The Moscow Times
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Takes Aim at 'Childfree' Ideology in Controversial Bid to Boost Birth Rates

By Moscow Times Reporter

October 17, 2024



Young women walking on the street in Moscow. **Valery Sharifulin / TASS**

“Childfree propaganda is a socially dangerous phenomenon. The Americans are promoting this. Our country is vast and their [U.S.] ideology is dangerous. Under no circumstances should it be allowed to spread.”

These were the words of Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament, as he justified proposed legislation imposing heavy fines on what the authorities see as the destructive promotion of “childfree ideology.”

But experts argue that this legislation, which is currently under review by lawmakers and passed its first reading on Thursday, is “repressive” and fails to address the root issues behind the country’s flagging birth rates.

Since launching the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian authorities have ramped up their

efforts to promote so-called traditional values and family-oriented ideals, contrasting Russia with the more liberal West.

President Vladimir Putin this year made increasing the birth rate a priority, with a particular focus on encouraging families to have at least three children and the importance of high birth rates for Russia's future.

With the Kremlin's war in Ukraine showing no signs of ending, the matter appears to have become even more urgent following the release of official data revealing that the birth rate has dropped to its lowest level in 25 years while mortality rates continue to rise.

Volodin claimed the legislation is aimed at curbing "any destructive content that may influence an individual's decision about having children" in order to boost the birth rate.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov last month echoed this sentiment. "Increasing the birth rate is one of the government's and the country's top priorities... Anything that hinders this must disappear from our life," he said.

In reality, however, the situation is far more complex.

Critics are skeptical that the legislation will lead to higher birth rates, arguing that officials should instead focus on creating better conditions for giving birth and raising a family.

Olga, a 37-year-old Muscovite with a stable job and a partner, told The Moscow Times that financial uncertainty is her main reason for choosing not to have children.

"What can I give this potential child? I understand that I can't give them anything beyond a roof over their head. Who would take care of them while I work 15 hours a day?" said Olga, who asked that her name be changed for security reasons.

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"If the only thing a parent does is fight to survive and worry about feeding the child — which is exactly how things are now — then, of course, it's going to be very hard [to have children]," she added.

The state-controlled pollster VTsIOM reported this year that 6% of Russians believe that families should not have children or that having children is not mandatory, while this figure is currently 20% among young adults aged 18-24.

A late 2022 study by the independent pollster Levada Center said that only 1% of respondents said a family with no children is the ideal.

While a few childfree groups have appeared on VKontakte, one of Russia's most popular social media platforms, they are relatively small, with the largest having 19,000 and 13,000 members respectively.

Experts said that the problem of declining birth rates is not rooted in childfree ideology, but rather in economic factors, noting that increasing financial assistance to families with

children is a quick way to boost birth rates.

“The state hysteria over birth rates has predictably devolved into yet another repressive bill that no longer directly addresses demographic issues. Nowadays, the government is skilled at repressing…but it is no longer capable of constructively and productively solving problems,” independent demographer Alexei Raksha said on his Telegram channel.

“There is a clear lack of understanding of the subject being regulated at all levels and branches of power. The authorities aim to put everything on ideological tracks, regardless of anything else, but this does not increase birth rates,” he added.

The legislation, if passed, would ban “childfree propaganda” on the internet and in the media, films and advertisements with fines of up to 400,000 rubles ($4,129) for individuals and up to 5 million rubles ($51,611) for legal entities.

In practice, any positive comments regarding a childless lifestyle or public discussions on birth control or abortion could be considered a violation, said Maxim Olenichev, a lawyer with the human rights group Perviy Otdel.

“The wording of the legislation is vague and unclear, which could lead to numerous abuses,” Olenichev told The Moscow Times.

Another key aspect is that “childfree propaganda” would be banned for minors, which could result in restrictions on educating teenagers about contraception and birth control, Olenichev said.

"If society stops discussing modern contraception and birth control methods, two major social issues are likely to emerge: a rise in teenage pregnancies and increased stigmatization of abortion. All of this is, of course, being justified as part of the effort to uphold traditional values,” he told The Moscow Times.

Yet some want to go even further.

State Duma deputy Biysultan Hamzaev urged the Justice Ministry to ban the “childfree movement” as an organization “engaging in extremist activities,” similar to how Russia has banned the LGBTQ+ community as “extremist.” The initiative, however, does not appear to have received any official backing.

Some pro-government experts proposed imposing a monthly tax on families without children — a Soviet-era practice.

When asked about the proposal this week, the Kremlin said that “we need to analyze the experience” of the Soviet Union’s tax, saying it “likely had little impact on the demographic situation.”

The legislation to ban “childfree propaganda” must pass two more readings in the State Duma, after which it would go to the upper-house Federation Council for a single vote. Putin would also need to sign off.

However, this legislation appears to have already raised questions among some Russians who

do not want to have kids.

“I have a very poor attitude toward the prohibitive initiatives of our State Duma,” Olga told The Moscow Times.

“I believe that our legislative body is, to put it mildly, focused on the wrong issues, distracting us from truly important matters,” Olga said. “There is no ideology of being childfree, in my opinion. They invented it yourself and are now trying to ban it. Moreover, they are not even fighting the right battle.”

“They have been in power for many years and during this time, almost nothing has been done to promote a healthy family life," she said.

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