

Differential Demographics

Russia's Muslim and Slavic Populations

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Judyth Twigg

Virginia Commonwealth University

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It is conventional wisdom that Russia's Muslim population is increasing dramatically relative to Russia's Slavic population, and that along a variety of demographic indicators its Muslim national groups are thriving in comparison to the demographic crisis being experienced by their Slavic compatriots. Reported ethnicity data from the 2002 Russian census, released in early 2005, permit a more rigorous test of this conventional wisdom than has previously been possible, along with an analysis of its implications for Russian stability and security.

Data Sources

The 2002 All-Russia Census was filled with well-publicized methodological and data collection problems, ranging from design of the census questionnaire to full-blown (and apparently occasionally large-scale) falsification of data. The data collection anomalies were particularly acute in Chechnya. This analysis proceeds with those distortions in mind.

For purposes of this study, the main challenge presented by the census is that it did not ask the respondents their religious affiliation; this question was considered too politically sensitive for inclusion. We will therefore have to infer religion from the ethnicity data that the census did provide. In most cases, there is a reasonable correspondence between ethnic/nationality group and religion, with the obvious caveats that many people convert to a different religion than that of their own ethnicity, and that degree of religious fervency and practice varies considerably within each confession and within each ethnicity.

How Many Muslims Are There in Russia?

People of nationality groups traditionally identified as Muslim comprised just over 10 percent of Russia's population in 2002, or 14.63 million people. People of Slavic nationality groups (ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians) made up 85.7 percent of the population, with peoples usually associated with animist and other indigenous faiths, in addition to small numbers of Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists, comprising the rest.

The 10 percent figure for Russia's Muslims falls somewhat below many commonly expressed estimates. This may be due to a variety of reasons. First, of course, many Russian citizens of a nationality group that is not traditionally Muslim may have converted to Islam. (The converse is also true, of course, as many people of traditionally Islamic nationalities may not be practicing Muslims.) Second, and more likely, the level of Islamic belief and practice in Russia may have been inflated by many spokesmen for political reasons. Leaders of Russia's Islamic community, for example, routinely cite a figure of 20 million Muslims, permitting a high quota of Russians each year allotted to make the annual *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca.

Who and Where Are Russia's Muslims?

The most populous Muslim nationality group in Russia is the Tatars, numbering over 5.5 million. Other dominant Muslim nationality groups (those with at least 500,000 people, in descending order of population) include the Bashkirs, the Chechens, the Avars, the Kazakhs, the Azeris, the Kabardians, and the Darghinians.

The Tatars are sufficiently spread geographically throughout Russia that Tatarstan is not the region with the highest absolute number of Muslims. That distinction belongs to Dagestan, followed by (in descending order of Muslim population and including only those regions with at least 500,000 Muslims) Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Similarly, the regions with the highest percentage of their populations of Muslim nationality are Ingushetia (97.38 percent), followed by (in descending order of percentage of Muslim population and including only those with at least 25 percent Muslims) Dagestan, Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and North Ossetia.

The regions vary dramatically, however, in terms of the ethnic composition of their Muslim populations. Chechnya is the Muslim region with the strongest degree of homogeneity, with 93.47 percent of its population ethnic Chechen; 5.94 percent of Chechnya's population is non-Muslim, and very small minorities are Muslim Ingush or Nogais. Ingushetia is also relatively homogeneous, being 77.27 percent Ingush and 20.42 percent Chechen, with small minorities of non-Muslims and Muslim Avars and Kumyks. Dagestan, by contrast, even though it is almost 95

percent Muslims, contains thirteen different primary Muslim nationality groups, several of which are located exclusively in that region. They include the Avars (29.44 percent of Dagestan's population), Darghinians (16.52 percent), Kumyks (14.20 percent), Lezgins (13.07 percent), and Laks (5.42 percent). Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia each have Muslim populations that are split primarily between their two titular nationality groups, and each has a substantial non-Muslim population. Tatarstan and Bashkortostan are almost half non-Muslim.

Russia's Muslims are concentrated primarily in the North Caucasus region (the southern part of the Southern Federal District), and in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. However, significant numbers of Muslims, expressed in terms of both absolute numbers and percentage of regional population, are located throughout Russia, with the notable exception of much of European Russia and particularly the Northwest Federal District. As might be expected, the regions with the highest percentage of Slavic nationals are those in European Russia, a wide swath of southern Siberia, and the Far East.

