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# To Help 'Brotherly People'? Russian Policy towards Ukrainian Refugees

## IRINA KUZNETSOVA

*Abstract*

The essay focuses on Russian policy towards displaced persons from Ukraine's war-torn territories from 2014 until mid-2019. The privileging of refugees from Ukraine relative to immigrants and refugees from other countries and, later, the granting of Russian citizenship to Ukrainian citizens from Donetsk and Luhansk regions, were interwoven with both influence-seeking in the Russian geopolitical neighbourhood and transborder nationalism and supported *via* direct presidential control of immigration. Despite a series of decrees and involvement of civil society in providing support, this essay detected the lack of efficient mechanisms for responding to the needs of the displaced.

THE ARMED CONFLICT IN UKRAINE THAT STARTED IN 2014 HAS, SO FAR, cost the lives of about 13,000 people, including over 3,000 civilians (OHCHR 2019, p. 6). Half the population of Donbas has been forced to flee. The majority of those who have fled, over 1.3 million, went to other parts of Ukraine (IOM 2019); over one million went to Russia (UNHCR 2016). The government-led campaign to welcome Ukrainian refugees in Russia was based on the idea of supporting 'brotherly people', namely Slavic Russian-speaking people, and received significant political and financial resources from the federal government from the outset of the conflict. Putin signed a decree on 29 April 2019 bringing in a simplified procedure to grant Russian citizenship to Ukrainian citizens residing in the non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasti*, with later amendments adding citizens from all areas of these *oblasti*.

As most conceptual frameworks of forced displacement are based on research on migration from the Global South to the Global North, displacement from Ukraine to Russia requires a different theoretical and methodological perspective. While the nature of the conflict and its socio-political origins are well represented in academic discourse (see for example, Sakwa 2014; Kuzio 2015; Wilson 2016, Malyarenko & Wolff 2018), discussions of the subsequent refugee policies towards displaced people from Ukraine in Russia are rare. Some studies show that Ukrainian refugees have a wide range of experiences and that refugee policies in Russia do not meet their needs (Kuznetsova 2018; Myhre 2018). What remains unclear is how the policy approach towards displaced people is connected to Moscow's geopolitical and nationalistic agenda. To explore this nexus further, this article engages with Brubaker's approach to transborder nationalism (Brubaker 2010), and explores Russia's immigration and refugee policy towards Ukrainians in a context of 'influence seeking' (Malyarenko & Wolff 2018). Considering unprecedented and swift changes in legislation that privilege displaced people from Ukraine in terms of applying for temporary asylum and citizenship, the hypothesis of the 'manual control' of immigration (Schenk 2013) is also tested. After detailing the methodology of the research, the essay analyses the political discourse of Russian authorities on Ukrainian citizens who have fled Donbas and, more recently, on those who still reside in the non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasti*. Government and civil society responses are explored alongside the situation of the Ukrainian diaspora. The essay goes on to focus on policies that regulate the status of Ukrainian citizens who have sought refuge in Russia, including the 'Compatriots' programme, rules on temporary asylum and refugee status and, finally Putin's recent decree simplifying the granting of citizenship for Ukrainian citizens from Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Drawing on these results, the essay argues that the geopolitical interests of Russia and nationalism influence its selective refugee and immigration policy towards Ukrainian citizens in Russia.

## 'Influence seeking', nationalism and 'manual control' of immigration

Many European societies are currently divided by their attitude towards immigrants, which has increased nationalism and rightwing social movements (Wodak & Boukala 2015; Postelnicescu 2016; Brubaker 2017; Antonsich 2018). Russian nationalism is no exception to this, with anti-immigrant rhetoric one of its main themes in past years (Laruelle 2010; Hutchings & Tolz 2015; Zakharov 2016; Tolz 2017), fed by postcolonial and racist narratives (Kuznetsova & Round 2018). However, Russian authorities welcomed hundreds of thousands of persons who fled Donbas in 2014, referring to them as 'brothers' and survivors, and offering opportunities to apply for temporary asylum and a special route to citizenship. Comparing Russia's generally very restrictive and

unwelcoming position on refugees from most of the countries[1], the case of displaced people from Ukraine suggests that Russia has a selective refugee policy, based on nationalistic narratives of Slavic brotherhood and a contemporary geopolitical situation in which Russia is attempting to win back lost influence.

Historically, there are some analogies with the USSR's collapse and the subsequent ethnic tensions in former Soviet republics, which saw the mass migration of ethnic Russians to Russia in the early 1990s (Pilkington 1998; Pilkington & Flynn 1999).[2] Between 1992 and 2000, around 1.3 million people from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the former USSR Baltic states received temporary asylum or refugee status. (Mkrtchyan 2002).[3]

Addressing the politics of belonging in Russia as a form of 'transborder' nationalism, Brubaker argues that 'when the Soviet Union collapsed, borders moved over people, not (immediately) *vice versa*, thus creating the post-Soviet internal and external membership politics in Russia and the other successor states' (Brubaker 2010, p. 69). According to Brubaker and Kim, the transborder membership politics involves 'political claims, institutionalized practices, and discursive representations oriented to or generated by a population that is durably situated outside the territory of a particular state, yet is represented as belonging in some way to that state or to the nation associated with that state' (Brubaker & Kim 2011, p. 22).

This point supports an understanding that Russia's granting of citizenship to 'compatriots' has a political motivation (Shevel 2011; Laruelle 2015; Tkach 2017).[4] In her study on policy towards displaced people from

[1] For example, Russia has granted refugee status to only 0.2% of Syrians who have entered Russia to claim asylum (Denisova 2018), see also Kubal 2016. According to UNHRC, on the 1st of July 2019, among 61 948 people with temporal asylum status in Russia, only 1755 were not Ukrainian citizens (mostly from Syria and Afghanistan) (UNHCR 2019).

[2] According to the 1989 Soviet census, the number of Russians living in Soviet republics other than the Russian Federation was 25.289 million ('Vsesoyuznaya perepis' naseleniya 1989 goda. Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniya po respublikam SSSR', *Demoscope Weekly*, 2019, available at: http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_89.php?reg=0, accessed 20 May 2019).

[3] Forcibly displaced people and refugees have been officially registered since July 1992, after the establishment of the Russian Federal Migration Service. However, before laws on refugees and forcibly displaced people were adopted in February 1993, these categories were combined (Mkrtchayn 2002).

[4] 'The State Programme to Assist Voluntary Resettlement of Compatriots Living Abroad to the Russian Federation State for the Voluntary Resettlement of Compatriots Living Abroad to the Russian Federation. Approved by Decree No. 637 of President Putin' [Please provide the title in the original Russian, transliterated to journal style], 22 June 2006, available at: http://www.ruvek.ru/?module=docs&action=view&id=724, accessed 24 July 2018.

Ukraine, Myhre demonstrates that Russian authorities 'have tried to control and distribute these refugees and migrants for the benefit of the state, according to principles of selectivity and economic interests—giving privileged access to permanent residency and citizenship to working-age people' (Myhre 2018, p. 104). Our research also confirms that access to Russian citizenship among the displaced from Ukraine is unequal (Kuznetsova 2018); however, I argue that this selective policy towards displaced Ukrainians originates from Russia's policy of influence-seeking in its neighbourhood, and is supported through direct presidential intervention.

