

The plight of the civilian population in selected areas of Luhansk and Donetsk regions

Preliminary documents of the international monitoring group following the results of the monitoring mission from August 15 to 27, 2016



Imprint

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This preliminary report was prepared by the members of the international monitoring team based on the findings of the mission undertaken to Eastern Ukraine from August 15 to 27, 2016. The mission comprised representatives of eight non-governmental human rights organizations from Belarus, Germany, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine.

List of participating organisations:

- The Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House
- Memorial Germany
- German-Russian Exchange
- Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights
- Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights
- Vostok-SOS
- 'Postup' Human Rights Centre
- Truth Hounds

During the mission, its participants worked in Luhansk oblast: the city and regional center of Shchastya, the villages of Lobacheve and Lopaskine, the urban-type settlement of Novoaidar, the village of Saryi Aidar, the town of Zolote (and a separate settlement Zolote-4), the urban-type settlement of Stanytsia Luhanska, the city of Popasna; and in the city of Avdiivka in Donetsk oblast.

Preliminary conclusions and recommendations

These brief preliminary documents were prepared by the members of the international monitoring team based on the findings of the mission undertaken to Eastern Ukraine from August 15 to 27, 2016. The mission comprised representatives of eight public human rights organizations from Belarus, Germany, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine:

*The Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House,
Memorial Germany,
German-Russian Exchange,
Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights,
Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights,
Vostok-SOS,
'Postup' Human Rights Centre,
Truth Hounds.*

Here we present some general assessment and photo documentation. The final report and results of the monitoring mission will be presented later and posted on the websites of the participating partner organizations.

The main task of the monitoring visit, as in 2015, was to document the situation of the civilian population in certain selected territories of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (provinces) controlled by Ukraine, but located in the vicinity of the contact line with the self-proclaimed "Luhansk People's Republic" and "Donetsk People's Republic"¹ and also to compare the situation with a similar period last year.²

All the areas, where the mission worked, have been affected by the armed conflict, in one or another way. Most settlements remain difficult to access and are considered to be areas of the antiterrorist operation (ATO) dangerous for living and visiting. The civilian population perceives the majority of these territories as the front-line zone. During the mission, its participants worked in Luhansk oblast: the city and regional center of Shchastya, the villages of Lobacheve and Lopaskine, the urban-type settlement of Novoaidar, the village of Staryi Aidar, the town of Zolote (and a separate settlement Zolote-4), the urban-type settlement of Stanytsa Luhanska, the city of Popasna; and in the city of Avdiivka in Donetsk oblast.

All the settlements visited by the group are territories where access remains restricted due to special regulations of these areas in the ATO zone (multiple controls at checkpoints), mostly poor road conditions (there have been positive changes in this regard as parts of the road surface in certain areas have been repaired), poorly developed transportation system and other reasons. Poor transport connections with remote settlements at the contact line are a particular problem: there is limited public transport, its schedule is often inconvenient, and in certain areas the buses don't go on weekends.

A significant part of the areas close to roads, around villages, along the contact line (including the river banks, forests, and fields) are still mined, but in comparison with September 2015, the number of signs - clearly visible red signs with the inscription "mines" - has increased. The current problem is the lack of clarity concerning the scale of the mine threat.

The situation for the residents of the visited areas has deteriorated due to the shelling that has increased since early August 2016.³ Shelling and shootings continued at least until the end of August 2016. The monitoring group witnessed shelling in Zolote-4 and Avdiivka. The sounds of distant shelling were recorded by the group in different settlements: Severodonetsk, Novoaidar, and Popasna. During the time of the monitoring mission in the visited territories at least two civilians were killed as a result of the shelling (a resident of Zolote-4 died from a gunshot wound in her home at night, when the monitoring group was in the village). Thus, in the 'front-line' areas, visited by the international group, the ceasefire was violated systematically like in other parts of the contact line between the conflicting parties. The local residents were especially concerned during the time around the two holidays: the Day of the National Flag and the Independence Day of Ukraine. At this time, the intensity of the shelling and shooting increased (for parts of the settlements, the experience from 2015 repeated itself).

