

Five years of war: 1,825 days and how many more?

———— June 2019 ————

Based on interviews among the civilian population of government-controlled
and non-government controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts

This publication was prepared by members of the Sviatohirsk Group with the support of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (Geneva, Switzerland).

To ensure the security and safety of the group members, the publication does not contain personal information about the authors nor the interviewees.

DISCLAIMER: the opinions, experiences and terminology presented in this publication should not be taken as a reflection of the views or positions of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD). These texts contain responses to interviews conducted with civilians affected by the conflict in eastern Ukraine, as they were conveyed by those who participated in this project. HD's role in this context has been to facilitate the group's meetings and enable this joint project, but not to determine the tone or content of the text.

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue is a Swiss-based private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to promote the prevention, mitigation and resolution of armed conflicts through dialogue and mediation.

Reproduction of all or part of this publication may be authorised only with written consent and acknowledgement of the source.

Table of Contents

1. About the Sviatohirsk Group	6
2. Foreword from the Sviatohirsk Group	7
3. Map of interview locations	8
4. Key conclusions based on the interviews	9
5. Report on the interviews	12
5.1. Expectations and current concerns	12
5.2. End of the conflict and possibility of coexistence	22
5.3. Justice after the conflict	33

1. About the Sviatohirsk Group

We are a group of people who live on both sides of the contact line and have been affected by the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Through joint activities, we aim to find something that brings us together, and to make the voice of those affected by conflict heard, in order to draw attention to important peacemaking questions.

The Sviatohirsk Group has 15 members, including internally displaced persons (IDPs), members of local councils in government-controlled areas of Ukraine (GCAs), students and ATO veterans, as well as representatives of humanitarian, human rights protection and religious organisations dealing with the effects of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine.

2. Foreword from the Sviatohirsk Group

When people heard the first sounds of war, they thought that everything would be over soon, that they would be able to return to normal life, live out the plans they had. Five years have since passed... 1,825 days... five years of war that have destroyed people's plans, ties with family and friends.

Most people, for whom the war became the norm, are united in their desire to end the hostilities. Overcoming the consequences of the war is not a simple task. This task asks difficult and painful questions of not only politicians but also everyone affected by the conflict. It is already time to raise and discuss these questions.

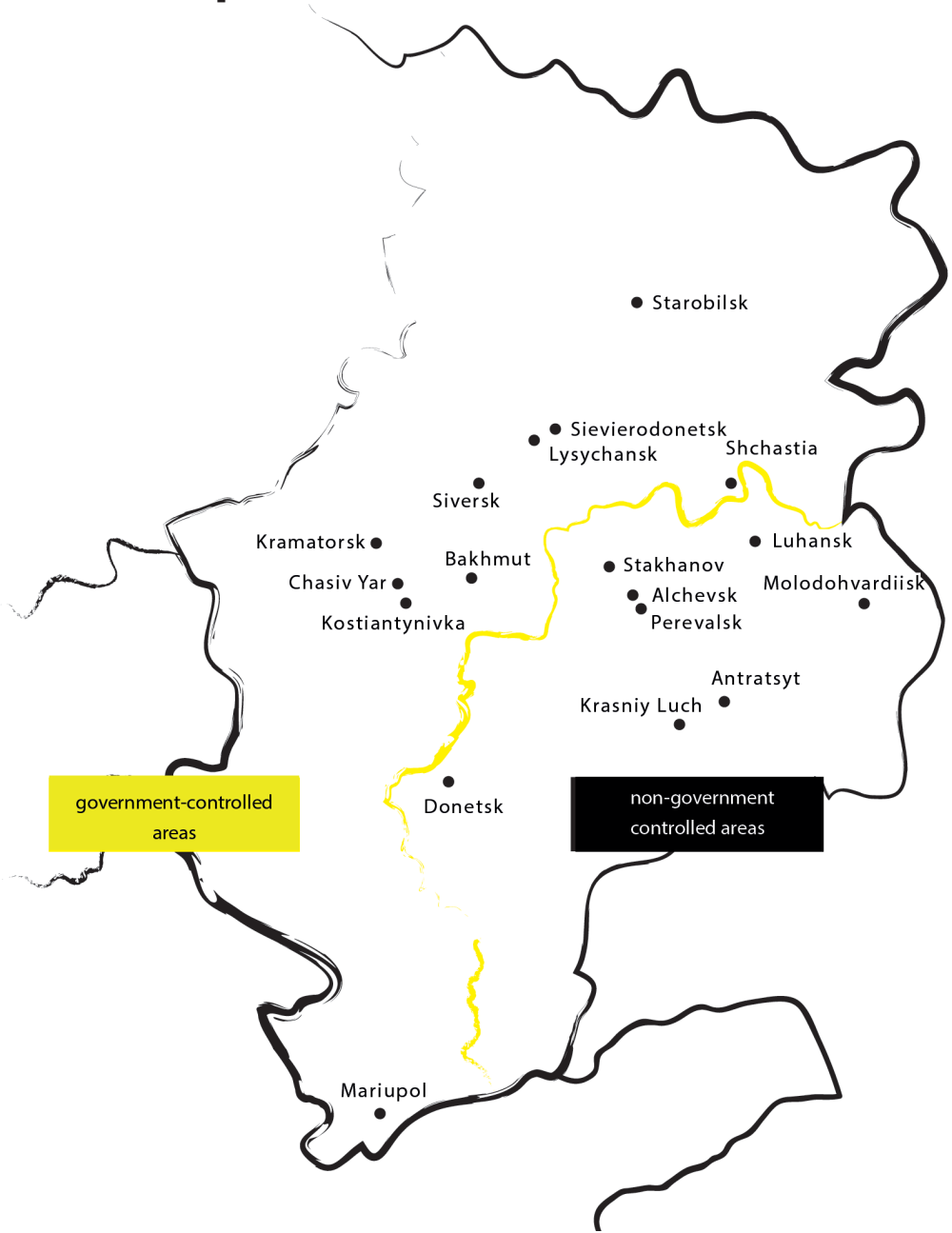
As people affected by the conflict, we asked ordinary people who live on both sides of the contact line about their fears, visions of the future, views on ending the conflict and post-conflict justice, in order to find common ground. As a result of our joint work, we understood that despite the difference in views, people on both sides of the contact line have strong points of commonality. And conveying these commonalities, as well as real views of the people to decision – makers and Ukrainian society is our objective.

