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DAILY LIFE IN DONETSK BEFORE RUSSIA'S 2022 INVASION: INSIGHTS FROM VIRTUAL FOCUS GROUPS

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Since the onset of violent conflict in Donbas in 2014, scholars, government officials, and pundits have viewed the non-government-controlled area (NGCA) through narrowly political lenses, construing the area's residents as loyalists or traitors of a particular regime, whose ethnic or linguistic affiliations define (or do not) their political orientations and interests. But apart from occasional journalistic accounts, we know little about daily life in the NGCA as experienced by its population, especially in recent years.

We implemented, with assistance from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, four virtual focus groups (divided by gender, each with 8-9 participants, ages ranging from 18-49) via Zoom with residents of Donetsk and surrounding areas in July 2021. We sought to understand the problems that concerned participants most, their views and behaviors regarding marriage and childbearing, and their perceptions of how "the conflict" (their most common term) had affected their lives, seven years after it began. Despite our thematic focus on family formation and other aspects of social life, what we found – and did not find – has implications for politically-oriented studies of the region. Our informants described a litany of problems in their lives, some commonplace, others specific to the post-conflict situation. They evinced deep despair and resignation of a nature more personal than expressly political, tempered by occasional signs of resilience and hope. They did not, however, take stances on the political issues that have been the overriding preoccupation of most external observers.

Asked what problems currently concern informants most, all groups complained about low wages (though not lack of work), high prices, limited resources, and poor social services – in short, economic problems experienced throughout the world. But the discussions also centered around problems more specific to the post-conflict context of Donetsk. For one, many informants recounted direct exposure to shelling in the early days of the conflict; some living in more remote outskirts still occasionally heard shots and explosions nearby. Psychological trauma from these experiences lingers for some informants and their children. For others raw fears had given way to a pervasive sense of insecurity and uncertainty what tomorrow will bring.

All four groups also complained about obtaining documents necessary for basic activities like leaving Donbas, getting married, receiving government benefits, and registering births of children or enrolling them in school. They were bewildered by changing policies and requirements, and spoke of endless delays, corruption, and high costs associated with obtaining documents. Other sore points were barriers to crossing the border to government-controlled Ukraine, (GCU) a long-standing curfew, and deteriorating public transportation.

The groups lamented how much of the population had left for GCU or Russia in 2014-15. Some eventually returned – including several group participants. But participants agreed that younger and better educated residents were more likely to leave, depriving the region of vitality. Discussions of why people leave or stay emphasized pragmatic – not political – considerations: having connections elsewhere made leaving more attractive, owning a house and having elderly relatives or young children in Donetsk were incentives to stay.

Some said the conflict had negatively affected relationships within families. Travel barriers cut people off from relatives outside Donetsk. Economic woes drove male household heads to work in GCU or Russia, separating them from partners and children. Some cited instances of political differences leading to major schisms between partners, or parents and children. However, others said the conflict strengthened families, as relatives became an indispensable source of psychological and material support.

Overall, the groups expressed much despair and resignation, but also resilience and cautious expressions of hope. Many sensed that more people were having children, based on their own social circles and observations that playgrounds seemed more populated. Discussions of young people's dating practices, the ideal number of children, and decisions about marriage and childbearing covered similar ground as in non-conflict contexts, demonstrating little evidence that the conflict affected these domains. Several saw positive signs in the recent lifting of curfews during weekends and perceived increased activity in the city center. A few reflected on how the conflict pushed them to start new careers or make other propitious life decisions.

However, all groups expressed a pointed sense that Donetsk is "stuck in place," while the rest of the world advances. The absence of quotidian innovations widely available in GCU and Russia, like bank cards and electronic payment systems, convinced them their region was falling behind their main points of comparison. They recalled Donetsk's former glory as a "progressive" urban center that hosted Euro Cup games in 2012, noting how little had been restored since the destruction of 2014-15.

Perhaps most striking of all, nobody raised issues relating to politics or nationalism. Though traumatized by shelling, resentful of the damage, and unhappy about curfews, border controls, and documents, informants offered no explanations of which side was to blame. They appeared to view these challenges like natural phenomena imposed by external forces over which they have no influence. No one mentioned political considerations when discussing decisions of relatives to leave for Russia versus GCU. Similarly, informants said COVID had virtually no impact on their lives because they were already accustomed to remote work, curfews, and quarantines.

Our focus groups provide a different perspective on the experiences and perceptions of the population in Donetsk on the eve of Russia's 2022 invasion than surveys that asked whether respondents preferred to join Russia, Ukraine, or be independent. Our informants' striking indifference to such questions could reflect learned reluctance to discuss such topics, fear of repercussions, or concern not to offend Kiev-based moderators. However, seven years after the conflict, the residents of Donetsk seemed more focused on survival and adaptation than on abstract ideas like national identification and statehood. They had been first traumatized, then neglected. Their world upended, they sought just to cope with the myriad challenges posed by the conflict and its aftermath. Partners, relatives, the security of owning a home, and small signs of improvements provided grounds for hope. But the strongest political sentiment expressed was a profound sense of abandonment by all sides in the conflict.

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