

EU: War and occupation: life and death across the front line

Saturday 21 December 2019, by [BOJCUN Marko](#), [SKOMOROSHCHENKO Olena](#), [Ukraine Solidarity Campaign \(UK\)](#) (Date first published: 14 November 2019).

Interview with Olena Skomoroshchenko of the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine

In search of a better understanding of the war in Eastern Ukraine and the prospects for its peaceful settlement, we are soliciting the observations and analyses of people in Ukraine close to the centre of the conflict. We asked Olena Skomoroshchenko (PhD, Philosophy), Director of the Institute of Social Partnership and International Secretary of the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine to answer a set of our questions. Her answers are given below in English translation.

- **Please tell us how the economic and social situation in Ukraine has changed during the war years, including the situation in the regions of Donbas on the Ukrainian government-controlled side of the military front.**

The most striking fact of the last four years of war is that the number of people employed in Ukraine's defence industries has more than halved. The second fact is that the rate at which state social programmes are being liquidated is not merely rapid, but has become like a landslide. The most disturbing aspect of these two quite complicated processes is the rampant popular disillusionment with the country's political leaders that accompanies them, how quickly these leaders and their Western allies have grown rich on the back of a generalised impoverishment. For example, this year Ukraine at war will spend \$3 billion on its defence and \$9 billion servicing the foreign debt to these allies.

Therefore, Ukraine in these conditions of war is losing what is left of its industries and jobs. For example, the Zhovti Vody uranium enrichment plant (Skhid HZK), the only one in the country, shut down yesterday, 1 November.

Strange as it may seem, the intensity of these processes (of deindustrialisation) in the regions along the Ukrainian government's side of the front does not differ from the general all-Ukraine trend. The metallurgical plant Azovstal' in Mariupol, which is 30 km from the front line, and the Severodonets'kyi Azot plant, 18 km from the front line, both have serious problems. But their severity is the same as it is at Cherkassk Azot or Zaporizhstal', plants which are hundreds of kilometres from the front. On the other side of the front line they have the same problems as in Greater Ukraine, but their intensity of another order altogether – more on that later.

- **How has the state of war affected civic organisations, trade unions and the distribution of political forces, their ability to influence government policy?**

At first, the Russian aggression provoked a social consolidation and a national uplift. That brought forth an explosion of social activism and a sharp rise of society's influence over government policy. Volunteer battalions and organisations became analogous with the French National Guard in the time of the French Revolution. The volunteer movement came out of nowhere. But very quickly those who gained power on the revolutionary wave began to erode the national upsurge. Under the slogan

of democracy and a struggle against corruption they began to introduce elements of a police state. New control organs, euphemistically speaking, like the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption appeared, which in practice prevent any civic political activity by any organisations that are independent of the oligarchs. Just imagine that you have to make a report of your accounts every three months that amounts to 65 pages. You are not an accountant so you have to employ one at considerable cost. Therefore, only the political affiliates of business structures can engage in legitimate political activity. And we haven't yet talked about what's fundamental in this situation: the property qualification for taking part in elections. It is like Britain in the 19th century when the Chartist movement spent a decade fighting for universal suffrage. We now have a palliative variation on your situation, when every citizen is a voter but only the rich can be candidates for public office. When you register your candidacy in an election you have to pay a security deposit, that is a financial deposit which is returned to only one of the candidates in your contest, the one who wins the election. All the rest know that their money is thrown to the wind. And this is serious money today in Ukraine. For example, a candidate for a constituency seat in parliament will put down about forty thousand hryvnia, that is \$1,300. The average monthly wage or salary in Kyiv is fifteen thousand hryvnia, less than \$500. A political party has to pay close to \$150,000 just to register to take part in elections. What kind of people's party has such money? As a result the only people who take part in elections are the rich or those who are funded by the rich. We (the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine) haven't registered to take part in several election campaigns, because we don't take money from the rich, and normal citizens like us don't even have enough money for their needy lives. So the people are left with no legal forms of struggle for a democratic government. That is why the people responded in an indirect way, which gave birth to the Zelensky phenomenon.

