

## Visiting the 'Demon' (On both sides of the fire. What is the difference between Ukrainian Donbass and pro-Russian Donbass)

It is not that scary to move through the area of the Anti-Terrorist Operation with a group of Russian journalists. A taxi driver unwillingly and expensively has agreed to take us from Donetsk to Gorlovka: it is too risky to pass through the military cordon; someone can just take your car away without any explanation. But for the moment everything is ok, thank God. When we approach the last outpost in the "Donetsk People's Republic" (DPR) at the entrance to Gorlovka the driver starts to slow down long before the Stop sign. Just to be on the safe side: those who do not reduce the speed may be shot at.

**A** strong bearded man with a gun comes to us; he inspects the taxi and our documents. After he saw the two-headed eagle on our passports he is nodding naturedly. It seems that the bearded man trusts us. I notice a puny guy in a white shirt behind the sandbags. His face betrays his fear; he has dark circles under the eyes, which have appeared after days of insomnia. His white T-shirt is shaking like a leaf.

– Look at the true patriot! – the bearded man snorts, pointing to the white jersey.

– He was running to Odessa! But we have caught him. Hey, come here ... we have caught him without documents, he lied that he was going to a girl in Gorlovka, but he didn't even know where she lives.

– But I ... – the white T-shirt is trying to justify himself.

– Maybe you were going not to the girl, huh? – The bearded man is approaching to him. – All right, we shall deal with you right now.

– What are you going to do with him? – I cry out from the back seat.

I already know that such fugitives and people without documents caught by the DPR's fighters subsequently have only three ways: to the cellar of the Security Service of the Ukraine for the prisoners' exchange, to the penitentiary labor brigades and to the 'militia'.

– Nothing special – says the fighter impressively. – We check him out and then we decide what we are going to do next. He's not the only one we have got. Recently, one woman drove here, she was carrying the stickers 'Spilna sprava' ('The Common Cause').

– And what have you done with her? – I can't appease.

– We have talked to her. – The bearded man is grinning; it looks like he is deciding whether to tell the story or not.

He has chosen "not to tell". He is allowing us to go proceed.

I'm looking at the back window of the car. The guy in a white T-shirt with his head down listens to a tirade from the man with a gun. I understand that I can't help the prisoner. I should at least survive myself.

The road from the checkpoint to the city center is deserted. Outside the window there are mainly cars without license plates – the "militia" takes these cars from the civilians. A lot of them have bulletmarks. I quickly adapt to the atmosphere of misfortune, especially as it seems that life in Gorlovka is going as usual: shops and cafes are open, people are in a hurry with their affairs as if nothing special happens. Later I find out that one can still withdraw money from local cash machines– such a luxury has already disappeared even in the big city of Donetsk.

The audience

We have a difficult route: Donetsk – Gorlovka – Slavyansk – Donetsk. The first point is the headquarters of the DPR's field commander Igor Bezler. The purpose of our trip is to see how the armies from both sides of the front line are arranged. We have passed a part of the way back and the headquarters of local separatists are appearing in front of us.

On the façade of the Department of Internal Affairs we see the nameplate: 'The Demon of Gorlovka'. The letters of the word 'Demon' are ripped off from other nameplates. Such a touching gift the 'militia' has presented to the authoritative citizen Bezler. Already in April this man became the only commander of the city: he has subdued the law enforcement agencies and the City Council, and created an army from the local miners and unemployed people. The townspeople say that he ordered the execution of all drug dealers, and today there are no drugs in Gorlovka. He has also established punishment for alcohol abuse.

There are lots of rumors about Bezler. The collective image of him: he is the most brutal DPR's governor, a former mortician who tortures the prisoners. People assert that he shoots personally the drug dealers and at the same time takes drugs himself. It's hard to judge which of these facts are true and which are lies, but it's fact that the locals are afraid of Bezler. The degree of fear has grown in May after he has demonstratively shot Ukrainian officers. A video of this event was posted on the Internet. Later Bezler said that it was a staging made to frighten the Ukrainian authorities.

They are waiting for us. At first it seems that the 'Demon' is an ordinary small-town official. A map of the Donetsk region lies on the table, the checkpoints and weapon emplacements are marked with blue ink. 'The Mayor' looks at us with a heavy glance, and now is asking the assistant to prepare coffee for everyone. Deep in thoughts he takes a cigarette from the pack. What does this materialized Demon look like? Blue eyes with a squint, short hair, a smile in the right corner of the mouth. The demonized field commander doesn't look like an enraged warrior. He displays military bearing and self-importance. He keeps his subordinates at a distance: no extra remarks just clear instructions. His speech is smooth, confident. During our conversation the 'Demon' takes an iron pipe from somewhere and gives it to me saying with pride:

– Look, this is a 'moderator'. We made it ourselves at the factory. This nozzle on a gun mutes the sounds and the fire, and allows us to issue strings of bursts. Do you think we should patent it?

For some reason I keep holding this thing, imagining how Bezlerov's soldiers shoot the Ukrainian military from such weapons. The 'Demon' is saying something, and my mind is grabbing a phrase about his plans from the flow of his words – they should get to Lvov.

– What boundaries do you see for this country? – I am coming alive and for a moment I think that I am hearing myself from outside myself.

My question was more for maintaining the conversation, because the answer should be the standard one: something about borders of the Soviet Union. But it's not. The 'Demon' rummages in his bosom and pulls out an old medallion with the double-headed eagle:

– Please, look at it. I want to establish the boundaries of Russia in 1815.

