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France-Ukraine: Demographic Twins Separated by History

*France Meslé, Gilles Pison and Jacques Vallin**

France and Ukraine would appear to be very far apart in terms of economics and history. Yet their demographic profiles were very similar for more than fifty years. France Meslé, Gilles Pison and Jacques Vallin investigate the long-term trends at work and tell us how that chance resemblance has given way to profound differences.

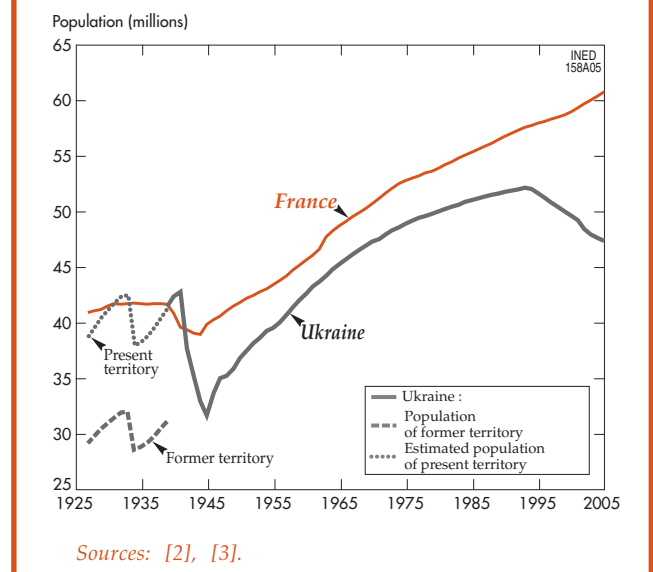
With approximately the same land areas, France (552,000 km²) and Ukraine (604,000 km²) also had about the same number of inhabitants (41.5 and 41.3 million respectively in 1939, Fig.1) (1) on the eve of World War II. Despite their very different political systems, the two countries had at the time not dissimilar economies, still largely dependent on agriculture. But today, France's population outnumbers Ukraine's by nearly 30% (60.6 million compared with 47.2 million as at 1 January 2005). How did this happen? Under both Soviet rule and Independence, achieved in 1991, Ukraine's population dynamics have been quite different from those of France. Are recent events in Ukraine likely to alter that pattern? Before forming an opinion, we need to look at the long-term fertility, mortality and migration trends.

◆ Different initial potentials

Although the French and Ukrainian populations were of roughly the same size before World War II, their development potential was radically different. Whereas France in the 1920s presented the age structure of a population aged by a long-term decline in fertility, Ukraine's population was still very young (Fig.2) and

so held a strong potential for growth, as compared with the near-equilibrium between births and deaths in France. The only feature common to the two age pyramids was the deep notch carved out in both countries by the First World War birth deficit. The Ukrainian population might have been expected to explode with the combined effect of longer life expectancy and fairly high fertility rates, and the French population to remain static as it had done for almost a century. This was where history intervened. Ukraine suffered two

