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► **To cite this version:**

Gérard-François Dumont. Russian depopulation and geopolitics. Geopolitical Affairs, 2008, 1/3, pp.51-53. halshs-03278892

HAL Id: halshs-03278892

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03278892>

Submitted on 6 Jul 2021

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Russian Depopulation and Geopolitics

GÉRARD-FRANÇOIS DUMONT

With the largest territory in the world and considerable natural resources, Russia would like to become a great power again, as the Soviet Union was. But Russia's population is falling rapidly and its demographic weight relative to the rest of the world is falling even more rapidly.¹

Russia achieved its highest population in 1992 with 148.3 million inhabitants. Every year since then the population has fallen and the latest figures put it below 143 million. This represents a loss of 5 million in fourteen years. What are the causes of this development? It is not the result of the migratory outflow because there have been more immigrants into Russia than emigrants leaving since 1974. The contribution of immigration is however limited: 107,432 in 2005 and 128,316 in 2006,² which is a rate of immigration far below that of the European Union³ or the US.

The fall in the Russian population is due to natural causes, that is, the fact that there have been far more deaths than births since 1992, often several hundred thousand more every year. If we look at the last full year, 2006, there were 146 deaths for every 100 births. What is the reason for this extraordinary imbalance, which has never been seen in peacetime?

First, fertility rates are low in Russia, less than 1.5 children per woman since 1992. The number of women of child-bearing age is not very high because of the demographic history of Russia. Second, morality rates in Russia are the highest in Europe, twice that of France or the Netherlands. This is true of people of all age groups, with a rate of child mortality more than double that of western or southern Europe.

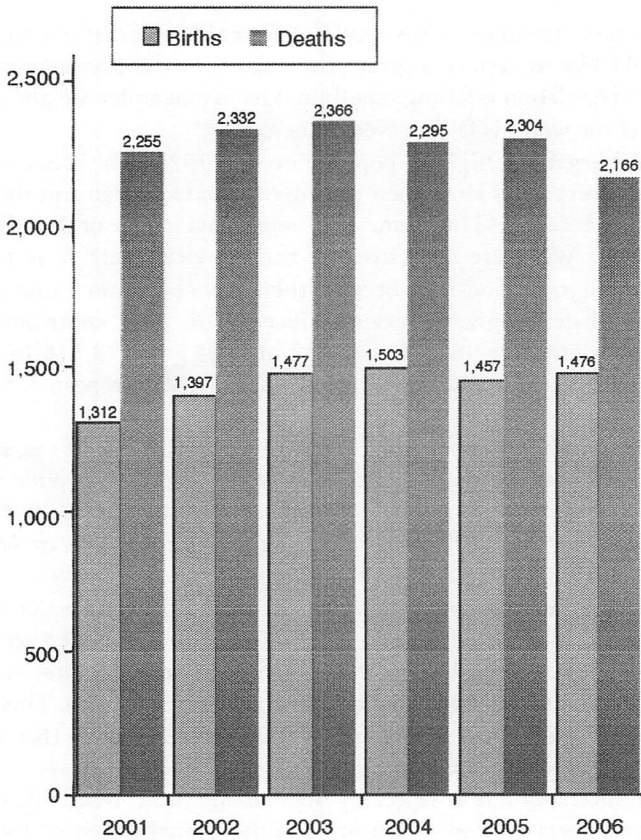
The high mortality rate is especially high among men,⁴ where life expectancy is only 59 years for men as against 76 in the United Kingdom and 77 in France. Life expectancy for women in Russia is 72, as against 81 in the UK and 83 in France.

It is important to note that there is little chance that the depopulation of Russia will be arrested in the future. Even the most optimistic projections

predict that the population will fall to 131 million in 2040, while the pessimistic projections predict 102 million.

Even it remains a permanent member of the Security Council of the UN, it is impossible for Russia to become a great power again while its demographic weight in the world is falling; the country will suffer a significant labour shortage at all levels which will oblige it to sign international agreements to employ foreigners.⁵

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Figure 1 Births and deaths in Russia (000s)

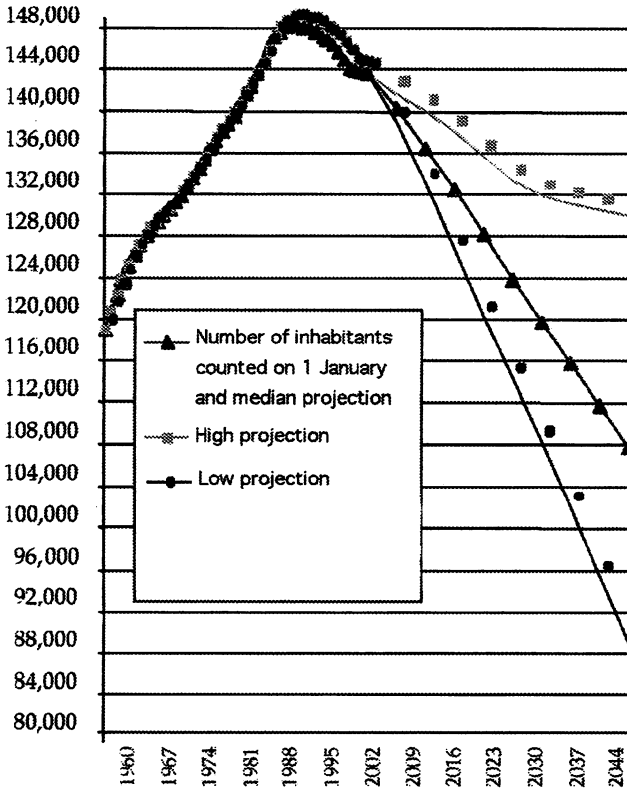


Figure 2 The Russian population, actual and projected (000s)

NOTES

- 1 *Geopolitical Affairs* is grateful to the journal *Population & Avenir* for the right to reproduce Gérard-François Dumont's editorial from its issue No. 684 (September–October 2007) <www.population-demographie.org>.
- 2 According to the official figures of the Russian Federal State Statistics Office <www.gks.ru>.
- 3 The EU had a net inflow of 1,650,000 migrants in 2005 according to Eurostat.
- 4 On the causes, see Dumont, Gérard-François, *Les populations du monde* (Paris: Éditions Armand Colin, 2004, 2nd edn).
- 5 Like the agreement on oil exploration in the Barents Sea signed with Total at the beginning of July 2007.

Geopolitical Affairs, janvier 2008.

Pour citer cette publication:
To cite this version:

Dumont, Gérard-François,
« Russian depopulation and geopolitics »,
Geopolitical affairs, Londres, janvier 2008, p. 51-53

[ISSN 1753-5417]