In that year the Russian Empire annexed a large part of the Duchy of Warsaw. I'm cringing. Bezler notices it and apparently tries to defuse the situation:

– Do you want to hear an anecdote? – The same grin in the right corner of his mouth. – In 19<sup>th</sup> century everyone studied French – and Russia took Paris. In 20<sup>th</sup> everyone learned German – Berlin was taken. Now everyone speaks English. So, it's time to take Washington.

I am supposed to laugh, but I don't. Not only because I am not pleased with the perspective of the Third World War. I'm afraid for my own safety: there is no guarantee that after these talks our entire group wouldn't be captured. I try to control this fear, but it seems that Bezler feels it:

– I can show you my prisoners – he suggests quietly for no reason. – But I prefer to call them 'guests'.

We leave the office and go down along the hallway. Bezler opens one by one the doors on the first floor. Gloomy bearded men with guns behind are watching us. I peer into the rooms. Some things are scattered about and some people are sitting around. It turns out that these are soldiers of the Ukrainian army. Most of them were captured more than a month ago, while their battalions were relocating closer to the border with Russia. They look tolerably well, without bruises and fractures. So they weren't tortured, I guess.

I'm trying to exchange glances or words with them. When I ask if they are treated well, the guys nod in unison. I know the name of one of them. And this man looks the worst. Roman Zasukha, the deputy commander of the Third Battalion of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, has a black eye and his leg is shot through. He recently became a hostage, after the fighters of the 'Russian Orthodox army' captured him. Here is the story in short: one of the Zasukha's colleges was killed in front of him, Roman himself has been tortured. The 'Demon' took him to be exchanged later for his fighters. The usual practice. Once again, the familiar feeling – you want to help somehow, but you cannot.

The relatives of the military prisoners live together with them: there are a few mothers who came to soldiers; wife Oksana has come to Zasukha. They are peeling potatoes and cutting sausages in the kitchen. I get a chance to talk to Oksana. She is saying that she is treated quite well. In her eyes there is a prayer for help.

– Do you want to pass something on for your relatives on the free side? – I am asking her quietly.  
– What can I pass? I hope that everything soon comes to the end. –Oksana responds softly and without much hope in her voice, she raises her eyes.

Her eyes are saying more than words.

I have counted forty prisoners. But it's hard to talk to them because the 'Demon' stands near. I'm asking if there are any civilians.

– I don't take civilians, just military, – he replies sharply. – But if you mean the National Guards I don't need them. We shoot them immediately.

– But why?

– Because they are mercenaries, not regular troops. – The 'Demon' explains.

I sense in these words the following interpretation: as an officer he is ready to talk with equals only.

I know that in the 'Demon's' kingdom everything is not as humane as he tries to pretend. The guilty citizens must do 'corrective labor' – for example those who have been walking drunk or without documents. On the territory under his control he has established a system of service: he forces businessmen to give him a part of their profit. It is just a detail. One more detail: one female volunteer

who was engaged in the evacuation of the forced migrants told us that she was tortured in the headquarters for getting information about her companions.

Finally the 'Demon' leaves us for a conversation with his fighters, who just have returned from a military observation of the region. His helper, the commander of headquarters, comes to us. His call-sign is 'The Border Guard'. He is a burly man, middle-aged. He has a slurred wandering smile and a nervy, wary glance. The Border Guard confesses his true hate of the Ukraine. As many others here he doesn't believe that this country deserves to exist.

– It's a great pity that we are not experienced in war, – he says. – So we have to learn during the process.

The Border Guard is a typical fighter of the DPR's 'militia'. He lived in Donetsk, served in the Army, worked at the factory, read a lot of history books. Probably these books were too many and not the right ones. The actual war disillusioned him about the books he has already read and the computer games he has already played. Now he plays adeptly. In his eyes – the belief that there is no way back, because he was already considered a terrorist.

The 'Border Guard' is fighting not for the 'federalization' of the Ukraine and not for the splitting of the Donbass and the Ukraine. He is fighting for the full subjugation of the country by the Russian Empire and for the re-division of power in the world.

Bezler returns from the negotiations very agitated. A few people in camouflage follow him in a hurry, they almost run after him. Everyone feels that the commander has no time for the journalists right now. Having given commands to his fighters, the Demon leads us to the exit.

He is accompanied by a young guy with small black eyes. His look is ruthless. The guy comes to me and points to a pile of sand left after the construction of fortifications. The Ukrainian flag has been trampled into the sand. I decide that they have taken it from the battlefield. Maybe this flag was hanging above the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

– Make a photo of that, – the guy suggests to me, but somehow not arrogantly, with insinuating voice, his intonation is trustful.

And he throws the not extinguished cigarette butt on the flag.

### A bright side

The car is starting to move, we are going to Slavyansk. During our trip we were stopped at the DPR's checkpoint. Everything is the same: they examine our luggage, our passports and the accreditation. The city of Kramatorsk has flashed behind the window. I managed to notice that there is not much life on the streets: no passengers, no cars, and about everything there is a silent, slightly sinister emptiness. Crushed bus stops, burnt buses, cafés with broken windows.

Passing several severe checkpoints of the Kramatorsk's gateway we get to the crossroad between Slavyansk, Izyum and Svyatogorsk. It is hard to believe but we are on the Ukrainian side. The checkpoints should be now Ukrainian. They are indeed. At the next checkpoint the fighters of the National Guard meet us. After they have examined our car and found out that we are journalists they start to ask our Russian colleagues "when Putin will leave us alone?". Everyone is smiling.

