

Peace and War

Reports from Ukraine, February 2015

Part 1

Kiev, four days after the Minsk II agreement has become effective

It has not been possible to keep expectations low regarding a successful outcome of the Minsk negotiations with Vladimir Putin, despite the fact that Angela Merkel and François Hollande as mediators did their best to keep them to a minimum. But anyone following the developments of the war in the Donbas can only hope for success and for the fighting to stop. It has been a year since the violent response to the Euromaidan movement came to a preliminary halt following the murderous deployment of snipers. The one hundred dead are being remembered in Kiev these days. Yet the mourning for the sniper victims on the Maidan, the memories of Yanukowich fleeing and of a new beginning being made in the Verkhovna Rada, are being diluted by more bad news coming in from the east of the country four days after the official starting date of the ceasefire. The conflicting reports on the citizens and Ukrainian soldiers surrounded in Debaltseve are the subject of virtually every conversation. It is hard to be optimistic.



Downtown Kiev remains a place of mourning and remembrance

Everywhere on Kiev's Independence Square, the Maidan, and on Institutskaya and Hrushevskaya, there are memorials for the dead of the Euromaidan. None of them is without fresh flowers. A large stage has been erected for the commemoration ceremonies and gatherings of the coming days. A photo exhibition on the square recounts the sequence of events of the Euromaidan. Young people

are collecting money for soldiers, battalions and refugees. But the city centre of Kiev is still dominated by the incessant stream of people coming to these places of mourning. The people here are united by grief. What I feel once again on this visit is the sense of bewilderment that I share with the people of Kiev. One remains stunned by the way that this country, this nation, these Euromaidan activists have been dragged into a war they never wanted. Stunned by the way in which the peaceful protest and occupation of the square that the journalist Mustafa Nayem had called for in November 2013 was such a provocation to the Kremlin that one year later, the result is a conflict with global ramifications. A year ago in February, we stood at the coffins of the “Holy Hundred”. In the meantime, at least 5,000 to 6,000 people have died. The number of wounded and crippled is in the tens of thousands. As in every war, the children suffer a deplorable fate. At least one and a half million people have fled Crimea and the Donbas. No one, therefore, needs to explain to the Ukrainian people that peace would be a good alternative. However, it was not the Ukrainians who occupied Russian territory. Russia occupied the Crimean peninsula by force and subsequently annexed it. And without Russian support in the shape of weapons, money and soldiers, there would be no war in eastern Ukraine. Consequently, it is true that a resolution can be achieved only with Russia. A lasting armistice, and much less, peace, will only be possible when the rearmament and funding of the so-called separatists by Russia finally ends.



Who could have a deeper longing for peace than those grieving for their dead?

There is much argument in Kiev these days about Poroshenko, Merkel and Putin. Be they journalists, politicians, scholars, human rights advocates, or friends of mine: I have not heard anyone say that the negotiations in Minsk were completely pointless. Everyone believes that by participating, Putin is admitting his responsibility. But I have also hardly seen anyone who believes that the result will be an agreement that can be trusted. The Ukrainians are full of doubt. This is hardly surprising as since last year, since the sniper attack and the occupation of Crimea, and in spite of all the negotiations and diplomatic efforts, their lot has at no point changed for the better, but only for the worse. The doubt

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gnawing away at the Ukrainians also has a lot to do with us, the politicians and citizens of the EU. Kiev is not some far-off backwater. Everyone here knows that although France once again decided to postpone the delivery of Mistral warships to Russia on the day after the meeting in Minsk, the issue is still on the agenda. Everyone knows that the EU will never come to an agreement on providing support in the form of weapons. Another thing everyone knows is that the economic sanctions, too, remain a highly contested issue. And the question why there is objection all over Europe to the American debate on supplying arms but no loud protest against Russia's systematic rearmament of the warlords in the Donbas, is put to me over and over again.

Time and again, the Ukrainians have felt the disunity of the West. In Minsk President Poroshenko, after consulting with the EU and the US, nevertheless made great concessions on behalf of the Ukrainian side to the Donbas warlords supported by Russia. On the political front, he has come under attack for this. The question of what led to the disastrous situation for the Ukrainian army in Debaltseve will certainly influence the way Minsk II is handled, as well as the political debate on the lessons to be learned. Without being able to judge it yet, I do believe that Poroshenko pursued the right path in Minsk. The war in the Donbas is not being fought over territory alone. While the "gathering of Russian soil" may be a popular propaganda theme for the Kremlin and the Duma, the war clearly serves the purpose of blocking the Ukrainian's path towards the rule of law and justice. The longer the war lasts, the harder it becomes to tackle the reforms which even in normal times would reach or transcend the limits of feasibility. And if the Minsk agreement still stands a chance, its longevity will depend firstly on whether it will be possible to monitor and maintain the line of demarcation. The second crucial step would be to also monitor the currently uncontrolled border between Russia and Ukraine and to make it impassable for military supplies. It should not come as a surprise to the EU that Poroshenko just proposed another peacekeeping mission to precisely this end, which the Russian leadership promptly refused.

