

Possible Explanations of the Divergence in Recent Mortality Trends in Belarus, Lithuania, and Russia

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ABSTRACT

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus, Lithuania, and Russia were quite comparable in terms of their socioeconomic development. Despite some differences in overall mortality levels, the three former Soviet republics were also very close to each other in terms of directions of mortality trends and age- and cause-specific mortality patterns. After 1991, all three countries experienced substantial political and social transformations, and the challenges associated with the transition from a socialist to a market economy system. The sudden changes brought numerous problems, such as rapid growth in unemployment, falling standards of living, and growing social and income inequalities. These factors contributed to the significant deterioration of the health situation in all countries, but the size and the nature of the mortality crisis was different in Belarus than it was in Lithuania and Russia. The marked similarities in socioeconomic and mortality trends in the countries up to 1991 contrast with their notable divergence during the subsequent years. The nature and success of market reforms seems to be the most plausible explanation for these differences. Russia and Lithuania have chosen more radical forms of economic and political transformation, which have led to massive privatization campaigns. The reforms were more sustainable and systematic in Lithuania than in Russia. By contrast, Belarus has chosen a gradual and slow transition path. Recent mortality trends in Belarus are explored in detail here, and are contrasted with those observed in Lithuania and Russia. Including a cause-of-death analysis sheds more light on the plausible determinants of the variations in mortality levels between the countries.

KEYWORDS

Belarus, Lithuania, and Russia; mortality trends; causes of death; market reforms; socioeconomic changes