Let’s have more Russian babies. How anti-immigrant sentiment shapes family leave policy in Russia

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ABSTRACT

This paper builds on scholarship of welfare chauvinism in Europe to present evidence of the relationship between xenophobia and family leave policies in contemporary Russia. I argue that popular anti-immigrant moods pressure government into providing more generous family benefits to Russian families while proposing restrictions to migrants. Findings are based on elite interviews, as well as content analysis of mass media, policy documents, public speeches, and party manifestos. I show that xenophobia is widespread in Russia among the public and policymakers alike, and find that xenophobia is embraced by policymakers to guide decisions regarding the allocation of social benefits.

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1. Introduction

What determines the scope of family policies in a post-communist country? Existing research on Central and Eastern Europe focuses on the economic conditions, party competition, concerns for gender equality, and institutional determinants of family policies (Blum, 2016; Inglot et al., 2012; Saxonberg, 2014; Saxonberg and Szelewa, 2007; Sobotka, 2002). This paper examines family policies from the viewpoint of allocation of benefits to different segments of society, specifically native populations versus immigrants. Public dissatisfaction with growing levels of immigration rocked many European societies in the recent past. The rising prominence of nationalism and xenophobia throughout Europe translated into increased electoral success for radical-right populist parties campaigning on anti-immigration messages. Nationalists and populists in government and mass media often feed the fire by promoting nativist ideas of expanding benefits that primarily support local populations. Building on the volume of scholarship that studies both family policies and the alarming trend of the rise of xenophobia throughout Central and Eastern Europe, I examine whether swelling immigration influences family policies. I propose that the governments can consider expanding family benefits to appease native families who feel threatened by the growing foreign-born population. This proposition is not to argue that immigration is the only consideration but an important component of the package of factors considered by governments.

A post-communist country, Russia exemplifies and amplifies demographic and socio-economic problems common to all CEE countries, such as low fertility rates and declining population despite generous family policies. Following the CEE-common post-transition trend, fertility rates in Russia dropped sharply. Although they are slowly recovering, to this day they remain below population replacement of 2.1 children per family (World Bank, 2019). Meanwhile, the general scope of family policies continued through the initial period of transition and expanded since the mid-2000s. The ongoing
commitment to the continuation and expansions of family policies comes in contrast to the reductions and reforms in other social welfare sectors such as pensions, housing, healthcare, and education (Chandler, 2004; Cook, 2007; Cook et al., 2019; OECD, 2001).

Against the backdrop of a declining population, during the economic boom of the 2000s, Russia became a reluctant host to an army of labor migrants coming largely from the former Soviet Republics. Currently, Russia absorbs the largest foreign-born population in Europe, 11 million, comprising about ten percent of the labor force (UN, 2013). The high visibility, rapid influx of immigrants, combined with corruption, weak rule of law, and less-than-successful migration policies, has exacerbated the tensions between the shrinking local population and the growing mass of immigrants. Anti-immigrant sentiment has been on the rise in the past decade and is now a part of the daily political and media discourse.

On the policy level, the problems of immigration are connected to low birth rate in debates about maintaining population levels for sustained economic and military capabilities and the future ethnic composition of Russia. Immigrants are feared to dilute the national identity and replace the shrinking native population. In this context, the government announced that the population decline is a matter of national security and introduced a series of comprehensive policies aimed at supporting native families with children. This paper argues that anti-immigrant fears in Russia motivate government support of generous family policies. The following sections 2 and 3 set the theoretical argument within the literature on welfare chauvinism and describe data collection and methodology. Section 4 describes Russian population and immigration patterns as well as the rising popular xenophobia while section 5 connects anti-immigrant sentiment to welfare chauvinist policy proposals and attitudes. Sections 6 and 7 discuss the underlying social and political mechanisms that drive welfare chauvinism in family policy proposals in Russia and offer concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical background and argument

Scholars rigorously explore the rising influence of xenophobia on politics and society throughout contemporary Europe (Bustikova, 2009, 2014; 2015; Kitschelt, 1995; Mudde, 2005, 2007; Mering and McCarthy, 2013; Norris, 2005; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Pelinka, 2013; Shehaj et al., 2019; Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016; Wodak, 2013). Many European countries have seen their party politics surprised by sustained electoral successes of radical-right (RR) parties such as Jobbik in Hungary, the Freedom Party in Austria, the Danish People’s Party in Denmark, the Golden Dawn in Greece, Law and Justice in Poland, UK Independent Party in the UK, Alternative for Germany, True Finns, or the Sweden Democrats. These parties are actively exploiting public fears of immigrants to further xenophobic agendas, such as limiting government benefits to immigrants, reversing the liberal asylum policies, and closing borders to immigrants (de Koster et al., 2013; van der Waal et al., 2010). Radical-right strongly relies on nationalistic rhetoric, denial of rights to non-natives, and cultural conservatism through the exclusion of other non-traditional cultural elements (Bustikova and Kitschelt, 2009). Studies describe the common trend in Europe of demonization of Muslim immigrants for their cultural and religious practices (Krzyzhanowski, 2013) and fear of other non-Europeans or non-EU citizens (McLaren, 2001). Boreus (2013) details the ways politicians in Austria, Denmark, and Sweden use discursive discrimination in portraying immigrants in an unfavorable light as undesirable people that should be discouraged from entering and settling. Keskinen (2016) traces the development of True Finn’s xenophobic party platform to target and stigmatize immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East.

