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Interview
Capturing
«the normal»
in war

Focus
Legal expert's
account from the
frontline

Reportage
Donbass conflict:
mental health at the frontline

Humanitarian information from



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Resilience in the face of crises

In March 2021, the whole world is looking back on a year marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has turned billions of people's daily lives upside down with all its uncertainties, and put our ability to adapt and remain resilient to the test.

Facing a health situation which seems to be spiralling out of control, every day emerging new variants of the virus are postponing the hope of a return to normality, while all our efforts are focussing on one single goal: an end to the crisis.

If these testing times have weakened even the most advanced health systems in the developed world, what about countries affected by humanitarian crises?

The war that has been raging for almost seven years in eastern Ukraine continues to significantly affect the lives of over 5 million people living in the Donbass region, with 3.4 million in need to humanitarian aid.

The pandemic has only aggravated an already critical situation caused by the hostilities, which have persisted despite the ceasefire in July 2020, and which take a heavy toll on the people living on both sides of the **'contact line'**, separating the areas controlled by Ukrainian government and the areas ruled by the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

The measures taken by the governmental and non-governmental authorities to contain the spread of the virus have led to the closure of the crossing points normally used by over a million people each month to reach basic amenities or to visit their families.

COVID-19 has created an extra pressure for these people who may not have any way of protecting themselves from the virus. As well as causing trauma, attacks related to the conflict regularly destroy health infrastructures, disrupting access to water, hygiene and health services for people living in the area.

This edition of La Chronique, dedicated to Ukraine, highlights the work done by the Première Urgence Internationale teams facing all these challenges to deliver humanitarian aid adapted to the specific needs of these people. **Mental health and psychosocial support programmes** show how necessary it is to adopt a holistic approach to the needs to help families surmount their traumas and build up their resilience in the face of the different crises they come up against.

*Amal Huart,
Asia & Europe area manager,
Première Urgence Internationale*

DONBASS CONFLICT: MENTAL HEALTH AT THE FOREFRONT

The conflict in the Donbass, a mineral field in eastern Ukraine where the majority of people speak Russian, broke out in 2014. Since then, the Donetsk and Luhansk regions have had part of their land cut off by a frontline where fighting has raged ever since.

There are quite a few villages on the 427-kilometre contact line that delineates the government-controlled area from the area out of its control. The villages of Zalizne, Pivnichne, Novodorodske, Druzhivka, Katerinovka and Toretsk make up part of the area where **Première Urgence Internationale** is working. In these villages in the Donetsk region, their inhabitants have been living alongside this conflict that has forced itself onto their doorsteps, and that no one speaks of anymore.

Valeriy Panteev, head of supervision for **Première Urgence Internationale** explains: *'Although the conflict's impact on the local population may have been forgotten by the media, humanitarian organisations are trying to remind the outside world about the problems the civil population has to face, and about the need to find solutions to help them out of this crisis.'*

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the conflict has meant that (as of 10 December 2019) 'more than 13,000 people have lost their lives and 25,000 have been wounded since 2014'¹. On top of this, *'1.6 million people have been forced to flee their place of residence to other regions in Ukraine and approximately 1 million refugees have moved to bordering countries. Donbass has become one of the world's most mine-filled zones, together with Afghanistan and Iraq.'*

Since the summer of 2020, thanks to the establishment of a new ceasefire, bombardments have abated, and the victims since then have mainly been armed forces. But private homes, infrastructures and essential systems such as hospitals, roads, schools and water infrastructures form part of the collateral damage and still need to be repaired or reconstructed.

Last year, 461 soldiers and 143 civilians were killed, as opposed to 788 and 200 respectively in 2019. According to the 2021 risk index by INFORM (an inter-organisational collaboration linked with the European Commission), Ukraine remains the only country in Europe to be at the highest level of risk of a humanitarian crisis due to the probability of a new rise in the conflict's intensity.