From December 2018 to February 2019, members of the Sviatohirsk Group conducted 84 in-depth interviews. These consisted of 59 interviews with residents from government-controlled areas (GCAs) and 25 with those in the non-government controlled areas, or NGCAs, of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

The sample of respondents in the NGCAs was selected using the 'snowball' method, including people known to members of the Sviatohirsk Group and who lived in the following places: Alchevsk, Antratsyt, Donetsk, Luhansk, Perevalsk, Stakhanov, Krasniy Luch and Molodohvardiisk. In GCAs, the respondents were from Bakhmut, Kostiantynivka, Kramatorsk, Lysychansk, Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, Siversk, Starobilsk, Shchastia and Chasiv Yar. IDPs were included from localities in the NGCAs (See Map of interview locations on p.8).

The report on the interview findings was prepared by members of Sviatohirsk Group. It reflects the different positions of the respondents, including more radical views. The report is based exclusively on the interviews and should not be viewed as the position of the Sviatohirsk Group.

3. Map of interview locations



4. Key conclusions based on the interviews

Fears and visions of the future

1. Respondents in both NGCAs and GCAs of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts recount the same experience when hostilities started – what was happening **seemed temporary**. Consequently, the conflict reduced everyone’s planning horizon to **‘living one day at a time’**.
2. In general, local people on both sides of the contact line **feel fatigue from the conflict as well as a loss of faith in the future**. **The conflict is becoming ‘normal’**; the longer it lasts, the more adverse effects it has on people living in the region.
3. People on both sides of the contact line identified common fears, hopes and priorities.
 - **Fears:** worsening of the conflict (threats to individual security), loss of homes, economic instability and loss of social ties.
 - **Hopes:** peace, end to the armed conflict, security and safety, stability and a predictable future, opening or legalisation of borders separating the territories along the contact line.
 - **Priorities:** universal human values and concern to protect life, security and prospects for economic development.

End of the conflict, possibility of coexistence and reconciliation

4. Most respondents in both territories shared the common **desire for the conflict to end**. This factor has to become a unifying one for all parties to the conflict, regardless of their views and convictions, including political leaders, civilians and various stakeholders who could initiate the reconciliation process.
5. Respondents on both sides of the contact line are mostly in favour of a **peaceful and diplomatic settlement of the conflict**, despite differing views on ways to end the conflict.
6. Most respondents believe that **coexistence and reconciliation between people on both sides are possible** under certain conditions, despite the presence of opposing opinions. The search for common ground could be based on a **common goal** such as improvement of the social and economic situation in the region and its economic recovery.

7. Some people on both sides of the contact line **feel powerless in influencing conflict-related political decisions**, and that their readiness for reconciliation is not a decisive factor in this process.

Justice: who is responsible for the conflict?

8. Despite different views about who should be held responsible, most respondents on both sides of the contact line agree on the following.

- **The demand for justice:** finding people guilty of crimes should be done on a case-by-case basis; the process of bringing people to account on both sides should be fair according to the law.
- **Being resident in NGCAs is not a crime in itself.**
- **There should be no impunity for those who committed grave crimes.**
- Taking into account the differences in opinions on both sides of the contact line, a significant number of respondents attribute responsibility for the conflict to **political decision-makers at national and regional levels.**¹

9. According to some respondents, real reconciliation will be possible only on condition that **those who stayed in NGCAs and who have not committed grave crimes are unafraid of returning to Ukraine**. Overcoming this fear will depend largely on Ukraine's state policies. These include:

- the concept of **transitional justice and respective laws** that would provide clear answers to questions about who will and will not be sanctioned or prosecuted
- **public assurances** by Ukraine's officials promising people in NGCAs that those who did not commit any serious conflict-related crimes will not be accused and prosecuted, with their rights protected by the state of Ukraine
- an **information policy** that aims to retain the connection of people in NGCAs with the state of Ukraine, as well as providing them with access to objective information about the situation in Ukraine.

¹ Authors' note: based on the interviews, this refers to the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the so-called 'LDPR'.

10. Most differences in opinion do not depend on the place of the respondent's residence: a similar range of views is present in both GCAs and NGCAs. There are proponents of and opponents to every idea regarding the armed conflict raised by the project on both sides. This has brought us to an overwhelmingly simple yet significant conclusion: it is the presence of different opinions that brings together communities across the contact line. **Because we still live peacefully side by side with those who have similar or completely opposing opinions, both within Ukraine and within the NGCAs, this is real proof that we can coexist peacefully after the conflict is over.**

5. Report on the interviews

5.1. Expectations and current concerns

Vision of the future when the conflict started

Many respondents define the exact timing differently when describing the start of the conflict. Their answers ranged from the Maidan events in 2013 to the start of active hostilities in spring-summer 2014. At the same time, the common thread in respondents' answers is a perception of life before the conflict as measured and stable, with positive hopes for future development of the region.

Most respondents on both sides of the contact line emphasise that, when the armed conflict started, they regarded the situation as temporary and expected the conflict to be over soon. Nobody anticipated hostilities.



“Before the 2014 events, it seemed that Ukraine would prosper. In any case, there was this feeling that life was getting easier. At that time I associated my future with my country.”

Luhansk

“When the army got involved in the conflict, we could not believe to the last that something could happen. Even during the events in Sloviansk, nobody could believe that we will be in the occupied territory.”

IDP from Krasnyi Luch

“We thought that it will be over with the change of those in power: there will be arrests, change of officials, but nobody could imagine that the situation would escalate all the way to violent hostilities.”

Shchastia

“May and June 2014. Those were the two most terrible months of my life. Because the world you were living in really collapsed in a second. You realise that the city is captured. There are no authorities whatsoever.”

Starobilsk, an IDP from Luhansk

During the active phase of hostilities, interviewees in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts had a common vision of the future. Most of them remarked that nobody expected anything good to come from that situation. People lived – or rather, survived - one day at a time.



“There were no thoughts about the future at that time, you survived another day – that was it.”

Alchevsk

Everyone hoped that the war would be over soon. Expectations of duration ranged from two weeks to six months, with the situation then soon resolved one way or another. However, there were already contrasting expectations of the next stage. Some people saw their future and the future of the region ‘under the Russian Federation’s protection’; many people were inspired by the ‘Crimean Scenario’; still others were hoping to become independent. Some people saw their future remaining with Ukraine. They were hoping that “everything would be resolved soon, the army would bring things under control and detain those behind the disturbances”. Most residents did not show any affiliation with any side, and did not actively participate in the conflict.

The following quotes are from respondents from both sides of the contact line.



“I realised that nothing good would come out of it. In analysing the events in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia I realised that the same would happen to our region, without prospects.”

Alchevsk

“I was convinced that the region had committed suicide. I was in a complete stupor. I tried not to think about what would happen next.”

