

How many Jews may be caught up in the conflict in Ukraine?

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March 2022



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Research briefing

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As conflict rages in Ukraine, we take a look at the latest Jewish population figures in Ukraine and Russia to help understand the many different numbers that are often quoted by community leaders and journalists. Ascertaining how many Jews live in both countries is complex – in this short research briefing, we explain why.

/ Different definitions generate different answers

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 on to 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 the **'core' Jewish population** – i.e. those who 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.

However, if one uses an expanded definition, applying the core Jewish population but adding to it others who have **at least one Jewish parent** – the figures effectively double to 90,000 in Ukraine and 320,000 in Russia. This is an important way of measuring the size of the Jewish populations – with religious aspects of Judaism strongly suppressed in the Soviet Union and Yiddish culture all but destroyed after the Second World War, Soviet Jews could only really affirm their Jewishness on the grounds of being part of a minority group with common ancestry. The fact that the numbers increase so much today simply by applying this definition is an indicator of how much Jewish life was impacted by the restrictions imposed on Jews by the Soviet authorities.

A third estimate can be made if one extends the counts to include non-Jewish family members living with self-identifying Jews. Again, this is another 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. Applying this criterion, known technically as the **'enlarged Jewish population,'** 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

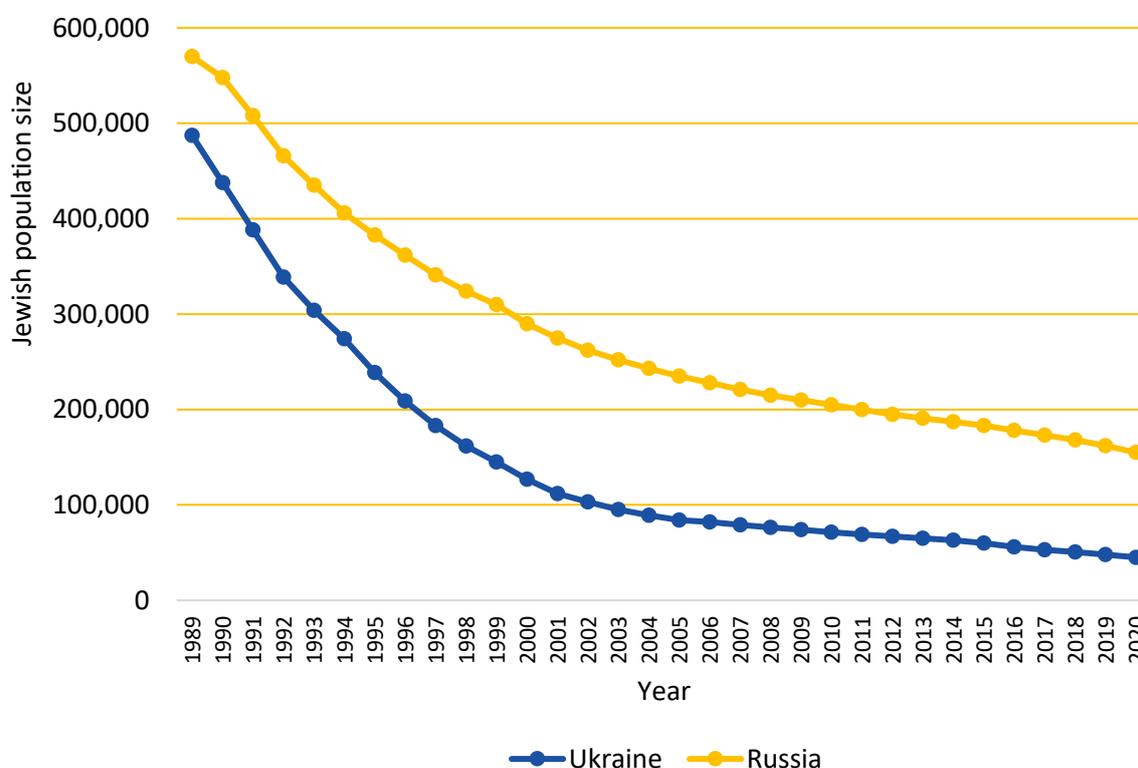
Country	Core Jewish population	Population with Jewish parents	Enlarged Jewish population	Law of Return Jewish population
Russia	155,000	320,000	460,000	600,000
Ukraine	45,000	90,000	140,000	200,000

