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In Russia, a Demographic Crisis and Worries for Nation's Future

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The country's plunging population crisis -- low birth rates and high death rates -- has serious implications for the future of the world's largest nation.

Following Vladmir Putin's decision that he will run again for President of the Russian Federation next March, there are questions about continuity or change in economic reform, political reform, weapons control, U.S.-Russian relations, and a host of other issues.

But there will surely be one constant: Putin's concern about arresting the demographic decline of Russia -- especially of Russia's working-age males -- which has significant implications for Russian society, economy, and standing in the world.
This issue received global media attention in 2006, when then-President Putin said in his state of the nation address that “The most urgent problem facing Russia is demographic crisis.” In his recent speech to his party, United Russia, in which he and current President Dmitry Medvedev said they would swap positions next year, Prime Minister Putin emphasized again the importance of stopping Russian depopulation, while claiming that there had been progress in the past five years. This issue is the classic “under the water” part of the Russian iceberg, which will shape the nation’s direction for years to come.

To a non-expert like me, the Russian demographic story is fascinating, not just because of its national and geopolitical implications but because it is about both low birth rates and high death rates. Male life expectancy in Russia today is approximately 60 years, or at least 15 years less than in most industrialized nations. It has been oft-remarked that many developed nations now have declining birth rates because of job opportunities for women. But Russia’s low birth rates are due to economic problems, and together with high death rates caused by poor health, these factors make Russian's demographic problems striking. Together these have led to a decline in Russian population from 148.6 million in 1993 after the breakup of the Soviet Union, to 146 million at the beginning of the 21st century, to somewhere between 139 and 143 million today.

The UN Population Division estimated several years ago that Russian population in the year 2025 -- one year after President Putin would complete two six-year terms -- would continue to decline dramatically, settling in a range from 121 million to 136 million. The U.S. Census Bureau, in another study several years old, estimated that the Russian population would be 128 million in that year. However, according to published reports, Russian state statistical authorities say that the 2025 population could be in the high 130 millions (lower than present, but not much lower), while the Ministry of Economic Development optimistically states (hopes) that population decline will stop in about 10 years and return to current levels by 2025.

Whatever the disparities in estimates about Russia's future population, there is no question about the facts that existed in 2006 when Putin addressed the demographic crisis in his state of the nation speech. These are the benchmarks from which improvements are measured. At that time:

- 16 Russians died for every 10.4 babies born, with population declining by 700,000 people a year.
- Women on average had 1.34 babies during their lifetime, far below the 2.1 babies per woman considered the replacement rate in industrial societies (the
rate to keep population stable) and far below the rate of 2.63 children per woman in 1958.

- Males 16 years old had only a 50 percent chance of living past 60.
- In the 15 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, there had been 10 million more deaths than births in the Russian Federation.

The causes of the alarming death rate include heart disease, accidents, violence, and suicide -- often associated with heavy, sometimes binge, drinking. Smoking rates are among the highest in the world (twice as high as in U.S.). Environmental conditions, especially in the work place, are often poor. Diet is harmful. And the quality of the health care system is often low. Nicholas Eberstadt, a demographic expert at the American Enterprise Institute and senior adviser to the National Bureau of Asian Research, has said that with high rates of injuries and violence, Russia looks liked like a Sub-Saharan conflict or post-conflict society, not a middle class society at peace.

Putin's policy initiatives in 2006 were aimed at increasing the average birth rate by providing incentives and subsidies. These included increasing cash grants for more children, extended maternity leave benefits, and enhanced day care services. The result appears to be an increase in the birth rate from 1.34 to 1.42, an improvement to be sure, but still significantly below the 2.1 replacement rate required to keep the population stable. Demographers also note that increases in per woman birth rates may have limited impact in the future because there will be fewer women of child-bearing age due to low fertility rates in prior years going back to the early 1990s.

But addressing the systemic conditions causing the high death rate -- alcohol, smoking, environment, health care -- are much more problematic because the policy responses are more complicated and culture change more difficult. According to The Russia Balance Sheet (published in 2009 by the Peterson Institute for International Economics and the Center for Strategic and International Studies), Russia initiatives in recent years to improve their health care system and to reduce drinking and smoking have had some impact. The death to birth ratio is declining slightly. Life expectancy for men has risen by a year or two. Infant mortality is down. As noted, the birth rate per woman is up slightly.

But the demographic problems reported by researchers are still profound.

- Compared to other countries male death rates are extraordinarily high. Currently, 14 Russians for every 1000 die per year (compared with 8 per 1,000 in the U.S.), making Russia's death rate one of the world's worst. The average computed by the UN Population Division for "least developed countries" is 10 deaths per 1000 people.
• While male life expectancy has improved slightly, it is still ranked about 160th among nations -- lower, for example than Bangladesh or Algeria.

• Women outlive men in Russia by 13-14 years, one of the biggest gender gaps in the world.

• A significant proportion of the deaths (for women as well as men) are in the working age population, which is declining in size, leading to a bulge in the aged.

This is why demographic experts like Nicholas Eberstadt remain pessimistic about whether Russia can avoid continued abnormal rates of death and population decline. As he wrote in a recent article in Foreign Affairs, Russia "has been in the grip of a protracted demographic crisis since the end of Communism." Eberstadt cites the "Kremlin's official statistical service" as envisioning "ten million more deaths than births over the next two decades."

The continued high mortality in working age people compared to many other nations -- certainly compared to the EU, the other BRICs (i.e. Brazil, China and India) and the U.S. -- raises questions about Russia's economic future if it wishes to expand from one based heavily on natural resources to more labor intensive manufacturing and services. Russian experts estimate a labor shortage of 14 million appropriately skilled workers by 2020. Similarly, the demographic problems raise issues about the ability of the Russian military to meet conscription requirements (the number of men at conscription age in 2016 will be half the number 20 years earlier according to The Russian Balance Sheet). Even harder to measure is the impact on Russian morale and optimism of continued high death rates (which some argue affect birth rates because they dampen hope of parents to be).

So, there are a range of predictions about whether the modest progress on demographic issues -- which has apparently taken the crisis situation of 2006 to quite severe conditions today -- can continue and can stop Russian depopulation. Will Putin's focus on this issue -- and the continued funding of policy initiatives -- increase birth rates and moderate death rates? And, even if so, is the problem so serious and deep-seated that that Russian population decline, especially among workers, will continue, even if at slightly slower rate?

Churchill's famous and oft-quoted 1939 aphorism about Russia's foreign policy -- that it was "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" -- applies today to Russia's population future, with demographers and other experts offering different views. Whether Russia, in the years ahead, is dying, stabilizing or growing is a question of great moment which should hold fascination, not just for experts, but for non-experts,
like most of us, concerned about Russia’s fate as a nation and as a player in the great game of geopolitics.

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