“They treated us like we were from Donbas”: Displacement and ‘Self-Reliance’ in Odessa, Autumn 2014

Deborah A. Jones, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*

When Vitalii, a builder from a mid-sized city near Donetsk, decided to move to Odessa with his wife and 14-year-old son in August 2014, he did not think of himself as a refugee. He planned his family’s departure from war-torn Donbas carefully, using an agency he found on the Internet to secure a job that included modest housing. He packed up his tools and clothing for summer and autumn, said quiet goodbyes to his parents and a few trustworthy friends, and mentally prepared himself for a permanent – or at least long-term – move. They didn’t flee the war, he emphasized; he and his wife, Ania, made a choice to seek a better life for their son, Misha. They were confident that this better life was to be found in Ukraine, so the family headed west by bus and train. When they arrived in Odessa, they learned they had been cheated. The agency,

---

1 All names and some identifying features have been changed to protect the anonymity of the informants.
2 I use Ukrainian names for places in this article, except for Odessa (Ukr. Odesa), which has a long-standing English equivalent. All translations here are from Russian, the most frequently used language of Donbas and Odessa, unless otherwise noted. Transliterations are based on the Library of Congress system, except for word initial я, in which case I follow the Ukrainian government’s convention of using a Y (i.e., Yulia, rather than Iulia or Yuliya).

*The author may be reached at: jdeborah@umich.edu.
which Vitalii had paid 800 Ukrainian hryvnia, had swindled them. There was no housing, and no job.

“We literally bought tickets to go home,” Vitalii told me, when we met in September 2014, outside the dormitory where he and his family were living in at the time. “I already didn’t care if the deenerovtsy (those associated with the Donetskia Narodnaia Respublika, the separatist Donetsk People’s Republic, henceforth DNR) killed me, or the...” He paused. “The Ukrainians?” my research assistant, Aleksei, asked gently. “They’re all Ukrainians,” Vitalii replied. “It’s a civil war.” After learning they had been cheated, Vitalii and his family returned to the train station, intending to spend the night there before heading back to Donbas. Vitalii went looking for the toilet, and that was when he passed a small sign, just a piece of typing paper taped to the wall, with an arrow and the words, “coordination center for the displaced” (pereselentsy, literally, ‘re-settlers’). “We had no idea,” he said.

Since the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014, and the declaration of secession by separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces in Ukraine’s east in May 2014, about 610,000 people have fled their homes for other parts of Ukraine, and another 594,000 have gone abroad, primarily to Russia. The numbers surged in late August, 7

---

3 About 100 United States (US) dollars at the start of 2014; about 60 by August.
4 Thanks to Aleksei Tkachenko, research assistant extraordinaire, for his professionalism, empathy, and insight.
5 As of late October, 2014, the signage had been significantly improved.
6 No one I interviewed referred to themselves as a bezhenets (Rus. refugee, literally one who flees), a word associated with foreigners and particularly non-Slavs; many even shied away from the term pereselenets (approximates ‘internally displaced person’). “I’m just here to rest (otdykhvat’) for a while,” one woman told me. “Just to take a break from it all.” Most people wanted to go home. Perhaps there will come a moment when more of the people I interviewed will call themselves ‘refugees.’ The cynical might point to how being from the east could be used to obtain certain social services, or, should the war ever end, compensation for lost property. For the moment, though, refusing to call oneself a ‘refugee’ seems to be a way people who have lost their former lives maintain the tiniest bit of control over their new reality.
7 Figures from the State Emergency System of Ukraine and when Russian troops began their incursion along the Azov Sea toward Mariupol, sending westward waves of both newly displaced people from the coastal area, as well as those already displaced from other parts of separatist-controlled Donetsk oblast who had sought refuge there. Actual numbers of internally displaced people (henceforth, IDPs) within Ukraine are likely two to three times higher, as many people have not registered with state services as IDPs, sometimes for fear that doing so might cause trouble for family members who remain in Donbas. Some have moved back and forth between Donbas and their place of refuge in order to care for property and family members unable to leave, or because they perhaps naively believed the ceasefire of September 2 would hold. Still others didn’t register because, for a long time, there was no clear national policy on the support of IDPs: it wasn’t until October 20, 2014, on the eve of the parliamentary election, that the Verkhovna Rada finally passed the draft law, “On Ensuring the Rights and Freedoms of Internally Displaced Persons.” The legislation was not signed into law by President Poroshenko until November 19. Thus, while it might initially seem odd that Vitalii, a man who had used the Internet to find housing and work from afar, and who lists BBC Ukraine as his favorite news source, had not been aware that there were social services, however loosely organized, available to him and his family, it is less surprising once one understands the extent to which transportation, food, and shelter for IDPs were organized by networks of local volunteers, and strikingly often, by the IDPs themselves.

