Ukraine’s Donbas region: how borderlands became battlefields and boundaries became frontiers

Natalia Mirimanova

Natalia Mirimanova is a conflict resolution scholar-practitioner and has over 25 years of experience of mediation, design and facilitation of dialogue processes, research and advocacy in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, Russia, Moldova, Ukraine, Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and Cyprus. Natalia received her Ph.D. from the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University. Natalia has served as a consultant for the UN, OSCE, EU, Internews, Aga Khan Foundation, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and other international, national and local governmental and non-governmental organisations.

In 2014, parts of the eastern parts of the Donbas – the Donets (river) Basin, encompassing the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine bordering Russia – broke away from Ukrainian control and with Russian military and financial assistance established two self-governing ‘republics’. An agreement reached by Russia and Ukraine under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2015 plotted a path for these territories to reintegrate into Ukraine, but little progress has been made towards making this a reality. This article explores the complex identities of the Donbas region and how it came to be divided by war. It looks at why progress in the official peace process has been so slow and what international actors and local NGOs have done to build peace at the grassroots level.

Borderland communities in the Donbas: redefining the periphery

Ukraine shares borders with seven countries: Russia, Belarus, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Moldova. In each of its borderlands lives territorially concentrated minorities with ethnic kin communities across the border. However, the identity structure of the heavily industrial Donbas is unique. Its history has yielded a mixed identity defined more by its economic role than by national loyalty or ethnic kinship. Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish, Belgian, Croat, Serbian, British and German investors, workers, managers and adventurers, as well as historical communities of Greeks living along the Sea of Azov, have shaped its outlook. People of diverse skills and backgrounds migrated here, blending once distinct social identities to produce a hyper-localised identity centred on the industrial occupations of its population.

Russian has dominated as a lingua franca rather than a marker of ethnicity. While most of the populace speak Russian as their mother tongue, this has not necessarily deepened their connection to Russian communities across the border. Yet the Ukrainian national identity has not been traditionally strong here either. Local identity has overshadowed other ethnic or national attachments.

“The identity structure of the heavily industrial Donbas is unique. Its history has yielded a mixed identity defined more by its economic role than by national loyalty or ethnic kinship.”

This reality is more complex than the imaginary line that is often drawn between western and central Ukraine and the Donbas. Some Ukrainians regard the eastern region as one of political apathy and clientelism, lacking in civic activism, independent agency or entrepreneurial spirit; this is contrasted with western Ukraine, where the people are seen to be more entrepreneurial and mobile. The long-standing animosity between eastern and western Ukraine can be partly attributed to historical memory and in particular the framing of the Second World War: the Western Ukrainian nationalists’ resistance to the Soviet army allegedly included siding with the Nazis and complicity in mass atrocities against Jews, Roma and others. Stereotypes had sometimes turned nasty and, for example, inter-mingling between the Russian-speaking Luhansk and the Ukrainian-speaking Lviv was always discouraged. However, such animosities rarely led to violence and the perceived divide had been decreasing, with new generations growing up in Donbas after Ukraine’s independence in 1991 embracing Ukraine as their home.

Illustration (opposite): Key features including checkpoints in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts (Donbas) in eastern Ukraine. © Jon Sack
Map 1: Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, eastern Ukraine.

Map 2: Regional location of the border between Ukraine and Russia.
Since independence, Ukraine’s leaders have consistently tried to break free from Russian dominance without necessarily cutting all ties.”

Borderlands became battlefields
Since independence, Ukraine’s leaders have consistently tried to break free from Russian dominance without necessarily cutting all ties. Europe was regarded by many as a natural alternative, a space to which Ukraine belonged. After a decade of hard negotiations with the European Commission, an Association Agreement with the European Union was ready to be signed in November 2013. Russia viewed this as a threat to its Eurasian Economic Union, and moreover feared that economic integration would eventually bring Ukraine closer to NATO – a ‘red line’ for Moscow. Victor Yanukovych, leader of the Party of Regions and Ukraine’s President at the time, yielded to Russian pressure and did not sign the agreement. Pro-European citizens and political elites launched peaceful protests in the Maidan square of Kyiv, which met with a brutal reponse from the riot police. The protests escalated and, after violent clashes left dozens of protesters and police officers dead, the President fled the country in February 2014 and new leaders took power. Russia called it a coup d’état.

