

Internally displaced and immobile people in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022

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Internally displaced and immobile people in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022: Older age and disabilities as factors of vulnerability

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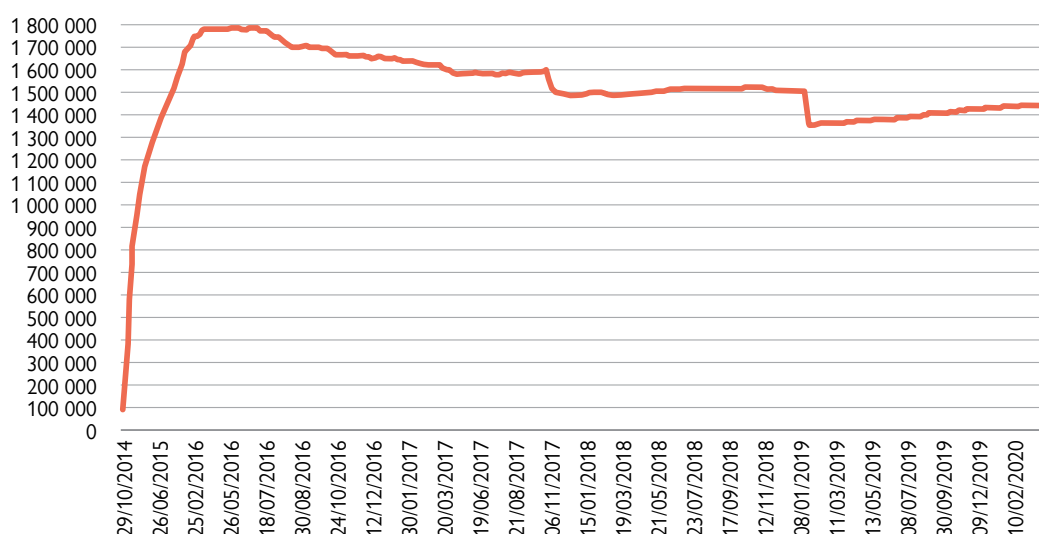
Introduction

Since February 2022, one third of the people living in Ukraine have fled from their homes because of full-scale Russian aggression, with estimates of over 7.7 million fleeing Ukraine to European countries (UNHCR, 2022) and 6.5 million internally displaced (IOM, 2022:Annex 1). Out of Ukraine's total population of 44 million, 15.7 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance and protection (OCHA, 2022).

While the scale of the current displacement is widely represented by the media and politicians, the internal displacement caused by the war in the temporarily occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk region and in the Crimean Peninsula since 2014 has received less attention. In 2021, the Humanitarian Response Plan for Ukraine was launched by local and international humanitarian actors; however, this was only 27 per cent funded by mid-August, with just USD 45.4 million of an overall call for USD 168 million received (Humanitarian Response, 2021).

Understanding the vulnerabilities of displaced populations caused by war, persecution, torture and protracted internal displacement before their actual departure is crucial to evaluating the impacts of the ongoing crisis. As a result of the war in the eastern regions and the temporary occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, Ukraine had the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Europe, even before 2022, with over 1.4 million people fleeing as of July 2021 (Slovo I Dilo, 2021). The number of registered IDPs in Ukraine slightly decreased in November 2019 and was stable until 2022 (Mykhnenko et al., 2022; see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Ukraine's internally displaced population, official registrations: 29 October 2014 to 13 April 2020



Source: Ukraine Ministry of Social Policy, cited by Mykhnenko et al., 2022:702.

Focusing on individuals displaced before 2022, this paper argues that the pre-existing vulnerabilities of those who were stranded in occupied areas since February 2022 have been exacerbated. These vulnerabilities include involuntary immobility, lack of access to employment, difficulties in receiving pensions and lack of affordable housing. The statistics of IDPs before 2022 show that a majority –over a million – were registered in the eastern and south-eastern regions that are occupied by Russian forces or damaged by the invasion (Slovo I Dilo, 2021).¹ Also, according

¹ 514,982 IDPs were registered in Donetsk oblast; 285,651 in Luhansk oblast; 135,580 in Kharkiv oblast; 56,427 in Zaporizhzhia oblast; and 14,753 in Kherson oblast (Slovo I Dilo, 2021).

to estimates based on data from the Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy, 52 per cent of IDPs were pensioners, and 60 per cent were women (see Kuznetsova et al., 2018; Mykhnenko et al., 2022). People with disabilities comprised about 4 per cent of registered IDPs in 2016 (UNHCR, 2016). Taking into consideration people stranded in the conflict-affected Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (on both sides of the “contact line”), people with disabilities constituted 13 per cent 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 is possibly 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 a large proportion of older adults (46%) and people with disabilities among the IDPs (IOM, 2022).

