

RUSSIA

A New Cold War?

Editors

MICHEL KORINMAN JOHN LAUGHLAND

In the Same Boat as the West

ANATOLY VISHNEVSKY

Both in Russia and beyond, many people are certain that the country is going through an unprecedented demographic crisis, caused by the economic and political events of the 1990s. People are similarly convinced that the favourable economic transformations and a vigorous demographic policy are capable of creating prerequisites for solving this crisis. To what extent are these views justifiable?

It is true that since the first half of the 1990s Russia's population has been shrinking. By the beginning of 2007, population loss in Russia had exceeded 6 million (4.3 per cent of the historical maximum observed in 1993). All the major demographic indicators – fertility, mortality and migration – are extremely unfavourable. Nevertheless, the most common clichés – 'demographic crisis', 'demographic catastrophe' – do not by any means adequately reflect the demographic situation as a whole. There are evolutionary components contributing to the demographic situation which should not be interpreted in a simplified manner as purely negative, or deduced from Russia's specific economic and social context. These are characteristic of all developed economies, and therefore it would be wrong to view them as manifestations of the crisis only because events are not evolving in the way we would prefer. At the same time there are, of course, also components of Russia's demographic situation which cannot be referred to other than as a crisis or a catastrophe.

It would be fair to speak of a specifically Russian crisis where mortality is concerned. But it would be wrong to date this crisis to the 1990s, since it has much older and deeper roots. The most favourable mortality indices in the whole history of Russia were observed in 1965, and the situation has worsened ever since. The gap between Russia and the West has increased steadily. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the gap had reached the size of that between Tsarist Russia and the West in the early twentieth century: with respect to males the gap grew even larger in many cases than in 1900 (see Table 1).

Russia is unique in that the life expectancy statistic is determined by high mortality in the adult population, particularly men, rather than by infant mortality as in many developing countries. The main causes of death are either

Table 1 Russia's gap in terms of life expectancy, in comparison with other countries, in the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries (in years)

Year	From the US	From France	From Sweden	From Japan
Males				
1900	15.9	12.7	20.3	14.5
1965	2.2	2.9	7.2	3.1
2005*	15.9	17.9	19.0	19.5
Females				
1900	16.2	14.1	20.8	13.1
1965	0.5	1.4	2.8	-0.5
2005*	7.7	11.4	10.0	12.9

*Russia and France – 2005; the US, Sweden, Japan – 2003

cardiovascular diseases at an unusually young age, by Western standards, or 'external causes', such as suicide, homicide, traffic accidents, poisoning, and so on, etc. of which quite healthy people die. The high mortality in Russia is rooted in the lifestyle of the majority of population, that is, its norms of behaviour and system of values.

Of course, the public health care system too is far from ideal, since it had never been adequately financed. However, the mortality of the adult population does not greatly depend on this factor. The health care system is relatively more efficient when ensuring lower infant mortality: in Russia, infant mortality is still rather high – 11 deaths per 1,000 births, which is three times the figure in France – but is on a continuous downward trend. As for the adult population, the reason for such high mortality lies in lifestyle specifics, in the face of which the health care system is largely powerless.

Nowadays, we can predict tendencies of mortality in Russia in a situation of great uncertainty. On the one hand, the fact that mortality levels are lower in many countries is grounds for optimism: in principle, the lowering of this level is feasible, and there are grounds for hoping that, sooner or later, this trend will also be seen in Russia, though there are no signs of such a change at present. On the other hand, it would be wrong to rule out the probability that the situation will stagnate or even worsen, as has been the case over the past forty years.

Things are quite different in respect to fertility. In this case, the comparison with other developed nations is not as discouraging for Russia as it is with in the case of mortality. In terms of fertility, Russia is well within the norm for developed nations, occupying a place in the middle of the list (see Figure 1).

