biryukova and Sinyavskaya (2017), to change the paradigm of 'bad' institutions, the views of a corrupt and harmful system continue to permeate the micro level, which, in its part, adds to the distrust between the parents and the child welfare authorities, frustrating some of the prospects of goodwill and cooperation between them.

The macro and micro levels, nonetheless, share an inclination towards a discernible child-saving rhetoric. Whether the political actors' pronounced desire to save the rhetorical children of Russia is indeed genuine – and not driven by ulterior motives or authoritarian interests of the state – remains debatable and, in that, continues to be met with general suspicion at grassroots level. In any case, the conservative government has been showing intensifying concern over family and child-related issues, and, together

with the ROC, Russian policy-makers have been engaging in the creation of 'a moral panic' around family and child wellbeing (Kulmala et al. 2017). The imageries of risks and threats to Russian children as envisaged by the state have gradually gained ground in wider social imagination, as several legislative initiatives and regulation, such as the 'Dima Yakovlev Act' and the 'gay propaganda laws', engaging with rhetorical protection of children of Russia, have been imposed by the government in recent years. These acts have evoked both support and protest among the public, resulting, if anything, in increased media attention being paid to the Russian child welfare system and its shortcomings. (Kulmala et al. 2017, 360.) Similarly, we may recognise images of deprived and vulnerable children in need of saving being constructed by the foster parents in the Russian Children's Villages.

The child-victim images narrated by the parents, while corresponding in many occasions with the governments portrayals of child deprivation, are not necessarily a reprise of the official discourse. For instance, while the state seeks to protect the children from supposedly harmful external influences that 'reject traditional family values' (FLPC 2013), many foster parents in the Children's Villages view their foster children precisely as victims of the welfare system, upon which the state authorities become one of the 'culprits' in their narratives. Of course, we may consider the fact that the state has, at all, introduced a deinstitutionalisation reform in child welfare an admittance of the public system's failings so far to produce adequate care. In fact, Kulmala (2017, 8) affirms that, due to long-term advocacy of child welfare NGOs and increasing awareness domestically of the inhumanities of the child welfare institutions in Russia along with increasing international pressure, the Russian government realised and admitted the need for reform, sparking the wheels of deinstitutionalisation in motion. On the other hand, the reform has yet to overcome some of the persisting structural inertia of the Russian welfare state and solve the socio-economic root causes of child and family deprivation in Russian society. Many families, biological and foster, still lack sufficient material and expert support, and the endeavours of the welfare system to engage in preventive social work with the birth parents and focus equally on the welfare of all citizens and thus holistically address the problem of social orphanhood remain partially or wholly unrealised. (Biryukova et al. 2013; Jäppinen 2018; Kulmala et al. 2014; Lokshina 2002; Mikkola 2008; Schmidt 2009.)

The child-saving agents and reformers generally view children as victims of something or someone – of unfortunate socio-economic circumstances, of maltreatment and neglect by adults who should have been taking care of them, or of a bankrupt system – whereupon the children themselves are not held accountable for their distress, but seen as vulnerable to harm caused deliberately by others. In order to rescue the children from (further) harm, adults maintaining the victim-child image tend to produce legislative, policy and practical measures meant to assist either the children to protect themselves or other social actors or institutions to do the protecting or to strike down the ones causing the harm. (Best 1990, 3–6.) While the intentions behind these child-saving attempts may appear benign, some of their impacts might turn out harmful, especially if the saving of the rhetorical children is done at the expense of others. The Russian state's projects to safeguard children from harmful influences have translated into policy and legislation that normalise traditional family structures and heterosexuality at the cost of those compositions and types that do not fit those normative ideals. What is more, refusing to recognise the inherent paradoxes of its policies that simultaneously support certain human rights (the children's) and hamper others (the LGBTI community's), inevitably undermines the success and durability of any of the state's welfare reforms, as the welfare state, who should be the protector of all, continues to marginalise and repress some of its own citizens.

