



EDUCATION IN THE LINE OF FIRE

access to education near the front lines



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Vyacheslav Likhachev

**Informational and Analytical Report Based
on Monitoring Results**



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The analytical report focuses on the positive obligations of Ukraine to ensure access to secondary education in the government-controlled settlements of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that are located in close proximity to the line of contact, as well as the situation of schools and the quality of the educational process.

The study is based on a monitoring program that took place over the course of the 2017/2018 academic year.

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SUMMARY

Despite the ongoing armed hostilities, Ukraine as a state guarantees and has the obligation to ensure children's access to a full secondary general education in areas controlled by the government. This means that Ukraine is responsible both for the availability, and for quality and competitiveness of education.



This study took place over the course of the 2017/2018 academic year. It has found the following issues with the functioning of schools in settlements located within the 15-kilometer zone along the contact line:

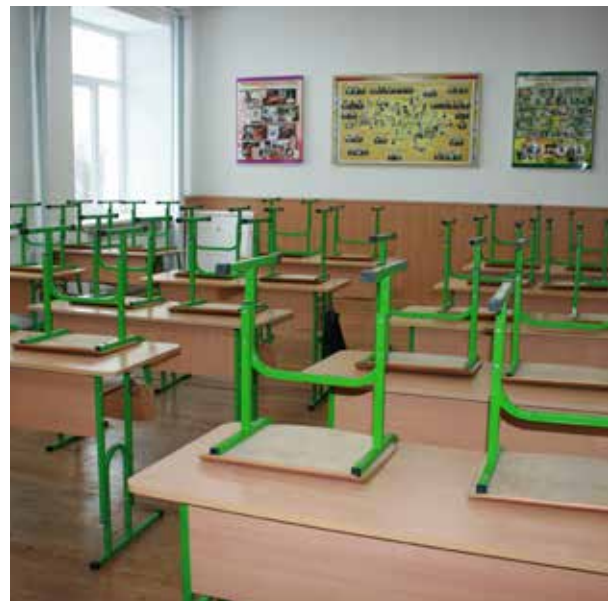
- Most of the school buildings located in the immediate vicinity of the contact line that the study covers were damaged during the hostilities. Some buildings were damaged by recurrent shellings. Almost all the buildings have been restored, either completely or sufficiently to resume classes, with a number of exceptions that include totally destroyed or unusable buildings. However, as a rule, most repairs were of a superficial, restorative nature (re-

placement of blown-out windows, roof covering, and often the heating system), while many buildings require major repairs.

- For most schools, the educational process was interrupted for a period of time (from several days to several months), mainly in the 2014/2015 academic year. In some schools there were injured (wounded or dead) children, but mostly schools attempted to evacuate children from settlements during bouts of intense fighting, and the schools were closed for that time. However, sporadic attacks continue, and the schools need to be more protected. Many schools do not have equipped shelters.

- At present, the educational process continues with hardly any interruptions. Teaching is fully carried out, all graduates receive their diplomas. Practically all children in front-line settlements have the opportunity to attend schools.

- On average, as a result of the displacement due to hostilities, the number of students now amounts





to just over half of the pre-war age. There are IDP children in almost every school.

- The children's moral and psychological welfare has been severely impacted, which inevitably reflects on their studies. Constant stress and, in many cases, PTSD reduce memory and concentration, and harm both the ability to learn and general health. In addition, the fighting has a very negative impact on the socio-economic situation in the region. The dire straits that the children's families are often in also have their own negative influence on their psychological and emotional state. There is a significant need for psychological and educational assistance from those who have special training to work with children with trauma or are under constant stress.

Currently, this need is filled to an extent due to the efforts of non-governmental and international organizations.

- With only a few exceptions, there is a shortage of staff in schools. Almost all schools have lessons taught by teachers of other specializations. This, of course, affects the quality of education and competitiveness of graduates in terms of equal conditions for access to higher education for all Ukrainian citizens. Due to the average age of the educational staff, the problem of staff shortages requires immediate solutions in the coming years.

- Charitable foundations, Ukrainian non-governmental and international humanitarian organizations have made a more significant contribution to the reconstruction of the affected buildings and equipping schools by different equipment and supplies than the state (aside from the "core" schools in the new Ukrainian educational system). In general, schools are equipped enough for the full implementation of educational work – and, in many cases, due to efforts of humanitarian organizations, they're equipped much better than it was before the war. However, it is a serious challenge to prepare the first grades for the 2018/2019 academic year in accordance with the new requirements of the education reform. The "new Ukrainian school" requires considerable expenses, while state funding does not reach the front-line schools.

Our study has recorded a number of problems within the current situation, and a number of recommendations to improve the state of affairs are made at the end of the present report.



INTRODUCTION

The right to education is one of the most important social and cultural human birthrights. Human beings have the right to education, like all other natural and inalienable rights, independently of the will of the state. However, the state lays down its obligations to provide an access to education for its citizens.



The state's positive obligations in this sphere are recognized in international laws that have been ratified by Ukraine and, in particular, by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which was signed by the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

According to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everybody has the right to



education. At least elementary and fundamental education must be free. Primary education must be compulsory.

The principle of compulsory and free primary education is also recognized in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human Rights.

All of the aforementioned international conventions have been ratified by Ukraine.

The obligations of the state to ensure access to education are also confirmed in national law. According to Article 53 of the Ukrainian Constitution, everybody has the right to education, and having a full secondary-level education is compulsory. The state must ensure access to education and that it is free.



According to Article 3 of the Ukrainian law on education, every person has the right to free education in all state educational facilities regardless of age, sex, race, health status, disability, nationality, ethnic origin, political, religious or other views, colour, place of residence, language, origin, social and material position, and criminal record, as well as other circumstances and characteristics.

The five-year-long conflict in the east of Ukraine¹ has led to the deaths of over 10,000 people, out of which more than 3,000 are civilians who did not take part in the hostilities². The Ukrainian military conflict is a daily threat to fundamental human rights, including the right to life, health and well-being, and freedom.



The right to education is no exception. Despite all of the obvious difficulties related to the armed hostilities and their consequences, Ukraine is still responsible for providing access to education in territories it controls and must provide children with real access to a full secondary education.

Educational facilities, as well as other facilities belonging to the social infrastructure of the region, have been under attack in times of active fighting.

¹ This conflict is frequently, almost as a standard term, called the "military conflict in the Donbass" or "the war in the Donbass". There are a number of reasons why I do not find the term "war in the Donbass" to be completely satisfactory, as well as the use of "Donbass" to designate the conflict region. As an economical and geographical term, the Donbass takes its name from the Donets coal basin. This region is defined by the presence of certain mineral deposits and the specifics of the region's economy includes more than just parts (not all!) of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, but also a part of the Dnipropetrovsk region, as well as the Rostov region of Russia. On the other hand, the Donbass does not include the north of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions (historically, they are a part of the Sloboda Ukraine region) and the southern part of the Donetsk region (Pryazovye). As for the "war in the Donbass region", I believe that this term muddles the context of the conflict currently taking place in the east of Ukraine. I think that it is important to understand that we are not talking about an isolated event, but about a part of the entire armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which began when Russia attacked in the February of 2014.

² According to the 22nd Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation in Ukraine, based in the work of the OHCHR Monitoring Mission, which is the latest at the time this report is being written. See: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 February to 15 May 2018 P.10 (https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/ReportUkraineFev-May2018_RU.pdf)

Many of the school buildings have sustained serious damage.

