

**Russia's Unprecedented Mortality Crisis as a  
Flashpoint Condition for Geopolitical Conflict**

David M. Paschane

Nathaniel S. Trumbull

Department of Geography, University of Washington

Paper presented at the 7th Annual Northwest Regional Conference for Russian, East  
European, and Central Asian Studies, April 14, 2001, Olympia, Washington

Please send written correspondence to the authors at:

Box 353550, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195

Paschane@u.washington.edu; Trumbull@u.washington.edu

## Abstract

Security scholars seek to identify potential flashpoints for geopolitical conflict in particular areas. Russia's unprecedented mortality rate in the last decade, and its other related indicators of social volatility, reflect a widespread institutional decay that may be setting the conditions for such a flashpoint. This paper considers an array of evidence that rapid changes in health status in Russia may contribute to political behaviors at different scales and in different geographic dimensions. Predicting a flashpoint, based on conditions attributed to medical problems, is a new approach to theorizing potential geopolitical events. Russia's potential threat to the world may lie not in its military capacity, but in its deteriorating population. As a developing theory, this work may help researchers who are planning analyses in global conflict prevention in a number of the world's regions.

## I. Overview

The chronic decay of Russia's economy has left the country in a difficult and unfamiliar geopolitical position. At the same time that a sustained economic downturn has undermined Russia's return to superpower status, its own internal instability may introduce an entirely new set of geopolitical threats. The critical question may not be whether the Russian government can regain its military strength, but whether Russia's health crisis may provide an equally serious, even if indirect, threat to the world? Unprecedented mortality combined with pervasive corruption in government and business, migration and emigration trends, and related environmental factors may have created a potential threat for Russia's international neighbors.

Predicting a flashpoint for geopolitical aggression is of course impossible. However, unique circumstances do make for worthy discussion since they may be the only source from which to extrapolate a chain of events. If the Russian experience of incredible political change is being further aggravated by social desperation due to mortality, or morbidity leading to the same, then aggression, under the right leadership, may be possible. Signs of political unrest and uncertainty have emerged repeatedly since the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Regional mortality may manifest an entirely unexpected polarization within the federal government as representative leaders realize the critical state of their people's survival. They may respond with radical interventions that may seem impossible within the current infrastructure of the national system, or they may seek to take advantage of such plight by organizing their people in circumventing the

national government's authority. At some scale of measurement, the struggle for survival in the context of death will affect the organization of power, whether it is the impact of familial mortality, aggregated regional mortality, or the death of a single leader at a critical political moment. It may be impossible to identify when mortality becomes linked to a chain of geopolitical events; nevertheless, the potential for flashpoints is conceivable if the limited information on mortality is representational of the true conditions in post-superpower Russia.

## II. Flashpoint Conditions in Russia

The relationship of widespread institutional change to population health is inherently complex. Aggregated mortality is a rather crude indicator of a country's changing state of affairs. Russia's circumstances may be so variable that to encapsulate its internal turmoil is a necessary simplification. Yet the overall statistics are stunning: The deterioration of the population health of the former Soviet Union is unprecedented for an industrialized society outside of conditions of war. Russia and its other previous states have set repeated records in declining average life expectancy since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. One demographer characterizes this situation as the "depopulation" of the former Soviet Union. (Feshbach, 1999)

### A. Mortality in Russia

The single most important factor in explaining the crisis in Russia's recent demographic trend has been the increase in rates of mortality, which were particularly dramatic among working-age men in the early 1990s. One recent source reports that overall mortality has risen forty percent between 1987 and 1994 (Powell, 1998) and, according to Eberstadt (1999), the first half of 1998 shows that crude death rates are still thirty percent higher than they were in the final years of Soviet rule. All age-cohorts have faced unprecedented mortality increases; most notable has been among men. For example, between 1990 and 1995, the mortality for men aged forty to forty-nine climbed by seventy-seven percent (Powell).

