Analysing the local governance of internal displacement: an emerging (local) social contract in eastern Ukraine since 2014

MELISSA WEIHMAYER [iD]

Melissa Weihmayer is a PhD candidate at the London School of Economics, Department of Geography and Environment, UK; a PhD Studentship holder at the International Inequalities Institute; and Research Affiliate at the Internal Displacement Research Programme.

Address: The London School of Economics and Political Science – Geography and Environment, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK; email: m.f.weihmayer@lse.ac.uk

ABSTRACT   There is growing recognition of the challenges faced by internally displaced people as well as the potential for subnational actors to contribute to durable solutions. Despite this, we know little about local government responses, both in theory and practice. This paper draws on governance theories, practitioner experience and secondary literature to analyse the governance context, processes and interactions that shape the experience of internal displacement in eastern Ukraine between 2014 and 2022. It argues that nascent relationships built between internally displaced people and local governments in eastern Ukraine reveal the possibility of bottom-up state-led responses. The paper intervenes in debates around rebuilding a "social contract" as a mechanism for resolving displacement, demonstrating why attention must be paid to how this occurs at local levels in places of refuge.

KEYWORDS   governance processes / internal displacement / local governance / local government / social contract / Ukraine / Ukrainian IDPs / urban displacement

I.   INTRODUCTION

On account of their direct contact with IDPs, and their immediate role in the provision of local services, and formulation of local development strategies, local authorities are often the best placed to identify and assist IDPs outside camps living in their communities.[1]

1. United Nations General Assembly (2011), page 15.

As early as 2011, a Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons described the unique potential of local governments in responses to internal displacement, especially for assisting internally displaced people (IDPs) who "self-settle" outside of camps. Yet over a decade later, a tendency to overlook this level of government persists.

While there is a lack of attention to internal displacement in general within both research[2] and policy debates,[3] this is especially true with regard to the role of local governments and their responses to the needs of those internally displaced living within their jurisdictions. This may be explained by a lack of normative guidance on this issue. The 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, for example, affirm the primary

2. Ferris and Kerwin (2023); Cantor and Woolley (2020); Zetter (2019); McAdam (2018); Polzer and Hammond (2008).

3. Zeender and Yarnell (2020).

duty and responsibility for the protection of IDPs lies with *"national authorities"*.[4] Though other *"competent authorities"* are called upon to ensure that services are provided to enable IDPs to enjoy at a minimum an adequate standard of living,[5] this still assumes that decision-making rests with the national level, and other roles remain underdefined.

There is growing recognition of the importance of the local governance of internal displacement, however. Three points raised in the landmark 2023 report of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement demonstrate this: the centrality of nationally owned responses, the call for *"whole-of-government"* approaches and the recognition of the role of municipal actors in service provision.[6] Indeed, the report argues that the requirement for *"effective Government action"* to resolve internal displacement stems from the presumption that citizenship and residency imply a relationship with government at all levels. It states that:

> . . . recogniz[ed] as citizens and residents of a country, IDPs should be the responsibility of all parts of government, from the highest levels of political leadership to local and city authorities and across all relevant ministries.[7]

I respond to this call for a "whole-of-government" approach by presenting a more nuanced understanding of the state and its responsibility, recognizing that displacement is always experienced in locally specific ways.[8] I acknowledge the diverse networks of civil society, private sector, regional, national and international actors engaged in local-level decision-making alongside the local state. Whether and how local governments play a role within these networks becomes an empirical question. Here I ask: how do state responses to internal displacement emerge at the local level?

To address this question, I analyse the governance context, processes and interactions within internal displacement responses in Ukraine. I focus on the under-researched period between 2014 and 2022, before the so-called *"full-scale Russian invasion"*.[9] Ukraine is relevant as an example of a decentralizing unitary state facing unprecedented levels of conflict-induced internal displacement. The political will of local actors makes emergent responses in the eastern Donbas region pre-2022 a "most likely" case (as explained in Section IV of this paper) of local government intervention, yet significant structural challenges remained. This case encapsulates a "bottom-up process" of internal displacement response.

Conceptually, this paper advances two claims: first, if we conceive of the "local governance of internal displacement" as the vehicle through which IDPs can exercise their rights and obligations, among other activities, this must start from governance reforms that build a formal relationship between displaced populations and their local (not just central) state. Second, I propose a local social contract as the product of a gradual process towards developing trust in state institutions at local levels, which can be scaled up for greater trust overall. In the following section I explain how local governments feature in existing literature on internal displacement. After justifying the case study approach and methods, I outline three salient governance processes within Ukraine's response: voting reforms, collaborative data collection to inform response

decisions, and the development of participatory forums. These three processes show different ways that a relationship between IDPs and their local governments was being created, negotiated and potentially reconfigured prior to 2022. These different ways include enabling access to local politics, analysing disparities between displaced and non-displaced residents, and creating formal platforms for civic engagement; each contribute to making IDPs more "visible" to their local state. I explain how these relate to building a social contract at the local level. I conclude by discussing the implications of bottom-up responses.

II. OVERLOOKED LOCAL GOVERNMENT

a. Local government within internal displacement research

10. UNHCR (2019a).

11. Earle et al. (2020); Cotroneo (2017); Earle (2016); Landau (2014); Crisp et al. (2012); Lyytinen (2009); Fielden (2008).

12. Anzellini and Leduc (2020); Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2020); Cotroneo (2017).

13. Crisp et al. (2012); Alcanya and Al-Murani (2016).

14. Brun (2003) in Sri Lanka; Ibáñez and Velásquez (2008); Vidal et al. (2013) in Colombia; Kamungi (2013) in Kenya; Funke (2022) in Georgia.

15. Ibáñez and Velásquez (2008).

16. Vidal et al. (2013).

17. Weihmayer (2023).

18. Funke (2022).

19. A durable solution concretely refers to three options for settlement after a person is displaced: integrating locally, resettling elsewhere in the country, or returning to one's place of origin. However, these options have been argued to imperfectly reflect the wide spectrum of settlement patterns experienced by those internally displaced (see for example Brun and Fábos, 2017; Tete, 2009; Long, 2014). IDPs are said to have "reached a durable solution" if they *"no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement"* (Inter-agency Standing Committee, 2010, page 5).

