

Reproductive rights vs reproductive responsibilities: particularities of political gender discourse in Russia in the context of the population crisis

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the analysis of the representation of women's reproductive rights in the public discourse of modern-day Russia in the context of the deepening demographic crisis and conservative turn. Based on the analysis of the regulatory framework of demographic and family policy and the discursive analysis of political discourse, it is revealed how state and public actors articulate the contradiction between the reproductive rights of the individual and the practices of regulatory pressure that turn reproduction into an obligation to the state. It is shown that the decline in the birth rate against the 'context of macroshocks and meso-shocks (military action, migration, economic risks), as well as structural factors (population aging, deformation of the age-sex pyramid, gender asymmetry of the labor market) is accompanied by the ideologization of family policy. The article identifies the key frames of political gender discourse: (1) patronizing and paternalistic, limiting women to the framework of "natural purpose"; (2) demographic-instrumental, reducing a woman to the function of fertility; (3) aggressively anti-feminist, marginalizing the struggle for gender equality; (4) moral-normative, legitimizing the feeling of guilt for "deviating" from the traditional family model. Based on the analysis of the programmes of political parties, speeches of reference persons (representatives of legislative and administrative authorities, activists of nonprofit organizations and religious figures), it is shown that women's rights in public discourse are either ignored or replaced by the rhetoric of traditional values. Particular attention is paid to the legal trend of 2020-2025: restriction of abortion and ART, regionalization of anti-abortion policy, expansion of administrative sanctions, cooperation between the authorities and religious structures. The authors summarize that the representation of the issues in the field of reproductive rights is accompanied by institutional and discursive narrowing and by formation of a normative model of femininity as a set of maternal responsibilities. Taken together, these processes reproduce the conflict

between the principles of gender equality enshrined in international documents and national political practices, in which women's reproductive behaviour becomes an object of ideological control regulated by the state, the church and public organizations.

Key words

Reproductive rights; gender order; demographic policy; family policy; reproductive strategies; gender discrimination; conservative turn; frames of gender discourse.

1. Introduction

In today's political systems, preservation and reproduction of the population is considered a crucial element of the country's social capital and a factor of national development. In present-day Russia these problems are of relevance in the view of the declining population size, where the total fertility rate over the last 20 years has fluctuated from 1,31 (in 2006) to 1,78 (in 2015). Moreover, a brief increase in birth rate was once again followed by a decline, the number currently standing at 1,41 (2024). It should be noted that new factors influenced demographic figures in 2022 - 2024: military action in Ukraine, mobilization, mass external migration. According to the Institute of Demographic Research FCTAS RAS, in 2022 - 2023 alone, approximately 700 000 people left the country (mainly young men aged between 20 and 40 years old) (Rostovskaya, Shabunova, 2024, p. 11). This led to additional loss of the working and reproductive potential and created a "demographic drawdown" effect in urban areas. (Mkrchtyan, 2023, p. 27).

Along with the macroschocks, chronic structure factors have intensified, such as population aging, regional disparity and a decrease in the number of women of reproductive age. In several regions (Central Russia, Northwest) the number of women aged 20-29 has decreased by 25% compared to 2010, augmenting the demographic "hole" (Rostovskaya, Shabunova, 2024, p. 12). On top of that, the level of urbanization (77%) and high living costs in cities make having children less beneficial economically. Besides, the employment structure in today's Russia still remains gender-asymmetrical: women make up more than 70% in education and health care, but only 30% in high-tech industries. This limits their income and ability to provide for children, augmenting the gender "childbirth price".

It is natural that the authorities put a strong emphasis on solving these problems. In 2018, the national project DEMOGRAPHY¹ was adopted, consisting of 5 key federal projects: “Federal Aid for Families at the Birth of Children”, “Employment Promotion”, “Senior Generation”, “Strengthening Public Health”, “Sport is the Norm of Life”. These projects aim at increasing life expectancy and birth rate, improving the quality of health care.

The effectiveness of these programmes receives an ambiguous assessment among experts, while leading demographers, analyzing the full range of measures taken by the government, focus on the negative tendencies of the country’s demographic development, since “the implemented measures are mainly of a social nature, are aimed at population groups in need and their effect is delayed in time” (Rostovskaya, Shabunova, et al., 2024; Zolotareva, 2021).

In 2024, the national project “Family” was adopted, which will be carried out between 2025 and 2036 as a part of the Action Strategy on Family and Demographic Policy Implementation and on Support for Large Families in the Russian Federation. This national project includes five federal projects: “Family Support”, “Large Family”, “Protection of Motherhood and Childhood”, “Senior Generation”, “Family Values and Cultural Infrastructure”. This allows us to state the fact that family is a priority in governmental policy. And, although the mentioned project is not only aimed at supporting families in fulfilling their reproductive function, it is this aspect that becomes ground for various and conflicting discourse practices.

This is related to the fact that the tendencies of demographic development in Russia over the recent years, accompanied by the already mentioned yet another birth rate decline, form in the context of the so-called new conservative turn. According to most gender issues researchers, it is not only characterized by the resumption and intensification of conservative rhetoric that is discriminatory towards women (Ajvasova, 2017), but also by the adoption of a number of legislative and administrative solutions that limit or restrict the field of implementation of women’s reproductive rights.

This actualizes the study of public and political discourse related to the problems of ensuring women’s reproductive rights and those

¹ Financing of which in 2019-2024 amounted to 3,105,200,000,000 rubles.

aspects of social policy that are in one way or another related to the solution of demographic problems.

