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Update on Forced Displacement around Ukraine

Photo: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

Critical Questions by **Erol Yayboke**, **Anastasia Strouboulis**, and **Abigail Edwards**
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The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a regional forced displacement crisis. Over seven months since the start of the war, many Ukrainians are still outside their country. Some are still being forcibly displaced while others—especially those in eastern Ukraine—are being forcibly transferred to Russia. Some refugees have returned to Ukraine, though for what length of time remains to be seen. And with President Putin's "partial mobilization" decree, a whole new group of forcibly displaced and asylum-seeking people may be forced from home—this time from Russia itself.

Q1: How many Ukrainian refugees are there and where have they gone?

A1: As of September 30, 2022, 7,536,433 Ukrainian refugees have been registered outside of Ukraine. Poland and Germany have received the most refugees—over one million each. The Czech Republic has recorded the next highest number (438,926), followed by the United States, United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Italy, and Spain, each of which have received between 100,000 and 300,000 refugees. Smaller numbers have fled into Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Moldova, countries that are a part of the UN Regional Refugee Response Plan, along with Poland. Men between the ages of 18 and 60 have been barred from leaving the country since the beginning of the conflict; consequently, many of those who have fled Ukraine are women between the ages of 30 and 39 with children or elderly parents.

Q2: Why and how are Ukrainians going to Russia?

A2: Since the invasion, 2,772,010 Ukrainian refugees have been recorded crossing the border into Russia. Some report voluntarily moving through Russia as a means of eventually reaching the European Union. However, there are more troubling reports of forcible transfers of Ukrainians to Russia or Russian-occupied regions as Moscow tries to rid eastern Ukraine of people sympathetic to Kyiv. Long feared as a tactic of war Putin's Russia would be willing to deploy, more concrete allegations were made public during

people are from eastern Ukraine, specifically the Mariupol and Kharkiv regions near the Russian border. Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield went on to say that "there is mounting and credible evidence that those considered threatening to Russian control because of perceived pro-Ukrainian leanings are 'disappeared' or further detained."

A recent Human Rights Watch report provides such credible evidence, showing that Ukrainians are being rounded up by Russian authorities before being forced to go through an intense screening process referred to as "filtration," during which they are subjected to body searches, biometric data collection, interrogation about their political views, and at times, beatings. Those deemed to have connections to the Ukrainian military or nationalist groups are reportedly taken into detention centers in Russian-controlled territory. The rest are put onto buses to Russia—despite some Russian officers lying about the buses being destined for other parts of Ukraine. These victims of state-sponsored forced transfer—which constitutes war crimes and potentially crimes against humanity—have been sent as far as Khabarovsk and Vladivostok in the far eastern reaches of Russia.

Many Ukrainians who fled or were forcibly transferred into Russia have faced difficulties returning to Ukraine. For example, those traveling with undocumented family members (including newborns) or without accepted documentation (or only electronic documentation, commonly used and accepted in Ukraine) have been unable to leave Russia. Many of those who went through the filtration and forced transfer have had their identity documents confiscated or were forced to sign papers renouncing Ukraine, tactics which have made it more difficult for these people to leave Russia and return home.

Q3: How many people have returned to Ukraine?

A3: While there is no clear data documenting how many of the 7.5 million Ukrainian refugees have returned home permanently, as of September 20, 2022, there have been over 6 million cross-border movements back into the country. Border crossing points in Poland and Romania receive the majority of the traffic, with nearly 4.5 million crossings from Poland and nearly 1 million from Romania. The security situation remains volatile in Ukraine, so while some may be returning permanently, others are crossing the border to check on property, visit family members, or collect belongings and documents, and then return to their accommodations. These pendular movements can be expected to continue at least until the war ends and likely for some time afterwards.

In the longer term, many Ukrainian refugees say they are intent on return. A recent United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) survey of 4,300 refugees living across the European continent notes that while only 13 percent plan to return permanently to Ukraine in the next three months, 81 percent hope to return to Ukraine one day. Moreover, the majority of those surveyed plan to return with all their household members (76 percent) and to the same place where they were living before the war (79 percent). A July survey of 371 Ukrainians boarding trains back to Ukraine from Warsaw by the Norwegian Refugee Council revealed that the main motivations for return are family reunification and a desire to return home. With Ukrainian men between the ages of 18 and 60 still prohibited from leaving the country, the economic, psychological, and social impacts of family separation seem to be a powerful pull factor. Yet the current security situation in Ukraine is the key factor impacting decisions to return, with 86 percent of the UNHCR survey respondents stating they do not plan to return within the next three months due to safety and security concerns.

Q4: Do Ukrainian refugees have freedom of movement within the European Union?

A4: On March 4, the European Union put in place a Temporary Protection Directive (TDP) which mandated that all EU member states (with the exception of Denmark) must grant temporary protection to Ukrainians, any of their family members who were residing in Ukraine before the invasion, and stateless persons with permanent residence status in Ukraine. Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia—all a part of the UN Regional Refugee Response Plan—are also countries that have open borders with the European Union. Once in the European Union, the TDP grants Ukrainians access to residence, education, medical, housing, and labor market assistance for three years in any of the participating countries. However, many refugees have returned to Ukraine due to the fact that temporary EU protection only allowed them to travel freely within the Schengen Area for 90 days. After these initial 90 days, refugees must stay within one EU country. Whereas many Ukrainians continue to be separated from their families, some are fearful of getting stuck in a different country from their families and are instead choosing to return to Ukraine (despite security-related misgivings) rather than risk not being able to reunite with their families.

