

WELCOME TO GILEAD

PRONATALISM AND THE THREAT TO REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

A POPULATION MATTERS REPORT



FOREWORD



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Across the world, sexual and reproductive health and rights are under attack by politicians who are worried that women are choosing to have fewer children. As someone who fights for those rights in my country – Poland – I see the destructive effects of toxic pronatalism playing out on a daily basis. The government has long been trying to convince people to have more children for the sake of the nation, and its failure to do so has contributed to increasingly restrictive measures. Almost one year ago, the politicised Constitutional Tribunal in Poland banned abortion in cases of foetal abnormality, leaving very few people able to access the service with safety, dignity and compassion within the Polish healthcare system. Poland is also the worst country in Europe for contraception access, and the ruling Law and Justice party is only making a bad situation even worse. For example, its revision of sexuality education is based on religious doctrine and has left young people uninformed and scared, as I know from experience as a sex educator working with young people.

In my work I am painfully acquainted with the suffering that these political actions have caused. The government's latest abortion restrictions recently claimed their first known victim: Izabela, a young woman who tragically died after doctors refused to perform a termination of her pregnancy out of concern that doing so would violate the restrictive new abortion law.¹

The Polish pronatalist movement drove doctors into such a state of fear that they would rather let a patient go into septic shock than terminate the pregnancy earlier and save her life. Many are terrified of prosecution and stigma from the pronatalist movement, and some use the law as an excuse to not provide their patients with necessary medical care due to their personal beliefs. But in both cases, it is clear: aggressive, nationalist pronatalism has paved the way for human rights violations in Poland.

As this report shows, the linkages between extreme pronatalism and reproductive rights violations are not limited to Poland. This is a global and growing threat – as I write this foreword in November 2021, the right to abortion is under debate in the US Supreme Court. Sexual and reproductive health and rights advocates have made tremendous gains over the years, but should recognise that in some places, hard-won rights are under attack because of a pervasive, political push for women to have more children, no matter the cost. As members of civil society, we cannot let that stand.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When people think of coercive population policies, their minds often go to examples like China and India, in which leaders wanted to limit population growth by forcing women to have fewer children. Now, however, with the populations of many countries starting to decline, that has changed. A growing number of politicians are embracing pronatalist policies, which encourage women to have more children. Many of these policies are simply intended to clear away barriers to having children, but as people continue to choose smaller families, governments across the world are increasingly resorting to de facto coercion in order to increase their populations, by depriving people of their reproductive rights.

The concerns fueling pronatalism are varied, intertwined and sometimes difficult to ascribe with certainty. Some leaders worry that a low birth rate will make their economies less competitive. Others worry explicitly about the low fertility rate among their ‘native’ population in relation to the population growth of other groups such as migrants. Still others are motivated by a patriarchal worldview in which women must stay home and bear children. In many cases, a combination of factors is at play. No matter the reason, governments and politicians now want women to have more children, and some are resorting to coercion to achieve that goal.

In this report, we furnish the evidence linking pronatalism with restrictions of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), by connecting the statements politicians and political influencers make on population with their actions on reproductive rights. We start with the autocratic governments of China and Iran, which are freer to impose their policies, and do so out of a combination of nationalist and economic interests. Then, we turn to the dubious democracies of Russia and Turkey, where human rights are easily ignored in pursuit of policy goals, and where more native-born citizens are seen as essential to sustained or growing national power. Next, we move to Hungary and Poland, in which nationalistic populism – like elsewhere across Eastern Europe – is blossoming and the rhetoric of the ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy theory is driving regressive

measures like abortion restrictions. We finish with Germany and the US, Western democracies in which ugly tendencies towards fascism and eugenics threaten to reappear as calls for ‘native’ women to have more children intensify.

Across these many examples we find that coercive pronatalism is not simply a manifestation of patriarchy or misogyny, but can be a product of political and economic forces entirely indifferent to women, who exist for them simply as productive or non-productive wombs.

In combination with exclusionary, nationalistic and socially conservative agendas, and fragile or non-existent regard for human rights, a toxic brand of pronatalism emerges that represents an almost inevitable threat to sexual and reproductive health and rights. It is essential to be cognizant of the warning signs, and to address these threats at source. We conclude with recommendations for policymakers and the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) community.



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INTRODUCTION

“The fact that nearly half of women still cannot make their own decisions about whether or not to have sex, use contraception or seek healthcare should outrage us all. In essence, hundreds of millions of women and girls do not own their own bodies. Their lives are governed by others. It is nothing less than an annihilation of the spirit, and it must stop.”

UNFPA Executive Director Natalia Kanem¹¹

The atrocities committed in fictional Gilead were not born in Margaret Atwood’s imagination – the author drew on real historical and contemporary cases when she crafted *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Yet we tend to think that such gross violations of women’s rights are a thing of the past, or, at least, that they are confined only to the most repressive societies. On the contrary, reproductive rights are under attack in every corner of the world, and pronatalism – the promotion of childbearing – has much to do with it.

Pronatalism is not a new phenomenon. Martin Luther taught that “Women should remain at home, sit still, keep house, and bear and bring up children ... If [a] woman grows weary and, at last, dies from childbearing, it matters not. Let her die from bearing, she is there to do it.”² Throughout history, pronatalism has been at the core of restricting women’s rights.

Pronatalism is not simply a belief about the status of women, however. It has long been associated with political, nationalistic and even economic goals. Despite, for instance, the perception of fascism’s association with population control, it is usually strongly, but selectively, pronatal, aiming to decrease procreation only among those deemed inferior – such as people of colour, migrants, and religious minorities – while increasing birth rates among the superior ‘native’ population. Hitler’s Germany, for example, gave awards to ‘Aryan’ women who had at least four children (with mothers

of eight or more receiving the highest honour), and encouraged them to stay home.³

The demographic context of pronatalism is different today. As a result of welcome gains in gender equality, poverty eradication and modern family planning giving them more freedom to choose, women in most of the world are no longer forced by circumstances to have more children than they want. Almost everywhere, they are having fewer children. Demographers’ measure for that number is the Total Fertility Rate (TFR)*. In any given population, if the TFR falls below 2.1 children per woman, population will inevitably decline over time (though not immediately⁴). According to the United Nations, almost half of the world’s population now live in countries with a TFR below 2.1.⁴

In many of those countries, politicians fear that women are choosing to have fewer children, and resort to pronatalist policies to change that trend. As a result, the percentage of countries with pronatalist policies grew from 10% in 1976 to 28% in 2015, according to the UN’s most recent data.⁵ Many of these policies are unproblematic from a gender and reproductive rights perspective, such as those intended to remove barriers to childbearing – for instance, through increasing paid parental leave. However, most experts agree that such policies have not so far had a significant effect on fertility rates:⁶ once women have the ability to control their reproduction, they tend to choose smaller families.

* See Glossary for definition

¹ A TFR below replacement rate within a given population does not necessarily mean population decline or fewer children at first. In addition to the effects of greater longevity, if a population has a larger number of women of childbearing age than the generation before, more children may be born in total, even though on average each woman is having fewer. This phenomenon is known as population momentum, and may continue to drive population growth for decades after TFR falls below 2.1.

So, a growing number of politicians are embracing a new, de facto coercive strategy to boost birth rates: making it difficult for people to access sexual and reproductive healthcare. The UNFPA warns that “modern family policies must be non-coercive, should fully support individual reproductive rights and allow people [to make] informed reproductive decisions.”⁷ but that hasn’t stopped many leaders from pursuing versions of pronatalism that contradict those principles.

Abusing women’s reproductive rights to achieve population objectives is not new. For generations, policymakers in low-income countries have – rightly – been concerned about the consequences of large family size and high population growth, which trap communities and nations in poverty, stretch government budgets, and consume natural resources. While many, including Thailand, Costa Rica and recently Rwanda, to name just a few, have successfully pursued ethical and empowering policies which reduce birth rates, coercive policies such as China’s one-child policy, India’s forced sterilisation camps and eugenicist programs in the US and Puerto Rico brought about misery and injustice, and cast a long shadow as a result. Now, though, reality looks much more like *The Handmaid’s Tale*: as birth rates have dropped across the world, some politicians are effectively forcing women to have children.