The incredible change in mortality is striking and at the same time difficult to interpret. Russian mortality data have had questionable validity because of the belief that Soviet leaders inflated the reported life expectancy and concealed high rates of mortality as a means of improving Russia's standing in the global context. The government-induced environmental threats to health, identified by Feshbach and Friendly (1992), add credence to such suspicions. Nevertheless, recent mortality data and its comparisons continue to support the belief that these data may accurately represent an unparalleled condition. When Russia is compared to the European average, the death rate for men is almost three times higher, and for women it is one and a half times higher (Powell). The same source reports that the 1996 death rates for men in Russia and the United States were 15.1 and 8.8 per 1,000, respectively. Although age may account for a great deal of the mortality faced by other industrial countries, an estimated one third of Russian's mortality is among the working age adults. The World Health Organization standardizes

mortality data to control for population aging and the results suggest that Russia's excess mortality between 1992 and 1995 amounts to nearly 1.8 million and may reach 3 million when estimated through the year 1998 (Eberstadt). These data evidence a severely diminishing workforce in Russia.

The severity of the mortality status is incomplete without including the low fertility that is due to high rates of infant mortality and the highest rate of abortion, which also develops into more health complications for the mother and fewer offspring (Powell). In comparison to other industrialized countries, Russia's infant mortality is three to four times higher and maternal mortality is five to ten times higher (Anonymous, 1999). The combination of low fertility and high mortality results in a negative population growth, afflicting Russia where deaths exceed births by well over half (Eberstadt). Not only the severity, but the notability of these conditions is significant: "Russia appears to be the first industrial country in history to experience such a sharp decrease in births versus deaths for reasons other than war, famine or disease" (Powell). Russia also experienced the largest disparity in the world between male and female life expectancy, a difference of 13.5 years in 1994 (Powell).

A variety of causes explains the increased mortality rate in Russia. Infectious and parasitic diseases, cancer, and diseases of the circulatory, respiratory, and digestive systems contribute to the high mortality rates. Cardiovascular diseases, and especially heart attacks and strokes are most significant. Smoking, alcohol, obesity, and poor diet, and largely untreated forms of psychological illnesses are likely stressors in high rates

of cardiovascular disease. Cancer has been another cause of high mortality rates. Causes of cancer are multi-factorial, but likely contributing factors in Russia have been heavy smoking and contact with toxic emissions and chemicals in soil, food, and water. Violent death has been another significant cause of mortality in the former Soviet Union. Russia's rates of homicide and suicide are now among the highest in the world. Alcohol appears to play a fundamental role in these types of deaths. Likewise, fatal alcohol poisoning is common among Russians. Unfortunately, public attitudes toward healthy behavior have not changed significantly during the post-Soviet period.

## B. The Health Crisis in Context

The rampant economic and political corruption that has crippled the social service infrastructure has apparently facilitated even more direct affliction on the Russian people, as their mortality is largely attributable to those causes that are associated with extreme stress. For example, the behavioral and attitudinal aspects of risk factors such as excessive alcohol consumption, heavy smoking, and obesity, combined with the stress and anxiety of a decaying society, may explain Russia having the highest cardiovascular mortality among industrialized countries. The standardized death rate attributed to cardiovascular disease in Russia is higher than the death rate in the United States for all causes combined (Eberstadt). The long-term culmination of physical and psychological insults raises the susceptibility to this disease.

The widespread mortality faced by surviving Russians may further strain psychological well being and provoke anxieties leading to further self-destructive behavior. After cardiovascular disease, externally caused deadly injuries account for the next largest proportion of Russia's mortality. Many of these injuries are attributable to worksite accidents; however, a great deal of them evidence a society plagued by criminal and alcohol-induced violence. The average Russian no longer has police or legal protections as organized crime and political corruption have bankrupted such services.

The extraordinary consumption of alcohol in Russia may be a form of amelioration of the psychological effects of unimaginable violence and social decay that simply leads to further provocation of injury. Excessive consumption of alcohol among Russians is a largely accepted lifestyle for living in a circumpolar region where extreme climates and seasonal changes may induce maladaptive behaviors. However, the theory that northern latitude contributes to substance abuse is inconclusive. When Russia is compared to its fellow circumpolar countries, its alcohol-attributable mortality is notably higher, as illustrated by a comparison to Norway where Russian men (relative risk = 48.40) and women (relative risk = 16.50) are at much greater risk than their counterparts (Paschane, 1998). The extreme differences suggest that alcohol consumption is not a mere marker of a northern location, but an indicator of complex responses to an overwhelming social environment. The Russian mortality situation is even more distressing when the rise in suicide is included. In 1993, the number of suicides was estimated at 56,000 and this number increased to 61,000 in 1994 and 67,000 in 1995 (Powell). Suicide may be the final solution for Russians who fail to pacify

their hopelessness with alcohol, and must continue to face a tragically decaying social structure. As these data demonstrate, Russia's unprecedented crisis is framed by the incredible prevalence of early death, violence, and self-destructive behavior.

