

UNHCR Border Monitoring

Sumskiy Transit Center
Sumy, January to March 2024 (Q1)

The international border crossing points (BCP) between Ukraine and the Russian Federation have been non-functional since February 2022. However, a humanitarian corridor between the two countries (Kolotylivka BCP of the Russian Federation and Pokrovka BCP of Ukraine) allows for returns of Ukrainian nationals (one-way) by foot since April 2023.

UNHCR monitoring teams were deployed in May 2023, with systematic monitoring established in late July the same year.



Studying the plan of the transit center in Sumy during UNHCR's field visit. © UNHCR/Grygorii Lukianenko

In 2023, all people arriving through the Kolotylivka-Pokrovka humanitarian corridor were undergoing screening in Krasnopillia – a town located 18 km from the border. Since 26 January 2024, the location for the screening procedures changed to Sumy due to deterioration of the security situation in Krasnopillia.

As of 26 January 2024, in Krasnopillia, border guards review passports and other documents confirming the right to enter Ukraine, while all other security screening procedures by security and law enforcement agencies are conducted in Sumy.

People spend several hours in the transit centre, as everyone has to wait for the completion of the screening of the entire group before they are transferred to a hub where they can stay overnight (Illinska street).



The following is available at the new transit center:

- Rooms of law enforcement officers conducting the screening
 - Doctor's room with a bathroom
 - Canteen
 - Changing and storage rooms
 - Children's playroom
 - Room for pets
 - Room for mothers and babies
 - WC and shower rooms
- NGOs can meet returnees and work in the corridors of the centre.

METHODOLOGY

At the end of May 2023, UNHCR deployed border monitoring teams through local NGO partners to provide information and assistance to individuals returning to Ukraine via the border with the Russian Federation in Krasnopillia hromada (Pokrovka border point) in Sumskaya Oblast. UNHCR partners provide legal assistance, protection counseling, and social support to people in transit five days a week at the transit center in Sumy, and have access to provide services at the hub in Sumy as well.

Protection monitoring teams conduct individual interviews with people returning to Ukraine. In January – March 2024, a total of 227 people were interviewed (28% females 18-59 years, 15% males 18-59 years, 26% females 60+ years, 29% males 60+ years, 2% females 0-17 years). This note presents the findings from these interviews and other observations made by the border monitors in January - March 2024.

1. Return Movements

During the quarterly monitoring period, the one-way cross-border movement through the humanitarian corridor has gradually increased each month from January to March 2024. However, daily movement numbers have generally remained modest during the first three months of the year, according to monitors. Compared the 2023/Q4, with a daily average of 77 people crossing, this average reduced to 32 persons a day in 2024/Q1.

Since July 2023, when the border monitoring started, an overall decline in the number of arrivals has been noticeable. Initially, this decrease was associated with deterioration of weather conditions during winter months. In January 2024, there were days of heavy snowing. With roads covered in snow and it took time to find a tractor driver willing clear the road, which is also important given the risk of explosive hazard contamination. In February and March 2024, according to monitors, the steady and modest number of arrivals was due to a limit imposed by the Russian authorities, only allowing some 40-45 people to cross daily. Should this practice remain in place, it is likely that the number of daily and monthly arrivals will not increase significantly. This policy forces people to queue and wait, spending money on overnighing in a hostel in Kolotylivka or a sleeping place in a private accommodation. In March 2024, people who crossed via the humanitarian corridor disclosed that the waiting list grew to about 200 people.

In addition to winter conditions and the reported limiting of numbers of people crossing via the humanitarian corridor, other factors contributing to the steady decrease in arrivals over the past 9 months could be attributed to the following:

- **Burdensome travel with high costs:** The travel via the humanitarian corridor is lengthy, burdensome, complicated and comes with risks. It is also often costly due to the lack of competition among transport service providers. During the reporting period, some isolated cases reported having managed to get to the crossing point in the Russian Federation for free using the railway transportation or receiving support from volunteers.
- **Holiday season** in January 2024 likely led to the reduction of arrivals via the humanitarian corridor, as it is closed on official holidays in the Russian Federation.
- **Security:** The deterioration of the security situation was reported as deterrent as well. Specifically, reports included the shelling of Krasnopilska hromada as well as instability in Sumy Oblast overall. In addition, contamination with explosive hazards of the 2km corridor people need to use when passing between the two BCPs was reported.

