

# “Displaced” as a Label, Not an Identity for Internally Displaced Ukrainian Women

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“I am not a *pereselenka*, I am a citizen of this country. I am Ukrainian.”<sup>2</sup>

Forced displacement is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that disrupts how individuals understand and relate to themselves, their surroundings, and other people within their societies. These processes are especially complex in situations wherein individuals are displaced within the territory of their home states. Although internally displaced people (IDPs) are citizens of the countries within which they are forcibly relocated and thus do not ultimately change one society for another, the arrival of new people in local communities prompts novel interactions and expectations.<sup>3</sup>

The label of “displaced person” applied to forcibly moved people by administrative and legal frameworks particularly implicates local dynamics, as well as individuals’ lived experiences of displacement. While this label indeed describes displaced persons’ situations and may even complement their “citizen” identities, it can also breed tensions, especially within host communities. This is because the category of “displaced” risks constructing and reinforcing social boundaries by positioning certain citizens as insiders (the “non-displaced”) and others as outsiders (the “displaced”). These divisions can impact both internally displaced individuals’ integration prospects and social cohesion in societies affected by forced displacement. Yet,

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2 In Ukrainian, “*pereselenka*” is the feminine form of “displaced person”. Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.

3 While we use “internally displaced persons” in this chapter with reference to forcibly moved people, we acknowledge that this label does not fully reflect their lived realities. See: Kerilyn Schewel, “Understanding Immobility: Moving Beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies”, *International Migration Review* 54/2, 2019, 328–355.

as the label of “displaced” is externally imposed by governments and societies, it remains unclear whether and how forcibly moved people themselves engage with this categorisation.

Ukraine provides a valuable case to study how internally displaced persons perceive their “displaced” status after forced displacement. Since the beginning of Russia’s war on Ukraine in 2014, the number of internally displaced Ukrainians has grown immensely. Approximately 1.5 million people were internally displaced during the first eight years of the war, and it is estimated that this number grew to 6.9 million by August 2022, the peak of the displacement following Russia’s full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022.<sup>4</sup> While this number fluctuates as people both leave and return to their original homes, and as not all displaced persons register with local governments, an estimated 4.6 million people were internally displaced at the end of 2024.<sup>5</sup> Crucially, there is a significant gender dimension to displacement in Ukraine as women have constituted 61%<sup>6</sup> of all IDPs and 72%<sup>7</sup> of social protection recipients since 2022. Internally displaced women’s socioeconomic vulnerability is further demonstrated by the fact that job losses among them are twice as high as among internally displaced men,<sup>8</sup> while many have become the primary caregivers in their households with men serving in the military.<sup>9</sup> Limited access to childcare and education has also restricted many Ukrainian women’s ability to seek employment and integrate into their host communities.<sup>10</sup>

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- 4 *International Organisation for Migration (IOM)*, “Displacement in Ukraine Again on the Rise, IOM Data Shows”, *IOM Office to the United Nations*, 31 August 2022, <https://unofficeny.iom.int/news/displacement-ukraine-again-rise-iom-data-shows> [accessed: 18.11.2025].
  - 5 Natalija Jurčenko, “Skil’ky v Ukraini pereselenciv i de naïbil’she VPO: statystyka za oblastiamy” (“How many displaced persons are there in Ukraine and where are most IDPs located: statistics by region”), *RBC-Ukraine*, 22 October 2024, <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/skilki-ukrayini-pereselentsiv-i-de-naybilshe-1729603384.html> [accessed: 18.11.2025].
  - 6 Victoria Polishchuk et al., “Internally Displaced Women in Ukraine during the Full-scale Russian Invasion”, *YurFem*, 2024, <https://jurfem.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Internally-Displaced-Women-in-Ukraine.pdf> [accessed: 18.11.2025].
  - 7 *Country Gender Profile: Ukraine* (EU4GenderEquality Reform Helpdesk, 2023), [https://euneighbourseast.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/eu4genderhelpdesk\\_ukrainegenderprofile\\_2023-cgp\\_v3.pdf](https://euneighbourseast.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/eu4genderhelpdesk_ukrainegenderprofile_2023-cgp_v3.pdf) [accessed: 18.11.2025].
  - 8 Inna Volosevych, “The Economic Effects of Russia’s War on Ukraine’s Internally Displaced Women”, *ZOIS Spotlight*, 26 July 2023, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/the-economic-effects-of-russias-war-on-ukraines-internally-displaced-women> [accessed: 18.11.2025].
  - 9 *Country Gender Profile* “EU4GenderEquality”.
  - 10 *CARE International*, “Rapid Gender Analysis Ukraine October 2023”, 27 October 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/rapid-gender-analysis-ukraine-october-2023-enuk> [accessed: 18.11.2025].

Although a growing number of studies since 2014 has explored the challenges and reintegration experiences of IDPs in Ukraine, especially women, no research has investigated how they perceive the label of "displaced person" applied to them by policymakers and Ukrainian society more broadly. Prior research on internal displacement and identity – in Ukraine and elsewhere – has also failed to examine how externally imposed labels intersect with broader patterns of marginalisation, such as those related to gender. Although many studies highlight that women and men experience forced displacement differently, with the former facing distinct constraints<sup>11</sup> and limited economic opportunities<sup>12</sup> – even when they are legally granted equal or preferential economic rights following their forced relocations<sup>13</sup> – the ways their "displaced" status may affect their experiences of displacement remains underexplored. This chapter, therefore, examines the lived experiences of internally displaced Ukrainian women by asking how they perceive the label of "displaced person."

