

# War-displaced Ukrainian citizens in Russia

Lidia Kuzemska

**Without support from international actors, displaced Ukrainians in Russia are in a precarious situation reliant on volunteer help and on State aid that is conditional upon the acquisition of Russian citizenship.**

While international attention is – rightly – focused on the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia, less is known about the overall situation and needs of other war-displaced Ukrainian nationals in Russia. They remain largely beyond the reach of the international protection regime and without support from the Ukrainian State since diplomatic

ties between the two countries were cut in February 2022. Russia has subsequently closed all humanitarian corridors between the occupied territories and government-controlled territory of Ukraine. Most civilians fleeing war had little choice about their route of escape from the active war zone and many were deported by the Russian authorities.<sup>1</sup> All had

to undergo ‘filtration’: a mandatory screening process that involves checking documents, taking fingerprints and photos, checking phones, body searches, questioning, (often arbitrary) detention, and occasionally torture.<sup>2</sup>

Official information about the number of war-displaced Ukrainians in Russia and their needs is scarce. Russian data on population movement and socio-demographic changes is considered unreliable; it is also increasingly hidden from public scrutiny. The activity of major humanitarian organisations, including UNHCR, is limited by the Russian government to sporadic monitoring visits to State-run Temporary Accommodation Points (TAPs), always accompanied by Russian officials.

The last number provided by UNHCR (through its Ukraine Data Portal) for total border crossings from Ukraine to Russia was 2.85 million; this was on 3rd October 2022 – two days before Russia declared that the occupied regions were part of the Russian Federation and all residents were declared Russian citizens. Since then, there have been no UNHCR updates on the number of border crossings, perhaps because Russia now considers displaced Ukrainians to be Russian citizens moving within Russian territory. In June 2023, UNHCR finally updated its portal stating that 1.27 million ‘refugees from Ukraine’ were recorded in Russia. However, this number does not correspond with the total number of Ukrainians who received any kind of documented status in 2022.

### Legal status options

Ukrainian nationals can enter and remain in Russia without registering for a legal status for up to three months. However, they will not be able to access any State support or services if they do not regularise their stay through one of the following statuses.

Firstly, but almost non-existent in reality, is **refugee status**. Only five Ukrainian nationals received it in 2022. In total, 26 Ukrainians have received refugee status since 2014. The application process for it is lengthy, and strongly discouraged by Russian officials.

Secondly, displaced Ukrainians can apply for **temporary asylum status**. After receiving it, a person can stay in Russia for one year

(with the possibility of extension), can apply for a one-off cash allowance of RUB10,000 (approximately US\$123), and can work or study, but cannot leave Russian territory without losing this status. In total 97,591 Ukrainian nationals received temporary asylum in Russia during 2022, but only 65,374 held it by the end of the year. Some had left the country; others had applied for other statuses or were naturalised.<sup>3</sup>

The third option for displaced Ukrainians is to apply for **temporary or permanent residency**. This is not very popular due to lengthy procedures with few immediate cash and service benefits and many restrictions on travel and work.

Finally, the fourth option – most favoured by Russian officials – is **naturalisation**. Since 2019, Russia eased its naturalisation requirements for Ukrainian nationals, especially for those coming from the occupied Donbas region. In May to July 2022, after the occupation of the south-eastern Ukrainian territories, the naturalisation procedure for Ukrainian nationals was further simplified and became de facto mandatory in the occupied territories. For the war-displaced Ukrainians already on Russian territory, naturalisation is often the only way to access services – such as full State medical insurance, free medications, social benefits and pensions. Similarly, access to legal employment, education, mortgages and bank loans is facilitated for citizens with permanent residency but difficult to access by foreigners with temporary residency.

Overall, 300,000 Ukrainian nationals received Russian citizenship in 2022. Many refuse to apply for naturalisation as they are afraid of repercussions back in Ukraine, where they left family members and property, and where they expect to return. Others are afraid of being drafted into the Russian army or not being allowed to leave Russian territory.

### Constraints and assistance

Ukrainians applying for any status in Russia need to undergo mandatory fingerprinting and medical examinations and provide officially certified translations of relevant documents from Ukrainian into Russian. However, displaced Ukrainians’ documents

might have been destroyed (while living in a war zone), lost during the journey, or taken away by Russian authorities during the ‘filtration’ procedure. Furthermore, Ukrainian bank cards and SIM cards do not work in Russia, and displaced Ukrainians are not allowed to exchange Ukrainian cash. People with HIV-AIDS, tuberculosis or hepatitis are unlikely to pass the medical examination and access the health-care services they need. Vulnerable groups of people – such as those with disabilities, elderly persons, orphaned children and all those under State care – who were ‘evacuated’ by the Russian authorities have little say in where they will be evacuated to and which status they will receive.

