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## Hearing the voice of Donbas: art and literature as forms of cultural protest during war

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This paper analyzes literary, visual, and street art works of writers and artists from Eastern Ukraine produced during 2014. Two Donetsk artists, Serhii Zakharov and Anzhela Dzherikh, and two Luhansk writers, Serhii Zhadan and Olena Stepova, play with the myth of the proletarian Donbas, on the one hand, and debunk the popular perception of Donbas people as being in consent with the politics of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, on the other. They explore familiar tropes and images of Donbas and use guerrilla tactics (shock effects, provocativeness, and deception) to initiate public reaction to the war. Their works are united by their search for a shared communication space and direct access to the audience on occupied territories. These artists challenge the accepted perception of Donbas as a free but uncivilized space and participate in the creation of a new Donbas text. The interaction between politics, art, and activism makes their voices and vision powerful and infectious and can help achieve civic consolidation in Donbas.

**Keywords:** art; Ukraine; war in Donbas; ethnic conflict; artistic citizenship

### Introduction

“To Hear Donbas” (*uslyshat’ Donbas*) has become a propaganda motto of the Eastern Ukrainian politicians who have instigated and funded the separatist movement in the region in the aftermath of Euromaidan.<sup>1</sup> Local political leaders and oligarchs have capitalized on a strong sense of regional identity in fomenting ethnic hatred and distrust toward the central Kyiv authorities among the population in Donbas. This renewed claim of a unique Donbas identity was juxtaposed against the national Ukrainian identity, in keeping with the myth of “two Ukraines” that gained popularity in Western and Ukrainian scholarly and political discourse in the post-Soviet period.<sup>2</sup> It was precisely the contested Soviet legacy and ethno-linguistic distinctiveness of Eastern Ukraine that have been claimed as the main reasons of the separatist movement (Nechepurenko 2014; Sakwa 2014; Way 2014). This paper will analyze the roots of the separatist movement in Donbas and trace the artistic response of local Donbas artists and literati to the war in their attempts to create a public space for dialogue between the two sides.

The history of the region can shed light on the Soviet sentiment of the Donbas people after 1991. The region became a part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1918 after the failure of local Bolshevik leaders (Artem Sergeev, a.k.a. Comrade Artem, and

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Semen Vasilchenko) to establish an autonomous Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic within the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic. Unable to mobilize the local Ukrainian peasants to fight against the Central Rada troops, the Central Committee of Bolsheviks agreed to leave the territory to Ukraine. During the next several decades of rapid industrialization in the region, the ethnic profile of Donbas has changed from being predominantly rural Ukrainian to urban Ukrainian-Russian. The people of Donbas developed the cosmopolitan identity of “the Soviet people” which embraced persons of many linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Another factor that caused the eventual denationalization of the region is associated with the special working conditions in coal mines. Since the 1930s, Donbas has been one of the most dangerous regions in the world. Environmental pollution, rapid social transformation caused by *dekulakization*, industrialization, famine, and World War II all contributed to the creation of a stress-induced environment. Stress became a starting point for the transformation of individuals, making self-preservation and procreation dominant social values. The Stakhanovite movement, socialist competition, and labor dynasties annihilated the concepts of national identity, native language, and ancestral faith and contributed to the development of a more cosmopolitan (Osipian and Osipian 2006, 498) or civic (Kuromiya 2008, 109) type of identity. All these trends constituted the proletarian myth of Donbas: having lost their ties with traditional patriarchic society, the miner-workers performed risky labor tasks and earned their exclusive status in the Soviet system of social hierarchies. Because they were believed to “fulfil a sacral mission of subduing the depths of the earth, the worker-heroes formed the core of the Soviet mythology” (Bilokobyl’s’kyi 2013, 267). The dusty faces of miners, loaded wagons of coal, and black waste banks on the background of the rural setting of preindustrial Donbas all have symbolized socialist transformation of the old social order.

Taking into account the complex history of the region and the multiethnic profile of its people, the profound crisis of identity that millions of Eastern Ukrainians faced after 1991 seems a natural reaction to the major sociopolitical transformation of the region. Unlike Ukrainians in other regions, who could rely on their local linguistic, cultural, and religious traditions, the people of Donbas were more united by their Soviet legacy than by a sense of shared culture and traditions, as national surveys demonstrate (Shulha 2002). However, because independent Ukraine did not define itself as an ethnic state, the Donbas people felt themselves more or less comfortable within the Ukrainian state and enjoyed their regional privileges as a predominantly Russian-speaking community. Thereby, ethnic Russians and Russophones of the Donbas region could simultaneously retain a nonpolitical attachment to Russia and consider themselves “full-fledged members of a Ukrainian nation” (Szporluk 2002).

