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FEMINISM MAKES US SMARTER

DIGEST

April 2024

Pronatalism Rises Again

Pronatalist discourse is suddenly resurgent around the world. Political and religious leaders wring their hands about “demographic winters,” “weakening nations” and people preferring to have pets (Pope Francis), as they scold women and couples for not having more children. How worried should we be?

Oh, let's be clear... Pronatalism has *a/ways* been a major talking point of far-right pundits and politicians, since the demographic makeup of the nation is *a/ways* a major concern of theirs. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has led the charge on this issue in Europe for more than a decade, making frequent speeches where he combines pronatalism with anti-immigration, racist and homophobic views. Here is what Orbán said in 2019 in [a nationally televised speech](#): “We do not need numbers, but Hungarian children. In our minds, immigration means surrender. If we resign ourselves to the fact that we are unable to sustain ourselves even biologically, by doing so we admit that we are not important even for ourselves.” [He doubled down in 2022](#): “Part of the picture of the decade of war facing us will be recurring waves of suicidal policy in the Western world. One such suicide attempt that I see is the great European population replacement program, which seeks to replace the missing European Christian children with migrants, with adults arriving from other civilizations.”

Attacks on LGBTQ persons and on “gender ideology” have featured prominently in Orbán’s policies, since he perceives them to be a threat to the heterosexual family and to childbearing. In 2020, Orbán’s government even [amended the Constitution](#) to define the family as resulting from the marriage of a man and a woman, to state that “children have the right to their identity in line with their sex at birth” (who said they didn’t?), and to mandate that children be brought up “in accordance with the values based on our homeland’s constitutional identity and Christian culture.” Whew.



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán meeting with then-President Donald Trump at the White House in May 2019. Orbán has developed very close ties with the U.S. far-right

Credit: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Orbán’s government offers [tax breaks and low-interest loans](#) for families with children, and [free](#) in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment. Women who have four or more children are even exempt from income tax for life. Hungary’s birthrate is higher than in neighboring countries in Eastern and Central Europe, but even after all of this, it still sits just above 1.5 children per woman, well below the replacement rate of 2.1.

Orbán has predictably become a darling of the international far-right crusade to

restore large families. In September 2023, Orbán hosted the [5th Budapest Demographic Summit](#), which once again brought together far-right academics and religious figures to discuss how to persuade white European women to have more babies, and how to restore traditional gender roles. This time, they were joined by several prominent political figures. Canadian polemicist Jordan Peterson, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić [bemoaned the loss of “traditional family values”](#) and highlighted the dangers of immigration, while proposing little that would actually entice people to have more children.