The 2017 report of the Ukrainian NGO "Truth hounds" documents many shellings of school buildings. See: "This is no place for children: monitoring attacks against children and educational facilities over the course of the three years of the Donbass war"³. The report documents various attacks on 79 schools since the beginning of the armed conflict.

I would like to stress once again that according to standards set by international humanitarian law, educational facilities are protected objects, attacks on which constitute war crimes. However, a school may lose this protected status if combatants use it as a base of operations or if it is located too closely to a military object.

At present, of course, this situation is particularly difficult in settlements in territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that are controlled by the Ukrainian government, but which are directly near the contact line⁴, as armed hostilities of varying intensity continue along almost its entire length. While the front lines used to change significantly in 2014-early 2015, there have been no significant changes in either directions over the last three years. Accordingly, settlements that happened to be located on the contact line in the spring of 2015 are still subject to either sporadic or constant shelling. The monitoring conducted for this project specifically focused on the zone near the front lines. It is little surprise, then, that many of the schools in the study have been fired upon in recent months.

According to data published by UNICEF in May 2018, 55 thousand children reside in the 15-kilometer zone near the contact line that is controlled by the Ukrainian government⁵.

Active hostilities are a direct threat to people's life and wellbeing, and make children's physical access

³ http://truth-hounds.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Zvit2017_rus_m.pdf.

⁴ The term "demarcation line" is sometimes used to denote the line which separates territories controlled by the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian territories where the state authorities are unable to fulfill their obligations. Ukrainian law uses the term "contact line" ("лінія зіткнення"). This term is also used by international organizations, particularly the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. I also use "contact line" as the term that best describes the situation. In the interest of brevity, I sometimes use the informal, but fully descriptive of the actual state of affairs, term "front-line" to denote the territories that lie directly near the contact line.

⁵ The Children of the Contact Line in East Ukraine. 2017 Assessment Update. – UNICEF Ukraine, May 2018. P. 3 ([https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/2018_Assessment_Update-web\(1\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/2018_Assessment_Update-web(1).pdf)).

to education particularly difficult. But this is hardly the extent of the war's impact on education in the region.

The demarcation line cuts across many important transportation and infrastructural connections. Many familiar social, cultural, and administrative centers are now located in occupied territory. This change of regional borders and the necessity to change the schools' administrative allegiance was accompanied by the usual chaos of a transitive period, which in practice meant many months of salary debt for the teachers and junior school staff, among other difficulties. This chaos still impacts the relationship of schools and district educational offices.

The time period in which this study was conducted is most sharply defined by a relatively low intensity of military activity in comparison to 2014–2015. Of course, it must be stressed that the situation is only relatively "calm", stretching the meaning of the term by quite a bit. Hostilities intensified greatly almost over the entire line of contact in December 2017, and to an even greater extent in April–June 2018. There have been multiple shellings of residential areas and objects belonging to civilian infrastructure, including schools. Sporadic one-time shellings of settlements near the front line continue constantly, even when the general situation is relatively calm.

Nonetheless, educational facilities continue to function relatively normally, without significant interruptions. Most of the school buildings that have been seriously damaged in the fighting have been restored fully or sufficiently to continue the educational process. Thanks to the efforts of international humanitarian organizations, Ukrainian charitable foundations and, in certain cases, private sponsors, most schools have replenished their supplies of furniture and office equipment. Some schools were equipped even better than before the war.

Over the course of the 2017/2018 educational year in Ukraine, several processes happened in Ukraine on the state level that impacted access to education, the state of schools, and the educational process in the conflict zone. In particular, this concerns the adoption of the law #7163, the initiation of the Joint Forces Operation (JFO), and the reform of the education system conducted throughout the entirety of Ukraine.

The law "On the peculiarities of state policy on the restoration of the state sovereignty of Ukraine over temporarily occupied territories in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts", which was enacted in February 2018, is better known under the incorrect journal-

ist nominations "the law on Donbass reintegration" and the "law on Donbass deoccupation". In particular, this law implies a possible restriction to the work of any and all non-governmental organizations in the zones where measures are being taken to repel armed aggression, as well as in the "secure zones". Once the JFO began at the end of April 2018 in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the zones where civilians and NGOs had different modes of access (including free, restricted, and not allowed) became somewhat more defined, but still not entirely.



This new law was at first doubted by human rights watchdog groups and humanitarian organizations. These doubts were exacerbated by a multi-month process of learning how to obtain permission to work in the zone of the JFO and the adoption of various instructions and orders that brought a concrete reality to the changes. However, in practice humanitarian organizations do not encounter systematic restrictions on their work. Particularly "Vostok-SOS" has never been restricted in access to settlements, including the so-called "red zone" (zone of active fighting). Colleagues from other organizations have reported several cases of restricted access; however, those were strictly linked to an intensification of fighting. Temporary access restrictions during periods of intense fighting were placed by the military even before the new law was implemented. Potentially the law allows for a wide variety of restrictions that could make work difficult for organizations, including those that work with schools. But none of these potential restrictions have been implemented, and work continues in the same manner it had before.

The educational reform, however, directly impacts schools. Its implementation in the conflict zone has its own particularities, and so will be analyzed in detail below.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

In preparation for the study, Vostok-SOS has made the decision not to narrow its focus down to access to education, which is purely a human rights issue, but also to analyze the educational process and the general state of schools located near the front lines. We also believe the matter of the quality of education and the students' later competitive performance (that is – of equality for all graduates of schools) to be important for truly integrating the liberated populace of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions into the Ukrainian cultural, informational, and social space.



The topic of our study is a critically important one, both concerning the sheer numerical scope of the families whom our study concerns, as well as the importance of the data for the development of the region and Ukrainian society as a whole.

According to the evaluation of UNICEF, there is approximately half a million children suffering the consequences of the conflict on both sides⁶.

Vostok-SOS created a preliminary list of settlements to visit based in prior experience of providing humanitarian aid and collaboration in educational projects. We selected educational facilities within 15 kilometers of the contact line in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. We gave preference to the cities, towns, and villages located closest to the front lines. We decided on a number of schools, created a preliminary list of places to visit, as well as a preliminary questionnaire with the working title “Passport for schools near the front line.”

On January 16–20, 2018, we held a preparatory workshop for our prospective interviewers. Its participants were local activists who lived in settlements near the line of contact. Moreover, as we worked with current teachers and educational staff during the workshop, we made modifications, corrections, and additions to our questionnaire.

The monitoring fieldwork was carried out from February to July 2018. Moreover, some of the material was collected on December 17–23, 2017, during the international monitoring mission that was organized by Vostok-SOS in collaboration with the DRA NGO (Germany). During this latter expedition we studied the situation in Teploye, Popasnaya, Zolotoye, Stahanovets (Luhansk region) and Novoluhanske (Donetsk region).

Over the course of the monitoring fieldwork undertaken in the first half of 2018, our mobile group visited a number of settlements near the contact line in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, including those that are, according to JFO documentation, lo-

⁶ UNICEF seeks \$3.6 billion in emergency assistance for 48 million children caught up in catastrophic humanitarian crises// UNICEF, 30 January 2018 (https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/media_31726.html)

cated in the so-called “red zone”, that is – zone of active fighting. The group interviewed a number of person and recorded the situation near the front lines. A total of 31 questionnaires was filled in by schools in territories directly near the contact line, as well as, for the sake of comparison, one control questionnaire for the Rubezhnoye school of the Luhansk district, which is located in the Antiterrorist Operation zone (JFO), but which is over 20 kilometers away from the contact line. Aside from visits to schools, the group in the field also met with staff from the Luhansk Regional Department of Education and several district departments of education in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Questionnaires began to be processed in April alongside the remaining fieldwork. In early July, all 32 questionnaires were processed, and information from them had been entered into a database that had been prepared in advance and then analyzed. All of the questionnaires were processed using the “Statistical package for the social sciences” (SPSS).

