



The Unseen Battle: Unity and Trauma Amidst Ukraine's Forced Internal Displacement

The war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, has led to the internal displacement of an estimated 5 million individuals. Ukrainian IDPs are facing both the challenges of physically being forced from their homes to relocate elsewhere and the psychological challenges and mental health impact of residing in a conflict zone. This article discusses the importance of the mental health impact forced displacement plays in the compounding the trauma of Ukrainian IDPs. Highlighting how loss of identity and community as well as the disconnection from their loved ones leads to additional psychological strain, the authors address the stressors Ukrainian IDPs are facing while also identifying the key roles resilience and increased access to social support play in helping aid in mental health recovery.

Published 12 September 2024

Natalia Tsybuliak and Yana Suchikova

The full-scale war in Ukraine that began in 2022 has led to profound changes, including the mass internal displacement of millions of individuals and families. The reasons for internal displacement range from the desire to find a safer place in the territory of one's own country, where the search for shelter seems easier and more understandable than migrating abroad, to the impossibility of continuing to stay in the temporarily occupied territories due to physical violence by the occupying authorities.

In Ukraine, forced internal displacement goes beyond physical relocation; it is a profound psychological ordeal, deeply affecting mental health and well-being. Since the full-scale war began, the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine has registered approximately [5 million internally displaced people \(IDPs\)](#), particularly from regions under Russian occupation. This displacement represents not only the loss of material possessions that cannot be taken with them or retrieved from the occupied cities, but also

an immense invisible loss. Individuals are uprooted from their homes, communities, and community identities, leading to widespread mental health challenges.

Ukrainian IDPs face a multitude of challenges, deeply shaped by the ongoing war and the absence of truly safe havens within the country. The conflict has uprooted millions, leaving no city free from the threat of violence, as shelling and airstrikes reach even areas once considered safe. This constant danger exacerbates the psychological trauma of displacement, with exposure to violence, loss of homes, and separation from loved ones weighing heavily on mental health. Many displaced individuals struggle with grief, burnout, anxiety, and depression, all intensified by the uncertainty of their futures. Economically, many IDPs struggle to secure stable employment and housing, further compounding their stress. In addition, they experience social isolation due to the loss of established support networks and the difficulties of integrating into new communities. Community dislocation is particularly significant in Ukraine, as regional differences in language and customs often force IDPs to navigate unfamiliar environments, challenging their sense of identity. The ongoing instability, coupled with the fear of further war crimes by occupying forces, leaves them in a constant state of emotional exhaustion, uncertain whether they will ever find lasting safety or be able to return to their native communities. The absence of a clear end to the war only deepens these challenges, intensifying the psychological and socioeconomic toll of forced displacement.

The sheer scale of the crisis – both in terms of human suffering and destruction of infrastructure – means that recovery will be long and difficult, even after the fighting ends. The mental health and well-being of millions of Ukrainians now hinge on the ability to provide them with psychosocial support, both during displacement and in the eventual process of [returning home](#) or rebuilding their lives in new communities.

In response to the growing mental health crisis, the Ukrainian government, in collaboration with international partners, has initiated efforts to address both the immediate and long-term mental well-being of its citizens. However, it is crucial to recognize that the mental health and psychosocial support ([MHPSS](#)) landscape is rapidly evolving due to

the ongoing war. Community mental health teams are providing vital services amid constant conflict, while the World Health Organization (WHO) is working alongside partners to scale up mental health and psychosocial services in the most affected regions. A significant recent development is the establishment of [Resilience Centres](#) across Ukraine, following the adoption of a government procedure on January 23, 2024. These centres are intended to offer psychosocial support to individuals and families within each territorial community, with a particular focus on addressing the pervasive stress and emotional toll of the ongoing war. In addition to government efforts, public organizations – many of which are funded by foreign donors – are playing a critical role in providing psychological support to IDPs. These organizations specialize in helping displaced individuals manage trauma and rebuild their lives, offering a lifeline to those most affected by the war.

