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Trajectory: Dimensions and
Implications**

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Russia's Demographic Trajectory: Dimensions and Implications

ABSTRACT

Demographic trends in Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 have largely been unfavourable. Deaths exceeded births for the first time in 1992, and a period of negative growth followed which continued unabated until 2012 when marginal yet positive growth was achieved for the first time in two decades. This paper studies the demographic patterns in Russia since 1991, which are unique for several reasons. While population decline is common among modern developed societies, unlike them and in spite of being an industrialised middle-income country, Russia has an extraordinarily high mortality rate which exacerbates the impact of falling births. At a time when the economic slump in Russia has emerged as a major concern, this paper summarises the challenges posed by Russia's demographic decline and its grave repercussions in the long run.

INTRODUCTION

Early signs of a demographic decline in Russia emerged in the mid-1960s, when fertility rate for the first time plummeted below the replacement level, and the country entered a period of “latent depopulation”.¹ This trend became prominent in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when like other post-Soviet states, Russia suffered demographic shocks in the form of fewer births, increased deaths, and increased emigration.

In 1992, as the country's population entered a phase of negative growth with the number of deaths exceeding births, "the latent depopulation became manifest, as natural population increase gave way to natural decrease, signalling the start of a new, more dangerous stage of the demographic crisis".² This phenomenon was a first in the peacetime history of Russia and would become known in demographic literature as the infamous "Russian cross": implying large-scale depopulation graphically represented by the falling birth rate line crossing over the growing mortality one.³ The situation began to improve, albeit marginally, around 2012 with birth and death rates converging and moving towards positive figures in 2013 and 2014. However, as pointed out by Anatoly Vishnevsky, director of the Demography Institute at the Higher School of Economics, Russia's recent population growth is not sustainable, as the next few generations of potential mothers will be those born after 1991, when birth rate was historically low.⁴ In addition, the growth is still below replacement level, meaning that the population is still shrinking.

Aggravating the situation is the current state of the Russian economy, which has been contracting since 2015. Following a turbulent political and economic transition in the 1990s, Russia experienced over a decade of economic growth, driven largely by high oil prices. Signs of a recession, however, began to appear towards the end of 2014 and the contraction of the economy gained pace in 2015. Continuously falling energy and commodity prices throughout 2015 resulted in a major revenue deficit for Russia. The commodity prices are expected to remain low in the near future, too. The head of the Department of Macroeconomic Forecasting at the Ministry of Economic Development, Kirill Tremasov, estimates the price of oil at \$41 per barrel and a growth of 0.7 percent in 2017. He further expects an average growth rate of around 1.5 percent between 2017 and 2019, less than half of the required rate of 3.5 percent.⁵

The combined impact of low oil prices and sanctions, and a weak domestic market have contributed to the ongoing recession. The devaluation of the ruble has increased inflation and reduced real incomes.

Unemployment has been on an increase. According to World Bank estimates, poverty rate in the country stood at 8.2 percent in 2016.⁶ The country's isolation from international markets owing to sectoral financial sanctions has only worsened the impact of falling oil prices. High military spending, on the other hand, "has added a further strain on the country's economy."⁷ While macroeconomic stability is already at risk, large state-owned institutions have increased their domination of the financial sector at the expense of private domestic and foreign banks.⁸

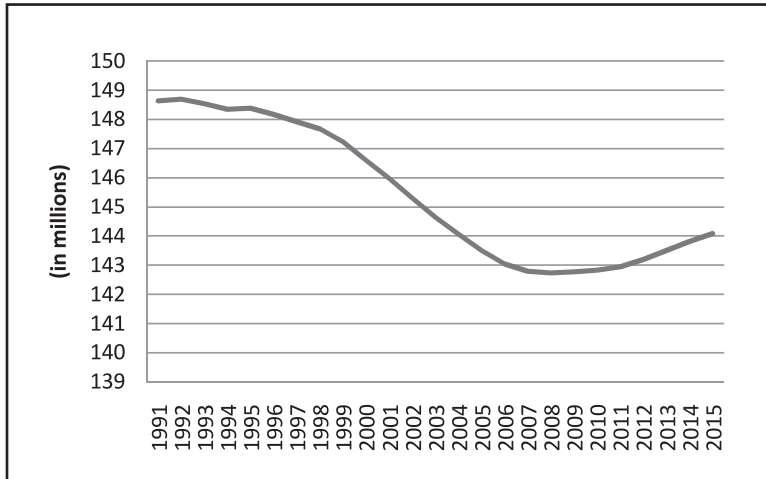
This paper examines Russia's demographic trajectory since 1991. It studies population trends including the natural growth of population, composition, fertility and mortality rate, while also taking into consideration migration trends and regional variations. The study observes that with the exception of the last couple of years, the country's demographics has been characterised by negative trends in the past two decades. The paper argues that economic uncertainty was a major factor that accelerated the process of demographic decline in Russia in the 1990s. This is manifested in a decrease in the average number of children per woman (from about 2 to 1.2) during this period. This backdrop is taken to underscore the challenges of the current scenario where a slowing Russian economy raises doubts over the country's growth in the coming years. Finally, the paper discusses the social, political, economic and security implications these trends are likely to have in the future.

