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ABORTIONS IN RUSSIA BEFORE AND AFTER THE FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION

Abstract: The initial section of the article elaborates on diverse attitudes towards abortion, and specifies the number of abortions performed before and after the fall of the Soviet Union. The following section presents spatial characteristic of the performed abortions against the largest Russian administrative units. Regional conditioning has been analysed based on the number of abortions per 100 labours and number of abortions among women in labour age (between 15 and 49 years of age). The article also discusses the activity of non-governmental women organisations which aim at providing medical information and participate in the family planning initiatives. Finally, the article presents the rules and conditions of allowing to perform abortion and significant changes in Russian legislation on that issue.

Key words: abortion, non-governmental women organisations, Russia, Soviet Union.

Abortions are an issue much talked and heard, but definitely less written about. They divided already the ancient societies, where although they were fairly commonly accepted, they had their opponents, a.o. Hippocrates, who in the text of his oath included the formula "... and I will not give a woman an abortion-inducing drug".

It is difficult to talk about serious topics only in the qualitative context; therefore, an analysis of the quantitative material concerning the number of performed abortions is a valuable complement of this approach.

In almost all countries of the world abortion is regarded as an offence by the criminal law. Under certain clearly defined circumstances, abortions are however performed according to the letter of the law.¹

In the globalised world there is currently a dominating tendency to liberalise the legislature regarding this issue. In Russia, however, an opposite trend can be observed. For the first time in a half-century, abortion regulations were made stricter in 2003, because the previous policy contributed indirectly to the decrease in population of the Russian Federation.

¹ China is the only state in the world whose legislature does not recognize performing abortion procedures as offences or crimes. In Ireland, on the other hand, no legal regulations allow for performing abortions, not even under specific circumstances (Zielińska, 1990).

ABORTIONS IN THE SOVIET UNION AND AFTER ITS FALL

After the founding of the Soviet Union abortions were legally admissible as a result of legalisation of abortions by the Bolsheviks already in 1920. One of the zealous advocates of those regulations was Aleksandra Kollontai, a radical feminist, an advocate and propagator of the “new morality”. Regulations causing abortions to be as common as other medical procedures were abolished by a decree introduced by Stalin in 1936. The main factor influencing the making of this decision was the concern of the state leader about the appropriate population growth of the world empire, as Stalin regarded then the Soviet Union. After his death the new authorities decided to legalise abortion procedures. Since 1955, abortion became again a common and generally accessible, as well as basically free of charge procedure. It is not known exactly how many abortions were performed in the Soviet Union, because the Soviet authorities never allowed publishing the relevant statistical data. From the estimates performed yearly by the medical personnel dealing with abortions it follows that in the Soviet Union, a country with population of almost 290 millions, 6 to 7 millions abortions were performed each year. First statistical data concerning abortions come from the times of perestroika. From the data it follows that in 1988 almost 6 millions procedures were performed in the Soviet Union. Since the early 1990s we have full data concerning abortions performed in Russia. This doesn't mean, however, that these publications are commonly accessible and widely distributed.² From the data supplied by the Ministry of Health of Russia it follows that the number of abortions is systematically decreasing. In 1991, the year of the fall of the Soviet Union, 3,608,000 abortions were performed in Russia, and in 1994 its number decreased by over 500,000 to 3,060,000. This tendency persisted in the subsequent years (in 1998, 2,346,000 abortions, in 2000, 2,114,000 and in 2002, 1,802,000). This doesn't mean, however, that the number of performed procedures is small; on the contrary, only in Romania more abortions yearly (per 1000 inhabitants) are performed.

