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To Russia, With Love

By Douglas A. Sylva

Babies and bombs: You must have some sympathy for the journalists assigned to report on Vladimir Putin's annual speech on the state of Russia last week, an unanticipated and extraordinary address in which he linked his nation's strategic survival to an increase in both births and military spending.

The Washington Post led its report with this cumbersome line: "President Vladimir Putin offered couples cash to have more children to halt a dramatic decline in population and called for a stronger army in a key speech on Wednesday." Almost apologetically, the Post went on to say that, "Putin, defying predictions he would focus on foreign policy, zeroed in on Russia's dwindling population -- an issue with huge implications for the economy -- which is falling by 700,000 people every year."

Putin wanted to make the obvious point that population decline has now become a matter of national security, even national survival: "And now for the most important matter. What is most important for our country? The Defense Ministry knows what is most important. Indeed, what I want to talk about is love, women, children. I want to talk about the family, about the most acute problem facing our country today -- the demographic problem." It is a strange state of affairs indeed when it is the Russian Defense Ministry that knows that love (not war) is most important for national security.

The basic numbers are daunting. In 2004, for every 16 Russians who died, only 10 were born to replace them. Most demographers agree that the current Russian population of about 144 million people will dwindle to about 90 million over the course of the next few decades.

And the geopolitical picture -- Putin's view -- is even more alarming. The Minister for Regional Development has estimated that out of 20 million Russian men currently able to work, 4 million are in the military or police, 4 million are chronic alcoholics, 1 million are drug addicts, and 1 million are in prison. At the same time that fewer and fewer boys are born, men are sicker and dying younger -- male life expectancy has plummeted to about 59 years. As the Minister despondently concluded, "In a country with a population of 144 million people, soon there will be no one left to work."

Two other factors exacerbate the low birth rate: The only regions that happen to be growing are peopled predominantly by non-Russians, and the border regions are emptying as people emigrate to the few large cities where economic opportunities are still thought to exist. It is apparent to just about everyone, Putin included, that all of these forces will build upon and accelerate one another, a witches' brew of demographic catastrophe.

And why have Russians stopped having children, the most important ingredient in the brew? In the New York Times report of the speech, the writer is quite confident in a Marxist interpretation: "Much of the fall in the birthrate is caused by economic concerns: low wages, shortages of decent housing and worries over finding a job and keeping it in a volatile economy, and with laws that provide little job security." If only Russia returned to the days of socialist planning and security, the problem would disappear.

Of course, there is a much more obvious explanation, an explanation that does not accord with the Times' ideology, and must therefore go unmentioned: abortion. The Russian Ministry of Health admits that there are 1.7 abortions for every one live birth. This rate is five times higher than the high rate of US abortions, and it crosses that symbolic threshold that seems to signal a society's collective suicide-wish, when many more children fail to survive the gauntlet of pregnancy than live to see the literal light of day.

It is the simplest math: If abortion did not exist, fertility would be substantially above replacement rate. And, abortion, too, is a witches' brew of ever-accelerating demographic disaster; not only does abortion eliminate the supposedly unwanted children of Russia, it often renders the wanted children unattainable, as well. According to the Ministry of Health, infertility has risen substantially, and three quarters of all cases of infertility are caused by complications from abortion.

Putin knows all of this, and in 2003 he sought some modest restriction on late-term abortions. Not surprisingly, the New York Times editorial page played all of the cards in its reproductive rights deck, claiming that the Ministry of Health was not operating in the name of public health (claiming that it acted "under pressure from conservative lawmakers"), that there was "little public debate" on the restrictions, and that -- and this is the ace in the deck, whether east or west -- that "Russian women could return to back--street charlatans for the kind of botched, unsanitary procedures that once killed many" (never mind that the Times, elsewhere in the same article, admits that Russia has seen "free and virtually unlimited access to abortion" as a component of the USSR's socialist utopia for decades, so that if there were charlatans killing Russian women they were doing so legally, even financed by the state for their efforts).

Finally, the Times had the temerity to assert that, "The answer to a declining population is not curbs on abortion." The editorialists had the good sense not to offer a reasoned argument to prop up such nonsense. The truth is that, in the world of abortion absolutism, the Times and its ilk would not mind if the nation of Russia ceased to exist, as long as the last Russian woman exercised her freedom of choice in the process.