

Demographic Change in the Russian Federation: Causes and Strategic Implications

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Demographic Change in the Russian Federation: Causes and Strategic Implications

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Abstract

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Russia's population and demographic dynamics have changed significantly since Soviet times and continue to evolve with strategic consequence for the United States. In the next fifteen to thirty years these changes will profoundly affect Russian society and its ability to reliably field land power of the size it has today. This trend may make Russia even more dangerous to the United States than it is today. The main elements of this analysis will seek to shed light on current and projected demographic trends in Russia, and examine how demographic change could influence the Russian strategic outlook and how it staffs and integrates its armed forces. In question is whether or not current or projected government policies will adequately manage the demographic changes occurring within the borders of the Russian Federation.

Demographic Change in the Russian Federation: Causes and Strategic Implications

In Republics, the great danger is, that the majority may not sufficiently respect the rights of the minority.

—James Madison¹

By the sheer size of its landmass, Russia is the world's largest country. It occupies one-eighth of the world's landmass and spans nine time zones.² As such, the country has traditionally relied on large armed forces to secure its borders and has maintained a large standing army since the 1700s and the time of the Tsars.³ Russia's history is also replete with violent episodes that have justified the need for a large force to secure its borders. Recruited or conscripted from the entire empire, or even the far-flung republics of the Soviet Union, Russian armies have somewhat reflected the diversity of that vast landmass but always maintained a distinctly Slavic character. However, Russia's population and demographic dynamics have not only changed significantly since Soviet times, but continue to evolve. I argue that in the next fifteen to thirty years these changes will profoundly affect Russian society and its ability to reliably field land power of the size it has today. This will likely make Russia even more dangerous to the United States.

At various times since the early 1990s, the Western press has described the Russian demographic question as quite dire since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nicholas Eberstadt, in his highly influential *Foreign Affairs* article "The Dying Bear," outlines a bleak forecast for Russia over the coming decades.⁴ While his incredibly pessimistic outlook is not universally shared, many of his arguments are undisputable. Falling birthrates and life expectancies, alcoholism, drug usage and accidents are just

some of the reasons attributed to the potentially catastrophic changes in the Russian demographic outlook. Also of note is the relative rise in the Russian Federation's Muslim population and its impact on Russia's ethnic identity.

It is critical for the West to understand Russia as well as the influences that drive its behavior. Indeed, the West had hoped for a much different outcome after the end of the Cold War; a Russia that was not only a strategic partner, but a State that was a reflection of Western values after a short period of post-Soviet reform. Instead we are now witnessing a regionally aggressive and potentially more dangerous Russia acting decisively to secure its sphere of influence, even at the expense of its relationships with Europe and the United States. The Russian strategy of "ambiguous interference" on its periphery has deeply disturbed a two-decade peaceful interregnum and has brought forward a foreboding sense of crisis that most Europeans could not envisage even a few years ago. Regardless of the drivers and motivators of the present Russian strategy, the West must once again focus on internal Russian stimuli in order to understand what drives Russian decision-making and protect its own long-term interests.

Of strategic importance to Western security analysts is whether the ongoing Russian demographic change is significant enough to change the way Russian leaders view their internal and external security environments, and if that change is significant enough to cause a change in their behavior. For example, will Russia, as one of the world's largest net immigration destinations, seek to become more inclusive of its diverse population and cultures? Or will Russia become internally more repressive as cultural frictions challenge the current political dynamic? Given Russia's resurgent role

on the world's stage, this research analysis will seek to address whether changes in ethnic and religious demographics over the next twenty years are significant enough to warrant security concerns for the West.

The main elements of this analysis will seek to shed light on current and projected demographic trends in Russia, how demographic change could influence the Russian strategic outlook, how it staffs and integrates its armed forces, and if current or projected Russian policies will adequately manage the demographic changes occurring within the borders of the Russian Federation.

Why Demographics?

Why study the effects of demographic change? Long the province of insurance companies and bankers, demographic analysis yields foundational data critical to futures theory. Simply put, an analysis of root causes can result in strategic insights that may influence important future outcomes. Changes to the strategic landscape are often manifested in ten to thirty years. However, most analysis occurs in the present, without projecting ahead in order to provide actionable insight to decision makers. While this is understandable, key strategic decisions, particularly in liberal democracies, take time to form and coalesce around shared viewpoints. This analysis seeks to provide a glimpse into at least one factor that will drive future Russian decisions and actions.