The perception toward Donbas underwent a significant transformation after the Orange Revolution in 2004. In the late 1980s, Donbas coal miners were in the vanguard of social protests that expedited democratic changes and eventually the collapse of the USSR. In the 2000s, their support for corrupt presidential contender Victor Yanukovich and denial of the democratic opportunities brought about by the Orange Revolution contributed to the stigmatization of Donbas people as “bandits” (Kuromiya 2008; Tkachenko 2005). The mythologization of Donbas as a free but unmanageable territory, alien to culture and civility, has become a popular cultural topic. For example, the Western Ukrainian writer Yurii Andrukhovych has emphasized the “colossal social-civil lag of Donbas” and contrasted the “medieval-feudal” or “Cro-Magnon/Neanderthal” people of Donbas to the “modern-bourgeois” people of the rest of Ukraine (2005, 2). Although the writer has denied any political meaning to his myth of Donbas,<sup>3</sup> it is clear that he expresses a widespread perception of the region as a sinister and corrupting force undermining everything Ukrainians want to

achieve. Commenting recently on the war in Donbas, Andrukhovych pointed again to the rupture between Ukrainian and Donbas cultures: “The conflict in Donbas is the war between the two cultures, between their ‘Russian civilization’ (*russkii mir*) and our ‘free European Ukraine’” (2015). Indeed, the war that erupted in the region in 2014 could only have happened because of the cultural vacuum that emerged in the absence of any literature about Donbas and by Donbas artists. Lately, there has been a consensus among Ukrainian intellectuals on the urgency of transforming the Donbas myth. Andrii Kurkov, a Ukrainian writer who is internationally known for his Russian-language novels, has claimed that support and promotion of Russian-speaking Ukrainian writers and artists from Donbas can transform the proletarian myth of the region. “We have the Kyiv and Lviv texts,” – Kurkov says – “why cannot we have the Donbas text?” (2015).

The most recent cultural and literary initiatives produced by two Donetsk artists, Serhii Zakharov and Anzhela Dzherikh, and two Luhansk writers, Serhii Zhadan and Olena Stepova, which are discussed in this paper, represent grassroots attempts to create a political literature and art, both in its classical and contemporary understanding. In the ancient Greek meaning, *politika* designates all types of activities, objects, and issues that have a universal concern for the community, or the polis; in a similar sense, the Roman concept of *res publica* signifies a public matter rather than a thing in isolation. Political art in the contemporary meaning is identified by a note of rebellion. “It has nothing to do with consensus and wide acceptance. It arises from the desire to think and act in a politically aware way ...” (Bieber 2011, 51). Moreover, the medium of social networks and public performances in which their works are being disseminated and performed is one of the operations of political art. Regardless of whether this art is aligned or not with the ideas of the public, the fact that it carves a space and adds its voice to other voices in public can be considered as the civic practice of artists. Randy Martin identifies public art’s goal:

It invites us to entangle art’s means and ends and the artist’s ability to create work and the space for it. [It] reconfigures the relation between public and private at a moment when public figures are judged as much on character as policy and citizens are asked to trade privacy for security ... Faith, security, risk, and affection combine uneasily in newsworthy attentions with those people, places and ideas labeled minority, marginal, or foreign. The assertion of properly shared identities jostles against cultural expressions that challenge the consensus conception. The work of artistic citizenship is both to make these fissures legible as matters available to common rumination and to provide a means by which we can navigate and negotiate the differences in our midst so that they become productive and not divisive. (Martin 2006, 5)

Zakharov, Dzherikh, Zhadan, and Stepova employ different strategies and motivations in their works: anarchist, autonomous, communal, humanist, and universalist. Some of these artists explore familiar tropes and images; others adopt guerrilla tactics (shock effects, provocativeness, and deception). What unites their works is the search for a shared communication space and their direct access to the audience on occupied territories. They turn art into an open sore on the collective body of their people. The interaction between politics, art, and activism makes their voices and vision powerful and infectious, if one follows Leo Tolstoy’s definition of art, and can help achieve civic consolidation in Donbas.

### **Serhii Zhadan**

In contrast to Andrukhovych’s attempts at orientalizing Donbas as an anarchic, uncivilized space (Appendix 1), Serhii Zhadan’s texts deal with *Ostalgie* – a term from East Germany for nostalgia for life under the socialist system. In his novels and poems, Zhadan focuses on excavating the Soviet past buried in the present. A transcultural geopoetry of Eastern

Ukraine not only constitutes a setting for Zhadan's works, but also serves as a metaphor of post-Soviet Ukraine in transition. He shows a persistent presence of transit zones between the present and the past (Kratochvil 2010). Presenting himself as Ukraine's most counter-cultural writer, Zhadan remains in opposition to both pro-Russian forces in his hometown of Kharkiv and the state authorities of Ukraine with their antiterrorist operation in Donbas. "You must understand, in Eastern Ukraine, people are still in shock," Zhadan said trying to explain the considerable support of the separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine in May to June 2014.

