

Article

The Gendered Discourses of Illiberal Demographic Policy in Poland and in Russia

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Abstract

Despite being dissimilar cases, both Poland and Russia exhibit strong anti-liberal and democratic backsliding tendencies. Concomitantly, politicians are spreading a demographic moral panic, employing the argument that both nations are in danger of demise. There is scaremongering concerning below-replacement population growth rates and, in parallel, a tightening grasp on reproductive health rights and a growing fear of non-binary gender identities, people of color, and homosexuality. The political anti-gender mobilization in Poland in the 2010s and the gendered anti-Western and anti-gay conspiracy narratives in Russia are examples of this phenomenon. How are the policy responses to “demographic crises” constructed and gendered in political discourses today? What lies behind it and what is its role in illiberal politics? In this article, I discuss the current demographic discourses in Poland and in Russia. I argue that the politics of rallying against “demographic crises” surfaced on the wave of growing dominance of ultraconservative and nationalist discourses in East-Central Europe in response to perceived socio-economic pressures. I demonstrate how Polish and Russian politicians have been utilizing nativism, familialism, and “tradition” discourses for reasons of political legitimacy and expediency. Looking at political debates and concrete demographic strategies, I trace how the rhetoric of “demographic crises” is deployed to shore up illiberalism in both countries.

Keywords

demographic policy; discourse; gender; illiberalism; Poland; Russia

Issue

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1. Introduction

Current Russian and Polish politics have witnessed a resurgence of nationalist and ultraconservative discourses with regards to issues of “sexual citizenship” (Richardson, 2000)—including policies on gender identity and expression, sexualities, and sexual health and reproduction (cf. Edenberg, 2019, 2021; Mole et al., 2021; Sperling, 2014). Despite being dissimilar cases in terms of geopolitical trajectories and historic legacies, both Poland and Russia exhibit strong anti-liberal and democratic backsliding tendencies. The “controversial” policy issues such as contraception, abortion, and population control are tied to demography. In Poland, in the last decade (particularly after 2015) and in Russia especially since the second presidential term of Vladimir

Putin (specifically since 2007), a demographic moral panic has been circulating, spreading the argument that both nations are in danger of demise. On the one hand, there is scaremongering concerning the below-replacement population growth rates and, on the other, a tightening grasp on reproductive health rights and a growing fear of trans persons, non-binary gender identities, migration, and non-heteronormativity.

The discursive and institutional anti-gender mobilization in Poland in the 2010s and the gendered anti-Western and anti-gay conspiracy narratives in Russia are examples of this phenomenon. How are the policy responses to “demographic crises” constructed and gendered in political discourses today? What lies behind this rhetoric and what is its role in illiberal politics? In this article, I compare the current demographic discourses in

Poland and in Russia. I argue that the political mobilizations rallying against “demographic crises” surfaced on the wave of growing dominance of ultraconservative and nationalist discourses in East-Central Europe in response to the perceived socio-economic pressures. The concern with population growth in Polish and Russian political discourses has strengthened not only an ultra-religious understanding of political values, but also provided a pragmatic way to create collective responses to constructed threats and thereby shore up support for the governing regimes. I argue that the growing hegemony of these narratives has been a way of responding to socio-economic problems and has come at the expense of societal diversity and minority rights. I trace the mechanisms guiding the discursive moral panic concerning family, reproduction, kinship, gender, and sexuality as intertwining with trans/homophobia and anti-equality rhetoric.

Demographic policy provides a case allowing for a parallel discussion of common and differing points in Poland and Russia because politicians in both countries often equate population decrease with economic problems. As Goetz et al. (2022, p. 7) have argued, demographic policies (as part of a modernist project) can easily fall victim to illiberal tendencies. It is also a policy area that has been under-researched from a feminist perspective while at the same time gaining more importance in Europe (Goetz et al., 2022). The comparative approach explores the political expediency of the “illiberal offer” (cf. Pető, 2021) in two different countries and across the EU/non-EU divide. While the article draws on the insights of the growing literature on “anti-gender” mobilizations (see for instance Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Kováts & Pöim, 2015; Lombardo et al., 2021), it aims to contribute to the strand that focuses on the constructive projects and the new “politics of knowledge” offered by the opponents of gender equality (Ahrens et al., 2021; Bracke & Paternotte, 2016; Paternotte & Verloo, 2021). Thus, the analytical focus is not on the dismantling and destructive powers of illiberal forces in politics. Rather, I argue that demographic policies yield concrete programmatic results in terms of what illiberals offer their constituents.

The article begins with a discussion of the literature that conceptualizes the relationship between gender and illiberalism. Subsequently, I outline the theoretical and methodological assumptions that allow me to conduct a discursive analysis of demographic policy from a feminist point of view. The empirical analysis is structured as follows. First, I explore the discursive constructions of the notion of a “demographic crisis,” followed by the main demographic policy components: fertility, mortality, and migration. Next, I analyze the ideological values that underpin the illiberal demographic projects in Poland and Russia. The final sections examine the gendered “illiberal offer” that is propounded by politicians via demographic discourses. In the conclusion, I return to the question of why illiberal demographic policies can be pragmatic and politically expedient.