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- **Did the election of President Zelensky and the new Verkhovna Rada (parliament) improve the atmosphere in society or lower the level of tension? Is the field for involving people in civic and political activity getting any wider?**

The most appropriate analogy to the Zelensky phenomenon I can give you is the Luddite movement, when the desire to answer evil with evil overpowers the desire to improve one's life. The Ukrainian peculiarity was that Luddites came to power. Now they are destroying oligarchs, and together with them whatever remains of Ukrainian industry and even the remaining guarantees of social security. In the example I gave of yesterday's closure of the uranium enrichment plant Skhid HZK, its trade union committee did everything to have Zelensky elected President, while on the other hand Orzhel', Zelensky's energy minister, declared yesterday that nuclear generated electricity is not a government priority. Meanwhile Tretiakov, head of the parliamentary committee for social policy, announced that her priority is a liberalised Labour Code in which the rights of employers will be maximally enlarged and, accordingly, the workers' rights will be maximally reduced. What's really happening here is a fundamental shakedown, where the norms of a labour agreement are pronounced to take precedence over the norms of existing legislation! Can you imagine how absurd this is?

On the one hand, three quarters of the parliament has been replaced with newcomers, which we can only welcome. But on the other hand, all these people are casual. Not only are they not professional; they are basically incompetent. I was in parliament the day before yesterday after a long absence and I was struck by what I saw. In 1998, near the end of the parliamentary session, the scheme for replenishing the parliament was as follows: "the millionaires replace the billionaires so that they can become billionaires themselves, and five years after that they are replaced by new millionaires".

Today, the scheme looks like this: “the servants, that is the service personnel – hair dressers, wedding photographers, showmen, media people and masseurs have occupied the seats of their masters”. They don’t have their own millions or the ability to use someone else’s. And that is why a barbaric sell-off has begun of everything that can be and should not be sold: the nuclear energy industry, the transport infrastructure, the land, the remaining state-owned mines and plants. What kind of lowering of social tensions can one talk about in such a situation? Social expectations and the hopes of most people have not even been aired yet, while at the same time the social status and living standards of everyone, from the homeless to the oligarchs, is falling precipitously. The influence of the people on the government and the president has fallen so low that it amounts exclusively to the right to vote for a president every five years. I don’t see any new ways being created for the expression of popular influence.

Is the field for involving people in civic and political activity getting any wider? We don’t have any realistic mechanisms to do that, nor the traditions that the European democracies have. People are recruited to government according to how close they are to the group that has already seized power. That is why the present power is held by the circle of people around Zelensky’s concert holding company, the 95th Quarter. Their competence doesn’t matter; the main thing is intimacy and loyalty.

- **How do you assess the efforts of the President and his government to renew the process of a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Donbas? In your opinion, what steps are needed and in what order to start the process of reconciliation?**

We don’t consider what is happening in the Donbas as a conflict. There hasn’t been and there are no conflicts there. It’s a war. We have to call things by their names so we can talk about the reality and not about the myths of foreign propaganda.

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Second, we do not think that what is happening in the Donbas is a Russian-Ukrainian war. From our point of view it is part of a global confrontation, first of all between Germany and the USA for geopolitical control over the European continent. For example, the beginning of this war and the tragedy at Ilovaisk (when Russian armies entered the Donbas) had as its main consequence the entry of the US tank group Iron Horse into the Baltic countries. For the first time in forty years the Americans were not withdrawing their armies from Europe but bringing them in at the request of the governments and peoples of those countries. Our second big tragedy – Debaltseve and the signing in its wake of the Second Minsk Accords – led to the articulation of two fundamentally opposing European strategies: Merkel’s strategy to reconcile the aggressor and Cameron’s strategy to restrain the aggressor in the most resolute way. In the end this led to Brexit and Macron’s announcement that France would pursue its own strategy, separate from the European Union’s, which clearly will have as its long term consequence the collapse of the EU in its current form.

It follows that neither the President of Ukraine nor even the President of Russia can determine when and how the occupation of the Donbas and Crimea will end. Both Ukraine and Russia find themselves captives of someone else’s strategy, what is under external management. The war in the Donbas, the end of its occupation and the occupation of Crimea will be finally resolved after the reformation and reconfiguration of the European Union. Local players like the presidents of Ukraine and Russia influence only the temperature of the conflict, whether it is cooling down or heating up. There is no military or economic basis at the local level for this conflict. It is merely a form of civilizational confrontation between the Asian and European paths of development. The decisive argument for the outcome of this confrontation will be the level and quality of life in Ukraine.

- **The recent protests “against capitulation”, are they not at odds somehow with the desire for peace, which according to the most recent opinion polls is shared by the majority of Ukrainians? What sort of currents and nuances in society’s consciousness are at work here?**

The people who figure locally in the conflict – Ukrainians, Russians, those who live in the occupied territories – they all want peace, but peace as their final and complete victory. They don’t accept any other forms of reconciliation at all in their public consciousness. Without making the kind of special and purposeful efforts that the Germans and French made after the Second World War any signed peace will only be a temporary truce. According to my information no-one is making such efforts in Ukraine or indeed in Russia or the occupied territories, including Crimea.

