

Motherhood and the Nation: Gendered Memory and Civic Duty in Contemporary Russia (2014-2021)

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Author's Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the Russian state constructs a gendered vision of national identity by mobilising motherhood as a site of ideological and moral reproduction. Situated within a broader context of Russia's post-Soviet transformation, with particular attention to developments after 2014, it examines how the state discourse draws on historical memory, civilisational narratives, traditional values, and affective rhetoric to position women, especially mothers, as symbolic bearers of the nation. Drawing on feminist theory, cultural memory studies, and the literature on illiberalism, the study employs discourse analysis to examine legal frameworks, public speeches, and civic discourses. It argues that while state narratives idealise mothers as biological and cultural reproducers, these representations often contradict policy realities and exclude women who do not conform to heteronormative and patriarchal ideals. At the same time, feminist actors and civil society initiatives contest these constructions, revealing the fragility and contradictions at the heart of the state's ideological project. By foregrounding the intersections of gender, memory, and power, this thesis contributes to debates on nationalism, illiberal governance, and feminist critiques of state-building in authoritarian contexts.

Keywords: Gender and nationalism, illiberalism, motherhood, Russian state discourse, cultural memory

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List Of Abbreviations

CSMR	Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia
DHA	Discourse-Historical Approach
FAR	Feminist Anti-War Resistance
GPW	Great Patriotic War
IID	Institute for Internet Development
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning
MOR	Mothers of Russia
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WUOR	Women's Union of Russia
WWII	World War II

Introduction

According to the V-Dem Institute's Annual Democracy Reports, as of 2025, the world is undergoing a global wave of autocratisation, with fewer democracies than autocracies for the first time in over twenty years (Nord et al. 2025). This erosion of democratic norms is marked by the rise of nationalist discourses, declining freedom of expression and deteriorating freedom of elections, among other indicators. Across various contexts, a key aspect of this illiberal shift is the resurgence of deeply conservative moral and cultural ideologies.

Notably, gender has become a central category in contemporary nationalist authoritarian regimes (Thomson 2020). In the discourses of far-right populist parties, "gender" has become a signifier of deviation, associated with "gender ideology" and "Western values" that are set to represent unnatural and immoral values imposed by the outsider. Anti-gender campaigns frequently construct international organisations, global liberalism, and LGBTQ+ movements as existential threats to national identity. In opposition to the constructed enemy, authoritarian actors appoint themselves as saviours of tradition and moral order. Using gender as a polarisation trigger, they reestablish a populist outlook on familialistic-nationalistic ideology (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Villa 2017; Wodak 2021). Amidst the growing dominance of ultraconservative narratives, political actors have increasingly mobilised anxieties around the so-called "demographic crisis," transforming reproductive policies into tools of ideological and geopolitical control (Gaweda 2022). Within this context, women are positioned as both the biological reproducers of the nation and its symbolic moral guardians. Reproduction, family, and motherhood become not only social or private domains, but national duties.

Additionally, this ideological project is underpinned by selective historical memory. Authoritarian states often invoke the past to construct a coherent, singular vision of the nation that naturalises existing hierarchies and legitimises contemporary political agendas. This narrative of restorative nostalgia² promotes a backwards-looking rhetoric and emphasises continuity, unity, and moral order, focusing on familial and patriotic values (Boym 2001). This form of collective memory is transformed into a political tool of national consolidation by creating historical narratives, foundational myths, and intergenerational continuity (Smith 2011). These narratives are emotionally charged and rooted in inherited mythologies that are not reinvented by each generation, but are recycled and reinterpreted within pre-established emotional and symbolic

² Boym (2001) distinguishes between reflective nostalgia, which is critical and aware of the past's complexity, and restorative nostalgia, which seeks to reconstruct an idealised version of the past to serve present ideological goals.

confines. Gender plays a crucial symbolic role in this process: women, particularly mothers, are positioned as carriers of tradition, transmitters of cultural memory, and caretakers of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997).

Russia provides a particularly interesting case for exploring the intersection of nationalism, gender, and historical memory. This is especially relevant given the country's recent shift towards conservative values, increased nationalism, and the securitisation of historical memory since 2014. The state has increasingly positioned itself as a global defender of "traditional values," explicitly opposing the liberalism perceived as a threat to Russia's cultural sovereignty (Gradszkova 2023a; Sharafutdinova 2020).

This conservative turn was significantly marked by the political aftermath of the 2011–2012 protests, which challenged Putin's return to the presidency. The unexpected political turmoil led the government to develop a stronger ideological national idea rooted in Russia's unique history to consolidate people against the perceived outsider enemy. This ideological framework increasingly linked patriotism, gender roles, and demographic strategies as essential components of state identity (Sperling 2015). Additionally, the state constructed a national ideology rooted in historical exceptionalism. Against the backdrop of anti-liberal sentiment, the securitisation of memory, a turn to the past for the recovery of national values based on historical tradition, and the rising importance of the Russian Orthodox Church, the state made gender and sexuality central components of the conservative turn (Miklóssy 2022; Novitskaya et al. 2024).

Moreover, appeals to national heritage and century-old traditions serve to naturalise gendered and sexualised value systems, framing them as timeless and authentic. Through a combination of legal and ideological strategies, the state actively marginalises alternative non-normative identities, securitises traditional values, and legitimises its authoritarian rule to protect national sovereignty and moral order. Through the construction of a protective nationalist imaginary grounded in reproductive norms, traditional family values, and a deliberate opposition to perceived Western moral and ideological offence, the state naturalises and legitimises nationalist discourses. The intersection of gender norms, patriotism, and nationalism is therefore essential for explaining the significance of womanhood and motherhood within Russian ideological contexts.

Historical Background

The ideological framing of motherhood and gender roles in Russia is deeply rooted in the country's turbulent historical transformations. From the early Soviet period to the post-Soviet era, state policies and discourses have continuously evolved, shaped by socio-political changes and ideological shifts (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2003). Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, motherhood has been positioned in many ways, ranging from a revolutionary duty to a patriotic obligation and a moral imperative, reflecting broader political and social changes. To understand how contemporary Russian discourse constructs motherhood as a patriotic and moral duty, it is essential to trace the historical development of state approaches to gender, reproduction, and national identity. Across Soviet and post-Soviet periods, women's roles have been repeatedly redefined in response to ideological, demographic, and geopolitical shifts. While rhetorical commitments to gender equality have varied, motherhood has consistently functioned as a central site of biopolitical governance. The state's ideological vision has been naturalised and contested in this space. The following section outlines key ideological shifts in how motherhood and women's civic roles have been framed from the early Soviet era to the present, highlighting the continuities and ruptures that shape the current nationalist project.

Early Soviet Period

The ideological foundations for contemporary constructions of motherhood in Russia were laid in the early Soviet period (Buckley 1989). From the earliest stages of the revolutionary struggle in the early 20th century, the “woman question” was central to the Bolshevik agenda, which sought to modernise the country through social transformation. However, after coming to power, Bolshevik gender policies were often inherently contradictory, reflecting the challenges and tensions of the Bolshevik project itself (Krylova 2017). Initially, the goal of gender policy was to disrupt traditional notions of womanhood and motherhood, integrating gender policies aimed at promoting equality into state institutions and cultural practices. This progressive rhetoric was underpinned by the view of the “backwardness of the female proletariat,” which was attributed to Russia's patriarchal legacy (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2003). The state's main efforts aimed to dismantle traditional family roles, viewing women as active agents in building socialism, even as its policies fluctuated between liberation and control. While women were presented as agents of socialist progress, their reproductive capacity was increasingly treated as a national resource. This tension between liberating women from patriarchal structures and instrumentalising their roles in the service of the state shaped Soviet gender ideology for decades to come.

The issues of female emancipation in the 1920s were addressed through the concept of “defamilisation” and the political mobilisation of women (Pushkareva 2012). The ideology of defamilisation advocated for the liberation of women from the constraints of the patriarchal bourgeois family structure. In a new communist society, women were expected to join the workforce, while child-rearing and household responsibilities would be shared collectively. Marriage was reframed as a civic institution, abortion was legalised, and maternity protections were introduced to integrate women into the workforce. Institutions such as communal kitchens, nurseries, and state-funded maternal care were designed to collectivise domestic responsibilities (Gradskova 2007). The concept of “conscious motherhood” emerged, framing the decision to bear children as a personal choice rather than a biological destiny (Issoupova 2000). Yet this rhetoric of autonomy coexisted with an enduring view of motherhood as a civic duty. Even as women gained new legal and social freedoms, the expectation that they would bear and raise children for the socialist future remained firmly in place. Gradskova argues that childbearing was still viewed as a natural and moral function of femininity, a belief that reinforced the continuity of state authority over women’s bodies (Gradskova 2007, 76). The state continued to promote the idea that motherhood was another civic duty, in addition to a woman’s role in the workforce. Despite the revolutionary goals, traditional family norms persisted, and the state lacked the infrastructure to fully implement its vision of collective care (Buckley 1989).

This period laid the ideological groundwork for a new gender contract that would intensify in the Stalinist era, one in which women’s emancipation was conditional on their service to the state. The early Soviet state’s effort to redefine womanhood through progressive reform ultimately led to a shift toward conventional family structures. As more women became involved in production during industrialisation, the focus on women’s issues gradually faded into the background. The transition from revolutionary upheaval to state totalitarianism in the 1930s was marked by a blend of gender policies, some of which were radical while others were conservative, reflecting the diverse visions of gender identity held by different factions and social groups within Soviet society. This shift began a long-standing narrative that equated motherhood with national service, which would resurface repeatedly in Soviet and post-Soviet memory politics.

The Stalinist era marked a sharp ideological turn in Soviet gender policy. It abandoned the earlier discourse of personal autonomy and collective care in favour of a state-controlled vision of motherhood rooted in national duty and sacrifice. As industrialisation progressed and demographic anxieties intensified, the state reimagined women’s primary role as that of biological reproducers of the nation, even as they continued to be mobilised for labour (Issoupova 2000). This new gender

contract demanded dual service: in the workplace and at home. The idea of “conscious motherhood” disappeared from state rhetoric, replaced by pronatalist campaigns and restrictive reproductive policies. Abortion was banned in 1936, contraception disappeared from public availability, and maternity was heavily moralised. At the same time, previously abolished protections for women in the workplace were rolled back, allowing for night shifts and physically demanding labour (Pushkareva 2012). This dual mobilisation was framed as a patriotic obligation, what Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2003, 302) describe as the “etatist contract” of the Soviet working mother, who served both the state and the family.

Throughout the 1930s and into the war years, the Soviet woman was recast as a heroic figure: industrious, self-sacrificing, and emotionally resilient (Gradskaia 2007, 79). The family unit, once criticised as a bourgeois social structure, was rehabilitated as a site of national strength. Women were expected to raise the next generation of Soviet citizens while upholding the values of discipline, endurance, and loyalty. As Gradskaia (2007) notes, by the late 1930s, women’s reproductive capacity was no longer framed in terms of autonomy but as a resource to be managed by the state, a symbol of moral virtue and ideological devotion. This transformation reached its peak during and after World War II. The wartime mobilisation of women reinforced their symbolic centrality in national survival. They were portrayed as both producers and protectors: mothers sending sons to war, workers supporting the front, and icons of a motherland worth defending (Pushkareva 2012). In this context, motherhood became not only a civic duty but a sacred symbol of patriotic love that demanded sacrifice without guarantees of support.

In the aftermath of World War II, the Soviet Union faced a catastrophic demographic crisis, with women outnumbering men by nearly 26 million (Buckley 1989, 133). This gender imbalance, coupled with the massive loss of life and displacement, turned reproductive policy into a national emergency. The state responded with an intensified pronatalist campaign that reasserted women’s reproductive labour as a cornerstone of post-war reconstruction and moral revival (Nakachi 2021). The 1944 Family Law marked a significant ideological shift in Soviet gender ideology. While the war had expanded women’s participation in labour and military support, the post-war state redefined motherhood as the central axis of women’s civic identity (Pushkareva 2010). Awards such as “Mother Heroine” and medals for motherhood valorised high fertility as patriotic service. Material benefits were tied to the number of children, reinforcing a vision of motherhood as both natural and nationally necessary (Nakachi 2021). Motherhood in this period became a symbol of moral duty and social honour. Through law and propaganda, the Soviet state constructed an ideal maternal figure, self-sacrificing, politically loyal, and biologically productive. Women were no

longer merely encouraged to have children. They were expected to fulfil a reproductive role deeply entwined with the ideological national recovery project (Prokhorov 2007). This expectation was accompanied by increased state regulation of reproductive decisions, even as structural support remained inconsistent and class-based exclusions persisted.

These policies reflect more than demographic management. They reveal how motherhood was transformed into a site of ideological investment. By idealising maternal sacrifice and rewarding reproductive conformity, the post-war Soviet state reaffirmed a gendered vision of citizenship in which women's value was measured by their contribution to the nation's biological and moral future. This pronatalist discourse, rooted in patriotic symbolism and selective welfare, laid the foundation for how motherhood would continue to be mobilised in Russian political ideology well into the post-Soviet period.

Late Soviet Era: Liberalisation and Ambiguity

The late Soviet period, shaped by de-Stalinisation and Khrushchev's "Thaw³," marked a partial liberalisation in gender and reproductive policy (Buckley 1989). Following decades of rigid pronatalism, the decriminalisation of abortion in 1955 signalled a tentative shift toward acknowledging women's reproductive autonomy (Nakachi 2021). However, this reform did not dismantle the ideological association between femininity and motherhood. On the contrary, the state continued to promote pronatalism, which was now framed less as an authoritarian imposition and more as a moral appeal to women's "natural purpose" (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2003). Women were increasingly idealised as both workers and caretakers, but the balance between these roles was expected to prioritise domestic responsibility (Pushkareva 2012). This dual expectation reinforced a deeply ambivalent gender order that celebrated women's contributions to economic productivity while continuing to naturalise motherhood as their primary civic duty.

By the 1970s and 1980s, broader political and economic crises began to reshape Soviet gender policy. The regime's attention shifted away from regulating private life toward stabilising the system against the backdrop of stagnation and geopolitical tension. Yet this retreat opened ideological

³ The "Thaw" refers to the period of political and cultural liberalisation in the Soviet Union following the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, most notably under Nikita Khrushchev's leadership. It was marked by a relative relaxation of censorship, partial rehabilitation of political prisoners, and limited reforms in social and family policy, including the 1955 legalisation of abortion. While the period saw some ideological loosening, it retained many of the structural features of state control.

space for limited re-evaluation of gender roles. During Perestroika⁴, the loosening of state control and greater exposure to global feminist discourse enabled some public contestation of motherhood as a purely national function. The longstanding idea of children as “communist capital” gave way to a more individualised understanding of family and reproduction (Gradszkova 1999). Still, this moment of potential transformation was short-lived. Alongside democratic openings, neo-traditionalist voices emerged, calling for a return to the private sphere and reaffirming women’s domestic responsibilities (Aivazova 1998).

Overall, the late Soviet era represents a transitional moment in which limited liberalisation coexisted with enduring ideological conservatism. While reproductive policy briefly loosened and women’s civic roles expanded, the state never abandoned its investment in the heterosexual family as the foundation of moral and demographic stability. This period of ideological ambiguity laid the groundwork for the conservative revival of the post-Soviet and Putin years, where motherhood would once again be re-centred as a patriotic and moral imperative.

Post-Soviet Crisis and the Conservative Turn

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was faced with an economic and political crisis as well as an ideological vacuum. For over seventy years, Soviet identity had shaped conceptions of citizenship, labour, and family, including gender roles. The dissolution of this system left behind a vacuum of meaning, eroding collective narratives and generating a deep sense of ontological insecurity (Sharafutdinova 2020). In the absence of a unifying ideological framework, the Russian state began to rely on historical memory to construct a new sense of continuity, not only with the imperial and Soviet past but with a reimagined, morally cohesive national future.

