



Displacement, Emplacement, and Reintegration: IDP Experiences in Ukraine, 2014-2021

The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine not only shocked the world and made millions of Ukrainians either refugees or internally displaced persons. It also overshadowed the invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, which resulted in an intense armed conflict, forcing people living in Donbas to flee further from the frontlines. Based on numerous interviews with IDPs, the author explores the 2014 internal displacement from Eastern Ukraine and the challenges faced by IDPs, including integration and reconciliation. Highlighting one of the interviews in particular, this brief article provides the firsthand experience of a displaced person who was forced to leave her hometown, Donetsk, which, before 2014, was the second-wealthiest city in Ukraine, had an international airport that welcomed millions of passengers annually, and hosted concerts of world-renowned musicians and the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship.

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Introduction

When did I realize it was actually real? When our first close acquaintance died—that's when I understood it was real. Because over the course of the conflict, among our close acquaintances, probably around 15 people have died. Not just died but were killed. Some from injuries, some because a shell exploded right next to them. With that first death, I think we realized that it was truly reality. And when the number of victims started to grow, then it became an undeniable reality. The only thing was, not everyone wanted to acknowledge it or accept that it had really happened and

that there was no escaping it anymore. That first death was like litmus paper—it revealed the boundary between what was real and what wasn't.

Tamara was just 26 years old when Russia's invasion of Eastern Ukraine forced her and her family to leave their home in Ukraine's second-wealthiest city, [Donetsk](#). Among the [one-and-a-half million people who were officially registered as internally displaced in Ukraine as of 2021](#), Tamara's story allows us to better understand the intertwined processes of displacement and emplacement in the context of protracted war before [Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022](#).

In the months after [the pro-democracy Euromaidan protests](#) in Kyiv ousted then-President [Viktor Yanukovich](#) in February 2014, local separatists and their supporters from Russia began to [expand their presence in the Donetsk region](#) and the city itself. They occupied government buildings and other spaces, and they began to violently target local activists who were known for their pro-Ukraine positions and for their participation in Donetsk's Euromaidan protests. People quickly began to flee to safety in Ukraine's government-controlled parts of Donetsk and [Luhansk](#) regions, as well as to further regions of Ukraine. The war grew through 2014 and 2015, eventually stabilizing with the [Minsk II ceasefire agreement](#) and establishing a front line, entry-and-exit checkpoints (EECPs), and an unrecognized occupation authority.

This internal border between Ukraine-government-controlled and the temporarily occupied territories was extremely fluid until 2020, when the occupying authorities shut down the EECPs to Ukraine in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Until then, millions of Ukrainians crossed the border monthly at five EECPs (four in the Donetsk region and one in Luhansk). According to the UN, in 2018, 1.1 million people crossed between non-government-controlled areas (NGCA, also referred to as the temporarily occupied territories, or TOTs) and government-controlled areas (GCA) per month on average, or around 38,000 per day (UN Ukraine, 2019). While these numbers suggest huge traffic of citizens across the contact line, UN research noted significant hardships for those crossing due to

the small number of checkpoints serving millions of people, resulting in four- and five-hour wait times; small numbers of staff working at the EECs; and the advanced age of many of those crossing, who were required to collect their pensions in government-controlled areas of Ukraine.

While studies of the forced movement of people begin with the *displacement* of people from their homes, the process is rarely linear. And while displacement is often described as temporary, in reality, it is unlikely to be short-term. Further, displacement from one point to another is rarely fixed. In the case of Ukraine, internally displaced people (IDPs) established a variety of patterns: some moved from one place in the Temporarily Occupied Territories (TOTs) to a place in government-controlled Ukrainian territory, and then moved again; others moved to a place in Ukrainian-controlled territory and then moved back to their homes in the TOTs; and others went to places in Ukrainian-controlled territory and then moved back to their homes, commuting between the temporarily occupied territories and the Ukrainian-controlled territories to confirm their “displaced” status with official institutions. In a context of protracted displacement, like Ukraine before 2022, this movement was a common practice of people who were officially registered as “internally displaced.”



2014 Russo-Ukrainian Conflict Map by Niele is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

At the same time, many IDPs decided to stay in a new host community, yet they retained their official “internally displaced” status. Here, we should recognize this *emplacement* as part of the process of displacement ([Çağlar & Glick-Schiller, 2018](#)). It helps us see that displacement is not a clear, linear process of movement from one place to another and possibly back again. “Emplacement” encourages us to consider how displaced people must create new local, national, and global connections in order to survive. The framework of “emplacement” prompts new questions, such as, how do displaced people build their lives in host communities? And relatedly, how do residents of host communities respond to displacement?

