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The Waning World Power

The Demographic Future of Russia and the other Soviet Successor States

by Stephan Sievert, Sergey Zakharov and Reiner Klingholz

The collapse of the Soviet Union almost 20 years ago did not only have grave economic consequences; it also caused enormous demographic shifts throughout the territory of the former super power. Some of the most important are either presented below or can be found in the study published by the Berlin Institute for Population and Development. (http://www.berlininstitut.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Russland/Russland_e_online.pdf)

- Since 1993, Russia's population has shrunk from 149 to 142 million people; since the Second World War, it had grown steadily.
- If it had not been for immigration, population losses would have reached 11.5 million.
- After the Iron Curtain fell, the average number of children per woman in Russia decreased from its previous 1.89 to 1.16; it has started to rise again slowly, but at 1.54, it remains below the level required for stable population development.
- Even though modern methods of birth control have slowly been spreading throughout the former Soviet Union, there are more abortions in Russia than in the EU, where four times as many people live.

- Life expectancy in Russia sank between 1991 and 1994 from 69 to less than 64, contributing significantly to a mortality surplus; slight improvement can also be observed here.
- Men's health in particular has worsened: in the mid-1990s, men had an average life expectancy of 58. Today, a life expectancy of 62.8 years is still lower than it is in Bangladesh.
- Circulatory diseases are the most common cause of death, followed by external influences (homicides, suicides, accidents).
- In typical Russian industrial cities, between a third and a half of all deaths among the male adult population can be traced directly or indirectly to alcohol abuse, although infectious illness such as Aids or tuberculosis are gaining ground in Russia.
- The population decrease will accelerate in the future since immigration rates are lower than in the 1990s and there will be fewer potential mothers.
- By 2030, Russia could lose about 15 million people; this is the figure by which the working-age population will decline, since the shrinking number of children will be balanced out by older people.
- Peripheral areas in the north and east are suffering disproportionate losses.
- In the Central Asian Soviet successor states and in large parts of the Caucasus, however, the average number of children is over two and, in some cases, even three. These countries will continue to grow. Tajikistan, for example, will grow up to 35 percent by 2030.
- Labour migration to Russia will continue; remittances by migrants are important in the fight against poverty in countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and others.
- Despite improvements in recent years in Russian migration policy, a fourth of all migrants still live illegally in Russia; even registered migrants often earn their money in the shadow economy.

The Soviet population has experienced more than its share of hardship and extensive demographic losses in its 70-year history. The massive starvation of the 1930s and the Second World War at the beginning of the following decade claimed up to 40 million victims.^{1,2} Stalin's forced resettlement of farmers, the deportation of entire peoples and forced labour in Siberia's prison camps and the Far East claimed many millions more and extensively altered regional settlement.

Compared to all of this, the current demographic crisis, which has dogged many of the Soviet successor states since the demise of the multinational empire, seems relatively harmless. Yet

¹ Overy, R. (2003). *Russlands Krieg. 1941 – 1945*. Reinbek: Rowohlt.

² Shelton, D. (2005). *Encyclopaedia of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity*. New York: MacMillan Library Reference.

all of these countries are, in many ways, treading new territory. Where child rates are low, societies are ageing and shrinking in many places. Entire stretches of land are emptying due to emigration. And then there are the old, well-known problems, especially the high mortality rate of men of working-age, which is largely due to excessive alcohol consumption.

Economic allies became economic competitors overnight when the Soviet system of regional labour division collapsed: while the Central Asian countries had been responsible for the production of waterpower and cotton, the Ukraine for the supply of numerous finished products and Moldova for food, the countries now had to stand on their own feet and seek markets for their own products. The competition for capital, people and technology flared up even within the new countries and regions. Where economic and settlement structures were once subordinated to security policy issues, they now primarily pursued market logic. The last Soviet census had counted 285.7 million people nationwide and at the beginning of the millennium, there were a million more in the same area, but in nine of the 15 new countries, the population had declined - in Ukraine, by about three million people.

Demographic Descent

Russia and the world's most populous countries, inhabitants in millions, 1960, 2010 and 2050
 Source: United Nations, World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision Population Database, New York

1960		2010		2050	
China	646	China	1.354	India	1.614
India	448	India	1.214	China	1.417
Soviet Union	214	USA	318	USA	404
USA	186	Indonesia	233	Pakistan	335
(Russian SSR)	120	Brazil	195	Nigeria	289
Japan	93	Pakistan	185	Indonesia	288
Indonesia	93	Bangladesh	164	Bangladesh	223
Brazil	73	Nigeria	158	Brazil	219
Germany	73	Russia	140	Ethiopia	174
Bangladesh	54	Japan	127	Congo	148
United Kingdom	52	Mexico	111	Philippines	146
Italy	50	Philippines	94	Egypt	130
Pakistan	49	Vietnam	89	Mexico	129
France	46	Ethiopia	85	Russia	116
Nigeria	45	Egypt	84	Vietnam	112

