

Ordinary People Under Extreme Life Conditions: War and Displacement in Contemporary Ukraine

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Broken Life-Worlds, Displacements, and Life on the Frontline

Since 2014, when Russian aggression against Ukraine began, leading to the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, I have been conducting, in collaboration with colleagues, a series of studies focusing on different groups of people affected by the war. These include: internally displaced persons (IDPs) with their own strategies of migration and adaptation; people residing in the occupied territories, who are witnessing a transformation of their everyday lives; and residents of the so-called grey zone, the territory between the two conflict parties, beyond their jurisdiction, and therefore, where no one is responsible for the lives and wellbeing of people who live there.¹ In all these cases, the focus is on

1 This research took place as part of the following collective projects: “IDP Ukraine: Ukraine’s hidden tragedy: Understanding the outcomes of population displacement from the country’s war torn regions”, University of St. Gallen, 2016, <https://idpukraine.com/> and <https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/about/ukraines-hidden-tragedy>; “Cultural contact zones”, Catholic University of Ukraine, 2014–2015, <http://sociology.ucu.edu.ua/projects/displaced-cultural-spaces/>; “Present Ukrainian Refugees: Main Reasons, Strategies of Resettlement, Difficulties of Adaptation”, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2017–2018, <http://sociology.ucu.edu.ua/projects/contemporary-idps/>; “Women and War: Everyday Life on the Occupied Territories”, <https://sociology.ucu.edu.ua/projects/proekt-zhinka-ta-vijna/> [all accessed: 25.08.2020].

the people whose life-worlds have been ruined, and who have found themselves in extreme circumstances of war, forced migration, and/or under occupation. Together, all of these studies could be referred to as “the average person’s life under extreme circumstances”.² In the context of this research, a range of social phenomena arise, which deserve careful attention since these concern the recognition of people’s rights to full life and protection. These social phenomena include stigmatization, social exclusion, social deprivation, discrimination, practices of othering, and adaptation.³

Ordinary people who have found themselves in extreme circumstances somehow try to restore the normality of their lives. At the same time, they face certain barriers both at the level of reactions in the society and at the institutional level. Internally displaced persons are limited in their rights. All Ukrainian IDPs had been deprived of the right to vote at local government elections until 2020. IDPs from Crimea are still defined as non-residents by the country’s bank system, and have limited access to banking services. IDPs from the occupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions still have to undergo additional humiliating procedures of identification and provide detailed personal information (including answering questions about their loyalty to the Ukrainian state), which ultimately creates a feeling of their inferior citizenship.

2 Oksana Mikheieva, “Menschen im Ausnahmezustand: Der Wandel der Alltagswelt und Erklärungsmodelle des Krieges im Osten der Ukraine”, in: Roman Dubasevych, Matthias Schwartz (eds.), *Sirenen des Krieges. Diskursive und affektive Dimensionen des Ukraine-Konflikts*, Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2019, 345-371, 2, (translation by the author).

3 Irina Kuznetsova, Oksana Mikheieva, Gulara Gulyieva, Rilka Dragneva and Vlad Mykhnenko, “The Social Consequences of Population Displacement in Ukraine: The Risks of Marginalization and Social Exclusion”, *Policy Brief*, 13.4.2018, *Zenodo*, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.1217838.

People residing in the territories engulfed by war received no support from the government at the beginning of the military conflict. A very small number of people were evacuated – mostly by volunteer groups. Most of the people moved on their own, spending their last savings on leaving the war zone. The most vulnerable populations (people with disabilities, single retired people, those who are unable to work, large families) were brought to modular towns, dormitories and so-called sanatoriums⁴ provided specifically for IDPs. Such concentrated settlements of people experiencing a range of various social, economic and psychological problems led to their social isolation. Most of the modular towns are located in the suburbs, in abandoned territories, hardly accessible by the transport system, which makes it even harder for people to adapt, particularly as workers. After six years of war, the modular towns that were intended as a temporary solution are still there, and their residents live in isolation from the rest of society.