Public health issues are a source of serious concern. The interviewed medical staff in different towns reported a significant rise in diseases caused by stressful situations. In addition to cardiovascular diseases, there is an increase in mental and psychosomatic disorders such as heightened

1 This is the definition used in the documents of the OHCHR.

2 See last year's report <http://vostok-sos.org/monitoring-doklad>

3 A ceasefire was once again agreed upon in the Donbas region from 1 September 2016. However, it is already known about cases of ceasefire violations in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

anxiety, skin diseases, nightmares, insomnia, neuroses, fears, and others. It is especially worrisome that these health problems are often diagnosed in children, of whom a significant number lives in the so-called front-line zone. Constant threats to life due to continuous shooting and shelling create conditions of permanent pressure. Thus far, there is no systematic psychological support for the local residents. There is also no effective solution to the problem of access to health care of the civilian population in the villages at the contact line. For example, in response to the call about a wounded person in Zolote-4, the ambulance, stationed at the coal mine 'Gorskaia', refused to go to the village. The emergency service workers decided that it was dangerous to go to the village because of the information about the shelling. The ambulance workers suggested that local residents themselves organize the transportation of the wounded woman to the checkpoint at the entrance to the village. We believe that this situation is unacceptable. It is important to point out the fact that several settlements are located at a considerable distance from each other in this area and are served by a single ambulance. There are quite a lot of similar problems in the visited areas.

A serious problem for the population is the restriction of freedom of movement between the territory controlled by Ukraine and the regions not under its control. In Luhansk oblast there is only one pedestrian crossing in Stanytsia Luhanska (the day when the monitoring group was visiting the crossing, a man died of a heart attack there, despite receiving medical help. This fact once again demonstrates the great stress associated with this way of crossing the line of contact). An additional checkpoint was built and equipped in Zolote, but it is not working because the opposing side does not agree to its functioning. There is no access for transport crossing of the line of conflict (it is possible to create such a corridor of movement through the checkpoint "Zolote", which is fully equipped and is ready to resume its functioning, but there is no agreement to its work from the illegal armed forces). Furthermore, there are cases of attacks on checkpoints, which is absolutely unacceptable and poses a direct threat to the lives of the civilian population.

Many of the problems of the local residents are related to social and welfare issues. There is a serious divide between different groups of the population, a lack of understanding of the work and actions of the 'men in uniform', and other issues. All the above facts require further consideration, description, and mandatory systematic work in the aforementioned territories.

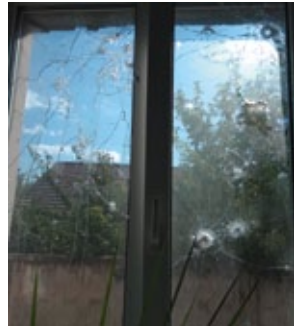
It is important to develop activities with the aid from different countries and international organizations in the following areas: free access from both sides of the contact line for humanitarian and human rights organizations; increasing security by establishing a wider and more permanent presence of international civilian observers and humanitarian organizations at the line of contact; development of continuous night monitoring of the line of contact with the purpose to record the shooting and shelling; improvement of emergency medical services in the settlements in the so-called front-line areas; expansion of social services for people living near the contact line; development of individual evacuation plans for families with children; protecting and ensuring the rights of children; program of compensation for injured residents and for family members of the civilians killed in the conflict; program of compensation for damaged private housing; local programs of psychological rehabilitation in the conflict areas; increased presence of specialists in psychological support; support of small investments in the conflict areas with the aim of creating sources of income for local communities; strengthening legal aid services; development of access to alternative sources of information, including facilitating access of the population of the front-line areas to the Ukrainian television and radio broadcasting, etc.