Starobilsk

Due to the sense of physical danger, as well as for ideological reasons, many people left the conflict, fleeing to ‘nowhere’ with only their few most necessary and valuable possessions. Some refused to leave – mostly elderly people. With time, IDPs were becoming more active and tried to establish themselves in new places, but many returned to the NGCAs.



“I was very well aware that if there was any risk to my life, the lives of my children, my relatives, I would have to leave this region.”

Sievierodonetsk

“I didn’t even think of staying [in Luhansk], no matter how hard it is to leave your home and enter the unknown.”

Sievierodonetsk, an IDP from Luhansk

In summary, respondents’ expectations at the start of the conflict were as follows.

- 1) Before the conflict, there were positive hopes for continuing regional development.
- 2) With the start of hostilities, most people hoped that the conflict would be over soon and that their lives would go ‘back to normal’.
- 3) People in NGCAs had different reactions to the uncertainty over the future and to security threats in the context of an armed conflict: some people left (going to Ukraine and to Russia), and some stayed.

Fears: current concerns and worries

The biggest concern is the resumption of active hostilities. Without exception, all residents in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, both GCAs and NGCAs, share this fear.



“The biggest concern of locals is that the armed hostilities may resume and that the war will come back to our cities.”

Perevalsk

“The worsening of military conflict – this is the biggest horror. More widely, I keep thinking that the region will be without water. It will be a colossal problem.”

Mariupol

“The concern is that the conflict will return to its active, hot phase. People are already tired of the war!”

Alchevsk

Local people are tired of living with constant pressure and complete uncertainty, and with no confidence in tomorrow.



“My biggest concern is uncertainty.”

Alchevsk

“We are tired of living without a sense of the future. You do not know where your life might end. We have lost our homes, the people we knew; families are far apart from each other.”

Starobilsk

Life, children, property – these are the things that people are most concerned about. Continuing fears are those of losing a house, conflict within families because of opposing views and loss of social connections.



“I am worried about my personal security, in case shots are fired and I have to move somewhere again.”

Sievierodonetsk, an IDP from Luhansk

“Not seeing your loved ones. It is very scary.”

Donetsk



“I miss the places dear to me, and the people that I used to be in contact with. They stayed there. Some left for Russia; I miss them too. Some of my friends and relatives died there, and I didn’t attend their funerals, which haunts me. As if I have renounced my whole previous life. I just want to have an opportunity to come back home.”

Sievierodonetsk, an IDP from Luhansk

“Those who live on the front line in the ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ are concerned with losing their homes, while those who have already lost them are preoccupied with searching for new ones.”

Donetsk

Instability, lack of jobs, issues with payment of pensions, overall social insecurity and the absence of a legal framework in NGCAs are also major concerns.



“Most of all I am worried about my personal security, being completely unprotected from arbitrary treatment by authorities [the so-called LPR authorities].”

Alchevsk

“The issue of pensions earned in Ukraine is worrying. I am concerned with the state of the economy and the high prices.”

Perevalsk

“People are anxious about possible instability... The soaring foreign currency exchange rates.”

Mariupol

The quotes above illustrate fears common to people on both sides of the line of contact, concerning: deterioration of the conflict (and consequent threats to individual security), loss of homes and economic instability, and loss of social ties. We conclude that people both in GCAs and NGCAs have a similar experience of hostilities.

The differences in fears depend not so much on the place of residence but rather on the difference of opinions, including political views.

- The fear of Russia establishing control over the territory:



“I am worried that our city will be under Russian control. Because it will dramatically change everything. And that will put a stop to the city’s development.”

Mariupol

“We fear an offensive and becoming a part of the LDPR.”

Lysychansk

- Fears of reprisals by the Armed Forces of Ukraine:

“If the Ukrainian army comes here, it will be a massacre, and this fear is not unfounded.”

“The only concern I have is the Ukrainian army’s offensive against the DPR.”

Donetsk

- The prospect that the situation will drag on for much longer:

“This is really scary, to have a generation of people who do not know about a different life, for whom the war is an accepted reality.”

Alchevsk

- The prospect that the situation in NGCAs will remain ‘as is’ (i.e. that the territory will remain unrecognised and people will continue to be unprotected, outside a legal framework, as basically hostages of the situation):

“People are concerned that the ‘young republic’ has an unrecognised legal status. This is very relevant for students: the degrees and diplomas received in the ‘LPR’ are not valid in other countries.”

Perevalsk

“Now I am concerned with the uncertainty, being unprotected, emotional fatigue, the looming environmental disaster, systematic destruction of enterprises, upbringing of children in schools in an unpatriotic spirit.”²

Antratsyt

² Authors’ note: here the respondent was referring to a spirit of Ukrainian patriotism.

Local residents also have concerns about purges, mob justice, the prospect of a frozen conflict for many years to come, and even the start of a world war. All of these concerns stem from the questions of ‘Who will win?’ and ‘What will be the consequences for civilians?’



“The critical issue is which government will be here, when the war is over – that will determine the future of those who supported the losing side.”

Perevalsk

How do you see the future today?

Many respondents on both sides of the line of contact still describe themselves as living ‘one day at a time’. Their lives are divided into ‘before’ and ‘after’ the start of the conflict. People in the NGCAs often mention the word ‘survive’, and share their concerns about the lack of jobs. Some people are still considering the option of leaving – “we don’t want to, but we are ready”.

It is important to note that respondents from the conflict area are hopeful about a peaceful resolution of the conflict in future.



“We are waiting for peace to come, and then everything will go back to normal by itself.”

Stakhanov

“If only they didn’t shoot. We expect some kind of stabilisation of this armed conflict.”

Sievierodonetsk, an IDP from Luhansk

“The war will be over, and normal, peaceful life will start. People will be able to find work.”

Starobilsk

For some people, the consequences of peaceful resolution of the conflict do not matter – the main thing is for the military action to stop completely.



“Those who are neutral about everything, they just want it all to end and they don’t care where they will be, be it in Ukraine, in Russia or with autonomy.”

Alchevsk

However, some respondents do have preferences regarding the future of the region. The visions expressed include:

- Joining Russia:



“We want to be with Russia, but the reality says otherwise.”

Stakhanov

“Ukraine will cede these territories and we will peacefully become part of Russia.”

Perevalsk

“Many people wait for the Russians to come. They think that this is good...”

Mariupol

- Coming back to Ukraine:

“What we wait for most of all is the establishment of peace in Donbas as well as the recovery of its industrial potential. It is especially important now that Russia leaves us alone. The people of Ukraine will figure out their own authority in their own state.”

Luhansk

“People are tired of the ‘DPR’; they want Ukraine...”