A beacon of hope in the country's struggle to rise out of these dire circumstances is the Ukrainian people's extraordinary readiness to organise and to take responsibility, a fact which was not very well known a year ago. This new, self-confident side of Ukrainian society has been brought to the fore even more strongly by the exigencies of war and humanitarian distress. The EU absolutely needs to take up the spirit and the suggestions of these members of civil society, not only because they are prepared to push the government to implementing reforms – these activists also provide the ideas for getting rid of the old ways of thinking and the old insider networks. The Polish path of administrative reforms, an actual strengthening of the cities and communities as well as the regions, is taken as an example by politicians and citizens. New legislation is beginning to follow this direction. The new and transparent distribution of decision-making competence and state revenues, the communalisation and decentralisation, must be advanced in a more forceful and consistent manner. This important restructuring process is being thwarted by the ideas on federalisation, the very kind of federalisation often cited as the best model by many EU politicians who for the most part have never truly examined the actual conditions in Ukraine. From the vantage point of the Ukrainians, federalisation is the path that would lead directly to the balkanisation of their country. Talks with newly elected Rada delegates reveal the travails of those who want change to happen. They have not lost their ideas, but the debate over the war consumes a lot of energy. The arguments here are also about correct or inappropriate responses, even about weapons and sanctions. And every reform takes much longer than expected. There are reasons for this, such as the inertia perpetuating conditions of the past, mistakes that are made, or political fighting. It seems to me that too many major reform projects are being handled at the same time – and there must be an honest debate with the electorate about mistakes, and also about limitations and priorities.



Hromadske TV is the youngest and most committed media company that I know, and it stands for the new, young and self-confident Ukraine setting out for a better future!

Even before the latest meeting in Kiev I knew that we in Brussels must get ready to walk down a long road together with Ukraine. Considerable sums will be involved. Yet money alone won't be enough. The political impetus that could create the necessary ambition in Brussels and the other capitals is most likely to be found in the citizens' initiatives. It is these seemingly transformed Ukrainians with whom the EU must courageously imagine and build, piece by piece, the country's future. I too believe that the Ukrainians chose the best leadership they have ever had in the last elections in May and October of 2014. It was an important new experience when Petro Poroshenko called for a ceasefire on the eve of February 15th, 2015. For the very first time, people around the world saw a Ukrainian president on their television screens whom they could also understand. But taking the turn towards a democratic new beginning is not the achievement of Poroshenko or Yatsenyuk or Klitschko. This transformation was set in motion by young people, by journalists and students and others from all over the country when in November 2013, they dared to call on the people to join the Euromaidan. A young, mostly leftist democracy movement fired the starting gun a few days before the summit in Vilnius. The effective date of the Minsk II accord coincides with the beginning of the week a year ago that ended with Yanukovich, the kleptocrat willing to use violence, making his getaway from Ukraine. The positive, young patriotism which rose from the huts of the Euromaidan has the potential to change into angry nationalism in the face of the aggression. So far, however, the Ukrainians have withstood this danger better than other nations, EU countries no less. Yet the numerous paid and unpaid trolls and agents of the Kremlin have been working long and hard on falsifying the image of what the Euromaidan is and what today's Ukraine is. All too often I must hear and read lies in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, London or Athens, about an expansionist West who supposedly forced the Ukrainians to associate with the EU and turn their backs on their sister nation. Too often, I hear and read regurgitated, pompously voiced doubts about the desire and will of the Ukrainians. So deep runs the

mistrust of some towards the EU or “the West” itself that they cannot fathom that the Ukrainians would choose Brussels, Berlin, Warsaw and Paris over Moscow without external pressure and wily CIA strategies. It is a shame that only very few EU Westerners actually travel to Kiev to form their own opinion. The determination of the Ukrainians to finally work their way out of the debris of the Soviet Union and out of the unjust, oligarchical system which was erected on this debris, can be felt everywhere here. Of course, it is the young generation who want it the most.



More EU Westerners need to experience Ukraine for themselves – the young people pictured here came thanks to the Erasmus programme



Travelling to the east

Part 2

A few days after Minsk II

Kharkiv

A change of location. After spending two days in Kiev, I arrive in Kharkiv. The small NGO “Kiev Talks” is represented not only in Kiev, but has set up small branches in other Ukrainian cities as well. They have helped to prepare my visit. First, I debate with various volunteer organisations, with soldiers, students and teachers.



