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What is the impact of social isolation of internally displaced persons in rural communities? Implications for Ukraine's recovery

Abstract

This article explores the institutional and socio-economic dimensions of social isolation among internally displaced persons (IDPs) in rural territorial communities (rural hromadas) of Ukraine during 2022–2023. Framed by historical institutionalism and the social capital/integration literature, the analysis draws on focus group discussions with the IDPs in rural western Ukraine. It identifies key causes of isolation, including cultural differences, infrastructural challenges, and institutional dysfunctions such as communication gaps, lack of employment opportunities, and opaque access to

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documents and services within thin service networks. The article reveals how IDPs often face subtle forms of exclusion despite the absence of direct hostility, contributing to a decline in human and social capital in host communities. We argue for an integrated approach that includes closing the communication vacuum, strengthening community engagement through local initiatives, and launching joint educational programmes for IDPs and residents. We also emphasise participatory mechanisms, digital inclusion initiatives, and low-cost community-building activities. These measures are crucial for preventing the long-term institutionalisation of social isolation during recovery and reconstruction and for enabling the successful integration of IDPs into the social and economic life of rural Ukraine. In policy terms, linking and bridging ties – together with dependable institutional access – emerge as practical levers to reduce isolation and support rural recovery.

Keywords: rural communities, social isolation, internally displaced persons, post-war recovery, historical institutionalism

Introduction

The institutional phenomenon of social isolation has been known in economic science since the second half of the 20th century. We distinguish social isolation – an objective lack of social contacts and participation – from loneliness, a subjective perception of being isolated (Beller & Wagner, 2018). We analyse isolation across household, community, and institutional settings, drawing on social capital and integration accounts that emphasise bonding, bridging, and linking ties (Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004; Ager & Strang, 2008). Its impact became particularly relevant and even acquired a global dimension due to the COVID-19 pandemic from 2019 to 2022. Most countries worldwide introduced quarantine restrictions, which led to the emergence of various problems associated with increased social isolation for certain groups of residents and, in some cases, entire social strata. The most affected categories of citizens in this regard were individuals from so-called "risk groups", including pensioners, cancer patients, diabetics, and people with cardiovascular diseases. In many countries, support programs were specifically aimed at mitigating the issue of social isolation among vulnerable populations. Global responses to isolation during COVID-19 (e.g., home-delivery schemes for seniors, remote social services) are relevant here only as a contrast: they addressed health-related isolation, whereas wartime displacement in Ukraine generates institution – and place-dependent isolation tied to documentation, services, and mobility in rural settings. Researchers have also noted the worsening issue of social isolation among other groups, such as homeless individuals (Nóżka, 2024, p. 10), for whom staying outside shelters and other crowded places proved to be safer than participating in various socialisation programmes.

However, these aspects of social isolation largely receded into the background following the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. Since then, at least in the Ukrainian context, this issue has taken on new dimensions and more complex institutional meanings. The war led to the displacement of a large number of people

from combat zones to safer regions of Ukraine, as well as to neighbouring European countries and the EU in general. In many cases, this was accompanied by social isolation not only of individuals and families but also of entire social groups among refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), i.e., people displaced within a country's borders in line with the UN usage.

After 2022, the financial dependence of Ukraine's territorial communities (decentralised local-government units formed through the 2014–2020 reform; when referring specifically to rural units we use "rural hromadas"), increased significantly, particularly in rural ones. A significant share of subsidies was directed toward supporting IDPs, leading some local residents to view displaced persons as competitors for financial aid. According to Zaiats et al. (2024), rural communities also demonstrated higher per capita budget expenditures and higher spending on education and culture compared to urban areas. At the same time, social isolation of IDPs stems from objective factors, mainly difficulties in securing housing, employment, and acceptable living conditions. Research shows that the employment rate among IDPs is 10% lower than among the local population, whereas before the 2022 invasion, 60% of those now displaced had jobs, compared to 50% in host communities today, according to Malynovska and Yatsenko (2024).

In Ukraine's current context, the social isolation of IDPs results from both objective conditions and subjective factors, contributing to a decline in social and human capital in host – especially rural – communities. Here, "social capital" refers to connections among people, including networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trust, which enable coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2000). This highlights the need for effective mechanisms to address the issue. The article aims to identify the key drivers of social isolation among IDPs in rural communities and outline priority strategies for overcoming it in the context of recovery and reconstruction. We approach IDP isolation as a "wicked problem": causes are interlocking (housing, employment, documentation, distance), stakeholders have conflicting incentives (hosts, local authorities, IDPs), evidence is incomplete in wartime, and interventions shift the problem rather than "solve" it once-and-for-all. This warrants a theoretically anchored, place-sensitive analysis and modest, testable implications.

We investigate social isolation among internally displaced persons (IDPs) in rural Ukrainian communities in 2022–2023 (post-February-2022 displacement) and draw out implications for national recovery. Framing the analysis with historical institutionalism and with research on social capital and integration, we trace how path-dependent gatekeeping and thin service networks heighten isolation, and how linking and bridging ties, together with dependable access to documents and services, can counter it.

This study is situated at the intersection of three strands: research on IDP integration; the social isolation and loneliness literature; and rural, place-based development that examines distance and "thin" service networks in low-density areas. This focus on rural hromadas connects our argument to current debates in refugee studies, social policy, and rural studies. Existing work concentrates on urban reception contexts, uses heterogeneous measures of "isolation", and rarely examines rural IDPs in Ukraine. As a result, we know less about how institutional access and social ties

interact under rural constraints such as long distances and thin service networks (Ager & Strang, 2008; Strang & Quinn, 2019; Williams et al., 2022; Pickering et al., 2023; IOM DTM, 2023; IOM DTM, 2025; Zhang & Dong, 2022).

Grounding the analysis in historical institutionalism, we link long-run legacies to the displacement shock after 2022 in rural communities and specify a place-based mechanism in which institutional access and bridging and linking ties shape isolation. We draw on qualitative evidence from focus group discussions with IDPs in rural western Ukraine and conclude with pragmatic, context-bound suggestions that follow from the analysis.

Empirically we analyse experiences from 2022–2023 in rural hromadas of western Ukraine. References to 2014–2021 serve only to situate policy and reception dynamics, while the brief discussion of the Soviet period provides historical background that motivates the theoretical lens rather than evidence within the analysis window. Because rural settings are often more closed and conservative with thinner infrastructure, the problem can intensify there (Fyshchuk & Kolesnik, 2024; Chitea & Dona, 2018). The article first sets the historical and institutional context, then examines institutional and socio-psychological aspects of IDP isolation during the war, including local-government integration challenges and host-community concerns, and finally outlines mechanisms suited to rural hromadas with a view to recovery and European-integration priorities.

Literature review

Researchers in the field of social and socio-economic issues have long noted a close relationship between citizens' social activity and their economic success. Numerous studies have shown that people with sufficiently diversified social connections – regularly communicating with friends, colleagues, business partners, and like-minded individuals – tend to find suitable jobs more easily. According to Cherry (2023), they also tend to be more successful in entrepreneurship and are less likely to suffer from depression and various psychological dysfunctions compared to those who lack social self-realisation and emotional support from their surroundings. This aligns with integration frameworks in refugee studies that foreground social connections as central to well-being and economic participation (Ager & Strang, 2008; Strang & Quinn, 2019).