Mariupol, an IDP from Donetsk

- A future as in Transnistria or Israel:

“Many people have already accepted that Luhansk’s future will be roughly like that of Transnistria, where the conflict has been in progress for 20 years already with no end in sight.”

Luhansk

“The Israeli scenario – there is war with a specific territory where this war is waged.”

Kramatorsk

Most respondents are convinced that the independent development of the so-called L/DPR has no potential:

“The independent ‘Luhansk People’s Republic’ is a utopia. Everyone understands that we cannot exist only with our own resources. And, of course, everyone expects this conflict to be over.”

Alchevsk



“At first we, as local residents, expected the conflict to end and then we would be part of Ukraine. This was the first phase of the conflict. In the middle of the conflict we thought that we would become part of Russia. Now we realise that neither Ukraine nor Russia needs us. Our expectation is that we will survive...”

Donetsk

Some people in those territories wish for a return to life “as it was before, before the conflict”, which is most likely impossible. For this reason, there is a need to look for common ground and to find ways towards peaceful coexistence.

The respondents also agree that the war has an adverse effect on the economy, resulting in the loss of jobs and the closure of enterprises and businesses.



“Economic factors and hopelessness bother them [local residents] more than the fact that it’s not part of Russia.”

Kostiantynivka

“The economic situation in our city is awful. Almost all the plants have closed down. The conflict has brought a lot of destruction; it has damaged the economy; a lot of roads and bridges have been destroyed, and also some apartment buildings and private houses. A lot of people have left, especially young people; many specialists have left the city.”

Lysychansk

There is a perception that some are gaining financially from the conflict.



“Someone is definitely benefiting from the war, and most of the money has already been drained.”

Mariupol

In general, on both sides of the contact line people are tired, many of them have lost their hope in the future. Some people have become used to this state of affairs, which is frightening in itself – it is when the armed conflict becomes the norm. Many respondents emphasise that this is a protracted conflict, and the longer it lasts the more damaging it is for the people affected, and for the prospects of resolution.



“People do not believe that the situation will be better or worse. It has lasted too long already. There are no changes in either direction. I believe that the people have simply given up. People think that they can’t do anything about it.”

Mariupol

However, there is also a widely shared hope for stability and a better future.



“People want peace, they want to be sure of tomorrow.”

Alchevsk

There are those hoping that they themselves, like other people, can learn to forgive:



“Something must happen to ‘sober’ people up a little bit. So that they could learn how to make conclusions and reach out.”

Chasiv Yar

People are brought together by their hopes for: peace, the absence of armed conflict, improved security, and the opening or legalisation of borders separating territories along the contact line. All of this could help to reunite families and foster a shared future. There are common fears shared by respondents on both sides of the contact line. There are also common priorities – to uphold universal human values and fear the loss of the most important things.



“We would like to say, one wonderful day, that everything is over, everything is resolved, that there will be no night shooting or shelling somewhere in the distance, to breathe easy, knowing there is no more war. I think that everyone wants it, both those who support Russia and those who support Ukraine, as well as those who do not care about who they live with.”

Luhansk

5.2. End of the conflict and possibility of coexistence

Ways to end the conflict

At the start of the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014, people on both sides of the contact line thought that it would not last long. After what many countries had endured in the 20th century, those memories should have prevented any repetition that history...

Some of people's expectations on both sides of the contact line, during the initial, hot phase of the conflict, were different, but there is one expectation that remains the same now: an end to the conflict.

The end to the conflict is seen as an opportunity to breathe easy and stop being afraid, to return to the old life, if this is possible, or build an even better life than before... Then, in spring 2014, people who lived in the same state suddenly didn't know that they would have to postpone these hopes - not for five days, five weeks or even five months, but five long years.



“We spent three weeks in Odesa on vacation. We had to decide where to go next. The bank moved to GCAs in Luhansk Oblast, so we decided to come back to work in Svatove.³ I had friends there who said we could stay at their place until everything is over. Nobody had even the slightest idea that the situation would still remain unresolved four years later.”

Sievierodonetsk, an IDP from Luhansk

During the hot phase of the conflict, it seemed that the rumbling of war made this wait even more excruciating. But after two years of lower-intensity war, this sense of expectation is even more agonising (on both sides) in the silence.



“We thought that everything would be contained soon, that those who organised and incited all of this would be detained. Nobody could even imagine that this would turn into a war. It was perceived more as a riot. And so we thought everything would be over soon.”

Starobilsk

³ Authors' note: the respondent spent about three months in Svatove at the beginning of the conflict.



“At that time I didn’t think about the future, either the future of the region, or my own future. When the rallies started in Luhansk and Donetsk and the war broke out in our region... I was concerned with only one thing – I wanted it to be over as soon as possible, and it didn’t matter who we would be living with.”

Luhansk

“I thought that everything would be over within a year. We would be offered some conditions that we will agree to, everything will be as it used to be. Personally I saw myself working in the public sector...”

Donetsk

On both sides of the contact line, lives have been drastically changed by this conflict. Life priorities were revised, with things like enjoying a nice meal or dressing well becoming secondary to surviving the conflict. The key priority became: “that they don’t shoot, and that it ends as soon as possible”. The desire to end the conflict, common to all respondents, is a starting point for peace. This factor has to become a unifying one for all conflict parties, regardless of their views and convictions, including political leaders, civilians and various stakeholders who could initiate the reconciliation process.



“The only thing that people expect of the future is to have peace. In addition to peace, local residents want to be left alone.”

Donetsk

“People need peace, some stability. Then, I believe, we will become better people when we have peace.”

Sievierodonetsk

“Of course, people can get used to anything. But new deaths and new conflicts bring back the fear. Today it is important to have peace and not war.”

Mariupol

Beyond the general desire to end the conflict, it is necessary to understand whether there is a common consensus on how to solve it. If there was common truth on both sides, for all the conflict participants, this would not be a question at all. Yes, everybody agrees that they are tired of the present situation, but everyone also has their own ‘war baggage’ – the legacy of both heavy personal and social losses and, in some case, gains in terms of money and status.

What are the options for ending the conflict, according to people on both sides of the contact line?

For most outside observers, there are just two ways ahead from the current situation: either diplomacy, or war until one of the warring parties wins. But are the parties ready to sit down at the negotiating table and engage in dialogue? Or is it easier to follow a military option? These two questions, defining the way to achieve conflict resolution, are increasingly raised in the media.

There is some dissonance here. On one hand, there are people from GCAs and NGCAs with shared opinions advocating a rapid end to the conflict. On the other hand, there is a sense that ordinary people cannot influence military or political decision-makers: “nothing depends on us, everything is decided up high”, as expressed by those living in both government and non-government controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.



