

SPOTLIGHT

The difficulties of counting IDPs in **UKRAINE**



The conflict in Ukraine between the government and pro-Russia separatists in the eastern regions of Luhansk and Donetsk began in 2014 and remains unresolved, despite the Minsk I and II agreements signed in 2014 and 2015. The agreements provided for an immediate ceasefire and aimed to pave the way for the gradual return of the disputed territories to Ukrainian control, but fighting and shelling along the contact line continues to cause loss of life, displacement and damage to civilian infrastructure.

The Ukrainian government's policies and frameworks to guide its response to displacement acknowledge the protracted nature of the phenomenon and demonstrate its willingness to address it. Its most recent initiative was the adoption on 15 November of a strategy to integrate IDPs and facilitate durable solutions.²³⁵ Significant gaps remain, however, in the way the government defines, registers and subsequently responds to IDPs and their needs.

The Ministry of Social Policy (MoSP) currently has a national database of nearly 1.5 million IDPs, but the highly bureaucratic registration process means that the figure is likely to be an underestimate for some areas of the country, particularly those where IDPs' financial situation is less acute and they may feel that the scant state benefits they would receive by registering are not worth the time and effort.²³⁶ That said, the fact that registration determines IDPs' social benefits means it is likely to be an overestimate elsewhere, particularly in non-government controlled areas (NGCAs), where registering as an IDP is the only way to ensure people continue to receive what is rightfully theirs as Ukrainian citizens.

Given these difficulties, OCHA has made its own calculations for its humanitarian needs overview. It was able to estimate the number of IDPs in the national database living "more permanently in government-controlled areas" separate from those in NGCAs. This was done because it is unclear whether the latter are indeed IDPs or simply residents who had registered to access social benefits.²³⁷ OCHA identified 760,000 IDPs as living in government-controlled areas, a figure which it rounded up to 800,000 to account for those who are unregistered. According to various surveys, this applies to between five and nine per cent of the country's IDPs.²³⁸

The number of IDPs in NGCAs remains unknown. The de-facto authorities there have severely restricted humanitarian access, making it impossible to gauge the scale of displacement. The fact, however, that around 1.2 million residents a month crossed into government-controlled areas in 2017 to obtain personal documentation and pension payments, access medical care, education, food and other supplies or maintain social ties is an indication of how dire their situation is.²³⁹

There have been no accurate profiling exercises carried out for IDPs, which makes it difficult to respond appropriately to their assistance and protection needs, or to develop strategies for durable solutions. It is clear, however, that those directly affected by the conflict, primarily those who live along the contact line, remain highly vulnerable and are in need of emergency assistance including shelter, food and non-food items. Those living in protracted displacement in government-controlled areas away from the contact line would benefit from early-recovery and recovery assistance such as income-generating activities.