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Reproducing the Nation: Biopolitics and the Global Return of Demographic Strategy

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Facing an accelerating demographic collapse, Russia has transformed reproduction into a patriotic imperative that fuses fertility policy with authoritarian nationalism. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, this brief explores the Kremlin's framing of population growth as a geopolitical strategy and civic duty.¹ Policies such as maternity capital work to reinforce traditional gender roles and make the intimate terrain of family life a frontier of state power. Similarities to Russia's policies in the United States reveal a convergence: as birth rates decline, regimes across the political spectrum are reconceptualizing reproduction as a matter of national destiny.

RUSSIA'S DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS: BIOPOLITICS AS GOVERNANCE

Russia currently stands at the precipice of a demographic implosion. The United Nations projects a population decline from approximately 144 million in 2020, to under 130 million by 2050.² This contraction stems from persistently low fertility rates, high mortality (especially among working-age men as a result of violence, alcoholism, and chronic illness), and accelerating emigration among skilled professionals.³ These were significant factors before the current Russo-Ukraine conflict, which has inflamed them further.⁴

Not a mere statistical problem, a shrinking population carries existential implications such as the erosion of economic output, weakening of existing military capacity, and the undercutting of the Kremlin's ambition to project global power. In response, the Russian government has implemented a pronatalist strategy, enacting policies aimed at encouraging higher birth rates. In his 2020 address to the Federal Assembly, President Vladimir Putin emphasized the urgency of the situation, warning that "we are alarmed by the negative demographic forecasts," and framed

demographic renewal as being a “historic duty”.⁵

Central to this strategy is the “maternity capital” program which financially incentivizes childbirth. Originally launched in 2007, and expanded in 2020, it provides up to 616,617 rubles (approx. \$6,800) for the first child, and additional funds for subsequent children.⁶ These funds can be used for education, housing, or the mother’s pension fund.⁷ For 2025 however, only 536 billion rubles (around \$7 billion), a mere 0.27% of GDP has been set aside for this purpose.⁸ Beginning July 1st, 2024, was an accompanying concession on another central state mechanism to support families: family mortgages. Where previously families could claim a preferential rate of 6% with one child up to the age of 18, it has since been reduced to children under the age of six.⁹

In 2022, the state Duma introduced a bill prohibiting “childfree propaganda,” one which did not initially pass, but was adopted by the Russian parliament on November 12th, 2024, citing its essentiality for “national security”.¹⁰ In parallel with this legislative effort, political figures such as Elvira Aitkulova, a deputy of Putin’s United Russia party, have advanced rhetoric framing “childfree ideology” as the promotion of “a deliberate renunciation of children”.¹¹

To further counteract the asserted existence of childbearing and rearing renunciation, as well as to alleviate the demographic crisis, on August 15th, 2022, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree reviving the Soviet era “Mother Heroine” award introduced originally by Joseph Stalin when the Soviet population plunged during World War II. This

acknowledgment is awarded to Russian women who have given birth to and raised ten or more children. It is once their 10th child turns one, if all have survived, that a payment of 1 million rubles (approx. \$16,500) will be granted.¹² These measures are reflective of a broader strategy of biopolitics—the governance of populations via the regulation of childbirth. A policy local to Russia’s republic of Karelia where female, full-time local university students (residents of Karelia) under 25, will be paid 100,000 rubles (approx. \$1,100) in exchange for giving birth to a healthy baby further supports this incentivization of childbirth.¹³ Markedly, the bonus is not available to mothers who give birth to a stillborn child.

Russian pronatalism positions the ideal woman as a mother and moral guardian of the nation, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles as essential to national survival.¹⁴ Simultaneously, state rhetoric presents Western liberalism, particularly LGBTQ+ rights, and feminism, as corrosive to social cohesion, subsequently framing Russia’s demographic agenda as a civilization defense.

This ideological stance is exemplified by the recent designation of 2024 as the “Year of the Family,” a campaign used to advance policies that promote traditional values. As part of this effort, divorce fees have been significantly raised, laws have been passed restricting what is described as “incitement to abortion,” and private clinics in some regions have stopped offering voluntary abortion services.¹⁵ This marks a sharp turn from Russia’s past as a pioneer in reproductive rights.