“We are ready [for reconciliation]. People are tired, they want it to be over soon. The problem is that nothing depends on them.”

Bakhmut, an IDP from Donetsk

“Most people do not hate each other; that’s why the truce is possible in the event of a diplomatic resolution to the conflict. The military could have some difficulties with that.”⁴

Stakhanov

“The maximum – they discuss [in private]: this is bad for us, and this is good for us. Anyway, you have no say.”

Mariupol, an IDP from Makiivka

⁴ Authors’ note: meaning that the military may not accept this decision.



“Maybe. You just have to want it. It is the people who live in this state who should negotiate agreements. Society should make the decision. But there is a catch, if we come to some agreement and those higher up decide differently, they might not hear us.”

Shchastia

“First, there must be some will from the state... the will to reconcile. And I believe in this. As I live here, and I communicate with people, I understand that you have to tell the person to at least stop shooting at you. This is it. Of course, I understand that there is some other force that will be in the way of reconciliation... but you have to be ready for that. If there is a political will, people have to know the truth, talk about what has happened, about the prospects ahead of us, if we decide to reconcile. Another person will hear that, and will be ready for reconciliation.”

Bakhmut

The survey asked people on both sides of the contact line whether they supported the peaceful or the military approach to conflict resolution.



“The conflict must be settled exclusively by diplomatic means, to prevent the war from starting all over again.”

Luhansk

“The military way, of course, is undesirable, it is very bad. Ideally, the solution should be diplomatic. Two states must agree: Russia and Ukraine. A representative from the ‘LPR’ and ‘DPR’ should be invited as an intermediary. They should negotiate who should have this territory, and discuss why everything happens the way it does. To talk and find out who wants what.”

IDP from Krasnyi Luch

“I don’t want the situation to be resolved in a military way; it is out of the question. So many people have been killed, many houses in villages around Luhansk have been destroyed. Has it changed anything? No! Only through negotiations, there is no other way.”

Luhansk



“We, people of Donbas, want all Ukrainian government bodies to have a decisive political resolution of this conflict. There are a lot of talks and coaxing, and virtually no decisive political steps.”

Anratsyt

“... those people who I know, they are ready for dialogue. Even with those who have opposing views. Of course, they are hopeful that their reasoning will prevail, but they are ready. Now they started reasoning a little differently, and it seems to me sometimes that they start reflecting on their thinking.”

Chasiv Yar

“The diplomatic way is the only way. Because the Russian Federation backs us. Waging a war on the ‘DPR’ means being at war with the Russian Federation. I don’t think that Western states supporting Ukraine are ready to go to war with the Russian Federation: not today, not tomorrow, not in the future.”

Donetsk

From the responses above, we conclude that the majority of respondents support a peaceful and diplomatic resolution to the conflict. This fact once again shows that people are tired of the horrors of war, of living in fear. However, there were other opinions also expressed, including a preference for Ukraine regaining control over certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts by force.



“The territories must be returned through force. We don’t have any leverage in diplomacy; diplomacy is possible only from a position of strength. To start bargaining, the parties have to be in an equal position, at least.”

Chasiv Yar

“I can see only one scenario. This is Ukraine’s victory and liberation of the occupied territories. Those things that are offered to us: reconciliation, sitting at the negotiating table... It will give us nothing other than dragging out the situation and increasing the number of casualties. Victory by any means: diplomatic, military and economic. Ukraine is not strong enough to simply defeat Russia on a battlefield.”

Starobilsk



“For me, this conflict has gone too deep. Since the situation is hybrid, the solution has to be hybrid as well: both diplomatic and military.”

Kramatorsk

Ukrainian experts on the conflict in eastern Ukraine often voice the idea of this being a lost war. This is based not on the loss of territory but on losing the support of citizens – those who live in NGCAs. That is, losing the information war. The lack of an effective information policy at state level since the very beginning of the conflict, aimed at this target audience, has had persistent negative effects. Citizens of Ukraine in NGCAs lacked sufficient access to objective information about the economic and political situation in Ukraine. Although this has now changed with the adoption of an information strategy, people still feel abandoned and still receive inaccurate information about the attitude of Ukrainian authorities towards them.

Thus, improved information can become part of a peaceful (diplomatic) resolution to the conflict, if an appropriate information policy is implemented at state level. People in GCAs of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine also believe that information policies can be a tool used to present a better image of Ukraine to those who reside in NGCAs.



“Reconciliation? Perhaps it is possible, but it will take years. It will require soft propaganda on TV that will reconcile people. It means that all the media have to be reconciliatory in a way. And it should be a decision taken by both parties, of course. But I don’t believe it will happen.”

Sievierodonetsk, an IDP from Luhansk

“I would suggest [to Ukrainian authorities] engaging in an information war: more positive messages showing that life in Ukraine is better.”

Sievierodonetsk

Despite the considerable difference in opinions on how to resolve the conflict, most respondents in GCAs and NGCAs polled by this survey are predominantly supportive of a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Are coexistence and reconciliation possible?

If the conflict can be resolved diplomatically, is it then possible for people in GCAs and NGCAs to agree on peaceful coexistence? Is it possible to reunite people on both sides of the contact line, both socially and intellectually?



“At the beginning of the war, the prevailing view was that, regardless of the events that have taken place, we will be able to come to an agreement within two–three years.”

Donetsk

Resolving a conflict by diplomatic means gives some hope for coexistence and reconciliation, since it does not involve hostilities. People may be brought together by either common grief or a common goal, both of which may play a role in eastern Ukraine. The common sense of grief experienced during the conflict in Donbas could have the positive effect of uniting people with different experiences and allegiances. On the other hand, the loss of relatives, homes and peace can also fuel new accusations and grievances, on opposite sides of the political divide. Hence despite grief being a common factor on either side, it might still play a divisive role, because the extent of loss (and consequently the degree of grief) is individual.

Common goals, like the desire to settle the conflict through diplomatic means, could form the foundation for peaceful coexistence of people on both sides of the contact line. Shared goals could include the reconstruction of houses and re-issuance of documents, and renewed access to territory that was restricted due to the conflict.



“Development is the common goal. So is peace, stability, and working in your own country. So that, in future, NGCAs do not turn into a grey zone that nobody recognises.”

Mariupol

There is widespread perception that the conflict has caused economic devastation and the deteriorating social situation. As such, another common goal of people on both sides could be the improvement of the social and economic situation.



“We have so much catching up to do to get back to the situation we had in 2014. Development has slowed considerably, or even been rolled back. You can see it yourself looking at people’s incomes; most of them are below average.”

Alchevsk



“It is important to people that things get cheaper. We need to provide for our basic needs, nothing more sophisticated. If a person spends 90% of their income on food, it means mere survival.”