2. Theoretical and methodological bases for the study of the issue and research methods

The obvious instability and conflict-prone nature of the sphere of gender rights and freedoms, where standards, values and social practices are constantly being revised, gave reason to A. Graff to call this process a “war of gender” (Graff, 2016, p. 3-7) a process that can be illustrated by numerous attempts to attack women’s rights, some of them taking place in Russia. This is especially evident in public discourse, which is becoming a field of gender conflicts, intensified by globalization processes that are changing labor markets, transforming family relations and forms of parenthood and that lead to the complication of the identity sphere and form new social practices, which in turn expands the set of methodological and methodical research strategies (Fonow, Cook, 2005).

Following the tradition of feminist sociology (sociological gender concepts), we proceed from the fact that reproductive abilities and sexuality of women determine their position in the social space as special objects constrained by the boundaries of their bodily nature and social situation, which inevitably switches the discourse to a plane where the hierarchy of men’s and women’s positions, the injustice of the resource distribution and differences in social practices are discussed. This is also reflected in UN documents, according to which women’s sexual and reproductive health is linked to other human rights, including the right to health care, privacy, education and the prohibition of discrimination, the right to work and social support.²

Within the framework of this article, we intend to focus on the representation of reproductive strategies and reproductive rights of women in the public sphere that reveal the emerging conflict of discourses, focusing on political discourse, in which ideological elements promoting the interests of a particular social group present themselves

² UN Information Series Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights // Official site of the UN [Electronic resource]. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/RU/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/Information-Series-Sexual-Reproductive-Health-Rights.aspx> (accessed: 29.10.2025)

more clearly (Habermas, 2001). In this regard, we are interested in how women's reproductive rights and reproductive strategies are reflected in the discourse of influential opinion leaders – politicians, public figures, party and fraction leaders and representatives of state bodies.

We believe that the chosen format of gender discourse is able to both relieve the tension of unequal gender relations, as well as form gender asymmetry, disguising discrimination as difference (Velikaya, Ovcharova, 2018), which is especially evident in societies of a transitional type, where a certain “gender order” is currently in a state of transformation.

In this case, the subjects developing the discourse are various interest groups that have access to media resources and are highly influential. Our research strategy involves pointing out the ideological elements articulated by political actors represented in official documents, statements, public texts and speeches, as well as identifying the dominant text frames related to reproductive rights, strategies and behavior and meaning expressed in rhetorical practices.

Before considering the specifics of the discourse, it is logical to refer to some objective indicators of the reproductive behavior of Russian women and the framework of demographic and family policy.

3. Features of reproductive strategies in modern Russia

Low fertility remains a stable trend in modern Russia, which is exacerbated by both present structural factors (population aging and a decrease in the number of women of reproductive age) and situational social shocks. For example, a study by T. Rostovskaya (2024) shows that in half of the federal districts of the Russian Federation, the number of marriages in the fourth quarter of 2022 increased by 7-10% — the “uncertainty effect”, but the number of births in 2023 did not increase (Rostovskaya, 2024, p. 19). In other words, statistics confirm that crisis marriages do not translate into demographic growth.

Studies by the Levada Center³ and FOM (2023-2024) record a decline in optimism in reproductive intentions: the share of those planning to have a child in the three following years fell from 37% in 2019

³ Levada Center was recognized as a foreign agent in September 2016.

to 24% in 2024⁴. Among women under 30, the share of those who postponed childbirth “due to uncertainty about the future” reached 42%. Thus, a psychological barrier added itself to the economic and institutional ones – a crisis of trust and stability that affects reproductive behavior.

At the same time, Russians of reproductive age (18-45 years old) perceive a large family as an ideal option for a family – it confidently bypasses the options with one or two children. Under the best circumstances, 53% of Russians would like to have three or more children (See Table 1).

	2017	2020	2021	2025
One	7	6	6	6
Two	40	35	32	30
Three	28	31	32	31
Four or more	14	16	19	22
I would not like to have chil-	6	7	6	5
Difficult to answer	5	5	5	6

Table 1. How many children would you like to have under the best circumstances, without taking into account the current living conditions? (closed-ended question, one answer, % of total respondents)

Source: VTSIOM⁵ (All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion)

Interestingly, the main interested parties in large families are men. Women prefer a family with two children as an ideal option. This is largely due to the features of the labour market and the already mentioned dominant model of the “working mother”. The structure of employment remains gender-asymmetrical: women make up more than 70% in education and health care, but only 30% in high-tech industries⁶. This limits their income and ability

⁴ Russians’ Attitudes Toward Raising the Age of First Childbirth and Toward Those Who Don’t Want to Have Children <https://fom.ru/Rabota-i-dom/15055?ysclid=midjgwfr3a756486602> (accessed: 29.10.2025).

⁵ <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/reproduktivnye-plany-rossijan-dva-pishem-tri-v-ume>

⁶ Report of the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation “Analysis of the implementation of state policy measures aimed at supporting women, ensuring their equal opportunities for development and inclusion in the social process.

to provide for children, augmenting the gender “cost of child-birth”, which is a certain barrier to the transformation of reproductive strategies for women.

It should also be noted that Russians of older reproductive age (30-45 years old), who already have children and are financially successful, are more oriented toward large families today (See Table 2).

	Male	Female	18-24 y.o.	25-34 y.o.	35-44 y.o.	45-59 y.o.	60+ y.o.
One	5	7	10	10	6	6	4
Two	26	33	37	33	28	28	29
Three	30	32	31	36	33	29	28
Four or more	28	16	13	16	27	24	21
I would not like to have children	4	6	2	2	4	6	8
Difficult to answer	7	6	6	3	2	7	10

Tab. 2. How many children would you like to have under the best circumstances, without considering the current living conditions? (closed-ended question, one answer, % of total respondents) 2025

Source: VTSIOM (All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion)

Meanwhile, the real plans of Russian citizens are far from ideal, which can be easily explained by the general standard of living, low salaries, underdeveloped childcare infrastructure. As a result, the reproductive intentions of Russians are more than modest (Table 3).

