

Socio-demographic development regulation in the central black earth economic region under current challenges and threats

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Abstract. The article analyses the prospects of sociodemographic development in the regions of the Central Black Earth economic region in the context of modern challenges and threats. It is noted that demographic processes today are significantly transformed under the influence of a complex of negative factors, including COVID-19 pandemic, special military operation, digitalization, etc. It is noted that these factors are ambivalent for demographic development (they can become a white swan or a black swan for demography). It is not yet clear how they will affect life expectancy, migration, employment, and employability, and the reproductive attitudes of citizens. Everything depends on how the situation develops and how effective the measures, in particular state and municipal policy in the sphere of demographic development, will be.

1 Introduction

For several decades now, one of the strategic objectives of Russia's national policy has been to address acute problems in the field of demography. Ensuring stable demographic development of the country is the central idea not only of the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation but also of a number of strategic documents. The Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 642 of 01.12.2016 "On the Strategy for Scientific and Technological Development of the Russian Federation" specifies "demographic transition, caused by the increase in life expectancy of people, changes in their lifestyle, and related ageing of population, which together lead to new social and health problems" among the most significant from the perspective of scientific and technological development of the Russian Federation [1].

"Like most developed countries, the Russian Federation is experiencing serious changes in the size and composition of the population in terms of nature and consequences. As a result of the decline in the birth rate, each successive generation of children has, on average, been smaller than the generation of their parents. This incomplete replacement of generations predetermines a tendency towards depopulation and population ageing, which is aggravated by the continuing decline in mortality in older age groups. Demographic waves are

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fluctuations in the number of births and certain age groups due to reasons of both demographic and socioeconomic nature. In some years, they soften, as, for example, in Russia in the 2000s, and in other years, as in the 2020s, on the contrary, they intensify these trends" [2] - noted in the scientific digest prepared by the scientific centre "Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Human Potential" in 2022.

In our opinion, demographic processes today are significantly transformed by several factors:

First, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused a major shift in the trajectory of demographic development. The pandemic and the constraints it provoked have not only affected population reproduction (and, just as importantly, the psychological attitudes and life strategies of citizens), but have also exacerbated many socio-economic problems.

Secondly, it is the evolving processes of automation and digitalisation of economic activity. Under the influence of digitalisation, there are "prerequisites for inequalities among different demographic groups in the near future [3]. The digitalisation of the economy can affect different sociodemographic groups in different ways: women and men, young and old, households with and without children, urban and rural dwellers. Meanwhile, the context and assessment of unequal access to the benefits of digitalisation are also important, as growing economic inequalities can hamper development, especially in the long term. It is extremely important today to systematise the directions of possible reciprocal influences of demographic development and digitalisation". [3].

Third, the state of risk and uncertainty caused by the special military operation in its economic and geopolitical expression (this factor has a particular impact on the border regions of the Central Black Sea Economic Area, Belgorod, Kursk, and Voronezh oblasts). The special operation has already led to mass migration of the economically active population from Russia, and there is no talk of an increase in the birth rate either. According to experts, "the main blow to fertility in Russia will be indirect, because families will not be able to plan the birth of children. The impact will be stronger the longer the mobilisation lasts. The Russian economy is already experiencing a shortage of young workers and is at risk of stagnation, which could last long after the special operation." [4].

According to Igor Efremov, a researcher and demography expert at the Gaidar Institute in Moscow, "if hostilities continue in the coming months, it is expected that less than 1.2 million people will be born in Russia next year, the lowest number in modern history. [4]. Thus, experts agree that the consequences of the pandemic and "the aftermath of the February and especially the September events will be for Russia perhaps the most serious demographic challenge in recent history. The Ministry of Health advises physicians to tell women about the joys of motherhood, but this is not enough. The Public Opinion Foundation (POF) records that anxiety levels have now jumped higher than at the beginning of the special military operation and at the peak of the pandemic". [4].

It should be noted that the above factors are ambivalent for demographic development (they can become a white swan or a black swan for demography). It is not yet clear how they will affect life expectancy, migration, employment and employability of the population, reproductive attitudes of citizens. Everything depends on how the situation develops and how effective the measures, in particular state and municipal policy in the sphere of demographic development, will be.

