



WOMEN ON THE CONTACT LINE



Organization for Security and
Co-operation in Europe
Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine

Amid suffering and sorrow on the contact line in eastern Ukraine, there are remarkable women who strive daily to make life better. Female community leaders and female monitoring officers from the OSCE SMM build bridges between people, serving the cause of sustainable peace in often unseen but concrete, meaningful ways. Read their stories of resilience and hope [here](#).

Foreword by the Chief Monitor of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine

Contained in these pages is a selection of remarkable stories of remarkable women, of those living and working along the contact line in eastern Ukraine and SMM female monitoring officers monitoring and reporting from there.

These pages show that in eastern Ukraine, as elsewhere, there are many people, especially women at a community level, committed to and practicing an inclusive approach to conflict resolution. There, women are the backbone of civil society, reaching across the divide, maintaining and building bridges, and crucially, re-building them. The women on the contact line portrayed in these pages are determined and focused, above all on resolving problems that they themselves did not cause.

Among those portrayed in this book are SMM female monitoring officers. Day-in, day-out, they bring dedication, empathy, hard work and determination to their work. In monitoring and reporting from the contact line, they facilitate in giving voice to a section of society whose voices must be heard. This book, I hope, is part of a broader, more inclusive conversation and ultimately, an inclusive, lasting peace.



Rejoicing in the happier moments



Story 1

Name:

Olga

Occupation:

Doctor

Location:

Krasnohorivka

Olga has reached the age of retirement but continues to work. "Staying at home would be silly," she tells OSCE SMM monitoring officers, not least because she worries that her patients would be unable to afford to travel to the neighbouring hospital in Kurakhove. Most of them are unemployed and cannot even afford the 40 hryvnia (some 1.25 Euro) return trip, she explains.

In the hospital and in her wider community, Olga is seen by everyone as an irreplaceable mainstay of society. From a distance though, she is practically invisible. Hardly registered by the outside world, she and thousands of other women defy ongoing violence every day to ensure that schools, hospitals, and other centres of care remain functioning. Far from the glare of media attention, these women work to support their families and ensure that life continues in the most difficult of circumstances. Their efforts contribute to much-needed social cohesion. In the hospital where Olga works, 50 of the 55 doctors and all of the 121 nurses are women.