Over time, the term "social isolation" has become widespread in scientific literature. However, it remains primarily a subject of study in sociology and psychology, while economists have paid much less attention to it. Nevertheless, in the economic domain, the manifestations of social isolation can have the most destructive societal impact. Psychological problems of an individual or group requiring social support or psychotherapy are one thing, but systemic manifestations of individual issues related to social isolation that spill over into the economic sphere are quite another. Modern history provides numerous examples of industrial accidents, technological disasters, traffic incidents, financial crises, and business failures caused by this seemingly inconspicuous phenomenon. Consistent with this, meta-analytic evidence shows a robust negative association between perceived social support and loneliness across contexts,

underscoring the public-health and economic salience of connectivity (Zhang & Dong, 2022).

Social isolation can take various forms, each with different causes and consequences. Two primary types are distinguished. First, physical isolation, occurring when an individual cannot interact with others due to health conditions or spatial constraints, as seen among elderly people with mobility issues, hospital patients, or individuals with disabilities. Second, psychological isolation, where individuals, despite being surrounded by others, feel lonely and disconnected due to a lack of understanding, close relationships, or experiences of rejection. This phenomenon, as noted by Urbas (2024), is particularly dangerous, as over time it can lead to memory and concentration issues, workplace conflicts, and deviant behaviour in society. In empirical work, isolation is operationalised via network size and diversity, validated loneliness scales, and participation in associations – measures that link directly to labour-market search frictions and team productivity (Ager & Strang, 2008; Strang & Quinn, 2019).

Key indicators of social isolation identified by researchers include withdrawal from social activities, ignoring family or corporate traditions, spending most of the day alone, reluctance to communicate with close ones and colleagues, loss of business contacts, lack of trust, destruction of long-standing relationships, growing latent intolerance and hostility, feelings of alienation and loneliness, and unhealthy reactions to external stimuli like loud noises, bright lights, or laughter, as identified by Widłak (2024). These indicators are also used in displacement settings to track exclusion risks among uprooted populations.

The Evolutionary Theory of Loneliness (ETL), as discussed by Beller and Wagner (2018), explores the adaptive functions of loneliness, aiding short-term survival but causing detrimental long-term effects in the modern world. ETL places the social level of organisation at the centre of studies on the human brain and behaviour, arguing that the social world's centrality stems from both social and biological processes shaped by evolutionary forces long before humans appeared. While ETL focuses on adaptive mechanisms, policy-relevant literatures in refugee and social policy studies emphasise how institutions can either buffer or amplify isolation through access to services, documentation, and legal remedies (Krakhmalova, 2022).

Social isolation remains a complex global public health issue, as highlighted by a 2023 Gallup study (Tulane University, 2020) based on over 100,000 participants across 142 countries, which revealed that nearly a quarter of the global population felt "very lonely" or "fairly lonely", meaning over a billion people worldwide lack social connection. In parallel, conflict-related internal displacement has reached record levels globally, which magnifies isolation risks in affected communities (IDMC, 2024).

The problem is particularly acute in rural areas, where interpersonal communication is less intense than in cities. Traditional conservatism and the dominance of agricultural production methods further limit opportunities for alternative communication and economic mobility. Evidence from rural studies documents both elevated risks and promising, community-based responses in low-density areas (Williams et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2019).

In many ways, social isolation is a de facto element of rural life compared to urban areas, due to lower population density and greater physical distance between

residences. According to Pickering et al. (2023), rural residents, across various race and ethnicity divisions, are more at risk of loneliness than their urban counterparts and face disadvantages in access to social services and social capital, particularly among older adults. These disadvantages include thinner service networks and higher mobility costs that can entrench isolation, especially for older and low-income households (Williams et al., 2022).

Another important aspect is the intensification of factors exacerbating social isolation during wars and military conflicts. For example, Graham (2022) notes that approximately half of US veterans report feeling they do not belong in society after separation from military service, often experiencing social isolation despite familial support. Similar patterns of non-belonging and strained social ties are widely discussed in the refugee-integration literature (Ager & Strang, 2008; Strang & Quinn, 2019).

Older adults are often unable to flee from conflict and remain alone, without family or support, including access to medicine and food. They are especially vulnerable during outbreaks of violence, unable to shelter from danger. Research by HelpAge (2022) after the 2014 conflict in Ukraine highlights the specific risks older people face during escalations, such as separation from family and resulting social exclusion. A striking 96% of older respondents reported conflict-related mental health issues.

The social isolation of forced migrants and internally displaced persons (IDPs) is also a critical issue during war. They bear a double psychological burden: the loss of home and way of life, and the loss of livelihoods and social ties with colleagues and business partners. In Ukraine, legal-institutional analyses show how policy design and court practice shape IDPs' agency, entitlements and risks of exclusion (Krakhmalova, 2022).

Research in Ukraine reveals a consistent pattern of social isolation among internally displaced persons (IDPs), marked by loneliness, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, regardless of location. Cultural disconnection plays a key role – war-induced shifts in social norms create alienation in native communities, while adapting to new cultural settings in host areas presents its own challenges. IDPs are also more vulnerable to stigma, bias, and anxiety in social interactions (Tsybuliak et al., 2024). Recent displacement-tracking analyses likewise foreground social cohesion, trust, and perceived fairness as determinants of integration trajectories (IOM DTM, 2023; IOM DTM, 2025).

Evidence from other conflict-affected settings shows similar mechanisms with context-specific manifestations. In Colombia, internal displacement produces sizeable and persistent labour-market penalties and scarring, including higher unemployment, greater informality, and slower earnings recovery, even in receiving cities. (Calderón-Mejía & Ibáñez, 2015; Ibáñez et al., 2022). In Nigeria, studies document large gaps in rights protection and access to healthcare among IDPs, with high burdens of infectious disease and barriers to care in camp settings (Ekezie et al., 2021; Acha-Anyi, 2024). In Syria, research highlights severe obstacles to healthcare for the IDPs within a fragmented system, contributing to excess mortality and poor treatment outcomes in high-need areas (Abbara et al., 2022). These cross-country findings qualify our claims and help delineate the external validity of results from rural Ukraine.

Beyond historical and psychological drivers of social isolation in rural Ukraine, recent studies stress the importance of sustainable development, poverty reduction, and access to services. Łuczak and Cermakova (2024) propose a framework for assessing territorial development, emphasising regional policy's role in strengthening social cohesion. Kalinowski et al. (2025) highlight multidimensional poverty in rural Poland, showing that limited access to healthcare, education, and transportation intensifies social exclusion and obstructs integration. Taken together, this supports a place-based policy approach that pairs social protection with investments in transport, healthcare and education in low-density areas (Williams et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2019).

Thus, the issue of social isolation of IDPs in Ukraine's rural territorial communities – now in the third year of war – is relevant not only in applied terms but also theoretically and methodologically. It requires a comprehensive analysis and justification of effective institutional mechanisms for its mitigation. Our analysis is, therefore situated within current debates in top scientific discussions in refugee studies, social policy, and rural studies (e.g., Journal of Refugee Studies, Social Policy and Society, Journal of Rural Studies).

The analysis draws on two main theoretical strands. First, historical institutionalism explains how inherited rules and routines generate path dependence; legacies of gatekeeping or defensive withdrawal can persist under new shocks, with change often occurring through layering and conversion rather than abrupt replacement (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney & Thelen, 2012; Thelen, 1999; North, 1990). Second, the social capital/integration literature distinguishes bonding ties (within-group) from bridging (across groups) and linking ties (to public authorities and services); bridging and linking ties are especially important for access, opportunity, and trust in new settings (Putnam, 2000; Ager & Strang, 2008; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Therefore, we read rural isolation as an interaction between historical gatekeeping routines (HI) and the structure of ties plus institutional access. Our empirical section explores these expectations qualitatively using FGD evidence of post-February-2022 displacement.

