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**NONVIOLENT PEACEFORCE, HELPING TO LEAVE,
& WAY OF UKRAINE**

PERILOUS JOURNEYS:

Protection risks and responses
to Ukrainian citizens returning
from Russia-occupied areas



This is what the neutral strip of the border between the Russian and Ukrainian checkpoints looks like. Photo taken at the 2km gravel road in between Kolotilovka-Pokrovka. Anna Kolesnikova / BBC.

CONTACT

GALAKTION CHAVLEISHVILI

G.CHAVLEISHVILI@NONVIOLENTPEACEFORCE.ORG
NONVIOLENTPEACEFORCE.ORG

DINA URICH

D.URICH@HELPINGTOLEAVE.ORG
HELPINGTOLEAVE.ORG

VITALII DMYTRIUK

DMYTRIUK.VITALII@WAYOFUKRAINE.ORG
WAYOFUKRAINE.ORG

Background

Nearly a decade since the unfolding of the conflict in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, an estimated four to six million people across Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, Kherson and Crimea currently live under Russia's military occupation. As these areas are not accessible to independent international media or international humanitarian organisations, it is difficult to grasp the true scale of the challenges faced by civilians living in occupied areas of Ukraine. However, civilians who have fled occupation and moved to Ukrainian-controlled territories have provided distressing accounts of how fundamental human rights are being denied and abused by occupational authorities, including the requirement to obtain a Russian passport to access essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment. Expression of pro-Ukrainian sentiments also leads to security and safety risks, making it difficult to maintain Ukrainian political and cultural identity. Some civilians also fear being forced to take up arms against one's compatriots: ***"My main fear of living under Russian occupation stemmed from being mobilized and used as cannon fodder at the front line ... I did not want to kill my own people,"*** shared Maksym (name changed), a man in his forties, who had lived under Russia's occupation in the town of Nova Kakhovka, Kherson region, Ukraine for twenty months before escaping occupation.

Choosing to flee occupied Ukraine is not an easy decision. The movement from Russian-occupied Ukraine to Ukrainian-controlled territory entails numerous protection risks as people travel through regions heavily affected by conflict and into Russia, subjected to at least two security screenings, all before crossing into Sumy region of Ukraine via the Kolotilovka (RU)-Pokrovka (UA) border checkpoint.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine closed all border crossing points with Russia. The Kolotilovka-Pokrovka checkpoint on the border between Belgorod oblast and Sumy oblast, Ukraine, has been open since November 2022, with a temporary closure between the last week of July and the beginning of August 2023, allowing Ukrainian citizens to return to Ukrainian-controlled territories from those under Russian occupation. This checkpoint serves as the only point of access into Ukraine from Russia. In addition to civilian movements, it is used as a point of exchange between the warring parties, including transfers of prisoners of war and bodies of soldiers killed in military actions.

Movement through Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine



Data as of Feb. 3, 2023 at 3 p.m. ET

Notes: "Assessed" means the Institute for the Study of War has received reliable and independently verifiable information to demonstrate Russian control or advances in those areas. Russian advances are areas where Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks, but they do not control them. "Claimed" areas are where sources have said control or counteroffensives are occurring, but ISW cannot corroborate nor demonstrate them to be false.

Sources: The Institute for the Study of War with AEI's Critical Threats Project; LandScan HD for Ukraine, Oak Ridge National Laboratory

Graphic: Renée Rigdon, CNN

Sumy (green) and Kolotilovka-Pokrovka checkpoint (orange) points and movement arrows (blue) added to base map accessed from [CNN.com](https://www.cnn.com). Movement arrows are not to scale and depict the scale of civilian movement on which this report is focused; any movement across the frontline and within Ukrainian-controlled territories not depicted.

Protection Needs & Responses

Movement of Ukrainian citizens from temporary occupied areas via the Russian Federation into Ukraine

Exiting Russia-occupied areas of Ukraine

To exit any of the occupied areas of Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhyya, Kherson and Crimea, Ukrainian citizens must pass a security screening run by Russian occupational authorities. If these checks are successfully passed, Ukrainian citizens are allowed to exit the occupied areas of Ukraine and enter the territory of the Russian Federation. However, the screening process itself can pose risks to the wellbeing of Ukrainian citizens. NP learned of instances of disappearances at the filtration points, physical abuses, including beating of elderly women due to their familial ties with Ukrainian service members, psychological violence, and coercion into obtaining Russian passports.

