

Samodova, Anna

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A critical analysis of Russia's Maternity Capital program: Demographic intentions vs. socioeconomic realities

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A Critical Analysis of Russia's Maternity Capital Program: Demographic Intentions vs. Socioeconomic Realities

Anna Samodova

anna.samodova@smail.fb06.h-brs.de



**Hochschule
Bonn-Rhein-Sieg**
University of Applied Sciences

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Abstract

Russia's Maternity Capital program, launched in 2007, is a key policy with an obvious pro-natalist focus aimed at countering the country's long-term depopulation trend by encouraging families to have more children. Initially, providing financial incentives for second and subsequent births. The program was moderately effective in influencing reproductive decisions within this target group. In 2020, the government revised the Maternity Capital program to include first-born children. This redesign shifted the program's emphasis from promoting higher-order births, which are more likely to raise fertility, to broader poverty reduction among families with children, weakening its demographic effectiveness. This study provides a literature review and demographic analysis to evaluate the program's effectiveness in achieving its stated goals.

The data sources include state legislation, strategic demographic and family policy documents, official government reports, peer-reviewed research, and expert opinions. The findings show that while Maternity Capital investments have supported families in improving housing and educational access, the program's limited flexibility, due to its paternalistic design restricting fund usage, may constrain its ability to meet diverse family needs. The study observed short-term increases in fertility. Still, the program alone has proven insufficient to reverse long-term demographic decline. This paper identifies gaps between the policy's intentions and the socioeconomic realities faced by families, offering recommendations to improve the Maternity Capital program to achieve more favourable demographic outcomes and address social protection needs and providing insights for policymakers and researchers from the standpoint of its impacts on family social protection and child well-being. It argues that financial support must be substantial, well-targeted, particularly toward families considering a second or subsequent child, and paired with complementary pro-natalist measures rather than replaced by them.

Key words: child grant; demographic policy; family support; fertility rates; Russia

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1 Introduction

For more than half of the world's economies, including the Russian Federation, fertility rates have fallen below the replacement level, posing significant demographic challenges (International Monetary Fund, 2024). Researchers have examined the effectiveness of economic support measures for families, such as birth grants. Comparable initiatives, including Canada's Child Benefit and Baby Bonus programs in Australia, Singapore, and South Korea, provide financial assistance but show limited effects on fertility due to diverse cultural and economic contexts; some of them affect fertility by reducing the so-called "cost of children" through offering various subsidies or tax relief, others by increasing family income with cash transfers (Gauthier, 2007; Langridge et al., 2012; Enache, 2013; Kim, 2023). A broader set of family support measures in the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and European Union countries typically includes: (1) financial incentives, such as family allowances, birth allowances, and other incentives, are often combined with (2) tax benefits and deductions, as well as (3) extensive childcare provisions and parental leave systems (Kuklina, 2024; OECD Family Database, n.d.).

Social scientists have extensively examined the quantity-quality trade-off in childrearing across countries, particularly the relationship between fertility and income (Becker, 1960; Becker & Lewis, 1973; Heckman & Walker, 1990; Schultz, 2005; Cohen et al., 2007; Lovenheim & Mumford, 2013; Huang, 2015). Becker (1960) suggests that higher household income would increase fertility, arguing that the cost of improving "child quality" rises with the number of children, creating a negative quantity-quality relationship. Subsequent research demonstrates that this relationship depends on how families balance parental time against market goods, with costs varying based on factors like parental time value and market prices. Critics note the model's failure to consider parental time constraints in childcare (Lovenheim & Mumford, 2013).

Societal unpredictability also impacts fertility, especially in transition economies (Burke, 2012). In post-Soviet countries such as Russia, the steep 1990s fertility decline stemmed primarily from employment instability and childcare access rather than income reduction alone (Philipov & Kohler, 2001; Frejka & Zakharov, 2012). This evidence suggests financial incentives alone cannot overcome structural barriers to childbearing nor sustain fertility growth.

In contemporary Russia, policymakers frame declining birth rates as a national security threat. This perspective has expanded birth grants beyond direct family support. In line with this, political authorities focus heavily on the family as a source of human capital, notably the declaration of 2024 as "the Year of the Family in Russia" (Presidential Executive Office, 2024a).

The Maternity Capital¹ (MC) program, implemented in 2007, has been extensively studied for its demographic impacts. While research shows a moderate positive correlation with birth rates, scholars attribute this partly to external factors (Frejka & Zakharov, 2012; Slonimczyk & Yurko, 2013; Arkhangelsky et al., 2015; Elizarov & Levin, 2015; Zakharov, 2017; Yakovlev & Sorvachev, 2019). Despite nearly two decades of operation, the program's long-term effects on fertility and social protection remain understudied. Declining birth rates followed the 2020 expansion to first-born children, though causality requires further analysis (Shcherbakova, 2022).

Russia's family support system also includes Soviet-era policies: pregnancy and childbirth benefits, parental leave, child allowances for under-18s, plus regionally varied programs (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya, 2021; Vakulenko et al., 2024). While these measures aim to support families, their collective impact on demographics remains unclear and may dilute the MC's effectiveness.

This article critically analyses Russia's Maternity Capital as a non-cash form of state support for families raising children. Not aiming to compare the conditions of child grants in different countries, this article focuses on the government's strategic decisions that have impacted the program's effectiveness and the demographic considerations behind them. It highlights relevant discussions and provides recommendations for a comprehensive program understanding. Due to the limited follow-up period for this program's second iteration, assessing the long-term impact of the implemented changes on demographics is challenging. Therefore, from a methodological standpoint, this article also integrates ideas from various fields and analyses the evolving legislation and broader socioeconomic context. This study examines the MC program as a case study of pro-natalist social policy and its effectiveness in improving social protection for families with children while assessing its limitations in reversing demographic decline.

Therefore, the research question is: What are the strengths and limitations of the Maternity Capital program in improving social protection for families with children in Russia, and how does it address the multidimensional aspects of child well-being while pursuing broader demographic objectives? This paper comprehensively assesses the program's outcomes and

¹ The benefit under the program is generally referred to as "maternity capital". The official title of the program in the legal document includes the word "family" – "maternity (family) capital" – to encompass specific situations when the main beneficiary is not a mother upon the birth or adoption of a second, third or subsequent child, but this child's father in case of mother's death. The family can receive significant money under the MC program, fully financed from the federal budget through the Social Fund of Russia (SFR). Existing research equally refers to "maternity capital" as a "child grant" or "child subsidy", and less often – as a "baby bonus".

implications for future policy design by examining legislative frameworks, demographic data, and existing literature. This analysis may be particularly relevant for policymakers seeking to balance the demographic objectives of such policies with socioeconomic realities.

