



## NEED-BASED SOCIAL POLICIES

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## Fighting Poverty in Russia

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### Abstract

This paper examines the extent of poverty in Russia and analyses the government's policies to combat it. Russia's fight against poverty only targets the most extreme poverty, not the entire lower third of the population which sociologists consider "poor." Extreme poverty, which affects about every eighth Russian, has become the focus of political attention, as shown by Putin's promise to halve poverty in Russia by 2024. To achieve this goal, Russia needs a sustained high rate of economic growth.

### Explosive Poverty

"Poverty in Russia has become a disgrace," said the long-serving former Russian Finance Minister and current Chairman of the Russian Accounts Chamber Alexei Kudrin in Summer 2019. He warned that the situation, if it continues, could lead to a "social explosion."<sup>1</sup> This diagnosis gives rise to the question of how serious the problem of poverty in Russia really is, and what measures are being taken to combat it.

### Putin's Decree: Halving Poverty

In May 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a decree requiring the government to halve poverty by 2024. He also decreed that real wages must grow sustainably, as well as pensions, and that housing conditions for at least five million households annually must be improved.<sup>2</sup> But, as is often the case, talk comes cheaper than action. How realistic is it to halve the poverty rate within six years? How serious is the problem of poverty in Russia? And what measures has Russia taken so far to combat poverty? These are the guiding questions for the following text. I will show that social policy aimed at alleviating poverty is based on two pillars: First, redistribution in favour of certain social groups (elderly people, families with young children), and second, to an increasing extent, targeted social assistance for those in need.

The most important pillar, however, is the hope of high economic growth. "This is the only way to overcome poverty and ensure steady and perceptible increases in income," Putin stated in his 2019 Address to the Federal Assembly. "As soon as 2021," he said, "Russia's economic growth rate must exceed 3 percent and stay above the global average afterwards."<sup>3</sup> Russia's fight against poverty therefore faces two problems. On the one hand, Russian anti-poverty policy is fraught with uncertainty

due to its dependence on extraordinarily strong economic growth. On the other hand, the focus on specific social groups and extreme forms of poverty hardly meets the challenges of poverty in Russia, which is estimated to affect one third of the population.

### Quantifying Russia's Poverty

How poor is Russia? The answer to this question is not simple because social scientists have very different views about what exactly poverty is, and how one should measure it. One approach is to identify poverty through income or material living standards, often distinguishing between absolute and relative poverty. While absolute poverty refers to the physical subsistence level, relative poverty emphasizes the deprivations regarding a socially acceptable standard of living. Other approaches, by contrast, focus on the capability of people to lead a self-determined life or questions of social exclusion.<sup>4</sup>

The Russian poverty debate is dominated by a perspective that focuses on the physical subsistence level and material standard of living. The official poverty line is the statutory minimum subsistence level. In addition, survey data exists on the material situation and self-assessments on poverty. All these data provide a quite different picture of poverty in Russia, but show the same clear trend.

This trend indicates that the poverty rate in Russia fell sharply between 2000 and 2013, especially during the economic boom years up to 2007. However, the economic crisis of 2014 led to an increase in poverty for the first time during Putin's reign. After the poverty rate stabilised in the following years, there are now signs that poverty in Russia is on the rise again (see Figure 1 on p. 6).

Despite the undisputed long-term trend, there are large differences in the perceived prevalence of pov-

1 <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/6558947>

2 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57425>

3 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59863>

4 See Jörg Dittmann, Jan Goebel: *Armutskonzepte*, in: Böhnke, Petra, Jörg Dittmann, and Jan Goebel. *Handbuch Armut Ursachen, Trends, Maßnahmen*, UTB, 2018, pp. 21–34.

erty within Russian society. According to official figures from Russia's State Statistics Service (Rosstat), in the first half of 2019, 19.8 million people (13.5 percent of the population) had an income below the minimum subsistence level. However, the minimum subsistence level is often criticized for being set too low, and for not reflecting the real costs of everyday life.<sup>5</sup>

This criticism is backed by a recent survey of the independent opinion research institute Levada Center. Respondents put the perceived minimum subsistence level almost twice as high as the official poverty line of 11,185 roubles (approx. 172 US Dollars) per month.<sup>6</sup> Taking this subjective minimum subsistence level as the baseline, almost 40 percent of all people in Russia lived in poverty in 2018.<sup>7</sup>

According to surveys on living standards and deprivation, the extent of perceived poverty is also much worse than the official poverty line suggests. Asked by Rosstat about their material situation, 26.5 percent of respondents answered with "bad" or "very bad". If we take one Levada survey at its word, a full 71 percent of respondents estimate that they have less than the subsistence minimum at their disposal (see Figure 1 on p. 6). This scarcity of income leads to different types of deprivation among Russians. For example, every sixth household states that its income is only enough for food, and more than a third of respondents state that they cannot afford to buy each family member two pairs of comfortable, seasonally appropriate shoes (see Figures 2 and 3 on p. 7).

In a study on neediness in contemporary Russian society, sociologists Natalia Tikhonova and Svetlana Mareeva quantify the problem of poverty. Based on official statistical data and the results of two all-Russian research studies on deprivation-based poverty they conclude that by 2013 almost one third of the Russian population was affected by poverty. These people form the "new periphery," a closed social group that clearly differs from the rest of the population, according to Tikhonova and Mareeva.