Mariupol

Despite the deterioration of the economic situation due to the conflict, the non-combatants who were surveyed in the GCAs tend to find themselves in a better situation than those in NGCAs.



“In the past eighteen months we had four pay rises at our plant. Public life has become more active and interesting.”

Mariupol

“We have opened an office here, money is invested. There is an impression that the life from Luhansk is steadily trickling down here... People invest their money here... and it is good. International organisations are helping immensely as well. I have this hope that it is not in vain... Luhansk oblast on the other side: you can feel the degradation there. At least in terms of our work, we are in contact with our former colleagues... Desperation... Everyone is leaving.”

Sievierodonetsk, an IDP from Luhansk

Despite the positive economic trends within the GCAs in Ukraine, the conflict is still limiting development and income growth. The conflict is an obstacle to investment that could help restore pre-war standards and develop new areas of industrial production. The desire for economic recovery, for both the region and all of Ukraine, is common on both sides of the contact line. If the conflict is resolved diplomatically, this issue will come to the fore, especially if people in certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts become part of Ukraine again. Economic and social development could become the unifying goal requiring joint action and creating the basis for future peaceful coexistence.

These points are supported by the respondents’ answers from both sides of the conflict.



“Survival is now essential for every resident of the region, i.e. having a job, earning money to feed the family. People’s incomes have dropped dramatically. That is why all other issues are secondary to survival.”

Donetsk

“There is a need for new jobs. We have to create arguments to convince the other side that here the life is good, it is comfortable, so that they would want to come and stay here because adequate conditions have been created for people. If you have a job, you have money. People can meet their basic needs.”

Mariupol

“When everyone lives in economic prosperity, when everyone is well-fed and content, then everyone will forget about it.”

Stakhanov

In contrast, some respondents feel that coexistence is impossible in the near term. In some situations, for example with the loss of loved ones, people will find it difficult to accept the reconciliation process. And there will be those opponents who, for example, are afraid of losing their newly acquired status, those who used the war as some kind of a social elevator. And some will still be influenced by the information policies of one or the other conflict party.



“I can’t see any room for reconciliation at all. Somewhere in a very, very distant future there can be a possibility for peaceful coexistence. My engagement in this process is out of the question completely, because I don’t believe a single word said by the Kyiv authorities, and personally I am actively engaged in state-building in the Donetsk People’s Republic.”

Donetsk



“It’s difficult to say. Perhaps; everyone has different moods. It seems to me that we are not ready. Perhaps, at some everyday level... it is possible...”

Starobilsk

The future strengthening and maintenance of peace will require both state and non-state organisations to work with people currently opposed to reconciliation. For example, professional volunteers could help to address psychological issues and potentially bring people on board to support the reconciliation process. At the same time, the Ukrainian government will need effective state policies to reach people in NGCAs with the message that Ukraine recognises them as its citizens, and will provide them with equal rights and opportunities.



“First, when those areas are liberated, it is important that the people there are free of fear. Second, the state should demonstrate that those people matter, that they will be taken care of. I believe that the infrastructure there will need reconstruction; then there should be comprehensive programmes to work with people. I believe that international organisations will be glad to go there and work with people, provide training. I believe that we also have a lot of young people who are prepared to work with the population.”

Shchastia

“Many people are aware that, for the most part, residents of the Donbas are not to blame. People have to understand that we are one nation, one people; we have to stand united to survive. Otherwise, divided, no one will survive. I believe that people are ready for reconciliation to some extent. At least, in the Ukrainian territory, there are no accusations that people in Donbas have brought it on themselves, almost none. We need the media to provide more information about the need for reconciliation.”

Luhansk

“We need professional support - specialists who work in this particular area of reconciliation. They can be sociologists, psychologists. Everyone engaged in this work like mediators, facilitators.”

Shchastia

Despite the difference in opinions, respondents from both sides predominantly conclude that coexistence, following the end of the conflict, is possible.



“I think that we will be able to reconcile. Because everyone wants peace; they want it just like we want it; everyone is tired of living in fear, uncertainty about tomorrow.”

Shchastia



“I don’t know to whom, but I would say... ‘Let’s create the future [together]!’”

Mariupol, an IDP from Makiivka

“I believe in reconciliation. It is not so much reconciliation as forgiveness, reunion. I believe that all the parties have to remove hate speech from their media discourse, to abandon pseudo-patriotic slogans; they should gradually start the project of reconciliation. It’s difficult to say what prevents this. Let me share my own opinion: Ukraine is not interested in that. Those people in power in Ukraine are supported by this war rhetoric.”

Donetsk

In conclusion, there are three general trends among the responses on both sides of the contact line in eastern Ukraine. Residents on both sides:

- want an end to the conflict
- want the conflict resolved peacefully and diplomatically
- are ready to look for common ground to facilitate coexistence.



“...the conflict in the east of Ukraine is not a game; those are human lives there. People in Moscow, Kyiv, political observers... look at the situation only through the TV screen, on paper. But this problem affects every one of us and not only in Ukraine but in the whole world. My advice to political decision-makers is to visit checkpoints themselves, to talk to local residents, to see the situation with their own eyes. This problem can be solved only by diplomatic means. People expect the conflict to be settled peacefully.”

Kramatorsk, an IDP from Luhansk

5.3. Justice after the conflict

Many interviewees found the question of restoring justice after the conflict to be difficult, and admitted that they had not thought about it. For many, this survey was the first time they had heard about transitional justice and this type of experience in other countries. However, in the course of the conversation, respondents were able to form their own opinions. Few people were radical in their views on punishment. Most respondents in the region separated by the conflict realise that there is no simple solution. For the sake of real reconciliation, and not just the formal end to the military activities, it is necessary to restore justice.

Most respondents on both sides of the contact line believe that reconciliation in the form of “it’s nobody’s fault, let’s just stop shooting and return to life as it was” is impossible. Most of those interviewed believe that people who violated the laws of Ukraine should be held accountable. At the same time, most responses did not call for revenge; people supported a fair process of identifying perpetrators and bringing them to trial on both sides, in both GCAs and NGCAs.



“It seems to me that punishment should be primarily reserved for leaders, those who initiated... gave resources... Because when we are talking about some ‘low level’ confrontation... very little can be done by regular people without free time off work, with no guns, tanks, ammunition, etc. Those people with power and resources, those who have provided for and fuelled all of that, they have to be held accountable.”

Sievierodonetsk, an IDP from Luhansk

“Any reasonable person will tell you that someone who has killed has to be held accountable. The very fact of serving there [in NGCAs] has to be a criminal offence with a suitable time in prison. Without it there will be an internal conflict. Ukrainians with patriotic sentiments will not tolerate this humiliating treatment if all these thugs get amnesty.”

