LUISS

Degree Program in International Relations

Course of Demography and Social Challenges

Demographic and Democratic Decline: The Russian Federation and The United States of America

Prof. Maria Rita Testa

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Carolina De Stefano

CO-SUPERVISOR

Isabella Zannoni - 654342

CANDIDATE

Academic Year 2024/2025

DEMOGRAPHIC AND DEMOCRATIC DECLINE:
THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION: *LIVING IN A - SWIFTLY - AGEING WORLD*

Population ageing, defined as the increasing proportion of elderly individuals (more than 65 years old) in a population due to longer life expectancy and declining fertility rates is shaping not only social, but also political realities worldwide. According to 2024 UN World Population Projections, the global median age has increased from 22.2 in 1950, to 30.9 in 2025, and will increase to 42.1 in 2100. High income countries, with widespread below-replacement fertility levels per woman, are the most affected ones at the moment, those who will likely be the first to face the challenges posed by this unprecedented phenomenon to the endurance of social welfare schemes and even of political systems themselves. Some among them have already started adapting to this momentous change, for instance by trying to raise pension age via extremely unpopular reforms or wagering everything on technological innovation in an effort to raise labor productivity, while others try to swim against the tide through the periodical implementation of costly and sometimes shaky pro-family policies. At the same time, UN population projections show how high income countries are the ones receiving almost all net global migration and witnessing a persistent surge in migrant flows since the 2000s, which represents both a challenge and an opportunity depending on the capacity of states to properly frame and handle it.

Indeed, the changing population composition is neither alone nor isolated from other major trends that are already radically transforming contemporary reality. Observatories such as Freedom House and V-dem warn about the increasingly shrinking proportion of people living in free states and the lingering wave of autocratization and democratic backsliding across the world, still on the rise after 25 years. Populist, sovereignist and nationalist parties have gradually grown their public support, won elections, reached executives, implemented policies and possibly eroded the pillars of liberal democracies by attempting to change the rules of the game for their benefit, to the point of triggering outright autocratic turns in a few cases. Beyond the domestic level, proliferating promises to make one own's country "great again" are also having repercussions on the international arena, leading to the progressive withdrawal from multilateralism as a means of ensuring global stability and reaching common goals, while fostering instead confrontational dynamics and antagonistic demeanours aimed at maximising national interests, sometimes at the cost of peace.

How are these trends connected, if they really are, and how do they interact with each other? This dissertation will try to provide an answer to this question in an effort to develop a comprehensive interpretative framework to understand some of the most impelling problems of our present and, chiefly, future times. The intrinsic bond between political processes and demographic factors is due to the fact that people's identity, including their age, gender and ethnicity has a pivotal role in shaping their preferences and actions (Lu, 2024). For this reason, the main hypothesis around which this dissertation will revolve is that population ageing and migration, as altering factors in population composition, are shaping the present and future of political systems by substantially changing the fears, expectations and, consequently, actions of governors and governed alike in a variety of regimes, ranging from democratic to authoritarian. Specifically, it will be argued that a native aging electorate with traditional values, when faced with the perceived risk of being physically and culturally

outnumbered by non-native minorities, will likely try to reassert its social dominance by facilitating the rise to power of populist parties, thereby influencing their rhetoric and policy outcomes in both domestic and foreign domains in ways that are compliant to this demographic anxiety – to the point of jeopardizing the functioning or even the very existence of a healthy democracy. In authoritarian systems, where the leaders' worldview, influenced by demographic factors in its turn, matters to a dramatically higher degree and governmental action has much looser constraints, policy outcomes deriving from these underlying fears have an enhanced potential to scale up the magnitude of conflictuality in foreign policy, to the degree of considering actual warfare as a viable instrument for pursuing national grandeur. In this light, the binary "us vs them" opposition which populism, conceived according to its most widely accepted definition, constructs, replaces national elites with international ones and challenges the status quo in international power structures rather than in domestic politics (Metawe, 2024). To sum up, this thesis' research question is the following: *"Is demographic change, specifically in the forms of population ageing and migration-driven increasing ethnic diversity, associated with the global rise of right-wing populism and with its impact on the structural features and policy outcomes of modern political regimes?"*

In order to investigate this complex set of interrelations, two countries with opposite political systems were selected as case studies: the Russian Federation and the United States of America. Not only do they differ in their regime type but also in the extent and intensity to which population ageing has impacted them in recent years, with Russia being much more sensitively affected than the US. Through a a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD)-based comparative and qualitative analysis of their respective age structures, migratory trends, public rhetoric and policy initiatives, it will be argued that, despite diverging starting conditions, the political dynamics generated by the public construction of the "ageing problem" and the policy responses put in place to tackle it at both domestic and foreign levels have the potential to follow similar patterns in autocracies like Russia as much as in advanced democracies like the US.

In short, this dissertation aims to explain the current trends of democratic backsliding, increasing autocratization and international instability by employing the underutilised lenses of political demography, in an attempt to shed light on the link between population ageing, demographic decline, migration flows and the populist, sovereignist and nationalist worldwide tide. Considering only two in-depth case studies rather than a more extensive set of countries of course represents a non-negligible limitation, thus, further research will be needed to better ascertain the nature and conditions under which this link substantiates, possibly expanding the investigation to other areas of the world and employing quantitative methods so as to carry out systematic analyses supported by wider and more comprehensive datasets. Moving forward in time might additionally reveal more insights into a relatively new phenomenon such as population ageing, bearing in mind that all past research in the fields of international relations and political science was historically grounded in a world shaped and transformed by young populations rather than older ones.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POLITICAL DEMOGRAPHY AND ITS GAPS

a. A surprisingly understudied field

The focus of this dissertation lies at the intersection of demography and political sociology, within a small but progressively expanding field of research: political demography (Lu, 2024, p. 604). The term was coined by M. Weiner, who described it as "the study of the size, composition, and distribution of population in relation to both government and politics" (Lu, 2024, p. 606). Despite the recent sparking interest for this area by more and more media outlets and policymakers, scholarly attention towards it has been rather scarce and limited, with a relatively low number of studies carried out by few prominent scholars such as Goldstone, Sciubba, Cincotta and Teitelbaum (Lu, 2024, p. 604, 606). According to Lu, this mismatch has, on the one hand, left public discourse on political demography to be shaped by non-expert voices, leading to the diffusion and sometimes mainstreaming of incorrect or exaggerated stances about population change and political issues for mainly ideological purposes. On the other, it represents a "missed opportunity" for enriching research on political sociology though its interdisciplinary integration with demography, which would help shedding light on the two-way relationship between structural demographic changes and politics by using the former to provide a deeper understanding of the latter, including government policies, electoral politics, political institutions and conflict, social movements and democratization processes.

Through further clarification made by the aforementioned political scientists on this mutual link, the term "political demography" gradually departed from what is often labelled as "demographic engineering" or "population policies", the branch of study which focuses on how politics deliberately influences demographic change. Hence, it acquired Weiner's "reverse" connotation of being "concerned with the political consequences of population change", such as "the effects of population change on the demands made upon governments, on the performance of governments, on the distribution of political power within states, and on the distribution of national power among states" (Lu, 2024, p. 606). As Lu remarks, between these two opposite and symmetrical perspectives, the first remains, to this date, staggeringly understudied with respect to the second one. This dissertation will try to fill this gap by first exploring the - neglected - dimension of political demography, then attempting to reconcile it with its counterpart by encompassing demographic engineering among the key policy outcomes which population change, matched by its consequential structural and political transformations, engenders, in a sort of conceptual ouroboros.

Indeed, Lu's seminal review article sets some directions for future research that were individually taken into account to orient the reasoning behind the choice of the topic and the methods of this study. They are enumerated below for the sake of providing a 360-degree overview of both what is missing in the field of political demography and what, within the scope of this research, could possibly contribute to make up this shortcoming.

I. **An examination of predominant theories and empirical studies in light of the new demographic realities**; in the second chapter, theories of democratic backsliding, populism and power transition (specifically J. Sciubba's standpoint on the latter) will be critically reviewed to reflect the interconnections of the phenomena that they illustrate with population ageing and, notably, migration.

II. **A focus on more varied population composition factors (such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and urbanization) rather than on a specific cluster of demographic forces**; within the comparative section, special consideration will be dedicated to this range of factors in order to deliver a more articulated and detailed explanation of how changes in the population composition due to migration and ageing concretely affect political developments. Specifically, gender in terms of ideas on masculinity and femininity, along with ethnic and religious diversity, will hold extreme significance for both the Russian and the American cases, the latter being also critically concerned by the rural vs. urban divide.

III. **An evaluation of the complex interplay of different demographic factors in shaping political landscapes rather than the mere study of their isolated effects**; to unravel the - demographic - reasons behind the international surge in populism, democratic backsliding and withdrawal from multilateralism, focusing on just one demographic factor would be utterly insufficient and simplistic. Therefore, this research will rather delve into the interactions between diverse demographic factors such as ageing, migration and fertility, in an effort to picture the exact scenarios under which the main hypothesis is verified.

IV. **A considerable expansion of the set of contextual aspects - especially prevailing ones in political sociology - which research has recently started to investigate, aiming to further unearth context-dependence in the political impact of demographic factors**; in line with the growing academic recognition that a state's capacity to manage opportunities or pressures arising from population change is drastically shaped by the configuration of its economic and political system (Lu, 2024, p. 617), within this dissertation due attention will be paid, whenever possible, to the effect of contextual factors (e.g. macroeconomic conditions, pre-existing political or institutional dynamics, etc.) on the investigated phenomena. These factors are deemed crucial to understand the public perception of population shifts, which will be itself an essential component in the analysis.

V. **An exploration of the mechanisms and channels that link specific demographic variables to precise political outcomes**; moving forward from the niched investigation of demographic and political processes, a more holistic approach will be put in place with the goal of pinpointing which trigger is responsible for materialising the political outcomes outlined in the introduction as of population change, taking into account possible non-linear patterns. Once again, perceptive aspects will play a pivotal role in this identification process.

VI. **A micro, rather than macro or meso level study on how demographic factors may shape political attitudes and behaviours over people's life course and across generations**; probably the most marginally addressed aspect in the dissertation, it still bears a considerable relevance for the main

hypothesis due to the impact of personal experiences in orienting political and voting behaviour, up to even leaders' attitudes to demographic change and policymaking.

Having identified the gaps in the literature to be filled and set the milestones to be reached throughout the research path, the next step is outlining its demographic tenets, starting from a comprehensive account of the dynamics at the root of population ageing and concluding with an evaluation of the role of migration in this process.

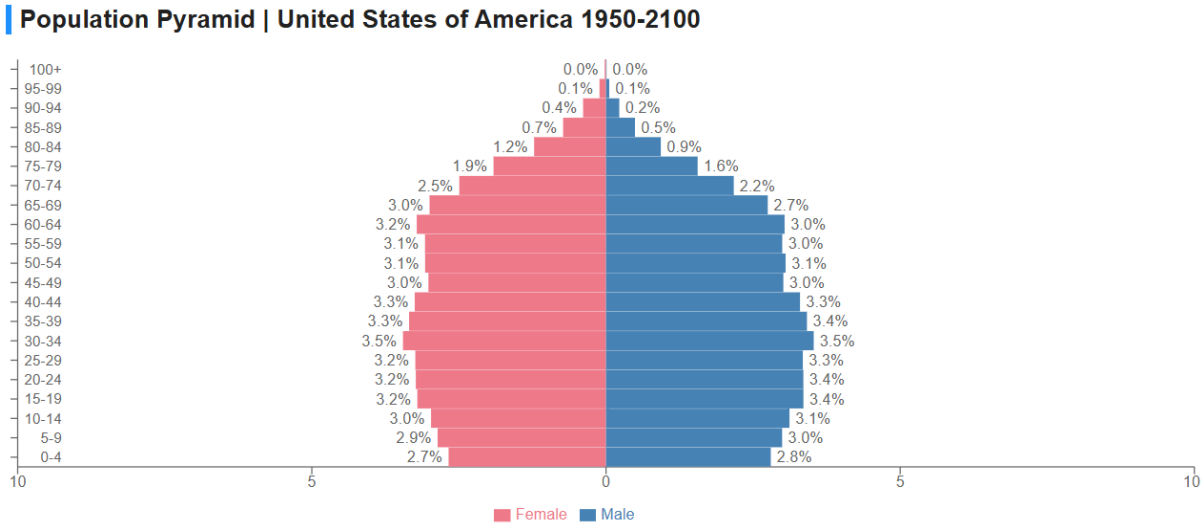
b. A graying society

In illustrating the key demographic trends which this dissertation will revolve around, the well-known and discussed theories of demographic transition (FDT and SDT) represent a valuable analytical tool. Within their framework, the path followed by populations in Western Europe in the last two centuries is taken as a blueprint for constructing the model of the prototypical historical demographic transition. Ludquist, Anderton and Yaukey (2015) identify six major transition theories which employ different variables to explain these demographic changes. The main findings of these theories and of demographers at large converge on the description of a common pathway for countries that undergo the two transitions: 1) improved nutrition and sanitation coupled with economic modernization cause a decline in epidemic mortality (especially infant mortality), raising life expectancy, lowering death rates and leaving the last deaths to be largely due to degenerative and human-made diseases, which then helps materialize the necessary conditions for motivating and enabling populations to adopt birth control - *first demographic transition*; 2) fertility rates further fall until they reach below replacement-level (the level at which women have enough daughters to "replace" themselves in the population, namely above 2.0 children per woman), as a result of a deep shift in culture and values towards individualism, secularization and gender equality, leading to the proliferation of different household structures and reproductive behaviours, such as cohabitation or childbearing postponement - *second demographic transition*.

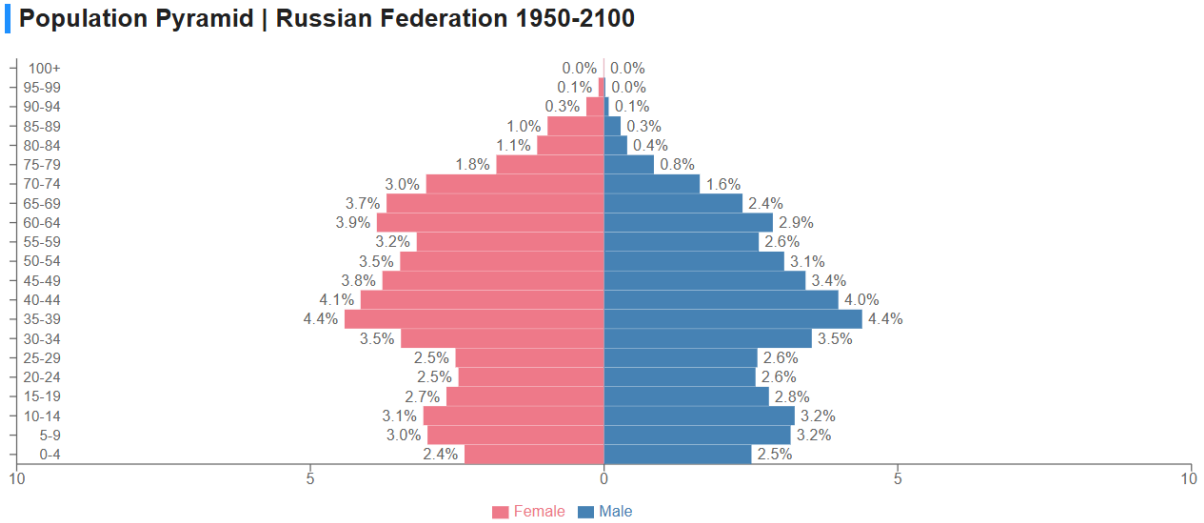
Both FDT and SDT theories have regularly faced vocal criticisms, with the latter being especially targeted due to its Western-centrism and to its overestimation of ideational factors vis-a-vis economic ones, for instance the fact that many among the typical behaviours featured in the SDT, like cohabitation, are prevalent among lower classes and tied to growing poverty, economic insecurity or social inequality rather than cultural shifts (Lesthaeghe, 2014, p. 18114). These issues are intrinsically related to another common and well-grounded criticism addressing SDT, namely its lacking estimation of equality in sex relationships, which, if improved, would turn continued below-replacement fertility into a temporary phenomenon (Lesthaeghe, 2014, p. 18114). On this particular matter, McDonald (2006) has thoroughly demonstrated how, since family, unlike other individual-oriented social institutions, continues to be characterized by gender inequality, women postpone family formation and childbearing as much as possible to preserve their career and lifetime earnings in those labor markets (especially deregulated ones) that do not guarantee them the possibility to reconcile

their aspirations with motherhood. In support of this argument, Mathieu (2013) uses the concept of "dematernalisation" to stress how policies aimed at countering population ageing by increasing fertility are successful just as long as they facilitate the reallocation of part of the social and economic costs associated with childbearing and childrearing from the mother to external actors, such as the state, the market or even their partners in societies with high levels of gender equality. Remarkably, both McDonald (2006) and Testa (2014) point out the, apparently counterintuitive, positive association between high investment in women's human capital, high female participation to the labor market and high fertility rates in countries which have committed themselves to removing the obstacles which prevent highly educated women from attaining this work-family balance. In addition, the two authors deconstruct the SDT hypothesis according to which the youth's materialistic values and aspirations are the reason behind low fertility by using the evidence of statistical investigations showing how educated women and people in general have changed neither their attitudes toward family nor their reproductive intentions but the lack of state and social support has rather brought about an unmet need for more children than the actual number they end up having. Later on in the dissertation, these counter arguments will help to explain the failure of the state interventions (particularly Russia's ones) targeting fertility rates in an attempt to slow down population ageing and their link with the following controversial developments in domestic politics and aggressive demeanors in foreign policy.

Whatever their root causes, below-replacement fertility rates fundamentally alter a country's population composition, with both short-term and long-term effects. An effective way of portraying the present and projected age structures of a population and comparing it with those of widely varying populations in terms of size is through population pyramids (Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 99). Below are those of Russia and the US in 2024, which have visibly lost their "pyramidal" shape originally associated with pre-transitional populations - those featuring high mortality, a greater number of young individuals broadening the base of the pyramid and a lower number of old individuals sharpening the apex. By contrast, societies that have undergone both demographic transitions typically take a more rectangular shape, with fewer births at the bottom and more people living into old ages at the top. When age-specific fertility rates (referring to the number of live births per 1,000 women in a specific age group within a given year) first fall, fewer people enter the low end of the population pyramid, resulting in smaller young cohorts and a shrinking base. After roughly fifteen years, the number of females in those cohorts having finally reached their childbearing years will be smaller, hence, an additional decline in births will occur due to this delayed "echo" effect (Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 135). Under unchanged age-specific fertility rates, they will produce even smaller cohorts, causing a subsequent decline in population growth and so on; this self-feeding mechanism can translate into a negative *population momentum*, defined as the resistance to change in crude birth rates by reason of the age structure deriving from the prior fertility regime, a concept applicable to both declining and growing populations and able to persistently work against population policy goals (Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 457).



StaTrend (2024). *United States of America Population Pyramid 1950–2100* [Online]. Available at: https://www.statrend.net/pyramid/US [Accessed 12 May 2025].



StaTrend (2024). Russian Federation Population Pyramid 1950-2100 [Online]. Available at: https://www.statrend.net/pyramid/RU [Accessed 12 May 2025].

The continuation of the previously discussed trends can lead - and is already leading, across several high income countries - to social and economic outcomes that are increasingly concerning a large number of governments, prompting them to engage in policy actions aimed at tackling or preventing the consequences of population ageing and, whenever possible, reversing the trends that originated it. As the age structure becomes skewed towards the old segments of the population, two major consequences generally arise. First, an alteration of the age-dependency ratio, namely the number of "dependents" (people considered too young and too old to be economically productive) divided by the working-age group times one hundred, along with its specific variations - *old-age* and *oldest-old* dependency ratios - and an overall change in the workforce age structure; second, the increasing size and cultural visibility of the elderly as a share of the total population (Lundquist et al., 2015, pp. 96-97, 119).

While the increasing age of the workforce represents a concern primarily for employers, who worry about the waning productivity and technological backwardness of older workers, disproportionate old-age dependency will have more serious implications for the financial sustainability of social security schemes and healthcare systems if adjustments are not made on time (Lundquist et al., 2015, pp. 81, 119). Being already the most expensive areas of the welfare state, pensions and healthcare are particularly likely to face rising costs due to the combination of a growing number of pensioners and smaller contributions from a shrinking labour force (Naumann and Hess, 2021, p. 357). In the European case, the bountiful early retirement pathways established throughout the 90's have further aggravated this trend, while the introduction of the pay-as-you-go system has engraved a generational contract based on the current working-age population's expectations to benefit from pensions: both substantially hinder the public acceptance of any radical and path-departing pension reform (Naumann and Hess, 2021, pp. 357-358). Under these circumstances, governments seem to be at a crossroads: either taxes have to triple in order to provide as many retirement benefits as the previous generations have enjoyed, or those benefits have to be cut by ⅔ to maintain the same fiscal pressure as before, amounting in both cases to the need for drastic fiscal restructuring (Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 869). Moreover the increasing share of the old-old - 80 years and older people - owed to the improvements in life expectancy - will likely result in a surge in both costs and demand for healthcare and long-term caregiving, considering that risks of physical and mental dysfunctionality are more common at that age (Naumann and Hess, 2021, p. 358).

Nevertheless, the way old-age dependency ratios are measured can dramatically change the estimate of the financial burden on the welfare state, since, from an economic standpoint, it is the proportion of employed persons vis-a-vis the inactive population that matters the most (Naumann and Hess, 2021, p. 358-359). Although the age in the numerator is conventionally set at 65+ and the denominator between 18 and 64, within several countries young adults start to earn incomes just as soon as they reach their mid-twenties, while older adults may keep working seamlessly until their seventies: therefore, a great variability in the extent to which the older population is really dependent must be recognised (Lundquist et al., 2015, pp. 96-98, 125-126). Indeed, as the human lifespan continues to expand, healthy life expectancy also improves, setting in motion a culturally and time-specific reconfiguration of the concept of dependency, along with age-dependency ratios (Naumann and Hess, 2021, p. 359; Lundquist et al., 2015, pp. 97-98). Such considerations have led many governments to accept the inevitability of population ageing and to accordingly figure out various adaptation strategies and incremental reforms to cope with its consequences. Some of the most relevant ones consist in boosting labor productivity through technological advancement in automation, artificial intelligence and robotics, facilitating youth and female entry into the workforce and keeping the elderly employed for longer by making pathways for early retirement unavailable or simply raising retirement age, while encouraging working beyond the latter through flexible arrangements (Goldstone, and Diamond, 2020, p. 870; Turner, 2023, p. 211; Naumann and Hess, 2021, p. 359).

Among the pressing social and economic issues that population ageing unearths, intergenerational justice certainly holds an important place. Following Vanhuysse (2014)'s analysis, the idea of sustainability

is the moral cornerstone behind this concept, which measures the amount of "available opportunities for social security, education, the environment and other valued rights, capabilities and resources, enough and as good" that each generation leaves to the next one. Within this paradigm, the capacity of a country's social and public policy models to react to demographic change in a way that shields young and future citizens from legacy burdens is scrutinized according to the four dimensions of the IJI (Intergenerational Justice Index): 1) the ecological footprint created by all generations alive today; 2) early-life starting conditions as measured by child poverty levels; 3) the fiscal burdens on the shoulders of currently young generations, as measured by public debt levels per child; 4) policy effort as an indicator of the overall pro-elderly bias in social spending (Vanhuysse, 2014, pp. 4-5). Countries with low levels of intergenerational justice as measured by the IJI - including the US - should rapidly reform current policy patterns so as to boost economic growth, productivity and innovation in environmental technology if they wish to reverse these detrimental trends (Vanhuysse, 2014, p. 12). Indeed, many observers are concerned about the constant broadening of the wealth gap between the old and the young in countries such as the U.S., where levels of poverty in the old-ages have declined at an even faster pace than those of working-age Americans - that very segment of the population on whom the elderly are supposed to be dependent (Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 129). While larger proportions of U.S. elderly citizens were able to accumulate their wealth for long periods of time, lesser wealth is held by younger generations, with children being the most vulnerable societal dependents and anticipating a lower lifestyle standard than that of their parents (Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 129). This negative scenario could be partly mitigated by well-documented structures of intrafamilial support and solidarity, which nonetheless can vary significantly within and across societies, thus, potentially turning child-rearing and education into a family-dependent endeavor: unless adequate extrafamilial public support or redistributive mechanisms are guaranteed by stable legislative frameworks, young people will always stay in a precarious position of dependence on familial benevolence, while existing social inequalities will eventually be reflected in their upbringing (Buchmeier and Vogt, 2024, pp. 173-174).

Although a representation of the intergenerational distribution of resources as a zero-sum game may be neither always accurate nor inescapable, it is useful in explaining one of the root causes of intergenerational conflict, which also has a sociological component. As the proportion of the elderly in a population grows consistently compared to the other age groups, shown by the higher median age, so does their cultural and political visibility, enabling them to significantly shape societal norms and even policy outcomes (Lundquist et al., 2015, pp. 122-124, 131). Buchmeier and Vogt (2024) poignantly argue that "the shift toward a graying society has overrepresented the elderly's interests and underrepresented the younger generation's interests", acknowledging how population change not only does not have neutral consequences on political systems but, quite the opposite, deeply influences all dimensions of politics, from political participation to representation and policy making. This complex interrelation, which thrives in the widening social distance between the young and the elderly, is among the key elements of this dissertation and will later be thoroughly illustrated. In the past decades individuals have come to resemble each other less and less in terms of age and cohort experiences, partly due to the rapid pace of technology development and dissemination, which has resulted

into a continual replacement of the skills of a generation with those of the next ones (Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 131). This process is additionally exacerbated by sudden changes in the ethnic composition of a population, which end up creating a gap between the ethnic makeup of the oldest generations, who are also generally more conservative, and that of the youngest - as the American case exemplifies (Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 131). Since these transformations mostly occur through migration, this will be the focus of the next section.

c. Towards a third demographic transition

As a demographic factor, migration can change the size and composition of the labor force in origin and destination populations alike, which is the reason why some policymakers have optimistically pointed to steady immigration streams as an effective way to offset rising old-age dependency in ageing countries (Lundquist et al., 2015, pp. 126, 353). Optimism stems from the fact that, although migration has indeed kept some high income countries from declining in size and higher levels of migrant fertility usually have a positive impact on overall growth rates, current levels of in-migration flows are by far insufficient to halt population ageing, allowing at best to slow down the process and fill specific gaps in the labour market (Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 358; Naumann and Hess, 2021, p. 357; Skeldon, 2021, p. 38). Moreover, a growing number of authors has demonstrated that, depending on several factors such as fertility norms in migrant women's origin countries and their levels of cultural entrenchment in destination countries (often due to urban segregation), the degree to which they actually contribute to long-term population growth can vary significantly (Wilson, 2019, pp. 448-449). Indeed, even if migrant fertility is initially higher than native's one, the sheer number of migrant women in their childbearing age might just not be a sufficient share of the total population to have a remarkable effect on overall fertility (Volant et al., 2019, pp. 1-2). Most importantly, when migrant fertility patterns are compared with those of women in origin countries, they have been shown to undergo considerable adjustments, gradually coming to resemble native women's ones as a result of improved access to reproductive healthcare, positive self-selection of immigrants in terms of education and adaptation to native's behavioural norms - especially across generations or within very young immigrant women (Volant et al., 2019, p. 3; The Project on Collaborative Research: Migration and Fertility, 2022, pp. 1-7; Blau, 1992, pp. 34-36; Adserà et al., 2012, pp. 182-183).

Thus, "replacement migration" does not seem a viable or likely option to change dependency ratios in the long-term: as American baby boomers age, even with continued strong immigration, the proportion of working age adults to those over 65 is projected to fall from 3.5 in 2020 to 2.5 by 2060, while without it, the U.S. labour force would likely shrink by tens of millions at that time (Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 869-870). These projections appear rosier than those in Europe (including Russia), where, according to Goldstone and Diamond, the prime working age population will decline from 436 million to 347 million, a total loss of 89 million. In the long run, immigration streams could be circular, with ageing migrants choosing to retire in their home countries due to the lower cost of living, as migration patterns from Mexico to the U.S. have already shown (Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 870). Even so, a youthful, cheap and flexible workforce able to

boost productivity and GDP will be unattainable without immigration in the next few decades (Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 870).

Despite the blatant need of many high income countries for migrants, not to mention their current scarcity relative to the macroeconomic and demographic challenges that these nations are faced with, a considerable section of the public opinion claims to be already flooded with migrants and advocates for policies that do not leave immigration unchecked, framing it as a social problem rather than a resource (Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 870; Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 356). Within the European context, migration policy has been at the top of the political agenda since the refugee crisis in 2015, when the abrupt surges in immigration streams of asylum-seekers and refugees generated intense anxieties even across the most long-standing democracies (Naumann and Hess, 2021, pp. 363-364; Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 873). Numbers are often greatly overestimated by opponents of immigration and the European case was no exception, with many sharing the common belief of being overwhelmed by Muslim migrants, whereas in fact, as of 2016, no major west European country was estimated to have a Muslim component larger than 8% of the total population, neither was it projected to see that percentage raise by more than 12% by 2050 under constant immigration levels (Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, pp. 870, 874).

Of course, it would be naive to review debates over immigration policy without considering the recurring xenophobic motivations behind it: national debates and policies regarding ethnically distinct migrants have often allowed the public justification of discriminatory attitudes through rationalization and negative stereotyping, depicting migrants at times as a danger to public health, at times as a risk to job security or a drain on social welfare systems, as criminals and terrorists, and, tellingly, as a threat to the dominant identity or culture of the host country (Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 360). Indeed, identity politics is the determinant factor in magnifying and reinforcing the economic concerns of native populations - for instance, the perceived competition with migrants for jobs or welfare benefits (Skeldon, 2021, pp. 38-39). This argument is further reinforced by the fact that the fear of ethnic decline played a non-negligible role in Brexit (despite the overall assessment of the contribution of immigrants to the UK economy being clearly positive) and, more broadly, the rise of populist parties across Europe (Skeldon, 2021, p. 39; Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 875). Needless to say, declines in economic status and job security arising from economic crises, especially the great recession of 2007-2009 and the long period of austerity policies that followed, have a considerable impact in making voters more susceptible to the anti-immigrant appeals and "cultural backlash" of illiberal populists, as found by Inglehart and Norris (2017) (Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 873). Nevertheless, in revisiting the work of Richard Hofstadter and Daniel Bell on American conservatism in the 1960s, Turner (2023) suggests that "cultural politics", and specifically status concerns, have a key role compared to economic frustrations in underpinning populist voters' resentment, as additionally confirmed by the strong evidence provided by recent studies of the significantly greater influence of the cultural dimension in citizens' voting patterns over the last decade (Herold, 2025, p. 3). In this light, populism speaks to and for the people who feel dispossessed of a status position, be it "a landed estate or the privileges of a white skin, the unquestioned authority of a husband, or the untrammelled rights of a factory owner" (Turner, 2023, p. 213). This resonates

with recent research in the U.S. showing that many white Americans perceive and frame the impending "minority-majority" shift - associated with the increasing ethnic heterogeneity of American society due to immigration - as a threat to their dominant social, economic, political, and cultural status, to the point of considering themselves "under siege" or "left out in their own country" (Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 875, 877). In line with this strand of research, experimental findings indicate that candidate preferences in 2016 - notably, support for Donald Trump - reflected mounting anxieties for changing demographics among high-status groups much more than pocketbook-related complaints within low-status ones (Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, pp. 875). To sum up, immigrants are not only viewed as socio-economic competitors for jobs, affordable housing, and social services but also as rivals for personal development opportunities, government welfare services, and public attention, and ultimately as a threat to social cohesion, the country's cultural identity and religious heritage - not to mention public security (Herold, 2025, p.3).

It is precisely the underlying demographic subtext of populist claims which will be crucial in the development of the main hypothesis of this dissertation, starting from the - often overlooked, trivialized and derubricated to conspiracy theory - Great Replacement theory. It was developed in the 1970s, at the start of the second demographic transition, namely, the context of falling birth rates and rising immigration from North Africa and other former European colonized territories which persisted and intensified for fifty years until today (Sedgwick, 2024, p. 552). This - widely understood as antisemitic, anti-feminist and white-supremacist - theory is thought to have originated with the French novelist and commentator Renauld Camus, but its theoretical premises actually lie in the work of serious demographers, historians and political scientists, such as Teitelbaum and Winter, Chaunu, Chesnais, Coleman, Laqueur and, notoriously, Huntington (Sedgwick, 2024, pp. 548-549, 552-556). As its name suggests, the theory foresees the progressive replacement of "ethnically European" populations by immigrants and their offspring as a consequence of rising immigration and differential fertility between the two groups (low birth rates in native women and higher birth rates in immigrant women), culminating in the gradual decline of Western societies, their colonization and cultural conquest (Sedgwick, 2024, pp. 548, 550; Herold, 2025, pp. 1-2). It outlines the prospect of a "third demographic transition" which will result in Western states becoming irreversibly multiethnic or, following the most extreme interpretations, in a full-fledged "genocide by substitution" (Skeldon, 2021, p. 42; Maher, 2025, pp. 7-8).

The relevance of this theory stems from the fact that, despite looking like a fringe and extremist narrative, it is playing a growingly central role as one of the main narratives mobilising the contemporary Right across the world, not just in Europe but also in the US. (Sedgwick, 2024, pp. 548, 562; Maher, 2025, p. 9). Heads of state like Hungary's Prime minister Viktor Orbán and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (the former openly refers to the theory while the latter has only embraced its language), politicians like Éric Zemmour or Marine Le Pen and prominent neoliberal personalities such as Elon Musk and even Friedrich Hayek himself, have all, consciously or not, contributed to the propagation and mainstreaming of the Great Replacement theory (Sedgwick, 2024, pp. 558-559; Maher, 2025, pp. 6-7, 9, 13-15). According to Ennser-

Jedenastik (2022), these political actors (radical right parties) have not only achieved significant electoral gains during the last decades, but also propelled their mainstream competitors to shift their issue agenda to the right.

In addition to having been promoted by political figures, the theory is also accepted by alarming numbers of ordinary citizens, as evidenced by polls and, of course, the ballot box (Sedgwick, 2024, p. 549). A recent empirical study by Herold (2025), who analysed original survey data in ten European countries in 2022, shows how immigration-skeptical and socio-culturally conservative attitudes are not even a necessary condition for believing in the Great Replacement conspiracy, though remaining strongly correlated with its endorsement. As proof of the pervasive mainstreaming of the theory, including among those who do not support extreme political ideologies, Herold (2025) found that many of its proponents do not apparently consider advocating for gender equality, the rights of sexual minorities and European integration to be at odds with the belief that sinister elites plan to destroy European civilization through mass immigration. This unexpectedly politically diverse group heeds the call of populist far-right parties, which, although illiberal at heart, ostensibly appeal to liberal values such as the defense of individual freedoms in order to justify the fight against, for instance, the "Islamization of the West" via the "Great Replacement" (Herold, 2025, p. 11). In its most radical versions, the theory has also motivated terrorists, like Anders Behring Breivik, who killed 77 people in Norway in 2011, or Brenton Tarrant, who murdered 51 people in New Zealand in 2019 and even dubbed his own manifesto "The Great Replacement", later inspiring other two American terrorists: Patrick Crusius, responsible for the killing of 23 people in El Paso that same year, applied the theory to Hispanics while Payton Gendron, murdering other 10 people in Buffalo in 2022, applied it to Black Americans (Sedgwick, 2024, pp. 549, 557).

What is the key to such overwhelming success? According to Sedgwick, the main explanation of why this theory is so widely believed lies in the fact that, although sometimes combined with conspiracy theories, it is by no means one, rather appearing as a serious hypothesis based on sound data and reasonable arguments which point to an, indeed very plausible, scenario of dramatic demographic change. Needless to say, believable does not mean true. Although the basic mathematics behind demographic predictions based on differential birth rates look convincing at a first glance, they actually tend to assume constant fertility rates in women of immigrant origin, which, as extensively demonstrated in the previous section of this chapter, is contradicted by overwhelming evidence of their gradual adjustment to the local norm (Sedgwick, 2024, pp. 559-560). Other problems with the theory's assumptions include its lacking consideration of intermarriage and its evident essentialism, which predicts only immutable and mutually exclusive identities (Sedgwick, 2024, p. 560). Ironically, this last issue is also related to the wide acceptance of the theory, since the propensity of people to think in categories of ethnicity and race and to construct the "imagined community" of the nation in terms of ethnic homogeneity makes its fundamental precondition: without it, the Great Replacement would be meaningless (Sedgwick, 2024, p. 560).

Another explanatory factor in the popular endorsement of this rhetoric could be found at the local level: the transformative impact of migration on the cultural, racial, linguistic and ethnic composition of the national population in destination countries is most intensively felt in small towns, rural areas or in particular city

districts where migrants are geographically concentrated and where limited "replacements" appear to have actually occurred (Sedgwick, 2024, pp. 553, 560-561; Skeldon, 2021, pp. 40-42). In those locations, characterized by limited preexisting diversity, generally away from metropolitan areas and dominated by rather homogeneous, middle-income and older populations - the "left behind" of globalization - things like hearing unintelligible languages on the street or noticing an increasing number of ethnic neighbourhoods, new religious spaces such as mosques or Hindu temples and shops specializing in foreign foods and goods, have fed availability heuristics among many natives, resulting in the anti-immigrant sentiment and support for nativist parties being stronger there (Sedgwick, 2024, pp. 560-561; Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, p. 386; Skeldon, 2021, pp. 40-41). This is sometimes described as "halo effect", whereby the presence of ethnic minorities not in a given district but at a sufficient distance (near, yet not within a homogenous native population) can foster feelings of danger and threat, increasing the probability of choosing populist radical right parties (Dvořák et al., 2025, p. 2).

Proponents of the Great Replacement theory pinpoint a range of culprits of this situation, always underscoring the deliberateness of what they deem a "political plot". First, supranational elites (the so-called "genocidal bloc"), whom equate at times with the political Left, at times with the European Union, either way with supporters of multiculturalism and political correctness, are believed to deliberately encourage mass migration with the final goal of bolstering their political majorities through the replacement - or, as it's often termed in the US, "white genocide" (Maher, 2025, pp. 2, 7-9; Sedgwick, 2024, p. 555; Goetz, 2021, p. 63). In support of this idea, they claim that migrant populations supposedly favour centre-left political parties and left-wing policies (such as the expansion of the welfare state or open borders policy) in their voting patterns, which should have prompted these cosmopolitan elites to conspire for the creation of their own future voting constituencies (Maher, 2025, pp. 2, 7-9). The second group of often referred-to "perpetrators" are women. Indeed, gender relations play a central and multilevel role in the construction of the Great Replacement narrative, especially since the agendas of population policy advanced by its proponents and right-wingers also include topics of reproduction policy (Goetz, 2021, pp. 61, 65, 68). Furthermore, the family itself is considered as the traditional institution for reproduction and the primary vehicle by which the next generation acquires the language, culture and values of the national community: hence, modern populist movements understand the instability of the family as an explanation for national decline, given its criticalness to the demographic health of the nation (Turner, 2019, p. 4). In this framework, the threat of "decomposition" of the native people is envisioned as coming from both within and outside: insufficient births on one hand and foreign infiltration on the other (Goetz, 2021, p.64). Low birth rates are explained as the outcome of women's emancipation, including rise in female employment, birth control, sex education, legal access to abortion, feminist ideologies, gender theories and LGBTQ+ rights, which allegedly promote childlessness, decadence, individualism, hedonism and selfishness by fuelling ambitions and anti-family attitudes (Goetz, 2021, pp.62-63; Sedgwick, 2024, p. 555). In short, they call upon several components of the second demographic transition. In addition to the internal side of the "decomposition process", women are also assigned responsibility for the external one because they vote consistently more often than men for liberal or left-wing parties - somewhat finding

resonance in Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2000) - therefore, they are portrayed as enablers of the planned "exchange of populations" aimed at forcibly turning a 'mono-ethnic' population into a 'multi-cultural' one through liberal immigration laws and refugee policies (Goetz, 2021, pp. 67, 69). In this way, the Great Replacement framework has effectively co-opted the grievances of different fringe communities by connecting anti-migration, anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-abortion, anti-EU and anti-establishment - populist - narratives, outlining a common interest and strategic approach against the declared "enemies of the people" (Goetz, 2021, pp. 62, 64).

Generally speaking, the female body was often placed at the heart of demographic engineering projects, as a key tool for achieving national and international goals of all sorts (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, p. 389). As Rodríguez-Muñiz (2020) remarks, ideologies of nation, gender, race, class, and sexuality have informed these projects and structured their effects. In fact, women also represent an integral part of the solutions to declining birth rates proposed by right-wing extremists, which, as it will be argued, all focus on the biological reproduction of the autochthonous people: they can be summed up in a set of pro-natalist, nativist and familist policies demanding a privileged status for the heterosexual nuclear family, the strengthening of national sentiment through the cult around family, children and motherhood and in some cases the prohibition or severe punishment of abortion (Goetz, 2021, pp. 62, 64-65, 68-69). According to this vision, native women should prevent the Great Replacement by having more children while the reproduction of immigrants should be restricted or at least discouraged, in an effort to control which children are born: this concept often boils down to the implementation of chauvinistic welfare programs, particularly in the Russian case, as will be argued further on in the dissertation (Goetz, 2021, pp. 63, 69-70). Naturally, policies of this kind, which picture women exclusively in terms of motherhood and reduce their societal role to their childbearing potential, amount to serious limitations of women's right to self-determination of their body, an increased dependency on the male breadwinner, and a re-naturalization of the social designed to force women back into traditional gender roles (Goetz, 2021, pp. 65, 70).

In conclusion, the Great Replacement narrative provides far-right exponents with a respectable cover for xenophobic, racist and sexist sentiments, permitting their articulation in apparently neutral terms and under a veneer of scientificity (Sedgwick, 2024, p. 561). It effectively speaks to the anxieties of communities marginalized by globalization: these, in their turn, have driven some of the most profound political changes in recent history by redirecting their votes from established parties and elites to leaders who pledge to protect the dominant nationality group and culture - even when those leaders openly defy constitutional constraints (Skeldon, 2021, pp. 39, 41; Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 873). All in all, the collective fears conjured up by changes in the population composition seem to be much more powerful than the concern with population decline itself, leading to the exclusion of mass immigration from the politically viable responses to sub-replacement fertility (Sedgwick, 2024, p. 553). As will be shown in the next chapters these fears can actively erode democratic checks and balances and undermine trust in democratic institutions, contributing to the marked democratic recession of the last dozen years (Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 871). Remarking that "immigration problems are really integration problems", Goldstone and Diamond (2020) stress the importance

of perceptions in generating this dynamic, particularly exposure to and expectations of immigrants, which explains why countries like Canada or Australia have not been crossed by anti-immigrant populism to the same degree as the US or many European nations despite having a larger proportion of foreign-born residents. Unlike, for instance, the UK, which witnessed the growth of "parallel communities" among immigrants due to its weak social inclusion policies, these countries faced social inclusion issues by harnessing the social benefits of social diversity and favouring multiculturalism as a positive policy (Turner, 2019, pp. 2-3).

3. METHODOLOGY: *OLD ACTORS, NEW STAGE*

a. Same outcomes, different regimes

The - previously discussed - perceived threat of demographic replacement at the root of the recent resurgence of right-wing nationalism, which Gökarıksel et al. (2019) name "demographic fever dreams" due to their fear-driven distortion of demographic realities, has by now become a worldwide phenomenon capable of linking cases situated across oceans (Gökarıksel et al., 2019, pp. 561-563). The widespread diffusion of this narrative seems to stem from its adaptability, allowing political actors to exploit context-specific legacies of colonialism, nationalism and patriarchy for shaping from time to time which group becomes the main object of fear, and justifying political action or violence against it (Gökarıksel et al., 2019, pp. 561-563). This could explain why similar examples are detectable across countries with very differently composed populations which nonetheless feature fertility differentials between two ethnically or culturally distinct groups, for instance, even in a demographic giant with a youthful age structure like India. Indeed, Hindu nationalists pledge to defend Hindu women from "love jihad", a purported conspiracy orchestrated by Muslim men with the aim of changing India's demographic composition through conversion, marriage and reproduction (Gökarıksel et al., 2019, p. 561). On top of that, despite historic concern with underpopulation having been traditionally fueled by an "us versus them" mentality, where more developed countries feared being eclipsed by quickly growing less developed countries, it is clear that population decline and low fertility levels are an inevitable outcome for all populations undergoing fertility transitions, making it a global issue albeit occurring much sooner for some than others (Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 81).