2. Conceptualizing Gendered Illiberalism

The growing contestation of both “liberal democracy” and gender equality have been pinpointed and explored in recent academic literature as profound challenges particularly in East-Central Europe (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Lombardo et al., 2021). Whilst the term “illiberal democracy” has been panned as ambiguous or as an oxymoron (Müller, 2016), scholarship has moved to discussing “illiberalism” (Laruelle, 2022) or “anti-liberalism” (Zbytniewska, 2022). “Illiberalism” refers to political projects that juxtapose themselves to and oppose liberal democracy and liberalism, according to their own definitions (Laruelle, 2022). Political scientists have also theorized “democratic backsliding” and “de-democratization,” concepts that describe the erosion of central aspects of democratic systems such as freedom of the media, independence of the judiciary, separation of powers, and minority rights (see for instance Bogaards, 2018; Lombardo et al., 2021). Importantly, de-democratization, democratic backsliding, illiberalism, and the opposition to gender equality have been and should be analyzed in conjunction. Indeed, “[g]ender equality is a central facet in the polarization caused by de-democratization” (Lombardo et al., 2021, p. 521).

Extant literature on this topic includes three main strands: research on the (a) genderedness of the far right (e.g., Köttig et al., 2017) or (b) populist radical right politics (e.g., Kantola & Lombardo, 2020), and (c) backlash against gender equality in the form of “gender ideology” (see for instance Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Kováts & Pöim, 2015). Drawing on these three literatures, there is a growing understanding that while illiberalism is gendered and gendering, it also is more than just “illiberal anti-gender backlash” (see Grzebalska, 2022). Gender plays an important symbolic role as one of the key uniting elements for illiberal politics of disparate right-wing actors (Kováts & Pöim, 2015; Pető, 2021), offering “opportunistic synergy” (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021) to radicalize the opposition to neoliberal globalization. Gendered illiberalism offers a “counter-hegemonic narrative...it is an anti-modernist response to the modernist, neoliberal model of society” (Pető, 2021, p. 318). Edenborg (2021, p. 2) has argued that “the Putin regime has articulated, provided ideological coherence to, and made visible a narrative where resistance to LGBT rights appears as a logical choice for states seeking to position themselves in opposition to the ‘liberal West.’”

Scholars have argued that illiberal gender politics consist of more than mere opposition to or backsliding in terms of gender equality; it is rather a “project of alternative knowledge production” (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016, p. 144). They have highlighted the productive nature of this rhetoric, which redefines the gender equality field by imbuing it with new illiberal and ultraconservative meanings (cf. Ahrens et al., 2021). As argued by Pető (2021, p. 319), the “illiberal offer” consists of

“opposing ‘gender ideology’ and political correctness [while] also offer[ing] a livable, viable alternative centered on the family, the nation, religious values, and freedom of speech.” Arguably, the issues of “sexual citizenship” (Richardson, 2000) that are at the heart of the gendered illiberal project are often implemented in the form of demographic welfare policies. This article follows these insights and focuses on how illiberal governance is produced and sustained at the level of discourse around demographic policy.

3. Towards a Feminist Demographic Policy Analysis

Demography as a discipline has always been engaged in the study of population changes via levels of fertility, mortality, and migration (Williams, 2010). Moreover, it only “gains legitimacy by being relevant to policy makers” (Williams, 2010, p. 200). Despite the original aims of population policy of ameliorating societal well-being (Goetz et al., 2022), like other academic disciplines rooted in European modernity, it has also been “a home for the racist and classist views...concerned about the high fertility of the lower classes and immigrant ethnic groups” (Hodgson, 1991, p. 35). Worse still, as Williams argued: “Feminism has had little impact on demography. Demography’s lack of engagement with critical theories in general is commonly attributed to demography’s connection to policy” (2010, p. 199). So, a double-burden lies on demographic policies—not only are they enmeshed with socially ambivalent foundations, but also in this case, they are designed and implemented by illiberal political forces.

Criticisms from “international activists in the human rights, social justice, and feminist movements...charge that the...approach to population growth is linked to the global system of racialized and patriarchal capitalist relations” (Kuumba, 1999, p. 448). Furthermore, like-minded critiques in the 1990s and 2000s have focused on “the relationship between repressive reproductive polity, or ‘reproductive imperialism,’ and the...trends toward increasing international economic polarization. [Whereby] in addition to serving the dominant economic interests, population policy perpetuates the underdevelopment and exploitation of ‘third world’ women and communities” (Kuumba, 1999, p. 448). Feminist scholars have long examined how the population-controlling approaches in population policy are a “form of patriarchal manipulation of women” (Kuumba, 1999, p. 448). Historically, demographic policies and population control have ambivalently related to gender, sexuality, race, respectability, and (dis)ability in European nation-building and welfarist projects (Sear, 2021). Feminist discussions about policies of family planning and eugenics expose how demography is rooted in racist eugenics (Sear, 2021). The shifting policy focus to population growth in Europe maintains biopolitical control elements of gendered bodies. Arguably, pro-natalist policies aimed at increasing population are just as oppressive

and manipulative. Categories of women are othered and marginalized in national construction projects, especially when these are conducted by right-wing and ultraconservative forces (cf. Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989).

