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Back to School in Ukraine's Rebel-Held Donetsk as Shelling Rumbles in Distance

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A first-grade pupil looks back at her mother while walking to a school building after a festive ceremony to mark the beginning of another academic year in Makiivka, eastern Ukraine, in this Oct. 1 file photo.

MAKIYIVKA, Ukraine — On the first day of school outside the east Ukrainian rebel stronghold of Donetsk, 11th-grade teacher Yelena Sepik tells her class to get out of their seats to clap and sing along to the Soviet military music playing over the speakers.

"Louder!" she yells, theatrically clapping in rhythm to the music coming from a classroom CD player in front of about 30 unamused 15- and 16-year-olds in the town of Makiyivka.

"We have witnessed the formation of a new state," she says. "The Donetsk People's Republic, New Russia."

Half a year into the republic, proclaimed on territory held by pro-Russian separatists since April, the region's new rulers are trying to create a sense of normality and the trappings of a functioning state, not least in the education system.

But there is much that is not "normal."

For one thing, there has been an exodus of Ukrainian-speakers and others reluctant to live in Russia's orbit under an armed rebel administration. Schoolteachers say their classes have shrunk to as little as a third of their pre-insurgency sizes.

Shelling in the city, which has killed scores of civilians, delayed the opening of schools from Sept. 1, the traditional start of term across the former Soviet Union, to Oct. 1.

Although a cease-fire has been agreed between Kiev and the separatists, the crash of distant artillery fire still carries as far as Sepik's third-floor classroom, where three classes have been combined into one, making seating scarce.

For the children who have stayed, a new curriculum awaits, with mentions of Ukraine carefully avoided, and a new focus on the history of Russia and the separatist regions.

Moscow vehemently denies accusations from Kiev and the West that it has backed the separatists with weapons and soldiers, but its influence is never far away from the classrooms, where teachers openly praise Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Whose History?

Much of the former Soviet Union shares the same school traditions, including a first lesson of the school year devoted to broad morals or civic values.

In communist times, this might have meant lessons on Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, or international Socialism; more recently perhaps on peace, or social skills.

But in this school year, children in the rest of Ukraine are focusing on "national unity" for the first period of their year, and those in the secessionist east are learning about the history they share with Russia.

In the Matviyivka class, that means World War II, known in Russia and Ukraine as the Great Patriotic War.

The students watch a black-and-white documentary about the region's battles, with a voiceover that drifts between the city's current name of Donetsk and its Soviet name of Stalino, after wartime leader Josef Stalin.

History teacher Natalia Kudoyar expects more changes to her curriculum.

"World history will be studied in depth, Russian history," she says. "But our priority is the history of Donbass [the industrial region around Donetsk]. Because it is our region; we are proud of our region."

The idea that this region is at the very least culturally part of Russia, and far removed from a Ukraine whose rulers are routinely labelled fascists, is as pervasive in the classroom as it is in the rebel administration's public statements.

Irina, a teacher in a Ukrainian-language school who declined to give her last name, said all

Ukrainian national symbols had been removed from the classrooms.

"We still use the old curriculum, but the school principal said that, in my 9th-grade class, the number of hours for Ukrainian language and literature will be reduced," she said.

On Putin's birthday on Tuesday, a video was posted on YouTube showing children in another school in Donetsk being asked who had done the most for peace in their region. "Putin," said the teacher. "Putin!" the children repeated.

Pressure to Use Russian

Unsurprisingly, language is a central part of that cultural struggle. While everyone in the region is fluent in Russian, some speak Ukrainian as their first language.

Before Donetsk's municipal administration building was occupied by protesters in mid-April, the Donetsk region had a roughly equal number of Russian- and Ukrainian-language schools, and parents decided which to send their children to.

On Monday, Kirill Baryshnikov, spokesman for the Donetsk People's Republic's Ministry of Education, said: "We don't make anyone study in Russian or in Ukrainian. We have two state languages."

But the pressure on everyone to speak Russian rather than Ukrainian is growing.
On Thursday, the same ministry issued an order making Russian the official language for all education.

It said the only exception would be primary or secondary schools where 90 percent of parents requested teaching in "another language" — there was no direct mention of Ukrainian. Schoolbooks written in Ukrainian would continue to be used until new Russian-language ones could be issued.

A teacher of Ukrainian named Marina, who also declined to give her surname, said she saw "no future" for Ukrainian-language schools in Donetsk. "It hurts so much," she said.

Maria Ivanitskaya, a mother who has left Donetsk for Kiev with her 12-year-old son, said she feared that Ukrainian-language schools could attract violence from people sympathetic to the rebels, and had no desire to return.

"I got a call from my son's teacher. She asked if we were going to attend school this year," she said.

"But our school is Ukrainian, and I'm scared of provocations. I called my husband in Donetsk, and he said: 'Whatever you do, don't come back.'"

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