Also, child-saving rhetoric, if utilised in excess, can further deprive the children of agency. Needless to say, welfare states and their adult populations are the principal actors in charge of protecting the children in society and should thus strive to create social and legislative structures that ensure a safe and secure environment for the children to develop and grow up in (Best 1990). Yet, these structures, whilst protective, should also be enabling, allowing the children to express themselves, take initiative and participate in society as its active and equal members. In this connection, the image of a victim-child may prove itself extremely problematic; by naturalising the victim and vulnerable child narratives, the adults may, in fact, exercise an unnecessarily strong discursive power over the children, confining them to a passive role. Neither the Russian government nor the foster parents in the Children's Villages manage to escape this entirely, but tend to place significant emphasis on their own role as saviours. That said, the child-saving rhetoric in the Villages is accompanied by ideas of children's empowerment. Analogously,

government policy seeks to promote the idea of a 'prosperous childhood' for every child in the country, which, as we understand it, should undoubtedly include every child's right to active agency, although the children's de facto ability to participate in and influence socio-political processes remains minimal.

The official language and terminology used in Russia to describe family systems, Elena Yarskaya-Smirnova, Pavel Romanov, Viktoria Antonova and Svetlana Biryukova (2014b, 75) warn, continue to be normative, moralising and discriminatory rather than analytical and neutral. The ideas of child wellbeing or prosperity in Russian family policy and welfare sector are accompanied by concepts of 'fortunate' (*blagopoluchnaia*) and 'unfortunate' (*neblagopoluchnaia*) families. These constructs, the scholars note, lack clear definition, whereby they remain adaptable for use and abuse, although the prevailing family discourse tends to assign certain general criteria for each category; the former is typically used to refer to a family unit that is 'whole', meaning it has two parents of the opposite sex and is thus a reproductive system, preferably with multiple children, and it has the socio-economic capacity to provide a safe and stable environment for the children to grow up in. (Yarskaya-Smirnova et al. 2014b.)

Meanwhile, the latter serves as a blanket term for a much wider spectrum of 'dysfunctional', 'conflicting' and 'non-adaptive' family systems in deprived circumstances that fail to support child wellbeing. The characteristics associated with 'unfortunate' families, Yarskaya-Smirnova et al. (2014b) have found, may include: poverty, lack of spirituality, marginalisation, antisocial behaviour of the parents, conflicting relations between spouses or between children and parents, substance abuse as well as too small or too large number of children. Of course, the last point presents a contradiction in terms, as multi-child families are encouraged per se, but at the same time, too many children in a family structure that is perceived incapable of providing for them is deemed undesirable. Hence, the qualifier 'unfortunate', on the whole, remains ambiguous, but usually implies some form of perceived breakdown or disruption in household structures, whereupon the family is no longer regarded as 'complete'. (Yarskaya-Smirnova et al. 2014b, 72-76.)

While providing adequate support for children and families in vulnerable situations is an essential task of the welfare state, Yarskaya-Smirnova et al. (2014b) are

right noting that the use of labels such as 'unfortunate family' or 'difficult youth' is potentially more harmful than helpful; these descriptions do not accommodate the identification of the problem itself, nor do they help determine its root causes and solutions. Instead, classifying certain families as 'unfortunate' or 'deprived' based on their represented household structures has but a stigmatising effect. On this, the writers note that, for example, single-parent or multi-child families, low income families or families with children with disabilities do not automatically translate to 'unfortunate' families incapable of supporting the wellbeing of the children within these family systems. (Yarskaya-Smirnova et al. 2014b, 75.)

Official family discourse resting upon a traditional value base that normalises the biological, heterosexual nuclear family structures, however, generally fails to make such distinctions, continuing to employ the 'fortunate–unfortunate' dichotomy. Thus, the blended family structures of foster families usually accommodating an exhausting number of orphaned children – therefore being a indirect consequence of child or another family's deprivation – and often remaining dependent on government support, we see, escape the first of the two categories. Hence, what is left is some form of 'unfortunateness' to describe these family systems. Yet, if allowed a bit more conceptual latitude, it becomes clear that a 'fortunate' nuclear family, on the one hand, and a stable and secure foster family, on the other hand, be it somewhat 'nontraditional' in its form, are not necessarily the opposite extremes of the same scale. Naturally, an appreciation of family diversity is the prerequisite for such a realisation, as is the acceptance of the viewpoint that the 'natural' form of organisation for a family need not be determined by biology.

