Four Days in Ukraine

Notes from Kiev, Kharkiv, Sloviansk and Artemivsk

Dear readers,

The journey I am reporting on is one of many trips I have made to Ukraine since I first visited the country in 1988. Back then, the Soviet Writers' Union sent me off to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone so that I could then go on to Kiev and Moscow and report in public what I had seen there. Today it seems to me just as vital and urgent to report on what I see when I visit Ukraine. Since the wave of demonstrations and civil unrest known as the Euromaidan began in November 2013, I have visited the country on an almost monthly basis. But my trip in July, the one I'm telling you about here, was very different from all the others. It began on the day that Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over the fields of the Donbas. And it was there, to the eastern part of the country, that I happened to be travelling at the time.

In July I had a series of moving encounters with professional soldiers, volunteers, ordinary citizens, politicians and activists in Kiev, Kharkiv and Sloviansk. The people I spoke to included advocates and opponents of the Euromaidan and supporters and critics of President Poroshenko. I particularly want to let those people in eastern Ukraine who are fighting for a better future have their say. The Ukrainian people do not all deserve to be tarred with the

same brush and branded fascists. They are also entitled to be taken seriously before we in the West and EU relegate them in our minds to mere inhabitants of a buffer state.

Eastern Ukraine is distinct from the western part of the country, and the Donbas is, again, different from the eastern and southeastern parts of the country. There are dialect differences, too, but language is not the main problem here. Social devastation in the Donbas is a product of local mafia activity and Ukrainian politics. Poverty and a lack of prospects are the major problems afflicting the region with its declining coal and steel economy.

Of course, a great deal has happened since July, both in Ukraine and in Europe. The direct involvement of Russian troops in the war in the Donbas is beyond question. The European Parliament and the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, have ratified the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement. Tougher economic sanctions have been imposed on Russia. Diplomacy is in full swing between Russia and the EU. Out of consideration for Russia, the EU-Ukraine trade agreement is not being implemented right away. The Contact Group's negotiations in Minsk led to a ceasefire and the world is now hoping for an end to the fighting. But instead of working towards a genuine, lasting peace, Russia seems to be striving for a new kind of 'frozen conflict'. So as we head for the end of 2014, European foreign and security policy is facing a new situation on the European continent as well.

That situation started to come about when Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and deliberately violated the European peace order. Europe's lack of unity, which clearly emerged in the debate about economic sanctions against Russia, must be overcome. It will certainly not be easy to agree on the wording of a new common security policy, but a consensus is the only option, and the EU must not leave the task of reaching it to a blusterer like NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Given its recent experiences with Russia, the EU also needs to agree as swiftly as possible on a common, sustainable policy on energy. Being less dependent on imports of raw materials fosters a greater sense of security and means more freedom. This idea is a central aspect of the Greens' energy strategy.

As a Green MEP I naturally feel committed to supporting democratic people's movements. To paraphrase Jean Monnet, the European community not only unites countries, but first and foremost it brings people together. It is this notion that shapes my work in Ukraine. We Greens ought to serve as the Western counterpart of the democratic people's movements in Ukraine and do far more to support the civil society in Russia. Enlivening the relations between the democratic movements in both countries is no easy matter, but we can try harder and thus do our bit to help defend freedom and democracy.

I hope that my report encourages efforts in this direction.

Rebecca Harms

I would like to thank the Civic Forum in Kharkiv and the aides from the AutoMaidan movement. Without them, the journey to Sloviansk and Artemivsk and the open discussions that ensued would not have been possible. Kyril Savin from the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Kiev and Paolo Bergamasci are tireless advisors and companions in Ukraine, and my team in Brussels also very patiently strove to remove numerous obstacles in our path.

18 July 2014: Kiev

News of the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner and the deaths of so many people pervades Kiev. A shadow is looming over the otherwise summery city. People are asking themselves when the horrors will end. And many of them also ask themselves and me why their peaceful striving for democracy and justice has met with such an aggressive response. There are so many places of mourning in Kiev, so many trees, streets and walls on which flowers are being left all the time as signs of remembrance. Since yesterday, flowers are also being brought to the Dutch Embassy. An endless stream of Ukrainians trudges up to the building to deposit them. Many are in tears. The talks we had scheduled with the Ukrainian government and also with the OSCE unfortunately cannot take place. There is also widespread shock at the German and EU embassies, where we are briefed on the current situation during every visit to Kiev. Here the language is more muted than among the Ukrainians. People talk of an unexplained crash rather than of the airliner being shot down. On the other hand, in the embassies we learn that before flight MH17 met its dreadful destiny, six aircraft and several helicopters had already been brought down in eastern Ukraine by so-called separatists. In the talks we hold, the hope that this catastrophe will mark a turning point in the conflict is repeatedly expressed. The EU's representatives once again bank on reason prevailing in Russia. They argue that surely Russia cannot refuse to cooperate in determining what caused the disaster and has no option but to bring the 'separatists' to their senses. Some think Russia might now clearly distance itself from the leaders of the 'people's republics' in the Donbas and that the air catastrophe was surely Putin's last chance saloon. The Ukrainians I meet that day do not share the diplomats' hopes and expectations.

That morning, after the downing of flight MH17, the Ukrainian government, OSCE and embassies of the countries whose citizens lost their lives in Tores, are doing all they can to recover the victims' bodies as quickly as possible and in the most dignified manner possible. Preparations are being made for an international inquiry. The first experts are expected to arrive that very day. The Dutch are to lead the investigation.

One concern clearly emerges in the talks with diplomats: Ukraine has been dragged ever further into an armed conflict since Russia occupied and annexed the Crimean Peninsula, and the country's political response is determined by anti-terror measures. On the one hand, that is understandable. After all, would any other country react differently? But it will be hard to make headway on the necessary political changes, the country's democratic awakening, its fight against corruption, its constitutional debate, all of which would be desirable developments. Ukraine's economic situation is deteriorating. This downward spiral, too, must be broken. Putin's strategy is bent on preventing democracy from gaining a foothold in Ukraine. Surely even experienced, stable governments, ministries and administrations would despair in such a situation.

18 July 2014: National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine in Kiev

The Deputy Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, Oleksandr Lytvynenko, briefs us on the situation in Donetsk and Lugansk as he sees it. The so-called separatists in eastern Ukraine can rely on extensive support from Russia. Some information on supplies from Russia is being provided by satellites, but eyewitnesses, soldiers and civilians from the villages along the border with Russia are also sending in reports. Until the

annexation of the Crimea, Ukraine had never anticipated having to engage in a military conflict. The country had – probably without good reason and too trustingly – relied on the Budapest Memorandum and on Russia being its brother nation. Granted, the Russian propaganda campaign against the supposedly fascist uprising in Kiev did not come as a complete surprise. After all, such tactics have been more than familiar since the days of the Soviet Union. However, the fact that this Russian propaganda about the alleged fascist coup is viewed as a 'justification' for Russia's aggression not merely in Russia, but also in the West, is something that aggravates the situation.

