

# The 2002 Russian Census and the Future of the Russian Population

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Throughout the 1990s, Russian and Western demographers competed over who could produce the gloomiest forecast of Russian population trends for the coming decades. Highly respected demographers argued that the population of the Russian Federation would drop from a high of 148 million in 1992 to 100–105 million by 2025. These forecasts were based on statistics produced by the State Statistics Committee of the Russian Federation (Goskomstat), which showed that the Russian population was declining steadily due to an increase in the death rate and a simultaneous decrease in the birth rate. The panic began in the early 1990s, when in one year the death rate increased by 20 percent while the birth rate dropped by 15 percent. Overall, from 1991 to 1994 the death rate for men increased from 14.6 per thousand to 21.8 per thousand. (The increase for women was smaller.) As it turned out, most of the increase in the death rate was the result of an increase in deaths due to alcoholism that had been deferred because of the Soviet government's anti-alcohol campaign in the mid-1980s. As this effect abated in the mid-1990s, life expectancy and the death rate recovered and long-term population estimates were to some extent revised upward.

By 1998, the male death rate had dropped to 17.2 per thousand. Nevertheless, forecasts of significant long-term Russian population decline persisted based on Goskomstat data that showed that the country's population was dropping by about half a million people annually. As the 2002 Russian census wrapped up in October, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article stating that some forecasts called for Russia's total population to drop below 80 million by mid-century. Other newspapers in the United States and Great Britain gave similar estimates. At the start of 2002, Goskomstat publications declared Russia's population to be 143 million, a decline of over 5 million in ten years.

## The Census Surprise

It thus came as a surprise to many when the first returns of the 2002 Russian population census showed that the Russian population stood at 145.3 million. If the census results are approximately accurate, then the dire forecasts about Russia's upcoming drastic population decline are unlikely. While Russia's population is not likely to grow in the coming years, it is likely to shrink far less rapidly than previous estimates predicted. Even

the gloomiest forecasts published since the census results were made public show that the Russian population will be no smaller than 120 million by mid-century.

The size of Russia's population is an important question for policymakers because of the connection between population decline and economic stagnation. The combination of a relatively low birth rate and a high death rate among males of working age means the country will have to support a large population of retirees. So the source and composition of the unexpected population is critical in determining its impact on both the economy and future population trends. If the "newly discovered" two million people are primarily comprised of relatively young migrants who work and are likely to have children, both the economic and total population forecasts will need to be revised upwards. If, on the other hand, they consist of poor, elderly people who were somehow missed by the government's population tracking methods, then the long-range forecasts are likely to remain unaffected. In the rest of this memo, I examine the likely source of the overcount and discuss its impact on Russian society in the coming decades.

## **Where Did the Extra People Come From?**

Speculation about the provenance of the extra two million people initially focused on the reliability of the counting procedures used in the census. Some analysts argued that local census bureaus had deliberately inflated their population totals to increase financial assistance from Moscow, because such assistance was sometimes apportioned according to the size of a region's population. Others pointed to the double counting of students and migrant workers, who might have been counted both in their actual place of residence and in the place where they were officially registered residents.

Although at least some double counting and population inflation certainly occurred during the census, it was more than offset by the census bureau's inability to count all of the people living in Russia. The extent of the undercount varied by region. Approximately 7 percent of the population of Tatarstan was not counted, but the undercount in some districts of Moscow reached as high as 20 percent. The worst problems occurred in the larger cities, while there were virtually no problems in rural areas, where it is much easier for community leaders to keep track of population movements. The urban undercount resulted partially from poor recordkeeping and census organization and partially from the efforts of illegal migrant workers and other population groups to avoid being counted. Each of these factors will be addressed in turn.

Insufficient financing of the census meant that many local census agencies faced difficulty in hiring a sufficient number of enumerators and were only able to provide them with limited training. Low pay and long hours discouraged many potential enumerators from signing on. In many regions, enumerators quit during final preparations once they realized the volume of work involved. The lack of properly trained enumerators had a negative impact on census coverage; in some regions entire streets and neighborhoods were skipped.

Housing units were also missed because of the volume of new housing construction over the last ten years. In some locations, new housing districts were not included in the enumeration plans and were missed entirely. This was a particular problem in suburban areas, where entire districts of so-called cottages have sprung up. The inhabitants of these

cottages, which are really suburban single-family homes, usually list a city apartment as their official residence, even if they are never actually present in the apartment. Such people are likely to have been missed by the census, since the cottages were not in the housing registry while enumerators would have found no one home in the city apartment.

However, the bulk of the undercount is likely to have resulted from deliberate avoidance of participation in the census by two groups of people. Migrant workers, often in the country illegally and accustomed to police harassment, had little incentive to reveal their presence to authorities. Many migrants did not believe officials' assurances that information collected by the census would not be made available to other government agencies, such as the tax police and the migration services. The media encouraged such skepticism by noting that other kinds of personal data collected by the government are regularly pirated and sold.