Some scholars argue that Russian power revolves around four pillars: population, energy, weaponry and geography.⁵ Zachary Keck believes three of the four pillars are in decline and that only Russian Arms remain a strength. If his analysis is true, or even partially true, then what are the possible effects of this decline on the Russia's people, government, and its relations with the rest of the world?

If the population pillar is declining, and Russia depends upon conscription to man its armed forces, then how will that be accomplished with fewer males? Would Russia rely less on tactical forces and more on strategic forces, (e.g., nuclear), or would we simply see a smaller Russian army? Another potential outcome is the possibility of increased internal strife within Russian Federation borders. Would that lead to an instability of the existing government structure as security concerns disrupt or overwhelm the population?

These are but two examples of the insight to be gained by studying the demographic question. Other Western scholars also share the notion that Russia is really a fragile, albeit quite dangerous nation, and that internal problems could lead to economic or governmental collapse. That question is beyond the scope of this work. However, by examining a component of that fragility, it may be possible to glean some level of strategic insight in order to anticipate any negative impacts to the Western security environment.

Russian Historical Demographics

Russia is slowly but inexorably changing. During the 1990s and early 2000s, expert demographers and analysts also declared Russia's population problems catastrophic and predicted dire consequences for the future of the state.⁶ For example, Russia's population was 148,538,000 in 1991 immediately before the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁷ The United Nation's estimate for 2015 is 143,463,000, a figure that represents a net loss of over five million over the last years of the Soviet Union.

Of note, Russian domestic policy has improved the population situation somewhat. The actual rate of population decline is not as steep now as it was during the tumultuous period of the late 1990s.⁸ Significantly, the figures noted do not include any

additions from recent events in Crimea or refugee flows from fighting in the Ukraine. The magnitude of hardship and the toll it took on the post-Soviet Russian population during the transition from communism is difficult to fathom as death rates soared and birth rates fell dramatically during that time.

This was not always the case. Historically Russia has maintained one of the largest populations in Europe, counting on its vast reservoir of human capital for strength in times of war and disease. It is estimated that the Russian population reached one-hundred million in the early 1930s, and its zenith in 1992. By comparison, the United States reached a similar figure in the 1930s but is now over three-hundred million.

Population Decline

Population change in any country is a complicated issue and it is worth examining some of the causes of the population decline in post-Soviet Russia in order to determine whether these conditions were temporary or if some still linger. The period of the transition from communism was a particularly severe period in the already harsh Russian history as the country struggled in its transition from totalitarian rule to more of a free market approach. Therefore, it is not really surprising that alcoholism, suicide and poor general health conditions led to an extremely high mortality rate, especially for males, for an industrialized society.⁹

In 2009, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev stated that, *on average*, Russians consume approximately eighteen liters of pure alcohol per year, which is double the per capita alcohol consumption of the United States and equivalent to 180 bottles of vodka per year.¹⁰ Also contributing to the overall population decline were extraordinarily high rates of divorce, abortions, drug use, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis,

smoking, heart disease, work place accidents and criminal violence.¹¹ In addition, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for Russia by 2010 was only 1.5 births per woman, which is twenty-seven percent below the 2.1 births per woman required for population stability.¹² The combination of high mortality and low birth rates led to nearly universal ominous predictions for the future, and indeed the Russian government did not ignore these observations.

Russian policies aimed at correcting these trends have had some success. In 1996 life expectancy for males had fallen to only fifty-eight years of age; today it has risen to approximately sixty-four years.¹³ While a significant improvement, this is still fifteen years lower than Germany, Italy and Sweden.¹⁴ Aided by public information campaigns and large monetary incentives, the total fertility rate has also risen to 1.7 births per woman, although this still remains significantly below the replacement rate.¹⁵

Of note, while total pregnancies have gone up, Russia's abortion rate is estimated at two abortions for every live birth, the highest in the world.¹⁶ While the Russian government has made strides in improving birth rates and health care, some problems remain culturally endemic and will be difficult to influence in the short term. Mortality rates for males are still twice as high as in the United States and binge drinking, smoking and general health problems are still significantly greater than in other economically developed nations.¹⁷

