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Hegemonic power-struggle over Ukraine's future  
leaves the weakest at the roadside

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The war in eastern Ukraine has uprooted two million people formerly living in the conflict regions and put several million Ukrainians at risk of a humanitarian crisis. A war-torn Ukraine and its eastern break-away provinces are unable to bear the burden of humanitarian aid and the international community must step up relief efforts in order to prevent a large-scale crisis that could further threaten peace and stability in Europe.

### Quiet before the storm

A war thought utterly impossible just 18 months ago has split Europe and caused one of the its largest displacement crises since the Second World War. When the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) presented the global trends in June 2014, internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine counted exactly zero persons.<sup>1</sup> Less than one year later, the situation has changed dramatically. In UNHCR's operational update from April 10, 2015, the number had swelled to roughly 1.2 million while surpassing two million when including refugees.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of the 1.2 million IDPs belong to the most vulnerable groups of society. Mid-April 2015, UNHCR counted 730,000 pensioners, 150,000 children and 50,000 disabled persons<sup>3</sup> - with numbers continuously rising. As a result, the European Union (EU) and UN estimate that as many as 3.2 million people are in need of humanitarian aid and up to five million in danger of being affected by a looming health crisis due to risk of epidemics as a result of poor living conditions and the lack of proper health care.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, the current Minsk II ceasefire agreed upon by the Ukrainian government and the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) is fragile at best. Both sides have used the hiatus to regroup and throughout May 2015, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in

Europe (OSCE) has reported a rise in military activities, making intense fighting likely to erupt again within the foreseeable future.<sup>5</sup> Growing numbers of IDPs will be the tragic corollary of renewed warfare. Considering the deteriorating economic situation in Ukraine, DNR and LNR coupled with poor international relief efforts, we are likely to not only see a surge in human suffering on a short- and long-term basis but also increasing refugee waves out of Ukraine, resulting in yet another refugee crisis at the borders of EU and Russia.

### IDPs and refugees

The roughly two million people at the heart of the displacement crisis can be divided into two categories: IDPs inside the borders of Ukraine (excluding Crimea due to annexation by Russia) and refugees who fled into neighbouring countries. The majority of the latter category has sought refuge in the Russian Federation (636,640<sup>6</sup>) and Belarus (80,900). From their Russian offices, Caritas reports unofficial figures "beyond 200,000" Ukrainian refugees in the Rostov region alone, prompting Russian authorities to sending newcomers more and more to "sparsely populated areas in Eastern Russia".<sup>7</sup>