### Who Are the Poor?

This discovery of a "new periphery" leads to the question: who exactly are Russia's poor? Regardless of how poverty is measured, families with children—especially large families and single-parent families—are considered to be particularly affected by poverty. The risk of poverty is also high for pensioners and people with dis-

abilities, at least in terms of subjectively perceived poverty and material deprivation.<sup>8</sup>

Tikhonova and Mareeva argue that Russian poverty today is, above all, determined by where an individual is placed within the labour market. According to their study, unemployed and unskilled/low-skilled workers are particularly at risk of poverty. A large share of the poor is involved in shadow employment practices, and therefore cannot seek any kind of social protection. Thus, the situation of the poor today differs fundamentally from the situation of the 1990s and early 2000s, when the professional portrait of the poor and the non-poor was almost the same.<sup>9</sup>

Another factor that determines the risk of poverty is geography. The poor are more likely to live in rural than in urban areas (see Figures 2 and 3 on p. 7). For example, according to Tikhonova and Mareeva, even middle-skilled and high-skilled workers in small towns and settlements have twice the risk of poverty as those in regional capitals. In general, it can be said that the smaller the municipality, the poorer the people's material situation.<sup>10</sup>

There are also large regional disparities. Based on the regional minimum subsistence level, the poverty rate in the economic centres of Moscow and St. Petersburg and in the oil-rich Republic of Tatarstan is only half as high as the national average of 13.5 percent. This contrasts with the situation in the North Caucasus and along the Mongolian border, where in a number of regions more than one person in five is living below the minimum subsistence level (see Map 1 on p. 9).

### Redistribution in Favour of Certain Social Groups

So, if every eighth (official poverty line) to every third (sociological estimate) Russian is affected by poverty, how is social protection organized? Above all, via three major mechanisms of monetary redistribution: pensions, monthly cash payments for certain categories, and maternity allowances. These social welfare programmes target specific social groups within Russian society, namely elder people and families with young children. There also exists unemployment insurance, but its maximum payout is generally below the subsistence minimum.

The pension system is the most important instrument of monetary redistribution in Russia. To give only a rough

5 See Natalia E. Tikhonova and Svetlana V. Mareeva. Poverty in Contemporary Russian Society: Formation of a New Periphery, *Russian Politics*. 2016. Vol. 1. No. 2., pp. 159–183.

6 <https://www.levada.ru/2019/09/20/otsenka-neobhodimogo-prozhitochnogo-minimuma-sredi-rossiyan/>

7 [https://www.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/1-2-1\(2\).doc](https://www.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/1-2-1(2).doc)

8 [https://isp.hse.ru/data/2018/11/01/1142579138/Prokofieva\\_RU.pdf](https://isp.hse.ru/data/2018/11/01/1142579138/Prokofieva_RU.pdf)

9 See Tikhonova and Mareeva.

10 [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/KOUZ18/Files/80.1.xlsx](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/KOUZ18/Files/80.1.xlsx)

idea of the scope of pension benefits, some statistical cornerstones: Almost a third of all people (30%) in Russia receive an old-age pension, but the pension level is very low. In 2018, it was just 30.8 percent of pre-retirement income, which is far below the ILO's minimum standard of 40 percent.<sup>11</sup> When the Russian government decided in 2018 to gradually raise the retirement age from 55/60 to 60/65 years (women—men), it also promised to raise the pension level significantly. Nevertheless, there were protests throughout the country. At least, however, the average old-age pension is well above the official subsistence level for pensioners. All in all, Russia spends almost 7 percent of its GDP on pensions, which is slightly below the OECD average but well below the level of most EU countries.<sup>12</sup>

Another key system for the monetary redistribution of income are monthly cash payments for a variety of categories of citizens. At the federal level, 15.2 million people benefited from this in 2018; in the regions their number is likely to be even higher, at least regions cover a much larger part of the monthly cash payments. After all, monthly cash payments account for about one and a half percent of GDP.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, they are often criticized in the scientific debate because they are not paid out specifically to those in need but to “deserving” social groups, e.g. war veterans, people with disabilities or veterans of labour. However, these monthly cash payments correspond to a large extent to Russian society's sense of justice. In practice, most of the monthly cash payments also benefit elderly people.

Women with young children are an additional group that particularly benefits from social redistribution. Apart from the continued payment of wages during maternity leave, the maternity capital program is of key interest. This is a one-off benefit for mothers who give birth to a second child, introduced in 2007 after President Putin declared demographic development to be Russia's most important contemporary problem. Although the maternity capital can only be used for certain purposes, in particular to improve housing conditions, its amount is considerable and currently roughly corresponds to an average annual salary. The programme is therefore extremely popular, and more than 5 million families have so far made use of it.<sup>14</sup> In his speech to the Federal Assembly in 2020, Putin promised to extend the programme until the end of 2026 and to include the first child.<sup>15</sup>

Russian redistribution policy is aimed at specific social groups, but not at greater social equality for the society as a whole. For example, the very moderate flat tax of 13 percent on income has remained unchanged for years, while VAT, which particularly affects poorer households, was raised from 18 to 20 percent in 2019. Thus, it is not surprising that the distribution of income, not to mention assets, has been highly unequal for years (see Figure 4 on p. 8). There have been no visible efforts to seriously reduce the extent of social inequality. Instead, in recent years Russia has adopted a range of targeted measures to support those in need and thereby solve its poverty problem.

### Targeted Poverty Alleviation

Since 2010, as a result of the global financial and economic crisis of 2008, low pensions below the minimum subsistence level for pensioners have been supplemented, benefiting more than 6.4 million people by the beginning of 2019. As a result, almost all pensioners in Russia are protected from existential poverty.

Another focus of targeted social assistance in the past few years has been the support of needy families with children. Since 2018, low-income families have received federal support, equivalent to the regional minimum subsistence level, for young children up to the age of one and a half years. From 2020, as Putin promised in his 2019 address to the Federal Assembly, the range of low-income families is to be expanded further.<sup>16</sup> Earlier, in 2012, Putin had already asked the regions to introduce similar financial support for large families—which many of them implemented immediately.

A milestone in targeted social assistance was the “social contracts” introduced at federal level in 2012, because they are intended to address all those in need and not just certain social groups. In line with the idea of an activating social policy, these support programmes aim to provide tailored solutions for applicants in need, e.g. vocational training or financial support to run a household farm or to start a small business.

