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Donetsk People's Republic – Story Untold by Western Media

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My refusal to believe ongoing Western media reports of "Russian aggression" makes me a "Kremlin troll". My punishment for not towing the "party line" – simple, effective "shunning" by Western media – has not, however, diminished my ongoing commitment to seeing the other side.

Having previously investigated the Crimean reunification with Russia, this May I turned my attention to the birth of two new government formations in Eastern Ukraine, the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Lugansk People's Republic (LNR). Americans only hear either what Kiev "reports", or the US propaganda machine puts out – these are puppet regimes born of "Russian aggression" and forcibly kept in place by "occupation". Not being a brave "war correspondent", I admittedly undertook my journey with some trepidation – not from fear of "Russian aggression", but the Kiev regime's ongoing shelling of civilian targets.

I am eternally grateful to my newfound colleague Konstantin Dolgov for showing me the sad "Alley of Angels" – a deeply touching memorial to children killed to date by Kiev-regime forces. Further, my virtual contact with Patrick Lancaster, an American journalist who now resides there, and Alexander Sladkov, a Russian correspondent who largely lives there, but, more importantly, "run toward the sound of gunfire" have allowed me to counteract the information-war blockade by Western media.

A central street of Donetsk – the Donetsk Palace

As I approached the larger city of Donetsk (previously over 1 million residents, now much smaller due to the initial flood of refugees to Russia (the paradox of people *fleeing into the arms of the "aggressor"*), I feared I would see a city center damaged by Kiev shelling, and people cowed and deprived of the most basic needs. Contrary to Ukrainian "patriots" on Russian TV, I was relieved to find an active, bustling city, with a very charming downtown, and thrilled to see a populace that, far from being cowed, harbors a firm belief in a better future, one outside the Ukraine.

Despite Kiev's total blockade, the city of Donetsk proper seems to have a reasonable assortment of goods and foodstuffs. Much of this seems to come from ever growing trade and cooperation with Russia, a bordering neighbor and largest trade partner of the "former", pre-war Ukraine. In fact, while I was there, a conference on enhancing this cooperation took place, and due to Kiev's economic blockade, the ruble has displaced the Ukrainian grivna. Western media will no doubt hold this up as further proof of "Russian aggression".

The open air market at the train station in Donetsk

My most important "resource" during my all too brief stay was Ekaterina Pavlenko, a young, local deputy in the DNR parliament. Ekaterina herself is certainly no "Russian aggressor" or "occupying force". Quite the contrary, she is very typical of local residents whose largely Russian-heritage ancestors have lived on these lands for generations. Ekaterina, having previously engaged in "social" issues is not even a "typical politician". As I became more acquainted with her, her eyes explained it all – they showed the unique combination of a burning desire to further the life of the new, independent republic and an underlying kindness and loving regard for those around her. Ekaterina most eloquently summed up the belief of the new republic – these are the ancestral lands of the actual residents, not some bargaining chip in a larger geopolitical conflict, or "subject" for Kiev domination. This is admittedly hard for the average American to understand given our very transient nature.

I quite accidentally ended up in Donetsk for their "Republic Day" – their 4th of July. As Ekaterina's guest, I was invited, without any control or oversight whatsoever, to watch, film, and ultimately join in a massive, celebratory parade of literally tens of thousands representing all aspects of life and all regions of the DNR. Western media will be disappointed to learn there were no machine gun-toting, heavily- armed Russian occupation forces forcing people to participate. In fact, beyond the day of the parade, contrary to Kiev's "little boy who cried wolf" shrieks of massive Russian invasions, there were no signs of any regular army Russian presence to be seen anywhere.

The Free Donbass Movement – the group Ekaterina belongs to – at the Parade on Independence Day in Donetsk, May 11 2017

For my gullible fellow Americans who might say "they simply hid them from you", I would simply ask how hides – according to Kiev – 10s of thousands of troops, vast support infrastructure, and heavy weaponry from prying satellite "eyes", not to mention smart phones in an area the size of Connecticut. The only conclusions one can draw are either there is in fact no Russian dominance (the simplest and most accurate assessment), the Russians have invented startling new "stealth" technology for tanks and troops, or, assuming some Russian presence, the locals are truly grateful for the support and defense it provides. None of which are good for the West…

As I studied local maps, walked and rode public transport (3 rubles…about $.05), street names and numerous monuments spoke further not only of the majority Russian-heritage population whose ancestors lived here for centuries (in 1922, the fledgling Ukrainian Republic grew by 25% in size after Lenin "ceded" it the larger Russian "Novorossiya" – including all of the Donbass, Kharkov, and Odessa), but one which still honors and reveres those who gave their lives to defeat fascism. As is happening throughout the rest of the Ukraine, were Kiev able to somehow regain control, Russian-oriented names of streets would certainly be changed, and any and all monuments would be toppled – especially those relating to the Soviet victory over Hitler. In other words, Kiev's so-called "decommunization" is clearly "derussification – a sad, largely unreported 21st century ethnic cleansing.

A Soviet WWII monument in Donetsk – proof of the Russian engagement – against Hitler

Since I was "self-funded", I had to choose a more "thrifty" hotel than the superior "Donetsk Palace". When I happened upon the hotel and went in, I found not simply a palace, but Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observer living quarters. Hard to blame these brave folks for preferring staying put in their rooms vs. doing their job of exposing the ongoing Kiev shelling of civilian targets.

While avoiding front-lines, I nonetheless hopped on a streetcar out to the main rail station shut down by Kiev shelling early on in the war – quite close to areas currently being shelled. As the car slowly but surely wound its way to the station, I looked around with apprehension, expecting riders to get off well before. Instead, I found folks of my own (mature) age traveling to the very end. After wandering around the now abandoned station and nearby modern shopping complex – still showing signs of shelling— I headed over to what initially appeared to be several smaller kiosks. I was shocked, however, to find these were simply the "front lines" of a huge market with all manner of goods and quite appetizing-looking locally grown produce. When I asked various vendors if they were not afraid to be this close to the front, the very typical Russian stoic nature emerged – "life goes on", with a wistful, sad sigh of "of course, we wish they (Kiev) would leave us to live in peace and quiet."

Still at war – no guns, and beware unexploded munitions notice at the gates of a local store in Donetsk

In summary, were the West to send unbiased, knowledgeable correspondents to the DNR, they would indeed find not Russian "occupation" and "aggression", but Russian-heritage people determined to move ahead to a future based not on hatred and rejection of their Ukrainian "Slavic brothers", but on positive, life-affirming values such as liberty, justice, and self-determination. Given that the US started off this way centuries ago, it is tragically ironic that today it supports Kiev-regimes efforts to rid itself of "undesirable" Russians.

Stephen Ebert is the American political analyst writing for Russian media.

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