What kind of Russianness?

– Exploring the role of traditional family in constructing the Russian national identity during “the decade of childhood”

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Introduction and background

“Everything for strengthening the family” (a sex shop tagline)

“It is a Russian tradition to have many children in a family” (Alexey Lisovenko)\textsuperscript{1}

In March 2018, a controversy emerged around a legal case in St. Petersburg in which a sex shop owner took the Child and Family ombudsman of St. Petersburg to court for defamation. The ombudsman earlier published a series of articles with titles “Diapers [sold] by perverts”, “‘Pink Rabbit’ (‘Rozoviy krolik’, store’s name) advertises vice” and others (Arbitrazhniy sud 2018) when the local sex shop started selling children’s toys, diapers, pacifiers etc. in addition to regular sex toys. The sex shop used a stylized picture of bunny ears and the tagline “Everything for strengthening the family”. The articles penned by the Family ombudsman describe the owner of the store and his “accomplices” as “blinded with impunity sellers of devices for prostitutes and pederasts” (Ibid.: 1), who “essentially work in the interests of pedophiles” (Ibid.: 6). The shop owner lost the case as the Arbitration Court ruled that his reputation was established in a cultural milieu with

a system of values that are alien to the cultural and spiritual traditions of Russia, which have deep historical roots and are transmitted from generation to generation and constitute the basis of the civilizational identity of the Russian state, in particular, the priority of spiritual over the material, the family, the norms of morality and ethics. These \textit{traditional spiritual and moral values}, forming the basis of Russian (civic) society, are proclaimed as strategic goals for \textit{ensuring the national security}. Threats \cite{1} to the security include erosion of \textit{traditional family values} and weakening of the \textit{unity of the peoples of the Russian Federation} through external cultural expansion, including propaganda of permissiveness \cite{1} supporting principles that are not typical for the Russian mentality introduced into the public consciousness \cite{1} (Russian original, emphasis mine).\textsuperscript{2}

It is remarkable that the “(traditional) family values” were not simply enumerated in a policy document and remained a declaration but were applied by a judge in an economic lawsuit. The existence of a store that co-opted the image of a family, albeit presumably a heterosexual couple with children, which was portrayed to be engaging in the “wrong” kind of sexual behavior, was deemed a threat to the national security. The ombudsman, in the view of the court, acted to protect the public moral that strengthens the family, while

the instability of the modern family is due to the loss of traditional spiritual and moral values, including due to the dissemination of information aimed at attracting and stimulating the attention of adolescents and young parents to sexual pleasure in a perverted (unnatural) form (Ibid.: 13).

\textsuperscript{1} Quote from Sharkov (2015).
\textsuperscript{2} The ruling relies heavily on the language of the Strategy of National Security (2015).
Serving as an epigraph are also the words of Russia’s ruling party deputy Lisovenko who commented on the creation of the “straight pride flag” in response to the legalization of same-sex marriage in the US. The flag was waived on the Day of Family, Love and Faithfulness, a religious holiday that acquired state support and became secular in 2008. The banner depicted a man and a woman holding hands with three children, and featured a line of text which read “the real family”. The need for creating such a flag is telling in a number of ways. A symbol that is both depicting an abstract idea, yet establishing a rather concrete example, it asserts not just heterosexuality as the norm and implies that heterosexuals need to express pride, but a very specific family makeup of a heterosexual family, the “desired” ideal, a family with many children. Besides, alleging to “traditions” and their “national” character must all be signs of important policy developments that have been underway. Is the focus on traditions and family supposed to solve Russia’s apparent “identity crisis”?

As the two anecdotes above show, family and children are brought to the front in contemporary Russia and constitute an important policy area. Manifesting the centrality of family and children, the period 2018—2027 has also been officially proclaimed “the decade of childhood” (Putin 2017), leading to numerous policy initiatives and momentous media attention.

“The decade of childhood”, President Putin’s initiative to concentrate efforts and devote policy attention to children in order to “improve the state’s children protection policy” (Ibid.) can be seen an important development in the field of family policy. Its significance is explained by its massive scope both ideologically, as it includes quite a significant time span and employs the trope of the “child”, and content-wise, as it builds upon a body of policy documents and encompasses a diverse range of policy initiatives, decrees and laws. The plan of the “decade” published on a government webpage (Mintrud 2017), which enumerates all the activities that are to take place in the next ten years, demonstrates that the initiative includes a number of activities that vary in purpose, scope, and effect. They are subsumed under ten broad categories, including financial support for families for birth and upbringing of children, child education, medical care, cultural and physical development of children, child tourism, information security, equal opportunities for children in need of special care of the state, ensuring the rights and interests of children, creation of the industry of child goods and provision of children with high-quality food products.

Research problem, aim & questions
This thesis explores this current development with a particular interest in what role the family plays in asserting and negotiating (state) power and in the overall national project of constructing Russianness.
My overall aim is examine the articulations of Russianness and family in contemporary Russia using “the decade of childhood” as case in point. More specifically, I pose questions such as:

1. How is the notion of Russianness articulated in the policy and media discourse around “the decade of childhood”?
2. What is the role of family in this discourse? How does gender intersect with nationhood in articulations of the “family”?
3. What possible effects are produced as a result of these articulations in regard to the nationhood?

Outline
The thesis is structured as follows: in the remainder of this chapter, I explain my method and account for the selection of the empirical material. In the next chapter, I describe and motivate the relevance of the theoretical approaches and definitions that I employ in the thesis. Next, I present a selection of the previous research that is related to the topic of the thesis and position my work in relation to the research field. I proceed to the analysis of my empirical material and follow up with conclusions in an attempt to answer the questions posed above. The thesis ends with a list of references and an appendix where I list the analyzed data.

Method & material

Discourse theory
The analysis will be conducted mainly at the level of discourse. The inspiration comes primarily from Laclau and Mouffe’s approach to discourse theory, first outlined in their 1985 work Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. As described by Marianne Winther Jørgensen and Louise Phillips (2002: 24), this approach postulates that social phenomena are never finished or total. Meaning can never be ultimately fixed and this opens up the way for constant social struggles about definitions of society and identity, with resulting social effects. The discourse analyst’s task is to plot the course of these struggles to fix meaning at all levels of the social.

Further, they summarize the aim of the discourse analysis as the one to map out the processes in which we struggle about the way in which the meaning of signs is to be fixed, and the processes by which some fixations of meaning become so conventionalised that we think of them as natural. (Ibid.: 25–26)

This approach allows one to investigate the relationship between meanings and they way they are ascribed to the different aspects of reality, how is narrative made to fit the discourse, and, most importantly, what meanings are taken for granted, i.e. seen as unchangeable truths.
In addition to providing a theory of discourse that would focus on studying the linguistic phenomena that constitute discourse, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) also construct a theoretical framework that can be used to analyze social phenomena. Their understanding of discourse seeks to give equal weight to both economic and social determinism, in contrast to the Marxist idea that the base determines the superstructure. In their view, each has the equal possibility to construct the other. Further, their theory does not distinguish between objects that are “discursive” and “outside of the discursive field”. Rear (2013: 4) aptly summarizes:

For Laclau and Mouffe, there is no objective material reality, or base, that divides groups of people into classes; rather, the groups that exist in society are all the result of political, discursive processes. This is not to say, of course, that external reality has no independent existence. However, our perception of reality and of the character of real objects is mediated entirely by discourse. We, as human beings, enter a world already composed of discourses and cannot conceive of objects outside it. For this reason, the discursive and non-discursive worlds (the superstructure and the base, to put it another way) cannot be separated.

The representations of reality constitute the social. This constitution is the result of the articulation of meaning; as Laclau & Mouffe (1985: 96) write, “a discursive structure is not a merely ‘cognitive’ or ‘contemplative’ entity; it is an articulatory practice which constitutes and organizes social relations”. Discourse is the “structured totality that emerges” (Ibid.: 105) as a result of the articulation.

All concepts (signifiers, also called signs) in a given text “that are not discursively articulated” are called elements. Through the process of articulation, i.e. “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Ibid.) they become moments of a constituted discursive totality.

A nodal point is a “central” moment that has connections to a number of other elements; in relation to it, other elements acquire meaning and chains of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 96) are formed. Equivalence is established between a number of signs if they are all ascribed the same meaning; the discourse then points to what signs might be equal to and different from. Rear (2013: 6) notes that “[t]hey bind together a particular system of meanings or ‘chain of signification’, assigning meanings to other signifiers within that discourse.”

A floating signifier is an element that is open to be assigned a certain meaning as the result of articulation. “In and of itself, a nodal point possesses no density of meaning – quite the opposite, it is, ‘an empty signifier’”. In my analysis, I treat “family” as a floating\(^3\) signifier that acquires meaning in the process of articulation in relation to other elements.

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\(^3\) Also called “empty” signifier. For the purpose of consistency, I have chosen the former.
Jørgensen & Phillips (2002: 28) explain that

whereas the term “nodal point” refers to a point of crystallisation within a specific discourse, the term “floating signifier” belongs to the ongoing struggle between different discourses to fix the meaning of signs.

They look at the use of the word “body” in two discourses. It appears to be a nodal point in the discourse of clinical medicine and a floating signifier in the struggle between the two competing discourses, that of clinical medicine and that of alternative treatment. As Laclau & Mouffe further point out, discourses are in constant opposition to each other. They each strive to structure reality, i.e. an aspect of the social world in a different way, according to their own logic.

In a study of nation(hood), myth, Laclau’s term for a floating signifier that refers to a totality (such as ‘the people’, ‘the nation’ or ‘Russia’) is useful. It is

a principle of reading of a given situation, whose terms are external to what is representable in the objective spatiality constituted by the given structure (Laclau 1990: 61, quoted in Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 39).

Myths are useful in providing speakers (e.g. politicians who deliver policy speeches) with a horizon of reference in relation to which articulations are directed (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 39).

A discourse is situated in the field of discursivity, which contains all the other meanings excluded by a particular discourse, i.e. the possibility for the contestation of a discourse. Because the total fixation of the meaning cannot be achieved, the different discourses fight each other (i.e. are in the process of antagonism) to achieve hegemony, that is the fixation of meaning that would naturalize a particular articulation and construct the reality in such a way that it appears neutral (Ibid.: 32).

As I explain further, the policy discourse that I analyze in this thesis has already established itself as hegemonic. Its extension, the media discourse, centering around the policy documents that I consider can also be seen as dominant and likely having few dissonances or inconsistencies within itself. Thus, I am more interested in exploring the effects of such hegemony.

Material

My goal with this study is to explore what meanings around the notion of family are crystallized in the articulations of reality and what net, to borrow Jørgensen & Phillips’ (2002) term, of meaning they have created. To this end, I use material of two kinds: policy documents and media material.

4 I do not use Laclau’s concept of myth in my analysis, although the constructionist theories that I employ are in line with this view.

5 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the material from Russian into English are mine.
The policy documents that I analyze are:

(1) National Strategy of Action in the Interests of Children for the Years 2012-2017 (National Strategy 2012);

(2) Draft plan of the main activities until the year 2020, held within the framework of the Decade of Childhood (Mintrud 2017);

(3) Concept of State Family Policy in the Russian Federation until the Year 2025 (2014);


The official discourse that I aim to analyze is related to the implementation of these policy strategies. In addition to the legal acts, the inquiry explores a selection of newspaper articles, given the easy access to materials that can be found in online versions of these newspapers. The two newspapers that I chose for the analysis are Rossiyskaya Gazeta (RG) and Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP).

Rossiyskaya Gazeta (RG) was founded in 1990 and is the official daily newspaper of the Russian government that is entirely owned by the Russian government. It publishes legal documents, such as decrees, laws, and other documents related to the functioning of the state bodies as well as voices the opinions and policy interpretations. The newspaper audience mainly holds, according to the newspaper’s website, conservative views (RG 2018). The daily circulation is 160,000.

Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP) is a popular tabloid newspaper that ranked most cited in the social media in 2017. It was founded in 1925 and is currently owned by Grigory Berezkin’s company, an oil magnate who has close links to Gazprom. The newspaper expresses opinions that are in line with the official line but simultaneously amplifies and sensationalizes them to make them appeal to a wider audience. The daily circulation is 655,000 copies.

The first one (RG) is the best reflection of the official policy stances, and the second one (KP) might provide additional policymakers’ views and commentary that are seen to have a more popular appeal. As a combination, they are to provide a good insight into the mainstream official discourse.

The choice to focus on the media analysis can largely be explained by the role that mass media has in societies and Russian society in particular. I share the assertion that Emil Edenborg (2016) makes in his analysis of visibility and belonging in the Russian media space that “the media have become a ubiquitous pervasive part of people’s lives, and in many cases themselves the space in which social and political practices are played out” (Ibid.: 17) and, therefore, are more than simply actors or policy tools. The media are co-producing lives of people and constituting “the spaces of appearance” “where political life increasingly finds its place” (Silverstone 2006: 31), quoted in Edenborg (2016: 17)). Media thus plays an important role as a space where the world appears.
Further, media can be understood to have power to render certain phenomena visible or invisible. As shown by Edenborg (Ibid.: 19—20) who theorizes around the relations between media and power using Butler’s and Rancière’s works, media delimits what is appropriate for the public, and thus defines who can be seen as subjects. Power appears to be both coercive as it controls the content through physical force, law, or outside of the legal framework and discursive as it uses certain types of narratives. By establishing what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in public spaces, for what can be said or shown, “actors can also set the norm for legitimate interpretations” of social phenomena (Ibid.: 20). The place that the media occupy in the process of meaning/discourse production and in “ordering and controlling visibility in the public sphere” (Ibid.: 21) thus makes it particularly compelling to work with the newspaper articles as a source of material.

In order to find the articles for analysis, google.com was used to search the websites of the newspapers, http://rg.ru and https://www.kp.ru for the keywords through the period since November 15, 2016 when the “childhood decade” was first spoken of until January 31, 2018. The motivation for selecting this particular time period is that the “childhood decade” bill was signed into law on May 29, 2017, so this period would allow exploring the media messages that came before and after the law, as well as when the bill came into legal force (starting January 2018).

"Decade of childhood" (desyatiletie detstva) was used as a search prompt and 20 articles came up on the RG’s website and 5 articles on KP’s one. These constitute the main material that I analyze later. The articles were sorted oldest to newest and numbered.

