

## Fleeing the Russia-Ukraine War of 2022: Paying Attention to Vulnerable Populations

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine caused the fastest growing human displacement since World War II: by April 30, 2022, around 13 million people left their homes, with around 6 million of them crossing Ukraine's borders ([IOM, 3 May 2022](#)).<sup>1</sup> Some of these people crossed the border into the Russian Federation, considering the proximity factor and the intensity of the warfare. Some of them did it voluntarily, while others were forcefully deported or kidnapped into Russian territory. As a Ukrainian Canadian with friends and relatives in Ukraine, I monitored the evacuation stories daily. Unlike in previous cases when I had no personal connections, the terms "flight" and "massive displacement" received different lived meaning: the stories were individual, and choices of seeking safety were individual, too. The Ukraine-Russia war revealed anew the complexities of forced migration and vulnerabilities caused by a sudden need to seek safety from the invading foreign army. Imagine being foster parents with, say, ten children in your care and living in Mariupol. How do you organize the relocation to safety, with all legal (i.e., proper guardianship paperwork and travel documents), socio-economic (i.e., means to flee and survive on, suitable shelter), and safety and security considerations (e.g., how not to lose a child in a crowd at a border crossing point) accounted for? This is a rhetorical question.

My presentation at the workshop "Asylum Regimes, Political Processes and Asylum seekers' mobilization in the EU" on May 17, 2022, was a time-limited empirical investigation into the war-related displacement of Ukrainians through the lens of intersectionality, an analytical framework that challenges homogenizing experiences in the refugee context and allows bringing to light how intersecting identities (of gender, sex, class, race, religion, and abilities) create unique situations of vulnerability, as well as that of privilege. I asked: did the Russian occupation produce unique categories of asylum seekers and in what way? How do we account for the voluntary and forced displacement of Ukrainians towards Russia while the war rages on? Data was collected through "desk research" that involved: 1) a review of reports on the displacement prepared by the UNHCR, Ukrainian government, and relevant EU agencies; 2) analysis of English- and Ukrainian-language mainstream media (in digital format), 3) monitoring Facebook stories related to forced displacement, and 4) following posts on Twitter with hashtags "GBV," "Russian war," and "#AfricansinUkraine." The cut off time for data collection was May 2, 2022.

Among the main observations, one should highlight a high degree of vulnerability of internally displaced populations, especially if they remain in the occupied territory or settle close to the frontline, with such issues as food insecurity, lack of access to clean water and to electricity, threat of physical and sexual violence, and overall safety and insecurity being pronounced. Secondly, vulnerabilities of those crossing the international borders can and are related and heightened by a legal and political environment in a country in which temporary protection is sought. Thirdly, Ukraine and the international community have limited resources to find and assist children, youth and adults kidnapped and deported to the Russian Federation. These claims

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<sup>1</sup> IOM. 2002. *Ukraine Internal Displacement Report: General Population Survey*, Round 4. 3 May. Available at: <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-internal-displacement-report-general-population-survey-round-4-29-april-3-may-2022>

merit further research and elaboration. Some of these themes (for example, kidnapped Ukrainian children) have captured headlines in international media since (e.g., [Farberov 2023](#)).<sup>2</sup>

**1. The scale of displacement from Ukraine.** The Russia-Ukraine war produced the fastest growing humanitarian displacement since World War II (see Table 1). With more than half of the Ukrainian children displaced from their homes by war and men of 18-65 years of age not allowed to leave due to martial law, the majority of asylum seekers were – and continue to be – women and children.

**Table 1: Ukrainians Fleeing for Safety as of May 1, 2022**

### Ukrainians fleeing for safety

**5.6 million** crossed the border

**7.7 million** internally displaced

#### **In the EU+:**

registered for **temporary protection: 2.5 million (98% Ukrainian citizens)**

international protection: **19,900 (57% are female)**

**4.8 million** in the **4** EU neighbouring countries

Source: EUAA, data for Feb 24- May 1

of the war.<sup>4</sup>

However, the movement across the western border was happening in both directions (towards Ukraine and out of Ukraine), as some men and women returned to Ukraine to defend their country. By April 30, 2022, Ukrainian Border services started to register a change: more people crossed into Ukraine, rather than left for Europe.

