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The Russian Handmaid's Tale

Demography and the Erosion of Female Autonomy
in the Former Soviet Bloc

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The Russian Handmaid's Tale:

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Lucy Shearer (Research Fellow)

Russia faces a gendered demographic crisis exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. To alleviate its demographic woes, the Kremlin is implementing increasingly conservative pronatalist policies that threaten women's autonomy. This regressive approach will not reverse demographic decline. Moscow ignores the greater social, cultural, and economic factors which diminish incentives to have children. Moscow's conservative pronatalism will not be confined to its own borders. Post-Soviet states facing similar demographic decline are vulnerable to their own Handmaid's Tales. Now is the time to emphasize women's rights throughout the former Soviet republics.

Introduction

The war in Ukraine will exacerbate Russia's decades-long demographic crisis. Moscow has implemented increasingly regressive pronatalist policies which decrease women's public participation and increase rates of violence against women.

In the future, the Kremlin will likely promote conservative pronatalism in the former Soviet sphere where demographic strain and political polarization makes those countries vulnerable to Russian conservative influence. If this likely scenario is not recognized, Moscow will use "Handmaid's Tales" policies to gain influence among social conservatives on or within NATO's borders. To contain this challenge, the United States and its European and Central Asian allies should promote and support women's rights throughout the former Soviet Union.

Russia's Demographic Bomb

Social, ecological, political and economic futures will always be entangled with birth, death, and the presence and absence of laboring bodies.

— Robbins and Smith, 2013¹

The population of the Russian Federation has generally declined since 1991 as death rates increase, birthrates decrease, and immigration into Russia falls. Population decline is viewed internally as an existential threat to Russia's international influence because it is seen as decreasing economic,

military, and cultural strength.² In 2021, President Vladimir Putin referred to demographic decline as an “emergency.”³ The war in Ukraine will add to this emergency as working-age males die or flee, and as having children becomes less economically feasible.

Russian Demographics

Russia has steadily declined in global population rankings. Russia’s population in 2021 was 143.4 million, the highest in Europe but below desired levels.⁴ High male mortality and poor health in old age separate Russia’s demographic crisis from other “greying” countries, such as Germany, France, and Japan.

- *High Mortality.* Premature male death drives Russia’s mortality crisis (See Appendix). Cardiovascular disease and substance abuse have increased unnatural death due to external causes among working-age men.⁵ According to the World Bank, Russian men have an average life expectancy of 64 years at birth compared to 75 years for women.⁶ Putin announced in 2021 that the state aimed to increase the average life expectancy to 78 in 2030.⁷ Russia is unlikely to achieve this goal due to the war in Ukraine.
- *Low Immigration.* Current immigration into Russia is not enough to compensate for natural population decline. In 2021, the World Bank reported that 320,617 net migrants entered the country.⁸ Russia’s Higher School of Economics (HSE) estimates that Russia requires 390,000 to 1.1 million immigrants per year until 2100 to offset population shrinkage.⁹ Poor economic outlooks and xenophobia lessen the attractiveness of Russia as a destination for skilled workers.¹⁰
- *Low Fertility.* Economic decline contributes to low birthrates in Russia.¹¹ Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has generally declined since 1960, reaching a low point of 1.2 births per woman in 1999 (See Appendix).¹² In 2020, the TFR was 1.5 births per woman, well below the desired population replacement level of up to 2.5 births per woman.¹³ A history of low birth rates and adverse economic circumstances makes Russia’s low TFR unlikely to spontaneously reverse.¹⁴

The Russian government views a low TFR as an existential threat to state power.¹⁵ President Putin stated in his 2021 address to the Federal Assembly that “[t]he fate of Russia, its historical perspective depends on how many of us there will be... depends on how many children will be born in Russian families in a year, in five, in ten years, what they will grow up to be, what they will become, what they will do for the development of the country and what values will be a support for them in life.”¹⁶

The War in Ukraine

Flight to escape military mobilization, lower birth rates from financial stresses, and higher casualties resulting from the war in Ukraine accelerate Russia’s population decline.

