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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Tensions in Cultural Identity and Sense of Belonging for Internally Displaced Adolescents in Ukraine

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the cultural, educational and mental health consequences of large-scale internal displacement for children and adolescents from the Donbas to other parts of Ukraine. The research findings and methodological innovations of the study are discussed in the context of forced migration and displacement caused by the previous (2014) armed conflict in East Ukraine and Donbas with additional challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Our data collection was halted by the military action in Ukraine that started in February 2022 that has caused another wave of forced migration. We reflect on the experience gained from conducting research on sensitive topics of displacement using online methods in the environment of restricted access to schools and adolescents. The adolescents who were interviewed described their experiences of displacement, which for some had taken place nearly eight years before. Trauma from conflict and displacement can have mental health, educational and social consequences for displaced adolescents. These displaced young people and their families face, as internally displaced populations, a double-edged sword in their relationship with their new contexts. They often have numerous challenges in their settling in a new location and public sphere given the existing ethnic, cultural and language diversity of Ukraine and yet have the advantage of being able to adopt and adapt to their new socio-cultural contexts relatively quickly and minimise their pre-migration identities, if they so wish.

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## KEYWORDS

internally displaced persons (IDP); adolescents; East Ukraine; cultural identity; belonging; education, online research

## Introduction

The focus of our paper is cultural identity and sense of belonging of internally displaced adolescents in East Ukraine. Factors that can enhance the ability of younger populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to thrive in the post-migration school environment need to be better understood in order to ensure that these components are encouraged or adequately resourced in post-migration environment settings. We used the

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notion of Internally Displaced Individuals (IDPs) defined by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) as people who:

have fled their homes to find safety. They have not crossed an international border but remained within their home country. IDPs legally remain under the protection of their government. They keep all of their rights and protection under international human rights law. (UNHCR Ukraine, 2020)

Research has suggested that although internally displaced persons face higher risks of long-term health and economic difficulties yet these risks can be mitigated by effective social support in their new, post-displacement environment (e.g. Siriwardhana & Stewart, 2013). However, the impact of forced migration on children and adolescents who have been internally displaced is an area that has been less well studied.

Although internally displaced children and adolescents in Ukraine might have fewer cultural differences to navigate, their experience of the post-migration setting can still be potentially challenging, and markedly so if language and cultural differences still feel pronounced, despite being in the same nominal “country”. Furthermore, if language and cultural differences are minimal, then the alienation from the fabric of their new schools, communities and societies might feel particularly harsh, and so their experience of displacement can feel like a double-edged sword with ease of integration on the one hand and yet facing the tension between a commitment to Ukraine and their mixed or bilingual identities of Donbas (Rimpiläinen, 2020; Sasse & Lackner, 2018).

However, there are no studies that have studied the effects of this twin portrayal of IDPs in Ukraine or studies which have addressed the impact on adolescents of displacement, in this case taking place seven-years previously. Our own research shows that migration experience and socio-economic status are crucial dimensions affecting educational opportunities (e.g. Nurse & Melhuish 2021; Thompson, 2020). Forced migration can make children and their families disadvantaged in many respects: economically, socially, but also culturally, which is often poorly addressed. Research on post-migration environments for refugee children and adolescents highlights the importance of belonging and acceptance, especially in the school context (Fazel, 2015; Fazel & Betancourt, 2018).

This paper focuses on tensions in the cultural identity formation of young IDPs in Ukraine. The data reported here are drawn from a larger AHRC funded study *Cultural Artefacts and Belonging: A Case Study of displaced and refugee young people and families in Ukraine* which examined the role that cultural artefacts might play in the IDPs’ sense of belonging, primarily to their cultures of origin. The focus of this work was to understand how the IDPs’ cultural and social skills, memories and cultural artefacts (e.g. music, poetry, literature) were used to navigate some of the complexities of their current social situation (Nurse, 2011; Thompson & Tawell, 2017). Kozulin (1993), for example, has argued that a cultural artefact, such as a work of literature, can become a powerful psychological tool that may help people to adapt to their environment through a sense of cultural identity and belonging. Use of qualitative biographical research methods enabled us to capture dynamics of developing layers of new identities of adolescents through their experiences of new places, schools and the cultural environment. Biographical research in Eastern Europe (e.g. Aarelaid-Tart & Bennich-Bjorkman, 2012; Humphrey et al., 2003; Nurse et al., 2013; Rozhdestvenskaya et al., 2016) has shown the importance of this method for the study of identities within changing societies.

