

## **[Un]Wanted People: Internal Displacement in Russia caused by the Russo-Ukrainian War**

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*This brief article highlights a lesser-known instance of forced displacement in the Kursk region, triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian War – internally displaced Russians who were forced to flee their homes as a result of the August 2024 Ukrainian cross-border attack and occupation of Russian territory. The absence of the term “internally displaced persons” and related protections in Russian legislation has put internally displaced Russians in limbo, a situation made worse by the government’s apparent unpreparedness for a Ukrainian invasion. The author of this piece argues that the mostly ad-hoc IDP protection responses by the Russian authorities, driven often by political, not humanitarian, concerns, have left many IDPs without adequate support. The possibility that such protections could be suspended at any time has further contributed to a sense of uncertainty and injustice among IDPs in Russia.*

### **Introduction**

On March 14, 2025, [in his post](#) on Truth Social, President Trump claimed that “thousands of Ukrainian troops are completely surrounded by the Russian military.” According to Trump, the encircled Ukrainian units were located in the Kursk Oblast, one of the Western regions of Russia that shares a border with the Sumy region of Ukraine.

Such depictions of the dynamics of the Russo-Ukrainian War, highlighting Russia’s relative strength and Ukraine’s relative weakness, are commonplace. As a result, people who are unfamiliar with events on the

frontlines of the Russo-Ukrainian War might have been astonished to learn that Ukrainian units had controlled an area in Russian territory. Even people who have closely followed the news about the war might have been surprised that the Ukrainian army managed to hold part of the Kursk region for so long.

The unexpected Ukrainian attack on the Kursk region started on [August 6, 2024](#) and was [the first time a foreign army stepped onto Russian soil after WWII](#). There has been fierce fighting over the past nine months, allowing Ukraine to hold at the peak of its offensive [1,376 sq km of Russian territory, including approximately 100 towns and villages](#). Russia called the Ukrainian attack “[a terrorist operation](#)” and tried to downplay its actual size. By March 2025, Russian forces managed to reclaim most of the Kursk region with the [help of North Korean soldiers, belatedly acknowledged by Russia](#). By the beginning of April, according to [DeepState OSINT, a well-known team of Ukrainian experts that monitors the development of the war and creates an interactive map of frontlines](#), the estimated area still under Ukrainian control was around [140 sq km](#). [On April 26, 2025](#), the day when Trump and Zelensky had a quick one-on-one meeting during Pope Francis’s funeral, Russia announced that the Kursk region was liberated entirely, though Ukraine contradicted that. It should be noted that, due to the ongoing armed conflict, verifying any such information is challenging.

Given Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine of more than two years at the time, the August 2024 attack on the Kursk region surprised many. Moreover, it revealed significant issues with the Russian policy on IDPs and the unpreparedness of the Russian federal and regional authorities to address the problems of displaced persons. By August 12, 2024, the Ukrainian operation in the Kursk region had displaced approximately 120,000 Russians from the area, mostly from the frontlines to Kursk, with approximately 2,000 Russians remaining in the occupied territories. By November 2024, the number of IDPs had reached [150,000](#), and by February 2025, there were 112,620 registered IDPs in the Kursk region. The [displacement](#) affected every fifth inhabitant out of the one million people of the region and almost doubled the number of dwellers in Kursk, which had a population of approximately 400,000 people before the Ukrainian attack.

## IDP Policy Issues

Due to political objections, the Soviet Union was not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. Moreover, the country considered UHCHR “[as an instrument of the Cold War](#).” In September 1990, when the Soviet observer delegation attended the UNHCR’s annual Executive Committee, the government finally informed the High Commissioner, Thorvald Stoltenberg, that the country intended to accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention and was working on legislation regulating migration. At the time, it was dealing with approximately 600,000 IDPs displaced by “the continuing economic decline and resurgence of nationalism in the Soviet Union” ([UNHCR, 2000](#)). However, the Soviet Union collapsed in August 1991 without joining the international refugee protection system. Only on February 2, 1993, did Russia, as an independent state, become a [Party to the Convention and its Protocol](#). After the accession, in February 1993, Russia adopted federal laws on [refugees](#) and [forcibly displaced persons](#).<sup>1</sup> In 1995, the latter was significantly amended and became the Federal Law on Forced Migrants ([#202-FZ](#)) and has had several amendments since then.