In the nineties, the industrial and agricultural economies collapsed entirely. Now when there is some degree of stability, people are afraid of losing what little they have. That is why they are willing to put up with the corruption [Yanukovich's regime – Yu. I.] (McGrane 2014)

Born into a working-class family in the Russophone town of Starobilsk, Zhadan writes in Ukrainian, which, as he says, is a political act in itself. His texts are wild and funny, while reflecting the pain of the economic collapse that devastated Donbas during the past 30 years. He presents himself as a voice of the underprivileged working class which he glorifies and ridicules simultaneously for its inability to change the system. In his poem "The Mushrooms of Donbas" (2007), a pump factory worker regrets losing his privileged status in the Soviet Union ("We were the *élite* of the proletariat"). After the collapse of the Ukrainian economy in 1991, the worker starts growing psychedelic mushrooms, but his new business is soon taken away by a local gang. The worker fights back, because he believes that "there are just things you have to answer for, things/you can't just let go."

Everything that you make with your hands, works for you.  
 Everything that reaches your conscience beats in rhythm with your heart.  
 We stayed on this land, so that it wouldn't be far for our children to visit our graves.  
 This is our island of freedom, our expanded consciousness of agriculture.  
 Penicillin and Kalashnikovs – two symbols of struggle,  
 the Castro of Donbas leads the partisans through the fog-covered mushroom plantations to the Azov Sea. (Zhadan 2007, 42)<sup>4</sup>

Kenarov (2015) has interpreted the meaning of a mushroom enterprise as a tiny "island of freedom" for the Donbas worker, not some theoretical nationalist idea of a country or an imagined community, but a specific plot of land that one owns and works daily. It is, to paraphrase John Locke, property that becomes private through one's own investment of labor into it. And this property, this personal plot of land, is the only land worth fighting for.

Despite Zhadan's outward declaration that his work is apolitical, his texts present a leftist ideology – if not Marxism–Leninism, then neo-leftism of the young European artists protesting against capitalist society. In other words, Zhadan's "leftism" is not so much an element of a political-philosophical system as a means of *décor* and *epatage*. His "leftism" also plays a crucial role in reviving the Soviet mythology of Eastern Ukraine (associated with the anarchist leader Nestor Makhno and Bolshevik revolutionaries Nikolai Shchors and Artem), the nostalgia for which has always been an important part of the Donbas identity.

In his recent works, Zhadan strives to introduce chaos into the system's orderly existence. He wants to live life as an act of rebellion – against the state machine and against consumer society. Only by infecting the system like a virus and by damaging it at its core can one eventually heal it. Since the beginning of the war in 2014, Zhadan remains actively engaged in organizing and performing at various cultural events (festivals, performances, and poetry readings) on the territories of Ukrainian-controlled Donbas (Severodonetsk, Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, and Mariupol). This part of Donbas experiences the strongest

influence of the separatist mood from the occupied territories and requires support of their grassroots democratic initiatives. Zhadan speaks for the entire Donbas – occupied and free – liberating it from the burden of the Soviet past and living through the traumatic events of the war with the people.

In *Fight for Her* (2014) – Zhadan’s collaborative album with the Kharkiv punk group “The Dogs in Space,” – the poet tackles the grey areas of post-Soviet Donbas identity. The first song of the album “Introduction” creates an intimate atmosphere of the bar stage; the poet addresses his audience as “brothers and sisters” and promises to turn them into “moral monsters.” The next three songs (“The Budget,” “An Unemployed,” and “The Country”) show workers as weakened, broken-down non-entities who can no longer withstand the injustices of the market economy. In “The Budget,” the lyrical persona reproduces the government’s trolling of Donbas workers: “Go to work, fill up the budget.” The lyrical persona is one of the Donbas workers who chooses to stay in his region to work for his country, as opposed to those who leave it to “sell pizza and clean swimming pools,” transparently hinting at Western Ukrainians who migrate en masse to Europe for better-paying jobs (“The Country”). The juxtaposition between a comfortable bourgeois lifestyle in Ukraine and the harsh mining reality of Donbas (“And while you were watching your evening news, I was finishing my last inhalation”) resonates with the line from the soundtrack of the cult film *The Sandpit Generals* (“When you were caressing your children I was asking for food, was freezing”). In the late 1970s, the film achieved great popularity in the Soviet Union and, according to official data, contributed to an increase in crime among Ukrainian youth, especially in the Eastern regions. The last songs “The White People” and “Somali” with their exotic images and stories of black slaves and pirates provide a commentary on the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine. A cobblestone, the only powerful weapon of the proletariat against the system (“The Weapon of the Proletariat” (2012)), is replaced with the Kalashnikov rifle; the former worker becomes an outlaw and now “shoots the sun in the sky from a Kalashnikov.” These songs can be also interpreted as an act of rebellion taken to its extreme.

Zhadan’s most recent collection of poetry “Life of Maria” (2015) tells the story of the war in Donbas through a series of meditations which become increasingly religious in content and form toward the end of the cycle. All poems in Zhadan’s collection are structured as a conversation either with the Virgin Mary or with a priest (Appendix 2). The title of the collection is not accidental. It is taken from Rilke’s poem “Life of Maria” to emphasize the affinity between the Austrian modernist poet and the Ukrainian post-modernist poet’s experiences of war; more precisely, the human soul’s wandering through the circles of the war hell. After the death of Christ, his disciples scattered around the world, and only the Virgin Mary carried her love to humankind. Zhadan’s acute sensitivity and humaneness make him a universal poet. He knows how to balance seriousness with sentimentality and when to fall silent in order to avoid excessive pomposity.

