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As Ukrainian Forces Withdraw, Kursk Evacuees Reunite With Loved Ones

Hundreds of civilians, many of them elderly, had been trapped in Kyiv-held areas for months, leaving their families fearing for their safety.

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Evacuees from Sudzha. **@Hinshtein / Telegram**

“Grandma, I miss you. I want you to come back as soon as possible.”

These were the words in a video recorded by Lyubov Prilutskaya and her children in hopes of convincing her elderly parents, who wound up under Ukrainian occupation when Kyiv launched its Kursk region incursion in August 2024, to evacuate to safety.

For over seven months, Prilutskaya had no contact with her parents, Alexandra Pashchenko and Ivan Prilutsky, as they remained in their village near Sudzha, a town of about 5,000 residents and the largest population center to fall under Ukrainian control during the attack.

When Russian forces announced last week that they had regained full control of the town, Prilutskaya's parents initially refused to leave their home despite the risks. Only after watching the video of their grandchildren did they finally agree to evacuate.

“They are feeling a bit unwell now. But overall, they are fine,” Prilutskaya said in an interview with the local news outlet Kurskiye Izvestiya on Friday. “They just keep worrying about the home they left behind.“

Russian forces recently regained control over most of the Kursk region, an area Kyiv had hoped to use as leverage in potential peace negotiations. Last week, President Vladimir Putin called on Ukrainian troops still present there to surrender.

For months prior, residents of border villages — many of them elderly — were effectively trapped under Ukrainian control. Families of the missing estimated that as many as 3,000 people were in occupied areas — while authorities said in January that regional police had received reports of at least 1,174 missing persons, 240 of whom were found.

So far, Russian authorities have evacuated 508 people from the reclaimed settlements in the Kursk region, acting Governor Alexander Khinshtein said Wednesday. Some evacuees were taken to temporary shelters, while others were placed with relatives.

Prilutskaya had been one of the most vocal advocates for evacuating Ukrainian-held areas, repeatedly urging Russian authorities to establish safe corridors and create a list of all missing Kursk residents.

Frustrated by officials’ lack of response, she even recorded video appeals to Khinshtein and Russia’s Human Rights Commissioner Tatyana Moskalkova.

“We have been living in uncertainty...The thought of how our loved ones are surviving there — under constant shelling and bombings, without bread, heat or water, and whether they are even alive — is terrifying,” Prilutskaya said in an appeal published in January.

For Prilutskaya’s family, everything ended well.

But since the invasion of Ukraine, the Kursk region has seen at least 167 civilians killed, with 43,000 more affected by the fighting, Russia’s Investigative Committee reported on Friday.

Kursk authorities also said this week that evacuations of civilians’ bodies from the formerly occupied areas of Kursk had begun.

Pro-Kremlin war correspondent Alexander Kots, who visited Sudzha after Ukrainian forces’ retreat, reported finding freshly dug graves in the town.

"Many people died — those who were bedridden, the sick, they were all left behind," one Sudzha resident told Kots in a video interview.

Ukraine previously released numerous videos from occupied Sudzha, showing soldiers distributing humanitarian aid to local residents. In footage published by the Ukrainian outlet TRO Media, Kursk residents praised Kyiv’s forces and complained that the Russian authorities had abandoned them.

The Moscow Times could not independently verify the conditions in which Kursk region residents were living under Ukrainian occupation.

Ukrainians who left areas occupied by Russian forces spoke of oppression, torture and sexual violence. The UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said in a report last year that Russian forces "carried out widespread arbitrary detention of civilians, often accompanied by torture and ill-treatment," in occupied Ukrainian territories.

Prilutskaya estimates that up to 1,500 people might still be in Sudzha, she told the independent regional media outlet 7x7 on Wednesday.

She said her parents were currently processing the necessary documents to receive state assistance for those who lived under Ukrainian occupation. At the same time, they already want to return to Sudzha.

"They're already asking to go back. We're doing everything we can to convince them otherwise," Prilutskaya said.

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