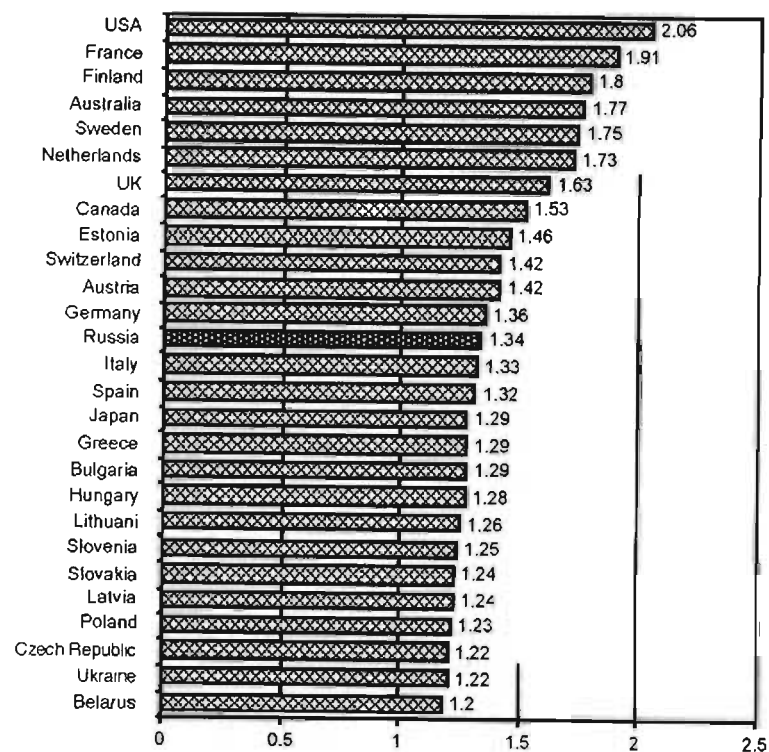


Figure 1 Total fertility rate in some countries in 2004 (births per 1,000)

It is true that this level of fertility is very low and is not sufficient to keep the population size constant. The fact that Russia is in the same club as many rich and successful countries does not alleviate the acuteness of the problem for Russia. Already the decline in fertility between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s has meant that Russia's population stopped reproducing itself in the mid-1960s. The new decline in fertility in the 1990s, has aggravated this situation further.

Since 2006, in the wake of President Putin's message to the Federal Assembly in May 2006, problems of low fertility have been the focus of attention for the political establishment. Since the beginning of 2007, new measures to encourage families have been introduced and old ones strengthened. The initiators of this policy attach a special attention to the so-called 'birth voucher' – an amount equal roughly to US\$10,000 (and subject to indexation) which is provided in the form of a special voucher upon the birth or adoption of a second or subsequent child. The mother (and sometimes also

the father) is authorized to dispose of this capital after the child has reached the age of three or three years after the date of the child's adoption. The money can be spent on housing, payment for the child's education or on a pension for the mother.

Moreover, child care payments up to the age of eighteen months have been increased and the range of its recipients expanded; the terms of entitlement to maternity pay somewhat improved; the size of payment for antenatal clinics and maternity hospital services, provided on the basis of the so-called 'birth vouchers', increased; compensation for child care service charges instituted, and so on.

It is assumed that the pro-natal measures of the state will lead to higher fertility. However, demographic experts are cautious, and express rather reserved optimism. They note that pushing up fertility rates is a complicated task which no one has managed to solve so far. True, there is a recent positive example in France, where the total fertility rate rose to two children per woman in 2006. But even if the current success of France is viewed as a result of pro-natalist policies there, it is also clear that it took a long time to achieve this, while in other European countries considerable resources have been spent on promoting a rise of fertility with only insignificant results.

The high mortality and low fertility rates in Russia are in addition to the changes in the age composition of the country. Russia's population is ageing. This general trend for all developed countries is aggravated by the specifically Russian age pyramid. The overwhelming majority of deaths is obviously among elderly people – 60 and especially 70 years, and older. Until the beginning of the 1990s, there were comparatively few people of this age in Russia, for they belonged to the generations who had endured huge losses during the Second World War. But then the generations born in the late 1920s and later started to age past 60 and then 70. By the time they were old enough to be eligible for military service, the war had ended: there were consequently more of them by the time of their retirement. This could only have the effect of causing a considerable increase in the absolute number of deaths among the people in the previous and current decades. And although the number of women of child-bearing age was larger than ever in Russia at the turn of the century, the absolute number of births since 1992 turned out to be lower than the number of deaths because of low fertility. Hence, natural population decrease started.

It is very difficult to return to the natural rate of population increase in Russia, and it is probably impossible to do so within the next 10–20 years. The current rate of population reproduction in Russia provides for just 60–65 per cent of the replacement of parental generations with children, and any essential changes in this rate are unlikely in the foreseeable future, even given the most favourable course of events. All demographic forecasters for Russia are unanimous on this point.