For these reasons, the chosen method for this research is the comparative one. Comparison makes it easier to assess whether a phenomenon is merely local or instead a broader trend - potentially establishing causality - which, as just illustrated, deeply resonates with the worldwide scale of the identified *demographic fever dreams* (Hopkin, 2010, p. 285). The type of analysis which will be put in place to engage in comparison is qualitative, since it allows for an in-depth examination of a larger number of independent variables and of the impact of their complex interactions on the dependent variable (Hopkin, 2010, p. 289). The qualitative perspective is particularly suited for this research because it permits to envision phenomena within their own contexts and as "wholes" - complex combinations of circumstances/events/processes or configurations of variables that can produce particular outcomes at particular points in time (multiple conjunctural causation), hence, offering the opportunity to mediate between empirical complexity and parsimonious theory (Hopkin, 2010, pp. 301-302). Indeed, as anticipated in the previous chapter, more than one single explanatory variable is needed to explain the "democratic recession" process under scrutiny: population ageing by itself is not enough, despite being a necessary ingredient. Instead, when coupled with differential fertility rates between a declining majority and a growing minority, demographic decline can be effectively turned into a mobilizing narrative by political actors, who exploit the ethnic or cultural distinctiveness between the two groups and combine it with other types of cleavages (economic, status, anti-system, gendered etc.) to eventually create an

all-encompassing, powerful and actionable political framework based on the fears that these processes activate in the majority group. In support of this interpretation, Eric Kaufmann argued that the "most important driver of majority attitudes is demography: the balance between ethnic change and integration", while Goldstone claims that "demographic trends alone determine nothing", underscoring that political outcomes are created by the interplay of existing institutions and demographic changes, depending on how flexible the former are in adapting to the latter (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, pp. 386-387). To prove the validity of such a complex chain of reasoning, employing a holistic approach is essential, so that all the pieces in the jigsaw will eventually fit their right place to form the final picture.

Another more subtle reason why a qualitative approach might be a better fit for this study is the partly "constructivist" nature of the latter: it is indeed difficult - though not impossible - to use quantitative techniques in investigating the role that cultural and ideational differences play in the social construction of political experiences (Hopkin, 2010, p. 302). Constructivist lenses help researchers assess the degree to which subjective interpretation motivates human action, under the assumption that people ultimately act through meanings and social constructs (ideas, beliefs, norms, or other interpretative filters that shape the perception of the world) that they develop in order to organize their identities, relationships and environment (Hopkin, 2010, pp. 80, 83-84, 87). The idea of inhabiting a "world of our making", where human action never follows an automatic stimulus-response mechanism in responding to external conditions (Hopkin, 2010, p.84), deeply resonates with the relevance that narratives such as the Great Replacement have as an intervening variable in developing a common understanding of *objective* demographic changes and, accordingly, in the political reactions that follow. Here, ethnically and culturally-defined identities in crisis are mobilized to turn a particular interpretation of demographic realities into political action and produce certain policy outcomes aimed at countering the perceived threat that these radical changes should entail, which, as it will be argued, eventually results in democratic backsliding/autocratization, erosion of rights (especially minority and women's ones) and aggressive conduct of foreign policy.

The two cases examined - the United States of America and the Russian Federation - were carefully selected according to the Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), a type of theory-driven small-N analysis developed by Przeworski and Teune that draws from Mill's "method of agreement" (Anckar, 2010; Hopkin, 2010, pp. 291-292). This research approach compares across contexts that are maximally heterogeneous on all factors except for the variable(s) of interest and the outcome, seeking out similarities between the cases in spite of the potentially confounding differences between them (Anckar, 2010; Hopkin, 2010, p. 293). The logic behind it is that if a hypothesized relationship between two or more variables is replicated in a variety of diverse settings, then there are stronger grounds for arguing the existence of a causal link between those variables (Hopkin, 2010, p. 293). This makes it possible to shift the attention from the "intersystemic level" to the "intrasystemic level", thus, eliminating irrelevant system-level variables (for instance the political regime) from the inquiry, favouring sufficient explanatory individual factors and finally establishing generalizations that hold their validity across different settings (Anckar, 2010; Hopkin, 2010, p. 293). The US and Russia not only have radically different political systems - according to the classification by Lührmann et

al. (2018) and the estimates by V-Dem (Our World in Data, 2025), one is a liberal democracy, while the other is an electoral autocracy and a consolidated authoritarian regime (Freedom House, 2024) - but are also situated at rather dissimilar stages of population ageing. Beyond grandevity, which is the proportion of the population achieving extremely old ages, and total fertility rates (1.45 births per woman in Russia and 1.62 in the US in 2023, both well below replacement) a useful single indicator of elderly concentration that can help envision the extent of this gap and effectively measure how far the process has advanced in each state, is median age - 39.5 in Russia and 38 in the US (Our World in Data, 2023; Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 123). The benefit of using this measure to visualize a state's age structure lies in its ability to capture the population's 'center of gravity' in a single number, while also allowing for meaningful cross-national comparison (Sciubba, 2023, p. 2125).

The choice of comparing countries with such different socio-political and demographic backgrounds aligns with the MDSD method and was further motivated by the importance assigned to the perception and framing of objective data in establishing a causal relationship between the shared demographic outlooks and policy outcomes. On the side of similarity, both *independent variables* (**demographic trends**: the combination of population ageing with majority-minority differentials), *intervening variables* (**perceptive aspects**: the use and spread of "demographic fever dream" narratives such as the Great Replacement by populist constituencies) and *dependent variables* (**political outcomes**: polarization, democratic backsliding and increasing revisionism in domestic and foreign policy), are less easily captured in a single figure. While the first two have been hinted at in the previous chapter, the latter will be better explored in the next section, in an attempt to elucidate what common results are assumed to be produced by the joint action of all other factors and what is the mechanism that links them all together.

Finally, regarding data gathering, both practical and methodological considerations informed the decision of drawing data from mainly secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports and data repositories. Beyond being less resource-intensive and logistically challenging than direct data collection, this method enables the researcher to benefit from the rich contextual understanding - notably required in qualitative studies - that high-quality literature, expert insights and longitudinal data already provide, allowing for both a synthesis and a reinterpretation of existing knowledge. Rather than generating entirely new, first-hand data this work seeks to develop a unique and holistic analytical framework based on real-world complexity by rethinking established findings from an original explanatory perspective, in an effort to uncover the genuinely political influence of demographic dynamics even when not immediately apparent. Notwithstanding the risks of unrepresentativeness and biasedness of small-N studies, there is no a priori reason to regard a case-oriented, qualitative-comparative research of this kind as a methodologically 'soft' option (Hopkin, 2010, p. 300). Quite the contrary, owing to their emphasis on "process tracing" at the expense of deterministic general theory, qualitative approaches can capture underlying causal mechanisms which are too subtle to be observed through quantitative large-N analysis, providing far more rigorous and sophisticated responses to some types of research questions (Hopkin, 2020, p. 303).

b. Population politics

There is one more theoretical missing piece to further clarify the path that this dissertation will follow in sketching out an interpretative framework on the topics at issue: population politics. This (third) area of enquiry will help bridge the gap between the other two mentioned at the beginning of the previous chapter, namely political demography and demographic engineering. Unlike these, which either focus on the effects or on the control of demographic processes, population politics "addresses 'demography' as an object of political knowledge and tool of political rhetoric" (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, p. 390). Reconnecting with Weiner's broad definition of political demography, also recalled at the outset, "what matters is not only the empirical facts underlying demographic trends, but in addition the ways in which such trends are perceived by political elites and publics" (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, p. 391). Population politics interacts with political demography and demographic engineering by mediating, facilitating, informing or legitimising both kinds of processes: this activity is carried out by political, social and intellectual actors and elites, who actively work to construct demographic "populations" and shape the public perception of demographic trends, along with how they are then acted upon (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, pp. 385, 390-392). Translating this mechanism into the context of this dissertation, populist forces employ and spread ideational systems such as the Great Replacement theory - capitalizing on the native majority's grievances and status concerns - and pursue certain political projects which strongly hinge on demographic premises and aim to control the population composition of a country by disincentivizing certain solutions to population ageing (e.g. migration) and incentivizing others (e.g. raising native fertility).

In sum, population politics turns the political work behind what people come to perceive as relevant demographic categories or significant demographic changes, into the object of analysis (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, p. 391). Such a political work involves the production, movement and mobilization of demographic knowledge, which enters public discourse and is invoked to advance political projects, echoing the Foucaldian concept of biopolitics[1] (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, pp. 391-392). Indeed, researchers in this domain of study have used the lenses of *perception* to explain phenomena such as conflicts between older local groups and newer ethnically distinct migrants, or the regulation of fertility through coercion or persuasion, which, far from being automatic, objective responses to demographic conditions are rather politically cultivated and presuppose certain beliefs on the significance of demographic trends (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, pp. 390-391). For instance, as demography reemerges as a major object of public discourse, policy-making, and political conflict, in the US and Western Europe talk about the growth of "minority" or "non-white" populations has become ubiquitous in the media and partisan rhetoric, serving as a platform for right-wing extremist and white-supremacist projects (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, p. 399).

[1] As Rasmussen (2023) remarks, "Foucault outlined the centrality of the idea of demography to the modern nation-state", whose national imagery "sees population as an object of investment that must be grown to guarantee continued growth and productivity across economic, social, and cultural dimensions"

The idea of population politics acting as a "filter" between demographic realities and political outcomes was already hinted at in the first chapter, which, although preeminently focused on demographic "hard facts", was also partly devoted to elaborating on one of the currently most powerful and widespread "perceptive filters" - the already mentioned Great Replacement theory. As Sciubba (2023) remarks, "the causal relationship between a nation's demography and its future is not straightforward", and the influence of various factors, including institutions, can "mediate or amplify the adverse effects of demographic conditions". These intermediate variables can obviously include the expectations of citizens and leaders of one another - in other words, their social contract - and, where institutions concentrate decision-making in the hands of a few people or just one individual, also those leaders' preferences and perceptions (Sciubba, 2023, pp. 2128-2129). In addition, as already touched upon in the first chapter, states are not passive in the face of demographic change, but rather respond or adapt to demographic shifts by means of domestic and foreign policy making, thus, requiring the analysis to overcome a simplistic assessment of demography as destiny (Sciubba, 2023, pp. 2120, 2128). Whether those policies are attempts to mitigate the effects of population ageing (which, as shown above, sometimes clearly boils down to the shrinking of what is defined as the native population) or rather a consequence of the ageing-driven transformations of the political system and of its leaders' political vision itself, a certain political, identitarian or even normative perspective on demographic phenomena underlies them. To summarize:

1) Population ageing and migration jointly influence a country's political system and dynamics by altering its population composition (**political demography**), which results in the old and shrinking native majority developing - mostly identitarian - anxieties related to those demographic shifts while simultaneously gaining greater representation in the public sphere;
2) These fears are then intercepted by political actors, who translate them into political projects that follow a certain normative interpretation of the new demographic realities (**population politics**);
3) These projects, beyond being a mere political manifestation of the transformations undergone by political regimes due to demographic changes, also entail domestic and foreign policy shifts that are designed to alter the population composition once again in an attempt to make it comply with that same normative interpretation (**demographic engineering**).

In this way, the three issue areas are ultimately brought together and integrated.

The next section will go beyond the "inputs" to the conceptual and analytical system that is being developed and connect the intervening variable to its "outputs". The latter in particular will be its main focus, with a view to providing an overview of the expected outcomes of this research. Going back to the research question, it will be argued that the demographic trends at issue (population ageing and majority-minority fertility differentials) are having a transformative impact on both the *structural features* and the *(domestic and foreign) policy outcomes* of the two countries examined via the filter of population politics, which pivots on the identities of governors and governed alike. What exactly are such expected alterations in the structural

political features and the policy outcomes of a regime, whatever its nature? Since the selected cases have radically different political systems, the answers to this question will surely be context-based, but in spite of the different modes of action, a downward spiral is evident in both contexts. Starting from *structural features*, the phenomena of democratic backsliding and autocratization will first be illustrated; then, moving on to *policy outcomes*, demographic engineering will be encompassed in the examination of the domestic and foreign domains alike.

c. From demographic inputs to political outputs

As anticipated at the end of the second section of the first chapter, population ageing has critical implications for political systems, technically altering the way in which regimes work and challenging their political legitimacy by reason of the increased social, electoral and cultural prominence of the elderly vis-a-vis other age groups: under these conditions, a democratic system can turn into a "tyranny of the majority" that is no longer suited to build a sustainable future for the nation (Buchmeier and Vogt, 2024, pp. 168-169). Buchmeier and Vogt (2024) identify three possible forms that this demographic influence can take: participation, representation and policy effects.

The first type derives from the structural imbalances in the electoral system created by the aging voters' majority and the corresponding marginalization of young voters among the electorate. The fact that senior voters make up a growing share of the latter and that their voter turnout is generally higher than that of all other age groups produces an overrepresentation of the elderly and an underrepresentation of young adults both as voters and as political representatives. In the case selected by the two researchers - Japan, where young people already account for an absolute numerical minority among the electorate - this situation was further exacerbated by the electoral abstention of younger voters, whose lower electoral turnout is actually a well-known and widespread tendency in most consolidated democratic systems, and the malapportionment of voting districts. This last additional factor of the aging-induced disequilibrium in voter participation stems from an electoral system that disproportionately apportions more parliamentary seats to rural regions than to urban areas, indirectly favoring the faster-ageing electorate concentrated in the rural parts of the country. Far from concerning only Japan, this phenomenon is also particularly relevant to the U.S., as it will be shown later.

The second type of effects refers to the dominance of elderly lawmakers and the insufficient representation of young people inside parliaments and governments. In particular, the numerical disadvantage or outright absence of young parliamentarians, cabinet members, and political candidates, which is particularly striking in Japan, is increasingly recognised as a serious democratic deficit worldwide, probably comparable to that of female political representation. In line with the paradigm shift from a "politics of ideas" to a "politics of presence" of the last decades - "who does the representation can be as important as the ideas or visions they represent" - a certain level of (generational) pluralism in political institutions is required to successfully sustain their legitimacy, as well as to improve decision-making in general by avoiding short-sighted policies.

Lastly, the third type of effects manifests in an imbalance in policy making resulting from the preference for policies catering to an aging majority. This policy bias is distinctly visible in public expenditure patterns, where it can be detected by measuring the relative weight of welfare spending on the elderly versus that on working-age adults and children. The US and Japan have the highest relative social spending for the elderly, with the former allocating 11 times more government funds to old people compared to young families. This effect can also be explained by the correlation between politicians' age and their preferred welfare spending: for instance, younger mayors tend to increase long-term public investments in child welfare, whereas older ones generally concentrate resources on short-term benefits for the elderly. Hence, the dominance of "politics made by the old for the old" causes the issues that disproportionately affect younger generations to remain fundamentally unaddressed; the scarce public attention that climate change and environmental policy usually receive is a prominent example of the negative impact that the political underrepresentation of young people has on policy outcomes.

In sum, Buchmeier and Vogt (2024) argue that the disequilibrium in political power and visibility between generations is structurally and deeply entrenched in the entanglement of demographic aging and these democratic processes (participation, representation and policy-making). Therefore, far from being easily adjustable by electoral will, the features of an ageing democracy challenge our very notion of democratic legitimacy and reflexively undercut the founding principles of the modern nation-state, calling into question some of their core institutions and processes, such as the proportional representation system (Buchmeier and Vogt, 2024, pp. 172-173, 175). Yet, as demographic ageing is affecting a variety of states worldwide and not only democratic regimes, which this study primarily focuses on, radical changes in political outcomes and dynamics can be found along the whole spectrum of political systems. Data from the 2025 V-Dem Democracy Report summarize the general worldwide wave of autocratization affecting democracies and autocracies alike. Liberal democracies have become the least common regime type in the world - 29 in 2024 - hosting less than 12% of the world population (0.9 billion people) and losing out the most in terms of economic power, which reached its lowest level in more than five decades. Autocracies (n=91) outnumber democracies (n=88) for the first time in over 20 years, with nearly 3 out of 4 persons in the world currently living in autocracies - 72%, the highest since 1978 - and 38% of the world population - 3.1 billion people - living in autocratizing countries. Out of these 45 autocratizers, 27 were democracies at the start of their episode, at a fatality rate of 67%. The level of democracy for the average world citizen is back to 1985. The next chapter will take a closer look at how these trends unfold in Russia - a closed autocracy undergoing further entrenchment of authoritarian rule, largely fueled by war-time restrictions - and the United States - a democratic regime under strain, experiencing its fastest evolving episode of autocratization, which led even cautious analysts like Professor Steven Levitsky to spot early indications of regime transition (V-Dem, 2025, pp. 45-47).

As Goldstone and Diamond (2020) point out, this long-standing downward spiral of democratic erosion or "third wave" of autocratization - still on the rise after at least 25 years (V-Dem, 2025, p. 6) - looks odd at first glance from a demographic standpoint, since research has traditionally associated population ageing with the ability of states to transition to and maintain democratic governance. Nonetheless, as previously

demonstrated, this relation does not seem to hold and gets even reversed when other factors such as a migration-driven increase in ethnic heterogeneity and globalization-related economic stagnation come into play. Under these conditions, population ageing has instead the potential to generate powerful anxieties that lead the electorate to seek safety in the promises of a strong leader - one willing to act in open disregard of constitutional constraints for the sake of protecting the dominant nationality group and culture, somewhat resonating with the previous wave of democratic reversals in the 1930s - and whose political weight is magnified by the fact that the elderly already represent a demographic, *ethnic* and political majority owing to that very process, as explained by Buchmeier and Vogt (Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, pp. 872-873, 875). Turner (2019) additionally argues that "populism and the crisis of democracy cannot be understood without an examination of the demographic transformation of modern societies", given that "declining populations are often seen diagnostically as evidence of the national crisis brought on by modernity and secularisation." He considers declining total fertility rates and resulting population ageing as the "background conditions" for the populist emphasis on the threat of immigration, the connection between the family and the survival of the nation and the defence of the dignity of women. The demographic crisis is, hence, a fundamental component of the crisis of democracy caused by the rise of populist parties and movements.

i. Populism and Democratic Backsliding

Having repeatedly referred to the concept of populism, it is important at this stage to explore it in greater depth and to clarify how it will be utilized within the comparative analysis. Recalling the idea of population politics illustrated in the previous section, populism lies at the point of intersection between the demographic inputs and the political outputs: by employing the Great Replacement narrative, populist constituencies help materialize that "tyranny of the majority" for which population ageing creates the structural preconditions, eventually producing and enhancing the domestic and foreign policy outcomes that will be discussed in this section. It is, in a sense, both an *input* (in its demographic origins), an *intervening variable* (in its political rhetoric) and an *outcome* (in its structural consequences on democracy). Starting from its canonical definition, all these three aspects will be addressed below.

Following Cas Mudde's renown "ideational" approach, populism is conceptualised as a "thin-centred ideology", namely a coherent but narrow set of ideas or beliefs that coexists alongside a full-fledged "thick-ideology" - like socialism or ethno-nationalism - and considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: "the virtuous people", whose *volonté générale* should be the only driving force of politics (evoking Rousseaus' idea of a general will rooted in the nation), versus "the corrupt elite" (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 666; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, p. 31). According to Destradi et al. (2021), it entails two constitutive ideological dimensions or core features: 1) *anti-elitism*, which is manifested in the claim of populist leaders to speak in the name of a "morally pure and fully unified" (good) people as opposed to a predatory (evil) ruling class detached from it, implying a deeply Manichean worldview; 2) *anti-pluralism*, which derives from populist leaders' self-ascribed monopoly on political representation - they, and they alone,

are entitled to represent the people. Consistent with its discursive nature, populism tends to be indeterminate in its ideological content at first: depending on the thick ideology espoused by populists from time to time, on the political context and on its related opportunities, depictions of both the elite and the people can vary significantly, usually keeping a certain vagueness in their characterization so as to allow for different understandings and, thus, maximize appeal (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1070; Destradi et al., 2021, p. 667). However, right-wing populists in particular have a markedly "exclusionary" conception of the people, routinely foregrounding the pre-established moral distinctions between groups in order to justify the exclusion of certain parts of society, notably ethnic or religious minorities (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 667). In constructing this antagonistic cleavage by filling *empty signifiers* with meaning ("us" or the "Self" - the people, which is represented as a coherent totality - versus "them" or the "Other" - the establishment), populist discursive practices contribute to shape the identity of the people, eventually defining the very social categories they claim to represent (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 667). Hence, the discursive nature of populist reason can be understood as a politics of identity which is substantiated in the political actions of constituting a people, of manufacturing political subjectivities, of creating chains of equivalence (identification) and difference (othering) (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1071).

As already touched upon in the previous chapter, populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs such as the Great Replacement theory are closely connected, with the latter having demonstrable effects in inspiring far-right parties, populist movements and right-wing extremist terrorists worldwide (Herold, 2025, p. 4). They exhibit a wide range of commonalities: both are associated with political dissatisfaction (especially towards democracy), mistrust and alienation; they share a strongly stereotyped dualism of good and evil, truth and lies, and light and darkness - systematically harnessed by populist leaders to demonize and delegitimize their opponents; they exploit the same type of resentment against the elite, which is alleged to pursue sinister ambitions at the expense of the ordinary people; both try to make sense of certain events or broader political and historical developments in an attempt to alleviate a perceived sense of chaos or "loss of control", particularly at the border (Herold, 2025, pp. 2-4; Goldstone and Diamond, 2020, p. 870). According to Turner (2019) borders and bordering have indeed become "dominant markers of the psychological need for security against the threat of national decline", a need that is consistently exacerbated by the prolonged sense of crisis that populists in power promote by employing conspiracy theories (Herold, 2025, p. 4).

Of course, the large and often implicit role that demographic issues play in populist ideology by means of the Great replacement conspiracy (Turner, 2023, p. 211), is not the only way populism and demography are intertwined. In their empirical research, which investigated the impact of district-level demographic decline on support for populist parties by using the Czech Republic as a case study, Dvořák et al. (2025) argue that populist attitudes and voting behaviour is a manifestation and consequence of objective macro-structural processes - such as globalization, technological advancement and demographic change - that influence attitudes and values. More specifically, many among the major long-term economic and social consequences of demographic decline (some of which were already outlined in the first chapter) also overlap with the root causes behind the grievances exploited by populist movements - usually ascribed to globalization and

technological change. This demography-driven chain reaction starts with de-industrialization and the associated outflow of young and skilled labour, resulting in deteriorating quality of the labour force, rising unemployment, economic underdevelopment and so on (Dvořák et al., 2025, pp. 3-4). Given that population size is often linked to government financial contributions, reduced natural increase (or sometimes even natural decrease) and outmigration can lead to lower investment in infrastructure and consequently undermine the ability to maintain the existing quality of public services by reason of the decreased funding for municipal budgets, with an overall negative impact on living standards (Dvořák et al., 2025, pp. 3-4).

Naturally, these demographically driven negative economic repercussions are further aggravated by the other previously mentioned macro-structural factors. Globalization has moved many manufacturing jobs offshore and, as governments seek ways to improve work productivity in an attempt to counter the (ageing-induced) contraction of the labour force, new technologies are increasingly replacing the traditional working class form of employment (Huang, 2023, p. 30; Turner, 2019, p. 2). As a result, the demand for less-skilled workers has drastically fallen, culminating in surging unemployment rates, depressed salaries for domestic workers and widening wealth gaps: ultimately, economic inequality was exacerbated by a series of institutional changes - including labor market deregulation, privatization of public services and low taxation for corporations - associated with the shift towards neoliberalism by most industrialized economies (Huang, 2023, p. 30). According to Haggard and Kaufman (2021), anxieties spurred by skill-biased technological change, greater openness to trade, economic crises (the 2008 financial crisis clearly added to the rise in unemployment rates) and reforms, had a strong influence on the proliferation of populism in a variety of otherwise disparate contexts, including Russia and the US.

The local marginalization, economic downturn and diminished access to public services generated by these processes is particularly intense in rural and non-urban contexts, where the rising costs of the ageing population remaining in the region additionally put a severe strain on public budgets (Dvořák et al., 2025, pp. 3-4). This aspect is consistent with the shifts in the ethnic composition of outlying and predominantly homogenous populations and the related growth in local populist support described earlier in the dissertation. It also explains why right-wing populist appeals typically rest on strong cosmopolitan-nationalist divides, which essentially reflect a rural-urban distribution of the population: the political values of young, cosmopolitan populations inhabiting metropolitan regions differ significantly from those in the rural hinterlands (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, p. 31; Skeldon, 2021, p. 41). Indeed, living in economically lagging regions or, correspondingly, contexts characterised by rapid demographic decline, may elicit feelings of relative deprivation or of having been left behind and negative attitudes towards outgroups - namely, anti-immigration sentiments (Dvořák et al., 2025, pp. 2, 4). Hence, people with demographic panic seem to coincide with the so-called “losers of globalization”, who unleash their unspoken fears about the extinction (or, maybe more accurately, irreversible change in the composition) of their own population in situations of subjective threat - such as economic or migration crisis (Dvořák et al., 2025, pp. 3-4). In times of upheaval, populist politics flourishes, propelled by a significant segment of the population which does not feel represented by existing institutions and is skeptical of the latter’s ability to meet their demands (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1072).

Dvořák et al. (2025) also mention social capital, which according to Putnam represents the interconnectedness of people in social networks and the resulting mutual trust in other members of the community, as a major linking mechanism between demographic decline and rising populist parties. In this framework, depopulation is envisioned as a multidimensional process that may erode community cohesion and cultural capital, hampering the maintenance of existing social connections and ties while setting in motion a progressive disintegration of social life. Additionally, an ageing population generally entails a lower capacity to get involved in common projects, take initiative and have an active civic and social life (Dvořák et al., 2025, p. 3). These outcomes - specifically deteriorating social interconnectedness and low social trust - have been found to be associated with a negative evaluation of outgroups, exclusionary attitudes, intolerance and distrust, all stemming from a perception of the world as a dangerous place: the social isolation thus produced fosters receptiveness to populist rhetoric and electoral choices (Dvořák et al., 2025, pp. 1, 3).

After clarifying the definition of populism adopted in this dissertation and illustrating its extensive connections to the demographic issues at hand, it is necessary to explain how populism triggers processes of democratic backsliding and what role demography plays in these dynamics. The current wave of populism is mostly characterized by the combination of the constitutive components of the *thin* populist ideology - namely anti-elitism and anti-pluralism/people-centrism - with other *thicker* ideological traits, which converge in "authoritarian populism" (Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1822). Driven by a long-standing distrust in politics and political parties, as well as a widespread dissatisfaction with the liberal policies promoted by non-majoritarian institutions (e.g. central banks, constitutional courts and international organizations), authoritarian populism blends the core populist ideological features with nationalism, majoritarianism and decisionism (Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1822). Its majoritarian appeals do not necessarily imply that the rise to power of elected populists - or, in some cases, would-be autocrats - is always rooted in surges of support and broad electoral majorities, as confirmed by the significant increase in voter abstention recorded in the most recent elections across Europe - those very elections that elevated populist parties and leaders to executive roles in several European countries (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, p. 31; Barbieri and Newell, 2023, pp. 19-24). This widespread indifference and apathy towards politics is driven by the feelings of powerlessness and political irrelevance routinely experienced by the "losers of globalization" and reciprocates the perceived disregard for ordinary people's demands displayed by political elites, which are portrayed as out of touch with their problems and needs, unresponsive to their concerns and merely interested in gaining public office (Barbieri and Newell, 2023, pp. 27-30).

Despite the self-ascribed prioritization of the people's voice over that of the elites, authoritarian populism in power goes hand in hand with the weakening of democratic institutions, which is a function of populists' time in office: populist leaderships with longstanding governmental functions have the potential to become increasingly authoritarian over time and the longer they stay in power, the greater the effect on both domestic and foreign politics (Wajner et al., 2024, pp. 1822-1823). In this way populism, a genuinely democratic phenomenon per se, can and does - in the most extreme cases - transform into authoritarianism over time, as populist leaders slowly reshape democratic institutions, undermine the separation of powers,

make all institutions pliable to their will by infiltrating them with loyalists, increasingly control the media and ultimately suppress opposition forces (Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1823). Democratic backsliding is an incremental phenomenon in nature, consisting of the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, rules and norms by means of the actions of duly elected governments and incumbents: the slow accretion of powers by the latter makes the process difficult to detect and counter until it is too late (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, pp. 27-28).

More specifically, the primary channel through which populism distorts democratic processes and contributes to democratic backsliding is *political polarization*. By definition, it consists of the increasing division over public policy and ideology of political elites and publics (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, pp. 27-30). It pivots on populist leaders' understanding of representation as "embodiment of the popular will" and the resulting assertion of being the sole legitimate representatives of the "true people" (Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1823). This (illiberal) majoritarian conception of democratic rule translates into the more or less explicit exclusion of their political competitors (and their constituencies), which is mirrored in populists' characteristic disdain for checks and balances, minority rights and constraints on executive power (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, p. 31; Destradi et al., 2021, p. 667). Populist leaders label targeted groups - e.g. ethnic or religious minorities and LBGTQ communities - as not being legitimate members of the national community yet unfairly enjoying special benefits and protections while corroding its social fabric (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, p. 37). They exploit popular grievances and anxieties in order to heighten divisions, while systematically attacking the rights of those "scapegoats" on the other side of the stark us-versus-them divide for the sake of rallying support (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, pp. 30-31, 37). In highly polarized settings, that same basic antagonism (us-versus-them) submerges cross-cutting cleavages on a wide range of issues: consequently, partisan attachments become increasingly based on issue positions rather than on underlying identities and political adversaries are framed not only as competitors but as enemies or even traitors (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, p. 30). Through their portrayal of parliaments, courts, the media, and civil society activists as elitist instruments for the control or abuse of the true people, populists escalate the us-vs-them cleavage to the point of undermining political institutions as such, while centralizing and personifying political power at the same time (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 667; Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1823).

Polarization has a series of adverse consequences on democracy. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2020) warn, "nearly all the most prominent democratic breakdowns across history have occurred amid extreme polarization". Firstly, it increases the likelihood that the government fails to operate efficiently and witnesses either stalemates or swings between policy extremes: government dysfunction, in turn, further fuels popular disaffection and distrust of institutions (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, p. 31). Political polarization also increases the risk that incumbent mainstream parties will be captured by extremist elements or that new antisystem parties will gain traction (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, pp. 31, 37). This specific aspect allows for a deeper exploration of another recurring pattern within populist movements, that is, their proclivity to partisan violence - a byproduct of polarization. In contexts of extreme polarization, where populist candidates and their voters view critics and partisan rivals as existential threats rather than legitimate competitors, it is but a short step for them to place greater value on winning than on maintaining the constitutional order: this includes

justifying extraordinary means, such as violence, election fraud or coups to prevent any (otherwise catastrophic) victory by their political opponents (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, p. 31; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 7). According to Gökarıksel et al. (2019), an epic reversal is underway: violent responses are rhetorically justified and even envisioned as a legitimate act of self-defense against an existential threat (usually linked to fears of dissolution of society or of masculinity itself) by reversing the roles of aggressor and potential victim between marginalized groups in need of protection and men with majority privilege. Needless to say, the demographic forecasts propagated by the Great Replacement theory have played a major role in fostering such fear-driven normalization of violence in certain milieus, unleashing a significant potential for political radicalization and violent extremism - as addressed through examples of terrorism mentioned earlier (Herold, 2025, p. 4). Both data-based empirical evidence and theoretical, historical and ethnographic literature confirm the existence of a link between the belief in the theory and individual willingness to accept political violence - or at least a lowered threshold for resorting to it (Herold, 2025, pp. 4, 11). Studies also reveal a strong overlap between the rhetoric of extremist perpetrators - for instance, the Capitol rioters of 2021 - and the inflammatory language of right-wing personalities who stoke fears of replacement through immigration in the media (Herold, 2025, p. 4).

Once polarization mechanisms are set in motion, their effect on democratic backsliding will depend on the extent to which would-be autocrats succeed in capturing the executive and securing the legislature's support or acquiescence for the concentration of their authority (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, p. 27). Taking executive office also means gaining access to significant organizational resources that can be effectively employed to undermine democratic rule: these range from command of the bureaucracy, military and security apparatus to endless opportunities of influencing the media and the economy, as well as, in some cases (e.g. Russia) the transformation of networks of state-owned enterprises and private-sector cronies into vehicles of patronage and outright corruption (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, p. 32). Nevertheless, the consolidation of autocratic control ultimately depends on the cooperation of the legislature, which, through the support of acquiescent ruling parties or coalitions, plays a crucial role in the collapse of the separation of powers: the weaker the legislature, the more vulnerable the system becomes to democratic backsliding (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, pp. 28, 32).

ii. The restoration of national grandeur

Having thoroughly explored populism as the intervening variable connecting the demographic premises stated in the first chapter with their structural consequences on the regime, the focus now shifts to its effects on domestic and foreign policy. Since it was demonstrated that populism has indeed strong demographic determinants (which in turn exert a non-negligible influence on the dynamics of democratic backsliding typically set in motion by the rise of populist leaders), it can be expected that, following the programmatic rhetoric of the Great Replacement theory, most political projects pursued by populist leaders are essentially designed to address those demographic anxieties by means of altering the population

composition: in other words, through demographic engineering. It is not within the scope of this thesis to analyze populist policy altogether: rather, as a complex, multidimensional and relatively context-dependent phenomenon, populism is introduced in the analysis inasmuch that its domestic and foreign manifestations could be directly attributable to the impact of population ageing and fertility differentials.

In general, as anticipated in this chapter's first section, the policies advanced by an aged electorate and/or political class tend to be short-sighted and to poorly deal with long-term policymaking, a sort of democratic myopia which is additionally exacerbated by both democratic backsliding and populist politics (Peters, 2024, pp. 43-44). The latter in particular, with its simplistic approach to complex problems and its systematic denigration of expertise, has a significant hampering effect on the solution of problems of collective action, for instance, reforming existing programs so as to pursue long-term political projects (Peters, 2024, pp. 42, 44, 50). Since both social trust - especially trust in the government - and a sense of community are key factors needed for managing such problems, whose solutions often entail the acceptance of short-term deprivations in order to accrue future benefits, their absence produces a twofold intensification of that myopia, acting simultaneously as a catalyst for the rise in populist support (see above) (Peters, 2024, p. 43). Moreover, as Peters (2024) remarks, "contemporary populism is often about the past": indeed, most populist political campaigns are backward-looking, in that they usually promise to restore some golden past instead of focusing on the problems that may harm the country in a plausible future. The idea is to reverse current policies that are perceived to have been responsible for the retreat of a given country from its past glories, to preserve the status quo from abrupt changes and uncertainty, with an emphasis on current threats to short-term security (including issues like immigration and terrorism) and weakness in international affairs (Peters, 2024, pp. 45-47, 50). On top of that, the exclusionary and narrow definition of "the people" upheld by populists helps contextualise their efforts in maintaining the current distribution of resources or even returning to some previous distribution, out of the fear that the benefits associated with being a member of society may be passed on to individuals "unworthy" of that membership (Peters, 2024, pp. 47-48).

With these premises, populist political projects informed by population politics and aimed at altering the population composition through demographic engineering are equally expected to follow such "backward-looking" and "exclusionary" patterns on both domestic and foreign fronts, the goal being always the restoration of national grandeur. Starting with domestic policy, the demographic crisis is typically cast as a pressing item on the national policy agenda by populists, as widely illustrated in the first chapter. Even so, although the concern about national population decline may appear to reflect a genuine commitment to long-term policymaking, it is the *quality* rather than the *quantity* of the shrinking population that actually matters within their political programs, which are generally aimed at a specific increase in the size of the native population: this explains the above-mentioned unwillingness to rely on replacement migration to mitigate the most adverse economic effects of population ageing, for the economic considerations surrounding this issue have been subordinated to questions of national identity in populist and nativist political discourse (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1075). Hence, populist responses to the demographic crisis, with their emphasis on cultural values rather than

economic or political power, end up proving dysfunctional in relation to the long-term challenges that population decline poses, further aggravating democratic myopia (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1076).

Instead, the goal their strategy is truly aligned with is the "preservation" of the national identity from what are perceived as external threats to its existence by means of the reproduction of the native citizens and their participation in traditional family forms (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1076). Across various global contexts right-wing populists describe the family – in its reproductive function, a linkage that guarantees the passage of racial identity through generations and so provide a source of order and stability – as under siege by hegemonic liberalism and the conspiratorial, destabilizing and culturally transformative forces assigned to it: in brief, globalization, multiculturalism and feminism (Rasmussen, 2023, pp. 1070, 1084; Erel, 2018, p. 1). More specifically, the latter are presented as "challenging the social order that makes the nation a 'homely' space" or literally a *homeland*: in practice, the threat they pose to the future of the nation is concretely identified in the demographic changes caused, permitted or facilitated by these ideologies, namely immigration and excessive birthrates of migrants on one hand and lack of national women's reproductive activity on the other (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1070 Erel, 2018, pp. 1, 4). Practices like abortion, immigration, interracial marriage and voluntary childlessness are considered as every-day manifestations and evidence of such alleged efforts to eradicate native born populations (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1084). Incidentally, this interpretation leaves little room for serious inquiry into the real structural causes of low fertility, population ageing, evolving family patterns and reproductive choices, let alone policymaking informed by a deep understanding of those issues and equipped to address them. The emphasis on security recurs, as national identity is assumed to provide an essential point of ontological security in a rapidly changing and globalized world, to serve as a stable sense of self across time and to shield from the flows of capital, ideas and bodies which are all encompassed in the populist idea of a transnational elite threatening traditional sources of order and meaning (Rasmussen, 2023, pp. 1070, 1081, 1084).

In this framework, the transmission of national identity occurs both in the cultural reproduction of specific traditional values and in the literal passage of genetic identity through biological reproduction, implying that public investment in this project should mobilize both physical and symbolic state resources to secure the "traditional family" (Rasmussen, 2023, pp. 1070, 1077). Consequently, not only the scope (combating the cultural and demographic decline of the native people) but also the means envisaged in the actualization of this vision should be designed according to the idea of "preservation", with the family becoming the linkage connecting a once great past to a once again great future (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1070). Going into the details of how the "backward-looking" and "exclusionary" patterns are concretely reflected in such means, family policy can mainly take two strongly interrelated directions under populist radical right governance: welfare nostalgia and welfare chauvinism (Fenger, 2018, pp. 190-191, 202). Turning first to the former, it is useful to recall Mathieu (2013)'s concept of "dematernalisation" - or, in Ennser-Jedenastik (2022)'s terms, "defamilialization" - already mentioned in the first chapter in relation to the critiques of the SDT, and juxtapose it with its opposite, "familialization". De-familializing natalist policies (e.g. the provision or subsidy of institutional childcare) aim to provide care alternatives outside the family, decreasing both the

dependence of those being cared for on their family and the burden of childcare on families (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2022, p. 156). On the contrary, familializing natalist policies (e.g. family allowances or child tax credits) support and enhance the capacity of families to care for their dependants, whitout offering any alternative provision of care through the state or the market[2] (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2022, p. 156).

In line with the patterns discussed above, radical right populists tend to promote strong familialization, seeking to support the reproductive capacity and care capability of the nuclear family (e.g. through cash benefits) but remaining wary of government intervention that could potentially weaken the family's caring role and the traditional intra-family division of labour (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2022, pp. 155-157, 170). They usually limit their "pro-natalist thrust" to policies that do not challenge or sometimes explicitly seek to preserve and reinforce traditional gender roles within the family unit, insisting that families – which translates to mostly women – should bear exclusive responsability for the care work (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2022, pp. 155-157). Clearly, the centrality of the family in populist demographic engineering projects reflects and underscores the control of women's bodies as a necessary condition for their implementation. Again, beyond phisically reproducing the nation, women (in their role as mothers) also transmit culture and values to the next generation, undertaking most of the childrearing and socialization work involved in reproducing a country's cultural, social and economic structures, including its inequalities (Erel, 2018, p. 2). The crucial role that women play in the construction of national identity allows the justification for public investment in family policy to extend beyond material well-being or economic concerns and tie the social and personal benefits of the family to its participation in a nation-building exercise through reproduction (Erel, 2018, p. 2; Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1076). Supporters of familialization are, therefore, expected to criticize family planning programs that, by emphasizing women's sexual autonomy over family formation choices and encouraging their economic independence, prevent them from carrying out their patriotic duty to procreate (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1078; Randeria, 2024, p. 21). Subverting gender norms is equated with the disruption of the smallest building block or 'the "ultimate cell" of society, that is the traditional native nuclear family, in much the same way that transnational liberal elites are accused of having disrupted local practices and subverted the natural order through processes of globalization: this reasoning accounts for why gender ideology is often linked to intellectual elitism and the neoliberal order by right-wing populists (Rasmussen, 2023, pp. 1078-1080; Ennser-Jedenastik 2022, pp. 157-158).

Familializing natalist policies reveal the underlying logic of welfare nostalgia. According to Fenger (2018), this concept "refers to policy positions that are aimed at securing or reinforcing the social position of the modernisation losers based on traditional economic and family patterns", with "the restoration of 'traditional' labour relations and social rights" at its core. If such "losers" are understood as the typical populist electorate, those who feel overwhelmed by the "acceleration of economic, social and cultural modernisation" - as well as of globalization itself - then the backward-looking component in populists' social policy agenda

[2] The difference from dematernalisation lies specifically in the inclusion of paid parental leave within the familializing policies' cathegory, while Mathieu (2013) did not exclude the mother's partner from the group of external actors to whom the costs of childbearing could be reallocated. To this end, Mathieu's framework allows for the integration of gender equality discourse into family policy analysis and potentially draws a distinction between different types of parental leave (maternity, paternity, shared etc.).

(especially nativist policies) becomes readily intelligible (Fenger, 2018, pp. 190-191). Nevertheless, the design of populist nativist policies might partially diverge from the familialization model as rising immigration introduces greater ethnic diversity: given the typically younger age profiles and higher fertility rates of immigrants, it is likely that a larger share of family benefits is consumed by non-native recipients (Ennser-Jedenastik 2022, p. 155). This would make family allowances comparatively less attractive than childcare services, which, by contrast, may be viewed as instruments for fostering the cultural and linguistic assimilation of immigrants (Ennser-Jedenastik 2022, p. 155). Logically, the emphasis on national identity in right-wing populist policymaking has resulted in pro-natalist campaigns frequently being paired with equally popular immigration restrictions (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1076). This is where welfare chauvinism and its connection with the "exclusionary pattern" discussed above become relevant: the concept fundamentally entails the "exclusion from social benefits of a broader group of outsiders of the labour market", whom, according to Fenger (2018) are primarily identified as migrants, though the category broadly encompasses those deemed "undeserving citizens." It can be understood as the application of nativism[3] to social policy, envisaging a limitation of the state's capacity for care – in terms of generous policies – to native families, based on the exclusionary premise that all non-native ideas, persons and, in the context of natalist policy, families represent a threat to the nation (Ennser-Jedenastik 2022, pp. 157-159; Erel, 2018, p. 8). It is important to highlight the relationship between welfare chauvinism and welfare nostalgia, which appear to be not only inextricably intertwined but also mutually dependent: both tend to go hand in hand with a rejection of the pressing need to adapt the welfare state to new economic, demographic, and social realities - such as an ageing population, increasing ethnic diversity, and the rise in single-parent households (Fenger, 2018, p. 202). Ultimately, they converge in tangible policy forms that combine both the backward-looking and exclusionary orientations discussed above.

Turning to foreign policy, the notion that population composition - particularly the interpretation of demographic trends as signs of civilizational decline or as indicators of power - is a key factor in the populist project of restoring national grandeur becomes even more evident (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, p. 390). As Sciubba (2023) argues, a nation's potential for power projection and defence is fundamentally shaped by the characteristics of its population, whether in terms of soldiers, workers or leaders. In the military field above all, while technological tools such as unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) and artificial intelligence (AI) can, to some extent, replace "boots on the ground," so far these solutions have proven to be imperfect substitutes for manpower (Sciubba, 2023, p. 2130). This illustrates why states have not remained passive in the face of the monumental demographic shifts of recent years, adapting their military recruiting practices and immigration policies to these changes in order to continue pursuing their national security objectives (Sciubba, 2023, pp. 2120, 2136). Ever since population ageing emerged as the predominant global demographic trend - with two-thirds of the world's population now living in countries with below-replacement fertility - understanding how a nation's age structure influences its external behaviour has become increasingly relevant, especially given

[3] Ennser-Jedenastik (2022) defines it as a combination of nationalism and xenophobia which prescribes that the continued existence of the nation can only be guaranteed by the reproduction of the native population, however defined – not through immigration.

that most of our social science and national security theories were developed in a demographic context that no longer exists (Sciubba, 2023, pp. 2120-2121, 2136).

