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# Victims to villains: Internal displacement and nation-building in Ukraine

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## ABSTRACT

The war in Donbas has created large-scale displacement within Ukraine, an issue the impoverished state has struggled to manage. Internally displaced people (IDPs) have suffered from prejudice at the hands of host communities and from legal ambiguities caused by the state's incoherent attempts at limiting the threat of mass displacement. This paper examines how the Ukrainian government-owned newspaper *Uriadovyi Kurier* represents the IDPs from Donbas and analyses what the publication's attitudes towards internal displacement mean. Over time, a distinction appears in the newspaper's reporting between real IDPs in need of help, and people posing as IDPs, guilty of siphoning Ukrainian tax payers' money to the rebel-held areas. Also, the paper eagerly discusses how the European Union (EU) and foreign states can be engaged in providing support for the IDPs, relieving pressure from regional budgets and simultaneously binding Ukraine to the West. These tropes serve to construct Ukrainian national unity by excluding politically suspicious migrants from Donbas. They also excuse the state from making any structural adjustments or battling corruption as inadequate social protection can be replaced with foreign aid.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, internally displaced persons, nation-building, ideological discourse analysis

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## **INTRODUCTION: Ukraine's second round with internal displacement**

“A whole scheme of fraudsters posing as internally displaced people and receiving millions of hryvnia from the state budget has been revealed,” Prime Minister Arseny Yatsenyuk, justifying halting the payment of social benefits to 150,000 people in February 2016 (Ukrainska Pravda 2016).

“I have come to meet folks with a very negative attitude to people from Donetsk. There were insults and reproaches, very unpleasant things. But then I resigned myself: it is impossible to prove myself for everyone, to be good for everyone.” Viktoria Kuznetsova, an internally displaced person from Donbas living in Kherson, interviewed by the BBC (Dorosh 2016).

The war in the Donbas (portmanteau for Donetsk basin) region of Eastern Ukraine has created a type of person with whom Ukraine had only had fleeting experience prior to 2014: internally displaced person, or IDP. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 forced some 350,000 people from their homes, but the scale of displacement following the armed clashes in Donbas is wholly different: by October 2015, there were about 1.5 million internally displaced people in Ukraine (Petryna 2013, 124; UNHCR 2015). The challenges of managing such a large-scale displacement are obviously enormous for an impoverished state, especially one experiencing conditions of war and rapid institutional change following the Euromaidan revolution. In addition to being a strain on resources, I argue that the displacement has had a definite role in Ukraine's nation-building project, which has intensified after Euromaidan and especially the war in Donbas. A host of exclusionary discourses and practices towards IDPs, exemplified by the quotes above, have contributed to the formulation of a more unitary conception of the nation in Ukraine.

For most of its independence, Ukraine has struggled to find a commonly accepted conception of the nation, with a population deeply divided on issues such as the country's geopolitical orientation, constitutional choice (unitary or federal state), and state language laws. In this paper, I assess recent

developments in Ukraine's nation-building project by concentrating on internally displaced people from Donbas as an object of state policies. The IDP as a figure poses a challenge for the statehood of any country: they acutely make visible the state's inability to exert control over its own territory and question its monopoly on violence. Research on forced migration has shown that forced displacement in general is intimately connected to nation-building policies and questions of "stateness" (Mylonas 2012; Soguk 1999; Turton 2002). In Ukraine, former Donbas residents are, as carriers of potentially dangerous political ideas, also likely to become demonised in the tense media atmosphere. It is thus interesting to examine how the state talks about IDPs and how the exclusionary practices mentioned above are justified.

I investigate how the Ukrainian state relates to this group of people and analyse what its attitudes towards IDPs might mean through a reading of selected articles in the government-owned newspaper *Uriadovyi Kurier*. My analysis of this publication shows that the figure of the IDP is used to delimit the Ukrainian national unity by excluding "fake IDPs" residing in the occupied areas through an association with Russian occupants, separatists, and corrupt officials. Conversely, proper IDPs are shown to be hard-working, honest, and having pro-Ukrainian sympathies. Inclusion or exclusion in this case is not predicated by ethnicity or mother tongue, but by the right kind of movement and political choice. In the following section, I will briefly explore some basic facts related to the IDP issue, and discuss the observations of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with forced displacement in Ukraine. After this, I will move on to discuss the connection between displacement and nation-building and present the findings of my analysis in more detail.

