

# Russia: Feminist Anti-War Resistance abortion rights petition

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**“Russians are dying out”, officials and parliamentarians tragically tell us from the rostrum. It would seem, indeed, that the birth rate is not rising, and that in April 2022 Russia recorded its lowest birth rate since 1943-1944. In January 2023, Russian President Vladimir V. Putin even instructed the government “to come up with a way to raise the birth rate as soon as possible” and gave a full two weeks to solve the problem.**

But instead of stopping costly and senseless military operations in Ukraine where tens of thousands of Russians are dying, or instead of fighting poverty and developing effective programs to support childhood, motherhood and responsible parenthood, the Russian government together with the Russian Orthodox Church decided to force Russian women “to have at least four children” by various means. Over the years they failed to figure out how to encourage women to have children and decided to take the most ineffective and harmful route: gradually restricting the right to abortion, making access to it more difficult and threatening to take it out of mandatory medical insurance.

What restrictive measures have already been introduced or are proposed?

- Since 2011, Russian hospitals have introduced so-called “weeks of silence”: when a woman applies for an abortion, she is to put off the date of the procedure for a week or more in order to influence her decision during this time. Often the silence week delays the abortion and women have it later - with greater risk to their health, as other types of abortion (up to and including surgery) have to be used if the deadline is delayed.
- Since 2013, Putin has banned abortion-related advertising.
- Since 2016, there has been an amendment that many experts consider inhumane: doctors are required to “show an image of the embryo and its heartbeat during ultrasound” to women who want an abortion.
- The government encourages hospitals to send women to psychologists before having an abortion, or to develop special pre-abortion questionnaires in which women are asked accusatory and abusive questions. Many hospitals are also distributing illiterate and manipulative pamphlets with misleading information about abortion and its consequences. All of this has one goal - to discourage women, to frighten them and to stimulate their feelings of guilt. Russian health workers in some regions are being trained in “pre-abortion counselling with traditional values in mind”, and women at consultations are asked to fill in questionnaires with questions along the lines of “Are you ready for a posthumous encounter with the soul of your child?”
- Patriarch Kirill, speaking in the Federation Council, proposed a ban on abortions in private clinics. He suggests that the increase in the number of illegal abortions (which threatens to increase women’s mortality rates) should be ignored.
- The Duma has proposed a ban on online sales of medication for abortion (the safest). Hospitals and pharmacies have been experiencing problems with the availability of oral contraceptives

and pills since March.

- In the summer, the State Duma announced a draft law banning abortions under the compulsory medical insurance scheme.
- Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova proposed a ban on abortions before the age of 18 without parental consent.
- The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has proposed to oblige married women to obtain their husbands' consent for abortions. The number of interested statements from representatives of the ROC has generally increased. For example, Mikhail Vasilyev, rector of the church at the headquarters of the Strategic Missile Forces, suggested a non-trivial solution to the problem of women who do not want to send their sons to die in the war. It turns out that you just need to avoid abortions and have more children—then parting with just one of them will not be so sad!
- The State Duma will consider an amendment to prohibit the promotion of “voluntary abortion and the Freudian ideology of the child”.

But the truth is that all these measures to restrict the right to abortion will not only fail to bring the Russian government any closer to its desired demographic goals but will also cause undeniable additional harm to Russian women and thus to Russian society as a whole. Studies prove that the number of abortions has nothing to do with the birth rate: in 20 years, thanks to public awareness and contraception, the number of abortions in Russia has almost halved, but it has not resulted in any demographic growth. Fewer abortions do not mean more children. Russians are “dying out” not because of abortions, but because of low living standards, poverty, involvement in military operations, a sense of insecurity, and the futility of raising children in their own country.

According to Alexei Raksha, a demographer, “fertility in Russia may drop another 10% in the next couple of years and then become the lowest it has been in 250 years” (source: *Important Stories*). This prediction is due to falling incomes and a growing sense of uncertainty about the future.

Obstructing access to free abortions or to abortions in general is a blow to the well-being of society as a whole:

- Prohibiting abortion or making it harder to access free abortion encourages the development of an underground market for health services. Clandestine abortions are unregulated and threaten the health and lives of women. When abortion was banned in the USSR under Stalin (1936-1955), female mortality increased significantly. Also, clandestine abortions are more likely to result in serious illness, injury, infertility and in the worst case, death.
- The inability to control their own bodies places women in a vulnerable position, particularly in situations of ongoing domestic or economic violence. An unwanted pregnancy that cannot be terminated may cause a woman to remain with a partner who is physically dangerous to her.
- Unintended pregnancies lead to increased social orphanhood: children are left without parental care and without a positive experience of family life.
- Unwanted pregnancy and inability to have an abortion makes already poor people even poorer: the poorest category of people in Russia are single mothers with two or three children. According to different data, women who already have a child most often have an abortion. Many of them when interviewed say that they have had an abortion because they cannot afford to have a second child.

But none of that matters to the Russian parliamentarians: they are interested in the welfare of women and mothers only when there are upcoming elections. In other cases, the Russian government just makes a show of presenting itself; it introduces the title of “heroine mother” for mothers of many children instead of providing them with real social and material support.

We, Russian women, are not your incubators and not your property. To every parliamentarian trying

to score political points on the topic of abortion, we want to say:

Fight your own battles, give birth to your own children!

We demand:

- Repeal all discriminatory amendments regarding the reproductive rights of women and girls;
- Preserve access to free abortion at state clinics;
- Retain the right of non-state clinics to provide abortion services;
- Include free contraceptive programmes in the MHI for women in difficult life situations;
- Remove representatives of the ROC from the topic of reproductive rights and women's health: women themselves, as well as doctors and experts, but not priests, should be the ones to assess what is going on;
- Stop wasting money on militarism: this money could go to health care and support children and motherhood.

We do not live, love and give birth to children for you and your demographic tables and political ambitions. We have a right to choose and to reproductive justice—to both abortion and maternity. We have a right to a peaceful and free state in which it is not frightening to give life to a new human being. By banning abortion, you will not encourage us to have more babies. Many pregnant women are now leaving Russia to give their child the citizenship of another country. As long as the situation in the country is as it is and human rights are not respected, you will not be able to do anything about the birth rate. You don't own us and you can't exploit us: the falling birth rate is society's reaction to the country's policies. Russians are not dying out because of abortions; they are dying out because of you! And it is impossible to solve this problem in the two weeks Putin has outlined.

We recommend the government to adopt a few "weeks of silence" to reflect on this impossible task.

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## **P.S.**

Russian original (as petition which can be signed) at

[https://www.change.org/p/%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%82?utm\\_source=share\\_petition&utm\\_medium=custom\\_url&recruited\\_by\\_id=32b33370-6db0-11ed-901b-138fd7dfef7\)](https://www.change.org/p/%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%82?utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=custom_url&recruited_by_id=32b33370-6db0-11ed-901b-138fd7dfef7)