My fantastic friends from Kharkiv at the local Crisis and Information Centre

Minsk II is the burning issue. A young woman, a journalist from Donetsk, tenaciously and impatiently insists that the West is not doing enough to help Ukraine. She describes the siege and shelling of Debaltseve. She points out that this is taking place before the ink has even dried on the Minsk II agreement. The West and the Europeans do not know anything at all about this war, she says. She wants to know why something as terrible as the events in Debaltseve and previously in Ilovaysk can happen with newspapers and television broadcasters around the world hardly taking note or only reporting belatedly.

Even though I can explain the West's fluctuating interest and attention, and some listeners are nodding, the disappointment remains. I too am disappointed by it time and again. In Kharkiv, the question regarding Minsk II is not one of being for or against it. No one is saying that it is wrong to negotiate for a ceasefire. Much less is anyone opposed to a truce. But the fact of the matter is that no one believes it will work. A peacekeeping mission, as currently demanded by Poroshenko and others, is viewed here in Kharkiv as a necessary prerequisite for a lasting armistice. It is not the first time that I must hear reports that in spite of Minsk II the separatists have declared their intent to occupy Kharkiv as well. What is Ms. Merkel's and Mr. Hollande's response to that? How can things move forward if the aggression does not stop? These questions turn out to be the common thread that runs through all talks starting with this first meeting.

Some teachers have come to tell me about the problems plaguing the education system. Another necessary reform! They describe the need for reforms in the field of education. The school students in the room want to know what they must do to ensure a good future both for Ukraine and for themselves. They ask me whether I believe that they can be as good as the young people in Germany or France. And as always, dissatisfaction with the government in Kiev and with politicians in general is a central theme.

Everything is taking a long time, I am told. Changes are being made much too slowly. But the conversations also convey a sense of the strain which the war is putting on everyone. Although the city has large volunteer organisations, these will not be able to replace non-functional state institutions in the long run.



After the debate with pupils, teachers and soldiers in Kharkiv



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Kharkiv holds the greatest number of internally displaced persons registered in Ukraine. 130,000 have been recorded officially. What the exigency demands of everyone is visible in the schools and kindergartens. Volunteers provide the lion's share of the support and assistance. As in all the other discussions, stories of corruption abound. It would be particularly sad if it was really true that the departure of people from areas controlled by warlords and so-called separatists was being used as an opportunity to cash in twice.

I cannot judge whether personnel at the checkpoints on both sides are in fact supplementing their income in this way. But the Ukrainians, the authorities, politicians and citizens, must do everything to investigate this and prevent it. However, anyone with complaints about corruption should stop just telling stories about it all the time. It is such stories that are ruining the mood in the whole country.

A little later we attend a small discussion event on the topic of mobilisation for the Ukrainian army. This is another issue that has sent rumours and emotions flying. While some say there is mass refusal, the word in Kharkiv is that the quota for the region has been met. Our travel companion and interpreter Tetyana tells us about her hometown of Rivne and her friends and family, from whom she has heard no reports of anyone refusing to enlist. The debate, joined via live stream by people from two cities in the ATO zone, features a panel comprising soldiers, representatives of the local authorities and psychologists. The tone of the discussion is very calm.

I am happy to see that a public debate in a Ukrainian city so close to the war zone and to the Russian border is conducted in such a level-headed manner, focussing on why mobilisation is necessary but also on which parts of it are not going well and what should definitely be handled differently. Even if there are some who have no sympathy at all for conscientious objection, there are also voices on the panel arguing that there simply has to be an alternative service option. The point being made is that religion is not the only reason for refusing to join the army, and a soldier who feels pressed into service will almost inevitably be a bad soldier. This alone makes compulsory enlistment an unsuitable choice. As difficult as the debate may be, it also impressively demonstrates the nature of the new Ukraine.

I have been invited to a local broadcaster's TV studio. Being interviewed before me is a young woman who works as a volunteer army nurse at the hospital in Artemivsk. The wounded and dead from Debaltseve have been arriving there over the past few days. She, too, does not know how many soldiers have been wounded or killed. Since my arrival in Kiev I have heard much speculation about the victims of the late retreat from Debaltseve. Some say that the number of casualties is much higher than officially acknowledged, while others reckon that it is not altogether as bad as previously feared. Whom to believe? The journalists who witnessed events on the ground, the army spokespeople, or the government? Likewise, there is much back and forth among the friends in Kharkiv about the quality of information in times of war.