The larger project on which this blog is based includes 78 interviews with IDPs from Donetsk and Luhansk regions (*oblast'* in Ukrainian), as well as Crimea. These interviews were conducted in 2014, 2015, and 2016 by a Ukrainian anthropologist from [Horlivka](#) in Donetsk Oblast and completing a PhD in Lviv. In this blog, I will draw from just one of these interviews, conducted in Dnipro in 2016, with a 28-year-old woman from the city of Donetsk whom I call Tamara. Tamara had been living in [Dnipro](#) since September of 2014, having left Donetsk following the capture and occupation of the [city's airport](#), which was near her family's residence. Tamara and her family first went to [Mariupol](#), on the southern coast of Donetsk region, before moving to Dnipro in September. In Donetsk, she worked for the global [Catholic charity Caritas](#), whose office in Donetsk moved to [Ivano-Frankivsk](#) in Western Ukraine in 2014, and then relocated once more to Dnipro. Through Tamara's narrative, the processes of displacement and emplacement are complicated, reflecting the reality of the lives of many displaced Ukrainians.

Non-Linear Displacement and Decision-Making

In 2014, when people began to be displaced from Donetsk and Luhansk regions following violence and occupation by pro-Russian separatists and Russian forces, most of those interviewed for this project described that they did not think their displacement would last for a long time. Tamara described the initial decision to go temporarily to Mariupol:

Because everyone thought that it would end from week to week, that is, no one could predict that everything would drag on for so long, and that the terms would be so long, prolonged, that the conflict would drag on. Everyone hoped that the government would take a normal, correct decision that would be able to resolve this

conflict in the near future, even, let's say, not a conflict, but at first a brawl (заварушка/zavarushka). But no one was going to do this already, probably then, so at first, we thought: "Let's sit, okay, a month," and then this month turned into a second month. And when it all passed into the second month, we realized that everything would not end so quickly, we decided that we still need to move on.

The perception of a quick return to one's home might discourage a displaced person from thinking about long-term relocation. The joint problems of housing and employment further influenced people's decision-making. Many IDPs left stable housing and employment behind in the TOTs, and the decision to seek long-term housing and permanent employment indicated that a person was open to staying in the host community over the longer term. Those who already had connections in their new community—for instance, through the Caritas organization, which had employed many of those interviewed in Donetsk and then offered employment when the office was moved to Ivano-Frankivsk and later to Dnipro—were more likely to find both work and housing, though many interviewees also mentioned the kindness of total strangers over the course of their displacement.

Once Tamara realized that her displacement was not as temporary as she had initially envisioned, she describes the factors that led to her relocation from Mariupol to Dnipro (in her Russian-language interview, Tamara refers to her host city as ["Dnipropetrovsk," even though the city's name was changed to Dnipro in 2016](#)):

Well, let's put it this way, we were looking for a city where we could realize some of our desires, because before the war, everyone had their own life, their own life, and activities. And that is why it is more difficult to realize one's desires and ambitions in a small town than in a big one. And probably Dnipropetrovsk is somewhat similar to our city, of course, not so beautiful, not so polished and clean, and beautiful, but still also an industrial city, big. Therefore, perhaps this was such a key moment that served to choose the city in which we are now.

Later in the interview, however, Tamara mentioned how difficult it had been to build long-term plans.

We also had supervision [here at Caritas], and my supervisor asks me: "What are your plans for the next year?" And I understand that

this is probably wrong, but I can't build any global plans as such, because, well, maybe in ... although I'm saying, I accepted the process that there was a war, that for now I cannot return to Donetsk, that there are circumstances that, unfortunately, do not depend on me. But somehow I can't build long-term plans. Of course, I understand that while I cannot make long-term plans, life goes on, and something needs to be thought about. Well, for the time being, we are working here, for the time being my husband also works here. For the time being, in Dnipropetrovsk.

Tamara was in a privileged position not shared by all IDPs: she was able to leave her home in Donetsk and move to a safe place, and she was able to find a stable job and housing in that new place. With her work at Caritas Donetsk, she had a built-in community of others who were, like her, displaced. In her interview, she spoke about the team of employees and volunteers who worked with Caritas Donetsk in Dnipro, sharing stories of their interactions with other displaced people that shed light on the experience of displacement among those who were less fortunate than she was.

At Caritas, we began the work of Caritas Donetsk in the city of Dnipropetrovsk right from the very start. We launched a German-funded project, but at first, no one really understood what to do or how to do it. The situation was war—how could we adapt everything that was happening to our program? Then we began interacting more closely within the team, and very quickly, a really great, productive effort began. And when you could actually see how many people you were helping, and when you saw all those endless letters that people wrote us...We had this little box—we called it the “gratitude mailbox”—and it was filled to the top with letters, thank-yous, and notes of appreciation. Especially when people—like poor elderly women or mothers with children—would write, it was so moving.