Despite the recent gains, there appears to be a significant danger of population decline as the fifty percent drop in fertility rates between 1987 and 1999 will result in a drop from thirteen million women of child-bearing age today, to approximately seven or eight million in the coming years.¹⁸ This dip is a matter of simple mathematics and

cannot be corrected. Thus, given the other endemic health issues in the Russian cultural landscape, these numbers suggest that despite significant government efforts to improve fertility rates, the number of Russian births will be substantially below replacement levels for the foreseeable future.

Ethnicity Factors

Understanding subtleties within general trends is clearly important in order to understand if there are any strategic effects of Russian depopulation. For example, Russia is estimated to have the largest Muslim population in Europe with a 2010 census estimate of 16,379,000, or about twelve percent of the total population.¹⁹ This is expected to increase to a number between fifteen and twenty percent, or 18,556,000, by 2030.²⁰ Indeed, this figure could even be as high as thirty percent by 2050.²¹ These estimates appear plausible because Muslim women generally have more children, less abortions, and have lower divorce rates than Slavic women. This increases the proportion of Muslims within the overall Russian population when all other factors remain constant.

Historically, any significant demographic change in a given population has also resulted in a change in human behaviors. These range from the benign, such as increased tension between ethnicities, to outright inter-ethnic violence and government upheaval. Many questions arise from Russia's ongoing demographic evolution. How will internal Russian politics and culture be affected? Will there be a fundamental change to the traditionally Slavic character of the Russian Federation? The geographic distribution of Russia's Muslim population is also important. Two-thirds of Russia's Muslims have traditionally resided in the Southern and Volga Districts, however economic as well as conflict avoidance and security migration have resulted in substantial internal migration

to Moscow and the oil-rich provinces.²² Indeed, Russia is also the home of eleven million immigrants, or eight percent of the population, making Russia the world's second largest destination for immigration.²³ Most of these immigrants are from the former Soviet Republics and differ from their Slavic counterparts in culture, language, race and religion.²⁴

This movement of people has not been without consequence; ethnic tension and violence have become increasingly common occurrences in Russia. For example, violent clashes between police in Moscow and Dagestani Muslim migrants resulted in the call for a network of nationwide detention centers.²⁵ Anti-immigrant disturbances after the murder of an ethnic Russian by a Muslim from Azerbaijan resulted in the arrest of over twelve hundred ethnic Slavs protesting over a perceived loss of "Russian" rights.²⁶ Although racially similar to many of their Muslim countrymen, in many cases the Slavic population considers itself to be the true owner of the Russian identity.

Between the rampant Russian nationalism that Russian President Vladimir Putin encourages, and the prevalent anti-immigrant xenophobia of a majority of ethnic Russians, it is unsurprising that ethnic tensions remain stubbornly high. Unlike the old communist model where the predominately Muslim republics could encourage loyalty to a Soviet supranationalism, the Russian Federation is unconvincing in its approach to inclusive citizenship.

Despite the fact that Russia's Muslim populations are indeed part of the indigenous Russian population, most Muslims report that they feel like second-class citizens compared to their Slavic counterparts.²⁷ However, it is very important to note that Russia's Muslim populations do not constitute a single block of like-minded

individuals, or even ethnicities. Islam has been part of Russia's culture for almost a thousand years and some Muslim groups, such as the Tartars, are quite renowned for their service and loyalty to the state.

Demographics and the Russian Armed Forces

The Russian Army, whether Tsarist or Soviet, has long relied upon universal conscription and has traditionally required a service commitment from all male citizens to serve in the armed forces.²⁸ While this requirement to serve has evolved over time, the Russian Federation still employs conscription, theoretically requiring a year of universal military service from all male citizens.²⁹ Ostensibly a force of one million, the Russian military relies upon of a mix of conscript and professional, or *kontraktniki*, personnel to fill its ranks. Conscripts serve for a one-year period and theoretically are now exempt from deployment to combat zones, although it is unclear whether this policy continues given the ambiguities of Russian operations in Ukraine and the Crimea.