### **Olena Stepova**

A popular blogger and an emerging literary writer from Sverdlovsk (Luhanska People’s Republic), Stepova has become known thanks to her daily posts on Facebook since 1 June 2014. When communication with the rest of Ukraine was lost, Stepova began recording war atrocities and local people’s responses to them. Her “eavesdrops” (*podslushki*) of changing public opinion about the separatist movement won popularity first among the Facebook community, and later were assembled in a book, entitled *Everything Will Be*

*Ukraine!* (2014). The publication was sponsored by the renowned Russian writer Liudmila Ulitskaia who recognized Stepova's unique writing style as:

generated out of the writer's response to people's pain. She created a new type of literature, a people's book, in which the borderline between the writer and the readers is blurred. When professional historians will investigate the war between Ukraine and Russia, they will refer to this book as a most truthful source of information and testimony on a war that could have not happened and that should not have happened at all. (Stepova 2014, 5)

In the preface to her book, Stepova emphasizes the storytelling quality of her writing: "I do not write, I talk to people." She uses the medium of social networks to gain her voice as a representative of Ukrainian Donbas which stood in contrast to the one-sided image created in Ukrainian media in the spring of 2014. Her conscious orientation toward the audience outside of the war zone has defined her position vis-à-vis the local community (whom she describes as "full of complexes," "fearful and suspicious") as well as vis-à-vis the rest of Ukrainians ("I was afraid that my beloved Lviv will consider me a separatist"). Stepova believes that the popular motto "To Hear Donbas!" has never been realized by the Donbas people: "Everybody shouted 'To hear Donbas!' I think no one attempted to speak; shout – yes, demand – yes, but speak – no! I speak, and not only Ukraine but the entire world responds to me" (Stepova 2014, 8). The title *Everything Will Be Ukraine* is the author's response to her neighbors' question: "What do other Ukrainians say about us? Will there be Ukraine in our town?" And the writer answers: "Everything Will Be Ukraine!" Organized in chronological order, Stepova's stories document the emergence of the separatist movement in her hometown of Sverdlovsk. First, the local rebels mobilized the community around the idea of "federalization within Ukraine," which received mass support because of high pro-Russian sentiments. Once the city was taken by the Don Cossacks, the rebels split into several camps and exerted control over the various spheres of city life: some rebels extorted local businesses, some just robbed car owners, while others controlled road checkpoints. Attitudes toward the rebels began to change when many elderly people were absent, and their houses were taken over by professional Russian military personnel. The municipal council played a crucial role in the criminalization of the city. The city authorities had access to residents' personal information which was used to compile "death lists" of pro-Ukrainian citizens. The word "death" in many cases entailed physical elimination of the dissenters by the rebels without any trial.

The most difficult thing to learn, according to Stepova, was how to "balance" between "us" and "them" during the conflict. One grasps gradually the profile of "them" while reading Stepova's stories. Despite the popular belief that Donbas separatism was a revolt of the lumpen-proletariat, she shows that actual support for the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) was mostly among the *budzhetniki* – state-employed educators and technical intelligentsia. Paradoxically, the so-called proletariat turned out to be the most patriotic force in her town: they controlled security not only in their own factories, but also in public places – a function that was completely ignored by the local authorities and the police. Retired people also showed an active pro-Ukrainian position and confronted the Russian occupants. "The Pension Story" describes the expropriation of the property of a small supermarket by the Russian "liberators." They put the sellers and customers face down on the floor, while stealing the stock. Only a few old retired people were mercifully excluded from the humiliation. An old man approached an armed rebel: "Listen, boy, ... who are you?" – "I came to defend you. We are the army that defends you!" – the military man replied. "I see that you are from the army, I do not understand from whom you are defending us? Did the Germans occupy us again?" ... "We are defending you from the Ukies, Nazis, and the Right Sector who want to sell you into slavery to America." "Well, son, what kind of slavery are you talking

about? ... We are a burden on the state, America will not take us into slavery even for nothing, not to mention our organs ... ” The unarmed retirees went on the offensive, leaving the soldier terrified:

if you are a defender why do you threaten the women with your rifle? ... Why do you dishonor your grandfather’s heroic memory? ... Your grandfather now is reaching out for his gun in the heaven. He turns in his grave when he sees how his grandson ‘defends’ women by putting them face down on the asphalt ... Did your grandfather also rob stores? Did he kill Russians? Did he kill women? (Stepova 2014, 76)

Rumors became a mechanism by which the local community were brainwashed against the coming National Guard of Ukraine (NGU), who were imagined as invisible “Nazis.” In the story “The Phobias of Our Town,” Stepova records one such popular rumor:

