

**Period and Cohort Fertility Changes under the Pressure of Pronatalist Policy in
Putin's Russia: 2006-2025**

Extended abstract

Over the last decade, state intervention in private life has greatly increased in Russia. Demographic policy became a part of a larger plan for the control of industry, labor, culture, society and family by state institutions and their affiliated agencies. In his Presidential address to the Federal Assembly in January 2020 Putin assured the nation that “Russia's destiny and its historic prospects depend on how numerous we will be”, and he repeated many times since 2006: “Without any doubt, I can say that a family with many children is the fundamental support of the country.”

Post-Communist Putin's Russia attempts to re-patriarchalize gender and family through a number of pronatalist and pronuptialist state initiatives closely connected to nationalist goals. For the first time in a long while, Russian political rulers have taken the liberty of setting goals, within a set timetable, for definite quantitative parameters of fertility, mortality, migration and population change in general. In such a directive form, the Russian government has never before openly declared a pronatalist policy and has never taken the full responsibility for the growth of the population, neither in the days of the Empire, nor in Stalin's time, nor in Khrushchev's time, nor in the late Soviet/Brezhnev era. Previously, pronatalism was presented only in a latent form in Russian social and family-oriented policy. The Orthodox Church does not remain on the sidelines. The participation of the Church in the development of Russia's demographic policy is very significant, as is its influence in the wider context of family, social, ethnic and cultural policies.

In our earlier works relying on demographic data and facts characterizing social changes in the first ten to fifteen years of the post-communist transition period with its liberal approach to family policy, we drew conclusions about the beginning of profound changes in family, marriage and fertility associated with signs of the Second demographic transition (SDT) that we were able to see in Russia only after the collapse of the Soviet system, and with a corresponding delay from the countries of the West (Zakharov and Ivanova 1996; Zakharov 1999, Zakharov 2000, Zakharov 2007a, Zakharov 2008). Some authors supported our conclusions with the results of their research (Philipov and Jasilioniene 2008, Hoem et al. 2009, Eberstadt 2010, Potârcă et al. 2013); others expressed doubts, starting from the idea that the low level of well-being in Russia does not contribute to the growing attitudes in favor of the self-expression and choice of life paths (see e.g.: Billingsley 2010, Perelli-Harris and Gerber, 2011). The discussion about Russia's right to move along the path of the SDT is in many ways reminiscent of the discussion that took place at the same time about the validity of the SDT-process for the United States (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006).

Now, a few decades later, in the context of changing milestones in the economy and politics, it is time to look at the shifts that have taken place to assess the extent to which the Russian population retains the most general regularities in the transformation of fertility patterns (‘postponement transition’) constituting the process of the SDT. It is time also to continue our critical assessment of the pro-natalist policy that started about twenty years ago (in 2006) and was supported by the state both with constant energy in intrusive propaganda and increased financial incentives for the birth of children (see previous works: Frejka and Zakharov 2013, Zakharov 2016, Zakharov 2024). To what extent did state social and family policies in Russia,

which are based on the ideology of traditionalism and conservatism, derail or slow down the modernization of the quantitative and structural parameters of fertility patterns within the SDT context?

Our analysis is based on indicators from increment-decrement age and birth-order-specific period and cohort fertility tables which are computed on Russian official statistics and harmonized with data from Human Fertility Database (period 1979-2023, female birth cohorts 1944-1995). Extrapolations are used for cohorts born in 1980-1995 to arrive at expected ultimate fertility outcomes. We analyzed simultaneously period and cohort total fertility rates, period at parity progressions and ultimate distributions by number of children born (fig. 1-3).

A more detailed analysis of the fertility tables is presented in: Zakharov S.V. (2024). (Zakharov S.V. Three Decades on Russia's Path of the Second Demographic Transition: How Patterns of Fertility are Changing Under an Unstable Demographic Policy. *Comparative Population Studies*. 2024. 49: 25-54. <https://doi.org/10.12765/CPoS-2024-02>), and will be updated by the date of the EAPS-2026 Conference (3-6 June, Bologna, Italy).