STATISTICAL INDICATORS SHOWING THE SCOPE OF ABORTION IN RUSSIA

To present the spatial differentiation of this phenomenon, as well as its frequency and intensity, four indicators are used. First of them is used to show the frequency of the performed procedures and gives the number of abortions per 100 births in a given community during one year (such data from the year 2000 are presented on Fig. 1, the map). The next coefficient, described as a general indicator of abortions (per 1000 women), shows the

² The best evidence of this is the fact that in the 620-pages long statistical overview published every year by Goskomstat and containing data from all the territorial units (federal subjects) of Russia there are no detailed materials concerning abortions, but only general data.

number of abortions performed during one year among women in reproductive age, that is, between 15 and 49 years of age. Statistical data containing these calculations for the period 1992–2000, for all highest-level administrative units in Russia are presented in Table 1. The third abortion indicator is the number of procedures among women in the given age group in the specified area. The fourth one, the summary indicator (given most often), presents data regarding the number of abortions per 1000 women.

In this article, the spatial differentiation of the performed abortion procedures in Russia is presented, and an attempt at an interpretation of data concerning the first two indicators is made.

Analysis of data concerning the number of abortions performed per 100 births for the period after the fall of the Soviet Union allows for presenting a few conclusions. Among all the highest-level territorial units the largest number of abortions occurs in the units situated in the Asian part of Russia. Their share is increasing each year: as recently as in 1992 among the ten highest-level federal subjects characterised by the largest number of performed abortions there were four units situated in Siberia and the Russian Far East. The Kamchatka Oblast was second (after the Yaroslavl Oblast in the European part of Russia) with 233 abortions per 100 births. Among the first ten units there were also the Novosibirsk Oblast, the Tomsk Oblast and the Krasnoyarsk Krai. In the 1990s the share of the units of the Asian part of Russia among the units with the largest numbers of performed abortions was systematically increasing. In 2000, among all the federal units of Russia, the largest number of abortions was performed in the Russian Far East: in the Khabarovsk Krai (239 abortions per 100 births). In the second and fourth places were the Magadan Oblast and the Novosibirsk Oblast. Among the first ten units with the largest value of this indicator there were also the Krasnoyarsk Krai and the Amur Oblast. The sudden increase of the share of the units situated in the Asian part of Russia in the number of performed abortions may be an evidence that it was the Siberian population that suffered most as a result of the political and economic transformations after the fall of the Soviet Union. The deteriorating economic situation influenced the lowering of living conditions and was reflected in the increasing number of performed abortions. The lack of a significant financial support for the Asian part of the country (just as it was in the times of the Soviet Union) contributed to the impoverishment of the Siberian society. Impossibility of coping with the existing conditions and lack of perspectives for an improvement of the socio-economic situation contributed a.o. to the increase in the number of the performed abortions. Another characteristic feature of the spatial distribution of the performed abortions is the fact that among the administrative units with high values of this indicator are those where the majority of population consists of Russians. In all the territorial units where the number of abortions was larger than 200 per 100 births, more than 80% of the population were people of Russian nationality. Units situated in the South of the country, in the Caucasus, on the other hand, have the lowest