To answer this question, the chapter focuses on 70 interviews with Ukrainian women who were internally displaced following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. By investigating their perceptions of the label "*pereselenka*" (the feminine form of "displaced person" in Ukrainian) used by Ukrainian policymakers and society to describe them following their forced displacements, the analysis shows how this externally imposed category shapes female IDPs' experiences of displacement. Specifically, the label "displaced person" institutionalises forcibly moved women as "others" within their own society, denies them of their agency, and reduces them to stereotypes. Importantly, this study does not address the question of how the Ukrainian state or media frames displaced citizens, nor does it examine how narratives and assumptions associated with the label of "displaced person" are (re)produced in Ukrainian society. A detailed comparison of societal attitudes toward displaced persons in Ukraine similarly falls outside the focus of this research. Nevertheless, the chapter offers an important empirical contribution to

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- 11 Jane Freedman, Zeynep Kivilcim and Nurcan Özgür Baklacioğlu (eds.), *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*, New York: Routledge, 2017; and Anoji Ekanayake et al., "Gender and Forced Displacement in Humanitarian Policy Discourse: The Missing Link", *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 11/3, 2023, 243–260, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23315024231189487> [accessed: 18.11.2025].
  - 12 Lucia Hanmer, Eliana Rubiano, Julieth Santamaria and Diana J. Arango, "How does poverty differ among refugees? Taking a gender lens to the data on Syrian refugees in Jordan", *Middle East Development Journal* 12/2, 2020, 208–242, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17938120.2020.1753995> [accessed: 18.11.2025].
  - 13 Kristen Schuettler and Laura Caron, "Jobs Interventions for Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons", *International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/ The World Bank*, Jobs Working Paper 48, 2020, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/467251592598151781/pdf/Job-s-Interventions-for-Refugees-and-Internally-Displaced-Persons.pdf> [accessed: 18.11.2025].

the literature on displacement and identity, particularly related to self- and external categorisations during and following war. It moreover reveals acute grass-roots implications of the Russia-Ukraine war and challenges to social cohesion in Ukraine.

## Identity, Labeling, and Displacement

Much prior research highlights how forced displacement can complicate individuals' self-identifications. As identity is inherently relational, shaped by narrated processes of self-reflection, assessment, and societal influences across different contexts, circumstances, and opportunities,<sup>14</sup> it integrates both *being* who we are in the present and *becoming* who we aspire to be in the future. Affiliations with social groups play a significant role in shaping individuals' identities, as people tend to align their attitudes with and adopt the dominant discourses of the groups they support ("in-group favouritism") while devaluing and rejecting those they do not ("out-group denigration").<sup>15</sup> In this way, identity gains relevance through comparisons between ingroups and outgroups, in addition to one's self-categorisation with a group and distinction from others.<sup>16</sup> As people draw on their various identities in different times and places in response to their own self-perceptions, beliefs, and memories, as well as external factors, interactions within and across in-/out-groups can both foster solidarity and reinforce divisions.<sup>17</sup>

The impact of forced displacement on individuals' self-identifications is particularly complex. Unlike other types of movement, such as recreational travel or eco-

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- 14 Andrew Butler et al., "Landscape Identity, before and after a Forest Fire", *Landscape Research* 43/6, 2017, 878–889, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2017.1344205> [accessed: 18.11.2025].
- 15 Martyn Barrett, Evanthia Lyons and Arantza del Valle, "The Development of National Identity and Social Identity Processes: Do Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory Provide Useful Heuristic Frameworks for Developmental Research?" in: Mark Bennett and Fabio Sani (eds.), *The Development of the Social Self*, Hove: Psychology Press, 2004, 159–188, here 163; Bart Duriez et al., "Which National Group Will I Identify Myself With? The Role of Preferred and Perceived Identity Representations", *Nations and Nationalism* 19/3, 2013, 456–474, here 457, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12004> [accessed: 18.11.2025].
- 16 Duriez et al., "Which National Group Will I Identify Myself With?", 458; Adriana Petryna and Karolina Follis, "Risks of Citizenship and Fault Lines of Survival", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44, 2015, 401–417, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102313-030329> [accessed: 18.11.2025].
- 17 Anna Rabinovich et al., "Collective self and individual choice: the effects of inter-group comparative context on environmental values and behaviour", *British Journal of Social Psychology* 51/4, 2012, 551–569, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2011.02022.x> [accessed: 18.11.2025].

conomic migration, which typically involves a degree of anticipation and preparation, forced displacement can cause an abrupt, involuntary, and often traumatic rupture to one's sense of self. The experience of forced displacement may therefore destabilise individuals' sense of continuity and belonging, creating both a sense of dislocation from place and from oneself. Katrina Powell argues that this rupture – a "jolt" around one's identity – is violent, as it forces individuals to quickly renegotiate their place in the world, often without the emotional resources to process the transition.<sup>18</sup> Displacement may therefore leave people in a state of liminality or "in-betweenness", where old certainties no longer apply and new foundations have yet to emerge. At the same time, displaced individuals may resist being defined by this liminality and, instead, choose to inhabit a metaphorical "third space", wherein a hybrid identity forms through the blending of their old and new associations and affiliations.<sup>19</sup> Within this space, they can (re)negotiate their belonging through practices of adaptation and resilience.

External actors, such as media, political institutions, and host societies, also greatly influence how displaced individuals self-identify following forced displacement.<sup>20</sup> The labels of "displaced person" and "refugee" used to categorise forcibly moved individuals in official and administrative frameworks, as well as in society, are particularly acute for identity (re)negotiation. While these terms accurately describe displaced persons' situations, they classify them in distinct ways. As Kiros Hiruy notes, after a forcibly moved person receives a paper with an official ID number, they acquire a new one-dimensional status.<sup>21</sup> Unlike self-identifications or categorisations, these externally imposed categories are neither flexible nor open to individual negotiation; they are at the service of public institutions, or what Roger Zetter calls "institutional agency."<sup>22</sup> Categories like "displaced person" and "refugee" may hence be used as instruments of control to establish a fixed set of expectations and limitations on displaced individuals' behaviour by conceptually separating them from the places they originated from and relocating them into unfamiliar spaces

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18 Katrina Powell, "Rhetorics of Displacement: Constructing Identities in Forced Relocations", *College English* 74/4, 2012, 301.

19 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2003, 38–39.

20 Kari Burnett, *Feeling Like an Outsider: A Case Study of Refugee Identity in the Czech Republic*, Geneva: UNHCR, Policy Development and Evaluation Service, 2013, <https://digitalibrary.un.org/record/759256?ln=en&v=pdf> [accessed: 18.11.2025].

21 Kiros Hiruy, *Finding Home Far Away from Home: Place Attachment, Place-Identity, Belonging and Resettlement among African-Australians in Hobart*, University of Tasmania, Master Thesis, 2009.