Although only about 115,000 “social contracts” were signed in 2018, involving about 320,000 people, Putin has promised a massive expansion. “More than 9 million people will be able to benefit from these support measures over a five-year period” he said to the Fed-

11 [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/population/generation/ur1-1.doc](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/generation/ur1-1.doc)

12 <http://www.pfrf.ru/opendata/>

13 [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/population/urov/urov\\_227.docx](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/urov/urov_227.docx); [www.pfrf.ru/files/id/press\\_center/godovoi\\_otchet/annual\\_report\\_2017\\_1.pdf](http://www.pfrf.ru/files/id/press_center/godovoi_otchet/annual_report_2017_1.pdf), p. 62

14 <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9795>

15 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582>

16 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59863>

eral Assembly, pledging financial support to the regions through the federal centre.<sup>17</sup>

According to estimates by Lilia Ovcharova and Elena Gorina, targeted social assistance still plays a marginal role in Russia. At the federal level, it has so far accounted for only three percent and at the regional level for a quarter of all social benefits.<sup>18</sup> But this is likely to change in the coming years.

Another targeted social measure was to increase the minimum wage in 2019. From then on, the minimum wage has been fixed to the subsistence minimum, a requirement enumerated in the Labour Code since 2001 but which has not yet been implemented. Previously, about every tenth wage earner was paid less than the minimum subsistence level.<sup>19</sup> These extremely low wages should be prevented by the new minimum wage, but the widespread phenomenon of the working poor is unlikely to be resolved. In 2020 Putin proposed to anchor the coupling of minimum wage and subsistence minimum in the constitution.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude: how likely is it that Putin's May 2018 decree will become reality and that poverty will be halved in the coming years? As the Russian President himself emphasized, this will require strong economic growth of over 3% per annum. Russia's Central Bank, however, fore-

casts something different: "The GDP growth rate will gradually increase from 0.8–1.3% in 2019 to 2–3% in 2022."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the International Monetary Fund expects no more than 2% annual growth until 2024. A look back also reveals that economic growth of more than 3% was last achieved in Russia in 2012.<sup>22</sup>

Assuming that the Russian economy develops slightly better than predicted, and that the government actually manages to raise the necessary resources to expand targeted measures for the needy, the chances of significantly reducing the share of Russians in poverty are good. However, this pertains only to absolute poverty, i.e. those people or families who live below the minimum subsistence level. Nevertheless, this would be a tremendous success compared to the growing poverty of recent years.

At the same time, it is unlikely that the material situation of the lower third of society as a whole will improve significantly. In my view, this would require a stronger policy of redistributing the resources of society: from the wealthy to the less wealthy, from metropolises to smaller cities and rural areas. However, support for such a redistributive policy, which refers to general ideas of "social justice", is rather marginal in Russia's political discourse. So far, redistribution has only taken place to social groups considered to be "deserving" or to which great importance is attached in terms of national development, namely elderly people and families with children.

## About the Author

Martin Brand is research fellow at the Collaborative Research Centre 1342 "Global Dynamics of Social Policy" at the University of Bremen, Project Area B: Transregional Dynamics B06: External reform models and internal debates on the new conceptualisation of social policy in the post-Soviet region. This project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation)—project number 374666841 – SFB 1342. He is working on poverty policy in the post-Soviet era and is writing his PhD on social policy development in Russia.

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17 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59863>

18 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10611991.2017.1431480?journalCode=mpet20>

19 [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/population/trud/raspr1-osn.xlsx](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/trud/raspr1-osn.xlsx)

20 [http://asozd2c.duma.gov.ru/addwork/scans.nsf/ID/D6CC4D82492F601E432584F5004BA0B7/\\$FILE/885214-7\\_20012020\\_885214-7.PDF?OpenElement](http://asozd2c.duma.gov.ru/addwork/scans.nsf/ID/D6CC4D82492F601E432584F5004BA0B7/$FILE/885214-7_20012020_885214-7.PDF?OpenElement)

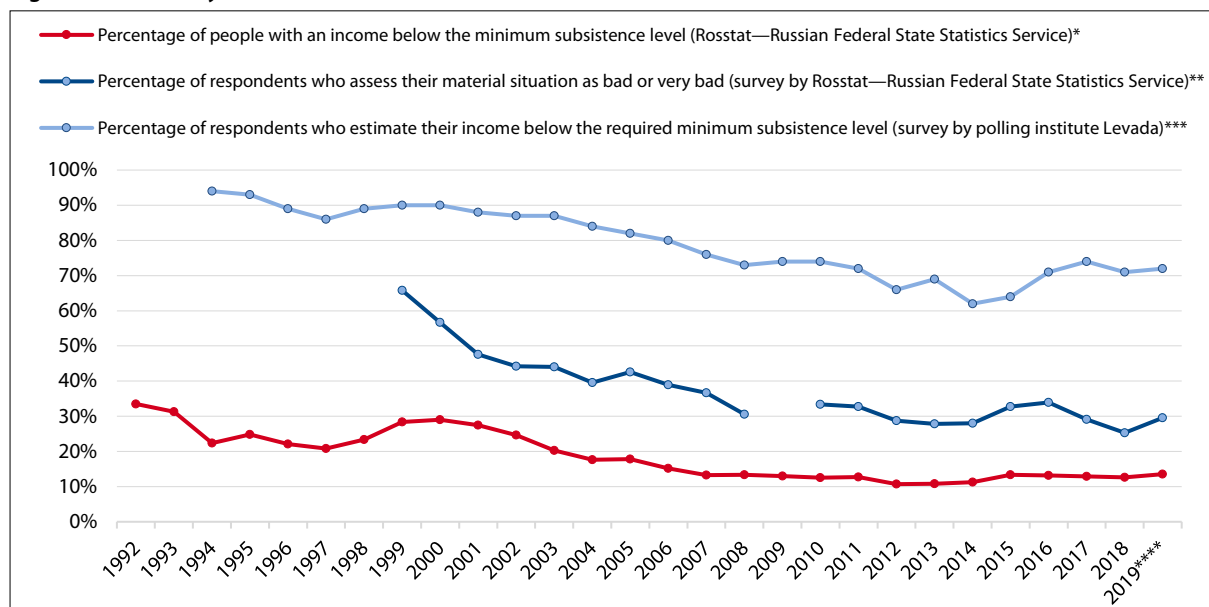
21 <https://www.cbr.ru/eng/press/keypr/>

