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ARTICLE

The Reproduction of Nationalism and the Nationalism of Reproduction: Putin's Biopolitics of Defending Tradition, 2012–2021

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Abstract

After Putin's return to the Russian presidency in 2012, a further turn toward authoritarianism has been coupled with attacks on Western secularism, multiculturalism, and alleged moral decay. At home, the Kremlin has been increasingly preoccupied with defining and addressing problems related to citizens' bodies, linking "traditional values" to national security. Central to this discourse are issues relating to reproductive norms. This analysis uses the Foucauldian concept of "biopower" as an epistemic point of departure in an attempt to understand the central role of reproduction in the Kremlin's identity project. Administering the bodies of a population simultaneously produces and delimits that population according to bodily criteria. Thus, this "bodily turn" in Russian nation-building may be understood as "bionationalism," a depoliticizing style of nationalism that relies on biopolitical techniques. The analysis explicates the mechanisms of this style of nationalism: how and why this discourse functions, legitimates problematic practices, excludes "abnormals," expands the state into the everyday lives of citizens, and marginalizes and even securitizes alternative notions of national identity. Putin's bionationalism may be read as an existential nationalism and thereby as producing a specific mobilizational context.

Keywords: Russia; identity; biopower; body politics; authoritarian legitimation

In the wake of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, one of the ways in which the Russian regime presented their war of aggression, was as resistance to Western "satanism" and "perversions that lead to degradation and extinction," specifically, the normalization of "other genders" and gender change being "imposed on children" (Putin 2022). The argument is thin, but the thickness of its construction can hardly be overestimated. It draws legitimacy from a vocabulary that permeates the regime's power politics. In 2020, the Russian Constitution was extensively amended for the first time since it was adopted in 1993. The focus of the media as well as in academic debate was directed at changes that allowed Vladimir Putin to remain in power until 2036. Less discussed, but perhaps just as important for the life of the average Russian, was the introduction of a series of articles that target the private lives of Russian citizens. The additions include sections on "healthy lifestyle" and "protecting family, motherhood, fatherhood and childhood" and "the institution of marriage as a union of a man and a woman."[1] These changes are in line with a trend that has characterized Russian politics especially since the commencement of Putin's third presidential period, where Russian public discourse has been increasingly preoccupied with defining and addressing problems related to citizens' bodies.

After Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, a further turn toward authoritarianism has been coupled with attacks on Western secularism, multiculturalism, and alleged moral decay (Laruelle 2019). Moreover, the government has increasingly promoted "traditional values" in spheres such as sexuality, health, and family relations, discursively linking these spheres to national security (Sharafutdinova 2014; Østbø 2017). The "identification" of threats to Russian bodily integrity—historical, current, and hypothetical—serves to legitimate state interference in the private spheres of citizens and formats questions about reproductive health, sexuality, gender roles, and child-rearing as central to the nation's continued existence. This production of new associations reformats the discursive opportunity structure within which the Russian state operates.

This shift has been interpreted as a conservative turn (Bluhm and Varga 2018; Suslov and Uzlaner 2019) and an ethnonationalist turn (Kolstø 2016; Teper 2016), and the way that political discourse has since 2012 formatted "traditional values" as vital for Russian sovereignty has productively been conceptualized as a shift toward the securitization of "spiritual-moral values" (Østbø 2017) and a discourse of "sovereign morality" (Sharafutdinova 2014). "Traditional values" have thus become a mainstay of the regime's legitimacy. Central to this discourse are issues relating to reproductive norms.

Studying how this seemingly nonpolitical aspect of human life is represented in the top–down construction of identity in Russia can shed new light on an interesting yet undertheorized commonality in the nationalist projects of many regimes where individual freedom has been restricted and political competition limited: from Benito Mussolini to Viktor Orbán, the body politics of "health" and "family values" are fundamental. In the body-focused nationalism that Putin propagates, there is an inseparable bond between nationalism's form and matter, making Russia a pertinent case for exploring how a project of national identity is linked to bodily self-governance—and how that may empower the personal relationship of many Russians to the Putin regime.

A nationalizing discourse anchored in the body is easily misread as a "regression to tradition" or a primordialist, "bloodborne," basis of togetherness. Such an approach ignores nuances valuable for understanding how power circulates in the Kremlin's nationalist discourse. To grasp the bodily dimension of the regime's nation-building in a way that avoids orientalization requires an approach that is dynamic and relational. Some scholars have read the regime's preoccupation with regulating the corporeal lives of the citizenry as what Michel Foucault has called "biopower" (Makarychev and Medvedev 2015; Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017, 2019). In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, prominent Russianists have suggested that "biopolitics" might provide a fruitful frame through which to view the relation between the Russian state and Russian bodies (Laruelle et al. 2021). This analysis uses the Foucauldian toolkit as an epistemic point of departure in an attempt to understand the central role of reproduction in the Kremlin's nation-building discourse.

It is an oversimplification to understand Putin as an agent of traditionalism or ultraconservatism. For example, Janet Johnson and colleagues (2021) find that Putin's statements on gender only partly align with an ultraconservative camp and more frequently draw on a Soviet "stereotypical" gender regime in which the characteristics of maleness and femaleness were linked to biology. Traditionalism/conservatism is explicitly prescriptive, but this discourse is ostensibly descriptive—claiming to describe factual natural qualities (Johnson et al. 2021, 512). The study of corporeal symbolism and values-based regime legitimation in Russia after 2012 tends to focus on recognizing traditionalist representations, whereas a biopolitical approach readjusts our conceptual lenses to capture a multidimensionality of how Putin's nation-building discourse engages with the "productive" administration of bodies.

As a political project, biopolitics may appear nonideological, based on objective knowledge about how best to safeguard the corporeal lives of citizens. However, these truths are both contingent and have social and political implications. Administering the bodies of a population simultaneously produces and delimits that population according to bodily criteria. Thus, the "bodily turn" in Russian nation-building may be understood as "bionationalism," a depoliticizing style of

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nationalism that relies on biopolitical techniques. Studies of the turn toward values-based regime legitimation in Russia largely ignore the *modern* values that are also present in Putin's discourse, whereas the bionationalism lens is well suited to explicating a nation-building discursive system that intertwines rationalism, traditionalism, modernism, antiwesternism, and securitization. The below analysis explicates the mechanisms of this style of nationalism: how and why this discourse functions, legitimates problematic practices, excludes "abnormals," expands the state into the everyday lives of citizens, and marginalizes and even securitises alternative notions of national identity.

"Bionationalism": Biopolitics and Identity

It is possible to understand the Kremlin's biopolitics as at once a practice of sovereignty and a practice of nationalism. Switching from the perspective of possessed and Weberian sovereign power to biopower helps to nuance the popular image of Putin's increasingly authoritarian power as similar to that of the Leviathan, where fear threatens and civilizes, revealing a "positive," or productive, side to the regime, centered on techniques of power that revolve around the human body and are legitimized by life itself.