Table 1 uses the data provided by [the European Union Asylum Agency \(EUAA\)](#).<sup>3</sup> Ukraine's immediate neighbours received hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians searching for safety. Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, and Belgium also received Ukrainian refugees in the first months

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<sup>2</sup> Farberov, Snejana. 2023. "Inside Russia's harrowing 're-education' camps — where they send kidnapped Ukrainian kids," *New York Post*, March 6, <https://nypost.com/2023/03/06/ukrainian-kids-kidnapped-by-russia-sent-to-re-education-camps/>

<sup>3</sup> EUAA. 2022. *Analysis on Asylum and Temporary Protection in the EU+ in the Context of the Ukraine Crisis*, Week 17 (25 April-May 1, 2022). Available at: <https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/analysis-asylum-and-temporary-protection-eu-context-ukraine-crisis-3> (last accessed February 25, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> As of February 15, 2023, UNHCR reports 8,075,440 Ukrainian refugees registered in European countries, with 4,850,464 being registered for temporary protection or similar national measures within Europe. We can also assess the scale of onward movements within the EU. Among the countries not sharing the border with Ukraine, Germany (about 1,055,000), Czechia (489,865 individuals), Italy (169,837), Spain (166,832), United Kingdom (161,400), and France (118,994) are among the number of Ukrainian refugees exceeding 100 thousand ([Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation \(unhcr.org\)](#), last accessed February 20, 2023).

**Table 2. Neighbouring countries of arrival**

Location Name	Ukrainian Population on May 3, 2022	Temporary protection or national protection status on February 12, 2023
Poland	3,094,446	1,563,386
Romania	846,521	113,086
Russian Federation	703,523	2,852,395 (as of October 3, 2022)
Hungary	539,821	34,248
Republic of Moldova	449,605	109,410
Slovakia	385,284	109,185
Belarus	25,852	20,235 (as of February 7, 2023)

Source of Data: UNHCR, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location> (last accessed February 20, 2023). The table was updated for illustrative purposes only.

## 2. The Diversity of Population in Ukraine.



Caption: Nalinda (on the right), Roma, with her three sons near their house in Sydorovychi village, Kyiv region.  
Photo: © UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine / Oleksandr Katerusha

The importance of intersectional analysis to understand how identities intersect to create groups with specific vulnerabilities

Women, men, boys, girls and people of all genders have different humanitarian needs. Age, ability, ethnic identity (e.g. Roma), health status, literacy level, previous IDP status

It is important to understand the diversity of Ukraine’s population when analyzing potential vulnerabilities of people on the move. Intersectional analysis allows us to account for how identities overlap to produce groups with specific vulnerabilities because of age, gender, sex, health status, ability, and ethnic identity, among other things. The experiences of the Ukrainian Roma, Nigerian Ukrainian, Afghani Ukrainian, Vietnamese Ukrainian, or Somali

Ukrainian interacting with law enforcement and border control authorities may differ from the experiences of a Caucasian cisgender male or female. Although last census in Ukraine took place in 2001 and the data on ethnic composition of Ukraine are demographic estimates, we could talk about the following groups that have emerged in media coverage of war-displaced from Ukraine:

- 1) Ukraine has about 400,000 Roma people, with 30,000 of them being undocumented. There have been news reports about the unequal treatment from other Ukrainian refugees (e.g., [Vice News 2022](#); [NPR 2022](#)).
- 2) a Vietnamese diaspora (around 4000 people) in [Kharkiv and Odesa](#). It was reported that the Vietnamese Ukrainian community relied on the diasporic connections to relocate to safety abroad.
- 3) a growing number of immigrants from (post-soviet) Central and Eastern Asian countries since 2001;
- 4) growing diasporas of Nigerians, Somali, Ghanaians and other nationals from the African continent, that have grown due to their nationals coming to Ukraine as international students.

There has also been a growth in mixed race marriages ([Kyiv Post, 2006](#)), as well as a growth in Ukrainians marrying foreigners within Ukraine ([UNIAN, 2018](#)). While foreign passport holders were allowed to accompany their Ukrainian family members to Europe and Canada, they were not necessarily treated in the same way. The hashtag campaign on Twitter *#AfricaninUkraine* (trending in March 2022) highlighted some of the challenges that people of colour faced both at the border when leaving Ukraine, but also upon their arrival to European countries. While Ukrainian students could continue studying in European universities, international students had to struggle for their right to continue their education on par with their Ukrainian peers from the same universities. Hence, arguably, individual experiences with war-related displacement differed both in material terms (such as presence of individual and community resources to rely on) and in symbolic terms (i.e., who was automatically assumed as being a typical “Ukrainian” at border crossing points, on both sides of the border). It is important to have a contextual understanding of Ukraine’s demographic situation when talking about displacement vulnerabilities.