Although these general patterns were roughly similar at the time of the last Russian census in 1989, some important shifts can be observed over that thirteen-year period. First, many regions in the North Caucasus saw significant increases in the percentages of their total populations that are of predominantly Muslim ethnicities. Chechnya is the most dramatic example of this phenomenon, moving from 68.3 percent Muslim in 1989 to over 94 percent Muslim in 2002, an increase of over 25 percentage points. Ingushetia similarly climbed by over 12 percentage points, Karachai-Cherkessia by almost 10, Kabardino-Balkaria by over 9, and Dagestan (from an already high 1989 level of 88.3 percent Muslim) by over 6.

Overall, 47 regions experienced an increase in the percentage of Muslims in their total populations, compared to 19 regions that experienced a decrease in their percentage of Muslim nationals (the remaining regions contained too few Muslims in either year to be significant, or none at all). The decreases are almost exclusively in Siberia, the Far East, and the far North, with the notable addition of Kalmykia, which experienced an over two-point decline in its percentage of Muslims. In terms of absolute numbers of Muslims (as opposed to regional population percentages), 43 regions saw an increase, compared with 24 that experienced an absolute decrease.

It is interesting to compare the Muslim 1989-2002 population dynamics with those for Russia's Slavs. Virtually all of Russia's regions, as might be expected given the context of Russia's overall population decline, have seen a decrease in absolute number of Slavic nationals. The number of Slavs grew in only 14 regions from 1989 to 2002, and four of those regions are in the Southern Federal District. A similar minority of regions experienced an increase in the percentage of their population that is

Slavic. In other words, as will be elaborated in the following sections, Russia's traditionally Muslim national groups have weathered Russia's demographic storm much more successfully than have the Slavs.

Near-Term Population Dynamics: Implications for Conscription

The best window into the near-future dynamics of Russia's Muslim and Slavic populations is its birth patterns. Recent-year birth trends, coupled with age cohort patterns presented by the census, indicate that fertility in the most heavily Muslim regions is significantly and consistently higher than in Russia as a whole, and quite decisively higher than in the most heavily Slavic regions.

Most worthy of note, however, is the recent narrowing of the gap between Muslim and Slavic fertility (since 1999). The Muslim regions with the highest fertility, Ingushetia and Dagestan, have seen declining (although still high) birth rates since 2001, while many of the predominantly Slavic regions have experienced significant fertility increases since 1999. This trend is also illustrated by an examination of the ethnic makeup of Russia's male population by young age cohort. The percentage of Muslims in the total Russian male population was approximately 9.5 percent in 2002. That percentage was significantly higher for males of conscription age in 2002 (18-19 years old), where it was 10.07 percent Muslim. Moving down to the 5-9-year-old age cohort, the percentage of Muslims among each male age group gets larger and larger: 10.15 percent among 15-17-year-olds; 11.8 percent among 10-14-year-olds, and 13.2 percent among 5-9-year-olds. This implies, of course, that the conscription pool will continue to become more Muslim by approximately those same percentages as these younger age cohorts reach draft age. For the youngest male age group (0-4), however, the percentage of the population that is Muslim declines to 12.71 percent – reflecting the fertility trends observed above, where the gap between Slavic and Muslim birth rates is shrinking.

Two key conclusions emerge from these data. First, the conscription pool becomes most proportionally Muslim at precisely a time, around the years 2012-2016, that the absolute magnitude of the conscription pool (the sheer number of 18-year-old men) reaches a low point. In other words, the draft pool will be the smallest in overall numbers at precisely the same time that it contains the most Muslims and fewest Slavs, compounding the demographic dimension of the conscription crisis with a profound ethnic component. Second, however, if current trends prevail, the percentage of Slavs in the draft pool will rebound after the years 2016-2017, with the percentage of Slavs increasing and the percentage of Muslims decreasing. Great caution must be exercised in extrapolating from fertility trends that have been in place for only a few years, but it appears as though the

Muslim youth bulge may be a temporary phenomenon that will be in the process of diminishing by the year 2020.

Social and Demographic Standards among Russia's Muslims

Another way to illustrate the differences in demographic trends between Russia's Muslims and Slavs is to run statistical correlations, using Russia's 89 regions as the unit of analysis, between the ethnicities of those regions' populations and several other demographic indicators. This analysis reveals a strong correlation between the percent of a region's population that is Muslim (or Slavic) with its fertility rate, its coefficient of natural population growth (births minus deaths), its mortality rate, its life expectancy, and its age structure. Put starkly, Russia's Muslims, wherever in the country they live, have significantly more babies, suffer less premature death, and live longer than do Russia's Slavs.

