Russia, the sick man of Europe

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The Russian Federation today is in the grip of a steadily tightening mesh of serious demographic problems, for which the term “crisis” is no overstatement. This crisis is altering the realm of the possible for the country and its people—continuously, directly, and adversely. Russian social conditions, economic potential, military power, and international influence are today all subject to negative demographic constraints—and these constraints stand only to worsen over the years immediately ahead.

Russia is now at the brink of a steep population decline—a peacetime hemorrhage framed by a collapse of the birth rate and a catastrophic surge in the death rate.

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Negative population growth

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In proportional terms, this was by no means the largest population loss recorded during that period. According to estimates and projections by the U.N. Bureau of the Census, over a dozen states with a million people or more experienced a population decline between mid 1992 and mid 2004, 11 of these amounting to drops of 3.1 percent or more. Unlike some of these drops, however—Bosnia, for example, whose population total fell almost 10 percent—Russia’s decline could not be explained by war or violent upheaval. In other places, population decline was due entirely to emigration (Armenia, Kazakhstan), or nearly so (Georgia). Russia, by contrast, had absorbed a substantial net influx of migrants during those years—a total net addition of over 5.5 million newcomers was tabulated between the territory’s Soviet-era January 1989 census and its October 2002 population count.

Despite the mitigating impact of immigration, Russia’s post-Communist population decline was larger in absolute terms than any other country’s over the past decade. Furthermore, continuing population decline—at a decidedly faster tempo—is envisioned for Russia for as far as demographers care to project into the future. The only ques-
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tion is how steep the downward path will be. The U.S. Census Bureau, for example, offers the relatively optimistic projection of a “mere” 14 million person drop in Russia’s population between 2000 and 2025—an average net decline of about 560,000 persons a year. The U.N. Population Division’s (UNPD) “medium variant” projection, by contrast, suggests a drop of more than 21 million over that same quarter century—about 840,000 persons a year for the period as a whole.

In the years ahead, Russia’s population decline will continue to accelerate because the prospective flow of net migration into Russia is drying up. The officially tabulated annual levels of immigration to, and emigration from, Russia have declined markedly since the early 1990s—and officially measured net inflows to Russia have likewise dropped very significantly. These official numbers reflect the swelling, cresting, and spending of the migration wave of ethnic Russians from the “near abroad” who resettled to the Russian Federation during and immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The draw of Russia to the (now smaller) pool of overseas Russians appears to have been much diminished, while the allure to foreign ethnics of living on Russian soil does not seem to be increasing appreciably. Russia’s reported economic growth rate in the very first years of the twenty-first century has been has been positive, even brisk. Nevertheless, according to official figures, the net inflow of migration to Russia totaled less than 80,000 in all of 2002, and a mere 25,000 in the first seven months of 2003. By the first quarter of 2004, according to official statistics, the officially tallied surfeit of immigrants over emigrants was barely 4,000 persons.

With in-migration flows thus subsiding, Russia’s population must mirror, with ever-greater faithfulness, the actual balance of births and deaths within the country. And in post-Communist Russia, the current disproportion between deaths and births is stark, indeed astonishing.

Russia, to be sure, is not the only European country registering more deaths than births nowadays—according to the Council of Europe’s numbers, fully 19 European states currently report “negative natural increase.” But, in
other European settings, the balance is often still quite close. For example, in Italy—the poster child in many current discussions of a possible "depopulation" of Europe—there are today about 103 deaths for every 100 live births. Russia, by contrast, currently reports about 160 deaths for every 100 births.

Examples of extreme surfeits of mortality over natality are, to be sure, familiar from human history. But in the past, these were witnessed only during times of famine, pestilence, war, or mass disaster. As a peacetime phenomenon it is utterly new, and while it is not unique to Russia these days—the excess of deaths over births is nearly as great today in Belarus, Bulgaria, and Latvia, and even more exaggerated in Ukraine—the Russian Federation is perhaps the most important example of this post-Communist demographic condition.