Yet, a focus on gender (or women) is not identical with a feminist critical approach. The latter implies a normative stance that is invested in social (and reproductive) justice, human betterment (in terms of well-being and life quality), as well as inclusion in terms of gender identity, expression, and sexualities (and sexual orientations):

A feminist perspective goes beyond describing gender differences and specifies these differences as in large part socially constructed to the advantage of [some], who are relatively more empowered than [others], both within and outside the family. The nature and extent of such advantage depends on context and varies by race, ethnicity, and social class. (Presser, 1997, p. 302)

Attention to such intersectional interactions highlights the linkages between gender inequality and other inequalities. In practical policy terms, demographic policies preside over the most intimate and gendered aspects of politics. They regulate and strategize for the future of fertility, mortality, migration, and by association sexual relations in society. Arguably, as witnessed in the moral panics concerning “demographic crises,” population policies are a tool of illiberals that use them to implement their visions of future societies. Following Williams’ (2010) call for more feminist demography, this article engages in a critical feminist demographic policy analysis.

4. Discursive Policy Analysis and the Material

To analyze the policy responses to “demographic crisis,” this article applies a critical discursive angle to policy analysis (cf. Fischer, 2003). Discourses establish the political terrain in which policies are designed, debated, and then implemented. I examine how policies are constructed and contextualized. Focusing on the mutually constructive relationship between discourse and policy, the goal is to explore how specific discourses become hegemonic, identify the defining claims of the different positions, determine the structure of the arguments, and which discursive strategies make them effective in given contexts. It also aims to uncover how particular discursive constellations serve to justify specific policy courses of action (Fischer, 2003, p. 90). This allows also for the exploration of what is unsaid—specifically what do the demographic strategies under analysis miss and why?

The analysis is based on a set of main policy documents: the proposed Polish “2040 Demographic Strategy,” the 2018 Russian national project “Demography,” the “Concept of Demographic Policy in the Russian Federation until 2025,” and the “Concept

of State Family Policy in the Russian Federation until 2025,” along with leading policy makers’ public statements and political debates (as reported in media coverage and press service materials) directly pertaining to demography and utilizing “demographic crisis” arguments. I conducted desk research online to collect the relevant documents in Polish, Russian, and English. I selected politicians’ public statements by including in the dataset any public media statement that referred to “demographic policy” or “demographic crisis” available online. The critical discursive analysis in this article aims to reveal the underlying relations of power that structure discourse and how political actors consciously and unconsciously reproduce hegemonic discourses (Fairclough, 2001). The media statements complement the policy document analysis and are used both as a source of data and as a contested arena for the discussion of relevant issues. From the perspective of feminist critical analysis, media appearances and utterances relating to “demographic crises” yield material with regards to the production, dissemination, and consumption of discourses. The media provide an arena for the development of hegemonic discourses that are outlined in the government policy documents.

4.1. *The Countries Under Analysis*

The article focuses on examining in parallel the demographic discourses in both countries. It does not purport to be a systematic comparative study, instead it employs an open-ended comparative approach as an analytical attitude. While Poland and Russia are dissimilar cases in terms of socio-economic, political, and historic circumstances, they tend toward similar outcomes in terms of illiberal demographic policy, as argued below. Both states have strong illiberal tendencies, with Poland taking an “illiberal swerve” (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017) after 2015 and classifiable as a “defective democracy” and Russia often being labelled as an “electoral authoritarian” state (cf. Bogaards, 2009). Accordingly, extant scholarship explores both Russia and Poland as political projects “grounded in illiberal premises of biopolitical conservatism, which implies distancing from and protecting against the ‘liberal West’ for the sake of societal and ontological security” (Yatsyk, 2019, p. 464; see also Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2017). The joint discussion of the two countries exposes common points, since both, despite dissimilar historic trajectories and legacies, have been implementing policies promoting only heteronormative, gender essentialist, and binary identities. At the same time, as I demonstrate below, there are policy differences stemming from various legacies in both countries. Overall, the analysis of the Polish and Russian cases aims to highlight how the policy trends under examination are shared across geopolitical divides and in political systems with different legacies. Hence, the article contributes to studies on political expediency and illiberal pragmatism in East-Central Europe. In the following

sections, I address demographic discourses in Poland and Russia examining hegemonic aspects and blind spots.