	All	Male	Female	18-24 y.o.	25-34 y.o.	35-44 y.o.	45-59 y.o.	60+ y.o.
One	13	16	10	21	33	22	5	0
Two	9	11	8	25	21	13	3	1
Three	4	5	3	12	10	4	0	1
Four or more	3	5	1	9	3	4	1	1
I would not like	68	59	76	26	28	54	89	94

	All	Male	Female	18-24 y.o.	25-34 y.o.	35-44 y.o.	45-59 y.o.	60+ y.o.
to have children								
Difficult to answer	3	4	2	7	5	3	2	3

Tab. 3. Considering your real-life circumstances, do you plan to have children in the future or not? If so, how many children do you plan to have in the future?

(closed-ended question, one answer, % of total respondents) 2025

Source: VTSIOM (All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion)

The existing tendencies suggest changing family policy in favour of families and, particularly, women with children. However, the implementation of family policy allows experts (Mkrtchyan, 2023; Vishnevsky, 2022) to talk about an incongruity between state rhetoric about “family values” and real support mechanisms. For example, O. Ananyeva writes: «Family support in Russia often carries an ideological load: it contains a lot about morality, but little about the rights and conditions for self-realization» (Ananyeva, Ivliev, 2021). As a result, despite record social payments, the demographic well-being index (FCTAS RAS, 2024) remains at the level of 2017 – low and unstable.

Thus, the key challenge for Russian society and state is not merely the number of births, but also the quality of life in families, since without changing institutional conditions – housing accessibility, gender balance of the labor market, development of care infrastructure – demographic goals remain declarative.

It should be noted that different family models exist in different regions of the Russian Federation. For instance, the leaders in the birth rate are the national republics of Chechnya (2.71), Tuva (2.31), the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Republic (1.92), and Altai (1.87). Ingushetia (1.83). At the same time, in Chechnya and Ingushetia, the high birth rate is provided primarily by large families. In Tuva, firstborns and second children make a significant contribution, which indicates a high rate of population reproduction. In the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug and Altai, the birth rate is more balanced in all categories.

In the titular Russian federal subjects, the birth rate ranges from 0.9 to 1.7. We see the lowest birth rate in the Leningrad region (0.891), Mordovia (0.991), and Sevastopol (0.998).

4. Specifics of the Gender Order in Modern Russia: A Conservative Turn

To understand the causes of conflict in gender discourse, it is necessary to recall in general terms the transformation of the gender order in Russia at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century.

Let us recall that Mitchell, identifying four *structures of gender relations* (production, reproduction, socialization and sexuality), showed that all of them are in one way or another related to reproductive strategies. However, each of these structures has its own path throughout history and can change at a greater or lesser speed compared to the others in different periods of time. For our study, it is fundamental that it is the state in modern-day society that carries out normative regulation of relations and forms the features of gender regimes in various social spheres (Connell, 1987, p. 126), as well as creates an ideological apparatus of coercion that controls gender relations through dominant official discourses.

Understanding gender order as the interdependence of institutions and gender identity (Connell, 1987; Ashwin, 2000), we consider it in historical retrospective. Since the topic of gender order transformation in Soviet times is very well covered in both European and Russian literature (Ashwin, 2000; Tartakovskaya, 2000; Zdravomyslova, Temkina, 2003; Belova, 2024), we will only point out some of the items affecting gender regimes in various social spheres in the post-Soviet period.

The overwhelming majority of researchers of gender issues agree that in the Soviet Union, despite the declared gender equality, a polarized gender order was formed, in which the responsibilities of men and women to the family and the state differed significantly, and social roles were determined by the so-called “gender social contract between the working mother and the state” (Zdravomyslova, Temkina 2003; Aivasova, 2011).

Secondly, the Soviet period was marked by a paternalistic type of gender policy (Khasbulatova, 2005), characterized by legal equality of women and men in all spheres of life, which suggested women’s active participation in the production sphere and their inclusion in the labor market, which led to the “two providers” way of life. At the same time, support for motherhood and childhood in the Soviet Union, which included childcare infrastructure for children of different ages, allowed

women to return to work quickly. However, family responsibilities continued to be women's prerogative, which resulted in the phenomenon of a "double burden" (the need for women to simultaneously fulfill both professional and family responsibilities). It should be noted that the situation remains similar at present. According to researchers of time budgets, Russian women today spend about 6 hours per day on housework.

Thirdly, gender inequality in the labor market, which was entrenched back in the days of the USSR, persists. If we divide all sectors of the Russian economy into three groups according to the size of the median wage in each of them, we will see that in the segment with low salaries in 2023, almost four times more women (11.5 million) than men (3.2 million) were employed. In the same way as in the USSR in the 1960s and 1980s, women in present-day Russia earn an average of 30% less than men.

Fourthly, the Soviet gender policy, with the legalization of abortion, was in a sense pronatal and pursued an ideology that identified "proper femininity" with motherhood (Zdravomyslova, Tiomkina, 2003, p. 315).

According to the majority of researchers of the women's issue in Russia, gender equality had no time to be implemented in Russia, either in institutional or cultural formats, and at the beginning of the 21st century, due to the deepening demographic crisis, turned into a political tool for implementing the project of a conservative turn (Velikaya, Ovcharova, 2018). This is manifested in the reproduction and popularization of traditionalist, neo-conservative discourse, which prescribes women secondary roles in society and certain norms of reproductive behavior. Instead of the norm of equal rights and freedoms for women and men embodied in the Constitution of the Russian Federation, «...came the maxims of ontological morality, cemented by the idea of the natural purpose of the sexes, i.e., biological determinism and essentialism» (Aivazova, 2017, p.4), which in the political sphere was accompanied by the refusal to consider the draft law on women's equality, the launch of an anti-abortion campaign, the decriminalization of battery, etc.