Despite these efforts, establishing a systematic approach to providing mental health care poses [significant challenges](#) for Ukraine, as it requires substantial investment in financial resources, strategic planning, and human capital – resources that are limited due to the war.

Forced Internal Displacement and Trauma

For Ukrainians, war has become an ever-present reality, deeply affecting all aspects of life, not just through direct exposure to violence but also through the pervasive psychological impact of ongoing uncertainty. Millions of Ukrainians live under constant stress, as the war brings continuous disruptions, from daily news of bombings and territorial occupations to personal losses and the destruction of infrastructure. Even those not directly caught in the conflict zone suffer from anxiety, fear, and grief as they are forced to leave behind their homes, heritage, and social ties.

IDPs face the compounded trauma of both physical survival and the emotional devastation of being uprooted from their communities. The nature of forced displacement itself, particularly in Ukraine, is marked by a harrowing journey through multiple stages. The first period often involves staying in areas [under occupation](#) or enduring heavy shelling, which could last from several days to years depending on the circumstances. Many people were unable to leave, paralyzed by fear of

the unknown, lack of financial means, or the inability to flee safely due to health issues. Those under occupation faced constant terror, the threat of torture, and the oppressive force of propaganda. For example, IDPs from Mariupol endured a city blockade that left them living in inhumane conditions, further exacerbating their psychological trauma.

The second stage of displacement is the journey itself – a dangerous road to what may be considered safer cities in Ukraine. Often called the "Road of Death" by those fleeing, this journey was fraught with terror and uncertainty. Many IDPs witnessed the wreckage of civilian cars destroyed by attacks, the remnants of indiscriminate shelling, and the psychological burden of passing through checkpoints and filtering operations, where people and their belongings are meticulously searched by occupying forces for perceived threats.

The third stage involves the arrival in a host community. In a state of heightened stress, people rarely had the clarity to choose an ideal location for temporary stay. Safety and proximity to loved ones often dictated their decision, rather than long-term viability. In many cases, the destination was determined simply by the availability of shelter and the presence of familiar faces. Finally, the fourth stage is the arrival and attempted integration into a new place. Adjusting to life in a new community while still reeling from the trauma of displacement is a significant challenge. People must not only rebuild their lives but also grapple with the loss of home, identity, and community ties.

Displacement is not a temporary disruption but a profound and often enduring shift in an individual's life, leaving deep psychological scars that permeate both individuals and the larger social fabric. This collective trauma affects the entire country, permeating Ukrainian society, straining the social fabric and affecting mental well-being across entire communities. The widespread displacement creates ongoing challenges for social cohesion, as families and individuals grapple with their losses while trying to adapt to new, unfamiliar environments. The sense of belonging, community roots, and identity – integral to well-being – has been fractured, making recovery an even greater challenge, especially in the absence of stable due to the war.

Community Identity and Disconnection

Forced displacement within Ukraine's borders has exposed significant discrepancies rooted in the country's unique historical, cultural, and geopolitical diversity. The variations across regions – such as language, customs, values, and religious practices – present challenges for IDPs as they attempt to resettle in unfamiliar parts of the country. For many, this forced severance from their origins results in a rupture of cultural norms, religious customs, and other elements constituting their identity, leading to a profound sense of cultural bereavement. While [some argue](#) that a robust identity can be maintained regardless of attachment to place, others believe displaced individuals must construct new identities in their new environments.