My aim is to analyze the official discourse surrounding the notion of family. Despite belonging to the different genres, namely, the law and the newspaper article, I treat the latter as an extension of the former. As shown by the content of the articles found in the two sources, the key phrase is mostly used in official discourse, i.e. it consists of interviews with policymakers and officials and their statements as well as reports on instances where officials explicitly mention this policy initiative (including the two articles in KP).

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6 cf. “On the one hand, the state performs normative compulsory regulation, pursuing a policy of gender differences in legislation. On the other hand, it creates an ideological apparatus of coercion that controls gender relations through dominant official discourses, setting the framework for representation” (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2015: 332).

7 The articles are cited throughout the paper using the name of the article and its number. “RG 10”, for instance, means “article number 10 from Rossiyskaya Gazeta”. A full list with the titles translated into English is given in the Appendix.
Theoretical framework
In this section, I outline the concepts that theoretically inform the analysis of the selected material. As my aim is to analyze the discourse concerning Russia and the Russian nationhood, I start by analyzing the notion of the *nation-state*. I begin by providing the definition of the *nation* and expand on the use of a related notion, *nationalism*, and their role in forming discourse. I then consider the role of the *state* and the ways it, via actors, constructs discourse by exploring the notions of “symbolic politics” and “political myth”. Next, I turn to the critiques of the “ideal types” of the *nation* (the civic and the ethnic) and the postcolonial critiques of the “ideal types” of the *state* (nation-state and empire). Lastly, I consider the scholarship produced by feminist researchers that from a gendered point of view engages with the notions of *gender*, *state*, *nation*, and *sexuality*.

Defining the nation
In the section below, I outline the main theoretical views concerning the notions of the nation and nationalism. Mostly late modernist (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) and postmodernist views (Billig 1995; Yuval-Davis 1997) have inspired the analysis conducted in this thesis. I start by showing how the notions of “invention” or “imagination” have been used to approach the “nation” and “tradition” and consider some critiques of this approach.

Anderson (1983) suggests treating nationalism as “an ideology” (Ibid.: 5, original cursive) and viewing it “as if it belonged with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion’, rather than with ‘liberalism’ or ‘fascism’”, i.e. as a way in which people’s interaction is organized, as “cultural artefacts” (Ibid.: 4), not as a unique political ideology. From this then follows his definition of the *nation* as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Ibid.: 6). A nation, he contends, appears as soon as a large enough number of people start considering (or, imagining) themselves to be “a nation”. This is in line with Gellner (1983) who famously contended that nationalism creates nations and not vice versa.

In another important work devoted to studying traditions of the contemporary British society, Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) highlights the importance of recurrent actions that are assigned symbolic nature. Conceptualizing them as “traditions”, he notices that much of what is deemed a continuation of historically formed practices is in fact “invented”. He defines an “invented tradition” as a term that means

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. (Ibid.: 1)
He further states that although the “‘invented’ traditions” attempt to establish historical continuity, this continuity is largely created. Further, the ‘invented’ traditions in the British context are divided (Ibid.: 9) into three overlapping types:

a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour.

Hobsbawm claims that the first was the dominant type; other functions followed from “a sense of identification with a ‘community’ and/or the institutions representing, expressing or symbolizing it such as a ‘nation’” (Ibid.: 9).

He notes a difference between old practices, which are specific and strongly binding, and ‘invented’ practices, which are “unspecific and vague in the content of the values and obligations of group membership they inculcate—such as ‘patriotism’, ‘loyalty’, ‘duty’” (Ibid.: 10). Still, the practices that symbolize “Americanness” or “Britishness” are specific and compulsory, such as singing the anthem, the pledge of allegiance etc. Hobsbawm sees the pivotal importance in inventing elements of group membership, such as flags and anthems, that are emotionally and symbolically charged. Despite the fact that in private lives of most people invented traditions occupy a much smaller place than old traditions did in the lives of people who lived in “old agrarian societies” (Ibid.: 11), the ‘invented’ traditions play an important role in structuring the public domain of citizens’ lives. This includes state schooling, army and other institutions that structure membership in states. Most of these traditions, it is contended, “are historically novel and largely invented—flags, images, ceremonies and music” (Ibid.: 12).

The interest in studying the ‘invented’ traditions is thus explained by the fact that they are “highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the ‘nation’, with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest.” (Ibid.: 13)

Smith’s (who is known for defending the perspective on the pre-modern origins of nation and its links to primordiality) main critique of Hobsbawm consists in the fact that

the very term ‘invention’ which, among its meanings, often carries connotations of fabrication and/or creation ex nihilo—something that Hobsbawm is at pains to repudiate. To see nations as composed largely of ‘invented traditions’ designed to organise and channel the energies of the newly politicised masses, places too much weight on artifice and assigns too large a role to the fabricators (Ibid.: 130).

Anderson suggests moving beyond the “falsity/genuineness” dichotomy, and a consequent thought that there might be some other communities that are “true” in comparison to nations. He proposes to consider the ways in which different communities are imagined. It makes sense to conceptualize the nation as a community because
regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings (Ibid.: 7).

When using this definition of the nation, it is therefore important to realize that “invention” is used to highlight the fact that nations are not eternal entities that have been in place since the time immemorial, but rather results of creation. Just because a social or political order, or a community, is “imagined”, it does not necessarily follow that it is not “real” or does not have consequences for people’s lives. The similarity of this conceptualization of the “nation” to the concept of “myth”8 in Laclau & Mouffe’s (1985) discourse theory, is what I think makes it useful for the purposes of this inquiry.

While Hobsawm’s inquiry does not produce a clear-cut explanation as to why nationalism has garnered so much public support, Anderson raises a number of important points in attempting to answer the question why nationalism creates feelings of deep attachment by comparing it to the institution of family. He shows how nations are naturalized and conceptualized in terms of kinship or home, both of which signify objects that one is naturally connected to. Central to the idea of the nation is the idea of its disinterestedness (Ibid.: 143). Anderson sees the similarities between the notions of family and nation. While family has been oft-conceptualized as a power structure in scholarly literature, it is argued that this is a “foreign” concept to much of the humankind. Instead, many view family as “the domain of disinterested love and solidarity” (Ibid.: 144). Precisely because a nation is thought not to have a ‘national interest’, can it ask its citizens to die for it. Dying for one’s country possesses a certain “moral grandeur” which other communities do not have because they cannot compare in “purity” and “disinterestedness” to the nation.

Nationalism and discourse

In this section I highlight the ways in which the notion of the nation, and a related concept, that of nationalism, can be operationalized for the analysis of discourse.

An important point Wodak (2018: 404) makes regarding Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” is that it operates with the notion of homogenous imagined communities and does not take into account the heterogeneity of its members’ identities and the fluidity of its content. The content of “the nation” is never “defined once and for all and can be renegotiated according to socio-political and situative contexts” (Ibid.).

In line with this critique, Calhoun (2007) suggests treating nationalism as a discursive formation, which is “implicated in the widespread if problematic treatment of societies as bounded,
integral wholes with distinctive identities, cultures, and institutions” (Ibid.: 40). He also stresses (Ibid.) that although “traditions”, “communities” or “nations” may well be imagined or even falsified, they are nonetheless real, i.e. their existence affects the lives of members of these communities.

Michael Billig’s (1995) study emphasizes two important points, the renegotiation and reproduction of the nation via repetition. His work explores representations of the nation and everyday expressions of nationalism which constitute the imagery of national solidarity. He introduces the term “banal nationalism” as a way to cover ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced. It is argued that these habits are not removed from everyday life, as some observers have supposed. Daily, the nation is indicated, or “flagged”, in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in establishing nations, is the endemic condition (Billig 1995: 6).

In line with Hobsbawm’s view regarding ‘invented traditions’, Billig points out that many of the national symbols become effective because of their repetition and indirect, vague nature. The symbols serve as a background for a variety of everyday practices; naturalized and “harmless”, they are “flagged” and activated in the minds of citizens. Nationalism does not only operate with grand intentions underpinned by violence in wars and revolutions; banal nationalism, in contrast, relies on small and seemingly trite words by constantly reminding the citizens of the existence of the nation. As a result, nations are naturalized and become taken for granted. In other words, the language that is used by politicians contributes continually to the discursive construction of national identities.

Ruth Wodak, who is also guided by a discourse perspective, provides a useful summary of how one might perceive the relationship between the nation and discourse:

- nations are primarily mental constructs, in the sense that they exist as discrete political communities in the imagination of their members;
- national identity includes a set of dispositions, attitudes and conventions that are largely internalised through socialisation and create a “national habitus”, drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, capital and field;
- and, lastly, nationhood as a form of social identity is produced, transformed, maintained and dismantled through discourse (Wodak 2017: 408).

I will use these as a starting point in an analysis inspired by Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of discourse. A discrete nation is a “myth” that is created in the imagination; an identity is a set of “invented traditions”, or articulations, that are passed on among members. Thus, discursive production that happens “banally” is an important mechanism for the creation and (re)negotiation of the national identity.
State and symbolic politics

In order to analyze the ways in which the nationhood is shaped and produced, it is necessary to consider the related perspective on the notion of the state, as it is intimately related to the notions of the nation and nationhood. As Miller (2009) asserts, “the stable existence of the state is impossible without nationalist discourse”. Below I first sketch out the main approaches to theorizing the relationship between the nation(hood) and the state and then I go on to discuss the notion of “symbolic politics” as a concept to theorize about the role of the state bodies in relation to the construction of national identity.

For the purposes of the current inquiry I operate with the definition of the state as, on the one hand, an array of institutions that have a number of departments endowed with different functions, among which are control and enforcement (Yuval-Davis 1997: 14; Gal & Kligman 2000: 20). This definition is in the Weberian tradition, which Walby (1990: 150) approaches critically, insofar it focuses on the state’s ability to use physical force (monopoly on violence), yet the state may be not the only institution to have the power to control and enforce. On the other hand, following a Marxist tradition, the state can be seen as an actor that maintains cohesion in class society, although as Walby (Ibid.) notes, not only does it maintain a hierarchy in relation to capital, but also in relation to gender and ethnicity.

As noted by scholars (Yuval-Davis 1997: 14-15; Gal & Kligman 2000: 20), analytically, the state should not be reduced to being a single entity. They caution against using “definition of states as reified or personified entities with set social functions and unified goals” (Gal & Kligman 2000: 20). While it may be hard to avoid denoting state as “it”, or viewing it as an entity, one should not forget that it is the active participation of people that in fact “makes” the state. Consequently, as the population’s makeup is usually non-homogenous, power struggles, including over production of meaning, emerge and inform the workings of a state.

Yuval-Davis (1997: 14) further notes that although the schools and the media play an important role in the ideological production, these social institutions are not “inherently part of the state as such”, and proposes viewing the state, the civil society, and the family and kinship ties as separate domains. All three have different access to political and economic power and ideology, she says, does not reside (in a privileged sense) within any of these. All three domains are not homogenous, and for the present study of the official discourse it is important to keep in mind that the perception that states have unified goals may be created by the media; the idea that “the state” “intends” something by itself requires scrutiny (Ibid.: 15). Who is it exactly that does something if we refer to the point that people’s participation makes the state? This is also echoed by Gal & Kligman (2000: 20).
A Russian researcher Malinova (2012, 2013) scrutinizes how different actors, the state being one of them, attempt to discursively structure the reality (in Laclau & Mouffe’s (1985) terms, produce discourse). She explores the theories about the nation-building process in Russia using the concept of symbolic politics which she defines in line with Bourdieu’s “symbolic power” to mean political activity aimed at producing and promoting certain modes of interpreting social reality and ensuring the dominance of these [modes of interpretation] (Malinova 2013: 13).

The concept of symbolic politics deemphasizes the distinctions between the material and non-material, verbal and non-verbal and highlights the role of discourse as an instrument of power. Symbolic politics of memory, such as interpretation of history, collective forgetting and remembering, and politics of identity that aim at constituting the Self as homogenous and representing the Other play a significant role in the discursive construction and legitimation of the nation-state (Riabov 2015: 82-83).

This enactment of invented communities, as Yuval-Davis (1997: 14) theorizes, is not limited to state institutions. In contrast to Yuval-Davis who says that “ideology” can be found and produced in any sphere or by any actor, Malinova contends that the state occupies a special position in the domain of symbolic politics at least in the Russian context as it is able to impose certain interpretations of social reality on society by using administrative resources (implementing educational standards) and legal measures (citizenship laws); by assigning a special status to particular symbols (establishing public holidays, official symbols, state awards, etc.); and by representing society on the global stage. Consequently, public statements by official representatives who speak “for the state” and make decisions acquire special significance and serve as reference points for other participants in political discourse. (Malinova 2012)

Further, she provides a critical account of the state policy that, as in the case of official symbolic policy, “might be inconsistent and context-dependent”. In pursuing the policies, the elites or state bodies aim to avoid societal conflicts and do not always coordinate their actions.

McClintock (1993: 70) in her study of nation building similarly to the scholars described above stresses that the nationalist ideologies have become inspired by a “politics of symbol and cultural persuasion”. The members of the nation experience the collectivity “preeminently through spectacle”, which allows McClintock to maintain that “nationalism is a symbolic performance of invented community, staged by political interests, and enacted by designated cultural actors” (McClintock 1991: 108). This is a slightly different take on the notion of symbolic politics. The performance of a community with a view to structuring the social reality in a certain way, e.g. by

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9 Both distinctions being in line with discourse theory’s approach that stresses the absence of practices outside of discourse.

10 This term, as I see it, can be compared to Yuval-Davis’ use of “ideology”.
assigning certain value to symbols, is what largely contributes to the identity-building process as understood by Malinova.