To supplement our information collected directly from schools, we have also monitored materials in open sources that concern problems connected to damage to educational facilities during fighting

from the start of the hostilities and the state of schools located near the front lines. We have also analyzed the legal corpus that concerns the state’s obligation to provide access to education. Special attention was devoted to the adoption of a new Law on Education at the end of 2017 and the newly introduced changes from the educational reform (preparation for the introduction of the the New Ukrainian school system from the new academic year, that is – September 1, 2018).

The opinions and evaluations in the report are given by its author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the organizations which we had been partners with during this project, including the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland) and the human rights watchdog Coalition “Justice for Peace in Donbas”, and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which supported the project financially.

The report organizes data on the situation according to a number of themes and generalizes them as much as possible. Particular cases are given as illustrations of typical problems or, to the contrary, in cases of exceptional circumstances.



HUMAN CASUALTIES WITHIN THE CIVILIAN POPULATION AMONG CHILDREN

According to the Spring 2018 report of the UN Monitoring Mission, the war took the lives of 218 children⁷. This number includes the 80 children on board of the MH-17 Malaysia Airlines flight that was downed by a Russian Buk surface-to-air missile. If we take this incident out of the statistic, 138 children have perished to date on both sides (91 boy and 47 girls). 35 deaths were recorded in territories controlled by the Ukrainian government, and 95 were recorded on territories controlled by pro-Russian armed groups. In 8 cases it is unclear who controlled the territory at the time of the tragedy.

Our study documented incidents which involved injured, wounded, or dead school children. To

⁷ See: Kotlyar A. Head of the UN Monitoring Mission on Human Rights Fiona Fraser: "Civilian casualties reduced". Dzerkalo tyzhnia, # 10, March 17-23, 2018. (<https://zn.ua/SOCIUM/glava-monitoringovoy-missii-oon-po-pravam-cheloveka-fiona-freyzer-zhertv-sredli-mirnoo-naseleniva-stalo-menshe-278272.html>)



summarize our findings, the largest number of victims was recorded in late 2014-early 2015. The incidents we have recorded that resulted in death or injury (shellings and explosions) happened outside of school grounds and not during school hours. This is due to schools closing while fighting went on. Parents also prefer to pull their children out of school when sporadic fighting is taking place. During bouts of intense fighting, children were prioritized for evacuation.

Shellings. Children were killed and injured by shellings during the 2014-2015 periods of intense fighting in Schastye, Tryohizbenka, Luhanske, Mironovka, and other settlements.

Mines and other explosives. Over the last two years, excluding a short intensification of the fighting in the second half of April-May 2018, according to the UN Monitoring Mission, OSCE, and UNICEF, most children who are killed or injured are not harmed by shellings, but by explosives of careless conduct around missiles that have not detonated.



An adequate evaluation of the situation requires an understanding of just how high the concentration of left-over explosives is in the region. At present, such explosives are the most serious threat to children’s health and wellbeing.

According to UNICEF’s calculations, approximately 220,000 children in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions reside in territories riddled with landmines, trip wires, and “blind” shells and their elements⁸. Even after the fighting will be over, their life and well-being will continue to be threatened. This matter calls for utmost attention from the Ukrainian government and the international community.

On August 18, 2017, a seventh-grader from the Teploye primary and secondary general school, triggered a mine trying to disarm it. The child was seriously harmed, losing a hand in the process.

A seventh-grader in Krymskoye brought a grenade to school in 2015, which turned out to be faulty.

It needs to be noted that schools, like all educational institutions near the front lines, constantly hold safety workshops to teach safe behavior around mines, and all school lobbies and hallways have posters or other information on the subject. Some schools have reported cases when children found missiles or trip wires, even in the settlements themselves, and called in adults and the military in a timely fashion.

⁸ 220,000 children threatened by mines and other explosive weapons in eastern Ukraine – UNICEF, 21 December 2017// https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/media_31677.html

In particular, in Rubezhne children found a grenade attached to a railway line on their way back from school. The children called the police and monitored the situation until their arrival, making sure nobody got close to the grenade. In Verhnetoretsk children found a missile that failed to explode and notified the military. Children in the Rodina settlement have found multiple grenades, including one that came from a rifle-attached grenade launcher, and so on.

This behavior shows that teaching children about safe behavior around mines has had some success.



MATERIAL DAMAGE DUE TO MILITARY ACTIVITY

In general, the buildings of a significant number of schools that we cover in our study have been significantly damaged in the fighting. If we take into account damaged roofs, destroyed windows and other similar damage, then arguably most schools had taken significant damage. Many buildings have been shelled multiple times. The most serious damage had been dealt in 2014-2015. By now most of the buildings have been restored thanks to the joint efforts of the government and international humanitarian organizations. In some cases part of the building (for example, a given wing that had been the most damaged in the shelling) remains un-restored, but the educational process nonetheless continues.

In some cases the school building took so much damage that it is best classified as destroyed without any possibility for restoration, or is still located in the line of fire in the zone of active hostilities, and

is thus impossible to use for continued educational activity at present. This is particularly the case for school #2 of Stanitsa Luhanskaya (Luhansk district), and schools #1, #2, and #3 in Krasnogorovka (Donetsk region).

Several incidents in which schools were damaged took place during the period over which the monitoring was conducted.

For example, on December 18, 2017, there was a major shelling of the Novoluhanskoye village of the Donetsk region⁹. Missiles from the multiple rocket

⁹ See the description of damage done to civilian objects because of shelling, including drone-assisted shelling, conducted by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission: <http://www.osce.org/ru/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/363881> See also: "We live as if in a reservation: Humanitarian situation and state of the civil population in territories near the contact line in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Kyiv, Civil Initiative "Vostok-SOS", 2018 P. 9-11.





launcher system “Grad”¹⁰ hit residential areas. The author of this report and other Vostok-SOS staff visited one of the schools which suffered a shelling (Skhkolnaya str. 2) on the next day after the shelling. We took interviews of the staff and recorded the damage done.

Judging by the shell craters and damage, two missiles exploded in the school courtyard. The explosion blew out many windows and damaged the roof. By the time the monitoring mission visited the school, the search and rescue services had already patched up the damage temporarily.

According to UNICEF, there were 13 shellings recorded in 2017 during which schools in Ukrainian-controlled territory were damaged¹¹.

The intensification of fighting from mid-April to early June 2018 has once again led to even more damaged buildings. According to UNICEF, five schools were damaged over the course of just one week’s shellings (May 11–17)¹².

Aside from damaged received from shells directly hitting the building or its vicinity, it is also necessary to take into account the consequences of constant vibrations and the ground motion resulting from the constant detonation of missiles and explosives nearby. Without carrying out an expert investigation it is hard to say for certain how damaging these factors are, but during our interviews, many staff representatives stated that the buildings are falling into disrepair extremely quickly due to the constant shellings near the settlements.



