

# Wentworth Courier

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Picture: Renee Nowytarger

## Race against time

Ukrainian families in our community have no homes to return to as humanitarian visas enter final year



# Living in limbo

The war in their homeland shows no sign of ending but their Australian visas will soon expire. Angela Saurine reports on the plight of Ukrainian families in Sydney

**H**er father was killed in the war. Her husband has been missing for more than a year. Now Tetiana Taranuschenko and her 17-year-old son Georgy face an uncertain future, with the displaced Ukrainians' three-year humanitarian visa set to expire next year.

As far as Tetiana is concerned, returning to Ukraine is not an option. Her home in Kherson has been destroyed and her mother's house is located on the left bank of the Dnieper River, in the epicentre of the fighting.

"I just have nowhere to go back to right now," she says. "Returning to the occupied territory is dangerous for my life and the life of my child. Kherson is shelled daily by Russian troops with all kinds of weapons: artillery, ballistic missiles, aerial bombs. There is no safe place. They are bombing residential buildings, hospitals and schools."

Tetiana worked as a doctor in a maternity hospital in Ukraine and says when a shell hit the building in which she worked, the duty crew was killed. She has also been open about her political views and support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which she fears will put her at even greater risk.

"All my relatives and friends in Ukraine live in a state of constant stress and danger," she says.

Tetiana and Georgy have been living with friends in Matraville for two years. She is learning English at TAFE and working as a dental assistant.

Georgy is studying IT and working at a cafe on weekends. He is also learning to drive. Both are in Australia on 786 temporary protection visas that expire in mid-2025.

"We are in limbo," Tetiana says. "The uncertainty worries me and thousands of other Ukrainian refugees very much. I hope for the opportunity to continue living in Australia legally."



**Ukrainian refugee Tetyana Pyshna and her daughter Anastasia, 14, in Sydney. Picture: Renee Nowytarger**

About 1600 displaced Ukrainians have made Sydney home since Russia invaded their country in February 2022. The Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations (AFUO) says the limitation of a three-year stay for those who arrived on humanitarian 786 visas prior to July 31 that year is causing major stress and anxiety for displaced Ukrainians, with no readily identifiable pathway for them to secure permanent residency.

Similar challenges face those who arrived after July 31 on tourist visas before transitioning to emergency bridging visas.

Angelina Samko, whose father was also killed by Russian soldiers, is among those who fear for her future. She has been living at Bellevue Hill with her husband Andrii and children Artem, 15, Anton, 10, and Veronika, 7, since fleeing to Australia.

Andrii, an electrical engineer who owned his own company in Ukraine, is working as a technician in Alexandria while Angelina, a cosmetic tattoo artist, is renting a beauty room at Bondi Junction. The children are attending school and have learned English quickly. They are also taking

part in activities like gymnastics, football and surfing.

"Emotionally, it is tough to think about moving again," Angelina says. "We are both working hard to have more chances to stay. We are sending letters to the government and joining meetings with a request for a special pathway for our visa. My husband has five English lessons a week and a full-time job."

Tetyana Pyshna and her 14-year-old daughter Anastasia have also integrated well into Australian society. They are renting an apartment. Tetyana works at non-profit organisation STARTTS (Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors), teaching pilates and Zumba classes for displaced Ukrainians.

Anastasia is studying at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and was awarded a scholarship by Sydney's Next Step dance school. Tetyana's husband stayed behind to fight in the war, and the pair divorced late last year.

"War destroys not only cities, but also families," she says.

