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## Putin Urges Plan to Reverse Slide in the Birth Rate

By [C. J. CHIVERS](#)

MOSCOW, May 10 — President [Vladimir V. Putin](#) directed Parliament on Wednesday to adopt a 10-year program to stop the sharp decline in [Russia's](#) population, principally by offering financial incentives and subsidies to encourage women to have children.

Mr. Putin's instructions, issued to a compliant Parliament that follows his orders almost without fail, formed the center of his annual address and signaled a new Kremlin determination to confront a problem that demographers have warned endangers the future of the Russian state.

Russia's population, now about 143 million, has been falling since the collapse of the Soviet Union, trimmed by emigration, rising death rates and declining birthrates. Both the government and demographers predict more downward pressure, including H.I.V. infections, that could shrink the population below 100 million by 2050.

Mr. Putin has raised the issue in the past, but never with such a clear set of instructions aimed at increasing the low birthrate, or at such length in a prominent speech. Among his proposals were one-time cash grants to mothers upon the birth of a second child, extended maternity leave benefits and a graduating scale of cash and day-care subsidies as a woman has more children. "The situation is critical in that sphere," he said.

Mr. Putin also responded acidly to the Bush administration's recent criticism of the Kremlin for its turn away from democracy at home and its efforts to counter democratic movements in neighboring countries, citing what he called a double standard in American foreign policy.

Speaking not long after President Bush and Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) had publicly met and complimented the records of two other autocratic presidents in former Soviet states — Mr. Bush met Ilham H. Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Mr. Cheney met Nursultan A. Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan — Mr. Putin suggested that Washington abandoned its public principles on democracy and human rights as it saw fit. Both Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have large reserves of gas and oil, and a growing ability to transfer them to the West.

"Where is all that pathos of the need to fight for human rights and democracy," Mr. Putin asked, "when it concerns the needs to realize their own interests?"

He quickly shifted his tone, however, and veered away from the suspicious or angry screeds now common in

statements by several prominent Russian officials, which have raised warnings of a deepening chill in relations with the United States.

"Realizing the gravity of the problem, we should not repeat the Soviet Union's mistakes, the mistakes of the cold war years, neither in the political sphere nor in the defense strategy," Mr. Putin said, according to the translation provided by Federal News Service, a private transcription agency.

Mr. Putin addressed several other themes, including the need to improve education, revitalize old industries and incubate new economic sectors, and he spent considerable time addressing plans to upgrade military and security services.

But the most detailed of his plans were directed at the decline in population.

His attention to this issue brought a rare moment of levity when Mr. Putin said, "Now, the main thing, what we see as the main thing—" and he was interrupted by a call from the floor.

"Love!" the voice said.

"Right," Mr. Putin answered. "The Defense Ministry knows what the main thing is. Really, I am going to speak about love, women, children" — there was applause from the assembled officials — "family, and Russia's most acute problem today: demography."

The subject, however, was not light. Mr. Putin then warned that Russia's population had been declining by almost 700,000 people a year, and that the state must stop this fall. The shrinking birthrate could undermine the economy and tax the pension system, among other effects.

A number of other countries facing declining birthrates have offered similar incentives. Australia offers a \$4,000 bonus for every baby, and recently proposed to pay all child care costs for women who want to work. Many European countries, including France, Italy and Poland, have offered some combination of bonuses and monthly payments to families.

Some Japanese localities, facing near catastrophic population loss, are offering rich incentives. Yamatsuri, a town of 7,000 just north of Tokyo, offers parents \$4,600 for the birth of a child and \$460 a year for 10 years. Singapore has a particularly lavish plan: \$3,000 for the first child, \$9,000 in cash and savings for the second; and up to \$18,000 each for the third and fourth.

Russia has good reason to emulate them, for the underlying data are grim. In 2004, for every 16 Russians who died, only 10.4 babies were born. And the average age of death for a Russian man was 58.9 years, far below other industrial nations and roughly two decades behind the life expectancy for an American male.

Birthrates have also plummeted, falling from an average of 2.63 children per woman in 1958 and 1959, to 1.89 children in 1990 and to 1.34 children in 2004. These numbers are backed up by the sights on the streets of Russia's major cities, where families with more than a single child are a rare sight.

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.

Russian and international scholars and demographers have warned of the perils for years.

One alarming report, "Russia's Health and Demographic Crises," by Dr. Murray Feshbach, was published in 2003.

The crisis, he wrote, is a result of "a constellation of occurrences that include not only infectious disease, but alcoholism, drug abuse, suicide, trauma injuries, astounding levels of cardiovascular disease, male/female estrangement and loss of family cohesion, declining physiological fertility, ugly environmental pollution and micronutrient starvation."

Since that report, several others have addressed the effects of rising rates of H.I.V. infection and limited efforts by the Russian government to thwart its spread.

By projections often cited in health conferences here, between 5 and 10 percent of the population could be infected by H.I.V., the virus that causes AIDS, within 15 years — not as high a rate as in countries with the worst epidemics, but astounding for a nation that had tiny rates of infection when the Soviet Union disintegrated.

In his speech, Mr. Putin moved quickly past the issues of adult health and did not mention H.I.V. at all.

Instead, he took up the cause of large families, which was once also championed by Soviet leaders. He called for a wide range of subsidies and financial incentives, some to be paid by the government and others by employers. These include increasing government subsidies for children up to 18 months to about \$53 a month for a first child and about \$107 for a second child. Mothers currently receive about \$25 a month for a child up to 18 months old.

Mr. Putin also proposed maternity leaves as long as 18 months that would pay a mother at least 40 percent of her salary, and compensation for some of the cost of day care: 20 percent of the cost for a first child, 50 percent for a second child and 70 percent for a third.

For mothers who choose not to return to work, he proposed a one-time subsidy of about \$8,900 upon the birth of a second child — a large sum here. He suggested subsidies for adoptive parents as well, and investments in prenatal care, maternity hospitals and kindergartens.

Mr. Putin told the legislators to work on the details of these programs, and to have them ready to take effect in 2007.

State television swiftly threw its coverage behind the Kremlin. "Putin is setting strategic goals for the country's development on which the necessary financial resources will now be allocated," Vyacheslav Nikonov, president of the Politika Foundation, a consultancy with close connections to the Kremlin, said on the First Channel.

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