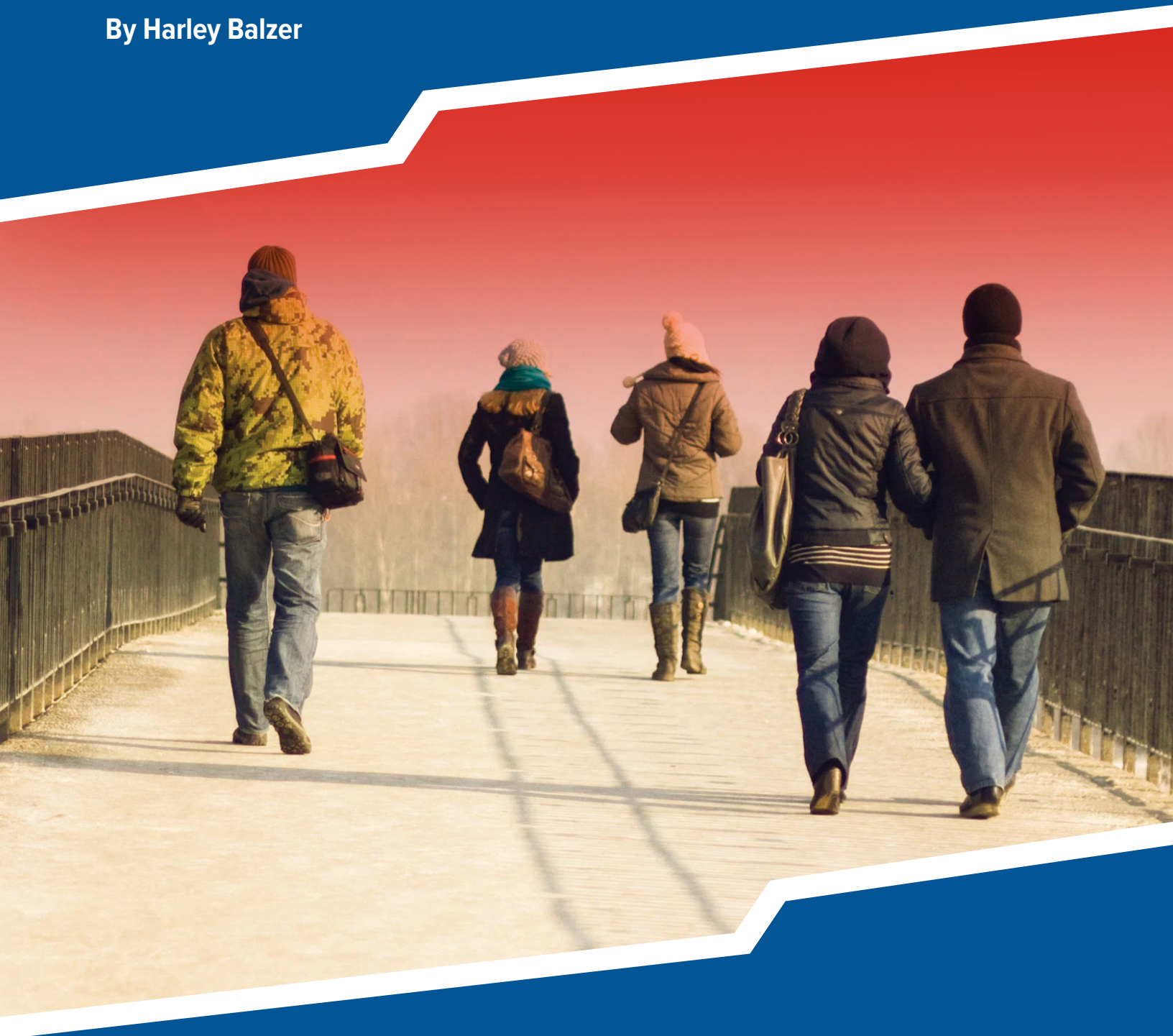


# A RUSSIA WITHOUT RUSSIANS?

## Putin's Disastrous Demographics

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By Harley Balzer



Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 challenged much of the common Western understanding of Russia. How can the world better understand Russia? What are the steps forward for Western policy? The Eurasia Center's new "Russia Tomorrow" series seeks to reevaluate conceptions of Russia today and better prepare for its future tomorrow.

