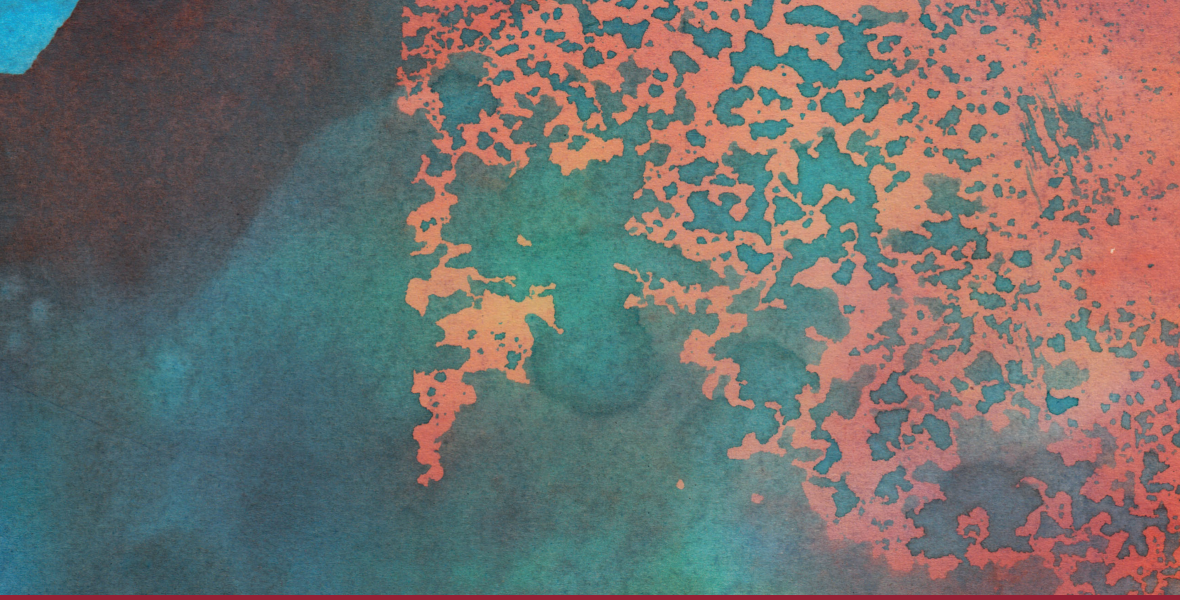

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BORDERING AND MOBILITIES IN UKRAINE

INCONVENIENT PEOPLE IN THE TIME OF WAR

Irina Kuznetsova and Oksana Mikheieva

Bordering and Mobilities in Ukraine

This book analyses how war and bordering impact daily life and mobility and immobility tactics. It brings to light the memories of people who were displaced from Ukraine's eastern regions because of Russian aggression against Ukraine started in 2014.

Based on extensive in-depth research including interviews with individuals who were direct witnesses, participants, and victims of the events in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, the study presents a novel perspective. It explores everyday experiences of war, bordering, and (im)mobilities through the lens of 'inconvenient people' including their hard journeys and resistance in occupied territories, the loss of home and struggles to find housing, volunteering, and the traumatic responses. The book amplifies the voices and agency of civilians who experienced the war and displacement, including older adults and people with disabilities, and provides theoretical and practical implications beyond Ukraine in a context of global uncertainties and growing mass population displacement.

The book urges politicians and experts to look at the experiences of both displaced and immobile people who lived through the war in Ukraine before the full invasion. It will be of great interest to scholars of Race and Ethnic Studies, Asian Studies, European Politics, Security Studies, Migration Studies, Human Geography, and War and Conflict Studies.

Irina Kuznetsova is Associate Professor in the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of Birmingham. She has extensively researched the social impacts of displacement from Ukraine's war-affected regions and led the UK Art and Humanities Research Council -funded Ukraine's Hidden Tragedy project. With over 25 years of experience in migration, immobility, and social exclusion across countries, she brings a cross-disciplinary, impact-driven approach to collaborative research, particularly in understanding both internal and international dimensions of war and conflict-related displacement.

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To everyone who has been forced to flee their home because of war.

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

ATO	Anti-Terrorist Operation
DPR	Donetsk People Republic
GCA	Government-Controlled Area
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IOM	International Organisation of Migration
LPR	Luhansk People Republic
NGCA	Non-Government-Controlled Area
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SSU	Security Services of Ukraine
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Preface

Our book is about the experiences, through 2014–2022, of those who lived in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts or fled to government control areas of Ukraine. It is also about those who lived in-between. The project from which most data that the book reflects on had a now unimageable title of 'Ukraine's hidden tragedy'. The full-scale Russian invasion on 24 February 2022 made this tragedy visible and shocking. At the end of 2016, when the project started, we had to shout out about the scale of displacement in Ukraine and the continuum of violence people were facing. The war, without a declaration of war, had already taken the lives of over 14,000 people before 2022, including civilians, and shortened the days of those who could not cope anymore. Over 1.5 million people had to flee their homes. Still, it seems like internally displaced people and those who lived in occupied areas were never on the radar of international leaders, unless they transformed to the 'huge numbers of refugees' attempting to cross borders.

Many of those who have been displaced in 2014 found their homes in various regions of Ukraine, often in large cities such as Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Dnipro. Some were trapped under occupation. Some had to flee again to Europe. This book is another reminder that the refugee journey is not just a travel from place A to place B, but it is a long process, often stretching for years, when displacement is often not a first choice, but a hard decision. The decision to stay behind is also a difficult one, and thus, our book is also about those who stayed in occupied territories for various reasons, be it due to old age, or ill health, or the necessity to look after a house, or simply they did not want to leave the place where they spent all their life.

This book is not about language and ethnic identity which many believe are the stumbling blocks of the war. It is not about the political forces and confrontations in its traditional terms. We do not write about those who were on a frontline defending the Ukrainian independence and freedom. It is about ordinary people whose rights (as fighters on both sides claimed) were defended, and who still often found themselves 'out of place' and experienced violence on both sides of the borders. Inconvenient people.

Inconvenient such as Lisa (name changed), a person with disabilities, who had to be evacuated by volunteers from her home due to the harsh hostilities in Donetsk oblast but then had to return as did not have any accommodation or money to survive. Inconvenient as those volunteers who questioned the existing models of

support and organised their own charities and NGOs to support internally displaced. Inconvenient as those who continued living in Donetsk and once walking in Easter day in a city centre, shouted at Russian soldiers that they have a right to do so. Inconvenient as Maria who together with several hundred thousand of other retired people still struggled to receive their Ukrainian pension even after they moved to government-controlled areas of Ukraine. We argue that while you will not find their names in media, their experiences are highly political. They were the first who lived through the new border regime, both in its physical terms and symbolic terms. They were often the ones who had an emergency backpack ready and knew what to do when the full invasion started.

The book took a long time to write, but the stories which were shared by the research participants were shared extensively soon after we collected the data. We published policy briefing papers, discussed the key issues with the UNHCR, International Organisation of Migration, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Chatham House and at numerous events in Ukraine. We organised a summer school for internally displaced people (IDPs) in Chernihiv and a forum on forced migration at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. With all those events, we tried to challenge both the international support of internally displaced, which was very underfunded, and the government approach who often seeing them as a problem rather than a human potential.

We are extremely grateful to everyone who shared their stories during several studies and assisted with recruitment and interviews. We would like to thank Dr Svitlana Babenko, Dr Mariia Kolokolova, Dr Viktoriya Sereda, Dr Yuliia Soroka, Larysa Pylgun, and Dr Tetiana Yereskova and Professors Jon Catling, Vlad Mykhnenko, and Mikhailo Savva for collaboration, Dr. Nataliia Zaitseva-Chipak, Ukrainian Center for Public Opinion Research 'SocioInform', for help in field studies and organising survey on mental health. A special shout-out to Natalia Duditch for her positive and kindness. Special thanks go to Professors Bill Bowring and Rilka Dragneva, Dr Gulara Guliyeva, and Dr Sarah Whitmore for fruitful discussions. With special appreciation to Nataliya Drozd and Oleksandr Pidhornyy from NGO Dobrochyn Centre, who organised a summer school for IDPs in Chernihiv in 2017 within the project 'Ukraine's Hidden Tragedy', and IZOLYATSIA for organising workshops for IDPs. We would also like to thank Diane Bowden who has been always so helpful in proof-reading our work. Our appreciation goes to Stuti Goel and Dorothea Schaefter from Routledge whose editorial support was always valuable.

The research has been supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK through the project 'Ukraine's Hidden Tragedy: Understanding the Outcomes of Population Displacement from the Country's War-Torn Regions' (the Partnership for Conflict, Crime, and Security Research, grant AH/P008305/1) which also helped to organise a fieldwork and policy impact activities in Ukraine in 2017–2019 and the UK Wellcome Trust Institutional Strategic Support Fund. Thanks are given to other institutions who provided funding for studies which contributed to this book: the University of St. Gallen, British Embassy in Ukraine and Ukrainian Peacebuilding school, and PAX (grant number 169251).

Irina Kuznetsova would like to thank her daughters for their inspiration and patience while she was working on the research and writing this book and her partner Professor John Round for all his support and encouragement. Oksana Mikheieva would also like to thank her family and friends for their support, understanding, and patience.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the University of Birmingham's School of Geography, Earth, and Environmental Sciences, Ukrainian Catholic University, ZOiS, and European University Viadrina whose intellectual environments significantly contributed to the development of this book.

There are colleagues, participants, and friends who lost their lives as the result of Russia's invasion. They should be named. Oksana Mikheieva would like to express her gratitude to Valery Pavlyuk, who volunteered to support Ukrainian soldiers from the first days of the Russian invasion in 2014 and was subsequently detained in the basements of the so-called Donetsk People Republic's (DPR's) Ministry of State Security, where he was tortured. After his release, he moved to Kyiv where he worked in the education and had a status of an internally displaced person. With the start of the full-scale war, he enlisted as a volunteer and was tragically killed on the battlefield near Bakhmut on 9 May 2023. Among those who are no longer alive are husband and wife, Andriy and Natalia Nykyforenko. For Oksana, they were close friends, and they studied together at the History Department of Donetsk State University (now – The Vasyl' Stus Donetsk National University in Vinnytsia) and then worked with Natalia at the same department. Nykyforenko family had to move to Mariupol in early 2015 and continued their work to develop the field of sociology at the evacuated Donetsk State University of Management. They helped a lot in organising interviews in Mariupol in 2017. Andriy was killed in an air strike on 20 March 2022 in Mariupol, which was under siege by Russian forces. Natalia with her daughter made a horrific journey from Mariupol. She died a year later, in exile, after suffering loss and hardship. These are the deaths and losses we know about. These cases are not isolated. Rather, they have become part of the tragic fate of many individuals who were affected by the war in 2014.

Finishing the manuscript, we would like to urge the politicians and experts to look at the experiences of both displaced and immobile people who lived through the war before the full invasion. What can be learnt from their experiences and from the government and NGO responses? Which place will they find in a post-war Ukraine?

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1 Understanding displacement, immobility, and bordering in Ukraine

Introduction

> If someone asks me what you associate this year [2014] with, it is shells, explosions, death, blood, a lot of blood: walking down the street, you can see it. I understand that they were removing [bodies] of people, but these traces of blood – it's a horror. And my friend cried very hard when the windows were broken; when they ran out to the basement, there was a man lying near their entrance with a lot of splinters. She remembered that, and she said: 'When I go home, I have this situation in front of my eyes all the time and when you go home there is already some fear'
>
> (22-year-old woman, Yasynuvata, Ukraine, 2017).

There are many such memories in our interviews. They are in the interviews of those who remained living in the occupied territories and those who left their homes. Millions of people became direct witnesses and victims of a war that remained unnamed and their voices not heard neither by Ukrainian society or internationally. According to official Ukrainian rhetoric, until 2018, what was happening in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts was called an anti-terrorist operation, which blurred the understanding of who was opposed in this conflict and formed an ambiguous attitude towards the inhabitants of these territories in the society. The latter were seen both as victims of the hostilities and as their perpetrators. The memory of the residents of the captured territories contrasted strongly with the way these events were perceived by the residents of Ukraine, whose knowledge of what was happening was mediated by the media and communications in which the information war unfolded. Memories of those who were displaced were uncomfortable, often in stark contrast to the dynamics of national narratives. In interviews with people who were direct witnesses, participants, and victims of the events in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, there was often surprise and regret that their experiences of war, occupation, forced displacement, and integration into new communities were not fully understood and heard. Even if some individuals sympathised with or helped those affected by the war, there remained a gap in understanding. People did not fully grasp what had happened or what those who bore the indelible stamp of war had endured.

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All this raises a number of questions as to why the experience that could have prepared Ukrainian society, to a large extent for the events of a full-scale war with Russia, was not sufficiently heard and understood? Why did this experience have such a difficult time making its way into general knowledge? Why did millions of people for a long time remain invisible in their tragedy or become 'inconvenient people' with their 'wrong' memories and struggle for their rights? For example, the return of the right to vote in local elections to internally displaced people (IDPs) took six years of active campaigning (Council of Europe Office in Ukraine, 2020). And why now, in the context of a full-scale war, these experiences, which have not been fully worked through by Ukrainian society, remain excluded from national narratives, maintaining both its exclusivity, inconvenience, and invisibility.

We see our book as an act of remembering. We hope that the stories told will help to deepen understanding of the everyday reality of war and forced migration in all its complexity and ambiguity. While we did publish briefing papers and reports based on numerous interviews collected earlier, new understanding has been required since the full-scale invasion. Besides, we refrained from publishing some of the stories earlier for ethical reasons as it would not be safe for some individuals at that time. We agree with Howlett and Lazarenko (2023) that delays in publishing some of the data varies "from months to years depending on the topic and the people involved" (p. 730).

Before the full-scale invasion, Ukraine had the highest number of IDPs in Europe with over 1.4 million people fleeing as of July 2021 (Slovo I Dilo, 2021). This was the result of Russian aggression and the temporal occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in 2014. The war-without-declaring-war started in 2014 and took the lives of about 14 thousand people, including civilians, and shortened the days of those who could not cope anymore. All this took place before the full-scale invasion of Russia. During those eight years, some IDPs returned to non-government-controlled areas of Ukraine, some moved to the EU countries as labour migrants or students or even repatriated to Israel (Kushnirovich et al., 2025). However, most tried to cope and settle in a new place within the government-controlled areas of Ukraine.

The 2022 phase of the war finally destroyed any hope of returning home for many people who have been displaced since 2014. As of April 2025, it is estimated that over 6.9 million Ukrainians became refugees (UNHCR, 2025), 3.6 million as IDPs (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2025), and 12.7 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance (USA for UNHCR, n.d.).

While the scale of current displacement is widely reflected by the media and politicians, the internal displacement caused by the war in the temporarily occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the Crimean Peninsula since 2014 has received less attention. We argue that the situation in the occupied territories and the vulnerabilities of those who stayed behind has also to be addressed. Looking at the situation from the viewpoint of people who were affected by the unnamed aggression at the time in the first place allows us to see what is happening in a long-time perspective and in a complex interweaving of different factors, and to

re-emphasise the importance of people's 'inconvenient' experiences and their value for the resilience and autonomy of the community.

In our book, we rely on the personal stories of individuals who recount eight years of their (trans)border lives. We do not know whether our participants managed to return or whether they moved to other countries. We have not been able to contact most of our participants because, according to the ethical review, we could not trace them unless we knew them before or they themselves wanted to contact us. All we know is that Russian strikes killed and injured many civilians in all the cities and towns where our research participants lived. We know for sure that some of those who left Donetsk in 2014 and helped us with recruiting or interviewing in Mariupol, for example, are dead for a variety of causes – some died during the hostilities over the city, some died from lack of food, water and constant shelling, and some died far away from their homes from aggravated illnesses as a result of their traumatic experiences.

We foresee a lot of scepticism from readers given the large number of published research since the start of the full invasion. Also, the research on Ukraine is often attributed to Area studies, questioning whether knowledge about Ukraine or other Eastern European countries offers prospects for broader theoretical and practical engagement on a global scale. We argue, while this book offers some insights from the perspective of social sciences and human geography, in particular, regarding everyday experiences, (im)mobility and bordering, it can provide some implications beyond Ukraine in a context of global uncertainties and crisis.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. We begin by conceptualising one of the key terms of this book: 'inconvenient people' which is deeply geographical. We critically engage with literature on migration, the social production of IDPs, bordering studies, intersectionality, feminist geographies and everyday life. These key concepts help us to understand the discomfort and invisibility experienced by many people who feel 'stuck' between borders – even after crossing the 'check points'. We then turn to the methodology underpinning the studies in this book, also offering personal reflections on our positionality and explaining the terminology used in naming the territories. Finally, we guide the reader through the overall structure of the book.

(In)visible and inconvenient

In conditions of war, occupation, and displacement, people find themselves outside of the norm, visibility and protection. 'Ukraine's hidden tragedy' – the title of the project which constituted a large part of the research for this book, speaks for itself as the social consequences of the war started in 2014 were not much reflected in international media and academia for a long time.

This was caused not only by the 'hybrid' character of the war which was named as 'armed conflict', 'conflict' for a long time but also by the lack of visibility of experiences of ordinary people overall. The lived experiences of civilians, and especially women "are less commonly credited with historical importance" (Sylvester, 2012, p. 495). Therefore, we engage with feminist international relations

theory and feminist political geography as they help to bring more significance to the private sphere when understanding of politics "must incorporate the body and not be limited by the troika of global national local" (Brown & Staeheli, 2003, p. 250).

Invisibility defines the relationship between those "who have the power to see or to choose not to see, and, on the other hand, those who lack the power to demand to be seen or to protect themselves from the negative effects of imposed visibility" (Polzer & Hammond, 2008, p. 421). It is closely impacted by knowledge production. We find it helpful to refer to Fricker's understanding of epistemic injustice (2007) which manifests via testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. While the first one is related to diminishing a speaker's credibility due to prejudice, the second one is caused by the gap in interpretive resources which would make sense of certain experiences, specifically those of marginalised groups. We argue that, in Ukraine, we could observe injustice – related both to the lack of language and policies which would understand and recognise the experiences of those who stayed or fled from occupied territories, and also prejudice towards them.

The most radical case of invisibility is 'social disappearance'. In this case, we can speak about victims of war and forced displacement in the categories of 'social disappearance' (Gatti, 2020). The concept of 'social disappearance' allows us to speak of war, occupation, and forced displacement as a situation of social catastrophe in which people suffer for a long period of time not only in a physical but also in a moral and psychological sense. 'Invisibility' and the 'social disappearance' approach capture some of the groups of IDPs such as people with disabilities – both displaced and immobile but still is not enough to address the diversity of the population which suffered from the war in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022.

Still, one should not romanticise visibility given it is a double-edged sword, as Brighenti coined, and "can be empowering as well as dis-empowering" (2007, p. 335) and where fundamental tensions between recognition and control exist. Engaging with this consideration, we might see that invisibility is always a consequence of oppressed and controlled visibility. As Le Blanc (2021) argues, invisibility is often connected with silencing which is a form of an 'ethical violence' as it is disqualifies certain subjects by purposely not perceiving them, making life unliveable. Such a purposive character of silencing and (selected) invisibility therefore requires an additional epistemic pathway.

We follow the recent call for the launch of 'uncomfortable geographies' (Owen et al., 2022) which is largely inspired by bell hooks' call in acknowledging the need for discomfort to generate political and social meaningful change. We argue that it is crucial to provide an articulation of 'discomfort' that is caused by people who cannot 'fit' neither into the new regime of understanding of a good citizen, nor into the expectations of the Ukrainian politicians (as the pensioners who did not want to move to government-controlled territories). For example, while the government portrayed those who stayed in the occupied territories as 'terrorist supporters' (see Chapters 2 and 3), those who maintained a neutral or pro-Ukrainian position during the occupation did not fit into the official Ukrainian narrative of the time, were little included in the public discourse and were too 'inconvenient' to be considered.

Still, we argue, the term 'inconvenient' is more appropriate than 'discomfort' as the latter is linked with the necessity of the articulation of voice and fighting for your rights. However, some individuals deliberately choose not to be under a spotlight as our research demonstrates. The trauma and stress experienced by those affected by the war in Ukraine were often endured in silence – sometimes because they did not want to be an 'inconvenience' to relatives and friends. In such cases, the choice to become silent and 'invisible' was not merely a simple attempt to avoid bothering others, but an act of care – to spare loved ones additional worry during a time of crisis. For some, an 'inconvenience' was caused by the fear of stigma within the Ukrainian context, while others could not provide a voice because of exhaustion.

In this book, we propose the following definition of 'inconvenient people' which includes two categories. First, there are those who are involuntarily excluded from political decisions made regarding their neighbourhood or communities because of prejudices or the lack of language and knowledge to recognise their experiences. The second category are people who voluntarily choose to be invisible whether because of perceived prejudices and stigma, the willingness not to cause others stress or exhaustion. Inconvenient is not a rigorous definition, but more a lens which helps us to recognise and draw attention to the voices of those people who stayed in the occupied territories, fled or lived in-between, contributing towards better epistemic justice.

A 'doing migration approach' in the context of internal displacement and immobility

Although the number of IDPs worldwide reached 83.4 million by the end of 2024 – more than double the figure reported a decade ago –comparatively little attention was paid to IDPs by academia, the media, and international organisations, especially when compared to refugees. Yet, as the experiences of many countries demonstrate, IDPs are among the most vulnerable population groups globally as they often face discriminatory practices, organised persecution, exposure to violence, limited access to essential services such as healthcare and education, and precarious living conditions (Adejoh et al., 2022; Brun, 2003; Cantor & Maple, 2021; Kamara et al., 2017; Regasa & Lietaert 2024; Vincent & Sørensen, 2001, among others). For a long time, IDPs were rarely considered as a specific category, until 1998 when the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement were presented to the UN Commission on Human Rights 1998, forming the foundation for a normative framework for addressing the needs of IDPs (UN OCHA, n.d.).

Still, in this book we try to avoid focusing on the fact of displacement itself to avoid an essentialist approach. As Stein (1981) mentioned, the focus on the fact of displacement is often essentialist as it makes refugees a category of people who do not only share a certain legal status, but became 'a culture', 'a community', and 'an identity'. As Malkki pointed out, refugee studies are often ahistorical and functionalist. Defining the experiences of people whose mobility is forced and war-driven through defining "the refugee experience" postulates "a single, essential

and transhistorical refugee condition" (1995, p. 511). Therefore, the experience of the people themselves, who have lived through war, occupation, threat to life, violence, forced displacement, and found ways to save themselves and others affected by war, is of particular importance. Refugees' problems are always political (Loescher, 1993). In this book we show how the policies towards the legal status of people residing in the occupied territories of Ukraine, and those who fled or have a transborder mobility, created such an essentialist image of people that contributed to their othering.

We seek to reconstruct the complex, ambiguous experience of displacement or immobility by drawing on people's individual stories. Moreover, we speak of people whose reality has split, leaving them permanently in limbo, where different, often mutually exclusive definitions of geopolitical context coexist. The conflicting discourses in defining the situation put individuals in the difficult position of searching for a language to describe their own reality. The lack of a clearly defined status for the Russian-occupied territories in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts led to complex and confusing explanations, in which people constantly encountered limitations. For example, when talking about his journey from occupied Donetsk to Kyiv, one of our participants said "when I was travelling from Ukraine to Ukraine", thereby emphasising the importance for him of the fact that the territories that are not controlled by the Ukrainian government nevertheless remain Ukrainian. Research participants we interviewed in 2016–2018 often found it difficult to answer the question of who the parties in this military confrontation are and who should sit at the negotiating table representing the interests of the warring parties. The 'demarcation line' has artificially divided the residents of the administrative units of the unitary state, which used to be one society. Ordinary people, without even changing their place of living, found themselves in a new complex reality where Ukrainian statehood, the realities of the occupation and the unrecognised statehood of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People Republics (DPR and LPR) coexisted and intertwined simultaneously.

The right to name the situation under these conditions takes on a special significance because it reflects the position of power and power discourse. That in turn impacted the practices and policies regarding those who had to stay in occupied territories or flee. As Amelina stated, with some exceptions, "most studies of migration policies and migrant integration/assimilation fail to analyse relevant institutional definitions of 'migration' and 'integration' and the discursive knowledge they incorporate" (2021, p. 2). In this book we examine the social production of IDPs exploring routines, performative knowledge and power effects the 'doing migration approach' (Amelina, 2021). This approach focuses on how "(im) mobile individuals are transformed into 'migrants' through a variety of routinised institutional, organisational, and interactive (i.e., face-to-face) routines that incorporate discursive knowledge related to manifold (gendered, racialised, and classed) dis-tinctions between 'Us' and 'Them'" (Amelina, 2021, p. 2). Migration studies are viewed as an 'imposition' that naturalises and objectifies migrants (Dahinden, 2016; Schinkel, 2019).

Still, most of the publications regarding the 'doing migration approach' focus on international migration. So, this book, by bringing this critical approach to the study of forced internal displacement and immobility and adding a feminist geopolitics perspective with a particular emphasis on the role of power in space, allows a novel perspective on studying internal displacement in a context of war and conflict. While our research focuses on everyday practices and interactive routines, it also shows the institutional and organisational routines which created and supported the particular categorisation of IDPs in Ukraine. The process of categorisation of IDPs includes social attributes that refer to their previous place of residence. As our research shows, the government discourses (re)produced a new bordering regime within not only physical checkpoints but discursive landscapes of power which draw distinction between 'IDPs' and 'citizens'.

Geographies of borders and feminist geopolitics

There are not only physical checkpoints between government and non-government-controlled territories in eastern Ukraine and discursive landscapes of power between Kyiv and the supporters of the non-government-controlled regional regimes (see Chapter 3), there are also symbolic differentiations between East and West in Ukraine (Portnov, 2016). Zhurzhenko states that in the last two decades, "a detrimental identity politics has led to the cultural essentialization or 'Donbas' and 'Galicia' and has programmed cultural stereotypes, aggressive cliché and open hostilities" (2014, p. 250). Forced population displacement from the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts was followed by the creation of discursive landscapes of power over IDPs, especially pensioners (Kuznetsova & Mikheieva, 2020) who often experienced othering and 'social distancing' (Rimpiläinen, 2020; Sereda, 2020; 2023). These factors constitute complex processes of bordering within Ukraine's territory and society.

Recent debates about borders consider them as beyond territories (Cassidy et al., 2018; Jones & Johnson, 2016; Sassen, 2013). Critical border studies aim to decentre the border which is not a "taken-for-granted entity" but a condition "in a constant state of becoming" (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012). There is a tendency "to essentialise the discursive constructions that accompany the empirical apprehension of changing bordering practices" (Sohn, 2016, p. 187). In this context, we engage with the lens of modalities of technical landscapes of social control and discursive landscapes of social power (Paasi, 2009; 2013). Technical landscapes of social control (Paasi, 2009; 2013) manifesting in databanking, digital surveillance, biometric identity technologies, and digital surveillance (Dijstelbloem & Broeders, 2015; Paasi, 2013) are significant parts of borders nowadays. Discursive landscapes of social power include various components such as material landscapes, national commemorations, and media (Paasi, 2013), and serve as emotional landscapes of control (Paasi, 2009). In our research, we will focus on multifaced aspects of bordering studying how the politics towards pensioners from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts is embedded in the media via official interviews and statements of politicians (Chapter 3). The special role of discourse we understand

following Müller's conceptualisation as not just a language, but also as language and practice (2008). Moving away from a border dichotomy whose understanding is embedded in the perspective of the state allows for an alternative perspective, or what Rumford has called "seeing as a border", a point of view that reveals the fluidity and heterogeneity of borders (2012). The dismantling of dichotomous static categorisation inscribed in the border is a process of "disbordering" (Giudice & Giubilaro, 2015). We are guided by the following definition of borderings offered by Cassidy et al. (2018, p. 175):

> Borderings are practices that are situated and constituted in the specificity of political negotiations as well as the everyday life performance of them. They shift and are contested between individuals and groupings as well as in the constructions of individual subjectivities. The impact of this for borderlanders has been to disrupt the connection (real and imagined) between living at the border and borderwork.

Feminist geopolitics helps to deepen our understanding of borders further by revising our idea of the role of civilian people via seeing them as "embodied political subjects" (Hyndman, 2019). Moreover, the territory is constituted via "racialised, gendered and classed bodies" (Smith et al., 2016, p. 260, see also Smith, 2012).

This perspective traverses a scale of analysis from the disembodied space of geopolitics to the area of people's lived experiences and emotions. Therefore, we focus on particular embodied experiences of people with disabilities and older people who were most affected by the new bordering regime (Chapter 3). And Chapter 7 is devoted to trauma and mental health caused by the war and displacement. This resonates with Uehling metaphor of 'PTSD land' for understanding trauma in Ukraine in her book *Everyday War* (2023). Still, she calls for a broader approach that would not portray survivors of war in Ukraine as helpless victims and looks into intersubjective perspectives. While we also focus on everyday experiences, the key lens we employ is related to the multiple events affecting individuals that are related to the new bordering regime and mobility (mostly in government-controlled areas of Ukraine), while Uheling focuses on the anthropological understanding of different ordinary actors of the war.

We understand everyday life as "a site where power relations, inequalities, and social differences are played out, lived, experienced, felt, remembered, imagined and represented" (Hall, 2020, p. 813). Focusing on inequalities and struggles which displaced people faced and often resisted, we also talk about agency and resistance. The common rhetorics on people's agency in Ukraine is politically driven and often emphasises it as resistance in military terms as a heroism of Ukrainians in combating Russian aggression, that often makes other types of agency invisible. To fill this gap, we follow Mahmood's (2012) call for cultural specificity in relation to agency which challenges the liberal feminist approach by bringing agential embodied practices of women in their everyday live. We argue that helps to advance also understanding of experiences of individuals with various intersectionalities, including civilian man,

older adults and people with disabilities. Post-structuralist approach in human geography that reveal embodied subject/agent in space and time perspective (Holloway et al., 2019) is another conceptual lens that enable to explore the effects of bordering on everyday life, while de Certeau's (1984) understanding of coping tactics which are undertaken by individuals as a mechanism to navigate and oppose the 'strategies' of power, helps to uncover often 'hidden' practices of resistance.

We argue that without seeing the specific experiences and needs formed by the intersections of age, special needs and displacement, and understanding how many are denied their rights, not only will particular groups of IDPs continue to endure extreme marginalisation but, overall, further efforts for reconciliation and social cohesion will continue to be very problematic.

Intersectionality, forced displacement, and power geometry

Intersectionality, originating within anti-racist feminism (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983; Crenshaw, 1991; Nash, 2008), has been used in Social Sciences to address the relationship between different social categories as gender, race, age, sexuality, ability, and others. As McCall (2005, p. 1780) stressed, "Interest in intersectionality arose out of a critique of gender-based and race-based research for failing to account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection – ones that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations as opposed to dominant or mixed locations". The multiple oppressions within the intersectional approach, according to Collins (1990, 276), are interlocked via a "matrix of domination" which comprises structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal power relations. Yuval-Davis calls for bringing situated intersectionality to analyse social inequalities (2015). She argues, that "situated intersectional analysis does not homogenize or reify boundaries of localities or groupings. It takes into consideration the situated gazes of particular people in relation to their own social locations and social well-being" (Yuval-Davies, 2015, p. 97).

Despite the fact that most of the research within intersectionality concerns gender and race, a considerable amount of literature has been published on exploring the geographies of age (Ho et al. 2024; Hopkins & Pain, 2007) and disability (Erevelles & Morrow, 2023; Lister, 2007). The intersectional approach has also increasingly been employed to help understanding of ethnic diversity and inequality as determinants of health and services access (see, for example, Green et al., 2014; Hankivsky & Christoffersen, 2008), and as a tool for exploring mental health among migrants (Tang & Pilgrim, 2017). Bastia (2014), providing an overview of intersectionality's role in migration studies, highlighted that it has "greatly contributed to visibilizing the interconnected and constitutive nature of multiple forms of oppression … in migration processes" (p. 238). We draw on those contributions as bringing various 'situated gazes' to intersectional analysis, which helps to reveal new inequalities and vulnerabilities. We include older people, women, people with disabilities, and those whose mental health have been challenged as the result of war and displacement or immobility within our area of study.

Women were often excluded from narratives of the events despite the active role they played in Maidan and as volunteers in Eastern Ukraine (Blacker, 2015; Khromeychuk, 2016; Phillips, 2014), and often portrayed as victims of violence during those events. At the same time, as Zychowicz explains in her study of feminist art in contemporary Ukraine, women stepped into the "vacuum left by the Orange Revolution in Kyiv's streets, museums, libraries, and other public spaces" (2020, p. 10). In our book, we show both examples of women's active resistance from art and street activism together with more subtle tactics of resistance (Chapter 4). Also, we look at gendered practices of mobility and immobility and how decisions are often linked with caring responsibilities and women taking more responsibilities in overcoming daily challenges.

Some authors criticised the intersectionality approach for its predominate focus on North America and Europe which cannot provide a universal approach of tackling gender and class in broader contexts, especially in relation to the Global South (see, for example, Bastia, 2014; Lutz & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2011). While, conceptually, it is difficult to regard Ukraine as either the Global North or the South (see Müller, 2018), we argue that the intersectional approach is a very valuable lens to critically explore how the inequalities caused by the forced displacement and how state policies towards this group exacerbate the situation. In our research, we focus mainly on structural and disciplinary aspects of the power relations which we capture via interviews with ordinary people affected by the war, NGOs, and local-level officials and analysis of interviews and talks of public officials.

The emergency character of state policy towards the mass population displacement from war-torn territories implies the importance of focusing on spatial and temporal aspects of both lived experiences and policies. Following Anthias (2012, p. 134), we admit that the combination of a translocational lens and intersectionality "enables the understanding of contradictory social locations and therefore the intersection between privilege and disadvantage" which also provides significance to the broader social context and temporality. For the analysis of how political discourses regarding IDPs impact on their lived experiences, we engage with Massey's (2009, p. 19) notion of "power geometry", which enables us to "capture both the fact that space is imbued with power and the fact that power in its turn has a spatiality". This geometry has a relational (space) component "exercised in interaction with other places" (p. 19), and a component of time and temporality as space is always "under construction".

Thus, we consider IDPs and those who stayed in occupied territories in the same way as Massey, seeing space as where power relations take place, related to those "who are also doing a lot of physical moving, but who are not 'in charge' of the process in the same way at all" (Massey, 1994, p. 149). This is applicable in Ukraine, where some parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and Crimea became accessible only via a few checkpoints since 2014.

Research design and methodology

The book is based on a series of field studies conducted by the authors between 2014 and 2019 in Ukraine focusing on lived experiences of war and displacement of people from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and policies towards IDPs (while

some of the projects included IDPs from the Crimean Peninsula too which are not within the scope of this book) and life in the so-called 'grey zones' or occupation (see Appendix). In all cases, these are residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine, for whom the war with Russia began in the spring of 2014. These are the people who, in almost all interviews, talk about their lives being divided into 'before' and 'after' in 2014. Each of these individuals faced the experience of war and loss, a difficult existential choice that included not only the problem of their own choice, but also the question of responsibility for their loved ones or the situation. With our interlocutors we talked about life before the war, the moment of decision to stay or leave, and what happened to people afterwards – what problems IDPs faced and how life was for those who did not leave their homes and continued to live in occupation.

Often, we took an iterative approach to reveal some of the most pressing issues, discussing them with individuals affected by displacement and NGOs' activists before starting any fieldwork. The project 'Ukraine's hidden tragedy' which is one of the key studies for this book, was very much oriented to providing some public engagement and policy impact activities, so it was very important to know at the start the most recent issues regarding the legal status of IDPs and campaigns organised by international and local organisations. Thus, we strictly followed the principle of minimising information, clearly defining what information is absolutely essential for the research's purpose to protect interviewees privacy and minimise re-traumatisation (also in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulations, 2016 ('GDPR'), the UK Data Protection Act, 2018 DPA).

As the study is drawn from an intersectional approach, the focus on everyday life is important as it "offers an important potential tool for feminist geography to understand the intimate connections between the production of space and the systematic production of power, thereby increasing its effectiveness to develop and employ its critical insights within and beyond the academy" (Valentine, 2007, p. 19). Therefore, unstructured and semi-structured in-depth interviewing was chosen, as it provides the participants with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Intersectionality has been reflected in the sample as we aimed for adults of different age, gender, and place of origin and displacement to be represented in the sample. However, we did not aim to select participants based on their religious or ethnic identity. As a result, we did not have enough representation of Roma who have been affected by war, despite that their experiences could be different given the history of discrimination (Bocheva, 2019).