Bearing this in mind, inasmuch as adoption is the purported endgame of foster care – and the foster parent–foster child relationship therein not intended as temporary, but very much a permanent arrangement – great many foster families, even if dissimilar to textbook examples of traditional nuclear families united by biological ties, come relatively close to the top-down-proposed ideal of a thriving multi-child family with extended kinship ties. While the foster families, like any family unit that hosts as much as eight or more children, may require extra material support from the state, it does not mean that these families per se could not be functioning family systems. Nonetheless, we continue to see dissonance between the authorities' views and how the foster families

themselves perceive and portray the 'fortunate Russian family'. While foster care, as outlined in Russian child welfare and family policy, is indeed one of the desired types of non-institutional care for children, the social position of the foster family as but a family structure – as opposed to being a mere form of alternative care – remains overshadowed by its nuclear equivalent. Still, it is hardly surprising that, for instance, the foster parents in this study generally do not characterise their families as unfortunate or deprived.

Officially corroborated family norms continue to carry unfortunate effects on those family structures that escape these normalised ideals. Bogdanova (2017) argues that there is a certain level of camouflaging the 'foster' side of the Children's Villages and the families residing in them occurring in Russian society. This 'masking of the foster' may manifest itself in avoidance of visible signs indicating the Village premises or in the children attending school and the parents seeking work outside the Village realm in hopes of, first of all, preventing the families from being stigmatised and, second, furthering their inclusion into the surrounding communities (Bogdanova 2017, 403). While community engagement is undoubtedly a constructive goal facilitating social integration, it is somewhat distressing to think that the fade-out of the 'foster' side of the Children's Villages and their residents would be a sine qua non for the families' social inclusion and acceptance by rest of society. Needless to say, such conditional inclusion presents a slippery slope that, instead of integration, risks marginalisation of those individuals and social systems that experience a need to engage more in efforts to hide themselves than to reveal themselves.

From social inclusion, turning to the question of individualism, as might be expected, foster parenting as a personal project is not the primary discourse that the official state-level actors promote when it comes to their attempts to advocate foster care as a desired form of alternative care for children and recruit new foster parents to engage in service provision. Official rhetoric avoids framing foster parenting as a potential avenue for individual parents' socio-economic mobility, self-examination or attainment of personal goals. Instead of 'selfish' interests of the adults, emphasis is put on serving the interests and wellbeing of the children. To be sure, foster parenting *is* as personal project for the parent, inasmuch as it is an activity carried out by a certain individual. Similarly, outsourcing care responsibilities from the public sector entails an idea of turning child welfare into a project of the individual, as the citizens' personal

responsibility as service providers increases. From the perspective of the state, however, the presentation of the reasons behind the activity of parenting and how they appear to the wider public is what is important. Thus, it is more the narrative of joint and several responsibility of the citizens vis-à-vis vulnerable groups in society – in this case, the foster parents acting charitable towards orphaned children – that the government seeks to accentuate in its social and family policy rhetoric rather than explicitly nurturing and encouraging people's individualistic ambitions per se.

Of course, the objective of ensuring 'a prosperous childhood' for all children implies that the children's wellbeing is materialised in and via 'family prosperity', and that suggested prosperousness undoubtedly entails the idea of all family members being entitled to happiness and contentment in their family lives and systems. This 'prosperity', however, is not presented to be about money or riches per se, as though 'a prosperous family' would automatically translate to a well-to-do family – albeit affluence is not reprehended as such, as long as foster parenting does not represent the primary means to achieve it. That said, seeing that foster parenting does not necessarily represent the most lucrative business venture one can engage in today's Russia – money-wise at least – it is unlikely that avaricious foster parents are what the government is currently most afraid of. A more rational a concern for the state would perhaps be the purity and sincerity of individual foster parents' intentions towards the children, that is, whether they as caregivers have the children's best interest at heart. Be it somewhat paradoxically, similar reservations are expressed by the parents in our study when it comes to the state, its intentions and motives. In this atmosphere of mutual distrust, the parties may thus experience a need to justify themselves via such descriptions as 'calling', 'duty', 'vocation' or 'moral obligation'.

