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Fear and Uncertainty For Ukrainians Forced to Flee to Russia

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Evacuation of civilians in Mariupol. **Sergei Bobylev / TASS**

After three weeks of sheltering in their basement, Marina, Sergei and their two children, aged 6 and 19, made the difficult decision to flee their home in northeastern Ukraine — but unlike millions of other Ukrainians, they headed east rather than west.

Fighting had been raging near their village of Kozacha Lopan, 48 kilometers from the city of Kharkiv, since Russian forces invaded Ukraine in late February.

"We really wanted to evacuate through Ukraine," Marina said in an interview in which she requested a pseudonym for her and her husband to speak freely. "But sadly, we had no such opportunity."

Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian civilians have crossed the border into Russia since Moscow launched its attack on their country. While there have been widespread reports of

forcible relocation, particularly from devastated cities like Mariupol, many in eastern Ukraine – like Marina and Sergei – had no other alternative but to head for Russia if they wanted to avoid a hazardous journey across the frontlines.

"All the people who ask for our help had no other choice [but to flee to Russia]," said Svetlana Gannushkina, the founder of the Civic Assistance Committee, a Russian human rights NGO that supports refugees.

"Your city is bombed. Buildings collapse, and you can't escape. And then someone clears the collapsed walls and says: "Here is the bus, let's go." People don't ask where they are going. And then they realize they are going to Russia," said Gannushkina.

Bogdan, 29, his wife and their two children decided to escape to Russia when fighting erupted last month in their eastern Ukrainian village of Rubezhnoe. The family is currently in a hotel in the Russian city of Voronezh.

Related article: Refugees Flee Fresh Fighting Around Kyiv

"There was no water, electricity, or gas. We cooperated with our neighbors and decided to leave for Russia. There was nowhere in Ukraine to go — everything was on fire there as well. We needed to get the children to a place of peace," he told The Moscow Times.

Both Russian and Ukrainian officials say that about 700,000 people have left Ukraine for Russia since the start of the invasion. The United Nations puts the figure at 433,083.

Many are forced into so-called "filtration camps" where they are subjected to interrogation and sometimes torture, according to Ukrainian officials and media reports.

Once inside Russia, refugees face an uncertain future. Some are housed in refugee facilities, but most seek shelter with friends and relatives. There are government plans for tens of thousands of Ukrainians to be sent to regions as far away as Siberia, according to a decree issued last month.

On arriving in Russia, Marina, Sergei and their family were put up in a hotel in the western Russian city of Kursk.

Many of the refugees in the same hotel were from the breakaway Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and appeared to support Russia.

"Those who were from DNR were different," said Marina. "They saw the Russians as their savior. We tried not to talk to them much."

She said the staff at the hotel also appeared to support the invasion and told them that Russia was "freeing Ukraine from the Nazis."

It's difficult for Ukrainian refugees to share their honest thoughts about being sent to Russia while they remain inside the country.

Gannushkina said that the Civic Assistance Committee had not seen any refugees complaining

about having to go to Russia. "But we need to understand that people are already in Russia, and they are not in a position to overshare. They are too scared to talk."

The long-term legal status of Ukrainian refugees in Russia is also unclear. Ukrainian Human Rights Ombudswoman Lyudmila Denisova last week criticized so-called "forced passportization" in which Ukrainians were pressured into applying for Russian citizenship, a tactic she said was a violation of international law and the Geneva Conventions.

More than 18,000 Ukrainians have received "urgent" Russian citizenship since the invasion began, according to the Russian Interior Ministry.

"We can only stay in Russia for 90 days," said an elderly woman staying in the same Voronezh hotel as Bogdan and his family.

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"We don't know what we will do after that. We have nowhere to return to: our house in Ukraine is destroyed. They won't give us a flat here, and we're already old," said the woman, who requested anonymity.

Once they arrived in Russia, Marina and Sergei decided they wanted to try and leave for a European country. Friends put Alina in touch with Helping to Leave — a nonprofit organization run by a multinational team of Russian-speaking activists. The group helps refugees from Ukraine reach safety.

When Marina's family left the hotel, staff asked them questions about why they were leaving, but didn't try to stop them.

"Everyone tried to persuade us to stay," Marina said. "But we just said we were going to live with our friends. We were afraid the whole time."

When they crossed the Russian border, this time going westward, border guards interrogated them — but ultimately let them out of the country.

Marina and her family are now in a European Union country, which they declined to identify for safety reasons. But they remain deeply worried about their elderly parents, who refused to leave Ukraine.

Their village of Kozacha Lopan has reportedly been targeted by cluster bomb attacks, and the railway station, shops, and other infrastructure destroyed. Marina's aunt was recently killed in a missile attack.

In the meantime, Marina and Sergei are looking for jobs, as well as a school for their younger son. They hope one day to be able to make the journey back to Ukraine.

"We would love to return home," Marina said, "if there is a home to return to."

The Moscow Times Russian Service contributed reporting

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