Rallies in Donetsk and Luhansk in support of the Maidan
Protests attracted only a few thousand people. The majority chose to wait and see. Support for the corrupt rule of Yanukovych was low, but few in the region felt any affinity with the Maidan revolution, especially after the Maidan nationalist leader proposed banning the Russian language. Moreover, the prospect of European integration was also an economic challenge for the Donbas, whose economy would require rapid modernisation and substantial investment. Resentment and fear of losing access to Russia’s markets contributed to growing anti-Maidan sentiments in Donbas, further fuelled by longer-standing working class grievances associated with industrial decline. Threatening messages from Ukrainian nationalist forces and anti-Ukrainian propaganda invigorated by Russian state television stirred existential fears and motivated locals to join anti-Kyiv riots in the east and south of Ukraine in the winter of 2014.

Before long, criminal gangs and Russian ´curators’ took control of the riots, and further rallies were orchestrated from and supported by the Kremlin, including by supplying ´protesters’ from Russia. The demands at the heart of the riots were quickly over-shadowed by Russian and Soviet symbolism. Eventually, in April 2014, a military contingent with no insignia marched into Donbas. Some communities, led by the local administration, welcomed the Russian ´saviours’. Those who tried to resist were killed or detained. Extortion, kidnapping, torture and murder of businesspeople and Ukrainian activists – anyone suspected of loyalty to Kyiv – marked the blooming of the ´Russian Spring’.

The official Ukrainian line, widely shared across Ukrainian society, is that this represented a Russian invasion and occupation of the border region. Russia’s military presence and direct command over the de facto leadership of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics is not contested, even by Russia. Russia, however, emphasises the voluntary and paramilitary nature of the operation, and insists its presence in the breakaway entities was dictated by ‘humanitarian concerns’.

The same month, Ukrainian forces initiated a military operation to re-take the Russian-captured territories. Fierce fighting broke out with heavy artillery and tanks in densely populated cities and villages. Suddenly, peaceful borderlands had become battlefields.

Boundaries became frontiers
The Ukrainian military operation brought tragic clarity to the residents of Donbas: they were a new ‘other’, a sentiment carefully nurtured by both the Russian and Ukrainian media. The military operation was carried out by special security forces and volunteer conscripts – which helped shape national and international perceptions of the operation as a grassroots mobilisation of the nation against the invasion. The people in the Donbas felt increasingly isolated and those remaining in rebel-held territories were particularly alienated from notions of Ukrainian nationalism and sovereignty.

A ceasefire orchestrated by the Trilateral Contact Group (Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the OSCE) in February 2015 established a ‘line of contact’ that – with checkpoints, barbed-wire fences, anti-tank ditches and flags – split the
Donetsk and Luhansk regions into government-controlled areas (GCAs) and non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs).

**As political and geopolitical preferences became conflated with territory, ethnicity and linguistic divides, the ‘other’ was increasingly dehumanised in ordinary conversations, the media and political campaigns.**

The war did not just mark the division of geographic space. The violence triggered a wave of displacement to other regions of Ukraine or to Russia. The numbers are estimated at slightly less than 1.5 million, about 800,000 of whom chose to settle in the adjacent Ukrainian-controlled territories. The outflow of hundreds of thousands of people from the breakaway territories into the rest of Ukraine signified a rupture of human ties and a widening of social disparities, not only between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian populations, but also reflected in the social composition of the two parts of the borderlands. The majority of people who left were those who could: the wealthy, educated and young. Those who remained were predominantly pensioners and impoverished groups, as well as micro-business owners and industrial workers.