- **What have you learned from people who cross the front line about the situation in the so-called People’s Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk?**

I call your attention to the fact that you are talking only about certain separate districts of the Donbas, whereas the biggest zone of occupation is Crimea. Actually, the reason for occupying the Donbas was to divert attention away from Crimea. We will not let them do that! We speak about two zones of occupation and they are qualitatively different from each other. If in Crimea there are functioning state institutions of the aggressor country which provide at least some kind of legal order, be it one of occupation but all the same a legal order, then in the Donbas they have established a Somalia. That is a deliberate policy. They have recreated the Wild Fields [\[1\]](#) in the Donbas, as it was in the Middle Ages, as a showcase of horror and hell with which to frighten all progressive humanity and the occupied Crimeans in the first instance, who should rejoice and appreciate that they are not in the Donbas.

There is an added bonus, of course: a demonstration of the ugly face of Ukrainian fascism. That is why people from the Donbas will not say anything to anybody, because God forbid that someone should inform on them after they return there and they will disappear without a trace forever. If in Crimea the punishment for expressing dissatisfaction with the Russian occupation regime is imprisonment, in the Donbas it is death. In Crimea it is made to look like a prosecution for narcotics or explosives which they find in your home or in your personal belongings while you are traveling. In the Donbas no-one bothers to make it look like they are acting in accordance with legal procedures. People simply disappear without a trace and without explanation. It is systematic, not the occasional incident. And everyone knows that.

Then there are things that all occupational regimes have in common. The first is fear and total mistrust of everyone. You can’t say what you truly think. You confide only in the people closest to you, people who you certainly know will not inform on you. Secondly, there is a lack of work and massive unemployment. No future. Both occupational zones depend on the aggressor for their maintenance. Money becomes scarce and there is mass impoverishment, even by the standards of impoverished Ukraine. The deputy head of the Mine Workers Union of Ukraine, Valerii Mamchenko, told me that Russia spends \$6 billion a year supporting the Donbas.

Thirdly, a huge growth in prices, mainly for food products, and a simultaneous shortage of food. All that is available are Russian and Belarusian products of poor quality. Prices are a little lower in Donbas than in Crimea, but people simply don’t have enough income to buy basic necessities. The aggressor country pays out a pension, four thousand roubles a month in the Donbas and 8,500 roubles in Crimea. But the prices in Crimea are incomparably higher, as are the costs of communal services. It costs 4,500 roubles a month for a two room flat in Sevastopol. And the four thousand roubles that are left will buy you one kilogram of meat and one kilogram of cottage cheese, enough for two people for three or four days. Communal services are a lot cheaper in the Donbas, even

cheaper than in Ukraine.

The situation in the Donbas is really terrible. Right at the beginning of the war the aggressor country dismantled and removed to its own territory the solvent, valuable enterprises along with their workers. That's why there is no industry, except for a few mines owned by Akhmetov [2] where they pay wages in Ukrainian hryvnia. The workers there have returned to the Mine Workers Union of Ukraine, headed by Viktor Turmanov, and pay it their union dues, rather than belonging to the Independent Trade Unions of the Donbas which were formed out of the old Donetsk Oblast Regional Council of Trade Unions.

The most widespread employment of men is to serve in the armed formations maintained by the aggressor. They pay them money, modest as it is. There is also work for miserable wages in the *kopanky* [3]. The most popular and profitable business is kidnapping people and demanding ransom for their release. Two sisters from Donetsk who resettled in Dnipro, where they work as senior managers, spent three months looking for their mother, who had refused to leave her home and her dog. They found out she was being held and could be released if they paid fifty thousand hryvnia (around \$1,500) into a specified bank account. The general situation looks like that. This is a laboratory of terror, where the theoretical schemes of Surkov [4] on how to control society are tried out. It is an experimental base.

As for the social situation, the picture looks like this. There are regular Russian armies there, mainly special forces, who are actually the ones in charge. They are the governing authority. Below them are the armed formations of mercenaries made up of local people. They are cannon fodder, the first to be thrown against the Ukrainian army. They live in the greatest danger and for the shortest period of time. And then there are the so-called "peaceful residents", who make up the mass of the population, all those who for various reasons were not able to leave this Somalia. The land has been ruined, pillaged and humiliated because no-one feels sorry for this land and its people. Everyone lives in fear and misery, waiting for it all to end. It is understandable that the situation and the mood were somewhat different in the spring of 2014. Local people tell us that the situation and their mood sharply changed in the second half of 2015 to what they are now. What struck me was how the vast majority of these civilians were so cynically robbed and abused. As a result, from the second half of 2015 people became more and more pro-Ukrainian and they now wait for Ukraine to return. More than that, those local people who are serving today in the Russian armed formations clearly understand that they are disposable material and their lives are unpredictable. They stand between our army and the Russian special detachments. If they try to flee to Russia they will be shot, and they have been told so. They are held to be driven against the Ukrainian army, like cannon fodder. They will also be shot if they try to avoid this fate. Naturally, that changes the mood for most of them. So, any kind of signal from Ukraine of some kind of amnesty for the non-criminal elements among them would very much change the situation. They would naturally prefer to surrender to the Ukrainian army in exchange for at least some kind of guarantee than surely face death in all other eventualities. Unfortunately the position and the rhetoric of the Ukrainian government, especially the previous one, is very Stalinist. No-one is working with the occupied people and that is a mistake.

