

# Population Declines for 20th Straight Year

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The government reported on Wednesday that there were around 2,500 more deaths than births in Russia last year, representing a steep decline in the natural population loss but also a 20th straight year of natural decrease in the country.

President Vladimir Putin and other top officials have in recent months been praising the demographic numbers from last year, trumpeting natural population rises of a few thousand people in the first 11 months of 2012. Putin has declared improving the demographic situation one of his priorities as president.

But the Labor and Social Services Ministry reported an overall natural population decline of 2,573 people last year, or 51 times less than in 2011.

Natural population change is calculated by taking the number of births in the country and subtracting from it the number of deaths. It differs from changes in the overall population,

which takes into account migration flows.

There has been no natural population growth nationwide over the course of a calendar year since 1992, according to official data.

For the whole of last year, natural population growth was registered in 40 of Russia's 83 regions, compared with an increase in 28 regions the year before. Nationwide, monthly natural population growth was seen only from June to November.

Last month, the ministry reported nationwide natural population growth of 4,600 people from January 2012 to November.

Putin praised the figure at a meeting of a Kremlin commission for social and economic development late last month. The president qualified his praise by saying the growth was "small" and "unstable," but he called it a trend and a significant change from earlier large declines.

"Not so long ago, the death rate dramatically exceeded the birth rate," Putin said.

In December, the ministry reported nationwide natural population growth of 790 people from January to October, a figure promptly applauded by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who called it a "joint result of the work of authorities in recent years."

Some experts have dismissed the improvement as likely being short-lived, saying the birth rate will fall in about five years, when the number of women of reproductive age decreases.

In 2012, births rose 5.7 percent in Russia, or approximately 102,400 people, to some 1,896,300 babies, which is the highest result since 1990, Labor and Social Services Minister Maxim Topilin said Wednesday.

Meanwhile, deaths decreased 1.4 percent in the country, or some 26,200 people, to about 1,898,800 people.

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