The coordination center for displaced persons that Vitalii stumbled upon at the Odessa train station was housed in the VIP waiting room. On one side of it, anyway. Two long lines of plump, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, published December 26, 2014.
8 Vitalii and other displaced people who talked openly about their pro-unity position often mentioned that they got their news from the Internet rather than Russian television channels.
9 ‘VIP’ in the Ukrainian context does not mean ‘very important person’ so much as it means ‘privileges that are paid for’. This room might be better thought of as a business-class lounge with an entrance fee.
fauk leather chairs stretched across one wall of the hall. Perpendicular to them was a table for consultations; alongside it stood a bulletin board with information about services organized by enthusiastic but overburdened volunteers. The newly arrived took turns dozing while their family members watched their bags. Frazzled-looking young mothers lined up to handwrite petitions to enroll their children in local schools. The elderly, educated and employed in a particularly Russophone corner of the Soviet Union, coached each other on scripting their pension requests in Ukrainian. Children that parents hoped would be too young to remember the bombs ran up and down the long aisle, weaving around or occasionally stumbling over the piles of luggage and boxes. Teenagers sulked and disappeared into their phones.

For Vitalii, asking for help was difficult, even humiliating. “I always relied on myself, on my own strength,” he said. That night in the train station, Vitalii suppressed his ego. It had been just 48 hours since his departure from Donetsk region and he’d already learned that his pro-Ukrainian views and willingness to work were not enough for him and his family to start a new life. He initially felt tempted to chalk up his negative experience to Odessa’s historical reputation for petty crime, but later blamed something much simpler: his lack of a local network in a city in which jobs are largely postroennye, literally, ‘built’, and figuratively ‘arranged’ through long-term and carefully cultivated contacts. Food aid and housing assistance were only very temporary solutions. Besides, he emphasized, he and Ania were people who didn’t like to receive, but to earn (zarabatovat’). People from Donbas, he declared, are the most hardworking (trudoliubivy) in Ukraine.

Vitalii’s assertion parallels one that could often be heard by Eastern Ukrainians: that the industrial east ‘feeds’ (infinitives: Rus. kormit’; Ukr. kormyty; nourishes physically or supports financially) the agrarian center and west. Activists opposed to now-ousted president Viktor Yanukovych’s regime (Yanukovych is a native son of Donetsk) pointed out that the east and its aging factories and mines sucked up huge amounts of government subsidies, many of which made their way into local oligarchs’ pockets. A map heavily circulated on social media during Maidan offered a province-by-province illustration of cash flow in and out of government coffers in the first half of 2013; in this analysis, central, heavily agrarian were the most self-sufficient. As the situation in Donbas worsened, and more Easterners sought refuge in other parts of the country, some non-Easterners I encountered gloated, “Who feeds whom now?”

What I find striking is how the value of self-reliance (Ukr. samopomich), or even self-sacrifice (Ukr. samopozhertvu), was one that both IDPs like Vitalii and the volunteer networks that assisted him claimed as their own. Over and over again during my research with IDPs in early autumn 2014, interviewees expressed how much they disliked feeling dependent, that they didn’t want someone else to have to ‘feed’ them. Those who had jobs were certain to mention them right away. Those without them either stressed that they were searching, that they were physically unable to work, that they would work as soon as they could find child care (a tremendous and often overlooked challenge for IDPs), or that they felt their situation was temporary. To some extent, Vitalii’s emphasis on the hardworking nature of Donbassians may have been a response to rumors and bad press about the displaced being too demanding. In my work in Odessa, Dnipropetrovsk, Kyiv, and Vinnytsia, I heard constant complaints about IDPs: that they were greedy, lazy, and had a ‘Soviet mentality’ and expected constant care from a paternal state; that they only wanted to live in cities (it was often pointed out that people from Donbas who had fled

10 I use ‘pro-Ukrainian’ in this piece to mean ‘pro-unity’ and ‘anti-separatist’. Many of the people I’ve worked with, despite being ‘pro-Ukrainian’ in this sense, were not necessarily ‘pro-Maidan’, and are not necessarily supportive of European integration.