The most communicative one – Volodya – is telling on our camera everything he thinks about this war. He runs to the Ukrainian flag strapped to some snag, gently picks it up and says:

– I’m standing here not for America or Europe, and I’m not against Russia. I am ashamed that I can’t fix the flag of my country on a normal flagpole and stretch it through all the sky so that one who is bombing us could see that my country will be independent, – young Volodya becomes silent and now he is looking somewhere on the side. The commander appears from behind. He yells that he should shut up. In few seconds I understand: the commander is displeased that someone is filming at the checkpoint.

– When we saw that camera is directed at us we were going to shoot. But you are lucky, –the commander says sternly.

After the camera was turned off, the officer relented. He sighed, waved his hand, and even asked how he can help us.

While crossing the Ukrainian territory, after the communication with Volodya and his commander something moves me. What is it? I think, Volodya will get into trouble. But no, it’s something else. I tell myself that here is not scary. Suddenly I understand how strained I have been on the territory of the DPR’s commandos. In Svyatogorsk, Izyum, and even in just liberated Slavyansk it is much easier to breath. The feeling that at any minute you could be arrested, sent to the cellar or be killed has gone. During some hours that I have spent on Ukrainian territory I felt securely. And the world has changed: different sun, different swallows above the evening city.

But there is a way back - to Donetsk. To the city which the army of Igor Strelkov, the ‘Defense Minister’ of the DPR, recently entered.

### A dark side

The road goes to Donetsk. It seems that the asphalt is lined with colors of flags: at first appear yellow-blue stripes, and then the black-blue-red. Sometimes the stripes are white. The Ukrainian stripe extends from Izyum to Kramatorsk, and from Kramatorsk to Druzhkovka goes a neutral stripe. The DPR’s army left the settlements in this area, but there are almost no Ukrainian soldiers. Although firefights happen sometimes. And here is just another border – Gorlovka’s checkpoint.

The DPR’s border. An alarm knocks in my temples again. I’m pressed in the chair. A guy wearing sport trousers is coming to us. There is a tommy-gun hanging on his neck. He said that he is also a journalist, the stringer at ‘Vesti-24’ TV-channel, and also a part-time militiaman. He is saying loudly that our TV-group is disloyal to Novorossia (New Russia). At this moment another man comes to our car, takes of his tommy-gun from the shoulder, and asks seriously:

– Should I shoot them?–

The guy is starting to laugh and explains to the tommy-gunner that it was a joke.

For me it is not funny at all, I see that the same tommy-gunners are taking out a guy from the neighboring car. They mean that he said something wrong. That’s why I’m trying to not move, sitting in the chair silently. There is a lump in my throat. Luckily the jokers let us to pass.

We have arrived. Donetsk means darkness, Donetsk means Girkin (idem Strelkov). It is raining, and it seems that the city is wrapped up in a gray oilcloth, and the rays of the sun cannot break it. In this

inhospitable kingdom we have to overnight. The hotel where I stayed just few days ago is closed. For it is much too close to the building of the Security Service of Ukraine, where Igor Strelkov is now located, as well as the fighters of the DPR that came from Slavyansk. It turns out that yesterday the armed people went through this hotel with a toothcomb. They checked guests with Ukrainian passports. The hotel nearby is also settled by 'militia'.

### The whisper of the city

I'm walking through the city-center in the rain. Near the building of the Security Service I see a group of women. One of them is holding a heavy bag with a pair of boots and a sweater. Her son was detained by the DPR fighters for the fact that he walked down the street without documents. So he was sent to 'corrective labor' – to dig trenches on the outskirts of Donetsk.

– I'm not against him doing it, but now it's too cold and he is wearing only a sports-jersey – the woman is starting to complain after she found out that we are journalists. – It's heartless to take people away just from the street. Why couldn't they make some announcement first?

How can I help you? I'm trying to find the familiar café. But it is closed. The next one is also closed. Finally I have found one that is working. I fold down my umbrella and ask for a cappuccino and a bottle of juice. Hiding the juice in my handbag, I drink my coffee with small sips – warm myself up and listen to the whispers of the city. At the neighbouring table one girl starts crying. She is talking to someone by phone:

– Can you imagine, 'the militiamen' have taken him off? They just came and that's it. Why does it happen to us?

– When the guys from the Slavyansk came they went to the shopping center with their guns and in uniform, – a man from the left side is muttering. – The next day the shopping center was closed. The city dies.

Just two weeks ago the Donetsk's crowd used to speak differently. Before the latest events they spoke about the "militiamen" with enthusiasm. Now this word is pronounced with disgust. And with a fear. It's always near. Donetsk citizens understand that with the advent of Strelkov the same things as in Slavyansk might happen at any minute in their city. Nobody in fact knows what the DPR's army is fighting for.

The cappuccino is warming me up. I recall the 'Border Guard', and the guardsman Volodya. Suddenly I realize quite clearly why the 'militia' inevitably will be defeated. Because the dream of the 'Border Guard' is the dream about war. And the dream of blue-eyed Volodya from Slavyansk's checkpoint – is about peace and new life.

– It will be like in Slavyansk – the voice from the left side is whispering.

– One more? – a waiter is asking, taking my empty cup.

I flinch. It is too symbolic question.

– No way – I answer.

Never more. If possible. I don't want that this waiter or the man in the left corner, or the blonde woman at the table behind have the same experience as the citizens of Slavyansk. Once again I understand that I cannot help these people.

// According to the messages of the Security Council of Ukraine the Russian military technicians and armed fighters cross the Russian-Ukrainian border daily. The reporter Ekaterina Sergatskova has discovered the main “black holes” on the borders at the request of ‘Esquire’ journal.