Denial of rights includes access to social welfare programs and benefits to immigrants. Importantly, radical right does not oppose the general concept of redistribution and does not challenge the existence of a welfare state, but rather argues for selective redistribution of welfare to natives and limiting benefits to immigrants and religious or ethnic minorities. This phenomenon has been dubbed ‘welfare chauvinism’ (Akkerman and Hagelund, 2007; Bustikova, 2013; Brady and Finnigan, 2014; Ennsser-Jedenastik, 2018; de Koster et al., 2013). Some recent examples include imposing ‘length-of-stay’ limitations for foreigners in Denmark (de Koster et al., 2013, p. 5), public pension reform in Denmark (Careja et al., 2016), or restrictions on the size and length of benefits for new immigrants in the UK (The Guardian, 2014).

As the foreign-born population grows, so does the debate over the deservingness of foreigners to receive social welfare. Studies of public opinion find that the European public distinguishes between kinds of welfare recipients based on their perceived neediness. Van Oorschot (2006) shows that programs for the disabled and elderly receive more support than programs for the unemployed. Reeskens and van Oorschot (2012) find that most Europeans favor placing conditions on welfare disbursements such as working and paying taxes or receiving citizenship. The ethnic and cultural origins of welfare recipients also play a role in the public’s approval of social benefit transfers. Applebaum (2002) and van Oorschot (2000) find that immigrants are seen as less deserving of social assistance in Germany and the Netherlands. Survey experiments conclude that white Britons support welfare redistribution to co-ethics but discriminate both on immigration status and racial origin (Ford, 2016). Cappelen and Peters (2018) find more welfare chauvinism in EU countries with higher concentrations of immigrants from Eastern Europe when compared to intra-EU migration. Research indicates that gap of ‘us vs. them’ is wider in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe (Van Oorschot, 2006, p.31; van Oorschot and Uunk, 2007, p.72–73). Populist debates across Europe focus on the alleged abuse of social welfare by immigrants who are perceived to overburden the social welfare state, including education and health care, housing benefits, pensions, family support policies, and unemployment benefits. These debates allude to the assumptions that immigrant families are larger and poorer than local families and thus are using more benefits than locals (McLaren, 2001, p. 89; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010; Kitschelt, 1995, p. 260–261). Various European political actors initiated public debates about restricting access to social benefits to native populations (Boreus, 2013; Wodak, 2013; Krzyzhanowski, 2013). Support for such restrictive measures is found primarily
among blue-collar, less educated workers (Kitschelt, 1995, p. 260–273; Mewes and Mau, 2012; van Oorschot and Uunk, 2007; Waals et al., 2010, p. 352). Scholars note a widespread fear that competition from immigrants will lead to the reduction in welfare benefits (Hero and Preuhs, 2007) and wages, although empirical evidence suggests that the personal pocketbook (egotropic) effects are limited while most concerns about immigration is concentrated on an undesirable societal and cultural impact of immigration (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Jeanett, 2018).

The Russian context of unfinished democratic consolidation, high levels of corruption, low party loyalty, and fragile rule of law provides fertile ground for the growth of xenophobia. The nationalist issue is an easy political trump card for political elites with weak legitimacy who “seek to enhance political legitimation via recourse to national traditions” (Beichelt and Minkenberg, 2002, p.10). As the share of the foreign-born population increases in Russia, it expands the already complicated ethnic composition of Russia leading to tensions. Immigrants are perceived to violate cultural norms, increase competition for jobs and welfare benefits as well as cause crime spikes. These consequences of immigration contribute to rising xenophobia and manifestations of welfare chauvinism in public policy. The state’s responses to these real or perceived threats can vary from confronting xenophobia to embracing it. In the latter scenario, the state embraces xenophobia to channel resources to Russians. Because the social welfare programs ease citizens’ hardships caused by economic stagnation, corruption, and weak rule of law, these programs are highly valued by the people making them feel protected.

Family benefits such as the expanded paid parental leave, baby bonus programs, and family allowances have been singled out by President Putin as important policy initiatives connected to the overall country’s well-being (Putin, 2006, 2012, 2017). The Demographic Policy of Russia spells out an ambitious goal of reversal in population decline as a top priority vital to national security (President RF, 2007). The Policy outlines a comprehensive approach including balancing skilled immigration with increased native birth rates. In reality, as my analysis shows, the government favors the costly long-term strategy of stimulating native birth rates while immigrants are demonized as undesirable temporary nuisances.

Russian family benefits have become more comprehensive in the first decade of the twenty-first century with increased levels of compensation and new benefits. On the federal level, Russian mothers are entitled to a 20-week maternity leave, compensated at 100% of salary. Thereafter, paid parental leave compensation was increased in 2007 to cover 40% of mother’s average salary, with a cap for the highest wage earners. Since 2007, families having two or more children are eligible for a baby bonus program Maternity Capital (Avdeyeva, 2011; Borodzina et al., 2016) and a birthing certificate program. A Maternity Capital certificate entitles families to receive a voucher worth 453,000 Rubles in 2016, for the birth of a second or higher order child. This generous program is restricted to the Russian citizens only. The amount has been indexed every year to reflect inflation until 2016 when the indexation was stopped due to the economic crisis. The Maternity Capital voucher can be used on a mortgage payment, as a pension investment, or put towards a child’s education. A birthing certificate entitles expectant mothers who are ensured under the federal compulsory medical insurance to state-provided coverage of childbirth in state-run hospitals. The certificate was introduced in 2006 as a part of the National Priority Health Project to stimulate better obstetrics services for women. The structure of the voucher compensates the obstetricians for providing prenatal and postnatal care thus creating a financial incentive to see through as many pregnancies to childbirth as possible. Other federal family benefits include employment guarantee for new mothers, government–subsidized preschools, and family cash benefits. Many states and federal cities have additional cash monthly benefits for infants and children under seven years old, land grants, and regional Maternity Capital programs. At the end of 2017, V. Putin called on his government to focus on supporting families with multiple children, low-income families with children, and create policy inducements for the birth of second and third children (Kremlin, 2017). The President suggested increasing paid parental leave compensation, creation of government-subsidized mortgage program for families, and prolonging the Maternity Capital program, which was intended to end in 2018.

