

**STORIES**

# PULSE OF PEACE IN DONBAS




**Alisa Sopova**

**Igor Kozlovsky**

**24 August 2021 was the 30th anniversary of Ukraine's independence. This is a day important for all Ukrainians, and especially important for the people who live in the cities located in the conflict zone. For the monthly column “Rules of Life”, CivilMplus spoke with two people from Donbas:**

**Igor Kozlovsky** is a scientist, scholar of religious studies, historian, senior researcher at the Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, a former prisoner of conscience of the so-called DPR.

**Alisa Sopova**, journalist, Nieman Fellowship alumna, PhD student at Princeton University.

## **Igor Kozlovsky**

I myself find it difficult to answer the question of how to present myself, because even for myself it is sometimes also difficult to consider who I really am. **As a man of science I no longer operate with the concept of "identity", but with the concept of "authenticity", because it is connected precisely with my vision of myself. And how I define authenticity for myself is connected to honesty, to truthfulness.** That is, the correspondence of the inner self with the outer one. As for identity, there is a very important point here, connected with the fact that identity –, as we translate into Russian is actually a correspondence. That is, what is the answer? How do you answer the question posed: "Who are you?" In this case, I am probably a public figure and scientist.

I remember the events of independence well, at that moment I was in Donetsk, like many of my friends and colleagues. We somehow were internally prepared for this. To say that it was a surprise? No. At that time there was some, I would say, period of "romantic revival". Because since the end of the 1980s, the process of restoring historical memory has been going on, and as a historian, I was not only interested in this - I was engaged in it quite deeply. **That is, there was a feeling of profound change in the air. Including changes related to national identity, self-awareness of who we are, where we are coming from and where we are going.**

But what came as a surprise was probably the fact that it happened almost immediately after the coup of 1991. **In this process, people with different positions, different backgrounds and visions of the future of Ukraine have united. But it was the choice of the collective reason, I would say.** Because the Communist Party and the Communists supported independence, and the people who stood on the right flank. That is, it was not to say that it was surprising or deeply surprising, but rather unexpected to some extent.

**I understand that it is not enough to declare something political, hang out flags and call it independence. It is necessary to change the consciousness of people who do not know what independence is, what it means to live in a free country.** They still do not know anything and their consciousness in this respect is rather rigid, because it is filled with certain stereotypes and has no historical memory. And so my task was to restore the destroyed ruins of the inner man, historical memory. Teach a person to think, answer questions and be responsible for the answers he takes.

If we talk about my life then, at that time in modern language my task was to hack – to hack the internal system of people, cleanse the slag that was, and change consciousness. Of course, it is easier to do this with young people, but I did not stop there, trying to go to different levels. And now, probably, I would describe my task more broadly. **On the one hand, I continue to be an educator, because as always I say**

**that the territories are occupied, and not only the territories. The consciousness of people is also occupied. Therefore, it is important that the process of de-occupation of consciousness goes systemically.** And since I myself am used to thinking systemically, I continue to be engaged in the same enlightenment. At the same time, I am also largely engaged in human rights work.

I am alarmed when I see how people continue to retain mythological structures that help him explain reality. **Now in the occupied Donetsk a kind of strange system of myths has formed, in which fragments of different eras are mixed. Starting from the era of 1937, then the Soviet Union of the 50s, 70s and up to the 80s – before perestroika.** These are structures of consciousness that habitually paint a picture of a certain order, fraternal communication with the idea that everyone is enemies, and we are all good, all brothers and peace in the whole world. But at the same time they forget all the negatives that were there. **This is the displacement of the negative, I would rather put it this way: some internal betrayal, when the Soviet Union is presented as something predictable.** You knew that you will have tomorrow, that you will retire, yes, you have a small pension, but there will always be stability, paternalism and dependency. When everything is decided for you, and you are in an infant state. The most important thing: you have no responsibility and this is like a mountain off your shoulders. People don't want to remember that they paid for it. They only want to remember that something was decided for them and they were not responsible.