20. Funke (2022), page 178.

With the realization that roughly two-thirds of those internally displaced by conflict and violence reside in cities,[10] there is a nascent discussion on internal displacement in urban areas.[11] This literature recognizes the challenges in understanding urban displacement, including its scale and its consequences, and emphasizes disappointment with the state of the evidence, which has only been partially rectified by reports shedding new light on this issue.[12] It also reflects on the need for international humanitarian actors to shift their approaches to working in cities with complex existing governance structures. But though this literature advocates for developing partnerships with local authorities,[13] there are few empirical examples investigating their specific role within responses or what incentivizes them to engage on issues of internal displacement.

The studies that do exist on local government responses to internal displacement raise significant concerns over confusion in their roles and responsibilities.[14] Two contexts most transferrable to the Ukrainian case due to their middle-income status and unitary but partially decentralized and democratic structures are Colombia and Georgia. In Colombia, though all levels of government were given responsibility for supporting people displaced by its internal armed conflict in its landmark legislation in 1997, a minimum budget allocation for humanitarian assistance and services to IDPs was never defined. Any budget reserved for IDPs was therefore seen as funding taken away from other vulnerable populations.[15] Hence responses to displacement were politically unfavourable, especially in poorer municipalities.[16] This gradually changed as the central government offered more municipal autonomy in exchange for clear reporting processes and the potential for capacity-building and joint-funding opportunities.[17] Georgia faced similar budget restrictions that limited support for IDP integration at local levels. Though a strong national law protecting IDPs was issued in 1996, its focus on returning those IDPs to their places of origin meant that local government interventions were directed towards implementing temporary fixes, such as small pots of emergency cash assistance and allowing the building of new settlements with limited infrastructure, far from jobs.[18] Funke argued that the lack of a clear role and dedicated funding for what is now often referred to as *"support for durable solutions"*[19] for IDPs relegated municipal actors in Georgia to a minor supporting role.[20]

The confusion around roles and responsibilities for municipal actors, however, is not unique to internal displacement responses, as reflected

in literature describing multi-faceted challenges for local governments. These challenges include limitations on their autonomy;[21] often severe financial constraints from a lack of local revenue and obstacles to fiscal reforms;[22] political challenges such as local conflict or opposition to central government parties;[23] managing often complex relations with other municipalities and civil society actors;[24] and capacity concerns.[25]

Decentralization may bring more fiscal, administrative and/or political autonomy to local governments, but the benefits to local democracy are mixed, in particular during and after conflict.[26] Though local governments may be given a strong role in peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery, the elite capture of local budgets and powers[27] and the reaffirmation of strong central government control are also likely outcomes. Jackson argues that positive outcomes depend on the *"politics of local government and the political framework in which it operates, including the dynamics of the conflict itself"*.[28] In this way, peacebuilding literature cautions us not to take an overly rosy view of local government and what constitutes the "local", and instead to critically examine local governments' diverse roles across and within countries.[29]

b.   Justifying outside intervention

Repeated scholarly discussion of local government failures generally supports an argument for international actors to intervene[30] rather than building local capacity or supporting state-led responses. National state-led responses to internal displacement are indeed hampered by structural issues around inadequate funding and, related to that, a general lack of capacity to either plan or implement programmes and services for IDPs to the levels expected by international legal frameworks. Literature on internal displacement posits international organizations and NGOs as the capacity-building force for national authorities, with the presumption that capacity will then trickle down to local levels through comprehensive national-level laws and policy initiatives.[31]

In addition to low capacity, insufficient "political will" is frequently raised as a barrier to both the adoption of laws and policies as well as their implementation.[32] But its theorization remains superficial,[33] especially at local levels.[34] Earle et al. propose cultural and social as well as political factors to be significant: *"Where there is a lack of or limited political will to recognize IDPs as full citizens, this may be a result of entrenched cultural attitudes, misconceptions, misinformation, or the politicization of internal displacement."*[35] Additionally, the lack of capacity to generate political will is overlooked. Viewing political will and capacity as mutually constituted is more productive.[36] But if we assume that governments either lack the capacity (they cannot respond) or lack the political will (they can but choose not to respond), then the only solution to designing any response that supports IDPs becomes outside intervention. The factors resulting in a tendency towards outside intervention at the local level are indeed evident at all levels of the state.

c.   Bringing in a differentiated state

Investigating the role of local governments complicates notions of the state. There is growing recognition that our understanding of "states" needs to

21. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and United Nations University – Centre for Policy Research (OECD/UNU-CPR) (2024).

22. United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) (2015).

23. Khalaf (2015); Vidal et al. (2013); Lowndes and Polat (2022).

24. Ataç et al. (2020).

25. Weihmayer (2024).

26. Jackson (2016).

27. Tahir (2023).

28. Jackson (2016), page 749.

29. MacGinty (2011).

30. Carr (2009).

31. See for example Nicolau and Pagot (2018); Adeola and Orchard (2020).

32. de Aquino Barbosa Magalhães et al. (2020).

33. Crisp (2018).

34. Earle et al. (2020).

35. Earle et al. (2020), pages 499–500.

36. Nicolau (2022); OECD (2019).

37. Gill (2010).

38. Gill (2010), page 627.

be more nuanced in relation to displacement debates,[37] acknowledging especially its multi-layered governance systems. Gill demonstrates that asylum and refugee research tends to essentialize the state such that it is seen to be a separate entity from the social, even, as Gill puts it, *"standing apart from society and acting upon it from a distance"*.[38] This treatment of the state presents it as a homogeneous entity with a unified set of interests. It fails to account for the agency of individuals, such as mayors or other elected officials, or even the influence of networks of actors like political parties and transnational organizations. Gill argues that the reifications of the state preclude critical questions on state behaviour as certain practices are assumed to be state driven rather than socially driven in particular ways. This is countered by rich political geography discussions that refute fixed definitions of the state because of the dynamic social forces constantly reshaping it.