22 Roger Zetter, "More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20/2, 2007, 172–192, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fem011> [accessed: 18.11.2025].

that belong to others.<sup>23</sup> State authorities and political elites, acting as “political and identity entrepreneurs”, may also strategically deploy their power, resources, and influence to use the category of “displaced” for broader political claims.<sup>24</sup> This was seen in Georgia after Russia invaded Abkhazia in 2008, wherein the integration of displaced persons into local communities risked weakening the state’s bargaining position by limiting the population available to exert political pressure on the international community – the Georgian government consequently maintained clear boundaries between displaced and non-displaced populations, leaving the former in a protracted state of liminality “at the edge of society.”<sup>25</sup> Institutional actions like these fundamentally shape sociopolitical narratives, cultural norms, and public policies around displaced people.

The labels used to categorise displaced people can equally be, and often are, imbued with particular assumptions, stereotypes, and biases, which are categorically prescribed to all those to whom they refer. Crucially, these assumptions are regularly linked to other aspects of individuals’ identities, such as their age, gender, and social status. The label of “displaced” may thus not only construct or uphold social boundaries between “displaced” and “non-displaced” members of society but also enable, or even actively drive, the marginalisation of certain people by positioning them as “different” or “outsiders” in society. This can then affect their inclusion in and access to labour markets, social networks, and other vital opportunities.<sup>26</sup> Categories like “displaced person” additionally risk assuming the needs of certain individuals and reinforcing gender stereotypes, xenophobia, and even racism.<sup>27</sup> For example, displaced women are often perceived as passive, vulnerable, and in need of protection.<sup>28</sup> Because of these implicit expectations and assumptions, forcibly moved people may be compelled to accept external categorisations that do not reflect their lived realities or the ways they wish to be perceived. They may equally struggle with the

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- 23 Umut Ozkaleli, “Displaced Selves, Dislocated Emotions and Transforming Identities: Syrian Refugee Women Reinventing Selves”, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 70, 2018, 17–23, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.07.010> [accessed 18.11.2025].
- 24 Jacqueliën van Stekelenburg, Anouk van Leeuwen and Dunya van Troost, “Politicized Identity”, in: Donatella della Porta et al. (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, 976.
- 25 Annefloor Robijn, *From People to Pawns: A Constructivist Approach to the Debate on Internally Displaced People in Ethnically Divided Georgia*, Utrecht University, Master Thesis, 2021.
- 26 Prince C. Ekoh and Uzoma O. Okoye, “More than just forced migrants: using intersectionality to understand the challenges and experiences of older refugees in Western societies”, *Journal of Social Work in Developing Societies* 4/2, 2022, 33–52.
- 27 Somidha Ray, “What Is in a Label? Exploring How Labelling Shapes Refugees’ Experiences”, *Essex Student Journal* 16/1, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.5526/esj.403> [accessed: 24.11.2025].
- 28 Neha S. Singh et al., “Research in Forced Displacement: Guidance for a Feminist and Decolonial Approach”, *The Lancet* 397/10274, 2021, 560–562.

imposed nature of these new statuses,<sup>29</sup> especially in cases when they cannot be incorporated into their existing definition of themselves,<sup>30</sup> thus affecting their integration prospects and social cohesion more broadly. In this way, displaced individuals' identities are not only shaped through ongoing processes of self-definition and the ways they wish to be perceived by others,<sup>31</sup> but by external categorisations<sup>32</sup> and the conditions under which these are internalised.

## Internal Displacement in Ukraine

Ukraine offers an acute case to investigate how displaced individuals' self-identifications interact with externally imposed categories. Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2014, a growing number of studies has examined the experiences of IDPs in Ukraine, and particularly, their reintegration into host communities.<sup>33</sup> Although it may be expected that Ukrainian IDPs face(d) few barriers to reintegration as they remain within their home country and thus the same society, those fleeing the conflict during the first wave of forced displacement between 2014 and 2021 had mixed experiences of reintegration because of their regional identities and social marginalisation.<sup>34</sup> Ian Thompson, Lyudmila Nurse, and Mina Fazel found out

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- 29 Manuela Barreto and Naomi Ellemers, "The Effects of Being Categorised: The Interplay Between Internal and External Social Identities", *European Review of Social Psychology* 14/1, 2003, 159, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463280340000045> [accessed: 24.11.2025].
- 30 Richard Jenkins, "Categorization: Identity, Social Process and Epistemology", *Current Sociology* 48/3, 2000, 7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392100048003003> [accessed: 24.11.2025].
- 31 Joshua Rutt and Corinna Löckenhoff, "From Past to Future: Temporal Self-Continuity Across the Life Span", *Psychology and Aging* 31/6, 2016, 631–639; Maya Becker et al., "Being oneself through time: Bases of self-continuity across 55 cultures", *Self and Identity* 17/3, 2018, 276–293, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2017.1330222> [accessed: 24.11.2025]; Heather Piper and Dean Garratt, "Identity and Citizenship: Some Contradictions in Practice", *British Journal of Educational Studies* 52/3, 2004, 276–292.
- 32 Barreto and Ellemers, "The Effects of Being Categorised", 159.
- 33 See, for example: Oksana Mikheieva and Irina Kuznetsova, "Internally Displaced and Immobile People in Ukraine Between 2014 and 2022: Older Age and Disabilities as Factors of Vulnerability", *Migration Research Series* 77, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva 2023, <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/pub2023-031-r-mrs77-internally-displaced.pdf> [accessed: 17.11.2025].
- 34 Tetyana Bulakh, "Entangled in Social Safety Nets: Administrative Responses to and Lived Experiences of Internally Displaced Persons in Ukraine", *Europe-Asia Studies* 72/3, 2020, 455–480, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1687648> [accessed: 24.11.2025]; Irina Kuznetsova and Oksana Mikheieva, "Forced Displacement from Ukraine's War-Torn Territories: Intersectionality and Power Geometry", *Nationalities Papers* 48/4, 2020, 690–706; and Irina Kuznetsova et al., *The social consequences of population displacement in Ukraine: the risks of marginalization and social exclusion*, Zenodo, 2018, 8, <https://zenodo.org/records/1217838> [accessed: 24.11.2025].

