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# War in Eastern Ukraine Brings Lasting Misery for Elderly (Op-Ed)

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Pro-Russian rebels transport a damaged tank in the village of Chornukhyne near the town of Debaltseve, north-east from Donetsk, March 12, 2015.

The armed conflict that swept eastern Ukraine in 2014 and is still ongoing displaced close to a million people, who fled the fighting.

Among those left behind, trapped in the war zone, were those too frail, too sick, or too poor to flee. Many spent months hiding from shelling in dark, damp basements, with little food and practically no medical aid as explosions shook the world outside.

A cease-fire has been in place for more than eight months, albeit with occasional bursts of shooting and shelling near the line of contact separating Ukrainian government forces and Russia-backed rebel forces. Those near this line are no longer confined to makeshift bomb shelters, but their livelihoods have been shattered.

Take for example, 76-year-old Vera Fyodorovna and her 78-year-old husband, who live in Vuhlehirsk, a town in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic that suffered severe damage from both shelling and street fighting. They are for all intents and purposes homeless.

During the fierce fighting between government forces and rebel forces in February 2015, two shells hit their modest house, turning the garage and the summer kitchen to rubble.

"Whose shells, from which side — no one knows. Both sides were busy at it," Vera Fyodorovna shrugged.

She and her husband thought themselves lucky because at least the house was still standing. However, shell fragments, which left intricate scars on the outside walls, also damaged the wiring. The house burned to ashes a few weeks later.

The municipal authorities have told Vera Fyodorovna she won't be getting any help to rebuild the house because, technically speaking, it was not destroyed by shelling.

Their next-door neighbor, who left Vuhlehirsk early in the war, has not returned yet, so the elderly couple has been squatting at her house.

"Every day I pray she won't be returning soon." Vera told me "What are we going to do when she's back? Where will we go? I lived here my whole life, I worked at a coal mine here for 40 years.... And now I've got no roof over my head, what's left of my life has been wiped out by this war. Why am I paying for the war I did nothing to instigate? Those who are waging it don't give me another thought, they don't care whether we live or die."

I met Vera Fyodorovna as she and two of her friends were standing in the middle of Suvorova Street, where her house once stood. They were gathered at a huge pile of debris that used to be a single-story apartment building. The elderly women were trying to identify whose apartment was buried where.

"Mine was right here, I'm telling you," persisted Svetlana Evgenyevna, the youngest of the trio, pointing to a particular spot in the ruble. Svetlana's only child, 27-year-old Arthur, had disappeared without a trace at the end of February last year, when the hostilities were in progress, and she's been looking for him ever since.

"No!" disagreed Nina Stepanovna, "Yours was to the left, Svetlana, that one was Shura's, can't you see? Shura is nearly 80, and now that there is nothing left of her place she's staying with some relatives on the other end of town," she explained for my benefit.

Nina Stepanovna is more fortunate than many others on their street: her friends lost their homes in the shelling but she still has hers. It's visibly crooked, the shock of blast waves has caused the walls to slant, and the window panes were all gone. But the place is livable and the vegetable garden helps put food on the table.

Nina Sergeyevna is the same age as Vera Fyodorovna and is all alone. Her pension, now paid by the authorities of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, amounts to 2,000 Russian rubles — some $30 — a month. With the food prices on the rise since the start of the war, this is only enough to cover the electricity bill and buy bread and a few other basics. She

and her friends are all terrified of getting sick. The local clinic treats them free of charge but they have to buy medication out of pocket, and it's simply unaffordable.

Nina Stepanovna had initially left Vuhlehirsk when the armed conflict broke out. She had been staying with her relatives in western Ukraine for a couple of months when a neighbor called to say her 33-year-old son, Andrei, was killed in an explosion in the street.

"I was wailing so hard the whole village heard me and they actually started a collection at the local church and gave me enough to return home and bury him .... There are kind people on all sides, see."

Now she has a new mission in life. Her son is buried next to her long dead husband at the Vuhlehirsk cemetery but there is no gravestone. Her husband had "a very handsome granite gravestone" but a shell fragment split it in pieces.

Nina Stepanovna keeps writing petitions to municipal officials asking for help to restore it. The authorities reply by saying that though the monument was evidently destroyed as a result of hostilities, "no compensation fund for cemetery monuments has been allocated."

But Nina Stepanovna perseveres. "How else will I erect another one, my pension being what it is?" she said. "And I cannot let my loved ones lay in the ground without a monument over them, it's just not proper."

It is understandable that faced with a large-scale reconstruction task, local de facto authorities need to prioritize, and reconstruction of a gravestone is not on their list. Likewise, they cannot immediately offer adequate housing to all the people left homeless by the war and do not seem to be able to provide free medications to all the needy.

What they can do however, is let aid groups operate in the region freely. Today, the International Red Cross Committee and the prominent Czech organization People in Need are the only major humanitarian groups allowed in DNR-controlled territory.

Last autumn, the DNR leadership kicked out Doctors without Borders, an international organization that had been helping hospitals on the ground and providing medical assistance, including psychological aid, to the public, especially to particularly vulnerable people, like Nina Stepanovna and her neighbors. Their departure left a huge gap that the de facto authorities are clearly incapable of filling.

In February, DNR authorities suspended the work of a Donetsk-based grassroots group, Responsible Citizens, which had been providing food, medicine, and other aid to the sick, the elderly and other vulnerable people since early in the armed conflict. The DNR Ministry for State Security held one of the group's leaders in incommunicado detention for weeks and eventually expelled all the key activists from DNR-controlled territory "without right to return."

It is not clear what prompted the rebel authorities to take these arbitrary steps against aid workers. What is perfectly clearly on the other hand, is that when making those decisions they were not thinking about the plight and needs of people left immensely vulnerable by the war.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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