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Representations of Donbass Displacement in Russian and Ukrainian Governmental Media

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine has displaced at least 3 million people, an issue largely absent from the international media. The largest numbers of displaced people from the Donbass region have fled either westward to government-controlled areas in Ukraine, or across the border to Russia. My research looks at representations of these displaced people in the Russian government newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta and the corresponding Ukrainian publication Uryadovy Kuryer. It would seem like an obvious assumption that the possibility of instrumentalising displacement for foreign policy goals is attractive especially for Russia, which has been accused by the international community of inciting the conflict in the first place. There is positive PR potential for effectively managing displacement for both countries, which each could claim the rightful role of representing the interests of Donbass residents by displaying a positive attitude toward the displaced people. However, representations of involuntary migrants in public discourse has been far from uniformly positive, and managing the displacement has run into problems in both Ukraine and Russia.

The research highlights the connections between the (nation) state and displacement in general. At the very least, dealing with displacement is a task that befalls the states receiving displaced people, as states are obliged by the international charters they have signed. Displacement and states are also connected at a much deeper level, however. Scholarly discussion on forced migration suggests that displaced people, instead of being essentially marginal to states, as they are often portrayed, in fact occupy a central place in relation to the state. That is, refugeeness and (and displacement in general) makes visible the silent assumptions about citizenship and nation state. What kind of assumptions become evident through the refugee/IDP representations? What kind of identities are created with the narratives? Are there differences in how Russian and Ukrainian media represent the displaced? What might cause these differences?

Analysis of the newspaper representations shows that the narratives on displacement are connected to nation building ideologies in both Ukraine and Russia, but in very different ways. While Uryadovy Kuryer moves from emphasising the need for national unity in the face of adversity to demonising “fake IDPs” and equating them with “terrorists”, Rossiiskaya Gazeta carefully avoids drawing any kind of division lines between people. Instead, Rossiiskaya Gazeta uses the example of involuntary migrants to emphasise Russian state capacity. The political frontier between Ukrainians and Russians is never drawn in ethnic or nationalist terms in Russia, but between political loyalties. In both papers, the ethnicity of the forced migrants is not important, but who they support is. Where they fled matters the most.