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Russia's Peacetime Demographic Crisis:

Dimensions, Causes, Implications

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's Demographic Crisis: Not a "Normal Country" Problem

In late 2003 and early 2004, toward the end of Vladimir Putin's first term of office as president of the Russian Federation and during the run-up to his campaign for reelection to a second term, a pair of highly regarded U.S. academics (one an economist, the other a political scientist) published a series of papers that would make a deep impression on informed thinking about Russia in Western political and intellectual circles. The topic of the studies was the Russian transition, the political and economic evolution from the old Soviet order to the new, post-Communist system that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Marshalling a broad array of economic and political data, and situating the Russian Federation's performance rankings in international perspective, these papers argued that Russia had, at last, become "a normal country." To be sure, the authors noted that, "Russia's political and economic systems remain far from perfect. But their defects are similar to other countries at similar levels of economic development." "In slightly more than a decade," they concluded, "Russia has become a typical middle-income capitalist democracy."¹

Only a few years later, there are probably few analysts outside Russia who would volunteer a similar evaluation. An unrelenting march of events—Putin's 2005 declaration that the demise of the USSR was the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century"; his belligerent declamations about the United States and the West at the 2007 NATO *Wehrkunde* conference; and the progressive clampdown on press freedom, judicial independence, and electoral choice—have glaringly differentiated Russia from such

¹ Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman, "A Normal Country," National Bureau of Economic Research, NBER Working Paper, no. W10057, November 2003; and *Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman*, "A Normal Country," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 2 (March/April 2004): 20–38. An extended version of this argument was published as Andrei Shleifer, *A Normal Country: Russia After Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

countries as Mexico, Brazil, Malaysia, and Croatia, to which Russia was once likened in these widely discussed studies.

In 2010, the Russian Federation no longer looks much like a typical middle-income capitalist democracy. The point, however, is that only a few years ago such a judgment was not at all eccentric, from certain perspectives. Many well-informed observers concurred with the normality thesis that was being offered at that time about the Russian system. Indeed, given the economic and political facts then available to specialists in those disciplines, it could have been reasonable to designate Russia as a normal country—or a country approaching that status. However, no student assaying the country's population trends could possibly have rendered a similar verdict—then or now. Already by 2003 and 2004, Russia's basic demographic rhythms were fundamentally, even alarmingly, different from those of such countries as Mexico, Brazil, Malaysia, and Croatia, and they remain so today.

From the demographic perspective, the Russian Federation was, and still is, not a normal country. To the contrary it was and is a country in the grip of a highly anomalous, peacetime demographic crisis. This study is an exposition of those terrible and ongoing trends.

To be sure, observers of population are sometimes all too ready to label any given demographic trend as a crisis, be it the rapid increase of human numbers in low income regions or the stagnation of population growth in more affluent societies of Europe and East Asia. By any impartial valuation, however, the Russian Federation is incontestably victim to a genuine and severe population crisis today. The country's population is steadily shrinking, mortality levels are nothing short of catastrophic, and the human resource base appears to be on a trajectory of dangerous erosion. During the decade-long economic boom from 1999 to 2008, when the country's natural resource exports facilitated a spurt of sustained rapid growth, these problems were temporarily obscured. Today, in the wake of the world economic crisis and slumping international demand for natural resources, they are once more inescapably exposed.

Russia's demographic problems are not typical, much less normal, for a contemporary society. Worse still, there is little evidence that any general process of self-correction is as yet underway for the afflicted population.

The following pages will document and analyze this most unusual—indeed abnormal—population crisis. The study is divided into two parts. The first part examines what we might call the arithmetic of Russian depopulation, such as the trends in births, deaths, and migration that are driving the Russian Federation's strange peacetime depopulation, as well some of the factors behind these atypical trends. The second part moves beyond the arithmetic of population change to examine some other aspects of the Russian population profile, such as population aging, patterns of education and labor productivity, and "social capital." These aspects are perhaps less routinely assessed in demographic surveys but are arguably hardly less important to individual well-being and society's prospects.