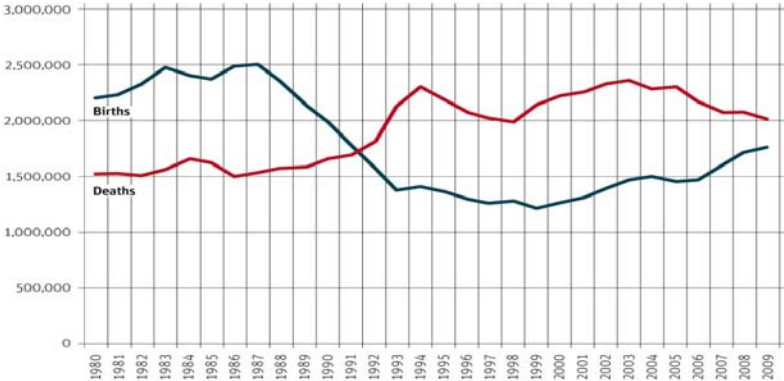
In 1960, the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic was the earth's fourth-largest country measured in terms of population numbers. Even though today's Russia continued to grow, it fell to 9th place in 2010. Due to demographic shrinkage, which could cost Russia about 25 million inhabitants by 2050 – as many as now populate the country's ten largest cities taken together – the country will no longer be among the world's ten most populated by the middle of the century.

Economic uncertainty during the transition period to a market economy led to a decrease in the average number of children per woman almost everywhere; in Russia, from about 2.0 to 1.2. The Soviet Union's fall equally drastically affected life expectancy, which fell from 68.9 to 63.9 years old between 1991 and 1994 alone. A disproportionate number of men were affected by this, as they sought to solve the problems of transition with vodka. By the middle of the 1990s, they had a life expectancy of a mere 57.4 years. Generally, the economic situation in Russia can be inferred quite well from a look at life expectancies. After the downswing of the early 1990s, life expectancy rose again to 67 during the period of consolidation, which lasted up to 1998, but fell once again during the subsequent years of crisis to under 65.

In 1992, more people died in Russia than were born for the first time since World War II. Annually, the country began to lose an average of 800,000 inhabitants due to rapidly increasing mortality surpluses. Countering this development, however, was the yearly return of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians who wanted to come back to the country of their ancestors following the fragmentation of the Soviet Union. The returnees were inspired by a lack of prospects and germinating xenophobia in the Soviet Union's successor states. It was only thanks to them that Russia was able to avoid a population decline of several million people in the 1990s.

The Russian Cross

Annual number of births and deaths in Russia, 1980 to 2009



(Source: Rosstat, Demograficheski Yezhegodnik Rossii – 2010 g., Moscow)

At the end of the 1980s, the number of children in Russia began to sink and only stabilized in the mid-1990s. At about the same time, the number of deaths rose drastically. Working-age men, especially, were affected. In 1992, more people were born than died in Russia for the first time since the Second World War and the curves are only gradually beginning to approach one another. In the long term, the numbers of children will sink since there are fewer and fewer potential parents.

Meanwhile, within Russia regional disparities widened. The Asian parts of the country especially struggle with extreme out-migration and low fertility. Following the discontinuation of state wage and holiday subsidies in cold Siberia, only a paltry few Russians could be found who wanted to work in the factories and mines east of the Urals. Gradually, the country's north-eastern regions emptied and have by now lost over half of their populations. Chukotka Autonomous Okrug and Magadan Oblast have suffered most. It is particularly the rural areas which have experienced a true exodus: whoever had no opportunity to go west settled, at the very least, in the local region's capital.

For many regions, the ability to attract migrants is going to be a matter of existence in the future, since only a few areas in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and the Baltic States will be able to achieve demographic stability on their own. Even if women in these areas were to have more children in the foreseeable future – and the most recent figures suggest they will – they will hardly exceed the 2.1 children necessary for stable population numbers. Furthermore, the next generation of parents has already thinned out significantly due to the dearth of births in the last 20 years.

Great Regional Differences

A cluster analysis based on several demographic indicators divides 141 regions and countries in the former Soviet Union into five groups.

