Responses to the Phenomenon of Internal Displacement in Ukraine

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Last summer I packed some household items to donate to a humanitarian centre for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kyiv. I called a taxi and when it arrived, a friend of mine volunteered to carry the bags to the car. As I was buckling my seatbelt, I noticed that my friend took a picture of the car's license plate. A minute later I received a text from her, saying: 'please, let me know when you arrive.' I was surprised by her concern for my safety. When I called and asked what was it about, she said: 'Didn't you see? He had a Donetsk number plate. I was worried about you.' In response, I told her that the driver offered me a free ride when he learned where we were heading. This incident is one of the signs of a growing tendency to categorise displaced people from the Donbas region of Ukraine as a social threat. In an exacerbated realm of hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine, increasing social tension could potentially escalate into more hostile confrontations. Thus, a critical examination and understanding of IDPs categorisation and its repercussions have significant importance.

In this chapter, I explore the transformations of responses toward the phenomenon of IDPs in Ukraine. My specific focus is the labelling of IDPs from Donbas, their acceptance and further alienation from a collective identity of 'ours.' Though the tendency to socially marginalise displaced people is a common problem all over the world (Malkki 1996, Pandolfi 2003, Calhoun 2008, Fassin 2012, Dunn 2012), my interest is to follow the dynamics from the de-terrorisation of people from Donbas to an accentuated image of Donbas; from a companionate acceptance as 'ours' (*свої*) to a growing rejection and outlawing. I aim to elucidate the internal diversity of Ukrainian IDPs, when those from Eastern Ukraine are perceived as less privileged, politically threatening subjects, while internal refugees from the annexed Crimea are often embraced as sufferers of political injustice. The hierarchy of othering and challenges of IDPs inclusion into a larger national community highlight nuances of identity politics in Ukraine, problematise equal access to social welfare, as well as jeopardise social stability in the country.

My analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in Ukraine in the summers of 2014 and 2015. This included participant observations at humanitarian centres, analysis of media discourses, and 13 in-depth interviews with aid providers for IDPs, such as representatives of the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, local social welfare officers, representatives of international NGOs, and volunteers from Kyiv and Kharkiv. Exploring the perception of displaced people, I narrowed the pool of my informants to those who are directly involved in making decisions about welfare support. In this way, they have the power to translate emotionally charged negative or positive perceptions of IDPs into actions, for instance, influence the distribution of aid. In other words, their attitudes toward IDPs have tangible economic repercussions for the latter. However, I acknowledge that quite different perspectives can be obtained through studying how IDPs adapt in local communities and are perceived among them.

One of the major challenges I encountered while working on this project was the issue of prejudices and stereotypes

in relation to IDPs. These generalisations are based on 'fixity' which Homi Bhabha defines as a central component 'in the ideological construction of otherness' (Bhabha 1996). Fixity induces reproduction of stereotypes, often without their critical examination. In this process, the Other is constructed as essentially or even ontologically different. Importantly, the knowledge about the Other is not grounded in actual experiences, but rather dissimilated and replicated through repetitions. Bhabha's explanation of fixity captures the danger that stereotypes present, namely that they produce an unchanging order, which is often taken for granted and maintained by constant reproductions of stereotypes. His observations were fundamental for the postcolonial critique and not so widely appropriated in studies of other discourses of power like social marginalisation of migrants. Though, when extrapolated for the situations with displaced populations, Bhabha's theorisations can highlight how IDPs are stigmatised and how their social marginalisation is normalised.

Expanding Bhabha's ideas, my observations showcase that the fixity can be challenged under certain critical circumstances, such as initial responses to emergencies. As Craig Calhoun observes, under the emergency imaginary of crisis, the relationships between people shift in the moral recognition of humans, where individuals are deemed as equivalent to each other (Calhoun 2010, 34). The initial compassion for displaced people, who are seen as victims, overshadows the prejudice and stereotypes about them. Even though, as I will discuss further, this appears to be a temporary phenomenon, a critical investigation of the variability of attitudes can challenge the unchangeable order that fixity produces. Accordingly, this implies that stereotypes can be transformed, which can lead to some practical application in the informational and media policies related to IDPs and forced migrants.