- *Mortality.* The war in Ukraine will lead to deaths of primarily male Russians. Up to 315,000 Russian soldiers are reported to have died as of December 2023.¹⁷ Meduza reports that 20 to 30 percent of soldiers may suffer from PTSD upon return, comparable to “Afghan syndrome” following the Soviet-Afghan war.¹⁸ PTSD is correlated with “increased risk of criminal behavior, substance abuse, domestic violence and problems at work” which contributed to mortality spikes after the fall of the USSR.¹⁹ The Ukraine War will exacerbate the existing demographic crisis, worsen a mental health crisis, and increase health care costs for Russians.²⁰
- *Emigration.* An estimated 700,000 Russian men have fled Russia to escape the September 2022 partial mobilization.²¹ A leaked official document illustrates concerns that Ukrainian war has exacerbated Russia’s “brain drain.” Skilled workers are moving away from – or in some cases fleeing – Russia in response to the Ukrainian War. This pattern is both a symptom and a cause of a declining economic environment.²²
- *Fertility.* The “special military operation” creates a backdrop of uncertainty about the future, complicating family planning. Two to four percent of the labor force could be affected by the war in Ukraine.²³ One year of service for the approximately 300,000 mobilized could directly decrease Russian births by 25,000.²⁴ The TFR may decrease to 1.2 births per woman in part because sanctions and high military spending threaten consumption and social spending.²⁵

Handmaid’s Tale: Policies and Effects

“Saving the people of Russia is our top national priority. This priority underlies the stipulations of the updated Constitution concerning the protection of the family, the important role parents play in bringing up their children, strengthening social guarantees, and further developing the economy, education and culture.”²⁶

– President Vladimir Putin, 2021

Since Stalin, Russia has implemented pronatalist policies to alleviate demographic strain. With the reemergence of the Russian Orthodox Church, policies aimed at increasing birthrates are imbued with popular conservative beliefs. In his 2021 address to the Valdai Club, Vladimir Putin stated that “[t]his conservative approach is not about an ignorant traditionalism, a fear of change or a restraining game... It is primarily about reliance on a time-tested tradition, the preservation and growth of the population...”²⁷ Russia’s “conservative pronatalism” has little impact on total fertility and is associated with decreases in women’s public participation and increasing rates of violence against women.

Pronatalism in the Soviet Union

Conservative pronatalist policies have a long history in the Soviet Union.²⁸ Women played a primary role in sustaining the Soviet military and labor force through childbearing and childrearing.²⁹ Soviet population policies simultaneously promoted egalitarianism and entrenched

the gendered division of labor in both the household and in the labor force, stalling women's position in society and the household.³⁰

- *Maternal Support.* Pronatalism in the late Soviet era attempted to ease the weight of the “double burden” without removing the normative obligation of women to act as wives and mothers.³¹ The Soviet Constitution, Chapter 6, Article 35 mandated “Legal protection and maternal and moral support for mother and child; Granting of paid leave and other benefits to pregnant women and mothers of young children; Gradual reduction of working hours for women with small children.”³² Stalin also implemented the “Mother Heroine” award for those women who had ten children or more. While Soviet family policies generally excluded men, women were obligated to the state to give birth, theoretically increasing total fertility rates.³³



Figure 1: “Glory to the Mother Heroine!” (1944)³⁴

- *Abortion.* Limiting abortion access has been internally perceived as a way for Russia to improve birthrates. Stalin banned abortion in 1936 to counteract population declines from famine and eventually from World War II.³⁵ Subsequent Soviet leaders reversed the bans.³⁶ Per Figure 2, abortion was legal but not encouraged.³⁷ Still, the USSR had the highest rates of abortion in the world partly because the state limited access to contraception.³⁸ Poor quality of Russian healthcare meant that legal and illegal abortions led to complications – and in some cases secondary sterility – in about two thirds of women undergoing abortions.³⁹



Figure 2. "Abortion will deprive you of happiness." (1966). Courtesy of the Russian State Library.⁴⁰

- *Exclusion of Women from the Workforce.* The USSR introduced in 1974 legislation that banned women from participating in 456 occupations in 38 industries.⁴¹ The bills were intended to prevent reproductive harm that could result from manual labor.⁴² Concerns about men's reproductive health were not recognized in these policies.