We emphasize that this material does not contain a comprehensive assessment of the present situation, and it does not consider every individual case of human rights violations or violations of humanitarian law. It only describes some of the problems that exist in the front-line areas, and does not claim to be complete or comprehensive in presenting the situation.

Stanytsia Luhanska

Stanytsia Luhanska is the most affected district (raion) capital of Luhansk oblast – more than 3,000 houses have been damaged here since the start of the conflict. The village is located on the contact line. For the local inhabitants it is the front line as it is being shelled every night. In the second half of August, the intensity of shelling and shooting was very high. Here is the only official crossing in Luhansk oblast which allows movement to and from the territories not controlled by the Ukrainian government. This control point can be crossed by pedestrians only, and not by vehicles. To reach Stanytsia from the city of Luhansk, which is only about ten kilometers away, vehicles have to travel hundreds of kilometers through Donetsk oblast or through the territory of Russia in violation of the Ukrainian law.



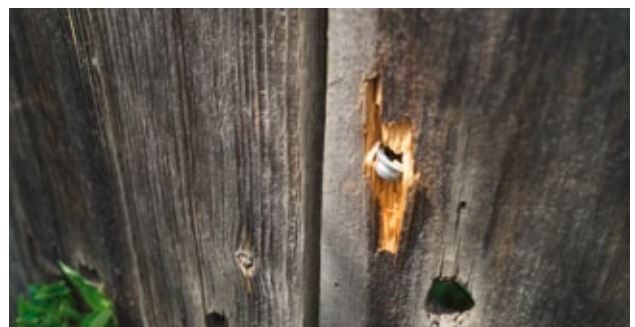


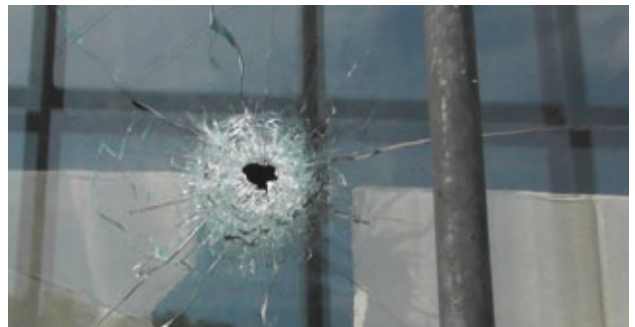




Lobacheve

Lobacheve and Lopaskine (see p. 12) are two villages located at a considerable distance from other settlements in the Novaidarskii district (raion) of Luhansk oblast. Here the conflicting parties are separated only by the river Siverskyi Donets. At the river, there is a small ferry crossing which is only used by the local population. While the two settlements are considered to be located on the territory controlled by Ukraine, they are, as a matter of fact, in the “grey area”. The delivery of medicines and food is impeded by poor and dangerous road connection. There are no health facilities. In the summer of 2016, the shelling and shooting intensified and was very intense in August.









Stryi Aidar

Stryi Aidar is a “frontline” town, located near the town of Shchastya. In the past, the two settlements were connected by a bridge, which has been destroyed three times since the beginning of the conflict. Now the locals have built a new wooden pedestrian bridge. In the past year of the war, the town did not experience any shelling and so the locals are trying to readjust to a more peaceful life. At nights, however, people still hear the sounds of artillery and small arms battles. This has become an ordinary experience for the local residents.





Shchastya

The strategic importance of the city of Shchastya lies in its thermal power plant, which is the only source of electricity for the entire territory of Luhansk oblast controlled by Ukraine, as well as for the rest of the region that is not under the Ukrainian control. The city is situated on the bank of the Siverskyi Donetsk river, which serves as the line of contact. The city's infrastructure is being reconstructed with the aid from international organizations and foundations. Within the last few months this small city has not suffered from shelling. But at the end of August, the attacks resumed. As a result of the shelling of residential areas, a nurse at the local hospital was killed and several houses were damaged.





