



Misreading a Russia on the Run

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Far from robust, the federation is facing implosion

Don't let Russia's recent attempts to play peacemaker on Syria fool you — U.S.-Russian relations are still on the rocks. A range of issues — from Russia's stubborn support for the Iranian regime to the Kremlin's very public snub of the White House in granting asylum to fugitive whistleblower Edward Snowden — have cast a profound pall over bilateral ties. In the process, they have sounded the death knell for the vaunted “reset” of relations with Russia that President Obama made a centerpiece of his foreign-policy agenda during his first term in office.

In response, experts have taken to calling for a “strategic pause” in relations between Washington and Moscow, so that the White House can reassess exactly what is possible to achieve through outreach toward Russia. That's undoubtedly good thinking. However, Washington's reappraisal also needs to take into account the larger, more long-term threat to international security that is now posed by Russia. This is because the Russian Federation is fast approaching a massive social and political upheaval, one that promises to be as transformative as the Soviet Union's demise some two decades ago. Russia's coming crisis is driven by the convergence of three trends:

Russia is dying. The once-mighty Russian state is undergoing a catastrophic post-Soviet societal decline. Health standards are abysmal, and life expectancy in Russia is nothing like it is in the West — just age 60 for men (less than in Botswana and Madagascar) and 73 for women, roughly the same as in Saudi Arabia. Alcoholism — the scourge of Soviet society — continues to ravage the country, with a death rate among Russia's youth that is 35 times higher than among their counterparts in Europe. So does drug addiction. According to United Nations statistics, more than a fifth of all heroin consumed globally every year occurs in Russia. Prevalent, too, is a corrosive culture of abortion, with unofficial estimates placing the number of annual abortions at 2 million to 2.5 million — close to 2 percent of the Russian Federation's potential population.

In all, the country is contracting by close to half-a-million souls every year owing to both death and the emigration of its citizens (to Europe and beyond). At this rate, according to the Kremlin's own estimates, Russia could lose a quarter of its population by the middle of this century. It's a phenomenon that demographers have described as “the emptying of Russia” — a wholesale implosion of Russia's human capital, and a collapse of its prospects as a viable modern state.

Russia is also transforming. The country is experiencing a radical change in its ethnic and religious composition. Today, Russia's roughly 21 million Muslims are still a distinct minority. Comparatively robust birthrates have put Muslims on track to account for a fifth of the country's population by the end of this decade, and possibly a majority by midcentury.

Such a demographic revolution will fundamentally change Russia's character. That is not a problem, per se. In recent years, though, the Kremlin has discriminated against its Muslim minority and ignored (even abetted) the rise of corrosive xenophobia among its citizens. This has bred resentment and alienation among Russia's Muslims — sentiments that radical Islamic groups have been all too eager to exploit. The result is an increasingly restive Muslim minority that has little connection to — or love for — the Russian state.

Finally, the Chinese are coming. Over the past two decades, Russia's population east of the Ural Mountains has declined by a fifth, and now stands at some 25 million, or some six inhabitants per square mile on average. This depopulation has sharpened the strategic competition over the country's resource-rich east, which is now increasingly coveted by an energy-hungry China. In this unfolding contest, China, a rising global economic and strategic power, holds the upper hand over a declining Russia. Because it does, China could soon grow bold enough to challenge Russia for dominion over the latter's economically vital eastern territories.

This perfect storm of demographic change, religious transformation and external pressure will determine Russia's internal political climate, its place in the world, and its future strategic priorities. The economic and social indicators are unmistakable: The Russia of tomorrow will look radically different than that of today.

As they set about rethinking their approach to Russia, policymakers in Washington would be wise to understand this reality. They would be even wiser to begin planning for it.