Russia's demographic travails qualify as nothing short of a humanitarian catastrophe in the modern world. The implications and consequences of this catastrophe, however, extend beyond the realm of humanitarian sentiment alone.

PART I

FEWER BUT NOT BETTER:
THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF
RUSSIA'S DEPOPULATION

In March 1923, months after the formal constitutional establishment of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR), and only months before his own death, Vladimir I. Lenin, the indispensable strategist and prolific theoretician behind Russia's Communist Revolution, wrote his final political essay. Its memorable title—still known to every literate adult in Russia today—was “Better Fewer, But Better.”¹

In “Better Fewer, But Better,” Lenin considered the prospects for the fledgling Soviet state. There could be no doubt, he assured his readers, as to the eventual triumph of Communism, and not just in Russia but across the entire earth. Sheer human numbers worldwide, he wrote, were on the side of this revolution. More immediately, however, the success (if not the fate) of the Soviet project would turn not on population mass but on population quality—more specifically on the acumen and dedication of the cadre committed to constructing socialism within the USSR. Thus for now, Lenin instructed, “We must follow the rule: Better [to] get good human material... than work in haste without hope of getting any at all.”

In Russia today, Lenin's famous aphorism can only have a bitter and ironic aftertaste. This is, in part, because of the carnage the ultimately failed Soviet experiment would inflict on its own subjects in the name of building utopia. For three generations, “better fewer, but better” was taken to mean that massive human losses at the hand of the state were acceptable as long as the Kremlin's own objectives were advanced in the process.

But only in part. The bitter irony of the aphorism also bites today because independent Russia, while freed from the nightmare of Soviet totalitarian rule and at last unshackled from the quasi-colonial apparatus that bound the country to fourteen “fraternal” socialist states, is currently in the middle of a demographic crisis that could have scarcely been imagined by the Marxist-Leninist theoreticians of yore, much less comprehended by their intellectual descendants today.

Russia is in the throes of a terrible peacetime depopulation. From one year to the next, the population is becoming progressively smaller. Unlike other modern societies facing population decline—Japan, Germany, and Italy among them—this descent is unaccompanied by any improvement in the health outlook for the remaining citizens. Rather, the country is caught up in an alarming upsurge of general mortality, and is witnessing a grim downward spiral in levels of public health. In a modern world that is being transformed by steady health progress, significant elements of the Russian population must contend with less favorable odds for celebrating their next birthday than were enjoyed by their ancestors before Lenin's revolution.

This first section of our study will focus on the basic demographics of Russia's ongoing peacetime depopulation, outlining its dimensions, analyzing its components, and attempting to account for some of the factors and phenomena that may be behind it. From a purely arithmetic standpoint, births, deaths, and migration must account for changing populations in any country. Accordingly, we will examine Russia's trends in each of these areas.

Chapter 1 presents data on the scope and scale of the Russian Federation's current depopulation, placing this peacetime population decline in international and historical perspective. Since the end of the Soviet era, Russia's total population has fallen by nearly 7 million. In the postwar period, only one country has suffered a larger population drop: China in the wake of the disastrous “Great Leap Forward” campaign. In Communist China, however, the country's population stabilized and demographic growth resumed once the Great Leap was abandoned and a more practical

¹ V.I. Lenin, “Better Fewer, But Better,” *Pravda*, March 4, 1923, translated in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 33 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 487–502, <http://www.marxistsfr.org/archive/lenin/works/1923/mar/02.htm>.

policy regimen was embraced. There is no obvious or comparable policy remedy for relieving contemporary Russia's great leap downward.

Chapter 2 considers trends on births and family formation in Russia today. In the years immediately following the end of Soviet power, Russia's birth rates collapsed. This fall-off in fertility, however, is not the principal factor behind the Russian population decline. Furthermore, it is far from evident that Russia's descent into steep sub-replacement fertility is a temporary perturbation. Even in the Soviet epoch, Russian fertility levels were often among Europe's lowest. Over the past two decades, moreover, Russian patterns of marriage, divorce, and co-habitation have been undergoing rapid change, seemingly replicating familiar norms in Western Europe. This transformation would hardly seem auspicious for a sustained birth upsurge, especially considering the enormous income gap that separates parents in Russia and Western Europe today.

