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Here's Why Russia's Birth Rate Plan Won't Work

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A maternity hospital in Krasnodar in 1989. **Vladimir Velengurin / TASS**

It seems that Russia has no more formidable enemy than its own people, who have given up reproduction. The Kremlin has banned "childfree propaganda," given pregnant schoolgirls money and told them from every church pulpit that a woman's true happiness is to stay in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant. Yet the birth rate keeps falling, breaking previous sad records.

Perhaps the most vivid recognition by the authorities of their helplessness is awarding the title of foreign agent under the jubilee number 1,000 to demographer Alexei Raksha, who has long explained that their demographic policy is wrong.

He says that it is unnecessary to pay women to have children earlier in life, as younger first-time mothers do not go on to have more children. But it is necessary to pay for their subsequent children. It will not be cheap, either: two million rubles ($25,000) per child.

You do not need to be an expert to know that a mother who is little more than a child herself will forever associate children with deprivation of the opportunity to enjoy her youth, get a good education and forge a career. Since such pregnancies are usually unplanned, the child is often unwanted and unloved. Having lost the chance to establish herself, the young woman may decide that having subsequent children will be too expensive.

It seems pointless to discuss the stupidity of the government's demographic policy because it is a cynical calculation. Governors can boast about the increase in their jurisdiction's birth rate without any meaningful success.

Schoolgirls do not get pregnant for the sake of money, but because of the inaccessibility of effective contraceptives and lack of sexual education. In a few years, all these interventions will turn out to be a flop. But by that time, the people in charge will have moved on.

It is much more interesting to discuss what, in addition to material incentives, could cause a real, long-term and sustainable increase in fertility. Modern history demonstrates that this is only possible by making housing and childcare more affordable.

In 1947, the American developer Levitt & Sons debuted a modest house with two bedrooms and an attic large enough to convert into two more. They were affordable and Second World War veterans could buy them at a discount. These Levitt houses were built en masse in the 1950s, expanding the suburbs of metropolitan areas.

William Levitt believed that he was fighting communism through his houses. There was no way a person who owned their own house would sympathize with an ideology seeking the eradication of private property. But Levitt's most significant contribution was to the United States' demographics. It was in these houses, cheap and uniform, that the baby boom began.

It is self-evident that a lack of living space is one of the most powerful means of curbing the birth rate. In a one-bedroom apartment, you can give birth to one child at most. In a studio, none. You could have two children in a two-bedroom apartment, but it will be cramped and uncomfortable.

Related article: Russian Orthodox Church to Promote 'Miracle of Birth' in Anti-Abortion Letters to Pregnant Women

Having more children also puts pressure on a family's expenses, which makes upsizing to a new home even more difficult. Living in a reasonably priced two-bedroom home to which an extra two can be added cheaply allows newlyweds to grow their families without having to look for another place to live.

Another ingenious, perhaps unintentional, thing the Levitts did was to normalize the white picket fence suburban life with two or three children. Some Americans now describe that convention as toxic. Women were forced back into the home to make room in the workforce for returning veterans and told they could find fulfillment being the perfect housewife. This may have caused problems later on. But at the time, it contributed to the baby boom.

There are many who support creating such suburbs in Russia today. But so far, efforts are

limited to one-off initiatives in some regions.

The reason for this is simple. The disadvantages of such settlements are clearly visible: a lack of social infrastructure and poor public transport accessibility.

Moreover, most Russian women have neither the ability nor the desire to become housewives. There are a lot of obstacles to this, from modern gender roles, the unfeasibility of surviving on the husband's salary alone and problems with financial security in case of divorce.

Nevertheless, there are ways to learn from the U.S. experience, such as radically reducing the price of houses and making mortgage payments easier. Real estate developers would need to be brought on board to achieve this. Building large neighborhoods with community spaces and public transport links is possible but much less profitable than constructing another human anthill.

But since the Kremlin can take a hard line when it is in their interests, there is no reason for them not to be firm here. Moreover, the increasing popularity of working from home eases the problem of how women in poorly-connected neighbourhoods can find employment.

Do I believe that something like this will be done? No. Primarily because the people currently urging to increase the birth rate are doing so to further their own careers rather than actually solve the problem. Therefore, Russia may follow Scandinavia in becoming a country where only the rich can have multiple children.

Like in Russia, many middle-class Scandinavian families have two working parents and the woman may even be the higher earner. They may have the means to hire a nanny or put their children in private child care. The joy of motherhood here is not expressed in stoic round-the-clock childrearing, a life filled with changing diapers, feeding, cooking and cleaning. Occasionally in such families, grandmothers play the role of babysitters. But this becomes less likely as the retirement age rises or elderly relatives become infirm.

I know such a family myself: a classmate of mine who married as a student suddenly found herself the wife of a middle-class millionaire with four children. Even with an army of support staff including two nannies, private kindergartens, boarding school and a housekeeper, she was unable to keep up a career while the children were small. But the children grew up and she started a small business which has now expanded internationally.

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Wealthy couples having multiple large families is not objectionable in itself. What could be better than more children growing up well educated in well-to-do homes? There was also a time when it even became fashionable for wealthy parents to adopt children. I have nothing against this, unless we are talking about stealing Ukrainian children, as in the family of Sergei Mironov and the current children's rights commissioner, Maria Lvova-Belova.

The trouble is that Russia's social ills will make trends harder to break out of current trends. Encouraging early births (and depriving women of access to contraception and safe abortion

will mean that the bulk of the poor Russian society will become increasingly marginalized. It will then be harder to ensure that these children have a proper upbringing.

The slogan “you give birth and the state will take care of it”, which was used during the Soviet era, led to a horrifying number of parents surrendering their children to orphanages. We are still dealing with the consequences of this devaluing of family relations today. Wives and mothers are horrifyingly to send their men to war in return for cash payments. The birth rate, by the way, did not really rise: Russia has had two baby booms: the first after 1945 when births delayed by war were realized, and the second in 1969 when women became entitled to 8 weeks of paid leave on either side of childbirth.

Another trend seems to be taking off in Western countries: late childbearing. Women aged 40 and above, having established themselves in their careers and built some wealth, are using in vitro fertilization and surrogacy to have children if they cannot conceive naturally

However, such women, as a rule, limit themselves to 1-2 children. This will not solve the problem of people having smaller families. It merely means that women who might not have given birth at all will do so. While this trend is too new to judge its longevity, it shows that women are not the lost causes Russian propagandists claim. They are still ready and willing to give birth, but they do not want to sacrifice themselves to society.

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