

# “Does Ukraine need us?”

The results of the survey in the areas of Donbas that are not controlled by the Ukrainian Government, the analysis of the opinions and the conclusions by a conflict expert



# Imprint

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## Foreword



**Tim Judah**

British journalist, author of the book  
'In War Time: Stories from Ukraine'

If experience has taught me anything it is that sometimes you need distance to see things. I am not talking physical distance of course but emotional distance.

Let me explain. During the 1990s I covered almost every moment of the Yugoslav wars. Actually more: I lived them, even more than most Yugoslavs in the sense that, as a journalist, I not only covered all of the conflicts, in Croatia, in Bosnia, in Kosovo – but unlike them I was able to move back and forth across the frontlines. Then, after the wars, I continued to cover this region. My next story will be about what 25-year-olds in Bosnia think. Why? Because the war there ended 25 years ago.

So what is the connection? In April 2014 in Ukraine I was stunned with a feeling of *déjà vu*. I saw euphoric men given guns, manning checkpoints and screaming about “fascists”. Suddenly they thought their humdrum lives had meaning. They too could be like their parents, grandparents or great grandparents with their very own tales of fighting a just war or rising in revolution. Then, in Donetsk, I was invited to a dinner with a large number of people and, as a foreigner, they asked

me to give a speech. I said that not only had I just seen these checkpoints but that I had seen them before in Croatia and in Bosnia and that they meant that war was coming.

The other guests disagreed. It was not just that they did not believe me it was that they did not want to believe me. And that I had seen before too of course. As war raged in Croatia, Bosnians smiled and said, “It won’t happen here, because everyone knows just how awful it would be if it did.”

And now here we are again. A quarter of century since the end of the Bosnian war and almost seven years since the beginning of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and everything I have read in this report is ever so familiar again.

There is a caveat though. There were many similarities between the Balkans and eastern Ukraine but there were also some key differences. The most important was or is that in the Balkans the conflicts were drawn on clear ethnic or at least identity lines. Serbs (Orthodox) v Croats (Catholics) v Bosniaks (Muslims) v Albanians (not Slavs). In eastern Ukraine the difference between Russians and Ukrainians was entirely fluid – but as this report makes clear – with every year that passes that is ever less of the case. If in the non-government-held territories Ukrainian has been expunged and for many on the other side Russian is the language of the aggressor, then new identities are being formed. Should we be surprised that the report reveals that younger people can be more nationalistic than their parents? We have seen the same in the Balkans. The young have no memory of the time when everyone lived together and schools mould the thinking of the new generation. In the Balkans new identities have emerged – Bulgarians and Greeks for example are enraged that Macedonians think they are Macedonians, because 100 years ago they might not have done. In the second half of the twentieth century Kosovo Albanian identity morphed from being a regional one to a national



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one. In Bosnia, younger Serbs are no longer just Bosnian Serbs but identify with Srpska, the para-state in which they live. Now the same is happening in Donetsk and Luhansk.

The idea that we must know what people are thinking – even if it is not the entire story because people there are not free to speak their minds – is entirely valid. But it does not mean of course that, just because you know what people on the other side of the line think reunification or peace is possible. Quite apart from the fact that Kyiv and Moscow may have their own reasons for keeping things as they are, the fact is that in recent times, no other directly comparable conflict has ended peacefully with people reconciled. Don't forget of course too that the biggest lie in international relations is that “there is no solution through violence”. In 1995 Croatia solved the problem of the breakaway Serbian republic of Krajina by expunging it from the map militarily. In 2009 the Sri Lankan army crushed the breakaway Tamil state on the island. In 2020, after more than a quarter of century, Azerbaijan struck and crushed the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh leading to columns of refugees, some of whom set fire to their houses before leaving, in scenes powerfully reminiscent of the Balkan wars.

In 1995 in Croatia one Serb-held region however was surrendered without a fight and there Serbs continue to live, however to what extent there has ever been reconciliation with Croats there is questionable. Serbs and Albanians live parallel lives in Kosovo as do Macedonians and Albanians in North Macedonia – although there, despite conflict in 2001, all governments contain Albanians. In Bosnia, there was no revenge killing after the war but every year journalists write that the country is on the brink of war again although it never happens.

What does this all mean and what are the lessons for Ukraine?

The strange thing is that in the years since the end of the Yugoslav wars people have lived on different planes.

On the one hand for example, Bosnia is clearly a dysfunctional state. Across the region young people talk the nationalistic talk and so on. And yet, and yet...

Many years ago I went to interview a newspaper editor in Bulgaria. At the end I asked him if he knew editors from Belgrade and Zagreb and so on. He said that during the wars of the 1990s he met them frequently but afterwards he lost touch with them. “Why was that?” I asked him. “Because they were only interested in talking to each other and went back to doing that,” he said. It dawned on me that however much had been destroyed during the wars there was still a huge amount people had in common and that included family and friends now divided by new borders and much of what has happened since then has been the reconnection of everything from families to business.

At the top level I even get the impression that whatever they say about one another for their media the region's leaders see one another more often than they see their own ministers. They seem to tour the region and Europe, meeting one another in conferences, forums, official gatherings and so on every week. At the same time ordinary people too may do the same in a way. They may say if asked that they “hate” the other side but they still want to go on holiday there and eat their familiar food and listen to their music. In that sense Serbs, Croats and Bosnians and so on don't think of one another as “real” foreigners. In the past week I took part in a conference in which young researchers from all of the Balkan countries discussed papers they had written together, discussed common problems, discussed possible solution and swapped data and experiences. This is today's normal. Much of the media, politicians, priests and so on say what they have to say to keep their tribes of voters on side but, at the same time,



real life where people just have get on with things, carries on.

In 2014 I saw war coming in a way my dinner companions in Donetsk could not while, on the checkpoints, they foresaw rapid “victory”. No one wanted to admit to themselves that either they would have to flee or that very soon they would become trapped in a giant, isolated and rotting Transnistria or South Ossetia. When Ukraine did not collapse, it then became clear to me that this was exactly what was about to happen.

So now of course, while it is important to know what people think and feel, it is important to be clear-headed too. Most conflicts such as these go on for generations. Cypriots have talked of reunification since 1974. Abkhazia, Transnistria and so on have existed as breakaways for so long that everyone in the rest of the world has long forgotten what these conflicts were about. In all of these places though NGOs have played their roles and brought people together and made an often intangible difference. It is very rare though that the political stars align such that politicians on both sides who have an

interest and ability to strike a deal are in power at the same time. But it can happen, as it did in Northern Ireland and between Greece and North Macedonia for example.

Sometimes it can seem like hopeless work though. You bring people together, you work on projects, you research what people think and then another year has gone by and a solution seems further off than ever. And yet, on another plane people are getting on with the rest of their lives. Then, pressure here and there, position papers, ideas published as reports seem to come and go with no result – but actually each one is a brick which builds something, does something good, filters up to politicians and each in its way makes a difference. That is the lesson of the Balkans which can have relevance for Ukraine. Conflicts as such may not have a solution, but they can be managed and things can be done to make people’s lives better, to contribute to lessening hatred and to increasing understanding. Then one day, if ever the stars do actually align, maybe things can change and people will not be total strangers to one another.



# Survey “Six years behind the frontline: what do people living in non-government-controlled territories think about Ukraine, the war and the future?”

This survey is the result of 35 interviews with people who live in areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions that are not controlled by the Ukrainian government. The selection is not representative. The interviews were conducted with people whom the interviewers know personally. This survey is not a full-fledged opinion poll. The interviews took place in 2018-2019.



# Introduction

**The conflict has a direct impact on**

**3 000 000** residents in eastern Ukraine

The **427km-long front line** divides the government-controlled part of Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the self-proclaimed 'Donetsk people's republic' and the self-proclaimed 'Luhansk people's republic'<sup>1</sup>



Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict in eastern Ukraine has had a direct impact on the lives of more than three million people in the region. For the six years already, a 427km-long contact line and the system of entry-exit crossing points (in total, there are five crossing points in two regions) has been dividing people in Donetsk and Luhansk regions: those living in government-controlled territory and those in temporarily occupied territory. In the conflict zone, people have suffered from the war – physically, psychologically and economically.

Human suffering is the same on both sides of the contact line, yet life is very different, especially with regards to the political situation, employment opportunities and media environment. While there are still ties between communities, families and friends, objective non-politicised information about daily life is scarce and sporadic. The reality in which people live in occupied Donbas – propaganda, militarization, human rights violations, lack of free media, blocked crossing points – contributed to the alienation. At the same time, such factors as the simplified procedure of distribution of the Russian passports, recognition of diplomas and other documents issued by the de facto 'authorities', concert tours of Russian singers and actors put the occupied Donbas more and more under the influence of the Russian Federation. All of this contributes to the growing mental distance of the non-government-controlled area (NGCA) from the rest of Ukraine.

This publication aims to address the lack of public exchange of opinions across the contact line and within Ukraine, to create the space to present views of people living in non-government-controlled territory, to support the development of a public discussion about the possibilities for reintegration.

For many reasons, the voice of people from NGCA rarely reaches the rest of Ukraine. This research is a certain platform for their personal stories. We have gathered opinions and thoughts of men and women living across the contact line. They speak about the impact of the armed conflict on their lives, about economic difficulties and survival techniques, about their relations with family and friends on the other side of the front line. This research also describes the way people perceive Ukraine and its government, as well as their views on communications with people living in government-controlled territory. Adolescents (16-18 years old) and their vision of

<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter – self-proclaimed or so-called 'DPR' and 'LPR'

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the future are of particular interest in the study, but also of particular concern, since their views on the situation appear to be the most radical. This research can be useful for government institutions and civil society organizations that

are engaged in dialogue processes, work with the theme of memory and reconciliation, and are ready to contribute to strengthening contacts between civilians on both sides of the contact line.

### Terminology

When using direct quotes, we preserve the terminology of the interviewees. It does not mean that the DRA or the German Federal Foreign Office agree with this terminology or with the opinions presented in this publication. Since the majority of the interviews were conducted in Russian, the quotes contain Russian transliteration of people's and geographical names which is different from the official Ukrainian transliteration.

When referring to the armed conflict, we use various terminology, including the terminology of international organizations, a glossary of civil society organizations, and the official Ukrainian terminology that refers to the non-government-controlled territory as to the certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine (ORDLO). This terminology is also used in the Minsk agreements.

## Methodology

Representative data from the non-government-controlled areas of Ukraine is scarce due to the lack of access and the presence of security threats for both researchers and respondents. Available data include phone surveys conducted by REACH initiative, with a focus on the humanitarian needs in the region.<sup>2</sup> A German think tank ZOIS (Zentrum für Osteuropa und Internationale Studien) organized phone surveys in 2016 and 2019, addressing issues of identity (citizenship, ethnicity and language), as well as transnational links.<sup>3</sup> Ukrainian sociology centres<sup>4</sup> and think tanks<sup>5</sup> have also conducted phone surveys.

