

HOW MANY JEWS MAY BE CAUGHT UP IN THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE?

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Determining precisely how many Jews live in former Communist countries such as Ukraine and Russia is notoriously challenging. Jewish life was severely hampered during the Soviet era, making it extremely difficult to pass one's Jewish identity onto the next generation, so there are remarkably different Jewish population counts today depending on how one defines who is, and is not, Jewish.

The latest estimates (2020) for the size of 'core' Jewish population – i.e. those who would choose to self-identify as Jewish in a survey or census – number 45,000 for Ukraine, or about one in every one thousand people. That ratio is almost identical across the border in Russia, although the core Jewish population is larger there, standing at about 155,000.

But if one uses an expanded definition – for example, the number of people with Jewish parents – the figures effectively double to 90,000 in Ukraine and 320,000 in Russia. Furthermore, extending the counts to include non-Jewish family members living with self-identifying Jews – an important measure in these two contexts as intermarriage is very common and Jewish agencies supporting Jews in both countries often extend that support to their family members irrespective of whether or not they are Jewish – the numbers rise again, to 140,000 in Ukraine and 460,000 in Russia.

Still larger counts can be estimated if one uses the Israeli Law of Return definition – the legislation determining who is entitled to Israeli citizenship if required, which may be particularly pertinent if Jews in either country see the current conflict as a reason to activate this right at this time. The right to claim Israeli citizenship applies to anybody who descends from at least one Jewish grandparent, and it extends to the immediate families of those individuals as well. Using this as the inclusion criterion generates counts of 200,000 in Ukraine (and 600,000 in Russia).

Thus today, the numbers of Jews living in the two countries together, who may be affected in various ways by the current conflict, range from anywhere between about 200,000 to 800,000.

Table 1. Jewish population sizes from Russia and Ukraine in 2020, based on different definitions

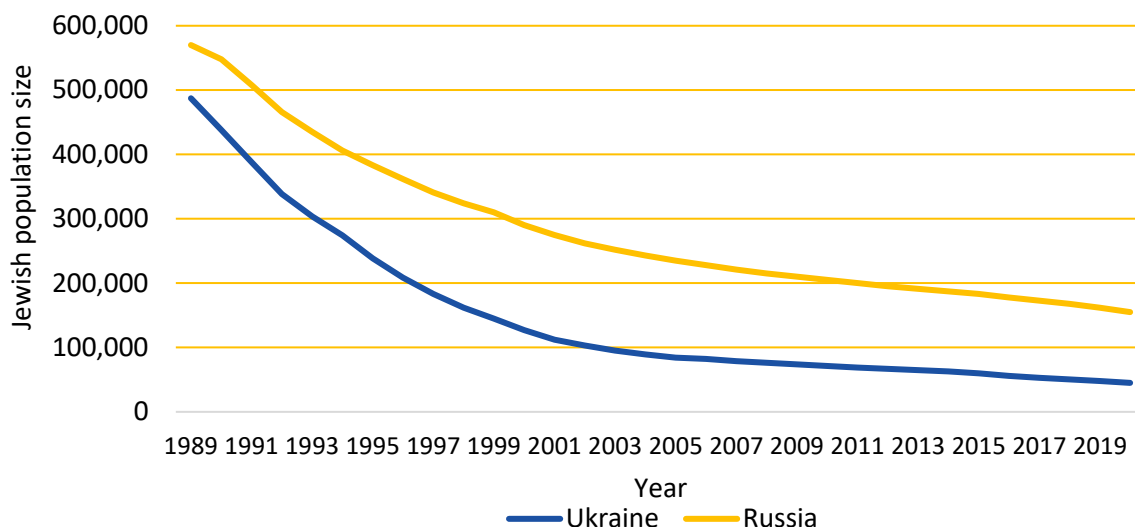
Country	Core Jewish population	Population with Jewish parents	Enlarged Jewish population	Law of Return Jewish population
Russia	155,000	320,000	460,000	600,000
Ukraine	45,000	90,000	140,000	200,000

Source: DellaPergola and Staetsky (2020). *Jews in Europe at the turn of the Millennium: Population trends and estimates* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research).