22 [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/RUS](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/RUS)

## DATA

## Key Figures on Poverty in Russia

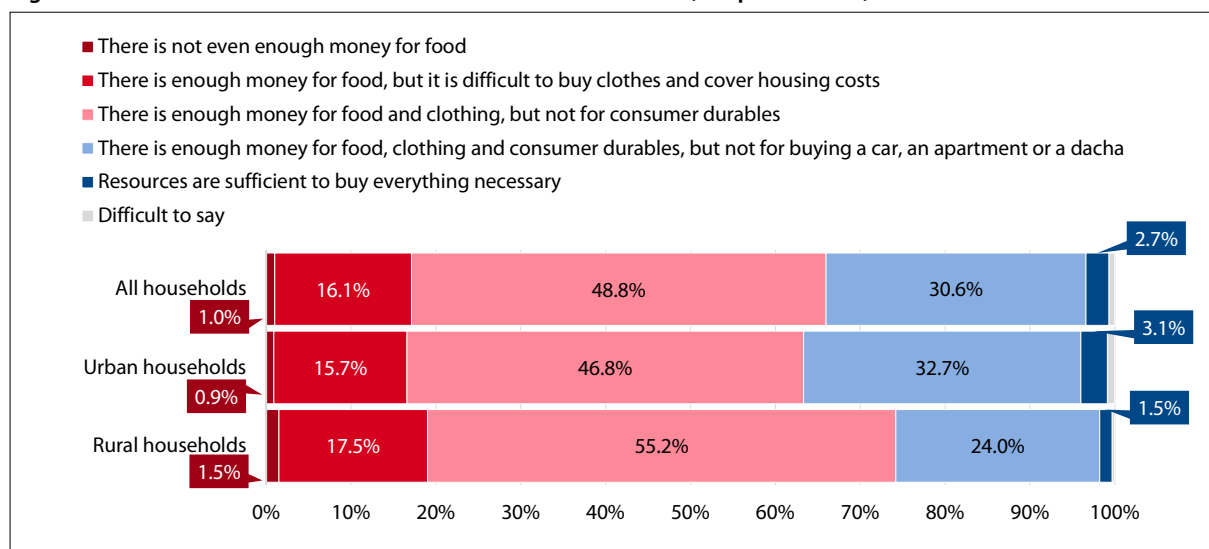
Figure 1: Poverty Rates in Russia (1992–2019)



Year	Percentage of people with an income below the minimum subsistence level (Rosstat—Russian Federal State Statistics Service)*	Percentage of respondents who assess their material situation as bad or very bad (survey by Rosstat—Russian Federal State Statistics Service)**	Percentage of respondents who estimate their income below the required minimum subsistence level (survey by polling institute Levada)***
1992	33.5%		
1993	31.3%		
1994	22.4%		94%
1995	24.8%		93%
1996	22.1%		89%
1997	20.8%		86%
1998	23.4%		89%
1999	28.4%	65.8%	90%
2000	29.0%	56.7%	90%
2001	27.5%	47.6%	88%
2002	24.6%	44.2%	87%
2003	20.3%	44.0%	87%
2004	17.6%	39.6%	84%
2005	17.8%	42.6%	82%
2006	15.2%	38.9%	80%
2007	13.3%	36.7%	76%
2008	13.4%	30.6%	73%
2009	13.0%		74%
2010	12.5%	33.4%	74%
2011	12.7%	32.7%	72%
2012	10.7%	28.7%	66%
2013	10.8%	27.8%	69%
2014	11.3%	28.0%	62%
2015	13.4%	32.7%	64%
2016	13.2%	33.9%	71%
2017	12.9%	29.1%	74%
2018	12.6%	25.3%	71%
2019****	13.5%	29.6%	72%