We hypothesised that adolescents who assigned value and meaning to their cultural artefacts have better well-being and a sense of belonging in their post-displacement environment, hence influencing the pace of adaptation to a new setting. However, we were also open to the negative consequences traumatic memories may have. In the paper, we first briefly explain a background that led to the forced migration and displacement. Then we describe the methodology of the mixed methods study, which was tailored to the circumstances of the on-going conflict situation and Covid-19 lockdowns. Results are presented from both the quantitative and qualitative studies, examining whether displaced and refugee children and adolescents use their cultural and linguistic heritage as part of their sense of self, especially in its possible transformation, in the post-migration environment, followed by the discussion and conclusions.

## Displacement and national identity in Ukraine

Since 2014 increasing research has been focused on the political ramifications of war in Donbas. As Sasse and Lackner (2020) observed, the case of the displaced in Ukraine before the recent 2022 military conflict concerned “similarities and differences within one reference group: the residents of the Donbas region, who are characterised by a diversity of ethnic and linguistic characteristics and a sense of regional identity” (Sasse & Lackner, 2020). Thus, their focus was on the consequences of displacement and the impact of the polarisation of identities on political views rather than ethnic differences.

Other research has suggested that the conflict and war in Ukraine has contributed to the strengthening of a national “Ukrainian” identity/idea. Uehling (2017), for example, argues that “after the conflict with Russia in the east and the occupation of Crimea in the south, there is a clearer sense of what it means to be Ukrainian emerging” (p. 70). Rimpiläinen (2020) examined the portrayal of IDPs from Donbas in the Ukrainian and Russian national “government” media. She argued that government publications in both countries use the concept of displacement for political purposes. For example, the Ukrainian publication *Uriadovyi Kurier* “attempts to construct Ukrainian national unity by drawing a political frontier between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ IDPs from the occupied territories” (Rimpiläinen, 2020, p. 497). The depiction of “fake” IDPs leads to a potential association of these populations with terrorists trying to divert Ukrainian taxpayers’ money to rebel areas.

## Methods, procedures, ethical considerations and participants

The Study *Cultural Artefacts and Belonging: A Case Study of displaced and refugee young people and families in Ukraine* was an AHRC-funded project at the University of Oxford in collaboration with the Karazin Kharkiv University scholars in Ukraine<sup>1</sup> from 2021 to 2022. Young people and their families in the Ukraine affected by forced displacements due to the 2014 conflict in Eastern Ukraine were studied. These IDPs were not concentrated in “refugee” camps but had settled in urban and rural areas of Ukraine and those that were refugees from this conflict were predominantly in the neighbouring countries of Belarus, Moldova, and Russia. In this paper we are only reporting on our study of the IDPs who settled in East Ukraine (in Kharkiv). In the study we specifically targeted two age groups of young people: aged 10–11 and 15 to 17. These young people would have

spent approximately seven years as IDPs, and many were old enough at the time of their forced migration to remember events associated with their families' move to new places. The older age group of young people were in the final years of secondary school, and it was crucial for us to look at the impact of their IDP status during these formative years for their identities and future life plans.

## Methods

A mixed method approach was utilised in the study including a scoping quantitative questionnaire survey of two age groups of IDPs (aged 10 to 11 and 15–17) and online qualitative biographical interviews (IDPs aged 15–17 only and their parents). The choice of these particular age groups – the first and last years of secondary school – was based on the length of their experience of being IDPs in the period from 2014, which was 7 years to the time of the study. The scoping study questionnaires were available in both Ukrainian and Russian languages. Participants had an option to choose the language at the beginning of the interview. Qualitative interviews were conducted in Russian as preferred by the informants' choice of language. The interviews were video and audio recorded and then transcribed, fully anonymised and translated into English. Careful attention was paid to presenting nuances of the original language in the narratives, including the use of specific language characteristics of the young people's styles of telling their stories and use of local dialect words; the participants also occasionally used some Ukrainian and English phrases and words.