Given that much emphasis has been placed on the threats of low birth rates as immigration rises, populist protectionism became a recurrent theme. Speculating on irrational fears of national demise, pundits and media create the xenophobic hype that family benefits should be channeled primarily to native Russians. Populists of different political flavors are advocating the exclusion of immigrants from receiving state family benefits. The underlying logic of this restriction rests on the premise that immigrant children are not worthy of benefits. They cannot contribute to the reversal of the population decline due to their temporary status in the country and inability to integrate in the Russian society because of the wide ethnic and religious gaps. Based on this reasoning, I argue that xenophobia is an important determinant of family policy generosity in Russia. Irrational fears of losing the Russian identity, losing jobs and benefits due to a high concentration of foreigners lead Russians to express xenophobic attitudes and welcome preferences from the government that support the native families. Spending on Russian families can provide some sense of stability and importance for native Russian who perceive their ways of life threatened by the changing demography.

3. Data and methodology

Data for this project were collected in 2013 through a systematic review of mass media resources, official publications, longitudinal public opinion data, and analysis of party manifestos, videotaped press-conferences, political candidate public debates, and election materials. To gain perspective on the views of Russian academia, I communicated with three Russian political scientists and demographers in person and via email. Additionally, I analyzed publicly available transcripts of interviews on problems of immigration with prominent Russian xenophobia and immigration scholars. Six semi-structured interviews in Russian were conducted with representatives at the Russian legislative and executive branches on the federal, regional, and municipal levels. In general, the author asked interviewees about their views on: the demographic situation
in the country, family policies, and the rise of immigration and anti-immigrant sentiment. The interviews were conducted in fall-winter of 2013 in several regions, including the Central Region, North-Western, Siberia, and the Far East.

The semi-structured interview method is well-suited to the research question at hand. By allowing for a free-flowing discussion without the constraints of a structured interview, the researcher creates an inviting atmosphere for a respondent to express opinions in his or her own terms (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002, p. 674). This research design is appropriate for the Russian cultural and political setting, as many public and elected officials are reluctant to participate in studies about immigration, a potentially inflammatory and politicized subject. Russian politicians and public officials are particularly hesitant to discuss these topics with an American-affiliated researcher (Goode, 2010). As one contact put it, when contentious issues are in question, public officials prefer working with trusted members of pro-government media and tend to avoid collaborating with foreign researchers on sensitive topics, saying “the Russian political establishment shies away from foreign researchers as the devil avoids holy water.”

An innovative aspect of this project is the use of digital resources to increase accessibility to inaccessible politicians and to fact-check or validate the statements of interviewees who may be suspected of “social desirability” bias in their responses. To remedy the lack of accessibility, I used press-conferences with high-ranking public officials published on the internet, videos of public speeches, and other publicly available content on the topics of immigration and family policy, to allow analysis of information in a setting that in some cases may yield more authentic responses than an original interview with a politically suspect researcher (Gudkov, 2013; Mizulina, 2011; Lekareva, 2013; Sobyanin, 2013). These sources of information were used to corroborate information received from direct contact with public officials and members of academia. As Bennett and Checkel (2014) suggest, researchers should consider the “potential biases of evidentiary sources.” Cross-checking the evidence strengthens the internal validity of the study (Gerring, 2007).

Process tracing (PT) methodology is utilized to analyze the collected data. PT involves investigating mass amounts of detailed information and carefully describing relevant events, usually in chronological order, with the purpose of establishing the causal chain of evidence from the hypothesized cause to the observed effect (Bennett and Checkel, 2014; Collier, 2011; George and Bennett, 2005; George and McKeown, 1985; Mahoney, 2012; Tansey, 2007; Van Evera, 1997). Process tracing can be used to test existing theories or develop new theories that explain causal relationship between variables (Bennett and Checkel, 2014; George and Bennett, 2005).

Establishing causation depends on finding and describing “diagnostic pieces of evidence” (DPE) over time. Identifying DPE relies on prior knowledge, which can be in the form of existing conceptual frameworks, established patterns of relationship between phenomena, and existing theories (Collier, 2011, 824). In this case, I aim to establish the causation between increased immigration and expanded family policy benefits within the regime-survival context by tracing the following causal chain of events: 1. Substantial immigration increase in Russia leads to increased xenophobia, 2. Increased xenophobia adds to societal instability, and 3. Politicians respond by focusing on expanding and channeling programs exclusively to native-born Russian families.

As Mahoney discusses, process tracing can be used to show that the cause and/or outcome took place (Mahoney, 2012, p. 574–578) and to infer a causal connection between causes and effects (Mahoney, 2012, p. 578–583). The next section unpacks the proposed causal connection between xenophobia and family policy. I describe the origins, dynamics, and quantitative patterns of immigration in Russia and detail public opinion towards immigration, demonstrating a significant increase in xenophobia. To show causation, I trace the connection between immigration and family policies in Russia, triangulating methods using interviews and content analysis of politicians’ speeches, public statements, and documents.

4. Population decline, immigration, and xenophobia

This section describes immigration in Russia, its origins and dynamics, and the anti-immigrant sentiment in Russia. The discussion below places the recent mass immigration trend in the context of post-communist demographic slump in Russia. As the USSR broke down, the Russian Federation (RF) faced problems of aging, declining population, and plummeting birth rates (Figs. 1 and 2).