ABOUT UKRAINIAN JEWS

The largest Jewish population centres in Ukraine today are **Kyiv, Dnipro, Kharkiv, Odesa** and **Donetsk**. The country's Jewish population has declined substantially over the past thirty years, since the collapse of Communism. The core Jewish population count for Ukraine in 1989, at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, was 487,300, but the opening up of the Former Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War prompted hundreds of thousands of Jews to emigrate from former USSR countries, particularly to Israel but also to the United States and Germany. This vast wave of Jewish migration has had a pretty devastating effect on the Ukrainian Jewish population, which has **declined by 91% in just 30 years**. That decline has been further exacerbated by the age distributions of the remaining Jewish population— recent data demonstrate that **about 70% of Jews in Ukraine today are aged 45 or above**, and only about 5% are children aged 0-14.

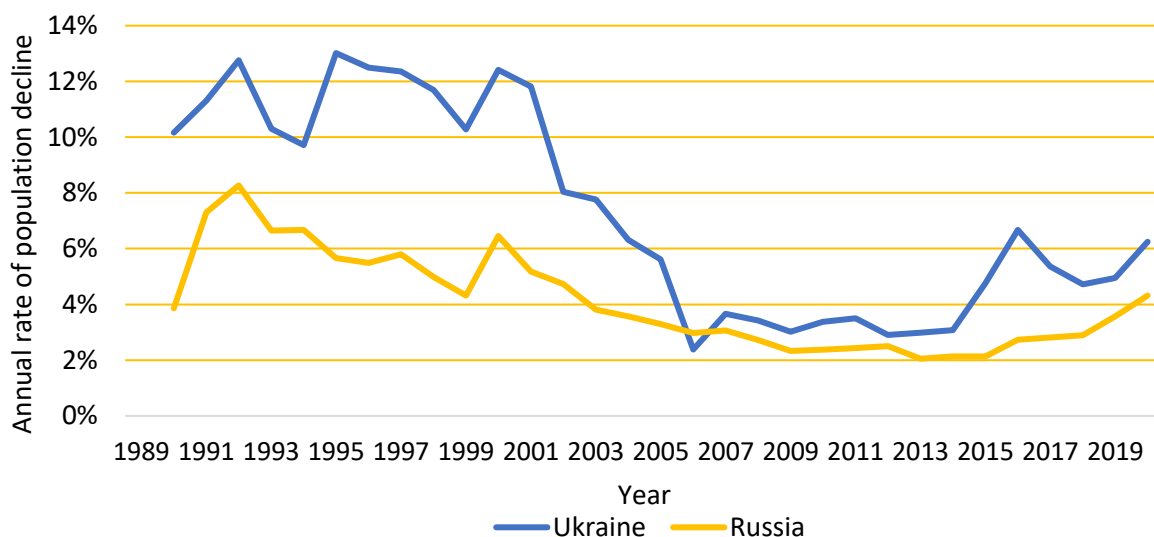
Figure 1. Jewish population decline in Ukraine and Russia, 1989-2020



Data: Mark Tolts, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. See: JPR European Jewish Research Archive: <https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-1334>.

The story of how Jews have reacted to developments in both countries can also be seen by looking at the proportions of Jews from within both Jewish populations who emigrated each year. Figure 2 demonstrates that the proportions have consistently been higher in Ukraine than in Russia, but the overall trajectories are strikingly similar – highest in the 1990s, followed by significant drop-offs in migration rates in the 2000s followed by stabilisation for a few years. But **there is a notable spike in the mid-2010s in Ukraine, following the ‘Maidan’ Revolution in 2014**, which saw about 100 Ukrainian civilians killed in the unrest. The Ukrainian Jewish population has been declining by about 5% per annum for the past five or six years, and there is no particular reason to think this will not continue given the trend. Indeed, **given the current conflict, it is likely that the Jewish emigration rate will increase.**

Figure 2. Annual rate of Jewish population decline in Russia and Ukraine, 1989-2020



Data: Mark Tolts, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. See: JPR European Jewish Research Archive: <https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-1334>.