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URL:

<https://frictions.euopeamerica.de/essay-abylkalikov-0047-stolen-future-how-war-and-xenophobia-are-accelerating-russias-demographic-decline/>

doi number: doi: 10.15457/frictions/0047

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Recommended citation

Salavat Abylkalikov: Stolen Future: How war and xenophobia are accelerating Russia's demographic decline. In: Frictions (10.03.2026), doi: 10.15457/frictions/0047

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Stolen Future: How war and xenophobia are accelerating Russia's demographic decline

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Abstract: War and inward migration being rendered less appealing are contributing to Russia's growing demographic contraction. Three distinct factors are converging at a single point: a deteriorating migration balance, the smaller cohorts entering the labour market, and a fresh surge in male excess mortality. This article examines the specific mechanisms of depopulation and puts forward a "point of no return" hypothesis. It focuses particularly on how migration has shifted from being a compensatory factor to a source of risk against the backdrop of militarisation. The situation is further complicated by measurement difficulties, as official Russian statistics become increasingly incomplete and hard to compare.

A shorter version of this text is available in English on the [IOS Ukraine Blog](#) and in German on the [IOS Ostblog](#).



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It is necessary to solve a number of expensive tasks: ensuring the availability of pre-school and school education near the place of residence, including through the construction of new nurseries and schools where they are lacking; a substantial increase in child benefits to a level allowing families to cover the costs of children; and further expansion of funding for programmes using assisted reproductive technologies.

The point of no return

Russia has been grappling with an extremely acute demographic crisis in recent years. This crisis defines the country's future development prospects. Amidst the ongoing war against Ukraine, a harsh socio-economic environment, sanctions, and international isolation, population-related issues are only intensifying. These factors exert a complex negative influence on fertility, mortality, and migration flows. Together, they create formidable challenges for the future of Russia, not least because of the inertia and path-dependencies of demographic trajectories.

The primary demographic processes are fertility, mortality, and migration. It is these factors that determine the population dynamics of a country, as well as its constituent parts: regions, cities, and various ethnic and socio-economic groups. The age structure of the population also plays a vital role. This structure has been shaped over a long period and possesses significant inertia.

Demographic trajectories greatly impact a country's development. They shape economic capacity, social cohesion, and geopolitical positioning. Population size functions as a primary resource for state governance. A growing demographic base often generates a substantial domestic market. This scale offers clear advantages for establishing scientific hubs, although human capital and regulatory frameworks frequently exert a greater influence than raw numbers alone (as demonstrated by successful smaller states like Israel). Furthermore, population volume directly determines military capacity. A sufficient mobilisation reserve remains essential for national security. Depopulating countries inevitably experience demographic ageing. This shift escalates the dependency burden upon a contracting workforce. Consequently, vulnerabilities to economic stagnation multiply.

Russia possesses the world's largest landmass and abundant natural resources. However, this is combined with a population that is relatively small for such a vast space and extremely unevenly distributed. In the post-Soviet era, demographic challenges have sharpened, though in many ways this was a continuation of long-term trends. Nevertheless, the present moment appears unique. We propose an operational hypothesis that the country is passing a demographic "point of no return". This is understood as a situation where, even if external conditions improve, the demographic trajectory will, in all probability, not return to its previous values within the foreseeable future.

This situation is described by three markers: a potential decline in the country's appeal as a destination for migration, the entry of numerically smaller generations into the labour market leading to a concurrent labour shortage, and a new stage of male excess mortality. In this context, war, rising xenophobia in Russian society, and nationalistic policies act as catalysts for the crisis.

Fertility: Ups and downs

During the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia faced a sharp decline in the number of births and in the most used relative indicator of fertility—the total fertility rate (TFR), which represents the average number of births per woman of reproductive age estimated on the basis of the age-specific average fertility at a time. There was both a decline in fertility and a postponement of childbearing to a later time due to a severe transitional crisis, economic uncertainty, and the collapse of Soviet-time welfare measures.

This exacerbated the “demographic hole” of the 1990s and early 2000s. The consequences of this gap are felt even today; a sharp decline in the number of potential parents is visible, which causes a slump in the number of births and intensifies the shortage of workers, particularly young ones. Those people who would have been born in the 1990s if late-Soviet fertility levels had remained unchanged, are today simply not there.