While people continued to move back and forth through checkpoints, even during open conflict, long waits, fears of shelling and mistreatment, coupled with sharply deteriorating road conditions and increasingly unaffordable transport fees, became inherent obstacles to movement. Human interactions across the line of contact weakened and perceptions of ‘the enemy’ were inflated. As political and geopolitical preferences became conflated with territory, ethnicity and linguistic divides, the ‘other’ was increasingly dehumanised in ordinary conversations, the media and political campaigns. The political divide was transformed into a ‘blood line’ (to use Vamik Volkan’s term) between incompatible identities, and new borderland communities and dynamics emerged on either side as a result.

**Contested representation and legitimacy: pitfalls for genuine dialogue**

In the self-proclaimed ‘republics’, the new leaders and their armed supporters evicted local authorities who refused to cooperate. Individual mayors and administrators did continue to deliver services to the population, including carrying cash for pension payments across the line of contact, as most of the banks in the rebel-captured areas had stopped operating, but eventually some of them decided to leave. For example, the Luhansk regional administration relocated to Severodonetsk, a city in western Luhansk recaptured from the rebels by Ukrainian forces in July 2014. Similarly, Kramatorsk became the new regional centre for the Donetsk region. Some public officials relocated to other parts of Ukraine, where they were often met with suspicion, while those who did not support the post-Maidan leadership or feared persecution moved to Russia. This left local authorities without a mandate to operate.
Efforts to make peace have been pursued through two diplomatic groupings. One high-level contact group, the Normandy format, was established in June 2014, through which Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany talk mainly at the foreign ministerial level. Around the same time, the Trilateral Contact Group embarked on the ‘Minsk process’, holding direct negotiations between representatives of Ukraine and Russia under the aegis of the OSCE. Three working groups have been developed to deal with political, humanitarian and economic issues, in which individuals – de facto officials and experts as well as Russian and Ukrainian officials and experts – participate. This process yielded agreements in September 2014 and February 2015, but progress has been slow. Participants do not have the power to make any significant decisions on their own, and even technical matters, such as the exchange of prisoners of war or the restoration of energy and water supplies, take time due to the need for consultations with superiors. Implementation then depends on personal commitments made by Minsk participants or informal interventions from the governments or individuals, such as Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian oligarch and Russian President Putin’s close personal friend.

Representation at the Minsk process negotiation table has been contentious owing to the disputed legitimacy of actors. The post-Maidan national leadership refuses to recognise any authority in the NGCAs other than official local authorities loyal to Ukraine. The legitimacy of the leaders of the self-proclaimed republics is not fully accepted within these own territories either, with clashes between different groups over access to power and public finances common. Similarly, rebel leaders reject the legitimacy of the post-Maidan leadership in Kyiv. There is therefore no explicit representation of the non-government-controlled Donbas nor of the government-controlled Donbas. Yet in practice, leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics have at times participated in an informal capacity or via Viktor Medvedchuk, who has been mandated by the Ukrainian President to play this role.

The Ukrainian authorities sought to shore up their legitimacy in the run-up to the first post-Maidan presidential elections in May 2014, when, with support from the Swiss-chaired OSCE, a national dialogue process was established. This was to include representation from the borderland regions in the east and in the south. One of the three rounds of dialogue had even been scheduled to take place in Donetsk, but was cancelled for security reasons. The Donbas was represented by official authorities from the region from the previous President’s party – but, with nearly zero legitimacy at the time, they had a weak public mandate. The short-lived process served a tactical goal of preparing the way for elections to take place, thus countering Russian’s claims that the Ukrainian interlocutors were illegitimate.