Why are they concerned? In many cases, politicians fear the economic consequences of an ageing and declining population (consequences which are in fact brought about more by macroeconomic policy than women’s reproductive decisions, and which can be comprehensively addressed through policies that do not increase births).^{*} In a growing number of cases, the motivation behind the alarm is more sinister: nationalists fear that low birth rates will result in a loss of national power and geostrategic influence, or that groups with higher fertility rates (usually, minorities) will ‘erase’ the culture and position of the existing ethnic or religious majority. Those same individuals tend to also hold the patriarchal view that women should stay at home and bear children.

Pronatalism is not confined to countries with low birth rates. Leaders in high-fertility countries have also promoted continued population growth by encouraging

women to have more children. In 2018, Tanzania’s late President, John Magufuli, told women to throw out their birth control pills because a growing population would allow the country to thrive.⁸ Now, however, the leaders of most high-fertility countries understand that declining fertility rates enable development, and eschew pronatalist policies, in many cases pursuing ethical and positive policies with the effect of lowering total fertility. While hundreds of millions of women in low-income countries still lack basic reproductive rights⁹, that has to do with factors other than a political desire to increase the population. Therefore, this report looks at countries with low fertility rates, where pronatalism spurs harmful policies.

Some politicians are bold – or crass – enough to state the motivations behind their pronatalism explicitly, though in most cases the complex of reasons is difficult to disentangle. However, there is ample evidence that economic, nationalist, and misogynist agendas are combining to fuel reproductive rights restrictions around the world. Nationalism is a thread running through many of the most egregious.

In this report, we examine how nationalistic pronatalism – with its various motivations – drives reproductive rights violations. We do so using in-depth case studies – a far from exhaustive list, but one which indicates the trends and dynamics everywhere that this threat exists. We start with authoritarian regimes, China and Iran, in which leaders use their immense power to control women’s fertility decisions. We then turn to Turkey and Russia, where nominal democracy is compromised by investment of autocratic power in the executive, and then look at the more democratic countries of Eastern Europe, Hungary and Poland, where – as in Russia – populist governments have exploited nationalist undercurrents to enact a number of regressive laws that hurt women. We end by exploring the spread or threat of reproductive rights violations in countries that are closer to home for most readers: Germany and the United States. These are countries in which we have tended to think that reproductive rights are safely assured, yet as Margaret Atwood warns in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “Nothing changes instantly: in a gradually heating bathtub you’d be boiled to death before you knew it.”¹⁰

^{*} For more on solutions to ageing societies, see Population Matters’ [Silver linings, not silver burdens](#) report.

1 CHAPTER ONE: DISPATCHES FROM GILEAD

Not all the fruits of unchallenged political power are bad. China's communist regime initially brought greater gender equality to the country¹² and Iran's, now abandoned, non-coercive family planning programme empowered millions of Iranians to take control of their reproductive decisions.¹³ However, authoritarian regimes wield their power solely in their own perceived interests. Today, China and Iran demonstrate the very real dangers of pronatalism when civil society is unable to fight back. Faced with low birth rates, both have taken increasingly egregious steps to raise their fertility rates, disregarding human rights with impunity. Because the leaders of these countries are able to assert their motivations more freely, they also provide a picture of how dangerous ideologies drive pronatalism.

IRAN: FERTILITY AS A WEAPON

"The enemy has been implementing a consistent plan to reduce the birthrate."

Iranian parliamentarian Nasrollah Pejmanfar¹⁴

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a long history of controlling women's reproductive decisions for its own benefit. Following the revolution in the late 1970s, Iran got rid of family planning and promoted large families. The government especially pushed its pronatalist agenda during the Iran-Iraq war, urging women to make more "soldiers for Islam".¹⁵ Following the economic devastation of the war, however, the regime struggled to care for its rapidly growing population and instituted



an extremely successful, non-coercive family planning programme. Iran continued to ban abortion but provided contraception free of charge. Fertility rates fell at record speed, from nearly seven in the late 1970s to under two in 2000.¹⁶ Women benefited tremendously by gaining independence and financial stability, but this was not the government's goal: women's empowerment was merely a side effect of its drive for economic growth.

Now that population growth is slowing, the government is once again reversing course. Since 2011, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has repeatedly expressed concern that the country's population is ageing.¹⁷ In 2014 he released a decree for the government to restore Iran's "dynamism, development and youthful nature" by doubling the population by 2050.¹⁸ The chairman of Population Health and Family at the Ministry of Health has fretted about Iran's "population trap", invoking economic concerns.¹⁹ Khamenei seems also to be motivated partially by the economic implications of supporting an ageing population, but has stated that the size of the workforce isn't his only worry.²⁰ Maintaining traditional gender roles is also important: he marked Women's Day in 2014 by telling Iranian women (who now outnumber men in universities) to reject "Western clichés", sexual equality, and career aspirations and instead embrace their destiny to be mothers.²¹

National power is perhaps an even more important feature of Iran's population discourse. Khamenei frequently frames population growth as imperative for national security and identity, and invokes conspiracies about Western enemies plotting to bring down Iran by diminishing its birth rate.²² In response, Iranian law now places abortion within the Ministry of Intelligence's jurisdiction, framing it as a national security matter and it tasks Iran's Passive Defense Force with addressing the effects of genetically modified food and bioterrorism on infertility.²³ Furthermore, all healthcare providers must now meticulously track their patients' fertility and reproductive histories.²⁴

In 2019, the government arrested two university demographers after accusing them of espionage and of exaggerating Iran's birth rate to hide the extent of Iran's slowing population growth. Parliamentarian

Nasrollah Pejmanfar claimed that "The enemy has been implementing a consistent plan to reduce the birthrate".²⁵ He also asserted that reducing Iran's population through small family norms, birth control, and even demographic statistics is "part of the enemy's assault that is indeed an all-out war against the Islamic Republic".²⁶

A number of important clerics such as Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani have worried specifically about low birth rates among the Shia population, which is the dominant Islamic sect in Iran.²⁷ Given that Iran is an Islamic theocracy governed by Shia clerics, maintaining a Shia majority is important for the regime's political future. In a 2013 speech, Khamenei told Iranians that reproduction is "women's jihad" – a religious duty.²⁸

Iran's government hasn't stopped at imploring women to have more children for the sake of their country. Recent reforms have cracked down on abortion enforcement, banned sterilisation for both men and women, and outlawed free birth control.²⁹ Even in the private sector, women have had trouble obtaining contraception: in recent years, many women have only been able to purchase domestically produced birth control, which is known for being unreliable, or Yasmin, a Western-produced oral contraceptive, which has been sued thousands of times for its connection to serious side effects like heart attacks.³⁰ One woman explained the toll limited contraception options took on her: "I vomited on a daily basis from the birth control pills I took. I tried every pill on the market this past year, and each was worse than the other. It got so bad that I now have my aunt in Germany send me a packet of birth control pills every month".³¹ Many women have it even worse: reports suggest that the government has restricted birth control access even more severely in rural areas, where women are especially vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies.³²

Foreign sanctions, which have made many medications difficult to obtain in Iran, have clearly played a role. However, the coincidence between a lack of foreign birth control and Iranian leaders' constant warnings that its enemies are plotting to decimate the population is too strong to ignore. Khamenei, after all, has referred to birth control as a "disorder".³³

Whether population issues influence Iran's continued tolerance for child marriage can't be judged. The legal age for marriage is 13 years for girls and 15 years for boys and younger with parental consent. In 2020, 10% more marriages in which one or both partners were aged 10–14 took place than the year before.³⁴ On average, globally, a girl married at 13 will have 26% more children than one married at 18 or above.³⁵

One significant difference between Iran and the fictional Gilead is that Iran's regime doesn't even care about the health of pregnant women or their unborn children, despite encouraging all women to bear children for the republic. Many female activists have been imprisoned and tortured despite being visibly pregnant.³⁶ In some cases, authorities threatened to kill the unborn children of their prisoners if they refused to sign off on doctored confessions. In recent years, these instances were presided over by Ebrahim Raisi, then chief of the Judiciary. If his name sounds familiar, it's because he recently took over Iran's Presidency. During his two years as Head of Judiciary, he supervised the execution of more than 30 and torture of at least 36 women prisoners.³⁷ "Dynamism, development and youthfulness" may well matter to Raisi, Khamenei, and others in the regime, but only when it's contained within a patriarchal and traditionalist power structure, with them at its head.

CHINA: UPGRADING POPULATION QUALITY

"The birth of a baby is not only a matter of the family itself, but also a state affair."