It is a problem for the scholarship on recent Russian identity-based regime legitimation that the term "traditional values" covers too much territory for analytical application (Johnson et al. 2021). Understanding the regime's nationalist project requires sensitivity to the complex ways in which symbols commonly associated with both civic and ethnic nationalism are infused with context-specific meaning and incorporated in a coherent nation-building narrative. The recent rise of values-based nationalisms around the globe should remind us that social science is situated in the "real world": at a time of general agreement that nations are in one way or another modern constructs, a primordialist ethnonationalism has strong connotations of "backwardness," also outside scholarly circles. Nationalist entrepreneurs have a self-conscious relationship to the civic–ethnic dichotomy and use the language of civic nationhood to present their states to domestic and international audiences alike (Brubaker 2004, 134).

Civic, "modern" nationalism in turn disciplines a population by "seeing central evils of the modern world produced at a safe distance by ethnic nationalists from whom they are deeply different" (Calhoun 2007, 146). Demonstrating the epistemic value added by the bionationalism approach, Banu Subramaniam's *Holy Science* (2019) challenges analyses that dichotomize the archaic and the modern. The author shows how scientific developments and neoliberal governance in India is narrated as a restoration of the country's Hindu past after colonial rule and how Hindu nationalists invoke the social authority of modernity by presenting traditions as scientific knowledge (Subramaniam 2019). In Russia, Putin has remained consistent in his emphasis on the importance of a national identity based on civic patriotism. However, the recent turn in Russian nationalism appears to transgress the civic–ethnic distinction: its discursive makeup consists of cultural, rationalistic, "organic," liberating, and illiberal features. What emerges is a modern form of exclusive cultural community that adopts the language of rationality.

Foucault's concept of "biopower" provides a good starting point for analyzing such a nationalism. Instead of being a power that curbs, diverts, and destroys, biopower is geared toward management of life: producing capabilities, making them grow, and ordering them (Foucault 1978, 136). Biopower operates on two different, yet entangled, levels, seeking power both over the human body and over the population as a whole. When directed at regulating the human body directly, it is referred to as "anatomopolitics" and "centred on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimisation of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces […] its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls" (Foucault 1978, 139). Where biopower regulates bodies as population, it circulates in a regime of governmentality termed "biopolitics." Biopolitics deals with issues that belong to life as such, like health, the ratio of birth to death, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population, and disease as well as the institutions that frame such phenomena: race,

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reproduction, medicine, health, science, and technology (Foucault 2003, 243). In short, "biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power's problem" (Foucault 2003, 245). As Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk point out, Foucault's scholarship must here be approached "as a site of fervent definitional struggle and disagreement" (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2019, 5). It never focused on producing finalized, stabilized and ready-to-apply concepts, and these concepts go hand in hand, intersect, and merge.

Although biopower certainly poses a challenge to sovereign power as conceptualized by Hobbes and Weber, Giorgio Agamben identifies an intersection between biopower and sovereignty by employing Carl Schmitt's conceptualization, defining the sovereign as the one who decides on the state of exception (Agamben 1998, 24–28). The link between biopolitics and sovereign power is, according to Agamben, to be found in the ability of the sovereign to transcend the law for the best of the population. In modern societies, where human life itself is the target of its own political strategies, the administration of life legitimates exempting some lives from being covered by the rights and duties that characterize modern politics. This "sovereign ban" produces a bare, human life which constitutes the threshold of the political community (59). The biopolitical process of deciding which lives will be recognized as belonging to the community of qualified, political beings is constitutive of sovereign power (Agamben 1998). In turn, the community that is administered to live is defined by those lives that are excluded from it.

Where Agamben focuses on biopower as a "deep structure" of all modern politics, Foucault's project is to study a historically specific phenomenon—not what power is, but how power works in a given context (Koopman 2015). Applying the biopolitical lens to contemporary Russian authoritarian regime legitimation helps to illuminate both similarities and differences to the regimes described by Foucault and Agamben. More explicitly so than their "western", "modern" biopolitics, Putin's biopolitics appear as "identity biopolitics":

> If identity politics refers to political organizing and claims-making in terms of particular identities, identity biopolitics refers to governing subjects as members of particular populations through technologies and strategies aimed at cultivating identitarian attachments and resentments. (Judge forthcoming, 3)

From an identity perspective, biopolitics "does not only correspond with regulation of (pre)existing populations, but also might be part of nation-building, a subjectifying force that produces various collective identities grounded in accepting sets of corporeal practices to control over human bodies and their physical existence" (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2019, ix). Nationalism's point of reference is then placed in the sphere of "knowledge," "nature," and doxa. This inconspicuousness of corporeal politics is reflected in the academic tradition within political science to "treat bodies as an unproblematic category […] apolitical and unchanging" (Waylen et al. 2013, 162). Whereas seemingly personal issues associated with the body—from clothing and hair style to pregnancy, contraception, and rape—have not traditionally been understood as lying within the provenance of political science, the Foucauldian embodiment approach takes into account how "body politics" segregate and organize our social worlds. Central to the biopolitical perspective is the identification of the body and its historical specificity as the direct locus of social control (Foucault 1978, 1988).

The more effective the mechanisms of discipline are, the less do we notice them, and the more effectively do we contribute to their maintenance. The way that national identity besieges the private sphere may be understood as what Michael Billig terms "banal nationalism"—the ordinary, taken-for-granted signs of national identity that permeate modern society (1995). Like Hanna Arendt's "banality," Billig's should not be misconstrued as meaning "harmless": it concerns the ideological habits that reproduce nations and their embeddedness in everyday life (Thapar-Björkert 2013). As a highly "contemporary" source of collectivity, bionationalism must be understood in the context of globalization and its acceleration of transnational flows. Globalization puts pressure on

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the reification of national communities and challenges the way we think about processes of inclusion and exclusion. New patterns of discursive border drawing expose the ways in which these processes penetrate and transgress the nation-state. The "imagined community" is discursively (re)produced at its cognitive frontiers, but these frontiers, the borders of collective identities, permeate our everyday lives.

Bionationalism and War

A central element of the bionationalism lens on the ways in which others are included as exiled sides of the self is the Foucauldian notion of "war." Foucault describes how war, over the *longue durée*, has transformed from a physical act to a discourse that legitimizes the modern state—understanding politics as "the continuation of war by other means" (Foucault 2003, 15). As a conflictual form of othering, analysis of sovereign power should keep "war" in mind as a force that permeates society. This is a continuation of war "by means of verisimilitude": The presence of "war" is not necessarily predicated on the occurrence of attacks but rather on the playing out of the practices and interactions that are part of war's discourse (Der Derian 2009, 48). In what is perhaps the earliest articulation of the bionationalism frame, Herbert Gottweis and Byoungsoo Kim describes the tendency in South Korea "not only to optimize the population […] but also to 'defend' the nation against biological menace from the outside" (Gottweis and Kim 2009).