Russia's abrupt and brutal swerve onto the path of depopulation began during the final crisis of the Soviet state. Over the two decades before Mikhail Gorbachev's 1985 accession to power, Russia's births regularly exceeded deaths; natural increase typically ranged from 700,000 to 1,000,000 during those years. After 1987, however, births began to fall sharply, and deaths to rise. Both tendencies were further accentuated after the collapse of the USSR. The first full year of post-Communist governance for Russia, 1992, also marked the shift to negative natural increase for the Russian Federation, with 200,000 more deaths than births. A decade later, Russia's death total was over 50 percent higher than in 1987 (2.3 million vs. 1.5 million), while its birth level was over one million lower (1.4 million vs. 2.5 million). In 1987, Russia recorded a natural increase of 968,000; in 2002, deaths surpassed births by almost exactly the same magnitude (935,000).

This is an extraordinary result, but it is hardly exceptional. Tabulated deaths have outnumbered births by 900,000 or more in Russia in 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002, by nearly 900,000 in 2003, and by over 420,000 in the first half of 2004. In all, between the eve of 1992 and the summer of 2004 the Russian Federation evidently recorded 10 million more burials than births.
Where have all the babies gone?

Russia’s current depopulation bears all the trappings of a “demographic shock,” reflecting the vast, historic change from Soviet totalitarianism to a commercial democracy. Though it might seem reasonable to expect that earlier, more “normal” demographic patterns would reassert themselves as the reverberations from Russia’s “transition” subside, there are good reasons to believe that Russia’s current, seemingly anomalous population trends define a new norm for the country. Remarkably low birth rates and terrifyingly high death rates can accurately be described as regular, rather than transitory, features of the new Russian demographic terrain. A powerful and self-reinforcing network of social factors—forces typically resistant to rapid or easy emendation—will likely keep fertility low and mortality high in the Russian Federation. Until these fundamentals change, depopulation and tragically foreshortened lives will be the distinguishing features of the Russian population profile.

Consider Russia’s current fertility patterns. In a society with the Russian Federation’s present survival patterns, women must bear an average of about 2.33 children per lifetime to assure population stability over successive generations. In the late Soviet era, Russian fertility levels were near replacement: The country’s total fertility rate (TFR) fluctuated near two births per woman from the mid 1960s through the mid 1980s. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian fertility rate likewise collapsed, plummeting from 2.19 births per woman in 1986–87 to 1.17 in 1999. Moreover, extreme subreplacement fertility is not peculiar to certain regions of Russia today; to the contrary, it prevails across almost the entire territorial expanse of the Federation.

Since 2001, there have been some indications of a resurgence of fertility in the Russian Federation. For the year 2002, according to Goskomstat, the country’s total fertility rate has risen to 1.32. And for the year 2003, according to Russian Federation President Vladimir V. Putin in his 2004 New Year’s Day address, an “especially joyous” auspice was the absolute increase in births over the
previous year. According to Goskomstat, Russia’s total births rose in 2003 to 1.48 million—by that report, a 6 percent increase over the previous year. Birth figures for the first half of 2004, for their part, are 2 percent higher than for the first half of 2003.

These signs of improvement raise the question: If Russian fertility fell suddenly and sharply with the demise of the Soviet Union, might it not also rebound vigorously in an auspicious political and economic environment? That possibility cannot be entirely ruled out. Demographic science, after all, lacks any robust techniques for accurately predicting future fertility patterns. But even supposing an improvement in social conditions and an increase in general levels of confidence (improvements, it should be pointed out, not entirely independent from the demographic trends under discussion here), there are a number of factors weighing against a significant upsurge in the Russian birthrate—much less a return to earlier, Soviet-era, levels of fertility.