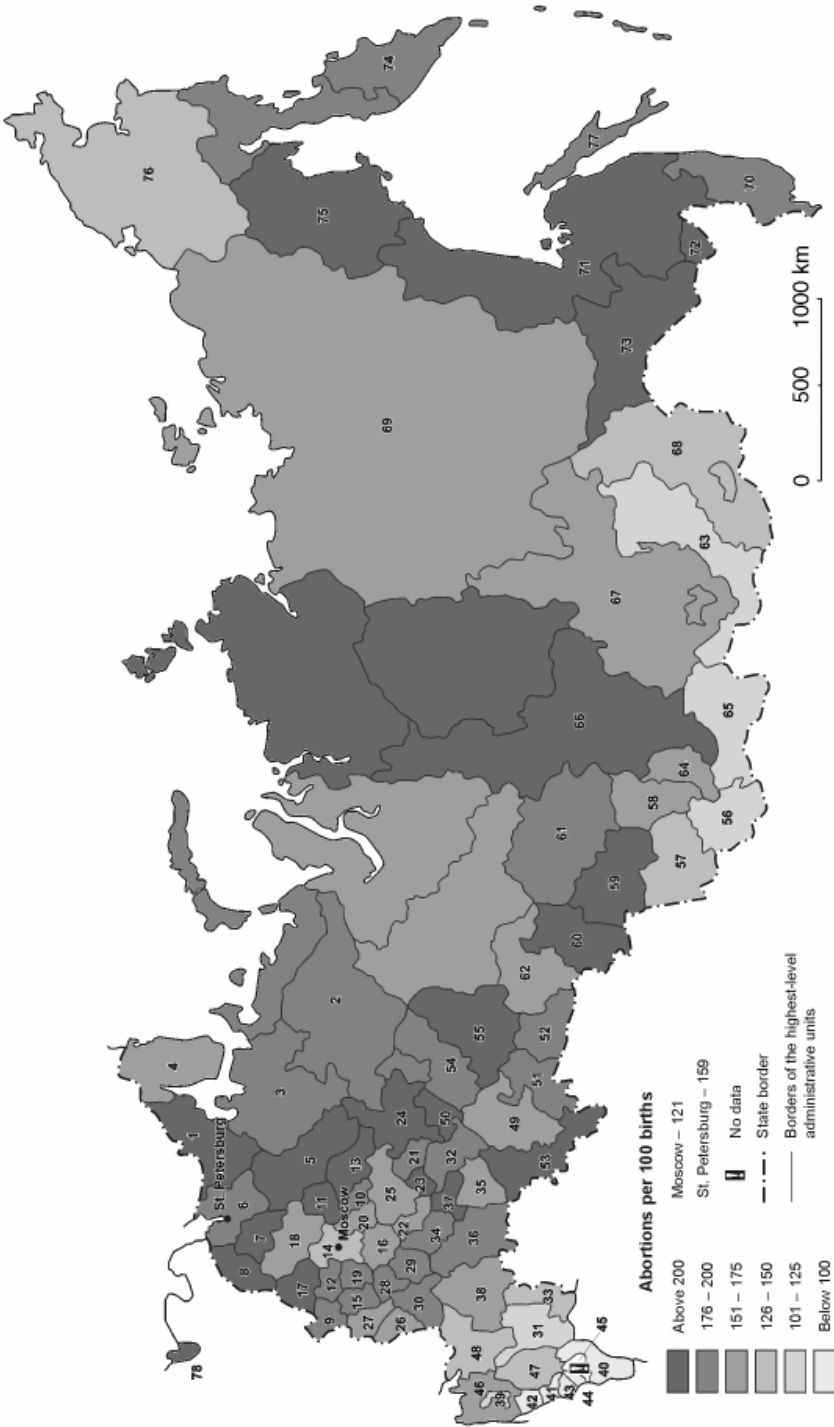


Fig. 1. Abortions in Russia (in 2000).

1. Republic of Karelia	27. Kursk Oblast	53. Orenburg Oblast
2. Komi Republic	28. Lipetsk Oblast	54. Perm Oblast ^b
3. Arkhangelsk Oblast ^a	29. Tambov Oblast	55. Sverdlovsk Oblast
4. Murmansk Oblast	30. Voronezh Oblast	56. Altai Republic
5. Vologda Oblast	31. Republic of Kalmykia	57. Altai Krai
6. Leningrad Oblast	32. Republic of Tatarstan	58. Kemerovo Oblast
7. Novgorod Oblast	33. Astrakhan Oblast	59. Novosibirsk Oblast
8. Pskov Oblast	34. Penza Oblast	60. Omsk Oblast
9. Bryansk Oblast	35. Samara Oblast	61. Tomsk Oblast
10. Ivanovo Oblast	36. Saratov Oblast	62. Tyumen Oblast ^c
11. Yaroslavl Oblast	37. Ulyanovsk Oblast	63. Buryat Republic
12. Kaluga Oblast	38. Volgograd Oblast	64. Republic of Khakassia
13. Kostroma Oblast	39. Republic of Adygeya	65. Republic of Tuva
14. Moscow Oblast	40. Republic of Dagestan	66. Krasnoyarsk Krai ^d
15. Oryol Oblast	41. Kabardino-Balkar Republic	67. Irkutsk Oblast ^e
16. Ryazan Oblast	42. Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia	68. Chita Oblast ^f
17. Smolensk Oblast	43. Republic of Northern Ossetia	69. Sakha Republic (Yakutia)
18. Tver Oblast	44. Republic of Ingushetia	70. Primorsky Krai
19. Tula Oblast	45. Chechen Republic [*]	71. Khabarovsk Krai
20. Vladimir Oblast	46. Krasnodar Krai	72. Jewish Autonomous Oblast
21. Republic of Mariy El	47. Stavropol Krai	73. Amur Oblast
22. Republic of Mordovia	48. Rostov Oblast	74. Kamchatka Oblast ^g
23. Chuvash Republic	49. Republic of Bashkortostan (Bashkiria)	75. Magadan Oblast
24. Kirov Oblast	50. Republic of Udmurtia	76. Autonomous District of the Chukchi
25. Nizhny Novgorod Oblast	51. Chelyabinsk Oblast	77. Sakhalin Oblast
26. Belgorod Oblast	52. Kurgan Oblast	78. Kaliningrad Oblast

