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Article

## How the Everyday Logic of Pragmatic Individualism Undermines Russian State Pronatalism

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### Abstract

The article examines the reproductive decisions of Russian urban middle-class women. We look at women's lives in the context of Russian pronatalist family policy and the official conservative gender ideology of 2019–2020. Based on biographical interviews with 35 young women, we focus on working mothers. The sample is composed of middle-class mothers since their lifestyle serves as a cultural model for the whole Russian society. We reconstruct the everyday rationalities deployed by the mothers to justify their reproductive decisions. The respondents seek “self-realization,” postponing childbirth or limiting their reproduction. We reconstruct the discourse of “pragmatic individualism” as an everyday logic used by mothers, which helps them cope with the instability of the labor market and marriage and the lack of state social support. Using the logic of “pragmatic individualism,” women present themselves as respectable, socially competent individuals able to build their lives according to middle-class living standards. The logic of pragmatic individualism contradicts the message of pronatalist state ideology based on “traditional” gender roles and high fertility. It gives women a rational explanation for why, despite socially supported childbearing, they decide to have only one or two children. We argue that while women rationalize childbearing decisions for financial security and social well-being, their rationale is determined by class standards of respectability. These standards are associated with high standards of care and quality of life for a small number of children.

### Keywords

gender inequality; labor market; married women; middle class; pragmatic individualism; Russia; social policy; state pronatalism

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

This article seeks to answer the question: How do urban, young middle-class women discursively frame their life stories, inscribing them into the dominant neoliberal ideology of individualism and self-productivity, alongside the conservative gender ideology of family and fertility? Why do female respondents, we ask, despite sharing the

ideas of conservative Russian state ideology, limit their fertility to 1–2 children? Based on interviews with 35 young women and their biographical stories, we reconstruct meaningful categories in which these women make sense of themselves as gendered subjects in narratives about employment, marriage, and experiences of social policy. We try to determine how everyday neoliberalism is combined with pronatalist traditionalism, and

how their common sense appropriation leads to limited family sizes, making the Russian state pronatalist policy fragile.

Based on the data analysis and by following studies of everyday gender ideology in a neoliberal capitalist context (Meuser, 2003; Utrata, 2015, p. 94), we develop the concept of “pragmatic individualism” as a type of everyday discourse shared by young middle-class women who seek to build a coherent interpretation of their lives among the conflicting demands of individualization and traditionalization. The discourse of pragmatic individualism is a type of gendered ideology, an everyday “folk knowledge.” It allows women, on the one hand, to present themselves as independent and competent social actors who can overcome their vulnerability in the labor market and family (associated with precarity and low pay in the workplace and a high divorce rate in the family sphere); on the other hand, pragmatic individualism allows women to correspond to the ideal of “traditional” femininity, associated with external attractiveness and the ability to handle a “prosperous” family (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2010). We also claim that the discourse is class-rooted, as it explains how to convert available resources into class-based womanhood and motherhood.

The sociological conceptualization of reproductive choice allows us to present it as a decision based on a moral rationality—which we call pragmatic individualism—set by class notions of a decent way of life. Class rationality forces people to manage various resources (labor market, family capital, social support measures) and to focus on the high standards set by class position for a limited number of children.

Members of the Russian middle class are engaged in the signification and legitimation of their life project, placing it within a semantic framework of what is culturally acceptable and admissible. In our biographical interviews, the female respondents construct their narrative identity by normalizing their life stories and aligning them with cultural notions of “respectability” (Skeggs, 1997). The concept of respectability refers to class and group conventions regarding lifestyle and consumption. It is also based on individuals’ moral judgments about each other’s behavior (Paxson, 2004). By constructing their biographical project and discursively presenting it in interviews, the interviewed women are guided by notions inherent in their class morality. This discursive work is a way of producing subjectivities (Lawler, 2000).