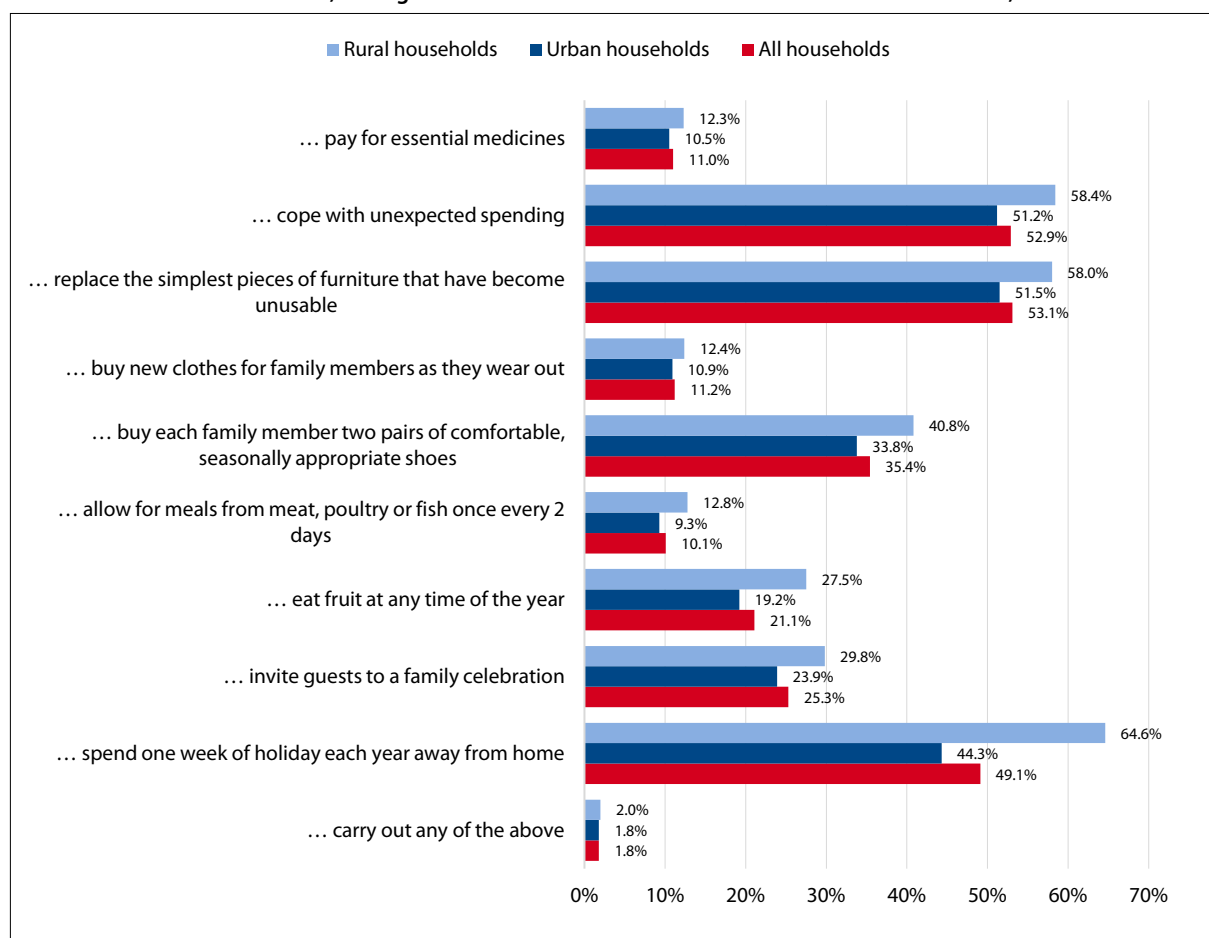
Sources: \* <https://www.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/2-3.doc>; [https://gks.ru/bgd/free/B04\\_03/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d04/166.htm](https://gks.ru/bgd/free/B04_03/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d04/166.htm); \*\* [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/population/urov/urov\\_831.xls](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/urov/urov_831.xls); \*\*\* <https://www.levada.ru/2019/09/20/otsenka-neobhodimogo-prozhitochnogo-minimuma-sredi-rossiyan/>; \*\*\*\* 1<sup>st</sup> half

**Figure 2: Assessment of the Financial Situation of Households (2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 2019)**



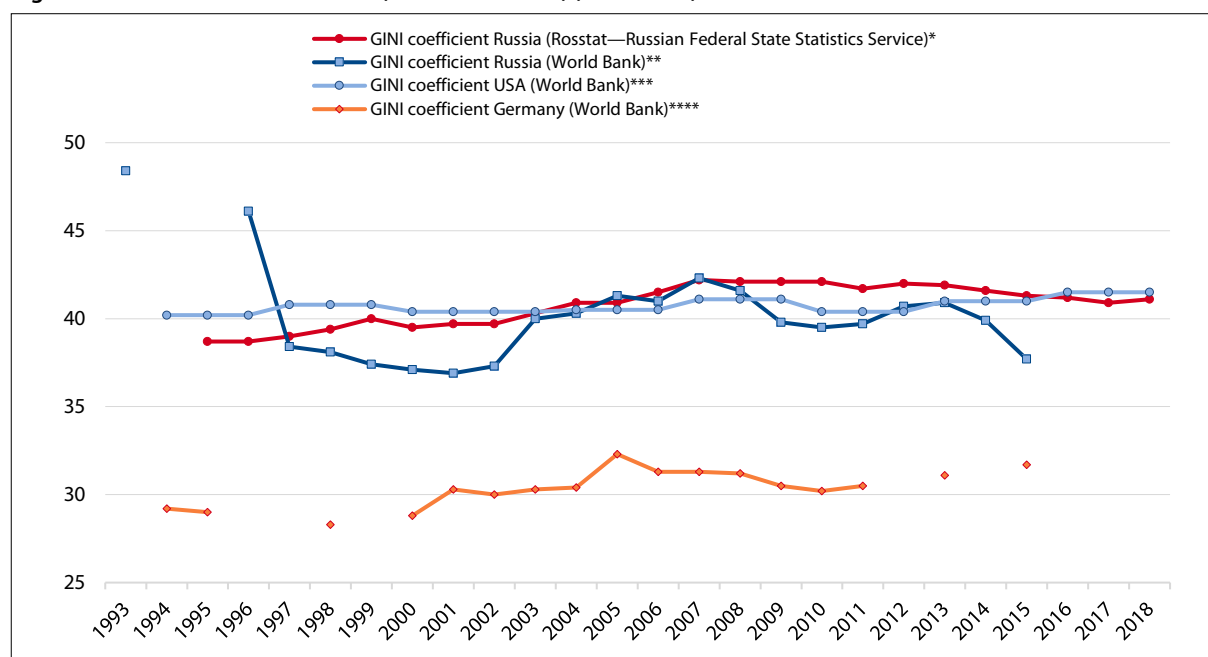
Source: Rosstat—Russian Federal State Statistics Service: <https://www.gks.ru/compendium/document/13271>

**Figure 3: Assessment of the Financial Situation of Households (2018): Households Which, Taking into Account the Income of All Members of the Household, Cannot Afford to ...**



Source: Rosstat—Russian Federal State Statistics Service, KOUZ-18: [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/KOUZ18/Files/80.1.xlsx](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/KOUZ18/Files/80.1.xlsx)

Figure 4: Distribution of Income (GINI Coefficients) (1993–2017)



