



The Emptying of Russia

By Nicholas Eberstadt

Russia, whose birth rates have declined and whose mortality rates have dramatically increased in the last several decades, faces a demographic crisis. Thus far, Russian political leaders have focused on trying to increase birth rates, but a greater sense of urgency must be applied to diminish mortality rates and to respond to health threats, including HIV/AIDS.

Population trends and demographic characteristics in Russia today are severely—and adversely—altering the realm of the possible for that country and its people. Russian social conditions, economic potential, military power, and international influence are all affected, and the situation stands only to worsen.

Russia is at the brink of a steep demographic decline—a peacetime population hemorrhage framed by a collapse and a catastrophic surge, respectively, in the birth and death rates. The forces that have shaped this path of depopulation and debilitation are powerful and by now deeply rooted in Russian soil. Altering this demographic trajectory would be a formidable task under any circumstances. Unfortunately, neither Russia’s political leadership nor its voting public have begun to face up to this enormous challenge.

Declining Population Rates

On New Year’s Day 1992—one week after the dissolution of the Soviet Union—Russia’s population was estimated at 148.7 million. As of mid-2003, according to the Russian State Statistics Committee, the Russian Federation’s population was 144.5 million. This was by no means the only population loss recorded by any country during that period.

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According to estimates and projections by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, more than a dozen states experienced a population decline between midyear 1992 and midyear 2003, ten of these amounting to drops greater than Russia’s 3.1 percent. But unlike some of these drops—e.g., Bosnia’s—Russia’s could not be explained in terms of war and violent upheaval. In other places, population decline was due entirely to emigration. Russia, by contrast, absorbed a substantial net influx of migrants during those years—a total net addition of more than 5.5 million.

Moreover, continuing population decline—at a decidedly faster tempo—is envisioned for Russia as far as demographers care to project into the future. The only question is how steep the downward path will be. The U.S. Census Bureau offers the relatively “optimistic” projection of a drop of ten million between 2000 and 2025. The U.N. Population Division’s “medium variant” projection suggests a drop of more than twenty-one million in that period.

Russia is not, to be sure, the only European country registering more deaths than births. According to Council of Europe numbers, fully eighteen European states currently report “negative natural increase.” But in other European settings, the balance is often still quite close. For example, in Italy—the prime example in many current discussions of a possible depopulation of Europe—there are today about 103 deaths for every one

hundred live births. Russia, by contrast, reports more than 170 deaths for every one hundred births.

Russia's abrupt and brutal swerve onto the path to depopulation began during the final crisis of the Soviet state. Over the two decades before Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power in 1985, Russia's births regularly exceeded deaths. After 1987, however, births began to fall sharply and death totals to rise.

Russia's current depopulation bears all the trappings of a "demographic shock," reflecting abrupt and violent changes in the nation's vital rates in the immediate wake of a momentous, system-shattering, historic event. This shock is probably not just a temporary disturbance: there are good reasons to believe that Russia's population trends define a new norm for that country.

Obstacles to Recovery

Fertility plummeted from 2.19 lifetime births per woman in 1986–1987 to 1.17 in 1999. (Over the past several years, fertility has edged up, but only slightly.) Given how quickly it declined, is it not possible that it would rebound vigorously in a more favorable political and economic environment? It is possible, but there are a number of obstacles to such a recovery.

First: Russia's poor and declining overall health patterns extend into the realm of reproductive health, meaning that involuntary infertility is a more significant problem for Russia than for Western countries, and possibly a worsening one. According to some recent reports, 13 percent of Russia's married couples of childbearing age are infertile—nearly twice the figure for the United States in 1995. Other Russian sources point to an even greater prevalence of infertility today.

Russian womanhood has been scarred by the country's extraordinary popular reliance upon abortion as a primary means of contraception—with the abortions in question conducted under the less-than-exemplary standards of Soviet and post-Soviet medicine. As one expert (Murray Feshbach) has noted, "approximately 10 to 20 percent of [Russian] women become infertile after abortions, according to numerous reports." Add to this the explosive spread of potentially curable sexually transmitted infections. According to official figures, the incidence of syphilis in 2001 was one hundred times higher in Russia than in Germany.

Second: Russian patterns of family formation have been evolving markedly over the past generation—and not in a direction conducive to larger families. Simply put,

young Russians are now much less likely to marry—and ever more likely to divorce if they do. In 2001 Russia recorded three divorces for every four new marriages.

Third, and perhaps most important: With the end of the Soviet system, Russia has in some real sense commenced a rejoining with the rest of Europe—and in present-day Europe, Russian fertility rates are by no means aberrant. While Russia's levels tilt toward the lower end of the European spectrum, they are actually higher than for some other post-Communist areas whose "transitions" to democracy and market order look rather more complete (Slovenia, 1.21; Czech Republic, 1.14)—and are comparable to the current levels in a number of the established market democracies of the European Union (Austria, 1.31; Greece, 1.29; Spain, 1.26; Italy, 1.24). Viewed over a longer horizon, Russia's postwar fertility levels and trends look altogether "European."