Occupying a dominant position in Russian symbolic space, the middle class has hegemony in producing cultural norms, gender and family models, and professional biographies (Salmenniemi, 2012). Symbolic orders of gender and class are built on various systems of distinction, based, among other things, on the assessment of moral and ethical qualities, behavior, and lifestyle of individuals, which are labeled as decent and respectable in contrast to others that have less symbolic significance (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2010). Skeggs (1997) uses

the concept of respectability to describe how British working-class women attempt to fit a British middle-class lifestyle when working-class women are depicted as lacking respectability in British society and media. In this sense, working-class women struggle for respectability in classed and gendered judgments and power issues. Russian middle-class women are situated in a different context. Being a part of the global middle class, they compare themselves with the cultural patterns and representations of the Western middle class. They are newcomers to the global post-colonial order where the struggle for respectability is conducted between different parts of the national middle class. Their position in social space is set by the double reference system where they want to distinguish themselves from the local working class and get respectability in the global dimension. They are involved in class dynamics which produce the symbolic order and moral judgments about what is decent and worthy (Bourdieu, 1996). In the global cultural and consumption space, women develop the discourse in pragmatic individualism to bring dissonant ideas together and think about their future.

In the following sections, we briefly present the theoretical discussion relevant to our study and address the issues of research methods, data collection, and analysis. We then describe the social composition of the Russian middle class and state pronatalist policy in the context of childbearing decisions. We present our empirical results by explaining how the everyday logic of pragmatic individualism plays in work, family, and women’s perception of state policy, as it helps them to reconcile contradictory demands of pronatalism and pragmatism by rationalizing their limits on childbearing. In the conclusion, we engage in a discussion of how the pragmatic thinking of middle-class women contradicts the traditionalist political message and leads to fertility restriction.

## 2. Data and Method

The body of data was built with biographical interviews with 35 women. The criteria of respondent selection were age (under 35), children (no age criteria), marital status (married, divorced, with a partner), level of education (BA/MA/PhD), and work experience (all respondents had an experience of paid employment). The sample was built in two stages: First, we used our social networks to generate the snowball sample, then subsequent respondents were found through the snowball method. All women interviewed dwelled in St Petersburg at the time of the research.

The research design and guide for the interview were reviewed and approved by the ethical board of the St Petersburg Sociological Association in 2019. Data were collected in 2019–2020, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews were structured around life course issues with questions about marriage, childbirth decisions, work experience, and perception of social policy measures. The interviews were conducted in person

in the places chosen by the respondents (their homes, offices, or cafes) in a confidential and supportive atmosphere. The interviews lasted on average 1–1.5 hours, after which they were transcribed and anonymized.

To analyze biographical narratives, the method of thematic coding was used (Flick, 2006). Transcripts of the entire body of interview data were coded using the ATLAS.ti program. We relied on an inductive logic of data analysis. Based on the open coding procedure, the typical categories were identified to describe and interpret respondents' experiences regarding employment, family, and social policy. We reconstruct the reproductive choices, meaning we look at them not only as direct answers to the questions about their desired and planned number of children; because the discussions developed into complete biographical stories, we were also able to dissect the interwoven narratives about their different spheres of life, such as employment, marriage, and social support. The analytical interpretation of the meanings of the categories allowed us to understand them as a part of an overall everyday discourse, which we called the discourse of pragmatic individualism.

### 3. Russian Urban Educated Middle Class as Bearer of Cultural Norms

The category "middle class" was identified by the following criteria: education (university or higher vocational school) and employment (in such sectors as IT, management, education, medicine, banking, and design). The middle class numbers about 40% of the Russian population, but its composition is heterogeneous and depends on the stability of the economic situation in the country (Mareeva, 2021; Tikhonova et al., 2018). The Russian middle class is analyzed as a bearer of the lifestyle of the global middle class (Jouko & Tšernyšov, 2020; Salmenniemi, 2012). The concept of the global middle class refers to the newly emerged and globally-oriented segments of the middle classes in the recently economically modernized countries that maintain consumption standards typical to the Western middle class (Koo, 2016).

The Russian middle class used to be characterized by a nuclear family structure and relatively egalitarian gender relations (Chernova, 2012b). This wasn't accompanied by gender equality in employment, as the gender pay gap reached 24.8% in 2019 (Statista, 2022). Salary levels and tax policy stimulated double-career families. About 85% of women of fertile age were employed (Federal State Statistics Service, 2019). At the same time, the motherhood wage penalty was 11% in the period 2000–2015 (Karabchuk et al., 2021), with divorce occurring in up to 50% of marriages on average (Federal State Statistics Service, 2019). All these indicate that women are being pushed into the labor market with high risks to motherhood. The average total fertility rate in Russia in 2020 was 1.5 births per woman. This figure varies considerably from region to region. This indicator is lower in

large cities and urbanized regions (e.g., in St Petersburg it was 1.4 in 2019; Federal State Statistics Service, 2019). Together with the well-developed educational, health care, and public services infrastructure, the low fertility rate indirectly testifies high rationalization and individualization involved in family planning in these centers of modernization and post-industrial economy (Tikhonova, 2010; Zubarevitch, 2019).