People's Daily, China's official newspaper³⁸

China is infamous for using its authoritarian power to enforce the one-child policy, which may have contributed to economic growth but unquestionably violated the fundamental human rights of hundreds of millions of people. China is no longer, however, the poster child of population 'control'. Today, it is starting to reverse the goals of its coercion with an aim to boost its birth rate.

Given the government's past interference in reproductive rights, the danger to women now is being forced to have *more*, not fewer, children than they would like.³⁹

China has been fixating on its low birth rate and sluggish population growth rate, which was slower in 2020 than it had been since 1953.⁴⁰ In particular, the government worries about sustaining its economic growth with a declining, ageing population. One recent government study warned that its labour force could shrink by 200 million people from 2020 to 2050,⁴¹ and concerns about funding the pension system are deepening. In response, President Xi Jinping has emphasised family values, highlighted the reproductive role of women, and warned of instability if birth rates stay low.⁴²

Like most of the countries featured in this report, China's concern is not with mere numbers, and this is where the economic and ethno-nationalist motivations for pronatalism come together. The government's recent five-year plan sets an ominous goal of "upgrading population quality",⁴³ and the evidence shows this effectively means higher fertility rates among the Han majority (particularly those who are educated and wealthy) and lower birth rates among minorities like the Uyghurs, who the government scorns as "baby-making machines"⁴⁴ and subjects to forced abortions, sterilisations and long-term contraceptives.⁴⁵ Recent population policy harkens back to China's not-so-distant past, when a 1993 law initially called "On Eugenics and Health Protection" intended to improve population "quality" by limiting births among those with disabilities and other health problems.⁴⁶

The government has demonstrated its intention to raise birth rates through positive means such as shifting the one-child policy to a two-child and then three-child policy, and talks about making education and housing more affordable. However, relaxation of restrictions has had no significant effect so far,⁴⁷ and leaders are already eyeing more coercive policies. Premier Li Keqiang stated vaguely that the government is pursuing "appropriate" fertility rates, and the Politburo announced that it would "strengthen the education and guidance" of newly married couples and "control bad social customs".⁴⁸ China expert



Carl Minzner warns that “[g]iven the current political atmosphere in Beijing, the real risk is that Chinese leaders will launch an aggressive pronatalist campaign infused with traditionalist norms. With Beijing’s predilection for numerical targets, it is easy to imagine this resulting in a 180-degree inversion of the antinatalist tactics pursued during the decades of the one-child policy, with local Party cadres graded on their success in increasing—rather than reducing—birth rates in their jurisdictions.”⁴⁹

Minzner’s predictions are already coming true. In September 2021, China’s cabinet released its ten-year plan for women’s health. The guidelines include the cryptic goal of reducing elective abortions, and Chinese women fear that – in light of the government’s obsession with population growth – this will mean new abortion restrictions.⁵⁰ Some provinces, like Jiangxi, have already introduced stricter abortion measures, such as requiring several doctors’ signatures after fourteen weeks of pregnancy.⁵¹ Pronatalist policies have hurt Chinese men, too. Doctors often require men to supply a ‘family planning certificate’, which states marital and parental status, before performing voluntary vasectomies, and turn down requests from men who don’t already have children. One man, who was single and childfree, was turned down by six different hospitals after being told that by seeking a vasectomy he was opposing China’s birth policy.⁵²

The Chinese government has also used its propaganda expertise to shame single women (particularly those who

are educated) for choosing careers over family. Since the demographic panic began, state media has ridiculed them as “leftover women” and encouraged them to marry and have children for the sake of the country.⁵³ Hong Fincher explains that “The Chinese government aggressively perpetuates traditional gender norms and reduces women to their roles as dutiful wives, mothers and baby breeders in the home, to minimize social unrest and give birth to future generations of skilled workers... policymakers continue to view women primarily as reproductive tools to realize the nation’s development goals”.⁵⁴ China’s state paper told readers that “the birth of a baby is not only a matter of the family itself, but also a state affair”.⁵⁵

One of the most disturbing outcomes of China’s emphasis on producing more children is a flourishing industry that traffics vulnerable Kachin women from neighbouring Myanmar to serve as brides for single Chinese men. These men want a handmaid, not a wife. Once they give birth, many of these women are allowed to return home, without their babies.⁵⁶

Observers blame the one-child policy for leading to a surplus of single men. Today, however, the Chinese government has different priorities: one Chinese official even told a group of women’s rights activists from Myanmar that the government provides culture classes at the border to help the trafficked women become good Chinese wives.⁵⁷

2 CHAPTER TWO: 'STRONGMAN' LEADERS AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

China and Iran are fundamentally authoritarian regimes, pursuing their perceived national interests with technocratic fervor. In Turkey and Russia, autocratic leaders ride a wave of populism to maintain and justify the increasingly undemocratic concentration of power they enjoy. Both also see population growth as a cornerstone of national status and international influence, and exercise their power to promote the values and implement the policies which they believe will secure it.

TURKEY: THREE-PLUS CHILDREN FOR THE ECONOMY

“[Abortions and cesarean sections are] secret plots designed to stall Turkey’s economic growth and a conspiracy to wipe the Turkish nation from the world stage.”

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 2012⁵⁸

Like China and Iran, Turkey is no stranger to using reproductive policy to control population size. Following its War of Independence in the early 20th century, Turkish leaders instituted pronatal policies in a nationalist attempt to replace war casualties. Contraception, sterilisation, and even sharing contraception information was made illegal, and abortion was codified as a crime against “racial integrity”.⁵⁹ In the 1960s, however, Turkey joined many other countries in realising that population growth was a threat to economic development and changed its tune, providing free contraception and later legalising abortion.⁶⁰ Again, it was economic growth, not women’s rights, that drove the agenda.

The nationalist Justice and Development (AKP) party’s rise to power, with President Erdoğan at its helm, has revived pronatalism in Turkey. In a 2012 speech, Erdoğan called abortion mass murder, equating it to a recent incident in which the military killed 34 of its own civilians.⁶¹ He

also claimed that abortions and cesarean sections are “secret plots designed to stall Turkey’s economic growth and a conspiracy to wipe the Turkish nation from the world stage”.⁶² Though the fertility rate remains above replacement rate, Erdoğan erroneously believes that faster population growth will automatically expand the economy, helping achieve his goal of catapulting Turkey into the world’s top ten economies. He frequently brings up Turkey’s increasing average age – though it’s still much younger than that of most countries in Europe – and tells women that “one or two children mean bankruptcy ... At least three children are necessary in each family, because our population risks ageing”.⁶³

Nationalism is also at play: experts believe that AKP is concerned with the higher birth rates of the Kurdish minority, and wants to prevent demography from shifting the balance of power.⁶⁴ The higher birth rates among Turkey’s large refugee population may also be a concern for nationalists. Erdoğan has told Turkish women that birth control is treason,⁶⁵ abortion is unpatriotic, and that to serve their country, they must have at least three children.⁶⁶ “A woman who rejects motherhood, who refrains from being around the house, however successful her working life is, is deficient, is incomplete”, according to Erdoğan.⁶⁷

Erdoğan’s calls for baby-making aren’t limited to within Turkey’s borders. He has also implored Turks who live abroad to have at least five children – even more than their compatriots – in order to “stake a claim” in their new countries.⁶⁸

To realise its goals, AKP has repeatedly attempted to restrict abortion, either by limiting it to only the first month of pregnancy or banning it altogether.⁶⁹ Such harsh actions were thwarted by public opposition, but succeeded in confusing people into believing abortion is now illegal in Turkey. The attempts have also encouraged doctors to refuse provision of abortion or allow it only

with a husband's permission – leaving single women without options.⁷⁰ The Ministry of Health, which supplies clinics with contraceptives, is inconsistent at best: in 2012, it did not purchase any contraceptives at all.⁷¹ Nurses often have to watch women leave empty-handed when they come in for contraceptives, only to return a few months later, pregnant.⁷²

As in the United States, neoliberal reforms have also put reproductive healthcare out of reach for many poor Turks. The government can withhold 20% of nurses' salaries if they don't meet performance measures, which crucially don't include reproductive healthcare.⁷³ So, nurses often refuse to provide services like IUD insertion simply because they are pressured into prioritising other healthcare.⁷⁴

RUSSIA: THE MOTHERLAND NEEDS MORE MOTHERS

“Russia's fate and its historic prospects depend on how many of us there are... it depends on how many children are born in Russian families.”

