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This publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense or the United States government.

# **Russia's Intentions and Actions Toward Flows of People in the Black Sea Region**

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**March 2025**



As early as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the leadership of the Russian Empire influenced population flows as a means to change the ethnic composition of territories. During the existence of the Soviet Union, such activities of the central government intensified significantly. In the national republics of the USSR, labor was recruited for new buildings in the eastern regions of the country, and for the development of the Far North and the virgin lands of Kazakhstan. as well as the forced removal of Dekulakised people and victims of political repression were forcibly removed from their homes. Certain ethnic groups were deported. These processes were particularly significant in Ukraine and in Crimea, which was part of the Soviet Russian Federation until 1954.

An important mechanism of the Soviet government's migration policy in the period after World War II was the redistribution of specialists: graduates of higher education institutions of different republics were distributed throughout the former USSR, and there were also organized resettlements to Ukraine, Moldova and, to a lesser extent, Georgia, from other Soviet republics, primarily the Russian Federation. Soviet-era immigrants, especially ethnic Russians, who were an unofficially privileged ethnic group of the former USSR, did not integrate into the host community. Many of them showed no interest in learning the languages of the national republics. Moreover, in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, especially in Crimea and in large cities of the Donbas, as well as in the Transnistrian region of Moldova, where there were especially many immigrants from outside these countries, there was a process of partial assimilation of the local population by the migrants.<sup>1</sup>

Ethnolinguistic analysis shows that the Russian language's current prevalence in Ukraine can be traced primarily to inter-republican migration in the former USSR and to the lack of effective incentives for a significant number of migrants to learn Ukrainian.<sup>2</sup> 87% of inter-regional differences in the spread of the Russian language are due to the territorial differentiation in the share of people born in Russia. The policy of population redistribution in the former USSR was aimed at forming contingents of people who did not integrate into host societies of national republics as a mechanism to integrate the indigenous population into a so-called 'Soviet people.'

In the last years of the USSR and especially after its collapse, the Russian leadership provoked and supported ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet republics.

As a result of armed conflict in March-July 1992, refugees and internally displaced persons appeared in Moldova. In spring and summer 1992, the armed conflict spurred migration within the country. Around 100,000 refugees were registered during that time. These people fled to Belarus, Russia and especially to Ukraine (61,000, of which 30,000 were children) and countries outside the CIS (around 20,000). 51,300 persons (28,700 of which were children) were registered as internally displaced persons on the right bank of the Dniester River region of Moldova. Around 80% were ethnic Moldovans. The end of military action and the signature of the peace agreement, with the help of Russia and the OSCE as mediators, on unobstructed return of persons to the places of their permanent residence enabled the issue of displaced persons to be resolved promptly. Most people returned to their places of permanent residence. Practically all refugees to Ukraine also returned to their places of permanent residence.<sup>3</sup> In sort, by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the problem of displaced persons as a mass-scale social phenomenon in the Republic of Moldova was practically resolved.

In the early post-Soviet period, over half of the population of the Abkhazian region of Georgia moved to other regions as a result of ethnic cleansing. According to the census of 1989, 525,000 people resided

in the Abkhazian ASSR. By 2003 only 215,000 remained, according to the census carried out by the separatist authorities. 309,000 (59%) were driven out of Abkhazia by ethnic cleansing. 15,000 refugees were registered coming from the Tskhinvali Region, where in 2008 ethnic cleansing occurred during the Russian-Georgian war and where the Georgian population was driven out completely. As of 2012, 265,100 people in Georgia (6% of the population) had the status of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and were paid a corresponding allowance.<sup>4</sup> In 2023, there were 311,000 IDPs in Georgia.<sup>5</sup>

Russia's occupation of Crimea and the beginning of the intervention in Donbas in 2014 generated almost 1.5 million IDPs in Ukraine. However, up to 600,000 of these registered IDPs were so-called "retirement tourists," i. e. persons who actually lived in an uncontrolled territory and periodically came to receive a pension or social assistance in territories controlled by the Ukrainian authorities.<sup>6</sup> The real number of IDPs who permanently lived in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government was thus more likely to have been between 800,000 and 900,00 people.<sup>7</sup> In general, before Russia's full-scale invasion began on February 24, 2022, the share of registered IDPs in the total population of the receiving regions decreased steadily with increasing distance from the Donbas.