2 [https://www.impact-repository.org/document/reach/234360b4/reach\\_ukr\\_flowchart\\_eastukraine\\_cclmovement\\_20feb2019.pdf](https://www.impact-repository.org/document/reach/234360b4/reach_ukr_flowchart_eastukraine_cclmovement_20feb2019.pdf)

3 [https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOIS\\_Reports/ZOIS\\_Report\\_3\\_2019.pdf](https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOIS_Reports/ZOIS_Report_3_2019.pdf)

4 <https://nv.ua/ukraine/politics/opros-na-donbasse-radio-nv-novosti-ukrainy-50052818.html>, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/donbass-realii/30259668.html>

5 <https://dif.org.ua/article/chto-dumayut-v-dnr-i-lnr-o-prichinakh-voyny-na-donbasse-opros>





35  
interviews

19  
men



16  
women

The age of the  
respondents

16 - 67 years

Among those who participated  
in the survey were

IT specialists

Businessmen or  
businesswomen

People working  
in education

Pensioners

Housewives

The analysis shows that numerous stakeholders often doubt the validity of the surveys in non-government-controlled areas. These doubts derive from generally valid assumptions that people in the NGCA are cautious to speak freely and express their honest opinion, especially if it is critical of the regime established in certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions (ORDLO).

To prepare this publication, 35 interviews were conducted. To address the above-mentioned issues of the lack of security, trust and freedom of expression, the interviewees were talking to people they know and trust. As the questionnaires contained explicit questions about interaction and communication across the contact line, we may have received more responses from people who have a tendency towards being open for dialogue and interaction.

This means that the selection of opinions is not representative. Views and quotes presented in this publication should not be perceived as a full-fledged reflection of public opinion in NGCA.

The interviews were conducted at the end of 2018 and in the first quarter of 2019. Out of 35 respondents, 19 were male and 16 were female. Twenty-five people were under the age of 35. The youngest person was sixteen, and the most senior interviewee was 67 years old. Around half of the respondents were school graduates or university students. Some of the respondents represented education, business or IT spheres. Two pensioners and several housewives were also among the interviewees. Thus, this non-representative sample does give insights into the views and opinions from different spheres of life.

For privacy and security reasons, names of the interviewees in this publication have been changed. Participation in the survey was voluntary and under informed consent.

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# The war became the new normal

More than six years have passed since the war broke out in Ukrainian Donbas. Our interlocutors in Luhansk and Donetsk mostly refer to the conflict in the past tense as “the events of 2014-2015”, when the heaviest hostilities took place. No one says that the war is over: it goes on, and all the questionnaires mention that deaths and injuries continue to happen. At the same time, many things have returned to normal. People see neither houses ablaze, nor overcrowded hospitals, nor dead bodies in the streets. Yet, they remember it all, and never want to experience it again. Having said that, people, especially middle-aged and older people, feel the consequences of war in their

everyday life, be it in relationships with family members or running a business. We conducted the poll before the pandemic. Already back then, without the impact of a new virus, the interviewees talked about difficulties in crossing the contact line. Now the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly deteriorated the situation with access to healthcare and freedom of movement. Since spring 2020, the residents face enormous complications while crossing the contact line.

Compared to the first years of the armed conflict, hostilities have less impact on the daily life of the people. Yet, the war is still present, shadowing them in every activity.

# Divided by living in ‘different worlds’

“The collapse of the whole life”

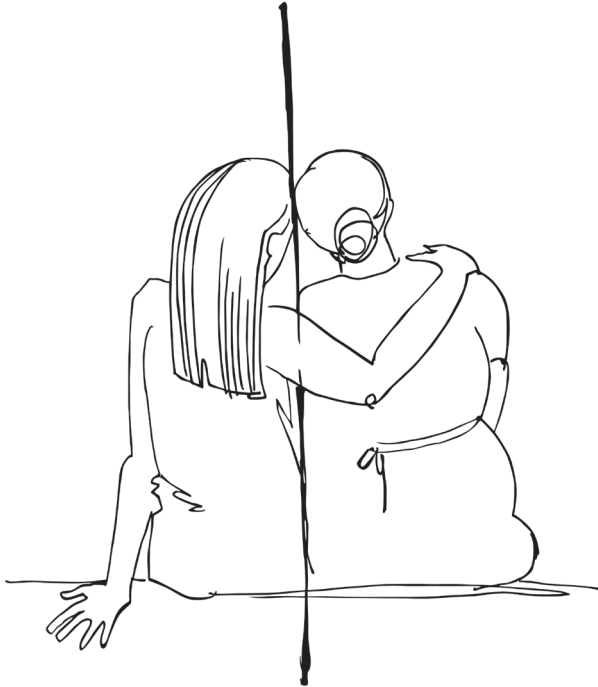
Deaths and injuries, loss of loved ones and loss of homes are the most painful consequences of a war. In Ukraine, people lose family and friends not only due to the hostilities, but also due to the growing mental distance between those living in the self-proclaimed ‘republics’ and those in government-controlled territory. As the conflict continues, people on different sides of the contact line live in different realities. While their daily hurdles are, in fact, similar, they go through these hardships in a different environment and are exposed to different, sometimes opposing influences. The separation and loss of friends and relatives is painful for many, yet, they seem

especially hard to handle for the elderly. Some of them were suddenly torn away from their loved ones.

*“Our parents are almost of a retirement age. They perceive the conflict as the collapse of their whole life. We have relatives in Ukraine and my parents miss them a lot, but we cannot even visit them once a year. The [mobile] connection is expensive. Sometimes we talk via Skype, mainly exchanging complaints and ideas about what is to come, whether our republic [here and further is the quotes the terminology of the interviewee is kept] will become a part of Ukraine again.”*  
Valeria, 30.

*“Our family is separated by the borders. I think that if not for the war, we would have all stayed in the same city, would spend time together as usual, visit each other’s home. I live with my mother and sister in a small town in LPR, my*





father left for Russia to earn money, to the North, and we only see him once a year. My grandmother and grandfather left for their relatives in Poltava [a town not in Ukraine's north-east, not in the conflict zone] region. We are simple people; we don't have enough money to travel to each other. We communicate via internet or phone. It was very hard in the beginning, we missed each other a lot and worried. Now we have got used to it." Artem, 18

"Because of the conflict my elder sister left with her family to the government-controlled territory of Ukraine, and we don't see each other. I can't cross checkpoints because of my health, and she does not want to travel to our territory. I don't get to see how my nieces and nephews are growing up, she doesn't see my daughter. It upsets me a lot that we are becoming more distant. Our mother is ill very often, and now it's only me who can support her in the household. (...) My mother has nothing to do with politics and it is difficult for

her to understand why it all happened this way, why her elder daughter left. She finds it difficult to accept the current situation and worries a lot, I think all this stress is affecting her health. Her brother and sister live in Ukraine, but she cannot visit them. She believes that Ukraine should be united." Karina, 27.

Family ties and friendships break down not only because of physical borders and checkpoints, but also because of different political opinions, interpretations of what has happened and perspectives for the future. Political tensions and disagreements are also difficult to deal with for families not separated by the contact line. Some people reported disagreements between different generations, but also between spouses.

"My grannies and granddads, and mom and dad a bit less, hold pro-Russian views, strengthened by the Soviet past. I sometimes find it difficult to talk to them, when, for example, my grandad starts saying: "We lived without all sorts of Europe and life was good. In Ukraine we became paupers, and now you can't even understand what is happening out there. They have started the war, and what if they take you to the army?" I have a completely different opinion, while my sisters still waver." Mikhail, 24.

At the same time, some of our respondents noted that the joint experience of the hostilities has led to greater consolidation in the neighbourhoods and strengthened ties within the immediate family. One of the young respondents, Kirill, 16, noted the psychological change which happened during the active phase of the conflict: "When the conflict began, everyone started being more kind, open to others, I was like that as well".

Anton, 18, replied sharply: "We broke ties with our relatives in Poltava and, on the contrary, became closer within our family. In July 2014, a Ukrainian shell killed my grandma in the quarter of the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution [Luhansk]."

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While in some families, the ties seem to have broken down suddenly, other interviews reveal that the breakdown in a relationship was slow and gradual. Sometimes ties break down because the realities become too different and common topics disappear. In some instances, however, people even stop communicating online because they feel misunderstood or humiliated. Some have experienced rejection when they needed help.

“For them we are separatists, traitors and it’s all our fault anyway”

“I see this in the example of my own family. My extended family on my mother’s side were already not in touch with us very often, and now they stopped talking to us completely, because for them we are separatists, traitors and it’s all our fault anyway. This is what they told us already in 2014 when we wanted to stay with them for a little while during the military fighting. Probably they were afraid that we will stay for a long time. I know that many residents of Donbas were in a similar situation.” Karina, 27.

“We no longer communicate with our relatives in Chernigov [a town in northern Ukraine], because they support Maidan and are against us. (...) Based on this example with our relatives, it is impossible [to maintain ties with people on the other side]. They went completely insane.” Vasily, 17.

“I had a very good friend; we were friends since the first grade at school. After school, she entered a university in Dnepropetrovsk [a city in eastern

Ukraine, not in the conflict zone]. Initially we stayed in touch and everything was fine. A bit later she fell in love, started seeing a guy who served in the “Azov” (battalion). For her, I immediately turned into an enemy, a *vatnik*<sup>6</sup> and a traitor. Now she has different friends and broke all her ties not only with me, but with the city in which she was born. It is very difficult for me to accept that she started a relationship with someone who was shooting our way.” Oksana, 22.

Meanwhile, maintaining personal ties with relatives and friends across the contact line, no matter how difficult these relationships can at times be, is crucial for mutual understanding and any reconciliation or reintegration efforts in the future. Even though people find it difficult to talk about politics or the course of events in the future, they manage to find common topics to discuss, such as raising children, education, and student life. This serves as a reminder that people on the other side of the contact line are humans, just like them, and that it is possible to find topics that connect rather than divide.

“Only ties to my family have remained. If my parents still discuss something political over Skype, my sister and I talk only about our children and everyday problems. We have been living in different worlds for six years already and we have tried to avoid expressing our personal views about the conflict in order to avoid fights.” Valeria, 30.

“For example, my friend from the school times is studying pharmacy in Kharkov and under no circumstances wants to come back here. But sometimes we call each other or chat on social media, tell each other about our studies and student life. Students or other groups could easily stay in touch in this way.” Elena, 21.

<sup>6</sup> A derogatory term describing people who is inclined to identify themselves with soviet values and the so-called ‘Russian world’. Wikipedia definition: “politically motivated nickname of the patriots of Russia, supporting its government. It is used to [...] characterize the opponents with pro-Russian views”.



## “The hostilities caused a shock”: traumatic memories as a key obstacle to the dialogue



*all the events of 2014. Perhaps that was the strongest argument to realise: Ukraine does not need the people of Donbas. The nimblest businessmen and public officials escaped to Kiev, and those people who remained had to fend for themselves”. Aleksandra, 29.*

Many of our respondents continued to go back to their memories of the beginning of the war. Even though from a civilian perspective it is difficult to determine who is responsible for the shelling of a certain location, some respondents reported having witnessed shelling from the side controlled by the Ukrainian army. They blame Ukrainian military forces and volunteer battalions for their personal losses. For some, this experience has led to a radical change in their political views and a rejection of a Ukrainian identity.

