

Eastern Ukraine – a personal view of a land of myth, fear and dangers (guest blog)

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Ukrainian LSE media student Elena Serdyuk has been watching the conflict in the eastern part of her country from London for the last few months. She has also visited her homeland and describes how her relatives living in the heart of the disputed zone are now facing a humanitarian crisis. In this personal account she outlines how, in her view, the population of the eastern part of Ukraine now believes in a set of myths that is dangerous as well as ignorant.



What next for eastern Ukrainians?

The problem with eastern Ukraine is that it is, in a sense, politically illiterate. An average citizen does not understand basic concepts of international relations or law, and their engagement in political analysis and discourse usually centers around the evils that, they claim, the United States brings to this world. How do they know about these evils? From television, mostly of Russian origin.

Through Russian TV they heard about Western Europe allowing gay marriages. This is their biggest fear. They find natural the corruption of their police, their courts, and officials. This is how they know things to be, this is how things have been for decades. Gay people in their minds are far scarier than getting beaten up at their local police station, being

extorted for money by a judge, or having their business or home taken away, or experiencing the safety of their family threatened. All of that is a part of the reality they have long accepted—it's like Stockholm syndrome on a mass scale.

There are many reasons for why eastern Ukraine has been this ticking bomb of complete social and political ignorance. 95% of the locals have never been abroad—to Europe, the US, or elsewhere. Naturally, we all fear the unknown. Only some of them have traveled to other (post-)Soviet territories, but still few have even been to western or central Ukraine.

Petrified Of the West

These are the demographic who are petrified of the West and NATO, which, they are convinced, sponsored the “fascist” revolution in Kyiv this past winter. These are the people who declared Donetsk People’s Republic, and now, mixed with Russian special forces and Chechen militants, are fighting against the Ukrainian army in Donetsk and Lugansk regions. The Ukrainian media refer to these people as “separatists” and “terrorists” and these two terms pretty much convey the essence of their activities in the area. Separatists are not in the majority, but there are enough of them to cause the crisis Ukraine is experiencing in the east.

The locals believe that the fighting is over the shale gas, which was found near Slovyansk a couple of years ago. This theory seems plausible, as having its own gas would allow Ukraine to finally get the Russian noose off its neck. What is completely baffling to me is that some of the locals believe that it is not the Ukrainian army that is trying to reinstate peace in the region and clear it from gangs of separatists, but Americans! They claim to have heard that Americans are fighting on the side of the Ukrainian army. Not a single local has, however, seen an American in flesh, but many are convinced of the US presence in the region.

Unpopular Opinion

I feel sorry for these people and I am aware that my opinion is not hugely popular among Ukrainian expats in the West. I feel sorry that a lot of them never had a chance in life. In small towns like Slovyansk all that a lot of these people have seen in life is corruption, depression, unemployment, lack of education, abuse. When it's all you've known, it's hard to believe in yourself and have a strong national identity.

These two regions brought our now “wanted” ex-president Yanukovych to power with their vote in 2010, and they suffered from his reign the most, as Yanukovych’s “family” stole for 4 years. These people do not generally speak foreign languages and are thus unable to read European or American press and see that the West has in fact been rather hesitant to involve itself in the conflict.

Ukrainians feel strongly about these politically clueless “declassified elements” in the East and some people do not believe that they are worth fighting for or liberating. Some even think that Donetsk and Lugansk should be given to Russia, if the locals support the separatists. I have a different opinion. It may be because I have lived much of my adult life in the place so often vilified in eastern Ukraine—the United States of America.

People Fooled

This does not mean that I don’t cry when I read about 20-year-old Ukrainian soldiers killed by separatists or that I think that they have a right to act the way they do. I want them to get punished. I want to see them captured and tried for their crimes. But I can’t help but feel that these people have been fooled—by the media, by the state, by the people who called them to fight, by the people who are paying them to fight.

Ever since the conflict started, I’ve been calling my grandparents who live in Slovyansk, a 140-thousand town in Donetsk region, almost every day. Every time I speak with my grandmother, I want to hop on the plane and get over to that depressed provincial place, where my childhood summers were spent and which has now become one of the epicentres of fighting in Donetsk region.

Last week I couldn’t get through—there was no cell phone connection on their end. An entire week when my 80-something grandparents, along with tens of thousands of other people, were in a complete information vacuum in a town under siege, with no electricity, TV or radio, no pharmacies open, ambulances having no petroleum, shootouts keeping them awake at night, as their windows shake. Because the water supply was cut off, people who live in apartment buildings nearby were coming to my grandparents’ street consisting of private houses, all of which have wells, with buckets to get water.

Humanitarian Crisis

The town is on the verge of a humanitarian crisis. Improper burials of killed separatists hold a risk of epidemics. My grandfather has been trying to keep up his and my grandmother’s spirits by saying they had already lived through one war, that is World War II. My mother has not been able to get through the military posts for over a month now, as the town is “locked.”

The information vacuum creates space for gossip, fear and false accusations. Information is the most valuable commodity, but it’s often counterfeit and unreliable. Access to it is crucial right now, as people are deciding whether to evacuate their families or stay put. The Ukrainian government has not been efficient at communicating its position to the locals, which results in them feeling lost and not knowing whether the Ukrainian army in fact has their best interests at heart.

When I speak with my relatives, I am shocked at what their neighbors believe, what they argue over and how easily they are manipulated. When the fighting is over, Ukraine will have its work cut out for it. Educating people politically, teaching them to take responsibility for their actions, as well as their words, should be its main focus. Communicating with them and being efficient in that communication is the only way to rebuild a region free from

terrorism and separatism.

This article by LSE media student Elena Serdyuk

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