Russian President Vladimir Putin⁷⁵

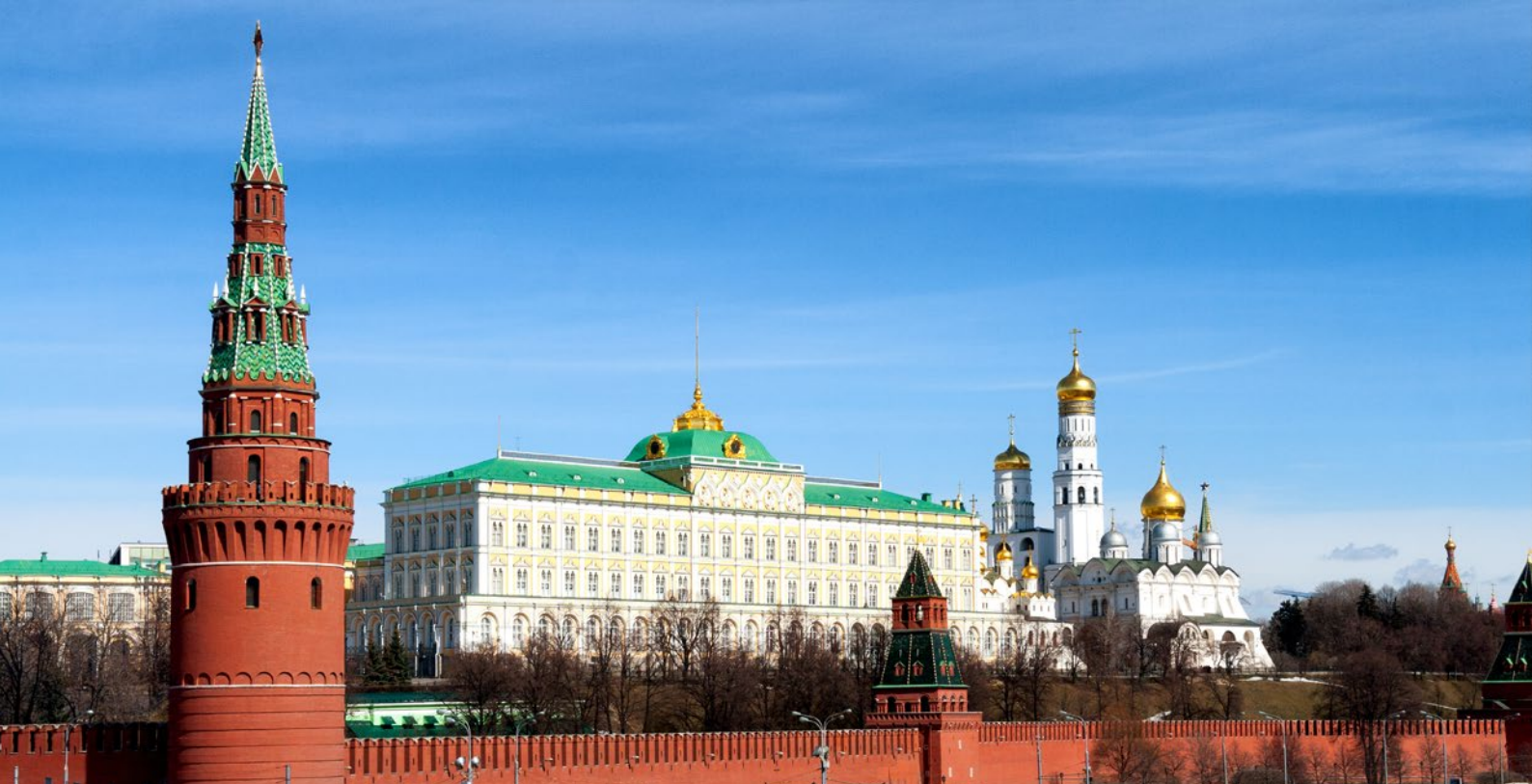
Russia's population peaked in 1992.⁷⁶ Since then, low birth rates, poor life expectancy and emigration have worried the nationalist government. In 2006, President Putin “identified Russia's decreasing population as a possible national security threat and as the most acute issue facing the country.”⁷⁷ Putin reiterated the message more recently in 2020, telling the country that “Russia's fate and its historic prospects depend on how many of us there are... it depends

on how many children are born in Russian families”.⁷⁸ Other politicians have no choice but to agree: a Moscow State University demographer explained that securing a seat in the Russian parliament now requires pursuing population growth as a major policy goal.⁷⁹

Russian pronatalism, as in Hungary and Poland (see below), seems to be rooted in nationalist and religious objectives. Economic concerns don't appear to play as big a role as they do in other pronatalist countries, perhaps because given Russia's poor life expectancy and meagre pensions, most people don't live long enough past retirement. Thus, concerns about having enough future workers to support the elderly are not as prominent as they are in, say, Japan. Russia's government is now funneling upwards of the equivalent of £6 billion each year into attempting to raise the birth rate – much more than it has allocated for healthcare and education investments, which would make more sense for its economic future.⁸⁰

This funding is used for programmes such as tax breaks and one-time payments of about £5,800 to mothers.⁸¹ Some local politicians are taking it a step further. The Governor of the Ulyanovsk region, for instance, declared September 12 the “Day of Conception”, urging couples to create new “patriots of Russia” by taking the day off





work to procreate. Those who manage to give birth to “patriots” exactly nine months later are given cars and other rewards.⁸²

As in other semi-authoritarian countries, Russia’s leaders haven’t stopped at economic incentives. There have long been proposals in Russia’s legislative body to restrict abortion, and the demographic panic of the past couple decades has made them more viable.⁸³ In 2010, the parliament established a working group to find ways to decrease abortions. This committee included not just legislators but leaders from the Russian Orthodox Church, which enjoys tremendous power in Russian politics.⁸⁴ The Church is opposed to all forms of modern contraception and has utilised the demographic panic for its anti-reproductive rights agenda.⁸⁵ Patriarch Kirill, head of the Church and friend of Putin, has explicitly tied abortions to population decline, estimating that the prevention of one million abortions each year would result in population growth.⁸⁶ Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov (who previously said that girls should eschew school for childbirth) has called abortion by Russian women a mass murder worse than the Holocaust.⁸⁷

As a result of this political-religious collaboration, a 2012 law requires people who want an abortion to undergo counseling and a two-to-seven day waiting period. The legislation’s authors intended for these new restrictions to prevent women from terminating their pregnancies. They

know that the waiting period penalises those who have to travel to bigger cities to seek abortions. Even in Moscow, a shortage of gynaecologists means that women already have to wait weeks for an abortion.⁸⁸ The mandatory counseling – which in many cases must take place with a priest – is also intended to discourage abortion. In fact, government guidelines regulating mandatory counseling state that abortion is “murder of a living child”, and that the priest or psychologist should dissuade the patient seeking an abortion through graphic abortion images and a reminder that motherhood is her purpose.⁸⁹ Though countries with restrictive abortion laws tend to have equal or even higher incidents of abortion, Russia’s abortion rate *has* gone down by 30% since 2015, but this hasn’t significantly affected population decline, which continues to gain momentum.⁹⁰

The inextricable links between the government’s profound social conservatism and its demographic preoccupations were made even more explicit in a recent (September 2021) call by Andrei Tsyganov, the chairman of a government commission, to label some social movements as “extremist ideologies”, a designation which provides a pretext for legal action against them. While the inclusion of LGBTI campaigns and radical feminism in his list was little surprise to all who have watched the Kremlin’s social policies with increasing dismay, Tsyganov added another group – the childfree movement.⁹¹

3 CHAPTER THREE: A SAVIOUR FOR CHRISTIAN CIVILISATION

“The UN’s Sexual and Reproductive Health Agency is concerned that the focus of some population policies currently being implemented in the EECA [Eastern Europe and Central Asia] region could have a negative impact on women’s and reproductive rights. Despite the complexity of demographic change, most policies to ‘improve demographic trends’ in Eastern Europe remain focused on one principal demographic driver – increasing birth rates.”⁹³

Alanna Armitage, UNFPA Regional Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia

A wave of Christian white nationalism has swept across the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe. At the same time, the region has experienced some of the world’s lowest fertility rates. The populist leaders of countries such as Hungary and Poland have used the uncertainty of demographic change as a political opportunity to increase support for their nationalist, religion-infused politics. White, Christian civilisation is collapsing, they claim, and women are to blame for having fewer children. In reality, population decline has more to do with the droves of young people who emigrate from those countries in search of more economic and social opportunities – and freedom – elsewhere in Europe.