The current crisis in occupied territories has to be addressed from the perspective of the vulnerabilities of IDPs who lived in those areas. 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, female-headed households, and children living in isolated villages. However, the internally displaced population is not the only category of the population under concern within the displacement continuum in Ukraine. While involuntary immobility is crucial in refugee studies (Lubkemann, 2008), voluntary immobility (meaning people choosing to stay) is a significant part of the continuum as well (Schewel, 2020).

Many support organizations have been established in Ukraine to support IDPs, including some initiated by IDPs themselves. For example, between June and December 2014, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Station Kharkiv found accommodation for 30,000 IDPs. Organizations in the non-profit and non-governmental sector supported IDPs in becoming “assets” to their communities, as well as IDP self-reliance (Uehling, 2021; see also United Nations Volunteers, 2021). NGOs provided various types of support for IDPs and the communities into which they are received, including legal and psychological services and vocational professional training (Kuznetsova and Mikheieva, 2018). This was necessary for the vast majority of IDPs in Ukraine because the displacement has caused great socioeconomic disruptions with increasing levels of poverty, as well as issues in terms of health and pensions (see, for example, Durnyeva et al., 2019; Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska and Palaguta, 2017; Bulakh, 2020; Kuznetsova and Mikheieva, 2020). Though there were some positive changes in legislation since 2019, the situation with accommodation and pensions has remained challenging.

This paper is based on qualitative and desk-based research, and aims to explore the vulnerabilities of IDPs before 2022. After describing the methodology, the paper addresses why statistics of IDPs do not clearly reflect their situation. Then it focuses on the causes of immobility and experiences of return to occupied territories of Ukraine, followed by analysis of the intersections between, on the one hand, displacement and immobility, and on the other, disability, older age and housing.

Methodology

The qualitative research on which this paper is based comprise interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 148 semi-structured in-depth interviews were undertaken with IDPs from the occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the Crimean Peninsula from late 2014 to 2018. Interview questions covered issues related to the decision to leave, the displacement process, the choice of a new place of residence, coping tactics and belonging.² The interviews were recorded and transcribed. At the initial stage of the analysis, we conducted a line-by-line open coding of the interview fragments. Further research included 104 interviews with

² Professor Mikheieva was a co-investigator within the project Cultural Contact Zones funded by the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland.

IDPs, two focus group discussions with IDPs, and 25 interviews with experts from international organizations, volunteer groups, local authorities and officials from government agencies working with IDPs.³

Findings

Registration as internally displaced persons in Ukraine. What is behind the statistics of internally displaced persons before the full-scale war?

