CONVERSATIONS ON RUSSIA

REFORM from YELTSIN to PUTIN

PADMA DESAI

Chapter 14

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Demographic Dilemmas

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In the last twenty-five years of its existence, the Soviet Union lagged behind the rest of the developed world in enforcing measures for fighting mortality. As a result, Russia began its transition in 1992 as a laggard. That was its Soviet heritage. To this day, no changes have occurred to alter the situation, so high mortality and low life expectancy continue to be predetermined by the strong inertia of the Soviet days.

Excessive mortality due to external causes is a Russian problem, but it is also an old problem. The gap between Russia and the Western countries has been increasing for decades.

The current contraction [of population], the fourth since 1913, differs significantly from the previous three, which were caused by extreme social shocks—World War I and the civil war, famine, the repressions and purges of the thirties, and World War II. In contrast, the current loss is conditioned by stable changes in the demographic behavior of Russians. That is why one should not expect that it will be transitional and that a positive natural growth in population will be reestablished in the near future, leading to an increase in the number of the country's residents. The Russian population will continue to decline in the future. All of the demographers agree on this prediction.

[Russia] needs immigrants. Its demographic situation with the continuing population loss is extreme. It is also experiencing migratory pressure from the outside. Its labor market does not welcome foreigners . . . The immigrants feel excluded and unassimilated.

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Desai: How serious, in your view, is the Russian demographic situation, which analysts attribute to a sharp rise in the mortality rate and a decline in the birthrate in the nineties?

Vishnevsky: Russia began the twenty-first century with a difficult demographic situation. I will address the exact details of this complex legacy as we talk, but I'll confine myself to a single comment for now. If I were to explain the current demographic situation solely in terms of the events of the 1990s, I would end up sounding like the man on the street or the quasi-literate journalist or the political agitator who is seized by nostalgia—all those who view the recent demographic situation as an inevitable negative part of all that is new in Russia. By tracing the origins of Russia's demographic problem to its Soviet past, I will attempt to put it into its proper perspective.

Desai: Let's begin with the mortality rate. It is abnormally high among men of working age. What special factors contributed to this statistic in the nineties?

Vishnevsky: In Russia and beyond its borders as well, everyone is convinced that a huge, "unheard-of-in-peaceful-times" rise in mortality occurred in Russia in the 1990s. Even Yeltsin's opponents used this as grounds for impeaching him, saying that he was guilty of "the genocide of the Russian people." In reality, the situation is not that simple.

It is true that in the early 1990s the mortality rate among men as well as women increased in all age groups. Overall, 22 percent more deaths occurred in the five years from 1990 to 1994 than in the preceding five years. The increase in the mortality rate for men was 32 percent. Life expectancy, which reached its historical maximum in 1987 at 65 years for men and 74.6 years for women, declined in 1994 to numbers unseen since the end of the fifties, when these numbers began to be regularly reported. In 1994, life expectancy had slumped to 57.5 years for men and 71 years for women. All of these indicators, however, are a matter of coincidence and reflect the situation in particular calendar years.

Desai: What do you mean?

Vishnevsky: These numbers are the result of extraordinary economic and political factors that contributed to the distortion of the mortality calendar, making the number of deaths in one year either "denser" or "thinner" than in another. Precisely such changes were taking place in Russia between 1985 and 1995. Gorbachev's antialcohol campaign, which began in 1985, sharply altered the evolving mortality dynamics. A temporary improvement set in, annual deaths decreased, and generational extinction slowed down, but this improvement did not last long. The first half of the nineties witnessed a significant rise in the deaths "delayed" from the late 1980s. As a result, the total number of deaths became "denser," resulting in a dramatic worsening of the mortality numbers.

I say all of this not with a view to justifying the rise in the mortality rate indicators in the first half of the nineties or for absolving Yeltsin of the accusations of "genocide." These accusations, in effect, did not amount to much. The problem, however, is different.

Desai: How is it different?

Vishnevsky: Let me first separate the short-term, temporary influences on mortality from its long-term trend. At the very outset, the "mythology" of an unforeseen rise in mortality as a reaction to an overall deterioration of the situation in the country and as proof of such a deterioration can be used for political purposes. It certainly deflects attention from an understanding of what, in reality, was happening with mortality in Russia. In fact, long-term mortality indicators had been deteriorating for the past forty years.

Desai: You mean for most of the Soviet period?