The population growth in the RF has been negative since 1993 and only in 2013 did it show a positive population dynamic. According to the Russian Statistical Agency, Russia recorded positive population growth of 13,000 in 2013 for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The positive population change was sustained for three years before dipping back into the negative figures in 2016 reflecting the coming of age of the smaller cohort of women born in the 1990s (Rosstat, 2013, 2019). The positive population growth rate can be explained by a combination of factors, such as an increase in life expectancy due to better health practices among men and women, decreased mortality rates due to improved automobile safety and better emergency care for victims of traffic accidents, a decrease in mortality due to tuberculosis and cardiovascular disease, and a fall in infant and maternal mortality due to prenatal and infant screening and investments in building new cutting-edge neonatal centers across Russia. Many of these initiatives were realized under the umbrella of the National Priority Health Project launched in 2006 by President Putin (Itar-Tass, 2013; RIA, 2009; Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2014).

In the first several years following the dissolution of the USSR, the decreasing birth rate was offset by the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians, who found themselves unwelcome in the former USSR republics and moved back to Russia to escape violence and instability. At least half of all the ethnic Russian population left conflict-torn Tajikistan and the Caucasian Republics by 1995. About 40 percent of all Russian repatriates came from Kazakhstan in 1990–2001. However,
repatriation of ethnic Russians slowed significantly by 1995 and all but dried up by 2011: 612,400 Russians returned from the former USSR republics in 1994 but only 32,000 compatriots repatriated in 2011 (FMS, 2012; Vishnevsky, 2002, 5.4.3).

As the Russian economy picked up pace following the recovery of the 1998 financial default, it attracted migrant workers from former Soviet satellite countries. This wave of immigration was different from the repatriation migration with most labor migrants coming from the Central Asian Republics. For example, in 2013 there were 2.3 million Uzbeks, 1 million Tajiks, 553 thousand Kazakhs. Additionally, migrants from Ukraine and Moldova accounted for another two million migrants (FMS, 2013). Overall, at the height of migratory wave in 2013, the official government records estimated 11 million migrants in Russia, about 2.5 million were legally employed and about 3 million migrants remained in Russia illegally (FMS, 2012). By 2015, the economic crisis and the tightening of the labor migration regulations slightly reduced the flow of migration, but Central Asian countries remained the main origin of labor migrants to Russia (Florinskaya and Lipman, 2019).

The influx of immigrants from Central Asia (CA) caused the most tensions in society highlighting cultural, language, and religious differences between natives and newcomers. According to research, the majority of CA migrants are unskilled, lack Russian language proficiency, and often agree to perform work without social benefits or official contract, which dampens salaries for the whole segment of the low-skilled job market (Denisenko and Varshavskaya, 2013; Florinskaya and Lipman, 2019; Zalionchkovskaya and Florinskaya, 2009).

Fig. 1. Total Fertility Rates (TFR) in Russia, 1985–2018.

Fig. 2. Population in Russia.
Source: Russian Statistical Agency.
As data in Table 1 indicate, the official estimate of irregular migrants in Russia fell between 2011 and 2013 to a little less than a third of the overall migrant population. It continued declining in 2014–2015 due to the changes in labor migration regulations that allowed border control officials to deny entry to immigration law offenders and the widespread implementation of labor patents for migrants. Reducing the number of irregular migrants has been at the forefront of the migration and law enforcement officials (RIA, 2016). Irregular migrants are those who overstayed visas, failed to register with authorities, those who work without a work permit, and others. This fact is exploited heavily by the media and populist pundits to cast a negative light on all immigrants by portraying them as a lawless group. Aside from job competition, a common complaint of the native population is that the CA migrants can carry contagious diseases such as tuberculosis and typhoid, having arrived from regions with poor public health (Rosbalt, 2013). Additionally, migrants have been associated with drug trafficking as some come from regions bordering Afghanistan, the largest source of opium in Europe (Rodionov, 2013). Central Asians differ significantly from the local population in religious practices. For example, Russian city dwellers are uncomfortable with religious ceremonies that are uncommon for the modern urban environment, such as public ceremonial slaughtering of livestock (Vzglyad, 2011).

The heightened relevance of immigration is reflected in the emphasis on the negative consequences of immigration within the Russian political discourse. For example, the topic of the dangers of illegal immigration dominated the high-profile 2013 Moscow mayoral race. Content analysis of election materials shows that xenophobia is a fertile ground for easy political gain in Russia. The often-cited incumbent mayor Sobyanin’s May 2013 interview resonated well with the citizens of Moscow (Afanasieva, 2013). In his speeches, Sobyanin often argued that migrant workers from Central Asia are the source of crime and economic anxiety of local population. He argued against attempts to integrate them into Russian society, emphasizing the temporary seasonal work they perform. In the summer 2013, Mayor Sobyanin said, “Moscow is a Russian city, and should remain such. Not Chinese, not Tajik, not Uzbek” (Nikolaeva and Bogomolov, 2013). Mayor Sobyanin was not alone in his emphasis on the negative consequences of immigration. All registered candidates dedicated space in their official manifestos to the problem of increased immigration. Many of them projected harsh anti-immigrant, xenophobic attitudes trying to manipulate xenophobia by first portraying immigrants as the threat and then propose often harsh measures to rid the city of the migrants — the source of societal problems. Table 2 reflects the candidates’ positions on immigration with additional information presented in the Data Appendix (available upon request).