*“The hostilities caused a shock: Ukrainian artillery was shelling our cities. We looked at destroyed houses and crying children in shock. I was in a hospital, I saw children in bandages, one 10-year-old boy was missing a leg. My memory still holds*

*“In 2014, I saw with my own eyes how the house on the neighbouring street burned down after the shelling from the side of Zhdanovka where the Ukrainian battalion “Donbas” was stationed. At the cemetery, there is an entire row with children’s graves, I was there. These children died after the shelling from an airplane. This is the reality”. Valeria, 30.*

The youngest respondents in this survey (aged 16-18) used the strongest language, referring to what they call the ‘fascist ideology’ of the Ukrainian state. ‘Ukrainian fascism’ is a part of the narrative of the Soviet, and for more than last 20 years – of the Russian security services and pro-government Russian media. Fakes and manipulations with facts – both historical

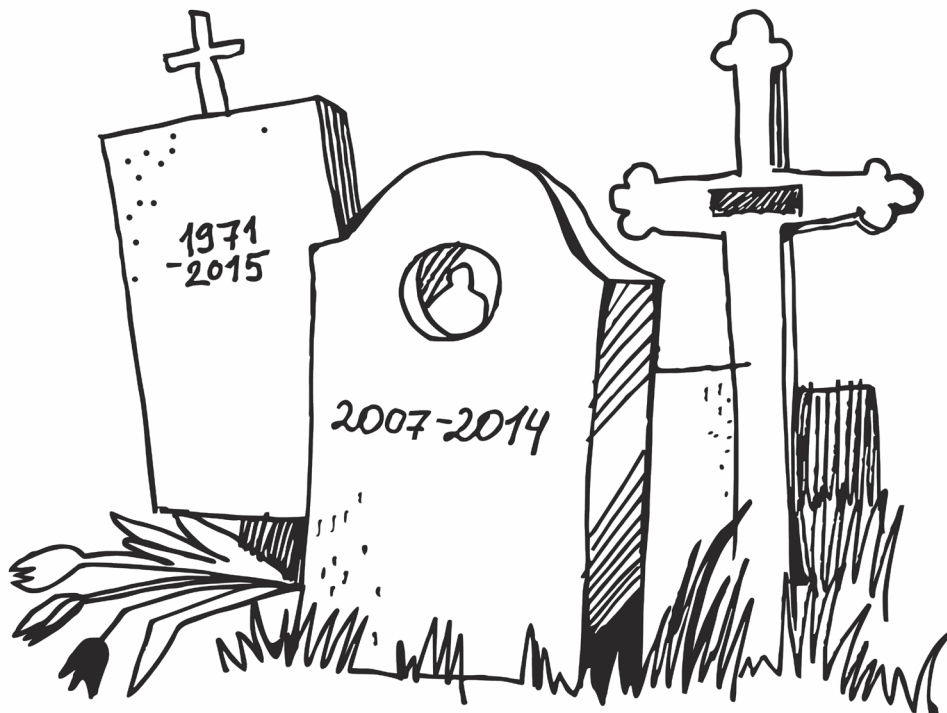
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and current – are still being multiplied. In Russian narratives, all Ukrainian nationalists are fascists. It should be noted that during elections in Ukraine, nationalistic parties do not even pass the 3 per cent threshold. It means they have neither influence, nor public support. Nevertheless, several young people we talked to, do believe that this ideology prevails in Ukraine. Today’s teenagers were 10-12 years old when the hostilities started. They witnessed heavy fighting, spent nights in basements, lost friends or family members. This traumatic experience, coupled with the dominating impact of Russian media, militaristic propaganda in schools, as well as other factors, shaped their radical views.

*“For a start we need to get rid of the fascist government in Kiev and kick the Ukrainian army out from our country.” Vitaly, 16.*

This short quote can trigger the wave of resentment, incomprehension and anger. At the same time, it is a marker of the situation and of the level of influence of the above-mentioned factors on the children and teenagers in the self-proclaimed ‘republics’. Such opinions could be seen as a warning signal to all stakeholders who promote dialogue and reconciliation. New approaches and strategies are needed to avoid the prevalence of such opinions, especially among children and young people.





## “If there was no war, we would be together”: families separated by unemployment and poverty

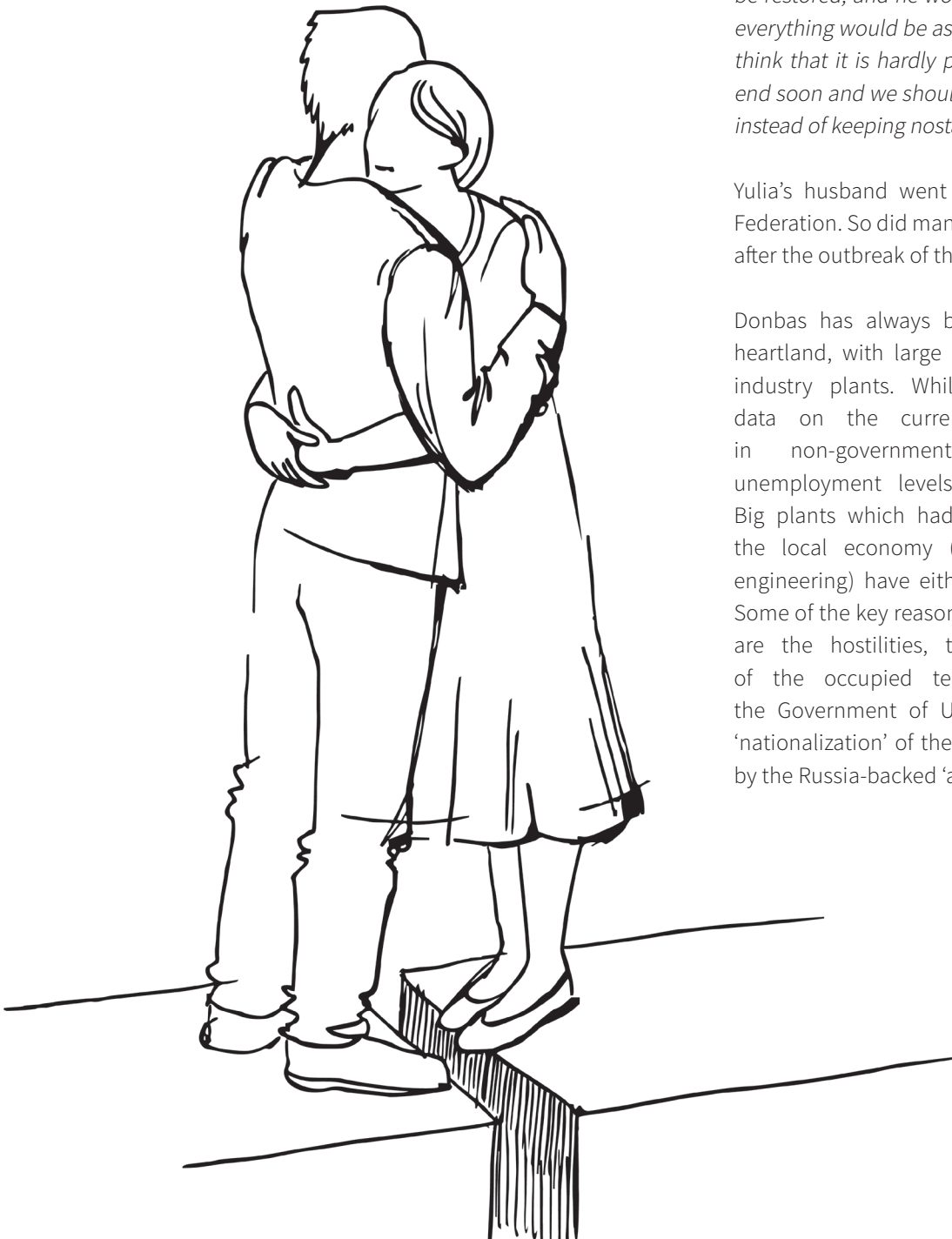
Very few people think that the war has not changed anything: “Almost nothing has changed, except for the currency and the flag,” says Illia, 21.

For others, the situation is the opposite.

*“As for me and my husband, our life is very much ruined, we practically live separately. At the beginning, we thought that our industry will soon be restored, and he would be able to return, and everything would be as it used to be. But now we think that it is hardly possible for the conflict to end soon and we should get used to this new life instead of keeping nostalgic hopes.” Yulia, 31.*

Yulia’s husband went to work in the Russian Federation. So did many people, especially men, after the outbreak of the armed conflict.

Donbas has always been Ukraine’s industrial heartland, with large coal reserves and heavy industry plants. While there is no reliable data on the current economic situation in non-government-controlled territories, unemployment levels must have increased. Big plants which had been the backbone of the local economy (metallurgical, chemical, engineering) have either closed or downsized. Some of the key reasons for the industrial decay are the hostilities, the economic blockade of the occupied territories introduced by the Government of Ukraine in 2017 and the ‘nationalization’ of the industry and companies by the Russia-backed ‘authorities’.



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Employment in Russia does not necessarily mean pro-Russian political preferences. Solutions that allow a family to stay together are preferred, but people cannot afford to leave their homes together with their children or to live in rented apartments. Even travelling to visit each other is expensive.

“Before the war, my husband worked at a big company. (...) Our baby was born in 2013, so I did not work when the war started. We had a flat and enough money. But the factory stopped working after the war broke out and we had to find the means to fend for ourselves. My husband had to leave to work in Russia, he still works there on shifts. When our son turned two, I enrolled him in the kindergarten and started working. But my salary is only enough to cover our utilities. Our main income is what my husband earns, but the main problem is that our child is growing up without a father. His occasional visits cannot make up for the long absence. We mainly see him

on a phone screen and even that only 1-2 times a week, because he is so busy. This makes us very depressed. We cannot move to another city to be together because we don't have enough money to rent a flat. Also, I need to stay here to take care of our aging parents.”Valeria, 30.

“My father used to work at a big factory, but after the beginning of the military operations, the factory has almost stopped working. He left to earn money in Russia. He is paid well, but he works in shifts and is rarely home. We only see him over Skype. My chores at home have increased. We miss him a lot. Grandma often cries because he works so far away from home and we often don't even see him on holidays. If there was no war, we would be together.”Andrey, 17.

“Right before the war, after serving in the army and graduating from a technical school, I found a job in a metallurgical plant. The job was good, so was the pay. I had met a nice girl and we wanted to start a family. At the time, I thought that the main question on how to provide for my family was already solved for me. However, after the beginning of the military operations, the plant was closed. My girlfriend, together with her parents, left for the Kharkov oblast, for the countryside. I had to search for makeshift jobs, to earn anything. Together with my father, we went to Russia to work as builders.”Igor, 29.

Unlike previous stories, there was a positive turn in Igor's case. The factory he used to work at eventually reopened.