Vishnevsky: In the last twenty-five years of its existence, the Soviet Union lagged behind the rest of the developed world in enforcing measures for fighting mortality. As a result, Russia began its transition in 1992 as a laggard. That was its Soviet heritage. To this day, no changes have occurred to alter the situation, so high mortality and low life expectancy continue to be predetermined by the strong inertia of the Soviet days. The current low life expectancy for Russian men—less than 59 in 2001—is on the trajectory that developed in the sixties and the seventies and around which the sharp fluctuations of the 1980s and 1990s occurred.

Thus the real challenge is to get Russia off the well-traveled track of worsening mortality that it has been riding for several decades, rather than focus on the "imagined" mortality crisis of the 1990s. Russian mortality indicators have been moving in completely different directions from those in other developed countries. Russia, a nonparticipant in the improving performance, is paying a heavy price.

Desai: What price do you have in mind?

Vishnevsky: Let me give you some numbers to illustrate my point. Suppose Russian mortality, starting in 1966, decreased on average at the same rate as in the United States, Japan, and member nations of the European Union from 1961 and 1966. In that case, the number of deaths in Russia during the thirty-five years of the last century, although higher than the rates for the set used for comparison, would have been 14.2 million fewer than in reality. In other words, the population would be 14.2 million larger. These losses can be considered excessive. More than half of these consisted of middle-aged men—it's as if the country were in a constant state of war.

Desai: Which specific causes contribute to these higher deaths in Russia?

Vishnevsky: If you consider the entire population, the excessive mortality rate among Russians, when compared to their Western counterparts, arises from the diseases of the respiratory and circulatory systems. This is not because Russians are more prone throughout their lives to die from diseases of these types, but because they die from them at a much younger age than the Europeans, the Americans, and the Japanese.

If, however, we focus on the group at extreme risk of mortality, namely middle-aged men, then the primary causes are external: accident, poisoning, injury, murder, and suicide. Excessive mortality due to external causes is a Russian problem.

but it is also an old problem. The gap between Russia and the Western countries has been increasing for decades. The numbers tell the story. In 1960, the standardized coefficient for deaths due to these causes in Russia was 1.5 times higher than in the United States; in 1970, the difference was 1.9; in 1980, 2.8; in 1984, on the eve of Gorbachev's antialcohol campaign, 3.1. In 1994, it was unprecedented at 5.2. Later it declined a little but still remained high.

The antialcohol campaign highlighted the well-established connection between high mortality and alcoholism in Russia. Perhaps there is a similar link between other specific factors and high mortality in Russia in the 1990s and even earlier. I would attribute this high mortality not to specific factors but to the long-term tendencies of Russia's failure to reach the advanced stages of epidemiological transition.

DESAI: The general impression was that the Soviet Union was quite advanced in providing health services to the population.

VISHNEVSKY: The Soviet health care system more or less successfully managed the early stages of combating mortality when the state could successfully use paternalistic means such as mass prophylactic campaigns, obligatory vaccinations, and improved living conditions. These paternalistic methods, however, were deficient when it came to strong activism on the part of the population itself.

By the midsixties, the opportunities for combating mortality through this strategy were exhausted. Western countries had moved to the next stage of transition by developing a new strategy, a new type of preventive approach aimed at lowering the risks of mortality from noninfectious diseases, among them heart disease and cancer. The new strategy extended to combating other causes, such as accidents and violence, unrelated to these diseases. This strategy demanded active and informed participation by the public in dealing with health problems. It was also matched by more government spending. The process was interactive.

DESAI: In your view, the Soviet health care system was lagging behind as far back as the early 1980s.

VISHNEVSKY: Absolutely. The new response was missing. As the 1970s ended, Soviet nonparticipation in this novel approach of fighting mortality created the widening gap I mentioned earlier. This was not an accidental, temporary episode, but rather pointed to a deep crisis in the system. The inadequate financing of the health care system contributed to the gap with the West. Along with other "nonproductive" sectors, the health care system received the meager cash left over after the militarized "productive" industries had been abundantly provided for. This residual funding was not adequate for safeguarding and rehabilitating public health. Compared to the resources devoted in the West for the purpose, it was skimpy. By some accounts, the average provision per capita in 1990 was 124 rubles. In the United States, it was a high $2,600.

DESAI: And, as you mentioned, individual initiative was also missing.