## **Background of Donbas displacement**

Much has happened since demonstrators occupied regional state administration buildings in the Eastern Ukrainian cities of Luhansk and Donetsk in spring 2014, triggering a series of armed clashes between Ukrainian government forces and local militias covertly backed by Russia. The fighting soon escalated into a full-blown war, affecting at least 4.4 million

people in total and killing more than 10,200 (situation in September 2017, OHCHR 2017). The conflict has caused large-scale displacement both within Ukraine and in neighbouring countries, an issue not widely discussed in the international media. The occupation of Crimea in March 2014 also prompted some 20,000 Crimeans to move to mainland Ukraine (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2015). In total, about three million people left Donbas during the most active military operations in 2014 and 2015. As the situation has been stagnating with little developments either way since early 2015, the number of displaced people has been slowly decreasing. Currently there are about 1.6 million internally displaced people in Ukraine (UNHCR 2017a). Most of the IDPs are within or near the Donbas region itself, and many move frequently from government-controlled areas across the “contact line” to territories controlled by rebel fighters to check on their property and relatives (UN OCHA 2016, 6). As with internal displacement, numbers of Ukrainians seeking refuge abroad has been declining. By August 2017, the numbers of Ukrainian citizens in external displacement had dropped to about 0.5 million, while still in February 2017 it was nearly 1.8 million (UNHCR 2017b; UNHCR 2017a). The majority of external refugees from Donbas have sought some form of legal residence in Russia. By 2016, Russia was hosting over 1.3 million displaced Ukrainians (UNHCR 2017b), but many have now returned to Ukraine or have been naturalised as citizens and are hence not included in the refugee statistics. Current estimates of Ukrainian refugees in Russia hover around 400,000 people (UNHCR 2017a).

While this mass displacement has been virtually invisible to audiences in West European countries, it was a salient topic in Ukrainian and Russian public discussions especially in the early phases of the conflict. The largest instances of mass displacement from Donbas took place in August-September 2014 and late January 2015, following intensification in fighting and rapid changes in battle dynamics (Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska and Palaguta 2017, 6–7). Consequently, there was a lot of discussion in the Ukrainian media about the phenomenon of internal displacement, and appropriate government response to it. At the onset of the crisis, the Ukrainian government lacked institutional and procedural mechanisms for dealing with the repercussions of its “anti-terrorist operation” in the eastern regions (Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska and

Palaguta 2017). Because of this, internally displaced persons have sometimes lacked access to housing, healthcare, and education, and have sometimes failed to receive their pensions and other social benefits. Delivering humanitarian aid to the afflicted areas has been hampered by both the Ukrainian government and the rebel leadership. Ukraine has at times restricted movement of displaced persons between the government-controlled area and non-government controlled area (Calabia and Gabaudan 2015). IDPs were largely unable to vote in the elections of 2014 because they lacked registration documents in their new place of residence (Woroniccka-Krzyzanowska and Palaguta 2017). The Ukrainian government has been criticised for these shortcomings by NGOs working with displacement, including the Red Cross and UNHCR.

Of course, the situation with mass displacement has been a shock for Ukraine, as it struggles to cope with economic crisis and the reorganisation of the country's political structure. According to Kateryna Ivashchenko-Stadnik, "in 2015 Ukraine found itself among the five countries in the world with the highest number of IDPs associated with conflict and violence (...) and ranks first in Europe" (2017, 26). According to NGO and academic research into IDP conditions in Ukraine, relations between IDPs and their host communities have been complex, with both welcoming and suspicious reactions towards the resettled IDPs (IFRC 2015; Ivashchenko-Stadnik 2017). Over time, a dynamic change from welcoming reactions and keenness to help to increasingly suspicious attitudes towards IDPs has been observed (Bulakh 2017, 51). According to Tania Bulakh, media narratives on IDPs in Ukraine in the beginning of the crisis typically featured positive interpretations of the displaced people. Later, negative perceptions of IDPs, influenced by stereotypes and rumours, have appeared in the societal imagination (Bulakh, 2017). While explicit discrimination and negative attitudes toward IDPs are still relatively rare in Ukraine, IDPs from the east are sometimes portrayed as being criminals and bringing instability to other regions of the country. These stereotypes have manifested in discrimination especially in the housing and job markets: advertisements for rented apartments in Kyiv, for example, often explicitly tell displaced people not to bother (Bulakh 2017, 54). Further, an interesting differentiation has appeared between attitudes to IDPs from

Crimea and those from Donbas: while those who fled from Crimea are often revered as victims of political oppression, IDPs from Donbas are classified as a social threat (Bulakh 2017, 49–50). This is motivated by the idea that Donbas IDPs are somehow complicit in the conflict in Ukraine's eastern regions. According to Katerina Ivashchenko-Stadnik, "local people's escape from the conflict zone often provokes moral stigma. In a sense, they are seen as both victims and perpetrators" (2017, 28).

Ukrainian researchers and NGOs working with displacement observed that negative representations of IDPs appeared in Ukrainian media already in 2014: "In summer 2014 the first cases of discrimination of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and media publications that negatively characterize IDPs were recorded in Ukraine" (Andreyuk 2015, 3). Typical negative media tropes include suspicions of IDPs abusing social benefits and exhibiting anti-Ukrainian sympathies. Especially after it became evident that the conflict in the eastern regions was stalling and that displacement was to be a long-term issue, "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." (Bulakh 2017, 55).