According to Article 1.1 of this bill, a “forced migrant” is

*a citizen of the Russian Federation, who has left the place of his residence as a result of an act of violation or of suppression in other forms, committed against him or against his family members, or as a result of the real threat to be subjected to suppression because of his racial or national affiliation, religion or language, and also because of his belonging to a particular social group or because of his political convictions, which have become a pretext for launching hostile campaigns with respect to a particular person or a group of persons, or massive breaches of the public order.*

As can be seen, the abovementioned Article mostly aligns with the grounds for obtaining refugee status listed in Article 2 of the Refugee Convention. However, the term “forced migrant” [does not correspond with international refugee law](#) and replaces an internationally recognised concept of the internally displaced person, as, according to Article 1.2 of 202-FZ, a forced migrant is a Russian citizen who is either fleeing to Russia from abroad or fleeing from one region of Russia to another.<sup>2</sup> Therefore,

people fleeing the territory controlled by Ukraine after August 6, 2024, could not be recognised as forced migrants as most of them stayed within the Kursk region and as only a small number of them crossed the regional border. For example, on August 15, 2024, it was [reported](#) that the Oryol Oblast, a northern neighbour of the Kursk region, hosted only 1,540 forced migrants out of 120,000 displaced by the Ukrainian attack on the Kursk region in August 2024.

Acknowledging the gap in IDP policy, in September 2024, the [members of the Kursk regional parliament](#) appealed to the [State Duma](#), the lower chamber of the Russian Federal Parliament, to expand the definition of the term “forced migrant” to include those who fled their homes but stayed within the region. There were two reasons for the proposal. First, the expansion of the term could entitle forced migrants in the Kursk region to receive various social benefits, including financial compensation for buying new houses and the loss of old ones, and make the policy more just for all Russian citizens. Second, the expanded definition of “forced migrant” would incentivise displaced persons to stay in their region of origin. Relatedly, it was feared that the potential return rate for those who might leave would be relatively low, especially for highly educated and skilled people, like doctors, teachers, and police officers ([Kireeva and Verchenko](#), 2024).

However, the Ministry of Internal Affairs did not support the proposal, claiming, without explanation, that the suggested changes may provide less protection to the displaced in the Kursk region. The Ministry’s representative mentioned that the policies implemented in August 2024, including [the state of emergency](#), the [counter-terrorism regime](#), and the federal law on Protection of the Population and Territories from Emergency Situations of Natural and Man-Made Character ([#68-FZ](#)) and other measures taken by the federal and regional authorities already protected forced migrants staying within Kursk ([Kireeva and Verchenko](#), 2024). It should be noted that the primary purpose of the abovementioned state of emergency and counter-terrorism regime was to provide the security forces with [additional powers](#), including extra powers to inspect and restrict the movement of vehicles and people, stronger public order controls, suspension of the provision of services, temporary resettlement of people to safe areas and unrestricted entrance

to residential premises, which lead to limitations, if not violations, of human rights, not protections for IDPs.

Alongside the “forced migrant” legislation, the situation is also complicated by the existence of other laws regulating such issues. For instance, federal law #68-FZ regulates situations of natural or industrial disasters, catastrophic crashes, and the spread of the diseases posing danger that might cause death, damage the health of people or the environment, or cause considerable material losses and violations of the conditions of life (Article 1). Despite that, this federal law was widely applied by Russian regional authorities while dealing with significantly increased numbers of Ukrainian citizens seeking refuge in Russia in 2014 and 2022 ([Bagdasaryan, 2023](#)). However, an increased number of refugees or forced migrants, and, moreover, an ongoing armed conflict, may have created an emergency situation, but they also have created a significant humanitarian crisis whose scope is bigger and more complex than an emergency. Therefore, it is unclear how this act (#68-FZ) could protect IDPs.