Our respondents are the first post-Soviet generation whose experience of growing up took place in the market economy, with rapid social change, increasing risk and instability, and social inequality (Radaev, 2019). This period was also a time in which the consumer society formed (Abramov & Zudina, 2012; Gladarev & Tsinman, 2007). Our respondents grew up in a situation where diversity of consumer choice was already the symbolic order (Djuk, 2003).

Post-Soviet transformations have affected the sphere of family and parenting both at the level of discourses and practice. Young women actively mastered the ideology of "responsible parenting," the Russian version of Western intensive parenting (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2011). "Responsible parenting" made childbirth and childrearing an extremely time- and money-consuming project and became a distinctive element of the middle-class lifestyle. It also justifies traditional female roles as mother and wife as necessary for a child's well-being (Shpakovskaya, 2015).

As representatives of the first post-Soviet generation, our respondents could rely on their parents' resources as private property, real estate, and bank savings became available. Therefore they didn't need to fight for survival but could devote themselves to pursuing their interests and preferences. All our research participants had paid employment experience, as do most women in Russia. Some respondents positioned themselves as career-oriented. They shared the neoliberal market ideology of effectiveness and self-development (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). In the 2000s in Russia, the neoliberal ideology was produced not only by the market but also by the rapidly growing industry of psychological counseling and pop psychology (books and magazines on popular psychology; see Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017; Lerner, 2011). Thus, the life projects of our respondents become rooted in the context of market, consumption, reflexivity, and individualization, which permeated all areas of their lives, from work to family and parenthood.

The early 2000s was characterized not only by the penetration of neoliberal market ideology but also by a growing political pronatalism and traditionalism. The traditionalist discourse first appeared in a document titled the *Russian National Security Concept* (Russian Federation, 2000) and was then developed by Vladimir Putin in his public speeches (see, e.g., Putin, 2006). The official statements framed Russia's declining population as threatening national security. The policy aimed at raising the birth rate through "protection of [the] family

as the fundamental basis of Russian society, preservation of traditional family values” (“The concept of state family,” 2014). The pronatalist conservative agenda has been supported by the Russian Orthodox Church and also found support in local NGO initiatives (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2021). Conservative discourse was reflected in mass culture that produced images of male breadwinners, female “hearth-keepers,” and happy families with many children (Nordenstreng et al., 2010).

Social policy measures have been focused primarily on female fertility (Chernova, 2012a; Rivkin-Fish, 2010). Women benefited from the paid six-month “decree” leave, after which they could use paid maternity leave for up to 1.5 years, which can be extended for another 1.5 years without payment, although their role in the workplace would be preserved. The amount of monthly allowance during paid maternity leave was 40% of the salary, but it must not exceed RUB 31,281 (EUR 422) in 2021. The average salary in 2021 comprised RUB 56,545 (EUR 603). Public clinics provided medical care, but citizens could use paid medical services in the private sector or purchase health insurance for private clinics (Shishkin et al., 2019). Thus the structure of the labor market and public support measures did not favor raising many children or having a one-career family (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2020). The middle class was compelled to reconcile the contradictory messages of gender ideologies, market, and social policy while pursuing their family and fertility projects.

#### 4. Employment: Finding the Meanings of Instability in the Labor Market

In this section, we analyze the meanings of employment shared by the women in relation to their childbirth decisions. We show that pragmatic individualism in a situation of precarious employment and low job security makes middle-class women limit their fertility to minimize the risk of job loss and gain promotion opportunities. Our respondents aspired to well-paid middle-class positions, which were highly competitive, especially for young women. Struggling for “good workplaces,” they faced overwork, excessive workloads, and stress. By the age of 30, women managed to move between three or four jobs, which meant that their length of work in one place was no more than two years. The average age of entering the job market for university graduates in Russia was 25 (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2020). At the time of the research, some had yet to find a permanent position or job they considered their main occupation. The transition from education to employment was a long, complex, and diffuse process (Cherednichenko, 2020). This diffusion was determined by the Russian labor market, which contains a large and diverse segment of project employment and temporary work (Gimpelson, 2019; Luk’ianova, 2017).