Perhaps Sevastopol, which led the Russian intervention in February 2013, provides the best illustration of what has happened in Crimea. The people of Sevastopol under occupation inform us that their life is not as terrible as in the Donbas, but that it is hell in comparison with what it was like under Ukraine. The social atmosphere is intolerably oppressive, people are frightened and keep to themselves. They cannot speak about anything other than household matters, otherwise they will be locked up. The turnout of voters for the recent elections to the Russian Legislative Assembly was 27%, while in Ukraine 54% is the lowest a turnout has been. They brought out agitators and threatened to release the dogs. People just don't talk about politics to anyone, but dissatisfaction is growing. Putin is also unhappy about Sevastopol and says he no longer knows what to do about it,

how to approach it.

There are two basic programmes of the occupying power that characterise the current condition of Crimea and Sevastopol [5]: an aggressive militarisation and an even more aggressive migration from Russia. Crimea today is in fact mainly a military base, stuffed everywhere possible with the latest Russian technology, most of it rockets. Meanwhile, the wages of some military personnel I know are six months in arrears. There is no money. The sailors they sent to fight in Syria were promised sixty thousand roubles, but they got only twenty thousand. The ships are ageing, all rusting, rats running about, food is awful and no improvement in sight. All infrastructure projects, in the first instance construction and road repairs, are for the military in the event they have to defend Crimea.

The second programme is a massive mobilisation of Russian citizens to migrate to Crimea. All housing that is being built is for these Russian settlers. An agitation campaign is being waged in all institutions and enterprises in Russia for people to settle permanently in Crimea and Sevastopol. The Russian government is promising fantastic conditions to these settlers: 1.5 million roubles upfront, free housing, land in Crimea, all they have to do is just go there. Crimea is ours, they say, the land is ours, we will give you everything. According to the Kremlin's plans Russian settlers should become a majority of the peninsula's population in the shortest possible time. These projects, especially the distribution of housing and land, are not for the local people. On the contrary, they are stupidly confiscating the land from them, simply taking it and giving it to the incoming settlers.

The Crimeans and Sevastopol locals call them "blow-ins" «понаехавшими» and hate them with a passion. They do notice that these settlers don't last there very long because life in Crimea is incredibly expensive. For example, a kilogram of Bulgarian peppers costs three times as much as it does in Novosibirsk. Notwithstanding the formal existence of legal rights, they really don't exist, especially with regard to property and land. They demolished people's homes in Kacha, gave them no compensation, and are now building a military airport there. It was the same thing in the village of Liubimovka. Striletske, is the most prestigious settlement next to Sevastopol, where war heroes, the top generals and admirals who served on the front in the Second World War got land. It became a luxurious cottage township right by the sea. Several generations grew up there. Now they have evicted them and quartered Russian soldiers in their homes. People in Sevastopol can cite an endless number of such examples. By such a policy Putin is Ukrainising the Crimeans and the long standing residents of Sevastopol. They are saying their only hope is for the war to end and for Ukraine to return.

- **We know that thousands of people cross the front line every day in order to meet their essential needs. What are those needs and are they meeting them?**

Truly, thousands of people cross the front line daily. It is shyly called "the dividing line" both alongside Crimea and in the Donbas. These are streams of quite different size. There are long queues of people lining up to come into Ukraine from Crimea and the Donbas. The number of people crossing out of Ukraine into Crimea and the Donbas is a hundred times smaller. Secondly, Crimea is temporarily but more forcefully cut off from Ukraine, so the stream of people coming out and heading into Ukraine is smaller than the stream coming out of the Donbas. In addition to coming to collect their pensions, people enter Ukraine to apply for legal documents such as Ukrainian passports, to get married, to get an education. There are people traveling to their relatives in Greater Ukraine or leaving for other countries through Ukraine. Crimeans conduct their relations with the outside world mainly through Ukraine.

