



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



**UKRAINIAN
HELSINKI
HUMAN RIGHTS
UNION**



Executive Summary of Report

“STORY OF A CITY.

LIBERATION AND DEFENSE OF MARIUPOL”



2018

“STORY OF A CITY. LIBERATION AND DEFENSE OF MARIUPOL”

The conflict in eastern Ukraine and its periodic escalations are having a direct impact on everyday life of entire Ukraine and have resulted in a large number of victims killed afterwards the occupation and liberation of Donbas cities.

Human Rights Abuse Documentation Center of the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union (UHHRU) presents chronicles of the events of hybrid armed conflict in Ukraine in 2014-2017 using the example of several Donbas cities. In course of its monitoring visits, UHHRU's Documentation Center collected eyewitnesses' stories and studied open information sources and statistical data regarding serious violations of human rights, including the right to life. **A series of brief analytical reports proceeds with events in Mariupol**, a city in Donetsk oblast that became an outpost of resistance against Russian aggression.

MARIUPOL is being one of the largest cities in Donbas, second most populated city in Donetsk oblast, which is of strategic importance to the region and Ukraine as whole, as well as the main port in the Sea of Azov and second largest port in the country in terms of turnover, next to Odesa. Mariupol's Sea commercial port ensures transportation of cargo to dozens of countries every year (with approximate annual cargo turnover of 15 million tons). The city is a center of industry, with Illich and Azovstal metallurgic plants, Azovmash group of companies, ship repairing yard, Elektropobutprylad, Termal and Azovelektrostal plants, and Mariupol Experimental Research Plant “Magma”; it is a strategic hub of automobile, maritime and railroad traffic. Mariupol airport, which provided for the flights to different cities of Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, Greece and other countries, was closed in June 2014.

From September 2014, Donetsk Oblast Civil-Military Administration had been temporarily based in Mariupol.

Thus, in April 2014, hostilities broke out in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts between the Armed Forces, Security Service and Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine on one side and pro-Russian anti-government paramilitary forces on the other, who opposed the Revolution of Dignity and Euromaidan and wanted a repeat of so-called Crimean scenario in Donbas, i.e. unlawful and illegitimate annexation of these territories by the Russian Federation. Russia was and continues to provide active support to anti-government paramilitary forces, which includes funding, supplying weapons and fuel, and secret participation of Russian soldiers and even whole units of the Russian Armed Forces in the conflict.

It should be noted that unlike in Donetsk and Luhansk, pro-Ukrainian forces in Mariupol had been more cohesive, with active pro-Ukrainian Mariupol self-defense unit and established cooperation between various military and law enforcement agencies (Armed Forces of Ukraine, National Guard of Ukraine, Ministry of Internal Affairs/MIA, State Border Guard Service/SBGS, State Emergency Service and others), which allowed to actively fend off the Russian Spring in April 2014.

At the beginning of May 2014 the situation quickly deteriorated.

The provocation of 9 May 2014 with setting on fire of the building of MIA's local department sowed discord among locals, and the lack of information from official sources resulted in rumormongering. Due to information pressure exerted by the supporters of the self-proclaimed republic regarding “punitive expeditions” and “shooting at civilians”, a large number of Mariupol's residents joined the separatists. The provocation in Mariupol can be seen as a link of a larger chain, being a logical next step after the provocation of 2 May 2014 in Odesa (fire at the House of Labor Unions – fire at the building of MIA's city administration), when, according to so-called “witnesses”, *“40 to 120 people were burned alive, with many dead civilians lying in the streets”*. The version of “Donetsk People's Republic” supporters spread all over the city, many people believed it, and as a result, the fake referendum of 11 May was attended even by those who

initially had no intention to go; this was a calculated PR move paid for with blood. Blood on that day played into the hands of separatists, who managed to use the tragedy to discredit the forces of the anti-terrorist operation.

Therefore, on 11 May 2014 a unsystematic informal poll of the population was conducted in Mariupol and several other cities of Donetsk oblast, dubbed as “Referendum on the state sovereignty of Donetsk People’s Republic”, on the grounds of which a group of individuals declared a new “republic”, which no country has yet recognized.

Thus, from 10 May to 13 June 2014 Mariupol had been under the control of a quasi-state formation “Donetsk People’s Republic” and run by paramilitary forces. As would later become the norm for the so-called LPR/DPR, this period was marked by numerous problems (often brought about by the “authorities” themselves) for the locals to face, e.g. inability to access their bank accounts because cellphones and internet were down; unjustified arrests, rapes, robberies; inability to vote in the snap elections of the President of Ukraine; as well as other violations of human rights. It should be noted that arrests were being used both as tool of oppression and fear as well as extra-economic coercion, which is a common practice in the so-called LPR/DPR. We would also like to mention that in almost 4 years of the armed conflict, 58 Mariupol natives died and 78 people lost their lives within the city and in its vicinity.