The conservative turn in political discourse manifested itself in appealing to tradition, which was understood as a return to the values of the pre-industrial past, to the actualization of irrational archaic fears, to the idea of the "natural purpose of sexes", and to homophobia. Numerous proposals to ban child-free and abortion, to ban homosexuality and feminism have been and are being voiced in different variations and are being

embodied in legislation. In order not to be unfounded, let's illustrate our idea with the fact that at least 110 e-books on feminism, sex education, gender and women's rights have been removed from the popular online book service Yandex Books⁷.

5. Regulatory and ideological basis of family policy

Modern family policy is considered one of the key elements of the national strategy and is associated with the ideas of population preservation and sovereignty.

The state implements a wide range of social and economic measures to support family and childbirth: monthly allowances, maternity capital, tax deduction and others. However, expert assessments emphasize the limited effect of such initiatives: without real conditions for combining parenthood and women's employment, without developed infrastructure (kindergartens, health care, etc.), without stimulating socio-economic conditions, a significant increase in the birth rate is unlikely to be expected (Rostovskaya, Shabunova, 2024).

The objectives of the national project "Demography" (natural population growth, increase in life expectancy to 78 years, increase in the total fertility rate to 1.7, etc.) were not achieved. In the following Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 474 of 2020, the deadlines were extended until 2030 and the goals were adjusted, but the key challenges remained. According to opinion polls, back in 2019, most Russians were skeptical about the attainability of such benchmarks (How do you live, Russia?, 2025), which reflects an understanding of the limited effectiveness of population policy.

At the same time, the existing programmes enshrine the priorities of strengthening marriage, stimulating the birth of several children and supporting families as a return to "traditional values". The family is presented both as an object of social support and a basic value category linked to morality, identity, and the legitimization of power.

⁷ Among the works that disappeared from the site are Anna Shadrina's books "Not Married. Sex, Love and Family Beyond Marriage", the essay "On Women" by Susan Sontag, the book "Women in battle: freedom, equality, sisterhood" by Marta Breen and Jenny Jordahl, "Women and Power: a Manifesto" by Mary Beard, and others.

In this framework, the traditional family (man-wife-children) is proclaimed the basic unit of society. Official rhetoric emphasizes the role of women primarily as mothers and keepers of the hearth. A study by I. E. Kalabikhina records a decrease in gender sensitivity in strategic documents: the emphasis shifts from the rights of the individual to the interests of the family and the state (Kalabikhina, 2019).

The Kremlin website publishes the materials of the meetings under the slogan (quoted by Vladimir Putin): «Our choice is unequivocal – it is the all-round support of the family as the fundamental basis of Russian society». Censorship and regulatory initiatives are also intensifying. Federal Law of 23.11.2024 No 411-FZ banned the dissemination of information “promoting the refusal of childbearing” (childfree ideology). The Ministry of Culture has initiated amendments according to which films with childfree propaganda do not receive a distribution certificate. Family policy includes not only financial incentives, but also regulation of the information space; the family institution is used as an instrument of ideological mobilization.

Realizing that material support on its own does not lead to a desired result, the authorities are intensifying administrative and propaganda measures. Initiatives of early parenthood and large families are being promoted in regional areas. The example of the Kemerovo Region is illustrative, where in 2025 almost 70 million rubles were allocated for a campaign to popularize the birth of children by women under the age of 25. Slogans are used: “I want to be born”, “Being a mother is the best thing that happens to a woman”, “A big family is a big love”, the campaign is aimed at schoolchildren, students, young people and middle-aged people, spread through billboards, social networks, transport and medical institutions.

At the same time, measures to support “student families” are being expanded. In a number of regions, special payments are being introduced to female students and married couples at the birth of their first child (for example, a one-time 100 thousand rubles or a “student capital” of 1 million rubles with a restriction on the age of the mother). A bill on the status of the student family and proposals to multiply maternity benefits for female students by about 10 times are being discussed at the federal level.

However, statistics show that the age at which women give birth to their first child continues to rise: between 1991 and 2008 the

largest number of newborns in the country (almost 34%) was among women from 20 to 24 years old, between 2009 and 2018 – among women from 25 to 29, and since 2019 – from 30 to 34 years old.

In the context of the ideologization of family policy, the restriction of women's reproductive rights is increasing. Regulations are being introduced that narrow the ability to address the issue of childbirth individually; restrictions concern access to abortion and ART, surrogacy, and information policy. The Ministry of Health has limited the circulation of drugs for medical abortion by introducing item-quantitative accounting. Banning abortions in private clinics, reducing the maximum period to 8 weeks and introducing the requirement for the child's father's consent are being discussed at the federal level, which reduces the availability of safe abortions. The rights in the field of ART and surrogacy are also narrowing. In a 2025 case, the Basmany District Court of Moscow denied a woman the right to use cryopreserved embryos without the consent of her former partner.

At the same time, there are no federal programs for education in the field of contraception, reproductive health and rights (Basova, 2023); there is a persisting issue with access to high-tech infertility care, to IVF quotas for women with reduced ovarian reserve (Reproduction Problems, 2025).

The "women's issue" in Russia, when discussed at all by various public associations and political forces, on the whole remains secondary. The main subjects of this discourse are not so much referential political figures and significant public politicians, as party activists and deputies, as well as representatives of various public organizations and movements, both feminist and anti-feminist.