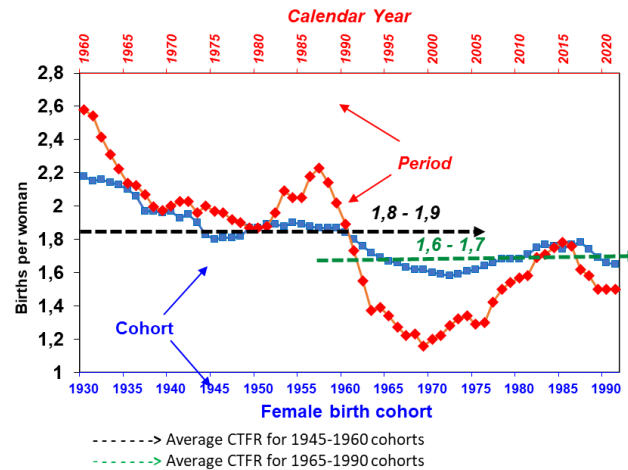


Figure 1. Completed cohort (observed and expected CTFR) and period fertility (PTFR): birth cohorts 1930-1991 (bottom axis), period 1960-2021 (top axis), Russia, average number of children born to a woman by age 50.

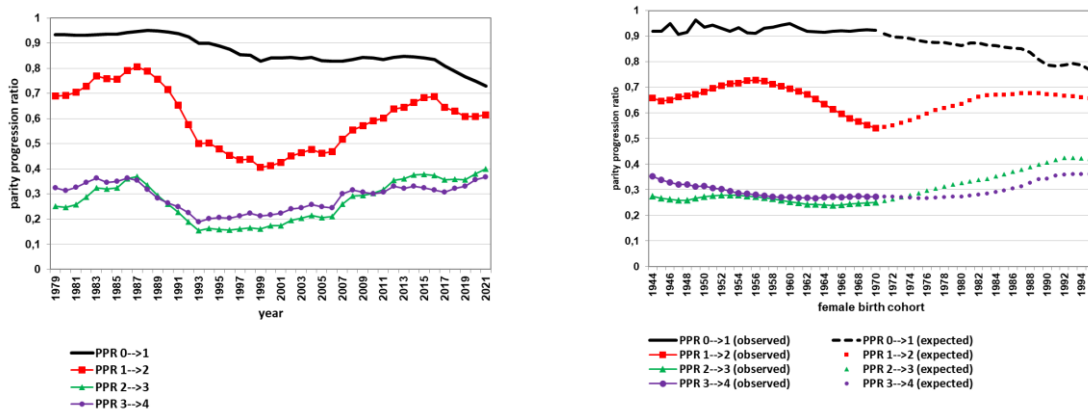


Figure 2. Parity Progression Ratios for women by age 50: period 1979-2021 (left panel), cohort 1944-1994 (observed and expected, right panel), Russia.

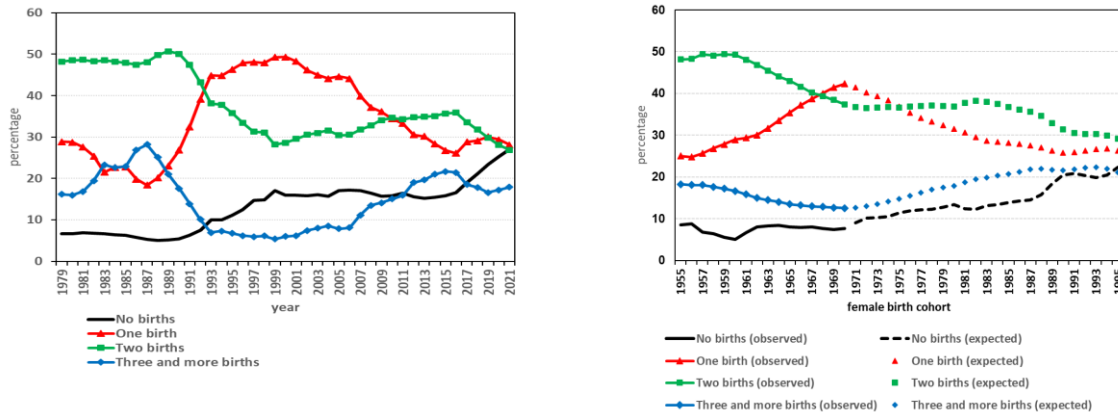


Figure 3. Distribution of women by number of children born by age 50: period 1979-2021 (left panel), cohort 1955-1995 (observed and expected, right panel), Russia, %

General conclusions and discussions

Changes in fertility patterns in Russia over the last three decades can be summarized with at least three points.

