

**STORIES**

# PULSE OF PEACE IN DONBAS




**"Peacebuilding even in a small community is a big step so that later there will not be a huge disaster in our countries as a whole":  
Svetlana Krot's Rules of Life**

An exhibition “(NOT) War: realizing oneself and boundaries in ‘Donbas diaries’ dialogues” is opening in the end of August in the French city of Nantes, in the framework of a summer university of social movements. The exhibition is the outcome of a dialogue process between young people from Ukraine and Russia. The dialogues about war and the perceptions of it took place in 2018-2020 in Ukraine, Russian, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lithuania within a project of the international civil society platform CivilMPlus. At the last stage of the dialogue process, the participants were joined by artists and designers; together they created the artworks: collages, photos, videos and texts. Before the

exhibition in France, we talked to Svitlana Krot, the deputy head of the NGO 'Country of Free People', project coordinator from the Ukrainian side.

In general, the exhibition turned out to be a very solid, long-term project, very large-scale as it took us almost 2.5 years to bring the participants together, organize the whole process and help them make their art products. **The project united young people living in different parts of Ukraine, including in the non-government-controlled territories, and there were also participants from Russia.** For security reasons, we do not disclose the names of the Russian participants and the names of partner organizations.

We understood that there were people among us who had and still have their own trauma, including possibly transgenerational, and it was important that everyone was ready to go deeper, to talk about more serious topics, and work out some internal issues. This was very important for the further creation of art.



The dialogue was a very valuable process, although at first our participants did not understand at all how to work with art and art projects, but thanks to an excellent team of experts, it gradually turned out. **Participants said: "We realized that we have something to tell our children about, and how to react to certain situations that have taken place in this or that country.** And we understand how one can safely talk to people about difficult topics". It seems to me that this is generally a great result. And I am glad that we were able to light this fire of further changes in them. Now our alumni continue their own peacebuilding activities in various volumes. Peacebuilding does not really mean that we must necessarily save the whole world and today reconcile all

countries. **Peacebuilding even in a small community is a big step so that later there will not be a huge disaster in our countries as a whole.**

In 2014 I personally had to pack my things very quickly, take my child by the hand and sit on the train in complete shock. I had no idea whether we would make it before our train was bombed or not. And then it was time to adapt, taking into account my mental condition that can be described by a line from a song "I am looking into strange sky from a stranger's window and don't see a single familiar star<sup>1</sup>." Therefore, this whole topic is personal for me, **I know what it means when people cannot agree, and as a result, a catastrophe occurs.**

**Migration is cool, but I would like future generations to choose where they will go, when, and in what condition.** For me my experience was probably the main decisive factor for my work - dialogue processes, humanitarian projects, youth initiatives.

During the project, I realized: there is no need to force people to talk about difficult topics. **We create a mini-world, a mini-process, and we see how communication happens by itself – through confrontation and misunderstanding, to the point of finding common solutions. And when people want, it turns out, they can find not what divides them, but what they can agree upon.** Then a dialogue arises, and then we can build new relationships, not forgetting about the old ones, they cannot be forgotten, in fact. But you can accept the other, understand why this or that happened, and what we can do with it further to ensure it does not happen again.

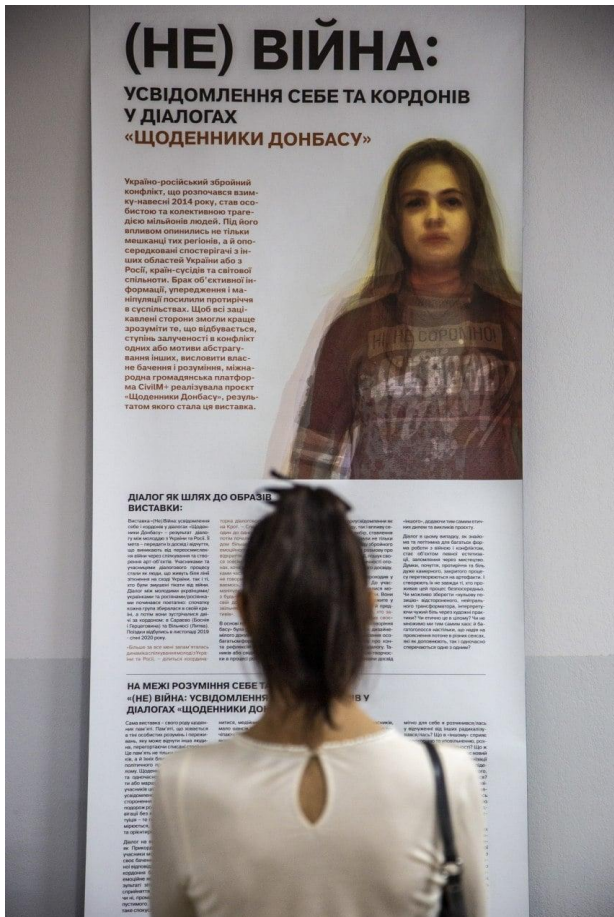
It was very interesting to observe how we actually react to the labels. When we enter a room, we are just people who have come together. But as soon as we start talking about belonging to a particular nation, to a particular country, we put a label on ourselves and start looking at others differently. **I realized that we quickly create an image of an enemy.** I had known before that it could be done easily. In ten minutes you can create this image, but it will take forever to remove it. Deleting an image is much harder than creating, as it turned out.

I was amazed by a statement of one of our participants when she said: "I woke up in the morning and realized that I was an enemy. Before that I was Masha, Olya, Tanya, and then one morning I woke up and realized that I was an enemy, that millions of people woke up this morning with a feeling that I am their enemy. And I can't help it. I'm walking down the street with this label". Even when I'm talking about this now, I still have goosebumps. I was amazed that people experienced such emotions and were willing to share them. And what else amazes me is that **with such projects we can transform the conflict.** I would not say that we can resolve or remove it, but we can simply transform it into another energy.

After the project finished, I began to identify myself very clearly. I often conduct trainings in different parts of the country, and **earlier it was uncomfortable for me to mention that I am from Donbas, just so as not to touch upon this topic again. And now I**

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<sup>1</sup> A quote from a song by Victor Tsoy, late post-Soviet rock-musician.



am uncomfortable with hushing it up. I realized that I could give an example: here I am, I am a displaced person, so what? This is also very valuable when later people come up to me and say: "Thank you for saying this, because we look at you and understand that yes - people are different and this gives us an understanding of what we can accept."

It seems to me that sooner or later we will all get tired. It has already come from peacebuilding processes in which you do not see your global goals and results. And here I would like to say that we should appreciate some moments and results we achieve. Even if you made a small step - be grateful for it, enjoy this moment. I would like all of us to understand the value; not to make judgements, but to appreciate the value of what we do and what other people do. And if we don't like something, we shall not say they are doing

something wrong, but we shall approach this organization and say: "I have an idea. Let's do this and that. Let's give it a chance together".