Zolote-4

Zolote-4 is a mining settlement situated near the front line and is part of the town of Zolote. The nearby settlement of Zolote-5, being also part of the town of Zolote and located just behind the coal mine "Rodina", is not controlled by the Ukrainian army. The shelling and shooting of residential areas still continues. The residents find fragments of shells and small arms bullets in their backyards. It was highly dangerous to be outdoors in the evenings and nights in August. The residents are particularly afraid of "stray bullets" after a local woman was lethally injured by one such bullet on August 21. On that day, the monitoring group was in the settlement. In Zolote-4, there is a school, attended by about seventy children. There are seventeen children of three years and younger. The city of Pervomaisk, which is not controlled by the Ukrainian government, is located not far from Zolote. An entry-exit control point for road traffic was planned to be opened between these towns; in effect, this plan was not realized due to a last moment refusal of the self-proclaimed "Luhansk People's Republic" (LNR). On the territory controlled by Ukraine, all the relevant preparations have been made. Although the checkpoint services are ready for use, the checkpoint does not function.





Popasna

Popasna is a town in Luhansk oblast and a major railway junction. Outside the town limits, there are positions of the illegal armed forces of the self-proclaimed "Luhansk People's Republic". During the first year of the war, Popasna was almost empty, but now its residents have returned. The town was badly damaged. The most intensive shelling was in the summer of 2014 and the first months of 2015. Many buildings in the town were restored, but the shelling of residential areas continues. For example, in August 2016 several houses and a newly repaired road were damaged in the outskirts streets of the town. Popasna is also one of the towns where people are accustomed to the sounds of shelling at night.





Avdiivka

Avdiivka is a town located north of the city of Donetsk, controlled by the illegal armed groups of the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic", and north of the Donetsk airport destroyed as a result of the conflict. The town was partially destroyed during the military action around the Donetsk airport. One of the largest coke plants in Europe is located in Avdiivka. The fighting here has intensified since March 2016 when the Ukrainian Army took control of the Avdiivka industrial zone. This area is the "hottest spot" at the moment. The shelling continues every night. Buildings are regularly destroyed at the outskirts of the town. The residents of the area known as Stara Avdiivka are particularly affected. In July and August 2016, according to the residents, the area constantly suffered from incoming "stray" bullets of different calibers.





European support for civic monitoring in Eastern Ukraine

These preliminary documents have been prepared as part of the project 'European support for effective civic monitoring of human rights violations in Eastern Ukraine' implemented by the **German-Russian Exchange** with the support of the **German Federal Foreign Office**. Three monitoring missions on the situation of the civilian population in selected districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions will be carried out in the time space between August and December 2016. A separate international monitoring group is formed for the purpose of each visit and a separate report will be drawn up based on the results of each mission. The presented preliminary documents result from the first monitoring mission which took place from August 15 to 27, 2016 in selected areas of the Luhansk region located in the immediate vicinity of the contact line.

The **main objective** of the project 'European support for effective civic monitoring of human rights violations in Eastern Ukraine' is a systemic and consistent documentation of the situation of the civilian population, violations of human rights and humanitarian rights in Eastern Ukraine. The project also aims on creating a network of European human rights organizations involved in international monitoring, which should provide detailed and unbiased information to the general public and decision makers relating to the situation of civilians in the conflict area of Eastern Ukraine.

Work on the project is based on the belief that the documentation of the real situation and violations of human rights should result in the curbing of violence and serve as a sign to violators of these rights as well as officials in charge that they cannot count on impunity. The European monitoring of human rights violations in Eastern Ukraine contributes towards the establishment of peace and possible future reconciliation.

The project is implemented by Vostok SOS (<http://vostok-sos.org>) in Ukraine, the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (www.hfhr.pl) in Poland, and the German-Russian Exchange (www.austausch.org) in Germany.

This report and other information relating to the situation of the civilian population and human rights in Eastern Ukraine are available on the website www.civicmonitoring.org.