**Ukrainian Refugees in Israel: "Between One War and Another"**

**Status report**

**January 1, 2024**

**Almost two years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, refugees from Ukraine in Israel find themselves, once again, at war. After fleeing war in their homeland, they now face another war in their place of refuge. Their already vulnerable situation has intensified, and is only getting worse.**

**The brutal attack by Hamas on October 7, and the war that followed, continue to shake all of Israeli society. We are all overwhelmed with shock, grief, and mourning. We are in a state of emergency which, for many, is dictating every aspect of life: work, school, even where they live.**

**Even those who have a safety net (whether economic aid from the government or thanks to the resilience of their community) have found themselves in a completely unprecedented situation. Populations who were already weak are even more vulnerable to emergencies and crises. They do not have access to the processes for receiving government aid. They are in exponentially greater danger of falling into poverty, severe food insecurity, homelessness, even survival prostitution and human trafficking. Ukrainian refugees are included in this population. Most are women and children. Since October 7, their appeals to ASSAF for humanitarian aid have increased by about 70%.**

About 14,000 Ukrainian citizens have fled to Israel since February 24, 2022. They are in the country, but are not eligible for citizenship under the Law of Return. In addition, about 20,000 Ukrainian citizens were already in Israel before this date, as migrant workers, asylum seekers, or undocumented immigrants. Currently, both populations are legally permitted to stay in Israel under group protection against deportation, since the State of Israel recognizes that there is no possibility of deporting them to Ukraine. However, according to data from the Israel Population and Immigration Authority, nearly 4,000 Ukrainian citizens have left Israel since October 7, 2023.

When refugees from the war in Ukraine began arriving in Israel, the state provided them with aid, including healthcare services, food vouchers and housing assistance in extreme cases. Over time, this was reduced to only limited healthcare services, and even these are prolonged every few months, each time at the very last minute. Further, while at first relatives and volunteers provided these refugees with clothing, food, and a roof over their heads, this too has dwindled over the past two years. Civil society cannot continue to step in for the state and provide the needed support system for refugees.

Moreover, since the outbreak of war in Israel on October 7, 2023, many refugees have lost their jobs, such as cleaning restaurants and houses. With no economic or social safety net, this loss of income increases the already high risk of Ukrainian refugees and their children for extreme food insecurity, eviction because they can’t pay rent, and exploitation.