The large-scale migration of Ukrainians fleeing from the war in Donbas from 2014 is significantly different from the displacement in the early 1990s because of the special character of geopolitical relations between Russia and Ukraine. As Malyarenko and Wolff state, 'Russia's neighborhood strategy in Ukraine is driven by the logic of competitive influence-seeking' (2018, p. 205), and 'Russia has used various tactics to assert and sustain its influence in and over Ukraine, gradually escalating its level of military engagement in combination with consolidating its diplomatic and political leverage' (2018, p. 203).

The role of nationalism is not very straightforward in this influence seeking, as Laruelle has argued: 'The articulation between nationalism and Russia's foreign policy poses a chicken–egg dilemma' (Laruelle 2015, p. 95). She suggests that the rhetoric of a 'divided nation', as presented in the 'Compatriots' programme and which became explicit from the start of the Ukrainian crisis, is 'part of the discursive repertoire of Russia's foreign policy, deployed whenever the Kremlin needs to penalise a neighbour for its geopolitical or political disloyalty, but it does not appear as a driver of routine foreign policy decisions' (Laruelle 2015, p. 95). Following Schenk's that Russia's migration policy is interwoven with its geopolitical interests (Schenk 2016), I argue that its policy towards refugees from the eastern regions of Ukraine was instrumental in this respect and balanced between, on the one hand, humanitarian responsibilities and the requirement to keep a status quo related to the promises given to the displaced from Donbas, and on the other, the immigration regulations and positionality of Russia in the context of the conflict in Ukraine.

The essay argues that this selective refugee policy in Russia can be understood through what Brubaker (2002, p. 167) called 'ethnicity without groups', which implies thinking about ethnicity and the nation in terms of practical categories, discursive frames, organisational routines, institutional forms and political projects. It is important to look at the categorisation and discursive frames used to define the beneficiaries of the policy towards the displaced people from Donbas, as the ethnic categories 'channel conduct through official classifications …

and may be used to allocate rights, regulate actions' among other things (Brubaker 2002, p. 184) when a state identifies and constitutes a transborder population as 'their own' (Brubaker 2010).

I argue that in terms of immigration control, the only way to react rapidly to an influx of refugees and, later, to authorise privileged access to citizen status, was 'manual control' by the head of state. Following Schenk, who emphasises the importance of 'manual control' in Russia's current immigration policies, I understand 'manual control' as 'a technique of authoritarian rule employed by Russian political elites that uses personal intervention in policymaking in order to maintain popular legitimacy for the regime and shore up the vertical of power' (Schenk 2013, p. 1446). Schenk argues that manual control is exercised by presidential decree (*ukaz*), firm control of the *Duma* and so-called 'telephone justice' (informal influence) (2013, p. 1448).

In our research, manual control is considered an instrument of refugee policy, privileging some categories of displaced people in a situation of crisis and a war. The discussion below focuses on policies towards the displaced from Ukraine from spring 2014 until July 2019, and aims to analyse how the Kremlin's rhetoric of 'brotherly people' was embedded in the policies. I argue that the logic of 'transborder nationalism' and Russia's influence seeking in Ukraine are the reasons why displaced people from Donbas are not considered refugees but prospective citizens within current policies.

### *Methods*

The field research upon which this essay is based was conducted 2016–2018 and includes interviews with displaced people, and representatives of local and national authorities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and textual analysis of relevant documents and official statements up to July 2019. The essay uses the term 'refugees' not as a legal term but as the equivalent of forcibly displaced people for both lived experiences and the political rhetoric which named the displaced from Donbas as refugees. In-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with women and men of different ages displaced from non-government-controlled areas in southeast Ukraine and nearby territories (n=60). These interviews were undertaken in Kazan, Moscow and Moscow O*blast'* and also in Kaluga, Voronezh and Vladivostok; 20 more interviews were undertaken with public officials and representatives of civil society and international organisations. The snowball technique was used to select informants among refugees. The interviews with displaced people were anonymous and conducted in such a way as to minimise the risks of the disclosure of personal information. The discussions below, due to space limitations, are restricted to analysis of policies.

*The rhetoric of 'brotherly people', 'manual control' and humanitarian response*

From the outset of the conflict, thousands of refugees fled to Russia's southern regions, especially to Rostov and Krasnodar *oblasti*. The Russian Ministry for Emergency Situations was put in charge of organising accommodation for refugees and, according to an interview with the UNHCR representation in Russia, temporary refugee camps were set up with relatively good living conditions.[5] A government decree issued on 22 June 2014, simplified the asylum procedure, shortening to a maximum of three days the decision-making times for granting temporary asylum to Ukrainian citizens. It also recommended that the local authorities would fund temporary accommodation for some of the displaced for Ukraine and provide premises for free for centres for the registration of refugees.[6] Assistance was provided for evacuation from areas of conflict, and many respondents interviewed while researching this article stated that for them it did not matter whether to flee to Ukraine or Russia because they just had to save their lives.

If people arrived in the southern areas of Russia, transport services were provided to take them to other Russian regions (Borisov 2014). Most interviewees made their own choice about where to go and did not ask for any assistance. Centres were set up by local authorities for people displaced from Ukraine, usually in former Pioneer camps, hostels or sanatoriums. By the end of 2014, there were 576 such centres accommodating about 30,000 people,[7] mostly for those with special needs, such as single parents or large families. According to the deputy chief of the migration office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Valentina Kazakova, 'Overall in 2014–16 the government spent about 18 billion rubles to support refugees and displaced people including 70% for living costs'.[8] The federal government used its increased administrative powers under the 'power vertical' to force regional authorities to support refugees financially, with particular reference to facilitate their access to jobs.

The influx of people from Ukraine saw the rise of volunteer activities and civil society groups aimed at supporting refugees, initially by providing food, clothes and sometimes a place to live. This support was

[5] Interview, Moscow, April 2017. [Please provide more information on the interviewee – please can you provide their name/pseudonym and profession]

[6] Postanovlenie Pravitel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 22 iyulya 2014 g. N 690 g. Moskva 'O predostavlenii vremennogo ubezhishcha grazhdanam Ukrainy na territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii v uproshchennom poryadke', available at: https://rg.ru/2014/07/24/bejency-site-dok.html, accessed 26 June 2017.

[7] 'V Rossii prodolzhayut deystvovat' 47 PVR dlya bezhentsev s Ukrainy', *RIA Novosti*, 27 October 2016, available at: *https://ria.ru/society/20161027/1480119047.html*, accessed 20 November 2016.

[8] 'V Rossii prodolzhayut deystvovat' 47 PVR dlya bezhentsev s Ukrainy', *RIA Novosti*, 27 October 2016, available at: https://ria.ru/society/20161027/1480119047.html, accessed 20 November 2016.

significant: a Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (WCIOM) survey in 2014 showed that 17% of people in Russia had Ukrainian refugees among their acquaintances and that 14% had provided material aid for them.[9] Russian mass media devoted particular attention to the campaign that—through information points, charitable events and volunteering opportunities—intended to support Ukrainian refugees. As Mukomel (2017) notes, out of 70,000 articles in the media and internet on people who fled Ukraine published between June 2014 and June 2016, 64% were published in the short period between June and September 2014. In our research, overall, respondents were surprised by the support they had received from civil society in Russia: 'We were amazed by the depth of the kindness of the local population in Kazan. … And when we said that we were from Ukraine, some people burst into tears.'[10]

Reflecting why civil society provided such a quick and generous response to Ukraine's refugees, one of the directors of a charitable foundation in Kazan stressed:

> It is how Russia is interwoven [with former Soviet republics], although we live separately, there are such tight bonds. This is a unique phenomenon of the Soviet state. …We are all Slavs and have the same language. …they [people from Donbas] always were different from the rest of Russia … but different in a very nice way.[11]

How could such a rapid positive response towards Ukrainian refugees in Russia be explained apart from media influence? Studies have shown that before 2014, Ukrainians were regarded as more 'favourable' migrants for the population in comparison with migrants from other countries, which might be one of the factors (Bessudnov 2016). A genuine and spontaneous public solidarity with and sympathy for the Ukrainian refugees cannot be discounted. However, this article will concentrate on how this humanitarian response and government policies were supported by state rhetoric.

