

Ukraine
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Peace Books / «Книги Миру»

Background: While the conflict in eastern Ukraine may have faded from the public eye and conscience, the protracted and unresolved occupation of the Donbas has resulted in the internal displacement of over 1.7 million Ukrainians. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the eastern Donbas region face intense scrutiny from their host communities as they are more likely to speak Russian and have stronger ties to Russian culture – resulting in the perception of IDPs as co-nationals who support Russian annexation and separatism. Prejudice and discrimination lead to IDPs lacking equitable access to employment, education, and other public services. Though the publicity of the conflict has waned and ebbed, it has persisted as a salient presence throughout my life. Before 2014, I thought little of what it meant to be Russian-Ukrainian as I had immigrated with my family from Russia to a Brooklyn neighborhood where the peoples of the former USSR coexisted in relative harmony. I only learned what power a national identity can hold when Russian separatist forces invaded my father's hometown of Donetsk, a city that would become the heart of the fighting over the next year. Many years later, I had the chance to work with Ukrainian refugees as a caseworker with a resettlement agency and reflect on how little has changed since 2014. Very few of those displaced were able to cross borders as refugees and remained in Ukraine as IDPs. After interning with Right to Protection, a Ukrainian NGO dedicated to protecting the rights of IDPs, I learned about the discrimination IDPs faced at a personal and legal level. I wanted to create a project that addressed the need for empowering personal narratives and dialogue among IDP youth facing confusion about their identity amidst the conflict and provide a pathway for them to build bridges of understanding with their host communities. «Книги Миру» or “Peace Books” intends to address this need by creating a creative community of IDP youth that are led through a series of bookmaking workshops over the course of five weeks to develop writing and artistic skills, thereby promoting healing within a community and fulfilling psychosocial needs. The workshops will be paired with dialogue sessions facilitated by Peace Engineers where participants will have the opportunity to discuss their identities in the context of the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine and learn how to facilitate constructive post-conflict dialogues, with the goal of becoming the next generation of peacemakers in their communities. At the conclusion of the program, excerpts of writings and illustrations of participants will be translated and published to a “Peace Books” website, which aims to share the accomplishments of the participants in addition to raising awareness of the struggles IDPs face in Ukraine. The hope is that graduated «автори миру» or “peace authors” will go on to use their developed writing, communication, and facilitation skills to advocate for IDPs and build greater understanding with host communities, making relocation more sustainable and positive. In addition, Peace Authors can return as mentors to future cohorts and continue to serve as examples of IDP leaders and writers empowered to contribute to the future of their country. The program will also provide a much-needed space to heal and process the trauma of displacement through an artistic project with a community of peers, as IDP youth are chronically lacking accessible psychosocial resources. As the threat of further conflict bears down upon the nation again, “Peace Books” is a program necessary to unlocking the potential of IDPs to serve as an integral population in defining post-conflict reconciliation in Ukraine.

Project Outline: «Книги Миру» or “Peace Books” will invite ten to fifteen internally displaced youth (ages 14-17) to a series of workshops over the course of five weeks in late June – early July in Kyiv at the Peace Engineers headquarters. The goals of the project are twofold:

- 1) The artistic process of writing and creating a book can serve as a therapeutic process for processing post conflict trauma, foster a sense of agency, and create a safe space for expression for IDP youth. 15% of IDPs in Ukraine are children, a reality that creates a succinct need for psychosocial support and trauma informed educational spaces for this population. The first component of the workshops will focus on creative writing skills and storytelling, led by an instructor with experience working with displaced youth. The second component of the workshops will provide copies of books from the UNHCR Refugee Book

Initiative, a campaign that aims to highlight the writing of refugee authors. Authors would be invited to answer questions and discuss their journeys from refugees to published authors. This component aims to provide role models for IDP youth and emphasize the importance of telling stories of displacement and the refugee experience.

2) IDPs have faced significant barriers to integration, ranging from discrimination in employment and housing to curtailed legal rights, and the perception of IDPs as overly reliant on government support and loyal to Russia has contributed to the stagnation of reconciliation efforts. Yet despite these struggles, IDP communities have been described as the “key to peace” in Ukraine due to their ability to act as bridges between the east and west. Therefore, a crucial component of the Peace Books program provides workshop sessions for participants to learn how to facilitate constructive post-conflict dialogues and act as mediators for mutual understanding and reconciliation. The expertise that the partner organization, “Peace Engineers,” has accrued after successfully graduating six classes of peacebuilding experts trained in facilitation and mediation, will serve as the core of these workshops. The organization has offered to recruit two of its graduates who are originally from the Donetsk region to lead these workshops. Graduates of the program will be “Peace Authors” or «автори миру» and become the next generation of IDP peacemakers in their communities. This will create a pathway for civic engagement and changemaking for participants of the program.

The hope is to run the program every summer as during that time the Peace Engineers HQ is not in use and school is out of session. Excerpts from books created by each cohort will be published to a Peace Authors website which will be circulated with the aim of spreading awareness of the barriers IDPs in Ukraine face and fundraising for the continuation of the program. Individual authors will retain the rights to their books. The biggest accomplishment of the program will be the creation of a generation of youth that is empowered to lead reconciliation with host communities and advocate for the peaceful integration of IDPs.

Theory of Change: UNHCR’s Guidelines for Educational Assistance to Refugees states that education for peace, cooperation, conflict resolution and reconciliation are all prerequisites for... reconstruction, whose promotion can avoid repetition of conflict by a new generation. This principle defines Peace Books as it aims to create durable peace in Ukraine. The structural indirect violence that IDPs experience – discrimination, legal vulnerability, poverty – is not the physical danger faced in the Donbas, but its persistence evidences a lack of positive peace. Changing the attitudes of host communities is necessary to building a strong foundation for peace as attitudes toward IDPs are symbolic of the relationship between the west and the east, a divide that has been repeatedly stoked in geopolitics. Peace Books aims to foster a generation of leaders who can tackle this challenge and cross the divide while creatively engaging youth who have undergone the trauma of displacement to nurture healing and hope for the future.