Figure 1 - Comparative French and Ukrainian population trends since 1926

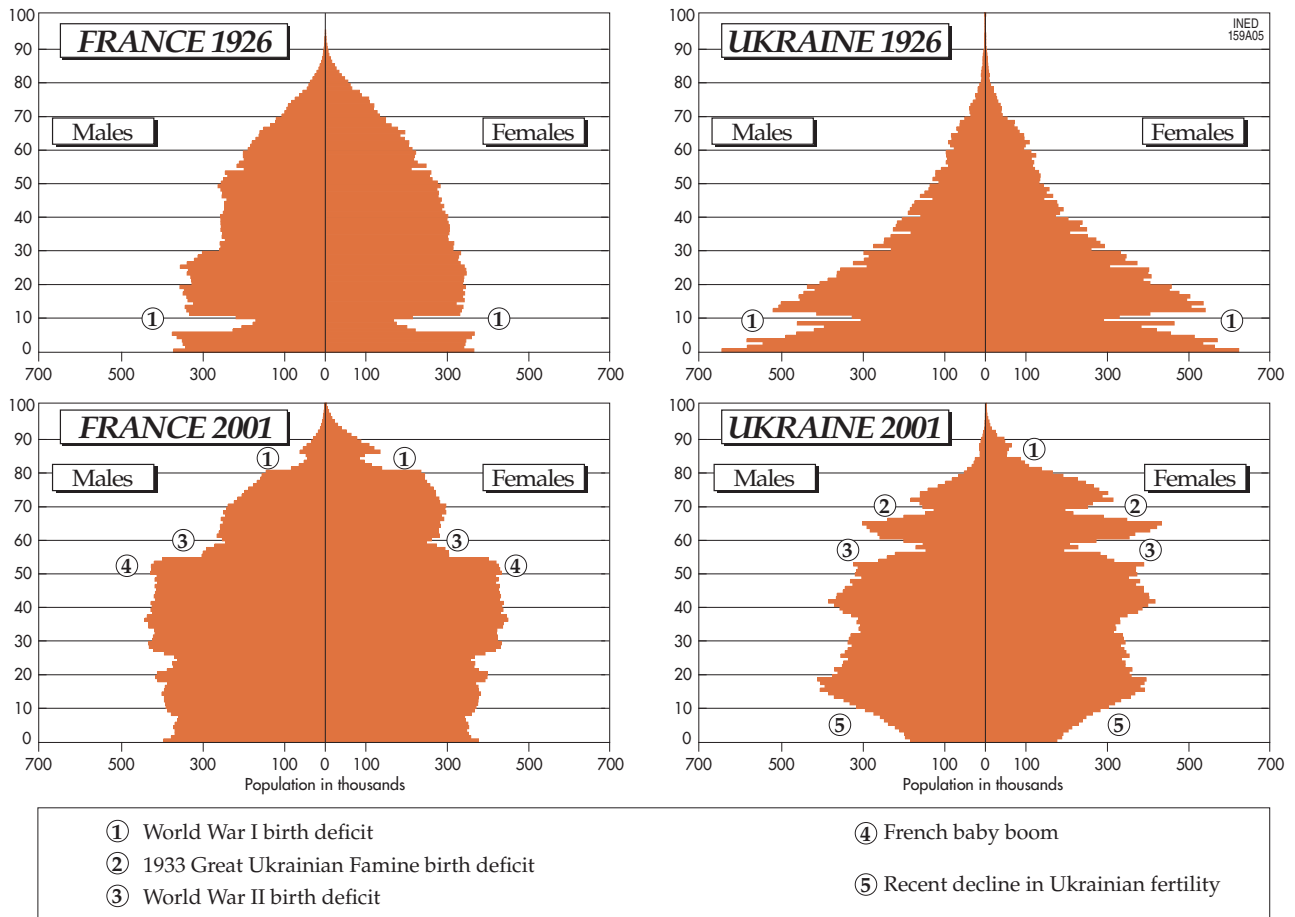


Sources: [2], [3].

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(1) Taking in all the people then living in the present-day territory of the Ukraine, which was greatly enlarged by the annexation of Polish, Czechoslovak and Romanian provinces after World War II.

Figure 2 - French and Ukrainian age pyramids in 1926 and 2001



Sources: [2], [3] and [4].

terrible calamities one after the other – the famine of 1933 and the slaughter of World War II – each of which erased millions of individuals from its population [1]. The 1933 famine cancelled out the 4 million person increase that had resulted from ten years of rapid population growth. The Second World War was, for its part, responsible for the loss of 11 million lives, reducing Ukraine's population from 42.6 to 31.5 million (Fig.1). Meanwhile, France's population, which had remained constant at 41 million until 1939, suffered losses of "only" 2 million during World War II. Following the War, while France experienced an unexpected baby boom, Ukraine recovered a substantial part of its comparative deficit. This had reached 8.2 million by 1945, but by 1962 it was down to only 2.9 million. After that, the two trajectories moved apart again, sharply accentuating their divergence in the mid-1990s when the Ukrainian population began to decline rapidly (Fig.1).

After these developments, the two countries' age pyramids become markedly different once again, but in almost reverse fashion: the Ukrainian one violently contracting at the base, the French pediment still remaining relatively broad. Near the top, Ukraine's losses from the famine and the War remain clearly vis-

ible, while France displays the swelling of the baby boom.