There was one situation: some people came in who literally had nothing. They'd lived in a village, no money, nothing. They rented a small house and wanted to start growing vegetables—like dill, parsley. When they were taken into the program, they got support so they could buy food, hygiene supplies, medicine. And when harvest time came, they brought us these huge, huge boxes—actually two of them—full of peppers and tomatoes. We were

stunned. I said: “Why did you bring all this? You need it for yourselves.” And they said: “No, we are so grateful to you, because you treated us like human beings. You gave us hope, support, you showed us that not all people are the same. Because when we went to certain state social services, they treated us like dogs. They yelled at us endlessly, said we were separatists, that it was our own fault. But here, you treated us with such understanding, such kindness.”

Another very important factor was that we ourselves were all displaced persons. We had been in their shoes; we had felt all of it ourselves. This work became such a powerful resource, and that very first project was, I’d say, like the cradle for many social workers—others, and for me too. Of course, this work also brought a lot of pain through us, because people came with stories that just made you want to break down and cry. But at a certain point, you had to pull yourself together and remember: you’re at work. If people saw weakness in you and didn’t show reliability, a sense of support, then why had they come? If you just sat there crying and suffering?

A recurring theme in the interviews that make up this project is the contrast between IDP experiences with state services and with charitable organizations such as Caritas. IDPs were required to register with state institutions in order to access their pensions or any reparations for damaged homes or property in the TOTs. Because of stereotypes about Eastern Ukraine and commonly held notions that many of those who were displaced might support separatists in the TOTs and were taking advantage of state payouts for IDPs, many IDPs described experiencing poor treatment at the hands of state actors. Yet most IDPs also recognized that state benefits for IDPs could barely cover any expenses, so many younger people who did not need to register for pension payments or property reparations chose not to register at all.

Tamara’s story also highlights how regional identities had been internalized among Ukrainians. Among the 78 interviews, IDPs came from various cities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and they were displaced to places across Ukraine, including Dnipro in the east, Kyiv in the center, and several cities in Western Ukraine, such as [Lviv](#), [Lutsk](#), and [Uzhhorod](#). Some of these IDPs describe experiencing discrimination personally based on their regional identity, whereas others—such as Tamara—did not experience this discrimination herself, but she was well

aware of its existence. Here, questions of emplacement come to the forefront of IDPs' stories.

Emplacement: Integration, Adaptation, and Community-Building

One of the most challenging aspects of emplacement for IDPs from the TOTs was prejudice against those from Donetsk based on stereotypes about the region and city. Tamara describes landlords in Mariupol (a city on the sea in southern Donetsk oblast') as "ripping off their own people" in order to "jack up the rental prices so high that my hair stood on end" when the war first began. Donetsk, in particular, had a reputation for *ponty*, show-offs, based on strong individual purchasing power gained in the industrialized city. Tamara understood why prejudices against people from Donetsk appeared in host cities:

Well, yes, of course, that was there in Donetsk itself, among our own, but... it probably somehow spread to other parts of Ukraine too, because people still saw us at the doorstep like: "Aha, they came here to stir up trouble." That existed, but now it doesn't. I think now it's no longer the case, everyone clearly understands there's no point in showing off, because... well, there's nothing left to show off with anymore.

Like many younger IDPs, Tamara's parents stayed in Donetsk, and she had returned one time since her displacement to help take care of her sick father. The changes she noted in the city help explain what she means about having "nothing left to show off with anymore," and the nostalgic tone reflects how many IDPs mourned for their lost home.

It was a very beautiful, fashionable, modern, European city, in which all nationalities found their place. Everyone was friendly, never had any problems. It was a dynamic city, constantly developing, in front of our eyes. But it was very beautiful. Now, of course, it's not like that... I was there a year ago for the last time, I had the first impression ... I prepared myself like that, I think: "I'm about to drive in, what will be there?" I was really shocked, because everyone in our city ... Donetsk was very cool, you could walk and walk at any time of the day or night, and we very often liked to walk with our child there along the embankment, in the center of the city. When our child was sleeping in the stroller, we walked, looked, breathed the air, such a feeling of euphoria, that's what summer is there, this weather, this cricket singing, and everything that goes with it. And

then I drive in, and it's really dark — I don't understand what's going on, where are the streetlights? Only every other one is working. I had been preparing myself, because when we left, the city was, roughly speaking, a diamond, and now it had become like some shabby dried-up raisin. And that feeling — I don't even know how to describe it. But I was in a state close to shock.