Our earlier analysis of the representation of women's rights and interests in the programme documents of 14 political parties (Velikaya, Knyazkova, 2021) participating in the elections at the regional and federal levels revealed a rather limited presence of women's issues in political intentions and plans. It is illustrative that some parties do not mention women at all in their programmes, and in 10 parties women are considered only from the point of view of their biological and childbearing functions. Thus, supporting women and solving women's issues is reduced to taking care of motherhood and strengthening the family. Therefore, the main object of social support is the family (104 mentions in

total), including the traditional family (5), the large family (17), and the young family (7). Women are mentioned in the programme much more often than men (25 versus 16).

As for reproductive rights and social support measures that contribute to changing reproductive strategies, they are mentioned only 11 times in the programmes of all 14 parties and mainly concern support for women with children. Despite a fairly active discussion of the topic of abortion and its removal from the compulsory medical insurance system, this topic appears in the programmes only 4 times, and the main position here concerns the implementation of “precautionary measures to prevent artificial termination of pregnancy”.

The exception here is the LDPR party, which proposed to abolish abortions for 10 years, excluding special cases, to reduce the marriageable age, as well as to sanction entering a new marriage without dissolving the previous one. The updated programme, which is published on the website in anticipation of the 2026 elections, deals only with measures to support families with children.

Representatives of traditionalist religious and public organizations have the same agenda, but use different discursive strategies. Thus, the Russian Orthodox Church is actively interfering in the process of developing and implementing family and demographic policy. The Patriarchal Commission of the Russian Orthodox Church on Family, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, with the help of volunteers, conducted a “study” on abortions in private clinics in Russia from September 2023 to October 2025, during which they found out that private clinics in 76 regions of the Russian Federation do not abide by the law in the field of abortion (we are talking about the “advertising” of the service). As a result of the “study,” representatives of the Church filed 64 complaints to the Prosecutor General’s Office. It is also claimed that the commission identified “large-scale abortion advertising” presented on 339 aggregator sites in 17 cities and towns of the region. Naturally, this work is accompanied by active propaganda of traditionalism and large families.

Among pro-life organizations, one that stands out particularly, is the Women for Life Foundation, created in 2016 in order to support women in the situation of reproductive choice and promote the idea of fighting against abortion. The foundation is headed by the

journalist Natalia Moskvitina, who works for the Orthodox channel “SPAS”. It was this foundation that actively worked in regional areas, collaborating with public chambers and regional parliaments, on adopting bans on abortions in private clinics, as well as laws on fines for inducement to abortion.

Another figure actively promoting the anti-abortion agenda is the former Commissioner for Children’s Rights (2016-2021) and a current deputy of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly (2021-2026), a mother of 7 children Anna Kuznetsova. In the Penza region in 2011, she was the head of the Pokrov Foundation, which participated in the implementation of a regional demographic programme aimed at promoting large families and preventing abortions. At the same time, she opposed the domestic violence bill, proposed by the Russian parliament in December 2019, declaring that the bill is unconstitutional and imitates similar foreign laws.

The next human rights ombudsman, Maria Lvova-Belova, also a mother of many children and a former priest’s wife, strongly supported the decision to eliminate the practice of abortions in private clinics, considering it the “right guideline” that will allow the state to provide more support, psychological support included, to mothers, and also welcomed the idea of involving representatives of religious organizations in working with pregnant women.

All of a sudden, the mother of 9 children, Maria Lvova-Belova, divorced her husband, a priest, and married the billionaire and owner of the TV company “Tsarshrad” K. Malofeev, after which her publicity decreased.

5. From an anti-abortion campaign to regulatory bans

Anti-abortion legislation occupies a special place in modern family policy. Over the past two decades, the conditions for obtaining a legal abortion have been gradually tightened and psychological pressure on women considering abortion has increased.

The key stages are as follows. In 2003 and 2007, the list of social indicators for abortion was reduced with only one item remaining (pregnancy as a result of rape), which closed the possibility of late abortions for social reasons. However, according to some representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, this is not a valid reason for abortion. In the Irkutsk Region, the rector of the Church of Image of Edessa from Ust-Kut, Irkutsk region, Oleg Zyryanov, advised Russian

women to give birth to rapists, so as not to give rise to a new sin, which, according to the church, is abortion⁸.

Since 2007, the concept of family planning in official documents has been redefined: instead of unwanted pregnancies prevention, the emphasis is on a woman's refusal to have an abortion. In ante-natal clinics, "medical and social care offices" are created, the main task of which is to convince women who have applied for an abortion to continue their pregnancy.

In 2011, a "week-long silence period" was introduced, a waiting period between the request and the procedure, during which a woman is offered psychological counseling and meetings with a social worker aimed at preserving the pregnancy. The delay intensifies moral pressure and increases the risks, since the operation is carried out at a later date. In 2013, advertising abortion services was banned (advertising meaning basic information about the possibility of abortion in a particular clinic), and since 2016, ultrasound doctors have been required to show an image of the embryo and listen to the fetal heartbeat; also, the updated informed consent form emphasizes the personal responsibility of a woman for the consequences of an abortion done by her own choice. Abortion is institutionally labeled as an undesirable and morally reprehensible decision.

In a number of regions, fines have been introduced for "inducement to terminate pregnancy" – for persuading a woman to have an abortion (Drobyazko, 2025, p. 24-26); since 2023, such laws have been adopted in 24 regions of the Russian Federation. Pressured by religious and political actors, private clinics refuse abortions: in 2023, such decisions were made by private centers in several regions of the Russian Federation (Lyadova, 2023, p. 54-58).