The article is structured as follows: It begins with the methodology, detailing the literature review approach and addressing data limitations. The results section provides an overview of the MC program's evolution, analyses changes in the child grant's real value, and presents key findings from demographic research. The discussion section critically evaluates the program's impact on demographic trends and family social protection, drawing on relevant literature. The article concludes with recommendations for improving the effectiveness of such policies in changing socioeconomic conditions.

2 Methodology

This study employs an in-depth literature review to evaluate the MC program in the broader context of socioeconomic factors influencing its outcomes, such as improvements in the legal framework and changes in Russia's economic and political setting. Methodologically, this study draws on a wide range of data sources in both English and Russian, including peer-reviewed academic articles, governmental reports, policy documents, expert opinions, and demographic statistics, with a focus on works published between 2007 and 2023. The study selected sources based on relevance, publication quality, and availability of demographic data, prioritising analyses from official institutions such as Russia's Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) and the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation, the supreme body of external state audit (control). The selected newspaper and journal articles served as supplementary sources to contextualise findings from other research and capture the public and political discourse surrounding the MC program's implementation.

This study categorises the results using thematic analysis into three key areas: demographic impacts, socioeconomic effects, and programmatic challenges. This study reviewed the available literature using this theoretical framework to identify insights and trends. Particular attention was paid to studies with conflicting findings, as these discrepancies can highlight critical differences in data sources, research methodologies, and theories behind these conclusions. Such inconsistencies often stem from differences in data sources (e.g., census vs. surveys), analytical models (tempo vs. quantum fertility), and the varying socioeconomic contexts in which the studies were conducted. This study relies mainly on secondary data for its analysis, especially regarding demographic statistics. Despite this, it aims to provide a comprehensive and meaningful synthesis of existing research. This study employed the approaches of child

well-being (CWB) and child-sensitive social protection (CSSP) to assess the MC program as a family-oriented social protection measure.

Limitations include the short follow-up period for the post-2020 MC program changes and the challenges of accessing recent information. Therefore, this study cross-referenced data from multiple sources to enhance reliability. The data collection for this study was, to a certain extent, affected by recent geopolitical events. For example, due to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the World Bank suspended cooperation with the Russian government, which interrupted economic data availability in 2021 (World Bank, 2022). This data gap poses a challenge for future assessments. However, some recent demographic data sets are still available on the official Rosstat website; they provide insight, albeit limited, into the country's demographic landscape – for example, data on total fertility rates (TFR) and selective national household surveys. The reliability of data from the 2021 Russian census (the first digital population census) is also subject to significant scrutiny due to implementation obstacles, such as the unprecedented use of online data collection methods that hindered real participation of the population, along with enactment during the COVID-19 pandemic (Manuzina & Kopytok, 2024; Okladnikov, 2024). In addition, in 2021, the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation presented a comprehensive thematic report on the benefits under the MC program; since then, official institutions have conducted no further analysis of the economic context (The Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation, 2021). Consequently, reliance on national sources for recent data on the MC program introduces potential concerns regarding data integrity and comprehensiveness. The current data constraints require carefully interpreting Russia's demographic policies and their outcomes. For further research on this topic, it might be essential to search for alternative data sources or methodologies that address these limitations and provide a more complete picture of demographic trends traced from 2021 onwards.

This study adopts a multidisciplinary perspective, integrating demographic and policy-oriented research to offer a well-rounded evaluation of the MC program. By comparing diverse methodologies and outcomes, it seeks to extract practical lessons for policymakers and future researchers, delivering valuable insights into the evolving role of the MC program as a tool for social protection and demographic policy in Russia.

The following section will provide a detailed description of the MC program, including its key features before and after the re-design of 2020 and the value of the benefits in different periods of the MC program's implementation.

3 Results

Prerequisites for the adoption and goals of the Maternity Capital Program (2007 – 2020)

The Russian government implemented the MC program to counteract the country's persistent demographic decline through financial incentives for families to have additional children. Established under Federal Law № 256-FL of December 29, 2006, the program formed part of Russia's Demographic Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025 (Federal Law No. 256-FL, 2006; Decree of the President No. 1351, 2007). Its dual objectives were to boost fertility rates to population replacement levels and provide targeted support to families with children. Originally conceived as a 10-year initiative, the program was later extended first under the "Financial Support for Families at the Birth of Children" project and subsequently incorporated into the "Family" National Project (2024-2030).

Informed by the 2002 census data revealing a fertility rate below the replacement level (2.1 children per woman) for over a decade, the MC program initially targeted families with two or more children. The certificate-based system, administered by the Social Fund of Russia (SFR), restricted fund usage to approved purposes like housing and education. A 2020 reform expanded eligibility to families with firstborns, marking a strategic shift from fertility incentives to broader poverty alleviation.

The most recent data from the World Bank classifies the Russian Federation as an upper-middle-income country (World Bank, 2022). The Russian Federation is known as one of the countries that provides various social protection measures to families with children, such as paid parental leave for all formal workers and universal birth grants for all citizens (International Labour Office & UNICEF, 2019). Nevertheless, along with unemployment and illness, having several children can increase the overall risk of falling into poverty for families in Russia. For instance, the self-reported financial capacity of households with children also showed differences: that is, a smaller share of families with two and three children (49.9% and 44.1% respectively) reported themselves as feeling prepared for the unexpected expenses compared to one-child families (54.7%) (The Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation, 2021).

Based on selective national household surveys, the average household's disposable resources (per household member) for families with two children is 33% lower than that of a household without children (Rosstat, 2024). At the same time, according to the national legislation, most other types of child social support measures and benefits are available only to large families with three or more children. Numerous families, specifically those reliant on in-

formal or low-wage employment, face significant challenges in affording the expenses associated with having additional children. At the beginning of 2025, Russia set the monthly minimum wage at 22,440 Russian rubles (RUB), about US\$250 (Statista, 2025).

Overall, in Russia, the risk of poverty is likely higher for families, particularly for mothers, after having children. The birth of children often results in a decline in the quality of life for the family, especially regarding housing conditions. In the long term, these poverty risks can affect children's health, significantly impacting various dimensions of child well-being (UNICEF Innocenti, 2020). In response to this pressing issue, the initial parameters of the MC program were designed to target families with two or more children and address their needs through its effective implementation.

The Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation has observed in the abovementioned report (2021) the multifaceted impact of the MC program on the Russian economy and society; the report's primary focus was on assessing how this program functions in providing support to families with children. According to the report, the MC program has been one of the most popular social support measures, with over 10.8 million families participating. By 2021, 77% of those 10.8 million families had already used their maternity capital funds fully or partially. From 2009 to 2020, nearly 2.950 billion Russian rubles (RUB) were allocated to implementing Federal Law № 256-FL (The Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation, 2021). These funds helped families meet their most pressing needs, such as improving their living conditions and children's education.

Thus, the MC program contributed to realising children's rights under Articles 27 and 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by increasing families' access to the housing market and various educational services (Convention on the Rights of the Child, n.d.). The MC program's emphasis on housing and education aligns with the key Child-Sensitive Social Protection (CSSP) principles. The program potentially enhances children's physical well-being and security by facilitating access to adequate housing. Simultaneously, the possibility of directing benefits funds to improve educational opportunities may contribute to cognitive development and long-term prospects. These two points suggest a design that considers fundamental aspects of child well-being. Within the broader economic context, the MC program has had one more visible impact: it has ensured the flow of investments in sectors such as housing construction and, to a lesser extent, education, with 96.7 % and 2.2 % of overall spending, respectively (The Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation, 2021). For example, the rise in the number of families who have access to the purchase of accommodation, directly at the expense of maternity capital or using credit resources, has significantly affected the balance of supply and demand in the real estate market.

On the other hand, if maternity capital benefits are used to purchase an apartment, legislation requires that the child be registered as a co-owner, which can affect the future liquidity of the asset. A more comprehensive CSSP approach would consider this obstacle to ensure holistic support for children's well-being in their later development stages.

Evolution and Expansion of the Maternity Capital Program to families with one child (2020 – Present)

The legislation analysed shows that Maternity Capital should be categorised as a birth grant, which is determined by demographic criteria. The child and mother must be Russian citizens who are permanently residing there. Although the program is aimed at families (or single parents) with children, the mother still has the primary right to apply for the maternity capital benefit. Participation in the MC program depends on the child's date of birth and the birth order of the children. Initially, the right for maternity capital is associated with a combination of several conditions, the central one being the birth (or adoption) of a second child, but not earlier than the start date of the MC program – January 1, 2007; thus, at the start, the program targeted predominantly women of the 1980 cohorts (and even earlier cohorts).

However, in 2020, legislative changes shifted the MC program's focus towards firstborns. Thus, the benefits were distributed unevenly between first and higher-order births – that is, any second or later child². Families can qualify for benefits under the new rules if their first child was born (or adopted) after January 1, 2020, the date the amendments entered into force. The MC program now allows a smaller benefit for the birth (or adoption) of second or subsequent children. The only exception is if the family (or single mother) had not previously exercised their right: if the first child was born before the changes in the MC program in 2020, the family could claim the entire (larger) amount of maternity capital. In the case of the family applying to the Social Fund of Russia (SFR) after the first child's birth, they obtain the right to use the remaining part of the birth grant after the second or subsequent child is born.

The right to receive maternity capital is granted only once in a lifetime. This social transfer is a voucher-like state-issued certificate confirming the right to receive maternity capital funds, which cannot be sold or cashed out. Over the last decade, ongoing digitalisation processes in Russia have created transparent mechanisms that appeal to beneficiaries. From April 2020 on, certificates are issued automatically after registering the birth of a child, and the information about the provision of funds is sent to the individual account of the certificate holder on the

² Demographers use the term “higher-order births” to denote a family's second, third, or any subsequent child (e.g., Frejka & Zakharov 2012; Arkhangelsky et al. 2015; Elizarov & Levin 2015; Validova 2021).

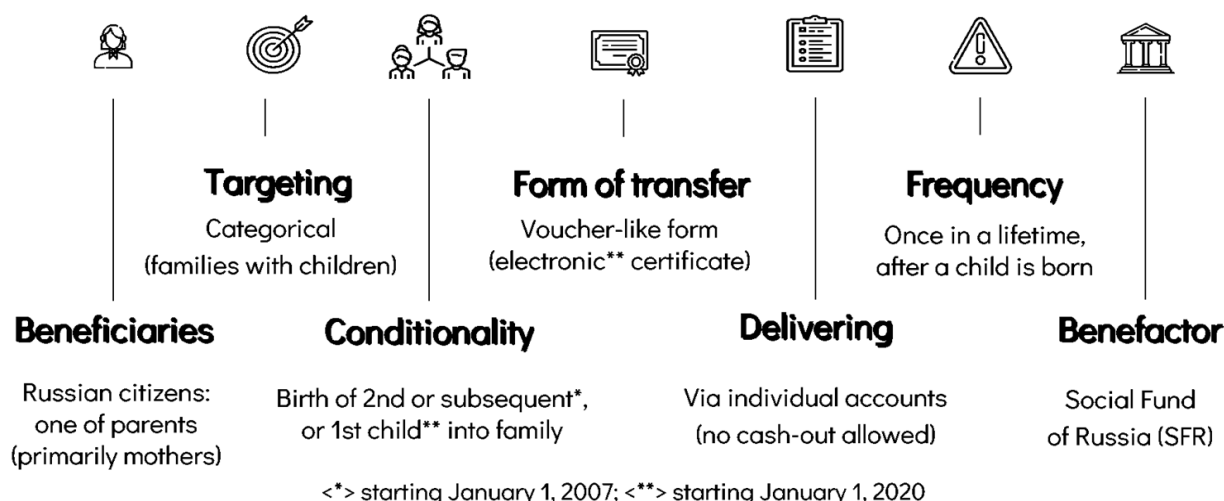
Social Fund of Russia (SFR) website ³or through the State Services portal ⁴. Social transfers are delivered through the system of the individual accounts of certificate owners held by SFR. Any cash-out schemes are illegal and promptly suppressed by law enforcement agencies. Suppose the certificate owner agrees to participate in the proposed schemes for misusing maternity capital funds. In that case, they commit an unlawful act and may be considered an accomplice to the crime. Graduation from the program is exogenous. It occurs automatically – after the full amount of maternity capital funds is used, participants are no longer in the program.

