

# Depopulation in Ukraine: Low fertility, high mortality and emigration

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POLICY BRIEFING

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In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, leading to severe population loss as millions exited the country and casualties mounted. However, population decline in Ukraine had been happening for decades due to the triple burden of depopulation: low fertility, high mortality and substantial emigration. Ukraine had also already experienced years of armed conflict and large-scale displacement after the Russian-backed separatist movement, which started in 2014 and exacerbated population decline.

This policy briefing describes Ukrainians' perspectives of depopulation collected using online focus groups in July 2021, seven months before the current invasion. Discussions were compared from eastern Ukraine, including in rural villages, the city of Mariupol, the large city of Kharkiv and occupied Donetsk. Participants observed that cities were growing at the expense of rural areas. The situation in Donetsk was bleak due to mass emigration, but some participants pointed to a recent increase in births. Overall, the participants acknowledged the triple burden of depopulation in Ukraine, and the consequences of population decline, such as a shrinking labour force and rapid ageing. It is therefore vital for the international community to support Ukrainians in the short-term and, post-war, to help with rebuilding and regenerating Ukraine to stop depopulation.

## Key Points:

- *Depopulation has had dire consequences for Ukraine, leading to a shrinking labour force, severe population ageing and a lack of development.*
- *Focus group participants were concerned about a lack of births, especially of second or third children.*
- *Participants complained about the toll that high emigration from rural areas and Ukraine in general was taking, with the most active young people leaving.*
- *Participants in all focus groups were concerned about growth in urban areas and the deterioration of rural areas, with people moving out of villages and into cities.*
- *Mortality was the least mentioned factor in population decline, despite the high number of excess deaths from Covid-19 in the year before the discussions.*
- *The war in Ukraine has accelerated population decline, and Ukrainians will need support to rebuild, regenerate and stop depopulation.*

## Introduction

Russia’s war against Ukraine has brought immense suffering to the Ukrainian population. Although Ukraine’s population crisis is clearly evident now, the process of depopulation has been unfolding for decades (Figure 1). Ukraine has had one of the highest rates of population decrease in Europe, with only Latvia and a few Balkan states recording similar declines.

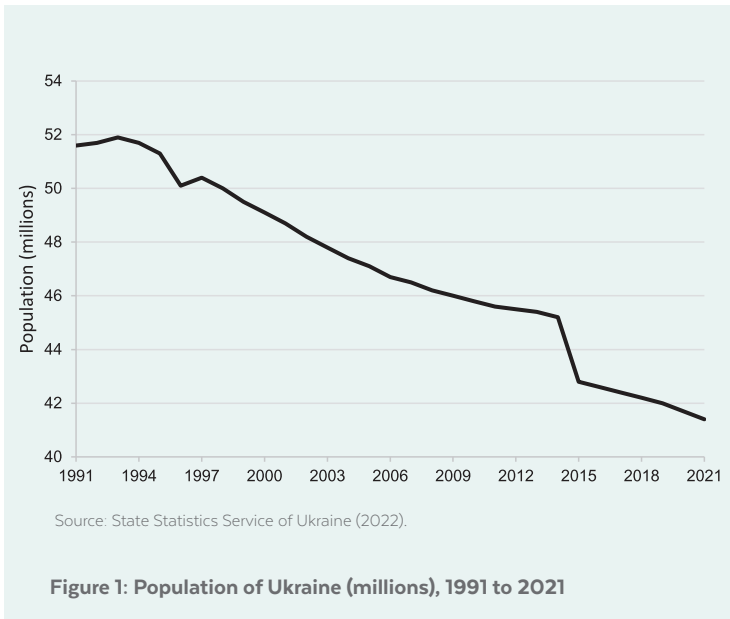


Figure 1: Population of Ukraine (millions), 1991 to 2021

been steadily declining since; however, due to the lack of an accurate census, the exact size of the population remains unknown. Ukrainian demographers have long been concerned about all three factors impacting the population structure, a phenomenon we call the “triple burden of depopulation”: low fertility, high mortality and significant emigration (Figures 2 and 3). However, little is known about whether the Ukrainians themselves have been aware of depopulation or consider it to be a problem.

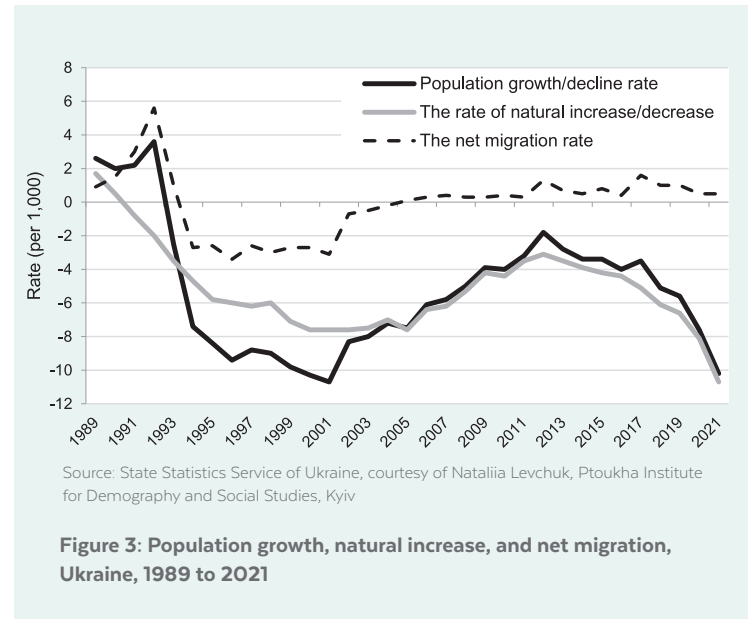


Figure 3: Population growth, natural increase, and net migration, Ukraine, 1989 to 2021

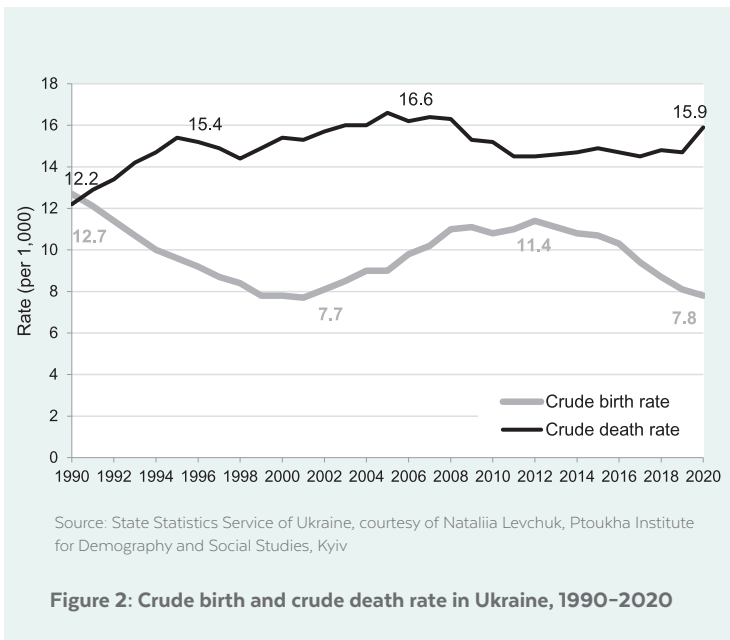


Figure 2: Crude birth and crude death rate in Ukraine, 1990-2020

However, unlike most countries experiencing extreme population decline, Ukraine’s population is relatively large. In 2020, Ukraine was the eighth largest country in Europe (sixth if Russia and Turkey are not included). Ukraine’s population peaked at 52 million in around 1993, and has

## The study

In this study, we used focus group methodology to investigate general perceptions of low fertility and depopulation. Focus group research aims to explore social norms and attitudes in greater depth than possible with surveys, yielding insights into how people think about social processes. The conversational format allows for multiple opinions and perspectives to emerge, which can then feed into explanations for why population change is occurring.

Our focus groups took place in July 2021, eight years after the start of the original conflict in eastern Ukraine. Working with a Ukrainian research agency, we conducted 16 focus groups online. The groups were divided by gender and took place in urban and rural areas. We were particularly interested in the experiences of individuals who fled the conflict. We conducted six focus groups with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and six focus groups with residents of regions bordering the conflict area. We also had the unique opportunity to conduct four online focus groups with residents of Donetsk, the largest city in the Donbas.

Our study explored whether and how Ukrainians perceived population decline, their stated reasons for the decline, and whether they thought it had negative social and economic consequences. We aimed to answer the following general research questions: (1) Had the focus group participants perceived a change in their local surroundings over the past few years? (2) Did the participants' perceptions differ depending on whether they were living in rural or urban areas? (3) How did the participants in Donetsk, in the Russian-backed separatist territory, view population change in their city? (4) Was population decline in Ukraine seen as a problem? (5) How did the participants perceive the causes of population decline, and its consequences for the country?

## Main findings

Participants described, sometimes in great detail, the population changes they observed, often using metaphors or references to demographic knowledge from the media, Wikipedia and even conspiracy theories. In general, we did not observe differences in perceptions of population based on IDP status or gender, which were the primary characteristics by which the focus groups were split. Instead, perceptions differed by location, reflecting urban-rural differences, and whether the local area had experienced an influx of IDPs or, conversely, depopulation.

