



Statement on Threats to the Ethnic Russian Identity in Ukraine

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During a meeting with the EU Ambassador to Ukraine on November 9, 2023 Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of Ukraine Olha Stefanishyna stated that the issue of Russian language rights in Ukraine is not raised during negotiations with the EU on minority rights because “there is no Russian minority in Ukraine. It does not exist! There is not a single legally registered community that identifies itself as a Russian minority.” The Lemkin Institute is alarmed by such rhetoric emanating from Ukrainian government officials. To deny the existence of Russian minorities in Ukraine as a mechanism to avoid discussing their rights compromises democratic institutions and mirrors Putin’s genocidal rhetoric denying the existence of a Ukrainian national identity.

There is a well-documented history of Russian minorities in Ukraine, particularly in those territories which Ukraine hopes to liberate from Russian occupation. Ethnic Russians constitute a majority of the population in Crimea and are a significant minority in the Donbass region, with smaller numbers living in Central and Western Ukraine. Ethnic Russians have played an important role in the development of Ukrainian national identity and in defense of Ukraine’s sovereignty and independence. Recognizing this reality only strengthens Ukraine’s status as a liberal democracy that respects minority rights.

If Ukraine wants to successfully reintegrate Crimea and the Donbass region under Ukrainian sovereignty, then it cannot deny that a significant number of people living there identify as Russians or Russian-speaking Ukrainians. To deny their identity not only undermines Ukraine’s status as a multinational democracy, but also lends credence to Putin’s allegations that Russia’s invasion was justified and necessary due to the ongoing suppression of the rights of Ukraine’s Russian minorities. It is a mistake to fall into Putin’s trap and treat all ethnic Russians as supporters of Russian aggression simply because they are ethnic Russians. Plenty of Russians have emigrated from Russia as an expression of their opposition to the war and continue to lend their voices in support of anti-war causes and efforts to aid and bolster Ukraine’s ability to defend itself against invading Russian forces.

The Lemkin Institute urges Ukrainian officials to respect the rights of the Russian minorities living in Ukraine territory and strongly recommends treating them with all the respect and privileges afforded to other Ukrainian citizens. The Lemkin Institute further cautions Ukrainian officials against denying the existence of ethnic Russians in Ukraine and notes that affirming the identity of ethnic Russians serves to bolster Ukraine's European and liberal ambitions. The Lemkin Institute sharply criticizes the EU for allegedly affirming the Ukrainian official's position on the nonexistence of Russian minorities in Ukraine and reminds the EU that ethnic Russians are not the enemy. In fact, many Russians reside in Europe and support European values in the face of Putin's genocidal endeavors. Finally, the Lemkin Institutes implores European and Ukrainian leaders to avoid treating ethnic Russians inside Ukraine as potential belligerents and enemies of the state simply because of their ethnic identity.