

Conflict Context Mapping in Non-Government Controlled Areas of Ukraine

Report prepared for **Peaceful Change initiative**

(Abbreviated version of fuller report prepared by Dr. Anna Matveeva, King's College London)

Executive Summary

This report examines the human security and peacebuilding challenges in the non-Government Controlled Areas (NGCA) of Ukraine by exploring the perspectives on the past, present and future, gaining a perspective on broader views among the local population on prospects for dialogue, contacts and engagement, and develop recommendations for local, national and international stakeholders on how to engage on issues affecting the population in conflict-affected areas.

The Maidan movement and overthrow of President Yanukovich were a shock for the people of the region, a sign of a dramatic turn in the direction of the country, and ushered in fears of a threat to their way of life. The narratives of liberation emerging at that time and the collective experience of war built a new identity in the region based on survival and defiance while those who supported a unitary version of Ukrainian statehood, represented by the new authorities in Kiev.

As the Minsk agreement led to a reduction in the scale of hostilities, displaced persons began to return to a situation characterised by economic decline, continuous insecurity from shelling, restrictions on movement to and from government-controlled Ukraine, and repeated disruptions to services from civil infrastructure (water, gas, electricity) located on Ukrainian territory.

People see their basic welfare tied to Russia. Russian relief is prominent in the region, while that of western organisations is little-known and the majority of western organisations have, in any case, been expelled. There is a war-time level of fear of unsanctioned political activism and intelligence-gathering activities, which has led to the expulsion of a number of Ukrainian activists. To a large extent the conflict is seen as being externally driven and in fact a clash between Russia and the West. This belief in the supremacy of the West in Ukrainian decision making, as well as the absence of a vision of a common future, leads to a general lack of confidence that a resolution can be reached under the present authorities.

The report recommends:

- Salvage what can be preserved in terms of infrastructural and economic links, and reinforce interdependency, including the legalisation of trade, before divisions reach a point of no return.
- Find ways of making the Donbas narrative heard not only in Russia.
- Reach out to civic-minded intelligentsia among academics, politicians, media and CSOs in the NGCAs to make them more prepared for dialogue with the other side.
- Encourage national authorities to take symbolic steps to show the NGCAs that they are still welcome in Ukraine and regarded as a part of its citizenry.
- Move more vigorously with efforts to promote dialogue and conciliation and seek out allies among academia, public intellectuals and journalists in the region and in Russia in order to make the space to engage.
- Support existing infrastructural, economic and social connectors which dilute isolation and resistance mentality and generate a more favourable climate for a settlement.

Disclaimer - This report reflects personal observations and analysis by the author and does not represent an organisational view or affiliation. The report is based on a desk review, previous experience of working in Ukraine, and several key informant interviews. Expected travel to NGCA Ukraine did not come to pass.

Background

The NGCAs comprise about 30% of former Luhansk and 40% of Donetsk oblasts. Ukrainian sources estimate the remaining population on the territory at 3 million, which is 800,000 less than rebels claim. The Russian Federal Migration Service which reported a 400,000 drop in refugees from Ukraine in the year to February 2015¹, indicating a trend of increasing returns. Heavily-bombed settlements in the countryside, where it has become difficult to sustain a livelihood, have suffered most from depopulation according to DNR sources² and fewer than 100,000 live in rural areas in LNR and 110,000 in DNR.

Perceptions of the Past

Prior to the outbreak of the violent conflict, one narrative spread in the region was of vulnerability and apprehension of enforced cultural transformation. According to a Research & Branding poll taken in December 2013, 81 percent of population in Donbas did not support the Maidan protests against President Viktor Yanukovich.³ The 2014 Maidan events unleashed strong fears that the victorious Maidan forces would move to stamp out their way of life. The Supreme Rada's vote to abolish the Law on Languages (which was never signed into law) prompted concern that the Donbas communities would be forced to accept an interpretation of history and cultural symbols that they did not share, and which were alien to them. Moreover, many feared that the region would be made a scapegoat as a backbone of the old regime, which inflicted casualties on protestors in Kyiv.