¹⁰ According to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission, it was an 122-mm BM-21 “Grad” (<http://www.osce.org/ru/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/364061>)

¹¹ The Children of the Contact Line in East Ukraine. 2017 Assessment Update. – UNICEF Ukraine, May 2018. P. 9. ([https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/2018_Assessment_Update-web\(1\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/2018_Assessment_Update-web(1).pdf)).

¹² <https://us13.campaign-archive.com/?u=e1e1bf3a94ad7660b-6313b71e&id=a1ea4cc1bc>

SCHOOL SECURITY

“I have a pipe dream: to get a proper bomb shelter for our school,” laments the director of a school in the Verhnetoretsk town of the Donetsk region, which is located about a kilometer off the contact line. The school doesn’t have a bomb shelter or even a regular basement. If a shelling takes place, everyone in the building comes down to the first-floor lobby, near the main entrance. The lobby has large windows, although they are faced away from the front lines. They have been blocked by bags of sand by about a third of their height.



Unfortunately, the situation described above is typical for many schools near the front lines. Even though the hostilities are going into their fifth year now, the buildings still have not been secured adequately.

Deep, reliable basements that had been built to double as bomb shelters are present only in urban schools built from the late 1950s to the early 1980s. Some settlements that are located near chemical factories, which are plentiful in the region, had shelters with especially secure facilities, as they were also built for technogenic disasters. Such shelters are the best that we have recorded. However, even these shelters were never kept in a state of readiness in case of emergency. Over the dozens of years, these basements were used at best as spare storage space



(and at worst as a dumping ground for trash, broken furniture, and so on). Correspondingly, their doors, ventilation systems, water supply and sewer system all fell into disrepair.

When the fighting began, schools have cleared their basements, and in some cases used their own efforts to fix the ventilation systems, installed water supplies, benches, and beds. There are settlements where school basements are the only reliable bomb shelters in the vicinity.

However, in many schools it is simply not feasible to use the basement as a bomb shelter. In some buildings access to the basement is only possible from the outside, and in others there is no base-





ment at all. In schools such as the Verhnetoretsk one, teachers take the children to a lobby or inner hall, preferably without windows.

Windows are usually reinforced through bags of sand, but also with a special see-through film that is glued to the glass and prevents them from breaking into dangerous flying splinters in case of explosions near the buildings. These additional security measures are often installed with the help of international humanitarian organizations.

We have also recorded defensive slabs that are “sandwiches” made from metal and chip wood boards, which are secured outside of the building and cover a little over half of the window. The height is calculated so that shell fragments from missiles exploding outside of the building could not harm students sitting at their desk. Such defenses have been installed in 2018 in the schools of the Rodina mining town (Zolote-4); and slightly earlier in the Tryohizbenka village and other settlements that are still shelled regularly.

Notably, the standard plan in case of emergency for schools is mostly intended for natural disasters, such as earthquakes and fires, and their main focus is evacuating the children from building. Of course,

this is hardly an adequate plan in case of shelling. Most schools practice evacuating once per year, but other situations are not practiced. There are no standard instructions on what to do in case of shelling. For example, not only the students, but even the teachers did not know the “correct” answers to such simple questions as: “if you are outside of the school and are subject to a sudden mortar shelling, do you lie down immediately, covering your head and using natural cover as best you can, or do you run inside as soon as possible?” or “if you are in the classroom and a shell explodes outside, breaking the windows, do you need to get under your desk, covering your head with your hands, or do you need to evacuate the class immediately and take cover in the hall”, and so on. Even though in many cases it is less dangerous for children to be in school rather than at home, even despite many children being located in one place, generally when fighting resumes or there is intensive shelling schools stop their work, and children stay at home, where they often have no protection whatsoever. This is partially linked to the subjective judgement of parents, who are afraid to let their children outside of the house during “turbulent” periods, and partially linked to formal legal responsibility of the teachers for the life and well-being of children who are located on school grounds.

PHYSICAL ACCESS TO SCHOOLS

Generally, children and teenagers are able to attend school without interruptions. Practically all children in front-line settlements have the opportunity to attend schools. At present, there is no critical lack of school buses in places where they are needed. During the times when most of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were controlled by pro-Russian armed groups, some school buses were stolen or seriously damaged. However, in recent years schools were provided with new buses or had old ones fixed, and the number of buses is no longer a problem.

Of course, there are particular places that have difficulties. For instance, parents in Karbonite complained that the school bus only has summer tires, which are dangerous in the winter ice and snow. In Krymske the bus was significantly damaged by shrapnel during the shellings of early 2015, but is still in use after being only slightly patched up.



The most serious problem with physical access to education was recorded in the so-called “gray zone.” However, some settlements had the situation change for the better in the half year over the course of which this study was conducted.

In the beginning of the 2017/2018 academic year it was difficult, almost impossible, to children and teenagers from Katerinovka (Luhansk region; from September 8, 2016, the village is part of the Zolote Town Hall of Popasnaya region, when before it was part of the Berezovske Village Council). This difficult situation was mostly due to the settlement’s location.

The problem is that Katerinovka, like some other parts of the Zolotoye city (the so-called “Khutor”, the Rodina – Zolotoye-4 part of the Shahta settlement¹³) is cut off from the rest of Ukrainian-controlled territories by the Zolotoye access point. The access point was fully prepared and ready to allow citizens through the demarcation line. However, it does not function as such at present, as the de-facto authorities of the occupied territories are not fulfilling their obligations to open an access point from the side not controlled by the Ukrainian government.

The problem is that, unlike with internal access points, this check point is de-facto a border post. The access point operates only while it is light out, and thus times when it is open are widely different in summer and winter. Moreover, minors must be accompanied by adult relatives through the access point. This meant one of the family members had to take the child to school and pick them up daily, which is practically impossible for working parents and is physically taxing for senior citizens.

The “Rodina” settlement has its own school, and so the existence of the access point does not impede the children’s capability to attend school. Most children from Katerinovka attend school in Zolotoye (the Zolotoye Multiprofile Gymnaisum), and some children attend school in the Stahanovets settlement (Zolotoye-3).

¹³ Ukrainian media reported the liberation of Zolotoye-4 in April 2018, referencing the PR department of the JFO. In reality, the settlement has been under Ukrainian control since 2015, and there was no change in its status since that time. Our monitoring group has visited Zolotoye-4 twice over the course of our study, in December 2017 and in April 2018.



In the winter of 2018, the school bus from Zolotoye did not only not cross the access point to get to the village, but only had a stop that was located almost another kilometer away from the access point. This meant children did not only have to get to the access point themselves (which in practice meant walking), but also walk some more afterwards. Their village is several kilometers long, and is stretched out along the contact line. The distance between the village center and the access point is about 4 kilometers. Because of this, families with children (as well as miners who retained their positions, as the access point also made life difficult for them) tried to leave Katerinivka.



In September 2017, 13 school children resided in the village, as well as one teacher, who also used the school bus to get to work. "Vostok-SOS" representatives and journalists of various media have been raising the matter of the village children's access to education for a long time, particularly when conversing with the local authorities, but largely in vain. The staff and leadership of the Popasnaya State District Administration and the Luhansk

Region Military and Civil Administration gave many promises to resolve the matter of the access of children in the "gray zone" to education since the beginning of the 2017/2018 school year, but they demonstrated a complete lack of understanding of the practical side of this situation. In particular, they did not even know how many children of school age resided in Katerinivka¹⁴.

However, the situation in Katerinivka changed over the course of the study. Our monitoring group visited Katerinivka twice in December 2017 and in April 2018.