A snowball sampling technique was employed to recruit informants among IDPs, as it is commonly used for the research of sensitive topics or hard-to-reach populations. Each participant – initially identified through social media groups, NGOs, or personal networks – provided several referrals, but only one new informant was selected from each set of recommendations (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

Interviews were conducted in Ukrainian and/or Russian depending on the preferences of participants or interlocutors (while a few interviews with stakeholders were taken in English). Beginning the interviews three to four years after the inception of the war as in the 'Ukraine's hidden tragedy project', "allowed for reflection on changes

in the situation of IDPs, as well as evaluation of the social consequences of the recent changes in legislation regarding displaced people in Ukraine" (Kuznetsova & Mikheieva, 2020, p. 694).

In the research 'Ukraine's hidden tragedy', we had a website in English and Ukrainian, participant information leaflets and consent forms in Ukrainian and Russian which stated the goals of the study, the universities participating and the project's team. All of the studies followed the ethics protocol of informed consents from the participants and informing them about the project's aims and procedures, including potential risks, before deciding whether to give consent. Research participants who had left the occupied territories and were in the Ukrainian territories under the control of the Ukrainian government were invited to participate in both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. In the occupied territories and in the so-called 'grey zone', we conducted only in-depth interviews, trying to protect our participants as much as possible as focus groups would not be safe. Only individuals over 18 years old and those able to provide informed consent participated in the studies. Where participants were hesitant to sign a consent form, informed consent was obtained verbally and recorded.

As a default, the studies used anonymisation of the data (with the exception of some policy briefing papers we published when some of the stakeholders were willing to be named for visibility of advocacy campaigns). Still, a 'blanket anonymisation' is not enough for working in a highly sensitive context during the war. Therefore, to represent the data in this book, we employed a contextually contingent approach for anonymity (Saunders et al., 2015) which included specific attention to limit disclosers regarding places, occupation, and background that could be tracible. While the use of pseudonyms is a very common way to hide a person's identity while telling a story, we decided not to include pseudonyms (with a few exceptions) in this book. The main reason for this is because some of the individuals were under prosecution by the new regime in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and giving pseudonyms could accidentally alert those with power towards people with similar identities. For the same reason, in many cases, we do not provide a specific age of the participants giving just a generic estimate. We refer to the participants' occupation only when it is essential for the argument.

The conversations with people in the occupied territories were conducted either through the protected communication channels or face-to-face when they were visiting Ukrainian-controlled territory for their personal purposes. Although we have tried to diversify the group of participants as much as possible, we realise that our research has a number of limitations. Under conditions of war and occupation, it is difficult for researchers to gain full access to the field, and a few potential informants refused to make a contact and talk about their experiences (Sereda & Mikheieva, 2025). On the other hand, we relied on interviewers with IDP status who had been forced to leave these areas because of the war, but who had retained their previous ties and could provide entry points into the field and select participants via the snowballing method described above. At that the initial stage of Russian aggression, ordinary residents of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts openly expressed their positions and talked about their experiences, as neither researchers,

nor residents perceived that freedom of speech would be discontinued so rapidly. This allows us to reconstruct what happened, considering the complexity and uniqueness of people's individual experiences.

Participants were informed that they can withdraw from the research before, during or after the interview/focus groups without a need to provide a reason. Still, there were not many withdrawals – instead, we found out that the opportunity to talk about the everyday life was therapeutic for some people. Interview setting, especially in sensitive research, can often be perceived as "offering a therapeutic opportunity in which participants could revisit and reorder past experiences" (Birch & Miller, 2000, p. 200). The ability to remain sensitive and empathetic is crucial for the research among vulnerable people (Montero-Sieburth, 2020). All the researchers participating in the data collection in the various projects were supportive and empathetic, though sometimes it has been emotionally exhausting, especially for the researchers from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts or those who had family connections there (Sereda & Mikheieva, 2025). In some of the projects, such as Ukraine's hidden tragedy, we had lists of contacts of free mental health support services that we shared with the participants. We often consulted with professional physiologists while creating an interview guide. Still, at that time, professional mental health support was not considered something people could relate to, even in times of crisis (Chapter 7).

Interviews (which lasted between 40 minutes and two hours) were recorded (if consent was given) or written down by a researcher as notes, and transcribed. At the initial stage of the analysis, we conducted a line-by-line open coding of the interviews. In the next phase, the open codes were reassembled by linking categories and subcategories. The codes were then categorised, and the axes that make up the main subject headings of this book were constructed from them (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Axial coding allowed us to look at the primary codes we constructed in the wider context of the narrative, and to work with the causes and conditions of the phenomena and processes under study (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Still, when revisiting coding a few years later, we could find some new relations between the themes, especially through the lens of the full-scale invasion when the loss of home and political status of many people from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts who moved to other parts of Ukraine and then often abroad stopped being a 'temporal problem' but transformed into the prolonged situation of liminality.

In writing this book, we employed a triangulation method following Denzin's (2009) suggestion for four types of triangulations for correlating people, time, and space; correlating the findings collected by different research assistants and comparing the findings and conclusions with one another; engaging with different theoretical strategies and correlating data from different collection methods. The data from different projects mentioned above were cross-analysed to avoid any bias linked with positionality of researchers who collected interviews (Patton, 1990), the interview guide, and the impact of a context including a time of an interview and individual behaviour of the participants. The qualitative interview can be seen as "another site for 'telling a certain story a certain way'"

(Birtch & Miller, 2000, p. 194). The way how people saw their past experiences depended on how they were coping and trying 'to make sense' about challenging events. Correlating people, time and space included analysing interviews taken in different time since 2014 in various regions in Ukraine (see Appendix). To examine policies and procedure liked with the regulations of mobility, IDPs status and pensions, analysis of documents has been utilised. The documents included were available in the open access draft law and laws regarding the status of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and IDPs, interviews with politicians and other stakeholders, policy briefing papers, and working papers based on research. The advantage of using documents was to explore how the changes in the legislation towards the IDPs and territories are reflected in people's understanding and everyday practices which we observed via interviews. Another benefit of the document analysis is to know the opinions of policy-makers without the presence of a researcher in a field (Bowen, 2009) and potential challenges in access in power dynamics (Li, 2021). To explore the authorities' position towards pensioners, critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Reisigl, 2001) of their statements and interviews in the online mass media has been employed.

Our positionality is very important as it helps us to recognise any factors that could impact knowledge construction and representation, including emotions (Hubbard et al., 2001) and an insider/outsider perspective, which is in turn not straightforward as it has some other factors beyond the country of origin which impacts the power dynamics (Merriam et al., 2001). While the authors are both driven by empathy and by the rights of people to have their voice heard, we still have very different positionalities.

Positionality

Irina Kuznetsova

Positionality is never a 'convenient' topic, especially if that starts from a question where you are from. It's a simple question for some (and many male British and US academics did not even include positionality in their books), yet not an easy one for me to answer. I was born in the Soviet Union and lived in Russia until 2014.

This war is not in my name. I will repeat it again. I was not afraid to speak out publicly in February 2022 in the New York times: I felt sick when I read about Vladimir Putin announcing the start of a "special military operation" in Ukraine. Images of bloodied civilians and bombed-out residential buildings flood my phone and TV. I still feel shaky. And angry. These words will offer no comfort for those under fire in Ukraine – but the least Russian citizens like me can do is not remain silent, even from afar. I only regret not speaking up when it all began in 2014 (Kuznetsova, 2022).

Still, the guilt and sense of collective responsibility do not go away with the words and probably will stay forever. Therefore, I have constant self-doubts about whether I should keep silent as a researcher (Howlett & Lazarenko, 2023). However, I feel, that withholding the knowledge that I have, from studying displacement

and immobility related to Russia's war on Ukraine, would conflict with promises I made to the people who shared their stories to make sure their voices are heard. It would also compromise my commitments as a British academic funded by the United Kingdom Research and Innovation council which values open research (UKRI, 2025). Uploading interviews to open access would not be possible as it would create risks of identifying some people via their stories. To prevent any bias, I am very critical towards any assumptions and preconceptions I could have, so I was as reflexive as possible from the planning to the interpretation of the data (Rose, 1997).

My research on Ukraine started with a small-scale project funded by the British Academy after I moved to the UK and was focusing on people from Ukraine displaced in Russia from 2014. I revealed how the Kremlin used rhetoric of 'brotherly people' and simplified routes for Russian citizenship for Ukrainians as geopolitical tools (Kuznetsova, 2020). I learned about families divided by borders, about choices people had to make between staying in Ukraine and coming to Russia. I realised how there is very little attention both within international media and academia is about this over a million displaced people in Ukraine. This is how the project 'Ukraine's hidden tragedy' started and how I met Oksana Mikheieva, and am truly grateful to her for the endless conversations, warmness, and trustful and meaningful collaboration which is worth more than any grants.

Epistemologically, I am driven by my long-term expertise in studying people who experience othering and exclusion. I critically employ post-colonial lenses in studying racism and othering towards migrants from Central Asia in Russia (Kuznetsova & Round, 2019). Mbembe's necropolitical approach and understanding of the situation of some people via triple loss – of their body, political status and home (Round & Kuznetsova, 2016) and Fanon's understanding of zone of being and non-being later provided a lens to get sense on what is happening in occupied territories in Ukraine.

Positionality is not only about my reflexivity but also about how it is viewed by others (Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). My travels to Ukraine and the research which I led there began a few years before the full-scale invasion. Although I have one of the most common Russian surnames and am not fluent in Ukrainian, still, I was asked far fewer questions about where I'm from while in Ukraine than I am in the UK. In most cases, I used English as a 'lingua franca' given the sensibility of the language question in Ukraine but ready to switch to other language if my interlocutors wanted to. The project involved Ukrainian speaking colleagues as well whom I am very grateful (see Preface). Similar to Axyonova and Lozka (2023), other renegotiation strategies included establishing collegiality by discussing institutional affiliations, shared interests in research, international mobility, and even parenthood as I am a mother of two. I shared as well that I lived and worked in Kazan, Tatarstan before moving to the UK in 2014. Despite that Russian being my mother tongue, I am from diverse ethnic background. Perhaps, it is a subject for another paper, but I feel since I moved to the UK, and started to engage with feminist geographies, it aided my self-reflection on the understanding of my family experiences, gender relations, and my previous research.

I understand that I have a double burden of both positionality as a British (I became a citizen) and a person who grew up in Russia. Both of which are colonial. 'British academic' is almost a meme, and it does come with a lot of privilege in terms of access to funding, various training and academic community. It does also come with a heavy baggage of colonial legacy which unfortunately is still reproduced by the government in the international development agenda and Global Challenges Research Fund (Noxolo, 2017) which supported research in the so-called Global South (now suspended) including the project 'Ukraine's hidden tragedy' that I led. To avoid any 'resourcification' and 'westplaining' (Donovan, 2023), the project was focused on reflexive impact via engaging with a number of local and international NGOs, universities, and local communities. We organised various discussions, a summer school, creative events in Lviv, Kyiv, Brussels, and London. The discussions were prioritised over academic publications at that time as they enabled proper reflections, collaboration, and impact.

'Inconvenient People' is a book about how Russia's war quietly arrived in eastern Ukraine – through silence and denial – and how it went on to shatter thousands of lives. I wish not only for Russia's crimes to be punished, but for the pain inflicted on people to remain documented – as both a testimony and a testament to their strength and resilience.

Oksana Mikheieva

This part of the introduction is one of the most challenging for me. In this book, I write about people with whom I have common experience of war, forced migration, multiple encounters with the common problems of forced migrants and stigmatising practices. As a public person with an obvious pro-Ukrainian stance, in the summer of 2014 I was forced to leave occupied Donetsk, the city where my two sons were born and where I had lived for 43 years. I initiated projects related to studying the experience of Ukrainian IDPs with a very complex motivation, which included many things: a desire to talk about the experiences (past and present)of people who found themselves in the war zone and were forced to leave their homes; a desire to reach out to those who did not notice the war and the tragedy of millions of people in their own country; and to find a way to change the official rhetoric about IDPs, formed by stereotypes and information warfare.

Starting in 2014, almost immediately after my forced displacement, I began working with different audiences – young journalists, young scholars, IDPs themselves, and members of host communities – to share information that remained outside of public discourse: individual stories that had no place in the unified state and government response to uncomfortable people marked by tragedy. Lost behind the cumbersome 'state' approach is, for example, one of our participants, an entrepreneur originally from Crimea, who lived and worked in Kyiv for more than ten years before 2014 and who woke up one day without

access to his bank accounts and in a 'non-resident' status in Ukraine because of his Crimean "propiska" (registration). Others remain invisible, such as some of my colleagues from Donetsk State University of Management, who waited for the state evacuation of the university from the turbulent spring of 2014 until the new year 2015, continuing to work in a hostile environment under threat of being arrested and sent to the 'cellars' of the unrecognised 'young republics', and then re-experiencing the horror of war and the siege of Mariupol. Or the woman from Kostiantynivka who moved there after surviving the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, giving birth to her firstborn in a basement under shelling. She knew well how the war started and did not wait a second, immediately gathered her family and took them to Odesa, where we met for an interview. Even my own memories of four people in the compartment of the train, which was no longer from Donetsk, because the railway station was shelled, partially destroyed, and closed. After a risky passage through a series of spontaneous checkpoints with armed men, I travelled outside the war zone and physically, with my whole body, felt the line of demarcation. We, four adult people, unfamiliar with each other, in one compartment were silent and breathless until we passed this invisible line hanging in the air. But, having overcome it, we began to speak and could not stop. At that time, we did not know yet how many new life experiences we would have ahead of us.

By collecting the experiences of IDPs, I was trying to save them from being alone in tragedy. When we think that it happens only to us, we blame ourselves. When we realise that millions have faced this problem and not only in our country – we can draw on the experience of others and change our lives. From project to project, we talked to people affected by the war, those who were forced to move within the borders of Ukraine or beyond, or those who, for various reasons, stayed where they lived before the war. Sometimes in the course of the interview I admitted that I myself had lived in Donetsk, but more often I preferred not to create a competition of tragedies and immersed myself in the reality of another person. Often my interlocutors would say to me: "You can't even imagine what it's like to live through all this!"

For me, with my tragic but similar story to many others, it was a bitter irony. But my inclusion in the topic allowed me to frame the course of the conversation carefully and gently, helping the person to open up, build distance with what had happened, and tell their story. It also forced me to critically rethink what I was doing and to look for ways to verify these stories. Often this happened already during the interview process through a series of clarifying questions, but also afterwards when coding the data, which we always did together with colleagues who had considerable distance with both the region and the events. Their fresh and detached perspective balanced my personal involvement.

For me, this book is a tribute to and admiration for the fortitude of people who are willing to share their often painful and unpleasant experiences. I learnt with them to understand what was happening and to find the right words to describe these difficult experiences.

Occupied territories of non-government-controlled areas of Ukraine? Issues of terminology

We understand that terminology which describes the state and society during the war could activate semantic content "specific to the current moment" and became the social responsibility of a researcher (Sereda & Mikheieva, 2025, p. 5). While there was no consensus how to call the armed conflict which started in 2014, we write about war as it is often how the armed conflict have been perceived by the people from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts who shared their experiences in our studies. Regarding naming the territories, we use the terminology reflected and clarified in Ukrainian legislation – temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine (Law of Ukraine, 2022). The same law names Russia as an aggressor. We also use more detailed wording as necessary to clarify areas – the Temporary Occupied Territory of Crimean Peninsula and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Also, where it should be emphasised that the Ukrainian Government has no control over the situation in a particular part of the occupied Ukrainian territory, we use the international acronym of 'NGCA' (non-government-controlled area).

The terminology used to describe what is happening has depended on how the parties to the conflict have sought to present it to their societies and to the international community (Kulyk, 2020). In order to focus on the value of an unbiased description of the armed conflict, since 2014 the international community has been looking for neutral terminology to describe what is happening.

International organisations that focused on a local approach to working with conflict victims have, in most cases, used a classification that was neutral from their point of view and avoided naming the parties to the conflict or the nature of what was happening – 'GCA' (government-controlled area) or 'NGCA' (non-government-controlled area). However, this approach, firstly, led to a focus solely on Ukraine and excluded the cause of the conflict – Russian aggression – from the picture. Secondly, it created a strange situation in which most of an independent sovereign country was referred to not as Ukraine, but as territory controlled by the government. A local approach focusing on the everyday problems of the population in the conflict zone, rather than neutrality, shifted the emphasis from the aggressor to the victim.

Structure of the book

To begin to develop a deeper understanding of how the war and bordering impacts daily life and mobility and immobility tactics, Chapter 2 provides a classification of different types of mobility and immobility caused by the Russian aggression and the new border regime in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. This chapter then examines the social production of an 'internally displaced person' via physical and discursive bordering as a static category without consideration of intersectionality. This is reinforced in Chapter 3 which explores the experiences of pensioners and persons with disabilities in both occupied and government-controlled territories in Ukraine. Prior to 2022, pensioners comprised over half of all registered IDPs

in the country. The chapter demonstrates how these individuals often felt trapped by both physical and symbolic borders, facing significant challenges in accessing pensions, benefits, and suitable accommodation. It also highlights the struggles of persons with disabilities – particularly during evacuation and in securing benefits and housing and discusses the phenomenon of 'forced return', whereby individuals were compelled to return to occupied areas despite the high risk of renewed hostilities.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Donetsk and the bordering and de-bordering of the city via the politics of re-de-commemoration and everyday resistance. It starts with an overview of the role of art in understanding resistance relating to the anti-Maidan and war in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. It then explores the re-commemoration, de-commemoration, and new memoryscapes in Donetsk as practices of the Russian occupation administrations which created the new bordering in the city. It then focuses on how ordinary people with a pro-Ukrainian position reacted to, and resisted, these disruptions. Subsequently, the chapter goes on to analyse art activism in Donetsk as resistance to the new regime in creating an alternative semiosphere. Then, we analyse the case of the Ukrainian artist Maria Kulikovska, a displaced artist from the Crimean Peninsula, whose statues in the art centre in Donetsk, IZOLYATSIA, were demolished by militants supporting the new regime.

Chapter 5 then reveals the meaning of home, and the general housing situation, as the loss of home has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges both for those whose houses were destroyed as the results of war or had to be left as the results of displacement. Housing remained a decisive factor in shaping IDPs' decisions regarding resettlement in government-controlled areas of Ukraine. This chapter argues that the loss of home constitutes an emotional epicentre, shaped by displacement, longing, and uncertainty. It also examines IDPs' experiences in securing housing and advocating for their rights, with a critical focus on how neoliberal housing policies have influenced their everyday lives and the tactics individuals have undertaken to resist them.

Chapter 6 explores volunteering as a hybrid phenomenon within the context of internal displacement in Ukraine. It argues that traditional notions of 'pure' volunteering are inadequate in situations marked by legal ambiguity and urgent humanitarian needs. It shows how volunteers often acted as intermediaries, bridging gaps in welfare provision, and influencing policy. By focusing on the process of volunteering, the study reveals its dynamic, situational nature and its potential to drive systemic change and capacity to support the post-war reconstruction in Ukraine.

Chapter 7 first explores the traumatic responses to life under war, occupation, and displacement from spatial and atmospheric perspectives. It demonstrates the intersectional experiences of fear caused by shelling, street violence, and the necessity of making decisions to flee. It reveals how, even in a place of safety, IDPs' well-being was affected by various tensions and stressors, including navigating bureaucratic challenges, building new networks of contacts, and ensuring basic survival in a context of limited resources. Addressing the structural and institutional stress factors affecting IDPs, the chapter then turns to the experiences of volunteers and mental health professionals by examining war and displacement

through the lens of personal and professional challenges, and the coping mechanisms employed in situations of uncertainty and scarcity.

Chapter 8 brings the findings together to provide an overview of the key theoretical contributions for migration studies and human geography and political implications regarding engaging with intersectional voices of IDPs and those who left behind in occupied territories or areas under conflict in developing durable solutions both in Ukraine and other countries.

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2 Fleeing, staying, and in-between

Forced mobilities since 2014

Introduction

There are different types of mobility and immobility caused by the Russian aggression and the new border regime in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts before 2022. Our understanding of mobility and immobility is different from the popular model that interpret these terms via the capacities and aspirations approach (de Haas, 2021; Schewel, 2020). We argue that this model is not applicable in the case of Ukraine several reasons. First, de Haas and Schewel understand involuntary immobility in terms of the lack of capacities (lack of freedom or ability), and though there are some capacities in place, people might still find the displacement too risky (despite high aspirations to move). Second, the term 'aspiration' would not necessarily be relevant here either as in many cases the mobility was not something that people would 'aspire' to achieve. The risks would include both the journey and the settlement in a new area and would be perceived very differently depending on people's positionalities including age, gender, and financial capacities. According to our study, older people and people with disabilities face more risks in all the continuum. People subjected to forced mobility included those who had to leave their homes because they lived in areas of active combat, another group included those who physically felt quite safe but did not want to stay for various reasons.

The internally displaced population is not the only category of the population of concern within the displacement continuum in Ukraine. Involuntary immobility is also crucial in refugee studies (Lubkemann, 2008), while voluntary immobility is a significant part of the continuum as well (Murzakulova et al., 2024; Schewel, 2020). Before February 2022, 3.4 million people on both sides of the contact line had 'critical humanitarian needs' (Humanitarian Response, 2021), including the elderly, people with disabilities, and female-headed households. So, in this chapter, we start by exploring the different categories of people who stayed in the occupied territories. Then, we reveal how individuals were taking decisions to flee and how they 'categorised' themselves (mostly not within the IDPs category). Then, we examine why the official data on registered IDPs only partially conveys the scale of displacement. Following that, the chapter analyses the way how the state was 'producing' a category of an 'IDPs' via borders of social control and street bureaucracy. We explore the new orders and new bordering which, in turn,

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'produce' a group of persons who do not just move from one territory to another but have characteristics that different institutions employ to label that group in order to govern it and pursue particular political or geopolitical aims. As Allen et al. (2018, p. 218) noted, "categorisation is central to efforts to govern migrants and refugees" and it has "wider geopolitical implications for our understanding of nations, states and citizens" (p. 221). We argue that it is true with categorisation of IDPs as well. Categorisation is part of the 'social production' or 'doing migration' (Amelina, 2021, Chapter 1). In this chapter, by analysing people's daily experiences, we argue that the category of IDPs is 'produced' by those in power. In terms of the "power geometry" (Massey, 2009), the authorities were shaping space in such terms that they try to support order in conditions of uncertainty and protracted conflict.

'Trapped', 'immobile', or just carrying on with their lives? Why people stayed in occupied territories

Were the population in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts 'trapped'? Black and Collyer (2014) understand 'trapped population' via involuntary immobility – "could be the need to move, based on some form of well-founded fear of the consequences if movement does not take place. The term 'trapped' highlights the issue of need to migrate" (p. 55). Still, not all the population in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were 'trapped' without the capacity to leave. Except for cases when people had to flee imminently because of the active combat, the decisions regarding mobility could take some time and involve not only weighing pros and cons but negotiating mobility with other family members. Our research revealed the following categories of 'stayers' had different reasons for staying:

- 'Supporters and collaborators'. Those who ideologically support the new regime on occupied territories and would like to stay to be part of the change.
- 'Former collaborators'. People who used to support the occupation regime and could not go to the government-controlled part of Ukraine as they could face prosecution.
- Russian passport holders. Especially those who received Russian citizenship before 2019 and had to renounce Ukrainian citizenship, but also those individuals who received Russian passports since 2019 when Russia's allowed a simplified procedure for residents of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts to receive citizenship.
- 'Hostages of the new regime'. People who are detained by the so-called Donetsk People Republic and Luhansk People Republic (DPR and LPR) for their pro-Ukrainian actions. Often after detention, they were released, but representatives of the security forces of the occupation regimes took away their passports, thus turning them into actual hostages. Without a passport, they could neither find employment nor leave the occupied territories.
- 'Stayers'. Those simply would like to stay where they are (see also Chapter 4).
- 'Carers'. Those who would like to leave but have to stay and look after the family members and/or property.

- 'Immobile'. Those who would like to leave but have weak health and do not have enough financial resources (e.g. people with disabilities and older adults).
- 'Internally displaced'. There were people who were displaced internally within the occupied territories and did not have the capacity or aspiration to move to the government-controlled areas of Ukraine.

While the Ukrainian government often defined everyone who stayed as supporters of the new occupation regime (see the next chapter), in reality, those who stayed because they wanted to be part of change in the so-called DPR and LPR were not in the majority. They were quite visible ones if we talk about people working in local administrations, police, or even journalists. As one of our interlocutors, a volunteer and a journalist shared:

> I realised three things: first, I will never accept, under any circumstances, the Ukraine that this country became after February 2014. Second, I will never be able to come to terms with the swastikas and other such things happening there. And the most terrible thing is that I can't come to terms not even with this, but with the people who look at these swastikas and remain silent. I can't come to terms with people who see this and say, 'What are you doing?' I will never be able to come to terms with people who have convinced themselves or allowed themselves to be convinced that someone else is to blame, not themselves. Russia, or someone else. Therefore, my duty is to take care of my land, my home, my garden, my city. To take care of my city, protect it, care for it, and do everything to make my city, my land, and neighbouring cities prosper. The more, the better, wonderful. But as long as I live here, I will die on my land, but I will not be able to compromise my beliefs, my heart. I don't know, it may not seem deep to you, but I will not be able to compromise my soul.
>
> (Woman in her mid-age, Donetsk)

She did not see the future of Donetsk oblast within Ukraine, only within Russia. During an interview, she expressed a negative image of Ukraine, emphasising nationalism and fascist symbols – an image that is also actively echoed in Russian propaganda – which she uses to justify her decisions and choices. And she was confident that she would rather 'burn her house and move to Russia' than stay in the city if it returned under the Ukrainian government control. So, the decision to stay revealed her agency to care and her reference to protection of 'my city' and was deeply emotional since leaving Donetsk would mean 'losing heart'. From the feminist geopolitics point, such emotions are not just at the core of her decision but help to reveal a deeply personal account of the war.

Some people became 'trapped' in the occupied territory as they could be prosecuted as 'collaborators' of the new regime. They stayed in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts as if they moved to the government-controlled areas of Ukraine, there was a high risk they would be prosecuted. The following case is about a person from Sloviansk who collaborated in an imitation of the referendum for independence of the

so-called Donetsk People's Republic. When Ukrainian forces retook control of the city in July 2014, some people who collaborated with occupation administrations and local supporters moved to other territories of Donetsk oblast which were under control of the occupation regime. In the case of the person below, they regretted their collaboration, but were too scared to leave:

> Oh, how they sang Ukrainian songs at her birthday karaoke, you just had to hear it. And he says, 'I want to go home, I lived my whole life in Ukraine, I want to go to Ukraine.' I said, 'You need to go, there's this programme, they are waiting for you at home, someone went and was forgiven, and he went home.' Well, it looks nice on the internet, I don't know, some were forgiven, some were not. But he didn't kill anyone, he didn't carry weapons, he does clean work. So, people seem to want to return, but they don't believe it. (…) People want to go home, they have already realised that they were deceived, that they were just used by both sides.
>
> (Woman 45–55 years old, Donetsk, 2017).

So, borders became hard for such people. They stayed because of being involved in collaboration with the occupying regime in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, which could lead to arrest and the lack of trust of the Ukrainian authorities and legal system. So, some people stayed 'trapped' in occupied territories while losing loyalty to both Ukraine and the new regime. Since the start of the full-scale invasion by mid-2024, almost 9,000 cases were opened on collaboration in Ukraine, with offences ranging from simply denying the illegality of Russia's invasion, or supporting it in-person or online, to playing a political or military role for the occupying powers and some people are prosecuted for continuing doing their job, for example, in education (Waterhouse, 2024). Accordingly, new forms of forced immobility and mobility that emerged after the full-scale invasion, due to the difficult choice between remaining in the occupied territory or moving to government-controlled areas of Ukraine, can be viewed not only through the prism of vulnerability, but also from the perspective of the work of security services.

A separate category of 'immobile' people is those who received Russian passports and renounced Ukrainian citizenship (before 2019) or publicly voluntarily destroyed their Ukrainian passports. While in principle, before 2022, Russian citizens did not require a Ukrainian visa, they were often detained and interrogated by border guards even in Kyiv Boryspil airport. Crossing the border from non-government-controlled territories of Donetsk or Luhansk oblasts to territories controlled by the Ukrainian government with a Russian passport seemed impossible without being not only questioned but denied entry. One woman (55–65 years old), originally from Donetsk who has a Russian passport, shared that she would rather not have a border dividing territories:

> I would like the border be (…) how it was before, before the war. In fact, as I said, now with a Russian passport, I cannot go to Ukraine, I cannot leave,

> I am a hostage of the 'DPR', that's it. I come here for the summer, I spend the whole summer in [name of a village] within the limits of Donetsk, I cannot leave beyond its borders.

There were also internally displaced people (IDPs) within the occupied territories who, however, were not considered as official 'IDPs' but 'the population of humanitarian concern'. We argue that it covers an intersectional category of displaced 'stayers' which includes people who stay for several reasons, whether it is a lack of capacities and weak health, being collaborators or people who simply did not want to leave their oblast. We define them specially because of the vulnerabilities caused by loss of home, forced mobility, and trauma. Those people were dependent mostly on the help of the occupation regime in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, international organisations, Russia, and volunteers. We did not have interviews with this category of displaced people in our research, but they were mentioned by other participants interviewed in the occupied territories. The scale of the humanitarian crisis was huge as people's homes had been demolished or damaged, and supplies of electricity, water, and food were disrupted or non-existent (see, for example, United Nations Ukraine, 2014).

We explore the everyday experiences of other categories of 'stayers', including carers, in Chapter 3; however, it is important to stress that decisions to stay and experiences of the new reality caused deep emotions of fear and anger, and feelings that 'life is broken':

> As soon as the war started, everything stopped, turned upside down, and fell apart. It's an absolutely terrible situation that everyone found themselves in. It's terrible because my life was simply broken. I can't leave for several reasons. My mother is very ill, she's 93 years old, and you can't take her anywhere because she's bedridden, and this brings a lot of problems. And why should I leave my city?
>
> (Woman between 55–65 years old, small shop owner, Donetsk)

Still, one cannot simply define her decision to stay based on her caring responsibilities, because there is a strong desire to stay in the city, the longing for the sense of home. For some, however, coming back is too traumatic, almost 'sickening', but many people had to leave Ukrainian government-controlled territories and return to the occupied territories to look after their older relatives and property, like a woman in her 50s from Donetsk who lived between Dnipro and Donetsk:

> I didn't want to come back here; it was very difficult to return here mentally. Physically. Because you feel, you read, what is happening here. It's hard to return to this 'swamp'. I can't leave everything behind (…) There is no future here. If you want the best for your child, you need to leave. We've already reached that age, for example, when you are responsible for the elderly, you

> can't abandon them. I have a mother-in-law, I have a father who will be 81 years old. Well… I have some property here that I also can't leave behind because I would end up on the street in my old age.
>
> (Woman, 51 years old from Donetsk, moved to Dnipro, 2016)

The social production of an 'internally displaced person'

In our interviews, we often asked people about their status and how they see their position in a new place in Ukraine after leaving the war-torn territories. It was clear that the status of internally displaced person ('*pereselenets*' in Ukrainian), given to people by the government and international organisations, was perceived negatively by many. There was always a powerful agency in leaving home behind, taking the risky journey via checkpoints. No one decides on one day to become a refugee or an IDP. There was always the element of people's agency in finding resources, helping others, and settling in a new place. In this first stage of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the state did not aid evacuation. So, when people who temporarily or permanently left their homes in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were required to register as IDPs, they were seen as part of the new power relations. The new order was manifested physically by the creation of checkpoints and symbolically by imposing new terms to address the Ukrainian citizens who happened to live in the territories that later became known as the 'Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone' (ATO zone).

The status of IDPs who fled from the war-torn territories of Ukraine quickly became an issue of international concern with the UN Refugees Agency, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the European Commission, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and other international organisations who tried to provide support. It was necessary for all displaced people to assume the status of IDP in the first years after forced relocation in order to engage with any kind of formal relationship with the state – including accessing health care, pensions, employment, and education. Therefore, people who were more vulnerable in the labour market and dependent upon benefits, such as older adults and people with disabilities, were more dependent on this status.

We argue that the categories which people on the move use to describe themselves are very much affected by their experiences during this continuum. For many, the decision to flee had to be taken imminently when the risks to stay were too high. In 2014, people in non-government areas had to rely on themselves or volunteers to move to safer places as there was no evacuation provided. A journalist, interviewed in Donetsk in 2017, who holds a pro-Ukrainian position, was still very critical about it:

> In 2014, volunteers were evacuating people from under shelling. We called the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MES), the regional administration, and asked: 'Guys, where are the green corridors through which people can be evacuated?' The MES pointed to the regional administration, the regional administration pointed to the MES, and with great difficulty, the MES said:

> 'What, you don't know where the green corridors are?' We said, 'No.' 'The list is posted on the internet.' We said that it's great the list is posted on the internet, but in the same Horlivka, you know, not everywhere has electricity, let alone the internet. And an eighty-year-old grandmother with some kind of pain, for example, doesn't care about the internet at all. They can't get out of the basement for ten days. You tell us what to do? Well, it turned out that few people used these green corridors. Volunteers evacuated people; people were evacuated at their own risk. The government didn't even create a green corridor. And this was already July.
>
> (Age is hidden for anonymity reasons)

Moreover, many people did not adopt an IDP status. For some, it was painful as after organising evacuation by themselves, they felt that such a status would limit their freedom. As one of the activists for IDPs' rights in Kyiv who fled from Donetsk, stated:

> I would avoid using the status 'displaced' because 'temporarily displaced' implies an organised evacuation, which did not take place. The evacuation was carried out by volunteers, not by the state. Therefore, we can say that these were temporarily relocated people. To call them refugees, 'refugee' is a legal term that Ukraine does not accept because it entails taking on obligations towards these refugees. Plus, the word 'refugee' has a connotation that demeans a person's dignity, making it unpleasant to feel like a refugee. So, 'temporarily relocated' seems more appropriate, I guess. 'Displaced' is correct in a philological sense, meaning they were taken and moved, right? But in reality, they left on their own. (…) better to use a term 'temporarily left people'.
>
> (Woman, 40)

Many people agreed with this opinion, saying that the obligatory requirement to register as IDPs does not make sense as they did not receive state support neither for evacuation nor for settling in:

> They say it's required… I didn't want to because I didn't consider myself a refugee or a displaced person. It was unclear to me. We moved with our own money, rented housing with our own money, and I made passport copies for 100 UAH. I even joke that I made so many passport copies that someone could take out a loan in my name, and I wouldn't even know about it.
>
> (Woman, 25 years old, Donetsk-Odesa)

This echoes with Bulakh's (2020) findings regarding the resistance of some IDPs to engage with this status as there was no evacuation help provided by the state. Moreover, drawing parallels with the Chornobyl nuclear accident, some displaced people were arguing that the Chornobyl victims were resettled, but those who left Eastern Ukraine had to flee on their own and 'left alone'.

Some considered themselves as refugees, as they thought it more appropriate due to the urgency of the displacement and the lack of any preparation or state support:

> No, well, those people who fled from the war are naturally refugees, because I never had any plans to specifically change my place of residence, go to another city, and neither did my parents. We thought that where we live, we would continue to live, work, study, and so on. So, we didn't plan to move, but when the war started, when the actual military actions began, then naturally the question of moving arose, and we decided to move to our grandparents. Well, we can really be called refugees because we fled from these military actions.
>
> (Woman, 18 years old from Donetsk, living in Dnipro)

A young man from Luhansk-Lozova echoed her, though argued that the Ukrainian term for IDPs, 'resettled' does not make sense as they had to flee imminently:

> Refugees in the literal sense of the word, because we left everything behind and ran away, simply fleeing from the shells, from these rockets, from everything. We didn't resettle; in my understanding, you resettle when there's a flood or a hurricane, you just move. But we ran away, we fled with what we had on us. For example, I was in shorts, grabbed my documents, and ran away in shorts, a T-shirt, and barefoot.
>
> (Man, 32 years old)

The self-categorisation of people as refugees also shows how the undeclared and unrecognised war before the full-scale invasion by Russia has affected people's lives. It tells us about the creation of 'borders' before the checkpoints were introduced. The checkpoints were not only physical borders but symbolic borders both in time and space: a territory before the hostilities, with predictable and safe social routines under the Ukrainian government, and the same territory during the hostilities, only later declared a territory of ATO, and where no one could feel safe, neither under the protection of the Ukrainian state, nor relying on the new regime. So, displacement has been one of the first manifestations of bordering.

Making sense of IDPs data

The term IDPs was introduced to the international humanitarian and legal framework in 1998 by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) with its Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement which define internally displaced persons as "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or

human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border" (United Nations, 1998, p. 5). In Ukraine, the term "internally displaced person" (*vnutrishn'o peremishchena osoba* in Ukrainian) was legally adopted several months after the outbreak of hostilities in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts – in October 2014 by a key law 'On the Implementation of the Rights and Liberties of Displaced Persons', and later on Decrees No. 509 ('On the Reporting of Displaced Persons') and No. 637 ('On the Payment of Social Benefits to Internally Displaced Persons'). Therefore, IDPs status became a welfare category in Ukraine as it is required for the receipt of pensions and benefits, in particular (Bulakh, 2020; Tarkhanova, 2023).