Among such theories, Sciubba (2023) turns to Power Transition Theory (PTT) to draw a connection between demographic ageing and national security. Based on the assumption that the distribution of power in the international system shapes international outcomes, PTT predicts two core dynamics: 1) a dominant power perceiving its relative decline will act aggressively to preserve its position before losing its advantage; 2) a rising challenger, perceiving an increase in its strength relative to the dominant state, will act aggressively to seize a window of opportunity. If, as already noted, a country's age structure is among the most significant measures of its power, then an ageing state can also be seen as a declining one - prompting, according to PTT, a potential for increased violence under certain conditions. For instance, states may either anticipate that the costs of ageing will weaken them in the future, thereby resorting to aggressive action in the present, or assess that a rival state is growing weaker due to population ageing and thus act aggressively as that competitor's position deteriorates (Sciubba, 2023, p. 2123).

PTT not only provides a useful framework for linking foreign policy and population ageing, but also supports the case selection for this dissertation: the higher the salience of foreign policy during the period of data collection, the greater the potential for complex, country-specific developments (Isernia et al., 2025, p. 37). As major powers and ageing states, the US and Russia are particularly likely to attribute strategic importance to the size and structure of their populations, hence, to engage in the kinds of power dynamics described by the theory (Skeldon, 2021, p. 31). Russia in particular, with its ageing and shrinking population, will offer a highly insightful case study in the next chapter, especially in light of its recent foreign policy assertiveness. Widely recognised as a revisionist power, the Russian Federation not only seeks to elevate its international standing to that of the United States and China, but does so with the distinctive backward-looking stance discussed above (Sciubba, 2023, p. 2134). Indeed, Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine - or, in his own words, his effort to "reunite" the Slavic Rus' peoples of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine - reflects the same patterns observed in populist family policy, notably his proven willingness to sacrifice economic objectives in favour of nationalist goals (Sciubba, 2023, p. 2134). PTT's explanatory value also stems from its connection to population politics, as within this framework, leaders' perceptions of the relationship between population ageing and national security arguably outweigh the actual impact of demographic realities on national security (Sciubba, 2023, p. 2136). Such preferences and perceptions take on a greater importance as factors capable of overriding the fiscal and personnel strains of an older age structure and allowing an aggressive foreign policy when decision-making is concentrated in the hands of one leader or a small group (Sciubba, 2023, p. 2120). As shown in the previous section, this drift towards centralization is not a trend unique to autocracies but, rather, a defining characteristic of populist governance regardless of regime type. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of how foreign policy is shaped by the demographic changes discussed in this dissertation requires integrating Sciubba's perspective with the analytical framework of populism (the intervening variable), thereby introducing populist foreign policy as a reinforcing factor in these dynamics.

Despite the considerable variation in foreign and security policies among populist governments and the absence of a unified theoretical account capable of isolating the impact of populism from other mitigating factors, populists nonetheless appear to exhibit distinct systems of foreign policy attitudes at the public level which are independent of their underlying host ideologies (Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1820; Destradi et al., 2021, pp. 670-672; Isernia et al., 2025, p. 36). Populists in power affect both the formulation and content of foreign policy, gradually radicalizing over time; their impact is most pronounced when authoritarian variants maintain control for prolonged periods, as the two selected cases will later show (Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1831). Overall, the populist logic of articulation, which rests on the permanent discursive construction of an internal or external "other", spills over into foreign policy, transforming it into a site for reproducing the notions of "people" and elite" (Destradi et al., 2021, pp. 671, 673; Metawe, 2024, p. 205). The American case effectively exemplifies this continuity between populist domestic and foreign policy (Metawe, 2024, p. 205). Trump's foreign policy rhetoric is typically instrumental to his populist agenda: it exploits international crises in order to generate continued domestic support and mobilization by creating a sense of crisis, portraying the relative decline of the "heartland" and instilling ontological insecurity among the public (Destradi et al., 2021, pp. 671, 673). As populists reframe the international arena as a source of threat, they forge a closer ideational and affective tie with their constituencies within the context of domestic politics. (Löfflmann, 2022b, p. 412). Hence, populists' confrontational rhetoric toward international actors and antagonistic representations of identities may simply stem from their ongoing need to construct enemies, even after becoming part of the governing elite (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 673).

The projection of the basic antagonism of "us/the people" versus "them/the elite" onto the international sphere has tangible implications for those policies, ideologies, institutions and organisations (with their embedded elites) whose inherent multilateralism and internationalism is rejected by populist anti-globalists in the name of reclaiming national and popular sovereignty (Löfflmann, 2022b, p. 404). Traditionally seen as a *domaine réservé* of an "exceptionally elitist community of unelected bureaucrats (diplomats)", involvement in international affairs can require both the delegation of authority and a willingness to compromise, often resulting in decisions that bypass democratic deliberation and deviate from the "will of the people" (Isernia et al., 2025, p. 26; Destradi et al., 2021, p. 675). Given that the power of elites to shape the lives of ordinary citizens is directly proportional to the extent of a country's engagement in international affairs, such deviations may be instrumentalized by populists in order to cultivate electorally profitable anti-elitist sentiment among the public: as it will be shown, sovereignty is a central asset in populist narratives of popular mobilisation (Isernia et al., 2025, pp. 26, 37; Jenne, 2021, p. 329). Therefore, as anti-elitists by definition, populists in power tend to marginalize foreign ministries, diplomatic echelons and expert advisers, as well as entirely disregarding diplomatic conventions (Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1824; Destradi et al., 2021, p. 675). Correspondingly, the populist assertion to personally embody popular will entails a strong personalization and centralization of foreign policy making, a tendency that is most pronounced under highly authoritarian populist governments (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 675; Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1824). The latter are likely to rely more on leader-level meetings and decisions - usually involving a tight inner circle - while completely sidelining conventional

bureucratic procedures and political deliberations (Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1824). Additionally, populists' ideational anti-pluralism excludes civil society representatives or foreign policy experts from consultative process: conversely, it includes fostering the cult of leaderhip among regional and global audiences and patron-client relations with transnational networks among the instruments of public diplomacy (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 675; Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1824).

The natural consequence of these attitudes is that the current authoritarian wave of populism may prove detrimental to countries' multilateral engagement in the long run, which could potentially lead to growing failures in the provision of global public goods in critical areas like climate change mitigation - reflecting the concept of democratic myopia introduced in the previous section (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 674; Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1826; Metawe, 2024, p. 207). Authoritarian populists are, indeed, openly hostile toward international institutions and global governance bodies, particularly where significant authority has already been ceded: this is especially - though not exclusively - true of regional organizations with supranational powers that are viewed as bureaucracies composed of transnational elites detached from the needs of the people and therefore intrinsically illegitimate (Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1826). Overall, nationalist, right-wing or authoritarian populists are a threat to the existence of a rules-based liberal international order and the functioning of key global governance institutions and organisations such as the EU or NATO (Löfflmann, 2022b, p. 405).

Populists' reluctance to cooperating in international negotiations and settling disputes has a deeper root than their confrontational and uncompromising posture in foreign policy: at its core, sovereignty is perhaps the concept that best captures the populist logic in international affairs (Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1824; Destradi et al., 2021, p. 674). According to Jenne (2021), "both populism and nationalism can be conceptualized as sovereigntist 'movements of crisis' that emerge in reaction to perceived gaps in the representation of certain groups within the state" and can gain political dominance in the aftermath of events generating crises of public confidence. These critical junctures, of which globalisation and the structural transformation of states in the international system are prime exmples, raise the likelihood of popular demands for a new kind of political leadership, one that promises to 'rupture with an existing order' in order to address the perceived deficits in the in-group's exercise of sovereignty (Löfflmann, 2022b, p. 404; Jenne, 2021, p. 326). Since the progressive erosion of national sovereignty primarily entails a reduction of states' capacity for socio-economic regulation and their subsequent adaptation to trans-national forms of governance, the populist mobilization of popular discontent and anti-establishment resentment often takes the form of demands for the renationalisation of policies, ranging from border security and immigration control to trade protectionism and even to calls for reforming or ending national membership in international organisations and free trade agreements (Löfflmann, 2022b, p. 404).

In short, authoritarian populism, as a reaction to processes of dilution of both national and popular sovereignty, manifests in foreign policy through sovereigntism - a political ideology that advocates for the preservation or enhancement of the political independence of a territorially defined community (e.g. a region or state) and the prioritization of the "authentic" state community's interests in both domestic and foreign policy (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 674; Jenne, 2021, pp. 325-326, 342; Löfflmann, 2022b, p. 409). International

politics is hence reimagined as a zero-sum game, an arena of confrontation and persistent struggle between the in-group and the alien Others[4] who threaten its sovreignty; after having restrictively defined the boundaries of the authentic - and idealized - sovereign community, such ethno-nationalist and ethno-populist frames operate as overarching problem-solving templates in foreign affairs (Löfflmann, 2022b, p. 407; Jenne, 2021, pp. 327-328). Specifically, when incomplete sovereignty is diagnosed as the core problem in foreign policy, populists prescribe its correction or revision to align with the interests of the idealized sovereign community: in other words, the solution is identified in foreign policy revisionism (Jenne, 2021, p. 325). This concept refers to the policies and diplomatic practices through which state leaders, whether symbolically or materially, commit to consistently privileging the interests of the in-group both in international affairs and domestic policy (Jenne, 2021, p. 325).

IR scholarship highlights the close connection between revisionism and PTT, defining the former as efforts of aspirant hegemons to challenge or displace incumbent hegemons through a process of power transition (Jenne, 2021, p. 329). Nonetheless, there is no a priori reason to assume that revisionism is exclusive to rising powers; even established hegemons such as the United States may adopt revisionist strategies, and, more broadly, any state may be considered revisionist if it seeks to reshape the international order or radically redefine its role within it (Jenne, 2021, p. 329). Most of the state policies and practices outlined above as features of populist foreign policy, particularly those involving withdrawal from international organizations, regimes or alliances as well as efforts to alter international institutions, fall within the definition of systemic revisionism (Jenne, 2021, p. 330). Even among populist leaders who adopt pragmatic policies at the outset, the entrenchment of authoritarian practices over extended periods in power can be expected to heighten scepticism toward any limitations on national sovereignty (whether internal or external) and coincide with a radicalization of their foreign policies across multiple thematic areas: a turn toward revisionism (Wajner et al., 2024, pp. 1825-1826). The populist drive to break with long-standing foreign policy principles - most notably those rooted in liberal internationalism - and to move away from international partnerships established or favoured by the much-despised previous elites, can also lead to a reorientation and fragmentation of a state's formal alliances (Destradi et al., 2021, pp. 675, 670). According to Jenne (2021) in the absence of countervailing opportunities or constraints (for instance, as it will be argued, in authoritarian regimes), ethno-populist leaders may also engage in lateral revisionism, which consists of attempts by the state to "correct" its territorial boundaries or reorder its relations with neighbouring states.

Given that highly nationalistic leaders are believed to be more aggressive and prone to conflict, due to their frequent prioritization of cross-border ethnic affiliations and inflated assessments of military strength (which may be further aggravated by the notorious populist distrust of expert elites), it is plausible that the use of force could become a tool for pursuing lateral revisionism (Jenne, 2021, p. 324; Isernia et al., 2025, p. 37). A typically populist, Manichean attitude could substantially facilitate the acceptance of a black-and-white

[4] Authoritarian populism frames these actors along both populists and nationalist lines - respectively as 'elites' from 'above' and national 'others' or 'enemy nations' from 'outside', who, as explained earlier, are often believed to be working in concert (Jenne, 2021, p. 329; Löfflmann, 2022, pp. 408-409).

interpretation of international affairs and, consequently, the dehumanization of those aganst whom military force is deployed, implying a rejection of human rights and international law on the basis that people's will matches that of a silent majority constrained by elite-imposed individual and minority rights (Isernia et al., 2025, p. 37; Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1825). However, as Destradi et al. (2021) observe, the impact on populism on defence - and, to some degree, also on foreign policy itself - is largely mediated by its underlying thick ideologies, national strategic cultures and a country's structural position in the international system: for example, while most populist parties (especially those on the right) tend to favour territorial defence, some endorse external force projection and military interventions against terrorist groups. In any case, the instances presented suggest that nationalism alone is less likely to foster extensive foreign policy revisionism than when coupled with populism (Jenne, 2025, p. 343).

In a 2002 journal article, J. A. Goldstone argued that, based on the significant usefulness of demographic factors in models forecasting political risks, the likelihood of international war is higher in contexts where population changes produce domestic political crises. Although his study did not specifically address population ageing, focusing instead on other types of demographic changes, he also stated that the decrease in population growth "offers no clear relief for concerns about the security implications of population change". As it will later be shown in detail, the theme of revisionism is closely linked to demographic change. Ethno-nationalist frames are indeed more likely to gain prominence in foreign policy in the face of perceived threats to the ethnos, such as state succession crises or structural demographic shifts that appear to endanger or undermine the status of the dominant ethno-national group (Jenne, 2021, p. 330). Populist appeals to restore national sovereignty through revisionist agendas are frequently directed at public anxieties surrounding the societal, cultural and economic impacts of those very shifts (Löfflmann, 2022b, p. 409).

In conclusion, as national and popular sovereignty are progressively conflated within populist logic, the empowerment of the people becomes synonymous with the restoration of the nation and, in a now familiar nostalgic register, with the revival of its imperial past (Löfflmann, 2022b, p. 409; Wajner et al., 2024, p. 1826). With their self-appointed role as leaders in civilizational clashes, populists claim the task of restoring the rightful political, socio-cultural, and economic primacy of the 'pure people' - the 'hard-working, God-fearing, patriotic citizens' who alone are deemed entitled to political sovereignty - both within the country and in relation to other nations (Wajner, 2024, p. 1826; Löfflmann, 2022b, p. 409). Any violent or radical means, possibly including war itself if necessary to achieve this end, become potentially justifiable as legitimate acts of resistance against perceived injustices (Löfflmann, 2022b, p. 410). Amidst such "tensions over the definition of the nation and the demos", also reproducive capacity could be turned into a means of asserting control over territory and defending the nation through population numbers, always defined in terms of "us" and "them" (Randeria, 2024, p. 20).

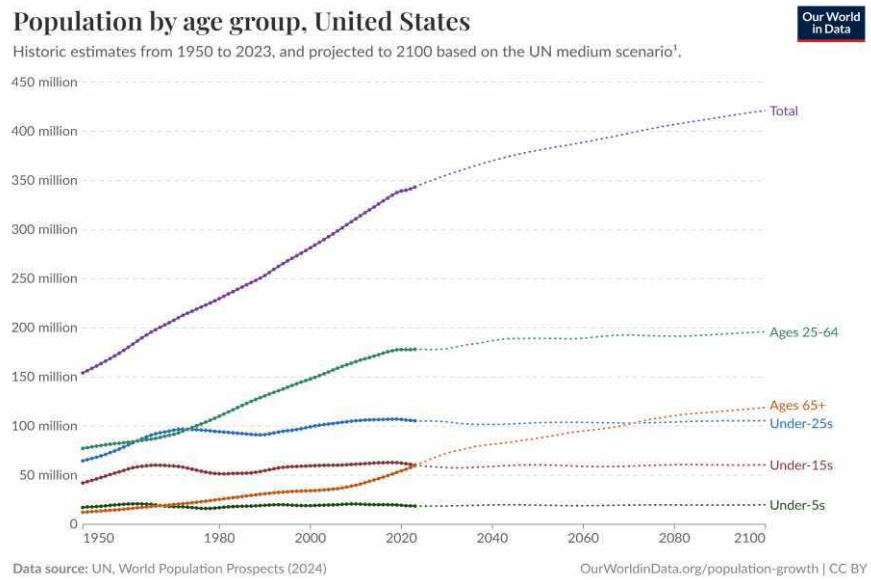
The concept of cultural loss, as employed by anthropologist J. D. Eller in his 2021 article, will serve as a valuable analytical tool in the following chapter to examine how the political and demographic themes discussed thus far inform both Russian and American foreign and domestic policies, despite the profound differences between the two cases. The deleterious effects of cultural loss and trauma - typically associated

with indigenous, colonized and marginalized societies, or with communities experiencing rapid and disorienting change - can, to some extent, be observed in countries where populism has gained increasing momentum and ultimately reached the executive level (Eller, 2021, pp. 13-14). In a cruel irony, just as colonized peoples once watched their borders torn open, their sovereignty violated, and their territories flooded with foreign peoples, cultures, and religions, so too does the descent from global hegemony produce a sense of vertigo, despite the trauma being mild by comparison (Eller, 2021, p. 14). Indeed, while Western societies - long the champions and intended beneficiaries of neoliberal policies - were the last to feel the disillusionment of liberalism's exhaustion and to confront its broken promises and destabilizing effects, Eastern Europe and other regions experienced these consequences much earlier, often in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, and turned to the populist alternative sooner (Eller, 2021, p. 4). Interestingly, Russia began experiencing also demographic decline and its far-reaching effects well before similar trends became visible in the United States. The deep civilizational malaise currently afflicting the West mirrors the damage historically inflicted by Western ideas and their agents on much of the world, a pain around which non-Western populist politics coalesces: this parallel will help illuminate why both the American concern over "too little America" and the Russian backlash against "too much America" ultimately stem from similar origins and operate through comparable dynamics - especially demographic ones (Eller, 2021, p. 5).

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: *RUSSIA AND THE U.S.*

a. The demographic crisis and its narratives

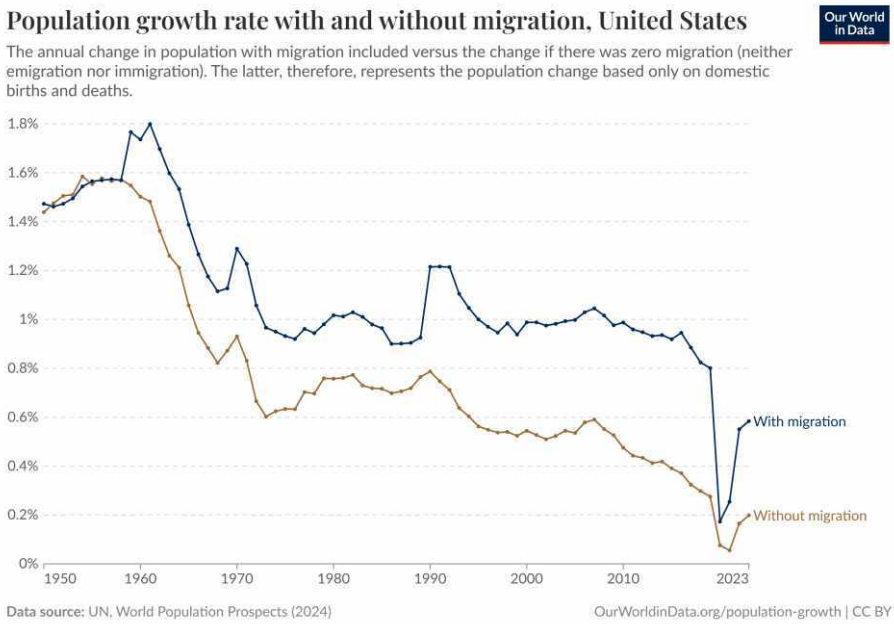
To trace the formation of population politics from demographic trends, the analysis will begin with a more in-depth comparative examination of those trends in Russia and in the US. As anticipated earlier, in both countries fertility rates have declined, though at rather different paces. Despite resembling most developed countries in terms of rising life expectancy and declining fertility, the United States stands out for its comparatively higher population growth, with the lowest median age among G7 nations – 38.3 in 2024 – and a 27% population increase over the past three decades (Our World in Data, 2024; Galan, 2025; Sciubba, 2021, p. 327). This exceptionally favorable demographic outlook, which has relied on a near-replacement fertility (around 1.8 children per woman on average) and robust immigration for the last several decades, is now waning: births in the US have dropped to a thirty-year low and the total fertility rate of 1.62 marks the lowest level in fourty years (Sciubba, 2021, p. 328; Our World in Data, 2025). As illustrated in the graph below, each of the youngest age cohorts in the US population (0–5, 5–15, and 15–25) is projected to be outnumbered by those aged 65 and over, whereas the oldest-old - those aged 80 and above - are likewise expected to experience significant growth (Our World in Data, 2024; Sciubba, 2021, p. 330). Goldstone and Diamond (2020) note that this demographic crossover is expected to take place in the US as early as 2035, when the population aged 65 and over will, for the first time, exceed that of those under 18. Thus, while younger than its peers, America's population is clearly an ageing one (Sciubba, 2021, p. 330).



Our World in Data (2024) *Population by age group, United States* [Online]. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/population-by-age-group-with-projections?country=~USA (Accessed 23 October 2025).

Rising ages at first marriage and first birth, along with falling births among adolescents and teenagers suggest that women in the US are increasingly postponing childbearing to complete their education and

establish their careers (Sciubba, 2021, p. 329). Nonetheless, by the mid-1990s it was immigration, not natural increase, that had emerged as the primary driver in America's potential workforce, even with near-replacement fertility levels - indeed, not a new trend, given that the United States has historically been a land of immigration and remains among the top destinations for migrants worldwide (Sciubba, 2021, pp. 329-330). From 1970 to 2014, the number of births to foreign-born mothers increased threefold, while births to U.S.-born women moved in the opposite direction, declining by 11%: these divergent trends indicate that the overall rise in U.S. births (from 3.74 million in 1970 to 4.0 million in 2014) was entirely driven by births to foreign-born mothers - despite the birth declines associated with the 2007-2009 Great Recession being both more pronounced and more persistent among this group (Livingston, 2016). As the graph below illustrates, this pattern has remained largely stable up to the present day, with the sole exception of a noticeable decline occurring around the time of the COVID-19 crisis, likely attributable to pandemic-related travel restrictions (Our World in Data, 2024). The dramatic shifts in sources and proportions of immigrants of recent years, coupled with natural changes in fertility and mortality, have reshaped the composition of different ethnic groups in the US (Sciubba, 2021, p. 326). All of them are ageing, despite the notably lower median ages of non-Whites compared to Whites, whom, as Sciubba (2021) argues, will lose their majority status by 2055 due to the combination of these trends - sooner in some US states than in others. This, combined with the growing insolvency of America's pay-as-you-go Social Security system resulting from population ageing, will likely constitute the two most significant population-related challenges over the next 30 years, potentially leading to an elevation of racial issues within political discourse (Sciubba, 2021, pp. 326-327).



Our World in Data (2024) *Population growth rate with and without migration, United States* [Online]. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/population-growth-rate-with-and-without-migration (Accessed 13 November 2025).

According to the Pew Research Center's analyses of Census Bureau data (Kramerand and Passel, 2025), as of mid-2023 the largest immigrant group among US residents is from Mexico, representing 22% of

all immigrants nationally, followed by India (6%), China (6%), the Philippines (4%) and Cuba (3%). About half of all U.S. immigrants (26.7 million people) were born in Latin America and around a quarter (nearly 14 million people) in Asia. As of January 2025, prior to the Trump administration's recent policy changes - which resulted in the deportation or voluntary departure of more than one million immigrants and produced the first decline in the U.S. foreign-born population since the 1960s - the United States was home to 53.3 million immigrants, accounting for 15.8% of the country's population, the largest number on record. Between 2020 and 2025 unauthorized immigrants (without full legal status) accounted for most new immigrant arrivals - many coming from Central and South America - and hit the record high of 14 million in 2023. In 2023 nearly one in five workers (19%) were immigrants, a share that has risen steadily since 1995, when they made up 12% of the US labour force. These 33 million immigrant workers included approximately 23 million lawful immigrants and 10 million unauthorized immigrants.

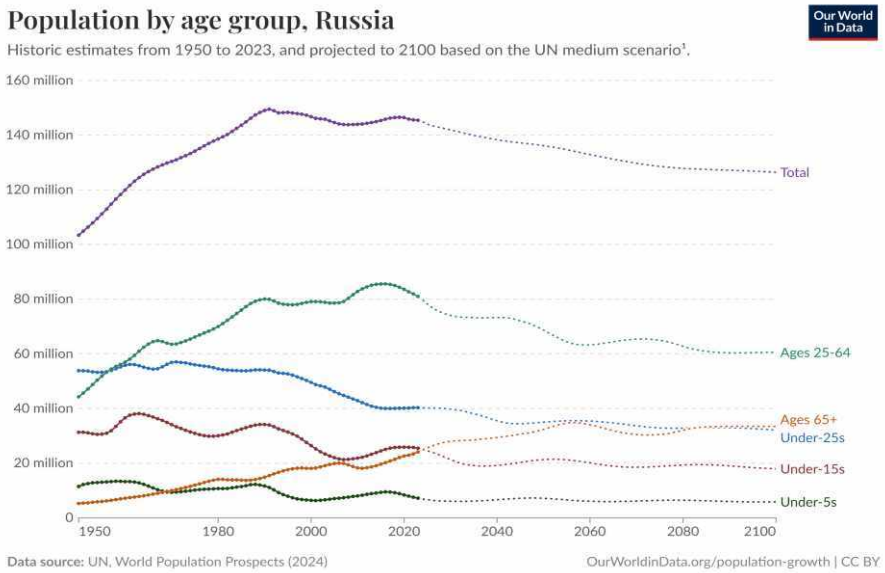
Turning to the residential distribution of immigrants, a majority lives in only 12 metropolitan areas, where they generally tend to be concentrated; by 2010 already 22 of the biggest 100 metropolitan areas in the US were majority non-White and, indeed Whites have become a minority of the population in most urban counties since 2000, remaining the majority in 90% of suburban and small metro counties and 89% of rural ones (Parker et al., 2018; Sciubba, 2021, p. 331). Rural areas host a higher share of adults aged 65 and older (18%) - the large Baby Boom generation, born between 1946 and 1964, which began reaching this age in 2011 and will be fully within this cohort by 2030 - compared with urban (13%) or suburban counties (15%), while also having a lower and declining population younger than 18 (Parker et al. 2018). Since 2000, rural counties have experienced more move-outs than move-ins, resulting in a net loss of 380,000 people; a loss that would have been even larger - over 950,000 people - if it had not been partly offset by roughly 600,000 new immigrants (Parker et al. 2018). The latter accounted for a larger share of overall population growth in rural (37%) and urban (38%) counties than in suburban ones (26%), although in the vast majority of rural counties the influx of new immigrants was insufficient to offset the loss of U.S.-born residents (Parker et al., 2018).

Hence, while metropolitan areas have become more racially and ethnically diverse and are comparatively younger than rural areas, these are increasingly older and overwhelmingly homogeneous (White-dominated), the white population falling by only 3 percentage points since the 2000 in rural counties compared to 8 in the suburbs and 7 in the urban core (Parker et al., 2018). Rural communities also exhibit the highest levels of concentrated poverty - measured as the share of counties in which at least one-fifth of residents live below the poverty line - and the lowest proportion of residents with college or postgraduate degrees (Parker et al., 2018). While urban and suburban areas have experienced growth in their prime-age working populations (those aged 25 to 54) since 2000, most rural counties (88%) have instead seen declines, with the employment rate among prime-age rural residents also remaining comparatively lower than in other community types - 71% versus 77% in both urban and suburban counties - along with the lowest average earnings per worker (Parker et al., 2018).

As the economic fortunes of Americans are closely tied to broader demographic trends, substantial differences in socioeconomic attainment emerge across subgroups (Sciubba, 2021, p. 331). Although the age

structure of rural areas contributes to relatively higher poverty levels, non-White and younger populations have been slower to accumulate wealth than earlier generations and consequently possess significantly less wealth than White Baby Boomers (Sciubba, 2021, p. 331). In particular, the relatively low levels of wealth accumulation of younger cohorts are likely to undermine their future old-age income security, with economic repercussions that may extend for decades to come (Sciubba, 2021, p. 332). Because the U.S. Social Security system operates on a pay-as-you-go basis, a shrinking ratio of workers to retirees - exacerbated by rising life expectancy and static eligibility ages - has placed increasing strain on entitlement programs, which policymakers have so far shown little ability or willingness to address (Sciubba, 2021, pp. 334). U.S. Millennials are reaching traditional milestones of adulthood - leaving their parents' homes, establishing careers, marrying, and having children - five to seven years later than their Baby Boomer parents, a 'failure to launch,' as Sciubba (2021) describes it, that is especially pronounced among Black and Hispanic young adults. The economic outlook for both minorities and younger generations has deteriorated markedly over the past few decades: the wealth of Black and Latino families fell by 75% and 50%, respectively, between 1983 and 2013, while poverty rates among individuals aged 18–24 rose from 12% in 1980 to 20% in 2015, and among those aged 25–34 from 8% to 15% over the same period (Sciubba, 2021, p. 332). The impact of socioeconomic differences across generations is amplified by the growing proportion of older adults and the shrinking share of workers, generating widening wealth disparities along both age and racial lines: due to the greater diversity of younger generations compared to older ones, these trends are, indeed, deeply interconnected (Sciubba, 2021, p. 331). In a country like the United States, where wealth translates into political influence, these disparities have allowed political power to remain concentrated in the hands of a shrinking White population, even as the share of non-White Americans continues to grow (Sciubba, 2021, p. 332).

Shifting the focus to Russia, the demographic outlook appears much more dire. Compared to the U.S., where some population growth is still projected to occur, Russia's population had already begun to decline as early as the 1990s and is projected to continue shrinking for the rest of the twenty-first century (Our World in Data, 2024; Balzer, 2024, p. 2). United Nations scenarios estimate that Russia's population in 2100 will range from 74 million to 112 million, compared with the current figure of approximately 146 million - a decline of 25 to 50 percent (Balzer, 2024, p. 2). As shown by the graph below, apart from a brief recovery between 2013 and 2015, the negative natural population growth rate has persisted for three decades and is likely to be further worsened by the consequences of the war (Our World in Data, 2024; Chawryło, 2024, p. 1). The median age in Russia is 39.9 as of 2024 - the highest value since measurements began - and, similar to the U.S., the share of people of post-retirement age in Russian society is steadily increasing, notwithstanding high mortality rates (Our World in Data, 2024; Chawryło, p. 6). As the proportion of people aged 65 and over has now reached a historic high of more than 18 percent of the population and is expected to rise to 24 percent by the middle of the century, this aging population - without a significant influx of young workers - is becoming an overwhelming burden on Russia's pension and healthcare systems, making the collapse of the social security system a very real prospect (Abylkalikov, 2025).



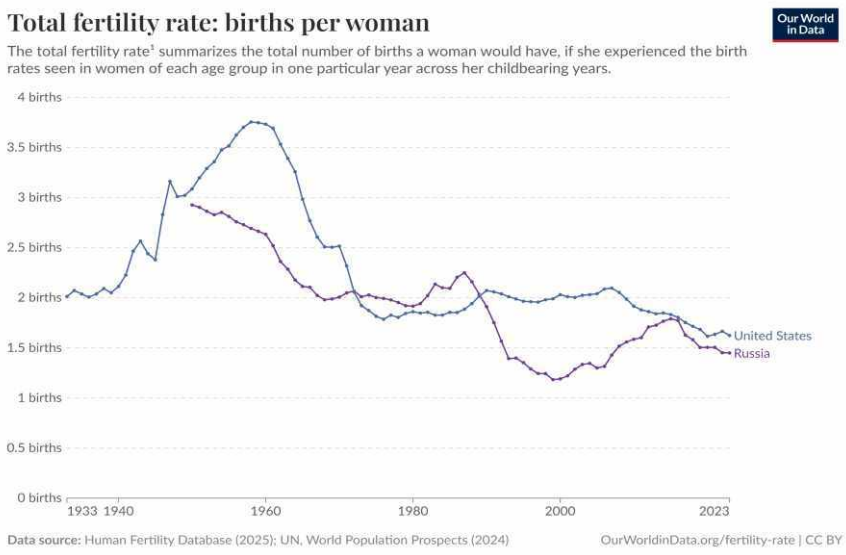
Our World in Data (2024) *Population by age group, Russia* [Online]. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/population-by-age-group-with-projections?country=~RUS (Accessed 20 November 2025).

The origins of Russia's demographic crisis, one of the most - if not the most - severe in the world, can be traced back to the economic disruptions associated first with Gorbachev's perestrojka and, subsequently, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Sciubba, 2014, p. 209; Balzer, 2024, p. 4). This, together with the breakdown of the Warsaw Pact, dislocated longstanding economic linkages and supply chains while prompting massive population movements, as millions of Russians and non-Russians returned to their titular homelands (Balzer, 2024, p. 4). Spiraling economic crises, waves of inflation, plunging living standards, and political turmoil characterized the rest of the 1990s (Gerber and Gimpleson, 2024, p. 2). The resulting deep economic insecurity further depressed an already declining birth rate across much of the post-Soviet space, with Russia's TFR falling from just below replacement level in 1988 to 1.3 in 2004 (Balzer, 2024, p. 4). As Lundquist et al. (2015) explain, the age structure thus generated sets off the self-perpetuating cycle known as *negative population momentum*; each shrunken birth cohort at the base of the population pyramid - created by the reduced crude birth rate - will, in turn, produce fewer children once it reaches its childbearing years because it is smaller than it would have been under previous fertility levels. These Russian children will then form an even smaller birth cohort at the bottom of the pyramid, thereby perpetuating the cycle and making each policy intervention required to reverse the trend increasingly demanding (Lundquist et al., 2015, p. 237). In 2024, 1.22 million people were born, only slightly above the all-time low of 1.21 million recorded in 1999: that record will not stand for much longer, as the number of births is projected to decline by 3–5% annually, along with the size of future cohorts of mothers (Abylkalikov, 2025). Indeed, to stabilize even at this critically low level, the TFR would need to rise from its current 1.4 to 1.7-1.8 and remain there until the early to mid-2030s - an outcome that, amid broader instability, is virtually unattainable without unprecedented levels of spending on family policy (Abylkalikov, 2025).

Zakharov (2024) argues that the decline in birth rates observed during the first decade and a half of the post-communist transition could also reflect a delayed manifestation of the Second Demographic Transition

relative to Western countries - evidenced by the growing diversification of life strategies and of marital and reproductive behaviours, including the rising prevalence of births both within marriage and outside of wedlock, as well as changing patterns in the number, timing and spacing of children. Other factors pointing in this direction include: 1) the steady increase in the age at parenthood, with the mean age of mothers rising from 23 to 26; 2) pronounced fluctuations in period fertility indicators contrasted with only modest changes in cohort measures; and 3) a substantial decline in the probability of a first birth since the 2000s - the expected share of childless women, at roughly 20 percent, has approached levels observed in developed countries further advanced in the SDT (Zakharov, 2024, p. 39).

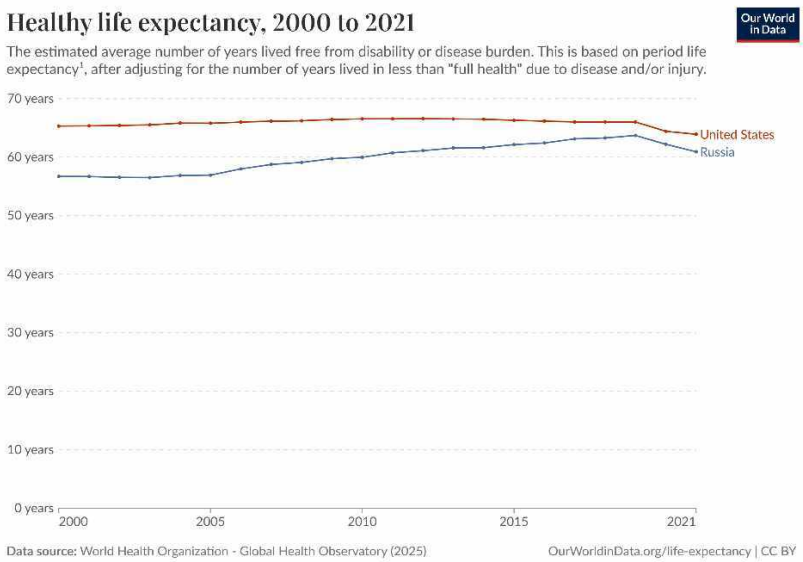
Last but not least, female-headed households, which have become increasingly common since the collapse of the Soviet Union due to rising non-marital childbearing and higher divorce rates, have experienced lower incomes and greater exposure to poverty than male-headed households since the early 2000s (Gerber and Gimpelson, 2024, p. 10). Although Russia became one of the world's leaders in homeownership following the demise of the Soviet Union[5], low incomes and limited access to mortgages and consumer credit have hindered the further development of the country's housing market (Gerber and Gimpelson, 2024, p. 10). As a result, purchasing a home has become financially out of reach for most Russians who are not already homeowners, forcing many young adults to live with their parents or in-laws while waiting to inherit property rights - a pattern which, as several recent studies have established, correlates positively with the postponement and, in some cases, the outright foregoing of childbearing (Gerber and Gimpelson, 2024, p. 10; Van Wijk1 and Feijten, 2025, pp. 1-2.



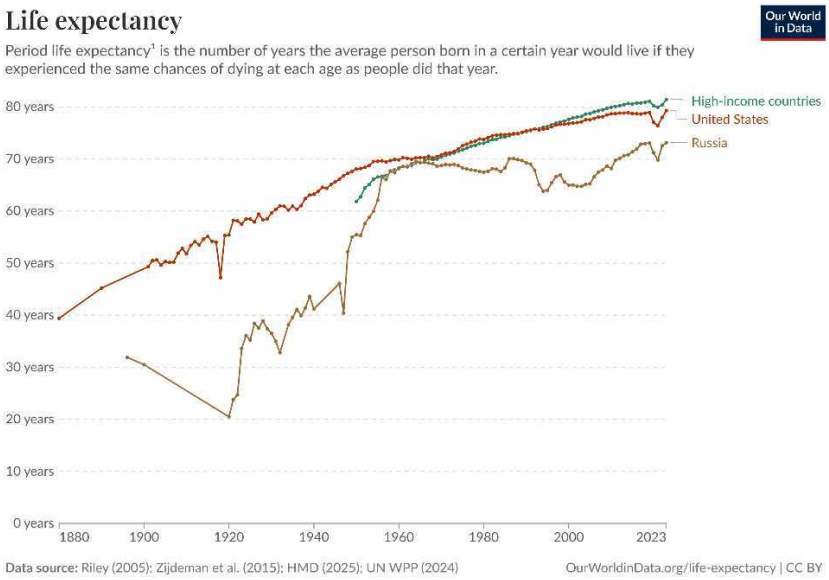
Our World in Data (2025) *Total fertility rate: births per woman* [Online]. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/children-born-per-woman?country=USA~RUS (Accessed 23 October 2025).

[5] According to Gerber and Gimpleson (2024), this was the result of the mass privatization of state-owned housing stock in Russia and other former Soviet republics, which transferred ownership to officially registered residents - most of whom had lived in state-owned apartments during the Soviet era.

However, low birth rates are only one side of Russia's demographic problem: while its fertility levels are broadly in line with those of developed countries, its mortality rates - especially among working-age men, a key economic asset - remain markedly high and resemble those found in some African states (Balzer, 2024, p. 5; Chawryło, 2024, p. 2). At the time of Putin's first election in 2000, Russian men aged 18-64 were dying at four times the rate of their European counterparts, while Russian women were dying at roughly the same rate as European men (Balzer, 2024, p. 5). If sustaining a stable population requires a TFR of at least 2.1 in the absence of positive net migration, Russia's exceptionally high adult mortality implies a need for an even higher fertility rate to maintain population size (Balzer, 2024, p. 4). The abrupt six-year decline in male life expectancy following the collapse of the Soviet Union (1990–1994), before rebounding in 2008 to levels last seen in the 1970s, has been attributed by a number of studies to hazardous alcohol and tobacco consumption, substandard healthcare and treatment and lower levels of education and living standards (Lundquist et al., 2015, pp. 170-171). Unhealthy diets and lifestyles, binge alcohol drinking, accidents and diseases have not only contributed to high adult mortality numbers and, largely overlooked, to unusually high infertility rates among Russian men, but also to the very poor Russian HALE (health-adjusted life expectancy) and its severe economic and social consequences (Balzer, 2024, p. 5; Sciubba, 2023, p. 2127). This indicator corresponds to the number of years someone can expect to live in full health, and is particularly informative - relative to overall life expectancy - in determining how many years are spent in debilitation, and thus how long individuals will require costly care while having limited capacity to contribute to the economy or to military readiness: in Russia it stands at 67.5 years for women and just 60.7 years for men (Sciubba, 2023, p. 2127). In 2023 women still outlived men by over a decade (Sciubba, 2014, p. 210; Our World in Data, 2025).



Our World in Data (2025) *Healthy life expectancy, 2000 to 2021* [Online]. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/healthy-life-expectancy-at-birth?tab=line&time=2000..2021&country=RUS~USA (Accessed 21 November 2025).



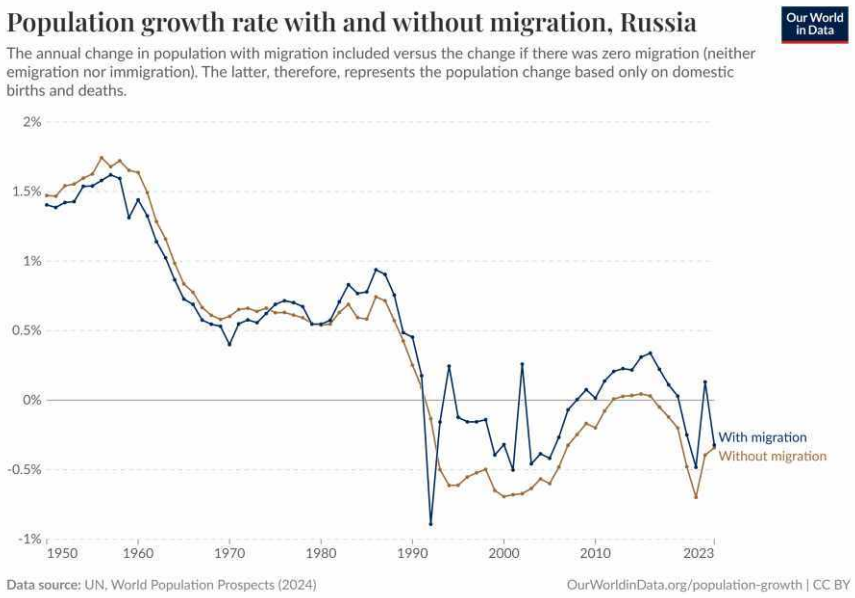
Our World in Data (2025) *Life expectancy* [Online]. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/life-expectancy?country=USA~RUS~OWID_HIC (Accessed 18 February 2026).

The wide gender gap evident in both HALE and life expectancy is also reflected in Russia's suicide mortality rate - one of the highest in the world according to the World Bank - which is disproportionately higher among men, although it has been declining over the past two decades (Bellman and Namdev, 2022, p. 8; Jukkala et al., 2017, p. 1). Naturally, Russia's long-standing excess mortality rates among men of working and reproductive age were magnified by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, doubling the demographic strain on the nation's future: the smaller cohorts now entering the workforce are likely to limit economic expansion and increase the age-dependency ratio over the next three decades (Abylkalikov, 2025; Gerber and Gimpelson, 2024, p. 10). Estimates by Mediazona, BBC Russian Service and Meduza report at least 219,000 Russian war losses as of August 2025, with indirect casualties likely exceeding this figure: for each soldier killed, several others are severely wounded, left disabled or unable to work, and, overall, likely to live shorter lives than they would have under normal circumstances (Abylkalikov, 2025). The cumulative effects of war-related budget cuts and sanctions will probably exacerbate this situation over the next decade, as reduced public investment in healthcare, shortages of medicines and equipment and delays in the adoption of innovations are already contributing to an increase in preventable deaths (Abylkalikov, 2025). This is not limited to physical health; the psychological toll of the war is indirectly impacting both mortality and fertility in Russia. Studies show that the well-being and sense of security of the Russian public, deeply affected by the prolonged war, play a crucial role in family-planning: for instance, an October 2023 survey by Russian Field found that 43% of Russians expect their financial situation to deteriorate within the next year or two (compared to only 21% who anticipate an improvement), a pessimism that is notably more pronounced among those under 45 (Chawryło, 2024, pp. 4-5). Russia's reproductive potential has been constrained not only by the absence of the hundreds of thousands of men of reproductive age deployed in Ukraine, but also by the growing tendency among Russian women to avoid pregnancy in the face of economic hardship and rising uncertainty (Balzer, 2024, p. 11). Furthermore, the mass reintegration of soldiers, psychologically traumatized by their experiences

on the front lines and potentially desensitized to the value of human life, is a primary catalyst for the potential rise in alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence and crime - in other words, for a spike in mortality rates and a drop in HALE (Abylkalikov, 2025).