Methodologically, the reproduction of stereotypes presented a dilemma in the course of research. Guesses, assumptions, and generalised comments about IDPs can be often seen as an elusive knowledge that fades upon further inquiry, as it is not supported by actual facts or evidence. But rather then dismissing these beliefs, I found that they could be a prolific material for investigation. At the end, they illustrate a paradoxical situation when actors of state and humanitarian systems, who make political decisions related to IDPs, are guided by the epistemology of imagining, assuming not only beneficiaries' needs (Dunn 2012, 12), but their status and social identity.

Another methodological complication was the on-going transformation of attitudes toward IDPs. At the initial stage of the project in 2014, the phenomenon that drew my attention was the welcoming positive attitudes among Ukrainians that mobilised their resources to assist displaced people in need. However, in 2015, I documented reappearing unfavourable comments about IDPs, which was also the case in media publications. Thus, instead of investigating the positive perception of IDPs as 'one of us,' I faced more dynamic processes of how positive generalisations were replaced by negative prejudices. This transformation called for alterations in interviewing techniques. In most cases, state employees and representatives of international programs did not want our conversations to be recorded, as they were worried about the professional repercussions of talking negatively about IDPs on the record.

I recognise that my observations have a certain degree of generalisation as well. However, my intention to capture the prevailing opinions about displaced populations justifies a certain amount of generalisation for the purposes of giving a clear picture of the overall situation. At the same time, it is important to recognise that these generalisations are heuristic, and there are of course many nuances and variations to the perceptions.

Initial Responses: How Displaced People Became 'Ours'

The initial civil responses to the needs of displaced people were highly praised as a prominent social phenomenon. Volunteer initiatives and grassroots engagement to assist IDPs were seen as a sign of an emerging civil society within a surge of political changes. Many of these responses originated from a self-coordinated grid of Euromaidan support (Euromaidan SOS, Automaidan, etc.). Already established and functioning networks of citizens refocused their activities either to support the Ukrainian army or to assist displaced populations.

In a way, volunteers were overtaking or complementing fundamental functions of the state to secure the safety and provisions for its citizens in need. This fact was especially important considering the major political reconfigurations, triggered by Euromaidan such as the introduction of a new cabinet of ministers, rotation and lustration of other state officials. These changes complicated even more the promptness of emergency responses from the inflexible and

bureaucratically immobile state system. In this light, the impulse to assist the state was often seen as a part of citizens' responsibility on behalf of Euromaidan participants and activists.

From a broader perspective, support for displaced people is rooted in the ethical principle of shared humanity beyond social divisions (Pupavac 2010, Calhoun 2010). However, citizenship status is an important link that connects IDPs with volunteers. The idea of belonging to the same community of 'our fellow citizens' is at play, even though the nation-community is internally diversified (e.g. politically and ideologically). As it was rationalised by one of my informants, Anna: 'They are *our* people, *our* citizens and as we are building a new state, they should have faith in it' (Anna, volunteer).[1] In some cases, the acceptance into the category of 'our people' is rooted in the choice that displaced people have made. Some volunteers explained that from their point of view, IDPs fleeing to other regions of Ukraine were 'voting by their feet' in favour of a united Ukraine. It is particularly related to the displaced people from the Donbas region, where the conflict heightened political and ideological differences. However, it should be mentioned that in two volunteer centres that I visited, discussions on IDPs' war experiences and reasons that made people flee were restricted in 2014. This facilitated romanticism towards the displaced people and ascribing a moral dimension to their decision. Accordingly, it accommodated IDPs acceptance into the imaginary national community by the volunteers and generally within the hosting environment.