Another important concept that can be located in the field of symbolic politics and helps to conceptualize and problematize the functioning of the state and enactment of nationhood is that of a political myth.\footnote{The use of the concept of “myth” in the works that follow is different from that of Laclau & Mouffe (1985).} In this understanding, a political myth is an almost naturalized version of reality that underpins the ongoing (re)negotiation of the nation. Persson & Petersson (2014) provide an overview of scholarly work that has dealt with the concept to provide a framework for the concept of the Russian “Great Power myth”.\footnote{I return to engage with this notion in “Situating my analysis” at the end of Previous research.} They contend that political myths can be seen as shared beliefs in a society that set common frames of reference for a nation, serves as the basis for shared identities and serve to give popular legitimacy to political leaders who fulfill their promises in line with the myths (Ibid.: 194). Myth’s truthfulness and factual accuracy are not important for its functioning and its political potential. A political myth can be central to conceiving a shared identity as it helps to define a common purpose for the nation; it serves as a framework which new information is fitted into and interpreted within. The role of the elites is highlighted in the process of assigning the meaning and constructing the reality as political myths are promoted by the authorities. Persson & Petersson also note (Ibid. 195) that a successful myth can become inscribed in political practices and institutions, gain support from the beliefs and norms that are already in place or further become normalized and thus protected from critical interpretation. Questioning the orthodoxy of some myth may amount to breaking taboos. Yet despite the possibility of acquiring a taken-for-granted status, as the researchers note, a myth can be disproved or destroyed from within if counterclaims are made successfully or an alternative discourse is constructed.

**Civic or ethnic nationhood?**

One of the last theoretical moments that deserve scrutiny is the distinction between the civic and the ethnic ways of conceptualizing nationhood. The relevance of addressing this ideal type distinction is discussed further in *Previous research*.

As Calhoun (2007: 41) points out,

> The opposition between two “types” of nationalism was formulated most influentially by Hans Kohn [in his work *The Idea of Nationalism*]. In his and almost all subsequent usage the analytic distinction was embedded in a privileging of the more “liberal” civic variant.

Yack (1996: 196) points to a number of other dichotomies that emerge in connection with the “civic/ethnic” divide, namely “rational/emotive, voluntary/inherited, good/bad, ours/their’s”.

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11 The use of the concept of “myth” in the works that follow is different from that of Laclau & Mouffe (1985).
12 I return to engage with this notion in “Situating my analysis” at the end of Previous research.
Calhoun (2007: 42) sums up the scholarly debate by saying that “not all scholars accept the distinction or hold it to be sharp”. The distinction between the kinds of nationalism is at times unclear, not in the least because civic nationalism can be based on cultural or racial ideas of who constitutes as a “proper” or good citizen” (Ibid.). In other words, the distinction, as Smith notes, is analytical and normative, and it does not describe particular nationalisms, nor can it be used to trace the trajectory of nationalism in general. For even the most ‘civic’ and ‘political’ nationalisms often turn out on closer inspection to be also ‘ethnic’ and ‘linguistic’ (Smith 1998: 126).

In conclusion, Calhoun (2007: 44) stresses the “need to address the contemporary conditions that make [nationalism] effective in people’s lives”. Nationalists, he notes, might find it useful to claim an ethnic foundation to the nation, as it implies that nationhood is in a sense natural; research from social or historical science, however, does not provide evidence of this. This leads him to conclude that “all nations are historically created” (Ibid.: 46).

Akturk (2011), in line with many other scholars whose work Calhoun (2007) surveyed, agrees that the distinction between the two kinds of nationalism is methodologically fruitless. He proposes considering “regimes of ethnicity”, which he defines as “the dynamics of persistence and change in state policies regulating the relationship between ethnicity and nationality” (Ibid.: 117). Effectively saying that each national project has an ethnic component, he proposes a framework that would help categorize them. In his view, all national projects can be subsumed under three categories, as either monoethnic, multiethnic or antiethnic or in transition between these three. If membership in the nation is limited to one ethnicity, then the regime is monoethnic; if not, and multiple ethnicities are institutionalized, it is the multiethnic regime. Lastly, if there are multiple ethnicities that enjoy membership and multiple ethnicities are not institutionalized, then the regime is antiethnic. His description and analysis of the Russian case show that the Soviet Union was a multiethnic project and Russia is now transitioning to an antiethnic regime (see more in Previous research section).

The nation-state and the empire

The concept of the nation-state is another one that requires some scrutiny in order to be used in the analysis. The state has not always existed in the form of a nation-state. Butler, for instance, inquires the purpose of the hyphen in term (Butler & Spivak 2010: 2), “does [it] finesse the relation that needs to be explained? Does it mark a certain soldering that has taken place historically? Does it suggest a fallibility at the heart of the relation?”

The concepts of state and nation can be related to each other in a variety of ways, but the nationalist ideology is before all a “theory of political legitimacy which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones” (Gellner 1983: 1). Yuval-Davis (1998: 11) aptly
notes the existence of the fiction holding that the boundaries of the community and the nation-state coincide. This fiction, according to her, is used to “naturalize the hegemony of one collectivity and its access to the ideological apparatuses of both state and civil society” (Ibid.).

The fiction she talks about is likely difficult to achieve at any given point but even more difficult to maintain. The history of Russian statehood is a case in point. Contemporary Russian statehood can be viewed differently; these views are summarized in the Previous research section. An important theoretical question, however, is whether nation-state, a notion that emerged and has been studied mostly in the Western context, can be applied to studying Russia. Some research that problematizes the application of the “ideal types” to studying nationalism outside the tradition that assumes the nation-state to be the point of reference is presented by Kumar (2010) and Bhamba (2016).

Helpful to understanding the theoretical and empirical analyses of the Russian nationhood is Kumar’s (2010) discussion of the relationship between “nation-states” and “empires”, as there is debate among Russian political science scholars regarding the question whether Russia can be seen as either ideal type. He proves that (1) empires and nation-states have much in common and (2) the succession line “from empire to the nation-state” is misleading as empires have existed alongside nation-states. As many of the characteristics of empires and nation-states overlap, methodologically the distinction between the two loses its sharpness. Gurminder Bhamba (2016) highlights that when historians and sociologists talk of the emergence of the nation-state in Europe, they erase the fact the state they study “was a colonial and imperial state” (Ibid.: 336, emphasis original). The fact that the state’s governmental institutions consolidated precisely in the period when the states started to exert influence over other parts of the world is usually not given proper consideration. In her words,

this ‘external’ domination is not theorized as a constitutive aspect of the state which, instead of being understood as an imperial state, is presented in ‘national’ terms (Ibid.: 340).

Feminist critique of the state

As many scholars note, analyses of state, nation, nationhood and a number of other concepts for a long time have not paid sufficient attention to the implications of the notion of gender. In the

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13 While nations are usually seen as egalitarian (Anderson’s “deep horizontal comradeship” and focused inward, praising the existence of a “we …”), empires are envisioned as hierarchical and heterogeneous, focusing outward, as bearers of civilization. He arrives at the conclusion that “nation-states” are empires in miniature because of the way they have been formed, with the histories of conquest, and because they continue being home to more than one nation without the ideally required degree of “consensus, community and homogeneity” (Ibid.: 128). Further, Kumar argues that if an ethnie (in Smith’s terms) exists around which other subordinate nations cohere in a nation-state, the same can be said about empires. “Empires, especially modern empires, can seem no more than nation-states writ large” (Ibid.: 133).
coming analysis, I am inspired by Yuval-Davis’ conceptualization of gender. She suggests thinking of it as follows:

Gender should be understood not as a ‘real’ social difference between men and women, but as a mode of discourse which relates to groups of subjects whose social roles are defined by their sexual/biological difference as opposed to their economic positions or their membership in ethnic and racial collectives. (Yuval-Davis 1997: 9)

In an attempt to provide an analysis of the state and nationhood that is gendered, I rely on works by Sylvia Walby (1990), Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias (Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989; Nira Yuval-Davis 1997), Patricia Hill Collins (1998) and Susan Gal & Gail Kligman (2000).

An important starting point is Walby’s (1990) theorization of patriarchy in both private and public spaces. At home, the figure of a man is the beneficiary of the patriarchal structure; in the public space, women experience subordination that is more institutional. Since the increased demand for labor and entry of women into the labor force, an important transition from private to public patriarchy has occurred. This is critical to understanding the idea that women and men are affected by the state in different ways and especially concerns the welfare state that is aimed at providing benefits to certain groups of citizens.

The state is considered by Walby (1990) to be one of the six structures of patriarchy. Of special interest is the relation between women and state. Although a “welfare state” has never existed in (the Soviet) Russia in its developed, Western form, the pronatalist policies, i.e. policies pertaining to encouraging a higher birthrate, however fragmented and incoherent, reflect a similar dynamic. Walby (1990: 159) cites an article by Hernes (1984) that dealt with the role of the Norwegian welfare state in the structuring of the gender relations, which noted a “shift from private to public dependence for women”. Hernes’ (1984) overall argument is that women’s lives—in all of their different roles as “citizens, employees, and welfare clients”—are more determined by the state than men’s. This leads her (Ibid.: 31) to conclude that the welfare state is patronizing toward women. Later, however, she allows for the possibility of the welfare-state to be “women-friendly” in the Scandinavian context, i.e. a state that “would not force harder choices on women than on men, or permit unjust treatment on the basis of sex”, provided that there is “broad political mobilization of women from below and the institutionalization of gender equality from above” (Borchorst & Siim 2002: 90). As Orloff (1996) notes in an earlier analysis of the gendered welfare policies, in addition to the two main approaches in scholarship, which see the state either as a structure reproducing patriarchy in its policies or as ameliorating gender inequality, social policies in fact have a varied effect on gender (Ibid.: 56).

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14 For a discussion of this concept in relation to Russia, see ‘Gendering the state and its family policy’ in the Previous research section.
In their work *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, Gal & Kligman (2000: 21) identify four ways in which “reproduction makes politics” in East Central Europe after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Regularizing gender relations and having debates about reproduction has been important for the state because these discussions directly (1) establish a certain mode of relations between the state and the citizens; (2) serve as the basis upon which the nationhood relies to (re)establish the category of nation; (3) constitute women as political actors. Indirectly and lastly, (4) the discussions about reproductive politics are in fact debates about the morality and legitimacy of the state.

Their research shows that not only are gender relations implicated in the working of a state (points 1, 3, 4) but also in the construction of the nation (point 2). With this in mind, I turn to the overview of theories that consider the role of gender in establishing the nation.

**Gendering the nation**

Women are not only affected differently from men by the state, but also emerge and figure prominently in the process (re)establishing nations. In the introduction to their volume, Yuval-Davis & Anthias (1989) suggest five ways in which women are involved in national projects and ethnic processes:

1. as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
2. as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;
3. as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
4. as signifiers of ethnic/national differences - as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories;
5. as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.

*(Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989: 7)*

*Gender & Nation* explores the ways in which gender relations “affect and are affected by national projects and processes” (Yuval-Davis 1997: 1); one of the main arguments of the book is that conceptions of nationhood involve specific constructions of “womanhood” and “manhood”. Women, she contends, not just bureaucrats, intellectuals and politicians, play a crucial role in reproducing the nation.

Due to the fact that family is seen as an important block in the functioning of a state, it is crucial to see how gender (put in place and reproduced in many contexts, including the context of family) and nation are informed and constructed by each other (Ibid.: 12). In three separate chapters, she explores the three types of nationalist projects and the ways that women affect and are affected by the national processes that are central to them. The notion of common origin (*Volknation*), common culture (*Kulturnation*), and equal citizenship (*Staatnation*) and the roles of women in them.

As biological reproducers of the nation, women should be seen not in their capacity as individuals but rather as members of the national collective (Ibid.: 22). In the name of the nation,
women can be called upon to have more or fewer children, which is expressed in “people as power” discourse or a Malthusian\textsuperscript{15} discourse, respectively. In addition to “demographic race” (Ibid.: 30) justification, which usually mobilizes members of a certain ethnicity to reproduce so as to outnumber others within the same state, women can be urged to have more children as a way to overcome a national disaster, such as a war or a revolution. As a result, there often arise tensions between the national and individual interests in terms of how many children a woman should have; this depends, among other factors, on the existence of welfare structures that provide the elderly with care. Yet in many cultural contexts, as Yuval-Davis points out (Ibid.: 35), the power of women to have autonomy over their bodies may be seen as threatening to the elite’s authority or to traditions and customary laws.

In regard to the cultural reproduction, Yuval-Davis (Ibid.: 23) stresses the importance of gender symbols, manifest in specific conceptions of womanhood and manhood, and sexuality for the nationalist projects. In line with the idea that biological racism has been replaced by cultural racism, she notes that culture has come to play a pivotal role in the articulations of national identities (Ibid.: 39). Importantly, she point outs that ethnicity is not specific to minorities; it can take form of hegemonic ethnicity, the one that has succeeded in naturalizing its social and cultural norms and construction. (Ibid.: 44). Those outside the dominant ethnicity or having a different “culture” can come to be seen as Others and any culturally perceived symbol can be used as a boundary signifier to justify the division and othering (Ibid.: 47). As other researchers have shown more elaborately (see the next section), sexuality has become one of these signs of differentiation.

The main approach to investigating the interplay between the notions of nation and gender is intersectional. Walby (1996: 252) stresses the importance of analyzing gender in connection to ethnic, national and ‘race’ relations and seeing how the two sets of relations mutually construct each other. Further, that in an analysis “it is not a case of simply adding these two sets of analyses together, but rather that they mutually affect each other in a dynamic relationship” (Ibid.).

An important starting point is Collins’ (1998) theorization that family is “a privileged exemplar of intersectionality”. She describes the US context where “family values” are crucial to “national well-being”; with certain ideas about the authority structure held by emotions of attachment, the family functions with the sanction of the state that allows heterosexual marriages, “an imagined traditional family ideal” (Ibid.) serves as an ideological construction as well as a basic principle of social organization.

The use of the family trope helps gloss over the inconsistencies generated by the civic vs. ethnic nationhood as “women’s national role as a mother-figure effectively cuts across th[is]

\textsuperscript{15} Thomas Malthus predicted that population would grow exponentially while the food supply would increase linearly and argued for the need to control population (Yuval-Davis 1997: 33).
dichotomy” (Cusack 2000: 541) and adds another dimension to understanding these constructions. Drawing on a body of scholarship, Cusack shows that both civic and ethnic nationalisms look to the future and the past, conceptualized as Janus-faced. Ethnic nationalism looks into the past by conceptualizing members of the nation as being descendants of a common ancestor; it can also look into the future by conjuring up images of a shared destiny. Civic nationalism is based on an agreement in the past that enabled the existence of the nation in the first place; it employs the future metaphor by portraying the nation in terms of marriage and future relations. McClintock (1993: 66) claims that the ‘natural’ division of gender employed by national projects associates women with the past, being organic and traditional, and men as oriented toward into the future, being progressive and forward-looking.