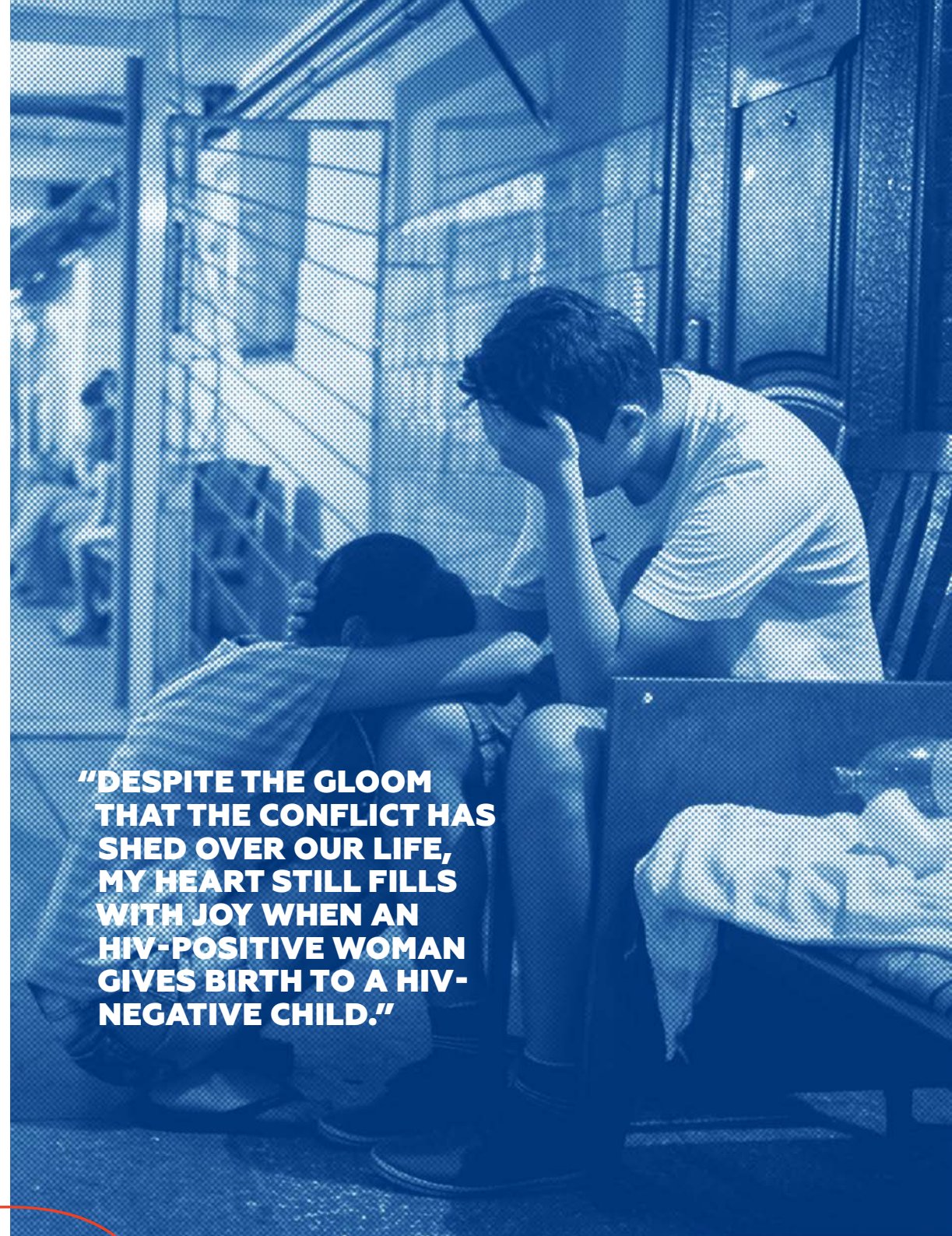
These numbers are typical, highlighting the responsibilities that the conflict has placed on the shoulders of women all along the contact line, with many working under the most trying of circumstances. In 2014 and 2015, when Krasnohorivka was regularly subjected to shelling, Olga and her colleagues worked for months without electricity, heating or water, forced to administer medicine by candlelight and wash their uniforms with rain water.

Although violence has abated since then, the town and in particular the hospital are still within range of artillery and mortar pieces that should have been withdrawn a long time ago. The heavy weapons remain an ever present danger, especially in Olga's mind as her only son perished under shelling. Although loss and danger are never far away, she and the other employees of the hospital remain defiantly upbeat, rejoicing in the happier moments that punctuate hospital life. "Despite the gloom that the conflict has shed over our life, my heart still fills with joy when an HIV-positive woman gives birth to a HIV-negative child," she says.

Olga tells the OSCE SMM monitoring officers that the conflict will negatively affect the fight against HIV/AIDS in Ukraine. She explains that often harmful survival practices exacerbate the problem; treatment is often delayed as conflict brings other priorities; and access to services and treatment is problematic as security concerns entail restrictions.

Now that the level of kinetic activity has decreased, her concerns have shifted to the longer-term health effects of the conflict. People living on the contact line are struggling to survive. "The difficult socio-economic conditions are likely to shorten the life expectancy of HIV-positive patients, who, more than anybody else, need a proper diet, clean water and a stress-free environment," she says.

Despite everything, Olga maintains an optimistic attitude. She laments being cut off from nearby Donetsk city, remembering fondly Sherbakova Park and Pushkina Boulevard. "I would like to see again the roses of Donetsk," she says.



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Monitoring Officer: 10 years of service

Story 2

Name:

Tinatin

Occupation:

Acting Hub Leader

Location:

Kadiivka

At the conference table in the OSCE SMM Luhansk hub – where ordinarily operational briefings are held and presentations given – Tinatin Bezhanishvili stands beside a cake. As the acting hub leader and former Patrol Group Leader at the Kadiivka Forward Patrol Base, there has been little that has ever left her unable to respond but now as she faces her smiling colleagues, there to celebrate and honour a woman who has given 10 years of service to the OSCE, she is momentarily left speechless.

From the wine-growing region of Khatheti in Georgia, Tinatin initially worked with an NGO, supporting Chechen refugees in the Pankisi Gorge and later with the OSCE Mission to Georgia, working on law enforcement capacity building. From there she joined the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, focusing on community policing capacity building.