Thus, the social support measures under the MC program initially responded to Russia's demographic and economic situation in 2007. However, by 2020, it had become clear that there was a significant difference between the needs of a family and the amount of financial support available to beneficiaries. Russian authorities decided to tie the prevailing part of the benefit provided under the program to the birth of the first child. By 2007, when the MC program was introduced in Russia, the TFR, perceived by policymakers as a benchmark for measuring the effectiveness of demographic policies, had already been only 1.3 children per woman. It subsequently increased to a maximum value of 1.76 in 2017, but by 2023, it had fallen again to the pre-reform level of 1.41 (Rosstat, 2024). Thus, the impact of the MC program on TFR appears to be insufficient to reverse the situation by allowing for simple generation replacement. Demographers believe it is unrealistic as there are only a few countries in the world where the TFR exceeds 2.1 children per woman. None of them has undergone a demographic transition (when high birth and death rates are being replaced with low levels of both).

Figure 1: Key Features of Russia's Maternity Capital as a Social Transfer Scheme

³ Accessible at: <https://sfr.gov.ru/en/>.

⁴ Accessible at: www.gosuslugi.ru



Source: Author's elaboration based on the Social Fund of Russia (2020)⁵

Figure 1 summarises the main design features of the Maternity Capital program in Russia, following the analytical framework proposed by Schüring (2021). It outlines the essential elements of a social transfer scheme – including targeting, conditionality, form of transfer, beneficiaries, and benefactor – and reflects how the programme evolved after the 2020 expansion to include first-born children. The following section examines the actual size of the benefit over time.

Financial Analysis: Changes in Maternity Capital Value Over Time

Since its launch, the MC program has undergone several changes, including benefit increases and new regulations on the utilisation of the benefits. To understand the impact of these changes on Russian families' reproductive decisions, transparent, comparable data on the benefit size over time are essential. Hence, the approximate valuations of the benefits are derived from the data on the value of the Maternity Capital benefits paid by the government in Russia from 2007 to 2023 (in rubles), in conjunction with official RUB/USD exchange rates and Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) conversion factors obtained from the World Bank Open Data. However, it is essential to note that the following calculations do not incorporate inflation data, such as the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for Russia or the United States, as this paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive economic analysis of the social transfer magnitude.

⁵ See <https://sfr.gov.ru/en/matcap/> for original policy details

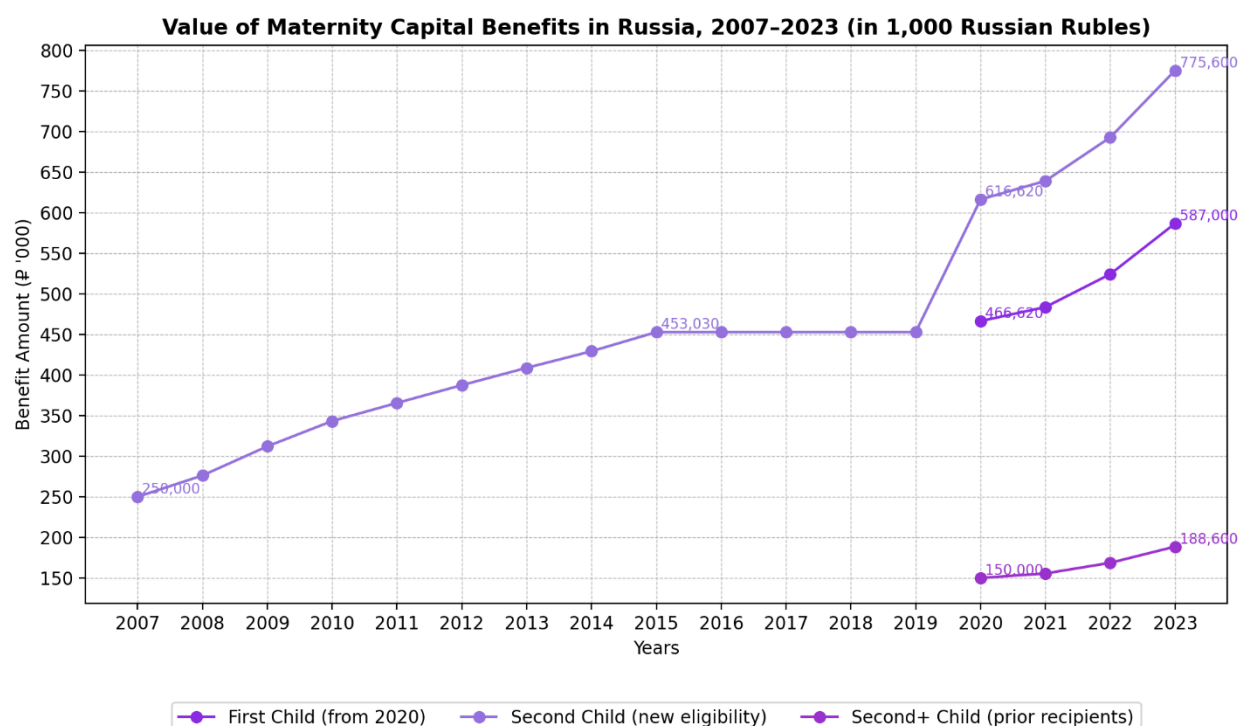
In 2007, the value of the MC certificate allocated to a family or single mother corresponded to 250,000 RUB. It was a substantial amount, equivalent to approximately US\$9,800 that year based on currency exchange rates, or if adjusted for the purchasing power parity (PPP), around US\$17,800. This amount corresponded to approximately 7 to 8 square meters of housing at average Russian prices (Raksha, 2024b). These funds were subject to indexation once a year to the level of actual inflation (*Federal Law No. 256-FL*, 2006). In 2015, the value of the certificate reached 453,000 RUB, equivalent to approximately US\$7,400 that year, or, adjusted for PPP, around US\$19,300. However, indexation was suspended from 2015 to 2019 (Statista, 2023; The World Bank Group, 2023a; The World Bank Group, 2023b).

Since 2020, with a revision of the MC program conditions, the overall benefit amount has been unevenly divided between the first and the second and following children. As a result, families were eligible to receive 467,000 RUB for their first child, equivalent to US\$6,800 that year, or, adjusted for PPP, around US\$20,200. If the family had not received maternity capital earlier, the amount for the second child would have been 617,000 RUB (approximately US\$8,600 that year, or, adjusted for PPP, around US\$27,000).