2. Key Monitoring Findings

2024, Q1	Total	0-17	18-59	60+
Female	127	3	64	60
Male	100	0	34	66

Figure 1. People surveyed after arriving to Ukraine in 2024/Q1

temporarily occupied territories.

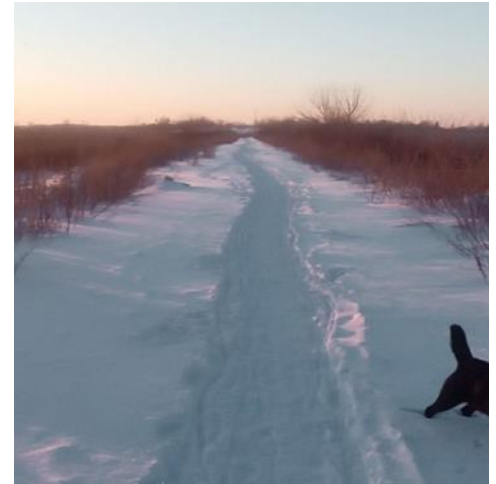
In Q1 of 2024, monitors surveyed 227 arriving individuals. The share of men has increased from 24% in the last quarter of 2023 to 44% in this reporting period. There is also an increase in the number of older people (from 93 to 126 people), while the share of women among them has decrease by almost 30%. The share of men of conscription age (18-59) has grown from 11% in the last quarter of 2023 to 15% during the reporting period, mostly due to arrivals of men released from penitentiary facilities in the

The humanitarian corridor procedure (according to border monitors)

According to reports of people crossing the borders via the humanitarian corridor, the established schedule for running the border crossing point is from 08:00 to 18:00. However, the actual movement is limited to 10:00 to approximately 15:30. It is not possible to cross borders via the humanitarian corridor during official holidays in the Russian Federation (for example, New Year, Christmas) and when exchanges of the prisoners of war or bodies of fallen soldiers take place.

There is an unpaved two kilometers pedestrian path between the two BCPs, which makes the crossing burdensome for all, but especially for people with limited mobility. In February 2024, the Red Cross reportedly launched a mission to help people with disabilities or with low mobility to pass the two km road between the two BCPs.

No humanitarian organizations, local NGOs or Red Cross representatives are present at the Russian BCP.



Two kilometers pedestrian path between the BCPs of the Russian Federation (Kolotylivka) and Ukraine (Pokrovka), January 2024. © Unknown/social media.

Protection concerns

During the reporting period, the following protection concerns were reported by border monitors:

Unaccompanied children: (1) A 14-year-old girl was accompanied through the corridor by other returnees. Her father met the girl in Sumy. The only documents she had was her birth certificate. Partners provided legal counselling to the family on how to obtain an ID card for her. (2) A 13-year-old girl was accompanied through the corridor by other returnees. The border guards informed relevant child protection services in Sumy who took custody of the girl and started procedures related to the establishment of guardianship.

Access to urgent medical assistance: People crossing the borders via the humanitarian corridor have not had access to urgent medical assistance. During the reporting period, one older woman walking between the two BCPs reportedly died before reaching Ukraine. As medical services are not allowed into the 'grey zone' between the two BCPs from the Ukrainian side, another person who was crossing at the same time brought her body to Ukrainian territory. In a second case reported during the first quarter of 2024, an older person experienced a heart attack after crossing the checkpoint but still close to the territory of the Russian Federation. A Russian ambulance took him to the hospital in the nearest settlement.

