



Russia's Fraught Demographic Future

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Summary

Russia today is undergoing a profound demographic transformation. Contrary to the official narrative being propounded by the Kremlin, the Russian Federation still labors under deeply adverse demographic trends driven by a confluence of societal and cultural factors. These trends will invariably affect both the size and the composition of the Russian population, with far-reaching implications for the country's foreign policy and its place in the world. This paper examines Russia's demographic trajectory, and analyzes the long-term strategic implications of the population changes now taking place within its borders.

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Introduction

Just how healthy is Vladimir Putin's Russia? To hear the Russian president tell it, his administration has successfully solved the demographic crisis that has bedeviled the Russian state and its predecessor, the Soviet Union, for much of the past century. In December of 2014, Putin used the occasion of a major televised address to the nation to celebrate the "effectiveness" of his government's programs in reversing the country's demographic trajectory. [1] Since then, the official narrative propounded by the Kremlin has been both clear and consistent: thanks to firm leadership, the demographic problems that once plagued Russia and the Soviet Union are now effectively a thing of the past.

A close reading of the pace of Russia's population, however, should lead observers to a very different conclusion. Propelled by persistent and deeply adverse population trends, Russia is in the throes of a demographic transition of profound scope and reach. The extent of the changes underway within Russian society is not adequately understood by ordinary Russians, whose grasp of the country's socio-cultural currents has been diluted—and in many cases obscured—by extensive official propaganda. Nor is it, as yet,

fully appreciated in the West for its potential long-term effects on the country's foreign and national security policies. Yet, that demographic transition has the potential to fundamentally transform the Russian state and its place in the world in the years ahead.

A Demographic Continuum

Russia's demographic difficulties are neither new nor surprising. As long ago as the 1960s, early signs of a population downturn were already evident in the Soviet Union; and by the 1970s, total fertility had declined to fewer than two children per female in nearly all of the European republics of the USSR. [2] This reality, however, was not generally accepted or publicized because it rubbed against the grain of official Soviet doctrine, which continued to project a future of robust population growth right up until the collapse of the USSR. [3] As a result, successive Soviet leaders only sporadically addressed the contributing factors that lay behind the country's demographic decline during the four-plus decades of the Cold War.

The Soviet Union's collapse brought about a worsening of already-dismal demographic conditions in its successor state. According to World Bank statistics, in the decade following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia's total fertility rate (TFR) declined precipitously, and by the early 2000s averaged just 1.3, far below the figure of 2.1 live births per female required to maintain a stable national population. [4] The period between 2006 and 2012, however, saw a partial reversal of this trend, with Russia's TFR rising back up to 1.7—the fastest total increase during that timeframe in Europe, and the second fastest in the world. [5] There it has remained. Today, Russia's TFR is still 1.7, well below the level required for a sustainable replenishment of its population. [6] In other words, despite a temporary surge in its demography in recent years, Russia's population is still shrinking. It is just doing so at a slower pace than before.

Drivers of Decline

Russia's ongoing demographic decline finds its roots in a wide range of societal and cultural factors, many of which date back to the Soviet era and have continued unabated. A full accounting of them is well beyond the scope of this work. However, a trio of adverse trends deserves special mention here because of their contemporary effects on Russia's population.

Mortality

Whereas at the start of the Cold War life expectancy in Russia was only marginally lower than that of the United States, in the decades that followed a real—and widening—mortality gap emerged between the USSR and the US. That gap narrowed in the 1980s with the advent of *perestroika* (and its attendant focus on public health), but following the Soviet collapse Russian life expectancy again plummeted, declining some 6.6 years for men and 3.3 years for women between the years 1989 and 1994. [7] Russian life expectancy has remained low in the post-Cold War period. In 2005, the country ranked 122nd in the world in life expectancy, placing it in the bottom third of all countries and far

outside the norm for industrialized ones. [8] Since then, it has declined still further. According to UN estimates, Russia now ranks 126th in the world, with an average life expectancy for its citizens just below 70 years of age, on par with North Korea (average life expectancy: 69.91) and behind Tonga (average life expectancy: 72.6). [9]

Pervasive Abortion

Under Communist rule, abortion was the only practical method of birth control available to Soviet citizens, and it was employed extensively. In 1964, there were 278 abortions for every 100 live births in the USSR, a rate that far surpassed those in the West. [10] Russia's abortion rate remained high through the 1970s and 1980s, with the number of abortions exceeding 4.5 million annually. [11] It gradually began to decline as Soviet authorities—and then Russian ones—became more conscious of the negative effects of abortion (like widespread female infertility [12]) and more restrictive in its authorization. In 2006, for the first time, the trend reversed, with 95 abortions for every 100 live births. [13] Nevertheless, Russia still ranks near the top of those countries with the world's highest abortion rates. In 2015, according to official statistics, that figure was 930,000—or an average of 106 per hour. [14]

However, like in many other places, official estimates do not capture the true extent of Russia's abortion phenomenon. Back in 2012, Igor Beloborov of Moscow's Institute of Demographic Studies noted that the actual number of annual abortions performed in Russia is as much as double the official figure—some 2.0–2.5 million in all at the time—owing to “a vast layer of private clinics” that carry out the procedure in parallel to official hospitals and facilities. [15] If this tally is accurate, then the true cost of Russia's abortion culture is the annual termination of more than 1 percent of the country's total population.