The narratives were coded according to 'spontaneous' and 'semi-structured' components using NVivo12 and analysed thematically. The spontaneous part of the interview coding was aimed at establishing the sequence of events that preceded informants' migration and experiences related to different stages of informants' lives (Nurse et al., 2022). The semi-structured part of the narrative was coded according to themes identified by the researchers for comparative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2016; Nurse et al., 2016, 2022). Throughout each stage of the project, there was a need to carefully tailor both the qualitative and quantitative approaches and methodologies because of the culture and linguistic background of the target population. This was achieved through the experience of the local partners, the use of Ukrainian and Russian languages and the bi-lingualism of the researchers. This work was spearheaded by the Ukrainian partner institution and was crucial to the execution of the research, especially because of the many pandemic disruptions and delays leading to limited access to the schools. This necessitated finding methods of online data collection both asynchronous and synchronous. Knowledge of local research practices through the previous research and fluency in Russian by a team member the project Co-I enabled us to develop a research plan that could be further tailored to access the target populations.

The study team, therefore, needed to constantly re-assess the situation and design a set of methods that were appropriate to the evolving situation in the country whilst maintaining research rigour and focus. First, significant adjustments for the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing all students into a virtual environment, which limited the qualitative interview plans. The Covid-19 delays and restrictions to travelling to the target country left us with fewer options in the methodological design and limited training of the local researchers. The use of virtual meeting technology replaced on-site

training and even enabled greater direct involvement of the Oxford team researchers with the different members of the local research team in Ukraine.

Secondly, the empirical work was approaching its final stage when it was interrupted by the start of military intervention of the special forces of the Russian Federation into the country on 24th February 2022. The local partner organisation, the University of Kharkiv, had to close, suspending all work. The abrupt cessation of the research demonstrated the volatility of conducting research with internally displaced populations and the need to adjust our methodological approaches and research methods to complete the research.

## **Participants**

Internally displaced adolescents, whose families were forced to migrate or flee from the Donbas region of Ukraine because of the 2014 military conflict, were the target group of the study. Donbas is culturally and historically connected to the neighbouring oblasts of East Ukraine<sup>2</sup>, however, it is predominantly Russian-speaking. Displaced people from this region were starting a new life after migrating from the conflict zone where they had potentially been exposed to some of the challenges and trauma related to the conflict. We specifically focussed on schools in city of Kharkiv with a higher density of IDP students. We tried to ensure whole classes were included and recruited from schools with higher IDP populations and tried to ensure as many of them were able to participate by organising online interviews in school premises only (rather than in homes) to enable equal access to computers to participate in the quantitative study. Furthermore, online questionnaire studies were conducted in the classrooms of selected schools to preserve the privacy and autonomy of participants, especially of the IDPs, and to limit any potential influence of parents or siblings/friends who may have been tempted to “assist” with the questionnaires or observe responses.

Following the online classroom-based interviews, young IDP participants were invited through their parents to participate in the online in-depth qualitative biographical interviews. Criterion for the invitation for qualitative interviews was participants’ IDP status as confirmed by the schools and parents. The methodology of the online qualitative interviews was specially developed by through a period of piloting this methodology, training local interviewers in the technique and conducting online interviews for the study.<sup>3</sup>

This study was approved by the Department of Education, University of Oxford Research Ethics Committee (DREC Reference no CIA-21-283) in August 2021. The local research team in Kharkiv followed the research ethics protocol, which was approved by the DREC. This included translation into Ukrainian and Russian of information letters to head teachers of the participating schools, parent information sheets, opt out and consent forms for the quantitative scoping study (for head teachers and parents) and for parents of the adolescents who participated in the follow-up qualitative biographical online study. Fifteen schools signed up for participation in Kharkiv; 14 schools actually participated. Thirty-three displaced adolescents (15–17 years old) participated in the scoping study. 55% girls, 30 (91%) were ethnically Ukrainian, and two were Russian. Of the IDPs, 30 (91%) were born in Ukraine, two reported being born in Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR), and one was born in Kazakhstan. All IDPs lived in the Donbas area of Ukraine immediately before they migrated to Kharkiv.

Five informants (3 male and 2 female) participated in the qualitative biographical online study. Unfortunately, no more interviews could be conducted, despite more

participants being recruited, because of the start of military actions in east Ukraine in February 2022. The qualitative interview participants were local secondary school students and had all moved to Kharkiv from the Donbas area with their parents. At the time of the interviews, they were living in Kharkiv.