The Russia-TV in the voice of auntie Olga broadcasts: “I told you, I warned you. You did not listen to me, they are coming to slaughter people. They knife everyone on their way and sell people’s organs either to Americans or to Europeans. Mostly to the U.S. They need our genes, because their produce is genetically modified. This is why their genes degenerate, and they want to buy our genes. We have good genes. That is why the Nazis sold us to the Americans. They come to get our organs and transport them frozen in refrigerators. Everybody’s organs, kids’ and men’s. Our houses will be taken by the banderites. Do you remember Tan’ka? The one who is married to Mishka? Well, the girl who left Sashka and had an affair with Van’ka, and who was beaten by Kat’ka? This Tan’ka works as a nurse. She said that she was given a secret task to collect information about everybody, and then, according to this data, they will decide who is to be slaughtered for organs first and who – second. Just in case the first ones won’t match the transplant recipient.” The crowd listens to Olga, some assent, some argue, some sigh, and some twist finger at their temples. Some swear that they were witnesses, some – victims. (Stepova 2014, 55)

The genre of the “eavesdrops” (*podslushki*) is employed by the author to portray the collective identity of the Donbas people. Spying has become the norm of everyday behavior in an atmosphere of mutual distrust and jealousy, when everyone spies on one another and denounces each other to the separatists’ commandant’s office. Stepova eavesdrops on people’s conversations in public places and presents them unfiltered. Formally written in a conversational mode and in a colorful *surzhyk* (a regional form of Ukrainian–Russian pidgin), Stepova’s stories often capture the events through the eyes of her close friends, colleagues, and neighbors who have limited access to information from outside the LPR. Stepova’s detached perspective, as realized in her use of the third person, helps readers to enter the minds and internal thoughts of people who find themselves in difficult-to-imagine situations of war. In the poem “Instagram of the War,” the lyrical persona is killed in the course of shelling in the first stanza, and relives her happy Soviet life throughout the rest of the poem (Appendix 3).

Through her distinctive feminine voice, Stepova produces a gendered account of memory of the war: even when talking about the rebels, she tries to humanize and inscribe them into the local community as one of “us.” Stepova’s writing demonstrates the extreme emotionalization and personalization of history that impede mutual understanding and conflict resolution through the presence of hope in the face of traumatic losses and death.

### Sergei Zakharov

A 47-year-old artist from Donetsk, Zakharov has been styled by art critics as a “Ukrainian Banksy” for his artistic provocations in occupied Donetsk amid the military escalation in July–August 2014. Like Banksy, Zakharov had to conceal his true identity behind the artistic association “Murzilki.” The plural “murzilki” was used to fake a collective identity



which in reality consisted of the artist and his photographer Mazurkevych who assisted the artist during the installations. Zakharov also prioritizes a direct connection between the artist and his constituency. But if Banksy creates an anti-establishment art targeting capitalist consumerist society, Zakharov challenges the separatist identity of his native Donetsk. As Zakharov himself has reflected on his artistic act,

how else the artist can express his dissent with what was going in Donetsk? The idea of street art caricatures originated in the spring [of 2014 – Yu.I.] when people with weapons and Russian flags appeared in Donetsk. I, like many other Donetsk residents, was outraged. But only when the militants occupied the town, I decided on the first “expedition.” (Zakharov 2014c)

Thus, he resorted to street art as a means of infiltrating people’s minds. Street art in Ukraine in general, and in Donbas in particular, has rarely been used as a means of counterculture communication with the state to the same extent as it is used in other post-socialist cultures. The wall graffiti in industrial areas of Ukrainian cities were not universal in their reach and served to separate the youth subculture groups from each other. Zakharov’s street art fits into this artistic niche. The multimedia, multimodal dimension of his installations allows him to comment upon the conflict that otherwise could not be done.

Before the war, Zakharov was an interior designer, only occasionally producing works of high art. In the early spring of 2014, when the streets of Donetsk became occupied by armed people, Zakharov began contemplating his projects, but his first installations of the caricature images of Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) commanders appeared only in late July, after the destruction of Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17. Zakharov (2014b) said he was outraged by this war crime: “Well, how else could I, as an artist, express my own revulsion? Street art has been always the quickest means of reaching an audience. I was pleased to see people’s reaction to my works immediately on the streets.” A caricature of DPR chief commander Igor Girkin shooting at his own temple, the field commander “Motorola” with his infernal wife-to-be, a clownish terrorist, and a symbolic death depicted wrapped in the flag of “Novorossiiia” appeared in various public places in Donetsk (Figure 1). During their first installation, Zakharov and Mazurkevych were stopped and searched by armed rebels who, luckily, did not find the other two caricatures in the car trunk. After this incident, Zakharov set up his works in daytime, one at a time, near the DPR headquarters at symbolic moments. For example, the cutout of “Motorola” and his bride appeared near the City Wedding Palace on the day of their wedding. The caricature was removed within half an hour, but the photos captured by passers-by flooded the Internet within minutes after their installation.