**Sexuality and nationalism**

Besides regularizing subjects according to their gender, the state often appears to place restrictions on citizens’ sexual and reproductive rights and justifies them in referring to the national interest. Then the family ideal that is deployed in the construction of nationhood becomes not only gendered, as discussed above, but also sexualized (Yuval-Davis 1997: 46-53). Of particular interest for the present study are the works of Puar (2007) and Fassin (2010) that explore the connections between normativity, sexuality, and nationalism.

Puar’s (2007) work explores the shift that occurred in the American society where non-heterosexual citizens, usually constructed as outside the norm have recently become (more) included into the national projects as individuals worthy of protection. She introduces the concept of *homonationalism* to denote a process where same-sex relations (especially between white gay males) are legitimated, while ethnic minorities, in particular Muslims are othered and constructed as unable to embrace the sexual diversity and respect for LGBT rights that becomes a newly shared national value.

Similarly, Éric Fassin (2010) argues that sexual democracy is entering the political agenda in Europe. Even despite contradictions that exist both within particular countries, such as France, where (modern) secularism is reconciled with (conservative) Christian tradition (Ibid.: 552), and among European states, such as France and the Netherlands. In this process of definition against the sexual Other, the sexual freedom that is shared by Europeans and is present in Europe and absent elsewhere is highlighted, especially among migrants coming to settle in European countries.

Another approach to studying sexuality’s role in the national projects and the relations between the state and the population can be Foucault’s concept of biopower. Biopower, in Foucault’s conception, is a mechanism of power peculiar to modern nation-states expressed in “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the
control of populations” (Foucault 1979: 140); the main concern of biopower is with demographic issues, such as birth, life expectancy, public hygiene etc.

Population comes to appear above all else as the ultimate end of government. In contrast to sovereignty, government has as its purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, and so on […] (Ibid.: 216)

Discipline and regulation happen as the outcome of state’s power to “qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize” (Foucault 1989: 144); the outcome is usually manifest in the production of a norm, in this case, “a normal” sexuality. The ways the notions outlined above have been employed to theorize about nationhood and sexuality in Russia are outlined in the Previous research section.
**Previous research**

Below I outline the academic works that were written on topics similar to the topic of this thesis. The summaries of the main arguments and findings will provide an overview of the existing research field and help situate the present inquiry. The two main domains of research that have dealt with the issues that I am interested in are first, a field dealing with the notions of nation and nationhood, and, second, a body of work that attempts to provide a gendered understanding of the notions.

**Nation and nationhood**

The section below analyzes the research that deals with two interrelated problems that pertain to the nature of the Russian nationhood: if it is possible to conceptualize Russia as a nation-state or an empire, and what kind of nationhood (civic or ethnic) it has. I also draw on research that has explored the role of the church as an institution in the formation of national identity.

**Russia: a nation-state or an empire?**

The First World War led to the dissolution of the great continental land empires, “prison-houses of nations”, including the Russian empire that was “replaced by [an] independent nation-state” (Kumar 2010: 123). The Soviet Union, however, took shape of an empire with both external (in the East Central Europe) and “internal” colonies, or the various national republics (Ibid.). This is not to say that even within the Russian Soviet Republic there were numerous ethnic groups. Considering this, the question is then whether the Soviet Union collapsed to be replaced by a nation-state. The theoretical aspect of the question is discussed by a number of researchers in an issue of *Russian Politics & Law*.

All of the articles question whether there is a *nation* at all, or Miller (2009) highlights that there is currently no consensus whether Russia is (or should be considered) a nation-state or some type of multinational state. While he sees the danger in constructing a nation that will be confined to ethnic Russians, he is also cautions to advocate for a nation based on civic Russianness, as the Soviet example showed the drawbacks of such a system. Pain (2009) argues that a civic nation is impossible under an authoritarian rule and does not see it as a viable option; the existence of a civic nation, in his view, is an important prerequisite for the existence of a nation-state. Tishkov (2009), on the other hand, shows that the authorities have used the notion of civic Russianness and maintains that the longer the nation is constructed this way, the more acceptance this construction will gain. He concludes pessimistically by noting that his view has become unpopular among Russian scholars and politicians alike.
The Russian nation: civic or ethnic?

Before outlining the previous research dealing with these ideal types, I would like to highlight the ways the difference between civic and ethnic Russianness is expressed in the Russian language. The noun/adjective Russian can be understood in two ways. Firstly, as a nationality, i.e. a citizen of Russia, rossiyanin (the corresponding adjective, used to refer to e.g. national symbols is rossiyskiy); secondly, as an ethnicity marker, russkiy (adjective is the same), i.e. ethnically Russian (not Tatar or Chechen, for instance). The Russian language uses the “ethnicity” adjective. In what follows, where the distinction is needed, the former is referred to as simply “Russian” or “RussianC”, and the latter as “ethnically Russian” or “RussianE”.

Shevel (2011) approaches the issue by referring to the ethnic/civic dichotomy (see also Theoretical Framework) to highlight that both approaches are problematic in the Russian context. A total of five options emerge as possibilities for the construction of the national identity. Two civic approaches (“nation” is everyone who lives on the Russian territory, or Soviet Union territory) and three ethnic approaches (nation is Ethnic Russians, Eastern Slavs or Russian speakers) differ significantly concerning the style of articulation, implications for Russia’s policy, both internal and external, and for the territorial integrity of the Russian state. Yet all are somehow problematic. Thus, policymakers have avoided operating with a straightforward definition of who constitutes the Russian nation; it has not been defined in either civic or ethnic terms, but rather “purposefully ambiguous”. As Malinova (2013) who has explored the ways post-Soviet national identity has been discursively constructed at various points and in different policy documents shows, the denotation of the national collectivity has been manifold and contradictory. The contemporary political lexicon uses a variety of terms, such as “a multinational people”, “citizens of Russia”, “inhabitants of Russia”, “RussiansC”, “RussiansE”, as well as others (Malinova 2013: 207).

Aktürk’s (2011) research shows that in the Soviet union, which allowed multiple ethnicities to belong and allowed for their institutionalization, which included cultural and language autonomy, can be characterized as a multiethnic state. Soviet identity was, however, an overarching national (civic) but nonethnic category. As shown by the research above, the attempts to institute a similar nation-wide RussianC identity, similar to that of the Soviet Union, have been unsuccessful. The removal of ethnicity from internal passports in 1997 (Ibid.: 117) has paved way for this, yet the chance was incomplete as “other features of a multiethnic regime, such as ethnic federalism, remained in place” (Ibid.: 122). Ultimately, Tishkov (2009) was in the 1990s one of the main advocates of the transition; as his article shows, his views have not changed but remain challenged by both scholars and political elites.

Further exploring the ways nationhood was articulated as civic or ethnic is Zakharov’s (2015) analysis of nationalist protests and the government reactions to them. The inquiry reveals a lot
about the racism of the Russian society as well as the contradictions inherent in the approach to
ethnic policy and establishing nationhood. Racialization and globalization go hand in hand in
Russia while “racism has become the social glue that is holding a traumatised and disillusioned
Russian society together” as argued by Law (2012: 155). In the wake of racist demonstrations, the
prime minister urged not to forget the multiethnic culture that is based on the Russian culture,
which is the former’s foundation and backbone. This, argues Zakharov (Ibid.: 123), put all other
ethnicities in an inferior position. Ethnic Russians were again portrayed as superior and equalized
with the whole of the Russian nation (Ibid.: 124), which effectively reverses the attempts to build a
civic Russian nation.

Zakharov (2012: 175-176) also notes that the Russian government is more likely to assert the
feelings of Russianness in terms of “a civic nation, rather than an ethnic group” with elements of
populism that divide inhabitants along the temporal line of “established residents” / “outsiders” and
essentialize and biologize difference both of the Russian people and of the civic nation, especially
in terms of “our people”, yet agreeing with Shevel (2011), Zakharov remarks that it remained open
to interpretation who constituted the people.

In summary, it is possible to say that Russia is between the antiethnic and multiethnic regimes;
the nation-building process has been purposefully ambiguous, which has been utilized to achieve
different goals and construct nationhood in ways to appeal to various groups within the nation. In
light of this, it is problematic to say that Russia fulfils the criteria for being considered an ideal type
nation-state. Yet the ways in which Russian nationhood is constructed, especially within the
framework of this thesis that seeks to consider this process through the lens of gender, remain a
highly interesting topic to explore.

Religion’s role in shaping the nation

The fact that national identity is lacking a single definition allows a number of subjects to partake in
shaping it. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) can be said to have a noticeable role in shaping
the official discourse.

Chernyayev (2015) discusses the role that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) could play in
consolidating the Russian society, “atomized since the collapse of the Soviet Union”. He notes how,
in line with Huntington’s (1993) “clash of civilizations” approach, the ROC has tried both to
alarm the society about the ambush of the Western values as well as assert the authority being the
representative of the “Orthodox civilization”. From this follows the ROC’s role as a spiritual guide
that blames societal problems on the lack of “spirituality” and promises to bring Russia to the

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16 It postulates that there are not just nation-states but civilizations, and that civilizational (cultural and religious)
identities will be the main source of conflict in the 21st century. In that classification Russia forms the core of the
Orthodox civilization.
“orthodox principles”, away from “Western liberalism” (Ibid.: 336). However, the scope of the “religious renaissance” in Russia should not be overestimated in everyday practices and discourse. Religion in Russia does not fulfill a spiritual function, but acts as an identity marker. Orthodox Christianity as a belief system allows for “collective self-identification” (Redichkina 2012: 23) as support for the church has transformed into endorsement for the current political regime as church has acquired the status of a political institute. Second, some Russians conflate religion and nationhood, contending that to be civically Russian one must be Orthodox (Ibid.: 24). Thus, identifying as Orthodox reinforces their ethnic Russianness but also sets the normative expectations for the “true” Russianness, even if it is defined in civic terms.

The role of gender and sexuality

Gendering the state and its family policy

I now turn to look at research dealing with the intersection between state and gender, both in the Soviet and the post-Soviet contexts.

Following Sarah Ashwin (2000), Russian feminist scholars (e.g. Temkina & Rotkirch 2002; Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2015) use the notion of the gender order to theorize about power relations in the Russian society. With the key assumption regarding the Soviet state as a unified “actor”, they contend that gender relations in contemporary Russian state are based on and can be traced back to the ones that existed in the Soviet era.

In the Soviet gender order, the gendered division of responsibilities was clearly pronounced. Women’s role was that of worker-mothers who had a duty to work, to produce future generations of workers, and run the household. They received ‘protection’ from the state in their capacity as mothers, as well as independence through their access to paid work. Men’s role was both more limited and higher-status as they were to manage and build the communist system, while the state assumed responsibility for the fulfillment of the traditional masculine roles of father and provider, becoming, in effect, a universal patriarch to which both men and women were subject (Ashwin 2000: 1). While gender equality was officially declared and both genders were equally citizens, the

17 As Chernyaev (Ibid.: 336) contends, those identifying as “Orthodox Christians” do not follow the religious norms and may even disagree with the fundamental religious dogmas. Adherence to Orthodoxy is mostly declarative. Orthodoxy is incapable of significantly influencing people’s behavior on the national scale, such as the reproductive behavior, economic and labor ethics, attitudes toward military service, etc. because its ideology clashes with the everyday modernity.


19 Ashwin (2000: 23) notes that “while the perception of the state as an ‘actor’ is not without its problems – there are always factions and fractures within any state – this has proved fruitful as an initial assumption. The post-structuralist approach has been most effective when applied to states in the developing world, which are often distinctly fragmented: by comparison, the Soviet state was notable for its unity”.
gendered ideology reproduced biological determinism, that ascribed special traits to femininity and particular roles to women. Despite the Soviet state being conceptualized as “patriarchal”, the dominance and position of men within the state machine is not perceived to be the basis of this ‘patriarchal’ character; “the state was by no means an unqualified ally of men” (Ashwin 2000: 23). This implies that men’s roles have been subject to redefinition in the contemporary Russian context.  

The Soviet order can be thus characterized as *etacratic*, i.e. state-centred (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2015: 332–361) as the state policy delimited the scope of individual’s actions. This contributed to the significant mismatch between everyday practices and discourse and the official discourse. In contemporary context, because much of the instructional framework has been dismantled (Ibid.: 2), the gender order becomes less strictly defined and a number of possible gender contracts arise. With the re-emergence of class as a stratifying marker, ethnicity, ‘race’, age and other factors reappear to play an important role in shaping the everyday gender relations. Despite having gone from an etacratic to neo-traditionalist gender order, the state occupies a significant role in determining the nature of gender relations. In recent years the state has resumed many of its controlling functions (Chernova 2012b: 3). 

The policy of maternity capital is seen as a cornerstone of the family policy in post-Soviet Russia. Rivkin-Fish (2010) places it within a larger framework of the biopolitical aspirations of the state, which resulted in a renewal of family support in the last decade. She examines the “gendered consequences of linking family support to state pronatalist goals” which produce and normalize gender inequalities. The article shows how in the Soviet Union the two discourses explaining low fertility emerged, the “state obligations” discourse (i.e. to provide welfare and conditions for the creation of the family) and the “values” discourse, the latter emphasizing the “selfishness” of women and constructing one-child families as deviant. Due to lack of resources to improve housing and economic conditions, the “values” discourse has been given preference since 1970s; however, after perestroika, the discourse changed to highlight the material difficulties and economic vulnerability faced by society as a leading cause of the population decline, yet the state failed to provide enough welfare for the families.

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20 Ashwin & Lytkina (2004) write about the role of domestic marginalization that men came to occupy. Salmenniemi (2005: 739–740) shows how this reflects in everyday “demasculinization” discourse; as she proves, essentialist discourses that draw on biological explanations of gendered hierarchies are present in the everyday discourse and contribute to reaffirmation and justification of the existing gendered distribution of roles in the family.