A conclusive analysis of the causes of the sharp decline in population health of residents of the former Soviet Union after its dissolution may be premature. The challenge of isolating variables as more or less important causal factor remains significant. We might instead conclude tentatively that an array of complex problems are determinant: A deteriorating health service infrastructure, an increase in barriers to receiving primary aid, and continuing negligent personal behavior are together at the root of the unprecedented trend in the former Soviet Union. The total effect of each of those problems may indeed be more detrimental than the sum of its individual parts.

### III. Flashpoint Catalysts

These mortality data elicit the question: At what point does Russia's decaying population become a global threat? Today's Russia, for the time being, may be only a threat to its own residents. However, the potential flashpoint conditions of Russia's mortality, put into the context of recent and probable events, suggests that other potential catalysts can lead to geopolitical ramifications. Clearly, it is not the deceased that pose a threat beyond Russia's borders, but the Russians who must resort to uncertain and desperate means of survival.

In the 1990s, Russians relied heavily on bartering in what Gaddy & Ickes (1999) describe as a virtual economy. According to Chang (1999), approximately two-thirds of Russia's economic activity was bartering and other non-monetary forms of transactions. As Russians managed survival on the fringes of the Soviet-planned system, especially in its urban centers, they may also face oppression from a system of organized crime. It is imaginable that some of those who bartered in the back streets of Moscow are now committing overt crimes against their fellow Russians as they take part in the abuses of a mafia-type system. A potentially widespread result from such survival, through illegal means, is that it creates a belief in survival by aggression because the timid and weak appear to die without satisfaction. Consequently, a community of desperate people disillusion the latest generation with less conscience about their own behavior and a readiness for even more aggressive acts. Russia's deteriorating education system fails to mitigate these problems, and may even exasperate behavior that is more dangerous. Nevertheless, widespread desperation, loss of belief in the nation's governing capacity, and general corruption by itself does not make a flashpoint for international conflict. The actual catalyst of a flashpoint is likely to arise from cross-border activities that are instrumental in escalating strain between countries.

#### A. Illicit Economic Activities

Many observers indicate that Russian groups are involved in a wide range of illegal economic activities throughout the world. As a geopolitical example, Russians are associated with extreme price fluctuations in natural resources, including nickel,

aluminum, and diamonds. The oil industry, particularly in the Caspian Sea region, has also been subject to potential illicit activity, and has created widespread concern, given the presence of Western investments. Russia's sales of arms to China and Iraq have also been the subject of scrutiny and tension for Western governments. Nuclear arms sales, whether authorized or not, remains perhaps one of the most serious threats to global security. While none of these economic activities has been the source of direct geopolitical conflict, they do involve a great deal of competing international interest. The geographic scope of illicit activity involving Russia is astonishing. It emphasizes the need for investment in human capital since we can not know when Russia "...can break out of the grip of organized crime, protectionist tendencies, and monopolistic networks that currently dominate and cannibalize much of the economy" (Breslauer, 1995).

In addition to the suffering that Russians have experienced within their own country, they also face the international embarrassment of becoming a supplicant rather than a supplier of aid (Breslauer, 1995). As a recent example, Russian customs officials ultimately destroyed a large supply of medical equipment and medicines after allowing it to sit in storage for over a year. The customs authorities reported animosity towards the American suppliers because they did not consider themselves in need of charity. This does not mean that the would-be recipients would have shared these opinions, but it does illustrate a complexity of ideas and attitudes that act as real barriers to interventions.

Selective aid can increase tensions and may even encourage more illicit activity. As Janet Wedel's work emphasizes, Western aid to Russia during much of the 1990s may have even supported the interest of ill-intending factions. In discussing the role of foreign aid to Russia, Breslauer (1995) recommends that foreign governments, through comprehensive engagement, encourage nongovernment entities to become involved. Such groups can make cooperative relationships work by personalizing experiences through mutual collaboration on local projects. Government grants can help support such projects while allowing the fostering of relationships between nongovernmental ties. Comprehensive engagement between people with similar interests can help build hope among Russians while minimizing the tensions that result from bilateral agreements between governments where corruption has its greatest potential. The sphere of economic assistance is one in which Western governments have demonstrated possible collusion with the Russian government, to the point of ignoring the plight of ordinary Russians in terms of their health and means of survival.