Central to Putin's discourse about Ukraine's crisis was the assumption that 'ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in the south-east of Ukraine' were under threat (O'Loughlin *et al*. 2017, p. 128). From the very beginning

[9] 'Grazhdanskaya voina na Ukraine: mysli, chuvstva, emotsii rossiyan', Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, 31 June 2014, available at: https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=753, accessed 18 May 2017.

[10] Interview with male, 48 years old, resident in Kazan, Russia, September 2016.

[11] Interview with a director of a charitable foundation, Kazan, August 2016.

of the conflict in Donbas, senior Russian politicians accused Ukrainian authorities of genocide to justify the urgent need to support refugees from Donbas. For example, Sergey Ivanov, former chief of the administration of the Russian president, stated in the early days of the displacement:

> What takes place there, I do not want to be pathetic, but there is a civil war, which is turning into genocide against its own citizens. Obviously, it is a humanitarian catastrophe. But we, the regional and federal governments, will react and help. Again, there are innocent people, brotherly people.[12]

Later in December 2014, in a meeting of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, Putin discussed the situation of Ukrainian refugees and people residing in the Donbas conflict zone. He claimed that the Ukrainian authorities were conducting a campaign of genocide and referred to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

> These events exposed the full-blown crisis of both international law and the basic norms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. Article 3, 4, 5, 7, 11 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, Article 3 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of December 9, 1948 are violated on a mass scale. … People here are subjected to torture, cruel and degrading punishment, discrimination and unjust decisions. [13]

As Kuzio (2016) has highlighted, positioning Ukrainian nationalists as fascists has been part of the hybrid war since 2014. It was also echoed in statements by separatists leaders, for example, by the assassinated DNR

[12] 'Bezhentsy s Ukrainy v Rossii smogut rasschityvat' na adresnuyu finansovuyu pomoshch'', *Pervyi kanal*, 19 June 2014, available at: https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-06-19/44183-bezhentsy_s_ukrainy_v_rossii_smogut_rasschityvat_na_adresnuyu_finansovuyu_pomosch, accessed 10 November 2016.

[13] See, for example, 'Zasedanie Soveta po razvitiyu grazhdanskogo obshchestva i pravam cheloveka', President of Russia, 14 October 2014, available at: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46786, accessed 3 December 2019.

separatist leader Sergei Zakharchenko, who blamed Ukraine for the genocide in Donetsk.[14] This position is not only expressed in media from Novorossiya or Donetsk but also in some popular Russian newspapers. In an interview to *Kommersant''*, Vladislav Brig, a representative of the armed forces of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) explicitly used the word 'genocide' to describe the conflict in Donbas;[15] barristers from Donetsk were apparently preparing a 'second Nuremberg' to bring to justice Ukrainian authorities for war crimes committed in the armed conflict.[16] The discourse of genocide has been also used polemically by both Ukrainian and Russian politicians when commenting on refugees from Donbas. Ukrainian politicians are troubled by the number of Ukrainians living in Russia, as the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin claimed in 2018: 'Russia is waging a war against us, but three million Ukrainians still live in Russia. That is, almost every twelfth Ukrainian is now in Russia.'[17] As a response, Russian MP Evgenii Revenko insisted that the return of Ukrainian migrants from Russia to Ukraine would be as bad as a 'genocide', due to the very poor economic context they will find locally.[18] It demonstrates how the Kremlin uses transborder nationalistic rhetoric, justifying separatists' actions and providing an ideological basis for the shift in immigration policies towards Ukrainian refugees in a context of influence seeking in the neighbourhood. This has become very explicit in the context of challenges faced by Ukrainian diaspora organisations in Russia since 2014.

*Ukrainian diaspora in Russia: challenges and persecution*

[14] 'Zakharchenko obvinil rezhim Poroshenko v samoi massovoi posle VOV gibeli naseleniya Donbassa', *TASS*, 22 May 2018, available at: http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/5222220, accessed 3 December 2019.

[15] 'Samoprovozglashennye DNR i LNR soglashayutsya na shirochayshchyu avtonomiyu', *Kommersant''*, 13 May 2015, available at: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2725314, accessed 29 October 2017.

[16] 'Donetskie yuristy gotovyat "Vtoroi Nyurnberg"', *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 12 August 2015, available at: https://www.kp.ru/daily/26418/3292160/, accessed 29 October 2017.

[17] 'About three million Ukrainians currently live in Russia, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin has said', *Ukrinform*, 23 April 2018, available at: https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/2446967-almost-three-million-ukrainians-live-in-russia-klimkin.html, accessed 1 June 2018.

[18] 'Revenko o zayavlenii Klimkina: eto genotsid sobstvennogo naroda', *Vesti*, 23 April 2018, available at: https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=3010410, accessed 1 June 2018.

The conflict in Donbas was followed by the persecution of some of the prominent members of the Ukrainian diaspora in Russia. For example, Natalya Sharina, the director of the Ukrainian library in Moscow, received four years' suspended sentence for possession of banned literature, including a book on the Holodomor, and for financial fraud. Sharina claims that someone else must have placed those books in the library.[19] The Russian Ministry of Justice refused to register Ukrainian Congress, an NGO that aimed to support the Ukrainian diaspora in Russia.[20] Victor Girzhov, the founder of the Congress, was forced off a train by the Russian security services on his way from Kyiv to Moscow and refused entry to Russia.[21] In July 2019, the Russian Prosecutor General's Office blacklisted the Canada-based Ukrainian World Congress and instructed the Ministry of Justice to register it as an 'undesirable organisation' noting that 'the activities of this organisation pose a threat to the fundamentals of the constitutional system and the security of the Russian Federation'. [22] Before 2014, there were 120 Ukrainian ethnic-cultural organisations in Russia with the aim of supporting the Ukrainian language and traditional culture (Glukhovsky 2015). There was no data about the number of such organisations at the time of writing, but interviews revealed that some of them had reduced their activity because of the conflict in Donbas.

The 2017 UN report 'Racism, Discrimination and Fight against "Extremism" in Contemporary Russia', flags up the issues that the Ukrainian minority face in Russia. Discrimination includes hate speech, people feeling it is dangerous to speak their language, and the persecution of Ukrainians who attempt 'to assert their native culture and pro-Ukrainian positions' (UNHR 2017, p. 22). Therefore, refugees who value their Ukrainian ethnic

[19] 'Ex-head of Ukraine library in Moscow Natalia Sharina guilty', *BBC*, 5 June 2017, available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-40162173, accessed 10 September 2017.