Emigration

During the decades of the Cold War, Soviet rule was punctuated by repeated surges of politically and religiously motivated flight. Even so, the pace with which people are leaving Russia today is notable—and deeply concerning. As of 2011, between 100,000 and 150,000 Russians were estimated to be emigrating every year, compounding Russia's adverse domestic population trends. [16] Today, the situation is significantly worse. “Russian government statistics show a sharp upturn in emigration over the last four years,” according to Professor Judy Twigg of Virginia Commonwealth University, a leading expert on Russian demographics. “Almost 123,000 officially departed in 2012, rising to 186,000 in 2013, and accelerating to almost 309,000 in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea and even more in 2015.” But “[t]hese statistics probably underestimate actual flows [...] as many people no longer notify the government that they're leaving.” Moreover, according to Twigg, “[e]ven more important than the absolute numbers is the type of people who are leaving: the younger, more urban and better educated.” [17]

The causes are both economic and political. A 2011 poll [18] by the Moscow-based Levada Center identified economic pressures—such as the high cost of living—as

principal drivers in Russians' decision to depart at that time. [19] Since then, however, worsening economic conditions engendered by a confluence of factors—from Western sanctions against Russia for its ongoing aggression against Ukraine to the low world price of oil—have led to a marked decline in prosperity for ordinary Russians, propelling more and more to seek to emigrate. Russia's climate of deepening authoritarianism is also contributing to the exodus, especially among the country's best and brightest. "Overwhelmingly, Russia's recent upturn in emigration is driven by relatively skilled urban liberals fleeing due to politics rather than economics," notes Twigg. "These are the heart of the 'creative class,' the scientists, educators, artists and knowledge-based workers who drive much of current economic growth worldwide. People in this category are disturbed by the political environment under Putin and are anxious to leave before it gets worse." [20]

As the statistics above suggest, the long-term trend line of Russia's population is one of decline, despite recent positive trends in individual indicators such as birth rate and life expectancy. This assessment has been confirmed, most recently, by the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA), a respected Russian think tank. In a 2015 study, RANEPA's International Laboratory on Political and Social Macro-Dynamics warned that, despite short-term improvements in demographic-related social indicators in Russia over the past several years, "the potential for a demographic crisis is not over." In fact, according to the study, the chances of such a crisis will increase dramatically in the near future. "In 10 years the number of women in the most active reproductive age (20–29 years, when almost two-thirds of all births take place), will fall by almost half; this will inevitably lead to a reduction in the number of births." [21] As a result, the study concludes, Russia's demographic outlook is still one of long-term decline in the absence of massive state intervention.

Official Neglect

Such intervention, however, remains highly unlikely. To be sure, the Russian government has made several attempts to ameliorate persistent negative population trends within the country. Arguably the most prominent of these is the "maternity capital" campaign launched by President Putin in late 2006 and entailing payments of approximately \$11,000 apiece to women who give birth to at least two children. The "maternity capital" policy has, to date, had a mild remedial effect on the Russian birthrate. [22] However, a comprehensive demographic strategy on the part of the Russian government remains mostly conceptual, despite the passage of a formal government blueprint to this effect. [23]

Official investments, meanwhile, have lagged behind the scope of the threat. In just one example, according to World Bank calculations, Russia's expenditures on health care have actually declined as a percentage of GDP since the mid-1990s. [24] (By contrast, since the early 2000s, Russia's defense expenditures have effectively doubled, rising to 4.4 percent of GDP in 2013. Since then, they have declined as a result of the economic downturn engendered by the Ukraine crisis, but has done so only slightly. [25]) Topics like education, public health and science, are likewise viewed as only marginally

important: back in September of 2012, Deputy Economic Development Minister Andrey Klepach admitted that reform in those sectors was impossible in the near term because of the government's budget priorities. [26]