Shared citizenship validated the volunteer assistance to the displaced people. Even though the first wave of displacement in 2014 was accompanied by critical narratives and some forms of housing and employment discrimination, the level of hostility toward IDPs remained comparatively low (KrymSOS 2015). The ideological differences and labelling IDPs as pro-Russian at that time did not translate into active confrontations or violence. Much like refugees, IDPs were perceived as 'stripped of the specificity of culture, place, and history' (Malkki 1995, 12), therefore their affiliation with the Donbas region was largely overshadowed.[2] Depoliticised and reduced to their status as citizens and humans, displaced people were categorised as victims, which meant that they were essentialised (Dunn 2012). Unlike refugees, displaced Ukrainians were not heavily labelled as distant or unknown Others. Citizenship affiliation granted them a place within a category of 'ours' (Ukrainian—*свої*), which has significant cultural implications in the post-Soviet milieu.

While the dichotomy of 'ours—others' has an extensive genealogy, I would like to focus on its function within the Soviet discourse, particularly because the semantic opposition of *sviy/nash* (ours/us) versus *other/they* obtained a strong political connotation during the Soviet times. In Catherine Wanner's definition, *sviy* signifies a common Soviet identity produced by 'shared experience with an oppressive state apparatus,' in which '[we] bond together against 'them,' the enemy, the state and its institutions' (Wanner 1998, 9; see also Yurchak 2006, 102-108). Bonding experiences of citizens in opposition to the oppressive state— or what would be more accurately described in this case as dysfunctional state— shaped the acceptance of displaced people by the volunteers and sympathisers. The recognition and acceptance of IDPs as 'ours' mitigated and silenced potential ideological discrepancies. An amplified sense of unity and a threatening state of emergency also reinforced generalisations of displaced people and made their suffering more salient than their regional differences.

Changing Image and Alienation of 'Ours'

The critical reevaluation of Euromaidan and recalibration of post-Euromaidan optimism have significantly affected civil and state responses to the needs of IDPs. The initial wave of compassion fuelled by the crisis and the anxiety from the unfolding war began to fade when the conflict shifted into a less active phase and when emergency displacement transitioned to a protracted one. Consequently, the narratives that criticised IDPs became more visible. These critical narratives were mostly directed towards the IDPs from Donbas and not to those from Crimea. People who fled Crimea after the Russian annexation were categorised as ideological refugees, who sacrificed their homes to resist the Russian occupation. In contrast, internal refugees from Eastern Ukraine were more commonly seen as those who 'were not able to defend Ukraine' (Olga, regional social welfare officer). This assumption was also reflected in gender biases, as male IDPs were often perceived as failed protectors or potential separatists.

This division between Crimean and Donbas IDPs can be seen as an internal Ukrainian 'hierarchy of othering,' where one type of Other is imagined as more threatening than another (Kaneva and Popescu 2014). The hostile and,

accordingly, lower status of Donbas migrants is informed by the East-West division of Ukraine. Though the separation of pro-Russian Eastern Ukrainians and pro-European Western Ukrainians is highly debated and contested, the differing historical backgrounds and contrasting electoral preferences of these two parts of Ukraine cannot be ignored.

The areas that first reflected a negative image of displaced people were the real estate market and the job market. Typically, they are the most critical for resettled people and crucial for their social integration. Both markets started to openly filter IDPs from potential contacts and beneficiaries and the marker of displacement soon became a reappearing category in the rubrics for announcements. For instance, in spring 2015, six out of ten long-term rent announcements for moderately priced apartments in Kyiv had some kind of reference to displacement: 'displaced people and brokers, please do not disturb,' or in some cases 'displaced people might be considered' (data from olx.ua).

Even more damaging to their image is the growing tendency to criminalise displaced people. IDPs from Eastern Ukraine come from a region strongly associated with an industrial, underprivileged, and criminogenic environment. During the Euromaidan the hostility toward Eastern Ukrainians aggravated, particularly as the targets of the protests – former president Viktor Yanukovych and his Party of Regions – were from Donbas. The unfolding violence during Euromaidan was often extrapolated to the people from Eastern Ukraine. Not only were they blamed as supporters of brutality against Euromaidan protesters, but seen as a root cause for it because of the electoral choice they had made that led Yanukovych to presidency. The negative attitudes disseminated in media discourse, when, for instance, Donbas people were named as 'the most retrograde part of [Ukraine's] population' by historian Alexander Motyl (Radio Liberty 2014).