Research methodology

The methodological framework of this study is based on the theory of institutional economics, taking into account the fundamental postulates of human and social capital theories. In particular, it relies on the contributions of economic scholars regarding methods and tools for analysing institutional dysfunctions in the context of their impact on transaction costs in different types of economic systems, including rural economies. The key principles of institutional analysis are also applied to identify characteristic interrelations between various groups of economic agents in rural territorial communities of Ukraine. This has made it possible to identify the impact of institutional distortions caused by the social isolation of IDPs on the economic development of the studied communities, including the post-war recovery phase of their economies. The study's empirical window is 2022–2023 (post-February-2022 displacement), with contextual references to 2014–2021; the primary setting comprises rural hromadas in western Ukraine.

Guided by historical institutionalism and the social capital and integration perspective, our codebook tracked three domains: legacy gatekeeping and path dependence; institutional access (documents, services, decision channels); and types of ties (bonding versus bridging and linking). This allowed us to trace historical-institutionalist mechanisms in participants' narratives (e.g., boundary work – "capsularisation" – as gatekeeping; improved administrative access as conversion that reorients local routines). These are working expectations suited to qualitative inquiry, not claims of general causality.

The socio-empirical aspect of this research is based on the methodological framework of sociology, using specialised approaches that form the theoretical, methodological, and procedural-instrumental foundation for empirical studies of social processes. Specialised sociological theories ("middle-range theories"), as described by Verbets (2007), focus on identifying specific manifestations of general sociological laws within defined spatial and temporal contexts. They translate general methodological principles into the language of concrete sociological research to ensure reliable characteristics of the object and serve a prognostic function by enabling the formulation of scientific hypotheses.

The sources of informational materials for studying the outlined problem included publications by scholars and experts specialising in the research subject. Additionally, analytical materials developed by specialised institutions studying rural economy issues and the institutional development of social systems in crisis situations were used. These materials particularly focused on eradicating the prerequisites and factors that contribute to the social isolation of various categories of citizens, including forced migrants.

We use exploratory qualitative evidence from focus group discussions (FGDs) with internally displaced persons (IDPs) residing in five territorial communities in Lviv region (oblast) – Yavorivska, Pustomytivska, Stryiska, Horodotska, and Drohobytska. Fieldwork took place between July 2023 and January 2024. The study was implemented under the project "Synergy of Cross-Sector Partnerships for Integrating Relocated Business into the Community's Economic Space" by the Agency for Local Economic Development of Yavorivshchyna. Recruitment was purposive via local social services and IDP coordinators; eligibility: adults (18 years or older), IDP status (formal or de facto), current residence in a locality within the listed communities. We conducted five FGDs (one per community) with approximately 10–15 participants each (total $\approx$ 50–75). Sessions lasted 60–120 minutes, were facilitated by trained moderators; detailed notes were taken and, where consented, sessions were audio-recorded. Analysis followed thematic coding with a shared codebook; quotes are anonymised. As a non-probability qualitative design, findings are not statistically generalisable.

To complement FGD themes, the team also held ten semi-structured in-depth interviews with managers of relocated enterprises operating in the same five communities (approximately 45–75 minutes) and convened a closing community forum (approximately 50 participants); these materials inform context but are not the primary unit of analysis here. A small structured questionnaire (up to roughly 70 forms across sites) was used descriptively to prompt discussion; any reported shares indicate theme salience across FGDs rather than population estimates. Data were stored as facilitator notes and, where consented, audio files; the internal project report is on file

with the implementer and not publicly released. Participation was voluntary with informed consent and anonymisation, in line with the implementer's ethics guidance.

Evolution of the problem of social isolation in rural territorial communities of Ukraine: the "collective farm period" and the post-totalitarian context

This section provides historical context (pre-1991 and early post-totalitarian legacies) to motivate a historical-institutionalist reading of today's rural dynamics; it does not extend the empirical window beyond 2022–2023 (post-February-2022 displacement).

Rural hromadas in Ukraine have inherited entrenched institutional remnants – rooted in the Soviet planned economy and its routine social isolation – that still shape village relations. The issue was largely ignored under the collective-farm system and after 1991, and even the 2014–2016 territorial reform offered no conceptual reassessment; instead, unresolved isolation complicated decentralisation, especially in rural areas. In historical-institutionalist terms, these legacies reflect path dependence and change via layering and conversion rather than abrupt replacement (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney & Thelen, 2012; North, 1990). From the start of Soviet rule, social isolation became built into rural life in Ukraine. Different groups experienced it in alternating waves, and although its forms shifted, it remained a constant feature of the centralised planned system.

In the 1920s, the Bolsheviks brought the "Red Terror" to Ukrainian villages, followed by mass collectivisation and the isolation of so-called "kulaks," wealthy peasants capable of running efficient individual farms (today we would call them farmers). Many were executed, deported, or branded as enemies, and prosperous peasants thereafter concealed their assets to avoid ostracism, an early and enduring form of social isolation. Researchers note that as early as 1919 the Bolsheviks launched mass repressions: revolutionary tribunals and commissions monopolised violence, targeting affluent peasants, the rural intelligentsia, and clergy, and carrying out uncontrolled executions (Seredynskyi, 2020). Unable to flee, many members of the rural elite withdrew into a "social underground," one of the harshest forms of isolation.

Later, this problem significantly intensified and became more complex with the onset of mass collectivisation. One of the main slogans of collectivisation was the "Liquidation of the Kulaks as a Class." In this regard, a special resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) was adopted on January 30, 1930, titled "On Measures for the Liquidation of Kulak Households in Areas of Complete Collectivisation". According to this resolution, all kulak households were divided into three categories ("Kolektyvizatsiya ukrains'koho sela", 2012):

1. Economically strong households belonging to active opponents of collectivisation (their owners were to be "isolated" in prisons and labour camps);
2. Economically stable households whose owners did not resist collectivisation (they, along with their families, were exiled, mostly to Siberia);
3. Relatively strong and stable "middle-peasant" households that did not resist (the social isolation of their owners was carried out by granting them small land plots outside the newly created collective farm areas).

Despite official claims of "victorious" collectivisation, resistance persisted among nationally conscious Ukrainians, wealthy peasants, the rural intelligentsia, and national minorities – especially Polish and German communities. Branded by the Soviet government as centres of petty-bourgeois resistance, these areas experienced especially brutal collectivisation and persecution, peaking in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Yakubova, 2004).

This policy, which targeted 10%–20% of Ukrainian peasants – mainly effective farmers, rural intelligentsia, and clergy – with persecution and social isolation, triggered even deeper problems. The brutal destruction of traditional rural life, intensified by repression and misanthropic Bolshevik policies, culminated in one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th century – the Holodomor of 1932–1933.

This genocidal policy targeted the national identity and deeply rooted individualism of Ukrainian peasants, which conflicted with Bolshevik ideology. As documented by the Holodomor Museum (2024), it was implemented through legalised violence and mass killings of those who tried to leave collective farms or reclaim property (livestock, tools, grain). The regime then banned peasants from owning grain or livestock and even from gleaning abandoned harvest remnants; violations carried up to ten years' imprisonment with confiscation or execution. Special brigades searched homes and seized grain, enforcing terror through physical and psychological abuse.