Starobilsk

“All those guilty of crimes against the state and human rights violations are to be punished in accordance with international human rights laws.”

Alchevsk

Most respondents on both sides of the contact line believe that those who started the conflict and those involved in its spread should be punished first. Respondents described such people as those who: spurred the separatists' ideas, were actively engaged in separatist activities and directly influenced the start of hostilities. Respondents also cited government officials who ordered the separation of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts from Ukraine, and those who incited violence and armed clashes. Some blamed journalists for spreading misinformation, manipulating people and inciting them to commit illegal actions.



“Once I was asked, ‘Who is more dangerous, a coward or a traitor?’ Cowardice is fear, it is a natural phenomenon. While treachery is a personal choice, it is a conscious decision. It should not go unpunished. We did put fascism on trial...”

Chasiv Yar, an IDP from Donetsk

“All those directly involved in fuelling and maintaining the conflict should be punished without doubt. Those are politicians, the military, public officials whose decisions shaped the events. Because those people and their actions have made the situation worse, they are responsible for everything that happened.”

Alchevsk

“Of course, politicians should be held accountable, as well as our TV... the opinion voiced on TV is considered trustworthy by a lot of people. Experience shows that it is very difficult to tell the truth from a lie. And the incitement to conflict, and... these revolutionary moods emerged because of the TV. And this is any broadcaster, be it in Ukraine or in the LPR. It is a source of misinformation and plays people off against each other with incomplete or false information.”

Molodohvardiisk

“The regions blame the government for everything. Ukrainian territories blame Ukrainian government. There [in the NGCAs] local government is at fault.”

Kramatorsk

Respondents in both NGCAs and GCAs almost unanimously agree that those who committed grave crimes should be punished.



“Those involved in atrocities, torture, murders, on either side should be punished.”

Donetsk

“There is the law of Ukraine that clearly specifies that amnesty is possible, unless there are any grave crimes. And if this person was involved in murder, looting, deliberate robbery – then he is scum.”

Sievierodonetsk

“The militants, yes, they killed, they were in the trenches, but if they didn’t torture anyone, then they can be treated as prisoners of war. Yes, they were in war combat, but they didn’t commit any war crimes.”

Bakhmut, an IDP from Donetsk

Many respondents from GCAs believed that those involved in fighting on the side of the illegal armed formations should be punished. At the same time, some expressed a more lenient attitude to those who took up arms – in the sense that these people were simply following orders, they were often deceived by misinformation, some of them went to the front under pressure of personal circumstances. Accordingly, these respondents considered that they could be granted amnesty.



“I believe that those who opened fire should be punished under the law. I think that the ‘DPR’ and Russian military that invaded our territory should be punished.”

Mariupol

“All of us were stupefied, deceived. At first we didn’t understand what was going on. Many people took up arms not because they wanted to fight against Ukraine. They wanted this region to live. Of course, Russia poured fuel on the fire of existing tensions. Russian media were saying, ‘look, those people came from the west and they want to turn this land into desert, to extract shale gas here, damaging the local environment’. I believe that only those beasts who deliberately tortured and killed people with cruelty should be punished. While those who have been fighting in the trenches – they are soldiers. They are innocent.”

Lysychansk



“I believe that amnesty can be extended to those who took up arms, because they had to earn their living. If your family is starving, then there are no other options for you.”

Bakhmut

In the NGCAs, the prevailing opinion is to grant amnesty to regular combatants, provided that they did not commit grave crimes. Some of the rank-and-file fighters engaged in the armed conflict for ideological reasons, or out of fear for the security and safety of their families. Some of them needed to earn money to provide for themselves and their families.



“Those who committed atrocious acts must be brought to justice, while those who fought on either of the sides, they should not be liable in any way. At first everything was fuelled by ideology, and then it was about earning money. And then people would join only to survive somehow.”

Stakhanov

“If we have reconciliation here, amnesty should be granted to every rank-and-file combatant, except those involved in crimes against unarmed people, against prisoners.”

Alchevsk

The view that justice should be individual, depending on what specific crime a person has committed, unites people from GCAs and NGCAs in their attitude to post-conflict justice. There is a common view that there should be no prosecutions for being associated with certain professions. The prevailing opinion of the polled respondents is that those who stayed in the NGCAs and were involved in maintaining essential services for local people – i.e. employees of public utilities, officials providing municipal or rural services, and doctors – should not be liable, although technically they worked in the public service of the so-called republics. Residents of the region are aware that many people in the NGCAs were often forced to work for these authorities. Further, they recognise that this was the only possible solution to humanitarian problems that local people faced during the armed conflict.

Many interviews in this project convey the idea that people who stayed in the NGCAs and are innocent of grave crimes should not be afraid of coming back to Ukraine, and that this is the essential condition that makes reconciliation possible. Respondents believe that there has been manipulation of information through the mass media of the so-called

republics, as well as a lack of transitional justice concepts developed by the Ukrainian government. Passing relevant laws to provide clear answers about who is, and is not, liable for criminal prosecution could be a convincing argument in the NGCAs to convince people to favour reintegration with Ukraine. Such government decisions should be developed and adopted, along with public assurances by Ukrainian officials addressing the people living in the NGCAs.



“These are people who want to live. They would want to move out [of the NGCAs] but our government didn’t provide them with this opportunity, so people became hostages of this situation.”

Lysychansk

“Everyone who stayed in those territories to work there needs an individual approach. Doctors, teachers and other specialists who were not involved in hostilities should not be liable, and that should be openly announced for everyone to hear. People should not be afraid of Ukraine, coming back. For many people, this work was vital, regardless of their convictions.”

Anratsyt

“People who live in a criminal state are not criminals. Local self-government bodies, those people who worked to provide support and services to people who live in their rayons, if they had been engaged in that work before the referendum and nothing changed, I don’t think they are guilty of anything.”

Bakhmut

However, the attitude to those working in the judiciary and the security services is different and depends on where the respondent lives. The polled respondents from the NGCAs often state that members of the security services should not be punished since they perform the important function of maintaining public order. Those who live in the GCAs lay blame primarily with judges, police officers and security services personnel who sided with the so-called L/DPR. Some respondents in the GCAs believe that people in these professions should be subject to administrative sanctions, such as removal from office, professional bans and restrictions on the right to stand for elected office.



“As for the authorities, judges and the rest... It is an illegal entity, and they work there in the name of this illegal state, which means that they violate the laws of our state [Ukraine]. That’s why the simplest thing is not to let them [retain office].”