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Atlantic Council  
1030 15th Street NW, 12th Floor  
Washington, DC 20005

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# INTRODUCTION\*

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Russia's future will be characterized by a smaller population. Russian President Vladimir Putin's war has virtually guaranteed that for generations to come, Russia's population will be not only smaller, but also older, more fragile, and less [well-educated](#).<sup>1</sup> It will almost certainly be ethnically less Russian and more religiously diverse. While some might view diversity as a strength, [many Russians](#) do not see it this way.<sup>2</sup> In a world with hordes of people on the move to escape war, persecution, poverty, and the increasing impact of climate change, xenophobic political rhetoric sells well.

Putin has spoken frequently about Russia's demographic problems, beginning in his first months as president. Despite spending trillions of rubles on high-profile "national projects" to remedy the situation, population decline continued. Putin's choice of timing for military aggression in Ukraine might have reflected an understanding that Russia's demographic (and economic) situation would not improve in the next two decades. However, the war is turning a growing crisis into a catastrophe.

The demographic consequences from the Russian war against Ukraine, like those from World War II and the health, birth rate and life expectancy impact from Russia's protracted transition in the 1990s, will echo for generations. Russia's population will decline for the rest of the twenty-first century, and ethnic Russians will be a smaller proportion of that population. The ethnic and religious groups that embrace the "traditional family values" Putin favors are predominantly non-Russian.

United Nations scenarios project Russia's population in 2100 to be between 74 million and 112 million compared with the current [146 million](#).<sup>3</sup> The most recent [UN projections](#) are for the world's population to decline by about 20 percent by 2100.<sup>4</sup> The estimate for Russia is a decline of 25 to 50 percent.

While Russia is hardly unique in facing declining birth rates and an aging population, high adult mortality, and infertility among both men and women, increasingly limited immigration and continuing brain drain make Russia's situation particularly challenging. Population size is determined by a combination of natural factors—birth rates and life expectancy, along with the emigration-immigration balance. Putin's war on Ukraine has undermined all the potential sources of population growth.

\* This report draws on material from a forthcoming chapter in a volume under contract with Brookings Institution Press: *Failure. Russia Under Putin*, edited by Harley D. Balzer and Steven A. Fisher. The material is used with permission from the Press.

There have been four important inflection points in demography policy since Putin became president. The first came in 2006, when Putin's rhetoric about demography finally resulted in specific policies: demography was one of the first four national projects he launched at that time.<sup>5</sup> The second significant change came following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The reaction to that aggression in Ukraine, Moldova, and other former Soviet republics narrowed the number of countries providing labor to Russia.

A third key moment was the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack near Moscow in March 2024. Tajiks made up half of the immigrants to Russia in 2023, but that has become politically problematic in the aftermath of the Crocus attack.<sup>6</sup> The most recent policy shifts accompanied the formation of a new government in May 2024. Initial reports promise a long-term approach that perhaps begins to recognize Russia's new demographic reality. It comes too late, and the measures proposed fail to offer new solutions.

The paper begins with a summary of the demographic problems the Russian Federation inherited from the Soviet Union and its ineffective initial response. The second section reviews the deteriorating situation after 2013.<sup>7</sup> The third section focuses on ways Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine is exacerbating all of these challenges. The conclusion suggests what impact population decline will have on Russia's future.

# ADDRESSING THE SOVIET LEGACY

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➤ **T**he Soviet Union experienced multiple demographic shocks in the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Following Joseph Stalin’s death, recovery appeared possible. Yet by the 1960s, Russia’s high infant mortality and low adult life expectancy were outliers compared with most highly industrialized countries.<sup>9</sup>

The population shock from World War II echoed for decades. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign in 1986–1987 generated a brief improvement in life expectancy, but this was hardly enough to change the dynamic.

Economic disruptions, beginning with Gorbachev’s perestroika and continuing into the 1990s, resulted in fewer births, higher mortality, and significant emigration.<sup>10</sup> The dissolution of the Soviet Union spurred massive population relocation, as millions of Russians and non-Russians returned to their titular homelands. Every former Soviet republic became more ethnically homogeneous. This trend has continued within the Russian Federation, as some non-Russian republics continue to become less Russian. Russians relocating within the Russian Federation have [reduced the population in the Far East](#).<sup>11</sup>

Russia’s immigration-emigration balance involves several population flows. Russians have moved back to Russia from newly independent former Soviet republics. As Russia’s economy improved, labor migrants, primarily from former Soviet republics, have found formal and informal work in Russia. Prior to the war, the immigrants compensated for the multiple waves of (mostly Russian) people emigrating from Russia.