The moral trauma of the Holodomor and its precursor, collectivisation, lodged deeply in Ukrainians' collective subconscious and was transmitted across generations. Even after independence, many rural households kept dried bread, salt, sugar, and barrels of lard "for a rainy day". Authorities and self-styled "progressive" circles stigmatised such prudence as "vestiges of kulak mentality", "anti-people attitudes", or "stinginess", fostering palpable alienation and, at times, social isolation.

After World War II, another layer of social dysphoria was added to this issue. Alongside the "kulak descendants", other groups were labelled as "alien elements" in Ukrainian villages: "fascist collaborators", "Bandera remnants", and "descendants of police officers", terms used indiscriminately to describe nearly all villagers who had lived under the occupation.

As in the 1930s, a new wave of repression followed after World War II. Thousands of families were deported, and rural intellectuals were barred from their professions. The 1947 famine, driven by food seizures and repression, deepened social isolation in villages. It also ingrained fear of the authorities and distrust among villagers – anyone could be betrayed for hiding even a crust of bread.

The famine of 1946–1947 was triggered by a combination of extreme drought, post-war devastation, and a shortage of male labour for cultivating land. Adding to this was the cessation of food supplies from the United States under the Lend-Lease programme. According to the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (2021), the Soviet government, eager to demonstrate the superiority of communism, prioritised grain exports to drought-stricken Eastern European countries. To fulfil unrealistic state quotas – over 360 million poods of grain from Ukraine to Moscow – grain was confiscated not only from collective farms but also from private households. A large portion of the collected grain rotted in storage facilities but was not redistributed to

the starving population. Stalin's "Law on Five Ears of Grain" still applied, threatening even children with labour camps for gleaning. In desperation, people ate goosefoot, acacia blossoms, mallow, sparrows, and even mice.

All this bred latent intolerance toward the authorities and their most zealous enforcers, often outsiders, especially ethnic Russians known in Western Ukraine as "osvoboditeli" ("liberators"). A deep divide emerged between party-economic elites and the rural majority; in some villages it hardened into unspoken norms that discouraged marriage with members of the "alien" administrative milieu.

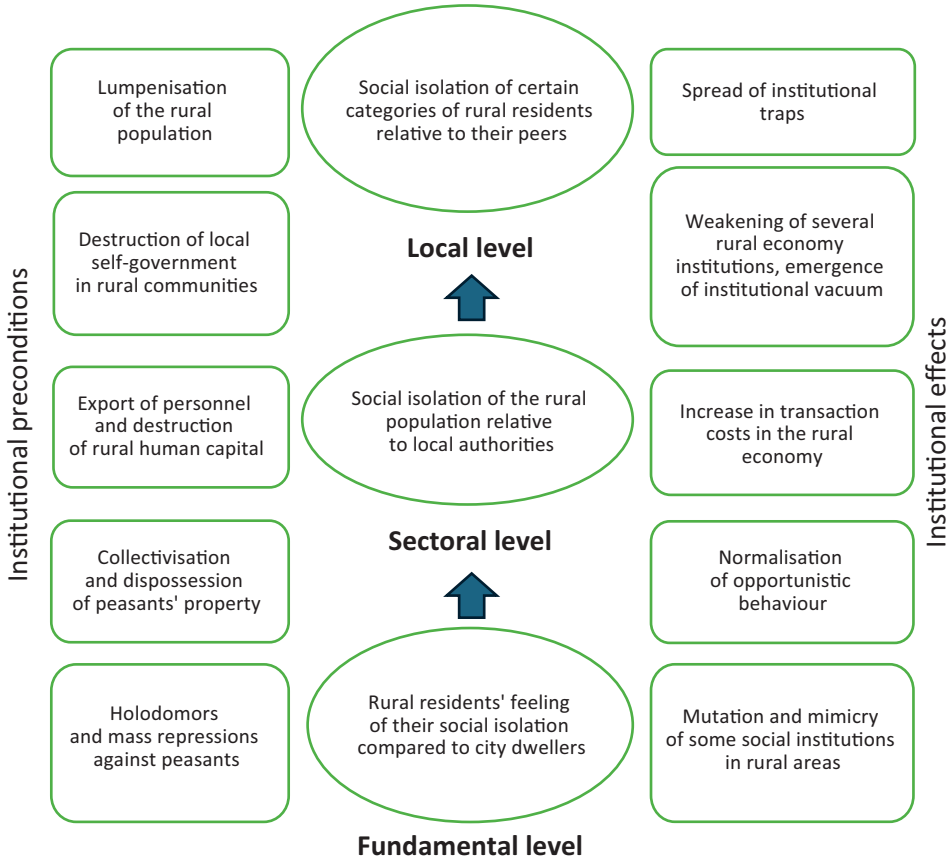
To some extent, this process was reciprocal. Soviet authorities deeply distrusted Ukrainian peasants, effectively keeping them in a state of serfdom. Until the 1970s, rural residents were denied passports, binding them to collective farms. At age 16, they were automatically enrolled as farm workers and needed special permission to leave their villages. Only in 1976 did they begin receiving passports, yet even then, employment in cities required official documentation from the farm administration (Pyvovarov, 2024).

All this effectively institutionalised social isolation of peasants as state policy, reinforced daily by the stereotype of the "backward villager". Even when rural residents moved to cities as students, factory workers or officials, they encountered subtle suppression and open discrimination, epitomised by "limita," the Soviet system of residential quotas that restricted rural migrants' urban rights. "Harmless" jokes, patronising kindness and condescending remarks were common. These patterns, internalised in self-perception and everyday mental habits, entrenched a lasting sense of separation from the societal mainstream.

Scholars of Soviet life have described a peculiar social phenomenon known as "out-being", "un-realness", or "self-obliteration". It refers to a state in which individuals, while formally complying with ideological requirements, effectively withdrew from official life, retreating into social niches beyond political control. Large segments of the rural population deliberately avoided political and social engagement, forming communities of "their own". Official discourse was seen less as false than irrelevant; instead of "conscious builders of communism", isolated enclaves pursued a "normal life", mimicking required rituals (parades and communal labour days) without conviction. The world split into "ours" and "others" – activists, the nomenklatura, dissidents, and criminals (Lakinsky & Kulchynsky, 2021). The term "ours" recurs in late-socialist memoirs and persists in independent Ukraine, often signalling distance from the official state position.

Thus, in Ukrainian social tradition, the rural community evolved alongside the entrenchment of a three-tier institutional system that shaped and perpetuated social isolation as an inherent attribute of rural life. In HI terms, these are durable "rules and routines" whose effects persist via reproduction and conversion into contemporary practices (e.g., boundary-making, gatekeeping, defensive withdrawal), thereby shaping today's reception of newcomers. Layering means adding new rules on top of existing ones, while conversion repurposes existing rules toward new goals (Mahoney & Thelen, 2012). The various forms of social isolation that developed in rural communities over time can be schematically illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Forms of social isolation prevalent in rural territorial communities of Ukraine (evolutionary context)



The most common negative institutional effects resulting from the described destructive socio-economic processes and political phenomena include the mutation and mimicry of rural social institutions (family, local government, cooperation, private property, etc.); the entrenchment of opportunistic behaviour among peasants (mainly in passive forms – lower labour productivity, deviant behaviour, ignoring or covertly sabotaging government decisions, falsification); increased transaction costs in the rural economy, leading to highly inefficient collective farm operations; the weakening of several rural economy institutions and the emergence of an institutional vacuum (especially regarding intermediary organisations, infrastructure, and qualified personnel training); as well as the spread of institutional traps such as barter settlements, bribery, corruption, and counterfeit production. We refer to these as "lock-ins" (locally stable equilibria that are costly to exit), consistent with HI accounts of path dependence (Pierson, 2000).