But Russia's death rates do not look European at all. Over the four decades between 1961–1962 and 2002, life expectancy at birth in Russia fell by nearly five years for males; it also declined for females, though just slightly. Desperately poor health conditions are distributed with a wretched evenness across the land.

To judge by Russia's (admittedly less than perfect) statistics on cause of death, nearly all of the increase in mortality rates for men—and absolutely all of the increase for women—can be attributed to an explosion in deaths related to cardiovascular disease (CVD—heart disease plus strokes) and injuries. Between the mid-1960s and the end of the twentieth century, CVD mortality rates in Japan, Western Europe, and North America fell sharply. In Russia between 1965 and 2001, the age-standardized death rate for CVD surged by 25 percent for women and 65 percent for men. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, the level of CVD mortality was of a totally different scale than anything seen in the West. For working-age people, or those twenty-five to sixty-four, Ireland reported Western Europe's highest level of CVD mortality. Russia's was more than four times Ireland's.

Social Causes and Effects

As for mortality attributed to injury—murder, suicide, traffic, poisoning, and other violent causes—age-adjusted levels for men and women alike more than doubled between 1965 and 2001. Among contemporary societies at peace, Russia's level of violent deaths places the country practically in a category of its own. For men

under sixty-five, the death rate from injury and poisoning is more than four times that of Finland, the nation with the worst rate in the European Union.

Russia's dismal health record can be explained by a number of things: pervasive smoking, poor diet, sedentary lifestyles, increasing social atomization and anomie, the special economic stresses of Russia's variant of "transition," and the poor Soviet medical system and the limited coverage of its successor. At the end of the day, however, it is impossible to overlook the deadly contribution of the Russian love affair with vodka.

From the sixteenth century, when vodka was first introduced to a receptive public, to the present day, Russians have demonstrated a predilection to drink heavy spirits in astonishing excess. Russia's thirst for hard liquor seems to have reached dizzying new heights in the late Soviet era, and then again in the early era of post-Communism. Heavy drinking is directly associated with Russia's appallingly high risk of deadly injury—and Russia's binge-drinking lifestyle also seems to be closely associated with death through cardiac failure.

The UN Population Division estimates the life expectancy for Russian men today to be lower than the average for men from the world's "less developed regions" (i.e., Africa, Asia, Latin America). The country's lingering health and mortality crisis promises to be a drag on economic development. In the modern era, the wealth of nations is represented, increasingly, in human rather than natural resources—and the richer the country, the more pronounced the tendency for an entity called "human capital" to overshadow or replace "physical capital" and land in the production process. It is difficult to see how Russia can expect, in some imagined future, to maintain an Irish standard of living if its workforce suffers an Indian schedule of survival—or worse.

As for the effect of population decline on daily life and affairs of state: in the decades immediately ahead, Russia seems likely to contend with a sharp falloff in its youth population. Between 1975 and 2000, the number of young men ages fifteen to twenty-four ranged between ten million and thirteen million. By 2025, on current UN projections, the total will be barely six million. Apart from the obvious military implications of this decline, there would be economic and social reverberations. With fewer young people rising to replace the older

retirees graduating from the Russian workforce, the question of improving (or perhaps maintaining) the average level of skills and qualifications in the economically active population would become that much more pressing. And since younger people the world over tend to be disposed toward and associated with certain kinds of discovery, innovation, and entrepreneurial risk-taking, a pronounced choking off of younger blood could have real consequences for Russia's social capabilities and economic responsiveness.

To the extent that Russian policymakers have concerned themselves with the country's negative natural increase problem, they have focused almost entirely on the birthrate—and how to raise it. Not surprisingly, this pro-natalist impulse has foundered on the shoals of finance. In plain terms, raising the birthrate is an expensive business: especially when the potential parents are educated, urbanized women accustomed to paying careers. To induce a serious and sustained increase in childbearing, a government under such circumstances must be prepared to get into the business of hiring women to be mothers—and this is a proposition that could make the funding of a national pension system look like pin money.

Meanwhile, Russian policy circles persist in treating the country's horrendous mortality rate with an insouciance verging on indifference. Authorities have adopted a virtual *laissez-faire* posture toward the conditions that lead to "excess mortality" of something like four hundred thousand of their citizens each year. President Vladimir Putin—himself a teetotaler and exercise enthusiast—has taken to the podium from time to time to urge his electorate to engage in sports. But it will take more than a cheerleader in chief to win Russia's battle against chronic disease, injury and poisoning (just as it will take more than the four employees that the entire Ministry of Health reportedly has working on the country's likely next major health menace, HIV/AIDS, to deal with that impending crisis).

It seems likely that Russia will become a "normal" Western nation only when its voting public makes clear that this situation is intolerable and must be remedied. Only then, one can argue, will Russia's public servants finally be aroused from their deadly lethargy and mobilize themselves for this absolutely necessary struggle in defense of the motherland.