The Security and Defence Council sees no alternative to the Ukrainian anti-terror measures. The country must defend itself. In the Council's view, the developments since the annexation of the Crimea pose a threat not just to Ukraine, but to the whole of Europe. It is unrealistic to expect the EU to supply Ukraine with arms, but it is also absurd to prevent Ukraine even from procuring defensive equipment. Up until the week of our visit an EU embargo on sales of bulletproof vests, helmets and communications technology to Ukraine had been in place. Lytvynenko tries to stay calm as he reports that even equipment for emergency field hospitals is being withheld.

The result of the attempted ceasefire, which had since failed, is hard to take. During the supposed ceasefire 108 attacks were launched, 29 Ukrainian soldiers killed and 60 seriously wounded. Gas and water infrastructure in the regions where fighting is taking place is becoming increasingly damaged. The fighting against Ukraine is being escalated by Russian mercenaries, whose leaders are supposedly paid very well (by Ukrainian standards). Their combat activities are making them rich. By contrast, the Ukrainians who join them are being paid relatively little, although the poverty prevalent in the Donbas makes even low pay seem like a lot of money.

Time and time again our discussion returns to the Malaysian passenger plane. There is widespread scepticism about whether Russia will cooperate properly and whether the causes of the disaster will be explained. And nobody here has any doubts that the airliner was shot down. We are told about all the aircraft shot down in previous months, starting with the downing of a military aircraft in which 48 Ukrainian soldiers lost their lives. Kiev was convinced that no cheap mercenaries could have been involved in any of these incidents. The missile system used to bring down such aircraft could only have been operated by well-trained soldiers, not any old fanatics. And the Ukrainian Army does not even possess any modern air defence weapons systems.

At my request, the Ukrainians run through the bare outlines of an emergency energy plan with us. If Russia turns off its supply of gas to Ukraine this coming winter, Ukraine will have to rely on supplies from the West.

At the end of our meeting, we discuss the fresh elections and when would be the right time to hold them. In this circle, everyone favours new elections, because only fair elections would be able to determine who the legitimate representatives of eastern Ukraine really are. There is consensus on elections being essential for the eastern part of the country, because citizens must be represented by elected politicians, not fanatical mercenaries of Russia.

Meeting in the Kiev office of the Open Dialogue Foundation

This human rights organisation is focussing on urgently needed support for citizens of Ukraine who have been abducted and taken away to Russia. Russian courts have just opened legal proceedings against them.

One of the most spectacular cases is that of a young Ukrainian female pilot, named Nadiya Savchenko, who stands accused in Russia of espionage and involvement in the death of two Russian journalists. The Open Dialogue Foundation in Kiev has invited her sister Vira to come and talk to us, to explain the urgency of this case. Vira had herself tried to find Nadiya and secure her sister's freedom when Nadiya was being held in the Donbas. And Vira herself had been put in jail overnight during her trip to Lugansk. Vira explains to us that her sister, although deeply patriotic, could never be a spy.

The other cases concern a filmmaker and three journalists, who disappeared shortly after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, only to re-emerge in Russian jails. This group is also facing court proceedings in Russia. We are told that during their first court appearance they looked as if they had been tortured.

The Open Dialogue Foundation called for the closest possible and most aggressive monitoring of these Russian court cases. Prison visits, letters sent to the relevant Russian authorities, attendance of court proceedings and, of course, international public relations work were all absolutely vital.

Discussion of the Volia Party's platform

At a meeting held at the offices of the newly founded political party Volia (meaning ‘Freedom’), we find ourselves sitting opposite young people who are not only demanding a state that does a better job for its citizens, but also striving to assume their share of responsibility. They are informed by their experience of the Euromaidan. So much can be achieved, they say, if the citizens show the will and take matters into their own hands. This scenario often sounds rather hackneyed to our ears, but in the Ukraine of today it is fascinating to see how the Euromaidan has unleashed in them a readiness to manage their own affairs and take responsibility. I got to know Egor Sobolev, one of Volia's founders and leaders, during the Euromaidan, when former President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign the EU association agreement in Vilnius. Sobolev was one of the first Euromaidan speakers to come to the European Parliament at the invitation of our group. He currently chairs Ukraine's Lustration Committee under the government led by Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk. He has taken my previous appeals to heart, that criticism should not go without also taking responsibility.

A platform built on five key priorities

The party's platform is short but pithy, comprising five key priorities, which are presented to us as follows:

1. Lustration
Lustration is all about ascertaining whether individuals have been involved in corruption and other criminal activities. Clearing this up is a prerequisite for the success of any other reforms. The members of Volia are disappointed that progress in this domain is still being made so slowly, in spite of the orders issued by Yatsenyuk's government and parliament.

2. Economic reforms
The priority here is to break up monopolies. Privatisation has not really altered the monopolistic structures of old. The interests of oligarchs and of the old bureaucratic state apparatus go hand in hand. Deregulation and curbing bureaucracy are absolutely essential. Ukraine needs SMEs. Many citizens and entrepreneurs could then achieve more. Currently, there is great concern over the fact that it is again the small enterprises that are the first to crumble.

3. Reform of the Ukrainian Army and defence policy
We are told that Volia will push for compulsory military service, drawing on a Finnish model, though the party is unwilling to discuss any details yet.

4. Regional and local self-administration
Rather than federalisation, the redistribution of powers between Kiev and the regions will be the crucial measure for ensuring good relations between Ukraine's citizens and government.

5. Media reform
The media situation in Ukraine contrasts starkly with the democratic changes taking place there, with state-run broadcasters and mass media alike either controlled by government figures or owned by oligarchs who exert influence via TV channels, news agencies and newspapers, driven by specific political orientations and interests. The public service broadcasting systems in Germany or Great Britain are cited as examples of how things could be done better.

Next after these five key priority domains come health, education, agricultural and environmental reforms and measures designed to stimulate foreign investment.

For now, Volia has start-up capital because one of its founders sold his company and poured the proceeds into the party. The man in question is already a Ukrainian MP and was actively involved in the Maidan. On the day of our visit he has scored a success for Volia in parliament. By persevering in the dispute about misappropriations of funds from the International Climate Fund in Ukraine, he has managed to force the repayment of 3 billion hryvnia (approx. EUR 180 million).