It is thus not a surprise that the IDPs' relationship to the state has been at times problematic. IDPs in Ukraine can face a variety of problems in their daily lives, ranging from registering, finding accommodation and work, continuing their education, and placing their children in day-care. NGOs cited problems with registration and obtaining IDP status as especially acute in the beginning of the conflict, but the government has later issued decrees to facilitate these procedures (Ferris et al. 2015; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2016). Nevertheless,

"some of the registered displaced persons have not been resettled: they applied for IDP status to claim their social welfare payments in Ukraine (...), but have been either unable to rent accommodation or unwilling to abandon their dwellings in the occupied territories. As a result, they move back and forth with no endeavour to integrate into a new community." (Ivashchenko-Stadnik 2017, 28).



Despite being citizens of Ukraine and thus entitled to all the same social support and benefits as other civilians, IDPs in Ukraine have been forced to take extra steps to prove their right for support. IDP registration was introduced as a necessary precondition for receiving targeted support in October 2014 (Ferris et al. 2015, 9). A government decision harshly criticised by NGOs in 2014 was the introduction of Resolutions number 505 and 637, which stipulate that the payment of state benefits is conditional on registration and residence in government-controlled areas (GCAs) (Ferris et al. 2015, 12). This has forced some pensioners and other benefit recipients unable to move permanently to GCAs to go back and forth across the contact line to receive their benefits. According to both Ukraine's own pension legislation and international agreements signed by Ukraine, claiming benefits should not be dependent on place of residence (IDMC 2016, 5). These resolutions were the direct cause behind widely-discussed suspicions of benefit fraud, as some IDPs living in non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs) began traveling to GCAs to collect benefits, to which they were not entitled based on their residence status. It also directly caused a wave of internal displacement from the rebel-held areas, as especially pensioners were forced to leave their homes in order to receive their pensions (Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska and Palaguta 2017, 7). These examples may paint a needlessly dark picture of IDP adaptation in Ukraine, however, since positive experiences tend to be less newsworthy and visible in media and NGO reports. Nonetheless, simply the fact that a group of citizens has a different set of rights on paper than others because of forced displacement, is reason enough for concern.

### **Displacement and the nation-state: a chicken and egg problem**

These problems with displacement would seem to be ultimately technical issues that the government of Ukraine simply lacked the experience to solve; as time passes, the problems should disappear as the state machinery becomes more competent in dealing with displacement. However, I argue that the question is trickier than that, since the treatment of IDPs goes much deeper, to the very justification of the state and its limits. Scholarly discussion on forced migration suggests that displaced people, instead of being

essentially marginal to states, as they are often portrayed, in fact occupy a central place in relation to the state (Soguk 1999; Fassin 2015; Turton 2002). Nevzat Soguk proposes that the figure of the refugee is "essential to statecraft, particularly at the intergovernmental level" (1999, 244). This is because the international system divides the surface of the earth into non-overlapping nation-states (typically) in full control of their territories, and assumes a relationship of representation between states and their citizens. As argued above, people displaced by war make immediately visible the state's failure to control its territory. Further, persons outside of their state or without state protection are an abnormality in urgent need of regimenting and controlling, so that the system of nation states itself can be protected. Forced displacement is thus, according to David Turton, "both a threat to, and a product of, the international system of nation-states" (2002, 20). Migration and citizenship are the last bastions of state authority: if the state cannot protect its territory from outsiders, it does not have a reason to exist (Turton 2002, 70).

Because of the perceived challenges displaced people pose to the state's authority, states are anxious to limit the danger by subjecting forced migrants to various policies regulating their movement and settlement. The range of actions available to states to protect themselves from displacement include integration, adaptation, and deportation of forced migrants. Unfortunately for Ukraine, the IDP is a type of migrant you cannot deport because they are citizens of the country. This radically limits the scope of actions available for the Ukrainian state, in comparison with, for example, the Russian state which can deport unruly migrants at will. I propose that the problems IDPs face in Ukraine are related to this dilemma. Since the inconvenient IDPs cannot be removed from Ukraine, the state attempts to find other strategies to cope with displacement if it cannot easily integrate the IDPs or adapt them and the society to each other. For example, it is in the state's interest to maintain legal ambiguities regarding the status of internally displaced people, because this ambiguity gives the state some room to manoeuvre vis-à-vis the migrants (see Reeves 2013).

Furthermore, it has been argued that the contemporary state can be best captured and comprehended at its margins, in terms of population, territory, and policy (Fassin 2015, 3). That is, the state arguably becomes most visible in the way that it treats its marginal populations, including refugees and other migrants, because they reveal the tensions between a punitive and welfare orientation at the heart of the state (Fassin 2015). In policing populations at its perceived borders, the state constructs those exact borders. These observations mean, first of all, that there is no forced displacement without nation-states, but also that there might not be any nation-states without forced displacement; in many cases it is impossible to say which comes first. In the next section, I will review the data and methods used to analyse Uriadovyi Kurier's discourse on IDPs.

## Data and methods

Because of the connections explored above, I expect that the Ukrainian state's attitudes towards displaced persons from Donbas can offer insights into the politics of nation-building in Ukraine. That is, looking at how forced migrants are portrayed in government media can bring us closer to understanding the ideology of the Ukrainian state regarding the nation and its borders. My research questions are: what kind of assumptions become evident in the way IDPs are represented in governmental media? What kind of identities are created with these narratives? What does the state's attitude towards IDPs tell about the state itself?