### Perceptions of local population change in the cities of Mariupol and Kharkiv

*“The bulk of Kharkiv residents are not Kharkivites”*

The participants living in Mariupol and Kharkiv largely shared similar perceptions of population change. While they acknowledged that the total population of Ukraine was decreasing, they thought that the population was declining mainly in rural areas, and not in the cities where they lived. The noticeable increase in population in the cities was due to an influx of various newcomers, most notably of IDPs who arrived after 2014 from eastern Ukraine. The perceptions of population decline differed between the residents of Kharkiv and Mariupol. While the population increase in Kharkiv was in line with the long-term development of the city since the Soviet era, the changes in Mariupol were more recent.

### Perceptions of local population decline in Donbas villages

*“I see more people leaving and empty houses appear”*

The participants living in the rural Donbas were much more concerned about depopulating villages. The triple

burden was evident in the participants' narratives; while they focused on outmigration, they also acknowledged that fertility was low and mortality was high. According to the participants, the underlying reasons for the population decline were the lack of job opportunities, the degradation of infrastructure and limited public transport. As a result of these conditions, more and more people, and especially young people, were leaving the villages.

### Perceptions of local population decline in Donetsk

*“Empty! Empty!”*

The situation in Donetsk was even worse. An overwhelming sense of desolation permeated the discussions held in this region. Donetsk experienced armed conflict in 2014, followed by a massive outflow of people in subsequent years. These population processes were reflected in the participants' descriptions of Donetsk, as well as of the neighbouring towns and villages.

They spoke nostalgically of pre-2014 Donetsk, a once-bustling city with nearly two million people that had since been cut off from the world. Now Donetsk felt like a village, with only familiar faces on the streets and few foreigners or newcomers. Residents spoke of empty apartments, deserted neighbourhoods, and eerily quiet streets with few people or cars. The 10pm curfew, which had been in effect since the start of the war, exacerbated this situation, as it stifled any evening activity or nightlife.

### Perceptions of Ukraine's population decline

Despite their scepticism of population data, most of the participants thought that population decline was a problem, using terms such as “catastrophic”, a “demographic hole” or “dying out of the nation”. They believed that the declining population was a problem for Ukraine both now and in the future. Some of them referred to all three factors of the triple burden of depopulation: low fertility, high mortality and outmigration. Because of these trends, the participants observed, people did not want to stay in the country.

The participants linked the fertility decline to the economic situation, noting how difficult it was for young people to have children. Financial reasons for not having children permeated all of the focus group discussions, such as low standards of living, insufficient income and rising costs. The war was mentioned as a factor leading young people to postpone childbearing. The outmigration of youth, and cohabitation rather than marriage, were seen as having an impact on fertility and overall population decline in Ukraine.

## Conclusion

Our online focus groups demonstrated that average Ukrainians are aware of the depopulation crisis. The conversations about national population decline were often bleak, permeated by a sense of doom about the future of the country. Depopulation has had dire consequences for Ukraine, as it has led to a shrinking labour force, severe ageing and a general lack of development. The main concern raised was lack of births, especially of second or third children, as young people were “refusing” to give birth. Participants complained about the toll that high emigration was taking, with the most active young people leaving. Mortality was also mentioned, but it was the least recognised factor in population decline, despite the high number of excess deaths from Covid-19 that had occurred over the previous year. Our focus groups also recognised that the decline in population was uneven across the country, and that even if the nation’s total population was declining, certain cities could still be expanding. Participants in all focus groups contrasted the growth in urban areas with the deterioration of conditions in rural areas, and made the direct link between people moving out of villages and into cities.

The rural residents recognised that the decline was due not only to outmigration, but also low to birth rates. It was clear from the participants’ comments that the effects of the triple burden of depopulation in rural areas, combined with poverty and neglect, were more severe in Ukraine than in many parts of rural Europe. For urban areas, while internally displaced persons were usually portrayed in a positive light,

some participants, particularly those in Mariupol, were wary of additional population pressures. These discussions are a reminder that even though a country may be depopulating overall, certain regions, and especially urban areas, may still be growing, often due to unexpected migration processes. The discussions in the separatist-occupied territory of Donetsk corroborated the observations of the people who were living in Kharkiv and Mariupol, recognising that the shrinking population had led to less diversity and fewer younger people, drastically changing the age structure of the population.

## Policy implications

Since the focus groups were conducted, the events of the past year have accelerated Ukraine’s population decline in ways scarcely imaginable in July 2021. Ukraine’s people have experienced immense turmoil and trauma, especially in the regions where our focus groups took place. It is therefore vital to remember the voices of our focus group participants, who have had their lives directly threatened by violence. They have been displaced, destitute, detained, forcibly deported, conscripted into the Russian army or worse.

Looking to a post-war future, it will be important for policymakers across the world to recognise the issue of depopulation in Ukraine, and provide support to its people in rebuilding, regenerating and stopping the inimical spiral of depopulation. In the short-term, Ukrainians should be supported with jobs, housing, and policies to help them start families.

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