Also unclear are the true numbers and quality of the yearly conscript cohorts, or their ethnic demographic makeup. Anecdotal evidence suggests Russia can barely manage seventy percent of her annual manpower requirements leading to widespread under manning in Army units. Wildly unpopular in Russia, conscription will by necessity remain a key manning strategy for the Russian Armed Forces for the foreseeable future. According to the European Command's Deep Futures Organization, this is particularly true for Russia's Army, which relies primarily on draftees for its numerous manpower intensive, but lower-tech requirements.³⁰

As previously stated, demographic estimates, if accurate, reflect a Russian society in 2030 that will be between fifteen and twenty percent Muslim, and at least thirty percent Muslim by 2050.³¹ However, questions remain. Will the Russian armed

forces reflect Russian society? If not, why, and what are some of the implications for Russian security policies?

Manning Issues in the Russian Armed Forces

Service in the Russian armed forces has never been an easy or pleasant endeavor, especially for conscripts. Manning problems within the Russian armed forces, particularly those concerning enlisted members, can generally be attributed to three main causes: availability, abuse, and ethnicity.

As noted previously, conscription and service in the armed forces is extremely unpopular with both Russian youth and their parents. Much of this unpopularity stems from the traditionally poor treatment of Russian enlisted personnel but some is also a natural outgrowth of the more open post-Soviet environment in the Russian Federation. Regardless of a desire, or lack thereof, to serve in the Russian armed forces, demographic forces once again come to the forefront in terms of actual conscript availability. In 2012 Russian newspapers widely reported that Army manning in the short to medium term will continue to be problematic as authorities deal with the demographic “disaster” of the late 1980s and early 1990s. For example, it was estimated 700,000 men became draft-eligible each year, but only 550,000 were actually available due to deferments and exemptions.³² In addition, as a consequence of the 1980s and 1990’s “demographic valley,” the number will fall to only about 300,000 per year.³³ The general quality of the recruits is also of concern. Of the conscripted individuals, less than seventy percent were considered suitable for service because of poor health conditions.³⁴

Abuse of service members, especially new conscripts, in the Russian armed forces is legendary. The Russian term, *Dedovshchina*, or rule of the Grandfathers,

loosely describes the informal authority older conscripts exert over younger soldiers. It is a particularly brutal form of abuse, hazing and servitude, and although official Russian figures are likely fictional, human rights groups report the possibility that hundreds of soldiers are either murdered or commit suicide because of the severe brutality.³⁵

Despite government half-hearted edicts, limited prosecutions, and the ongoing military modernization and reform of the armed forces, Dedovshchina is still a very real part of the Russian military culture. Consequently, children from affluent families most often do not serve, either buying their way out of the draft or finding other exemptions such as falsified doctor reports. Thus, the ranks are filled by the poor, the unhealthy, the problematic, or even criminalized young men who further exacerbate the brutal conditions of service. This is especially true of Russian land power.

While acknowledging a shortfall in numbers of quality recruits for service, Moscow remains hesitant to draft males from the restive republics where Muslims are either the majority or make up a substantial percentage of the population. For example, in the 1980s the Soviet Army annually drafted approximately 25,000 recruits from Dagestan. That number fell to 5,000 by 2007 and to only 179 in the fall of 2012.³⁶ Numerous theories exist why the Russians have failed to exploit this source of manpower. One theory states that Caucasians are notoriously difficult to train and discipline. Others fear that providing military training to potential Islamic terrorists. The inability to integrate the various ethnic groups in military units is also discussed.³⁷

There is more than enough solid and anecdotal evidence to support these Russian fears. Some of the most deadly terror attacks on Russian soil, including the Breslan siege and slaughter, the Moscow Metro and Moscow Theater attacks, and a

host of other bombings were attributed to radical Islamists from the Caucasus region. Yet these populations, excluded or not, are ostensibly Russian citizens. However, authorities are failing to integrate them in any meaningful way into the greater Russian culture other than by force.

Freedom of Religion?

