

# Experts Dismiss Population Rise as Momentary Blip

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A baby being carried by her mother between two sections of the White Square office complex near Belorusskaya. **Igor Tabakov**

In his first address to parliament as president on Wednesday, Vladimir Putin is likely to reiterate that improving Russia's demographic situation will be one of the key targets of his six-year term.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on Friday praised a first small rise in natural population growth in 20 years as a "joint result of the work of authorities in recent years."

Natural population growth is the sum of the number of births in the country minus the number of deaths, as opposed to a change in the overall population, which includes changes from migration flows.

Medvedev was apparently referring to the announcement last Wednesday by Labor and Social

Development Minister Maxim Topilin that there was natural population growth of 790 people in the first 10 months of 2012, which he said was the first such rise in "many years."

Experts conceded that various government subsidies for mothers of two or more children introduced since 2007 have contributed somewhat to the growth. But they said the rise was mostly linked to the baby boom of the 1980s and to the inflow of migrants, and that it will be short-lived.

One pundit even speculated that the announcement could be an attempt by Topilin to rehabilitate himself in Putin's eyes after the president reprimanded him in late September for failing to fulfill orders.

A Labor and Social Development Ministry representative said the growth was a result of various kinds of subsidies for mothers that the government started introducing in 2007 and due to a decrease in the death rate from "most diseases" as the result of a Health Ministry program.

Subsidies for mothers and measures to decrease mortality are parts of the government's demographic policy to 2025, a policy adopted in 2007.

The policy includes measures to boost the birth rate and to decrease mortality, including improving the quality of medical care, boosting road safety, promoting healthy lifestyles, providing accessible housing and many others.

Igor Beloborodov, editor of Demographia.ru and head of the Moscow-based Demographic Research Institute, an association of independent experts, called the growth by 790 people a "mockery for such a huge country," saying it will change into a decline after one or two years.

Russia's population was just over 143 million people in 2011, according to official statistics. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the population has increased annually only in three years: 1994, 2009 and 2011. But these increases were due to migration exceeding the natural population loss.

There has been no natural population growth over the course of a calendar year since 1992.

The particular data for natural population growth cited by Topilin can also be misleading, since there have been such rises over periods of multiple months at various times in the past.

This year, for instance, there was a natural population loss of more than 50,000 people from January to May, while there was natural growth of more than 50,000 people from June to October, resulting in the net growth of 790.

In his last report to the State Duma as prime minister in April, Putin mentioned what he called "the most cruel demographic decline" of the 1990s.

He said that "preserving and developing" the population would be one of his priorities as president, saying it had "strategic meaning" and was "linked to our historical perspectives as a nation."

Yury Krupnov, head of the supervisory board at the Institute of Demography, Migration and Regional Development, a nongovernmental organization, said Medvedev's attribution of the population growth to the government's work was indicative of the prime minister's "incompetence."

Krupnov compared the delight of government officials at the natural population growth to "the joy of the relatives of a dying person who has stopped moving when suddenly his eyelid starts twitching."

Beloborodov said the subsidies for mothers, or so-called "maternity capital," introduced in 2007 made mothers who wanted two or more children "give birth faster."

"The population has grown because births have been concentrated in a certain period of time and not because more women started giving birth in Russia," Beloborodov said.

He also said the natural population growth was due to an inflow of migrants, who in turn have children in Russia, and to the baby-boom of the 1980s, combined with the fact that many women now prefer to have children at an older age than in Soviet times.

The birth rate will fall after around five years, when the number of women of reproductive age falls, he said.

He said the experience of European countries from the 1970s to 1990s has proved that allowances for mothers bring an increase in the birth rate for five or six years.

Beloborodov also offered an even more pessimistic reason for the statistic, saying Topilin "perhaps wants to show that he works effectively," speculating that there may not have been any such growth at all.

Putin reprimanded Topilin in late September for failing to fulfill decrees issued in early May that included draft proposals for pension reform and for ways to raise salaries for university professors. He also censured him for failing to draft amendments introducing standard requirements for qualifications in various jobs.

In September, Putin hinted that ministers who fail to meet his deadlines may be fired.

In one of his other presidential decrees in early May, Putin outlined several measures to improve Russia's demographic situation.

The president ordered the government to increase the average birth rate to 1.753 babies per woman and average life expectancy to 74 years by 2018; to co-finance with regional authorities allowances for families who have more than two children starting from 2013; and to provide opportunities for women on maternity leave to work from home and to train them for these jobs.

Krupnov said that an average birth rate of at least 2.3 babies per woman was needed to replace the population and that the number of women aged 20-30 will fall from the current 13 million to 7.5 million by 2025, citing official statistics.

Krupnov echoed Beloborodov in saying that the baby-boom of the 1980s, combined with

the fact that the average age for having children has increased by three to four years, has contributed to the population growth, which he said could last for another year.

He said the demographic policy to 2025 has "in fact achieved nothing."

After the growth stops, there will be a sharp decline in the population caused by the decrease in the birth rate in the 1990s, Krupnov said.

Beloborodov and Krupnov suggested a range of measures they said would help improve the demographic situation — many of them based on conservative values promoting traditional family structures.

They said the lack of a cult of the family and the promotion of sexual freedom and "comfort" in the mass media together with poor living conditions and low salaries bring about the perennial population decreases in Russia.

In order to boost the birth rate, the government needs to promote traditional family values; to provide good educational opportunities and salaries for men so that they can support their wives and children; to improve the quality of life in small towns to bring it closer to that in big cities; and to integrate more with CIS countries to improve the economy, Krupnov said.

Beloborodov said that family values must be promoted at special lessons in schools and on television and that people must learn about the negative consequences of abortions and form negative attitudes toward prostitution.

He also suggested tougher restrictions on abortions.

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