

"Abortion Culture," Demographic Crisis and Neotraditionalism in Russia: A Mixed-Methods Approach

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Abstract

As contraception has become more widely available in the post-Soviet era, Russia's famously high abortion rate has plummeted – from 169 per 100 live births in 2000 to fewer than 60 per 100 today. In spite of this secular decline, a powerful anti-abortion movement has emerged in the last decade within the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government. This paper examines the end of Russia's "abortion culture," both demographic and discursive. I show how the crisis narrative common in Russian population discourse is paired with two separate logics – one of neotraditionalism, nationalism, and religious rhetoric, and another of wellness and self-improvement – to discourage abortion and contraception, and I explore Russian women's reactions to this narrative. In addition to demographic data, I use ethnography and data from interviews conducted with women involved in an anti-abortion campaign that provided "psychological counseling" to abortion patients in provincial Russia in 2017.

Background

Over the past 30 years, a decrease in the rate of abortion has been established as a trend throughout the developed world, including in the countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Sedgh et al., 2016). The number of abortions in Russia has been dropping steadily since 1990, from 113.9 per 1000 women of reproductive age in 1990 to 26.0 per 1000 women of reproductive age in 2014. However, the level of abortions in Russia remains high compared to most OECD countries (Sakevich, 2016b).

Why have abortion rates declined? There are several possible explanations. In Russia, as in the United States, laws governing access to abortion have become stricter in recent years. Under Russian law, first-trimester abortions are always legal; later abortions are allowed based on the presence of social or medical indicators that make termination of the pregnancy appropriate or necessary. The list of social indicators allowing abortion has been reduced twice, in 2003 and 2012, and the list of medical indicators was reduced in 2007. In addition, a seven-day waiting period before an abortion was introduced in 2011. In 2015, conservative Duma member Yelena Mizulina introduced a bill to exclude abortion from the Russian system of state medical

insurance (that is, from medical treatment available to Russian citizens free of charge), except in cases covered by social or medical indicators. However, in October 2017 the Duma Committee on Public Health recommended that parliament not support this bill (Volkova, 2017).

However, it is likely that increased use of effective methods of contraception has played a larger role than stricter rules in the decrease in abortion incidence. In Russia, the decrease in abortions in the 1990s coincided with an overall fall in fertility, as well as earlier age of sexual debut among adolescents (Zakharov, 2008). Taken together, this indicates that a reduction in unwanted pregnancies, not reduction in access to abortions, was responsible for the decrease in incidence. Newer data indicates that among Russian women who have not yet had a birth, 79% use a method of contraception. In the 1990s, this number was less than 50% (Sakevich, 2007). By 2012, contraceptive use was already near the level observed in other developed countries (Sakevich, 2016a). However, it is worth noting that Russia has fallen behind the other Slavic post-Soviet republics in this domain – contraceptive use is more effective, and the abortion rate is lower, in both Belarus and Ukraine (Denisov, Sakevich, & Jasilioniene, 2012).

Finally, changing attitudes may play a role in the decreasing abortion rate. Soviet reproductive culture is widely considered an “abortion culture,” but in the post-Soviet era, this has changed substantially. As early as 2002, research in Kazakhstan found declining approval for abortion and use of abortion, among both “culturally Russian” and “culturally Kazakh” women (Agadjanian, 2002). Accelerating this change in attitudes is one of the main strategies of the new anti-abortion movement. From as early as 2003, but especially in the years since 2010, social actions against abortion have proliferated, often directly or indirectly state-sponsored. These include a new (to Russia) style of crisis pregnancy counseling aimed at convincing women to carry unplanned pregnancies to term; campaigns featuring well-known politicians and media personalities speaking out against abortion; and social advertising about the ills of abortion. Several of the legal restrictions on abortion, such as requirements that women listen to the fetal heartbeat before terminating a pregnancy and laws mandating psychological counseling for patients seeking abortion care, also aim, partly, at attitudinal change.

This study examines the strategies and arguments used in Russian anti-abortion campaigns. The aim is not only to understand contemporary Russia, as a curious example of a context where abortion has transitioned from fully accepted to semi-taboo, but to create a foundation for thinking about anti-reproductive rights strategies that are becoming increasingly common in other contexts, as more countries face very low fertility and as far-right and populist groups grow in power politically across the globe.