11 The original material seems to come from this article: Artem Zacharchenko, “Zona proedaniia,” Investgazeta (January 20, 2014).

12 Those familiar with Ukrainian culture and politics will recognize that samopomich is also the name of a new, reformist political party that surged in popularity in the 2014 parliamentary elections. There is much more to say about circulating discourses of self-reliance, self-sacrifice, and heroism in contemporary Ukraine – alas, that is another, longer piece.
to Russia had not been allowed to settle in Moscow or St. Petersburg, but rather been sent to the far reaches of Siberia; that they refused to take work they felt was ‘beneath’ them; that they were disrespectful of locals and responsible for an upswing in petty crime; that they were simply ‘different.’

The stress of displacement should not be underestimated, of course, and volunteers who worked with IDPs were more forgiving, usually only expressing their frustrations with people who were too picky about the products they received (for example, disabled people and their families living in a sanatorium near Odessa kept requesting specific brands of shampoo), or noting that it was difficult for the IDPs, particularly the older people, to understand that the volunteers were not government employees or even paid, and that resources were extremely limited. Even the most devoted leaders of the relief effort could lose their cool: one coordinator, an individual of astonishing capability and commitment, took to her group’s Facebook page to complain about a phone call she had received from a displaced woman earlier that day. The woman had called to say that because her child was ill and her husband needed the car for work, she could not make it to the group’s aid distribution point during the opening hours. She asked if she could stop by the aid center the following day; when the coordinator explained that this wasn’t possible, the woman grew angry. The coordinator lashed out at her: the woman had a husband with a job and a car, and she wanted free buckwheat? Aid, the coordinator explained to me, had to be triaged. They tried to focus on the neediest families, the people who could not ‘feed’ themselves, and everyone else would have to make do.

Who qualified as ‘needy’ had much to do with who was perceived as able-bodied and therefore capable of working. Disabled people and orphans were assisted by networks of volunteers and social workers that appear to have been well-organized prior to the violence in Donbas; these populations were evacuated as early as June. Some of these same organizations, as well as groups aiding the Ukrainian military, also worked with seniors and single mothers with small children – the latter perhaps a bit grudgingly. Single mothers were eyed with quite a bit of suspicion. Where are their husbands?, both volunteers and other IDPs would ask, insinuating that these were the families of separatist fighters, and therefore undeserving of assistance. (Women whose male relatives had gone to the front were usually quite quick to announce this and could expect better support.) The dormitory where Vitalii, Ania, and Misha landed after that night at the train station housed approximately 40 people, about half of whom were children. Vitalii was one of the few men; the other occupants included about a dozen anxious-looking 20– and 30-something women, a similar number of shrieking toddlers, and a handful of disturbingly quiet school kids. Non-IDP residents were a small number of recovering drug addicts – the dormitory was part of a rehabilitation center and tuberculosis dispensary that had donated its modest facilities. “We’re grateful for the housing, of course,” one mother said loudly, then whispered, “but our neighbors are narkomany (drug addicts)!”

The women in the dormitory found many things to worry about: small rations of sunflower oil (one bottle per family, whether you have two people or four, a solitary mother of three kept repeating), too much kasha and not enough canned foods, a lack of dishes and cooking supplies, the long bus ride to the aid distribution centers, the competition for old clothes in the wrong sizes, and, most importantly, the single bathroom for some 40 people. They showed me around their dormitory hall: bright aquamarine paint in the hallway and some bedrooms; flaking salmon in others. Those
sticky, dark-red painted floors found in so many older buildings in the former Soviet Union. Sometimes linoleum, peeling, and further peeled up by children with nothing to do. Narrow metal-framed beds, one (ideally) for each member of the family, one family per room. Big windows — a blessing in the heat; a concern for winter. Laundry strung up from the pipes, although there was a designated drying room down the hall. An odd room with a sink, a cabinet, and a toy car and some children’s blocks strewn on the floor. Another odd, narrow room, perhaps a repurposed closet, with a mini-fridge and a hot plate (a gift from a volunteer, they explained). The main kitchen, at the end of the hall, was scrubbed clean, and the only cooking supply there was a teapot. I realized that people were eating in their rooms, keeping food in their rooms, holding onto their few precious dishes (just two bowls and two spoons for the four of us, another woman kept repeating), making certain the narkomany they claimed lived down the hall didn’t take their rations. I recalled Vitalii’s answer when I asked his son if he’d enjoyed going to the nearby beach: we’ve only been a couple times, and never as a family. Someone always has to be home to guard the room; we don’t trust anyone.

