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Refugees welcome

Alexander Volkov, daughter-in-law Yulia and grandson Sergiy fled Donbas and ended up in Mittelhäusern. Most of Ukraine's refugees are mothers, children and elderly people like them.



Tens of thousands of Ukrainians fleeing the war have arrived in Switzerland. The unbureaucratic manner in which they have been admitted into the country bears testimony to a groundswell of solidarity, but also reveals the flaws in Switzerland's asylum system.

THEODORA PETER AND MARC LETTAU

“When I sleep at night, I dream of my dacha,” says Alexander Volkov. And of the vines that he should now be tending. The retired metallurgical engineer from Kramatorsk is currently residing 2,500 kilometres from his summer lodge in a small Bernese village that he never knew existed until recently: Mittelhäusern. Volkov is Ukrainian. Aside from the random destination, Volkov’s journey here was little different to that of millions of other people from Ukraine. He and his daughter-in-law Yulia and grandson Sergiy fled the shelling and bombing of their home city in Donbas, leaving the death, destruction and suffering of war behind them. In Switzerland, the refugee authorities informed Volkov that he and his family had an “invitation to stay in Mittelhäusern”. This was a stroke of luck for them. “Our host family has been very kind to us.” Nevertheless, the situation in Donbas and specifically in Kramatorsk is constantly on Volkov’s mind. “Every morning, we start the day by finding out what is happening and whether our house is still standing.” He wonders which outcome is better: a “good war” claiming many lives, or a “bad peace” leading to years of uncertainty and enmity.

There are others in Mittelhäusern who share the same thoughts. Whenever he takes a stroll with his walking cane, he is liable to bump into fellow refugee Anhelina Kharaman and her mother and daughter, who are also staying with hosts in the village. They come from Mariupol, the flattened city in southern Ukraine. Mykola Nahornyi and Lilia Nahorna, a couple from Dnipro, are currently

staying in Mittelhäusern as well. They too have a garden back home, with fruit and vegetables that they would normally be preserving for winter.

Wave of solidarity

Around a dozen Ukrainian refugees currently live in Mittelhäusern – a dozen out of over 50,000 women, children and elderly people who fled to Switzerland during the first three months of the war. The Second World War was the last time so many people sought refuge in Switzerland in such a short period. The country has seen a wave of solidarity, as people donate aid, offer support and welcome Ukrainians into their homes – a response similar to other shows of generosity in the past. Switzerland welcomed refugees from Eastern Europe with open arms after Soviet

troops marched into Hungary in 1956 and the former Czechoslovakia in 1968, for example.

In March, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, the Federal Council activated “protection status S” for Ukrainian refugees – a specific category that has existed on paper since the 1990s, when many people fled the Yugoslav wars. Switzerland had never triggered this specific protective status before, even when millions of people were displaced during the war in Syria.

Refugee organisations call for equal treatment

Protection status S affords Ukrainian refugees the priceless advantage of being able to register with the authorities without having to file an asylum application. They can look for work



Anhelina Kharaman enjoying the spring blossom in Switzerland – her home city of Mariupol lies in ruins.

Photos: Danielle Liniger

Identity card with the coveted “S” – the Federal Council has activated “protection status S” for the first time, allowing Ukrainian refugees to integrate quickly into Swiss life.



Some six million people have fled Ukraine since the war began.

Switzerland expects to have accepted between 80,000 and 120,000 refugees by autumn.

immediately, reunite with their family members in Switzerland and travel freely within the Schengen Area. Refugees from other war zones are denied these benefits. If you come from Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, Ethiopia or Iraq for example, you have to go through the regular asylum procedure and are not permitted to work or travel until your application has been processed. This also applies to anyone who is only temporarily admitted to Switzerland because it is not possible, not permitted or not reasonable for them to return to their home country.

Refugee organisations welcome the government's generous, pragmatic response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. But all people fleeing armed conflict should be treated equally, they argue. "From a refugee's perspective, it is irrelevant whether the war from which they are fleeing is a war of aggression by another country or a civil war between two parties within their own country," says Seraina Nufer, who co-heads the protection department at the Swiss Refugee Council. Experts on immigration law think it is unacceptable that people escaping war zones in other countries are treated differently and, for example, have to wait three years before their family can join them in Switzerland. However, there is no groundswell among Swiss politicians to make the asylum process easier. The fear is that it would only encourage more immigration.

Increasingly on the breadline

But Switzerland is no paradise if you are a Ukrainian refugee either. First, you are worried about loved ones who remain in the war-torn country: husbands, fathers and sons who have been called up into the army. Then you have the problem of making ends meet. Most Ukrainian refugees lack the necessary language skills to quickly find a job in

Switzerland. If you are penniless, you can apply for asylum support. The benefits you receive are 30 to 40 per cent below what people in Switzerland would normally get, however. Basically, government money is barely enough for you to subsist. Consequently, more and more Ukrainians are also queuing up at food banks. Asylum organisations warn that refugees will become destitute. They say the financial assistance for these people is pathetic for a country as rich as Switzerland.

The generous Swiss families who have opened their doors to over 20,000 refugees are also taking a fi-

nancial hit. They receive nothing more than a symbolic payment depending on their respective canton, and often minimal support otherwise. "Many host families feel like they have been left to fend for themselves," says Christoph Reichenau, co-founder of Ukraine-Hilfe Bern, a charity set up to help Ukrainian refugees. Ukraine-Hilfe Bern operates as a contact point for refugees and host families from its base near Berne railway station. It organises language courses, and its website acts as an interface for the many volunteers wanting to help. There is still a huge amount of solidarity among ordinary people, according to Reichenau. But a clear vision and improved guidelines are needed to "ensure that the outpouring of assistance develops into something more sustained."

No speedy return to Ukraine

The authorities are working on the premise that the Ukrainian refugees will remain in Switzerland for longer than a year. It looks increasingly unlikely that many would want to return to Ukraine's bombed-out cities any time soon. The Russian invasion was still unfolding at the time of our editorial deadline in mid-May. With the number of refugees continuing to rise (the federal government expects the total figure to be between 80,000 to 120,000 by autumn), the authorities not only have to provide more accommodation but also work out how to integrate the refugees into Swiss life.

Alexander Volkov, Anhelina Kharaman, Mykola Nahorny and Lilia Nahorna would return home immediately if they could. Back to their houses and gardens in Kramatorsk, Mariupol and Dnipro. In the meantime, Lilia Nahorna is growing seedlings in Swiss flower pots. She can easily take these back with her, to plant at home, in Ukraine.



Lilia Nahorna and Mykola Nahorny are impatient to return home to Dnipro and tend to their garden as soon as possible.
Photo: Danielle Liniger