The breakdown of the Warsaw Pact—and then the Soviet Union itself—disrupted economic linkages and supply chains that had existed for decades. Economic insecurity reduced already-declining birth rates across much of the post-Soviet space. Russia’s total fertility rate (TFR)—the number of births per woman—dropped from just below replacement level in 1988 to 1.3 in 2004. Maintaining a population level requires a TFR of at least 2.1 without positive net immigration; Russia’s high adult mortality rate requires one even higher.<sup>12</sup>

In his initial inaugural address in August 2000, Putin warned that Russia could become “an enfeebled nation” due to population decline.<sup>13</sup> Despite the warnings, little was done. Russia’s TFR increased from 1.25 in 2000 to 1.39 in 2007.<sup>14</sup> This slight improvement reflected better economic conditions due to rising oil prices, and a (temporarily) larger number of women in the 18–35 age cohort.

### Russian children born per woman, 2000–2007

YEAR	FERTILITY RATE
2007	1.39
2006	1.28
2005	1.27
2004	1.26
2003	1.33
2002	1.30
2001	1.27
2000	1.25

SOURCE: “*The World Factbook 2008*.”

One reason for persistent difficulty in achieving higher birth rates or TFR numbers has been the legacy of Soviet policies. Lack of access to effective birth control and male resistance to condom use resulted in abortion being the widely used solution for unwanted pregnancies. Murray Feshbach calculated that the Soviet-era abortion rate averaged **seven per woman**.<sup>15</sup>

Far less attention has been devoted to male infertility. Alcohol and substance abuse have resulted in unusually high infertility rates among Russian men.<sup>16</sup>

Low birth rates are only one part of the population problem. Unhealthy diet and lifestyle, binge alcohol consumption, and accidents contribute to the high adult mortality numbers.<sup>17</sup> When Putin was first elected president in 2000, Russian men aged 18–64 were dying at four times the rate of European men. Russian women were perishing at about the same rate as European men.<sup>18</sup>

Until early 2005, Putin’s public position was that Russia could offset its population decline by attracting more Russians living in former Soviet republics to return to Russia, bringing with them needed skills while augmenting the ethnic Russian population. This immigration offset much of the population loss in the 1990s but has increasingly declined since Putin became president. Significantly, non-Russians became the dominant labor migrants.



Data from the Russian state statistics service Goskomstat indicate legal immigration peaked at 1.147 million in 1994 and declined each year thereafter, shrinking to 350,900 in 2000 and 70,000 in 2004.<sup>19</sup>

#### Percentage of immigrants replacing population decline

YEAR	PERCENTAGE
1992–1995	60–93 percent
1996–1998	41–47 percent
1999	17 percent
2003	0.4 percent

Despite the declining numbers, the Russian government adopted a [highly restrictive law](#) in 2002 limiting legal immigration.<sup>20</sup> When the Security Council discussed immigration again in 2005, Putin called for a more “humane approach,” dropping the racial and religious criteria. Yet he followed this with a “[clarification](#)” prioritizing Russian speakers.<sup>21</sup> It is possible that Putin understood the situation but adjusted his rhetoric in accord with public opinion.

Russian media reports of a massive influx of Chinese immigrants in the 1990s were wildly exaggerated.<sup>22</sup> By 2000, as oil prices rose, workers from Central Asia, Ukraine, and Moldova found formal or informal work in Russia. Russia incorporated the populations of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, and additional territories since 2022, which accounts for official claims of a larger “Russian” population.

Immigrants to Russia have come overwhelmingly from former Soviet republics, which account for 95–96 percent of the total. Just five countries that were part of the Soviet Union (Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) had population growth between 1989 and 2004.<sup>23</sup> Migrants from two former Soviet republics with declining populations, Ukraine and Moldova, continued to provide labor until 2014. Putin reiterated the importance of demography in his inaugural addresses in [2012](#), [2018](#), and [2024](#), and in many of his annual call-in programs.<sup>24</sup> Several times he has acknowledged the failure to achieve promised increases in births. Yet there appears to be no learning curve regarding policies. Putin’s [2024 address](#) promised more of the same: paying Russians to have larger families, accompanied by invoking the need for more soldiers to defend the motherland.<sup>25</sup>

