



## Navigating Uncertainty: The Future of Ukrainian Refugees in the UK

A partnership event from Opora & the Aspen Institute UK

The UK's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine saw over 200,000 visas being issued and more than 150,000 Ukrainians arriving in the UK. The British public mobilised to support the Ukrainian refugees arriving in the UK, offering their homes as sanctuary and standing in solidarity with communities in need. Yet, as we enter the second year of the humanitarian refugee schemes supporting Ukrainians and with no imminent end to the conflict in Ukraine, the future of the Ukrainian refugees in Britain is increasingly uncertain.

Aspen UK and Opora hosted this timely discussion on the future of Ukrainian refugees as we approach the end of the three-year visa period. We brought together academics, community advocates, and people with lived experience for a discussion about this complex problem. What options will be available to Ukrainians once their visas expire? What are the potential benefits and challenges of providing Ukrainian refugees with greater clarity and flexibility for long-term settlement in the UK? And how can Ukrainian refugees navigate and reconcile the uncertainties regarding their eventual return or long-term settlement?

Moderator:



Leon Hartwell - Leon is a Senior Fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA). He is also a Senior Associate at LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics, co-founder and chair of the Russia-Ukraine Dialogues, and a former Sotirov Fellow. His research interests include conflict resolution, genocide, transitional justice, diplomacy, and democracy.

## Panellists:



Meredith Kelly – Meredith is the Homes for Ukraine Lead at Reset Communities for Refugees, specializing in refugee resettlement programming. She has extensive experience of working in the UN, NGOs, and complex international contexts.



Vlad Mykhnenko – Vlad is an Associate Professor of Sustainable Urban Development at the University of Oxford. His work specialises in geographical political economy. Empirically, over the past twenty years, Mykhnenko's research interests have expanded from the post-communist urban and regional economies of eastern Europe (esp., Polish Upper Silesia and the Ukrainian Donbas) to encompass the local development phenomena observed both in the high-income global North and in the middle-income global South. Since 2003, he has produced well over 100 research outputs, everything from books to articles in top quartile peer-reviewed journals.



Maria Romanenko – Maria is a journalist, writer, public speaker, and activist from Kyiv, Ukraine living in Manchester. Having fled the war with her Mancunian partner, she continues to do work to support Ukrainian people. She has worked with the BBC, ITV, ABC News, and Sky News and was Editor-in-Chief of Hromadske International – an English-language Ukrainian publication – from 2018 to 2020. Most recently, she became the first Ukrainian recipient of the Prime Minister's Points of Light award for her voluntary work in "advocacy for Ukraine".

## Event Report

### Current Perspectives and Political Engagement:

The panel emphasised how the insistence of the UK government that the Ukraine visa scheme is temporary and *not* a route to settlement has meant there has been little policy incentive to develop additional schemes or guidance. This lack of government guidance means that Ukrainian refugees in the UK are living with significant uncertainty about their future prospects in the UK coupled with the uncertainty about the possibility of returning to Ukraine when the visas begin to expire in March 2025. For this reason, the panel stressed the urgency of initiating conversations at political and policy-making levels to establish a plan to address the possibility that the Russian invasion may still be in effect by the time the current scheme expires.

Maria Romanenko described how Ukrainians in the UK are facing difficult decisions about settling their children into schools and themselves into jobs. In addition, public funding to support local governments in providing for Ukrainian refugees is running out. Decisions related to access to education, employment, housing, and recourse to public funds will play a central role in the future of Ukrainian visa holders. The panellists called for clear and

timely guidance from the government to allow individuals to plan for their future effectively.

The panel agreed that the most likely solution to provide stability and assurance for Ukrainian visa holders would be an extension to current visas. An extension would allow them to continue rebuilding their lives in the UK while giving families some breathing room to make long-term decisions on whether to return to Ukraine or seek an alternative visa route to stay in the UK.

#### Return and Rebuild Pull Factor:

Vlad Mykhnenko highlighted the significant damage caused by the war in Ukraine, amounting to \$411 billion and rising. He noted that until government control is fully restored in all Ukrainian territories, many Ukrainian refugees will be reluctant to return. The main reason that Ukrainians would return home would be if the Ukrainian government won the war.

Beyond the stability of winning, Vlad described that the investment and reconstruction efforts in the first 12 months have the potential to stimulate the economy and create employment opportunities, and more than double GDP per capita. This early investment in reconstruction would be a major pull factor for Ukrainians to return to their home country. The Ukrainian government has already stressed the importance of the return of the Ukrainian population to the rebuilding efforts will require a sizeable workforce.

#### Voices of Ukrainian Refugees and Adequate Support:

Maria emphasised the importance of including the voices of Ukrainian refugees in the UK decision-making processes surrounding visa extension and refugee needs. While some local authorities have employed Ukrainians to ensure there are advocates in the room to express the needs of the UK-based Ukrainian refugee population, there needs to be a more proactive effort consistently across, national government, councils and counties.

Meredith Kelly addressed the existing gaps in support networks for Ukrainian refugees, particularly for women with children. According to Meredith, existing refugee policies and support networks are primarily designed for young, able-bodied men but most Ukrainian refugees are women and families meaning approaches need to be adjusted to address their specific. Policies need to address the most pressing needs including housing insecurity, language skill deficiency, lack of appropriate employment, and childcare. The panel highlighted the need for infrastructural investment and redundancy in the support system to ensure comprehensive support for the Ukrainian refugees in the UK.

Although the panel recognised charities such as Settled, Work Rights Centre, and the Ukraine Advice Centre as valuable resources for Ukrainians with a UK visa, they emphasised the need for better government-funded resources and better accessibility for legal advice.

While the UK has provided extensive support to people on the Homes for Ukraine visa, the Family Visa Scheme lacks essential support, creating disparities among different groups of visa holders. The panel emphasised the importance of equitable support for all visa holders.

#### Education, Employment, and Housing:

Education, employment, and housing were highlighted by the panel as key factors that greatly impact the lives of Ukrainian visa holders. The current uncertainties surrounding the duration of their stay in the UK have left many individuals feeling unsettled. This instability has a negative impact on mental health, particularly as the end of the three-year visa term approaches. The stress and instability are exacerbated by the fact that many families remain separated due to visa and practical restrictions.

Research indicates that the 1-1.5-year mark is pivotal for Ukrainian visa holders when deciding whether to remain in the UK or return to Ukraine. Various factors come into play during this decision-making process, including the summer season, the school calendar, and significant anniversaries.

Once Ukrainian children have settled into schools, it increases the likelihood that families will want to stay put. Those who have lost homes in Ukraine, especially those who lost homes twice because they were from the previously invaded Donbas region, are more likely to stay in the UK.

Stockport Council was given as a good example of local government support. The Council has established partnerships with approved landlords to ensure suitable housing arrangements are available for Ukrainians in the area.

#### Conclusion:

The panel discussion shed light on the challenges faced by Ukrainian visa holders in the UK, emphasising the need for clarity, policy development, and support across various domains such as education, employment, and housing. Addressing these practical issues, providing legal support, and incorporating the voices of Ukrainian refugees in decision-making processes are essential.

The event concluded with the panellists calling for more clarity from the UK government on the future policies affecting Ukrainians living in the UK. If Ukrainians were forced to leave the UK because of political inaction and a lack of practical support from the UK government, it would tarnish the positive legacy of all the benefits brought about by the UK's Ukrainian visa schemes thus far.