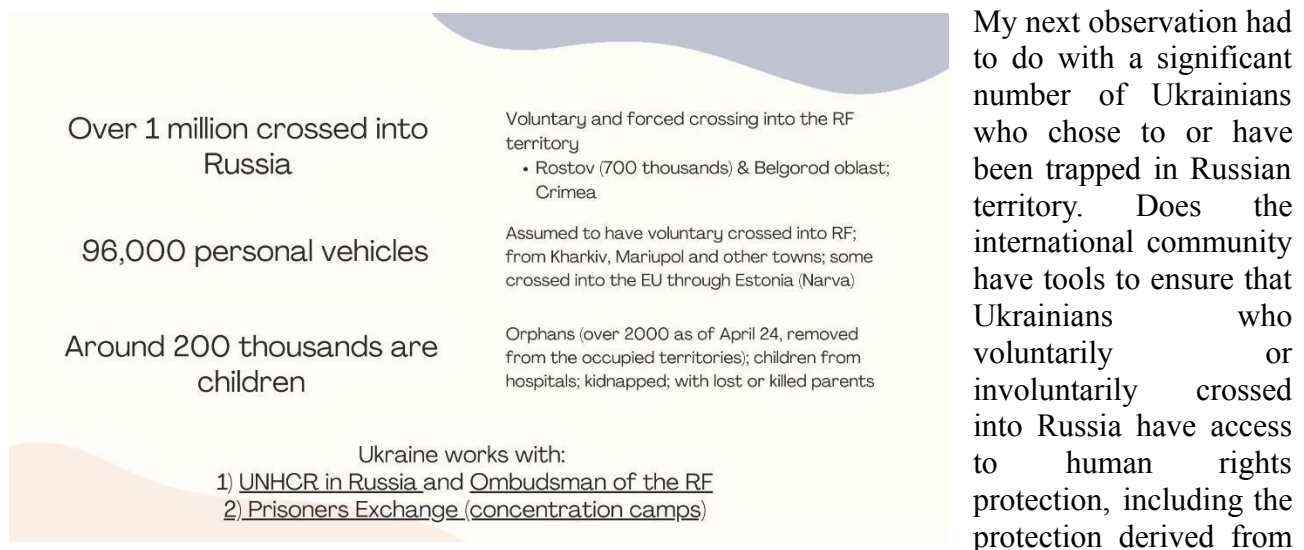
As far as vulnerabilities when crossing the border are concerned, a media scan of English and Ukrainian news sources conducted in February 24 - April 30, 2022, revealed four emerging concerns for vulnerable population groups: 1) potential discrimination of LGBTQ+ persons when crossing the border and settling in a country of temporary protection; 2) vulnerability of women and men to trafficking when and after crossing the border; 3) racial profiling, linked to at least 20 years of Ukraine’s cooperation with the EU on the control of unwanted migration flows towards the EU; and 4) disability, age and health-related vulnerabilities. The analysis only concerns Ukraine’s western border; there is no trusted and comprehensive data on northern (Belarus) and eastern (the Russian Federation) border crossings.

When talking about vulnerabilities in destination countries, it is important to highlight that differences in legal, political, and cultural environments will have their impact on the adaptation process of Ukrainian women. [UN Women and Care \(2022\)](#) reported the following gender-sensitive themes and vulnerabilities for women from Ukraine upon arrival in their destination country:

- 1) Financial hardships: Women, especially with dependents, are more likely to experience financial hardship and can experience financial exploitation;

- 2) Reproductive health: Women may experience unequal and not guaranteed access to reproductive health-related medical service (for example, access to abortion). UNHCR estimates that 4% of the displaced will be pregnant women and girls; 15 percent of them will require life-saving emergency care related to complications of pregnancy [source].
- 3) Housing situation: Ukrainians have been welcomed in homes around Europe, with both government-endorsed and private hosting arrangements. Hosting programs, however, may create situations of dependency and/or toxic relationship between a host and hostee, or lead to conditions for sexual harassment and subsequent vulnerability [source];
- 4) “Sandwiched” caregivers: a proportion of the displaced people are caregivers that provide care to their children and to their aging parent(s). These women will have to balance school, childrearing, and job search in order to survive.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Protecting Ukrainian citizens in the Russian Federation.