¹ Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations, Ukraine,

[online], <https://onu.delegfrance.org/Ukraine-11949> [Last viewed 5 February 2021]

Wellbeing stretched to the limit

There is a different sort of collateral damage from war, suffered by vast numbers of people, less visible and therefore often overlooked: mental health. Mental health is an essential component of health. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as follows in its constitution: *'Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.'*

Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which a person can be fulfilled, can overcome the normal tensions in life, accomplish productive work and contribute to community life. In this positive sense, mental health is the foundation of the wellbeing of an individual and of a community's effective function.

This issue is only now emerging in many countries, and as a result, access to psychologists or mental health specialists is extremely limited and where it does exist, it is often focussed on severe and stigmatised mental disorders.

Someone living in a small town may often prefer to ask for help from doctors, who may not have had mental health training, rather than risk being stigmatised and categorised by their neighbours.

Olga Osmukha and Valeriia Volkova are working in the **Première Urgence Internationale** team at Kostiantynivka, in Ukraine. One of them is a project manager and psychologist, and the other is also a psychologist, responsible for mental health and psychosocial support work. Both insist on the importance of carrying out this type of work in the area. Valeriia Volkova explains: *'We hadn't had a war in Ukraine for a long time, and when it broke out, people found themselves alone and abandoned with their fears and worries. It was only humanitarian organisations that managed to offer them some help.'* Olga Osmukha adds: *'There is an enormous need for psychological support and a range of mental health services in the Donetsk region as we have been suffering with this conflict for seven years now. While pre-existing needs are still there, we are also regularly seeing additional new requirements that we also have to respond to.'*

Defence mechanisms

Most people who have chosen to remain in the small villages along the contact line show signs of psychological distress. To be able to face up to adversity, people naturally use their coping and defence mechanisms. Some of these mechanisms are appropriate and can help, such as surrounding themselves by their loved ones or maintaining their usual routines, while others, like isolation or substance use, can have extremely damaging consequences in the long-term.

'People tell us they have got used to the war and that when they hear heavy weapon fire, bombardments or artillery attacks, they no longer feel threatened because they are used to it,' explains Valeriia Volkova, and she adds: *'This is serious because the situation is dangerous. The worst case is when they are used to it and they consider it a normal part of their daily lives: it has become chronic.'*

These coping mechanisms, although harmful for their security, are still useful for an individual's mental survival. These reactions and behavioural patterns are not irreversible, but long-term psychological work is needed to help people face the traumas that have developed as a result of the conflict and have evolved over these seven years.

'We can also see the effects of regression in psychological development, particularly in young children, and this is a significant problem that we need to raise awareness about,' Valeriia Volkova says.



By visiting them we bring something different to their routine. >>



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Work at ground level

Première Urgence Internationale has been working in this region since 2015, mostly in the health sector.

Olga Osmukha works in health centres, and especially in mercy homes* where she gives training to residents and to the people who work in them. The training covers various themes, such as *'individual care, psychological first aid, using clinical evaluation tools, behavioural activation for elderly people.'* Valeriia Volkova adds: *'We also train health workers who deal with situations relevant to mental health and psychosocial support. We teach them how to diagnose the most common mental disorders, how to define depression, or grief, the signs of post-traumatic stress... We insist that they know how to diagnose all these disorders so that patients can be referred to specialised health centres where necessary.'*



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Support on different levels

What Olga Osmukha likes about her work is her growing empathy for the mercy home residents: the elderly people whose lives have been turned upside-down after *'an artillery, rocket or missile attack'*. *'These people are now living in a restricted space: they do not have the freedom they used to have and on a daily basis they go through painful emotions such as loneliness, depression, a feeling of uselessness, abandonment. By visiting them, we bring something different to their routine. We help them to overcome their restrictions and the obstacles that their emotions have built,'* she says.

The Première Urgence Internationale teams offer indispensable help to the people they meet, whether therapeutic, psychological or just on a human level. *'I cherish these experiences as the people we support appreciate and value our work for the NGO. They have such a sincerity: the way they welcome us each time we visit is the most wonderful reward,'* the psychologist tells us.