First, Russia’s poor and declining overall health patterns extend to the area of reproductive health. Notably, involuntary infertility is a more significant problem for Russia than for any other Western country. And the problem is getting worse, not better. To be sure, data on infertility for contemporary Russia are not entirely reliable. According to some recent reports, however, 13 percent of Russia’s married couples of childbearing age are infertile—nearly twice the 7 percent for the United States in 1995 as reported by the National Center for Health Statistics. Other Russian sources point to an even greater prevalence of infertility today, with numbers ranging as high as 30 percent of all males and females of childbearing age. Whatever the true level, medical diagnoses of infertility in Russia are clearly on the rise—suggesting that the 13 percent estimate and others of its ilk are more than just a statistical fluke.

With respect more specifically to female infertility, Russia suffers today from two pronounced and highly unusual risks. For one thing, Russian womanhood has, quite literally, been scarred by the country’s extraordinary popular reliance on abortion as a primary means of contracep-
tion—with the abortions in question conducted under the less-than-exemplary standards of Soviet and post-Soviet medicine. A Russian woman nowadays can expect to have more abortions than births over the course of her childbearing years. In 1988, at the end of the Soviet era, Russian women underwent an officially tabulated 4.6 million abortions—two for every live birth. In 2002, the country officially reported 1.7 million abortions—over 120 for every 100 live births.

And the problem of involuntary infertility in Russia today is further exacerbated by the current explosive spread of potentially curable sexually transmitted infections (STIs). According to official figures, for example, the incidence of syphilis in 2001 was one hundred times higher in Russia than in Germany, and several hundred times higher for Russia than a number of other European countries. One recent survey in St. Petersburg calculated that 15 percent of the college students questioned had at least one sexually transmitted disease. Since untreated or inadequately treated STIs can result in sterility the potential for inadvertent impediments to childbearing for Russia’s young men and women due to such infections could be appreciable.

A second obstacle to an increase in the Russian birthrate is the Russian family itself. Russian patterns of family formation have been evolving markedly over the past generation—and not in a direction conducive to larger families. Simply put, young Russians are now much less likely to marry—and ever more likely to divorce if they do.

Between 1981 and 2001, marriage rates fell by over one third, while divorce rates rose by one third. In 2001, Russia recorded three divorces for every four new marriages—a breakup ratio even higher than Scandinavia’s. The human import of these trends can perhaps be better understood by thinking in terms of a woman’s odds of getting married or divorced. In 1990, under Russia’s then-prevailing nuptiality patterns, marriage was almost universal—and the odds of eventually divorcing were about 40 percent. By 1995, the odds of getting married were down to 75 percent—while the odds of eventual divorce had risen to 50 percent. In just five years a Russian woman’s odds of forming a lasting marriage dropped from about
three in five to three in eight. Since then, the odds of having a lasting marriage in Russia seem to have declined still further.

At the same time that Russian marriages were becoming less common—and more fragile—the disposition to childbearing outside of marriage was increasing. In 1987—the recent high-water mark for Russian fertility—about 13 percent of the country’s newborns were out of wedlock. By 2001, the proportion had more than doubled, to nearly 29 percent. The overwhelming majority of Russia’s newly emerging cohort of illegitimate children, it seems, were being raised by single mothers. Consensual unions and cohabitation still account for the living arrangements of only a tiny fraction of Russia’s young adults.

The rapid decline of the two-parent family in contemporary Russia undercuts prospects for substantial increases in national fertility levels. Relative to available household resources, all other things being equal, raising children in a mother-only family is a much more expensive and difficult proposition than in an intact family. It is true that fertility rates in Russia are currently 20 to 30 percent below those of the Scandinavian countries, even though the level of marital commitment in the Nordic countries is low, and the level of illegitimacy is high. But unlike the Scandinavian welfare states, Russia does not provide generous public benefits to help mothers raise their young children—nor could the Russian state afford to do so even if it were so inclined.

The third, and perhaps most important, obstacle to higher Russian birthrates is that Russian fertility rates are reflective of larger European trends. True, Russia’s levels currently list toward the lower end of the European spectrum. Even so, they are actually higher than for some other post-Communist areas whose “transitions” to democracy and free markets look rather more complete—and are scarcely lower than the current levels in a number of the established market democracies of the European Union. Viewed over a longer horizon, Russia’s postwar fertility levels and trends look altogether “European.” Although the precise timing of Russia’s fertility decline is distinct,
Russia has nevertheless clearly followed the same general path as Italy, Spain, and Germany.