RUSSIA'S DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE: TRENDS AND FACTORS

In 1991, Russia's population was estimated at 148.6 million.⁹ It would be the last year in the next two decades to register a natural growth of population. The year 1992 marked the shift to negative natural increase for the country, with 219,797 more deaths than births.¹⁰ The negative trend continued throughout the 1990s and in 2000, the country's population fell by two million to reach 146.5 million. In 2006, when President Vladimir Putin declared demography to be the most acute problem of the country, Russia's negative growth had in fact already improved a little. Today, the

country's population (excluding Crimea) has shrunk to about 144 million (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Total Population of Russia



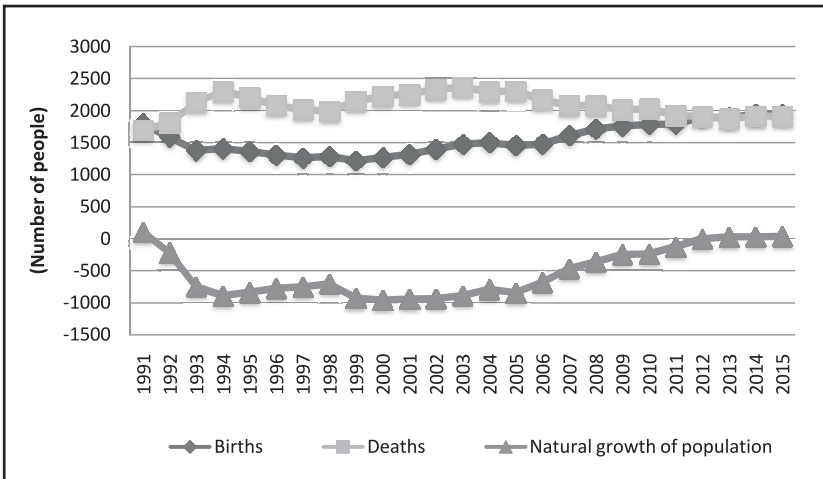
Source: World Bank, 2016¹¹

Russia's overall mortality rate of 13.6 per 1000 people is among the highest in the world; its birth rate of 11.3 per 1000 is among the lowest. While the Russian birth rate is equivalent to that of developed countries, its death rate is considerably higher, especially among working-age males due to a variety of factors discussed in a later section of this paper. Moreover, though it is an industrialised middle-income country, Russia “appears to be an emerging economy in terms of wealth with the demographics of an advanced nation.”¹² This combination has resulted in a devastating combination for Russia since it is the first country to experience such a sharp decrease in births versus deaths in a peacetime period.¹³

The natural loss of population is the main depopulation factor which is stable and long-term by nature.¹⁴ Prior to the 1990s, the main source of population growth in Russia was natural increase. After the 1990s, a period of sharp decrease in birth rates and an increase in death rates followed, as a result of which the natural population began to decline. However, the constant migratory flow from former Soviet states,

especially from Central Asia, was instrumental in maintaining the population equilibrium (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Births, Deaths and Natural Growth of Population in Russia



Source: Russian Federal State Statistics Service, 2016¹⁵

The period between 2006 and 2012 proved an exception as the country witnessed improvement with its Total Fertility Rate (TFR) rising to 1.7. Therefore, despite the catastrophic fall in population in the early 1990s, birth and death rates in Russia saw a convergence around 2012. According to official statistics, Russia witnessed more births than deaths in 2013 and 2014, implying natural population growth for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In 2013, the number of births exceeded the number of deaths by almost 24,000. The trend continued throughout 2014 and 2015 with natural increase of about 30,200 and 32,700, respectively.¹⁶