During the turbulent 1990s, gender roles in Russia underwent significant renegotiation. Economic collapse, widespread unemployment, and the dismantling of state welfare systems disproportionately impacted women, particularly working mothers. Consequently, women found themselves navigating an unstable labour market with decreasing state support (Johnson and Robinson 2007). At the same time, the symbolic value of motherhood as a civic ideal receded from public discourse. The state’s withdrawal from family support coincided with the rise of a market economy that individualised responsibility while neglecting structural care provisions. In this

⁴ Perestroika (“restructuring”) was a political and economic reform initiative introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s. It aimed to revitalise the Soviet economy and governance by introducing limited market mechanisms, reducing state control, and encouraging greater transparency (*glasnost*). It also opened ideological space for feminist and civil society discourses, including critiques of gender norms.

context, women were increasingly marginalised both materially and discursively. Amid this instability, traditional gender norms began to re-emerge. By the early 2000s, a cultural and political shift framed demographic decline as a civilisational threat and linked national renewal to the revival of “family values,” was underway. This was not a simple return to pre-Soviet ideals, but a reaction to the perceived failures of Soviet gender policies (Rands Lyon 2007). As the state reoriented itself ideologically, motherhood regained political salience as a moral and national imperative. The 2000s marked the beginning of what some scholars call a “patriarchal renaissance,” driven by a growing alliance between state actors and the Russian Orthodox Church (Rands Lyon 2007, 26; Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2003).

This ideological trajectory set the stage for a more coordinated effort by the state in the 2010s to institutionalise “traditional values” as a key component of national identity, particularly in the aftermath of the 2014 annexation of Crimea. From that moment on, memory politics, pro-natalist discourse, and conservative gender ideology were increasingly utilised in coherent and authoritarian ways to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and create a moralised vision of Russian national identity. Importantly, this return to traditionalism did not represent a complete detachment from Soviet-era practices. Instead, there were notable continuities, especially in the area of biopolitics. Just as the Stalinist state had framed women’s reproductive labour as a patriotic duty, the post-Soviet state increasingly positioned motherhood as a solution to the country’s growing demographic crisis. While the context had changed, the underlying logic remained the same: women’s bodies were expected to serve the nation. As Yuval-Davis (1997) points out, women often function as symbolic reproducers of the nation, biologically, culturally, and ideologically. In post-Soviet Russia, this role was reactivated and moralised through both state policy and civic discourse.

This ideological landscape, where pronatalism, historical memory, and gendered nationalism intersect, has become central to the state’s efforts at patriotic consolidation following 2014. The subsequent chapters of this thesis will explore how this intersection is shaped through discourse, including laws, speeches, and civic mobilisation campaigns that elevate motherhood, militarise historical memory, and portray reproduction as both a duty and a form of defence.

Literature Review

Feminism and Nationalism: Women in Nation-Building Projects

Feminist scholars have long argued that nation-building is not a gender-neutral process, but one deeply reliant on women’s symbolic and material positioning. Foundational work by Yuval-Davis

and Anthias (1989) outlines the multiple roles women play in national projects: as biological reproducers, cultural transmitters, boundary markers, and symbolic bearers of the nation. Enloe (2014) similarly critiques the masculinisation of national narratives, showing how state ideologies often universalise male experiences while rendering women's roles invisible or purely reproductive. These scholars have demonstrated how femininity becomes politicised in the service of national continuity and how women's bodies and identities are mobilised as sites of cultural reproduction, civic virtue, and moral order.

Building on this, McClintock (1993) highlights the use of familial metaphors in nationalist discourse, showing how the nation is imagined through patriarchal family structures that naturalise hierarchy and heteronormativity. In such narratives, the mother becomes a moral guardian and the heterosexual family a symbol of national stability. This framework has been particularly influential in understanding how nationalist movements construct gender roles not only ideologically but emotionally, through affective ties to land, memory, and sacrifice. However, much of this scholarship focuses on democratic or postcolonial contexts, with less attention paid to how these dynamics play out in authoritarian or illiberal regimes.

This thesis builds on these foundational insights but shifts the focus toward contemporary Russia, a context where motherhood is not just symbolically elevated but instrumentalised within a broader project of illiberal nationalism. It investigates how women are positioned as moral and biological reproducers of the nation, not only through rhetoric but also through policy and discursive governance. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of feminist work on the gendered politics of authoritarianism.

Gender and Memory in Post-Soviet Russia

While memory studies have developed into a rich interdisciplinary field, analyses of post-Soviet memory politics have largely focused on state narratives of history, trauma, and legitimacy, often neglecting the gendered dimensions of these processes. Scholars such as Malinova (2018), Mäklsoo (2015), and Sharafutdinova (2020) have examined how the Russian state instrumentalises memory to construct national identity and political stability, particularly through the mythologisation of the Great Patriotic War. This body of work offers valuable insights into how memory functions as a tool of ideological control and ontological security in the post-Soviet context. However, these studies often frame collective memory in geopolitical or security terms, with limited engagement in how gender shapes and is shaped by these mnemonic constructions.

Feminist interventions into memory studies, such as those by Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith (2002), have emphasised that memory is not only institutional and political but also embodied, emotional, and deeply gendered. Women have historically served as both transmitters and symbols of collective memory, as mourning mothers, wives of fallen soldiers, and protectors of cultural continuity. Yet in the Russian context, such symbolic roles are frequently taken for granted and under-theorised. As Riabov (2020) and Caiazza (2002) point out, the figure of the patriotic mother, particularly in war commemoration and pronatalist discourse, is central to the reproduction of national myth, yet rarely problematised in memory-focused political analysis.

This thesis builds on the securitisation approach of Mälksoo and the ideological framing of Malinova while integrating a gendered reading of mnemonic power. It argues that women's roles in memory politics are not just symbolic but are instrumental to the state's moral authority and nationalist appeal. By examining how maternal figures are mobilised in patriotic commemorations, moral narratives, and demographic campaigns, this research contributes to feminist memory studies and expands the scope of post-Soviet political discourse analysis to include gender as a structuring force.

Illiberalism, Gender Conservatism, and the Global “Anti-Gender” Turn

Recent years have seen the rise of illiberal and authoritarian regimes that challenge liberal democratic norms through nationalism, moral panic, and the reassertion of traditional values. Scholars such as Laruelle (2022), Villa (2017), and Wodak (2021) have analysed how gender and sexuality have become a common signifier in these ideological battles. In this emerging field, gender is not merely a policy domain but a symbolically charged terrain on which cultural belonging, sovereignty, and national morality are contested. The so-called “anti-gender” turn, marked by attacks on feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and reproductive autonomy, has been central to the political legitimacy of illiberal governments in countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Russia.

In the Russian context, this global trend intersects with a longer history of state control over reproduction, civic identity, and family structure. Scholars, including Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2003), Rivkin-Fish (2006; 2010), Chernova (2012) and Gradskova (1999; 2023) have documented how Russian gender politics are shaped by both Soviet-era practices and contemporary ideological alignments with Orthodox morality and civilisational narratives. This thesis situates Russian gender conservatism within the broader illiberal turn but emphasises the discursive mechanisms through which gender becomes a site of ideological consolidation. It focuses particularly on how

motherhood is mobilised as a national duty, a moral resource, and a symbolic bastion against perceived cultural decline. Central to this process is the role of historical memory, which the state uses to naturalise traditional gender roles and legitimise policy through selectively constructed narratives of war, sacrifice, and national survival. In doing so, the thesis contributes to the growing literature on the role of gender in illiberal nation-building and feminist analyses of how conservative regimes reproduce power through the language of tradition, morality, and demographic crisis.

I situate this thesis at the intersection of feminist political theory, and memory studies, with a focus on authoritarian nationalism. While each of these fields has developed rich bodies of scholarship, they are rarely brought together in the context of post-Soviet Russia. Most studies of Russian nationalism and memory politics either centre around geopolitical narratives, often overlooking the gendered, affective, and symbolic dimensions of state ideology. At the same time, feminist research on post-Soviet societies has tended to focus either on policy or lived experience, with less attention paid to the discursive construction of gender roles within state rhetoric. With this research, I try to address that gap by analysing how motherhood is positioned as both an ideological cornerstone and a moralised duty in Russian political discourse. This thesis contributes to feminist research on nationalism by showing how the Russian state uses historical memory, affective mobilisation, and policy frameworks to construct a gendered national identity centred on reproductive labour and maternal citizenship. In doing so, it brings a gendered reading to memory studies and illiberalism, demonstrating how symbolic representations of motherhood across laws, speeches, and civic discourse function as tools of affective governance. By integrating these fields, this research offers a discursive and intersectional account of how women's roles are instrumentalised in the service of nationalist ideology. It expands the scope of analysis beyond what the state says to examine how it mobilises emotion, history, and normative gender scripts to legitimise exclusion and moral control. Rather than simply analysing policy outcomes, this thesis explores how state discourse employs symbolic gender roles and historical narratives to emotionally legitimise political authority and construct national identity.

Research Questions and Methodological Outline

While existing scholarship has extensively examined the rise of authoritarianism and its intersections with nationalism, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis on how historical memory and gendered nationalism specifically shape state narratives in contemporary Russia. This research seeks to fill this gap by exploring the interplay between gender, nationalism, and historical memory

in Russian state discourse, focusing on the role of women and motherhood in the national imagination.

In this research, I aim to answer how historical memory is employed on a state level to construct a gendered, nationalist idea of womanhood and motherhood, and the broader implications of these narratives for women in Russia today. To structure the work better, I will be attempting to answer several subquestions: (1) How are reproductive roles and maternal identities framed as patriotic or civic duties? (2) In what ways do state and civic actors use history and memory to legitimise gender ideology? (3) How do these narratives converge across legislation, public rhetoric, and civic organisations? These questions guide an analysis of how Russian state discourse constructs motherhood not only as a demographic strategy but as a symbolic pillar of national identity, offering new insights into the emotional and rhetorical dimensions of illiberal governance.

In this thesis, I use the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to analyse how historical memory and gender are utilised in Russian state discourse to construct nationalist ideas of womanhood and motherhood. The DHA allows for a critical and contextual reading of texts, linking language with power and ideology over time. My analysis focuses on the period from 2014 to 2021, a time characterised by a significant ideological shift in Russia. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked the beginning of heightened nationalism, the securitisation of memory, and the state's explicit embrace of "traditional values." By 2021, these narratives had become central to state identity-making. Focusing on this period allows me to capture how this ideological trajectory consolidated before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which dramatically altered the political landscape and intensified state rhetoric. Drawing on federal legislation, presidential speeches, and materials from civic organisations, this research illustrates how gendered narratives are strategically employed to frame motherhood as both a moral obligation and a form of patriotic service rooted in the country's historical tradition. This qualitative and historically grounded approach reveals how women's reproductive roles are intertwined with broader state initiatives concerning cultural continuity, demographic policy, and civilisational defence.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is organised into five chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on feminist scholarship on nationalism, memory, and illiberalism to explore how motherhood is constructed as a civic and symbolic ideal. Chapter 2 presents the methodological approach, grounded in the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), and outlines the source base, timeline, and

ethical positioning of the research. Chapter 3 begins the analytical portion of the thesis by examining how historical memory, civilisational identity, and moral rhetoric are deployed in state discourse to naturalise gender roles and legitimise exclusion. Chapter 4 analyses the ideological function of the family, focusing on how motherhood is framed as a mechanism of moral continuity and demographic security. Chapter 5 shifts to the contradictions within this vision, interrogating the gap between symbolic idealisation and policy reality, and highlighting feminist critiques and maternal resistance. The thesis concludes by reflecting on how state discourse constructs motherhood as both a site of ideological control and political contestation, revealing the fragility of nationalist projects that rely on the moralisation of gender and the instrumentalisation of women's bodies.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis of how the Russian state constructs motherhood as a civic and ideological project. Drawing from feminist political theory, memory studies, and discourse analysis, I develop a multi-dimensional lens that helps interpret the gendered rhetoric of nationalism and the discursive practices of the state. The framework is organised around the core fields of scholarship: (1) gendered nationalism and affective governance, (2) memory and mnemonic security, and (3) illiberalism and authoritarian control. Together, these provide a set of tools for analysing how gender, history, and power intersect in the production of national identity.

This theoretical framework connects directly to the main research question of the thesis: how is historical memory employed at the state level to construct a gendered, nationalist idea of womanhood and motherhood in Russia?

Gender and Nationalism

This thesis understands nationalism as deeply embedded in gendered narratives and emotional regimes. Rather than reiterating descriptive accounts of how women participate in nation-building, this section focuses on how gendered roles are ideologically produced and emotionally sustained.

Yuval-Davis's (1997) understanding of the symbolic and reproductive functions of women in nationalist projects guides the analysis of contemporary Russian discourse. I use this typology not to categorise roles but to examine how certain gendered figures, especially the mother, are politicised in national rhetoric. Based on this framework, it is crucial to note that with the ongoing redefinition of boundaries, certain groups of women are excluded from the national project. The practices of exclusion reinforce the idea of a nation's "quality" that has to be consistently maintained. If women are seen as reproducers of nations, migrant women or members of ethnic minorities could not occupy this role (Yuval-Davis 1997). This idea is reinforced by different social and legal tools, as will be evident in the analysis of the Russian case. According to similar logic, only heterosexual womanhood is acceptable in nationalist imaginaries. As Peterson (1999) notes, this reinforces exclusionary boundaries based on gender and sexuality, presenting reproductive heteronormativity as both natural and necessary and excluding non-heterosexual forms of womanhood, as they are not able to participate in biological reproduction of the nation. In the Russian case, it is manifested through the rhetoric of blaming homosexual citizens for the population decline (Novitskaya et al. 2024)

However, certain women are understood as “reproducers” of national identity, often framed within the maternal archetype, which underscores their reproductive functions (Thomson 2020). Here, McClintock’s (1993) concept of familialism helps to unpack how the nation is imagined as a family. Moreover, since national unity is constructed through familialism, it makes the heterosexual family model emblematic of the nation’s moral health. Consequently, the family structure emerges as an instrument legitimising social hierarchies, framing them as natural while enabling a narrative of historical change as a natural evolution. In this framework, women’s place in the family becomes their place in the nation: nurturing, subordinate, and reproductive. Rather than presenting these as neutral ideas, my analysis interrogates how this imagery legitimises inequalities and prevents alternative gender roles.

Within the framework that sees the nation-state as a familial space, women are prescribed a particular role of symbolic bearers of the nation (McClintock 1993). Highlighting motherhood as the primary role of women, mothers are often regarded as “icons of nationalist ideology,” entrusted with key reproductive and symbolic responsibilities (Nagel 1998, 242). As mothers, women are tasked with reproducing the population and raising the children according to national ideals. Consequently, female civic duty is the expectation to birth and raise a new generation of citizens (Caiazza 2002). This idea is also represented in the perception of Motherland as female, and Motherland protectors as male. Womanhood comes to symbolise continuity of the nation, and women are seen as “guardians, protectors, and mothers” (Mosse and Roberts 2020, 18) or as “symbols of the national hearth and home” (Nagel 1998, 256). In the Russian context, the image of Mother Russia continues to serve as a powerful national symbol. The maternal metaphor functions not only as a cultural icon but also as a political instrument. By naturalising the relationship between the state and its citizens as a familial bond, the figure of Mother Russia cultivates a sense of belonging while simultaneously reinforcing civic responsibility through the metaphorical indebtedness of “children” to their “mother” (Riabov 2020). While national identity in Russian culture has often embedded femininity, fertility, and maternal sacrifice at the core of its national self-representation, the intensification of this discourse after the fall of the Soviet Union is of particular interest in this research (Hubbs 1993).

