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Executive Summary of Report
“STORY OF A CITY.
OCCUPATION AND LIBERATION OF
SEVERODONETSK”



2017

**“STORY OF A CITY.
OCCUPATION AND LIBERATION OF SEVERODONETSK”**

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 starts with events in Severodonetsk**, a city in Luhansk oblast that used to be at the epicenter of the so-called “Russian Spring”.

Severodonetsk is situated close to the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk and is among the largest industrial cities of Donbas (it produces 22.18% of Luhansk oblast's total industrial output)¹, with a number of chemical, machine building and instrument engineering enterprises located there. It worth noting that in the 1990s the city's enterprises and plants were being shut down and abandoned. In 2010, most plants became non-operational, and, in 2011, most local companies were liquidated, including a chemical enterprise “Azot”, which led to unprecedented unemployment levels. In addition, Severodonetsk belongs to so-called environmental “Donbas chemical triangle”: large chemical enterprises were having a catastrophic effect on local environment, with agricultural enterprises and private farms practically nonexistent in the city.

Economic decline and population impoverishment have contributed to success of the Russian Spring in this region. It should be noted that during presidential elections, on 28 November 2004, it was Severodonetsk that hosted the First Ukraine-wide Congress of People's Deputies and Local Council Members organized by the Party of Regions. It was then that the “delegates” voiced the idea to form a separate state formation out of Ukraine's eastern and southern regions in response to the Orange Revolution. This idea got a mocking name from the public, P.I.S.U.A.R. (while the acronym's meaning is South-Eastern Autonomous Republic of Ukraine, it sounds like the word “urinal” in Ukrainian). In 2014, these regions were to form so-called “Novorosia” [New Russia].

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.

On May 11, 2014, an unsystematic unofficial survey was conducted among the population of Severodonetsk and several other cities of Luhansk oblast, which the initiators called “Referendum on the State Sovereignty of Luhansk People's Republic”, based on which the group declared the creation of a “republic”, which no other country would recognize. Thus, from May 22 until July 22, 2014, Severodonetsk had been governed by a fictitious quasi-state formation “Luhansk People's Republic”; in addition, several organized crime groups had been operating in the city. This period

¹ <https://www.obozrevatel.com/politics/28347-silyi-ato-nachali-zachistku-severodonetska-i-boi-za-lisichansk.htm>

was marked by numerous problems (often arranged by the local “authorities” themselves) that local population had to contend with, such as: food deficit; unreliable water supply; inability to use bank accounts due to no internet access and cellphone communications; targeting buildings with artillery fire to be videotaped and used to turn the public against the Armed Forces and National Guard of Ukraine; unlawful imprisonment, rape, looting; deprivation of the opportunity to vote in the extraordinary Presidential election, and other human rights abuses. It is therefore important that unlawful imprisonment was used not just as a tool of oppression and intimidation, but also for extra-economic coercion, which later became a common practice in the so called LPR and DPR. It should be mentioned that 20 residents of Severodonetsk died over three and a half years of the armed conflict.

Ukrainian soldiers liberated the city on July 22, 2014, after an intense firefight with use of automatic weapons, grenade launchers, heavy armored vehicles and aircraft.

At present, despite the proximity of Severodonetsk to the demarcation line (which is essentially a line of defense against the occupied territory of Luhansk oblast), the city’s previously destroyed buildings, roads, bridges, theater and administrative facilities have been rebuilt. Starting 2015, the city reports positive population growth for the first time since independence, and this dynamic holds to this day². Material, technical and financial aid, including that provided by international governmental and non-governmental organizations, significantly improved the economic situation in the city.³ However, for objectivity’s sake it must be mentioned the unstable political situation and high crime rates in the city⁴.

In the end, after experiencing firsthand the “benefits” of the “Russian World” (murder, robberies and looting) and serving as the epicenter of the Russian Spring, liberated Severodonetsk has become not just a city where the Luhansk Civil-Military Administration has been located since September 2014, but also a place of reconciliation and understanding for the entire Ukrainian land of Luhansk.

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² <http://irtafax.com.ua/news/2014/12/2014-12-30-27.html>

³ <http://www.ostrovok.lg.ua/news/severodoneck/v-severodonecke-norvezhskiy-sovet-po-delam-bezhencev-nrc-provel-kruglyy-stol-po-aktualnym-problemam>

⁴ An example of this was the high-profile assassination of a member of local self-governance body Serhiy Samarskyi, in 2017, engaged in Petro Poroshenko’s “Solidarity” party. This political assassination was a warning to all patriots and real fighters that pursuing such activity in Luhansk is dangerous. Details are available at <http://day.kyiv.ua/uk/article/polityka/krov-luganskogo-patriota>.