The anti-abortion agenda is also developing at the regional level. Since 2023, several subjects of the federation have adopted acts on punishment for inducement to abortion; the first case was the law of Mordovia (August 2023), then similar regulations appeared in other regions. Patriarch Kirill called for the ban on "inducement to abortion" to be extended to the federal level as a response to the

⁸ Priest advises Russian women to give birth to more soldiers // Lenta.ru 1/02/2024 // <https://lenta.ru/news/2024/02/01/svyaschennik-posovetoval-rossiyankam-rozhat-bolshe-soldat>

demographic crisis, thereby supporting the strategy of reducing abortions on behalf of the church.

These initiatives are criticized by human rights activists and experts. Eva Merkacheva, a member of the Human Rights Council (HRC), asks: «Who is this law for? Doesn't it discredit our doctors? I don't know a single doctor who, without medical indications, would advise a woman to have an abortion»⁹.

Some regions use financial incentives designed to indirectly reduce the number of abortions. In the Vologda Region, in 2025, the programme "Family is the stronghold of the Russian North" is being implemented: women under 25 years old will be paid 100 thousand rubles for the birth of their first child, and doctors will be paid 5 thousand rubles for each case when they persuaded the patient to refuse an abortion or refused to perform the operation themselves. Such a scheme encourages the rejection of legal abortions and makes professional duty dependent on bonuses.

6. Ban on childfree propaganda

One of the newest and most resounding measures of the ideological component of family policy was the ban on the promotion of childfree – a voluntary childless lifestyle. At the end of 2024, Federal Law № 411-FZ (November 23, 2024) was adopted, prohibiting the dissemination of information "promoting the refusal of childbearing" on the Internet, in the media, cinema and advertising¹⁰ [Federal Law of 23.11.2024 No. 411-FZ]. It marks a new line of censorship affecting the freedom of expression on family and childbearing issues. In fact, there is a ban not only on appeals, but also on any positive public discussion of a conscious childless choice. The "childfree ideology" is proclaimed as a threat to the country's demographic security. Legislators present

⁹ The Human Rights Council criticized the law adopted in Mordovia on the prohibition to persuade to abortions [Elektronnyi resurs] // Lenta.ru. – 3 Aug. 2023 – Available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2023/08/03/merkachhg/> (accessed: 18.11.2025).

¹⁰ Federal Law of 23.11.2024 № 411-FZ "On Amendments to Articles 10⁶ and 15¹ of the Federal Law "On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection" and Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation" [Electronic resource] // Rossiyskaya gazeta : [official site]. – Published on 27.11.2024. – Available at: <https://rg.ru/documents/2024/11/27/fz411.html> (accessed: 18.11.2025).

childlessness by conviction as a harmful social trend that must be fought against by information methods.

For instance, one of the initiators of the bill, deputy V. Milonov, calls child-free «a truly extremist ideology, which violates human rights and in the eyes of the state should stand on a par with the vilest ideologies and views»¹¹. Back in 2015, the above-mentioned deputy appealed to the Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation with a request to check public calls for childfree in the media and social networks for signs of extremist activity and proposed to ban public propaganda of the refusal to have children as an idea that goes against the national interests of Russia¹².

However, critics, including human rights organizations, individual experts, members of the Human Rights Council, and even some senators, point out the new ban as potentially repressive. It threatens to stigmatize those who consciously do not want to have children, and creates a precedent for even greater state control over the private lives of citizens. Childlessness is basically put on a par with socially disapproved phenomena, just as the legislator previously equated the forbidden topics of non-traditional sexual relations or gender reassignment with propaganda.

The adopted ban on the propaganda of the refusal to have children results in blocking of Internet communities, the media, private accounts of social networks under the pretext of fighting against “denial of family values”. The presence of such information has now become a basis not only for blocking Internet resources, but also for refusing to issue distribution certificates for films. The implementation mechanisms of the law are quite severe. The first administrative case for “propaganda of refusal to give births” was opened against a 29-year-old resident of Sevastopol, who published pictures on her VKontakte page, including photos of the film director Quentin Tarantino with the motto: “Make films, not children” – and other

¹¹ The vilest ideology: Milonov suggested how to fight childfree in Russia // 28.02.2023// https://tsargrad.tv/news/samaja-merzkaia-ideologija-milonov-podskazal-kak-nuzhno-borotsja-s-chajldfri-v-rossii_733485

¹² The Ministry of Health is urged to recognize childfree as crazy // 6.11.2015. // Izvestia.IZ // <https://iz.ru/news/594458>

publications with cartoon and film characters¹³.

The problem pointed out by lawyers is the vagueness of the criteria for “propaganda of refusal to have children”. Almost any content – from works of art to personal posts on social networks – can fall under the law if it is interpreted by supervisory authorities as a call not to have children. Such vagueness of concepts creates space for arbitrary law enforcement.

The birth of children is more and more often presented not only as a personal family matter, but also as a patriotic obligation of citizens to the state. In official discourse, the demographic crisis is explained not so much by socio-economic difficulties as by the “wrong values” of certain groups (in this case, adherents of childlessness). For example, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church directly say that women should give birth to more soldiers: «A woman wins wars... Who will fight, who will stand up for our Russian world then, if there are no births».¹⁴

In conclusion, the ban on childfree propaganda was an expectable addition to other ideological measures of family policy, but caused a wide public outcry. It reveals that the state is ready to use the tools of censorship and punishment in the field of private reproductive decisions, considering them through the prism of national interests.

7. Dominant frames of Gender Discourse

It should be noted that in today’s public political space an obvious denial of gender problems is present, which often leads to a conscious policy of marginalizing the topic of women’s inequality and the realization of women’s rights. The analysis of public texts demonstrated that women are generally remembered for three reasons.