Furthermore, within the past year, the overall decreasing quality of life and well-being in Ukraine became more frequently blamed on IDPs. Thus, a so-called 'return of the 90s' is now often framed as IDPs' fault. Ukrainian media widely circulated the comment by sociologist Inna Bekeshkina, who explained the rise of crime rates in Ukraine by the pre-war high level of crimes in Donbas that has 'followed IDPs to other regions' (BBC 2016). Such comments imply displaced people's direct responsibility for this tendency. At the same time, Ukrainian police reported that the rise of crime rates started in 2012 and for the past two years increased only by 0.3 per cent (Korrespondent 2016). Even though the tendency of increased crime rates might be linked to the demographic changes triggered by the war, it is more likely to be caused by the spread of uncontrolled weapons, deterioration of the socio-economic situation, and more accurate reports on crime rates that followed the police reform (Korrespondent 2016).

According to a media monitoring survey conducted by Krym SOS, the regularity of media news reports that ascribed increasing crime rates as a result of IDPs influx has been constantly growing since the end of 2014 (Krym SOS, 2015). While regional media are not so biased, Kyiv news outlets do publish unproven and unchecked materials that have negative overtones for the construction of the IDPs' public image. A very recent example is related to a growing number of stolen cars in Kyiv. For the period of January-February 2016 this number tripled in comparison to the previous year. While experts express their concerns with a technical side of the issue—e.g. an introduction of a special devise that allows intercepting car key signal—the media with no evidence link the disturbing statistics to the influx of displaced people. For instance, one of the key media outlets reported: 'Among displaced people, many did not succeed in finding a job and normalising their lives, and some of them, to be honest, do not even want to do this. Stealing a car is a profitable alternative to official employment, especially under the unstable circumstances' (Nash Kiev 2015). The implication that stealing a car is as easy as shoplifting and that it is the work of displaced people does not leave any room for critical examination of the issue and puts the blame on IDPs' shoulders. The harming effects of reports like this result in alienation of displaced people and their further marginalisation.

Negative depictions of IDPs by media raise significant concerns, as they have a strong potential to shape both civil and state responses to IDPs' situation and influence policy decisions. Such media power is known as the 'CNN effect', as described by Steven Livingston (1997, see also Robinson 2005, Peksen et al. 2014). Analysing the role of television in the US foreign policy, Livingston named one of the types of the 'CNN effect' as 'policy agenda-setting' (Livingstone 1997, 1). He explained how emotional and dramatic reports necessitate political responses from governmental institutions. Drawing the parallel to the situation with internal displacement in Ukraine, we cannot

dismiss the possibility that negative media discourse has had an impact on political responses from the state.

What I found especially disturbing is that these negative perceptions influence mid-level state workers who are responsible for the development and implementation of relief programmes. In my interviews, the reproduction of media narratives commonly occurred among these respondents. Accordingly, a reappearing theme was the replication of stereotypes about IDPs. For instance, one of the ministry workers reproduced a fake story about displaced children burning a Ukrainian flag – a widely circulated media report that was refuted a few days after the publication. Thus, the previously imperfect system of state assistance is further hindered by the functionaries of the state apparatus, who express their prejudices while developing and distributing assistance to displaced people. And although a direct correlation between personal preconceptions of state workers and larger political decisions regarding IDPs cannot be clearly identified, the circulation of stereotypes exposes an existing distance between how IDPs' experiences are imagined and what they actually are.