Nevertheless, the change proposed by the Kursk regional parliament to the policy on forced migrants has not been accepted yet by the State Duma, which puts IDPs in the Kursk region in limbo and makes their access to social benefits dependent upon on executive orders and bylaws of the federal and regional authorities, not legal entitlements.

### **IDP Entitlements**

Since there is a gap in policy that is supposed to protect those displaced in the Kursk region, any protections and social welfare IDPs might receive have to come from multiple ad hoc legal acts issued by various branches of power.

#### *Housing Certificates*

One of those acts was issued on August 7, 2024, by the Kursk regional government, [a policy](#) funded by the federal and regional budgets aiming to support people living in the border areas of the Kursk region and whose houses were under constant shelling during the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The policy entitles a person who lost property in the fighting to receive a certificate allowing them to purchase a new property.

The value of each certificate is calculated individually per household and depends on the size of the destroyed property and the cost per-square-meter. However, the requirements for who can receive certificates could be challenging to meet. For instance, in order to receive a certificate, an IDP household that owned not only a house but also the plot of land where the house was built was required to renounce their right to the land without compensation. Another example is that a new property bought with a certificate should be the same size as the damaged property or smaller (but not by more than fifteen percent), making it difficult to find a property of the right size. For example, for people fleeing rural areas for urban areas, buying a house of approximately the same size might be considerably more expensive, even after applying the full value of the certificate. ([Lisitsyna](#), 2024).

Initially, the policy was intended to have fewer beneficiaries as it was adopted before the Ukrainian army crossed the border. However, the unexpected Ukrainian attack significantly increased the number of people impacted by the policy, which slowed the policy's implementation. By November 2024, only approximately [2,500 households](#) had received certificates. This slow speed prompted IDPs to act. Thus, risking their freedom during the first week of November, IDPs protested twice, complaining that they were unable to receive the certificates since [the application process](#) was quite complex and bureaucratic. Even though the representative of the Kursk regional administration, Anatoly Drogan, who spoke to the participants of the rally, called the public action "[illegal](#)"<sup>3</sup> and ["demanded that people disperse and write a collective appeal at the public reception office"](#) instead, the rallies led to a November 12th [meeting](#) with the then-governor of the Kursk region, Alexey Smirnov, which sped up certificate distribution. On December 2, 2024, the governor [announced](#) that more than 25,000 applications for property certificates had been accepted, and 2,954 certificates were distributed, including 505 that were given out from November 12. On February 18, 2025, the Kursk government announced that since 2023, approximately 6,700 certificates had been distributed; however, the number also included certificates for people who had to leave their houses even before the Ukrainian attack happened.

The number of distributed certificates demonstrates that the need for housing by IDPs has not been appropriately addressed, forcing most IDPs to stay for months in uncomfortable shelters or rent apartments and cover the rental cost themselves.

### *Social Welfare*

Since August 8, 2024, each IDP has been entitled to a one-time payment of [10,000 rubles](#) (approximately USD 121) from the federal government, and by August 29, 2024, more than 100,000 IDPs had received this payment. Due to the state of emergency announced in the region, IDPs were paid an additional one-time federal benefit of [15,000 rubles](#) (USD 181). Moreover, IDPs could apply for compensation for partial or complete property loss, which is [75,000 rubles](#) (USD 864) and [150,000 rubles](#) (USD 1,815), respectively. Also, the following one-time compensatory payments were established for IDPs: for loss of a family member during the Ukrainian attack, [1,5 million rubles](#) (USD 18,153); for serious or moderate bodily harm, [600,000 rubles](#) (USD 7,260); for minor damage to health, [300,000 rubles](#) (USD 3,630).

