

June 2017

www.fmreview.org/shelter

Repurposing shelter for displaced people in Ukraine

Laura A Dean

Buildings in Ukraine are being repurposed to provide shelter for those fleeing conflict in the country but, as the war continues, the need for more permanent solutions must be acknowledged.

The war in Ukraine has left 1.6 million people displaced inside the country and uprooted another 1.4 million who have fled to neighbouring countries since the conflict began in 2014.¹ This displacement began slowly and then exploded, with the first wave from Crimea starting in March 2014, the second wave from Donbas starting in April 2014, and the numbers have continued to increase since then.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine are scattered over the entire country, although concentrated in the five eastern regions. While the geographic area is large, the ratio of the displaced to the local population in the regions bordering the conflict is only between 51 and 120 IDPs per 1,000 people and in the western regions of Ukraine it is less than five IDPs per 1,000 people.² According to one NGO, only 7% of the IDPs live in state-sponsored collective centres, while 33% live with relatives and friends and 60% rent houses at their own expense.³

The collective centres are various kinds of buildings – provided by the regional and municipal authorities, private citizens, religious groups and local NGOs – which have been repurposed to serve the needs of the displaced populations. Because of the extremely cold winter weather, provision of suitable shelter necessitated construction materials for roofs and windows, and blankets and tarpaulins to cover windows or uncovered floors. Repurposing of old facilities is not a new concept and has been prevalent since the fall of communism in Ukraine. Declining birth rates and the collapse of the planned economy after 1991 left many structures abandoned in the post-Soviet period; factories have been turned into shopping malls and former hospitals into university buildings. When

the conflict broke out in 2014 the strategy of repurposing structures was again utilised by the government as they sought to house the displaced population. IDPs were housed in vacant summer camps, old kindergartens, sanatoria and student dormitories throughout the country.

For example, the main buildings of the former residence of Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's deposed president, are now a museum but the former residences of Yanukovich's bodyguards and maids have been turned into housing for IDPs. The Ukrainian Orthodox church has offered parts of their monasteries to be repurposed as housing for IDPs. Some private citizens have also volunteered their property to be repurposed; one businessman in the capital, Kyiv, offered an old warehouse which was turned into apartments to house IDPs. Old storage facilities have been converted into acceptable living spaces; summer camps on the Black Sea have also been repurposed into housing for IDPs, although many of these facilities were not equipped for long-term stays during the winter months.

These collective centres can house anywhere from 20 to 200 people and many are overcrowded. One person compared it to living in a dormitory with common facilities. Although these are permanent structures, they are still temporary solutions to the housing situation; some people stay for a few months and others move from one place to another in search of work, while others have remained for more than two years, demonstrating that a better solution is not available. A shortage of housing and job prospects has kept people in these collective centres. Eventually, however, private citizens and organisations will want their property back and some IDPs have already been threatened with eviction or

charged rent since many of these landlords did not foresee their property being used for such an extended period of time.

The continuing war and daily bombardments have been an impediment as any housing repairs that are undertaken can be quickly undone as the conflict's front line moves. Over 20,500 houses have been repaired in Donbas since October 2014 and there is a database of over 21,000 addresses in the government-controlled areas where repairs, structural retro-fitting, heating and insulation are planned for 2017.

Under Ukrainian law, the government is required to provide housing for IDPs but implementation of the law has been problematic. Although money has been allocated to local administrations for the financial support of temporary accommodation for IDPs, this money does not cover all of the expenses and the extreme need for shelter. The Ukrainian State Emergency Service and local administrations organise referrals to collective centres but IDPs must first register and obtain certification of their IDP status. Many people do not want to register due to fear of military conscription, lack of paperwork (as is the case with

displaced Roma people), inability to pay taxes, or concern about the arduous and unclear process of registration.

As the conflict currently stands, Ukrainian IDPs face displacement for the foreseeable future. It would clearly be beneficial if the government could place people in permanent living situations but to do that would be to admit publicly that they have lost the territories from which the IDPs have come. To assist the displaced population, however, the government needs to move beyond politics, streamline its approach, and introduce safeguards to protect IDPs from forced evictions out of these repurposed collective centres.

Laura A Dean deanla12@gmail.com

Assistant Professor of Political Science and the Williams Professor in Global Studies, Millikin University www.millikin.edu

1. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2016) *Ukraine: Translating IDPs' protection into legislative action* <http://bit.ly/IDMC-UkraineIDP-Protection>
2. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2015) <http://bit.ly/UNOCHA-Ukraine-displacement2015>
3. Zaharov B (2016) *Rights of the internally displaced persons*, Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union <http://helsinki.org.ua/en/rights-of-the-internally-displaced-persons>