SSOAR
Open Access Repository
www.ssoar.info

Helping Ukrainian Refugees as an Alternative to Street Protest

Meyer-Olimpieva, Irina

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Meyer-Olimpieva, I. (2023). Helping Ukrainian Refugees as an Alternative to Street Protest. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 291, 2-5. https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000595208

Nutzungsbedingungen:
Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de

Terms of use:
This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Comercial-NoDerivatives). For more Information see:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der
Leibniz
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Diese Version ist zitierbar unter / This version is citable under:
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-86787-0

ANALYSIS

Helping Ukrainian Refugees as an Alternative to Street Protest

By Irina Meyer-Olimpieva (Center for Independent Social Research/George Washington University, Washington, D.C.)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000595208

Abstract
In this article, I explore the network of volunteers helping Ukrainian refugees who have ended up on Russian territory while fleeing the war zone. Based on 31 in-depth interviews with the members of the volunteer network in Telegram, I analyze their attitudes toward the war and motives for joining the network. I further demonstrate that for the participants in this chat, helping Ukrainian refugees is in essence an alternative to anti-war street protests.

Ukrainian Refugees in Russia
According to UN data, since February 2022, about 2.8 million refugees have fled Ukraine to Russia. Ukrainians have not always arrived in Russia of their own free will, although this does not necessarily mean that that they were forcibly taken to Russia. A more typical scenario is that people who found themselves in the battle zone did not really have a choice: the humanitarian corridor provided by the Russian military was the only way to escape.

To accommodate Ukrainian refugees, over 800 PVRs (temporary accommodation points) were established in 58 Russian regions to provide refugees with temporary shelter and food.

However, not all Ukrainians who found themselves on Russian territory wanted to stay in PVRs. Some of them wanted to go to Europe to reunite with their relatives who had sought refuge in European countries or just because they did not want to stay in the aggressor country. Others hoped to return to Ukraine as soon as possible.

Ukrainian refugees are often physically and mentally traumatized people who need medical care and psychological treatment. Many spent weeks in the basements of their houses, hiding from shelling, without food, water, or electricity. Lots of them saw their houses bombed and relatives and friends perish before their eyes.

One also needs to understand that Ukrainians striving to reach Europe are often residents of small towns and villages who have rarely visited large cities even in Ukraine, never mind foreign countries. As a rule, they do not speak any foreign languages; it is difficult for them to book an itinerary via the Internet, buying tickets or finding hotels. Many of them do not even own suitcases. It is therefore obvious that to make the difficult journey from the Ukrainian border through Russia and across the European border, Ukrainian refugees need help. It is no less obvious that in this matter they cannot count on assistance from the Russian state.

Volunteers Helping Ukrainian Refugees
The community of volunteers (or "the chat," as they usually call themselves) was created precisely to assist Ukrainian refugees who did not want to stay in Russia. It was launched in St. Petersburg in March–April 2022 as a joint effort by a group of friends to help some families from Mariupol to reach Europe. Between April and July, the chat expanded from less than 100 members to over 10,000 participants. Simultaneously, a similar chat appeared in Moscow and experienced the same explosive growth (to about 9,000 participants). As the chats expanded, volunteers started to help not only refugees who wanted to leave for Europe, but also those who decided to stay in Russia.

In addition to the two in St. Petersburg and Moscow there are many related chats of volunteers in other regions and cities. The most active of these are the chats in the southern regions of Russia, which have received the majority of the flow of refugees coming from Ukraine. Cities such as Rostov, Belgorod, and Krasnodar, as well as Crimea and Smolensk, have the largest communities of volunteers. Various groups of volunteers operate in almost all Russian cities where PVRs have been established.

How the Help Works
Requests for help from refugees are accepted by volunteers who keep in touch with their "wards" 24/7, responding to their requests and solving problems as they arise. They help in purchasing travel tickets, organize accommodation and meals along the route, and arrange medical assistance if necessary.