21 This term is employed both to theorize about the nature of the gender order in the Soviet Union (and to a lesser extent in contemporary Russia) and about class in Russia. The latter strand emphasizes the specificity of the makeup of the Russian society and explains the peculiarities of power relations between the state and the populace. In that approach, estates rather than classes are preferred to account for social inequality. An overview of scholarship on class in Russia can be found in Melin & Salmenniemi (2012).
Caiazza (2002) explores the ways in which gendered understanding of nationhood, in addition to limiting individuals’ possibilities for action can provide citizens with (symbolic) resources. Russian women used their motherhood role as a justification for founding the “Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia” in the late 1990s and early 2000s based on the “different civic obligations that [men and women] each are expected to fulfill” (Ibid.: 5) vis-à-vis the state. The contingencies between the gendered nature of the military, that is, men’s obligation to be soldiers and the duty of women to become mothers.

In modern Russia, neotraditionalist discourses have gained prominence. As Zhurzhenko (2008: 120–124) shows, in these discourses, family is assigned six symbolic features. These are, namely, the idealization of a nuclear, as opposed to a fragmented family; family socialization as opposed to “collective” socialization by other social institutes; reproduction and childrearing as the main (even, defining) functions of the family; restoring the family’s function as an economic subsistence unit (childrearing should not be experienced as a “burden”) advocating for raising the “demand for children” and the family’s social prestige; restoration of gender roles and the role of family as the display site thereof; urging the government to account for the “interests of the family,” as if these are clear and universal and creating an “ideal” family type, and, additionally, critiques of the global gender and sexual politics seen as threats to Russia’s demographic well-being (Rivkin-Fish 2010: 712).

Rivkin-Fish (2010) seems to agree with Chernova (2012) in that the welfare policy of the late 2000s was contradictory and inconsistent. The desire of the state to cope with the population decline by means of constructing and promoting a certain family ideal (two parents, two or three children) entrench existing gender inequality and marginalize other family arrangements.

Importantly, Chernova (2011: 46) in her analysis of the family policy in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia remarks a development that occurred in the yearly presidential address of 2011. As she points out, the speech presented a new vision of the “demographic issue”, which can be designated as “child-centered”. The difference from the previous policy measures consisted not in their content or in the priorities within the realm of family policy, as the focus remained on raising the birth rate by means of direct material support from the state, yet in shifting the emphasis to children that came to embody family policy:

While in the early 2000s, the overcoming of the demographic crisis in the country was framed in terms of the preservation of the nation and national security and the need to preserve the country – concepts that are rather abstract for a layman, in the 2010 Presidential Address the main motive of all the

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22 The very figure of the child, in its symbolic capacity, employed, for instance, in various ways by the Soviet artists has been an object of study in itself in their connection to the national project. On the use of image of the child in the Soviet propaganda, see e.g. Peacock (2008), Pitkänen (2017).
proposed actions is the aspiration of each parent to ensure well-being of their children. (Chernova (2011: 46); Russian original, emphasis mine)

Using the notion of symbolic politics I attempt to analyze the politics of the state institutions that set out to provide both material support in the form of benefits as well as “ideological” support (Ibid.: 47). The most prominent example of the former is the maternal capital, which was discussed in the Previous research section, and the instances of the latter are sponsoring “The Year of the Family” and the establishment of the “Day of Family, Love and Faithfulness” in 2008, as well as continuing construction of the family ideal in policy documents.

Riabov & Riabova (2014) discuss the gendered construction of the national image contending that there has been a “remasculinization” of Russia and linking the gender and power discourses. They show that the gender binary has long been utilized to discursively construct those in power as masculine (including the specific attention to Putin’s body, which is sexualized and his persona that is ascribed “traditional manliness”) and the opposition as debilitated, unable to take action and “feminine”.

Intersecting with sexuality

As shown in the theoretical chapter, sexuality has been an important component of some national identities. Simultaneously with these processes occurring in Europe and the US, whereby sexual minorities gain state support and sexual freedoms become national ideas, in Russia, the opposite can be noted.

Stella (2007) has theorized about the politics of sexual citizenship in post-Soviet Russia. In a later work (Stella & Nartova 2015), the issues of “gay propaganda” and reproductive health laws are surveyed using the lens of Foucauldian biopolitics. They conclude that on a practical level, restrictions on sexual rights are placed with the aim of defending the national interest and promoting state’s biopolitical aims of increasing the population and improving its health. The ‘gay propaganda’ law is meant to contribute to the healthy psychological and moral development of Russia’s younger generations by strengthening ‘traditional’ family values. Ideologically, specific models of family are cemented as legitimate and ‘traditionally’ Russian (Ibid.: 32). 23

Kondakov (2014) writes about the tensions between rights-based citizenship informed by heteronormativity and citizens that do not fit into this heteronormative framework resulting in the production of “silenced citizens”. Edenborg (2016) in a similar vein considers the importance of visibility to community formation and examines the Russian case of the ban on “homosexual

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23 Although the thesis explores the dominant discourse pertaining to the construction of the heterosexual family ideal, I find it curious how homosexuality, “sexual permissiveness”, and “non-traditional” sexual practices, as described in the Introduction, are constructed as “belonging to “another cultural milieu”, i.e. “Western”, where the West/Europe comes to embody the sexually perverse Other. cf. “the ideology of split mind/body, superiority/inferiority”, which Yuval-Davis (1997: 51) says has been characteristic of the Western racialized thinking, has been adopted by Russia.
propaganda” and its relation to a surge in nationalism. The limits placed on sexual freedoms of those engaging in “non-traditional sexual relations” are considered necessary for the nation’s survival as homosexuals are equalized with pedophiles by juxtaposition and depicted as threats to nation’s survival and prosperity.

Situating my analysis: “searching for the ‘national idea’”?

The focus of the analysis that follows is on the notions of family and “Russianness” in the contemporary Russian context. As scholarship on nationhood in Russia shows, the policy discourse is characterized by the lack of a clear-cut definition of who constitutes the nation. Although there exists an overarching political myth that provides political legitimacy and to an extent situates the actions of the state bodies that postulates that Russia is a Great Power (Persson & Petersson 2014), the ruling elites have failed to come up with coherent answers to the questions that pertain to the process of [national] identity building, namely, “What should we be called?”, “Who should count as us?”, “What should we be imagined as?” Behind the different models of collective identity that compete in the discursive space are different social groups that have had different experiences throughout the (recent) history of Russia. (Maliniova 2013: 229-230).

This can explain why, according to some, there is (perceived) absence or lack of “national idea” (e.g. Maximova et al. 2016), a notion that is used in the official discourse to give purpose to the existence of the nation or even, on a larger scale, an ethical void (Arkhangelskiy 2016) that appeared as a result of the abolition of the Soviet authoritarianism that put the interests of the state before the interests of individuals. Definitely, as Malinova (2013: 230) contends, finding answers to the questions outlined above is much more than finding or defining a “national idea”.

References to a number of notions, including the nation, are made in policy documents concerning family. As previous research shows, the family policy can be termed neo-traditionalist and pronatalist (Rivkin-Fish 2010; Chernova 2012a, 2012b; Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2015). It is important to understand that in mentioning the nation every day in a certain way, e.g. by using a specific adjective to describe it, the actors (be it government officials, judges, members of parliament) flag (cf. Billig 1995) and discursively construct it in a certain way.

Gender appears to be a crucial resource in these articulations that “create” the nation. If the boundary between “sex” and “gender” is blurred, as it becomes in the naturalizing articulations of difference that invoke biological essentialism, then all difference is constructed as biological, “biology would be constructed as destiny in the moral and political discourse of that society” (Yuval-Davis 1998: 9).

I am thus interested in approaching the problem of creating (discursively construing) the Russian national identity, which has been mostly done solely in the domain of political science scholarship, from a feminist perspective using the intersectional approach. Drawing on the concepts
outlined in the *Theoretical framework* section and keeping in mind the analyses of the Russian nationhood and the role of gender in structuring power relations that have already been researched, in what comes I explore the construction and involvement of the “family” in the national project and attempt to point out the resulting effects.
The analysis

The bill and its background

The purpose of this section is thus to analyze policy documents and media material and inquire what answers are given to address the questions concerning the character of Russian national identity in the context of family policy.  

I show that family is related to the nation in a number of interrelated discursive articulations such as the decline of “traditional values” that leads to “family in crisis” and a drastic reduction of population, i.e. “demographic crisis”. “Unprotected childhood” is another consequence of the “family in crisis”, which requires “responsibility” on behalf of both the state and the members of the nation. The family’s role is also seen as upholding the “unity” of the nation and as an important factor in gaining and keeping the nation’s “competitiveness” in the global arena.

The “decade of childhood” initiative first appeared in an article published in Rossiyskaya Gazeta (RG) in November, 2016. Valentina Matvienko, the upper parliament chamber speaker, suggested working toward a continuation of the National Strategy of Action in the Interests of Children for the years 2012-2017 (National Strategy 2012) and pay special attention to the interests of children while making a budget blueprint. She spoke primarily regarding the disabled children because the budged proposal included a cut in funding for them. Listing a number of other important points, such as provision of medicines and actions to prevent privatization of child resort centers, she urged to “build a strategy to support children in the next ten years” (RG 1). On May 29, 2017 this initiative was signed into law “in order to improve state policy in the field of childhood protection” (RG 2). The government was given three months to come up with the plan of activities until 2020 to be pursued in connection with the decade.

In another piece (RG 5), Matvienko says that in the last five years the National Strategy in the Interests of Children for the years 2012-2017 (National Strategy 2012) aimed to turn the “economic, social, financial policies of the state toward children”. Based on the success of this policy initiative, the “decade of childhood” project is a continuation of the policy that was implemented throughout the 2012-2017 period. In the words of the policymakers, “family and children” became the real policy priority.

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24 To repeat, the policy documents explored in the section are: (1) National Strategy of Action in the Interests of Children for the years 2012-2017 (National Strategy 2012); (2) Draft plan of the main activities until 2020, held within the framework of the Decade of Childhood (Mintrud 2017); (3) Concept of State Family Policy in RF until the Year 2025 (2014); (4) Strategy of Development of Upbringing in the Russian Federation Until 2025 (Strategy of Development of Upbringing 2015). In addition, a total of 25 articles were analyzed, 20 from the newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta – denoted RG, and 5 from Komsomolskaya Pravda – denoted KP. For reference purposes, the articles were sorted oldest to newest and assigned numbers stated in the parentheses; the full list of corresponding articles can be found in the appendix.
The main aims of the decade as outlined in (RG 5) can be summed up as follows. The state aims 1) not to have any budget cutbacks in the sphere covered by the initiative; 2) to provide monetary support for families with multiple children; 3) to protect orphans and act against family and street violence against children; 4) to protect children’s and mothers’ health; 5) to protect psychological, moral and spiritual health of children; 6) to create inclusive environments for children with disabilities and otherwise protect them; 7) to provide better opportunities for children’s rest and recreation. In the framing of the goals it is interesting to see how the state promises to protect and support the family. As I show further, the ways the family is constructed and responsibility is ascribed warrant attention.

When describing the legislative act that introduced the initiative, it said that Putin “proclaimed a decade of childhood” (RG 2). Although the naming follows the same syntactic logic that was seen before in “the year of cinema” or “the year of France in Russia”, this seems quite different from projects with similar titles:

When there is, say, the Year of Literature or the Year of Cinema, it is clear that this applies to those who are engaged in literature or cinema. Yet when it comes to the Decade of Childhood, this applies to everyone. (RG 6)

The Concept of State Family Policy until the Year 2025 (2014), which serves as the basis for the other policy initiatives in the sphere, opens up with a paragraph that mentions the importance of creating “the atmosphere of priority of family values and moral values”. As the notion of values appears quite early in and permeates both policy and media material, I start the analysis by examining it.

**Traditional values**

An articulation that appears frequently in the material where the notions of family and childhood are assigned a role vis-à-vis the image of the nation is the (traditional) values discourse. I first discuss the articulation of the nation in a policy document dealing with children upbringing and then go on to examine the use of the family trope in relation to traditional values found in the media material.

Valentina Matvienko, Chairwoman of the upper house, when the bill was signed into law said

The ideology of the [decade of childhood] project is consonant with the traditional values of Russians and can become a consolidating idea for the citizens of the country (RG 4).

This quote is exemplary of two discourses that are mutually constructive, the “values” discourse and the “unity” discourse. I continue discussing the former in this section; the latter discourse is addressed later.
It is assumed that all Russians share some inherent “traditional” values that are determining, among other things, the ideas about what family is and should be. The family comes in touch with the nation via being profoundly shaped by the existing traditions, which, by the virtue of being “traditions” are assumed to have existed for a long time. The government, according to this logic, is attempting to use the existing values as a basis for constructing a policy that would reflect the need for family support.

Children upbringing

In addition to assuming responsibility in the financial sense, in a manner similar to that of the Soviet state that hegemonically established and upheld the gender regime that influenced the citizens’ lives, the Russian state has officially extended itself to care for the way children are brought up. In May 2015, the government adopted the *Strategy of Development of Upbringing [Vospitania]* in the Russian Federation Until 2025 (Strategy of Development of Upbringing 2015). Aiming to support upbringing in the family, in the educational system and by non-state actors, the state extends itself into the family realm. It does so by protecting children’s rights, forming a system of upbringing in which both the society and the state partake. The framing of the issues implies that there are overarching objectives in the field of child socialization that the government sets out in the text and aims to support.

A number of references to the “nation”, framed as civic Russian, are found in the policy text. The priorities of the policy include:

- fostering in children of a high level of spiritual and moral development, a sense of belonging to the historical and cultural community of the Russian people and the fate of Russia;
- fostering respect for the Russian language as the state language of the Russian Federation, which is the basis of the civil identity of Russians and the main factor of national self-determination.