In early February, first social networks and then the media reported the "liberation" of Katerinivka¹⁵. These reports were false. Katerinivka never had pro-Russian armed forces in it, and the settlement was completely and constantly under the control of the Ukrainian government since 2015. The "liberation of Katerinivka" reported in the winter of 2018 was, in fact, a minor relocation of the Ukrainian armed forces stationed in the region. The number of military personnel stationed in the region also led to some negative consequences – in particular, residents were further restricted in their movements. But the necessity to demonstrate success on the front lines also ensured some positive changes in the village's humanitarian situation. When Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko visited the "recently liberated" village in March, it became a catalyst for quality-of-life improvements for the civilian population. After that visit, the school bus from Zolotoye was able to go through the access point to pick up the village children. It still does not go to the far edge of the village, stopping near the village shop, which is close to the Zolotoye access point. Children from the far-off edge of the village still must walk approximately 2 kilometers. However, it must be noted that they can now actually attend the school.

With the exception of Katerinivka, there were no recorded difficulties with physical access to education. Notably, the situation was more difficult earlier, and not just during times of intense fighting.

To give another atypical, but very notable example of the difficulties that school children had with physical access to education, one can cite the situation in Lobachevo village of the Stanitsa-Luhanskoye region, which is located near the contact line, on the bank of the Seversky Donetsk river. Before the war,

¹⁴ See, for example.: <http://informator.media/archives/283538>

¹⁵ See: "We live as if in a reservation..." P.23-24.



children from Lobachevo attended school in Zheltoye village, on the other side of the river. In 2014, Zheltoye remained in occupied territory. The closest school to Lobachevo in Ukrainian-controlled territory was in Tryohizbenka village. Lobachevo and Tryohizbenka are several kilometers apart, and are connected by a dirt road in bad condition. The road runs along the contact line and is not considered to be safe. The Tryohizbenka school has a bus, but it did not go to Lobachevo.

Because of the situation at hand, the children continued to cross the river and attend school in Zheltoye. In the beginning of the 2016/2017 school year they were transferred to the Novoaidar boarding school.

In Verhnetoretsk, the situation was the other way around. The local contact line cut off some of the far edges of the settlement from the government-controlled territory where the school is located. Nonetheless, children from territories not controlled by the Ukrainian government attended school, at the very least until very recently. The school teacher also went to work from territories not controlled by the Ukrainian armed forces. Of course, there was no formal access point, but “check point zero” had a list of persons who had an unlimited daily right to pass. Problems came up from time to time when new military units were rotated in; however, these problems were temporary, and children’s access to education continued. This situation was documented by our monitoring group as late as at the end of April 2018, when we visited the settlement. Later we were informed that the situation had changed with the initiation of the JFO, but we had not been able to verify this before the school year ended.

Naturally, it is very important to allow children from territories not controlled by the Ukrainian government to attend Ukrainian schools, and this should be encouraged wherever it is feasible security-wise.



RELATIONS WITH THE ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE

In general, the school administrations and students in the region have regular, sympathetic and generally appropriate relations with military personnel.

The normal state of affairs in most schools is that Ukrainian military personnel participate in school events (from taking part in New Years' celebrations to teaching safety workshops on proper conduct around left-over explosives), and from time provide food, fuel, gifts, or sometimes even children's clothing and shoes for the schools. In some schools, the army is the main source of food for the children (and all students in these cases eat for free¹⁶).



When new detachments are rotated in near settlements, their commanding officers visit schools to meet with the administrative staff. Military personnel usually visit schools unarmed. In some cases schools asked the military for materials (such as an electric cable for renovations) or people to do physical work, and have received what they asked for.

¹⁶ Normally, Ukrainian schools provide free food for primary school students (up to the fifth grade). Other children have access to either a buffet or to a dining hall with hot food, but they must pay for it, with the exception of students receiving social benefits. How many students receive subsidized food may vary depending on region, as the decision whether to provide free food to certain categories of children falls within the responsibilities of the local councils. But all schools provide free food for poor families, sometimes for families with multiple children, and in rare cases for children from internally-displaced families.



For their part, the students send their salutations for Defender of Ukraine day and other holidays, send military personnel postcards, and so on. In some cases, military personnel invite high school children to their posts to show the children how they live, and some even allow the children to hold actual combat arms.

It needs to be noted that during the intense fighting of 2014–2015, there were often serious problems with military personnel living in schools. Schools are big buildings that are usually empty during the fighting, and in a rural environment they are often the only buildings that have several floors. Often, they were the most suitable locales not only for stationing personnel, but also for establishing firing points. Of course, in these cases schools were subject to focused fire. Even if the building was not seriously damaged in the attacks, the very fact that the military was stationed inside led to damage, and restoring them into a workable condition after the military moved out took significant effort. Moreover, there were several recorded cases when the schools were looted, up to stealing all of a school cafeteria's equipment. In different time periods the military had occupied school buildings in Krymskoye, Tryohizbenka, Krasnogorovka, Verhnetoretsk, Luhanske, and so on.



In the vast majority of cases, the military presence in school was temporary and caused by the general state during the first year of the Anti-Terrorist Operation. However, in some cases the military maintains a continued presence near educational facilities beyond the limits of what is provided by the standards of international humanitarian law.

For example, the Teploye village has a school building near the village entrance housing the check point of the Ukrainian forces. Surrounding buildings and territories all show signs of prior shellings, although the locals say that the situation has been relatively calm recently.

Military personnel are based in the school itself, taking up one of the buildings, where the school kitchen and dining hall are located. According to the school principal, relations with the military are normal and conflict-free. The Ukrainian military helps the school with firewood and sometimes with food, gives children holiday presents, and the administration invites military personnel to school

events. However, the very fact that military personnel are based in an educational facility is a violation of protocol. Not only is a military object like that a legitimate target from the point of view of international humanitarian law, which is why it is inadmissible to place military targets in educational and health facilities, but the presence of military personnel is also a negative influence on the general atmosphere. Children constantly encounter armed personnel in uniform and, according to the administration, are in a state of constant stress, which impacts their studies, their health, and their general psychological well-being. The matter has been brought to the Head of the Regional Military and Civil Administration, and representatives of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission have reported it many times, but there has been no change.



Our study also recorded military targets located directly next to educational facilities. For example, in Schastye the command post has been located in the nearest building to the school since 2014, literally next to the school fence.



STUDENTS

As a result of the fighting, internal migration has significantly intensified, which has impacted both how full the schools are near the front lines and how many staff there are to meet the students' needs.

Student population. The mean number of students currently is a little over half of what it was before the war. There are IDP children in almost every school.



Psychological state of the students. The children's moral and psychological welfare has been severely impacted, which inevitably reflects on their studies. Constant stress and, in many cases, PTSD reduce memory and concentration, and harm both the ability to learn and general health. There is a significant need for psychological and educational assistance from those who have special training to work with children with trauma or are under constant stress. Currently, this need is filled to an extent due to the efforts of non-governmental and international organizations. The fact that the hostilities have negatively impacted the social and economic status of the children's families, in turn, negatively impacts the children.

International and Ukrainian humanitarian organizations actively work to improve the children's psychological state. All of the schools in the study are part of one or more such programs, although how systematic the help is varies between school. Such organizations as the International Committee



of the Red Cross, Vostok-SOS, A Child's Smile, Terra Zone, Rise Against Hunger, the Rinat Akhmetov Foundation, Caritas, and others organize a variety of therapeutic and support workshops, teach techniques that allow children to relax and reduce the impact of stress. Additionally, most schools keep their own psychologists on staff. Most of them have received additional training since the conflict began. Schools that do not have their own psychologist usually work with psychologists from the district departments of education.