The other narrative was one of liberation. Younger and previously unknown figures came out at the time of Euromaidan to articulate this new narrative. When the political crisis in Kyiv deepened at the beginning of 2014, Pavel Gubarev organised a 'People's Defence of Donbas' group. Gubarev supplied a political passion to the first protests in Donetsk, which subsequently created connections with other cities. He was proclaimed a 'people's governor of Donetsk oblast' on 1 March 2014 and demanded a referendum on its status.

Lines deepened, and people started to confront identity choices they had not been previously conscious of. The main positions and worldviews amongst the population that emerged from these narratives included the idea of repeating the Crimea scenario by joining Russia. This momentous event opened a window of opportunity unthinkable since the end of the USSR as changing borders suddenly appeared possible. There was also some support for the idea of federalisation as a model conducive for the conditions in the region

¹ Cited in Vladimir Dergachoff, Dmitrii Kirillov «Зарплата в 10 тысяч рублей в ДНР очень хорошая!», August 12, 2016. http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/08/09_a_10112825.shtml

² *Ibid.*

³ Research & Branding Group polling December 2013. 12 February 2014. <http://reporter-ua.com/2014/02/12/81-zhiteley-vostoka-ukrainy-ne-podderzhivaet-sobytiya-na-maydane-i-zahvat>

with its distinct economic and social features. This was held by respondents who considered themselves as a part of Ukrainian citizenry, but with a strong regional identity. They expressed regret that the notion was rejected without serious consideration.

No political project of irredentism existed under Yanukovich, and Donbas's different constituencies co-existed peacefully together. Much of the population was prepared to live in an imperfect, but pluralistic and largely tolerant Ukraine of Yanukovich, but was unwilling to follow what was perceived to be a hard-line 'European Choice.' There were other strong views which adhered to Ukraine's unitary statehood. 'National-democratic' parties had their modest followings in the region, with several local council deputies elected on their tickets; their party offices and friendly NGOs continued to operate. For example, the Donbas branch of the Voters' Committee of Ukraine led by Sergei Tkachenko attempted to organise the vote in the Ukrainian presidential election on 25 May 2014 in Donetsk⁴

After the initial conflict developed into a full-fledged war, people with strong pro-Ukrainian identity – many among the cultural intelligentsia, NGOs, private business and associated with administrative structures – began to leave the region, believing their exile would be for a short time only. The main exodus occurred in July 2014. Many relocated to Kyiv, Mariupol and Dnipro. The other wave consisted of well-to-do businesspeople who largely supported the insurgents' cause (and some even participated in it), but found it hard to live in the conditions of war, insecurity and criminality. The 'former rich', as they called themselves, went to Crimea and some - to Russia. People tried to maintain relations with their relatives who found themselves on the other side of the conflict divide, but this often involved conflict avoidance, meaning political positions were not discussed for the sake of family peace. Many old friendships with Kyiv-based people were disrupted. The remaining population of NGCAs largely regards what happened in Donbas as an act of aggression by the Ukrainian state and Euromaidan as an anti-constitutional coup.

Understandings of the Present

Life in the NGCAs⁵

The territories sustained uneven damage. While Donetsk was only destroyed on its edges, Horlovka (Donetsk oblast) took a heavy toll in the fighting and supplies hardly reached it. The frontline town of Uglegorsk (Donetsk oblast) was almost totally wiped out in ferocious shelling in January 2015. In Luhansk oblast, the worse situation is in the north in heavily bombarded Pervomaisk. Donetsk and Luhansk airports have been destroyed. The humanitarian situation

⁴ Sergei Tkachenko interview with author, Kyiv, October 2014, see also Tkachenko in Radio Svoboda on 25 May 2014, <http://www.svoboda.org/a/25398049.html>.