Recently, the Ministry of the Social Policy suspended financial assistance to IDPs that are suspected of forging their documents. The decision was made based on undisclosed lists of the Security Council of Ukraine (SBU) and affected 600,000 IDPs who are dependent on state payments (OCHA report from 24 June 2016). This situation was alarming for volunteers, as people they help were suddenly cut from state assistance with no prior notices or explanations, which significantly increased the amount of assistance they needed. At the same time, the state employees interpret this response as an urgent step because of the 'growing levels of fraud and crimes.' The payments were eventually resumed under requirement that IDPs' living conditions and places of actual residence would be inspected by special commissions (Cabinet of Ministry Decree №367). These forms of state responses damaged perceptions of IDPs, limited their mobility under strict state's control,[3] and are calling into question the state's ethical responsibilities to IDPs. Importantly, as follow-up interviews showed in summer 2016, volunteers who initially presented an alternative form of social support network for IDPs also introduced control measures to check the background of displaced people.

Thus, over the past year the generalised entity of displaced people was fragmented. The initial responses based on empathy and compassion blurred the social and ideological boundaries between IDPs and a larger national community. However, a post-euphoria syndrome and social tension associated with economic and political instability (Malyarenko 2016) along with a growing competition for scarce economic resources shifted the IDPs from falling within the category of 'ours' (*svoi*) to the domain 'they.' Consequent proliferation of negative media images of IDPs and profiling them as a social threat is one of the factors that contribute to shaping public opinions and institutional responses, such as meticulous background checks of IDPs, suspension of social payments, and everyday discrimination. However, it cannot be ruled out that demographic changes caused by the influx of IDPs contribute to the social instability, magnified attention to their lives and totalisation of them as criminals as well as increase social tensions within the country. As one of the volunteer activists mentioned, it triggers 'a road roller of repressions' that affects all IDPs. The fluctuation of attitudes demonstrates the emotional and highly perceptive nature of the sense of national community and questions critical rationalisations of these responses.

Contamination with Donbas

A growing stigma of displaced people is a discursive phenomenon. In popular narratives, the danger that IDPs carry often has no tangible or actual references and are embedded into a larger clichéd perception of Donbas. The volunteers describe the everyday hostility towards the displaced people in the following way: 'People say "You are guilty of what has happened in Donbas. And now you are coming here and *it* will start here (здесь будет то же самое)"' (Larisa, volunteer). These fears are often not rationalised, but emotional, and the threat is seen as an invisible, imaginary danger of '*it*' – some indistinguishable quality of regional identity that is ascribed to Donbas IDPs. Interestingly, this perception resembles the alienation of people who were displaced from the Chornobyl zone in the 1980s.

Conflict-driven displaced people are a new phenomenon in the history of independent Ukraine (Uehling, this volume). However, five years before the country's independence, in 1986, almost 100,000 people were internally displaced from Chornobyl. The social marginalisation of nuclear disaster victims was heavily marked by social overreactions to

the unknown consequences of the radioactive explosion. The lack of knowledge about the radioactive effects caused public anxiety, stress, and triggered the social exclusion of displaced people (Jaworowski 2010).

The invisible threat of radiation can be compared to the invisible threat of association with Donbas that affects the 'normalcy' of displaced populations. In this way, belonging to the national community becomes secondary, whereas the regional marker (either Chornobyl or Donbas) is amplified. In her research on refugees in Tanzania, Liisa Malkki emphasises the significance of the category of 'purity' for displaced people – both a purifying effect of suffering that populations have gone through and how hosting actors categorise them as 'pure,' depriving from social and political markers in order to rationalise assistance (Malkki 1996, 384-385). In the case of Ukraine, an 'impure' effect of radioactive or ideological 'contamination' is evident, as it converts the legal status of displaced people into a social label. The same effect can be seen as an important factor in the hierarchy of othering, as the 'impurity' of separatist movements in Donbas and the on-going war there are seen as more dangerous elements for Eastern Ukrainian IDPs' identity in contrast to the Crimean internal migrants.