Resettlement in different sociocultural environments requires IDPs to reconstruct their lives while preserving their cultural identities. Ukraine's regions exhibit significant cultural and historical differences, which have been shaped by centuries of varying geopolitical influences. For instance, the western regions, such as Galicia and Volyn, were historically part of the Austro-Hungarian and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealths, leading to strong Ukrainian national traditions and predominantly Ukrainian-speaking populations. In contrast, the eastern and southern regions, such as Donetsk and Luhansk, were more heavily influenced by the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, resulting in a higher prevalence of Russian language use and distinct cultural practices. These differences are reflected in language, religious customs, and social norms, with the west being predominantly Ukrainian-speaking and the east and south having larger Russian-speaking populations. The division is not only linguistic but also cultural, with western regions maintaining closer ties to European traditions, while the eastern regions have been more aligned with Russian and Soviet influences.

This cultural divide often leads to social isolation or difficulties in forming new connections, as IDPs must adapt to regions with distinct customs and languages. These discrepancies, compounded by the trauma of displacement, make it difficult for IDPs to find a sense of belonging in their host communities, forcing them to navigate complex social environments while trying to preserve their identity.

All of this unfolds against the backdrop of an ongoing war, where persistent concerns about personal security, basic needs, economic stability, and an uncertain future further hinder any sense of normalcy. The disconnection from their home communities and the change in familiar cultural and social identities significantly exacerbate the mental health challenges faced by Ukrainian IDPs. Uprooted from their sense of belonging, many struggle with feelings of alienation, loss, and disorientation in their new communities, which intensifies the emotional toll of displacement. The severing of ties with familiar social networks leaves IDPs grappling not only with the external chaos of war but also with an internal crisis of identity. This fragmentation of community and identity makes it even harder for individuals to adjust and rebuild their lives, as they seek stability in a place that remains fraught with challenges, without the grounding influence of their familiar social networks.

Disconnection with Native Community

One of the most significant challenges for Ukrainian IDPs during the ongoing war is maintaining connections with relatives and friends who have remained in the temporarily occupied territories. Disrupted telecommunications infrastructure and fears of surveillance make communication difficult, particularly in areas where internet and mobile networks are controlled by occupying forces. Even when communication is possible, concerns about monitoring, coupled with the fear of betrayal, strain conversations and weaken relationships. Stigma and bias from those who remained behind can further isolate IDPs, and visiting family members is often prohibited, deepening the sense of disconnection. Additionally, the focus on securing and maintaining material possessions in their temporary relocation becomes a recurring source of stress, as it amplifies IDPs' sense of instability and lack of control over their situation.

[Research](#) shows that constant stress and worry about the safety of loved ones lead to emotional exhaustion, making it harder for IDPs to sustain meaningful relationships. Within host communities, IDPs often face a mix of sympathy, indifference, and apathy, which contributes to feelings of isolation. Misunderstandings and prejudices are further exacerbated by the lack of direct communication, eroding social ties and diminishing emotional support. Over time, the differing experiences of those who fled

and those who remained create cultural and identity disconnects, complicating any attempt to maintain a sense of belonging. These compounded challenges make it extremely difficult for IDPs to preserve their social ties amidst the ongoing war. Without deep social support, many find themselves struggling not only with the immediate physical and emotional consequences of displacement but also with a profound sense of loss regarding their former lives and relationships.

Surviving Displacement: Role of Resilience and Social Support for Ukrainian IDPs

Forced internal displacement disrupts social networks and support systems, amplifying feelings of vulnerability. The loss of social bonds, family ties, and community structures during wartime intensifies these feelings, exacerbating the traumatic experiences faced by those IDPs. This disruption reverberates at both the individual and community levels.

The role of social support in mitigating isolation cannot be overstated. Humanitarian responses, family cohesion, and community support are crucial for those displaced during war. These networks provide a sense of belonging that can alleviate the feelings of isolation accompanying internal displacement in a new host community.

At the same time, forced displacement makes individuals vulnerable to discrimination due to their insecurities within social interactions. Ambiguous social interactions in a new host community can trigger elevated levels of anxiety, increased vigilance, and heightened perception of threat, further intensifying their negative mental state. The trauma, grief, and uncertainty inherent in such situations can lead to various mental health challenges of IDPs. Developing appropriate mental health support services for those forcibly displaced is a fundamental concern.

