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The Russians are Stressed



And Russia is stressed too – which is why the world ought to take note

Little known fact: The transition to a market economy and democracy in the 1990s in the former Soviet Union and in other Eastern European countries caused a dramatic increase in mortality, shortened life expectancy and, in many cases, led to outright depopulation. Indeed, the steep upsurge in mortality and the decline in life expectancy in Russia were the biggest ever recorded anywhere in peacetime; that is, in the absence of catastrophes like wars, plague or famine. Between 1987 and 1994, Russia's mortality rate increased by 60 percent, from one percent to 1.6 percent, whereas life expectancy went down from 70 to 64 years. Hard to believe, but in the last years of Stalin's rule (1950 to 1953), Russian mortality rates were nearly twice as low as in the 1990s. True, the 1990s saw a transformational recession – output fell by 45 percent between 1989

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and 1998 – and social indicators, such as crime, murder and suicide rates, as well as income inequalities, all deteriorated sharply; but these alone do not fully explain the staggering increase in mortality. During the Great Depression in the US, for example, life expectancy rose from 57 years in 1929 to 63 years in 1932. The increase occurred for both men and women, and for both whites and non-whites. And mortality rates from all causes of death, except suicides, fell.

The increase in mortality in post-communist countries has precious few analogues in history. One is the transition from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic age between around 7000 BC and 3000 BC, when life expectancy fell by several years – possibly due to changes in diet and lifestyle. Another comparable – better documented – case is the increase in mortality during the period of the Enclosure Acts and the Industrial Revolution in Britain: from the 16th to 18th century, life expectancy in Britain fell by some 10 years – from about 40 to slightly over 30 years – due to changes in lifestyle, increases in income inequalities and the general impoverishment of the masses. Other cases of drastic reduction in life expectancy due to social changes – such as for the black population of the American South after the abolition of slavery in 1865 – are just as exceptional.

So why did the transition from communism cause premature deaths? The answer lies in the peculiar stress associated with great shocks. A stress index constructed out of variables like increases in unemployment, labour mobility, migration, divorces and income inequality is a good predictor of changes in life expectancy in post-communist Russia. That index shows that, in the 1990s, men in their 40s and 50s who lost their jobs, or who had to move to another job or another region, who observed increases in inequalities in their country (or region) and who divorced their wives, were the first candidates to die prematurely.

The major theory that today competes with the stress-related mortality explanation is alcoholism. But there are problems with this explanation. First, there are some periods where per-capita alcohol consumption and death rates moved in opposite directions – in 2002 to 2007, for instance, death rates from external causes, including murders and suicides – were falling against a background of rising alcohol consumption.

Second, the levels of per-capita alcohol consumption in the 1990s were equal to, or lower than, those of the early 1980s, whereas death rates from external causes doubled, and the total death rate increased by one half. What we observe, therefore, is a simultaneous increase in three variables – total death rate, death rates from external causes and alcohol consumption; all driven by another factor: in all likelihood, stress.

Countries that proceeded with more gradual reforms (from China to Uzbekistan to Belarus) all managed to preserve institutional capacity, and to completely avoid or at least mitigate the collapse of national output and increases in mortality. China and Vietnam did not have any transformational recession during their transitions, and life expectancy in these countries grew constantly. In the post-communist states of Central Europe, where there were stronger institutions, reduction of output and increases in mortality were less pronounced than in the former Soviet states.



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Past GB Geo-Bloggers

The implications of the mortality crisis for Russia are far-reaching. Even the 'average' official forecast envisages a reduction of Russia's population from the current 142 million to 139 million by 2031, whereas more pessimistic forecasts suggest a fall to some 127 million. Attempts to replenish these losses through immigration would certainly imply more ethnic tensions within the Russian Federation – tensions that are already pronounced and not easily managed.

For other countries, the Russian mortality crisis reveals the pivotal role of social stress in life expectancy. In a sense, Russia's 'shock' transition from the Soviet order to its present-day order was a 'natural experiment' that happens but once in 1,000 years; it showed how much stress human societies can take without dying out. It also suggested, however, that humans live longer when they are not 'shocked.' Said de Gaulle: «*Il faut laisser évoluer les esprits*».

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