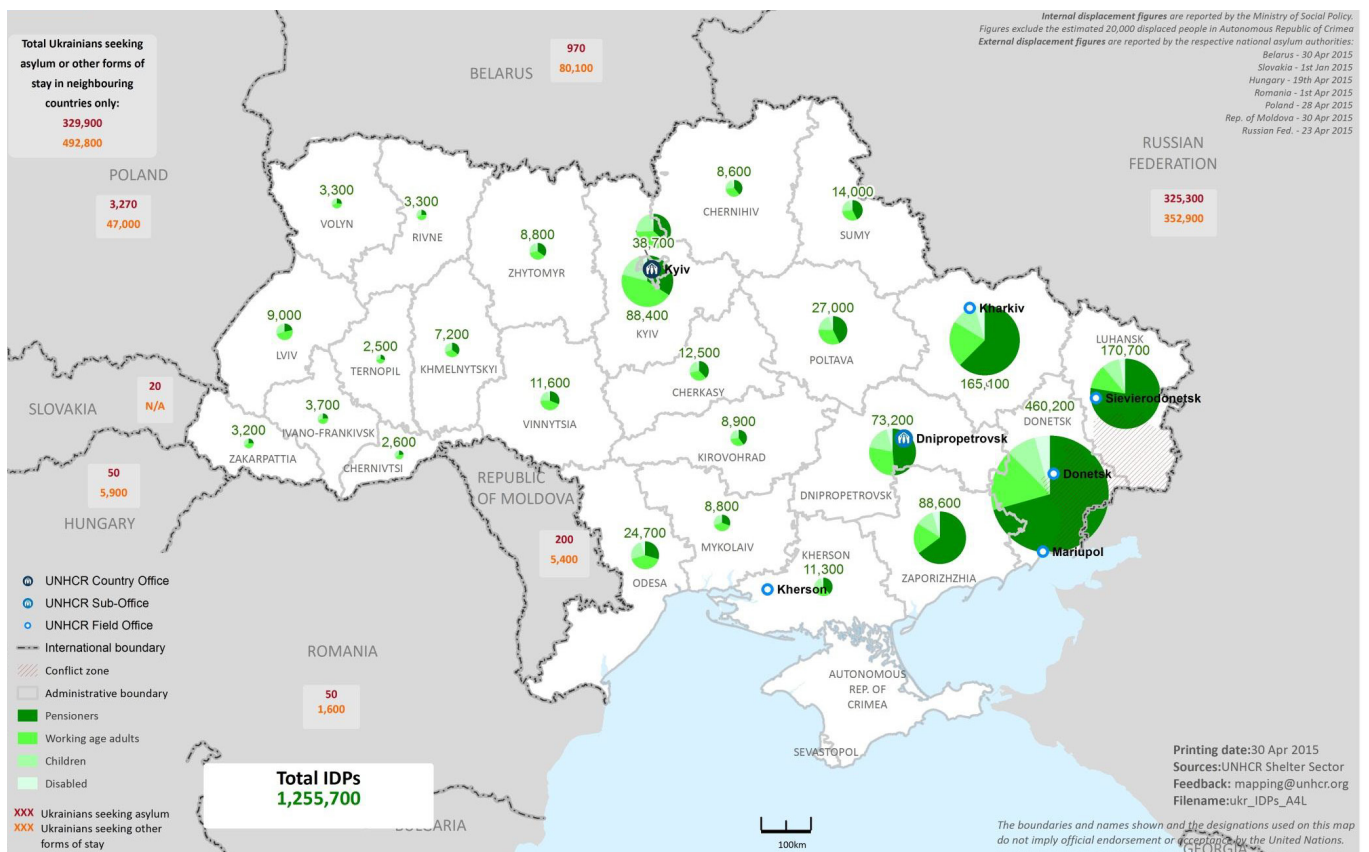
Inside Ukraine, the 1.2 million IDPs divide equally between the government controlled and the non-government controlled areas. Concentration is highest in the eastern provinces of Kharkivska, Dniepropetrovsk, Zaporizk, Luhansk and Donetsk, which together account for more than 900,000 people or 76 per cent of the total number of IDPs. The highest IDP-density is found in the larger urban areas, which provide better access to shelter, social infrastructure and job opportunities.<sup>8</sup> With the conflict continuing and the economic collapse progressing in both government and non-government controlled areas, however, local tensions rise alongside humanitarian needs.



The EU has so far been relatively unaffected by the waves of refugees from Ukraine. In fact, merely 60,000 Ukrainians have fled to neighbouring countries west of Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> The relatively low numbers are undoubtedly due to the strict EU immigration policies and external border regimes with non-Schengen states. In case of a ceasefire breakdown,

however, the situation is likely to deteriorate considerably and increase pressure on the EU-Ukrainian border to Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. Rising pressure on the border will, in turn, result in higher trafficking activity and augment human rights violations often lamented e.g. by Amnesty International.<sup>10</sup>

On this map: refugee concentration and breakdown of social groups in Ukraine and neighboring countries.



Source: UNHCR Ukraine, Operational Update, April 30, 2015.



## Humanitarian crisis and local tensions

International organisations have monitored the development during the course of the war with increasing alarm. There is broad agreement that it is only a matter of time before a large-scale humanitarian crisis erupts if relief efforts are not scaled-up. The primary cause of concern is the serious strain on an already weak Ukrainian social and health care system, resulting in lack of medicine and medical equipment - a disastrous situation for the chronically ill and people in need of treatment and special diets (amounting to 300,000 people in the Kharkiv region alone). With many thousands cramped into temporary shelters, the WHO furthermore estimates that a polio outbreak is immanent, while the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) sees "millions of Ukrainian children being at risk from new epidemics."<sup>11</sup>