For Andrey Makarychev and Sergei Medvedev, a main characteristic of Russia's "biopolitical turn" around 2012 is an escalating securitization of routine social practices (Makarychev and Medvedev 2015, 47) and the proclamation of "a sort of 'sexual sovereignty' of Russia" (Makarychev and Medvedev 2015, 45). Their observation aligns with David Campbell's reconceptualization of the relationship between foreign policy, security, and identity. In *The Biopolitics of Security*, Campbell explores how nation-states are produced through boundary-constructing political performances in which distinctions between Self and Other are "constituted through the writing of threats as externalized dangers," allowing for an understanding of national identity construction that goes "beyond the 'domestic' versus the 'foreign'" (Campbell 2005, 947). Campbell points to US politics after September 11: The "War on Terror" had an enemy that was "by definition largely unseen," and the association of terrorism with other "resistant elements" within the USA became a mechanism by which the threat was materialized (Campbell 2005, 943).

Similarly, Russian biopolitics builds discursive bridges between external threat and internal behavior. Through discursive formatting, responsibility for the survival of the Russian nation-state becomes individualized. Linking domestic bodies and their behavior to external danger constructs them as a borderland where "practices intersect, actors and issues meld into one another, and conflicts potentially arise" (Campbell 2005, 946).

It is something of a truism within peace and conflict studies that value conflicts—conflicts over incompatible belief systems—are usually more durable and harder to de-escalate because the conflict is over who one is and not over some achievable or negotiable materiality (Mitchell 1981; Hasenclever and Rittberger 2000). The threat is therefore existential, and the conflict is assigned a fatalistic logic (Schmitt 2003). This notion appears transferrable to the war of verisimilitude over Russian national identity. Little is more central in our relationship to our own existence than the body. Foucauldian thinking here has a "French connection" with that of Pierre Bourdieu (Lewellen 2003, 184), who argued that embodied knowledge has a conservative inertia that opposes change and is both shaped by and conveys power (Bourdieu 1977). The construction of a "biopolitical community" turns a foreign threat to Russia into a threat to a nationalized habitus—a threat to "Russianness." Given the link constructed between adversaries abroad and behavior at home, this logic extends inward to "perverted" or "alien" others that would ostensibly be seen as part of the Russian in-group. Banal corporeal activity is made into a patriotic matter, and any representation of "perversion" comes to signify existential danger.

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A biopolitical approach sheds light on how the "traditional values" discourse and its centering on reproduction imagines the Russian nation as a state-centered community striving for congruence between the national and the sovereign political unit (cf. Gellner 1983, 31; Anderson 2016, 6–7). With the legitimacy of civic nationalism and the biological and naturalized sense of belonging of ethnic nationalism, the production of "meaningful differences" in the Kremlin's bionationalism not only delineates a Russian nation from other nations but also links national identity to self-governance in a way that goes hand in hand with the turn toward authoritarian politics that the state has taken in the last decade. The rationale it constructs calls to defence against existential threat. The product constitutes important configurations of the "bandwidth of possible outcomes" of Russian politics (Neumann 2008, 62), producing a particular mobilizational context.

Data

The devotion to family politics may be guided by multilayered intensions. Although the exact thinking behind the Kremlin's treatment of reproduction is hardly epistemically accessible, we may come closer to understanding what responses it may yield: what configurations are done to the opportunity structure and discursive space within which the Russian state operates? Here it may be useful to recall Foucault's distinction between the study of discourse and the history of thoughts (Edkins 1999, 46; Foucault 2002, 29–31). Whereas the latter seeks to uncover meaning and intention behind statements, Foucault argues that the more fruitful question to ask is "What intention does this discursive formation produce?"

In other words, this article is interested in the top-down construction of a particular nationalist biopolitical rationality. It is therefore based on analysis of official discourse, through close reading of two sets of annual speeches by the Russian President during the period 2012–2021 to the Federal Assembly and the Valdai Discussion Club and two key texts from the same period, the revisions to the Constitution introduced in 2020 and the 2014 *Concept of State Family Policy for the period until 2025* (hereafter, the Concept of Family Policy). Although Foucault encourages a decentralized analysis of power, there are good reasons for why political scientists often privilege official discourse (Dunn and Neumann 2016, 97). The way state leaders are situated in the public sphere makes them important conveyers of the basic discourses at play (Hansen 2013). Moreover, their speech acts are "sites where national politics and ultimately states are performed" (Butler and Spivak 2007). The texts analyzed here have been chosen based on three criteria: they clearly articulate identity and policy, are widely read and attended to, and have the formal authority to define a political position (Hansen 2013, 76).

The Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, always broadly cited in secondary literature, enjoys considerable prestige. Covering a wide range of topics, it summarizes the state of the Federation and provides direction for the coming year. The President's annual interventions at the Valdai Discussion Club initiate the audience into his vision of the country's past, present, and future with a scope that makes the "Valdai speeches" significant as "programmatic speeches on national identity" (Blakkisrud 2016, 250).

The Concept of Family Policy has been included because it is treated as a nodal point in secondary literature on Russian body politics and by later policy documents (Rostovskaya, Kuchmaeva, and Bezverbnaya 2019). The reasons for including the constitutional amendments are self-evident: If medium and presentation are seen as giving value to text, a constitution is perhaps unrivaled. It is not only a governing document but also a nodal point for any nationalist project—as a text, or by its absence. The 2020 amendments represent only the second—and by far the most encompassing—change to the Russian Constitution since its adoption in 1993: in addition to five entirely new articles, changes were introduced in 41 of the existing ones.

Finally, as for the decision to focus on the period 2012–2021, it is well established that Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 marked a qualitative shift toward "conservatism," "neotraditionalism," values, and authoritarian politics (Blakkisrud 2016; Laruelle 2019). I approach

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the period following 2012 as what Foucault calls a "problematizing moment": a shift in the history of Russian nation-building that provides an opportunity to explore the emergence of social facts that later come to stand unquestioned. At such a moment, Foucault argues that discourse analysis may "demonstrate how things which appear most evident are in fact fragile and that they rest upon particular circumstances and are often attributable to historical conjunctures which have nothing necessary or definitive about them" (Mort and Peters 1993, 19). Anchoring the analysis in a close reading of selected texts allows us to study how the Kremlin's nationalist project is narrated in biopolitical terms—on what metanarratives it draws "and the rules according to which these metanarratives are tied together […] into a coherent whole" (Diez 2001, 17–18). What emerges is the articulation of a Russian national identity that targets human bodies and produces them as members of a population. This process naturalizes certain truths in the societal script in ways that serve to empower the ruling regime.