It is noteworthy that although the amount of the benefit has been subject to annual indexation again since 2020, the officially announced inflation rate in Russia has consistently been lower than the actual rate, and this situation continues. The benefits under the MC program have been indexed to the inflation level by 7.4 % since February 1, 2024, and by 9.5% as of February 1, 2025. Currently, families in Russia receive 677,000 RUB for their first-born and 894,000 RUB for their second or subsequent children, provided the family has not yet received the money for their first-born under this program (The Moscow Times, 2024).

The following graph displays the value of maternity capital certificates allocated by the Russian government to a family or single mother from 2007 to 2023 (in Russian rubles, RUB).

Figure 2: Value of Maternity Capital Benefits in Russia, 2007–2023 (in 1,000 Russian Rubles)



Source: Social Fund of Russia (2020); Statista (2023b)

Figure 2 presents the Russian government's nominal value of maternity capital benefits from 2007 to 2023, according to the Social Fund of Russia (2020) and Statista (2023). It highlights key policy changes, including regular indexation and the 2020 eligibility expansion to first-born children. Although nominal benefits have risen, their real value has varied due to inflation and indexation freezes, reducing the program's effectiveness as a stable social protection measure.

Beyond the nominal value of the benefit, its real impact depends significantly on how families can use the funds, which is determined by specific rules and restrictions in the programme's legal framework. According to criteria set out in the Federal Law № 256-FL with further amendments, the full amount of maternity capital (or part of it) can be spent in the child's interests.

The directions of use are the following: improving the family's current living conditions (purchase of an accommodation or a house; construction or refurbishment of a home; compensation for expenditures incurred in construction or refurbishment of a house; an initial payment on a credit (loan), including a mortgage loan, for purchase or construction of accommodation;

the payment of the mortgage loan's principal debt or interest, etc.); children's education (payment for state-accredited education programs, for accommodation or childcare in kindergarten, or payment for accommodation and public utilities in a dormitory provided by an education institution for the training period); investing in a pension plan to increase mother's future pension; goods and services for social adaptation of children with disabilities (these expenses have been included in the MC program since 2016); and receiving monthly payments (since 2018, this form of spending has become available to low-income families).

Other purposes are strictly prohibited (Social Fund of Russia, 2020). Thus, the Russian government, while maintaining the paternalistic orientation of its policy, did not seek to allow families too much freedom in spending benefits provided under the MC program for the birth of a child – the SFR and its territorial branches have the right to control the intended use of these funds, as mentioned earlier.

Pro-natalist policies may influence fertility, but high opportunity costs and cultural attitudes can limit their effectiveness (Yakovlev & Sorvachev, 2019). The assessment of the financial support levels offered by the federal government demonstrates that despite the increasing value of the maternity capital certificate, its growth rate has not been sufficient to substantially improve the living conditions of families with children. As mentioned earlier, while the MC program was re-designed in 2020, the TFR started to fall again and descended to 1.41, which is noteworthy because the lowest TFR of 1.31 was previously observed in 2006 (RBC, 2024). This suggests that the program changes made from 2020 onwards seemed to have had little impact on demographic outcomes (Rostovskaya et al., 2021). Nevertheless, despite the indicated correlation, the complexity of the interaction of socioeconomic factors affecting birth rates and fertility should be taken into account.

4 Discussion

Impact of the Maternity Capital program on Russia's demography

The previous section comprehensively examined Russia's MC program, focusing on its dual role as a social protection mechanism and a response to demographic challenges. The study employed a literature review approach, analysing a wide range of multidisciplinary sources published between 2007 and 2023, selected for their relevance and methodological rigour, focusing on the MC program's demographic impacts, socioeconomic effects, and programmatic challenges. This section provides the historical context for Russia's demographic challenges in the post-Soviet era and the impact of economic and political instability in the 1980s

and 1990s on demographic patterns based on the demographic analysis results reflected in the relevant literature.

The Russian Federation experienced a decline in population growth rate following the collapse of the Soviet Union: between 1993 and 2008, the population declined from 148.37 million to 143.25 million (World Population Review, 2024). The reason for that was the persistent below-replacement fertility, leading to a natural population decline (Shcherbakova, 2022). The TFR declined to 2.0 children per woman (i.e., below the replacement level), as early as the mid-1960s. Compared to most European countries with low fertility, the demographic transition in the Soviet Union occurred with a time lag and altered traditional patterns of early marriage and childbearing. Additionally, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, the country experienced a period of economic and political instability and rapid institutional transformations (Validova, 2021). Due to these circumstances, by 2010, more than two-thirds of Russian families had only one child (67.5 % of families, up from 50.8 % in 2002), and two-child families represented just over 25 % of families (Elizarov & Levin, 2015). Overall, a key factor contributing to the decline in the fertility rate in Russia was the change in family structures. Frejka and Zakharov (2012), who analysed the 1950s – 2000s fertility trends in Russia, indicated that the loss of second-order births was a cause of that (Frejka & Zakharov, 2012). Similarly, the World Bank's study (Elizarov & Levin, 2015) evaluated the Russian policies designed to encourage more second and higher-order births, and it noted that a reason for low fertility was the high prevalence of one-child families.

There is an ongoing debate among demographers about the influence of the MC program on fertility behaviour and population growth in Russia. Numerous studies suggest that the MC program initially positively influenced fertility rates, particularly in encouraging second and subsequent births. However, the evidence indicates that this effect was temporary and primarily the result of timing adjustments, often the tempo effect, rather than a substantive increase in overall family size.

Some scholars attribute the MC program's positive impact to an existing trend of increasing TFR that matches the MC program's start. For instance, Biryukova and Sinyavskaya (2021) traced the TFR negative dynamics in 1990 – 1999, then its slight increase in 2000 – 2004, and the following decrease in 2005 – 2006; between 2007 and 2015, researchers indicated the TFR rise from 1.42 to 1.78, that coincided with the MC program implementation. They concluded that the likelihood of subsequent births increased significantly, particularly among women with lower incomes. This selective influence suggests that the MC program has effectively incentivised families who might have otherwise delayed or foregone subsequent children due to economic hardship (Biryukova & Sinyavskaya, 2021). This is consistent with research

from other countries showing that birth grants tend to increase fertility only temporarily, primarily when not supported by comprehensive family policies (Gauthier, 2007).

Arkhangelsky et al. (2015) and Zakharov (2017) suggested, based on the Rosstat data for 2014 (the most recent at the time of writing), that the MC program influenced the timing of reproductive activity rather than the decision to have more children, both argue that this rise in fertility was essentially a tempo effect (a shift in the birth calendar) – meaning that births were shifted forward rather than leading to a sustained increase in the number of children per family. (Arkhangelsky et al., 2015; Zakharov, 2017). In this context, the increase in TFR identified in these studies is seen as a short-term trend driven by already planned children and not by an increase in the total number of children born.