The aggressiveness of the Russian propaganda, however, would certainly be better answered with clear and correct information. In the evening, we go to see Yevgen Zakharov in his office in Kharkiv. I have met him before in many different places in Europe, but never here.



Yevgen Zakharov and Rebecca Harms

The Human Rights Protection Group in Kharkiv is the oldest human rights organisation in Ukraine. It is a member of the Helsinki Human Rights Organisation and has also been receiving long-term support from the EU.

The Group's Donetsk office, supported by the EU like the one in Kharkiv, had to be shut down soon after the beginning of the war due to attacks and threats against the staff by the so-called separatists. As in our last encounter with Zakharov two months earlier, our conversation revolves around the increasingly dire situation of the people in the self-declared people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Zakharov is deeply concerned about the old and the sick who have stayed there and have no money and no access to supplies.

He is convinced that the international community must do something to relieve these people, regardless of whether or not the Minsk II agreement holds. We also speak with him at length about the case of the journalist and conscientious objector, Kozaba. In Zakharov's view, Kozaba's opinions as well as his journalism are debatable, but putting him in prison was entirely the wrong thing to do. As a soviet-era dissident, Zakharov has seen his share of human rights abuses. He believes that it will still be a long road until Ukraine truly understands the meaning of the rule of law and an independent judiciary. I am happy that he is contributing his experience as a member of the group charged with examining the applicants for the national anti-corruption commission.

The library and the archive in Kharkiv have to be a treasure trove for all human rights activists. The shelves and cabinets, brimming with books and files, must hold a lot in store for anyone seeking a better understanding of today's Donbas and Ukraine.



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Part 3

Slavyansk and Artemivsk

A trip to the ATO zone shall take me back to places that I have visited once before in the summer. Our small group is again guided by Vlad and Dima. Vadim is our new driver. All three of them know the routes in the ATO zone like the back of their hand. They belong to a group of volunteers who evacuated thousands from the war zone last year. They move sick and wounded persons, bring food and medical supplies into embattled areas and cut-off villages. And they attend to the soldiers.

For the first time since the beginning of the Euromaidan movement, I am travelling outside Kiev with a Rada delegate. It is Natalya Veselova. She is from Donetsk, her parents live in Slavyansk. She ran on the platform of the newly formed Samopovitch (self-help) Party in the parliamentary elections last October. Even though great doubts were entertained – and nursed – whether new parties even stood a chance, a large group of Maidan activists and volunteers succeeded in the end. They did not want to expose themselves to the pressures within the old political parties. And because they followed through, they became the third strongest force.

They joined Poroshenko's coalition and are working with the Euromaidan activists in the Verkhovna Rada in the group of the Euro-optimists. Our mutual friends Vlad and Dima proudly point out that they are accompanying the first joint trip of Ukrainian and European members of parliament.

I am meeting Vadim for the first time on this journey. He has been in the ATO zone as a volunteer for many months. To him, not committing himself to the Ukrainian cause is unimaginable. He has planned to talk about Green politics with me during the trip. He works for a company that produces oil and natural gas. He discusses shale gas and fracking with me and wants to know about the regulations on fracking that are in effect in the EU. He thinks that rules are necessary and that they should be adhered to. But he says it should also be clear that Ukraine could not do without shale gas. He talks about the film against fracking he recently saw which shows how water flowing out of a tap somewhere in the US could be set alight. The one thing he does not understand, he says, is why this is supposedly a bad thing. If this were his tap in Ukraine, that would be good for his country and also for him, and he would be very happy because he would be set for life. A little story from Ukraine that I simply have to tell Lech Kowalski, the maker of the film "Gazland".

We arrive in Slavyansk. The square on the way into town which last summer had been strewn with the debris of battle and burnt-out vehicles has since been rebuilt. There is a reopened kiosk selling freshly brewed coffee and a whole variety of goods. And the sign that reads "NEED HELP", shown by the media all over the world during the heavy fighting over Slavyansk, no longer hangs from a ruin but has been affixed to a fence, behind which there is a newly planted garden. Life had to go on after all, Dima says.



A reopened kiosk on the outskirts of Slavyansk. Behind the 'Need help' sign, a garden is being tended again

In the municipal administration building, we meet the mayor and his team in charge of the internal refugees. IDPs is the correct term rather than refugees, we are told by the members of the administrative staff. These refugees in their city are not refugees, but IDPs – internally displaced persons. Work has been done with the UNHCR people to clarify matters regarding status, rights and registration. We learn that the number of IDPs in Slavyansk, too, is very high. Many of them have been here for quite some time. And the city is making every effort to ease their situation as much as possible, even if circumstances in many cases are difficult.