In post-Soviet Russia, partly due to the economic crisis and the revival of nationalism, the focus on women’s roles shifted to their reproductive and nurturing roles (Marsh 1998). Additionally, contemporary Russian pro-natalist policies contribute to the essentialisation of women by

emphasising that their primary roles are still as wives and mothers. This shift represents not a complete departure, but a selective continuation of Soviet-era gender policies, one that reinterprets their legacy through a new ideological lens while introducing significant ruptures in meaning and purpose. Although Soviet ideology also essentialised femininity, it did so within a paradoxical framework that valorised women's labour, while still rooted in essentialist conceptions of gender (Goscilo and Lanoux 2006, 7). Contemporary discourse, by contrast, romanticises motherhood as the pinnacle of femininity and patriotism. Additionally, it centralises the "properties of the Russian nation, glossed as Russia's gene pool" (Rivkin-Fish 2006, 153). This shift represents both a continuation and a rupture with the past: retaining ideological control over women's bodies while repackaging it in emotional and moral terms.

The transition to capitalism further marginalised women economically and politically. The new capitalist system with competitive labour structures and decreased welfare measures from the state to support mothers "perpetuated inequality and disparity in almost all aspects of economic, social and political life" (Johnson and Robinson 2007). After the collapse of the USSR, women constituted disproportionate numbers of the unemployed and poor, along with a drastic erosion of women from public political life (Rands Lyon 2007). In the transitional period with an uncertain future, women found themselves in an even more precarious position. My analysis situates this within a broader strategy of biopolitical governance, in which demographic fears and economic instability justify reassertions of traditional gender roles.

Emotion and affect are central to this theoretical framework, helping to explain how the state constructs gendered belonging through discourse. The cultural politics of emotion, as developed by Ahmed (2014b), provides the framework for analysing how the state cultivates and directs emotional attachments. This framework is particularly relevant to the Russian context, in which state narratives around demographic crisis, traditional values, and moral decline are inextricably linked with affect. In this research, I examine how feelings like fear, pride, and love are circulated to produce national cohesion and justify exclusion. In the Russian context, motherhood becomes a site of emotional investment and symbolic labour, while the demographic crisis is framed as an existential emergency, with women's bodies cast as both the site of decline and the source of recovery (Chernova 2012). Patriotic celebrations, public speeches, and civic campaigns frame maternal sacrifice as an expression of love for the nation, while dissenters, such as feminists and LGBTQ+ individuals, are portrayed as threats to the moral order.

Wodak's (2021) concept of the "politics of fear" complements this by showing how emotional narratives create enemies and crises. With the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), Wodak illustrates how language is used to construct social identities, legitimise exclusion, and frame political agendas. In particular, her concept of the "politics of fear" describes how national belonging is constructed through the discursive production of enemies and crises, often in emotional and moralising terms (Wodak 2021). In the Russian context, fear-based narratives since 2014 have framed dissenters from feminists to anti-war mothers as threats to the national unity (Novitskaya et al. 2024). Ahmed's argument that fear is often twinned with love is particularly relevant. Love for the family and nation becomes a disciplinary force demanding loyalty, conformity, and sacrifice (Ahmed 2014, 123).

These dynamics culminate in the state's use of affective rhetoric. Patriotic celebrations, such as International Women's Day, mobilise love and pride to legitimise the maternal role as national service. Emotional labour is reframed as civic virtue: women must raise children and embody and transmit the values that sustain the nation (Eichler 2012; Gradszkova 2023b). Emotions like fear and love are deeply intertwined in building national identity, with love for the nation being the foundation for security narratives and fear-based rhetoric. This emotional strategy reinforces heteronormative family values and marginalises those who fall outside these roles. Emotional labour thus becomes a form of national service, with women expected to reproduce not only the population, but also the values and feelings that sustain the national imaginary.

In summary, feminist perspectives on nationalist projects offer a rich theoretical and conceptual framework for analysing Russian gendered nationalism after 2014. In my analysis, I will draw on a critical understanding of the national project through familial metaphors and the subsequent positioning of women as mothers, biological and cultural reproducers of the nation. This framework allows me to explore motherhood as a patriotic duty. Additionally, employing the "economy of emotions" concept, I will have a deeper understanding of the instrumentalisation of fear and love in the state rhetoric.

Historical Memory and Mnemonical Security

This strand of the theoretical framework examines the ideological function of memory in constructing gendered national identity. Rather than offering a descriptive account of memory theory, it highlights how selective memory serves contemporary political goals, specifically, how

the Russian state mobilises historical narratives to produce legitimacy, regulate gender norms, and suppress dissent.

Collective memory constitutes a foundational aspect of the present research, drawing on the seminal work of M. Halbwachs, who articulated the view that memory is inherently a social process rather than an isolated psychological phenomenon. Halbwachs argued that collective memory exists within the social framework of memory, and that our individual thinking reconstructs memories only because it exists within a social framework and participates in that collective memory (Halbwachs 1992). Employing this conceptualisation of memory as a collective occurrence, I also turn to the concept of cultural memory and how it contributes to establishing collective identity. Building on Halbwachs' legacy, J. Assmann furthers his idea by introducing the concept of cultural memory as a "form of collective memory in that a number of people share cultural memory and in that it conveys to them a collective (i.e. cultural) identity to consolidate memory, culture and social group (Assmann 2011, 17). In this framework, cultural memory is not related to the immediate experience of an individual. Thus, history is transformed and reconstructed by reminiscence and the establishment of mnemonic codes, which transform cultural memory into a foundation of society (Assmann 2011). According to Assman, an essential characteristic of cultural memory is its elitist nature, as cultural memory exists within an imbalance of power relations, establishing who has access and who is restricted from constructing historical narratives. Cultural memory is, therefore, institutionalised and formalised by different forms of symbolisation. In the Russian context, the state monopolises the historical discourse by regulating the historical narratives taught in schools, restricting dissenting voices, and controlling media narratives.

This framework is relevant to my research since it uncovers how state actors use memory to naturalise political agendas. I draw upon the idea of "mnemonic codes" in my analysis, as articulated in discussion on "mnemonic hegemony" (Miklóssy 2022; McGlynn and Jones 2022; Schwartz 2016; Molden 2016). This perspective recognises that the legitimacy of any governing power requires the creation of collective narratives, therefore enabling an exploration of power dynamics, specifically regarding who is empowered to validate certain hegemonic narratives as "natural" and "true" while contesting others. Hence, historical and collective memory play a crucial role in any nation-building project. The construction of "usable" symbols, myths, and rituals that facilitate continuity with the past, along with the sedimentation of these "invented traditions," is essential in establishing and reinforcing concepts and sentiments of national unity (Hobsbawm and

Ranger 2012). Understanding the ongoing nature of the nation-building process, it also becomes evident that historical memory is continuously reconstructed and reinterpreted within the established frame of traditional symbols of previous generations (Smith 2011). This framework helps to establish how the Russian state constructs its narrative of continuity as the main ideological strategy.

Moreover, shared trauma contributes heavily to the construction of unifying mythology in the present as “suffering in common unifies more than joy does” (Renan 2011). Grief, therefore, becomes a powerful foundation of national memories. Here, I am building my framework referring to the concept of cultural trauma (Alexander 2004). Alexander positions cultural trauma as a socially constructed, narrative-driven process that influences collective identity, moral responsibility, and social integration across various cultural contexts. Social actors with power within a society use cultural resources and institutional structures to craft and propagate master narratives that define certain suffering as traumatic, while the denial to recognise the suffering by social groups can be a factor of exclusion (Alexander 2004, 10). In the Russian context, this framework helps to analyse dissenting anti-war voices, which are labelled as “foreign agents” and national enemies by the state (Lacassagne 2010). Therefore, a constructed shared trauma interwoven with gendered expectations can also contribute to present national consolidation.

The constructed memory of the past contributes significantly to forming collective identity and boundary-making, which define inclusion and exclusion within a social group, shaping who belongs to the nation and who does not (Wimmer 2008). In the Russian context, this is particularly evident in the construction of “ideal motherhood” through appeals to collective memory, where mothers are expected to uphold patriotic values by reproducing and nurturing the future defenders of the state. For example, Gradska highlights how children- and family-oriented policies, along with national security discourse, contribute to the process of boundary-making by excluding “non-desired parents and families.” For instance, migrant mothers are portrayed as bad mothers and a “threat to a good environment for mothering in the country in general” (Gradska 2023b, 3).

National myths and rituals are never gender neutral. Instead, they often draw on idealised images of motherhood and feminine sacrifice to stabilise narratives of continuity and virtue. Building on an understanding of women as bearers and transmitters of national culture, as well as national boundaries, I analyse recurrent tropes that symbolise resilience, suffering, and moral authority, such as “Mother Russia,” a maternal figure or a mourning war widow (Anthias and Yuval-Daïis 1989).

As Hirsch and Smith (2002) argue, cultural memory is not only a site of historical continuity but also a deeply gendered and embodied practice. Feminist memory work often challenges hegemonic narratives by foregrounding mourning, care, and intergenerational transmission. This perspective is crucial to my analysis of how maternal figures are mobilised in state memory to reinforce national unity while excluding dissenting forms of remembrance.

To understand the ideological function of historical memory in post-Soviet Russia, I draw on cultural memory theory to examine how narratives of continuity are strategically constructed and gendered. Rather than representing a clear break from the Soviet past, post-1991 Russian nationalism has involved a selective reintegration of Soviet, imperial, and Orthodox symbols (Smith 2011; Malinova 2018). This process reflects what Eppler (2024) calls a “contested memory landscape,” in which the state negotiates its ideological position by balancing dissociation from, and appropriation of, Soviet legacies. Memory serves a threefold role in this context: it legitimises the present through glorified pasts, shapes collective identity through selective remembrance, and projects a cohesive national future. As Olick et al. (2011) argue, states manipulate time and space to produce authority, a dynamic that becomes especially potent in moments of rupture. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, Russian officials engaged in what Sharafutdinova (2020, 84) terms a “double denial,” distancing from Soviet identity while still inheriting its symbolic burden. As Malinova (2018) describes, the outcome is an eclectic historiography that fuses multiple ideological traditions into a new nationalist framework.

These mnemonic strategies are not ideologically neutral. Drawing on Mäklsoo’s (2015, 223) concept of “mnemonical security,” I interpret the Russian state’s efforts to fix historical narratives as a form of securitisation. This process involves depoliticising memory by framing it as a matter of cultural truth rather than ideological construction, prohibiting dissent. Such securitised memory stabilises the national narrative and reinforces gendered expectations: maternal figures embody national sacrifice and continuity. In contrast, voices that challenge official memory, especially feminist and anti-war, are delegitimised.

Initially, the Russian state embraced a critical narrative of the Soviet past centred around the concept of a “new” Russia. The first Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, had a strict agenda of distancing himself and his administration from the Soviet apparatus. However, this critical perspective turned out to be unstable. As Eppler (2024) underscores, moving from a narrative of national glory to one of national trauma is a challenging symbolic shift, especially when a nation’s

emotional foundation relies on stories of pride, sacrifice, and unity. Consequently, after a brief period of liberalisation in the 1990s, the Russian state shifted towards nostalgia. According to Boym (2001), nostalgia can be of two types: reflective and restorative. Reflective nostalgia is a self-aware process that invokes individual and cultural memories while realising the impossibility of returning to the past. On the other hand, restorative nostalgia is instrumentalised in national revival and returning to origins. It is used as a tool of emotional manipulation aimed at glorifying the past, which is used as a value to the present (Boym 2001, xviii). The Russian state usually applies restorative nostalgia to evoke the national past and envision the national future.

In contemporary Russia, the selective construction of collective memory is most visibly shaped by Vladimir Putin's presidency, particularly through what Malinova (2018, 93) calls an "eclectic narrative." This approach fuses elements from Tsarist, Soviet, and Russian Empire traditions into a cohesive story of uninterrupted national greatness. Central to this is the discourse of a "thousand-year-long history," which begins in 9th-century Kyiv and presents Russian statehood as a continuous civilisational arc (Mjør 2019). This temporal narrative underpins the state's moral and political legitimacy, positioning contemporary Russia as the culmination of a heroic past.

The Great Patriotic War⁵ occupies a significant place in this narrative, functioning as both a source of national pride and a symbolic cornerstone of unity. However, this memory is curated in ways that avoid assessing collective trauma, replacing reflection with mythologisation. Drawing on Alexander's (Alexander 2004) concept of cultural trauma, I argue that this narrative reframes suffering as redemptive and unifying, while delegitimising critical or oppositional interpretations of the past. The state's management of WWII memory, particularly since 2014, mirrors Soviet-era ideological control, using affective commemorations to mobilise loyalty and silence dissent.

This securitised memory regime is also inextricably linked with gender logic. As Yuval Davis (1997) argues, women often serve as biological and symbolic reproducers of the nation. In post-Soviet Russia, maternal figures were reestablished as stabilisers of national continuity. Women, particularly mothers, became caretakers of tradition and embodiments of intergenerational sacrifice. Since womanhood is strongly connected to and defined by motherhood, mothers are responsible for transmitting cultural and moral values to the next generation. Especially in authoritarian regimes, like in Russia, where the public space does not allow for questions about historical responsibility,

⁵The Great Patriotic War is a Russian/Soviet term for World War II, specifically when referring to the Eastern Front (1941–1945).

practices of commemoration and remembrance become the primary domain of women's participation. For instance, organisations like the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers and Mother's Right Foundation, whose activities include establishing memorials, publishing books, and creating support groups (Oushakine 2004).

The mobilisation of historical memory does not merely serve commemorative purposes but functions as a central pillar of contemporary illiberal governance. As memory becomes securitised, it converges with other authoritarian strategies to produce ideological cohesion, suppress dissent, and reinforce traditional values. This convergence is particularly evident in how memory intersects with gendered expectations and patriotic duties. The symbolic capital of the past is not only evoked to define national identity but also to legitimise the present political order and its moral hierarchies. The following section explores how these narratives are embedded within broader illiberal strategies of ideological control, including the regulation of gender roles as civic obligation, the cultivation of a leader-centric state mythology, and instrumentalising emotions like fear, hope and love to generate support.

Illiberalism and Global Conservative Turn

This final section of the framework situates Russia within a broader global trend of illiberalism, understood as an ideological formation that rejects liberal democratic norms in favour of nationalistic, traditionalist, and heteronormative values. Laruelle (2022, 2) defines illiberalism not simply as anti-liberalism, but as a “new ideological universe” that articulates majoritarian, sovereignist, and culturally homogenising solutions. In this mode, electoral legitimacy coexists with authoritarian governance, often achieved through populist mobilisation and cultural conservatism.

In the Russian context, this “conservative turn” is not only a reaction to domestic political challenges but also a part of a broader transnational pattern of authoritarian governance like Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, where leaders have combined populist rhetoric with attacks on liberal institutions, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ communities (Laruelle 2025). Russia's form of illiberalism is influenced by its historical background, which includes post-Soviet ontological insecurity, nostalgia for imperial and Soviet power, and the symbolic importance of the Great Patriotic War. These narratives of historical memory act as an ideological framework for a gendered national project. Within this framework, women are seen as moral guardians and reproducers of the nation, while men are associated with military protection and patriotic sacrifice. Concepts such

as motherhood, family, and demographic responsibility are not considered personal choices. Instead, they are presented as existential duties linked to the survival of the Russian nation. Through the “conservative turn” of Russian politics, illiberalism became the main ideological tool of the Russian government, centring patriotism as its national idea. This ideological shift allowed the government to strengthen its control of cultural hegemony and to reinforce boundary-making and marginalisation of minorities (Laruelle 2020). The ideological underpinnings of Russian illiberalism manifested themselves in the rejection of Western liberal norms, the promotion of traditional values, and repressive policies targeting dissent.