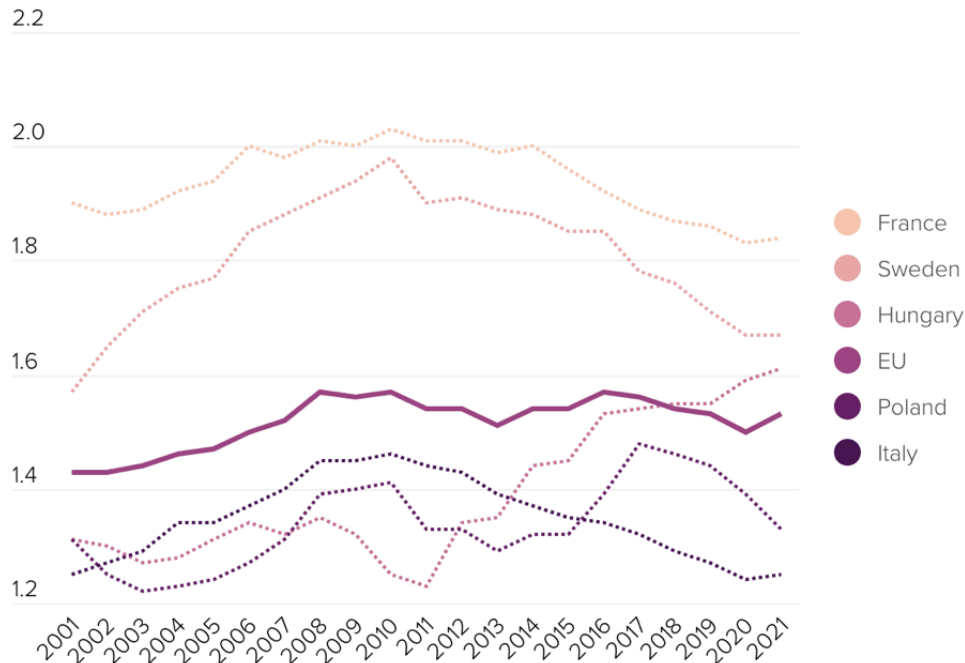
According to Peterson, “The proper encapsulating structure around the infant are united and combined parents, man and woman. All alternatives to that are worse... Single people, divorced people, gay people deviate from that.” Andreas Kinneging, a professor of philosophy at Leiden University, concurred: “Our task is to figure out what is the role of men and what is the role for women, and which roles best correspond to their respective nature. One of them works and one of them takes care of the children.” For her part, Meloni bluntly stated that “In our view, demography isn't just another of the main issues of our [Italian] nation. It is *the* issue on which our nation's future depends.”

This sexist and hateful rhetoric hasn't lifted European birthrates outside Hungary either, as you can easily guess. European birthrates have been below 2.1 for decades, across all 27 countries (except in France briefly, between 2005 and 2014). But these ideas have had very harmful effects on the treatment of immigrants and asylum seekers, and have contributed to homophobic, transphobic, racist, misogynistic and anti-abortion discourse and policies across the European Union and beyond.

BABY BUST

Birth rates in the EU are below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman in all 27 member countries.

Total fertility rate for the EU and select countries, by average number of children per woman.



SOURCE: Eurostat

By Giovanna Coi

Further east, Russia's Vladimir Putin has denounced "gender ideology" and pursued attacks on LGBT groups for years. More recently, Putin also jumped on the pronatalist bandwagon, possibly out of concern for Russia's mounting losses in its assault on Ukraine. In a [February 2024 address to the Federal Assembly](#), Putin argued that "some countries deliberately destroy norms of morality and institutions of the family, and push whole peoples towards *extinction and degeneration* [emphasis added]. But we choose life." Tell that to the Ukrainians, Vladimir.

In the fall of 2023, an anti-abortion campaign was launched by the Russian authorities together with the Russian Orthodox Church. Putin had long seemed reluctant to curtail access to abortion, which was the main method of family planning in Soviet times. That is no longer the case. "The population can be increased as if by waving a magic wand: if we solve this problem and learn how to dissuade women from having abortions, statistics will go up immediately,"

said Patriarch Kirill, the influential head of the Russian Orthodox Church who is close to Putin.

Although Russia's abortion laws remain liberal on paper, a number of other measures have been taken. Russia's Health Ministry has drawn up [guidelines](#) on how best to dissuade women from having an abortion. Doctors will now tell pregnant teenage girls that young parents bond better with their children "because they are practically from the same generation." A single woman will be told that "having a child is no obstacle to finding a life partner."

In November 2023, Patriarch Kirill led [a push to ban abortions in private clinics](#), where one fifth of all abortions take place, usually with abortion pills. The governors of ten Russian regions have so far responded to the call, with the Crimean and Kursk regions leading the pack. The Kursk deputy governor, Andrei Belostotsky, [called this "a significant event"](#) because almost all women wishing to terminate their pregnancy would now have to go to state hospitals, where the authorities will "actively work with them" to make them change their mind.

Meanwhile, a number of regional parliaments have [instituted penalties](#) for "encouraging abortion" and engaging in the "promotion of abortion," leaving medical personnel unsure how to counsel patients about their options.