[20] 'Ukrainskii kongress Rossii schitaet otkaz v registratsii davleniem na ukrainskuyu diasporu', *112ua*, 8 July 2014, available at: https://112.ua/politika/ukrainskiy-kongress-rossii-schitaet-otkaz-v-registracii-davleniem-na-ukrainskuyu-diasporu-84775.html, accessed 15 October 2017. [Please check that this follows our transliteration system from Ukrainian] – this is an article in Russian but I edited the mistakes in transliteration

[21] 'Zhurnalistu Viktoru Girzhovu zapreshchen v'ezd v Rossiyu', *RFI/RL*, 14 October 2015, available at: https://www.svoboda.org/a/27305675.html, accessed 15 October 2017.

[22] 'General'naya prokuratura Rossiiskoi Federatsii prinyala reshenie o priznanii nezhelatel'noi na territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii deyatel'nosti mezhdunarodnoi nepravitel'stvennoi organizatsii', General'naya prokuratura Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 11 July 2019, available at: https://genproc.gov.ru/smi/news/genproc/news-1653516/, accessed 16 July 2019.

and cultural identity do not have many opportunities to preserve their language and culture while in Russia.[23] There are some informal groups in social media were organised by displaced from Donbas, for example, such groups in Vkontakte as 'Donbas in Moscow. Displaced and refugees' (over 11 thousand members), 'Donbas in Kaluga. Displaced and refugees' (over 800), 'Donbas in Rostov. Displaced and refugees' (over 3000), and similar groups in some other cities. Some smaller groups are devoted to Donetsk and Lugansk displaced or in general to 'Ukrainian refugees'.

The conflict in Ukraine has split the Ukrainian diaspora in Russia. An activist belonging to one of the ethnic associations in Russia described how support for the refuges was political contentious:

> There are two divisions in the Ukrainian diaspora—pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian. Also, I discussed the official position of authorities; it's accurately designated. If somebody from the Ukrainian diaspora openly supports refugees, there could be a conflict. However, some [representatives of Ukrainian diaspora's organisations] provides support unofficially, but they cannot demonstrate their position. Most of the people, let's say just frankly, cannot express it.[24]

It appears that any reference to Ukrainian culture and language has been excluded from the discourse on the displaced people from Donbas. Also, the situation with silencing Ukrainian identity could be interpreted as what Feklyunina called 'a hierarchical relationship between Russia and other members of the community' (Feklyunina 2016, p. 784). In such a relationship, Ukrainian ethnicity is considered not as an independent category but as part of a greater, overaching Russian identity.

From the very beginning, policies towards displaced from Donbas were conducted via manual control and became very dependant from Russia's geopolitical vector. Therefore, the alternative voice in regards the war in Donbas and consequently, concerning the Russian policy towards displaced from south-eastern Ukraine could not be welcome. A discourse blaming Ukrainian authorities for genocide and prosecutions against Ukrainian organisations and activists in Russia not only prevented Ukrainian diaspora's involvement into the campaign to

[23] This is compounded by the context, which was described by Victor Girzhov, the former head of the association 'Ukrainians of Moscow' and initiator of Ukrainian Congress, as the assimilation of Ukrainians within a dominant culture (Glukhovsky 2015). Official statistics confirm this latter proposition: between 2002 and 2010, the number of ethnic Ukrainian decreased from over 2.9 million to 1.92 million (Rosstat 2010).

[24] Interview with an activist belonging to one of the ethnic associations in Russia, July 2016. The location and organisation are not provided here because of confidentiality requirements.

support displaced but questioned the future of the development of Ukrainian culture and language in Russia. While opportunities for the diaspora to influence policies towards refugees were limited, Russian civil society was actively involved, albeit reluctantly, as it will be discussed in the next section.

*The role of civil society*

The key role of organising NGOs and charities to help refugees is filled by the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, regional civic chambers and all-Russian and regional coordination committees. At the regional level, as in Tatarstan, for example, interviews revealed that the Civic Chamber, comprising representatives of business, culture and civic society, provided a platform for the coordination of urgent help for Ukrainian refugees: this platform included specific areas—employment, health care, inter alia—that were not covered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and local authorities. Similar situations emerged in other regions: a public official interviewed in Vladivostok noted that, by request from the regional Civil Chamber, two notary companies in Vladivostok work for free, translating and notarising around 5,000 documents for Ukrainian refugees, so that they could meet bureaucratic requirements.[25]

Alongside volunteers and NGOs who had no particular ideological motivation were large-scale charitable campaigns organised under the slogan 'Help for Novorossiya'. The board of trustees of one of the biggest private charitable foundations helping refugees from Ukraine—the Foundation of Saint Vassily Veliky—is headed by businessman Konstantin Malopheev, who is under sanction from the European Union, Canada and Ukraine for financing 'illegal armed groups' in Ukraine (Weaver 2014).[26] On the other hand, groups such as the Civil Assistance Committee and *Memorial*, which have provided free advocacy services for Ukrainian refugees in numerous Russian regions, have been forced to decrease their activities under the 'foreign agents' law', which has created barriers for NGOs receiving funding from abroad and generally discredited them.[27] As Civil Assistance Committee stressed in 2016, after a year or including the organisation into the list of 'foreign agents', they received less funding from donors and had to close some of the projects. Moreover, they were twice denied in collaboration with Russia charities because of the 'foreign agent' label. [28] Some of the foreign donors including

[25] Interview with a public official, Vladivostok, October 2016.

[26] 'Kak fond Konstantina Malofeeva pomogaet Novorossii', *RBC.ru*, 8 September 2014, available at: https://www.rbc.ru/politics/08/09/2014/5424884bcbb20f18b6e4b903, accessed 20 December 2016.

[27] See, for example, Crotty *et al*. (2014); Stewart and Dollbaum (2017).

[28] Civic Assistance Committee (2016) *One Year With 'Foreign Agent' Label,* 16 May,

The National Endowment for Democracy and Open Society Foundation which supported human rights projects were included to the list of 'undesirable organisations', and had to stop their work in Russia.

By 2016, two years after the beginning of the conflict, state-led discourses had become less supportive of the refugees' plight. Interviewees stated that issues facing refugees from Eastern Ukraine had been 'forgotten' (Kuznetsova 2018). Mukomel (2017) notes a marked decrease in media attention to Ukrainian refugees: out of the 70,000 articles in print and online news sources about people who fled Ukraine that were published between June 2014 and June 2016, only 14% were published in the second year, between May 2015 and June 2016. At the same time, efforts by both the state and civil society to support Ukrainian refugees declined. The chief of the NGO Civil Assistance, Svetlana Ganushkina, said during an interview with the author in April 2017 'those who ideologically supported those from Eastern Ukraine… their activities quickly started to decrease, they quickly lost their enthusiasm'. The number of temporary accommodation centres was decreasing every year—from 567 in 2014 to 252 in 2015 and 56 on September 2016 (Litvinova 2016a): the last of this centres was closed on 1 January 2017. While authorities justified this decision by the decreasing number of the demand from the displaced population (Litvinova 2016b), those forced out were not offered alternatives or any support in looking for accommodation. Considering that most of the people who lived there were the most vulnerable groups, this step had serious consequences for many, as described by an NGO interviewee:

> As the federal subsidies ended, the regionals [regional authorities] promptly asked all refugees to leave and people faced a stressful situation when it was necessary to urgently look for somewhere to rent; it was necessary to look for work, and those who suffered most, of course, were single mothers, people with many children, the disabled, pregnant women.[29]

There was very little coverage in the media about the closures, and NGOs had little success in raising awareness. The day before these closures, Mikhail Scheglov—leader of the Russian Ethnic Society of Tatarstan, who provided a lot of support for those who fled from Donbas—tried to raise awareness of the situation. To discuss the issue, Scheglov called a press conference, at which, however, none of the invited local and regional politicians was present. Ultimately, he was unable to gain any media coverage (Shamsutdinova 2016).

available at: https://refugee.ru/en/news/one-year-with-foreign-agent-label/, accessed 11 July 2019.