Volia's people are calling for a fresh general election. However, depending on their standing in the polls, the various political camps are pressing for earlier or later election dates. President Poroshenko favours the earliest possible date, because his poll ratings are still good. Volia holds the view that ensuring the earliest possible election date should not be the sole objective. The election also needs to be well prepared and must not merely give old, familiar faces a chance to reconfigure in a new constellation. Volia is calling for an election to be held in spring 2015 and claims that the October date will only be constitutionally viable if the relevant decisions are taken immediately. Volia, too, is arguing that elections are essential for

stabilising Ukraine's society, but stresses that organising them will only really make sense if truly fair and free elections can be held in the East as well.

19 July 2014: Kharkiv

Kiev and Kharkiv are now connected by a very efficient express rail link. The journey takes around four hours. We leave Kiev early. Upon our arrival in Kharkiv I am surprised to see such a splendid station building. Two years before, when I came there to visit Yulia Tymoshenko in her prison hospital and to protest against a politically influenced judiciary at the Euro 2012 football match between the Netherlands and Germany, I had vowed to return, albeit thinking of a visit in happier times. Kharkiv is just 30 kilometres away from the border with Russia, making it closer to Russia than Donetsk or Lugansk. Nonetheless, it was here in this city and in the surrounding oblast, or administrative region, that an attempted separatist takeover failed.

In Kharkiv, and on the following day in the Donetsk region, we are accompanied by members of the Kharkiv Civic Forum. One of them, Dmytro, I know, because as he took part in an event held by our parliamentary group in Strasbourg. Standing on the steps of the governor's palace we gaze across the city's huge main square, Freedom Square. It would only be a slight exaggeration to say that it seems to stretch all the way to the horizon. Dmytro explains that it is the largest square in Europe and I'm quite prepared to believe him. Opposite us is the statue of Lenin and behind us in the entrance stand young, armed members of the National Guard, who have been standing guard since the brief, forcible occupation of the regional governor's seat. It was in this square, at one of the pro-Euromaidan rallies, that the author and musician Serhiy Zhadan was seriously assaulted by brutal thugs. He was one of the lucky ones: others were killed. At the time, the governor's state administration building was in flames. When we go inside, as far as we can see, virtually all traces of destruction have been removed. However, the paint on the walls is still fresh, new carpeting is just being laid, and armed guards throughout the building keep watch on the square and surrounding area from the windows.

Meeting with Kharkiv Region Governor Ihor Baluta

The governor gives us an exceedingly friendly welcome. I am presented with flowers and a copy of the city's 'golden book'. Baluta and his aides want to brief us on the political situation in the city and oblast.

They tell us that the situation in Kharkiv has calmed down since the attempted coups by agents of Russia and pro-Russian Ukrainians were thwarted. However, tensions remain palpable. The police claim to have averted four terror attacks. Unlike back in April, the Army and National Guard are on alert and prepared to defend Kharkiv. Everywhere there is evidence of Russia's strategy to destabilise the region, which has a long border both with the Donets Basin and with Russia. There is constant provocation along the border with Russia. Kharkiv already has 30,000 registered refugees from the Donbas and that number is rising. Moreover, many refugees who have been given a roof over their heads by relatives have not registered with the authorities. The accounts about the regime of the mercenaries and terrorists given by refugees who fled the fighting have tended to strengthen the citizens' pro-Ukrainian attitude. However, here in the oblast there are estimated to be between 150,000 and

180,000 pro-Russian supporters who continue to favour a federation with Russia and who boycotted the elections held on 25 May. Nonetheless, the intensity of pro-Russian demonstrations has waned. Back in March and April as many as 6,000 people had taken part in them, protesting against Kiev and backing Russia. Today only 200 are still doing so.

Baluta goes on to tell us that many residents of the region can hear the noise of Russian tanks from the border at night. The Russian troops are being moved around a lot and Russian military personnel outnumber the Ukrainian forces 5:1 in the Kharkiv region, as shown time and time again by satellite images. If Russia decides to invade, it won't take its military long to reach Kharkiv. Baluta states that consequently, Ukraine needs to mobilise its forces. It is a catastrophe for Ukraine that necessary reforms are becoming ever harder to implement because all efforts need to be channelled into the country's defence. Baluta also laments the European Union's equivocal attitude in the face of the progressing escalation.

News of the downing of the Malaysian airliner has merely further aggravated the tensions felt by people living in the oblast. As the governor of the city closest to where the wreckage fell to earth, the day before our visit Baluta had been asked by Prime Minister Yatsenyuk to take charge of organising all measures that were necessary. Kharkiv is to be a way station for the bodily remains of victims being taken back to their home countries and will have to accommodate families and friends of the deceased and prepare the first mourning ceremonies. At the same time, the city is supposed to serve as a base for the commission of inquiry into the crash and for international air disaster experts. We are told that the necessary preparations have already been made. Storage and working space has been booked, as have hotel rooms. Interpreters are ready to translate from and into all the relevant languages. A host of volunteers in the city are willing to provide any kind of assistance required. Kharkiv's civil protection authority had immediately contacted its counterpart in Donetsk, but although its staff were well known to their colleagues in Kharkiv because until recently they had worked together, soon after initial contact was made Donetsk broke off communications altogether and could no longer be reached by phone. Baluta is concerned and entertains serious doubts as to whether the plans for recovering the remains of the victims and investigating parts of the wreckage can be implemented. He suspects that the officials in Donetsk are afraid of the militias. Certainly, the fact that contact has been broken off does not bode well for smooth cooperation with Donetsk.

Lunch with a friend at Kharkiv University

My friend is concerned. He says that the city seems quiet, but its residents are very tense. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that they are living in fear. Most of his circle of friends, including the Russian ones, backed the Euromaidan and are against Yanukovych. But his family, which has Russian roots, is plagued by problems common to many others. He is barely on speaking terms with his sisters anymore. The older generation simply doesn't understand the situation. Sometimes he gets the feeling that some of those elderly people are still living in the Soviet Union. But younger people, especially those who have spent time in Russia, clearly favour the European way.

When unrest broke out in Kharkiv, 80% of the pro-Russian activists were unquestionably brought in from Russia. Busloads of thugs arrived from Belgorod and it was they, or their kind, who beat up Zhadan. My friend feels sure that the situation can only start to improve

once the border has been sealed. He wants to know what we think of the proposal made by Ihor Kolomoisky, the Governor of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, to erect a wall. Because the question on everybody's lips in Kharkiv is how that damned 'border', which in reality doesn't even exists, can be quickly sealed!