Arriving in Ukraine in August 2016, she found herself right on the contact line, leading a group of 36, including 26 monitoring officers, at the Kadiivka forward patrol base.

There she was to see the conflict up close and personal. Daily patrols along the contact line put her and her colleagues face to face with the fighting and its effects on the civilian population. "When you see how people in places like Zolote are affected, you just want to help," she says.

And help she did. From the base, she and her small tight group of monitoring officers were regular participants in mirror patrols, forming a monitoring blanket on both sides of the contact line that allowed engineers and workers to enter areas where critical civilian infrastructure was in immediate need of repair or maintenance. In one instance, teaming up with colleagues from Popasna forward patrol base, they monitored adherence to the ceasefire, enabling repairs that restored water to over 10,000 people. "Being right in the middle of a conflict that has caused so much pain and suffering can be incredibly frustrating and heart-breaking but sometimes we do get to make a real difference to real people," she explains.

Tinatin and her team were, however, to soon know pain very directly and personally. On 23 April 2017, on a day she will never forget and hopes is never repeated, Tinatin, on a day off, woke to the sound of her phone ringing. It was the worst news imaginable. One of the patrols that had set off from the

base early that morning had been caught up in an explosion, and the medic on board, Joseph Stone, was killed. Two other SMM patrol members sustained injuries. "There was no time to go into shock or even to cry," she remembers. "I was in charge on the ground and I had to respond."

The response, in co-ordination with colleagues in Luhansk, Sievierodonetsk and Kyiv, led to immediate medical assistance and evacuation of the patrol members, and the removal of Joe's body and the destroyed vehicle to a government-controlled area, allowing for the start of an investigation into the incident. "We had a number of immediate priorities," she explains, "foremost of which was the safety and security of our colleagues and friends." "For me personally, it was also hugely important to get Joe back, for us as his friends but especially for his family," she adds.

In all, Tinatin has spent over three years in Ukraine, including a subsequent stint as the deputy hub leader in Luhansk city, where she oversees daily patrolling along the contact line and elsewhere, and manages more than a hundred monitoring officers. "There is an enormous responsibility involved in sending out a patrol; their safety and security is paramount," Tinatin says.

Right now though, as she stands before her colleagues, celebrating and remembering 10 years with the OSCE, Tinatin finally finds the words that had been eluding her. "In this conflict and others, we have seen bad days we all hope to never see again," she says, "but there have been many good ones too where we in the OSCE have made a difference."

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Cups of Hope

Story 3

Name:
Nataliya

Occupation:
Businesswoman

Location:
Berezove

Her stall is basic – a few pieces of wood covered by an aquamarine cloth with white flowers where an array of sausages, smoked pork, honey, fruit, and cups of warm coffee await customers.

Basic though it is, Nataliya's small stand is a lifeline for the thousands of people passing through Berezove, a small town in a government-controlled area of Donetsk region close to the contact line. As they wait to cross or having spent many hours crossing, it is local people like Nataliya who provide nourishment and refreshments much needed in an often times gruelling journey.

Her small business – allowing her to provide for her aging parents, three children and two nephews in a hard-hit settlement caught in the crossfire of conflict – is not unique. The 42-year-old is one of many traders in the area, mostly women, who have responded to five years of conflict, in particular the economic havoc it has wrought, identifying a niche and meeting a demand for everything from snacks to even beds for the night. "There has been a lot of support but ultimately people in this community are standing on their own two feet," she tells an SMM monitoring officer. "Resilience in the face of hardship is nothing new to people here."

Nataliya outlines some of the hardship facing her and the local community, saying the conflict had resulted in the closure of a local pig farm and the loss of her own job. "There are plans to close the local kindergarten as well as the First Aid facility, and the nearest hospital is 30 kilometres away," she says in a lull at the stall. "It is hard."

Outside, demonstrating just how hard it is, more than a dozen busses and mini-vans line up to transport passengers. Thousands more cross on foot, many old, carrying plastic bags and wheeling suitcases past red and white signs warning about the presence of mines and unexploded ordnance. The danger is real for the thousands of people passing every day through the checkpoints along the heavily-mined contact line with two people killed and one injured in February in nearby Olenivka when their vehicle hit what appeared to be an anti-tank mine.

