Chapter 6
Ukrainians and Russians in Ukraine and in Russia

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In the 1989 census, the population of Ukraine included 22% ethnic Russians, which prompted us to ask: is this strong Russian presence in Ukraine a reason for the relatively small difference observed between Ukraine and Russia in age-specific patterns of mortality?

Available statistics enable us to give a partial response to this question, since ethnicity is shown both on death certificates and in census reports, and Goskomstat has produced some tables and analyses based on that information. However, for at least two reasons, the data must be treated with caution.

Firstly, under the Soviet regime, in both Russia and Ukraine, ethnicity was really only established at the age of 16, with the issue of the passport that every citizen of the USSR received at that age.[1] Because of this, the ethnicity of minor children, especially those of mixed-ethnicity parentage, remained legally undetermined before that age, and declarations made for children under 16 might not have corresponded to the ethnicity that was eventually chosen. Most often, where death occurred at a young age, ethnicity was recorded on the basis of a simple declaration by the parents; sometimes the mother's ethnicity was even attributed automatically (especially for deaths at under 1 year of age), while the most frequent choice when the passport was issued tended to be the father's ethnicity. This accounts for the fact that mortality rates by ethnicity are subject to fluctuations at the threshold of 16 years of age. It therefore seems more reasonable to limit our analysis here to ages over 20.

More generally, census declarations made by a person in question him(her)self might sometimes not accord with the ethnicity shown in the passport, whereas more

[1] Since 1995 in Ukraine and since 2002 in Russia, ethnicity has no longer been shown in new passports.

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Table 6.1 Life expectancy at age 20 by sex and ethnicity in Russia and in Ukraine, 1988–1989

	Country of residence		Difference
	Ukraine	Russia	in life expectancy
Ethnicity	(a)	(b)	*(a) – (b)*
Men			
All	48.32	46.82	*1.50*
Ukrainians (1)	48.49	48.75	*–0.26*
Russians (2)	47.99	46.69	*1.30*
(1) – (2)	*0.50*	*2.06*	
Women			
All	56.62	56.26	*0.36*
Ukrainians (3)	56.64	56.00	*0.64*
Russians (4)	56.59	56.26	*0.33*
(3) – (4)	*0.05*	*–0.26*	

systematic use was made of passports at the time of death, to verify the declared ethnicity. This obviously entails the risk of bias in the calculation of mortality rates by ethnic group, since the numerator and the denominator may be inconsistently defined. However, for the last years of the Soviet regime, this risk of bias should not be too great where Russians and Ukrainians are concerned. It seems that in the late 1980s under the soviet regime there was hardly any advantage for either side to declare a ethnicity different from the one shown in the passport.

From 1959, Goskomstat (named Rosstat in present) systematically calculated mortality rates by sex, age and ethnicity for periods of 2 years around each population census. Here we shall use the calculations made for the period 1988–1989, which rely on the 1989 census.

In this census, 73% of the population of Ukraine declared themselves to be Ukrainian and 22% Russian. In Russia, Russians represented 82% of the population and Ukrainians only 3%. Table 6.1 gives sex-specific values for life expectancy at age 20 in Russia and in Ukraine, for both Russians and Ukrainians.

Taking all ethnic groups together, the difference in life expectancy at age 20 between Ukraine and Russia is, as we already know, greater for men than for women: 1.5 years and 0.4 year respectively. Here we can see not only that, in both countries, the differences between people of Russian and Ukrainian ethnicities are greater for men than for women, but also that this male-female contrast is much more pronounced in Russia than in Ukraine. In Ukraine, the difference in male life expectancy at the age of 20 is 0.5 years in favour of Ukrainians, as against only 0.05 years for females. In Russia, it is 2.1 years for men, still in favour of Ukrainians, but the reverse is true for women (0.3 years in favour of Russians). In reality, there are two superimposed phenomena here: firstly, excess mortality among Russians essentially involves males but, secondly, it is much less marked in Ukraine, because the advantage of Ukrainians who live in Russia over their compatriots who remain in Ukraine is smaller than that of Russians living in Ukraine over Russians living in Russia. Whether this is the effect of selection or of a difference in quality of life between the two countries is not something we are in a position to address here.

