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“I have arrived in an apartment, but not in the country”

Remote Work and the War in Ukraine

Working from home has become a normal part of life for many since the Covid-19 pandemic. Having two or three days to work from home can save commuting time, free up time to squeeze in some household chores or allow for some focused work without distractions.

But for Ukrainians displaced by the Russian invasion of their home country, remote work is more: it allows them to keep in touch with Ukraine and their lives before the war. Researchers from the REMAKING project in Germany, Czechia, and Ukraine have examined the experiences of Ukrainians under temporary protection with remote work. They found that paid work is part of a constellation of relationships that have transformed spatially through displacement.

Remote work provides a connection with home …

Digital technologies enable many people to work together from almost anywhere: they do not necessarily have to be in the same room – or even the same country – as their colleagues anymore. Instead, they can also do their work from home, a coworking space or a plane.

As a consequence, when they had to leave their homes after the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion, the respondents in this study did not automatically have to leave their jobs behind. Many of them had experiences with remote work since the Covid-19 pandemic and now joined online meetings from Germany. This way, they stayed connected to colleagues, some of whom stayed in Ukraine, while others were scattered all across Europe since the beginning of the war.

Remote work was also a strategy for those who would have liked to find a job in Germany: because they struggled to find a job that matched their qualifications and their professional field – such as IT or project management – without a local network and German language skills, they pivoted towards international freelance work. They sometimes also work for clients in various countries in parallel.

Some internationally operating organisations have adapted to the situation: the Swedish company Sigma Software, for example, operated a big office in Kharkiv in Eastern Ukraine before the full-scale invasion. To prevent losing their Ukrainian employees, the opened offices in several European countries.

… and prevents a connection with the new place of residence

Ukrainians under temporary protection thus use translocal work as a strategy to cope with the severe uncertainty that they face through war and displacement. At the same time, it sometimes makes them feel as if they were cut off from their current place of residence. One respondent explained it like this: “I feel like I have arrived in an apartment, but not in the country”.

The connections that remote work creates sometimes come at the cost of relationships with one’s immediate surroundings. There is often only little time for a language course, there are no local colleagues to interact with, and as most work from home, there are few encounters with those around them. In addition, digital connections with colleagues in Ukraine are often disrupted by electricity and internet cuts – so connections are anything but seamless here, as well.

This is also evident in professional networks: job recommendations or the exchange on developments in the field, which used to be discussed over a glass of wine during an event, have moved to digital platforms like Slack or Telegram, but also visits across Europe. These networks provide support by sharing knowledge, references, and the chance to share experiences. Remote work is also a strategy to stay relevant with one’s professional network in Ukraine; at the same time, many describe that the feel a growing distance when they only communicate digitally.

Care work over smartphone

Besides paid work, care work also plays an important role in the everyday lives of many Ukrainians. The war has separated many families spatially: because men who could be eligible for army service often cannot leave the country, many women navigate care for their children or elderly relatives in their destination country on their own.

At the same time, care work is also performed across a distance: for instance, relationships are sustained through video calls or messages, but also through regular visits with relatives and friends. Ukrainians temporarily travel home, for example, to be there for their families, or they meet in other European countries; they often also work remotely from there to make longer visits possible.

Remote work makes the lines between paid employment and domestic care work even blurrier; for example, when parents manage paid work and childcare in parallel at home. That can make it easier to coordinate these tasks, but it also leads to workdays that stretch far into the evening and turns every spare minute into potential working time.

Volunteer work contributes to feeling at home

Despite this high workload, many of the people who fled the war in Ukraine volunteer locally, for example in an urban gardening project or a football club. They thus contribute to shaping their local surroundings and make up for the lack of local social connections through remote work.

Local support initiatives also support Ukrainians with settling in and feeling at home in Germany; Ukrainians who have migrated further in the past often contribute substantially to those initiatives. They offer childcare, for example, or share their knowledge on labour market integration.

At the same time, volunteer work and activism also happen remotely: Ukrainians abroad collect donations, for example, or offer online tutoring classes for high school students in Ukraine.

Thus, remote work can help sustain connections back home and beyond. At the same time, this sometimes comes at the cost of relationships with one’s immediate surroundings. Paid work, personal relationships and volunteer work are interwoven and each happen locally as well as remotely.