Feeding the troops

He then goes on to tell us about a new 'popular sport' in Kharkiv. Every weekend, people pack their cars full of supplies and head for the border or Donetsk to 'feed the troops'! Initially this sounds a bit mean, but we quickly realise that my friend is actually dead serious. Moreover, he is proud of this initiative by the Ukrainians, and stresses that since the winter of the Euromaidan a new feeling of personal responsibility has swept through the entire country. This feeling has grown even stronger since Russia's aggression. The Russian invasion in the Crimea, the region's annexation and now the violent bands of troublemakers in the Donbas has forged fresh, strong bonds between Ukrainians again. And those links have been getting even stronger since their loss of faith in dependable support from the West. The West is "all talk and no action", he claims, "so we have to help ourselves". Of course, it still has to be borne in mind that Ukrainian society remains deeply paternalistic, so there are plenty of people who, just like in the olden days, are simply waiting for help to arrive and for the government to take care of everything. His students are different. They are the next generation, the people who will break out of the old mould.

We've met up to eat in a pleasant, airy café run by young people from the university. It feels like a product of Scandinavian design, but was actually dreamt up and built by people from Kharkiv. The food is very good and the service is friendly. Sitting here, thinking of the young people and summer and the south, it is hard to imagine that Donetsk is so close by and that the Russian army is massed just 30 km away. People like those who built the café really don't want to leave this place. Of course, they could always start afresh in Kiev, but here they have something to defend, too.

Talk with Hennadiy Kernes, mayor of Kharkiv

Hennadiy Kernes is still confined to a wheelchair following an assassination attempt two months before our visit. Details of the attack are still hazy. It is clear that Kernes is a seriously ill man.

Kernes, too, explains to us that what is going on in the Donbas can never happen in Kharkiv. For although the people here are in favour of decentralisation, they oppose the pro-Russian separatists. Kernes is advocating a political solution, but fears that every day of continued fighting will lower the chances of resolving the situation that way. He tells us he's tried to establish contact with his counterparts in the Donbas, but they don't want to speak to him.

After our short conversation with Kernes, I ask his interpreter how he came to speak such good German. He replies that he spent time in East Germany, working for the KGB, playing a junior role in the German Democratic Republic's nuclear programme. He adds, somewhat mischievously, that he knew I'd been involved in actions opposing the Stendal nuclear power plant right after the fall of the Berlin Wall. We might have already met on that occasion, he intimates.

He returned to Kharkiv for the KGB and remained in charge of monitoring the university there until the demise of the Soviet Union. He does not wish to say what he thinks Russia's objectives in Ukraine are or share his views on the war in the Donbas.

Meeting with Alla Aleksandrovska, a member of the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) and former Ukrainian MP

When we were planning our trip with the Civic Forum, it was clear to me that I also had to arrange meetings with pro-Russian politicians. The first of these talks takes place in the offices of the Communist Party in Kharkiv.

Alla Aleksandrovska served four terms as a deputy in the Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, and gathered international experience through years of work for the Council of Europe. She opposes Ukraine's association agreement with the EU because she can't imagine it yielding any benefits to Ukraine, a country whose economy is incapable of meeting the necessary standards for its products. She warns that the situation in the country will inevitably deteriorate, since the agreement has also undermined its trade with Russia.

Ukraine has had 22 different governments since 1991, she tells us. Therefore, the country's ministries have never had a chance to work efficiently. A strategy of the type needed for a treaty like the association agreement could never be drawn up by these Ukrainian ministries. After all the debates she says she is unable to identify any benefits of such an agreement. As a result, she can understand why Yanukovych has acted in the way he has. The attitude prevalent in western Ukraine is irrational and emotional. In the winter, Yanukovych's opponents had capitalised on the uncertainty following the EU's third Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius to initiate a putsch.

The emergency laws adopted on 19 January had been seized on to drive out Yanukovych by force and stage a nationalist coup. Aleksandrovska asks us whether we know who issued orders to the snipers at the Euromaidan. For her the constant cries of "Slawa Ukraina" (Glory to Ukraine) are an indication that the fascist ideas of the twentieth century nationalist politician Stepan Bandera are rearing their ugly heads again. Meanwhile, people who think any differently are targets of violence and politically motivated charges across the country. Hundreds have disappeared into jails in the Kharkiv Oblast. One of Aleksandrovska's friends, a university professor, stands accused of terrorism, and she expects to end up in prison herself. This is how the central government in Kiev deals with dissidents, she goes on; the 'massacre' in Odessa shows what Bandera's modern-day disciples want.

We have no opportunity to challenge most of what Alla Aleksandrovska says during our encounter because she barely gives us any opportunity to question or respond to what she says. The fact that we are in favour of an international inquiry into all crimes against humanity committed in Ukraine, whether in Kiev or Odessa, is not really of interest to her. And my criticisms of politically motivated 'justice', regardless of who dishes it out, are not enough to stop her monologue. Furthermore, my view after many days and nights at the Maidan, that the Euromaidan movement is a democratic citizens' movement not dominated by right-wing extremists is anathema to her.

Kharkiv Civic Forum: Nationwide meeting of initiatives on lustration

Citizens' initiatives from around Ukraine have gathered together in Kharkiv to make headway with the laws on lustration. Even with the change of government and the election of Petro Poroshenko as president, the call for an investigation into the past remains firm. A nationwide law on lustration is regarded as both possible and necessary. Previous failures of legislative initiatives in the Rada are no reason to give up on the idea. There is a shared view that the 450 Ukrainian MPs are opposed to lustration out of self-interest. The argument that the respective bills had to be stopped because they were unconstitutional is dismissed at the meeting in Kharkiv. A constitutional law expert talks about potential conflicts with the constitution and human rights and concludes that any incompatibilities can be resolved by good legislation that *is* constitutional.

Following the failure of the first law on lustration in the Rada, the participants in Kharkiv discuss how the initiatives in the regions can continue their work. One thing that all the delegates at the meeting are able to agree on is that without lustration, investigation and transparency, there cannot be a genuine reform of the public administration, curbing of corruption, or true public responsiveness. Various models are discussed, not all of which I understand. Proposals are made for individual and preventive lustration. Then there is voluntary lustration. And if all else fails, 'tyre lustration' is advocated, involving the dumping of used tyres in front of the houses of incriminated individuals. The aim is to impose regional rules from the bottom up against a feared permanent top-down blockage of lustration by the central government in Kiev. The proposed initiatives seek to exchange experience gathered from regional and local lustration procedures between cities and regions. Candidates who have been found unfit for public office in one city must be prevented from popping up again elsewhere. In other words, the merry-go-round must stop!

When asked for my assessment, I recommend looking at the experience gained in other countries and warn against vigilante justice. On the other hand, I say that a nationwide law that also wins the approval of Ukraine's regional populations will help to ensure this.

This debate about lustration highlights just how deep the mistrust towards the central government and old circles of power is. There is a lot of talk in the EU about regionalisation and the redistribution of power and responsibility. However, Ukraine badly needs some new faces in the administration to help oil the wheels of the state apparatus.