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

/ Jewish population trends in Ukraine

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 dramatically changed the size of the Ukrainian Jewish population, which is estimated to have **declined by 91% in just thirty years**. That decline has been further exacerbated by natural change – recent data on the age composition of the remaining Jewish population demonstrate that **about 70% of Jews in Ukraine today are aged 45 or above, and only about 5% are children aged 0-14**.

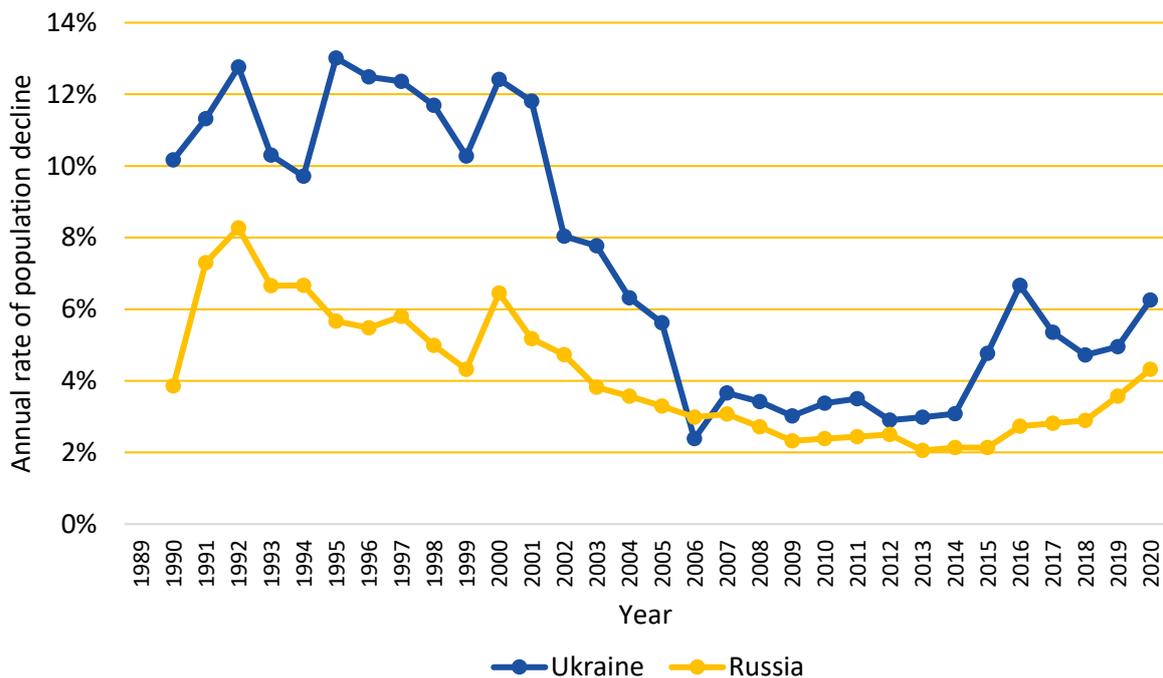
Figure 1. Jewish population decline in Ukraine and Russia, 1989-2020 ('core' Jewish population counts)



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 was **a notable spike in the mid-2010s** in Ukraine, following the ‘Maidan’ Uprising in 2014, which saw about 100 Ukrainian civilians killed in the initial unrest. The Ukrainian Jewish population has been **declining by about 5% per annum for the past few years**, and there is no reason to think this will not continue given the prevailing trend. Indeed, when one factors in the current conflict, it is likely that **an expected increase in migration will further drive the rate of decline**.

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



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

/ About the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) is a London-based research organisation, consultancy and think-tank. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and across Europe by conducting research and informing policy development in dialogue with those best placed to positively influence Jewish life. Web: www.jpr.org.uk.

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