To those who stop by at the stall – 200-300 people a day – Nataliya offers something priceless, more than the wares laid across the makeshift counter in front of her.

Asked by a customer when would the conflict end, she has a ready answer.

"Soon; it must end soon," she insists.

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Small Steps in Right Direction

Story 4

Name:

Ruth

Occupation:

SMM Monitoring Officer

Location:

Svitlodarsk

Ruth Ni Ghlasain, an OSCE SMM monitoring officer from Ireland, still sometimes wonders how she, with no police or military background, ended up on the contact line in eastern Ukraine.

On the surface – with armoured vehicles, flak jackets and an array of security mitigation measures – the OSCE SMM seemed like an ill-fit for a human rights defender who had spent years working on local grassroots initiatives in Cambodia, advocating for peace and social justice, and promoting and defending human rights and freedom of assembly and expression. “I had wondered if there would be a place for me but from the moment I arrived in Ukraine, I knew I was in the right place at the right time,” Ruth explains.

Currently on a seven-day rotation at the SMM forward patrol base in Svitlodarsk, in one of the most kinetic areas along the contact line, Ruth does indeed spend most of her time wearing a flak jacket and helmet, monitoring and reporting ceasefire violations. “Most nights here, the sky is lit up with tracer rounds, and the horizon is speckled with artillery and mortars exploding,” she says.

Ruth spends her days counting the human cost of conflict. She cites a recent example, in which a man was injured in nearby Novoluhanske, hit by shrapnel from a 122mm mortar that flattened his home. "He's one of the latest civilian casualties in a list that just keeps growing," she says, referring to the estimated 13,000 people killed and 30,000 injured, the result of ongoing fighting that has undermined the security of the civilian population.

The OSCE though, Ruth explains, takes a multi-disciplinary approach to security, and so there's a lot to do in addition to monitoring the sides' partial compliance with the Minsk Agreement. "That's where I come in," she says.

The most striking aspect of this conflict, she says is the absence of bitterness. "People are suffering; we hear and see it every day," she says, "but it's a shared suffering among neighbours; not one inflicted on each other." Prolonged violence though, she warns, can result in protracted conflict and hostility. "Believe me, I know; I grew up just a few kilometres from the border in Ireland."

Hard lessons learnt from home and remedies practiced on the other side of the world, in particular dialogue facilitation, Ruth says are what she brings most of all to Svitlodarsk and other towns and villages in eastern Ukraine. Sometimes it's just a matter of listening to people and giving them voice, she says, especially when they are engaging with one another, demanding an end to violence.

These are small steps, she admits but steps in the right direction nonetheless, away from the past five years of violence. "I don't have experience in fighting in a conflict," Ruth says, "but with the OSCE SMM, I hope my experience and efforts here can prove useful in resolving this one."



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A community stands together: a Story of Resilience

Story 5

Name:

Anna

Occupation:

Cultural Center Manager

Location:

Novomykhailivka

“Who needs art when guns are firing?” Anna Voloshyna asked herself in 2014, when the conflict in Donbas started. The answer soon became clear – everyone does. The cultural centre she leads in Novomykhailivka, kept its doors open, bringing new life to the village of almost 1,500 which lies close to the contact line, some 28 kilometres from Donetsk city.

“It has given young people a purpose,” says the 37-year-old manager “[They] always come up with new ideas, festivals and workshops. We stay active, and never give up.”

The artwork on the walls tells a story of resilience and unity, warming up the crisp autumn air in the old concrete building as heating season has yet to start. Amid the tragedy of conflict, a powerful bond has developed with people, especially the young. Empathy is in abundance, Anna says, as youngsters have learnt to take care of each other and shoulder more responsibility. “If you have experienced throwing yourself on the floor during shelling at a young age, you grow up fast,” she adds.

A native of Donetsk, Anna moved to Novomykhailivka in 2014 – it was somehow a return to her childhood. When she was 10, her mother, who managed the Donetsk College of Culture, decided to swap the city’s active

life with the fresher air and the slower pace of the village. The family relocated back to Donetsk upon Anna's graduation. There she followed her mother's footsteps, working in Donetsk's Centre of Slavic Culture and immersing herself in a dynamic community of artists and culture workers. She was also part of a creative group called "Star Moment." The conflict shattered this creative family: some of her friends fled and she headed back to Novomykhailivka.