Volunteers also help those who have decided to stay in Russia. Unlike relatively short-term help to travel to the European border the work with those who remain can drag on for weeks and months.

To take proper care of their wards, volunteers seek help from the network. They approach the chat with specific tasks, such as, for example, *"# to shelter a family of three for 2 nights—a grandmother and a woman with*

a child of 5 years old," *"# to meet an elderly couple from Mariupol, 75 y.o., at the railway station, feed them, take them to the bus station and put them on a bus to Tallinn*"; *"# men's boots/sneakers size 43, warm jacket for a 12-year-old boy"; "# crutches or wheelchair for a disabled elderly man*"; "*needed: diapers and baby food"; "needed: medical consultation for a patient after a stroke"; "needed: to drive a group of 5 people and a dog to the Finnish border,"* etc. The tasks are being solved immediately.

Volunteers can also specialize in specific tasks. Some of them organize warehouses of donated items. There is a group of drivers ("auto volunteers") who take refugees across the border. There is also a separate chat of medical workers who purchase medicines and organize consultations with doctors and, if necessary, treatment of wards. Some volunteers specialize in taking care of the pets and animals that many refugees bring with them. Within the general chat, there is a chat providing psychological assistance to those volunteers who have developed psychological burnout and depression following close communications with refugees. The money collected from donations and charitable fairs is accumulated in a special fund used to buy tickets and medicine, fund medical consultations and treatments, and other purposes.

Research

The fieldwork lasted from August to December 2022. I conducted 31 in-depth interviews with volunteers in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Most of the interviews were conducted online, but I also took 9 interviews in person during a visit to St. Petersburg in December.

The interview guide focused primarily on attitudes toward the war and reasons for joining the chat. All interviews lasted for at least one hour and were conducted on the condition of anonymity (all names in the quotations have been changed).

Attitudes toward the War and Reasons for Joining the Chat

For all my interlocutors, February was experienced as a disaster. All of them understand the catastrophic consequences of the war for the country and for their personal lives:

> *"I was just in horror, and I'd sit and cry, … I couldn't even breathe, I had a feeling, just like a stone in my soul, … it was just hard to breathe" (Ella, 28, postgraduate student)*

Many could not maintain their daily routines, they could not go to work or to university, any usual activity lost its meaning.

> *"I couldn't do anything after the twenty-fourth: I couldn't sell, I couldn't talk about something not related to these events, I couldn't pretend that this was not happening" (Sveta, 42, businesswoman)*

Joining the Telegram network was, in the first instance, a way to survive the shock caused by the beginning of the war. Volunteers repeatedly said that for them, finding the chat was a "*salvation,"* "*the way out of a cognitive dead end"* or *"cognitive dissonance." "If not for this chat, I would have gone crazy" (Olga, 45, businesswoman).* Volunteering helped them to "*escape from reality*," to busy themselves with something that makes sense while leaving "*no time for depressing thoughts, or even for reading the news" (Agatha, 45, journalist).*

Not least among their motivations was overcoming social isolation. After February 24, many volunteers found themselves surrounded by pro-Z-minded relatives and colleagues. Many lost friends when the latter emigrated from Russia immediately after the beginning of the war. Joining the chat was, in a sense, akin to joining a community of like-minded people. Some informants say that they have acquired new life and new friends here.

Finally, joining the network was a way to overcome the feeling of helplessness, to feel like an *"actor"* rather than an object of political manipulation. Volunteering helped my respondents to *"overcome and survive helplessness and atomization,"* to feel the power of collective action, and to realize "*that together we can do everything" (Adrian, 45, artist).*

Attitudes toward Street Protests

For most of my informants, their first response to the beginning of the war was an impulse to go out onto the street. However, enthusiasm for protest was quickly replaced by disappointment.