From the beginning of the political crisis, spontaneous attempts were made by local and regional administrations to pacify protesters and establish a dialogue between different groups. This was a risky business since banditry and gun rule increasingly replaced law and order. For example, a member of Horlyvka city council was murdered after he attempted to enter the captured local administration building and engage in talks with rebels. All similar attempts have failed. The emerging leaders of the protest movement perceive the Ukrainian side as manipulative and untrustworthy. At the same time, these ad hoc representatives have a very limited mandate to negotiate with Kyiv representatives owing to the tight control exercised by the Russian security services.

Thus borderland communities in the Donbas lost their voice in Ukrainian politics. Some felt they were marginalised, while others explicitly rejected post-Maidan Ukraine as a political space. Internally displaced people (IDPs) who relocated from NGCAs to GCAs were deprived of the right to vote in local Ukrainian elections. Those who stayed had to re-register in GCAs in order to vote in national elections, entailing a risky crossing of the line of contact.

“From the beginning of the political crisis, spontaneous attempts were made by local and regional administrations to pacify protesters and establish a dialogue between different groups.”

How the centre defined the conflict

Borderland: unwanted reintegration

NGCAs were defined by the Ukrainian government as ‘temporarily occupied territories’ and legislation was enacted to regulate them. The movement of people has been channelled exclusively through checkpoints along the line of contact – five of which are operational in the Donetsk region and one in the Luhansk region. While international humanitarian cargo is allowed into NGCAs, all commercial cargo has been banned. Residents can only obtain their pensions and social payments after registering in GCAs and once their actual whereabouts in the GCAs has been confirmed by the authorities. Since many people commute and live in two places, such ‘pension trips’ are risky and costly, and impossible for the elderly or disabled. International human rights organisations have consistently highlighted this as a human rights violation. Ukraine argues that it is impossible to carry out bank transactions in NGCAs or access records now in the hands of de facto authorities. Russia has instead assumed responsibility for providing some social payments there.

The central government has also developed a series of initiatives to curb separatist sentiments. This includes a range of campaigns promoting Ukrainian national symbols, flags, holidays, traditional dress and culture, as well as infrastructure repair and housing. IDPs have also been offered education opportunities in the Ukrainian language and scholarships and grants to study in other parts of Ukraine.

The September 2014 agreement generated by the Minsk process envisioned a phased reintegration of the NGCAs into Ukraine. For Ukraine, this would take place after border control is restored and Russian troops leave. For Russia and the self-proclaimed republics, elections and special status for the territories should pave the way to restoring Ukraine’s
jurisdiction, including over the state border. However, none of the parties seem seriously invested in making this work.

For example, while a Ministry of Temporarily Occupied Territories and Internally Displaced Persons was established in Kyiv in April 2016, it is chronically under-financed and unable to service the conflict-affected population adequately. Most parliamentarians have resisted any efforts directed at integrating IDPs or developing inclusive processes that might ease borderland communities back into Ukrainian society. Furthermore, although the Minsk agreement prescribes granting special status to NGCAs within the Ukrainian state, a draft law on special status has not yet been ratified. An overwhelming majority of deputies in the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament) and their constituents oppose any special status for the Donbas region. Instead, the people of Donbas are often labelled a ‘fifth column’ in political and media discourse. Some commentators question Ukraine’s wish to take the NGCA’s back at all, suggesting, as a Foreign Policy article did, that Ukraine benefits from avoiding the immense cost of not having to sustain a depressed ‘rust belt’.

Yet, subsidising Donbas in the long term is a burden Russia does not want either. It needs less hostile and more cooperative relations with Ukraine and may use the territories of the Donbas currently within its control as a bargaining chip. However, until Kyiv and Moscow address the issue seriously, the Donbas NGCAs will remain in political limbo.

Peacebuilding: a local affair
International organisations, especially the OSCE and the UN, have made significant contributions to projects on confidence building, entrepreneurship and infrastructure, as well as providing humanitarian assistance and advocating better functioning checkpoints between the controlled and uncontrolled territories.