The village's cultural centre, the Aesthetic Education Centre, was damaged by shelling in 2014, but continued to function nevertheless. Then in 2018 state funds were mobilized: the building was repaired and a youth centre, Step to the Dream, was set up. Today, a steady stream of passionate youth volunteers organizes dancing lessons, table tennis tournaments, and movie nights. "Everyone is welcome here, but we have to build trust among each other. It is truly a give and take," Anna says.

To further support the community, the centre joined forces with aid organizations and organized mine awareness training and psychological support sessions.

For many, the facility is a second home, a place where they can be more themselves – "it is freedom," says Anna.

She remains positive, but asked about how the conflict has affected her life she becomes silent – and tears up. Looking around her, at the centre and a handful of people busily engaged, she simply says: "When you lose something, you also gain something."

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Reconnecting divided communities

Story 6

Name:
Annett

Occupation:
SMM Monitoring Officer

Location:
Stanytsia Luhanska

Annett Gerber knows well the deep pain and the exhausting challenge inherent in divided communities – she comes from one of them. Hailing from the former German Democratic Republic, the 54-year-old SMM monitoring officer is no stranger to division. “There is a special link to my own personal history as I have myself experienced all the hardship that families face to stay in touch,” Annett explains as she observes the flow of people crossing the Stanytsia Luhanska bridge, which is the only entry-exit checkpoint in Luhansk region.

Annett has been with the SMM since October 2018, but her journey to support communities started over 20 years ago. She worked with an NGO which provided psychological support to refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina to overcome trauma as well as administrative assistance for resettlement or repatriation, and in years to come, she went on to work elsewhere in the Balkans and the South Caucasus.

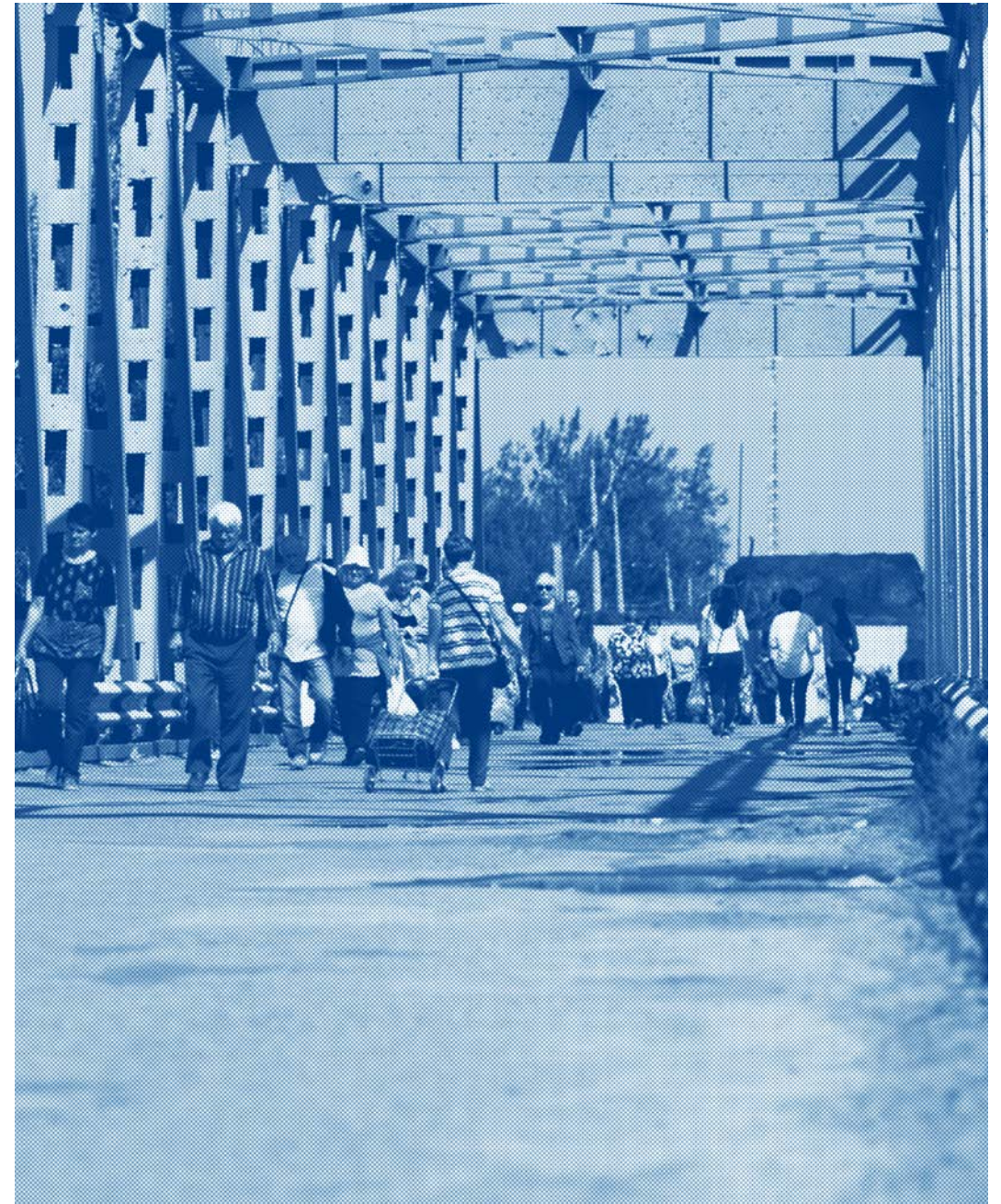
Today Annett spends most of her days on patrol, monitoring and reporting on the situation on the Stanytsia Luhanska bridge connecting the communities living in the government-controlled and non-government controlled areas of Luhansk region. A skilled driver, she is regularly at the wheel of a five-ton armoured vehicle somewhere along the 500-kilometre contact line. "Winters are particularly challenging," she explains. "As if snow and ice were not strenuous enough, roads often run through minefields, so as you drive you are fully aware that mistakes can be fatal."