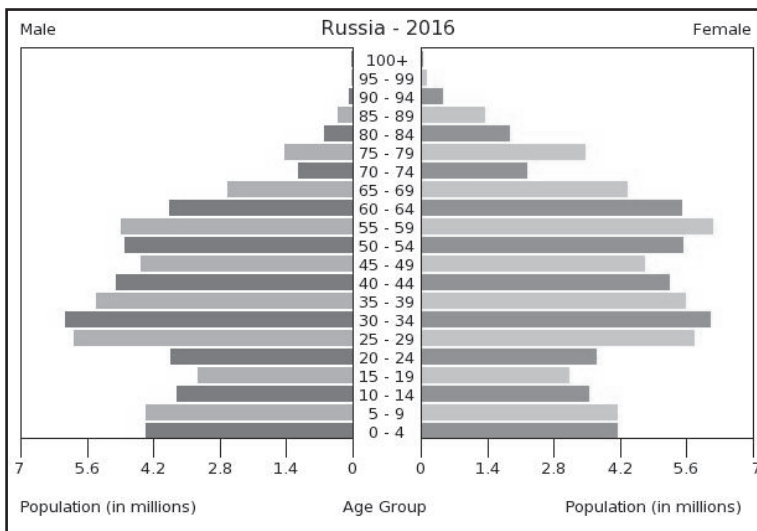
This happened primarily because of the increase in the numbers of people who were born in the “bumper” years of the 1980s, in the reproductive structure of the population. In 1996–2000 the average annual growth rate of gross domestic product (GDP) was 1.6 percent, and in the following five-year period (2001–2005) it reached 6.2 percent.¹⁷ This was also, in part, due to the introduction of the Demographic Policy in

2006 which offered subsidies for multiple child policies (up to \$10,000 in credits and subsidies for mothers who had a second or third child) which triggered a surge in births during the period. In addition, a crucial factor due to which the policy was able to yield better results in the initial years was a better economic environment. In short, the prosperity at the turn of the 21st century, the introduction of the Demographic Policy in 2006 and the maturing of population born in the 1980s, reversed the negative trend that had characterised Russia since 1991.

Composition of Population

Russia's population dynamics over the near future is closely interlinked with the composition of its population. Figure 3 classifies total population into five-year age groups represented as horizontal bars along the vertical axis. The youngest age group lies at the bottom and the oldest at the top. The right side represents females while the left denotes men.

Figure 3: Composition of Population by Gender and Age



Source: Central Intelligence Agency, 2016¹⁸

As is evident in the figure, the composition of Russia's population is characterised by a highly irregular age sex structure and enormous gender

gap in terms of life expectancy. The bulk of the male and female population (about 45 percent) lies in the age group of 25-54 years. Beyond 55, the gap between males and females begins to widen, indicating the high mortality rate among Russian men in particular.

According to official statistics,¹⁹ ethnic Russians make up 77.7 percent of the total population. Six other ethnicities with population exceeding 1 million include Tatars (3.7 percent); Ukrainians (1.4 percent); Bashkir (1.1 percent); Chuvash (1 percent); Chechens (1 percent); Others (10.2 percent); and Unspecified (3.9 percent). Interestingly, regions where population has remained stable or showed growth include national autonomous republics with a high share of the Muslim citizens.²⁰ Population decline is also minimal in regions like Tyumen and Moscow, where growth is the outcome of immigration and higher living standards.

Table 1: Russian Population Projections

	1990	2000	2010	2020	2030
Total Population (in millions)	148	147	142.5	137	128
Muslim Population (in millions)	13.6	17.2	16.7	18.3	20
Muslims as % of total Population	9.2	11.7	11.7	13.3	15.6

Source: Stratfor, 2013²¹

According to United Nations statistics, the fertility of Russia's Muslims stands at 2.3, much higher than the overall national fertility rate of 1.7.²² Russia is expected to have a Muslim majority in absolute numbers by 2030, with Muslims projected to make up more than 15 percent of the total population. Its Muslim population is expected to rise from 16.7 million in 2010 to 18.3 million in 2030. A comparatively robust growth among the Muslim population could be attributed to lifestyle choices like less or no alcoholism and higher rate of reproduction. While the growth rate for the

Muslim population in Russia is projected to be 0.6 percent annually over the next two decades, the non-Muslim population is expected to shrink by an average of 0.6 percent annually over the same period.²³ Continuation of TFR differentials across ethnic groups implies long-run shifts in the ethnic composition of the population.

