

STORIES

PULSE OF PEACE IN DONBAS



DARIA KUZNETSOVA

“We wanted to be the subject, not the object, of what was happening in the Donbas”

The 3rd International Forum on Eastern Ukraine, held in Kyiv in November, brought together participants from different countries whose work is related to overcoming the consequences of the conflict in Donbas and the development of peacebuilding initiatives. For the "Rules of Life" column, we have talked with Daria Kuznetsova, one of the founders of the "Donbas dialogue" crowdsourcing peacebuilding project.

“Rules of Life” is a column in which the floor is given to the people of Donbas, as well as to people who play an important role in the peacebuilding process.

Daria Kuznetsova lived in Donetsk before the war, worked at the Institute of Economics and Industry of the National Academy of

Sciences of Ukraine. She could never imagine her future as an organizer of dialogues in a conflict zone. “Donbas Dialogue” is a grassroots peacekeeping project that worked online and offline in Ukraine in 2014-2021.

When the war began, when hostilities began in Donetsk, all of us who created this project **thought about how to become not an object, but a subject of this situation, how to somehow fit into the dynamics of change in relationships that took place on different levels.** Because everything here collapsed: banks were closed, enterprises were closed, people fled and it was as if it was not clear what to do. That is, you live now, but you do not know at all what will happen tomorrow. The picture of the world stops before, roughly speaking, your doorstep. Because you cease to understand what is happening outside your apartment.

The name itself speaks for itself, **"Donbas Dialogue" is a project on how to build a safe space for those people who are interested in the topic of peaceful resolution of the conflict.** How you can influence the processes, how you can get involved, how you can compare your point of view with another - these are the questions that are of interest to us. That is, how can we understand what happened to us. And perhaps, to give some support to other people who have reached a dead end in trying to understand the situation that has arisen.

After three years of trying with our resources to organize dialogues between residents of controlled and uncontrolled parts of Donbas, we came to the conclusion that we need to spread this practice by increasing the number of dialogues. **Because, unfortunately, due to the conflict, the topic of dialogue / facilitation of dialogues and communication between people has become very relevant and necessary.** Increasingly, round tables were organized in Ukraine, which were called dialogues, while there were not enough professional facilitators. In fact, society also turned out to be not very ready to actually work on difficult topics.

For me personally, **the “Donbas Dialogue”** was a salvation. Because, probably, for the first three years, I didn't always understand what I was participating in. **There was an understanding that peaceful life there was no. And until we set it up, there is no point in talking about something else.** Yes, we can adapt. In the eighth year, the inhabitants of the region have already adapted. To come to terms with the fact that it will not be the same as before is a huge challenge and work, first of all, on oneself. Confidence in the possibility of building a peaceful life gave me the strength to live and at least look into the future.

The Forum for me has become a place to sum up the work of the Donbas Dialogue. Now the project has been completed for a number of reasons, and it was important for us to analyze the experience, put an end to it and discuss what we can do next. **Unfortunately, we do not have many such forums in Ukraine. And the big**

question is why so far this is being carried out by international donors, and not organized from within.

After Nikolai Borisov passed away (*the founder of the “Donbas Dialogue”*), the remaining team decided to close the project. **The situation in the country has already changed a lot, and any project has its own start and end date.** Now we need a new team and new initiatives. But there will also be an archive of our project, its library, a detailed description of the methodology, which is already being presented at the international level as an innovative methodology for working in post-conflict areas.

The complexity of any dialogue projects in Ukraine is that there are no two points of view, there are many more, and each side has its own perception of the situation. During these 8 years, people have simply become accustomed to and created their own lives, they live in “bubbles”, which sometimes do not intersect at all. **The contact line has not been moving since the beginning of the conflict, that is, it is, in fact, a frozen conflict. Accordingly, there is also the question who will we reconcile with?** It is not clear who and to what extent should be involved in the reconciliation process. Because there is a government, there is a civil sector, there is a professional community, and it also does not seem to be united yet. There is also no single platform where this should work, and these topics are generally brought up for discussion. That is, they are somehow fragmentarily processed, but there is no overall picture. And without understanding the future it is difficult to build any process.

For any further work to strengthen peace in Ukraine, it seems to me very important to take into account the international scientific experience that already exists in other countries. **We will not be able to change our geography and create Ukraine in another place, and we will not be able to move the Donbas,** so it is important to work with what we have, to create various civil institutions that would reflect the voices of those who are not heard now as much as possible.