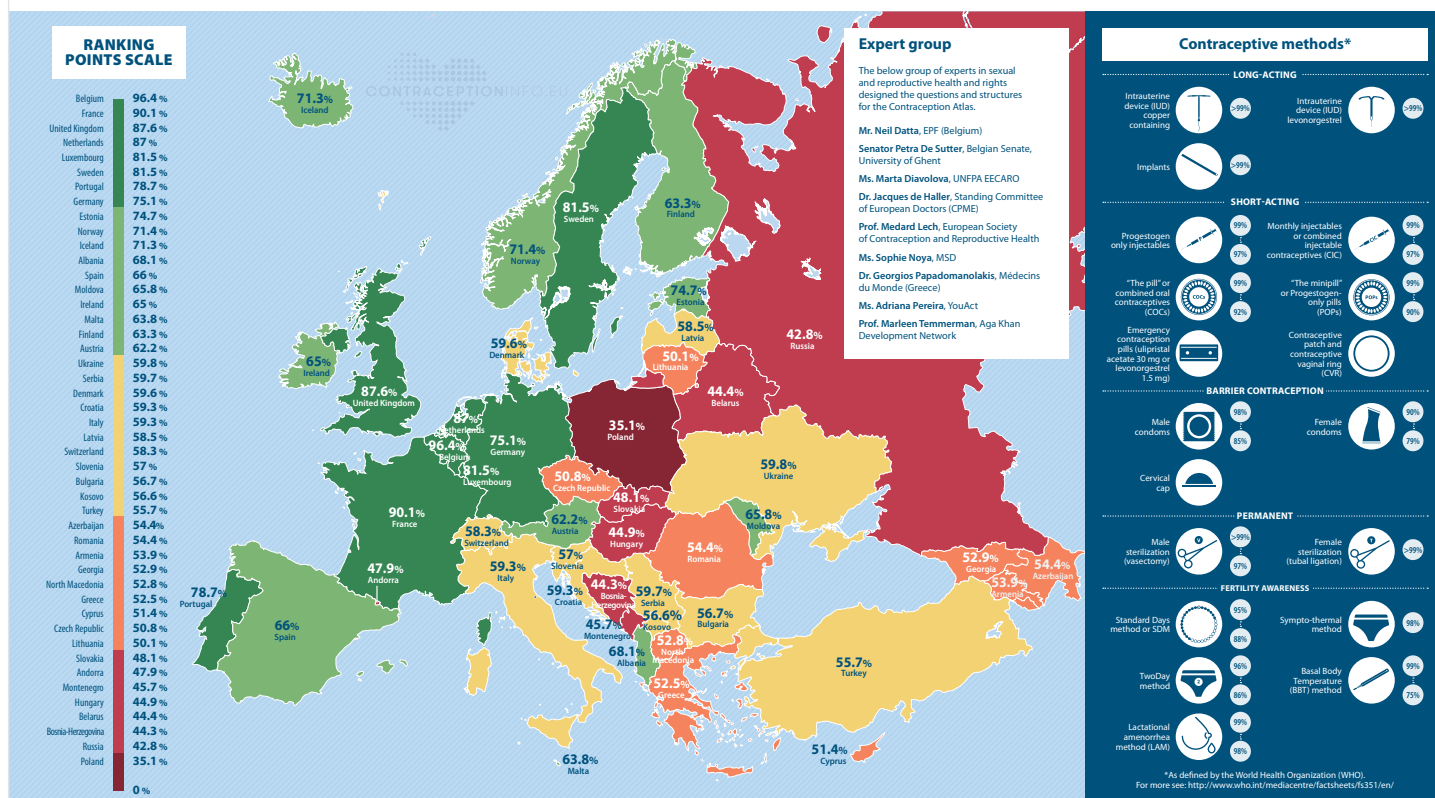
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Courtesy of European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights¹²⁷

Women in this part of the world tend to have more freedom of speech and protest than do those who suffer in China, Iran, Turkey and Russia, but still leaders are abolishing reproductive rights at a dizzying speed, all within the veneer of democracy. Eastern Europeans have been left with the worst access to contraception on the continent, as shown in the map above, and countries like Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, and Belarus are also experiencing potentially dangerous waves of pronatalism. As politicians attempt to increase economic and geopolitical power through fertility, they violate the international principle of non-retrogression, which states that once a right has been granted, it shouldn't be removed⁹⁴, and usher in a reality that looks more like Gilead each day.

HUNGARY: DEMOGRAPHY IS DESTINY

“Europe, our common homeland, [is] losing out in the population competition between great civilizations... In the struggle for the future of Europe, stopping illegal migration is imperative... This struggle ... is only worthwhile if we are able to combine it with a family policy that restores natural reproduction on the continent.”

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán⁹⁵

Hungary exemplifies one of the most sinister motivations behind pronatalism: the ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy theory. In short, the theory accuses shadowy forces of intentionally decimating white Christian populations by encouraging low birth rates and allowing other groups – namely Muslims, migrants, and people of colour – to gain power through immigration and higher birth rates. Those who propagate it frequently blame women for enabling population decline by choosing careers over motherhood.⁹⁶ They also accuse those who promote small families for environmental reasons – as Population Matters does – of participating in an anti-white conspiracy.⁹⁷ Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán openly endorses the Great Replacement theory. He and other far-right Hungarian politicians state that population decline is one of the biggest problems facing Hungary, while at the same time stoking panic

about high birth rates among the Roma and refugees, who Orbán calls “Muslim Invaders”.⁹⁸ He also incites antisemitism by accusing Jewish Hungarian billionaire George Soros of promoting migration.⁹⁹

Unsurprisingly, there are few women in Hungary's halls of power. But the country does have a real-life Serena Joy, of a kind: politician Dóra Dúró, who has held positions of power in various far-right parties. Dúró has stated that patriotic Hungarians must have at least four children, and she's no hypocrite: the thirty-four-year-old already has four of her own children.¹⁰⁰ She opposes legalisation of medical abortion because it would expand the national “disaster” already caused by surgical abortions.¹⁰¹ Her laptop sticker reminds colleagues that “The nation lives in the womb”.¹⁰² And like Serena, Dúró is one half of a far-right power couple: her husband, politician Előd Novák, is known for his vitriolic attacks on Hungary's Roma, Jewish, and LGBTQ communities. Unfortunately, Dúró doesn't seem to recognise that women are another major target for the politics of her husband and party.

Hungary's government has channeled its nationalist agenda into some ostensibly positive pronatalist policies. For example, married couples can apply for a loan of about £25,000, which they don't have to repay if they have at least three children. And women under 40 are entitled to free fertility treatments. However, a look under the surface reveals that these policies, too, are regressive. Couples who get divorced have just four months to repay their loan, and lesbian women are excluded from government-provided fertility treatments.¹⁰³ The government wants people to procreate – but only if they're Hungarian, heterosexual, and married.

Orbán's pronatalism comes with an expensive price tag: Hungary spends 5% of its GDP on trying to increase the birth rate,¹⁰⁴ which could be better spent on building a safety net for a broader section of society. But Orbán is proud of his ‘investment’: “Instead of just numbers, we want Hungarian children. Migration for us is surrender”.¹⁰⁵

In 2018, one Hungarian minister declared that its population would be double if abortion had not been legal¹⁰⁶. And indeed, the government has attempted to force – rather than encourage – women to have more

KEY TO SUSTAINABILITY



Laszlo Balogh/AP/Shutterstock

(Left to right) Czech Republic's Prime Minister Andrej Babis, Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Milorad Dodik at the Budapest Demographic Summit, September 2021.