Source: data from the Ministry of Health of Russia, 2002, Moscow

* no data.

^a Including the Autonomous District of the Nenetses.

^b Including the Autonomous District of the Komi-Permyaks.

^c Including the Autonomous District of the Khants and Mansis and the Autonomous District of the Yamal Nenetses.

^d Including the Autonomous District of the Evenks and the Autonomous District of Taimyr.

^e Including the Autonomous District of the Ust-Ordinsk Buryats.

^f Including the Autonomous District of the Aga Buryats.

^g Including the Autonomous District of the Koryaks.

share of the number of abortions. In 2000 the lowest number of abortions were performed in the Caucasian republics, a.o. in Republic of Ingushetia (14 per 100 births), Republic of Daghestan (31), Kabardino-Balkar Republic (71), Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia (72) and Republic of North Ossetia (83), while the average for the whole Russia is on the level of 169 abortions per 100 births. In Moslem families living in the northern part of Caucasus abortion is a sporadic phenomenon and is not socially accepted. Also in Siberia and the Russian Far East fewest abortions are performed in the territorial units with the definitely larger share of native (autochthon) population compared with the share of Russian population; for instance, in the Altai, Tuva and Buriat Republics.

Of particular interest are data concerning abortions in the two largest Russian cities.³ It would seem that in Moscow and St. Petersburg, because of the unrestricted access to abortion clinics, the values concerning abortion procedures should be relatively high. This was the case as recently as in the early 1990s. Moscow was at that time in the third place among all the administrative units in the number of performed abortions (241 per 100 births) and St. Petersburg, in the tenth (224 per 100 births). Gradually, however, the number of abortions performed in these cities decreased each year. In 2000, the capital of the country was at the end of statistics regarding abortions. It is also the only federal subject, which despite of the low number of abortions has a relatively large share of the native Russian population. Also St. Petersburg became, in the period 1992–2000, a city with a definitely smaller number of abortions. There are several reasons for this. In the largest Russian cities, a large-scale campaign aiming at helping women a.o. in the matters concerning health is being conducted.

In the 1990s non-governmental women organisations began to be founded.⁴ One of the organisations whose aim is assistance for women with creating family planning programmes is the International Women Centre “The Future of Woman”. This association deals with the implementation of the family planning programme “Children in the Time of Crisis” and with assistance with medical information. Another organisation conducting actions of educational character is the Service of Assistance for the Minors “Goluba”. An important sphere of interest of the association is health care and help with medical problems caused by abortions, in particular among female adolescents. Greater social consciousness and easier access to contraceptives are the main reasons of the sudden decrease of the number of performed abortions in the largest Russian cities (*Zhenskiye nepravitelstvennye organizatsii Rossii i SNG* [Non-governmental Women Organisations in Russia and CIS], 1998; in Russian).