Now the factory has reopened, and I have come back to my previous workplace. However, the work of the factory is not stable, the salary could be better. We live with the hope that our industry will recover. I started a family last year, my girlfriend returned from Ukraine and we got married. During the years of separation, she visited me many times, but I visited her less often. It's dangerous for young men to cross





checkpoints because they attract more attention from both sides. Now we live together in the city we were born in. We are not yet thinking about children, because there are too many different problems. I think, if not for the war, we would have gotten married much earlier, could have bought a house, and maybe we would already have children.” Igor, 29.

At the same time, several respondents said that the situation has improved, and local jobs have reappeared.

“Before the war, my husband worked at an illegal coal mine (‘kopanka’) without official employment, in terrifying and dangerous conditions. A welder by training, he could not secure a job at the factory where his father worked, and he wanted to work at. There were no vacancies. It was possible to pay a bribe, but

we did not have the money. Now he works at that factory and he did not have to bribe anyone to get employed. Although the salary there is now smaller than before the war, at least we do not need to worry about his life”. Karina, 27

This could be attributed to general depopulation and the resulting decline in competition for places, to the real change in the situation, or it could be the result of the local media influence. Yet, it seems clear that associations with corruption prevail in people’s minds when they speak about pre-war employment, education and public services.

“I study at the medical university for free. It was my childhood dream, but during Ukrainian times it was not realistic, because of the corruption. Now it is easier to enrol, find an internship and get employed.” Elena, 21.

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# “Left behind by the Ukrainian state”

“Why do I need to become a fake pensioner to receive my earned pension?”

“In Ukraine, no one is interested in our life. They got used to seeing us as ‘others’, what do they need us for?” Valerii, 18.

In their responses in the questionnaire, people referred to the hardships they face when trying to access Ukrainian state services. First of all, crossing the contact line is an arduous journey in itself. Though the situation has improved over the years, people still complain about the lack of infrastructure, the long hours spent waiting on both sides, and humiliating restrictions for carrying goods. When they finally manage to get to the government-controlled side to obtain services, they often face discriminatory procedures and practices. Access to a pension is one of the most emblematic examples. For those registered in non-government-controlled territory, the right to a pension is still linked to an IDP registration, despite numerous advocacy campaigns by Ukraine’s civil society and international community, calling for equal access to a pension for all citizens of Ukraine.

“Why do I need to become a fake pensioner to receive my earned pension? Let’s get things straight. To spare us from the humiliation, the Pension Fund could create an additional department dealing with people living in LPR and DPR. They will see us physically anyway, we come to withdraw money from the bank. It is the state bank, the same as the Pension Fund. Can they not

exchange information? This is real and doable, it’s just no one in Ukraine wants to do that, because it doesn’t look patriotic.” Denis, 67.

Quite a few respondents felt if not attacked, then neglected, or even humiliated by the Ukrainian authorities.

“The more time goes by, the stronger the separation of Donbas from Ukraine is, and it will be impossible to bring it back. I would ask, why didn’t Ukraine listen to its citizens and why did it go to war with them?” Kirill, 29.

The widespread opinion about the lack of action from the Ukrainian authorities is then contrasted with the information local residents have about the support provided by the Russian Federation and the so-called ‘authorities’ who are de facto responsible for the territories not controlled by the Ukrainian government.

“During the hardest time, at the end of 2014 and 2015, Russia was saving our people with humanitarian assistance (from the government and many ordinary people), the Red Cross and Rinat Akhmetov (we hope he will return soon), but not the government of Ukraine. Many of us realised that it was a betrayal.” Aleksandra, 29.

“In DPR, we have already had a program aimed at the reunification of people of Donbas for several years now. People can come from the Ukrainian side and receive free medical treatment. They take part in cultural and sports events. These people have the opportunity to show their talents, receive education, have complicated surgeries in medical institutions. But the Ukrainian side doesn’t have any similar program. So does Ukraine need us?” Galina, 40.

7 In fact, many regions of Ukraine have a number of the support programs to IDPs. In November 2017, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved the Strategy for the integration of IDPs and for the long-term decisions about the displacement till 2020. The Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy was approved in 2018. Based on this plan, each region developed special programs for the integration of IDPs, on housing, education, employment.



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In their responses to the questionnaire, the survey participants said that they felt neglected not only by the state or the army, but also by simple people, just like themselves.

“Sometimes I am infuriated by the statements of “friends” when they talk about something not related to politics but post some sarcastic comment about Donbas people. I understand that they are victims of propaganda and try not to reply.” Elena, 21.

“For example, my Ukrainian relatives would never agree to come to see us, the propaganda has made them too fearful and they think that only bandits and looters live here.” Valeria, 30.

## “We used to live together”: how people see Ukraine

“Even if Donbas returns, it will never be the same again”

The majority of our interlocutors think of Ukraine as of something from the past. They say: “We used to live in Ukraine” or “back then, when this was Ukraine”. They live in the ‘republics’ now, which is their reality, as well as the only available institutional link between them and the territory where they live. The possibility of returning to Ukraine sounds hazy, but so does the possibility of a unification with Russia. Overall, the respondents remained vague and ambiguous when talking about the future.

“Of course, it’s difficult to live in an unrecognised republic, and many people feel nostalgic about the more stable time of living in Ukraine, but we all understand that even if Donbas returns [to Ukraine], it will never be the same again.” Aleksandra 29.

The respondents shared mixed feelings about Ukraine. Those who have strong family ties or any other connections to fellow citizens on the other side of the contact line have a more positive attitude towards Ukraine. Those who lost loved ones in the hostilities view Ukrainians as the main perpetrators in this conflict. Almost all our interlocutors believe that nationalism dominates in today’s Ukraine. Many mentioned discriminatory attitudes towards people from Donbas.

The majority of the survey participants were Russian speaking. Yet, many tried to depoliticise the language issue. After saying that Russian is their mother tongue or that they speak primarily Russian, some noted their emotional attachment to Ukrainian language and culture. Many have Ukrainian-speaking extended family members or grandparents.

“For me, both Russian and Ukrainian cultures were close. Of course, my mother tongue is Russian, but Ukrainian was also not foreign. When my extended family was gathering around the table, the elders would be singing Ukrainian songs. My grandma still speaks Ukrainian, as

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*she always has. But now all communication, everything that goes on at the factory, in the city, is in Russian.” Kirill, 29.*

The language issue, however, is not entirely out of the political or military context. Some of our interviewees mentioned that even though they try not to have hard feelings towards the language itself, the Ukrainian language has become tainted with associations of war and military aggression.

*“Once we had an event at school about the friendship between the peoples of Donbas. Each school had to talk about a nationality living in Donbas, because we have a very multi-ethnic region. During the event there were sketches about Greeks, Azeri, Georgians, Russians, but there were no Ukrainians. As my friend from another school told me, they were supposed to present Ukrainians. But no one wanted to. Several children started crying because their fathers and brothers had died at the frontline, someone’s home had been destroyed. I think quite a lot of time will have to pass before the situation becomes normal. Of course, we all understand that Ukrainian language and culture have nothing to do with the problem, but Ukrainian was the language in which the threats to Donbas were made. Because of that if anyone talks Ukrainian in everyday life, people look at them with a prejudice.” Daria, 16.*

Nevertheless, young people who are about to finish school in the self-proclaimed ‘republics’ do not entirely reject the option to go and study in a university in Ukraine.

*“After finishing college, I want to enrol in a university according to my specialisation, in Kharkov, or Dnepropetrovsk. In a big city with developed industry I hope to find a decent job. My parents are not against such a decision, on the contrary. I want to live in a country which I am used to, where young people can develop,*

*build a career, or open a business, where it is possible to earn well. In the future I wish to go to a European country, to find a good job there”.* Andrey 17.

This, however, was not the most popular line among our respondents. Many stressed they were not going to live and work in Ukraine, mainly, they say, ‘due to grim economic perspectives and nationalism.’

Some look at Russia as they (or their families) believe that young people can find better paid jobs there. Many appreciate the fact that Russia recognizes diplomas and graduation certificates issued in the so-called “DPR” and “LPR”.

*“I want to enrol in Moscow State University at the faculty of international relations, become a rightful citizen of the Russian Federation and live my life to the fullest.” Vasily, 17.*

Some of the respondents, mainly from the city of Donetsk, said they preferred staying in their hometown, claiming to have plenty of opportunities there.

*“My parents try to convince me to move to Russia because the salaries there are higher, and it is easier to make a career. It won’t be difficult to make it with a diploma corresponding with Russian standards, which our medical university now provides. But I don’t want to leave my home”.* Elena, 21.

*“One can stay in Donetsk, there is a good variety of universities here for any kind of professional interest. You can enrol at a state-subsidised place, or pay the contract, in any case it will be much cheaper than in Russia or Ukraine. Those who plan to study and then stay in Ukraine or Russia, all try to do their best already while studying because any newcomers need to prove themselves. Those who are going to Ukraine are studying the language and if they feel school*





*lessons are not sufficient, they hire a private teacher. Because the (university) enrolment tests include Ukrainian.” Elena, 21.*

Young people said they were much more fearful of being stereotyped as “vatnik”, seen as enemies or being bullied than of not fitting in because of the language.

*“I graduated from school right in the middle of the hostilities. We left for Ukraine. It was time to submit documents to the university, but it was scary to return to Donetsk, even though I dreamt of studying in Donetsk at the faculty of Linguistics. In order to not lose a year, I enrolled in Mariupol university. My parents insisted that I continue to study there [...] All four years of studies were like hell for me. I could visit home only during vacation because of the complicated procedure of crossing the contact line. I only had one friend among the locals, the others were*

*bullying me because my parents lived in DPR. It was a challenge for me to be at politicised events, communicate with visiting celebrities, who were exalting the Ukrainian nation. I couldn’t wait for the time when I got my diploma and moved away. Now I work in Donetsk in a lovely team where my knowledge and skills are useful (I know Russian, Ukrainian, English and Polish languages). I study, develop, communicate with partners from all over the world thanks to IT technologies. And I live in my beloved city.” Oksana, 22.*

Though Oksana’s case is not unique, there are also positive examples, when students from Donbas were accepted in student and other communities and managed to integrate easily.

*“People I know told me different stories about their experiences of studying in Ukraine. Some were openly bullied, others found a lot of new friends.” Gennadii, 17.*

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# “What could bring us closer? Objective information”

A lack of access to information, a lack of objective information and a lack of trust in the news and analysis from the other side create fertile ground for manipulation and propaganda.

In our conversations, we heard opinions from people who have access to Ukrainian media but do not trust it, those who do not have access to Ukrainian media, and those who rely rather on interpersonal communications than on media sources to obtain information from the other side.

The survey participants included those who have access to Ukrainian media but don't trust it; those who do not have access to Ukrainian media, and those who prefer interpersonal communication as a source of information from and about the other side.

Many respondents mentioned that Ukrainian TV sounds too nationalistic, too arrogant, and does not have any content that people in non-

government-controlled territories can identify themselves with. “It sounds like they want territory, but not the people living on it,” says one older man bitterly.