Chapter 3 examines Russia's trends in mortality, placing them in international perspective and disaggregating their components. Simply put, Russia is experiencing a health disaster. Even by the unexacting standards of Gorbachev-era survival schedules, the country has suffered, since the end of Communism, over three times the toll of World War I. For males and females alike, life expectancy at birth in Russia is lower today than during the Khrushchev era, well over four decades ago. General health levels in Russia today, in fact, compare unfavorably with those prevailing in many third world countries, and in some respects even with a number of fourth world countries (that is to say, desperately poor contemporary societies where income levels and living standards fall well below those prevailing in the third world). Yet Russia's means of attaining these appallingly high levels of mortality are frighteningly new. No fourth world country, after all, could have the material wherewithal or modern comforts to generate the sorts of death rates from heart disease that have been felling Russia's men and women in droves in recent years.

Chapter 4 takes a closer look at Russia's dreadful new patterns of mortality and health, seeking explanations from both historical analogies and the contemporary literature on public health. However we try to frame it, Russia's health performance is exceptionally bad. Other transitional societies today suffered health setbacks with the breakup of the Soviet imperium. Russia's, though, has been the most extreme, even though other post-Communist societies appear to have experienced even more serious economic shocks. When we look to the prewar era, moreover, we find that a number of Western societies endured steep and prolonged economic slumps, some apparently comparable in magnitude and duration to Russia's post-Soviet economic crisis. None of the societies, however, registered anything like the health setbacks that have occurred in modern Russia. In a proximate sense, modern Russia's mortality explosion has been due mainly to heart disease (CVD) and injuries. Alcohol abuse, smoking, poor diet and inadequate health care stand out as immediate possible explanations for such public health problems. Each of these likely plays a part in modern Russia's health tragedy. The problem is that Russia's mortality problem looks to be even worse than the public health literature would lead us to expect. Russia's greatest killer, for example, is its remarkably high level of deaths from CVD, yet the classical risk factors developed from six decades of research on Western populations simply cannot account for why Russia's CVD mortality rates are so very high. The health disaster underway in Russia, in short, is not only outside Western experience; in important ways, it may still be beyond Western understanding.

Chapter 5 investigates modern Russia's migration situation. Migration is one potential mechanism for improving individual wellbeing, promoting economic development, and, not least important from the purposes of this study, mediating Russia's population decline. Since

the end of the Communist era, voluntary migration—both international and domestic—has become incomparably easier in Russia. Though data on migration is problematic and at times even contradictory, there is little doubt that Russia has enjoyed a very substantial net influx of men and women from beyond its borders during the post-Communist era. These many millions of newcomers have had the beneficial impact of augmenting Russia's manpower pool, expanding national output beyond where the level it would otherwise have been (for their part, Russian migrants overseas have regularly been remitting billions of dollars back home, which underscores the often-overlooked fact that emigration is not necessarily a bad thing for the sending country). All in all, net migration may have cushioned Russia's population decline rather substantially. Absent any international migration, Russia's post-Communist population drop to date would have been closer to 13 million than the roughly 7 million officially registered.

The increasing ease of voluntary travel to and within Russia has also been accompanied by some complications and inadvertent consequences. One of these has been to highlight the question of ethnicity and assimilation in what remains, for all intents and purposes, a multi-ethnic society. Another is to accentuate what some would describe as regional imbalances. Over the past two decades—since the last Soviet-era census—the population of Moscow has steadily swelled, while the Russian Far East (always sparsely populated) has steadily emptied. Few Russians, it seems, wish to live in the Russian Far East. Yet the territory adjoins some populous and densely-population parts of Northeast Asia. We may be prompted at least to ask if Russian sovereignty in these vast and largely uninhabited reaches is, under these circumstances, a sustainable long-term arrangement.