



on Trafficking in Persons
and Smuggling of Migrants
in the Context of Displacement
caused by the War in Ukraine



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Special Points of Interest

Background to the study



This UNODC study examines the extent and risks of trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants in the context of the displacement of over 6.7 million refugees from Ukraine since February 2022. The study draws on official data, statistics and information; available literature; a non-probabilistic survey of over 1,600 refugees from Ukraine; and interviews with key informants and refugees in three European host countries and in Ukraine in 2023-2024. The full study can be downloaded from www.unodc.org in English and Ukrainian.

Key Messages

- ☞ The study finds that visa-free entry, temporary protection (or similar national protection schemes) and extensive anti-trafficking measures across Europe effectively mitigated trafficking and smuggling risks in the context of the displacement caused by the war in Ukraine, which, given its speed and magnitude, could have been severe.
- ☞ Considering the risks of exploitation, the continuing war and the large population of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees who continue to be affected, visa-free entry, temporary protection and robust anti-trafficking measures can continue to protect people fleeing Ukraine, though more attention is needed for certain vulnerable groups.
- ☞ The study indicates that, when applied to population displacements or migration movements, these measures can reduce the incidence of trafficking and smuggling of people on the move.
- ☞ The capacity of Ukrainian anti-trafficking stakeholders needs to be supported and built to ensure that domestic and cross-border trafficking can be effectively identified, including forms of trafficking specific to, or exacerbated by, the war. In addition to trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation, forms specific to, or exacerbated by, the war include exploitation in armed conflict, use of fraudulent humanitarian organizations as a front for trafficking and forced criminal activities.

-  The humanitarian and protection response should be supported and expanded in Ukraine, particularly for groups especially at risk of trafficking, including children, IDPs and residents at accommodation centres for vulnerable groups, such as drug-users and homeless people.
-  Ukrainian stakeholders should be supported to protect children from forced labour and domestic servitude, as well as to monitor the risks of trafficking for illegal adoption - including in the context of surrogacy - and identify and refer potential cases.
-  Monitoring and enforcing the labour rights of refugees from Ukraine in host countries is of crucial importance, ensuring that risks of trafficking for forced labour are mitigated and potential cases are identified and referred, with a particular focus on sectors such as domestic work, cleaning, agriculture and factory work.
-  The situation of Ukrainians sexually exploited in host countries – offline and online – should be given proper attention to ensure that risks of trafficking are mitigated, and potential cases of sexual exploitation are immediately identified and referred.
-  Systems for the provision of accommodation to refugees by private hosts should be regulated and monitored to ensure that individual accommodation providers do not abuse the situation of dependency of refugees on their hosts for the purposes of forced labour or sexual exploitation.
-  The situation of Ukrainian men subject to a ban on leaving Ukraine, who wish to seek protection in another country, demands a tailored law enforcement response to ensure that criminal actors profiting from this situation can be disrupted, and a legal, policy and protection response that ensures safety for refugee men who experience these dangerous journeys.

Special Points of Interest

-  **The refugee response prevents and mitigates smuggling and trafficking.**
 The legal and policy framework that applies to over six million refugees from Ukraine in the EU and other European countries (of a global total of over 6.75 million) - visa-free travel, rapid access to temporary protection and anti-trafficking measures - reduces the risks of smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons.
-  **The incidence of paying for the facilitation of irregular border crossing is low.**
 Five per cent of Ukrainian refugees, and six per cent of non-Ukrainians who fled Ukraine, surveyed in Germany, Poland and Switzerland in 2023, self-reported that they paid for services to cross borders irregularly. Some may be Ukrainian men who exited Ukraine irregularly, rather than paying for services to enter another country irregularly (smuggling of migrants according to the international definition). Survey respondents who said that they paid a third party to facilitate irregular border crossing were twice as likely as respondents who did not to have experienced abuses or witnessed abuses of fellow Ukrainians, like non-payment of wages and work-related deception.

A significantly higher percentage of surveyed men stated that they paid for facilitation of irregular border crossing (9.7%) compared to women (3.6%). 45 per cent of Ukrainian refugee men surveyed who stated this were aged 27-60, so they were eligible for conscription at the time of the survey. Almost all were aged 18-60 and therefore subject to Ukrainian martial law provisions prohibiting them from leaving Ukraine, subject to certain exemptions.