Those people who lost access to Ukrainian media because it is blocked in the NGCA, sound hopeless to find and access reliable information, which is not biased or politically tainted. In an environment where Ukrainian TV and radio is blocked (and people do not actively seek out news from the other side), they get news from Russian or local media, or by word of mouth, which results in a profound lack of trust. According to Nikolai (42), the only reliable source of information remains direct contact with people living on the other side of the contact line.

*“The politicians have already succeeded in making sure that we are not very interested in news about Ukraine (on TV), and it's not interesting for residents of Ukraine how we live. The separation of the two societies only grows. People are already loaded with propaganda and watching the news or programmes from the other*





"People are already loaded with propaganda and watching the news or programmes from the other side turns into "five minutes of hate". What could bring us closer? Objective information"

*side turns into "five minutes of hate". What could bring us closer? Objective information. But it practically does not exist, more precisely, it is not accessible. The only objective source of information is statistics, but propaganda goes about interpreting it."* Galina, 40.

*[People can overcome propaganda by] "learning to separate facts from propaganda, reading various sources, making their own conclusions. Because of the military situation, many news sources have been blocked (TV, websites) or hidden (statistical information, results of opinion polls), as such information can influence popular opinions. So, almost all TV channels, either in Ukraine or in Donetsk, turn every available fact into propaganda. Because the authorities switched off the TV channels of the "enemy" on both sides, some people are under the influence of propaganda, others are annoyed and turned everything off. But this is a fake balance, people won't be able to live their whole lives only in their own worlds. The problem is not really with the internet or satellite TV where you can basically watch whatever you want. It is the mindset. I think that human communication is the only way to counter propaganda – people have to visit each other, so that they can see with their own eyes everything that is happening and can then make their own conclusions,"* says Nikolai.

During the survey, people talked about the necessity to communicate with their compatriots from the other side of the contact line. There is a common understanding that since people have been living in different realities for six years already, dialogue has to start as soon as possible. Some expressed the idea that starting or increasing communication and contact is indispensable, as the war is not going to last forever, and people will have to live with one another. Many agree that there are a lot of stereotypes and contradictory perceptions of the situation, which can only be overcome gradually. At the same time, people living in the NGCA say they feel that people from the rest of Ukraine are not willing to talk to them as to equals.

Our interlocutors suggested various forms of communication between people living on different sides of the contact line: meetings for youth groups, joint/mutual visits, online conversations.

*"It's possible to communicate via internet or to visit each other. Everyone who visits their extended family, without exception, talks not only with them. Spontaneous conversations arise: "How do you live there?". People are interested in the issues of daily life. But on the level of politicians or public figures everyone is looking only for bad things. If there were groups of people who would manage to restore normal relations within the civil society, I would only salute this. Now we have a situation where the same problem can be seen differently here and there. The most important thing is not to force decisions which are against people's convictions. Otherwise nothing will come out of it."* Vadim, 51.

However, there are also voices questioning or denying the value of communication across the frontline. Many are cautious and think about the potential risks, but some, especially those who lost loved ones in the hostilities, reject the idea of a dialogue with the Ukrainian side.

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# Communication across the contact line: risks and fears

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*“There is a risk if we are talking about visiting each other. If this is done too openly, someone in Donetsk could, for example, ask me why I travelled to listen to nationalists? Maybe I was recruited? And from Ukraine of course no one will come to us, everyone is too intimidated by the ‘aggressors’ and ‘terrorists’. I think the stereotypes are weighing down on people on both sides too much,*

*especially during these last five years. Getting rid of them should be on the agenda.” Oksana, 22.*

However, despite cautious hopefulness with which some people spoke of possible meetings or dialogue initiatives, numerous concerns were raised about the practical organisation of real-life meetings focused on reconciliation.

## 1. Ongoing hostilities

*“The issue of personal safety is still too acute. As long as the shooting continues, any trip across the checkpoints is a physical risk.” Oksana, 22.*

## 2. Fear of persecution by the security services

Quite a few of the respondents mentioned the risk of being interrogated or persecuted by the security services or border guards. Some are worried about potential attempts to force them to cooperate with the security services.

## 3. Fear of political and social repercussions

Some of survey participants were concerned that participation in such meetings, even without expressing pro-Ukrainian political views, may result in job loss or restricted education opportunities. Others mentioned judgement and disapproval by neighbours, classmates, or colleagues. This social climate discourages both interest and contact and pushes the NGCA further away from the rest of Ukraine.

*“There are no risks in such communication if you don’t discuss it with neighbours or classmates. They can misunderstand and become suspicious. It can end in a conflict or something worse.” Gennadii, 17.*

#### 4. **Fear of not being heard or misunderstood**

*“Now on both sides of the contact line simply expressing a point of view which is different from the official position is seen as mutiny. In the best case you will be kicked out of your job, or respective agencies will organise a “meeting” with you, in the worst case – prison.” Nina, 51.*

In addition to concerns about safety and political repercussions, people are also wary of stereotyping.

*“People in the republics are defined either as terrorists, or as victims. No one perceives us as equals. (...) In Ukraine, no one wants to listen to what the inhabitants of the republics think about their future. (...) There is a risk that others will not want to understand and to get to the essence of things, that personal opinion will dominate, and the acceptance of others will be missing.” Nadezhda, 65.*

*“It will be very hard for people to discuss these topics because we have lived through too much and many issues don’t depend on us. Are persecutions possible here? Yes, if we betray our values and act against the law.” Kirill, 29.*

The security concerns, especially fears of persecution, are serious. Even though people believe in the potential positive impact of the dialogue, real-life meetings with peacebuilding goals are perceived as too dangerous.



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# Recommendations

## Starting a dialogue: do's and don'ts

For the time being, especially in the times of the pandemic and lockdown, online communication is seen as a more realistic option. One of the ideas was to organise special groups or forums on social media, where such communication across the contact line could be supported and facilitated. People believe that focusing on practical matters that are in the common interest of all would allow interaction without falling into stereotypes and discussions about the conflict. Many saw politics (in wide terms) as a dividing force and wanted to steer clear from it. Some people we talked to were young businessmen

and businesswomen who expressed their interest in learning about opportunities in their industry or meeting potential partners. Young mothers are interested in topics related to upbringing and education, as well as healthcare. Graduates in NGCA could thus learn about educational opportunities on the government-controlled side.

The following suggestions reflect the preferences and recommendations of our respondents for communication with people from the other side of the contact line.

### **These suggestions could be useful for mediators and dialogue facilitators to create the safe space for communication and the restoration of ties.**

- **As a confidence-building measure, the communication should start from issues that are of a common interest to the parties in dialogue.** It can be business opportunities, sports, leisure, student life for young people, healthcare or education. Politics should be discussed at the later stages. Encouraging political discussions without the long-term, delicate, and complicated process of confidence-building may undermine the whole process. However, a couple of our interviewees (aged 45+) suggested discussing issues that are directly related to the conflict, including identity.
- **People who are genuinely open for a dialogue should be involved.** As prejudices are a recognized obstacle, people engaged in a dialogue should be prepared for the process, gaining skills to listen and accept the opinions of others. It is important to agree on the terminology in advance. Inappropriate wording may be seen as an imposition of a different point of view and might bring an end to the process.



- **Impartial civil society actors are best placed to organise the dialogue process.** Those survey participants who said that dialogue meetings were possible, often expressed hope that NGOs, activist groups or humanitarian organisations with a mandate to work on both sides of the conflict line would take the lead in organising such encounters.
- As real-life meetings become less and less realistic, **creative ways of engaging people remotely should be explored.** Some respondents suggested simple information and awareness-raising campaigns, such as sending greeting cards to each other.

*“How to find a good job, make use of my skills. One could think of an online technical school for teenagers where they could learn the basics of programming, hi-tech creativity. In this manner one can identify talented children and then invite them to study in the universities.” Mikhail, 24.*

- **To encourage the development of the existing connections.** People who maintain stronger personal ties with their relatives and friends on the other side of the contact line, are more open for further communication. It was explicitly mentioned in the questionnaires that everything starts from personal communication and non-biased attitude.

*“With friends, we discuss everything in the same manner as before. We talk about music, computer games, films, sport. Sometimes they do not understand me when I am talking about the life here. They ask why we did not leave. I don’t want to discuss political questions because I don’t really understand them. I am interested in how an internally displaced student can survive, whether there are any support programs. For instance, if I move to Ukraine and stay there, I can be drafted to the army - this scares my mom. I am not against military service, but I would not want to be deployed to the conflict zone.” Gennadii, 17.*

- **Civil society initiatives facilitating encounters and communication should be long-term, well-planned.** The work with the selected target groups should be systematic, since learning to listen, to overcome stereotypes and to developing relationships is a long process.



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# Conclusions

The survey has shown that the distance between people living on the different sides of the frontline is growing. People in the NGCA still think about Ukraine and discuss the situation in the country, but mostly from the position of strangers or outsiders. Such mental division will pose a serious challenge when the territory returns under the control of the Ukrainian government.

### To summarize, the key conclusions of this survey are the following:

- Many policies pursued by the government of Ukraine from the beginning of the conflict have contributed to the alienation
- Adolescents express the most radical and often anti-Ukrainian views when asked about the armed conflict, their future and possible reconciliation
- Those who lost loved ones tend to blame the suffering of the civilian population on the Ukrainian army and the government
- People who maintain regular contact with family and friends on the government-controlled territory are the most open for a dialogue with the other side.

Obviously, dialogue initiatives alone will not be able to relieve all tensions and to resolve entrenched contradictions. Measures at the state level are required to create conditions for the future reintegration. Such measures should be aimed at both winning hearts and minds, and ensuring equal access to the rights and services of all citizens of Ukraine, wherever in Ukraine they live.



**Essays by Ukrainian  
journalists whose origin  
is in Donbas about the opinions  
expressed in the survey**



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# From the perspective of the “excepted”



**Alisa Sopova**

journalist, doctoral candidate in anthropology, Princeton University, born and raised in Donetsk

When conversation turns to the residents of uncontrolled territories, I am always asked the same question: “Which side of the conflict do they support?” I reply that the majority of people do not support anyone, and if they do, then it is not as important as it seems from the outside.

Not all Hungarians support Orban. Not all Turks support Erdogan. Moreover, when we talk about the Hungarians or the Turks, for some reason we do not expect that their whole lives have to be reduced to their political views. When Donald Trump won the presidential election in the USA, many Democrat-supporting Americans were horrified and claimed that they no longer wanted to live in the country and would emigrate to Canada. However, in practice, of course nobody emigrated, because real life is much more complicated than such assertions. In real life, we all need to go to work, pay off loans, make repairs, take the kids to school, help elderly relatives. Political views (even though they are fun to argue about) are somewhere at the end of this list. That is why no-one believes that every American who has not left the country automatically agrees with everything Trump writes on his Twitter

account. However, when it comes to the people living in non-government-controlled territories in Ukraine, this simplified perception prevails. We know too little about these people and hear their voices too rarely to realise that their lives and views are far more complicated than the question of supporting one side or the other.