Sharing the discourse of pragmatic individualism, our respondents took advantage of such precarious employ-

ment, rationalizing it as an opportunity to receive practical competences. They also develop the pragmatic vision of such employment by giving it a meaning of a chance for “self-realization.” They perceive changing jobs as a way to find interesting, “creative,” and meaningful work. Respondents make sense of instability by explaining that they do not strive for a high income, as their work expectations are mostly related to “personal growth.” The quotation below is an example of a story about entering a labor market in which moving between several professional fields, low wages, and semi-legal contracts are justified as they give an “opportunity to gain an experience”:

I went to work as a purchasing manager....I was recommended by an acquaintance to this office, with no work experience, without anything, they took me on. I worked there for four years....I received a salary in an envelope, 12,000 rubles officially. But it was a very interesting job, and I’m madly grateful to the head of this firm, who helped me and made a good professional out of me. After four years, I realized that I didn’t want to work in that field anymore. But I learned how to negotiate, and the overall experience was amazing. (Nina)

As mentioned by the respondent, semi-formal employment and pay are widespread and tolerated in small and medium-sized businesses in Russia (Gimpelson & Kapeliushnikov, 2015); indeed, in the interview, it is presented as something usual and fair.

The narratives about employment unfold alongside the stories about reproduction. Women who are planning childbirth share other types of narratives about the workplace. Permanent employment, legal contracts, and “white” salaries are reported as the most important. When choosing a job, they consider the type of enterprise; ideally, it should provide them with extra support during the maternity period and provide childcare as part of its corporate policy. In the quote below, the interviewee describes her job in a large international company as ideal in terms of medical insurance:

I don’t want to leave this place. We have a good premium insurance program; it covers the top clinics, it includes dentistry, we have massages. Next, we have very good maternity insurance, which is paid by the employer if you have worked for the company for more than two years. Then, in my case, for example, I’ve been on maternity leave, but I haven’t worked for two years. But it was arranged for me by an agreement—I just asked—and I was told: “Of course, you are a person who has been with the company for a long time; we’ll give you the insurance anyway.” (Varvara)

Regarding maternity leave, the research participants are pragmatic and have a sound understanding of labor

law, being well aware of the statutory labor law guarantees and informal discrimination against mothers. Ksenia describes how she faced discrimination when she came back from maternity leave and how she was able to solve the problem by insisting on her employment rights:

After two years of being on maternity leave, I called my boss and told her that I was ready to come back and had a very tough conversation. She said: “Why are you leaving now? You will ruin everything for us.” Despite the fact that I was a very good employee, there were no complaints about me. I said: “Look, I have to work.” [The boss] said: “We already have a temporary worker now.” I did not trust her very much; I saw that she was cheating me for her benefit. And I then called and said that I would be out in a month. They couldn’t do anything against me.

In general, employment is presented as insecure. Not all women have access to well-paid, stable jobs. Some make a conscious choice for precarious employment, justifying this choice by “professional development” and “interest.” The pursuit of stable employment is a way of minimizing economic risk in the period of maternity leave. The discourse of pragmatic individualism turns the disadvantages of unstable employment into women’s own preferences and rational decisions in favor of “self-development.” Combining work and motherhood in a situation of precarious employment makes child rearing a risky project. Women limit their fertility and justify it as being due to self-fulfillment at work, but with little discussion of reasons related to working conditions and contracts. Pragmatic individualism gives the feeling of mastering one’s career within an unstable job market.

### 5. Family; or How to Insure Against Marital Failure

Unlike employment, which is presented as unstable, the informants define family as more stable and controllable. Despite that, it turns out to be a sphere of uncertainty; rationalizing it and dealing with it leads to strict birth control. The respondents are aware of the high divorce rate and worry about possible marriage breakdowns, but if that were to happen, they believe they would be able to survive. Limiting childbirth is one way to cope with marriage instability. Narratives about marriage are largely similar in their content and structure. A typical marriage narrative is structured as follows: One gets to know and starts a relationship with a socially close partner; the relationship develops further, usually involving a period of living together, which is understood as a period of testing the relationship; the couple decides to get married with reproductive plans in mind; official registration of marriage (wedding) is followed by the birth of the first child. As quoted below, a marriage narrative is typically structured around the same set of biographical events:

My husband is a couple of months older than me—we are the same age. We met at university a long time ago. We dated and got married in 2014....Because we love each other—there is no other way to put it. In 2016, Sasha was born. (Svetlana)

Young women present marriage as a project requiring planning and assessment of possible risks from a long-term perspective. The narratives about getting to know a partner and the further development of the relationship seem rather rationalized. There are no accounts of strong emotional feelings of love and passion; conflicts and serious disputes are not mentioned either. The respondents share an emotional culture (Illouz, 2007) type involving the management of emotions and the ability to adjust them to a meaningful context and situation. They demonstrate the skill of correct presentation of feelings by normalizing their love and marriage story according to the conventional cultural script of the middle-class bourgeois family. This script is built on the value of an individualized choice of partner, with the requirements of social proximity, the ability to share personal aspirations and interests, and having enough resources to provide a middle-class lifestyle.

In order to minimize possible risks of the marital project, the informants resort to the discourse of pragmatic individualism, which in the context of intimacy and family relations is most evident in handling such cross-cutting categories as “to count on yourself,” “safety airbag,” and “self-development in marriage.”

The category “to count on yourself” emerges in the context of the problematization of marital stability. Although middle-class women seek to build stable relationships, the stages of which are planned (marriage, having a child, acquiring joint property), they still assess the potential risks of marriage. Children tend to stay with their mothers after divorce, and the number of men who evade child support is extremely high. The logic of pragmatic individualism allows women to imagine themselves as actors capable of controlling their marriage:

Only at my own expense [in case of divorce]. I, of course, can count on child support, but I do not like this option. I’ve read up different life stories on [a popular forum] that women believe that they owe, they owe the man, they owe someone else. Respectively, if women divorce, the man is forced to pay child support. I do not like this. I endorse that only I [will support myself in case of divorce]. (Nina)

The category “to count on yourself” implies the capability to use available resources to support personal well-being in marriage and that of one’s children. In the quote below, a young woman (Irina) lists sources of material stability, which include her partner’s income, parental support, owned dwelling, and respondent’s own position in the labor market: “I feel secure enough because I have own apartment, have a profession, have parents who

are still in good shape, have a husband, only one child, not sick.”

Irina takes into account not only revenue but also necessary expenses. In particular, she says that having only one child makes her feel financially secure, as it is not a burden on the family. In addition, she notes that her child is healthy (“not sick”) and does not require expensive treatment, which means that she can work rather than care for the child. As regards parents “who are in good shape,” this means that, on the one hand, Irina can count on their financial and childcare support when needed, but on the other, the parents themselves are healthy and don’t need care or material support from her. The family is presented here as nuclear but extended by demand (Rotkirch, 2000), which was typical for the later soviet time. It is a system of support where material aid and care circulate from one generation to another when needed. Family expenditure is not driven by the logic of survival but by the logic of class distinction, as it is oriented toward maintaining access to high-quality private medical care (rather than the public health system) and family care for children under three (instead of institutional care).

Another category of the discourse of pragmatic individualism is the “safety airbag.” A “safety airbag” is a personal savings fund made even by married women for a “rainy day.” This money can be used in case of divorce, a family member’s illness, or job loss. A “safety airbag” may also mean real estate and other property on which respondents can rely. The “safety airbag” is an insurance according to informants’ individualized view of their vulnerable position in the marriage and labor markets. It is seen as a personal asset that is managed directly by women for their use in case of need. Knowledge about “safety airbags” functions as folk wisdom that women share. In the following quote, Larisa talks about her female boss, who gives her a piece of advice:

She [the boss] said [to me]: “You need an airbag anyway.” She said that the airbag helped her greatly during her divorce and when her mother was ill. She said that per person...roughly put, “you need 200,000 [rubles] per snout” [the equivalent of EUR 2,500]. Before the divorce, she came to the point where she had two hundred thousand for herself and her child, and with this money, she was able to move to Moscow, help her mother get cured, and find a job herself. She is a very wise person.