VISHNEVSKY: Absolutely. Growing social apathy and disappointment in the unrealized common ideals of socialism contributed to the malaise. The new strat-

egy of fighting mortality demanded that the public adopt an active role rather than passively accept the standard provisions of the health service organizations. Neither before nor after the fall of the Soviet Union was the Russian public able to alter its lifestyle, to care for its health, or to discard bad and adopt good habits. Meanwhile, the majority of the population was marginalized by decades of Brezhnev-era stagnation. It found itself in a cultural and ideological void. It lacked the drive to actively fight for its health—for life itself. Alcoholism and the related high mortality from accidents, poisoning, and injuries are the direct results of this general social malaise.

These are the objective conditions that led to the current redoubling of the mortality rate in Russia. As of this date, nothing has changed. Russia is still stuck somewhere in the early stages of the epidemiological transformation.

Desai: Let's move from the mortality problems to the fertility picture. Is the decline in the fertility rate contributing abnormally to a lower birthrate in Russia? How would you compare it with trends in the world's developed economies?

Vishnevsky: The number of annual births between 1973 and 1999 [twenty-six years comprise a mean interval between successive generations] declined by roughly eight hundred thousand, not an insignificant number. The fertility level, measured in terms of the total fertility rate, really plummeted in the nineties.

The public associates the resulting population decline, which began in 1992, with the socioeconomic crisis of the "transition period." Therefore, it hopes that, as soon as the crisis ends, births will start to increase. The actual situation, unfortunately, is more complicated. There is little room for optimism.

Desai: Why are you pessimistic about a rebound in the fertility rate?

Vishnevsky: Birthrates in Russia have been declining throughout the twentieth century. In the midsixties, the birthrate for the first time fell below the replacement level. It has continued to fall ever since. Russia, in fact, was increasingly moving toward the pattern of urbanized and industrialized countries, which, by and large, are marked by low, and recently very low, fertility levels. The Russian fertility level, following its decline in the 1990s, was not lower than that in many European countries. Therefore, the excessively low Russian fertility, as an indicator of the overall systemic crisis at the end of the twentieth century, has no basis. Even if one views the low Russian fertility as a crisis, its extensive presence in all industrial, urbanized societies does not make it a specifically Russian malaise. It is more likely a common crisis of the entire modern, postindustrial West.

Desai: So declining birthrates, in your opinion, are a common crisis of postindustrial societies.

Vishnevsky: I am not sure that one necessarily has to view them as a crisis. We know that declining birthrates in postindustrial societies accompany the changes that are usually interpreted as positive attributes of modernization: the almost complete elimination of child mortality, the emancipation and self-fulfillment of women and an increased freedom of choice for them, the increase in per capita investment

in children, higher levels of education, and so on. These changes in mass procreation behavior and their consequences, therefore, do not necessarily represent a crisis but instead underscore the internal contradictions of the modernization process. Perhaps modernization changes social life from mere quantities to better quality.

DESAI: In your belief, the fall in fertility in Russia cannot be considered in isolation from similar processes in developed countries.

VISHNEVSKY: Lately I have increasingly come to believe that this decline can and should be viewed in a wider, more global, context. It can be seen as a systemic reaction to a worldwide demographic crisis created by a global demographic explosion pressing on the planet's limited resources. Declining fertility on a global scale below the level of simple reproduction for a sustained period is therefore a boon. The decline in births in Russia and in the West is simply one episode in this global transformation. Viewed in this light, the low Western birthrate is by no means proof of the negative propensity of Western civilization, but rather evidence of its immense adaptive ability.

All of this does not rule out the fact that low fertility and the consequent slowing or halting of the population growth of the developed world is harmful, even dangerous. However, nothing can be done about this because the interests of the survival of all countries together outweigh the interests of a particular country.

DESAI: So you do not think that specific policies can raise the birthrate in Russia.

VISHNEVSKY: Let me backtrack a little. As far back as a hundred years ago, public opinion, backed by demographics researchers, sought to explain low fertility in terms of a variety of factors, including a low standard of living, which prompted families to raise consumption levels that conflicted with the costs of having more children, which in turn contributed to parents' lack of interest in having children, unemployment, excessive labor force participation by women, uncertainty about the future, women's desire for self-fulfillment, and the list goes on. However, these factors, multifaceted and interacting with one another in a variety of ways in different countries, have continually led to the same result—declining fertility. One can hardly expect to produce a large effect on the birthrate by influencing a single factor, yet that is exactly what demographic policies are expected to do.