Even if the mortality level started to fall soon, it will be difficult to change sharply the negative trends of its dynamic which has been building up for over forty years and furthermore to make up for the lag behind the West, which has also accumulated over the time. It will be equally as difficult to ensure a rapid and sustainable increase of fertility. The most optimistic Russian forecasts, assuming the absolute success of current pro-natal efforts, assume that the number of births per one woman will rise from the current 1.3 to 1.7–1.8 per thousand. But this is insufficient for the replacement of generations even in ordinary conditions, the more so given an expected sharp decline in the number of women of child-bearing age: over sixteen years – from 1990 to 2005 – 6.6 million fewer girls were born (a decline of 37 per cent) than within the preceding sixteen years. At the same time, the number of elderly people increased, pushing up the number of deaths. In the post-2005 period, cohorts of the elderly will be replenished with the most numerous post-war generation: in the fifteen years from 1946 to 1960, 76 million children were born into conditions of much lower infant mortality than the 47 million children born within the preceding fifteen years which included the Second World War years. So it would be possible, at best, to count only on a gradual improvement of the situation, which is capable of slowing down the natural population decrease but incapable of terminating it.

Under these circumstances, immigration becomes the only source of population replenishment in Russia. Within the period from the start of natural decrease in 1992 and up to the beginning of 2007, immigrants numbered 11.8 million people. During the same period, net migration has numbered 5.5 million, which was not enough to compensate for the natural decrease, although it reduced the total population loss in Russia to 6.3 million. True, no account was taken of unregistered, illegal migrants, whose amount is unknown. But, to all appearances, the bulk of illegal migrants are guest workers, so their presence in the country can hardly be viewed as compensation for the of natural decrease of permanent population.

So far, it has been repatriation that constituted the bulk of compensating migration – four-fifths of migrants arriving in Russia were ethnic Russians or representatives of other peoples of Russia (Tatar, Bashkir, and so on) returning from the former USSR republics. Recently, most of them had Russian citizenship by the time of migration.

This migration resource is gradually running out, whence a fall in the rate of migration increase and the smaller compensating role thereof. In 1994, registered migration increase was close to 1 million persons, then fell to 0.5 million for several years running; since the beginning of the current decade, it has been hovering at around 100,000 persons a year. Thus, the virtually offsetting role of repatriation is rapidly abating, and Russia faces the necessity of turning to other sources of migration increase. The situation is further

aggravated by the fact that while to date the decline in the total number of Russians was accompanied by a growing number of people of working age, a rapid decline in their number is expected in the next few years (at a rate of roughly 1 million people a year). So, in addition to demographic arguments in favour of immigration, there are also economic ones.

In 2005, Russia's president said in his message to the Federal Assembly that Russia 'is interested in the influx of skilled legal labour migrants' and that the country needs a 'sensible strategic immigration policy'. He said also 'In the final count, each legal immigrant must be given an opportunity to become Russian citizen.' It is important to recognize, however, that anti-immigration sentiments are running very high in Russia now, and a large-scale stream of migrants capable of offsetting the natural loss of population becomes increasingly problematic. Hence, there will be further shrinkage of Russia's population.

Formally, there is an official 'Concept of national demographic development', approved by the Russian government in 2005, which set the goal of stabilizing the population and creating premises for subsequent demographic growth. One of the tasks cited is 'the regulation of migration streams with a view to designing effective mechanisms for natural decrease substitution'. A new 'Concept of demographic policy' is being drawn up, which maintains continuity in relation to the previous concept in terms of demographic development goals.

On the basis of this logic of 'stabilization', the scale of migration would automatically depend on the natural decrease of the population: it must not be lower than the latter. But the size of the decrease can be so considerable that its real compensation at the expense of growing migration is unlikely. The annual natural decrease, and as was noted above, the decrease of working-age population, will be around 1 million people in the next few years. The annual reception of the same number of people for permanent residence in Russia is hardly possible (for different reasons).

True, economic needs can to a considerable extent be met at the expense of temporary guest workers, and a fraction of them can be viewed as candidates for permanent workers with a prospect of obtaining Russian citizenship. But this does not eliminate the problem of population reduction, which is as acute as before.

Since the early 1990s, when the depopulation of Russia turned from a looming threat (predicted by demographic forecasts back in Soviet times) into a reality, public anxiety concerning the demographic future of Russia has intensified sharply. An expression, 'the Russian cross', meaning where the downward birth-rate curve and upward death-rate curve intersect on a graph, has entered the language of journalists and politicians.

One would wonder, however, to what extent is it justified for one country to 'appropriate' this metaphor in conditions when the natural decrease of

population becomes more and more a widespread feature of demographic dynamics, at least in Europe. In 2003, for example, this 'cross' was observed in seventeen European countries. According to the medium variant of the latest UN forecast (2006), in the period 2015–20, the rising death-rate curve will intersect the falling birth-rate curve for the all developed nations of the world. The size of the discrepancy between the two will keep on increasing.¹ All these countries will face the same increasingly acute problems associated with compensatory (if viewed from these countries' positions), or redistributive (if viewed from a global position) migration.