D.C., held a conference called “Make Families Great Again”, in which the government encouraged the US to adopt similar pronatalist policies. Three American Members of Congress spoke at the event.¹¹⁰ Shannon Kowalski of the International Women’s Health Coalition cautioned that the “conference demonstrates the insidious connections between authoritarian governments, far-right nationalists, and anti-choice movements who conspire to strip women and gender-diverse people of their rights”.¹¹¹

children by restricting and banning abortion. These efforts failed to materialise into legislation, however, because of public backlash. So instead, the government is inching towards an abortion ban with smaller measures. Hungary amended its constitution to specify that the right to life begins at conception. Women now have to attend not one but two counseling sessions, at least three days apart, before they can obtain an abortion.¹⁰⁷ During those sessions, doctors try to dissuade women from terminating their pregnancies, sometimes telling patients that they’re crazy for not pursuing the government’s “generous” loan programme.¹⁰⁸

Emergency contraception requires a prescription, and medical abortion is illegal. A government-sponsored propaganda campaign stigmatises any form of abortion. However, many Hungarians still reject the government’s nationalist pronatalism. One young woman, who had to travel to Austria for an abortion, questioned, “why are you forcing women to have babies they don’t want when there are all these refugees who want to come here?... At this rate the only thing Hungarian women are going to be allowed to do is sit in a dark room and keep giving birth to babies they don’t want—while Syrian women desperately try to find homes for the children they do want.”¹⁰⁹

Orbán has increasingly aimed to export his agenda, and his nationalist pronatalism is inspiring other politicians. In 2019, Hungary hosted an international ‘demography’ conference in which Orbán and other heads of state peddled the Great Replacement theory. That same year, the Hungarian embassy in Washington,

In September 2021, a new iteration of the event, the Budapest Demographic Summit attracted a swathe of international politicians and others for whom demography, family values and national destiny are unambiguously intertwined. The governments of Poland, Slovenia and the Czech Republic joined Hungary in endorsing the associated declaration that:

“Increasing the number of European children is essential to preserving Europe’s Christian culture and other religious traditions for future generations.”¹¹²

POLAND: WHAT YOU DON’T KNOW WON’T TEMPT YOU

“In Germany, billions of euros are spent on support for immigrants, but here these billions of złotys are spent on Polish families...This is a revolutionary socio-demographic project, and we are proud of it.”

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki¹¹³

Poland has never been a haven for sexual and reproductive rights. Since the nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party’s ascension to power in 2015, women have faced even more hurdles. As in Hungary, large-scale emigration and a low fertility rate have meant that Poland’s population is ageing and slowly declining. PiS has exploited this situation, claiming that low birth rates are an existential threat to Polish identity and survival.

Bolstered by extreme-right Catholic organisation *Ordo Iuris* (sic), the government blames Polish women, who they claim are selfishly choosing careers over their duty to preserve the nation through procreation.

Education minister Przemysław Czarnek has accused feminism of undermining the “fundamental procreative function of the family” and said that women should prioritise motherhood over careers because that’s what “God called on them to do”.¹¹⁴

Publicly, Polish politicians echo Hungarian nationalists in denouncing immigration and limiting their calls for baby-making to Polish women. Prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki boasted that “In Germany, billions of euros are spent on support for immigrants, but here these billions of złotys are spent on Polish families...This is a revolutionary socio-demographic project, and we are proud of it”.¹¹⁵ Silently, however, the government has been allowing a record number of migrants into Poland in order to fill gaps in the labour market.¹¹⁶ Most of these migrants, however, are Christian Ukrainians, fitting within the PiS narrative of saving white, Christian civilisation.

Its secret acceptance of migrants reflects, though, that demography is more than just a nationalist concern for Poland. The economy also matters, and Poland’s government is trying to replace the workers that have left for western Europe – and those that women are refusing to produce. But the government still vastly underreports the number of immigrants it accepts, and fired a minister for openly expressing the economic case for immigration.¹¹⁷

In an attempt to entice women to have more children, the government spends the equivalent of over £7.5 billion each year in monthly payments to parents.¹¹⁸ That has failed to significantly affect the birth rate, and the country has turned to more regressive pronatalist measures. Polish women must now obtain a prescription for emergency contraception which, in delaying the drug’s administration, directly impedes its efficacy. The Health Minister justified the decision by wrongly claiming that emergency contraception is a form of abortion.¹¹⁹ The government also emboldens doctors to abuse the ‘conscience clause’, which allows them to refuse abortions on moral grounds, to also deny provision of contraception.¹²⁰

In 2021, the government enacted a law that prohibits abortion on the grounds of foetal abnormality, which had been one of only three cases in which abortion was legal and served as the basis for 98% of all abortions. Alarming, PiS had tried to do this for years, and only succeeded after removing several pro-choice judges from the Constitutional Tribunal. Now, abortion is only legal if the pregnancy resulted from a crime or is an immediate threat to the woman’s life.

A more subtle manifestation of Polish pronatalism lies in the government’s revisions to sexuality education. The government hired a Catholic theologian – who has claimed that contraception leads to “hedonism, sex addiction and a tendency to betray” – to design the new curriculum.¹²¹ It’s no shock that the revised ‘Preparation for Family Living’ mentions the word “sex” only twice, but the word “family” over 170 times.¹²² As the handmaids are told in Gilead, “what you don’t know won’t tempt you.”¹²³

Sexual and reproductive rights have reached such a low state in Poland that the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development had to find a new colour to represent Poland on its contraception policy map (see page 13). Poland is by far the worst.¹²⁴

Though Poland’s birth rate increased slightly in the wake of its government’s draconian laws, it remains low. * If anything, Polish youth have become more opposed to childbearing, terrified of raising children in such a restrictive society. But, without access to contraception, abortion, and sexuality education, they struggle to protect themselves from pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. Tens of thousands of Poles have to travel abroad every year to obtain abortions, and about 150,000 procure illegal abortions within Poland.¹²⁵ The effects on both physical and mental health are hard to overstate.

It’s easy to view what’s happening in Poland as a faraway dystopian tale. But the extremist, religious, nationalist currents controlling Poland are spreading across the globe. Expert Neil Datta warns that “This is not just ‘Poland being Poland’. These actions are illegal, inhumane and could infiltrate the rest of Europe – and this is just the beginning...it is also the beginning of exporting Poland’s ultra-conservatism beyond its borders.”¹²⁶

* The fertility rate increased slightly from 1.39 in 2016, when the child payments started, to 1.48 in 2017, and then fell again (World Bank)

4 CHAPTER FOUR: ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT?

The established democracies of Western Europe, North America and elsewhere are often considered havens for sexual and reproductive health and rights – and yet rights that have been won long ago can still be lost.

Fears of falling birthrates and ageing populations exercise a powerful hold on policymakers in thrall to principles of economic growth. The EU has recently appointed a Commissioner for Demography to examine the issue, though in the words of one MEP, “if you have a commissioner for demography, it sounds like a commissioner to produce babies.”¹²⁸ While its first holder, Dubravka Šuica, also has an ambiguous track record on sexual and reproductive rights,¹²⁹ it seems currently unlikely that the EU as an institution will embrace their restriction. With a number of its member states already doing so, however, there is no room for complacency.

Indeed, even shorn of the most extreme and malignant opposition to it, the political and electoral implications of immigration are a factor in politics throughout Europe and across the world. Boosting populations through births rather than the importation of people from other countries offers politicians a tempting, and relatively uncontroversial, solution to perceived risks associated with population decline.

There are politicians everywhere who are seeking to curb women’s rights in order to meet their nationalist and economic objectives. Even France, which is known for achieving a relatively high birth rate through generous financial support for parents rather than reproductive rights violations, hasn’t been spared. French member of the European Parliament Aymeric Chauprade called abortion and contraception a “mass destruction weapon against European demography”.¹³⁰ In this final section of the report, we look at the threat that pronatalism could make Germany and the US look more like the repressive societies previously discussed.

GERMANY: CHILDREN FOR THE GERMAN RACE

“Germany’s negative demographic trend has to be counteracted. Mass immigration has a high potential for conflict and is not a viable economic solution. The only mid- and longterm solution is to attain a higher birth rate by the native population by stimulating family policies.”

German political party Alternative für Deutschland¹³¹



The same nationalist pronatalism that is being openly displayed in Eastern Europe has found its way into fringe political parties in Western democracies. In Germany, that fringe has gained power and political influence through right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the country’s third strongest political party before the September 2021 elections, and still the holder of 83 out of the 299 seats in the German parliament.¹³² AfD promotes gender policies rooted in misogyny and homophobia, and links its traditional view of family to population growth. According to AfD members, “The biological as well as the cultural reproduction of German society is seemingly in danger when the traditional family is put at risk”.¹³³



Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge

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In a section of their political programme titled “Larger Families instead of Mass Immigration”, AfD leaders juxtapose low birth rates among ethnic Germans with influxes of immigrants – especially Muslims.¹³⁴ AfD members cite the Great Replacement conspiracy theory often, claiming that political elites are intentionally welcoming refugees and immigrants to facilitate the demise of the white, Christian German population, and stoke fears of coming instability.