[29] Skype interview with a representative of a Human Rights NGO, Kaluga, January 2018.

Overall, there is now little open discussion about the situation of Ukrainian refugees in the Russian media and almost no meaningful dialogue between state and regional officials, on the one hand, and civil society representatives, on the other. One of the reasons for this public silence, put forward by Lydia Grafova, a prominent Russian human rights activist, is corruption, which makes authorities unwilling to allow public oversight of the significant financial resources allocated by the federal government to spend on Ukrainian refugees. In 2014, at the beginning of the government-led campaign to welcome refugees, she stated:

> Strikingly, even in the current extreme situation, when state services are clearly unable to cope with the flood of problems of refugees, many officials are not interested in the help offered by competent NGOs. Taking into account the omnipresence of our 'mistress', corruption, it would be good of course to suggest that for using budget funds allocated for refugees, vigilant public control is needed, but I know that officials will not allow anyone into this 'inner sanctum' (Grafova 2014).

The current, difficult position of Russian civil society under the Putin regime is another reason for the lack of attention paid to Ukrainian refugees by NGOs; in addition, discussion of the conflict that contradicts the official government view of besieged 'compatriots' requiring assistance creates further difficulties. As an academic expert in migration policy in Russia noted during an interview in 2017:

> And this is a problem, as the issues of refugees are not discussed within society. Any discussion of this by an NGO means that it can be declared a 'foreign agent'; an individual can be criticised. A different point of view is not welcome. We can have negative consequences.[30]

Thus, despite the initial efforts by government and civil society to support the Ukrainian refugees, the withdrawal of government support and the erosion of the allocated public funds by corruption has left many refugees struggling.

*Refugee, asylum seeker or compatriot? Ambiguous policy towards displaced Ukrainians*

It is difficult to estimate the total number of refugees from Donbas who now reside in Russia. In 2016, the Deputy Head of the Federal Migration Service, Nikolay Smorodin, noted a continuous rise of the number of people fleeing

[30] Interview with an academic expert in immigration policy, Moscow, July 2017.

from south-eastern Ukraine to Russia, stating that by January 2016 the balance between 'entry' and 'exit' amounted to over 1.1 million people.[31] However, it is impossible to say how many are from the conflict zones and what status they hold: refugee, temporary asylum, regular labour or irregular migrants (those who, for example, overstay in Russia without permission). What is clear, however, is that very few of them have been granted refugee status: only 894 Ukrainian citizens were registered as refugees in Russia between 2014 and June 2019 (Rosstat 2019). It is interesting that the level of recognition of Syrian refugees is also very low: Russia has granted refugee status to only 0.2% of Syrians who have entered Russia to claim asylum; the United Kingdom recognised 85% of asylum seekers from Syria as refugees (Denisova 2018).[32] Putin sent a clear message to the government that it must not to allow to replicate in Russian patterns of illegal migration witnessed in the European Union, in order 'not to offend Russian Federation citizens'.[33] Top Russian politicians quickly toed the presidential line: in 2016, Valentina Matvienko, chairwoman of the Federation Council, warned that 'the interests of Russian citizens should be reliably protected from threats associated with the migration crisis in Europe'.[34] Svetlana Ganushkina, chief of the NGO Civil Assistance Committee, which has supported refugees in Russia since 1989, told the author:

> We [in Russia] do not give refugee status to anybody. There is such a policy. 'Why do we need them?' We often hear this question. I cannot answer that, because they, as you know, apply for asylum not because we need them but because we are obliged to provide asylum. This humanitarian problem is not considered seriously in Russia.[35]

Although Russia signed the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1992, there have been significant issues with respect to the rights of refugees in Russia, including the lack of transparent information

[31] 'FMS: prodolzhaet rasti chislo grazhdan Ukrainy, pereezzhayushchikh v Rossiyu', *RIA Novosti*, 28 January 2016, available at: https://ria.ru/20160128/1366392744.html, accessed 18 January 2018.

[32] See also Kubal (2016).

[33] 'Putin prizval ne dopustit' v Rossii situatsiyu s nezakonnoi migratsiei, kak v ES', *RIA Novisti*, 15 March 2016, available at: https://ria.ru/20160315/1390339905.html?in=t, accessed 15 December 2016.

[34] 'Valentina Matvienko: bez RF ne reshit' ni odnoi mezhdunarodnoi problemy', *RIA Novosti*, 25 March 2015, available at: https://ria.ru/20160325/1396761678.html, accessed 15 December 2016.

[35] Interview with Svetlana Ganushkina, chief of the NGO Civil Assistance Committee, Moscow, April 2017.

about the criteria of applying for asylum, the unlawful rejection of applications, corruption, the violation of the rights of refugees and stateless refugees to receive citizenship, and barriers to the naturalisation of persons who have received temporary asylum *via* a temporary residence permit and indefinite leave to remain (Burtina *et al.* 2015). At the beginning of the conflict, the Russian government accepted Ukrainian refugees as on the legal basis of temporary asylum. As mentioned above, soon after the arrival of hundreds of thousands of displaced Ukrainians in July 2014, Russia adopted the law on the Regulation of Granting Temporary Asylum for Citizens of Ukraine,[36] followed by the Provisional Simplified Rules for Granting Temporary Asylum in the Territory of the Russian Federation for Citizens of Ukraine and Stateless Persons.[37] However, from summer 2014, there were long queues to apply for asylum, and in Moscow and St Petersburg, people had to wait for several months just to submit an application.[38] Furthermore, due to the location-based quota system, Moscow City, Moscow *Oblast'*, St Petersburg, Rostov *Oblast'*, Crimea and Sevastopol were soon closed to refugees as quotas were quickly met.[39] As noted by the NGO 'Migration and Law' network ,[40] the introduction of such quotas this was illegal, as the Russian law on refugees does not mandate quotas for asylum applications in Russian regions.[41]Although many refugees intended to stay with relatives in Russia, who would obviously provide support, they were still included in the quota, thus limiting the overall numbers.

[36] Pravitel'stvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii. Postanovlenie ot 22 iyulya 2014 g. No 690. Moskva. 'O predostavlenii vremennogo ubezhishcha grazhdanam Ukrainy na territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii v uproshchennom poryadke, available at: http://government.ru/media/files/41d4f3a5c06af7f5f50e.pdf, accessed 18 January 2018.

[37] Pravitel'stvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii. Postanovlenie ot 22 iyulya 2014 g. No 691. Moskva. Ob utverzhdenii raspredeleniya po sub"ektam Rossiisko' Federatsii grazhdan Ukrainy i lits bez grazhdanstva, postoyanno prozhivayushchikh na territorii Ukrainy i pribyvshih na territoriiyu Rossiiskoi Federatsii v ekstrennom massovom poryadke, available at: http://static.government.ru/media/files/41d4f3a61bb7c28f744d.pdf, accessed 18 January 2018. An application for temporary asylum could be submitted at the local office of the former Federal Migration Service (FMS) or at one of the regional centres specially set up for Ukrainian refugees. [The text mentions two successive laws but footnotes 35 and 36 cite the same law. Please check and amend] – amended, thanks

[38] 'O polozhenii bezhentsev i lits, ishchushchikh ubezhishche, iz Ukrainy v sub"yektakh Rossiiskoi Federatsii (1 noyabrya 2014–1 maya 2015)', Migration and Law, unpublished report, 2015, p. 1.