**These are the seven main difficulties facing Ukrainian refugees in Israel today:**

1. **Insurance for medicine and healthcare**: At the beginning of August 2023, the arrangement for providing healthcare services was unexpectedly terminated. This caused a sudden stop of medical treatments, risking patients' lives. After a public struggle, pressure from civil society organizations and the Embassy of Ukraine, and the filing of a legal petition, the arrangement was extended until the end of 2023 and it was prolonged for another 3 months, until March 31, 2024, only after a second petition was filed, on December 31, 2023. It should be noted that until now, the healthcare services were provided only for people over the age of 60. Other Ukrainian refugees only had access to healthcare services at the *Terem* clinics, which provide basic emergency services, not complete and ongoing healthcare. In addition, Ukrainian citizens who entered Israel before February 24, 2022 are not entitled to any medical services at all.
2. **Tourist visas**: Ukrainian refugees have not received a “special visa” or “special status”. They can only stay in Israel with short-term tourist visas, which they have to renew periodically. On July 5, 2023, the [Minister of the Interior announced that tourist visas for Ukrainian refugees would be renewed for six months, through January 31, 2024](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/enforcement_ukr_0507). However, this renewal was conducted only through a notice published on the Population and Immigration Authority's website and Ukrainian refugees do not possess a valid physical document attesting to the legality of their stay. Over time, life as a "tourist" without a physical stay visa has become unbearably difficult. Without a proper visa, Ukrainian refugees have difficulty finding work and housing, their access to banking services is limited, as is their access to public services. Their lives are plagued by the uncertainty of not knowing whether or not the visa will be extended. This adds to the already-heavy burden of trying to conduct their daily business, and increases their risk of abusive employment and exploitation.
3. **Employment**: Instead of granting work permits to Ukrainian refugees so they can find legal employment, the government has announced a policy of “non-enforcement”. This means that the refugees have not been given work permits since arriving in Israel, but if they do work, no legal actions are being enforced, against them or their employers. This is the same as the supposedly “temporary” policy enacted regarding the refugees from Africa, which was instated in January 2011, and is still in effect today. This ambiguous policy of non-enforcement increases the difficulty in finding a job and the risk of harmful employment and exploitation. According to data collected by ASSAF, 39% of the Ukrainian refugees who have contacted us are unemployed, and 26.2% are working “illegally”.
4. **Children and Education**: About 3,000 Ukrainian children have arrived in Israel since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Children who remain in Israel for three months or more are eligible to register in the public education system. However, ASSAF estimates that of the children who have arrived in the two years since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, only about 60-70% are registered and studying in kindergartens or schools in the areas where they live. This means that between 30-40% of Ukrainian refugee children are not in any educational setting in Israel, despite a compulsory education law. For refugee mothers whose children are not in any educational framework in the mornings and afternoons, working to support their families is difficult. Some children who are not in any educational framework are studying with teachers in Ukraine via Zoom, although prolonged online learning has negative consequences. In addition, even the children who are in Israeli schools often sit in the classroom without knowing how to speak, read, or write in Hebrew, and they do not get any help with the language or educational support tailored to their needs.
5. **Housing shortage**: When war broke out in the Ukraine, the refugees who came to Israel had to stay with Israeli residents. The state provided housing solutions only in extreme cases. Over time, many hosts could no longer offer the refugees a place to live, and the state stopped offering housing solutions, even in extreme cases. Many refugees had to look for places to rent. But renting an apartment is difficult for those with only a short-term visa. In addition, rent in Israel is extremely high, and not all refugees can afford this economic burden. Many families of Ukraine refugees must pool their small incomes to rent apartments together, and live in severely crowded conditions with their children.
6. **Human trafficking and survival prostitution**: A year ago (at the end of 2022), we already saw an increase in the number of Ukrainian refugees trapped in the terrible situations of human trafficking and survival prostitution. The Tel Aviv Center for Ukrainian Refugees documented about 850 women who were engaged in survival prostitution. Not a single one of them agreed to enter the Center’s program for protecting and rehabilitating survivors of human trafficking, in part due to the lack of appropriate language-adapted mediation for this complex situation.

In this context, it should be noted that the [U.S. Department of State’s 2022 *Trafficking in Persons Report: Israel*](https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/israel/) listed the State of Israel at “Tier 2”[[1]](#footnote-1) for the second year in a row. Further, this report indicates that the low status of asylum seekers in Israel exposes them to exploitation and survival prostitution. The report also noted that Russian, Ukrainian, and Eritrean women who are citizens of Israel are susceptible to trafficking.

1. **Deterioration of mental health**: For many refugees, who experienced and fled a war in their homeland, the attack by Hamas caused them to relive their traumas. With no access to mental health services, they are not receiving the mental health support they need in these difficult days.

**For almost two years, Ukrainian refugees have been living in Israel as "tourists" with temporary visas, inadequate and unstable healthcare services, and no additional assistance. This situation is almost unbearable in itself. Today, they are refugees of one war, facing another. The threat hovers over them that even these temporary tourist visas and partial health insurance will be terminated.**

**The State of Israel must grant Ukrainian refugees regular work stay visas valid for one year, on which their right to work is explicitly stated. Their healthcare services must be extended for another year, and it must be ensured that their children receive the healthcare and educational services to which all children living in Israel are entitled.**

**ASSAF’s vast experience in helping refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan, who have been living in Israel legally for about 15 years under group protection against deportation, has led us to realize that without any social safety net, refugees are pushed into a life of poverty, food insecurity, and constant deterioration of their physical and mental health. The State of Israel must learn from this, and act immediately to renew and expand the assistance provided to Ukrainian refugees, so that they will be able to live with dignity and security.**

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1. Tier 2: Countries whose governments do not fully meet the minimum standards of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.

   <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)