An analysis of indicators relating to standard of living reveals that socioeconomic factors do not explain this differential. A region's level of Muslim or Slavic population does correlate significantly with its unemployment rate, poverty levels, and average per capita living space, but in a direction opposite of what might be expected given the health indicators: Muslims are more likely to be unemployed, to have a wage below the subsistence minimum, and to have below-average-sized apartments.

More potent as explanatory factors, and also quite effective as clues to the degree of faithful practice of Islam among the population that is ethnically Muslim, are behavioral indicators. Statistically, Russia's Muslims have significantly fewer abortions (which goes a long way toward explaining the birth rate differential), divorce more rarely, and experience a lower crime rate than do Russia's Slavs. Mortality from cardiovascular disease and trauma/injury, leading causes of death thought to be closely related to binge drinking patterns of alcohol abuse, is significantly higher among Slavs than among Muslims. In other words, it seems to be lifestyle choices relating to religion (staying sober, staying married, and staying out of trouble) that contribute to the positive Muslim health and demographic picture within Russia.

Disaffected Muslims and Instability in the Southern Federal District (SFD)

Some Muslim regions in the SFD are widely viewed as possible flashpoints of instability, with the roots of that instability potentially related to religion and religious fundamentalism. It is therefore useful to examine key social and economic indicators for Muslims in the SFD, looking particularly closely at male Muslim youth, and to ask the following questions: do young Muslim men in the SFD experience life

circumstances that might make them susceptible to fundamentalist ideologies? Are their life situations significantly different from those of young men in the remainder of Russia, and from those of the older generations of men in their own communities? Is there cause for them to perceive that more and fairer opportunities exist for Slavic men in other parts of Russia, or that more and better opportunities were available to their fathers' generation than to theirs?

The 2002 census provides data for a preliminary exploration of these questions. First, the census asked questions about education. For Russian men as a whole, we find that approximately 16 percent of 16-29-year-olds have achieved some form of higher education (defined as having done post-graduate work, having graduated from college, or having done some college-level work), while about 19.5 percent of the working-age Russian male population has done so. Within the SFD, interestingly, the less Muslim regions (Krasnodar, Stavropol, Astrakhan, Volgograd, Rostov, Kalmykia) have less male educational attainment than Russia as a whole, while the more Muslim regions (Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia) actually have higher levels of higher educational attainment than the country in aggregate. The more Muslim SFD regions also have a lower gap in the achievement of higher education between 16-29-year-olds and the working-age population. In other words, younger men have had an educational opportunity experience closer to that of the older generation in these regions, with younger men in Kabardino-Balkaria actually having more higher education than their fathers. Young Muslim men in the SFD have more college experience than young men in Slavic Russia.

Marriage patterns, however, tell a different story. By and large, older men (those aged 45-54) are married at noticeably higher rates across the SFD than in Russia as a whole, especially in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Chechnya. In several SFD regions, however, marriage rates among younger male age cohorts are significantly lower for the more heavily Muslim SFD regions than for their fathers, and for Russia as a whole. This is especially true for Ingushetia, where marriage rates for 20-24 and 25-29-year-old men are less than half that of the same age groups in all of Russia.

The census also registered employment data by age cohort and gender, permitting the observation that young male unemployment levels are significantly higher among the SFD's more Muslim regions than in the country as a whole. Among economically active males (that is, men not in school or otherwise not eligible for the work force), unemployment among 20-29-year-old men hovers around 50 percent in Dagestan and 40 percent in Karachai-Cherkessia, and soars to nearly 80 percent in Ingushetia.

To be blunt, the sociodemographic situation of young men in the more predominantly Muslim regions of the Southern Federal District should be

of great interest to anyone concerned with social and political stability in this part of Russia. A crude but interesting stereotype emerges: a Muslim man in his mid-to-late twenties, with a university education that would have created for him some significant positive expectations about his future, but who has been unable to find a job and who does not enjoy the bonds of marriage to tie him in a significant way to family or to community. His college experience may have acquainted him with (or even immersed him in) radical philosophies that would further inspire him to feelings of alienation and disconnection from society as a whole. Given the proper trigger, this young man may be inclined to act on those feelings of disaffection and alienation.

This analysis points toward the need for further examination of the situation of Muslims in the Southern Federal District. Given the broad preexisting socioeconomic conditions for unrest in this part of Russia, what might be the tipping points that could activate the existing potential for instability? What could cause acute politicization of general discontent? Where are the likely geographic foci of instability? These and a host of other politically significant questions emerge from the demographic analysis made possible by 2002 census data.