39. Draper (2023).

Importantly, internal displacement scholarship has yet to embrace this more nuanced view of the state. For example, political theory literature makes a normative case that IDPs are owed support because, as with refugees' relationship to their country of origin, IDPs have experienced a rupture in their relationship with their state.[39] Though useful as a conceptualization of displacement, this member–state relationship remains simplistic. It reifies the state as a monolith and does not account for the complexity of the governance processes involved in establishing and undertaking responsibility for the protection of IDPs at different levels of government and in particular locations.

40. Bevir (2011), page 457.
41. See for example Nicolau (2022).

Indeed, the process of what Bevir refers to as *"opening the black box of the state"*[40] goes beyond questions of how national laws and policies domesticate international legal frameworks.[41] It considers different subnational laws and policies, as well as how these are or are not implemented in practice. Questioning networks of state actors becomes relevant here, as well as relationships between state actors and civil society at different levels. Drawing on international relations scholarship, Funke for example brings in the concept of *"organized anarchies"*, highlighting that responses to internal displacement in Georgia *"do not consist of one unitary, rational actor"*.[42] This complexity and fragmentation of responsibility leads to a situation in which state actors at all levels are not fully aware of the broader problems that affect their response, do not know what they seek to accomplish, and therefore make decisions based on preferences and individual experience (and limited data-gathering resources), which do not fully align between levels. For more grounded scholarship on state behaviour within internal displacement responses, I propose studying the governance context, processes and interactions that manifest in the inclusion or exclusion of IDPs.

42. Funke (2022), page 65, based on Cohen et al. (1972) and Kingdon (1984).

III.   ANALYSING LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Based on a more general definition of local governance from the UN Development Programme, I understand the local governance of internal displacement to encompass the *"combined set of institutions, systems and processes at the subnational level"* through which people internally displaced can *"articulate their interests and needs, mediate their differences and exercise their rights and obligations"*.[43] Local governance aims for the development or restoration of a relationship between citizens and

43. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2016), page 3.

institutional environments in places of refuge. Note that this definition does not necessarily assume that the exercise of rights and obligations must be undertaken through state institutions, leaving open the role for civil society to act as service providers and rights-enablers.

Other governance concepts emphasize different aspects of these relationships. "Multilevel governance" stresses the interactions between nested levels of government and between government and a wide range of non-government actors that enable or hinder joint decision-making in the public sphere.[44] It attunes us to the interdependencies but also the contestations between different networks engaged in policymaking, including civil society and the private sector. For example, Ukraine's post-2022 reconstruction and recovery planning represents a complex web of multilevel governance that reveals a strengthening central authority.[45] The term "hybrid governance" focuses more on the ways in which governance in a conflict or post-conflict context is managed and constantly reshaped by a dynamic set of actors. These actors span from local to international levels and differ in how they enable or subvert a state of *"liberal peace"*.[46] Khalaf's study on non-government-controlled areas in Syria, for example, demonstrates the importance of nuancing our understandings of civil society in cases where the state is absent, as the diversity of this sector is often accompanied by many competing political agendas.[47] In Khalaf's case, hybrid governance manifests as potential misalignment between local-level governance priorities and those imposed by international actors. While this resembles what Scholten calls a *"decoupled"* mode of multilevel governance,[48] the fragility of peace and the disruption to most formal governance structures necessitate a different concept.[49] Ideas from both hybrid and multilevel governance inspire my analysis. However, local governance remains most applicable because I prioritize interactions between IDPs, civil society and local government and I focus on places of refuge that are not experiencing the massive flux of live conflict (at least during the period of study) in a context with heavily bureaucratic structures.[50]

The aim of studying the local governance of internal displacement is to reveal both the governance issues affecting the entire population and those affecting responses to internal displacement specifically, and ultimately how both of these affect IDPs. To study this empirically, I propose distinguishing between the governance context, the governance processes and the governance interactions affecting the response to and experience of internal displacement. Within this delineation I am particularly interested in the role that local governments play (or not) among the many actors that could influence outcomes for IDPs.

First, understanding the overall *governance context* within which displacement responses emerge (or not) assumes that some responses to internal displacement are impeded not by resource constraints and capacity alone but by wider governance challenges at different levels of government that affect all policy areas. Investigating the governance context implies engagement with public administration, spatial planning and urban politics literature in order to outline the legislative landscape, bureaucratic practices and institutional cultures specific to that geographic region. For example, some contexts are characterized by more formal, hierarchical institutional environments while others are less formal or leave more discretion to local levels.

44. Caponio and Jones-Correa (2018); Scholten (2013); Marks and Hooghe (2004).

45. Udovyk et al. (2023), page 21.

46. MacGinty (2011). This concept helps to "*more easily recognise the agency and diversity of local actors in peace and conflict situations*" (page 10).

47. Khalaf (2015).

48. Scholten (2013).

49. Brown and Ahmed (2016) provide another useful example from Karachi, Pakistan in which local government dissolved, exacerbating conflict dynamics. This work suggests that formal local governance structures serve an important role in maintaining peace in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

50. Processes of hybridization likely would be relevant for studying practices of local governance in Ukraine's non-government-controlled areas, now transformed into "occupied territories". Researchers cannot currently access these areas.

Second, conducting an in-depth investigation of the specific *governance processes* reveals how decisions on the response are made, paying attention to the actors involved in the process. This attunes us to the voice that displaced people have within decision-making in their places of refuge.

Finally, analyses of processes are complemented by a focus on *governance interactions*, or the experience of IDPs in navigating this multifaceted category and citizenship rights. This focus could reveal how everyday encounters with bureaucracy affect the IDP experience. Bulakh,[51] for instance, describes how Ukrainian IDPs face bureaucratic hurdles that others do not face when receiving state pensions. In this way the IDP category, in Brun's words, *"develops particular local meanings at different locations and commonly also itself becomes a social category and identity"* that can support integration or amplify alienation depending on the context.[52]

Both governance processes and interactions provide a more holistic picture of what produces a relationship between IDPs and their local state: what I refer to in this article as the building of a local social contract. Governance interactions additionally reveal the extent to which IDPs feel a sense of social and cultural belonging in their new place of residence (or not). Scholars of the displacement situation in Ukraine, for example, have pointed to this operating differently for different groups of IDPs, creating *"hierarchies of belonging"*.[53] Important here is the agency and capacities of those internally displaced. As Sereda explains, *"More needs to be known about the conscious and productive efforts of displaced people to rebuild their lives in the new receiving communities"* including their inclusion in civil society networks.[54] Because of the valuable work of Sereda and others on this issue in the Ukrainian context both before and after 2022,[55] I wish to avoid duplicating these efforts and instead build from them. I therefore focus on the governance context and processes within the scope of this paper.