**T**he border between Ukraine and Russia is 2295 km long. The black holes have appeared at its South-Eastern part: the check points, which were abandoned by the Ukrainian frontier guards and the army after the armed confrontations, are now occupied by fighters of the “People’s Republics” of Donetsk (DPR) and Lugansk (LPR). The Border Service of Ukraine said that more than a hundred kilometers of the border is now out of the control, but in fact this area is much bigger.

The Ukraine is fenced off from Russia by ordinary wire grid, partly with barbed wire. If you want to get to the other side you can just cut the grid with clippers: there are no surveillance cameras or moving sensors. Normally, instead of this simple grid there should stand pillars and cabins with a patrol service on each kilometer. But the borders of the ex-Soviet Union Republics still haven’t been demarcated. The Kremlin explains that if the borders will be demarcated it will create an extra barrier for the “fraternal nations” and an obstacle for the “border collaboration”. In fact, according to the international law, there is no official border between Russia and the Ukraine at all.

The most important events happen at the border in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions two hundreds kilometers in length. It’s almost impossible to get there from the Ukrainian side: the commandos occupy the biggest part of the territory. The inhabitants of Lugansk and the nearest cities flee from the bombardments usually to Izvarino – a checkpoint, which is controlled by the LPR’s cutthroats from one side and by the Russian border guards from another.

I’m trying a trick to get to the border by the safe way and to see what it really looks like: I’m getting through the liberated cities in the Northern part of Lugansk region to the village of Melovoe, which is the last checkpoint in the Eastern Ukraine that is under supervision of the Ukrainian military.

### **The border**

I got to the checkpoint by taxi in the absolute darkness. The Ukrainian mobile operator doesn’t work here – the mobile net is informing me that I’m already near Rostov-on-Don, in Russia. I have a bottle of the Crimean wine in my bag, the Russian passport and the Ukrainian press-card.

A small plastic cabin with a barrier is placed in front of the entrance to the village. Through rare lights you can see the road to Russia. When our car appears several worried men in uniform run to us and persistently ask us to stop. They suspiciously look at my passport and the press-card.

– For what reason do you cross the border? – They ask in unison.

Shots are heard somewhere very close. The border guards get panicky.

– Harry up, go into your car! Turn off the light! Don’t use your mobile phone! – They scream and run away with my documents.



During the next ten minutes of waiting I recall all the news about bombardments on the Ukrainian border, the number of victims of the multiple launch rocket system "Grad", mortars and howitzers, and understand that if now the fighting starts around here, I probably will stay in Melovoe forever.

- Come with me, - Finally the border guard comes to the car window and adds meaningfully: - With the luggage.
- Is it safe down there? - I ask. - There were shootings.
- Yes, there is nothing particular. Our neighbors launch fireworks, - he answers.

They take me to a cabin near the checkpoint. There are two guys sitting in the small room: the shift supervisor Sergey, a strong man with a sly face, and his assistant Aleksey, a young guy with the appearance of an anchorperson.

- So you are a journalist, - the commander ascertains. - You come too late. Yesterday we were bombarded from mortars. Usually everything is pretty calm, we did not expect this.

A phone is ringing. A woman is crying in the receiver.

- Local women call us regularly. They are afraid, - explains Alexey. - You shouldn't cross the border at night. You never know what the neighbors think. Better we transport you through the border.

A rigorous old man in a greasy panama hat opens the door to the hotel; he looks like a forester. On the walls of the hall I see heads of deer and wild boar, someone's child, wrapped in a blanket, sleeps on the sofa. A stout woman in a sports suit stands at the reception.

- Why didn't you come yesterday? There was shooting on the border! You should go to the market place tomorrow and watch how people live here. And at the same time you will see how the locals cross the border. It's situated right on the market.

Up in my room I open the bottle of wine and I drink a glass in one gulp. Under my windows there is a café- the only one in the whole village. A woman cries to someone in Ukrainian that he is a separatist, and starts to laugh, while I'm getting asleep with a disturbing borderline dream.

## **Melovoe**

Everything is very near in Melovoe. People sell milk, honey, and cereals direct on the road. One of the women-sailors complains that the trade is really bad: the goods earlier were brought from Lugansk, but now Melovoe is cut off from the supplies.

- Even to visit a pharmacy we have to go to Russia. It is nearby, - she points to a fence just behind the market, where the military are crowded.

People enter the village one by one through a small hole in the fence. The woman explains that this is a checkpoint for the locals. I don't see any cabin, a barrier or any other sign that might help me to understand that this is the border. A few people in the border guard's uniform check the incomers' documents but not examine their bags.

I inspect the main attraction of Melovoe - the Street of Druzhby Narodov ("Nations' Friendship"). On the left side of the road there are cars with Ukrainian numbers, on the right side stay those

with Russian ones. The bus stop in yellow and blue colour bears a message written in large letters "PTN PNH" (the abbreviation means "Putin, fuck off"). A mailbox with the white-blue-red flag hangs on a house façade across the road. A shop nearby accepts Russian rubles only. I ask a shopwoman what time is it. She makes clear what time I want to know: Russian or Ukrainian. I opt for the Ukrainian.

Easily passing from the one country to another I imagine that if Kolomoisky carries out his plan and builds a metal wall between Russia and Ukraine, it could be breached just down the Street of the Nations' Friendship. I make its photo for the memory and a military car stops immediately behind me. A round fellow in a stretched out T-shirt rolls out.

– Didn't you know that taking photos of the border is prohibited?  
 – But I have made only a photo of the road!  
 – It is the border. You can't photograph anything here; – the man calls the guards on duty by phone.

A group of people in uniform arrives to us; I recognize Alexey among them, with his face of an anchorperson. He shakes his head in a fatherly way and escorts me to the checkpoint.