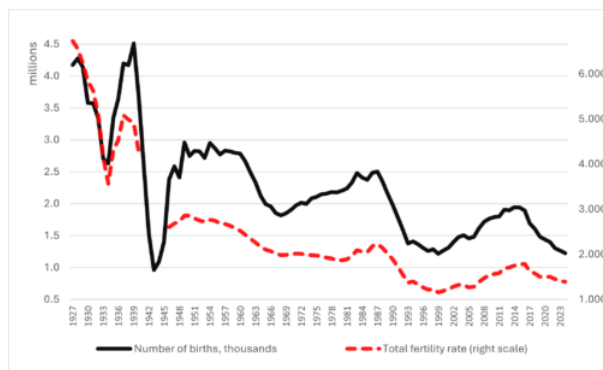


Figure 1. Birth Indicators. Prepared by the author based on Rosstat data

Demographic waves, formed because of the demographic catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century—specifically the Second World War—triggered a cycle of alternating small and large generations in Russia. According to Russia's state statistical authority, Rosstat, the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, today's Russia) lost 6.9 million people aged 0–4 years solely due to decreased fertility and increased mortality during the years of the Second World War.[1] An additional 12.9 million people from age 4 years and older died because and during the war, including soldiers.

This results in cyclical spikes and drops in the absolute numbers of births (as well as deaths) with an amplitude of appr. 25–30 years. For example, the post-war period of the late 1940s and early 1950s

was marked by a baby boom, many people who postponed childbirth during the war now had a kid. This was followed by stages of decline in 1960–1968, a rise in 1969–1988, a sharp drop from 1987 to 1999, and a new period of growth until 2016. From 2016 to the present, the number of births once again has been declining.

The deepest “demographic wound” inflicted by the war in the 1940s manifested most strongly 20–30 years later (in the 1960s), and thereafter it should have gradually faded. However, this was prevented by two factors that coincided with subsequent “valleys”. The first was the completion of the demographic transition, with the total fertility rate (TFR) falling to the replacement level (2.1 at modern mortality rates) and even lower since the 1960s. The second was a sharp transformation of the childbearing model in the 1990s, moving from the late-Soviet style—which was characterized by extremely young age of birth of mothers at their first child and short interbirth intervals—to a more usual model for industrialized countries today, that is, later childbearing age.[2]

Each period of growth or decline in fertility forms more numerous or smaller generations which, upon reaching reproductive age, affect the number of births in the following cycle. For instance, in 1999, the number of births in the country fell to 1.21 million people. In 2016, it rose to 1.89 million, yet 25 years later, the number of newborns has again approached the earlier minimum—1.22 million in 2024, with a trend towards further decline.

According to my calculations, to stabilise the number of newborns even at this extremely low level, the TFR would need to rise from the current 1.4 to an improbable 1.7–1.8 and be maintained at that level until the mid-2030s. Otherwise, the cycle may repeat in 25–30 years, albeit with an even greater decline, since at such a low fertility level, each generation of children will be 25–30% smaller than the generation of their parents (so, even if women had the same number of children like their parents, they would give birth to fewer children because the cohort is less numerous).

In the early to mid-2010s, when a rise in the TFR and the number of births was observed, the Russian pro-government press issued boastful statements suggesting that the demographic problem had been solved.[3] Professional demographers were mocked for their scepticism. Pro-natalist policies have gained significant attention recently. Yet, consolidated family expenditures in Russia (encompassing both federal and regional budgets) remained below 1% of the national GDP in 2017.[4] This level of support is lower than international standards. Most OECD nations demonstrate higher figures. Average spending in these countries exceeds 2%. Specific states (including France and Estonia) allocate appr. 3% for these purposes.[5]

In my opinion, policy in the sphere of fertility should focus on supporting families in the realisation of their reproductive plans. One must consider that Russian women have primarily been oriented towards having two children for over half a century.[6] It is also worth noting that fertility rates can fluctuate in any given calendar year due to timing shifts in the birth calendar.[7] For example, during crisis periods,

families often postpone having a child, whereas when new support measures (such as maternity capital) appear, many try to give birth to a planned child earlier to be eligible for the welfare payment. Furthermore, there is a trend towards a later age for childbirth.

For long-term stabilisation and perhaps even an increase in fertility in Russia, a comprehensive approach is vital, including significant state investment. As noted above, the experience of developed countries suggests that successful demographic policy requires spending at the level of 2-3% of GDP. This includes ensuring the financial stability of families, creating accessible and high-quality infrastructure for children, and supporting working parents. The well-known Russian demographer Aleksei Raksha believes that to significantly increase fertility, large one-off payments for the second and subsequent children are necessary.^[8] These should be of a size sufficient to improve housing conditions by adding an extra room.