This ideological project is sustained through a broader system of state-aligned actors, including the Russian Orthodox Church, the Ministry of Education, patriotic youth organisations, and state-controlled media. One of the most prominent illiberal actors in Russia is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which plays a crucial role in shaping the ideological framework of state discourse. The ROC offers theological support for government positions on gender, sexuality, and national identity, presenting them as based on divine law and historical truth. Since the early 2000s, the ROC has become a significant policy influencer, often consulted on legislation concerning family, education, and reproductive rights (Laruelle 2020). Patriarch Kirill’s⁶ rhetoric frequently aligns with state narratives about moral decline, Western decadence, and the need for spiritual security. This alliance between the Church and the state not only reinforces heteronormative and patriarchal values but also blurs the distinction between religious morality and political governance, thereby strengthening the moral legitimacy of authoritarian rule (Skladanowski and Smuniewski 2023).

Gender plays a central role in global illiberal movements, functioning as a signifier of both moral order and existential threat. Gender is often instrumentalised as a powerful symbol to counter a natural, divine, and cultural order. Campaigns against so-called “gender ideology” frame feminism, gender equality, and queer rights as imported, elitist, and morally corrupt (Villa 2017). Fear and moral panic are often employed as tools to mobilise society. Illiberal actors construct gender ideology and the LGBTQ+ movement as an ontological threat to national unity (Wodak 2021). By defending traditional gender roles and family structures, illiberal movements position themselves as defenders of moral order and justify authoritarian measures, restrictions on reproductive rights, and censorship as necessary to protect social order, linking gender issues to broader struggles over cultural hegemony and ideological dominance. Moreover, gender discourse is closely tied to religious narratives, particularly fundamentalist Christian groups, which emphasise divine laws and

⁶ Patriarch Kirill is the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

a natural order that reinforce their resistance to secular and progressive policies (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). At the centre of this strategy is a biopolitical project: controlling and regulating citizens' bodies and reproductive norms to reinforce cultural homogeneity. Practices such as childbirth, sexual morality, and family structure are reframed not as political debates but as essential expressions of national continuity. In this logic, the personal is not only political but national. Drawing on Naterstad (2025), I interpret this as a mode of governance in which nationalism is sustained through depoliticised discourses that transform ideology into moral and biological fact. This framework allows the Russian state to portray its policies as defending public health, sovereignty, and heritage, while shielding them from critical engagement.

This illiberal framework culminates in the personalisation of state ideology through Vladimir Putin, who increasingly embodies the values of patriotic masculinity, historical continuity, and national sovereignty. As the state's reliance on patriotic rhetoric has intensified, Putin has come to symbolise the very essence of the nation – its history, security, and masculine strength. This evolution reveals how symbolic leadership and historical narrative converge to produce an image of the president as both protector and patriarch of the Russian nation. Widely portrayed as the “embodiment of the nation,” Putin has become the primary symbolic vehicle through which state power, historical continuity, and national identity are articulated (Laruelle 2025). A key legitimisation strategy of his regime involves instrumentalising historical memory, producing frequent and deliberate comparisons between his persona and the Soviet cult of personality. While Putin initially avoided cultivating an overt cult of personality during his early presidential terms, his third term in 2012 marked a decisive shift (Cassiday and Johnson 2010). The growing emphasis on memory politics and the ideological rehabilitation of the Soviet past has facilitated the emergence of a highly curated personality cult around him. Riabov and Riabova argue that Putin's constructed persona centres on restoring “collective male dignity” following the social transformation of the 1990s (2014, 32). In this context, the rebuilding of national pride was explicitly gendered. Through careful curating, Putin has been fashioned as an ideal of Russian masculinity, stoic, strong, militarised, and erotically appealing (Riabov and Riabova 2011). His image as a “real man” resonates deeply with a society steeped in patriarchal norms and traditionalist gender values. This construction is further reinforced through visual performances of masculinity, including militaristic imagery and staged displays of physical ability (Eichler 2012). The state's cultivation of Putin as a hypermasculine leader, militarised, sexually desirable, and historically conscious, reinforces gendered constructions of civic duty across society. As national identity is increasingly aligned with traditionalist ideals and embodied through the president's persona, the roles expected of men and women become more

rigidly prescribed. In this framework, patriotism is not only a political stance but a gendered moral obligation. In contemporary Russia, the intensification of patriotic rhetoric has prescribed distinct gender roles, with women expected to contribute to society through reproduction while men have become responsible for national security. This gendered configuration of citizenship often plays a central role in legitimising state violence and militarisation (Eichler 2012).

However, these discourses and strategies are not without contestation. While the regime promotes a coherent ideological vision, its authority is constantly negotiated in public discourse and challenged by dissenting actors. These figures not only oppose the state's policies but also disrupt its memory narratives, emotional appeals, and symbolic gender order. Recognising these tensions is vital for understanding the ideological work of illiberalism not as monolithic but as deeply affective, embodied, and contested.

To fully understand Russian illiberalism, then, it is essential to analyse how gender, memory, and power intersect to produce and reproduce a normative vision of national identity. This chapter has outlined how state discourse transforms reproductive roles, familial structures, and historical myths into governance technologies. By tracing these intersections, I establish a framework for exploring how nationalism in Russia is sustained through regulating bodies, emotions, historical myths, and symbolic roles. Yet, these ideological formations are not uncontested. As dissenting actors, such as feminist groups, anti-war mothers, and civil society organisations, disrupt official narratives and symbolic gender orders, they expose the contingent and unstable foundations of the state's moral authority. These interventions reveal that affective and gendered discourses must be continuously reinforced, suggesting that illiberal nationalism is not a fixed ideological structure, but one under constant negotiation. These theoretical insights provide the foundation for examining how these dynamics play out in the legal realm, public discourse, and civil society in the following chapters.

By combining insights from scholars such as Yuval-Davis, Assmann, Wodak, and Laruelle, this framework allows for a critical reading of the Russian nation-building project not as a neutral but as an emotionally charged and ideologically contested practice. The emphasis on affect and memory highlights the mechanisms through which national belonging is imagined and enforced, while also showing how these mechanisms produce exclusions and moral hierarchies based on gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Importantly, this chapter also highlights the contingency of these ideological projects. While the Russian state aims to present a coherent narrative, its authority is constantly negotiated through civil society resistance, feminist work, and counter-discourses that challenge both the symbolic order and its emotional resonance. The theoretical framework developed here will guide the empirical analysis of the chapters that follow, which examine how

state discourse is institutionalised and contested across various sites, legal texts, public speeches, NGO activities, and civil resistance. By tracing how ideology operates through discourse, emotion, and memory, the thesis explores the dynamics that underpin Russia's conservative turn and its implications for women, citizenship, and national identity.

Chapter 2. Methodological Framework

This research is based on a feminist-informed Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), as outlined by Wodak and Meyer (2015), to examine how historical memory is mobilised at the state level to construct a gendered, nationalist conception of womanhood and motherhood. Wodak's analysis of far-right populist discourses in Austria and Europe is particularly relevant to this research (Wodak 2021). Using the discourse-historical approach, she illustrates how political language plays a role in constructing social identities, legitimising exclusion, and framing national narratives. Similarly, this project examines how the official Russian state discourse and civic organisations' rhetoric under Vladimir Putin shape gendered and nationalist identities through various rhetorical strategies and emotional appeals.

DHA is particularly useful for analysing how political actors strategically draw on the past to shape contemporary identity discourses. Given my focus on the gendered deployment of historical narratives, DHA offers a rich framework for critically deconstructing hegemonic discourses and tracing their ideological functions. This study adapts Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to examine the affective and ideological functions of discourse. However, it also situates the analysis within a specific historical and political context: the conservative ideological shift during Putin's third presidential term. This period is characterised by intensified appeals to tradition, national identity, which provide the backdrop for interpreting the discourse. Consistent with DHA principles, this study takes an interdisciplinary approach, integrating theoretical and empirical analysis while emphasising historical context. This historical orientation allows for investigating how recontextualisation functions as an important process of linking texts and discourses intertextually and interdiscursively (Wodak and Meyer 2015). Moreover, recognising that power is exercised and legitimised not only through language but also through control over discursive genres and social occasions, it is essential to detail the corpus and sampling strategy employed.

Together, these frameworks support a critical reading of how language is mobilised to naturalise gender roles, construct moral hierarchies, and consolidate political power. This approach builds on Michel Foucault's conception of discourse not merely as language or representation, but as a powerful mechanism through which knowledge, norms, and subjectivities are constituted and regulated (Foucault 1972). Foucault's insight on how power works through language helps to understand how state narratives define what is considered legitimate, moral, or deviant.

In parallel, this study draws on Norman Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which sees discourse as both shaped by and shaping social structures (Fairclough 2003). Fairclough operationalises Foucault's theoretical insights into a method for examining how language functions within institutional contexts to sustain ideological dominance. His emphasis on the dialectical relationship between discourse and social relations, particularly through the concepts of interdiscursivity and recontextualisation, is beneficial for analysing political texts that aim to legitimise specific visions of nationhood, tradition, and gender.

By approaching legislations, Putin's speeches and civic rhetoric through this lens, the study treats them not as neutral records of state communication but as discursive sites where power is exercised, identities are constructed, and emotions are mobilised. The analysis highlights how gendered and nationalist ideals are reinforced in language within a political context, often under the pretext of moral restoration and cultural defence.

This research draws on three types of primary materials to investigate the construction of gendered nationalist discourse in post-2014 Russia: (1) federal legislation; (2) presidential speeches by Vladimir Putin; and (3) publications and online content from state-affiliated civic and patriotic organisations. These sources were selected because they represent top-down, state-sanctioned discursive work, which plays a central role in constructing and disseminating ideological narratives in contemporary Russia (Laruelle 2025).

Focusing on state-produced discourse, particularly the speeches of Vladimir Putin, is relevant due to the way Russian national identity is often personalised around the president. As scholars like Sharafutdinova, Laruelle, or Riabov argue, Putin is frequently represented as the "embodiment of the nation" (Sharafutdinova 2020; Riabov and Riabova 2014; Laruelle 2025). Although there are constitutional limits on his formal legislative role, Putin greatly influences policy direction. His tacit approval can expedite legislation, while his disapproval can stall or block proposals altogether (Johnson et al. 2021). He serves both as a political actor and a symbolic figure, acting as a "protector" of the Russian moral and geopolitical order (Eichler 2012, 49). Another crucial dimension of Putin's symbolic authority is his performance of hegemonic masculinity, which forms part of the ideological foundation of contemporary Russian nationalism and gender order.

This symbolic role extends to the production of historical narratives. Since his third term in office, Putin has become increasingly active in shaping public memory and official historiography:

publishing articles, holding public meetings with historians, and promoting legislation institutionalising a specific national past (Kangaspuro 2021b; Frederick and Coman 2022). These actions highlight the discursive power of presidential communication, which not only governs but also contributes to nation-building. As scholars have noted, Putin is framed not only as a political leader but as a masculine protector, a figure who embodies stability, strength, and control (Riabov and Riabova 2014; Eichler 2012). Constructed through carefully curated photo-ops, rhetorical style, and even eroticised fan media, his public persona reinforces a state-endorsed model of gender hierarchy, in which masculine dominance is tied to national security and cultural resilience (Cassiday and Johnson 2010). In this way, gender ideology is not only articulated through policies and statements about women and families, but through Putin's own body and voice, which become discursive instruments of patriarchal power. This gendered dimension of state discourse further justifies the focus on presidential speeches. They offer insight not just into official positions on gender and family, but into how masculinity itself is mobilised as a national value, especially in times of crisis. Analysing these texts helps reveal how the state constructs a vision of idealised gender roles, often through affective appeals to duty, strength, protection, and moral order.

Similar to other authoritarian regimes centred on the leader's personality, the Russian state operates within a broader ideological ecosystem in which non-governmental actors play a crucial role. As Laruelle (2025, 24) argues, Russian ideological production is not monolithic but polyphonic, involving a spectrum of actors that add nuance, whether more radical or more moderate, to the overarching narrative. Unlike the rigid ideological machinery of the Soviet era, the contemporary Russian system operates as a flexible "ideological market," where discourse is shaped through patronal and transactional relationships. Within this framework, NGOs and civic organisations, particularly those focused on women and family, function as "entrepreneurs of influence" (Laruelle 2025, 30). They produce and disseminate state-aligned discourses under the guise of civil society, often using polit-technology, emotional appeals, and references to cultural tradition to reinforce nationalist and heteronormative values. Including these sources in my analysis allows a more comprehensive understanding of how state ideology is co-constructed and diffused across institutional boundaries.

Legal documents were sourced through Consultant Plus, a Russian database of federal legislation⁷. The final sample includes 25 laws and regulations passed between 2014 and 2021, addressing

⁷ Consultant Plus is a centralised legal database that stores all the up-to-date texts of Russian legislations, as well as archives all the outdated version of legal documents. <https://www.consultant.ru/>

motherhood, family, demography, and reproduction themes. Presidential speeches were collected from kremlin.ru, the official website of the President of Russia. The corpus includes 31 speeches delivered between 2014 and 2021, across four recurring genres: New Year's addresses, March 8th (International Women's Day) speeches, Direct Line press conferences, and Federal Assembly addresses. Finally, materials from civic and patriotic organisations were collected via official websites, with archived content retrieved using the Wayback Machine⁸ in cases where groups have since disbanded. The final sample includes ten organisations: three women's organisations, Mothers of Russia, the Women's Union of Russia (WUOR), and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia (CSMR); two youth movements, Yunarmy and NASHI; and four state-affiliated organisations and intellectual platforms, the Institute for Internet Development (IID), the Russkiy Mir Foundation, the Izborsk Club, and Sorok Sorokov. Analysing this selection enables a deeper understanding of how state ideology is co-constructed and diffused across civic, generational, and cultural domains.

The analysis proceeded in three steps: (1) coding the texts for recurring gendered and historical themes (motherhood, intergenerational duty, femininity, civilisational narratives, and patriotic sacrifice); (2) situating these themes within broader historical memory discourses; and (3) interpreting the findings in relation to state ideology, demographic policy, and national security discourse. This layered method enables a critical understanding of how women's roles are discursively constructed not only as familial and moral but as central to national survival and ideological reproduction.

Themes were identified through close reading and refined into a coding framework applied across the text corpus. The coding focused on lexical and metaphorical choices, emotional appeals, and intertextual references to historical events. A theme was defined as a recurring concept or narrative pattern that contributed to the ideological work of the text, such as positioning women as moral guardians, reproductive agents, or emblems of civilisational continuity.

The empirical scope of this research is limited to the period from 2014 to 2021, a particularly significant timeframe. Many researchers note that Vladimir Putin's third presidential term marked a conservative turn in both domestic and foreign policy (McGlynn and Jones 2022; Sharafutdinova 2020; Kangaspuro 2021a; 2021b; Epple 2024). As discussed in the historical background, many of the discursive themes addressed in this thesis, including appeals to traditional values, militarised

⁸ Wayback Machine – non-profit internet archive, a digital library of Internet sites, <https://web.archive.org/>

patriotism, and the symbolic mobilisation of motherhood, have deeper roots in post-Soviet and even late Soviet narratives. However, the period beginning in 2014 represents a discursive intensification and consolidation of these themes, particularly in response to external pressures and internal political objectives.