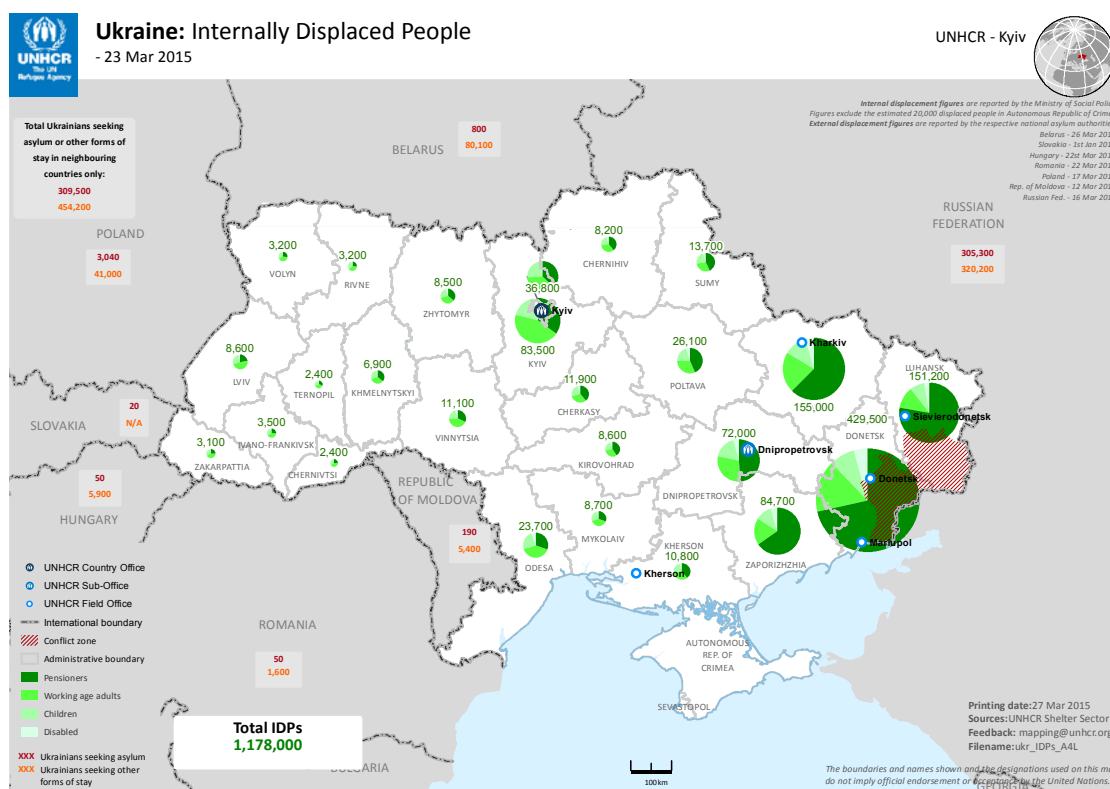
Interviews with IDPs unveil the fact that available data on the number of registered IDPs between 2014 and 2022 only partially convey the scale of the displacement. During our first interviews in 2014–2015, we identified that some displaced people avoided official registration as an IDP for various reasons. 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 stigmatization. IDPs with higher financial resources also tended to avoid registering as IDPs if they were able to quickly purchase housing in the government-controlled part of Ukraine and change the place of residency of their registration.⁴ Since registration is reflected in one's internal passport, people from occupied territories felt less stigmatization if they had a new official address in a government-controlled area (GCA) of Ukraine.

On the other hand, the actual number of IDPs during this period may be inflated by those who registered as IDPs but were not displaced from the occupied territories to territory controlled by the Ukrainian Government. This was, for instance, the case for a number of people of retirement age, many of whom had registered in a GCA 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 Oshchadbank in line with government requirements. This can be deduced to a certain extent from the 2015 map published by UNHCR (see Figure 2), which shows the total number of IDPs by oblast, disaggregated by population group; specifically, pensioners, working age adults, children and disabled (UNHCR, 2015). It shows that 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 in Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia oblasts.

³ The project was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the United Kingdom with the Partnership for Conflict, Crime, and Security Research, through the project *Ukraine's Hidden Tragedy: Understanding the Outcomes of Population Displacement from the Country's War-torn Regions* (grant AH/P008305/1, principal investigator, Dr Kuznetsova; see Kuznetsova et al., 2018).

⁴ 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 the first-kin family that own a property. In case of living in a different city or area people have to register at their new place of residency while they can still have the permanent registration in a different address. Despite the existence of registration in places of displacement, the official registration, recorded in the passport, remained tied to the address in the occupied territories. In the context of the information war, which formed a negative perception of IDPs, this registration additionally stigmatized people who were already in difficult conditions of displacement.

Figure 2. Ukraine: Internally displaced people, 23 March 2015



Source: UNHCR, 2015.

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

The payment of pensions has been and remains problematic. In the solidarity model that exists in Ukraine today, pensions are not linked to local budgets and social assistance. However, in the first wave of displacement caused by Russian aggression in 2014, people of retirement age faced the need to register in GCAs and undergo exhausting verification procedures every few months. Ukrainian citizens from the non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs) of Ukraine had to register as IDPs in order to receive pensions and social benefits (for disability, for example). To keep a right to receive a pension, IDPs had to verify their place of residence in a GCA every six months in a procedure conducted by authorities. According to most of our respondents, this process of verification was very frustrating, as often they were given a 2–3 day timeslot, during which they were not able to leave their accommodation while waiting for staff from social welfare to check if they really live there. Research participants reported that such checks were continued even after checks had been cancelled for some categories of IDPs and for those who passed the verification via Oschadbank. Those pensioners who continued to live in occupied territories had to cross the line of control in order to receive their pensions several times per year, risking their lives and queuing for many hours to cross the frontline (Mikheieva, 2019; Kuznetsova et al., 2018; Kuznetsova and Mikheieva, 2020).

