

# Why Ukraine's Millions of Displaced People Will Define Its Future



*Most are Russian speakers from the east, and once harbored sympathies for Moscow. If the country embraces them, they could form the bedrock of a free and open Ukrainian society.*

October 2022

By *Danilo Mandić*

“**T**hey bombed our apartment,” Sasha told me nonchalantly in Kyiv last May. Fortunately, no one was

hurt. She and her husband Dimitri were busy in a friend's kitchen preparing Molotov cocktails to hurl at Russian tanks, a popular pastime in the early stages of the invasion. Yet Sasha and Dimitri, whom I interviewed in mid-2022, are not part of the educated, EU-leaning, English-speaking sector of Western Ukraine from which most of our reporting and refugee imagery come. Rather, they are Russophones from Donetsk, one of the cities annexed by Russia in the latest escalation of aggression.

Like [many](#) internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kyiv, Sasha and Dimitri struggled for years to integrate into the city. They arrived with empty pockets and hungry in 2014, knowing no one. Landlords refused to rent to them because they were from Donetsk and thus suspect. They were scammed by people who prey on the displaced. The job market was also tighter for them because of where they came from. [State bureaucracies made them jump through endless hoops](#) to secure basic documents, including required IDP certifications. Unemployed, they could not afford winter jackets or Sasha's epilepsy medicine. For eight years, they have lived with the knowledge that their parents and family—still stuck in the eastern police-terror statelet known as the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR)—could get [killed at any moment](#).

They both eventually found jobs: Dimitri as a cameraman, Sasha as a television journalist. After years of financial struggle, they even managed to secure a mortgage to purchase a small apartment in Irpin, a western suburb of Kyiv. In February 2022, Russian missiles struck their home. “This is Monty Python irony,” Dimitri told me, “The Ukrainians bombed my home in Donetsk, and the Russians bombed my home here.”

Gathering refugee and IDP testimonies in Ukraine this summer, I learned that such stories are painfully common. They also provide a glimpse of the challenges that a liberated and democratic postwar Ukraine will face as it grapples with both a humanitarian catastrophe and a demographic, regional, and political reconfiguration.

For millions of people like Sasha and Dimitri, the war's horror did not begin in February 2022. It only escalated. The 7.7 million refugees registered across Ukrainian borders since then is [alarming enough](#). But, by [conservative estimates](#), many more forced migrants are displaced *within* Ukraine. [Most of them](#) are from eastern parts of the country, are Russian-language speakers, and have experienced chronic displacement and dispossession since 2014. Their lives, livelihoods,

and health—physical and mental—have been endangered for years.

Much has been made of the [mass repatriation](#) of refugees from Europe back into Ukraine. These returns are undoubtedly significant. They are formidable testimony to the resilience of Ukrainian society and its army's spectacular performance. But we should bear in mind that military-aged men were never allowed to leave Ukraine to begin with, and that refugees are disproportionately well-off and connected compared to IDPs. Refugees' experience of reintegration, therefore, is highly unrepresentative of that of the overall forced-migrant population. The vast majority of displaced are like Sasha and Dimitri: They were alienated long before this phase of the war, and will continue to face obstacles long after it is over.

Worse still, refugees and IDPs—tragic as their fates are—are just the tip of the iceberg. There are also those who remain trapped in frontline towns and villages, enduring bombing and artillery from Russian and Ukrainian militaries. Civilians who fled, in other words, are the lucky ones. There are those who did not even have the good fortune to escape. Several million people remain trapped inside the breakaway provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, the Kafkaesque cages masquerading as “People’s Republics.” Since 2014,

they've lived a precarious existence with routine artillery shelling, saturation bombing, economic deprivation, and a terror-police state ruling over them. Since the February escalation, men have been cajoled or brutalized into forced mobilization by separatist authorities. Adding insult to injury, they no longer have access to water. In late July, President Zelensky ordered a [mandatory evacuation](#) of remaining civilians in the Donetsk region—an impossibility, since most of them lack the resources or social capital to leave their village or town, let alone the breakaway separatist authorities' jurisdiction. Indeed, the act of leaving is a lethal choice for many of them.