Regional Variations

Along with the skewed gender ratio gaining pace in the country, regional variations also need to be considered while analysing Russia's demographic patterns. For example, the country's population is predominantly urban, with over 70 percent of the population centred in urban areas. Urban migration is widespread with the population concentrated in the European parts like Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Among the most sparsely regions are Russia's Far East and Siberia. According to the 2010 national census, the total number of Russians in Eastern Siberia and the Far East combined was 25.4 million. Meanwhile, "as Russia has receded, China has advanced, in both political and economic terms."²⁴ The region is rich in natural resources such as oil, gas and timber. Over the years, China has taken advantage of the same as it is easier to send these goods to Asia instead of shipping them across 3,000 miles to Moscow. As a result of China's increased investment, its workforce has also risen over the years. While the numbers are still modest in general terms, a constantly diminishing Russian workforce has ensured a continuous inflow of Chinese workers.²⁵

Variations are also evident in life expectancy levels. In regions like the Republic of Tuva, life expectancy (61.79 years) is equivalent to that of underdeveloped countries like Zambia, Tanzania and Niger in Africa.²⁶ Higher expectancy of 70-plus years has been recorded for North Caucasus and federal Southern districts.²⁷ Birth rates remain low in the northern and eastern parts of the country, whereas southern areas have recorded growth. The only three regions recording growth rates are located in the south: Chechnya (in the Russian North Caucasus), Altai, and Tuva (both in the south of Siberia).²⁸

Migration Trends

Historically, Russia has witnessed mass waves of emigration in the 20th century. The outward migration flows peaked in the post-revolution (1917) period. The combined impact of two World Wars, the 1917 revolution, the collectivisation of agriculture,²⁹ and the ensuing famine (1932-33) ensured that this trend continued for the next four decades, only to shift in Russia's favour during the 1970s when emigration began to decrease. The trend reversed once again when the economic uncertainty in the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union forced many ethnic Russians to migrate.

However, the loss of population in Russia has often been compensated via huge immigration flows from neighbouring regions over different timeframes. Importing demography is not a problem for any country that has an income level even a few times higher than that of its neighbours; Russia has largely benefitted in this regard in terms of labour migrants. Until 1998, migration into the country compensated for over half of the natural decrease in population.³⁰ Over the past decades, Russia's labour market has remained lucrative for workers from the Commonwealth of Independent (CIS) member countries. These immigrants (mostly temporary) have been instrumental in compensating for the natural decline of people. With oil prices at their historic low and wages remaining unattractive, maintenance of this trend is likely to be difficult. According to official data, between 1992 and 2010, 8.4 million immigrants entered the country, mostly coming from Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.³¹ The fall in real wages has raised serious questions on the continuity of this trend. The present economic scenario is unfavourable for labour immigrants from neighbouring Central Asian states.

Compounding the situation is the increase in the number of people emigrating from the country after 2012. In 2011, between 100,000 and 150,000 Russians were estimated to be emigrating every year. Today, the

situation is significantly worse. It is estimated that almost 123,000 people officially left the country in 2012, rising to 186,000 in 2013, and further to almost 309,000 in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea, and to 350,000 in 2015.³²

Total Fertility Rate (TFR)³³

Simple reproduction requires a minimum average of 2.1. With the exception of the years 2006-2012, when it showed improvement (1.7 in 2012 from 1.3 in 2006), the TFR in Russia has been below replacement level. The economic conditions of the 1990s seem to have had a toll on Russian fertility rates. Frequent abortions (especially during the immediate years following the collapse of the Soviet Union), and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) rendered a large section of the population infertile.