Since war casualties have become a taboo subject in propaganda and public discourse - often accompanied by the threat of punishment for those who mention it, under a law that criminalizes the dissemination of allegedly false information about the Russian military - official casualty and mortality statistics have been released only sporadically and are undoubtedly underreported (Chawryło, 2024, pp. 2, 6-7). Due to the Russian government's reluctance to disclose information that could damage its image or expose its vulnerabilities in the ongoing conventional war with Ukraine and the hybrid conflict with the West, reliable and detailed information on the extent of Russia's worsening demographic problems in recent years - particularly concerning actual births and deaths - is missing (Chawryło, 2024, p. 2). Indeed, independent demographers suggest that the official figure for Russia's current population (around 146 million, which includes the 2.3 million people from the illegally annexed Crimea), might be inflated by as much as 5-5.5 million people, a discrepancy that is supported by the actual population decline the country has experienced since 2020 despite the annexation (Chawryło, 2024, p. 2). The authorities' alarming attempts to conceal or distort population statistics, evidenced by, among others, the poor quality of the latest census, distorted migration statistics and the classification of much demographic data, will, of course only alter the situation on paper (Abylkalikov, 2025). Based on the UN's most recent forecast, if migration were to end entirely, Russia's population could fall to only 90.8 million by 2100, instead of the medium-case projection of 112.2 million, and could decrease to 57.4 million in the worst-case scenario, rather than 74.6 million (Abylkalikov, 2025).

Notably, immigration acted as a major demographic shock absorber in the late 1990s crisis, mitigating its impact: as shown by the upward spike in the graph below, in 1994 alone, nearly one million Russian-speaking residents of the former Soviet republics returned to Russia as labor migrants and 73.6 percent of the total 16.8 million natural population decline that occurred during the post-soviet period (1992-2023) was offset by the arrival of 12.3 million immigrants (Abylkalikov, 2025; Balzer, 2024, p. 4). In absence of the powerful centripetal flows set in motion by the collapse of the Soviet Union, this compensation mechanism no longer operates, making a situation that strikingly resembles the country's experience three decades ago - falling birth rates, natural population decline, and rising male mortality and a worsening age structure - far more dangerous than before (Abylkalikov, 2025). Russia's appeal to immigrants is fading: its economy, lacking any prospects for rapid growth, is becoming increasingly unattractive, its currency is depreciating and, overall, traveling to and working in Russia now carries more risks than benefits for migrants, given the Kremlin's interest in deploying them in the ongoing conflict (Abylkalikov, 2025; Chawryło, 2024, p. 8). Their participation in the mobilisation could, in fact, be compelled in exchange for legal residence or a Russian passport, particularly under a 2022 law allowing foreigners to obtain Russian citizenship after one year of military service and another 2024 law permitting immigrants and their families to acquire citizenship through an expedited procedure immediately upon signing a military contract (Chawryło, 2024, p. 8). This approach has undermined all efforts to develop new sources of labour migration from Southeast Asia (Balzer, 2024, p. 11).



Our World in Data (2024) *Population growth rate with and without migration*, Russia [Online]. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/population-growth-rate-with-and-without-migration?time=1950..2023&country=~RUS (Accessed 20 November 2025).

In addition, the Russian labour market has become remarkably unwelcoming for Central Asian migrants - traditionally the country's largest source of labour - due to rising xenophobia within Russian society (Abylkalikov, 2025). Following the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack near Moscow in March 2024 - which Russian law enforcement alleges was carried out by Tajik nationals - Central Asians have become the target of full-blown persecution by both the Russian government and civil society (Abylkalikov, 2025; Balzer, 2024, p. 11; Chawryło, 2024, pp. 8-9). As will be discussed later, legislation regulating the presence and employment of foreigners in Russia has been significantly tightened despite the growing need for immigrants and severe labour shortages in several economic sectors - estimated at around 4.8 million workers by the Russian Academy of Sciences (Chawryło, 2024, pp. 8-9). Between 2010 and 2020, the average annual replenishment of the labour force from Russian citizens reaching working age declined by 40% relative to the preceding decade, while the number of unfilled vacancies was two to three times higher than the number of job seekers (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 61). Beyond key sectors like construction, transportation, trade and agriculture, staff shortages also affect state-critical industries such as defence and energy, with nearly 70 percent of companies reporting insufficient personnel - a trend that is already dampening economic growth and will likely intensify (Abylkalikov, 2025; Chawryło, 2024, pp. 8-9). Considering that people in Central Asia now have alternative employment opportunities both at home and abroad - for instance, the European Union, the Persian Gulf countries, Turkey and South Korea - the number of legal foreign migrants residing in Russia has plummeted (Abylkalikov, 2025). According to Interior Ministry statistics, this number has fallen from 5-7 million in 2012-2013, to 4.5 million before the COVID-19 pandemic and currently stands at 3-3.5 million; they accounted for approximately 3-4% of the labour market in 2023, marking the lowest number of immigrants (560,400) since 2013 (Abylkalikov, 2025; Chawryło, 2024, p. 8).

Compounding this sharp fall in immigration, Russia has now shifted from being a destination for migrants to becoming a source of emigration (Abylkalikov, 2025). The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the mobilisation announced later that September prompted the largest population outflow in twenty years: collectively, these two waves saw roughly 700,000-800,000 individuals of all ages leave the country either for political reasons or to evade conscription - figures that are not reflected in official data (Abylkalikov, 2025; Chawryło, 2024, p. 9; Balzer, 2024, p. 12). Worse still, the September 2022 exodus amounted largely to a brain drain, as it predominantly involved young men of working age - further depleting the already small cohort of Russians in their prime reproductive years - as well as highly qualified professionals (Abylkalikov, 2025; Chawryło, 2024, p. 9; Balzer, 2024, p. 11). Many of these were information technology (IT) specialists who believed they could continue working from abroad, despite legislation prohibiting this - a measure that has sparked intense conflicts between security services and Russian companies reliant on these employees in an already tight labor market (Balzer, 2024, pp. 11, 13).

Another distinctive feature of the Russian demographic landscape is the wide variation in birth rates across regions and among different ethnic and religious groups (Balzer, 2024, p. 9; Chawryło, 2024, p. 5). Whereas major urban centers exhibit Central European–style fertility patterns - later marriages, widespread contraception, and many one-child families - rural areas and small towns largely retain traditional child-rearing norms, with earlier family formation and a higher prevalence of families with two or more children (Balzer, 2024, p. 9). Some communities, such as the predominantly non-Russian and Muslim republics of the North Caucasus, have shown greater resistance to the demographic transition, undergoing it at a slower pace than most Russian regions; as a result, although birth rates among many non-Russian ethnic groups are slowly declining to Russian levels, they remain significantly higher than those of ethnic Russians (Balzer, 2024, p. 9; Sciubba, 2014, p. 211). Fertility levels are highest in the North Caucasus and Siberian republics: in 2023, Chechnya led with a rate of 2.66, followed by Tuva (2.44) and the Altai Republic (2.03) (Chawryło, 2024, p. 5). In the case of Chechens, high fertility rates and a pronounced pro-natal ethos may represent a reaction to a sense of existential threat and an attempt to secure national survival - an attitude shaped, according to several analysts, by collective memories of their World War II deportation to Central Asia (Balzer, 2024, p. 9).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Leningrad Oblast and Sevastopol recorded the lowest rates - 0.88 and 0.98, respectively - both falling below one child per woman (Chawryło, 2024, p. 5). While 70 percent of Russians live in urban centres, those most likely to have large families reside in villages, small towns, Russia's non-Russian regions and the so-called "ethnic republics" - particularly within Muslim communities (Balzer, 2024, p. 9; Chawryło, 2024, p. 5). Also Central Asian sending countries have higher fertility rates than the Slavic population and their immigrants in Russia tend to give birth at younger ages and exhibit lower levels of childlessness than native-born Russians (Sciubba, 2014, p. 211). Whether driven by fertility differentials or by the inflow of immigrants, a shift in the ethnic composition of the Russian population - specifically, a noticeable decline in the share of ethnic Russians - is set to occur, unfolding against a backdrop of ethnic and religious tensions (Chawryło, 2024, p. 10). In 2023, non-Russians made up approximately 30 percent of the population and census data indicated that the number of residents identifying as ethnic Russians had fallen

from 111 million in 2010 to 105.6 million in 2021 – dropping from 78% to 72% of the population (Balzer, 2024, p. 9; Chawryło, 2024, p. 6). Demographers argue that the actual decrease may be even larger, as over 16 million census participants withheld their ethnic affiliation, likely due to concerns about potential persecution and the practice of census takers - motivated in part by political considerations - of omitting this field in questionnaires when respondents indicated a non-Russian identity (Chawryło, 2024, p. 6).

This growing ethnic heterogeneity presents a long-term challenge for Moscow, as regions with expanding non-Russian communities may become progressively harder to administer and to maintain within the federal centre's social and political orbit (Chawryło, 2024, p. 10). Consequently, trends such as rural depopulation, internal migration and accelerating urbanisation - particularly in the European part of Russia - which are already widening socio-economic and infrastructural gaps between regions, may escalate, with serious implications for national cohesion (Chawryło, 2024, p. 10). A strong indication that Russian leaders fear declines in particular segments of the working-age population - most notably the Slavic male population - more than demographic shrinkage per se is the disproportionately higher likelihood that residents of ethnic republics in Russia's far east and southern regions are mobilized for military service (Sciubba, 2014, p. 211; Balzer, 2024, p. 10). Although intent is difficult to establish and Russian officials claim that the disproportionate recruitment from rural regions is justified by the military's attractive pay, the data tell a different story: men from Buryatia face a 50- to 100-percent greater probability of deployment to Ukraine than residents of Moscow or St. Petersburg (Balzer, 2024, p. 10). As the conflict appears to be causing a sharper decline in births among ethnic Russians in urban centres than in both Russian and non-Russian rural communities, many of Russia's non-ethnic-Russian citizens increasingly feel that their populations are being singled out as cannon fodder in Ukraine (Balzer, 2024, p. 10).

Much like Russia, the United States also demonstrates pronounced regional political differences that align closely with underlying demographic patterns. As urban and rural communities in the US grow increasingly distinct in economic and demographic terms, the Americans who inhabit them have also become more politically polarized, holding sharply divergent views on social and political issues (Parker et al., 2018). Generally speaking, rural areas are home to more Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, whereas most urban residents identify as Democrats or lean toward the Democratic Party - a pattern that has intensified over the past two decades (Parker et al., 2018). However, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2018, before Donald Trump's first election, community-type differences were so marked that some persisted even after controlling for partisanship (Parker et al, 2018). For instance, while 71% of rural Republicans view the legalization of same-sex marriage as bad for the country, only 56% of Republicans in urban areas agree; a similar gap appears when respondents are asked whether society is better off when people prioritize marriage and having children (Parker et al., 2018). The pattern holds for Democrats as well, particularly on the issue of immigration: urban and suburban Democrats are more likely than their rural counterparts to say that the growing number of newcomers strengthens American society rather than threatening traditional customs and values and to believe that the impact of immigrants on their local communities is mostly positive (Parker et al., 2018). Differences on this question within the Republican

coalition are more modest, but the divide across community types remains consistent, preserving the same relative order (Parker et al., 2028).

Hence, beyond partisanship, large racial, gender and generational gaps exist within communities on key issues (Parker et al., 2018). While about half of white Americans (51%) believe that people in their racial group do not benefit from societal advantages, only 22% of nonwhite Americans share this view: this racial gap persists across all three community types even when controlling for partisanship, and extends to Americans' perspectives on demographic change in the US (Parker et al., 2018). Indeed, white rural residents are twice as likely as urban whites to believe that their racial group does not receive extra advantages (60% vs. 30%), and among nonWhites, there is also a noticeable gap between urban and rural residents on this issue (Parker et al., 2018). Views of immigrants vary widely by generation, with about half of rural Millennials saying the growing number of newcomers strengthens American society, compared with 36% of rural Baby Boomers - a generational pattern that is nearly identical across all community types (Parker et al., 2018). Millennials are also far more likely than Baby Boomers to support same-sex marriage across all community types, and these generational differences persist even after accounting for the partisan composition of each community (Parker et al., 2018). Americans in urban areas are also more likely than those in suburban and rural areas to say that women still face significant obstacles to getting ahead, and a clear gender gap in views on this issue exists across all community types - for example, 62% of rural women say they think obstacles still exist for women, compared with 43% of rural men (Parker et al., 2018). Unsurprisingly, Trump's ratings are especially high in rural areas and among rural Republicans compared with their urban counterparts; the age gap among this core segment of his base remains notable, as younger rural Republicans (50 or under) are less likely than older ones (50 or over) to rate Trump very warmly (44% vs. 66%; Parker et al., 2018). (Parker et al., 2018).

Population characteristics such as age and race do not inherently translate into political influence; rather, political institutions determine whose voices are amplified or muted and which groups are advantaged or marginalized (Sciubba, 2021, p. 338). In the United States, the two-party system and the Electoral College tend to elevate the political power of rural and White Americans while diminishing the influence of residents of large cities and non-White populations (Sciubba, 2021, p. 338). Republicans in particular have benefited from the Senate's disproportional overrepresentation of sparsely populated rural states and from enhanced gerrymandering opportunities after gaining control of state legislatures: this enabled them to capture almost 57 percent of the House seats with only 49.1 percent of the vote and to retain their Senate majority with only 42.2 percent of the popular vote in the 2016 congressional elections (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, pp. 33-34). Redistricting and gerrymandering, as well as the strategic exploitation of disproportionate electoral rules, electoral thresholds, and laws restricting voting rights and access, constitute legal instruments through which empowered executives and compliant legislatures can entrench their hold on power (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, p. 38). As Haggard and Kaufman (2021) argue, the resulting mismatches between popular vote shares and seat allocations have played a major role in several episodes of democratic backsliding.

Beyond the Electoral College and the Senate, partisan minority rule has also affected another key countermajoritarian institution: because Supreme Court nominations require Senate approval, the Court itself is indirectly biased toward sparsely populated states (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 12). The entrenchment of this electoral minority - primarily voters in rural, conservative, and largely white areas -has deep historical roots in the United States; however, recent demographic trends, particularly the gradual depopulation of rural areas and its associated social and economic consequences discussed earlier in this chapter, are further intensifying this dynamic (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 12). For most of American history, the rural bias built into the political system had little partisan impact, because both major parties contained urban and rural wings; as a result, the system consistently favored smaller states like Vermont over larger ones like New York, but not any particular party (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 12). In recent years, however, this rural bias has become systematically partisan as Democrats and Republicans have sorted along urban-rural lines, with Democratic voters concentrated in metropolitan areas and Republicans increasingly dominant in sparsely populated states - giving the GOP (Grand Old Party, the US Republican party) a growing structural advantage in the Electoral College, the Senate, and the Supreme Court (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 12). Because each U.S. state elects two senators regardless of population size, these trends mean that, within 20 years, as 70 percent of the US population will be living in 16 states, the remaining 30 percent of the country - sperad across less populous states - will control 68 percent of the Senate (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 12).

Unsurprisingly, the United States' rural, aging, and predominantly White population - now representing only about 15% of the national total - played a pivotal role in the 2016 election of Donald Trump: he won 63.2% of the rural vote compared with Hillary Clinton's 31.3%, and his vote share rose with higher levels of rurality (Sciubba, 2021, p. 339). His strongest support came from counties grappling with severe economic and social hardships, including declining living standards and falling life expectancy, as noted earlier, are common in the predominantly rural, older areas that have been most affected by recent demographic shifts (Sciubba, 2021, p. 339). Reference group theory suggests that, because White Americans in these regions perceive themselves as faring worse than their reference group - the previous generation - while Black and Hispanic populations have made comparatively greater gains, support among these Whites for Trump and similar populist candidates is likely to persist (Sciubba, 2021, p. 339).

When examining how demographic trends shape U.S. politics, it is not only institutions that matter but also mobilization capacity - that is, the ability of demographic groups to convert their numbers into political power (Sciubba, 2021, p. 334). Mobilization capacity in the US is both a racial and age issue: young people consistently turn out to vote at lower rates than older citizens - a gap that is even more pronounced at the local level, where the median age of voters in mayoral elections is 60 - while Hispanics have the lowest turnout among the major racial groups in the US, especially in contrast to Whites, who exhibit the highest participation rates (Sciubba, 2021, pp. 334-336). In the 2018 midterm elections, Baby Boomers' turnout exceeded that of Millennials by about 30 percentage points: insofar as political power accrues to those who actually participate at the polls, this disparity confers disproportionate influence on White, older Americans (Sciubba, 2021, p. 336). Despite nearing parity with Baby Boomers in the voting-eligible population - 27 percent in 2016,

compared to 31 percent - Millennials remain markedly absent from national office (Sciubba, 2021, p. 337). As of 2018, there were no Millennials in the U.S. Senate, whose youngest member was 40 years old, while Baby Boomers were overrepresented in the House of Representatives, holding 62 percent of the seats though they made up only 23 percent of the population (Sciubba, 2021, p. 337). Since, as explained earlier, political influence is strengthened when officeholders share voters' generational experiences, the current age composition of representatives leaves younger generations largely excluded from the highest levels of power (Sciubba, 2021, p. 337).

In addition to turnout, another dimension of political mobilization is voter eligibility, which is highly politicized and, similar to wealth, closely tied to demographics in the U.S. (Sciubba, 2021, p. 335). Relative to their share of the U.S. population, Hispanics and Latinos are disproportionately disenfranchised - either because a larger portion are under 18, the legal voting age, or because a higher share are non-citizens and therefore ineligible to vote (Sciubba, 2021, p. 335; Fox, 2020, p. 101). For example, in 2012, Hispanics represented 17% of the U.S. population but only 11% of eligible voters, while Whites made up 63% of the population yet accounted for 71% of eligible voters (Sciubba, 2021, p. 335). On the other hand, Black Americans' underrepresentation stems from the U.S.'s exceptionally high rates of felony convictions and incarceration, which disproportionately affect them: felonies have stripped one in 13 Black Americans of their voting rights, versus just one in 56 among non-Black Americans, effectively constraining their mobilization capacity (Sciubba, 2021, pp. 335-336). Consequently, even if the United States becomes a majority-minority nation by 2043, the proportion of minorities within the eligible electorate is likely to lag population trends by at least a decade and a half, largely due to institutional and policy barriers such as voter ID requirements, felon disenfranchisement laws, voter roll purges, and redistricting practices (Fox, 2020, p. 101).

Moreover, the 2020 census - mandated by the 1787 Constitution to allocate both political power (seats in the House of Representatives and the Electoral College among the states) and federal funding (approximately $1.5 trillion annually) on the basis of a decennial population count - was conducted amid a convergence of extraordinary challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, a presidential election, and heightened political polarization (Anderson and Beveridge, 2022, pp. 1, 4). According to the national Post-Enumeration Survey released on March 10, 2022, these conditions significantly compromised the census's accuracy, introducing systematic biases that resulted in the disproportionate undercount of minority populations and the overcount of non-Hispanic White groups (Anderson and Beveridge, 2022, pp. 1, 6). Both Anderson and Beveridge (2022) and Mora (2020) conclude that Trump launched a "multi-pronged attack on the integrity and accuracy of the census", particularly targeting the enumeration of non-citizens and the foreign-born, including undocumented immigrants, as well as other racially and ethnically diverse populations. The administration proposed adding a citizenship question, which, by enabling the use of citizen-of-voting-age counts only, threatened to distort political representation, challenging existing redistricting rules based on total population, and thereby shaping apportionment and funding decisions in favor of an older, Whiter, and likely more Republican electorate (Anderson and Beveridge, 2022, pp. 3, 5). The tabulated esponses to such a question, combined with already collected census data on race, age, and Hispanic origin, would have made

it possible to exclude non-citizens and children from the population counts used to draw legislative districts, a long-standing objective of many GOP redistricters (Anderson and Beveridge, 2022, p. 3). Although the citizenship question was ultimately not included, the effort itself, alongside Trump's broader statements and actions, undoubtedly suppressed census participation and undermined public confidence in the enumeration process (Anderson and Beveridge, 2022, p. 3).

As extensively illustrated in Chapter 1, Section 2, and Chapter 2, Section 3, and building on the frameworks developed by Buchmeier and Vogt, 2024 and Dvořák et al., 2025, the political consequences of these institutionally and demographically-driven imbalances are unlikely to foster greater pluralism or democratic deepening. On the contrary, in addition to overrepresenting the interests of a "once-dominant majority undergoing numerical and status decline" at the expense of other social groups (already a challenge, if not a threat, to democracy), these developments generate additional adverse effects such as the erosion of social trust and rising polarization, which, as shown earlier, are closely linked to both the growth of populist movements and processes of democratic backsliding (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 9). Friedrichs (2025) argues that declining social capital driven by generational divides in the United States has contributed to the emergence of the "disaffected voter," who, unlike traditional swing voters, is motivated not by ideological commitments but by broader dissatisfaction with the political system itself. As declining social cohesion undermines collective problem-solving, deepens social fragmentation, and erodes trust in democratic institutions, many voters become increasingly sceptical of the government's capacity to represent their interests, oscillating between civic disengagement and heightened susceptibility to anti-system appeals (Friedrichs, 2025, pp. 4, 6-7). The resulting pattern of support for candidates advocating radical disruption regardless of feasibility or adherence to democratic norms weakens traditional mechanisms of accountability by emboldening political leaders to pursue extreme or symbolic policies with limited fear of electoral backlash, as evidenced by high rates of incumbent re-election amid widespread public dissatisfaction (Friedrichs, 2025, p. 8). A striking illustration is the rapid erosion of the political salience of the January 6, 2021, insurrection: the fading public memory of an event with profound implications for democratic governance and the US' international standing underscores how voter apathy enables leaders to evade scrutiny and how attacks on liberal democratic institutions can prove more politically mobilizing than substantive policy debate (Friedrichs, 2025, p. 8).

Adding to the erosion of accountability, on his first day in office Trump pardoned approximately 1,500 individuals convicted for their role in the January 6 Capitol assault, an act that was accompanied by open defiance of judicial authority - encapsulated in his claim that "he who saves his country does not violate any law" - and arguably amounted to a tacit endorsement of future political violence by excusing and even celebrating past illegal attacks (V-Dem, 2025, p. 46). The 2025 V-Dem report confirms the unprecedented scale of the challenges facing American democratic institutions, likely representing the fastest-evolving episode of autocratization in the United States' modern history. Already during the first Trump mandate the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) fell from 0.85 to 0.73 in those four years, bringing the country back to its 1976 level; after losing the 2020 election, Trump tried to compel election officials to "find" him extra votes

and coerce Vice President Pence to alter the results; finally, in 2024, he ran an openly authoritarian campaign, pledging to prosecute his rivals, punish critical media, and deploy the army to repress protests (V-Dem, 2025, p. 46). So far, his second term has been marked by the expansion of executive power, the erosion of Congress's power of the purse, sustained attacks on independent oversight bodies and the media, and the purging and dismantling of state institutions - hallmark strategies of autocratizers - all unfolding amid a climate of acquiescence and silence among critics wary of retaliation (V-Dem, 2025, pp. 46-47).

Accountability has been undermined through the replacement of civil servants with personal loyalists, as exemplified by Trump's purges of the military - including its top judge advocates general - and the highest ranks of the Department of Defense, Justice Department, Department of Homeland Security, Department of State, USAID, and the FBI, alongside the dismissal of independent Inspectors General across 17 agencies (V-Dem, 2025, pp. 46-47). A particularly stark example of the erosion of accountability and the dismantling of state institutions is the creation of the opaque Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), led by billionaire Elon Musk, who—despite significant conflicts of interest—has been granted access to sensitive, private, and classified information (V-Dem, 2025, p. 47). Although DOGE is not a formal government department and appears accountable only to Trump, it has already overseen the dismissal of tens of thousands of government employees, including large numbers of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) staff, effectively shuttering an agency instituted by a Congressional act (V-Dem, 2025, p. 47). Given USAID's central role as the world's largest provider of international democracy assistance, these actions are likely to have severe and lasting consequences not only for global democracy but also for U.S. soft power and international standing, an issue examined further in the foreign policy section (V-Dem, 2025, p. 47).

High levels of polarization - which largely defined political debate during the 2024 elections - represent another destabilizing byproduct of the institutionally and demographically uneven configuration of American politics: the current demographic trends (population ageing and massive imigration) have become politically explosive because racial, cultural and generational cleavages in the United States now align closely with the two major parties, a pattern that contrasts sharply with earlier periods (V-Dem, 2025, p. 41; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 9). Social and political identities have become increasingly intertwined, deepening partisan divisions and narrowing opportunities for cross-party interaction; one visible consequence of this polarization is its intrusion into family life, as political disagreement has become a leading cause of familial estrangement since the 2016 and 2020 elections (Friedrichs, 2025, p. 5). Americans have thus sorted into parties that represent sharply divergent communities, social identities, lived experiences and normative visions of the nation: while the Democratic base is increasingly diverse and expanding - drawing heavily from nonwhite, urban, younger, and more educated voters - the Republican coalition remains comparatively homogeneous, dominated by White, older, rural, and Christian constituencies (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 9). The reason this asymmetry is problematic is that Republican electoral prospects are increasingly constrained by demographic shifts: the party remains overwhelmingly White and Christian in an increasingly diverse society, while younger voters are turning away - for example, in 2018, those aged 18 to 29 supported Democrats by more than a 2-to-1 margin, and voters in their 30s cast nearly 60 percent of their ballots for Democratic

candidates (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, pp. 9-10). “Demography is not destiny”, yet the experience of California Republicans in the 1990s - after adopting a hardline anti-immigrant stance - illustrates how the growing diversity of the American electorate can penalize parties that resist societal change, making it difficult for the Republican Party to secure national majorities (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 10). A 2016 National Review cover vividly illustrates this tension: a large blue wave appears poised to overwhelm a small vessel with a solitary, frightened GOP elephant, accompanied by the headline, “Demographic changes are threatening to turn traditional red states blue” (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, pp. 395-396). While South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham described the Republican Party as being in a “demographic death spiral,” framing population trends as a challenge, Steve Phillips, a senior fellow at the liberal Center for American Progress, viewed the growth of nonwhite voters as an opportunity to forge a new majority (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, p. 396).

Constitutions are insufficient to protect democracy on their own; they rely on strong unwritten norms, including the willingness of parties to accept electoral defeat, without which democracy is unsustainable (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, pp. 7, 9). For parties to accept defeat, they must feel secure that loss will not have catastrophic consequences and trust that they have a realistic chance of winning again in the future: when party leaders grow convinced that they cannot win future elections or fear that defeat will pose an existential threat to themselves or their constituents, the stakes rise, their planning horizons shrink, and they become willing to pursue short-term gains by any means necessary (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 9). This “win now at any cost” mentality is most evident in contemporary efforts to shape or distort the electoral environment: since 2010 several Republican-controlled states and local governments have reduced access to polling places in predominantly African American neighborhoods, implemented voter roll purges and imposed additional legal barriers to voter registration and participation (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 10). For instance, in Georgia’s 2018 gubernatorial race, then-Secretary of State Brian Kemp, sought to use a 2017 “exact match law” to invalidate tens of thousands of voter registration forms, the majority of which belonged to African American applicants (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 10).

While no party welcomes electoral defeat, this dynamic is magnified within the Republican Party by a growing perception among its core constituencies - predominantly White, older, and Christian voters - that loss threatens not only electoral outcomes but their broader social and political position: in their view, they would lose not just an election but the country itself (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 10). As a result, parties representing anxious and declining majorities may, out of desperation, increasingly resort to illiberal or norm-breaking political strategies, reflected in the Republican case in a mounting aversion to accepting electoral defeat (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, pp. 9-10). One may ask where this fear originates; the answer lies in population politics. In the contemporary U.S. social imagination, ethnoracial demographic change is widely perceived as an established social fact (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, pp. 394-395). The prominence in public discourse of the belief that the country is undergoing an unprecedented - perhaps even inevitable - demographic transformation cannot be explained by population trends alone; rather, media narratives and partisan representations actively engage in processes of meaning-making by assigning political and symbolic significance to demographic statistics and projections (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, pp. 394-396). Immigration

restrictionists make extensive use of demographic statistics to construct “demographic threat” narratives regarding population change, undocumented immigration, and White minoritization as scientifically grounded phenomena, thereby deflecting accusations of racism (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, p. 397). In other words conservative and White supremacist political projects have mobilized population politics as a strategy to recruit voters and consolidate support for their agendas (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, p. 397).

By adopting Eller’s (2025) concept of “agnocracy” (from a, meaning without; gnosis, knowledge; and kratos, rule)—understood as the deliberate use of uncertainty, ignorance, ambiguity, and opacity as techniques of governance—and recognizing, as he does, that agnocracy has become increasingly ordinary, overt, and standardized across the globe, including in contexts where democracy once appeared secure, then population politics and its associated projects can be seen as operating at a qualitatively higher level. In a context characterized by unprecedented volumes of data, rapidly increasing complexity, and heightened uncertainty, and in which cultural diversity and migration have arguably unleashed clashes among competing truths - not least between religions, but also between cultures and civilizations - non-knowledge can become a welcome refuge for audiences (Eller, 2025, pp. 32-33). Gaps in knowledge create space for suspicion and conspiracy theories to flourish, especially when many contemporary realities, from climate change to economic stagnation, are widely experienced as inconvenient or unsettling (Eller, 2025, pp. 32-33). The sense of disappointment felt by populist constituencies toward governing elites both mirrors and is embedded within a broader, cross-cultural experience of disillusionment - and often humiliation - stemming from the perceived failure of “Enlightenment” ideals, including faith in linear progress toward truth, scientific knowledge, and democratic governance, to deliver the promised improvements in human well-being (Eller, 2025, pp. 32-33). A kind of epistemic counterpart to the failure of what Francis Fukuyama termed “the End of history” - the post-Cold War vision of the inevitable global triumph of liberal order - which not only underestimated the darker contradictions of liberalism itself but also presupposed a linear, self-reinforcing progression toward open societies, an assumption now decisively undermined by the worldwide rise of right-wing populist movements (Stoeckl, 2023, p. 53).

Indeed, many populist leaders, operating under a “win now at any cost” mindset, seek to assert power over truth by adopting the playbook of agnocracy, in which communicative effectiveness outweighs factual accuracy (Eller, 2025, pp. 33-34). This not only explains the relevance of seemingly fringe conspiracy theories such as the Great Replacement, which reinterpret demographic realities to serve specific political objectives, but also illuminates why agnocracy - by moving beyond the description of reality to its active construction, and by privileging the leader’s unconstrained assertions over evidence - aligns closely with autocratic governance and, by extension, contributes to processes of democratic backsliding (Eller, 2025, p. 34). Moreover, starting from the premise that cognition and rational thinking alone are insufficient to account for political behavior, Homolar and Löfflmann (2021) stress the role of emotions in populist security rhetoric, emphasize the central role of emotions in populist security rhetoric, whose persuasive power derives less from any measurable or objective “truth” than from the emotion-laden repertoires through which political narratives are constructed and conveyed. Both Trump and Putin engage in habitual deception: the former is an acolyte

of the latter in the realm of agnocratic governance, as the Kremlin's strategic manipulation of information - exemplified by Putin's euphemistic framing of the invasion of Ukraine as a "special military operation" - has become paradigmatic (Eller, 2025, p. 29). In 2021, The Washington Post calculated that Trump made 30,573 false or misleading claims during his first four years in office - an average of 21 per day - many of which Fox News helped disseminate under the guise of reporting (Eller, 2025, pp. 29-30). He repeatedly denounced mainstream journalists and outlets that challenged him as fake news, labeling them "enemies of the people", while also targeting higher education and excising or deleting government websites (Eller, 2025, p. 30).

The manipulation of demographic data - like that of all other forms of information in an agnocracy - can and did, therefore, play an active role in the construction of populist narratives in the United States, narratives that have been instrumental for Republicans in mobilizing a shrinking electoral base and countering the potentially grim consequences that demographic change might otherwise have posed for the party. Racialized demographic fear has underpinned support for the Tea Party movement and the candidacy of Donald Trump, while also contributing to episodes of White supremacist violence, as discussed earlier (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, pp. 396-397). As Rodríguez-Muñiz (2020) argues, far from eroding racial hierarchies, increasing diversity may, when filtered through racialized knowledge production and the strategic use of demographic data, reinforce antiblackness, not despite demographic and social transformation but precisely as a reaction to it. The section of this chapter devoted to demographic data has shown how the US has indeed grown more diverse over the past half-century as a result of large-scale immigration and advances toward racial equality: these developments have effectively eroded both the numerical dominance and the social status of the country's former White Christian majority (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 9). In the 1950s, White Christians comprised well over 90 percent of the American electorate, a share that had declined to 73 percent by 1992, when Bill Clinton was elected president, and further to 57 percent by the time Barack Obama was reelected in 2012 - signaling the erosion of a long-standing electoral majority that mirrored their dominance across political, economic, cultural, and symbolic hierarchies (Levtsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 9). For many White Christian men, this demographic and status shift is experienced not merely as political loss but as the displacement of a familiar social order, thus, an existential threat (Levtsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 9).

A growing body of experimental research examining the effects of exposure to information about the USA' changing demographics confirms that projected population trends are perceived by White Americans as threatening - a sense of peril that is crystallized in slogans such as "take our country back" and "make America great again" (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2020, p. 396; Fox, 2020, p. 96; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2020, p. 9). Compared to a control group, White participants in such studies who are exposed to information about their impending minority status usually report higher levels of anxiety, perceived threat and resentment, alongside increased anger, fear, and hostility toward racial minorities; they also express greater sympathy for other Whites and stronger preferences for racial homophily in social settings and interpersonal interactions (Fox, 2020, p. 96; Piazza, 2024a, p. 1124). These reactions are further associated with a greater prevalence of racist and xenophobic attitudes, intensified group status concerns, racial bias and antipathy, an elevated sense of victimhood, and a redefinition of "Whiteness" along more restrictive lines (Piazza, 2024a, p. 1124; Stewart

and Willer, 2022, pp. 792-793). Overall, exposing White American subjects to the much-criticized 2044 demographic projections of the U.S. Census Bureau, which underpin the narrative of a looming "majority–minority America" - *racial demographic shift manipulation* - appears to trigger a broader "conservative shift" in social and policy attitudes (Piazza, 2024a, p. 1123; Stewart and Willer, 2022, pp. 792-793). Experimental participants are more likely to identify as political conservatives, support right-wing movements - including the Tea Party and Donald Trump - endorse more restrictive immigration policies, favor cuts to social welfare when such programs are perceived to disproportionately benefit racial minorities, and support increased military spending (Piazza, 2024a, p. 1124; Stewart and Willer, 2022, p. 792; Baker et al., 2020, p. 274).

At the contextual level, some studies find that Whites residing in racially isolated communities exhibit the strongest support for Trump, while others show that Americans living in U.S. counties with higher shares of foreign-born residents tend to express more positive attitudes toward immigrants - lending support to the availability heuristic hypothesis discussed in the first chapter (Fox, 2020, pp. 96-97). Rapid Latino population growth is associated with vote-switching toward Trump, particularly among White working-class Democrats and Independents - but primarily when national rhetoric is politicizing immigration; still others identify conservative shifts primarily among individuals who already hold zero-sum views of the economy (Fox, 2020, pp. 96-97; Stewart and Willer, 2022, p. 793). Overall, making demographic changes salient activates status-based anxieties among White Americans concerning the erosion of their group's dominant position; Piazza (2024a) terms this response "demographic change threat," understood as the perception that one's group power and status are endangered by demographic shifts. Indeed, group position theory holds that racial prejudice should not be conceptualized as a purely individual-level phenomenon but rather as an outcome of the relative positions of different groups within a given society: hence, because Whites have traditionally occupied the dominant racial group position in the US, enjoying enhanced access to resources and power, they also, on average, have the most to lose from shifts that threaten this hierarchy (Stewart and Willer, 2022, pp. 792-793).

Membership in a dominant group confers a range of benefits, including feelings of control, self-esteem, belongingness, cultural prototypicality and the capacity to shape one's social environment – benefits that, according to sociologist A. R. Hochschild's widely acclaimed qualitative and ethnographic study, conservatives in Louisiana perceived as increasingly under threat (Stewart and Willer, 2022, pp. 793-794; Eller, 2021, p. 10). In her 2016 book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, Hochschild seeks to explain the "great paradox" of why people who are statistically poorer, face higher rates of social pathology[6], live in more polluted environments and have lower life expectancies nonetheless maintain conservative, anti-government views and vote for Republican candidates who perpetuate these conditions - while deliberately avoiding the temptation to dismiss them as ignorant racists and rejecting the stereotypical depictions of "backward primitives" so common in popular, polemical, and even scholarly work (Eller, 2021, p. 10). She does it through a summarizing narrative that she calls "the deep story": it depicts society as "a line of people waiting for their shot at the American Dream", where "white, older, Christian, and

[6] "more teen mothers, more divorce, worse health, more obesity, more trauma-related deaths, more low-birth-weight babies, and lower school enrollment" (Eller, 2021, p. 10).

predominantly male" people, positioned in the middle, see themselves being unfairly overtaken by undeserving outsiders - mostly poor and uneducated people of color, women, immigrants, refugees, public-sector workers and "even endangered species like the brown pelican" (Eller 2021, p. 12). In their view, the government, coastal elites and liberals appear to condone or facilitate this perceived injustice by granting "blacks" unfair advantages - such as affirmative action, welfare and free school lunches - while condemning them as "outmoded, sexist, homophobic" and ultimately producing a profound sense of betrayal and the feeling of being strangers in their own country (Eller 2021, p. 12). As Trump remarked during the 2020 presidential campaign, "a vote for Biden is a vote to hand the keys of government over to people who despise you," - echoing Hillary Clinton's notorious dismissal of half of his supporters as a "basket of deplorables" - "and who want to rob your children of their American dream," [...] "a vote to give control of government over to the globalists, communists, socialists, the wealthy liberal hypocrites who want to silence, censor, cancel, and punish you" (Löfflmann, 2022a, pp. 548-549).

Hochschild's work, together with that of many other scholars, challenges the conventional view that individual economic grievances directly drive populist sentiment: empirical research consistently shows that personal economic dissatisfaction or changes in financial well-being are much weaker predictors of support for Trump and Trump voting than feelings of cultural anxiety or perceived threats to White Americans' sense of dominant group status (Jung, 2025, p. 10; Baker et al., 2020, p. 274). Scholars have found that, in the United States, individuals' resentments against racial, ethnic, gender, and religious minorities, along with the fear that these groups' empowerment and demographic growth would have translated into a loss of White racial power and priviledge, was a strong predictor of electoral support for Trump, a populist candidate who campaigned on platform rooted in White backlash (Piazza, 2024b, p. 155). The appeal of populists' Manichean worldview is particularly strong precisely because it exploits such fears of increasing demographic and cultural pluralism in the United States—framed as challenging the traditional socio-political, economic, and cultural dominance of White Christian men—and because it glorifies a pure, virtuous, and homogeneous "people" defined in exclusivist racial, ethnic, or cultural terms (Piazza, 2024b, p. 155).

On June 22, 2015, during his public announcement of his first candidacy for the U.S. presidency at Trump Tower in New York City, Trump declared that since the American Dream was "dead", the nation needed a "cheerleader" to root for it - to make it "great again" (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021, p. 4). Much of his campaign's emphasis on a return to embattled cultural traditions - including rhetoric around immigration and "American exceptionalism", criticism of antiracist activism, and calls to restore traditional cultural arrangements - has resonated among many White Americans "mourning for a time when their racial standing was more assured", offering them a way to defend their declining social standing and address anxieties about their loss of cultural centrality (Stewart and Willer, 2022, pp. 792, 794). According to Jung's (2025) empirical study of survey data from a nationally representative sample of U.S. respondents, populist attitudes show a statistically significant positive relationship not only with age - being more pronounced among older, particularly middle-aged, individuals, possibly reflecting accumulated wealth, property ownership, and a desire for stability - but also with religion, especially Christian affiliation. The notable ideological synergy

between fundamentalist and evangelical strands of Christianity - which emphasize a return to "pure" religious and moral principles - and populism in the United States may stem in part from a shared perception of cultural siege, whereby both conservative Christians and populists view their way of life as being threatened by modern secular and liberal forces (Jung, 2025, p. 9). As American populism gravitates toward protecting national identity and traditional societal structures, this alignment reflects a broader cultural movement in the United States aimed at defending and reclaiming a perceived Christian heritage as a means of safeguarding both cultural dominance and social status (Jung, 2025, pp. 9, 11). As it will be shown later, this dynamic is also manifest in the Russian case, and to an even greater extent.

Along with cultural anxieties, scholars have found that demographic change threat triggers among U.S. Whites a desire to take action to preserve their dominant social status and traditional social hierarchies (Piazza, 2024a, p. 1125). Because they tend to be more skeptical of liberal democratic institutions and pluralistic modes of governance that safeguard the rights and political representation of an increasingly non-white population – thereby granting non-natives equal access to political participation – they are consequently more likely to endorse illiberal and nondemocratic rule (Piazza, 2024a, pp. 1124-1125). Core institutions of inclusive liberal pluralist democracies – such as minority rights protections and the equal application of the rule of law – are regarded by nativists as "majority-constraining" and inauthentic, as they believe that only native-born, "real" citizens should enjoy such rights (Piazza, 2024a, p. 1125). Therefore, among U.S. Whites exhibiting demographic change threat, anti-pluralist or nondemocratic strongman rule is more likely to be viewed as a "truer" form of democracy, insofar as governance unencumbered by pluralist institutional constraints - illiberal by definition - is perceived as a more authentic and direct expression of popular will: the political will of a narrowly defined, native-born majority acknowledged as the "true" people, from which the strongman originates (Piazza, 2024a, p. 1125). This is confirmed by the fact that racist, sexist and xenophobic White voters, fearful of losing social status amid growing ethnic diversity and minority empowerment in the United States, were more likely to support a populist politician with clear illiberal leanings like Trump (Piazza, 2024a, p. 1126).

Moreover, Americans who support illiberal and nondemocratic forms of governance are more likely to endorse the use of political violence - the belief that violence is an acceptable means to achieve political goals or to express political ideas - and view terrorism as a justifiable behaviour (Piazza, 2024a, pp. 1124, 1126). In democracies, citizens and political actors forgo violent political action and agree to abide by the rules and institutions of governance in exchange for the opportunity to participate in the political system and influence policymaking; the aforementioned "loser's consent", on which democracy rests, reinforces norms of nonviolent political engagement and enables the system to curb political violence by substituting it for peaceful participation (Piazza, 2024a, p. 1126). However, this fragile bulwark against political violence can be eroded by the weakening of democratic norms and institutions, leading to the gradual normalization of violence, as noted earlier (Piazza, 2024a, p. 1126; Piazza, 2024b, p. 155). In his empirical analysis of the relationship between populist political attitudes and support for political violence, Piazza (2024b) identifies only two factors that together substantively mediate roughly 50% of the effect of populism on political

violence: 1) fear of socio-cultural and demographic change in the United States perceived as challenging traditional White male privilege and power and 2) the embrace of illiberal or authoritarian forms of political rule. Again, contrary to prevailing expectations about populism, he finds no evidence that populist individuals' tolerance of or support for political violence is driven by economic grievances or distrust in political institutions, while they are, on average, more likely to be tolerant of or endorse its use.

In a similar vein, Putin has relied on popular anxieties linked to racism, xenophobia and demographic change threat to consolidate his power, attempting to build a narrative centred on the reinvigoration of Russia and of Slavic men that closely parallels the strategies employed by Trump in mobilizing his core constituency. As Russia began undergoing pronounced population ageing more than a decade before similar trends became evident in the US, the political effects of these demographic shifts - including declining-majority backlash, populism, anti-immigration sentiment, and a broader conservative turn in society and politics - also began to unfold earlier and to a greater extent, given the exceptionally rapid pace of Russia's mortality crisis during the post-Soviet transition. No other industrialized nation at peace experienced such a steep population decline (from 148.5 million in 1992 to 146.5 million in 2000), prompting some demographers to speak of an "unprecedented pace of deterioration in a country not at war" (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 85-86). As noted earlier, excessive alcohol consumption, drug dependency, psychological distress and suicide reached levels unseen in decades, unfolding against a backdrop of daily uncertainty, widespread poverty, income inequality, social suffering and a shared sense of loss (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 85-86). While the ten richest Russians controlled 3.5 percent of the country's GDP, unchecked inflation, food shortages, and a doubling poverty rate led many Russians to perceive the country as descending into chaos and anarchy (Avrutin, 2022, p. 85).