In parallel, Russia's Ministry of Health is [restricting the sale of mifepristone and misoprostol](#), the two substances known as abortion pills. Mifepristone alone is also commonly sold in Russian pharmacies for use as emergency contraception in the first 72 hours after unprotected intercourse. Starting in September 2024, these drugs will be added to a registry of substances subject to "item and quantity recording" ("предметно-количественному учету or PKU), usually reserved for controlled substances such as narcotics. As a result, manufacturers, pharmacies and medical institutions will be required to register the distribution and sale of these pills in special databases. Pharmacies will also now require a doctor's special "PKU" prescription, even to dispense mifepristone for emergency contraception. (The parallel with past restrictions on

mifepristone in the U.S., which the American right-wing is trying to persuade the U.S. Supreme Court to reinstate, is unmistakable).

Russia's Duma (Parliament) is also currently considering a bill that would ban the "promotion of childlessness" (!) in school curricula. The bill [claims](#) that voluntary childlessness "goes against traditional family values and the state policy of the Russian Federation." A few brave Russian women's groups have protested all of these repressive measures.



The brave women of the Urals Feminist Movement protesting in favor of abortion in August 2023, as increasing restrictions were being brought in by Russian authorities. Their signs read: "His minute - My life," "Abortion is surgery, not murder," "Abortion is a woman's right," and "No children from rapists"

In November 2023, [Chinese President Xi Jinping headlined the National Women's Congress](#) by calling on Chinese women to "foster a new type of marriage and childbearing culture." What he meant, of course, was that Chinese women should once again embrace the role of mother and wife. China had abandoned its one-child policy in 2015. But until last year, Chinese officials would still speak about gender equality and women's self-realization in the labor force as national policy goals. No more. At the Congress, President Xi made no mention of women's rights and instead demanded that women leaders "tell good stories about family traditions and guide women to play their unique role in carrying forward the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation."

Policies and official practices now seek to persuade Chinese women to stick with marriage and have children. Divorces can only be [finalized after a 30-day waiting period](#), and 80 percent of divorce petitions filed by women are now denied on the first attempt, even when there is evidence of domestic abuse by the male partner.

Xi has targeted feminists for particular repression, arresting five prominent activists in 2015 and censoring debates on women's rights, gender-based violence and discrimination. Unsurprisingly, young Chinese women have not complied with the leadership's commands, with [the number of marriages at a record low](#) (the share of urban Chinese women aged 25 to 29 who have never been married rose from 8.6% in 2000 to 40.6% in 2020). Since childbearing in China is closely tied to marital status, the trend clearly points to further dramatic declines in birthrates.

When Chinese young women are interviewed about the situation, they speak of economic uncertainty, but also of the deep-seated patriarchal norms that force them to bear the brunt of childcare, eldercare and home maintenance, with little and even decreasing legal protection in marriage. In 2011, a Supreme People's Court even [decided that, upon divorce](#), the value of the family home would no longer be split between spouses but instead go to the person whose name is on the deed—usually the man—further spooking women away from matrimony. Stay-at-home mothers panicked, as reported by Elgar Yang, 24, a journalist in Shanghai, in a [recent New York Times article](#): “Instead of having more care and protection, mothers become more vulnerable to abuse and isolation.” Given China's past willingness to enforce its one-child policy through invasive and brutal measures, Chinese women are, of course, concerned that similar tactics could once again be deployed to deny them control of their bodies and fertility.

In the U.S., the far-right, a.k.a. the base of the Republican Party, has also gone full tilt on white nationalistic pronatalism, layering it upon its bedrock of anti-abortion fervor.