To answer these questions, I analysed 86 articles discussing displacement from the Donbas region, published in the governmental newspaper Uriadovyi Kurier (UK) across a 2-year time period<sup>1</sup>. The data collection period spans two years from the beginning of the armed clashes in Donbas in early April 2014 to the end of April 2016. The number of articles published in Uriadovyi Kurier in this period amounts to thousands of relevant items, which is more than can be meaningfully analysed through qualitative text analysis. This is

<sup>1</sup> My data set also included 90 articles from the corresponding Russian newspaper Rossiiskaia Gazeta, but I concentrate on the Ukrainian case here.

why shorter collection periods were chosen from the beginning, middle, and end of the two-year time span. The first collection period is from the beginning of April to the end of June 2014, when displacement from Donbas was becoming a mass phenomenon for the first time. Two natural data collection points in the middle of the collection period are around the Minsk agreements, first in September 2014 and then in February 2015. The final collection period spans from the beginning of January to the end of April 2016, after which the situation has remained at a deadlock with little development either way. The articles were found in UK's web archive using the search function. Search queries used included words like refugees (bizhentsi), "settlers" (pereselentsi), involuntary migrants (vymusheni pereselentsi) and IDPs (vnutrishnio peremishcheni osoby) as well as their derivatives.

The articles were saved as PDF files into the data analysis software NVivo for qualitative coding. Following a coding methodology used by Hutchings and Tolz (2015), the main theme or topic of the articles was identified from the headline and content and coded into a main topic category in NVivo. When an article contained several themes, the more prominent one was selected so that each article was coded only once. Before data collection, I developed a deductive set of codes based on my research questions in addition to previous research, and proceeded with identifying further codes from the text. The main deductive codes included the tone of the article towards the displaced persons (either positive, neutral, or negative), the displacement keyword used to address the displaced persons (settlers/migrants, refugees, IDPs, or other), and some of the themes in category later named "necessities of life" (for example employment, healthcare, and education). While reading the articles, I developed new codes and ways to group previously appointed codes. One especially important set of codes obtained as a result of inductive coding was the Actors category, identifying the main active subject dealing with the issue of displacement. These include the involuntary migrants themselves, regional administration, state or presidential administration, volunteers, friends and relatives, foreign states, migration services, and others. Coding finally produced three parent categories for the main article topics: Crisis Management, Politicisation of Migration, Society-Migrant Relations, and the

category Other for articles that did not neatly fit with any of the main categories.

After qualitative content analysis, the data was also analysed using the tools of ideological discourse analysis (IDA). The added value of conducting both qualitative content analysis and ideological discourse analysis with the same data is that while the first approach identifies salient themes in the publication, the latter shows how exactly these discourses work, and what is being achieved through them. Ideological discourse analysis is a theory of identity construction in politics. Politics in this case is understood in a very broad sense as any practice concerned with dynamics of power in human societies, not just parliamentary politics or the operation of political institutions. The concept of discourse itself here refers to not only textual forms of communication, but any “relational systems of meaning and practice that constitute the identities of subjects and objects” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 9). In this sense, the structure of a party system or the social dynamics of a classroom can constitute a type of discourse. The case at hand is of course more traditional, as I am analysing text produced by a rather overtly political actor. What I concentrate on, however, is not so much the referential content of the political messages the newspaper produces, but the kinds of political identities it is attempting to construct.

A central concept for the creation of political identities in ideological discourse analysis is the empty signifier (Laclau 2007, 70–71). The operating logic of this concept is based on Ferdinand de Saussure’s assertion that language, and in Laclau’s view, any signifying system, is fundamentally a system of differences. Linguistic identities, or values, are purely relational, and the totality of language is involved in each single act of signification (Laclau 1996). In a system like this, the only possible relations between items of a signifying system are equivalence or difference, which are mutually exclusive relationships. Either two items are different and separate, or they are equivalent and essentially the same. Each element of the system has an identity only so far as it is different from the others. Herein lies a dilemma, however: there can only be a coherent system of elements if there is something that is outside of that system, that is, if something is excluded. In

human interactions, limitless systems of relation, as exemplified by the concept of an infinite universe in physics, are impossible. This is where empty signifiers come in: as markers of the “outside”, they reveal the unity of the system. The exclusion of an element grounds the system as such: "Only if the beyond becomes the signifier of pure threat, of pure negativity, of the simply excluded, can there be limits and system" (Laclau 1996, 38). This necessary distinction between the in- and out-group can be articulated with the help of empty signifiers (Laclau 1996).