IDPs from the city of Donetsk generally concurred with Tamara in their descriptions of Donetsk, but most also recognized that the city they loved was gone. The impossibility of truly being able to go home colored their interactions with new neighbors and inhabitants of host cities. In her perspective, Tamara felt largely welcomed by those in Dnipro. She described her appreciation for “completely reasonable people” in Dnipro, “landlords who are always willing to compromise,” and who helped her get a reasonably priced apartment in the center of the city. At the same time, as she put it, “Donetsk people do still look out for their own.” Tamara narrated the shared experience of being from elsewhere with a telling anecdote:

I live sort of in the center; I go out to the embankment at 9 o'clock, and by 9 o'clock people are already slowly heading home. And I'm like: "But what about going for a walk with the child before bedtime?" There's no such thing. I think that's also a historical factor, because Dnipro used to be a closed city with all that rocket-building and everything else, so people prefer to spend their free time... either in establishments, or in cafés, theaters, movie theaters. Whereas where we were from, we had clubs, movie theaters, theaters, cinemas, and you could go out in the evening, walk down the street, and really enjoy it. Enjoy the beauty that surrounded you and get a real kick out of it. Here, of course, it's not like that. Back home, moms like me would go out with the stroller at 11 or even midnight. The baby sleeps, I'm walking, observing people and the beauty around, then you get in the car, fold up the stroller, go home, that's it. Here, that doesn't happen. I feel the same way—that little piece of home is missing. Because when... actually, it was really interesting, too, when we used to walk along the embankment in the evening, just strolling around. You didn't need to spend crazy money, just walk, enjoy yourself. And here, people would come toward us. I'd say to my husband: "They must be from Donetsk for sure." They'd turn around and say: "Oh, are you from Donetsk too?" (laughing)

Interviewer: How did you know?

Because in the city nobody goes for walks in the evening! I'd say: "Wow, look at that." And they'd reply: "Oh, you noticed too that nobody goes for walks." I'd say: "Yeah, only our people do." We laughed so much about it. So that's the part that's missing. But still, it's fine—I, for example, understand, and the people who live here also understand, that you can't just take a mentality, the inner spirit of a city, and transplant it into a completely different one... you don't walk into someone else's monastery with your own rules. Meaning, it's impossible to transfer one part to another without consequences, so nobody is going to do that.

Despite having been displaced for two years, with good housing conditions and a stable job, Tamara remained in a situation that was common for many IDPs. Her parents had stayed in the occupied territories, and the fluidity of the borders allowed her to go back when necessary. On the other hand, her experience of occupied Donetsk was that of shock, and she clearly preferred her life in Dnipro. At the same time, she felt a stronger kinship to those from Donetsk than locals from Dnipro, even if the latter had treated her kindly. She missed the "inner spirit" of Donetsk, destroyed by the occupying forces and impossible to recreate in Dnipro.

"Few Will Accept it in their Souls": Prospects for Reintegration and Reconciliation

We are taught by God, the Bible, that it is necessary and important to forgive, and even psychology speaks about this. But it's very hard. The constant agitation that sounds from the radio, from television, says that there are such bad people, bad people who kill you and your children. It takes a lot of time to explain and show, because everyone remains with their own opinion, even if there is some kind of formal reconciliation now, few will accept it in their souls, and few will want to do it in practice. Because they will say, these will say "you are separy [сепары¹]", these will say "you are ukropy [укропы²], damn you," and they will also wish the same for them in return. There is no reconciliation... I think it will take at least 10 years to somehow balance what happened.

Before 2022, reintegration had become a major topic in Ukrainian politics. In 2016, the [Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied](#)

[Territories](#) was given jurisdiction over managing questions related to internal displacement, as well as the governance of the TOTs. But the problems that created the possibility for separatism to take hold remained and, over time, became entrenched, as Russian influence grew through the [distribution of Russian passports](#) to residents of the TOTs.

The Russian invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and the ensuing occupation were the precursors to the 2022 invasion that forcibly displaced millions of Ukrainians—the [UN currently estimates](#) 3.7 million internally displaced and 6.9 million refugees globally. Displacement and reintegration were never resolved, and now the possibility for reconciliation seems even further away. Returning to stories of displacement from 2014 sheds light not only on how challenging these problems were before the full-scale invasion but also reminds us of what is at stake—the lives of millions of Ukrainians who will never be able to go home.

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¹ *Separ [сепар](singular)/Separy [сепары] (plural)* is a derogative and pejorative nickname used by Ukrainians to call people from Eastern Ukraine who supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. In many situations, the word was used to refer to all natives from Donbas, regardless of their political affiliations. The word “*separ*” [сепар] *originates from the* English words “*to separate*” and “*separatist*”.

² *Ukrop [укроп] (singular)/Ukropy [укропы] (plural)* is a derisive and derogatory nickname used by Russians to call Ukrainians, especially those who have supported the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine. *Ukrop* literally means “dill” in Russian and has syntactical similarity with the word *Ukrainets* (a person with a Ukrainian background in Russian).