# PRE-WAR POLICIES

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**A**s the price of oil increased in the 2000s, Putin’s government debated how to use the windfall to address persistent demographic challenges. As in many countries, immigration remains politically fraught. Russian nationalist groups adopted “Russia for the Russians” as a campaign slogan. Improving life expectancy is an ideal solution, but it is slow and expensive, depending on adults taking care of their health. Putin’s government opted for pro-natal policies. In his presidential address in 2006, Putin cited demography as “the most serious problem in Russia today.”<sup>26</sup> Rather than listening to advisers familiar with the basket of diverse policies that improved birth rates in France and Sweden—prenatal and postnatal care, parental leave, daycare, preschool programs, housing support, and other incentives—Russia’s government emphasized “maternity capital.”<sup>27</sup>

The initial maternity capital program offered incentives to women for the birth or adoption of a second or additional child. The funds, paid when a child turned three, could be used for housing, the child’s education at an accredited institution, the mother’s pension, or assistance for children with disabilities. Over time, changes have included payment for a first child and improved housing. The annually indexed funding was enough to encourage additional births in rural areas and smaller towns but had little impact in higher-priced urban areas that are home to 70 percent of the population. Moreover, many women who experienced giving birth in a Russian maternity hospital decided once was sufficient.<sup>28</sup>

The pro-natal policy coincided with slightly higher Russian birth rates, raising the TFR from 1.3 when the maternity-capital program was launched in 2007 to nearly 1.8 in 2015.<sup>29</sup> Most demographers, however, attribute the higher numbers to a (temporarily) larger cohort of women in prime child-bearing years, economic growth due to higher oil prices during Putin’s first two terms, and hopes that nationwide protests over the 2011–2012 elections augured real change. After 2012, the reduced number of returning compatriots *offset* the gains in births.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the augmented maternity-capital program, Russia’s TFR dropped back to 1.5 by 2019, prior to COVID-19 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian official sources continued to report the rate as 1.8. Without immigration, even a TFR of 1.8 would result in Russia’s population decreasing by about 20–25 percent in each generation.<sup>31</sup>

The other endogenous factor in natural population change is life expectancy. Russia is hardly an outlier in experiencing lower birth rates. Most countries outside of Africa are projected to have smaller populations in the coming decades.<sup>32</sup> Yet Russia continues to be exceptional among developed countries in the rate of mortality among adults aged 18–64. Russia’s economic recovery during Putin’s first two terms as President did lead to some improvement. While Russian men died at four times the rate of European men in 1990, by 2022 the rate was merely double the European rate.<sup>33</sup>

The modest improvements during Putin's first two terms were due to the economic recovery, greater stability, and efforts to improve healthcare. Yet the major focus of the healthcare program was not the badly needed primary and preventive care. Instead, most of the funds were used to purchase expensive new equipment, creating opportunities for graft.

The improvements in life expectancy began to reverse by 2019. Russia's COVID-19 response was deeply flawed, resulting in the highest per-capita death rate among industrialized countries, though official statistics have consistently concealed the impact.<sup>34</sup>

Economic benefits from people living longer are double edged. The impact depends on individuals' capacity to work and the related dependency ratio for the population. Societies need enough able-bodied workers to support the young, the old, and the disabled.

Russia's demographic issues involve quality as well as quantity. Even before Putin opted to invade Ukraine, Russia was experiencing another significant brain drain. Just before the war, Valerii Fal'kov, Russia's Minister of Science and Higher Education, told Putin that the number of scientists in Russia was declining. Outside of atomic energy and the defense industry, Russia's best specialists preferred to work in the US, Europe, and "even China." Nikolai Dolgushkin, Academy of Sciences Chief Scientific Secretary, reported that emigration by scientists had increased from 14,000 in 2012 to 70,000 in 2021. Russia was the only developed nation where the number of [scientific personnel was shrinking](#).<sup>35</sup>

The challenges have become more serious, as the war on Ukraine has resulted in as many as half a million young men killed or wounded, women choosing to forego having children, women being sent to fight in Ukraine, and more than one million mostly young and highly educated people [choosing to leave Russia](#).<sup>36</sup>