From a European perspective, in short, Russia’s current levels of extremely low fertility would hardly stand out as exceptional. It is thus far from obvious that the further suffusion into Russia of “European” norms and attitudes about family size (to the extent that such attitudes and norms are not already firmly rooted in Russian soil) should serve to buoy childbearing in the Russian Federation. Quite to the contrary. It is equally possible that an embrace of particular aspects of childbearing patterns currently manifest through much of the European Union (EU) could actually depress birth rates in Russia in coming years. Throughout the EU, for example, the median age at marriage for women is the late 20s, while it is still about 22 in Russia; Russia’s median female age at first birth, correspondingly, is distinctly lower than in most EU countries (23 vs. 27 to 29). A shift toward these EU patterns of marriage and maternity would have the immediate effect of postponing births, and thus probably lowering annual fertility further.

**The grim reaper cometh**

If Russia’s low fertility rates are cause enough for concern, its mortality rates are scandalously high. Broad segments of the Russian populace have suffered a disastrous long-term retrogression in health conditions.

A marked deterioration of public health in an industrialized society during peacetime is counterintuitive and highly peculiar. At first glance, the very fact that Russia’s mortality catastrophe looks so anomalous might seem to suggest that the problem should be intrinsically remedi- able—if not positively self-correcting. The particulars of Russia’s health and mortality woes, however, underscore just how difficult it will be to achieve even modest improvements in the years immediately ahead—and how vulnerable Russia remains to further degradations of public health.

Over the four-plus decades between 1961–62 and 2003, life expectancy at birth in Russia fell by nearly five years
for males; it also declined for females, although just slightly, making for an overall drop in life expectancy of nearly three years over this four-decade span. Age-standardized mortality rates cast an even grimmer light on Russia’s continuing health crisis: Between the mid 1960s and the start of the twenty-first century, these rates underwent a long and uneven rise, climbing by over 15 percent for women and over 40 percent for men.

Russia’s upswing in mortality was especially concentrated among its working-age population, and here the upsurge in death rates was utterly breathtaking. Over the three decades between 1970–71 and 2001, for example, every female cohort between the ages of 20 and 59 suffered at least a 30 percent increase in death rates; for men between the ages of 40 and 59, the corresponding figures uniformly reached, and some cases exceeded, 60 percent.

What accounted for this peacetime collapse in public health standards? To go by Russia’s (admittedly less than perfect) cause-of-death statistics, nearly all of the increase in mortality rates for men—and absolutely all of the increase for women—can be traced to an explosion in deaths attributed to cardiovascular disease (CVD—heart disease plus strokes) and injuries. Between the mid 1960s and the end of the twentieth century, CVD mortality rates in Japan, Western Europe, and North America fell sharply. Russia, by contrast, suffered an explosion of cardiovascular death over the same period. Between 1965 and 2001, Russia’s age-standardized death rate for CVD surged by 25 percent for women—and it soared by 65 percent for men. Today, CVD-related mortality in Russia is four times higher than in Ireland, five times higher than in Germany, and eight times higher than in France.

As for mortality attributed to injury—murder, suicide, traffic, poisoning, and other violent causes—age-adjusted levels for Russian men and women alike more than doubled between 1965 and 2001. Among contemporary societies at peace, Russia’s level of violent deaths places the country practically in a category of its own. For men under 65 years of age, Russia’s death rate from injury and poisoning is currently over four times as high as Finland’s, the nation with the worst rate in the EU. Russia’s violent
death rate for men under 65 is nearly six times as high as Belgium’s, over nine times as high as Israel’s, and over a dozen times that of the United Kingdom. As is well known, men are more likely than women to die violent deaths—but in a gruesome crossover, these death rates for Russian women are now higher than for most western European men.