◆ Life expectancy convergence and divergence

What is striking in the long-term picture of Ukrainian life expectancy is the devastating impact of the calamities of the 1930s and 1940s (Fig.3). In 1933, the famine which had occasioned unparalleled excess mortality of 2.2 million (2), cut the period life expectancy to a low of under 10 years [2]. The corresponding plunge during World War II was a little less steep, down to a minimum of 18 years in 1944, but the cumulative outcome of war, German oppression and Stalinist purges over several years was excess mortality of 7.4 million over the period 1941-1948

From a strict population dynamics viewpoint, however, it is probably more important to look elsewhere. From the 1920s to the 1960s, leaving the exceptional catastrophes out of account, life expectancy in

(2) 2.6 million deaths in 1933 instead of the normal 433,000 to be expected from previous trends.

Figure 3 - Life expectancy at birth in France and Ukraine (mean of both sexes combined) since 1926



Sources: [2], [3] and [4].

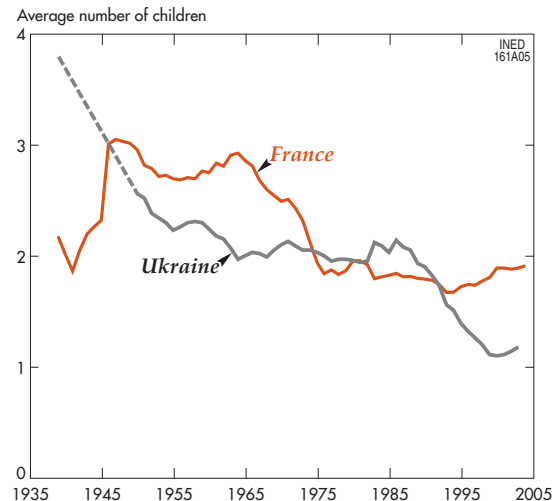
Ukraine caught up quickly with that of France. In 1930, it was 44.7 years (both genders combined) in Ukraine compared with 56.8 years in France. By 1964, it was exactly the same in both countries: 71.3 years. Since then, France's life expectancy has continued its uninterrupted rise, whereas that of Ukraine has fallen. In 2004, the French figure was 80 years as against 68 years in Ukraine. So the gap today is 12 years, as wide as it had been in the late 1920s

Under Communist rule, Ukraine, like the other Eastern bloc countries, succeeded in catching up with the West in the battle against infectious diseases. More particularly, infant mortality rates plummeted, leading to longer life expectancy. But Soviet-governed Ukraine did no better than its neighbours in matching the West's decisive progress against cardiovascular diseases. It also failed, like Russia, to stem the upsurge in man-made diseases (alcoholism, accidents, suicides, murders, etc.) [5].

◆ Dissimilar fertility trend

While in France the post-war years saw a vigorous baby boom, fertility in Ukraine rapidly declined. In France, the total fertility rate rose from 2.2 children per woman in 1939 to 3.0 in 1946. In Ukraine, by contrast, it fell from 3.8 in 1939 to 2.5 in 1950 (Fig.4). Afterwards, fertility in France remained fairly steady until the mid-1960s – it even rose further during the 1960s as age at marriage decreased. Fertility rates then dipped, first because of a simple calendar effect, and later due to a more deep-seated behavioural change which blended a real decline in fertility with a rise in age at childbearing. Since the mid-1970s, however, French fertility has remained relatively stable at around 1.8 children per

Figure 4 - Average number of children per woman in France and Ukraine since 1939



Source: [3], [6], www.ined.fr

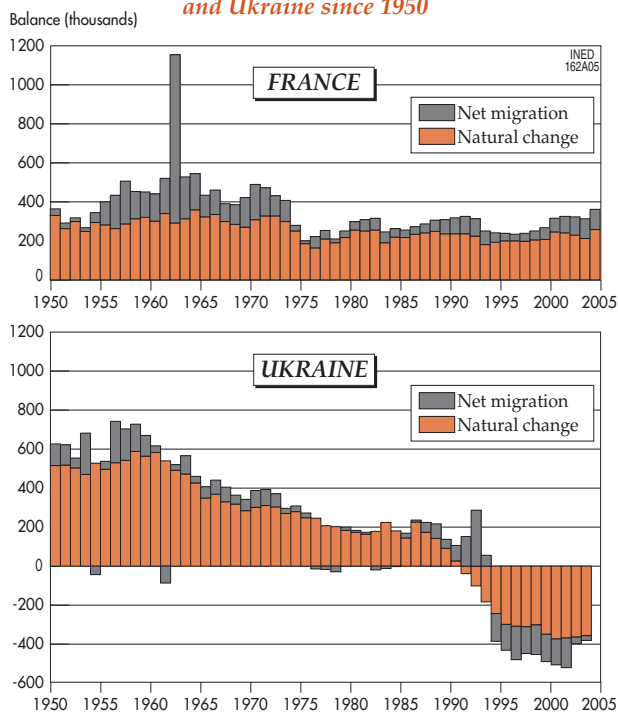
woman. Fertility in Ukraine has followed a very different path. From the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, it stayed reasonably steady at 2 children per woman but, in the 1990s, it suddenly slumped to 1.1 child per woman, one of the lowest rates in Europe. True, the French and Ukrainian rates at the turn of the 1980s stood at roughly the same level. But the reason lay in two very different fertility patterns: the marked downturn in the average age at childbearing of Ukrainian women equated momentarily with the contrasting rise in that of Frenchwomen [7].