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Sunni Islam are the two dominant religious faiths in the Russian Federation and have co-existed within the boundaries of the Russian or Soviet State for almost one thousand years.³⁸ While the post-Soviet Russian Federation constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and is theoretically secular, the reality is that the Orthodox Church holds a favored place in current Russian politics. This is an interesting development from Soviet times, when communist authorities aggressively repressed the Church and atheism became the official belief system of the Soviet Union. Today the situation is very different and it appears that the State and the Orthodox Church are very closely aligned.

Indeed from all outward appearances it seems that the Orthodox Church and clergy have become a useful political tool for Russian President Vladimir Putin. The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill Gundyayev, not only publicly endorsed Vladimir Putin during his last election campaign, but he also called him a “miracle from God” just before Putin’s landslide victory.³⁹

What does this favoritism, indeed a de facto state-sponsorship of a particular faith, signify for a growing Muslim population in general, and the Russian Armed Forces in particular? Pictures and news articles of Orthodox priests blessing everything from armored vehicles to nuclear missiles are abundant demonstrating the closeness of the clergy and the military. More troubling are rumored reports of Orthodox priests not only

actively supporting pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, but also acting in concert with Russian security services, supplying weapons and intelligence to both the separatists and Moscow.

Moscow has rewarded the Church for its loyalty; billions in property confiscated by the communists has been returned and hundreds of Orthodox military chaplains have been integrated into the Russian Armed forces. While a nod has been given to other religions, little apparent action to accommodate non-Orthodox religious views is evident. It is also important to note the reach of the Russian Orthodox Church. Besides the post-Soviet schism of the Russian and Ukrainian Churches, the Russian Orthodox Church maintains a strong influence that extends throughout the areas that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. This provides a ready platform for state-sponsored influence and Russian interference in its near abroad.

Although eighty percent of today's Russian Federation is ethnically Slavic, twenty percent is not, and there is little evidence to suggest that the Russian government is seeking paths towards inclusiveness. This is especially true in the Russian Armed Forces and the implications will bear out as the demographics of the Armed Forces continue to change. Images of Orthodox zealot priests urging Russian soldiers on against innocent Muslims in Afghanistan and Chechnya still weigh heavily against the collective memory in the predominately Muslim republics. On the other hand, images of desperate Slavic refugees, driven from their homes by merciless Muslim terrorists, are still prevalent in the Slavic mindset. Xenophobia, encouraged and demonstrated by all ethnic groups in the Russian Federation, will continue to manifest itself and is only one

of the possible repercussions for the Russian State as the demographics of the population continue to change.

Unlike the Russian Orthodox Church, Islam shares no similar state sponsorship or support in the greater Russian Federation. Despite the fact that in Europe, Moscow is second only to Istanbul in the number of Muslim believers, no state sponsored mosques have been built. On the contrary, the Russian leadership views Islam as an ideology and political movement that threatens the stability and integrity of the state and the Russian constitution.⁴⁰ This is a change from the past when Soviet authorities tolerated Islam and simply considered it a “backwards” practice from the far ends of the realm. Immigrants from Central Asia, the Middle East and the worldwide spread of information since the Soviet collapse have changed not only the face of Islam in Russia, but also the behavior of some of its adherents. Not only has radicalism emerged but ordinary Muslims are demanding equal rights to their faith.⁴¹

Finally, it must be noted that unlike the Orthodox Church in Moscow, or even the Vatican for Roman Catholics, there is no central authority in Islam for the Russian State to coopt. Islam in practice is widely divergent in both belief and practice, making it much more difficult for the Russian leadership to find points of leverage or manipulation.

Putin and the Demographic Question

Mr. Putin understands his demographic dilemma very well. Between his “Russian Mother’s Campaigns” and embrace of the Orthodox Church and its traditional values, it is clear that he and the Russian leadership fully understand the significance of a declining Slavic population for the long-term strength and health of Russia. His proactive policies in regards to general health and education have even had some positive effect in both fertility and longevity rates. He also must fully understand that,

despite these efforts, the coming demographic “valley” will have strategic consequences for the Russian State. He has utterly failed in achieving any meaningful integration of the various cultures and peoples of his vast country. Slavic Orthodoxy, or perhaps even a recreation of a “New Byzantium,” is the sole cultural operating paradigm in contemporary Russia. Consequently, the Russian State will remain brittle, backwards and increasingly dangerous as time goes on.