IV. CASE AND METHODS

The conflict in Ukraine has been ongoing since early 2014, when "separatists" claimed territory in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region to establish the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, just months after the occupation of Crimea by Russia. Eight years later, 24 February 2022 marks the date that Russia announced a "special military operation" and initiated ground invasions from various fronts. Studying the effects of Russian aggression on Ukraine before the escalation brought by this second invasion is important for a variety of reasons.[56] The following two reasons are most salient here: first, despite the high levels of displacement between 2014 and 2022, the government had few resources for dealing with it. In addition to over 43,000 deaths recorded by 2019,[57] the Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy figures cited 1.8 million officially registered IDPs at its highest point in 2016.[58] Even with these staggering figures, attention on the conflict was wavering at best: it was referred to as a *"forgotten crisis"* and a *"neglected crisis on Europe's doorstep"*.[59] This period therefore demonstrates how a local governance of internal displacement emerged despite scant resources and a weak central government response.[60] Second, the IDP policies developed after 2014 created the foundation for the response to internal displacement that is still in place today, with nearly 5.1 million

51. Bulakh (2020).

52. Brun (2003), page 380.

53. Sereda (2020); Sasse and Lackner (2018, 2020).

54. Sereda (2023), page 32.

55. Sereda (2023); Bulakh (2020); Lazarenko (2019); Krakhmalova (2019).

56. Knott (2023); Hendl et al. (2024).

57. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) (2019).

58. This is expected to be an underestimate (Sasse, 2020).

59. Bulakh (2020) referencing Stylianides (2016) and Bociurkiw (2017).

60. Council of Europe (2016), page 12.

people estimated to have been internally displaced in May 2023, down to 3.7 million by December 2023.[61] Hence analysing emerging processes of (local) governance of internal displacement within eastern Ukraine before 2022 provides important lessons for scaling up responses to conflict-induced internal displacement in decentralizing unitary states.

While I was a practitioner visiting eastern Ukraine in 2019, local humanitarian and UN partners often referred to the situation between 2014 and 2022 as a "frozen conflict", appropriating assumptions in Western foreign policy that did not foresee the escalation caused by the second Russian invasion.[62] This discursive framing resulted in growing fatigue with continued displacement but also a lack of urgency for dramatic reforms to the national policies in support of IDPs. Though the government passed a national law for IDPs by October 2014, which formally established "internally displaced person"[63] as a status in Ukraine, amendments were needed in the following years to align the law with international legal frameworks and develop action plans to support its smooth implementation.[64] Implementation included the establishment of a new government ministry, the Ministry of Temporarily Occupied Territories and Internally Displaced Persons,[65] which struggled with insufficient funding and political voice within national-level debates.[66] In 2018, the government developed a *National Strategy and Action Plan for the Integration of IDPs and Implementation of Durable Solutions to Internal Displacement*. But this only remained valid until 2020, leading to significant uncertainty around the future of the Strategy. The Regional IDP Action Plan in the Luhansk *oblast* (province, located in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine), for example, was not adopted until June 2019 and was already set to expire in 2020.[67] There was significant variation in the integration programmes available to IDPs in different oblasts.[68] Some municipal and regional governments let local action plans lapse while awaiting new guidance from the national level on priorities and benchmarks, showing the expectation of local levels that central government would steer the response. The new National Strategy was finally released by October 2021.[69]

Despite the languid policy landscape, the work of local and regional governments in eastern Ukraine represents a "most likely" scenario for the development of IDP responses at the local level. I argue that this is because support for IDPs was strong among local government officials, demonstrating high levels of political will. By "most likely" I mean that the conditions are favourable for a certain outcome to occur, and if the phenomenon does not manifest here, then we can conclude that it would likely not manifest in similar contexts with these conditions. Rather than aiming for a representative sample of a phenomenon, "small-n case study" research delves deeply into an instance of a phenomenon to assess its transferability to a wider universe of similar cases.[70] Examples of the "most likely" approach to selecting a small-n case has been applied to migration contexts.[71] It is not necessarily the scale of displacement that drives this research – at the time, the top displacement-producing country was Syria with 6.1 million people internally displaced[72] – but rather the complexity of the governance structures that makes the local governance of internal displacement in eastern Ukraine a useful small-n case to, in Yin's words, *"shed empirical light on some theoretical concepts or principles"*[73] of local governance.

Both in my professional experience and in policy reports, local governments demonstrated surprisingly strong support towards IDPs.

61. International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2023a, 2023b).

62. Coker (2023).

63. The common term used is *pereselentsi* or "relocated people" (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2016) but the official designation in Ukrainian is "внутрішньо переміщені особи".

64. Council of Europe (2016); Ferris et al. (2015).

65. This ministry was later renamed the Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine and restructured to be chaired by the Vice Prime Minister.

66. Van Metre et al. (2017), page 3.

67. Norwegian Refugee Council and Luhansk Regional State Administration (2020), page 5.

68. Norwegian Refugee Council (2021).

69. The National Strategy was updated to reflect the increased scale of the conflict and internal displacement in April 2023 (Cabinet Ministers of Ukraine, 2023).

70. Small (2009).

71. Bonjour (2011) asked why liberal states accept unwanted migration, arguing that if a "most likely" liberal social welfare state like the Netherlands transitions from a country of emigration to a country of immigration, then this is likely to happen in other European states as well.

72. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2020).

73. Yin (2018), page 92.

74. Krystalli (2023).

75. Council of Europe (2016), page 12.

76. Especially Mikheieva et al. (2023); Danish Refugee Council Ukraine (2021); Havryliuk (2022).

77. This is a collaborative process and methodology for data collection in displacement situations developed by practitioners (Joint IDP Profiling Service [JIPS], 2020; Chemaly et al., 2016; Jacobsen and Cardona, 2014; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2008).