The debate about lustration is followed in the agenda by a debate about the EU and its relationship to Ukraine. The disappointment with Brussels is palpable. I try to explain how the Union is structured. Not everything that takes time in Brussels should be seen as an affront against Ukraine. In Kharkiv, sitting around the large round table of the Civic Forum two days after the downing of Malaysian Flight MH 17 in the neighbouring Donetsk region and just months after the annexation of the Crimea, most delegates are disenchanted with the EU. What they have seen is that the EU always only moved forward on sanctions after something terrible had happened again. Only very few of those seated around the table harbour serious hopes that the deaths of almost 300 aircraft passengers will move Moscow to change its course. Western hopes are largely met with shoulder-shrugging. The biggest issue on which the Ukrainians are still angling for support from the EU concerns breaking up the oligarchic system in their country. How can transparency and addressing the past serve to

crack the old system? What can the EU do to break up the oligarchs' monopolies and give SMEs a helping hand so that they can change Ukraine for the better? Once again it becomes evident just how many Ukrainians are not first and foremost looking to the EU for financial assistance. They are asking for practical advice, seeking people who have gained experience during the transformation and reform of Eastern Europe following the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc. At the same time, fears that the Russians might escalate the situation loom large over the roundtable talks. However, the people here do not intend to yield to Putin's strategy of destabilising eastern Ukraine to break up the country as a whole. That is why, despite the fighting in the East, these political and social reforms are so important to them. The EU must not fail them, I am told. Any successful step towards reforms in Ukraine will be a step forward in the fight against aggression.

After the gathering, we run into a demonstration in front of the hotel – which turns out not to be a demonstration at all, but a large chorus of Maidan activists. I know that some people will again claim that they are all misguided supporters of fascists from Kiev, because they are singing the anthem. But again, the people I encounter are not nationalists or latter-day supporters of Bandera; they are simply people who want their country to be different from the state that Yanukovych and others have put it in. The fact that the Ukrainian people feel more like a nation now than a year before has precious little – if anything – to do with Bandera, but far more with Yanukovych and Putin. And if a still fresh, newfound affection for their own country morphs into a new form of nationalism, then this development can hardly be blamed on the people who initiated the Maidan. Rather, it is a consequence of the nationalistically and ethnically motivated annexation of the Crimea. And it is why the Ukrainians not only *feel* they are under attack, but reflects the reality that they are actually *being* attacked.

20 July: The journey to Sloviansk and Artemivsk

When the people of the Kharkiv Civic Forum suggested to me a few weeks before this trip that I should also visit the Donetsk region, it was still not clear where we could go without running an unacceptably high risk. I wanted to gain a few insights of my own into places that were no longer under the separatists' control, preferably without any official chaperone or major fanfare. If possible, I really wanted to go to Artemivsk, too, a city I had first visited 14 years earlier when the Ukrainian environmental initiative Bahmat had invited me along with a group of German nuclear power opponents and experts to support opposition to a nuclear waste repository in a salt dome. Unlike in Germany, the efforts made back then in Artemivsk were successful: our support helped to bring about a referendum and prevent the facility from becoming a reality. Before I set out, my friend Julia, who today lives in the EU, but regularly works in Ukraine, once again explained to me why the mood in Artemivsk had already been so strongly pro-Russian before the conflict began: The dangerous anti-Kiev/anti-junta feelings were the result of constant exposure to strictly Russian media, rampant mismanagement, the mafia-like situation in the Donbas and mounting poverty in recent years. What their parents so badly wanted was a way out of the region’s poverty and to live a somehow 'normal' life. All the same, nobody in Artemivsk would vote for Yanukovych again either.

As we set off early in the morning from Kharkiv, heading towards the Donetsk region, it is not yet clear exactly what our destination is. At least, *we* don't know. I wonder why I so blindly trust the four people with whom Kyril, Paolo and I are travelling. At least two of

those accompanying us have driven the route to Sloviansk numerous times. Led by a friendly, somehow impish fellow I will call Yuriy, they are commuters between war and peace. He seems to be a man for all situations, especially the tricky ones. He runs his own humanitarian aid organisation. For weeks, like the Stalker character in the eponymous book by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, they have been heading in and out of combat zones, evacuating more than 1,500 children with the help of their group. They take medicinal drugs into occupied cities ravaged by fighting, save diabetics by bringing in fresh supplies of insulin, or bring out the old women who had wanted to stay on in Lugansk even after their children had left. Shortly after we leave, Yuriy receives calls concerning a grandfather in Donetsk and a badly wounded soldier who urgently needs to be taken to a decent hospital. Yuriy tells me that he had done the same in the winter with the AutoMaidan in Kiev. But now things have probably become a little more dangerous. He will do everything he can to defend Ukraine against a Russian invasion. Born in Armenia, he had originally joined the Red Army, but during the fighting centred around Nagorno-Karabakh he had fought on the Armenian side. It was as a refugee that he ended up in Ukraine, and he will always be grateful to his host country and its people for awarding him Ukrainian citizenship. He says there is no way he's going back to Russia, but now he has a chance to give something back to the Ukrainians.

He shows me a photo. "Here," he says, "this is what I looked like a year ago!" I see a man with a paunch badly covered by a red shirt, wearing a conspicuous watch, a lot of gold jewellery, and with a blonde on each arm. Yuriy describes the man he used to be as a more or less typical businessman. "But a successful one", he added, with no small amount of pride, "spending my money freely". He's right when he says that today he is unrecognisable as the man in the photo. He still spends his money freely, but today it is all pumped into providing aid. The watch in the picture he gave away at the first checkpoint on his very first trip when the youngest soldier there complained so loudly that he never knew what time it was because they had no way of charging up their mobile phones.

Another of the assignments that Yuriy had taken on (or which had found their way to him) was to supply the troops. At the first checkpoint on our journey I understand why both cars we are travelling in are so heavily laden. We are carrying boxes of coffee, cigarettes, suntan lotion, biscuits, vodka, socks, deodorant and mineral water in canisters. The soldiers dutifully ask to see our passports, but first and foremost they are delighted with their fresh supplies. Yuriy, whom they seem know well, notes down anything they're short of. At the second checkpoint the sentries complain about the shortage of petrol before asking us to show them our passports. We empty water bottles and promise to bring them some petrol on our return journey. At the next stop we are told that 20 men have just 10 sleeping bags between them. Incredulity must be written all over my face and they spot it right away. "You see, this army wasn't prepared for a deployment", Yuriy tells me. "But we, the country and its citizens, are getting it done. Socks, underwear and sleeping bags – we bring whatever they need". He then tells me about Ukrainian entrepreneurs in places like Düsseldorf and Cologne, who transfer money to his group week after week. "But only directly", he adds, "not via Kiev".