The grey zone, which occupied an area of a few square kilometers at the beginning of the conflict, has now turned into a frontline. After its more active phase, the military conflict moved to a slower pace, but it is still continuing. The number of victims among both the military and civilian population is increasing, and there are now as many as 13,000 mortalities, with civilians making up a quarter of that number. The number of injured is approximately 30,000. Another tragic issue is the children that have been killed or injured since the beginning of

4 A sanatorium is a specialized prevention and treatment institution. Under the Soviet regime, sanatoriums were facilities used for holidays or restorative stays for working people. They were usually located in huge buildings for great numbers of visitors. Some of them are still in state property in present day Ukraine, while others are in private hands. At the beginning of the war, some of these buildings were used by the government for the resettlement of IDPs.

the military conflict: according to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) monitoring, it is as many as 147 children (98 boys and 49 girls) killed and 392 injured (237 boys, 139 girls and 16 cases when a child's gender was not identified).⁵ The number of injuries and deaths within the child population continues to increase due to continuation of the military conflict as well as because of the mines in the frontline territory, which children often accidentally hit. Such injuries often lead to disability. The situation is especially tough when the child is an orphan. However, having parents who are deprived of the opportunities to have a normal life and income in the frontline area does not make their situation much better. Thereby, children often lack the necessary help and access to medical care, plastic surgeries and prosthetics.

Another problematic category of those suffering from war is elderly people.⁶ The amount paid through Ukrainian pension generally does not give enough for recipients to afford housing, therefore a lot of elderly people residing in the occupied territories were not able to move out. As the ties between territories controlled and not controlled by the Ukrainian government were broken, banking services became inaccessible as well. Therefore, to receive their pensions, elderly people from the occupied territories have to cross the demarcation line regularly (once in three months), stand in queues and risk their lives undergoing humiliating and meaningless identification procedures in Ukrainian banks and state institutions. This policy especially affects elderly people with limited mobility who end up being

5 UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission, https://www.facebook.com/UNHumanRightsUkraine/?tn-str=k*F [accessed: 30.06.2020].

6 Irina Kuznetsova and Oksana Mikheieva, "Forced Displacement from Ukraine's War-Torn Territories: Intersectionality and Power Geometry", *Nationalities Papers*, 2020, 48/4, 690-706, DOI:10.1017/nps.2020.34.

completely denied access to pension provision. It is estimated that the number of such people who are not able to receive their pensions exceeds about half a million.⁷ Those who dare to cross the demarcation line for the identification procedure suffer as well. Crossing the line may take just a few hours, or as much as several days. Elderly people, who die while passing through the demarcation line, contribute to the statistics on civilian victims. The exact number is unknown as there is no systematic calculation of people who died in queues on both sides of the demarcation line.

Another group seriously affected by the conflict is people of pre-retirement age. People from this category have little chances of employment, and therefore find themselves in an extremely tough situation as a result of forced displacement. The amount of state aid for incapacitated persons⁸ is 1000 UAH (36 euros) monthly, and 442 UAH (16 euros) monthly for those who are able to work.⁹ Such payments cannot even cover basic food expenses, and are of course not enough to rent housing. Moreover, this category of people has been completely ‘invisible’ for most of the international organizations that help people affected by war. International organizations mostly work with target groups, such as retired people, people with disabilities, mothers with little children or large families.

7 Human Rights Watch, “Ukraine: Low-Mobility Citizens in Donbas Cut Off From Pension” (in Ukrainian), <https://www.hrw.org/uk/news/2020/01/29/338178> [accessed: 30.6.2020]; Ukrinform, “Ludmila Denisova. Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights” (in Russian), <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-polytics/2818175-ludmila-denisova-upolnomocennyj-vr-ukrainy-po-pravam-celoveka.html> [accessed: 30.06.2020].

8 People who are currently not working, or unable to work for various reasons.

9 Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, *Resolution No. 505*, 1 October 2014 (in Ukrainian), <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/505-2014-%D0%BF?lang=en#Text> [accessed: 30.06.2020].

People of pre-retirement age are considered able to work and remain ignored by international organizations, although this category is also vulnerable. As a result of such an ‘invisibility’, most of these people had to return to the occupied territory.

Under these conditions of ‘divided worlds’ and separated families, there are ‘unmourned’ deaths that are rarely described in academic literature. To get into the non-government-controlled territory, the average person has to send a request to the Security Service of Ukraine and to receive (within 10 days) a permit for border crossing. Important life events (the death or severe illness of a relative, a family reunion) may accelerate the procedure, although one still has to spend time providing official confirmation of life events. Also, a decision to (not) let someone cross the line is made arbitrarily by a certain military person at the checkpoint (on any side of the demarcation line). The pandemic and quarantine have worsened this problem: people are being denied their right to cross the border even when they can confirm purposes of important life events.¹⁰ The psychological traumas of the deaths of loved ones who are separated by long distances and ‘unmourned’ deaths are hard to assess. The interviews I conducted show that in the occupied territory neighbors get together to bury elderly people who lived alone, and their children never see their parents dead.