that after the outbreak of the war in 2014, IDPs often faced challenges to reintegrating due to their competing “Ukrainian” and bilingual “Donbas” identities, which, in some cases, caused tensions in their host communities.<sup>35</sup> Emma Rimpiläinen moreover shows that media discourses affected the reintegration experiences of IDPs during the first wave of displacement by shaping the Ukrainian public’s perceptions of them.<sup>36</sup> Specifically, Ukrainian media used the concept of “displacement” for political purposes by constructing negative representations of IDPs from Donbas as those who abuse social benefits and exhibit anti-Ukrainian sympathies.<sup>37</sup> The effects of these representations were seen through large attitudinal shifts in Ukrainian society over time as the initial charitable solidarity with IDPs turned highly critical, including blaming displaced people for the overall decreasing quality of life in Ukraine, and framing them as different, burdens on local economies, and politically suspect or even complicit in the war.<sup>38</sup>

Other scholars have highlighted how the official classification of “displaced” has created divisions in Ukraine since the beginning of the war. As IDP registration in government-controlled areas became a precondition for receiving state benefits, including pensions,<sup>39</sup> since 2014, these state-mandated processes underscored IDPs’

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- 35 Gwendolyn Sasse and Alice Lackner, “War and identity: the case of the Donbas in Ukraine”, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34/2/3, 2018, 139–157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1452209> [accessed: 24.11.2025]; Ian Thompson et al., “Tensions in Cultural Identity and Sense of Belonging for Internally Displaced Adolescents in Ukraine”, *Child Care in Practice* 29/3, 2023, 319–334, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2023.2199192> [accessed: 24.11.2025]; Valeria Lazarenko, “Mapping identities: Narratives of displacement in Ukraine”, *Emotion, Space and Society* 35, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2020.100674> [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Maria Lewicka and Bartomiej Iwańczak, “Regional differentiation of identities in Ukraine: how many regions?”, in: Ulrich Schmid and Oksana Myshlovska (eds.), *Regionalism without regions: reconceptualizing Ukraine's heterogeneity*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2019, 25–66.
- 36 Emma Rimpiläinen, “Victims, Villains, or Geopolitical Tools? Representations of Donbas Displacement in Ukrainian and Russian Government Media”, *Europe Asia Studies* 72/3, 2020, 481–504, here 497, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1672622> [accessed: 24.11.2025].
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Tetyana Bulakh, “Strangers Among Ours: State and Civil Responses to the Phenomenon of Internal Displacement in Ukraine”, in: Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Greta Uehling (eds.), *Migration and the Ukraine Crisis: A Two-Country Perspective*, E-International Relations, 2017, 51.
- 39 Suleiman Mamutov et al., *Off to a Shaky Start: Ukrainian Government Responses to Internally Displaced Persons*, Brookings Institution, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/off-to-a-shaky-start-ukrainian-government-responses-to-internally-displaced-persons/> [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Dorota Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska and Nika Palaguta, “Internally Displaced Persons and Elections under Military Conflict in Ukraine”, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30/1, 2017, 27–46, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/few021> [accessed: 24.11.2025].

"otherness" and reinforced a persistent denial of their belonging within society.<sup>40</sup> It also prompted discourses around "fake" IDPs – a label applied to all "politically suspicious migrants" from non-government-controlled areas who had left their homes to receive benefits from the Ukrainian government.<sup>41</sup> While some scholars argue that there has become "a clearer sense of what it means to be Ukrainian" since the beginning of the war in 2014,<sup>42</sup> these studies nevertheless suggest that a shared national identity or even citizenship has not eliminated discrimination towards IDPs or led to the seamless reintegration of all individuals displaced because of Russia's war on Ukraine.<sup>43</sup>

These issues have only become more critical with the quickly growing number of displaced people following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion. As displaced people now constitute a larger percentage of Ukraine's population, much research has consequently examined and compared patterns of displacement across these two "waves."<sup>44</sup> Still, no studies have explored how Ukrainian IDPs perceive their "displaced" status, or the ways that this label might contrast their lived experiences of displacement. Given the significant empirical lacuna, the remainder of this chapter accordingly focuses on how internally displaced Ukrainians engage with the categorisation of "displaced person". Because of the gender dimension of displacement

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- 40 Viktoriya Sereda, "'Social Distancing' and Hierarchies of Belonging: The Case of Displaced Population from Donbas and Crimea", *Europe-Asia Studies* 72/3, 2020, 404–431, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1719043> [accessed: 24.11.2025].
- 41 Rimpiläinen, "Victims, Villains, or Geopolitical Tools?", 497.
- 42 Greta Uehling, "A Hybrid Deportation: Internally Displaced from Crimea in Ukraine", in: Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Greta Uehling (eds.), *Migration and the Ukraine Crisis: A Two-Country Perspective*, E-International Relations, 2017, 70. See also: Greta Uehling, "Three rationalities for making sense of internal displacement in Ukraine", *Migration Studies* 9/3, 2021, 1536–1559, <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnaa005> [accessed: 24.11.2025].
- 43 Oleksandra Tarkhanova and Daryna Pyrogova, "Forced Displacement in Ukraine: Understanding the Decision-Making Process", *European Societies* 26/2, 2024, 481–500, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2280680> [accessed: 24.11.2025]; See also: Evgenii Golovakha et al., "From Patronalism to Civic Belonging: The Changing Dynamics of the National-Civic Identity in Ukraine", in: Bálint Madlovics and Bálint Magyar (eds.) *The Russia-Ukraine War*, vol. 1, *Ukraine's Patronal Democracy and the Russian Invasion*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2023.
- 44 Viktoriya Sereda, *Displacement in War-Torn Ukraine: State, Displacement and Belonging*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023; Vlad Mykhnenko et al., "Understanding forced internal displacement in Ukraine: insights and lessons for today's crises", *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 38/3, 2022, 699–716, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grac020> [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Oksana Mikheieva et al., "Forced Displacement of Ukrainians during the War: Patterns of Internal and External Migration (2014–2022)", in: Bálint Madlovics and Bálint Magyar (eds.), *The Russia-Ukraine War*, vol. 1, *Ukraine's Patronal Democracy and the Russian Invasion*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2023.

in Ukraine since 2014, the analysis focuses specifically on the experiences of internally displaced women.