5. **Constructing “Demographic Crises”**

To begin with, taking a social constructivist and discursive approach, I explore the notion of “demographic crises” in Poland and Russia. Extant research has pinpointed crises as pervasive and ubiquitous conditions invoked by leaders and policy stakeholders (Gigliotti, 2020). Social constructions of “crisis” labels often stem from external phenomena, situations, or events, yet “crises exist because of the ways in which people perceive the situation or because of the ways that leaders talk about the situation” (Gigliotti, 2020, p. 563). Furthermore, “[i]ndividual perceptions matter, and as socially constructed phenomena, crises exist if others perceive the existence of crisis” (Gigliotti, 2020, p. 572). Therefore, if “crisis lies in the eye of the beholder” (Gigliotti, 2020, p. 573), the way politicians speak of demographic policies, using the explicit notion of “demographic crisis,” constructs it in the discursive social matrix and at the same time calls for solutions on the policy side.

The Polish demographic preoccupation is newer: The country’s first Demographic Strategy was announced in 2021, whereas the Russian Demographic Concepts date back to 2007. The Polish government also established a new State Undersecretary position in the Ministry of Family and Social Policy—the Government Plenipotentiary for Demographic Policy in 2019. According to World Bank data, both countries have “below replacement” population rates (the population replacement rate is 2.1 children per woman)—with Russia at 1.5 fertility rate (a drop from 1.7 in 2015–2016) and Poland at 1.4 in 2019 with a consistently downward trend. Net migration offset the lower fertility in Russia between 2017 and the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The population in both countries will continue dropping in the coming decade if the trends continue. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, life expectancy was 73 years in Russia and 78 years in Poland (with female life expectancy higher in both countries). At the same time, the Polish statistical office announced that in 2020 Poland saw 68,000 more deaths than in 2019 (with about 60% officially attributed to Covid-19). Similarly, according to Reuters, Russia recorded almost 994,000 excess deaths between April 2020 and March 2022, when compared to average mortality in 2015–2019 (“Russia’s total number,” 2022).

Hence, both countries have less-than-desirable demographic indices from the perspective of politicians concerned with generational replacement rates and their impact on domestic economies. The politicians are anxious about the economic efficiency of pensions systems and the decreasing purchasing power in both countries. In the case of Russia, politicians and experts also voice security concerns in terms of military power (Samedova, 2019). So, the governing elites in Poland and

Russia construct “demographic crises” as both features and effects of wider social and economic problems. They make an explicit connection between issues like economic downturn and access to welfare benefits (such as pensions and unemployment benefits) and smaller populations. The demographic policy documents under analysis provide a concrete policy solution (via welfare and social policy) to the perceived social and economic ills. Politicians in both countries explicitly frame the familialist and natalist aims of demographic policy in discursive opposition to earlier neoliberal economic government positions.

In Poland, ruling party politicians with affiliated media outlets and experts have been mainstreaming the notion of a “demographic crisis” since 2021, when they announced the above-mentioned Demographic Strategy. “We are dying out” as the Polish vice-Minister for Family and Social Policy stated in April 2022 (Papiernik, 2022). “We’ve been having a ‘demographic winter’ for 30 years” according to the vice-Minister (“Zima demograficzna,” 2021). In Russia, the official countering of the “demographic crisis” has been continuing since 2007. Specifically, President Putin and the subsequent Russian administrations have “framed family support as necessary for solving the country’s demographic crisis” (Rivkin-Fish, 2010, p. 702). In June 2022, President Putin stated that “demography is the first task for the country....We should have more people and they should be healthy.” According to the Chairperson on the Russian Institute of Demography, there are also:

cultural risks [that] arise mainly due to compensating for the decline in the population with the help of “forced migration”....We are in a situation of a colossal demographic crisis for the first time in world history. This carries both cultural and—I would say—vital risks. Even if the authorities increase social benefits, pay closer attention to the family and fertility issues, by the end of the century, Russia will have half of the current population. (Samedova, 2019)

6. Fertility, Nativism, Natalism...and Migration and Mortality?

Overwhelmingly, both the Polish and Russian state demographic programs aim first and foremost to increase fertility (stressing fertility of younger women). This is jarring especially in the Polish “2040 Demographic Strategy,” which does not mention decreasing mortality or increasing life expectancy even once and only focuses on “improving health conditions” for women of reproductive age. In fact, the Polish document explicitly states that “the additional aspects [of population policy] being mortality and migration are not the subject of the Demographic Strategy” (2040 Demographic Strategy, p. 27). It mentions excess deaths of *young* males and foremost in the context of it being a negative factor in the “material and psychological situation

of young widows.” Meanwhile, the Russian discussion of demographic plans do call for a “rapid increase of life expectancy in the Russian Federation.” This includes advocating decreased alcohol and tobacco consumption, as well as reducing mortality from cancer, and “preserving access to health care (including emergency care) in rural and sparsely populated areas.” There is an attempt to balance fertility, mortality, and migration in the approach (Table 1). By contrast, even though the Polish Demographic Strategy was announced at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and against the backdrop of the highest death rates in the country since the Second World War, the government made no contingencies for trying to lower mortality.

