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## After 15 years of transition, the Russian population is still in turmoil

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Since the end of the Soviet era, the population of Russia has fallen substantially. The October 2002 census made it possible to quantify this decrease and to examine the factors involved. Alain Blum and Cécile Lefèvre assess the situation and reflect upon the role of social policies. The upheavals of the last 15 years are the latest episode in a turbulent demographic history, and this is highlighted by the deep notches in the Russian population pyramid.

The census of the Russian Federation – the first since the break-up of the USSR – has refuelled the debate which flared up at the end of the Yeltsin years concerning the population decline (its Russian component especially), often attributed to the transformation of the country's economic and social system.

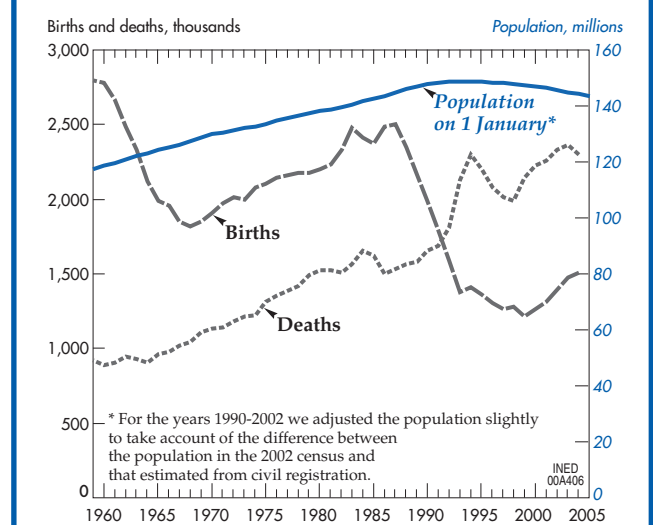
### ◆ The population is declining and fleeing the inhospitable regions

In 1989, the date of the last Soviet census, Russia had 147.0 million inhabitants. According to the 2002 census, the population totals 145.2 million. So it has indeed dropped, but by less than predicted by the statistical office, which had calculated that Russia's population would count only 143.5 million inhabitants on 1 January 2002 (1). The census confirms a reduction in the birth rate since the 1980s, associated with a very large shortfall in births compared with deaths (Figures 1 and 2). Without migration, which offsets this deficit, the population would have dropped by over 7 million between the two censuses (Table 1).

The population has dropped in all regions except for the Northern Caucasus, which experienced a particularly large influx of refugees, and a few regions of the

Urals, which are enjoying a return to economic growth and are once again attracting manual workers [1]. The population of Moscow, where much of the country's wealth is concentrated, is also growing fast. However, the decrease in Siberia and the Far East is especially acute. The region of Magadan has lost more than 200,000 of the 386,000 inhabitants that it counted in 1989. In the

Figure 1 - Changes in the Russian population



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(1) Based on the observation of natural increase (births and deaths which have always been correctly recorded) and an evaluation of the migration balance.

**Tableau 1 - Components of the change in the Russian population between 1989 and 2002 (in millions)**

Population in January 1989	147.0
Births	20.5
Death	27.9
Natural increase	-7.4
Immigration	11.0
Emigration	5.4
Net migration	5.6
Total change	-1.8
Population in October 2002	145.2

Source: Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat).  
<http://www.perepis2002.ru>

Chukotka region, in Russia's extreme north-east, the population has dropped by a third in thirteen years (100,000 in 2002 versus 157,000 in 1989). In many of the Arctic regions, where the harsh living conditions and absence of prospects are no longer offset by financial benefits or incentives, as was the case in the days of the Soviet Union, whole districts of abandoned houses and buildings standing three-quarters empty are now a common sight.

The census has some imperfections however. The results concerning the population of Chechnya and Ingushetiya are, quite clearly, considerably overestimated. As for those concerning the city of Moscow, they exceed the current estimates by over a million. Substantial efforts were made to ensure an accurate count, but due to insufficient preparation, the discretion given to the enumerators probably led to many double-counts, and to very approximate enumeration. For example, the enumerators sometimes used lists of inhabitants kept by the housing management organizations or relied on statements of neighbours about inhabitants absent from their home [2].