The Russian media contributed to the spread of xenophobic discourse by keeping public focus on the negative consequences of immigration. During the 2013 Moscow mayoral race, a local news station, Moskva24, featured special debate segments on immigration. City Mayors and municipal heads often were mentioned in mass media during 2013 in connection with anti-immigrant initiatives. The incumbent Mayor of Moscow Sobyanin openly opposed assimilation and integration programs for labor migrants, proclaiming that they are not welcome to stay in Moscow. In the same time frame, the head of municipality of Kronstadt, a part of the city of Saint-Petersburg, made headlines with a controversial experiment that replaced all migrant street cleaners with Russian citizens (RIA, 2013b). The apparent populist initiative was favorably met by the citizens, as evidenced from public comments on news sites, news coverage, and personal conversations (The Village, 2013). Two of my interview respondents familiar with the initiative expressed enthusiastic support when asked to evaluate it.

Mainstream media outlets kept immigration at the forefront of public consciousness throughout 2013 by emphasizing that immigrants commit a disproportionately high number of grave crimes and causing societal instability. For instance, in May 2013 Moscow Police reported that 20 percent of all investigated crimes in Moscow were committed by migrants and the Prosecutor’s Office Investigative Committee reported that every other rape in Moscow is committed by immigrants (Interfax, 2013). Media also fomented such issues as medical tourism: pregnant migrant women come specifically to Russia for free medical care. Another hot-button issue was the high number of migrant children in Moscow schools and government-subsidized preschools. The controversy revolved around the cost of educating children of illegal migrants, who do not pay taxes. Another common grievance is the difficulties teachers face providing instruction to children with limited knowledge of the Russian language and culture (Lenta, 2013).

It is important to note that proliferation of anti-immigration populist rhetoric was not limited to elections. Mass manifestations of nationalism expanded dramatically since the early 2000s through demonstrations like the yearly “Russian Marches.” These marches are held annually across Russia on November 4th during the national holiday the Day of National Unity. The first March, held in 2005, was a small affair attended mostly by marginal nationalist groups. Since then, it became a yearly mass rally held in multiple cities at once. The event unites various ultra-radical and populist nationalist groups under the umbrella slogans of “Russia for Russians” chanting demands for the protection of the rights of native Russians. Public
opinion polls indicated a growing familiarity of the mainstream Russian public with the slogans of the Russian Marches. A leading independent Russian public opinion research organization, Levada Center, reported in 2013 that 40 percent of polled Russians supported the idea of such marches (Levada Center, 2013b). Wide support of these events indicate an alarming trend of normalization of such discourse in the society. What started as a radicalized marginal movement for uneducated youth now has gained a tacit acceptance among educated middle class (Gudkov, 2013).

The official position of the Kremlin, although inconsistent, strived to send a politically-correct message that migrant workers are beneficial to the growing economy, especially given low birth rates. The economic argument is supported by such high-profile figures as President Putin, the Labor Minister Maxim Topilin, and the Head of the Federal Migration Services Konstantin Romodanovskiy. However, Putin and his cabinet give in to the popular anti-immigrant sentiment and embrace xenophobia when deemed politically advantageous, such as after ethnically-charged riots (TASS, 2013a). Other public figures, such as State Duma and Senate representatives are on record exploiting anti-immigrant sentiment by issuing xenophobic statements and proposing anti-immigrant legislation. For example, Senator Ozerov of United Russia, the Head of Security and Protection Committee in the Senate, in response to the Business Ombudsman’s proposition to amnesty illegal migrants, argued that many facets of migration are “connected to national security” and thus migrants should be strictly controlled (RIA, 2013a). United Russia Deputy Starshinov proposed a bill in October 2013 to prohibit migrants from holding front-line jobs in retail following remarks made by President Putin at the United Russia party meeting. Putin said: “… we need, at last, to determine some areas of work for migrants. I said that from the country’s economic interests point of view, it is difficult to do without a foreign labor force, but in some economic areas it is fully possible to replace it with local citizens, say, in retail” (Kremlin, 2013). The head of an influential Duma Committee on Security and Anti-Corruption Yarovaya supported zero quotas for migrants in retail.

Several initiatives could be classified as welfare chauvinism. President Putin’s 2013 Annual Address of the Federal Assembly touched on deservingsness of migrants to receive social benefits. Putin argued that only those migrants that pay taxes and other social taxes should be eligible to use state education and healthcare resources (Putin, 2013). United Russia’s Deputy Starshinov proposed in October 2013 that social welfare benefits should only be available to legal migrants who pay taxes, and not their numerous relatives (TASS, 2013b). Duma Representatives Aleksei Zhuravlev (Rodina) and Sergei Zigarev (LDPR), both of radical-right parties, sponsored a bill in October 2013 that would limit the opportunities for children of migrants to take spots in government preschools only if their parents can prove that they pay Russian taxes and were tax residents for at least one year. Among reasons behind these restrictions the authors cite shortage of preschool slots for the native population, low educational levels of migrant children and cultural differences, such as problems that children from Central Asia or South Caucasus have with taking directions from female teachers. The authors of the bill argued that migrants and their children cause societal tensions (Duma, 2013). The former State Duma representative, now an adviser to the Head of Rodina party, Vera Lekareva argued that the “indigenous population” of Russia is afraid for their lives due to the influx of migrants (emph. Author). “It is the citizens of the Russian Federation [unhappy about the migrants] whose balanced and comfortable rhythm of life has been violated by the impudent invasion, ignorance of tradition and disrespect to our laws [by the migrants]” (Lekareva, 2013).