Validova (2021) provided an analysis of the separate roles of two components of fertility – the tempo effect (related to the timing of births) and the quantum effect (associated with the total number of children born, including childlessness) – in the TFR changes in Russia. She concluded that the primary reason for the rise in observed fertility is the influence of the MC program on the timing of births during the first years after its implementation (Validova, 2021).

While the MC program's short-term effects are well-documented, its long-term impact on fertility remains ambiguous. This uncertainty is attributed to various external socioeconomic factors and the shifting priorities of families, as well as to the MC program and other social policy changes.

The study by Slonimczyk and Yurko (2013), based on the five years of data since the MC program started in 2007, has found that it has led to a modest, long-term increase in TFR of about 0.15 children per woman (Slonimczyk & Yurko, 2013). However, they caution that evaluating the program's effectiveness is obscured by other simultaneous fertility-related policy changes, such as increases in pregnancy and childbirth benefits. Yet, this study has a limitation in its immediate conclusions: the final number of children for women still in their fertility period cannot be predicted, as their reproductive plans may change multiple times before their fertile period⁶ ends, depending on different circumstances.

Yakovlev and Sorvachev (2019) provide a contrasting perspective, arguing that the MC program's influence on reproductive behaviour should not be overlooked. Their analysis of the program's short-term and long-term results for a larger cohort of Russian women suggests

⁶ Assuming that woman's reproductive age is between 15 and 50 years.

that, while the tempo effect was significant, the financial support also encouraged some families to expand beyond their original plans (Yakovlev & Sorvachev, 2019).

Families' reproductive intentions and attitudes to the MC program were also studied. The potential impact of the MC program as a pro-natalist intervention was explored by Isupova (2018), who used the results of the 2015 Russian Microcensus questionnaire. The study assessed the attractiveness of various policies that influence families' decisions to have more children than planned (Isupova, 2018). In 2019, a survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (RPORC) showed that Russians generally recognise the MC program's effectiveness: 64 % of respondents confirmed that maternity capital encourages families to have second and subsequent children (RPORC, 2019).

In-depth research by Rostovskaya et al. (2021) has shown that a person's high estimation of their quality of life influences their intention to have a second child. Participants have expressed a desire to expand their families but often limited themselves to having only one child due to financial constraints. According to this research, an individual's reproductive decisions have been proven to be highly dependent on subjective well-being, but only among those who plan more than one child.

The most recent survey (Vakulenko, Gorskiy, et al., 2024) indicates changes in the reproductive intentions of Russians during the socioeconomic shocks of 2022 – 2023. Among respondents who initially planned to have children, around 30% postponed or opted out of having children, while 70% either maintained their plans or even decided to have a child earlier. As with the earlier survey, essential factors influencing these decisions included income, housing, health, and whether the respondents already had children.

The claim that the universalisation of the scheme, which included first-born children starting in 2020, diminished the MC program's effectiveness as a demographic tool aligns with earlier findings. Initially, the design of the program encouraged higher-order births. However, the extension of benefits to first-born children blurred the demographic focus of the MC program since financial incentives for higher-order births, the only effective in boosting fertility, became less pronounced.

Social Policies for Families with Children and Economic Conditions

Drawing from the previous section's comprehensive literature review, it is apparent that the MC program has had a moderately positive impact on birth rates, but its effectiveness in reversing demographic decline has been limited. At the same time, families with children in Russia face multiple economic challenges that influence their fertility decisions. As of 2021, one

in five children in Russia was raised in a low-income household (Kartseva et al., 2024). Although some additional social benefits are implemented at the regional level, they are primarily means-tested, as required by the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation for regions with budget deficits. As a result, many families with children do not qualify for additional support, undermining their financial security. This particularly affects single mothers and low-income households, for whom the MC program alone is insufficient to improve living conditions or other aspects of well-being.

Another primary concern is employment insecurity, particularly for mothers returning to work after childbirth. Many women struggle to re-enter the workforce due to limited job flexibility and a lack of employer incentives for hiring mothers with young children. Additionally, Russia's informal labour market remains large, meaning that many women working in unregistered jobs are being excluded from formal maternity and parental benefits.

It must be admitted that the MC program is part of a broader set of policies for families with children, some of which are pretty generous and have roots dating back to the Soviet era. Although Russia provides up to 36 months of parental leave (the longest in the world, alongside Germany), only 18 months are partially paid, and the benefit amount (40% of the average salary) is still insufficient to sustain a household. This extended period of leave, combined with rigid employment structures, makes it difficult for mothers to re-enter the workforce. Russia also lacks flexibility and gender balance in its parental leave policies: parents cannot choose to receive a higher payment for a shorter leave period, and shared parental leave – common in Northern European countries – is not available. Employers are often reluctant to hire or promote women of childbearing age due to perceived long-term absences, reinforcing gender discrimination. Also, existing maternal healthcare policies provide some support nationwide, but they inadequately address the gaps in specialised care within rural areas, negatively impacting families raising children with disabilities. Due to Russian cultural norms, the responsibility of balancing work and childcare falls disproportionately on women. This puts them at risk of being excluded from the workforce or experiencing difficulties returning to full-time formal employment.

Since the 2010s, improvements have been made to childcare policies. To address the shortage of kindergarten places since the 1990s, the government launched programs to build new facilities, particularly in populated urban areas. Initially, these measures ensured that all children aged 3 and older (the end of the parental leave period) could access preschool education. The program was later expanded to include all children aged 1.5 and older (the end of the paid parental leave period). As of January 1, 2024, the federal government reported nearly universal coverage for kindergarten places: 99.5 percent for children aged 2 months to 3

years, 99.5 percent for those aged 1.5 to 3 years, and 99.86 percent for children aged 3 to 7 years (Development of Education, n.d.).

In addition to childcare support, housing remains a fundamental interest of Russian families and a central focus of Russia's family policies. The MC program has played a significant role in improving housing conditions for many families. According to the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation (2021), 96.7% of MC funds were directed toward housing expenses, leaving only 3.3% for all other permitted uses. However, due to inflation and rising real estate prices, the purchasing power of MC benefits has diminished over time. Research from Statista (2023) estimates that in some regions, maternity capital funds now cover only the equivalent of 10 square meters of housing space, making it insufficient for families aiming to improve their living conditions (Statista, 2023a). As a result, many families have to take out extra loans, which increases their financial stress instead of helping them.