Pronatalist measures stalled the entrance of women into the workforce as Soviet women struggled to balance childrearing with their obligation to work.⁴³ In 1987, Gorbachev stated that in the Soviet Union, "[a]n active and equal participation of women in social production, in political, scientific and cultural activities... has not always been accompanied by changes making any easier the performance of their inherent functions as wives and mothers."⁴⁴

Pronatalism Before the Ukrainian War

About half of President Putin's speeches from 2000 to 2020 reference gender accompanied demographic concerns inspired by Soviet-style biological essentialist or Russian Orthodox views.⁴⁵ Women are expected to participate in the home and the workforce in traditionally gendered roles which emphasize a peaceful, maternal nature.⁴⁶ Russian elites such as Konstantin Malofeev, Vladimir Yakunin, and Senator Elena Mizulina join Orthodox leadership in traditional or ultra-conservative policy movements.⁴⁷

Conservative rhetoric has popular appeal and is supported by a strong Orthodox church.⁴⁸ According to a 2018 Levada Center poll, 54% of participants agreed that "A husband's job is to earn money, while a wife's job is to run a home and raise a family."⁴⁹ At the same time, both

genders are expected to take an active role in the labor force.⁵⁰ Russian traditionalists tend to support conservative pronatalism.⁵¹

- *Maternity Capital.* The Maternity Capital Act of 2006 earmarks funds for housing, education, and pension to ease financial strains associated with childbirth and childrearing and encourage women to have children.⁵² In his Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly in 2021, Putin stated that “It is extremely important for a mother-to-be to get support from the state and society, so that they can keep their pregnancy and know that they will receive help in raising and bringing up their child.”⁵³ The policy is unlikely to structurally alter birthrates and reverse the demographic crisis as the payments are relatively small and do not alleviate the double-burden.⁵⁴

The Maternity Capital Act reinforces the idea that a woman’s proper role is to act as a caretaker by excluding women from the labor force.⁵⁵ A 2023 study showed that the employment rates of first-time Russian mothers four to five years after the birth of their child is about 17 percent lower than those before birth.⁵⁶ Mothers with higher-order births are lower than prebirth levels, albeit to a lesser extent than those of first-time mothers.⁵⁷ Husbands with patriarchal attitudes are likely to further stall their wives’ re-entries into the labor force.⁵⁸

- *Abortion.* Restricted abortion access is a core tenet of conservative pronatalism. It is ideologically compatible with the Kremlin’s conservative messaging, and according to the state would increase the number of live births. In 2023, Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children Vitaly Milonov proposed to remove abortions from covered procedures under Russia’s Compulsory Medical Insurance (CHI), “a set of measures designed to increase the birth rate in Russia” and reportedly “[o]n behalf of the President.”⁵⁹ In 2021, the Kremlin published a plan to halve abortion rates by 2025 by dissuading women from undergoing abortions and by “creating conditions to help the woman and her family in raising the child, placing the child on its feet, and giving the child the possibility to receive a decent education.”⁶⁰

Restrictions on abortion will fail to alleviate demographic strains. Abortion policy results in the USSR demonstrate that women without safe, legal access will turn to underground abortions which may cause complications such as infertility or death.⁶¹ Unsafe abortions contribute to 4.7 to 13.2 percent of maternal deaths.⁶² Women who face restrictions to abortion are also more likely to experience poverty.⁶³

- *Exclusion of Women from the Workforce.* Women in Russia today are still banned from participating in over 100 occupations in 21 industries which require manual labor for concern that the occupations harm reproductive health.⁶⁴ The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) found in 2016 that Russia’s “banned jobs” reinforces gender stereotypes thereby limiting women’s “social status and their educational and career prospects.”⁶⁵