10 UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission, <https://www.facebook.com/UN-HumanRightsUkraine/posts/1631453693687334> [accessed: 30.06.2020].

Existences Beyond Visibility, Protection, and Register

The category of the social disappeared, in the way it is characterized by Gabriel Gatti,¹¹ applies to people who find themselves in extreme conditions. In legal terms, this limits disappearance to those cases of the physically disappeared, persecuted, and tortured. However, the opportunity to broaden the categories of disappeared and disappearance for an understanding of wider contexts of people situated beyond the norm, visibility and protection, as proposed by Gatti, is much more relevant for my research.

This allows us to regard a situation of social catastrophe such as war and occupation from the perspective of people who suffer from a long period of deprivation not only in the physical, but in the social and moral-psychological sense as well. Such are the everyday lives of people residing in the quasi-republics established in the occupied territories. Their status is beyond the state, international laws do not protect them, and thus they are placed in contexts torn away from full political being – contexts within which people find themselves in a long-drawn-out theatre of the absurd – are living in isolation (the procedures of crossing checkpoints remind us of its fortitude and power), and are searching for ways of self-determination under uncertain political conditions.

Interviews with people from the occupied territories demonstrate their frustration, loss of prospects and feelings of timelessness and a postponed life pending the end of war. Ukrainian IDPs become people with an inconvenient memory that cannot

11 Gabriel Gatti, "The Social Disappeared: Genealogy, Global Circulations, and (Possible) Uses of a Category for the Bad Life", *Public Culture* 32/1, 2020, 25-43.

fit in the national narrative due to their experience of war, forced migration, the limitation of their civil rights and the spread of stigmatizing rhetoric towards them in Ukrainian society.

As this is a case of a war taking place in central Europe, a range of international organizations¹² monitor the situation of Crimea's annexation and the occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and assess the quantitative parameters of these processes. The charitable foundation "Right to Protection"¹³ actively works at the demarcation line providing advocacy and legal assistance for different categories of people who have been affected by the military conflict. The organization also performs the regular monitoring of people's needs and cases of rights violations.

Since the beginning of the conflict, the number of IDPs has been calculated by at least two governmental structures: the the Inter-department Coordination Headquarters and the Ministry of Social Policy. However, these institutions only take data from those displaced people who have undergone registration and have received official confirmation of their status. Our interviews with displaced people prove the existence of various groups who left the conflict zone, but at the same time denied the IDP status, considering it to be stigmatizing. The data on external and internal forced migration is also doubtful. In the case of internal migration, besides people who refused to receive an IDP status, there are also 'commuters' - those who are

12 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); International Organization for Migration (IOM); Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

13 "Right to Protection" is an NGO dedicated to protecting the rights of asylum seekers, refugees, stateless and undocumented persons, as well as internally displaced and conflict affected persons, <https://r2p.org.ua/en/> [accessed: 21.08.2020].

registered in Ukraine as IDPs, but actually reside in the occupied territories. In the case of external migration (Ukrainians seeking asylum or other forms of legal residency in neighboring countries),¹⁴ it is worth mentioning that each conflict party, especially in the beginning of the conflict, was interested in showing a higher number of people sheltered, as this was used as an additional argument in the construction of their images as aggressor or defender.

This is also relevant for the number of victims among both the military and civilian population. Depending on the context, each conflict party strove to downplay or exaggerate the real number of deaths and injuries, eventually leading to these calculations becoming inaccurate. Another factor to such inaccuracies is that there is no information about some missing persons and prisoners.

As these various problems arise when it comes to the quantitative assessment of different groups affected by the war and occupation, I have carried out my research within the qualitative paradigm. This paradigm allows us to re-orient from the phenomenon's scale towards its essence, people's motives, and their own evaluations of the situations they experience and the world around them. Such an approach allows to create a comfortable atmosphere for the research participants and thus to let them unwind and start speaking on sensitive topics, describing their own feelings and subjective impressions that, in most cases, are not possible to assess with quantitative methods.