The process of obtaining Russian passports in the occupied territories of Ukraine has lately become more challenging. Ukrainians report having to pass a test on knowledge of Russian history and culture and the waiting period for receiving a Russian passport is taking a longer time. Some groups of Ukrainians such as former prisoners or former service members have also been denied Russian passports. NP is also aware of several cases of Ukrainian women who were released from prisons located in the occupied territory after completing their sentence time without any identification documents. For them to apply for a Russian passport to begin a process of exiting the occupied areas of Ukraine would require applying for identity certificates first, another challenging and lengthy process. Other Ukrainian prisoners were deported from the occupied territories of Ukraine to the territory of Russia. After completing their sentences in Russia, former Ukrainian prisoners have been immediately re-arrested and detained upon their release as Russian Authorities consider them migrants who crossed into the territory of the Russian Federation illegally. As in occupied areas, former Ukrainian prisoners in Russia found themselves in a precarious situation trying to prove their identities while in detention.

Other Ukrainians report being denied exit from the occupied territories and entry into Russia despite possessing a Russian passport.

Movement through the territory of the Russian Federation

After exiting occupied areas of Ukraine, Ukrainian citizens find themselves in the territory of the Russian Federation where they must pass through one more security screening before being allowed to exit Russia. Following the re-opening of Kolotilovka-Pokrovka checkpoint on the border area of Russian Belgorod oblast and Ukraine's Sumy oblast, some 18,000 Ukrainian citizens have returned from occupied territories through this route. Ukrainian citizens who exited or attempted to exit Russia through Kolotilovka have reported both risks and instances of sexual and gender-based violence, physical violence, and disappearance. According to local organisations supporting civilians on the move, experiencing mistreatment or abuse at the Kolotilovka security screening point, some Ukrainian citizens aborted their attempt to proceed with the movement out of Russia.

Unaccompanied children are required to present a physical copy of power of attorney that specifies that a child's legal guardian allows the child to exit Russia unaccompanied. To deliver this document from a legal guardian in Ukraine to a Ukrainian child physically in Russia is a major undertaking. Furthermore, the risk of physical and other types of harm to a child traveling unaccompanied through this route raises major child protection concerns.

Ukrainian citizens who belong to the LGBTQI+ community and who attempt to move from Russia-occupied territories of Ukraine and exit via Russia also face increased risks of discrimination, including denial of exit, as well as risks of violence, particularly during security screenings.

Crossing Kolotilova-Pokrovka border checkpoint

Physical barriers

To move across the border point, Ukrainian citizens including those with limited mobility, need to walk around two kilometres in an open space on an unpaved road, carrying children and all their belongings on foot. There is no protection from exposure to weather (often including heat, storms, and snow) and no assistance available to those who may particularly struggle with the movement, including older people, children, and people with disabilities. According to Ukrainian border officials, up to 200 Ukrainian citizens use this border checkpoint daily.

For older people, those suffering from physical and mental health conditions, and people with disabilities, making the journey across the Kolotilovka-Pokrovka crossing can be particularly challenging. To support those with specific needs, Helping to Leave solicits and manages support from other Ukrainians who are also evacuating

from occupied territories. For example, In January 2024 it was reported that an elderly woman passed away on the transit road in the 'grey' area between the border crossing points – a fellow traveller managed to bring her body to the Ukrainian side, as medical services have no access there.

Additionally, as this is a humanitarian access point rather than an 'official' border crossing point, the functional operation of the point is not guaranteed. Sometimes, the Russian side closes the crossing point unilaterally. This unpredictability can be a challenge and a risk to civilians. Cases have been reported where civilians who had been traveling for days made it all the way to the crossing point only to find it closed. This exposes civilians to protection risks, unable to find shelter or other necessities to sustain themselves at the access point for longer periods. This is exacerbated if there is a backlog of individuals waiting to cross. In winter, this can lead to major health risks, including freezing to death.

Legal barriers

When a person arrives to Ukrainian-controlled territory, the border guards check their Ukrainian identification documents or copies of the documents, allowing Ukrainian citizens to enter. Though civilians who reach Ukrainian-controlled territories may identify as Ukrainian, legally, they are seen as refugees and not Internally Displaced People (IDPs), unless they have Ukrainian identification cards. Many people do not have these documents or copies of the documents, as those who have lived in Russian-occupied territories have often been obliged to surrender their Ukrainian documents to receive Russian passports, and therefore access to services and free movement:

“The only way I could attempt to leave was to first obtain a Russian passport,” Maksym recounted. **“Not possessing a Russian passport precluded me from leaving twice previously.”** In addition, many people (particularly young people) have not had access to Ukrainian identity documents due to the start of the conflict in the Donbas in 2014, after which registering for Ukrainian legal identification or passports in these regions became extremely difficult.