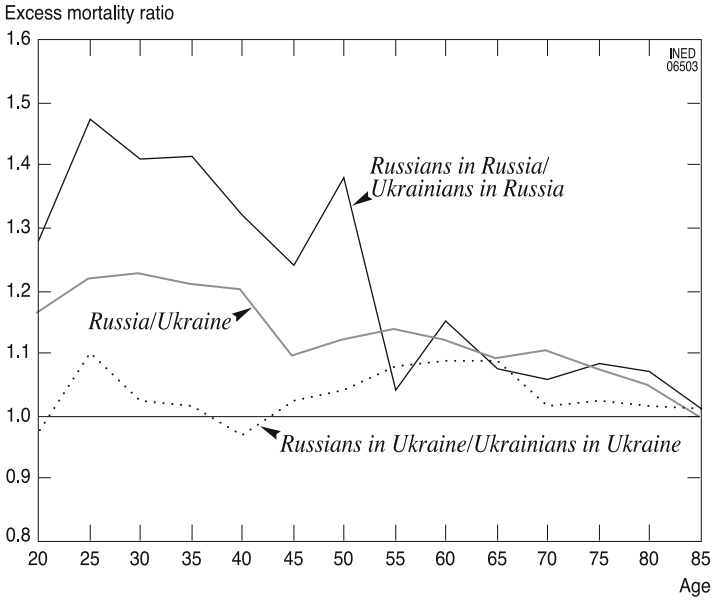

Fig. 6.1 Age-specific male mortality rate ratios: Russians living in Russia compared to Ukrainians living in Russia and Russians living in Ukraine compared to Ukrainians living in Ukraine, Russia compared to Ukraine (total male populations), 1988–1989

As the difference in mortality between Russians and Ukrainians is above all a male phenomenon, the rest of our analysis will focus on males.

Since, whether they live in Russia or in Ukraine, Russians have lower life expectancy than Ukrainians, the question we asked at the outset could be answered in the affirmative: there is a risk that the proportion of 22% Russians in the population of Ukraine is minimizing the differences in life expectancy observed between the two countries. However, the reality is more complex. Firstly, the difference between the two nationalities is much smaller in Ukraine (0.5 years) than in Russia (2.1 years); secondly, if we look specifically at Ukraine, this difference of 0.5 years represents just a third of the total difference (1.5 years) between the two countries. Therefore, relatively speaking, it must be playing only a secondary role in the comparison between total male populations of Ukraine and Russia.

In addition, the effects of these differences are very uneven in respect to age. Figure 6.1 presents the age-specific ratios of Russian to Ukrainian male mortality rates, firstly in Russia and secondly in Ukraine, by comparison with the same mortality ratios for the whole of Russia to the whole of Ukraine.

As is to be expected, the difference between the two ethnic groups is much more pronounced in Russia than in Ukraine. But in fact this contrast is restricted to young adults; over 50 years of age, it diminishes abruptly. This observation is all the more important because it is known that these young adults occupy a significant position in the particular age structure of mortality in the countries of the former USSR, where violence and alcoholism make a high impact on mortality of death among young adults. Yet, although this particular phenomenon clearly exists in Ukraine,

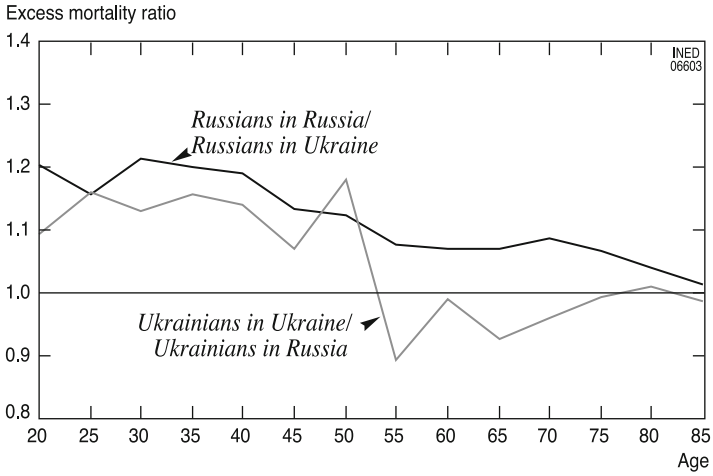

Fig. 6.2 Age-specific mortality rate ratios: Russians living in Russia compared to Russians living in Ukraine, Ukrainians living in Ukraine compared to Ukrainians living in Russia

here we see that it cannot be significantly related to the presence of a large minority of Russians, since it is precisely in these age groups in Ukraine that excess mortality of Russians over Ukrainians is almost negligible. It is clearly apparent that, among people living in Ukraine, the behaviour of Russians in regard to these harmful practices is hardly any different from that of Ukrainians. In fact, although the excess mortality of Russians slightly diminishes the overall difference in life expectancy between Ukraine and Russia, this is almost exclusively because of the over-50 age groups, where diseases of the circulatory system predominate. And obviously, the phenomenon cannot be other than modest in scale.

