DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 12.11.2024 | Daria Boll-Palievskaya

# Maternity by mandate

## Faced with a sharp population decline, the Russian government is frantically seeking ways to push women into having more children

'[Women] simply need to give birth to as many children as possible and bring them up as best they can. The rest they can manage for themselves.' This is how Vadim Shumkov, governor of Kurgan Oblast, expressed his solution to Russia's demographic problem on his Telegram channel. Demography is indeed one of Russia's biggest challenges. The birth rate is currently at its lowest level for 25 years, while the mortality rate continues to climb.

Russia's statistical authority Rosstat estimates that in the first half of 2024, the population fell at almost twice the rate (a factor of 1.8) as in the previous year. Birth rates also continue to fall. In the first half of 2024, 2.7 per cent fewer children were born than in the same period of 2023. Policymakers have responded to these alarming developments, however, not with balanced demographic measures, but with mere propaganda. The Russian government is frantically seeking ways of getting women to have more children, but rather with a stick than with a carrot.

## A ban on 'childfree propaganda'

As early as 2022 the State Duma introduced a bill to prohibit so-called childfree propaganda. That bill was rejected at the time, but on 12 November 2024, the Russian parliament adopted the law: The ban on 'childfree propaganda' is essential for 'national security'. According to Elvira Aitkulova, co-sponsor of the law and a deputy of Putin's United Russia party, advocates of 'childfree' ideology spread 'notions of a deliberate renunciation of children'. They are thus peddling depopulation. The law is intended to reinforce traditional family values and counteract the dissemination of information on childlessness online and in the media, films and advertising. Violations can result in severe fines of up to €4 000 for individuals and up to €50 000 for companies.

The law has not even had its first reading yet, but has already had

practical consequences. The administrators have closed one of the largest internet forums, 'The Happiness of Motherhood'. In this forum, tens of thousands of women exchanged views on the problems of motherhood. One might ask what women *with* children have to do with the ideology of childlessness. This was an act of self-censorship. But the women's fears are very understandable. What will be considered propaganda for childlessness is determined by those in power. Some experts have already expressed fears that this could also include advertising for contraceptives and condoms.

Vadim Shumkov even compared supporters of the 'childfree' movement to Satanists who are in 'open conflict with God'. The chairman of the Patriarchal Commission on Family Matters, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood of the Russian Orthodox Church, priest Fyodor Lukyanov, described the ban as a necessary 'measure for the self-protection of society' against harmful external influence. In his opinion, the ideology of this movement had been developed by 'Western strategists'.

But the Russian parliament seems to have declared war on a non-existent danger. Although it holds up the 'childfree' movement as a national threat, recent studies found that only 2.4 per cent of women and 3.5 per cent of men don't want children. These figures, which have risen only slightly since 2012, come from a 2022 Rosstat survey on Russians' reproductive plans.

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The assumption that there is a widespread reluctance to have children thus seems to be groundless. Almost half of all Russians (45 per cent) would like a couple of children, but often lack the financial resources to go ahead. A study by the Higher School of Economics shows that the income shortfall of families with children is 4.3 times higher than the support provided by the state. According to the study, families with kids are the group most at risk of poverty.

It is not true that the Russian government has done nothing to improve demographic developments. Since 2007, so-called 'maternity capital' has been available, a one-off payment on the birth of a child. This can be used to buy a flat or spent on the child's education. For 2025, however, only 536 billion roubles (around €5.3 billion) have been set aside for this purpose, a mere 0.27 per cent of GDP. Concessions on family mortgages, another central state mechanism to support families, were also tightened up from 1 July 2024. Families can now claim the preferential rate of 6 per

cent only if they have at least one child under the age of six. Previously, the scheme was open to families with one child up to the age of 18.