The main requirement for an empty signifier is, as the concept suggests, notional emptiness. An empty signifier lacks a signified. According to David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, “the articulation of [any] political discourse can only take place around an empty signifier that functions as a nodal point. In other words, emptiness is now revealed as an essential quality of the nodal point, as an important condition of possibility for its hegemonic success.” (2000, 13). For example, the notion of “the people” is a commonly used empty signifier especially among populist movements: political actors often make extensive reference to “the people”, but never define or interpret the concept. It can mean whatever the audience wants it to mean, which can be as many things as there are people in the audience. Because the notion is emptied of all particular meaning, it can function as a unifying node, as the success of various populist movements attests. However, populist movements do not have a monopoly on using empty signifiers, as political identity projects of all kind are necessarily built around empty signifiers (Norval 2000, 220). Further, populism, the practice of creating political identities around empty signifiers, is the very act of constituting the unity of a group, not simply the mobilisation of an already existing group (Laclau 2007, 73). Thus, “‘the people’ is not something of the nature of an ideological expression, but a real relation between social agents.” (ibidem). Empty signifiers do not summon pre-existing social groups, they create them.

Further, the construction of social divisions, or othering, is crucial for the stabilisation of the discursive system. Such social antagonism shows itself through the production of political frontiers: political division lines built between

a united inside and an excluded outside, articulated with the help of the empty signifier. In this process, “[s]ocial antagonism involves the exclusion of a series of identities and meanings that are articulated as part of a chain of equivalence, which emphasize the ‘sameness’ of the excluded elements.” (Torfing 2005, 15). The concepts of empty signifier and political frontier are specifically useful for the Ukrainian case, because they expose the way political identities are constructed through equation and exclusion. Ukrainian authorities are in a difficult position because, on the one hand, alienating the residents of Donbas from the Ukrainian nation would pre-empt the war effort, but on the other hand, the situation offers the perfect opportunity for nation-building through exclusion of the separatists. Armed with these analytical notions, we can move on to consider Uriadovyi Kurier’s representation of IDPs in practice.

### **Representations of Donbas IDPs: from victims to crooks**

Analysing the articles using ideological discourse analysis, I found that Uriadovyi Kurier attempts to construct Ukrainian national unity by drawing a political frontier between “real” and “fake” IDPs, that is, those who have relocated to government-controlled areas, and those who have not. In the newspaper’s reporting, Ukrainian national unity is delimited with the figure of the ‘fake’ IDP, acting as an empty signifier. The ‘fake’ IDP is juxtaposed from ‘honest’ IDPs entitled to benefits, and is equated with terrorists, corruption, and rebels backed by Russia. This act of social othering is not articulated in the language of ethnicity, language choice, or religion, but is determined by political loyalties. The choice to flee west to government-controlled areas, east to Russia, or to stay put in the NGCA thus justifies the civilians’ inclusion into the in-group, or exclusion from national unity.

Interestingly, this conclusion only emerges gradually: Uriadovyi Kurier’s representation of IDPs changes over time from moderately positive to a more polarised picture between extremely positive and extremely negative. For example, in summer 2014, articles describing life in displacement portray the IDPs largely in a positive manner and often mention how their political outlook has changed from agnosticism to active support of the Ukrainian nation as a

result of the conflict. A long story from June 2014 describes how those fleeing the war do not complain about anything and are only grateful for help: “The main thing is being alive; Dnipropetrovsk people have greeted us so well,” says Liudmila, an IDP from Donbas (UK 27/06/2014). Almost without exception, the involuntary migrants interviewed in these stories were, or had recently turned into proponents of the Ukrainian central state. Uridovyi Kurier seems eager to show that politically loyal IDPs are entitled to aid from the state.

Further, many articles published in 2014 feature mentions of alleged repression of pro-Ukrainian people in Donbas and occupied Crimea, and include explicit calls to strengthen national unity. An article from 27 June 2014 recounts the story of Tetiana from Kramatorsk, who was forced with her family to leave their house after the referendum about DNR’s status the previous May, as Tetiana’s husband was a member of the well-known Dnipro battalion in the Ukrainian army and her son a scout in a nationalist scout organisation. Tetiana says that after their departure from Kramatorsk, her son's scout friend was arrested and questioned about him. She says her family did not realise they were pro-Ukrainian until the recent events (UK 27/06/2014). One article, commenting on procedures of accepting IDP students to universities in September 2014, ends with a moralistically coloured lecture about national unity and the inadmissibility of giving in to enemy propaganda among students:

“[The problem] is about dividing [people] into one's own and strangers (podil na svoyikh ta chuzhikh). Of course, it is difficult to find yourself in the regions which are, according to enemy propaganda, opposed to you. But we must remember that this is a lie, that we are all one people. Residents of the East sometimes face a prejudiced attitude from the side of people from other regions, laid down on the soil prepared by propaganda. Usually they are blamed for what happened, or for an atrophied sense of patriotism. There is only one solution here – do not play into the hands of the enemy, do not give in to provocations.” (UK 03/09/2014)



This concern with ensuring national unity by urging IDPs and those encountering them to surpass the false notion of an internal division in the Ukrainian society, created by Russian propaganda, amounts to a hegemonic struggle for identity (Torring 2005). The division between East and West, traditionally seen as one of the major fault lines of political opinion in Ukraine, is rejected in exchange for the idea of a unified nation. The author argues that newcomers from the East need to be patiently explained how volunteers are helping at the front and through various organisations, so that the IDPs too can understand the importance of unity at the face of adversity (UK 03/09/2014). Thus in 2014 at least, there was a clear attempt to integrate IDPs from Donbas into the Ukrainian political community.