Arguably, the Polish government has recourse to pre-existing discourses and policy positions due to specific historical legacies. The lack of policy interest in the disproportionate effects of Covid-19 reveals broader politics at play (cf. Russo Lopes & Bastos Lima, 2020, p. 93). It is an instance of necropolitics in Poland, when the state assumes the power to decide who lives and who may acceptably die (Mbembe, 2003) or stands back on an inert policy position. While Mbembe (2019, p. 80) stresses that it is racism that usually underscores such dictating of “who is disposable and who is not,” Bobako (2011) has demonstrated that in Poland class differences have been racialized in the process of post-state socialist transformation. In her discussion, the process of creation of class difference in Poland after 1989 can be interpreted as the racialization of social groups that were victims of the neoliberal market transformation (Bobako, 2011, p. 1). Moreover, she claims that the categories of race, class racism, and racializing are a useful tool in analyzing the creation of post-transformation class differences in Poland (Bobako, 2011, pp. 10, 14). Historically, drawing interdiscursively on rhetorical devices of racial superiority, Polish political and economic elites legitimized inequalities and explained the economic disenfranchisement of the former working-class, public-sector employees, the unemployed, and those who needed welfare as the inescapable result of the neoliberal-oriented economic transformation. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed these pre-existing mechanisms of social exclusion and segregation based on hierarchies of subjects, also yielding hierarchies in inertly “acceptable” or “inconspicuous” deaths.

In their goal to increase the number of children per woman, both the Russian and Polish documents are ideological and comprehensive at the same time (Table 1). The natalism advocated in the documents is clear and upfront. The stress is on women in both countries; there is little to no mention of men and their role in reproduction and childcare. The planned Polish demographic strategy focuses on three main goals:

1. Strengthening of the family (including financial support for families, e.g., the 500+ child benefit; support in fulfilling housing needs of families;

Table 1. Overview of the main policy components of the demographic policy documents under analysis in Poland and Russia.

Components of demographic/ population policy	Polish plan for a “2040 Demographic Strategy”	Russian “Concept of Demographic Policy in the Russian Federation until 2025” and the 2018 Russian national project “Demography”
Fertility	Stated aim: increase births and “strengthen the family” via financial and infrastructural support for parents	Stated aim: increase births via social benefits for parents; increase the number of mothers receiving the one-time “maternity capital” upon birth of a child
Mortality	Near total absence of stipulations: only concern are excess deaths of young men which have “negative consequences for the procreative potential of the population”	Aims: increase healthy life expectancy of the population; decrease alcohol and tobacco consumption; reduce mortality from cancer and cardio-vascular disease; decrease infant mortality; improve healthcare and enhance health monitoring
Migration	Not addressed	Aim: decreasing out-migration from the Russian Federation

support of the durability and stability of families; popularization of a “pro-family culture”; strengthening cooperation with civil society and NGOs working for the family).

2. Removal of barriers for parents who want to have children (including the development of a labor market that is friendly to families; the development of different childcare options; development of healthcare; the improvement of the quality and organization of the education system; the development of infrastructure and services for families).
3. Improvement of quality management and policy implementation (at both the national and local self-government levels).

Similarly, the Russian national project “Demography” has very concrete objectives: to raise Russians’ healthy life expectancy, to boost the total birth rate to 1.7 children per 1 woman, and to increase the number of people who lead a healthy lifestyle. It also stipulates for “financial support for families after the birth of a child” and “promotion of employment opportunities for women—creation of pre-school education available to children up to three years of age.” “Native” births are favored over migration. Both the Polish and Russian demographic plans stipulate for and expand on existing direct transfer benefits as well as tax benefits (“maternity capital” in Russia and the “500+” child benefit in Poland). Yet, financial state help is offered to heterosexual families usually with stable and standard employment and eligible for welfare provision. What is more, no provisions are made for parents caring for children with disabilities (especially for carers of adult children with disabilities).

The Polish demographic policy scape does not acknowledge the second major component of domestic

population growth—migration (Table 1). Without significant attention paid to migration, as a major element increasing population, the politics of “nativism” (and not just “natalism”) are at play. The primary goal is to increase “native” fertility, especially in Poland, which is a nearly ethnically homogenous country in comparison to the Russian Federation. Conversely, the Russian programs both recognize Russia’s position as a net receiver of migration (albeit from countries that are also facing demographic lows) and identify the need to decrease the “considerable out-migration” from the country.

7. Unpacking “Traditional” Values

The stress on “families” is evident in both Polish and Russian demographic documents. “Family” signifies a nuclear, heterosexual married couple with able-bodied biological offspring. As one Polish MP put it: “A marriage is a family; a family cannot exist without marriage.” On a discursive level, Polish and Russian politicians are only interested in a particular type of family which reflects the supposed demographic interests of the nation. A “strong” family is seen as the basis for a strong and “healthy” nation. Formed through a combination of (preferably religious) marital and blood ties, the nation-state is conceptualized as a national family, with the traditional nuclear family ideal providing the standards used to assess the contributions of family members in heterosexual and married-couple households. Consequently, both state programs stress “family stability” and the need to decrease divorce rates.