As such, many people who move to Ukrainian-controlled areas find themselves in a difficult position of legal limbo, wherein they do not have the documents needed to prove Ukrainian citizenship, and therefore cannot prove IDP status, nor legally work in Ukraine or receive social benefits. The process of acquiring Ukrainian documents and identification can be long, and during this period, people are unable to exercise their basic rights, including the freedom of movement. This can have negative impacts on their mental health.

Access to services and humanitarian aid

Once a Ukrainian citizen crosses from Russia to Ukraine, a free bus transports them from the border checkpoint to Sumy city, an administrative centre of Sumy region, where Ukrainians returning from occupied areas and Russia are taken for security screening, this time on the Ukrainian side. After this process is completed, all Ukrainians can access psychological first aid, legal and humanitarian assistance, receive sim cards, and register for cash support. Additionally, Ukrainians are provided with a free train ticket to Kyiv or a free bus ticket to Kharkiv or Dnipro. While some returning Ukrainians express their wish to return to a part of Kherson region under the Ukrainian government control, such returns are not being facilitated due to security risks. The closest place to Kherson these civilians can be taken is Mykolaiv oblast. Temporary shelter is provided to those Ukrainians who require overnight accommodation before they proceed with their travel to other parts of Ukraine.

As of mid-February 2024, the Ukrainian citizens crossing Kolotilovka-Pokrovka checkpoint now receive a document, provided by the Ukrainian authorities, that confirms their entry into Ukraine. Although, this document aims to allow easier access to support services for returning Ukrainians, the process has only recently been rolled out and many people continue to face challenges in accessing support services and receiving humanitarian aid.

Reintegration

Helping to Leave purported that many civilians moving from occupied territories to Ukrainian-controlled areas do not feel part of Ukrainian society and feel marginalised, while government mechanisms for effective reintegration and overcoming perception biases are not yet clearly established.

Local non-governmental organisations facilitating movement of Ukrainian citizens from occupied territories to Ukraine highlighted the importance of holistic long-term case management for returning civilians. Protection, psychological support, and social support services should be stepped up and tailored to accommodate the specific needs of these civilians. Out of 581 persons surveyed by Helping to Leave, 41% reported not only a need for legal and psycho-social support, but also identified feelings of having no one to ask for help. While challenges with reintegration are widespread and vary across the different regions of Ukraine, it is paramount that reintegration work is being prioritised and supported by international organisations and donors to sustain lasting peace.

Responding to the needs of local actors facilitating movements of Ukrainian citizens from occupied territories to Ukraine through responsible partnership

Ukrainian civil society organisations and volunteer collectives have been crucial responders to the needs of civilians in occupied regions and the threats they face during these movements. A key case study demonstrates the unique partnership between two local organisations, Helping to Leave and Way of Ukraine in Kharkiv. Helping to Leave operates at the intersection of chatbot technology and messaging platforms, offering a vital lifeline to Ukrainian civilians who are forced to flee or voluntarily want to return. Through the chatbot and messenger functions, people in need of assistance can reach out to the organisation, sharing critical information about their situation. Once the organisation receives this information, they leverage their extensive networks across the occupied territories, as well as in the Sumy region, to arrange the evacuations through Russia and Russian-occupied areas. As people cross borders seeking refuge, Helping to Leave plays a pivotal role in coordinating transportation services—both in the occupied territories and upon arrival in the Sumy region from where they are then transported to the neighbouring Kharkiv region.

After completing the security checks from Ukrainian authorities, individuals may board a free train direct to Kyiv, financed by Ukrainian Railways, or board one of the free buses Helping to Leave and Way of Ukraine provide from the city of Sumy to the larger hub of Kharkiv. Civilians who arrive to Kharkiv may stay at a transit shelter operated by Way of Ukraine, or, if they choose, are supported to relocate elsewhere in Ukraine, by train with tickets provided by Helping to Leave.