It is necessary to solve a number of expensive tasks: ensuring the availability of pre-school and school education near the place of residence, including through the construction of new nurseries and schools where they are lacking; a substantial increase in child benefits to a level allowing families to cover the costs of children; and further expansion of funding for programmes using assisted reproductive technologies. Critical importance lies in the confidence of parents in the future, as well as the prevention of poverty among families with children, especially those with many children. Naturally, the possibility of combining a career and family is also required.

Bans on “LGBT” or “childfree” movements, ideas of returning to the Soviet tax on childlessness, and unscientific and ineffective attempts to “rejuvenate” fertility, along with abortion restrictions—the level of which has already decreased tenfold in post-Soviet years, with their number dropping sixfold—and the propaganda of “traditional” values, can be seen as an imitation of government activity under conditions of insufficient funding for demographic policy. Funds are being redirected towards priorities that are more important to the authorities—namely, the war against Ukraine

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The current Russian government do not wish to stop the war and redirect the freed-up finances towards

supporting the population. Nor are they taking sufficient measures to ease sanctions or stimulate economic growth and, consequently, incomes. Increasing the confidence of potential young parents in tomorrow also remains beyond their capabilities in the foreseeable future. Therefore, they are left only with measures that require practically no expenditure: the introduction of various bans and the conducting of verbal interventions, that is, pro-natalist propaganda. Such a policy, however, can have the opposite effect, intensifying negative trends and further undermining trust in the authorities.

There is an alternative explanation for what is happening. Although the authors of all these useless and harmful initiatives link them to demography, they are attempts to curry favour with a single elderly reader in the Kremlin who has the power to solely make fateful decisions. In this situation, they are forced to try to guess his wishes, focusing on public statements, including those regarding “traditional values” and fertility.

On 15 March 2025, the Strategy of Action for the Implementation of Family and Demographic Policy until 2036 was approved by the Russian government.^[11] In addition to the ideological block, it contains a set of practical measures. These include support for families with children, intensified control over alimony payments, housing solutions, conditions for combining family with study and work, and measures to improve reproductive health.

However, this is not the first document of its kind. There was the Concept of Demographic Development until 2015 and the Concept of Demographic Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025, along with many other similar documents developed at federal, regional, and even municipal levels. Without proper funding and priority attention, they may once again remain merely declarative.

It is important to distinguish between the TFR and the absolute number of births. Even with a relatively stable TFR, the number of newborns will decrease if smaller generations enter reproductive ages and births shift to later ages. In such a situation, support measures more often redistribute births over time rather than significantly increasing their total volume in the coming years. Against this background, the role of migration in maintaining population size and the composition of working ages becomes fundamental.

Mortality: the fragile lives of Russian men and women

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant increase in mortality and a decrease in life expectancy. Russia was among the countries with the highest excess mortality. This occurred for a variety of reasons: extremely inconsistent and insufficient anti-pandemic measures, a failed information campaign for vaccination, and the use of less effective Russian-made vaccines.

Russia has historically lagged behind Western countries in terms of mortality indicators. During the pre-revolutionary period, this lag was particularly significant due to low levels of socio-economic development, insufficient medical advancement, and a high prevalence of infectious diseases. Thanks to substantial successes in healthcare, by the 1960s, it was possible to significantly reduce the gap with mortality indicators in Western countries.^[12] However, since then, life expectancy at birth (LEB) in Russia has remained practically unchanged for nearly half a century, while in Western countries it continued to grow.

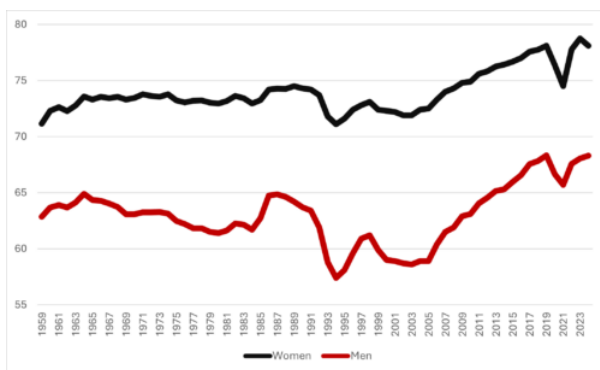


Figure 2. Life Expectancy at Birth (Years) in Russia. Prepared by the author based on Rosstat data