With the aim of “updat[ing] the process of upbringing given the recent scientific achievements and national traditions (otechestvennye traditsii)” This features, in addition to “citizen education”, “patriotic education (vospitanie) and *formation of the Russian identity*” (emphasis mine). The latter implies:

- fostering a sense of patriotism, a sense of pride for the motherland, readiness to defend the interests of the fatherland, responsibility for the future of Russia on the basis of the development of programs for patriotic education of children, including military-patriotic education;

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25 *Vospitanie* entail[s] the concept of education as ‘nurturing’, i.e. upbringing and cultivation, essentially a form of positive socialization. It imply[es] moral upbringing, the development of character, and the inculcation of cultural traditions, mentalities, values and modes of behaviour. These could be associated with ideals of loyal state service, but also (often simultaneously) the culture and habitus of a particular estate/class and/or family. Thus, *vospitanie* was often explicitly linked to particular (broadly understood) ‘class’ values and ideologies. *Vospitanie* had traditionally been associated especially with family upbringing (as the key form of preschool education) and it was therefore the word used for the parents’ responsibility for education (See Byford (2012)).
cultivating respect for the national symbols.

The policy document also discusses the necessity of “spiritual and moral education of children on the basis of Russian traditional values”. The ambiguity of the last formulation is apparent given the developments in the field of identity formation, the use of history and (re)interpretations of the past carried out mainly by state institutions (Malinova 2012, 2013).

The emphasis on the significance of the Russian language warrants some attention. Shevel (2011: 180) claims that speaking Russian is an ethnic rather than a civic criterion because it determines belonging based on a cultural rather than political or territorial principle. If the ability to speak the Russian language is used as a test to determine somebody’s Russianness, as Shevel (Ibid.: 188) points out, although this criterion is much less in conflict with multiethnic federalism than others (ethnic Russians or Eastern Slavs), the belonging of subjects of difference “race” remains contested (“If someone speaks Russian but is Black, can this person be our compatriot?” (Ibid.))

Likely in line with the Strategy of Development of Upbringing (2015), children’s ombudsman Anna Kuznetsova reported about the creation of a course devoted to family, “Family Science”, to be taught in schools (KP 5). According to the director of the federal project “Strong Family” Artur Rean, because coping with the challenges of family life is learned by experience, and many people who create families at a young age lack the necessary skills, the main focus of the course should be teaching the appropriate “male and female behavior in particular situations”.

Constructing the self and the Other

The instance of the values discourse present here is part of a larger discursive formation. Growing in strength simultaneously with the consolidation of political power throughout the period of the third presidential term since 2012, the difference in “values” is used to entrench “Russianness” as opposed to the ideas of “the liberal West”. The official Russian discourse is attempting to establish continuity between “caring for family and children” that is “deeply rooted in country” both as “indispensable part of our culture, a national tradition”, “fundamental values” (RG 5) and a policy area that is given a high priority. In this construction, it is precisely because of the “traditional values” that family is given so much support by the state. The Russian state appears to be driven by values and respectful of the cultural legacy, as caring and thoughtful of what it deems most important, i.e. the family. The other (mainly European) states are constructed in opposition to what the Russian state is. Russia’s minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, said the following in his speech at International Christmas Readings:

Obviously, the revision of basic standards of morality, a permissive environment and tolerance reduced to an absurdity are doing irreparable damage to the moral health of people and depriving them of their cultural and civilisational roots. Thus, a number of EU countries are banning religious paraphernalia and depriving parents of the right to bring up their children in the spirit of Christian morality. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018, English original)

In the passage above, the existence of underlying “basic norms” is assumed as necessary condition for the functioning of a state and these “norms” are seen as something worthy of protection. What threatens them is the current revisionism (i.e. the Western liberalism). This feature of the values discourse seems to further reinforce and justify the need for the protective role of the state. Additionally, because “too much” tolerance leads to adverse consequences, it is permissible for the state and the citizens acting for the common good to be intolerant of “immoral behavior”. In this way, the “moral authority” of the state and the individuals is elevated and the necessity of “a guiding light” is underlined. This is realized both within the nation, where the government and individuals function as moral guards, and outside the nation, as Russia is constructed as occupying a moral high ground, in opposition to the “too liberal” West.

The value of remembering one’s “roots” is deemed an evident truth here, as it is something that will allow to uphold the structure of the family; “traditional values” and “family” will then mutually reinforce each other and family in its turn will serve as a basis for a strong state. The protection of traditional values, equated with the state support of the family and childhood, is what will consolidate the citizens and will be conducive to a stronger Russia. Consequently, if the state supports family, then it ultimately strengthens itself. Thus, according to this discourse the only way for Russia to be strong is to adhere to the traditional values.

An important point to be made here from a constructivist point of view is that “traditions”, “values” and the combination thereof, “traditional values”, do not exist independent of individuals. Even if they are “real” in a sense that they shape and affect people’s lives (which many would agree they are), one should remember that they emerge and are filled with meaning as a result of articulation, be it “invention” of a tradition or “imagination” of a nation (cf. Anderson (1983), Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983)).

In this discourse, the family has two main roles. Firstly, family emerges as a holder of the traditional values and morals and its task is to transmit them between generations by participating in educating children in line with the “traditions” and producing the “proper citizens”, as there are even legal documents that determine the role and task of family in such education as the state aims to promote the development of a culture of family upbringing of children on the basis of traditional family spiritual and moral values (The Strategy of Development of Upbringing 2015).
Secondly, if sharing the traditional values is a necessary condition for being a member of the national collective, then family also plays the role as a primary site of belonging to the national community.

“Moral health” that is referred to in the quotation above (…a permissive environment and tolerance reduced to an absurdity are doing irreparable damage to the moral health of people, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018, emphasis mine]) is a curious term. A search of all the web pages returned fewer than 200 results, so this combination has been established relatively recently in the Russian context. Why is the choice made to call the degree of adherence to a set of moral norms “health”? A likely reason is that the equivalence is assumed between physical health and “ideological” health. If one looks at it through a biopolitical lens, in the Foucauldian (Foucault 1979) understanding of biopolitics, the health of the population is considered something that the state can measure, categorize and regularize with the purpose of “curing the sick”. The nation is viewed as a body, which can be either “healthy” or “sick”. In a similar fashion, the state can regulate the “moral health” of people; the idea of fitting the norm, the average, is applied beyond the bodily understanding to matters that pertain to the realm of culture.

The “right to educate children in the spirit of Christian morality” may refer to a case of German family relocating from the “sexually permissive West” to Russia due to “spiritual deficiencies” in Germany. The heterosexual couple with many children was immediately dubbed “sexual refugees” by the media (e.g. Wesolowsky & Sazonov 2017).

Russia’s foreign minister Lavrov also pointed to the fact that European countries are on the way to self-destruction because of the values they choose to uphold:

I would like to recall that at one time the EU refused to include in its charter documents the idea that European civilisation has Christian roots. I believe those who are ashamed of their moral roots cannot respect those of other religions. Likewise, the latter have no respect of the former. This is creating a breeding ground for xenophobia and intolerance and opening the way to society’s self-destruction. It is important to vigorously oppose this pseudo-liberal policy that encourages destructive models of behavior. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018, English original)

As Massignon (2014: 23) points out, between the two modes of constructing the national identity (the ethnic and the civic), in one of the formulations, “the substantialist and culturalist ‘spirit-nation’ based on the remembrance of shared heritages”, and the “contractualist and universalist ‘contract-nation’”, the EU chose to stress the latter.27 Therefore, the decision not to include “Christian roots” was made because the European integration project was “carried out in opposition to a kind of nationalism that has its roots in a traditional image of the national community as something natural, confronted by alterity considered immutable and foreign” (Ibid.: 25). In the

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27 See also the section in Theoretical Framework where I outline the main points concerning the debate on ethnic vs. civic conceptions of nationhood.
Russian case, although the policy document, e.g. the *Strategy of Development of Upbringing* (2015) analyzed in the beginning of the section, stresses the civic character of the nation, religious (Christian, that is, ethnically Russian) values are mentioned in the present material. From Lavrov’s quote it follows that the failure of Europe to account for its heritage should be attributed to the fact that the states found new “pseudo-liberal” values that they now center their identities around.

Although the articulations of ethnicity (i.e. names of the specific ethnic groups that jointly make up “the RussianC multiethnic people”) are almost absent in the materials I have been analyzing, except the ethnic Russianness that is stressed via Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill’s voice, one can note the way in which the cautionary wording of “creating a breeding ground for intolerance” fits into way Russia is usually described, i.e. “multiethnic” and “multiconfessional”. Here, the “unstable” West plagued by the presence of ethnic conflicts is contrasted with Russia, where the alleged tolerance of the members of the nation toward each other contributes to the peaceful co-existence of various ethnic groups.

While the church’s influence can be seen as limited, it still appears in the official discourse. Its role as exemplified by the passage below can be seen as bridging the policy and the morality, providing support for the idea of the universal “traditional” values that would resonate with most of the population, which sees itself as members of the Russian Orthodox Church. “Legislation, […], the tax system, the development of education and healthcare… all this is designed to support families, especially the young [ones], to promote the upbringing of children in a spirit of love, peace and respect for tradition”, said the Patriarch (RG 20).

**From “family in crisis” to “demographic crisis”**

Even before the upper chamber’s speaker Matvienko suggested continuing the policy line that prioritizes children and family, a clear development could be noted in the ways the family has been framed, namely the “crisis” discourse. The word “crisis” is an empty signifier perceived to have a negative connotation. In the context of the analyzed material, it is possible to discern at least two intertwining discourses which employ the element of “crisis” that affect the framing of the family policy, the crisis of the family and the demographic crisis.

**Family in crisis**

First, the “crisis of the family” is manifest in “deterioration” of the traditional family structure, namely, a large number of single-parent families, children born out of marriage etc., for instance, as child ombudsman notices,

> despite all the talk about the moral crisis and new challenges that the traditional family is not ready for, young people dream of a family with a husband, wife and at least two children (RG 15)
This might be seen as an example of “regularly conduct targeted propaganda in the media in support of traditional values of family and marriage, morals and morality” (Concept of State Family Policy 2014).

The policy document (Ibid.) points out that “support and comprehensive strengthening of the prestige of the family way of life” is needed. Although the language of the concept is overall optimistic, as it shows improvement in many of the demographic indicators, this framing implies that the status of family is weakened and requires support.

The family is shown to be in a precarious position as

at the present stage, the family in its lifespan can face problems related to the development of health care system, employment, education, culture, the housing market and the functioning of state structures. (Ibid.)

With this positioning of the family, the state then aims to contribute to

affirmation of traditional family values and family lifestyle, revival and preservation of spiritual and moral traditions in family relations and family education. (Ibid.)

Notably, the family traditions need to be revived; this again assumes their existence as a coherent whole previous to some events which are not named in the concept but whose existence is assumed and regarded as adverse.

The semantic content of the “traditional family values” is broadly defined by the concept as

the values of marriage, understood as a union of a man and a woman, based on state registration in civil registration bodies, concluded for the purpose of creating a family, the birth and (or) mutual raising (Rus. vospitaniya) of children, based on care and respect for each other, for children and parents, characterized by voluntariness, stability and common life, associated with the mutual desire of the spouses and all members of the family to preserve it.

This construction of family is contradictory at least in that the family is seen as a natural and traditional yet needs to be bureaucratically approved. In this articulation the strong presence of the state is seen to produce ambiguous effects; on the one hand, as negatively affecting the independent family institution, the concept attempts to boost family’s “economic independence and [create] conditions for the independent fulfillment of its social function”; on the other hand, the government has also developed and is currently implementing programs to regulate, among other areas, upbringing and education, usually seen as exemplars of family functions, as shown above in the Values discourse.

Further, the concept states that “a large, multi-generational family has always been the main type of family [makeup] in the traditional Russian family culture”. The use of the time marker “always” in relation to the articulated family ideal in connection with “traditional Russian family” points to the perpetuity of the described “tradition” as well as to that of the Russian nation. It is unclear,
however, what period of time this historically refers to. The civic Russian nation is assumed to have existed for some time now, given the reference to the nation’s tradition. The adjective Russian or any other ethnic markers are not used in the text of the document.

**Demographic crisis**

Second, there is an almost naturalized discourse of the “demographic crisis”. Despite the fact that shifts in the structure and number of population started occurring in early 20th century, the main emphasis in policy discourse is put on the period that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the policy discourse, the equivalence is established between the era of 1990s, a decade that has acquired negative associations because of the economic and political instability that followed, and the start of the population decline. “Democratic governments [are] accused of demographic deterioration. We are dying out as a result of socio-economic changes, which means that the reform course has been dangerous and harmful” (Zakharov 2004). As Rivkin-Fish (2010: 710) aptly summarizes it, in the late 1990s the discourse of population crisis acquired the character of an urgent, often hysterical call for government interventions to halt the population decline. A moral panic framed in the language of catastrophe emerged, as terms such as ‘dying out’ (vymiranie, ubyl’), depopulation (depopulatsiya), and degeneration (degredatsiya) pervaded the media.28

Demographic decline is often brought up to justify the family support programs, such as the following,

> in 2025 Russia will experience a demographic “dip”, experts predict. Only the new national strategy of action in the interests of children can reduce risks. (RG 9)

> The state takes systematic and large-scale measures to improve the demographic situation in the country (RG 12)

> “child” laws are aimed at improving the demographic situation. (RG 17)

The two discourses that employ the notion of crisis (“the demographic crisis” and “the crisis of family”, intertwine and amplify one another. “The crisis of the family” discourse gives ground to “demographic crisis/depopulation” discourse, as well as to another articulation that continues to place family within a larger assembly of “threats”, namely “the unprotected childhood”. The

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28 Exemplary of this discourse is the article “The geopolitical aspects of depopulation in Russia” (Zakharova & Rybakovskiy 1997). One approach to depopulation is to view it as a neutral phenomenon, a natural consequence of natural demographic evolution, without seeing the gravity of “irreversible changes in the number of children and the structure of the family” (Ibid.: 48) and taking into account the peculiarities of individual nation-states, and in particular “the features of the demographic development of Russia, and especially its status, geopolitical position and interests in the world” (Ibid.: 49). The proponents of the second position, with which the authors side, view depopulation as “a long-term crisis fraught with a threat to these geopolitical interests” (Ibid.: 48). Since Russia’s “most important strategic task stemming from its geopolitical position is the maintenance and consolidation of the status of a great power inherited from the USSR” (Ibid.: 49), it must be guided by the dynamics of the population in countries with similar “great power” status (likely, the USA, China and possibly others), where population growth is projected in the coming decades.
“protection” discourse immediately follows the portrayal of family as affected by two crises often articulated in relation to children, especially given the overall theme to which the policy is devoted.