Another parallel between Chornobyl and Donbas IDPs is their life-death experience that frames their social interactions and distances IDPs as 'them' (*вони*). Anthropologist Adriana Petryna in her study of post-Chornobyl life, politics and biological citizenship in Ukraine (2002), describes how victims of the nuclear catastrophe navigate their new social identities of survivors. For them, as Petryna argues, the idea of inclusion into a national community is 'charged with the superadded burden of survival' (Petryna 2002, 7). For IDPs from Donbas the survival is largely marked not only with the eruption of war, but also with an internal political conflict. Their experience is often silenced, for instance when volunteers are instructed not to talk with IDPs about the war. These measures are introduced not to disturb highly traumatic memories but also to avoid potential confrontations. The silenced past, this 'burden of survival,' conceals a possibility of being a political opponent or a supporter of separatist movements, which often contribute to othering and distancing of IDPs.

Drawing the parallel between Chornobyl and Donbas IDPs I aim not to equate their experiences, but rather to compare the emotional, uniformed, and somewhat superficial assumptions that shape responses to their situations of displacement. The danger of these assumptions is in magnifying IDPs as a social threat. This does not mean that the connection between the arrival of displaced population and social instability should be altogether dismissed. However, it calls for deeper critical examination of the process, reasons for IDPs' social exclusion, and the alteration of responses.

Conclusion

In this paper, I highlight a shift on the axes of public perception of displaced people in Ukraine. The initial support of IDPs was celebrated as an indication of an important societal process, in which the regional belonging of IDPs was largely dismissed under the overarching concept of 'ours.' The same regional belonging became a marker of social stigmatisation over the past year. An accentuated image of Donbas ideological 'impurity' pictured IDPs from Eastern Ukraine in less favourable light than those from Crimea, creating internal hierarchisation of othering. Alienation and negative images of displaced people are reflected in the everyday discrimination and reinforce preconceptions about them. However, this fluctuation of attitudes questions the fixity of IDPs differentiation and demonstrates that the 'unchangeable order' can be more dynamic than unchangeable. Not only does it necessitate a revision of the conceptual framework of othering, but should be accounted for in the work of media communications, where often the generalised image of displaced people is generated.

The categorisation of uprooted people as impure and threatening is something that Lisa Malkki explores as a transcendent discursive phenomenon that affects public and academic languages about refugees (Malkki 1992). However, the danger of this tendency is particularly crucial in a larger context of ideological discrepancies within Ukraine, where the taken-for-granted separation between Eastern and Western Ukraine is heightened by displacement. Beyond the declarative statements about a unified Ukraine, the social standing of the displaced population remains complicated. Their inability to participate in local elections due to the legislative inconsistencies, meager and unstable social payments, as well as a growing tendency to social marginalisation make their inclusion into the larger national community quite complex.

This situation can potentially have significant political repercussions for displaced populations. The proliferation of negative images endangers their prospects of social inclusion and can affect future institutional actions and policy delivery (Zetter 1991, 2007). IDPs' limited leverages in these processes undermine their status as citizens – the one that initially granted them access to aid resources – and puts them on the margins of the 'state-citizens' relations, which is a prolific area for further ethnographic observation and examination.

Notes

[1] As research shows, even though significant support for displaced people came from the civil society sector and NGOs, displaced people's expectation was to receive assistance from the state (Semygina et al.). While a nuanced explanation can highlight different historical and ideological underpinnings of these expectations, in general, it was the status of citizenship that grants them entitlement and shaped their anticipation for the state's support.

[2] While it should be acknowledged that there were some social tensions and blaming of IDPs for the conflict in Eastern Ukraine took place, the critical narratives did not prevent the wave of compassionate responses from civilians and the state.

[3] In case IDPs are not at place of their official residence during the inspection, they are deprived of their status and social welfare payments. The decision can be appealed within three days from the date of inspection. For this, applicants should come to the state welfare office at the place of registration in person. NGO and human rights organisations alarmed that these conditions significantly restricted IDPs rights for movement and 'imprison' IDPs in their homes.

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