Middle-aged ethnic Russian men were the most affected by the epidemic of "deaths of despair": in 1994, a twenty-year-old Russian male had only a one-in-two chance of surviving to age sixty and the death rate among working-age males was approximately four times that of their US counterparts, contributing to a precipitous decline in the ethnic Russian majority (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 85-87). The decline of the ethnic Russian majority (from 81.5 percent of the total population in 1989 to 77.7 percent in 2010) occurred as the share of non-Russians, particularly those from the traditionally Muslim populations of Caucasus and Central Asia, increased, progressively altering urban landscapes (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 86, 96). These demographic trends were consistently highlighted by journalist and television commentators, who, reflecting broader public concern, warned that Tatars, Bashkirs, Chechens, Kabards, Ingush, and numerous other darker-skinned groups, including Avars, Dargins, and Kumyks, posed a threat to Russian cultural values and the White Russian majority (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 86, 88). Racially charged headlines such as "They are turning Moscow into a little Caucasus" regularly appeared in the press, advocating for the expulsion of undocumented southern migrants; at the same time, television networks promoted the special status of ethnic Russians as the first among equals and frequently reinforced ethnoracial stereotypes in their coverage of crime and interethnic conflict (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 97, 99).

Anxieties over the influx of migrant populations from the southern border set the stage for racial tensions, fueling the rise of far-right extremism as a significant social phenomenon; the number of right-wing

attacks - typically targeting people of non-Slavic appearence such as Chechens, Jews, Africans, Central Asians, and Roma - was five times higher in Russia than in the United States (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 87, 89, 91). Between 2000 and 2017, at least 458 people were killed in extremist crimes and thousands more were beaten or injured, leading some observers to rank Russia as "the most dangerous country for racist violence in the world" (Avrutin, 2022, p. 87). The ideological vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union created what Doudou Diène - the United Nations special rapporteur on racism during his 2006 inspection tour in Moscow and St Petersburg - described as a "cocktail," or a "culture favorable to the emergence of groups of individuals and of political parties that have used the racist and xenophobic platform as its main discourse" (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 91-92). Slogans such as "Russia for the Russians, Moscow for the Muscovites" - strikingly reminiscent of those now circulating in American right-wing populist discourse - were frequently displayed in mass demonstrations, which, far from being the exclusive domain of right-wing nationalists or a small group of disenfranchised extremists, were supported by an overwhelming majority of Russian citizens, according to contemporary polls (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 100-101).

Indeed, mass manifestations of nationalism—especially the annual "Russian Marches" held every 4 November during the Day of National Unity—expanded dramatically beginning in the early 2000s (Kingsbury, 2019, p. 288). The first march, held in 2005, was a small-scale event attended primarily by marginal nationalist groups; since then, however, it has evolved into a yearly mass rally held in multiple cities at once, transforming what began as a radicalized, marginal movement predominantly associated with uneducated youth on the social periphery into a form of mobilization that has attained tacit acceptance among vast segments of the educated middle class (Kingsbury, 2019, pp. 288-289). Analogous to contemporary white supremacist movements in the United States, which extend race-based entitlements to themselves as an endangered majority on the grounds that they are only defending their culture, asserting their rights and representing "the underrepresented Caucasian demographic", Russian White power extremists attending these demonstrations similarly called for "greater rights" for ethnic Russians, who were perceived as "dying" due to population ageing and as being "degraded by other races" through immigration (Eller, 2021, p. 9; Avrutin, 2022, pp. 88, 101). Fears of the "Islamization of Russia" driven by migration from predominantly Muslim regions in the Caucasus and Central Asia have loomed large in Russian public discourse, particularly following terrorist attacks on the Moscow metro in 2010 and Domodedova airport in 2011 - much as Islamist terrorist attacks in Western and Central Europe have fueled a right-wing populist backlash in countries experiencing migration from Syria and North Africa (Kazimov and Zakharov, 2021, p. 417; Avrutin, 2022, p. 99).

While popular support for white supremacist groups did not become particularly strong, xenophobic attitudes were unusually widespread, with men exhibiting more negative, xenophobic sentiments than women; dominant members of the Russian society viewed non-Slavic migrants as racial outsiders, often stigmatizing them as "chernye" ("blacks") on the basis of their appearance, speech and behavior (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 96, 103). In the labor market, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg, "Slavs Only job advertisements and apartment or room listings proliferated: employers consistently preferred applicants with Russified or Europeanized names over those whose names were easily identifiable as Caucasian or Central Asian, while

many landlords openly refused tenants with darker skin, Caucasian, or Asian features or easily recognizable ethnic names and accents (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 103-104). While legal frameworks - including the Russian Constitution, the Criminal Code, and the Labor Code - formally guaranteed equal rights and freedoms and established penalties for discrimination, racial hierarchies were sustained in practice through entrenched social conventions rather than legal practices (Avrutin, 2022, p. 107). In the early 2000s, authorities routinely subjected dark-skinned populations to systematic harassment, manifested in arbitrary document inspections, demands for proof of employment, refusals to certify residence registration, denial of medical care, the imposition of burdensome fines and fees, and demands for bribes (Avrutin, 2022, p. 97). Random document checks targeting individuals of "non-Slavic appearance," often resulting in brief detentions of up to two hours, became a common feature of urban life; in other cases, police raids led to fabricated drug and weapons charges and mass deportations, drawing widespread attention from human rights organizations such as Memorial and Amnesty International (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 97-98).

Following Chechnya's declaration of national independence, Russian armed forces launched unusually destructive military campaigns; in popular and military language, racial prejudice readily merged with anti-terrorist ideology to justify the extreme violence, with soldiers frequently referring to Chechens as "apes," "bandits," and *chernye* (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 93-95). Denied the status of internally displaced persons under the Federal Law on Forced Migrants, these individuals were excluded from health care, employment, and legal residence in cities and towns beyond their regions of origin, while the escalation of the second Chechen campaign in 1999 saw federal mobility laws and their enforcement become even more restrictive (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 95, 97). Some politicians, including Yuri Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, proposed constructing a concrete barrier around Chechnya similar to the Berlin Wall - and, arguably, to Trump's US–Mexico border wall - as a means of protecting Russians from terrorism (Avrutin, 2022, p. 95).

Drawing on data from 2006-2012, Gorodzeisky (2019) argues that in post-socialist Russia - a society undergoing a massive reconfiguration of national identity amid economic instability and nationalist ressentiment - perceived state and collective vulnerability in areas such as the economy, government performance, education, and healthcare is a key predictor of anti-immigrant attitudes among ethnic Russians, more so than self interest and socioeconomic position. The persistently high level of xenophobia in Russia, still evident today, can be understood, at least in part, as a consequence of widespread dissatisfaction with the country's economic and social conditions, pervasive corruption and disillusionment with government functioning, and a collective sense of humiliation experienced by citizens of the former USSR, once a global superpower (Gorodzeisky, 2019, p. 28; Kingsbury, 2019, p. 285). This dynamic helps explain Putin's appeal, as his political legitimacy has rested largely on restoring Russia's vigor, strength, and pride - a project framed around remaking the country and its leadership in the image of an all-dominant white male (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 93-94). Indeed, a "crisis of masculinity" has been a hidden foundation of populism not only in the US but also in Russia: post-Soviet anxieties about masculinity and male identity in a new, capitalist-oriented environment mirror the status anxieties of white working-class American men, who witnessed many jobs that were once their exclusive domain disappear due to globalization (Turner, 2019, p. 6; Randall, 2020, p. 895).

As early as the late 1960s and 1970s, sociologists, demographers, physicians, and other experts began studying men's aforementioned lower life expectancy than women, high rates of alcoholism, and lack of accountability in the family, workplace, and society, fueling the idea that men, rather than women, were the "weaker sex" (Randall, 2020, p. 894). While some attributed men's issues to a supposed biological weakness or to unhealthy and destructive habits, others ascribed it to their marginalization within the family and the corresponding over-emancipation of women in Soviet society - a critique that emerged alongside a sharp increase in women's higher education and employment in the late 1960s and 1970s, including in traditionally male-dominated fields such as engineering (Randall, 2020, p. 894). Under Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost, the weakened economy and food shortages made the double burden of women workers even more onerous, leaving many Soviet women feeling "crushed by emancipation" and giving prominence to the perception that "women are tired of being strong and men are yearning for 'normal wives'" (Randall, 2020, p. 895). Given this historical gender context and Russia's decline as a global power in the 1990s, it is understandable that Putin has come to embody a restored sense of masculinity and national regeneration: both an assertive alpha male who defends Russia's international interests and a *muzhik*, an ordinary man of the masses he is often described as a "real man" by his supporters and Russian admirers alike (Randall, 2020, p. 896; Enroth and Hjelm, 2025, p. 9).

The Kremlin has carefully crafted and disseminated an image of Putin as a strongman not only in political but also in physical terms - an 'action hero' and 'macho sex object' - drawing on nostalgic Soviet-era representations of hegemonic manhood that emphasized strength, self-discipline, and service to, and defense of, the nation (Enroth and Hjelm, 2025, p. 9; Randall, 2020, p. 895). The most unabashed manifestation of this masculine self-marketing may be found in the internationally notorious photographs - distributed by the Kremlin, broadcast on Russian state television and even uploaded to the Kremlin's official website – that showcase Putin's physical prowess and macho discipline (Enroth and Hjelm, 2025, p. 9; Randall, 2020, p. 897; Burrett, 2020, p. 196). Some depict Putin riding a horse bare-chested in Siberia in 2009, while others portray him swimming in Siberian waters, driving a Formula 1 race car, leading a judo training session, riding a Harley-Davidson alongside bikers, or training young hockey players: taken together, these images reinforce the portrayal of the Russian president as a man of action who embodies a militarized, patriotic, and robust vision of Russian masculinity (Enroth and Hjelm, 2025, p. 9). In contrast to previous Russian leaders such as Leonid Brezhnev - who "was there ageing on TV, the same static image capturing the decay of the state" - Putin has engineered a 'videocracy' marked by constant media visibility, through which strength, youthfulness, and vitality are deliberately performed (Enroth and Hjelm, 2025, p. 10). This imagery also serves a populist, Dickensian rags-to-riches narrative, rooted in Putin's humble origins: he was raised in a communal apartment in a poor district of what was then Leningrad (Enroth and Hjelm, 2025, pp. 9-10).

It has been argued that his 'telepopulism' has been particularly effective precisely because Putin came to mirror a wounded Russia just as it aspired to see itself - athletic, healthy, and proud (Enroth and Hjelm, 2025, p. 10). The same can be said of the war in Ukraine, which, despite its losses and risks, has functioned as a means of restoring the fractured self-worth of Russian men - particularly those from the more impoverished

and depressed regions - by offering an escape from the constraints of everyday life, marked by low wages and routine frustrations, and by conferring, as one Russian soldier wrote on Telegram, "a sense of belonging to the great male deed, the deed of defending our Motherland" (Makarychev and Medvedev, 2024, p. 136). Beyond psychological compensation, the war also offers a more tangible incentive: mobilized individuals reportedly rushed to local registry offices to arrange expedited marriages, ensuring that their families would be eligible for substantial state payouts in the event of serious injury or death - 3 and 7 million rubles, or $45,000 and $100,000, respectively) (Makarychev and Medvedev, 2024, p. 137). The issue of so-called "death money" (*grobovye*) has gained significant prominence in both social media and state propaganda: Russian state television, for instance, broadcast images of concert halls filled with hundreds of mobilized men in uniform standing alongside their fiancées in white dresses, collectively taking marriage vows and receiving blessings from Orthodox priests before being sent to war (Makarychev and Medvedev, 2024, p. 137). In another segment aired on state television, parents were shown purchasing a Lada with the compensation paid for their son killed in Ukraine and driving the car to his grave (Makarychev and Medvedev, 2024, p. 137).

As discussed earlier, systemic poverty, unemployment, crushing debt to microcredit organizations, alcoholism, and family violence often lead many families to view the man - typically middle-aged, unemployed, and struggling with alcohol dependency - as a burden; the resulting high levels of female misandry prompt women to send these "worthless men," perceived as useless in daily life, off to the trenches (Makarychev and Medvedev, 2024, p. 138). Except in a few ethnic regions - such as mothers' protests in Dagestan and actions by ethnic activists in Buryatia and Tuva - which is not coincidental, given that these areas serve as the main human reserve for the war, protests against mobilization led by women have been rare; instead, many have actively volunteered by providing supplies to the army and collecting provisions, clothing, and equipment while mothers have even been known to encourage their sons to enlist in order "to become real men" (Makarychev and Medvedev, 2024, p. 138). In this resource exchange - where the bonds of blood and kin are effectively corrupted by ideology, cynicism, militarism, fear of repression and pure economic rationality - women, caught between domestic violence and state oppression, convert the socially devalued assets of male bodies into state-provided payments and benefits (Makarychev and Medvedev, 2024, p. 138). Notably, to address the "gender disorder" inherited from the Soviet regime, Putin's government has promoted rhetoric and policies aimed at reasserting men's "natural" roles as household breadwinners and authorities, including the partial decriminalization of domestic violence in 2017, which permits "lighter" acts of abuse that do not result in serious injury (Randall, 2020, p. 896). The biopolitics of the Russian state treats human bodies as a disposable mass, to be cultivated as a strategic natural resource and deployed on the battlefield: male bodies serve as cannon fodder, while women's bodies function as machines for reproducing this strategic raw material, reducing gender roles to their barest form (Makarychev and Medvedev, 2024, p. 139).

Predictably, support for the actions of the Russian army is weakest among people of conscription age - especially the youngest - and strongest among the older generation, a group that is largely detached from active social life and unaffected by involvement in combat operations (Levinson, 2025, p. 58). Although these military actions were neither initiated nor demanded by the Russian populace, but instead driven by specialised

actors advancing their own political and strategic interests, pensioners nonetheless constitute a critical electoral demographic for Russia's current political regime, much like Trump's older electoral constituency (Levinson, 2025, p. 54; Kazimov and Zakharov, 2021, p. 413). Indeed, Putin secured re-election to his fourth presidential term in 2018 after campaigning on a promise not to raise the pension eligibility age, a deeply unpopular reform that triggered protests across Russian cities (Kazimov and Zakharov, 2021, p. 413; Burrett, 2020, p. 201). Although this pledge proved short-lived, as the State Duma introduced pension reforms in June 2018 that increased the retirement age from 55 to 63 for women and from 60 to 65 for men, the "regime of babushkas" - a term infamously coined to capture Russia's pronounced gender gap in old age - still faces the dilemma of managing an escalating demographic crisis while safeguarding the support of its core electorate (Kazimov and Zakharov, 2021, p. 413).

Although the populist character of Putin's rule remains highly contested among scholars, his consistent reliance on populist discourse and strategies suggests that he can be situated within the category of authoritarian populists - alongside Trump - albeit in a distinctly Russian variant that foregrounds civilizational conflict rather than the conventional "people versus elite" narrative typical of Western populist movements (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 52). In March 2000, nearly two decades before Trump, Putin won power in Russia on the promise of making the country "great again" - by wiping out Chechen terrorists, reining in unruly oligarchs and restoring Russia's international prestige (Burrett, 2020, p. 193). When he first rose to national prominence during the Chechen conflict in 1999 - a faceless functionary before president Yeltsin appointed him prime minister - Putin capitalized on the patriotic emotions stirred by the war as well as on his own relative obscurity, which enabled him to construct from scratch a public persona of the strong, tough and decisive leader many Russians desired (Burrett, 2020, pp. 193, 195). Initially, he exploited the convenient populist target of the oligarchs, who, in the aftermath of the 1998 Russian financial crisis that devastated living standards, had amassed vast wealth by appropriating state assets and seizing control of Russia's natural resources (Burrett, 2020, p. 197). This largely performative crackdown allowed Putin to present himself as a populist defending ordinary citizens against wealthy elites, while in reality he never sought to dismantle the oligarchs' economic power; rather, he restructured it to serve his own interests, ensuring they operated within the framework of his political dominance, remained loyal to his regime, and continued amassing billions in exchange for their political allegiance (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 228, 230).

Proof of this can be seen in the worsening concentration of wealth under Putin's rule: the share of national wealth held by the richest 10 percent of Russians rose from 77.1 percent in 2000 to 89 percent in 2016 and, according to The Economist's 2016 Crony Capitalism Index, the extent of corruption in Russia - where billionaire wealth from crony industries accounted for 18 percent of GDP - was the highest in the world (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 228). This model of state capitalism, in which economic success hinges on political loyalty, has come to define Russia's economy under Putin - a system where business leaders retain influence only insofar as they align with the Kremlin's agenda, no longer independent power brokers but economic actors reliant on the state for their survival (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 230). Legal loopholes and opaque financial dealings gave Putin the leverage to wrest media assets from the oligarchs, allowing him,

in a single move, to expand state control over the media and bolster his anti-elite credentials - a highly effective maneuver, given that his war with the oligarchs featured prominently in his 2004 re-election campaign (Burrett, 2020, p. 197). Indeed, his legitimacy was strengthened by the widespread perception that he had "tamed" the oligarchs by bringing media holdings under state control, with only 4 percent of the population interpreting his actions as a clampdown on free speech, while the majority attributed them to rivalries between oligarchic clans or to broader economic concerns (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 232; Burrett, 2020, p. 197).

Beyond anti-elitism, Putin has also employed other populist strategies, such as the selective use of ethnic and xenophobic nationalism for electoral gain and political legitimation, while developing his own civilizational form of populism (Burrett, 2020, p. 195). In response to the public protests following his 2012 re-election, Putin incorporated ethno-racial definitions of national identity into state-mediated official discourse, thereby addressing public grievances by successfully mobilizing themes formerly confined to ultra-nationalist circles and redeploying them to advance a state-building nationalism (Burrett, 2020, p. 195). Dmitry Medvedev even openly claimed that there was nothing wrong with elevating ethnic Russians as "first among equals," arguing that because ethnic Russians constitute the majority of the population, Russian is the state language, and the Russian Orthodox Church is the country's largest religion, these characteristics together form the distinctive makeup of the Russian character—"this is fine," he concluded, "and we should not be afraid to say this" (Avrutin, 2022, pp. 100-101). Putin and Medvedev were not alone in exploiting xenophobia for easy political gain—a strategy that found fertile ground in Russia, as evidenced by content analysis of campaign materials from the high-profile 2013 Moscow mayoral race, which was dominated by discourse on the dangers of illegal immigration (Kingsbury, 2019, p. 288). All registered candidates devoted space in their official manifestos to the issue of rising immigration, with many portraying immigrants as a threat and proposing harsh measures to remove them from the city (Kingsbury, 2019, p. 288). In speeches and interviews, incumbent mayor Sergei Sobyanin frequently argued that migrant workers from Central Asia were a source of crime and economic anxiety for the local population, stating in the summer of 2013: "Moscow is a Russian city and should remain such—not Chinese, not Tajik, not Uzbek" (Kingsbury, 2019, p. 288). As Putin and other prominent political figures embraced a conservative-nationalist agenda, ideas previously relegated to the social fringe - such as the elevation of White ethnic Russians above other groups and the framing of immigration and demographic decline as existential threats to the homeland - gradually entered the realm of acceptable public discourse (Avrutin, 2022, p. 103). Similar to developments within Trump's electoral demographic, a conservative turn unfolded in Russian politics and society, marked by an increasing normalization of sexism and homophobia in popular consciousness, the reinforcement of "traditional family values," and the increasing regulation of family and reproductive behaviour, as will be further argued below (Avrutin, 2022, p. 103).

Putin's enduring appeal despite economic stagnation, corruption, and international isolation can be attributed to the lasting imprint of the hardships and instability of the 1990s on Russian society, which fostered deep skepticism toward market liberalization and democratic governance and led many Russians to perceive Putin as a stabilizing force shielding them from a return to past chaos (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 229).

However, after twelve years at the apex of Russian politics and a well-established record of imprisoning political opponents, Putin could not plausibly campaign for a third presidential term in 2012 as a plucky outsider battling an entrenched elite: he was unmistakably the establishment candidate, and to suggest that oligarchs were still plundering Russia's wealth would have been tantamount to admitting failure (Burrett, 2020, p. 198). In order to renew his populist appeal, Putin shifted its primary focus from domestic economic elites to new, *external* "enemies" of the Russian people: an international Western liberal elite -embodied by the hegemonic power of the United States and its allies - and its alleged fifth-column provocateurs, namely pro-Western actors within Russian society and the Russian diaspora (Burrett, 2020, p. 193; Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 233). In this way, foreign policy offered Putin an opportunity to construct both a new vertical enemy against which to redirect public anger - the ultimate global "elite" of the West, portrayed as conspiring against the legitimate interests of the Russian people - and, simultaneously, a horizontal enemy, establishing a division within society between "authentic" Russians and traitorous pro-Western liberals (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, pp. 233, 104). By shifting his focus from domestic to foreign enemies, Putin has not abandoned populism, as nationalism - understood as the construction of a limited, sovereign community tied to a certain territory in opposition to "out" groups - is often articulated within populist politics (Burrett, 2020, p. 199). He combines populism and nationalism by portraying the virtuous Russian people - equated with the Russian nation - as an underdog resisting hegemonic Western powers and liberal multinational institutions accused of undermining its sovereignty, identity, and pride (Burrett, 2020, p. 199).

Although Putin had employed this framing earlier in his presidency - for instance during Ukraine's 2005 Orange Revolution - it was not until 2012 that it became a consistent and central feature of his rhetoric (Burrett, 2020, p. 198). In an effort to delegitimize those who staged public demonstrations against his re-election, state-controlled television portrayed domestic critics as a privileged elite, recasting some of Russia's most educated citizens as traitors allegedly in the pay of the United States and other Western governments (Burrett, 2020, p. 198). That same year, the Russian government introduced legislation requiring all NGOs receiving overseas funding to register as foreign agents (Burrett, 2020, p. 198). In January 2015, in the context of the Ukraine crisis that erupted in February 2014, Putin claimed that pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine were fighting not only the Ukrainian army but also a NATO-sponsored "foreign legion," a narrative that provided him with an ideal opportunity to further consolidate nationalist and anti-Western sentiment as the central basis of support for his leadership (Burrett, 2020, p. 198). By presenting himself as the symbol of Russia's resurgence on the international stage, Putin was able to consolidate his popularity during one of the most severe economic crises in recent Russian history, maintaining high approval ratings despite Western sanctions and economic recession: many Russians felt - perhaps for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union - that their country had regained superpower status (Burrett, 2020, p. 198, 200).

The "spectre of a hostile West" was once again mobilized to rally support for Putin ahead of the 2018 presidential election: Russian television warned voters that high turnout was the only safeguard against Western annihilation of the nation; social media circulated rumours of Western government plans to interfere in the election through presidential rivals - who were accused of acting as agents of foreign powers; and state

news agencies claimed that more than a dozen countries had attempted cyberattacks against Russia (Burrett, 2020, p. 198). Since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent Washington-led sanctions campaign - an episode systematically framed by Russian media as a U.S. plot to prevent Russia from reclaiming its rightful place on the world stage - the portrayal of U.S.–Russia relations as an existential struggle for survival gained significant traction in public opinion (Burrett, 2020, p. 200). By mid-2014, the United States was perceived as the least friendly country toward Russia, even more hostile than Ukraine: whereas in June 2012, 53 percent of Russians described bilateral relations with the U.S. as good and only 17 percent as bad, two years later 64 percent characterized the relationship as bad, while just 25 percent viewed it positively (Burrett, 2020, p. 200).

From 2004 onward, pro-Kremlin elites increasingly depicted both domestic critics and international adversaries as conspirators seeking to undermine Putin's rule, to the point that even the collapse of the Soviet Union was retrospectively framed as the product of Western interference (De Luca and Giungato, 2024, p. 5). Anti-Western conspiracy narratives, which, far from remaining fringe beliefs are instead deeply embedded in both official and grassroots discourse, became a powerful instrument of governance and a central component of Russia's authoritarian turn (De Luca and Giungato, 2024, p. 16). They provide a resilient - if misleading - interpretive framework through which supporters of Kremlin policies rationalize crises and policy choices, such as the war in Ukraine, by attributing complex geopolitical developments to the machinations of a global elite (De Luca and Giungato, 2024, p. 16). One conspiracy theory in particular, the Golden Billion (*Zolotoj Milliard*), gained increasing prominence following Russia's military actions in Ukraine, as senior officials invoked it to criticize Western policies (De Luca and Giungato, 2024, pp. 2, 6). For example, in May 2022, Nikolay Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council, accused the "Anglo-Saxons" of superficially promoting human rights, freedom and democracy superficially while advancing the elitist goals of the "golden billion" (De Luca and Giungato, 2024, p. 6). This uniquely Russocentric theory holds that a small, privileged segment of the global population - primarily in Western countries - controls the majority of the world's resources, leaving the rest of humanity to contend with scarcity (De Luca and Giungato, 2024, pp. 2, 5). It is intertwined with and possibly influenced by the Great Replacement conspiracy, as proponents frequently reference a misattributed quote from Margaret Thatcher - purpotedly asserting that the Russian population should be reduced to 15 million - as part of the narrative, thereby amplifying fears of a Russian genocide (De Luca and Giungato, 2024, p. 5).

The Golden Billion theory reflects profound societal anxieties, historical fears and contemporary insecuities about globalisation, inequality, external influence on Russian life and politics, the unchecked dominance of the West - particularly the US - and its implications for Russia's international role (De Luca and Giungato, 2024, pp. 2, 5). Much like in U.S. politics, the gradual mainstreaming of conspiracy theories in Russian society reveals a deep collective sense of vulnerability and a search for simple, one-dimensional explanations in an increasingly complex world - one that no longer fits within the obsolete Cold War narrative of good versus evil (De Luca and Giungato, 2024, pp. 2, 5). The cross-cultural sense of disappointment with "Enlightenment values", science, and democracy is particularly acute in non-Western countries such as Russia, where the unfulfilled promises of these ideals are compounded by Western cultural imperialism and its erosion

of local identities and civilizations (Eller, 2025, p. 33). Deception and disinformation have become so pervasive and overt in contemporary Russia that, as anticipated earlier, agnocracy now constitutes a defining feature of Russian governance: having largely abandoned the goal of persuasion, the Kremlin seeks to sow confusion through conspiracy theories and the systematic spread of falsehoods across media, diplomacy, and culture, weaponizing information to manipulate, demoralize, and destabilize domestic and international audiences in pursuit of strategic and geopolitical objectives (Eller, 2025, p. 29).

According to the 2025 V-Dem report, Russia scores close to the maximum on disinformation, which, as a tool of autocratic rule, can be deliberately deployed to amplify negative sentiments and cultivate societal distrust, thereby fueling polarization. As discussed earlier, polarization in turn erodes trust in government institutions by facilitating the dissemination of state propaganda, the discrediting of opposition forces, and the mobilization of support for policies that undermine democratic norms; together, disinformation and polarization reinforce processes of autocratization (V-Dem, 2025, p. 38). Conspiratorial thinking has also permeated the mindset of Russia's security services, including the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the Federal Security Service (FSB), as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose officials adopted this worldview from former KGB officers in the upper echelons of power - espousing deeply regressive conceptions of the world order (Bondarev, 2025, pp. 83, 85). Within the worldview of the narrow circle of unaccountable senior officials who have long shaped Russian foreign policy, protest and dissent - including Ukraine's departure from Russia's orbit and its rapprochement with the West - are never understood as endogenous phenomena but are invariably attributed to foreign instigation and Western financing (Bondarev, 2025, pp. 85, 90).

Depriving both Ukraine and Russian society of agency reflects a paternalistic caretaker attitude commonly adopted by populists towards a presumed passive public: although Putin, like many populist leaders, seeks to cultivate a personalistic link with voters, his governance relies less on genuine emotional identification than on the delivery of socially popular measures (Burrett, 2020, p. 196). However, the strategy of demobilizing and depoliticizing citizens is not incompatible with populism, as many populist leaders replace the ideal of "rule by the people" with that of "rule for the people," grounded in the claim that the leader alone authentically embodies the popular will (Burrett, 2020, p. 196). Russia may even be considered a "post-populist" state, illustrating the potential trajectory for other populist leaders - such as Trump - once they reach the apex of political power and begin reshaping governing structures, bypassing the rule of law, and consolidating authority in the name of the "real people" (Roose, 2019, p. 116). According to Yudin (2022), Putin's Russia exemplifies a radicalization of tendencies already present across several liberal democracies - including depoliticization, public disengagement and resentment, technocratic governance, a weakened public sphere, and popular demands for strong, decisive leadership - to the extent that a liberal democracy pushed to the limits of electoral fetishism may come to resemble it. Clear parallels exist in the challenges to citizenship and social cohesion that underpin support for populist strongmen in both Russia and the US, including a declining middle class - particularly pronounced in Russia following post-Soviet economic transformations - eroding trust in public institutions, and the shifting status of men (Roose, 2019, pp. 111, 120).

Compared to other populist leaders, Putin has made relatively modest constitutional changes to strengthen the executive or weaken checks and balances, likely because Russia's constitution already grants the president extensive powers - including the ability to issue decrees, dissolve parliament, and veto legislation - providing all the tools necessary to construct a vertical power structure (Burrett, 2020, p. 195). For instance, in 2004, without amending the constitution, Putin abolished direct gubernatorial elections, granting himself the power to appoint Russia's 89 regional leaders and, in turn, select governors based on their loyalty to the Kremlin (Burrett, 2020, p. 195). More consistent with populist practice, Putin oversaw constitutional amendments in 2012 that extended presidential terms from four to six years (Burrett, 2020, p. 196). In 2020, he enacted measures that not only circumvented his term limits but also expanded the formal powers of the presidency, enhancing his capacity for a purely personalist mode of leadership (Golosov, 2023, p. 403). Over time, the regime has evolved from electoral authoritarianism, characterized by relatively strong but largely informal constraints on executive power, into a full-fledged personalist dictatorship, a process finalized with the 2020 constitutional amendments (Golosov, 2023, p. 390). Russia's recent decline on V-Dem's democracy index reflects wartime restrictions imposed by Putin, including the banning of independent media, dismantling of critical civil society organizations, and censorship of over 247,000 websites - in 2022 alone, the State Duma passed a record 653 laws criminalizing speech related to the war in Ukraine. Instances in which functioning democracies, however imperfect, have degenerated into stable personalist dictatorships are rare; accordingly, the Russian case is central to the comparative politics research agenda (Golosov, 2023, p. 403).

Compared to other political regimes, including institutionalized dictatorships, personalist rule is particularly prone to policy failures stemming from the leader's arbitrary judgement and the absence of collective deliberation on major political choices (Golosov, 2023, p. 404). Putin's catastrophic decision to invade Ukraine in 2022, grounded in his own historical and political fantasizing and reportedly surprising much of his inner circle of *siloviki* - Russian officials with backgrounds in the intelligence services or the military - illustrates this dynamic (Golosov, 2023, p. 404; Özdamar and Yanik, 2024, p. 1849). Reinforcing this systemic fragility, in a personalised autocracy the ruler not only bears the *persona* of the state but is also tantamount to its *person*: the ruler's physical self comes to embody state authority, as well as its identity and continuity over time, rendering the prospect of the leader's decline or death especially destabilizing (Enroth and Hjelm, 2025, p. 9). In such regimes, the state functions as an extension, a prosthesis of the autocrat's natural person, such that the ruler's physical health becomes indistinguishable from the health of the body politic and, so long as the leader appears robust, the country's actual condition cannot be allowed to interfere with the performance (Enroth and Hjelm, 2025, p. 9). Russia's future is explicitly tied to Putin's personal continuity, as illustrated by a statement made by Vyacheslav Volodin, then chair of the lower house of the Russian parliament, during a closed-door meeting in 2014: "If there is Putin, there is Russia; without Putin, there is no Russia" (Shekhovtsov, 2025, p. 112). This underscores how time, aging and mortality constitute fundamental challenges for autocratic rule, since the only term limit autocrats are ultimately forced to respect is the biological one - a constraint that, by definition, is unacceptable to them (Enroth and Hjelm, 2025, pp. 10-11). What makes autocracy both unstable and unsustainable as a regime is its untenable approach to time

and political succession, in contrast to liberal democracy's paradigmatic solution of separating the abstract person of the state from both the natural person of the ruler and the composite person of the people (Enroth and Hjelm, 2025, p. 13).

As Putin confronted his own biological finitude, he appears to have increasingly interpreted the West's victory in the Cold War - famously calling the collapse of the Soviet Union in 2005 "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century" - as a historical rupture that could and should be reversed (Shekhovtsov, 2025, pp. 104, 116). One of the central levers through which such a correction is imagined to be enacted concerns the share of national economic and military power derived from demographic strength: fears of population decline are therefore primarily articulated in terms of their anticipated effects on the economy, military capacity, and, ultimately, national power and global influence (Sciubba, 2014, p. 210). A contraction of the most economically and militarily productive segments of the population - particularly working-age Slavic men - threatens to reduce GDP, narrow the military recruitment pool, and, in turn, constrain defense spending: as will be discussed later, these concerns are key to understanding how the demographic crisis shaped Russia's decision to invade Ukraine (Sciubba, 2014, p. 210). Already in 2000, Putin himself identified the population issue as "one of the most alarming that the country faces", warning that continued population decline could turn Russia into "an enfeebled nation" (Avrutin, 2022, p. 86; Balzer, 2024, p. 4). This contrasts with his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who rarely addressed Russia's demographic problems in his speeches; notably, one of the charges raised during his failed impeachment in 1999 was the "genocide of the Russian people," a claim that referred to the country's negative natural population growth (Zakharov, 2024, p. 27).

Putin's apprehension regarding population ageing extends beyond its immediate demographic consequences to encompass concerns about what he perceives as its underlying origins. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, which, despite its official atheism, was a relatively conservative society, opened the country to an influx of liberal Western ideas that challenged long-established cultural practices (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 257). As argued earlier, the seismic political, economic, and social shifts experienced by Russians in the first three decades after the end of the communist era were reflected in changing patterns of family formation and fertility, ultimately resulting in a delayed Second Demographic Transition (SDT) (Zakharov, 2024, pp. 26-28). Over the same period, Putin has been noticeably losing support among younger generations, who are separated from him and his ruling elite by an abysmal cultural divide – it is worth noting that he does not use the internet: this growing disconnect likely heightened his sense of vulnerability, further reinforced by the 2020 youth-led uprisings in Belarus (Yudin, 2022, pp. 34-35). The fact that Russian leaders trace the country's demographic crisis to a seemingly Western-induced Second Demographic Transition (SDT) is reflected in what they deem to be the remedy: the promotion of traditional values. White papers issued by the Russian government assert that "population growth and the well-being of the nation are explicitly linked to fertility and family values" and, as will be argued in the next section, a suite of government-endorsed policies designed to achieve these objectives emphasizes both the biological and symbolic continuity between kin and nation, advocating a return to spiritual and familial norms rooted in Russia's prerevolutionary past (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1076).

Putin interprets the erosion of traditional values - accelerated at a moment when Russian society appeared poised to embrace not only political freedoms but also the social values associated with democratic governance, as a result of globalization and post-Soviet exposure to Western cultural influences - as particularly visible in today's ageing and liberal Europe (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, pp. 109, 257). He maintains that the latter has become an *enemy of itself* through processes of secularization, the erosion of Christianity's societal role, and the "imposition" of individualistic and progressive values, especially in relation to LGBT rights and gender equality, on "traditional societies" (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 107). Russia is positioned as one of these nations under constant assault from Western liberal values, which Putin considers fundamentally incompatible with social harmony and the cultural traditions of the Russian civilization-state (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 107). The Putin regime seeks to draw a concrete lesson from what it considers Russia's greatest historical mistake and a geopolitical catastrophe (the collapse of the Soviet Union) by adopting a stance of firm intolerance toward external - namely Western liberal - forces, allegedly seeking to fragment the country and disseminate liberalism within Russia itself, its satellite states, regional allies, and broader Eurasian sphere of influence (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 108). Under Putin's rule, preventing the penetration of Western liberal culture into Russia has thus become a priority of the state's political agenda (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 109).

This narrative has also enabled Putin to reinforce the populist dichotomy between "authentic" Russians, the bearers of traditional values, and Westernized liberals, accused of betraying Russian civilization by attempting to impose the enemy's cultural norms upon society (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 107). This latter category has then come to encompass not only political opponents and opposition figures advocating liberalism or democratization, but also ordinary citizens who challenge the regime and seek greater political participation, liberal reforms, and social freedoms, particularly in relation to LGBT rights (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 107). Putin was provided with an opportunity to operationalize this civilizational populist turn in 2012, when members of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot were arrested for staging an anti-Putin protest inside a church, an act widely perceived by many Russians as deeply offensive; the following year, Putin signed legislation banning so-called "gay propaganda" to minors, framing it as a necessary defense against unacceptable moral corruption imported from Europe (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 257). Since 2012, Russian political discourse and modern Russian identity have been increasingly shaped by "culture wars", defined as conflicts over non-negotiable moral and cultural principles - naturally encompassing debates on sexuality, LGBT rights, gender equality, and abortion (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, pp. 109, 256). In this respect, the Putin regime exhibits notable similarities with right-wing populism in the United States, where analogous culture wars over these issues have been extensively documented in scholarly literature, most notably by the American sociologist and coiner of the term J. D. Hunter (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, pp. 109, 256; Stoeckl, 2023, pp. 56-57).

Putin explicitly subscribes to a variant of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, arguing that the real civilizational clash of the contemporary world opposes the West to "the rest" and is driven by the Western conviction in the universality of its liberal values: the latter are therefore construed as yet another

form of Western imperialism, weapons within the West' soft power arsenal deployed in the "culture war" against Russia (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, pp. 107-108). Consequently, the liberal West is positioned as Russia's principal adversary, insofar as it encroaches upon Russia's sphere of influence by drawing former Soviet territories and previously neutral states into its orbit through both NATO expansion and the promotion of its values (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 109). This framing helps explain why, during the 2020s - and especially following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine - Putin has more frequently and systematically resorted to civilizational discourse, depicting the Russian people as victims of Western imperialism and its instruments, including the imposition of its values upon a "glorious" and "holy" Russian civilization, which, as will be discussed later, is conceived as encompassing Ukraine as well (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, pp. 105-106).

Much like Trump's nationalist rhetoric, Putin's civilizational discourse is deeply infused with nostalgia for the glory of Russia's past "golden ages", selectively drawing at different moments on the strength, unity, and relative socioeconomic equality of the Soviet Union, the spiritual holiness of *Rus'*, and the imperial grandeur of Tsarist Russia, and promising a return to an idealized vision of Russia's historical past (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 108). A central component of this restorative agenda consists in the re-empowerment of the Russian Orthodox Church, suppressed during the Soviet period: by closely associating himself and his regime with the Church, Putin seeks to establish a perception of continuity between contemporary Russia and its deep Christian past, while simultaneously lending his rule moral and cultural legitimacy (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 108). Religious Orthodox Russians constitute a core constituency of Putin's support base and, within his rhetoric framework, form the civilizational nucleus of the Russian nation: thus, Orthodox Christianity emerges as a defining element of Russianness and the principal source of Russia's "traditional values", marking the country as both morally and spiritually superior to the liberal, irreligious and "sinful" West (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 154; Makarychev and Medvedev, 2024, p. 25).

In the three decades since the end of the Cold War, the Russian Orthodox Church has gradually evolved from being one religious institution among many within the Russian Federation into the provider of a new form of civil religion for the Russian state and an active participant in global culture wars (Stoeckl, 2023, p. 55). As Stoeckl (2023) remarks, contemporary Orthodox discourse on "traditional values", increasingly shaped by culture war dynamics, has truly come to mirror the themes, patterns and strategies of Christian Right movements in the West. The fall of communism in 1991 ushered in a visible religious revival in Russia, as shown by Pew Research Center data indicating that the share of Russian adults identifying as Orthodox Christian increased from 31 to 72 percent between 1991 and 2008 (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 152). Putin recognized early on the political utility of religion as a potent ideological alternative to communism and has consistently mobilized religious narratives throughout his rule to justify both his policies and his authority (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 153). He found a willing ally in the Russian Orthodox Church, eager to legitimize the regime in exchange for state sponsorship and an elevated institutional status within Russia's religious landscape (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 153). Church leaders are accorded public respect, clerics are regularly present at state ceremonies, and, where compatible with broader political priorities, Putin has generally favored the Orthodox Church's agenda (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 155). Patriarch Kirill has

reciprocated this support by strongly endorsing both Putin personally and the regime's violent actions against fellow Orthodox Christians in Ukraine, famously describing Putin as "a miracle of God" destined to correct the "crooked twist" of Russian history that had weakened the Church under Soviet rule (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, p. 108).

While the Russian Orthodox Church remains subordinate to the state, its influence has expanded significantly as a result of the convergence between its values and the aims of the Kremlin, with both actors sharing the conviction that Russia must resist liberalization and Westernization and that liberalism represents an existential threat to Russian civilization (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025, pp. 155-156). The Church has also become actively involved in the formulation of Russia's demographic policy and exerts influence across a broader range of family, social, ethnic, and cultural policies: as will be argued in the next section, since the early 2000s, shared concerns over demographic decline have brought religious and political elites together around a project aimed at encouraging reproduction through the revival of "traditional values," including restrictions on abortion, the promotion of marriage, opposition to"non-traditional families," and even the decriminalization of domestic violence (Zakharov, 2024, p. 27; Rasmussen, 2023, p. 1076; Makarychev and Medvedev, 2024, p. 27).

b. The domestic solutions

Having outlined the demographic outlook of the two countries and linked it to the formation of populist population politics, the analysis now turns to examining how the latter informs domestic policy in each case, covering both pronatalist measures aimed at increasing the native population through higher fertility rates and antinatalist measures that simultaneously restrict the presence of groups whose fertility rates are perceived as threatening to natives - most notably migrants. Starting with the United States, Jessoula, Natili, and Pavolini's (2022) comparative analysis shows that the Republican Party has joined a broader group of right-wing populist parties that have recently reoriented their programmatic platforms toward competition along the socio-economic dimension, marking a clear departure from traditional right-wing ideological positions. The five countries examined in the study have adopted an exclusionary populist platform in the fields of welfare and labor policy, strategically deploying social policies as instruments of consensus-building - an approach the authors term "exclusionary welfarism"; interestingly, their findings reveal that the only policy area in which most of the selected parties unanimously advocate expansionary reforms is family policy. Exclusionary populist parties conceptualise the welfare state as a key institutional sphere reserved for members of an ethnically and/or nationally defined community, asserting that the "true people" are entitled to greater social protection (Jessoula, Natili, and Pavolini, 2022, p. 452). Conversely, "others" - most notably migrants - are portrayed as welfare scroungers who exploit access to social provision while allegedly failing to contribute "adequately" to the system despite their extensive use of social benefits, thereby increasing costs for the general population (Jessoula, Natili, and Pavolini, 2022, p. 453).

According to the authors, 2016 marks a critical turning point for the Republican Party with regard to exclusionary welfarism, as prior to that year's presidential campaign—when Donald Trump was first elected—exclusionary claims and welfare chauvinism were largely absent from the party's agenda and electoral pledges. In the context of labor market policies, unemployment was for the first time associated with migration, and the party's manifesto explicitly stated that the interests of American workers should take precedence over those of foreign workers competing for the same jobs. Since then, the U.S. Republican Party has developed a new programmatic platform—distinct from the traditional conservative neoliberal agenda—that combines a longstanding preference for limited welfare provision and market-based solutions with openly chauvinistic positions in key policy areas, including healthcare and labor policy.

Amid this Republican paradigm shift in welfare policy, the Trump administration and its broader entourage have increasingly embraced a growing conservative and religious discourse in the United States centered on prolific childbearing and pronatalism (Brady, 2025, p. 2). Prominent figures associated with this milieu include Elon Musk, who has publicly acknowledged having fourteen children with four women and has repeatedly claimed on social media that he is "doing [his] best to help the underpopulation crisis," describing declining population levels as "the biggest danger civilization faces by far" (Brady, 2025, p. 1). In a 2021 Fox News interview with Tucker Carlson, current Vice President J.D. Vance similarly mobilized this discourse by characterizing women who decide to forego childbearing as miserable "childless cat ladies" (Brady, 2025, p. 2). The cultural landscape underpinning the renewed emphasis on conservative gender roles also includes a network of conservative influencers and celebrities that has played a significant role in popularizing both pro- and anti-natalist sentiments: among these are so-called "tradwives," who have emerged as a prominent presence in highly visual social media content since the early 2020s (Brady, 2025, p. 9). Tradwives adopt a hyper-feminized and aestheticized form of homesteading domesticity— often drawing on imagery nostalgic of the 1950s housewife; they engage in home-centered activities such as food preparation and recipe sharing; and they overtly reject feminism while embracing conservative models of nuclear family, in which women are encouraged to remain at home rather than seeking paid employment outside the household (Brady, 2025, p. 9).