While the situation is dire in many government-controlled areas, it is even more critical in the non-government controlled regions. Before the war, Donetsk and Luhansk were major coal mining and heavy industrialized areas. However, the majority of coal mines and large industrial production sites are now almost entirely non-functional with supply chains cut off, leaving people unemployed. With the central government's disruption of pension payments and support of social care infrastructure, essential services have collapsed, leaving the areas dependent on outside aid.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, intense warfare has resulted in the partial or complete destruction of more than 50 health care facilities as well as a 30-70 per cent drop in health care workers who have fled the region.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the war has left a catastrophic mark on the region that will take years to resurrect: schools have been damaged or destroyed so children do not receive education; food and nutrition security of the population is uncertain due

to damaged agricultural production sites and fields left fallow; in many places electricity is disrupted; psychological assistance is desperately needed; water supply networks are damaged or destroyed in many areas, causing severe hygiene concerns.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the critical humanitarian situation, the conflict and mass-displacement have triggered a series of inter-related consequences in areas of high IDP-density: food and housing shortages drive up prices, making it nearly impossible to get by on the minimal monthly special allowance of roughly 20 euro per person that the Ukrainian central government provides in government-controlled areas to IDPs, who are often unemployed and have left all belongings behind<sup>15</sup>; reports on disparagement of IDPs accumulate; and, finally, tensions between IDPs and host communities are recorded ever more often. Several agencies and NGOs operating in Ukraine (e.g. the Danish Refugee Council, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) or Crimea SOS) report that IDPs are often discriminated when looking for apartments or work, and receive insufficient assistance for urgent protection issues.<sup>16</sup> In some areas such as the city of Kherson, the situation has even sparked a rise in crime rates, possibly related to high IDP-density and former rebel prisoners of the Ukrainian authorities released in the region.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, IOM is working on preventing trafficking on internal and external borders.<sup>18</sup>

### International Community

In his laudatory speech to the awardees of the Lev Kopelev Peace Prize in Cologne late April 2015, European Parliament President Martin Schulz urged that we must do everything in our power to help the people in need in Ukraine. Help can take many forms. Nevertheless, one cannot but wonder why Western states and Russia seem rather to release funds for (defensive) military equipment than for humanitarian aid. Military aid from Russia to DNR and

LNR forces has long been a public secret and while US president Obama has agreed that he will only provide defensive military supplies to Ukrainian state forces, falcons in the US House of Representatives and the Senate are pressing for greater investment including lethal equipment. When it comes to providing humanitarian aid, however, the international community is far less prompt in its response. In fact, UNOCHA estimate that 316 million USD are needed for the most basic provisions, of which merely 20 per cent have been met by donor countries.<sup>19</sup>

### Policy recommendations

The current situation in Ukraine calls for decisive action by the international community. There is a critical need for a concerted relief roadmap, including an emergency action plan, should the military conflict intensify. Despite serious political disagreements with regard to economic and political solutions for Ukraine, a roadmap for meeting minimal relief needs should be politically acceptable to all parties. Such roadmap should include the following minimum requirements:

- The international community must secure rapid provision of necessary funds for humanitarian aid (especially medicine, food and non-food items) and assistance as estimated by UN agencies;
- Increase political pressure on the Ukrainian state authorities as well as DNR and LNR leaders to immediately allow and support the safe passage of aid convoys through the internal borders between conflicting parties, possibly through the assistance of UN peace-keeping forces;
- Negotiate solutions to reduce obstacles to the work of international organisations, INGOs and NGOs as well as relief agencies in the conflict zone and high-density IDP areas, including lifting bureaucratic burdens and money-transfer bans;

- Development of better response mechanisms in the event of intensifying military action;
- Initiate negotiations on better care and support facilities to secure the social, economic and political integration of IDPs in host communities during a potentially long-lasting conflict.

### Call for Action

The little donor commitment appears all the more surprising when it is related to the consequences that a deteriorating situation would entail not only for Ukraine but for Europe. To reiterate but a few: enhanced refugee waves toward neighbouring countries; exploding emergency relief costs due to the absence of a timely response; destabilisation of peace and security in Ukraine and Europe at large. In other words, while Russian, European and US administrators have been busy competing over hegemony, influence spheres and Ukraine's future, they have left the weakest victims of the conflict at the roadside. It is high time to reconsider these priorities.

### References

1 <http://www.unhcr.org/5399a14f9.html>, (accessed 24.04.2015), 43.