Moreover, in some schools the staff have noted that they simply do not have time to put all of the psychological workshops that volunteers, humanitarian organizations, and the state want to conduct into their schedule. Nonetheless, we have not recorded any negative or skeptical attitudes towards such workshops in our interviews. All of the principals and the teachers noted that they were very useful.



SCHOOL STAFF

Formally, the staff roster is full in most schools. There is often a lack of junior auxiliary staff, most likely due to the fact that they have very low salaries. Many schools are also missing a few teachers specializing in particular subjects. This is in part due to the general outflow of people from the zone where hostilities are taking place, and in part due to teachers' generally low salary. It should be noted, however, that even though Ukrainian schools traditionally have fairly low salaries, many settlements have colossal problems with having no work available at all. Schools, like other government institutions, are one of the very few places that provide work. Right now payments come largely on time, and the slight improvements in their salary are met positively by the teaching staff; however, the increase is not nearly satisfactory for them. In 2014-2015, salaries in the region had often been delayed for many months, as many of the administrative centers in territories near the front lines wound up on the other side of the contact line, and thus all of the files and accounting documents were lost. It

took some time for the districts to adjust to new administrative and territorial borders, which delayed teacher salaries even further.

It also must be noted that the formal number of vacancies in schools does not provide an accurate impression of the actual lack of qualified staff. Almost all schools have lessons taught by teachers of other specializations. This, of course, affects the quality of education and competitiveness of graduates in terms of equal conditions for access to higher education for all Ukrainian citizens. Due to the average age of the educational staff, the problem of staff shortages requires immediate solutions in the coming years.

There is one more factor that negatively impacts the teaching staff: new leadership after 2014-2015. Besides those teachers and principals which simply took their families and left during periods of intense fighting, there was one more negative aspect to the situation.

School buildings are traditionally used as voting stations for all elections in Ukraine. When the Russian aggressors and local collaborators prepared and conducted the propaganda campaign they called a "referendum" in territories that were not controlled by the Ukrainian government at the time, the occupants used the venues familiar to all Ukrainian citizens - the schools - as their own "voting stations." The school administrations had no choice in the matter. Representatives of pro-Russian groups simply walked in armed and the principals could not resist in any meaningful way. The only choice they had was between handing the reins over completely or to try to have at least some kind of hand in the process, if only in the interest of preventing looting¹⁷.



¹⁷ There were cases when participants of illegal pro-Russian military groups have kidnapped school principals, but none of those schools fell within the scope of our study.

After some of the Donetsk and Luhansk territories where the so-called “referendum” took place were liberated in the summer of 2014, many of the locals who took part in its organization fled, fearing punishment, both to territories not under Ukrainian control and to other regions of Ukraine, if that was possible. It was necessary for many of the remaining school administrative staff and teachers to shoulder the burden of responsibility at the most critical time for the region, and it was a heavy burden indeed. This process did not go smoothly everywhere. There were cases where principals disappeared, simply leaving or going into hiding, with the keys and seals to the school. However, there was also a positive aspect to these tumultuous leadership changes that took place in many schools. In these extreme situations, the most courageous, motivated, and resourceful teachers took up the mantle of principle. These often relatively young teachers did not abandon their schools and were ready to take responsibility for the children studying in their halls.

The degree to which school administrations participated in holding the so-called “referendum” varied (from helping the organizers to passively resisting), and their behavior was driven by a range of motivations, from sincere ideological support to fear of real violence, worry for the school’s fate, or simple conformism. Currently there are criminal proceedings opened against several acting principals in such schools. They are suspected of conducting activities that can be qualified according to Article 110 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code (“Trespass against territorial integrity and inviolability of Ukraine”). There are almost no investigative measures being actually taken, and as far as can be inferred now, these cases have no chance in court. However, the very fact of open criminal proceedings, even if they are only formally conducted, negatively impacts the morale of the school principals and the general atmosphere of the schools they are responsible for.

In some settlements, teachers, junior auxiliary staff, and their relatives were injured during the fighting. A school chief caterer was killed in Shchastye, and a teacher of music in Verkhnetoretsk. In Krasnogorovka, a member of the junior staff was severely injured during a shelling, and a member of the staff was injured by shrapnel in the Rodina village (Zolotoye-4), and so on. Many teachers’ houses and apartments have been damaged.

Even more teachers complain that their health has degraded due to secondary consequences of the whole situations. Constant stress, strain, and sleep disturbances manifest as psychosomatic illnesses



and exacerbate chronic illness, usually of the cardiovascular system. Some humanitarian organizations (UNICEF, Doctors Without Borders, and others) provide psychological support and guidance for teachers. However, among those staff members we interviewed, we often found a skeptical attitude towards such programs. The following quote from a deputy principal summarizes the typical opinion about this type of support program: “So there’s this girl coming in, right after university, twenty years old and a psychologist. So she asks me how I’m feeling in this whole situation. And I ask her back: ‘Have you ever been under mortar fire?’ She says no. So I say, ‘And that’s been my last five years here.’ How could she possibly help me?” Another teacher was even more candid: “We’re pretty much experts on this here ourselves, anyone can learn a thing or two from us. As for stress, we’re old-fashioned about stress reduction. What do you do to reduce stress, for instance? We drink.”

In any case, it seems that it is necessary to continue improving the emotional and psychological state of the teaching staff, although perhaps it could be more systematic. Of course, it is absolutely necessary to devote particular attention to the professional training of the psychologists who will be working with teachers suffering from PTSD. It seems prudent to consider conducting off-site therapeutic and rehabilitation sessions from teachers of schools located near the contact line, which would take place at health resorts well away from the front lines.

EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

In most schools, the educational process was mostly disrupted in the 2015/2016 academic year. In some districts class only began in October. At the moment, the teaching process is conducted in full, without interruptions.



Most of the difficulties were related to school buildings being damaged so much that it was impossible to continue teaching in them, or to school buildings located in the line of fire in areas where the fighting still continues. This is the situation with one of the Stanitsa Luhanskaya schools: the children study on the premises of a local newspaper and at other locations that are hardly suitable for their needs.

The situation is critical in Krasnogorovka, where children from five schools are forced to hold class in only two buildings. The schools use a two-shift system, but it is not enough to mitigate the lack of space. Sometimes two different classes are held in

one room that is separated by a few cabinets. The administration of the “host” school that houses children from severely damaged or destroyed schools do not allow the new students to use the computer class for their studies.

Such incidents require resolution as quickly as possible; however, this is an exceptional situation. Generally, the educational process differs little from the way it is across Ukraine.

Interestingly enough, there were practically no negative reports about the reclamation of using the Russian language in teaching that had been laid out in the new Law on Education that was adopted in late 2017. It seems that the process of fully adopting Ukrainian in schools, including schools that had formerly taught everything in Russian, has not given the students and teachers any trouble. In fact, they seem to have hardly noticed the change. The only problems that our interviewees mentioned were connected to the fears of some parents that they would not be able to help their children study as they themselves learned in Russian. It is also very notable that this position was never communicated to us directly – it was always a retelling of someone else’s position, and the person telling the story would often continue by saying that these pre-emptive fears faded as the school year commenced. Of course, these data are not enough to state that residents of the Luhansk and Donetsk region do not feel any problems concerning language as a whole and education in Ukrainian particular. However, it is hard not to consider the sheer solidarity: all of our conversation partners mentioned that the transition had been practically painless. This proves that the idea of how difficult it was to teach considering the language situation in the region that appeared in 2012-2014 (both in pro-Russian “separatist” propaganda of 2014, and in Russian media and propa-

ganda in occupied territory until this very day) had been significantly magnified and overblown, which was most likely a conscious act. In practice, making Ukrainian the mandatory language of study for all schools and groups after the adoption of the controversial Law on Education in late 2017 had not brought any significant problems¹⁸.