2 Materials and methods

The empirical basis of the article is

- statistical data characterizing the migration movement of the population;
- a sociological study "Social and Demographic Potential of Rural Areas" conducted in Belgorod Oblast in September-October 2021 by a team of scientists from Belgorod State

University; the study included: a mass questionnaire sociological survey N=1000, a series of focus-group interviews, and an expert survey (N=37);

- expert survey (N=30) conducted in 2022 in order to assess the possibility of managing socio-demographic processes in the regions of the Central Black Earth Economic Region. The experts were: representatives of the scientific community, state and municipal officials, representatives of public organizations, deputies, media workers.

3 Results and discussion

The majority of the expert community agreed with the statement that "the current reality regarding demographic processes can be characterised as 'risky'" (74%). Only 13% gave a negative answer and another 13% could offer no opinion.

Only 8.7% of respondents gave an unequivocally positive opinion of the possibility of changing current negative trends in the demographic situation. More than half of the experts chose the option "more likely yes than no" (52.2%) and every third person (34.8%) chose "more likely no than yes". Another 4.7% of experts gave an extremely negative assessment of the possibility of changing the demographic situation for the better - Figure 1.

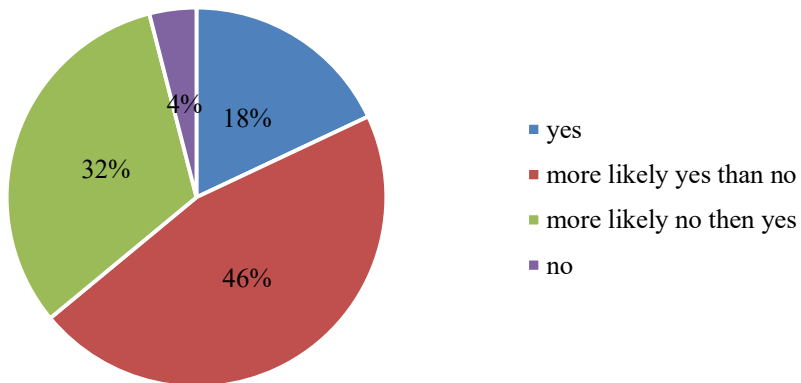


Fig. 1. Distribution of expert responses to the question: "Do you think the current negative trends in the demographic situation can be changed?"

In this case, experts are arguing within the dominant approach in science, according to which predicting the situation regarding demographic development is difficult. Indeed, in today's dynamically changing reality, the prospects for demographic development are ambiguous. "For the third year the Russian population is in the situation of "perfect storm": in the conditions of COVID-19 pandemic, rapid technological changes associated with the digitalization of the entire living space, increasing international tensions, occurring against the background of the aging population of the country". [5] - V.G. Dobrohleb writes. At present, in the era of turbulent socio-economic processes "there is no agreement in demographic forecasts of researchers". [6].

When identifying the tools that can affect the demographic situation, most experts follow a comprehensive approach, highlighting economic, organizational and social mechanisms. They include "strengthening financial and economic support of the population (state benefits, payments, tax benefits, etc.)" (77.8%); "strengthening the institution of family and traditional values" (77.2%); "implementation of targeted programs and projects in the sphere of demographic development" (55.6%). The implementation of information policy promoting a

healthy lifestyle and health saving as an effective tool to improve the demographic situation was singled out by only a third of experts (33.3%).

Experts doubting the possibility of overcoming emerging negative trends (41%) argue their viewpoint with the strong influence of external (foreign policy, foreign economic) factors on demographic development (53,8%) as well as the connection of demographic processes with the internal attitudes of individuals, which are quite difficult to influence (53,8%). Some experts were pessimistic in their opinions and noted that negative demographic trends are difficult to overcome (23.1%) and cannot be leveled under current conditions (7.7%). Another 15% of respondents said that there are no effective instruments for managing socio-demographic development today.