DESAI: So you do not believe that the Russian health care system can cope with the problems of high mortality and low birthrates?

VISHNEVSKY: The potential of the health care system for influencing mortality, and more so fertility, is limited. Mortality and fertility tendencies are formed under the influence of diverse economic, social, and cultural factors. A few of them are or can be under the control of the health care system.

Of course, I would not want to diminish the ability of health care to influence the situation, but declining fertility is not a medical problem at all. Furthermore, the overly high Russian mortality is primarily mortality from external causes of absolutely healthy men. Here, preventive measures may deflect dangerous behav-

ior and lower mortality from accidents and injuries, but they cannot eliminate the root of the evil.

Desai: Does Russia face a drastic population decline from the current level of about 145 million as a result of these demographic factors? Is it possible that the improving economic situation will lower the mortality rate, lift the birthrate, and help arrest the population decline?

Vishnevsky: Let me respond by giving you a historical perspective. In 1913, the population of Russia in its present borders was ninety million. Russia experienced a demographic transition in the twentieth century, which was generally accompanied by accelerated population growth around the globe. But in Russia, the potential demographic expansion was cancelled out by the immense human losses suffered during the catastrophes of the first half of the century. The chance to appreciably increase the population was permanently lost. However, the natural growth in population, which remained high despite the many catastrophes the country faced, helped close several demographic gaps. As a result, the country survived the demographic crisis caused by World War II. In 1955, we reached the prewar levels of population. During the next ten years, through the second half of the 1960s, natural growth increased the population, allowing some people to migrate to other Soviet republics.

Desai: When did the impact of the declining birthrate actually begin?

Vishnevsky: Soon thereafter. The natural increase weakened under the combined impact of diminishing fertility, the end of the declining mortality rate, and an aging population. In 1964, the crude rate of the natural increase of the population of Russia fell below 10 per thousand for the first time, reaching 7 per thousand in 1967; it never again reached that level, fluctuating from 5.5 to 6.5 per thousand—rarely outside that range. These numbers fell rapidly at the end of the eighties. From 1992, when the Russian population was historically at its highest with 148.7 million people, the natural increase became negative, leading to an overall decline of the country's population by more than 5.2 million people, or 3.5 percent in 2003. In contrast, Russia's population had increased by 8.7 million people, or 6.2 percent, in the preceding decade.

Desai: How does the recent continuing decline differ from the earlier pattern in the first half of the last century?

Vishnevsky: The current contraction, the fourth since 1913, differs significantly from the previous three, which were caused by extreme social shocks—World War I and the civil war, famine, the repressions and purges of the thirties, and World War II. In contrast, the current loss is conditioned by stable changes in the demographic behavior of Russians. That is why one should not expect that it will be transitional and that a positive natural population growth will be reestablished in the near future, leading to an increase in the number of the country's residents. The Russian population will continue to decline in the future. All of the demographers agree on this prediction. According to the 2002 forecast by the United Nations,

in 2050 the population of Russia will be 101.5 million people, which represents a decline of about 30 percent from 2000 levels. Russian forecasts suggest similar numbers.

Desai: What consequences will result from such a sharp population decline?

Vishnevsky: Of course, population does not have to increase always and everywhere. Declining population is not always a problem, nor is growth always a benefit. However, considering the specific conditions in Russia, this loss in population is unquestionably damaging.

Although Russia ranks among the more populated countries of the world, serious inconsistencies prevail between its population and the size of its territory, the length of its borders, the vastness of its territory that needs exploration, and the lack of a developed settlement network. Russia has always had a lot of poorly utilized land with low population density. These features were gravely distorted after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when Russia inherited three-fourths of the territory but only half of the population.

The European part of Russia has a population density that is comparable to that of the United States, with 27 people per square kilometer, compared to 29 in the United States. However, in comparison to the industrial countries of Western Europe, Russia's historical center is thinly populated. More than a quarter of Russians are concentrated in the central federal districts, which constitute less than 4 percent of the territory. However, even here, the density of the population—more than 58 people per square kilometer—is thinner, by half, than that of the European Union, at 119 people per square kilometer.

Desai: Isn't the situation much worse—actually a demographic disaster—in the Asian part of Russia?