78. Sonevytsky (2022) cited in Hendl et al. (2024).

My 2019 collaboration was the first time that I worked in a context of internal displacement in which the local government partners were mostly themselves displaced. This led them to speak during workshops and meetings from their own experiences or to recall challenges faced by relatives, reflecting a dual-role as *"victim-bureaucrats"*.[74] This extended beyond my own interactions, prompting a Council of Europe report to say, *"Many regional and local authorities in communities receiving IDPs have also demonstrated solidarity with IDPs and actively responded to their concerns, often doing so in the absence of adequate resources."*[75]

To develop this case study, I drew on my practitioner experience, facilitating workshops and conducting bilateral meetings with a variety of local actors. I combined this experience with a synthesis of grey literature and document analysis along with a more in-depth literature review. A review of research, reports and government plans on the response to internal displacement in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022 explains two elements: the opportunities and barriers that internally displaced populations faced while integrating into different parts of the country, and the nascent policies attempting to remedy these challenges.[76] I thematically analysed this literature, focusing on the role that local governments were playing within integration discussions. Broader academic literature on Ukraine's institutional reforms since 1991, moreover, helped me to situate local government activities within decentralization debates.

I embed three specific governance processes – voting reforms, data collection processes and participatory forums – into this case study because of their prominence within and around discussions held while I travelled to the displacement-affected eastern Ukrainian city of Severodonetsk in the Luhansk oblast over four weeks in 2019. As an Information Management Officer with the Joint IDP Profiling Service, I collaborated with the Severodonetsk field office of the international humanitarian NGO Norwegian Refugee Council to organize a series of bilateral meetings and workshops with a wide range of local partners, including various departments of the Luhansk Regional State Administration. My role was to lead discussions that would inform methodological decisions in the sampling approach and household survey design for a data collection exercise known as a "profiling of the displacement situation".[77] As I did not speak Russian or Ukrainian, I communicated with collaborators in English and relied on Norwegian Refugee Council partners for live translations during meetings and workshops. Though the majority of the workshop attendees were white and female like myself, I was perceived as an external technical actor from a "western" (and UN-affiliated) institutional context. Practically, this positionality afforded me access to some high-level meetings but limited my participation in informal discussions. Analytically, it risks *"epistemic imperialism"*,[78] which I partially mitigate through a deep reading of multidisciplinary Ukrainian scholarship.

V. LOCAL GOVERNANCE OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN EASTERN UKRAINE

This section outlines the governance context and three governance processes that demonstrate the emergence of a relationship at the local level. These processes made internal displacement visible to the local

state in particular ways, highlighting especially people's locally specific experiences and socioeconomic inequalities, while building foundations for political participation.

a. Governance context

Two aspects of Ukraine's governance context are especially relevant for understanding its displacement responses: decentralization and housing policy. Decentralization processes are not simply a backdrop: they interact with displacement responses and in some cases the conflicts that cause displacement.[79] Ukraine had been transforming away from a highly centralized state authority since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.[80] This transformation was seen as necessary, as the political and administrative structures in Ukraine were thought to be "out of step" with its strong regional identities.[81] Ukraine's government underwent political, administrative and fiscal decentralization reform in 2014 (around the same time as the first Russian invasion), which consolidated and reshaped municipalities. This was seen as one of the most successful areas of reform to date and was combined with regional development initiatives in the hopes that this would prevent other secession conflicts.[82] The decentralization process aimed to improve municipalities' capacity to provide basic services to their populations. Crucially, the reform granted municipalities the power to negotiate local budgets with their regional counterparts. Hence, not only did local budgets increase, the reforms also incentivized collaboration between local and regional administrations. According to Romanova and Umland, these reforms exceeded expectations in boosting local democracy and improving *"general resilience"*, internal cohesion and *"Europeanization of the Ukrainian State"*, giving the reforms geopolitical implications.[83] However, the reforms left rural municipalities especially with insufficient capacity and resources, and with some confusion regarding the division of responsibilities with the regional level. As Krawchenko notes, *"ongoing work is needed"*.[84]

The municipalities' dilemmas around the provision of shelter and housing for IDPs stem from a loss of social housing and a wider stagnant housing market.[85] The state played a leading role in the provision of housing under the Soviet regime. But the state's retrenchment from housing provision after 1991 through "giveaway mass privatization" meant a significant drop in its stock of social housing and a high owner-occupancy rate. This set the groundwork for a highly unequal housing market in which those unable to afford mortgages and those who had lost homes due to war are left behind financially and face insecurity as renters with few protections. Local governments have been left scrambling to implement emergency measures, such as housing people in temporary accommodation for indefinite periods. Instead of finding permanent solutions that support their integration,[86] IDPs struggled to pay high rents in places of refuge or resorted to poorly serviced collective shelters.[87] While the decentralization reforms brought greater autonomy, the broader housing challenges imposed severe limitations on local government planning and programming to support integration, hindering responses.[88]

79. See for example Steele and Schubiger (2018).

80. Tyminskyi (2022).

81. Krawchenko (2023).

82. Tyminskyi (2022); Rabinovych and Shelest (2020).

83. Romanova and Umland (2019).

84. Krawchenko (2023), page 5.

85. For an in-depth discussion, see Sukhomud and Shnaider (2023).

86. UNHCR (2019b); Norwegian Refugee Council (2021).

87. Sukhomud and Shnaider (2023).

88. Norwegian Refugee Council (2021).

b. Voting reform

National voting legislation has important local implications. Local governments are more likely to support newcomers given political and economic incentives to do so.[89] Excluding or including IDPs in local elections can be one mechanism influencing these incentives. In democratic contexts like Ukraine, this conceivably serves as a pathway to equal rights for IDPs in line with international principles. Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska and Palaguta argue that voting rights for IDPs go even beyond the general principle of equality before the law and political equality (equal opportunity to influence decision-making bodies). Indeed, if they are inclusive of national minorities and IDPs, elections can contribute to the process of *"national healing and restoring stability"* in conflict settings.[90]

In the case of Ukraine, participation in elections could only happen in the location where voters were officially registered. For IDPs who had left their electoral voting district, it meant not being able to participate fully in the location where they sought refuge. Special legislation needed to be passed before they were allowed to change their official voting residence to a temporary residence. Changing this permanent residence was, according to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, *"administratively extremely burdensome and in practical terms almost impossible"*.[91] This additional administrative burden is thought to have reduced the participation of IDPs in the 2014 parliamentary elections, though the actual number of IDPs who managed to vote is difficult to ascertain.