Data

While conducting dissertation fieldwork in Russia in the fall of 2017, I was able to gather a wealth of material on a project that was being implemented at the institute that hosted me. As part of a grant administered by the Russian Orthodox Church (with money originating from the federal government), the psychology department at the small, private, non-religiously-affiliated institute had opened a center called “*Sokhrani mne zhizn*” (“Preserve my life”) dedicated to

community anti-abortion education and counseling, as well as assistance for pregnant women in difficult situations. As part of my research, I collected and documented the literature and educational materials available at the center, photographed the center itself, attended center events, and interviewed three institute staff involved in the project, including two women who were regularly conducting anti-abortion counseling at the local abortion clinic. The field notes from my encounters with the center, as well as these interviews, comprise my main data source.

This data is supplemented by interview data from my main dissertation research, which consisted of oral interviews with women of childbearing age in a midsized provincial city in Russia. I completed 41 individual oral interviews with women ranging in age from 20 to 45. These open-ended interviews covered a range of topics related to fertility, and most touched on abortion.

Quantitative data will come from two sources: first, broad data on abortion rates are available from the Russian State Statistical Service. Second, the Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey (RLMS), a series of yearly nationally representative surveys administered by the Carolina Population Center and the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and designed to monitor the health and economic well-being of Russians in the post-Soviet period, offers some microdata on abortion practices.

Preliminary Results and Future Work

Analysis of textual data, field notes and interviews around the “Preserve my life” project reveals a complex web of rhetorical strategies to combat abortion. While some of these strategies center on reducing access, the majority focus instead on changing women’s minds about abortion. Some are shared with the U.S. context: for example, references to the physical characteristics of a fetus intended to humanize it, or philosophical arguments about when “life begins.” Most interesting, however, are those that connect the notion of “demographic crisis” – an omnipresent rhetorical category in both everyday life and Russian media for the last twenty years or so – with moral arguments against abortion. In this framing, abortion is the cause of Russia’s perennial low fertility¹, which becomes a sign of the weakness of the Russian nation. Women’s individual morality, explicitly gender-based, becomes the key to the moral renewal of the nation as a whole. Worldly concerns, such as the cost of raising additional children, are often explicitly mentioned by anti-abortion advocates in this context, only to be cast aside as irrelevant in the face of the joy of motherhood.

Preliminary analysis of interview data, however, suggests that the dominant modes of thinking about abortion among women of reproductive age are through the lenses of health and social class. Participants’ approaches to family planning were varied and seemed to follow a generational pattern; several older respondents (ages 38-45) had only unplanned pregnancies,

¹ Russia’s fertility is not, in fact, particularly low – current TFR is around 1.7. However, Russia did suffer a steep fall in fertility in the early 1990s, and recovery from it was slow. In the context of these arguments, the Russian population is presented as in a perpetual state of crisis.

or a first unplanned and a subsequent planned pregnancy, while younger respondents more typically planned their birth timing and spacing, or, if childless, had successfully avoided unwanted pregnancy altogether. Modern methods of contraception (the pill and the IUD) were frequently mentioned as available, but often framed as undesirable; many participants said they use condoms, withdrawal, or a calendar method instead. Participants almost universally cited abortion as something that happened, first, to their mothers in the Soviet era; and second, to other, often poorer, women. It was presented as the least desirable option for managing fertility, viewed as painful, potentially damaging to one's future fertility, and often a moral gray area. Several participants placed women who had multiple abortions in the same rhetorical category as those who had had more children than they could support, indicating that the use of abortion has begun to be regarded as a mark of improperly managed fertility. (Others mentioned abortion as the province of irresponsible teenagers, to the same effect.) The belief that contraceptives and abortion carry a high risk of permanent damage to one's fertility remains common. In spite of the arguments used by the anti-abortion activists, respondents were extremely unlikely to link the prevalence of abortion with the country's demographic crisis.

Establishing a causal link between anti-abortion rhetoric and changes in abortion rates is not possible with the data available, but nonetheless, quantitative data forms an important contribution to this study. Analysis of Russian state data and RLMS data will be conducted to assess whether women's perceptions of the socioeconomic component to abortion is reflected in reality; whether decreases in abortion align temporally with specific anti-abortion campaigns; and whether abortion patterns have changed in response to worsening economic conditions due to sanctions on Russia after the seizure of Crimea.

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