⁵ OSCE SMM Open access weekly reports do not provide figures of casualties or other statistics. Rebel websites release such data from their side, but because the figures are not independently verified, absolute numbers are not cited in the report.

has improved: in June 2016 only a half of the population (54%) relied on aid as compared to 69% in January 2015.⁶ Still, many buildings are damaged or destroyed, production cycles are disrupted, and some businesses have withdrawn. Economic decline is apparent. The Ukrainian Hryvna is gradually being replaced by the Russian rouble, though it remains in circulation.

IDPs and refugees have started to return. This has been confirmed by figures both from Ukraine and Russia, although rebels' own statistics are at variance with those of the Ukrainian government. Salaries are low – in mid-2016 a member of the local 'parliament;' one of the highest public office positions, was paid 30,000 roubles (£381) per month, amidst higher prices for basic goods than in GCAs. Living standards in the comparable GCAs of Donbas are better, although its residents have to pay much more for housing, transport and public utilities.

Key issues

A new identity has been formed among the population which remained on the territories. It is no longer a Donbas regional identity with a cultural and historical closeness to Russia and a pride of being an industrial region and Ukraine's locomotive, but a society that went through the hell of a devastating war and survival on the war-torn territories. It cannot be understood without a reference to this experience.

Three main issues are of paramount importance to understanding the perceptions of the population that lives in these realities. Firstly, there is the continuous insecurity and shelling of residential areas, which affects the DNR more than it does the LNR. The question in people's mind is 'if Kyiv signed the Minsk Agreement, why does it continue with military hostilities and is determined to make us feel vulnerable and afraid of it?'

Secondly, freedom of movement has been limited by a permit system introduced on 21 January 2015 by a Temporary Order from the Ukrainian government.⁷ Going through checkpoints is difficult as this requires possession of a permit approved by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and issued by the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) command. Roads are frequently closed, and queues can be hours' long. Crossing into LNR is only possible by foot over a damaged bridge which is unusable for vehicles. Families have been disunited. Taking a minor through a checkpoint necessitates legal consent of both parents certified by a Ukrainian lawyer, which is impossible in cases when one parent resides in the NGCAs where no such lawyers exist. Checkpoints are frequently closed and residents have to travel to them some distance which is expensive and inconvenient. For example, the LNR has only one

⁶ Gazeta.ru 4 August 2016

⁷ UN Office of High Commissioner on Human Rights. February 2015. 9th Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine. Geneva.

checkpoint for the entire territory, and the government side did not wish to sanction opening another one although the LNR leadership had agreed to it.

Thirdly, conscious efforts have been made to cut infrastructural connections that used to be a part of the same regional system and maintained by the same companies for the whole of the Donbas. For example, the main Luhansk power station is located in Schastye in GCA, which supplies electricity to the whole oblast, and any disruption inflicts hardship on the LNR. There have been cuts in gas supply because at certain points the lever is on the government side, although NGCAs have now started to receive deliveries directly from Russia. The main leverage is control over water from Siverskii Donets canal where the government has an upper hand. As seen from the NGCAs, they are in favour of the preservation of infrastructural links, but Kyiv takes steps to cut them off and makes survival as hard as possible. Thus, self-sufficiency and re-orientation towards Russia strengthens. In January 2017 a new State Recovery Policy was adopted aimed to preserve infrastructural links and social ties, but with many barriers already erected this might come across as a vastly overdue move.

This situation affects the attitudes towards the Minsk process. There is a strong perception that Kyiv wages war by subversive means because it cannot launch a military offensive. This includes violent acts such as the assassination of the Sparta battalion commander Arsenii Pavlov (Motorola) on 16 October 2016 following several unsuccessful attempts on his life, believed to be perpetrated by the SBU. Similar failed attempts, allegedly organised by the SBU⁸, have also been made against prominent commanders and de facto premier Alexander Zakharchenko.