14 Valentyina Smal, "A Great Migration: What is the Fate of Ukraine's Internally Displaced Persons", *Vox Ukraine*, 30.06.2016, <https://voxukraine.org/en/great-migration-how-many-internally-displaced-persons-are-there-in-ukraine-and-what-has-happened-to-them-en/> [accessed: 30.06.2020].

Mobility, Agency and Survival Strategies: Claiming the Right to One's Own Memory

The war had a significant impact on the nature and intensity of mobility in present-day Ukraine. First, mobility has become more complex as a result of the loss of state control over parts of the districts of Donetsk and Luhansk. Residents of these occupied territories have been increasingly isolated and subjected to increased control over their movements, complicating their relocation process. Demarcation lines, long queues, difficulties to access documentation and concrete life danger are part of their everyday experiences. Second, this is a case of forced migration that makes returning home impossible for a great number of relocated people. The IDPs' situation is only partly alleviated by the state and its institutions. Housing is still the key problem of forced migrants from the military conflict zone. Third, the war can be regarded as a trigger for external migration. Sociological and demographic research, recently conducted in Ukraine, demonstrates a significant increase in the migrational sentiment. The results of the research on the Ukrainian migrant community in Poland show that war has been one of the key triggers for migration.¹⁵

People's reactions to their conditions vary and depend on several factors and the socio-demographic characteristics of certain migrant groups. According to our research, elderly people from the territories engulfed by war often refuse to move out. In many of these cases self-sacrifice played a role: when

15 Oksana Mikheieva and Viktor Susak, "Modern Migration Challenges: Ukrainian Community in Poland: Analytical Report", Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University (in Ukrainian), http://sociology.ucu.edu.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UA_MIGR_TO_PL_2019.pdf [accessed: 30.06.2020].

experiencing a lack of money to relocate the whole family, elderly people decided to stay for the benefit of the youth. At the beginning of the war, there were also cases of family breakup when women left with their children while their husband stayed to protect their property from seizing and lootings. Children were another significant factor that influenced the decision to relocate from war-torn territories.

Experiences of forced migration, and quite different reactions about the IDPs and the situation in the East of Ukraine within Ukrainian society, have formed different life strategies that followed the displacement. In a range of studies focusing on the processes of IDPs' adaptation, we discovered that people mostly do not encounter stigmatization at the individual level of communication. At the same time, when it comes to interaction with representatives of state institutions, people face various humiliating procedures, as well as traumatic discussions with stigmatizing rhetoric on social media, related to the problems of forced migration and everyday life in the occupied territories.

As a result, we can see different reactions of people affected by the war. Some of the interviewed strive to avoid any contact with state institutions, constructing their own parallel world. As one of our informants noted, "I live in a contactless interaction with the state." Some informants have found themselves with volunteer movements and NGOs where they have been helping other people affected by the conflict since its beginning. Others have started to actively fight for their political rights, for instance, the Civil Holding "Group of Influence",¹⁶ created in 2016 by a team from the Donetsk regional organization Committee of Voters of Ukraine, who has been actively advocating for IDPs' political rights. There is also such a phe-

16 Civil Holding "Group of Influence", <https://www.vplyv.org.ua/> [accessed: 30.06.2020].

nomenon as traumatic growth: some of the IDPs have started new professional careers and have become famous and successful, as they believe, due to their experience of war and displacement in particular.

I should also mention the category of injured and crippled people (among both the military and civilian populations) who have often become socially isolated in the realities of the Ukrainian conflict, and the past and present prisoners of the quasi-republics established on the occupied territories.

Some of the citizens were imprisoned in the occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. As a result of prisoners-of-war exchanges between Ukraine and occupation regimes, some of them were released and were able to return to the territory under Ukrainian control. Most of these people have traumatic experiences, such as of torture and humiliation, and do not wish to talk about what they have gone through. However, some of them have taken an active position and found meaning and purpose in addressing these sensitive and complicated issues, claiming their rights to the experience they have undergone, and their memories of it.

Periods of sudden social transformation and instability, when the fundamental principles of society's existence become challenged, are marked by the emergence of various stereotypes and phobias in processes of looking for a scapegoat to what has been happening. The findings of my research allow us to look at the situations of different groups of Ukrainian society affected by war through the prism of social disappearance as an approach towards understanding such a phenomenon of extreme social exclusion. Collecting, recording and analyzing the experience of 'invisible' social groups give us the opportunity to render visible individuals and social groups who have been deprived of resources and opportunities for a good life.

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