This survey is a unique opportunity to address this injustice, at least in some way. It reflects, in a fairly correct manner, the dominating moods in the ‘republics’, as I see them. It is important to pay attention to the fact that the main motifs in the quotations from the survey are not the separatist mobilisation (as is usually presented to an outside observer), but feelings of helplessness, betrayal and injustice. These feelings are directed not only towards the state of Ukraine, but also local authorities and law enforcement agencies, who left the population to their own fate in 2014, towards the separatist authorities and their own relatives and friends who refuse help and rush to accuse victims that they have “themselves to blame”.

Under normal circumstances, we live with the knowledge that there are several social institutions that protect our life and dignity: the law, morality, society and the state. We may not always like our state, but we still expect it to ensure our basic rights and not allow us, for example, to be killed with impunity. However, for most people living in the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine, and especially in the uncontrolled areas, this knowledge collapsed at some point, and collapsed in quite a painful manner. They ended up, in effect, being outside of the law and this is actually very scary. I remember my own feelings in 2014. The most frightening thing was not so much the physical danger itself, as much as the

feeling that I was suddenly in a separate category, and because of that I did not have the same right to life and dignity as my fellow citizens in Kharkiv or Chernivtsi.

This situation is of course not unique to Ukraine. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben proposed a term to describe such situations, the state of exception, where certain categories of the population are officially deprived of their rights and declared to be outside of the law. As a rule, this takes place in an extraordinary situation, when the state tries to justify violence against one group or another or its unwillingness to protect a certain group of citizens, when they are in danger. A classic example of the state of exception according to Agamben is the fascist concentration camp. However, there are also many examples in the modern world of people who are “allowed” to be treated as if they are not exactly the same as us: refugees, illegal migrants, residents of black ghettos in the USA. The quotations from the interviews clearly illustrate how the state of exception works in the context of the armed conflict in Ukraine and what reactions it provokes in the “excepted” themselves.

What kind of reactions are they? Excerpts from the interviews once again highlight an important aspect of the conflict in Ukraine which is mentioned by all experts familiar with the situation: this conflict is characterised by an unusually low level of hostility between ordinary people on different sides of the contact line. This is a very good sign, and it could become the basis for a potential reunification. Moreover, we see that many of the respondents intuitively propose exactly the solutions that are usually the basis of professional mediation: direct dialogue between ordinary people on different sides, bypassing biased official means of communication; focus on practical issues (education, business), and not on politics; “do not impose solutions that go against convictions”. This is a healthy approach.

At the same time, the interviews also reflect an opposite trend: people on different sides of the contact line are increasingly living in different realities, subject to opposing ideological influences. The parties interested in settling the conflict and restoring the status of the disputed territories (primarily Ukraine) should do everything to smooth out the ideological contradictions and establish links across the contact line. Unfortunately, the opposite approach – the stigmatisation and rejection of Ukrainian citizens living in the non-government-controlled territories – dominates so far.

Quotations from the interviews clearly illustrate the result of this policy: the gap between controlled and uncontrolled territories is widening literally before our eyes. Existing ideological contradictions and new measures aimed at mutual isolation from both sides are becoming a vicious cycle. With every instance of corruption and humiliation at checkpoints, with every unpaid pension, with every biased news release, Ukraine loses what remaining support there is among the population of the uncontrolled Donbas – support without which it is unlikely to be able to restore its territorial integrity.

In order to reverse this trend and move from rejection to dialogue, the state must first of all reconsider its central idea about the inhabitants of the uncontrolled territories: these are our fellow citizens who are in trouble, and not traitors or “unreliable elements”. Even if people living in the uncontrolled territories say or do something that we do not like, we need to understand that we are dealing with people who have experienced psychological trauma and their faith in justice has been undermined. The notes of cynicism and bitterness as well as radical statements should be evaluated from this perspective, and not interpreted as signs of a kind of moral degradation or political inferiority (and exactly such interpretations are still prevalent in the Ukrainian information space).



## **“Does Ukraine need us?”**

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At the same time, it is important not to hit the opposite extreme. As one respondent rightly pointed out, “the residents of the republics are simply categorised as either terrorists or as victims. No-one considers us as equals”. This problem is relevant not only in Ukraine, but for the civilian population in practically any conflict zone. People affected by the war are often perceived as being “poor and wretched” but not as being “people like us”. This is another manifestation of the state of exception, albeit in a more “benevolent” form. When starting a dialogue with people living in the uncontrolled territories, it is important to remember that all people have the same right to respect for their human dignity, even if they have experienced trauma or have different political views to our own. In the same way, the state is obliged to ensure the safety and rights of these people not out of pity or because they are “politically reliable”, but because they are citizens and have the same rights as residents of Kyiv or Vinnytsia.

Specific measures that Ukraine, as a state, could take to finally turn its attention to the citizens of the uncontrolled territories have long been known, the list of them can be found in every report of every humanitarian and human rights organisation working in the country over the last six years: resumption of pensions and social benefits, recognition of documents issued by de facto separatist ‘authorities’, easier crossings via checkpoints, improvement of transport links and the lifting of the economic blockade. However, all this is hardly possible until there is a radical change in the state and public’s position towards the inhabitants of the uncontrolled territories, until they are brought out of the state of exception.

What matters is not so much the list of measures as the willingness to meet and adapt, to help people, rather than putting up obstacles in each case. A prime example is the situation surrounding the admission rules for Ukrainian universities for applicants from the uncontrolled territories. For

reasons unknown to me, this is the only situation in which Ukraine is showing flexibility and understanding: applicants are allowed to take the External Independent Evaluation tests in a special way; they are accepted in absentia to schools in the controlled territories so that they have Ukrainian certificates; and this year, special quotas were even introduced for them. In my opinion, this situation demonstrates a simple fact: when Ukraine wants to meet the needs of people living in the uncontrolled territories, it does so, and without any problems. This approach should be extended to other “everyday” areas of interaction between the controlled and uncontrolled territories. The problem so far is not not knowing what to do, but the unwillingness to do anything, as a matter of principle, for the residents of the self-proclaimed ‘republics’.

# To be dug up in a hundred years? How in some parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions there is almost no Ukraine left



**Yulia Abibok**  
journalist, PhD candidate in media and communications

Andrey drops the Ukrainian coins from his money box into a clay pot. He covers it in wax from a melted candle. This will be the treasure.

In fact, his coins are worth nothing. In Donetsk, where Andrey lives, the Ukrainian currency has long since been replaced by the Russian ruble. The coins cannot be taken over to the free territory of Ukraine either: people are only allowed out of the self-proclaimed Donetsk ‘republic’ in the direction of Russia, since the checkpoints at the contact line have been effectively shut since March 2020. The only thing left is to use them up for this cheap entertainment.

Andrey’s wife and sister guffaw when he says that he will mark the place on the map where he has buried the pot and will give half of the map to his sister, and the other half to his wife. On the pot, he will carve in his phone number: let whoever digs it up in a hundred years call him. His sister reminds him to not forget the country code, so that people don’t think they dial Russia or somewhere else. They laugh again when Andrey replies, “No. Let only those who understand that this is Ukrainian territory call”.

## The Lines of Division

In fact, the territories under the control of the Donetsk and Luhansk “republics” have become less and less Ukrainian over the years. They are moving away not only from Kyiv and Poltava, but even from those parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that remain under the control of the Ukrainian government. Not only state symbols and the currency have been replaced. Ukrainian documents are subject to complete replacement. During the year, more than around three hundred thousand inhabitants of the “republics” have become Russian citizens, and Moscow plans to at least double this figure by the end of the year. The Ukrainian language is no longer taught in schools. For many locals, it is now only a language that they have to hear at Ukrainian checkpoints, from armed people in uniforms.

At the same time, on the other side of the contact line, a total Ukrainianization of education is taking place and a gradual Ukrainianization of the media. The Ukrainian language, which has been considered a provincial language in the urbanised east since Soviet times, and, as the opinions given in the survey show, it recently has also become associated with war and aggression for some, is becoming the language of progressive young people in cities under the control of the Ukrainian government.

The influence of Ukrainian media in the territory under the control of the “republics”, as is apparent in people’s responses to the survey, is practically non-existent: local inhabitants have stopped trusting any kind of media. However, personal communication, which is usually relied upon in the “republics” and on the line of contact, has been lacking since March 2020, when communication between the two parts of the region ceased due to the quarantine.

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During the six years of the war, people in occupied Donetsk and government-controlled Kramatorsk, in occupied Luhansk and government-controlled Sievierodonetsk have learned to watch different films and talk shows, go on holiday to different destinations, celebrate different holidays and study very different school and university curricula.

On 1 September 2020, the war crossed a symbolic threshold: for the first time, children were going to school who were born after the outbreak of armed hostilities. In different parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, these contemporaries of the war will study in different languages and with different books. They will be told a very different story about their homeland. The heroes and villains from their lessons will swap places when “crossing” the contact line.

It is specifically children, as the presented opinions show, that are the most susceptible to isolation from the rest of Ukraine and the anti-Ukrainian propaganda of the “republics”. It is unlikely that today’s first year pupils will grow up to have more positive attitudes towards Ukraine than today’s teenagers, who at least had had brief experience of living in a peaceful state.

### Difficult Questions

The Ukrainian government and parliament should be commended: for a time now, they have begun to listen to the human rights defenders and to adopt at least some regulations and laws in the interests of people who are practically hostages in the uncontrolled territories. For example, special admissions criteria to Ukrainian universities have been introduced for applicants from Luhansk and Donetsk.

Politically speaking, no one wins from such steps. On the contrary: the patriotic public more often than not greets these measures with hostility,

while the residents of the “republics” hardly vote in Ukrainian elections.

The problem, however, is not just the political toxicity of the necessary governmental measures in the interests of the war-stricken east of Ukraine. It is that in such measures, Kyiv is far behind Moscow, which has long since begun, for instance, accrediting Donetsk and Luhansk universities, which it also effectively funds.

Many residents of the “republics” are no longer prepared to accept anything from the Ukrainian state themselves. The survey participants talk about Ukraine from the position of outsiders: they are no longer politically, economically, culturally, nor informationally included in the Ukrainian state. Local and Russian propaganda, strengthened by careless or provocative actions and statements from Ukrainian officials and celebrities, has managed to ensure that for many inhabitants of the “republics”, Ukraine has become the embodiment of all the negative things that have been or are in their lives. Not only war and poverty, but also, as it turns out, corruption.

What is even worse: no one knows the real number of people who have decided to cut ties with Ukraine, nor their motives, whether out of fear or political convictions. The opinions presented confirm that there are many such people, but their motives are different. Some of the opinions that were voiced were based on grievances due to loved ones who died, others drew solely upon the claims of local propaganda, and others were due to the fear of condemnation or even punishment for even purported loyalty to Kyiv. The people holding such different views need to be approached in very different ways. It is possible to build relations with different people living in the Donetsk and Luhansk “republics” in different ways. In Ukraine nowadays, it seems that no one takes this into account.