Information Space

Ukrainian TV channels have no reception in the NGCAs; however, they can be watched online or via privately-owned satellite dishes, and Ukrainian information websites are accessible. The 'republics' have their own broadcasting channels and printed media, the latter reportedly of mediocre quality, and can watch Russian regional channels from across the border. Russian federal channels are widely watched, but, contrary to widespread perceptions, they have not dedicated much airtime to Ukraine since 2015, unless national-level developments occur. People rely on internet sites set up during the conflict such as Novorossia Today and RusVesna which provide extensive daily coverage of Ukraine's news.

⁸ Alexander Zakharchenko implicated the head of Donetsk branch of SBU, Vitalii Marikov, in masterminding the killing, on 10 November 2016, https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2016/11/10/n_9317633.shtml. Seven teenagers aged from 15 to 18 carried a series of eight explosions from May 2015 to June 2016. When detained, they implicated SBU staff Ihor Rytsko in organising and ordering the explosion. Videos of teenagers describing their actions and explaining motivations are available on Russian and rebel sites. UN HRMM had access to the detained.

OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM)⁹ reports are available in open access and are considered biased. People trust the news with which they have 'frame alignment', that is, the convergence between the narrative and the views and beliefs they already hold.

Word of mouth is an important information source because many have relatives on the other side with whom they are in regular telephone contact, and some travel there to visit family, to access pensions and social benefits, or to study (for example, part of Donetsk University relocated to Vinnitsa, and students and staff come back to visit). Access to benefits and pensions has been made more difficult by a requirement from the government in Kyiv to re-register. The authorities try to clamp down on 'pension tourism' and warned that those who obtained payments illegally would be required to pay them back. Exchange of goods with the GCAs has been restricted and Kyiv's prohibition on commercial ties by a Temporary Order on 21 January 2015 was tightened in summer 2015. However, despite these attempts to curb illegal trade smuggling is believed to take place and shadowy ties between contrabandists continue.

Welfare and aid

People see their basic welfare tied to Russia, which provides essential social payments, despite its own economic woes.¹⁰ By 2016 the DNR authorities established an aid distribution capacity and a system for payment of pensions and social benefits. The ex-chair of DNR 'Security Council' Alexander Khodakovsky stated that 70 percent of the 'republic's' budget expenditure was covered by Moscow in 2015. The Coordinator of 'non-humanitarian assistance' Alexander Juchkovsky estimated that from April to October 2015 Moscow spent 150 billion roubles (\$2.42 billion) on civilian aid alone.¹¹ This support is set to continue. Capital Management System's owner Rinat Akhmetov has been the main provider, throughout the conflict, of humanitarian aid delivered from the Ukraine side.¹² Russian assistance is administered through EMERCOM, an international arm of the Ministry of Civil Emergencies (MCE), and is destined for the de facto and local authorities for distribution.

There are Russian charity groups which are funded through private donations, for example, the Novorossiya Movement and various Russian Orthodox and Cossack grassroots organisations, such as Georgievskiy Cossack Humanitarian Battalion which focus more on the vulnerable in small towns and villages while needs in the major cities are largely covered by the Russian EMERCOM.

⁹ OSCE SMM monitors are drawn from different countries belonging to the OSCE, including from the CIS, and the Mission overall it does not have an exclusively 'western' feel.

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, "Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine," *Europe and Central Asia Briefing 79*, February 5, 2016: 5

¹¹ Alexandrov, Georgii. Воевать нельзя мириться. *TheNewTimes*, 41, 7 December 2015.

¹² For details see Rinat Akhmetov Foundation's website <http://www.fdu.org.ua/en>

The international community's role in the NGCAs is limited and little-known in society. A breakdown of humanitarian aid delivery occurred in July 2015, when the de facto authorities imposed daunting restrictions and stopped the operations of INGOs until such time as international humanitarian organisations were accredited. Implicitly, they were suspected of spying, but no concrete accusations were put to them. Some UN agencies have acquired permission to work, while others work through local partners.