Childbirth as Conservatism

After Putin's reelection to the presidency in 2012 amidst an unprecedented wave of oppositional protests,[2] the Russian government introduced a series of legislative measures restricting civil rights and the activities of civil society including a law on "Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent" (the "foreign agent" law) and a law "For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values" (the "gay propaganda" law). Putin's speech at the Valdai International Discussion Club the following year can be seen as an attempt at legitimizing these decisions. The speech constitutes a landmark in the development of Putin's rhetoric. His main message was that the state of global politics required "new strategies to preserve [Russia's] identity in a rapidly changing world" (Putin 2013b).

The 2013 Valdai speech made it clear that national identity would play a more important role than during Putin's two first terms as president, during which legitimacy was primarily linked to administrative and economic success. According to Putin, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic, political, and social collapse left Russia without a grand narrative and with no readily acceptable alternatives. In Putin's words,

> We have left behind Soviet ideology, and a return to it is not an option. Proponents of fundamental conservatism who idealise pre-1917 Russia seem to be similarly far from reality as the adherents of western ultraliberalism. (Putin 2013b)

Russia's turbulent history has resulted in traditional political categories and perhaps grand ideological projects, as such, being perceived as both divisive and precarious. In this context, bionationalism emerges as seemingly "postideological" political identity. The 2013 speech makes a claim for Russia as a defender of traditional values both at home and on the world stage. It presents the security and success of the country as dependent on the extent to which the population identifies with its history, historical values, and traditions (Putin 2013b).

In 2014, Putin's Valdai speech was again dedicated to the deteriorating state of global politics. Questioned by a member of the audience about the relationship between his conservatism and Russia's modernization, Putin stressed that his concept of conservatism is "not so different from the traditional interpretation." It does not mean, he explained, "some kind of reluctance to develop."

> Healthy conservatism is about using all the best, new, and promising to ensure progressive development. […] for society to survive, we must support the basic pillars that humankind has developed over centuries: looking after mothers and children, preserving and cherishing our own history and achievements, and looking after our traditions and our traditional faiths. (Putin 2014)

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There is an obvious biological logic in connecting Russia's survival to the conditions of mothers and children. Nonetheless, listing "looking after mothers and children" as the first among three basic pillars of Russian society is presumably more than a simple statement of medical facts. This linking of care toward mothers and children to a particular conservative ideology exposes a contingent problematization at the core of the "traditional values discourse": if Putin's "conservatism" entails looking after mothers and children and looking after mothers and children is needed to ensure Russia's survival, logic would say that Putin's conservatism is needed to ensure Russia's survival. Within the Russian President's sober account of a forward-looking conservatism hides a syllogism with political implications: a threat to the Kremlin's brand of conservatism is an existential threat.

Here it should be noted that, as Putin himself points out, neither conservatism nor traditionalism necessarily involves looking backward. The fact that the term "conservatism" does not refer to the conservation of some essence is what allows Putin to speak of a conservatism that is "different." It has been claimed that our time is posttraditional: traditions no longer validate themselves—they are validated in competition with other alternatives. What is left is precisely "traditionalism," a modern ideology that values the virtues of tradition, serving as a counterweight to the gloom of modernity (Giddens 1994). In *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger argued along similar lines and show how the past is manipulated to fit the needs of the present. "Traditions," they argue, are responses to new circumstances that present themselves as old (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012). Hobsbawm and Ranger could perhaps be criticized for their dichotomizing of genuine tradition and modern invention. Nevertheless, the book forcefully conveys an important message about national identity: "National character is not an explanation; it is something to be explained" (Bauer 1996, 41).

What then, does Putin's inclusion of care for mothers and children as a basic pillar of Russian society—as a conservative and traditional value and as a matter of existential security—really entail? His nationalist project fills an identity vacuum with a depoliticizing national identity grounded in aspects of life that appear to precede political conceptualization. In his 2014 speech to the Valdai Discussion Club, Putin places the emphasis on motherhood in the sphere of values. However, the Kremlin frequently problematizes motherhood within the frame of scientific reason, often within the biopolitical science par excellence: demography. Thus, motherhood becomes a nodal point for national identity that binds together two discursive flows across epistemic boundaries: modern life sciences and traditionalist ethics.

"People as Power"

The management of population growth through family politics has been a consistent theme in Putin's speeches, particularly and increasingly so over the past decade. In his first annual address to the Federal Assembly after having been reelected in 2012, Putin named stabilizing the population as a top priority. The three-child family was to become the new norm in Russia (Putin 2012). Eight years later, in 2020, Putin again began his annual address by declaring, "The fate of Russia, its historical perspective, depends on how many of us there will be" (Putin 2020). Fertility levels in Russia have long been well below population-replacement levels (Temkina 2015). Besides, Putin is not the only head of state to encourage citizens to procreate: "states are interested in reproducing themselves and governing their population accordingly" (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2016, 69). However, demographic concerns are variously constituted across discursive and geographic landscapes. The local framing of demographic trends "tell us about how states seek to engineer society by governing bodies, particularly women's bodies" (69).

There is an inherent methodological "groupism" in the demographic science (see Brubaker 2004). It studies human populations and their size, structure, and movement, as regulated by birth, death, and migration. Thus, it is a precondition for the very existence of demographic knowledge that human populations are, in the words of Benedict Anderson, "imagined as limited" (Anderson 2016, 7). Discussing Russia's demographic challenges, Putin during his second term sketched out

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three solutions: to reduce the mortality rate, to increase the birth rate, and to develop an effective migration policy (Putin 2006). In the texts analyzed for this article (2012–2021), there is no further encouragement, or mention, of migration to the Russian Federation. What remains, then, is a language for thinking about birth and death on a societal level—biological life as linked to membership of an in-group. Thus, the "demographic crisis" creates an ideal discursive field for a link to be nurtured between bodily discipline and a sense of national belonging.

In the texts examined, an intertextual bridge is constructed between demographic growth and some form of Russian exceptionalism. Putin depicts Russia as a civilized Christian nation in a sea of "others" unwittingly subsiding into godlessness. Religious belief is defined as a precondition for human dignity, and implicitly, a grim picture is painted of the state of human dignity in many European countries (Putin 2013b). Referencing Europeans' negligence of their own moral foundations, he warns against following the West on "a direct path to degradation and primitivisation." "What else," he asks, "but the loss of the ability to self-reproduce could act as the greatest testimony of the moral crisis facing a human society?" (Putin 2013b). Discussing the birth rate in 2020 (1.5 per woman in 2019), Putin declares that although this seems to be enough for many European countries, "it is not enough for us" (Putin 2020).