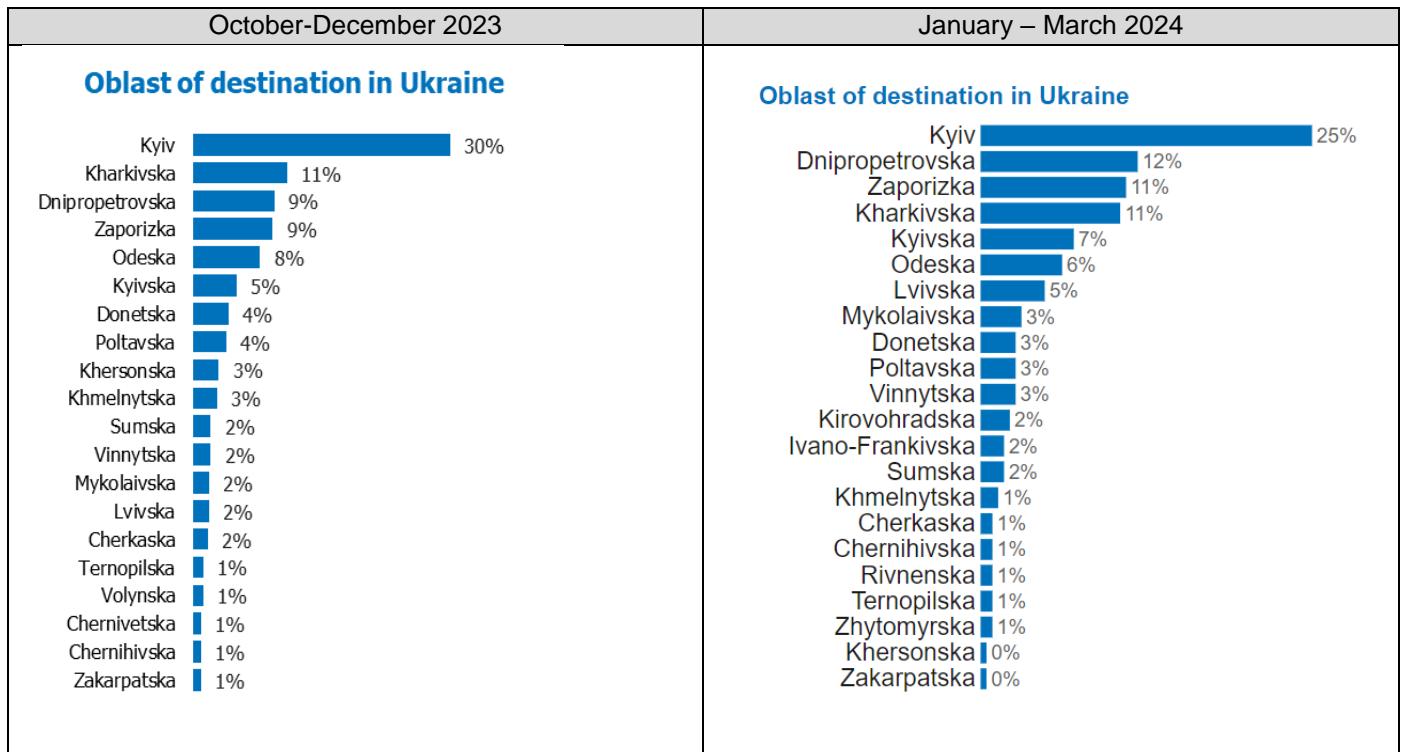
Return of people released from penitentiary facilities: Partners reported an increased number of cases of returning Ukrainian nationals, mostly men, who were released after serving criminal sentences in different penitentiary facilities in the temporarily occupied territories, mostly Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. The only document they usually had was a release certificate ("dovidka"). About half of them had no Ukrainian passports, nor a copy, but the border guards took steps to verify their citizenship through the cooperation with the National Police, which has records of individuals imprisoned before the start of occupation. If an individual possesses no documents at all, they are handed over to the National Police. If they have some personal documents confirming the identity, they were allowed to further travel. Partners inform that many of them return with different chronic diseases. Several men confirmed having Tuberculosis (TB). Through the Protection Cluster, several organizations running shelters for people living with HIV/AIDS or with TB were identified and partners were instructed to refer arriving men in need of accommodation to such shelters.

Return to Ukraine – Motivations and Intentions

Among those interviewed during the reporting period, 185 (or 82%) intend to remain in Ukraine permanently, which is 10% higher than in the last quarter of 2023. Among them, more than 80% are people between 18-59 years.

Only few respondents mentioned that they will go to other European countries (two older persons cited Germany and two other old persons mentioned Poland; one single woman of working age named Switzerland). There were 34 people who said they will return to the temporarily occupied territories. Among them are 32 older persons further firming up the assumption that residents of temporarily occupied territories may use the humanitarian corridor to renew access to pensions. It should also be noted that all respondents who planned to return are from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts which have been under temporary occupation since 2014.

The graph below demonstrates oblasts of destination for returnees:



*Percentages above are based upon the total number of individuals interviewed by UNHCR Border Monitoring Teams during January-March 2024.

People cite various reasons for undertaking this long trip, with concerns over the security situation in the place of departure and uncertainty about the future being the top ones. Longing for family reunification, fear of enforced issuance of a Russian passport and unclear consequences of that, as well as the need to access medical services were other factors. These reasons remain unchanged compared to the previous reporting period. The only change relates to fewer requests for educational services, which is due to a small number of children passing through the corridor.