Many people do not know how to operate with the concepts of meanings, choices and infantilism - this is convenient, because you shift all the responsibility to another. **Because, as the same criminals told me during captivity: "Igor Anatolyevich, professor, I am not like that – this is how life is." This is the idea that you are good, but someone else is to blame at the same time?** Government,, life, wife, husband, society, neighbor, that is, someone outside. And in order to finally calm yourself down, you need to rationalize these ideas - to create that very rational myth. That is, to explain that everyone is doing this, everyone is living this way, but what's wrong with that? Who cares? These phrases immediately betray an infantile, irresponsible person.

**On the one hand, we are fighting for the return of territories, which is understandable, but on the other hand, people are of course important to us.** Again, returning to the de-occupation of consciousness: in order to accelerate this process, it is necessary, of course, to create conditions in Ukraine itself, so that it would be attractive to them. Since this is the consciousness of people who think in a utilitarian way, and not in some high categories. Quite pragmatic, in the simple sense of the word. Naturally, it is difficult to conduct a dialogue, because there is no civil society in the uncontrolled territories. It was simply destroyed there. Any civic activity outside the ideological system that exists there is simply persecuted. A person may end up in basements, in a concentration camp, or be killed, so it is very difficult to conduct a direct dialogue with that territory here. But people leave for this territory and it is possible to create conditions for the same young people who still break out. They obviously will not stay there - in that territory, because it is hopeless. In any case, the coming decades.



**In general, the most important thing for me is the definition of what a mature person is, one who has a meaning to live.** He or she understands that his life is not accidental. For him, not only some biological aspirations, stereotyped, some schemes that were formed in childhood and adolescence are important. It is very important for him how he sees the future. How he sees himself in this future and what place he occupies in its

history. In other words, how does he answer the question "why?" Why does he live?

I always answer this question like this: everything in this world moves with love. If we take love out of brackets, then the very meaning of existence, both of man and of humanity, disappears. As far as we, as disciples of love, have learned to love - so much we are people, probably. And at the same time, I understand that deeply these are not just words, a kind of empathy, as a factor in understanding the pain and suffering of another. This is when you can hear the inner person, his soul.

**I would like to wish that we not only have compassion for each other, but be those who know how to love.** And love is always not emotions, but actions. I would say an action that is related to what we are investing in making the world a better place. To make the world feel less pain. What efforts we put into it. I think this is the purpose of man as the highest link in the development of the highest link on our planet. This is responsibility not only for oneself, but also for the world around. Even going beyond the boundaries of their nation and state. Only then can it create the phenomenon that will save our planet as a whole.

### **Alisa Sopova**

I worked as a journalist for many years, and now I write articles from time to time. In Donetsk, I worked for the local newspaper "Donbass" for 8 years. When the war began, our newspaper immediately closed down, and I began working as a fixer, a local producer and sometimes a correspondent for various foreign media. I am currently attending a PhD in anthropology at Princeton. **It seems to me that anthropology is very close to journalism, and with its help I hope to look a little deeper at the processes happening in Donbass.**

When the war began, at some point I realized that my experience, what I see around me and the way I see it, is very different from the usual coverage of military actions in the media. **Journalists come and just say "let's get it quick."** "Where is the action the strongest? What does Putin want? And what does Ukraine want? What kind of military do they have there?" Basically, only the military and political aspects are of interest to everyone.

And I myself as someone who lived there began to notice things, which, probably, can only be noticed if this happens at your home. How people I have known all my life began to change their way of life. How the city is changing. How residents cope with what is happening. At first, people will hear one explosion and think that's it, this is the end of the world. Then after six months they start ignoring the explosions which are right by their windows. I began to notice some of these and realized that they are not particularly interesting to anyone else in journalism. And that I cannot offer material about this in any media. Therefore, now the topic of my research is the coping strategies of civilians in the conflict zone in Ukraine, and how they psychologically adapt to what is happening.

**When we talk about war, we usually mean that heroes must be military people.**

And I know one person, who is my favourite hero of this war – his name is Rodion Lebedev. Near the Donetsk airport there is the village of Opytnoye, this is the place that got the most, it ended up in a gray zone, everything around it is mined and bombed. There is no electricity, no water, no connection, no shop. And people still live there – about thirty people, most of them very elderly. And only one middle-aged man – Rodion. Everyone else had left, but he stayed as he decided that otherwise there would be no one to keep an eye on this village, on these elderly. He remained there as a self-proclaimed humanitarian organization, he is the only connection of this village with the world.