In 2024, the Russian parliamentarians introduced new legislation to address these issues through legislation (bill № 569640-8) to increase the amount of maternity capital, citing a significant rise in housing costs since 2022 and inflation rates consistently exceeding 5.3%. However, the Cabinet of Ministers of the Russian Federation rejected the proposal, arguing that indexation mechanisms are already in place and the federal budget cannot support unplanned increases. Additionally, the federal government underlined the previous efforts of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, which have also implemented measures to support families, a concerning trend toward the decentralisation of social support programs, which limits assistance based on the financial capacity of each region.

The Changing Role of the MC Program in Family Planning

Since its launch in 2007, the MC program introduced by the Federal Law № 256-FL has played a central role in attempts to solve existing demographic challenges, initially designed to stimulate second and subsequent births. Some experts opine that the absolute number of births in Russia has risen owing to this program. Alexey Raksha (2024), an independent demographer formerly working at Rosstat, estimates that between 2007 and 2022, the MC program in its initial form increased the birth rate of second children and contributed to the births of approximately 2–2.5 million additional births – accounting for 7 – 9% of all births and 13 – 17% of second and subsequent births. Moreover, the estimated probability of having a second child after the first child's birth increased from 47% in 2006 to 55% by 2008 (Raksha, 2024a).

However, the MC program has evolved from a fertility incentive to a poverty reduction tool. In 2020, the program was expanded to include first-born children: here, the bulk of payments

went to families (or single mothers) welcoming their first child, while for the birth of a second child in one family, the benefits became significantly less. It is plausible that the authorities' primary focus was on achieving immediate demographic gains, namely, increasing the number of first-born births within a defined timeframe, thereby enhancing the program's effectiveness. Yet, this shift diluted the MC program's impact on higher-order births, thus weakening its long-term effect on overall fertility.

Additional considerations were at play. The allocation of maternity capital expenditures appeared to function as a form of direct public investment in specific sectors requiring substantial funding – a point highlighted by the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation (2021). According to the Accounts Chamber's estimates, in the structure of the country's overall expenses for the MC program, 96.7 % were directed to various means of improving housing conditions, and 3.3 % remained for all other directions defined in the federal law (The Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation, 2021). Thus, there may have been an intentional effort by the federal government to sustain increased demand in the housing market. Overall, the main visible consequence of re-designing the MC program in 2020 is the diminished role of this benefit as a stimulus for increasing fertility. With the decrease in the real value of the MC certificate during the period without indexation, the MC program has transformed from a demographic policy tool into a tool for reducing poverty among families with children.

Moreover, the MC program's design procedures and communication strategy had unintended consequences for shaping fertility patterns, as its duration had been initially limited to the end of 2016. The government made further decisions to extend the program at the last minute, and they were not announced in advance, which also affected family planning by Russian citizens. According to the 2019 National Demographic Report, the increase in TFR in 2014 – 2015 may have been partly due to a shift in timing, with families rushing to have children before the announced termination of the program (Arkhangelskiy et al., 2019). Thus, the uncertainty surrounding the continuation of the MC program appeared to have led to a short-term increase in birth rates as families took advantage of the program before its expected end. In contrast, the recent decision to extend the MC program until 2030 was announced well in advance, allowing families to consider the possibility of receiving the child grant in the long-term reproductive decisions (Presidential Executive Office, 2024b).

Despite its relevance in supporting families, the MC program in its current form is no longer an effective fertility booster: many families want a second child but stop at one due to financial concerns. Igor Efremov, the researcher of the International Department of Political Demography and Macrosociological Dynamics of the Gaidar Institute, opines that the current amount of benefits for a second child, in case the family has already received its part for the first child,

became “so small that it does not help families in any way reduce the barriers that prevent them from having a second or subsequent child, even in regions with relatively low prices, including for real estate” (The Gaidar Institute, 2022). While the program has allowed millions of families to improve living conditions, it no longer functions as an incentive to increase birth rates. Instead, it has become a direct form of social assistance.

Being evaluated through the lens of child well-being (CWB) and child-sensitive social protection (CSSP) approaches, the MC program is the social protection policy for families with children, addressing their immediate and long-term needs. Reducing poverty helps foster a more equitable society. Notably, the discussed measure covers the whole family, not just children. At the same time, the program aims to improve children's well-being by strengthening family living conditions and promoting their health, emotional well-being, and social connections (Proshin, 2023). The maternity capital funds generally help to ensure that children in the family receive a better foundation for healthy and fulfilling lives. However, compared to direct cash transfers, the MC program's certificate system offers benefits and drawbacks regarding child well-being. The positive point is that the established mechanisms for managing the certificate ensure the use of maternity capital funds for specific expenses related to children. The authorities guarantee families with children access to improved housing conditions and educational opportunities. Furthermore, by limiting the use of funds to specific purposes, this policy is designed to promote long-term planning for the needs of families. This approach appears to lack flexibility in meeting the diverse needs of families and limits parents' discretion in deciding how best to provide for the well-being of their children.

Notably, the MC program has led to an evident increase in birth rates before the numbers started to decline again. However, the program adjustments from the year 2020 radically changed its essence. The new role of maternity capital is reduced to a direct tool for solving the problems of child poverty, among other Russian social policies on federal and regional levels (Vakulenko, Vasileva, et al., 2024). Although the MC program works well to alleviate the financial pressure of raising a child, especially for low-income families and single mothers, it is no longer an incentive to have more than one child since the amount of money added for the birth of a second and subsequent children does not cover either one of the basic needs.

From the child well-being approach perspective, the current level of benefits is insufficient to make a difference in the living conditions of many families with children; however, it may still help solve other problems. For instance, the program has contributed to realising children's rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly by enhancing access to housing and education. Over the past decade, the MC program in Russia has also acted as a direct government investment in human capital and specific sectors of the economy, such

as housing and education. Most beneficiaries under this program have improved their living conditions by paying down mortgage payments, paying off existing loans, purchasing homes or apartments, or investing in property renovations. Parents apply for MC certificates to cover their children's education costs, including expenses for private kindergartens and schools; this certificate disposal direction ranks second among the most popular in utilising the benefits under the MC program. Reflecting on the trajectory of the MC program, it becomes clear that it has demonstrated a broader economic impact beyond its primary demographic goal. Regarding child well-being outcomes, the restricted use of funds has mixed implications: on the one hand, it allows resources to be directed towards fundamental aspects of child development, such as suitable housing and better access to education; on the other hand, they may not adequately address other important areas of children's well-being.