A5: While millions of Ukrainian refugees have crossed international borders in search of protection, nearly seven million people are currently forcibly displaced inside the country. The Ukrainian government initiated a process for registering IDPs from the current war in March 2022, escalating the use of the 2016 IDP registration system. In addition to expanding government staff managing the situation, as of April 2022, Ukrainians are able to register as IDPs, change their residences, and access social protection services digitally through Diia, a smartphone app that "serves as a digital wallet for electronic versions of many official Ukrainian government documents," including driver's licenses and passports.

About two-thirds of IDPs are women, as men face additional barriers in traveling and finding accommodations under the same martial law that prohibits them from leaving the country. Almost two million people are displaced in eastern Ukraine, with the majority of IDPs coming from Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Luhansk Oblasts. Some IDPs are living with relatives, renting apartments, or staying with host families; however, others are living in schools, gymnasiums, and collective shelters run by local authorities and civil society organizations. With temperatures dropping amid fuel shortages and rising prices, UNHCR and other groups are prioritizing the winterization of accommodations.

More broadly, many of the feared civilian impacts of a Russian invasion have come to pass, with particularly acute consequences for IDPs. Finding durable housing solutions is challenging because of the difficulty and danger of moving within areas of active fighting and because of overall resource constraints. Indiscriminate shelling and missile attacks have targeted and destroyed critical civilian infrastructure. About 15.7 million people across Ukraine are in need of humanitarian assistance. Under these hostile conditions, IDPs and other civilians have faced family separation, trauma, and medical injury, as well as loss of personal property and identity documents. Additionally, some who have found shelter in western Ukraine, where fighting is less intense, are now running out of resources without adequate employment opportunities and supplementary aid. Amid the war, Ukraine's employment rate has escalated to 35 percent—around 5 million people—though this figure could be underestimated given that many were not able to register as unemployed before fleeing.

The situation for IDPs in Ukraine is worsening given the impending winter. It will be even worse if Russian president Putin's unlawful annexation of Ukrainian territory results in escalated—or even nuclear—conflict.

Q6: Are Russians fleeing Russia after Putin's decree of "partial mobilization"?

A6: Much of the discussion of forced displacement since February has rightly centered around Ukrainians, but what about Russians fleeing Russia? Following weeks of Ukrainian advances, on Wednesday, September 21, President Putin called for a "partial mobilization" of reservists to bolster its invasion force. While the decree is only supposed to apply to reservists who have prior combat experience, wherein up to 300,000 troops (or more) could be called up, there are already reports of indiscriminate conscription, and the orders could also be expanded to full mobilization. Since the speech, there have been mass protests across the country, with more than 2,300 people detained and at least a dozen arson attempts at government buildings.

As of Sunday, September 25, leaked documentation from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) reported that more than 260,000 men had left Russia in the five days following Putin's decree. Though there is reason to doubt the accuracy of this figure—the FSB could be using an alarming figure to encourage Kremlin officials to close the border—the mere mention by government sources of a significant number of Russian citizens fleeing is notable.

Though exact reliable numbers may not be available, it is clear that Russians, in particular Russian men, are indeed fleeing the country by land and by air. There are reports of Russian security vehicles and officials being deployed to stop border crossings and flights to Armenia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan, where Russians can still enter visa-free. These flights are selling out despite steep price increases. Others are escaping through land borders to neighboring countries, including Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Georgia. Kazakhstan reported that 98,000 Russians have entered and Georgian officials stated that the number of people seeking entry had doubled over the past week to about 10,000 a day—at one point, over 2,000 cars were waiting to reach the border. Ongoing efforts to limit the entry of Russian citizens with EU visas have complicated departures for Russians attempting to flee to Europe, including the September 19 entrance bans by Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that go beyond previously agreed-upon EU level limitations.

forcibly conscripted into the Russian military while the Kremlin orchestrated what is widely considered to be a sham referendum in late September in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts where Russia-installed officials claimed that 96 percent of Ukrainian people "voted" in favor of becoming part of Russia. In a sign of the growing attention on forcibly displaced and asylum-seeking Russians, EU countries have commenced discussions on how to manage this new dynamic, including whether to keep borders mostly closed to Russians (as they have been for months), or to reopen them to those fleeing Russia.

Anastasia Strouboulis is a research assistant with the Project on Fragility and Mobility at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Abigail Edwards is a research intern with the CSIS Project on Fragility and Mobility. Erol Yayboke is a senior fellow with the International Security Program and director of the CSIS Project on Fragility and Mobility.

Tags

Europe, European Union, NATO, Russia and Eurasia, Geopolitics and International Security, Human Security, International Development, and Human Mobility

Paige Montfort
Media Relations Manager, External Relations
202.775.3173
pmontfort@csis.org
See Media Page for more interview, contact, and citation details.

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