**Protection and “unprotected childhood”**

In this section, I explore the ways in which the discourse of crises is followed by the idea of the childhood and family as unprotected in the discursive construction of the relations between the state and the family. I show below how the “ideology of protection” is used to account for the actions of the state.\(^\text{29}\)

On May 29, 2017, when the bill was signed into law, Deputy PM said that “the decade of childhood is a big responsibility for the state” (RG 3), and that it requires the state

to mobilize its resources to properly provide for the health, education and successful development of every child living in our country (Ibid).

Further, Matvienko, the original author of the initiative, said that the decree “reflects the fact that the state cares for children” (RG 4) and that “the issues of childhood protection are confirmed by the president to be of outmost importance and priority” (Ibid., emphasis mine).

The interpretation of the idea of “protection” that appears quite often in the articles that discuss the policy initiative in question can be twofold. Firstly, it has the naturalized connotation, as in “social protection” discourse,\(^\text{30}\) which is the Russian term for “social policy” or “state welfare”. Equivalence is created in this discourse between the state’s protection of “socially vulnerable/unprotected strata of society” (Rus. sotsialno uyazvimiye/nezaschischenniye sloi nasedeniya), a term commonly found in the official discourse to refer to various groups of individuals that are allocated monetary government support. It follows that the state might need to address other types of risks and protect its citizens from them. This may in part explain why, especially since the *Law on Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development* (commonly referred to as *Law on Protecting Children*) (Kremlin 2011) was passed, “protection” has become part of the “harm to children” or “unprotected childhood” discourse.

In 2012 this law was amended to include a system of ratings and mandatory content labeling for all information that is distributed publically, similar to that of MPAA film rating system. A register of websites containing information harmful to children and “whose dissemination is prohibited in the Russian Federation” (Kremlin 2012) was established.

\(^\text{29}\) cf. Cusak (2000: 545): “The nation inserts itself into every aspect of social and family life, covering this intrusion with the ideology of caring and protection. Family and kinship relations are codified and appropriated by the state, while the state, representing itself as a large family, effects a ‘naturalisation of belonging’ (Balibar 1991: 96) among its members.

\(^\text{30}\) As defined by United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, it can be understood as “concerned with preventing, managing, and overcoming situations that adversely affect people’s well being” (UNRISD 2010).
In 2013, it was amended for the second time and included the ban of public propaganda of “non-traditional sexual relations”, i.e. homosexuality. Edenborg (2016) aptly shows how homosexuality was portrayed in state-leaning media during that period to be similar to pedophilia. With the continued juxtaposition of the two sexual behaviors, affect, in Ahmed’s (2004) understanding, was created that then went on to circulate among citizens. 2013 thus saw amendments with the Aim of Protecting Children from Information that Promotes Negation of Traditional Family Values (Kremlin 2013).31

The “unprotected childhood” is exemplified by Matvienko who claims that Russian children proved to be a social stratum that fully experienced the hardships of perestroika32 and the next decade. Family support, access to quality education, upbringing, healthcare, and protection of children’s rights… serious problems were found in all of these areas. They quickly accumulated and were poorly addressed. (RG 5)

The discourse is likely rooted in Article 7 of the Constitution (CRF 1993 [2001], English original), which says that Russia’s policy as a welfare state “is aimed at creating conditions for a worthy life and a free development of man” and ensures, among other things, “state support to the family, maternity, paternity and childhood, to disabled persons and the elderly”. Here, the “welfare state” is equalized with a “state that supports ‘motherhood and childhood’” because these institutions are deemed most vulnerable, while there are other problems, such as poverty, low wages and pensions, lack of elderly care etc. that resulted from the transition to market economy.

As discussed in the previous section, the family is constructed to be in crisis in a way that naturalizes the protective role of the state. By vowing to protect the family, the state assumes the responsibility. For instance, the attention is drawn to the fact that the state has “not been doing enough to secure a happy (blagopoluchnoe) childhood” (RG 10) in a situation where the family is in crisis and there are number of threats to it. The “happy childhood” (Russ. blagopoluchnoe or schastlivoe) can be seen as discourse constructed in opposition to the “unprotected childhood” discourse.

The state discursively assumes the protecting role by inserting itself into the family with a view to protecting children from harm that is posed to the nation as a whole yet affects “vulnerable” institutions, such as family and childhood. In this process children are simultaneously constructed to be part of the nation.

31 These legal initiatives are mentioned and discussed on The International Day for Protection of Children observed Russia as Children’s Day on 1 June when journalists question “from what” or “from whom” children are to be protected. Out of 55 results that appear on rg.ru with the key phrase “protection of children from”, only 4 results are about family violence, and the rest mention “toxic information” or “unwanted content” and its equivalents.
32 Russian for “restructuring”, referring to the changes instigated in the political and economic system of the Soviet state under Gorbachev’s rule during 1980s until 1991.
Within this discourse one can note an instance of (re)negotiation of the boundaries between the private and the public, i.e. the role of the state in relation to the family. As I mentioned earlier, the main threats to well-being of children are “harmful information” (stated explicitly) and lack of social infrastructure (implied in the policy material). One other point is mentioned briefly, namely, abuse:

Of serious concern of the state and society is the scale of family and street violence against children. No radical change has been achieved here. Nevertheless, the trend is towards a decline: since 2012, the number of crimes against minors has decreased by 18 percent. (RG 5)

Despite historically (given the Soviet experience) having considerable influence over and the power to control family relations, the state institutions are facing resistance in taking care, in a physical sense, over children whose parents may be deemed not fit to carry out their parental functions. What came to be called yuvenal’naya yustitsia (lit. “juvenile justice”, mainly used to mean “child protection laws”)\(^3\) is meeting opposition on behalf of radical-right traditionalist parent-formed groups who co-opted many of the mainstream policy discourses (“values”, “crisis of the family”) and allege that these “protection laws” are a Western conspiracy against the Russian “traditional family”.\(^4\) Families who subject their children to or fail to protect them from violence come to be seen as “troubled” or “dysfunctional” (neblagopoluchniye), being “in need of special care of the state” (Concept of State Family Policy 2014) as children face “neglect and homelessness”.

The ways in which responsibility is assigned and distributed between the citizens and the state bodies is discussed in the next section.

**Responsibility**

In this section I explore the ways in which the notion of responsibility is articulated both in relation to family and the nation at large. Firstly, as shown in the protection discourse, the responsibility is assumed by the state. Second, I argue that it is possible to see responsibility being assigned to some members of the nation in their capacity as individuals.\(^5\) I also explore which groups of the population are particularly concerned by this discursive construction.

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\(^3\) “Alleged juvenile threats are constituted by law bills, but they can also be understood as sex education, liberal protests against obligatory religious education in schools, feminism, gay parades, and so forth” (Højdestrand 2015).

\(^4\) Højdestrand (2015) further illuminates that challenging the Russian authorities directly is often avoided due to “simultaneous distrust in “Western” models of governance as well as in the Russian state bureaucracy. (Mis)representations of Western systems of child protection are used to draw up apocalyptic scenarios of a domestic future”.

\(^5\) This can be a conceptualized as responsibilization, in one of the definitions as “the process whereby subjects are rendered individually responsible for a task which previously would have been the duty of another – usually a state agency – or would not have been recognized as a responsibility at all” (Wakefield & Fleming 2008).
A responsibility for the state

I would like to focus on the framing of the decade in relation to responsibility. First, one can see an all-or-nothing framing of the “decade” initiative. Matvienko asks,

Is there a demand by the country for this or that initiative? Is it feasible […]? After all, nothing weakens the confidence in the authorities as much, as the failure to fulfill the goals (RG 8).

Second, she points out that

[the participation of the civil society] will help to formulate the program of action in a way that it fully meets the needs of our society (RG 8).

Here, the “society” or “country”, not “families” or “women” demand a certain initiative, so the decade project is framed using a gender-neutral reference to “society” rather than “women” that reflects a pronatalist logic of erasure of women’s double burden and guides the discursive construction of the state’s responsibility toward society.

In addition to taking on a role as a protector of family, childhood and motherhood, the state also emerges as a breadwinner and a provider for the families, a policy which closely resembles the etacritic Soviet gender regime where fathers’ role was insignificant. Just as in the Soviet gender regime, although the father is assigned the symbolic role of the family’s financial provider (following from the fact that women, due to their biological predestination were “natural” caregivers), workers’ low salaries and women’s active participation in the labor force meant that this role could not be fully realized (see also Ashwin (2000: 1–29). Ultimately, the Soviet state was the paternalistic provider, with women and men both dependent on it for their survival. The family policy build around these notions came under yet stronger criticism when the Soviet state encouraged birth of the third child in a family (Zhurzhenko 2008: 119).

The problem of non-payers of alimony (who are mostly men) stemming from the gendered configuration of the family, is another one that received policy attention. In addition to the state assuming the responsibility, there are instances in the discourse where responsibility is also assigned to citizens, as their “the civil duty”.

The five-year National Strategy in the Interests of Children for the years 2012-2017 (National Strategy 2012) was aimed at “addressing the most acute problems in the [policy] field of childhood and family” (RG 8). Most of the times “family” is mentioned in the articles that bring up responsibility or the role of the government, it is mentioned in combination with “childhood”. This
can be understood in two ways. First, that the role assigned to the family as a recipient of governmental help discursively precludes people who form a family from acting as independent actors. I read it as if a family is simply told to follow a certain path paved by the government. The state, by protecting “motherhood and childhood”, further entrenches and reaffirms the gender order, by caring for women and excluding men. At the same time, as Rivkin-Fish (2010: 710) succinctly notes, in post-Soviet Russia women and women’s issues are constructed “through a narrow lens focused on reproduction, motherhood, sexuality, and beauty”. The interests of women are primarily seen as the interests of her family and her children. Second, in connection with this, the family is understood and articulated solely in connection with children; this follows from the “child-centered” focus of the policy as well as from the various discursive articulations that are present in the analyzed material. It is worth pointing out that other family arrangements, such as families with no children, single parent families, let alone same-sex/queer marriages, are mentioned neither in the program document, nor in any of the articles. In relation to the mainstream discourse that articulates family as consisting of two parents and multiple children, all of these family structures belong to field of discursivity, and thus become challengers to this particular understanding of the family. Yet as the “traditional” family makeup has become naturalized, it cannot be easily challenged.

Assigning responsibility to members of the nation

The policy implies that a particular kind of family is made responsible for reproduction, the kind of family that receives most policy attention; it is likely the family that is vulnerable. It can be argued that low income families would benefit most from additional financial recourses. Although similar argumentation that criticizes the size of the allowances can be considered an “instrumentalist critique” (Rivkin-Fish 2010: 717) that leaves the need for state support and the state’s right to engineer reproductive behavior unquestioned and does not address the gender dimension, it can be useful in highlighting the meaning of class in relation to the other categories of power. “An extra $100 a month [handed as a benefit] is helpful to people with low incomes and rural or Muslim families, who have more children anyway, but is unlikely to persuade middle-class families to produce more babies,” says demographer Vishnevsky (Economist 2008). Gurko (2008: 11), implicitly highlights the gendered effects of this policy by adding that the support measures provide incentives mainly for the poor, while in the middle-class environment, women (emphasis mine) consider a number of other factors, such as the availability and quality of child facilities, career opportunities, maintaining their living standard when planning childbirth. The way women enter the picture only when middle-class citizens are discussed may be telling of the ways gender operates in relation to different classes. It is also possible, to note in line with Calhoun (2007: 23-24) that need for membership in various solidaristic groups is most acutely felt by those “lacking wealth, elite
connections, and ease of movement”. Consequently, the families that receive most support might feel most inclined to produce children; thus, a certain type of family is made responsible.

Responsibility was also articulated explicitly in connection with the decade project and linked to the “values” discourse discussed above. The authorities of the Yamalo-Nenets autonomous okrug (one of Russia’s administrative subdivisions) in West Siberia set out to “devote 2018 to family values” (KP 4). According to the head of the region, the idea is to

expand on the notion of family values and pronounce 2018 the Year of Social Responsibility [because] a harmonious future is impossible without social responsibility, without respect for traditional and family values, for fellowmen, for each other, for neighbors, for the native land (Ibid.)

This is an example of how the state by proving support for the family assigns responsibility to others. People ought to have “respect for family values”, where a particular naturalized articulation of “family” issued, which itself serves to define “values”, is placed into a row with other subjects, including “the native land”, which can be seen as a reference to the “nation”. The scale of the subjects, as well as the level on which they are “imagined” varies multidirectionally, which naturalizes the imagined national community in articulations such as this. The reason explaining the importance of being “socially responsible” is “the harmonious future”, which can also be interpreted as part of the nation-building process. The references to “the future” are discussed in detail further.

While the state declares to have much responsibility in relation to the family, people also take on responsibility, although this is empirically observed primarily outside of the official/policy discourse yet may be seen as proof of the existing devolution of responsibility. The policy discourse might co-opt the idea:

“We [the regional authorities] did not plan any father movements, our fathers reached out to us. Mothers’ organizations are mainly created in order to receive assistance, and fathers [organize themselves] to provide it. Fathers addressed us through their representatives: let’s declare Father’s Day at the federal level, let’s create a Council of Fathers. What should be the father of the future be like?
(KP 5)

As seen in the quote, the state bodies might be likely to control the content and organization of the “daddy schools” and are ready to invest both ideological and power resources.

Unity

Another prominent articulation can be seen connected to the ideas of “unity” or “consolidation”. In addition to what is articulated in connection with the “unprotected childhood” and “values”

36 See Chernova (2012b), Shpakovskaya & Chernova (2016) discussing parenthood in Russia as personal responsibility and mutual cooperation, and Åberg (2015) theorizing about “daddy schools” as an instance of biopolitical governmentality.
discourses, citizens are implicitly reminded that Russia is an extremely large country and that in the light of the challenges and risks some universal values are required to serve as the “glue” that would hold the nation together.