Demography

- Cluster 1
- Cluster 2
- Cluster 3
- Cluster 4
- Cluster 5



1. Slight population losses (strong immigration, low number of children, older populations)
2. Slight population losses (high life expectancy, average numbers of children, emigration)
3. High population losses (low numbers of children, older populations)
4. High population losses (high emigration, average number of children)
5. High population gains (high numbers of children, young populations, emigration)

Due to low numbers of children, as well as possibly increasing life expectancies in the future, the share of older people in the population will grow significantly. Currently, the number of older people is relatively low when compared to Western Europe, even in the "oldest" of the Soviet successor states, since women bore about two children through the end of the 1980s and life expectancy remains low.

Of Russia's 142 million inhabitants, about one-fifth was of pension age in 2009. By 2030, this share could have increased to about 30 percent. However, the country might then only have a total of about 127 million inhabitants. Since the large cohorts of the 1950s and 1960s will reach pension age in the upcoming years, while comparatively few adolescents reach employment age (men between 16 and 59 years, women between 16 and 54), Russia's working-age population will most likely shrink by about a million people annually until 2020. It will be that much more important to use available labour power as well as possible. In particular, the country has to fight the high rates of disability, which are due to unhealthy life-styles.

Both the economy and state coffers will suffer due to the losses of potential tax-payers. More elderly people does not only mean greater burden on a pension system which is already chronically in debt, and not only in Russia; it also means that the need for geriatric care will explode. Paradoxically, the greater the recovery in numbers of children per woman, the graver the cost increase in the next ten to 15 years, since the younger generations will create medical care and education costs before they can contribute to the country's wealth. The Russian government has already introduced initial reforms for the largest social sector, the pension system, by adding a fully-funded component to the traditional pay-as-you-go system. And the government could soon increase the comparatively low retirement age of 55 years for women and 60 years for men to prevent a decrease in pension levels and related old-age poverty.

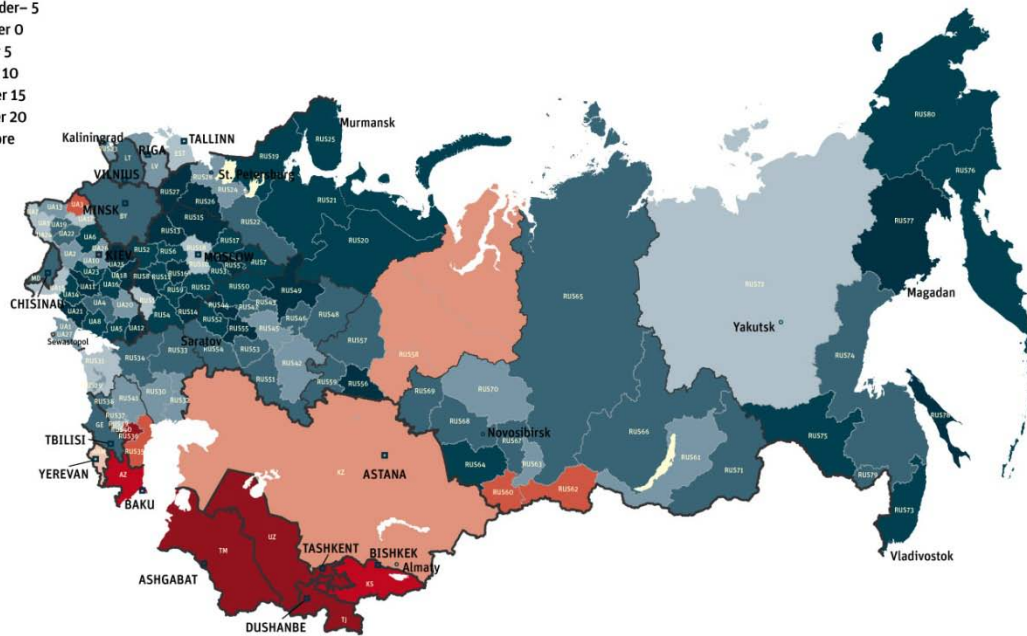
The consequences of demographic ageing will affect all Soviet successor states sooner or later, from the relatively old societies in the Baltic States, Belarus and Ukraine to the very young nations of Central Asia. For even in the republics of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have a wealth of children, the number of children has sunk in the last few years, a trend which will continue in the future. In these countries, a public infrastructure of geriatric care needs to be developed since such care has so far been in the hands of the family. This tradition could change, however, in the wake of economic development and the modernization of society so that the demand for public institutions will increase.

In the next 20 years, demographic weights in the territory of the former Soviet Union will shift. This will burden primarily the Slavic republics in the north. In contrast, the societies of the Central Asian states as well as of Armenia and Azerbaijan will continue to grow due to younger populations and high rates of children, although there are also regional differences here. For example, Armenia will grow only minimally from today's 3.1 million to 3.2 million inhabitants by 2030 – and will even shrink subsequently – while Tajikistan will grow by more than 35 percent to ten million inhabitants by 2030.