Replacing them has been increasingly undermined by shortsighted government policies. In a country with a history of claiming to be multinational while viewing Russians as the system-forming ethnicity, recent government policies are creating additional difficulties. One of the great ironies of the situation Putin has created is that, in addition to poor rural villagers, the demographic groups best matching his August 2022 decree advocating "preservation and strengthening traditional Russian spiritual-moral values" are Russia's [non-Russian and non-Russian Orthodox populations](#).<sup>37</sup>

# THE ETHNIC VARIABLE

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➤ **R**ussia's birth rates vary across regions and ethnic and religious populations. The rates in major urban centers resemble those of Central Europe, with later marriages, widespread use of birth control, and a large number of single-child families. Rural regions and small towns tend to retain more traditional values around child-rearing. People in these venues marry and begin having children earlier and are far more likely to have two or more children. Yet 70 percent of Russians live in the urban centers. The citizens most likely to have large families live in villages, small towns, and Russia's non-Russian regions and Republics. In 2023, the non-Russian share of the population was about **30 percent**.<sup>38</sup>

Putin-era policies have persistently undermined the principles of federalism enshrined in Russia's 1993 constitution. Some non-Russians believe the assault on their special status stems, in part, from Russians fearing their higher birth rates.

Significant differences in birth rates among ethnic and religious groups within Russia pose serious policy challenges. Some groups have been more resistant to the "demographic transition" than others.<sup>39</sup> The predominantly non-Russian and Muslim republics of the North Caucasus are experiencing the "demographic transition" more slowly than most Russian regions. The Chechens in particular have responded to their deportation to Central Asia during World War II with a **strong pro-natal ethos**.<sup>40</sup>

Comparative studies find relationships between high birth rates and traditional religious beliefs in multiple places. Some accounts emphasize higher birth rates among Muslims, despite wide variation across communities. Religious conservatives in many faiths record higher birth rates: evangelical Christians, Mormons, Hindus, Orthodox Jews, and others. Some groups have historically been known for large families. In Russia, some non-Russian ethnic groups have higher birth rates than Russians. The birth rates in the largely Muslim North Caucasus have been a particular concern for Moscow. Despite birth rates among many ethnic populations declining, births in many non-Russian communities continue to remain higher than those of ethnic Russians.<sup>41</sup>

Several analysts call attention to a phenomenon of ethnic groups that feel threatened responding with high fertility rates. Russia's "punished peoples"—those accused of sympathizing with the Germans during World War II and deported from their homelands—have received particular attention. Marat Ilyasov, a scholar from Chechnya who now teaches in the US, makes a strong case for the Chechens, one of the groups that managed to return to their ancestral territory, striving for high birth rates to guarantee the nation's survival. They have the highest birth rates in the country.<sup>42</sup>

Chechens are hardly the only ethnic group in the North Caucasus with birth rates higher than the Russian average. Some official sources intentionally downplay

the numbers of Chechens and other non-Russian groups in an attempt to emphasize “Russianness” and downplay the significance of non-Russian populations.<sup>43</sup>

Some Russian demographers suggest that non-Russians are increasingly experiencing the “demographic revolution,” but at a slower pace. While this is plausible, complaints about changing definitions and undercounting in recent Russian censuses provide ample grounds for skepticism regarding the official numbers.

Even the official data show that birth rates continue to be higher among many of the non-Russian groups in Russia. Many leaders of non-Russian peoples claim that these populations are being sent to fight in Ukraine in far larger numbers than ethnic Russians. Russian officials try to emphasize that it is the rural population that provides most of the soldiers, due to the high wages the military offers.

Data show that individuals from ethnic republics in Russia’s far east and south have a far higher chance of being mobilized for combat. While proving intent is complicated, the numbers are shocking. Men living in Buryatia have a 50- to 100-percent **greater chance** of being sent to fight in Ukraine than a resident of Moscow or St. Petersburg.<sup>44</sup>

It is too early to gauge whether the high numbers of deaths and injuries will stimulate a response by some groups to try increasing birth rates. It does appear that the war is resulting in a more serious decline in births among ethnic Russians in urban centers than in both Russian and non-Russian rural communities. Russia’s non-ethnic-Russian citizens increasingly perceive their populations as being singled out as cannon fodder in Ukraine.<sup>45</sup>

Immigrants have also been pressed into military service, causing a precipitous drop in immigration.