On 7 August 2014, Zakharov was kidnapped from his house, detained in a “cellar,” and three times taken out for mock execution. The DPR militants detained him on suspicion of nationalist propaganda activity. “Are you a religious man?” the prisoners asked him. “Can you spit on an icon? Now, imagine that you have spit on our icons” (Zakharov 2014a). International publicity that surrounded Zakharov’s arrest saved his life. Following Zakharov’s abduction, Mazurkevych asked Russian and Ukrainian journalists to create public pressure for his release. Russian artists in St. Petersburg set up an art tribute to Zakharov: the installation featured Zakharov dressed as the Grim Reaper threatening to execute a cowering pencil. After surviving two detentions and a series of physical torture by the DPR guards, Zakharov (2014b) does not make himself out to be a hero: “In captivity, there are no heroes. If they would force me to confess to J.F.K.’s murder, I would do it.” After his second release in October 2014, Zakharov managed to escape to Kyiv where he currently lives and works on projects of the Donetsk cultural initiative “IZOLYATSIA.” His new installation “The House of Cards” was performed both in Ukraine (Kyiv,



Figure 1. Serhii Zakharov's installations in Donetsk in July–August 2014.

Mariupol, and Slov'iansk) and abroad (Paris and Tokyo). The cards of the house depict Russian President Vladimir Putin and the main DPR separatists as the devil and his cronies. The artist's conception that the self-proclaimed "republics" of DPR and LPR only exist by virtue of the Russian leader's patronage was played out as the "Putin" card was kicked away. The construction is symbolically dismantled in front of the audience to reveal the wobbliness of the DPR. As Zakharov explained the idea of the performance, "the DPR will vanish once the main joker is eliminated" ("Kartochkii domik" 2014).



Figure 2. Anzhela Dzherikh's paintings. © [Anzhela Dzherikh]. Reproduced by permission of Anzhela Dzherikh. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

### Anzhela Dzherikh

Dzherikh is a 50-year-old artist from Donetsk. After the destruction of her house in the fall of 2014, she moved to Yalta (the native town of her husband). In a recent interview, she



Figure 3. "Egyptians." © [Anzhela Dzherikh]. Reproduced by permission of Anzhela Dzherikh. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.



Figure 4. “Shtirliz of Our Yard” and “Fellow Travelers.” © [Anzhela Dzherikh]. Reproduced by permission of Anzhela Dzherikh. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

explained her relocation to Crimea as the only affordable option at the time of a great humanitarian crisis in Donetsk (Dzherikh 2015). The main object of Dzherikh’s paintings is “Soviet person” (*sovetskii chelovek*) depicted in an expressive *lubok*-like manner. Her colorful images of the innocent *byt* of ordinary people are full of nostalgic recollections of life in Soviet times. In her interviews, she insists that she does not wax nostalgic about the



Figure 5. “Pure Art.” © [Anzhela Dzherikh]. Reproduced by permission of Anzhela Dzherikh. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

Soviet past per se, but simply recalls life when she was happy. Back in the USSR, “is where my childhood took place, where the people dearest to me were alive, and I felt good being with them” (“SSSR na kartiinakh” 2015). Her treatment of the Soviet past straddles the line between nostalgia and irony, which is evident in such paintings as “I am a little girl, I do not go to school. I never saw the USSR, but I still love it” and in the image of a spooky pioneer, a popular character of Soviet children’s folklore (Figure 2).

The universalism of Dzherikh’s images and the intimate atmosphere of Soviet everyday life carry the viewer away from the harsh realities of post-Soviet Donbas to the secluded world of its Soviet past. Her images penetrate the imagination like fairytales and do not require the involvement of everyone since the folklore values require not an articulation of the participants’ values and cultivation of self-expression, but a preservation of the image of the Soviet man in its “primeval” form. The motif of antiquity is played out in the painting “Egyptians” (2012) in which a Soviet family poses on the beach in pharaoh costumes (Figure 3). Tattoos of Stalin’s and Lenin’s heads on the chest of one of the men reflect the worship of the Communist leaders as cult figures who are as ancient to the post-Soviet audience as pharaohs. The only figure not dressed in a costume is a girl who blows into a seashell in the direction of her family, as if trying to unlock the secrets of Soviet mythology. The freezing of the Soviet past is reinforced by such markers as dates on calendars, newspaper titles, vintage-style postcards, wallpaper, and other objects of Soviet everyday life. Dzherikh uses different manners, techniques, genres, and topics, but her emphasis is never critical. She creates a proper ironic distance from the past



Figure 6. “A Submarine in the Steppe of Ukraine.” © [Anzhela Dzherikh]. Reproduced by permission of Anzhela Dzherikh. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

without making any judgments. Humaneness, subtle irony, and childlike empathy are the chief characteristics of her artistic style. The paintings created before the war in Donbas are connected through a nostalgic tone. We see her characters (mostly female) in prosaic everyday activities: making pies in front of the TV while watching the Soviet hit “The Seventeen Instances of War,” listening to Soviet pop-singers, or enjoying traveling companionship on a train (Figure 4). Very rarely does the artist provide her own social commentary, of the type evident in the painting “Pure Art” (Figure 5).

