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No. 973 (221/2023) | 12.10.2023

ISSN 2657-6996
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Ukraine's Demographic Challenges

Keywords: demography, internal migration, external migration, Ukraine, war

Ukraine's population began to decline long before February 2022. On the eve of the Russian invasion, it ranged from 34.5 to 37.4 million people. The armed conflict catastrophically accelerated the depopulation of the country and led to an even greater deformation of the age and gender structure of the population. Alongside numerous irreparable human losses, mobilisation, traditional labour migration, and years of negative natural growth, the mass exodus of Ukrainians abroad has become a major challenge to the continued functioning of the state.

The demographic situation before the invasion. The only census in the history of independent Ukraine was conducted in 2001. According to it, the state was inhabited by almost 48.5 million people, which is 3.7 million less than in January 1993, when the population reached a historic maximum of 52.2 million. On 1 December 2019, an 'electronic population census' was conducted at the request of the government. As its results indicated, the country's actual population was 37.3 million, not counting citizens permanently living abroad, in Crimea, and in the parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions not controlled by Kyiv. However, if the approximately 5.7 million people living in non-government-controlled territories are included, it can be seen that Ukraine's 2001 population has decreased by more than 11.3%. Due to the fact that the census was conducted using, among other things, data obtained from mobile operators, demographers were quite sceptical about it. According to some of them, the real demographic figure was much lower at the time.

The validity of this opinion is confirmed, in particular, by data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine (SSSU), which estimated the population (excluding Crimea and the city of Sevastopol) to be 41.1 million as of 1 February 2022.¹ Similar figures were also quoted by Eurostat. At the same time, excluding the inhabitants of Crimea and the separate regions of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, the country's population was already 37.4 million. However, in the explanatory notes to the draft of state budget for 2023 and 2024, it is stated with reference to the SSSU that as of 1 January 2022, the territories controlled by the Government of Ukraine were inhabited by only 34.5 million people.² Such significant discrepancies have led to considerable differences in estimates of the actual population of the country after the invasion of the Russian Federation.

Current population. Russian aggression has dramatically accelerated the depopulation of the country, causing tens of thousands of irreversible military and civilian casualties. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the number of civilian casualties by 24 September 2023 was 27,449, including 9,701 deaths and 17,748 injured. However, the actual numbers are much higher, as many cases need further confirmation or have occurred in frontline territories, making them difficult to verify. This is particularly the case

¹ Державна служба статистики України, Демографічна ситуація у січні 2022 року, Експрес-Випуск, 18.03.2022, <http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua> [5.10.2023].

² Пояснювальна записка до проекту Закону України „Про Державний бюджет України на 2023 рік”, Верховна Рада України (ВРУ), 14.09.2022, <https://itd.rada.gov.ua/billInfo/Bills/Card/40472> [5.10.2023]; Пояснювальна записка до проекту Закону України „Про про Державний бюджет України на 2024 рік”, ВРУ, 15.09.2023, <https://itd.rada.gov.ua/billInfo/Bills/Card/42796> [5.10.2023].

in Mariupol, Lysychansk, Popasna, and Severodonetsk, where numerous civilian deaths and injuries have been reported (see "IES Commentaries", no. 564; "IES Commentaries", no. 615).

The Russian invasion has also led to massive internal and external migration (see "IES Commentaries", no. 968). In September 2023, Ukraine's Ministry of Social Policy estimated the number of registered internally displaced persons in the country to be almost 5 million. However, there is no accurate information on the number of Ukrainians residing abroad, as each institution uses its own calculation methodology. In the opinion of the director of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Yevhen Holovakha, up to 20% of the population, or every fifth Ukrainian citizen, could have left the country since February 2022. Most of these are people of working age and children, while pensioners account for less than 2% of the total.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, from the time of the full-scale invasion until 3 October 2023, some 6.2 million Ukrainians left the country and have not returned. In particular, more than 5.8 million refugees from Ukraine have been registered in European countries, including 1.09 million in Germany, 960,000 in Poland, 372,000 in the Czech Republic, 210,800 in the United Kingdom, 190,000 in Spain, 168,000 in Italy, 119,000 in Moldova, and 109,000 in Slovakia. The Russian Federation, in turn, had approximately 1.28 million refugees from Ukraine at the end of 2022 (see [„Komentarze IES”, nr 938](#)). However, the director of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine believes that there may currently be around 1 to 2 million Ukrainians in Russia, including those with pro-Russian views or those who have fled the armed conflict from the occupied territories.