Incoming IDPs are received at the city's railway station. This is where the initial paperwork is handled and the people are given food and other supplies for their daily needs. As soon they arrive, they are met by psychologists and doctors. But the first priority usually is to find something to eat and a place to stay. Many of the refugees make it here with nothing more than the shirts on their backs. Most of them stay at the central shelters for a week or two at most. However, living space is becoming scarce, and the schools and kindergartens are facing mounting problems. Psychological and medical support are absolutely necessary. The city's chief health official hands me her list of items in short supply. Unemployment in the city has risen to at least 30%.



With press officers and my friend Galina outside the Slavyansk administration building



Tents have been set up to provide initial assistance to the refugee

The mayor wants to know if the donor conference for Donbas will materialise. And he wants to know if there is a real intent to rebuild the Donbas. What can I say? The donor conference has been talked about for such a long time and was just recently postponed once again from the spring to the fall of 2015. For its part, however, the Slavyansk administration must begin to prepare now for a need that will not get smaller, but ever greater.

We drive to the station. There is no activity at the registration office. But we are told that many people from Debaltseve arrived a few days ago. Two women enter while we are talking with the psychologist. Both are from Debaltseve. They want to know if tickets are available to go on to other places. They say they want to work, but that finding work in Slavyansk seemed rather unlikely. A man from the administration apparently tells them about possibilities to work. Right away, the women decide to register after all. In a tent next door, food and medical care is provided for the IDPs. There are diapers, sanitary products, foodstuffs. Everything distributed here has been donated. Likewise, the kitchen and medical services are organised by volunteers.

On the edge of town, a freshly renovated house has become home to dozens of children, most of whom are living here with their mothers and grandmothers. A young woman explains that she stayed in Debaltseve so long because their field and garden and a few animals allowed her family to sustain itself. The house and the small plot belong to her and her disabled husband. What would they survive on elsewhere? But then the fighting became so terrible that she had to leave for their children's sake. Her husband stayed behind to watch over the house. The IDP home is run by a Christian relief organisation. By Ukrainian standards, it appears to be perfect. We speak with the mayor about the possibility of securing EU funding for a programme to complete or rebuild housing units.



A child refugee in a renovated house on the outskirts of Slavyansk

Many of the internally displaced persons want to stay close to their old homes. We are told that Slavyansk and other places close to Donetsk and Luhansk probably need to prepare for more people seeking shelter and work.

Before we leave for Artemivsk, I ask my companions and the mayor why it is that their town has managed to integrate the IDPs rather well, as confirmed by a number of brief, coincidental conversations. Natalya points out that the people of Slavyansk had themselves been affected by the separatists and the war, and thus were better able to understand why others had not left immediately. But they could also see how experiencing the violence of this war for some time would eventually move people to decide to get out of the separatist area and head for Ukraine.

At the Slavyansk municipal administration, I run into an old friend from Artemivsk. Galina belongs to a group of environmental and anti-nuclear activists with whom I and the Gorleben citizen's initiative had cooperated years ago to prevent the establishment of a radioactive waste repository in the region. We had been successful at the time. She tells me that in the meantime the group has become deeply divided over the future of Artemivsk. She herself is pro-Ukraine, while others favour Russia. The whole city is split, she says.

In Artemivsk we head straight for the hospital, where most of the wounded from Debaltseve have been accommodated and treated.



Children from all over Ukraine have painted pictures for the wounded soldiers in the hospital

Vlad wants us to meet the head of the medics and doctors. On the hospital driveway, tired soldiers are trying to warm up in the sunshine. Others are keeping an armed watch in front of the building. Shots have been fired at the hospital over the past few days. The images of the fighting in recent weeks often resemble images from the two world wars. At the entrance to the Artemivsk hospital, one feels transported back in time again. The buildings, the cars, the cobbled-together uniforms of the soldiers of the Donbas Battalion – none of this seems as if it was taking place in present-day

Europe. One of the soldiers approaches me with a smile. He is happy that I remember that the two of us have spoken before during my last visit. I am happy to see him alive. He has no time for an extended conversation because he is responsible for transporting wounded combatants. He says the wounded have to lie in unheated rooms. And rumour has it that the hospital is taking money.

A vacant building nearby has been converted into a field hospital. First aid is provided here. There are examination rooms, a pharmacy and administrative facilities. A guided tour of the premises once again reveals how much work has been put in by volunteers to quickly create a space for a provisional field hospital and accommodation for soldiers.