Today, such a focus is even less likely. Since the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict in early 2014, Russia's economy has found itself in an even more precarious state, making significant investments in social sectors a low priority for the Kremlin. At the same time, deteriorating relations and growing tensions with the West have served to reinforce the Kremlin's martial focus, which in recent years has made possible a major military spending boom on the part of the Russian government. A 2015 analysis by the *Bloomberg* news agency noted that Russia's federal budget had shifted toward a war economy, with a large spike in "black budget" defense increases authorized by President Putin but not publicly announced, ostensibly due to national security concerns. [27] That black budget, moreover, has doubled over the past five years, to some \$60 billion, and is set to grow even larger in the future. In all, the *Bloomberg* study estimates, military expenditures have increased by a factor of 20 since Putin became president 15 years ago, and defense and security now account for some 34 percent of Russia's budget. [28] By contrast, Russia today is estimated to spend less than 11 percent of its budget on health care and only slightly more (11.5 percent) on education. [29]

The Weaponization of Demography

Nonetheless, Russia's demographic crisis is not, strictly speaking, a hidden problem. It would be incorrect to say that ordinary Russians are unaware of their country's demographic difficulties. To the contrary, multiple studies by polling institutions inside the country have found Russians to be generally aware of the nation's negative demography—and concerned by it. Thus, in a 2014 survey by independent pollster VTsiOM, roughly 10 percent of respondents specifically identified the country's "demographic situation" as a top concern, while related issues such as migration, health care and alcohol addiction all ranked high as sources of worry (25, 31 and 36 percent, respectively). [30]

It is also the case, however, that Russians have a distorted perspective on the true state and health of the national population. These misperceptions are actively promoted by the Kremlin, which has effectively "weaponized" the question of demography in Russia, and harnessed it for political purposes. It has done so in two main ways.

First, the Russian government and its ideological fellow travelers have propounded an official narrative which, while recognizing the demographic crisis as a real threat, has tended to minimize and obscure its severity—and overstate the remedial impact of government initiatives. Thus, in just one example, Russia's government has been quick to highlight improvements to the death rate within the country, something it attributes overwhelmingly to official policy. The prevailing official interpretation, however, is highly subjective. Experts like Galina Tikhova of the Russian Academy of Sciences note that, while the mortality rate in Russia has indeed been dropping, it remains three to four

times higher than in most developed countries—and worse than the conditions that prevailed in Russia in the year 1990. [31]

Likewise, pro-Kremlin outlets like *Russia Insider* have argued that Russia’s “real demographic picture is therefore almost the exact opposite of what you read in the western media,” and that, “[i]f fertility rates continue to grow in Russia and continue to fall in the west in line with present trends then the future belongs to Russia.” [32] Notably, this narrative feeds into the dominant political argument being propounded by the Kremlin on the world stage: that of Russia’s inexorable geopolitical advance, and the West’s strategic and ideological retreat.

At the same time, Russian officials and operatives have cherry-picked demographic data to promote several concrete themes. Russian experts, for example, have historically warned that the country’s eastern regions are being overrun by Chinese migrants, [33] with estimates of the number of Chinese nationals in the Far East running as high as 1.5–2.0 million. [34] Russian authorities, too, have in the past actively promoted the idea of a looming “yellow peril” in the country’s east. Perhaps the most famous example was Vladimir Putin’s July 2000 speech in the city of Blagoveschensk, in which he warned residents that if they did not “take practical steps to advance the Far East soon,” the population would soon be speaking Chinese. [35]

The actual number is almost certainly much lower. A 2003 study by the American Foreign Policy Council estimated that there were fewer than 150,000 Chinese nationals throughout the entire Far East. [36] A survey by China’s state-controlled *People’s Daily* the following year put the number of permanent, legal Chinese residents in Russia’s East at between 100,000 and 200,000. [37] More recent projections put that number considerably higher—about 300,000—making clear that China’s presence in the Russian Far East is indeed increasing, albeit modestly. [38] However, the narrative of Chinese encroachment has been broadly embraced at both the official and unofficial level as a means for stirring nationalist sentiment. [39]

A similar trend is visible with regard to Russia’s Muslims. Russian officials have done little to ameliorate the rampant xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment that prevails throughout the country, instead highlighting the differences between ethnic Russians and Muslims—and the growing prevalence of the latter—in putting forth an array of protectionist and even discriminatory policies. [40] This trend has grown even more acute with the onset of Europe’s migrant crisis, which has led many in Russia to ascribe to the notion of a civilizational war now underway between Islam and the West. [41]

Strategic Consequences

The long-term strategic ramifications of Russia’s population decline are far-reaching. They can be felt in the transformation of Russian society itself, which is changing inexorably in at least three distinct ways.