The AfD’s political programme does address the economic effects of population decline, claiming that Germany’s pension and healthcare systems can’t withstand “undesirable demographic developments” like young Germans choosing smaller families.¹³⁵ However, the same document acknowledges the reality, which is that because of growing automation and other factors, the economy doesn’t actually require more population growth. Such inconsistencies expose AfD’s true motivation: the fear that immigration and low birth rates among ethnic Germans are a threat to their racist, xenophobic vision of what Germany ought to look like.

Their solution to the conspiracy is by now a very familiar one: restrict immigration and get white women to have more babies. AfD’s view of women is very reminiscent to the traditional German saying *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*

(children, kitchen, church), which exemplified the role of women in the Third Reich.¹³⁶

AfD opposes abortion, and its Deputy Leader Beatrix von Storch, who also happens to be the granddaughter of Hitler’s finance minister, leads Germany’s anti-abortion march each year. Clearly, sanctity of life is not a concern for von Storch, though: she has previously advocated for police to have the right to shoot refugees – including children – who try to cross Germany’s border.¹³⁷ Abortion is not a moral issue for AfD; rather, it’s an inconvenient barrier to forcing Germans to have more children for the sake of the nation.

Because AfD lacks a majority in Germany’s legislature, it’s unable to turn all of its nationalist, sexist policies into reality. It *has* succeeded in blocking revision to Nazi-era sections of German law, however.¹³⁸ According to Section 218, abortion – which is listed next to manslaughter – is illegal. This law was passed in 1933, when authorities declared that abortion “shall be exterminated with a strong hand ... proceedings will be taken against every evil-doer who dares to injure our sacred healthy race”.¹³⁹ An amendment was passed in the 1970’s that allows abortions but only within 12 weeks of pregnancy and after counseling and a four-day waiting period.¹⁴⁰ And in most cases, abortion fees must be paid out of pocket.¹⁴¹

Section 219a – another law rooted in Nazi eugenics – prohibits medical professionals from publicising abortion information. In a dark quirk of the law, there is one German website that is allowed to list all of the country's abortion providers: babycaust.de. This anti-abortion website compares abortion to the Holocaust, features pictures of aborted fetuses, and lists doctors who provide abortions, in order to encourage followers to report them to the police. But because no alternatives exist, many pregnant Germans have to turn to babycaust.de to find an abortion provider.¹⁴² Attempts to overturn 219a have been blocked by conservative parliamentarians.

Other far-right parties, like the Neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany, join AfD in accusing feminists who try to liberalise abortion law of “supporting the demise of German society”.¹⁴³ Even when they aren't able to affect abortion law, nationalist parties manage to intimidate abortion providers, whose numbers have fallen in the last decade.¹⁴⁴ Lower Bavaria, a region of 1.2 million people, has only one gynaecologist who still performs abortions. He intended to retire long ago, but keeps working because he has no choice.¹⁴⁵

UNITED STATES: PRO-LIFE... UNTIL BIRTH

“Preventing babies from being born is not medicine. That's not constructive to our culture and our civilization. If we let our birth rate get down below the replacement rate we are a dying civilization.”

Former US Congressman Steve King¹⁴⁶

There are many motivations fueling American pronatalism. Nationalism and white supremacy are strong. The eugenics movement, which blossomed in the 1920s and 30s, coincided with a growing number of American women attending college, and wanted to push those women back into the home to outbreed the growing community of immigrants. American eugenicists successfully promoted a four-child norm – but only among native-born white, middle-class Americans.¹⁴⁷ The nationalist politicians of today's America draw inspiration from European nationalists like Orbán and envy their grip on power, which would allow

them to attack women's rights even more than they already do. Republican congressman Steve King (who only recently lost his seat after twenty years in the House of Representatives) admires the right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders for understanding “that culture and demographics are our destiny” and civilization can't be restored “with somebody else's babies”.¹⁴⁸ King supports legislation that makes abortion illegal even in cases of pregnancy resulting from crime, stating that population growth has depended on rape and incest.¹⁴⁹ And he opposes free birth control on the grounds that “Preventing babies from being born is not medicine. That's not constructive to our culture and our civilization. If we let our birth rate get down below the replacement rate we are a dying civilization”.¹⁵⁰

Another nationalist lawmaker, Dennis Baxley of Florida's state legislature, has also openly asserted that abortion restrictions are beneficial because they increase births among white women.¹⁵¹ Baxley has echoed the Great Replacement rhetoric, warning that abortion – alongside immigration – is a threat to white survival.¹⁵² Author and rising conservative star JD Vance, who is currently running for a US Senate seat, regularly warns of the threat low fertility rates pose to nationalism. He recently suggested that childfree adults shouldn't be allowed to vote because they have no stake in the country's future.¹⁵³ Lyman Stone, an ardently pronatalist economist whose research influences powerful members of Congress, further postulates that low birth rates are a national security risk because “You need warm bodies to fill the uniforms”.¹⁵⁴ Jonathan Last, The Weekly Standard's digital editor, attempts to take a less egregious approach, claiming that women need to bear more children to protect democracy; otherwise authoritarian countries, with their higher fertility rates, will “inherit the earth”.¹⁵⁵

This linkage is far from limited to the fringes of politics. In September 2021, the US' former Vice President, Mike Pence, spoke at the Budapest Demographic Summit. His comments also reflected the increasingly apocalyptic tone of the discussion:

“We see a crisis that brings us here today, a crisis that strikes at the very heart of civilization itself. The erosion of the nuclear family, marked by declining marriage rates, rising divorce, widespread abortion and plummeting birthrates.”¹⁵⁶

The ‘global population crash’ narrative has certainly been seized upon by US campaigners seeking to roll back progress on SRHR, and abortion in particular.¹⁵⁷ For them, amplifying concerns about declining birth rates and fostering associations between family planning, population ‘control’, coercion and colonialism are useful weapons in their assault on reproductive rights.

Among organisations working in this field is the Population Research Institute, whose stated objectives are to “expose the myth of overpopulation, expose human rights abuses committed in population control programs and make the case that people are the world’s greatest resource”.¹⁵⁸ Despite its name and “pop.org” url, however, it appears to do no research on demography or population: founded by a Catholic priest in 1989, its website and social media make its anti-abortion agenda absolutely clear (while throwing in a generous mix of anti-vax, anti-communism, and climate change scepticism).¹⁵⁹

The New York-based Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam), meanwhile, makes its anti-abortion purpose explicit, and addresses population issues in a dedicated section on its website,¹⁶⁰ including articles about social strife in the US due to declining fertility and the wholly unfounded claim that the United Nations Population Fund UNFPA “impose[s] population control targets on countries all around the world”.¹⁶¹ Should anyone imagine these voices to be marginal, C-Fam has special consultative status at the United Nations¹⁶² and the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops carries an article entitled “the myth of overpopulation and the folks who brought it to you” by its president.¹⁶³

Connections between the religious nationalists of America and Europe are strong, thanks in part to the World Congress of Families

(WCF), which was founded by right-wing American Christians in collaboration with equally conservative Russians in the late 1990s. The WCF regularly convenes large gatherings of its international followers, in which they lament the “demographic winter” and defend “natural” family values.¹⁶⁴ Thanks to their efforts, these ideas are becoming more and more common.

Though white supremacy and nationalism are real forces in America’s pronatalism, economic concerns about a shrinking labour force and social security funding are a pervasive motivator among policymakers. Former Speaker of the House and father-of-three Paul Ryan told reporters, “This is going to be the new economic challenge for America: people...I did my part, but we need to have higher birth rates in this country...Baby boomers are retiring and we have fewer people following them in the workforce”.¹⁶⁵ Ryan was simultaneously working to cut spending on social safety nets, while promoting a tax bill that would drastically decrease taxes on corporations and rich Americans.¹⁶⁶ Rather than encouraging women to have more children by providing desperately needed support for parents, Republican congressmen like Ryan choose the cheaper route: restricting access to SRHR.

Lawmakers aren’t the only ones interested in higher birth rates: anti-abortion legislation has been supported





Photo: Gayatri Malhotra, Unsplash

contraception coverage introduced by Obama, leaving many poor Americans unable to afford birth control. Republican politicians have consistently attacked and attempted to defund Planned Parenthood, even though it legally cannot use federal funding to provide abortions. Individual states have imposed draconian restrictions on abortion.