The first occasion is the eve of March 8, where references to women and women’s rights are limited to pathetic congratulations, complimentary statements about exceptional external and spiritual qualities, hard work and sacrifice, and historical reminiscences about how women fought at the fronts, built the economy and raised children. In

¹³ A court in Sevastopol issued the first fine in Russia for childfree propaganda. 02.02.2025 // DZEN.ru // https://dzen.ru/a/Z5-Dx9ZRjRf_BUp

¹⁴ <https://lenta.ru/news/2024/02/01/svyaschennik-posovetoval-rossiyankam-rozhat-bolshe-soldat>

the second case, women as social subjects are remembered in connection with demographic problems and the need to solve them. This is where we see the anti-abortion agenda. In the third case, it is a reaction to newsbreaks in the media that have caused a public response – events related to the discussion of the domestic violence problem, ongoing criminal investigations in this area, harassment, ratings of gender inequality and artistic actionism of radical feminists.

The first frame that we singled out while analyzing the speeches can be described as “condescending and patronizing”, where misogynistic statements dominate and the principle of gender equality is actually denied. For example, the statement of one of the deputies of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation A. Tarnavsky didn’t receive much of a response: «I feel sorry for them and treat them humanely. I primarily see them as the weaker sex, not as deputies», – explains the parliamentarian. Their mission is «to be in a family, give birth to children, go shopping, and so on» (Ushakova, 2016).

It is within the framework of this discourse that women are denied the right to professional growth, to engagement in political activity, it is here that standpoints justifying bans on a number of professions for women are centered. In the field of Russian national politics, especially at official venues, the main speakers on gender issues are women. At the same time, they become the flagships in the attack on women’s rights in the reproductive sphere (Velikaya, 2018).

For example, I. Yarovaya, Deputy Chairman of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, has repeatedly spoken out against the policy of gender equality: «... Now fighting for [gender] equality means giving up one’s privileges”, by which the deputy intends “politeness, delicacy, care, attention, complementarity...”¹⁵.

Oversimplifying women’s role and assigning to them the sole function related to childbirth and raising children remains dominant in the existing framework of discourse strategies of the legislative corps’ representatives, which undoubtedly affects the results of the law-making process. It is important to recall that in recent years, the State Duma

¹⁵ TASS news Agency // Irina Yarovaya vystupila protiv gendernogo ravenstva [Irina Yarovaya spoke out against gender equality] available from: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/4743629> (accessed: 29.08.2020)

has discussed bills that, if adopted, would actually discriminate against women's rights, primarily reproductive rights: there have been attempts to limit access to free medical abortions, social support for women with children is slowly growing, but remains insignificant; high-tech medical care for children (especially from the regional areas) often remains inaccessible and of paid nature. The vulnerability of women with children in the labor market and the lower level of women's wages also do not encourage drastic change in reproductive strategies, a change that could significantly increase the birth rate.

The second frame that is revealed in the speeches of political leaders, is the demographic and social one, in which women are hardly mentioned and not in the context of the realization of their rights, but either as the main tool for increasing the birth rate, or as consumers of social benefits and payments. For example, it is quite illustrative how the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, G. Zyuganov, in one of his speeches, criticizes the government's policy and speaks about the extinction of the Russian people, the low birth rate and the high mortality rate, and proposes some additional measures to stimulate population growth. At the same time, throughout the speech, the word "woman" is used only once, when comparing the level of male and female mortality¹⁶. Later in 2024, speaking at a meeting of the State Council dedicated to family support, he noted that the country (Russia) «Needs at least 200-250 million people to survive. Therefore, the question of a large family is a matter of the historical survival of the country, the state, and each of us... And any newborn should be seen as a future worker and soldier, and the state needs to undertake a lot regarding the support of families»¹⁷.

The most active speaker on demography among the leaders of parliamentary fractions is S. Mironov, who, announcing in 2019 a set of measures developed by the party to increase the birth rate, proposed to introduce additional cash payments for student families with children and pregnant women; to expand social guarantees for low-income families and families with children with disabilities, to multiply lump-sum payments at the birth of the first child, to exempt low-

¹⁶ https://kprf.ru/rus_soc/56296.html (accessed: 29.10.2025)

¹⁷ <https://novvedomosti.ru/news/family/102712> (accessed: 29.10.2025)

income large families from property and transport taxes¹⁸.

It must be said that recipes for increasing the birth rate and solving the demographic problem often take grotesque forms. Thus, we all know of Zhirinovskiy's ideas about the need to introduce polygamy in Russia, which were last voiced from the Duma rostrum during a round table in the State Duma on the topic "Traditional values and legal guarantees of their securement"¹⁹.

The head of the State Duma Committee on the Protection of the Family, Nina Ostanina (Communist Party fraction), also expresses a definite position. She has proposed to conduct a "special demographic operation" in Russia. According to the deputy, we must get to a point where 51% of all the families in the country are large families. Ostanina believes that every family should have four or five children²⁰.

Her colleague, State Duma deputy from the Sverdlovsk region, Zhanna Ryabtseva, called on Russian women to give birth at the age of 18-19, because "student families are the best families", and students' parents should help them raise children²¹.

No less popular are the proposals to give up education for girls in favour of childbirth. Many figures have been noted in this field – the Chairman of the Women's Union and a former deputy of the State Fiscal Service of the Russian Federation of five convocations E. Lakhova, numerous representatives of the church, the former Commissioner for Children's Rights P. Astakhov, who supported marriages with underage girls, the already mentioned I. Yarovaya, who opposed sexual education of children, which actually contradicts Article 16 Paragraph E of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which ensures, among other things, sexual education and sensitization linked to the preservation of women's reproductive health.