My next observation had to do with a significant number of Ukrainians who chose to or have been trapped in Russian territory. Does the international community have tools to ensure that Ukrainians who voluntarily or involuntarily crossed into Russia have access to human rights protection, including the protection derived from

their citizenship? With the ongoing battles and occupation in the east and south of the country, some Ukrainians have voluntarily crossed towards the Russian Federation to save their lives. Figure 1 illustrates the data that was available about the movement towards the RF as of May 10, 2022. Those who crossed the Ukraine-Russia border by personal vehicles, are assumed to have done so voluntarily. The Ukrainian media reported on secondary movements of these individuals out of Russia and towards the EU territory and, in some cases, back into Ukraine.

However, Russia has also used forced removal of Ukrainians, specifically, of minors, as well as kidnapping some of them (for example, see [Al Jazeera 2022](#)).<sup>6</sup> Such acts (targeting children) can be classified as having a genocidal intent against the Ukrainian nation ([Al Jazeera 2023](#)).

<sup>5</sup> UN Women and CARE. 2022. *Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine*. May 4, 2022. Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-of-Ukraine-en.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> According to a study by Conflict Hub Observatory, more than 6000 Ukrainian children from the occupied territories have been sent to re-education camps in Russia, with some of them placed for adoption with Russian families. Available at <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/sharing/rest/content/items/97f919ccfe524d31a241b53ca44076b8/data>



This situation amounts to forced population exchange undertaken by the authoritarian government of Russia. Ukraine does not have the resources to help its citizens or know their real situation because it has no diplomatic presence in Russia. UNHCR in Russia, International Red Cross and communication with an Ombudsman of the RF are the only available means to reach out to Ukrainian citizens.

#### 4. Vulnerabilities of the internally displaced population and people under occupation.

In my presentation (see two slides below), I emphasized the vulnerabilities of the elderly with access to food, medicine, health services, shelter, and clean water. In case of minors and families with minors, we can also add access to documentation, information and schooling, as well as access to social, psychological and material support.

### IDPs: Access to Services and Resources

- Safe shelter
- Status and documentation
- Cash and Social support
- Access to information
- Food security and access to clean water
- Access to education
- Access to health services

## Vulnerabilities for Groups in the Occupied Territories

<p><b>Sexual Violence</b></p> <p>Psychological support hotline (with UNICEF)</p> <p>400 calls in 2 weeks from the Kyiv region; majority women</p>	<p><b>Mothers and wives</b></p> <p>Kidnapping of children for ransom</p> <p>Photos of the killed sons or husbands</p> <p>Psychological torture</p>	<p><b>Children</b></p> <p>Children of the military servicemen</p> <p>Orphans Foster families</p> <p>Missing Children (1889 hotline calls)</p>	<p><b>Elderly, Disabled and Sick</b></p> <p>Deprived of care</p> <p>Unable to relocate</p> <p>No access to necessary medicine and help</p>
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I concluded by highlighting the importance: 1) of finding tailor-made responses to address the situations with people fleeing the war, 2) of undertaking context-specific analysis of vulnerability of refugee population in a given country of arrival (e.g., for Roma people); 3) paying attention to

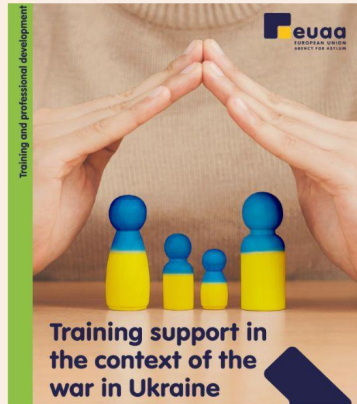
domestic politics as a factor in policy responses to Ukrainian refugees, and 4) finding avenues to protect and return population forcefully removed to Russia.

## Policy and practitioner community mobilization



### Support

Knowledge and awareness;  
Data collection;  
Risk assessment



### Training and Information Sharing

European Union Agency for  
Asylum



**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



### Documentation of Human Rights Violation

Awareness; legal support;  
advocacy; assistance with  
documentation of war crimes