The battalion pharmacist shows us his inventory. At the moment he has everything he needs. But none of his supplies were provided by the state, he says. All of it came together through donations and the efforts of volunteers. Great pride is taken in the volunteers and their tremendous support for the soldiers. The question about the role of the state is not voiced aloud, yet it looms large throughout the entire tour of the facility.



Many of the cold, damp rooms are jam-packed with beds and a ragtag assortment of sheets and blankets

In one of the rooms we find medics and doctors of the Donbas Battalion who have just returned from Debaltseve. They are trying to rest and get some sleep. I do not want to disturb them. But they are ready to talk. They had been in Debaltseve since October. “We were there for one hundred and forty long days,” one of them says. They observed how their adversaries took up positions all around them and dug in. They do not know the number of casualties either. But it had been bad there, they tell me. And they want to rest. They say their unit needs to be relieved urgently.



These doctors and soldiers were deployed in Debaltseve for 140 days

The medical officer who heads the battalion's team of medics speaks with us in his office. He, too, is full of praise for the assistance provided by the volunteers. But he is aware of the divisive atmosphere in the city. In his view, the war has intensified the tensions that have always existed. He says that right now it is 60 to 40 in Kiev's favour, but things are still difficult. For him it goes without saying that one would stand and fight for one's country and resist an invasion. If there were a chance for a truce, however, he would certainly use it.

He received his training back at the military academy in Moscow. He was in Afghanistan. Even after his retirement, he took part as a doctor in three peacekeeping missions in 10 years. And if asked how an armistice could work, he would say: only with a robust UN peacekeeping mission.

On his desk there are three 'Swiss military' chocolate bars. He pushes them apart. Donetsk here, Luhansk there, and the third bar in between is the demilitarised zone. And that is where the peacekeeping forces should be. No one else would be able monitor and control something like this. And peacekeepers would also be the right thing for the border between Donbas and Russia. Yes, he states, he supports the compromise that Poroshenko agreed to in Minsk. But there is no way to implement this compromise for an armistice without neutral outside help. And waiting too long again would be detrimental.

He says that if the DNR and LNR, with Russian assistance, made an attempt to occupy Mariupol or Kharkiv, as they had already announced, the Ukrainians would be prepared to continue defending themselves.



Working with a host of volunteers, MO Colonel Igor Ilkin heads the Artemivsk military hospital

He urgently needs ambulances to carry out his work. They do not have to be ultra-modern or brand-new, he says, but they should have reanimation capabilities. Three ambulances in perfect working condition have been destroyed. Only one of them is to be replaced sometime in the next few days. Please, is there anything we can do to help in this matter? He believes he will still be needing the vehicles. Once they are no longer required, they should be given to the Artemiivsk hospital.

A young doctor wants to discuss something urgent with the medical officer. He and his father, who is also a doctor, both signed up as volunteers. And he is glad to see me again. He is another one of the people I met last summer. It is the same experience as with the soldiers outside the hospital, or with Vlad and Dima. We have only seen each other on one, two or three occasions, always here in the Zone. But every time we meet we get the feeling that we have known each other for ages.

Over the next few days, a small chapel is to be erected in front of the makeshift hospital to commemorate the dead of the Maidan and the victims of the war.

We drive back to Slavyansk. A surprise awaits: Natalya Veselova's parents would like to have us over for dinner. Natalya is happy that I accept the invitation. I look forward to an evening with common people from Slavyansk, as Vlad describes them to me. Natalya's parents live in one of the countless little old houses that make many parts of Slavyansk and other cities here in the east appear so rural. It is one of these houses behind brightly painted fences that was not destroyed last year when

grenades fell only a few hundred yards away. We are being expected. There are slippers for everybody.

We have barely taken our seats at the table when the food is brought in. Three varieties of cucumbers, and the best pickled tomatoes in Slavyansk, as I am told by the men at the table. The stragula floor and oil fabric tablecloths, the pickled cucumbers, chicken on mashed potatoes – like a leap back to my own childhood. No talk about the war, Vlad signals by laying a finger on his lips. Without my asking, Natalya's father explains that leaving had never been a consideration for him. Not even when the separatists from Donetsk came. Not voluntarily. Here, he and his wife know what they've got. The house. A piece of land. Not much, he says, but much better than uncertainty.



Countless shrapnel grenade hits destroyed this billboard in Slavyansk

This is not something I am hearing for the first time. When the fighting came to the city Natalya tried to take her parents away from here. It was the same in this family as it was in so many others. The young left, the old were reluctant to make that decision. As we say goodbye I am moved to see how proud the parents are of their daughter, the assembly woman in the Verkhovna Rada, despite all differences of opinion.