The lag increased not only due to relatively low levels of healthcare funding and outdated treatment methods but also because of high mortality from preventable causes. These include accidents and poisonings, including alcohol-related ones, as well as violent deaths.^[13] The severe socio-economic crisis that accompanied the collapse of the USSR in 1991 exacerbated existing problems and led to a sharp reduction in life expectancy at birth in Russia during the 1990s. This period was characterised not only by a worsening economic situation and falling living standards but also by the destabilisation of social institutions, rising crime, and a deterioration in the quality of medical care. As a result, male life expectancy in Russia reached its minimum in 1994 at 57.4 years. This figure was 15–20 years lower than in most developed countries. Female LEB also decreased, though not as significantly, so the gender gap reached 13.7 years.

In the period between the 1998 crisis and the mid-2000s, the life expectancy of Russians, after a brief and small recovery in the mid-1990s, again fell sharply. The trigger for the next decline was the financial and economic crisis of 1998. However, its economic consequences were overcome quite quickly, and from 2000 onwards, Russia's main economic indicators showed rapid growth. Yet perhaps the only important social indicator whose dynamics ran contrary to the general trend was life expectancy, especially for men.

There is a high probability that the cause of such an unusual mismatch between life expectancy

dynamics and all other socio-economic factors was the state's alcohol policy.[14] In those years (likely with the aim of replenishing regional budgets), state regulation of the alcohol market changed and made high-alcoholic drinks increasingly accessible to Russians (a reversal of Gorbachev's policies in the 1980s), effectively facilitating the mass intoxication of the population. No such illogical life expectancy dynamics were observed in neighbouring Slavic countries (Belarus and Ukraine),[15] which also experienced severe transformational shocks in the 1990s. In this regard, a new rise in the alcohol consumption of the population causes serious alarm.[16]

From the mid-2000s, a trend towards a reduction in mortality was observed in Russia thanks to favourable conditions in the global energy market, economic growth, and improved living conditions, as well as increased healthcare spending and the development of medical infrastructure.[17] Furthermore, the consumption of strong alcohol decreased, the road situation improved, and crime declined. Consequently, the life expectancy at birth of both men and women began to grow gradually and by the beginning of the 2010s had exceeded the levels of the 1960s. The gap with developed countries narrowed somewhat but remained notable.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant increase in mortality and a decrease in life expectancy. Russia was among the countries with the highest excess mortality.[18] This occurred for a variety of reasons: extremely inconsistent and insufficient anti-pandemic measures, a failed information campaign for vaccination, and the use of less effective Russian-made vaccines.

One should also consider the extremely high excess mortality during the Covid-19 pandemic in almost all post-communist European countries. These share certain features which made such a terrible outcome probable, especially low levels of trust, both interpersonal and towards institutions.[19] Likely, it was this that led to the flourishing of anti-vaccination and other pandemic-related conspiracy theories. This resulted in mass refusals of vaccination and non-compliance with precautionary restrictions by the population.

The full-scale invasion against Ukraine, which began in February 2022, also exerts a significant negative influence on mortality in Russia, particularly among working-age men. According to fairly conservative but, in my view, methodologically sound estimates by Mediazona, the BBC Russian Service, and Meduza, the number of confirmed killed Russian soldiers as of 24 February 2026 is at least 200,186 people (a documented lower bound based on individually verified names and open-source corroboration rather than a full-population estimate), predominantly men aged 21–47 years.[20] The Economist's model-based "meta-estimate" suggests substantially higher losses, placing Russian fatalities between 230,000 and 430,000 and total Russian casualties between 1.1 million and 1.4 million (where "casualties" include not only those killed but also the severely wounded).[21] Under conditions of peace, these people could have lived for a long time and contributed to the Russian economy for decades.

Beyond the direct losses from military actions, the war will have indirect socio-economic consequences that may significantly exceed the damage from the combat itself: economic sanctions, rising inflation, and a shortage and high cost of medicines and medical equipment, as well as worsening access to modern methods of treatment and diagnostics. All this could lead to premature deaths, especially among working-age men, who are the weakest and most vulnerable part of the Russian population in this regard.[22]

Moreover, an increase in the consumption of alcohol and drugs, domestic violence, crime, and in the number of suicides is expected as a result of the mass return of war-traumatised people, for whose rehabilitation there may not be enough resources; not least, there are many convicts who received amnesty if they enlisted, now returning. An increase in injuries in industry, transport, and daily life is also possible due to difficulties with equipment upgrading and even maintenance under conditions of limited access to technology and spare parts from the West. All these factors could negatively affect life expectancy and mortality in Russia in the coming years. The number of excess deaths will grow and could exceed millions over a decade.

