

Almost 900,000 refugees from war in Ukraine flee to Russia

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The Ukrainian government's war against separatists in eastern Ukraine has forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee. Most have sought refuge in neighbouring Russia, where according to figures from Russia's federal migration agency 875,000 refugees from Ukraine are residing.

Vast numbers of people fled when the Ukrainian army heavily shelled the cities of Donetsk and Lugansk. Although some have returned following the agreement of a ceasefire, the majority have remained in Russia for the time being, fearing a resumption of hostilities. In addition, many houses have been destroyed, making a return simply impossible for many.

Many people have lost all of their belongings. In particular, families with large numbers of children and refugees with serious health problems are in a desperate situation. Many have also been traumatised by the war.

The governments in Berlin and Washington bear the main responsibility for this catastrophe. They backed a coup in Kiev in February, assisted a right-wing and pro-Western regime to power, and practically divided the country. They have been encouraging the Poroshenko regime to take violent action against eastern Ukraine ever since, supporting it militarily.

Kiev has not only deployed the regular army against its opponents, but also fascist militias. While the army has shelled densely populated cities, the militias have terrorised the population with acts of revenge, increasing the wave of refugees in the process.

The refugee crisis in Ukraine has been ignored in the Western media and possible humanitarian aid has not even been discussed.

The refugees have met with broad support from the population in Russia. Many Russians have relatives or friends in Ukraine whose lives have been destroyed by civil war. In a show of solidarity, tens of thousands of Russian families have housed refugees, even though most

people in Russia get by under impoverished conditions. Since government funding is nowhere near enough to meet the refugees' need for medication and warm clothing, they have been forced to rely on donations from the population.

Although Russian President Vladimir Putin declared in June that the refugees were welcome and would be generously supported financially, and the Kremlin promised around 4.5 billion rubles (€100 million) to the refugees from state funds to help everyone, the reality is very different.

Most refugees only have a right to reside for 180 days, following the increase of the temporary residency period of 90 days by the government in July. While according to official figures 800 rubles (around €16) is being spent on every refugee each day, many receive just 100 rubles (around €2).

Due to the flood of refugees, the Kremlin has declared a state of emergency in 20 regions. At the beginning of September, only 40 of 85 regions received financial support from the federal budget. The remaining regions, which are mostly heavily indebted, have to accommodate and care for the refugees at their own expense.

In the Sverdlovsk and Buryatia regions in the Urals, which have not received financial support from Moscow to date, conditions are catastrophic, according to newspaper reports. The situation is especially critical in the southern Russian oblast Rostov, which directly borders Ukraine. Around 300,000 refugees are currently living there.

Refugees are granted the rights to the government's meagre social welfare and to work in Russia only when they are officially accepted as refugees and given Russian citizenship. But this status is very difficult to obtain. In addition, many still plan to return home as quickly as possible.

To date, around one third have applied for refugee

status, and only 33,000 have obtained it. Anna Kusnezova, who fled from Ukraine, told a Russian online newspaper that the federal migration service had convinced her not to apply for refugee status. “I was told that I had to prove that my life was seriously in danger in order to obtain refugee status. That is very difficult, almost impossible.”

Russian companies are seizing upon the insecure position of the refugees to intensify their exploitation. A father of a five-member family from Krammatorsk that found refuge in Moscow reported to the *Argumenty i Fakty* newspaper that he had worked at a job for four days without pay. Ukrainian migrants have been exposed to similarly criminal exploitation as immigrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus.

But even with refugee status, most Ukrainian workers receive poverty wages like their Russian counterparts. When a Ukrainian refugee turned down a job paying 15,000 rubles (around €300) per month and demanded a wage of 40,000 rubles (€800), local and national newspapers attacked the Ukrainian refugees.

Pravda wrote angrily, “There have been cases where refugees from Ukraine have made demands which do not correspond to the status of a refugee, for example, that he should be provided with an apartment, and a job with a wage of 40,000 rubles, and so forth. People who have just been rescued from the fire of war do not behave like that.”

Pravda and other newspapers are attempting to incite the Russian population against the Ukrainian refugees, who are allegedly receiving a lot of money from the state. They are seeking to drive a wedge between the Russian workers, the vast majority of whom live in terrible poverty, and the Ukrainian refugees. Politicians from the right-wing LDPR and Stalinist Communist Party have also expressed themselves in similar terms.

At the same time, authorities in several regions are using the refugee crisis to impose cuts long in the making. In the oblasts Ivanovo and Saratov, the refugees’ plight was used as a pretext to “optimise” three children’s homes, a euphemism for their closure.



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