The interplay and mutual amplification of the discourses discussed above can explain the necessity of having a (unifying) “national idea”. Willerton (2017) stresses the perceived necessity of having “a national idea”, yet demonstrates that Putin’s idea of “the strong state” is in fact a vague and hollow formulation that can be seen as an iteration of the Russian “Great Power Myth” (Persson & Petersson 2014). As they contend, “in both political myths, about the overcoming of smuta [the time of trouble] and the return of the great power, the strong leader and the formidable inherent power of the people (once it has become united) emerge as key ingredients” (Ibid.: 196).

In the situation where some definition of the national identity, be it in the form of a national idea or some other, is required for the legitimization of political power, family can be seen as an empty signifier, that is filled with meaning and assigned functions to become a policy tool. If family is placed at the beginning of the chain of equivalence “decline in traditional values” – “crisis of the family” – “demographic crisis” – “decline of the Russian nation”, with assumed “cause-effect” relations between the elements, family can be imagined a perfect site for amassing and unleashing the “inherent power of the people”. In the article entitled “How an ordinary family can preserve the integrity of a country” (RG 13), the following is stated:

In a world where borders are getting blurred, it is becoming increasingly difficult to preserve one’s cultural and historical identity. The family can save the situation. This is the topic of the upcoming forum ‘Family in Multinational Russia’ and the festival of family traditions ‘Faith. Hope. Love’ (RG 13, emphasis mine).

This is another example of the way identity is constructed. It is viewed to be something fixed and unchangeable, something that allows one to differentiate between “us” and “them”. Although the multinational character of the nation is highlighted, the name of the festival clearly references the Christian tradition; “losing one’s identity” was also articulated in connection with stressing the importance of the Russian component as the foundation of the multicultural national project.37

The connection is established between the desire of each parent to make their children happy and the prosperity of the whole country. In this vein, as pointed out on a rather abstract level, the main objective of the decade is that “children will grow up more educated, happy and free” (RG 6, emphasis mine).

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37 One of Zakharov’s (2015) findings is that in a conflict situation, where the interests of Russians and migrants were in conflict, several government bodies preferred to pursue a racializing discourse that pandered to the ethnic Russian population (see more in Previous research) by hinting at its significant role as “the backbone in the development of the multi-ethnic culture” (Medvedev 2011).
“If children grow up in an atmosphere of love, understanding, happiness, they will build their families according to the same principles. And this is precisely preserving the integrity of the country” (Ibid., emphasis mine).

In the last decade, the provision of a happy (blagopoluchnogo) and protected childhood has become one of Russia’s main national priorities. (National Strategy 2012)

Two points are worth mentioning here. First, this is a continuation of the responsibility discourse; the “families” are to bear responsibility for ensuring children have a happy childhood. Further, here, by linking universally understood emotions and feelings to being part of a family, while the family is seen as playing a pivotal role in the national project, the discourse cements the equivalence between “being happy” and “being Russian”.

Parallel to this is the ongoing definition of “being Russian”. Here “Russian” is defined in the context of Russia’s multiethnic makeup, so the concept of the civic Russian nation is furthered. Usually, such as in this case, when the reference is made to “the country”, the conflict-free solution of defining the nation as everyone who lives on the territory of the country is preferred. This comes in conflict with discursive (and policy) practice of featuring the Russian Orthodox Church, which traditionally includes the Russian in its name and whose articulations are aimed primarily at those who identify as Orthodox Christians (i.e. ethnic Russians).

Whatever the national idea might be, according to a high-ranking ruling party member, “a people without a national idea will not create anything and, most likely, will be conquered” (Tretyakova 2018). To be weak and “be conquered” is the opposite of the direction of Russia becoming a great power; thus, even if the national idea is not articulated as a statement, it can be formulated by implication and by pointing to what the national idea is not, rather than to what it is or could be.

**People as power, competitiveness and looking to the future**

In this section I outline the three intertwined articulations that involve the figure of the child and produce children as both a solution to the problem and hope for the future.

The “demographic crisis” outlined at the beginning of the analysis usually serves as a frame to situate “people as power” discourse. In it, as Yuval-Davis (1997: 29) puts it, “the future of ‘the nation’ is seen to depend on continuous growth”. Maintaining the “welfare”, or, in the Russian context, the “competitiveness” of the nation is cited as the reason for creating families and having (more) children.

In the article entitled “Today’s children are tomorrow’s nation”, Matvienko (re)produces precisely the “people as power” discourse:
Supporting the family and childhood is not an expense the return of which is unknown. This is an investment in human capital, the quality of which, as it is known, determines the competitiveness of the country, and therefore its position and role in the world (RG 5).

In the modern world, the viability of any country, its prosperity, authority and influence in the international arena are determined primarily by the quality of human capital. It is no exaggeration to say that a competitive country is a country where children are intellectually developed, healthy, gifted, inquisitive, and free from excessive guardianship by adults (RG 10).

By producing more children, and ensuring their “happy” upbringing, a family, on the one hand, addresses the negative consequences of the demographic crisis and contributes to maintaining the viability of the nation. On the other hand, preventing the population decline helps to build a strong state that is able to wield its influence in comparison to and in relations with other countries. The second component should be viewed with the construction of Russia in opposition to Europe and the West, as discussed in the values discourse.

Children are viewed as the human capital par excellence and as the solution to both the “demographic crisis” in and the lack of contemporary Russia’s competitiveness in the world. No other ways of approaching the issue are given serious consideration in the “demographic crisis” discourse, which appears to be linked to the “people as power” and the “competitiveness” discourses. In line with blaming

“[d]emographers who prioritized reducing male mortality instead of promoting childbearing, on the basis that low fertility represented a trend common throughout the developed world and could not be effectively reversed” and labeling them “anti-patriots” (Rivkin-Fish 2010: 710)

that occurred in the late 1990s, the current policy ignores the issues of low life expectancy and the possible solutions that migration could afford by focusing solely on children.

In this discourse, the “viability” of the nation is considered in almost biological terms of population growth, depending on reproduction carried out by women. It is in line with the official discourse that the one-sided “children” solution emerges. The specificity of the child figure justified the need to control the women’s bodies who are viewed as biological reproducers of the nation.

The significance of children for the nation’s survival may be seen in the articulations produced by the Russian Orthodox Church. The patriarch said the church was ready to take on the responsibility for bringing up children whose mothers decided to keep the baby but are “unable to raise the child”, which would, however, “allow the mother to keep the custody over the child” (Gorodova 2018). The patriarch also spoke about the efforts of the church to minimize the number of abortions, which acted together with the civil society to “reduce the scale of this truly nationwide disaster” (RG 19).

In many of the instances of these discourses, children and family support is also explicitly constructed as an investment in the future. It is important to point out that despite its character, be it
civic or ethnic, both national projects root themselves in the past and look out to the future (McClintock 1993). In the Russian case, as men are largely absent from performing roles in the family, the traditional women/men – past/future dichotomy appears not as pronounced in the family policy discourse; yet conceptualizing the nation as female, and “its” children as progressive and future oriented does in part clarify the reasoning behind this articulation.

As exemplified in the media discourse surrounding the ten-year plan (Mintrud 2017) and the National Strategy of Action in the Interests of Children for the years 2012—2017 that preceded it,

The scale and severity of existing problems in the sphere of childhood, the emerging new challenges, the interests of the country’s future and its security, urgently require the government bodies of the Russian Federation, local governments, civil society to take urgent measures to improve the situation of children and protect them. (National Strategy 2012)

This can be also seen in line with the idea of Russia’s “Great Power Myth” (Persson & Petersson 2014), which is about the overcoming of hardships and striving to be great despite the difficulties that the country and its citizens face in the (current) time of instability. Clearly, the logic of this myth presupposes the existence of a large enough number of people that could be used as a resource for revitalizing the country; the task of the women is to produce these individuals and then family is to reproduce culture by properly educating these individuals. The other important characteristic of the policy, namely its child-centeredness, also follows the discursive logic of the power myth. According to it, it is necessary for families to have and raise children so that their lives contribute to the future of the Russian nation.

**Summary: producing “the family” and Russianness**

While there is no definitive answer regarding the naming or the makeup of the national collective, the family is seen as the institution that will make a significant contribution to addressing the issue. It emerges as an institution that safeguards the “tradition”, reproduces and socializes the future members of the nation and thus serves as a link between the individual and the nation.

Both the family and the nation are at the intersection of different normative constructions of difference in gender, ethnicity/‘race’, class and sexuality. The differences are articulated in a rather vague and incoherent manner. Homogenization of the family along the multiple axes of inequality and across the categories that denote groups is simultaneous with the homogenization of the nation. The appeals, in addition to referencing “tradition”, to the “true masculinity/femininity” seem to suggest that both notions are constructed in “natural” terms.

In relation to gender, the discursive strategies are twofold. A number of “gender neutral” articulations appears together with the gendered ideas about the division of gender roles. Gender-neutral language used to talk about the interests of “families” conceals the ways families are
constructed by subjects who are differently gendered, have competing interests and are affected by uneven and power-laden relations. The gender-neutral language, while appearing universal and inclusive, obscures its own deep involvement in neotraditionalist and pronatalist family policy.

Gendered constructions provide the basis for formulating policy in a number of discourses. The gendered division of labor, biologization of difference between men and women, relying on the binary understanding, underpins the multiple manifestations of policy. The Russian neotraditionalist discourse stresses the importance of women as biological reproducers of the nation while not explicitly focusing on women’s role in the reproduction of culture.

In relation to sexuality, it is important to point out that the ideal family type constructed in the policy is the result of the officially registered marriage, which is only possible for heterosexual couples based on the gendered hierarchy, with several kids, promoting traditional values. The Other constructed in opposition to Russia is the liberal West, where “the true values” were lost, which not in the least pertains to its sexual permissiveness.

‘Race’ and non-Russian ethnicity are not articulated explicitly in relation to family policy. Immigration as a solution to the population crisis is excluded from the discourse because it does not fit into the chain of equivalence that equates “losing traditions” – “crisis of the family” – “demographic decline” – “lack of national coherence” / “loss of state’s competitiveness”.

Lastly, the notion of “class” is not explicitly stated in the policy documents and the analyzed material yet matters significantly. As most policy attention is directed toward the families of the lower class, these families also feel most pressure to create families and reproduce. Holding different class positions likely influences the uneven distribution of significance with which membership in the national collective is seen, with citizens belonging to a lower class viewing it as much more of an asset.

As the analysis has shown, the family trope, informed by multiple intersecting categories, has been increasingly appealed to and deployed to ground policy in fields not only limited to family (or demographic) policy, but also concerning freedom of speech, political participation, and overall development and prospects of the nation.
Conclusions
In this section I would like to highlight the main conclusions regarding the questions posed in the introduction.

In the analyzed policy and media materials, the kind of nationhood articulated is the civic Russian (Russian as rossiyskaya) nation. “The nation” is equated with everyone who lives on the territory of Russia, which is in line with the constitutional formula of “a multinational Russian people”. Yet references to the ethnic Russianness can still be seen in designating the language as the backbone of the civic Russian identity as well as the heightened importance assigned to the ethnic Russian “core” in the statements by the Russian Orthodox Church, an institution which is clearly connected to ethnic Russianness.

Scrutinizing the significance of the family trope for the national project, I have shown how a number of articulations in various ways employ the element of the family. These are, namely, “loss of (traditional) values” – “crisis of the family” – “demographic decline” articulated together and forming a causal chain of equivalence that result in either “lack of national coherence” / “loss of state’s competitiveness” or “unprotected childhood”. The citizens are made responsible for producing children, the “human capital”, and raising them to be “happy” and with the “proper values”, which will ultimately make Russia unified domestically and competitive globally in the future. It is precisely the use of family in these articulations, as it is a community present in lives of (almost) every member of the nation, that makes nationalism effective in people’s lives.

A common discursive strategy pertaining to constructing the family ideal and Russianness can be identified. It consists in pointing to the “traditional” nature of a certain mode of family composition and family relations that is made national when it is described as “Russian”. Judging by the arrangement of the moments in the discourse, because some of inherently Russian values were lost, altered or continue to be under threat from the “morally permissive West”, the crisis of the family occurred. The family is no longer traditional, patriarchal and hierarchical. This leads to a population decline, since children are not so valued anymore. The rapidly shrinking population contributes to Russia’s losing positions internationally and to deconsolidation of the nation that has lost its moral reference points. Due to this implicit importance of the family for the national project, on many occasions the institutions of the state vow to protect it, simultaneously constructing childhood to be in danger and explicitly assume responsibility and implicitly assign it to the members of the nation. As a result of a number of articulations, the structured totality, the “traditional values” discourse emerges, in which family in crisis becomes a metaphor for Russia in crisis, or Russia experiencing “an identity crisis”, looking for a “national idea”. The Other, whose role is mostly assigned to Europe or the West is constructed more clearly in relation to the normative sexuality than to “race” or “ethnicity”. As public displays of homosexuality are equated
with the “negation of traditional family values”, homosexuality, as well as certain heterosexual practices are rendered “non-traditional”, i.e. in opposition to the heteronormative Russian family and the Russian nation.

No clear answers as to what “Russianness” is are given in the policy, even though most explicit references are made to its civic character. There is, however, a striking mismatch between the alleged traditional and primordial nature of both the nation and the family and the desire, as expressed in the material, to construct the nation in civic terms. “Russianness” is articulated in relation to “traditionality” in an eclectic and conflicting way. Similarly, the way of articulating and constructing a “civic” nation (rossiyskaya naciya, rossiyskiy narod), where both the “tradition” and “civic Russianness” are defined as antitheses to the homogenized Western Other with no clear specific reference points, forces Russia and its people to be stuck with a “history” that has not been worked through and precludes the new, inclusive Russian identity from emerging.

As outlined above, this study has mainly focused on the type of the nationhood that is articulated in policy documents and media. Yet an emerging question that I have not explicitly explored is that of the relation between Russians and the state, which constructs itself as a welfare provider (e.g. in the “responsibility” discourse). As the child benefits are increasing and the pension reform is looming (see, for instance, Oliphant 2018), with the government aiming to drastically raise the retirement age, one cannot help but wonder what consequences this will have for the welfare regime, the notion of “Russianness”, the Russian people and the family as well as for the country which will continue constructing its national identity and finding its place on the global arena.
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**Additional media material**


Appendix: Analyzed media material
From Rossiyskaya Gazeta (RG) all accessed on 21 February 2018:


From Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP) all accessed on 21 February 2018:


