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Demographic Crisis in Ukraine

Since 1994, Ukraine's population has been in steady decline; however, a severe demographic crisis has unfolded over the past three years. Russia's armed aggression has led to mass internal and international migration, a sharp decline in the birth rate and life expectancy, as well as increased mortality and significant changes in the distribution of the population across the country. In an effort to minimise the consequences of the crisis, the government approved the Demographic Development Strategy of Ukraine for the period until 2040; nevertheless, the state currently lacks sufficient resources to implement this effectively.

Dynamics of demographic change. The decline in Ukraine's population began in the early years of its independence. In 1993, it recorded its highest population level, exceeding 52.2 million people. The only nationwide census, conducted on 5 December 2001, showed that the country was then inhabited by just under 48.5 million people. By 1 February 2022, that is, on the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine's population, according to the State Statistics Service of Ukraine (SSSU), amounted to only 41.1 million. This figure did not include residents of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea or the city of Sevastopol (approximately another 2.3–2.4 million), but did include the entire population of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions¹. At the same time, excluding the inhabitants of Crimea and the parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions not controlled by Kyiv, this figure ranged from 34.5 to 37.4 million people according to various estimates (see ["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 973](#)).

As a result of Russia's invasion in 2022, which led to a mass exodus of citizens, the population of Ukraine within the territory recognised by the international community had, by the end of 2024, declined to approximately 34 million, as estimated by the Institute of Demography and Quality of Life Problems of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Of this number, only around 28–29 million people resided in territory controlled by the Ukrainian authorities. It is worth noting that current estimates by Ukrainian demographers are based not on data from the SSSU, which has not published population figures since February 2022, but primarily on migration data from: (1) the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, providing information on crossings of the western state border; and (2) the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, concerning the number of registered births and deaths in territory controlled by the Ukrainian authorities. Additional data sources include mobile network operators, the Pension Fund, the Ministry of Social Policy, and the Ministry of Education on the number of active mobile phone users, recipients of pension and social benefits, as well as pupils and students registered in the education system.

Causes of population decline. Among the main reasons for Ukraine's depopulation, the following should be distinguished:

– **A sharp reduction in the birth rate**, which occurred immediately after Ukraine gained independence in 1991, primarily as a result of the economic crisis and changes in the reproductive attitudes of society. The birth rate in post-Soviet Ukraine has consistently remained lower than the death rate; however, due to migration triggered by the collapse of the USSR, the population size during the first years of independence remained relatively stable. The highest level of births was recorded in 1991, when 630.8 thousand children were born. In subsequent years, the number of births declined year by year until an increase occurred again in 2003, when 408.6 thousand children were born. This trend continued until 2013, when the number of births reached 503.7 thousand. In the following years, the indicator began to decrease once again, reaching just 176.6 thousand newborns in 2024 in the territories

¹ Державна служба статистики України, *Демографічна ситуація у січні 2022 року*, "Експрес-Випуск", 18.03.2022, <http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua> (18.02.2025).

controlled by the Ukrainian authorities. The total fertility rate² in the country fell from 1.78 in 1991 to only 0.7 in 2023, while the replacement threshold³ is 2.1–2.2 children per woman.

– **Low average life expectancy and a high level of premature mortality**, especially among men of working age, who more frequently work in harmful and dangerous conditions, are involved in more road traffic accidents, and die from diseases associated with alcohol abuse, psychoactive substance use, and tobacco smoking. Furthermore, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, average life expectancy at birth in 2021 declined to 65 years for men and 74–75 years for women.

The outbreak of the war in February 2022 caused numerous deaths among the population, including children (exact numbers have not been disclosed), a deterioration in the quality of medical care, problems with access to medicines and treatment, a decline in quality of life, and chronic stress, which both triggers new illnesses and exacerbates existing ones. As a result, based on the estimates by the Ministry of Social Policy, the average life expectancy for men in 2024 fell to 57.3 years, and for women, to 70.9 years. According to data from the Ministry of Justice, last year in Ukraine, excluding the regions occupied by Russia, almost 495.1 thousand deaths were registered, which was 2.8 times higher than the number of registered births.

– **Unregulated migration processes**, which intensified significantly in 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in Donbas, and again in 2022 as a result of Russian aggression. Active warfare and the occupation of a large part of Ukraine's territory caused two massive waves of forced internal and external migration. While the first wave took place mainly within the country, the second – more extensive – wave led to both a substantial increase in the number of internally displaced persons (reaching a total of 12 million in 2022) and to mass refugee migration, exceeding 8 million people by the end of 2022 (see ["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 968](#); ["Komentarze IEŚ", no. 1067](#); ["Komentarze IEŚ", no. 1215](#)). According to calculations by the National Bank of Ukraine, approximately 500 thousand residents left the country in 2024 alone.

As of 2 January 2025, the number of persons registered as internally displaced, as recorded by the Ministry of Social Policy, amounted to 4.6 million. The largest shares were located in the Ukrainian-controlled parts of the Donetsk (11.4%) and the Kharkiv (11.2%) regions, as well as in the Dnipropetrovsk region (9.8%) and Kyiv (9%). In turn, pursuant to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, from the beginning of Russia's full-scale aggression until mid-February 2025, more than 6.3 million Ukrainians received temporary international protection in European countries⁴. About half of these were residing in Germany (1.2 million), Poland (998 thousand), the Czech Republic (390 thousand), the United Kingdom (254 thousand), Spain (223 thousand), and Romania (180 thousand). In addition, over 560 thousand people obtained protection outside Europe.

A significant number of refugees also left for the Russian Federation and Belarus, where 1.22 million (as of 30 June 2024) and 22.5 thousand (as of 31 January 2025) people, respectively, are now residing; the United Nations, however, does not specify what proportion of these individuals were forcibly deported. Based on estimates by the Ukrainian authorities, the number of children forcibly displaced deeper into occupied territory or deported to Russia amounts to at least 19.5 thousand. These figures, however, include only officially registered cases, and the actual number may be much higher (see ["Komentarze IEŚ", no. 938](#)).

– **Irreversible losses among military personnel and the civilian population** as a result of the armed hostilities ongoing since 2014. It should be noted that citizens of Ukraine fought and died on both sides of the front. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, from 14 April 2014 to

² The fertility rate represents the average number of children that a woman would give birth to over her entire reproductive lifespan, assuming that during each phase of that period she would give birth at the same rate observed in the year under review.

³ The replacement threshold is the minimum fertility rate required to ensure the replacement of generations.

⁴ Temporary international protection is a mechanism introduced by the 2001 EU Directive, activated in exceptional circumstances in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons from countries outside the European Union, in order to provide them with immediate collective protection and to relieve pressure on the national asylum systems of EU Member States. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this mechanism was activated on 4 March 2022.

31 December 2021, at least 3.4 thousand civilians and approximately 10.8–11 thousand soldiers were killed on both sides of the conflict in Donbas. Between 24 February 2022 and 31 December 2024, 12,456 civilians became victims of the warfare. These estimates are, however, likely to be greatly underestimated, and many cases still require further confirmation or occurred in frontline or occupied areas, which complicates their verification. For example, it still remains unknown how many people lost their lives in the virtually destroyed cities of Sievierodonetsk, Lysychansk, Popasna, Bakhmut, and other similar localities. In Mariupol alone, which was almost entirely devastated in the spring of 2022, at least 20 thousand civilians may have been killed. These losses were recorded by representatives of the Ukrainian authorities before they left the city. However, the actual number may range from 60 to 100 thousand residents⁵ (see "[Komentarze IEŚ](#)", no. 564; "[Komentarze IEŚ](#)", no. 615).

In an interview with NBC published on 16 February 2025, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated that since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, more than 46 thousand Ukrainian soldiers have been killed, while tens of thousands are considered missing. At present, these are the only official figures available on this issue. At the same time, according to estimates by The Wall Street Journal, the number of Ukrainians and Russians killed or wounded between February 2022 and September 2024 reached approximately one million people.

The government's demographic strategy. In February 2024, the European Union launched a financial assistance instrument for Ukraine for the years 2024–2027, known as the Ukraine Facility. Its objective is to provide the country with support amounting to 50 billion EUR, *inter alia* for recovery, reconstruction, and modernisation, as well as for carrying out reforms necessary for EU accession. As part of the implementation of this instrument, the Cabinet of Ministers, by a resolution of 30 September 2024, approved the Demographic Development Strategy of Ukraine for the period until 2040, and on 1 November, adopted an action plan for its realisation.

The main goals and objectives of the Strategy include:

- creating conditions to increase birth rate and supporting families;
- reducing the level of premature mortality;
- creating conditions for positive net migration (the return of forced migrants and those who left the country before the start of the full-scale war; encouraging the involvement of representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora; the selective admission of migrants from other countries), as well as reducing emigration;
- adapting society to population ageing and creating conditions for active longevity;
- engaging the maximum number of citizens in the labour market;
- improving living conditions and quality of life by ensuring a safe environment, creating barrier-free access to all residential and social infrastructure, introducing mechanisms to provide citizens with accessible housing and high-quality, affordable infrastructure, and fostering social cohesion.

The Strategy outlines two scenarios for the development of the demographic situation in the country:

1. **The "inertial scenario",** which assumes the continuation of the existing system of state support for the population. This will result in a reduction in Ukraine's population within the 1991 borders to 28.9 million people by the beginning of 2041 and to 25.2 million at the beginning of 2051 (according to estimates by the Institute of Demography and Quality of Life Problems of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine).
2. **The "change scenario",** which takes into account the implementation of the Strategy, envisages the stabilisation of the demographic situation in the country at 33.9 million in 2041 and 31.6 million in 2051.

⁵ See H. Bazhenova, *Genocidal Dimensions of the Russo-Ukrainian War: Targeting the People and Cultural Heritage of Ukraine*, "Genocidas ir rezistencija" 2024, no. 2(56), p. 228.

However, this scenario will require a considerable positive migration balance, estimated in the millions of people⁶.

A major shortcoming of the Strategy is that the realisation of its objectives is not supported by separate funding from the state budget. According to the document, the amount of expenditure should be determined annually during the preparation of state and local budget drafts for a given year, "taking into account their real capacities". Such a formulation may hinder the effective implementation of the Strategy in the future.

Conclusions. Ukraine's population has been declining at varying rates since 1994; however, the annexation of Crimea, the outbreak of the armed conflict in Donbas, and especially the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation have significantly accelerated the demographic crisis in Ukraine. Whereas after 2014 the primary cause was natural population decline resulting from low birth rates, since February 2022, the main drivers have been forced mass migration and increased mortality due to hostilities and disease.

By the end of 2024, the population of Ukraine within its 1991 borders amounted to approximately 34 million. Thus, over the period of independence, it has decreased by at least 18.2 million people, or 35%, including a reduction of approximately 9.5 million in the last three years alone. A more precise assessment will be possible only after the cessation of military operations and the conduct of a national census.

The Demographic Development Strategy of Ukraine for the period until 2040, adopted by the Ukrainian government in September 2024, defines the main objectives of state policy aimed at overcoming the demographic crisis and ensuring the country's sustainable development. The document is more strongly focused on migration-driven population growth (in particular through attracting migrants from other countries, which does not require substantial financial resources) than on increasing fertility and reducing mortality. Nevertheless, the lack of dedicated funding for the Strategy raises doubts about its feasibility.

The key prerequisite for halting the deepening demographic crisis is the end of hostilities and an improvement in Ukraine's security situation. Prolongation of the conflict will further increase population losses and the number of forced migrants and refugees who may decide not to return to their country. For this reason, the implementation of the Strategy is virtually impossible at present. In order to stabilise the demographic situation, it will also be necessary to improve the state of Ukraine's economy and the living conditions of its citizens.

⁶ Закон України № 922-р від 30.09.2024 р. „Про схвалення Стратегії демографічного розвитку України на період до 2040 року”, Верховна Рада України, Законодавство України, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/922-2024-%D1%80#Text> (18.02.2025).