### **Limitations and positionality**

Conducting empirical research in schools during the pandemic presented certain risks due to the unpredictable access to schools and also with students often absent when we conducted the online interviews. Furthermore, all international travel became difficult and so the Oxford researchers could not visit Kharkiv preventing additional observational data to be gathered. The Kharkiv partner also had to utilise “remote” technology when interviewing and had to rely upon the dedication and commitment of the head teachers and classroom teachers at the participating schools; later also assisting with the recruitment of students and parents of young IDPs. The abrupt cessation of the research left us with results on a relatively small number of IDPs that we were able to access, however, we were able to collect sufficient data to identify the main difficulties and challenges that IDPs were facing following displacement to Kharkiv. The combination of the research methods and techniques enabled us to cross-examine findings from quantitative and qualitative data and to make the voices of the children and parents from IDP families heard.

## **Results**

### **Educational consequences of forced migration: new schools and teachers**

For the children of school age, school is one of the important places of socialisation and a gateway into their new community and society. Most of the participants reflected on their memories of differences starting new schools after moving from Donbas; none made comments that their experiences had been difficult, although some did not recall the process.

*< ... > I thought we were taught well, but it turned out we weren't because the new school had English five times a week. Uh. We had more teachers (...) who knew more in this field, err, [I] was asked to do a lot of homework, it was more demanding [difficult] in the lessons and as if I realized that in fact I needed to learn anew, because the level of school, well, in English in my last city, it did not correspond to that in [X]. English was much, much better, 'heavier' and actually different. And then there was something else in school different. The construction of the school was different and, basically the buns in the cafeteria tasted better. Just like that < ... > (Male student, 16 years old)*

*< ... > From my former [school], it is more difficult to study here, here they teach some subjects more strictly, well, for example, it was difficult for me with the Ukrainian language, because I forgot it before moving [in X] and our teacher is very good, but at the same time very strict. So I needed to pull it up specifically, maybe even to some extent to learn it from the basics, < ... >. (Female student, 16 years old)*

The difference in the quality of teaching seemed obvious to the young IDPs. Since the start of 2014 hostilities, the relocation of teachers from Donbas to other parts of Ukraine meant that the teachers who were left in Donbas were less experienced.



The exodus of academics, students and teachers from Donbas after the events of 2014 was a result of rethinking their previous affiliations and allegiances as well as censoring their language. Many of them “with a benevolent attitude towards the Russian language and culture faced a significant identity crisis” (Oleksiyyenko et al., 2021, p. 105). One participant in our study reflected on the fact that their school teachers left Donbas after the start of hostilities:

*< ... > It was just a primary school, then our teacher left and everything became less positive and after the hostilities that happened in the town and this region [referring to the 2014 military actions LN], the teaching staff changed a lot, that is, the quality of education deteriorated a little bit and that is why of that I changed the school to another gymnasium < ... > (Female student, 16 years old)*

Another issue commented on was that sometimes their teachers had poor command of the Ukrainian language. The use of Ukrainian as the official language of instruction has been one the sources of tension in the predominantly Russian-speaking East of Ukraine.

*< ... > here in this school [in X] all teaching is in Ukrainian, which started recently officially. If before, for example, teachers could speak Russian, now everyone speaks Ukrainian and for many teachers because of this it is quite difficult, because not all teachers know the Ukrainian language well enough to speak it fluently and very often there are situations, when the teacher asks the children how this or that word will be in Ukrainian. Well, I think teachers will cope. (Male student, 16 years old)*

### **Cultural and educational consequences of forced migration**

The language of communication and knowledge of local cultures can play an important role in refugee and forced migrants’ post-migration adaptation. These internally displaced children and adolescents had moved to post-migration contexts not significantly different culturally from where they had lived before, apart from the significant changes in the national narrative and interpretation of the national cultural heritage and use of the country’s official language. Ukraine had been part of the Soviet Union (USSR) until 1991 and although there were borders between the previous Union republics there remained substantial movement between republics for work, education, family and other visits. Most of the institutions such as pre-school, schools, social and health care institutions were comparable. Many schools in the East of the country retained Russian until recently as a language of instruction, although in the Union republics speaking titular nation languages, along with Russian, was also common (Laitin, 1998; Pavlenko, 2008). Many attempted transitions of their education systems to the languages of the titular nations although this process was not smooth because of the mixed populations across the newly independent countries (Pavlenko, 2008; Wright 2000). In Ukraine the transition to Ukrainian as the main language of instruction took longer than in the Baltic countries (Laitin, 1998) and in the East of Ukraine, where this study was located, the majority of the IDPs and non-IDPs consider Russian as a mother tongue. As Table 1 demonstrates, there are almost no language differences between the IDP and non-IDP groups.