# WARTIME POLICIES UNDERMINE POPULATION GROWTH

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➤ **R**ussia's natural population growth has been curtailed by mobilization, casualties, emigration, and widespread reluctance to have children. Illegally annexing Crimea added 2.4 million people to Russia's population, but significantly reduced immigration from Ukraine and Moldova. After 2014, labor migration to Russia was limited to five countries in Central Asia. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine stalled, the Kremlin has consistently needed more troops, forcing increasing numbers of these workers into military service.

Offering high salaries has attracted mercenaries from Cuba, Syria and elsewhere, but devious tactics have discouraged many labor migrants. In 2023, half of Russia's labor migrants came from [Tajikistan](#).<sup>46</sup> The Crocus City Hall terror attack in March 2024, which Russian law enforcement alleges was carried out by Tajiks, is curtailing this pipeline. Tajiks have been rounded up for deportation and subjected to physical violence. Efforts to develop new sources of labor migration from [Southeast Asia](#) have been undermined by Russia continuing to send labor migrants to Ukraine.<sup>47</sup>

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine also provoked another large exodus of Russians from Russia. Some families had their bags packed and were ready to leave when Russian troops crossed the border in February 2022.<sup>48</sup> Mobilization in September 2022 caused an additional exodus, primarily by young men. Many information technology (IT) specialists left, believing they could continue to work while abroad.<sup>49</sup>

Emigration by hundreds of thousands of young men, and an unknown number of young women, is reducing the already small cohort of Russians in prime reproductive years. Hundreds of thousands of men being sent to serve in Ukraine further limits reproductive potential. Russian women have increasingly opted to avoid pregnancy in the face of economic difficulties and growing uncertainty. In the first half of 2023, a record number of Russians applied for passports for travel abroad "just in case" (*na vsyaki sluch*).<sup>50</sup>

The regime has responded with efforts to prevent abortion and limit birth control. This comes at a time when abortions are less frequent. Some Russian women are choosing [sterilization](#) instead.<sup>51</sup> This represents an ironic shift from the Soviet-era legacy of many women being unable to have children due to multiple abortions.<sup>52</sup> Births in 2023 reflected the lowest fertility rate in the past two or three centuries.<sup>53</sup>

The declining value of the ruble and raids on immigrant communities to conscript workers to fight in Ukraine have reduced the number of Central Asians seeking work in Russia. The number willing to become paid mercenaries is limited.

Russia's leadership apparently did not anticipate the need to recruit additional soldiers for a protracted war in 2022. Doing so now represents a serious challenge. Data in 2015 indicated that Russians were pleased that Crimea was under Russian control. However, fewer than 20 percent of Russians surveyed thought their government should spend large sums to rebuild occupied areas of Ukraine, especially the Donbas region. Fewer than 10 percent said it was worth risking Russian lives to keep these territories.<sup>54</sup>

The Russian government's polling consistently reports approval for the war as high as 70–80 percent. Some Western analysts accept these numbers, and some have commissioned their own polling that confirms strong support for the war. Others are dubious, reporting data similar to those of 2015, when respondents [were asked](#) about financing reconstruction or the need to suffer casualties.<sup>55</sup>

One indication that Russia's leadership understands the problem of sending Russians to fight in Ukraine is an increasingly desperate and shortsighted attempt to find alternatives to mobilizing more Russians. After the February 2022 invasion provoked a large exodus of Russians of all ages, the “partial” mobilization conducted in September 2022 resulted in tens of thousands more, primarily young men, leaving the country. No one has precise data, and many of these Russian citizens have moved on from their initial refuge. If seven hundred thousand Russians now registered as living in Dubai is any indication, the émigrés may number far more than one million.<sup>56</sup>

The people mobilized are overwhelmingly from low-income rural and non-Russian regions. Stories have emerged about recruits needing to provide their [own equipment](#), including [bandages](#) in case of injury. Some received less than a week of training before being sent into combat. These conditions confirm the belief that the authorities view them as expendable cannon fodder. The result is [widespread efforts](#) to evade serving.<sup>57</sup>

In an attempt to reduce the need for mobilization, other tactics were developed. Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder of the paramilitary Wagner Group, toured Russian prisons to offer convicts the opportunity to serve six months in Ukraine in return for presidential pardons. Tens of thousands took him up on the offer and [died at the front](#).<sup>58</sup> Survivors have returned to Russia, with some resuming their criminal activity, including [rape and murder](#).<sup>59</sup>