Because the Russian state has assigned much greater resources for the maintenance of Crimea than the Donbas, there isn't such a massive stream of pensioners coming out of Crimea to collect their Ukrainian pensions. Some Russian economists have testified that Russia spends more on

maintaining Crimea than it does on Chechnya. A pensioner gets 8,500 roubles a month in Crimea, but only four thousand in the Donbas. In order to survive a pensioner needs to come into Ukraine at least once every two months to pick up their pension. If they do not their pension is revoked and they have to submit their documents all over again for it to be renewed, which is unbearably onerous given the current state of affairs. People use their pension money to buy up products which cost a lot more and are of much lower quality on the other side of the front line. Doing all this is very tiring physically and demoralising, especially when the days grow short, the check points at crossings open late and close early because they only work in daylight.

A few Ukrainians travel to Crimea from Ukraine, but to the Donbas there are practically none who go voluntarily. That is primarily because of the absence of legal protection and security and the prevalence there of kidnapping for ransom. If in the first years after the war began people were losing their freedom and even their lives because they were suspected of sympathy and support for Ukraine, then today it is purely a business. Vasyl Sanin, the former head of our Donetsk oblast division of the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine, who tried to form the volunteer battalion called Makiivka, is still sitting in prison in the so-called Donetsk People's Republic. There is nothing we can do about it. He's been in prison now for five years.

- **Have you looked into what workers, average citizens can do to further the peaceful resolution of this conflict?**

Hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people from the Donbas and Crimea were successfully resettled and integrated into the society of Greater Ukraine. They have become an organic part of their local communities, they have fully joined into the social, political and economic life of different regions of the country. There are people of moral authority among them who retain their influence in the occupied territories. Olena Stiazhkina, the writer and professor of Donetsk University, is one of them. At the present moment, society is stunned by the Steinmeier formula [\[6\]](#). It has probably realised for the first time the dire lack of Ukrainian sovereignty over its own land. Now there is literally a plague of proposals being made by different political functionaries about how to de-occupy and get these Ukrainian territories back.

In our view, the principal role has to belong to the people from these territories who were forced to leave their land in 2014 under the threat of annihilation. Olena Stiazhkina takes the view that the point of departure must be that these are our people and our land on the other side of the front line. Donbas is ours and Crimea is ours. That is non-negotiable. And if that is the case, we have to behave towards these people and this land as our own. And not like Josef Stalin who shipped out everything he could from a territory before relinquishing it, betraying and abandoning the people there to hunger and extermination. Afterwards, when their occupation was over, he discriminated against them because they had been in occupied territory and survived. Millions of Soviet citizens were branded like this for decades and it was a gross violation of their rights. I don't want my Ukraine to demonstrate this kind of Stalinist attitude to its own citizens, which national liberals like Yatseniuk and Poroshenko until recently were doing: "ship out the children, put barbed wire around it and cover it over in concrete". Understandably it is not that simple and not everyone is an innocent victim of Russian aggression. We will have to return at some point to the treason against the state perpetrated by the local elite, who played to the aggressor's tune, expected to get in return some choice economic privileges from the central government, and whose appetites only kept growing, without limit. That is, until they were taken apart by the foreign special forces and were themselves forced to flee, leaving millions of ordinary people defenceless. They have now settled down in comfort, some in Rostov-on-Don, others in Moscow, but the majority of them ran away to Kyiv abandoning their own people in the flames of war, under fire and occupation. A new leadership has to come to the de-occupied territories from among the people of these lands. They have to play the leading role in developing a concept of de-occupation and implementing it in practice.

Ukraine Solidarity Campaign
Olena Skomoroshchenko
Marko Bojcun

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Footnotes

[1] The Wild Fields were territories traversed by Cossacks in the 17th century, situated between Muscovy, the Ottoman Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth but controlled by none of them.

[2] Renat Akhmetov, the richest man in Ukraine.

[3] Exhausted coal mines where small groups of workers illegally extract residual coal.

[4] Vladislav Surkov, Personal Advisor to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

[5] Before the Russian annexation Crimea was an autonomous republic of Ukraine and Sevastopol's naval base was under a separate jurisdiction on a long term lease to the Russian Federation.

[6] Frank-Walter Steinmeier as foreign minister of Germany in 2016 (today its president) proposed a fast track procedure to implement the Minsk Accords: to hold elections in the occupied Donbas and grant it special autonomous status before the withdrawal of Russian forces and the restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty. This proposal came to be known as the Steinmeier formula. President Zelensky caused much controversy in October 2019 when he accepted the formula as a basis for further talks between Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany to end the war.