One of the paintings deserves special note: “A Submarine in the Steppes of Ukraine” was made in 2013 but acquired a new sociopolitical interpretation in 2014 (Figure 6). The image of the submarine, the four figures crossing the road, and the logo “The Beatles” on the bag of one of the figures – all allude to the well-known song “Yellow Submarine.” The song was written by The Beatles in 1966 as a nonsensical children’s song, with only a yellow submarine surviving by the end of the song. When the pacifist movement in the West expanded into mass protests in response to the Vietnam War, the yellow submarine became a symbol of escapism. As Donovan commented on the meaning of the song:

it’s not really a submarine, it’s really about the life that they had been forced into living inside their own lives in the white tower and not really having any contact with reality out there anymore, and we all live in a yellow submarine ... we are insulated from the outer world. (Donovan 2014)



Figure 7. “One soldier in the field *is* a warrior.” © [Anzhela Dzherikh]. Reproduced by permission of Anzhela Dzherikh. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

The same could be said about Dzherikh's image of Donbas. It is insulated in the comfort zone of the Soviet past. The nostalgia of Donbas people places them outside space and time, since the old life they long for is no longer retrievable. By placing her characters in the idyllic landscapes of peaceful Soviet Donbas, she emphasizes a sense of acute dislocation that characterized the lives of many Donbas people, who after the collapse of the USSR developed an unsettling lack of fit between their internalized dispositions and the new rules of the market economy.

In her most recent works, Dzherikh retreats from her usual topic – Soviet everyday life (Figure 7). She wrote that after surviving daily artillery shelling, she came to appreciate every single minute and has created paintings in even greater quantities (Dzherikh 2015). The landscapes and images of her new paintings are becoming more universal and can no longer be identified as Soviet or post-Soviet. The Spanish subtexts (the Don Quixote characters, Anzhela's self-representation as Salvador Dali) can be interpreted as artistic escapism from the Soviet home which no longer exists as a fetish object in her memory. In her retreat to universal themes, the artist epitomizes unsullied individualism, an inner-directed free spirit who answers the muse, not the state. The idea of artistic citizenship, by contrast, implies group membership. Yet the turbulent experience of civil war, where the private realm of the individual leaves off and the public domain of civic life takes up, is neither so simple nor clear-cut. Her latest installations "The House in Which I Live" and the collage "We Want Peace!" comprising her earlier paintings present her own civic position regarding the war in Donbas.

## Conclusion

I want to turn to another quote from Andrii Kurkov's interview about the possibility of creating a new Donbas culture based on its own traditions. He recognizes the potential of the proletarian myth of Donbas, which should be reanimated and modernized:

There is no sense in abandoning the old and authentic elements only because they were created during Soviet times. One can reject the old tradition if it has neither intellectual charge nor artistic value ... When people live in Donbas and have not read any book written about their region because such literature has not been created, they begin to believe only in the past, i.e., in the Soviet myth. (Kurkov 2015)

The search for a collective identity and "communitarianism" have always marked the Donbas people's experience during Soviet and post-Soviet times. However, a collective identity cannot answer the question "Who am I?" It can only temporarily consolidate society around a common historical past, cultural heritage, and language during the time when everything is moving and shifting. But in the long run, the people of occupied Donbas will have to answer the question of their identity not on the collective but on the individual level. During the past 24 years of Ukraine's independence, these people were squeezed into a collective identification as "Ukrainians." Now is the time for them to make their own individual choices of national allegiance. While official ideology, whether national Ukrainian or separatist, tries to box people into collective identity, artists focus on the identities of individuals and encourage their audience to take responsibility for their own life and destiny.

## Notes

1. In the early spring of 2014, when the separatists seized the regional administration in Donetsk and the central Ukrainian government started the antiterrorist operation (ATO), one of the richest Ukrainian oligarchs and the "owner of Donbas" Rinat Akhmetov made an appeal to the Ukrainian government to stop the operation and to "listen to the voice of Donbas people." <http://narodnarada>.

[info/news/ahmetov-podderjal-separatistov-sozdaet-svoi-news-1567.html](http://info/news/ahmetov-podderjal-separatistov-sozdaet-svoi-news-1567.html). Accessed 17 March 2016.

2. For further reading, see Mykola Ryabchuk's "Two Ukraines?" In his 2002 paper "Ukraine: One State, Two Countries," Ryabchuk carved the space for a "third Ukraine" that has emerged out of the ambivalence and ambiguity of the contest between the Soviet and European legacies of Ukraine. However, his main argument of the bilateral structure of Ukraine has remained unchanged.
3. In his interview for *L'vivs'ka hazeta* on 5 January 2006, Andrukhovych said that he only tried to produce an "artistic condensation of ideas and images connected to this region."
4. All translations from Ukrainian are mine, unless otherwise stated.