Studies document a notable increase in [mental health disorders](#) among war-affected populations. It can manifest in feelings of hopelessness, sleep difficulties, fatigue, and other distress symptoms. The cumulative impact of social disadvantages experienced before, during, and after displacement further contributes to psychological distress.

Social support plays a key role in the mitigation of challenges IDPs are facing. Humanitarian aid, family cohesion, and community support are

crucial for providing a sense of belonging that can alleviate the isolation experienced during internal displacement. However, ambiguous social interactions in a new host community can trigger elevated anxiety, heightened vigilance, and an increased perception of threat, further exacerbating negative mental states. Emotional exhaustion caused by ongoing stress and the difficulties of adapting to new social conditions profoundly impacts IDPs' ability to engage in social activities or form meaningful relationships within their new environment. The sense of being overwhelmed by unfamiliar realities hampers their ability to connect with others, leading to feelings of alienation. The sense of being overwhelmed by unfamiliar realities hampers their ability to connect with others, leading to feelings of alienation. For example, many Ukrainian IDPs who have relocated to the western regions of the country, where the Ukrainian language and traditions are dominant, may struggle to adapt if they come from predominantly Russian-speaking areas in the east. The unfamiliar customs, language barriers, and regional differences can create a deep sense of alienation, as they find it difficult to integrate into the host community while feeling like being "[in a stranger's house](#)".

This emotional exhaustion not only depletes their energy and motivation but also exacerbates existing mental health challenges. The constant mental strain weakens their capacity to cope with daily stressors, making it harder to process the trauma of displacement and war. Over time, this compounded exhaustion can lead to a sense of hopelessness and further isolation, preventing them from accessing the social support that is crucial for their mental well-being. Without the necessary mental resources to recover and adapt, IDPs become trapped in a cycle of deteriorating mental health, deepening their sense of alienation and disconnection from both their native and host communities.

Many IDPs struggle to adapt to the norms and practices of the host community, intensifying their sense of being [outsiders](#). This is further compounded by a perceived lack of understanding or sympathy from the host community regarding their wartime experiences. In some cases, discrimination and mistrust rooted in the stigma associated with IDP status contribute to deepening their social isolation.

A holistic approach, which includes addressing the psychological trauma of displacement, fostering resilience, and considering the unique sociocultural context of the host community, is essential for understanding and addressing the complex challenges faced by IDPs. This approach not only involves providing mental health services that focus on trauma recovery but also creating support systems that promote social integration and community cohesion. It recognizes that IDPs' experiences are shaped by both individual psychological responses and the broader sociocultural dynamics of their new environment, requiring interventions that are sensitive to local customs, language, and community structures ([UNHCR](#)).

The ongoing conflict and displacement have profoundly affected the self-efficacy and resilience of Ukrainian IDPs, as they face significant challenges in managing their mental health while adapting to new realities. Many IDPs, despite enduring war trauma and the loss of their homes, are finding ways to cultivate self-help, self-care, and self-empowerment as critical strategies to cope with their mental conditions. In the face of instability, they are leveraging personal and community resilience to regain a sense of control over their lives. For some, this involves building new routines in temporary communities. Alongside these efforts, a deep belief in eventual victory and the conviction that enduring current trials is essential for the future well-being of generations to come provides further strength. Many IDPs hold on to the belief that after darkness, there is always dawn, which helps them to persevere through their struggles. Ultimately, this focus on self-efficacy, resilience, and hope is essential for their mental health recovery, empowering them to navigate the immense challenges of displacement with a greater sense of control and optimism for the future.