Ultimately, the opinion about the prejudiced attitudes of people in the rest of Ukraine towards those living in the territories under the “republics” control is, unfortunately, true. But this prejudice is mutual and arose long before the outbreak of the war. While the war is constantly feeding this prejudice, it is difficult to imagine methods that would allow it to be eradicated. No one can effectively control the spread of careless statements and hate speech in the media. The mass of training projects for journalists and bloggers that took place in 2014 and 2015 has not affected the situation.

Whether naturally or not, the originally artificial conflict has long since entered a phase from which there is no way out to at least pre-conflict relations: the conflict reproduces itself on all levels.

Ukrainian civil society in its attempts to resolve this situation is powerless without the support of the state and the participation of civil society on the opposite side – where there is no civil society. At the same time, Ukraine is too politically and economically unstable to become a magnet for those who are behind the contact line, like, for

instance, the Republic of Cyprus has become for residents of occupied Northern Cyprus. Single, private initiatives cannot, by definition, have a cumulative effect, even in the long-term.

The opinions presented force us to once again raise these difficult questions about opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation, and many will not be able to resist the temptation of providing answers to them. But there are no answers. In the post-Soviet space alone, there are four other frozen or simmering conflicts and a whole series of temporarily subdued or emerging conflicts. There are dozens worldwide. No theory, no good intention encompasses the real complexity and contradictions of such a conflict.

That is why I am not sure that the territory where Andrey’s pot with the coins and his telephone number will be dug up will be in the same cultural and mental bounds as Kyiv, no matter who controls it politically. All that we can do for the territory’s return as civil society representatives, public servants or professional communicators can only be done after an honest assessment of both the existing situation and our opportunities to influence it.

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# Dialogue across the contact line has never stopped



**Dmytro Durnev**  
journalist

Current version of the Criminal Code of the “DPR”.

“Article 320. Treason

Treason, that is espionage committed by a citizen of the Donetsk People’s Republic, providing intelligence constituting a state secret to a foreign state, international or foreign organisation or their representatives, which has been entrusted to the individual or made known to him in the course of service, work, study or other cases as specified in the legislation of the Donetsk People’s Republic, or providing financial, logistical, consulting or other assistance to a foreign state, international or foreign organisation or their representatives...”

Contact with an international and simultaneously foreign organisation from Berlin that does not have official accreditation in the “DPR”, helping it collect information “about the socio-economic situation in the republic” would fall under the “treason” article, if one of the survey’s participants had a passport of the “young republic”. In other cases, the process, from the point of view of any investigator from the “MGB” (“ministry for state security”) could well fall under Articles 321 and 328 of the “criminal code” of the “DPR” (that is “espionage” and “incitement of hatred and enmity, degradation of human dignity”). Moreover, in large part, those who conducted the interviews risked being arrested for spying on the territory of the “DPR”. In lesser part, those

people who gave interviews, if they have a “DPR” passport. These people as “DPR citizens” with an official document would fall under the “treason” clause.

Such outcomes would not be any sort of exaggeration from the executors or an overstatement from this journalist. This is simply commonplace in Donetsk, a lottery in which, like any other lottery, few “win”, but practically everyone knows what type of “winnings” we are talking about.

1/3 of the Donetsk region, turned into the “DPR”, is a rather compact area where a little more than two million people live. The territory itself is controlled and as for the people, there are a lot of them, meaning that it is more difficult to control them than the territory. It is impossible to put everybody in jail, the places of imprisonment of the “DPR” are not even theoretically in a state to hold more than 15 thousand people, and there would be budgetary problems for such an operation, yet there is an attempt to keep control over the population through fear and propaganda.

The arrest of someone you know, a relative, a person of your standing and profession is the norm for anyone in this area. Everyone around you knows that if you have made the big decision to live at home, then everything else must come second. You do not need anything unnecessary such as speaking out, writing on social media, documenting your thoughts on others’ digital recording devices or on paper surveys... Anything else is irresponsible behaviour towards your own children and elderly relatives.

This is the first thing you need to understand when reading about any “telephone survey” or targeted questionnaire in the “DPR”.

All international organisations, beginning

with the Czech organisation People in Need and ending with the French Doctors without Borders, have been thrown out of the Donetsk “republic”, formally – for collecting information. All international organisations allocate money and resources with some kind of reporting about the recipients of the aid, their needs and their number. All of this is also “the collection of information about social and public processes in the DPR”.

Loyalty to the “DPR” or participation on its side during the armed combat in 2014 does not protect one from reprisals and everyone understands this. Those who do not understand this are quickly and harshly corrected; the Donetsk blogger, Alexander Bolotin, a member of the public council of the “DPR”, was arrested very openly and publicly on 21 January 2020. The website of the “ministry for internal affairs” of the “DPR” reported that “the suspect was found to have posted on the internet a number of videos containing knowingly false, unconfirmed information, aimed at inciting hatred and enmity, as well as besmirching the honour, dignity and business reputation of the authorities and law enforcement agencies of the Donetsk People’s Republic”.

No one fully understands yet which Facebook post exactly was the real reason for the months-long arrest of the blogger, who is completely loyal to the “DPR” – whether it was the cautious criticism of law enforcement officers for detaining all those who did not have a “DPR” passport at the New Year celebrations in the centre of Donetsk (no more than 10% of the population currently have a “DPR” passport) or the criticism of the Makiivka administration for the real disruption of children’s meals in schools? But Bolotin has been in custody since January, and his wife, after a ten minute meeting in the presence of investigators in February, saw her husband only for the second time in more than seven months on 2 September

2020 at the first court sitting, where the merits of the case were considered. Lawyers told her that her husband could receive a maximum of four years under the article with which he is charged. With such a short possible sentence and the September court sitting, Bolotin appears to be a very privileged figure – usually people are held in custody before a court date for a lot longer.

At the same time, efforts to work for Ukrainian and international media, work paid in euros for half-legal here international organisations and the work of some individual international photographers and interviewers certainly takes place. Much like the work of people who are simply conducting business along the front line – it is true that the Donetsk people are extremely used to risk at work.

All this is not terror, but a miscalculated and, possibly in some places, poorly executed form of order, supplemented by an absence of the primacy of private property as such, very aggressive propaganda, a relatively large number of people around with post-traumatic stress disorder and all the delights of martial law in the form of a strict six-year long curfew from 11pm – 4am and checkpoints on the way to the sea.

One has to consider this overall familiar atmosphere, which is no longer spoken about as it is a given. Yet, it is not to be found in the completed questionnaires, like at all. In Donetsk, you can talk about the “bombing” of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and there is enough mention of it in the responses, but no mention of the arrests, the lack of freedom, checkpoints, curfew...

This survey is quite informative for people immersed in the conflict, who are familiar with the situation and it will be useful for psychologists, philologists, professional negotiators. Those who will work with this whole area in the future, building bridges and trying to understand the



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narratives that have built up over the years out of words, concepts and the numerous new statues on every corner.

A typical feature in the questionnaires is the multiple memories linked to the “bombing” (‘bombezka’ - this is just a trademark word for Donetsk; in Mariupol and Kramatorsk no one talks about the shelling from Grad or Smerch rockets in 2015 as “bombing”, in the “DPR” the consequences of any shelling is often referred to as “bombing”).

There are many eyewitnesses to aeroplane sightings and the work of volunteer battalions (always the ‘Donbas’ and ‘Azov’ battalions – they are local and from Kharkiv, their eastern counterparts and “traitors”, they are most often mentioned in local newspapers and on television).

I always talk to people there, both people I know and those I don’t know really well. The conversations with pensioners while waiting for hours at checkpoints or in traffic jams on the line of contact tend to go particularly well. Some conversations are still on my Dictaphone. I am always struck by two things: the traumatising of memories surrounding the referendum on 11 May 2014 – people always talked reluctantly about it, few took part and if they did take part, then they “didn’t vote for this”. And the heated discussion, the clear and solid understanding of all the procedural changes made by the Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy and the state bank Oschadbank, as well as the new initiatives and old promises of Volodymyr Zelensky. It would be interesting to research how all of this information managed to reach behind the “DPR’s” information curtain so effectively.

I would add one thing to the recommendations – the complete lifting of bans on the movement of goods and cargo by people across the entry-exit crossing points. Small cross-border trade will do more and already does a lot more than any joint telecasts. The importance of the millions of people

who were crossing the line of contact back in March this year cannot be underestimated. The Covid-19 pandemic was an excuse to stop the flow of people across the “DPR’s” entry and exit crossing points in the direction of territory controlled by Ukraine (the restrictions have been lifted for crossing into Russia).

Before, it was a simple fact that many thousands of people, as a rule, took empty bags across “to Ukraine”, and returned with them filled with products, and no one did it the opposite way round. This fact counteracted the aggressive propaganda better than anything else. Talk to market traders in Volnovakha – the “donetskie” took everything from baby formula and medicine to plastic buckets and washbasins. With the closing of the checkpoints on the line of contact, the market’s turnover fell by 30%.

Only with the war did Donetsk understand that Ukraine is good for medicine and food and that there are Ukrainian brands for which they don’t mind paying more.

I always find it interesting to talk with the Donetsk babushky in the queues for milk. In the mornings special vehicles with barrels of milk go from the farms of Starobesheve and Novoazovsk to certain neighbourhoods in Donetsk. The milk there is a ruble or two cheaper than in the shops. While chatting in these lines for milk, you immediately realise that the influence of the local television agenda is almost non-existent, but that of Moscow and Russian television is huge: the twists and turns of the Russian selection for the Eurovision Song Contest, all sorts of soaps operas, political and music shows are discussed in a detailed and reverent manner.

Regarding the dialogue. It is impossible to ignore the war and the simple fact that dialogue across the line of contact never ceased. “DPR” leaders, those out of favour and those still active, are in touch via instant messengers with Donetsk

businessmen in Kyiv – issues of property, possible reprisals and post-war cooperation need to be resolved now. Not everything has been confiscated, the production of counterfeit cigarettes at the Khamadey factory in Debaltseve and Donetsk, dairy production for the Hercules brand, factories and plants for the production of cardboard packaging, sweets, metal parts and a section of the printing industry are all working beyond the full “state” control of the “DPR”. There is also already spontaneous dialogue between people and the information departments of the special services of both sides in mass chats and groups on Telegram (<https://t.me/blokpostDonBus> , <https://t.me/dnrdom> , <https://t.me/blokpostdonbasschannel>). As for my family, I can say that communication between relatives on both sides of the contact line has never once been interrupted, despite the often differing views on the war.

The situation in the “DPR” is very fluid, despite its external stability, and it is developing from month to month among families and individuals. Even now, in the seventh year of the war, families with possessions, dogs and children make carefully thought out decisions to leave for territory controlled by Ukraine. It is also worth talking to these people – how do they set themselves up in Ukrainian Kostyantynivka after six years in Donetsk, how do their children adapt (if they adapt) to Ukrainian schools? I keep track of such stories and I really want to produce material about those who left during the coronavirus

blockade and their adaptation. Does it even exist? In turn, a dominant trend has already developed among the families who are still living in Donetsk and Makiivka, namely the missing breadwinners, who mainly go to Russia to earn money. A large swathe of children growing up without fathers already exists and teachers in Donetsk schools have complained to me about a generation of students, who, against the backdrop of six years of war, simply do not pay attention to threats of talking to the principal or being summoned to the headmaster.