This collaborative work across the evacuation route provides essential services and support to civilians. Following twenty months of living under Russian occupation, Maksym finally made it across the access point: **“After passing through six rooms, comprised of the Security Service of Ukraine, police, and social services, I was cleared and picked up directly by Helping to Leave, who brought me to a transit shelter in Kharkiv region. I am very grateful for the help of Helping to Leave and Way of Ukraine, which not only included accommodation, but also transporting me twice to a hospital in Kharkiv city and helping with obtaining new documents.”** As Maksym notes, Helping to Leave also support civilians in their application for Ukrainian identification documents. Helping to Leave and other civil society organisations provide essential legal expertise, time and funding, and guidance to those applying for legal documentation.

Case Study | Enhancing capacity of local actors through responsible partnership: What role for INGOs?

NP provides wraparound support to Ukrainian volunteer groups who are at the forefront of the Ukrainian humanitarian response. In Kharkiv city, NP has leveraged its extensive contacts with local organisations, including Helping to Leave and Way of Ukraine, to ensure effective accompaniment of individuals once back in Ukraine based on their specific situations and needs. NP has established a coordination group consisting of six strong national NGOs and initiated the creation of 'redirection groups', which function as advance notification systems when civilians travel to these destinations to reunite with their immediate or extended families and require specific support with accommodation, legal accompaniment, or other concerns. Such groups now exist for major centres including Odesa, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro - key regions where a large number of civilians travel after departing Way of Ukraine's transit shelter in Zernove, Kharkiv region. In addition, NP has spearheaded the production of information booklets which list specific resources available by region for recently arrived IDPs. The booklets are distributed to travellers upon their departure from Way of Ukraine's transit shelter and provide new arrivals with essential information about their rights and access to services and support.

To ensure continued operations and sustainability, NP supports Way of Ukraine with fuel and stipends for their volunteers to transport individuals that opt to temporarily stay in the transit shelter. As an additional means of support, NP assists Way of Ukraine to purchase train tickets for displaced civilians who want or need onward travel to other areas of Ukraine. To meet the needs of displaced civilians with special needs, NP is also supporting Way of Ukraine with the refurbishment of a one-story house located on the premise of the transit shelter. The house will accommodate older people and others with limited mobility, to ensure they have access to a dignified transit environment that meets their specific physical needs. NP is also present at the existing transit shelter on a weekly basis to identify and address protection concerns of civilians and volunteers, and to provide ongoing partnership and support.

Recommendations

The Government of Ukraine, national and international humanitarian organisations, civil society groups, and international donors can take several steps outlined below to better respond to protection risks and challenges faced by Ukrainians returning from occupied areas.

Ensure information dissemination to returning civilians

Providing returning Ukrainians with information, space, and time to make informed decisions about their next movements is critical. Months or years of living under occupation and in an information vacuum means returning Ukrainians have a lot to process and absorb. They are often not aware of the current security situation in the area where they aim to go in Ukraine. Previously accessible support networks such as family and friends may no longer be present or available or may take significant time to trace and reconnect. Days of travel under extremely stressful conditions are overwhelming and pressure to make a rapid decision about where they go next once they crossed to Ukraine mean that their next movements can be rushed and ill-informed. People should be allowed to rest when they reach Ukraine-controlled territory before they are provided with information on services and support available and can make an informed decision about their next movement.

Lift barriers to accessing cash assistance.

Humanitarian actors and donors must demonstrate flexibility and agility in responding to the urgent cash needs of Ukrainians returning from occupied areas and Russian territories to Ukraine. Although registration for cash assistance occurs promptly upon arrival and after the clearance process, physically accessing cash remains challenging for individuals awaiting confirmation of their Ukrainian citizenship documents. Banks are unable to dispense funds to individuals without a valid Ukrainian ID, further complicating the situation. This gap in support presents returning Ukrainians with heightened vulnerabilities in this period.

Provide holistic support and long-term case management

This should be provided to civilians returning from the Russia-occupied areas of Ukraine. This includes legal aid, access to long-term psychosocial support services and access to professional training and legal employment opportunities.

Make all necessary efforts to establish robust mechanisms for re-integration of returning Ukrainians.

This mechanism should be established in consultation with civilians returning as well as communities they return to. Key humanitarian actors and organisations should be given the opportunity to contribute to this reintegration effort.



Ensure information dissemination to returning civilians



Provide holistic support and long-term case management



Lift barriers to accessing cash assistance.



Establish and bolster robust mechanisms to support the re-integration of returning Ukrainians.