“Self-development” is another axial category of women’s talk about marriage (in one or another form in all interviews). Marriage, while giving life stability, can deprive women of “their own” and “self-development,” leading to “personal degradation.” According to one informant, full commitment to marriage and children can reduce women’s competitiveness in both the labor and marriage markets (in case of divorce):

There are lots of women now: They have children, they stand behind their husbands, and think that this will always be the case, they don’t develop in any way. They, roughly speaking, put themselves on the altar of [the] family. Their husband may look to his right, to his left, and he no longer needs his wife. And who needs a wife who hasn’t worked for 15 years? Children don’t need her either because she’s already raised them. It appears to me that in 10–15 years, we will come to a crazy division between women. There will be one part of successful, self-fulfilled, developing women, and the other part will be, let’s call them, “dumped” [*broshenki*], who aren’t wanted, and they will be with a wild feeling of self-dissatisfaction and depression. (Raisa)

“Self-development” in marriage refers to acquiring new knowledge in the fields of privacy, hobbies, beauty, and body shape. These may include learning foreign languages, culinary skills, interior and landscape design, acting, or yoga. Self-development may also deepen parent–child relationships and relations with partners through active mastery of popular psychology and the use of psychotherapists and family counselors. Motherhood in this context is a controversial project, which on the one hand, allows the development of parental skills and, in this way, female maturity, but on the other, having many children may hinder female attractiveness and personal skills.

Thus, the discourse of pragmatic individualism helps women cope with marital instability and economic vulnerability caused by dependence on their partner’s income. The “concept of self” developed by the respondents falls into a logic of neoliberal ideology of self-efficacy and independence. This logic makes women rationally plan childbirth, limiting their family size to one or two children. Women are aware of the risk of divorce (despite believing it will not happen to them) and know they might end up being the sole breadwinner and care provider for their children. Pragmatic logic is combined with traditionalist thinking. All our respondents believed that marriage was an indispensable element in a woman’s life. They also considered having children to be necessary for them. For most, motherhood was more important than a successful career. Women saw the ideal of family life as a lifelong heterosexual marriage with a breadwinner husband, with the wife responsible for childcare, housekeeping, and self-grooming to maintain the spouse’s interest. Family as an extended by demand system, in their narratives, is a core category for talking about themselves and presenting themselves in the interview situation as a socially competent, fulfilled woman.

## 6. “Who Does Feel Socially Secure Nowadays?”: Attitudes Towards Public Support

Whereas in the narratives about the labor market and marriage, respondents present themselves as independent actors able to manage potential risks, resorting to

public assistance places them in symbolic relations of need, dependency, and disadvantage. Young women's perception of social policy is ambivalent since they share the concept of public aid as primarily about helping the poor and, at the same time, pragmatically want to take advantage of all benefits available to them. The unevenness in attitudes towards state support is expressed, on the one hand, in articulating the fact that respondents do not count on the state and do not see it as a source of welfare and de-commodification (Esping-Andersen, 1990); on the other hand, they strive to use all social rights regardless economic or family status. They resolve this contradiction through a discourse of pragmatic individualism.

Respondents mention the support they receive: maternity leave, parental leave, one-off childbirth payment, allowance, and benefits for low-income families. They also use public child daycare services. By constructing a discursive presentation of themselves as successful and independent, young women demonstrate their social competence and agency in relation to public support and the state. Although most benefits are universal, they are provided by request and are subject to certain conditions. Social competence in dealing with the state is a class-specific cultural capital that provides respondents with the skills to find necessary information about benefits and application procedures. Women can understand all the complex and confusing bureaucratic rules, fill in all papers and electronic forms, and ensure all benefits have been paid. In the quote below, Anna demonstrates her social competence:

I found out right away what I was entitled to when I got pregnant: I got registered at a maternity clinic at the very early pregnancy stage. There was a small payment for that. Of course, it doesn't make any difference, but it's still nice to get something. Then I calculated with our accountant what maternity benefits I'm entitled to and then strictly made sure that I was paid, all that was due, a one-time payment at birth too, and I got a baby card.

Even if the amount of material support is not a meaningful contribution to the family budget, the informants strive to receive as much as possible, as this demonstrates their ability to "get on in life." This skill implies social dexterity to combine and maximize different types of income, benefits, and allowances, which is also complemented by their consumer competence and the ability to "spend money wisely." In this logic, they interpret entitlement to social support as a nice bonus or something that "drops" into their personal account, which they receive in addition to their family income. It is precisely because of this logic that informants do not see the state benefits they receive for low-income families or families with many children as symbolically threatening their concept of self as respectable middle-class women. The quotation below is an example of such

social dexterity, when a "good salary" does not discourage claiming an allowance for low-income families. Elena leads a middle-class life and shares the appropriate standards of consumption. However, she finds a way to get a low-income allowance because her husband works semi-legally. Elena came to the low-income benefit in a period of unpaid maternity leave:

Up until a year and a half, everything was fine. Because I had a good salary, and so I had maximum pay for the whole period. That's a pretty decent amount. And then the monthly payments were also maximum—which was also a decent amount. Plus, I got four thousand a month from the state, which dropped on my child card. Then I applied for a supplementary allowance for low-income families. My husband had a very low official salary, and we fell into the low-income family section.

