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Amanda Scott

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*Around the World*

**The Ukrainian Family Separation Crisis**

*Amanda Scott\**

In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there has been a dramatic increase in Ukrainian family separation. Women and their children were forced to leave their homes and oftentimes their husbands, to seek safety in another country. Family separation was an expected consequence of the war, and in preparation for this disaster, UNICEF trained thousands of people on how to shelter children separated from their families in Ukraine. However, no amount of preparation could have been sufficient to handle the magnitude of Ukrainian family separation that took place within such a short amount of time. Ukrainian family separation has become Europe's largest humanitarian crisis since World War II and was exacerbated by the family separation that occurred at the United States-Mexico border.

**I. WOMEN AND CHILDREN FLEEING UKRAINE**

As of September 30, 2022, 7,536,433 Ukrainians have been registered outside of Ukraine since February 2022. The assumption can be made that many of these people had to undergo family separation, as women between the ages of 30 and 39 make up much of this number. This is so because men over the age of 18 and under the age of 60 were mandated to stay in Ukraine serve for their country. However, as of September 20, 2022, there have been over six million people re-cross the border back into Ukraine. This number indicates that returning to Ukraine is the end goal for many of those who were forced to leave. However, until they are able to return home, the mothers are left feelings cared, confused, alone, and in most cases without an easily accessible safe place to go.

Such was the case of Valentina, who was forced to flee her home with her two young children leaving behind her husband. She spoke about her young son crying as they crossed the border to Romania. She detailed how scared she was as they heard explosions while leaving. Her husband drove them to the border where, for their safety, Valentina had no choice but to leave her husband and take her children to safety in a neighboring country. Valentina and her young children fled, in great fear, to Romania where they were welcomed and offered support at the border by people waiting to help the influx of Ukrainians.

While some chose to go to further countries such as Romania, many mothers opted to flee directly at Ukraine's borders to Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Moldova. In most of these instances, they only had with them the belongings that they could carry. Many Ukrainian families also fled to eastern Europe. Poland and Germany have received the most refugees, with over one million each. Germany is a country that welcomed Ukrainians with open arms and outpouring support, both financially and emotionally. Many Ukrainians also journeyed to the United States to seek refuge.

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\* Amanda Scott is a second-year law student pursuing her JD at Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

## II. UKRAINIANS SEEKING REFUGE IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States is home to the second-largest Ukrainian population in the world. The majority of Ukrainian immigrants gain legal permanent resident status through family sponsorship or admittance via refugee and asylum channels. In continuance of this relationship with Ukrainians, as an initial response to the attack on Ukraine, President Biden pledged to provide a temporary safe haven for those displaced from their homes. The Biden administration implemented action to take in Ukrainians on March 3, 2022, when Homeland Security announced the grant of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for 18 months, from April 19, 2022, through October 19, 2023. This concerned certain Ukrainians already present in the U.S. This plan was expected to allow 59,600 Ukrainians to be eligible for relief from deportation and work authorization. Later, on April 21, 2022, the Biden administration announced a plan to welcome up to 100,000 Ukrainians through a combination of multiple programs such as Uniting for Ukraine and other, more permanent entry pathways.

The United States received more than 100,000 Ukrainians in the first five months following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. When Ukrainians come to the U.S., they have multiple ways to enter. These include temporary or immigrant visas, private sponsorship programs, a traditional refugee system, or admittance at the U.S.-Mexico border. It is at the U.S.-Mexico border that more hardship has been caused for the children from Ukraine as they are often separated from their guardians.

In April 2022 alone, over 20,000 Ukrainians showed up to U.S. ports of entry and were stopped at the border because they were deemed "inadmissible." About a third of these Ukrainians were below the age of seventeen. The U.S.-Mexico border was the place of entry for those without necessary papers, whereas the other means of entry were where the people with the necessary papers went. These people that showed up at the border were allowed to temporarily enter the U.S. at the border under "parole" for the obvious humanitarian reasons.

## III. CHILDREN SEPARATED AT THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

Although families coming from Ukraine to the U.S. have been granted expedited admission, there are hundreds of children that arrived without their parents, with extended family members such as aunts, uncles, and cousins. At the U.S.-Mexico border, these Ukrainian children have been detained and separated from these caregivers. The guardians are detained because they are not the direct parent or sibling of the child, and they must go through the proper screenings to be admitted into the U.S. with the child. This is a precaution taken to prevent issues such as trafficking, as it is known that a child crossing the border with an adult other than their parent is a sign of potential exploitation. There are many instances in which adults are using kids as their ticket to enter the US. The separation is done with the child's best interest in mind, however, in innocent cases, it only harms the child.

Seventeen-year-old, Yelyzaveta Krasulia, was faced with the decision to flee her home when Russia invaded Ukraine. She made the incredibly difficult choice to separate

from her mother, who stayed behind to provide care for her loved ones that were unable to travel due to not having valid passports. Yelyzaveta traveled to the U.S. by herself to stay with a close family friend. At the San Diego-Tijuana border, Yelyzaveta was separated from that family friend and put in a holding cell. Shortly after, she was sent to a New York facility designated for unaccompanied migrant children. Yelyzaveta's family friend had a notarized letter from Yelyzaveta's mother authorizing her to escort Yelyzaveta into the U.S. and to be her caregiver. However, this legally verified letter was denied. This process resulted in Yelyzaveta and her mother undergoing further trauma after being forced to flee from their home. Yelyzaveta reported having all her belongings taken from her, including her phone, documents, luggage, book, and shoelaces. She told her family friend that she was being held in a prison cell with approximately twenty-five other people from Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. Yelyzaveta was told she would be released at certain times only to be transferred to another facility. She was stopped from speaking her preferred language of Russian and was told she could only speak English. Following the false release incident, Yelyzaveta and her mother were informed it would take weeks for them to reunite, leaving them feeling that the U.S. was not allowing an easy or welcoming pathway for Ukrainians to take care of their families during this traumatic time, as much of their help was just surface level and not done with the intention of providing legitimate shelter.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Stories like Yelyzaveta's are all too common and gut-wrenching. These individuals are forced to flee their homes in Ukraine without their families, only to be separated from their only caregivers at a U.S. border, where they were supposed to receive relief. There has been significant public outcry for solutions to this existential problem. It is clearly not an accessible option for many of these Ukrainians to return to their homes in Ukraine, as it is still not safe to do so. Overall, millions of Ukrainians have undergone family separation in 2022 due to the war and need accessible safe havens.

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