IDPs also faced an added complication. Their administrative place of residence while in displacement, where IDPs could, for example, access pensions and other government transfer payments, was linked to the place where they registered officially as an IDP. Because this location appeared on their IDP certificate, there were concerns raised that changing one's administrative place of residence could invalidate a person's IDP status.[92] Some people also chose not to register as an IDP in their first location of refuge in case they had to move again later. The administrative limitations of the IDP certificate were therefore seen to limit freedom of movement internally within Ukraine.[93] Though the processes for establishingR one's administrative place of residence and voting location were separate, the issues these both caused compounded challenges for IDPs.

The Council of Europe flagged the issue of IDP disenfranchisement during the 2015 and 2018 local elections, providing recommendations so that this issue could be rectified before the next round of local elections in 2020.[94] The reason this inability to vote locally causes such a problem for the local governance of internal displacement is not just that it marginalizes IDPs and contravenes international legal principles,[95] it also fails to provide local authorities with incentives and the practical tools to represent the interests of IDPs. Performing key local functions, such as managing housing policy, becomes difficult when they do not have accurate figures on how many people actually live in the area under their jurisdiction. A resolution passed in May 2020 finally rectified the issue of voter registration by making it easier to change one's address. UNHCR argues that this reform not only benefits IDPs but represents *"an important reform for an increasingly mobile population"*.[96] Though participation in local elections does not necessarily mean that local governments will develop policies and programmes benefiting IDPs, it can be considered a prerequisite for more locally owned responses to internal displacement. The ability to vote also does not always translate to high voter turnout, which indeed may be the case among IDPs,[97] suggesting that other

89. Landau et al. (2013).

90. Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska and Palaguta (2016), page 29.

91. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (2019), page 16.

92. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (2019), page 41.

93. Sereda (2023).

94. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (2019).

95. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (2019), page 11.

96. UNHCR (2020).

97. Danish Refugee Council Ukraine (2021), page 13.

mechanisms for influencing local decision-making are potentially more important than voting for (re)building trust.

c. Collaborative data collection processes

Data on the scale and scope of internal displacement in eastern Ukraine were not tailored to subnational level decision-making. National datasets[98] have been used in various quantitative studies analysing the heterogeneity among the IDP populations as well as the causal mechanisms that impede their integration.[99] But these data are primarily collected to inform humanitarian operations. This created a gap for local authorities, for whom the data were not granular enough to inform their planning. Other surveys also did not necessarily cover their jurisdictions. The "rapid needs assessments", for example, were generally relegated to an area 20 km from the "contact line" dividing the government-controlled (GCA) from the non-government-controlled territories (NGCA), because this is where the main humanitarian donor – the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) – prioritized its relief efforts. This left gaps in understanding the experiences of displaced people living in denser settlements in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of the GCA.

To address these difficulties, the Norwegian Refugee Council developed a collaboration with the Social Protection Department of the Luhansk Regional State Administration[100] to collect data *"with the primary objective to support local decision-making in [the] Luhansk region in devising various strategies aiming to support durable solutions for IDPs"*.[101] A survey of 2,361 households compared the socioeconomic situation of IDPs and non-IDPs in five urban areas in February 2020: Severodonetsk, Rubizhne, Lysychansk, Kreminna and Starobilsk.[102]

The survey process collaboratively engaged a wide group of partners from various local government offices, local humanitarian NGOs and UN organizations to decide collectively what information to prioritize and how to contextualize the tools.[103] This led to discussions that guided the household survey to focus not just on the humanitarian needs of the presumed vulnerable groups, which in this context were considered to be elderly IDPs, but rather on the incentives that might attract working-age IDPs to stay instead of moving on to larger urban centres like Kyiv or Kharkiv. The partners prioritized barriers to finding suitable employment and affordable housing, among other topics related to socioeconomic integration. These discussions demonstrated a longer-term strategy: attracting working-age IDPs was expected to increase local tax revenues to enable support for more vulnerable populations over time. Indeed, the results revealed that the majority of working-age IDPs in those areas had previously lived in cities and had a university degree (54 per cent), flagging difficulties for the local authorities to match them to suitable local jobs in more agricultural areas. The majority had also left behind housing in the NGCA, often travelling back and forth to maintain it in the hopes of being able to return.[104] This prompted discussions around rental subsidies to offset the jump in rental prices in Severodonetsk and other locations of refuge.

The data that resulted from this process did indeed help the local and regional governments plan a nascent response for those internally displaced

98. The two main data sources on the internally displaced population in Ukraine are the Ministry of Social Policy's database of registered IDPs, and the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), a repeat monitoring system that combines key informant interviews with randomly sampled phone surveys, managed and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In addition, a variety of humanitarian and UN organizations also conduct "rapid needs assessments" and more specialized surveys on sanitation, food security, fuel shortages and other issues.

99. For example REACH data used by Vakhitova and Iavorskyi (2020); IOM data used by Balinchenko (2021).

100. Also with the support of the Joint IDP Profiling Service.

101. Norwegian Refugee Council and Luhansk Regional State Administration (2020), page 23.

102. Note that the cost of carrying out this exercise benefited from DG ECHO, hence international, funding.

103. Welsch and Weihmayer (2019).

104. Norwegian Refugee Council and Luhansk Regional State Administration (2020).

105. Order No 65, Norwegian Refugee Council and Luhansk Regional State Administration (2020), page 5.

106. Sereda (2023). There were over 3,000 registered civil society organizations of all kinds in the Luhansk oblast by December 2020 according to the Ministry of Justice in Ukraine, though only 281 were considered "active" by the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) (cited in Sereda, 2023, page 40).

107. Norwegian Refugee Council and Luhansk Regional State Administration (2020), page 24.

108. Norwegian Refugee Council and Luhansk Regional State Administration (2020).

109. Research on this issue in Colombia is ongoing, for example Schouw Iversen (2022) and Lemaitre and Sandvik (2019).

110. The original funding for the pilot project by the Stabilization Support Services came from the Democracy Grants Program of the US Embassy to Ukraine; like the profiling exercise, these local governance processes relied on international funding sources, at least initially.