This was strongly demonstrated in the qualitative biographical interviews, with fluency in both Russian (for most it was their mother tongue) and in Ukrainian,



**Table 1.** Native languages as indicated by IDPs and non-IDPs ( $n = 33$ - IDPs;  $n = 361$ —non-IDPs) %.

Native languages	Yes	No
<i>Internally Displaced Persons (IDP)</i>		
Ukrainian	55	45
Russian	88	12
<i>Non-IDPs</i>		
Ukrainian	49	51
Russian	80	20

which they learnt in school. Knowledge of the Ukrainian language for the High-school students was an asset to those whose families moved from Donbas to East Ukraine. The informants whose narratives we analysed planned their future primarily in Ukraine and were actively trying to integrate into the peer group and new community. The schools' language policy and requirements for the entrance exams to study Ukrainian and Ukrainian history are particularly influential in this respect.

If language and communication were not significant barriers to their integration into their post-migration life, moving to a larger city, like Kharkiv, was among the main cultural "shocks" described by the participants in qualitative interviews. Adapting to the new urban lifestyles represented big opportunities and certain challenges to the children when they arrived in Kharkiv as migrants. There was little official relocation support for the IDPs when they arrived in Kharkiv and their families relied on the help of the extended families, friends, and acquaintances.

*Well, (...) I liked Kharkiv. Mgm (...) I went to the center, went to Gorky Park, Shevchenko Park, I liked these places, a good city, I had positive impressions, from the very beginning (Male student 16 years old).*

*< ... > I also like that I live in a big city, where I have the opportunity to go to University and in principle, Urm, to climb up a career ladder. I like some places in Kharkov. (Female student 16 years old).*

Of note, many participants were annoyed by urban noise and valued being close to the nature:

*... [what] I like about this place of residence, that there is a forest not far from me. A good pine forest, a lot of trees, clean air, aaa, you can set up a picnic and again there is a big lake there, which is "cool", and it's all very close, in a 20-minute walk, that is, if I want to walk through the forest, to relax spiritually and to relax and I go. It is not far. (Male student 16 years old)*

*< ... > near the apartment block there is a forest nearby, though small. It's kind of considered a park, well, but more like a forest. I like to walk there, like, basically, I love nature, so everything that's connected with it, that's it. (Female student 16 years old)*

The same student also referred to being tired of too many people:

*Hmm (...) [what] I don't like, probably it's sometimes far too many people here, maybe it's just me a little tired of people, but just when in the rush hour in the metro there are too many people for me it is (...) sometimes annoying, of course. (Female student, 16 years old)*

In the scoping questionnaire study, we explored the adolescents' sense of belonging to their current location and asked of them, if they had the opportunity, would they move from the place where they were currently living. Most of the IDPs who responded

thought they were likely to stay in the place where they were living at the time of the interviews (November–December 2021).

Of the 30 who answered that they would move away, only 9% indicated that they would return to the Donbas region (Table 2).

The majority of IDPs still had relatives (84%), friends (68%) and acquaintances (61%) in the Donetsk or Luhansk region. Most had settled in their new location with only two of the 33 IDPs reported not knowing anyone in their new community. Most ( $n = 31$ ) of the IDPs still stayed in contact with people in the Donetsk or Luhansk region. However, only five visited Donetsk or Luhansk regularly, while seven have never visited since leaving.

