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High Mortality Among Men Undercuts Moscow's Pro-Birth Policies

By Paul Goble

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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.

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Extremely high mortality rates among Russian men of child-bearing age, rates far higher than those in other developed countries and largely the result of alcohol consumption and drug abuse, are undercutting not only Moscow's efforts to solve the country's demographic problems with pro-birth policies but also its hopes to modernize the Russian economy.

Over the past few years, the Russian government has sought to boost the country's birthrate but done little or nothing to cut the sky-high mortality rates among Russian men. Now, Moscow experts are pointing out that these mortality rates among the working age population are themselves putting a brake on any increase in fertility rates.

The birthrate in Russia over the last 40 years has fallen to West European levels and is now well below the replacement level of 2.15 children per woman per lifetime. "But if in the West, women do not want to give birth in order to live as they want," reporter Nikita Mironov wrote

in an article in "Komsomolskaya Pravda" this week, "Russian women cry with one voice: 'there aren't any men.'"

According to Mironov, there are currently a total of 22 million men aged 20 to 40, the prime age group for new fathers. "Of these," however, "about 700,000 are in prison, 2.1 million are registered alcoholics &mdash and how many of those are uncounted," Mironov continues. There are also 2.5 million drug addicts. As a result, 5.3 million potential fathers are not as available as others.

To make things worse, the 2002 census found that there are 65,000 more married Russian women than married Russian men, a fact that may reflect a growing preference for unregistered marriages in which women see themselves as married but men do not. Such unions produce fewer children than regular ones.

With fewer children being born and working age men dying in large numbers, the Russian population is now aging rapidly as a result of the large number of births right after World War II. At present there are 15 million more retirees than young people between the ages of 15 and 24.

The average age of Russians has risen from 34 years in 1989 to 38.7 now and is projected by the United Nations to reach 50 by 2050, a figure that would mean that retirees would make up 55 percent of the population. That prediction is leading some in Russia to adopt Western arguments for boosting the retirement age to 65.

That is not a realistic possibility, however, for Russia. As Yevgeny Gontmakher, the head of the Center of Social Policy at the Moscow Institute of Economics, points out, the health of Russians, and especially Russian men, at age 60 is too poor to expect them to stay in the work place five more years.

What's more, people at that age are, "as a rule," he says, far more poorly trained and less productive than younger people. Consequently, boosting the retirement age, as some in the United States and Western Europe are urging because of the burden of paying for pensions, will not work in Russia.

All these constraints suggest that Moscow must focus on bringing down the extremely high rates of mortality among working-age Russians and, especially, among working-age Russian men, something the authorities have failed to do not only because it would be costly but also because it would require radical changes in behavioral patterns among this age group.

Several reports this week highlight just how much the excessive consumption of alcohol and the use of illegal drugs are contributing to the high mortality rates among working Russians and especially among working-age men, who live 13 years less than Russian women on average.

According to the latest research, some of which is published in the British medical journal, "The Lancet," "the extraordinary consumption of alcohol, especially by [Russian] men in the last several years has been responsible for more than half of all deaths of [Russians]

aged 15 to 54."

At present, Moscow experts say Russians, "including children and old people," are consuming 15 to 18 liters of pure alcohol per year, up from 6 liters in 1984 and twice the amount that the World Health Organization says will lead to serious medical and even genetic damage in a population.

And given that much of this consumption is concentrated among Russians aged 18 to 55, the actual rate of consumption of that group is much higher &mdash some studies have suggested that it may be over 30 liters per year &mdash and hence far more damaging, with experts saying each additional liter over eight cuts life expectancy by 11 months.

Most of the impact of this alcohol consumption &mdash and Russian experts stress that the problem is more about people who drink too much than about genuine alcoholics &mdash is concentrated among men, given that the number of heavy male drinkers is four times the number of such female imbibers.

The negative impact of alcohol is now being exacerbated by the increasing and negative impact of drug use. There are 2 to 2.5 million drug users in Russia today, most between the ages of 18 and 39. Their number is increasing by 220 every day, and the average age of death within the group is 28.

In the face of this crisis, one that puts the future of Russia not only demographically but economically and even politically at risk, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin acknowledged last week that alcohol consumption was a major problem but suggested only that "Russians should drink less."

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