High Rate of Abortions

The post-1991 period was characterised by increased cases of abortions. In a report prepared in 2001 by Research and Development (RAND) Corp., about 70 percent of pregnancies were terminated by the end of 2000. The same report points that the situation in the 1990s worsened to such an extent that some Russian women had “ten or more abortions in their life time” and more than three in four Russian pregnancies ended in abortion.³⁴ This adversely affected almost 20 percent of the female population, who would eventually lose their ability to bear children. One major impact of the increased rate of abortions in the 1990s is that there are today fewer women of active reproductive age (20-29 years), when two-thirds of total births occur.³⁵

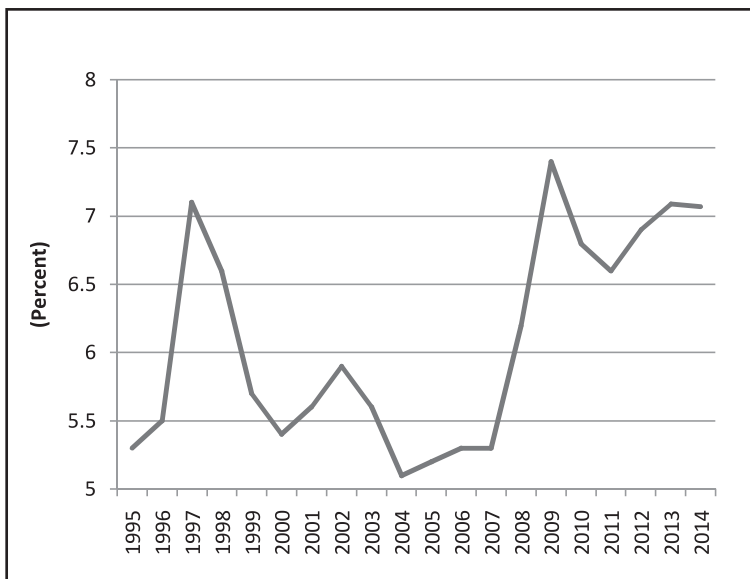
It must be noted that countries elsewhere in Europe have fertility levels that are equally low or even lower but “the Russian demographic predicament is aggravated by mortality that is exceptionally high by modern standards.”³⁶ Moreover, as pointed out by Anatoly Vihnevksy, the low fertility levels in Russia are attributable to economic hardships.³⁷

High Mortality Rate

According to most recent World Health Organization (WHO) statistics, Russia has a life expectancy of 71.4, which is about 10 years less than in most developed countries. Moreover, male life expectancy in Russia is low at approximately 65 years, while female life expectancy averages about 76.8 years,³⁸ making Russia the country with the largest gap between male and female life expectancy in the world. The gap underlines the intense nature of Russia's mortality crisis. As pointed out earlier, the falling birth rate is not unique to Russia and many countries in Europe have TFRs similar to or even lower than Russia. However, what differentiates Russia's situation with other developed countries is its poor state of health, fuelling higher death rates.³⁹

Total expenditure on the health sector in Russia averages seven percent, which is significantly lower than most developed countries. Figure 4 traces total expenditure on health as percent of GDP in Russia from 1995 onwards. Fluctuations in the level of expenditure are evident

Figure 4: Total expenditure on health as Percent of GDP



Source: World Bank, 2016.⁴⁰

from the figure, with frequent steep falls in investment. There is some progress in the post-2005 period after the Russian president announced an ambitious plan to improve the health sector.⁴¹ This has, however, led to selective progress and the gap between federal cities and far-flung areas continues to grow. This is largely due to a continued “lack of funds, medical and technical equipment and supplies, and, finally, to the ineffective organization of health care delivery services.”⁴²

The Russian provincial state health care, in particular, remains dire. For one, “17,500 towns and villages across Russia have no medical infrastructure at all.”⁴³ According to the State Statistics Service, the number of health facilities in rural areas fell by 75 percent, from 8,249 to 2,085 between 2005 and 2013. This includes a 95-percent plunge in the number of district hospitals and a 65-percent decline in the number of local health clinics.⁴⁴

As the health sector has declined, the country has reported increased instances of people suffering from cardiovascular diseases, alcohol-related mortality, and violent deaths.⁴⁵ Douglas W. Blum, in his book, *Russia and Globalization: Identity, Security, and Society in an Era of Change*, estimates that “alcohol alone caused the deaths of roughly 7 million people” between 1990 and 2001.⁴⁶ Apart from general causes like suicides and accidents, substance abuse⁴⁷ is also among one of the serious causes behind the high rate of mortality among the population, claiming an estimated 100,000 lives a year.⁴⁸ According to Marlene Laurrelle, consumption of heroin is prevalent in Russia, influencing Russia's infection rate which is among the highest in the world.⁴⁹