Trump's pronatalist policies took cues from this cultural landscape and particularly from his white Christian base, not only because religious commitment and theological conservatism are cross-nationally associated with higher fertility - in some cases due to doctrinal proscriptions against birth control and more broadly because conservative religiosity is linked to heightened social traditionalism and lower levels of educational attainment - but also in response to the constituency's imperative to expand white Christian demographics (Brady, 2025, p. 8; Perry and Grubbs, 2025, p. 14). Indeed, the relatively higher fertility of family-values religious conservatives bolsters and preserves their political and cultural influence, with opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion in the United States remaining substantially higher than it would be if their fertility rates were comparable to those of other Americans: this latter point highlights an often-overlooked dynamic in pronatalism, that is, higher fertility benefits group interests (Perry and Grubbs, 2025, p. 14). Prominent Christian pastors and authors articulate this logic, typically urging conservative Christians

to have more children in order to win “the culture war,” “save our civilization,” and forestall the “great replacement” (Perry and Grubbs, 2025, p. 13). For example, evangelical megachurch pastor and author Kevin DeYoung, citing declining overall birthrates, addressed evangelicals: “Here’s a culture war strategy conservative Christians should get behind: have more children and disciple them like crazy... The future belongs to the fecund” (Perry and Grubbs, 2025, p. 14). Yet the racial stakes are clear, as such calls are almost certainly not intended to promote higher fertility among committed Christians who predominantly vote for Democrats, such as Black Protestants and Latino Catholics (Perry and Grubbs, 2025, p. 14). Making explicit the racialized implications of this pronatalism, Christian-right activists, including Charlie Kirk, former Fox News host Tucker Carlson, and Peachy Keenan, have publicly emphasized that the - unacceptable - alternative to (White) native-born Americans replacing themselves, in order to avert America’s fertility crisis, would be economic and political “replacement” by Latino immigrants (Perry and Grubbs, 2025, p. 14).

Hence, Christian nationalist ideology, reflecting a desire to restore or privilege conservative Christian values and identity within American civic life, constitutes one of the principal forces underpinning nationalist pronatalism in the United States (Perry and Grubbs, 2025, p. 14). At its core, Christian nationalism entails adherence to a mythologized understanding of national belonging and, consequently, a commitment to group supremacy that envisions childbearing as a promising means for preserving the dominance of those to whom the nation is understood to rightfully belong - the so-called “true people” (Perry and Grubbs, 2025, p. 15). Group-serving pronatalism is thus closely intertwined with perceptions of political and ethnocultural threat within a zero-sum “us versus them” framework, which helps explain its strong affinity with populist leadership styles and rhetoric (Perry and Grubbs, 2025, p. 15). Indeed, other populist leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán—both of whom have actively promoted larger families as a means of countering cultural change associated with immigration—are frequently held up as exemplars of strong leadership by the Christian far right in the United States, particularly due to their opposition to LGBT rights and their defense of a national Christian identity (Perry and Grubbs, 2025, p. 15). J. D. Vance explicitly invoked Orbán’s policy agenda when advancing proposals for government-funded childcare, while Trump similarly signaled support for “baby bonuses for a new baby boom”; these and related proposals have emerged from MAGA Republicans who, much like Putin and Orbán, campaign on anti-immigration agendas coupled with Christian nationalist appeals (Perry and Grubbs, 2025, p. 21). Perry and Grubbs (2025) provide robust evidence that Christian nationalist beliefs strongly predict support for “group-serving pronatalism” and the perception that childbearing can counteract the nation’s declining fertility: their findings suggest that the pronatalist agenda of the current U.S. administration resonates with Americans who strongly adhere to the country’s conservative Christian foundations and seek to preserve or restore Christian supremacy in the nation’s identity, values, and legal framework.

Beyond overt appeals to their core base’s group interests, contemporary right-wing leaders in the United States frequently invoke national interests as a primary rationale for encouraging higher fertility, framing it as a means of addressing economic challenges, securing religious and political influence, and, in some cases, preserving the nation’s racial composition - objectives that they argue justify policy support and

subsidies (Perry and Grubbs, 2025, pp. 13-14). The U.S. current approach to natalism can indeed be classified as neo-mercantilist, given that mercantilist natalist policies adopt a state-centered strategy aimed at addressing perceived threats stemming from "relative weakness in terms of military power, economic growth, and cultural dominance as an issue of population" (Brady, 2025, pp. 2-4). Neo-mercantilism builds on earlier concerns regarding threats from foreign/enemy states but introduces a significant new peril in the form of foreign/enemy peoples, marking a shift from purely state-based, military threats to the inclusion of nongovernmental sources of risk, such as groups differentiated by religion or ethnicity (Brady, 2025, p. 4). Identity-based threats are a hallmark of neo-mercantilist policies and discourse, representing a relatively new national anxiety that drives state-supported natalist interventions (Brady, 2025, p. 4). Central to these policies are notions of authentic national identity and belonging, often racialized and closely linked to fertility: as consistently argued earlier, higher fertility among immigrant populations, compared to a broader low-fertility native population, is construed as a threat to the "essence" of the nation (Brady, 2025, p. 4).

Delving deeper into the Trump administration's concrete commitment to "family formation" so that "American families can have more babies", as it frequently emphasizes, the White House has discussed a range of incentives and policy proposals to boost birth rates in April 2025 (Brady, 2025, p. 2; Population Connection, 2025). These include a $5,000 "baby bonus", a "Medal of Motherhood" awarded to mothers with at least six children, a pledge to reserve 30% of Fulbright scholarships for applicants who are married or have children and government-funded menstrual education programs designed to teach women and girls about their most fertile days (Brady, 2025, p. 2; Population Connection, 2025). Trump declared himself the "fertilization president" and criticized the previous administration's more liberal stance on gender identity - which recognized trans identities - as a threat to women and mothers, a conservative position subsequently reinforced through the executive order requiring all federal agencies to recognize only two genders, titled "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government" (Brady, 2025, pp. 11-12). Building on this reactionary trajectory, on 24 June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court - whose conservative majority resulted from the appointment of three justices by Donald Trump during his first administration - ruled in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization that U.S. citizens no longer have a constitutional right to abortion, overturning nearly 50 years of precedent established by Roe v. Wade (1973) (Brady, 2025, p. 10). Thereafter, the Court devolved the authority to regulate abortion to individual states, leaving them to determine its legality within their own jurisdictions: as of March 2025, 19 states had enacted bans or imposed severe restrictions on abortion, including in cases where the pregnancy posed a threat to the mother's life (Brady, 2025, p. 10). Soon after Trump took office for a second term in January 2025, reproductiverights.gov - a federal website outlining women's rights to abortion and contraception under U.S. law - was taken offline, while information on contraceptive guidance was simultaneously removed from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) website (Population Connection, 2025).

On February 18, 2025, Trump issued the executive order titled "Expanding Access to In Vitro Fertilization", accompanied by a fact sheet noting that many "hopeful couples" face infertility, and that the administration "recognizes the importance of family formation and, as a Nation, our public policy must make

it easier for loving and longing mothers and fathers to have children" (Brady, 2025, p. 11). More specifically, the executive order instructed the Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy to submit policy recommendations aimed at "protecting IVF access and aggressively reducing out-of-pocket and health plan costs for IVF treatment," stating, "because we want more babies, to put it very nicely" (Brady, 2025, p. 11). The order and fact sheet paradoxically followed a disruption in IVF services in Alabama, triggered by a 2024 ruling from the state's Supreme Court that declared "embryos created through in vitro fertilization (IVF) should be considered children", thereby criminalizing the disposal of unused embryos - an established practice in IVF clinics - under the state's Civil Wrongful Death of a Minor Act (Brady, 2025, p. 11). Later in October, Trump reached an agreement with the pharmaceutical company Merck KGaA to reduce the cost of its IVF medications for U.S. consumers, with the discounted drugs to be sold through the new government website TrumpRX; according to a Wall Street Journal report, the site stands to benefit the Trump family owing to its Trump-branded pharmaceutical marketplace (Population Connection, 2025).

Trump's "one big beautiful bill," signed into law on July 4, provides a modest $1,000 baby bonus in the form of a "Trump account", a tax-advantaged savings account for all U.S. citizen newborns as of July 2026, and at the same time eliminates Medicaid funding for Planned Parenthood, thereby severely restricting low-income Americans' access to reproductive health services (Population Connection, 2025). In July 2025, The New York Times reported that the Trump administration signaled plans to divert funds from Title X — the $300 million federal program that provides low-income and uninsured Americans with family planning services and contraceptives — to establish an "infertility training center" aimed at boosting pregnancies by educating people on the root causes of infertility, offering holistic infertility treatments and more (Population Connection, 2025). Subsequently, the administration also targeted the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Population Affairs, which oversees Title X, for extensive layoffs (Population Connection, 2025).

While encouraging prolific white motherhood as a duty to country, family, and the national imagined community, U.S. natalists simultaneously advance antinatalist policies targeting the portions of the population deemed undesirable, as articulated in Trump's public statements that migrants, especially those from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, are "poisoning the blood of our country" - echoing eugenics ideology (Brady, 2025, pp. 2, 15). Although Latinos are a driving force in U.S. population growth, economic power, and educational attainment—contributing over $4 trillion annually to the U.S. GDP and reaching record levels of college enrollment—at the New York City launch of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, he portrayed the United States as a dumping ground for Mexico to send drugs, criminals, and rapists, campaigning on criminalizing both legal and unauthorized immigrants as a central threat to U.S. national security, economic growth, and the nation's overall character (Ong et al., 2025, p. 1). During his first administration, President Trump's leading immigration policies comprised a travel ban, the construction of a southwest border wall, and the termination of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS)—many of which disproportionately affected Latino immigrants and families (Ong et al., 2025, p. 1). Throughout his 2020 reelection campaign, Trump continued to wield rhetoric that cast Latino immigrants in xenophobic and

disparaging terms, weaving a divisive narrative that set U.S.-born Latinos in opposition to immigrant communities (Ong et al., 2025, p. 2). By the 2024 presidential campaign, he escalated these threats, promising to deport millions of undocumented immigrants, with particular emphasis on those with criminal offenses or what he provocatively called "the worst of the worst" (Ong et al., 2025, p. 2).

Among Trump's earliest moves after his 2024 election victory was appointing Stephen Miller, an immigration hardliner and veteran of the first Trump administration, as deputy chief of policy (Nagel, 2025, pp. 1-2). He became infamous as the architect of some of the most contentious immigration policies of the first Trump administration, including the 'Muslim ban' that barred entry from several Muslim-majority countries; the 'family separation' policy that tore over 2,000 children from their parents; the 'remain in Mexico' programme forcing migrants to endure prolonged waits in Mexico before requesting asylum; and the invocation of Article 42, a little-known public health provision, to shut the border during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nagel, 2025, p. 2). Like many in the MAGA ecosystem, Miller views immigration control as a matter of national sovereignty and cultural integrity, espousing the well-known MAGA refrain that Western "Judeo-Christian" culture is threatened by non-European—particularly Muslim—immigration, as well as by the "woke" ideology that legitimizes non-Western identities and norms (Nagel, 2025, p. 3). Yet his opposition to temporary, non-immigrant visas designed to address specific labor shortages puts him sharply at odds with post-1965 "mainstream" Republican politics (Nagel, 2025, p. 3). Miller has repeatedly argued that temporary skilled-labor visas depress the wages of U.S.-trained IT workers: specifically, his hard-right stance on the H-1B visa has drawn criticism from tech billionaires and Trump allies Elon Musk, a former H-1B worker, and Vivek Ramaswamy, both of whom have vocally supported expanding the H-1B system (Nagel, 2025, p. 4). While Miller did not respond to Musk's critiques on X, right-wing commentator Laura Loomer wrote, "Our country was built by white Europeans, actually. Not third-world invaders from India" (Nagel, 2025, p. 4).

On the inauguration day of his second term (January 20, 2025), Trump issued two executive orders: "Protecting the Meaning and Value of American Citizenship" and "Protecting the American People Against Invasion" (Ong et al., 2025, p. 2; Brady, 2025, pp. 12-13). The first order challenged longstanding interpretations of the Fourteenth Amendment, which states that "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and the States wherein they reside" (Brady, 2025, p. 12). Breaking with a legal tradition spanning more than 150 years, Trump's order claimed that prior readings of the Amendment had failed to account for the "subject to the jurisdiction thereof" clause, asserting that not everyone born on U.S. soil automatically qualifies for citizenship (Brady, 2025, pp. 12-13). The order further prohibited all government departments and agencies from issuing or recognizing documents that confer citizenship on individuals deemed ineligible under this new interpretation (Brady, 2025, p. 13).

The second order addressed both internal and external threats to the country and sought to implement his campaign pledge for the mass deportation of undocumented immigrants (Brady, 2025, p. 13; Ong, 2025, p. 2). It tasked multiple government officials and agencies with facilitating the deportation and removal of "illegal aliens" and mandated the establishment of a Federal Homeland Security Task Force in every state,

headed by the Attorney General and the Secretary of Homeland Security (Brady, 2025, p. 13). The order has been carried out through a combination of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations, including raids, detention, and deportation of thousands of migrants, as well as the apprehension of U.S. citizens and the deportation of minors who hold U.S. citizenship alongside their mothers (Brady, 2025, p. 13). ICE has launched large-scale operations targeting undocumented immigrants, deploying military-style, heavily armed tactical units to urban areas, which sparked public protests and legal challenges (Ong et al., 2025, p. 8). Enforcement authority has further expanded through Section 287(g) agreements, allowing state and local law enforcement to implement federal immigration laws during routine policing – a development that has raised serious concerns about civil rights and sanctuary policies (Ong et al., 2025, p. 8). In January 2025, the Trump administration also revoked an Obama-era policy, later expanded under Biden, that restricted ICE enforcement in sensitive locations such as schools, hospitals, and places of worship (Ong et al., 2025, p. 8). Additionally, the recent U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Noem v. Vasquez Perdomo* heightened alarm over racial profiling: in a 6–3 ruling, the Court lifted a lower court injunction that had barred ICE from conducting "roving patrols" based solely on factors such as appearance, language, occupation, or location (Ong et al., 2025, p. 8).

Civil rights advocates argue that these measures will disproportionately impact Latino communities, collectively signaling a dramatic shift toward more expansive, militarized, and punitive immigration enforcement (Ong et al., 2025, p.8). Indeed, while immigration is not solely a Latino issue, Ong et al. (2025)'s analysis of ICE data during the first six months of Trump's second administration indicates that Latinos comprised approximately nine out of ten ICE arrests. During Trump's first 100 days, Latino arrests by ICE averaged 558 per day—more than double the corresponding period under the Biden Administration—and surged further after Stephen Miller directed immigration officers to conduct 3,000 arrests per day, peaking at a 253% year-over-year increase in June 2025 (Ong et al., 2025, pp. 2, 8-9). Latino arrests were highly concentrated among a few nationalities, with Mexicans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans accounting for the largest numbers, which in some cases doubled or tripled relative to the Biden Administration (Ong et al., 2025, pp. 2, 9). Additionally, ICE arrests were heavily concentrated in a limited number of states, and evidence suggests no correlation with crime levels, as reflected in state-level variation and changes in both the number and share of Latino arrests between 2024 and 2025 - with Texas, Florida, California, Georgia, and Virginia experiencing the most significant increases under the Trump Administration (Ong et al., 2025, pp. 2, 9). Instead, arrests appear to have been influenced by political alignment and disproportionately targeted states with larger Latino noncitizen populations, implying that enforcement practices were shaped more by politics and ethnicity than by public safety or immigration status. (Ong et al., 2025, p. 2). Notably, the enforcement strategy shifted toward community-based arrests in public spaces, which increased by 255% and comprised 42% of all Trump-era arrests, representing a marked departure from previous administrations' focus on deporting individuals already incarcerated at federal, state, or local levels (Ong et al., 2025, p. 9).

The United States has also deported hundreds of migrants and immigrants accused of gang affiliation to a Terrorism Confinement Center in El Salvador without due legal process, with the Trump administration paying the Salvadoran government $6 million to detain these individuals (Brady, 2025, p. 13). Immigrant

detentions and deportations carried out by ICE in 2025 follow allegations of human rights violations during the first Trump administration (2016–2020), marked by the forcible separation of children from their parents and their placement in detention centres at the border (Brady, 2025, p. 13). During the same period, complaints of medical abuse also emerged from women detained in an ICE facility, where an alarming number of hysterectomies were reportedly performed on detainees without meeting established standards of informed consent (Brady, 2025, pp. 13-14). While deporting, detaining, and instilling fear among thousands of racialized Latino, Indian, and Asian migrants, the Trump administration nonetheless welcomed 49 white Afrikaners from South Africa for resettlement in May 2025, citing unsubstantiated claims that the group was facing genocide under the majority-Black post-apartheid South African government (Brady, 2025, p. 14). This latter, blatant attempt to contrast anxieties over the decline of supposedly "ideal" populations is coupled with a subtler fear surrounding the perceived expansion of "less desirable" groups: in a logic similar to that applied to migrants, the Trump administration has also framed disabled and neurodivergent people as threats to population health (Brady, 2025, pp. 14-15). At an April 16, 2025 press conference in Washington, D.C., Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. delivered remarks about autistic children that framed autistic people as a societal burden and questioned their eligibility for social support by portraying them as potential non–wage earners - a claim that is inaccurate in many cases (Brady, 2025, p. 14).

A large-scale deportation infrastructure was likewise developed in Russia beginning in 2012, when a digital "system of electronic accounting of foreign citizens" was implemented, fundamentally altering access to the Russian labor market for millions of migrant workers—many of whom increasingly found themselves removed from Russia and their passports electronically linked to re-entry bans (Bahovadinova, 2024, p. 695). As argued earlier, the Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan emerged as major labor suppliers for Russia's construction and service sectors following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a development facilitated by the visa-free travel regime among the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States—an intergovernmental organization established after the Soviet collapse (Bahovadinova, 2024, p. 695). However, as labor mobility to Russia from former Soviet republics expanded, so too did the infrastructure of policing and internal control, as Russian migration law—and the frequent amendments made to it—came to be used as a mechanism for regulating and containing migrant workers (Bahovadinova, 2024, p. 695). Since 2012, the Russian migration regime has increasingly relied on deportation and deportability as instruments of post-entry social control over migrant populations (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 5). Moreover, from 2014 onward, a series of amendments to Russian migration legislation required migrant workers to pass monetized tests in Russian language proficiency, history, and legal knowledge in order to obtain a *patent*, a paid work permit granting the right to work in Russia (Bahovadinova, 2024, p. 695).

This is analogous to the Trump administration's incremental expansion of requirements and procedural steps within the U.S. legal immigration and naturalization process. In August 2025, the administration issued a policy memorandum announcing that immigration authorities would begin interviewing neighbors and colleagues of certain applicants for U.S. citizenship, thereby reviving a practice not used since the George H. W. Bush administration (Bazail-Eimil, 2025). The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) further

indicated that applicants may be asked to submit letters of recommendation from "neighbors, employers, co-workers, and business associates" capable of providing substantiated information relevant to eligibility for naturalization (Bazail-Eimil, 2025). The new more stringent and "holistic" criteria for assessing "good moral character" in U.S. citizenship applications - a requirement long satisfied by the absence of certain criminal offenses or other disqualifying conduct - now extend to screening for "anti-Americanism," potentially assessed through social media activity (Jeyaretnam, 2025). USCIS officers are instructed to evaluate not merely the absence of misconduct, but also the presence of positive attributes, such as sustained community involvement and contributions, family caregiving and social ties, educational attainment, stable and legal employment history, length of lawful residence, and compliance with tax obligations (Jeyaretnam, 2025). At the same time, officers may deny applications based on conduct deemed "contrary to the average behavior of citizens" in the relevant jurisdiction, even when such conduct is "technically lawful" (Jeyaretnam, 2025). Trump has also signaled an intention to use these expanded standards to pursue denaturalization, publicly referencing figures such as New York City Democratic mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani (Jeyaretnam, 2025). In June 2025, a Justice Department memorandum instructed its Civil Division to "prioritize and maximally pursue denaturalization proceedings" in all cases permitted by law and supported by evidence, including alleged violations of eligibility requirements related to "good moral character" (Jeyaretnam, 2025). As will be illustrated below, denaturalization became an actionable policy also in Russia beginning in 2017.

Putin's presidential addresses and decrees – such as the 2012 decree *On providing inter-ethnic harmony* – together with Duma legislation, including the bill requiring all migrant workers (except highly skilled ones) to pass mandatory language, history and law examinations, as well as amendmends to the Code of Administrative Offences that widened the grounds for deportation and re-entry ban leading to a sharp increase in removals – collectively mobilized anti-immigrant sentiment to bolster the regime's declining popularity in 2011-2012 (Joo, 2024, pp. 489-492). Even prior to his election, in January 2012, Putin published a series of articles in major newspapers outlining the direction of his prospective government; in one such article, *"Russia: the National Issue,"* he marked a departure from previous practice, as Russian authorities had historically avoided overt ethnic nationalism—which positions ethnic Russians as the core of the state—and instead deliberately invoked the concept of *russkii* statehood, characterizing ethnic Russians as a "state-forming" nation and simultaneously pledging to address the "migration problem" through stricter admission policies and harsher penalties for violations (Joo, 2024, pp. 490-491). Indeed, despite widespread electoral fraud and manipulation, the Putin regime's high public approval ratings and vote shares are not entirely fabricated, and the Russian government closely monitors public opinion in order to adjust policies when necessary (Joo, 2024, p. 489). Public support is crucial for the Putin regime because it constitutes a central source of political power: given that Eurasian politics are structured around patronal networks, a leader's popularity shapes elite expectations regarding his durability, systemic stability, and regime survival, thereby enabling the consolidation of elite backing and the pre-emption of potential challengers (Joo, 2024, p. 489). This thus demonstrates how electoral competition can function as a key driver of restrictive immigration

policies, irrespective of political context—whether democratic like the U.S. or authoritarian like Russia (Joo, 2024, p. 496).

Central Asian citizens were able to enter Russia using only their travel passports under the visa-free travel regime; nonetheless, in order to work and reside in Russia for more than three months, they had to secure a wide range of documents, including temporary household registration and a labor license (*trudovoi patent*) subject to monthly fees (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 5). Because the patent's monthly fee generally amounted to a significant proportion of an individual's income, these legislative changes sharply increased the costs of mobility to Russia, resulting in a shift among migrant workers toward acquiring Russian citizenship through a variety of official and semi-legal channels - despite access to the latter remaining complex, contingent, and costly (Bahovadinova, 2024, p. 695). More recently, concerns over the geopolitical vulnerability of Russia's sparsely populated territories and imaginaries of demographic crisis have driven the state to mobilize citizenship policy in order to expand the government's program for the "resettlement of compatriots," which aims to increase the Russian population by encouraging the "return migration" of expatriate Russians (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 5; Bahovadinova, 2024, p. 695). While the desired citizen is imagined as white, Russian-speaking, and a carrier of Russian culture and traditions, with an emotional affiliation to the idea of Russianness, these changes have also opened expedited access to citizenship for less desired, racialized migrant workers from post-Soviet regions such as Central Asia (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 5).

Although the new citizenship regime appears to run counter to the core assumptions of antinatalist policies, it has instead been increasingly weaponised to render "second-class" naturalized citizens militarily expendable, deploying them as cannon fodder in Ukraine in place of Slavic men and thereby extracting instrumental value from their bodies. In 2022, Putin signed a decree *"On Accepting to Citizenship of the Russian Federation Foreign Citizens Who Have Signed a Contract to Serve in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation,"* which allows foreign citizens to bypass most naturalization requirements upon signing a one-year military service contract (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 7). Individuals conscripted to fight in Ukraine, along with their immediate family members, thereby became eligible for simplified naturalization, with the review period reduced to three months - building upon 2022 Presidential Decree No. 619, which reduced the minimum waiting period from three years to one year (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 7). An additional 2022 decree authorized foreign citizens to serve not only as contract soldiers but also as conscripts in the Russian armed forces, a status that likewise qualified them for expedited naturalization procedures (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 7).

To operationalize these policies, large-scale recruitment campaigns targeting foreign citizens were launched in major Russian cities, including sites of document production frequently visited by migrant workers; brochures and informational leaflets were distributed in Russian, Tajik, and Uzbek, presenting military service as a pathway to fast-tracked citizenship and comparatively high salaries (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 7). Beyond citizenship incentives, the Russian state also pledged a range of material benefits to recruits, including discounted mortgage rates, rent reimbursement, free healthcare and rehabilitation

services, assistance with employment, and free university education for recruits' children (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 7). Such enticement measures were complemented by the administration of state violence, repression, and denaturalization: throughout 2023, the Ministry of Internal Affairs carried out Operation *Nelegal* ("Illegal-2023"), nominally aimed at identifying undocumented migrant workers in Russia (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 8). Much like in the US, law enforcement agencies conducted repeated raids, at times even deploying drones to track individuals attempting to evade arrest; during these operations, migrant workers were rounded up, beaten, intimidated, and, in many cases, deported (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 8). Some detainees were offered military service as an alternative to deportation, with private actors—most notably the Wagner Group—also recruiting Central Asian citizens from Russian prisons (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 8). Naturalized citizens who had failed to register with military enlistment offices were likewise targeted: police were reportedly instructed to focus on migrants holding Russian passports, many of whom were forcibly transported to enlistment offices for registration (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, pp. 8-9).

In 2024, Mikhail Matveev and other parliamentarians proposed an amendment to the citizenship law allowing the revocation of naturalized Russian citizenship in cases where individuals were deemed to have 'violated the oath' of loyalty to the Russian Federation, which, following the 2017 amendments to the Russian Law on Citizenship and specifically Article 11.1, naturalized citizens are required to take when receiving their new passports (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 9; Bahovadinova, 2024, p. 696). He accused naturalized citizens of pursuing purely instrumental interests in obtaining citizenship—such as access to welfare benefits, education, and healthcare—a characterization strikingly reminiscent of recent declarations by USCIS chief spokesperson Matthew Tragesser on U.S. citizenship policy: "Immigration benefits—including to live and work in the United States—remain a privilege, not a right" (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 9; Jeyaretnam, 2025). Since 2017, Russian citizenship could already be revoked for naturalized individuals on the basis of 'providing false information about the intention to abide by the Constitution and law of the Russian Federation' or submitting 'counterfeit documents or deliberately false information,' according to Article 22, added to the Law on Citizenship via amendment (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 9; Bahovadinova, 2024, p. 696). Because 'evasion of military service' is criminalized, all naturalized citizens who fail to enlist effectively are turned into potential targets for denaturalization, with non-enlistment treated as evidence of providing false information regarding their intent to abide by the law (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 9). During 2023-2024, at least three dual Russian-Tajikistani citizens were denaturalized on this basis; yet, on 31 July 2024, a new amendment to Article 22 explicitly added 'failure to fulfill an obligation to enlist for military service' as an additional ground for revocation of citizenship (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 9). It is worth noting that these provisions are not designed to affect those born with Russian citizenship, but apply exclusively to those who have been naturalized (Bahovadinova, 2024, p. 696).

In June 2024, Aleksandr Bastrykin, head of the Investigative Committee of Russia, stated that authorities had already 'captured' 30,000 new citizens who failed to enlist for military service and sent approximately 10,000 of them to the 'special military operation', describing the policy as a novel 'schtick'

devised to control migration in Russia (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 14). The use of police raids—a routinized tool of migration control in Russia traditionally employed to 'hunt' for 'illegal' migrant workers—was extended to target 'migrants with Russian passports,' a category designating recently naturalized citizens from Central Asia, underscoring that racialized new citizens in Russia are still treated and regarded as illegal migrants regardless of their documentation (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 14). This display of state violence fits within the broader context of the reaction to the 2024 terrorist attack in Moscow, which resulted in the deaths of 145 residents and the arrest of four Tajikistani citizens as suspects (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 14). Scenes of the suspects being tortured by Russian law enforcement circulated online in a deliberate spectacularization of violence, while collective punishment of migrant workers and Tajikistanis escalated through mass raids, deportations and stop-and-frisk operations across Russia (Bahovadinova and Borisova, 2025, p. 14).

A similar absence of coherent criteria in targeting irregular immigration has similarly emerged in the most recent immigration enforcement strategy of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Drawing on ICE administrative records, Ong et al.'s (2026) recent study demonstrates that during the first eight months of the Trump administration, detentions and deportations increasingly targeted noncriminal, law-abiding Latinos, contradicting official claims that enforcement priorities focus on the "worst of the worst." ICE's expanded detention practices have definitively departed from a focus on public safety and flight risk, shifting instead toward robust, routine enforcement of mass detention that includes many individuals with no criminal record and subjects them to prolonged confinement under harsh conditions (Ong et al., 2026, p. 2). Indeed, according to the study, despite persistent rhetoric from the Trump administration asserting that it is "removing dangerous criminal illegal aliens," as of November 16, 2025 nearly three quarters of all detained immigrants had never been convicted of a criminal offense. In July 2025, the Trump administration opened a detention facility known as "Alligator Alcatraz" in the Florida Everglades and additionally contracted other remote or repurposed sites in states including Louisiana, Nebraska, and Texas; in doing so, it rapidly expanded ICE detention capacity, signaling a significant escalation of enforcement beyond traditional facilities (Ong et al., 2026, p. 2). The administration has further partnered with Republican-led states through the 287(g) program to expand detention with the aim of holding up to 100,000 individuals per day; by comparison, no prior administration has detained more than 50,200 individuals daily, and at the start of 2026 there were 153,651 federal inmates in the custody of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (Ong et al., 2026, p. 2). Owing to reportedly poor conditions within ICE detention facilities, deaths in custody have risen substantially, making 2025 the deadliest year for immigration detention in more than two decades (Ong et al., 2026, p. 2). The scale and trajectory of these developments are likely to intensify following Congress's allocation of $170 billion over four years to border and interior enforcement, with ICE receiving $45 billion to expand detention capacity—a threefold increase in the agency's detention budget, as the study reports.

Xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment were exploited by Russian government elites not only through intensified immigration crackdowns but also by channeling protectionist natalist policies rooted in welfare chauvinism, in an effort to project the image of a responsive and accountable state while deflecting

responsibility for deteriorating socio-economic conditions onto an externalized enemy, thereby maintaining political stability and containing social unrest (Kingsbury, 2019, pp. 292-293). The erosion of interpersonal and institutional trust, together with heightened social anxiety stemming from economic stagnation and stalled democratization, set the stage for the government to exploit xenophobia as a means of rationalizing "insecurities caused by the sense of vulnerability against the tyranny of the police, the unfairness of the legal system, and widespread corruption," prompting citizens to demand increased privileges for the in-group (native Russians) (Kingsbury, 2019, pp. 292-293). Given that public spending on family programs ranks among the policy areas most valued by Russian citizens, political elites further appropriated and legitimized anti-immigrant sentiment by promoting the allocation of family benefits to the in-group while simultaneously restricting access to welfare provisions for the 'others' (Kingsbury, 2019, p. 292). Immigration is often linked to low birth rates in policy debates over sustaining population levels deemed necessary for economic productivity and military capacity, as well as for shaping Russia's future ethnic composition: much like the American right-wing populist endorsement of the "Great Replacement" theory, immigrants are feared to dilute national identity and replace the shrinking native population in Russian public discourse as well (Kingsbury, 2019, p. 284). As in the United States, the radical right in Russia advocates for selective redistribution that favors natives and limits benefits for immigrants and ethnic or religious minorities, using welfare chauvinism to appease native families who perceive the growing foreign-born population as a demographic and social threat amid economic and political instability (Kingsbury, 2019, pp. 283-284).

Several initiatives could be classified as welfare chauvinism: in his 2013 Annual Address to the Federal Assembly, President Putin addressed the deservingness of migrants to access social benefits, arguing that only those who pay taxes and other social contributions should be eligible to use state education and healthcare resources (Kingsbury, 2019, p. 289). Similarly, Duma representatives Aleksei Zhuravlev and Sergei Zigarev, both members of radical-right parties, sponsored a bill in October 2013 limiting access to government preschools for children of migrants, contingent on proof that their parents have paid Russian taxes and were tax residents for at least one year, citing shortages of preschool slots for the native population, low educational attainment among migrant children, and cultural differences that allegedly generate social tensions (Kingsbury, 2019, p. 289). The *Government's Conception of Long-Term Socio-Economic Development* identifies migration management and the promotion of native birth rates as central to addressing the primary challenge to Russia's stability—the decline in population—but analysis of speeches and policy documents reveals a clear preference for prioritizing native fertility over mass immigration: in his 2012 and 2013 annual addresses, President Putin emphasized the importance of native fertility and called for a stimulation of second and third births while simultaneously highlighting the ills of immigration, which, when mentioned in demographic terms, has almost exclusively a negative connotation (Kingsbury, 2019, p. 291). In contrast, official discourse on birth rates focuses nearly entirely on native births, with policy attention firmly directed toward supporting Russian families through family benefits - on "making Russian babies" - as pragmatically illustrated by the fact that the generous Maternity Capital program, which will be discussed below, is restricted to Russian citizens (Kingsbury, 2019, p. 285, 291). In conclusion, the government regards the costly long-term

strategy of boosting native fertility as the sole viable solution to population decline, while immigrants are envisioned as undesirable, temporary nuisances, at best expendable as cannon fodder in battle (Kingsbury, 2019, pp. 285, 292). As Russkikh (2021) argues, the political choice to rely exclusively on pro-natalist policies while forgoing migrants in addressing depopulation could be explained by the fact that, unlike migrants, ehtnic Russian citizens of reproductive age represent a more "prolific" and "attractive" resource, both in terms of labor supply and future electoral population.

As the demographic crisis rose to the top of Russia's political agenda and fertility became a matter of national security, "Maternity Capital," a flagship pronatalist programme relying on substantial monetary transfers to families and designed to incentivize women to have more children, was introduced as ealy as 2006 (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, pp. 355-359). The programme provides a large one-time transfer (certificate), initially awarded to mothers who give birth to or adopt a second or third child and later extended to the first child born or adopted between 2020 and 2026 (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 359). Eligibility is determined at the household level, with a single Maternity Capital certificate granted per family regardless of income, and funds restricted to expenditures on housing, children's education, contributions to the mother's pension fund, or rehabilitation services for a child with a disability (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 359). Beginning in 2006 at RUB 250,000 (approximately $9,500), the benefit was steadily increased through indexation to RUB 429,400 (approximately $10,000) by 2014, an amount equivalent to nearly five years of minimum living expenses for a child, although it could not be used to cover most daily living costs (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 359). Despite its fiscal burden, the federal programme was maintained through the economic recessions of 2008 and 2012, and beginning in 2011 regional supplements were added for the third child (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 359). Maternity Capital may be accessed only after the third birthday of the child for whom it is awarded and is provided not as cash but for specific purposes, most commonly the purchase or rental of housing, as well as the payment of school tuition and fees (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 359). In 2021, an additional option was introduced allowing families to receive a monthly payment following the birth or adoption of a second child, which proved to be widely utilized (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 359).

The fertility increases associated with Maternity Capital were temporary, modest in magnitude, and faded over time (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 370). In Russia, fertility rose noticeably in the years following the introduction of Maternity Capital, with the largest gains occurring in the initial period and peaking in 2015; however, rates remained well below replacement level and, from 2016 onward, declined and stagnated (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, pp. 361-362). Higher fertility levels were not sustained even when benefit amounts increased, leading some analysts to speculate that newly introduced financial incentives primarily influenced the timing rather than the quantum of births per woman, possibly reflecting uncertainty about the long-term continuity of such policies (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 362). Interviews with Maternity Capital recipients, for instance, revealed a widespread distrust regarding the programme's sustainability (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 362).

The rationale behind the government's continued allocation of scarce financial resources to these largely ineffective policies appears puzzling: while the failure to provide adequate childcare—particularly for children aged 0–3—is consistent with official familialist rhetoric, it has not resulted in most mothers remaining at home to have and raise children, as the Maternity Capital model implicitly assumes (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 371). The post-communist governments' traditionalist rhetoric and their concentration of public spending on pronatalist incentives aimed at increasing births, rather than on expanding preschool childcare institutions that facilitate maternal employment, have had only limited success in either reversing demographic decline or re-traditionalizing women's lives (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 372). Instead, the "dual-earner"-"double burden" system—often described as a "working mother" gender contract, in which most women engage in full-time employment while retaining primary responsibility for childcare and domestic labor—has persisted from the communist period to the present, as reflected in the high share of employed mothers with children aged seven to ten (82% in 2009 and 86% a decade later), thereby crystallizing patterns of small family size combined with high female labor force participation characteristic of advanced economies (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, pp. 356, 367, 372).

The failure of the state-subsidized male breadwinner welfare model can also be attributed to the fact that, during the post-communist recessions, many facilities within the extensive network of state-funded preschool childcare inherited from the communist period were closed, partially commercialized, or rendered inaccessible as demand declined alongside falling birth rates, leaving post-communist governments with a limited preschool childcare infrastructure to support their pronatalist programmes (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 366). In the absence of adequate public provision, a combination of childcare arrangements—drawing on extended families, private nannies, and commercial facilities—has enabled maternal employment in Russia, particularly among poorer and rural households; however, this shortfall in public childcare simultaneously generates pressure toward a "home care" model that keeps many mothers out of the labor force for extended periods, thereby constraining their career advancement and long-term earnings (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, pp. 367-371). Moreover, although low-income families were not formally excluded from the programme, limiting eligibility to second or third children effectively marginalized larger, poor, and single-parent households that fell within the stigmatized category of *neblagopoluchnye sem'i* ("unfortunate families"), characterized by difficult living conditions and nonconformity with the traditional family model (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, pp. 363-364). Field research conducted during the programme's early years confirmed that many eligible mothers encountered bureaucratic barriers in accessing the benefit and that uptake was considerably easier among middle-class than among poorer families (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 359).

In more recent policy developments, the nationalist, conservative, and sanctioning dimensions of Russia's pronatalist policy have emerged as its dominant features, complementing existing benefits; notably, to promote higher fertility, wealthier regions are expected to rely primarily on financial incentives, such as direct grants to mothers, whereas poorer regions are encouraged to intensify pronatalist propaganda promoting childbirth (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 83). At the federal level, demographic performance has emerged as a

central criterion in the Kremlin's evaluation of local governments: beginning in 2025, a governor's failure to meet demographic targets may justify dismissal or block promotion (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 83). Russia has even established a new group of officials described as a "demographic special forces unit," according to the RBC business daily (The Moscow Times, 2025). The measure was announced at a press conference by Federation Council chair Valentina Matviyenko, who stated: "Today, any regional government agency can give you the name of the deputy minister responsible for demographics. A special demographic task force has been created. We can hope that we will return to our traditional values" (The Moscow Times, 2025). The regime's concerted attempt to address Russia's urgent need for more citizens—a "special demographic operation," as Nina Ostanina, head of the State Duma Committee for Family Protection, termed it—reveals that population decline is as much a demographic challenge as a geopolitical one for Russia (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 82; Rickleton, 2025; Russkikh, 2021, p. 150).

Russia's National Security Strategy, issued in July 2021, declared the Russian family a fundamental pillar of national security and established family protection as a national priority, marking a clear departure from the previous directive of December 2015, which mentioned the family only briefly (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 84). In the 2021 directive, the family is framed as a moral and spiritual bulwark against existential threats to Russia, reinforcing the regime's broader ideological stance against the West by identifying it as the source of allegedly harmful values contributing to declining birth rates (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 84). This logical association between "decadent" Western progressive values and dangerously below-replacement fertility rates is evident in Putin's declaration at the 2013 Valdai Summit, where he asserted that, in contrast to Western countries, Russia protects its traditional values and opposes same-sex unions (Russkikh, 2021, p. 148). "We can see how many Euro-Atlantic countries have strayed from their roots, including Christian values, which form the basis of Western civilisation. They deny moral principles and any traditional identity: national, cultural, religious or even sexual. They implement policies that equate large families with same-sex parent families, faith in God with faith in Satan [...] I am convinced that this is a direct path to degradation and primitivism, leading to a profound demographic and moral crisis. What does this moral crisis indicate, if not the loss of the ability to reproduce? Today, almost no developed country is capable of ensuring the renewal of its population, even with the help of migration flows" (Russkikh, 2021, p. 148; translation by author via DeepL).

Putin's intervention exposes his perception of the fertility crisis as a threat to national security not only insofar as it may weaken the Russian army and economy, but also as the direct outcome of the West's multi-pronged attempt to disseminate its toxic, enervating, and ultimately self-destructive values, further illuminating the centrality of traditionalist measures in Russia's pronatalist policymaking. From Putin's perspective, Russia's demographic decline is the outcome of a long-standing Western hybrid war against the country, in which liberal policies and gender norms are deployed as "genocidal" weapons of cultural extermination (Krastev and Holmes, 2024). Much like other authoritarian regimes, such as Iran—where religious authorities frequently attribute drastic declines in birth rates to "westoxification"—the Kremlin understands feminism and LGBTQ ideology as parts of a long-term strategy aimed at preserving Western

dominance by constraining the demographic potential of other civilisations (Krastev and Holmes, 2024). Hence, within the political imaginary of Russian pronatalism, a conservative discourse opposing abortion, sex education, and homosexuality while promoting "traditional family values" closely intertwines with the nationalist one advancing xenophobic agendas and propagating alarmist narratives about the "dying out" of the national majority in the face of perceived threats from migrants and ethnic minorities (Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova and Kozlov, 2023, p. 357). Ironically, alongside poor rural villagers, the demographic groups best aligned with these discourses are Russia's non-Russian and non-Orthodox populations (Balzer, 2024, p. 8).

The siege mentality of regime elites was formally institutionalized in state policy from 2013 onward, when legislation was adopted banning the dissemination of information about homosexuality; thereafter, further normative measures followed, under which same-sex couples were barred from adoption, intercountry adoption from states that do not criminalize homosexuality was prohibited altogether, LGBTQ activists were openly persecuted, and gender transition was banned (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 84). In the text of the 2023 law officially classifying the LGBTQ community as an extremist entity, this regulatory intervention was justified by reference to the community's alleged inclusion in a global Western movement seeking to undermine Russia's distinctive identity, particularly through attacks on the institution of the family, thereby legally construing LGBTQ individuals as a threat to the state (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 84). Conversely, the heteronormative family was constitutionally enshrined in Russia through an amendment ratified in 2020, which states: "The role of the state is to protect the family, motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood; to defend the institution of marriage as a union between a man and a woman" (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 84). On 12 November 2024, the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian Parliament, approved a bill—later ratified by the upper house as well—outlawing "propaganda in favor of a childfree lifestyle", which imposes fines of 400,000 rubles on individuals and five million rubles on organizations found to disseminate neutral or positive information about being childfree across the Internet, media, films, and advertisements (International Federation for Human Rights, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024; Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, pp. 83-84). The law models the legislation banning LGBTQ propaganda, once again justified on the basis that, as Vyacheslav Volodin, chairman of the Duma, stated in late September 2024, "Propaganda encouraging people to be child-free is a dangerous social phenomenon. The Americans are the ones behind it (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 83).

As in the United States, part of this effort to re-traditionalize gender roles in an attempt to bolster birth rates has involved a legal clampdown on abortion, which Putin himself described as an urgent issue for the regime in November 2023 (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 83). The Soviet Union maintained one of the world's most permissive abortion regimes, with the only exception of the Stalin-era ban between 1936 and 1955 – an approach consistent with socialist principles of women's emancipation, education, and labor participation aimed at bolstering the economy (Schulte, 2025, p. 15). Owing to the limited availability of quality contraceptives under conditions of restricted market access during the Soviet period, state-funded abortion became the default means of fertility control; indeed, between 1960 and 1990, the annual number of abortions in the Soviet Union exceeded six million (Schulte, 2025, pp. 15-16). This socialist legacy resulted in Russian women being socialized to expect access to abortion, which makes the current restrictionist policy all the more

striking (Schulte, 2025, p. 16). Since the 2010s, advertising for abortion services has been prohibited, and doctors have been granted the right to refuse performing abortions on the grounds that the procedure conflicts with their religious beliefs (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 83). In the summer of 2022, Russian Minister of Health Mikhail Murashko called for stricter enforcement of regulations governing the sale of abortion-inducing drugs, and in 2023, the Ministry of Health issued a set of recommended responses for physicians, intended to persuade patients to carry their pregnancies to term (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 83). Additional measures have included the closure of private clinics providing abortion services and the imposition of fines on individuals and organizations that promote pregnancy termination (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 83). As a manifestation of the increasing convergence between the regime and the Russian Orthodox Church—which staunchly opposes abortion and upholds traditional gender roles as divinely ordained—newly pregnant women at health clinics across 16 Russian regions have begun receiving letters from the Patriarch, offering blessings for their pregnancies while discouraging them from terminating them (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 83).