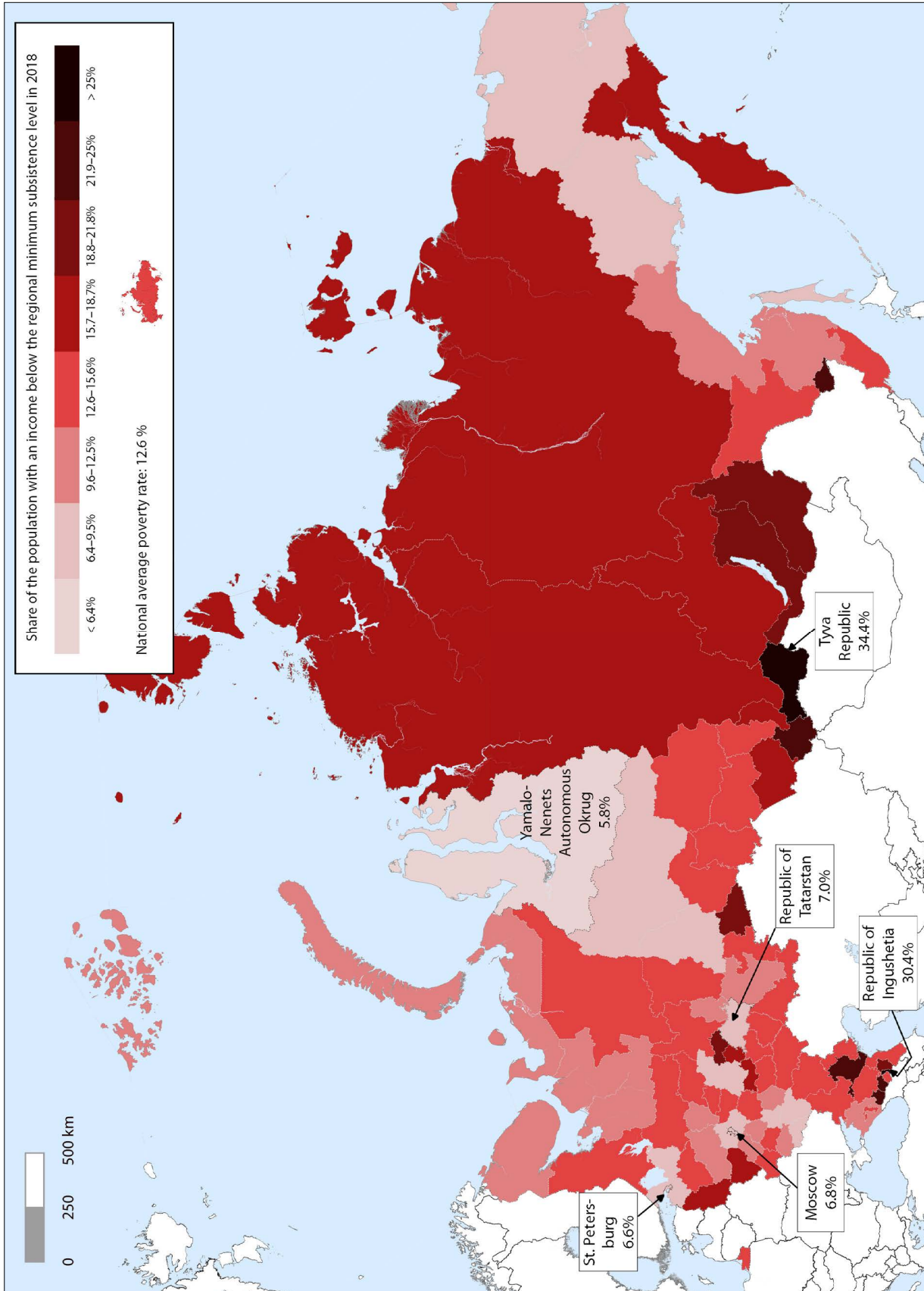
Year	GINI coefficient Russia (Rosstat—Russian Federal State Statistics Service)*	GINI coefficient Russia (World Bank)**	GINI coefficient USA (World Bank)***	GINI coefficient Germany (World Bank)****
1993		48.4		
1994			40.2	29.2
1995	38.7		40.2	29.0
1996	38.7	46.1	40.2	
1997	39.0	38.4	40.8	
1998	39.4	38.1	40.8	28.3
1999	40.0	37.4	40.8	
2000	39.5	37.1	40.4	28.8
2001	39.7	36.9	40.4	30.3
2002	39.7	37.3	40.4	30.0
2003	40.3	40.0	40.4	30.3
2004	40.9	40.3	40.5	30.4
2005	40.9	41.3	40.5	32.3
2006	41.5	41.0	40.5	31.3
2007	42.2	42.3	41.1	31.3
2008	42.1	41.6	41.1	31.2
2009	42.1	39.8	41.1	30.5
2010	42.1	39.5	40.4	30.2
2011	41.7	39.7	40.4	30.5
2012	42.0	40.7	40.4	
2013	41.9	40.9	41.0	31.1
2014	41.6	39.9	41.0	
2015	41.3	37.7	41.0	31.7
2016	41.2		41.5	
2017	40.9		41.5	
2018	41.1		41.5	

GINI index measures the extent to which the distribution of income among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. A GINI index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality.

Sources: \* <https://www.gks.ru/folder/13397>; [https://www.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/uov\\_32g.doc](https://www.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/uov_32g.doc); \*\* [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?end=2016&locations=RU&start=1979&view=chart&year\\_high\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?end=2016&locations=RU&start=1979&view=chart&year_high_desc=false); \*\*\* <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?end=2018&locations=US&start=1991&view=chart>; \*\*\*\* <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?end=2015&locations=DE&start=1991&view=chart>



Map 1: Regional Poverty Distribution in Russia (2018, regions with the lowest and highest poverty rates are highlighted)



Data source: Rosstat — Russian Federal State Statistics Service <https://www.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/2-4.doc>; map created by the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen in QGIS, with GIS data from <https://gadm.org/data.html> and <https://nominatim.openstreetmap.org/>

## Russia's Family Policy

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### Abstract

This article discusses Russia's latest family policy debates and developments. Most would agree that family policy is the essential component of social policy strategy in Russia, but the way it is seen differs. Depending on the focus of the analyst, Russia's family policy can be described as paternalistic, conservative, pro-natal or neo-liberal. To look at the issue from a broader perspective, this article treats family policy as a multidimensional strategy and analyses it in terms of communication, benefits, and legislation.

