

More Russians, Ukrainians seek asylum at U.S.-Mexico border

(Reuters) - A growing number of Russians and Ukrainians are traveling to Mexico, buying throwaway cars and driving across the border into the United States to seek asylum, a trend that could accelerate as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced more than a million people to flee their homes.

U.S. border officials encountered about 6,400 Russians in the four months between October 2021 and January of this year, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data show. That's more than the roughly 4,100 apprehended during the entire 2021 fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30. The jump is similar for Ukrainians, with a little more than 1,000 apprehended since October 2021 through January, compared to about 680 for all of the last fiscal year.

These migrants account for a slim fraction of the 670,000 apprehensions made by U.S. border agents in the first months of the 2022 fiscal year, CBP figures show. The majority of those stopped were from Mexico and Central America and were swiftly removed from the United States.

Yet almost all the Russians and Ukrainians have been allowed to remain while they pursue asylum claims, and their presence has been notable at border-area shelters aimed at helping newcomers.

Since June, Russians have consistently been among the top three nationalities arriving at a San Diego shelter, according to data published by the San Diego Rapid Response Network, a coalition of nonprofits, attorneys and community leaders. Last week, Ukrainians were the third most-common nationality among arrivals.

The CBP figures include only migrants who arrived before Russia's Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine. But one current and one former border official who spoke with Reuters on condition of anonymity said there could be further increases as the fighting has intensified.

More than 1 million refugees have already fled Ukraine amid an onslaught of Russian tanks, troops and missiles that Russia has dubbed a "special operation."

Most have headed to neighboring European countries. But the sheer speed and size of the exodus will exert tremendous pressure on these hosts and likely push some further afield.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, meanwhile, has cracked down on dissent at home by jailing anti-war protesters and closing independent news outlets. Powerful financial sanctions by Western countries are already hammering Russian citizens, adding to migration pressures there.

Would-be migrants from Ukraine and Russia are swapping tips on social media on how to make the journey to the U.S. southern border via Mexico to claim asylum.

Russian dissident Dmitriy Zubarev made that trek last year. A civil rights lawyer, Zubarev had worked on the presidential campaign of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who is currently jailed. Spooked by the growing crackdown on dissent, Zubarev fled after Navalny's organizations were labeled "extremist" by the Russian government.

Zubarev told Reuters he boarded a plane in June 2021 from Moscow to Cancun, Mexico, then flew to Tijuana at the U.S border where he boarded a minivan with 11 other migrants. As soon as he crossed over, he said he asked for asylum and was released to pursue his case. Zubarev currently resides in Connecticut. He predicted more Russians would follow.

"Repression is intensifying and the people coming out to protest the war are treated very harshly," Zubarev told Reuters. "There will be more people trying to use refugee routes to escape the bad situation in the country."

The Russian government did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Zubarev.

The Russian Embassy in an emailed statement said it was "very concerned" about what it characterized as "detention" of alleged Russian citizens at the U.S.-Mexico border near San Diego, and that it had contacted the U.S. State Department to verify their identities.

The State Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

U.S. President Joe Biden and his top officials have said they strongly support Ukrainians as well as Russians who have taken to the streets to protest the

invasion.

But his administration so far is playing a secondary role to Europe when it comes to the refugee crisis, and has said it expects most fleeing Ukrainians to head to European nations.

The Biden administration on Thursday said it was granting temporary deportation relief and work permits to tens of thousands of Ukrainians already in the United States as of March 1.

At a congressional hearing on Wednesday, Representative Lou Correa, a Democrat from California, said he was taken aback by the number of Russian and Ukrainian migrants arriving by car when he visited the San Ysidro port of entry between San Diego and Tijuana about a month ago.

A border agent pointed out 20 cars that had been pulled over, saying they were full of Ukrainian and Russian migrants, Correa recalled.

“This problem is not going away,” Correa said.

Under a pandemic-era U.S. policy known as Title 42, most migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border are rapidly expelled without a chance to claim asylum.

Those arriving on foot at official pedestrian crossings are usually turned back before they reach American soil. Vehicles are stopped less frequently.

Thus, some migrants are buying cheap cars in Mexico to enhance their chances of getting across the U.S. border to make their claims, according to former U.S. Border Patrol Chief Rodney Scott. “It’s a way to jump the line,” he said.

In December, CBP said 18 Russian migrants sped towards the San Ysidro port of entry in two cars. A CBP officer shot at the vehicles, striking one which collided with the other, according to a Dec. 14 CBP statement. Two of the migrants suffered minor head injuries, the agency said. At the same time, a third car carrying eight Russian nationals made it into the United States, the statement said.

Migrants who claim they’ve gained entry to the United States via Mexico are now sharing tips with hopefuls on Russian YouTube and through private group chats on secure apps like Telegram.

There they describe routes and share names and numbers of contacts who can help them procure cars. In a recent exchange in one Russian-language Telegram group, viewed by Reuters, a chat member said “helpers” charge at least \$1,500 per person to provide a car. Another was trying to find a seat in a car for his Ukrainian mother.

Some Russians and Ukrainians have also tried crossing between ports of entry. In the early morning hours of Jan. 22 near Yuma, Arizona, a Reuters photographer saw a young Ukrainian couple with twin baby girls and a boy turn themselves over to U.S. border agents and ask for asylum.

Jessica Bolter, an immigration expert at the Washington-based Migration Policy Institute, said the relatively high approval rates for both Russian and Ukrainian asylum seekers in U.S. immigration courts could prove a lure for others.

Government data from the 2022 fiscal year show that about three-quarters of Russians and half of Ukrainians who had applied earlier for asylum were ultimately successful in court, though such cases can take years to process in the backlogged U.S. system.

The Mexico route is also attractive because it’s relatively easy for Russians and Ukrainians to obtain visas to fly to Mexico as tourists, then head for the U.S. border, Bolter said. U.S. tourist visa requirements are much more stringent.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said on Monday that his country is committed to supporting Ukrainian refugees.

“We are not going to close the country,” he said.

RISKS OF STAYING ‘TOO GREAT’

Zubarev, the Russian dissident, said he was the deputy coordinator for Navalny’s campaign headquarters in the city of Vladivostok in 2017. That year, agents from Russia’s federal security service searched Zubarev’s apartment, according to a complaint he filed with the European Court of Human Rights which was viewed by Reuters.

Zubarev said in an interview that when Navalny’s movement was designated as extremist last year by the Russian government, “my legs buckled from under me. I knew what would happen next,” he said. “It was just a matter of time before the

risks to my personal safety became too great.”

Several of his fellow activists had traveled to the United States via Mexico before him, and shared the route they took, he said. After he arrived in Mexico, he took a couple of days to rest in a hotel in Cancun, before heading to the border. There, he connected with other Russians looking to cross into the United States.

Zubarev would not say how the group obtained the car, but Reuters spoke with an intermediary who has helped Russians find vehicles in Tijuana.

“It’s different with them than other migrants, because they have more resources,” the intermediary said.

After asking for U.S. asylum, Zubarev said he was detained for 53 hours in a frigid border station cell with about 15 other migrants.

After making his way to Connecticut, he dusted off his engineering background and started a business working with fiber optic cables as he waits for his case to be decided.

(Reporting by Dasha Afanasieva in London, Ted Hesson in Washington, and Kristina Cooke in San Francisco; additional reporting by Lizbeth Diaz and Laura Gottesdiener in Mexico City, and Go Nakamura in Yuma, Arizona; editing by Mica Rosenberg and Marla Dickerson)

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