

## Russia is playing the Ukrainian refugee card in its propaganda game

Katarzyna Chawryło

According to data announced on 7 July by the Russian Federal Migration Service (FMS), 481,000 Ukrainian citizens have arrived to Russia from the area affected by military operations since the beginning of unrest in south-eastern Ukraine. Furthermore, a total of 1.8 million Ukrainian citizens are currently in Russia. The publication of this data is part of the propaganda campaign which has been seen in the Russian media over the past few weeks focused on the influx of Ukrainian refugees to Russia. One element of this campaign has seen Russian public TV stations and the press publishing emotionally-charged reports presenting civilians fleeing from Ukraine and reports on camps for Ukrainian refugees in Russia.

### Commentary

- The reports on the upsurge in the number of Ukrainian refugees in Russia have become an important element of the media propaganda being used by the Kremlin both at home and in the international arena. Its goal is to discredit the government in Kyiv in the eyes of Russian citizens and the international community by accusing it of waging war on the civilian population in its own country and causing a “humanitarian catastrophe” in south-eastern Ukraine. This campaign is also aimed at building the image of the Kremlin as a “protector of human rights”. To add credibility to their narrative, the Russian media have made references to a statement made by the spokeswoman for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) of 27 June who, when referring to the conflict in Ukraine, stated that the UN estimates that around 110,000 people have entered Russia from Ukraine since the beginning of this year.
- It is impossible to determine the real scale of the influx of Ukrainian refugees to Russia on the basis of the data provided by the Russian government. The information published is inconsistent and lacks aggregate data concerning the movement of people between Ukraine and Russia. The differences between various categories of visitors have been intentionally blurred, and the term ‘refugee’ has been used imprecisely. This gives rise to an erroneous impression that most Ukrainians entering Russia are war refugees. Meanwhile, as can be concluded from the latest data from the FMS, only 20,461 Ukrainians have applied to the Russian government for formal refugee status so far. This suggests that a part of Ukrainian citizens have entered Russia for reasons which have

nothing to do with the military operation, for example, to visit their families or in search of a job. Russia is traditionally a frequently chosen destination by Ukrainian migrants. According to the FMS, Russia was visited by 3.3 million Ukrainian citizens in 2013, and 2.9 million Ukrainian citizens found employment in Russia.

- The message from the media presenting a wave of refugees has been used by the Kremlin to shape Russian public opinion in line with the Russian government's expectations. As a consequence, the majority of the Russian public believe that Russia should support the separatists in south-eastern Ukraine by offering them humanitarian and diplomatic support, and they support the participation of Russian volunteers in clashes. Another consequence of this message was that public support for a possible Russian military intervention in Ukraine has risen: in late June, 40% of Russians stated they would back Russian troops entering Ukraine with 45% against (while only 31% of them backed this idea in May; data from the Levada Centre).