By the time we have reached the last checkpoint before Sloviansk I have gotten used to the idea that apart from the supply situation, the attention is always focussed on the fighting and the ever-shifting situation. On Yuriy's next trip, his list will be longer. And everywhere he goes he finds out which roads are safe and which places he can reach, altering our route based on the soldiers' advice.

In Sloviansk

My first impression is that this is an awful place. Around a crossroads on the edge of the city everything that could be shot to pieces has been totally destroyed. Vehicles are burnt out and houses are piles of rubble. We come across a few old people who hear that I am from Germany. They cry out that every night they pray for this misery to go away, never ever to return. Never again. Anything is better than such terror. They say they have just seen the town again for the first time. Many houses have been destroyed. Yuriy's group takes photos. We drive through, looking for another road to Artemivsk, a route that was recommended to us.

Sloviansk is a mixture of industrial and village architecture. Some of the streets look like coffee-table books depicting Ukrainian or Russian villages in the summertime. There are gardens bursting with bloom around wooden houses with gaily painted window frames. The branches of fruit trees are dropping over the fences under the weight of all their fruit. I am reminded of the colourful cushions and tablecloths that I have so often admired on the seats and tables in such houses. But in other streets the houses are roofless, the windows are shattered and the fruit trees have withered. On one square all that is left is the façade of a supermarket. Yuriy tells me that after the town had been liberated Poroshenko and Yatsenyuk had come to this square to hand out sausages. And of course, the people had taken them gladly, but more than getting sausages they would have preferred to hear what the way forward would be. It is good that the terrorists have gone, he says, but the people don't need Poroshenko to come here to hand out sausages.

We drive on through Sloviansk, where kiosks have sprung up between the apartment blocks. We see many people carrying water canisters back home, because the water supply isn't working. Every time the conversation in the car turns to the topic of destruction and reconstruction, vehement demands are forthcoming. Whenever the EU and the international community give money, those funds must end up in the hands of the people here and on no account simply be passed on to the oligarchs, who never invested a penny here, just sucked the region dry. Reconstruction work in the Donbas must not be allowed to result in the oligarchs making a fast buck again.

In Artemivsk

After a few phone calls, Yuriy decides that we really can drive on as far as Artemivsk. He has been told that the road is open; we will just have to go very fast because we'll be passing through open terrain for a number of kilometres. And that is how we actually get to the city I so badly want to visit. Little has been destroyed here, as Artemivsk was in the hands of pro-Russian mercenaries only very briefly, I am told. I recognise a few landmarks. There is the park with the eatery we always used to go to for dinner when I was here 14 years ago. We had to order everything a day in advance. Would we want one or two slices of bread? One egg or two? How many grams of meat? How much vodka? Keeping supplies of food was too expensive back then. And having tourists like us as customers was virtually unheard of. As my friend had told me before I came out to Ukraine, Artemivsk is a purely industrial city and 80% of its inhabitants, if they aren’t outright Putin supporters, at least oppose the government in Kiev.

We have an appointment with the Donbas volunteer battalion. The city's main barracks have only been back in Ukrainian hands for a few days. The battalion's officers whom Yuriy wanted me to meet are not there because there has been a fresh outbreak of trouble on the outskirts of the city. Here once again, Yuriy knows many of the people. But he leaves it to Kyryl and myself to strike up a conversation with the soldiers in the barracks' parade ground. They can't believe where I come from. And initially they also find the pretty young lady from Kharkiv, who is a member of Yuriy's group, much more exciting. But then suddenly the dam breaks and two of the volunteers, evidently with the approval of their comrades, who listen very attentively, tell us more and more. One of them had lived in Russia where he'd had a great job at an agency for 10 years. Then he signed up as a volunteer, to fight the Russian invasion. The second had worked for a Ukrainian deputy in the Rada. Both men take pains to point out that they never thought they would end up as soldiers fighting for their country. Yet here they are, because there is no alternative. They, and everyone else here, are outraged that even in Poland shipments of defensive equipment like bulletproof vests and radios have been prevented from passing through by customs officials. NATO wasn't going to help; that much they had understood. "But why do we not even deserve protective equipment? Do you in the West expect us to stop Moscow with our bare hands?" the man who had come from Russia to volunteer asked me. They want to know whether NATO might deploy peacekeepers, and if so, when. They also want to know whether we in the West actually understand that Ukraine had actually only been formally independent. After independence, the Ukrainian Army had been destroyed systematically. Oligarchs wanted to launder their money and the army was and ideal instrument for doing that. And Putin had no complaints. The volunteers show us their weapons and we see confirmation for ourselves of what we've already heard: their Kalashnikovs and pistols date from the 1950s.

I ask about the mood in Artemivsk. I am told that the people in the city genuinely thought the Russians would be needed to protect them against the fascists. But after just a few days with the mercenaries they saw the law of the jungle prevailing. Everything the mercenaries wanted they simply took. Nothing was safe from them. "And when we arrived here, they still thought: 'Here come the fascists.' But we aren't fascists; we're people just like anybody else. Yesterday, four of us went to the market, without our rifles. And we were served food, for free. And the taxi drivers take us places without demanding a fare. They know our vehicles are needed and being used elsewhere."

I ask about the people from the Donbas, who had after all joined the pro-Russian militias everywhere. The response is: they are doing it either out of conviction or for the money, or both. Some of them are being paid really well, but those are mostly Russians or Chechens. There is a rumour going round that the wives of the most highly paid fighters from Ukraine are spending these rapidly amassed riches to buy houses and flats in western Ukraine. That's how things are here, I am told.

Our conversation repeatedly returns to their disappointment with the Europeans. The Ukrainian army plus volunteers can get the job done, but they need help, at least with equipment. The young volunteers insist that there is no option but to defend Ukrainian territory against the Russian-backed invasion. Putin wanted things to happen this way. "And regardless of what you are saying in Berlin or Brussels, we have to defend ourselves". Their complaints about the sorry state of the army is in reality criticism of the state of the

country itself. Yet despite their complaints, they are consciously committed to their country, whatever the outcome.

"We only have old trainers to wear on our feet", they say, and Yuriy adds boots to his wish list. On our return journey we take along a young volunteer who is being sent home for a few days. He tells us one of those terrible stories that are written anew by every war. His entire group had come under fire and only three had survived. His friend, with whom he had been to the Maidan, was badly wounded. He had carried him for hours, but in the end all he had been able to do was stand by and watch him die in the field hospital. Ever since, he had turned to vodka to dull the pain. On our journey back he tells us again and again about the ambush, being encircled by the enemy and under fire, and about the death of his friend. On his mobile phone he keeps looking at the photos they took together at the Maidan and of the fighting.

