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)?

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

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?
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

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?

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

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

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