Keeping up long-term demographic measures is thus an expensive business. Bans aimed at reinforcing traditional values, by contrast, are cheap and easy to impose under an autocratic system. Hence the relentless growth of such restrictions. From mid 2023, for example, private medical clinics in some regions were banned from carrying out abortions. In June, the State Duma's Health Committee recommended that the Ministry of Health shorten the time limit on abortions from 12 to nine weeks. There are also proposals to levy a tax on childlessness, as there was under the Soviet system, and to use the revenues to modernise Russia's orphanages.

## Scapegoating 'destructive' subcultures

These measures are part of a series of actions by Russian legislators to counteract imaginary threats. In November 2023, for example, Russia's Supreme Court banned the activities of the practically non-existent 'international LGBT movement', which it classified as an extremist organisation. Next to be banned was the youth subculture of 'quadrobics', whose miniscule following identify with animals, wear masks and imitate animal behaviour.

The prohibition of allegedly 'destructive' subcultures is one indication that the Kremlin has given up trying solve real problems, such as demography. In an effort to ensure that young Russians are not led astray by Western influences and instead turn their thoughts to starting a family, a new school subject has been introduced: family studies. The stated aim is to inculcate school children with pro-family values and ideas, such as marriage, childbearing and chastity, in order to solve the nation's demographic problems.

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At the Eastern Economic Forum in September, Putin declared that Russia needs to return to the days when it was normal for Russian families to have seven, nine or 10 children. On the same day, Duma deputy Zhanna Ryabtseva called on Russian women to 'give birth, give birth and give birth again'. In the Chelyabinsk region, on the governor's initiative, female students under the age of 24 are therefore eligible for one million roubles for the birth of a child.

But none of these appeals, bans, punishments and educational measures

appear to have done much to raise Russia's birth rate. As early as 2023, Putin's spokesman Dmitri Peskov admitted that the various measures to boost the birth rate had not had the desired effect. According to Rosstat forecasts, the number of births is set to fall from 1.244 million a year to 1.14 million from 2023 to 2027. Independent demographer Alexei Raksha has stated that raising the Russian birth rate would cost more than six trillion roubles a year (around €60 billion) to tackle poverty. He told the independent journal *Serena* that 'ideally, for each child there should be an unconditional payment at the level of the subsistence minimum until they reach adulthood or graduate from university'.

According to Putin, the guiding principles of state policy are 'protecting the people, promoting motherhood and childhood and increasing life expectancy'. But the campaign to promote family values and urging women not to postpone motherhood and to have more children don't really have much to do with 'protecting the people'. In fact, they sound cynical in a country waging war on its neighbour.

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The Kremlin's lip service to traditional values stands in sharp contrast to the reality, namely that day after day, Russia's genetic inheritance and most precious asset, its young men, are dying on the battlefields of Ukraine. Although accurate figures are not available, the Center for Strategic and International Studies estimated the number of dead and wounded on the side of the Russian Federation at around 200 000 to 250 000 already by the end of February 2023. A joint study by the *BBC* and *Mediazona* in October 2024 has identified the names of over 74 000 Russian soldiers killed. According to NATO, the number of dead or wounded Russian soldiers has doubled to 600 000 this year alone.

In a radio broadcast Mikhail Minenkov, mayor of Nevinnomyssk, explained the meaning and purpose of what Raksha calls the veritable 'moral panic over the birth rate' that has overwhelmed the Russian authorities in recent months: 'You owe a debt to your fatherland, but the fatherland owes you nothing'. Bearing children for the nation without asking whether you'll get anything out of it — that is true love for the country.

There's a Russian saying that illustrates perfectly the contemptuous attitude of (military) leaders to the value of human life: 'women can

make new babies soon enough'. The Kremlin is simultaneously hurling young men into the jaws of battle and urging society to bring more children into the world. The appeals to bear children for the fatherland sound like a strategic plan to ensure that there will be sufficient 'material' to supply the front even 20 years hence. Russian society is sacrificing its own people while at the same time imposing on them the duty of giving birth. The next generation is thus merely a resource to maintain the Kremlin's power.

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