My personal coping strategy is to write about all of this and delve into everything. I have noticed that there are two main reactions among people. Many people choose denial. People move to Kyiv or somewhere else and want nothing to remember. And when I publish my articles, some people often tell me in a personal conversation or write in the comments: "Alisa, how can you focus on this negative so much? Can't you see – life is so beautiful. What are you all about these grandmothers in the frontline villages?" **It seems that among people who have directly suffered from the war, this trend of denial is very strong.** I remember that in some frontline village in a grocery store there was a poster on the wall "Not a word about the war!" This is the motto for many people. They don't want to think about it. They want to get distracted as much as possible. And for me it's completely the opposite, somehow this works differently for me.

I was born in 1988, three years before independence, in Donetsk. Donetsk, as an industrial city, was formed around the DMZ – "Donetsk Metallurgical Plant". And for me, as for many Donetsk residents, the factory whistle has always been a kind of symbol of our city. These whistles were once canceled throughout the country so that they would not interfere with the residents. And the DMZ, for symbolic reasons, was allowed to keep it, because in Donetsk people got used to it. **And every day it rang several times – I remember exactly that at 7, 10 and 11 in the evening. This is the whistle from the steamer. It has such a sound ... It is not always audible, but even in the other part of the city, it seemed as if something was vibrating. That's what I remember from early childhood.**

I cannot say that I feel 100% Ukrainian. Ethnically, many bloods are mixed in me, and I grew up in a mixed, borderline culture, where few people had a clear national identity. In my childhood and adolescence, this issue was not even discussed, it did

not matter. **And when it all started in 2014, at first I took it from a national point of view. It seemed to me that this happened to us because we in Donetsk were such irresponsible citizens, "non-Ukrainians".** We did not have some kind of national core, therefore we were so easily manipulated. But when I started working as a journalist on both sides of the frontline, I realized that everything was much more complicated. When you spend time with people on both sides, it becomes impossible to assume that there is good Ukraine and bad separatists – or vice versa. It just happens that different people have responded differently at the turning point. Someone began to feel like a patriot of Ukraine, while someone really believed in other ideas. I met people who said to me: “Why don't you understand us? we went to fight to protect you from the fascists!” I understood that there were no fascists there and all this was propaganda. But if this man with the best intentions went to risk his life in order to protect someone from imaginary fascists then ... it was difficult for me to condemn him just for that.

The contact line **and this whole situation, which has frozen and is not moving anywhere is like the Berlin Wall for me. It was standing for thirty years, and then at one point it became simply irrelevant, because global political changes happened.** I hope that sooner or later a moment will come for us when something will change globally and the current situation will become irrelevant. When something politically changes between Russia and the West, this new Cold War will end. In the meantime, everything is happening in the same way in which it is happening, both in Russia and in Ukraine, I think we have no particular optimistic prospects.

My main recommendation to those who will read this in Europe is **not to assume that this situation is normal.** Because I myself (and, I think, many people) have the impression that almost everyone outside of Eastern Ukraine is happy with the current state of affairs. Of course, it's not good that there are disputed territories, hotbeds of conflict right on the territory of Europe. But, in principle, until there are no large-scale hostilities there, until millions of refugees from Ukraine storm the borders of the European Union, until it causes obvious inconvenience to anyone outside Donbass, it is easier and politically more comfortable for everyone to leave everything as it is than to take concrete steps.

And we – the people who live there (though I am not there all the time now, but my whole family is there) – we all perfectly understand this. And what they tell us: “We are for you, hold on, we will help you, we will do something there” ... We have long ago understood that this is not true. This can be told to each other at some high political level - and to those who are at the scene and live in this reality, it is quite obvious that people were simply abandoned. There are actually about 5 million people who have no illusions neither about Europe, nor about Russia. They are well aware that they have turned out to be extreme in a situation where everyone is pursuing some of their political goals at the expense of people who are forced to live with the consequences.