This sort of paranoia seems excessive, but it is critical to understand that many of these displaced people had arrived — traumatized — with little more than a change of clothing and personal documents. Men, in particular, had few belongings, as their departure from Donbas was strongly, sometimes violently, discouraged by the separatists, who sought them as fighters. Suitcases were conspicuous, so they had carried as little as possible. Many of the IDPs we spoke to had lost faith in their families, friends, and communities, and been chastised by those close to them for choosing independent Ukraine over the separatist territories. Then, upon arriving in independent Ukraine, they were chastised by locals for having stayed so long in the separatist-controlled regions, or for not having stayed to fight the insurgents (who, again, were sometimes their own family members). On top of all this, they felt the pressure to find work and housing, to feed themselves, to not be dependent upon people they suspected hated them. In interviews with IDPs, we made a point of not talking about politics, and people we interviewed also generally abstained. When they did talk about the conflict, they expressed extreme frustration with the separatists, Putin and/or the Russian army, and the Ukrainian government and/or army. For the most part, however, they spoke about daily concerns: shortages of sunflower oil; gluts of buckwheat; second-hand sweaters with holes in them. Displaced people displaced their anxieties, often fixating on matters that seemed trivial compared with the trauma they had experienced. I suspect most were not ready to inventory the entire houses and lives they had lost, or give up on the idea of returning home.

Dunn, writing about people displaced from Southern Ossetia in 2008 during Russia’s “brief but brutal war” with Georgia, considers the following puzzle: IDPs, even when “surrounded with…physical evidence of aid, [were] adamant that [they] had received nothing at all.”¹³ But generic aid intended for everyone could replace lifeworlds lost for no one; moreover, Dunn points out, the experience of receiving aid created other voids: those of activity, those of community. It wasn’t merely that people had ‘nothing’; without work, friends, and often, family, they felt like ‘nothing’. Displacement is traumatic, but it is also agonizingly boring. Vitalii fidgeted with excess energy as he spoke to us; he walked laps around his small neighborhood. He was a builder, he explained; he wanted something to construct. But war isn’t about construction.

Vitalii, Ania, and Misha returned to Donbas in late September; their home was still intact, and Misha’s school had re-opened, albeit without half its students and staff, including the Ukrainian language teacher, whose job had been eliminated by the DNR. They were in touch with their aging parents and a few close friends, but otherwise kept to themselves. In the evenings, they watched movies they downloaded from the Internet; they continued to avoid television news. When we last spoke

the family was applying for asylum in the European Union but did not want to give me too many details, lest they jinx their chances. I almost feel like I might jinx them by writing this piece. We Skyped, all four of us. I noticed that they had begun to talk about non-occupied Ukraine as tam, over there. I asked about it. “You’re from Chicago, right?,” Vitalii asked me. “Well, imagine that one day you wake up and there are no more American flags in your city, and there are these soldiers from, say, Mexico and they tell you that you don’t live in America anymore, and if you say otherwise you’ll be shot.” I nodded. ‘Here’ and ‘there’ had become a matter of survival.

But Vitalii and his family had learned, had really come to believe, that they were from Donbas rather than Ukraine not upon their return to their city, but during their time in Odessa. As Vitalii explained it, “We left Donbas because we were certain we were Ukrainians, but people in Ukraine treated us like we were from Donbas.” Being swindled had left a bad taste in their mouths — Ania admitted that “in reality, we decided to leave the day after we came” — but they had met some nice locals and continued to try to find work and housing for nearly two months. They blamed their inability to secure employment less on overt discrimination than on Odessa’s tight job market and “particular” (osobyi) business culture. I asked whether it was true that employers were reluctant to hire IDPs because they suspected they might leave as soon as the situation in the East improved. “And they were right!” Vitalii laughed. Still, he added that they would have been willing to stay if they had found decent work. “We like to earn money,” he repeated. “You won’t find more hardworking people than our people!” For Vitalii and Ania, it seemed that the problem with being treated “like we were from Donbas” wasn’t being perceived as the enemy, but being perceived as helpless.