Vishnevsky: Exactly. The Asian territory, which represents 75 percent of the country's landmass, accounts for only 21 percent of the population—a density of 2.5 inhabitants per square kilometer. The demographic potential of Siberia and the Russian Far East is totally inadequate in relation to their natural resources, not only for their exploration but also for the creation of a settlement structure that could more or less cover these territories.

However, there is another problem. In addition to the mismatch between the country's demographic potential and resource endowment, Russia's urban settlements are few in number and underdeveloped. Let me explain. The fraction of Russia's urban population at 73 percent matches that in the European Union and in the United States at 75 percent and in Japan at 77 percent. Overall, Russia is as urbanized as these countries. However, its urban population is spread out over a large number of settlements with a thoroughly underdeveloped network of large cities.

Desai: You mean Russia has very few large cities.

Vishnevsky: Yes. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia acquired thirteen of the twenty-four Soviet cities with a population of a million people. The

current census puts them at ten at the start of 2002, only two of which are west of the Urals. Only two Russian cities have more than 2 million residents. The United States has fourteen cities with a population of more than 2 million, eight of which exceed 3 million.

Desai: What are the specific disadvantages of having fewer large cities?

Vishnevsky: This underdevelopment of large cities attests to Russia's regional underdevelopment and its failure to generate a large number of regional and interregional capitals. The urban population, in conditions of limited demographic resources, moved to the few sizeable centers. This process prevented the growth of large regional metropolises, which in turn could provide an impulse for the development of their regions.

These internal complications, which Russia faces as a result of the current population shortfall, will intensify as the numbers decline. Then again, the decline creates external difficulties relating to Russia's place in the world community.

Desai: What do you have in mind?

Vishnevsky: The country is rapidly losing its place in the world demographic hierarchy. In 1913, the Russian Empire had about 8 percent of the world's population, 4.4 percent of which lived in Russia proper. Even in 1950, the territory of Russia, though it had not yet reached its prewar population level, had more than 4 percent and the Soviet Union 7.1 percent of the global population. Russia's current share—2.4 percent—of the global population is falling rapidly. According to the UN report I mentioned earlier, it will be a mere 1.1 percent in 2050.

In 1913 and 1950, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union ranked behind China and India in population. However, Russia's present borders would put it in fourth place—after China, India, and the United States in 1950. Currently, it is in eighth place, having been overtaken by Indonesia, Brazil, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In 2050, it will move to eighteenth place, having been surpassed by several African and developing countries, including Mexico, Egypt, the Philippines, Vietnam, Japan, and Iran.

Desai: Why are you concerned about this global ranking?

Vishnevsky: It is important because, even though Russia is sliding in the global population hierarchy, it composes almost 13 percent of the global territory—the largest in the world, rich in natural resources but poorly settled. Its neighbors, by contrast, are densely populated states that from time to time announce claims on Russian territory.

Thus, the population loss has internal economic and external geopolitical consequences that are contrary to Russia's interests. A larger, even a stable, population would prove beneficial, but is that possible?

Clearly Russia went down in the global ranking because of internal and external factors. The former arose from the low fertility and the high mortality, which we talked about earlier. The external factors relate to the demographic explosion in the developing countries, which are clearly surpassing Russia and the developed

nations. Both of these factors are beyond Russia's control. Perhaps arresting the rise in mortality can be managed. The experience of the developed countries provides an answer for Russian policy makers, but raising the fertility rate is next to impossible. Russia is stuck with low fertility, a negative natural population growth, and an aging population. It is well nigh impossible to find a solution out of this situation without creating new problems.

DESAI: Can immigration from the outside, as in the United States, help, or would it create new problems? Is that what you have in mind?

VISHNEVSKY: In principle, immigration can at least partially counter the contraction and the aging of populations in the industrial countries and posttransition economies, including Russia. However, Russia is currently unprepared to accept a large number of immigrants.

In order to keep the population at 146 million people, the count at the turn of the current century, Russia would need to accept, on average, more than 700,000 immigrants on a net basis and gradually increase the inflow to 1.2 to 1.3 million by 2035. These are, of course, ballpark figures.

DESAI: These are awesome numbers.

VISHNEVSKY: Right now, these numbers fly in the face of reality. In fact, net immigration into Russia is declining. From 1981 to 1990, 8.9 million people arrived in Russia from the former Soviet republics; only 6.9 million people did so between 1991 and 2000. However, Russia has been losing people to out-migration; as a result, the net addition to its population in the last decade due to migration was only 3.3 million, less than Germany's 3.8 million during the same period. Even if one adjusts the interstate migration numbers in the 1990s for their inaccuracy, it is difficult to argue against the net contraction (as against net expansion, as is often believed) of the immigrant flow into Russia.

