The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Economic Crisis Leads Moscow to Cut Back on 2010 Census Plans

By Paul Goble

May 28, 2009



About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

The economic crisis is forcing Moscow to cut back on the number of questions they will ask and languages they will use in the census scheduled for October 2010, reductions that will mean officials and scholars will have significantly less data on a range of demographic questions.

Irina Zbarskaya, the Russian State Statistics Committee official responsible for the census, said this week that the government had reduced the amount of money available for the census by 30 percent despite pleading by census officials who "attempted to show that the census is 'a sacred cow' that must not be touched."

Instead of the "long" and "short" forms of the census questionnaire, she said, census takers will now use only one, which will not include many of the questions that typically take the most time to respond to because people find them the most difficult to answer and census takers the most difficult to record and code.

Among the questions that will be dropped will be those concerning the branch of economic activity in which the surveyed individual works. Many find it difficult to specify that, she continued, and consequently, her committee will do without this sampling, relying instead on other sources for this information.

By reducing the size of the questionnaire, she continued, census takers will be able to talk to 450 people over 12 days rather than the 370 to 380 they had been slated to query. That will allow Rosstat to cut the total number of census takers from 700,000 to 600,000, for a savings of more than 577 million rubles ($18 million).

Additional savings, Zbarskaya said, are to be achieved by the elimination of plans to pay for the remodeling of buildings in cities and towns that are to be used by census takers and by cutbacks in advertising promoting the census and in translations of both the ads and the census forms themselves.

The Rosstat official said that "in a multi-national country like Russia, it is impossible" to prepare special advertising for each of the national republics." She also said that the census forms themselves will be printed only in Russian, although Zbarskaya suggested that census takers will be able to translate them into national languages.

These changes alone will mean that the results of the 2010 census will not be as comprehensive or reliable as many had hoped. Among other consequences of the funding decrease, many citizens of the Russian Federation who do not speak Russian may not even learn that a census is being conducted, and those who are questioned may not be able to answer correctly.

Even more serious is the possibility that funding of the census may be cut back still further. As Zbarskaya noted, Rosstat's current plans have been reduced twice so far this year, and the census itself is 16 months away.

But even if that does not happen, the 2010 census now appears likely to collect far less information about many sensitive issues &mdash including the relative size of the populations of different regions on the basis of which funds are allocated and the even more sensitive issue of the size of Russia's various national groups &mdash than many had hoped.

That is especially serious given the shortcomings of the census performed in 2002, when officials, pleading poverty, stopped doing the survey in many areas and relied instead on interior ministry files, a choice that caused overstating of the size of declining regions and nationalities (including the Russian nationality) and understated that of growing ones (including many Muslim groups).

That in turn will mean that the Russian Federation will not have had an accurate census since 1989 when it was part of the Soviet Union, something that will make it more difficult for Moscow to respond to social change and far more difficult to know what is happening in the country demographically.

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