Charlie Kirk, the founder of Turning Point USA, the MAGA movement's youth wing, has been obsessing about women's fertility for quite a while. [At a recent church event](#), Kirk (who is 30 years old, going on 70) ranted that women should not use the contraceptive pill because "birth control, like, really screws up female brains." Claiming the pill "increases depression, anxiety [and] suicidal ideation," he blamed women's voting patterns on hormonal contraception. "It creates very angry and bitter young ladies and young women," Kirk argued. "Then that bitterness manifests into a political party that is the bitter party. I mean, the Democrat [*sic*] Party is all about 'bring us your bitterness and, you know, we'll give you free stuff.'"



Charlie Kirk, 30, ranting about hormonal contraception "screwing up female brains" and making women vote for the Democratic Party. Let's keep popping those pills! Credit: salon/Getty Images

Former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt—who coined the phrase "race suicide" in the early 20th century in response to increasing Asian and Eastern European immigration—decried the white, upper-class women who had few or no children as full of "viciousness, coldness and shallow-heartedness." He would have felt right at home at a Turning Point event! And former President Donald Trump, when he says migrants crossing the U.S.' southern border are "[poisoning the blood of America](#)" and asks why people from "[nice countries](#) like Denmark and Norway" aren't immigrating to the U.S., is merely making clear the white supremacy underlying Kirk's rants.

But Charlie Kirk, that's NOT why *young ladies* are bitter and will turn out to vote in November. And we see what you are doing there, paving the way for MAGA's

frontal attack on contraceptives. Of course, the Republican Party fully intends to continue doing absolutely nothing to help families, whether through affordable childcare, paid parental leave, child tax credits or universal health coverage, so we'll have to keep popping those birth control pills.

Alright. You might say that these are all well-known far-right or authoritarian actors bent on controlling women's bodies and sexuality to serve nationalistic or racist goals, but what about Emmanuel Macron's recent call for a "demographic rearmament" to "strengthen France"? In a [January 2024 speech](#), the French President proclaimed his intention to "relaunch birthrates" by reforming parental leave and combatting infertility. Apart from troubling war metaphors (is the uterus some kind of weapon?), watching a center-right figure like Macron speak in such stark pronatalist terms surprised me and caused me to worry.

Surely, Macron is fully aware of the increasing sway in France of "the great replacement theory" (the assertion that "native" white people are being deliberately replaced by "foreign" brown and Black people), since this was one of the major themes of far-right candidate Eric Zemmour's failed presidential campaign against Macron in 2022. He also no doubt knows that the strident pronatalist propaganda in France's postwar period was stoked by racist opposition to Black and brown persons from France's former colonies moving to the metropolis. Not a good look.