The third frame is aggressive and misogynistic, where the struggle for women's rights, including reproductive rights, is perceived as harmful and irrelevant. The idea that the struggle for equality is ridiculous, contrary to

¹⁸ <https://spravedlivo.ru/9693110> (accessed: 29.10.2025)

¹⁹ <https://ria.ru/20191021/1560042261.html> (accessed: 29.10.2025)

²⁰ <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2024/09/06/19707001.shtml> (accessed: 29.10.2025)

²¹ <https://inform-24.com/7009-olga-epifanova-idei-rozhdennye-v-obschestve-pri-obretayut-format-gosudarstvennyh-resheniy.html> (accessed: 29.10.2025)

common sense and physiology, harms women and even increases their unrestrained exploitation keeps being replicated (Vinogradov, 2015).

The fourth frame considers a woman as a victim of: violence, social circumstances, aggression, misogyny on the part of men. However, this frame is barely represented in official political discourse. Here, perhaps, we can mention the activities and speeches of O. Pushkina, who is unsuccessfully trying to draw the attention of society and the authorities to the problems of violence against women in order to revise the law on the decriminalization of domestic violence, and the Vice-Chairman of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation O. Epifanova, who opposes the removal of abortion from the system of compulsory medical insurance and the decriminalization of articles for non-payment of alimony and the mitigation of liability from criminal to administrative for minor offences.

The fifth frame is the moral and ethical one, designed to generate in women a sense of guilt and inferiority for deviating from the approved standard of family and reproductive behaviour. The main subjects of this discourse are representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and church-affiliated organizations. For example, “religious processions” against abortion are being held more and more often, in which not only clergymen but also representatives of a variety of public organizations of a traditionalist orientation (Warriors of Life, Russian Community, etc.) take part²².

On the already mentioned Orthodox channels, women who plan to have an abortion are stigmatized. For example, on the air of the SPAS channel, the psychologist Lyudmila Podolskaya said that “Women who have experienced sexual violence and decided to have an abortion after are criminals”²³.

Such an active participation of a number of women’s organizations in the battle against reproductive rights gives activists various bonuses: from grant support from the state to the opportunity to participate in the electoral process. This allowed our colleagues to call this type of activity “gender entrepreneurship”, since it opens the possibility to monetize the conservative gender agenda.

²² <https://vm.ru/news/1170379-krestnyj-hod-protiv-abortov-proshel-v-sankt-peterburge> (accessed: 29.10.2025)

²³ https://news.rambler.ru/community/53518583/?utm_content=news_media&utm_medium=read_more&utm_source=copylink (accessed: 29.10.2025)

8. Conclusion

The analysis allows us to assert that the modern Russian political discourse on women's reproductive rights is developing in line with increasing ideologization and normative pressure, in which reproductive behaviour is more and more often interpreted not as a sphere of individual choice, but as an expression of "social responsibility" and even "civic duty". In the context of the demographic crisis, state actors, as well as religious and public organizations, propagate principles aimed at strengthening the traditional gender order, linking reproduction with the concept of national security and cultural sustainability.

Modern family policy combines financial incentives with ideological and administrative-propaganda practices focused on the formation of pro-family attitudes and norms of early parenthood. At the same time, the implementation of family policy demonstrates systemic issues with ensuring women's reproductive rights in Russia and the need to revise repressive regulations, strengthen legal protection and raise public awareness.

The gender conservative discourse of the political space, which imposes limited reproductive strategies, does not correlate with the dominant social gender practices and has little correlation with the dominant trends in the current reproductive behaviour in Russia, which we and many of our colleagues (Churilova, Zakharov, 2019; Velikaya, Knyazkova, 2021) have discussed several times. Moreover, in a number of cases, the frames of gender political discourse contradict the concept of demographic policy implemented in Russia, which focuses on improving medical care and socio-economic living conditions of the population.

Conservative discourse is opposed by feminist discourse, which is mostly represented by the leaders of a number of public and human rights organizations, but at present these organizations have practically no access to the media, many feminist and human rights organizations have been given the status of a foreign agent, and the activities of some had to be transferred to the Internet space.

At the same time, public rhetoric, appealing to traditional values, either marginalizes the topic, squeezing gender issues to the periphery of the information space, or is discriminatory against women, which

negatively affects the problem of understanding and implementation of women's civil and reproductive rights. The paternalistic and normative-moralistic frames create an atmosphere of symbolic pressure, where deviation from the dominant model – late motherhood, limited fertility, or conscious childlessness – is labeled as socially undesirable and sometimes dangerous. This forms a field of hidden discrimination that affects both public views and regulatory practices in the field of health care and social policy.

Of particular concern is the tendency towards limitation in the space of reproductive rights: tightening access to abortion, limiting the use of ART, discussions about banning private clinics, changes in law enforcement related to the new ban on “propaganda of refusal to procreate”. All these measures together transfer women's reproductive decisions from the sphere of personal autonomous choice to the sphere of state-controlled practices. Moreover, such initiatives contradict international norms enshrined in UN documents and create new risks for women's health and well-being.

The analysis shows that the attention of the authorities is focused primarily on the ideological component of family policy – the formation of the “right” image of the family, motherhood and femininity – while the structural factors of low fertility (working conditions, economic instability, housing problems, gender asymmetry of the labor market, lack of care infrastructure) remain secondary. Without eliminating these key causes, any attempts to regulate reproduction through regulatory pressure are doomed to low efficiency and can lead to the opposite effect: an increase in distrust, a decrease in reproductive intentions, and an expanded space for social tension.

The formation of a constructive and balanced gender order is possible only if reproductive rights are recognized as part of fundamental human rights, as well as if there is a transition from an ideologized model of regulation to a strategic policy based on protection of individual autonomy, equality of opportunity and social trust.

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