The OSCE Project Coordinator in Ukraine launched a reformed national dialogue in 2015, shifting the focal point and location of the dialogue to the easternmost conflict-affected areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions where officials from Kyiv do not frequently travel. These ‘Reconstruction through Dialogue’ forums in the Donbas GCAs became an important way for stigmatised Donbas communities – IDPs and locals alike – to participate in national and local policy making. The forums provide a space to discuss reforms and other strategies charted from the capital, often with little understanding of realities on the ground. This has helped cultivate a platform for communication between the centre and the borderlands, with positive material outcomes. The OSCE Project Coordinator in collaboration with local NGOs and experts holds dialogue and problem-solving meetings on issues relating to decentralisation reforms that have significant humanitarian, social and political implications, and require trust, cooperation and empathy on behalf of the designers, implementers and beneficiaries of the reform.

The UNDP has played a crucial role in providing support to both IDPs and host communities. This includes carrying out comprehensive assessments to understand the needs of the population of conflict-affected areas as well as levels of social cohesion (the UN SCORE for Eastern Ukraine – USE). The UNDP also supported exchanges between the western borderlands and the Donbas GCAs, helping students, entrepreneurs and local officials travel across the country – many for the first time – to meet people and break hostile stereotypes.

“Officially sanctioned dialogues between stakeholders across the divide is rare. Grassroots initiatives by borderland communities have begun to fill the void.”

The majority of dialogue and mediation projects and programmes focus on capacity building for facilitators to help communities overcome internal disagreements, creating dialogues between police and civil society organisations in Kharkiv, or designing decentralisation roadmaps in some locales. Officially sanctioned dialogues between stakeholders across the divide is rare. Grassroots initiatives by borderland communities have begun to fill the void. One example of this is ‘Donbas Dialogue’, an online crowdsourcing platform initiated by IDPs that helps individuals from across the line of contact engage in dialogue anonymously and confidentially. Quiet, confidential dialogue initiatives that involve representatives from across the line of contact have been carried out by Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. Dialogue platforms that involve residents and IDPs in NGCAs, on the one hand, and refugees who fled to Russia and Russians, on the other, are another unique format. They take place in neutral locations and are not widely publicised due to the personal risks for the participants. Sadly, residents of the breakaway republics are often reluctant to participate in direct dialogue with their counterparts owing to restrictions imposed by Russian security services.

Conclusion
The recent history of the Donbas shows how border regions, despite visible integration into national political and economic processes, can be vulnerable to rupture from geopolitical pressures. The future of the borderland communities of Donbas is a matter of secondary interest for both Ukraine and Russia. For Ukraine and to some extent for the West, the new division line in Europe – a challenge to the European security architecture – is the primary security concern. The war, though low in intensity at the moment, is far from over. It is draining Ukraine’s scarce resources. For Russia, keeping control over a patch of Donbas is a step towards the re-establishment of its hegemony in what it considers its historic sphere of influence.

The reintegration of Donbas into Ukraine has come to look like an empty promise. The human and political distance between the NGCAs of eastern Donbas and the rest of Ukraine has grown dramatically, and popular interest in stitching the human fabric back together again is weak. The programme of decentralisation in the GCAs has no links with the governance model in the NGCAs, with these two halves of Donbas living parallel realities. Not quite independent, and under the supervision of Kyiv, the GCAs struggle to leave the trauma
of war behind and create a new positive agenda for the local population and IDPs. The NGCAs for their part are turning into weakly founded state-like entities, but find it hard to generate any kind of ‘national loyalty’ to the new governing authorities. Instead, more and more people in these areas, impoverished and weary of the immense barriers for business, education and travel, feel pulled towards Russia itself, despite there being no prospect of their integration across the border.

Against this background – and in the absence of political talks between the different conflict parties – localised dialogue, affirmative action and the empowerment of communities to achieve small but tangible changes in their livelihoods have become meaningful activities.