[39] Postanovleniye Pravitel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 22 iyulya 2014 g. N 691.

[40] 'O polozhenii bezhentsev i lits, ishchushchikh ubezhishche, iz Ukrainy v sub"yektakh Rossiyskoy Federatsii (1 noyabrya 2014–1 maya 2015)', Migration and Law unpublished report, 2015, p. 2.

[41] Federal'nyi zakon ot 19 fevralya 1993 g. № 4528-I 'O bezhentsakh' (s izmeneniyami i dopolneniyami).

Thus, despite the advantages enjoyed by Ukrainians compared with citizens from other countries with regard to the time taken for a decision (three days instead of three months),[42] the number of Ukrainians receiving temporary asylum in Russia has been very low, peaking in 2015 at 311,000 (Rosstat 2019). Along with the quota issues described above, this is due to a number of reasons. Firstly, many interviewees described how, when they first came to Russia, they were told by migration officials not to write 'fled from war' but 'come to work' or 'come to visit family' as reasons for entry on their application documents. Under stress, and being unfamiliar with Russian legislation, they followed this advice, making it impossible to change their reasons in subsequent applications for documented status as a refugee or asylum seeker. Secondly, for some it was a rational choice not to claim asylum because this status restricts people's mobility, as they have to use their temporary document, following a complex procedure, if they need to visit their home or relatives back in Ukraine. Additionally, people granted temporary asylum status need to reapply every 12 months. Finally, persons fled from areas which are not included into Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone (ATO) were not able to apply for temporal asylum. As a results, the most attractive and, in some cases, the only way to stay in Russia for some of the displaced, was as an economic or irregular migrant (Kuznetsova 2018).

The status of refugee or temporary asylum is no guarantee of receiving Russian citizenship in the future. Another way those displaced from southeastern Ukraine can obtain Russian citizenship is through the State Programme for Voluntary Emigration of Compatriots Living Abroad to Russia [Gosudarstvennaya programma po okazaniyu sodeystviya dobrovol'nomu pereseleniyu v Rossiyskuyu Federatsiyu sootechestvennikov, prozhivayushchikh za rubezhom], known as the 'Compatriots' programme. The programme offers opportunities to receive Russian citizenship for different groups including former Russian citizens permanently residing abroad, individuals and their descendants who live abroad and whose ancestors previously resided on Russian Federation territory or in the USSR, and some others.[43] Though ethnicity is not mentioned in a programme, it clearly articulates the significance of shared culture: 'raised in the traditions of Russian [*rossiiskoi*] culture, speaking

[42] 'General'naya prokuratura Rossiiskoi Federatsii prinyala resheniye o priznanii nezhelatel'noi na territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii deyatel'nosti mezhdunarodnoi nepravitel'stvennoi organizatsii', General'naya Prokuratura Rossiiskoi Federatsii, March 2016, https://мвд.рф/Deljatelnost/emvd/guvm/признание-беженцем, accessed 30 May 2017.

[43]

Russian and not willing to lose a connection with Russia compatriots are most capable to adaptation and the earliest possible inclusion in the system of positive social relations of the host community'.[44]

Assistance to Ukrainian refugees became the priority of the Compatriots programme. Similarly, people seeking to move to Russia from former Soviet republics following the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s were supported by a repatriation policy rather than a refugee policy and as a result had to rely on their own means, without any state support (Pilkington & Flynn 2009). In 2014 and the first quarter of 2015, 70,900 Ukrainian citizens registered in Russia within the framework of the programme, amounting to 47.5% of all persons who migrated to Russia *via* the Compatriots programme. (Monitoring… 2015, p. 16). That was enabled by decree issued by the Russian government on 8 October 2014, which gave Ukrainians who had received asylum in Russia the right to apply to Compatriot programme on a simplified route.[45] The decree provided Ukrainians with express membership of the programme, 15 days instead of the usual three months; an interview was arranged to check the skills of those who had lost documentation for education and employment. Most importantly, Ukrainians accepted onto the Compatriots programme could apply for Russian citizenship right away. Thus, Ukrainians were privileged over citizens from other parts of the former Soviet Union

As Shevel argues, the fuzziness of the definition of compatriots that includes not only ethnicity, origin but also skills and other components 'serves a functional purpose as it allows Russian policymakers much room to maneuver' (Shevel 2011, p. 199). Thus, currently Ukrainian refugees are a priority, but this priority is dictated by the current geopolitical situation and the process of selecting participants of the program is highly selective. Firstly, the number of regions that take 'compatriots' is limited; secondly, most of these regions have strict age, education and skills requirements. Also, importantly, people who plan to receive a citizenship *via* this programme have to be registered as living in the region where they apply, in a property that they own. This requirement is

[44] Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 22.06.2006 g. N 637 'Gosudarstvennaya programma po okazaniyu sodeistviya dobrovol'nomu pereseleniyu v Rossiiskuyu Federatsiyu sootechestvennikov, prozhivayushchikh za rubezhom', Prezident Rossii, available at: http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/23937, accessed 17 January 2018.

[45] Postanovlenie Pravitel'stva RF ot 08.10.2014 N 1032 (red. ot 15.06.2016) 'Ob organizatsii raboty s sootechestvennikami, postoyanno prozhivayushchimi na territorii Ukrainy, pribyvshimi na territoriyu Rossiiskoi Federatsii, poluchivshimi vremennoye ubezhishche v Rossiiskoi Federatsii i zhelayushchimi prinyat' uchastiye v Gosudarstvennoi programme po okazaniyu sodeistviya dobrovol'nomu pereseleniyu v Rossiiskuyu Federatsiyu sootechestvennikov, prozhivayushchikh za rubezhom', available at: https://media.mvd.ru/files/embed/1294074, accessed 29 June 2018.

very problematic for displaced people who are unable to sell their property in non-government-controlled territories in Ukraine and have no other financial means to buy property in Russia.

A certified participant in the Compatriot programme does not gain additional political or social rights, including the right to receive benefits. What Compatriots does provide is the opportunity to apply for full citizenship, so in this sense, it is a 'quasi-citizenship' (Knott 2015). Initially, one of the programme's main roles was to attract economically active persons from the former Soviet Union to regions with low population density and a lack of human resources. For example, it was reported in 2018 that the Far Eastern Federal District, which has a serious shortage of qualified labour, was planning to increase the number of inhabitants, offering the incentive of a free hectare of land to Russian citizens.[46] This highlights Götz's argument that 'Moscow's compatriot policy in the past has been cool and calculating, rather than driven by nationalist sentiments or humanitarian concerns' (Götz 2016, p. 315). The role of the Compatriots programme in the resettlement of displaced people from Donbas demonstrates an instrumentalist policy towards these people. Schenk claims, 'Russia's legislative approach to refugees shows a robust commitment to legitimizing foreign policy prerogatives regarding the Ukrainian conflict in a way that also meets domestic goals' (Schenk 2016, p. 498). Thus, Ukrainian citizens from south-eastern Ukraine have become part of a Russian strategy to attract human capital. Proficiency in Russian and transferable skills make some migrants from Ukraine an attractive proposition, under the Compatriots programme, to halt population decline in certain regions. However, given the programme's overriding goal of attracting a quality workforce to depopulated regions, by its nature it excludes the elderly and those lacking education, skills or capital.[47] Therefore, the Russian politicians' claim that the programme can provide the regular status and then citizenship for displaced from Donbas is very questionable.