Russia's war against Ukraine has generated the greatest population movements in Europe since World War II (both within Ukraine and abroad). Once the full-scale invasion began in February, the number of IDPs grew sharply, exceeding 4.3 million people by July 13. 4.7 million by October 11. As of January 2, 2025, 4.6 million people were registered as IDPs.<sup>8</sup> Their actual number is lower, as the database probably includes pre-war 'pension tourists,' as discussed earlier. For example, almost 800,000 IDPs are registered in Donetsk (part of which is occupied by Russia and the other part is in the combat zone) and Luhansk (which, with the exception of a few villages, is not controlled by Ukrainian authorities) Oblasts. In addition, some people who moved at the beginning of the full-scale war but returned after mid-2022 may also have remained in the IDP database of the Ministry of Social Policy. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that 3.55 million de facto IDPs resided in Ukraine as of October 2024.<sup>9</sup>

The territorial structure of IDP settlement is changing dynamically. According to IOM monitoring of internal displacement in Ukraine, the role of the western regions in accommodating IDPs is gradually decreasing, while their concentration in the central and eastern regions is increasing.<sup>10</sup> This is because some displaced people have returned to their previous places of residence or to neighboring territories. Kyiv inhabitants and residents of the capital region return the most often. The intensity of return of residents of the eastern and southern regions is much lower.

In recent months, some IDPs have been returning to the temporary occupied territories (TOT), primarily due to housing problems, but there is no reliable data on this process.

The military aggression of the Russian Federation has caused large-scale forced external migration from Ukraine. Unfortunately, there are significant problems with the information coverage of the analysis of Ukrainian forced migration abroad. According to the State Border Guard Service (SBGS) of Ukraine, the difference between the number of departures from Ukraine and entries into Ukraine through the border with EU countries and Moldova between February 24, 2022 and January 12, 2025 amounts to approximately 2.1 million people.<sup>11</sup> UNHCR data for that time period, in contrast, recorded more than 5.5. million Ukrainians having received temporary protection in EU countries or similar protection schemes in Europe and North America.<sup>12</sup> Several reasons for this discrepancy including the fact that

many Ukrainian citizens arrived from the territory of the aggressor countries, many male Ukrainian citizens between the ages of 18 and 60 left Ukraine illegally, and many who had actually returned to their homeland were still being registered as forced migrants from Ukraine.<sup>13</sup>

Among the democratic countries, the largest number of Ukrainian citizens were granted temporary asylum in Germany (more than 1.2 million), Poland (almost 1 million), and the Czech Republic (almost 400,000). Other countries welcoming more than 100,000 Ukrainian forced migrants included the United Kingdom, Spain, the United States, Canada, Romania, Italy, Slovakia, Moldova, the Netherlands, and Ireland. Until the beginning of 2023, Poland ranked first in this indicator. In Germany and the Czech Republic, the number of military migrants has been steadily increasing, while in Poland it has been gradually decreasing since October 2022.

Women and children are the most common people to leave Ukraine. According to Eurostat, women comprised 60.2% of the 4.2 million Ukrainians in EU countries at the end of October 2024. 32% of the total were under the age of 18, 61.9 % were aged 18-64, and 6.1 % were 65 and older.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Ukraine's migration losses are significant. Since the majority of migrants are women and children, the potential failure of their return could lead to irreversible demographic losses and worsen Ukraine's already unfavorable demographic situation and potential.

