The War Context

The War Context: As of July 2023, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has forced more than 6 million people to flee Ukraine and has internally displaced 5.1 million. Experts estimate as many as 90 percent of those who fled were women and children, and more than half of Ukraine’s children were displaced. These refugee and displaced populations are especially vulnerable to human trafficking. There are reports of Ukrainian citizens being recruited, including through online means, for sex trafficking abroad and for forced labor, and reports of suspected traffickers targeting women and children fleeing the war at transit points and reception centers. However, despite trafficking indicators and continued risk, host governments have confirmed few cases of trafficking victims from Ukraine. Many European governments conduct extensive awareness-raising campaigns, provide assistance, and take other actions to prevent trafficking; however, experts note in some countries the lack of confirmed cases of victims may reflect authorities’ failure to identify trafficking cases, rather than an absence of trafficking victims. Even for those within Ukraine, Russia’s war and its economic impacts heighten civilians’ vulnerability to trafficking. A recent survey showed more than half of Ukrainian civilians are at risk of trafficking and willing to accept a risky job offer that could lead to exploitation. This includes men and boys and, increasingly, educated Ukrainian civilians seeking to provide for their needs.

Those Most Vulnerable: Among those most at risk of trafficking are refugees and other internally displaced populations, Ukrainian citizens living in Russia-occupied territory, children fleeing Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, unaccompanied children, children evacuated from Ukraine’s government-run institutions, and Ukrainians forcibly transferred within Russia-occupied areas of Ukraine or to Russia. The United States is deeply concerned by reports of Russia’s forcible relocation of Ukraine’s children, who are highly vulnerable to trafficking. Information about the well-being and whereabouts of these children or adults is limited, and there is not currently enough data to know whether these individuals are victims of trafficking. Finally, women and girls, members of ethnic or religious minority communities (such as the Roma community), third-country nationals, persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+ persons, and others facing discrimination are among those particularly vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation because of Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine, as during any crisis.

Future Risks: Experts assess the risk of human trafficking resulting from Russia’s war of aggression will likely continue to grow in Ukraine, Europe, and beyond. As the war continues, individuals’ personal resources may deplete and access to services and goods, including shelter, food, medical attention, and electricity may deteriorate for many civilians in Ukraine, leaving them increasingly vulnerable to trafficking. Support and access to safe jobs may decline in Europe and as refugees travel farther from home, the trafficking risks increase. Because of the growing risks, all governments, including Ukraine, must remain vigilant and do more to prevent trafficking and identify and protect victims.
Our Response

Preemptive Anti-Trafficking Response: In the weeks before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Department of State, including the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP Office) and our diplomatic missions abroad, preemptively engaged with Ukrainian officials, neighboring governments, and partner organizations to urge them to integrate anti-trafficking elements into their contingency planning and protection efforts for refugees and displaced persons. Since February 2022, we have continued to engage governments in the region and in countries across Europe that are welcoming refugees from Ukraine to raise awareness about human trafficking and to encourage governments to integrate anti-trafficking measures into their emergency and humanitarian response mechanisms to prevent trafficking among highly vulnerable groups and protect any trafficking victims.

Coordination and Partnership: The Department of State continues to coordinate with European governments and experts in the region, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), other international bodies, and NGOs to: raise awareness; encourage continued vigilance; identify trends, gaps, and best practices; and enhance efforts to protect trafficking victims and prevent a surge in trafficking of Ukrainian nationals and others fleeing the war. Our Diplomatic Security Service personnel throughout Europe work with other law enforcement and are prepared to provide investigative assistance, as appropriate, to protect vulnerable populations and thwart this crime.

Assistance: As of July 2023, the United States has provided more than $451 million in humanitarian assistance to support Ukraine response efforts in the region, to address the most urgent needs of Ukrainian refugees, including reducing the risk of trafficking. The Department of State and USAID have invested over $11 million in assistance to Ukraine and neighboring countries to combat human trafficking. The TIP Office works with international organizations and NGO partners on regional anti-trafficking efforts, through programs in Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, and Bulgaria totaling $6.5 million to assist those fleeing Ukraine and others at risk of trafficking in the region. In Ukraine, both the TIP Office and USAID have long-established anti-trafficking programs and our implementing partners are working in close coordination with local authorities and civil society to increase resources to mitigate trafficking and provide emergency victim assistance and medical assistance. For example, the TIP Office supported, and USAID continues to support, Ukraine’s national counter-trafficking hotline, which provides information to internally displaced people and the general population on safe migration routes and trafficking risks. To date, the hotline has assisted over 65,000 individual callers and led to the identification of potential victims of trafficking. Additionally, the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) has provided support to Ukraine’s Migration Police, including to address the increased risk of human trafficking.

Combating Human Trafficking in Conflict Situations

Given the evolving needs generated by Russia’s war against Ukraine, the Department of State will continue to monitor the situation, coordinate with relevant partners, and provide assistance where we are able. Additionally, the Department will continue to engage foreign governments hosting refugee and displaced populations to consider the following recommendations.

Recommended anti-trafficking measures for governments to protect refugees and displaced persons:

- Monitor and assess the trafficking risks to refugees and displaced persons, including unaccompanied minors.
- Map and monitor the landscape of high-risk online platforms for indicators of trafficking, including but not limited to: job offers targeting Ukrainian nationals, websites related to commercial sex, social media, and video chat and livestreaming platforms.
- Increase efforts to prevent trafficking, including by law enforcement presence at borders and transit centers and registering volunteers providing transportation, housing, and assistance.
- Increase proactive efforts to identify victims and vigorously screen for trafficking victims, particularly among highly vulnerable populations, including those displaced by conflict.
- Vigorously investigate and prosecute alleged trafficking crimes and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers.
- Raise awareness of trafficking risks by widely distributing information, in relevant languages and formats, on human trafficking and the related rights of refugees, migrants, and displaced persons, including in media campaigns and at transit centers.
- Ensure officials, particularly border guards, transit point authorities, health and social service professionals, and other front-line workers, are trained to identify human trafficking victims and signs and know where to refer them for care and assistance.
- Provide trauma-informed, tailored support for unaccompanied and separated children, including child trafficking victims.
- Coordinate with neighboring governments, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations on trafficking prevention and protection of victims to improve coordination and allow for information-sharing on observed trends and risks.
- Broaden partnerships between the government and local organizations to prevent trafficking.
- Plan for long-term care and services for identified trafficking victims.

https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/