Russian public opinion polls indicate steadily rising popular xenophobia since the mid-1990s (Levada Center, 2018). Since 2004, yearly representative public opinion polls reflect that over 50 percent of Russians approved restrictive labor migration policies while the share of immigration supporters consistently declined. Since 2011, about two-thirds of respondents

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### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate name and party affiliation</th>
<th>Percent of electoral votes</th>
<th>Position on Immigration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexei Navalny, RPR-Parnas</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>Campaigned for requiring Central Asian migrants obtain entry visas to Russia; jobs for Russians first; reduce illegal migration which negatively influences the labor market, breeds crime and ethnic tensions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergei Sobyanin, United Russia</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>Campaigned requiring Central Asian migrants obtain entry visas to Russia; limit unskilled labor migration; preferred skilled migrants and called for elimination of unskilled labor migration; opposed integration of migrants; emphasized that migrants breed crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikhail Degtyarev, LDPR</td>
<td>2.86%</td>
<td>Campaigned to reduce legal and illegal immigration; eliminate work quotas for migrants and achieve zero immigration. Alleged that migrants breed crime and threaten the Russian way of life: “We have 2 million Muslims, of them 1.5 million are illegal. We will build no Mosques in Moscow, just [Christian] Cathedrals,” Moscow as the capital for Russians only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergei Mitrokhin, Yabloko</td>
<td>3.51%</td>
<td>Campaigned for fighting illegal migration; advocates criminal prosecution for employers hiring illegal immigrants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikolai Levichev, Spravedlivaya Rossiya</td>
<td>2.79%</td>
<td>Stressed importance deporting illegal immigrants, but favored integration of migrants without letting them to create ‘ethnic enclaves’ in the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivan Melnikov, KPRF</td>
<td>10.60%</td>
<td>Stressed importance of effective and strict migration policy, favored a drastic reduction of the number of immigrants and migrant quotas, and requiring visas for immigrants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: official party publications, interviews of candidates, public debates [http://www.m24.ru/videos/27489](http://www.m24.ru/videos/27489)
consistently approve restrictive migration twice approaching an overwhelming majority. In 2013, 78 percent of respondents felt that the government should restrict migration; in 2016, 80 percent of respondents called for restricting migration. These spikes in restrictive attitudes are connected to the government stoking of anti-immigrant sentiment in 2013 and the European migration crisis in 2016 (Kingbury, 2017; Levada Center, 2016). The growing salience of immigration stands out in a ROMIR longitudinal survey of the most prominent societal problems: while in 2005 the problem of migrants was not mentioned, it has been ranked among the top ten most urgent societal problems since 2013 (ROMIR, 2018).

Levada Center’s 1996–2016 panel of polls reflect the growing percentage of Russians who believed that migrants increase crime and take away jobs from Russians (Fig. 3). In a separate 2017 poll, 54 percent of respondents agreed that migrants take away jobs and are a burden to the Russian economy (Levada Center, 2013a). A growing number of respondents, from 21 percent in 2005 to 24 percent in 2018, connect the slogan “Russia for Russians” with the desired policy of providing preferences for ethnic Russians at hiring for government and management jobs, as well as government-subsidized universities (Levada Center, 2019).

5. Xenophobia as justification for generous family policy

Russian scholars connect the support of nationalist populist rhetoric to the complex societal problems caused by political and economic stagnation and lack of trust in political institutions. By the autumn of 2010, public opinion indicated growing uncertainty about the future, partially caused by the world economic crisis and partially by the perceived worsening quality of democracy (Gudkov, 2013). Levada Center Social Sentiment Index, an aggregate that combines public opinion on economic, political, and social developments in society and measures the overall dynamics in mass attitudes (SSI), indicates 25 points drop in social sentiment between 2008 and 2013. Rosstat, the government statistics agency, reports that 34 percent of women and 32 percent of men say that insecurities about the future prevent them from having children (Nikitina, 2013). My interview respondents echoed this notion. Five of seven respondents (two legislative representatives, two public servants and one mayor) stressed corruption, economic instability, lack of access to government preschools, housing shortages, poor quality health care, and education as major areas of concern for their constituents.

![Fig. 3. Levada center public opinion polls on attitudes to immigrants (1996–2016)](source: Levada Center [2016].)
The interview respondents sounded out the common frustration over the large number and visibility of immigrants. However, the levels of frustration differed from region to region—a finding corroborated by ROMIR data, which found that migrants were perceived to be an acute societal problem in two out of seven Federal Districts: Central and Southern (ROMIR, 2018). Expressed xenophobia varied with the size, location and the economic development of a particular region, with more economically advanced localities exhibiting more xenophobia as expanding markets attract more migrants. The respondents’ attitudes toward immigrants ranged from neutral to negative (Table 3). Two respondents openly voiced frustration and hostility to immigrants, echoing the headlines from the mass media. However, three others were less hostile about the immigrants, calling the mass media campaign an artificial hysteria and pointing out that migrants do not commit more crime than the local population.

To gauge whether anti-immigrant sentiment affects policymaking, I asked respondents to assess the overall preferences of the government and elected officials to the components of the official population policy. The Government's Conception of the Long-Term Socio-Economic Development identifies two main challenges to the stability of the Russian Federation (FR): the fall in birth rates and the overall decline in population (Russian Federation, 2006). The solution to these problems, according to the Conception development, consists of two parts: migration management and increasing native birth rates (President, 2007). The Conception proposes that immigration is an integral component of population stability in the Russian Federation. However, the growth of immigration brought in growing xenophobia, and I hypothesize that immigration should be less favored than stimulation of native birth rates as an instrument of population stabilization.