To be sure, individuals possess the ability and potential to abuse the system of social and welfare benefits, but the in-kind benefits that foster families receive in Russia are hardly creating welfare traps as they are, insofar as these benefits remain, as Kulmala et al. (forthcoming, 18) note, insufficient to cover the basic costs of living for many of the foster families. It is also worth bearing in mind that the organisations, such as the case study Children's Villages, operating in this field of child welfare usually represent the third sector, whereby they are charitable nonprofit projects performing humanitarian functions, as opposed to profit-making businesses. The Russian government, in its turn,

promotes civil society partnerships as the preferred mode of cooperation in welfare and care service provision. Thus, for instance, when depicting the NGOs and civil society agents working amidst the Russian welfare reform as 'policy entrepreneurs', Bindman et al. (2018), are not referring to their potential to yield profit, but to their knowledge capital that can be utilised to generate further expertise, ideas and applicable practice solutions in social policy and welfare.

That said, the suggested professionalisation of foster care would certainly make parenting a personal, or at least a professional, project for the foster parent practicing it as an occupation. While the state is unlikely to highlight the possibilities of foster parenting as a business opportunity, there is currently not enough foster parents in Russia compared to the number of children that need to be placed outside state institutions that are gradually being dismantled and into family care. Thus, as is evident from the government's attempts to encourage more and more citizens to become foster parents, the authorities are clearly willing to support the idea of foster parenting as a personal 'career' choice. After all, as long as the demand exceeds the supply, how requiring can the state actually afford be when it comes to individuals' motives to pursue foster parenting? Also, insofar as outsourcing social service provision to non-state actors is one of the key objectives of the ongoing welfare reform, it may in principle be seen as a service to the state if someone adopts foster parenting as a personal project, provided that this choice equals the actor assuming personal responsibility and alleviating pressure from the state as the main care provider.

The prevailing discourse, however, at both the community and policy levels, seems to be that of 'collective effort'. For the parents in the Children's Villages, the sense of collectivity manifests itself in their collaborative co-parenting practices and the idea of the Villages as 'communal families'. 'Collective effort' may likewise be identified as a strong motif in Russian political rhetoric and social policy programmes often ambitious in their set objectives and implementation timelines; the realisation of, for instance, the officially prescribed family policy goals is presented possible only with the help of a comprehensive and dynamic partnership network traversing all levels of society. The concepts of *sobornost'* ('togetherness') – referring to a bond between the individual, the family, and society – and social solidarity are values that the Russian state continues to foster in its political rhetoric (Kolstø 2005; Ruutu 2017). The perceived national

'togetherness' adds to the political agents' social construction of the nation as if 'a communal family' mobilised to solve the social and demographic problems in the country alongside the state.

As already mentioned in the preceding sections, these constructions of collectivity and social responsibility are extremely important with respect to the government's elaborate plans to resolve the nationwide problem of social orphanhood and reverse Russia's population decline amid its concomitant attempts to reduce the public sector; arguments about joint and several responsibility of the individual and families and the role of civil society actors in solving the pressing social and demographic issues in Russia can be harnessed in the drive to reduce the welfare state and public spending (Fox Harding 1999, 126). That said, the promotion of collective responsibility and cooperation between different sectors and both state and non-state actors is not simply done to alleviate pressure on public healthcare and social services, but can also be seen as a bid to capitalise on civil society's knowledge and expertise. After all, the bulk of valuable firsthand experience and expertise in organising family care and services to families resides precisely at the local level. While the state actors' experience and expertise lie very much in the praxis of arranging public residential care, the knowledge and means to organise community and home-based forms of family-like care are largely found with street-level operators within the third sector.

Reinforcing and developing work done with the biological parents and blood relatives of children taken into the foster care system is stated as one of the major policy objectives of the Russian child welfare reform. Ideally, this would mean that the child in foster care would have an extensive collective of significant adults in her life and, as such, an extended or blended family consisting of both foster and biological family members, with social workers and other experts in child welfare services working as mediators amidst this network. It seems, however, that the political will to transform the de facto mindset and practices in the Russian child protection system remains rather weak, continuing to place significant blame on the birth parents whose child has been taken into custody rather than working towards reconciliation, often resulting in the marginalisation of the birth parents in the process and thus leaving them without support services or the possibility to participate in their child's life (see, e.g. Jäppinen 2018). Correspondingly, it appears that more endeavours to look for ways and develop practices to maintain the

child's relationship with the blood relatives exist in the foster families themselves, who maintain efforts to treat the birth parents as allies, even in situations where there is no realistic chance for the child to be returned to her biological family.