Prigozhin perished when his plane was shot down a few months after he staged an aborted march to Moscow to convince Putin to fire military commanders the Wagner leader deemed incompetent. But his program lives on, and recent reports indicate it is being expanded to [include](#) female prisoners.<sup>60</sup>

Ironically, while the convicts who survive their six-month contracts have been allowed to return home, Russians who have been fighting for two years or more are still on active duty. [Their families are furious](#). One of the few significant protest groups left in Russia, “the Council of Wives and Mothers,” that has protested the length of time their husbands and sons have been forced to serve, was [declared a foreign agent](#) in

July 2023 in an effort by Putin to stifle public awareness of the treatment of soldiers and overall casualties in the war.<sup>61</sup>

Despite major recruitment efforts, Russia is not experiencing a major influx of new immigrants or returning compatriots. The full-scale war has further limited the already diminishing prospects of inducing a large share of the 30 million Russians living outside of Russia to return home. In 2006, Putin signed a decree establishing a program to encourage Russians to return, and some eight hundred thousand did so between 2006 and 2018. The number of both applications and returns declined in 2020 due to COVID-19. The numbers recovered slightly in 2021 but declined after the start of the full-scale war in 2022. In 2023 the number applying to return was [the lowest in a decade](#).<sup>62</sup> The number who did return dropped below the 2020 COVID-19 level:

### Compatriots returning<sup>63</sup>

YEAR	APPLICATIONS	REGISTRATIONS	RETURNS	% APPROVED
2023	63,600	55,400	45,100	81.4
2022	112,700	100,300	64,800	64.6
2021	113,100	93,700	78,500	83.8
2020	90,800	76,900	61,900	80.5
2019	153,200	127,200	108,600	85.4

Legislation designed to prohibit Russians—especially mobile IT workers—from working while abroad has provoked sharp battles between security services and Russian companies that depend on these employees in a tight labor market.

Treatment of Central Asian and other foreign labor migrants has increasingly shifted to forced labor and sometimes outright slavery. Central Asians working in Russia have been rounded up and sent to join the war on Ukraine.<sup>64</sup> A study of the Uzbek community reports that many Uzbeks have been arrested for minor or contrived offenses and sentenced to terms of fifteen, twenty, or even twenty-five years. Once in prison, they are offered the Wagner option of “volunteering” to fight in Ukraine.<sup>65</sup>

Predatory practices have extended beyond Russia’s usual sources of migrant workers. Individuals from [Nepal](#), [Syria](#), and [India](#) have been recruited to work in factories or as guards at various venues in Russia. After they arrive, their passports are confiscated and they are sent to fight in Ukraine. As during World War II, punishment squads are deployed to prevent soldiers from retreating. These predatory tactics differ from the treatment of Cuban and African mercenaries who are attracted by the money.<sup>66</sup>

In addition to money, another inducement to attract foreign fighters is the offer of Russian citizenship. If these commitments are honored, the result will be to add more non-Russians to the country’s population. The disastrous long-term impact of the predatory recruitment policies is clear. As information (and bodies) reach families, word spreads. Russian programs to increase labor recruitment in Southeast Asia are being undermined as word of these tactics spreads.



# CONCLUSION

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**W**hy would a leader who has proclaimed demography to be one of the most serious threats to a nation's future launch an unprovoked war against a neighboring country that was a significant source of labor before 2014? We may never be able to answer this. We can conclude that Putin has turned a daunting crisis into a cataclysm.

Putin's policies cannot solve these demographic problems. He has been reiterating the importance of Russia's dire demographic situation for a quarter-century. Manipulating demographic data, adding people in occupied Ukrainian regions to Russia's population, and omitting war casualties from the census do not generate sustainable population growth. These tactics cannot **meet the needs** of employers who report serious labor shortages in nearly every sector of the economy.<sup>67</sup> Russia's defense industry is operating "three shifts" by requiring workers to work **sixty to seventy hours per week**.<sup>68</sup> The sustainability of these measures and the impact on quality raise significant questions. Financial incentives are undermined when workers are compelled to make "voluntary" contributions to fund the war effort.<sup>69</sup>