Interviews with IDPs unveil the fact that available data on the number of registered IDPs between 2014 and 2022 only partially conveys the scale of the displacement. During our first interviews in 2014–2015, we identified that some displaced people avoided official registration as an IDP for various reasons. This practice was more pronounced among young IDPs who described their motives for avoiding registration as both a reluctance to pass on their problems to the state and a desire to avoid stigmatisation. IDPs with higher financial resources also tended to avoid their registration as IDPs if they were able to quickly purchase housing in the controlled part of Ukraine and change their registration of the place of residency.

Ukraine has a compulsory registration of a place of residence. Ukrainian citizens have their permanent residence registration written in their internal passport. Usually, it is related to the fact of property ownership or belonging to a first-kin family that owns a property. In the case of living in a different city/area, IDPs had register at their new place of residency while they can still have their permanent registration at a different address. Despite the existence of registration in places of forced displacement, the official registration, recorded in the passport, remained tied to the address and property in the occupied territories. In the context of the information war, which formed a negative perception of IDPs, this registration additionally stigmatised people who were already in difficult conditions of forced displacement. Since the registration is reflected in the internal passport, people from the occupied territories felt less stigmatisation if they had a new official address instead of the previous address (registration) in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

On the other hand, the actual number of IDPs during this period may be conflated by those who registered as IDPs but were not displaced from the occupied territories to the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government. This was, for instance, the case of people of retirement age, many of whom had registered in Ukraine to receive their pensions, but who actually lived in their homes in the occupied territories and left every few months to verify their identity in the Oschadbank in line with government requirements. According to the UNCHR, a significant proportion of all IDPs of retirement age were registered in areas close to the contact line, primarily in the Ukrainian government-controlled parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, as well as Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia oblasts (UNCHR 2015).

The monthly statistics of the number of crossings across the contact line between warring parties provide another indirect evidence of instances of pensioners registered as IDPs in Ukraine living in the occupied territories. In 2016–2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic and checkpoint closures, the number of such monthly crossings ranged from about a million to 1,700,000 (State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, n.d.-b). As mentioned earlier, this high figure reflects in part the number of pensioners who lived in the occupied territories and crossed the demarcation line to claim their pensions.

The situation with mobility between the occupied territories and areas under governmental control changed dramatically with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The checkpoints were closed and remained partially closed until the beginning of full-scale war. At that time the only option was to enter through the territory of the Russian Federation, but in this case, people were risking being fined for illegally crossing the border. While before the pandemic, there were about a million monthly crossings (in both directions), with the April 2020 restrictions on crossing at checkpoints, the number of monthly crossings fell to 2,000 and did not resume to previous levels when the full-scale Russian invasion began on 24 February 2022 (State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, n.d.-a). With the outbreak of full-scale war, entry into Ukrainian government areas for people from the occupied territories became possible only through humanitarian corridors. These facts demonstrate the issues in monitoring the actual number of IDPs between 2014 and the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, as registration did not always indicate a person's actual presence in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government.

We argue that pre-existing vulnerabilities such as involuntary immobility, lack of access to employment, difficulties in receiving pensions, and lack of affordable housing have been exacerbated for IDPs and those who were stranded in the occupied areas since February 2022. The statistics of IDPs before 2022 show that a majority – over a million – were registered in the eastern and south-eastern oblasts that are occupied by Russian forces or damaged by the invasion: 5,14,982 IDPs were registered in Donetsk oblast, 2,85,651 in Luhansk oblast, 1,35,580 in Kharkiv oblast, 56,427 Zaporizhzhia oblast, and 14,753 in Kherson oblast (Slovo I Dilo, 2021). Also, according to the estimates based on data from the Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy, 52% of IDPs were pensioners and 60% were women (see Kuznetsova et al., 2018; Mykhnenko et al., 2022). People with disabilities comprised about 4% of registered IDPs in 2016 (Mikheieva & Kuznetsova, 2023). Taking into consideration people stranded in the conflict-affected territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (on both sides of the contact line), people with disabilities constituted 13% of the total number of people in need of humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2021). In fact, the share of people with disabilities among IDPs and people in need of humanitarian assistance can be higher as the Government of Ukraine only counts persons who register their disability and regularly verify it via a complex bureaucratic process (see also United Nations Ukraine, 2021). These findings echo the 2022 IOM survey data that revealed there was a large proportion of older adults (46%) and people with disabilities among the IDPs (IOM, 2022).

Borders of social control and (im)mobility: state production of IDPs

The state was reducing IDPs into one broad category of 'internally displaced people', expecting them to have similar issues to one another. Therefore, interactions with the state did not start with an evaluation of urgent needs, but with the procedures which aimed to identify the legal status of a displaced person. Moreover, if some of the IDPs actively resisted classification avoiding their IDPs status, some of the displaced who lack resources were dependent on how the state would interpret their status (Kuznetsova & Mikheieva, 2020).

In accordance with the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine dated 5 November 2014, all internally displaced persons who expected to receive various social payments, including pensions, were required to undergo an identification procedure at Oschadbank every six months (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2014). For pensioners, Oschadbank issued payment cards with a validity period of three years, which also fulfilled the function of a pension card. After the three-year cycle, it was planned to reissue them, but this did not happen, which created difficulties for the elderly and complicated the bureaucratic process for the payment of pensions. Since 2016, territorial state authorities and the Pension Fund received the right to control the presence of IDPs at the place of their registration (Ukrainska helsynska spilka z prav liudyny, 2024). Also, the transfer of payments and pensions to cards was stopped if there were no transactions on the card for six months. Payments continued, but were accumulated in the Pension Fund and transferred to a bank card only after the identification procedure.

In 2018, amendments to previous decrees were adopted, which further aggravated the situation with payments and provoked a wave of appeals by people to international courts for direct violation of their rights, especially with regard to pension payments. As of 2018, payments were reinstated not from the moment they were suspended, but from the moment a person made a request to the relevant authorities (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2018). And the money unpaid for the previous period was returned in accordance with the 'special order', which in practice resulted in a temporary loss of payments without the possibility of their return. For the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, identification procedures to receive payments were suspended. However, in 2024, the Ukrainian government reverted to enforcing identification practices at Oschadbank every three or six months. Various identification options were available – in-person, video-conferencing, registration through 'Diya' (the unified electronic portal of public services in Ukraine) – however, identification procedures remain bureaucratic and problematic. For people of retirement age, this created even more problems, as they also needed to contact the Pension Fund of Ukraine. If pensioners have not been identified, under these circumstances pensions are no longer 'frozen', but stopped and payments can only be restored through personal contact with the Pension Fund and in accordance with a 'special procedure' that has never been successfully implemented. All these restrictions and identification procedures were applied only to the first wave of forced migration and cover the group of people who obtained registration as

IDPs from 2014 until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 (Ukrainska helsynska spilka z prav liudyny, 2024). This policy deepens and reinforces the stigma towards the first wave of IDPs, especially given that while it is possible to refuse the IDP status in general, the registration certificate of this status remains necessary to gain access to many state services, thus becoming a lifelong stigma for this group of people in Ukrainian society.

The reality of law implementation and street bureaucracy

State policies directly affected the everyday lives of displaced people. For many of our respondents, this process was not only inconvenient and forced them to lose a day or more of work but also demonstrated the government's distrust towards IDPs. For example, an older woman who worked informally and was hardly making ends meet, stressed:

> …they said: we will be checking, you have to sit at home. But it is very inconvenient, if they call and say you must be at home for three days. For example, I am very pleased when I was asked to distribute leaflets; it is some income for me. I ask if I can come to social services by myself, and they say – 'no, you cannot – maybe you lie, and you go to Donetsk area'. This is very hard. It means they do not believe us. They think that we travel backwards and forwards.
>
> (IDP from Horlivka, female, 71 years old, Kharkiv)

According to most of our respondents, this process of verification was very frustrating for them, although checks have been cancelled for some categories of IDPs, and since 2016, it has been possible to verify identity at branches of Oschadbank. Nevertheless, interviews revealed that residence checks continued, even for those whose ID was verified via the bank. Informants from advocates for IDPs' rights mentioned that the law at that time made it prone to misinterpretations, and the research revealed that municipalities and other official institutions very often interpret regulations in a way that makes verifications more difficult than legal requirements, so IDPs suffer from so-called street bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010). IDPs should also take another step at this time in order to be fully documented by obtaining registration for their new place of residence. In 2001, the Constitutional Court of Ukraine recognised that the overall system of registration of the place of residence was a violation of human rights. The former Soviet approach to registration ('propiska') was therefore replaced with a more simplified system of registration for citizens with their place of residence (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2004); however, this did not change the system that provides the majority of public services to citizens on a territorial basis.

The active objection of civil society and legal organisations to the home inspections of IDPs in 2016 led to such inspections becoming formal and eventually ceasing. Instead, within one to two days of their arrival in a municipality, IDPs were asked to come to the Department of Social Protection. Still, reforms in 2016

did not resolve the problem of binding a person to the address registered in his/her passport. The registration with a place of residence becomes a problem when a person needs to use public services in a different location, e.g. pension payments, registering with tax authorities, etc. (see also, Kuznetsova et al., 2018). Many of the informants found the process of registering and receiving a document indicating their IDP status as a compulsory attachment to their passport very unfair:

> Anyway, as a person who is Ukrainian, why do I need to register? I have a passport stating that I am a Ukrainian citizen. Why do I need to have a separate registration?! (…) The state just wants to think that if I am IDP I am homeless (…) I am not going to live with a document of an IDP. I want to live freely.
>
> (IDP from Donetsk, male, 42 years old, Lviv)

Belonging to Ukraine is essential for most of our respondents, and these feelings echo Sasse and Lackner's (2018) results, which suggest that "Ukrainian citizenship is (and was) by far the most prevalent self-reported identity in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas and among the IDPs" (p. 153). Therefore, informants feel disillusioned with the necessity to have the additional status of IDPs. Besides, some perceived that it violates their constitutional freedom of movement. As one of the participants stressed:

> I am a resident of Ukraine. If I came here, then I came here. I am not a displaced person. I am a resident of Ukraine. (…) And the Constitution does not prohibit us from living this way. So, when they say 'displaced person' – I am not a displaced person. I just came to this city and want to live here.
>
> (Donetsk-Odesa)

Our findings echo with Tarkhanova's study that revealed that the IDPs status has not been internalised by displaced people who negotiated their IDPs status in relation to their citizenship. As she noted, some appealed to their citizenship "as a position that would delegitimize the differentiation perceived as discriminatory" (Tarkhanova, 2023, p. 4824). Some displaced people, however, refused to receive a document denoting their IDP status. Ivankova-Stetsiuk and Seleschuk (2017, pp. 31–32) recognise the choice to be "invisible" is a strategy of "assimilation". However, it is argued here that this strategy does not necessarily indicate 'assimilation' but rather reveals why some categories of the population choose to be 'invisible'. For example, while pensioners must receive an IDP status to be able to receive their pensions, young people working informally do so without the need for registration. This difference in needs partly explains the disproportion of elderly people in the statistics of IDPs in Ukraine.

In line with the rhetoric of the time, people with *propiska* in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were perceived as those who provide assistance, including financial assistance, to 'separatists' in non-government-controlled territory, and, according to some of our informants, this fear posed a big barrier to communication and even

employment, forcing them to opt for an 'invisible' status. The research revealed that a stamp in an internal passport with a registration in a territory which is currently not under the control of the government (Donetsk, for example), makes displaced people 'visible' and more prone to different types of 'othering' from official institutions as (e.g. banks and employers). For example, one of our informants was unable to receive a money transfer with just a passport, as the bank demanded a document of IDP status after a member of staff saw the stamp in his passport. Another informant from Donetsk reported that when registering at a new place of residence in Lviv, she and all her family members were forced to sign a document confirming that they had no ties with 'separatists'. This attitude caused disappointment, resentment, and also required additional efforts – repeated return with additional documents, longer waiting time due to processing and verification of documents. These practices were part of bordering as it demonstratively reminded IDPs of their separate position in society.

In addition to the benefits of access to constitutional rights, such as health care, pensions, and education, IDP status provides monthly payments since 2014. However, at 442 Hryvnia for adults (approximately 17 USD) (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014, and 1,000 for children and pensioners per month, it is below the minimum wage in Ukraine and would not be nearly enough to rent an apartment. Before January 2018, benefits for children and pensioners were 882 Hryvnia, but were increased by Decree No. 15 on 17 January 2018 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2018). Moreover, to receive this benefit, an adult of working age had to be in formal employment within two months of registering as an IDP (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014). As one informant argued:

> How can we call this 400 Hryvnia 'support'? For this we have to degrade ourselves and go to all these institutions. We made some attempts but to have to go every half year and tell them where you work, it is not worth it. And now we do not receive any financial support at all, in spite of the fact that legally and constitutionally we should.
>
> (IDP from Donetsk, male, 27 years old, lives in Kyiv)

Registration procedures had significant temporal and regional differences. At the initial stage, in the absence of specialised structures and the influx of IDPs, bureaucratic procedures were delayed. People who had already suffered from the war and displacement were forced to stand in queues, faced negative attitudes and unflattering comments against them. There were problems with obtaining international passports, as well as with restoring lost documents. In order to obtain an international passport both in 2014 and now, the first-wave IDPs who registered from 2014 until 24 February 2022 are subject to a special check. Such checks do not take much time, but the requirement itself that there is a category of people who need to undergo a 'special check' still demonstrates a special attitude towards this group of citizens of Ukraine.

One of the liaison officer in one of the oblasts which hosted a large number of IDPs, mentioned in an interview during our research in 2017, "In 2014 there was

a loyal policy towards documenting, but then perhaps there were some abuse and even statements of some officials that combatants from separatists move and receive Ukrainian passports" (implying that some people want to change their names to escape justice). Problems in clarifying identity and status in some cases could last from several months to several years, which excluded people from the formal labour market (again, pushing people into the informal economy), pensions, and social security. It also caused difficulties in finding suitable accommodation, as despite a significant segment of informal rental accommodation, landlords checked tenants' passports.

Respondents often mentioned the officials' negative attitudes towards them. Many benefits could only be received after registration as an IDP if a person came from a conflict zone: this is the case for not only pensions, but also benefits for people with disabilities, single parents, and parents with many children. Such requirements put many people at further risk, considering that the situation of displacement is stressful in itself. This all had a massive impact on the everyday life of forcibly displaced people regarding their access to social and political rights. This situation, combined with negative rhetoric from politicians, was making their further social integration very difficult.

The language which Ukraine's authorities used towards IDPs suggests a static status that excludes the displaced population which still resided in territories occupied since 2014. Furthermore, if some IDPs travel to occupied areas or abroad and do not return within 60 days, they automatically lost their IDP status and pension rights as well. The law 7163 "On Peculiarities of the State Policy on Provision of the State Sovereignty of Ukraine upon Temporary Occupied Territories" adopted by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine in January 2018 provoked a criticism from a range of NGOs. Donbas SOS stressed: "Issues of the implementation of the rights and freedoms of the inhabitants of the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts remain uncertain as well as issues concerning the consequences of the simultaneous conduction of the anti-terrorist operation coordinated by the Security Service of Ukraine" (Donbas SOS, 2018). The reintegration law also does not refer in detail to those who initially had to flee from uncontrolled territories but were then, in practice, forced to return, because of the difficulties of coping without accommodation, a job, and/or a pension.

Conclusions

We found that the formal categorisation of IDPs in Ukraine overlooks the complex, non-linear nature of displacement and the intersecting identities of those affected. These experiences often do not fit neatly into the official definition of an 'IDP' and are rarely considered through a vulnerability lens by the government or international organisations. Therefore, we offered an alternative classification of groups of 'stayers' and mobile individuals. They include 'supporters', 'collaborators', and 'former collaborators' of the occupation regime, and Russian passport holders, who cannot go to the government-controlled part of Ukraine. There were also hostages of the occupation regime, 'stayers' who simply would like to stay there, 'carers',

people who cannot leave because of weak health or lack of financial resources and IDPs within the occupied territories.

We examined the social production of an 'internally displaced person' exploring new orders and new bordering which in turn, 'produced' a group of persons often portrayed in a negative way demonstrating a government distrust towards IDPs. Recent debates show territories include "embedded logics of power and of claim-making" (Sassen, 2013, p. 23), and in Ukraine, control over borders and space was amplified because of the ambiguity of the status of the population from occupied territories. Not only did physical checkpoints become landscapes of technical control, but discursive landscapes of social power (see Chapter 1), including policies towards IDPs, also producing 'invisible' borders. The different spatial powers which are exercised in Ukraine, between the government and nongovernment-controlled areas, allowed the Ukrainian authorities to construct IDPs as occupational regime supporters, despite the extreme socio-economic marginalisation that many of them endure. This, in Collins' (1990) terms, is reflected in both structural and disciplinary policies towards IDPs.

In terms of temporality and space, the socio-political construction of IDPs by the authorities was static and one of control. For example, in order to maintain IDP status, citizens must declare to the authorities their place of residence, and they were not allowed to leave the GCA of Ukraine for more than 60 days. Some IDPs, especially young people and those who had resources, tried to avoid being placed in such "power geometry" and thus did not obtain the legal status of internally displaced persons to escape government control and observation. Those who did required state support, especially the elderly and people with disabilities or injuries from war, were affected in their everyday life by the above regime of verification even though registration with the state does not mean that their specific needs are provided for by the government. The following chapter explores the pension policy and the forced (im)mobility of people with disabilities which is the most explicit example of the power geometry involving IDPs.

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3 The unseen struggles of older adults and people with disabilities in both the occupied territories and during displacement

Introduction

Constituting over half of all registered internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Kuznetsova et al., 2018), older people are often among the most marginalised. They face difficulties in accessing pensions, a lack of affordable accommodation (see also Chapter 4), financial hardship that limits access to medical services, and restricted opportunities in the labour market. People with disabilities, in addition to these challenges, also encountered significant barriers to evacuation and support.

This chapter addresses a gap in migration studies, where forced migration is typically associated with younger populations, leading to the invisibilisation of older asylum seekers and refugees in both policy-making and academic discourse (Hatzidimitriadou, 2010). According to HelpAge (Barbelet, 2018), older displaced people are falling through the cracks of emergency responses. Internally displaced older people are similarly overlooked in academic research (Hunter & Böcker, 2023), despite often facing dependency, social disintegration, and precarious physical health (Böcker & Hunter, 2022, p. 27). Comparable gaps also affect IDPs with disabilities (IDMC, 2021).

Bringing intersectional approach (Chapter 1) and understanding of the discourse as language and practice (Müller, 2008) this chapter reveals the discourse used by the state, purposefully or not, to exacerbate the marginalisation of many IDPs, especially the older adults. Employing the discursive landscapes of social power concept which serve as emotional landscaper of control (Paasi, 2009; 2013, Chapter 1), the chapter starts from examining how the politics towards pensioners from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts is embedded in the media via official interviews and statements of politicians. Therefore, addressing authorities' stance towards pensions of IDPs represented in the media enables us to tackle social-space dialectic including 'representation of space' and 'space of representation' (Lefebvre, 1991). Then, we reveal the everyday experiences of 'immobile' older people who stayed in occupied territories calling for an integral approach to study internal displacement together with immobility. Having then reviewed experiences of people with disabilities both living in occupied territories and displaced and demonstrating their struggles in evacuation, accessing benefits and housing, the concluding section will show how return to occupied

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territories became 'forced' but the only option for many older people and people with disabilities.

Ukraine's pensioners within discursive landscapes of social power

The case of pensions is a crucial example of how IDPs were positioned politically within the context of the war that began in 2014 (Kuznetsova & Mikheieva, 2020), and how this influenced their mobility strategies, making trips to government-controlled territories necessary despite the risks involved. After 2014, pensioners who remained in the occupied territories had to cross the checkpoints regularly (at different times every three or six months) to undergo identification procedures in order to receive pensions, both risking their lives and being subjected to humiliation in queues while waiting many hours to cross the 'border'.

Furthermore, pension payments have also been suspended for many retired people residing in Ukraine because of frequent mistakes in the verification system which erroneously showed that a person no longer lives in the government-controlled areas. In November 2019, over 50% of pensioners residing in temporarily occupied territories had their pensions temporarily suspended for several months (UNHCR, 2020 as cited in Mikheieva & Kuznetsova, 2023). Many people with disabilities who depend on benefits found themselves included in lists of the IDPs for whom benefits and pensions were suspended, because of the lack of evidence of them living in Ukraine, including residents of 'Sviati Hory' – a care home where some of the IDPs with severe disabilities reside and have never left since moving from the occupied territories (The Right to Protection, 2017).

However, the permanent registration of residency did not resolve all of the issues, because even those IDPs who obtained a property in Ukraine still have to be registered as IDPs to receive pensions (identification procedures for residents of non-government-controlled parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were temporarily suspended during the period of the pandemic, but were reinstated in 2024) (Ukrainska helsynska spilka z prav liudyny, 2024). Therefore, there were two categories of pensioners in Ukraine: one group who have their pensions on time and, another one, IDPs who had to pass verification checks in order to receive payments and whose pensions were often suspended because of errors. This segmentation of pensioners and the attitude towards them becomes more understandable in the context of the general state rhetoric regarding the situation in eastern Ukraine.

Crossing 'the line of demarcation' was, however, not easy, especially for older people and people with disabilities. Crossing the checkpoints could take from a few hours to several days, which led in some cases to health issues and cardiac arrest among the people queuing. Although the exact number of individuals who died crossing the checkpoints is unknown, elderly people who died while passing through the demarcation line contributed to the statistics on civilian victims. Indeed, in 2019, among the 40 individuals recorded to have died at checkpoints, the majority was over 60 (Azizyan, 2020).

Official statements around the pension issue clearly indicate how those who fled from war-torn areas or still reside there were perceived. The former Minister for Social Policy at the time, Ludmila Denysova, said at the beginning of the conflict:

> I will explain why today there was a need to keep account of internally displaced persons: because there was now such phenomenon as 'pension tourism' – that is, people just leave, receive pensions outside this region, and then come back, and we don't know who these people are, why they come back to the anti-terrorist operation zone, and in what events they are involved.
>
> (UNIAN, 2014)

Furthering this line of thought, Dmytro Snegirev, from the civil movement Pravoe Delo, supported the idea of verification of IDPs, arguing that "Donbas-based terrorists" are sponsored by pensioners: "It is no secret that it is one of the sources of financing of illegal groups: when a person in the occupied territory collects the cards of pensioners, take cash there [in government-controlled territories] and comes to our territory" (Tkachuk, 2017). Though pensioners were not called "terrorists" directly, the authorities' discourse towards pensions for IDPs always included references to the war and terrorists. Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister, Pavlo Rozenko, stated in 2016 that the aim of "establishing order in social payments and fight against leakage of the budgetary and pension funds for occupied territories which we have begun together with the SSU [Security Service of Ukraine] [would] continue". He then gave assurances that "all pensions and social benefits to real displaced [would] be conducted in time and in full" and "any kopek from the State budget of Ukraine or from the Pension Fund [would not] get to the pockets of terrorists" (Uriadovyi kurier, 2016). These measures cost the suspension of pensions of many IDPs, even of those who had not visited occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

In April 2019, Mr Andriy Reva, the Minister of Social Policy, called pensioners who reside in temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts "scum" saying in his interview to the BBC, "Everyone who was pro-Ukrainian has left. And those who want to claim pensions on both sides have to put up with it. Honestly, I don't feel pity for them, not one of them, at all. I feel pity for those soldiers and officers, and for their families. They were killed there because of those scum" (Malinka, 2019). After massive criticism from Ukraine's civil society, Reva claimed that the journalist had deliberately misused his words, and emphasised that, "I used to think and still think that it is the Government's duty to assist residents of the occupied territories in obtaining social benefits, including pensions" but then stressed again that, "I believe that those citizens of Ukraine who are fighting with arms in their hands against their own country, killing our soldiers and officers, paying pensions is unacceptable" (cited from Kuznetsova & Mikheieva, 2020). Because of the ambivalence of his interview and the following reaction, the local news ran a headline "Kyiv Court to Consider Criminal Proceedings Against Ukraine's Social Minister" (Romanenko, 2019). This again demonstrates how the state's discourse links pensioners with the situation in the occupied territories.

That contributed to the creation of a fragmented space in government-controlled territories, introducing a military vocabulary into the discourse related to IDPs. Addressing authorities' stance towards pensions of IDPs represented in the media enables us to tackle social-space dialectic including 'representation of space' and 'space of representation' (Lefebvre, 1991).

An artist, Alevtina Kakhidze, who lost her mom who died from a cardiac arrest crossing one of the checkpoints, stated that the case of pensions for people residing in occupied territories is "such a classic example of structural violence" (Gumenyuk, 2019). She apologised to her mother for the suspension of her pension, and she apologised to the pensioners from Bakhmut: "it might look crazy but artists can [apologise]" (Gumenyuk, 2019). Alevtina Kakhidze responded to Minister Reva by producing a drawing about her mother's death at a checkpoint (Bega, 2019). In the picture, Minister Reva, with a crown on his head which might also be interpreted as a jester's hat, is standing on the blanket of a woman (Alevtina Kakhidze's mother). The woman is lying on the territory of government-controlled Ukraine, though Reva is positioned partly in a non-government-controlled area (his head) and partly in a government-controlled area. He stands with the words: "Everyone who was pro-Ukrainian has left. And those who want to claim two pensions have to put up with it". Reva's position on the border can be seen to emphasise his role in creating and supporting the invisible borders of control for the citizens of Ukraine residing in the occupied territories and for IDPs (Kuznetsova, 2021). The figure of the mother is holding a death certificate with the following words written next to her: "Mister Minister, she lacked patience, she died". Her image is placed on the government-controlled territory of Ukraine while the death certificate is issued by 'the DPR'. Thus, Kakhidze's art also evidences the administrative procedures for death. The practices of accessing the death certificates of residents of non-government-controlled areas of Ukraine are discriminatory as documents issued there are not recognised in the government-controlled territories (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2018).

There is no guarantee or a recipe for how to be a 'real' IDP; as previously mentioned, even those who remained outside territories not controlled by the Ukrainian government in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts after displacement could find themselves on an SSU list for pension suspension. The restrictions imposed also call into question the rights of citizens for free movement as emphasised by the Human Rights Watch (2018).

In contrast, some study participants believed that the situation of pension suspension should not be viewed via such an ideological lens, but rather as an instrument which the government uses to save money:

> Possibly, this is because they have seen a hole in a budget of pension funds and started to think how to save money, and unlawfully created lists of Security Services of Ukraine, and stopped payments for half a million of citizens simultaneously. …Well, I hope it is not ideological, but just a 'dry calculation'.
>
> (Interview with a lawyer from Donbas SOS, February 2018, Kyiv)

To try to alleviate the problem of suspension of pensions, Draft Law No. 6692, drawn up by Right to Protection, Donbas SOS, UNHCR, and other international and local organisations, as well as various MPs, was submitted to parliament on 12 July 2017. The law aimed to decouple pension payments from IDP status and place of residence, thus ensuring that the right to a pension is guaranteed irrespective of place of residence. It proposed to reduce verification procedures and cancel restrictions on receiving an unclaimed pension to just three years for this category of persons. The growing publicity of individual IDPs and the resonant nature of their life stories made many of the problems associated with this status visible. For example, the now deceased political prisoner in the so-called 'DPR', a well-known scholar in religious studies, Dr. Ihor Kozlovsky, was invited to the European Parliament after his release to make a speech. After his return, he was surprised to learn that according to one of the Cabinet of Ministers' orders, Ukrainian pensioners with IDP status lose the right to a pension if they go abroad. In his case, he had to overcome bureaucratic procedures and restore his pension twice – after his return to Ukraine from two years' captivity, and after his return from speaking abroad (Radnyk, 2018). However, despite the issue's urgency, all the initiatives of human rights defenders and indications of violation of people's constitutional rights, the draft law was finally withdrawn on 29 August 2019 after a number of reviews at the commissions of the Verkhovna Rada (national parliament of Ukraine).

Overall, the pension situation, along with other constraints that IDPs have faced and continue to face, has a significant impact on the daily experience of older people, some of whom have been forced to return to the war-zone or face extreme economic marginalisation.

Older people in occupied territories. 'Inconvenient' (im)mobile?

By the end of 2013, due to an ageing workforce and early retirements among coal miners, a third of the population of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts – 2,122,694 people – were of retirement age (Mykhnenko, 2020, p. 535). Our research revealed three strategies adopted among older adults in occupied territories: to stay; leave the occupied territories for Ukrainian-controlled territories; or temporarily move to Ukrainian-controlled territories with regular visits home in occupied territories. Moving abroad was an additional option, but this strategy was more typical for young and middle-aged people, which is in line with general migration trends – the migrant population is always drawn from the younger people among the population of the country of origin. This once again demonstrates the urgent need to consider internal displacement together with conditions of immobility, which can be voluntary or forced if related to poor health and physical limitations of mobility and the destruction of mobility infrastructure. People with disabilities, older adults, and people with physical limitations of mobility in temporarily occupied territories often could not move to other areas of Ukraine. As one of the participants in our focus-groups with IDPs in Chernihiv stressed, "Some say that those who wanted to move [from

war-torn territories] they moved. You know, well… But where? Does anyone invite you anywhere?" (2017).

Pension payments in Ukraine and IDP benefits did not even cover basic needs or rent of accommodation, forcing people to look for complex survival scenarios. In this case, the older generation of IDPs often found themselves dependent on their younger relatives. In our research, we found that, in some families, the older generation decided to stay in the occupied territories, explaining this decision by the fact that at least there they have a flat or a house, a garden, and supportive social network that they do not have in other parts of Ukraine. Some called it an act of the 'sacrifice' so their children could move to the government-controlled areas of Ukraine and 'get on with their lives'.

People also expressed frustration that some representatives of local authorities could continue their careers elsewhere in Ukraine, while older people became stuck in this situation without any proper support. A person who cares after their older Mom from Donetsk shared:

> I just feel hurt that those who should bear this deserved punishment, those who brought this war to Donetsk, they are all in Kyiv, in Lviv, they are all in leading positions. … And we are left helpless. Here is my mother, 93 years old, she has nothing to do with this war. But they are depriving her of her pension. I am forced to take her with me, constantly proving that we are not camels, lying to Ukraine that we live in another territory. Frankly lying, because we travel, as there is no possibility to live here, just none. I have no money to buy housing here or to pay [rent] for it. And the help that the state provides, I do not take it, social assistance. Because give me my pension, and I need nothing more. But you do not give the pension either. And for this help, then go, settle accounts. So, it is simply impossible to rent any housing and live on this money; it is unrealistic and especially for an old person, who needs ten such aids for one [item of] medicine.

One of the factors which supported the decision to stay, especially among older adults, was a house/apartment and an allotment/garden and *datcha* (summer house) as the latter could support people with some food and even provide a source of income in addition to emotional well-being benefits. This also motivated some of our participants to adopt 'transborder living' – going regularly back to their places in occupied territories. Thus, in studying IDPs, it is important to consider factors regarding individual vulnerability, the lack of resources, the lack of support from the state and international organisations, infrastructural risks, and individual decisions that prevent some to leave homes even close to the occupied area zones.

A retired woman who decided to stay in Donetsk shared her experience of staying in the city with broken infrastructure:

> Well, there were many difficulties. I can't even list them all. Well, the transport worked poorly, people were leaving, it was very hard somehow,

everything was falling apart, sometimes it didn't work, sometimes it was broken, sometimes there was no water, sometimes no gas, and so on, endless difficulties like that.

This echoes with the challenges mentioned by a woman from Luhansk:

Firstly, there was a shortage of food after Luhansk was bombed. People had nothing to eat. Prices in the market increased, and if it weren't for helping each other, neighbours, and relatives from Ukraine sending supplies, I don't know how we would have survived at all.

Such experiences and barriers in access to pensions created massive resentment and frustration with the government. The feeling of being forgotten and unfairness has been often mentioned in the interviews:

Ukraine treats us poorly, but they won't say it's poor treatment, yet they already treat pensioners differently. I consider this a great sin. Well, I understand that [they feel] we are to blame. We are not at fault. Well, how are we to blame? Even those who support Ukraine, they are morally responsible for their, well, compatriots, I don't know how to call it. We are all morally responsible for this. But here is the fault, because this is a matter of the future. All wars end, but peace should have been thought of from the beginning of the war.

(Donetsk, woman in her 70s, stayed in to look after 93-years-old, paralysed mother in her house. Her husband is looking after their house and a cat.)

In a similar vein, a participant from Luhansk shared:

Well, the actions of the Ukrainian authorities in the current situation, well, how can I assess them… Well, the Ukrainian authorities should also somehow help Donbas, and not abandon it, as they did – they completely abandoned it. Well, not completely, of course, people are re-registering their pensions, Ukrainian ones, and travelling. But again, they are relocating to Ukraine. But they have completely abandoned Donbas. I don't agree with this. There should be help. We are still people of Ukraine, and pensioners earned their pensions in Ukraine… They should help somehow, or pay some benefits or provide some humanitarian aid, because it is very difficult. I believe the government should not forget about its people in Donbas, because they worked for Ukraine.

(Luhansks, pre-retirement age, stopped working because of health, living on pension of husband and income from his irregular jobs and help from children).

As our interviews show, many people stayed to look after their older relatives or family members with disabilities who felt especially insecure during the war and displacement.

People with disabilities: coping with forced immobility, bureaucracy, and displacement

According to UNHCR (2016), difficulties in accessing disability benefits, and lack of accessible and affordable transport were the main issues faced by persons with disabilities among IDPs. Our research also revealed discrimination in the job market and a lack of reliable remote work opportunities.

People with disabilities living in the occupied territories had to cross the contact line to access pensions and benefits, but if they were not able to travel, or had nobody to assist them, they could not receive them. Those who moved from occupied territories to Ukraine faced difficulties in maintaining their disability status because of the long bureaucratic process involved, which requires them to prove their disability status while in the hospital and pass a medical–social expertise commission.

Together with the need to prove their disabled status for benefits, IDPs were faced with the necessity to attend appointments in the Social Protection Department, Pension Fund, and other institutions as such agencies do not provide a visiting service in most cities. One informant shared her stepfather's tragic experience:

> My stepfather was paralysed (…). And I brought him from there [occupied territories] with such difficulties. Then had to carry him to the Social Protection Department, Pension Fund, and bank [to verify his disability and IDP's status]. He suffered badly, and after two months he died.

Such experiences prevented some of the IDPs from applying for disability status.[1] As one of the respondents who had bad shrapnel wounds, stressed: "I have not applied for a disability status, and I am not going to. What will it give to me? I want to work while I am still alive. I did not apply, and do not recommend it to anyone" (female, 69 years old, Dnipro). This example clearly shows, as well, how a person is keen to escape from victimisation and preserve her dignity. This indicates that in some cases the state is considered the last resource for IDPs.

The following case is illustrative of a female, about over 75 years old, who fled from Alchevsk – a city located in the non-government-controlled part of the Luhansk oblast – with her daughter with disabilities that prevent her from independent physical movements. The daughter was unable to register herself to receive a pension in Kharkiv oblast, and she then had to return to her former home where she had an apartment and a pension to survive:

> My daughter had nothing left but to receive pension in LPR [name of an unrecognised republic 'Luhansk People's Republic'] as on Ukrainian territory they rejected her pension. (…) There were challenging conditions in a hostel here [in a town in the Kharkiv area where the research participant lives]. There was no money to rent an apartment as we did not receive benefits as IDPs, and she went back with volunteers to Alchevsk.
>
> (interview, 2017)

If there were people with limited mobility or disabilities in the family, in most cases, this would lead to the separation of spouses as one had to stay and look after a vulnerable relative. The following case is very illustrative – a husband had to stay in Donetsk to look after his paralysed mother and look after the house in case of marauding. His wife and daughter fled to Svyatohirsk in the government-controlled part of Ukraine. Then he lost his vision because of a stroke and had to stay even after his mother died later as he could not find a job anywhere else:

> My daughter and I left because we just couldn't stand all that horror, all that shooting, when our whole house was shaking, it was scary. In 2015 he [my husband] had a stroke and got cataracts in both eyes, now he could barely get an operation in one eye. (…) The Ukrainian railways fired their staff [in Donetsk], but at least some stayed in the DPR, they do something there occasionally [and earn some money]… And here, in Sviatohirsk, if he comes, it will be a total zero. And the same if he goes somewhere in Ukraine. To the man who is 50 years old, after a stroke, with one eye… Can you imagine if he finds a job somewhere? No, he won't. That's why he has to stay there, because at least he can support himself.
>
> (Female, 47, from Donetsk oblast, lives in Svyatohirsk)

The lack of social housing was also identified as one of the most significant problems. Predominantly, the informal rental market (without a contract) and the suspension of IDPs' benefits and pensions led to situations where people were simply thrown out from rented apartments onto the street without any means of livelihood. As one of our participants, a man in his late 40th fled from Luhansk oblast to Slovyansk, stressed:

> Temporary shelters and social housing are needed. I told you about those disabled people who were thrown out for non-payment. And they had nothing [no money] to pay [rent] because the state did not pay them for several months. They then received payment for all of these months, but where shall they live during that time?