111. Stabilization Support Services (2020).

in their region. They implemented a "Regional Targeted Programme for Support and Adaptation of IDPs"[105] with greater understanding of the specific needs of various IDP subgroups. Differentiated needs and interests were furthermore raised through the third governance process I present here: the development of participatory forums.

d. Developing participatory forums

Gaps in the state-led responses after 2014 were partially overcome by strong civil society mobilization. The mobilization involved both formal registered NGOs as well as less formal mutual aid groups, sometimes representing IDPs and at other times serving as networks to channel donations for IDPs located elsewhere.[106] These efforts remained quite separate from the state response. However, the development of a participatory forum called the "IDP Council" was a notable exception. IDP Councils according to the Norwegian Refugee Council and Luhansk Regional State Administration, *"serve as platforms for facilitated dialogues between authorities, hosts and IDP communities"* to enable IDPs to engage in the local legislative and policy proposals that will affect them.[107] The Luhansk IDP Council was established as part of a pilot project on the part of an NGO called the Stabilization Support Services, alongside two similar councils in the city of Kramatorsk and the regional administration in the Kharkiv oblast. The Luhansk IDP Council *"became a natural counterpart to validate and operationalize the data collected throughout the profiling process"*,[108] providing an example of how the IDP Councils could meaningfully engage in policymaking. Because of their affiliations in the IDP community, they also added legitimacy to the conclusions drawn from the data collected to support advocacy.

The Luhansk IDP Council created a formal relationship between IDPs and their local state because this platform became institutionally embedded in the local and regional government. A decree from the Luhansk authorities officially established the IDP Council on 28 February 2020. It is chaired by the Head of the Social Protection Department and includes representatives of other departments as well as civil society organizations representing IDPs. This sets the precedent that the responsibility for responding extends beyond the Social Protection Department and is also shared between the government and (some) civil society actors. Creating a formal relationship between civil society actors and local government processes serves as a key opportunity for building a local social contract. The extent to which participatory forums serve as meaningful spaces of dialogue and activism, or on the other hand, merely engage IDPs in tokenistic ways, has been the subject of debate in other IDP contexts,[109] meriting study here. But the IDP Councils do aspire to this; the Stabilization Support Services cites a long list of principles guiding the mission of these IDP Councils, ranging from simply promoting the participation of IDPs in public affairs to ambitious strategic visions, such as building social cohesion and establishing a stable democracy.[110] However, their function of *"strengthening the capacity of local government for the integration of IDPs"*[111] is most concrete, suggesting that local governments were benefiting from the capacity within civil society rather than the other way around.

These IDP Councils have since evolved from an emerging governance process to a more formalized governance structure that is now embedded

in the national response. On 2 September 2023, the Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories convened a meeting of the "Coordination Headquarters for Ensuring the Rights and Freedoms of Internally Displaced Persons" with a wide array of ministries as well as regional military administrations. The Deputy Prime Minister publicized two main agenda points: allocating a budget for housing subsidies for IDPs and establishing IDP Councils within local authorities across Ukraine. These, she argued, *"will help implement the regional policy on internally displaced persons. In particular, their adaptation and integration into host communities."*[112] This demonstrates a process of scaling up a mechanism of local governance deemed critical for long-term IDP integration. By November 2023, 529 IDP Councils had been established.[113]

This section has shown that developing a relationship between IDPs and their local governments in eastern Ukraine was a gradual and, some would argue, belated process,[114] but ultimately a promising one. Though disrupted by conflict in 2022,[115] several of these local governance processes were taken up more widely by the central government and are still important today. This therefore depicts the development of a local social contract creating the groundwork for a bottom-up state response. The response has benefited especially from an active civil society but also from outside funding and engagement from international NGOs, building some local government capacity and enabling local government to make better use of multilevel governance structures for advocacy and policymaking.

VI.   CREATING A SOCIAL CONTRACT AT LOCAL LEVELS

These three governance processes demonstrate that state responses emerge at the local level through specific types of visibilization of internally displaced people. The relative "invisibility" of IDPs has been noted in the literature, especially those in more urban areas.[116] Polzer and Hammond prompt us to question how making IDPs visible as displaced persons, rather than as citizens, *"mak[es] the same individuals visible and actionable to different institutions, under different rules and with different outcomes"*.[117] Here the key issue is that making IDPs visible to the central government inadvertently distanced them from their local government and communities. IDPs were given the option to claim the legal status of IDP as of late 2014; once in receipt of their certificate, they became administratively visible to the central government. This enabled the Ministry of Social Policy to quantify the scale of internal displacement to some degree. It also created a mechanism by which the central government could transfer pensions and provide a small subsidy for utilities. But it created administrative burdens on IDPs and did not produce sufficient material benefits to outweigh these burdens and convince all IDPs to register. Their relationship with the state was compromised by their displacement and was perceived as conditional rather than reciprocal. Sereda describes interviews with IDPs in which they *"complain[ed] that the state was 'invisible' when they needed assistance with resettlement, but rather was imposing new barriers and limiting their rights"*.[118]

Over the eight years between 2014 and 2022, gradual steps towards building a relationship between those internally displaced and state functions at the local level created new and different kinds of connections.

112. Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine (2023a), with regulations for IDP Councils outlined in Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine (2023b).

113. Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine (2023c).

114. Sereda (2023).

115. Severodonetsk for example has now been heavily bombed and is an occupied area of eastern Ukraine as of the writing of this paper; Tondo (2022).

116. Fielden (2008); Cotroneo (2017).

117. Polzer and Hammond (2008), page 417.

118. Sereda (2023), page 34.

New programmes helped to support longer-term integration efforts like job-matching and increasing the availability of social housing. Voting reforms enabled people to register in local elections in the locations where they were seeking refuge, regardless of the conditions of their IDP certificate. This rendered IDPs politically and administratively visible to their local governments at a time when municipalities also experienced increased budgets and powers from decentralization reforms, opening new opportunities for local responses.