## Methodology

This study draws on 70 semi-structured online interviews conducted between August 2023 and August 2024 with internally displaced Ukrainian women. All participants were forcibly moved from Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasti (regions), to cities and towns in Chernivtsi, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil, Zakarpattia, Odesa, and Kyiv oblasti following Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022.<sup>45</sup> The interlocutors varied by age (18 to 80 years), educational experience, employment status, and profession, including university professors, civil society activists, humanitarian aid workers, entrepreneurs, and housewives. 37 of the interviewees lost their jobs and ten ceased their entrepreneurial activities following Russia's 2022 invasion. At the time of the interviews, 12 respondents were retired and 12 were unemployed and dependent on social benefits and humanitarian aid. 65 interviewees resided in private houses, while three lived in shared accommodation with other families and five lived in shelters or public facilities for IDPs. 46 participants were married or in civil partnerships. The participants were accessed via snowball sampling utilising the authors' diverse social and professional networks in Ukraine and through community organisations supporting IDPs.

Extreme sensitivity was exercised throughout the entire research process to safeguard a high level of ethics.<sup>46</sup> This was important as many participants shared that they had experienced immense trauma during their displacements and because of Russia's ongoing assaults on Ukraine.<sup>47</sup> Still, most participants expressed a strong desire to share their stories, viewing their participation in the study as a way to voice their experiences. The establishment of trust and rapport was thus a critical element of the research design. To ensure comfort and foster trust and openness, the first author – a forcibly displaced Ukrainian woman herself – conducted all interviews. Her shared cultural background aided in establishing rapport, which complemented the “outsider” identity of the second author. Together, the authors'

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45 Thirty participants were first displaced from the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014 following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, while the remaining 40 were first displaced after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion.

46 Marnie Howlett and Valeria Lazarenko, “How and when should we (not) speak?: Ethical knowledge production about the Russia-Ukraine war”, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26/4, 2023, 722–732.

47 For example, 37 participants recounted direct exposure to violence in their hometowns or during evacuation, 22 had a close relative or partner serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and two had survived captivity and torture.

positionalities and prior work on several projects on internal displacement and the Russia-Ukraine war allowed them to approach the research with empathy and critical insight, as well as enabling a feedback loop that ensured a balanced analysis.<sup>48</sup> All participants were provided with information about free psychological support services in Ukraine, and the interviewer followed up with each interviewee within a day of the interview to ensure they felt supported. Informed consent was obtained and the studies' protocols and questions were approved by the University of Oxford before any data collection began.

The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian or Russian, depending on each participant's preference, and lasted one to four hours to allow interlocutors to share their full views. All conversations were recorded and transcribed into Ukrainian before they were analysed using NVivo 12. In line with Kathy Charmaz,<sup>49</sup> a grounded theoretical approach was applied to first identify significant themes and then to explore deeper meanings within the transcripts through hermeneutic analyses. This constructivist approach was used for its balance of flexibility and structure, making it well-suited to examine the complexities of forced displacement. The following section is subdivided into the main categories that arose from the data and showcase how internally displaced Ukrainian women perceive and engage with the label of "*pereselenka*".

## Findings

### Disoriented Sense of Self

A common theme expressed by all participants in this study was a disoriented sense of self following their forced relocations after Russia's 2022 invasion. Many women explained that their displacements left them feeling detached from both the places where they had previously lived and their host communities. Several echoed the sentiments of a woman in her late thirties who moved with her husband and child from Berdiansk to Lviv and shared that she cannot call herself a "*Lvivyanka* [a resident of Lviv], but on the other hand, [she] cannot call [her]self a *Berdianka* [a resident of Berdiansk] any longer."<sup>50</sup> Numerous other women similarly admitted that they feel like "a stranger" in Ukraine after their displacements in 2022, which, some shared,

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48 Viktoriya Sereda and Oksana Mikheieva, "How (Not) to Study a War-Affected Society: Challenges of Knowledge Production in Ukraine and Elsewhere", *Nationalities Papers*, 2025, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.56> [accessed: 24.11.2025].

49 Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2006.

50 Interview conducted on 10 August 2023.

was the second or even third time they were forced to move since the war began in 2014.<sup>51</sup>

To explain why they feel unable to fully engage in the broader social norms, values, and practices of Ukrainian society, participants in this study regularly stated that they “lost everything” because of their displacement, particularly citing their hometowns, apartments, and members of their families.<sup>52</sup> Some women stressed their lost social connections, sharing that their friendships and professional relationships had broken down after they and their friends and colleagues had moved to different communities – in Ukraine and abroad. This was disclosed by a mother of two children who admitted that she found it “very difficult to establish personal connections” after her displacement in 2022 “because all of [her] friends stayed in her hometown in the Donetsk oblast or moved around the world”.<sup>53</sup> Another respondent, a university lecturer, also divulged that she has struggled to adapt to new social environments after her two displacements because her “former colleagues are dispersed all over the world.”<sup>54</sup>

In addition to losing social ties because of their physical relocations, several participants admitted that they had deliberately severed ties with friends and family who remained in their home communities following Russia’s 2022 invasion. Many held views similar to those of a middle-aged woman from Zaporizhzhia oblast, who explained that she does not “have anything in common with people who stayed” in her occupied hometown after 2022.<sup>55</sup> Another interlocutor confessed that her relationships with her mother-in-law and some friends have worsened since she left her hometown in Donetsk oblast, as they stayed and now hold opposing views about Russia.<sup>56</sup> Five other participants in this study likewise expressed that people from their home communities, such as their former close friends, began showing pro-Russian views and even started collaborating with Russians after the full-scale invasion – this included people who had previously been pro-Ukrainian. In fact, one woman from Luhansk oblast noted that half of her former classmates are now on Russia’s side.<sup>57</sup> While not all participants shared such anecdotes, many admitted that they have cut off contact with once-close friends and relatives whose political views they have questioned since Russia’s 2022 invasion.

Beyond the relationships that have been lost because of their forced displacements, differences between displaced Ukrainian women’s home and host localities

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51 Interviews conducted on 26 August 2023.

52 Interview conducted on 21 August 2023.

53 Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.