These rather positive representations of IDPs as politically loyal to the Ukrainian central state slowly give way to more negative and ambivalent representations over time. The themes of IDP employment and adaptation issues were often discussed in *Uriadovyi Kurier* in 2015. These topics evoked both sympathy and suspicion towards the IDPs, who were seen alternately as victims of unfair stereotypes and dishonest about their qualifications and prone to blame others for their problems. By 2016, the trope of 'fake' IDPs as funders of terrorism emerges as a dominant theme in the newspaper's reporting, alongside articles about engaging foreign governments and aid organisations in managing the IDP issue. As mentioned earlier, NGOs argue that the problem of 'fake' IDPs in Ukraine is a direct result of Cabinet of Ministers resolutions 505 and 637, which establish residence and registration in government-controlled areas as a prerequisite for claiming any kind of benefits (IDMC 2016; Ferris et al. 2015). The resolutions created new IDPs and forced people remaining behind the contact line and either unable or unwilling to permanently move to GCAs to shuttle back and forth across the contact line to claim their pensions and other benefits, and often to use the services of semi-legal middlemen to obtain registration documents in the GCAs. To curb these informal practices, in February 2016 the government suspended the payment of social benefits to 150,000 people and implemented a verification procedure for IDPs' registration documents as a condition for continuing payments (IDMC 2016).

These investigations were eagerly discussed in UK in early 2016. Ukraine's difficulties with the state budget, drained by the conflict, was often mentioned as justification for these measures. The alleged fake IDPs themselves are never interviewed in UK, nor are their motivations discussed or interpreted. In a couple of articles, the authors express sympathy with those wrongfully included on the lists of people whose benefit payments have been suspended because of fraud investigations. For example, an article from March 2016 reports that IDP pensioners are contacting the offices of the state Pension Fund en masse to resume their pension payments, which has resulted in massive queues. The article cites local activists, according to whom every morning hundreds of elderly people queue at the door before opening hours, in frost, with nowhere to sit, and guards only let a few people inside the office at once. Local activists are trying to defend the right of the elderly to queue indoors (UK 30/03/2016). At the same time, other articles on the topic discuss the clever methods of misappropriation used by the fraudsters, who appear as nothing short of hardened criminals. The fraudsters are said to cooperate with corrupt officials in regional branches of state institutions. According to the Minister of Social policy Pavlo Rozenko, who is quoted in several articles, huge criminal schemes have been built on distributing assistance to IDPs, with multibillion sums in circulation. Rozenko claims that some of these funds from the Ukrainian budget and Ukrainian taxpayers flow into the pockets of corrupt officials, terrorists and Russian invaders (UK 19/04/2016). A careful differentiation is thus anxiously crafted in these articles between 'fake' IDPs and actual ones in need of help.

The figure of the IDP in this discourse can be interpreted as a floating signifier, that is, a signifier without a singular, unambiguous signified: the signifying relationship between IDPs and the group of people it refers to is contested. Perhaps this is the reason why the legalistic term IDP (*vnutrishnio peremisheni osoby*) appears so rarely in *Uriadovyi Kurier's* articles, and more vague words like migrant or settler (*pereselentsi*) are used instead. The UN definition of an IDP includes everyone displaced from their habitual place of residence without crossing an internationally recognised state border, regardless of their new place of residence (UNHCR 2004). In *Uriadovyi Kurier*, this inclusive definition is contested: only people living in government-

controlled areas are counted as IDPs, and those who have been displaced inside rebel-held areas are demonised as 'fake' IDPs. A representative from the state security service of Ukraine (SBU), commenting on the investigations into alleged benefit fraud, stated in February 2016: "Now that Ukraine is at war with an aggressor, in our state budget every penny is important. I responsibly emphasize: we do not threaten decent people (poriadny liudy) who migrated from the occupied territories to safe areas and actually live there" (UK 27/02/2016, emphasis added). The implications of this statement are evident: those IDPs conforming to the state definition are honest, decent people, who can be included in the national unity of Ukraine, while false IDPs staying in rebel-held areas are not.

The figure of the 'fake' IDP, in turn, can be seen as a constitutive myth in the hegemonic struggle to build a political identity in Uriadovyi Kurier's discursive system. As argued above, no coherent identity can exist without the exclusion of something else, which thus articulates the limits of that identity. For a national unity to exist in Ukraine, and for the IDPs to be included in that unity, some elements have to be excluded. This is where the empty signifier of 'fake' IDPs comes in handy: the category of the 'fake' IDP absorbs all politically suspicious migrants from the combat zone. Furthermore, a chain of equivalence is constructed between 'fake' IDPs, professional criminals involved in organising the benefit fraud schemes, corrupt officials, and finally the "terrorists" directly or indirectly benefiting from the money flows to NGCAs. Kateryna Ivashchenko-Stadnik seems correct in her statement that "in a state-sponsored war, civilians living in the enemy camp, even if they are not engaged in hostilities, are conceived by the other side as 'failed citizens'" (2017, 27).

