

Delay in Census to 2013 Could Open Door to Lies

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Citing budgetary shortfalls as a result of the economic crisis, the government has rescheduled the national census that had been set for 2010 to 2013, putting it after the next presidential elections and opening the way for claims that Russia does not face significant demographic problems.

Aleksandr Surinov, deputy chief of the federal State Statistical Service (Rosstat), [said](#) last week that the government had directed his agency to delay the census to 2013 because the authorities do not have the necessary funds to pay for it as a result of the economic crisis.

Rosstat has already spent some two billion rubles (\$60 million) out of a planned budget of 18 billion rubles (\$580 million) to develop census forms and the technology to process them. Those expenditures, Surinov said, will not go to waste, but now Moscow will not have to pay for census takers — the largest part of the budget — until 2013.

The census plans have been under threat for months. In February, Rosstat leaders insisted that despite reports, the census would not be delayed, pointing out that they can cut planned expenditures by 30 percent by dropping some questions and restricting plans to process the results as thoroughly as they had hoped.

Then in April, the same officials acknowledged, again in response to widespread media speculation, that the census would have to be postponed, quite possibly beyond the constitutional requirement for one by 2012, because of the economic crisis now and anticipated expenditures for the presidential election in that year.

But at the end of May, Rosstat head Vladimir Sokolin [made a last ditch appeal](#) to keep the census on track for 2010, saying any delay in conducting it would give the government the opportunity to more easily "manipulate various things in the absence of information."

Sokolin was apparently referring to two different phenomena. On the one hand, in the absence of accurate census data, the central government is in a position to continue to allocate revenue and set voting districts on the basis of older data, ignoring changes caused by regional and ethnic differences in demographic behavior and migration.

And on the other, when recent census data are not available &mdash especially given the widely recognized problems with the 2002 census, which did not conform to international standards and thus significantly overcounted the number of ethnic Russians and undercounted the number of non-Russians &mdash politicians, officials and commentators can make unsubstantiated claims.

Obviously, both Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev would prefer not to have a census showing adverse developments on their watch just before the 2012 vote, but they and others already feel free to make claims about the state of Russian society that independent observers suggest are not supported by facts.

This week, for example, Vitaly Kolbanov, the head of the analytic department of the Ministry of Health and Social Development, [told](#) a conference on "The Health of the Nation and State Demographic Policy" that the Russian Federation does not face "a demographic crisis."

That may be a message authorities want to be delivered, but even other participants at the same meeting offered data sets on alcoholism, tobacco use, health, and mortality that suggest at the very least that Kolbanov's rosy portrait of the situation is overstated, something an accurate census would almost certainly confirm.

But if the Russian government does not have enough money to finance a census in its own country, it appears likely that it will be financing one outside its borders: The Abkhaz authorities [announced](#) yesterday that they will be conducting a census in February of next year.

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