An innovation in this census was the publication of results concerning foreigners residing in the Russian Federation and a reformulation of the officially recognized national categories and ethnic groups [3]. The figures now make it possible to distinguish, among the citizens of former USSR states, between those who have adopted the nationality of one of these new states and those who have acquired Russian citizenship. Around 90 % of the foreign nationals in fact come from one of the eleven republics of the former Soviet Union which, with Russia, form the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Azerbaijanis and Armenians represent a particularly large proportion of them. Chinese and Vietnamese form the only group of non-CIS foreigners with a significant presence, though their true numbers have probably been underestimated.

## ◆ Extremely high mortality

The census confirms the deterioration in the country's state of health. The failure of the healthcare system is not new. In the late 1960s, the country missed an opportunity to refocus health policy away from infectious diseases and towards the prevention of cardio-vascular diseases and the treatment of chronic illnesses. The 1990s were marked by repeated attempts to introduce greater decentralization and privatization into the health system. It is difficult to measure all their effects but, in the opinion of patients, medical personnel and medical insurance organizations, the current system suffers from a lack of clarity and increasing complexity. The latest reform of the financing of free medication for old people and welfare beneficiaries is an example of this. In force since January 2005, it transfers responsibility for financing free medication (2) away from the ministry for social security to the health insurance fund. This measure may appear sensible, but its implementation has led to particularly long delays in obtaining prescribed drugs. As a result, many people have foregone their entitlement and resorted to procuring drugs at their own expense.

Apart from a few short-lived improvements during the Gorbachov and Yeltsin years [2] [6], life expectancy (figure 3) has been decreasing continuously since the mid-1960s. The Russian state clearly underrates the extent of this catastrophic situation. The deterioration has been particularly serious for men, who in 2003 had a life expectancy of 59 years, below that of France at the end of the Second World War. The increase in the accidental death rate amongst working-age men is one explanation for this: levels of suicides, road accidents and homicides are very high and are due, in part, to an exceptionally high rate of alcoholism. For women, the life expectancy is 72 years, or the level reached in France in the mid-1950s.

Amongst the central and eastern European countries, Russia, along with the Ukraine [4], is one of the last in which life expectancy is either stationary or falling. The absence of ambitious structural reforms, particularly concerning access to health care or the fight against alcoholism (3), is certainly one of the reasons for this.