In line with the regime's familializing approach to pro-natalism, these initiatives seek to promote childbirth as a woman's primary role, a role that Putin emphasized in his address to Russian women on International Women's Day, 8 March 2024: "You, dear women, are capable of changing the world… above all, through the greatest gift that nature has given you—giving birth to children. Motherhood is the destiny of women" (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 83). To propagate an idealized and traditional conception of motherhood, Putin has also reinstated a tradition that dates from 1944, namely the conferral of the "Heroic Mother" medal to women who have raised ten children, whether biological or adopted (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 86). Both a ceremonial and financial award, the medal is personally conferred by Putin to awardees, who also receive a one-time payment of one million rubles (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 86). Other Soviet-era policies whose reinstatement has been advocated include the imposition of fines on childless families and restrictions on constructing one-room apartments in major cities, a type of dwelling that would encourage solitary living (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 84).

Another issue the government has recently started addressing is Russia's exceptionally high divorce rate—among the highest worldwide—which, according to recent data from the Russian Federal Service for State Statistics (*Rosstat*), has coincided with a slight decline in marriage rates (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 84). A law passed by the Duma in December 2024 mandates that individuals seeking a divorce participate in multiple psychological counseling sessions, and, starting in 2025, the tax on divorce proceedings has increased from 650 to 5,000 rubles per person (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 84). The declaration of an official Year of the Family in 2024 entailed directives for all relevant governmental bodies to allocate resources toward the preservation of the family unit, as well as the creation of a special committee under Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova to advance the year's objectives (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 85). Among the new measures was the introduction in Russian schools beginning September 1, 2024, of "family management", a new subject emphasizing the moral foundations and social significance of family life (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 85). As part of the curriculum, students meet with "exemplary" couples who share their experiences and with medical personnel who discourage voluntary childlessness, while, predictably, topics such as sex education and family

planning are excluded from public education (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, pp. 85-86). The regime has even turned to cinema and state-controlled television to disseminate its family ideology, for example through TV series produced with government backing - such as the 2024 series *Big Family* - or films funded by the Orthodox Spas channel, including the 2024 film *Mother's Letter*, in which two women grappling with the decision of whether to have an abortion ultimately choose to continue their pregnancies against all odds (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 86). This film includes medical footage of abortions and interviews with women who had considered the procedure but eventually decided against it, clearly framing their struggle as a choice between the preservation of life and personal convenience, the latter depicted as a manifestation of selfishness (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 86).

c. The foreign articulations

After examining the domestic policies adopted by populist leaders in Russia and the United States to tackle the population-driven relative decline of their countries, the analysis will now delve into the ways foreign policy was likewise instrumentalized to respond to, or adapt to, what represents a systemic challenge to their international standing. Indeed, as outlined earlier and in line with the PTT framework, both Russia and the United States can be understood as dominant powers, whether regional or global, perceiving their relative decline – albeit unfolding at different paces - and acting aggressively to secure their position before losing their strategic advantage. At the same time, despite representing two opposite regime types, populist politics as conceptualized in the previous chapters, have shaped the foreign policy choices of both countries' leaders in relation to their core electorates, channeling narratives of national greatness to be restored through a combination of domestic natalist and anti-immigration policies and international actions: as these are aimed, in either case, at altering the status quo to recover their lost power, both Russia and the United States can be characterized as revisionist powers.

In the United States, the coalescence of nativism, economic pessimism, and political alienation characterizing Trump's constituency found a clear expression in foreign policymaking through his nationalist–populist rhetoric of anti-establishment resentment, national restoration, trade protectionism, and anti-globalism (Löfflmann, 2022a, p. 548). Trump appealed to collective narcissism, nostalgic longings for an idealized past of national greatness, and pervasive anxieties surrounding the erosion of national sovereignty, cultural identity, political relevance, and economic primacy within an increasingly globalized international system (Löfflmann, 2022a, pp. 544, 547). His security narratives, centred on themes of national disintegration, existential crisis, and chaos, were not intended to foster national unity but rather to mobilize a specific segment of the population—again, predominantly older, White, male, rural, and socially conservative Americans—who perceived the country as being under threat from an imminent decline produced by a multitude of domestic and foreign enemies (Löfflmann, 2022a, p. 548). Remarkably, a humiliating experience need not be tied to an actual loss of social, political, or economic status to generate blame attribution; rather, it can operate as a powerful anticipated emotion, whereby the expectation of a future loss shapes present action, even though,

as discussed above, demographic decline has already produced tangible effects on U.S. power projection, as illustrated by the U.S. Army's failure to meet its fiscal year 2022 recruiting target by 25 per cent and other branches meeting their goals only through the inclusion of Delayed Entry Program recruits (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021, pp. 6-7; Sciubba, 2023, p. 2131).

Mirroring the rhetorical strategy he employed in immigration discourse—where he frequently relied on emotionally charged representations of victimhood by invoking "countless innocent Americans," "grieving mothers and fathers," and families whose "loved ones" had allegedly been killed by criminal or terrorist "illegal immigrants"—Trump projected onto the domain of national security a mythologized image of a country fallen victim to foreign aggression, alien invasion, and the misguided choices of complicit domestic elites (Löfflmann, 2022a, p. 552). This strategy proved politically effective in the realm of immigration: although such narratives ran directly counter to official statistics and government data documenting a long-term decline in violent crime in the United States, as well as evidence showing that Latin American migrants were less likely than U.S. citizens to commit violent crimes, public perceptions remained largely unchanged - in 18 of the 22 Gallup surveys conducted between 1993 and 2018, at least six in ten Americans reported believing that crime in the United States had increased compared to the previous year (Löfflmann, 2022a, p. 552). Trump's narratives were "not Reaganesque, filled with warmth and filigree," but instead "harsh, soulful, a punch in the face, not a gentle hand on the nation's shoulder"; they departed from aspirational and unifying presidential rhetoric centered on "hope and change" and instead advanced the unsettling vision of an "American carnage" already unfolding, marked by the loss of American innocence and by dangerous international weakness (Löfflmann, 2022a, pp. 548-549, 552). Within this framing, the *external* "enemies of the people" encompassed "bad" countries, international institutions, and constraining regulations which—enabled by corrupt domestic allies within the Washington "swamp"—had rendered the United States vulnerable to tyranny from both within and without, driven it into economic and reputational decline, and actively undermined national greatness, dignity, and freedom (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021, p. 7). In populist humiliation discourse – including the American one – romanticized images of a treasured and glorified past serve as benchmarks against which lived experiences in the present are assessed, thereby being mobilized to demean contemporary conditions, portray the nation as fundamentally enfeebled, and foster a fantasy of national greatness and belonging grounded in shared emotions of resentment, pride, and nostalgia (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021, pp. 4-5).

Trump combined the roles of protector of the people and defender of the nation with that of a staunch culture warrior who alone was capable of shielding Americans from internal and external threats and renegotiating the "bad deals"—exploited by allies and adversaries alike—that had weakened and endangered the United States under both Democratic and Republican predecessors, promising to finally bring an end to the "long nightmare of American economic surrender" to foreign rivals (Löfflmann, 2022a, p. 549; Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021, pp. 4-5). Once again, this framing allowed Trump to divide American society was into two sharply polarized camps: the righteously angered "real" pro-Trump Americans of the innocent heartland, on the one hand, and an un-American Others allegedly intent on destroying the nation, on the other, which

functioned to unite Trump's constituency around a shared sense of suffering, humiliation, and the perceived legitimacy of retaliatory action against common internal and external enemies (Löfflmann, 2022a, pp. 548-549, 551-552). This is a crucial element for understanding how Trump's electoral demographic shaped his foreign policy, as his ontologically reassuring assertion that he was defending the interests, culture, and values of his followers while sustaining their attachment to an idealized vision of the past United States validated their sense of entitlement to continued socio-cultural primacy (Löfflmann, 2022a, p. 549).

More specifically, foreign competitors and imports of steel and aluminium from China, Canada, and the European Union (EU) were identified as strategically threatening U.S. national security and as jeopardizing the livelihoods and sense of self-worth of Americans employed in traditional manufacturing and energy sectors (Löfflmann, 2022a, pp. 550-551). In response, Trump prioritized economic sectors with a strong cultural presence in the American heartland—such as coal mining in Appalachia, car manufacturing in Michigan, and steel production in Ohio—emphasizing fossil fuels and traditional industries like steel and construction, while largely neglecting the United States' global leadership in communication and information technologies and services (Löfflmann, 2022a, p. 551). Trump's persistent linkage of international trade to threats against American prestige—especially in terms of job losses and national humiliation—provides an illuminating example of his populist foreign policymaking, as his constituency—the "true people"—is conflated with the nation itself, so that their prestige becomes the country's prestige, their decline is equated with the country's decline and their objectives are directly translated into the foreign policy agenda, becoming national priorities (Blum and Parker, 2019). Drawing on this idea of an intimate connection between Trump's electoral demographic and his foreign policy outcomes, and extending the tenets of status politics from domestic to international arenas, Blum and Parker (2019) show that Trump's supporters, as status-threatened conservatives, were more likely than other Republicans to adopt an isolationist stance and oppose free trade agreements, insofar as isolationism can be understood as a response to perceived threats to their group's prestige and way of life. They also underscore the notion that an apparently fringe element like status threat has moved from the periphery of the right-wing into the mainstream - including foreign policy, one of the historically most elitist and technically complex domains of public policy - forming a distinct faction within the Republican coalition.

The aspiration to redefine who constitutes the "real people" of a given political unit and who, therefore, should wield greater rights and decision-making power at the policy level relative to groups deemed exogenous and incapable of assimilating the essential characteristics of the original population, appears in some of Trump's speeches at the United Nations (Campani et al., 2022, p. 19). In his 2019 address, he echoed the rhetoric of far-right nativist groups, which contend that citizens with deep family roots in a country possess a more profound understanding of national interests than recent arrivals, even implicitly referencing the notion of the Great Replacement: "The free world must embrace its national foundations. It must not attempt to erase them, or replace them. The true good of the nation can only be pursued by those who love it, by citizens who are rooted in its history, nourished by its culture, committed to its values, and attached to its people" (Campani et al., 2022, p. 19). In another 2018 speech at the United Nations, Trump condemned globalism and defended

his administration's withdrawal from several UN organizations, including the International Criminal Court, the Human Rights Council, and the Global Compact on Migration: "The future does not belong to the globalists. The future belongs to patriots [...] Wise leaders always put the good of their own people and their own country first [...] Patriots see a nation and its destiny in ways no one else can. Liberty is only preserved, sovereignty is only secure, democracy is only sustained, greatness is only realized by the will and devotion of patriots [...] We reject globalism and embrace the doctrine of patriotism [...] The U.S. will always choose independence and cooperation over global governance, control and domination" (Campani et al., 2022, pp. 19-20).

Research on ontological security in international relations suggests that the drive for identity continuity produces antagonistic foreign policies; indeed, in Trump's populist security imaginary, the international arena is conceived as a zero-sum space in which the United States must ruthlessly compete against all other actors to safeguard its survival and prosperity, irrespective of whether these competitors are liberal democracies or authoritarian regimes (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021, p. 6; Löfflmann, 2022a, p. 553). Simplifying systemic complexity through external blame-shifting, aggressive messaging and warmongering rhetoric became a recurring feature of Trump's foreign policymaking, as illustrated, for instance, by his proposed response to the decline of manufacturing employment, which centered on the repatriation of American automobile companies (Campani et al., 2022, pp. 18-19). The use of force, or its projection abroad, is presented as the ideal instrument for reclaiming respect and rebuilding American greatness: among the many instances in which displays of toughness were priviledged over durable diplomatic engagement, a particularly salient example is the 3 January 2026 operation *Absolute Resolve*, which culminated in the apprehension of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife by U.S. authorities (Campani et al., 2022, p. 19; Friedrichs, 2025, pp. 10-11; Jütten and Delivorias, 2026, p. 4). In the most recent *National Security Strategy* (NSS), published by the White House in November 2025, the section devoted to the "Western Hemisphere" states that the US will reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine, supplemented by a "Trump Corollary," according to which Washington will "deny non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities, or to own or control strategically vital assets, in our Hemisphere" (Jütten and Delivorias, 2026, p. 4). Trump's message that "American dominance in the Western Hemisphere will never be questioned again"—interpreted by many observers as being primarily directed at China—reiterated the U.S. claim to Latin America as falling within its sphere of influence and evoked a Cold War era when the region was commonly referred to as America's "backyard," owing to the legacy of repeated U.S. military interventions (Jütten and Delivorias, 2026, p. 6).

Also the Trump administration's proposals to purchase Greenland – recently reiterated in a more intimidating and aggressive fashion – or to incorporate Canada as the 51st American state both fall within his strategy of transactional chaos, consisting of setting disruptive terms, dominating the media cycle, and framing negotiations around U.S. interests (Friedrichs, 2025, p. 11; Weissert, Keaten and Burrows, 2026; Rivolta, 2025, p. 3). The promise to end the conflict in Ukraine "in the first 24 hours" and the theatrical "Riviera of the Middle East" proposal for Gaza—referring to Trump's plan to transform the war-torn coastline into a luxury resort zone, implicitly entailing the displacement of the Palestinian population—reflect a consistent pattern of

projecting grandiose outcomes that set the agenda before substantive debate even begins (Rivolta, 2025, pp. 2-3). While often dismissed as reckless, incoherent, or impulsive, Trump's tactics follow a deliberate logic: what may appear outlandish frequently serves the clear purpose of controlling the narrative, bending negotiations to his advantage, and preparing the international stage for asymmetric bargaining (Rivolta, 2025, p. 3). Even tariffs operate within this framework—employed not merely as economic tools, but as instruments of disruption and coercive pressure (Rivolta, 2025, p. 3). Alongside this, Washington has progressively abandoned traditional tools of influence—attraction, persuasion, and normative appeal—treating soft power as a liability rather than an asset, and viewing the institutional arrangements underpinning America's peak period of global power as potential threats rather than strengths (Rivolta, 2025, p. 3; Moynihan and Zuppke, 2025, p. 330). Openly driven by conspiracy theories and empowered by the extraordinary authority granted to Musk, DOGE officials moved to close small institutions engaged in overseas work, such as the Inter-American Foundation, the African Development Foundation, and the Institute of Peace (Moynihan and Zuppke, 2025, p. 330). Trump also sought to eliminate the U.S. Agency for Global Media, which broadcast news internationally, and imposed restrictions that made it more difficult for foreign students to attend U.S. universities (Moynihan and Zuppke, 2025, p. 330). Most significantly, as noted earlier, the Trump administration effectively dismantled USAID: by February 7, 2025, nearly all of its 10,000 employees were on forced leave, leaving only a skeletal staff, and by the end of the month, 90% of the agency's contracts and grants had been canceled; Secretary of State Marco Rubio, appointed acting administrator, announced plans to terminate 83% of USAID's programs, dissolve the agency, and transfer the remaining functions into the State Department (Moynihan and Zuppke, 2025, pp. 327-328). Created in 1961, the agency had been the largest provider of food aid globally and the principal vehicle through which the United States delivered foreign assistance, while also providing critical support to populations at risk of HIV/AIDS (Moynihan and Zuppke, 2025, p. 327). USAID's functions extended beyond altruism: it had long collected health data in low-income countries, offering an early warning system to detect and address infectious disease outbreaks, purchased hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of food from U.S. farmers—much of which went unused in warehouses—thereby helping to prevent mass migration linked to food insecurity (Moynihan and Zuppke, 2025, p. 329). USAID funding also supported civil society organizations, and it was precisely because the agency operated as a conduit of U.S. soft power that it was viewed with suspicion by U.S. adversaries; indeed, Russia, El Salvador, and Hungary welcomed Musk's targeting of USAID (Moynihan and Zuppke, 2025, pp. 329-330).

As a businessman, Trump carried into global politics a negotiation style in which cooperation is subordinated to leverage, business tactics—such as escalation and disruption—supplanted traditional norms of multilateralism, and diplomacy was evaluated in terms of short-term transactional gains rather than long-term institutional stability (Rivolta, 2025, p. 1). Marking a clear rupture with cooperative internationalism, Trump pursues a unilateral strategy centered on tariffs, symbolic gestures, and withdrawals from international agreements, reframing global engagement as a series of business transactions (Rivolta, 2025, p. 1). The consequences of this disruption of global diplomacy—including the erosion of multilateral alliances, the

sidelining of formal diplomatic channels, and the normalization of transactional pressure in bilateral settings—are already evident (Rivolta, 2025, p. 3). Alliances, even long-standing ones, are recast as negotiable contracts or conditional bargains rather than mutually strategic partnerships, no longer valued for their stability and shared values but instead assessed through an immediate cost-benefit lens (Rivolta, 2025, p. 1; Friedrichs, 2025, p. 10).

As discussed earlier, at the core of this foreign policy approach lies a domestic realignment driven by economic anxiety, distrust of elites, and backlash against globalization: middle-class voters in deindustrializing regions such as the Rust Belt—among whom Trump's rhetoric resonated most strongly—demanded that the United States prioritize immediate domestic gains over long-term multilateral commitments (Rivolta, 2025, p. 1). For instance, a 2024 Pew Research Center poll documents a notable decline in favorable perceptions of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) among the American electorate, with the trend being especially pronounced among Republicans and independents (Friedrichs, 2025, p. 10). Trump's rallying in defense of America's "forgotten men and women," centered on sovereignty, economic self-reliance, and national revival, was reflected in several key policy decisions: the renegotiation of NAFTA into the USMCA to protect U.S. manufacturing; withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and the World Health Organization to shield domestic industries from what were framed as costly mandates; and sustained pressure on NATO allies to increase defense spending, recasting even this historic alliance as a set of financial obligations rather than a community grounded in democratic bonds (Rivolta, 2025, p. 2). In early December 2025 alone, Trump withdrew the United States from over 60 international organizations through a single executive order (Łukasz, Matusiak and Rodkiewicz, 2026). In this way, Trump's populist base shaped his foreign policy doctrine—"America First"—by embedding it in domestic priorities such as economic security, job protection, and national sovereignty, marking a decisive departure from the post-Cold War vision of U.S. leadership as a global public good (Rivolta, 2025, pp. 1-2). Rather than adhering to the notion that the US should lead the global order for the benefit of others, Trump redefined international engagement as a transactional venture, in which commitments are expected to yield immediate, tangible benefits for American workers (Rivolta, 2025, p. 2).

Trump's foreign policy represents more than a retreat from multilateralism—it constitutes a structural redefinition of how the United States perceives its global role under his leadership; as Marco Rubio put it, "The post-war global order is not just obsolete, it is now a weapon being used against us" (Rivolta, 2025, p. 3). By accelerating the erosion of the liberal order that has primarily benefited the U.S. and sustained its hegemony since 1945, Trump's actions have shaped a world in which Washington can no longer reliably act as guarantor of stability, with his most recent, increasingly conflictual foreign policy moves even appearing to follow a PTT logic (Rivolta, 2025, pp. 1-3; Moynihan and Zuppke, 2025, p. 330) One of the initiatives that most clearly reflects the U.S. administration's assessment that the current international order requires revision—as long as it purportedly fails to serve American interests and its key institutions have proven ineffective—is Trump's "Board of Peace" (Łukasz, Matusiak and Rodkiewicz, 2026). Initially introduced in a 20-point peace plan for Gaza presented by the US in September 2025 and subsequently endorsed in a UN

Security Council resolution adopted in November 2025, the concept later evolved into a revised proposal, culminating with the administration's invitation on 16 January 2026 for leaders from around 60 states to join (Łukasz, Matusiak and Rodkiewicz, 2026). Its Charter, signed by representatives of 20 states on 22 January at Davos, describes the Board as a global institution aiming to "promote stability, restore dependable and lawful governance, and secure enduring peace," to be chaired directly by President Trump, though its objectives and practical mode of operation remain unclear (Łukasz, Matusiak and Rodkiewicz, 2026). The Board ultimately represents an attempt to establish a new international body as an alternative to existing institutions—above all the United Nations, which Trump regards as ineffective and at times acting contrary to U.S. interests—that could potentially challenge the foundations of the current system of international organizations while remaining entirely subordinate to the authority of the U.S. president (Łukasz, Matusiak and Rodkiewicz, 2026).

These impressive shifts in foreign policy were facilitated by changes in the U.S. domestic political environment, which, compared with Trump's first term, is markedly more conducive to unilateral and disruptive policy initiatives (Böller and Wiedekind, 2025, p. 579). As extensively discussed above, Trump's second administration has significantly weakened the institutional mechanisms and interbranch dynamics that underpin the robustness of checks and balances among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches—and upon which the credibility of U.S. foreign policy has long depended (Böller and Wiedekind, 2025, p. 580). Ideological polarization within Congress has made bipartisan cooperation increasingly unattainable, giving way to entrenched partisan antagonism, intensified blame shifting, and a pronounced divergence in party positions on core foreign policy issues—including military alliances, trade regimes, climate commitments and multilateral institutions—thereby amplifying policy volatility (Böller and Wiedekind, 2025, p. 580). In contrast to Trump's first presidency, when cross-party collaboration in Congress successfully constrained several of his foreign policy initiatives, such as reductions in foreign aid and overtures toward Russia, meaningful criticism or bipartisan legislative oversight has thus far failed to emerge (Böller and Wiedekind, 2025, p. 579). Ideologically streamlined congressional majorities—reflecting the broader increase in societal polarization driven by demographic dynamics outlined earlier—have eroded the legislature's ability to restrain executive action, facilitating swift policy changes and undermining mechanisms of accountability in foreign policy (Böller and Wiedekind, 2025, p. 579; Friedrichs, 2025, p. 9). Finally, the consolidation of conservative ideological dominance within the Supreme Court, fostered by three Trump-appointed justices and jurisprudence expanding presidential authority, has further emboldened executive assertiveness, granting the president unprecedented discretion in foreign policy decision-making (Böller and Wiedekind, 2025, p. 579).

As a hyper-personalized authoritarian populist regime, Putin's Russia also exhibits a high degree of centralization within its foreign policy apparatus, concentrated in the hands of the top political leadership with close ties to secret services and the military, thus enabling the transformation of electoral support into majoritarian and nationalist policies with a "thick" ideological stance (Özdamar and Yanik, 2024, pp. 1847-1849). The Russian Constitution grants the president authority over the conduct of the country's foreign relations, prompting speculation that all foreign policy decisions—including those at the highest level, such

as the 2014 annexation of Crimea—are taken by Putin himself or his closest inner circle; as Putin's leadership has become synonymous with the Russian state, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is accordingly left with limited room for manoeuvre, rendering Putin's Russia a prime example of how the fusion of populism and authoritarianism rapidly degrades traditional foreign policy institutions, professional expertise, and decision-making processes (Özdamar and Yanik, 2024, p. 1848). The deinstitutionalization of the governmental bureaucracy, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with the sidelining of both chambers of the Russian legislature—the State Duma and the Federation Council, two institutions that might otherwise have exercised some degree of influence over foreign policy—resulted in the widely reported surprise among many elite members of the Russian government at the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a decision guarded with extreme secrecy by Putin (Özdamar and Yanik, 2024, pp. 1848-1849). Moreover, in his 24th year in power, President Putin has transformed Russia into a "militocracy," in which individuals with professional experience in the country's various force structures have come to occupy the most influential positions within the state (Özdamar and Yanik, 2024, p. 1849). Putin restructured the Russian state apparatus according to his own design of "elite militarization": drawing on his KGB background, he has cultivated the *siloviki* as his closest political allies since coming to power, with some—most notably presidential aide Nikolai Patrushev—emerging over time as de facto decision-makers in foreign policy (Özdamar and Yanik, 2024, p. 1849-1850).

As Shekhovtsov (2025) argues, Putin's training and service in the KGB may have influenced his policy choices—and, by extension, Russia's trajectory—on an even deeper and subjective level, insofar as the Soviet state's paralysis and the popular victory over the Party constituted, for an officer socialized into absolute subordination to the state, a profound identity rupture experienced as personal trauma and collective humiliation, a sentiment shared by many Russians haunted by a pervasive sense of inferiority and a lingering condition of historical disempowerment. Against this backdrop, Putin's war—directed both against the West more broadly and Ukraine specifically—emerges as an attempt to "correct" history by forging a present in which the West's victory in the Cold War and Ukraine's departure from the gravitational pull of the "Russian world" toward Russia's geopolitical rival no longer shape the historical landscape; in this sense, it is a war of "alternative history," aimed at undoing the West's triumph and erasing Ukraine as a nation distinct from Russia (Shekhovtsov, 2025, p. 104).

This interpretation is lent support by Shadrina's (2025) book *The Babushka Phenomenon*, which, similarly to the aforementioned Hochschild's study of Louisiana conservatives, examines the experiences biographical narratives of Russian women aged 60 and over, exploring the social production of ageing in post-Soviet Russia. Among the accounts of participants who explicitly supported Putin, the theme of overcoming painful experiences—from the hardships of the Second World War and the post-war reconstruction of the country to the turbulence of the 1990s—was a recurring feature. In their stories, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was not experienced as an exciting opportunity for economic or political freedoms, but rather coincided with multiple personal losses: by the 1990s, they were no longer young, and many had lost loved ones, jobs, savings, and what they had perceived as a predetermined life course, coming to realize that some of their earlier hopes would never materialise. The hardships of everyday survival and

their sense of personal loss resonated with the political narrative of the "Russian tragedy," which, from the late 1990s, became the dominant interpretative framework for Russia's post-Soviet history, enabling influential politicians, journalists, and academics to capitalise on equating the dissolution of the Soviet state with the dissolution of Russia as a nation. This imaginary offered ethnically Russian citizens the new identity of "suffering subject," providing them with a sense of continuity with the past and distinction from other ethnicities. As seen earlier, this identity has also been successfully mobilized by many populist politicians – including American ones – because it enables them to blame external actors for problems and claim moral superiority from the position of an innocent victim.

One of the most common ways in which this group of interviewees maintained a sense of belonging was by interpreting Vladimir Putin's national project as the country's pathway out of the "Russian tragedy": by reproducing the narrative of the Russia's return to superpower status, they sought to present themselves as patriots reclaiming what they believed had been rightfully theirs. The idea of overcoming crises also functioned as a narrative device through which they made sense of their current stage of life as part of a general upward progression, helping them to cast their past in a positive light and maintain hope for a better future for their children and grandchildren. This narrative strategy was particularly significant for participants in their late seventies and eighties, who sought to depict their life course as meaningful and accomplished—a task made difficult by the stark economic inequalities in Russia between ordinary citizens and the political elite. Many participants attributed their sense of marginalisation to the consequences of Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's policies and to the alleged anti-Russian Western conspiracy, yet even without a clear understanding of Vladimir Putin's ideological or economic platforms, they viewed him as someone who represented their interests. One interviewee, for instance, described Mikhail Gorbachev as responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union and Boris Yeltsin as enabling the privatisation of state resources by oligarchs, a perspective that allows her to see Putin's narrative of restoring Russia's greatness as a project aligned with her values.

These women's support for Putin also stemmed from their belief that he defends symbols long proclaimed as core Soviet values, in contrast to leaders who, at the end of perestrojka, dismissed the previously canonised figure of Lenin as a distortion and, in doing so, failed to identify any genuine source of inspiration beyond an empty political construct. For example, in 2012 Putin justified the preservation of Lenin's body in the mausoleum by arguing that the bodies of saints have been publicly displayed in Orthodox monasteries for centuries, and that extending this practice to Lenin would therefore align with a longstanding religious tradition. This ideological move enabled Putin's political project to secure popular support from both Communists and Orthodox Christian believers by offering a narrative of restored national greatness alongside the partial preservation of Soviet symbols, in exchange for their disengagement from formal politics. For the group of babushkas (literally "grandmothers") from less privileged families interviewed in the study, this seemed an acceptable social contract, as reflected in the fact that the older generation (55 and above) appears to be the most receptive to official propaganda (Shadrina, 2025, pp. 145, 149; Heinemann-Grüder, 2025, p. 101). The strong resonance of the national restoration narrative is further evidenced by the fact that the 2014 geopolitical victory of annexing Crimea sparked a public rally and a dramatic surge in support for Putin – his

approval ratings remained above 80% between March 2014 and April 2018 – such that the regime no longer needed to politicize migration issues to bolster its standing (Joo, 2024, p. 492). Russian media coverage and migration policies reflected this change, as shown by the Duma's 2016 repeal of the 2012 amendment that mandated the immediate deportation of migrants from key regions (Joo, 2024, p. 492).

These mythologised narratives have played a central role in what is arguably the most consequential foreign policy decision of the Russian regime in recent years, namely, the war of aggression against Ukraine. The Russian military presents itself as a defender of historical truth, and in particular as the guardian of an indisputable, dogmatised interpretation of the Second World War, according to which Russia is portrayed as the sole moral inheritor of both the suffering and the victory of the Soviet people, while "Europe" as a whole—and Ukraine, Poland, or France in particular—is accused of denying collaboration with the Third Reich or of falsifying history (Heinemann-Grüder, 2025, pp. 98-100). This historical narrative is fundamentalised and essentialised, elevated to the status of a quasi-religious obligation through the use of political myths and emotionally charged symbols drawn from Russia's past, functioning as another form of agnocracy—"ideology cast in the form of history" (Shekhovtsov, 2025, p. 113; Eller, 2025, p. 28). Russian military historians denounce any acknowledgment of Soviet complicity in the outbreak of the Second World War as a "falsification" that should be punishable by judicial means (Heinemann-Grüder, 2025, p. 98). The *Military-Historical Journal*, overseen by the Ministry of Defence, serves as a mouthpiece for this state-controlled and glorified vision of Russian and Soviet history, and contributes to the broader project of memory politics—that is, the reshaping of historical consciousness to suit present political needs (Shekhovtsov, 2025, p. 113). Russian historical revisionism – largely channeled through the *Journal* – thus seeks to perfect the past by constructing a mythologised continuity of a "Great Russian" civilisation whose integrity is depicted as being constantly threatened, both directly and indirectly, by the West (Shekhovtsov, 2025, pp. 113-114). War propaganda projects this eternal clash of civilisations with an imperialist and colonialist West, exploits the trauma of the Second World War, and reduces the conflict to a stark choice between "war against Ukraine or the dissolution of Russia" (Heinemann-Grüder, 2025, p. 100).

Indeed, the moral and political justification for the invasion of Ukraine in Russian political discourse rests on the claim that Ukraine has surrendered to the West and fallen under its destructive influence (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 85). The campaign to defend Russia's "traditional values" thus incorporates the war in Ukraine and is translated into a broader struggle against the culturally decadent hegemony of America and the West (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 85). Shortly after the invasion, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church described the war as a necessary step to protect the Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine from the moral decay stemming from Ukraine's allegedly "Western-controlled" government (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 85). Similarly, the governor of St. Petersburg, Alexander Beglov, underscored the importance of traditional values in the war effort by claiming that "soldiers who saw bathrooms in schools [in Donetsk and Luhansk] with three rooms instead of two—male, female, and non-binary—need no explanation as to which values we are fighting for" (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 85). Among those values, Beglov singled out

the need to protect children from what he described as the imposition of an unnatural sexual identity, views that are widely shared among government and community figures (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 85).

In this sense, Putin's decision to invade Ukraine can also be understood as an attempt to counter what he perceives as the Western conspiracy aimed at rendering Russia "childless," in which Ukraine is reduced to an agentless instrument of the West's culture war turned against Russia (Krastev and Holmes, 2024). The alleged Western brainwashing of Ukrainians was framed as part of a divide-and-conquer strategy intended to foster hostility toward Russia and to drive a wedge between two parts of a single historical civilisation, two countries "united by a shared history and culture, spiritual values, and millions of familial and human connections," as Putin himself has claimed (Krastev and Holmes, 2024). His pseudo-historical article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", published roughly six months before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, is widely regarded as the war's "theoretical" groundwork (Shekhovtsov, 2025, p. 108). The article proceeds from the premise that Ukrainians are, in fact, Little Russians (*malorosy*), who—together with Great Russians (*velikorossy*) and White Russians (*belorusy*)—constitute a single, unified Russian nation (Shekhovtsov, 2025, p. 108).

However, propagandistic and rhetorical explanations may obscure a deeper, more pragmatic and ultimately demographic motivation underlying this positioning of Ukrainians within a shared Slavic heritage, one that goes beyond Putin's oft-cited fear of democratic contagion from neighbouring Ukraine (Krastev and Holmes, 2024). All of Putin's strategies to reverse demographic decline, which he has repeatedly described as a top priority of the Russian state, appear to have been equally unsuccessful (Nastios, 2025, p. 23). As discussed earlier, costly pro-natalist policies aimed at encouraging larger families proved largely ineffective in the long term, with the initial recovery of fertility rates quickly giving way to renewed decline (Nastios, 2025, pp. 21-22). In the early years of his presidency, Putin even embraced immigration, as ethnic Russians returned to Russia from former Soviet republics that had become independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Nastios, 2025, p. 21). However, as noted above, once this wave of return migration subsided, the composition of immigration to Russia shifted by 2014 from predominantly White Russian (Orthodox Christian) migrants to largely non–Russian-speaking Muslim populations (Nastios, 2025, p. 21). Following the release of a report by the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies eight weeks before the first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, one of its authors, Igor Beloborodov, predicted in an interview that Muslims would become the majority of Russia's population by 2050 due to fertility rates well above replacement level among both indigenous Russian Muslims and more recent Muslim migrants, in contrast to persistently sub-replacement fertility among ethnic Russian Orthodox Christians—a claim widely regarded as a serious exaggeration (Nastios, 2025, p. 21). In response to the report, Putin's rhetoric and public statements increasingly emphasised that immigration could serve as an auxiliary measure but not as a viable solution to Russia's demographic crisis, an observation that draws an implicit parallel between his ethnic Russian Orthodox Christian base and nativist pro-Trump Americans fearful of a majority–minority shift (Nastios, 2025, p. 21).

Given the failure of all these strategies, the only remaining viable alternative appears to be conquest: Putin's final solution to Russia's demographic crisis is the annexation of new Slavic territory (and population)

into a reborn Russian empire (Nastios, 2025, pp. 22-23). Krastev and Holmes (2024) argue that Putin's decision to invade Ukraine was an implicit acknowledgement of the failure of his various pro-natalist policies aimed at bolstering the country's Slavic core, leading him to conclude that the only way to achieve a significant population increase was by annexing and subordinating ethnically and culturally related neighbors, using force if necessary. As political economist Nicholas Eberstadt observed: "The most successful population program that the Kremlin has had has been annexing neighboring territories, not increasing the birthrate" (Krastev and Holmes, 2024). Indeed, by incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation in 2014, Putin added around 2.4 million predominantly ethnic Russians to the country's population (Krastev and Holmes, 2024).

In this project, Ukrainians are envisaged as a reserve army of future Russians, intended not merely to augment the demographic size of the Russian Federation but also to counteract the anticipated decline of the Slavic majority within Russia, particularly in light of the expectation that future immigration will predominantly originate from non-Russian former Soviet republics characterised by higher birth rates than those of ethnic Russians (Krastev and Holmes, 2024). Notably, the assimilation of Ukrainians—one of the constituent ethnicities of the aforementioned "Slavic triumvirate"—would be unlikely to provoke a nativist backlash comparable to that directed at Central Asian migrants in Russia, as evidenced by the fact that more than half of Russians hold either favourable or indifferent attitudes toward the population with whom they are currently at war, according to data from the Levada Centre, an independent, non-governmental polling and sociological research organisation (Krastev and Holmes, 2024; Levinson, 2025, pp. 47, 51). Within the public consciousness of Russian citizens, the war is perceived as being waged not against Ukrainians—who are largely regarded as a "brotherly people"—but against "Nazis", "fascists", "Banderites", or, at most, against the stereotypical figure of the *khokhly*, a derogatory ethnic slur denoting that segment of the Ukrainian population which, rather than conforming to the image of educated, loyal, and integrated "Little Russians", seeks to assert its distinct identity from Russia, whether by "looking to the West" or by just having a "crude but picturesque aboriginal culture and a strange dialect" (Levinson, 2025, pp. 51, 53; Shekhovtsov, 2025, p. 110). Consistent with this, the Levada Centre reported in June 2023 that, as in the previous year, a majority of respondents (56%) attributed responsibility for the deaths and destruction in Ukraine to the United States and NATO, while 16% blamed Ukraine, 8% held Russia accountable, and a further 8% believed that no particular actor was responsible (Levinson, 2025, p. 52).

As PTT suggests, a country of 73 million people, with a high proportion of elderly citizens, would struggle in the twenty-first century to be classified as a great power—especially when compared to states such as China, India, or the United States and given its apparent trajectory toward inexorable decline (Nastios, 2025, pp. 21, 23). Putin has consistently singled out the demographic "emergency situation" as the primary obstacle to Russia's return to great-power status, aware that Russia cannot act as a dominant continental power in Europe without a large land army and a young, healthy labour force to sustain economic growth, a concern he has emphasised with increasing urgency in his annual addresses to the State Security Council since 2003 (Nastios, 2025, pp. 20-21). Beyond the concern that population decline would translate into an irreversible loss of military power and combat-ready forces, reducing Russia to a territorial giant yet a demographic dwarf,

another component of the Kremlin's calculus appears to be the fear that Russia lacks sufficient population resources to fully exploit emerging opportunities for mineral exploration and extraction in the Arctic, now increasingly accessible due to the thawing of permafrost (Krastev and Holmes, 2024). The expectation that a shrinking and ageing population cannot adequately harness the potential of Russia's vast geographic expanse may thus have informed the 2022 operation, alongside—and not merely as a by-product of—territorial ambition (Krastev and Holmes, 2024). Following the PTT logic, Russia's leaders—above all the president himself—likely viewed that moment as the last chance, both for the country and for themselves, to effect a historic reversal and restore Russia to the position of global significance once held by the Soviet Union (Levinson, 2025, p. 49).

The conviction that "Russia's fate and its historical prospects depend on one thing: how many of us there are and how many of us there will be," as Putin stated in a 2020 speech amid COVID-19, when the pandemic pushed Russian mortality rates to roughly double those of the United States—already high among advanced industrialized democracies—was elevated to the level of national security, rendering this interpretation a plausible explanatory framework for the war (Nastios, 2025, p. 20). In his annual address to the National Security Council on April 21, 2021—just as the Kremlin began massing troops along Ukraine's border ahead of the 2022 invasion—Putin once again returned to the issue of demographic decline, this time employing the most apocalyptic language of his presidency since taking office in late 1999 (Nastios, 2025, p. 22). He described the contemporary "situation in the sphere of demography" as "extraordinary," using a Russian term that can be translated as "alarming" or "in a state of emergency," and explicitly compared it to demographic crises experienced during the height of the Second World War and the mid-1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Nastios, 2025, p. 22). Furthermore, in a speech delivered to schoolchildren in Vladivostok in September 2021, Putin invoked an imagined Russia that might have existed but never came to pass, arguing that, absent the geopolitical catastrophes of the twentieth century, the country's population would have reached approximately 500 million—three to four times its current size (Krastev and Holmes, 2024). Equating the failure to realise this demographic potential with the collapse of communism as a historical tragedy, he exhorted his audience, "Under no circumstances should we allow anything like this to happen again," and framed the task of reversing demographic decline as a historical obligation, inasmuch as population loss constitutes an existential threat to the Russian civilization (Krastev and Holmes, 2024).

Krastev and Holmes (2024) propose that the war between Russia and Ukraine, often described as a typical war of attrition, is better understood as a modern "mourning war." The term refers to a type of conflict documented by historians among Native American tribes in the 17th and 18th centuries, in which communities would raid one another, kidnapping women and children to compensate for the widespread loss of their own people to disease and warfare, while killing adult males deemed unassimilable. To this end, Russia's war in Ukraine has been emblematically marked by the large-scale abduction of Ukrainian children: since February 2022, accumulating evidence indicates that children are being abducted and transferred to the Russian Federation for re-education and adoption by Russian families (Krastev and Holmes, 2024; Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 86). Russia has engaged in a systematic, intentional, and widespread program of coerced adoption

and fostering, orchestrated by Putin and his subordinates with the aim of "Russifying" Ukrainian children (Raymond et al., 2024, p. 1). The Yale School of Public Health Humanitarian Research Lab defines this program as the deportation of children from Ukraine followed by their placement with Russian citizens and/or in institutions where they are registered in Russia's child placement databases under the direct orders of senior federal and occupation authorities; these directives have been implemented by multiple elements of the Russian government in close coordination with occupation officials in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (Raymond et al., 2024, p. 1). As of June 2024, reports indicate that nearly 200,000 children have been affected, forcibly removed from orphanages, hospitals, and areas of active combat (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 86). Although Moscow claims that the children it is resettling deep into Russia are orphans, evidence compiled by the Yale Conflict Observatory demonstrates that many of them are not (Nastios, 2025, p. 22). These children undergo a process of Russification intended to erase their Ukrainian identity: their ties to biological families are severed, they are subjected to pro-Russian re-education at each of the eight known institutions to which they have been transferred, and they are placed for adoption with Russian families deemed suitable by the authorities (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 86; Raymond et al., 2024, p. 2). Moreover, Russia employs psychologists (психологи) as part of an apparent effort to legitimize the program by conferring a veneer of medical necessity on the deportation and placement of children with Russian citizens (Raymond et al., 2024, p. 2). In line with the argument presented above, the forced relocation of Ukrainian children into exemplary Russian families is depicted as a moral endeavor—a rescue of innocents from the moral decay spreading from the West's liberal approaches to sexuality and gender into Ukraine (Itkin and Mil-Man, 2025, p. 86).

The demographic situation in Russia has also been bolstered by an increase in Ukrainian refugees, particularly from the illegally annexed regions of Luhansk and Donetsk, as well as from individuals fleeing or being forcibly relocated during the so-called evacuations deeper into Russian territory from other parts of Ukraine (Chawryło, 2024, p. 9). From the beginning of the Russian invasion until the end of 2023, the UNHCR estimated approximately 1.2 million registered Ukrainian refugees in Russia, with nearly 3 million entries from Ukraine in total (Chawryło, 2024, p. 9). An extensive naturalization policy has been clearly employed to improve population statistics: despite negative demographic trends, Russia's population has remained relatively stable since the 1990s (Chawryło, 2024, p. 10). According to official data, in 2023, the population decreased by only around 1 million relative to 1990, an artificial stability largely attributable to the mass naturalization of foreign citizens (Chawryło, 2024, p. 10). Between 1992 and 2022, approximately 12 million individuals were naturalized, including around 269,000 in 2018, nearly 498,000 in 2019, 656,000 in 2020, 735,000 in 2021—the highest recorded number, 51% of whom were Ukrainian citizens primarily from the, later illegally annexed, Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR)—and 691,000 in 2022 (Chawryło, 2024, p. 10).

Far from being a novel phenomenon, Russia's citizenship policy has been extensively studied in the scholarly literature, particularly with regard to passportization in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, where it functioned as a tool for asserting control over contested territories, although these cases did not play a significant role in addressing Russia's demographic challenges due to the relatively small size of their

populations (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, pp. 61-62). In the Ukrainian case, Russia's citizenship policy combined demographic and geopolitical objectives: to expand the number of Russian citizens in the occupied territories and to attract skilled labour from the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR, before gradually shifting from the creation of a critical mass of Russian citizens toward the entrenchment of Russian presence in the occupied territories and the exploitation of their human resources for aggression against Ukraine (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, pp. 62, 71). Following the outbreak of the Russo–Ukrainian conflict in 2014, the Moscow regime initiated a policy of mass Russification targeting Russian citizens of Ukrainian ethnic background, a process reflected in census data showing that the number of individuals identifying as ethnic Ukrainians declined from 1,927,988 in 2010 to 884,007 in 2021 (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 64). Even accounting for the inclusion of Crimea—where, according to Russian data, 291,603 ethnic Ukrainians resided at the time of annexation in 2014 and were subsequently counted in the 2021 census—this indicates that over the eleven-year period at least 1.3 million ethnic Ukrainians effectively disappeared from the population of the Russian Federation as a result of Kremlin-led Russification policies (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 64).