Desperation over their own helplessness pushed elderly people into making rash decisions, which made their problems even worse. For example, one of our informants, a 25-year-old woman from Donetsk, who moved to Kramatorsk, told us about a neighbour who agreed to give her apartment to one person in exchange for care but received no help at all:

> In non-controlled territory, she is not mobile, she is blind, so she could not move [to the government-controlled territory] and she even donated her flat to a person, yes, an outsider, so that the person would take care of her and in general she was abandoned, dumped (.). I understand that she is on the edge. She is still living in her apartment, but she says she doesn't know what will happen to her tomorrow.

State assistance was mostly limited to the accrual of benefits (disability and resettlement), which required lengthy bureaucratic procedures. Our research participants with disabilities spoke about payments being suspended and having to go through these bureaucratic procedures again. Because of the lack of systematic state support for people with disabilities, their relocation often depended on both support from volunteer groups and representatives of Ukrainian businesses who, by agreement with the volunteers, could provide temporary shelters for IDPs.

However, at the beginning of the conflict, everyone perceived the need for such assistance to be temporary. Therefore, many businesses such as private spa resorts, holiday homes, and summer camps for children started simply evicting IDPs including those with disabilities after a few months. Such evictions occurred, for example, in a health resort called Kuialnyk in Odesa (Chernova & Tokhmakhchi, 2016) that had previously hosted 80 IDPs, most of them with disabilities. As one of our participants, a woman from Donetsk oblast over 55 years old had been told "the resort was at a [financial] loss" and no funding had been provided for their accommodation, so they had to leave.

Consequently, those who were evicted had to rely on the help of volunteers to be relocated. However, volunteer support was often inconsistent. The lack of procedures to evacuate people with special needs became urgent again after Russia's full invasion in 2022, where people had to rely on "the disability community, already under-resourced and struggling" (Landre, 2022). Those people with disabilities who live in residential care faced even more severe challenges in evacuation and assistance because of the systemic issues related to poor living conditions and pre-existing protection issues (Valenti, 2023).

Volunteers who helped evacuate, meet, and process documents at the outset were later switched to other groups of war victims. People with disabilities were left in a situation in which there was no systematic system of state support outside the provision of small cash benefits. As one of the IDPs rights activists who fled from Luhansk oblast to Slovyansk told us, a family of people with disabilities was evicted from a flat they rented as they could not pay rent because their benefits were suspended (as the benefits of other thousands of people with disabilities and pensioners), and a church stepped in to provide them with temporary shelter. The efforts of several civil society organisations pushed city authorities to provide the family with a room in a holiday resort where other displaced IDPs lived. According to his words:

> Well, they also came with whatever they had: someone helped with a blanket, someone helped with a pillow, someone helped with some canned food… We took them, and called other NGOs. (…) They [civil society organisation] said: if so, we'll move to the mayor's office and will live there, but 500–600 [people] of us will gather here now.

Thus, many people with disabilities have found themselves in a dependent position, both in occupied territories and when moving to Ukrainian

government-controlled territories. The need to support IDPs with disabilities was amplified when they had to verify their disabilities status repeatedly, depend on relatives and volunteers to help both with relocation and address the issue of reinstatement of payments.

Forced return?

According to the survey of 4,290 people crossing the 'line of contact', conducted by the Rights for Protection in June–July 2017, in the five operating entry/exit checkpoints (EECPs) located in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts 46.2% of the people who had moved to the government-controlled territories had since returned (Rights for Protection, 2017). For about half of the IDPs, the high cost of rented accommodations was the main factor behind this decision. This was also confirmed by a large-scale survey conducted by the International Organization for Migration in 2018 showing that pensioners comprised 63% of returning IDPs and the main reason for the return was "the possession of private property, resulting in them not having to pay rent" (IOM, 2018, p. 7).

Regarding family reasons, interviewees indicated that people with the responsibility of caring for their elderly parents or relatives with disabilities who cannot leave occupied territories often return to their former homes, because they cannot easily visit their dependent relatives, due to restrictions in crossing the contact line. As noted above, they cannot take the dependent family members to other parts of Ukraine because of the issues with pensions and accommodation. Taken together, these results demonstrate that there was a lack of recognition of the intersectionality of IDPs in state policies towards forced displaced people, and what can be called 'forced return' when people have had to go back to the territories that are not controlled by the Ukrainian government and where the risk of renewed hostilities was high. All of this placed them in a context of greater humanitarian concern because of the lack of infrastructure and the threat to their security in general.

Conclusion

We argue that multiple forms of social exclusion among the displaced elderly and persons with disabilities were exacerbated by the lack of state recognition of these different groups of IDPs together with the lack of economic resources and coherent social policies. Challenges included the lack of affordable and appropriate accommodation and issues with pensions and benefits due to complex procedures for verification and the suspension of payments. The research reveals how the Ukrainian government and international organisations were not able to provide coordinated sustainable support for displaced older adults and people with disabilities which led to IDPs' dependence on social networks and volunteers. These challenges had significant impacts on the everyday experiences of older adults and people with disabilities, leading to some returning to the warzone or coping with extreme marginalisation. Accordingly, disability and limited mobility massively

impacted families' relocation strategies – separating some families on both sides of 'borders' and forcing many people to stay in occupied areas (Mikheieva & Kuznetsova, 2023).

In the case of the first wave of forced internal displacement, we are dealing with different intersectional dimensions of forced mobility and immobility. The Ukrainian authorities' choice of evasive rhetoric in covering what is happening, the refusal to refer to the situation as a war, became the conditions that led to the stigmatisation of the population of the territories occupied in 2014, blaming them for what was happening. This distinction has enabled the Ukrainian government to suspend the pensions of thousands of elderly people and people with disabilities who rarely, or never, return to the war-torn territories. Therefore, addressing authorities' stance towards pensions of IDPs represented in the media enables us to tackle social-space dialectic including 'representation of space' and 'space of representation' (Lefebvre, 1991) and power geometry (Massey, 2009).

Combined with a weak social welfare system, it caused some IDPs to return to territories with a high risk of hostilities. The outbreak of a full-scale war changed the situation dramatically. Due to massive shelling by Russia, all regions of Ukraine became unsafe, and the expansion and shifting of the front line provoked new forced displacements. However, the policies for representatives of forced migrants who registered between 2014 and 24 February 2024 differ from those for the new forced migrants who emerged with the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion. In particular, this concerns the return in 2024 to the identification procedures and denial of pensions for IDPs of the first wave, as well as the preservation of the 'indelible' stigma of IDPs at the level of ordinary interactions with state structures, despite all the discussions and statements of human rights defenders.

Note

1 Persons with the most severe state of health, who require constant outside care or assistance, and are capable or partially capable of performing some elements of self-care, belong to the first disability group in Ukraine. https://igov.org.ua/subcategory/1/3/situation/20

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4 The bordering and de-bordering of Donetsk

Politics of re-de-commemoration and everyday resistance

Introduction

Donetsk will never be the same. The city that hosted the Euro 2012 would hardly be recognisable. The modern airport has been transformed into piles of rubble due to the hostilities. Since 2014, many public spaces have been occupied by pro-Russian military groups which radically altered the landscape of the city by re-shaping urban spaces after establishing the occupation regime. Thus, cities became borderscapes too via military destruction (Wille, 2022), and later on, the start of a new order was manifested by erecting new memorials and demolishing symbols connected with the Ukrainian national identity. The demolishing of memoryscapes or de-commemoration (Azaryahu, 2012) and reintroducing former memorable urban signs, so-called re-commemoration (Atkinson-Phillips, 2023; Rose-Redwood et al., 2022) and construction of new collective memories (Halbwachs, 1992) started in Donetsk and other cities of the occupied territories. These were focused on the Soviet past, a new regime, and excluded anything which would remind people about the Ukrainian state (Mikheieva, 2025). Such practices were also adopted during the full-scale invasion when Russian road signs were put up in Mariupol in 2022 (Farberov, 2022).

Such processes of 'decodification' of urban space are common in different conflict-affected settings. For example, Šakaja and Stanić (2011) studied the alteration of memorial landscapes and cultural politics of Other(ing) and Self(defining) in Zagreb. They demonstrated how spatial strategies were used in othering to distinguish Zagreb from Yugoslavia, 'the Balkans', Serbs and Serbia, and Russia via renaming, demolishing or moving monuments, etc. The authors draw on Lotman's semiotic tradition (Lotman, 1976) which considers the city as a 'semiosphere', which is heterogeneous involving multiple elements of self-description and differentiation from 'the Other'.

Artistic practices have been recognised as a significant aspect of resilience and a catalyst for political change in different conflict zones including Egypt (Gröndahl, 2012; Smith, 2015), Palestine (Salih & Richter-Devroe, 2014), Northern Ireland (Rolston, 1991), Bosnia-Herzegovina (Zelizer, 2003), and other countries. Public urban art and communities' interactions with this work can serve as a measurement

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for the development of conflict and societal transformation. Focusing on the artistic interventions and the politics of resistance in the Middle East, Tripp (2013) revealed three links between those two: first, the role of art in signalling presence and reclaiming public space; second, the potential of artistic interventions in creating a 'shared vocabulary' that can foster solidarities and identities; and finally, the role of art in creating 'reinforcing imagery' challenging hegemonic narratives and creating alternative interpretations of history.

Following critical border studies, feminist geopolitics (Chapter 1) and Lotman's understanding of the semiosphere, we argue that interventions in the memoryscapes represented discursive landscapes of power manifesting the new borders and regime within urban space. The new bordering regime not only disrupted everyday life and mobility of people, it left residents of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts without a clear understanding of the ownership of their territories following the events in 2014 (Grinchenko & Mikheieva, 2018). One way to re-establish the previous borders within its symbolic sense was to provide some interventions – from small everyday actions to more visible once. To explore it further, we employed de Certeau's (1984) concepts in distinguishing between the tactics of subjugated people and the strategies of those with power. The chapter starts with an overview of the role of art in understanding resistance relating to the anti-Maidan and the war in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts before exploring the re-commemoration, decommemoration, and new memoryscapes in Donetsk as practices of Russian occupation administrations creating the new bordering in the city. Then, we focus on how ordinary people with a pro-Ukrainian position reacted to and resisted these disruptions. Subsequently, the chapter goes on to analyse art activism in Donetsk as resistance to the new regime in creating an alternative semiosphere. Then, we analyse the case of the Ukrainian artist Maria Kulikovska, a displaced artist from the Crimean Peninsula, whose statues in the art centre in Donetsk, IZOLYATSIA, were demolished by militants supporting the new regime. Her art is performed in many European artistic venues, and reveals a strong protest against Russia's violation of borders. She negotiates her identity in the symbolic space of occupied territories onto which an ideology has been enforced that excludes sexual diversity and feminism.

War, identity shifts, and lived experiences in Ukrainian post-2014 art

Art performed an important social role in the Orange Revolution of 2004, inspiring protestors and documenting pivotal events (Bazylevych, 2010; Klid, 2007; Usenko, 2014). It was also embedded in Euromaidan in 2014 (Kozak, 2017; Radchenko, 2016). As Susann Worschech argues, art and cultural activities can be seen "as a seismograph for societal change and response" in Ukraine and in some cases, art and civic activism became intertwined: "Many organizations who are drivers of cultural change in the Donbas regions today first emerged from decentral Euromaidan civil society activities" (2020).

The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the armed conflict in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts that transformed into the war became the focus of

attention for many artists. Their art reflects their lived experiences and the sharp sense of engagement with these pivotal moments in Ukraine's independence and ideological trajectory since the Orange Revolution of 2004. As Marina Pesenti (2020) has underlined, culture itself is a crucial part of the response to Russian aggression and of Ukraine's "identity shift":[1]

> These two features – Russia's external aggression and Ukraine's domestic identity shift – sparked a moment of intense creativity, manifest in a flowering of the arts and public debate, including the prolific production of new literary works, theatre productions, films, curatorial visual work, music and large-scale cultural events. In turn, these developments stimulated an appetite for cultural consumption previously unseen in Ukraine'.
>
> (Pesenti, 2020, p. 25)

As Alisa Lozhkina (2020) stresses, "For some artists who actively participated in Maidan events, this period was a time of a hard post-revolutionary 'hangover', an emotional drama that was hard to express in a single artwork. For others, on the contrary, this very period gave impetus to work on new subjects, problems, and projects". Art is considered to be a part of the fight against Russian propaganda (Averianova, 2018; Tytar, 2019). In 2014, as Yuliya Ilchuk has noted, artists and writers challenged "the accepted perception of Donbas" and using guerrilla tactics accessed audiences in the occupied territories (2017). For example, Olena Stepova engaged with the genre of 'eavesdropping' and using both conversations overheard in her daily encounters and on social media, assembled a book with the title *Everything will be Ukraine!* In Ilchuk's view, Stepova "tries to humanize and inscribe [the supporters of the new regime] into the local community as one of 'us'" (Ilchuk, 2017, p. 262).

The individual lived experience of war has been reflected through art and theatre. The 'Theatre of Displaced People', coordinated by Natalia Vorozhbyt, develops verbatim theatre based on the stories of those who have experienced war and who have been forcibly displaced. The play *I Am Another You*[2] is performed by students from different parts of Ukraine and provided striking examples of the verbalisation of overcoming trauma.

Other Ukrainian artists are re-thinking the past and working at the intersection of memory and identity. Andrii Dostliev, an artist originally from Luhansk, has worked with Soviet family photo albums. Entitled 'Occupation', one of his projects is an attempt to both reconstruct the artist's memories and 'occupy' somebody else's memory while creating a new narrative (Lashchuk, 2018). In some cases, art has also revealed confronted positions regarding Euromaidan and war in the territory of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. For example, David Chychkan's exhibition 'Lost Opportunities' that questioned the social outcomes of the revolution from an anarchistic point of view, has been postponed due to threats from right-wing radicals and then destroyed by anonymous activists at the Visual Culture Research Centre in Kyiv in 2017 (Mrachnik, 2017).

Bordering Donetsk: re-commemoration, de-commemoration, and new memoryscapes

In the spring of 2015, in parallel with military actions, the occupying regime started actively intervening in the urban landscape via cultural events, de-commemoration and re-commemoration activities and launching new symbols and memories. 'Memory wars', which were a significant part of forming the national Ukrainian identity especially after establishing national independence (Schmid, 2019; Shevel, 2016), became a significant part of establishing the new urban memoryscape of post-2014 Donetsk.

This fed into already existing contested identities and memories in Ukraine surrounding the events of the Second World War, the Holodomor, and the overall relationship with the Russian state, (Fedor et al., 2017; Hosaka, 2019; Zaharchenko, 2013; Zhurzhenko, 2014), which has meant that, since the Soviet Union's collapse, Ukraine has experienced a fractured mnemonic geopolitical framework (Kubik & Bernhard, 2014). Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk highlight two different approaches in memory politics in Ukraine after Euromaidan: "the anticolonial, nationalist one, caught in a rigid binary opposition to the Soviet past, and on the other, hybrid forms that open up a third space for negotiations between new historical narratives and Soviet historical narratives in search of new meanings" (2019, p. 713). The urban memory policies of the new regime opposed the Ukrainian national one and re-embedded Soviet memoryscapes. Still, the shifts in the cultural urban landscape were also closely interlinked with regionalism which, as Kuzio notes, was often overlooked in the context of war in Ukraine (Kuzio, 2017; Lewicka & Iwańczak, 2019; Sasse & Lackner, 2018; Stebelsky, 2018). The founder of IZOLYATSIA, Lubov Mikhailova, has argued that the situation in Donetsk was partly rooted in the neglect of culture: "That idealism of people who wanted the coalmines to return and wanted to bring back the mentality of Soviet space is rooted in the fact that in the last 25 years after collapse of USSR, nothing was done in the cultural sphere in Donbas" (Kuznetsova, 2021). Understanding of these processes is inextricably linked to the entire previous period of Ukrainian independence.

Against the background of active renaming of streets in settlements all over Ukraine, the Soviet toponymy in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts has not undergone significant changes. While in western and partially central Ukraine, the abandonment of Soviet toponymy had already began in the years of 'perestroika', in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, as well as in the south of Ukraine, this process actually began only in 2015–2016, after the adoption of laws on de-communisation (Homaniuk, 2017; Hyrych, 2017). In most cases, the Soviet monuments remained in place. Therefore, after the beginning of 'perestroika', in the settlements in Donetsk and Luhansk regions the meanings of some Soviet monuments were recoded as Ukrainian (for example, monuments to Taras Shevchenko, foremost Ukrainian poet of the 19th century and a major figure of the Ukrainian national revival, whose designation as 'defender of the interests of the working masses' in the Soviet interpretation was transformed into a Ukrainian national one). With only

a few exceptions, the authorities preferred new monuments unrelated to history, but rather urban landscape figures that were not so much memorials as design elements.

All this created a rather complex space of memory that was never shared due to the lack of significant discussions and attempts to rethink the past. For example, the tragic past of the Jewish population during the Second World War was commemorated in the city with the unveiling of a monument to the victims of the Holocaust in 2006 on the site of the former White Career, where a Jewish ghetto was organised. However, another site of Jewish tragedy was not reinterpreted – 'Shurf Shakhta 4/4 bis', which became a grave primarily for members of the Jewish population, who were represented on the plaque as 'civilians tortured by the Nazis'. The memorial 'Shurf Shakhta 4/4 bis' is now in Russian-occupied Donetsk and was renovated in the Soviet tradition and opened in 2024. From the beginning of the 1990s in Donetsk, no monument of nationwide importance was installed (Mikheieva, 2025). All this created a rather complex and segmented memory space, where different memory models (national Ukrainian, local, Soviet) often existed in parallel and had no points of intersection.

After the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the occupation of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in 2014, their distance from the all-Ukrainian space and inclusion in the ideological construct of the 'Russian world' were enshrined. The new policy for memorials in the occupied territories at the beginning was a re-commemoration. The new regime aimed to restore Soviet monuments that had been destroyed in the course of hostilities in 2014–2015. Such an approach found a response from part of the population, who actively supported the drift in the occupied territories in favour of Russia and distanced themselves from Ukraine due to the de-Communisation policy among other things (Mikheieva, 2022). This tactic was understood among the population, some of whom might not consider the Soviet heritage important to them but were still inclined to oppose the demolition of Soviet monuments (Mikheieva, 2025; Sereda & Mazuryk, 2013). The regional identity of an industrial past has also been re-commemorated. For example, there was an exhibition of paintings in Donetsk paying tribute to the Soviet hero 'shock worker' Alexei Stakhanov who achieved record coal production levels at a mine in the Luhansk region in the 1930s.

Imposing Soviet and Stalinist symbols on the region also enabled the rejection of 'immoral' modern art, LGBTQ+ rights and the promotion of anti-Western discourses (Portnov, 2016; Riabova & Riabov, 2015) by idealising and de-problematising a deeply contested past.

During the same period, de-commemoration policies started in Donetsk. The bas-relief of Vasyl Stus at the Donetsk National University was one of the first memorials to be dismantled by the Russian occupation authorities in 2015 (Korrespondent.net, 2015). The figure of Vasyl Stus, a dissident Ukrainian poet and campaigner for democracy, human rights, and Ukrainian culture, who spent decades in jail and died in a prison camp just at the start of 'perestroika', was obviously alien and irritating for the occupation administration (Poliakova, 2015). Vasyl Stus spent his younger years in Donetsk (at that time, the city was called Stalino) and studied

at the Donetsk Pedagogical Institute, Faculty of History and Philology from 1954 to 1959. The bas-relief of Stus launched in 2001 was an important part of forming a new Ukrainian regional identity in Donetsk oblast. It aided the rehabilitation of people there repressed under the USSR and commemorated the battle for the rights of pro-Ukrainian city residents who were willing to install their own symbols in the public spaces of the city. Everything was symbolic in this story. Attempts to rename the university in Donetsk started back in 2009 but failed. The Donetsk National University was forced to move to Vinnytsia and was renamed in honour of Stus in 2016 (Ukrainian Truth, 2016). Only the war and the relocation of the university led to the renaming.

The physical capture of cities and regions also led to their symbolic occupation. For example, in Donetsk in 2015, street names were Russified in honour of the birthday of the Russian imperial poet Alexander Pushkin, whose monuments were one of the key markers of Russification policy during the Soviet era (Zabirko, 2024). Until then, the names of streets in the central part of the city were in two languages – Ukrainian and English. Accordingly, this Russification of street names defiantly solved two tasks – to purge from the city space everything that could remind residents of Ukraine's presence here, as well as positioning in relation to the notional 'West' and its presence at the symbolic level. The very name of the city has also undergone the same symbolic translation into Russian from Ukrainian (LB.ua, 2015).

At the same time, the settlements were actually repainted. Everything associated with Ukrainian state symbols and colour scheme was thoroughly cleaned out of the area. The Ukrainian symbols were replaced by Russian and new local symbols, created as part of the occupation project referring to events much earlier than the occupation itself. New military actions were memorialised through inscribing them onto Soviet monuments commemorating the 'Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945'. The use of this particular formulation of the war title and dates is also not accidental and makes it possible to exclude the occupied territories from the common European space, where the concept of the Second World War is used and counted from 1939, and to shift attention to the common historical fate with the Russian Federation, which claims to be the successor of the USSR (Mikheieva, 2016, 2025). The mythologem of the Great Patriotic War itself is used to create new solidarities and connects the older generation of participants and witnesses of the war against 'German Nazism' (Russian propaganda primarily uses the term fascism) and the younger generation of the region's residents who were victims/witnesses/soldiers in the fight against 'Ukrainian fascism' (a cliché often used in Russian propaganda rhetoric to refer to the population of Ukraine): "…They are lying, blaming us, the living/Holding their hands even in death/A grey-haired woman and her grandchildren/She was born in war and so were they" (Bykovskaja, 2022 cited from Ivannikov, 2022).

The last wave of memorialisation in Donetsk has involved the formation of images of 'war heroes', the installation of memorial signs and plaques in honour of fallen members of illegal armed groups, and the inclusion of the story of their 'heroism' in the educational curriculum. Schools were named after them, the

'Timur movement' (known in Soviet times from Arkady Gaidar's book *Timur and His Squad*) was revived to help relatives of the dead, and war attributes were often used in educational and public events.

The new monuments and memorials are used to consolidate links between the occupied territories in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and Russian cities and districts. This is due to the reanimation of the practice of the 'exchange' of commemorative signs known since the Soviet period within the framework of the Soviet policy of creating homogenised Soviet spaces. During the years of 'perestroika', these practices of the exchange of monuments had a multi-directional character. For example, the 'Bochum Bell' was installed near the city administration building in 1997, donated by the twin city of Bochum (Germany) as a symbol of common steelmaking traditions. The 'Tsar Cannon', donated by Moscow (donated in exchange for the 'Mertsalov Palm', a steelmaking symbol of Donetsk, donated by Donetsk), was also installed there. After the occupation, such exchanges took on strong elements of propaganda and a military tone.

From the onset of the conflict in 2014, leaders of the Russian occupation regime in the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts strengthened the presence of 'Russian' culture in the region, with explicit support from Russian film stars, musicians, and writers who visited the territories under the new regime. Concerts, talks, and charity events were staged even while fierce fighting was taking place. A famous Russian writer, Zakhar Prilepin, who formed his own battalion, was even listed as an advisor of Oleksandr Zakharchenko, a former leader of a fighting group in Donetsk (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Ukrainian Service, 2019). The representation of Russia's cultural elites in occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblast, as Makarychev and Yatsyk (2018) have demonstrated with the case of 'The Night Wolves', is an example of 'imperial nationalism'.

'We live in parallel Donetsk': the silent contesting of the urban space

When interviews took place in 2017 with several women from Donetsk, there were no active hostilities in the city, and one could say that the city and its remaining residents were trying to find a way to adapt to the new realities. The city authorities still tried to keep the city very clean. That has been mentioned by most of the interviewees from Donetsk. However, the cleanliness did not comfort them much and they considered it as an 'eyewash':

> The stores are open, everything is working as usual, to be honest. These street cleaners sweep the city from morning till night, especially the centre, and the fountains are working, ha-ha. As one old lady said, 'Our Donetsk has become even cleaner than it was under Yanukovych.' I said, 'Well, you should go to the outskirts, look at how the houses are destroyed and so on. The fact that they are cleaning the centre is just for show, a complete eyewash'.
>
> (Woman, technical professional, between 45–55 years old)

The cleanliness and buildings' reconstruction could not return the pre-2014 atmosphere. One of the research participants had been born in Donetsk, graduated from university there and has been living there all her life. For her, the transformations of the city have been especially painful. Being unable to express her pro-Ukrainian position, and not able to move to a government-controlled area of Ukraine because of family reasons, made her everyday encounters with the city another reminder about the complete loss of the city:

> The city, yes, our city is clean. They sweep actively in the centre, at least, and even some buildings are slightly renovated. You know, it takes the soul out of you, there's no shine, remember those famous Donetsk pretensions. When everything that could light up was lit up for New Year, garlands were hung on all the trees, on all the houses, on any kiosk. Everything was glowing and playing, prices soared thirty times, but people still bought things. Now, imagine that picture, now all of this is dying. It's all dead.
>
> (Woman, 35–45 years old, journalist)

Together with de- and re-commemoration and new commemorations that changed many public spaces in the city centre, the physical remainders about the hostilities from people in military uniform patrolling the streets and restricting access to some areas made interviewees feel uncomfortable. As one shopkeeper shared:

> The city has become foreign, the city has become empty, the city has become [full of] foreign flags… Our city is gradually turning into some kind of Russian colony.
>
> (A woman in her 50s, Donetsk, 2017)

The colonisation manifested itself via everyday encounters with people from Russia (often in uniforms), flags, re-constructed public spaces. While neither of the participants were saying that Donetsk became 'Russian', the perception of coming back to the USSR in its hybrid form was quite common. Also, since many people left for Ukraine government-controlled areas, Russia or other countries, the crowds, which had been one of the most important parts of Donetsk urban culture, were completely gone. As one of our participants mentioned, Donetsk now looked like 'a kind of provincial place':

> People are returning, yes, but not as the local authorities say, not as they tell it. Only a few are returning. Thousands left, and only a few, well, dozens, are coming back. And this is easy to confirm, easy to see for yourself, just go outside. Right now, it's seven in the evening. I won't go outside at most to the pharmacy. The streets in the centre are very deserted now. Today is Friday. It's really like a provincial town now. And Makiivka and Horlivka are just terrible. Our Donetsk, the capital of the mining region, has turned into some kind of provincial place, I don't even know what to compare it to. (…) No

> matter how much they try to tell us that Donetsk is alive, that everything is fine with us. It's not fine with us, we have empty roads, we don't have the famous Friday traffic jam near Green Plaza; when did that ever happen?
>
> (Woman, journalist, between 35–45 years old)

The curfew which prevented people from going outside after 11 pm has been mentioned by many, but apart from the formal restrictions, many participants expressed the feeling that it is not very safe for either women or men to be outside in the evening even before 11 pm because of patrols. Some evidenced that drunk people were arrested and detained for a few days. That sounds almost like a reminder about Soviet practices of the 'removal' drunk people and detaining them for 15 days. Urban mobility has been very much affected as the residents could be stopped any time by the local police or military for ID checks.

There were restrictions preventing filming in some public spaces too. The story below reveals a lot about a new urban bordering that not only affected people's mobility and their right to document the transformations happening in their city, but also the constant reminders about the change of regime and the establishing of a new order. The research participant had a hobby of walking in the city with a video camera. She was not a journalist but making videos only for herself and her parents who lived far away. The dramatic changes in her neighbourhood have led her to video-record it. She said, "when the conflict began, I started to video-record everything. Because when it has just started, I thought Ukraine will come and they will demolish Lenin [Lenin statue], and I will be recording it as it is". The year after the war began, and there was no more fighting in the city, and on a nice sunny and warm Easter day she went for a walk with friends and decided to do some filming in the city centre:

> We went out with friends, walked along Shevchenko Boulevard. I was filming and approached the regional administration building, where various flags were hanging: Russian, 'DPR' flags. I started filming these flags. A guy approached me and said, 'You can't film the building.' I asked, 'Why not?' He was standing there with a weapon, and he said, 'This is a military facility.' I said, 'Are you crazy? A military facility in the city centre? What kind of military facility is this?' He replied, 'The war isn't over yet.' I told him, 'Yes, it is over, everything is over.' I gave up on it. Then two of them came up, the one with the weapon brought another guy… I started telling him, 'Why are you ruining the holiday? Today is Easter, we can't even walk around the city, and here you are, what's this about?' He started talking on the phone, 'They were filming with a video camera, as usual, we are disturbing them here, we are disturbing them from living here, from walking around', he said on the phone. Then he hung up and said, 'The commandant's office is already interested in you.' I said, 'Do you think I'm afraid of your commandant's office?' (…) I asked him, 'What did I film?' He said, 'There is such equipment here now, you can film what's in the windows.' I said, 'It's nothing that there are residential buildings behind, and from these windows, your windows, they

> can film whatever they want at any time.' He told me, 'Only DPR people live in those houses.' I asked, 'Where are the real residents?' There was a pause, and then after half a minute, he said, 'People of Akhmetov lived there.' Well, fine, Akhmetov's people, but they don't have property rights either, so it turns out they kicked people out and only DPR people live there or what? (…) Then a girl walked by and clicked the executive committee building on her mobile phone right past us, he said, 'Girl, you can't take pictures here.' We were already together. I said, 'Oh, here we go', and she said, 'I'm just taking a memory photo, this will all be taken down soon.' He said, 'You can't take pictures here', and he said, 'You can't do anything here.' I said, 'Can we do anything at all?' She looked at me and said, 'You have problems too.' I said, 'Yes, they forbade me to take pictures here', and she said to him, 'You are so-and-so', and we both said to him, 'You are so-and-so.' He said, 'A gang of Ukrainian patriots, you need to leave Donetsk, get out of here.' I said, 'You need to leave here', and everyone dispersed. He turned around and left. We had already gathered so many people who were watching us argue with him. And that's how it was.
>
> (Female, software engineer, between 50–60 years old)

The story above is evidence of people's agency. The solidarities regarding the right to the city become solidarities regarding the old Donetsk which was ruled under Ukrainian flags. This episode shows the everyday bordering in Donetsk and discursive landscapes of power of the new regime which identifies pro-Ukrainian city residents as inconvenient, 'out of place' people and who must leave.

The flags became an important object of 'everyday signalling' which helped people to recognise between 'others' and 'ours' whether they were filming new flags out of amusement and anger like in the case above, or selling the flags as one of the small shop owners did:

> For me, it's a matter of principle because when all this nonsense started, people came to my store, and I had Ukrainian flags for sale. They said, 'Why did you hang this? It's a rag, take it down quickly and hang the Russian flag.' But I chased them away. They came, took pictures, intimidated me. But one way or another, I stayed there to work. I still work there. I had to re-register in the DPR, I didn't want to give up, I nurtured my business from scratch.
>
> (Woman, 55–65 years old)

The woman stayed in Donetsk despite the start of hostilities in 2014 as she did not want to leave her older mother and her small business. Such small acts of resistance helped her, and like-minded people to get through.

Such divisions between people became very distinctive. Many participants residing in Donetsk or living there through 2014–2015 recounted that it was a time when they could quickly understand who supported their views, and who did not. Often members of one family became divided on pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian feelings. The reflections below symbolically divide the city residents into three

categories: pro-Ukrainian, pro-new regime residents and people who did not find it important to lean to any of the geopolitical stands, so-called 'neutrals':

> The most negative actions of the authorities are, again, all in parallel with the Soviet Union. It's a double standard. There are two lives, just like when I lived there, there were three lives. There was the life of the DPR, the citizens of the DPR, who loved their republic, built it, and revived it. There was the life of people like me, pro-Ukrainian Donetsk residents, who lived a parallel life to these citizens of the republic, and neutrals who didn't want to be part of the DPR, living in their city, in their apartment, in their Donetsk. And there was a third life, that of the security forces, with their basements, torture, and detentions. And now all this continues.
>
> (Woman between 45–55 years old, journalist)

Everyone from all three categories had their 'own' Donetsk with distinctive memories, knowledge, signals to distinguish between 'others' and 'ours'. Activists with a pro-Ukrainian position often used art in the urban public spaces of Donetsk as a means of resistance and also to signal to other pro-Ukrainian residents supporting solidarity.

De-bordering Donetsk: guerilla art and (trans)border art

The war and the establishment of a new regime forced many artists to leave the non-government areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Artists in the art centre IZOLYATSIA: Platform for Cultural Initiatives had to flee from Donetsk in 2014 after supporters of the new regime demolished their art installations, including the statues of Maria Kulikovska, occupied their offices and installed Russian/Soviet symbols in their grounds. In 2015, artists associated with IZOLYATSIA "blew away" audiences by staging a mock-occupation of the Russian pavilion at the Venice Biennale, mimicking the Russian military involvement in East Ukraine (Deitz, 2015).[3]

Despite IZOLYATSIA and many pro-Ukrainian artists' departure, the policy of the Russian occupation authorities faced resistance from various groups of the city's residents.

During the initial stage of the occupation, battles over the symbolic space in cities were still possible. Occupation is a process, not a one-step act. Therefore, even in the conditions of growing threats and the first reprisals from the occupants, the population of settlements in Donetsk and Luhansk regions sought and found creative ways of protesting. The most common of these were to alter propaganda slogans so that their meaning was completely changed; to paint Russian symbols in the colours of the Ukrainian flag; and to hang Ukrainian flags in places that were difficult to reach (so that they could not be easily removed). At this time, people were returning to practices known from the time of 'late socialism' and the collapse of the Soviet Union, to the so-called 'third culture', the culture of the grotesque, street Happening, and the theatre of the absurd.

The street art became an important instrument of 'signalling' (Tripp, 2013). The artist Sergii Zakharov, who was later called 'Donetsk's Banksy', was placing life-sized caricatures of the leaders of the self-proclaimed republics in public spaces and then posted photographs of the caricatures on social media, which were widely shared. He has been arrested and jailed for six weeks without trial in 2014 by the occupation regime.

The demolition of the Vasil Stus bas-relief was met by outrage from many Donetsk residents. Those who were vocal against this demolition were summoned by the security forces of the new regime. For some, it was not a matter of ethnic identity or language, but more regional identity and the right to protest. As one of our research participants who used to live in Donetsk in 2015, remembered that event:

> Still, I am not a kind of Stus's fan, or fanatic supporter of Ukrainian poetry. I am more into the Russian language and literature. But for me it is a part of my university, my culture, where I live and which I also know. Overall, it was simply a part of history.
>
> (Woman, journalist 40–50 years old)

Moreover, the symbolic battle for Stus continued via guerilla methods by some activists placing banners with the images of the monument and quotes from Stus's poetry in Donetsk streets (TSN, 2018).

However, gradually, as the occupying power consolidated its hold, the period of symbolic battles for the public space of Donetsk has come to an end. Rigid control has been established over the dissent by repression and forced displacement of those whose views do not fit the new ideology established in the occupied territories in both Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. As Lubov Mikhailova stressed: "in occupied Donbas there is only one ideological line from 'above', and civil initiatives are just absent" (Kuznetsova, 2021). At the same time, some initiatives maintained conversations and artistic exchange between the government and non-government territories, such as, for example, the journal of informal culture of Luhansk and Donetsk, *Golden Coal*.[4]

Ukrainian artists residing in occupied areas challenged the political violence and new bordering processes enforced since the annexation of Crimea and outbreak of war in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Alevtina Kakhidze 'humanised' the people left under occupation, as well as the eastern territories of Ukraine, for national and international audiences, reflecting on the experiences of ordinary people.

"My sculptures were the first they shot": Maria Kulikovska feminist protest art

After Maidan, ideas about bordering were embedded in the works of many artists who experienced both displacement and loss and tried to express these lived realities in their work. Maria Kulikovska exhibited many artistic works in

IZOLYATSIA in Donetsk and has been displaced twice – from her home region of Crimea becoming an internally displaced person (IDP),[5] and from the city where she created her famous statues. Back in 2012, Maria Kulikovska created 'Homo Bulla – a HUMAN AS SOAP BUBBLE' sculpture tryptic from the ballistic soap which is used in military training. The sculptures were cast from Maria's body, and she stated that she felt a deep connection with them. Together with the 'Army of Clones' sculptures they were placed in the yard of IZOLYATSIA in Donetsk. Many people understood that the exhibition expressed the views of the artist as a form of protest against conservatism and patriarchy. As Maria stated in an interview with Irina Kuznetsova in 2016, "And some people did not like it, most people were negative about it, because it is provocation – the naked body in a patriarchal, very patriarchal society".