### **Chertkovo**

– No smoking here, is that clear? – A young Kalmyk with a gun rudely shouts at me on the Russian side, where the village of Chertkovo just starts. – And make no noise! –he adds for some reason.

I walk away to the grid with a barbed wire and see how families with young children and giant bags move from the Melovoe's side through the border zone. I am sent to the checkpoint following them.

There are two crossing points: everyone just shows his passport at the first one, the full control starts at the second. Everyone in the queue discusses the war. A border guard recognizing me as a journalist starts to lament:

– Five years ago we drank coffee with the Ukrainian border guards and what happens now? We look at each other in silence.

Just behind the checkpoint a guy in civilian clothes stops me and asks to step aside for a "talk." His grey bloodless face and a cold searching look gives the impression that he might be a FSS (Federal Security Service) agent. In the forty-degree heat he wears a grey-black sweater with long sleeves.

– Tell me what have you seen there – he asks with indifferent voice. – How the checkpoints looked like?

I recall a checkpoint on the road from the village of Schast'e near Lugansk. The National Guards have sealed one of the embrasures with a teddy hare and said that it was their "watching". The hare looked at me with sad blue eyes.

– Usual checkpoints. I don't know the difference. – I lie.  
 – Have you met radicals who said that it is necessary to kill Russian?

- No, - I lie again.
- Have you talked to people who believe that the Ukraine should be separate from Russia? - says the guy from FSS quickly being confused with his own question.
- What do you mean by that? - I do not get an answer: someone calls the FSS-man and he says "good by" with the same embarrassment.

## **Izvarino**

After Chertkovo starts the territory that from June does not come under the Ukrainian authorities. The "black hole" runs for two hundred kilometers. Fighters and military equipment from Russia penetrate to Lugansk region through it. The main gates of this hole are located at the checkpoint in Donetsk (Rostov region) - it is a small mining town that borders on Izvarino village.

It is through this hole in Izvarino the peaceful inhabitants and wounded soldiers flee to Russia from the bombarded towns. There are two ways to get to Russia: through Lugansk, where they have to risk being under the fire from mortars, and through Rostov region. I choose the second path and I get in a train to Chertkovo.

The approaches to Izvarino's checkpoint are crowded. Amid crumpled plastic bottles and other garbage people sit on their suitcases waiting for departure in a refugee camp. A woman with a baby in her arms tells on the TV how she escaped from the city of Antratsyt after a shell fell on the hospital where she worked, and killed a number of doctors. Another woman cries, describing picturesquely how she was taken under fire from Krasnodon. In the courtyard I meet a guy, who is strolling between the refugees.

- I am from Slavyansk, - he says and shows me a card with his name Ruslan Fedorov and symbols of the "Donetsk People's Republic". - I am sent for two weeks on vacation. I have done enough fighting, I have to rest. In ordinary life Ruslan looks like a normal guy who could sell SIM-cards in a supermarket. On the photo, which is glued to the "DPR" card, he looks more like a drug taker, who has been under the methadone for a week.

- I was removed immediately after the concussion - Ruslan explains. - I was sitting in a trench when a shell fell. It went through the almost whole trench and has stopped only in a half meter away from me. Then they brought me here through Izvarino. There are a lot of our guys; they have no hands, no legs. We could hardly take them out.

Ruslan boasts that he fought together with Strelkov in Slavyansk. And now - he says - they cast off the Slavs, and the "Minister of Defense" of DPR is offered a deal: if he leaves Donetsk he gets three hundred million dollars.

- It was cool to fight with Strelkov. And now too many commanders have appeared, and everyone plays his own tune. They don't like us - Slavs. They use to maraud in Donetsk, but Strelkov did not allow this. Yet I definitely get back there, for I have no house anymore, it was burned in Debaltsevo. Where should I go now?

The main gate of the "black hole" looks like an average crossing point on the border between Ukraine and Russia. There are several cabins for checking documents, several lines for traffic. Near the barrier there is a "duty-free" shop as if nothing has happened; women in ironed skirts

and white shirts with neckties advise about French perfumery and Scotch whiskey. A bearded man out of breath with a huge rucksack stops beside me to drink some water.

- Are you returning home? - I ask, thinking that it is quite silly to go towards the besieged Lugansk now.
  - No, I'm not local - he answers with a clear Moscow accent. - My name is Sergey Fokin, I'm going to Lugansk for important business. I have deciphered an important icon.
  - Could you tell me more details? - I wonder.
  - It's too early to speak about it, but there will be a big church procession in Lugansk, which is organized by local people and the priesthood. It is the icon of the Three-Faced Virgin of Lugansk, it is necessary to find it and use as a flag. I'm going to do it.
- After he has put the bottle with water back in his rucksack, Sergei Fokin raises his hand in farewell and says:
- Lugansk will be renamed in Svyatograd (Holy city). And the Tsargrad (King's city, i.e. Constantinople)!

The solar haze absorbs the bearded man. Following him I'm also falling into the "black hole" realizing that I appear in another dimension. The flag of "Novorossiya" is flying over a cabin that was riddled with bullets; and gloomy long-bearded guys in camouflage uniforms with badges in form of the letter 'V' - the Strelkov's army sign - are walking around. Men with guns smoke sitting on a bench near the building where the Ukrainian border guards used to be.

- Who are you? - one of them asks me.
- I'm a journalist.
- And I'm the 'Cat' - he says. - Where are you going?
- I want to see how you live.
- We live badly. Like on a powder keg.

A chain of refugees with trunks and children's prams are passing by.