Data collection processes bringing together local and regional authorities with civil society and international humanitarian organizations helped to establish a platform for debate on what data were most needed for local decision-making. The "profiling exercise" itself filled gaps in the information on "urban IDPs" by focusing on urban settlements. The data collected were not actually intended to measure the scale of the phenomenon; rather these data sought to contextualize the socioeconomic situation of those internally displaced by comparing them with local non-displaced populations on certain indicators. The results identified key barriers to integrating locally, such as access to stable and affordable rental accommodation. Hence socioeconomic challenges, including both needs and vulnerabilities of those internally displaced in Luhansk's urban settlements within government control, were made visible to the local authorities and wider local governance actors.

Local government fostering of IDP Councils in parallel encouraged political and administrative participation of individuals and communities of IDPs in local affairs. These councils provided a platform for collaboration, in which the local government served a convening rather than a decision-making role. This specific Luhansk IDP Council was able to make clear demands not only through the local government to central government actors, but also more widely to the international community; for example, they shared a list of these demands with the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement. Among other demands to adapt state services and systems to the situation of those displaced, the list called for the digitalization of services and legislative amendments delinking access to pensions from IDP registration, thereby pushing for visibilization on the IDP Councils' own terms.

I argue that these processes can gradually rebuild a "social contract" with those displaced. Brun discussed this concept in relation to internal displacement, invoking Hobbes and Walzer,[119] over two decades ago. More recently, this language has been adopted by policy discourse. The High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, for example, frames displacement as a breakdown in state–society relations, painting "solutions to internal displacement" as a restoration of a social contract:

> In many contexts, displacement is unplanned, arbitrary and represents a breakdown of the *social contract* between States and their citizens and residents – a breach of the promise and obligation of the State to keep its people safe from harm. . . . [R]ecovery from displacement is thus also about recovering the trust and confidence of populations in the State.[120]

A "social contract" here is not merely transactional, e.g. an opportunity to claim entitlements from the state, but a gradual process towards developing trust in state institutions. The focus on the responsibility of the state (as opposed to the international community) to fulfil its social contract towards its citizens and residents has become a cornerstone

of a more development-oriented approach to responses to internal displacement.[121] But as Elie points out in his study of a climate-induced context of internal displacement, these expectations omit the potential for civil society to drive the restoration of a social contract, and specifically a social contract at local levels.[122] A mobilizing civil society can lend capacity and legitimacy to local authority activities, as was experienced in the Luhansk oblast's early IDP Councils. Through their demands, they are advocating for a more reciprocal relationship with both their local and central state, a social contract in which the state supports their rights as citizens, provides for certain entitlements as IDPs, and thereby earns their trust, which may result in greater voter participation over time.

The first step in a "bottom-up approach" is therefore the visibilization of IDPs in specific ways and the building of trust between displaced people and their local state. This then anchors a wider state-led response so other levels, including international actors, can complement the support offered locally. But what are the drawbacks to this approach? With the variability in budgets and capacities of municipalities, not to mention housing availability and the specific geographic effects of conflict,[123] a highly differentiated response to internal displacement becomes likely. Municipalities with higher capacities and greater political will can provide support that other municipalities cannot (or choose not to). Within this paradigm, central-level policies and funding can mitigate these disparities and bring some consistency to local-level responses, especially through a dedicated fund for internal displacement.[124] Capacity-building is also a long-term project that requires deeper engagement with human resources and university training in public administration. The public sector cannot rely on civil society and communities to fill capacity gaps indefinitely.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Defining the local governance of internal displacement as a combined set of subnational institutions, systems and processes through which people internally displaced can exercise their rights attunes us to the many factors that influence the relationship between displaced people and a multi-faceted, multilevel state. When displacement disrupts this relationship, specific governance processes are needed to restore it, both in places of refuge and origin, and at all levels of government.

Though interest in urban internal displacement is growing, academic literature has thus far overlooked subnational responses to internal displacement, and specifically responses in urban areas (as opposed to camp settings). Research on this topic has yet to build a comprehensive picture of the role of local governments. Studying how the relationship between IDPs and local governments is built at the local level is one step towards understanding the potential of local governments for contributing to wider state-led responses to (urban) internal displacement.

I proposed centring analyses of local governance on the governance contexts, processes and interactions that affect everyday realities for those internally displaced. National voting reforms enabling IDPs to vote in local elections, data collection exercises engaging a variety of local stakeholders, and IDP Councils creating formal spaces of participation for civil society groups are examples of such governance processes emerging from eastern Ukraine.

121. See for example World Bank (2016).

122. Elie (2024). Elie describes a situation in which local authorities recognized their responsibilities but did not have the information required to identify relevant interventions for supporting those displaced or at risk of displacement. Displaced communities were supported by NGOs to develop their own community development plans that aligned sufficiently with local authority development plans and budgets to enable them to fund those projects. This, Elie argues, indicates a rebuilding of a social contract because it created a space for political voice and rights claiming by local communities, which could then be fulfilled by local authorities.

123. Havryliuk (2022).

124. UN-Habitat, JIPS and IIED (2021), no page. This report summarizes consultations with mayors and city leaders in municipalities from various contexts affected by internal displacement.

This approach is relevant not only for Ukraine, but for other situations of conflict-induced internal displacement in which the role of local government is being actively negotiated and redefined, including through its interactions with civil society and other levels of government. Rather than assuming that internal displacement responses must be top-down, the analysis of emergent processes facilitating the local governance of internal displacement in eastern Ukraine opens the possibility for various bottom-up responses.

To this end, hopes for local governance are high, especially in fragile and conflict-affected countries. Indeed, the local level is seen as the fulcrum around which state legitimacy builds, where, according to the UNDP, *"the state intersects with society and [the point at which] national policies meet local aspirations"* with the potential to *"reshape the social contract and make it an engine of peacebuilding, statebuilding and recovery"*.[125] The case of eastern Ukraine demonstrates that this goal is not only possible but also effective for developing governance processes that can be scaled up. In this way, I propose that we conceive of the local governance of internal displacement in Ukraine as a source of learning for other displacement contexts addressing ruptures in state–society relations.

125. UNDP (2016), page xiv.

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ORCID ID

Melissa Weihmayer https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7767-3022

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