

## Aging Populations Signal a Demographic Sea Change

*By Kevin Kinsella and Victoria Velkoff*

The graying of the population has been well-publicized in the industrialized nations of Western Europe and North America. There are more wrinkles, more retired residents, and more families seeking home care or nursing facilities for elderly relatives. Not as well appreciated is the fact that most countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are also well into the process of demographic aging. This region is home to 7 percent of the world's population, but accounts for 12 percent of the world's elderly (defined here as persons age 65 and over).

In the West, there has been increasingly acrimonious debate over the distribution of social resources as the relative numbers of older and younger persons change. The shifting balance between younger and older persons affects the implicit social contract, and may strain (or conceivably strengthen) intergenerational solidarity. Social security systems that evolved under one set of demographic circumstances may require substantial restructuring in order to remain solvent and functional for successive generations. The challenge for nations of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union is to tackle these issues in the context of rapid socioeconomic change.

There is enormous variation in the level and pace of aging among the nations of the NIS and CEE. Latvia currently is the "oldest" of all AIHA partnership countries, with 15 percent of its population age 65 or older. At the other end of the spectrum lies Turkmenistan, with just over 4 percent of all persons among the ranks of the elderly. Most other nations of the region in Figure 1 have at least one-tenth of their populations in the 65-and-over category. These levels are somewhat lower than typically seen in Western Europe, where Italy stands as the world's "oldest" major country with 18 percent of its populace aged 65 and over. With the exception of rapidly-aging Japan, however, percentages of elderly persons in Eastern Europe are frequently higher than in non-European industrialized nations, such as the United States, Canada and Australia.

During the next three decades, the percentage of elderly persons is projected to rise across the NIS and CEE. By 2025, more than one-fifth of the entire populations of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Latvia will be aged 65 or over. Most of the increase in the percentage of elderly is expected to occur after the year 2010, as the relatively large numbers of persons born after World War II begin to reach age 65. Thus, countries throughout the region have a window of opportunity to plan for the demographic aging of their population.

The challenge faced by these countries is illustrated more clearly by numbers than by percentages. Even though the percentage of elderly residents may be increasing rather slowly in the short term, growth in absolute numbers is a more important barometer for those concerned with the delivery of health care and other services. The region's current total of 48 million elderly persons is projected to expand to nearly 70 million by the year 2025. Russia alone will experience an increase of 7 million elderly during this period, even as its total population declines due to a below-replacement birth rate.

Another phenomenon is the emergence of the "oldest old," or those age 80 and over. Currently, this group constitutes 16 percent of all elderly in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. By the year 2025, more than one out of every five people ages 65 and over is likely to be in the oldest old category. Although the oldest old represent a small proportion of all persons, this group typically is the fastest growing segment of the population. In the Czech Republic, for example, projections suggest that there will be a slight decline in total population during the period 1998-2025. The 65-and-over population, however, will increase more than 50 percent, while numbers of the oldest old will jump by nearly 125 percent (Figure 2).

Growth of the oldest old is expected to outpace growth of the elderly as a whole over the next three decades in all CEE and NIS nations except Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union as a whole, the absolute number of this group in 1998 (7.7 million) is expected to nearly double by the year 2025. The numerical growth and increasing socioeconomic diversity of the oldest old challenge social planners to seek further knowledge about this group, since the oldest old consume disproportionate amounts of health care and long-term care services.

Past and current trends in the birth rate often have the greatest impact on the speed of population aging. Countries with higher birth rates generally have high proportions of their populations under age 20. Even if numbers of elderly are increasing over time in such countries, the elderly share of the total population remains small. In countries with low or steadily decreasing birth rates, the elderly come to constitute a growing proportion of total population.

Countries with traditionally Islamic populations have significantly higher fertility than other countries of the region. The total fertility rate in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, for example, is still around 3.5 births per woman, while in Estonia, Hungary, and several other countries, the total fertility rate has been well below the natural replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman for many years. In the absence of significant immigration, the persistence of low fertility becomes synonymous with population aging.

Although the effect of fertility decline is usually the driving force behind changing population age structures, changes in mortality (mostly at older ages) assume greater weight in countries that already have high proportions of elderly citizens. While Western industrialized countries generally have enjoyed reductions in adult mortality rates in recent years, there has been a disturbing downward trend in life expectancy for both men and women in much of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Current life expectancies range from 58 to 71 years for males and 65 to 77 years for females, with most national levels considerably lower than those in Western Europe and the United States. The decline in life expectancy in most countries began before the transitions to market economies, but the pace of decline quickened in the 1990s. Sustained decreases in life expectancy, particularly for males, in much of the region indicate that the health status of these populations is deteriorating. In Russia, for example, male life expectancy at birth plummeted from 65 years in 1988 to 58 years in 1995, while female life expectancy fell from 74 to 72 years.

The decrease in overall life expectancy is largely due to an increase in adult mortality between the ages of 30 and 50, although in countries of Central Asia, the increase in mortality has been concentrated at younger ages, according to a 1996 World Bank report. Elevated death rates due to cardiovascular diseases and accidents are primarily responsible for the increases in adult mortality in most countries in the region. Deaths from cardiovascular diseases are usually attributed to elements of an unhealthy lifestyle such as poor diet, lack of exercise, and high rates of smoking, while many deaths from accidents are related to high alcohol consumption.

One consequence of this is the growing gap between the numbers of men and women. In most industrialized nations, the differences in life expectancy between males and females range from 6 to 8 years. Many AIHA-partnership countries have higher differentials (Figure 3), and Russia currently has the largest gender gap in life expectancy--13 years--in the world.

Older women also outnumber older men as a result of deaths of men during World War II. The sex ratio (number of men per 100 women) for those ages 65 and older is 50 or less in Belarus, Estonia, Kazakstan, Latvia, Russia, and Ukraine. At the oldest ages, the gender disparity is even more extreme. In Russia, there are only 24 men for every 100 women ages 80 and older.

Imbalances in gender composition have important implications for older women. Older women are much more likely than older men to be widowed and to live on their own. They also are much more likely to live in poverty. In Hungary in 1995, the poverty rate for older women was more than twice that for older men. Likewise in Ukraine, the poverty rate for older women is much higher than for older men or among younger age groups. A third of Ukrainian women aged 75 and older were living in poverty in 1995, according to the World Bank.

On the eve of the 1999 United Nations Year of the Older Person, it is appropriate to highlight the aging process in all countries, but particularly in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union where issues associated with aging populations are not yet at the forefront of policy. In the coming years, policy makers will need to make better use of information on population and health changes to address the growing social concerns that stem from a sustained increase in numbers of elderly persons throughout the region.

*Kevin Kinsella is chief of the Aging Studies Branch at the International Programs Center of the US Bureau of the Census. Victoria Velkoff coordinates women in development issues at the Census Bureau. They are the authors of the 1993 Census Bureau book, **Aging in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union.***