Political Atmosphere and Civil Activism

A fear of a 'colour revolution' through NGOs, civil-minded independent groups and forces outside of the dominant power structure grew stronger, especially after an attempt to blow up the Lenin monument in Donetsk in February 2016. This explains a move against the organisation 'Responsible Citizens' registered in the GCA, but which had operated in Donetsk oblast, and arrests of public intellectuals such as religious scholar Igor Kozlovskiy. 'Responsible Citizens', who used to receive support from several INGOs, fell afoul of the authorities by going beyond a humanitarian brief. It explained that 'we more than once expressed opinions which contradict the main DNR policy line, opinions which they consider 'anti-state'.¹³ 'Responsible Citizens' did not hide their moderate pro-Ukrainian position and were vulnerable to an accusation of a lack of patriotism. An attempt to arrest a pro-Ukrainian activist Maria Oleinik, leader of Prosvity NGO was made in January 2016, but she managed to go into hiding. There was also reported harassment of representatives of non-Orthodox religious confessions.

After those suspected of spying or dissident activities were locked up or forced to leave, public expression of political opposition became limited.¹⁴ Spy mania and a search for the 'fifth column' run high in the political situation characteristic of wartimes. The number of respondents at the DNR who considered that a functioning political opposition was needed decreased from 69% in January 2016 to 62% in June.¹⁵

Professional CSOs supported by donor funding of a kind that exist in Georgia and the GCAs of Ukraine are absent. Politically-minded CSOs relocated to Kyiv and Mariupol, as well as to other cities in eastern Ukraine, and have little relevance to the current situation in the NGCAs. At the same time, there are local groups active in aid delivery and humanitarian work who partner with the ICRC, UN agencies and PiN, but they do not engage in anything political. They do not publicise their activities and keep below the radar. However, respondents

¹³ Yulia Nikitina, 'Донецк без ответственных,' 9 February 2016, <http://www.fontanka.ru/2016/02/09/138/>

¹⁴ Dmitrii Kirillov, Vladimir Dergachoff, "МГБприходитночью" January 30, 2016, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/01/30_a_8048999.shtml

¹⁵ Vladimir Dergachoff, Dmitrii Kirillov, "Хорошегомало, затонет «бандеров», August 4, 2016 http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/08/03_a_9747233.shtml#!photo=0

believe that they would become active and become more visible should the peace process become more dynamic.

Narratives, Stereotypes and Labelling

Hostile and mutually exclusive narratives emerged in 2013 during the time of Euromaidan. The discussion of Ukraine's options and alternatives to the Association Agreement offered by the European Union, led to a creation of narratives that poured scorn on the Russia-backed Customs Union. As the violent events progressed, labels became used by different groups, although it must be stressed that they reflect the rhetoric of the active conflict participants and are not necessarily shared by many in society who blame the conflict on the Kyiv government and its western backers rather than on the ordinary Ukrainians who live in the GCA or even members of the Ukrainian armed forces who responded to calls for mobilisation.

The conflict is seen in large measure as externally driven. The geopolitical narrative, interpreting the conflict as a 'clash of civilisations' and as a US/ Russia proxy war, is crucial to understanding the Donbas rebellion. The 'civilisational' aspect is seen as non-West showing the limits to the West on its power and expansion.¹⁶ The West is regarded as a party to the conflict rather than a fair and impartial outsider and is suspected to be culturally resentful of the people of the NGCAs because of their pro-Russian orientation, their outdated beliefs, traditional values, crude mannerisms, and an image of backwardness.