To understand the relevance of demography to contemporary Russian nation-building requires attention to what is perhaps the most fundamental apparatus of bodily self-governance: gender. It has become insuperable to our experienced identities—even those who work hard to be free of gender define themselves in opposition to it. This makes gender a critical field for the simultaneous processes of biopolitical problematization and normalization (Amigot and Pujal 2009). Gender perspectives have been at the forefront in thinking about the role of body politics in Russian regime legitimation. Although an important focus here has been Putin's politics of masculinity (Riabov and Riabova 2014; Sperling 2014), the workings of the Kremlin's bionationalism may also be illuminated by scholarship focusing on the subjectivation and political mobilization of womanhood. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias explore five important ways in which women tend to affect and be affected by nationalist processes and how nationalized womanhood may relate to the state:

(a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectives,
(b) as reproducers of boundaries of national groups,
(c) as participating in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture,
(d) as signifiers of national differences,
(e) as participants in national, economic, political, and military struggles (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989, 7).

For the politics of demography, the first option has the most obvious relevance. Exploring this category further in *Gender and Nation*, Yuval-Davis notes that it is not uncommon that "the pressures on women to have or not to have children relate to them not as individuals, but as members of specific national collectives" (Yuval-Davis 1997, 22). She identifies three main discourses that recur in the nexus between nation, gender, and population control: (1) a "people-as-power" discourse, promulgating a "the-more-the-merrier" logic; (2) a "eugenicist" discourse, concerned not with raising the quantity of the nation but with the "quality of the national stock"; and (3) a "Malthusian" discourse, concerned with preventing catastrophe caused by population growth (22). Whereas the latter discourse represents an opposite to the Russian, the former two may help understand Putin's narrative.

The people-as-power discourse "sees maintaining and enlarging the population of the national collectivity as vital for national interest" (Yuval-Davis 1997, 22). Yuval-Davis exemplifies this discourse with the 1991 platform of the Slovenian party Demos, which explicitly stated that "women should not have the right to abort future defenders of the nation" (30). Antiabortion activism in Russia has taken on a remarkably similar logos in the last years. As part of a privately sponsored pro-

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natalist campaign in 2017, a series of billboards appeared along Russian roads that showed two images: one depicting a strikingly developed foetus in the womb and the other showing a child with large, blue eyes. In different versions, that child is dressed in various military uniforms. Above the first image it is written, "Protect me today," and above the second, "I can protect you tomorrow." Emblazoned on the bottom is the campaign name "For life" (*Za zhizn,* "Leptazazhizn," n.d.). The campaign displays the people-as-power narrative in such a blatant form that it is easily derided. However, it echoes structures of meaning that are very much present also in the routinely securitization of "traditional family values" in Putin's speeches.

"All Happy Families are Alike": Constructing the Russian Family

Russia's ever-growing attention to families has practical political implications. In the area of child welfare, discourse and policy has turned from being focused on public and collective solutions toward emphasizing the "child's right to a family" (Kulmala, Rasell, and Chernova 2017). Recent reforms focus on the development of a support systems that can enable birth families to retain custody of their children. This shift is representative of the way in which an international child rights ideology has become domesticated in Russia (Kulmala, Rasell, and Chernova 2017). The focus on preventing families from splitting up finds a parallel in the approach to victims of domestic violence—many women's shelters in Russia are designed to help families to continue together, whereas alternative support groups have been branded as "foreign agents" (Johnson et al. 2021, 507–508). The priority accorded to the integrity of family bonds in Russian care policy demonstrates the nonessential nature of knowledge of the *bios.* The approach represents a culturally specific form of control based upon culturally specific truths. A normative universe is upheld by authorities and institutions, implemented by "scientific monitoring, welfare systems, and other administrative techniques" (Rodin 2015, 1524).

The Concept of Family Policy institutionalizes the family as an extension of the administrative state. According to its preamble, the family is the foundation of Russian society, and the Concept is designated to "support, strengthen"—and "protect" it.[3] Protection is to be provided through a series of economic measures as well as by "creating an atmosphere of priority for family and moral values in society."[4] The Concept interchangeably draws on and intertwines the ethos and logos of life sciences and economics, and of ethics and tradition. Hidden between measures to stimulate population growth, there is a political manifesto clarifying what traits that should identify such a population. Putin's address to the Federal Assembly in 2020 reflects this duality. Although the speech is perhaps best remembered for announcing the move to amend the Constitution, its first section addressed population reproduction:

> The fate of Russia […] depends on how many children will be born in Russian families […], how they will be raised, who they will become, what they will do for the development of the country, and what values will be their mainstay in life. (Putin 2020)

At first glance, the statement appears both self-evident and empty. "How," "who," and "what" are all interrogatives without specific direction, just like "how many." The "direction" of the first clause is quite intuitive, but deciphering the four latter ones dealing with the "quality" of the children requires contextual knowledge.

In addition to promoting demographic growth, the Concept of Family Policy goes far in addressing the substance of "quality." The document vows to revitalize the spiritual traditions that make up the basis for a family institution characterized by "marriage, understood as the union of a man and a woman […] concluded for the purpose of creating a family,"[5] but it has an explicitly functionalist and administrative approach to the heteronormative family unit.[6] In line with the people-as-power discourse, this relationship is summed up in the pronouncement that "the main

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priorities of the country's successful development should be strengthening the family as the foundation of the state"—directly linking the success of the state to family life.

The Concept represents a form of biopolitical totalization, as it addresses all parts of family life (see Makarychev and Medvedev 2015). Its stated objective is to ensure that families can perform their core functions as to the "birth, care and socialisation" of children and in the economy of the state, and maintain the "physical, mental and emotional health" of family members, thereby strengthening the state.[7] This spiritual reinforcement of the traditional Russian family is linked to everything from the prevention of violence, substance abuse, and alcoholism, to ensuring a healthy diet. To safeguard "the life-preserving function of the family," the Concept calls on researchers to develop effective technologies and mechanisms, but it is also noted that these must take into account domestic national and cultural characteristics.[8]

Echoing Yuval-Davis and Anthias' understanding of women as participants in the ideological reproduction of the collective and transmitters of its culture, the Concept of Family Policy stresses how the Russian multigenerational family has traditionally had an educational strategy "aimed at forming spiritual and ethical values in the younger generation."[9] The emphasis on "spiritual heritage" as a "scientific" path to a worthy life triggers associations to historical regimes that Putin's Russia has otherwise shown no interest in being associated with. When applied to the regulation of sexuality and reproduction, this mobilizes ideas of purity and perversions. It is here that modernist knowledge and traditionalist ethics meet: both claim referentiality in something that is outside of, and that precedes, discourse and politics—their credentials lie in unperverted, natural "truth."

The Defence of Russianness Requires Participation

Makarychev and Medvedev (2015) connect the Concept of Family Policy to a series of other initiatives directed at regulating the banalities of family relations—for example, a proposal in a regional legislature to introduce conscription for women childless upon turning 20, Duma representatives lobbying for a ban on abortions, and a proposal in the Federation Council to increase the fee for registering a divorce by 75 times—from 400 to 30,000 rubles (2015, 48). Mention should also be made of the so-called maternity capital implemented in 2007 and extended in 2018 and 2020, giving families a significant sum of money for each child born or adopted (Pension Fund of Russia 2021). Finally, the introduction of an "Order of Parental Glory" in 2008, essentially reintroducing the Soviet Order of Maternal Glory, links childbirth to patriotism, with retrospective and military overtones. The order is awarded by the President to married parents who, by raising seven or more children with "harmoniously developed personalities," have made an honorable effort for the motherland (TASS 2012).