### Families

In a comparably weak welfare state, family measures constitute a major component of what the government does to help underserved communities. Even so, children living with single parents or in large families are among the groups most vulnerable to poverty. Household, emotional and care work is mainly done by women. Women's role as mothers and primary care workers is clearly defined. In the Russian case, the prevalence of divorce and single-parent households is among the highest in the OECD, and female full-time employment is widespread. This leads to a strong double burden for Russian women: sustain household and care work while also being a full-time breadwinner.

Most Russian families have one child, a minority has two and just a small percentage has more than two children. In political and media discourse, this has been framed as a "demographic catastrophe." The birth rate dropped dramatically in the 1990s, while (early) mortality increased (Kainu et al, 2013). The demographic "collapse" of Russia is part of a governmental narrative and the collective mind. The fear that the Russian people will lose power due to reduced manpower is prevalent throughout the country and across social classes. Therefore, most family policy programs aim to increase the Russian fertility rate.

On the one hand, the need to increase the population is widely discussed. On the other hand, there have been few attempts to implement programs to support egalitarian concepts of parenthood and fight child poverty. Instead, the "maternity capital"—a prestigious billion-euro project—was introduced, a policy which favors middle class families. How do family policy strategies and policies address the issues of childhood poverty, single mothers, double burdens and population growth? Or, conversely, how far does pro-natal policy respond to the reality of citizens' lives? To explain the influence of these diverse factors, the article looks at different strategic measures, grouping them into communication, benefits, and legislation.

### Communication

In his 2012 State of the Nation address, Putin called the state of Russia "a real demographic and moral catastrophe, with a demographic and moral crisis. If the nation is unable to preserve and reproduce itself, if it loses vital references and ideals, it does not need an external enemy because it will fall apart on its own." In this speech, Putin rhetorically connects the nation's development to reproduction, and therefore families. Russian culture and values are presented as unique, special and built upon tradition. To keep and pass them on, new generations have to be raised upon them.

In his 2019 speech to the federal assembly Putin argued that part of the solution for Russia's problems is to preserve Russia as a civilisation with its own identity, rooted in centuries-long traditions and the culture of its people, its values and customs. To achieve this goal the united society has to pool its efforts together. The government has done everything in its power to strengthen family values and is committed to do so in the future. In fact, the future of Russia is at stake (Putin, 2019).

To support his position, Putin essentially declares that a decision against children means a decision against Russia. And the more children one has, the bigger one's commitment to Russia and the current system. The term (*traditional*) *family values* as a specific Russian canon of values is used repeatedly. It covers identity, tradition, culture, values and habits. Having a family is connected with taking responsibility for the country, its future and stability—a duty of every "good" citizen. Children should be raised in an environment, mindset and framework to preserve and pass on family values. "Family, childbirth, procreation and respect for the elderly have always served as a powerful moral framework for Russia and its multi-ethnic people. We have been doing everything in our power to strengthen family values and are committed to doing so in the future" (Putin, 2019).

The discourse about family is not only about demographic change and increased fertility. Through its connection with patriotism, spirituality and moral behav-

ior, a precise idea of society arises: Family as the core of society which forms the nation's strength. This challenges the status of single parents, and discredits atypical family models and people without children. Additionally, it supports traditional gender roles within families.

Russian authorities have claimed that families want to have many children, live happily, orient themselves around societal norms and respect tradition. To them, "family" means taking responsibility for the national well-being, and to make an individual contribution against "moral and demographic decline." The future of the Russian nation and society are equated with the presence and moral state of families, since they form the core of society. The individual decision to start a family therefore becomes a social duty. The parent-child relationship is promoted as fulfilling and meaningful, a promise of happiness.

In addition to moral expectations, a clear expectation of what families should look like is defined: "I still believe that families with three children should become the standard in Russia" (Putin, 2012). This constitutes encouragement of young couples to have large families. In return, promises are made to take responsibility and support parents, mostly through modernizing schools and childcare.

By connecting the nation's development and patriotic claims regarding having children, while promising a better future for everybody, an added burden and need for justification is placed on women without children and families choosing alternative family models, while a relatively narrow "ideal" type of family is forwarded.

Increasing the birth rate is not unconditional: "Russia's future and historical perspective depend on how many of us there are (I would like to start the main part of my Address with demography), how many children are born in Russian families in one, five or ten years, on these children's upbringing, on what kind of people they become and what they will do for the country, as well as on the values they choose as their mainstay in life" (Putin, 2020). The interdependence between conservative values, unique Russian traditions and pronatalism is high. Family is clearly defined and conceptually based within a patriotic social framework. That leads to a political discourse about identity, raising children, and morality, and less focus on structural issues like poverty, feasibility, domestic violence or women's double burden (Chandler, 2013). Better to uphold traditional family models and (patriarchal) gender roles than address some of the real problems that society is facing, according to the logic of this approach.

Even though the state promotes families with several children as standard, it is incompatible with most fami-

lies' reality. Arranging a life with a sufficient standard of living, pursuing career opportunities and having more than one child is impossible for many women and their partners. As long as the country's economic and welfare situation is unstable, and having a family raises the risk of poverty and limits women's opportunities (either in their career or in their free time), discourse and reality will remain in tension.