The situation Elena describes is widespread and is set by the semi-legal structure of the Russian labor market (Gimpelson, 2019), as well as by the rules of applying for state benefits. Manipulations with declared income are quite common and morally acceptable practices in the context of the low level of trust in the state (Rotkirch et al., 2007). Discursively presenting their social respectability, women do not consider state assistance a source of economic stability and social security. Like the market and marriage, social policy seems an unstable source of well-being since the rules and forms of state support are constantly changing, and the social policy programs often have a limited duration. In the following quote, Lidia describes her attitude towards public support as "skeptical," as it does not cover the costs of maintaining middle-class living standards:

I'm very skeptical about our state. I laugh when I hear the news that somebody's salary [in the public sector] has been raised by 200% when the equivalent in money is 50 roubles. Or that the indexation of pensions was enormous, and in rubles, it was three rubles. The benefit level is really the money that is equal to my rent payments. What is there to live on after that? It's not clear. This isn't social security.

Sharing the discourse of pragmatic individualism, in a situation where the main sources of well-being (market, marriage, state) are causes of risk, women present themselves as independent, able to use all available resources, and maximize their income. The credo of pragmatic individualism can be summed up in Varvara's words: "You have to count on yourself. Rely on others, but don't be fooled."

Nadia illustrates the everyday logic of pragmatic individualism as a regulator of fertility:

The ideal family, I believe, is with a husband, wife, and children, the more the better; they live in a house



or a separate apartment, but quite large. Each child has their own room....But realistically, we can't afford more than two children; it's a big burden. A family must allow the spouse's personal development. I want to have an opportunity to read a book and meet friends, and no one cancels the money issue.

Russian state pursues a pronatalist policy by offering various benefits related to childbirth and develops conservative rhetoric of family as a natural woman's destiny. Despite this, women do not consider all those measures in terms of their reproductive plans. On the one hand, this is because benefits are insufficient to maintain the consumer standards of middle-class parenthood; on the other hand, it is due to their pragmatic perception of themselves as independent. We agree with the observation that the mother-child bond is an elementary form of family in Russia (Utrata, 2015). Women limit their childbearing by considering their own ability to raise their children according to middle-class standards in case of job loss, divorce, or termination of benefits. They diversify their resources and pragmatically do not put all eggs in one basket, thus demonstrating their social competence and "female wisdom."

## 7. Conclusion

Young women are involved in the discursive class production, orienting on the global consumer middle-class culture. They remain in a relatively privileged position in terms of available resources. The discourse of pragmatic individualism sets the logic of respectability and limits childbearing according to class-based rationality.

Pragmatic individualism allows young women to develop their concept of self as having enough knowledge and resources to prevent a decline in their socioeconomic status and to avoid symbolic exclusion from respectability. In the labor market, it enables them to reinterpret the barriers to obtaining stable employment positively, and it allows them to justify the precariousness of their positions. In the sphere of the family, it allows them to cope with marriage instability. Concerning public support, pragmatic individualism offers practical strategies when the measures are not consistent with the actual costs of a middle-class lifestyle.

Traditionalist discourse manifests itself on the periphery of respondents' stories and emerges predominantly when they talk about the ideal family, marriage, and gender division of roles in households. Traditionalist discourse gives women a tough choice between motherhood and employment; when forced to withdraw from the labor market for three to six years, they can potentially lose their competitiveness or even their job. In other words, their position in the labor market is vulnerable and unstable. The state support of women with children does not compensate for the drop in the standard of living due to the birth of a second and subsequent child. Women limit the number of their children to one or

two to not fall out of the market for a prolonged period. Pragmatic individualism is a type of "folk" knowledge that women share with each other. This knowledge helps them perceive the biopolitical initiatives of the state critically, use it in their own interest, and direct the benefits received not to raise more children but to invest in class-differentiated lifestyle and care.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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