Russia’s dismal health record can be explained in terms of a multiplicity of unfavorable social, behavioral, and policy tendencies: pervasive smoking; poor diets; sedentary life styles; increasing social atomization and anomie; the special economic stresses of Russia’s “transition”; the unimpressive capabilities of the Soviet medical system and the limited coverage of its successor. At the end of the day, however, it is impossible to overlook the deadly contribution of the Russian love of vodka.

From the sixteenth century—when vodka was first introduced to a receptive public—up to the present day, Russians have always demonstrated a predilection to drink heavy spirits in astonishing excess—a fact remarked upon by visiting foreigners for centuries. Russia’s thirst for hard liquor seems to have reached dizzying new heights in the late Soviet era, and then again in the early post-Communist era. By 1984, according to some estimates, the per capita level of alcohol intake in Russia was roughly three times as high as in 1913 (that pre-revolutionary era not exactly being remembered as a time of temperance). By the mid 1990s, Russian per capita alcohol intake may have even slightly surpassed its previous, Communist-era, zenith. In 1994, for example, the estimate of pure alcohol consumed by the population aged 15 and older amounted to 18.5 liters per capita annually—the equivalent of 125 cc. of vodka for everyone, every day.

As it happens, in recent decades variations in alcohol consumption seem to track fairly closely with changes in Russian mortality (and especially with male mortality)—the former being a leading indicator for the latter. Heavy drinking is directly associated with Russia’s appallingly high risk of deadly injury—and Russia’s binge drinking habits also seems to be closely associated with death through cardiac failure.
At the moment, the expert prognosis for Russian mortality in the years immediately ahead is pessimistic. The U.N. Population Division, for example, estimates the life expectancy for Russian men today to be lower than the average for men from the world’s “less developed regions” (such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America)—and though UNPD projections envision improvements for Russia in the coming decades, Russia does not reach the level of the less developed regions until around 2020. The U.S. Census Bureau, for its part, estimates that life expectancy for Russian men over the coming two decades will approximate the levels for their counterparts in Bangladesh and Pakistan—and will remain steadily below the levels anticipated for India.

Yet somber as these readings appear, they may nevertheless prove excessively optimistic. The Census Bureau projections for Russian mortality, for example, have tended to err on the high side: Where the Census Bureau projections in 2002 put Russian male life expectancy for 2002 at 62.3 years, Goskomstat’s actual data for that year turned out to be three and a half years lower. And although the UNPD is imagining unexceptional improvements in male health levels over the next two decades—less than four years’ increase between 2000–5 and 2020–25—there are reasons to think such a goal highly ambitious under Russia’s current circumstances. The problem, simply put, is that today’s Russians seem to be less healthy than their parents. Consequently, merely managing to re-attain the survival rates reported by that earlier generation will take some doing. It is an accomplishment that cannot be taken for granted.

Comparing the mortality schedules of successive birth cohorts in Russia places the problem of “negative health momentum” in even clearer perspective. In industrialized Western societies in the postwar era, younger generations have come routinely to enjoy better survival rates than their predecessors. Sometimes these improvements have been truly dramatic. In contemporary Japan, for example, men born in the early 1950s have, over their life course thus far, experienced death rates roughly half as high at any given age as those that were recorded for the cohort born 20 years before them. By contrast, there has been no
improvement in survival schedules for rising birth cohorts among the two generations of Russian men born between the late 1920s and the late 1980s. Quite the opposite: Over its life course, each rising cohort of Russian men seems to be charting out a more dismal mortality trajectory than the one traced by its immediate predecessors.

The “negative momentum” apparent in Russia’s modern-day mortality trends makes the objective of broad, sustained improvements in public health especially unlikely in the years ahead. And this analysis, it is worth noting, has yet to take into account the possibility of additional new health troubles on the horizon. Yet such problems are, quite plainly, gathering today. Foremost among them may be Russia’s still-mounting epidemic of HIV/AIDS. As we have already seen, curable STIs are now rampant in Russia—and generally speaking, epidemic levels of curable STIs seem to serve as a leading indicator for the spread of HIV.

