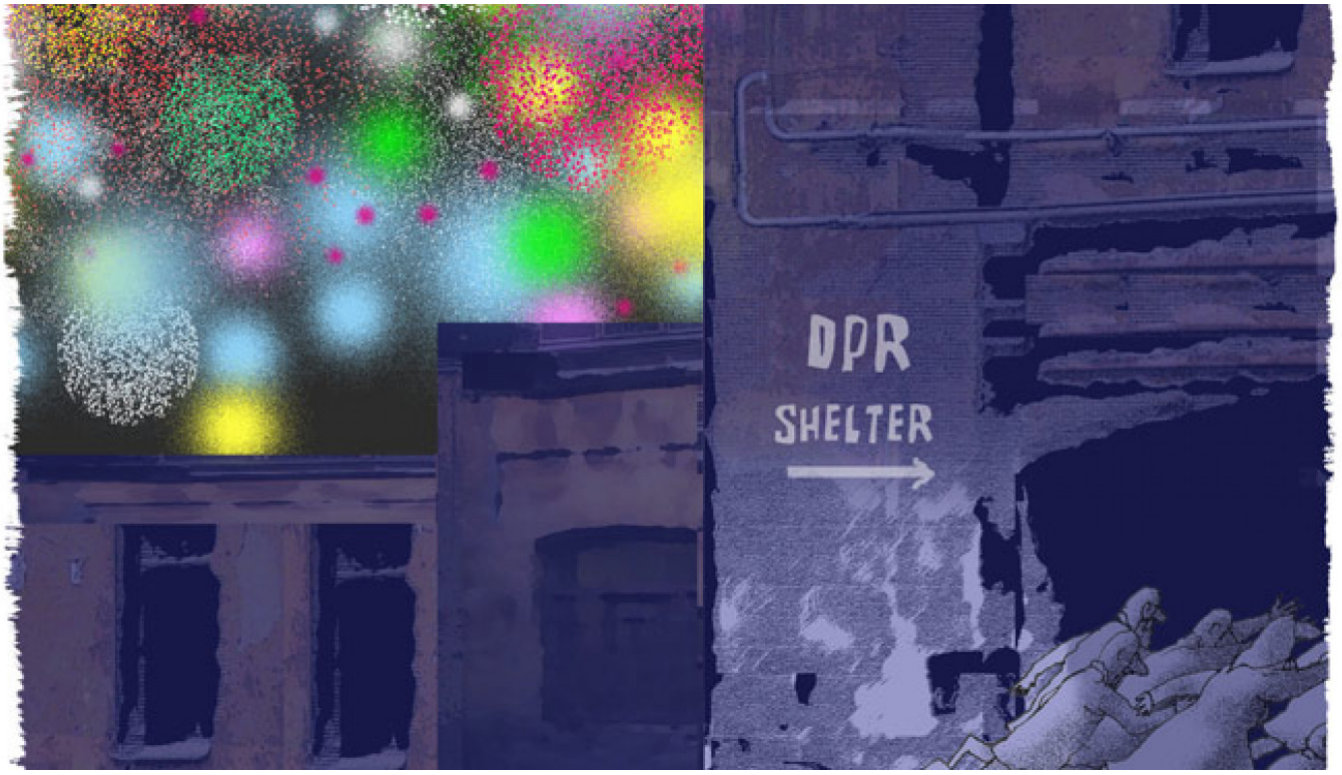
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Donbass Is Clinging to Illusion of Peace (Op-Ed)

By Tanya Lokshina

September 09, 2015



There was neither shelling nor shooting in Donetsk in the first week of September. The city seemed strikingly normal, with people out in the streets enjoying long balmy evenings, sipping drinks in outdoor cafes, strolling on the river bank. The warring sides appeared to stick to their pledge to observe a cease-fire, so as not to ruin the start of the school year. The air in the city center vibrated with chitchat and music. Not a single blast broke the illusion of peace. However, it was nothing but an illusion as weapons on both sides stand at the ready.

Checkpoints across the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) are still teeming with men in fatigues with no insignia. Some are aggressive and clearly drunk. Two twitchy fighters who stopped our car near Gorlovka were very keen to find out whether we had any cash, especially "dollars or euros." Fortunately, they were too drunk to follow up on their inquiry. Another bunch of fighters went up in arms at the sight of a camera: "Who are you spying for?"

Spy mania is overwhelming. One foreign correspondent told us some local busybody reported

him to the rebel security services as "an American undercover agent" — an accusation that almost landed him in one of the irregular jails the insurgent authorities continue to operate. Luckily, his acquaintance in law enforcement saw the just-released "wanted" alert and put a stop to it, flagging that the man in question was not a spy but rather a reporter.

A man in a coffee shop in Donetsk, where I was getting my morning fix, told his friend, laughter mixed with despair, that when the fireworks in honor of the annual City Day festivities resounded in the last weekend of August, elderly women in the courtyard of his apartment building screamed and ran for shelter: "'Grannies,' I yelled after them, 'What in the world are you doing? These are just fireworks! Today's a public holiday! You're supposed to enjoy the show!' But they hobbled down the basement stairway mumbling, 'Right, you'll be singing a different song when those shells start hitting the ground!'"

Military bases and heavy weaponry are located right next to residential buildings.
On Chelyuskintsev Street, a group of fighters has taken over an office building right next to several apartment houses. The inhabitants say the fighters go on drinking sprees and run around shooting their Kalashnikov assault rifles at nothing, frightening the children.

One of the residents told us he was sitting outside with his neighbors, by a small wooden table in the yard when an armed fighter flopped down next to them, clutching an open bottle of vodka in one hand and a bottle of Pepsi in the other. When offered a glass, he snorted, "This is not how Russians drink!" — and guzzled his vodka right from the bottle.

Back in July, one of the fighters in that unruly group set off a hand grenade right in the middle of the courtyard, killing himself and scaring the residents half to death. Another two had a drunken fight and started shooting at one another. Both were wounded and taken away by medics.

When we drove up to the fighters' headquarters, we saw several military vehicles parked there, including an armored personnel carrier, just a few meters away from civilian housing. It's hardly surprising that the apartment buildings in the neighborhood have been damaged by shelling — this is precisely what happens when military objects are placed in a densely populated area, and the very reason the laws of war, aimed at minimizing civilian harm, warn the warring sides against this practice.

The locals have complained time and again, but rebel authorities pay no heed to their pleas to move the weapons and rein in the fighters.

The city, pockmarked with traces of shelling, features countless freshly printed posters and billboards with the insurgent leader, Alexander Zakharchenko, in his camouflage uniform, in suit and tie, with schoolchildren, teachers and miners.

The images are accompanied by slogans about "peaceful sky above your head," "building our future together," and other throwbacks to Soviet-era cliches. These omnipresent images are reminiscent of Chechnya at the end of the second war, with its abundance of posters of the Kadyrovs, first the father Akhmad and then the son Ramzan, in similar poses and with similar slogans rising over the ruins of Grozny in 2003 and becoming ever more flamboyant over the years.

The first week of September was a week of quiet in Donetsk. But people are tense from apprehension, suspecting, fearing that fighting will flare up any time soon. The city was last shelled at the end of August and there is little hope the nightmare won't resume as the "start of the school year agreement" supposedly expires in just another few days.

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