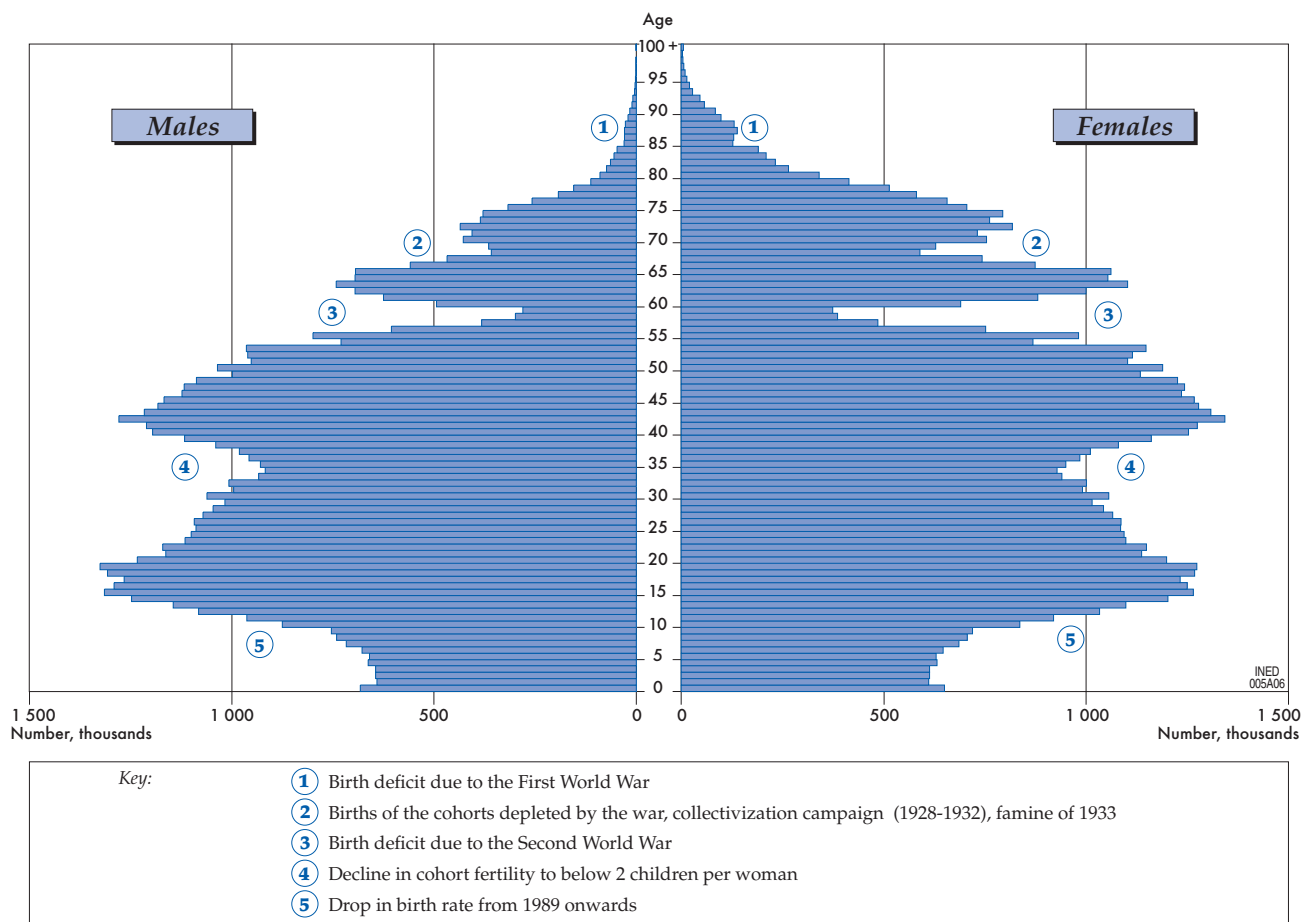
## ◆ The family is changing

The family has changed very quickly and behaviour patterns are very different from those of the Soviet era [5]. The final years of the Soviet Union saw a decrease in the age at marriage whilst everywhere else in Europe it was on the increase. Early marriage and frequent

(2) For the rest of the population, medicine has to be paid for but basic health care is provided free of charge in public health centres.

(3) S.Shishkin, T.Bogatova, E.Potapchik, et al. (2002) Free medicine: reality and prospects, (Independent Institute for Social Policy), Moscow, IISP Working Paper Series WPI /2002/07 216 p. (in Russian).

Figure 2 – Population pyramid of Russia in 2002

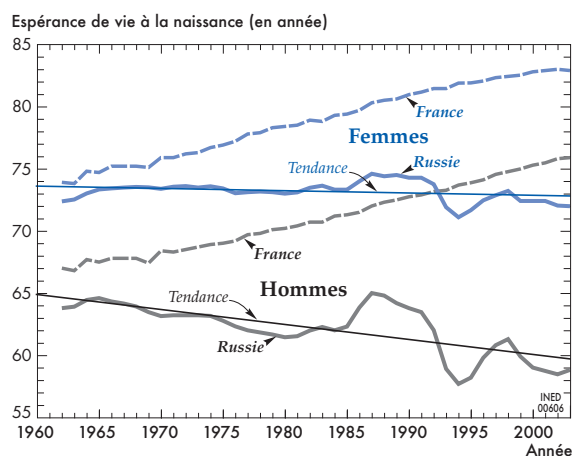


Source: 2002 census

co-residence with the parents of one of the spouses was rapidly followed by the birth of a first child (young couples rarely used contraception and abortion was rarely recommended before the first birth), and often ended in divorce [6].

From the 1990s onward, this model gradually disappeared. The timing of union formation and first births began to shift. The tendency has been accentuated by the lengthening of time spent in education and hence later entry of young people onto the labour market. While in the 1989 census, almost a third of young people between the ages of 15 and 19 declared that they were employed, only one in ten did so in 2002 (4). These combined factors tend to delay first marriage and, consequently, the first birth. Marriage used to be a pre-requisite for allocation of housing, but this is no longer the case, and in the same way, is no longer an essential stage in gaining independence from the parental home and in first union formation. The 2002 census shows the extent of the change during the last decade. Whereas in 1989 almost 80% of women in Russia between the ages of 25 and 29 were married or living with a partner, the proportion was only 65% in 2002, with 22% declaring themselves to be single (5).