Visions for the future

Perspectives on the future are not uniform, but the overall climate is unfavourable for political re-integration. In the view of the interlocutors, while this generation was alive, the territories would not be returning under Kyiv's rule, as the population's position shifted towards self-rule and away from Ukraine. The residents that suffered artillery bombardments by the Ukrainian army resolutely turned against Kyiv in a 'Won't forget, won't forgive!' outcry as civilian casualties mounted. An anti-Ukrainian narrative is strong despite everything that the 'republics' went through at the hands of their own leaderships - torture in dungeons, banditry, proliferation of rebel militias and Russia not taking them in. According to interlocutors, most ordinary people cherish the dream that Russia would eventually accept them in, but the leadership's public rhetoric adheres to the provisions of the Minsk Agreement, i.e. Ukraine's territorial integrity with the provision that the territories receive a 'Special Status'. Thus, the narrative of becoming a part of Russia cannot be openly discussed. It is not considered as a realistic option, but rather an inspirational dream temporarily put on hold. What is discussed on blogs, social media and rebel websites is whether the Ukrainian side is likely to launch a military offensive.

¹⁶ Huntington, Samuel P., "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, (1993): 22 – 49.

Polls¹⁷ suggest that support for re-integration into Ukraine has not disappeared entirely. Society continues to be split along political identity lines. Data illustrates this: support for the DNR as a self-governing entity increased from 15 to 20% in 18 months (January 2015 - June 2016), while the constituency wishing to return to Ukraine remained largely stable, - a slight increase from 13 to 15%, - in the same period.¹⁸ According to a poll in June 2015 by the DNR-registered sociological centre Osobyi Status (Special Status), 36% of DNR respondents supported the idea of joining Russia, 18% favoured an 'imagined future' Novorossiia from Kharkiv to Odesa, 14% adhered to 'independent state within the united borders of the present DNR and LNR,' and 10% would agree to a special status within Ukraine.¹⁹

When the conflict broke out, a body of opinion existed, including among the rebel leadership, such as Alexander Khodakovsky, Vostok battalion commander and Oleg Tsarev, chair of Novorossiia 'parliament,' that the rebel Donbas could find its place in a pluralistic and Russia-friendly Ukraine. This vision has not disappeared entirely, but the political and social processes that went on in the GCA Ukraine showed that the country has followed a different trajectory and that this vision, while desirable, no longer applies. That said, the population and the de facto authorities do not wish to disrupt connectors and are keen to preserve infrastructural and industrial links. They do not prevent their people from travelling to the GCAs or IDPs from returning, and keep up with Ukrainian news. However, a string of policies in GCA Ukraine have driven the two sides away from each other, including laws on the use of language, restrictions of Russian broadcasting, approach to how history is taught, the law banning the use of imagery from the Communist era, and the narrative surrounding a possible amnesty for those who took part in the insurgency, which public opinion seems to oppose²⁰.

The Minsk process is the only known political process that is ongoing. Previous direct contacts between Russian and Ukrainian presidential administrations are believed to have scaled down. In people's eyes, Minsk has significantly reduced hostilities and is an alternative to war, hence it is viewed positively. Society as a whole is satisfied how the process is conducted by their authorities, for example, Denis Pushilin's role as the DNR representative to Minsk is positively assessed. Special Status is not what the war was fought for; at the same time, it is not rejected outright. However, the Status is an amorphous and abstract idea rather than a

¹⁷ The author sought to qualify interview material with survey data which can be considered trustworthy, although as the UK and US elections, as well as Brexit demonstrated, pollsters can be wrong.

¹⁸ Vladimir Dergachoff, Dmitrii Kirillov, Хорошего мало, зато нет «бандеров», 04.08.2016 http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/08/03_a_9747233.shtml#!photo=0

¹⁹ Conducted in Donetsk and Makeevka, 1000 respondents interviewed face to face, cited in Gazeta.ru as above.

²⁰ Sociological Service of Razumkov Centre, December 2015, conducted among 2000 respondents in Ukraine apart from Crimea and NGCAs.

tangible product and it is hard to see what it would entail in practice. There is also pessimism that the West would allow this to happen even if Ukrainian lawmakers agreed to it, in an analogy of the failure of the Kozak Memorandum over Transnistria in Moldova in 2003.