Shchastia

“Those people took the oath of loyalty to Ukraine and betrayed it. Those are traitors. I would revoke their citizenship and ban them from working in law enforcement bodies for the rest of their lives.”

Starobilsk

“Law enforcement bodies... those who left their stations when they were under attack, and betrayed Ukraine – those are criminals. People working there [in the NGCAs] now, they work in a state, some sort of a state. I don’t think that they are criminals.”

Bakhmut

“Doctors, teachers, judges, police officers: these are services that ensure the social life in the region, regardless of the authority or jurisdiction. That is why people in those services should also be subject to amnesty.”

Alchevsk

Almost all respondents on both sides of the contact line agree that healthcare professionals should not be punished under any circumstances.



“In these areas we have old people, sick people, those who are registered for special care, someone has to treat them. That is why amnesty should extend to doctors as well.”

Perevalsk

“Doctor is a profession... Doctors save people regardless of whether they are enemies or not. That’s why I wouldn’t prosecute doctors.”

Starobilsk, an IDP from Luhansk

“No, I don’t think that it should apply to doctors. They took an oath, they must treat people.”

Bakhmut

The attitude to teachers who stayed and continue teaching is more disputed; people on opposite sides of the contact line have different views. Many of the polled respondents who reside in GCAs believe that teachers in the so-called DPR and LPR should be banned from teaching after the conflict is over.



“Judging by the way teachers organise their classes, they are turning into the main drivers of propaganda. And they should be liable, because children get everything from school. I believe that they have to be punished. When the war is over they should be banned from teaching.”

Bakhmut

“As for the teachers: there are different teachers. I would not make divisions along the lines of professions, I would personally use the criteria whether people have tarnished their reputation or not. Any subject can be presented differently. Even mathematics. And if this teacher promoted hatred towards Ukraine in his or her class, hatred towards the actual homeland, then, of course, it should be punishable. The extent of this punishment should range from administrative to criminal liability.”

Siversk

All the polled respondents in NGCAs believe that teachers should not be punished.

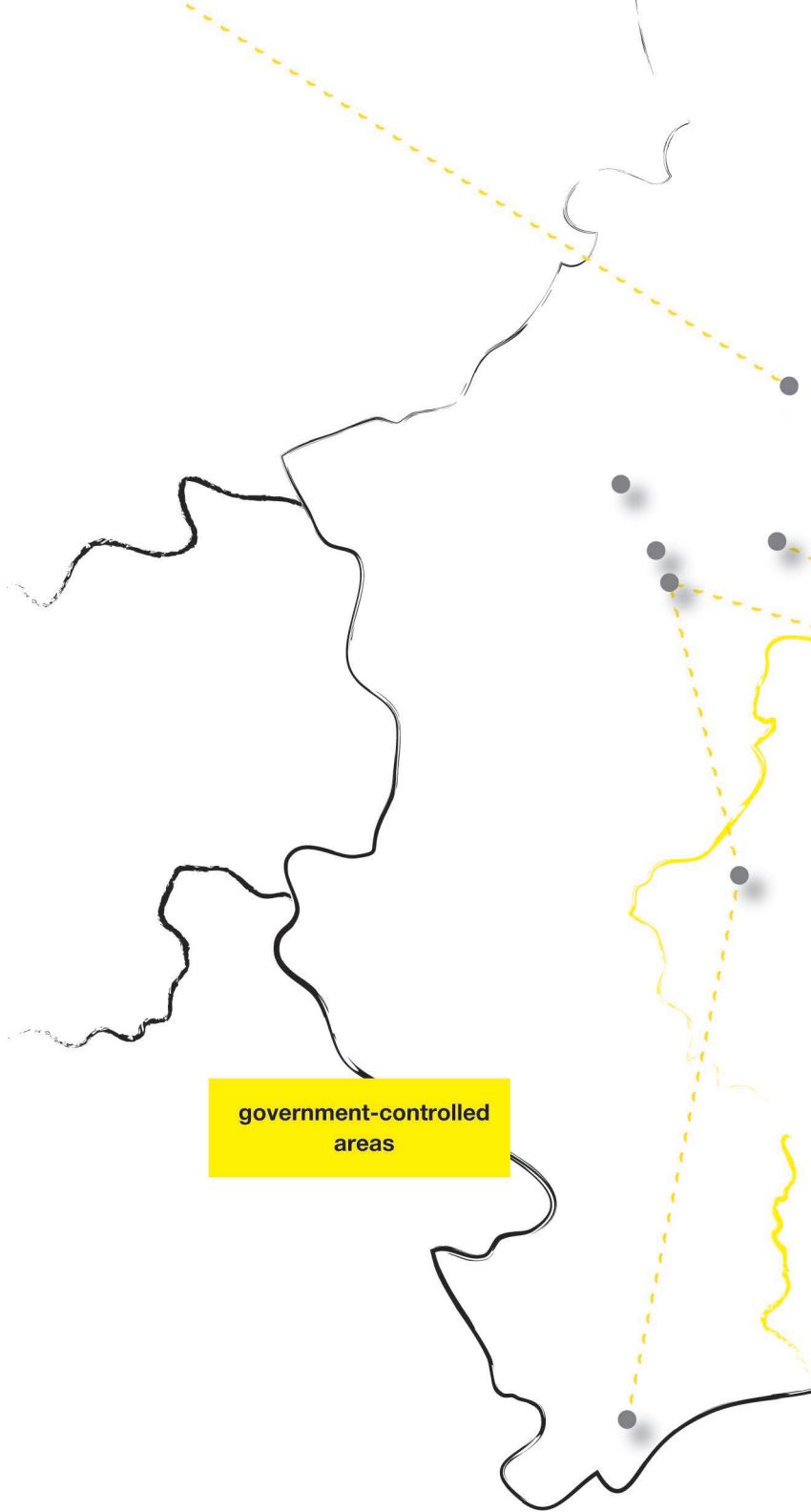


“I think that there are children in those territories and they need to be taught, they need to be educated. And someone has to do this job. That is why teachers must be amnestied.”

Perevalsk

Analysis of the interviews provides some points of convergence on post-conflict justice on both sides of the contact line in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

- There is a demand for some kind of justice – respondents mention individual investigations and liabilities. They believe that those who stayed in NGCAs should not be liable for the mere fact of staying and working in those territories.
- Respondents are united in their opinion that grave crimes like torture, murder outside combat, especially cruel murders, rape and similar offences must not go unpunished.
- Most respondents lay blame for the conflict on the political leadership of the conflicting parties as well as on those on both sides who funded and fuelled the conflict.



government-controlled
areas



non-government
controlled areas