

Uncertainty across the Contact Line: Armed conflict, COVID-19, and perceptions of fertility decline in Eastern Ukraine

Brienna Perelli-Harris,
University of Southampton

Yuliya Hilevych
University of Groningen

Uncertainty and Fertility

- Economic uncertainty is a key explanation for fertility decline across Europe, especially in areas with very low fertility.
- But how do macro-level events trickle down to influence individuals' fertility decisions?
- And what about other types of uncertainty (social, psychological)?

Research Questions

How do people talk about childbearing decisions, plans, and ideals?

What is the role of uncertainty?

How do the discussions differ across regions?

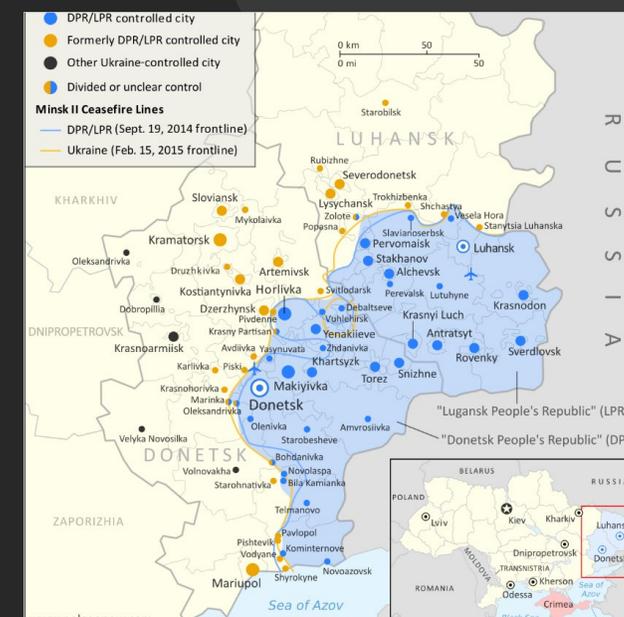
Uncertainty in Ukraine

- Ukraine is the only very low fertility country to have experienced armed conflict on this scale
- Russian-backed separatists took control of Donbass in 2014 (NGCA)
- 1.7 million Internally Displaced Persons (largest group of IDPs in Europe since WWII)
- TFR 1.3 in 2018



Method: Online focus groups

- Aim to capture social norms and perceptions
- Conducted in June-July 2021
- Moderated by Ukrainian survey agency
- Discussions lasted nearly 2 hours
- Questionnaire guideline developed for different groups:
 - Ukrainian Residents
 - IDPs
 - NGCA residents
- Men
- Women



- 4 in **Kharkiv** (2nd largest city in Ukraine, 1.5 mil)
 - similar experience with Covid-19 as in European countries (e.g. lockdowns, social distancing)
- 4 in **Rural Areas** near contact line
 - some discussion of Covid-19, but poverty greater problem
- 4 in **Mariupol**, a seaport on border of conflict
 - some discussion of Covid-19, but poverty greater problem
- 4 in Donetsk, **NGCA** (1 million people?)
 - Covid-19 hardly mentioned; problems with transport, documents, deterioration of services, and unemployment

Results: One Child Norm

- Ideal number of children was one, maybe two; three or four was usually out of the question
- Childlessness was usually not considered an option, but inevitably did occur, sometimes for health reasons

Economic Uncertainty and Fertility

- Salaries too low, costs too high, especially utility payments
- Struggle for basic necessities, often at the “survival” level
- Specific cost-benefit analysis: how many children can you afford?

Psychological Uncertainty

- Instability in the country affects childbearing decisions
- The impact of Covid-19 was overshadowed by war

Conspiracy Theories

- Someone is behind the war and virus, resulting in people not having children



*Quote: There will be a **pandemic**, there will be **war**, there will be some sort of **conflict** – [there is] no stability, people **do not have confidence** in tomorrow. Therefore, they **don't have children**... FGD-14 NGCA_men*

*Quote: For me, the situation in the country still raises **fears**. I don't know in general, what to expect in the next few years. And whether I do not need to have to flee somewhere again. But then again, if I have to **flee with children**, it would be **more difficult** to go somewhere in another country and settle in a new place, everything is not so simple. FGD-10 Kharkiv_locals_men*



Conclusions:

- Ukrainian FG participants revealed a strong desire for at least one child, but the inability to afford more than one (or maybe two)
- Postponement and ambivalence occurs for second and later births, similar to how Southern Europeans postpone first births
- Covid-19 was rarely directly mentioned as a reason for fertility decline; financial reasons and armed conflict were much more important
- The focus groups revealed how social and political events lead to general social anxiety about childbearing
 - The clearest link was when we asked about population decline in Ukraine (macro-level)
 - Some people expressed their own anxieties about childbearing in such an unstable society (meso)
 - Others discussed different types of uncertainty: economic and psychological, which impacted their own fertility decisions (micro)
- Nonetheless, some participants (even in NGCA) had or planned to have two or three children, possibly a minor “baby boom” as the conflict died down.
- But with renewed Russia-Ukraine tensions, what will happen next?