Based on the political discussions both in Poland and in Russia, in terms of demography, “family” is threatened. Politicians place themselves in the position of defending and speaking for “normal” and “traditional” families and

the health and sanity of children. This strongly nativist (as witnessed in the lack of migration policies in Poland and the concerns with “forced migration” in Russia) and natalist narrative determines preferred societal structures and defines norm versus “deviance.” The aim of this family model is the biological growth of the religious ethno-nation. Any divergence from the “natural norm” is underscored by revulsion and seen as subversive and threatening for society.

The political debates on demography in Poland and Russia revolve around the gendered discourses of “traditional values,” demonstrating how nationalist myths of a specific Polishness and Russianness must be protected or promoted against the European “other.” Demographic politics institutionalize and mainstream such beliefs presenting them as national-cultural accomplishments, leading to structural problems such as discrimination and segregation of particular social groups, rather than being attributed to specific socio-economic conditions. Others have shown the importance of organized churches both in Poland and in Russia (see for instance Duda, 2016; Laine & Saarelainen, 2017). These faith-based organizations legitimize the hegemony of the discourses. In the context of demographic policy, this means that the imposition of a concrete language forces unequivocal understandings upon the consumers of the discourse. Because political actors deploy hegemonic ready-made “frames of meaning,” they discursively enact, promote, and disseminate conservative and religious gendered values through political discourse. The axiology of the message is clear.

The social matrix of demographic discourses in Poland and Russia displays elements that prescribe or denigrate certain values for the family and the nation. Ultraconservative hegemonic discourses construct and fill with meaning both sides of the “values divide.”

Furthermore, this narrative depicts as anti-values a set of ideas that are traditionally associated with political and civic liberalism. The proponents of these discourses argue that the anti-values cause the collapse and decay of the “real” values. Figure 1 depicts the constructed “true,” traditional values as surrounded by anti-values, according to the narratives of the “demographic crisis” proponents.

The presented values and anti-values do not necessarily constitute gendered dichotomies or binary oppositions but are usually evoked in bigger and often messier discursive groupings. However, “liberal” values, especially those connected to ideas of tolerance and political correctness, are implicitly and derogatorily constructed as effeminate and foreign.

This tension between traditional values and “anti-values” emerges in the policy debates on demography in Poland and in Russia. Discursively, the field of gender equality is where these two sides come to a head. As Edenborg (2019, p. 17) concluded, “Russia’s project of “traditional values” clearly shows that...is not only a concern for excluded groups, but central to all efforts to (re)define community.” One MP of the governing ultra-conservative Law and Justice party in Poland argued that the divide is a war: “Huntington’s clash of civilizations as contrasted to the clash of the civilization of life and death are nothing.” According to another Polish politician: “This is an attempt to dazzle us with the ideology of equality, which is in essence a dictatorship of relativism, a dictatorship of a minority over a majority.” Similarly, President Putin stated at a Valdai Club meeting:

The importance of a solid support in the sphere of morals, ethics and values is increasing dramatically in the modern fragile world...values are a product, a unique product of cultural and historical

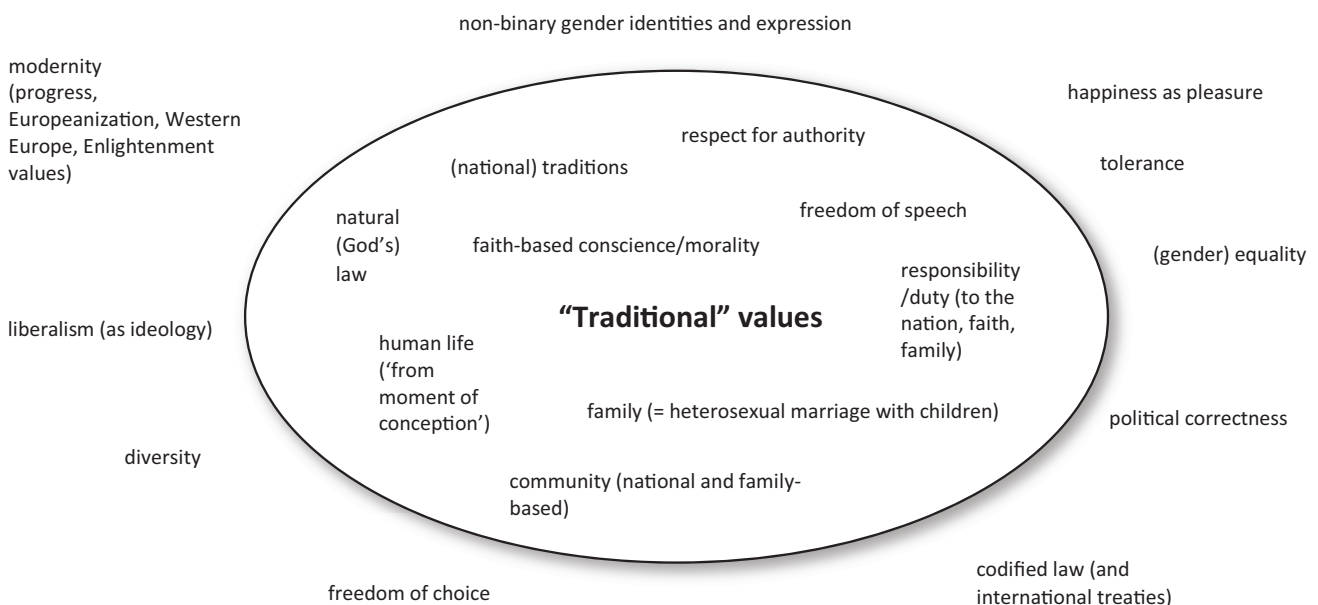


Figure 1. Overview of the values constructed in the “demographic crisis” discourses in Poland and Russia.