³ Moscow and St. Petersburg are treated as separate federal subjects; for that reasons in all statistics concerning Russian territorial units contain data from these two cities.

⁴ In 1990 54% of all Russian women organisations were active in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The Kaliningrad Oblast is characterised by a high value of the indicator (213 per 100 births). One could suspect that to a certain extent, abortions performed on Polish women contribute to this number. Polish women come to the neighbouring Kaliningrad Oblast, where for a small fee, and, first of all, legally they can terminate an unwanted pregnancy.

An analysis of the indicators concerning the number of abortions per 1000 women in reproductive age in the period 1992 – 2000 points out to the fact that the group of administrative units with high values of this indicator remains the same. The leading units are still the ones situated in Siberia and the Russian Far East. In the group of ten federal subjects with the highest number of performed abortions, both in the early 1990s and in 2000 are as many as six units from the Asian part of the country. They are: Irkutsk Oblast, Omsk Oblast, Krasnoyarsk Krai, Jewish Autonomous Oblast, Republic of Khakassia and Sakha Republic (Yakutia). It is worth emphasising that in 2000 a unit from the European part of the country, the Orenburg Oblast, led the statistics. In statistics from the consecutive years one can see a shift of Moscow and St. Petersburg from the group of units with high values of the indicator to that with the relatively low values.

In units distinguished by the greatest degree of depopulation after the fall of the Soviet Union, the share of the performed abortions is not the greatest. In the case of the European part of the country, the greatest depopulation after the fall of the Soviet Union occurred in the Pskov Oblast, and in 2000 the number of abortions performed among 1000 women in reproductive age was 61 (while the average for the Russian Federation was on the level of 55). In the Asian part of the country, however, the decrease of population in the period 1991 – 2001 was largest in the Autonomous District of the Chukchi where the number of abortions was 45 (Semenov S.P., Petrov A.N., 2001).

REGULATIONS CONCERNING THE CONDITIONS ALLOWING FOR ABORTIONS

In many countries of the world, where abortion is banned, the so-called indication model serves as the legal basis. This model assumes that the foetus in each phase of the pregnancy is regarded as an independent being protected by the law. Due to that, an agreement or even a request of a pregnant woman is not a sufficient reason for depriving the foetus of its legal protection. For the abortion to be legal, it is necessary to give a reason, which can be of medical, legal or social nature (Zielińska, 1990).

In Russia, the so-called time-limit model is used; that is, the foetus in the early stage of the pregnancy is regarded as a limited part of the mother and it is the mother who makes the decision concerning abortion. According to the Russian law, during the first 12 weeks of the pregnancy abortion can be performed without any restrictions. In the later stages of the pregnancy (when the foetus is 12 to 22 weeks old), it is necessary to give a reason for

performing abortion. The reason may be of medical nature (e.g., when the foetus is seriously damaged or when the mother's life is in jeopardy) or else of social nature. The latter were established already in the Soviet Union, when in 1987 the authorities presented a list of 13 so-called social factors allowing for performing an abortion. These include rape, divorce, imprisonment, but also unemployment or poor housing conditions. One of the main reasons for introducing such list by the Soviet authorities was the attempt to stop illegal abortions.⁵ Despite of that, it seems that each year about 250 women in Russia dies of abortion complications and 350 remains injured for life.