In the last two years, a new class of “DPR” bureaucrats has begun to form and emerge. My acquaintances from publicly funded “governmental bodies” with salaries of 12-17 thousand rubles (140-190 euros) have gradually made their way up to 30-45 thousand rubles (330-500 euros), and this year, for the first time after the coronavirus, they timidly went on holiday to Crimea and the Azov coast of Russia. The “DPR” has a small, but steady, strata of happy people who will not accept Ukraine’s return.

The situation in the uncontrolled territories must be studied, that is for sure. This survey will certainly provoke disputes, condemnation and debate, which will be all the more balanced, the more targeted and accurately the survey is distributed.

Personally, I was only able to force myself to begin to analyse it after the sixth reading.



# The reflections of a conflict expert



## Dialogue starts with personal stories



**Inna Tereshchenko**

mediator, facilitator, trainer, conflict expert, PhD in philosophy, the Head of Odesa Regional Group of Mediation

Before commenting on this study and publication, I will explain what I am basing my comments on. I am an experienced mediator and facilitator, including working as a dialogue facilitator, and with dialogue since 2014 being a particular priority. I have experience as a facilitator of Ukrainian-Russian dialogue projects, as well as multilateral dialogues with the participation of Ukrainians from across the contact line. And besides all this, I have experience of working with conflict in the broad sense of the word.

### Thoughts and views of ordinary people

a) Importance and relevance in terms of the conflict, the logic of conflict development.

This is primarily important for Ukraine and for Ukrainian civil society, given that issues of reconciling the situation are not yet being discussed sufficiently in Ukrainian society and are based on general descriptions of the situation and on default conflict stereotypes (where residents of the uncontrolled territories are either traitors, separatists or victims, as said in the text).

b) It is very valuable that the publication focused on the thoughts and views of ordinary people. It's

not so important that it is not representative. It presents a fairly diverse range of opinions that are now characteristic for the uncontrolled territories.

This is significant from the point of view of understanding, firstly, the atmosphere. Six years have passed, and the situation is changing. People tend to look for benchmarks and footholds in the search for stability. And this range of sentiments just reflects the process of adaptation. According to research, only 10% of people can easily tolerate a situation of uncertainty (tolerance of uncertainty), which is why the search for milestones and indicators of stability, intelligibility and tangible prospects is understandable. This probably explains the impression that the conflict is in the past, when active combat operations were being carried out – even though the situation has not actually been resolved and from a broader perspective, the conflict is in a critical phase. An adaptation to the presence of the contact line and other changes has taken place. And people think that now there is no real daily threat to life, as there was during active combat operations, then it means the conflict is already in the past.

Secondly, besides the moods and atmosphere presented in the survey, it is also important for understanding how life is changing in these territories, what challenges people are facing and how they are solving them.

The value of this publication lies in its practicality. And not so much for the development of political and state programmes, but rather to stimulate public debate about resolving the situation. It makes it possible to include the human aspect, the opinions and attitudes of people whose fates are on the agenda again. To return agency to people living in the uncontrolled territories and internally displaced persons living scattered throughout the whole of Ukraine.

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Another indicator of the practicality of the survey is the presence of a section on dialogue. In fact, the publication was produced precisely to outline the basis for and importance of communication between people. Such dialogues are already being conducted across the contact line. Some of the dialogue initiatives, for obvious reasons, are confidential and information about them is not public. Perhaps this is the reason why no specific examples of such dialogue meetings are given in the publication.

As a result, the main point and value of the publication is the conversation about the role of dialogue, the possibilities and difficulties in restoring links between people from different regions.

### **What do violent conflict and armed hostilities introduce into communication between people?**

The territory is divided by war, and this means that people on different sides of the line of contact automatically become parties to the conflict. And as the conflict develops, this division increases, as does the polarisation. And most importantly, there are victims, losses on both sides, which without doubt exponentially increases the negative perception of the other side. If in a usual conflict, before the use of violence, a narrowing of perception of the opponent takes place, then after the use of force and weapons, the opponent already becomes the enemy, who internally “gets issued with a bill” of accusations. In this case, when speaking about people in the uncontrolled territories, in their eyes everyone who is on the other side of the contact line is the enemy and all of them are responsible for the destruction and war happening in their territories. The same also happens with the population in the rest of Ukraine, where there is often a simplified view: if people stayed, then it means that they support the regime. There is no internal differentiation between different positions and relations. This is a

particularity of a conflict’s development, when the situation is assessed in black and white terms, when there are no “different opinions” and positions, but just “enemy and opponent”, regardless of one’s role in the conflict. This is how the laws of conflict work. And that is why it is so important in the critical phase of a conflict to dispel this polarisation, to move away from oversimplified perceptions of the “opponent”, of those on the other side. And it is equally important to not only show differences in opinion, sentiments, and accounts, but also to show what these views, perceptions and feelings are based on. This provides a possibility and basis for dialogue, to maintain connections and contacts and establish new ones.

### **What currently divides people and what kind of division is it?**

The situation has become more complicated after six years than it once was. And it’s not just about the emergence of a whole generation of young people whose political and social formation took place in the middle of conflict and war. Hence the radicalisation that is reinforced by the psychosocial characteristics of that age.

Division is reinforced by objective reasons: war and losses, the opponent’s positions in the war (including the severance of economic ties etc.) and subjective reasons, which a) call back to the logic and development of the conflict (dehumanisation, polarisation, radicalisation and so on, and b) have to do with the reaction to what is happening, reaction to interaction with citizens of the rest of Ukraine. And, of course, reaction to the divide in the media landscape.

I would like to draw attention to one more point that characterises the citizens of Donbas. Family ties are very important in the culture of this region, which is why breaking these ties is viewed as especially painful and different efforts are made to maintain these ties. Another feature of the culture is low mobility and a special attitude towards the home.

And this is also one of the factors that has heightened the trauma of the situation.

What is currently dividing people in the different territories?

1. Life takes its course, different realities, different laws, regulations, currencies etc. Within six years, this has led citizens of the non-government-controlled territories away from Ukrainian reality (if they do not have a pension, if there is no need to choose an educational institution etc.). In such a situation, Russia turned out to be close by and involved in its political space. But its own reality has already been created, one that is different to the life in the two states, Ukraine and Russia.
2. The different media landscapes in which people live. There is propaganda on both sides, and this means descriptions of a black and white picture.
3. Stereotyping of representatives of the different territories. In the interviews it was said that in Ukraine they are perceived as “enemies”, “vatniki” (which is a derogatory term) or victims. It should be noted that even before the conflict, before the war, during the Yanukovich presidency in Ukraine, there were already negative stereotypes about Donbas residents for various reasons. There was some transfer of negative attitudes towards the President’s system of ruling onto his compatriots. And this stereotype became the basis for reinforcing negative attitudes after the start of the war.
4. Difficulties in communication – both objective (contact line, absence of direct links), as well as subjective, when common topics for contacts and communication begin to be lost.
5. Resentment. The impression is that they were not supported, not helped. And in such a critical situation, there were no arguments for not helping, and so on.

**What may bring us closer, as one of the sections of the survey is titled. And the answer in the subheading is “objective information”.**

During war, the critical phase of a conflict and separation, there can be no objective information. Especially on the level of communication between ordinary people. Everyone has their own truth and their arguments to back it up. Challenges and attempts to present one’s facts and arguments causes only tension and distance. That is why many people say that they avoid conversations about politics, where everyone has their own truth. This is exactly why, when talking about dialogue, it is important to prepare people to hear and understand this other truth. From both sides. And this is not about an openness to dialogue. In the critical phase of a conflict, there may be different causes for dialogue. It can be a conscious position to do something to reduce the intensity of the conflict and the wish to take responsibility at your level of influence, in your circle of communication. It can also be an interest in understanding what these others think and understand. Sometimes people come to the dialogue with a desire to win people over and show their truth and prove that their lives have already recovered and are back up and running, to talk about their grievances. In the course of a facilitated dialogue, these people find out how and what is being done to help displaced persons in other regions of Ukraine, they find out how to relate to the war, and then this very willingness and desire to learn more, a readiness for dialogue appears.

**What issues can a dialogue be about and what possibilities does it have?**

Most interviewees said that they avoid sensitive and political issues. And perhaps this is the right strategy, especially during the time when relationships are recovering between people who communicated and were connected with



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one another before the war. And it is important to maintain these relationships. So that the connection is not broken. But that is just one of the tasks, one of the initial foundations of establishing communication across the line of contact.

If we are talking about dialogue as a means of resolving the situation then it is certainly important to raise issues that characterise the situation. Through narratives, through outlining individual stories and experiences, it is possible to understand what people really lived through. Then the situation becomes more expansive, more comprehensible. Personal experiences cannot be objected to. You can listen to them, you need to be prepared to listen to them and have the ability to empathise. Then these stories don't become the basis for arguments and the search for vindication, because the narratives are what specific people have experienced, they belong to someone, you

can't take that away, it is impossible to refute.

Dialogue can also be for understanding the other side and their arguments.

It is important that dialogue in such a sensitive situation must take place with the help of facilitators, they require preparation, so that they do not exacerbate the situation even further.

In conclusion, I can say that this is a very timely publication, as it provides an opportunity and a reason to understand these personal stories, to move the confrontation from the political level to understanding other people. And to establish, organise and maintain connections and relationships between people across the contact line. So that we only distinguish between territory, and not people. I recommend this study to all those who intend to work with dialogue.







# “Does Ukraine need us?”

The results of the survey in the areas of Donbas that are not controlled by the Ukrainian Government, the analysis of the opinions and the conclusions by a conflict expert

This publication aims to address the lack of public exchange of opinions across the contact line and within Ukraine, to create the space to present views of people living in non-government-controlled territory, to support the development of a public discussion about the possibilities for reintegration.

“When it comes to the people living in non-government-controlled territories in Ukraine, simplified perception prevails. We know too little about these people and hear their voices too rarely to realise that their lives and views are far more complicated than the question of supporting one side or the other. This survey is a unique opportunity to address this injustice, at least in some way”.

**Alisa Sopova,**

journalist, doctoral candidate in anthropology, Princeton University, born and raised in Donetsk.

“The value of this publication lies in its practicality. And not only for the development of political and state programmes, but rather to stimulate public debate about resolving the situation. It makes it possible to include the human aspect, the opinions and attitudes of people whose fates are on the agenda again. To return agency to people living in the uncontrolled territories and internally displaced persons living scattered throughout the whole of Ukraine”.

**Inna Tereshchenko,**

mediator, facilitator, trainer, conflict expert.

“This survey is quite informative for people immersed in the conflict, who are familiar with the situation and it will be useful for psychologists, philologists, professional negotiators. Those who will work with this whole area in the future, building bridges and trying to understand the narratives that have built up over the years out of words, concepts and the numerous new statues on every corner”.

**Dmytro Durnev,**

journalist.