BIOPOLITICS AS A GLOBAL STRATEGY

While the United States lacks a centralized demographic agenda, it is not immune to similar demographic anxieties. In both nations, we see the increasing entanglement of reproduction with cultural and political identity. Reaching a historic low of “1.62 births per woman in 2023,” this decline is frequently framed as an emergency within a strategic and cultural context—particularly by conservative commentators who may not view fertility as a solely

private choice.¹⁶ In a 2019 address, then-President Donald Trump fused nativist rhetoric with nationalist economic priorities, stating a preference for “American babies, not foreign labor”.¹⁷

Unlike Russia’s top-down governance, reproductive policy in the U.S. is shaped through a decentralized web of legislatures, courts, religious institutions, and civil society. Yet despite this fragmentation, pronatalist

concerns have become more politically visible in recent years, particularly amongst segments of the American conservative movement. Some pronatalist groups focus on the promotion of a traditional family unit, in which enforcement of traditional gender norms is a concern.¹⁸ Others are more concerned with birth rate and depopulation. However, both strands dismiss immigration as a viable solution, signaling that for many of these actors the issue may not be solely quantitative decline, but the perceived qualitative makeup of the population.¹⁹

Notably, the growing political influence of conservative pronatalist movements has occurred within the context of a largely stable public consensus on reproductive rights. Polls indicate that since 1975, there has been minimal shift in American attitudes towards abortion. With only modest fluctuation in those advocating for total legality or illegality, the majority of respondents consistently support legality under certain conditions. In 1975, 54% of U.S. adults asserted support for abortion under certain circumstances, 21% said it should always be legal, and 22% said it should be illegal.²⁰ In 2018, these numbers stayed largely consistent.²¹ This continuity suggests that recent changes in policy regarding reproductive rights are driven by the success of a politically mobilized minority, rather than a groundswell of public demand. During his second campaign, candidate Trump declared “The justices

that I am going to appoint will be pro-life, they will have a conservative bent”—as they did, resulting in the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.^{22 23}

The use of reproductive policy as a strategic tool is not unique to Russia and the United States, other nations have also adopted tangible pronatalist policies. Hungary’s Family Protection Action Plan includes a lifetime income tax exemption for mothers of four, or more children, as well as provides subsidies for large vehicles, and housing grants.²⁴ Poland has implemented its “500+” program wherein families are provided with a monthly allowance per child to better ease the economic burden attributed to childrearing.²⁵ France’s long-standing family support policies, which include paid parental leave, subsidized child care, and universal child benefits, are what allow it to maintain one of the highest fertility rates in Europe.²⁶

As Bunce (2014) writes, “Reproduction has re-emerged as the axis around which national futures are imagined and managed.”²⁷ Thus, the challenge lies in discerning democratic population policy, from that of governmental biopolitical control. When tied to authoritarianism, pronatalist measures risk undermining reproductive autonomy, and entrenching structural inequality.²⁸ Liberal democracies must therefore implement rights-based inclusive approaches to population policy that are not only ethical, but politically necessary.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Reframing Fertility as Social Infrastructure. Drawing inspiration from countries like France, the U.S. should adopt tested pronatalist models wherein sustained investment in family policy can help maintain a fertility rate near replacement levels. This could include generous parental leave, subsidized childcare, and universal preschool. Evidence suggests that such benefits not only support families, but also promote women’s labor force participation, and long-term economic growth.²⁹

Expanding and Institutionalizing the Child Tax Credit (CTC). Under the American Rescue Plan in 2021, the CTC’s temporary expansion reduced child poverty

by over 40%.³⁰ In making this expansion permanent, as well as ensuring monthly delivery, families would be better able to meet the rising costs of raising children.³¹

Strengthen Oversight of State-Level Reproductive Governance. Within a federal system, states have disproportionate power over reproductive futures. In light of divergent state-level policies post *Roe v. Wade*, federal protections are urgently needed. Restoration and expansion of Title X funding, for example, would allow for improvement in access to contraception, and family planning services. Additionally, the passage of the Women’s Health Protection Act would establish a statutory right to access abortion nationwide. The

Office for Civil Rights at HHS should monitor and address violations of reproductive rights.

Embrace Immigration Reform. As fertility rates decline, a critical lever in demographic sustainability remains immigration. Canada experienced a record low fertility rate of 1.33 children per woman in 2022.^{32 33} As part of its response, it implemented a points-based immigration system targeting needs in its workforce with an additional goal of raising birth rates.³⁴ The U.S. should adopt a more strategic immigration framework, devoting more resources to properly process applications.³⁵ Policies must also proactively counter resurgences of xenophobia, and xenophobic rhetoric

by emphasizing the demographic, and economic benefits of immigration.

Advance Maternal Health Equity Through the Black Maternal Health Momnibus Act. Amongst developed countries, the U.S. has the highest maternal mortality rate, with Black women being disproportionately affected. Addressing this through twelve legislative bills, the Momnibus Act funds community-based programs, supports culturally competent care, as well as expands postpartum Medicaid coverage³⁶. Through its implementation, alongside a reduction in racial disparities in maternal health outcomes, reproductive justice would be better ensured.

TOWARD A JUST DEMOGRAPHIC FUTURE

Russia's demographic strategy exemplifies how states can transform reproduction into a geopolitical strategy. Whilst the U.S. has a more decentralized model, it reflects the same trend of increased governmental control of reproductive choices. The global turn towards pronatalism raises an urgent question, can

states support population vitality without compromising personal autonomy? Ultimately, a measure of a society's resilience is not how many children are born, but whether individuals are free to choose how, when, and if, they wish to reproduce—without fear, pressure, or ideological imposition.



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