The MC program partially aligns with CSSP best practices but lags in some areas. It supports the key aspects of child development, albeit its limited flexibility may not fully address the evolving needs of families at children's different ages, or with the family's growth. For example, it does not considerably help with further improvement of living conditions after it has been done once due to insufficient additional benefit for the birth of second and subsequent children. Also, the possibility of utilising the child grant to improve living conditions is available only for families (single mothers) whose income is stable enough to allow for borrowing the rest of the funds as a mortgage. Drawing from this, a more comprehensive CSSP approach would consider a broader range of child needs and allow for more adaptable support throughout a child's developmental stage.

Despite the constraints of the MC program in its current form, there are potential ways to transform it to better meet its goals, along with practical insights. Regarding the directions of use of benefits under Federal Law № 256-FL, Arkhangelskiy et al. (2019) proposed in their National Demographic Report to broaden the benefits' scope, thus enhancing the demographic impact of the MC program: expanding the permissible applications of the funds, potentially increasing the program's appeal and effectiveness – rather than specifying allowed uses for the maternity capital, the law should state that the certificate can be used for “any purpose except...” followed by a list of directly prohibited uses. By benefiting a wider range of families and addressing their diverse needs, this change would possibly help improve the program's demographic and social impact, thus strengthening the well-being components of this policy.

Overall, the existing body of research on the MC program's effects has proved that maternity capital as a measure of social support initially increased the birth rate in Russia, particularly for subsequent births, but the numbers decreased again shortly after. Zakharov (2017), in his

previously mentioned research on the results of the MC program, observed that advocates of any fertility incentive policies, arguing for their universal effectiveness, often suggest that birth rates would have fallen more rapidly or to a greater extent without these incentives; however, this particular argument is extremely challenging both to verify or refute with empirical evidence (Zakharov, 2017).

Remarkably, the strengthening pro-natalist attitude in recent family and gender policies in Russia seems to be an attempt to replicate the approach taken in the Soviet Union, where the “paternalistic” model, as defined by Esping-Andersen's eminent work, placed considerable emphasis on direct intervention (Esping-Andersen, 1991; Rivkin-Fish, 2010). In this model, the state assumes “technical” functions related to children – and, to a lesser extent, mothers – resulting in families depending on state support for childbearing rather than their own resources. However, the gradual decline in the purchasing power of the MC certificate during periods without indexation has weakened the MC program's role as a demographic policy tool. Research literature widely agrees that there is room for improvement in the level of benefits, which opens the most straightforward way to bring its demographic objectives back to life.

The MC program is the government's flagship policy to strengthen Russia's human capital. Nonetheless, such measures only promote demographic growth if substantial financial support is provided for the birth of second and subsequent children. Otherwise, the twofold aim of providing this benefit is not fulfilled. Contrary to the other programs and policies providing direct cash payments (especially those regular but in small amounts), the MC program encourages parents to make long-term decisions that enhance the families' well-being and children's possible future success, such as purchasing a new accommodation or getting children into supplementary education to enhance their development. In this regard, additional financial resources could play a crucial role in increasing families' capabilities, and the transfer size should be a “game-changer” for a family.

5 Conclusion

The previous sections have analysed the impact of the maternity capital (MC) program on the well-being of Russian families and assessed its effectiveness in addressing the country's demographic challenges. This program is a notable example of an ambitious pro-natalist policy. While initially aimed at boosting fertility rates, it has increasingly served as a poverty alleviation measure, especially as inflation and economic changes have eroded the real value of the MC

benefit over time. This shift shows that even well-targeted family policies will have limited demographic impact unless they adapt to changing socioeconomic conditions and evolving family needs.

The Russian Federation is not the only country where a stable below-replacement birth rate determines population dynamics. The long-term decline in natural population is expected to spread to more and more countries in the future (Bongaarts, 2009; Gerland et al., 2022). In this regard, Russia's situation with the MC program provides valuable insights into the complex interaction between social protection measures and demographic challenges. This analysis showed that the initial focus of the MC program – on encouraging families to have second and subsequent children – had a modest positive impact on birth rates, consistent with its goal of counteracting demographic decline. However, the 2020 redesign, which expanded eligibility for benefits to include first-born children, diluted the program's demographic impact. By broadening the target group, the program shifted its emphasis away from families considering having another child – those most likely to influence overall fertility rates. This shift underscores an important lesson: financial incentives must be not only substantial in comparison to average family income but also specifically aimed at families who are considering having a second or later child. Without this targeted approach, the program risks functioning primarily as income support, with only minimal influence on fertility behaviour. Additionally, the MC program's paternalistic approach, which restricts fund usage primarily to housing and education, has successfully addressed some immediate family needs while also investing in important areas of the economy. Nevertheless, this rigidity also limits the policy's adaptability in meeting diverse family needs as circumstances change. Families' needs evolve, and narrow spending rules can reduce the program's relevance and compromise its potential to foster child well-being.

While the MC program has contributed to improving the material conditions of numerous Russian families, especially those with more than one child, those more likely to face financial burdens, its impact on reversing the country's demographic decline remains constrained by these design limitations.

Russia's experience shows that while family support policies may be ideologically motivated by pro-natalist goals, they must be based on practical support measures that address real family needs rather than being replaced by mere declarations. A more effective approach would combine targeted financial support – particularly for families deciding to have a second, third, or additional child – with complementary policies in various areas, for example, investing in the creation of educational and recreational infrastructure for children, promoting more flexible quality employment for mothers, rather than relying on financial incentives alone. As more

countries confront the issue of below-replacement fertility rates, the lessons learned from Russia's MC program are becoming increasingly relevant.

The key takeaway for other countries facing similar demographic challenges is that financial incentives must be sizeable enough to ensure a decent standard of living and well-targeted, particularly toward the births of second or subsequent children, to have a meaningful demographic effect. This social protection measure can help increase birth rates only if the highest are reserved for second and subsequent children, but not for the first-borns

Prioritising such programs and policies' long-term sustainability and adaptability is essential. These should effectively address both demographic objectives while contributing to broader social protection strategies, such as reducing child poverty. A careful balance in policy design can help address the dual challenges of population decline and family well-being, especially in today's fast-changing, dynamic global context.

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