2 Above 2 million, see UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA): [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ukr\\_displacement\\_17\\_April\\_2015\\_0.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ukr_displacement_17_April_2015_0.pdf); UNHCR, see: <http://>



[unhcr.org/ua/attachments/article/1299/UNHCR%20UKRAINE%20Operational%20Update%2010%20Apr%202015.pdf](http://unhcr.org/ua/attachments/article/1299/UNHCR%20UKRAINE%20Operational%20Update%2010%20Apr%202015.pdf) (both accessed 24.04.2015).

3 There is no publicised social breakdown of the refugees groups in Russia, the numbers are expected to be similar.

4 [http://www.who.int/hac/ukraine\\_notejanuary2015.pdf?ua=1&ua=1](http://www.who.int/hac/ukraine_notejanuary2015.pdf?ua=1&ua=1), [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/europe-and-caucasus/ukraine\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/europe-and-caucasus/ukraine_en), (accessed 24.04.2015).

5 See: <http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/154916> (accessed 06.05.2015).

6 Numbers vary: UN and EU agencies speak of roughly 650,000 thousand refugees in Russia, while Konstantin Romodanovsky, Head of Russia's Federal Migration Service, claimed the number to surpass 940,000 in March 2015. See: <http://tass.ru/en/russia/783497>, (accessed 24.04.2015). It deserves mentioning that unconfirmed rumours accuse the Russian state apparatus for including in their statistics all Ukrainian citizens residing in Russia – also ordinary work migrants in Russia prior to the crisis.

7 <http://www.caritas.eu/news/caritas-helps-ukrainian-refugees-in-russia-and-belarus>, (accessed, 29.04.2015).

8 April statistics: [http://unhcr.org/ua/attachments/article/1299/UNHCR UKRAINE Operational Update 10 Apr 2015.pdf](http://unhcr.org/ua/attachments/article/1299/UNHCR%20UKRAINE%20Operational%20Update%2010%20Apr%202015.pdf), (accessed, 24.04.2015), 6.

9 UNHCR lists roughly 14,000 applications for 'international protection' in Europe in 2014, representing a 1359 per cent increase: [http://unhcr.org/ua/attachments/article/1299/UNHCR UKRAINE Operational Update 10 Apr 2015.pdf](http://unhcr.org/ua/attachments/article/1299/UNHCR%20UKRAINE%20Operational%20Update%2010%20Apr%202015.pdf), (accessed 24.04.2015), 2.

10 See Amnesty International's 'The human cost of fortress Europe' from July 2014: [http://www.amnesty.eu/content/assets/Reports/EUR\\_050012014\\_Fortress\\_Europe\\_complete\\_web\\_EN.pdf](http://www.amnesty.eu/content/assets/Reports/EUR_050012014_Fortress_Europe_complete_web_EN.pdf) (accessed 04.05.2015), passim.

11 <http://blogs.unicef.org/2015/04/21/children-the-true-victims-of-conflict-in-ukraine/>; <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/05/01/millions-ukraine-children-risk-new-epidemics-323992.html> (accessed 25.04.2015).

12 Already in November 2014, the Ukrainian central government severed all payments of social services and support to the non-government controlled areas, which included bank transactions and money deliveries.

13 See: [http://www.who.int/hac/ukraine\\_notejanuary2015.pdf?ua=1&ua=1](http://www.who.int/hac/ukraine_notejanuary2015.pdf?ua=1&ua=1) (accessed 24.04.2015).

14 [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ukr\\_displacement\\_17\\_April\\_2015\\_0.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ukr_displacement_17_April_2015_0.pdf), (accessed 24.04.2015).

15 <http://zakon1.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/505-2014-%D0%BF> (accessed 24.04.2015). Given the complete

disruption on social services to the non-government controlled areas, IDPs there are not eligible for such support, which is provided only to a lucky few through cash grants by international organisations.

16 Interviews with Danish Refugee Council, Crimea SOS and IOM. Reports on local tensions have begun seeping out of Russia too where media increasingly runs stories on local concerns over the beneficiary treatment of Ukrainians over Russians who complain of neglect by the state: <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/inconvenient-truth-about-russias-ukrainian-refugees>, (accessed 05.05.2015).

17 Interview with the Crimea SOS.

18 Interview with IOM. In a former version of this policy brief, IOM was cited misleadingly.

19 As of April 17, 2015: <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA%20Ukraine%20SitRep%2035%20-%2010%20Apr%202015.pdf> (accessed 24.04.2015).

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