This policy especially affected elderly people with limited mobility, who would often end up being completely denied access to pension provision. For example, in November 2019, over 50 per cent of pensioners residing in temporarily occupied territories had their pensions temporarily suspended for several months (United Nations Ukraine, 2020).

The monthly statistics of the number of crossings of the line of separation provide further indirect evidence of instances of pensioners registered as IDPs in Ukraine living in the occupied

territories. Between 2016 and 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic and checkpoint closures, the number of such crossings ranged from about a million to 1.7 million per month (KPVV, n.d.). As analysed elsewhere, 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.⁵

Crossing the line of demarcation was, however, not easy. Crossing the line could take from a few hours to several days, which led in some cases to health issues and cardiac arrest. 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 were over 60 (Azizyan, 2020).

The situation regarding mobility between 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 doing so risked a fine 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 return to previous levels when the full-scale Russian invasion began on 24 February 2022 (Kontrol'ni punkti, n.d.). These facts demonstrate some of the issues involved in monitoring the actual number of IDPs, as registration did not always indicate a person's actual presence in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian Government.

Older adults: Pension rights, housing and (im)mobility

Our research revealed three strategies among older adults from occupied territories: to stay; to move to a GCA of Ukraine or abroad; or to temporarily move to a GCA with regular visits home to occupied territories. We argue that there is a 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 to the destruction of mobility infrastructure. People with disabilities, older adults and people with physical limitations on their mobility in temporarily occupied territories often could not move to other areas of Ukraine. There were no government schemes for evacuation or resettlement before 2022. 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?”⁶

Pension payments in Ukraine and IDP benefits do not cover basic needs or rental accommodation, which forces people to enter into complex survival scenarios. In this case, older IDPs often depend 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 stating that at least there they have a flat or a house, a garden and supportive social networks that they do not have in other parts of Ukraine. Some called it an act of “sacrifice” so the children could move to the GCAs of Ukraine and “get on with their lives”.

One of the factors that supported decisions to stay,⁷ especially among older adults, was a house or apartment and an allotment or garden and *datcha* [summer house], as these could support people with some food and even provide a source of income in addition to emotional

⁵ See Project number 169251 of PAX, The Netherlands, principal investigator Oksana Mikheieva: [Stepping Out of the Shadows. Impact of the Non-registration and Non-recognition by the Ukrainian Authorities of the Facts of Life in Non-government Controlled areas on the Roles of Men and Women in Public and Domestic Life](#).

⁶ Anonymous participant in focus group study conducted by the authors, 2017.

⁷ There were other factors to move or stay including emotional and family reasons, and feelings of belonging, that are not within the scope of this paper.

benefits to well-being. This also motivated some of our participants to adopt “transborder living” – going regularly back to their places in occupied territories. Thus, it is important to consider factors regarding individual vulnerability, the lack of resources, the lack of support from the State and international organizations, infrastructural risks and individual decisions that prevent some from leaving their homes, even close to the occupied zones.⁸

Another group seriously affected by the conflict is people whose age is within a few years of the retirement age: 50 years or older, but still working age. We call this group “pre-retirement”. People in this cohort have little chance of employment, and therefore find themselves in an extremely difficult situation as a result of forced migration. As a result, many have had to live in temporary accommodation provided by charities; however, after three years, many of the residences had to be closed down, because the businesses faced financial loss. For example, some modular housing in Dnipro and Kharkiv built via international aid for IDPs (Belsat, 2019) were not designed for long-term use. The following experience described by one of our participants is very common for people in this age group:

You cannot integrate into society without housing. You always live with suitcases.... Owners always look and if they feel you do not have stability they put the price of the rent up. You are always with suitcases and always have to think about what to do tomorrow. Which plans could you make? Nothing really when 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 not get sick – which landlord would keep you in a flat? It is very frustrating.⁹

Moreover, this category of people has been completely invisible to most of the international organizations that help people affected by war, as able-bodied people of working age, despite being close to retirement age, were considered able to work and were therefore not considered a population of concern by donors or the State.

As the result, returning to occupied territories was a common scenario for older adults. Most of our respondents mentioned that they knew elderly IDPs who had to move back to occupied territories because of difficulties with accommodations, pensions or employment. This was confirmed by a large-scale survey conducted by IOM in 2018, which showed that pensioners comprised 63 per cent of return IDPs, and the main reason for return was “the possession of private property, resulting in them not having to pay rent” (IOM, 2018:7).