One of the experts expressed his viewpoint and said that "an objective picture of the dynamics of population reproduction does not make it possible to make positive forecasts for most of the country's territory".

Regional authorities were identified by 73.9% of experts as the main entities to deal with socio-demographic development of territories. The second most important subject, according to the expert community, is the federal authorities (60.9%). Just over a third of experts (34.8%) identified "local government" and "civil society institutions" as the subjects of regulating demographic development. Every fifth noted the importance of the expert community in shaping demographic policy. The least frequent options chosen by the experts were: "population" (13%) and "media" (17.4%).

Linking demographic development to the policy of the regional authorities is wellgrounded. First, because it reflects the Russian reality in which they have (as compared to local government) the necessary resources to carry out this task. Secondly, given the significant regional differentiation of demographic development, it is the regional authorities that can fully take into account all the specifics of the region in the sphere of demographic development.

The issue of effectiveness of programme-targeted approach and project management in addressing demographic development issues has not been answered unambiguously by experts. Only 17% of the respondents were absolutely convinced of the effectiveness of these approaches, and another 44% chose the borderline answer "more likely yes than no". A third of the respondents chose the option 'more likely no than yes'. Only 4% of experts consider these approaches to be totally ineffective and an equal number of experts could offer no opinion.

Indeed, project management is quite widespread in regional management practices today. The process of applying project management and a programme-oriented approach to solving demographic problems is scientifically defined as "demographic design". N.P. Neklyudova refers demographic projection "to the technologies of conscious design and formation of the most rational type of population reproduction (demographic optimum)" [7].

"The basic foundations of population-based design theory can be represented as a triad of interrelated categories: subject, object and outcome. The logic of the relationship between these categories is interpreted as follows: the subject (the one who carries out the projection) influences the object (what is subjected to the projection process) in order to achieve qualitative and quantitative results. "Demographic" means related to or relating to demography" [7].

As examples of effective state, regional or local programmes and projects in the field of socio-demographic development, experts cited such as: the national project "Demography", "renovation programme, social mortgages", the project "Social support for citizens in Belgorod Oblast for 2014-2020", the project "Older Generation", "programmes of the Belgorod Mortgage Corporation, subsidies for baby food". It should be noted that these projects are being implemented not only by regional authorities, but also by public organisations and business structures.

The National Project "Demography" is currently the largest and most ambitious project in the area of demographic development. The project is complex and multidisciplinary in nature, and the regions of the Russian Federation have developed their own regional projects based on this project. Despite the project's scale, the experts we surveyed rated its effectiveness extremely low: 4.8 out of a possible 10 points. This is probably due to the fact that, despite the huge budget and the number of sub-projects being implemented, the National Demography Project is not yet able to achieve its stated indicators, and objective statistical data confirm this. "The current levels of funding for the National Demography Project from federal sources do not ensure a breakthrough in Russia's demographic policy. This was discussed at the press conference devoted to the report of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation "Demography-2024: how to ensure sustainable population growth". [8].

"As the authors of the report found out, the passports of the national projects "Demography" and "Healthcare" do not indicate their contribution to achieving the demographic objectives of national development - ensuring sustainable and natural population growth and increasing life expectancy to 78 years. "The descriptions of the national project passports also do not contain the justification of effectiveness, sufficiency and necessity of the proposed activities". [8] - noted the authors of the report.

Thus, the prospects of forecasting and managing demographic processes in today's realities are extremely difficult. Under the influence of social, economic and other transformations, the emergence of new challenges and threats, the tasks of socio-demographic development become more complicated.

In the context of high turbulence of the current socio-economic and political situation, the theoretical and practical rethinking of approaches and tools for the development of socio-demographic potential of the regions of the Central Black Sea Economic Region, in our opinion, should be based on the principle of scientific validity. This task can be implemented by means of such measures as:

1. Formation of regional expert groups in the sphere of demographic development. The task of strengthening the principle of scientific validity of demographic policy in the regions requires a large-scale involvement of experts in the design and implementation of demographic development programmes and projects. In our opinion, the selection of experts should be differentiated and involve scientists specializing in different fields of knowledge, in particular, experts in the field of demography, sociology of management, sociology of family, sociology of youth, social gerontology (Social gerontology is an interdisciplinary field that specialises in studying or working with older people. Social gerontologists may have degrees or training in social work, nursing, psychology, sociology, demography, public health or other social sciences). This will enable a targeted and more concentrated approach to the development of population development projects and programmes.