Earlier that day, one of the old women among the refugees in Slavyansk had already tried to explain how hard it had been for her to decide to flee. We already lived through the great war, she said. We cannot even believe that war has returned. Two wars in one lifetime. It cannot be that we who survived the first great war here, should die here now. Later Natalya tells me that on the one hand, she had feared very much for her parents' safety. She herself had been deeply involved in helping to build a volunteer organisation and was always fervently pro-Ukrainian and pro-European. That did



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not make things easier for her parents, particularly during the time of the separatists. But on the other hand, she knows quite well why so many people, including her parents, are finding it hard to trust Kiev. At a press conference in Kharkiv on the following day she is asked about precisely this conflict among the people in the Donbas. She answers that the people in the Donbas who are undecided today will most likely support those who offer to bring back normal life and, somewhere down the line, peace.



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Part 4

Looking back on my trip of February 16 to 23.

An attempted summary

I have been back from my last journey to Ukraine for a number of weeks now. Taking stock is more difficult than ever. However, to mark the day of the annexation of Crimea one year ago, I will nevertheless try to summarise my conclusions.

One reason is my last appointment in Kiev, which was a breakfast meeting with the young Crimean journalist, Denis Trubetskoy. Our paths had crossed in real time. I chanced upon Denis on Twitter. His concise comments on developments in Crimea during and after Russia's occupation of the peninsula – written, moreover, in excellent German – have become invaluable to me. I was happy that we were sitting face to face for the first time. I learned that by watching television and following the coverage of the Tour de France, he first became a fan of cyclist Erik Zabel as well as the sport, and subsequently, a fan of sports in general, and a fan of Germany. He is one of those Ukrainians who did not want to leave Crimea in spite of the annexation. Still, he supports the Euromaidan movement. That in particular makes it hard for him to bear the fact that the events in his home region appear to be of such little interest to the rest of the world. In Russia, he says, Crimea remained a hot topic, while in the EU the issue had almost completely fallen by the wayside. Even though I can find reasons to explain this, my responses citing the shifting priorities of an international public do not manage to convince even me. Denis insists that it would not make sense to impose sanctions because of the annexation, but at the same time fail to campaign for an improvement of living conditions in Crimea. And he says that it is also not enough to solely focus on the injustice done to the Crimean Tatars. Yes, the Tatars need the protection that would arise from attention being given to their fate. But neither must those Ukrainians and Russians who were and still are against the annexation be forgotten. The annexation, as well as the sanctions, have had a tangible impact in many areas of life. The Ukrainian government, too, has made any support and social services it might provide hard to reach for the Crimean citizens. By now, the feeling one gets as an inhabitant of Crimea is that the whole world is conspiring against you. Denis Trubetskoy himself has to contend with a growing number of organisational problems. Restricted Internet access and limited rail connections hamper his work as a journalist. Theoretically, it would be possible to embark from Crimea to other destinations. In practice, public transport links have been cut by the Ukrainian state, making every journey into Ukraine a complicated undertaking. Denis says that as a Ukrainian having stayed in Crimea one always has to expect dirty looks and mistrust. Sanctions that do not hit people in their everyday lives, and a reliable concern for Crimea, that is what Denis Trubetskoy asks of me, the EU, and also of the government in Kiev.

Reliability and clarity are probably the words that describe best what people in Ukraine expect of the EU. My entire trip took place under the impression of Minsk and Debaltsevo, of hope and suspicion. And therefore I will reiterate once again what my journey to eastern Ukraine has taught me on so many occasions: No one needs to explain to people there that an armistice and peace are the better alternative. They know more about life in wartime than the vast majority of those in the West talking about the desire for peace. Current OSCE memorandums indicate that on the whole, the situation along the demarcation line is quieting down. But there are also reports about towns still



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being attacked. The withdrawal of heavy weapons and soldiers is more akin to a regrouping and realignment. The tension and the fear of a new offensive remain. The Ukrainian city of Mariupol, which according to statements made by the leaders of the Russian-supported separatists could be counted among the important strategic objectives, continues to brace itself for an attack.

In the EU in particular, high hopes are placed on the OSCE monitoring mission's ability to control the situation in such a way that early detection will prevent a renewed escalation. Anyone familiar with the mission's manpower and equipment accoutrement knows that this assessment is unrealistic. I first voiced my call for the preparation of a UN peacekeeping mission during my visit to the east because I believe that a stepped-up presence and more robust mandate is in fact required if the international community is to make a serious effort to keep the situation under control. Discussion on this issue is being avoided. What is truly irresponsible is the concomitant failure to at least do everything possible to put the agreed reinforcement of the OSCE mission into practice. It is shameful that while Minsk II gives the OSCE so much weight, the EU countries continue to hold off on sending more personnel and better equipment. Taking Minsk II seriously precludes any hesitation. The OSCE mission must be augmented by additional personnel with military experience. The demand to send UN peacekeepers to eastern Ukraine arises precisely from the current mission's weakness. It can only be overcome if the EU states finally fulfil what they have once again pledged to support in the Minsk agreement.