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

According to UNHCR (2016), access to disability benefits and lack of accessible and affordable transport are 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 to the area controlled by the Ukrainian Government faced difficulties in maintaining their disability status because of the long bureaucratic process involved, which required them to prove their disability status while in the hospital and pass a medical–social expertise commission. Still, the amount of State aid before 2022 for persons

⁸ Since February 2022, about 13 million people were stranded in affected areas or unwilling or unable to leave (OHCHR, 2022). The HelpAge survey of older people in the GCAs of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in March 2022 revealed that 99 per cent of them did not want to evacuate (HelpAge International, 2022). The main reasons for staying mentioned were security risks, destruction of bridges and roads, lack of resources and information regarding safe routes and accommodation, and disability and older age. The [Ukrainian Government](#) started the mandatory evacuation of people from Donetsk oblast in July 2022.

⁹ Interview with female subject, 58 years old, from Luhansk oblast, living in Kharkiv.

with disabilities from a category who are not able to work was 1,000 hryvnia (UAH), or 36 euro (EUR) monthly, and UAH 442 (EUR 16) monthly for those who are able to work (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2014). Such payments cannot even cover basic food expenses and are not enough to rent housing.

Together with the need to prove their disabled status in order to access benefits, IDPs were required to attend appointments with representatives of the Social Protection Department, the 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....¹⁰ And I brought him from there [NGCA] with such difficulties. Then had to carry him to the Social Protection Department, Pension Fund, and bank [to verify his disability and IDP status]. He suffered badly, and after two months he died.

Such experiences prevent some IDPs from applying for disability status. 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".¹¹ This example clearly shows, as well, the person's desire to escape from victimization 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, 77 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; she then had to return to where she had an apartment and a pension to survive:

My daughter had nothing left but to receive pension in LPR [Luhansk People 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.¹²

In situations in which there were people with limited mobility or disabilities in the family, this would in most cases 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 Svyatohirsk, if he comes, it will be a total zero. And the same if he goes somewhere in Ukraine. To the man who is fifty 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.¹³

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Interview with anonymous female, 69 years old, Dnipro.

¹² Interview with anonymous female subject, 77 years old, Alchevsk.

¹³ Interview with anonymous female subject, 47 years old, from Donetsk oblast, who lives in Svyatohirsk.

The lack of social housing was also identified as one of the most significant problems. Predominantly, the informal rental market and the suspension of the IDP benefit and pensions led to situations where people were simply thrown out from rented apartments onto the street without any means of livelihood.

*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 to pay because the State did not pay them for several months. They then received payment for all of these months, but where is this period for them?*¹⁴

Desperation over their own helplessness pushed elderly people into making rash decisions, which made their problems even worse. For example, one of our informants 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.¹⁵

State assistance was mostly limited to the accrual of benefits (disability and resettlement), which required lengthy and costly 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 support from volunteer groups and Ukrainian businesses that, by agreement with the volunteers, could provide temporary shelters for IDPs.

However, at the beginning of the conflict, everyone perceived it to be temporary. Therefore, after a few months, many businesses such as private spa resorts, holiday homes and summer camps for children started simply evicting IDPs including those with disabilities. It happened, for example, in the health resort Kyualnik, in Odesa (see also TSN, 2016), that used to house 80 IDPs, most of them with disabilities. As one of our participants said:

*They said that it was enough to keep you here, the resort was at a [financial] loss, and there was nothing to keep us for. And they brought us here. We had no other way out. They had already cut off the electricity and water, and the lift, so we had to leave. So that's the way it is.*¹⁶

Consequently, those who were evicted had to rely on the help of volunteers to be relocated. However, volunteer support was often inconsistent. 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 system of State support outside small cash benefits provided. As one IDP rights activist from Slovyansk told us, a family of people with disabilities was evicted from a flat they rented as they could not pay because their benefits were suspended (as were the benefits of thousands of other people with disabilities and pensioners), and a church stepped in to provide them with temporary shelter. After time and effort from several civil society organizations, city authorities were pushed to provide the family a room in a holiday resort where other displaced IDPs live:

*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 [a civil society organization] said: if so, we'll move to the mayor's office and will live there, but 500–600 of us will gather here now.*¹⁷

¹⁴ Interview with anonymous male subject, 49 years old, from Luhansk oblast, lives in Slovyansk.

¹⁵ Interview with anonymous female subject, 25 years old, from Donetsk oblast, lives in Kramatorsk.

