

East Ukrainian War Refugees Seek Solace in Crimea

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March 17, 2015



A woman and child walk past a residential building decorated with graffiti reading "Yura, we have improved!" and depicting Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin and a map of Crimea in Moscow, Feb. 5.

YALTA, Crimea — As Sergei Gabuyev, a kiosk owner in rebel-held Donetsk, watched a street fight between two groups of insurgents devolve into a sea of AK-47 fire in front of the city's central bus station one evening, he knew it was time to leave.

As had been typical among Ukrainians before the annexation, Gabuyev used to spend his summer vacations in Crimea, nestled somewhere in the verdant slopes of Yalta or the idyllic Yevpatoria steppe.

Gabuyev now lives in Crimea permanently, having abandoned his home and business as Donetsk slid into chaos.

“When I left Donetsk, I expected to return in one to two months’ time, but at this point it

looks unlikely that I'll be able to go back for the foreseeable future," Gabuyev, 40, told The Moscow Times.

"Life is difficult in Crimea, but it beats the constant shelling in Donetsk," he said.

Like many Donetsk refugees The Moscow Times spoke with during a recent visit to Russia's newest region, Gabuyev's loyalties are to Moscow.

Many among this group interpret the peninsula's recent history and the current events unfolding across Ukraine in a manner consistent with the official Russian narrative. Most insisted that they'd formed their opinions independently, having enjoyed access to both Russian and Ukrainian media.

Still, many Donetsk refugees preferred not to discuss politics, indicating a sense of discomfort and unease, perhaps particularly while speaking with a Moscow-based reporter.

While many reports of life in Crimea — particularly among those fleeing from the conflict zones of east Ukraine — are optimistic, the peninsula is not without its controversies.

At least seven Crimean residents have been abducted in the past year. Their fates remain unknown. Another person disappeared, only to turn up dead and bearing physical signs of torture, London-based advocacy group Amnesty International said in a statement Tuesday.

Wednesday marks one year since President Vladimir Putin delivered a landmark speech in the Kremlin, declaring Crimea's accession to Russia's federal fold and launching a turbulent era of Russian relations with the West that many pundits have described as a new Cold War.

Russian flags have replaced Ukrainian ones, but the cityscapes, seashores and lush scenery that define Crimea remain largely unchanged. One thing that has changed is the demographic of the peninsula's population.

Thousands of war refugees have fled the rebel-held Donetsk and Luhansk regions seeking safe harbor in a region recently decry by senior U.S. State Department official Victoria Nuland as "suffering a reign of terror."

In February, Crimea's First Deputy Prime Minister Mikhail Sheremet said some 6,500 refugees had fled to the peninsula from Ukraine's war-ravaged regions in the preceding two months alone, Ukraine's Kharkiv news agency reported.

Several months prior, in August, Sheremet said the total number of east Ukrainian refugees in Crimea was "at least 30,000-50,000," the Novosti Kryma news agency reported.

Today, the streets of Yalta, Sevastopol and Simferopol are bustling with cars bearing Donetsk and Luhansk license plates. If you see a premium sedan or a luxury SUV, chances are you'll find a pair of Donetsk plates attached to it.

"These are representatives of the Donetsk elite," said Gabuyev, who now makes ends meet driving taxis. "Many of these people already owned property in Crimea, and they were among the first to abandon their homes when the fighting began."

With its booming coal industry, Donetsk was traditionally one of Ukraine's wealthiest regions. It was widely acknowledged as the stronghold of Ukraine's richest oligarch, Rinat Akhmetov.

Rustam Temirgaliyev, who had been serving as deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers of Crimea prior to Russia's annexation, told business daily Vedomosti on Monday of a power struggle between the incoming Donetsk elite and the long-standing Crimean elite when the refugees first started to spill into the peninsula, before it became part of Russia.

The lifestyles of most refugees are a far cry from those of the Donetsk glitterati. Gabuyev shares a tiny Yalta flat with several others who fled Donetsk.

Once a week, he leaves Crimea for the coastal Ukrainian city of Odessa to visit his 4-year-old son, who lives with Gabuyev's sister. When asked about the boy's mother, Gabuyev remained evasive.

Together, Gabuyev and his roommates pay 25,000 rubles (\$404) a month for the flat. But this is the off-season price. He fears that when summer begins and prices surge as Russians spill into the peninsula to vacation as he once had, he'll no longer be able to swing the rent.

Still, Gabuyev counts himself among the lucky ones. Many of his fellow refugees can't even afford the luxury of a cramped, shared apartment, instead being relegated to sleeping in their cars.

Aside from soaring on-season prices, Gabuyev and the others may soon face a whole new threat: inhospitable bureaucracy. As Crimea continues to adapt to life under Moscow's rule, Russian migration legislation is beginning to take hold, which will require many Ukrainian citizens to somehow legitimize their residential status — a process that most can expect to be costly and time-consuming.

Under the relevant law, citizens of Ukraine can stay on Russian territory for no more than 90 days within an 180-day period. In order to work legally, foreign citizens must obtain a temporary residence permit, a work permit or a special license known as a work patent.

A governmental decree passed last July that eased the bureaucratic burden for Ukrainians seeking refuge in Russia does not extend to the Crimean Peninsula. Thus, Ukrainians who have sought refuge there can either get a work patent according to the normal protocol, or opt to relocate to mainland Russia — though Moscow, St. Petersburg and Chechnya are also closed to them.

Obtaining a work patent can cost up to 20,000 (\$324), as the process requires a comprehensive medical screening, Russian language tests and a plethora of fees. Once the patent is issued, the foreign citizen must continue to pay up to 2,500 rubles each month in fixed income taxes.

These newfound obstacles have led a number of Crimean businesses to fire refugees from Donetsk and Luhansk, Lyubov Vlasenko, head of a refugee center in the town of Kerch, told Ukraine's Hromadske radio station.

Makeshift refugee shelters have been established by volunteers in every major city in Crimea. Refugees are offered help looking for work, temporary shelter, food and clothing. Several

Soviet-style sanatoriums and modern hotels have likewise offered their rooms for free to those in need, at least for the off-season period.

“Before this whole political quagmire, we never really knew who in Crimea was Ukrainian and who was Russian; the distinction simply did not exist for us,” Yana Ivleva, a volunteer in one such refugee center in Alushta, told The Moscow Times. “So for us helping these refugees is just like helping our own neighbors.”

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/03/17/east-ukrainian-war-refugees-seek-solace-in-crimea-a44851>