In comparison with the average monthly salary in the Kursk region (59,600 rubles/USD 721) and the cost of a square meter of residential real estate in the first half of 2024 ([91,000 rubles](#)/USD 1,100), the amounts offered as compensation were relatively low. Additionally, since most IDPs chose to relocate to Kursk, the regional capital, the demand for real estate there has increased dramatically, putting upward pressure on rental prices. For example, by January 2025, the rent of a one-bedroom apartment in Kursk had increased by approximately [70%](#), a two-bedroom by [72%](#), and a three-bedroom by [64%](#). The inability of IDPs to pay rent and multiple complaints from IDPs persuaded the federal government from November 1, 2024, to supplement IDP rent expenses with monthly payments of [20,000 rubles](#) (USD 240) for families with less than three children and [40,000 rubles](#) (USD 483) for families with more than three children. However, these compensations only partially cover rent, as the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is around [40,000 rubles](#) (USD 483).

Later, in February 2025, all IDPs who were entitled to receive compensation for the complete loss of their property (150,000 rubles) also started receiving monthly payments of [65,000 rubles](#) (USD 791). The



amount is supposed to be paid to [112,600 IDPs](#) until the complete liberation of the Kursk region and was based on what the Kursk governor said was the [average salary in the Kursk region at the end of 2024](#). However, most people who were not IDPs expressed dissatisfaction, saying the true average salary was much lower, with only [20% of people living in the Kursk region](#) receiving such high wages. As a result, these payments led to [tension and mutual discontent between the locals and IDPs](#).

The decision to establish the abovementioned payments was likely the outcome of [another IDP rally](#) that happened at the end of January 2025. During this time, IDPs complained about the lack of financial assistance from the federal and regional governments and demanded intensification of the distribution of housing certificates and the right to keep their land plots where the damaged property was located ([Rofo](#), 2025). It should be noted that the 2024 November rallies led to the resignation of then-governor Alexey Smirnov, who was elected in September 2024 with [65%](#) of the votes. It seems that the former governor was made a scapegoat as, on April 16, 2025, he was arrested on suspicion of embezzlement of budget funds allocated for defensive structures on the Kursk regional part of the Russian-Ukrainian border. According to official sources, the absence of these structures had allowed the Ukrainian army to gain control of the region ([Russian BBC](#), 2025).

It can be concluded that the financial assistance provided to IDPs does not address all their needs, especially given that most people lost all their assets and fled their houses with no possessions. Also, the size and duration of social welfare payments have been highly dependent on subsidies from the federal budget and could be decreased or stopped at any moment, given the difficult economic situation in Russia because of [sanctions](#) and the ongoing war of more than three years. More importantly, Ukraine's partial control of the Kursk region was unexpected, and it was assumed it wouldn't last so long, so hoping for a quick counterattack, the Russian federal and Kursk regional governments started paying relatively low compensations at the beginning, but the growing length of the displacement motivated the authorities to provide more solid financial assistance to IDPs. This was more of a political than



humanitarian act intended to keep people from protesting or attract unneeded attention to the IDPs.

### *'Downtime' Payments*

Obviously, an active armed conflict impacts not only people but also industrial enterprises, as companies cannot proceed with their usual activities, leaving employees jobless and therefore unpaid. To support employees, according to the Labour Code of Russia ([Article 72.2](#)), companies that cannot continue working normally should announce downtime, which means temporary suspension of work for economic, technological, technical or organizational reasons. After the Ukrainian attack, the Kursk regional government announced [the downtime of regional companies](#) that were entirely or partially funded by the regional government. Additionally, it was strongly suggested that municipal companies and private businesses follow suit. Since downtime was for reasons not caused by the employer, the employees experiencing downtime were entitled to receive at least 2/3 of their base salary ([Article 157](#)). Thus, by November 9, 2024, [320 out of 1,500 companies](#) in the Kursk region announced downtime, resulting in approximately 7,200 employees receiving this type of compensation.