Sloviansk

We make another stop outside Sloviansk where a group of young Ukrainian Army officers is expecting us. They explain what they have to do to guard the Sloviansk region and keep it safe. They thank Yuriy for the tents they sleep in. They are small, lightweight two-man tents, designed to fit in a hiker's backpack, and far too colourful in this context. To camouflage them more effectively, they have been smeared with mud.

Here, we are again told, on the one hand, how important the soldiers see their role as being and how seriously they take their duties, but on the other, it is also made very clear to us that the troops are paying the price for successive Ukrainian governments viewing the army as nothing more than a money-laundering tool. One of the most recent defence ministers under Yanukovych had supposedly even had dual Russian-Ukrainian citizenship, and thus, strengthening the Ukrainian army had definitely not been a priority for him.

The Ukrainian soldiers we visit last are not only being supplied with provisions by Yuriy. I meet some young people from Sloviansk who help with everything. They cook and wash the soldiers' dirty clothes. An entrepreneur butts into our conversation, telling us that his ceramics factory started up production again that very day. He has brought the soldiers some crockery so they can at least eat from proper plates. And this isn't the first time he has done this. He has started turning out products with a special camouflage design. I ask him whether everyone in Sloviansk is on the Ukrainian soldiers' side. The girl doing the cooking, the crockery manufacturer and his son all answer very thoughtfully, reiterating what I've already been told on numerous occasions. Here almost everyone had become more and more dissatisfied with the government in Kiev. The situation faced by most people in the region had been bad. Many of them had simply not understood what had happened in the capital before, during and after the Euromaidan. And it had been very difficult for them to comprehend because the vast majority only watched Russian TV. Many people had genuinely pinned their hopes on Russia. Then the Russian mercenaries had come, and not everyone had found that to be a good thing either. Some had joined them out of conviction. Many had been persuaded to take their side for the money, because if you have no job and no income it's a no-brainer to get paid every day for once, regardless of who the paymaster is and how much or little you earn. Then some bad things had happened. The mercenaries had taken everything they wanted by force and meted out their own form of justice. Then there had been major clashes with the Ukrainian army. And when the paid men from Sloviansk said they did not

want to withdraw along with the mercenaries, two of them were simply shot dead in the market square. Nowadays, they tell us, most people in Sloviansk don't care one iota about politics anymore. All they want is peace and some kind of 'normal' life, an end to spending their days and nights in fear of terror and war.

The soldiers and the people who have come from Sloviansk to this military post also express indignation at the downing of the Malaysian airliner. They follow the news as best they can and don't believe that the circumstances of the crash can be cleared up by cooperating with the mercenaries or with Russia. Yet perhaps the catastrophe will prompt a turnaround since so many people from other countries have been affected. "Maybe the Dutch in the West, who are so far away from us, now have a better understanding of the war here", they say.

After our discussion, we are invited to share a meal with them. The cook from Sloviansk has improvised a small table. There is borscht and bread, and the vodka drinking and toasting is putting us into a pleasantly jolly mood. The soldiers are happy that we have dropped by and given them a brief break from their everyday existence. But I am bombarded with more and more questions: "Can the border with Russia be sealed? What will the EU do? What can the United Nations do? Why can't they bring any influence to bear? Or are we Ukrainians actually not that important to the West after all?" The message I'm given to take back with me is the same as in Artemivsk: "Tell everyone that we weren't prepared to go to war. We didn't want this conflict. But we won't allow Putin to rule Ukraine. And now that a passenger plane has been shot down the West must understand that the acts of terror perpetrated by these mercenaries are unacceptable. And you must also tell them that in spite of our difficulties and complaints about Kiev we still believe in our cause. We believe that our country is good and that we are decent people who can achieve a great deal if corruption is ended. And say that we need the Europeans' help to attain that objective."

Driving back to Kharkiv, we make another stop in Sloviansk. The young volunteer whom we're taking back with us gets into a loud quarrel because an old man passing by insults him for wearing a Ukrainian uniform. It is only with great difficulty that we prevent him from drawing his weapon. I hadn't noticed that the traumatised youngster was carrying his revolver.

In the city of Isyum we stop at a service station. "For a breath of fresh air," Dmytro says. Isyum means raisin in Ukrainian. I seem to recall Julia telling me this 14 years before, when we went on a day trip to the river from Artemivsk. We eat an ice cream and look out across the North (Severny) Donets River. Here, overlooking the river and service station, an imposing monument stands as a reminder of one of the major battles of the Second World War. In the car park at the foot of the monument are three armoured personnel carriers belonging to the famous 95th Airmobile Brigade from Dnipropetrovsk. The Ukrainian troops who drive those vehicles are sitting at the kiosk eating sausage and chips. The striped shirts they are wearing under their uniforms remind me of images from movies about the Russian Revolution by the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov. But this is 2014, and in the shadow of a monument commemorating the exploits of the Red Army in Isyum, Ukrainian soldiers are indeed taking a break from a war backed by Russia, a conflict they didn't want.

When we are back on the road, Dmytro drives a bit faster. The journey has taken longer because we had to make more detours. I suggest we call off the meeting in Kharkiv scheduled

for our last hour here before we leave for Kiev, but Dmytro insists that we should meet this particular critic of the Ukrainian government, who opposes Poroshenko but is not a fan of Putin either. Hearing a wide range of opinions is important, after all.

Meeting with Yuriy Apukhtin, leader of the Southeast Movement in Kharkiv

I had feared that I might come across as impolite if I only had half an hour to spare for him, but Apukhtin is rather glad that we have come to see him. He had already attended the meeting of the lustration initiatives on the previous day. He is one of the people who had opposed the Euromaidan, and does not believe that change in Ukraine can be brought about that way. But it is also wrong, he says, that Russia now wants to hold sway in his country again. And one must do what it takes to deter a would-be conqueror. Therefore, it is a good thing that there is no pro-Russian majority in Kharkiv. However, there are deeply rooted links between the two countries' economies and people. For him, the association agreement is not a suitable way of improving the economy or the particular situation faced by people in the Donbas.

Dmytro takes us to the railway station. We arrive at the last minute, are bustled onto the train and given enormous food packages. It is a sad moment. I am asked to talk about our day in the Donbas, and I have to promise that I will return to Kharkiv soon. Our hosts wave us off as the train pulls out. With a heavy heart, I think of all the hazardous car journeys they make.

