**Abstract**

RS-153

Title: “Life Choices and Decision Making in Times of Instability”

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1. **Goal of research** is to study opportunities, limitations and factors of life choices in different areas related to the state's social policy.
2. **Methodology:** (1) desk analysis of Russian and foreign publications, (2) quantitative analysis of survey data (descriptive analysis, evaluation of econometric models of binary and multiple choice, Lasso and Ridge methods, random forest and support vector methods), (3) machine learning methods, (4) qualitative analysis of sociological data (narrative, thematic, discourse analysis).
3. **Empirical base of research:** (1) sample survey data "Person, Family, Society" undertaken by Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) in 2017 and 2020, (2) sample survey data "Reproductive behaviour of the population in the context of socio-economic shocks 2020-2022” collected as part of the project in 2023, (3) 2022 Student Life Monitoring (SLM) data, (4) semi-structured student’s essays on successful and unsuccessful life choices (30 essays), and in-depth interviews on decision-making during emerging adulthood (24 interviews), on the higher education choices among first generation students (33 interviews), on daily time allocation (60 interviews).
4. **Results of research:**

The study examined broad overview of the literature and found the complexity of life choices. This complexity comes from the causes and consequences of life decisions. Human life and behavior are interconnected in various manifestations and spheres. Different decisions also have a mutual influence on each other. These interconnections require comprehensive analysis of life choices and behaviors, their combinations and sequences at any stage of the life course. The variety of significant events in the scale of a person's life creates a request for an interdisciplinary approach in the study of life choices. Another challenge in this research field is the variability of individual value attitudes and other unobservable internal characteristics of a person. These traits have a significant impact on the choice of certain behavior patterns. The third limitation is that existing behavioral models have limited predictive and explanatory power. These models assume people are fully or partially rational, but this is unrealistic in conditions of uncertainty and shocks.

The most complete and diverse life choices is shown in demography. It includes decisions and actions that shape a person's life path. In demographic studies, life choices are understood ambiguously. On the one hand, life choices mean any choice. On the other hand, it is associated with decision making in significant areas of individual implementation. Decision-making primarily concerns various aspects of demographic behavior, such as having children, family planning, marriage and divorce, migration and moving, leaving parental home. Social and economic events, such as education, entries into the workforce or a job change, making significant purchases (e.g., housing) are considered as factors or consequences of demographic choices. However, one of the key life decisions in the field of demographic behavior is the decision to have a child.

Previous studies have shown that uncertainty affects family-related behavior and reproductive plans in different ways. On the one hand, during times of external shocks, such as economic shocks, financial crises, political upheavals, and outbreaks of infectious diseases, people postpone having children. On the other hand, the internal socio-psychological values of families and children can withstand external uncertainty. Therefore, deciding to have another child can help reduce uncertainty. Similar trends are indeed observed in some countries.

The estimation from the survey "Person, Family, Society" (2017, 2020) indicates that the coronavirus pandemic decreased short-term plans to have children for childless Russians. However, it did not affect the long-term reproductive goals. Econometric model evaluation based on data from the survey "Reproductive behavior of the population in the conditions of socio-economic shocks 2020-2022" showed non-uniform effect of uncertainty caused by a ‘special military operation’ for fertility plans. Russians who do not support the country's course and follow the situation in Ukraine are more likely to postpone the birth of a child. This is especially true if they feel negative emotions, such as fear. At the same time, high satisfaction with their own lives can eliminate anxiety, making them more likely to have a child. More mature respondents who were directly affected by the coronavirus and now experiencing anxiety, are more likely to postpone having a child. Younger people without children are less likely to delay having a child if they think state support for families is important.

Deciding on education, leisure, moving out, leaving home, and romantic relationships in emerging adulthood is related to self-determination and growing up, and partly influenced by age. Making choices can be tough, so young people may need institutional support and careful attention from professionals to whom they can turn for help. Analysis of the narratives of young Russians has shown that changing the place of residence in emerging adulthood is usually not intentional or planned. This event is connected to studying at a university in a different city, building a career, or changing relationships. In most cases, the resource of well-being for young people is not moving in itself, but positive emotions, relationships and achievements related to study or work. Moving is often linked to negative experiences, stress and loneliness. Moving increases young people's independence, but they often express their choices and social functioning in different contexts. In romantic relationships, there are three main behavior scenarios: rejecting relationships, testing, and starting a family. At the same time, the analysis of narratives allows us to trace changes in the perception of a sense of personal autonomy in this area, depending on the outcome of the experience. Informants believed they were chosen when discussing love failures and chose themselves when discussing relationship satisfaction.

Interview analysis of first-generation students reveals that choosing an educational path after school is challenging due to uncertainty, lack of information, and fear of failure. Due to these obstacles, students from low socio-economic backgrounds may be unable to access higher education. They may also make poor choices in universities or fields of study. Russian first-generation students differ from those abroad. In Russia, there is no major gap between school and university culture. Students stay connected to their parents' cultural environment.

First-generation students see being part of the student community as a way to improve their social status and increase their chances of success in life. Being involved in student life doesn't require knowing how it will benefit you later. Students who focus on a rich student life over academics and career preparation face risks to their social mobility. The study has an important new finding that relates to the Russian context. Unlike Western universities, where privileged students from elite universities tend to follow the "party way" strategy in exclusive male and female communities, in Russia, students with a lower status are more included in student life.

The project shows that time as a social category influences social research by creating new paths. Modern ideas about time are complex and make us think about time in a broad way. In the context of the study of inequality, the temporal context of the actions as well as the strategies of time management of different social groups must be included in life choices research. After analyzing interviews on time budgets, three common groups of Russians were identified: strategic planners, non-reflective planners, and non-planners. These groups contain various subtypes that relate to how severe the internal request for time planning is and how much reflection is involved in the process. They can be change, as factors have been found that (1) motivate people who don't usually plan to do so, (2) make planning slower, and (3) structure time and tasks. People in different categories have different attitudes towards plans. Planners set aside specific time, describe tasks, and break them down. Non-reflexive planners and non-planners simply think and want to do things. Women with families and children have limited time resources, which can motivate them to plan their time consciously.

1. **Level of implementation, recommendations on implementation or outcomes of the implementation of the results:**

The project's results will be used to develop research on life choices, social and economic behaviors of the Russian population. This will also help make applied recommendations management decisions in social policy for education, employment, demography, social protection and welfare, culture, health, consumer behavior, etc.