The city was liberated by the Ukrainian army on 13 June 2014, but on the very next day the road convoy of the State Border Guard Service was ambushed and came under fire near Mariupol’s Azovstal plant – the convoy had been expected – and 5 border patrol officers died in the shooting.

The fight for Mariupol took place on land as well as at sea. Thus, from August 2014 to June 2015 the Mariupol Unit of the SBGS Coast Guard lost 3 motorboats in the vicinity of Mariupol.

On 25 August 2014 the Russian forces crossed the border between Ukraine and Russia and started advancing toward Mariupol. The invasion force included from 10 to 30 tanks, KAMAZ trucks with troopers, and armored vehicles¹. On 19 December 2014, at the Mariupol tactical front, marines of the 810th brigade of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet stationed in Sevastopol encountered an unanticipated mine field while carrying out their combat mission. UHHRU Documentation Center gathered information from various sources regarding the involvement of the Russian armed forces in the fighting for Mariupol.

On the night of 8 January 2015 Ukrainian soldiers located the troops of the 54th Reconnaissance Forces Training Center of the Southern Military District of the Armed Forces of Russia (military unit 90091, Vladikavkaz). On 21 February 2016 the Head Reconnaissance Administration of Ukraine’s Ministry of Defense reported that a commando unit of the Russian Armed Forces had been neutralized near Mariupol at the end of February.

From 25 August 2014 until the beginning of October 2014 militants had been continually shelling Mariupol and its suburbs with artillery fire. On 4 October 2014 an international mission on border delimitation began its work in Mariupol. The military situation stabilized and turned into positional engagements in the countryside.

On 10 February 2015, the National Guard forces breached enemy defenses and mounted an offensive: they liberated Kominternove, Lebedynske, Berdianske, Shyrokyne and a number of other settlements. The counterattack of Ukrainian soldiers pushed the frontline 20 km away from Mariupol.

When studying the 2014-2018 hybrid armed conflict in Ukraine, it is impossible to ignore the issue of war crimes. The firing of multiple rocket launchers BM-21 “Grad” by paramilitary forces of the

¹ The force comprised battalion tactical teams of the 17th separate guard motorized brigade awarded the orders of Alexander Suvorov and Alexander Nevsky (military unit 65384 of the Russian Federation) as well as illegal paramilitary groups.

so-called DPR at the Skhidnyi residential area in Mariupol on 24 January 2015 should be classified as a crime against humanity or war crime. The civilians were the only victims of the attack. The shelling of Mariupol can certainly be classified as an intentional attack on civilian population, since it targeted a residential district on a weekend, when most people would be at home or in the streets. The attack on Mariupol can be used as grounds for a court proceeding at the international level, since planned attacks on civilians committed as part of a special policy or a systematic or non-systematic plan are classified as war crimes or crimes against humanity. It should be noted that the number of people killed in Mariupol during the entire period of the armed conflict equals 78, of which 30 were killed on January 24, 2015.

At present, despite the proximity of Mariupol to the demarcation line (which is essentially a line of defense against the occupied territory of Donetsk oblast), the city's previously destroyed buildings and administrative facilities have been rebuilt, the Mariupol-Zaporizhia route and city roads are being renovated, and housing facilities for servicemen and IDPs are under construction. Significant material, technical and financial aid, including that provided by international governmental and non-governmental organizations, significantly improved the economic situation in the city. Political instability and high crime rates remain a pressing concern. In the end, after experiencing firsthand the "benefits" of the "Russian World" (murder, robberies and looting) Mariupol is fast becoming an outpost of resistance against Russian aggression as well as a city of reconciliation and understanding for Ukraine's Donetsk oblast.

This publication is made possible by the generous support from the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) within the framework of the Human Rights in Action Project being implemented by the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union. The contents are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the USAID or the United States Government.

The American people, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), have provided economic and humanitarian assistance worldwide for over 55 years. In Ukraine, USAID's assistance focuses on three areas: Health and Social Transition, Economic Growth and Democracy and Governance. USAID has provided 1.8 bln. technical and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since 1992. For additional information about USAID programs in Ukraine, please visit our website: <http://ukraine.usaid.gov> or our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/USAIDUkraine>.