Our ovaries will NOT be going to war

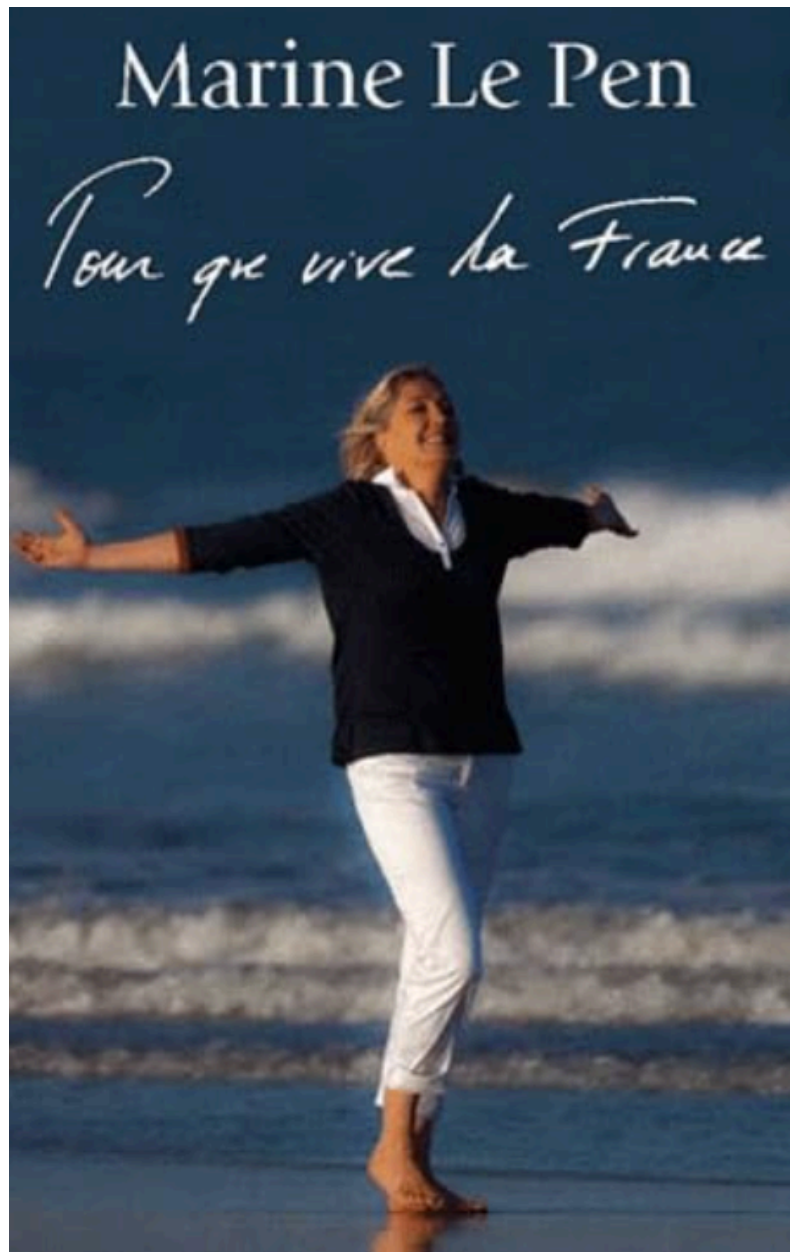
Feminist, health rights and other [left-wing](#) organizations [denounced Macron's turn to pronatalism](#) and his warlike metaphors: "No, our ovaries will not be going to war. Women's bodies must not be instrumentalized literally or figuratively in the service of the nation or of a war effort. Public action must be motivated by the rights of every individual and the quest for gender equality," wrote Equipop, an advocacy group for sexual and reproductive rights, in a fierce [press release](#).



French women were outraged by President Macron's call for a demographic rearmament. "Rearm my salary (not my uterus)" reads this sign



"No children today, no France tomorrow. So that France may live, join the National Alliance Against Depopulation," reads this 1950 French pronatalist poster. There was no ambiguity about what kind of children are desirable



How about that? Marine Le Pen's 2012 political manifesto was also entitled "So that France may live..."

Thanks to the fierce French feminists who made the change possible, the freedom to abort is now enshrined in the French Constitution, and I don't expect Macron to attack contraception, sexuality education or LGBTQ persons. Nevertheless, by speaking of birthrates as key to the strength of the nation, Macron is giving credence to the views of Marine Le Pen's right-wing base and other traditional, Catholic voters, notably their openly Islamophobic, authoritarian, white-nationalist views and their obsession about France not producing the right kind of babies. This is dangerous. Macron's use of such xenophobic discourse can only pave the way for Le Pen's Rassemblement

National and make her appear less extreme. If (or rather when?) Le Pen's party comes to power, the wombs of racialized and migrant women will no doubt be up for grabs.

Let's remain vigilant about whose bodies and whose rights are being commandeered in these demographic fever dreams. Let's remember that, if social safety nets need more funding, we can welcome immigrants and tax our ever-growing cohort of millionaires, billionaires and soon-to-be trillionaires in the U.S., Europe, China, Russia and beyond. And if the argument for more births is centered on a need for cannon fodder, then it's clearly well past time for peace.

In solidarity with reproductive justice and freedom activists, and free ovaries everywhere,

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