54 Interview conducted on 5 August 2023.

55 Interview conducted on 10 August 2023.

56 Interview conducted on 5 September 2024.

57 Interview conducted on 13 August 2024.

have also impacted their ability to establish a sense of self and belonging since 2022. Several participants in this study detailed that moving from big, industrialised cities, predominantly in eastern Ukraine, to smaller towns and villages, often in western Ukraine, was very difficult for them. For example, a woman now living in the city of Ivano-Frankivsk confessed that she "cannot get used to the narrow streets and small buildings" as she misses "the broad avenues and multi-story buildings in Donetsk and Mariupol", where she lived before her two displacements.<sup>58</sup> Another interlocutor from Crimea similarly referenced the architectural and environmental differences between where she previously lived and her host community, Dnipro, admitting that the latter is "not the place of [her] power [as] there is no sea".<sup>59</sup> Others described feeling a sense of alienation and even "culture shock" after their displacements because of differences between the local cultures in their home and host communities. This was demonstrated, for example, by a young woman from Kharkiv (Kharkiv oblast) who moved to Vinnytsia (Vinnytsia oblast) in 2022:

The attitude to work is different. Moving from central Ukraine to the west, the pace slows down. People are reluctant to take on interesting projects and are not interested in working harder, faster, or more efficiently. Life here in Vinnytsia is not suitable for my development. So, even here in Vinnytsia, I try to find people from Kharkiv with whom I can arrange everything much faster.<sup>60</sup>

Analogous views were expressed by another respondent displaced twice – in 2014 and then again in 2022. When speaking about her two experiences of displacement, she shared that she did not feel very different from other people in her host community located not far from her hometown in Donetsk oblast when she was first displaced in 2014, but after her second displacement in 2022, she feels "absolutely different" from her host community in western Ukraine.<sup>61</sup> To demonstrate these "differences", she elucidated that people in eastern Ukraine "are used to going to work at 6 am. Here [in Ivano-Frankivsk], a doctor can turn up at 10:15 am and immediately leave the hospital to enjoy a morning coffee".<sup>62</sup> Implicit in these views is the importance of the physical environment and social cultures in local communities for IDPs' ability to (re)establish their sense of self.

Crucially, internally displaced Ukrainian women's experiences of the war have also greatly affected their (in)ability to reintegrate into their host communities. Although not widely discussed in the literature on forced migration and the Russia-

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58 Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.

59 Interview conducted on 29 July 2023.

60 Interview conducted on 13 August 2024.

61 Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.

62 Ibid.

Ukraine war, several participants mentioned how much they have struggled to connect with other people in their host communities because of their diverging war experiences. For example, a woman in her late fifties disclosed that she feels tensions between local people and IDPs in western Ukraine because the former have predominantly seen the war through their TVs, while the latter have first-hand experiences of the conflict. She stated: “[T]hey [locals] live their own lives here. They do not understand what the war is. They are very far from all these atrocities, murders, and destruction. They cannot even imagine the scale of what has happened in Mariupol. They do not understand how terrifying it is.”<sup>63</sup> She elucidated that these differences, and the fact that local people “never ask and talk about” IDPs’ experiences of the war or displacement, make it challenging for displaced persons to relate to them.<sup>64</sup> This woman, like many other participants in this study, consequently admitted that she only engages with other displaced people in her host community. This self-imposed segregation has consequently created a divide between displaced and non-displaced Ukrainians within both host localities and Ukraine more broadly. It has also made it difficult for many internally displaced women to reintegrate and regain a sense of belonging after their forced displacements, leaving some with a disoriented sense of self.

### “Pereselenka” as an Imposed Label

When describing the struggles they have faced integrating into their host communities following their displacements, participants in this study frequently admitted that their status as a “*pereselenka*” has greatly influenced their experiences. Specifically, they elucidated that they felt “*pereselenka*” has become a negative category within Ukrainian society since 2022. Several described instances when they encountered adverse attitudes and judgments in their host localities when engaging in mundane activities like shopping at the market, walking their children to school, using public transport, or attending community events, because of their “displaced” status. A young participant from Alchevsk (Luhansk oblast) articulated these negative views when describing how she had intervened in a small dispute between a woman and a man on a bus soon after her displacement: “I just asked them to stop and the woman turned to me and said, ‘what are you, an IDP?’ As if, just because I expressed my displeasure, it automatically made me an outsider, like something was wrong with me simply because I am displaced.”<sup>65</sup> An interlocutor from the city of Kherson similarly disclosed that she could not find a doctor to treat her son after arriving in her host city, Ternopil, because they were not local. When she finally

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63 Interview conducted on 5 August 2023.

64 Ibid.

65 Interview conducted on 10 August 2024.

contacted the head of the hospital, the doctor inquired: "Who are you? We do not know you and do not want to know you. You are strangers to us."<sup>66</sup> In addition to this overt discrimination, other women shared that they feel local people in their host communities make false judgments about them, such as assuming that they are poor and facing economic hardships simply because they are displaced. This was disclosed by a woman displaced from Makiivka (Donetsk oblast) to Irshava (Zakarpattia oblast), who stressed that she "cannot even buy a cake without being discussed in the neighbourhood" as everyone starts asking how she has enough money to buy a cake because she is a displaced person, and therefore, likely "cannot afford it."<sup>67</sup>

Aside from stigmatising them, the women in this study emphasised that they believe the label of "*pereselenka*" is imbued with certain assumptions within Ukrainian society. Many women admitted that they think this category risks (re)producing gender stereotypes about their vulnerability, dependence, and passivity, which conflicts with how they see themselves. While forced displacement can indeed lead to economic vulnerability, especially for women, most participants in this study retained their jobs after their forced displacements or expressed a desire to work, and only 17% were dependent on social benefits and humanitarian aid. Yet, several interlocutors admitted that they believe locals see them as unable to work because they are displaced. Those with school-aged children emphasised that, despite seeking flexible or online work, they are perceived as having limited employment capacities due to their care-giving responsibilities. One unemployed participant divulged that she has repeatedly failed to find a job because she is displaced with children and, therefore, employers do not want to hire her.<sup>68</sup> She stressed: "[O]ther women I see at my son's school can find a job as they are locals, [so] what is wrong with me?" This perceived discrimination due to both displacement status and gender hence constitutes a structural barrier to internally displaced women's reintegration prospects and the (re)establishment of their identities and sense of belonging.

At the same time as being "othered", participants also confessed that the label of "*pereselenka*" has left them feeling that they are a burden for their host communities and the Ukrainian state. These sentiments were articulated, for example, by a young mother from Vuhledar (Luhansk oblast) now living in Pavlohrad (Dnipropetrovsk oblast), who stated, "I have heard these remarks several times: 'you have moved here, you are displaced. This means we have to pay you extra pensions and so on from our local budget.'"<sup>69</sup> Whereas numerous participants shared similar views, some expressed that they believe their "otherness" in Ukrainian society is institutionalised by

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66 Interview conducted on 26 August 2024.