IMPLICATIONS OF DECLINING POPULATION

The demographic realities of Russia have interlinked implications in the economic, political and social spheres. As discussed earlier, although gradual, China's influence in Russia's Far East has increased over the years. As a resource-rich region with abundance of oil, gas and timber, the Russian

Far East holds importance for an ever-growing China. Both Russia and China have a mutual interest in projects relating to Russian energy, trade and cross-border tourism in the former's Far East. The biggest project at present is the Power of Siberia pipeline (eastern route) which is expected to deliver about 38 billion cubic meters of Russian natural gas to China annually.⁵⁰ With the advantage of greater financing and a younger workforce, China clearly has an edge over Russia in utilising the untapped resources of Russia's Far East.⁵¹ According to regional development minister of Russia, Alexander Galushka, about \$2.4 billion worth of investment has been made by Chinese companies in the Russian Far East. Some of the most exposed regions to the Chinese border include the Amur oblast, Primorsky Krai, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, and Khabarovsk Krai.⁵² In Khabarovsk alone, over \$109 million has been invested by China in a timber plant.

This trend calls into question the Russian government's ability to retain control over the country's eastern periphery where China is making gradual yet steady inroads. It also creates challenges for maintaining long-term connection of the scanty numbers of indigenous people in the region with the Russian federal centre. With an unfavourable economic environment and low demographic presence in the region, the Russian government “may soon find itself at risk of being eclipsed, both economically and in demographic terms, in its eastern territories”.⁵³ This may have serious repercussions on Russia's relationship with China as “the Sino-Russian border dynamic in the Far East has the potential to be a hotbed for tensions” between the two in later decades.⁵⁴

The positive demographic increase that has taken place in the past three years seems unsustainable. The variety of factors contributing to a fall in birth rate in the 1990s have already been discussed in the earlier sections. The most imminent problem is that in the coming years, Russia is likely to face the consequences of its abysmal birth rate in the 1990s. Scholars refer to it as the “consequences of the demographic dip of the 1990s.”⁵⁵ The country has small populations of young people—6.5 million 5–14-year-olds and a little more than 4.5 million 15–19-year-olds.

Further, young women born in the early 1990s are now entering their childbearing years. This implies that the number of women in their active childbearing years (age 20–29), who account for some 60 percent of total births nationwide, would almost halve in a decade's time.⁵⁶ At present, the number of 15-year-olds is only half the number of 25-year-olds, which means that ten years from now the female population in this age group would be significantly less than what it is today. In 2025, Russia is projected to have just 6.4 million women in their 20s, about 45 percent fewer than today, “given that all women who will be between 20 and 29 years in 2025 are already alive.”⁵⁷ Moreover, the current total fertility rate (of 1.7) is not sufficient to offset the high mortality rate.

Russia also tops the list of countries with a high divorce rate. According to Nicholas Eberstadt, “marriages in today's Russia are less stable than marriages even in the Soviet era, when the country's divorce rates were already notoriously high.”⁵⁸ While increasing family instability is not unique to Russia, though, Russia's single parents have to raise their children on far lower income levels than their counterparts elsewhere in the West.⁵⁹ Moreover, as Siebert notes, “single mothers contribute to the low birth rate because of the difficulties they face balancing their work and parenting duties.”⁶⁰

The ageing population makes it imperative to reorganise the healthcare system. The elderly are more vulnerable to chronic non-communicable diseases and treating such cases requires expensive apparatus which, in turn, calls for greater funding from the government. Russia's increased military expenditure amidst a climate of economic slowdown has led to budget cuts, including in the health sector. Such reduction of state involvement—and the absence of private structures to replace it, especially in investments in medical technologies and drugs—has aggravated the impact on the people.⁶¹

Russia also has a high death rate by global standards. With birth rate well below replacement level and low life expectancy, the size of the country's working population is shrinking. Since human factor plays a

fundamental role in an energy- and labour-intensive development model that the Russian economy is currently based on, the adverse impact of a falling population is most likely to be felt in the economic sector. One major challenge is the falling working age population to support the elderly. According to Klingholz, current demographic trends have the potential to create problems for future generations, which will have to bear the burden of supporting a large retired population with a relatively small working population. He argued that the “bulge of the past is the problem of our future.”⁶² A related development is the evolving composition of society. As discussed earlier, the Muslim population in Russia has shown stable growth over the years. While current numbers are still modest, the continued decline of the Slavic population likely to happen in the coming years could provoke civil unrest.