To reduce mortality and ensure further life expectancy growth at the rates observed before the pandemic, it is necessary - in addition to ending the war - to significantly increase healthcare funding and improve access to medical care, as well as to implement advanced methods of evidence-based medicine according to international standards. Large-scale preventive programmes and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle and health-seeking behaviour are needed, especially for men as a key risk group.

Measures to combat the consumption of strong alcohol and smoking are essential. Special attention should be paid to the rehabilitation of those returning from the war to prevent a surge in mental disorders and to increase general safety. However, for all this, a correct setting of priorities, political will, and substantial financial outlays are required. Under conditions of an ongoing war, economic crisis, and sanctions, the implementation of these measures does look unlikely.

War affects mortality not only through direct losses. Significant indirect mechanisms also exist, such as changes in behavioural risks, worsening access to diagnostics and treatment, the accumulation of chronic morbidity, and the consequences of long-term stress for certain population groups. These effects can manifest even if the intensity of combat remains unchanged, as they depend on the conditions of the social environment and the functioning of the healthcare system. The working-age population is the most vulnerable, which is reflected in the age-sex structure and the labour market. In the next chapter, I will therefore turn to migration, which ceases to smooth out negative natural population dynamics and itself is becoming a risk factor.

The undervalued role of migration

As long as net migration remained significant, it partially compensated for the

natural decline of Russia's resident population and softened the consequences of an unfavourable age structure. When it contracts, the natural decline begins to determine population dynamics with almost no compensatory mechanism. The rise in emigration and the decrease in the influx of immigrants under these conditions intensify the labour shortage and narrow the pools of key working-age and reproductive ages. Migration stops working as a compensator and actually begins to reinforce depopulation trends.

Perhaps this is unfamiliar to many Russians, but for centuries, until the mid-1970s, Russia was a source of migrants for adjacent territories that later became Soviet republics and then independent states. This is precisely why especially many capitals and large cities of the Union republics were predominantly Russian speaking.

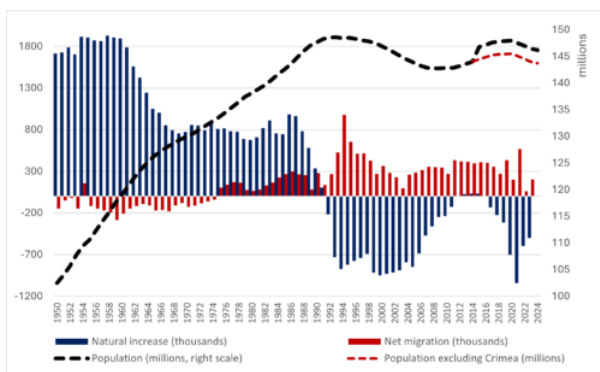


Figure 3. Components of Population Change. Prepared by the author based on Rosstat data

Contrary to popular belief, the collapse of the USSR was not so much a turning point as it was an intensifier of already existing centripetal migration flows. The return of a predominantly Russian-speaking population led to a significant increase of immigration to Russia in the 1990s, reaching a peak of 997,300 people in 1994. This influx partially compensated for the natural population decline and laid the foundation for a long-term trend which, however, developed unevenly. Already by the 2000s, net immigration had decreased to 250,000 to 350,000 people per year.

A substantial increase in net migration in Russia from 2011 is associated with a change in the way migration was accounted: from then it included persons registered at their place of stay for a period of nine months or more. It should also be considered that after each population census, a retrospective recalculation of migration volumes for previous years occurs. This is particularly important given the low quality of the data from the last census.[23] In the 2010s, after an initial surge caused by accounting changes, a trend towards a decrease in net migration to 125k people in 2018 was observed.