DESAI: Why do you think that Russia is not prepared to accept significant immigrant flows?

VISHNEVSKY: Countering population decline through immigration requires an active strategy for the purpose. The Russian public, however, does not support such a strategy. Anti-immigrant attitudes exist in many European countries, but they emerged over time as a result of the presence of a significant number of migrants in these countries. Russians, in contrast, displayed a negative attitude toward immigrants long before immigration inflows began. Most Russians believed that there were already far too many immigrants, although, in reality, their numbers were declining. They also believed that the presence of immigrants inevitably entailed negative consequences. In fact, Russians currently exhibit a negative attitude toward Russian and Russian-speaking immigrants from the former Soviet republics.

DESAI: You mean that Russians in Russia are opposed to the migration of ethnic Russians from outside? Why?

VISHNEVSKY: The locals see the outsiders as potential competitors in the labor market. Perhaps reflecting public sentiment, the Law on Citizenship passed on May

31, 2002, [and] imposed severe restrictions on applications for Russian citizenship. It was amended on November 11, 2003, and restored fairness with regard to former citizens of the Soviet Union. In reality, though, it acknowledges only that they can serve as stopgap additions for countering the shortages inherited from the breakup of the Soviet Union. Nothing more.

Desai: You mean the law does not have a long-term perspective.

Vishnevsky: The law does not recognize migration as a strategically important process for correcting the effects of the declining population on Russian life both today and in the coming years. More important, it does not deal with the potential role in that regard of non-Slavic immigrants and migrants with other religions, toward whom "migrantophobia" is magnified into xenophobia. These prejudices are so widespread that an aggressive proimmigration policy is politically risky.

Shutting the doors to immigrants would mean that the population will continue to contract and age, the mismatch between human resources and territory will grow worse, and Russia's place in the global demographic hierarchy will further deteriorate.

Desai: Do you not think that Russian policy makers will act before the situation gets out of control?

Vishnevsky: You are assuming that the inflow of immigrants into Russia depends on the decisions of the Russian government and that the government can fully control the situation. Such logical thinking rests on the possibility of a smooth migratory interaction between the developed and developing worlds, which has already ended. In the initial, benign stage of international migration, the engine of migratory flows was controlled by the recipient countries. However, as soon as these flows developed, they created their own momentum, increasingly reflecting the situation in the countries that were supplying migrants. The developed minority, "the golden billion," is losing the initiative to withstand the push of the surrounding billions of the Third World. Some time ago there were 2 billion, then there were 3 billion, now there are already 5 billion, and there will be more.

Desai: Are you suggesting that policy makers in the developed countries are increasingly unable to manage the pressures of illegal migration from outside?

Vishnevsky: Yes. When the legal routes for migration provided by the recipient countries became too narrow, illegal channels developed. We can see that ourselves. Exact information in Russia is hard to come by, but illegal immigrants are reported to number in the millions. The problem of illegal migration is becoming acute and is of serious concern to politicians and public opinion in recipient countries. The demographic pressure of the overpopulated Third World will only continue to grow. For a time, improving migration control in the recipient countries will prevail, but it will eventually be overtaken by the ability of illegal migrants to circumvent controls. I believe that the population transfer from the overpopulated to the depopulating countries provides an answer to demographic

problems of the twenty-first century. It will probably be the most critical challenge of the new century.

Desai: What forms might this challenge take?

Vishnevsky: Today's migration pressure may turn out to be only the distant thunder of a coming storm. Given the presence of certain critical conditions, the demographic pressure of the south on the north could escalate into military and political pressures, leading to a large-scale redistribution of the global political map. In view of that possibility, it might be prudent to let off some of that steam by allowing economic immigration from the South, despite some of its negative consequences.

Desai: What are the negative consequences?