Russia’s Population as a Whole Is Shrinking

The country's most recent census, carried out in 2010, found that the national population had shrunk by nearly 3 percent in the preceding eight years, to 142.9 million. [42] This decline is expected to continue. In 2012, official Kremlin estimates projected that—based upon then-prevailing trend lines—the nation's population would dwindle to just 107 million by mid-century. [43] More recent prognoses have reached similar conclusions. RANEPА's 2015 report concludes that, without remedial action from the Russian state, the country's population could shrink to 113 million by 2050, a decrease of more than 20 percent from today's figures. [44] Moreover, in a worst-case scenario, RANEPА predicts that Russia's population could constrict by nearly a third, to 100 million, before mid-century. [45]

As this trend continues, the Russian state will find it increasingly difficult to maintain control over its current territorial boundaries, raising the possibility of a reduction in the overall size of the Russian state. It is also likely to strengthen the country's longstanding imperial impulse, with the Russian government adopting an even more aggressive policy toward those former territorial holdings in the "post-Soviet space" and Eastern Europe that boast a significant Slavic population (e.g., Ukraine, Belarus) as it seeks to ameliorate its demographic situation through the re-absorption of select, demographically-desirable parts of the former USSR.

Russia's Population Is Transforming

Perhaps most notably, Russia's demographic decline has led to the rise of what could be termed "Muslim Russia." In 2002, 14.5 million Muslims were estimated to live in Russia. Today, approximately 20 million do. [46] This total is made up of two cohorts: indigenous Russian Muslims and co-religionists from the majority-Muslim states of Russia's Near Abroad (Azerbaijan and the "stans" of Central Asia). Accurate, timely estimates of the rate of growth of this overall group are not readily available. However, a few data points are known. Namely, while Russia's Muslims remain a distinct minority (roughly 16 percent of the overall population), differences in communal behavior—including fewer divorces, less alcoholism and a greater rate of reproduction—have given them a more robust demographic profile than their ethnic Russian counterparts. [47] Moreover, migrants (the majority of them Muslim) continue to enter the Russian Federation in search of employment and economic opportunity. In 2013, the total number of migrant workers present on Russian soil was estimated to be 11 million, more than 7 percent of the country's total population. [48] According to the United Nations, the fertility of Russia's Muslims, at 2.3, is significantly higher than the overall national fertility rate. [49] Other estimates peg the reproductive rate of Russia's Muslims higher still. [50] As a result, a variety of projections have estimated that Russia's Muslims will account for a fifth of the country's total population by the end of this decade, and may make up a majority of Russians by as early as mid-century. [51]

In and of itself, this shift is a benign development. But the past several years have seen the Kremlin aid and abet the rise of an ultranationalist ethos as a means of strengthening the state. [52] The unfortunate side effect has been a rising tide of xenophobia throughout

the country, with Russia's Muslims and their co-religionists from the "Near Abroad" bearing the brunt of a significant portion of this hostility. Russia's Muslims—increasingly alienated from the Russian state—have become susceptible to the lure of alternative ideologies, most directly the radical interpretation of Islam propounded by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as their local affiliates and franchises. The result is a dangerous distance between the Russian state and an expanding—and radicalizing—Muslim underclass that is viewed, and which sees itself, as separate from the rest of Russia. The consequent uptick in Islamic radicalism within, and directed at, Russia is a portent of things to come, with Islamists from Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union proliferating globally even as they take aim at the Russian state.

China's Presence in, and Influence Over, Russia's Eastern Territories Is Increasing

In the two-and-a-half decades since the Soviet collapse, the number of Russians living in Eastern Siberia and the Far East (a territory of more than four million square miles) has declined significantly. As of 2002, the cumulative population of both regions was 28 million citizens—merely 19 percent of the country's overall citizenry. [53] Less than a decade later, that figure had declined by more than one million. According to the 2010 national census, the total number of Russians in Eastern Siberia and the Far East combined was just 25.4 million—or fewer than six inhabitants per square mile. [54]

As Russia has receded, China has advanced, in both political and economic terms, although it has done so more slowly than official estimates imply. The available evidence suggests that the number of Chinese nationals now in the Far East is still modest, numbering only in the hundreds of thousands. But Beijing's influence—manifested in everything from growing Chinese labor migration [55] to expanding economic investment from the PRC [56]—is unmistakably increasing. As it does, it calls into question more and more the Russian government's ability to maintain control over the country's distant east, and the long-term connection of the peoples there to the Russian federal center. Simply put, Moscow may soon find itself at risk of being eclipsed, both economically and in demographic terms, in its eastern territories.

The cumulative effects of these intersecting trends will be nothing short of monumental. In the years ahead, the transformation engendered by Russia's demography will call into question long-held assumptions about the viability of the Russian state. But even before it does, their impact will be felt in the policies of the Kremlin. Already, the Russian government's persistent imperialism and foreign policy adventurism in places like Ukraine (and potentially Belarus and the Baltics) have been amplified by internal demographic pressures. Indeed, contrary to the image that the Kremlin has attempted to cultivate on the world stage, and in marked contrast to its current activism on a number of global fronts, demographic trends suggest strongly that the greatest long-term strategic threat from Russia will emanate not from its strength, but from its weakness.

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Notes

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