



International knowledge transfer and learning in social policy: The case of the post-Soviet region

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Andreas Heinrich
University of Bremen, Germany

In memoriam Sofia An

This special issue analyses the role that international actors play in the transfer of social policy concepts to reform processes in the former Soviet Union (FSU). At the same time, it asks how these concepts are perceived and evaluated and, in particular, which role domestic political decision-makers and the public ascribe to Western reform models. The articles look at a broad range of actors – not only at international governmental organisations (IOs), but also at relevant non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and national experts. Consequently, the focus of the analysis lies on the main actors during the (still ongoing) re-design of post-Soviet welfare systems. In this context, we understand knowledge transfer as an open and multi-directional process with a strong discursive dimension.

In order to keep the special issue focused, it follows the logic of a most similar cases design. We chose Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) as well as Russia and Ukraine and concentrated on only three policy fields: healthcare, gender and child welfare. Moreover, all contributions converge in their basic focus on international knowledge transfer and on the domestic evaluation of the related social policy concepts.

This special issue has emerged out of an international workshop on ‘International knowledge transfer in social policy: The case of the post-Soviet region’ conducted as part of the Collaborative Research Centre 1342 ‘Global Dynamics of Social Policy’ at the University of Bremen, Germany, on 9 November 2019. Sofia An, assistant professor of sociology at the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, was planning to participate in the workshop. With great sadness, however, we learned that she was taken seriously ill and suddenly passed away. Posthumously, a related article she co-authored with Meri Kulmala is published in this special issue, which is dedicated to her and her work on social policy in the FSU.

Corresponding author:

Andreas Heinrich, Collaborative Research Centre 1342 ‘Global Dynamics of Social Policy’, Research Centre for East European Studies, University of Bremen, 28359 Bremen, Germany.
Email: heinrich@uni-bremen.de

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, all of the newly founded states had to simultaneously reconceptualise their entire welfare system starting from the same Soviet model of a centralised, state-financed and comprehensive welfare regime. Besides this common Soviet legacy, all selected countries have developed authoritarian political regimes at least at one point since 1991, and they can all be classified as (low-)middle income countries. Since the late 1980s, they have started to move away from the Soviet model, explicitly aiming to create an alternative system. The national governments in all these countries perceived a need for reform in a policy field where the core Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) region was a clear reference point offering a number of different models. Thus, the need and the incentive for international knowledge transfer were clearly given.

Recent literature on the dynamics of social policy development has increasingly taken external influences on national social policies into account (cf., for example, Brooks, 2015; Orenstein, 2008, 2011; Schmitt and Obinger, 2013; Weyland, 2006). IOs, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations with its sub-organisations, have become the focal points of a global exchange of ideas on social policies (cf., for example, Béland and Orenstein, 2013; Martens et al., 2014; Schmitt et al., 2015). Although the focus of these studies lies mostly on Western industrial countries and democratic regimes, in the post-socialist context, transnational actors have also played a prominent role in directing and shaping social policy (An, 2014; Deacon et al., 1997; see also Cerami, 2006; Deacon, 2007).

Several authors have stressed that the transfer of knowledge needs ‘knowledge actors’ as carriers, exporters and introducers of new policy ideas. Transnational actors act as purveyors of ideas at the transnational level and are linked to the national policy process through their connections with domestic policymakers (Appel and Orenstein, 2018; Jacoby, 2008; Stone, 2000). Besides nation states, knowledge actors also include IOs, external NGOs, think tanks, consultancies, experts and academics. It also needs domestic actors as norm-takers: ‘[. . .] ideas and policies are only likely to be transferred successfully if there are “norm-takers” who adopt and implement them. The local context and dynamics within the importing jurisdiction is crucial in deciding which, if any, ideas are adopted’ (Stone, 2017: 63; see also Jacoby, 2008; Lendvai and Stubbs, 2007).

In order to advance research on the effects of IOs on social policy, this special issue scrutinises how knowledge transfer (and subsequently learning) takes place on the national and local level in the FSU region. It looks specifically at the international and national actors involved in this process and the level of interaction (national, local) at which the international knowledge transfer takes place. It analyses the interaction between IOs and national governments, between IOs and national experts, and between IOs and local NGOs. In practice, such a clear-cut distinction is rather unlikely as the process of knowledge transfer is open and multi-directional with a strong discursive dimension: many and varying actors become involved over the course of time.

The special issue is organised as follows: In form of broader overviews, the first two contributions look at the policy concepts and advice IOs provide and how they are perceived in the FSU using the example of national parliamentary debates on social policy.

The article 'The advice they give: Knowledge transfer of international organisations in countries of the former Soviet Union' by Andreas Heinrich tests the assumptions of the literature regarding the neoliberal agenda ('Washington Consensus') promoted by IOs through knowledge transfer and about the power they supposedly have through loan conditionality to impose their will on countries in financial need. In addition, it examines 'avant-garde measures' of neoliberal reforms exceeding the requirements from IOs. Looking at the social policy concepts and advice these organisations give countries in the FSU, it utilises the example of healthcare reform in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. The article examines the general advice these organisations gave between 1991 and 2018 for the re-organisation and management of the countries' healthcare systems, especially concerning introduction of a mandatory health insurance system.