Double the hardship

The **COVID-19 pandemic** in the region is a new source of worry for its inhabitants who, on top of everything else, now have fears about being infected and are also suffering with their movement and freedom being restricted as part of the measures to contain the virus. This also makes the psychologists' work more complicated, as sessions sometimes have to be held remotely. Valeriia Volkova says: *'At the moment, the biggest challenge is the quarantine, as sometimes we have to work online. The problem is that the internet is not always accessible in small villages. It is also difficult to hold sessions over the phone without any visual contact, and without being able to analyse non-verbal cues; it is vital to establish this connection for our work as psychologists to be as beneficial as possible.'*

Both women hope that mental health and psychosocial support quickly become an absolute priority in the east of the country, so that inhabitants' wellbeing can improve.

It is estimated by the Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network that the prevalence of psychological disorders is between 12% and 17% of the population, of which 5% represent serious mental illnesses.

But according to the World Bank in 2017, **around 30% of people in Ukraine suffer from psychological disorders during their lives**¹. And lastly, according to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in 2021, 3.4 million people are in need of humanitarian aid in Ukraine.

* Mercy homes are a kind of social or religious institution where elderly people can take refuge.

¹ Kuznetsova, Mikheiva, Catling, Round, Babenko. "The Mental Health of Internally Displaced People and the General Population in Ukraine". January 2019. University of Birmingham. [Online]. https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/mental_health_of_idps_and_general_population_in_ukraine.pdf [last viewed 17 February 2021].

LEGAL EXPERT'S ACCOUNT FROM THE FRONTLINE

From November 2015 to July 2018, Karine Ardault travelled in the region around the contact line separating the areas controlled by the Ukrainian government from the areas outside its control. She reminisces about the most memorable times there and about its forgotten civilians.

Karine Ardault, an expert in criminal responsibility in armed conflicts, worked for a regional international organisation with a mandate of 'observing the situation in Ukraine and impartially and objectively reporting on it, as well as facilitating dialogue between all the parties involved in the crisis.' A major part of this mission consisted of **recording ceasefire violations in the**

Luhansk and Donetsk regions.

Although the lawyer has not been there at ground level since the summer of 2018, it is clear to her '*that things have not changed much.*' In fact, a new ceasefire took effect on 27 July last year, but it is being violated on an almost daily basis.

The rules of war

As an expert in criminal responsibility in armed conflicts, Karine Ardault has worked in several conflict or post-conflict areas over the years, such as 'Kosovo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and many years dealing with the Rwandan genocide.'

Her day-to-day work concerns questions of international humanitarian law, its main objective, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), being to '*maintain some humanity in armed conflicts, saving lives and reducing suffering.*'



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*'From my findings at ground level, some situations can be seen as breaches to **what we call the rules of war.** On both sides of the contact line, some schools have been occupied by military forces, bombardments have destroyed civilians' houses, the opposing forces have established military positions in villages where inhabitants have been injured or killed, by mine explosions or in exchange of fire,'* Karine Ardault says.

In the fullness of time, it is the International Criminal Court (ICC) which '*tries individuals for genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity.*' According to Karine Ardault, several projects are underway '*to investigate serious human rights violations and potential international crimes since 2014.*'

Abandoned elderly people

At ground level, the lawyer became attached to forgotten civilians and the abandoned places she regularly visited. During this winter, she has been thinking more and more of the people there who would be struggling to find ways to keep warm and to have access to other basic services. '*I always remember an elderly lady, a babushka as they say there, who told me her greatest fear was of a bullet hitting her in her sleep during exchange of fire and of no one realising she had died. This, I think, really expresses everyone in the area's feelings: this oblivion, this indifference,*' Karine Ardault reminisces.