Figure 3 – Evolution de l'espérance de vie en Russie



Source: Rosstat de la Fédération de Russie.

(4) These figures are not directly comparable due to a change in the way that labour force participation is taken into account, though the difference is large enough to reflect real changes.

(5) The question was reformulated in 2002 and this probably affected the replies. In 1989 no distinction was made between "married couple" and "unmarried couple" but out of habit most unmarried persons living with a partner reported that they were married. The distinction was made in 2002.

The fertility trends confirm these changes in attitude, with a very rapid decline in fertility since the late 1980s (from 2.23 children per woman in 1987 to 1.32 in 2002) and an increase in the average age at first birth, previously exceptionally low (figure 4). The fertility decline has no doubt been accelerated by a rapid change in the behaviour of certain cohorts. Couples that had already given birth to children stopped doing so, especially since these births had been brought forward in response to pronatalist measures adopted in the early 1980's. Young adults, for their part, now postpone family formation by delaying both union formation and the birth of their first child, due partly to the deteriorating economic conditions but above all to a fundamental change in attitudes towards the family. The cumulative effect of these two factors has led to a large drop in the fertility rate and in the number of births (figures 1 and 4). Another notable development is the halving of the abortion rate between 1991 and 2002, from a lifetime average of 3.4 abortions per woman to just 1.8 (6). The total number of abortions dropped from four million in 1990 to 1.9 million in 2002, despite an increase in the number of women of childbearing age. The decline in the number of abortions and births is explained by increased contraceptive practice, with growing use of the IUD, the pill and the condom.

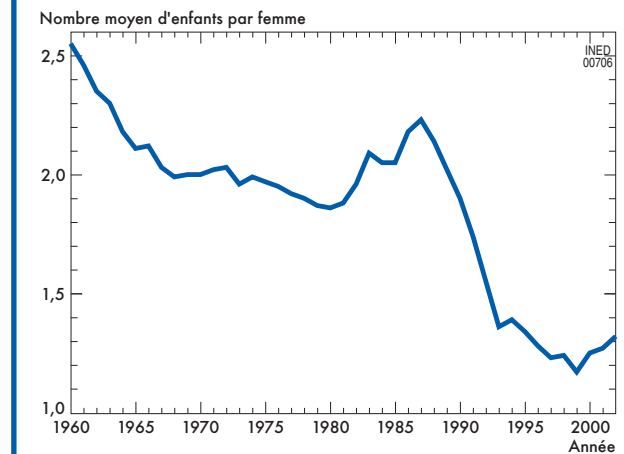
Many of these changes are linked to the emergence of new social and family models combined, in the 1990's, with the effects of the economic crisis and political upheaval. Having a child during this period, and a fortiori having several children, was an increased factor of economic insecurity and of poverty. Although a family allowance system does exist in Russia, it has gone through numerous changes since 1991 (regionalization of the system in 1994, change from a universal system to a means-tested system in 1998, recentralization in 2000, but with the emergence of regional allowance initiatives in 2003-2004, etc.). The allowances, often paid very late and in any case extremely small, have had little effect on general fertility trends [7] [8].

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Will these trends continue into the twenty-first century? The annual number of births has remained stable since 2000 (figure 1). In addition, first births increasingly occur outside marriage. The proportion of such births, which stood at 18% in 1993, reached almost 30% in 2003, half of which are acknowledged by both parents, a proportion which is also increasing. There is nothing exceptional about this rate in Europe, but its rapid increase is proof of a change in attitude with respect to marriage.

(6) This is a period indicator of abortion, which measures the frequency of abortions for a given year.

Figure 4 - Évolution de la fécondité en Russie



Source: Rosstat de la Fédération de Russie.

The transformations in marriage and birth rates are thus closely linked to changes in the social and political environment and to the new economic constraints under which these families are being formed. They are also the expression of a different relationship between individuals and the overall context: lower expectations with respect to the state, priority given to access to employment rather than to family formation. They tend to bring the thought processes that guide Russian families closer to those observed elsewhere in Europe. This is not the case as regards mortality in Russia, which is still affected by trends that began after the Second World War and, above all, trends observed since the 1970's, strongly marked by an inadequate healthcare policy.

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