In any event, the welfare reform presses on, with ambitious goals to overhaul the entire system of child welfare in Russia. The economic downturns of 2008–2009 and 2014–2017 severely affected the Russian welfare state's ability to manage the responsibilities of social service provision, and the turn towards the third and private sectors as the new provides securing social protection and adequate services for the Russian citizens occurred relatively swiftly (Nikula & Ivashinenko 2017, 386). The more the local and non-state actors are now able and willing to assume responsibilities for service delivery, the more public welfare spending is cut, although the onus of quality control and monitoring of services remains with the state. This kind of outsourcing of welfare services, however, as Zimmerman et al. (1994) note, generally means that the primary responsibility for ensuring the continuation and wellbeing of society rests with the individual and is largely dependent on the willingness and ability of individual entities and family systems to perform their functions in a way that meets larger societal needs. Yet, the families and individuals should have the sufficient resources and requisites to perform such welfare duties, considering that, just as the wellbeing of society depends on these social agents acting accordingly, the wellbeing and capability of the families and individuals are contingent upon rest of society's ability to meet *their* needs (Zimmerman et al. 1994, 195–196).

Family systems in the contemporary world are becoming increasingly diverse in form and function, whereupon the norms and practices of parenting likewise alter, making the needs and realities of today's families different to what they were to the generations before them (McHale et al. 2002). However, since the changing nature of family forms and parenthood has not been understood as so much a possibility but a potential threat to Russian society and its preservation by the state, viewing parenting through the prism of reforming as something that promotes the expansion and diversification of the family domain might further intimidate the Russian political authorities. After all, conservative governments, whose interest lies in preserving the existing social order, generally perceive such transformations in the family and parenthood domains as undesirable and threatening as they might function to destabilise the status quo in their society (see, e.g.

Fox Harding 1999; Kamerman & Kahn 1978). Thus, a perceived 'reformist' sentiment in citizens' social organisation and behaviour might excite resistance and reactionary measures by the state, for instance, in the form of restrictive and repressive policies and attempts at social regulation (Lotarev 2014).

Still, while those holding political power in Russia continue to securitise certain groups in society and view many of the civil society agents potentially threatening, government policies and welfare reforms nevertheless promote opportunities and avenues for cooperation between the state and myriad civil society stakeholders. As such, the 'reforming' capabilities of socially oriented third sector organisations in advising and implementing policies and enabling, for instance, the official goals of the deinstitutionalisation reform seem to be appreciated by the state authorities. While the final decision-making power remains with the government apparatus, and policies, including the child welfare reform, continue to be imposed top-down, the deinstitutionalisation process has opened (limited) access to certain child welfare NGOs to the otherwise exclusive political arena. On this, Bindman et al. (2018) see genuine potential in the Russian NGOs that possess invaluable expertise and experience in working with families in the field as 'policy entrepreneurs' forming truly reciprocal and constructive partnerships with the state. The scholars suggest that, by rendering ideas and practice solutions based on expert knowledge from the street level, non-state actors can, in fact, assume active agency in policy-making in Russia, with a genuine ability to influence reform policy design and implementation, instead of the state holding an autocratic power over such processes (Bindman et al. 2018).

Needless to say, like any welfare state machinery, the Russian government has its interest in ensuring the wellbeing of its citizens. Yet, the tradition of patrimonialism and the largely bureaucratic and hierarchical administrative structures the state hosts have created a pattern of governance in the country, which, to this day, carries a array of paternalistic and authoritarian features. This, in return, manifests itself in a policy-making culture of a power vertical, amid which the state's actions vis-à-vis its citizen may appear more controlling than caring – even if the purported motives and intentions of the government are nominally benign. A palpable lack of democratic structures and an absence of tradition of good governance that would foster transparency, integrity and liability in Russia may risk undermining the welfare state and the sustainability of its

reforms, as the accountability and responsiveness of the Russian government to the public remains minimal. The flow of information from the top to the bottom is likewise lacking, with official statistics often proving misleading or incomplete and quantitative assessment of policy success generally eclipsing qualitative evaluation of the results (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya 2017; Kulmala & Jäppinen 2015).