Character of social isolation in rural territorial communities of Ukraine and the IDPs in current conditions

Two complementary lenses guide the analysis: historical institutionalism, which traces how path-dependent routines, gatekeeping and defensive withdrawal (retreat from wider engagement into familiar in-group routines) persist (Pierson, 2000), and the social capital and integration literature, which highlights the role of linking and bridging ties, together with clear institutional access to documents, services, and decision channels, in reducing isolation in rural hromadas.

All the institutional effects mentioned, which accompanied the process of entrenching social isolation in the Ukrainian rural society over decades, led to the transformation of social isolation into a kind of inherent institutional characteristic of all rural territorial communities in Ukraine. It manifested most noticeably in those communities whose socio-economic development was influenced by agricultural monoculture and their distance from urban agglomerations. This phenomenon became especially pronounced during the initiation and implementation of the administrative-territorial reform in Ukraine (2014–2021), reaching its peak after the large-scale Russian invasion.

In this context, the main institutional factors contributing to the spread of social isolation in Ukrainian rural communities included institutional traps (corruption trap, shadow economy trap, barter transaction trap, and the self-fulfilling pessimistic expectations trap) and the vacuum of important institutions (primarily the lack of regulatory legal acts and unwritten rules regulating interactions between rural residents, local self-government bodies, state authorities, civil society institutions, and businesses). These factors were further aggravated by the opportunistic behaviour (strategic self-interest under weak enforcement) (Williamson, 1985) of rural residents and local elites (manifested in resistance to reforms, information concealment, and even sabotage of management decisions), as well as by institutional dysfunctions such as the mutation and mimicry of institutions, particularly within civil society and local governments.

For example, institutional traps, which still pose one of the greatest threats to the rural economy, evolved mainly due to illicit benefits gained by small but influential local interest groups. This not only reduced the efficiency of using available natural, human, and financial resources in rural territorial communities but also stimulated the spread of various forms of social isolation.

Thus, institutional traps formed the basis for the emergence of a specific form of social isolation among some peasants, such as group or "clan" self-isolation. This mainly concerned corruption, barter, or illegal institutional traps. Their participants tended to isolate themselves from the rest of the rural society, grouping mainly among themselves. This fostered a cautious or even unfriendly attitude towards outsiders, including members of other clans, although informal "non-aggression pacts" were often established. Other community members had little influence and were forced to tolerate the situation.

Outsiders (or "newcomers") threatened participants in institutional traps by risking disruption or information leakage. Urban incomers, researchers, project staff, and

foreign experts often faced "blocking" isolation – a preventive practice allied to clan self-isolation – where they were tacitly or openly "capsuled" away from everyday rural life. Sometimes this appeared hospitable (tours, invitations to public events) yet kept them from the community's real processes; when they sought deeper access, clan brokers mobilised residents to resist and press for their departure. We use capsularisation to mean boundary-making and gatekeeping closure that restricts cross-group interaction (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), and social blocking to mean informal or administrative access barriers for newcomers.

Loyal-type social isolation usually affected temporary visitors to rural communities, such as experts, foreign guests, or relatives visiting from cities. In contrast, "aggressive capsularisation" targeted outsiders seeking to integrate into the local institutional environment – investors, candidates for local government positions, or those aiming for employment in communal enterprises, healthcare, education, or cultural institutions. In social-capital terms, such closure suppresses bridging and linking ties that otherwise could reduce isolation and improve access to services and jobs.

With the appearance of IDPs, they were perceived as "suspicious outsiders" and risked falling into the same "capsulation" trap of social isolation – either of the loyal type (if they declared intentions to migrate abroad, move to another, usually urban, community, or return home after the war) or of the aggressive type (if they attempted to start a business or find permanent work locally, especially in government bodies).

The empirical references in this section draw on our 2022–2023 focus group discussions (FGDs) with IDPs across five rural communities in Lviv region (plus a small supplementary questionnaire and a closing forum used for context). Where shares are mentioned, they indicate relative salience across FGDs and are not population estimates.

FGD findings (2022–2023, five rural communities in Lviv region) show that, despite attention from local authorities, many displaced persons did not perceive genuine interest in cooperation from the local population or businesses. Participants frequently reported poor information about employment options, retraining, and the host community's culture and economic traditions. Support was experienced mainly as material and household assistance rather than integration, so many IDPs did not plan to remain in host communities, preferring to return home after the war or to move to cities in search of better opportunities.

Unlike traps rooted in illegalisation and corruption, the institutional trap of self-fulfilling pessimistic expectations operates through the internalisation of destructive forecasts, not the pursuit of illicit gains. Rather than "capsulating" outsiders, participants adopt opportunistic behaviour to minimise perceived risks such as rising unemployment, inflation or poverty. As a result, "carriers of threat", including IDPs, face isolation via ignoring, concealment of essential information, the creation of informational barriers and the spread of information asymmetries. Those least known to trap participants are most exposed, which makes IDPs particularly vulnerable. We treat this as an expectations-driven lock-in: defensive behaviour becomes self-reinforcing unless countered by trusted linking ties and clear institutional access.

The systemic effects of the self-fulfilling pessimistic expectations trap, contributing to the deepening of social isolation of IDPs in rural territorial communities of Ukraine,

as outlined by Borshchevskyi (2014), can be summarised as follows: widespread demoralisation caused by poverty, hardship, and war-related disruptions; loss of belief in the possibility of personal well-being; consolidation of social pessimism and a sense of hopelessness; proliferation of deviant behaviours (e.g., alcoholism, theft, idleness); internalisation of the notion that "social activity causes problems"; growing distrust toward those who hold different views; and marginalisation and exclusion of "alternative" social elements, including IDPs.

Another important factor contributing to the social isolation of IDPs in rural communities has been the long-standing institutional mutations and mimicry of key institutions. These include the erosion of local self-government's core functions, the motivational distortion of civil society organisations, and dysfunctions within the business sector. Instead of genuinely supporting IDP settlement and integration, some actors merely simulate activity – civil society efforts often remain superficial, limited to the scope of grant-funded initiatives, while local authorities and businesses tend to see IDPs more as a burden than a potential resource.

For example, research among Ukrainian IDPs revealed that in rural territorial communities, they often sense a lack of genuine engagement from local authorities in addressing their needs (Integration of internally displaced persons in host communities, 2023). Some respondents also reported excessive bureaucracy in administrative procedures, while cooperation with civil society organizations is frequently perceived as passive and ineffective.

It is also important to note that the prolonged hostilities in Ukraine – and their expected social and economic consequences for rural areas (e.g., damage to energy infrastructure, demographic decline, inflation, rising prices, mobilisation, and casualties) – intensify the destructive effects of institutional dysfunctions contributing to the social isolation of IDPs in rural communities.

For instance, in everyday conversations and even expert discourse in rear regions, narratives increasingly place blame on IDPs for their own hardships. This is often linked to the perception that residents of occupied or frontline regions had supported pro-Russian parties, and fled rather than defending their homes. Such views only deepen the divide and hinder the integration of IDPs, especially in rural areas.

In this context, it is particularly worth mentioning the traumatic social experience of Ukrainian village residents, which has become ingrained in their institutional memory. Such psychological experiences often resurface in critical situations, making IDPs especially vulnerable to the effects of these historical projections. First, many IDPs are Russian-speaking, which may provoke caution among predominantly Ukrainian-speaking rural populations. Second, they come from regions historically associated with repressive or authoritarian forces that brought suffering to peasants in central and western Ukraine. Third, cultural and mental differences between IDPs and local residents often require the latter to step out of their comfort zone – something particularly difficult in conservative rural settings. As a result, it is often easier for communities to distance themselves from newcomers, pushing them into social isolation rather than working toward integration.