Vishnevsky: These negative implications arise from economic and cultural incongruities. The demographic masses of the two worlds are numerically incomparable. The potential supply of cheap labor from developing countries is practically limitless, whereas the needs of the developed countries are limited. These immigrants face problems of social adaptation in the recipient countries, which have different cultural traditions. In any case, as long as the scale of immigration is limited, immigrants assimilate rather quickly, almost dissolving into the local environment without creating intercultural issues. However, when the absolute and relative numbers of immigrants become significant and, more important, when they multiply rapidly and create compact sociocultural enclaves in the recipient countries, the assimilation process slows down, generating intercultural tensions, which increase objectively as a result of the growing social and economic inequality of the "local" and the "foreign" populations. These "outsiders," settled in immigrant enclaves, battle marginalization and cultural duality by keeping in touch with their home countries, often turning to their traditional practices and simplified "fundamentalist" ideas, which help them retain their whole "I." Meanwhile, the process of assimilation is blocked, and many—not all, of course—immigrants find themselves maladjusted in their adopted lands.

Desai: That is a pretty negative picture.

Vishnevsky: The host countries that use foreign labor begin to feel the limitations of their immigrant capacity, and the impact of the competition between "us" and "them" in the labor force gradually escalates into debates over immigration policies, which turn into a major playing card in political battles. Anti-immigration sentiments arise in the public, and stereotypes are created, which often attract the intellectual elite. All of this is on the same level as the discontent harbored by the semiliterate, marginalized immigrants.

Desai: I wonder whether the rather polarized picture that you have presented relates to the Russian situation.

Vishnevsky: All of this applies to Russia in full measure. It needs immigrants. Its demographic situation with the continuing population loss is extreme. It is also experiencing migratory pressure from the outside. Its labor market does not wel-

come foreigners. It is aware of its limitations to absorb and assimilate immigrants. The immigrants feel excluded and unassimilated, but Russia's special features render its situation more complex.

DESAI: What special features do you have in mind?

VISHNEVSKY: These include vast, sparsely populated, and resource-rich territories, arable land, fresh water, and energy, all critical attributes for this century. These factors not only create demand for more workers in Russia but also attract migrant workers from the overpopulated South. However, from a geopolitical perspective, the migration outlook for Russia is not altogether benign. In particular, the massive inflow of the Chinese into the Russian Far East, if it were to take place, would not only leave them culturally separate because of the proximity of their massive homeland next door but also activate territorial claims by China sooner or later. Obviously, limits of immigration capacity should not be seen as totally airtight. Russia's migratory capacity can be increased via special policies aimed at widening the narrow corridors of opportunities as in other countries. Such policies, however active, can only expand the boundaries of Russia's migratory capacity; they cannot eliminate the problems I have outlined.

DESAI: If the labor force cannot be replenished by immigrants, Russia will experience a serious decline in the ratio of working-age people to retirees. This will have serious consequences for the Russian pension system. Are suitable reforms of the pension system being considered?

VISHNEVSKY: Let us consider a few numbers. The proportion of elderly people in Russia who are at least sixty years old grew from 6.7 percent in 1939 to 11.9 percent in 1970, to 18.7 percent in 2001, and it will continue to grow. Currently, their share in several countries (exceeding 20 percent) is 21.5 percent in the European Union and 23.7 percent in Japan. The same future awaits Russia. Because of decreasing mortality, the age pyramid changes inexorably: The years lived by each cohort in the middle- and older-age brackets increase, thereby contributing to an increase in the combined lifetime of each generation.

DESAI: So most developed countries face the negative consequences of a changing age pyramid. What is new?

VISHNEVSKY: For decades, demographers have discussed the negative economic and social consequences of an aging population. The biggest concern arises from the fast growth in the numbers and the proportion of pensioners relative to active wage earners. There are other problems, too, among them the aging of the labor force itself, the slowdown in the renewal of knowledge and ideas, the weakening of generational pressure for such renewal, and, above all, the impact of gerontocracy itself. The negative burden of an aging population and the social dynamic of the "shabbying" of nations diminish the benefits of democratic modernization.

DESAI: What is the answer to the burdens of an aging population?

VISHNEVSKY: As with all changes, social institutions must adapt to the new demographic realities. The creation of the pension system provided the answer to the

fast-emerging proportion of seniors in the twentieth century. The current growth of the "senior citizen load" is unquestionable, but why should it arouse such concerns, as if society is powerless to rise to the challenge? What is wrong with redistributing the common pool of society's resources in favor of later and later generations? Having extended the lives of the majority to truly old age, why must we express concern about having to provide for elderly people until they pass away?

Desai: What are the answers?