The older group of IDPs were in their final years of secondary school and observed, in their narratives about their future life plans, greater opportunities for further education and professional careers as compared to the place from where they came. From their views everything was better in the large city: higher quality of teaching (especially in Ukrainian and English, but also in other core subjects); greater opportunities in choosing university and even “easier” life as compared to small cities:

*< ... > I also like that I live in a big city, where I have the opportunity to go to University and in principle, Urm, to climb up a career ladder. (Female student, 16 years old)*

*< ... > English is much, much better, ‘heavier’ and actually different. And then there was something else in school different. (Male student, 16 years old)*

*< ... > here the city is big, here is much easier to live here than in a small one < ... >*

*(Male student, 16 years old).*

*< ... > here in this school, that I am now studying in all teaching is in Ukrainian, which started recently officially < ... > < ... > When I was still studying in that city [he means from where he migrated] from the first class, we had the Russian language, we had the Russian literature. These were two separate subjects. We studied them seriously and in this school we study the Russian language and Russian literature, well, all the time, that’s it < ... > (Male student, 16 years old)*

*< ... > it was difficult for me with the Ukrainian language, because I forgot it before moving [in Kharkiv] and our teacher is very good, but at the same time very strict. So I needed to pull it up specifically, maybe even to some extent to learn it from the basics < ... > (Female student, 16 years old)*

### **The displacement status: IDPs and the locals**

What did it mean to these Ukrainian adolescents to be an IDP? The sensitivity of this question was highlighted by the local research team and also the teachers from the participating schools in the online briefing and training meeting in 2021 who commented

**Table 2.** Where would you move from the place where you live now? ( $n = 33$ ) %.

Another country	30
Another Ukraine region	3
Return to Donetsk, Lugansk	9
No, would not move	42
Difficult to say	15

that it may have been far too traumatic for the children of IDPs to be asked questions about this, since they were probably already traumatised by their previous migration experience. Some teachers even commented that they, themselves, would have refused for their children to participate in the study if they had been invited. We therefore carefully constructed how to ask adolescents about their feelings of being an IDP in the semi-structured part of the biographical interviews, unless this issue had already been spontaneously raised (mentioned) by informant. The prompts were designed in such a way that encouraged informants to reflect on their own experience, separating it from their second-hand knowledge of such experience, or information they could have gained from mass media and social media (Nurse et al., 2013, 2016). The questions were: whether they have been treated differently because of where they moved from or have they heard of others feeling discriminated against? They were then asked to describe their own and other people's experiences.

We were aware that these questions were difficult to answer for two main reasons: (a) for those who moved at the time of the 2014 events, at around the age of eight, this was a distant memory and (b) some informants did not want to discuss this experience:

*Interviewer:* You said that when you came to a new school, you did not have any difficulties, no one treated you differently. Is that true? Have you heard that from other people?

*Yes, I know, I have a classmate from my very first school, she is something, well, in Kharkiv she did not have any difficulties, probably in about 2014 year she entered, no, she studied in Kyiv, well, about a month at school and there they did not treat her well because she was from the Luhansk region, that is, there were some ridicule from the children, that was the only time I heard about it.*

*Interviewer:* And you haven't experienced that?

*No, never experienced, no.* (Female student, 16 years old)

The other participant referred to the fact that he was young at the time when he moved this place:

*No, no, it was okay. I was a little one, I got used to it quickly.* (Male student, 16 years old)

It seemed that many of the informants had not spoken to their peers about coming from Donbas:

*Interviewer:* You said that you come from the Luhansk region, what is it like for you to be from there?

*To be born there, the fact that I was born there, the fact that my mother lived there and Dad also lived there over time, probably the place in which I was born, this means to me, where I lived some part of my life when I was just starting to grow up, that is, the very first years of life, which are important for every person.* (Female student, 16 years old)

*Interviewer:* What does it mean for you to be from the Luhansk region?

*Yes, well, (...) nothing, I am not ashamed of this, I say, I was born in Lugansk and that's it* (Male student, 16 years old).

*< ... > And mmm, I don't know how to understand this [question] (laughs), but aaa well, somehow at the beginning, when I moved I'm a little bit like. Well, I don't know if I was*

*shy about this, I didn't want to mention it. I didn't want to mention it at all, not to anyone.*  
(Male student, 16 years old)

This reflects a general reluctance to talk about their past or only to share experiences with their trusted groups of friends:

*Interviewer:* And if you experienced some negative experience, then in what places they usually occur?