◆ Reversed migration patterns in Ukraine

In Ukraine, as in France, migration is a much lesser factor than the natural balance between births and deaths (Fig.5). In the long run, it nevertheless makes an appreciable contribution to total population change.

Until the mid-1970s, the net migration balance in Ukraine was positive. Ukraine in those days was one of the more agreeable places in the USSR and it attracted several tens of thousands of immigrants a year from the other Soviet republics. This ingredient of Ukraine's population growth gradually dwindled, and trickled to nothing at the end of the Brezhnev era. In the late 1980s, immigration started to rise again and surged exceptionally just after Independence. The return of Ukrainians from other ex-Soviet republics greatly outnumbered departures, mostly of Russians. The migration surplus in 1992 amounted to nearly 300,000. But this did not last long and soon gave way to an unprecedented net exodus, primarily in the direction of Western Europe and North America. From 1994 to 2001, Ukraine lost 150,000 inhabitants each year to emigration.

Figure 5 - Natural and migration balances for France and Ukraine since 1950



Sources: [3], [6].

Note: 1962 includes, for France, Algerian repatriates.

France, on the other hand, has always had a positive migration balance, barely countered by a closed-border policy in the mid-1970s. The surplus was highest during the post-war period of strong economic growth from 1955 to 1974. It was during this time also that the French colonists were repatriated from Algeria, producing an exceptional immigration spike.

Since World War II, the two countries have in all experienced very different sets of demographic forces. At the start, Ukrainian population growth was distinctly livelier than that of France, despite the latter's baby boom and massive immigration, owing to the growth potential contained in its still young age pyramid. As the 1970s and 1980s wore on, however, this initial potential faded and the two countries' populations grew at much the same rates, with France gradually pulling ahead. Then suddenly, after Independence, the Ukrainian population fell into a decline caused by heavy migration outflows combined with a huge natural deficit (in turn due to very low fertility and high mortality).

◆ Towards a rebound?

The end of the Soviet era thus seems to have corresponded in Ukraine with a demographic implosion characterized by a decrease in population and a deformation of its age structure. The phenomenon is not confined to Ukraine – it has occurred in Russia also, for

example. Other Central and East European countries have not been affected to the same degree. For some twelve years now, Ukraine has been the theatre of very low fertility, high mortality and an exceptional migration deficit. Nearly all the former Communist countries have experienced a drop in fertility of like magnitude, but most of them have, more or less recently, found their way back to increased life expectancy, which they had lost in the mid-1960s. As to migration, only the Baltic countries suffered a comparable outflow, although this has apparently been largely staunch since the mid-1990s [7].

Each element in this serious crisis could nevertheless reverse itself in the coming years. The reason for the low fertility is that younger women are having very few children while the older ones have completed their families. What we do not know is whether today's young women will one day bear the children they have not produced over the last few years. As regards mortality, Ukraine, Russia and Belarus are the only countries of the former European Communist bloc not to have righted their situation. On the contrary, there has been a drastic deterioration in these countries since their transition to a market economy and its extremely harsh social and economic consequences. It may be hoped that Ukraine, in the wake of the Orange Revolution, will embark on the reforms, both of structures and mentalities, that have enabled the other Central and East European countries to make headway in restoring life expectancy. While it is difficult to credit recent figures indicating a sharp fall-off in migration losses, that objective could surely be achieved by a Ukraine determined to succeed in turning its economy around before applying for European Union membership.

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