CHANGES IN APPROACH TO THE ISSUE OF ABORTION

On 11 August 2003, 48 years after the introduction of the law allowing wide access to abortion, Russian authorities decided to restrict the abortion laws. There are a few reasons influencing this decision. One of the most important are demographic concerns, that is, the desire to stop the population decrease. The population of Russia in 1989 was 147,400,000, while in 2001 only 144,819,000. The decision regulating the abortion laws is a result of a debate in the country on the topic of the influence of abortion on women's health. Another factor, undoubtedly contributing to the changes, is the involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church in this issue. The position in this matter is based on the opinions of the Church Fathers, a.o., St. John of Damascene and St. Vassily, according to whom life begins at conception and as such it should be absolutely protected. The revival of religion and a stronger position of the Church in Russia contributed indirectly to the novelisation of the law, which, however, remains one of the most liberal in the world, since during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy abortion can be performed without any restrictions. The main change undertaken by the Ministry of Health and ratified by the Russian Parliament consists in reducing the number of social conditions from 13 to only 4. Nowadays, permission for undergoing abortion is given only to a woman who can prove that the pregnancy is a result of a rape, who is deprived of parental rights, or else who is imprisoned. The fourth social condition concerns directly the father: abortion may be performed is the father dies or is seriously handicapped, which would make it impossible for the mother to ensure adequate living conditions for the child. Abortion is however still possible after 12 weeks depending on medical considerations.

Russia is at the brink of a demographic downfall and it depends only on the Russians whether the current regression will continue. Indirectly, it is the accessibility of the abortion that contributes to it. Will Russia say "no" to self-destruction? We'll see in the next few decades...

⁵ This is the opinion of, a.o., Yuri Bloshanski, currently the chief gynecologist of Moscow, who has been practicing for over 40 years. According to him, the legality of abortions contributes to the smaller number of injuries during the abortion procedure (*Neravenstvo i smertnost' v Rossii* [Inequality and Mortality in Russia], 2000; in Russian).

Table 1.

Abortions (per 1000 women in the age 15 – 49 years)

Administrative unit	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
RUSSIAN FEDERATION	82	88	82	73	69	65	61	56	55
Autonomous District of the Chukchi	62	65	63	58	52	55	50	39	45
Altai Krai	50	60	51	45	40	38	38	38	48
Khabarovsk Krai	86	96	87	79	76	73	75	72	72
Krasnodar Krai	80	85	81	74	74	71	66	64	60
Krasnoyarsk Krai ^a	99	113	100	95	91	85	81	75	71
Primorsky Krai	84	90	85	83	75	68	66	60	58
Stavropol Krai	61	76	62	61	61	59	55	52	46
Moscow	70	82	71	60	56	52	45	41	38
Amur Oblast	80	89	81	74	71	73	71	71	73
Arkhangelsk Oblast ^b	76	79	77	71	69	65	65	58	62
Astrakhan Oblast	67	86	68	67	57	60	59	53	50
Belgorod Oblast	90	98	91	79	70	66	63	60	54
Bryansk Oblast	99	114	100	94	91	80	74	66	61
Chelyabinsk Oblast	86	99	87	84	77	79	73	56	65
Chita Oblast ^c	83	84	84	75	69	63	62	46	57
Irkutsk Oblast ^d	111	117	112	99	86	76	69	62	61
Ivanovo Oblast	77	85	78	70	69	62	59	53	51
Yaroslavl Oblast	102	103	103	95	90	75	69	61	63
Kaliningrad Oblast	97	105	98	87	80	76	72	67	64
Kaluga Oblast	70	78	71	64	62	56	60	58	56
Kamchatka Oblast ^e	86	100	87	76	68	69	65	59	57
Kemerovo Oblast	82	78	83	69	68	61	59	56	56
Kirov Oblast	86	90	87	78	77	75	71	68	66
Kostroma Oblast	95	105	96	82	76	72	70	69	63
Kurgan Oblast	95	102	96	86	85	82	79	80	70
Kursk Oblast	70	86	71	69	70	67	66	55	53
Leningrad Oblast	58	65	59	57	55	54	48	44	48
Lipetsk Oblast	78	86	79	72	69	69	66	62	60
Magadan Oblast	78	49	79	71	70	72	74	65	64
Moscow Oblast	55	56	56	51	49	47	44	42	40
Murmansk Oblast	55	57	56	43	44	45	44	42	46

Continued:

Administrative unit	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Nizhny Novgorod Oblast	77	84	78	66	63	62	56	53	49
Novgorod Oblast	82	90	83	79	69	64	61	48	57
Novosibirsk Oblast	92	102	93	85	78	76	75	68	69
Omsk Oblast	103	116	104	94	94	82	74	70	62
Orenburg Oblast	100	104	101	92	88	91	84	84	76
Oryol Oblast	79	84	80	75	72	65	64	63	59
Penza Oblast	80	90	81	74	71	64	65	60	56
Perm Oblast ^f	90	94	91	83	83	78	75	71	68
Pskov Oblast	85	92	86	78	73	67	66	62	61
Ryazan Oblast	71	76	72	66	56	61	57	52	48
Rostov Oblast	86	93	87	78	69	58	48	36	43
Sakhalin Oblast	78	81	79	79	76	71	71	62	61
Samara Oblast	81	93	82	70	62	57	53	47	46
Saratov Oblast	89	99	90	85	76	71	66	61	55
Smolensk Oblast	81	89	82	79	79	71	63	57	57
Sverdlovsk Oblast	89	100	90	85	78	76	72	69	64
Tambov Oblast	81	86	82	75	72	67	65	61	57
Tyumen Oblast ^g	91	96	92	81	83	75	72	63	61
Tomsk Oblast	78	94	79	69	67	65	63	61	60
Tula Oblast	77	84	78	71	65	59	60	57	52
Tver Oblast	77	79	78	70	66	60	56	51	49
Ulyanovsk Oblast	84	90	85	78	73	70	69	55	61
Vladimir Oblast	72	59	73	69	63	63	58	49	47
Volgograd Oblast	80	92	81	71	68	61	62	53	56
Vologda Oblast	88	95	89	82	73	71	68	65	68
Voronezh Oblast	77	89	78	66	66	62	57	51	54
Republic of Adygeya	50	56	51	53	51	46	28	26	39
Altai Republic	70	85	71	69	69	62	50	54	53
Republic of Bashkiria	100	96	101	81	79	75	71	68	63
Buryat Republic	73	81	74	70	66	53	56	51	48
Republic of Khakassia	99	108	100	82	78	65	46	46	59
Chechen Republic	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Chuvash Republic	101	109	102	92	90	86	81	80	69

Continued:

Administrative unit	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Republic of Dagestan	39	43	40	46	35	30	23	22	21
Republic of Ingushetia	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	19	7	14	10	10
Kabardino-Balkar Republic	63	68	64	63	52	42	42	38	31
Republic of Kalmykia	78	84	79	71	66	74	61	54	48
Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia	32	25	33	34	31	28	29	26	29
Republic of Karelia	80	88	81	70	68	66	58	62	61
Komi Republic	68	67	69	66	72	66	64	64	60
Republic of Mariy El	98	104	99	88	83	76	71	68	64
Republic of Mordovia	66	76	67	59	57	51	50	49	51
Republic of Northern Ossetia	45	51	46	47	42	40	36	18	33
Sakha Republic (Yakutia)	89	105	90	83	81	79	57	71	74
Republic of Tatarstan	93	102	94	79	81	75	52	70	65
Republic of Tuva	80	91	81	80	76	70	74	61	60
Republic of Udmurtia	98	113	99	90	87	81	81	79	75
St. Petersburg	59	68	60	54	53	49	47	42	40
Jewish Autonomous Oblast	96	109	97	91	85	86	84	72	72

Source: *Demograficheski Yezhegodnik Rossii* [Demographic Yearbook of Russia], 2000, Goskomstat, Moscow. *Regiony Rossii* [Regions of Russia], 2001, Goskomstat, Moscow

- a Including the Autonomous District of the Evenks and the Autonomous District of Taimyr.
 b Including the Autonomous District of the Nenetses.
 c Including the Autonomous District of the Aga-Buryats.
 d Including the Autonomous District of the Ust-Ordinsk Buryats.
 e Including the Autonomous District of the Koryaks.
 f Including the Autonomous District of the Komi-Permyaks.
 g Including the Autonomous District of the Khants and Mansis and the Autonomous District of the Yamal Nenetses.
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