*Nobody says anything like this to me. Never ever. I don't talk about this much, that is, I won't talk something like: hello, I'm from the Luhansk region. If anyone asks, I will answer, but usually I say it in the circle of my friends and they always have an adequate reaction.*  
(Female student, 16 years old)

*< ... >, there are friends in principle whose views on life are quite similar to mine. That is, very different things can connect [people]. Completely different.* (Male student, 16 years old)

According to the results from the scoping study among IDPs and their local (non-IDP) classmates about their friendship groups and communication (Table 3); the IDP students found it most easy to be friends, to communicate, and “be themselves” among people who share their life values (70%), who are of their generation (67%) and share their hobbies (63%). Non-IDPs had similar responses but in a different order with people of their generation (62%), share their hobbies (59%), and then those that share their life values (46%).

### Health issues

Among the main reasons for leaving the Donbas area were dangers associated with hostilities (72%). Another frequently cited reason was education opportunities (34%). For 31% of IDPs, they stated that there was no definite response. Table 4 shows results from the scoping study, which lists the reason the families of IDPs left their home places and moved to Kharkiv.

Although we were looking into the impact of “forced” movement out of the Donbas area, mainly seven years previously, we only asked about negative consequences from

**Table 3.** With whom is it easier for you to be friends, to communicate? Among which people do you feel most “yourself”? (IDPs  $n = 33$ ; non-IDPs  $n = 362$ )%.

	IDPs		Non-IDPs	
	yes	No	yes	No
People with the same education as me	37	63	35	65
... of the same faith, religion	17	83	10	90
... of my generation	67	33	62	38
... of the same gender	30	70	32	68
... with the same financial situation	20	80	12	88
Supporters of certain political views	13	87	10	90
People of my nationality and ethnicity	10	90	14	86
... who speak the same language as me	33	67	30	70
... of my future profession	27	73	15	85
... who share my hobbies	63	37	59	41
... who share my life values	70	30	46	54
... who listen to the same music	30	70	31	69
... who look just like me (style, fashion)	10	90	12	88
Difficult to say	9	91	13	87

**Table 4.** Why did your family move from Donetsk/Lugansk region? (%) ( $n = 33$ ).

	IDPs	
	Yes	No
Difficult economic situation	16	84
Dangers associated with hostilities	72	28
Arbitrariness and Lawlessness	3	94
Relatives live in Kharkiv	12	88
Job opportunities for parents/guardians	19	81
Education opportunities	34	66
Difficult to say	31	69
Other reasons	3	97

their experiences of displacement in the last year. The majority of IDPs (between 30 and 70%) tended to “never” experience negative effects, a minority of IDPs (3–12%) experienced negative effects “very often.” Between 6 and 27% of IDPs reported experiencing negative effects “from time-to-time,” the most frequent of which were being reminded of the event by other things ( $n = 9$ ), avoiding getting upset about it ( $n = 9$ ), pictures popping into their mind ( $n = 8$ ), and trying not to talk about it ( $n = 7$ ).

Although inclusion of questions related to Covid-19 were not part of the study’s aims and objectives, after several pandemic-related delays in starting the scoping study in the local schools, the research team in collaboration with the local researchers included questions on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on individuals’ well-being in September 2021. For this block of questions, we also had an opportunity to compare the 33 of IDPs with the 362 of non-IDPs. The majority of IDPs (82%) reported having good health. One IDP rated their health as being “very bad”. Just under half of IDPs ( $n = 15$ ) had not had Covid-19, while 12 may have had Covid-19 but were not tested. Six IDPs have had Covid-19 in the past, which was confirmed by a positive test result.

IDPs were generally more concerned about how Covid-19 might affect their family and loved ones or their future life plans than they were about catching it themselves. The majority of IDP (63%) were worried that Covid-19 might cause health problems in their future lives (non-IDP 50%). Other frequently reported concerns were that they would not be able to study where they had planned to (46%; non-IDP 32%), that they would see friends and relatives less often (46%; non-IDP 33%), and that it would be difficult to organise their free time (38%; non-IDPs 39%). Conversely, 9 IDPs (27%; non-IDP 17%) believed Covid-19 would not affect their life. For non-IDPs, the most frequently cited concern was health problems (50%), followed by not being able to travel or go on vacation (46%).

## Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we examined the potential impacts of historical 2014 forced migration from Donbas on the formation of young migrants’ identities by looking at how IDP adolescents use their cultural and linguistic heritage in finding new homes and a sense of themselves. The volatile situation in which this study took place also imposed changes in the use of research methods, which had to be carefully tailored to the constantly changing situation due to proximity to the conflict zone and the unpredictability of the situation caused by the pandemic. Though quite a number of publications recently have reflected on conducting educational and empirical research during the Covid-19

pandemic (Moran & Caetano, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2020) most of our work took place before these tools became available and covered a range of issues that we also had to address in a relatively short period of time and by working remotely.