Maria Kulikovska's sculptures attracted the attention of supporters of the new power regime in Donetsk and Luhansk oblast even before Maidan. As she explained, this militant group had made plans to seize IZOLYATSIA's premises before 2014, and one of the assailants was a frequent visitor to the exhibition space: "[he] had been visiting over the previous two years, and knew IZOLYATSIA well; he had been at my lectures about feminism, political art, performance and actionism. He had made a dossier about all the artists". The attention the new regime supporters devoted to the cultural centre, and to Kulikovska's art in particular, as targets of their cultural aggression, reveals the pervasiveness of Russian media narratives about Ukraine's status as feminine and Europe as homosexual, as Edenborg (2017) has noted (e.g. Portnov, 2016). The body has become a significant part of understanding democracy in Ukraine: "The nude female body in particular, but also the alternatively gendered body, became the primary site for protests" (Zychowicz, 2020, p. 19).

Kulikovska's art was too provocative in its feminist message for the adherents of the newly imposed ideology, which, as we mentioned above, attempted to assert and impose conservative values on the region. In the end, her soap sculptures from the 'Homo Bulla' tryptic and plaster sculptures from the 'Army of Clones' series were used as targets for shooting practice in Donetsk by regime supporters on 9 June 2014. As Maria stated in the interview with one of the authors, "the person who led the capture, he called me as an artist of 'degenerative art', and my sculptures were the first which they shot".

In 2015, Maria Kulikovska created sculptures similar to the destroyed 'Homo Bulla' and made them the centre of her performance 'Happy birthday!' at the Saatchi Gallery in London in 2015 by attacking them with a hammer. This action was once again intended to remind audiences in other European countries about the war in Ukraine:

> I was in one of the best galleries in Europe, and there are beautiful sculptures all around, and it seems like everything is fine, but beyond all this beauty and bombast, there is something profoundly broken inside (…). But war is not beautiful, and I decided for myself that I have to destroy them.

Maria mentioned that during her stay in the UK, she had a feeling that people do not know what is happening in Ukraine: the war seems to have been forgotten. The fact that the sculptures are made from the soap produced in Sweden, both for everyday life and for military training, made the performance a sharp metaphor of war:

> That was my response, and it held up a mirror to what was happening in Donetsk. It is a metaphor of war, because the soap which I used for sculptures I bought in Sweden, and apart from soap for everyday life and for the royal family they sell it to arms companies to test new weapons.

Marilyn Monroe's song 'Happy birthday, Mister President', which was played during the performance, can be understood as an ironic reference to the Russian President and his actions in Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Maria did not wear any clothes during the performance, demonstrating her closeness to the sculptures which were cast from her own body, while at the same time highlighting the contrast of a strong woman taking power over violence, reclaiming ownership over her body.

The performance not only demonstrated a woman's ownership over her body, but also allowed Kulikovska to negotiate her identity in the symbolic space of occupied territories onto which an ideology has been enforced that excludes sexual diversity and feminism. The performance can also be seen as a form of protest from within the territories which have been occupied. Kulikovska's feminist art protests against the violation of borders, and, at the same time, is an attempt to claim back those borders through the symbolic crossing of frontiers.

Similarly, the performance 'Let Me Say: It's Not Forgotten' in 2019 was a performance of Maria Kulikovska shooting her sculptures with a rifle. This time the activity took place in a forest in summertime. She also, in a parallel way to the performance at the Saachi Gallery, claimed ownership over her body by shooting sculptures cast from her body. As Somchynsky (2020, pp. 45–46) has remarked, this performance presented her "intimate relationship to the destruction of her sculptures" together with "the lineages of conflict experienced by generations of individuals such as Kulikovska's family" which had suffered displacement and political violence.

Later, in 2019, Kulikovska created a set of new figures made of ballistic soap with the addition of blood, semen, and plant juice instead of dyes (Kulikovska, 2020, 6 Shot Soap Figures) for the film *The Forgotten* (Onyshchenko, 2020). The main character in the film is a feminist who despite living in the occupied territory for some time, tries to resist the regime, and finally moves to Kyiv. It raises intersectional issues of war and displacement. As Onyshchenko stressed in an online event at the Ukrainian Cultural Institute in London, "The situation in the occupied territories of Ukraine is particularly difficult for women because they experience violence (…), not only in Ukraine (…) Mariia is a feminist sculptor, therefore, she corresponds with the main character". (Onyshchenko, 2020). In the film, Maria in the role of journalist from Luhansk TV, shoots her statues on the site of a former plant which is reminiscent of IZOLYATSIA in Donetsk. As Onyshchenko

explained, Mariia deliberately chose the role of a journalist, who is a supporter of the occupied regime and who creates her "war reportages" with a green screen behind her, because she wanted to inhabit the role of one of the main evils in this war – disinformation (Onyshchenko, 2020). So, through participation in the film, Kulikovska symbolically crosses the border between the government-controlled and non-government-controlled territories and locates herself in the occupied territory; she gains some authority over the enemy by "getting under its skin".

Conclusions

The reconstruction and destruction of different collective memories – re-commemoration and de-commemoration – were significant parts of the new realities in Donetsk since 2014. These practices were focused on the Soviet past, the new reality of the so-called 'DPR' regime and excluded anything which would remind people about their Ukrainian heritage. The occupation regime instrumentalised the memoryscapes associated with the Soviet era in Ukraine, which symbolically incorporated them into Russia's semantic space. Therefore, we argue that interventions into the memoryscapes represented discursive landscapes of power manifesting the new borders and regime within urban space.

However, Donetsk's semiosphere (Lotman, 1976; Šakaja & Stanić, 2011) still remained heterogeneous because of the agency of its residents who kept memories about the pre-2014 city alive, and tried to reclaim the space via small actions, or as in the case of the artist Sergii Zakharov, who placed life-size caricatures on public spaces, as artistic resistance. We might say that there were different co-existing levels in Donetsk: the Donetsk of those who have pro-Ukrainian views, the Donetsk of the 'DPR' supporters and people with a 'neutral' position, and the Donetsk with detention basements and torture. Residents with pro-Ukrainian views created an alternative semiosphere via subtle 'signalling' (often in urban places),

Opportunities for free artistic expression and resistance were scarce and are very limited in Donetsk, from which many independent artists and cultural organisation had to flee, and examples of modern feminist art such as Maria Kulikovska sculptures at IZOLYZTSIA in Donetsk were destroyed. In several of her performances in Ukraine and abroad, she re-created the execution by 'firing squad' of her sculptures in Donetsk by militants at the start of the war in 2014. By demolishing her ballistic soap sculptures newly cast from her own body, she was not only reclaiming her body but also creating 'reinforcing imagery' (Tripp, 2013). The embodiment of the experience of the war and the emotional intensity of Mariia's performances constitutes a feminist geopolitical approach to understanding the war.

Many people who stayed in Donetsk since 2014 were also 'inconvenient'. The Russian occupation regime was suspicious not only of openly pro-Ukrainian activists but also of ordinary people. For example, a middle-aged woman, whose story we provided, scolded an armed man and demanded her right to walk in the city centre on Easter day with her amateur video camera. Hundreds of others were less fortunate and have been detained or lost their lives for various acts of dissent and resilience.

Notes

1 Pesenti employs the term "identity shift" from Mykola Ryabchuk who also introduced the concept of the "two Ukraines" to describe the situation after 2014 and "identity clash can broadly be characterized as a contest between European and Eurasian modes of development".
2 The play *Ya – ce inshyj/insha ty* [*I Am Another You*], director Ul'ana Bon'tso, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5vdBJSBma4 accessed 05 April 2021. The performance at the Ukrainian Catholic University and its video recording has been supported by the project 'Ukraine's Hidden Tragedy…' (grant AH/P008305/1) supported by the AHRC led by Irina Kuznetsova.
3 The initiative was curated by New York artist in residence at IZOLYATSIA, Clemens Poole. For more information see more: https://www.vice.com/en/article/avyvn5/art-project-onvacation-tackles-the-russian-occupation-of-ukraine-555. From 2014, IZOLYATSIA has been based in Kyiv, and in 2020, it established another office and art residence in Soledar, an industrialised town in the Donetsk oblast.
4 *Golden Coal* – journal of informal culture in Luhansk and Donetsk. See, for example Josh Nadeau "Golden Coal: the zine capturing the lives of Donbas' youth in the midst of war" Calvert Journal, 22 January 2020, available at https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/11586/golden-coal-donbas-zine-youth-culture-east-ukraine-luhansk-donetsk, accessed 30 April 2021. See other initiatives: https://mitec.ua/podolati-rozyednannya-suchasne-mistetstvo-shodu-ukrayini/?fbclid=IwAR3OOy11Kxa4oOmJC0gZrtoaMtRplwchBNxLH9y9MCuDkyfqfbuKfZaqYh8
5 Maria Kulikovska held an unauthorised performance 'illegal Action 254' in Hermitage in Saint-Peterburg during the opening of the Manifesta'10 biennial on 1 July 2014 (see https://www.mariakulikovska.net/project-page/254-action, accessed 20 December 2024). The number 254 was allocated to Maria as a registered IDP from Crimea occupied since 2014.

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5 The loss of home

Navigating housing through displacement

Introduction

"I am not going anywhere. I have already had to flee several years ago. How many times shall I move?! I will try to cope" – Olena (name changed) told one of the authors on 24 February 2022. We first met her in 2017 in Chernihiv. She had lived there for some time after fleeing from Luhansk with her children before moving to Kyiv. A few weeks after our conversation in February, she will be in Poland, the same as millions of other Ukrainian refugees. Changing cities, moving homes became a reality for hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine since 2014.

Housing is one of the pressing issues for many displaced people in Ukraine and around the world. The war and displacement led to dispossession. 6.3% IDPs in eastern parts of Ukraine reported the complete destruction of their homes, 15% – severe damage, and 34.2% – light damage (REACH, 2015, p. 15). Both in occupied and government-controlled areas of Ukraine within the frontline, some properties have been occupied and sometimes expropriated by military units while homeowners could not rise complaints or demand compensation (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2016). Some properties were in severely mined territories which also limited access and return of residents. Also, people did not have access to their housing for political reasons. Information about a person's pro-Ukrainian position, as well as the presence of various signs confirming this position (national symbols, information in social networks, list of contacts in the phone, etc.) made it hazardous to pass the checkpoints and actually closed access to the occupied territory. So, even if the properties have survived undamaged, the danger faced by returning residents and overall risks and uncertainty of war could precipitate a decision not to live in occupied territories, leading to dispossession of homes. While the Constitution of Ukraine guarantees the right to choose the place of residence and free movement (Article 33), and the inviolability of a dwelling place, there were huge issues in terms of exercising these rights together with accessing the compensations and housing outlined by the special government resolutions regarding IDPs.

Following Wanner (2023) who argues that citizens of Ukraine have faced cultural, economic, and eliminatory dispossession following Russia's war on Ukraine, in this chapter, we focus on the loss of home and tactics of homemaking in a context of

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neoliberal cities. We engage with Brun and Fábos' broad definitions of 'home, Home and HOME', where they reflect on different localities and meanings that include 'home' as daily practices and homemaking, 'Home' as the representation of values and feelings of home and the political contexts of 'HOME' embedded in institutions (2015).

We argue that the loss of home is not only about the lack of a predictable and safe space, but it is an epicentre of emotions which are connected with the loss of home, forced displacement, and longing for home (Lazarenko, 2020) and the daily routines which used to comprise everyday life (Lefebvre, 2014). We also look into the IDPs' experiences in seeking for housing and advocating their rights and critically analyse how the neoliberal housing policies impacted the everyday lives of the displaced.

Loosing home

Below we include just a few of the many stories of loss of home after the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Some, as Olexander, did not flee immediately even after their house had been destroyed, but tried to stay. Others moved from the constant fear and risks even if their houses were undamaged. One of the research participants, 45 years old at the time of the research, moved to Mariupol from Avdiivka in 2017. At that time, Avdiivka was in a non-government-controlled area of Donetsk oblast. In February 2022, Avdiivka was among the first places to be attacked as soon as the Russian government recognised the so-called "Donetsk People's Republic". Olexander (not his real name) used to be a builder. In 2015, the house where he lived with his partner and children was bombed, so they had to move to his grandmother's home. As he described his life there in Avdiivka:

> First, we could go to the allotment, at least, even if there was some shelling. But in the summer of 2016, things became worse. There is an industrial zone nearby, bullets whistle above your head. It became difficult to do any gardening as they can start shooting [at any time]. And it became dangerous to take children to kindergarten. In winter, it used to be silent during the day, but at 5 pm when it is time to pick up kids from the kindergarten, they could start a skirmish as if on purpose.

As a result, the family had to move to Mariupol in 2017. Olexander spent several months looking for a job but could not find any. Still, he hoped to settle in a new city as he and his family were feeling safe. However, Mariupol, while it provided a home for many of the displaced, was just over 20 kilometres from the contact line and did not feel safe even before it was destroyed in 2022. As one of the research participants, Victor, a businessman from Mariupol (40–45 years old), left Mariupol for Kyiv as he could not cope with the atmosphere of war there:

> Honestly, if I was in the government, I would pay benefits to those people who still have not fled from Mariupol as it is almost a war zone if you talk about its suburbs that sometimes are under shelling and people have to sleep in basements. It is terrible.

All displaced persons experienced severe stress and a sense of devastation from feeling the loss of their own home. Roman (name has been changed) is a young man who moved with his parents to Lviv in 2014, both because the pro-Ukrainian stance of his family placed them under a direct threat and because their home, which was in close proximity to Donetsk airport and the war zone, was completely destroyed. He described his feelings of loss as follows:

> There has always been this feeling that you have a Home there, you have your house there, where your parents live and you can come and visit them at any moment. That's the feeling. That feeling is no longer there, the house is no longer there.

Halyna, a woman, 35–40 years old, fled from a village in the Luhansk area near the Russian border to Chernihiv, a city in north-eastern Ukraine in 2017. Back home, she used to work and was studying at university part-time. Halyna could not continue her study because of the military actions in Luhansk. She had a stable income and excellent career progression until the war started:

> There were lots of military vehicles and lots of military men. Once, there was even shelling, in May 2014. For over a year we lived in fear. Many people started to flee, and took their children because it [military aggression] could start there any day. Of course, we all worried (…) And one day I realised that I could not cope anymore with all these fears and worries. I was working on 24-hour shifts, and on the nights the shelling was especially scary. I gave up everything, took my son, and moved here [in summer 2015] to one random acquaintance who later became my friend. She just took pity on us and helped a lot.

Still, many wanted to believe that they will return home, and used any opportunities to check on home – whether asking neighbours, relatives or friends who stayed in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts to check on their properties. As we mentioned earlier, since displacement often was a collective decision taken from consideration of all the risks and opportunities of all members of a household, some had relatives who stayed to look after properties. Often that was an older person which again demonstrates the significant agency of pensioners in a context of war, when they are still continuing to care for their families by distance looking after a flat, house, or dacha. In other words, keeping a home ready for the family's return. As one of the women from Luhansk shared in an interview:

> Everyone has gone, some to Ukraine, some to Russia. All my relatives are in Ukraine. But we stayed behind, just the two of us, because you can't leave your own flat and the children's flats.

She stopped working because of weak health, and could not apply for her pension yet, so has to live on a pension from her husband, his irregular jobs and some financial unregular support from children who became IDPs.

Similar arguments were voiced by residents of Donetsk. For example, a middle-aged woman from Donetsk, speaking about her mother, emphasises the importance for them of keeping the only property they have and the lack of a realistic prospect of owning new housing.

> My mom understands that it's not safe to abandon the apartment. An abandoned apartment means looting. So, it's better if I stay here and watch over things because this is my only property in life and I'll never have any new one.

Making home in a neoliberal city

Most IDPs in our study lived in rented apartments. This echoes with other quantitative studies, such as the study by REACH which conducted a survey among 2,573 IDPs in the eastern oblast of Ukraine (REACH, 2015). It is important to note that renting was not common in Ukraine in the twentieth century as the country had among the highest homeownership rates in the world (Zavisca et al., 2023). Most of residents in Ukraine lived in housing acquired via the privatisation of state housing that occurred in the early 1990s, which then was redistributed via inheritance, family and market exchanges (Gerber et al., 2022). As the result, as Fedoriv and Lomonosova pointed out, "the public rental sector hardly even exists since the privatization, and the private rental sector is almost completely unregulated and provides no protection to either tenants or landlords" (2019, n.p.).

As the REACH study revealed in 2015, only 9.7% of IDPs in eastern oblasts of Ukraine had an official rental contract, while 22.6% reported that they did not possess a lease or rental agreement with their landlord, and 67.7% reported they had some sort of binding agreement with their landlord but without an official rental contract (REACH, 2015, p. 26). The informality in the rental market which had been present since Ukraine gained its independence (e.g. Round et al., 2008) rendered IDPs vulnerable to different kinds of scams, as noted by one of the participants who had changed accommodation several times in Kharkiv with her family of four:

> Firstly, there are a lot of scammers in Kharkiv who invite you to an office, you pay money for information services, and then they give you an unknown phone number. And the second option sometimes happens, I encountered it when we were looking at an apartment. I asked for documents for the apartment to understand who the owner was, because sometimes there are legal issues or, for example, three rooms and in two of them someone else from the family lives. They refused. I asked for a meeting with the owner. I was generally satisfied with the apartment, the price was reasonable, but they didn't provide it, so I realised something was wrong with this apartment. So, there are a lot of scammers. And I still encounter them. I've left my phone number

> with many agents, but very few call back. Maybe it's less of a problem in other cities, but in Kharkiv, renting is a big issue. So mostly I walk around the city and just ask directly. Although people are so wary, especially when they find out where you're from, they become very cautious because there are different kinds of people.
>
> (Woman, 35–40 years old with two children and a partner, Kharkiv).

The woman who shared the story above had moved between two cities and several temporary homes from June 2014 to 2017 following her family's flight from Donetsk. First, they lived in Lyman in Donetsk oblast in some health farms that provided free temporary accommodation. Then, in December 2015, they moved to Kharkiv and have since lived in four rented apartments. In mid-2017, when they gave an interview, they were considering moving again as their flat had mould on the walls.

The high prices for accommodation in Kyiv stop many IDPs from moving there. Still, the city was attractive because of less perceived discrimination and more job opportunities. A young woman from Donetsk who moved to Kyiv with her parents in 2014 shared the following comments:

> My parents' life hasn't changed much, because they moved to Kyiv; they have a nice flat there too, and they work. They moved their office there. So, there is work there.

The rental costs for housing were much higher for IDPs than their previous expenditure on housing as in most cases they owned their home before the displacement:

> With the move to Kyiv, expenses have increased, let's say. Despite the fact that good friends provided us with their housing at a very symbolic price, it is still a deduction from the salary. Moving back and forth to Krasny Liman also adds transportation costs. So, undoubtedly, the standard of living has dropped several steps. I can't say that we have fallen to the level of poverty – no. Actually, it's not like that because I understand that a huge number of people are much worse off than we are.
>
> (Woman, 40–50 years old, Kyiv)

In a similar vein, a student IDP shared her experience of paying for rent for the first time in her life as she used to live with parents before:

> Of course, [expenses] increased because I didn't rent an apartment before, but lived in my own house. Therefore, I didn't have any special expenses. And all the utility costs were covered by my parents.
>
> (Woman, Dnipro)

According to Zavisca et al.'s study (2023), before the full-scale invasion, there was a distinctive gap between IDPs and locals in terms of accessibility of clothing

and other durable goods because of the housing costs. IDPs faced greater uncertainty about staying in their current homes, especially in urban areas with higher prices. According to the REACH study (2015), one in five IDP households were certain they would face eviction. A monthly benefit for IDPs, officially intended to cover "assistance with living costs, including housing and utilities" (as per Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No 505, 2014), proved insufficient to meet their needs. It was 884 UAH (approx. 24 dollars) per month for pensioners, children and disabilities, and 442 UAH (approx. 12 dollars) per month for people of working age. The beneficiaries of this assistance had to obtain verification and checks on their places of residency. That often led to the suspension of the assistance (see previous chapter). The IDPs' social benefits and pensions were not enough to pay for accommodation costs. As the REACH study shows, one-third of households paying rent reported insufficient funds to cover rent for more than six months, and another third were unsure how long their funds would last (2015).

Those who still had some properties in occupied territories in eastern Ukraine had to sell them for half price or less than their previous commercial value. There was no market to sell, and it was too hazardous for owners to carry out sales with cash (as Ukrainian banks do not operate in occupied areas) and then bring money over control points. A mother of three from Donetsk, who once owned a large house but lost any opportunity to sell it, in an interview proposed a mortgage deposit scheme in which a Ukrainian bank would hold rights to properties in occupied territories:

> The housing always was a problem, but when you move and have to start everything from the beginning, working days and nights, it is unreal to buy even a small flat. I try to do something for two years, we both work hard, but cannot imagine how to buy housing. And we cannot sell anything there. What about an option if the bank or state could buy a property which people left there? (…) Let's say if a flat used to cost 30K US dollars before the war, now it worth 15K, it could be much easier for people to have a deposit for a mortgage.

In many interviews, we saw that people were willing to discuss housing options with authorities and banks and even sacrifice part of their property's commercial value. However, they felt deeply frustrated by the complete lack of options to receive anything in return for the homes they had lost.

The experiences of finding 'home' were very different for young people. Though educational mobility has not been widely common in Ukraine before 2014, for some, displacement was accompanied with study or a new job and getting new experiences. In general, young people were more optimistic about their situation of forced displacement and open to new opportunities. As one young woman from Donetsk oblast who moved to Lviv mentioned:

> Overall, I have housing, I study at a good university, and there are good people around me. In the first few months, I met such incredible people who just changed my worldview. Lviv, it all somehow changes you.

For many, it was the first time they were able to see Lviv, Kyiv, or Odesa and embrace the vibrant urban live. Some, as this young woman medical intern from Donetsk, simply liked the new city: "And I am such a person that I adapt everywhere. In a month I will say that I am like at home. Like I have always lived here". However, behind this optimism were often difficult housing conditions – poorly furnished dorm rooms or sharing flats with other young people to cut costs. For example, one of our interlocutors, a young man who left Donetsk in May 2014 at the age of 18, lived in his cousin's flat in Kyiv for six years and slept in a sleeping bag on the floor because there was no place to put an extra bed in the flat.

It is important to realise that the effects of forced displacement have long-lasting consequences that have a profound impact on people's entire lives and manifest themselves in everyday minutiae. For a long time, IDPs postpone their lives, wait for their former normality to return, and try to reconcile the past and the future. For example, Roman (name has been changed), a young man from Donetsk, who moved with his parents to Lviv in 2014, described his mother's attitude on first arriving:

> And for her, you know, such everyday things confuse her. She sees a fridge and says, "We had a fridge too." If she sees something like this, she says, "We had that too." She sees winter shoes and says, "I have them in Donetsk, maybe I don't need them." Such moments are demoralising.

Later they were informed that their house in Donetsk had been destroyed in the hostilities.

"I said, 'I'm from Donetsk' – they were not all willing to rent"

The above quote from one of the research participants was shared by many others. Often, participants reported that there were denied accommodation by landlords simply because they did not want to rent to the people from Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts. As one displaced woman in her 50s who tried to rent an apartment in Lviv with her family, shared:

> There was one case when we wanted to rent an apartment, but the owner said he didn't want to take people from the East. And there was another case when we came to look at housing at the same time as students from Vinnytsia. And the realtor said to the owner in our presence: "Why should we rent housing to outsiders when we have nowhere to place our own?" By 'outsiders' she meant us. And then I asked, "What about united Ukraine?"

That intertwines with the rhetorics from some Ukrainian politicians who blamed the population of those regions in supporting Russia (Kuznetsova &

Mikheieva, 2020). Some media and academics were talking about the rise of crime in cities because of the influx of IDPs from Donbas though there was not any evidence to support this supposition in the crime statistics (Bulakh, 2017). To some extent, it echoes with challenges in renting accommodation experienced by Central Asian migrants in Russian cities because of othering and criminalisation discourse (Kuznetsova & Round, 2019).

The discriminatory behaviour in the rental market has been fuelled by propaganda, as one of our participants, a young man from Donetsk shared:

> There was quite active propaganda going on for some time here and it was pretty hard to find anything. Housing, jobs. A lot of people from the west [of Ukraine] thought that some 'lumpens' were coming here who were not going to work and would live at someone else's expense. But in reality, the people who went to Lviv are professors, intelligentsia, IT- specialists, programmers, business owners. You can say that the intelligent part of the city left, and pro-Ukrainian part did too. That is why all rumours have gradually stopped. There were some problems with renting a place to live. We found a reasonable realtor. We found housing. And then the realtor called us back and said that the owners are hesitant… It came to them asking us to show a proof of employment to make sure we were settled here. It made me angry, I collected all possible documents, my student rosters, where I was written down as their lecturer, some decrees, a letter to [the title of the official institution has been deleted for anonymity reasons], in which my name was mentioned. In addition, I asked 'The Right Sector' to provide a letter of support for me. And then things started moving forward. Then those people calmed down.
>
> (Lviv, interview, 2015).

As Bulakh noted, there is a hierarchy of othering of Crimean and Donbas IDPs when the second is considered to be more 'threatening' than the other, and the estate market together with the job market were the areas that "first reflected a negative image of displaced people" (2017, p. 54). Our research revealed a similar trend with IDPs from Crimea with Tatar origin who were often considered to have a pro-Ukrainian stance. As one of the participants from Crimea noted:

> …my neighbour's mother was renting out a one-room apartment at the beginning of September, and I know that displaced people from Donetsk came to her, and she really didn't want to rent the apartment to them. She then talked to me, asking for help to find someone I knew because she didn't want to rent to people from Donetsk. However, I think the attitude towards Crimean Tatars has changed in a more positive direction because people are interested, and at some point, after the situation in Crimea, people became more interested and suddenly started to love (laughs) the Crimean Tatars for their pro-Ukrainian stance, although they have always

> held a pro-Ukrainian position. So, this kind of love appeared from the pro-Ukrainian population.
>
> (Young woman, Kyiv)

However, it is important to mention that such attitudes towards IDPs, or in the words of Sereda (2020), 'social distancing', do not necessarily reflect the 'West-East' divide in Ukraine that is also visible in the eastern Ukrainian oblasts bordering war-torn territories. We suggest that this perspective has often been linked not with the divide regarding attitudes to Euro Maidan and Russia, but with social–economic inequalities and prejudices. For example, some IDPs met rejections based on the prejudice that IDPs will not be able to pay their rent on time:

> There are owners who wouldn't lease housing to refugees. Well, here's the reason. If I hadn't had any support, I would have been in the same situation. People from Slaviansk, Kramatorsk were fleeing in their bathrobes and only some thought of taking some money. And [it is difficult] to get a job here right away, if someone is distracted, depressed, doesn't understand what's going on. Even if you start working right away, you are not gonna get paid right away, you'll be paid in a month. And even if you paid rent, you still need money for food. You pay for a month and then in a month you are out of money. And they share this information among themselves… Your permanent residency is in Donetsk? We are not going to lease to you because you have problems paying. Yet not everyone is like that.
>
> (Middle-aged woman, moved from Kostiantynivka to Odesa in 2014, interviewed in 2015)

Some landlords increased the price for the displaced compared to locals or increased the rent with short notice.

> Agents everywhere, when they heard that we were from the eastern region, they said that you will not find a flat here, because the locals do not want to house displaced people. This is the first part, the second part, when they heard that we were from Donetsk, the price of a flat went up three times […] We live in the first flat we found, thank God it suited us – it was normal.
>
> (Middle-aged woman, forced to move from Donetsk to Dnipro in 2014, interviewed in 2015)

Many of our participants, most of whom had limited or no savings and could not afford to buy or rent expensive housing, faced triple challenges: navigating an unfamiliar informal housing market in a new city, experiencing discrimination due to their origin from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and confronting prejudices related to presumed financial instability. The lack of housing support from authorities further deepened the uncertainty faced by IDPs.

State and donor-funded provision of housing

While IDPs were not considered a priority group for social housing, it is important to note the challenging issues with state provision of housing in Ukraine since the 1990s. Since the privatisation of private properties in the 1990s after Ukraine gained independence, social housing was not accessible like in many other countries of the former USSR. As Liasheva states on the example of Kyiv, housing has become "not a home, but 'real estate'; not a shelter, but an asset. This new 'asset' is being manipulated by local elites, together with international banks and institutions, which are using housing as a tool for capital circulation" (Liasheva, n.d.), and social housing and temporary housing stocks "have never been created" (Fedoriv & Lomonosova, 2019, n.p.).

The Law on Social Housing in Ukraine, enacted in 2006, has seen limited progress. By January 2021, there were 1,098 social housing apartments available for 1,564 individuals, including 175 IDPs, with 149 in Poltava and 72 in Kyiv (Bobrova, 2022). Temporary housing, which serves a similar purpose, was introduced for those unable to repay mortgages and has been utilised by IDPs since 2014. Despite a state budget subvention in 2017 aimed at developing temporary housing, progress has been minimal. By January 2021, there were 1,997 temporary apartments accommodating 3,363 people, including 1,840 IDPs, with the highest number (597) in Donetsk (Bobrova, 2022).

Still, even those who qualified as a recipient of social housing, for example, people with disabilities, could not rely much on state support for accommodation before 2014 as there were not enough funds, and the process could take many years. There were no legal mechanisms for providing social housing for the most vulnerable categories of IDPs (the elderly, people with disabilities, single parents) despite the existing lists.

Mariupol city administration has provided a good example of housing support for IDPs allocating 110 flats for IDPs and orphans (Mariupol Rada, 2019). There were some local initiatives under application of the laws 'On Local Self-Government in Ukraine' and 'On Housing Fund for Social Purposes' which provided some housing solutions for IDPs. Also, the legislative amendments in April 2017 allowed for IDPs to receive subsidised mortgages for construction or purchase of housing but it was reserved more for residents of local communities who lived in inappropriate conditions, and then the required deposit was too high for most IDPs. However, there were not enough funds to proceed with this initiative. For example, in 2017, there was only UAN 30 ml in a budget for a programme 'Affordable housing' (70–80 families maximum). Moreover, most of the programme had to be financed via local budgets. In addition to the extensive paperwork, IDPs had to provide confirmation from the occupied territories that they do not have any housing (which was lifted after of 10 days of demonstrations of IDPs near Rada).

The government together with the support of international donors has provided some temporary accommodation for IDPs. Dormitories provided for IDPs did not have the capacity to accommodate everyone in need. The dormitory in Kirovohrad

oblast funded by the European Commission did not have many IDPs as of 2017 because of its undesirable location – it is remote, with little job opportunities nearby (see TCH, 2017). In many cases, decisions about who will live in temporary dormitories were made on a first come, first served basis, which created inequalities between different categories of IDPs.

The so-called 50/50 scheme introduced by the state, whereby IDPs were meant to receive half the price of a property and must cover the rest of the cost themselves, was not met with enthusiasm from either IDPs or the NGOs that assisted IDPs, as the timelines and conditions were opaque, and not affordable, while vulnerable categories of IDPs are excluded.

IDPs have been staging protests for their rights and demanded accountability of the funds for housing received by the government from international donors. on 16 October 2017, there was a demonstration near the USA Embassy in Kyiv and a hunger strike. The protestors required the Embassy to check where the money from the United States to Ukraine to support IDPs and victims of the war had been spent (Hromadske, 2017 as cited in Kuznetsova & Mikheieva 2020).

For example, a temporary dormitory in one town (its name is hidden to protect anonymity) was closing down, and IDPs were offered the choice of moving to a dormitory in another oblast. This closure would have massive implications for their everyday life, considering that elderly people and women with disabilities were among those who lived in that dormitory. The following informant felt very frustrated when she shared her worries:

> We were offered to move to a different city – to Sumy or Kryvyi Rih – I do not remember now. But we are not stray musicians, right? We are temporarily [she stresses this word] displaced people. When the war will be finished we will go back home. How could we return there if we live in those two rooms where they placed us? I do not know. Where could I go to in another city? Children go to kindergarten. Lena – to kindergarten, Irina – to school, Anna – to college. Olga – in spite the fact that she has disability, has bronchial asthma – she went to work in the factory informally. What to do? I would like to work but I cannot physically, I have such a rare disease, one in a million people […] I have to stop after each 20 metres walking.
>
> (IDP from Horlivka, female, 50 years old, lives in Kharkiv oblast, names have been changed)

People whose flats and houses were damaged or destroyed because of the war faced massive issues receiving compensation, with only a few success stories (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2016). As Unruh claims, housing, land, and property rights prior to the war "comprised a dense tangle of confusion, corruption, and inadequate documentation" (2023, p. 263). Such barriers further marginalised IDPs, feeding into the growing anxieties in a context of growing economic and geopolitical uncertainty.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine further deepened the level of dispossession of IDPs and forced many to flee again. According to the organisation Right to Protection, between 2017 and 2020, 340 flats were purchased for the IDPs and a further 838 IDPS received temporary housing (Right to Protection, 2021, pp. 18–19). Most of the flats and temporary accommodation have been located in the territories which are occupied by Russia as of the situation in 2024.

Coping tactics and 'hybrid volunteering' in housing

Solidarity and support between displaced individuals and host communities helped to address injustices in the housing sector. In some cases, this included providing free accommodation, such as the case of a middle-aged woman whose family was hosted by acquaintances and friends for an extended period:

> In principle, I think that our situation is not very typical for the displaced. Why? If we had gone just like that, to an empty place, we would not have had acquaintances, friends and a certain coincidence of circumstances in Lviv – we were very lucky with housing, everything would have been different. But it turned out that we were accepted… At first it was said that it would be two or three weeks, when the situation calmed down… We were accepted by my friend's friends, friends of her husband, we lived in their apartment, we were allocated two rooms.
>
> (2014, Lviv)

That echoes with the REACH study (2015), which showed that a third of urban IDP households and nearly half of rural IDP households paid no rent for their accommodation. Some were finding support from realtors who were helping people to find a 'fair' landlord who would rent accommodation at a fair rate without prejudices towards IDPs from eastern Ukraine.

There were examples of hybrid support where both business, state, and communities got together to provide some housing like in the case of Trojanda in Svyatohirs'k. Trojanda is a tourist camp, and due to enquires from internally displaced people, local authorities provided support for it to be made into a housing unit for IDPs. At one time, there were 194 people living there. In 2016, IDPs created their NGO 'Trojanda-Svyatohor'e' aiming to protect the rights of IDPs. As its chair stressed in an interview:

> Initially, a charitable foundation helped us, but then we had some disagreements with them. We decided to take matters into our own hands, and in 2016, we created this organisation specifically to protect displaced persons. This way, no one could evict us from the base, and we could attract various external organisations, communicate directly with different government bodies, various deputies, and so on. It's no longer just one person fighting alone, but an organisation, and that means something.

The tourist camp had been abandoned for years before IDPs moved in and could not provide safe and appropriate living conditions. The Trojanda base was a collateral property for a company that went bankrupt, and then, all rights were transferred to a bank which went bankrupt as well. So, according to the research participants, the liquidation council put this property up for sale, and they were asked twice to vacate the premises to make it more attractive to the potential buyers. Still, the IDPs managed to stay.

Due to the activism of IDPs and help from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other organisations, the housing in the camp has been repaired. Moreover, international donors provided a heating system as initially the base had been designed only for the summer season. However, since the base had been registered as a commercial enterprise, it had to pay high electricity tariffs which IDPs could not afford. So, they had to lobby the national authorities to let them pay tariffs for residential buildings, which has been allowed since 2016. The further fate of these people is unknown. The town of Sviatohirsk survived shelling in 2022, a three-month occupation, and is now under the control of the Ukrainian government, but is located close to the front line.

"Home is the most important thing": the (im)possible homecoming

The lack of housing – not just a roof and a shelter, but home – was a crucial barrier for IDPs' sense of belonging, as indicated by Zavisca et al. for the integration of IDPs as well as an "affordable home of one's own has been a key element of the post-Soviet contract, yet in 2018 it remained out of reach for most IDPs" (2023, p. 14). Both our and Zavisca et al.'s (2023) research showed that IDPs renting accommodation also faced difficulties in receiving *propiska*, a registration of their current places of residency. Our research also revealed that due to the fact that the *propiska* was tied to their actual property rather than their de facto residence, people had limited access to health services, faced difficulties in finding employment (as employers usually asked about *propiska* and favoured local ones), and had to travel to the locality where they were registered in order to vote in elections.