¹⁶ Interview with anonymous female subject, 57 years old, from Donetsk oblast, lives in Sviatohirsk.

¹⁷ Interview with anonymous male subject, 49 years old, from Luhansk oblast, lives in Slovyansk.

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 disability status repeatedly, and had to depend on relatives and volunteers to help, both with relocation¹⁸ and with addressing the issue of reinstatement of payments.

Conclusion

This paper argues 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 both economic resources and coherent social policies. Challenges included access to 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 organizations were not able to provide coordinated sustainable support to 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 having to cope with extreme marginalization.

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.

As the experience of many countries has demonstrated, IDPs are among the most vulnerable population groups in the world due to discriminatory practices, organized persecution, exposure to violence, lack of access to essential services such as health and education, and precarious living conditions (see among others Brun, 2003; Cantor et al., 2021; Duncan, 2005; Kamara et al., 2017). Internal displacement issues are incorporated into the Sustainable Development Goals, which promises to "leave no one behind" (OCHA, 2018). The lack of inclusion in planning IDP support is especially dangerous in protracted displacement, such as in Ukraine.

We argue that knowledge about IDPs' experiences and policies before 2022 is crucial in planning both policies for the integration of refugees who have previously been internally displaced, and post-war reintegration in Ukraine. Information about the experiences of IDPs in Ukraine between 2014 and February 2022 can be used to enhance humanitarian responses and accelerate policy change. In particular, such information is valuable for two reasons. First, the migration policies toward Ukrainian refugees in countries of destination would benefit from a more sensitive approach, including consideration of pre-departure issues caused by prolonged internal displacement and protracted war since 2014.

Second, policies regarding IDPs in Ukraine who fled as a result of the February 2022 phase of the war need to consider the best practices regarding IDPs that have been formed over the previous eight years, and need as well to account for the areas that have been the most problematic. Following the research findings and IASC guidelines on inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian action (IASC, 2019:19–21), the following recommendations regarding IDPs in Ukraine can be provided:

1. Organize local monitoring of the needs of IDPs, based not only on registration criteria but also via screening in registration points and shelters, to ensure that no one is left behind;
2. Disaggregate data for monitoring inclusion for people with disabilities. Record not only people with disabilities in accordance with Ukrainian legislation, but those with mobility

¹⁸ A similar situation occurred in 2022 (see Landre, 2022).

issues and chronic diseases who are not classified as persons with disabilities but still require special support and adjustments.

3. Disaggregate data for monitoring the inclusion of older adults, including people close to retirement age (50+).
4. Promote the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and older adults and their representative organizations in the decision-making processes regarding measures to support IDPs and people in occupied territories;
5. Information about evacuation from occupied territories and dangerous zones needs to also provide guarantees about accommodation for older adults and people with disabilities;
6. Provide accessible and regular information about different kinds of support for IDPs.
7. Provide barrier-free shelters and accommodations (IASC, 2019:167) for IDPs with special needs and older adults;
8. Prepare training courses for authorities, international organizations and civil society on inclusion, especially on increasing sensitivity towards IDPs with disabilities and IDPs who are older adults;
9. Empower persons with disabilities and older adults, and support them to develop their capacities in providing advocacy for IDPs.

It is crucial to address IDPs' agencies and civil society responses in Ukraine toward internal displacement before 2022. Mutual support, the ability to access needs and provide a rapid response within communities, and forming initiative groups to develop and lobby the legislature for improving the rights of IDPs were vital for thousands of people coping with displacement from eastern Ukraine and Crimea. However, given the large scale of displacement, both internal and international, and the uncertainty and economic hardship in Ukraine, the activities of civil society to respond to the needs of IDPs must be massively supported.

Given that, globally, the number of IDPs increased from about 17 million in 1998 to 59.1 million in 2021 (IDMC, 2022), 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.

Annex 1.

