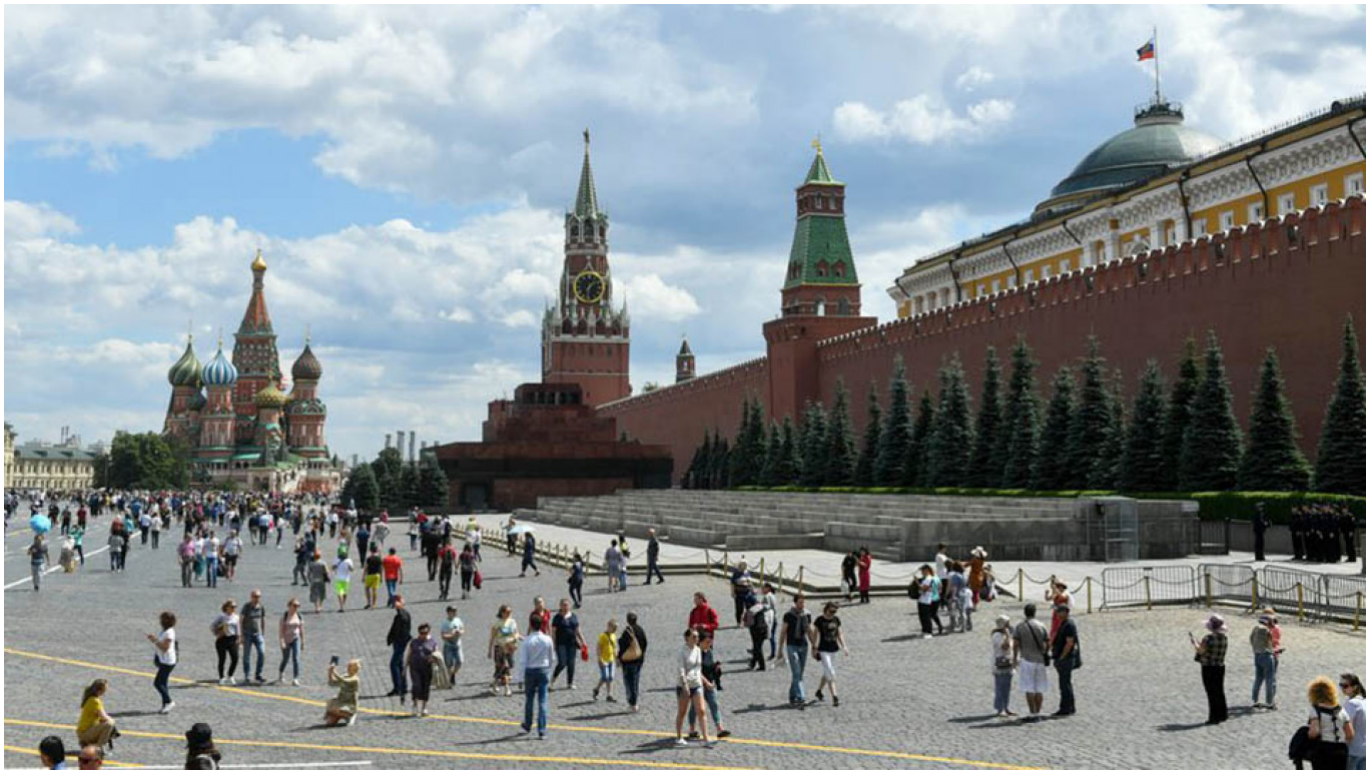
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Top Russian Official Warns of 'Catastrophic' Population Loss

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Sergei Kiselyov / Moskva News Agency

Russia's population numbers are declining "catastrophically" with several regions vastly underestimating their death rates, a top government official has said.

Russia has struggled with a demographic crisis in recent years, with population numbers falling for the first time in a decade to 146.8 million last year. Official data for 2019 places Russia's population at 146.7 million, declining by 149,000 people in the first four months of the year.

Related article: UN Predicts Russia's Population Could Halve By 2100

"That means our birth rates are falling," Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova said on Tuesday, adding that death rates are declining "not as fast as we'd like."

"We're catastrophically losing the population," she stressed at talks with medical officials in

St. Petersburg, the state-run TASS news agency reported.

Golikova blamed the authorities of "many" regions for lowballing mortality figures "in pursuit of good indicators."

The Voronezh region, she said, had submitted cancer death rate figures for 2018 that showed a minuscule growth of 1 percent. By 2019, the increase has ballooned to 20 percent, Golikova was quoted as saying.

Last month, the UN forecast that Russia's population could halve by 2100.

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