Despite the abovementioned routes to gaining the right to live in Russia, including temporary asylum and Compatriots programme, the situation of many Ukrainian refugees in Russia was far from easy.

### *Putin grants Russian citizenship to Ukrainian citizens of Donetsk and Luhansk* oblasti

By the end of 2016, it was clear, as the above has shown, that the legal mechanisms for granting regular status for displaced from Ukraine had many limitations. From the start of 2017, President Putin played an observably greater role in articulating policy towards refugees from Ukraine. On 18 February 2017, the decree 'On the recognition

[46] 'Gosduma v pervom chtenii prinyala zakonoproekt o pereezde sootechestvennikov v DFO', *TASS*, 4 July 2018, available at: http://tass.ru/v-strane/5348261, accessed 18 July 2018.

[47] See also Mytre (2018), Kuznetsova (2018).

in the Russian Federation of documents and registration marks of vehicles issued to citizens of Ukraine and stateless persons permanently residing in the territories of certain regions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine' was issued.[48] This allowed refugees from Ukraine who only had passports and other documentation (birth certificates, educational diplomas) issued by the DNR and LNR, which are not internationally recognised, rather than Ukrainian documents, to receive documented status in Russia. In Ukraine, the opposite is the case: no documents issued by the DNR and LNR are officially recognised, which puts IDPs there under great stress (Kuznetsova *et al*. 2018). This step by the Russian government has led to international condemnation. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi stated in February 2017 in an interview to *Kommersant''*, 'on the one hand, it is important that people have the documents. But, on the other hand, you cannot take steps which would complicate the Minsk peace process. I'm not saying that this is such a step—please do not get me wrong. But we must remember that the main task is to achieve a conflict resolution' (Dudina 2017). He argued that Russia's recognition of such documents amounted to an explicit statement that it believed the issuing authorities were legitimate and separate from the rest of Ukraine, thus complicating attempts at reconciliation. From the day of its announcement, the decree exerted influenced extending far beyond immigration policy but as a part of influence seeking. Prominent Ukrainian politicians strongly criticised the acceptance of the documents issued by separatists. President Petro Poroshenko called it is 'another evidence of Russian occupation'.[49] Oleksandr Turchinov, former chief of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, stated that 'Putin signed this Decree, de-jure recognised quasi-states' terroristic groups which as a fig list covered Russian occupation of a part of Donbas'.[50]

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[48] Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 18.02.2017 N 74 'O Priznanii v Rossiiskoi Federatsii Dokumentov i Registratsionnykh Znakov Transportnyh Sredstv, Vydannykh Grazhdanam Ukrainy i Litsam bez Grazhdanstva, Postoyanno Prozhivayushchim na Territoriyakh Otdel'nykh Raionov Dontsckoi i Luganskoi Oblastei Ukrainy', Ministry of Internal Affairs, available at: https://mvd.consultant.ru/documents/1056150?items=1&page=1, accessed 20 January 2018.

[49] 'Poroshenko: viznannya pasportiv "DNR"—dokaz rosijs'koyi okupacyi', *BBC news Ukraine*, 18 February 2017, available at: https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/vert-fut-39015518, accessed 25 February 2017. [Please check that this follows our transliteration system from Ukrainian].

[50] 'Putin yuridichno viznav teroristichni ugrupovannya "LNR" ta "DNR"—Turchinov', *UNIAN*, 18 February 2017, available at: https://www.unian.ua/politics/1784501-putin-yuridichno-viznav-teroristichni-ugrupovannya-lnr-ta-dnr-turchinov.html, accessed 25 February 2017. [Please check that this follows our transliteration system from Ukrainian].

After the recognition of the documents issued in non-government Ukraine's territories, Putin continued playing the leading role in shaping discourse and policies towards Ukrainians moved from Donbas. In the Valdai discussion club, later in 2017, Putin again referred to Ukrainians as a 'brotherly nation' and 'even part of the Russian nation, and stated the necessity to support those refugees from Donbas who wished to stay in Russia:

> We like Ukraine and I really regard the Ukrainian people as a brotherly nation if not just one nation, part of the Russian nation. Even though Russian nationalists do not like this and Ukrainian nationalists do not like this either, this is my position, my point of view. Sooner or later, it will happen—reunification, not on an interstate level but in terms of restoring our relations …. We must support these people, and those who want to remain in Russia should have the opportunity to do so. We are working on this now.[51]

Unsurprisingly, given the lack of advocacy available for displaced Ukrainians and the limited opportunities for NGOs to support the rights of refugees and those who seek for a regular migration status in Russia, appeals to the President of Russia during his annual 'direct line' (*pryamaya svyaz*), a televised event during which Putin responds to direct questions from the public, have provided the impetus for policy decisions. During the 'direct line' event of 7 June 2018, President Putin received complaints from refugees from Donbas living in Rostov *Oblast'*. They criticised the lack of jobs, noting that bureaucratic red tape was stopping them from acquiring regular status and integrate.[52] Their complaints resulted not only in an order to the governor of Rostov to improve the situation by September 2018, but also in a draft bill on offering amnesty for those displaced from Donbas who had overstayed their temporary asylum.[53] The draft bill also contained a proposal to simplify the granting of citizenship for the displaced from Donbas, providing the right to receive a permanent residence permit without having to apply for a temporary residence permit first. However, the Committee for the Civil society development and public and religious organisations of the Russian state *Duma* had not approved this draft bill by December 2018 as originally

[51] 'Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club', President of Russia, 19 October 2017, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55882, accessed 16 November 2017.

[52] 'Putin poruchil pomoch' bezhentsam iz Donbassa', *RIA Novosti*, 26 June 2018, available at: https://ria.ru/society/20180626/1523394554.html, accessed 27 June 2018.

[53] 'V Gosdumu vnesli proekt o migratsionnoi amnistii dlya bezhentsev s Ukrainy', TASS, 25 June 2018, available at: http://tass.ru/politika/5321852, accessed 26 June 2018. The draft bill on an amnesty for Ukrainian refugees was introduced in the Russian *Duma* in June 2018.

planned. As *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* suggests, this delay was explainable by noting that MPs, in general, are reluctant to responsibility for decisions regarding citizenship:

> It turns out that the profile committee, following the government, believes that only the president should specifically decide the issue of citizenship. The enacted law will give him additional powers to grant citizenship for humanitarian reasons, without any restrictions on the procedure .... But the MPs of the responsible committee do not want to take responsibility for the fate of compatriots. And the fact that years can pass until a presidential decree solves painful problems does not bother them. (Dokuchaeva 2018)

Soon after in December 2018, the federal law 'On Amendments to the Law on 'Russian Citizenship' was adopted. This entitles the President of the Russian Federation 'to determine, for humanitarian purposes, various categories of foreign citizens and stateless persons who can apply for Russian Federation citizenship in line with a simplified procedure' (Article 29, Point 1).[54] The timing was not accidental. Following on from this law, just two weeks before the inauguration of the new Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in May 2019, Putin signed a decree simplifying the procedure for the granting of citizenship to Ukrainian citizens from the non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk.[55] In a statement, the EU stressed that this was 'another attack on Ukraine's sovereignty by Russia. The timing of such a decision immediately after Ukraine's presidential election, which demonstrated Ukraine's strong attachment to democracy and the rule of law, further shows Russia's intention to further destabilise Ukraine and to exacerbate the conflict'.[56]

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[54] Federal'nyi zakon ot 27.12.2018 # 544-FZ 'O vnesenii izmenenii v Federal'nyi zakon "O grazhdanstve Rossiiskoi Federatsii"', available at: http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201812280032?index=2&rangeSize=1 , accessed 10 January 2019.

