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Russian Life Expectancy Fell In 2012

After collapsing during the chaotic 1990's and the botched transition from communism, many of [Russia's](#) demographic indicators have rebounded. Life expectancy in particular, has been on a pretty good run and, in 2011, was just below an all-time high. Considering Russia's troubled history the "all time high" isn't a particularly impressive one, but the point stands that, compared to its own past, Russian life expectancy was about as good as it had ever been and was generally heading in the right direction.

Well, according to Izvestia, Russia's recent run of success has come to an end and life [expectancy in 2012 actually decreased](#). Here's a quick translation of the most relevant bits of the article:

“ The average life expectancy of people born in Russia in 2012 was 69.7 years. Rosstat presented the data at a trilateral commission for the regulation of social-labor relations (and Izvestia also has its own copy of the document). According to official data of the statistical agency, last year this demographic indicator fell for the first time since 2003.

Now it's worth noting that the decrease from 2011 to 2012 was a relatively small one and that the decrease doesn't come close to outweighing the substantial improvements witnessed in recent years. Here's what's happened to Russian life expectancy since 2000 if you incorporate the preliminary 2012 results:



Nonetheless, while we should view the recent decrease in perspective, there is no getting around the fact that it is quite alarming. One year does not a trend make, but there wasn't any good reason for life expectancy to decline in 2012: the economy was growing, the health system was functioning normally, and, unlike in 2010, there weren't any natural disasters that inflated the mortality rate. Additionally, as I've written before, the death rates from external causes such as murder, suicide, and alcohol poisoning, which have an outsize impact on life expectancy because they tend to kill relatively young people, all continued to decrease in 2012.

So what happens next? Well there are some reasons for optimism: the government has recently started to [significantly crack down](#) on smoking and drinking, which are two of the main reasons why Russian life expectancy is still so low. Even if the campaigns are only modestly effective, they should help to bring down Russia's still stratospheric death rates and boost its still-low level of life expectancy.

But it's equally possible that 2012 is a harbinger of serious trouble. Through the first 2 months of 2013 mortality has been slightly higher than in the corresponding period in 2012, though this has been compensated by an offsetting increase in births, and this would suggest that any improvement in life expectancy is unlikely. Russia has never actually gotten its average life expectancy to exceed 70, and it's possible that it's on some sort of upper-limit for its existing health system and population dynamics.* If I had to guess I'd say that 2013 will see a modest increase in life expectancy, there's simply too much 'low hanging fruit' that can be captured from decreases in tobacco and alcohol consumption, but it's very much up in the air.

It's not exactly the most compelling conclusion, but we'll simply have to wait and see what happens in 2013 before we draw any sweeping conclusions. Russia, as always, finds a way to make even the driest and most straightforward topics interesting.

* Russia has approached 70 several times, but every time it has come close it then experienced several years of gradual declines.

So we should be cognizant of the negative developments in 2012 and look forward to receiving more and better data for 2013.

This article is available online at:

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/markadomanis/2013/04/04/russian-life-expectancy-fell-in-2012/>