Once in Russia, displaced Ukrainians’ options depend on their social ties, available resources, and socio-demographic characteristics. Those who have relatives or friends in Russia, or have sufficient financial means, can try to evade the standard pathway of being mandatorily distributed across the Russian regions and settled into one of the State-run accommodation options (TAPs) – hostels, summer camps, sanatoria or sports facilities. TAPs provide free accommodation and meals but are usually located in remote areas far from employment opportunities, education and health-care facilities. Reportedly, by the end of 2022, there were 42,000 persons, including 12,000 children, residing in 807 TAPs across 58 regions in Russia.<sup>4</sup>

War-displaced Ukrainian citizens in Russia cannot rely on the international organisations that usually operate in situations of mass refugee influx, such as UNHCR or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Even though UNHCR does have an office in Russia, it does not (or rather is not allowed to) work directly with Ukrainians. Instead, UNHCR in Russia relies on cooperation with local Russian organisations such as *Grazhdanskoje sodejstvije* (Civic Assistance), the Russian Red Cross, *Zdorozje I zhyzn* (Health and Life Charitable Foundation) and *SILSILA* Foundation for the distribution of humanitarian aid.<sup>5</sup> According to monitoring visits undertaken by UNHCR’s Russian office, Ukrainians residing in TAPs have difficulty accessing the necessary documentation,

pensions, social benefits, and compensation for lost or destroyed property back in the occupied territories. Obviously, few feel able to voice objections while living under close State surveillance and being fully dependent on State aid.

Ukrainian citizens outside the government-run TAPs struggle to access any public services without first legalising their stay in Russia, which can take up to six months in the case of citizenship applications. Official employment and long-term renting require legal status too. Kindergarten and school places for war-displaced children are only available if they officially register as residing in the same district – which is not always possible due to landlords’ unwillingness to register temporary residents who often have no income. While waiting for their documentation, many take precarious informal jobs; displaced Ukrainians often earn just enough to cover necessities but cannot afford medical care or clothes. NGOs report that it takes months to receive the one-off cash support of RUB10,000 promised by the Russian government. Meanwhile people rely on donations from volunteers.

The Russian Red Cross and the Russian Orthodox Church – operating in close cooperation and with financial support from the state authorities across Russia, including on forced relocations<sup>6</sup> – are major actors in providing basic aid to the war-displaced both inside and outside the TAPs. Local volunteer groups and newly emerged NGOs also play a role in providing basic humanitarian aid, psychological support, and help with employment, accommodation and transit options for those who want to leave Russia. For instance, in Moscow, the *Mayak* Foundation uses the donations it receives to support 7,000 war-displaced Ukrainians through a system of local volunteers who guide families through the various services available to them at the foundation, aiming to help them become independent within six months.

Transnational networks of volunteers, such as *Rubikus*<sup>7</sup> and *Helping to Leave*<sup>8</sup>, organise travel for Ukrainians, including those with reduced mobility or travelling with pets, from the occupied territories or from Russia to the

EU or other countries (such as Georgia or Turkey). Technically Ukrainian nationals are allowed to leave Russia with any document confirming their identity and citizenship, but there are often artificial obstacles and delays, and those without identity documents, or with Russian citizenship, may not be allowed to leave. Some Ukrainians remain in Russia because of family networks, their knowledge of the language, their health situation, a desire to stay close to their home region and eventually return, the lack of finances for further travel, and general exhaustion from being on the move.

Numerous challenges remain for Ukrainians living in a country that caused their displacement. They must navigate State bureaucracies that primarily aim to naturalise them rather than provide comprehensive support for local integration or enable their eventual return home. It is not yet clear how the Ukrainian State will regulate the possible return and reintegration of its (de facto dual) citizens.

Considering the harsh authoritarian regime inside Russia, its withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Criminal Court investigation of the war crimes against Ukrainian civilians, including deportations, the international

community cannot rely on existing international instruments and practices to promote a rights-based approach to the displaced Ukrainians in Russia during the war. It can only keep the borders with Russia open for those who can leave its territory, providing access to protection, or facilitating a return to Ukraine.

**Lidia Kuzemska**

*Lidia.kuzemska@gmail.com @kuzemska2*

Fellow, Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin

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