In the debate on Ukraine there is a common understanding in Brussels: We must win against war in the east, against destabilisation, with successful reforms. I can still hear myself making this argument again and again. But that is only half the truth. Nothing is more difficult than the kind of reforms that lie ahead for the Ukrainians. We know this because we have gained experience from EU countries with similar problems and fault lines, not only in the eastern part of the EU but also in a country such as Greece where oligarchical structures are prevalent as well. And it is all infinitely harder for a country embroiled in war. It is high time to create a strong Ukraine task force coordinated by Brussels. This task force must provide assistance to the Ukrainians – and, expressly, not only to politicians in Kiev but just as much to civil society – in determining the focus of the reforms and their implementation. The Polish administrative reform is viewed in Ukraine as a suitable model for orientation. This means that there should also be Polish experts assigned to this task. The energy sector has its own requirements. Here, too, there should be a swift decision on who is best suited to provide assistance. Great sums of money will be needed to stabilise Ukraine. But money alone without committed support for building functioning institutions will not be enough. I do not believe in the attempts of former EU commissioners and ministers to provide such counsel without any real knowledge of the country. As much as I admire Bernard Kouchner, I do know that there are people at Ukrainian hospitals and schools who know exactly what it is that needs to be changed. And it is their know-how that must be concentrated and applied to create a new beginning and to effect reforms. Seeing German parliamentarians pretend that they can make a side job of restructuring Ukraine simply leaves me speechless. I hope that this kind of expensive arrogance will not hold sway. It is the task of the EU to organise the required advisory services based on the expertise of experienced personnel.



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Ukraine and the sanctions against Russia were on the agenda at the spring summit of the European heads of state and government. I did not expect that the meeting in Brussels would result in new sanctions being imposed on Russia for its reluctance to implement Minsk II. But I am indeed extremely disappointed in the summit's failure to establish a firm link between sanctions and the implementation of the ceasefire and peace plan. This linkage proposed by EU Council President Tusk would likely have spared the EU further debates on sanctions, which so far have served to weaken not only its own position but that of Ukraine as well. As a reaction to Russia renewing its aggressive stance, the summit in Brussels also conferred on possible ways out of energy dependency. Unfortunately, the plans to achieve this, as manifested in the newly established European Energy Union, fall far short of the necessities as well as the EU's potential options. Instead of moving the EU ahead on the basis of new technologies of energy efficiency and renewables, Europe's leadership is still clinging to a short-sighted and unconvincing mode of planning which relies mostly on the substitution of Russian gas imports. As per the current state of planning, neither security of supply nor security in the classic sense is achieved.

One year after the annexation of the Crimean peninsula, with thousands left dead and close to two million refugees fleeing the war in the Donbas, presently bereft of a substantial part of its territory, and engulfed in severe economic and financial crisis, Ukraine needs the support of its citizens and its European neighbours. We in the EU have to adjust ourselves to the fact that it is a process spanning generations which the Euromaidan movement has set in motion in the largest country in our neighbourhood. Clearing the path that leads out of vertical corruption takes pressure from the outside, particularly from the European friends. It will cost us effort and money. There will be frustrations. But it will be worth all our trouble – I remain convinced that the EU must help those who want to make freedom and justice a reality. The EU will fail if it does not support those who are fighting for our values. Everything that is done for Ukraine now will also serve the interests of the other countries in our eastern partnership, and their right to territorial integrity and self-determination.

We must also get used to the fact that relations with the Russian leadership will remain strained. Unfortunately, there are no signs yet that the diplomatic efforts to reestablish a common language with the Russian president and the Russian leadership might be successful. The murder of Boris Nemtsov has gruesomely highlighted the country's ongoing internal escalation. This makes it all the more important to maintain unity in upholding the economic sanctions. It would be just as critical to build an Energy Union that is centred on the new, and truly alternative, energy strategies. In view of the deterioration of relations with Russia, however, we should also exploit all our options to stay in contact with Russia's civil society. As much as the Crimean annexation may have been hailed as a "gathering of Russian soil" in the streets of Moscow in recent weeks, the shock over the killing of Boris Nemtsov, Russia's highest-ranking opposition politician, runs just as deep. Moreover, support among the Russian population for the Ukraine war was never actually quite as strong as the leadership expects it to be. Even from within Russia, come some reports that represent a positive challenge for us.