2. Development of scientifically based comprehensive monitoring of the regional demographic policy performance. The objectively demanded trend of searching for new tools and technologies of demographic development in the regions of the Central Black Sea Economic Region involves the development and implementation of systems of indicators for assessing the regulatory impact.

In a turbulent and highly dynamic society, the problem of indicators and indicators that can be used to assess the efficiency/effectiveness of the demographic policy is of great importance. Today there is a need for scientific justification and development of indicators that will make it possible to assess the sociodynamics of demographic processes. They should reflect their objective and subjective sides. Objective indicators should include assessment of official statistical data; subjective indicators should include dispositions of the population with regard to self-preservation, reproductive behavior and life strategies. It is extremely important that the indicators allow us to assess the real state of affairs rather than the formal side.

3. Strengthening the targeting of social and demographic development projects and programmes in the regions of the Central Black Earth economic region.

Targeting implies the division of the population of the regions into specific target groups formed depending on the specifics of socio-economic development of the region, the level and quality of life of the population, special needs of the population.

5. Involvement of socially oriented NGOs in the implementation of projects in the sphere of demographic development. Today we need an intensive programme aimed at developing non-profit communities focused on demographic issues.

It seems possible to enhance the efficiency of NGO activities in the area of demography through a three-tier system of training, acceleration and support for communities, teams, thematic projects and startups based on an open digital platform.

1. Formation and acceleration of demographic communities, training of the team of community coordinators, development of the regional NCO network and its interaction with the state and other contractors.

2. training of core NGO staff and volunteers in core competencies in the area of demography, as well as family and maternity support and abortion prevention

3. Development of a high-level digital environment for training, acceleration and implementation of non-profit demographic projects

Involvement of target groups in the project: relevant NGOs, state and municipal institutions, socially responsible businesses, development institutions, and presentation of the results of acceleration.

4 Conclusion

Today, there is a broad discussion among researchers in the field of sociology of management, demography, and political science about the tools that could be effective in the implementation of the task of sociodemographic development. For example, A.S. Arbuzova and N.P. Prazdnikova [9] consider the development of public-private partnership as a promising technology for demographic development. C. V. Ustavshchikova [10] notes that: "economic and societal changes in the course of agglomeration development are likely to help form the migration attractiveness of the territory and demographic development of territories". Despite the different approaches to the assessment of demographic development tools, the researchers agree that the current situation in which the society is immersed is complex and requires regular study. M.A. Klupt rightly notes: "In times of crisis, demography's dependence on other social systems increases and it becomes involved in a chain of negative cascading effects. Stadial theories of demographic development, designed to make sense of long and smooth processes, lose their explanatory and prognostic power in this period. There is a need for a system analysis of crises, aimed at assessing the resilience of the demographic sphere to external shocks, identifying "bottlenecks" at its junctions with the natural environment and other social spheres". [11].

In today's dynamically changing reality, the prospects of demographic development are ambiguous, and forecasting the situation regarding demographic development is difficult. At present, in the era of turbulent socio-economic processes, there is no agreement in the demographic forecasts of researchers. At present, there is an urgent need for transformation of management approaches aimed at improving sociodemographic development.

Our study has provided us with a number of recommendations for authorities at various levels, the business community and public structures, etc., focused on the application of the project approach and aimed at improving the basic parameters of the implementation of projects and programmes for sociodemographic development in the regions of the Central Black Sea Economic Region, including: the formation of regional expert groups in the field of demographic development; development of scientifically sound comprehensive

monitoring of the results of strengthening the targeting of social and demographic development projects and programmes in the regions of the Central Black Sea Economic Region; involving socially orientated NGOs in the implementation of projects in the area of demographic development.

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