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WAR IN UKRAINE

OPINION

# Canada can do more to help Ukrainian refugees

Millions of Ukrainian women and children are not considered to be Convention Refugees. But if they are not refugees, what are they?

By **Alexandra Chyczij** Contributor

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I am the child of Ukrainian refugees who came to Canada after the Second World War. For the past five weeks, the vivid and horrific imagery of the brutal and criminal Russian attack on Ukraine plays out on our television screens, every hour of every day. For the Ukrainian people it is a nightmare from which they cannot wake. For me, it is déjà vu.

My parents and grandparents escaped the Nazi German and Soviet occupations of Ukraine. They fled west to Austria, where as a forced labourer my 14-year-old mother worked in a German munitions factory. She buried her 3-year-old brother and her beloved grandfather in Austrian soil.

My family was fortunate to be sponsored to come to Canada and were grateful Canadians for the rest of their lives.

Now, Russia has unleashed a genocidal war against the Ukrainian people, causing the largest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. And I, the child of refugees, prepare to welcome my brothers and sisters from Ukraine, a task for which it now seems I have been preparing all my life.

Today, no fewer than four million Ukrainians have fled into Poland and neighbouring countries; fully one quarter of Ukraine's population is internally displaced.

We are entirely unprepared for this crisis. About 90 per cent of those crossing the border of Ukraine into the West are women and children. This population is wracked by fear — fear for the safety of those they left behind and fear of what awaits them and their children.

These women and children are not considered to be Convention Refugees. But if they are not refugees, what are they? They have been consigned to an international limbo where they await the outcome of the war.

Canada has offered what is for all intents a visitors' visa — with a work permit attached. Nobody in the federal government is able to explain how this plan assists a single mother with children, who if she comes to Canada, would have to come at her own expense, but with no spouse, no parents, no support network, would find it very difficult to work in order to support herself and her children.

I am not naïve in believing that the situation Ukrainians find themselves in today is unique.

But I also know Canada has, time and again, been generous, has offered asylum to those who suffer persecution, who are the victims of war.

This country did that for my parents and I hope that what they went on to do for this country, their adopted homeland, and what I have done in my life, are evidence of their thanks, and mine, and of what my people have contributed to Canada.

The Ukrainian Canadian community, which worked together with international agencies and the Canadian government to support Second World War-era displaced persons from Ukraine, is stepping up. Just like after 1945, millions of compassionate Canadians are generously providing support. But we can't do it alone — just like we didn't do it alone after the Second World War.

The Ukrainian Canadian Congress is pressing the government for more support: a departure and arrival plan to a location where these women and children can quarantine, where they can undergo a health assessment, properly funded settlement agencies can assist them with obtaining work permits, health cards, clothing and shelter, grouping similar family units together, so these women can support one another, and not necessarily in Canada's most expensive cities, but where there are jobs for them, provide them with food vouchers and possibly start a job search, provided they can find care for their children.

The federal government needs to provide the framework and resources to support these efforts. Our government needs to demonstrate that it truly stands with Ukraine. Not in word but in deed.

I heed the words of the late Madeleine Albright who said that there is a special place in hell for women who don't help each other. I will not betray the trust of my Ukrainian sisters.

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*Alexandra Chyczij is national president of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress.*

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