The depoliticizing point of reference in the truths "inherent" to human lives makes for a manoeuvrable political identity that can tap into a broad repertoire of legitimizing discourses. Aleksei Levinson has argued that Russia's demographic experience makes the Russian individual the main value of society (Cordell 2021). Putin's speeches certainly support that observation. Their targeting of private practices as matters of national sovereignty individualizes responsibility for the survival of the Russian collective. While discussing demography at the Valdai Discussion Club in 2013, the President declared his deep belief that "individuals' personal, moral, intellectual and physical development must remain at the heart of [Russia's] philosophy." Here he quoted Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, stating that after the difficult 20th century, the nation's main goal should be to preserve the population (Putin 2013b). The hardships of the last century—the privations of the Soviet regime, the earthshattering costs of the Great Patriotic War, and the chaos in the wake of the failed "shock therapy" of the 1990s—infuse the call to protect the Russian body politic from distorting influences with emotion.

Especially the war is often invoked in discussions of demography, the argument being that the demographic losses in 1941–1945 still have ripple effects (Putin 2017). Although regime voices are increasingly recognizing it as difficult to attribute current demographic failures to the war instead of

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factors like low incomes (Bashkatova 2019), the "Great Patriotic War" is a total social phenomenon in today's Russia (Wood 2011; Hoffmann 2021) and can serve as strong justification of any national or international circumstances—that is, invoking the war replaces the need for further explanation. Invoking shared trauma personalizes the government's family politics and its discursive wrapping. Moreover, encouraging Russians in general, and potential mothers in particular, to enter into heteronormative marriages and produce children of a certain spiritual inclination is linked to a powerful node that represents Russians coming together across all divides for the motherland and the collective good. Framing childbirth as a continuation of the Great Patriotic War "by other means" produces a powerful call to participatory action.

Discourse is a political practice implicated in the production of subjects as subjects of knowledge (Edkins 1999, 44). In the discourse that problematizes demographic crisis as a threat to national security emerges a field of relations where individuals are subjectivized through their relationship to this crisis. Analysis of how the Russian regime approaches its prime threat, demographic crisis, sheds light on the complex ways in which Russia is constructed as a nation-state culturally located in relation to other nation-states. The many ways that Russians are repeatedly told to protect the traditional nuclear family as a foundation of the state cast women and children as "participants in national, economic, political and military struggles" (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989, 7).

Perversion and Norm

Also passages in the annotated text dealing with unrelated topics are permeated with the "Russian family" norm. While referring to policies that apply to all Russian citizens, Putin often uses Russian *families* as the reference object. Making families, not individuals, the objects of the state pushes to the margins the "others"—those living outside a "family" as defined by marriage between man and woman with the intention of producing spiritually and medically healthy children. Through such banal representations, the state produces itself as legitimized by its congruence with a naturally united and exclusive nation defined by certain characteristics.

The discourse on family politics constitutes a nationalist project that involves women and children in a people-as-power discourse dealing with the quantity of a population and in a eugenicist discourse addressing its quality. The "invention" and securitization of the traditional Russian family bridges the past and the future and the nation to the individual self in a way that connects two logics of bodily "health": moral purity and biological survival. The two facets of the regime's bionationalism are evident in Putin's 2019 address to the Federal Assembly:

> For our society […] the family, the birth of children, continuation of the lineage, and respect for the older generations has served and serve as a powerful moral framework. We have done and will continue to do everything we can to strengthen family values. […] Our future is at stake. (Putin 2019)

Analysis of Putin's narratives surrounding demography reveals the contours of a spatially particular sexuality. Gender is not something one has; it is something one *does*, and by practicing "Russian sexuality," one becomes an exponent of banal nationalism. The Russian family is subjected to a series of productive techniques and norms that make them objects of power, and the power-knowledge circulating in Russia's family politics makes these families into Russian subjects, perpetuating the identity of the nation-state through their daily practices.

Sexuality is central to biopower: it is the gateway "both to the life of the body and the life of the species" (Foucault 1978, 146). In Russia, the regime's bionationalism produces a heteronormative order that defines the symbolic borders of the nation as between inside and outside, good and evil, rational civilization and postmodern perversion, and moral reasonability and moral decay. The relation between sexuality and bordering becomes clear in Putin's 2013 Valdai speech:

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> Without the standards of morality that have taken shape over millennia, people will inevitably lose their human dignity. We consider it natural and right to defend these values. One must respect every minority's right to be different, but the rights of the majority must not be put into question. (Putin 2013b)

According to Putin, there are "both foreign policy and moral aspects" that challenge Russian identity. He depicts the "Euro-Atlantic countries" as rejecting the "Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation":

> They are denying moral principles and any traditional identity: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. Policies are implemented that equate multi-child families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with belief in Satan. (Putin 2013b)

These statements provide a densely packed coalition of biopolitically charged representations. A similar structure permeates the data material. Putin sketches a binary relationship where Russia represents traditional civilized (but natural) values, which stand in opposition to evil—promoted from the outside.

As a constituting Other to Russia, the West has been narrated and renarrated in numerous ways (Neumann, 2017). In recent accounts, it seems to represent something perverted, a danger to the wholesomeness of Russian bodily conservatism. After 2012, the term "Gayropa" (Gay Europe) has served as an important geopolitical signifier of difference between Russia and the EU (Foxall 2019) and "has become a means to define Russia's place in the modern world" (Riabov and Riabova 2014). As exemplified above, Putin juxtaposes an existential international conflict over traditional values with an internal social conflict in which "the right of the minority" is seen as imposing on "the right of the majority" (Putin 2013a). Thus, the threat of perversion links international relations with the exclusion and disciplining of individuals at home. As Campbell notes in *Writing Security*, there does not necessarily have to be an action or event to provide grounds for an interpretation of danger:

> The mere existence of an alternative mode of being, the presence of which exemplifies that different identities are possible and thus denaturalises the claim of a particular identity to be the true identity, is sometimes enough to produce the understanding of a threat. (1998, 350)

The exclusion of sexualities that "deny moral principles" is reflected in legal-administrative changes. Although same-sex marriage has never been allowed in Russia, the amended constitution of 2020 effectively subjects it to an active ban: one of several additions to Article 72.1, on areas of joint jurisdiction of the federal and regional level, lists "the protection of family, motherhood, fatherhood and childhood; protection of the institution of marriage as a union of a man and a woman."[10] Although it may seem rather odd to write this into a section of the Constitution distributing administrative power, the move shows the link between sovereignty and biopolitical normalization. As Foucault argued, an implication of biopower is that the workings of the norm become increasingly important at the expense of the legal system (Foucault 1978, 144). What Agamben does is to dissolve the separation between norm and law, saying that our entire centralized power distribution encircles the relationship between normal and abnormal life (Agamben 1998).