- Do you let the refugees go through so easily? - I'm wondering.
- Yes, and we not only let them in, but also feed them here and help them to carry their bags, you understand? - The 'Cat' answers resentfully.
- And what is there behind the checkpoint? - I ask, trying to see the road behind the barrier. The 'Cat' sighs heavily looking at his blackened hands.
- There is a war. Nazis are close, they are shooting the road. Better if you wouldn't be there. And we don't let you there! Because you will be killed and everyone will say that we shoot journalists. I turn around to go back, but see that the bearded man is a TV cameraman I am familiar with.
- You have filmed our faces! - yells an old man with a gun. - Delete it, quickly! Do you think that we are idiots?
- Hey, guys, what are you going to do with him? - I try to help my colleague.
- We will shoot him - answers the old man and adds with a strange dreaminess:
- We have a big "Zelenka" (Forest)!

### **Nizhnyaya Orekhovka**

I go back to the place with refugees, where a tall, handsome middle-aged taxi driver Vladimir picks me up. He has an expensive jeep. Earlier he went for building materials to Ukraine (they are twice as cheap there) and then sold them here in Rostov region of Russia. Now the taxi driver makes money by driving refugees and journalists.

- Where is the Russian artillery that is firing the Ukrainians? - I ask.

– You can't see it in the afternoon – he says flatly. – The military equipment is situated in fields. When they were shooting with the multiple launch rocket system "Grad" from the Ukrainian side, the artillery was right in the city. But you may not film it.

Vladimir tells me that there is not only one "black hole" in this land, but rather three of them.  
– If you wish we can go to a "hole" and buy an ice cream. – He proposes. – I use to do so myself. By the way I want to take two guys from Lugansk, they come here to buy generators.

Near the market Vladimir picks up two men. They look like typical Donbass guys whom I often met at the "DPR" checkpoints. Cracking jokes with each other they have loaded the generators into the trunk of the car and got into the car.

– Hey guys, are you fighting in Lugansk or what? – I ask them.

– We? No. We live there – a chunky brown guy laughs.

– Do you pass through the checkpoints without problems? I have heard that men of military age can't cross them.

– C'mon! – He answers. – I just gave them fifteen bullet-cartridges on the border and we passed. Vladimir pulls him up and puts a finger over the mouth: shut up.

– Where did you get the gun?

– Where, where ... – starts the guy, but Vladimir hits his knee. The other one is ending.

– Everything is easy – answers the second inhabitant of Lugansk. – Our military quarters were defeated, the Security Service of the Ukraine and the Administration were captured – and the weapons were kept in these buildings since Soviet times. Now a half of the citizens carry them walking around.

– And how do the militiamen behave?

– There is a lot of plundering. Some militiamen are doing it for profit. A lot of them have already been shot. I call them "stupidiamen". They have no rules, they forgot the military laws. All of them have been criminals. They are drunk, drugged. So I call them "stupidiamen".

The rocky country road brings us to the village of Nizhnyaya Orekhovka. The Pogranichnaya (Border) Street with small ramshackle houses leads us to a tiny wooden cabin.

– This street starts here and continues at the Ukrainian side – says Vladimir cheerfully. – Is it not funny, huh? One goes here – he is in Russia, but if he goes further – the Ukraine starts.

A single border guard sits in the cabin next which a shabby squeaky turnstile separates us from the Ukraine. After he sees my passport he says with a sly grin that can't allow me to pass.

– Only the residents of Lugansk and Rostov regions can pass here, – and he asks me to move away.

Two citizens of Lugansk bring generators through the turnstile and disappear in the black hole.

A military truck without any number plate comes to the checkpoint. Two men in camouflage with guns and identical black sunglasses come out from the driver's cabin. They walk to the border cabin and negotiate something with the border guard.

– They say there are products for border guards, – Vladimir tells me. – Something like humanitarian aid.

I imagine how much food can fit into such a truck and immediately estimate how much one border guard can eat. Something does not coincide.

I try to see where the boundary runs. Vladimir shows me a thin grid along the thickets.

– There's always a man who walks with a gun dressed in a robe, he is the only one for several kilometers, – he explains. – The main thing is not to meet him and then you can safely cross it.

The smugglers drive around, they know all the "holes". They can take you for two hundred dollars.

Smugglers work in Donetsk/Rostov since the time out of mind. Local border guards don't touch them.

– Vladimir, if you see Russian artillery on the way, wouldn't you show it? – I ask my guide while we are going in the direction to the southern border.

He shrugs.

– We shall see.

On the way from the city I notice a green "cobweb" standing alone in the field – it is a radar system, which is usually used together with the air defense system of the "Buk" type.

– Did you see something there? – I ask the driver.

He looks directly at me and responds curtly:

– No.

It's getting dark. On the way to the south Vladimir transfers me to the car of another taxi driver – a middle-aged man with reddish hair.

– I wouldn't tell you anything – he says immediately, but soon he starts a conversation himself. –

What have you forgotten in this Novoazovsk? – The taxi driver asks with a slight contempt.

– I need to go to the Ukraine, to my relatives – I lie once again.

– Relatives? And why in the night? Nazis wouldn't allow you. I may arrange this with our side.

– Who is "your side"?

– I was working at the customs. In general I am Ukrainian, graduated from Kirovograd's flight school. My grandfather is the famous aviator Mazurenko. If you will type his name on the Internet, you can compare the photos. I look just like him!

I'm typing. And he is indeed just as chubby and plump.

– How many Ukrainians are here? – I ask, expecting to hear a flurry of indignation and recriminations towards the Ukraine.

– But in Taganrog there are only Ukrainians! – He responds joyfully. – And there are many well-known people. In our regiment has served a grandson to Gennady Shtern, together with Blucher the winner of the battle at the Lake of Khanka. They founded the Far Eastern Republic and then Stalin shot them.