Russian official data are eager to emphasise major achievements made in improving the nation's welfare, but as Cook (2011, 28) among others points out, the wider expert community – us included – remains far more sceptical and modest in its evaluations of the actual policy results and the Russian state's general approach to welfare issues. In lieu of national priority programmes and government demographic policies that might offer a quick-fix on a limited number of issue but fail to address wider systemic challenges, experts stress the importance of striving for profound structural reforming of society along with systemic change in order to find durable solutions in welfare issues (Cook 2011, 29). The envisioned multilevel partnerships in welfare delivery cannot operate without a comprehensive revision of the pre-existing systems of communication and cooperation between the state and civil society in Russia. Thus, no matter how progressive a policy programme or reform, putting it into practice within a system that itself continues to resist reform is likely to prove pointless and but a waste of time and money (Cook 2011, 28–29).

The Russian child welfare reform certainly fosters the above-mentioned principles of systemic and structural change, however, it remains to be seen whether or not the welfare state can facilitate durable development and realise all the ambitious policy objectives or whether government achievements prove incomplete and superficial. That being said, Kulmala et al. (2017) remind that those changes that we currently see taking place in the Russian child welfare sector have not occurred despite of, but *due to* actual political will and pressure from above to reform the welfare system. In a political system that operates on the basis of a strong power vertical and where the executive power lies in the hands of the president's party of power, major decisions concerning the deinstitutionalisation process and its actual implementation have been urged forward only after references to children left without parental care started to be made by the highest-level officials (Gel'man & Starodubtsev 2016; Kulmala et al. 2017, 361–362).

Policy-makers, in Russia and elsewhere, will undoubtedly continue to operate on the basis of a certain set of values and categorisations defined by their political ideology. Consequently, their values and beliefs will permeate decision-making on all domains of policy, family and welfare included. That said, regardless of whatever modes of family life are considered 'right' or 'natural' by the prevailing political order in a given society and government, the welfare state never has a legitimate reason to favour certain family forms or systems at the expense of others, for the welfare state ought to have only one task – to ensure wellbeing for all its citizens. As our research on micro-level perceptions of parenting and the family in official discourse has shown, holistically embracing the plurality of family structures remains a challenge for Russian society. Nevertheless, family diversity is a contemporary global reality, whereby any government aspiring to generate sustainable social reforms and policies should acknowledge it as such. Equally as important is to accept and appreciate the many faces of parenting. What our study has shown is that the various forms of parenting can and do coexist, and the voices arising from the ground up need not discord with government ideas.

8   CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the perceptions and practices of foster parenting in Russian Children's Villages and the intersections of bottom-up constructions of parenthood and government-promoted ideas on family. We have thus placed our inquiry at the micro level in the broader framework of Russia's ongoing child welfare reform, marked by ambitious attempts to deinstitutionalise the country's entire system of child welfare.

Whilst the spectrum of forms of foster parenting is undoubtedly as wide as the plethora of Children's Villages themselves, our study has identified a range of interrelated, yet distinct, perceptions of parenthood emerging from our case study Children's Villages in Russia. Consequently, our social constructionist analysis of the interviews with foster parents and child welfare professionals in Russian Children's Villages has generated the following seven major thematic categories: parenthood/parenting as (1) *a profession;* (2) *a duty;* (3) *child saving;* (4) *a natural state;* (5) *a personal project;* (6) *a collective effort;* and (7) *reforming*.