By constructing a system of knowledge that relies both on the genre of science and the genre of ethics, Putin's discourse produces a nationalism that is clearly distinguishable from ethnic primordialism: It relies, in the vocabulary of Foucault, not on "symbolics of blood" but on "analytics of sex" (Foucault 1978, 148). National heteronormativity "is the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship" (Berlant and Warner 1998, 549). When Putin draws the cognitive borders of the Russian collective self, he mobilizes dichotomies that separate not only Russia from foreign Others but also "Russianness" from some of Russia's citizens. The nontraditional minority finds itself in a translocal borderland.

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The Children of the Constitution

The role that reproduction and heteronormativity has acquired in the Kremlin's discourse accords to children a fundamental symbolic function. In 2020, Putin declared that his politics were starting to pay off in larger numbers of children being born. What was now important, he stressed, was

> that they learn the true values of a multi-child family. […] If this becomes a *natural moral norm* for the younger generations and an integral part […] of their adult life, then we will be able to meet the historical challenge of guaranteeing Russia's development as a great and successful country. (Putin 2020; my emphasis)

Part of this naturalization arguably takes place in the form of interventions into children's lives through various initiatives related to "patriotic upbringing" and "military-patriotic education," through which techniques of the body write Russian children into the Kremlin's bionationalist discourse.

According to the Concept of Family Policy, "developing the life-preserving function of the family" includes cultivation of a healthy lifestyle through governmental involvement—for example, through "expansion of the network of social and psychological services" focused on "the preservation of pregnancy"[11] and promoting the "involvement of families and children in systematic physical education and sports activities, including […] the all-Russian physical culture and sports complex 'Ready for Labour and Defence' (*Gotov k trudu i oborone*, GTO)."[12] The approach sketched out ostensibly fits the genre of rational administration characteristic of the modern state.

Inspired by the Soviet program of the same name, GTO was (re)introduced in its current form in 2014. The so-called sports complex has local branches across the country, and citizens can take part and receive certificates based on their physical achievements (Shpet, Ovchinnikov, and Yakunina 2019). However, as is evident from the name, GTO is more than merely a sports program. The "complex" illustrates how the regime entwines the cameralist idea that a "healthy" population gives a strong state with better defense capabilities with a discursive structure that reverses the causal relationship and insists on the importance of engaging in practices of defense for a healthy population. This is perhaps even more spelled out in the emergence of a new military-patriotic movement for schoolchildren, *Yunarmiya*,[13] founded by the Minister of Defence in 2016 and blessed by the Patriarch (Sukhanin 2016). The organization's stated goals are to better its members spiritually and morally, socially, physically, and intellectually; foster love for the Motherland, a "healthy lifestyle," and "a respectful attitude towards the family" and "the ancestors"; counter "extremist ideology"; and nurture the principles of collectivism and the values that reside in Russian society (Yunarmy.ru n.d).

In 2012, Putin recognized that "the law can protect morality, […] but the law cannot establish morality." This, he argued, would be totalitarian. Instead of "acting through prohibitions," the "spiritual and moral foundation of society" should be strengthened through the "institutions that are bearers of traditional values," "education, culture and youth policies" (Putin 2012). That these values are to be instilled through physical activity brings to mind some considerations from Bourdieu:

> [N]othing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body, made body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as "stand up straight" or "don't hold your knife in your left hand." (1977, 94–95)

In *Yunarmiya* and adjacent Kremlin-backed youth organizations, children practice conducting military exercises and learn to handle weapons (RT International 2017, McGlynn 2023). Such practices increasingly move from extracurricular activities and into the formal curriculum. In 2020,

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the regime introduced "military-patriotic education" as a mandatory subject in schools across Russia (CSIS 2020). Through military-patriotic practice and the language of conflict, "the principle of war is assimilated into the very weft and warp of the socio-economic and cultural network" (Dillon and Reid 2001, 42).

The securitization of child development is cemented in the 2020 Constitution. A new Article 67^1 in the section on "The federal structure" exemplifies the ways in which the amended constitution breaks with the "civic" institutionalism that previously permeated the text while positioning itself in relation to the civic, democratic genre. Where paragraphs 67^1(2–3) deal with items like "preserving the memory of ancestors who passed on to us ideals and faith in God" and "securing the protection of historical truth", 67^1(4) presents a programmatic formulation in which children are declared the "primary priority" of Russia's politics:

> Children are the primary priority of Russian state policy. The state shall create conditions that facilitate the comprehensive spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical development of children, fostering patriotism, citizenship and respect for elders in them.[14]

This addition may at first glance appear inconsequential, and Russia is certainly not the only country to constitutionalize child rights. The Norwegian Constitution, for example, states that "for actions and decisions that affect children, the best interests of the child shall be a fundamental consideration" (para. 104). However, whereas the Norwegian document establishes a separate sphere for "politics that affect children," the Russian text makes children relevant to *all* state policy, dissolving the borders of where and when an appeal to family values and the development of children is pertinent. The birth and moral, intellectual, and physical development of children is made the ultimate end to all political means, and "a good childhood" becomes the primary principle that all other principles position themselves in relation to. This framing of children constitutes, and makes constitutional, a vast repertoire of doxas and encapsulates structures of meaning that define the identity and power propagated by Putin's regime.

Thus, a complete system of governmentality is built around the production of healthy children, and seemingly depoliticized administration of Russian child rearing may "instil a whole cosmology." The repeated juxtaposing of the quantity and quality of Russian children with concerns over threatening "foreign" sexualities binds together a narrative of the "besieged fortress" with the Kremlin's bodily disciplining of Russia's citizens and sheds important light on the nation-building function of reproduction.

Expanding on the idea that "the loss of the ability to self-reproduce" is "the greatest testimony of the moral crisis facing human society" (Putin 2013b), Putin noted how people in many European countries are "afraid to talk about their religious affiliations." Moreover,

> excesses of political correctness have reached the point where people are seriously talking about registering political parties whose aim is to promote paedophilia […] and they are aggressively trying to impose this model on everyone, on the whole world. (Putin 2013b)

Putin's speeches must be understood in the context of the increasingly authoritarian politics of the last decade. The role of defender of children pervades and legitimizes Russian politics. A much-discussed example is the "Dima Yakovlev Law," named after a Russian-born boy whose neglect by American foster parents resulted in his death. In addition to prohibiting foreigners from adopting Russian children, the law establishes a list of persons who are banned from entering Russia, it allows the Russian government to freeze their assets, and suspends the activity of NGOs receiving money from US actors. Similarly, when the Russian authorities in the spring of 2021 implemented sanctions against Twitter—a platform widely used by oppositional voices—state representatives cited the protection of children, referring to child pornography, calls for children to commit suicide,

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and the fact that Twitter "considers the actions of paedophiles to be correct" as a reason for such measures (*Pervyi kanal* 2021).