Novoazovsk comes as the light is breaking. A three hundred kilometer journey along the border comes to the end. The driver pulls out my stuff from the car and finally says:

– You know, the Bolshevik Party of the Ukraine was founded in Taganrog. Regards to the Ukrainians!

We don't see any grid with a barbed wire, no individual guards in the twilights. With a sigh of relief I cross the border, and a powerful steel wall, gleaming in the last rays of the sunshine, grows behind me. It cuts off the sunset in two parts. One part of the sunshine is left in Russia, another belongs to the Ukraine. The time on the phone screen is automatically converting to the Ukrainian.

Esquire (Ukraine) №32 (December'14)

## The Iron man

// At the request of Esquire the reporter Ekaterina Sergatskova went to Donbass with Vladimir Ruban and discovered how the exchanging of prisoners is going on.

**L**isten to me. There are bombs falling right in the heart of the city. You need to decide whether you want go further. Remember that you can die – Vladimir Ruban says in metallic voice, we have to stop at Kurakhovo, the last peaceful place before Donetsk. My hands are getting cold. I have never felt fear when arriving to the occupied Donetsk before this. But now I sit in a huge armored car, pasted with symbols of the "Officer Corps" and tremble.

Vladimir Ruban – whether the Colonel-General of the Armed Forces of Ukraine or not (he is absent in the list of the colonel-generals approved by the decree of the President of Ukraine) – is the first one who has begun to pull people out of captivity throughout the Ukrainian territories occupied by pro-Russian militants. He became well known for this in the last six months. This Ruban, with his small team, rescued hundreds of military, civil activists and ordinary civilians. He was himself taken as a prisoner being humiliated and tortured several times. One of such moments has been recorded by the operator of Vice News at the very beginning of the armed conflict in Donetsk: Ruban in a perfectly ironed blue shirt kneels in the office of the regional administration and explains to someone that the events in Odessa on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May are a "shock for everyone". On this record his voice was not as confident as it sounds now.

Twice a month Vladimir Ruban, with the team of the "Officer Corps", goes in armored cars from Kyiv to Dnepropetrovsk, where the transshipment of his Center for the released prisoners is located. The base is called "Sonechko" ("The Sun") and it also functions as a training center for the fighters of one of the volunteer battalions supervised by Igor Kolomoyskiy. The famous Ukrainian singer Ruslana Lyzhichko traditionally comes together with Ruban. However, she does not write on her Facebook about these travels and even doesn't tell to her family because she doesn't want them to worry. She lies that she has a concert tour.

The singer has a lot of fans among the Donbass militants. One of them is Vladimir Kononov, the Defense Minister of the "Donetsk People's Republic" nicknamed 'King'. In the Ruslana's phone book he is recorded as 'Volodya Judo'.

– I met him at the judo competition, which he has organized in Donbass. I had a concert there, – explains Ruslana.

For her song "Wild Dances" the governance of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics forgive her participation in Euromaidan. First the singer appeared at the territory of militants in August with the "Officer Corps" – at that time she managed to release sixteen Ukrainian militaries.

Since then Ruslana goes to Donbass as for work.

At the intermediate stop Ruban shows me a list of messages in his facebook.

– This girl is looking for her dad. What should I answer? Her dad was engaged in the organ transplantation business in Gorlovka – says Ruban.

I'm asking where her father is now. Ruban quietly folds his fingers in form of a gun and raises them to the head.

– Ninety percent of soldiers, who were captured –are now recruited by the other side –says Ruban tonelessly and keeps looking at his tablet computer. – Yesterday nine scouts have been captured.

– And how could they all be captured, if officially there are no military actions? – Ruban's deputy Sergei Ivancha is chuckling.

– Apparently they want to be captured, they like it – concludes Ruban, laughing almost silently.

After we left the gas station the cortege of the "Officer Corps" suddenly turns on the flashing lights for no reason – the road is almost empty. But they beautifully illuminate the roadside forest.

A driver of our armored car turns on the "Black Mountain" song loudly.

At the base of "Sonechko" the team of the Prisoners' Release Center gets breakfast in the shower cabin of the dining building. Ruslana asks for boiling water to make tea, but Ruban stops her.

– I do it myself – he says. – The plaster might suddenly fall from the ceiling, your hand might flinch... And you accidentally pour water on yourself!  
Everyone around the table starts to laugh.

– You think it's funny, but I live like that all the time – Ruban says. – My daughter Daria is fourteen. When she waits for the green light near the road, she stands behind the pillar on the left side of the road. Just in case.

The phone is ringing. Ruban picks it up and makes a long face.

– He was shot – he says with his special metallic voice, counting each syllable. – He was a sniper, didn't you know it?

A woman is starting to cry on the other end of the phone.

– You should know. Snipers are the most cold-blooded people in the war. They are professional killers, who can't be stopped. Snipers do not leave anyone alive.  
Then Ruban speaks to us:

– I wonder why on the military identity card of the Ukrainian armed forces they write "a cook" for a scout, while a sniper still has to be called a "sniper", even if he is the cook.

It is not clear if Ruban is joking or not. Sergei Ivancha adds seriously:

– Yes, they are killed immediately, as well as their spotters.

We are at the gas station in Kurakhovo. Ruban says flatly:

– Giving the oath I have promised to sacrifice my life. And you still have a chance to return alive. Are you coming further?



I nod and sit in one of the cars. Ruban's son, 25-year-old Daniel drives. Somewhere in the front seat there is a Makarov handgun, he says that he gave his rifle to Yuriy Bereza (the commander of the battalion "Dnepr-1") for a while but it was never returned. Daniel has gold-looking spectacles – the "droplets", he looks like a gangster from the films of Rodriguez. He resembles his father only by the foppishly ironed shirt.