Russian authorities have registered a cumulative total of just under 300,000 cases of HIV, while the U.N. Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) estimates that over 800,000 Russians were living with HIV as of 2003 (with an upper estimate of 1.4 million). The U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC) suggests that the true number as of 2002 could have been as high as 2 million. If the UNAIDS central estimate were accurate, Russia’s adult HIV prevalence rate would be over 2 percent; by the NIC’s 2002 estimates, it could already have been as high as 2.5 percent in 2002. The future course of Russia’s HIV epidemic is likewise clouded in uncertainty. Clearly, though, HIV has the potential to cancel any prospective health progress in Russia over the coming generation.

Progress is, of course, to be prayed for—and under the right circumstances, some progress may be achieved. But major reductions in Russia’s awful toll of excess mortality do not look to be in the cards any time soon.

The tightening demographic straitjacket

Russia’s demographic trends have unambiguously negative implications for Russian development and security.
The ramifications are manifold and far-reaching, some of them complex—but the basic outlines of the more important considerations can be briefly and simply adduced.

Russia’s lingering health and mortality crisis promises to be a brake on rapid economic development. In the modern era, the wealth of nations is represented, increasingly, in human rather than natural resources—and the richer the country, the more pronounced the tendency for “human capital” to overshadow or replace physical capital in the production process. Human health figures importantly in the overall composition of human capital, and thus the correspondence between human health and economic productivity has been fairly robust. In recent years, to judge by U.N. and World Bank data, an additional year of male life expectancy at birth has been associated with an increment of GNP per capita of about 8 percent.

The relationship between health and economic productivity, to be sure, is multidimensional and simultaneous—improved wealth also makes for better health, and does so through a variety of avenues. But it is difficult to see how Russia can expect, in some imagined future, to maintain a western standard of living if its work force suffers from a third-world schedule of survival—or worse.

Skeptics might argue that health does not seem to be constraining Russia’s economic progress today—recorded growth rates, after all, have been high for the past several years. Perhaps poor health will not overly constrain Russian economic development in the years ahead, since Russia can earn large dividends from the exploitation and sale of its abundant natural resources. But Russia’s dependence upon extractive industries only emphasizes just how limited the role of “human capital” is in Russia’s current international trade profile.

Russia’s poor health prospects, furthermore, stand to influence its economic potential far into the future. According to year 2000 survival schedules, for example, a 20-year-old Russian youth had only a 46 percent chance of reaching age 65 (compared with a 79 percent chance for an American counterpart). That discrepancy will surely affect the cost-benefit calculus of investments in educa-
tion and job training—and not to the benefit of Russia's younger generation or its overall economic outlook.

In the short run, the collapse of Russian fertility may have little practical (as opposed to psychological) import for daily life or affairs of state. If, however, extreme subreplacement fertility persists, current and continued childbearing patterns would directly shape the Russian future. In some nontrivial respects, it could materially limit Russian national options. In the decades immediately ahead, for example, Russia looks set to contend with a sharp fall-off in the nation's youth population. Between 1975 and 2000, for example, the number of young men aged 15 to 24 ranged between 10 million and 13 million—but by 2025, in current UNPD projections, the total will be down to barely 6 million. Those figures would imply a 45 percent decrease between 2000 and 2025 in the size of this pivotal population group—as compared with a projected 15 percent decline in Russia's overall population.

The military implications of the envisioned disproportionate shrinkage of the age group from which the Russian army draws its manpower are obvious enough. But there would also be serious economic and social reverberations. With fewer young people rising to replace older retirees, the question of improving (or perhaps maintaining) the average level of skills and qualifications in the economically active population would become that much more pressing. And since younger people the world over tend to be disposed toward, and associated with, innovation and entrepreneurial risk-taking, a declining younger population could have intangible, but real, consequences.