During her mission, she often saw the **Première Urgence Internationale** teams at the checkpoints. '*I remember the aid that the NGO teams brought to people suffering from the long waiting times, especially in the cold of the winter and in the snow, or in the overwhelming heat of the summer.*'

This conflict, forgotten in Europe and even within its own borders, continues to affect huge numbers of people. In an article published on 11 February ('UN political affairs chief warns against 'backsliding' in Ukraine') the United Nations states that '3.4 million civilians, mainly women and elderly persons, still require sustained assistance.' The UN specified being particularly concerned for vulnerable groups living along the contact line.

Karine Ardault warns: '*The conflict is now entering its seventh year; it seems to be taking the path that other frozen conflicts have taken in other former Soviet republics. But we also know that this type of conflict can become intense again very quickly.*'



CAPTURING 'THE NORMAL' IN WAR

Sergey Korovayny is a photojournalist; he was born and raised in the Donetsk region. In 2020, he worked with Première Urgence Internationale on the «Faces of Conflict» project to give a voice to the forgotten civilians near the contact line. He tells us about his experience.

Why were you interested in working with us on this photo project?

When the conflict started, I felt very disappointed, and a great sense of injustice as a human being and a Ukrainian citizen. But I also wanted to make myself useful as a photographer and journalist, and I did my best to tell the inhabitants' stories, not really as a war journalist but more by trying to find stories about people who were displaced or were forced to move after their houses burned down, for example. The NGO's project fits in perfectly with my goal of trying to talk as much as possible about Donbass, both in Ukraine and internationally. **Première Urgence Internationale is doing a great job.** By taking portraits of the people you support, your teams and medical staff, I was able to learn about how the NGO helps thousands of people at checkpoints, sometimes even saving lives. I just know that my family could be among the people who receive your help. It was not always easy, and it was emotionally draining, but it was useful and essential work.

How were the people's states of mind when you photographed them?

Although we mostly visited people in hospitals and mercy homes, we talked about many different things. **I managed to find a spark in them; they told me about their feelings, how they felt when the sun came up, they still felt alive.** Also, many people are happy that the situation has been calmer since the summer. I felt that they did not think about the war very much, because it was so painful. When they talked about it, some of them would start to cry. The wounds are still tender. People live from day to day. And now with COVID-19, I can only imagine the level of stress they have to deal with since their lives were shattered by the war. On the other hand, all the people who received help from the NGO were extremely grateful, especially those with reduced mobility. This broke the ice for the project and photographing them turned into a collaboration, a conversation between us. At the checkpoints, it was more complicated to start with because people were in a hurry and some did not want to be photographed for security reasons.

What are your hopes after this reportage?

I hope that this project will draw attention to the people in the photos, first in Ukraine, but also in France and internationally. The world needs to be reminded that this conflict is still going on, that it is far from over and that even when it is, there will still be many people who will need help, many people who will continue to struggle. I also hope that I have managed not to be too dramatic but to show these people's dignity. The incredible hope that helps them through such terrible conditions is truly surprising and inspiring. Finally, I hope that this campaign will help Première Urgence Internationale to continue its remarkable work in the Donetsk region. It is also important to show the faces of our fellow Donbass citizens to other Ukrainians: just because they are lucky enough not to be in their situation, they should not turn their backs on the problem.

Ukraine: faces of conflict

From March 15 to 27, 2021, the exhibition «Ukraine: Faces of Conflict» by photojournalist Sergey Korovayny will be held at the cultural venue «Le 193». Through photographs, videos and stories, the exhibition highlights the daily lives of people supported by Première Urgence Internationale and living near the contact line in the east of the country. In this context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the evolution of government measures, we invite you to find out about the potential a few days before the event on our Facebook page or on our website in the «Our news» section. updates on opening hours. You can also contact us on 01 55 66 99 66. If the exhibition is maintained, we will be happy and happy to see you at 193: 19 bis Rue Jean Baptiste Semanaz, 93310 Le Pré-Saint-Gervais, Paris, France, Monday to Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Contact: bonjour@le-193.fr.

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