Thus, ethnicity (Russian or Ukrainian) is not, in Ukraine, a highly distinguishing factor in the area of mortality. In order to ascertain whether living outside one's country of ethnicity has any impact on mortality, we juxtaposed age-specific excess mortality of Russians living in Russia compared to Russians living in Ukraine and of Ukrainians living in Ukraine compared to Ukrainians living in Russia (Fig. 6.2).

In both cases, it is clearly apparent that, for each ethnicity, there is an advantage in living outside one's own country, at least for young adults. For Russians, it is easy to understand why there is a certain advantage to living in Ukraine rather than in Russia: life expectancy is higher in Ukraine. On the other hand, this explanation does not hold good for Ukrainians, as they derive an advantage from living in Russia; this may be seen in the fact that the observed difference in life expectancy is smaller for Ukrainians than for Russians in the younger age groups but larger in the older age groups. However, the difference does exist in the younger age groups and so it requires another explanation. It is probably due to two factors. On the one hand, a large proportion of Ukrainians living in Russia and of Russians living in Ukraine are immigrants. Almost all studies on the subject show that migration selects individuals according to their state of health. Migrants are therefore, on average, in better health than the population they have left, and it is natural that their

mortality should be lower. But on the other hand, Ukrainians living in Russia, just like Russians living in Ukraine, have a different socio-economic status from the average status across their whole population of origin. In particular, they are more likely to live in urban areas and they have a higher standard of education.

According to the 1989 census, 87% of Russians living in Ukraine lived in urban areas, as against 73% of Russians in Russia. Similarly, 79% of Ukrainians living in Russia lived in urban areas, as against 61% of Ukrainians in Ukraine. In both Ukraine and Russia, life tables based on place of residence show that urban dwellers have higher life expectancy than those living in countryside. In 1989, this gap was 1.3 years in Russia and 1.7 years in Ukraine.

As far as education is concerned, the 1989 census shows that, although the proportions of men with higher education were more or less the same in Russia and Ukraine, they differed a great deal for both Russians and Ukrainians according to the country where they lived: 39% of Ukrainians living in Russia had higher education, as against 29% of Ukrainians who lived in Ukraine, and 38% of Russians living in Ukraine had higher education, as against 30% of Russians who lived in Russia. Consequently, if we look only at Ukrainians in Ukraine, the national average falls to 29%.[2] As with place of residence, there is significant variation in mortality according to standard of education. In 1989, the temporary life expectancy of men aged 20–69 who held a university degree or a full secondary-school diploma was 4 years higher than that of those who had a basic secondary or primary education (Shkolnikov et al. 1998). Nevertheless, as we have already seen (Fig. 6.1), even in Ukraine, Russians – despite being more highly educated and more likely to live in urban areas – have slightly higher mortality than Ukrainians.

However, this small excess mortality of Russians who live in Ukraine, as compared to Ukrainians, is not necessarily due to any specific feature of the Russian population. It probably bears very little relation to lifestyles or to eating habits; there is no proof of any major differences in these respects that could explain the gap between the two nationalities. On the other hand, we should note that two-thirds of the Russian male population live in the Donetsk-Dnieper region (as against only 40% of Ukrainian males), and that this region contains a concentration of mines, coal processing facilities, large chemical complexes and major iron and steel works. Pollution here is the highest in Ukraine, and this is the region with the lowest life expectancy in the country.

Reference

Shkolnikov, V. M., Leon, D., Adamets, S., Andreev, E., & Deev, A. (1998). Educational level and adult mortality in Russia: An analysis of routine data, 1979 to 1994. *Social Science and Medicine, 47*(3), 357–369.

[2]The situation in Russia is somewhat different, because of the low number of Ukrainians and the presence of other nationalities with very different socio-cultural profiles: for Russians living in Russia, the proportion is 31%, slightly above the national average.