As evident from analysis of speeches and policy documents, there is a clear preference for favoring increasing native birth rates while restricting mass immigration. During his 2012 and 2013 annual address to the Federal Assembly President Putin touted the native birth rates and called for stimulation of second and third births while also stressing the ills of immigration, focusing on the negative aspects of immigration (Putin, 2012, 2013). During the meeting of the National Council on National Projects and Demographic Policy, Putin called for a new fashion for families with more than one child. Russian President called the elimination of barriers that preclude Russian families from having children as the main demographic goal of the country (Putin, 2013). These high-level speeches outline the framework of thinking about population and demography. The emphasis is clearly placed on Russian births. Immigration, if mentioned at all in connection to demography, has a negative connotation.

This analysis is corroborated by the responses I obtained during personal interviews with Russian officials. Six of seven policymakers who participated in my interviews expressed a firm preference for the emphasis on stimulation of native birth rates while migration should be strictly controlled and/or drastically reduced. Two respondents stated that they received demands from their constituents to limit family benefits, especially government preschool slots, to the Russians. More than half of interviewees pointed out the restrictions that are implemented in their regions to limit immigrants’ access to family benefits, such as the regional or city residency requirement of three to five years.

Elsewhere, restrictive rules included requirements for migrants to provide proof that taxes have been paid in the region. These measures resemble the nation-wide October 2013 initiative of Duma Representative Zhuravlev of the Rodina party to require immigrants everywhere to prove tax residency status before gaining access to government preschools (Duma, 2013). The Head of State Duma Committee on Children and Families, Elena Mizulina, expressed, a firm belief in 2011 and 2013 interviews that traditional Russian values, such as having big families, will be vital in preservation of Russia and Russian population (Mizulina, 2011, 2013).

Thus, my analysis of public discourse, official documents, and publications support the proposition that, although the population decline is a known concern for policymakers, immigrants are not viewed as viable contributors to the reversal of population decline. Immigrants are demonized as unworthy criminals or a temporary need-based workforce. The discourse about birth rates almost exclusively focuses on native births, while the discourse on immigration is focused on the negative consequences of illegal immigration. Despite the intentions, declared by the Demographic Conception, when it comes to sustaining Russian population, emphasis is firmly placed on supporting Russian families through family benefits, on making Russian babies.

This perception of government policy in population management is consistent with the recent revival of state pronatalism in Central and Eastern Europe and fiercely critiqued by feminist scholars (Glass and Fodor, 2007; Johnson et al., 2016; Rivkin-Fish, 2010). Pronatalism describes the active state’s effort to stimulate birth rates through family support programs. In this view, people are valued insofar as they contribute to the grand goal of population stability. Russian families, that is Russian

### Table 3

Responses of Russian government officials regarding immigration, personal interviews.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes toward immigrants:</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative</th>
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<td></td>
<td>“don’t see particular problems with migrants,”</td>
<td>“migrants do not respect the law; they are dangerous and impudent … as every patriot I think that [local governments] should hire the Slavs first and foremost,”</td>
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<td>“no particular problems, not many migrants, they are mostly seasonal,”</td>
<td>“there are too many of them and they are too visible,” “migrants use corruption to their advantage to gain scarce public resources for bribes, such as slots in government preschools without waiting,”</td>
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<td>“we need to reduce the amount of migrants so that the city becomes safer … migrants parasitize on public benefits … we should not allow immigrants to exploit our public benefits system;”</td>
<td>“our goal is to push out all migrants from the labor market,”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“we receive many letters from constituents with requests to limit immigration and deport migrants.”</td>
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women, according to this line of argument, will shoulder the burden of replenishing the nation’s population shortage (Rotkirch et al., 2007; Temkina, 2012). Childbearing, according to this approach, serves the higher purpose of ensuring national interests through supplying a steady flow of labor force and military conscripts. It is not uncommon for the political and military establishment to view women as a resource for production of future workforce and conscripts for the armed forces (Rivkin-Fish, 2003). For example, Valentina Matvienko, speaker of the Council of Federation, upper chamber of the Russian Parliament, argued: “Of course, for the country with such territory,2 families must be bigger. It is not a social, but an economic and political consideration. We must settle territories and develop the economy” (Pension Fund, 2013). To this end, the state expanded its family policy benefits in an effort to prop-up population levels. Xenophobic fears are used to justify the state’s population agenda despite the feminist critique of pronatalism as counter-productive because it focuses on monetary support rather than a comprehensive re-thinking of underlying gender-inequality and lack of career-family balance that contributes to lower birth rates.

6. Discussion

This research establishes evidence of a substantial immigration and commensurate levels of xenophobia in Russia and shows the connection between xenophobia and the policy process, deriving from a detailed analysis of the events in 2013. Content analysis of political speeches, party manifestos, and in-person interviews show the anti-immigrant sentiment among federal, state, and local-level policymakers and government officials. Levada Center polls establish that populist xenophobia has penetrated the educated middle class validating anti-immigrant sentiment as a mainstream issue rather than a narrow outlook of marginal groups. Public attitudes distinguish between natives, the ‘us’ group and immigrants ‘the others’, as shown by negative sentiment and feeling of hostility captured by public opinion pollsters. These divisions are embraced by policymakers to justify limiting immigrants’ access to jobs and public benefits, including family policy benefits, based on their non-belonging to the ‘us’ group.

I present evidence that policymakers express anti-immigrant sentiment when considering or introducing policy that restricts access to benefits for immigrants because they do not belong to the in-group based either on alleged lack of contribution through taxation or because of ethnic or religious differences. In the more extreme cases, like Moscow, immigrants are viewed by the Mayor as a temporary workforce – ethnic and religious aliens, whose needs are beyond what’s deemed worthy of attention. Such discourse creates fault lines in public perceptions of immigrants as non-belonging to the ‘us’ group. In other regions and municipalities, the distinction is less acute, mostly driven by fiscal considerations, where migrants must pass what resemble a residence test by producing proof of legal residence and tax payment for several years. The elite thus appropriates and validates xenophobia by promoting the allocation of social programs to the in-group and restricting the ‘others’ from access to social programs and family benefits.