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### Appendix 1. Yurii Andrukhovych, *Dyavol khovaet'sia v syri*

Sarmatia is to the east and the south of the Dnieper River, in the South and the East of Ukraine. It is a challenge. For all Ukraine Sarmatia is a challenge, because it is plain and dry and speaks mainly Russian, it is dense, anachronistic, depressively industrialized, proletarianized and traditionally criminalized; it always was and will be the territory of fugitives – for example from Turkish slavery, and after that of homeless recidivists, unemployed gatherers of hemp and poppy and such godless anarcho-Orthodox types (who are mostly loyal to the authorities as a whole unless they touch their proletarian monuments); it easily succumbs to political manipulation in connection with a black-and-white view of the world; drinks vodka "Shakhtars'ka" with beer "Sarmat;" it doesn't like or at least doesn't like enough anything Western, for Europe is too far, too satiated, comfortable and too artificial. Europe was invented in Kyiv in order to annoy the brain. Europe doesn't exist for it, because Europe could betray; [Sarmatia] produces unlawful coal from unlawful mines with the hands and backs of old women and underage kids. It's an indivisible totality of zones – of industry and prison, closed, prohibited, free economic zones. [It] alludes to a Dreamland – a big proto-cultural wasteland which it very much wants to fill with something. But with what can it be filled? (Andrukhovych 2006, 129)

### Appendix 2. Serhii Zhadan, *Life of Maria*

– Where are you from, a black caravan, a bird's flight?  
 – We are, the chaplain, folks of a town that died.  
 We came here bringing fatigue and submission.  
 Tell your people there's no sense to continue the mission.  
 Our town was made of stone and iron.  
 Each of us has a travelling bag in our hands now.  
 Each bag is full of ashes collected at gun sight.  
 Now even our dreams smell like fire.  
 Women in our town were placid and bright.  
 Their fingers used to touch the abyss at night.  
 Wells were deep in our town, like our veins.  
 Churches were spacious. We burnt them themselves.  
 The gravestones tell best about us.  
 Can you just talk to us, chaplain?  
 Give us your love, clench the vise.  
 You were taught how to confess and baptize.  
 Tell us why they burnt our town.  
 Tell they did it mean to fire it.  
 Tell, at least, the guilty ones will be punished.  
 Tell at least what the news passes over in silence.

– Well, let me tell you what the loss is.  
 All guilty people will be punished of course.  
 And the innocent ones face the same fate too.  
 Atonement gets even those who have nothing to do.  
 Why did you get into dark torrents?  
 You should have read the books of the prophets.  
 You should have avoided the hellish holes.  
 It's important that a layman don't see Credo in action.  
 Remember what the prophets say about patience and pain,  
 About the birds that fall on cities like stone rain?  
 This is the moment when all losses commence.  
 In the end it's getting even worse, I won't even progress.  
 What is the difference between us? Like between consonants and vowels.  
 All are ready to accept death if it happens to someone else.  
 No one ever in this life avoids atonement.  
 I always tell this to my people when I've nothing to say.  
 I know nothing about inevitability of redemption.  
 I know neither where you can live nor how you can be, not to mention.  
 I talk about what is natural to us all.  
 If you could only know how unlucky we're all.

### Appendix 3. Olena Stepova, "Instagram of the War"

Her spring.  
 she cooked a rose jam  
 adding prunes, tarragon and mint into it.  
 Her husband has lung cancer, she – varicose veins.  
 Their pain was ended by a shell  
 hitting the kitchen ...  
 ... Before the shell there was May.  
 She walked through the puddles with her friends.  
 She exulted. She felt needed.  
 Well, this May was needed by her too.  
 They took everything from her.  
 Her youth, spring, and faith.  
 Life somehow has faded, goddammit.  
 The world has been filled with pain. It became dismal and gray.  
 Before there were dates, the waltz, prom, kisses,  
 career, and work ...  
 She was deprived of everything. It's not important by whom.  
 It vexes her how life had passed by her.  
 She wanted to get something back.  
 "Remember, – she told her friends, –  
 How we were marching in formation?  
 May First, Victory Day. We're proud of each other.  
 How we received a bonus and then  
 celebrated it with ice-cream and port  
 in the park, and talked about  
 how great is that Comrade Lenin is still alive.  
 How we dreamed to get to the Mausoleum,  
 exhausting themselves in endless *subbotniks*.  
 How we wrote letters to Reagan, released peace doves.  
 And, then, retirement, neighbors' funerals. Welfare recipients. Hospital.  
 Bribes for the doctors.  
 For entertainment we had only the garden and making jam.  
 In jars.

Don't know why so much. No one eats sweets at home.  
A glance into the abyss when the spoon scratches the saucer's sides.  
I do not know why, I feel we were deceived somehow.  
They call us, look, to the USSR.  
Perhaps, the old life will come back.  
One needs to believe, you see, Vera,  
that we'll wake up happy one day."  
This was her youth and her spring,  
Like a jump through the years into eternity.  
And this husky voice putting her into lethargy  
Gave her a dream, promised infinity.  
"Putin, save us!" – she prayed standing on her knees.  
She dreamt about the greatness of Rus. Mausoleum.  
Lenin smiling at her.  
She decided to endure. Hunger. Impecuniosity. Bullets.  
She could not just admit that  
she was deceived again ...  
... She cooked a rose jam,  
adding prunes, tarragon and mint into it.  
Her husband has lung cancer, she – varicose veins.  
Their pain was ended by a shell  
hitting the kitchen ...