development of any nation....Any alien elements will be rejected anyway, possibly bluntly. Any attempts to force one's values on others with an uncertain and unpredictable outcome can only further complicate a dramatic situation and usually produce the opposite reaction and an opposite from the intended result....Of course, the social and cultural shocks that are taking place in the United States and Western Europe are none of our business; we are keeping out of this. Some people in the West believe that an aggressive elimination of entire pages from their own history, "reverse discrimination" against the majority in the interests of a minority, and the demand to give up the traditional notions of mother, father, family and even gender, they believe that all of these are the mileposts on the path towards social renewal....We have a different viewpoint, at least the overwhelming majority of Russian society...has a different opinion on this matter. We believe that we must rely on our own spiritual values, our historical tradition and the culture of our multiethnic nation....The destruction of age-old values, religion and relations between people, up to and including the total rejection of family (we had that, too), encouragement to inform on loved ones—all this was proclaimed progress and, by the way, was widely supported around the world back then and was quite fashionable, same as today. By the way, the Bolsheviks were absolutely intolerant of opinions other than theirs. (Putin, 2021)

What rings clearly is the opposition of "our" natural, traditional, Christian values to "outside" destructive influence. The ultraconservative narrative is emotively formulated as the concern about influence from outside, especially Western European moral decay. There is a perception that Europe (by the doings of the EU and other international institutions) can force societal changes that are not appreciated or do not conform to constructed national traditions. Politicians like President Putin and Law and Justice MPs project gendered anxieties onto (Western) Europe, with Russia and Poland both seemingly remaining heterosexual and normatively gendered. Significantly, we can see a hint of the postcolonial discourse being hijacked and used for a nationalist and illiberal cause: "[Can] the European Union or some other international organization force Poland to register homosexual couples and to allow them privileges?" (Polish Law and Justice MP in 2017).

Thus, both discursively and in policy terms, there is a strong stress on the biopolitical elements in the "politics of values" in Russia and Poland (cf. Makarychev & Medvedev, 2015; Stella & Nartova, 2016; Yatsyk, 2019). There is an emphasis on spirituality, Christian morality, and community, contrasted to the rationalist, morally-relativist, and individual rights-centered culture supposedly dominating in the West (Agadjanian, 2017). The discourses involve an internal gaze, portraying the "traditional" values as organically rooted in national culture

and as explicitly securitized. When such values are implemented in demographic policies the effects are illiberal.

8. Natalist and Familialist Heteropatriarchy

As Pető (2021, p. 320) argued, "familialist policies have substituted dedication to gender equality with their own brand of women's rights." Women (and especially young women of reproductive age) are the main targets and subjects of both Polish and Russian demographic policies. At the same time, state help is advocated mainly for cis, married women with male partners. The removal of the income threshold and the inclusion of all minors under 18 in the Polish 500+ program came as an amendment to the original policy. The reasoning behind these policies points to women as primary caregivers, with the Polish strategy also naming grandparents in the section on various models of childcare. The underlying premise is for women to manage care responsibilities with work; there is little recognition of the need for men to share childcare.

Thus, both Polish and Russian demographic policy documents remain ensconced in gendered patriarchal stereotypes about family life. There is little recognition of single parenthood and no acknowledgment of same-sex parenthood (in both Poland and Russia single mothers constitute most single-parent households). Moreover, single motherhood is vilified—"boys raised without fathers have higher tendencies to substance abuse, frequent sexual activity, aggression, and teen crime," claims the Polish Demographic Strategy. For girls, the absence of fathers causes "young age of sexual initiation, sexual promiscuity, low body self-esteem, auto-aggression, and other psychological disorders including eating disorders." Tellingly, the list of social ills is gendered and sexist—boys have supposedly "frequent sexual activities," while girls are "sexually promiscuous" (2040 Demographic Strategy, p. 57).

In Russia, the government successively made pronatalist policies aimed to increase birth rates a key priority, reinforcing gender inequality and heteropatriarchal family ideals (Edenborg, 2019). The stress on values in both demographic policies reinforces heterosexism in education and welfare policy. For instance, the Polish Demographic Strategy stresses the need to "promote family competences" in society (especially among children and teenagers) by discouraging sexual promiscuity and promoting the culture of "healthy" family life. The Polish 2040 Demographic Strategy outlines personality disorders of one parent, stress, a "workism culture," and low self-esteem as causes of deteriorating family life and leading to alcohol abuse and domestic and sexual violence that "favour family disintegration" (pp. 55–60).