It is important to ground this observation in broader societal context of Russian economic and political life in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Economic stagnation and stalled democratization created economic and social anxiety, which results in uncertainty about the future, loss of interpersonal and institutional trust. Xenophobia in this context channels dissatisfaction and distrust in government, frustration with reality that causes individuals to be less empathetic to the needs of others. It is “a rationalization of own insecurities caused by the sense of vulnerability against the tyranny of the police, unfairness of the legal system, and widespread corruption” (Gudkov, 2013). The feeling of insecurity and vulnerability prompts citizens to demand more privileges for the in-group - native Russians. To maintain stability the government must address the roots of social unrest. Analysis of the rhetoric emanating from public officials amount to an understanding that the government embraces xenophobia in order to shift blame for the poor socio-economic conditions to the external enemy – the gastarbeiter – the source of heightened crime, corruption, and a threat to national security and national identity. Fear mongers, radical-right partisans, and xenophobes argue that immigration will inevitably bring death to Russia, the Russian nation, and the Russian state unless stopped. For example, the leader of the LDPR party, V. Zhirinovsky, is wide-known for arguing, “In 50—70 years they will replace us and [our land] will become one big Central Asia.” (LDPR, 2013). Immigrants are posed as a threat because they commit crimes and abuse limited public resources such as public preschools, government-funded healthcare, and draw on social benefits.

In such context, the only viable solution to the problem of population decline, must be investing into having Russian babies. Public discourse about immigration is negative and hostile, leaving pronatalist initiatives of supporting the native birth rate the only course of action viable in such policy context. Public spending on family programs is one of the areas highly valued by the Russian citizens. It is also a favorite populist project of the current Administration, which touts the success of monetary benefits, such as the Maternity Capital and Birthing Certificate, in the fight against population decline. The topic of reproduction, families, and babies, that is Russian babies, is so important that has occupied a prominent place in every yearly President’s Address to the Federal Assembly since 2007. Despite the economic crisis, the Maternity Capital program was extended through 2021, beyond its original end date, and new family benefits were proposed in 2017 and implemented in 2018. These benefits include an additional means-tested parental benefit for the birth of first child until she reaches the age of 1.5 years, cash payments from the Maternity Capital fund for the birth of a second or third child, and a massive allocation of federal funds to compensate families who have a third child in those Russian regions where the total fertility rate is the lowest.

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2 The speech refers to the sparsely populated Far Eastern territories, east of Lake Baikal.
(Kremlin, 2017). While demographers and economists are in agreement that a sizable influx of immigrants is needed to maintain economic growth short term and to stabilize population numbers long term, political elites focus on increasing monetary benefits to Russian families, excluding when possible immigrants from benefit eligibility, while calling for limiting immigration. Xenophobia is used to channel protectionist policy decisions in an effort to project an image of a responsive state. Given the growing lack of trust in Putin’s government, the increased spending on popular family programs, such as government preschools, cash benefits, subsidized mortgage programs, and Maternity Capital, allows the government a chance to appear accountable to public grievances. Successful family programs are touted as a significant achievement, a feel-good strategy, in the uncertain times of growing prices, stagnated economy, and the deficiency of rule of law.

This analysis contributes to our understanding of how party dynamics influence welfare spending in Russia. The existing scholarship attributes welfare chauvinism to the radical-right agenda. In the Seventh Duma of the Russian Federation, the radical nationalist Rodina has earned one seat and populist radical-right Political Party LDPR (formerly the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia) currently holds 39 seats (8.7 percent). The proposals to exclude immigrants from receiving family policy benefits were originated by the radical right partisans, but the mainstream parties also jumped on the xenophobic bandwagon. My analysis of the 2013 Moscow Mayoral race and the broader policy discourse shows that representatives of all major parties, with the exception of liberal Yabloko, have embraced welfare chauvinism in their policy proposals, not just radical-right parties. Analysis of candidate stances on immigration during the 2013 mayoral elections show candidates openly advocating limiting immigration or specifically limiting public benefits to immigrants (Table 2 and Data Appendix). While the most aggressive xenophobia is projected by radical-right LDPR and nationalist Rodina, United Russia functionaries like Mayor Sobyanin, parliamentarians Yarovaya and Starshinov have adopted a firm xenophobic stance. Welfare chauvinism in family policy allocation appear to be utilized by most systemic parties in what appears to be a broad strategy of embracing xenophobia for political gain.

7. Conclusion

This study documents the relevance of anti-immigrant sentiment to family policy generosity. As my data confirm, the perceived negative effects of immigration are considered by policymakers and used to justify channeling government benefits to the native population, while immigrants are deemed unworthy. I assess the components of the official policy designed to reverse the population decline and argue that because of the demonization of immigrants the main emphasis is placed on incentivizing the Russian families to increase birth rates or have more Russian babies. By focusing on the successful implementation and the increased value of family programs, while limiting availability of benefits to the ‘us group,’ the government aims to capitalize on the positive pronatalist image, while doing little to address deeper underlying socio-economic problems. The paper contributes to the welfare chauvinism literature by providing evidence of welfare chauvinism in family policy allocation in a country with a comprehensive family policy, low birth rates, and the growing immigration population. The electoral and popular support for radical-right parties and populist rhetoric may make the issue of immigration ever more salient when it comes to the redistribution of family benefits across Europe.

References