Several key events of 2014, like the Winter Olympics in Sochi, the 70th anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War, and the start of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, contributed to a heightened emphasis on patriotic consolidation, historical memory and a “more intolerant and authoritarian-conservative climate” (Kangaspuro 2021a). I argue that 2014 marked a significant turn to using collective memory as an instrument of societal consolidation. The post-2014 unification occurred around a shared glorification of the past and the resurgence of Soviet memory, as well as Soviet symbols and ideological tools. The ideological need to justify military intervention in Ukraine coincided with a critical commemorative date, which prompted the state to instrumentalise the analogy of fighting fascism, both during World War II and the contemporary struggle with Ukraine. The government sought to construct a new national identity and legitimise its authority by re-establishing a specific image of the past. Consequently, the state increased its focus on an ideology centred on patriotism, particularly its gendered forms.

While the decision to begin in 2014 excludes earlier rhetorical patterns, it allows for a focused analysis of a distinct phase in which memory politics, gender ideology, and national identity were strategically aligned through state discourse. Likewise, the end point of 2021 is not a claim to closure, but a methodological boundary that precedes the drastic rupture marked by the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. By limiting the analysis to this period, the project captures the construction of a pre-war ideological framework, providing insight into how the discursive groundwork was laid for later developments.

I approach this research with an awareness of my own positionality. As a feminist researcher with personal and intellectual ties to the Russian context, I am not detached from the material I analyse. On the contrary, this project is informed by both my academic commitments and my lived experience of witnessing state-led ideological shifts from within and without. In particular, I see this work as a response to the backlash against gender justice and feminist critique that has intensified since Putin’s third presidential term. This backlash is visible in policies and institutional restrictions and discursively constructed in speeches, laws, and public appeals that mobilise affect and morality to regulate gender norms. While I am not a mother myself, I have been continuously

positioned within the ideological frameworks of state discourse that define and idealise womanhood through motherhood and familial duty. Throughout my life, I have been on the receiving end of these symbolic messages, which assign value to women based on their reproductive potential, moral conduct, and patriotic service. This personal experience does not serve as evidence. Instead, it sharpens my sensitivity to state rhetoric's affective and normative power, especially how it disciplines femininity and erases alternative forms of subjectivity. This positional grounding shapes my reading of the texts, particularly in recognising the emotional and affective dimensions of nationalist discourse and their impact on women's lives, as I am dedicated to this research with both scholarly commitment and emotional investment.

However, I acknowledge the limits of my perspective. This study focuses on the discursive construction of gender and nation by state actors, not on the lived experiences of women or their reception of these narratives. The women represented in these materials are ideological figures and not speaking subjects. They are mobilised symbolically to represent duty or tradition, but their material, classed, racialised, or sexual lives are not present in the data. This absence reflects a broader issue in state discourse, but also a limitation in my own research design. The decision to focus exclusively on state-sanctioned, publicly accessible texts, including legislation, presidential speeches, and civic discourse, is both methodological and political. These texts are not neutral communications. They are ideologically curated performances that encode the values the state seeks to promote. Analysing them allows for a critique of the mechanisms by which normative gender roles are produced, reinforced, and moralised in the public domain, offering insight into how language becomes a tool of affective governance and ideological control.

Although my research attempts to critique gendered constructions, it does not fully engage with intersectional perspectives. The analysis does not explore how discourses differentially affect women based on their social position, nor how race, class, or sexuality intersect with these gendered narratives. This clear limitation reflects the constraints of the sources used, such as state-authored texts that flatten differences in favour of constructing moral archetypes. Future research should expand this work by analysing how these narratives are received, reinterpreted, or resisted by different groups of women, particularly through interviews, ethnography, or grassroots discourses.

Chapter 3. Memory, Civilisation, and Moral Order in Russian Political Rhetoric

In contemporary Russian state discourse, memory is not simply a tool of historical reflection, but a central mechanism of ideological governance. Since the conservative turn in 2014, the state has strategically mobilised memory, particularly of Soviet and wartime history, alongside civilisational rhetoric to construct a moralised, gendered vision of national identity. Building on the concept of “mnemonical security” (Mäklsoo 2015, 222), this chapter argues that memory is selectively curated to legitimise conservative nationalism and position the family, especially women’s roles as caregivers and reproducers of national values, at the heart of national continuity. These narratives frame patriotic motherhood as civic virtue, link reproduction to demographic security, and moralise familial loyalty as a pillar of Russian civilisation. Drawing on scholarship in memory studies and gender theory (Epple 2024; Kangaspuro 2021b; Malinova 2018; Sharafutdinova 2020), I examine how state rhetoric and state-aligned civic organisations use affective, historical language to produce a normative ideal of citizenship: patriotic, patriarchal, and morally disciplined. At the same time, I consider the performative nature of these narratives and the tensions they generate: Who is invited to identify with these stories? Who is excluded? And how do such rhetorical constructions function in a broader ideological landscape where dissent and rejection are also present?

Securitisation of Collective Memory

The securitisation of historical memory has intensified throughout Putin’s presidency, culminating in what scholars have termed a “conservative turn” during his third term (Sharafutdinova 2020; Kangaspuro 2021b). Within this framework, a state-imposed defensive historical narrative is increasingly juxtaposed against perceived “Western” efforts to distort or rewrite history, particularly concerning World War II. In the wake of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and escalating tensions with Ukraine, the Russian state adopted legislation criminalising the denial of the Nuremberg Tribunal and the public dissemination of “false information” about the USSR’s role in World War II. This law effectively drew a rhetorical and legal link between Nazi Germany and contemporary Ukraine (Government of Russia 2014a). In the same year, an amendment to the Code of Administrative Offences introduced penalties for displaying Nazi symbols and for “distorting” the Soviet army’s role in the Great Patriotic War (Government of Russia 2014a). These developments were accompanied by broader legal mechanisms allowing the state to designate organisations as “foreign agents” or “undesirable,” enabling the dissolution or marginalisation of civil society groups whose activities are perceived as threatening the state’s historical discourse.

These developments, which could be interpreted as the securitisation of memory, reflect a growing anxiety over the Russian nation's ideological coherence. Building on Mälksoo's concept of "mnemonical security," it can be argued that the Russian state securitises collective memory to maintain ontological security and a sense of stable national self-identity (Mälksoo 2015, 225). Instrumentalising memory, the state constructs national narratives that legitimise its existence, and defines who has the authority to remember and which historical narratives are permitted.

The 2020 constitutional amendments further established this legalised memory management. Alongside conservative provisions on family, religion, and national sovereignty, the amendments stated that "the Russian Federation honours the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland and ensures the protection of historical truth" while prohibiting the "diminishment" of the Soviet people's victory in World War II (Government of Russia 2020). This clause effectively grants the state the authority to regulate interpretations of the past, especially regarding the Great Patriotic War, and to delegitimise alternative or critical historical accounts. The implications of this legal framework are significant: it glorifies a state-sanctioned version of history as untouchable and uses patriotism as both a moral shield and disciplinary tool. These provisions reflect a broader ideological strategy in which the state instrumentalises memory not merely for commemoration, but as a means of affirming cultural sovereignty, controlling national narratives, and legitimising its contemporary political agenda.

Although these laws are not explicitly gendered, their ideological function aligns with broader measures to stabilise social roles by appealing to collective memory. By emphasising wartime sacrifices, national unity, and intergenerational responsibilities, the state reinforces a vision of social order that centres on traditional patriarchal family roles. Women are celebrated as cultural transmitters and guardians of emotional continuity. Therefore, memory laws do more than enforce loyalty to state narratives. They also help reproduce a gendered moral order in which women's primary function is to remember and nurture, not to question or critique (Miklóssy 2022).

War and Womanhood: Gendering the Great Patriotic Narrative

The Great Patriotic War holds a unique significance among all the episodes of twentieth-century Russian history. It serves as the foundational myth of contemporary Russian identity, a story of heroic suffering, collective sacrifice, and moral triumph (Mark Edele 2017, 95). Drawing on Assmann (2011), I argue that the war acts as a cultural script for national unity, legitimising the present by connecting it to the heroic struggles of the past. This is not just remembrance, but a

form of “memory work” that actively constructs a national identity through the selective recollection of historical sacrifice. Yet, while the war is typically narrated through the lens of male heroism and national perseverance, it is also a powerful site of gendered ideological production. The state’s commemorative rhetoric routinely casts women not as political actors or combatants, but as symbolic mothers of the nation, guardians of memory, transmitters of sacrifice, and reproducers of patriotic values (Khromeychuk 2020).

The gendering of wartime memory plays a crucial role in contemporary nationalist discourse. In Russia, the official memory of World War II serves not only as a historical reference but also as a cultural framework that associates women with roles of mourning, caregiving, and reproductive responsibility. As Khromeychuk (2020) argues in her work on gendered nationalism and memory, such representations serve a broader ideological purpose: they embed gender roles within the symbolic structure of the nation. Drawing on her work, it can be argued that state narratives selectively remember women in ways that reinforce their functions as caregivers, grieving mothers, and proud wives, reinscribing gender binaries through memorial practice, while erasing their political agency.

Hirsch and Smith (2002) identify this logic as a core feature of cultural memory under patriarchal regimes: women are included in memory as figures of grief and sacrifice, not as active participants. Memory becomes a gendered performance, where the private sphere, like caregiving, mourning, and nurturing, is elevated as a national virtue, while the public roles women played are omitted (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 7). This symbolic “domestication” of women’s wartime memory also extends into the civic sphere. During the 2020 “Year of Memory and Glory,” civic initiatives such as “Widows of Russia,” “Children of War,” and “Women’s Face of Victory,” coordinated by the Women’s Union of Russia, appeared to honour women’s wartime contributions. However, these projects reinforced a narrow, maternalised version of femininity, as Valentina Petrenko of Mothers of Russia once stated that “the most valuable thing women gave to the front was their children and husbands” (Press Office of the “Mothers of Russia” 2015b).

Such narratives reinforce a vision of passive maternal sacrifice while overlooking women’s own direct wartime contributions. Other initiatives, like “Mother’s Heroism,” a book project calling on citizens to share stories of their female relatives who experienced the war, seek to consolidate a feminine memory of wartime heroism. However, even in such efforts, narratives tend to centre on familial loss and support roles rather than on women’s participation in combat or production. Petrenko’s framing of WWII remembrance as a tribute to the “heroic deeds of our fathers and grandfathers” further underlines this gendered selectivity (Press Office of the “Mothers of Russia”

2015a). Such state and civic memory practices reveal a narrow vision of motherhood that is moralised, depoliticised, and emotionally instrumental. Memory, here, becomes a disciplinary tool, aimed at canonising specific roles, producing a homogenised, patriarchal vision of the past and highlighting the historical continuity. According to Talaver (2022), these narratives contribute to the militarisation of motherhood and the strengthening of historical continuity that allows the state to justify military actions through the recollection of glorified motherhood of wartime.

The 1990s: Moral Collapse and Gendered Blame

In contrast to the heroism of the wartime generation, the 1990s in Russian political discourse are depicted as a time of national chaos and moral decline (Sharafutdinova 2020, 22). This period serves as a rhetorical contrast, illustrating what happens when liberalism, globalisation, and weak state leadership converge. Yet this narrative of collapse is not politically neutral. It is profoundly gendered, casting women's emancipation and liberal individualism as symptoms of national decline.

In official rhetoric, the economic collapse, falling birth rates, rising mortality, and perceived cultural fragmentation are all portrayed as evidence of the dangers of liberal reform. However, these crises are often framed in affective and moral terms, rather than structural or policy-based ones. The period after the fall of the Soviet Union is remembered less for its material consequences than for its violation of Russia's "spiritual foundations" (Izborsk Club 2018b; Sorok Sorokov 2017). As McGlynn (2022) and Sharafutdinova (2020) argue, this retrospective condemnation allows the state to reassert control by presenting its current political project as a restorative and redemptive effort.

This moral discourse often has a gendered perspective. The language of loss and disorder is linked to concerns about demographics, declining family values, and the diminishing of traditional femininity. In response to the crisis period of the 1990s, scholars have observed an "intensification of maternal metaphors" (Goscilo 1996, 34) and a state-driven effort to "re-feminise" and "re-domesticate" women (Albanese 2016, 98). Within this ideological framework, women were cast not just as caregivers but as the moral and biological guardians of national revival. Against political turmoil, economic hardship, and cultural disorientation, the state increasingly relied on the trope of "mothering the nation" to legitimise its authority and restore social order. Thus, women were portrayed as either complicit in or symbolic of the era's moral collapse. Their growing presence in public life, shifting reproductive choices, and associations with liberal feminism were framed not as progress but as indicators of cultural decline (Kay 1997). This discourse enabled a biopolitical shift: national strength was reimagined as contingent upon the re-domestication of women, the

valorisation of motherhood, and the regulation of reproductive behaviour.

Similar to the discourse surrounding the Great Patriotic War, memory here is used to moralise. The 1990s are transformed into an ideological narrative, a period of disorder that justifies present-day policies of family promotion, gender traditionalism, and memory control. However, while the war narrative casts women as heroic mothers, the 1990s render them disconnected from their “true” national roles. The 1990s represent more than just a reference point. They signify a gendered trauma used to justify new reproductive policies in the name of national stability and revival.

Putin frequently draws explicit demographic parallels between the wartime past and the 1990s to underline this perceived crisis. In a 2017 address, he remarked:

In fact, this [1990s demographic decline] is comparable to the losses in the Great Patriotic War in terms of demographic development. This was the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall in people's living standards, huge unemployment, and a catastrophic drop in the birth rate. Now, the generation of the 1990s is entering childbearing age. There are simply fewer people who can give birth (Putin 2017).

This rhetoric transforms the demographic decline of the 1990s into a national wound, and by likening it to the Great Patriotic War, it affirms reproductive health as a matter of historical recovery. Crucially, women's biological capacity becomes a site of national interest: fertility is no longer a private matter but a patriotic obligation. By moralising the past in this way, the state aligns contemporary reproductive politics with historical memory, suggesting that demographic repair is a form of civilisational healing. In this biopolitical framework, women are not just asked to remember, but to compensate for the memory of decline through their bodies.

However, these memory practices also entail a form of erasure. The experiences of women who navigated poverty, political violence, and everyday survival during the 1990s are rarely acknowledged in official accounts (Eichler 2006). Instead, the decade is reduced to a narrative device, a dark age from which the nation was saved by paternal leadership and moral clarity. This retrospective simplification overlooks state failure and obscures the complex realities of women's experiences. The moral panic surrounding the 1990s thus becomes a powerful tool for the state's ideological project. By associating liberalisation with decadence and emancipation with national decline, the Russian government constructs a memory of crisis that demands traditionalism as a cure. And within this imaginary, women are discouraged from speaking of their trauma or agency. They are only asked to redeem it through motherhood and moral conformity.

Civilisational Rhetoric and Moral Sovereignty

The Russian state's memory politics are inseparable from its broader civilisational narrative. This discourse positions Russia as the “planetary centre of gravity for pro-family forces” and last bastion of “traditional values” in an allegedly decaying liberal West (Izborsk Club 2018a; Sorok Sorokov 2019). This narrative is presented as moral and geopolitical, defining national identity through contrast and opposition. Therefore, security discourses are central to the state rhetoric, often structured around a polarising narrative of “us versus them” in which Russia is portrayed as under attack by a morally corrupt and ideologically hostile West. While these narratives aim to unify, they also discipline, creating exclusionary ideals of patriotism, family, and femininity that obscure lived realities and restrict dissent. Additionally, the state uses security discourse to transform cultural difference into an existential threat, framing national sovereignty as a matter of territorial control and a civilisational duty to preserve moral order. As Laruelle notes, the West is portrayed as synonymous with “universal values, modernity, and progress,” but also as a vector of “gender ideology,” sexual liberalism, and social decay. The Russian state counters this with a rhetoric of spiritual revival, rooted in Orthodox values and historical continuity, a moral economy in which traditional gender roles are stabilising forces (Laruelle 2025, 78).

