

## **A second baby? Russia's mothers aren't persuaded.**

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From The Christian Science Monitor

May 19, 2006

**MOSCOW** - Cash for babies is the Kremlin's offer to women in its latest bid to reverse a population decline that threatens to leave large swaths of Russia virtually uninhabited within 50 years.

President Vladimir Putin last week defined the crisis as Russia's most acute problem, and promised to spend some of the country's oil profits on efforts to relieve it. He ordered parliament to more than double monthly child support payments to 1,500 rubles (about \$55) and added that women who choose to have a second baby will receive 250,000 rubles (\$9,200), a staggering sum in a country where average monthly incomes hover close to \$330.

On Monday, young women at the Family Planning Youth Center, a nongovernmental clinic for northwest Moscow, said they liked the sound of more money, but suggested that Mr. Putin has no concept of their lives. "A child is not an easy project, and in this world a woman is expected to get an education, find a job, and make a career," says Svetlana Romanicheva, a student who says she won't consider babies for at least five years. She hopes to have one child, but says a second would depend on her life "working out very well." As for Putin's offer, she says "it won't change anything."

Russia's birthrate, falling for decades, has plunged in post-Soviet times, to just 1.17 in 2004 from 2.08 babies per woman in 1990 - far below the 2.4 children required to maintain the population - according to the Federal State Statistics Service. The average rate from 2000-05 in the US, by contrast, was 2.0, according to UN figures, while Mexico, for example, weighed in at 2.4 and Italy at 1.3.

Russia also has one of the world's highest abortion rates. In addition, the death rate has climbed to levels seldom seen in peacetime, to 16.3 in 2002 from 10.7 per thousand people in 1988. The result is a population that is shrinking by an average of 700,000 people each year - and aging. A UN report last year predicted that Russia's population, around 145 million in 2002, could fall by one-third by 2050.

Experts foretell the grim prospect of a Russia that can no longer man its factories, field a decent hockey team, or defend its borders. "I think Putin's main concern is a lack of future soldiers," says Yury Levada, head of the Levada Center, an independent polling agency. "That's a narrow perspective, but one that resonates politically."

Some women say they resent the suggestion, made explicit by many nationalist politicians, that their lack of enthusiasm for bearing children is to blame. "This problem began long ago, and even if we were to have more babies it wouldn't mean the situation ... would improve," says Irina Isayeva, a medical student who volunteers at the family center. "A woman has to ... ensure that her conditions are adequate to raise children. Women may want fewer children, but be able to give them better chances in life."

Young women also say that it's hard to find a good partner. Official statistics show that almost 8 of every 10 marriages end in divorce, and one-third of children are born out of wedlock. "The interests of men and women seem different, so women just depend less on men," says Olga Istomina, a student. "A lot of people live together. Partners change all the time."

Others say Putin is moving in the right direction. "Russian women typically have one child ... but many of my patients would like a second if they felt they had enough support," says Galina Dedova, a gynecologist at Happy Families, a private Moscow clinic. "Most of my patients count their rubles.... If they could reliably expect more money, some might [consider] more children."

Putin also doubled subsidies for foster families, to 4,500 rubles (\$166) per month, a move widely welcomed by child-care experts. In recent years, Russia has cracked down on foreign adoptions, leaving 700,000 institutionalized children with few options. "I believe the situation will begin to improve after Putin's measures, and more people will see the importance of adopting," says Galina Krasnitskaya, an adviser to Russia's State Duma.

Critics point to the high male death rate, a problem Putin barely addressed. Men's ranks have been decimated by alcoholism, war in Chechnya, AIDS, and accidents. "Male life expectancy is less than 60 years," says Yevgeny Gontmakher, research head of the Center of Social Studies, an independent Moscow think tank. "Trying to stimulate the birthrate is pure populism; it's naive to think a demographic revolution can happen."

Low birthrates and high mortality could deliver an economic wallop that could dash Putin's hopes of restoring Russia as a great power. "If current trends persist, there will be four dependents for every Russian worker by 2025," Regional Development Minister Vladimir Yakovlev warned last month. "Russia needs a million new workers every year. If we don't get them, we can forget about economic growth."

Some say that Russia must open its doors to immigrants, as many Western countries have done. But Putin insists that only ethnic Russians - about 25 million remain stranded in former Soviet countries - will be eligible for easy entry. Polls show large majorities remain hostile to the idea of mass immigration of non-Slavs.

Nadezhda Kalmikova, director of the Family Planning Center, says she believes that money will solve little. "[F]amilies need to be sure there will be all the things children need," she says. "That goes beyond material requirements.... [W]e need children who will grow up well and become good citizens. You can't buy that."