Of course, the moral, psychological, and physical state of the students, which is kept continuously low by the continuing hostilities, the limits of the educational system's resources (impacting available supplies and facilities, see below), and the lack of necessary staff in schools located near the front lines impacts the quality of education and the students' further competitiveness. In theory, an independent external evaluation after the children graduate is supposed to create equality for all students seeking to continue their education. In practice, of course, the deficiencies in the educational processes provide serious hurdles for young men and women who live close to the contact line and seek to enter universities through competition.

Naturally, the state's obligations concern first and foremost secondary education, but they are not lim-

¹⁸ Evaluating whether the "language" part of the new Law on Education is justified or whether it complies with the current Constitution of Ukraine is, of course, beyond the scope of this study. However, to fully understand one of the important causes that formed the context of the current situation in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, we must mention the open pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda found in textbooks for Ukrainian schools where the primary language of education was Russian. These textbooks were published before 2013, and were investigated by us for this study in a school at Popasnaya that has since been shut down. Stopping this propaganda by making schools teach in Ukrainian on a mandatory basis is an objectively important step towards stabilizing and securing the region.



ited by it. In Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child it is said that participant states "make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means".

Even though over the course of the study many of the principles and students proudly said that their students had entered prestigious universities (not only in Kramatorsk or Severodonetsk, but also in Vinnitsa, Lviv, Kyiv, and Kharkiv), this rosy picture fades somewhat after a closer look. To be accepted in a university in Kharkiv, and even more so to a university in the center or west of Ukraine, means that the teenager will have to move hundreds of kilometers from home. Before the hostilities started, it was significantly simpler to get an education in Donetsk or Luhansk – and, what is also important, it was also cheaper. The student could live with relatives, eat the food they grew and cooked, and even, in case of certain settlements now located in Ukrainian-controlled territory, attend class each day without having to actually relocate. In this sense, even being accepted to the I. Dal Eastern Ukrainian National University, which has since moved to Severodonetsk, would be much more expensive for a prospective student from Stanitsa Luganskaya than it would have been five years ago for that same university located in Luhansk.

Moreover, family and other reasons many school graduates continue to study in illegitimate educational facilities in occupied territories which profess to be universities.

On the other hand, there is an important positive side: children who live in occupied territories can attend Ukrainian schools in government-controlled territory long-distance. This lets them take exams, have legitimate high school diplomas and enter normal universities and colleges.

FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

Charitable foundations, Ukrainian NGOs and international humanitarian organizations have made a larger contribution to restoring the damaged buildings, as well as to providing the schools with furniture, office appliances, and other equipment than the state. The exception to that rule are schools which are supposed to be “core” in the new Ukrainian school system: these, like school #5 in Zolotoye, were fully equipped by the government.

Such organizations as the International Committee of the Red Cross, UNICEF, Save the Children, People in Need, ADRAm Caritas, the Norwegian Refugee Council and other have made a colossal contribution to refurbishing the schools. Notable Ukrainian NGOs include “A Child’s Smile”, Vostok-SOS, and others. Some schools have had serious contributions made by private sponsors (usually business that are former graduates of the school, like in Zolotoye) or businesses (like in Svetlodarsk).

During our study we did not find a single school that did not attract the help of volunteers and humanitarian organizations. Of course, the scope of



such help differs from case to case. In some cases this implies irregular humanitarian aid, while in others about almost completely funding all of the school’s and children’s needs. We are talking about an incredibly wide specter of aid: starting from backpacks, notebooks and sports uniforms up until office appliances, musical instruments, sports equipment, and a soft floor for a lounge. In general, schools are equipped enough to conduct teaching adequately. In many cases, the help of humanitarian organizations, schools are equipped much better than they used to be before the war – and even than many schools in small Ukrainian cities and rural areas.



However, it must be taken to account that sponsors’ resources are not limitless, and their priorities change. Many international humanitarian organizations are toning down or concluding their activities in the region, or will have to do so very soon. If the state does not intensify its efforts to support the current equipment of the schools, the situation may worsen in the next couple of years.

EDUCATIONAL REFORM: THE NEW UKRAINIAN SCHOOL

The overhaul of the educational system implies an adoption of new standards, first and foremost for students who will start in the first grade in the new 2018/2019 academic year. The limited preparation time, the feeling that the decision-making process is anything but transparent, and the sheer scale of the changes all cause a feeling of uncertainty in the school staff and teachers. Considering that teachers and school staff are traditionally conservative, which is exacerbated further by the average age of those working in the region, this uncertainty sometimes grows into skepticism and internal resistance.



However, it must be noted that the school staff are not sabotaging the schools' preparation for the new standards. Traditionally as disciplined as they are conservative, the school administration and teachers are doing their level best to prepare for the upcoming changes. Often the difficulties linked to these changes are not related to the schools themselves but to the poor coordination and financing from the Ministry of Education and the local authorities.

To correspond to program standards of the New Ukrainian School, schools must not only provide opportunities for teachers to improve their qualifications, but also to make sure school rooms and equipment are up to par. For schools in small set-



tlements these are significant costs. Meanwhile, budget money provided for the program by the Cabinet of Ministers does not reach schools that are located near the contact line. The non-official explanation, which we have heard multiple times from representatives of school administrations and staff members from district departments of education, is that the state believes it to be very risky and unwise to invest in an infrastructure which might be damaged by the hostilities again and again. The administration and teaching staff are worried about how well they can prepare to take in first graders in accordance with the new standards, which impacts the quality of their work.



Over the course of the study we have found only one school that completely corresponds to the standards set for the study spaces for the first grade that will be required by September 1, 2018. And it must be noted that this was an experimental school even before the war began, and it used a methodological approach to teaching that was very similar to the New Ukrainian School standards, and so the required changes were absolutely minimal.

The situation is also relatively good in schools that are designated as “core” in compliance with the new standards for rural areas and small settlements. These schools have received financing for repairs and remodelling, new furniture, teaching aids and learning materials. Even though the “core” schools were created somewhat earlier than the adoption of the New Ukrainian School standards, and thus they did not have to equip new classrooms for the first graders, the schools that are a part of this program had significant additional opportunities within its scope.

In most schools, however, the required spaces for the first graders must be equipped using the schools’ own finances, without any significant spending from the government, and can barely meet the formal standards. The situation is made

somewhat easier by the fact that there are much less children in the region’s educational facilities in comparison both to the pre-war period and the number of children the schools are meant to accommodate. Because of this, most schools have space “in reserve”, which allows them to devote enough room to create the seven study zones required by the New Ukrainian school standards. Moreover, as Ukrainian and humanitarian organizations provided schools near the front lines with a great variety of learning materials, sport equipment and general equipment, and often with up-to-date office and other machinery. This allows schools to meet the minimum requirements for the first grades under the new program.