This binary framework is echoed and amplified by state-aligned civic organisations, which play a central role in legitimising the civilisational imaginary. Invoking a “thousand-year-old history,” groups like the Izborsk Club and Sorok Sorokov cast Russia as a sacred space under ideological siege. Western ideologies are blamed for introducing a so-called “cult of individualism,” LGBTQ+ rights, sex education, and feminist values. These organisations use affective language, drawing on what Ruth Wodak (2021) calls “the politics of fear,” to mobilise anxiety about cultural destruction and demographic collapse. Civic discourse frequently accuses Western “agents” of engineering a cultural invasion, targeting children through media, schools, and even “rap battles” (Izborsk Club 2018a). In this narrative, Western liberalism is not organically adopted but artificially imposed, designed to destroy the Russian family from within (Starikov 2019).

The family thus emerges as the ultimate site of ideological defence. Civic actors frame it as a cultural value and a civilisational frontline. Moral panic is used to justify campaigns against LGBTQ+ rights, sex education, and domestic violence legislation, portraying these initiatives as foreign intrusions and a danger to the family. Conservative organisations warn of catastrophic outcomes, “gay parades grabbing children,” “misanthropic neo-Malthusianism,” or national extinction (Izborsk Club 2018a; Sorok Sorokov 2019). The domestic sphere becomes politicised: women are cast as mothers

of the nation, children as future warriors, and households as microcosms of patriotic resilience. This logic culminates in a highly gendered model of citizenship, where motherhood is militarised and patriotism is naturalised. One Izborsk Club speaker declared: “Patriotism in Russia is a law of life, the main rule of survival, which children absorb with their mother’s milk” (Izborsk Club 2018). This shows how such framing militarises motherhood, transforming maternal care into a mode of ideological loyalty. The patriotic woman is not only a nurturer but a moral soldier, tasked with shielding the nation from cultural invasion.

Educational and youth campaigns further reinforce this ideological coherence. School curricula, especially after 2014, promote triumphalist Soviet narratives while erasing inconvenient historical narratives (Wood 2011). Youth organisations like Yunarmy turn memory into ritual through re-enactments, parades, and collective storytelling. Memory becomes a disciplinary mechanism, not just for narrating the past, but for regulating the present. Employing Ahmed’s (2014b) theory of affective politics, these examples showcase how the fear of cultural decline and pride in glorified and sacred pasts are mobilised to enforce loyalty and belonging.

Resisting Moral Order: Feminist, Pedagogical, and Everyday Dissent

While the Russian state aims to construct a unified moral imaginary through civilisational rhetoric, this discourse does not exist in a vacuum. Its emotional and ideological impact is often met with ambivalence, rejection, or even outright resistance. The ideal patriotic, heteronormative, and family-centred citizen is not a universally accepted identity but a contested one. Across feminist, LGBTQ+, and civil society spaces, alternative narratives challenge state ideology’s moral architecture and expose its exclusions and silences.

One striking form of opposition comes from the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR), a decentralised collective that challenges the gendered nationalism inherent in both militarism and memory politics. As of 2025, the Russian Ministry of Justice has classified Feminist Anti-War Resistance as a “foreign agent” and an “undesirable organisation” (Meduza 2022; Voloshinov 2024). This status is used to delegitimise and criminalise independent civil society actors, particularly those who oppose the war, challenge state narratives, or promote feminist and LGBTQ+ causes. FAR’s anti-militarist educational campaigns, including their widely circulated “Anti-lesson,” could therefore be understood not only as a pedagogical intervention but as an act of high-risk political dissent. Framed as a counter-response to the state-sponsored mandatory patriotic lessons, “Conversations about Important Things⁹,” the Anti-lessons seek to

⁹ A state-imposed weekly civic lesson introduced in schools from 2022 to instill patriotic values.

collaboratively create educational materials grounded in anti-fascism, anti-militarism, and the histories of anti-war resistance (Satanovskiy 2022; Feminist Anti-War Resistance 2025). Their goal is to foster critical thinking, historical awareness, and civic consciousness in a society increasingly shaped by ideological conformity. This call to pedagogical action illustrates the collective dimension of dissent: memory production becomes a shared, participatory act, not just a top-down state imposition. Crucially, the Anti-lesson campaign frames feminist knowledge and resistance as vital tools in the fight against militarisation. It highlights women's historical and present-day opposition to war, unpacks the link between masculinity and violence, and includes curated resources such as films and discussion prompts that challenge the glorification of war.

Some civil society actors take on more structured yet still subversive roles. Anti-violence NGOs operate within the limitations of an authoritarian system to provide alternative perspectives on family, care, and vulnerability. However, these organisations are compelled to refrain from “political activity,” and many function as epistemic communities. As explored by Davidenko, epistemic communities are defined as a network of professionals or experts in specialised knowledge. Essentially, epistemic communities use their expertise to promote shared norms and policy goals, influencing decision-making processes through knowledge dissemination and advice (Davidenko 2020, 1336). In Russia, anti-violence NGOs offer educational seminars and informal training for state professionals, particularly on topics such as domestic violence and gender-based harm. These initiatives subtly challenge the state's idealised portrayal of the family as a harmonious, conflict-free moral unit, instead revealing it as a space of inequality and control (Johnson 2023). While these NGOs avoid direct ideological confrontation, their focus on establishing practices in expertise and survivor experiences presents a quiet yet persistent challenge to state norms.

In the context of a growing political repression, resistance often takes the form of everyday negotiation: preserving dignity, intimacy, and solidarity in spaces not governed by state surveillance. Artistic collectives, online communities, and informal care networks become crucial sites for cultivating alternative understandings of family, kinship, and civic identity.

These varied forms of pedagogical, organisational, and emotional resistance reveal that the state's civilisational project is far from totalising. Its rhetoric may be powerful, but its emotional resonance is uneven, incomplete, and frequently contested. These tensions are part of a broader undercurrent of silent disobedience, in which refusal, irony, and alternative memory practices offer a fragile but meaningful space for imagining different futures.

These practices of dissent reveal the instability at the heart of the state's ideological project. While the Russian government seeks to stabilise moral and civilisational order through gendered memory politics, alternative forms of remembering and resisting expose the cracks in this hegemonic vision. The pedagogical efforts of feminist groups, the care infrastructure of NGOs, and the intimate practices of informal communities all point to a dispersed but persistent counter-action that refuses to conform to the state's script. These disruptions are not only symbolic, they challenge the state's claim to moral universality and reveal that the emotional infrastructure of its rhetoric is not equally persuasive but deeply uneven and contested. Most importantly, these practices underscore a central tension in the state's project: the more memory is instrumentalised and moralised, the more fragile and performative it becomes. In this sense, dissent is not only resistance, but it is somewhat diagnostic. It illuminates the limits of ideological control and highlights the spaces where national identity remains unstable, negotiable, and under construction.

This chapter has examined how the Russian state mobilises memory as an instrument of ideological governance, deploying narratives of war, trauma, and civilisational threat to construct a moralised, gendered vision of national identity. Through selective recollection of the Soviet past and the securitisation of cultural memory, state discourse establishes a normative framework in which patriotism, motherhood, and heteronormative family values are presented not only as traditions but as national imperatives. Women, in particular, are positioned as biological reproducers, moral anchors, and custodians of historical continuity. The next chapter builds on this argument by exploring how the ideological construction of family functions as both a continuation and intensification of these memory politics. If historical narratives define the moral terrain of citizenship, the family becomes the microcosm through which these values are lived, reproduced, and naturalised. Through an analysis of legal documents, policy frameworks, and political rhetoric, Chapter 5 will examine how the Russian state positions the family as the fundamental unit of civilisation and how this redefines women's roles, responsibilities, and rights in contemporary Russia.

Chapter 4. The Family as a Moral Institution: Gender, Reproduction, and National Continuity in Russian Discourse

In contemporary Russian political discourse, the family is viewed not only as a private sphere but also as a fundamental pillar of national identity and stability. Through legal frameworks, public discourse, and civic initiatives, the state promotes a vision of familialism that links reproductive choices to civic responsibility, positioning motherhood and family life at the heart of national survival. This chapter examines how historical narratives, gendered nationalism, and demographic anxieties shape the state's ideological construction of the family. The purpose of this chapter is to explore how familialism becomes a form of civic loyalty, reinforced through state rhetoric and civic organisations' activities, while also addressing the demographic crisis as a geopolitical threat. Drawing on feminist theoretical perspectives (Ahmed 2014; McClintock 1993; Yuval-Davis 1997; Wodak 2021), I argue that the state promotes a vision of familialism centered on a heteronormative, nuclear (and often multigenerational) family model, in which motherhood and traditional gender roles are valorised, which reflects a broader strategy to preserve the Russian nation against perceived external and internal challenges.

While presidential rhetoric under Vladimir Putin plays a central symbolic role in constructing this ideal, the ideological project of “traditional values” extends beyond speeches (Novitskaya et al. 2024). It is reinforced through federal policies, state-funded campaigns, education programmes, and the activities of state-aligned civic organisations. These initiatives collectively elevate the family as a site of patriotic reproduction and moral continuity. However, this discourse is far from uncontested. Social policies often exclude or marginalise women based on class, region, sexuality, or family structure, revealing contradictions between the promoted ideal and the lived realities of Russian citizens (Borozdina et al. 2016, 71). The chapter analyses federal family policy documents, presidential discourse, and civic narratives to show how familialism operates as both an ideological framework and a political practice, cohesive in its aims but fractured in its implementation. While this chapter focuses primarily on the discursive construction of family in official rhetoric, it is crucial to emphasise that these narratives are not purely symbolic. They are legitimised by and operate alongside a range of concrete state strategies that enact and reinforce the ideological project of “traditional values.” These include multimedia campaigns to popularise traditional values and nationwide initiatives to boost the family's prestige, legislative measures such as the ban on same-sex adoption, and financial measures like maternity capital¹⁰ or tax relief for families with three or more children. School programmes are encouraged to foster a “responsible attitude towards

¹⁰A state financial incentive for childbirth, introduced in 2007.

marriage, parenthood, and respect for the older generation” among children (Government of Russia 2015). Competitions such as “Family of the Year” serve not only to celebrate but also to normalise the large, heteronormative family model, reinforcing the idea that this structure represents the ideal Russian family.

The Family as a Microcosm of the Nation

State-issued legal documents in contemporary Russia provide an overview of the state’s ideological construction of the family as a foundational social institution. The legislative texts present the current state of demographic and reproductive conditions as unfavourable and portray the deterioration of traditional family structures as a threat to social stability. While many of the definitions and descriptions provided by the regulations are often vague and general, they still give a broader definition of the ideological understanding of the family and demographic situation in the country.

For instance, the official Concept of State Family Policy in the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025 (Government of Russia 2014b) explicitly declares that the state family policy is an integral part of social policy. This policy aims to support, strengthen, and protect the family identified as:

The fundamental basis of Russian society is preserving traditional family values, enhancing the role of the family in the life of society, increasing the authority of parenthood in the family and society, preventing and overcoming family dysfunction, and improving the conditions and quality of life of families (2014b).

Although “traditional family values” are never explicitly defined, their invocation serves a clear ideological purpose. It outlines legitimate family forms, reinforcing a heteronormative, reproductive model while implicitly delegitimising non-traditional partnerships. The 2015 amendments to the Family Code further illustrate this ideological stance, explicitly prohibiting adoption by same-sex couples and unmarried partners. These amendments effectively deny legal recognition to non-heteronormative families, reinforcing a narrow definition of the family as a heterosexual marriage centred on reproduction (State Duma and Federal Assembly 2015). Same-sex marriages are explicitly unrecognised, highlighting how the state classifies a family model rooted in biological reproduction and heterosexual union. This emphasis on heteronormativity is part of a broader ideological project that conceptualise the nation through familial metaphors that naturalise the gender hierarchy. Within this framework, family becomes a microcosm of the nation,

mirroring theoretical claims of feminist scholars like Yuval-Davis (1997) and McClintock (1993), among others. Family, therefore, becomes a public asset rather than a private domain.

Russian family policy predominantly idealises the nuclear family structure, which typically consists of a married heterosexual couple with three or more children. This model becomes central to economic policies, where financial incentives such as maternity capital explicitly reward larger families. However, legislative texts also elevate the multigenerational family as a cultural ideal, portraying it as a symbol of moral stability and cultural continuity. The state positions large families as sources of tradition, where respect for elders and close intergenerational bonds foster social harmony. For example, the Concept of State Family Policy underscores this by emphasising the importance of fostering a social atmosphere prioritising family and moral values. It calls for enhancing the “honourable status of parenthood” while promoting family-based socialisation that instils spiritual and moral norms (Government of Russia 2014b). The family’s role, therefore, extends beyond reproduction to encompass the preservation of cultural heritage and the transmission of moral values. Legal texts define the family as a social institution responsible not only for producing and raising children but also for engaging in economic activity, ensuring the health of its members, and preserving moral traditions. In this context, the Russian state’s emphasis on “spiritual and moral traditions in family relations” reflects an attempt to regulate not only the structure of the family but also the ethical practices and beliefs that shape family life (Government of Russia 2014b). However, while these texts construct a coherent and elevated image of the family, they also implicitly marginalise non-conforming family models, economic realities, and cultural differences across Russia’s vast and diverse population.

One of the recurring themes in the state rhetoric is the assertion that personal and familial well-being is inseparable from national success. For example, Vladimir Putin frequently emphasises that personal ambition and familial responsibility are directly aligned with the prosperity of the nation: “Caring for one’s family, children and parents is inextricably linked to responsibility for Russia, for the country where we live, which we love and want to see succeed and prosper” (Putin 2013); “Our personal plans and dreams are inseparable from Russia” (Putin 2019). This recurring motif portrays unity and solidarity as intrinsic characteristics of the Russian people. Moreover, this idea of unity is further reinforced through Putin’s consistent use of the “we” pronoun in his speeches when referring to national successes and hardships. By employing such “inclusive” language, Putin positions himself as part of the collective, reinforcing the perception of a shared national struggle

and destiny. This rhetorical strategy strengthens his personal authority and constructs a narrative where the state's stability is contingent upon familial loyalty and collective resilience.

Generational Duty and Moral Continuity

In Putin's official rhetoric and state-aligned civic organisations, the family is not just a moral unit but a vehicle for constructing generational obedience and national loyalty, embodying shared values passed down through generations and deeply rooted in the country's rich history. This framing links private emotional bonds to broader state goals of demographic revival and ideological continuity. Within this hegemonic narrative, family is framed as the cornerstone of Russian society, associated with love, hope, and kindness (Edenborg 2021, 114). For instance, in Putin's speeches, the conceptualisation of family extends beyond the nuclear model, emphasising the significance of the extended family and multigenerational connections. This approach underlines a vision of continuity, intergenerational bonds, and respect for elders. He consistently emphasises generational duty, portraying the care of older relatives as a moral obligation: "...so that our parents are surrounded with care and attention, and all the kind things they have taught and keep teaching us come back to them..." (Putin 2015). This moral framework implicitly depends on women's unpaid emotional and reproductive labour to support both the family and the state. This ideological strategy allows the state to deflect attention from systemic underinvestment in healthcare, pensions, and eldercare by casting care as a personal moral duty rather than a public responsibility.

This ideological narrative closely intertwines personal fulfilment with service to the state. Ambition and personal aspirations are framed as meaningful only when directed toward the collective good of a prosperous, sovereign Russia. This ideological narrative, deeply connected to family discourse, reinforces a vision of individual purpose as inherently linked to national progress:

Of course, everyone is thinking now, first of all, about their family's well-being [...] The prosperity of our Russia is formed from the happiness and success of each person [...] And we must fulfil, realise everything we have planned – for our own sake, for the sake of our children, for the sake of Russia (Putin 2014a).