Back to Kiev on 21 July 2014

Meeting with Hryhoriy Nemyria, MP representing the All-Ukrainian Union "Fatherland" party, Batkivshchyna

We meet Nemyria in the parliament building. I have been in touch with him for many years. He has close links with Yulia Tymoshenko and was also a member of her government. He has maintained close contact with the European Parliament for a number of years, making sure that it regularly exchanges views with his colleagues in the Rada.

Nemyria talks of a 'hybrid war', which Russia is waging against Ukraine, a war which had not been declared and which would never be declared. He says the Ukrainian government is hesitating to officially proclaim a state of war. Doing so would ring in far-reaching changes for the country, its people and all international relations, entailing the adoption of emergency laws, general mobilisation, the imposition of restrictions on the press, the closure of Ukrainian airspace and much more. The ‘anti-terror measures’ are synonymous with the necessary defensive deployment of the Ukrainian Army. It is clear to Nemyria that Putin is intent on destabilising Ukraine. There are also fears of terror attacks outside the Donbas.

Nemyria wants me to follow up on the rumours about the association agreement. It is said that the Rada's ratification of this agreement has been on hold at Angela Merkel's request since the meeting in Normandy to commemorate the outbreak of the First World War and should only be ratified when an agreement on its implementation has been reached between Poroshenko and Putin. The next meeting for this was scheduled for 12 September. Thus, Nemyria does not expect the association agreement to be ratified anytime soon. He seems

unhappy and is also critical of the fact that too little effort is being made to tackle Ukraine's mounting social and economic problems.

When we discuss fresh elections in the course of our conversation, disagreements between the allied parties in the coalition government emerge again. As necessary as fresh elections are, they will not have the required effect if the old powers that be end up orbiting each other again, if a few people switch jobs and the recently identified common ground vanishes again. It is *déjà vu*: Nemyria favours fresh elections, but not right now, arguing that if proper voting in the eastern part of the country is prevented by the war, then the outcome will be relatively worthless.

Meeting with Vitali Klitschko, Mayor of Kiev and leader of the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform (UDAR)

Later that day, when we meet Klitschko, the decision about holding fresh elections as soon as possible has already been announced. Klitschko and his people are in favour. They think Nemyria and his people fear fierce competition from Poroshenko's new party, which is strongest in the polls. That is why they want the election to be held later.

Vitali Klitschko confirms our fears after the meeting with Nemyria, saying: "I'm afraid that the rivalry between the political groups will not serve our country well."

Klitschko also shares the concerns about the state of the army. Better equipment and appropriate preparations and readiness for deployment are required. He, too, simply can no longer understand why the West and the European Union continue to see the war in eastern Ukraine as a Ukrainian problem, because in his opinion the entire world should feel attacked or threatened.

Meeting with Svitlana Zalishchuk and Hanna Hopko from the civic initiative Reanimation Package of Reforms (RPR)

The group with this extraordinary name was founded last winter at the Maidan and comprises around 200 activists, including experts in a number of domains, including numerous lawyers, but also doctors, scientists, the heads of Ukraine's leading think tanks and members of other major civic initiatives that sprung up around the Euromaidan movement. This group of citizen lobbyists involves itself systematically in the work done by parliament and the government. The RPR drafts legal texts for the reforms required in all areas, and endeavours to firmly anchor and assert its ideas. It is active nationwide, explaining its aims and initiatives and thus striving to garner popular support right from the outset. The Rada's cross-faction working group Platform for Reforms and the cabinet's Reforms Support Centre are working alongside it. Svitlana calls for regular meetings with the European Parliament to be held in Ukraine so that joint discussions can be held on the difficulties faced by Ukraine and how to resolve them. That way, the Ukrainians could also gain a clearer understanding of the EU's views and policies. And the institutions in Brussels finally would have to start taking people other than the established politicians and oligarchs seriously. On one point Svitlana is adamant: Her organisation must definitely be invited to the donor conference on Ukraine. The awarding and use of funds granted by the European Union must be discussed transparently

right from the start. Only then will the money be effectively and sensibly invested to benefit the majority of Ukraine's citizens. The EU must not repeat mistakes it has made in the past!

In response to the aggression from Russia, the RPR advocates imposing tougher economic sanctions on Russia. The EU's hesitancy, we are told, is making the Ukrainian people feel increasingly uncertain. Surely now, since the downing of the Malaysian airliner, everyone must see how big a threat Europe as a whole is facing. The RPR wants the association and trade agreement to be concluded swiftly, because that will be good for reforms. Changing things in Ukraine is also important for counteracting Putin. The young women from RPR are convinced that Putin's international isolation must be pursued further. No more G8, no more G20 and no 2018 FIFA World Cup!

Svitlana and Hanna not only embody the desire for a new Ukraine, they already *are* the new Ukraine. When we talk to the women about our impressions from Sloviansk and Artemivsk, the atmosphere turns highly emotional. They express fury and disbelief at the destruction caused in Ukraine. Svitlana explains why she sees no alternative to the anti-terror measures. It was simply unacceptable to yield to an authoritarian regime like Putin's again. I tell them that a friend of mine has received his call-up papers as a reservist and that his family is in utter despair about it. The three women discuss whether or not they would answer such a call themselves. Two end up saying yes and one says no.

22 July 2014: The extraordinary meeting of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs in Brussels on flight MH17

I rush to the meeting as soon as my flight from Kiev has landed. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin reports on the efforts being made to recover the victims' bodies from the crashed aircraft and make progress with the inquiry into the causes of the disaster. Five days have passed and there is still no access to the crash site. Klimkin seizes the opportunity to give MEPs an overview of the situation in the Donbas. I don't know whether anyone has ever described Russia's strategy so matter-of-factly or talked so openly about the balance of power in the region. Perhaps I am only hearing what I want to hear. The Dutch ambassador speaks about the horrified public response in the Netherlands to the catastrophic end of flight MH17. The victims included so many Dutch people that the effect on his nation is comparable to that on the USA after the 9/11 attacks. Fellow MEPs, acting in their capacity as spokespersons for the various parliamentary groups, express their sorrow and disbelief at what has happened. The Dutch say they are unable to explain to the people back home why the disaster occurred and why it is not even possible to recover the victims' remains. Never before has a session of the European Parliament spoken out so unequivocally against Russia or has such a huge majority called for substantial economic sanctions. Just a week before, Parliament had rejected my motion calling for the delivery of French Mistral-class warships to Russia to be stopped.

Somehow I feel strange at the meeting. The trips from the Donbas to Kiev and from Kiev to Brussels had each taken just a few hours. Yet I feel as if these places are eternities apart. The places I have visited over the past few days seem like different worlds, worlds that are utterly disjointed from one another. Part of me still seems to be in transit between these worlds. It is becoming increasingly difficult to keep up with the lightning-fast changes in Ukraine.