In 2019, a significant jump occurred—285k people—primarily due to changes in the provision of data by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.[24]

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected migration processes. Restrictive measures in 2020 led to a decrease in net migration to Russia to 106,500 people. In 2021, the indicators were distorted due to the administrative extension of migrants' stay periods, which led to an artificial inflation of annual net migration to 430,000 people and, accordingly, an undercount of it in 2022 (61,000 people). In 2023, against the background of military actions in Ukraine and the associated influx of refugees, recorded net migration increased to 203,600 people.[25]

The role of migration in demographic development is often underestimated. However, under conditions of low fertility not ensuring simple reproduction, migration acquires ever greater significance. Thus, during the post-Soviet period (1992–2023), 49.1 million people were born in Russia and 65.9 million died; thus, the natural decline was 16.8 million people. Yet at the same time, net migration of 12.3 million people (if the data of the last census is trusted) compensated for the natural decline by 73.6%.

The “anomaly” of net migration in 2024 requires a separate explanation. According to Rosstat, net migration amounted to 568,500 people, which nominally is the highest number for many years. Rosstat itself linked this result to a change in accounting technology, including the transition to the electronic daily transfer of primary data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This expanded the coverage and could increase the registration of those who previously fell out of the statistics. Therefore, it is important to interpret the 2024 data cautiously and not to project this value mechanically into expectations for future years.[26]

This experience is important as a point of comparison. As long as net migration remained significant, it partially compensated for the natural decline of Russia's resident population and softened the consequences of an unfavourable age structure. When it contracts, the natural decline begins to determine population dynamics with almost no compensatory mechanism. The rise in emigration and the decrease in the influx of immigrants under these conditions intensify the labour shortage and narrow the pools of key working-age and reproductive ages. Migration stops working as a compensator and actually begins to reinforce depopulation trends.

The start of the war and the subsequent “partial” mobilisation in the autumn of 2022 triggered the largest wave of emigration from Russia in the last 20 years. According to estimates by The Bell, based on statistics from arrival countries, approximately 650,000 people left the country and did not return.[27] For comparison, the previous large wave of emigration from 1992–2004 amounted to 1.6 million people but lasted for 12 years. Unlike previous waves, when predominantly representatives of specific ethnic groups left (for example, Jews and Germans within co-ethnic migration and repatriation channels) or people of various ages and professions, the current emigration can be described as a “brain drain”. Among those leaving, young professionals with high levels of human capital

predominate. This represents a serious threat to Russia's long-term economic development.

These data are not fully reflected in Russian departure statistics, as not all recent exiles and emigrants de-register. For example, in 2011–2021, Russian statistics accounted for between 5% and 60% of those who emigrated, with Spain sitting on the lower end of the percentage and the Baltic countries on the upper.[28] Only one in five emigrants who left for Germany—one of the main destinations for Russian emigration alongside the USA and Israel—was recorded in the statistics.

I should note that migration statistics, and especially those concerning departures, differ in their low accuracy compared to fertility and mortality statistics (and not only in Russia but everywhere because many out-migrants keep their home registration). Meanwhile, the statistics of arrivals in Russia, with the exception of certain years (for example 2019 and 2024), are quite complete and of good quality even compared to other developed countries.

In the autumn of 2025, a new Concept of State Migration Policy for 2026–2030 was approved.[29] A shift towards tougher regulation is noticeable in it: intensified control, an emphasis on combating illegal migration, stricter requirements for social adaptation, and a higher burden on the employer regarding the legal and social support (accompaniment) of labour migrants. It is important that in such a logic, migration is framed primarily as an object of management and a source of risk, rather than as a tool for compensating for demographic losses.

Temporary labour migration serves a vital economic function. Such individuals remain excluded from permanent population statistics. Current estimates by Julia Florinskaya identify 3–3.5 million legal participants.[30] Official data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs suggest an additional 600,000 undocumented workers. This aggregate figure (representing the entire temporary workforce) has contracted over time. Before the pandemic, the combined total approached 4.5 million.[31] Historical data from 2012–2013 indicate a peak of 5 to 7 million people.[32]

Such a decrease is caused by economic growth and a corresponding increase in incomes in sending countries, the emergence of alternative destinations for labour migration (EU, Gulf countries, Turkey, South Korea, etc.), and a strong weakening of the rouble. The rise in xenophobia after the start of the war and the persecution of migrants after the terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall also have reduced Russia's appeal as a labour market for foreign workers, despite a severe labour shortage and rising wages.[33] Out of a large number of sources for permanent and temporary migrants, essentially only three Central Asian countries remain—Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan—which significantly increases Russia's dependence on them[34].