Some rural communities are now so depleted that they struggle to meet even basic needs. Assistance is often delivered on a "take what you are given" basis, without

regard to actual needs, and forced migrants are increasingly seen as a burden rather than a resource. Community activists also note low social activity and weak job search among IDPs; in some places fewer than 1% are registered with employment centres even after three years without work. Support, therefore, narrows to material aid, fostering dependence on subsidies, fatigue among hosts, and growing alienation. In such conditions, the drivers of isolation intensify (Stelmakh, 2024). By contrast, where rural administrations establish clear channels to services such as documents, employment centres, and retraining, and involve IDPs in local councils or volunteer initiatives, participants report lower isolation and more frequent bridging contacts.

Another interesting social phenomenon that emerged in this context is the transfer of the objective spatial division of people, which existed before the war, into subjective social alienation within the same rural territorial communities. People meet in the streets, shops, hospitals, schools, and on public transport, even live nearby, yet remain mentally in different regions, separated by an invisible distance. The IDPs, even without much contact with one another, often form a distinct social group with its own psychological orientations, visible in politics, leisure, work, religion, parenting and daily routines. Feeling out of place, they drift into social isolation, which in rural settings is reinforced by the absence of established IDP networks that could ease loneliness and counter alienation.

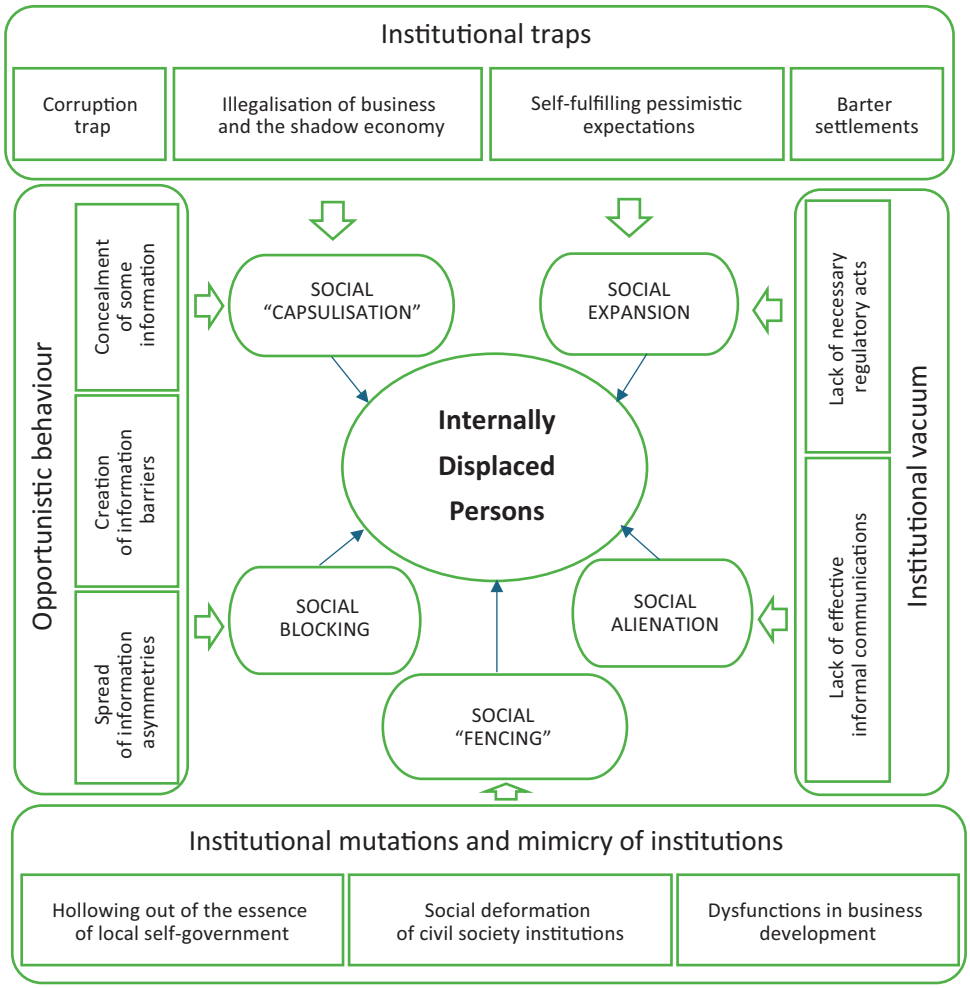
In summary, the main factors and forms of the spread of social isolation of IDPs in rural territorial communities of Ukraine in the current conditions are depicted in Figure 2.

Thus, the main preconditions for social isolation of IDPs in contemporary rural territorial communities of Ukraine include institutional dysfunctions related to the closed nature of host communities, pessimistic expectations shared by both IDPs and local residents, opportunistic behaviour on both sides, and low motivation among local authorities, businesses, and civil society actors. Another factor is the limited social activity of many IDPs. In rural areas – more conservative and less financially capable than urban ones – social isolation often negatively affects the psychological well-being of IDPs, causing depression, loneliness, a loss of optimism, and reduced engagement. These communities also offer fewer employment opportunities, poorer living conditions, and limited access to transport, mobile networks, and the internet. As a result, many IDPs seek alternatives elsewhere, which in turn hampers their integration and deepens isolation. In such a context, social isolation becomes institutionalised and begins to reproduce itself. Consistent with our framework, isolation is highest where historical gatekeeping persists and institutional access is opaque; it is mitigated where linking and bridging ties and reliable service channels are present.

Social isolation of the IDPs in rural territorial communities of Ukraine: factors of rooting and mechanisms for overcoming it

We interpret the patterns below through historical institutionalism (HI), which highlights path-dependent gatekeeping and defensive withdrawal, and through the social capital and integration lens, emphasising how linking and bridging ties, together

Figure 2. Main factors and forms of the spread of social isolation in rural territorial communities of Ukraine



with clear institutional access to documents, services, and decision channels, reduce isolation in rural hromadas.

The described models of social isolation of IDPs in rural territorial communities of Ukraine are still in the early stages of development, although their institutional roots stretch deep into historical traditions. It is important to accurately identify the key systemic effects that contribute to this process, in order to prevent social isolation from becoming a stable and self-sustaining phenomenon. Otherwise, it could gradually generate complex negative consequences across economic, socio-political, humanitarian, and security dimensions, potentially limiting the future opportunities for the post-war recovery and sustainable development of rural territorial communities.

In HI terms, such effects may harden into local "lock-ins" unless offset by inclusive routines and cross-group ties.

One of the main aspects to consider is the administrative and managerial dimension. For rural territorial communities of Ukraine, the arrival of the IDPs was largely unplanned, requiring local authorities to address new organisational challenges, find additional funding for social services, and solve housing and employment issues for IDPs. At the same time, the burden of responsibilities increased. Furthermore, as noted in the Integration of internally displaced persons into territorial communities' study (Novikova et al., 2018), the situation often created preconditions for rising social tensions, especially as opportunities for the local population to access education, healthcare, and utilities diminished. Where rural administrations clarified access points (one-stop windows, documented procedures) and involved IDPs in consultative bodies, participants reported lower perceived isolation – consistent with the role of linking ties.