In conclusion, the above analysis shows that UK's portrayal of IDPs has a specific role in consolidating Ukraine's state-building project. The IDPs' representation changes from a relatively benevolent picture to a more polarised one. If in the beginning of the crisis, people fleeing from Crimea and Donbas are primarily portrayed positively as victims of oppression who made the conscious decision to align themselves with the unitary Ukrainian state, later Uriadovyi Kurier's reporting concentrates solely on 'fake' IDPs and

foreign help in dealing with displacement. A political frontier is constructed between Ukrainian national unity, exemplified by selfless volunteers and “honest, hard-working” IDPs who fled to GCAs (and stayed there) on the one hand, and the thieving ‘fake’ IDPs, corrupt officials, and Russian occupiers, on the other. Unfortunately for the IDPs living in NGCAs, they are the constitutive outside of the political identity that UK constructs. These findings testify how struggles with state-building become acutely visible through displacement. As in Elizabeth Dunn’s research on IDPs in Georgia (2012), managing the issue of internal displacement is also tied to geopolitical orientation in Ukraine: by involving Western states as partners and donors in IDP assistance programmes, Ukraine can tie itself tighter to the West.

### **Statecraft versus statehood**

Looking at the articles across the two-year observation period, it is evident that the Donbas crisis expedites the process of Ukrainian nation-building. The initially fuzzy categories slowly change into an increasingly solid political division dividing Ukrainian national unity from its enemies, embodied in the figure of the ‘fake’ IDP. This is in line with other research on the Donbas conflict (see e.g. Riabchuk, 2015; Uehling, 2017). Greta Uehling argues that “after the conflict with Russia in the east and the occupation of Crimea in the south, there is a clearer sense of what it means to be Ukrainian emerging.” (2017, 70). Indeed, as Rogers Brubaker argues, high levels of group consciousness may be the result of ethnic conflict, rather than the other way around (2004, 19). My analysis of UK reporting reinforces these conclusions and shows how, exactly, this emerging “groupness” is discursively constructed.

Thus, the IDPs are relevant to the way in which the Ukrainian state attempts to negotiate its relationship to its citizens. What Uriadovyi Kurier discusses less in connection with the displacement crisis is the state’s capacity to manage it, in contrast to the corresponding Russian publication Rossiiskaia Gazeta, which devotes a lot of attention to this topic. The discourse on displacement in both publications does appear to relate to the state, but from

different angles. As we saw, in Ukraine the internally displaced are portrayed through a discourse of Ukrainian nationhood, either including them as hard-working and honest people, or excluding them as 'fake' IDPs. In *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, the refugees from Donbas evoke assurances of the Russian state's ability to govern it. Stef Jansen, discussing his informants' desires for "normal lives" in Bosnia and Herzegovina, argues for analytically distinguishing between two aspects of the state: statehood and statecraft (2015). According to Jansen, questions of statehood relate to what the state is, claims to be, and should be: they explore the legitimacy of a polity and its administrative-territorial anatomy, for example, questions of sovereignty and representation in identarian terms (2015, 12). Statecraft, in turn, is concerned with what the state does, claims to do, and should do; in a word, state capacity. Key concerns of statecraft are the provision of material conditions and temporal structures for the unfolding of 'normal lives' (ibidem). Against this analytical background, it is quite clear that *Uriadovyi Kurier's* articles on IDPs from Donbas primarily deal with statehood, while *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* essentially discusses statecraft through its representation of Ukrainian refugees.

It is intriguing that the Ukrainian and Russian government newspapers would in this context emphasise opposite aspects of the state, despite high salience of the other aspects in society. Media analyses from Russia and Ukraine indicate that the representation of forcibly displaced persons from Donbas has been connected, among other issues, to questions of state capacity in Ukraine and to the nation-building agenda in Russia (Mukomel 2016; Mukomel 2017; Andreyuk 2015; Ivashchenko-Stadnik 2017). In the case of these governmental newspapers, the situation appears to be completely reversed: the Ukrainian paper is mostly concerned with questions of nationhood, while the Russian paper uses the issue of displacement to discuss state capacity. This is remarkable because the issue of state capacity, especially in relation to corruption, is a persistent topic of political discussion in Ukraine. It is odd indeed that the Ukrainian paper devotes so little attention to questions of statecraft, even though Euromaidan, the "revolution of dignity," started out as a protest against corruption, clearly a question of statecraft, rather than provoked by identarian questions. Like the 2004 Orange Revolution, which had similar motivations, the Euromaidan eventually failed to deliver any

substantial change in state institutions and to end corruption. It did briefly change those in power, but the political leaders lacked either the will or the understanding of how to change Ukraine's extractive institutions. The state institutions changed hands, but that did not lead to change of the institutions themselves.

