

The pandemic takes its toll: Russia's demographic crisis

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On February 8, the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) released demographic data for 2020, showing that Russia has experienced its largest population decrease since 2005. Its main cause is excess mortality – by 18% compared to 2019 – largely generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a decrease in the level of immigration. According to demographers, the excess mortality associated with the pandemic places the country among the global leaders in terms of deaths per 100,000 population. In addition to the record-high mortality and population loss, the number of births has fallen to its lowest level in 20 years, and the migration balance has also declined significantly. The population growth noted in the earlier period was achieved by Russia as a result of the annexation of Crimea, baby boomers reaching reproductive age and, to a lesser extent, due to state projects to stimulate procreation. Since 2016, there has been a downward trend again. Today, the country has 146.2 million citizens, which is the fewest since early 2014.

Population decline in the pandemic

According to data published by Rosstat, 2.1 million people died in Russia in 2020. Natural population loss amounted to 689,000, double the 2019 rate. Mortality in 2020 rose by 18% compared to the previous year, i.e. by 324,000 deaths. As assessed by experts, such a high increase was recorded during major crises in the country's history. It occurred in 1993 (+17.8%), which could be due to the shock economic therapy of 1992, which included price liberalisation and a difficult economic and social situation and also 1947, the year of the great post-war famine (+37.2%).

According to official data, the highest monthly mortality among people with COVID-19 was recorded in December (44,400 deaths) and November 2020. (35,600). According to government officials, including Deputy Prime Minister for Social Affairs Tatyana Golikova, the pandemic accounted for about one third of deaths in 2020 (in the April-December period), while Rosstat's data suggests it was the cause of at least half of them. In turn, detailed analyses of the Moscow Health Department in December 2020 showed that COVID-19 was the cause of as much as 98-100% excess deaths among residents of the capital (5,988 more than a year ago, of which 5,891 were cases with a COVID-19 diagnosis – the main cause of 5,251 deaths). Moscow's pandemic statistics were considered relatively reliable from the outset, especially against the backdrop of data coming in from other Russian regions often recording suspiciously low rates and known for statistical anomalies (e.g. identical levels of new cases or deaths over a long period of time).

The discrepancies between the values provided by Rosstat and those presented on an ongoing basis by the government operations staff, coordinated by the Federal Service for

Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection (Rospotrebnadzor), are also significant. The mortality figures provided by the staff are about twice as low as those of Rosstat, which stems from differences in calculation methodology. Rosstat relies on death certificates issued by civil registry offices and indicates how many of the deceased were diagnosed with COVID-19. In contrast, the government operations staff counts deaths where COVID-19 has been deemed the primary cause. Additionally, the discrepancies are influenced by varying methodology used in different regions of Russia – some regions (e.g. Moscow, Moscow Oblast, St. Petersburg, Komi) attribute virtually all excess mortality to the impact of the pandemic, while others (e.g. Tatarstan, Bashkiria, Chechnya) do not interpret the increase in mortality at all. Moreover, the media have repeatedly reported pressure exerted by the authorities of individual regions on hospitals to underestimate the deaths caused by COVID-19 and thus "improve the ratings" of the region in the eyes of the central government.

Estimates also show a much higher pandemic mortality rate in Russia than on the global scale. In the period from April to December 2020, the proportion of deaths of people with COVID-19 in relation to the total number of confirmed cases of the disease (3.16 million) in the country was 5%, and for those who died with COVID-19 as the main cause of death this figure was 3.3 % (government operations staff data). However, even these calculations, based on government data, clearly exceed the average 2.2% COVID-19 global mortality rate (as estimated by Johns Hopkins University). According to some demographers, Russia also leads in the number of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants on a global scale. Calculations made by extrapolating the detailed data from Moscow (i.e. considering COVID-19 as the cause of nearly 100% of excess mortality) to national data from the end of 2020 placed Russia second in this category (after the US). Furthermore, it is likely that it will move to first in February 2021. According to estimates of "The Economist" from last December, Russia was fourth in the world – after the USA, India and Brazil – in terms of excess mortality.

Such a severe outcome of the pandemic can be largely attributed to the poor quality of healthcare and underestimating the virus, and also to the Kremlin prioritising political goals, especially the constitutional amendment that gave Putin the ability to retain power all the way through 2036. The vote on the amendment to the constitution was held at the turn of June and July last year and was spread over seven days with the intention of increasing turnout and bringing the supporters of the ruling party to polling stations. A month before the event, President Putin announced that Russia had already seen the peak of the disease, and regional authorities began to report that the dynamics of the pandemic were decreasing in their regions and the quarantine was being lifted (for example, on June 9 self-isolation was cancelled in Moscow). The Victory Parade held in the capital on June 24 (postponed from May 9) was intended to symbolise a "return to normality" before the constitutional vote.

Demographic trends

Along with the record level of mortality caused by the 2020 pandemic, Russia has seen a deterioration across the entire range of demographic indicators. The natural decrease of population turned out to be the highest in twelve years, amounting to 689,000 people. In 2005 it was 846,600 and this number gradually decreased in subsequent years: 687,100 in 2006, 470,300 in 2007, down to a mere 4,300 in 2012. In turn, between 2013 and 2015, a slow natural increase was recorded, amounting to 20-30,000 people. After 2016, the

downward trend re-emerged and worsened over the last five years.

The birth rate also dropped in 2020 – to 1.44 million from 1.49 million in 2019 - and was the lowest since 2002 (when 1.38 million children were born). As already mentioned, the birth rate in Russia recorded a slight increase for only three years (2013-2015), which can be attributed to the effect of the so-called maternity capital benefit introduced in 2007 (a state support scheme for families having a second or subsequent child) and, above all, the baby boom generation reaching reproductive age. The highest birth rate was recorded in 2014 (1.95 million), but the number has been steadily declining again since 2016.

The record population loss in 2020 was compensated, to a small extent, by a positive migration balance – about 100,000 people. However, the influx of migrants has noticeably dropped off compared to previous years (when the recorded number exceeded 200,000) due to various restrictions caused by the pandemic.

As a result, as of January 1, 2021, the Russian Federation had 146.24 million citizens, which is the least since the beginning of 2014. In 2014, owing to the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol, it increased its population by more than 2.3 million – to 146.3 million people. The only stable positive demographic trend over the past 20 years is the increase in life expectancy of Russians from 65 to 73.4 years, particularly noticeable in the case of men – from about 59 to over 68 years (for women it rose from 72 to 78). However, the pandemic year also affected this indicator – the average life expectancy dropped to 71.9 years (66.9 in men and 76.7 in women). More detailed information on the social structure will be provided by the census but, due to the pandemic, it has been postponed once more, this time to September 2021 (the previous one was conducted in 2010).

The long-term downward trend in many key demographic areas shows that the state projects designed to stimulate population growth or to attract new residents to Russia have yielded only limited results. One example of the former is the maternity capital benefit, which from 2020 has also been extended to cover the first child. An example of the latter is a simplified procedure for residents of Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and Kazakhstan to obtain citizenship. Instead, Russians' decisions to enlarge their families are affected by the negative economic outlook, the decline in real income recorded since 2013, and citizens' growing pessimism about the country's future and their own situation. The pandemic has only exacerbated these problems.