The ambiguity of the statistics of internally displaced persons in Ukraine since February 2022

Problems in recording and registering IDPs culminate in statistics that do not cover all those who are forced to move because of the war. Confusion occurs because such figures depend on how people assess their security and decide whether to leave their place of permanent residence or to return home. Against the background of these figures, which are formed on the basis of a representative survey in Ukraine conducted by IOM, the number of those who officially registered as IDPs after the introduction of martial law is inadequate. According to the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, there were 130,000 such people in March 2022 (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2022a). In April 2022, 3.4 million people were already registered in the Unified Information Database on Internally Displaced Persons, of which 2 million were those who relocated after martial law was imposed in 2022 and 1.9 of them had their first experience of forced migration (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2022). For those forced to migrate after the introduction of martial law, the registration procedure was greatly simplified. Before 2022, IDPs had to collect a set of documents and apply in person to the local authorities in the non-occupied territories in order to obtain status. Under martial law, IDPs have been able to register both personally and electronically through the *Diya* portal to receive State aid. The authors' desk research and conversations with IDPs revealed that the people who do not register as an IDP do so for various reasons: on the one hand, these could be individual decisions and, on the other hand, the influence of circumstances, such as the disputed and volatile status of territories, where registration may or may not entitle a person to status. We observe the same situation in conditions of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine: with the liberation of Ukrainian territories, the State reconsiders the grounds for granting status and aid. Some accept their new condition, and postpone obtaining status, hoping it is temporary and that they will return home soon. Official registration is partially avoided by men fearing conscription. Many IDPs are actively involved in volunteer work and see not registering and not receiving State assistance as a way of supporting the State and diverting funds to military needs.

Annex 2.

No mobility, no pensions. Life under occupation since 2022

With the full-scale Russian invasion, the area of the occupied territories has increased. From 24 February 2022, living under occupation is no longer a challenge faced only by Ukrainian citizens living in the Crimean peninsula, parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. As of August 2022, it is now also a problem for residents of parts of Kherson, Kharkiv, and Zaporizhzhia regions. While the procedure for accruing pensions has been simplified (with a bank card, a pension is automatically extended and money is transferred to the account), the problem for pensioners in the occupied territories remains the inability to receive the accrued money. The Russian Federation is blocking Ukrainian mobile communications and restricting access to Ukrainian websites and services via the Internet for residents of the occupied territories. Even if they have a bank card with money transferred to it, there is no place to withdraw cash, and nor is it possible to pay with the card in shops. As a result, people either have to find ways to travel to the GCAs of Ukraine, which is difficult to do given the hostilities, or turn to illegal money changers and lose a significant percentage of their transfers. In parallel, banks ensure that there are no long interruptions in the use of the card (at least six months), as this could indicate the possible death of the beneficiary of the pension. In such a case, payments are suspended until the circumstances are clarified. However, for older adults, the bureaucratic formula of "clarification" means finding difficult ways to travel to the controlled territory at the risk of death.

As of today, heated discussions about the possibility of paying pensions to “collaborators” seem to have subsided (Bondarchuk and Klyuzhev, 2022). The Ukrainian State demonstrates maximum loyalty in the accrual of pensions to those who have earned them according to the solidarity pension system in Ukraine. After earlier ambiguous statements about the population of the occupied territories, Government officials now clearly articulate the people as the State’s primary value (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2022b). However, the reality of war and the lack of effective mechanisms for receiving payments remains an acute problem, as all options are blocked by the aggressor.

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

Issues of terminology

In our text, we used the terminology reflected and clarified in Ukrainian legislation, using the term “temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine” (Supreme Council of Ukraine, 2022). However, we also use more detailed wording as necessary to clarify areas: the temporary occupied territory of the Crimean Peninsula and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Also, where it should be emphasized that the Ukrainian Government has no control over the situation in a particular part of the occupied Ukrainian territory, we use the international acronym NGCA for 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 conflict, since 2014 the international community has been looking for neutral terminology to describe what is happening.

Most international organizations and monitoring missions currently present in Ukraine use the terminology GCA and NGCA as a claim to neutrality. However, the territory of an independent State under the control of a legitimate government is self-evident and does not need additional emphasis. The additional problem of using such neutral terminology becomes clearer in the larger context. It is related to the turn in the study of societies at war, the key declarations of which are pragmatism, reliance on empirical data, and localization (with attention to the details of everyday experience at the local level and a claim to describe reality as it is). This approach in an ongoing war shifts attention from the aggressor to the victim.

Equally problematic and ambiguous for the situation described are the concepts of “annexation” and “occupation”. For example, in Ukrainian media and political discourse, the concept of annexation in relation to the territory of the Crimean Peninsula was transformed into the concept of “temporary occupation”, which has political meaning, since the definition of annexation forms the perception that the situation is an accomplished fact, while temporary occupation is a declaration of the ongoing struggle to restore the status of the Crimean Peninsula as part of an independent and sovereign Ukraine.

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