As a result, almost all interviews with IDPs highlighted that housing issues are one of the most crucial factors when they considered their prospects of living in the government-controlled territories of Ukraine.

> You cannot integrate into society without housing. You always live with suitcases. So, we keep everything what we do not use in boxes and then it is easier to move and find other accommodation. Owners always look and if they feel you have stability they put the price of the rent up. You are always with suitcases and always have to think what to do tomorrow. Which plans could you make? Nothing really if you do not have any stability. When you are young you can live in rented flats. But when you are elderly, and touch wood will get sick – which landlord would keep you in a flat? It is very frustrating.
>
> (Female, 58 years old, from Luhansk oblast, lives in Kharkiv)

Even when the IDP family could cope with the high rent, they still were not able afford a mortgage and thus considered going back to their original homes in war-torn areas. Moreover, since it was often impossible to bring elderly parents with them (again, usually because of housing issues), the choice to go back to the territory of the so-called 'self-proclaimed republics' for some displaced people became unavoidable, although not desirable. In June–July 2017, the organisation Right to Protection conducted a survey of 4,290 people crossing the 'line of contact' at the five EECPs (entry/exit checkpoints) in Donetsk oblast (Maiorske, Marinka, Hnutove, and Novotroitske) and Luhansk oblast (Stanytsia Luhanska). The survey shows that 46.2% of them had moved to government-controlled areas but were returning (Right to Protection, 2017). For about half of them, high rent was the main factor in making this decision.

Olia, a female 35–40 years old, moved from Luhansk with her husband and three young children to a small town in Kyiv oblast:

> You know, if someone would tell me now, that it [military aggression] has finished, and everything is back to normal, I would probably, return as my home is there. (…) Here it is just impossible to buy your accommodation. So, all life you will have to move from one rented flat to another. I do not see any future yet. Live day by day.

They had to leave their small but stable business in their home city behind and had to rely on charitable help at first. One family provided temporary shelter for them before they found a low-paid job and could provide for themselves. Still, they were looking forward to return. Similarly, Halyna (named has been changed) even though she found a job and rented individual accommodation, was still thinking of going back to her home village:

> Most of my university mates went back to Luhansk because here they did not have much support. There are difficulties with accommodation. And all my friends have families. It is very difficult to cope. They go back. (…) Even people over 59 years old, at first, they took their grandchildren and left, but then came back. Home is home. (…) I am longing for my home. I think about it day and night. I quite like to live in Chernihiv, it is a nice small town, but it is challenging financially. Salaries are very low. You need to work both day and night. Of course, I do not plan to stay there all my life. I want to return home. Or at least closer to my home. Mom keeps saying: 'Move at least to Kharkiv! That would be a bit closer.'

Sometimes people were returning temporarily to check on their properties and collect some possessions which would remind them of home. One of the research participants from Shyrokyne, a village in the Mariupol area of Donetsk oblast which has been occupied, remembers what happened on her return:

> When we were allowed into Shyrokyne in the autumn of, um, 2014, oh, 2015, we were allowed in from the DNR side. We entered from that side, but

> it was still an agreement with the authorities. When we were allowed to go home, everyone started repairing, hammering, and fixing things, understanding that the war was still ongoing, but they came to repair with the hope that they had a home to return to. (…) Well, it was only for about a week. Those who could, came to collect some belongings, and those who had nothing left at least took photographs to document the destroyed property. And you know, listening to these people, I realised that home is the most important thing. Yes, they live here, but everything here [in Mariupol] is foreign. Many brought back things like bullet-riddled pots, and some people laughed at them, saying it was nonsense. But it wasn't; it was their happy life. And that happy life was about having a home. Even if it was battered and wounded, it was still there. The most important thing is home.

So, in this sense, 'home' is a location with materialities, daily practices (Brun & Fábos, 2015) which people tried to take to the new places of settlement as they could not return 'home' permanently. Though, potentially they could, especially when the houses were not damaged massively and the hostilities suspended, but 'HOME' embedded in institutions and 'Home' in political contexts have been dramatically changed. Also, the social life has changed a lot, losing its predictability and comfort. Friends and family moved, the ruins reminded the IDPs about the trauma and loss. As a study of Greek-Cypriot refugee women's return visits showed, the tensions between remembered and encountered home prevented them from re-establishing meaningful connections with a new home, a new place (Peristianis, 2024).

The violence in borders and occupied territories became a factor of non-return for many displaced individuals. One of our young research participants, who left occupied Donetsk for Kyiv in 2014, told us that he missed home very much and had travelled there on his own from time to time, hiding this fact from his mother who also fled. He went to visit his father, who stayed in Donetsk, and also to stay in the flat where he and his mother lived before 2014. He stopped travelling to the occupied territory in 2018 after he was detained at a checkpoint controlled by representatives of the so-called DPR and was interrogated in a torture room. After he was released, he returned to Kyiv and was never in Donetsk again.

The meanings of HOME, Home, and home have been radically rethought by many. This is exemplified by the words of one research participant, who stayed in Donetsk during the first years of occupation before being deported to the government-controlled area of Ukraine. During an interview, he stated firmly:

> I have a luxurious apartment in the centre of Donetsk with a beautiful renovation, but that doesn't matter to me at all. There are completely different values. For me, the most important thing is freedom – freedom to think, freedom to move, and freedom to communicate with my family and friends. Freedom is the main value for me. I didn't realise this before the war. I didn't even think about it; I wanted a car. Now, I don't want a car. The most important thing for me is to think freely, to have free thoughts, and to express myself freely.

From an intersectional perspective, we understand that there is privilege in these words, as the person had an income after displacement, did not have caring responsibilities, was able to rent accommodation, and was in relatively good health. However, the change in values and visions of home, when freedom became the cornerstone, is hugely important to understanding the transformations in society. As we show in the following chapter on the case of Donetsk, it has become an alien city even to some of those who have not left it in 2014.

Conclusion

The loss of home was one of the most pressing issues for many displaced people in Ukraine because of its firm links with the sense of belonging and comfort. Often the willingness to keep home was a factor to stay in occupied territory. Those who fled had to face issues related to the lack of social housing in Ukraine and problems in the rental market which were amplified by the discrimination in a rental market on the fact of origin from Donetsk or Luhansk oblasts. The insecurity in rental relationships has been aggravated due to the often-informal nature of the rental housing market.

IDPs in 2014 faced the challenges of finding housing at a time of their highest vulnerability. Many of them suffered from a situation in which their homes and property became inaccessible or destroyed and their familiar world collapsed. In 2014, there were almost no state-organised evacuations of people from the war zone. Consequently, most people who fled the war had to decide for themselves whether to leave the war-torn territory and choose a place of relocation. In many cases, people relied on their pre-war acquaintances and contacts, as well as their assessments of their prospects for finding housing and employment in a new place.

As such, their experiences of internal displacement were ambivalent – they were grateful to those who have supported them, but at the same time spoke of numerous discomforts related to the negative perception of IDPs from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, due to stereotypes prevalent in both host communities and state rhetoric. Housing discrimination of IDPs, as Teremetskyi et al. (2021) demonstrate, is one of the pieces of evidence of housing discrimination in Ukraine which includes apart from the IDPs, people with disabilities, and persons living in a non-traditional family, which is not recognised as an independent legal concept in Ukraine. The amount of assistance received from the state compensated for only a small part of the real costs of displaced people, whose ability to stay in the place of relocation was directly related to their success in finding employment, without which they had no means to rent a place to live. Despite the support of international organisations and government payments, people who were unable to find a combination of work and accommodation were faced with the difficult decision to return to their former homes in dangerous situations.

The history of the state's search for compensatory mechanisms between 2014 and the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion on 24 February 2022 is generally a story of failure. Modular towns or camping cites which were conceived as a

temporary solution to the problems, turned out to be a long-lasting residence while not providing adequate living conditions for people. Most of the IDPs could not meet the requirements for special loans for housing. Discussions on social housing have not led to a comprehensive solution to this issue.

Many people who left the occupied territories have gradually solved their problems on their own with enormous effort. This difficult experience of IDPs since 2014 may have been one of the reasons for the mass refusal of people to evacuate from the frontline settlements in the face of full-scale Russian invasion. The question of what to do after people have salvaged their lives in war-torn territories continues to remain open.

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6 Agents of change

Volunteering in the face of the war and displacement

Introduction

Volunteering manifested itself in spontaneous actions at the beginning of the war and displacement in 2014 as a reaction to urgent needs for evacuation and humanitarian help, and later in the work of NGOs established to provide further support to internally displaced people (IDPs). The perspective on forced displacement from the point of view of the formation and development of volunteer practices in Ukraine is best illustrated by the agency of IDPs themselves. It is the bearer of the problem who knows best how exactly it should be solved. And in this regard, this topic allows us to see how, since 2014, many Ukrainian IDPs have gone from insecurity and victim status to active participants in Ukrainian and international groups and organisations, become founders of civil non-profit organisations, participate actively in civil control functions, and form new networks of assistance and mutual aid. Deep awareness of the situation and their own problems allowed Ukrainian IDPs to gain agency and become powerful agents of transformation in Ukraine.

This chapter[1] aims to reveal how civil society addresses the needs of IDPs in a context of protracted conflict with no or few regulations regarding volunteering activities, and when the state and international organisations cannot fulfil the demands for assistance. It contributes to the literature by combining the understanding of volunteering as a hybrid phenomenon and process model of volunteering in a context of mass population. The hybridity of volunteering manifests itself both in a fusion of motivations, discourses, and practices, and in specific configurations of cooperation and coordination between different actors, including volunteers, business, international organisations, and state institutions. Accordingly, in our study, we sought to identify and explore: a) how logistically coherent and well-organised interactions are formed in place of spontaneous volunteer reactions in a context of blurred legislative framework; b) what space of interactions and cooperation between different actors Ukrainian volunteer initiatives form around themselves; and c) whether the peculiarities and configuration of this cooperation allow us to strengthen the theoretical argumentation in favour of the hybridity of the volunteerism phenomenon. The analysis is based on our interviews with representatives of civil society, a survey of NGOs in Ukraine and an expert survey conducted in 2018.

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The chapter starts from the engagement with a literature on hybridity approach and a process model towards volunteering, then provides an overview regarding volunteering in Ukraine after Maidan before focusing on the role of volunteering in supporting IDPs. We discuss our data revealing the transition from spontaneous voluntary assistance to regular volunteerism and collaboration with business, civil society, and state. We show how volunteerism, due to its hybridity, not only provided help to IDPs directly, but mediated and coordinated the responses from businesses, international organisations, and authorities in a context of blurred legal framework and lack of state resources and also becomes the space of agency of the IDPs themselves. Volunteering often became a space for active interaction between IDPs and representatives of the local community and thus contributed to overcoming mutual stereotypes and forming sustainable and productive contacts.

Understanding volunteering in a context of internal population displacement: the hybridity approach and a process model

Many studies about volunteering to help with evacuation and provide humanitarian aid in a context of internal displacement take place within disasters. Spontaneous help is often the only way to react timely and efficiently to disasters (Twigg & Mosel, 2017). The extensive review conducted by Helsloot and Ruitenber showed that "the willingness of people to assist with disasters and serious accidents is generally rather 'abundant' and called 'informal mass assault'" (2004, p. 103). Disasters are met with a strong response from the bottom-up leadership that emerges voluntarily and collectively (Lough, 2021). Such a response provides not only immediate help, but often leads to political action to improve conditions in a context of protracted displacement. For example, post-tsunami in Indonesia IDPs mobilised collective protests and made political claims (Hedman, 2009). The literature about the role of local volunteers in a context of displacement during war or conflict is less common. Still, a study on Northern Ireland in the 1970s showed the role of solidarity and social capital in providing support for the displaced (Gilmartin, 2023). IDPs in Columbia build networks and provide strong 'confrontational collective action' against the governmental policies (Schouw Iversen, 2022). Besides, as stated above, there is a lack of research in volunteering in a context of internal displacement in low- and middle-income countries (Garkisch et al., 2017).

Spontaneous help might not be the most effective mechanism of support in a situation of protracted conflict and displacement, since durable solutions are needed to improve the lives of IDPs. Still, in a context like Ukraine, with the lack of financial capacities and legislation that would support IDPs' rights, the third sector becomes a critical actor in responding to the challenges that IDPs face. We argue that 'volunteering' in its 'pure' characteristics such as being unpaid, out of free will, conducted for the benefits of others, and associated with a non-profit, non-governmental sector (Shachar et al., 2019), would not be applicable. First, this is because of blurred boundaries between community support and volunteering. Following Omoto and Snyder, we understand that the community context "both influences the volunteer process and can be the target of volunteer efforts"

(Omoto & Snyder, 2002, p. 863). Second, the 'pure' characteristics of volunteering do not work, as the urgency of displacement in countries that do not have developed institutions working with refugees or IDPs means, also, that the word 'sector' or 'formal organisation' is not appealing as a conceptual framework. In this regard, Wilson's critique of the perception of volunteering is quite relevant: "Particularly troublesome is the attachment of volunteer work to formal organizations, which means that communities or countries where the infrastructure of nongovernmental organizations outside the private sector is poorly developed will by definition have fewer volunteers" (Wilson, 2012, p. 176).

Therefore, there is a gap in conceptual understanding of volunteering in the context of internal population displacement in low- and middle-income countries. Combining an experience of volunteering as a hybrid phenomenon and a process model of volunteering can be a suitable model for overcoming this gap.

The hybridity manifests itself in the understanding that 'pure' forms are hardly ever found in real life; third-sector representatives, including business structures, operate in a particular institutional environment, and both non-governmental and governmental structures can be a source of volunteering (Hustinx et al., 2010; Shachar et al., 2019). In addition, the hybridity of volunteering manifests itself "in the conflation of various motivations, discourses, and practices that can be discerned in the participation patterns at nongovernmental organizations" (Shachar et al., 2019, p. 8). The hybridity of volunteering is manifesting itself also via political action and work (Shachar et al., 2019). Thus, volunteer activities, international organisations, and state-led support are often intertwined in academic debates regarding the role of the third sector in dealing with challenges related to migration, constantly needing more understanding of the cooperation and coordination of different actors, including authorities (Garkisch et al., 2017). We approach volunteering via the process model (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Wilson, 2012). While two of the stages of the process, namely, antecedents and consequences, are widely explored in the literature, the experiences and practices of volunteering themselves remain under-researched (Wilson, 2012, p. 176).

Russian aggression and forced displacement in 2014 intensified the process of creating social networks, informal coalitions which, as a result, formed a space of 'weak' ties (Granovetter, 1983). Participation in such coalitions became a tool for overcoming mistrust and a mechanism for building social capital, through the formation of ties between representatives of different social and status groups including state institutions and business. The paper addresses the hybrid character of volunteering in Ukraine via its relations with business, communities, social welfare, and state authorities. We argue that the character of these relations impacts the state of the civil society role in addressing issues with displacement in 2022.

Volunteering in Ukraine after Euromaidan

Pre-2014 studies in Ukraine, such as Phillips' study on women volunteers, showed that "the dismantling of the social society net, and the revamping of economic institutions" made social activism, especially in the form of mutual

aid associations "possible and necessary" (Phillips, 2005, p. 508). Some studies reflected, though, on the relatively low level of volunteering despite the political freedoms in Ukraine in that period (Kamerāde et al., 2016). However, between the 2004 Orange Revolution and the start of Euromaidan protests in November 2013, Ukrainian civil society made a 'qualitative leap' and started seeing itself as "a fully-fledged actor in the reform process and demands its inclusion in policymaking" (Solonenko, 2015, p. 220). Maidan 2014 was a pivotal moment that strengthened solidarity among Ukrainians. While some third-sector groups demonstrated a transfer of social and human capital to the situation of mass displacement (Worschech, 2017), many organisations active today and providing help to IDPs were created at the very beginning of the conflict, their support arising out of a spontaneous offer of help (Drozd, 2017). Channell-Justice considers the rise of volunteering in post-Maidan Ukraine as a part of neoliberal governance and democracy that includes "a shifting relationship between governing and the governed" (Channell-Justice, 2022, p. 15). Many informal groups established during Euromaidan later became formal organisations (Krasynska & Martin, 2017).

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) index of sustainability of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) of Ukraine recorded an increase of the institutional capacity, financial viability, advocacy campaigns, service provision, and public perception of CSOs in 2014 (CSO SI, 2014, p. 16). The 2020 index showed that CSOs in Ukraine benefit from a relatively high level of sustainability, just under most of those in the Northern Tier countries (Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index [CSO SI], 2020, p. 15). The rat increase in involvement in various forms of volunteering in the context of Russian aggression, war, and occupation has taken place in Ukraine against a background of consistently low rates of membership in formal civic organisations (at 14–17%) (Ukrainske suspilstvo, 2020, p. 449). As Shapovalova and Burlyuk noted, "the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine emerges as a key factor shaping civic activism since the Euromaidan" (Shapovalova & Burlyuk, 2018, p. 28). The volunteering activities included assistance to the military, community support, mobility support (to assist people with mobility issues to cross border controls), and support to IDPs, among others.

The third sector became a significant factor of an agency that both supported IDPs in Ukraine in becoming 'assets' to their communities and cultivating self-reliance (Uehling, 2021), sharing knowledge, and social capital (Novikova & Shamileva, 2017). Volunteering played a significant role in supporting communities in war-torn territories of eastern Ukraine (Stepaniuk, 2022) via "pooling resources and consolidating solidarity needed to solve common problems and work for the benefit of community growth" (Syla, 2018, p. 154), and promoting a dialogue with different stakeholders. As a result, as Jarymowycz states, during the first stage of the Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine volunteering became "the most trusted societal institution and a space where ideals around state-society relations were being reimagined" (Jarymowycz, 2019, p. 131), though volunteers did not intend to replace state functions. From the legal perspective, at that time Ukraine did not have special legislation that would provide policies for IDPs.

At the start of the invasion in 2022, Ukrainian society responded to the rapid demands related to evacuations and providing support to displaced people in extreme conditions of war. Most, or as some analytics mentioned, virtually all humanitarian aid in Ukraine "was organised and implemented by local actors, including some 150 existing national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), church groups and some 1,700 newly created local aid groups" (Stoddard et al., 2022, p. 3). We argue that it is not a new phenomenon, as our study demonstrates how volunteering in a context of internal displacement before 2022, in its broad 'hybrid' sense, became an agent of social change and impacted social policies at local and national levels.

From spontaneous help to the large-scale institutional cooperation: the hybrid character of volunteering at the start of the displacement

Volunteers were the main support group during the first phases of forced displacement in 2014. Some of them were IDPs, and some were representatives of host communities neighbouring the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. For instance, 'Donbas SOS' was founded in 2014 as a hotline used for the quick coordination of help for injured people. As of 2019, the organisation had five coordinators and around 40 volunteers for the hotline; also, there was a network of regional volunteers in Donetsk, Luhansk, and 14 more oblasts of Ukraine. Another organisation, 'Station Kharkiv' got its name because of the specificity of its work. Its volunteers were at the railway station to meet people escaping from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions consumed by war. The organisation's volunteers provide help to IDPs, such as in searching for places of residence, or providing advice regarding all possible questions from families forced to rapidly leave their homes for an indefinite time. Just in the period from June till December 2014 'Station Kharkiv' managed to find places of residence for 30,000 displaced people. "All money was from sponsors and concerned citizens of Kharkiv", according to the local mass media: "The authority didn't help either with money, or with places of residence for refugees, or with catering arrangements" (Vesti.UA, 2014). Indeed, the state social protection system was not ready for such mass internal displacement, and in most cases, their role was restricted to the preparation of documents for allowances to be received by the separate categories of IDPs. There were not enough resources and technologies for the social assistance of the displaced people (Semigina & Gusak, 2015).

IDPs provided examples of 'organic' place-based leadership (Lough, 2021) gathering and distributing resources necessary for relocation and humanitarian assistance of the forcibly displaced. In Mariupol, one of the respondents explained why she, together with the other volunteers and NGOs, assisted in moving 1,200 people from the district which she had left a few months prior to the start of the war:

> I know that in my house, in my apartment block, a whole family is living. They came; they have two children. We greet everybody; we walk in the street on the weekend, meet. All of us can get into such a situation; we don't

> know what is going to happen to us tomorrow: that's why I started doing this. How can one do differently? You are a human, that's all.
>
> (Interview, Mariupol, 2017)

The increase of mutual assistance was observed not only in the south-east of Ukraine near the area of military actions, but also in other regions. Here is confirmation from a respondent of help provided for a number of IDPs, mainly children, living in one of the northern regions:

> I arrived and got to know that we had a group [of IDPs] here; there were children among 180 people from Donetsk…. I went to the local school and got acquainted with the management. I asked them to make an announcement at a school and [asked people] to bring anything they had at home…. And gradually everybody started to bring, bring, bring…. Then, people started to come, approximately 80 people [per day].
>
> (Female, 40–50 years old, 2017)

The spontaneous efforts were very soon supplemented with more organised support. The International Organization for Migration, the United Nations Office for Refugees, Danish and Norwegian Refugee Councils, the Red Cross Society, Caritas, and a range of other international establishments started monitoring the situation in Ukraine and targeted assistance for separate categories of the Ukrainian IDPs, very often by means of projects by local communities and NGOs.

The complexity of the situation required equally complex logistics and legal and financial expertise. To share information and expertise, some volunteer groups started supporting each other. This cooperation resulted in flexible and complex NGOs, which included a variety of volunteer groups as independent and autonomous units. One of the representative of the All-Ukrainian NGOs, described the origins of their organisation this way:

> We have our accounting and central office in Kyiv, of course, because it is more convenient to interact with our government and all sorts of organisations there. But we have branches in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, Odesa, and Kharkiv, everywhere else! [Organisation name] was therefore set up to provide legal and administrative support to volunteer organisations, in essence…. So this is where it all started – the volunteer initiatives that were there – they started joining [Organisation name] when they did not yet have a legal entity of their own.
>
> (Interview with authors, 2018)

Euromaidan and the outbreak of war in 2014 was the point of sharp activation of volunteer activity in Ukraine. In these conditions, the hybrid character of Ukrainian volunteering was clearly manifested, both in the different motivations of people who came to understand the need for volunteering, and in the processes of creating large-scale networks of interaction, which formed at almost all levels, including

both informal networks, NGOs, business, government agencies, and international organisations.

Volunteering in a challenging context of the blurry legal framework

In Ukraine, the activity of non-profit organisations of different types (civil associations, political parties, charitable organisations, religious organisations, associations of apartment building owners, trade unions, and so on) is regulated by special laws (GCC, n.d.). However, the specificity of the initial spontaneous reaction of active representatives of society had the intensive character of initiatives with little knowledge of the legal framework.

The tense expectation of the state's response to such activity, on the one hand, and the need to legally formalise all the transactions with all those involved in volunteering, on the other hand, led to the emergence of volunteer aid for volunteers: "In fact, we had planned that we would help them create this legal entity, our lawyers would help them write the charter, register the organisation and so on, and so it turned out" (Representative of All-Ukrainian Civil Society Organisation, 2018).

Still, voluntary associations faced inflexible systems at different levels and confronted established procedures and rules. The lack of legislation that would legalise this activity, and also provide clear mechanisms for publicity and accountability, has put volunteers in a peculiarly uncertain position.

The study participants mentioned that they were willing to cooperate with the Ukrainian Tax Service but could not produce documentation that could be considered by the tax authorities. At the same time, such kinds of informal economy are widespread in Ukraine: as the recent National Bank of Ukraine study demonstrated, nearly a quarter of Ukraine's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is from the shadow economy (National Bank of Ukraine, 2020). Therefore, it was not a surprise in our research that due to the shadowy nature of some of their activities, businesses were often interested in paying in cash from personal money rather than transferring money officially.

In 2017, more than 80% of requests for means provision for the humanitarian needs of Ukraine have not been funded (Metre et al., 2017). Despite the constant lack of resources, even from the international actors, the local organisations have been improving within the limits of the possible, based both on their own developments and on skills received by means of training and experience exchange with the foreign partners. Because of the involvement of the international organisations, who brought better methods of working with IDPs, as well as resource possibilities from the third sector getting stronger, the quality and diversity of the services provided has been gradually increasing. The public reaction to the different problems faced by IDPs became quicker and more efficient as a result.

In general, the institutional environment, which includes the peculiarities of the previous development of political systems and their contemporary institutional frameworks, forms a specific configuration of volunteering. Including new subjects, often unexpected, in volunteer activity, further emphasises the hybridity of volunteer activity and points to the complexity of the theoretical distinction of

assistance to the needy depending on the subject of the aid. We often see mobile, fluid, situational interactions between individual leaders, volunteer groups, NGOs, businesses, government agencies, national and international donors, and political organisations. The configuration of these interactions adapts to the need and, therefore, is unstable. As a result, the understanding of the logic of creating spontaneous partnerships in conditions of uncertainty, rather than proven cooperation schemes, becomes more critical for volunteer activity.

Interactions between voluntary sector and authorities: new spaces of trust and cooperation

The survey of representatives of 138 NGOs in Ukraine, carried out within the scope of the 'Ukraine's hidden tragedy' research project in 2018, showed that the forced displaced persons more often received the following services: consultations regarding employment (81%); psychological support (79%); arrangements for free time (67%); assistance in renewal of payment of allowances and pensions (58% and 53%); and help with finding a place of residence (49%) (see methodology in Kuznetsova & Mikheieva, 2018). In most cases, NGOs and volunteers were forced to deal with multifaceted case management: as a rule, people who asked for help had the burden of a whole set of problems which could not be solved separately. For instance, lost documents caused restrictions in the search for accommodation and employment. Older adults with suspended pensions could not pay for the accommodation, especially if they did not have any other support. To react quickly and efficiently to the IDPs' needs, volunteer groups and NGOs took on a whole range of interactions between the population, civil society, and the state, building relationships and communication which did not exist before.

Our research revealed that the key forms of interaction between volunteers and state structures after 2014 were about advocacy for IDPs' rights; development of strategies to solve key problems of IDPs both in cooperation with authorities, civil organisation and media; informal meetings and lobbying of interests of both affected categories of population and different stakeholders that solve their problems; active influence, motivation, and training of representatives of the state authorities in writing and submitting projects for international funding; and incorporation of certain types of volunteer work as a function of the state body.

Such interactions quickly uncovered structural problems with the decision-making processes at the state level. For example, in an interview during our study, a representative of an NGO that was organised by active people from the war-torn territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts described their experience with the Ministry for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories Internally Displaced Persons of Ukraine[1] as follows:

> We have signed a memorandum with the ministry and our hotline now works in such a way that we cover all consultations. If there are problems on the ground, we pass on all the information to such an organisation as the IDP Adviser. Well, these are mainly pension issues, social issues – they communicate

> with the departments. And if there are systemic problems, we pass it on to the ministry. But again, the ministry says it will refer this to working groups. And it passes it on to the working groups. I am, for example, one of the coordinators of the working group, that is, in fact, we are now passing it on to me. The ministry says: we don't have anybody to deal with this. Thus, in fact, the ministry is in the scheme, but it is not working.
>
> (Representative of an NGO, 2018)

This means that NGOs supporting IDPs not only helped to coordinate and inform the work but were the key agents in 'getting things done'. Systematic joint activities among the state, NGOs, and international organisations have generated experiences, on the one hand, and a critical approach towards state policies, on the other. Because of their flexibility and willingness to learn, voluntary organisations, which became a space for active representatives of local communities and IDPs to join efforts together, quickly adopted the experience of international organisations and converted it into active action. For example, one of the charitable funds became one of the key leaders of the civil society sector in the field of migration in Ukraine. Interviews with representatives of this organisation, many of whom were recruited locally, in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, revealed that they had already elaborated standard procedures for litigating typical situations of rights violations. These activities have significantly mitigated the impact of discriminatory political decisions against people affected by the war.

The rise of such activities, their visible and public nature, has gradually begun to work as reputational and social capital. A research participant from one of the NGOs helping IDPs shared the experience that wearing an NGO's branded T-shirt and a badge often helped in communication with banks related to IDPs:

> … when we come in a T-shirt and with a badge, yes, and when we can just come in an ordinary T-shirt and see which is more effective. When we come in our work T-shirt, with a badge, the bank staff start doing their job a little bit better, that's what I wanted to say.

Right to Protection had the same experiences while communicating with social welfare services. All of this has had a significant overall impact on the way state agencies deal with their clients. The understanding that a situation of rights violations would not go unnoticed forced officials to act strictly in accordance with laws and procedures. This increased the general competence of public officials and also created a new culture of public services. After all the public debate about the rhetoric of the state representatives in relation to the IDPs and the population of the occupied territories (see Chapters 2–3), government officials clearly acknowledge the people as the state's primary value.

Where the correct procedures were followed, representatives of volunteer groups and civic activists initiated innovations that aimed at improving the quality of public services, both by actively encouraging the authorities to seek additional sources of funding (writing grants, projects, budgets) and by making small improvements

to the service delivery process. As an activist of one of the NGOs supporting IDPs shared in an interview with authors in 2018:

> When there were queues at the social welfare department, where people were standing really for three, four and five days to get an appointment with a specialist, well we… have crushed it. [There is now] just a hotline. A person can call by phone and make an appointment, so that he/she does not have to stand for three or four days…. Elementary simple, but it cost three months of work.

Direct cooperation played an important role in this regard. The low civic engagement of the Ukrainian population before 2014 was due to a lack of trust in its effectiveness (for example, Kamerāde et al., 2016). This, in turn, acted as a self-limiting factor: distrust in effectiveness prevented people from trying to engage with authorities to achieve any impact. However, speaking about a broader context, as one of our studies has shown, the shift from reflection to direct action radically changes the situation (Mikheieva et al., 2020). A survey, conducted in 2020 in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson oblasts, demonstrated that about 40% of the respondents have tried to solve their problems via contacting local authorities and enterprises, signing petitions, or participating in volunteer activities (Mikheieva et al., 2020). Most of them assessed their actions as effective. The emergence of success stories has, in turn, encouraged the spread of such practices. However, the business sector, not the state, was the main partner for providing volunteering activities and, in many cases, the boundaries between business and NGOs were blurred.

Ultimately, understanding the diversity of volunteer activities and the networks of interaction that ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of assistance allows us to move away from the traditional opposition between volunteers, businesses, international organisations, and state response to urgent social needs. In this case, volunteerism, due to its hybridity, proved to play the role of a mediator that links different levels of response to social needs and ensures close interaction between different actors in assisting IDPs.

The role of business in organising aid and engaging with the third sector

The focus in our interviews, not on the status of the organisation or volunteer group, but on the specifics of their activities, has broadened the understanding of volunteering. Given the specificity of activities, the boundary between NGOs on the one hand and small- and medium-sized businesses on the other was blurred. Business representatives could act in very different roles at the same time. They could ask NGOs for help in implementing their social projects, initiate their own volunteer projects, be members of NGOs and volunteer groups, or create their own NGOs. As a representative of one NGO pointed out during an interview in our project in 2018:

This intertwining of roles and functions can be explained to a large extent by the common civic position of both NGO and business representatives, which

made them act primarily as representatives of one national project and only then as representatives of different spheres of activity. For example, after 2014, Nova Poshta sent large parcels free of charge to volunteer organisations. Nova Poshta cooperated with all the volunteers. The initiative came from them. You had to register to get promo codes for free shipping. One promo code allowed one poisoning to be sent weighing, I think, up to three tonnes. This was not a contract between two legal entities. Hundreds of volunteers all over the country used this option.

The specifics of interaction between NGOs, volunteers, and businesses in providing assistance to people affected by the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine were that representatives of business structures did not expect any 'dividends' from their donations and often preferred to remain anonymous donors:

> In all reports and public actions, we named the project donors and thanked them for their help. It is very difficult to explain that neither the volunteers nor their donors were expecting thanks at the time. Many even preferred anonymity. So many times they brought us trucks with food, winter clothes, hygiene products, and when asked 'from whom was the help?' they preferred not to name it or joked off: 'from people!'
>
> (Representative of an NGO, 2018)

In a situation of social demand for emergency assistance, the hybrid nature of volunteering became apparent: business people provided assistance to volunteer and civil society organisations. As one of the representatives of an NGO working with women stressed in the interview in 2018:

> When Rybinske was shelled, it was necessary to help the families with some losses, which they lost, well, everything. And then the business got involved. Basically, we know these people, some of them are members of NGOs, for you to have an understanding. And these people joined and calmly worked, everything is fine, and completely for all these families. And there are many such examples.

However, this anonymity had another side. Often, the reluctance to identify themselves or -officially transfer money was due to the specifics of Ukrainian business, which combines official and shadow activities. The same informant mentioned:

> This is a common Ukrainian problem and another big problem is that seventy, oh, I'm putting it very mildly, eighty percent of our business works, let's say, partly 'in white', partly 'in black'. We even had a situation, I'll tell you, for example, we need to hold an event, the person says: 'I am ready to help you'. I say "well, transfer the money to the account of the organization, we have our own accounting", but he says 'I'll give you cash', we say 'we do not need cash'… no, I can not do it, I say, okay, you will make the purchase,

there was a children's event, we need to buy all sorts of goodies, we also needed to give small prizes for these kids. He just bought and brought it, he said: 'well, I'm done, but…'. But officially he does not want to.

Cooperation between business and the civil sector was based on trust and informal relations, often bypassing the law. Due to the speed of response to problems on the one hand and the specifics of Ukrainian business on the other, most interactions were not documented in any way.

An expert survey of 50 representatives of small- and medium-sized businesses and 51 representatives of the civil sector in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in November–December 2017 showed high counter-interest in cooperation (UCU, 2018). The interaction in most cases was assessed as positive, and participants rarely talked about failures mostly after additional questions. Business often blamed civil society for imitation of activity to attract grants ('grantmaking'), lack of financial transparency, low professionalism, and unwillingness to speak to business in the language of well-prepared projects and estimates. NGO representatives refused to be a launching pad for political activity for businessmen, a resource to fight competitors, or a structure to avoid taxation. But overall, the need for cooperation outweighed the possible risks.

According to the data received, 82% of NGO representatives and 66% of business representatives noted that cooperation between business and NGOs should be carried out on a regular basis; 16% of NGO representatives and 26% of business representatives noted that such cooperation could be one-time if the need arose. 2% of NGO representatives and 8% of business representatives could not express their opinion. None of the respondents chose the answer: "No, there is no need for such cooperation". The survey revealed interest in cooperation, which was declared as mutually beneficial, bilateral and complementary. NGO business was primarily expected to provide material and resource support, while NGO business was expected to provide information, consulting support and practical experience in civic and charitable activities. The expert survey also made it possible to establish the degree of familiarity of business representatives with NCO activities. In contrast to declarations about the need for cooperation, the level of knowledge of successful examples of cooperation was many times lower – 17.66% of NCO representatives and 20.4% of business representatives knew nothing about such cooperation; 29.4% of NCO representatives and 28.6% of business representatives knew very few examples of such cooperation; 43.2% of NCO representatives and 36.7% of business representatives knew about such cooperation, but not enough; and 9.8% of NCO representatives and 14.3% of business representatives knew many examples of such cooperation.

However, 73.3% of the businesses surveyed indicated that they could name NGOs whose activities they considered effective. Subsequently, they were asked to name these organisations and indicate what they like about them. The result was a set of indicators by which business evaluates the effectiveness of NGOs – a high level of self-organisation, effectiveness of assistance to target groups, ability to support civic and business initiatives, ability to maintain tolerance,

and mutual understanding in the society. 52% of the surveyed businessmen indicated that they have experience of joint implementation of NGO projects, 8% were only sponsors of NGO activities, and 40% had no experience of cooperation. NGO experts confirmed this trend – 52% of the respondents confirmed the experience of cooperation with business, 35.4% indicated that cooperation was limited to sponsorship, and 23.5% indicated that they had no experience of such cooperation.

The experience of joint activities was manifested in the implementation of civic initiatives (51.6% of business representatives and 68.3% of NGO representatives), educational projects (51.2% and 54.8%, respectively), and social work (36.6% and 48.4%, respectively). Among other types of interaction, experts singled out projects to develop urban infrastructure, public spaces, provide social and psychological assistance to victims of war and forced displacement, as well as projects in the field of culture and art.

The specificity of this interaction between business and civil society was that cooperation was built between unstable institutions – volunteer groups in the process of their institutional development, as well as small- and medium-sized businesses, whose activities in the territories close to the war zone had a high level of risk. However, both found unique and flexible models of cooperation, which resulted, among other things, in the spread and consolidation of the culture of philanthropy in Ukrainian society.

The 'St Nicholas' reindeer' project is one illustration of how practices of beneficence were spread and reinforced. In 2017, a group of volunteers initiated this project. They collected letters to St. Nicholas, in which children living in war-affected Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts wrote about what gifts they dreamed of. Then, a list was formed from these letters and anyone who wished could take on the purchase of any of the gifts on the list.