In Crimea, the Russian policy of passportization aimed to consolidate control over the occupied territory and suppress organized resistance from both the Ukrainian army and the new political leadership in Kyiv (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 64). A fast-track procedure for issuing Russian citizenship was implemented just three days after the annexation was officially announced on March 21, 2014, under Article 4 of Law No. 6-FK3, according to which Ukrainian citizens in Crimea and Sevastopol with residence permits were automatically granted Russian citizenship unless they publicly renounced it within a month (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 64). However, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that this "choice" to renounce citizenship occurred under an atmosphere of intense intimidation, persecution, and discrimination, while those who opted out were treated as second-class citizens and denied equal treatment before the law, leaving many with no real option but to accept Russian citizenship (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 65). From 2014 to 2021, Russia implemented additional measures to alter Crimea's demographic structure, such as prohibiting individuals with Ukrainian citizenship from owning land in coastal areas, resettling approximately 140,000 Russian citizens from mainland Russia, and replacing local elites and administrators in state enterprises, banks, and organizations (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 65). Collectively, these actions facilitated the swift legislative and sociopolitical integration of Crimea into Russia, while also "blurring" eastern Ukrainian elites to ensure greater loyalty and direct subordination to the Russian state (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 65).

The Russian citizenship policy toward residents of the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR underwent a radical shift on 24 April 2019, with the issuance of a presidential decree that streamlined the process of granting Russian citizenship to individuals holding DPR/LPR passports, causing a spike in naturalizations (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 65). Notably, this decree was adopted two days after Volodymyr Zelensky's victory in Ukraine's presidential elections, during which he had advocated for a peace agenda aimed at resolving the conflict over Crimea (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 65). In this context, the Kremlin's mass passportization of DPR/LPR residents demonstrated a clear intention to raise the stakes in the conflict, making

any peaceful settlement in Donbas on mutually acceptable terms virtually impossible (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 65). The irreversible nature of this mass citizenship grant signaled the subsuming of Russian citizenship policy into the broader strategy of preparing for a major military conflict, a message actively reinforced by officials in the DPR/LPR administrations, who promoted the idea that the annexation of their republics into Russia would follow such process (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, pp. 65-66).

The Russian passportization of DPR/LPR residents between 2019 and 2021 was thus oriented toward a major escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, particularly through the development of Russian military capabilities in the occupied territories, as evidenced by the selective targeting of specific categories of DPR/LPR residents in the policy's implementation (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, pp. 66). While, in theory, all such residents could apply for Russian citizenship provided they held DPR/LPR passports, in practice the Federal Migration Centres in Rostov oblast prioritized military personnel, law enforcement officers, civil servants, and employees of DPR/LPR-funded organizations (such as pension funds, medical institutions, and schools), for whom, since 2019, obtaining Russian citizenship was a mandatory employment requirement (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, pp. 66). In contrast, the procedures for pensioners, entrepreneurs, and other civilians were artificially complicated by additional demands, such as high application fees and the requirement to first obtain local DPR/LPR passports (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, pp. 66). Moreover, by early 2020 reports indicated that individuals who had obtained Russian citizenship in the DPR/LPR were being enlisted into the Russian army, a practice later corroborated in January 2022 by the compilation of conscription lists in the self-proclaimed republics, revealing the Kremlin's use of the occupied territories as a reservoir of military manpower in preparation for further military operations (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, pp. 66).

The Russian citizenship granted to residents of the DPR/LPR was a "defective" one, as the Russian Federation exercised effective control over these territories without assuming responsibility for fulfilling core governmental functions toward this group of citizens (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 66). The latter were denied access to social payments and benefits (including pensions, medical care, education, and social guarantees) as well as bank loans, since eligibility required an individual pension insurance number obtainable only with registered residence in Russia—a restriction that applied even to DPR/LPR residents who relocated to the internationally recognized territory of the Russian Federation (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 66). Additionally, both the Russian Federation and the DPR/LPR imposed strict travel restrictions to control movement in and out of the territories, primarily aimed at preventing the departure of the working population and conscription-age men, while exempting residents without local or Russian citizenship from exit rules (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 67). After the full-scale invasion began in February 2022, the logic behind this selective and "defective" passportization became clear: Ukrainians holding DPR/LPR documents or Russian citizenship were immediately mobilized into the First Donetsk and Second Guards of the Lugansk-Severodonetsk Army Corps to fight against Ukraine, allowing Russia to use them as expendable forces without incurring the same rules and costs as conscripting Russian nationals or deploying mercenaries – in other words, fully leveraging demography to act once again as a great power (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 67).

As the battlefield situation evolved and the conflict shifted from a blitzkrieg to a war of attrition, Russia's citizenship policy took on a reactive character, refocusing on consolidating control over already occupied territories and encouraging the resettlement of pro-Russian Ukrainians from Kyiv-controlled regions, once the Kremlin realized by May 2022 that capturing the entire country was unlikely in the near term (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 68). The presidential Decrees of 25 May 2022 (expanding the simplified citizenship procedure from DPR/LPR residents to Zaporozhe and Kherson oblasts) and 11 July 2022 (further broadening it to all Ukrainian residents) made the process more formalized compared to the 2014 annexation, requiring an application and an oath of allegiance, while Ukrainian citizenship was retained unless explicitly renounced via a separate statement (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 68). However, pressure to renounce Ukrainian citizenship made survival in the occupied territories nearly impossible for those refusing it or maintaining dual citizenship, who were subjected to a range of restrictions: mandatory Russian citizenship for employment in local government, education, and culture; restrictions on property management and transactions for citizens of "unfriendly" states, including Ukraine; conditioning access to social benefits and financial services on Russian citizenship; and limiting the provision of medical care to those holding a SNILS (social security number), available only to Russian citizens (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, pp. 68-69).

The population of the occupied territories was thus divided into three categories—completely loyal (those who obtained Russian citizenship and renounced Ukrainian), relatively loyal (dual citizens), and disloyal (those without Russian citizenship)—indicating that the Russian regime, fully aware of local hostility in 2022, used citizenship policy not only to entrench control but also to filter and remove the disloyal, thereby reshaping the population structure to its advantage (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, pp. 69-70). To complete the legitimation of Russian-installed administrations and, more broadly, of Russia's territorial claims by increasing the number of Russian citizens in the region, Russian military and law enforcement personnel and officials were resettled in the occupied territories with their families, subsequently followed by approximately 60,000 Russian construction workers involved in reconstruction efforts (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, pp. 71-72). Evidence suggests that up to 100,000 Central Asian migrants were brought in for construction work and, as argued earlier, integrated into Russia's mobilization plans in exchange for citizenship (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 72). To finally resolve the status of Ukrainian citizens remaining in the occupied territories, on 27 April 2023 Putin adopted Presidential Decree No. 307, which reclassified them as foreigners and required them to obtain Russian residence permits; from 1 July 2024 onward, those who fail to do so may no longer reside in the occupied territories with their existing identification documents and are subject to deportation if deemed a threat to national security (Malyarenko and Kormych, 2026, p. 72).

5. CONCLUSION: AN OVERLOOKED CONNECTION

The comparative analysis of the two case studies presented above indicates that in both regimes the political actors emerging from ageing native electorates, the rhetoric embedded in the electoral platforms that bring them to office and the domestic and foreign policies they implement once in power, all follow a demographic rationale, namely the restoration of ethnic majorities – endangered by population shifts – to their "rightful" position of dominance within the national political system and the international arena. This pattern aligns with the majoritarian orientation of most populist leaders, who elevate their core electorate – the native ethnic majority – until it becomes indistinguishable from the state itself. In doing so, those very constituencies are actually stripped of genuine power, since the conflation of leader and people – whereby a single ethnic and demographic group is equated with the entirety of the nation – potentially enables populists to indefinitely govern in their name without democratic consultation, gradually eroding constitutional checks and balances, marginalizing opposition forces and disproportionally empowering executives as a result of this constructed collective identification. From this perspective, the Russian trajectory appears paradygmatic, as it transitioned from an electoral democracy to an entrenched autocracy in parallel with the transformation of Putin's populism into a nationalist project, a path from which the US, particularly in light of recent developments, cannot be considered automatically exempt merely because it originated as a consolidated democracy. To some extent, Russia may therefore be regarded as being at a more advanced stage of both demographic and democratic decline than the United States.

Both Putin and Trump relied on populist discourse to secure electoral victory and, at different historical junctures, capitalized on the perceived vulnerability of their countries' native majorities arising from large-scale migration flows and from the comparatively higher fertility rates of newcomers. Each pledged to return the country to a mythologized golden era while shielding them from the cultural forces allegedly accelerating their extinction. Those forces were identified in two principal elements: women's emancipation and feminism, which, understood as the ideological pillars of the Second Demographic Transition, have led to the disruption of traditional marital arrangements; and multiculturalism, manifested in the state's willingness to open its borders to migrants and accomodate their exogenous cultures and values. These two transformative elements, which demographically translate into declining native birth rates and population contraction among natives, alongside increasing ethnic heterogeneity driven by migrant inflows and their comparatively higher fertility, have generated a deep sense of onthological insecurity within the native group that was subsequently amplified and strategically mobilized by populist leaders. Perceiving themselves as disappearing both socio-culturally and numerically and seeking renewed visibility and relevance at home and abroad, natives turned to populist actors, who claimed to address their demands by repositioning them at the centre of domestic and international political life, thereby attaining political prominence in a context marked by the relative absence of alternative actors willing to engage demographic concerns with comparable urgency and intensity.

In the American case, this electorate consisted primarily of older, Christian, white, conservative and rural voters residing in the depopulating hinterland, who, feeling dispossessed of the "American dream" by

immigrants – especially those of Latino origins – and fearing social, political, and even physical marginalization amid the growing prominence of non-white groups such as Black and Asian communities, viewed MAGA nativism as a vehicle through which their worldview could once again enter the mainstream. Trump responded to their sense of demographic displacement through both concrete policies and rhetorical initiatives, implementing pro-natalist and welfare-chauvinist programs that diverged from traditional Republican reluctance toward expansive social provision, while simultaneously advancing comparatively lower-cost normative measures aimed at retraditionalizing gender roles and curtailing women's access to abortion. On the anti-natalist front, he enacted increasingly restrictive anti-immigration policies designed to control population composition, ranging from the Muslim ban to the more recent ICE enforcement campaigns. To a far lesser extent than Putin, he also signaled support for incorporating preferred demographic groups, such as white Afrikaners, though such gestures appeared to reflect rhetorical positioning rather than a systematic demographic strategy. In foreign policy, he further mainstreamized his constituency's grievances by treating long-standing alliances as transactional arrangements to be maintained only insofar as they served domestic supporters, withdrawing from commitments to international public goods and projecting an aggressive, revisionist and isolationist stance reminiscent of the Monroe Doctrine, which regards soft power as a liability and rejects the US' traditional role as guarantor of global stability.

In the Russian case, the relevant social base was found in a post-Soviet society, crippled by record demographic decline, a devastating mortality crisis, plummeting fertility rates and geopolitical demotion from superpower status. Older and economically vulnerable ethnic Russians, Christian Orthodox "useless" men and fatigued babushkas, left to confront the ideological vacuum produced by the collapse of Communism with nothing but xenophobia and fearing to be outnumbered by the large influx of "chernye" Central Asian migrants, placed their hopes in a populist strongman, who, well before Trump, promised to make Russia great again. In pursuit of this objective, Putin placed the mitigation of population ageing at the top of the national political agenda, allocating substantial resources to the pro-natalist and welfare chauvinist Maternity Capital program, while simultaneously pressuring Russian women into traditional gender roles by discouraging abortion and prohibiting "childless propaganda", thereby shifting the burdens of national resurgence onto them. Over the course of two decades, he sustained political support through a combination of selective clampdowns on immigration when politically profitable and highly visible foreign policy successes. Given the failure of domestic initiatives to undo Russia's demographic and international decline, Putin resorted to alternative measures to assuage his own demographic anxieties, which spilled over into foreign policy to a much greater degree than in the American case. From the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, citizenship policy was repeatedly employed to render Russia's population composition more Slavic through the incorporation of Ukranians, concurrently utilizing the less desirable demographics of migrants and non-ethnic Russians as expendable manpower to support geopolitical ambitions.

Because of the temporal lag in the onset of population ageing between Russia and the United States, political developments linked to it manifested sooner in the former and only more recently in the latter. Yet, when examined through the lenses of political demography, population politics, and demographic engineering,

the two cases converge: ageing and ethnically homogenous electorates, animated by fears of demographic transformations (political demography) and mobilized by the nativist rhetoric of right-wing populists (population politics), supported leaders who then enacted domestic and foreign policies aimed at reshaping the population composition of their countries (demographic engineering) in order to alleviate their anxieties and restore national greatness. For these reasons, the answer to the research question, *"Is demographic change, specifically in the forms of population ageing and migration-driven increasing ethnic diversity, associated with the global rise of right-wing populism and with its impact on the structural features and policy outcomes of modern political regimes?"* is affirmative. It is somewhat ironic that both the established hegemon and the challenger contest the international order originally instituted by the hegemon itself for its own advantage, each equally viewing hegemonic cultural norms as detrimental to native fertility and acting aggressively to preserve its position of power in response to perceived relative (demographic) decline – as indicated by PTT. In both cases, political leaders mobilized their constituencies against a cultural enemy blamed for national deterioration, whether external or internal: in the US, liberal, pro-LGBTQ and Democratic elites and citizens were accused of subordinating national interests – the interests of Trump's "real people" – to those of allies, whereas in Russia, a purportedly Western-backed "fifth column" within its territory and that of neighbouring states was depicted as conspiring to disseminate the West's corrosive values in order to lead the country along the same path of decline of its adversary.

The similarities across two political systems otherwise separated by profound historical, institutional, and cultural differences are therefore noteworthy, and although this research remains context-specific and not fully generalizable, it is evident that the US and Russia are not isolated cases of simultaneous democratic and demographic strain. Population ageing may thus be conceptualized as the hardware, and populism as the software driving the dynamics of political transformation across diverse Western and non-Western settings. If the proliferation of right-wing populist governments and the durable imprint they leave on regime structures and domestic and external policies – including those affecting human rights, diplomatic cooperation, and international stability – can be interpreted as either a product of or reaction to demographic chamge, then it is reasonable to anticipate that these political dynamics will persist in the foreseeable future (Sciubba, 2021). However, demography is not destiny, and lasting institutional change requires permissive structures and political actors capable of successfully translating demographic unease into authority. Indeed, Putin's initiatives informed by demography have thus far produced more far-reaching consequences than Trump's, in part because executive centralization encounters significantly fewer constraints in an autocratic context than in a democratic one. Even so, the unprecedented population shifts examined in this dissertation are unlikely to reverse rapidly, particularly if pro-natalist interventions continue to prioritize symbolic appeal over structural reform addressing the underlying drivers of fertility decline. As Sciubba remarked during the 2026 online event at the Stimson Center, *Japan 2026: Aging Challenges and Opportunities*, where she presented her latest book *Toxic Demography: Ideology and the Politics of Population*, co-authored with Teitelbaum and Winter, ideology is precisely what prevents public debate on population ageing from engaging seriously with the trade-offs inherent in the full range of possible policy adaptations to this unprecedented phenomenon. She contends

that unequivocally framing population ageing as a crisis and retreating into an idealized past that never existed in the first place—given that, until the 1990s, policymakers were primarily concerned with population control rather than growth, driven by Malthusian anxieties that excessively youthful age structures might constrain economic potential—significantly narrows the policy space and produces largely ineffective measures. Meanwhile, Trump's reelection and Putin's continued public backing despite the disruptions generated by war suggest that, just as demographic transformations unfold gradually beneath the surface of social turbulence, the political trajectories associated with them are unlikely to dissipate swiftly.

REFERENCES

Abascal, M. (2020) 'Contraction as a Response to Group Threat: Demographic Decline and Whites' Classification of People Who Are Ambiguously White', *American Sociological Review*, 85(2), pp. 298– 322. doi:10.1177/0003122420905127.

Abylkalikov, S. (2025) *Russia's Current Demographic Crisis Is Its Most Dangerous Yet* [Online]. Carnegie Politika. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/09/russia-new-demographic-crisis?lang=en (Accessed 20 November 2025).

Adserà, A., Ferrer, A. M., Sigle-Rushton, W., & Wilson, B. (2012) 'Fertility Patterns of Child Migrants: Age at Migration and Ancestry in Comparative Perspective', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 643(1), pp. 160-189. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716212444706.

Al Jazeera (2024) *Russian lawmakers endorse bill banning 'child-free propaganda'* [Online]. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/20/russian-lawmakers-endorse-bill-banning-child-free (Accessed 29 January 2026).

Anckar, C. (2010) 'Most-different systems design', in Mills, A.J., Durepos, G. and Wiebe E. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, pp. 582–584. Available at: https://methods.sagepub.com/ency/edvol/encyc-of-case-study-research/chpt/most-different-systems-design [Accessed 11 Jun. 2025].

Anderson, M. and Beveridge, A. A. (2022) 'The 2020 Census: Trump, the Pandemic, and Threats to Democracy', *New Labor Forum*, 00(0), pp. 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1177/109579602210909.

Avrutin, E. M. (2022) *Racism in modern Russia: from the Romanovs to Putin*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Bahovadinova, M. (2024) 'Subaltern citizenship: naturalization and belonging for New Russian citizens from Central Asia', *Citizenship Studies*, 28(7), pp. 691-708. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2024.2428667.

Bahovadinova, M. and Borisova, E. (2025) 'Weaponising naturalised citizenship: mitigating the risks of war mobilisation in Putin's Russia', *Citizenship Studies*, pp. 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2025.2486822.

Baker, J. O., Perry, S. L., Whitehead, A. L. (2020) 'Keep America Christian (and White): Christian Nationalism, Fear of Ethnoracial Outsiders, and Intention to Vote for Donald Trump in the 2020 Presidential Election', *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*, 81(3), pp. 272–293. doi:10.1093/socrel/sraa015.

Balzer, H. (2024) ‘A Russia Without Russians? Putin’s Disastrous Demographics’, Washington DC: *Atlantic Council Eurasia Center*, pp. 1-20.

Barbieri, G. and Newell, J. L. (2023) ‘Abstentionism, populism, and the crisis of democracy’, *Etica Pubblica*, 2, pp. 17-34. doi:10.1400/296142.

Bazail-Eimil, E. (2025) ‘Trump administration restores ‘neighborhood checks’ for citizenship applicants after 30-year hiatus’, *Politico* [Online]. Available at: https://www.politico.com/news/2025/08/26/trump-neighborhood-checks-citizenship-applicants-00527680 (Accessed 25 January 2026).

Bellman, V. and Namdev, V. (2022) ‘Suicidality Among Men in Russia: A Review of Recent Epidemiological Data’, *Cureus*, 14(3), pp. 1-14. https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.22990.

Blau F. D. (1992) ‘The Fertility of Immigrant Women: Evidence from High Fertility Source Countries’, in Borjas, G. J. and Freeman, R. B. (eds.) *Immigration and the Work Force: Economic Consequences for the United States and Source Areas*. Chicago: UCP, pp. 93-133.

Blum, R. M. and Parker, C. S. (2019) ‘Trump-ing Foreign Affairs’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 17(3), pp. 737-755. doi:10.1017/S1537592719000999.

Böller, F. and Wiedekind, J. (2025) ‘The Declining Reliability of U.S. Foreign Policy and its Domestic Sources Under Trump II’, *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik*, 18, pp. 577-587. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12399-025-01075-0.

Bondarev, B. (2025) ‘Between Apathy and Paranoia: Russian Diplomats, Conspiracy Theories, and Ukraine’ in Shekhovtsov, A. (ed.) *Russia against Ukraine: Russian Political Mythology and the War on Ukrainian Identity*. Vienna: Centre for Democratic Integrity, pp. 83-92.

Brady, M. J. (2025) ‘Citizen mothers and others: natalist discourse and politics in the U.S. after Trump’, *Social Identities*, pp. 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2025.2525412.

Buchmeier, Y. and Vogt, G. (2024) ‘The Aging Democracy: Demographic Effects, Political Legitimacy, and the Quest for Generational Pluralism’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 22(1), pp. 168-180. doi:10.1017/S1537592723000981

Burrett, T. (2020) ‘Charting Putin’s Shifting Populism in the Russian Media from 2000 to 2020’, *Politics and Governance*, 8(1), pp. 193–205. doi:10.17645/pag.v8i1.2565.

Campani, G., Fabelo Concepción, S., Rodriguez Soler, A., Sánchez Savín, C. (2022) ‘The Rise of Donald Trump Right-Wing Populism in the United States: Middle American Radicalism and Anti-Immigration Discourse’, *Societies*, 12(154), pp. 1-25. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12060154.

Chawryło, K. (2024) ‘Short-term stability and long-term problems. The demographic situation in Russia’, *Centre for Eastern Studies*, 610, pp. 1-11.

Cook, L. J., Iarskaia-Smirnova, E. R. and Kozlov, V. A. (2023) ‘Trying to Reverse Demographic Decline: Pro-Natalist and Family Policies in Russia, Poland and Hungary’, *Social Policy & Society*, 22(2), pp. 355–375. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746422000628.

Dattani, S., Rodés-Guirao, L. and Roser, M. (2024) *Age Structure* [Online]. Our World in Data. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/fertility-rate [Accessed 16 Jun. 2025].

De Luca, M. and Giungato, L. (2024) ‘Conspiratorial Narratives and Ideological Constructs in the Russia–Ukraine Conflict: From the New World Order to the Golden Billion Theories’, *Genealogy*, 8(131), pp. 1-20. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy8040131.

Destradi, S., Cadier, D. and Plagemann, J. (2021) ‘Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (Introduction)’, *Comparative European Politics*, 19, pp. 663-682. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00255-4.

Dvořák, T., Zouhar, J. and Bíba, J. (2025) ‘How and why does demographic decline lead to support for populist parties? The case of the Czech Republic’, *Political Geography*, 117, pp. 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103261.

Eller, J. D. (2021) ‘Race and rage: Mourning loss in right-wing populism and ethnonationalism’, *Reviews in Anthropology*, 50(1-2), pp. 5-21. doi:10.1080/00938157.2021.1962035.
Eller, J. D. (2025) ‘Agnocracy: Rule by Ignorance, *Current Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 8(1), pp. 25-36. https://dx.doi.org/10.12944/CRJSSH.8.1.03.

Ennser-Jedenastik, L. (2022) ‘The impact of radical right parties on family benefits’, *West European Politics*, 45(1), pp. 154-176. doi:10.1080/01402382.2021.1936944.

Enroth, H. and Hjelm, A. (2025) ‘Autocracy and Immortality: Vladimir Putin and the Problem of Time’, International Journal of Politics, *Culture, and Society*, pp. 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-025-09543-3.

Erel, U. (2018) ‘Saving and reproducing the nation: Struggles around right-wing politics of social reproduction, gender and race in austerity Europe’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 68, pp. 173–182. http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2017.11.003.

Fenger, M. (2018) ‘The social policy agendas of populist radical right parties in comparative perspective’, *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 34(3), pp. 188-209. https://doi.org/10.1080/21699763.2018.1483255.

Fox, C. (2020) 'Demography is not Destiny' in Obasogie, O. K. (ed.) *Trumpism and its Discontents*. Berkeley Public Policy Press, pp. 93-114.

Friedrichs, G. M. (2025) 'The Age of the Disaffected Voter: American Democracy and US Foreign Policy under the Second Trump Presidency', *Zeitschrift Für Ausländisches Öffentliches Recht Und Völkerrecht / Heidelberg Journal of International Law*, 85(1), pp. 1-16. https://doi.org/10.17104/0044-2348-2025-1-1.

Galan, S. (2025) *Median age of the population of G7 countries 2000-2024, by country* [Online]. Statista. Available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1372646/g7-country-median-age/ (Accessed 23 October 2025).

Gerber, T. P. and Gimpelson, V. (2024) 'Inequality and social stratification in Russia during the Putin regime: From market transition to war on Ukraine', *Sociology Compass*, 18(3), pp. 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13196.

Goetz, J. (2021) 'The Great Replacement' – Reproduction and population policies of the far right, taking the Identitarians as an example', *DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, 8(1), pp. 59-74. https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.v8i1.16944.

Gökarıksel, B., Neubert, C. and Smith, S. (2019) 'Demographic Fever Dreams: Fragile Masculinity and Population Politics in the Rise of the Global Right', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(3), pp. 561-587.

Goldstone, J. A. (2002) 'Population and Security: How Demographic Change Can Lead to Violent Conflict', *Journal of International Affairs*, 56(1), pp. 3-21.
Goldstone, J.A. and Diamond, L. (2020) 'Demography and the Future of Democracy', *Perspectives on Politics*, 18(3), pp. 867–880. doi:10.1017/S1537592719005000.

Golosov, G. V. (2023) 'The place of Russia's political regime (2003–2023) on a conceptual map of the world's autocracies', *Social Science Information*, 62(3), pp. 390–408. doi:10.1177/05390184231207597.

Gorodzeisky, A. (2019) 'Opposition to immigration in contemporary Russia', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35(3), pp. 205–222. doi:10.1080/1060586X.2018.1534473.

Haggard, S. and Kaufman, R. (2021) 'The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding', *Journal of Democracy*, 32(4), pp. 27-41. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0050.

Heinemann-Grüder, A. (2025) 'Memory, Myth, and Militarisation: Russia's War Propaganda and the Construction of Legitimised Violence in Ukraine' in Shekhovtsov, A. (ed.) *Russia against Ukraine: Russian Political Mythology and the War on Ukrainian Identity*. Vienna: Centre for Democratic Integrity, pp. 93-102.

Herold, M. (2025) 'Who Believes in the "Great Replacement"? Political Attitudes and Democratic Alienation Among Supporters of Immigration-Related Conspiracy Theories in Europe', *Social Science Quarterly*, 106(2), pp. 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13481.

Homolar, A. and Löfflmann, G. (2021) 'Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 0, pp. 1–11. doi:10.1093/isagsq/ksab002.

Hopkin, J. (2010) 'The Comparative Method', in Marsh, D. and Stoker, G. (eds.) *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. 3rd edn. Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 285-307.

Huang, K. (2023) 'Support for Democracy in the Age of Rising Inequality and Population Aging', *Social Indicators Research*, 166, pp. 27–51. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-023-03061-5.

Inglehart, R. and Norris, P. (2000) 'The Developmental Theory of the Gender Gap: Women's and Men's Voting Behavior in Global Perspective', *International Political Science Review*, 21(4), pp. 441-463. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512100214007.

International Federation for Human Rights (2024) *Russia: Ban on "propaganda" in favor of childfree lifestyles*, FIDH [Online]. Available at: https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/lgbtqi-rights/russia-ban-on-propaganda-in-favor-of-childfree-lifestyles (Accessed 29 January 2026).

Isernia, P., Mader, M., Martini, S., Radu, B. and Schoen, H. (2025) 'Populist attitudes and foreign policy postures: a comparative analysis of four European countries', *European Political Science Review*, 17, pp. 22-40. doi:10.1017/S1755773924000122.

Itkin, E. and Mil-Man, A. (2025) 'The Institution of the Russian Family under the Putin Regime and the War in Ukraine', *Institute for National Security Studies*, pp. 78-89. Available at: https://www.inss.org.il/strategic_assessment/russian-family/ (Accessed 19 January 2026).

Jenne, E. K. (2021) 'Populism, nationalism and revisionist foreign policy', *International Affairs*, 97(2), pp. 323-343. doi:10.1093/ia/iiaa230.

Jessoula, M., Natili, M. and Pavolini, E. (2022) ''Exclusionary welfarism': a new programmatic agenda for populist right-wing parties?', *Contemporary Politics*, 28(4), pp. 447-468. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2021.2011644.

Jeyaretnam, M. (2025) 'Trump Admin Expands 'Good Moral Character' Test for U.S. Citizenship Applicants to 'Root Out Anti-Americanism'', *Time* [Online]. Available at: https://time.com/7310570/uscis-good-moral-character-naturalization-citizenship-test-trump-administration-immigration/ (Accessed 25 January 2026).

Joo, S. H. (2024) ‘Elections and Immigration Policy in Autocracy: Evidence from Russia and Kazakhstan’, *Government and Opposition*, 59(2), pp. 482–503. doi:10.1017/gov.2022.47.

Jukkala, T., Stickley, A., Mäkinen, I. H., Baburin, A. and Sparén, P. (2017) ‘Age, period and cohort effects on suicide mortality in Russia, 1956−2005’, *BMC Public Health*, 17(235), pp. 1-11. doi:10.1186/s12889-017-4158-2.

Jung, Y. J. (2025) ‘Navigating Populism in America: Unveiling the Socioeconomic and Ideological Roots of Populist Attitudes’, *Social Science Quarterly*, 106(e13488). https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13488.

Jütten, M. and Delivorias, A. (2026) ‘The US military intervention in Venezuela and the regional and geopolitical context’, *European Parliamentary Research Service*, pp. 1-10.

Kazimov, R. and Zakharov, S. V. (2021) ‘Combating Low Life Expectancy and Low Fertility in Tumultuous Political Times: A Comparison of the Ukraine, Russia and Belarus’ in Goerres, A. and Vanhuysse, P. (eds.) *Global Political Demography: The Politics of Population Change*. Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 401-427.

Kingsbury, M. (2019) ‘Let's have more Russian babies. How anti-immigrant sentiment shapes family leave policy in Russia’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 52(3), pp. 283-295. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2019.07.004.

Kramerand, S. and Passel, J. S. (2025) *What the data says about immigrants in the U.S.* [Online]. Pew Research Center. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/08/21/key-findings-about-us-immigrants/#where-are-u-s-immigrants-from (Accessed 23 October 2025).

Krastev, I. and Holmes, S. (2024) *The Battle for Ukraine Is a War of Demography: Russia’s crisis of depopulation is at the heart of Vladimir Putin’s paranoid military strategy* [Online]. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/12/06/russia-ukraine-war-demography/ (Accessed 19 January 2026).

Lesthaeghe, R. (2014) ‘The second demographic transition: A concise overview of its development’, *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.*, 111(51), pp. 18112-18115, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1420441111.

Levinson, A. (2025) ‘Through the Russian Gaze: Perceptions of Ukraine and Ukrainians’ in Shekhovtsov, A. (ed.) *Russia against Ukraine: Russian Political Mythology and the War on Ukrainian Identity*. Vienna: Centre for Democratic Integrity, pp. 47-59.

Levitsky, S. and Ziblatt, D. (2020) ‘The Crisis of American Democracy’, *American Educator*, 44(3), pp. 6-13.

Livingston, G. (2016) *Births Outside of Marriage Decline for Immigrant Women* [Online]. Pew Research Center. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2016/10/26/growth-in-annual-u-s-births-since-1970-driven-entirely-by-immigrant-moms/ (Accessed 13 November 2025).

Löfflmann, G. (2022) ‘‘Enemies of the people’: Donald Trump and the security imaginary of America First’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24(3), pp. 543-560. doi: 10.1177/13691481211048499.

Löfflmann, G. (2022) ‘Introduction to special issue: The study of populism in international relations’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24(3), pp. 403-415. https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221103116.

Lu, Y., (2024) ‘Political Demography: The Political Consequences of Structural Population Change’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 50, pp. 603-625. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-030222-024414.

Łukasz, A. K., Matusiak, M. M. and Rodkiewicz, W. (2026) ‘Trump’s Board of Peace: an alternative to the UN?’, *Centre for Eastern Studies* [Online]. Available at: https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2026-01-22/trumps-board-peace-alternative-to-un (Accessed 03 February 2026).

Lundquist, J. H., Anderton, D. L. and Yaukey, D. (2015) *Demography: The Study of Human Population*. 4th edn. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press.

Maher, H. (2025) ‘The neoliberal Great Replacement theory: on the racialization of markets and migration’, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, pp. 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2025.2499827.

Makarychev, A. and Medvedev, S. (2024) *Biopower in Putin’s Russia: From Taking Care to Taking Lives*. Budapest & New York: Central European University Press.

Malyarenko, T. and Kormych, B. (2026) ‘New People for the Old Empire: Russian Policy of Citizenship in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine and Beyond’, *Ethnopolitics*, 25(1), pp. 61-76. https://doi.Org/10.1080/17449057.2024.2386794.

Mathieu, S. (2013) ‘Entre l’effet tempo et l’effet quantum: une analyse de l’effet des politiques familiales sur la fécondité dans les pays avancés’, *Sociologie et sociétés*, 45(1), pp. 255-276. https://doi.org/10.7202/1016403ar.

McDonald, P. (2006) ‘Low Fertility and the State: The Efficacy of Policy’, *Population and Development Review*, 32(3), pp. 485-510. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20058901.

Metawe, M. (2024) ‘Populism and domestic/ international politics: theory and practice’, *Review of Economics and Political Science*, 9(3), pp. 194-211. doi: 10.1108/REPS-11-2019-0146.

Mora, G. C. (2020) ‘Latinx Politics and the Census in the Trump Era’ in Obasogie, O. K. (ed.) *Trumpism and its Discontents*. Berkeley Public Policy Press, pp. 130-146.

Moynihan, D. and Zuppke, R. (2025) 'The Death of USAID: How Elon Musk and Donald Trump Ended America's Foreign Aid Agency', *Public Administration and Development*, 45, pp. 327–331. https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.70011.

Nagel, C. (2025) 'Immigration policy in the second Trump administration: Restriction, removal, and the limits of MAGA nativism', *The Geographical Journal*, 191(e70015), pp. 1-5. https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.70015.

Nastios, A. S. (2025) 'The Spreading Chaos: The Case of Ukraine', *South Central Review*, 42(1-2), pp. 19-23. https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2025.a961445.

Naumann, E. and Hess, M. (2021) 'Population Ageing, Immigration and the Welfare State: The Political Demography in Western Europe' in Goerres, A. and Vanhuysse, P. (eds.) *Global Political Demography: The Politics of Population Change*. Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 351-371.

Nord, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Fernandes, T., Good God, A., and I. Lindberg, S. I. (2025) 'Democracy report: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?'. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

Ong, J., Ong, P., Diaz, S. and Chinchilla, M. (2025) 'Latino Ice Arrests Surge Under Trump', UCLA: *Center for Neighbourhood Knowledge*, pp. 1-12.

Ong, P., Ong, J. and Diaz, S. (2026) 'Latino Ice Detentions Dramatically Reshaped Under Trump', UCLA: *Center for Neighbourhood Knowledge*, pp. 1-18.

Our World in Data (2024) *Median Age* [Online]. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/median-age?country=RUS~USA (Accessed 25 November 2025).

Our World in Data (2025) *Political regime* [Online]. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/political-regime [Accessed 16 Jun. 2025].

Our World in Data (2025) *Sex gap in life expectancy*, 2023 [Online]. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/difference-in-female-and-male-life-expectancy-at-birth?mapSelect=RUS~USA (Accessed 25 November 2025).

Özdamar Ö. and Yanik, L. K. (2024) 'Populist hyperpersonalization and politicization of foreign policy institutions', *International Affairs*, 100(5), pp. 1835-1856. doi: 10.1093/ia/iiae181.

Parker, K., Menasce Horowitz, J., Brown, A., Fry, R., Cohn D. and Igielnik R. (2018) *What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities* [Online]. Pew Research Center. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/05/22/demographic-and-economic-trends-in-urban-suburban-and-rural-communities/ (Accessed 24 October 2025).

Parker, K., Menasce Horowitz, J., Brown, A., Fry, R., D'Vera, C. and Igielnik, R. (2018) *Urban, suburban and rural residents' views on key social and political issues* [Online]. Pew Research Center. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/05/22/urban-suburban-and-rural-residents-views-on-key-social-and-political-issues/ (Accessed 03 December 2025).

Parsons, C. (2010) 'Constructivism and Interpretive Theory', in Marsh, D. and Stoker, G. (eds.) *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. 3rd edn. Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 80-98.

Perry, S.L. and Grubbs, J.B. (2025) 'Make One for the Team: Culture Wars and Group-Serving Pronatalism', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 58(1), pp. 13–22. doi:10.1017/S1049096524001069.

Peters, B. G. (2024) 'Democratic Backsliding and the Policy Agenda: Losing Interest in, and Capacity for, the Future' in Morais de Sá e Silva, M. and De Ávila Gomide, A. (eds.) *Public Policy in Democratic Backsliding: How Illiberal Populists Engage with the Policy Process*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 39-57.

Piazza, J. A. (2024) 'Demographic change threat, preference for nondemocratic governance, and support for political violence', *Social Science Quarterly*,105, pp. 1123–1139. doi:10.1111/ssqu.13402.

Piazza, J. A. (2024) 'Populism and Support for Political Violence in the United States: Assessing the Role of Grievances, Distrust of Political Institutions, Social Change Threat, and Political Illiberalism', *Political Research Quarterly*, 77(1), pp. 152–166. doi:10.1177/10659129231198248.

Population Connection (2025) *Pronatalism in the US: The Trump administration's push for more births* [Online]. Available at: https://populationconnection.org/learn/pronatalism-in-the-us/ (Accessed 22 January 2026).

Randall, A. E. (2020) 'Soviet and Russian Masculinities: Rethinking Soviet Fatherhood after Stalin and Renewing Virility in the Russian Nation under Putin, *The Journal of Modern History*, 92(4), pp. 859–898. https://doi.org/10.1086/711382.

Randeria, S. (2024) 'Soft Authoritarianism, Ethno-Nationalism, and the Backlash Against Women's Rights in Europe', *Polity*, 12(2), pp. 20-26.

Rasmussen, C. (2023) 'Fertile Ground: The Biopolitics of Natalist Populism', *ACME*, 22(3), pp. 1069-1092. https://doi.org/10.7202/1102113ar.

Raymond, N. A., Hathaway, O. A. and Howarth, C. N. et al. (2024) *Russia's Systematic Program of Coerced Adoption and Fostering of Ukraine's Children*. Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health: New Haven. Available at: https://conflictobservatory.org.

Rickleton, C. (2025) ‘Russia's 'Year Of The Family' Has Meant A War On Abortion And Divorce’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* [Online]. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/33273068.html (Accessed 28 January 2026).

Ritchie, H. and Roser, M. (2024) *Age Structure* [Online]. Our World in Data. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/age-structure [Accessed 16 Jun. 2025].

Rivolta, A. (2025) ‘Understanding the Trump doctrine: the business of foreign policy’, *Studi Internazionali*, 3(2), pp. 8-11.

Rodríguez-Muñiz, M. (2020) ‘Toward a Political Sociology of Demography’, in Janoski, T. et al. (eds.) *The New Handbook of Political Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 384–406. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108147828.015.

Roose, J. M. (2019) ‘Non-Western new populism: Religion, masculinity and violence in the East’ in in Fitzi, G., Mackert J. and Turner, B. S. (eds.) *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy - Volume 3: Migration, Gender and Religion*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, pp. 111-129.

Russkikh, S. (2021) ‘L’évolution de la Politique Familiale en Russie : D’une Politique Sociale à une Politique Traditionaliste’, *Revue d’études Comparatives Est-Ouest*, 52(2), pp. 125-154.

Schulte, D. (2025) ‘To Ban or Not to Ban: Explaining Abortion Policy in Poland, Russia, and Turkey’, *St Comp Int Dev*, pp. 1-30. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-025-09470-6.

Sciubba, J. D. (2014) ‘Coffins versus cradles: Russian population, foreign policy, and power transition theory’, *International Area Studies Review*, 17(2), pp. 205– 221. doi:10.1177/2233865914528823.

Sciubba, J. D. (2021) ‘Intergenerational Controversy and Cultural Clashes: Political Consequences of Demographic Change in the US and Canada Since 1990’ in Goerres, A. and Vanhuysse, P. (eds.) *Global Political Demography: The Politics of Population Change*. Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 325-350.

Sciubba, J. D. (2023) ‘Population ageing and national security in Asia’, *International Affairs*, 99(5), pp. 2119–2136. doi:10.1093/ia/iia 176.

Sedgwick, M. (2024) ‘The great replacement narrative: fear, anxiety and loathing across the West’, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 25(4), pp. 548-562. https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2024.2424790.

Shadrina, A. (2025) *The Babushka Phenomenon: Older women and the political sociology of ageing in Russia*. London: UCL Press. https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800089099.

Shekhovtsov, A. (2025) 'Putin's Genocidal Quest for Symbolic Immortality' in Shekhovtsov, A. (ed.) *Russia against Ukraine: Russian Political Mythology and the War on Ukrainian Identity*. Vienna: Centre for Democratic Integrity, pp. 103-117.

Siddiqui, S. (2021) 'Racing the nation: towards a theory of reproductive racism', *Race & Class*, 63(2), pp. 3-20. doi:10.1177/03063968211037219.

Skeldon, R. (2021) 'Migration in Political Demography: A Review of Evidence' in Goerres, A. and Vanhuysse, P. (eds.) *Global Political Demography: The Politics of Population Change*. Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 29-55.

Stewart, S. and Willer, R. (2022) 'The effects of racial status threat on White Americans' support for Donald Trump: Results of five experimental tests', *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 25(3), pp. 791– 810. doi:10.1177/13684302211048893.

Stimson Center (2026) *Japan 2026: Aging Challenges and Opportunities* [Online event]. 28 January 2026. Available at: https://www.stimson.org/event/japan-2026-aging-challenges-and-opportunities/ (Accessed 19 February 2026).

Stoeckl, K. (2023) 'Europe's New Religious Conflicts: Russian Orthodoxy, American Christian Conservatives and the Emergence of a European Populist Christian Right-Wing' in Selderhuis, H. (ed.) *The Power of Religion / Religion and Power: Third Annual Conference 2020*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 53-60. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111229102-005.

Testa, M. R. (2014) 'On the positive correlation between education and fertility intentions in Europe: Individual- and country-level evidence', *Advances in life course research*, 21, pp. 28-42. doi:10.1016/j.alcr.2014.01.005.

The Moscow Times (2025) *Russia Forms 'Demographic Special Forces Unit' as Birth Rate Hits Historic Low* [Online]. Available at: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/07/24/russia-forms-demographic-special-forces-unit-as-birth-rate-hits-historic-low-a89946 (Accessed 28 January 2026).

The Project on Collaborative Research: Migration and Fertility (2022) 'Migration from Africa to France: New findings on fertility change', *Institute for Policy Research Rapid Research Report*, pp. 1-9. https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/reports/ipr-rapid-research-report-migration-fertility-25-february-2022.pdf

Turner, B. S. (2019) 'Introduction: Demography, democracy and right-wing populism' in Fitzi, G., Mackert J. and Turner, B. S. (eds.) *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy - Volume 3: Migration, Gender and Religion*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, pp. 1-8.

Turner, B. S. (2023) ‘Masculinity, Citizenship, and Demography: the Rise of Populism’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 37, pp. 203–217. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-023-09459-w.

Van Wijk1, D. and Feijten, P. (2025) ‘Rising House Prices, Falling Fertility? How Rising House Prices Widen Fertility Differences between Tenure Groups’, *European Journal of Population*, 41(33), pp. 1-31. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-025-09754-6.

Vanhuysse P. (2014) ‘Intergenerational Justice and Public Policy in Europe’, *European Social Observatory (OSE) Paper Series*, Opinion Paper No. 16, pp. 1-17.

Volant, S., Pison, G. et Héran, F. (2019) ‘La France a la plus forte fécondité d’Europe. Est-ce dû aux immigrées ?’, *Population & Sociétés*, 568(7), pp. 1-4. https://doi.org/10.3917/popsoc.568.0001.

Wajner, D. F., Destradi S. and Zürn, M. (2024) ‘The effects of global populism: assessing the populist impact on international affairs’, *International Affairs*, 100(5), pp. 1819–1833. doi:10.1093/ia/iiae 217.

Weissert, W., Keaten, J. and Burrows, E. (2026) *Trump’s Greenland threats spark outrage from EU and test longtime NATO alliance*, Associated Press [Online]. Available at: https://apnews.com/article/denmark-greenland-trump-bessent-davos-ab05ebfaae6a413d1f8125cb9726a4c5. (Accessed 03 February 2026).

Wilson, B. (2019) ‘The Intergenerational Assimilation of Completed Fertility: Comparing the Convergence of Different Origin Groups’, *International Migration Review*, 53(2), pp. 429-457.

Yilmaz, I. and Morieson, N. (2025) *Weaponizing Civilizationalism for Authoritarianism: How Turkey, India, Russia, and China Challenge Liberal Democracy*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Yudin, G. (2022) ‘The War in Ukraine: Do Russians Support Putin?’, *Journal of Democracy*, 33(3), pp. 31-37. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0037.

Zakharov, S. V. (2024) ‘Three Decades on Russia’s Path of the Second Demographic Transition: How Patterns of Fertility are Changing Under an Unstable Demographic Policy’, *Comparative Population Studies*, 49, pp. 25-54. https://doi.org/10.12765/CPoS-2024-02.

Zavadskaya, M. (2024) *Russia: Nations in Transit 2024* [Online]. Freedom House. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/nations-transit/2024. [Accessed 16 Jun. 2025].