These civilians “[trapped in between](#)” are stigmatized, and receive [barely](#) any media or scholarly attention. To the Russian occupiers, they are little more than hostages. Stripped of civic protections, they are treated as political pawns by the [gangster-run separatist authorities](#) who deliver *nothing* on governance, human rights, or basic security in the breakaway eastern provinces. To the Ukrainian side, they are perceived as [potential traitors](#). Those imagining the days when Kyiv regains its territories know full well that reintegrating this population will prove, at best, a political and logistical nightmare. I asked a Ukrainian colleague in Lviv, a staunch patriot

and prominent public figure: “Imagine you win it all back—what will you do with all those people there?” His response, an alarmingly common view, was: “One-way ticket to Moscow.”

The [scholarship](#) on refugees and forced migration is devastatingly clear: Those displaced and trapped by violence routinely suffer politicization, scapegoating, and collective punishment. Triumphant, righteous armies are just as likely as losing belligerents to subject IDP populations to such abuse. There is a tremendous temptation—which Ukraine is not immune from—to treat every resident of Russian-occupied territories as a collaborator, and everyone who fled those territories as suspect.

Refugees and IDPs are not just a humanitarian sob story. They are part of a demographic and regional [reconfiguration of Ukrainian politics](#). Ukraine will never again be a country that elects anything resembling a pro-Russian government. But even in the best-case scenario of Russian aggression being reversed and most of the Donbas liberated, the rejuvenated Ukrainian nation will have a historic challenge ahead of it: to incorporate millions of Russophones into the education system, the labor market, the housing market, and—perhaps most sensitively—the political sphere. This will entail a

careful, creative reimagining of who belongs to Ukraine and what Ukrainian identity means. The temptation (**familiar** to any student of refugee studies) is to construct an exclusionary, ethnolinguistic nationalist narrative that reaffirms unity by discriminating against IDPs based on their language or regional background. Understandable as this may be during Putin's bloodbath, it would be a tragic mistake.

The need for a democratic, secure, stable, and sovereign Ukraine is urgent. As hard as this may seem, a healthy Ukrainian nation-state, free to choose its alliances, will somehow emerge from the rubble of this war. But it cannot afford to alienate millions of its citizens who bore the brunt of Russian aggression. The beginning of wisdom is the recognition that millions of people who have suffered dispossession and displacement will need to be meaningfully reintegrated—not **ostracized**—into a liberated Ukraine. A crude nationalist approach is neither feasible nor productive. A smart, strategic nation-rebuilding policy will include regional inclusivity, linguistic and cultural pluralism, and an emphasis on reconstruction and war-crimes justice—not revenge and scapegoating. Far from burdens and liabilities, war-zone civilians and IDPs can be tremendous assets. When treated fairly, the displaced can be the bedrock of a free and open society.

Take Larisa, who is from Kharkiv and was nearly killed by Putin's bombardment in April. She is a Russophone who spent much of her life in Russia but has cut ties with her family in Belgorod over the war. They had tried to persuade her that there was no bombing and that she was making it up; then, that she was bombing herself. "They are completely brainwashed," she explained,

They would rather believe their TVs than me when I tell them my building is on fire, that my whole world is on fire! I let them hear it through the telephone. Nothing. They trust the TV. I then realized that I have no family there [in Russia] anymore. I have nothing there.

She has turned, decisively, away from the country where much of her career and family were made. Millions of IDPs like Larisa, even those who may have harbored sympathies for separatism in the past, are today Ukraine's most loyal patriots. Thousands from the Donbas have already died repelling Putin's army. In the words of another Russophone, a military-aged man who had voted for former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich and the pro-Russian former mayor of Kharkiv, "I have never felt more Ukrainian in my life!" Ironic as it may seem, this pool of human capital



is postwar Ukraine's greatest resource. And the Kremlin's supreme defeat. 🇺🇦

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