The Demographic Policy issued in 2006 offered subsidies for multiple-child policies (up to \$10,000 in credits and subsidies for mothers who had a second or third child) which triggered a surge in births during the period. Russian families are entitled to a certificate for 429,408 rubles (\$12,500) for a second child. The money can be channelled to buying real estate or the child's education, or deposited into the mother's pension account.⁶³ However, in the absence of such incentive for a first child, Russia is witnessing an upward trend in the number of couples opting not to have any child at all.⁶⁴

In terms of politics, the implications encompass both domestic policy-making and international security. In the country's National Security Strategy of 2009, the demographic situation was outlined as one of the “new security challenges” that Russia must confront in the years ahead. In the current scenario where Russia is trying to reassert itself as a global power, the domestic realities could prove to be a significant obstacle in the future. Moreover, Russia's demographic crisis also has implications for its military capabilities. The prevalence of extremely high mortality rates among males creates additional burden for a country where conscription for military service for a period of 12 months is compulsory. In addition, the falling size of the young population (and consequently, women of

childbearing age), implies even fewer conscripts in the future. As Eberstadt puts it, “maintaining the country's current force structure—a military of more than a million soldiers will not be feasible in the years immediately ahead.”⁶⁵

Russia's demographic patterns also have implications for the country's neighbourhood policy. With the country's declining population, the role of the Russian Diaspora in neighbouring countries inevitably increases. A significant dimension of Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine and Crimea is the presence of ethnic Russians in the region. Though internationally unrecognised, the addition of Crimea meant a surge by over two million people—a huge number for a country which has shown minimal or no growth in population since 1991.

CONCLUSION

Studying Russia's demographic patterns is relevant as it presents a mix bag of characteristics. Like developed regions, Russia faces a population decline. Unlike those same regions, though, Russia suffers from a poor state of health, leading to high mortality which in turn exacerbates the impact of lower births. Given its high mortality rates, the improvement of Russia's healthcare system is crucial for its future demographic growth. It is thus imperative for the Russian government to advance its health and family welfare schemes in this regard. It is important to note that much of the current focus is on communicable diseases and nutrition. As this paper notes, though, the country is witnessing increased cases of cardio-vascular deaths. The need, therefore, is to make parallel investments in managing chronic diseases. At the same time, promoting healthier lifestyles (such as reduced smoking and alcohol consumption) could improve the overall state of health.

The initiatives undertaken by the government to stimulate the birth rate while reducing death rate have had limited results due to a lack of coordinated and comprehensive strategy. One outstanding aspect in this

regard is the multiple-child incentive policy. While the policy per se is a good one, the demographic policy adopted by the government is for a period up to 2025. In the given scenario where a demographic dip seems inevitable, it is pertinent for the government to update the policy to meet new realities. The government also needs to adapt the demographic policy to regional variations in order to ensure balanced growth across the entire country. For instance, low income may hinder individuals from having any children altogether. In this scenario, the second or third child policy serves no purpose. Therefore, substantial attention needs to be paid towards ensuring the birth of the first child.

Currently, Russian men retire at 60 while women, as early as 55. Given the high cost of maintaining the retired population, the government must lay out a concrete bill increasing the retirement age to 65 for both females and males. (Interestingly, early in 2016, there were reports that President Putin had signed a bill that proposed gradual increase in the pension age for state officials. The new law was supposed to be effective from January 1, 2017, but with presidential elections due in 2018, the plan has been put on hold).

Given that Russia's economy collapsed after the breakup of the Soviet Union, which had a devastating effect on the birth rate as families struggled to make ends meet, an uncertain economic environment is bound to affect lifestyle choices of the population, including opting out of having children. To facilitate the recovery of its economy, Russia needs to undertake structural reforms to reduce its dependence on oil. Reforms would require privatisation of selected sectors, transparent and efficient public investment, better customs administration, and reduced trade barriers to improve the performance of the domestic market. It is important both from the point of view of attracting labour migrants as well as ensuring a natural increase of population. Further, a shift in economic policy and change of development strategy would be categorical in assisting the country to capitalise more effectively on its limited endowment of human resources. ©RF

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