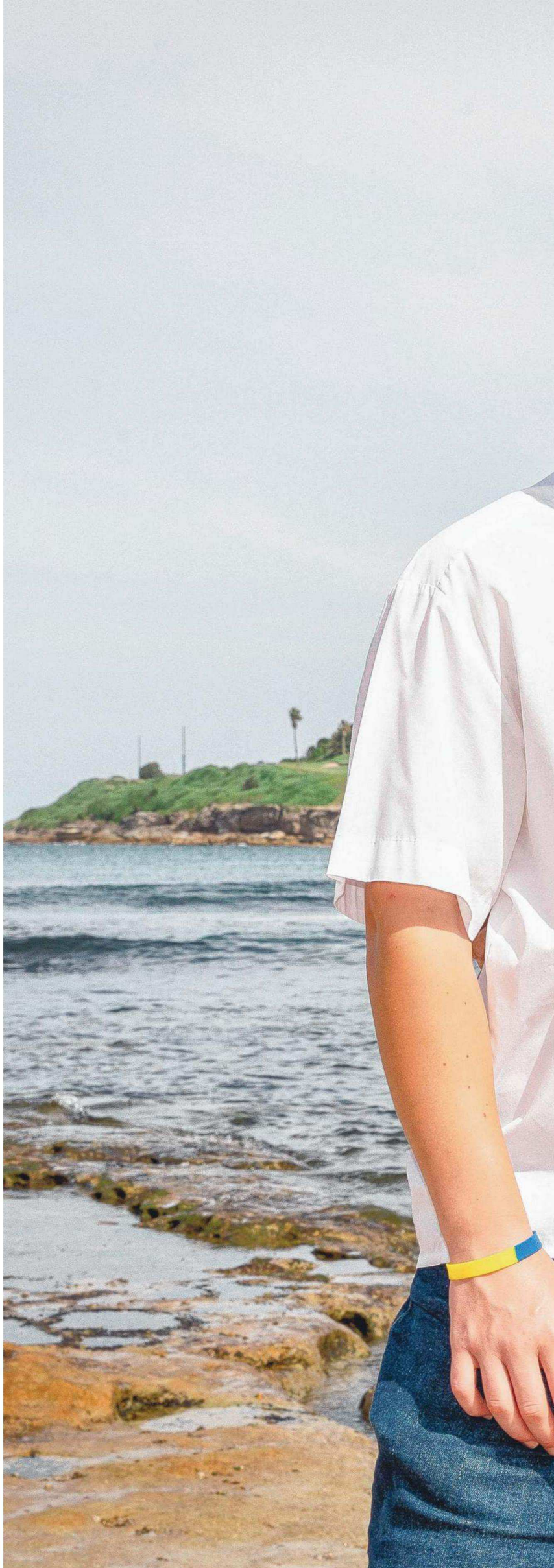
Tetyana also feels like she has nowhere to return to.

"My loved ones in Ukraine are living in fear," she says. "Every day they hear sirens. Every morning they don't know if they will make it through the day. They are not living, but surviving. I feel immense stress and fear as the end of our visa is approaching in a year. Our future is very uncertain. I am scared because the war in my country is ongoing and the situation is getting worse every day. Sometimes, I feel like crying because I worry about my daughter's future."

The pair feel like Australia has become their home and hope they can find a way to stay.

"My daughter is talented. I am sure she can fully develop her talents in this school, in this country, and bring benefit and many good things to Australia," Tetyana says.

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troops with all kinds of weapons:  
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Tetiana Taranuschenko (pictured with her son, Georgy)



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“I believe that Ukrainians can be beneficial here. We strive to work, pay taxes – we work very hard to be strong and independent.”

“We have found many good friends here. We love this city and this country. We want to live.”

Ukrainian Council of NSW vice-president Andrew Mencinsky says the first wave of displaced Ukrainians came to Australia on 786 humanitarian visas, which provided work and Medicare rights, as well as the ability to study at TAFE.

“It got people out of harm’s way and got their kids into school,” he says. “At the time they thought it would be adequate, but the war has been going for two years now and it doesn’t look like it’s going to end anytime soon.”

“The problem now with the humanitarian visas is that they are running out and there’s no way forward. The federal government has said, ‘let them apply via the skilled visa program’, but that program doesn’t fit this cohort. You need to be under 44 years old to qualify, which knocks out a whole bunch of people. You need to know English to quite a high level that people just can’t reach in time.”

“You also need to have Ukrainian qualifications recertified, which at best is a multi-year process. Displaced Ukrainians are also saying: ‘Do you realise the place where I worked has been destroyed and the manager has been killed, taken prisoner or disappeared? How can I provide evidence of employment?’”

“The government has provided a vague assurance that they’re not going to deport anyone, but these people need certainty. Some people aren’t getting jobs because of it. Employers say: ‘We’re not going to bring you in and train you when your visa expires soon and you might be deported.’”

Mencinsky, who lives in Edgecliff, met with Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs Andrew Giles to plead the Ukrainians’ case.

“The immediate tactical solution is to automatically extend

their humanitarian visas like the UK has done,” he says. “Give people two more years so they can get jobs and have more time to get their English up to the appropriate standard. This also provides time for the government to set up dedicated visa pathways that cater to the nuances of the displaced Ukrainian cohort. Both Canada and New Zealand have set up dedicated pathways for displaced Ukrainians and Australia has done it for other cohorts in the past. We’re looking to the federal government for some humanity and clarity.”

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**Andrew Mencinsky,  
Ukrainian Council of NSW**

The Department of Home Affairs says the Australian government remains committed to supporting Ukrainians and their family members who are temporarily in Australia as a result of the war.

“The Department of Home Affairs continues to progress visa applications from Ukrainian nationals as a priority, particularly for those with a strong, personal connection to Australia,” a spokeswoman says.

“Australia does not return individuals to situations where they face persecution or a real risk of torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, arbitrary deprivation of life or the application of the death penalty.”

**To donate to the Ukraine Crisis Appeal,  
visit [ukrainecrisisappeal.org](http://ukrainecrisisappeal.org)**



Ukrainian Council of NSW’s Andrew Mencinsky is pushing for ‘humanity and clarity’ from the government.  
Picture: John Appleyard



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