In the Russian Handmaid’s Tale, the government is unlikely to force women to become pregnant. However, they demonstrate a commitment to encouraging pregnancy and compelling women to

stay pregnant. Conservative pronatalism entrenches gender discrimination, which leaves women vulnerable to “physical and psychological pressure in situations where households experience stress, fear, social-psychological pressure, or financial difficulties.”⁶⁶ The WHO reports that victims of VAW are more likely to suffer “isolation, inability to work, loss of wages, lack of participation in regular activities and limited abilities to care for themselves and their children.”⁶⁷

Conservative Pronatalism After the Ukrainian War

The war in Ukraine has led to population strain and increased the perceived need for conservative pronatalism. President Putin has reintroduced awards intended to raise birthrates by providing women financial and social incentives for having large families. Putin reintroduced the Stalin-era “Mother Heroine” award in August 2022.⁶⁸ Mothers of ten children who survived past the age of one receive a medal and one million rubles.⁶⁹ The Moscow Times reported in July 2023 that abortion restrictions may increase as the Ukrainian War puts pressure on population because of growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church and arrests of pro-choice advocates.⁷⁰ Russia’s conservative pronatalism in the wake of the war in Ukraine contributes to a Handmaid’s Tale characterized by under-prosecuted, endemic violence against women (VAW).⁷¹

Conservative Pronatalism for Export

Russia may try to expand its influence abroad by exporting conservative pronatalism. Russia has led a concerted effort to be a global leader in what it views as conservative social values since at least 2013.⁷² This messaging often accompanies a polarizing divide Russia and the West. In 2021, Putin stated that resisting liberal Western values like LGBTQ rights “will protect our children from degradation and degeneration.”⁷³ Information campaigns are targeted to mobilize far-right groups and undermine democracy particularly in its former sphere of influence, the United States, and other NATO countries.⁷⁴ According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Russia garners influence in Central and Eastern Europe by “deepening political divides and cultivating relationships with aspiring autocrats, political parties (notably nationalists, populists, and Euroskeptic groups), and Russian sympathizers.”⁷⁵

Russian Influence in Demographic Policies

Former Soviet states experiencing demographic decline and an increase in traditionalist nationalism are susceptible to Russia’s conservative pronatalism, especially when demographic decline is similarly severe. Most former Soviet countries have some form of policies intended to increase birthrates.⁷⁶

The traditionalist package is more likely to take hold in “in-between” countries situated between Russia and the West. Here the Kremlin can take advantage of historic ties and sympathies to Russia to promote conservative pronatalism.

- *Armenia.* Armenia’s population has steadily declined since 1992, similarly to that of Russia. In 2022 the population declined by 0.4 percent.⁷⁷ Armenia’s TFR is 1.6 births per woman, far below the replacement rate of 2.1.⁷⁸ Only 60 percent of men in a cohort survive to age 65, compared to 85 percent of women.⁷⁹ Armenia has policies in place to raise the birth rate: maternity leave, publicly subsidized childcare, direct and indirect support for family planning, and school-based sexuality education.⁸⁰

Russia may gain influence over Armenian demographic policy by fueling the Armenian far-right. Like the Russian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) remains an integral part of the Armenian identity and works with far-right actors to promote traditionalist policies.⁸¹ The 2017 law, ‘On the Prevention of Domestic Violence Protection of Victims of Violence and Restoration of Peace in the Family,’ was gutted “due to the influence of conservative groups.”⁸² The majority of the population believes “that pre-school children are better off when their mother does not work.”⁸³ Armenia receives massive quantities of disinformation from Russia – including those “targeting values, social and cultural issues.”⁸⁴ Armenia may be on course to mirror or receive exported Russian conservative pronatalism.