Since the Labour Code establishes only the minimum downtime payments, most IDPs received from [3,000 to 5,000](#) rubles (USD 36 to 61), and only a few employees received 10,000 rubles (USD 122), while the maximum payment of 15,000 rubles (USD 183) was received by just a small number of IDPs. It should be mentioned that the companies that paid the 'downtime' were partially subsidised by the federal government. In November 2024, the Kursk region received the tranche of [10.5 million rubles](#) (USD 128,000) to cover local enterprises' expenses, while the second tranche of [800 million rubles](#) (USD 9 million) was announced in February 2025. [This amount](#) was supposed to subsidise enterprises not only in the Kursk region but also in the Belgorod and Bryansk regions impacted by the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Similarly to the application of #68-FZ mentioned earlier, it is unclear why this norm had been applied to IDPs as downtime is supposed to be applied in cases of "extreme natural and anthropogenic factors," including "in the event of a man-made disaster, flood, epidemic, which are declared as

emergency circumstances” ([Profkadtovik.ru](https://profkadtovik.ru), 2025). Since an ongoing armed conflict is not listed among the reasons for declaring downtime, it seems that a broad interpretation of the Labour Code norm was applied. Additionally, whilst the payments were subsidised by the federal government, the policy was not coherent and had a small impact on IDPs due to the insignificance of the amounts paid. However, the policy contributed to a sense of injustice among the displaced.

## Conclusion

The absence of the term “internally displaced persons” in the Russian legislation puts people who have had to flee their homes in limbo. The issue with the determination of IDP status, especially for people fleeing the Russo-Ukrainian war, highly depends on political will and does not guarantee reliable and adequate protection. The compensations that IDPs are entitled to can be cancelled at any moment as the Russian government claims that the Kursk region is entirely liberated from Ukrainian troops, though, in fact, it is not. Additionally, compensation is relatively low, as, according to IDPs in the Kursk region, the average sums needed to cover their true losses would be twice the current levels ([825,000 rubles](#) (USD 10,116) and [390,000 rubles](#) (USD 4,782), respectively. However, it should be mentioned that [IDPs in other Russian regions impacted by the Russo-Ukrainian war](#), particularly in the Belgorod and Bryansk regions, are not paid similar compensations to those paid to IDPs in the Kursk region, which creates unequal and therefore unjust treatment of IDPs within Russia.

Also, it is unclear what might eventually happen to the part of the Kursk region controlled by Ukraine as war dynamics shift. For example, if the part of the Kursk region were to stay under Ukrainian control, what would happen to the existing IDPs? It may simply prevent them from returning home and possibly entitle them to more compensation from the federal and local governments. Another scenario, of exchanging the Kursk territories controlled by Ukraine for Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia, such as parts of the Donetsk or Luhansk regions, would allow IDPs to return home.

However, there is uncertainty about what IDPs would find there, as multiple reports of looting were filed by some IDPs who had returned to

their homes. At the beginning, the Russian Defence Ministry claimed that all the cases of looting were conducted by the Ukrainian soldiers, but later it was uncovered that most cases happened and keep happening on the territory where no Ukrainian soldiers had set foot ([Liberman, 2025](#)). [Most IDPs know](#) that they would not be compensated for looting or even be able to seek any justice for the illegal actions of the Russian army. The case of IDPs in the Kursk region demonstrates their high reliance on government support, which is due to the selective application of legislation and the absence of political will, making the support insubstantial.

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<sup>1</sup> These resources provide the mentioned Russian laws translated into English; therefore, not the latest versions of the bill can be demonstrated there. To check the versions with all amendments please check the Russian versions of the bills provided in References.

<sup>2</sup> According to the [Constitution of the Russian Federation](#) (Article 65), the country consists of 89 regions, including six occupied territories of Ukraine (Donetsk People's Republic, Republic of Crimea, Lugansk People's Republic, Zaporozhye oblast, Kherson oblast and Sevastopol). Each region has its own local government, parliament, and laws.

<sup>3</sup> Since 2004, the right to peaceful protests in Russia has been constantly violated and significantly limited. Protestors face administrative fines, administrative detention, and criminal prosecution ([Amnesty International](#), 2021). Shortly after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia adopted a law on discreditation of Russian forces, which has a broad application, and people who express any dissatisfaction with any action of the Russian government can be easily sent to prison ([OHCHR](#), 2023).