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Scarred by Ukraine Crossfire, Slovyansk Faces Long Road to Recovery

By Francesca Ebel

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Slovyansk was under separatist control for months before being reclaimed by Ukraine government forces in early July.

In the weeks that have passed since Ukrainian government forces reclaimed Slovyansk, residents of the battle-scarred east Ukrainian city are still struggling to come to terms with its three-month occupation by pro-Russian rebels.

At night, Slovyansk's main square springs to life. Locals gather around the imposing figure of Lenin, their faces cast in the monument's shadow. Some lounge on benches, now painted in the yellow and blue hues of the Ukrainian flag. They flirt and laugh and make toasts to "Victory," "Glory" and "Peace." The hubbub of chatter can be heard into the early hours of the morning. Looking up at the night sky, the twinkling clusters of stars seem the brightest in any Ukrainian metropolis.

Not to be mistaken for the ordinary romance of a warm, summer night. At the edge of the

square, a dozen soldiers man an armored jeep, their guns loaded. The city's residents flock to the square to use its electricity supply and its strong Internet connection. With no electricity to power the city's lights, the rest of Slovyansk is left empty and soulless.

Despite the seemingly positive and purposeful atmosphere of the square, everyone remains on high alert, Slovyansk police chief Igor Rybalchenko told me during an interview.

"People here are scared that the rebels will return. They are scared that the situation will return to how it was. They know that their fate depends on the successes of the army. The sooner they win a total victory, the better," he explained.

When the separatists retreated on July 5, Ukrainian government forces were met with a mixed reaction.

It became clear from talking with the soldiers on patrol that they had experienced some unexpected problems.

Mikhail, a 24-year-old volunteer fighter with the Kiev-1 battalion, described how the troops were hailed with insults from inhabitants bold enough to come out of hiding as the army marched into the center.

"They thought we were the bad guys. They screamed all sorts of names: 'Fascists! Murderers!' But now those same people come to thank us for stabilizing the situation. They realized we were not coming here to steal things or kill people — just to regain control," Mikhail said.

As he speaks, a woman saunters over to ask for a cigarette. Swaying slightly, she plants a kiss on each of the soldiers' grinning faces. They joke that they did not liberate the town so that she could drink: "You should be making babies now!"

But not everyone feels blessed by the arrival of the Ukrainian army. The devastation wreaked by three days of constant shelling has left some residents with nothing.

Lida, a mother of three, showed me the grimy cellar she hid in for five days with her family. The house above is a mere crevice, torn apart by Ukrainian bullets and explosives. She feels that the response by government forces was unjustified. The rebels had strategically taken shelter in her neighborhood, hoping that the army would avoid civilian areas.

A month on, no one has come to help pick up the pieces. Winter is coming, and most of her windows have been blown out.

Just next door in a tightly bolted room there lies a much bigger threat: An unexploded mine sits in a corner, surrounded by slabs of wood and sheets of plaster. Authorities are too scared to remove it for fear that it might bring the entire apartment building down.

Indeed, for many, the scars left by the rebel occupation will not heal easily.

During the three-month period, the residents of Slovyansk witnessed what the United Nations high commissioner for refugees described in a report released last month as a "total breakdown of law and order and a reign of fear and terror."

Random abductions, intimidation and violence became aspects of daily life. Two weeks ago, authorities exhumed a mass grave at the local war memorial. Fourteen bodies were reportedly discovered. According to recently discovered documents, some of the victims had been executed for petty crimes in accordance with a 1941 Stalinist decree.

Some locals were incarcerated for wearing pro-Ukrainian emblems. Others disappeared for having set up webcams to film the separatists' movements.

Vadim Sukhonos, a Slovyansk city council deputy, described how his captors tried to break him physically and mentally: "Ponomaryov, the self-proclaimed people's mayor of Slovyansk, came to me and said: 'Vadik, we will kill you.' They began to beat me."

Natalya, a pensioner who has spent her whole life in Slovyansk, described the night her brother and sister-in-law were murdered: "One night, masked men came to the house. They started by checking their documents. Then they stole their cars. They left the bodies of my brother and his wife at their home. There was blood everywhere. We will never know for sure what happened or why. No one will help me understand, and I will grieve forever."

None of the local residents had ever imagined that a catastrophe of this scale could happen in their city. Many have been left totally shell-shocked by the brutality and severity of the regime changes they have endured in recent months.

Most are confused, and most don't care for the politics: They are merely concerned with regaining peace and normality in their lives.

But for others the quiet eastern city was always on the brink of destabilization. Vekua Fidon, a local activist, outlined the main factors guiding the insurrection: poverty and economic discontent, Soviet nostalgia and Slovyansk's much-desired shale gas reserves.

He explained that for some, the option the separatists offered was a better alternative to their Ukrainian lives; aligning themselves with Russia was comparatively attractive.

This is certainly the case for Tanya, 32, who has maintained support for the separatist cause.

"They could have made life better for us. Being a part of Russia would have improved our lives. We would have been happier. Joining with the EU — and being ruled by America — scares me," she said.

But pro-Ukrainian activist Andrei Krysin now refers to the occupation as the period of "Terror-Russia" — a dark pun on the separatists' dream for Novorossia, a new Russia.

He wants to put those three months behind him and focus on the future. For him, the priority now is to fight corruption, which he believes was partly to blame for the conflict.

"I am heartbroken by what happened and will never understand why Putin chose us. But now our priority is to fight the evil that has been left behind," Krysin said.

Indeed, a certain paranoia weighs on the town. Residents and officials alike believe that rebels and their collaborators remain in the city.

At a news conference last week,

Rybalchenko said the crime rate in Slovyansk had dropped since the rebel retreat. According to his logic, this is because all the criminals left the city along with the separatists.

But Krysin and his group of supporters are not convinced. Allegedly, there remain many local government and police officials who collaborated with the rebels. Whether this was due to force or intimidation is still unclear — but whatever the reason, Krysin wants to start the reconstruction of the city with new building blocks. He wants to wipe Slovyansk's slate clean of corruption.

What is certain is that months of flighting achieved almost nothing. The political and social problems, including systemic corruption, endure. People died needlessly and will continue to do so across the rebel-held territory in the east.

As the Ukrainian army continues to suppress and encircle the rebel strongholds of Donetsk and Luhansk, more recaptured cities will emerge, only to be faced with a very, very long road ahead.

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