Finding a sense of “new selves” in contemporary Ukraine before the outbreak of the recent military actions meant more than just re-allocation of school and home; it also meant reconsidering historical and cultural legacies. This included allegiances to the Ukrainian, Russian, or mixed languages which became a part of the post-migration identity building for various social and professional groups (Oleksiyenko et al., 2021) and made an impact on their views about the future.

Our initial analysis of the qualitative narratives demonstrates that the young IDPs who participated in the study had quickly integrated in the school system and though their families had to move from one rented flat to another, they preferred to stay in the same school to moving to a new one. Successful integration in education was an important motivation for children when they arrived in Kharkiv in 2014, to thrive academically, making plans for further education in Kharkiv and, for some, abroad (Fel et al., 2020). The difference between the schools, especially in some subjects and the quality of teaching, was acknowledged by the adolescents in their narratives. Even those who were not sure whether they would move back to the places from where they had to move reflected on the fact that Kharkiv’s choice of Universities is a better place to be as compared to Donbas.

Due to the similarity of cultural and economic conditions in the Donbas area to the other parts of Ukraine and the neighbouring countries, and also families and friendship ties, but most significantly due to fluency in the Russian language and knowledge of the Ukrainian language, the IDPs seemed relatively settled in their post-migration environments. They had started to establish ties and relationships among locals as they were able to communicate and access education and their families found work. However, this seemingly quick “integration” into new places did not diminish the impact of previous traumatic experiences with constant reminders of their relative instability and loss, likely exacerbated by the current social stressors of the pandemic and escalating conflict. Whilst the cultural links between the IDPs’ former and present place were strong, their histories and memories were markedly different. The main difference laid in the changed national narrative between the two places. Our participants highlighted the main differences between then and now, there and here, while reflecting on their schooling experiences in both places: back in the home towns and in the new places of residence (new home city).

One of the recent studies on the predictors of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among displaced individuals was that the place of residence — living in a city — proved to be correlated with lower PTSD (Fel et al., 2020). Participants in our study had been living in the second largest city of Ukraine but were often from much smaller places in Donbas. Although their new residence offered more opportunities for them in terms of quality of education, wider prospects for continuation of education in Kharkiv universities and also abroad, some recognised the difficult aspects of living a big city.

The outbreak of the new military actions in February 2022 has highlighted the importance of more systematic understandings of the processes/mechanisms of the transformation of young migrants and internally displaced families’ cultural identities. The IDPs in our study had already experienced multiple traumas and we can only speculate on the further effects of the current conflict.

What our study found is that the process of adaptation to the new post-migration location is lengthy and does not stop with settling in a new home, new school, or making new friends. This is especially difficult when the adolescents have to constantly re-assess their sense of belonging to the new place from the perspective of their cultural heritage (mother tongue and titular nation language, family background and new formal identity building, emotional attachment to their old “home” and growing attachment to the new places) and new developing identities. The important role of local schools is difficult to overestimate. Local schools are a potentially stabilising factor and provide a sense of educational direction for those who see the advantages of the place for further education. For those who plan to move on, the quality of teaching, and especially of English, broadens their horizons of the future outside of the country (Wright, 2000).

Families play a very important role in supporting young people in providing them with opportunities to continue education and promoting their well-being. An analysis of the family role is beyond the scope of this paper. Like many younger populations, these IDPs were generally more concerned about how Covid-19 might affect their family and loved ones than they were about catching it themselves.

However, the process of developing the new self (Oleksiyenko et al., 2021) is not a linear process and takes the adolescents IDPs through the process of “self-conscious avoidance of ethnically or nationally sensitive issues” (Brubaker et al., 2006, p. 307) by either communicating with those who share their views or associating with those who represent the dominant national narrative. These tensions in cultural identity and belonging play a critical role in these young people’s developing identities within their changing social situations.

## Notes

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2. Oblast is an administrative unit in the former Soviet countries, including Ukraine.
3. Co-I L Nurse led the development and implementation of the online biographical interviews in the project, provided training for the local researchers, conducted interviews, transcribed and coded interviews.

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