- *Belarus.* Belarus has generally experienced negative population growth since the fall of the Soviet Union.⁸⁵ Belarus faces gendered health disparities and demographic strain. The male life expectancy at birth as of 2020 was 69.3 years, compared to 79 years for women.⁸⁶ Total fertility increased from 1.3 births per woman in 1997 to 1.4 in 2020. The role which pronatalist measures played in these changes is unclear.⁸⁷ Belarus has had a small but net positive inflow of migrants since 2010. Addressing population decline caused by mortality and fertility is a state priority.⁸⁸



Figure 3: “Order of Mother” Medal. Image courtesy of President of the Republic of Belarus.⁸⁹

Belarus’s population policies closely resemble those of Russia and may be titled “conservative pronatalism.” Belarus’s Ministry of Labor and Social Protection reported

that as of 2022 women are banned from participating in 88 occupations due to concerns over their “reproductive ability.”⁹⁰ Women who have five children surviving past the age of one receive the “Order of Mother” medal pictured in Figure 3.⁹¹ Cultural norms and a lack of affordable childcare prompt 85 to 90 percent of women take full advantage of three years of paid maternity leave compared to one percent of men.⁹² Domestic violence protections are limited, and norms viewing domestic violence as a private matter encourages underreporting.⁹³

- *Estonia.* Estonia also faces demographic decline. From 2022 to 2023, Estonia’s population shrunk by 0.3 percent and the UN projects to decline or stagnation until 2100.⁹⁴ It has the eighth highest crude death rate in the world at 13.13 deaths per 1,000.⁹⁵ The life expectancy of men at birth was 72 years in 2021, compared to 81 years for women.⁹⁶ Its TFR in 2021 was 1.6 births per woman.⁹⁷

Women’s growing equality in Estonia may be undermined by Russian influence in pronatalist policies there. Pronatalist policies in Estonia, such as the “mother’s salary”, have already been implemented.⁹⁸ Informal religious and political ties to Russia may undermine pronatalist policies which are relatively progressive compared to the former USSR. 16.2 percent of Estonia’s population identify as Orthodox.⁹⁹ The nationalistic Estonian Conservative People’s Party (EKRE) is a strong force in Estonian politics. The party “desire[s] to appeal to Russian minority voters” and emphasizes a close relationship with Russia.¹⁰⁰

These three countries may be on course for their own “Handmaid’s Tales.” Hungary’s course under Victor Orban demonstrates that former Soviet states with a declining population are vulnerable to Russian disinformation and influence in domestic politics.¹⁰¹

Countering Russia’s Conservative Pronatalism

The Kremlin’s pronatalist social messaging is a way to increase Russia’s influence in the former Soviet bloc. Russia targets far-right populations and political sentiments to further its influence in countries experiencing demographic strain. Conservative pronatalism incentivizes patriarchal attitudes associated with high rates of domestic violence. International organizations should remain cognizant of the role which individuals’ beliefs play in perpetuating VAW particularly in those states where population decline makes the bodily instrumentalization of women for state aims more likely.

Gender discrimination is notoriously difficult to combat. However, both top-down policies and bottom-up approaches may counteract, or even replace, conservative pronatalism in the Soviet Union.

- *Labor policies.* Countries and the firms that operate within them should promote policies which equalize the burden of labor in the household. Countries like Sweden have implemented paternity leave policies that offer both parents in a two-parent household the opportunity to take parental leave.¹⁰² Beyond this, firms may offer flexible work schedules for mothers and fathers.¹⁰³ However, these policies do not account for the fact

that when offered family leave, women take about 5.5 times more days of paid leave than do men. Disparities in the amounts of family leave stall women's advancement in the labor force.¹⁰⁴ To the extent that individuals choose not to have children because of the unequal distribution of labor, policies that equalize the amount of family leave taken may slow or reverse population decline.