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) assesses that Russian forces occupy roughly 99 % of Luhansk Oblast, 66% of Donetsk Oblast, and 73% of Zaporizhia and of Kherson Oblasts.<sup>15</sup> The Russian government's demographic policy towards the TOT is to replace the local population with immigrants from the Russian Federation. The deportation of Ukrainian citizens from the temporarily occupied territories is carried out, in particular, in the following ways (the list does not claim to be complete):

- children are removed from orphanages; some are illegally adopted by Russian citizens;
- children are removed under the pretext of rehabilitation or recreation, with no prospect of returning. Their parents are encouraged to travel to Russia also without prospect of returning;
- Ukrainian families are relocated to the hinterland of the Russian Federation under the pretext of evacuation from the war zone;
- prisoners are transferred from penal institutions in TOT to penal institutions in the territory of the aggressor country;
- unacceptable living conditions are created deliberately in the TOT for certain categories of Ukrainian citizens (in particular, those considered unreliable by the occupiers), who are offered incentives to settle in the aggressor country (housing vouchers, employment assistance, etc.).

It is impossible to determine with a high degree of accuracy the number of Ukrainians who have been deported. Reports from Russian officials are not credible. There is no publicly available data from the border services of the aggressor countries. The UNHCR, based on information from Russian official sources, currently reports more than 1.2 million Ukrainian forced migrants in the aggressor country, but this data has not been updated since the end of 2023.<sup>16</sup>

According to Freedom House, professing Ukrainian identity in the Russian-controlled areas of Eastern Donbas has been dangerous since 2014, and many residents who identified as Ukrainian left thereafter.

The result: separatist-controlled media stressed that nearly all respondents claimed Russian ethnicity during the 2019 census. Since the launch of the full-scale Russian military invasion in February 2022 thousands of Ukrainians have fled or been forcibly transferred to other occupied Ukrainian territories or to Russia.<sup>17</sup>

In the occupied territories, conditions are being created where local residents are faced with a choice: to obtain Russian citizenship or to leave their native land. Residents of TOT without Russian passport are prohibited from using banks, registering real estate, driving vehicles, and getting married.<sup>18</sup> The occupiers systematically take Ukrainian children to Russia to assimilate young Ukrainians into Moscow's identity. In this way, young people are forced to belong to the Russian Federation and to be intolerant of Ukraine and everything Ukrainian.<sup>19</sup>

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine has identified three main situations in which Russian authorities have transferred Ukrainian unaccompanied children from one area they controlled in Ukraine to another or to the Russian Federation: transfers affected children who lost parents or contact with them during hostilities; children who were separated following the detention of a parent; and children in institutions. The government of Ukraine recorded 19,500 “deported and/or forcibly displaced persons” as of the end of September 2023.<sup>20</sup>

On March 17, 2023, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin and Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova for committing the war crime of illegally deporting and transferring children from the occupied regions of Ukraine to the Russian Federation since at least February 24, 2022.<sup>21</sup>

According to Freedom House information, since Russia has occupied Crimea it has taken steps to solidify ethnic Russian domination of the peninsula and marginalize the ethnic Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar communities. The elimination of the Ukrainian language from school curriculums and the closure of most Ukrainian Orthodox churches since 2014 are indicative of this attempt to Russify the population. Russian and local pro-Russian officials' policies and actions in Crimea have led to an influx of hundreds of thousands of people from Russia, including Russian troops, civilian personnel, and their families. People displaced by fighting and deprivation in eastern Ukraine, which is home to many ethnic Russians, have also come to Crimea. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Crimeans have been forcibly conscripted into the Russian armed forces since 2014, and many have been deployed far from the peninsula, all in contravention of international law regarding occupied territories.<sup>22</sup>