In a world of still-growing populations and generally improving health conditions, Russia would seem to face an uphill struggle. Between 2000 and 2025, by UNPD medium variant projections, Russia's share of total global population is envisioned as shrinking by a third, from 2.4 percent to 1.6 percent. Over the same period, improvements in Russia's life expectancy are expected to underperform the global average somewhat. Simply to maintain its share of world output, Russia's per capita economic growth would have to exceed the world's average by 1.6
points a year for the quarter century under consideration to compensate for relative population decline. To some important extent, a country’s relative economic potential limits its international political influence and its international security. Russia’s demographic prospects thus establish an obvious challenge for the nation over the coming generation. Can it avoid, through compensatory economic policies and foreign policy stratagems, the geopolitical marginalization to which demographic trends alone would seem to consign it?

The politics of depopulation

Russia’s political leaders are by no means incognizant of the demographic vise gripping their nation. The country’s politicians and policy makers talk about the nation’s population constantly. However, Moscow has done almost nothing worth mentioning to reverse the demographic catastrophe that has been unfolding on Russian soil over the past decade.

To the extent that Russian policy makers have concerned themselves with the country’s negative natural increase problem, they have focused almost entirely upon the birth rate—and how to raise it. Not surprisingly, this pro-natalist impulse has foundered on the shoals of finance. In plain terms, serious pro-natalism is an expensive business, especially when the potential parents-to-be are educated, urbanized women accustomed to careers with paid recompense. To induce a serious and sustained increase in childbearing, a government under such circumstances must be prepared to get into the business of hiring women to be mothers—and this is a proposition that could make the funding of a national pension system look like pin money by comparison. Consequently, Russia’s government has concentrated most of its pro-natalist efforts on attempting to “talk the birth rate up”—and as a century of experience with such official chatter in Western countries will attest, that gambit is almost always utterly ineffectual.

In 2003, the Russian government began experimenting with another variant of “pro-natalism on the cheap”: a quiet attempt to restrict the previously unconditional avail-
ability of abortion on demand. There are, of course, ethical reasons for opposition to the promiscuous destruction of fetuses. But from a strictly demographic standpoint, the dividends derived from a slight and gradual tightening of the rules on pregnancy termination are distinctly limited.

Reducing the number of abortions, after all, does not mechanismically increase birth totals. If it did, there should have been a baby-boom in post-Communist Russia. (Remember: Russia had about three million fewer abortions in 2002 than in 1987—but also about a million fewer births.) To the extent that Russia’s tentative steps toward the regulation of abortion may be seen as a factor boosting the nation’s fertility, the effect would largely be felt through the eventual enhancement of fecundity—which is to say, fewer Russian women would be rendered involuntarily sterile through such procedures in the years ahead. But in the greater scheme of things, that could hardly be described as much of a stimulus.

While Russian policy circles trained their attention on a literally fruitless and largely misdirected effort to revitalize the birth rate, they treated the country’s catastrophic mortality conditions—upon which sustained interventions would have yielded some predictable results—with an insouciance verging on indifference. Indeed, Russian authorities have adopted a remarkably laissez-faire posture toward the calamitous conditions that currently lead to the “excess mortality” of something like 400,000 of their citizens each year.

Russia’s devastating cardiovascular epidemic and its carnage from violent death might not be immediately controlled or completely prevented, but their cost could be at least somewhat contained through carefully tailored public policies. Yet government policy makers have shown no interest in pursuing such options.

Crisis in democracy

Moscow’s feckless approach to its ongoing national health emergency would be regarded as a scandal in most foreign quarters. But to Western eyes it also constitutes something of a mystery: How is it possible that such a
manifestly inadequate health regimen is tolerated in a still somewhat open and pluralistic political system? The proximate explanation for this puzzle is that, until now, no great political pressure has been brought to bear for correction or adjustment of the government’s course—and the absence of such articulated pressures reflects in turn a lack of perceived political concern by the public at large. Russia may have already lost the equivalent of its casualties in two, or more, World War I’s through premature mortality since 1992. But as yet there has been almost no public outcry about this peacetime outrage, and none of the dozens of competitive parties in Russia’s new electoral environment have seen fit to champion the promotion of the nation’s health as its own political cause. This is more than a health crisis. It constitutes nothing less than a fundamental test for Russia’s troubled fledgling democracy.