67 Interview conducted on 5 August 2023.

68 Interview conducted on 6 August 2023.

69 Interview conducted on 21 August 2023.

the government, as it grants their statuses and provides their payments. As one participant noted, the distinction established by the government between “displaced” and “non-displaced” Ukrainians “stirs envy among locals, and IDPs end up relying on aid instead of finding ways to work. It creates learned helplessness. The state should unite us.”<sup>70</sup> Several women stressed that humanitarian organisations also contribute to this marginalisation by exclusively providing aid to IDPs<sup>71</sup> or offering aid packages that differ in both content and size from what is available to non-displaced citizens.<sup>72</sup> Others underscored that it is not IDPs but local people who create problems in host communities, especially in terms of evading taxes. As a displaced businesswoman argued, “ten years ago in Donetsk, it was shameful not to pay taxes. All of us, big and small businesses in Donetsk oblast paid taxes. Here in Odesa oblast, people still try to avoid it.”<sup>73</sup> These findings consequently highlight the paradox of institutional support: while intended to provide protection and aid for conflict-affected individuals, it can also contribute to the marginalisation that displaced individuals often seek to overcome and create new divisions within society.

Unsurprisingly, then, interviewees repeatedly echoed this chapter’s opening idiom in rejecting the label “*pereselenka*”. Many women emphasised how substantially this label marginalises them within Ukrainian society, making them feel like second-class citizens and less than other people who have not been displaced. A young woman from Luhansk (Luhansk oblast) explained that being called “*pereselenka*” immediately “ignites a conflict” within her that she would rather avoid.<sup>74</sup> She stated: “I do not want pity or worse – judgment. People might tell me how I should live or what I’ve done wrong. I already feel guilty for what our region has brought.”<sup>75</sup> This was repeated by several interlocutors, including some who now avoid disclosing to others that they are displaced<sup>76</sup> or have deliberately not registered as an IDP and rejected state aid because they “do not want to be pointed at as a ‘*pereselenka*’.”<sup>77</sup> Many women even admitted that they feel more comfortable living in areas closer to the front line of the conflict, despite the greater security risks, because people there “do not differentiate between IDPs and locals.”<sup>78</sup> One example is a woman from Berdiansk (Zaporizhzhia oblast) who spent two months in Ivano-Frankivsk (Ivano-Frankivsk oblast) in 2022 before moving to central Ukraine, where she “felt a different attitude” as “the

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70 Interview conducted on 13 August 2024.

71 Ibid.

72 Interview conducted on 16 August 2024.

73 Interview conducted on 15 August 2024.

74 Interview conducted on 13 August 2024.

75 Ibid.

76 Interviews conducted on 10 August 2023, and 16 August 2024.

77 Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.

78 Interviews conducted on 10 August 2023, and 16 August 2024.

war is so close to people there.”<sup>79</sup> These sentiments underscore how considerably the labels used in administrative and legal frameworks and colloquially by society can impact displaced individuals’ lived experiences of displacement.

### “Ukrainian” as Self-Identification

While continuously negotiating the externally imposed label of “*pereselenka*,” the women in this study also regularly stressed their self-identification as Ukrainians. Participants particularly asserted that even though they have been forced from their homes because of Russia’s war against Ukraine, they are no less “Ukrainian” than their non-displaced compatriots. Rather, when asked how they identify, they repeatedly underscored that they are “Ukrainian” first and foremost.<sup>80</sup>

To demonstrate their Ukrainian identities and attachments to Ukraine, interlocutors often outlined criteria that they believe define someone as “Ukrainian”. Among the various identity markers cited, speaking Ukrainian was the most common amongst all participants. In fact, numerous respondents stated that a true Ukrainian must speak Ukrainian, with many divulging that they made a conscious decision after their displacements in 2022 to switch from Russian to Ukrainian. One demonstration is a middle-aged woman from Kramatorsk (Donetsk oblast) who shared that she “switched to Ukrainian” after speaking in Russian for her whole life, even though it “is not easy, but it will come gradually”.<sup>81</sup> Another participant from Berdiansk (Zaporizhzhia oblast) articulated similar sentiments when telling a story about how she felt extremely annoyed when a colleague in a neighbouring department at her work was watching Russian channels after Russia’s 2022 invasion. Although she had previously spoken Russian and also watched Russian television before her displacement, she admitted that she can no longer tolerate the language and asked her colleague to turn the Russian television off.<sup>82</sup> Other participants also confessed that hearing Russian now triggers traumatic memories for them, even though Russian remains their primary language for thinking. Importantly, this linguistic shift is part of a larger trend in Ukraine since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war, especially after 2022.<sup>83</sup> Still, many respondents shared that their decisions to only speak Ukrainian is their attempt to show that they are equally Ukrainian citizens, as well as to eradicate the distinctions they feel between displaced and non-displaced people. As an illustration, a woman from Kyiv who

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79 Interview conducted on 12 August 2023.

80 Interview conducted on 15 August 2024.

81 Interview conducted on 21 August 2023.

82 Interview conducted on 11 August 2023.

83 For more on this, see: Volodymyr Kulyk, “Language Shift in Time of War: The Abandonment of Russian in Ukraine”, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 40/3, 2024, 159–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2024.2318141> [accessed: 24.11.2025].

now lives in Lviv explained that she solely speaks Ukrainian because she wants to empathise with those who are most “triggered by the Russian language”.<sup>84</sup> In this way, speaking Ukrainian is not only internally displaced Ukrainian women’s response to external pressure, but a personal act of self-identification.