In terms of sexual and reproductive health, both Polish and Russian demographic strategies center on peri- and post-natal care, with general stipulations to promote reproductive care. At the same time, both countries have been implementing policies that restrict the

access to abortion (and in vitro fertilization [IVF] in the case of Poland). In Russia, the implementation of the President's Mother and Child Initiative 2007–2011 has substantially contributed to abortion control (Wang et al., 2021). After 2015, subsequent Polish governments have delivered a number of anti-women and anti-LGBTQ+ legal proposals and legislation: The state funding for IVF disappeared (replaced by funding for unscientific Catholic Church-promoted “naprotechnology”); domestic violence shelters lost funding; President Duda did not sign a gender recognition act; and, significantly, there were several attempts to restrict abortion legislation, with the final one resulting in a near total ban in 2021. The Constitutional Court of Poland, illegally captured by the Law and Justice party in 2015, ruled that abortion for embryo-pathological reasons was unconstitutional, thereby outlawing 98% of legal pregnancy terminations in the country.

9. Conclusions

Both policymakers and demographic analysts tend to evaluate demographic policies in terms of their overall success rates in achieving population growth/decrease aims (see for instance Arkhangelsky et al., 2015; Popova, 2016; Rostovskaya et al., 2019). The goal of this article was to expose the underpinnings of illiberal politics in the field of demography, rather than the evaluation of the effectiveness or efficiency of the demographic policies in Poland and Russia in terms of achieving population replacement rates serving domestic economies. Gendered values and norms are deeply engrained in the policymaking discourse. If these values stem from ideologically familial, natalist, and heteropatriarchal positions, then policies foster population growth while at the same time implementing an illiberal political project.

Overall, what comes across in the analysis of the contemporary demographic discourses in Poland and Russia is the stress on promoting the ethnonational(ist) familial community. The main differences between Poland and Russia appear in the policies relating to curbing mortality and net migration as elements of population growth. Comparatively, in Poland the absence of migration as a factor of demographic growth reflects the wider EU stance of right-wing anti-migration interpretation frames (cf. Goetz et al., 2022). In the Russian Federation, on the other hand, as a country more ethnically diverse than Poland, the demographic documents recognize the need to balance both in- and out-migration. In the documents and statements under analysis, Polish demographic policy is resolutely natalist, familialist, and nativist. The lack of attention to excess deaths (also in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic) or a coherent migration policy can be a feature of necropolitical unconcern with deaths of some groups of people, who are not prioritized in Poland due to historical legacies of racializing classes of public sector and welfare-reliant social groups. The demographic policies of Russia, on the other hand, include a

recognition of the need to deal with excess deaths and increase migration, also due to the historical legacies of the country. Increasing (especially male) life expectancy following the harrowing drops in the 1990s have been a priority of Russian demographic policy for several decades (cf. Makarychev & Medvedev, 2015; Rivkin-Fish, 2010). At the same time, both countries still need comprehensive measures responding to the excess mortality resulting from Covid-19 as well as migration policies addressing the ethnically non-native, so-called “refugee crises” of the recent years.

Despite the differences between the countries, the focus on protecting families and increasing fertility rates as part of the collective national body is central in both national narratives addressing external threats. The discursive codes of social value assigned to certain identities (and by association to gendered bodies) are embedded within constituent discourses on demography. At the center of the “traditional values” frame lies the imagined family ideal. The illiberal resurgence in politics discursively propounds a model of an employed, able-bodied man, a patriot-Christian, who is an obedient and eager entrepreneur multiplying wealth. By his side is his church-sanctioned, nuclear, and heteronormative family taken care of by a wife. Within political discourses in Poland and in Russia, family means marriage and marriage can only be heterosexual. Created by blood and marital ties, ideal families consist of heterosexual couples that produce their own (healthy!) biological children.

Demographic policies prove an effective tool for illiberal politics. Similarly to Goetz et al. (2022, p. 26), I have found that “demographic-political issues bring numerous advantages for the far right.” While being carriers of gendered values, these policies allow politicians to identify some social and economic ills and offer pragmatic solutions. These “illiberal offers” come with ideological and gendered “strings”—they allow for the implementation of gender unequal, exclusionary, and chauvinist society models. The political expediency of “illiberal pragmatism” is both enabled and despised by the progressive (mainly liberal) forces who are complicit in the formation of the current “neoliberal neopatriarchy” (Campbell, 2013, as cited in Pető, 2021, p. 321). A discursive analysis of demographic policies in Poland and Russia reveals the extent to which illiberal politics can respond to societal needs. Illiberal politics is not merely an erosive project; it can yield pragmatic solutions, albeit in socially regressive and exclusionary ways. Further research into the inequalities of the implementation of demographic policies in both countries is vital to examine the systemic inclusion and exclusion mechanisms of various social groups.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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