This idea of familial continuity extends into the state's broader ideological narrative. Projects like "Strong family – stable state" by the Women's Union of Russia, or "A large family is the hope, the future of Russia" by the Izborsk Club, reinforce the notion that the state embodies its people, equating statehood with peoplehood. These campaigns frame family life as both a civic and national asset, echoing Putin's pronatalist discourse that positions demographic strength as integral to

national security. Following this logic, children are portrayed as the nation's future, while mothers are tasked with their patriotic upbringing.

However, it is important to note that such narratives promote an exclusionary vision of the ideal family. The perfect family model is implicitly heteronormative, ethnically “native,” and centered around the image of large intergenerational family. Non-traditional families, migrant households, and queer identities are implicitly (and often explicitly) excluded (Gradszkova 2023b). Civic organisations, like Sorok Sorokov, use this exclusionary logic to build aggressive anti-abortion campaigns lobbying for the creation of a patriotic pro-natalist movement with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church (Starikov 2019). Civic organisations, therefore, rarely address the structural conditions shaping Russian families' lived reality. These organisations largely overlook material conditions, such as income inequality, access to childcare, and gender-based violence, in favour of promoting a spiritual-ideological agenda that moralises reproduction and sidelines systemic obstacles.

For example, a member of the Izborsk Club, Yuri Krupnov, has argued that large families should form the country's “demographic elite” and that having four or more children should be encouraged as a national ideal (Izborsk Club 2018a). This ideological perspective is significantly misaligned with the actual experiences of most Russian women. Studies indicate that while many women in Russia tend to become mothers at a younger age compared to those in many European countries, they often hesitate to have additional children due to economic, health-related, and emotional concerns, including exhaustion and isolation (Rotkirch and Kesseli 2012, 160). Public opinion research shows that 40% of Russians consider two children sufficient, while 79% of parents say they are unprepared to have more (Bannykh et al. 2019). Economic precarity is a major factor: 44% of respondents cited lack of money as their primary concern, and 37.7% of large families in Russia currently live below the poverty line (WCIOM News 2018). These statistics reveal a critical tension between the state's ideological promotion of large families and the structural realities that constrain women's reproductive choices.

Demography as Threat: The Politics of Fear

Since the early 2000s, concerns about population decline have played a central role in Russian state rhetoric. However, as scholars such as Rivkin-Fish (2006; 2010) and Leykin (2020) argue, these concerns are discursively constructed as a moral and geopolitical emergency. The notion that Russia faces a “demographic crisis” is not new, but it gained renewed urgency in 2006, when Putin

described declining birth rates as one of the country's most acute problems. This speech marked a turning point in the securitisation of family and fertility policy, followed in 2007 by the introduction of maternity capital and other pronatalist initiatives, along with an ideological turn to manipulating fertility concerns in the form of moral and social panic (Rivkin-Fish 2006, 152). As Gaweda (2022) notes, this strategy is part of a broader illiberal shift in which declining birth rates are framed as evidence of cultural decline, often accompanied by anxieties about gender nonconformity, migration, and Western influence.

Here, I examine how Russian state and civic actors construct demographic decline as a civilisational threat, and how these narratives reposition women's reproductive roles as patriotic obligations. Through official speeches, legislation, and pronatalist campaigns, reproduction is presented as a matter of national survival (Chernova 2012). At the same time, motherhood is framed not as an individual choice but as a moral duty in service of the state. The emotional weight of this discourse serves to mobilise women as guardians of national continuity and filters out those deemed undesirable or unfit to carry the burden of national reproduction.

Contemporary Russian political discourse routinely casts demographic decline as a catastrophic rupture that threatens the state's economic sustainability and its cultural and ethnic survival. In public addresses, Vladimir Putin alternates between optimism about minor gains in fertility rates and a deep alarmism rooted in historical trauma. He frequently situates current demographic challenges within a historical continuum, linking them to the devastations of World War II and the social dislocations of the 1990s:

[We] managed to smooth out the consequences of the two most severe, overlapping demographic failures of the Great Patriotic War and the end of the last century. As you can see from the graphs, unfortunately, it turned out to be about the same in terms of the level of decline in the birth rate. But today, the demographic losses of the 1990s are inevitably making them known (Putin 2018).

In framing population loss as a lingering effect of historical ruptures, Putin presents his administration as both the inheritor of a crisis and an agent of recovery, absolving it of blame while justifying further ideological intervention. As Rivkin-Fish (2006) points out, such rhetoric frames the population crisis in emotional and moralistic terms: a loss not only of people but of cultural values, familial responsibility, and national pride.

Putin frequently emphasises that demographic decline is not merely a statistical problem, but a challenge to national security and identity. Additionally, Putin always emphasises the drastic need for effective measures in demographic questions, asserting that demographic recovery must be a national priority. He explicitly links economic hardship to declining fertility, arguing that material insecurity deters families from having more children:

Families want to raise children, believe in their future, believe in their country, and rely on state support. Next year, the maternity capital program expires. [...] But we realise that all these efforts are not enough to heal the demographic wound of the past that Russia has received (Putin 2014b).

The language surrounding failures, loss, and healing presents fertility as a national issue and positions reproduction as a collective responsibility. Wodak (2021) points out that such discourses are often based on a “politics of fear,” where perceived external threats are used to consolidate loyalty and justify increased ideological control. In the context of Russia, fear serves both as a diagnosis and a tool. The state creates a narrative of decline and advocates for familial patriotism and maternal sacrifice as the solution (Rivkin-Fish 2006, 168).

The state’s demographic discourse is not confined to official policy or presidential speeches. State-aligned civic actors play a central role in amplifying the narrative of demographic decline as a moral catastrophe. Civic movements like the Izborsk Club and Sorok Sorokov often intensify state rhetoric, framing reproductive behaviour not only as personal responsibility but as a battleground in an ideological war with the West. These organisations frequently link declining fertility to cultural decay and external enemies. In doing so, they attribute demographic trends to the corrupting influence of liberalism, consumerism, and LGBTQ+ propaganda (Sorok Sorokov 2019). For example, the Izborsk Club describes the “childfree lifestyle” as a symptom of moral collapse imported from the West, “the plague of the 21st century” (Izborsk Club 2018b). The demographic crisis in Izborsk Club rhetoric is frequently described as a “demographic war” or a state of “demographic schizophrenia” (Izborsk Club 2018a). Sorok Sorokov goes even further, warning in 2019 of a “genocide of the Russian people” underway, a demographic threat framed as deliberate and ideologically driven:

Today, a genocide of the Russian people is unfolding on the territory of Russia. It is not as visible as the Red Terror or the Holodomor of the Communist-Trotskyists, or the actions of the Nazis from Nazi Germany on the territory of the Soviet Union (Sorok Sorokov 2019).

Civic actors borrow the language of past traumas to emphasise the political urgency of contemporary family issues. In this framework, motherhood as a reproductive choice is framed as an act of civilisational duty, while hesitation is framed as unpatriotic (Kutenyov 2021). Civic organisations rarely address the structural socioeconomic conditions shaping Russian families' lived reality and fertility decisions. Overlooking issues of income inequality, access to childcare and gender-based violence, they focus on “ideological-spiritual agenda” (Izborsk Club 2018a). By framing demographic recovery as a matter of values instead of infrastructure, these actors reinforce a narrative suggesting that moral virtue and national unity, rather than material support, are the answer to national decline.

State and civic narratives not only promote reproduction, but they also define who should reproduce. This ideological project constructs a narrow model of ideal motherhood: heteronormative, ethnically Russian, married, aspiring to have a large family and patriotic. Women who embody these characteristics are celebrated as moral exemplars, while others (migrant mothers, national minorities, queer couples, or single women) are excluded or marginalised. Pronatalist policy instruments such as the maternity capital programme reflect and reinforce this ideological hierarchy. For example, as Gradskova (2023b) shows, non-citizen migrant mothers are often excluded from benefits even after naturalisation, particularly if their children were born before receiving Russian citizenship. This exclusion is not only bureaucratic, it is also symbolic. It sends a message about who counts as a reproductive citizen, worthy of state investment and recognition.

Civic discourses mirror these exclusions with alarming clarity. In a 2019 publication, Izborsk Club commentator warned that the demographic crisis must be solved “not through immigration,” but through the expansion of native Russian families:

There is no other way to solve the problem of demography, as “launching” tens of millions of people of a different skin colour and a completely different culture into Russia is hardly considered an acceptable method in our country. This means that the large family is our country’s hope and future (Starikov 2019).

As noted by Caiazza (2002, 40), in the early post-Soviet period, declining birth rates were portrayed as a threat to the Russian people’s “highly prized genetic fund.” Civic organisations continue this framing, depicting Russia as a nation that is “dying out” and warning about the “degradation of the nation’s gene pool” (Rimashevskaya 2014). These narratives explicitly link demographic health to racial purity, emphasising the importance of ethnic Russian women for the survival of the civilisation while marginalising others.

This discourse constructs a heightened moral panic, wherein women's reproductive choices are no longer personal but geopolitical. The family becomes a front line in a civilisational battle, and motherhood is recast as a patriotic defence against a looming demographic catastrophe. These narratives of demographic warfare and moral decay do not operate in isolation. Instead, they are deeply embedded in a broader project of moralising citizenship through state-imposed historical memory. The moral panic surrounding demographic decline is not only perpetuated through official state rhetoric but is actively disseminated by state-aligned civic organisations. These groups serve as echo chambers, amplifying state-promoted narratives that equate motherhood with national duty. Within this framework, being a good citizen is not simply about obeying the law or paying taxes, but also about upholding the ancestors' legacy, preserving the nation's moral and cultural purity, and resisting external ideological contamination.

This chapter has shown how this framing relies on a deeply gendered and exclusionary logic. State policy and public campaigns promote a vision of familialism centered on a heteronormative, multigenerational, ethnically "native" Russian family, effectively marginalising queer, single-parent, migrant, and non-traditional households. State discourse casts reproduction as both a patriotic act and a civic responsibility, while civic actors intensify this narrative, linking fertility to spiritual duty and geopolitical survival. Yet, this ideological project is marked by contradictions and silences. While the state idealises large families and patriotic motherhood, structural barriers, such as poverty or bureaucratic exclusion, often prevent women from fulfilling these expectations. Research shows that economic insecurity, gender inequality, and emotional burnout significantly shape reproductive decisions, especially for women outside of the state's narrow model of reproductive citizenship (Isupova 2024). As such, the lived realities of Russian women complicate the state's narrative, revealing a gap between ideological aspiration and material possibility.

Chapter 5. Mothers of the Nation? Gendered Expectations and Policy Contradictions

In contemporary Russian state discourse, motherhood is framed as a patriotic duty and civic responsibility essential to demographic revival and moral continuity. This chapter shifts from the symbolic constructions explored in earlier chapters to the material and ideological implementation of motherhood through state policy and public rhetoric. I argue that policy instruments such as maternity capital, alongside official pronatalist discourse, reinforce a normative model of womanhood that conflates reproductive labour with national loyalty, while failing to support women's lived realities or acknowledge intersectional exclusions. Drawing on feminist critiques of welfare policies (Orloff 1993) and empirical studies of Russian women's experiences, I analyse how motherhood is idealised, moralised, and governed and how women engage with, resist, or are marginalised by these expectations. The chapter situates motherhood as a key site where ideology is not only promoted but also contested, showing how gendered citizenship is shaped through a contradiction between symbolic elevation and material neglect. This chapter contributes to the thesis by focusing not only on how motherhood is framed but also on how it is administered, experienced, and contested, primarily through feminist critiques and civil society interventions.

Motherhood in Policy and Ideology

Since motherhood is framed as a form of national service, state policies such as maternity capital explicitly link women's reproductive labour to the health and survival of the nation. Framed as both a demographic necessity and moral obligation, these initiatives naturalise women's roles as primary reproducers of the country while simultaneously idealising a self-sacrificing, economically productive, and nurturing maternal figure.

Financial measures such as the maternity capital program are officially aimed at supporting families, but remain overwhelmingly targeted at women. The mother is legally positioned as the automatic recipient of these benefits, reinforcing a normative gender contract in which the maternal body is both biologically productive and symbolically central to national continuity. Introduced by Putin in 2006, the program offered financial assistance to families upon the birth of a second or subsequent child, with 2020 amendments expanding the program to include first-time mothers. While maternity capital is often presented in state rhetoric as a generous and empowering measure, research shows that many women experience it with distrust and frustration. For example, a study by Borozdina et al. (2016) showed that significant bureaucratic obstacles and unclear implementation procedures prevent many women from using the benefit effectively. The program is most accessible to middle-class families, better equipped to navigate bureaucratic processes, while

more economically vulnerable families struggle to access it. The authors highlight a widespread perception among recipients that the policy is a symbolic gesture rather than substantive support, revealing a gap between state ideology and everyday lived experience.

While this policy provides financial support, its moral subtext is equally important. As Putin and other officials have consistently articulated, motherhood is both a civic contribution and a patriotic act. Therefore, criticism of the program often centres on its failure to provide adequate childcare options or support for mothers who wish to stay at home, reinforcing a gender regime that idealises maternal sacrifice while offering limited practical resources.

Despite gestures toward gender equality, such as the 2017–2022 National Strategy for Women (Government of Russia 2017), the policy framework overwhelmingly maintains that maternal and caregiving responsibilities are women’s natural domain. Structural inequalities, such as limited access to childcare, rigid employment models, and wage disparities, are reframed as individual challenges that women’s adaptability can solve, and not systemic reform. The state promotes flexible employment and family entrepreneurship as solutions, further entrenching the “double burden” without questioning the gendered distribution of labour.

This ideological framing mirrors what feminist theorists describe as the fusion of nationalism and maternalism. Drawing on McClintock (1993) and Yuval-Davis (1997), I argue that Russian state discourse positions women as biological and symbolic reproducers of the nation. However, the maternal subject celebrated in state discourse is not all women but a narrowly defined, heteronormative and often ethnically Russian mother (Gradsanova 2023b).

The Paradox of Womanhood: Work, Family, and the Double Burden

The state constructs a vision of motherhood that combines professional engagement with domestic responsibilities. Therefore, women are portrayed as productive workers and devoted mothers, celebrated for their resilience and natural capacity to “do it all.” Policy documents repeatedly assert that the state’s primary developmental strategy is to foster conditions for parents, specifically mothers, to harmoniously balance family duties, education, and economic activity. However, structural support does not match the symbolic elevation of women’s roles. This contradiction, widely discussed as the “double burden,” places women at the intersection of rising state expectations and declining welfare provision.

Contemporary Russian maternal policy reflects a complex legacy of Soviet gender ideology.

The Soviet state promoted women's dual role as mothers and labourers as a civic duty, while providing some welfare infrastructure to sustain it. This arrangement was progressive in scope but rested on essentialist assumptions that naturalised women's care work (Goscilo and Lanoux 2006). This ideological legacy persists in post-Soviet Russia but is reframed within a new political and economic context. As Johnson and Robinson note, the transition to a market economy dismantled much of the state's support system, leaving women overrepresented among the unemployed and working poor (Johnson and Robinson 2007). This ideological shift was accompanied by a discursive and policy-level re-romanticisation of motherhood. In contrast to the Soviet framing of maternity as a civic obligation within a socialist collective, contemporary pronatalism recasts motherhood as a woman's ultimate expression of femininity and loyalty to the nation (Rivkin-Fish 2006). Moreover, the ideological portrayal of motherhood in contemporary Russia has a distinct moral and emotional connotation (Isupova 2024). However, these expectations are promoted in a context where gender inequality in employment, rigid work schedules, and a lack of affordable childcare remain deeply entrenched (Savinskaya 2024).