- *Peaceful Masculinities.* Male attitudes are critical in combatting the Handmaid's Tale yet remain ignored. A 2015 Gallup poll reported that 50 percent of Russian men believed "domestic violence is a serious problem."¹⁰⁵ Only 44 percent of men believe that the "government is not doing enough to fight domestic violence."¹⁰⁶ The Peaceful Masculinities Approach emphasizes that gender is fluid, and that men are not inevitably perpetrators of violence. Investing in programs like the "Young Men's Initiative" in the Balkans, which center around peaceful masculine attitudes, may mitigate the effects which conservative pronatalism have on violence against women while remaining cognizant of local values and beliefs.¹⁰⁷
- *Grassroots Organizations.* Grassroots women's empowerment movements are found both in formal and informal capacities throughout Estonia, Armenia, and Belarus. Combined with a strong maternal family network, Russian women have historically found spaces to participate within these (small) activist networks, even under authoritarian rule. The European Union and the United Nations Population fund may funnel resources to these programs in former Soviet states: think the rise of Pussy Riot as a global phenomenon.

Conclusion

Malign interference by Russia is an old problem that has taken on a new form. The Russian example highlights how population decline can push states into conservative pronatalism. This paper is not a moral judgement of Russia's conservative values. Rather, it highlights the fact-based relationship between conservative pronatalism and the erosion of women's position in the public sphere. Should this trend expand beyond Russia further than is already being seen, women in the former Soviet sphere may experience a decline in their public participation, as well as increased rates of gender-based violence.

The negative effects of Russia's demographic crisis go far beyond its economy. In Russia, conservative pronatalism is a cornerstone of the state's social policies. However, its existence has also led to increases in human rights violations. There, decreases in women's public participation, and increases in gender-based violence are being witnessed.

Russia's conservative pronatalism is not a threat confined to its own borders. Russia is conducting clear efforts to spread its traditionalism throughout its former sphere of influence. In countries like Armenia, Estonia, and Belarus, those in which a declining population is regarded as an existential threat, conservative pronatalism is likely to take hold – if it has not already. Conservative

pronatalism will do little, if anything, to alleviate demographic strain, and national concerns over demography will not cease.

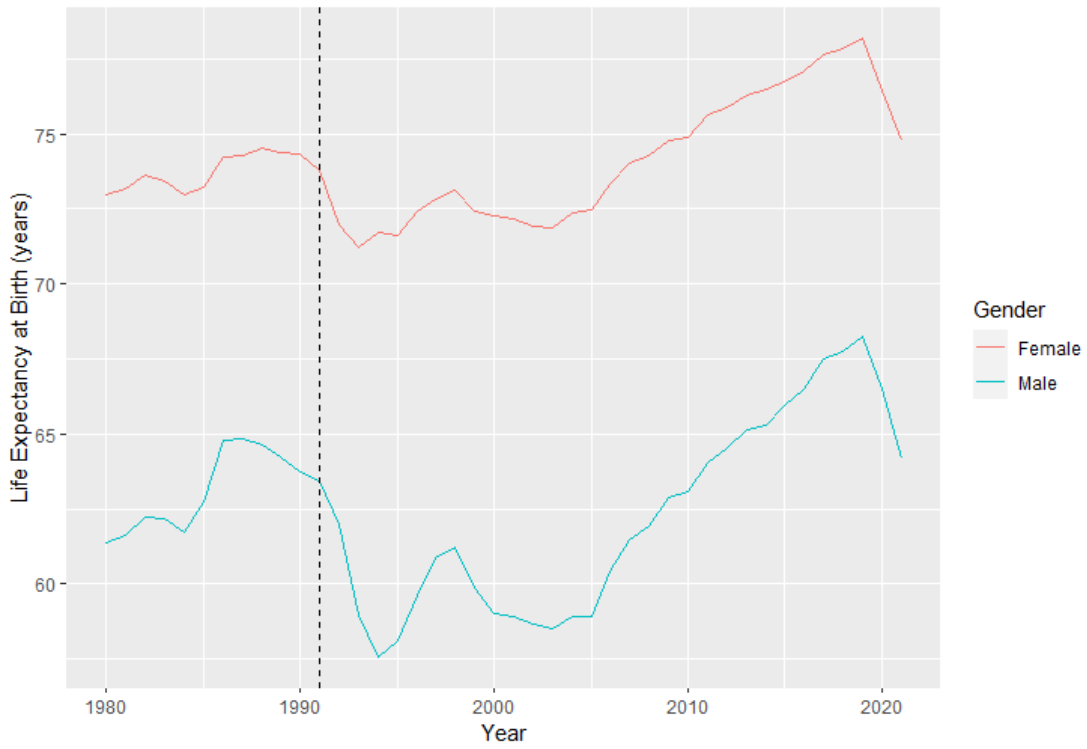
Conservative pronatalism in former Soviet may threaten alliance strength in the former Soviet Union. United by values, Russia's influence in the region, and hostility to Western influence, will grow. As this trend progresses, as is likely within the next two to ten years, it will become more and more difficult to address the backsliding in gender equality with roots in demographic strain.