Even before the Crocus City Hall attacks, I warned in a publication: *"In conditions of instability and turbulence, politicians and society are tempted to scapegoat minorities—those who differ by skin colour, eye shape, preferences in bed, or other criteria. They are the ones who can be declared guilty of all troubles. And this also contributes to a decrease in migration appeal for both permanent and temporary*

labour migrants. And the poorer we become, the more anger and irritation will accumulate."[35] The Crocus City Hall attack and the subsequent anti-immigrant campaign significantly accelerated this process.[36]

Conclusion

The processes examined here are interlinked and operate simultaneously through fertility, mortality, and migration. The decrease in births, the rise in losses among working ages, and the change in the migration balance are superimposed upon one another, as they primarily affect the same age groups and same parameters of population reproduction. Consequently, a deterioration in one component creates additional constraints for others. In this logic, the war and the accompanying changes in the social and political environment act as factors accelerating previously established unfavourable trends

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Under these conditions, the demographic situation in Russia remains strained. Low fertility, high mortality, and the brain drain weaken the country, undermining its economic potential and human capital formation. In all likelihood, the main demographic losses associated with the war and its consequences still lie ahead. And the consequences of current policies may turn out to be much more serious than many imagine today.

Due to significant payments to the military and rising wages, primarily in the defence industry, as well as the introduction of a fairly generous unified child benefit for families with low per capita incomes in 2023 (representing the majority of families with children in the country),[37] the total fertility rate has not yet fallen as much as demographers expected[38]. However, the intensification of economic difficulties in the future will inevitably affect fertility and mortality.

Furthermore, the reduction in the influx of both permanent and temporary labour migrants exacerbates the labour shortage, especially in key sectors of the economy (construction, transport, trade and services, agriculture, etc.). This deficit is already slowing economic growth, and in the future, it may

lead to serious socio-economic problems and imbalances that will further reduce Russia's appeal as a place for living and working.

The current Russian leadership has been in power for a long time, surviving several political cycles. During this time, a new demographic cycle has begun as well. It is likely that the transfer of power to the next generation of Russian leaders will occur under conditions of an acute demographic crisis, similar to the 1990s. However, the situation will differ due to a higher life expectancy, lower fertility, and a completely different level of Russia's migration appeal. For three decades, immigration—even if only partially—compensated for the negative natural population growth. In the perspective of the coming decade, net migration may hit zero or even enter negative territory due to Russia's foreign policy course and the consequences of its war against Ukraine. This will make the country's position extremely perilous.

In this regard, the words of Vladimir Putin, spoken back in 2012, sound prophetic: *"If we do not implement a large-scale, long-term project for demographic development, increasing human capital, and developing our territories, we risk becoming, in a global sense, an 'empty space', whose fate will not be decided by us."*^[39]

Unfortunately, the realisation of this very risk is becoming a reality.

Its tragic experience of the 20th century, filled with wars, famine, and repressions, testifies to Russia's high vulnerability to demographic shocks. It is estimated that without these catastrophes, Russia's population today could exceed 250–270 million people instead of the current approximately 144 million.^[40] Of course, such calculations are hypothetical in nature, but they allow for an estimation of the scale of the total demographic losses.

A separate risk is associated with the accessibility of demographic statistics. By 2025, Rosstat has effectively ceased publishing demographic data, including such on fertility, mortality, and migration.^[41] This increases the uncertainty of estimates and significantly complicates the testing of hypotheses, especially at the regional level, or which international organisations such as the UN or the World Bank do not usually publish their estimates.

If the potential reduction of migration to zero is considered, by 2100, the population of Russia is projected by the UN 2024 revision forecast to be 89.6 million instead of 126.4 million under the medium variant.^[42] Under the low variant of the forecast, this figure will even drop to 58.3 million.

The main risk of the coming years is that negative dynamics will become entrenched through the changing age structure and—the lack of—immigration. The age structure does not change quickly; therefore, even if economic conditions improve, demographic indicators will respond slowly. If net migration of the permanent population approaches zero, natural decline will remain without compensation. The decrease of Russia's appeal to migrant workers will intensify the outflow but

weaken the influx of migrants, thus causing sustainable depopulation and a different developmental trajectory. Has Russia's demographic history gone into a doom cycle?[43]

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by: [Salavat Abylkalikov](#)|Section:Essays|Key Words:Demographic crisis, Migration, Rosstat statistics, Russia, UN forecast, age structure, depopulation, fertility, labour market, mortality, war in Ukraine, xenophobia|Publishing Date:2026-03-10



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