Wealthy Russians were the other population category that sought to avoid the census. The reasons were similar. They did not trust the government with information about their sources of income, did not want to reveal their housing conditions, and generally perceived the census as an invasion of their privacy. Some elite high-rises did not allow enumerators to visit apartments, permitting them only to sit in the vestibule while those residents who wished to be enumerated stopped by.

Census officials recognized some of these access problems and sought to correct them by relying on other types of population data, including records from the housing administration offices of apartment buildings and place of residence registration records (*propiska*). Yet, these records proved inadequate because the development of a rental housing market over the last decade spurred greater mobility among the population. Some analysts estimate that 30–40 percent of the Russian population has moved since 1991. Many of these people have not updated their *propiska* records. Those who rent out apartments often do not notify their housing administration in an effort to hide the rental income from the government. The end result is that population records held by the local government are at least as flawed as the population tracking data used by Goskomstat.

## **The Migrant Bonanza**

This discussion shows that Russia's unexpected population growth is not the result of a census overcount. In fact, it is more likely that even with the higher than expected total population, the 2002 census undercounted the total number of inhabitants in the country. Since Russian data on births, deaths, and emigration are quite reliable, the discrepancy between the estimated and actual population is the result of a larger than expected number of migrants present in the country. Studies of migration to Russia in the 1990s focused initially on the large number of Russians who suddenly found themselves in a foreign country. Many of these Russians migrated to the Russian Federation in the early 1990s. This migration was especially significant for the Russian populations of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Fewer Russians left Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States. Although a large number of Russians remained in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the Russian "return to the homeland" slowed in the mid-1990s. In any case, most of this migration wave was legal, and the migrants were taken into account in Russian statistics.

The uncounted migrants come from a wide range of countries. A large number have come from the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union in order to escape political instability, civil war, and economic hardship. These are members of the titular ethnic groups of these countries, rather than Russians. An equally large number of migrants come from what the Russian media has called “the far abroad:” countries that were not part of the Soviet Union. These include Chinese and Vietnamese traders and migrant laborers as well as a smaller number of migrants from countries such as Afghanistan. These groups are more likely than Slavic migrants to make an effort to remain hidden from official population counts. These are the people who are stopped daily by the police to have their documents checked (or pay bribes). They are also the ones periodically subject to exile from Moscow during festivals or high-level summit meetings. They often live in cheap, overcrowded apartments. Construction workers from places such as Moldova and Ukraine usually live in temporary dwellings on the construction sites where enumerators were unlikely to travel.

Many of these migrants live in Russia temporarily, come for short trips, and leave their families behind. This is especially true of Chinese traders in the Far East. At the same time, many other migrants, especially those from the former Soviet republics, make an effort to bring their families and settle in Russia more or less permanently. Because they have more children and a lower death rate from alcoholism and accidents than the ethnic Russian population, on average, they are likely to play an increasingly important role in Russia’s demographic future.

## **Fears of a Changing Society**

The Russian media has portrayed these migrants as a danger to Russian society. Caucasian and Central Asian migrants are widely seen as being responsible for the majority of the crime that occurs in Russian cities. The Chechen war has caused additional problems for some groups, because many Azeris and Armenians on Russian streets are suspected of being Chechen and, therefore, potential terrorists. The governors of major Russian regions such as Moscow and Krasnodar have made openly racist statements, arguing that Caucasians, Armenians, and the like have no place in their lands. For several years, the government of Krasnodar has been engaged in an effort to deport Meskhetian Turks who came to the region as refugees after pogroms in Uzbekistan in 1990. These attitudes are not limited to the governing elites. Several surveys have documented the growing antipathy of the Russian population toward Caucasians and Central Asians.

At the same time, Chinese migrants in the Far East are portrayed as the opening wedge of a potential drive by China to annex these (relatively under-populated) areas in order to relieve population pressure in China proper. A recent article in *Novye Izvestiia* is indicative of the panic-mongering mentality. It purports to reveal soon-to-be-published census data on the ethnic composition of the Russian Federation. According to this publication, the percentage of the population that is ethnically Russian has declined from 81.5 in 1989 to 71.7 in 2002. At the same time, there are 3.25 million Chinese in Russia, including 2.5 million in the Far East alone. Given that the total population of the Far East

is 6.7 million, this last figure can only be regarded as part of a deliberate effort to promote fears of an already occurring “yellow invasion.”

## **A Multicultural Future?**

At the same time, Russia has no alternative to accepting these migrants. Since current birth and death rates are not likely to change dramatically, the ethnic Russian population will continue to decline in the coming decades. The negative economic and political consequences of a declining population can only be offset through migration. Few of the ethnic Russians still living in former Soviet republics such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan will migrate to Russia. The ones most willing to and capable of uprooting themselves did so in the immediate aftermath of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Surveys have shown that those who remain increasingly perceive the country in which they live as their homeland. Future immigration to Russia will be the result of economic, rather than ethnic, factors.

Russia will therefore be dependent on the migration of population groups that the Russian government and people currently consider undesirable. As some of the examples cited in this memo show, changing attitudes toward these groups will take time. If the Russian government wants economic growth to continue for the long term, however, it must begin to deal with the prospect of integrating these migrants into a more multicultural Russian society.

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