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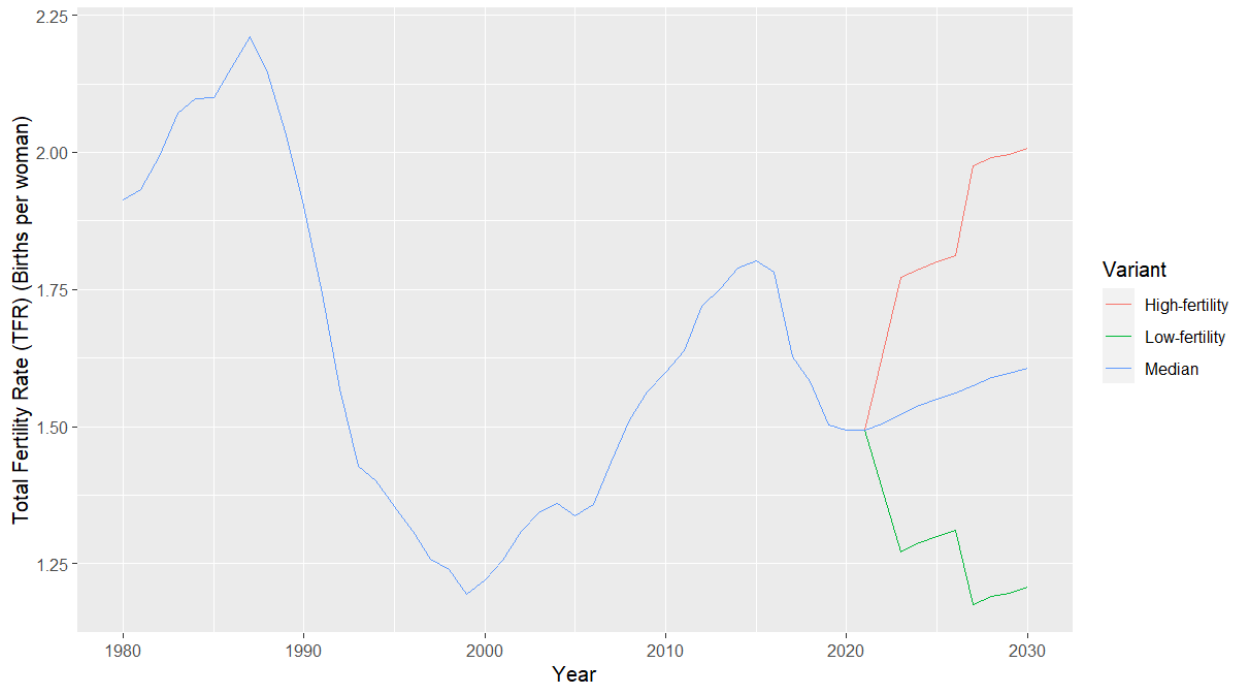
Appendix A

Life Expectancy at Birth in Russia, 1991-2021



Data Courtesy of World Bank Open Data.

Total Fertility Rate in Russia, 1980-2030



Data courtesy of World Bank Open Data.

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