- ✓ **Different modus operandi are used to assist Ukrainian men to exit Ukraine.**
Over 24,000 Ukrainians, the majority adult men, were identified attempting to irregularly enter the EU at the 'Eastern Land Borders' during 2022-2024. The Ukrainian authorities intercepted over 11,000 Ukrainian men attempting to leave the country in violation of the mobilization and martial law provisions in 2023, by either crossing borders irregularly (73%) or using fraudulent documents (27%). Both scenarios may involve facilitation by migrant smugglers if irregular entry to another country is facilitated for a profit. Criminal groups involved in facilitating men in irregularly crossing borders from Ukraine and providing forged or fraudulent documents charge US\$2,000-\$10,000 in fees, depending on the service provided and the country of destination.
- ✓ **Ukraine recorded fewer victims of trafficking in persons since February 2022.**
Since early 2022, fewer victims of trafficking have been identified by the Ukrainian authorities than in the years prior, due to reduced state capacity. During 2022-2023, 277 trafficking cases were investigated in Ukraine, involving labour exploitation (49%); sexual exploitation (29%); and forced criminal activities (21% - including drug trafficking and migrant smuggling). This marked an increase in the proportion of cases of labour exploitation and forced criminal activities - and a decrease in the proportion of cases of sexual exploitation and exploitation in pornography. 22 cases of child trafficking were identified.
- ✓ **IDPs and other vulnerable groups are trafficked in Ukraine.**
Ukraine has a comprehensive legal, policy and institutional framework for combating trafficking in persons, but trafficking risks have increased due to the ongoing conflict. Many trafficking cases heard in Ukrainian courts during the period February 2022 to June 2024 involve victims who are IDPs or residents of accommodation centres for vulnerable groups, such as drug-users, homeless people and orphaned children, exploited in forced labour, sexual exploitation and armed conflict.
- ✓ **EU countries recorded marginal increases in Ukrainian trafficking victims in 2022.**
EU countries hosting Ukrainian refugees recorded increases in Ukrainians identified as victims of trafficking during 2022. 402 Ukrainian victims of trafficking were recorded across the EU in 2022 - 206 women, 192 men and four unidentified, mostly adults trafficked for forced labour. For comparison, 65 Ukrainian victims were recorded in the EU in 2021. These increases occurred in a context where the population of Ukrainians in the EU more than tripled, from 0.35 per cent of the entire EU population in 2021 to 1.24 per cent in 2022.

Note

The indications of a relatively low prevalence of trafficking in persons may be because cases have not yet come to the attention of the authorities. There are various possible reasons for this, including underreporting due to challenges in identifying trafficking and the stigma attached to being a victim of trafficking. In addition, most official data on trafficking in persons globally for 2023 and 2024 was not yet available at the time of writing.

- ✓ **Most cases of trafficking of Ukrainians involve forced labour.**
Two per cent of Ukrainians surveyed in 2023 in Germany, Poland and Switzerland experienced or witnessed abuses that are indicators of potential cases of trafficking in persons for the purpose of forced labour. Most were situations witnessed rather than directly experienced. The potential cases mainly involve non-payment of wages; payments that were less than promised; deception in relation to the type of work; excessive working hours; unsafe working conditions; and deception about who the employer was. The sectors most at risk for forced labour of Ukrainians are domestic work, cleaning, care work, construction, manufacturing, agriculture, transportation and logistics, and restaurants and hotels.
- ✓ **There are minimal indications of trafficking for sexual exploitation.**
Of 1,602 people surveyed who fled Ukraine, seven (0.4%) knew of Ukrainians involved in forced prostitution (potentially trafficking for sexual exploitation). None reported personally experiencing sexual exploitation. However, this should be interpreted with caution as sexual exploitation is likely to be underreported in victimization surveys and in general.
- ✓ **Yet many risk factors for trafficking for sexual exploitation were identified.**
The research identifies indications of an increase in online demand among European men for sexual services and pornography from Ukrainian women - which may involve sexual abuse and exploitation - and for child sexual abuse and exploitation of Ukrainian children. There are many evident risk factors for exploitation in prostitution and sex work, particularly at massage parlours and accommodation centres, as well as indications of private accommodation providers requesting transactional sex from vulnerable women.
- ✓ **Ukrainian children are trafficked for forced labour, begging and illegal adoption.**
The research reveals indications of potential cases of hazardous child labour and child trafficking in agriculture, construction, begging and domestic work, in Ukraine and in host countries, as well as indications of cross-border trafficking for illegal adoption from Ukraine, including in the context of surrogacy.
- ✓ **The need for income generation and accommodation makes people vulnerable.**
Forty-six per cent of Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians surveyed in Germany, Poland and Switzerland in 2023 were not earning any money, due to language barriers, problems with recognition of qualifications and lack of childcare. Many exploitative situations are linked to the provision of accommodation. Private hosting arrangements present a risk of forced labour in domestic work, cleaning and agriculture, and of sexual abuse and exploitation, due to relationships of dependency of refugees on accommodation hosts.