### Benefits

There exist a variety of benefits aimed at supporting Russian families. Benefits cover, in this case, monetary support as well as infrastructural, material and time benefits. All of these seek to support families in their everyday life. Benefits help families bear the additional costs of childrearing and minimize opportunity costs, such as lost job opportunities and the reduction of social insurance or pension payments.

In the late 1990s and 2000s, Russia cut most of its non-cash transfer programs. Kindergartens, maternity health institutes and schools were closed due to the government's austerity policy. Over the last few years, the government has reinforced support programs. Kindergartens have reopened, with the aim of guaranteeing a place to every child, whether in Moscow or peripheral regions. Schools have gotten technical upgrades, access to internet, and renovations (Ministry of Education, 2020). New cash transfer programs were also implemented. The most costly and widely discussed one is the Maternity Capital program, through which every mother is entitled to a lump sum of 466,617 rubles (6,780 Euros) for her second child. The money is eligible to finance either maintaining or buying a house, investing into the child's education, or paying into the mother's pension. The program is a good example to illustrate how Russia conceives of the future of domestic family policy. The program fulfils three dimensions: 1) the name suggests who's responsibility a child is—having a child is closely connected with motherhood, 2) having a second child as the condition to get access—support for larger families, and 3) cash benefits are linked to investments.

Additionally, there are lump sums for giving birth and for medical registration, if the mother registers herself before the 12<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy. All of these cash transfers are provided to the child's mother and are given on the federal level. Regional governments also provide additional benefits, which differ significantly across the country. In general, benefits increase significantly with the second or third child.

There are several direct and indirect monetary benefits to families, but these rarely cover the costs of a child's care and education. In addition to lump-sums, there also exists a wage replacement scheme. Maternity leave

provides mothers with full wage replacement for twenty weeks. Since 2020, there also exists an additional care allowance with 40% wage replacement until the child turns three. Most families rely on a double household income, and thus most women return to their jobs after the care allowance ends, or even earlier. The newly introduced benefits thus mostly support families when their children are very young.

The state provides pre-school education institutes to enable parents a quick re-entry into their jobs. The supply of good care infrastructure is an important part of the family policy strategy. Almost all of the institutions are public, and Russian children spend 50 hours per week on average there—more than in every other OECD country (OECD, Country Note: 2018). Fees are affordable and places (usually) available, even though quality and availability differs greatly between rural and urban regions (Seliverstova, 2008). Provision of pre-education is an important relief for parents, reducing women's double burden, and also constitutes a socio-political instrument to minimize socio-economic differences and equalize chances among children; furthermore, it provides an opportunity for the state to educate children in its own value system—a legacy from Soviet times.

The latest developments in family policy mainly support families with more than one child, while support structures for single parents are lacking. The Russian system supports short maternity leaves and a quick return to the workplace. There have been no real attempts to increase fatherly duties or to promote more equal sharing of parental labor. Care leave for fathers is technically possible, but it is difficult to obtain due to bureaucracy and is socially discouraged. By making no attempt to involve fathers in child raising and incentivizing the quick return of women back into work, current policy worsens, rather than helps, Russian women's double burden. Support in the financial, material and time dimensions declines when the child turns three.

## Legislation

*The family, motherhood, fatherhood and childhood in the Russian Federation shall be under the protection of the state. Family legislation shall proceed from the necessity to consolidate the family, to build family relations on feelings of mutual love and respect, on mutual assistance and on responsibility of all its members before the family, from the inadmissibility of anybody's arbitrary interference into family affairs, from the need to ensure for all family members the opportunity to freely exercise their rights and the possibility to defend these rights in court.—Art. 1.1 Family Code of the Russian Federation*

The Family Code relies on marriage as the basis of living together as a family. A wife and husband with children are considered to be a family. Reproduction and raising children is the main task of marriage. Family should be built on feelings of mutual love and respect, and is defined as a voluntary union built on humanity, reasonability and justice. Having children entails obligations. If one of the parents is absent, (s)he has to pay child support. The Family Code relies on mutual agreements between spouses regarding the well-being of their child without public intervention. The role of the state remains small in this respect, privacy and individual freedom being major goals of the relevant legislation.

The code has been criticized for lacking clear definitions of terms like “family,” “marriage” and “welfare of the child.” The implications of terms such as “consensus,” “morality,” “love and respect” and “misconduct” have not been specified. This creates a vacuum that can consolidate traditional family models and established gender roles. The equal distribution of tasks between the parents is fixed, but not suitable. The code focuses more on economic duties between the spouses than on educational, child-rearing or care obligations. Especially in case of a divorce, economic claims are regulated in detail while custody and childcare are left to mutual consent. The code offers no base on which to litigate if one of the spouses is unhappy with the result of a divorce. A thin line between written and social norms and moral expectations results from this lack of definitions. A noninterventionist approach by the state in education provision leads to the reproduction of traditional family. Recommendations of moral behavior convey clear ideas of what the state believes family life should look like.

## Conclusion

The rhetoric of the “demographic catastrophe” is used to justify the social duty to start multi-child families and the prioritization of measures aimed at promoting reproduction. All three political instruments have in common a pro-natal character, as well as moral implications—value orientation, tradition-consciousness, standards of morality and appropriate behavior. These approaches do not recognize the existence of single parents as a reality for many—especially women—or try to alleviate the poverty of large and single-parent families. The legitimacy of “nonconformist” family models is partly denied through the holding up of married couples as role models, and their “value-oriented” lifestyle as mainstream. The state's promotion of traditional values advocates paternalistic structures and conventional gender roles, while single parents or small families are disadvantaged in terms of discourse and financial support.

In his 2020 annual address to the Federal Assembly, Putin stressed once more the importance of family policy and the demographic catastrophe Russia is facing. He promised further support, especially to single parents and large families, and a long-term policy to support

families, including increased spending in education, nursery care, maternity health, the Maternity Capital program and youth policy. This could constitute a turn to a more socially designed family policy.

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