Need for Reconciliation

The population wants the West to hear the Donbas side of the story as they feel that it took a one-sided view, but they are pessimistic that the West would listen to them. There is also a perception that the central government in Kyiv that came to power after the Maidan protests will not last long, and there is more mileage in building relations with a successor that would be more prepared to listen (and would not have been responsible for the war). That said, a desire to find reasonable interlocutors among the regional (GCAs of Donbas) and national authorities is also present, although thus far Kyiv has consistently refused direct dialogue. The biggest quest perhaps is to be heard by ordinary Ukrainians, especially those outside of the Donbas, to explain that the rebellion had local roots and driving forces, but there is absolutely no space available for that either in the media or in dialogues of intelligentsia and similar platforms.

As the conflict is multi-layered, several axes of reconciliation need to exist. Firstly, between the Ukrainian politicians and military command who ordered the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) and the population of NGCAs who have suffered artillery and airstrikes on residential areas, and continue to be the victims of civilians casualties. In other words, reconciliation cannot pre-empt a cessation of hostilities and acceptance of some form of responsibility for mass civilian casualties. Secondly, there is a need for reconciliation between people from NGCAs with Kyiv politicians, public intellectuals and media who strongly advanced a unitary model of statehood and a pro-West geopolitical orientation, so that the sides can acknowledge the views of the other and move forward in a more pluralistic vision. Thirdly, direct conflict participants who fought on both sides would have to reconcile with each other. People from Donbas who had strong and opposing views on the country's cultural and geopolitical orientation and who found themselves on different sides on the conflict divide will have to find ways of re-building relationships. Lastly, there is a need for reconciliation between Russia and the West over Ukraine, but this process has not yet begun.

Recommendations

- Salvage what can be preserved in terms of infrastructural and economic links, and reinforce interdependency, including the legalisation of trade. The practice of cutting remaining connectors is counterproductive as it does not inflict the kind of hardship which can bring the NGCAs to their knees, but make them bitter, prompts a search for ways to become more self-sufficient and increases their reliance on Russia. The same applies to the freedom of movement. While there are legitimate security

concerns, they should not create hard barriers. As long as everyday interactions continue, more common ground for reconciliation remains. If the point is reached that this is not one divided society, but two different ones, each with their own identities and mental frames, re-integrating them back together will be ever harder.

- Find ways of making the Donbas narrative heard not only in Russia. Conflict actors have their story to tell, which is worth hearing, without necessarily being accepted as the only truth. Opinion-makers in Kyiv have all the chances to influence the discourse, but the views of their opponents almost never reach the public domain outside of their own audiences.
- Reach out to civic-minded intelligentsia among academics, politicians, media and CSOs in the NGCAs to make them more prepared for dialogue with the other side by introducing experiences of other conflict zones and the first steps that need to be taken, e.g. de-escalation of public rhetoric. Dialogue between Kyiv and Donbas needs to begin sooner rather than later because the factor of time is working against reintegration.
- Some symbolic steps should be taken by the national authorities to show the NGCAs that they are still welcome in Ukraine and regarded as a part of its citizenry. Lately, rhetoric emanating from Kyiv has hardened and does not send a positive signal to Donbas. There is no peace narrative coming from Kyiv which would enable Donbas to create a narrative that could speak to it.
- Peacebuilding practitioners need to move more vigorously with efforts to promote dialogue and conciliation and not wait until a mutually hurtful stalemate arrives – in particular, as this may not happen. Valuable time has already been lost. Stakeholders in Russia both within official circles, without whose goodwill civil society engagement in Donbas would be unable to proceed, and among academia, public intellectuals and journalists, will have to be treated as an ally in this process. Russia's influence cannot be ignored and should be used where possible for positive ends.
- The international humanitarian and development community should support the existing infrastructural, economic and social connectors which dilute the isolation and resistance mentality and generate a more favourable climate for a settlement. It should use its good offices with the government to campaign for relaxation of the current restrictions.