Given the described trends, there is a justified concern that ignoring this problem may lead to the emergence of dangerous phenomena in the near future. First, there is the risk of further degradation of the social capital of rural territorial communities. Alongside existing demographic challenges, mental-psychological and socio-political problems would gradually accumulate. Particularly alarming is that these issues may develop latently at first, but could manifest acutely within a few years.

Furthermore, the security aspect will remain crucial in decision-making at the level of rural territorial communities. The escalation of social conflicts, provoked by the consequences of social isolation of IDPs and other groups, could undermine social cohesion. This would affect sensitive areas such as property distribution, business diversification, civil society development, the quality of governance, and democratic practices. Ignoring the problem may also lead to a significant decline in community governability, particularly concerning property use, land allocation, and power distribution.

For example, in Lviv region, controversies arose around investors – former pro-Russian deputies who relocated businesses from Kharkiv. They were criticised for refusing to cooperate with local authorities and for importing large numbers of workers from the east, potentially harming social processes in host communities. Activists warned that, if this ended badly in small rural localities, even locals could soon face social isolation, while oligarchic relocated firms might use "arriving" IDPs to push their representatives into local self-government and reshape governance. Local entrepreneurs also reported unhealthy lobbying by central and regional authorities in favour of the newcomers, which they saw as violating fair competition. In some communities, radical protests occurred (Bundz, 2022). Such episodes, if unmanaged, can reinforce boundary-making and deepen isolation.

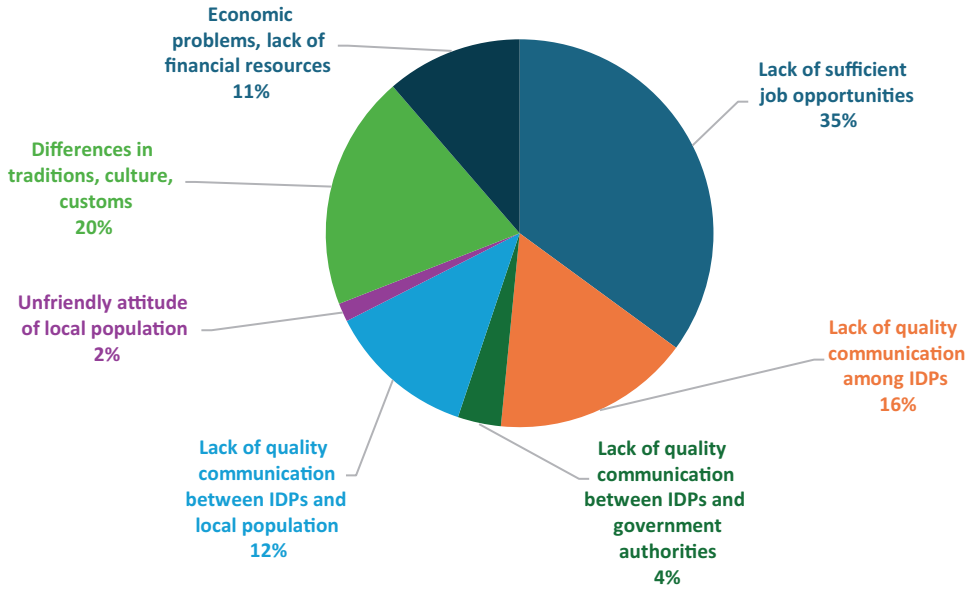
If we return to the main problems accompanying the social isolation of IDPs in rural territorial communities of Ukraine, the most important issue is the lack of sufficient job opportunities and low financial capacity. This is reflected in the low welfare of rural residents and, in some cases, their poverty.

Also noteworthy are several so-called "communication" problems, which are caused by the inability of local authorities to effectively manage information and gaps

in the development of information infrastructure (primarily regarding access to quality mobile communication and the internet). In the social-capital perspective, both constraints suppress bridging contacts (with employers, associations) and weaken linking channels to services, reinforcing isolation.

Thus, based on exploratory qualitative evidence from focus group discussions (FGDs, non-probability sample) held in five rural territorial communities of Lviv region (Yavorivska, Pustomytivska, Stryiska, Horodotska, Drohobytska) in 2023, nearly 70% of participants highlighted insufficient job opportunities in the community, and over 60% pointed to various "communication" problems (Fig. 3). Our primary material comes from FGDs with the IDPs (not one-to-one interviews); any percentages in the text indicate the relative prominence of themes across groups rather than population estimates.

Figure 3. Main factors causing the problem of social isolation of IDPs in rural territorial communities of Ukraine (according to the survey results)



Thus, the main factors of social isolation of IDPs in rural territorial communities of Ukraine include:

- Lack of sufficient job opportunities, which forces IDPs to search for jobs in neighbouring cities or even in regional centres, often 20–30 or even 50 km away from their temporary residence, thus limiting their ability and desire to integrate into the host rural community – as a result, they remain relatively distant from its problems and real interests (limits bridging ties to local employers and weakens attachment);
- Presence of cultural barriers, which complicates the process of social integration of IDPs into the host rural communities; the situation is worsened by the limited

opportunities to obtain information about the community and its culture and historical traditions, especially considering that communication with local residents is not sufficiently active, including through the centralized relocation of IDPs mostly in budget institutions or remote rural settlements (sustains boundary-making and what participants described as "capsularisation");

- Lack of quality communication among IDPs themselves partially caused by the shortage of targeted efforts in this direction by local authorities, and partially by the mental characteristics of the IDPs themselves, who do not feel a particular need to group together in new places of residence: some expect support from local authorities, others independently search for work or a new place to live, while others work remotely with clients with whom they have maintained business contacts (bonding ties often remain elsewhere, while local bridging and linking ties fail to develop).

Notably, the IDPs almost never reported overt ill-will from local residents or authorities (about 2% of responses). This suggests that isolation is driven primarily by institutional and organisational factors such as opaque access, thin service networks, and limited bridging and linking opportunities rather than by explicit hostility. The Summary that follows synthesises practical mechanisms that flow from this diagnosis while retaining Table 1 as a compact reference.

Summary: practical implications for rural hromadas

This section collates practice-oriented implications that remain secondary to the analysis. The recommendations align with our historical-institutionalist reading, which emphasises reducing path-dependent gatekeeping, and with the social capital and integration lens, which emphasises strengthening linking and bridging ties and institutional access in rural hromadas.

The first priority is to close the communication vacuum. IDPs often lack convenient opportunities to connect both with one another and with local authorities. Creating accessible internet platforms, leisure centres, coworking spaces and shared public areas can provide low-barrier entry points for contact. Engagement in public councils, business associations and civil society bodies within host communities should be encouraged. Local-history walks, joint volunteering and community events can further strengthen social ties and expand linking and bridging connections to employers and service providers.

The second priority is targeted education and skills provision. Joint programmes for the IDPs and local residents in digital and financial literacy, entrepreneurship, marketing, international partnerships, fundraising and community leadership can reduce capability gaps. Funding should come from state institutions and local authorities, complemented by business partners and international donors. Simple co-design and light follow-up (e.g., mentoring or job-matching) help consolidate gains.

The third priority is the use of "tactful encouragement" tools – light-touch behavioural nudges that lower entry costs and normalise participation. This includes social technologies, gamification and advocacy for necessary social transformations. It

is important to involve practitioners from the public sector, business, universities and research centres, particularly those with strong experience and partnerships in the EU. The three priorities above are operationalised in Table 1.