The law against promoting nontraditional sexual relations to minors follows the same logic: Norm-transgressing lives threaten Russian children, who must be defended. Our visceral reactions to any threat to a child underscores the manipulative potential in the symbol of childhood. In a world where family values will "determine Russia's fate in the 21st century" (Putin 2020), Putin's regime is positioned as a defender of children from Western perversion. In Putin's speech to the Valdai Discussion Club in 2021, this narrative became more refined than in previous speeches. Here Putin describes a "monstrous" practice of "imposing on [children] the supposed choice" of choosing their own gender, "shutting the parents out of the process." This, he continues, "verges on a crime against humanity" (Putin 2021).

The Kremlin's bionationalism gives the Russian political system the function of "protecting an identity programme based on the mythologeme of defence" (Sadowski 2021, 8)—legitimizing politics as the continuation of war by other means. In this "war," representatives of alternative ways of being in Russia constitute fifth columnists. In the parts of the population where Putin's bionationalism finds resonance, this embodied value conflict may prove hard to de-escalate. It is here that the bodily dimension of the traditional-values discourse is central to the way in which nationalism is linked to the individual self: What gives power entry all the way into the body is not the threat of death but the preservation of life (Foucault 1978, 144–146).

Conclusions

Instead of representing a primordialist or ethnonationalist turn, the traditionalism that Putin propagates is in reality multifaceted. Spiritual heritage is clearly emphasized, but it also has strong connotations to the near-cameralist rationality that shaped Soviet family politics. Close reading reveals that conservatism or tradition in Putin's speeches implies adherence to heteronormative family values and a collectivized, instrumentalized sense of Self. When successful, the Kremlin's delineation of the Russian nation produces a moral hierarchy that renders the domestic superior to foreign others. This hierarchy extends inward to a disciplining of domestic elements that challenge the stabilization of national identity.

Demography, with its inherent imagination of the population as limited, constitutes an ideal discursive field for a production of nationhood centered on the body. An interdependent relationship is constructed between Russian "tradition," Russia's survival in an increasingly threatening world, and giving birth to children. The Kremlin's bionationalist turn frames traditional family values as the gravitational centre of Russian identity. "Children" is a central, perhaps *the* central, node of this discursive system. However, there is a paradox in the Kremlin's framing of the production and protection of children as a true Russianness safeguarded by the regime itself: Constitutionally defined as the goal of all the regime's political means, children serve as a transgressive source of legitimacy—children become the ultimate means to all ends.

The regime's politics are thus legitimized by a national identity that cannot be classified as civic or ethnic but that is both administrative and corporeal. Following from the discursive interwovenness of rationalist and culturalist narratives, uses of the natural/unnatural binary here produce a double exclusion: those that resist or fall outside of the regime's bionationalist mobilization are positioned as both immoral and antirational.

In the intertwining of cultural traditionalism, civic rationalism, and narratives of external threats to Russia's survival, the Russian family becomes a site of patriotic praxis. In the process, the heteronormative organization designated with ensuring the quantity and quality of Russian children ties into the processes of exclusion and inclusion that make up the Russian imagined community. As childbirth becomes a central marker of Russian identity, so do heterosexual relationships. Heteronormativity enables imagining the nation as a continuation of the family,

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and a sanitized space. A eugenicist element emerges as a necessary corollary to Putin's emphasis on not only the quantity of Russians but also the quality of Russian bodies.

When Putin declares that "Russia's greatness is inseparable from the dignified life of its every citizen" (Putin 2020), it has a series of habitual, banal implications that cannot be grasped without an intertextual approach. Intrinsic to a state-centered style of nationalism focused on corporeal practices is the individualization of responsibility for the continued existence of the nation and of the nation-state. What Russians can do to ensure the nation's survival is to adopt the lifestyle propagated by the Kremlin. The individualization of responsibility for the strength and survival of Russia makes the performance of the nation-state corporeal.

It seems a paradox that such a discourse, centered on producing life, is mobilized to legitimize a war. Despite designs on new territories and large-scale forced displacement of Ukrainian children to Russia or Russian-controlled regions (OSCE 2023), Russia's demographic crisis will be exacerbated by the losses on the battlefield, the wave of emigration in the wake of the invasion, and uncertain times discouraging childbirth. Still, there are several ways in which Putin's bionationalism may have contributed to making the war thinkable. The sovereign nation this discourse constructs is a community of traditions and practices, dissociating the Russian community from civic belonging—a precondition for the regime's claim of representing people beyond the borders of the Russian political unit. Moreover, a critical characteristic of the community imagined is defense. Over the last decade, the Kremlin has constructed Russia as a besieged fortress, where war has a disciplining societal presence and is valued as a national practice. Last, perhaps the valuing of corporeal life could also in itself serve to reinforce the power of death. In Foucault's account, this complementary counterpart is an inevitable by-product of a demographic rationality: "Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity" (Foucault 1978, 137). As a biopolitical community's war becomes tangible, "massacres have become vital."

Thus, family values and the biopolitics of defending tradition reaffirm the regime's sovereignty and include, exclude, and discipline Russian citizens. In the process, external danger is coconstituted with the national subject. As a result, Putin's bionationalism represents a case where the value given to bodies is not cosmetic but substantial to high politics.

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Notes

1 Konstitutsiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii, July 4, 2020, para. 67, 72, https://rg.ru/2020/07/04/konstitucziya-site-dok.html.
2 Often referred to by the name of the site of the largest protests, Bolotnaya Square in Moscow, or simply as "the winter of discontent," the protests "for free and fair elections" made up the largest street demonstrations since 1993 (White 2013, 583).
3 Kontseptsiia, 2014, Kontseptsiia gosudarstvennoi semeinoi politiki v Rossiiskoi Federatsii na period do 2025 goda 2014, 1. http://government.ru/docs/14494/.
4 Kontseptsiia, 2014, 8.
5 Kontseptsiia, 2014, 20.
6 Kontseptsiia, 2014, 9.
7 Kontseptsiia, 2014, 7.
8 Kontseptsiia, 2014, 23.
9 Kontseptsiia, 2014, 9.

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10 Konstitutsiia, 2020, para. 72.1 [h].
11 Kontseptsiia, 2014, 15.
12 Kontseptsiia, 2014, 25.
13 Officially: The All-Russian "Young Army" National Military Patriotic Social Movement Association. At the end of 2018 it was decided that *Yunarmiya* should have a presence at every school in the country.
14 Konstitutsiia, 2020, para. 67.

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