Vishnevsky: In fact, the demographic changes have created an economic opportunity and provided an answer. Along with declining mortality, the number of total human years is growing in terms of not only consumption but production as well. The relationship between the years of "dependency" [in childhood and old age] and the "period of production" has remained practically unchanged. Viewed in this way, the problem of aging ceases to be a demographic problem. Dependent children act as consumer borrowers until they start producing. By contrast, the elderly revert to a dependent status after their working life is over, and their consumption is then paid for by labor they contributed earlier.

Desai: Are you suggesting that in Russia the financing of pension payments to retirees is manageable?

Vishnevsky: Currently, the issue of the destructive influence of aging on senior citizens and on the overall economic conditions in the country is widely debated in Russia. Note that the extreme changes in the Russian age structure did not occur until the end of the twentieth century. The population, of course, got older, but one should not forget that workers in the "active phase of production" provide for the "free-ride periods" of old age and childhood as well.

Desai: I do not understand the relevance of introducing the double burden of providing for the very young and the retirees in your argument.

Vishnevsky: In postwar Russia, the total burden of providing for children and seniors moved in waves as a result of the special features of the age pyramid formed under the double impact of the natural evolutionary process and the destructive traumas of the first half of the century. However, despite impressions to the contrary, the Russian population had a favorable age composition at the end of the last century, almost the best in the entire postwar period. The burden of supporting senior citizens continued to rise, but the combined burden of supporting young dependents and the elderly was falling and was unusually low by the end of the century.

Desai: So you see a silver lining in the emerging age composition of the population.

Vishnevsky: Obviously the age structure of the Russian population will continue changing; in the absence of the damaging traumas of the first half of the last century, the evolutionary component will dominate. Therefore, Russia's population will get older. However, in my view, the effects of the aging population, including economic ones, are not as threatening as the current demographic stereotypes

occasionally make them out to be. The presence of more seniors comes hand in hand with a variety of demographic and other changes that create genuine opportunities for neutralizing the negative consequences of aging. Let me give you the view of the distinguished American demographer and economist Richard Easterlin:[1] "The real issue to be faced is largely political, namely, how to capture via taxation the savings of households from supporting fewer younger dependents, so that these funds can be used to meet the rise in public expenditures needed to support older dependents. The question of political feasibility is a serious one, but it does not seem insurmountable, given that the workers to be taxed would themselves eventually be beneficiaries of such taxation."[2]

Desai: Easterlin is suggesting a redistributive tilt via taxation for supporting the older generation.

Vishnevsky: Yes. We need an appropriate social philosophy that will enable us to redistribute resources in favor of the later phase of generational life in the context of the new demographic realities. Currently, this approach is missing, but it will emerge in the developed world when it reaches a stable age pyramid with a narrow base and a wide top. Until then, in the absence of the necessary policy drive, the increase in the share of the elderly every ten years will aggravate their situation and create new economic pressures.

I also want to inject a note of caution from a global perspective. Developed countries, preoccupied with their own problems, clearly underestimate the dangers of the massively young age structure of the poor countries. Taken together, children and the elderly in developed countries number 800 per thousand people aged 20–59 years in contrast to 1,000 or more for the developing countries with rapidly growing populations. That number is 1,450 per 1,000 for Nigeria, which will soon surpass Russia in population.

Desai: What is the reason for such divergence?

Vishnevsky: The contrast results from their rapidly growing populations with large numbers of children in relation to people aged 20–59 years. These ratios are only 464 per 1,000 for Russia, in contrast to 585 for China, 723 for Brazil, 872 for India, and 1,339 for Nigeria. The immeasurable difficulties of providing for the children of these poor lands are far more serious than the problem of the aging in the developed countries.

Second, viewed in the context of world realities, the challenge of aging is more than just economic.

Desai: What is that challenge?

Vishnevsky: I mentioned earlier that, for every developed-country resident, the developing world has five. But for people under 20, the ratio is one to seven. The developing countries have 2.1 billion children and youth under 20 in contrast to 300 million in the developed nations. I wonder whether the wealthy, aging, tired North can successfully handle the impact of this imbalance in the twenty-first century. Russia's task in managing that challenge will be no less difficult.

Note

Mariya Konovalova translated the interview from Russian into English.

1. Richard A. Easterlin, professor of economics at the University of Southern California and member of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, combines the various disciplines of economics, economic history, sociology, and psychology in his research. His pathbreaking contributions include an analysis of worldwide transitions from high to low fertility and mortality.

2. Richard A. Easterlin, *Growth Triumphant: The Twenty-First Century in Historical Perspective* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 123.