Table 1. Mechanisms for overcoming the social isolation of IDPs in rural territorial communities of Ukraine (operationalises three levers: fill the communication vacuum; build skills; use tactful encouragement)

Proposed mechanisms	Priorities and directions for overcoming social isolation of IDPs		
	Filling the communication vacuum	**Educational and training work**	**Tools of "tactful encouragement"**
Institutional	Development of intersectoral partnerships with the involvement of IDPs	Implementation of special educational programmes for IDPs	Creation of coworking spaces and creative hubs for IDPs
Administrative and managerial	Creation of IDP councils within local self-government bodies	Involving vocational education institutions in the retraining of IDPs	Implementation of nudge technologies: social inhibition, group synergy
Informational and communicational	Organisation of regular communication events with the participation of IDPs	Conducting advocacy campaigns among the local population	Creation of local social networks and databases for IDPs
Financial	Funding programmes for informing IDPs about job opportunities, etc.	Funding training programmes for IDPs, payment for trainers' services	Grants for IDPs aimed at their better integration into the community
Socio-psychological	Organisation of joint leisure activities for IDPs and local residents (sports games, etc.)	Conducting educational tours of the community for IDPs, excursions, tourist hikes	Gamification of the social integration process for IDPs (quizzes, competitions, tournaments)

Given the long-term development prospects, including the post-war recovery of rural territorial communities, priority should be given to informational-communication and socio-psychological mechanisms for overcoming IDP social isolation. Special attention should focus on advocacy campaigns for local residents and businesses (highlighting the benefits of cooperation with IDPs), as well as on organising educational tours, excursions, and hikes for IDPs. These activities can be combined with gamification elements such as quizzes, competitions, tournaments, and joint sports events to normalise everyday contact and reduce boundary-making.

Quality funding for IDP social integration programmes is crucial, including informing about job opportunities, retraining, and conducting workshops (financial mechanism supported by institutional and administrative-managerial tools). Additional

synergy can be achieved through creating coworking spaces, creative hubs, and clubs for IDPs, especially for youth, and implementing over-technologies (behavioural design and nudge-based approaches) to enhance social integration.

To implement these changes effectively, the administrative and managerial mechanisms of rural territorial community development in Ukraine should be modernised. As argued by Borshchevskyi, Tsybulska and Chemerys (2024), shifting from bureaucratic routines to project-management approaches can broaden funding sources for integration activities and remove factors that sustain isolation, including institutional legacies, weak intersectoral cooperation and decision-making inertia. A simple results frame – tracking participation in events, taking up services and documents, and local job placements by IDPs – can help administrations iterate and scale what works.

Conclusions

The problem of social isolation in rural territorial communities of Ukraine has deep socio-psychological and historical roots. It has been evolving and entrenching itself over a long period, largely due to numerous institutional deformations that negatively impacted the development of Ukrainian villages and their social capital. These deformations were especially prominent during the era of the command-administrative economic system and were driven by political repression, forced collectivisation, artificially induced famines, and the resulting catastrophic socio-psychological consequences for rural residents and their way of life.

Given this, the problem of social isolation in rural territorial communities of Ukraine evolved throughout the 20th century, taking on increasingly new forms and methods of entrenchment. Even after the collapse of the totalitarian Soviet system, it did not lose its relevance. Indeed, in the context of Ukraine's restoration of independence, social isolation became a kind of response to new political processes and challenges. During the economic realities of the transitional period, characterised by mass privatisation and the distribution of former state property, the creation of new rural territorial communities, the formation of local self-government bodies, the development of market infrastructure in the countryside, and the arrival of private investors and their foreign partners interested in investing in Ukraine's rural economy, new institutional factors for the spread of various forms of social isolation emerged.

Thus, the Russian military expansion in 2014, as well as its second phase, which began with the large-scale invasion in 2022, took place against the backdrop of the well-known and long-standing problem of social isolation in Ukrainian villages. As a result, the appearance of a significant number of IDPs and their relocation to rural communities in central and western Ukraine from regions near the combat zones naturally accompanied the fact that these people often fell within the scope of the institutional phenomenon of social isolation.

The main manifestations of this isolation were: social "capsularisation" (or "locking" of IDPs in a limited circle of social contacts), social expansion (manifestations of various forms of pressure on IDPs from the local population through differences in customs, household behaviour, or culture), social blocking (denial of IDPs access to

certain sectors of the local economy, usually the development of their own businesses or entry into government institutions), social alienation (residents of host communities tolerate IDPs but do not accept them as "their own," causing IDPs to feel like "outcasts" and generating feelings of ostracism), and social "fencing" (when residents of host communities close themselves off in their own social circles, leaving IDPs with a very limited scope for establishing social contacts).

The main factors contributing to the spread of social isolation of IDPs in rural territorial communities of modern Ukraine include: numerous economic problems reducing the quality of life of the local population, creating a lack of job opportunities, and weakening the financial capacity of communities; cultural differences between IDPs and residents of host rural communities, which generate psychological and customary barriers; and insufficiently developed communication among IDPs themselves, caused both by objective difficulties (the specifics of their spatial settlement, gaps in communication infrastructure) and subjective ones (lack of desire to communicate with other IDPs or expectation of soon leaving the host community and changing their social environment).

These results have conceptual consequences. The findings support a historical-institutionalist reading of rural isolation: long-run routines of gatekeeping and defensive withdrawal persist as path-dependent constraints in today's displacement setting. At the same time, the evidence refines the social capital and integration perspective by showing that in low-density, service-thin environments it is linking and bridging rather than bonding ties, together with dependable access to documents and services, that most consistently reduce isolation. Conceptually, we specify how rural gatekeeping appears on the ground (informal boundary work similar to "capsularisation") and identify improving institutional access as a practical lever similar to conversion in historical institutionalism (repurposing existing routines toward openness).

These findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive. Evidence derives from five FGDs with IDPs in rural western hromadas (2022–2023; non-probability sample). Reported "shares" reflect the relative salience of themes across groups and are not population estimates. Participants were recruited purposively via local services; self-selection may over-represent more engaged or better-informed IDPs, and social desirability may colour accounts of interactions with authorities and hosts. The design is cross-sectional with limited triangulation (supplementary IDIs with managers of relocated enterprises and a closing community forum inform context but are not the primary evidence). Our analytical labels (e.g., "capsularisation," "social blocking") are theory-informed and require further operational validation. The geographic focus on low-density western rural settings and wartime fluidity limits statistical generalisation; our aim is analytic generalisation and transferability to similar contexts.

Looking ahead, several lines of inquiry follow. Future work should combine representative surveys with embedded FGDs and IDIs across rural and small-town settings (west, centre, and east) to test prevalence; follow cohorts over time to track networks, service access and labour reintegration; link administrative data (social protection, employment services) with transport and service geographies to quantify access frictions; run quasi-experimental or pragmatic trials (e.g., one-stop desks,

transport vouchers, time-bounded coworking) to assess effects on isolation and jobs; map networks to distinguish bonding versus bridging and linking ties and their wellbeing correlates; and pursue comparative rural cases beyond Ukraine (e.g, Colombia, Nigeria, and Syria) to test how historical legacies condition integration pathways.

Finally, practical implications are collated in the Summary to keep recommendations clearly subordinate to the analysis; in brief, addressing isolation requires coordinated institutional, administrative-managerial, informational-communication, financial and socio-psychological measures. Special attention should be paid to "tactful encouragement" tools (such as over-technologies, coworking spaces, creative hubs and advocacy initiatives), closing information gaps, and sustained educational work, including retraining IDPs and deepening their knowledge about host communities, their culture and traditions.

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