Mr. Putin has used the excuse of protecting ethnic Russians for his interventions in Crimea and Ukraine. Perhaps this is actually a way of acknowledging Russia’s demographic shortfalls and attempting to correct them by the process of forced enlargement. The Russian president has long stated that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical disaster in Russian history.⁴² Aggressive Russian actions on its periphery, such as the intervention in Georgia in 2008, have now been clarified by Russian actions in seizing Crimea and destabilizing Ukraine. This has brought Russia’s long-term strategic goals into the world’s focus, despite the attendant ambiguity and subterfuge. Indeed, *Maskirovka*, which is the Russian term for deception, has long been a key element of the Russian “Way of War.” Deception in all things was a key element of Soviet strategic thought and it may indeed be the key to understanding both Putin and Russia. For example, Russian Armed Forces’ casualties from Ukraine are hidden from the press and even from parents, ascribed usually to “training accidents.” The Russians have become quite adept at all forms of deception, including deceiving themselves about the inevitable demographic change occurring in their nation.

Implications and Conclusion

Returning to the Keck theory of population as a main element of Russian power, it is clear from the evidence that the pillar of a large Slavic population is on the wane and that this weakness will profoundly manifest itself in the next fifteen to thirty years. It is also clear that between fifteen and twenty percent of the Russian population will be ethnically non-Slavic and oriented religiously to Islam during that timeframe. What is unclear is how and when, or even if the Russian government will respond to this changing dynamic, and ultimately how this will impact the Russian armed forces. However, based upon both the extrapolated future population estimates, as well as current Russian behavior, it may be possible to predict some likely effects.

First, the Russian Armed Forces' manning construct will change. Conscription, as it stands today, is simply unsustainable for the mid to long term. Russia will have to reduce exemptions, increase service terms and integrate more Muslim males into its formations in order to maintain total strength. This is especially true for the Army with its higher manpower and lower education and aptitude requirements. Already immensely unpopular, the introduction of any further conscription changes will certainly bring attendant social upheavals.

Second, the Russian Armed Forces will become a de facto segregated force. The technical services, e.g., the Air Force, Strategic Rocket Forces, and to a lesser extent the Navy, will have better educated and "more reliable" Slavic members fill their ranks while the Army will make due with what is left. Despite Russian efforts at professionalizing their armed forces, a very real possibility may exist where a significant element of Russian hard power may not be deemed reliable enough to fulfill the wishes of the state. This could lead to Russian over-reliance on strategic weapons in dealing

with other powers, making the strategic environment even more dangerous than it is today.

Third, Russia will continue to seek alternative ways of filling its ranks. We have evidence of this happening even today, with Russia offering citizenship to foreign recruits, utilizing “volunteers,” and even employing criminal biker gangs to execute operations. Finally, another plausible scenario may exist in which we witness an ethnic conflagration in units of the Russian Armed Forces because of the lack of integration programs. Russia’s newspapers have reported clashes such as this in isolated cases.

Barring a complete change in Russian political structure and culture, in ten to fifteen years Russia may experience significant internal strife and will likely become more and more unstable as the year 2050 approaches. Hard demographic realities, combined with an inability to either recognize or integrate large and volatile segments of its population, will reduce the strategic options available to Russian leadership. Internal dissension between Slavic and Muslim populations leading to increasing levels of terrorism and inter-ethnic violence is a plausible outcome. Such a development would limit Russia’s ability to focus externally.

The present Russian leadership’s actions can be partly explained through demographic analysis. From the change in Russia’s strategic outlook, to the numerous “frozen” conflicts it has initiated in its near abroad, Russia is likely attempting to focus on an external enemy in order to deflect its internal structural weaknesses. Indeed, is even possible that Russia is presently seeking to secure its “empire” while it still maintains the reliable capacity and means to do so.

Despite the recent bluster and the seemingly decisive strategic moves on the part of the Russian State, Russia, like most autocratic states, is in reality a brittle one, without a strong foundation, built mostly around the personality of just one man. However, it is also a large, powerful and very dangerous state, and will become increasingly so to the United States and its allies. Viewed through just one lens, the lens of demographics, it is possible to understand the extent of, and even the timelines that will exacerbate that brittleness of the Russian State.

Endnotes

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