



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Ukraine

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Demonstrations in late 2013 against the government of Viktor Fedorovych Yanukovych, in response to his decision to abandon a planned agreement with the EU, intensified in early 2014 when hundreds were killed or injured in violent clashes between protesters and authorities before Yanukovych was removed from office on 21 February. Shortly afterwards, as an interim government was formed in Kiev, pro-Russian militias seized control of the Crimean parliament building with the stated intention of declaring independence from Ukraine. Following a controversial referendum on 16 March that was condemned by international observers as neither free nor fair, Crimea was formally annexed by Russia – a situation enforced by the growing presence of Russian troops.

From April, Russia had gained control over much of the region and began establishing state institutions, while state buildings were then seized by armed rebels in the provinces of Donetsk and Luganska in eastern Ukraine. In response, the Ukrainian government deployed soldiers to these areas, leading to direct conflict with separatist forces in June that, despite multiple attempts to reach a ceasefire, continued throughout 2014 and into 2015. As of April 2015, parts of Luganska and Donetsk remain under separatist control. According to UN estimates, the conflict had led to around 6,000 people killed and another 15,000 injured between April 2014 and the end of February 2015. The conflict also triggered a wave of internal displacement amid increasing insecurity, with hundreds of thousands of civilians – including many from ethnic or religious minorities – affected.

Though the uprising against the Yanukovych government was not motivated primarily by ethnic concerns, the subsequent annexation of Crimea and the separatist seizure of territory in eastern Ukraine with suspected Russian involvement has deepened existing political divisions in the country that correlate with ethnicity. Troublingly, one of the first acts of the interim government in February 2014 was the voting in of a controversial amendment to 2012 legislation on minority languages, which recognized Russian as a second official language in some areas of Ukraine. Its annulment could have deepened the tensions between Russian speakers and other linguistic minorities in the country. However, the move provoked criticism from rights activists and the recently appointed president of the interim government, Aleksandr Turchinov, subsequently announced that it would not be implemented.

Another legislative development related to minority and indigenous peoples' rights, this one positive, was the amendment of Ukraine's existing anti-discrimination laws in May. The revisions added new definitions, strengthened protections for victims and expanded the powers of the Ukraine's Commissioner for Human Rights. However, human rights defenders have noted significant problems with implementation and stressed the importance of practical support, such as free legal assistance for victims and training for law enforcement agencies, to reduce hate crimes and other forms of discrimination.

The need for adequate protection is especially acute for Ukraine's growing population of IDPs, many of them from minority or indigenous communities. Until recently a migration hub due to its location between the EU and Russia, Ukraine now faces mass internal displacement as a result of the conflict. As of April 2015, the country had close to 1.3 million IDPs concentrated largely in the eastern provinces. Women and children constitute the majority of IDPs as men tend to stay home, either for work-related reasons or in an attempt to protect family property. One of the most pressing issues is the integration of IDPs in new communities, particularly for minorities, who often face disproportionate challenges during displacement. Very few have been able to find jobs since their displacement, with most relying on savings, family assistance or limited social benefits to survive. Many cannot even search for jobs as they have to take care of small children, pensioners or disabled persons.

Housing is another area where IDPs have experienced difficulties. As the state did not have emergency infrastructure in place to accommodate displaced civilians from the conflict zone, resettlement has been ad hoc and varied according to the policies of the regional or local authorities. As a result, a large proportion have been housed in dilapidated sanatoriums, dormitories, summer camps and other forms of sub-standard shelter. These facilities are often located in isolated locations outside urban areas, which complicates the search for employment and creates further obstacles for IDPs attempting to integrate into new communities. At present, one of the best responses to the crisis has come from authorities in Khersonska province, next to Crimea, where 18,000 free land plots were granted to Crimean Tatars for resettlement. By contrast, Roma – already one of the most discriminated against groups in the country before the conflict began – have reported experiencing particular difficulties in accessing housing from local authorities due to discrimination.

Displaced Roma from eastern Ukraine face additional hurdles as, according to NGOs working with community members, more than half of them have never had birth or identity documentation, meaning they cannot be registered as IDPs or gain access to social welfare. Furthermore, from the first stages of the conflict, ethnically motivated violence against the community appears to have escalated. In April 2014, a joint statement by the European Roma Rights Centre and other rights organizations highlighted the rising levels of violence directed against Roma. This included, among other incidents, an attack on a Roma community earlier in the month in Sloviansk, with residents beaten and their homes looted. Following the attack, Roma residents fled the city. At the end of April, a Roma family's house in Cherkassy was set on fire after weeks of intimidation from locals, with the police reportedly failing to intervene to protect the victims.

The conflict also had a negative impact on the lives of religious minorities. In Donbas, the active efforts of Protestant pastors to provide shelter to IDPs, distribute humanitarian assistance and take civilians out of the zone of conflict led to frequent intimidation, theft and violence from separatists. After parts of eastern Ukraine fell under separatist control, many churches and religious facilities, particularly those belonging to evangelical Christian sects, were expropriated and community members forced to leave their possessions.

Much of the conflict has been concentrated in urban areas such as Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as other smaller cities in the eastern conflict zones, with rising casualties among civilians and

widespread damage to urban infrastructure. According to Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) research, the vast majority of IDPs have come from urban or semi-urban areas. Those minorities still living in separatist-held areas face new challenges in an increasingly nationalistic climate. In Donetsk, for instance, where until recently the population included a diverse mix of Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Tatars, Turks and foreign students, there have been accounts of increased intolerance and hate speech. African nationals, who even before the conflict faced frequent discrimination, have reportedly been particularly exposed to verbal abuse. Religious minorities, too, have been exposed to threats and intimidation, particularly people following non-Russian Orthodox forms of Christianity, with places of worship and other buildings seized from their communities by *[Refworld note: this sentence unfinished in original MRG pdf]*

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