These perceptions of parenthood and its practices do not exist in isolation, but operate in parallel, whereby parenting may take multiple forms simultaneously and consecutively, forming a cyclical rather than linear process. While the results do not reveal explicit manifestations of antagonism per se between micro-level stakeholders and the state and policy-makers, it is clear that the relationships between political ideology and local realities, between federal policy-making and regional policy implementation, between state objectives and NGO-run operations, between the government's welfare reform goals and third sector/individual responsibility for care service provision, and between officially promoted traditional family values and family diversity in society are not without conflict. Amid the sweeping nationwide programme of reforms in the field of child and family welfare, local realities are in constant negotiation with the largely authoritarian institution of the state that continues to predominate over all policy.

Yet, despite abundant challenges in their private lives and occasional points of collision and inconspicuousness within the public sphere, individuals in the Russian Children's Villages portray substantial ingenuity, resilience and initiative in their everyday family praxis. The Children's Villages as emerging civil society agents working with child and family welfare are not passive actors vis-à-vis the state, but demonstrate a sense of agency that cultivates both original and imaginative ways to operate in the field. Hence, whilst arguments could be made about the Russian conservative government's myopic attitude to family life based on its policy design and family discourse relying heavily on traditional family values, our inquiry at the micro level shows that family systems, structures and realities as well as ways to think about parenting in today's Russian society are far more diverse than what mere political rhetoric might suggest. Behind the authoritarian and patrimonial makeup of the Russian state, myriad local realities and their manifestations persist and are waiting to be discovered.

We have established that, in the course of the 2000s, concerns over Russian children, their safety and wellbeing as well as the preservation of traditional family values and the family as the basic unit of society have been mounting in the rhetoric and policy of the Russian conservative government. The political centre has become fixed on ambitions to reverse the negative trends of population decline, child deprivation and alleged family dysfunction in Russian society. As a result, family policy with a special focus on heterosexual nuclear families has been elevated to the top of state agenda.

Protection of children and reconsolidation of the institution of the family have become normative principles propelling and steering welfare reforms in the field of child and family welfare. One of the largest and most significant policy reforms of the last decade has been the state-initiated deinstitutionalisation of child welfare in Russia, aimed at dismantling and reconfiguring the existing system of residential care, while transferring a bulk of public sector duties and responsibilities for care service provision to the private and third sectors.

Rating family as the optimal environment for children, the government has prioritised the development of community and home-based forms of alternative care for children in lieu of traditional residential care. The Russian general public has similarly maintained a predominantly negative attitude to institutional care, deeming family placement better for children left without parental care than placement in institutions. Faced with an enormous problem of (social) orphanhood placing considerable strain on social systems, the idea of every child's right to grow up in a family has become the mainstay of the ongoing child welfare reform in Russia. In this view, orphaned children and children left without parental care are deprived of a family and, by that definition, one of their basic human rights is left unrealised. Hence, the Russian policy-makers have sought to combat this deprivation and restore that right via policy attempts to replace institutional care with a range of prevention and family-based alternative care.

In this connection, foster care presents one of the fastest growing types of alternative care for orphaned children and children left without parental care in today's Russia. The Children's Villages as NGO-run communities of foster families, in turn, represent one important form of community-based alternative care, providing ever-increasing community-based support services for families at risk. These Villages as agents of Russian civil society and the individuals residing in them are important care operators realising the objectives of the ongoing deinstitutionalisation reform and government family policies that require multi-level cooperation to materialise not merely on paper, but in practice as well. The Russian state has thereupon welcomed a range of socially oriented child welfare NGOs of such as its potential partners in designing and delivering child welfare across the country, albeit not without reservations.

The political arena in Russia remains ambivalent and paradoxical, introducing policies that are often either contradictory or incompatible in their goals and objectives. Alongside ambitious liberal tendencies and reformist programmes we may observe a wide range of illiberal, repressive and reactionary policies and legislation that undermine the fruition of the more progressive reforms which risk failing amid structures that hold onto conservative and authoritarian traditions. Nevertheless, we may see a peculiar duality prevailing in Russia where the political environment acts both controlling and enabling at the same time. While the federal centre outlines policies and reforms, envisioning their aims and objectives, it is the regions and local agents that are mainly in charge of their implementation. The political rhetoric and traditional values promoted by the conservative government often appear morally charged and principled, narrowing official family discourse and policy horizons. Yet, the praxis of regulation is laxer than the state's patrimonial rhetoric. In principle, the authoritarian government offers but little room for pluralism and creativity, however, seeing that Russia is, in fact, a multilayered entity operating at three levels of governance – federal, regional and local – the central authorities do not dominate local practice. Consequently, micro-level stakeholders possess more agency that what appears at first sight.