So far in 2021, there have already been 561 abortion restrictions introduced – making it likely to be the worst year for abortion legislation.¹⁷¹ Texas' new law makes abortion illegal after just six weeks – when women often don't even realise they're pregnant. In a Supreme Court brief, the legislation's author wrote that women don't

by wealthy lobbyists like the Koch brothers, suggesting that the economic stakes are significant.¹⁶⁷ Jenny Brown argues that “while lower birth rates are a phony crisis from the standpoint of workers, for the establishment the problem is real. Their profits, and capitalist economic growth in general, rely on a continually expanding workforce replenished with ever-larger cohorts of young people to labor and consume and pay taxes and serve in the military, and to provide for retired workers, either individually through family ties or collectively through Social Security.”¹⁶⁸

While some American policymakers turn to immigration or increased government spending to address the economic effects of low birth rates, others – conservative Republicans – oppose immigration and spending on what they call entitlement programmes.¹⁶⁹ So instead, they interfere with reproductive rights. This isn't new – historically, fertility rate declines have often been followed by new SRHR restrictions.¹⁷⁰ The Trump administration did away with the mandatory

need abortion to control their reproductive lives; they can merely abstain from sex. Alabama's law, which criminalises abortion even in cases of rape and incest, is more restrictive than the abortion laws of ten Middle Eastern countries, including conservative Saudi Arabia.¹⁷² And Mississippi's law, while less severe, directly challenges the legality of abortion under *Roe v. Wade*, setting up a crucial Supreme Court case in December. The anti-abortion movement is growing: in 2000, four states were hostile to abortion rights. By 2019, 21 states were either hostile or very hostile.¹⁷³

America's pronatalist nationalists must be pleased with the fruits of their labour: the US has the highest unintended pregnancy rate in the developed world.¹⁷⁴ After Texas closed 82 family planning centres, the birth rate in those areas rose increased by 27%.¹⁷⁵ For conservative lawmakers, this is a fantastic deal: they save money on healthcare costs and reap the economic benefits of future taxpayers, while women shoulder the costs of bearing and raising children.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The countries explored in this report are just a sample of the growing number of nations in which pronatalism threatens sexual and reproductive health and rights. A comprehensive account will require more resources than Population Matters can deploy (including research beyond English-language sources, to which our research has been limited). That comprehensive account is urgently needed. The evidence provided in this report is clear and compelling. Nefarious abuses committed in the name of saving humanity from low birth rates aren't limited to the pages of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

A growing number of politicians are unwilling to accept the reality that people are choosing smaller families, and invoke a number of false fears about the looming demographic 'crisis'. Some, like the leaders of Iran and Russia, frame it as a national security matter. Others, like Hungarian and German politicians, have stoked fears of outsiders conspiring to decimate their populations through low fertility rates and migration. Worryingly, the rise of European nationalism following the refugee influxes of 2015 threatens to resurface with the recent Afghan crisis. None of these leaders care about global population numbers: they only want population growth among certain groups – whether Muslims, Christians, their 'native' populations or others – in order to gain political, military, or economic power.

So, they turn to pronatalism to try to increase birth rates. In many cases, this means trying to persuade couples to have more children through financial incentives. When that fails, takes too long or is too expensive, the temptation to restrict women's reproductive liberties is too strong for many leaders.

"The population dynamic troubling policymakers across much of the world today is not 'too many' but 'too few', and the new, increasingly politically acceptable eugenics is not 'less of them', but 'more of us'."

Indeed, by happily cross-pollinating with a moralistic "pro-family" agenda, it presents an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone.

Despite this, the specific threat, and reality, of coercive pronatalism appears to figure less large in the discourse on reproductive rights than the spectre of 'population control'. As advocates for a progressive, rights-based population concern agenda, Population Matters is deeply aware of the longstanding associations between policies intended to limit population growth and coercion, the instrumentalising of women's bodies, racism and eugenics. The need for vigilance against such abuses remains. However, while the great systemic reproductive rights violations of the twentieth century arose primarily from a deadly mix of concern about population growth and indifference to human rights, the political and demographic landscape has fundamentally changed. The population dynamic troubling policymakers across much of the world today is not 'too many' but 'too few', and the new, increasingly politically acceptable eugenics is not 'less of them', but 'more of us'.

One consequence of this change is that the advocates and defenders of SRHR, and the institutions and paradigms within which they operate, risk being more preoccupied with abuses of the past than with the clear and present danger of today. In the twenty-first century, policies inspired by the imperatives of pronatalism – whether motivated by economic, ethnic, nationalistic or simply misogynistic concerns – represent a fundamental threat to reproductive rights.

The goals of gender equality and full sexual and reproductive health and rights are embedded across international frameworks, bodies and agreements, from the Cairo Program of Action in 1994, to the work of the United Nations Population Fund and the Sustainable Development Goals. They cannot be realised unless the threats posed by coercive pronatalism are properly understood, and the global community of reproductive rights defenders unites to overcome them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Gender equality advocates and the SRHR community

1. Continue to exert pressure on governments to uphold women's rights across the board, and fight for specific policies like making contraception affordable and widely available and removing barriers to elective abortions.
2. While pronatal policies need not by definition be inconsistent with SRHR, recognise general pronatal rhetoric in political and cultural discourse as a risk factor for SRHR restrictions, and that non-coercive pronatalist policies can be followed by more restrictive efforts if they are perceived to be unsuccessful.
3. Recognise political rhetoric targeting immigrants, ethnic or religious minorities and multiculturalism (including the Great Replacement theory) as a risk factor for pronatal policies that could lead to SRHR restrictions.
4. Seek opportunities to apply intersectional principles in defense of civil and reproductive rights. Publicly condemn the manifestations of pronatalism that are fueling many reproductive rights violations, and expose the nationalism, xenophobia, and misogyny at their core. Support civil society and other actors resisting these narratives within nations at risk, and internationally.
5. Recognise the “population decline crisis” narrative as a potential contributor to coercive pronatal rhetoric and policies. Where appropriate, highlight the existence of policy solutions which are not dependent on pronatal policies.
6. Recognise the value of the “coercive population control” narrative as a weapon used by opponents of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Acknowledge the existence of a positive, progressive and rights-based case for population stabilisation, and be aware that reflexive vilification of this case or its advocates risks reinforcing potentially abusive pronatal rhetoric and actions.

National and international policymakers and agencies

1. Maintain absolute commitment to gender equality and all sexual and reproductive health and rights. Challenge and condemn justifications for their restriction, including pronatal justifications.
2. In monitoring threats to human rights, recognise the risk factors identified above of pronatal political goals triggering policies which restrict sexual and reproductive health and rights.
3. In reporting on abuses of sexual and reproductive rights, include and specifically identify abuses stemming from pronatal policies.
4. Recognise the existence and availability of positive and practical policy solutions to demographic change which are not pronatal.

GLOSSARY

- **Birth rate:** Number of births over a given period divided by the person-years lived by the population over that period. It is expressed as average annual number of births per 1,000 population.¹⁷⁶
- **Nationalism:** “Loyalty and devotion to a nation, especially: a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups”¹⁷⁷
- **Pronatalism:** “The policy or practice of encouraging the bearing of children, especially government support of a higher birthrate”¹⁷⁸
- **Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR):** “Sexual and reproductive health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Therefore, a positive approach to sexuality and reproduction should recognize the part played by pleasurable sexual relationships, trust and communication in promoting self-esteem and overall well-being. All individuals have a right to make decisions governing their bodies and to access services that support that right. Achieving sexual and reproductive health relies on realizing sexual and reproductive rights, which are based on the human rights of all individuals to:
 - have their bodily integrity, privacy and personal autonomy respected
 - freely define their own sexuality, including sexual orientation and gender identity and expression
 - decide whether and when to be sexually active
 - choose their sexual partners
 - have safe and pleasurable sexual experiences
 - decide whether, when and whom to marry
 - decide whether, when and by what means to have a child or children, and how many children to have
 - have access over their lifetimes to the information, resources, services and support necessary to achieve all the above, free from discrimination, coercion, exploitation and violence”¹⁷⁹
- **Total fertility rate (TFR):** “The average number of live births a woman would have by age 50 if she were subject, throughout her life, to the age-specific fertility rates observed in a given year. Its calculation assumes that there is no mortality.”¹⁸⁰ Or, in simpler terms, the average number of children per woman.

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ABOUT POPULATION MATTERS

Population Matters is a UK-based charity which campaigns to achieve a sustainable human population, to protect the natural world and improve people's lives. We promote positive, practical, ethical solutions – encouraging smaller families, inspiring people to consume sustainably, and helping us all to live within our planet's natural limits. We believe everyone should have the freedom and ability to choose a smaller family. We are committed to human rights, women's empowerment and global justice.



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