> The children wrote letters. All the letters were read, sorted and scanned. An Excel spreadsheet was posted on the Internet, an appeal was published on social networks and on our website that we want to implement this project, sort out the children, who can help who.
>
> (Representative of All-Ukrainian Civil Society Organisation, 2018)

Volunteers offered potential donors seven options for possible participation – from disseminating information to direct volunteering in delivering and giving gifts, as well as open or anonymous financing of the action. The charity action united everyone – ordinary people (who bought gifts for children according to their wish lists), representatives of organisations and enterprises, representatives of business structures (for example, the publishing house 'Ranok' gave a batch of board games for children of different ages to 'Ukrainian Frontiers', and the online store chain 'Rozetka' sent several boxes of tablets and cell phones for children). This case illustrates how people gradually became involved in volunteer and charitable activities. The professionalism of civil society organisations and their reputational capital reduced the risk of mistakes, while the

involvement of businesses created a positive example and a sense that such tasks were feasible.

International organisations: cultural transfer of attitudes and mechanisms

An understanding of the specifics of Ukrainian volunteering cannot be full without taking into account the processes that have taken place in society as a result of the influence of international organisations and foreign funds in Ukraine. The presence of foreign donors in Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union gradually created a group of people who adopted new patterns of behaviour and began to speak a new language of democracy. The Revolution of Dignity and the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine was a factor that greatly intensified these processes. The situation encouraged many people to put their knowledge into practice.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine showed that under extreme conditions "virtually all humanitarian aid in Ukraine was organised and implemented by local actors, including some 150 existing national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), church groups and some 1,700 newly created local aid groups" (Stoddard et al., 2022, p. 3). As assessed by the authors of the express report prepared as part of the programme Humanitarian Outcomes in May 2022, most international organisations, with their considerable financial and human resources, were unable to provide the flexible and rapid response that volunteer groups were able to do, rapidly building logistics and other networks outside the civilian sector (e.g. engaging businesses to fund projects and initiatives in war situations). And it was the activities of national NGOs and volunteer groups that were crucial in the first months after the full-scale Russian invasion (Stoddard et al., 2022). However, this level of volunteer involvement could not emerge from scratch. From this point of view, the previous period associated with the events of the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 and the start of the first wave of Russian aggression against Ukraine in the same year is very important for understanding the transformations that have taken place in Ukrainian society.

The object of donor assistance often balances between the alternatives of becoming dependent on external influences and transfers of ready-made models of relations on the one hand, and growing to their own autonomy, authority, and capacity on the basis of their own knowledge and experience (Oleinik, 2018). The study of volunteerism as it unfolded in Ukraine after 2014 partly gives us answers as to what role international donors played in it. Our interlocutors, representatives of international organisations, described their role in Ukraine as follows:

> I think, in terms of modelling and acceptance, giving a new way of looking at things, sometimes it's helpful for the local people to see. Also certainly we can bring some resources. So I think our role is social and economic for the people in the communities. I think that's it. I think we are just models of accepting people as they are.
>
> (Representative of International Organisation, 2018)

International organisations, with their organisational culture and values, played an important role as a kind of guiding example. In the course of their activities, people became increasingly aware of their agency and reliance on their own strengths.

> Social cohesion is both a contribution to the development of people and the prevention of such conflict situations, which has emerged in the East. What we call resilient, resilient community, when a community is so united and so aware of its values, its identity, it is able to defend itself against any external manifestations, whatever they may be… many people say that if we knew that communities are a force, things would be very different. How it would have been is all a subjunctive mood, but what people note is a change in their mentality, in their consciousness, in their attitude to other people, to problems in the country, to problems in their region, not only political, ideological, but also economic and social. People are changing and changing their attitude to life for the better.
>
> (Representative of International Organisation, 2018)

However, to what extent did these declarations correspond to reality? Interviews with volunteers allow us to highlight several important mechanisms that were subsequently very important from the perspective of civil society's first response to a full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Situations of Russian aggression and forced displacement in 2014 intensified the process of creating networks of interaction, informal coalitions. Participation in such activities, collaborations, and logistical aid schemes became a tool for overcoming mistrust and a mechanism for building social capital and formation of ties between representatives of different social and status groups.

> Yes, we can say that we have such an informal coalition, 10 organisations together with internationals. This is exactly on advocacy issues. Yes, we understand that these are those who work in Kyiv and work systematically. These are us, 'Vostok-SOS', Right to Protection, 'Krym-SOS', the Danish Refugee Council, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the UNHCR, a UN mission sometimes joins us.
>
> (Representative of the NGO working with IDPs from eastern Ukraine)

The complexity of the situation at this stage was that the transformative activities of international foundations were being relayed to actors whose activities were "still in the early stages of their development" (Oleinik, 2018). Our interlocutors from charity sector often emphasised this processual, rapid development in their interviews:

> International organisations are very, very much working in Zaporizhzhya oblast until now. Initially it was like from a book. Humanitarian aid, sanitary hygiene, food products, and then we had integration measures, then trainings. Now we are, I think, that we are at the development, the development

> of the civic society, that is much supported. Initially UNHCR took over a lot of functions, helped a lot.
>
> (Representative of an International Charitable Foundation, 2018)

However, the tensions that began to emerge in the process of intensifying activity and interaction were also noted. The object of criticism was the rigid framework of engagement, which limited the scope for local initiative and created dependency on donors. The donors' lack of understanding of the local context and the excessive universality of their knowledge and procedures has also been the subject of critical reflection. As a representative of an international charitable foundation mentioned:

> This project is supported by the state structure of Poland and there is a very strict control: how many consultations were conducted, how many hours, it's all counted in percentages in Excel, people just don't have time to provide psychological help themselves, they are very much in numbers. There are constant reports with photos – it's very overloading. Sometimes these are donor requirements, that is, they have their own analysis of the context and needs, so they can make recommendations, but these recommendations can often be perceived by the organization as a mandatory condition…. If there is a good expert, they [civil society organizations] can argue and be more flexible, that is, prove that it is not the case now. Some cannot argue this difference.

The rapid development of civic initiatives unfolded in the context of their lack of resources and authority. In this respect, the presence of international organisations and their interaction with local actors became an additional instrument of influence for local activists. In situations where local actors lacked their own authority to effect change, the authority of international organisations was used as an additional resource. As one of the NGOs activists stressed in an interview: "Yes it's UNHCR, they always put together coordination meetings and if it's UNHCR, everyone always comes … introduced us to each other".

Initiative groups and civil society organisations depended not only on resources but also on formal conditions for receiving grants. These conditions were often general and did not take into account the nuances of the local context. One of our interlocutors, who had managed to unite a network of independent volunteer initiatives into a single flexible organism, summarised this problem as follows:

> Primary donors prefer to deal with serious and reputable organizations with a long-standing reputation. The vast majority of NGOs in Ukraine do not have this. Especially since the reputation of our country, due to the high level of corruption, is not very good. But, for example, Caritas, International Red Cross, UNICEF, UN Refugee Agency will not raise any questions. Organizations that have existed for decades. We also have a good reputation, but we

> do not exist for long, and perhaps in ten to fifty years potential donors will also stop asking questions.
>
> (Representative of All-Ukrainian Civil Society Organisation, 2018)

The history of many civil society organisations and volunteer groups in Ukraine, especially those specialising in assisting IDPs, begins in 2014. Therefore, a large number of them simply could not meet the 'five-year positive reputation history' requirement. Consequently, support for many such organisations was limited. They could not expect to receive sufficient funding to ensure their sustainability. The policy of 'small grants' often operated according to the principle of 'water in the sand' and created scepticism in the society towards initiative people as 'grant eaters'.

On the other hand, the inability to obtain significant funding due to formal constraints has played an important role in building experience of partnerships and networks of mutual support among activists at the local level. The presence of proactive people willing to solve socially important problems created an environment in which some initiatives spawned others. In general, all of this shaped the experience of charity and agency. This, in turn, ensured that quite a number of people moved from understanding the issues to practical assistance to those who were in need.

Overall, we can see that the role of international organisations in the formation and development of civil society in Ukraine has been significant. However, the process of interaction between international organisations and donors on the one hand and 'active citizens' on the other has not formed new dependencies and hierarchies of power in Ukraine. In the face of a full-scale invasion, Ukraine's flexible mutual aid structures and civil society organisations were able to provide an immediate response to the needs of society in extreme circumstances. In doing so, civil society has taken on assistance to war victims as well as non-specific functions – addressing security issues, protecting territorial integrity and supporting the army. In this sense, civil society in Ukraine has in fact identified itself with the state and is actively involved in maintaining its functions.

Conclusion

This chapter contributes to a critical perspective in understanding volunteering as a hybrid phenomenon (Hustinx et al., 2010; Shachar et al., 2019) within the process model, in the overlooked context of internal population displacement caused by war in low- and middle-income countries. We argue that 'pure' characteristics of volunteering are not effective in the context of the blurred legal framework for volunteering activities and the urgency of the response to the displaced population's needs that established organisations or authorities could not cover. Spontaneous volunteering in a time of a war and protracted displacement, as our study demonstrated, can become a crucial actor not only for the urgent humanitarian support of the displaced population, but hugely contributes to shaping relations between different stakeholders including authorities, third-sector organisations and international sponsors, IDP themselves, and designing new policies.

In Ukraine, volunteering manifested in spontaneous actions at the beginning of the displacement in 2014, reacting to urgent needs for evacuation and humanitarian help, and later in the work of NGOs established to provide further support to IDPs for several years. Moreover, volunteering activities were associated with business and political activities and provided an intermediary connection between IDPs, social welfare, and banks. This form of volunteering does not fit within the perception of volunteering in its 'pure' characteristics.

First, we argue that in response to the rapid character of the events such as Russia's war on Ukraine, civil society including IDPs was able to consolidate quickly and respond to both urgent humanitarian needs, but also to work with the business sector and the state on more sustainable solutions for the IDPs. Businesses (in most cases, these are small- or medium-sized businesses, as large businesses prefer to work with their own charities) saw volunteer groups as professionals to whom they can entrust and delegate social work. And trust, in turn, encouraged volunteers to care about their reputation and make their activities as open as possible. In a context of social upheaval and awareness of the state's considerable lag in its response, professionals who entered volunteering often saw it as an alternative to the unwieldy state machinery, and as an opportunity to implement projects that they could not bring about within the already existing structures.

Second, a key focus on the process of volunteering allowed us to talk about how volunteers and voluntary organisations created new forms of integration, cooperation, and discourses and ultimately contributed to social transformation. The focus on process has allowed us to move away from the duality between spontaneous and formalised volunteering. In the Ukrainian context of war and forced displacement, we could observe hybrid volunteering practices and strategies, some of which transformed into stable and formalised activities. However, both organised and spontaneous volunteering activities had a significant impact on IDPs: both providing urgent humanitarian assistance and achieving changes in legislation such as mitigating some barriers in providing pensions to people from occupied territories. We argue that, on the one hand, the voluntary sector compensated for the lack of necessary welfare policies, while on the other, it established and supported the agenda of the protection of IDPs' political and social rights.

The complex and flexible work of volunteers in Ukraine before 2022 involved efficient logistics and management, built on trust and informal connections, making use of sponsorship funding, and was publicly open to provide accountability for communities. Such activities are built on the involvement of a wide range of participants. This widespread involvement of people in charitable activities created a feeling of engagement and solidarity that is crucial during the war and displacement (see also Gilmartin, 2023). We suggest that, since 2014, volunteering has shaped new practices including collaboration with different stakeholders. However, especially in the current geopolitical and internal political context, there can be reservations regarding the level of political reforms related to efficient and developed volunteering as they require "an adequate change in the quality of democratic institutions" (Soboleva, 2020, p. 162). The legal framework for volunteering in Ukraine is still quite fragmented and lacks clear pathways for transforming spontaneous

volunteering into full-time professional activities. This increases pressure for the activists who must navigate the complex legal, political, and business environment. A limitation of the combination of our research methods is that we could not capture the full diversity of volunteer activities in the context of the first wave of Russian aggression. However, delving into the volunteers' individual perspective allowed us to go beyond registered organisations and look at volunteering through the lens of its individual and situational nature at its inception, and through the lens of key stages in volunteering and related issues.

Further research is needed to explore some simulations within the voluntary sector. As there were no formal systems of accountability for volunteering activities, one might suggest that some third-sector organisations did not have enough of the expertise, training, and background checks which are common in other contexts (for example, Twigg & Mosel, 2017). The case of Ukraine also provides important insights about the grassroots character of social support when state-funded welfare is weakened by economic decline, war, and neoliberal policies.

The strategy for Ukraine's recovery after Russia's invasion needs to engage with all the experience from the voluntary sector developed since 2014, including one developed by IDPs themselves. Ukraine needs to be ready for "a constructive use of war experiences" (Simić & Milojević, 2014). Likewise, the organic and place-based leadership that the third sector in Ukraine has demonstrated towards IDPs since 2014 could be considered as one of the pillars for the post-war reconstruction. Still, it is crucial to develop an adequate welfare system that would respond to the essential needs of those who are in need, so the third sector could provide independent support rather than compensate for the lack of vital support from the state.

Note

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7 Living through violence

(Invisible) trauma and the changing of mental health approaches

Introduction

War is always an embodied experience, whether we talk about death, injuries, or witnessing violence and experiencing fear from shelling, patrols, and the broken 'texture' and disrupted rituals of everyday life. War and forced mobility lead to a range of mental health reactions that depend on gender, age, personal situation and other factors. The effects of war and forced migration affect both individual mental health and the well-being of the whole family (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017).

We consider stress and mental health as part of the embodiment of war following feminist geopolitics (Chapter 1). Emotions are closely related to a range of spatial scales (Davidson & Milligan, 2004). It is also crucial to consider affective atmospheres which are "shared, relational and collective phenomena, and as such they cannot be reduced to overarching namings, subjective emotions or as conjured up in isolation" (Fregonese & Laketa, 2022, p. 7). Since 2014, those who lived in or stayed in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts found themselves in a state of limbo and a violent atmosphere. The institutions meant to protect citizens could no longer be relied upon. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated that different actors of self-proclaimed 'republics' have detained from 4,300 to 4,700 individuals, including not only persons who were fighting on the side of Ukrainian government forces but also pro-Ukrainian civilians. Most of the detentions in 2014 and in the first quarter of 2015 lacked any semblance of legal process and often involved torture and/or ill-treatment (UNHR, 2021, pp. 12–13, see also Bielousov et al., 2015). This situation is similar to the oppressive conditions of some Latin American cities which create "citizens of fear", where ordinary residents face unpredictable risks, and institutions "no longer guarantee the minimal right to move about or to be free from physical harm" (Rotker, 2002, p. 17). Those who face displacement experience what Delaney called "de-subjectivation" since "the bodies of the displaced are seen as objects operated on by outside hostile forces" (2004, p. 848). The loss of control over one's body can be considered via Mbembe's understanding of necropolitical situation, which also includes a loss of home, loss of political status (Mbembe, 2003; Round & Kuznetsova, 2016).

Emotions, experiences, and affective atmospheres impact well-being which we approach as 'intra-active', following Smith and Reid's (2018) understanding of the role

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of space as one of a significant catalyst of well-being which is seen in its (in)stability. Therefore, methodologically we took a non-representational approach to well-being, as the stories addressed below were not probed by any specific scales but appeared within the research participants' narratives about their experiences which reflect a lot of stress. We utilise a sociological approach to focus on understanding the relationships between social disadvantage and health (Aneshensel & Phelan, 1999; Scheid & Horwitz, 1999). Meyer et al. (2008) distinguish between stress caused by social disadvantage which include experiential stress and structural stress. Experiential stress is impacted by the events and conditions which limit an individual's capacity to cope while structural or institutional conditions affect disadvantaged populations via various forms of discrimination and inequality. While Anjum et al. (2023) focus on people in a situation of displacement, we also analyse the situation before and during forced displacement (Kirmayer et al., 2011), as many of our participants experienced direct and indirect life threats which contributed overall to the rise of fears and impacted well-being.

The impact of spatiality on living conditions before and after displacement is affected by proximity to military actions and the likelihood of meeting with militants and other people in power. Personal factors include specific events which affected people, including loss of family members and friends, witnessing or experiencing violence, and pre-existing health issues. Social factors are comprised of social status and intersectionality. The institutional factors include policies towards displaced people. While focusing on these factors helps capture the multiscale impacts of war on people's well-being, we argue that the war has created a situation of 'de-subjectivation', questioning the citizenship rights over one's body. This has affected both those who remained in the occupied territories and those who have been displaced.

Since almost all participants, despite two to three years passing after their displacement, were still experiencing stress, some suffering from nightmares, depression, and constant fatigue, we tried to find ways to convey their experiences to drive meaningful change and provide policy recommendations regarding mental health. Therefore, we collaborated with psychologists and conducted a large-scale survey of internally displaced people (IDPs) and people who have not been affected by displacement in Ukraine to compare the level of anxiety and depression and look into the utilisation of supportive networks and services.

Chapter 5 explores the traumatic responses to life under war and occupation from spatial and atmospheric perspectives. It then addresses the structural and institutional stress factors affecting IDPs. Following this, we focus on the experiences of volunteers and mental health professionals, not from a public health perspective, but by viewing the war and displacement through the lens of personal and professional challenges and coping mechanisms in situations of uncertainty and limited resources.

'Even if I don't get killed out there, my heart can't take it'

Shelling has become part of daily life in many cities and villages in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts since 2014. Even in a time without active hostilities its presence

'in the air' and the lack of any guarantees of safety were triggering fears and anxiety. As a woman from Donetsk in her 60s shared:

> Our flat is near the railway station, respectively the airport. All the sounds of shooting, bombing… Everything was audible. It was scary. I had prepared a bag with my documents… People live there. But I couldn't. I was scared. We, in our neighbourhood… there are a lot of enterprises [warehouses] where all these installations are standing and shooting. I can hear the sounds coming out, but it's so powerful, I'm scared. I kind of get the sense that they're outgoing. I don't hear any incoming, thankfully. But that doesn't make me feel any better. I'm really scared. I'm just afraid that I'm going to die of fear. Even if I don't get killed out there, my heart can't take it.

Still, she tried to 'normalise' looking at how young people still carried on with life: "I guess you can get used to it, though, because when I see women with little kids walking in the courtyard during the day, I think – if they're not afraid, why am I afraid? I guess one can get used to it". However, such a mental tactic did not help to cope with fear, and she and her family moved to a small town in the government-controlled area of Donetsk oblast in July 2014.

The fears and stress from the military actions and atmosphere of terror significantly impacted physical health and was aggravated by structural issues, such as the barriers in receiving pensions as we mentioned earlier:

> Well, for pensioners, what difficulties can there be – sometimes the pension wasn't paid, it varied. For example, I had an operation due to all the stress and nerves; my heart started hurting, and they fitted a pacemaker. All the money I had, everything I could, I paid for the operation. This affects pensioners who save money for funerals, for medicine, for treatment. It's very difficult for elderly people, pensioners, when it's hard to buy medicine and there's not enough money for it.
>
> (Woman in her 70s in Donetsk)

She could not leave Donetsk for various reasons, mainly because of the apartment she owned and the lack of any resources to rent property in the government-controlled areas of Ukraine. Still, her daughter with young children had to flee to Donetsk for safety, which left this woman without any care and support. However, such a choice was common as families had to prioritise the most vulnerable. In other chapters of this book, we have already written about the problem of lack of resources which prevented the relocation of a whole family from conflict-affected territories in the absence of evacuation procedures in 2014 and sufficient support for displaced households to survive. This often led to the phenomenon of torn families, frequently such decisions were made in favour of the younger members of the family, especially those with children, while the older generation both sacrificed themselves in this situation

and maintained a familiar way of life, not wanting to break away from their home walls and familiar conditions. Still, the lack of family support resulted in increased vulnerability.

While women are generally more affected by the fear of physical and sexual violence in public spaces (Pain, 1991), the conditions of armed conflict exacerbate these fears, leaving no opportunities for refuge in private spaces either due to the shelling. 'Scared' was one of the most common terms shared by our participants (mostly) women remembering their experiences during 2014:

> I was very scared; I was in the cellars. There were [shells] flying over my head. I was very scared. My daughter wrote on the phone: 'Mum, move!' And I moved, I was scared that there would be more to come.
>
> (Woman in her 60s, Yasynuvata – Kharkiv)

Still, there were tactics, coping mechanisms (de Certeau, 1984) which some individuals employed that included, for example, being able to enjoy the company of each other and make jokes. A woman in her 30s shared how she went to pick mulberries early in the morning with her 14-year-old daughter:

> You are afraid of the first shell, but on the second, on the third… I'm telling you once again, when Luhansk was bombed, it was bombed – the shells were falling not there somewhere, but they were falling, here they were falling. We only went out, then we ran into the house. Once I went with my daughter, we went at four in the morning, I said it was still quiet, I said: 'Let's go, the mulberries are ripe, let's eat'.

The line between 'normal' and 'abnormal' became blurred when people forgot about the war for a while and tried to enjoy themselves. However, the atmosphere of terror could engulf space in a split second:

> We went, there was a tree, we climbed up, ate mulberries, and came back – the bombing started. And I ran: 'Imagine', I said, 'my daughter, they're going to kill you now, I said, and they'll bury you like that: blue hands, blue face'. And at that moment we had a kind of humour. It's kind of abnormal, yes, to run with a 14-year-old child and talk like that.

Many people tried to reproduce their common everyday rituals such as going to work and shopping, taking decisions to leave at the last minute:

> But I was scared. To be honest, I didn't believe I would leave until the last minute. I went to work, these tanks were driving by, and it seemed to me that there were cellars there; it was nonsense.
>
> (Woman in 40s, Luhansk – Odesa)

The stress experienced by people articulated in the streets and in social media contributed to the increasing atmosphere of fear and violence which has also been an important factor pushing some people to flee:

> So, I wasn't happy with this one being shooting. I think it's not very good for the psyche. And the tension was created by the media. People were very nervous; it was so bad. I wanted to protect my family from this and that is why I offered to move to another region.
>
> (Man in his 30s, Luhansk – Siverskodonetsk)

Some of the interviewed IDPs shared their experience of being detained and tortured. A man in his late 20s from Luhansk who fled to Odesa, shared:

> On the 31st of July, there was a raid on people who were pro-Ukraine and I was detained for three days by 'the LNR' militants. My fingers and hands were broken; I was tortured. I am a traitor there. It's like this, you can speak for hours about all these horrors, passions, how people were killed, tortured, maimed.

The intensification of conflict and tension in society pushed people to restore 'clarity' in terms of political views. In such conditions, the political choice became crucial even for those who were never interested in taking any political 'sides' and/or demonstrating their position. Consequently, what previously remained invisible and insignificant, in conditions of tension become a key for recognising 'ours' and 'others'. A series of pro-Ukrainian rallies took place in a number of cities in eastern Ukraine in response to the unfolding Russian hybrid aggression. Simultaneously, those with pro-Russian positions actively demonstrated their position as well. The violence spread in the streets, sometimes even simple conversations could lead to harassment if they touched on politics. As one of the female participants in her 30s from Luhansk stressed:

> People lived, it would seem, all the same; someone was even able to disguise himself well. He was like that, in society he was respected. But then came the moment when this aggression, these military actions, gave an opportunity to show all the anger and aggression without hiding.

As aggression unfolded people were forced to make difficult decisions for themselves. In the absence of state evacuation procedures and the non-recognition of the situation as external aggression and war, people could only rely on their own resources. Accordingly, they had to make difficult and painful decisions about which part of the family should be rescued and moved out of the military conflict zone, and which part of the family could be left in the risk zone. A woman in her 70th from temporarily occupied territories of Luhansk oblast shared in 2018:

> My husband and I were caught in 2014 just there, under heavy bombing. We had our balcony bombed too. My sons-in-law sent their wives with their

> children [to the GCA], and all this went on. There was a kind of numbness. A mental stupor. And as for actions, I walked through the city under the bombing. I couldn't understand why, why and what was going on. I hoped that everything would calm down now, but no.

People reacted in different ways to the situation of the collapse of familiar life. Some fell into a feeling of 'numbness' and hopelessness, others tried to resist – as long as it was possible. The gradual seizure of territory was accompanied by a sense of acute anxiety about the loss of everything that had been built up with great effort over a lifetime. A middle-aged woman who moved to Svyatohirsk shared how her husband felt after their lost their entire house from the shelling:

> He sat there, a man in his mid-50s and sat on the floor and stupidly cried. Because he had spent his whole life building. We built a house with our own hands, we built a house for our son, in which he did not even have time to live (crying), he did not have time to live at all. Then I said to him, either we live on somehow, save our lives or if you want to die, then die, but we sent the child [away] earlier, because we were worried about him. I told him, you either [do] this or that, and he sat there crying. A man sits and cries.

The wife was the one urging her husband to live on. Flats, houses, jobs and careers, savings, social circles – all of this was crumbling before their eyes. Women often took the leading role in helping their partners to cope. The loss of an identity of a 'breadwinner' and 'a man who protects his family' was devastating for many. Men participated in the study rarely shared emotional experiences, possibly because of the perceived risks to 'lose their face'.

People were in a situation when they had to be in direct contact with armed men while fleeing the warzone, crossing checkpoints, having their bodies searched, harassed, when any confrontation could cost a life. Thus, displacement is a mode of de-subjectification (Delaney, 2004) as it puts people in a situation of dependency and fear.

Many of our interviewees spoke about waiting until the last minute, not wanting to accept the new reality and thinking that the old life would return in a short period of time. As one woman in middle age from Shchastya shared in 2018:

> I sat until the last, and then as it became scary, sitting, waiting and being afraid – there was no point. We hid in the basements, bathroom, toilet. I threw mattresses over the window, pillows, you know, it's like a wave, so that the shards did not fall on the children, then I threw mattresses over the children. And I was sitting in a cupboard, I have a small cupboard in the kitchen, so I was sitting there, and the children were in my room.

This postponement of the decision to move made the departure itself very difficult, which often took place under conditions of established military control over the occupied territories and required paying money to cross the checkpoints:

> But we paid a lot of money to be allowed to pass through their checkpoints and leave because we were not far from the line of contact. So, we were constantly being shot at. Cannons were standing under our windows and shooting.
>
> (Woman in 50s, Pervomaiske – Kharkiv)

The fear, panic, and anxiety for the health of children made some people feel numb and disconnected from reality. A mother in her 30s who fled from occupied territory to a safe city and then took a flight to one of the EU countries, found difficult to recall that experience though did want to share it:

> I don't even remember how I got on the plane. I was afraid for the child, to be honest, at that moment I was afraid to say it out loud [that he could be very ill], but for some reason, he didn't eat anything at all, he was rejecting everything. He weighed [so little with] just such a weak body. He couldn't stand on his feet (…) and this is, you know, as a mum, it is a crazy fear, it's just even, you don't know what to think about, how. (…) I was scared if I get a visa or not, that airport… I honestly don't remember well at all, like in a fog.

'We're not going to get away from that'. Intersectional impacts of displacement on mental health

When we started planning interviews with IDPs within Ukraine's hidden tragic project, we did not plan to ask about mental health, as our research mostly focused on coping. However, trauma and stress were among the key themes touched on by the participants. Moreover, this rather than language or ethnicity was one of the key distinctive features that made their experience so much different in comparison with the local population of cities and villages where they moved. As one of the women in her late 50s from Pervomaiske who moved to Kharkiv coined:

> I can guarantee you [I can pick out] up to 90% of the ATO-ers [military personnel who participated in the anti-terrorist operation] and identify displaced people. I see them. I see them by the pain that they have endured, by the traumas that they have shoved somewhere deep in there and they, let's talk like this, I haven't said this one for a long time. And they're just living with that trauma. We're not going to get away from that.

The long-term impacts of war trauma on an individual's mental health are influenced not only by their pre-war experiences but also by various social factors such as isolation due to limited social connections in the new place (Bernhard et al.,

2021; Solberg et al., 2021). Upon arriving in the host community people encountered various tensions and stresses associated with adapting to a new environment. This included dealing with bureaucratic issues, building new networks of contacts, and ensuring basic survival in a situation with limited resources.

Individuals had different resources and tactics to cope with displacement and the consequences of experiencing conflict and violence. This could include different abilities to adapt to the situation and find support or new acquaintances. Those who found the same level of employment and pay were able to cope better; however, such situations of 'success' were rather the exception to the rule, while the majority of IDPs faced the problem of one-stage poverty, which arises as a consequence of the forced nature of migration (Mykhnenko et al., 2022). That is often linked with mental health issues, studies in other contexts have demonstrated that displacement and violence-induced mental health issues have severe consequences on IDPs' ability for socio-economic recovery and often deepen the poverty trap for the IDPs (Moya & Carter, 2019). Still, employment was an important coping mechanism for people even when not providing enough means:

> And I, 0.25 of a full-time position, went to all the meetings of the department because I needed to go out, because I couldn't sit, I couldn't sit inside these walls. And there is also a psychological atmosphere at home, you know… And everyone thought that I worked there as a permanent employee.
>
> (Woman in her 40s, Luhansk – Lviv)

Trauma from the war and stress caused by displacement and living in 'limbo' affected people's physical health as well, preventing some people from working as this woman in her middle age shared:

> And when we moved to Odesa [from Kostiantynivka], he [husband] arranged to make kebabs. And I was getting sick from worrying, all this was affecting my health a lot. My blood pressure started to rise. Hypertensive second degree. Well. Anyway, a lot of illnesses were discovered. And now I am still kind of treated, I don't work.

The absence of relatives and friends created a feeling of uprootedness among the IDPs. Combined with missing the comfort of daily routines, this led to significant insecurity and vulnerability. People over 50 often found it more difficult, as finding a job at that age was more challenging. Additionally, since women at that age often focus on caring for both older parents and grandchildren, being away from them created a sense of purposelessness and unpredictability:

> When I left, I thought that I could practically adapt to any situation. So what, what if it's the same house, the same city, the same everything. But then a psychological wave of some kind of detachment, fear [comes]. You cling to your family and think that you are [alone], that there is nobody around. It's like your measured way of life and your attachment to your parents, to your

> relatives – it all breaks off abruptly, like a root, and you fly away, and you don't know what will happen to you tomorrow. That is why it is psychologically difficult to be a migrant, of course.
>
> (Woman in her 50s, Donetsk –Kherson)

She stressed that she understand the reasons why mental health support centres were created for IDPs and that psychological help is necessary. That has been echoed by another participant, a young woman from Donetsk who realised that specialised help is urgently needed:

> I just remember … when I first came to Berdiansk, [after] this week of shelling, then the [military] unit was taken there, I … can diagnose myself … I… I was hysterical, I was swearing, I mean I have some kind of nervous heightened state. I mean, I was a restless person, and I cried a lot…. This should be dealt with psychologically by specialists.

This state of limbo continued even after forced displacement and people continued to live with anxiety (Mikheieva, 2018). While finding it challenging on how to cope with this trauma themselves, the IDPs faced even more difficulties in attempting to help their children. Fireworks, noise, people in camouflage, car passing by – various things could remind them of shelling:

> When we came to Odesa, I'm telling you, the middle child is four years old, and he didn't know what thunder was, he had never heard it. But when the thunder started, he would fall into the bushes and say: 'Mum, they are shooting'. And if he saw guards in camouflage, he would say: 'These are bad uncles, they are going to shoot us now'.
>
> (Woman from Luhansk in her 30s, Odesa)

> I don't touch the topic of war [with children]. It starts [terror] with them right away. Yes. These explosions. This fear. At first, even when they came here, when a car would pass by, they were shaking. There was an explosion in the basement. A direct hit. My son was thrown against the wall. How he didn't die, I don't know. He was hit very hard by the wave.
>
> (Woman in her 50s, Pervomaysk – Siverskodonetsk)

While this research (unlike a few projects focusing only on women) had a sample which included an equal number of women and men, the latter were less open about talking of their emotions and health. So, instead, partners and adult children provided stories of the men's experiences. As a woman who fled Luhansk oblast in her late 60s, shared:

> My husband had his second stroke. Although he's a quiet man himself. Three people from our company, one of them has already died, and two of

> them – somehow, somehow, they got a stroke. Women are probably more resilient by nature. That's how it is.

The resilience of women was quite a common term repeated by the participants. New practices of fighting for the right to receive pensions and benefits from the state through overcoming bureaucratic procedures strengthened the discourse of 'victim' and 'object of assistance'. This role was more difficult for men than for women. A young member of staff of an NGO that was helping IDPs to receive pensions and benefits, interviewed within one of the projects, mentioned that, "Well, pensioners are somehow more, probably, women are more inclined to communicate with us (…) Maybe men, you know, sometimes feel ashamed to ask for help".

In situations where the role and function of women as the 'breadwinner' of the family increases, there was a redistribution of family roles. The latter is not painless for all participants in the communication – both women's expectations of men (which is often evident in interviews through emphasis on unexpected male 'weakness', male tears, helplessness, insecurity, etc.) and men's expectations of women (mostly manifested through rethinking their own roles and functions in the family, taking over the function of taking care of children, doing housework, etc.). It has not been easy for a young man who fled to Svyatogirsk to share that he has to take care of the child more than his wife now:

> I take care of the child more. She works more. I work at home, I do repairs, technical jobs. And she has… Well, what I have is not a permanent job (…). And she has a full-time job. I don't know. It's hard.

This significantly slowed down integration processes, leaving people alone in solving both domestic and psychological problems. People often lived in the mode of 'postponed life', which manifested itself in strong nostalgia about the past time, former place of residence and feelings about life. As one woman in middle age, displaced from Donetsk shared:

> So, everyone left, our family, my father, my sister and her daughter. They all left; they went to Chernihiv. But they want to come back, as it's hard for them there. It's hard in every way, I'll tell you. People were literally fleeing, and everything they managed to take, they took. There's just not enough stuff. My sister's husband has not been paid money for several months.

Being over 40 and 50 was especially difficult for women as it is harder to find a job at such an age in Ukraine because for a long time women used to have a retirement age of 55. A woman in her 40s from Donetsk who fled to Kyiv shared her concerns about starting a career again which echoes many of the other interviewees:

> There is no confidence in the future, not in the sense that I am not sure about my future, but what I was saying is that you just don't think about it, because it's scary for your future, because you are over 40. You have no home,

> nothing, and you have to start everything again at the workplace, when you were already established, formed, that is, you occupied a niche.

The new space in which people found themselves required integration efforts. Often, people who moved from large cities to medium and small towns were dissatisfied with the quality of services, lack of appropriate urban space and specific social and professional networks. This also became a factor slowing down integration, because in this case the non-acceptance of the fact of forced migration was further intensified due to the complex perception of the new space of the city, which required getting used to, mastering, accepting. This was also true on the contrary, when people from small towns found themselves in larger cities where the pace and scale of life was perceived as frightening, alien, and even dangerous for them.

However, some of the participants mentioned that after a while they started to get used to a new environment, especially if they felt acceptance from the community as in the case of a woman in her 50s who had moved from Pervomaiske to Siverskodonetsk :

> It seems to me that this war has had an effect on the psyche. And here somehow people are so friendly. And I'm used to it now. It's like a hometown. It's a long way to go. We're not used to it. And now I'm over it. I can sit quietly on the minibus. And before, when I got to the polyclinic to Smetanin, I got nervous, when will there be a stop? When will there be a stop? It takes a long time to go through the whole city.

Tension and confusion were manifested outwardly. People, without noticing it, were different in appearance from those who had no such experience. And this also required effort from the person who in the new conditions who had to gradually acquire the features of 'normalcy', become like everyone else, and escape from the tense field of visibility. Being together with other displaced people helped IDPs a lot to feel more settled:

> We used to see each other. Our eyes were different. We came here all scared, one. Secondly, we had to survive. We all had no idea where to go, what to do. We gathered in a bunch in Derzhprom, exchanged addresses. Then we just helped each other. You could see it then. Then I realised that I was different when people started asking me on the street for directions to some street. I thought, that's it, so I'm over it.
>
> (Woman in her 40s, Luhansk – Kharkiv)

Invisible trauma and affective othering

The use of warfare information methods and techniques at the initial stage of Russian aggression led to people affected by the war and forced displacement being perceived warily and often negatively in the host communities of their own country,

as we mentioned in other chapters. The local community did not acknowledge the sacrifices made by people from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts for their country, and the trauma and stress they experienced remained invisible:

> The general opinion among people is that if you are from Donbas, you are a separatist, so you went to the referendum, so you voted, so you were in favour of this republic, and now my children are suffering or someone is being killed because of you, and all that…. We empathise with these people, all of them, of course, all of them, but you have to understand that there is a war going on, so put your hand on your heart, not for Donbas, but in Donbas, that's all. And the person who lived there, somewhere in that place, which later turned into a front line, let's say, and was forced to leave, he sacrificed, well, a lot, let's say. It's a home, and a familiar place, I guess, here, and a job and all that. Well, and there are a lot of people from Donetsk, from Donbas, fighting, a lot of people. At least, I have to deal with such people a lot.
>
> (Man in his 40s, Olenivka – Dobropillya)

Moreover, some people were met with openly hostile attitudes. As a woman in her 30th who moved to Odesa shared:

> But Odesa is also very clear, someone feels sorry for you and says: "Yes, it's hard, you had to go through such an ordeal". And I even encountered this even in this foundation, when a woman came and said: "I am ready to take up a machine gun and shoot all the Luhansk–Donetsk people". I said: "Shoot me, I'm Luhansk – shoot me – where", I said, "where does such hatred come from?" Well, this is how I came to the conclusion that the most terrible weapon now is the post-media space.