First, we observe a continuous increase in the age of parenting. Second, we observed strong fluctuations in the period fertility indicators against the background of weak changes in the cohort indicators. The "true" average total fertility rate of women who participated in the reproduction of the Russian population in the period from 1980 to 2020 was maintained in a fairly narrow range of 1.6-1.7 births per woman. We can observe a slight rise in the 2000s, which could cautiously be associated with the intensification of targeted pronatalist family policy. But according to our estimates, the "marginal" effect of the policies is very moderate, namely 0.07-0.08 births per woman in terms of the ultimate total fertility for cohorts that were in the active childbearing in 2006-2021 (i.e. before the start of the war in Ukraine). Third, there were considerable changes in Russia's order-specific fertility model, due to an increase in the proportion of those who have never given birth to children and those who have given birth to three or more children. Since the 1990s there has been a significant decrease in the probability of first birth, and the universality of motherhood ceased to be the characteristic feature of the Russian fertility pattern. The expected share of ultimately childless women is approaching 20%, which corresponds to the average level for developed countries nowadays.

Comparison of fertility trends in Russia with Western countries and with the closest neighbors in Eastern Europe shows that the transformation of the fertility model continues towards convergence with developed countries which are more advanced on the path of the Second Demographic Transition.

Therefore, the main conclusion from our observations of the development of the situation in Russia will be the following. The expanding diversity of life strategies, matrimonial and reproductive practices, which we find in an increasing variety in the birth of children in marriage and out of wedlock, in the number, timing and spacing of children ever born, which is actively going on in Russia, fully corresponds to the content of the SDT.

The critical question, the answer to which puzzles most experts, is the extent to which pronatalist policies have had an effect on fertility patterns and trends. In this paper, we add what is in our opinion, an equally important question: to what extent the conservative policy of the state, based on financial and propaganda tools, was able to reverse the trends of the Second Demographic Transition, which brought Russia closer to other developed countries.

The clearly populationist (as much as pronatalist) framework of the contemporary demographic discourse held by the Russian authorities, articulates with the domination of conservative thought during the second decade of the 21st century. This is not unrelated to the very marked rapprochement, increasingly visible on the public stage, between the political authorities and the Orthodox Church, which unfailingly supports the war waged by Russia against Ukraine.

The latest embodiment of this conservative stance is, without a doubt, the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation entitled "The foundations of State policy aimed at preserving and strengthening the spiritual and moral traditional values of Russians" (November 9, 2022).

At the same time, the conservative discourse of the so-called "returning to traditional values" does not seem to have any significant effect on demographic behavior. Above all, it is in strong contradiction with the profound tendencies that bring Russia closer to other European countries. Sociological surveys reveal that marriages are transforming into selective, choice-dependent, and late unions; and the high prevalence of cohabitation are becoming widespread, normative, and early, which the State, actively supported by the Church, tries to combat. Union breakdown remains very frequent, the rate being one of the highest in the world, and this indicator has not changed since the mid-1990s.

The age at first childbearing is logically increasing following the transformation of the marriage model. Apparently as a result of the 2006 policies measures, the interval between births was considerably reduced, but this is more of a situational effect than a significant change in the fertility quantum.

Russian fertility began to rise in 2000, but the recovery that followed preceded the adoption of the 2006 decree on the introduction of maternity capital. It is very likely that the policy reinforced the slight rise in cohort total fertility, without being decisive. However, this had mostly only a temporary effect, since period fertility began to fall again in the middle of the 2010s and continues to decline (TFR was 1.47 in 2021, 1.41 in 2023, and 1.39 in 2024), and most likely it has disappeared for the generations born around the 1990s. Moreover, the comparison of the trends observed in Russia with those observed in Europe, testifies to a dynamic that is not specific to Russia. Fertility in Russia is now in a zone that corresponds to that observed by many countries (excluding southern Europe, which continues to be marked by low fertility), close to 1.5 children per woman.

We cannot support claims about the high demographic effectiveness of pronatalist policy measures adopted in Russia after 2006 because they rely either on direct fixation of the period effects or estimate long-term effects on less or more complex models with various assumptions and limitations, when it is possible to use the more direct and reliable measurement of final effects in the sense of complete cohort fertility, demonstrated in our paper.

In the medium term (within 20-30 years as a period corresponding to the demographic length of a generation) in Russia, one can hardly expect any fundamental changes in the quantum of fertility. The cohort TFR will be maintained at the level of 1.6-1.7 births per woman, as the strong two-child ideal is still visible in surveys in Russia. At the same time, more prominent fluctuations for the period TFR can be expected that will remain in the range of 1.4-1.8 births per woman due to multidirectional timing effects under the influence of changing political and

economic conditions. The paper will also provide an assessment of the impact of the war against Ukraine on fertility in Russia.