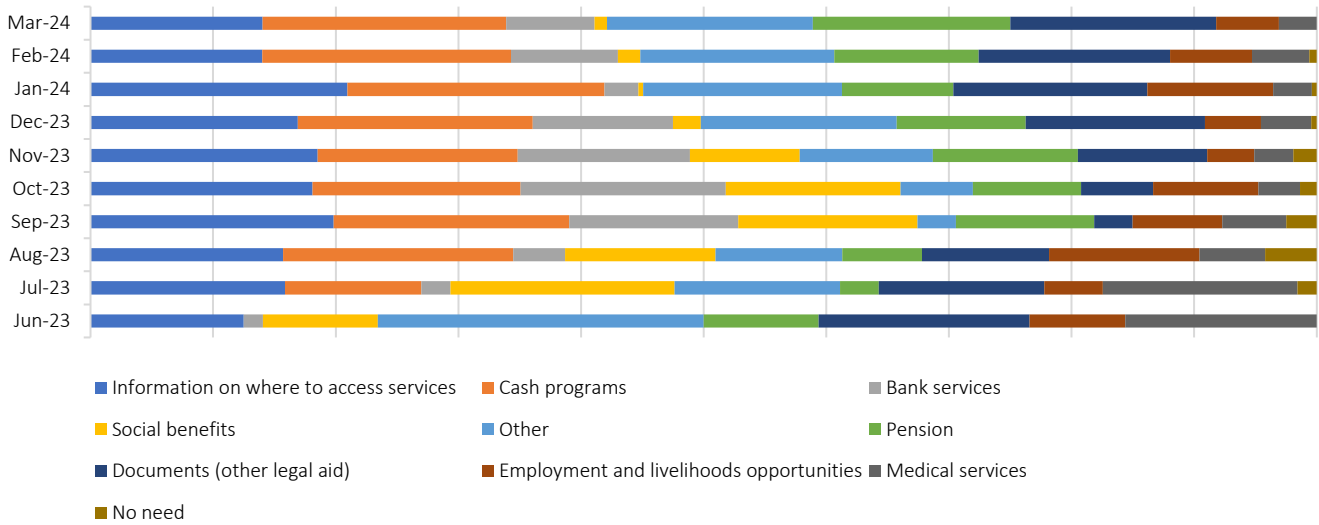
Priority needs upon return

Upon returning to Ukraine, the top needs identified by respondents are: cash assistance (93%), documents (73%), information on available services (72%), pension (56%), employment (33%), medical services (18%) and 12% were interested in the provision of the information regarding education.

According to above distribution of top priorities among returnees, (1) cash assistance was top one priority (93%), equally important were requests for (2) documents (73%) and (3) information on available services (72%). (4) Pension (56%) and (5) employment (33%) complete the list of top 5 priorities of people upon return in the first quarter of 2024.

The increase in the number of requests for documents and pension is explained by the larger share of older people returning in those months. Interesting to note is that information on social benefits was reported as of interest to 6% of returnees, while it was of highest interest in the last quarter of 2023 year. The majority of people of working age said that they are in need of information about employment and livelihood opportunities. All population groups require information on cash assistance.

Main needs upon return



3. Humanitarian Assistance Provided to People Crossing

The following support is provided by the Government, humanitarian and other partners in the return process via the humanitarian corridor. Following the changes to the corridor procedure by shifting it largely to Sumy, the majority of partners is also adjusting their presence accordingly.

Organization	Services
Government	
SBGS	Free transportation to Sumy (to the reception center)
Social Protection	Registration for one time of cash assistance from the state
Ukrzaliznytsia (Ukrainian Railroad)	Free transportation to Kyiv (from Sumy reception center)
Humanitarian/Other	
World Central Kitchen	Food assistance (ad hoc)
Skhid SOS	Transportation (ad hoc), mobile teams of lawyers, psychologists, and social workers
Right to Protection	Monitoring, legal counseling
Proliska	MHPSS, transportation (to Poltava and Dnipro), case management
Helping to Leave (in association with Way of Ukraine)	Transportation to Kharkiv (for those in the evacuation program of these organizations)
Pluriton	Psychological assistance, maintenance of the Sumy reception center (Illinska street)
IOM (through PHI)	Cash assistance

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LINKS

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