In 2022–2023, the most serious labor shortages were reported in agriculture and construction, sectors that **rely heavily** on Central Asian migrants.<sup>70</sup> Now Russia's government is endeavoring to attract labor from India, Pakistan, and North Korea to replace the war casualties and emigres. Firms involved in production, retail, logistics, and e-commerce face labor shortages. While manufacturers continue to prefer Russian workers, one company told journalists that bringing workers from India required paying salaries at the same level as those for Russian staff, plus the cost of transporting and registering the workers. Yet the company was looking for a contractor to arrange providing five hundred workers from India.<sup>71</sup> The reasoning was that workers who lack Russian language are less likely to be recruited by competitors, while foreign workers who know Russian are more mobile.<sup>72</sup>

A Russian entrepreneur noted that labor brokers in Kazakhstan smuggle thousands of workers from Bangladesh into that country in containers each year. They are now offering their services to Russian employers, suggesting that the same tactics can be used to bring workers **from India**.<sup>73</sup> Others point out that labor from India remains crucial in several Middle Eastern countries where wages are higher, making Russia the option for the **least skilled and least desirable migrants**.<sup>74</sup>

Sources of labor globally are increasing due to population growth in developing countries that face serious impacts from climate change. Demographers project that the major growth in global population during the rest of the twenty-first century will be in Africa. Yet the six African countries with the largest populations also appear on most lists of the places likely to face the greatest threats from climate change. As in Latin America, this will result in "green migration." These are not traditional sources of labor for Russia, and the regime may choose to rely on these countries for mercenaries.<sup>75</sup>

Putin's government has not evinced visible concern that Russia's population might be cut in half by century's end. Unless Russia's leaders can develop and finance a more effective set of policies, the only solutions to population decline will be a combination of incorporating non-Russian territory and/or immigration from Asia and Africa.

If Putin truly believed that demography is an existential problem for Russia, he might have calculated how many Ukrainians lived or worked in Russia before annexing Crimea and launching an invasion.

Putin's regime is both seeking and discouraging repatriation by compatriots. On February 1, 2024, Russian media reported new legislation allowing the government to seize property belonging to Russians outside the country who criticize the war on Ukraine. Multiple instances have been reported of Russian diplomats and security personnel demanding that other countries detain and repatriate Russians who speak freely. Threats to seize their property in Russia are a logical extension of policies threatening family members still living in Russia.

At the same time, Russia's policy does encourage compatriots to return, even as other citizens continue to depart.

One possible solution to the problems compounding Russia's labor shortage would be to decentralize policy, allowing Russian regions to make their own decisions about attracting foreign labor. The resulting competition could go a long way toward improving conditions for foreign workers. Regional development was the [prime mover](#) in China's massive urbanization and industrialization after 1978.<sup>76</sup> While this involved horizontal mobility within the country, the model would resemble the significant influx of immigrants that, at least thus far, has kept the US population at well above replacement level. As Russia's population continues to decline, immigrants will be increasingly vital to economic recovery.

Invading Ukraine while facing a catastrophic demographic challenge appears to have been a massive folly for the Kremlin. Hubris based on an astonishing intelligence failure might account for the miscalculation. Another possible explanation is that Putin understood that Russia's economic and demographic challenges mean the country would not be in a more favorable condition any time in the coming decades.<sup>77</sup>

Every corner of Russia's economy is experiencing personnel shortages, while war casualties continue to shrink the able-bodied population. Russians and their leaders must learn to value diversity, or Russia will have an increasingly smaller and older population. Either way, there will be fewer ethnic Russians.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Harley Balzer** retired in July 2016 after 33 years in the Department of Government, School of Foreign Service, and associated faculty member of the History Department at Georgetown University. He was founding director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies from 1987-2001. Prior to Georgetown, he taught at Grinnell College and Boston University, and held post-doctoral fellowships at Harvard's Russian Research Center and the MIT Program in Science, Technology and Society. In 1982-83, he was a congressional fellow in the office of Congressman Lee Hamilton, where he helped secure passage of the Soviet-East-European Research and Training Act (Title VIII).

In 1992-93, Balzer served as executive director and chairman of the board of the International Science Foundation, George Soros's largest program to aid the former Soviet Union. From 1998 to 2009, he was a member of the Governing Council of the Basic Research and Higher Education (BRHE) Program, funded by the MacArthur Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, and Russian Ministry of Education. BRHE established 20 Research and Education Centers at Russian universities, and was significantly expanded by the Russian government using their own resources.

His publications have focused on Russian and Soviet history, Russian politics, Russian education, science and technology, and comparative work on Russia and China

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