Paradoxical as it may sound, in spite of some exceptional features of the demographic situation in Russia – that is, a very high mortality and age pyramid, especially heavily deformed by social shocks and wars in the first half of the twentieth century – the similarity between the demographic problems of Russia and other developed nations is, in the long term, more essential than the differences between them. The similarity is determined by relative synchrony of demographic transition in all these countries, including Russia (in fact, it started somewhat later in Russia but nevertheless already had a hundred-year history) as well as by its asynchrony at the global level, which predetermined unprecedented demographic asymmetry in the modern world.

The demographic explosion in the developing world, largely in the global South, which has caused this asymmetry, is giving rise in turn to a new global reality. The world demographic transition entered a new phase (David Coleman, a British demographer, speaks of 'the third demographic transition') in which international migration starts playing a quite different role, that is, its primary role as a mechanism of spatial redistribution of population. This role was largely lost over the past three hundred years, after the system of modern European states and then of colonial empires took shape, though it would be wrong to say that it has disappeared completely – as evidenced, for example, by the transoceanic migration of Europeans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who colonized vast spaces. Nevertheless, the Westphalian principles triumphed in the Eurocentric world, in particular, the principle of sovereign control by the state of its borders, a control which is incompatible with the free movement of large masses of people. But this principle will now be put to the test in conditions which are infinitely different from those of mid-seventeenth-century Europe.

The 'North–South' demographic asymmetry is a very important component of these conditions, though it is not unique. It manifests itself in the presence, on the one hand, of rich countries with a population of slightly more than 1 billion tending to population reduction and, on the other, of poor overpopulated countries, whose population is over 5 billion and rising. There is a huge number of other economic, political, technological, ecological and other factors turning both groups of countries into communicating vessels,

rendering the migratory isolation of one part of the world from the other impossible. The direct economic, and probably also demographic interest of the North in the influx of migrants, and of the South in their outflow to rich countries, is becoming increasingly apparent. True, the quantitative needs of each side do not balance out, but this only complicates the situation further.

Somehow or other, though the state borders of the majority of Northern countries remain stable (and in this sense the Westphalian principles remain in force), the migration streams, largely directed northward, are becoming so significant that the composition of the population in developed countries is starting to change rapidly.

Russia ran into this reality later than its western European or North American neighbours (and, in effect, has not yet had to deal with it). Therefore it is susceptible, to a greater extent than they, to an illusion that sovereign governments are in a position to control the global redistribution of population. Today's Russia is too deeply stuck in its internal problems, and it ties them too closely to recent developments in its internal history, to be fully aware of the much more important and deep transformations that have occurred and are still occurring in the outside world. Hence, there is a considerable Utopianism in terms of its vision of its demographic future, in particular, of the opportunity to avoid a large-scale influx of migrants. But this does not mean that such views are not shared by a huge number of people across Europe or North America. Like the majority of Russian intellectuals and politicians, they believe that the keys to solving the situation lie in their respective countries, and that those from the 5 billion people in the developing world of today (and 7–8 billion of the future) who want to come to them will behave themselves, depending on the decisions of European or North American parliaments and governments.

This similarity of views points to the similarity of situations across the countries which have experienced demographic transition, but by no means serves as a proof that such unanimous views are true. Probably the situation is so new that it has not yet been properly recognized in any of these countries, which still cherish hopes that it is possible to turn back the tide of history, at least with respect to migration. Though in Russia, just like in Europe and the US, the so-called 'illegal migrants' are counted in millions and the number thereof is increasing by the year, hopes are still alive that migrant inflow can be halted, at least with a new variety of China's Great Wall – a technical construction along state borders or something of this kind. These hopes are most likely futile, and sooner or later the majority of developed nations will have to seek new strategic approaches to migration policy, guided by the English proverb 'what can't be cured must be endured'.

Russia will be no exception either. It is natural that the current dramatic demographic situation makes Russian society uneasy, pushing it to search for

measures which can arrest the unfavourable trends. As experience is gained, the knowledge and perception of the fundamental causes of demographic change will become more profound and people will start to realize that not everything can be changed. The elimination of the mortality-related deficit, accumulated by Russia, is an unconditional imperative, a *conditio sine qua non* for the successful development of this country. As for the dynamics of fertility and migration, these are determined to a very considerable extent by complex global processes. It is hardly possible to influence them by acting within the bounds of one country. Russia is at roughly the same phase of demographic development as all the industrialized countries (that is, at the closing stages of demographic transition), and so it must, in concert with them, design political approaches, providing not only for modifying what can be changed, but also for adapting to what cannot be changed.

Anatoly Vishnevsky is director of the Institute of Demography in the State University – Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

NOTE

1 Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision* <<http://esa.un.org/unpp>>.