## B. Migration and Emigration issues

Widespread migration across the former Soviet Union remains a constant concern for regional stability. The geography of Russia suggests one reason for the high levels of movement. For example, the Russia North, relative to its economic potential, is overpopulated. The centrally planned economic system of the Soviet years did not reflect the true labor, transport, and infrastructure costs added to production of goods from this region. Russia North contains fifty-five percent of the world's northern territory,

seventy-five percent of the northern population, and ten of the eleven northern cities with over 250,000 populations (Heleniak, 1999). According to Heleniak, the Russian North is experiencing a massive outmigration by those who have chosen this strategy as a means of survival. The loss of additional human capital even further disenfranchises those who remain in the remote social systems.

Russia's remote places allow for the development of more extreme political factions. The geopolitical concern is that local control over arsenals of weapons has potentially weakened during the post-Soviet era. The perceived distance both physically and politically from Moscow authorities may weaken military stability, thus allow for the organization of clandestine, localized military activities. Eberstadt (1991) even goes so far as to suggest "...a radical or revisionist state [that] could today cause tremendous difficulties for its neighbors, its region, and arguably even the entire international community..."

The risk of a large outflow of Russian citizens, some of whom have already left Russia through emigration in the 1990s, has contributed to a growing weight on the social network of Western Europe particularly. Most recent data suggest an estimated 100 thousand people are leaving Russia each year (Heleniak, 2001). While the question of emigration is a highly political one, and in many cases may have positive economic ramifications for the host nation, in the case of some nations, Germany in particular, high levels of immigration may also be a serious burden. If larger waves of emigration

were to occur in the future, it could lead to a much more tense relationship between Western European nations and Russia.

#### IV. Conclusions

One form of a threat to global security is the insidious disintegration of a previous military power. Russia's loss of superpower status does not guarantee global security; indeed, such changes may only complicate future international conflicts. Although health problems, attributable to pollution, natural disasters, and infectious diseases, are critical issues in geopolitical relations, analyses of mortality rates and severe health status as conditions for flashpoints remain unexplored.

The transition of the Russian population from its current state of health deterioration to healthy and productive citizens is likely to be a long and slow affair. The alternative of no change may fuel further political desperation and fragmentation. Contrary to Breslauer's proposal of discouraging foreign aid tied to mandates, some tactful leveraging may be possible on the part of the West. Aid provided through nongovernment organizations can encourage solutions immediate to local needs, and allow Russians a more accurate knowledge of Western interest in their well being. If Russia is to be included one day on an equal par among other industrialized nations, such as its interest in candidacy in the World Trade Organization, greater investment in the health and education of its workforce is necessary. These investments may help establish the foundation for Russia's recovery from its downward spiral of health deterioration, further complicated by illicit economic activities and migration problems. A

healthy population is critical for Russia's social, economic, and political transition, and such a transformation may be necessary for preventing the world's next geopolitical crisis.

## References

- Anonymous. (1999). Free at last, to die. The Economist, September 21.
- Breslauer, G. W. (1995). Aid to Russia: What difference can Western policy make? In G. W. Lapidus (Ed.) The new Russia: Troubled transformation. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Chang, G. H. (1999). Observations on the nature of Russia's virtual economy. Post-Soviet Geography and Economics, 40 (2), 114-121.
- Eberstadt, N. (1999). Russia: Too sick to matter? Policy Review, June-July (95), 1-23.
- Feshbach, M. (1999). Dead Souls. The Atlantic Monthly, January.
- Feshbach, M. & Friendly, A. (1992). Ecocide in the USSR: Health and nature under siege. New York: Basic Books.
- Gaddy, C. & Ickes, B. W. (1999). An accounting model of the virtual economy in Russia. Post-Soviet Geography and Economics, 40 (2), 79-97.
- Heleniak, T. (1999). Out-migration and depopulation of the Russian North during the 1990s. Post-Soviet Geography and Economics, 40 (3), 155-205.
- Heleniak, T. (2001). Population changes in the transition states during the 1990s. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers.
- Paschane, D. M. (1998). Global variability of substance abuse: Is latitude a unique etiological factor? International Journal of Circumpolar Health, 57, 228-238.
- Powell, D. E. (1998). The dismal state of health care in Russia. Current History, 97 (621), 335-341.