

Ukraine's Refugees Are Now My Neighbors

By [Ivan Sukhov](#)

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As of this Sunday, the idea of refugees fleeing to Russia from southern and eastern Ukraine no longer sounded like an invention of Kremlin spin doctors. That was when four Ukrainians — two elderly women and a young mother with an infant — moved in with my dacha neighbors.

These neighbors are extremely friendly people and, up until now, had no interest in politics. But politics has taken hold of them in a big way now. With 10 people currently sharing the limited facilities of their modest suburban home, they have good reason to think about the sad state of affairs in which the former Soviet republics find themselves 23 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Another of my neighbors in Moscow is originally from Luhansk and travels there each year with his wife and kids to visit his mother. When I asked him last month about the situation there, he said nobody had any thoughts about leaving. "My mother likes to say, 'It is only a one-hour walk to the Russian border from here, and if I had wanted to live in Russia, I could have easily made the trip long ago.'" That was back in May.

His relatives in Luhansk had been extremely skeptical about events in Kiev, but they never caused them to rethink their life in Ukraine. But when they began hearing daily exchanges of gunfire in the neighboring village, all of that changed. After first picking up a young relative living in a refugee camp near Dnepropetrovsk, they left for Russia.

The family now worries most about their elderly father whom they had to leave behind, alone in their large house. They know that when residents abandon a neighborhood, looters inevitably appear. And for the one who remains behind to face these marauders, the threat is the same, whether the intruders are yesterday's neighbors, militia members of this or that faction or ordinary Ukrainian soldiers.

The word "refugee" first became a part of my life when I was a student in the late 1980s. One day a new boy, whose family had been forced to leave Baku as a result of ethnic violence there, appeared in class.

For about a year and a half, he and his family lived in a hotel that the Moscow authorities had essentially converted into a temporary refugee center. After that, they migrated to Israel, though we still occasionally correspond through Facebook.

That one episode gave me, a relatively carefree Moscow schoolboy, my first glimpse of the frightening reality of war, of the way it can so suddenly and nonchalantly stride straight into our lives out of the world of Soviet war films and the stories our grandparents told us of bombings, hospitals and evacuation.

I have reported from a variety of conflict zones during my years as a journalist, and experience shows that any situation bad enough to produce refugees cannot be righted quickly. People only decide to abandon their homes overnight when life becomes so frightening that they prefer the uncertain and unsettled lives they know they will face as refugees.

And even then, it takes years before they can enjoy anything resembling a normal life. Most of the connections that characterize normal human interaction with the social environment break down as the person wanders from trains and refugee camps to public dormitories and the apartments of relatives, and stands in line to receive refugee status and unemployment benefits.

When the Chechen war began, Russian sociologists warned of problems when the babies of the North Caucasus — who would grow up howling in their mothers' arms as blockaded Grozny was shelled by both sides in the conflict — became adults. At the time few Russians were concerned about such a remote future. But that once distant future has arrived.

When most of the Chechen refugees managed to return to their homes after the conflict, it created the illusion that the era of humanitarian disasters — the last echoes of the collapse of the Soviet Union — had passed. But in 2008, tens of thousands of people, mostly ethnic Georgians, were forced to flee their homes in South Ossetia. And no sooner had they departed than their villages were burned to the ground and utterly destroyed.

Russia's state-controlled television did not focus attention on it, and only mentioned it with the caveat that Georgia "deserved" the punishment as retribution for having used force

to resolve its territorial dispute with South Ossetia.

And now the refugee problem has arisen very close to home, in southern and eastern Ukraine. And as compared to the Caucasus and Central Asia, it is a place where, from the end of World War II right up until this spring, nobody could have imagined an outbreak of hostilities involving shooting, looting and an exodus of refugees.

And all of it shifts from the realm of abstract drama unfolding on your television screen the moment your own relatives from Ukraine move in with you and sit down to watch news reports playing on that same television set.

The debate over who is to blame — President Vladimir Putin, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, the separatists, Right Sector, the Maidan or Chechen mercenaries — will probably be eclipsed by the more immediate problem of simple survival. And that is no easy task when the Russian family hosting the refugees includes an auto mechanic, door-to-door salesman, music teacher, municipal employee and a 2-year-old child — that is, nobody earning more than \$1,000 per month.

The government has announced that it will establish refugee reception centers along the border with Ukraine, but anyone who has seen such tent cities along Chechnya's administrative borders or temporary refugee centers in Russian cities knows that these are not places anyone would want to visit, much less live in. At the same time, the authorities have remained silent on the question of state assistance for Russian families that take in refugees.

Volunteer Russian fighters who consider it a matter of honor and patriotism to support the militias in Donetsk and Luhansk have not been in a hurry to provide refugees from those regions with places to live, jobs, clothes, food or money. They are more interested in fighting a war in the neighboring country — a war that, even after the shedding of blood, they seem to consider akin to a glorified video game.

But the refugees are already here — people from southern and eastern Ukraine who found themselves caught in a vortex of instability in only a few months' time. They are the first refugees to appear in the Moscow region in many years. But this is nothing more than a symptom of the continuing disintegration of a country: a process that everyone had thought ended long ago.

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