North-South Divide

Population change from 2010 to 2030 in percentages

Source: Rosstat, United Nations



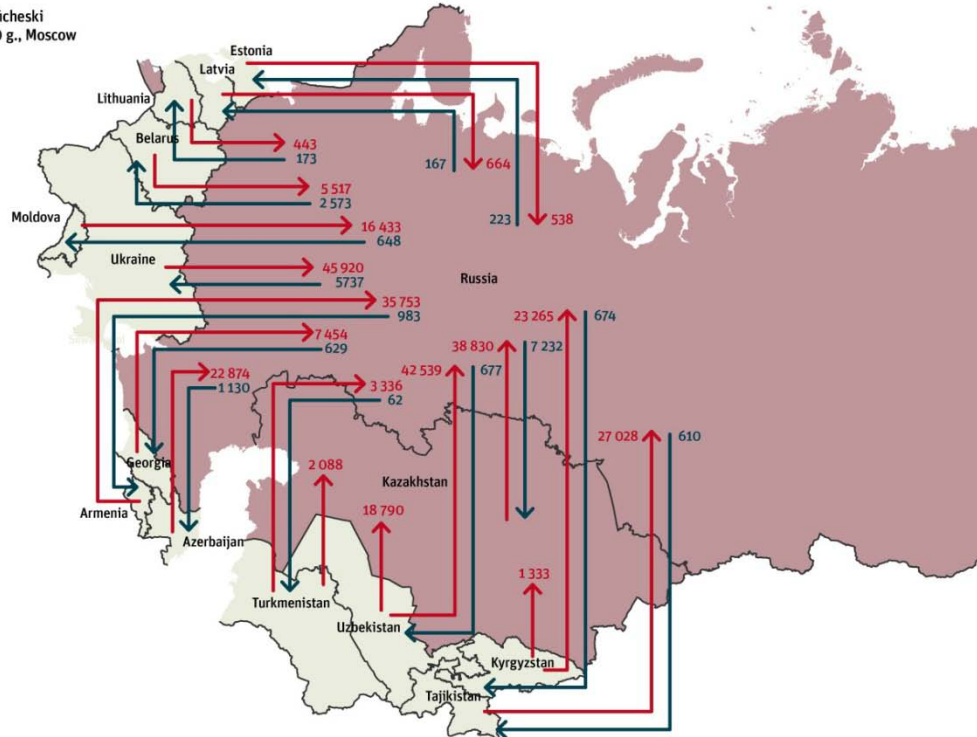
All Central Asian states as well as Azerbaijan and Armenia will grow by 2030 due to high fertility rates and young populations – Tajikistan could gain as much as one third of its current population. In large parts of the more developed northern countries, population decrease will continue. Even positive net migration and slightly increasing fertility rates will not be able to reverse this trend, as there are fewer and fewer potential parents.

Central Asian and Southern Caucasian countries are facing completely different challenges from those facing Russia and Ukraine, for example. The legion number of children and adolescents seek work in vain and emigrate in droves. During the summer months, up to seven million labour migrants can be found in Russia, most of them in large cities such as Moscow or St. Petersburg. Despite simplified migration policies, up to a fourth of labour migrants live here without a residence permit and a much larger share works in the shadow economy. Not only do they have to secure their own livelihoods on their wages, they also have to feed their families back home. Furthermore, they often fall victim to xenophobic attacks.

All Roads Lead to Russia

Selected migration flows in the post-Soviet space, 2009

Source: Rosstat, Demograficheski Yezhegodnik Rossii – 2010 g., Moscow



Russia remains the destination of choice for labour migrants throughout most of the post-Soviet territory. Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Armenia supply the largest numbers of immigrants to Russia. However, the flow of immigrants from the Baltic states has practically come to a standstill. Since joining the EU in 2004, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians have been looking for employment more intensively in Western Europe. Along with Russia, Kazakhstan has become a popular destination for migrant workers from neighbouring Central Asian countries. In proportion to its population, the Kazakh capital city Astana has seen the highest influx of immigrants in the entire territory of the former Soviet Union.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors.



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Since October 2008, Stephan Sievert has been employed as a research associate at the Berlin Institute, where his work revolves around the demographic and economic situations in Eastern Europe, Germany, France, and the republics of the former Soviet Union. From 2007 to 2008, he worked as a consultant to the World Bank and Gassmann Consulting of Maastricht, advising them on social protection and poverty reduction strategies in Kyrgyzstan.

Stephan Sievert obtained a BA degree in European Studies from Maastricht University, followed by an MSc in International Economics (with a major in social economics) from the same institution. His main areas of study were labour economics, social security, and applied econometrics. During his degree course, he spent a semester at Pontificia Universidad Católica in Santiago de Chile.