According to my interviewees, open protest proved to be a completely ineffective way of expressing opposition to the war. The security forces were well prepared for the protests: participants were met at the exit of the metro station and put into paddy wagons (*avtozaki*). Those who managed to avoid arrest moved through the streets in small groups or alone, running away from the police, so it was impossible to organize any kind of protest procession.

The press hushed up the protests. As they were invisible in the media space, they could not influence public opinion in any way. In the words of one informant who was arrested for taking part in an anti-war protest, it was possible, with the same result, to *"just go straight and sit into the 'paddy wagon,' but who will benefit from this? No one will even know about it" (Tatiana, 25, student).*

The disappointment was aggravated by the relatively small number of protesters: *"…[the protest took place] against the background of a cheerful crowd flocking along Nevsky Prospekt with shopping bags from Gostiny Dvor as if nothing terrible was going on,… and here you see this hundred brave boys and girls with tiny [anti-war] posters—well, that did not make any sense" (Adrian, 45, artist).*

A further reason for the negative attitude toward street protests was the fear of physical violence, especially among women:

> *It's scary, you know…although they say that women are not beaten hard, but sometimes [policemen] still beat them. I'm not even physically afraid, but, well, … after all, I went out [to protests] one or two times but it seems to me that I could have contributed better by doing something else (Kathe, 44, engineer).*

Women, especially single mothers, were afraid of being arrested and separated from their children for a long time.

Participation in street actions that would *"not be even reported in any news coverage,"* yet were extremely risky, only aggravated the feeling of total helplessness among my interviewees. Thus, while at the beginning of the war some of them thought seriously about organizing protest resistance, after participation in several protest actions, they generally dropped these intentions.

This does not mean that all of them completely reject the idea of street protest. However, the prevailing opinion is that today in Russia there is no legal mechanism for converting *"internal protest"* (a feeling of disagreement with what is happening in the country) into somewhat effective public action. Unlike participation in street protest, helping Ukrainian refugees has visible practical outcomes and brings psychological relief and satisfaction:

> *There are people, especially among my young colleagues …who have taken a different path, not the path of help, but the path of participation in actions. All of them have already received several fines, they have been detained, but I don't really believe in the effectiveness of this path—well, maybe this is my personal skepticism, but, well, so far, I see that the efficiency [of this path] is kind of sad … (Oxana, 58, eco-activist).*

Risks Associated with Helping Ukrainians

The risk of being prosecuted by law enforcement agencies was the primary response to my question about possible risks of volunteering activity. However, in the case of helping refugees, this risk is not as straightforward as in the case of anti-war protests. On the one hand, volunteering is a legal form of civic activism that does not break any Russian law. Helping refugees even seems to support the government's propagandistic statements about the "liberation" of Ukrainians from a "fascist regime." Helping Ukrainians to leave Russia is also beneficial for the regime because it reduces the burden on the state budget allocated to support refugees and prevents the accumulation of people negatively disposed toward the country within Russia.

On the other hand, any civic activity outside state control is perceived by the state as a potential threat to the regime. "*We know that in our country the word 'legal' can only be used in quotation marks. Any initiative that gathers too many people begins to arouse the deepest interest [from the law enforcement bodies]" (Agatha, 45, journalist).*

Many interlocuters told me that they try not to use the word "volunteer" when communicating with PVR officials, since it makes them wary.

Everyone is sure that FSB agents are watching the chats. Interviewees cited multiple examples of provocations (such as requests to help evacuate wounded Ukrainian servicemen). Some wards admitted to volunteers that during interviews with FSB officers at border control, they were forced to give the names of all volunteers with whom they communicated and to show all correspondence with the coordinators.

Another threat comes from the nationalist pro-war groups, which are no less dangerous to the volunteers than the FSB. They harass volunteers with the tacit approval of the law enforcement agencies. One shocking example is the case of a group of volunteers in Penza helping Ukrainian refugees, which had to give up after one of its activists—a woman with three children—was kidnaped and tortured by pro-war nationalists trying to find out where the group's financial support came from.