Beyond speaking in Ukrainian, paying taxes was another criterion that participants frequently stated showcases Ukrainians’ commitment to each other and their state. While many argued that paying taxes is important for all citizens because it is fundamental for rebuilding Ukraine, others argued that the fact that they pay taxes is a key reason why they should be viewed as equal to their non-displaced compatriots. As one woman from Mariupol (Donetsk oblast) now living in the city of Ivano-Frankivsk remarked, “I am a citizen of this country, born here and paying taxes all my life.”<sup>85</sup> Another participant from Donetsk likewise asserted that paying taxes is critical to rebuilding and supporting local institutions like schools and kindergartens.<sup>86</sup> These sentiments were also echoed by a middle-aged respondent from Crimea who emphasised that it is the duty of all Ukrainians to contribute to their country’s struggle. As she stated, “everyone has their own front”, and paying taxes is one way to support the Ukrainian state.<sup>87</sup>

Finally, staying in Ukraine rather than seeking refuge abroad was cited by many internally displaced women as an important marker of their “Ukrainian” identities. As a young woman displaced with two children from Mariupol (Donetsk oblast) to Ivano-Frankivsk (Ivano-Frankivsk oblast) explained: “I never wanted to leave Ukraine, not even temporarily. As we say, ‘you can only benefit where you are born.’ I love Ukraine and want to live here.”<sup>88</sup> Many interviewees shared similar views, including women who had initially moved abroad after their displacements but later decided to return to Ukraine. One example is a woman who moved from the city of Luhansk to Kharkiv in 2014 and then to Italy with her two children after Russia’s 2022 invasion, where she stayed for six months before deciding to return to Ukraine. When speaking about her reasons for returning, even though her hometown was still occupied by Russia, she shared that she “was homesick and couldn’t be happy there”.<sup>89</sup> She added that she had “learned Italian, made friends, and appreciated their culture”, but knew that she could “never truly feel Italian” if she stayed.<sup>90</sup> Another woman who moved from Mariupol (Donetsk oblast) to Warsaw in February 2022 similarly confessed that she returned from Poland and moved

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84 Interview conducted on 9 August 2023.

85 Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.

86 Interview conducted on 15 August 2024.

87 Interview conducted on 29 July 2023.

88 Interview conducted on 13 August 2023.

89 Ibid.

90 Interview conducted on 13 August 2024.

to Ivano-Frankivsk (Ivano-Frankivsk oblast) because she believes that “Ukrainians should live in Ukraine. If you can stay and work for the country’s economy, you should.”<sup>91</sup> Our participants’ decisions to live in Ukraine during Russia’s war against their country thus reflect the strength of their attachments to their homeland and national community. Their actions moreover illustrate their self-identifications as “Ukrainian”, and desire to be recognised this way, rather than categorised as “displaced.”

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how internally displaced Ukrainian women perceive the label of “*pereselenka*” applied to them by their government and society following their forced displacements after Russia’s 2022 invasion. The analysis revealed how the category of “displaced person” used in administrative and legal frameworks codifies power dynamics and institutionalises a sense of “otherness” in Ukrainian society by distinguishing forcibly moved people from their non-displaced compatriots. As this category is reinforced through interactions in local communities and by institutions like government and the media, it consequently differentiates IDPs and makes them feel marginalised and “less-than” Ukrainian citizens – a phenomenon that Homi Bhabha calls the “emergence of the others among ourselves”.<sup>92</sup>

This investigation pushes forward prior research around labelling, forced migration, identity, and gender during and after war by illustrating how the feminised version of the term “displaced person” (“*pereselenka*”) is especially loaded with negative connotations in Ukrainian society. Namely, it compounds the general stigma of displacement with gender stereotypes associated with vulnerability, dependence, and passivity. In doing so, this label (re)produces and positions displaced Ukrainian women as docile recipients of aid, denies them of their agency, and reduces them to passive actors. Like prior research thus shows how imposed labels misrepresent displaced individuals’ lived experiences and self-identifications, subsequently threatening their attachments to their states and larger national communities.<sup>93</sup>

At the same time, and by focusing on the voices and experiences of internally displaced Ukrainian women, this chapter offers new insight into how the people most affected by forced displacement – in the Russia-Ukraine war and elsewhere – perceive and negotiate the external labels used to categorise them. Specifically, as the discussion showed, internally displaced Ukrainian women largely reject the label of “*pereselenka*”. In fact, none of the participants in this study identified themselves as

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91 Interview conducted on 21 August 2024.

92 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38–39.

93 Ekoh and Okoye, “More than just forced migrants”; and Ray, “What Is in a Label?”.

a “displaced woman”. Rather than internalising the categories imposed onto them, or the liminal status often associated with displacement, they stressed their self-identification as Ukrainian citizens first and foremost. Since their forced displacements, they have additionally challenged and reinterpreted the boundaries between belonging and exclusion by dismissing gender and displacement as central markers in their self-identification. Instead, they emphasised ungendered markers like language and paying taxes, which primarily reflect their attachments to their state and nation. These findings add to prior research arguing that external categorisations are less likely to be accepted and internalised when they cannot be incorporated into people’s existing definitions of self.<sup>94</sup>

While understanding how internally displaced Ukrainian women engage with the label of “displaced” is crucial for theoretically and empirically advancing studies on forced migration and identity, as well as research into the Russia-Ukraine war more generally, it evidently also has significant implications for policymaking. Recognising these identity dynamics is essential for fostering social cohesion and designing more inclusive and responsive policies that address the specific challenges faced by displaced women. In Ukraine, acknowledging these perceptions is important as they influence individuals’ responses to forced relocation and reintegration, identity (re)negotiation, and adoption of different coping strategies. Failing to understand how individuals engage with the label of “displaced person” risks (re)producing the exclusion and marginalisation of displaced people rather than supporting their meaningful integration.

Conversations about the situation of IDPs in Ukraine and elsewhere should thus more thoroughly consider how war-affected communities can gain greater control over the criteria used by states and humanitarians to determine their eligibility for assistance. This involves rethinking the role of both state institutions and humanitarian actors in shaping displaced persons’ identities. Instead of reinforcing rigid categories that define IDPs primarily through their vulnerability, as this chapter suggests, policies should focus on enabling their meaningful participation in economic, social, and political life. This requires moving beyond short-term aid toward long-term strategies that facilitate integration while respecting displaced persons’ agency. Greater involvement of IDPs in decision-making processes, whether in local governance, policy design, or humanitarian programming, can also help to dismantle the structures that perpetuate their perceived “otherness”. Ultimately, addressing challenges to social cohesion in war-affected countries like Ukraine requires a shift from framing “displaced” individuals as passive requiring external intervention to viewing them as social actors with the capacity to determine their own futures.

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94 Barreto and Ellemers, “The Effects of Being Categorised”, 159.

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