Such encounters contributed towards "affective intensities of 'othering'" (Shaker, 2021). This, again, made some people feel 'inconvenient', leading to a sense of 'invisibility' and a tendency to focus mainly on close social circles made up of others displaced from the same areas. The 'geometry of power' (Massey, 1999) and everyday bordering and othering are additional lenses through which to examine how spatiality and mobility shape and reproduce restrictions and inequalities:

> We are not displaced, nobody needs us, that's all. Resettlement is when you move from a territory where you cannot stay due to a threat to your life, health, or activities to a more comfortable environment where the state protects you and takes on responsibilities. Here, it does not take on its responsibilities, it is on the contrary trying to practically get rid of you.
>
> (Man in his 20s, Feodosia – Kherson)

The pandemic and quarantine have worsened this problem: people are being denied their right to cross the border even when they can confirm their purpose is to

attend to important life events. The interviews show that in the occupied territory, neighbours work together to bury elderly people who lived alone. The psychological traumas experienced by IDPs about the deaths of loved ones separated by long distances and who are unable to attend the bereavement are devastating and once again form part of the complexity of the intimate geopolitics of bordering within Ukraine's war and displacement.

The mental health status of IDPs and their utilisation of mental health support

There is a need to study the effects of war and forced displacement in the long term. A systematic review of the publications on mental health in that context revealed that "mental disorders tend to be highly prevalent in war refugees many years after the war and resettlement" (Bogic et al., 2015, p. 28) including high prevalence rates of depression, PTSD, and other anxiety disorders five years or longer after displacement. Increased attention to the integration phase, including in the long term, is important for the recovery of the health and well-being of IDPs (Buchcik et al., 2023), which is important not only for forced migrants, but also for society as a whole.

Employing anxiety and depression measuring scales utilising GAD-7 (Löwe et al., 2008), PHQ-9 (Kocalevent et al., 2013), and hope (Snyder et al., 1991) after validation of the translation of those scales to Ukrainian and Russian via a pilot survey, we conducted a survey of 1,000 IDPs and 1,000 people in government-controlled areas of Ukraine (see methodology and full description of the results in Kuznetsova et al., 2019)[1]. A key finding from the survey is that 20% of IDPs and 12% of the general population have moderately severe or severe anxiety. The prevalence of moderately severe or severe depression was 25% of IDPs and 15% of the general population. This echoes other studies which demonstrated a 22% depression prevalence and 17% anxiety prevalence (Makhashvili et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2019) and partially a study on subjective well-being that showed significant differences between IDPs and locals in Ukraine before 2021 (Perelli-Harris et al., 2024).

According to our study, the mental health of women in respect to anxiety is more affected by displacement than men. Despite the high level of anxiety and depression among both IDPs and non-IDPs only 1.2% of IDPs and 0.3% of non-IDPs self-reported mental health issues. This demonstrates that in Ukraine people were often not 'mark' various conditions or emotions via the term 'mental health' and explain them via such terms as a 'bad mood', 'blues'. The situation is exacerbated by other health issues. For example, about half of IDPs self-reported difficulties with mobility comparing with 7.5% among non-IDPs which can be explained by the fact that in their sample there are more elderly people. Blindness and poor vision was self-reported by 7.4% of IDPs and 6.9 of non-IDPs and hearing loss by 6.1% of IDPs and 2.2. of non-IDPs. Struggling with mobility can be a significant barrier to seeking mental health support, as it makes travelling to appointments

difficult and much of the person's time may already be taken up by treatment for other health issues.

Only 21.7% of IDPs and 9.5% of the general population who have clinically significant anxiety and depression have tried to obtain mental health support. Most of those who receive professional psychological help did so only once. Women sought psychological help slightly more often than men. When mental health problems arise, the average person prefers not to seek solutions from specialists as only 2.8% talked to psychologists. Most of the informants preferred talking with friends (63.8%), watching movies/listening music (45%), walking/hiking (35.8%), etc. (see Kuznetsova et al., 2019).

There is a significant difference in levels of hope between IDPs and the general population, where there is higher level of hope. There is also a significant difference in hope between age groups with hope reducing as people get older – people 65 years old and older have a hope 39.2 (absolute score) while representatives of age groups young and middle-aged people between 47.7 and 47.2. No significant difference by gender were found. This once again demonstrate the negative effect of everyday struggles older displaced adults face during displacement (Chapter 3).

The invisibility of mental health problems was also due to the specificity of mental health culture in countries with a Soviet past, where psychiatry was not a help but a tool of stigmatisation and repression. Many people continued to be particularly reluctant to perceive mental health problems as something serious and requiring help and continue to fear diagnoses that are perceived as a lifelong stigma (Kuznetsova et al., 2019).

The mental health assistance was often spontaneous and chaotic, the 'entry points' for problem-solving were very different – from volunteers and pharmacies to seeking help from specialised professionals in medical institutions. Our interviews in 2018 with people working in the mental health sector, as well as with IDPs themselves, revealed a number of points that problematised accessing and seeking services. The financial vulnerability of displaced people themselves often closed them off from accessing quality professional services, while the available help raised fear and apprehension due to possible consequences, both in terms of health and in terms of possible increased stigmatisation. Mobile integrated response teams that travelled directly to settlements along the borderline and provided medical, psychological, legal, and counselling assistance to the affected population had a significant positive effect.

In relation to mental health, government policies can either reinforce stigmatisation by creating a persistent perception of IDPs as people requiring special attention in terms of mental health, or by imposing a range of restrictions on access to relevant services. In the Ukrainian context, for example, such restrictions were due to both the low financial capacity of IDPs after relocation and the limitations associated with the severance of daily ties and the loss of the opportunity to see a specialist whom they could trust and could be perceived as safe and more comfortable. Once again, war trauma was not something that could resonate with mental

health practitioners who never had experience in working with such cases. A 30+ man fled from Debaltsevo to Kharkiv whose mother was killed and left with severe injuries shared:

> Specialists [psychologists] cried. As soon as I began talking to them they started to cry and ask "just stop it". I say, "well, maybe you have to be fired and somebody else could help then?" (laughing).

Still, even when people have seen specialists and received some medicine to deal with sleep deprivation and overcome anxiety, the loneliness of displacement remained challenging:

> When we just arrived, we consulted a psychotherapist. We had some medicine. Because of this endless anxiety we did not sleep at all. And then we started to sleep, but then it became worse, and all three of us [interviewee, her husband and son] had medicine. We took it but our son still has anxiety and does not sleep well at all. There is no stability at all, it is all uncertain. Also, no people with whom you can just talk and share some memories. It is just an [older] age and difficult to make new friends.
>
> (Woman in late 50s, from Luhansk oblast, lives in Kharkiv)

As a result, some people tried to employ alternative copying tactics including escapist behaviours but also social activism, e.g. volunteering, religious communities' involvement (among support groups Evangelists, Adventists, Catholics were especially named). However, we cannot talk about the wide spread of religious practices.

Transformative effects of war on understanding of mental health support

Ukrainian society is undergoing significant changes in the field of mental health due to the simultaneous effect of a range of political, economic, social, and cultural factors. The obvious catalysts for change were the political protests in 2013–2014 that ended in the deaths of more than 100 participants. The start of a hybrid and then full-scaled war, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts led to a massive, forced migration of the population, caused an increase in military and civilian casualties, and the emergence of groups of people (both military and civilian) with disabilities from wounds and war veterans etc. The massive and simultaneous nature of the problems acted as a catalyst for rethinking the existing mental health system. The Concept for the Development of Mental Health in Ukraine until 2030, approved in 2017, outlines the key challenges in this area. This document reflects a redefinition of the concept of mental health, a shift from the Soviet repressive and hospital-based mental health system towards an understanding of the importance of preventive measures, addressing inequalities and facilitating access to services, etc.

These processes have resulted in the dismantling of the medical approach's monopoly and the emergence of new actors influencing the formation of new understandings of mental health.

The collective experience of death, injury, mass forced migration, and the constant tensions in society during the information war have all led to an increased focus on mental health issues. On the other hand, Ukraine's national health system is in the process of transformation. In 2017, the government of Ukraine passed the Concept of Mental Health Development in Ukraine for the period from 2018 to 2030. This concept focuses on increasing the visibility of mental health issues, overcoming discrimination against people with mental health problems and protecting their rights, decentralising service provision and strengthening the role of professional communities. However, the state system of mental health services continues to dominate, and the private sector is still small.

There are a number of socio-cultural as well as institutional factors behind this pattern of behaviour of the average person in the country. Our research revealed how the professional community and third-sector representatives involved in mental health issues view the degree of reform of the system on a voluntary basis and the obstacles that complicate the course of reform.

The majority of respondents note that issues of mental health in Ukraine became a significantly more popular topic of discussion after the social turmoil caused by a series of traumatic events, namely the events at Maidan in 2014, the beginning of the armed conflict, the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimean peninsula, the temporal occupation of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and the associated death and injury and forced displacement. The events of 2013–2014 can thus be seen as a borderline, after which a rethinking of mental health at all levels, from state policies to the practices of ordinary citizens, took place. As one of the psychologists working for Caritas mentioned, many people started to realise that there is a need for specialised help due to life-threatening events and loss:

> In general, even at Maidan, before the war, there was psychological assistance to Maidan victims – such as family circles, mutual support groups. This is what started to reduce the level of distrust in psychologists and form an understanding that mental health was important. People suddenly realised that they were different before a traumatic event had happened to them; they understood that something was happening – Maidan, war, displacement – or that they were witnessing some [violent] events. They understand that they are not what they used to be, but they don't understand what is happening to them.

The establishing of the Association of Specialists on Overcoming the Consequences of Psychotraumatic Events and the Ukrainian civic organisation Psychological Crisis Service enabled ATO veterans, displaced people and those who experienced violence during Maidan and aggression in Donbas and

Crimea to receive free mental health support. As one of the psychiatrist consultant shared:

> As a matter of fact, many things appeared after Maidan. Basically, Maidan was a trigger for many things, be it public or social sector, or health care. One example is the creation of the Crisis Psychological Service, which was organised by specialists, mainly psychologists and psychiatrists, to provide psychological support to the participants of protest and offering them assistance. It has now become the Association of Specialists on Overcoming the Consequences of Psychotraumatic Events, which has a wide network across Ukraine and works in the east of the country, providing psychosocial assistance to local population, IDPs and military personnel.

Experts discussed that the largest problem around mental health support in Ukraine is the legacy of previous approaches and structure which placed a strong emphasis on psychiatric care and in-patient care as the main method of treatment. This means the resources are misallocated as expensive in-patient care is not needed by many and, perhaps more importantly, people are afraid to engage with the system for fear of becoming institutionalised. According to the respondents, state institutions were too slow to respond to the extreme conditions posed by the of socio-political crisis and war; they were unprepared for the new mode of work and did not have the knowledge or experience needed. However, these problems go beyond mental health as it concerns the overall systemic problems of state health care provision:

> What does not contribute to mental health improvement? The bad organisation of the system and an insufficient level of specialist training, the level of health care in general – it does not help enhance mental health awareness and its cultivation at a proper level.
>
> (Psychiatrist)

Respondents also stressed the structural problems occurring in the interactions between different ministries, and the problematic redistribution of functions within state health care bodies, such as the irrational use of staff, work overload, the poor organisation of patient support systems and issues around the creation of appropriate medical records:

> With regard to veterans, it is the turf of the Ministry of Social Policy. They have information on where to go to get the assistance. This is something that state bodies lack when there is no interaction between ministries, between structures. There is no support and follow-up as if the clients had no official records.
>
> (Psychologist, NGO)

The state was 'lagging behind' in providing solutions in the mental health sphere is the reason for the rapid growth of the civil sector in filling the gaps between state

activities. However, this provision was often not undertaken in a professional way with public sector representatives generally aware of the danger of amateur intervention in such issues and thus quite often they faced a moral dilemma – the choice between provision of insufficiently qualified assistance or the unavailability of assistance at all. This awareness of the constraints created the demand for more active state response and intervention. As one of the activist from an NGO organised by IDPs stressed:

> And of course, if we had state level reforms, that would be wonderful. We cannot be engaged in the provision of specialised services, and they will not hire doctors, they will not make diagnoses, they will not hire psychiatrists as you need an actual mandate and right for that. NGOs are not engaged in this, and there is nowhere to refer this to. There are no ambulances, no psychiatric examinations are taking place in the buffer zone.

In the context of the intensification and diversification of mental health services provided by various organisations, questions were raised about the regulation of such activities and the creation of appropriate legislative frameworks. This is another area where we see the state was lagging behind the processes that are already taking place in society. On the one hand, this created situations of disjoint activities by various organisations, and on the other hand, formed new practices of collective pressure on state structures to provide victims with comprehensive social support as psychological help alone would not be completely effective amid other problems that are unresolved (such as lack of housing or unemployment). As one psychologist working in an NGO stressed:

> That is why there are services on the market that are unprofessional, manipulative and existing only for money making and building service systems in such a way that a client becomes dependent on the specialist. This is not how it should be. Such activity must be licensed. The only question is how it should be licensed and who should make a decision about it. This person must not be engaged in corruption. It is a complex process, it needs management. It is necessary but nobody knows how it will happen.

Case management is a very effective response to work with IDPs who have many social problems together with mental health issues; however, it is not a common practice in Ukraine yet. One of the mental health practitioners stressed:

> Besides this, as an expert I understood that psychological help alone was not enough because people needed to solve a series of problems. And then we implemented a case management method that provides comprehensive social support already … There is a multidisciplinary team working with it.

It must also be noted that the state response to these problems was partly driven by the level of public demand for such services; despite the scale of the issue in

Ukraine, demand, due to a number of social, cultural, and economic reasons, still remains low.

The traumatic nature of the work, especially in the first years of the war, and the often extremely difficult working conditions, has led to high levels of professional burnout. Often the work was exhausting, due to the scale of the issue, and the appropriate support was normally not available for the professionals. Given the number of people requiring treatment, there was insufficient capacity for professionals to have supervision or 'someone to turn to'; it was difficult to maintain appropriate boundaries with patients, given the often ad hoc nature of the treatment, and there was often little professional reward. The latter was due to the fact that patients would often not be able to have a full course of sessions (because some did not see the benefit, and some simply had to move to a different city or return), which meant that problems were often not fully explored and the benefits of the work were not visible to the professional. As one of the psychotherapists, an employer of one humanitarian human rights organisation mentioned:

> I meet so many people with a severe emotional burnout, who come from different spheres – from service providers who help IDPs to IDPs themselves. All the consequences of prolonged chronic stress become apparent. And if in 2014–2015 people managed to hang in there somehow – there were many breakdowns, many severe situations that were, however, associated with acute trauma, then in 2016–2017 it is rather a depressive state, bordering on nervous exhaustion.

For some, the professional burnout led to mental health issues and ultimately a career change, as was the case for one former psychologist we interviewed.:

> Well, I've lost my health, and I could not walk for two years. I paid a very high price. And I saw my family and my little child suffer as I was lying in my bed and could not get up. I realised that I would never be able to stand on my feet because nobody could cure me. Well, I do not want to experience it again. I want to do my job for a decent salary and spend my time there when I want it: I can, and I have been asked to. That's what I do. I mean something that does not bother me. I have my own resources. This awareness comes with time. I have done a lot for my country doing what I did, a lot during all those years.

Conclusions

This chapter focused on traumatic responses to life under war, occupation, and displacement, examined from spatial, atmospheric, and necropolitical perspectives. It demonstrates the intersectional experiences of fear caused by shelling, street violence, and the risks of detention and torture. The blurred line between what was considered 'normal' and 'abnormal', especially during the first year of the war, also contributed to an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Coping tactics of

'normalising' were quite common, as people tried to continue going to work, doing the shopping, or picking fruit. These actions helped for a time, but often postponed the decision to flee until the very last moment.

As there were no state-provided evacuation plans or guarantees of support in government-controlled territories, individuals were forced to make difficult household-level decisions – such as who would flee and who would stay. Women often took a leading role in helping their partners and families to cope, including caring for elderly parents. However, the survey revealed that women's mental health, particularly in relation to anxiety, was more adversely affected by displacement than that of men.

Individual reactions varied, ranging from forms of resistance (understood here as efforts to cope despite ongoing violence) to emotional responses such as numbness and feelings of hopelessness. The destruction of homes and the loss of predictability caused by ongoing violence left long-lasting trauma among those affected. Given the embodied experiences of losing both home and control over body via violence revealed through interviews with people in occupied territories, this condition could be described as a necropolitical situation, drawing on Mbembe's concept of the power "to let die".

We revealed how, even after moving to safe, government-controlled territories, displaced people's well-being was affected by various tensions and stressors – including navigating bureaucratic challenges, building new networks of contacts, and ensuring basic survival in a context of limited resources – often accompanied by the stigmatisation of people from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. This othering of displaced people and the 'invisibilisation' of trauma contributed to everyday bordering in government-controlled territories.

A nationwide survey conducted by our team in Ukraine in 2018 among internally displaced persons (IDPs) and those not affected by displacement revealed a significant gap in levels of anxiety and depression between the two groups: 20% of IDPs and 12% of the general population experienced moderately severe or severe anxiety. The prevalence of moderately severe or severe depression was 25% among IDPs and 15% in the general population. These findings echo international studies that show the long-term effects of war on the mental health of refugees (Bogic et al., 2015). The stress experienced by older displaced people in adapting to displacement, including fighting for their right to pensions (see Chapter 3), was shown to impact their level of hope, which was significantly lower than among other age groups.

The study also revealed a low uptake of mental health services among IDPs. We explain this through various factors, including the lack of a culture of addressing mental health in Ukraine at the time, fear of reinforcing othering, the lack of accessible and free services, and a shortage of professionals with expertise in working with civilians affected by war.

Ukraine's mental health support system began to transform in response to the challenges caused by war and displacement. The adoption of the Concept for the Development of Mental Health in Ukraine until 2030 marked a radical shift from the Soviet medicalised approach. In addition, associations focusing on the mental

health of ATO veterans and survivors of violence during the Maidan protests were established. However, interviews with professionals revealed ongoing resistance from entrenched structures and outdated approaches, as well as issues with the poor organisation and underfunding of the patient support system. While civil society organisations attempted to fill the gaps in mental health provision for displaced people, the traumatic nature of often unpaid work, combined with a lack of peer-to-peer support and recognition, frequently led to professional burnout.

Our research demonstrates the urgent need to address the mental health of those who lived through war, occupation, and displacement prior to the full-scale invasion. Stronger links should be created between institutional and private sector support, alongside a clear licensing system for those providing mental health services. It would be beneficial to support innovative, community-based, and culturally appropriate approaches to mental health. Crucially, gender- and age-specific approaches must be developed and widely publicised.

Note

1 We would like to thank Professor Jon Catling, the University of Birmingham, for contributing to the research design and quantitative analysis. The research has several limitations. First, the focus on assessment was limited to depression, anxiety, hope, and coping tactics. Second, it regards only the mental health of only adults. Third, because visiting the so-called 'grey zones' is against UK FCO advice, the research was not conducted there although via secondary data and interviews with practitioners we fully understand that mental health is very much affected there, and the access to health care and psychological support in these regions is very limited. Fourth, understanding the role of alcohol in mental health disorders and as one of the common causes of death, however, in this assessment we were not able to explore this issue in detail which will require a separate study. Fifth, because most of IDPs moved to government-controlled areas in 2014, it is impossible to conduct a retrospective analysis to ascertain the percentage of those who had clinically significant mental health conditions prior to their displacement.

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8 There is not yet a conclusion

Learning from the 'inconvenient' everyday experiences

'Inconvenient people' was the book's initial title to reflect the everyday struggles of residents and former residents of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts during the Russian aggression and war which started in 2014. The aim of the book is twofold. First, it serves as an act of remembering. It brings to light the memories of those who were displaced – often uncomfortable – as these recollections may be forgotten or may not align with national narratives. In interviews with individuals who were direct witnesses, participants, and victims of the events in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, there was often a sense of regret that their experiences of war, occupation, forced displacement, and integration into new communities were not fully understood or acknowledged. Second, the book presents a novel perspective on exploring everyday experiences of war, bordering, and (im)mobilities through the lens of 'inconvenient people'.

We elaborate this term drawing on theoretical understanding of invisibility (Le Blanc, 2021; Polzer & Hammond, 2008), epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), and uncomfortable geographies (Owen et al., 2022). We argue that this definition includes those whose voice is not heard or not recognised in public narratives and those who choose to be 'invisible'. So, being an 'inconvenient civilian' can mean to be either oppressed, controlled or to self-censor visibility in a scale of power geometry, where space and time are imbued by power (Massey, 2009). We employ agency in broad understanding of practices of open and 'hidden' resistance in a broad scale of highly risked actions against the occupational regime or advocacy for the IDPs rights in government-controlled areas of Ukraine, but also agency in risking the checkpoints or staying in occupying territories to provide care to older or ill relatives and various coping tactics to support own and family's well-being in challenging circumstances. In our study, we address war as an embodied experience, whether we talk about death, injuries, or witnessing violence and experiencing fear from shelling, patrols, and the broken 'texture' of everyday life. Thus, the book contributes to feminist geopolitics, which views civilians as 'embodied political subjects' (Hyndman, 2019), and to feminist war studies, which call for the study of civilians' lived experiences (Sylvester, 2012, 2013; Wibben, 2016).

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Adopting a critical border perspective, and feminist geographical approach (Chapter 1), we consider borders as always under construction both within physical and discursive spaces, including their relationships to everyday life. Displacement was one of the first manifestations of bordering before the checkpoints were established (Chapter 2). In Ukraine, control over borders and space was amplified because of the ambiguity of the status of the population from occupied territories. Not only did physical checkpoints become landscapes of technical control, but discursive landscapes of social power (see Chapter 1), including policies towards IDPs, which produced 'invisible' borders. The different spatial powers which are exercised in Ukraine, between the government and nongovernment-controlled areas, allowed the Ukrainian authorities to construct IDPs as occupational regime supporters, despite the extreme socio-economic marginalisation that many of them endure. This, in Collins' (1990) terms, is reflected in both structural and disciplinary policies towards IDPs (Chapter 2).

The checkpoints were not only physical borders but symbolic borders both in time and space: a territory before the hostilities, with predictable and safe social routines under the Ukrainian government, and the same territory during the hostilities, only later declared a territory of ATO, and where no one could feel safe, neither under the protection of the Ukrainian state, nor through reliance on the new regime. Although crossing the physical borders such as the checkpoints cost many lives, including those of pensioners, it was not only these physical borders that were violent. The power geometries and discursive landscapes within Ukraine's government-controlled territories also proved violent for some, prompting people to return to the occupied territories (Chapter 3).

The loss of home also makes the impacts of war and bordering long-lasting, and the inability to secure housing was often a decisive factor to cross the border again (Chapter 5). We talk about the traumas experienced across the mobility/immobility/borders continuum including the origin, flight, settlement, temporary, or permanent return (Chapter 7). In the case of Donetsk, we show how bordering and de-bordering affected the city, and the role and outcomes of re-decommemoration and everyday resistance (Chapter 4). The new bordering regime was reconstructing and dismantling various collective memories within Donetsk's urban space by instrumentalising memoryscapes associated with the Soviet era in Ukraine, symbolically incorporating them into Russia's semantic space, and removing elements that evoked the Ukrainian state from the urban landscape. This included the demolition of feminist art. Still, the research shows how the city's semiosphere remained heterogeneous due to the agency of its residents, who preserved memories of the pre-2014 city and sought to reclaim space through small acts or artistic resistance (Chapter 4). The atmosphere in cities under occupation, especially during the first two years of the war, blurred the understanding of borders as some civilians found themselves as 'citizens of fear' because of the potential for violence in the border areas (Rotker's term 2002). The situation which led some individuals towards the loss of control over their bodies, home, and political status fits into Mbembe's understanding of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003; Round & Kuznetsova, 2016).

Forwarding the embodied and intersectional perspective of internal forced mobility and immobility, the book further develops the approach of 'de-migrantisation of research' (Amelina, 2021; Dahinden, 2016). We explored the social production of 'IDPs', which included both the self-categorisation of people and how the state and international organisations created a static category of control which excluded considerations of intersectionalities and lived experiences (Chapters 2–3). We argue that the understanding of the vulnerabilities of displaced populations caused by war, persecution, torture, and protracted internal displacement before their actual departure is crucial. Therefore, we call for a comprehensive approach to studying the intersectional experiences of immobility. The book offers a more nuanced classification of people who remained in occupied territories, including 'supporters', 'collaborators', and 'former collaborators' of the occupation regime, as well as Russian passport holders who are unable to travel to the government-controlled part of Ukraine. There are also hostages of the occupation regime; 'stayers' who simply wish to remain; 'carers', or those unable to leave due to poor health or lack of financial resources; and people forced to flee from some parts of occupied territory to another for safety reasons (Chapter 2).

This book also fills a critical gap in the understandings of experiences of older internally displaced and 'immobile' people as they are overlooked in studies not only in Ukraine but worldwide (Hunter & Böcker, 2023), and often fall through the cracks of emergency responses according to the HelpAge international (Barbelet, 2018). We argue that the intersections of displacement with older age and disability, and the lack of state recognition of these different groups, in the occupied territories and among the displaced, together with the lack of economic resources for social policy, produced multiple forms of social exclusion. This included the lack of organised and accessible evacuation support, and affordable and appropriate accommodation and issues with pension and benefits. This ensured the dependence of many IDPs on social networks and volunteers. Chapter 3 demonstrates how pensioners, who constituted over half of all registered IDPs in Ukraine before 2022, often felt trapped by both physical and symbolic borders and faced issues around the receipt of pensions/benefits and finding accommodation. This all had significant impacts on the everyday experiences of older adults and people with disabilities, leading to some returning to the warzone or having to cope with extreme marginalisation. Accordingly, disability and limited mobility massively impact families' relocation strategies – separating some families on both sides of 'borders' and forcing many people to stay in occupied areas (Chapters 3 and 5).

The loss of home emerged as one of the most pressing challenges for IDPs in Ukraine. The forced internal displacement since 2014 exposed critical shortcomings in Ukraine's housing infrastructure, including a lack of social housing, a strained rental market, and heightened social tensions and stereotypes towards residents from occupied territories. We argue that the loss of home represents an emotional epicentre shaped by displacement, longing for home, and uncertainty. By examining IDPs' experiences in securing housing and advocating for their rights, we provide a critical focus on how neoliberal housing policies have shaped their everyday lives. Ultimately, housing remained a decisive factor in

shaping IDPs' decisions about resettlement in government-controlled areas of Ukraine (Chapter 5).

The book also contributes to the understanding of volunteering in the context of internal population displacement caused by war in low- and middle-income countries. Engaging with the perspective of volunteering as a hybrid phenomenon, we argue that 'pure' characteristics of volunteering are not effective in the context of the blurred legal framework and the urgency of the response to the displaced population's needs. We showed how spontaneous volunteering in the time of a war became a crucial actor not only for the urgent humanitarian support of the displaced population but hugely contributed to the shaping of relations between different stakeholders including authorities, third-sector organisations and international sponsors, IDPs themselves, and in the development of new policy responses (Chapter 6).

By exploring the traumatic responses to life under war, occupation, and displacement from spatial, atmospheric, and necropolitical perspectives, we demonstrated the intersectional experiences of fear caused by shelling, street violence, and the necessity of making decisions to flee. It has been revealed that even in a place of safety, IDPs well-being was affected by various stressors, including navigating bureaucratic challenges, the building of new networks of contacts, and ensuring basic survival in the context of limited resources – often accompanied by the stigmatisation of people from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. A nationwide survey conducted in Ukraine demonstrated higher levels of anxiety and depression among IDPs compared to those not affected by displacement, as well as a low uptake of mental health services. Analysing the challenges experienced by mental health professionals in a context of transforming mental health approaches in Ukraine, we revealed how often the poor organisation, the traumatic nature of often unpaid work, combined with a lack of peer-to-peer support and recognition, frequently led to professional burnout (Chapter 7).

So, this book, by bringing this critical approach to the study of forced internal displacement and immobility, together with a feminist geopolitical perspective, with a particular emphasis on the role of everyday experiences, forwards a novel perspective on studying the social consequences of war and conflict. A policy implication of this is that the lived experiences of those displaced Ukrainian citizens in 2014 have made them valuable sources of knowledge for those Ukrainians whose first encounter with the war occurred in early 2022. Their experience of preparing 'alarm suitcases', tactics on how to respond to shelling, and knowledge of basic rules of behaviour during the occupation made them more prepared in the conditions of a full-scale invasion. However, their own experience of accumulated unresolved problems with housing, poverty, and the ambiguous attitude towards them in society had prolonged negative consequences. For example, in the context of a full-scale invasion after 24 February 2022, state-organised evacuations were accompanied by the active refusal of some people to leave their homes in the war zone. Often behind this refusal was people's knowledge of the problems faced by the first wave of forced migrants after 2014, who failed to find a solution to their housing problems and faced stigmatising practices. However, there is a positive

aspect of this knowledge as well. The role of Ukrainian IDPs is noticeable in the development of Ukrainian volunteering and in defence of their own political, social, and economic rights before 2022.

From the perspective of humanitarian response and policy change, the experiences of civilians who endured war and displacement in Ukraine between 2014 and February 2022 are valuable in two dimensions. First, in the migration policies towards Ukrainian refugees in host countries which need to address pre-departure issues and traumas caused by war, displacement, and negative everyday experiences of IDPs that became refugees (e.g. Kuznetsova et al., 2024; Mikheieva et al., 2024). Second, the policies towards IDPs in Ukraine who have been displaced twice – in 2014 and as a result of the February 2022 phase of the war (Howlett & Dvornichenko, 2025) need to consider both their agency and vulnerabilities, especially in relation to mental health and loss of home.

It is critical to add visibility to the internal displacement given that the number of IDPs worldwide reached 83.4 million (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2025) and that many refugees experienced protracted internal displacement before crossing international borders, the lessons from Ukraine can be valuable in addressing similar challenges in different contexts.

By way of a conclusion

There was lots of friendly chatter over a dinner in Chernihiv, where some people from Luhansk already knew each other, during a summer school we organised in June 2017 for IDPs. Reminiscing brings back some fragmented images – a woman in a lovely sky-blue dress, the life and soul of the party, gathers everyone for a walk. A book, kindly given by a poet from Luhansk. A flip chart with advocacy projects of the participants. An engaging and inspiring coach who fled Donetsk in 2014 but does not talk about it much. Beautiful white churches and monasteries, creaky steps in a belfry. The trees are still bright green but started to collect some summer dust and fading in places. Cosy streets of a city where memorials remind about atrocities and occupation during the Second World War. Little we knew that the war will come to that city again. We still remember the words of one of the co-organisers of this summer school from Chernihiv: 'the North of Ukraine seems overlooked – we are not attractive for funders; all the attention is to the East. Guys, the Belarusian and Russian borders are just few kilometres away, wake up!' Little we knew.

The woman in a sky-blue dress had to flee to Poland with her children in 2022. Later she will move back to Ukraine ('I feel more comfortable in my motherland'). Some will fight the Russians. Some will also fight the narrative – those numbers which divide the population on before and after 2022, and every time when someone commemorate in social media 500, 1,000 days of war, providing a correct number starting from the Spring 2014. Invisibility should not prevail.

The stories of people in this book are an important reminder about loss and trauma caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine that began 2014, affecting more than one generation of residents of Donetsk and Luhansk oblast. These stories

are inconvenient for Russia who constructs a different narrative, and again, invisibility should not prevail.

We are finishing this book in May 2025 after the minerals deal between Ukraine and the USA has been signed, but the prospects of sustainable peace yet are still not clear. However, Ukraine's recovery is coming and therefore, it is important to ensure that the recovery will be as inclusive as possible which is a hard task considering the further neo-liberalisation of the country.

Neo-liberalisation will lead to a significant reliance on private institutions and the resilience of individuals in addressing challenges related to well-being and coping with the lack of personal economic resources. Still, one should not overexploit people's resilience. The resilience of people who went through the economic hardship in the 1990s, the Orange revolution, Maidan, and survived the war in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, were forced to flee is incredible. There is immense solidarity and mutual support, ranging from checking in on friends' elderly parents to creating NGOs that advocated for the rights of IDPs. While we demonstrated this in the book, we argue that civilians who survived the war and were displaced before 2022 were often left to rely on their own resilience due to their 'inconvenience' stemming from the society's polarisation in regard to the eastern regions affected, everyday bordering, and the overall unpreparedness of social and economic institutions to support them.

There is a need to understand the hardship of protracted living in such a highly bordered and hostile space (both physical and symbolic). Thus, the main call of this book is simple – people must be placed first. They should come first, regardless of their origin, gender, or age, to ensure that those who stayed in Ukraine have their voices heard, and those who left feel welcomed to return and contribute to the country's recovery.

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Appendix

List of research projects used as data sources for this book

'Ukraine's hidden tragedy: understanding the outcomes of population displacement from the country's war-torn regions' (Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC, UK) Development Grant – PaCCS Innovation Awards on Conflict and International development, 2016–2018, led by Irina Kuznetsova). The study included the in-depth and semi-structured interviews with IDPs from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the Crimean peninsular (n = 104) in the Lviv, Kyiv, Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, and Mariupol. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international organisations, and central and municipal authorities (n = 25). These oblasts were chosen because the majority of IDPs live there, and informants were representative in terms of gender and age, considering that the demographic characteristics of IDPs are different from the general population with a bigger share of pensioners. Not only people with the official status of IDPs were selected for an interview, but also those who had fled but were not registered as IDPs. Additionally, two focus groups were conducted with IDPs from Chernihiv, Zhitomir, and Sumy oblasts in Chernihiv in 2017 (12 and 9 people) and a survey made of representatives of 138 NGOs working with IDPs in Ukraine.

'Present Ukrainian refugees: Main Reasons, Strategies of Resettlement, Difficulties of Adaptation' (November 2014 – February 2015, British Embassy and Ukrainian Peacekeeping school. Project was a part of the project 'Ukrainian borderlands conflicts resolution and prevention strategies'). The project involved 24 in-depth interviews with IDPs from the Crimean Peninsula and 46 in-depth interviews with IDPs from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. At this stage, internally displaced persons in Ukraine mostly chose large cities, which were seen as more promising in terms of finding jobs, housing, and assistance. So, we focused our attention on the main large cities – Dnipro, Kharkiv, Odesa, Kyiv, and Lviv. The average length of the interview with each participant was about two hours.

Sub-project on cultural adaptation of refugees in Ukraine and surrounding countries, project 'Cultural contact zones' of the University of St. Gallen (Switzerland). The project also involved in-depth interviews with people who were displaced by the outbreak of hostilities and left for different regions of Ukraine (n = 42),

Russia (n = 5), European countries (n = 5) or remained in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (n = 5). The field phase of the study covered June–September 2016.

'Women and war: everyday life in the occupied territories' (supported by CIUS). This project involved conducting 50 in-depth interviews in spring 2017 with women who were then living in the occupied territories in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. A wide range of participants were represented among them – voluntary military personnel (military medical workers, volunteers, journalists working in the combat zone and ordinary women living in the region. Also, 13 in-depth interviews were conducted with women who left the occupied territories including military personnel, volunteers, and journalists.

'Stepping out of the shadows. Impact of the non-registration and non-recognition by the Ukrainian authorities of the facts of life in nongovernment-controlled areas on the roles of men and women in public and domestic life' (PAX, The Netherlands, 2018). The fieldwork included 45 in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of three groups: residents of the occupied territories of Luhansk oblast (16 respondents), internally displaced persons in the government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (17 respondents) and experts (12 respondents). The experts are represented by the staff of the international organisation 'Right to Protection', who provide legal assistance to people at checkpoints and in the government-controlled areas of Luhansk oblast, representatives of local authorities and self-government, and civil society activists. Project geography: Stanytsia Luhanska (the only pedestrian crossing point to the occupied area of Luhansk oblast), the towns of Shchastia, Siverskodonetsk, Sviatohirsk, and Sloviansk.

'Mental health and well-being of internally displaced people: copying tactics and resilience in conflict-affected societies' (UK Wellcome Trust Institutional Strategic Support Fund, the University of Birmingham, 2018). The sample of the survey included 1,000 IDPs and 1,000 people aged 18 and over who were not affected by the war, who reside in the 24 regions of Ukraine under government control. Furthermore, interviews with mental health professionals and IDPs were conducted.

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