According to the Permanent Mission of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Russia has replaced more than 35% of the Crimean peninsula's population during the first ten years of its occupation.<sup>23</sup> According to the European Parliament, Russian occupying authorities are particularly targeting Crimean Tatars, ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic minorities, and have resettled up to 800,000 Russians, forcibly altering the demographic composition of Crimea along ethnic lines in a neo-colonial manner. This constitutes a war crime under international law.<sup>24</sup> Migration from Russian regions to the city of Sevastopol has been particularly intense. According to the Russian census, the Sevastopol municipality had 547,800 inhabitants as of October 1, 2021.<sup>25</sup> That is far larger than the 383,900 registered by the State Statistics Service of Ukraine at the beginning of 2014.<sup>26</sup>

The Russian Federation's support for the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and military assistance during the civil war in that country contributed to the formation of significant flows of Syrian refugees. In 2023,



there were 6.36 million refugees from Syria in Europe and the Middle East.<sup>27</sup> According to the information of the UN refugee agency more than 115,000 people have reportedly returned to Syria from countries such as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon since the fall of the Assad regime to the end of 2024.<sup>28</sup>

After partial mobilization was announced in Russia on September 21, 2022, large-scale departures of Russian men abroad, including to the Black Sea region, began. Russians began to buy one-way tickets to Turkey, Georgia, Israel and the United Arab Emirates in large numbers, and attempted to leave the country by land.<sup>29</sup> According to media reports, more than 260,000 people fled in the first week after the mobilization was announced. Kilometer-long traffic jams formed on the borders with Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Georgia. By the morning of September 27, 2022, the traffic jam of cars trying to cross the border with Georgia was over 30 km long, with over 4,000 cars queuing to leave.<sup>30</sup> The Russian authorities did not immediately impose travel restrictions. This suggests that, amid the mass exodus, some agents of the Russian special services may have been deliberately sent abroad.

According to media reports, not only Ukrainian patriots, but also Russian supporters are leaving the temporarily occupied territories. The latter are travelling to EU countries on not on a Russian passport, but on a Ukrainian one, which they have kept for this purpose. These individuals are being recruited by Russia's security forces to perform criminal tasks in the EU, in particular to interrupt the provision of military assistance to Ukraine.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, modern Russia continues the policy of the Russian Empire and the USSR to replace the population in the occupied non-Russian ethnic territories and influences flows of people to achieve its own long-term goals, in particular by destabilizing the situation in neighboring countries.

<sup>1</sup> Libanova (ed) (2014). Human Development in Ukraine: the Historical Dimension of Transformation of Social Policy (collective monograph). – Kyiv, Ptoukha Institute for Demography and Social Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. [in Ukrainian] [https://idss.org.ua/monografii/2014\\_lyud\\_rozvitok.pdf](https://idss.org.ua/monografii/2014_lyud_rozvitok.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The correlation coefficient between the proportion of people who consider Russian their native language and the proportion of people born in the Russian Federation in the total population by region of the Ukraine, according to the First All-Ukrainian Population Census of 2001, was 0.933, and the coefficient of determination was 0.870. Author's calculation.

<sup>3</sup> Mosneaga V. (2013) Asylum-seekers, refugees and displaced persons in Moldova: Problems of recognition, social protection and integration. [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/62725/Explanatory%20Note\\_2013-103.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/62725/Explanatory%20Note_2013-103.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>4</sup> Tukhashvili M. (2013) Refugees and displaced persons in Georgia. [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/62727/Explanatory%20Notes\\_2013-105.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/62727/Explanatory%20Notes_2013-105.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>5</sup> Internal displacement Monitoring Centre. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data/>

<sup>6</sup> IOM. Report of the national system of monitoring the situation with internally displaced persons. Round 18-19. September 2020, March 2021. [in Ukrainian]