In 'The framing of IMF and World Bank in political reform debates: The role of political orientation and policy fields in the cases of Russia and Ukraine', Heiko Pleines presents a content analysis of parliamentary debates in Russia (1998–2008) and Ukraine (2010–2019) in order to examine how the role of international actors, namely the IMF and World Bank, is assessed by domestic political actors. Russia and Ukraine offer the opportunity to compare periods with and without an active agreement with the IMF. While Russia under President Vladimir Putin has stressed the country's independence from external advice, Ukraine is currently one of the biggest recipients of financial support from the IMF and World Bank. In addition, the WHO and ILO are included in the analysis to allow a comparison with IOs not working with financial conditionality. The content analysis identifies frames used in parliamentary debates to describe the role of the IOs. In addition, the analysis differentiates between political camps and policy fields, with a particular focus on social policy.

The next two articles deal primarily with the interaction between IOs and national governments. In 'Global deinstitutionalisation policy in the post-Soviet space: A comparison of child-welfare reforms in Russia and Kazakhstan', Sofia An and Meri Kulmala compare how the global policy of deinstitutionalisation (DI) of child welfare has travelled to, was translated by, and institutionalised in Russia and Kazakhstan. These countries share a Soviet legacy of child-welfare systems dominated by residential care and have recently introduced similar DI reforms based on the global child rights framework. The authors argue that the institutionalisation of the DI policy was an outcome of the interplay between structural factors and the agency of policy actors who translated global policy ideas into domestic policy discourses. The geopolitical position of a country is also a significant factor in how child-welfare systems have been reformed.

Karolina Kluczevska and Oleg Korneev, in 'Policy translation in global health governance: Localising harm reduction in Tajikistan', take a closer look at interactions between IOs and aid-receiving countries. They analyse programmes for harm reduction among injection drug users in the Central Asian country of Tajikistan. The authors argue that there is rarely a full acceptance or rejection of this knowledge on the side of local actors, but rather a localisation of global governance frameworks and knowledge claims through complex processes of policy translation involving various local actors (policy-makers, civil servants, experts, NGOs and community-based organisations).

In the article ‘International knowledge transfer and Russian social policy: The case of gender mainstreaming’, Tatiana Chubarova and Natalia Grigorieva deal with knowledge transfer between IOs and national experts (and to a lesser extent national governments). Using gender mainstreaming as an example, the authors examine the mechanisms of international knowledge transfer in Russian social policy in detail. They claim that specific knowledge transfer could facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge, but its sustainable application in social policy decision-making might be problematic, requiring the commitment of political actors as well as supportive institutional conditions. Being gender activists themselves, the authors provide valuable firsthand information, especially for periods of the movement in Russia for which written sources are rare.

Gulnaz Isabekova looks at knowledge transfer at the local level. Her article ‘Mutual learning on the local level: The Swiss Red Cross and the Village Health Committees in the Kyrgyz Republic’ focuses on the interaction between IOs and local NGOs, especially the mutual learning between providers and recipients of development assistance. She analyses the international project ‘Community Action for Health’, which aimed to empower rural communities in Kyrgyzstan and to encourage their participation in health-care. Her article analyses the factors enabling mutual learning in practice. It suggests that the decentralisation of the organisation, its leadership and response to failures; continuous contact between provider and recipient of development assistance; and emphasis on local expertise contribute to this learning process. Although context-specific, these findings are essential to understanding the mutual learning in general and taking this phenomenon from theory to practice.

The Forum section deals with the validity and reliability as well as applicability of research data, considering the amount of data generated by, and used for, this special issue: both, Heinrich and Pleines have created huge datasets (containing publications of IOs and transcripts of national parliamentary debates); the articles by An and Kulmala, Kluczevska and Korneev, and Isabekova have extensively used interviews, probably the most sensitive research data in social science. Therefore, in ‘Challenges for the management of qualitative and quantitative data: The example of social policy-related data collections’, Andreas Heinrich and Eduard Klein provide some thoughts about the quality and transparency of research data in the social sciences. Using post-Soviet area studies as an example, they argue for linking research data to a peer discussion and/or the relevant literature discussing or using the respective data collection in order to improve research on the region.

In ‘The OECD poverty rate: Lessons from the Russian case’, Martin Brand stresses the necessity to make the various underlying normative assumptions about poverty explicit when using poverty data. Especially for cross-country comparisons of poverty rates, he urges for a multi-dimensional poverty indicator that includes several dimensions of this phenomenon taking into account the specifics of a country’s socio-economic fabric.

In their article ‘Using Protest Event Analysis to study labour conflict in authoritarian regimes: The Monitoring of Labour Protest dataset’, Petr Bizyukov and Jan Matti Dollbaum advance labour conflict research – especially in authoritarian regimes – in two important areas, one methodological and one substantial, by using a new dataset, which

allows for the collection, processing and analysis of information on labour protests based on online sources. As official strike statistics are unreliable, the authors argue that methods from the field of contentious politics, like Protest Event Analysis, provide a way to more accurately assess the true scale and consequences of labour contention in modern authoritarian regimes.

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Author biography

Andreas Heinrich is Postdoctoral Researcher at the Collaborative Research Centre 1342 ‘Global Dynamics of Social Policy’ and the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany. His current research focuses on knowledge transfer induced by international organisations, with a special focus on the countries of the former Soviet Union.