Of course, the question remains how to create a truly sustainable and functioning liberally oriented child welfare system in a largely undemocratic society where the interests of the centralised state continue to prevail to the highest degree? While a comprehensive systemic change that would holistically embrace diversity in Russian society and family structures is yet to come, constructive progress has been made amidst the reform processes, especially at the local level. The total numbers of both foster families and children placed outside residential care have substantially increased over the past few years. What is more a range of new opportunities, although constraints as well, have arisen for myriad civil society organisations, such as the Children's Villages, as policy-makers have demonstrated political will to facilitate third sector partnerships in developing the systems of alternative care, including foster care. Hence, we may observe some small, but not insignificant, successes having occurred. That said, the reform is still underway, and it remains to be seen how durable its effects will be. What surprised us, however, is how diverse and progressive views the Russian foster parents express in their

everyday life, regardless of the fact that the general room for manoeuvre – socially, politically and discursively – is at times as limited as the resources available for them.

Hence, we may well conclude that the Children's Villages and the individuals therein, foster parents and child welfare professional alike, portray significant initiative and ideas within their field of child and family welfare. They are not merely care deliverers assuming responsibilities for service provision from the state and public sector and thereby facilitating the deinstitutionalisation reform. They may also be regarded as forerunners and innovators in the field of community-based family foster care, possessing a unique voice and thus carrying the potential to become paragons of alternative care not just within Russia but internationally as well. The Children's Village projects, the foster parents and their families in these Village communities represent the future of family diversity in modern society, and the ideas and perceptions they generate are invaluable vis-à-vis the development and reconfiguration of the Russian child welfare system towards sustainable solutions of non-institutional forms of family-centred care. What is more, they can open new avenues for family plurality and prosperity in Russian society in general when, as and if given the chance.

The 'A Child's Right to a Family: Deinstitutionalisation of Child Welfare in Putin's Russia' research project has done a commendable job mapping out the causes and consequences of the Russian child welfare reform. However, much remains unexplored as Russia continues to press on with the reform, whereby the need to investigate its progression and results persists as an essential research task for the future. True, much has happened, but this is only the start. Our study has laid some concrete foundations for further research into the topic of foster parenting in Russian Children's Villages. Particularly the professionalisation development and collective aspects of parenting present themselves equally interesting and important avenues for further inquiry. Moreover, our research has revealed the potential of the foster parents to be the vanguard of collaborative and reconciliatory work done with the biological parents. Experts and the academic community must continue to examine the cooperation development between the Russian state and civil society as well as the evolution of the position of the Children's Villages amidst the continuing deinstitutionalisation process. Last but not least, although the voices of the children have remained largely hidden in the pages of this particular thesis, we nevertheless deem it vital, should such chance occur in the future, to explore

and report on the perceptions and experiences of the children in the Russian Children's Villages.

Of course, alongside several opportunities, the future also presents some challenges for further research. For instance, a question remains of how to reconcile between quantitative and qualitative methods when evaluating the results, successes (and potential failures) of Russia's child welfare reform. While numbers certainly tell an important story, our study has shown that all these reform processes also have a qualitative aspect, whereby quantitative measurement alone would never be able to tell the complete story. Also, another challenge worth considering is that, inasmuch as it is essential to study the experiences of children in the midst of the deinstitutionalisation development, there are many ethical issues that generally arise in research with children and youth, e.g. in terms of negotiating access to the children and their consent, explaining anonymity and confidentiality to them as well as ensuring that the study results are disseminated to all the participants, children and youth alike, accordingly. Finally, Russia's political arena and policy action are often unpredictable, whereupon it remains difficult to predict the results and durability of its reforms, especially as the political system continues to exist such that policies may be reversed as quickly as they were initially introduced. Despite abundant challenges, we as scholars must remain vigilant and recognise that, insofar as family diversity is a contemporary reality in Russian society, this diversity ought to be made a reality in research as well.

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