[https://ukraine.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11861/files/documents/nms\\_round\\_18\\_19\\_ukr.pdf](https://ukraine.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11861/files/documents/nms_round_18_19_ukr.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> This, in particular, is evidenced by a comparison of the age structure of IDPs according to the data of the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine and the monitoring carried out under the auspices of the Mission of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Ukraine. The differences in the share of the retirement age population were especially significant. See Pozniak O. (2021). Assessment of the real number of internally displaced persons // Sustainable development of society: conceptual and practical aspects: collection of materials of the First International Scientific and Practical Conference. Rivne State University of the Humanities together with Rivne Regional Council. 11 June 2021 (electronic edition). Rivne, 2021. - P. 306-309. [in Ukrainian] [http://www.rshu.edu.ua/images/nauka/zb\\_sr\\_2021.pdf](http://www.rshu.edu.ua/images/nauka/zb_sr_2021.pdf)

- <sup>8</sup> The most noticeable increase (almost double - from 2.1 to 4.0 million people) was recorded during April 2022. State Enterprise 'Information and Computer Center of the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine'. [in Ukrainian] <https://www.ioc.gov.ua/analytics/dashboard-vpo> (accessed 12 January 2025).
- <sup>9</sup> IOM. Ukraine Internal Displacement Report. Round 18. October 2024. [https://dtm.iom.int/dtm\\_download\\_track/66401?file=1&type=node&id=44806](https://dtm.iom.int/dtm_download_track/66401?file=1&type=node&id=44806)
- <sup>10</sup> IOM. Ukraine Internal Displacement Report. Round 18. October 2024. [https://dtm.iom.int/dtm\\_download\\_track/66401?file=1&type=node&id=44806](https://dtm.iom.int/dtm_download_track/66401?file=1&type=node&id=44806)
- <sup>11</sup> Calculated on the basis of daily data of SBGS: State Border Guard Service of Ukraine. Official Site. <https://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/news/>
- <sup>12</sup> Ukraine Refuge Situation. The Operational Data Portal of UNHCR. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> (accessed 12 January 2025).
- <sup>13</sup> Pozniak O. (2023). The Situation of Forced Migrants from Ukraine in Europe after Russian Military Aggression and the Problems of Ukraine's Migration Policy in These New Conditions. Central and Eastern European Migration Review 12(1): 159–181. doi: 10.54667/ceemr.2023.17 [http://ceemr.uw.edu.pl/sites/default/files/Pozniak\\_2023.pdf](http://ceemr.uw.edu.pl/sites/default/files/Pozniak_2023.pdf)
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- <sup>16</sup> Ukraine Refuge Situation. The Operational Data Portal of UNHCR. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> (accessed 12 January 2025).
- <sup>17</sup> Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/eastern-donbas/freedom-world/2024>
- <sup>18</sup> The National Resistance Center. In the TOT, the Russians created a register of Ukrainians who did not receive a Russian passport. <https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/en/in-the-tot-the-russians-created-a-register-of-ukrainians-who-did-not-receive-a-russian-passport/>
- <sup>19</sup> Ukrainian National News. Occupants take 119 schoolchildren from Mariupol to St. Petersburg for “re-education” – Resistance. <https://unn.ua/news/occupants-take-119-schoolchildren-from-mariupol-to-st-petersburg-for-re-education-resistance/>; The National Resistance Center. Invaders took Ukrainian children from the TOT of Donetsk region to the Urals. <https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/en/invaders-took-ukrainian-children-from-the-tot-of-donetsk-region-to-the-urals/>
- <sup>20</sup> Ukrainian National Human Rights Council. Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine to the UN General Assembly (A/78/540) <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A-78-540-En.pdf>
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- <sup>24</sup> European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0072\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0072_EN.pdf)
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- <sup>28</sup> United Nation. Over 115,000 Syrians have returned home since end of Assad dictatorship. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/01/1158706>
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This publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense or the United States government.

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<sup>31</sup> Obozrevatel. Successful cover: Russian special services recruit residents of the occupied part of Ukraine for espionage and sabotage in Europe. <https://news.obozrevatel.com/ukr/abroad/vdale-prikrittya-rosijski-spetssluzhbi-posileno-verbuyut-meshkantsiv-okupovanoi-chastini-ukraini-dlya-roboti-v-evropi.htm>