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Raw Fear in Separatist-Controlled Donetsk

Fighting and Torture Continue to Rack Eastern Ukraine

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Mstyslav Chernov / AP

November was unseasonably warm this year in Donetsk, an eastern Ukrainian city under pro-Russian separatists' control. As you walk down Pushkin Boulevard, watching golden leaves gently drop to the ground, stop by a fancy coffee wagon and inhale the autumn aromas mixed with the intoxicating smell of freshly ground coffee beans; it's hard to believe that the war is still happening right around the corner.

Although the sounds of shelling are no longer part of daily life in central Donetsk, shelling and shooting still plague the city's outskirts – just like they plague the government-controlled towns on the other side of the contact line in eastern Ukraine.

But the war is far from over.

From 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. a curfew is still active in Donetsk. But the city is again full of life, kids are playing in the streets, expensive boutiques have re-opened, a brand new department store started welcoming shoppers just a few days ago, and music is blaring from innumerable bars and restaurants.

The city center looks so normal. Yet, under the vestiges of normalcy hides raw fear.

A man talking to me in a brightly lit café looks stealthily over his shoulder at a group of women chattering merrily and sipping sophisticated cocktails, "
Sorry, I know we're talking
quietly, but I'm just afraid that if they overhear a few words, they'll call the security services and we'll get dragged off to the basement."

He smiles awkwardly, as if expecting me to be put out by his "unmanly" behavior. "
You see,
with the security ministry, MGB, the fear gets the best of you, it's overwhelming."

He tells me about a computer repairman who came to his home to fix his broken computer. As the two were chatting casually, he said, the repairman suddenly asked him,
"do you
by any chance know a good lawyer? My son was taken away by MGB. He's been stuck in the basement there for weeks." My interlocutor sighs, "*I have no idea what to do. He is a nice guy, I really want to help, so I go to this acquaintance of*
mine who is a lawyer – and he says, if a
man is taken into the basement, his only way out is to get exchanged... unless his family or whoever can pay loads of money and buy him out... If I'm detained, God forbid, if one of my family members is detained, what's to be done, where to go? It's hopeless..
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I wish I could offer a piece of advice, that's what people generally expect of rights advocates, but to be honest, I've nothing to suggest. Our
research findings
in rebel-controlled areas
are very clear on the issue: in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics, local security services operate without any adherence to any sort of rule of law, subject to no checks and balances; anyone snatched by them is fully at their mercy, and the victim's relatives have no one to turn to.

"*The MGB is like this black hole, people sink into it and disappear, [you can] only sit there quietly and pray that it does not happen to you... You cannot speak of those detentions, you cannot speak of those basements... The [authorities] make it crystal clear: you must keep quiet, [and] not ask questions.*" I nod dejectedly and sip on my orange juice. Freshly squeezed.

A young man I meet in town the next day also has fear on his mind, "
People don't even speak
to each other freely – they're scared [everyone is] reporting on them, their neighbors, their colleagues, the person sitting next to them on the trolley ...The fear is paralyzing though actually, detentions as such aren't event frequent these days. They were

massive *back in 2014 when DNR was getting consolidated, but then gradually there were fewer and fewer people for them to 'work on.' Pro-Ukraine activists fled, critically minded people, those who could not dare keep silent, left. But everyone who stays knows – if you breathe even a word, you're off to the basement and they'll beat you and torture you and no one can save you*."

We're walking slowly, leaves crunching softly under our feet. This autumn day is so beautiful and it almost hurts.

A few days later, in government-controlled Mariupol, a colleague and I listen to another man, a small-scale trader, tell about his experience in the MGB's basement prison in Novoazovsk, a small town in DNR-controlled territory. He spent five and half months there in late 2015 early 2016, on suspicion of collaborating with the Security Service of Ukraine.

For three of those months his captors had him cuffed to a water pipe, so he could only sit, crouch, curl up on the floor, or crawl a short distance. His interrogators beat him, hung him up in an extremely painful position, tortured him with electric shocks, and starved him. It was the indignity of being chained "*like an animal, a wild beast*" for months that seems to have shaken him at least as much as the extreme physical suffering. "*How can they do this?*" he queries, "*How can they do this to their fellow human? I want these people punished.*"

During the two and a half years that Ukraine has been wracked by war, Human Rights Watch interviewed scores of victims of arbitrary detentions and torture by Russia-backed separatists and repeatedly raised these issues with DNR and LNR de-facto authorities. So far, none of these victims has seen justice.

I hope things will be different for that devastated man in Mariupol.

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