## Conclusion

The above discussion shows that the way in which internally displaced people are represented is not incidental. I have argued that the moral panic surrounding 'fake' IDPs as collaborators of terrorism is not just a question of scarce resources, it is an attempt to carve out the national community by delimiting its borders. In this nation-building exercise, finding political outsiders in the figure of the 'fake' IDPs, corrupt officials, and Russian-backed separatists matter more than concerns regarding statecraft. Of course, one could also argue that *Uriadovyi Kurier* is worried about state capacity, since the IDPs are presented as a strain on resources and the newspaper discusses ways to engage foreign donors in solving the issue. However, the state's solutions to the IDP issue are not dependent on the state itself: the solution is either exclusion of IDPs of the wrong kind, or increasing state capacity not by restructuring the state's institutions, but by involving foreign states and the civil society. Instead of reforming the state machinery, the government outsources the solution. The extreme way in which civilians attempting to gain access to their (earned) benefits become demonised in *Uriadovyi Kurier* and Ukrainian society in general is an effect of anxieties surrounding nation-building. For historical and contingent reasons, this discourse is not shaped around the issue of ethnicity or for example language choice: framing the exclusion in ethnic terms would immediately justify the Russian claim that ethnic Russians or Russian-speakers are in danger of oppression in Ukraine.

For post-Euromaidan Ukraine, questions of statecraft would seem equally if not more pressing than identarian questions about statehood. However, the problems with corruption and the state's capacity to function like a "normal" state remain largely unresolved. Instead, groupist concerns with, for example,

nationality and state language, dominate in the public sphere. The developments in Ukrainian society since 2014 have been interpreted in nationalist terms not only in Ukrainian domestic discourse, but also in the international press and the Russian media. According to Richard Sakwa,

“The Association Agreement offered by the EU in the framework of the Eastern Partnership proposed a lifeline to break out from the corruption and economic degradation in which Ukraine had been mired for so long. The original idealism of the Maidan protests was based on the profound repudiation of the failures of the past, but its idealism was not rooted in a substantive real political constituency. It was not able to sustain a political formation that could institutionalise its idealism” (2015, 269).

Instead, the Maidan protest movement became radicalised along the lines of Ukrainian nationalism (*ibidem*). This shows how easily nationalist rhetoric can mobilise people and demobilise alternative politics (Jansen 2015, 10). It is then probably not a surprise that the reporting on displacement in *Uriadovyi Kurier* attempts to make even the question of corruption into an issue of nationhood by equating corrupt officials with the separatists and excluding them from Ukrainian national unity.

The reasons for determinedly ignoring questions of statecraft in the government newspaper can be only speculated here, but journalists and analysts have paid attention to the new government’s failure to curb corruption and enact any kind of permanent change after the Maidan revolution. Former president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, who was appointed the governor of Odesa in May 2015, publicly complained that Ukraine’s government is not even trying to change corrupt institutions and that in fact both central and regional level politicians actively resist anti-corruption measures (Saakashvili 2016). Thomas de Waal, senior fellow at Carnegie Europe, notes that “the Ukrainian public is increasingly frustrated and cynical, perceiving that much of the old predatory political class has survived into the post-2014 era and that the fundamentals of the old system remain unchanged.” (2016). Disbanding former president Yanukovych’s Party of Regions and the Communist Party of

Ukraine has not stopped politicians from these parties from appearing in the Rada under different parties.

Also, IDPs themselves have lamented the state's scant resources for assisting displaced people. While the crisis has contributed to the development of a civic Ukrainian identity, "there is deep disenchantment [among Crimean IDPs] with the Ukrainian state that manifests itself most strongly in feelings of having been abandoned and betrayed by the government." (Uehling 2017, 63). According to Uehling, the government's failure to implement an effective policy response to internal displacement has effectively made IDPs second class citizens by depriving them of voting rights, access to state-funded education and sometimes to even their own funds in Crimean banks (2017, 67). The government is no doubt aware of these shortcomings and of the popular mood regarding persistent corruption. The reluctance to discuss corruption or state capacity in the government publication does not need to be motivated by a conscious attempt to deflect attention away from the issue, but at the least it is obvious that it may be an inconvenient topic in an era of institutional change.

The obsession with aspects of statehood, such as the country's new language laws, might thus obscure Ukraine's more formidable problems with statecraft, especially corruption and weak institutions. Politicians in Ukraine have regularly exploited the country's ethnic, linguistic, and regional diversity in elections, but there is contradictory evidence of the importance of these cleavages to the average citizen. Both the Orange revolution in 2004 and the Euromaidan revolution in 2014 were sparked by the popular sentiment that the citizens were not in fact in control of their own country and lacked the means to have any impact on politics. Unfortunately, both upheavals have failed to address the root causes of Ukraine's persistent underperformance, such as institutional design, quality of democracy, and rule of law. The hopes and failures of both the Orange and Maidan revolution shows that Ukrainians are acutely aware of the reasons behind the poverty and inequality prevalent in their country, but the incentives for maintaining the country's extractive institutions, benefiting the few, are too high for those in power.



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