At the entrance to Donetsk we are met by the power pylons, which are bent as if turned inside out. A few months ago they got under the multiple launch rocket system "Grad", which militants used for bombardment of positions of the Ukrainian militaries. Now these pylons look like a gateway to the world of the war – now begins the zone, which could be reached by the artillery.

Gradually it is darkening in the area where Donetsk begins. When we get closer the darkness becomes thicker. Daniel turns on the flashing lights.

Near the DPR's checkpoint there is a line of autos with Donetsk numbers, despite the fact that the city was bombed for the whole day. "The Officer Corps" passes out of the queue, leaving the ambulance behind: just a couple of minutes ago one of the cars was hit by a bomb and two persons were wounded. A little car joins us at the checkpoint and then we proceed to the verification of our documents somewhere further through the empty unlit streets of Donetsk.

The cortege stops near "Ramada" hotel in the center of the besieged city. Until recently the DPR's leaders lived and dined there. A tall middle-aged man with a usual face and a cute mole above his lip comes out from the car that was escorting us.

– My name is Sasha – the man introduces himself. – Or 'Tashkent'. I'm known more by this name.

Ruban comments:

– Sasha Tashkent is a Minister of Taxes and Levies and the Deputy Prime Minister of DPR.  
– When you called me, they stopped shooting here – the minister is laughing. – Can you imagine such a coincidence! Call me more often, ok?

Ruban comes quite close to Tashkent and tells him something. 'Tashkent' exhales loudly.

– They won't come out from the airport, is that not clear? – The Minister answers excitedly. – After they have defeated our city we will destroy this airport!  
– Well, well – Ruban is calming him down. – When you will start to work on taxes?

In the morning Ruban has an appointment with the negotiator from the DPR's side. Daria Morozova, a lady in a leather jacket and a mini skirt, appears on the terrace of "Ramada" making noise from her stiletto heels. She shakes Ruban's hand, saying usual welcome phrases and lighting a cigarette.

– Now I take only two business calls per day. Everything else – is mom's rehabilitation. – Daria says. – I'm going to Snezhnoe (one of the bases where the Ukrainian prisoners are kept). I give a handset to everybody who needs it. But the Ukrainian part refuses to do this.  
– You are deceived cruelly. – Ruban protests. – Mothers call you and me, and the Security Service of the Ukraine – everywhere.

The official position of Morozova is a Chairman of the Committee for Refugees at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of the "Donetsk People's Republic". Since May she also became a curator of prisoners. Her career has begun with her acquaintance with Ruban.

In mid-April the Special Forces "Alpha" have tied up her friend Leonid Baranov in Donetsk city center. Now he is a Chairman of a special committee at the DPR' Ministry of State Security, he is in charge of looking after cellars on the territory of the art center "Isolatsia" (Isolation), which was captured by militants. Morozova was sitting in Baranov's car while he was being handcuffed. And she was looking for the possibilities of exchange after he was taken to Kyiv's jail Lukyanovka.

– Ruban has found mutual friends and helped to release Baranov. – Daria says. – That time nobody understood how it might be possible – to take a person and then to carry him to Donetsk. But Vladimir could. In exchange for Baranov we gave him three seriously wounded persons with broken bones. Since this event we came to know each other.

After Baranov was released Morozova got the task of making lists of captives and missing persons, she was also provided with a "hot line" operator. Daria proudly tells how she conducted the first exchange of "26 to 26".

– There were seven prisoners missing and no one wanted to give them to me. During this time our Minister of Defense 'King' came to power. I came to him, grabbed a chair and said that I won't go anywhere without these seven prisoners. He told me: who are you? I said: I am Daria, give me the prisoners. We have talked for about fifteen minutes; he said that I have to leave refugees and become the chairman of the Commission on Prisoners. I refused this proposal because no one needs my refugees. I couldn't leave them. Then we have decided that I would be the curator. And when the time for Minsk negotiations had come, I was the only person who knew the situation on prisoners and missing people. First the military said: let her to cook borsch at home! But Baranov supported me. He answered: "Her borsch is also delicious, I have tried".

I meet Ruban later in the hotel lobby. A young guy in camouflage pants sits between him and Ruslana. His name is Sergei Batrameev, a soldier of the battalion "Donbass". He is the only one who is released during this trip to Donetsk.

– We had negotiations all night long – Ruban says. – Due to this he was given to Ruslana for free. They don't listen to me, they listen to Ruslana.

– He is brother of the singer Zhenya Vlasova – Ruslana whispers in my ear.

Ruban's phone is ringing; he is turning on a speakerphone. A woman on the other end is telling about her son who has disappeared in Lugansk.

– What should we do? – Ruban asks slowly.

The woman repeats the story about her lost son.

– Please, formulate the question – he says.

She starts to tell her story from the beginning.

– Tell me what you specifically want from us – Ruban repeats coldly.

– I beg you ... find my son –the woman says and begins to sob.

– Well, you have formulated it – Ruslana looks at Ruban accusingly and picks up his phone.

The car of Sasha Tashkent arrives to "Ramada's" porch. The team of the Center of the Release of Prisoners rolls out to the street. After he has smoked a cigarette, Ruban sits behind a wheel of the armored "Lexus". Ruslana looks around perplexedly.

– I'm here like Alice in Wonderland, – she says reflectively. – Whether the rabbit hole is deep enough? But it does not really matter.

The cortege of the "Officer Corps" is leaving Donetsk with flashing lights.