If one takes into account the estimates of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, the total number of Ukrainians abroad (including those who left before the Russian invasion) as of 21 June 2023 would be 8.177 million. Against this backdrop, the Ukrainian Institute of the Future's calculation that the country's population, excluding the temporarily occupied territories, was only 29 million people in May 2023 is quite realistic. More pessimistic estimates cite a figure of around 25 million.

Fertility rate. A downward trend in the birth rate in Ukraine had been observed since 2013 – at around 7% per year. However, the exodus of women abroad and the security threats caused by warfare have significantly worsened the situation. The country's fertility rate fell from 1.1 in 2021 to less than 1 in 2023, while it should be 2.1 children per woman to reach replacement level. As a result, according to SSSU data, 96,755 children were born in the first half of 2023. This was 28% less compared to the same period in 2021, when 135,079 newborns came into the world.

The following factors have contributed to the decline in the birth rate:

1. A substantial number of pregnant women went abroad and gave birth in other countries. Among others, in Poland in 2022, Ukrainian women bore 13,748 children, twice as many as in 2021.
2. An important part of the country is under occupation, so there is no statistical information on births in these territories.
3. Some families are postponing having a child due to the uncertainty of living conditions in the coming years.

Working population and pensioners. Calculations by the Ptukha Institute of Demography and Social Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine showed that the number of people of working age shrank from 17.4 million in 2021 to 11.9 million in early 2023. This represents a decrease of almost 32%. Concurrently, the territorial distribution of the workforce changed considerably due to massive population migration, with only 7.9-8.8 million people remaining in their places of permanent residence. Consequently, it is estimated that only 45-51% of the pre-war working-age population is able to continue employment in their regions without substantial investments in restoring or improving living conditions. According to the Ukrainian Institute of the Future, the total number of employed people is now around 9.1-9.5 million, including public sector employees and working pensioners.

The ratio of working-age population to pensioners is currently critical and poses a serious challenge to Ukraine's pension system. As of 1 January 2023, there were 10.7 million registered pensioners in the country, of whom 2.7

million were still working. If the situation does not change, the ageing of the population will increase, and in the next few years, there could potentially be twice as many pensioners as economically active people in the country.

Risk of permanent migration. At the beginning of the Russian invasion, the vast majority of Ukrainian citizens who went abroad declared their intention to return to their country. Meanwhile, a survey conducted by the research agency Info Sapiens on behalf of the Centre for Economic Strategy in April–May 2023 showed that the percentage of forced migrants planning to return to Ukraine had fallen to 63%. As a result, somewhere between 1.3 million and 3.3 million Ukrainians may remain abroad, mainly in European countries. This, in turn, means that the potential loss to the Ukrainian economy could represent some 2.7% to 6.9% of GDP per year.

Director of the Ptukha Institute of Demography and Social Studies, Ella Libanova, distinguishes two groups at risk of 'non-return': 1) forced migrants who can count on increased social protection in European countries, such as families with many children, mothers with young children, and people with special needs; 2) the most skilled and educated citizens who have an occupation that is desirable on the European market. One obvious fact is that the longer the hostilities last, the more Ukrainians will adapt to life abroad and will be inclined not to return.

Conclusions. Russian aggression and the resulting emigration have severely worsened the demographic situation in Ukraine. Irreparable human losses among the military and civilians, coupled with the high volume of migration of citizens abroad, have led to depopulation and a further distortion of the age and gender structure of the population. The prolonged military conflict, the destruction of the economy, the prospect of lengthy post-war reconstruction of the state, and the gradual integration of Ukrainians in host countries increase the risk that a substantial number of forced migrants, including youth, may not return to Ukraine. In the medium to long term, this will lead to a significant deterioration of the country's demographic potential.

Experience from other countries demonstrates that the longer a conflict persists, the less likely forced migrants might want to return. Moreover, emigration to wealthier countries and greater remoteness from Ukraine's borders also diminish the likelihood of migrants coming back after the end of hostilities. Consequently, in the near future, the depopulation of the country will continue, and the working-age population will decrease. Simultaneously, the disparity between the able-bodied and retired population will grow. These trends will have a negative impact on both the state of the pension system and the dynamics of Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and economic development.