Conclusion

Forced internal displacement due to the full-scale war and temporary occupation of Ukrainian territories by Russian troops has erected invisible barriers within the country, altering social ties and increasing internal discrepancies. These barriers are not only physical but emotional, fuelled by fear, anxiety, and prolonged uncertainty. For Ukrainian IDPs, this

disconnection from their native communities, coupled with the trauma of displacement, significantly impacts their mental health, contributing to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The paradox of displacement is that while it fragments pre-existing social ties, it also creates opportunities for new connections based on shared experiences among displaced individuals. However, these new connections are often limited by the stress and emotional exhaustion that IDPs endure, making it difficult for them to form and sustain meaningful relationships in their host communities. The loss of familiar social networks, combined with the uncertainty of displacement, deepens feelings of isolation and alienation, further straining their mental health.

Understanding how displacement affects social isolation and mental health is crucial for shaping effective recovery strategies. For IDPs in Ukraine, comprehensive mental health support must be a priority. Mental health services that focus on trauma recovery, such as counselling and psychosocial support, should be expanded and made more accessible. Initiatives like the establishment of Resilience Centres are a positive step, but more needs to be done to address the widespread emotional and psychological toll of displacement.

Ultimately, addressing the mental health needs of Ukrainian IDPs requires a holistic approach that not only focuses on immediate psychological care but also seeks to rebuild social cohesion and foster resilience. By understanding the mental health impact of displacement and implementing comprehensive support strategies, Ukraine can better navigate the long path to recovery and national unity.

Natalia Tsybuliak, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at Berdyansk State Pedagogical University, Ukraine, and a researcher in the fields of mental health, psychological resilience, and educational support in times of crisis. Following the relocation of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University due to the full-scale war in Ukraine, Natalia herself became an internally displaced person (IDP) in Ukraine, driving her deep commitment to understanding and supporting IDPs. Her [recent research](#) includes projects on the social isolation and challenges faced by IDPs during the full-scale war in Ukraine, notably through [her work](#) with the French Research Center in Humanities and Social Sciences (CEFRES).

Yana Suchikova, is Doctor of Technical Sciences, Professor, and Vice-Rector for Scientific Work at Berdyansk State Pedagogical University, Ukraine. Her primary research focus is on nanomaterials science, however, during the full-scale war, she has been actively studying the impact of the war on Ukrainian universities. Additionally, her research interests include exploring the third mission of universities – community service, particularly the role of universities in the reintegration of de-occupied territories.

Bibliography

BANDURA, R. & REYNAL, P. 2023. Investing in Mental Health Will Be Critical for Ukraine's Economic Future. *Center for Strategic and International Studies* [Online]. Available: https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-08/230821_Bandura_MentalHealth_Ukraine_0.pdf?VersionId=cyBxtuPWXsGkKM.MvyYKRduOjBAzbZ5d

COORDINATION CENTRE FOR MENTAL HEALTH. 2024. Mental Health and Psychosocial Support System of Ukraine: A Target Model 2.0. Available: https://howareu.com/storage/app/media/Posibnuki/TM_MHPSS_UKRAINE_ENGLISH%20VERSION_upd.pdf.

ELIAS, N. & SCOTSON, J. 1994. *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems*. 2 ed. London.

POPOVA, A., TSYBULIAK, N., LOPATINA, H., SUCHIKOVA, Y., KOVACHOV, S. & BOGDANOV, I. 2024. I (don't) want to go home. Will young people return to the de-occupied territories of Ukraine? *Heliyon*, 10 (15).

THEISEN-WOMERSLEY, G. 2021. Trauma and Migration. *Trauma and Resilience Among Displaced Populations*.

TSYBULIAK, N., POPOVA, A., LOPATINA, H. & SUCHIKOVA, Y. 2024. In a Stranger's House: Social Isolation of Internally Displaced People in Ukraine During Wartime.

TSYBULIAK, N., SUCHIKOVA, Y., HURENKO, O., LOPATINA, H., KOVACHOV, S. & BOHDANOV, I.
2023. Ukrainian universities at the time of war: From occupation to temporary
relocation. *Torture*, 33 (3), 39-64.