The situation is somewhat better with the additional preparation of teachers that is needed for work in the new system. In practically all of the schools, the primary school teachers that will be working with first graders next year, as well as the deputy principals and the primary schools curriculum developers have taken the necessary further education courses, seminars, and/or undertook long-distance courses. However, we will only know whether these courses will be enough and whether the standards of the New Ukrainian school will be met in practice at the start of the new academic year.



NEEDS OF SCHOOLS

The situation varies widely between particular schools, but this report allows us to present several problems that plague an overwhelming majority of schools in the region. It must be noted that at present the schools cannot resolve this situation either by themselves or with the aid of the state. These problems include:

- *Structural repairs.* Most school buildings are either very old (over 50 years) or, if they were built 30-40 years ago, were of poor quality to begin with. There were no school buildings built in the region for the last several decades, and neither were any structural repairs conducted on the existing buildings. In some cases the situation is close to catastrophic, and not merely because of the armed hostilities in the region. For instance, the school building in Krymskoye was built in 1866, and is not in the best of conditions. However, the age of the building is often not the defining factor in its state. For example, the sports hall in a Svetlodarsk school that had been built in the 1970s collapsed even before the war had begun.

- *School reform.* Preparation of the necessary premises and equipment to meet the requirements of the New Ukrainian school system.

- *Sanitary conditions.* Approximately half of the schools have toilets than need to be improved in a meaningful manner to meet basic hygienic needs.

- A general problem in all of the schools, as in the entire region, is the *quality of potable water*. The tap water in schools does not meet the necessary standards for drinking or cooking. The local water had always been of poor quality, but since the armed hostilities began, the problem worsened. Many schools have been provided by filters by international humanitarian organization; however, such aid was a one-time affair. But filters require expensive components, and they also break quite often. Moreover, there are sometimes problems with even

having access to water at all, regardless of quality. Many schools had to get their own pumps, which means spending even more.



- Many schools, and the region's settlements in general, have difficulties with *trash removal*.

- *Literature.* Schools are provided with new literature necessary for studies. However, staff members and librarians in almost all of the schools requested more contemporary children's and young adult books in Ukrainian, mostly fiction and popular science.





CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

Most school buildings near the front lines have been damaged. In most cases, they have been quickly patched up to allow teaching to continue; however, many buildings require structural repairs. Schools need to be much more secure from shellings.

The largest cause of deaths and injury to children in the last two years are explosives left over from prior shellings. The second largest cause is the shelling of settlements with indiscriminate weapons.

The children's morale and psychological state are low, which impacts their studies negatively. The fact that the hostilities have negatively impacted the social and economic status of the children's families, in turn, negatively impacts the children.

Schools lack qualified staff, and taking into account the mean age of the pedagogical staff, this problem will only get worse with time.



Humanitarian organizations have contributed more to the restoration of damaged buildings and into the refurbishing of schools than the state. In many cases, schools are equipped better than they were before the war.

It is a serious challenge to prepare the first grades for the 2018/2019 academic year in accordance with the new requirements of the education reform.

Taking into account the problems that we have found during our study, we provide the following **recommendations** to improve the situation:



TO THE GOVERNMENT OF UKRAINE

- The standards set forth by international humanitarian law must be taken with the utmost seriousness. The practice of placing military objectives or personnel of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and other structures that are a part of the Joint Forces operations directly near or on the premises of educational institutions needs to be stopped.
- Security workshops conducted within the schools must be more systematic and more efficient. Neu-



tralization of mines and searching for “blind” shells and other explosive remnants from active hostilities near the settlements needs to be conducted much faster and wider in scope.



• School buildings need to be audited for security absolutely as soon as possible. If it is at all possible, the schools need to be outfitted with or helped to outfit a protected space. Alternatively, it is possible to equip or help the schools equip a basement that corresponds to the necessary safety and hygienic norms. An immediate measure that needs to be taken is to at least provide minimal protection for the school windows, such as film guarding against glass shards or “sandwich” armor panels.



• The state of school buildings needs to undergo a general audit. Within the span of the next two years, schools that require structural repairs need to get them, before their critical state results in accidents or injuries.

• A realistic, step-by-step set of instructions and recommendations needs to be developed for students and teachers in case of shellings and other dangers. This algorithm needs to be based in statistical data. These instructions must be distributed to the schools and practical training sessions need to be held in every school.

• Special attention must be paid to the psychological state of students in schools near the front line. Even though right now there are many NGOs actively working in the region, this situation might change within the scope of a mere few years, as resources are limited. And even should hostilities stop, stress survived in childhood can have long-term consequences. The state should be highly invested in systematically training professionals who specialize in special needs education for children. These professionals will help children from settlements located close to the contact line adapt to normal life with minimal negative consequences possible in their particular situations. We propose to further develop the mobile psychological groups that work with the district departments of education.



• It seems justified to consider the possibility of developing a system of support for graduates of schools from settlements near the front lines who are entering colleges and universities beyond the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

• Consider the possibility of developing a stimulation program (for instance, providing service housing) for young teachers who are ready to work in areas close to the zones of active fighting. At present, similar programs for doctors are already being implemented in a number of settlements.



- Local governing bodies should consider the matter of including children of internally displaced persons into the categories of children who receive free food in school.
- Critically evaluate how prepared schools are to adhere to the standards of the New Ukrainian School for the first grades in the 2018/2019 academic year. When the school year begins, a monitoring should be held of how the classrooms for the first graders are equipped, whether the teachers have access to the necessary learning and teaching aids, and to test whether the additional preparation of the primary school teachers for the new program is up to the new program's standards. Provide the necessary finances to equip the classes in accordance with the new demands.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- This is the fifth year that hostilities are continuing in Ukraine. Their direct and indirect consequences negatively impact a wide variety of areas of society, including the educational process in middle schools. As this matter is highly important for society's continued development, and as the number of persons directly impacted by this situation is very large, the matter of children having access to quality education near the front lines and the matter of



helping schools and children in the region must remain on the agenda.

- It is necessary to fully understand the situation at hand in Ukraine. Even though full Ukrainian control over settlements located close to the contact line was established four years ago, due to a number of reasons – starting with the continuing hostilities and up to the general social and economic situation – the Ukrainian state so far hasn't provided the schools located near the front lines with everything necessary for the educational process. Schools have various needs depending on their situation, starting from repairs and up to office supplies. Naturally, it is necessary to stimulate the Ukrainian government to fulfill its positive obligations to guarantee access to education. However, it would also be good to continue providing spot help where it is truly needed.



- It is necessary to continue to put pressure on the Russian Federation as the state that has general effective control over the occupied districts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The goal of this pressure must be a real and continuous ceasefire. Hostilities that threaten tens of thousands of people who live in the zone near the contact line and that threaten basic human rights must be stopped. Moreover, the continuation of hostilities is a serious hurdle before fully restoring the damaged buildings and renewing the normal educational process. In some cases, this hurdle cannot be surpassed by any other means than stopping the fighting.
- It is necessary to be firm in insisting that the Ukrainian Armed Forces and other defense and law enforcement agencies abide by international law when it comes to educational facilities.

TO NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

- Create a system to collect and effectively exchange information about the needs of school near the front line and about the activity of humanitarian organizations and charitable foundations. Coordinate activities aimed at helping the schools and consolidate efforts in cases where significant resources must be mobilized to provide the necessary help.
- Continuously monitor access to education, the state of schools and their needs, and the quality of education provided.
- Continue providing humanitarian aid to schools and students in accordance with the needs such a monitoring system would reveal. Provide psychological and social support for staff and students who suffered from the conflict, and help increase the quality of the educational process.