Many contemporary researchers show the contradictory nature of the modern double burden in Russia. For example, Ashwin (2023) describes how women remain confined to low-paying sectors while continuing to bear the brunt of unpaid domestic labour. Despite a strong attachment to the labour market, Russian women face stagnant wages and limited opportunities for advancement. Moreover, Ukhova adds that while the shared breadwinning model remains present as a part of an egalitarian view on gender regimes, it remains subordinated to traditional gender roles. As a result, women continue to shoulder a heavier domestic load, even when working full-time, especially among lower classes (Ukhova 2023, 449). Another contradiction could be found between the official rhetoric of gender conservative backlash that insists on the priority of women's caregiving roles and the lived reality of families, who, since the 2010s in general, have become poorer, with women needing to consider entering the labour market out of necessity. Combined with limited state support, modern Russian women "receive virtually no help and are stigmatised for expecting any" (Isupova 2024, 248). As opposed to the state construction of motherhood as both joy and duty, Isupova notes that such a combination of gendered expectations often results in anger, frustration, fatigue and sometimes regret (Isupova 2024, 263). As a part of "happiness turn," Ahmed conceptualises the instrumentalisation of happiness as a tool of managing a gendered division of labour, by attributing care responsibilities to women and creating a picture of a happy housewife and mother (Ahmed 2010, 53). Civic organisations in Russia juxtapose this image of a

fulfilled and happy wife and a mother with unhappy women, who choose a feminist and childfree life (Izborsk Club 2018b).

Thus, the “double burden” is more than a practical challenge. It is a structural contradiction embedded in the ideological production of womanhood. Women are expected to be the primary site of demographic recovery, moral continuity, and economic productivity without sufficient institutional support. Rather than alleviating this tension, state discourse reframes it as an empowering moral challenge, masking the unequal distribution of labour and the systemic barriers that limit women’s autonomy.

Whose Motherhood Counts? Intersectional Exclusions

The Russian state’s celebration of motherhood is structured around a narrow ideological vision that privileges heteronormative, ethnically Russian, and economically stable women who conform to traditional gender roles. This idealised figure of the self-sacrificing mother is simultaneously moralised and politicised, framing her as both the bearer of cultural continuity and the engine of demographic survival. However, as feminist scholars have noted, this vision of motherhood is inherently exclusionary (Gradszkova 2023b; Savinskaya 2024). Women who deviate from the norm, like single mothers, queer families, migrant women, or those who choose not to have children, are often marginalised, both symbolically and materially. For example, migrant mothers, in particular, are systematically excluded from core family benefits, and are portrayed as “bad mothers” and as a “threat to a good environment for mothering in the country in general” (Gradszkova 2023b, 3)

Research shows that social policies such as maternity capital reinforce these exclusions. While formally universal, these benefits are not evenly accessible. As Borozdina et al. (2016) have demonstrated, bureaucratic complexities and implementation gaps disproportionately affect working-class and migrant women, who may lack the resources or legal status to claim the benefits. Even women who qualify for receiving maternity capital often view such policies with distrust, citing restrictive use conditions, unclear rules, or inadequate support structures. Moreover, women who are single or childless often face implicit moral judgment for not fulfilling their “biological and civic duty” (Savinskaya 2024). The state’s valorisation of motherhood also marginalises women who are child-free by choice or circumstance. While these women are not explicitly targeted, they are implicitly framed as deviating from the ideal path of feminine fulfilment and national service. Public discourse, including statements by civic organisations and Orthodox leaders, frequently equates femininity with motherhood, rendering women without children as morally suspect or

selfish. Additionally, as Lytkina and Yaroshenko show, single mothers usually opt for a “stable” job over their personal aspirations. The majority of these jobs are provided by the government and, therefore, are underfunded. As a result, the state became the most prominent actor in offering women stable jobs with insufficient incomes, further marginalising their positions (Lytkina and Yaroshenko 2021, 65).

These exclusions are also reproduced in public campaigns and civic rhetoric. For example, Rakhimova-Sommers notes that official media frequently depict lone mothers as isolated but heroic figures, suggesting an absent but normative father figure while overlooking actual diverse family forms (Rakhimova-Sommers 2019, 186). Similarly, public discourse rarely acknowledges queer or non-traditional families, effectively rendering them invisible in policy and public imagination. As Hirsch and Smith (2002) point out, memory and identity are shaped by who is remembered and represented, and who is not.

Ultimately, the selective celebration of motherhood in Russian state policy and rhetoric creates a stratified system of gendered citizenship. Russian family policy constructs motherhood as a unifying national project while simultaneously enforcing boundaries that exclude significant segments of the population. These exclusions are not incidental but fundamental to how national identity is constructed through gendered reproduction. This exclusionary logic sets the stage for growing tension between the state’s ideological vision and the lived realities of women across different backgrounds, which I explore in the next section.

Challenging Patriotic Motherhood: Maternal Resistance and the CSMR

To understand the fragility of the state’s maternal ideal, this section examines how women’s organisation around motherhood, exemplified by the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia (CSMR), directly contests state definitions of patriotic motherhood. While official discourse presents motherhood as a patriotic ideal, women’s lived experiences reveal a far more complex and contested terrain. Recent research and feminist analyses suggest that many women do not passively internalise the state’s normative vision of family and motherhood. Instead, they engage with it critically, navigating, adapting, or actively resisting its ideological and material demands.

The Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia is a non-governmental human rights organisation composed of Russian soldiers’ mothers (and other relatives). It was founded in 1989 during the Soviet-Afghan War to protect conscripts and active soldiers from arbitrary behaviour by

authorities, commanders, and fellow soldiers. As of 2024, there are 80 branches of the organisation spread throughout different cities in Russia. There are two different versions of the origin of CSMR. One suggests that the CSMR is a top-to-bottom organisation founded by the Ministry of Defence to exercise civilian control over the army by explaining the existing laws to soldiers and teaching them how to use and enforce their rights (Zdravomyslova 2005). Another version describes the organisation as grassroots. It pinpoints the conscription of first-year university students in the spring of 1989, depriving a significant proportion of full-time university students of the deferment traditionally granted to them, causing great outrage among mothers and students themselves. The lengthy war in Afghanistan in 1979-1989, as well as changes in the domestic political situation in the country as a whole due to the emergence of glasnost¹¹ and perestroika, contributed to the actualisation of the discussion of the problems of military service opening up opportunities for women to legally organise as independent movements (Caiazza 2002, 37).

One of the first demands by the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia was to end the military intervention in Afghanistan and to reform the army. Their intervention was also instrumental in stopping the conscription of students into the Soviet Army, as they succeeded in protecting 176,000 students from conscription during their studies (Danilova 2004). Moreover, in the first Chechen war, mothers very quickly came to the forefront of the war. They "sought to block the passage of the troops, leading several officers to refuse to continue the operation" (Lacassagne 2010, 161). Mothers' organisations undermined the traditional female image as a "hero's mother" through their actions and "instead used motherhood as a platform from which to voice their critique of the military and the war" (Eichler 2012, 495). This became crucial in turning the public opinion against the war. During the second Chechen war, Putin's strategy included controlling and silencing those voices so as not to let the women speak up against the war.

Over the years, the CSMR has gained a strong reputation for its opposition to the current political regime due to the activities of several regional branches, primarily in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The Committees' numerous publications, media appearances and actions made them appear as "an 'anti-army identification' sign" (Oushakine 2004). As a result, the committee became known to have an "anti-military" orientation, synonymous with an "anti-Russian" and, therefore, a "pro-Western" position of the Committee in public opinion. As their anti-war movements challenged the authority of the state and rejected the notion of a "hero's mother" who happily sends her son

¹¹ Glasnost' ("transparency") was a companion policy to Perestroika, aimed at increasing transparency in government institutions and encouraging public debate. While it primarily concerned media and political discourse, it also enabled limited feminist engagement with issues like domestic violence, reproductive rights, and gender roles.

to “protect the Motherland,” the CSMR became “the enemy” of the Russian regime (Lacassagne 2010).

In response to growing state repression, the CSMR gradually shifted its focus from active protest to the commemoration of fallen soldiers (Gradska 2023b). In the face of increasing political censorship and a conservative shift within Russia’s authoritarian regime, there were deliberate attempts to make the deaths of soldiers socially and personally meaningful for members of the Committee. When questions of the political responsibility of the state could not be raised, an emotional form of symbolisation of loss became crucial. As the state was both responsible for sending soldiers to war to be killed and for providing compensation for the families of the deceased, mothers had to shift their attention from seeking justice to commemorating the heroic acts of their sons.

Throughout its history, the members of the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia were particularly vocal about conscription abuses, hazing in the military, inadequate living conditions for soldiers, and ensuring proper medical care for injured soldiers. The committee has often faced challenges and criticism from the Russian government, especially when advocating against military actions or policies perceived as harmful to soldiers’ rights. The ideological stance of an organisation that has existed in small but significant opposition to the state could be interpreted as both civic and maternal. Maternal ideological foundation suggests that the principle of maternal concern is the driving force of organisations like the CSMR. Thus, the entire structure of social relations embodies the family structure, where mothers care for their adult children, contributing to the essentialisation of gender relations (Danilova 2004). On the other hand, the civic approach indicates an attempt to bring the problem from the micro-level of family relations, i.e. from the level of parental/maternal care, to the level of general legal issues, when the responsibility for ensuring the life and health of an individual is assumed by the law.

The CSMR’s example is particularly interesting in the Russian context, where maternalism has been continuously tied to militarism and motherhood has been described as a moral and civic duty of women before the state. The organisation has been reinforcing an image of traditional motherhood, highlighting mothers’ personal pain and grievances, and somewhat essentialising the role of women in civic society. On the other hand, the approach of “radical motherhood” directly challenges the state’s discourse of militarised patriotism and the role of the sacrificial mother (Caiazza 2002, 124). Against the backdrop of growing repressions and the closing and destruction of numerous

women's NGOs, the CSMR still stands. While it does not necessarily undermine the state's ideal of patriotic motherhood, it still legitimately challenges it. Relying on maternal instinct, the CSMR gained political legitimacy despite their "anti-patriotic" activities. For example, in 2014, the Committee initiated a conference on resolving the military conflict in Ukraine after the Russian occupation of Crimea. In 2022, amid the escalation of the conflict and right before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the CSMR appealed to the President: "We do not want war!" (The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia 2022). The group's current activities include helping young men legally avoid conscription.

In this chapter, I examined how Russian state discourse idealises motherhood as a patriotic and moral imperative, while material policy frameworks often fail to support women in meeting those expectations. The symbolic elevation of mothers as bearers of the nation coexists with economic precarity, reproductive pressure, and systemic exclusions based on class, sexuality, and ethnicity. These contradictions are not just practical oversights. They are central to how state ideology operates. By glorifying motherhood without providing necessary structural support, the state upholds a conservative gender order while evading significant welfare responsibilities. This gap enables the state to moralise reproductive labour, enforce demographic norms, and exert symbolic control over the family, all while failing to offer social guarantees.

In returning to the question posed in the chapter title "*Mothers of the Nation?*" the answer is both conditional and contested. Some women are embraced within this nationalist imaginary, while others are marginalised or erased. The maternal figure remains a site of ideological investment, but also one of tension and resistance. Where earlier chapters explored how memory and civilisation are gendered through national narratives, this chapter has shown how those narratives are lived, enforced, and challenged at the level of everyday policy and identity. The contradictions exposed here are not signs of failure, but evidence of the ideological labour required to sustain a vision of nationhood that relies on gendered sacrifice without offering structural support in return.

Conclusion

I began this thesis by asking how the Russian state uses historical memory to construct a gendered vision of nationalism, particularly through the idealisation of motherhood. Through feminist theory, cultural memory studies, and the framework of illiberalism, I analysed how motherhood is framed as a demographic solution and a civic and patriotic duty. My subquestions guided an investigation of how reproductive roles are moralised, how memory is strategically instrumentalised to support gendered ideology, and how these narratives come together across legal frameworks, state rhetoric, and civic organisations.

This thesis has examined how the Russian state strategically mobilises motherhood to construct a gendered vision of national identity. Grounded in memory politics, affective discourse, and illiberal governance, my research attempted to demonstrate that motherhood is not just celebrated as a cultural ideal but deployed as a tool of ideological control. Through legal frameworks, patriotic narratives, and civil society co-optation, the state glorifies mothers as moral guardians and biological reproducers of the nation. These discourses rely on emotional governance, mobilising fear, pride, and nostalgia. However, I argue that this symbolic elevation of motherhood hides systemic exclusions and underlying contradictions, as not all women receive full recognition within this nationalist framework.

The argument has unfolded through a close analysis of multiple parts: the historical evolution of gender policies from the Soviet era to the present; the discursive shaping of national identity through memory and family metaphors; and the contemporary articulation of illiberal state ideology, particularly since 2014. Beginning with the ideological legacy of Soviet pronatalism and state feminism, the analysis traced how these frameworks were reappropriated in the post-Soviet context to consolidate power through gender. By integrating cultural memory theory, feminist political thought, and discourse analysis, the research identified an ideological framework where motherhood is moralised and militarised, framed as both a civic duty and a defence strategy in the face of perceived cultural decline. While the state positions motherhood as essential to national survival, this idealisation often contradicts the everyday realities faced by women in Russia. The lack of sufficient welfare provision, the criminalisation of dissent, and the exclusion of non-heteronormative and marginalised women all point to the disconnect between rhetorical glorification and material support. This contradiction is not incidental but central to how the state governs through affect, presenting conservative gender roles as moral truths while evading structural responsibility.

Crucially, this thesis also highlights the presence of resistance. Civil society actors, feminist organisations, and especially maternal dissenters offer important counter-narratives that challenge the state's gendered discourse. Through initiatives like the Feminist Anti-War Resistance and anti-violence NGOs, alternative visions of motherhood, care, and civic responsibility emerge. These interventions complicate the state's attempt to construct a monolithic national identity and demonstrate that ideological hegemony is invariably incomplete and needs reinforcement. This instability reveals the conditional nature of the gendered nation and opens up space for transformative political imaginaries.

This research contributes to broader scholarly conversations about the gendered dimensions of nationalism and illiberalism. It offers an analytical model for understanding how state narratives are produced through memory, emotion, and discourse, and how they are both enacted and contested in public life.

While this thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of state discourse on motherhood and national identity in contemporary Russia, it also has several limitations. Firstly, the study focuses primarily on official rhetoric, legal texts, and state-aligned civil society organisations. As such, it does not include extensive fieldwork or firsthand accounts from women directly affected by these policies. Future research could build on these findings by examining maternal resistance more closely. While this thesis has analysed how the state ideologically constructs motherhood, further research could explore how maternal identities are reclaimed, redefined, or resisted in everyday practices and activist spaces. Attention could be paid to how anti-war mothers, feminist educators, and women-led civic initiatives engage in alternative forms of care, mourning, and memory work that directly challenge the state's moral narratives. Such work could also investigate how maternal resistance operates across borders, evolves in exile, connects transnationally, and offers new models of solidarity and civic participation. These perspectives could contribute to developing feminist understandings of resistance in authoritarian contexts and expand the field of gender and nationalism studies beyond institutional critique.

If the Russian state uses motherhood to look backwards, to restore and mythologise, then feminist resistance offers a way to look forward, toward a politics of care that refuses to be conformed to nationalism's script. In the ongoing struggle of feminist dissent and the quiet labour of everyday resistance, there is an enduring possibility of a future where womanhood is no longer bound to sacrifice but instead reclaimed as a space of autonomy and collective power.

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