While understanding the risks, volunteers continue to help refugees because it has become a way of preserving their humanity in the context of the ongoing war. *"Personally, I went into this activity with an absolute awareness that at some point, the FSB officers could fall on me. And it doesn't scare me because I just can't live without it [volunteering]. And I know that many feel the same. Well, you weigh the pros, you weigh the cons, and you make your decision." (Alla, 25, student)*

Conclusion

The assistance to Ukrainian refugees described in this article can be considered an anti-war civic initiative that, while humanitarian in nature, has a strong political sentiment. Volunteers cannot express their negative attitudes toward the war openly by going out into the streets. Volunteering is therefore a way for them to convert their rejection of the war into (legal) civic action that is visible and has a positive effect.

This does not mean, of course, that all Russians helping Ukrainian refugees share the same political attitudes. Many pro-war activists also collect donations, warm clothes, and other necessary items for the Ukrainians in PVRs. Charitable campaigns are regularly launched by the state to collect funds and items for Ukrainian refugees.

While it is hard to estimate the real scale of opposition to war among the Russian population, it is obvious that in doing this, one cannot rely solely on the figures for participation in open protests. As this analy-

sis of the chat has demonstrated, refusal to participate in street protests does not equate to a pro-war position, and there are many other ways to demonstrate disagreement with the state's military policy that are less visible but no less significant.

About the Author

Irina Meyer-Olimpieva is the founder and Executive Director of the Center for Independent Social Research in the United States and a research professor at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at the George Washington University. Her recent studies address social and labor protests, as well as the most topical issues of science, education, and academic freedom in Russia. In the US, she explores the Russian-speaking immigrant community.

ANALYSIS

Arson Attacks on Military Enlistment Offices and the Reaction of Russian Propaganda

By Daria Zakharova (Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000595208

Abstract

Attacks and arson against Russian military enlistment offices, which represent one of the cores of the Russian war machine, have become a common form of anti-war protest. This article examines these attacks and how the Russian state-run media discuss them.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine sparked a massive wave of discontent and protests worldwide. Within Russia itself, however, the public response is believed to have been muted. For instance, the number of protesters who took to the streets of Russia's capital, Moscow, on the first day of the invasion was estimated at around 700. This reality can be attributed to a range of factors, but the main cause is the serious toll that protests take on a person in Russia. With the invasion of Ukraine, Russia introduced de-facto "military censorship," rapidly issuing prison sentences to those who criticized the invasion of Ukraine. The severity and danger of persecutions produced an explosion of underground anti-war movements, which many Russians chose as a safer or more reasonable alternative to open protest. Attacks and arson against military enlistment offices (so-called military commissariats), which represent a core of the Russian war machine, became a regular form of protest, with around 77 attacks recorded in the first 10 months of the war.

The Attacks

Military commissariats in Russia are, first and foremost, responsible for conscription into the compulsory and contract army service (the latter is available to those who served in the compulsory service and are willing to stay). There are approximately 1,300 military commissariats in Russia. The first months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine mostly featured the participation of contract army soldiers. In September 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced a mobilization in order to send around 300,000 additional soldiers to Ukraine on an obligatory basis. The implementation of this mobilization is also the responsibility of Russian military commissariats. Thus, the commissariats have been involved in supplying soldiers to Ukraine at all stages of the war. The attacks on the commissariats have both a concrete purpose—to destroy the personal records of Russian men in order to create a barrier to further conscription—and a general one—to attack military-related spots in Russia.

The first attack on a military commissariat took place in the Moscow region. On February 27, 2022, 21-year-old Kirill Butylin threw a Molotov cocktail through the window of a military commissariat near Moscow. He also published a manifesto about his arson. "Ukrainians will know that Russians are fighting for them; not everyone is afraid and not everyone is indifferent. Our protesters must be inspired and act more decisively. And this should further break the spirit of the Russian army and government," Butylin wrote.