[55] Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiskoi Federatsii 'Ob opredelenii v gumanitarnykh tselyakh kategorii lits, imeyushchikh pravo obratit'sya s zayavleniyami o prieme v grazhdanstvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii v uproshchennom poryadke' 24 April 2019, available at: http://pravo.gov.ru/laws/acts/32/495651.html, accessed 30 April 2019. As of 17 July 2019 about 13,000 Ukrainian citizens had applied for citizenship *via* this route (Tretyakova 2019).

[56] 'Statement by the Spokesperson on the Russian decree enabling the simplified issuing of passports in certain areas of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions', *European Union External Action*, 25 April 2019, available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-

This decree once again made Russia's position in the Donbas conflict very clear and immediately provoked a virtual duel between Zelenskyy and Putin. When the Ukrainian president responded to Putin's offer by pledging to 'give citizenship to representatives of all nations that suffer from authoritarian and corrupt regimes, but first and foremost to the Russian people who suffer most of all',[57] the Russian leader hit back:

> I've said many times that Ukrainians and Russians are brotherly nations. And even more than that: I generally think that this is one nation in fact, with its own characteristics: cultural, linguistic, historical, but in essence one people. And if we have general citizenship, only Russians and Ukrainians will benefit from this, we will be stronger and more successful.[58]

On 17 July 2019, a new decree extended the simplified rules for granting citizenship to all inhabitants of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, including those in government-controlled territories.[59] The introduction of further essential changes granted Ukrainian citizens the right to apply for a temporary residence permit without regional quotas, and the right to apply for the permanent residence permit without a temporary permit for 'Russian language native speakers'.[60] The recent draft bill suggests to include citizens of Ukraine and Belarus as 'Russian language native

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homepage/61444/statement-spokesperson-russian-decree-enabling-simplified-issuing-passports-certain-areas_en, accessed 30 May 2019.

[57] Personal Facebook page of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 27 April 2019, available at: https://www.facebook.com/zelenskiy95/posts/2236347569948940, accessed 8 June 2019.

[58] 'Putin otvetil na slova Zelenskogo o pasportakh dlya rossiyan', *Ria Novosti*, 29 April 2019, available at: https://ria.ru/20190429/1553165543.html, accessed 5 May 2019.

[59] Ukaz 'O vnesenii izmenenii v Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 29 aprelya 2019 g. N 187 'Ob otdel'nyh kategoriyakh inostrannykh grazhdan i lits bez grazhdanstva, imeyushchikh pravo obratit'sya s zayavleniyami o prieme v grazhdanstvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii v uproshhennom poryadke', available at: http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/P5fha7h9zoa5l2JrLlB2bzAmGe55YESz.pdf, accessed 18 July 2019.

[60] Federal'nyi zakon ot 02.08.2019 N 257-FZ 'O vnesenii izmenenii v Federal'nyi zakon "O pravovom polozhenii inostrannykh grazhdan v Rossiiskoi FederaciiFederatsii" v chasti uproshheniya poryadka predostavleniya nekotorym kategoriyam inostrannykh grazhdan i lits bez grazhdanstva razresheniya na vremennoe prozhivanie i vida na zhitel'stvo', available at: http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201908020030?index=3&rangeSize=1, accessed 15 August 2019.

speakers' and will omit the interviews which usually are compulsory for the procedure of applying for the permanent residence permit via this route.[61]

Thus, the immigration policy towards displaced from war-torn territories of Donbas, which grants the simplified route for permanent residency and citizenship, started to extend to the broader categories of Ukraine citizens. It continues to be dependent on the President's manual control and interwoven with Russian geopolitical vectors.

*Conclusion*

This essay's central argument is that Russia's selective refugee policy concerned with both exerting its influence in its perceived geopolitical neighbourhood and by means of transborder nationalism to enable the privileging of those displaced from Ukraine over migrants and refugees from other countries and, later, the granting of Russian citizenship to Ukrainian citizens in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. This selective policy has been established *via* President V.V. Putin's 'manual control' of immigration, as confirmed by presidential decrees and the exercising of the *vertikal' vlasti* [vertical power] from Moscow to the regions.

In comparison to the populist rhetoric in numerous Western societies, where blaming refugees is used to strengthen nationalism, in Russia nationalistic discourse is used to officially support Ukrainian refugees and in the shaping of people's notions about origins of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and Russia's geopolitical role. Since the start of the conflict in 2014, the Russian policy towards Donbas' displaced has been interwoven with Russia's current geopolitical interests through the narrative of the 'Russian world', the transborder category which Kremlin uses to identify Russian-speaking people and ethnic Russians in countries of the former Soviet Union. Underpinning the assistance provided to displaced from Ukraine was the idea that such assistance was to help 'brotherly people', that Ukraine was almost 'the same nation' and that 'ethnic violence' in Ukraine was the cause of the conflict, as promoted by the Russian media. Official Russian rhetoric excluded consideration of any ethnic and language differences among those displaced, and, from 2014 onwards, those Ukrainians residing in Russia who became critical of Russia's approach to the conflict came to be targeted by the government.

Before July 2019, the main path for the integration of persons fled from Donbas in Russia, according to official policy, was through fast tracked temporary asylum and citizenship through the Compatriots programme.

[61] 'Ukraintsev i belorusov priznayut nositelyami russkogo yazyka bez ekzamena', *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 19 October 2019, available at: https://rg.ru/2019/10/19/ukraincev-i-belorusov-priznaiut-nositeliami-russkogo-iazyka-bez-ekzamenov.html, accessed 30 October 2019.

The Compatriots programme is exclusive in terms of which categories of people can apply, and where applicants can be settled, acting, in effect, as a means to obtain human capital rather than a true humanitarian effort. Both federal and local governments and civil society organised large campaigns to support displaced from Ukraine; these policies, however, were implemented from the top down, without any public control, becoming in some sense unsustainable. Moreover, as for all migrants to Russia, issues of bureaucracy and corruption have made the process of obtaining fully documented status problematic. Thus, the refugee policy with regard to Ukrainians was supported by the state's geopolitical motivations and nationalism. While a series of decrees has made the process easier, efficient mechanisms for providing regular status or responding to the needs of displaced are still lacking. The recent presidential decree of 17 July 2019, which extends simplified citizenship rules to all residents of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, including territories controlled by the Ukrainian government, creates critical questions for future research. Better tools are needed to understand the crossborder experiences of displaced people and the everyday experiences of trying to obtain regular status or citizenship. The transformation of Russian immigration policy represented by the new law that entitles the president to determine, for humanitarian purposes, the various categories of persons who can apply for Russian citizenship, requires deeper investigation. As Kaldor (2013) noted, population displacement is one of the methods and goals in conflicts currently fought in the name of identity. Therefore, Russia's case provides an evidence of a critical need for further analysis of the role of refugee and citizenship policy in the context of 'new' and hybrid wars.

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