Stanytsia Luhanska has been the main focus of her work since disengagement in June 2019. Crossing the bridge, destroyed in 2014, is as time-consuming as it is vital for people trying to access basic goods and social services, including health care

and pensions. While everyone is a person of concern, the struggle of the elderly is the closest to her heart – research shows that more than 30 per cent of the 4.4 million conflict-affected people in Ukraine are over 60 years old. "Once I saw an elderly couple crossing the bridge. The man collapsed after crossing the broken part and died from a heart attack," she recalls. "The man was about my father's age. It is hard for me even to imagine my own family member being exposed to such hardships."

Decades of experience have taught Annett that any progress matters. "The sides have agreed on de-mining and the restoration of the bridge, and a shuttle bus was introduced to ease the long way for the elderly. People still feel insecure, but also hopeful. I am privileged to be able to listen and talk to them," she says.

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Lessons in Courage

Story 7

Name:

Galina

Occupation:

NGO Activist

Location:

Selidove



When Galina, chatting with SMM monitoring officers in a second-hand charity shop in Selidove in Donetsk region, looks back at her life, she has little doubt in her mind that she is exactly where she ought to be.

Born in the middle of World War II which claimed the lives of millions, among them her father who never returned, Galina and her mother were left alone to face an often harsh and traumatized society. Post-war economic hardship, exacerbated by growing up in a one-parent family, forged in her a burning desire to undo wrong and heal wounds.

Galina went on to become a history and philosophy teacher at the Technical Secondary School in Selidove, but it was her own personal and family history that would mould her and shape her responses her entire life. "One must choose one of two paths in life," she says. "The path of violence or the path of peace." She chose the latter.

In the late 1980s, Galina was appointed head of the Selidove Union of Women of Ukraine, leading to over 30 years of active social engagement at a community level, countering violence in all forms and healing wounds caused by it. Among her achievements are a women's crisis centre and various publications on "Children of War" for those of her generation who lost one or both parents to violence. With her son sent to fight in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the father she never met was never far from her mind. "We want the children to stop dying," she tells the SMM.

The latest conflict has typically not gone without a response from Galina and the other women in the union. They provide humanitarian assistance, in particular clothes and toys to those displaced by the fighting closer to the contact line. Acutely aware of the emotional and psychological toll of conflict, they have also tried to provide an outlet, arranging to print a collection of poetry written by local people.

As a teacher, Galina has seen many students go through her hands but it is outside the classroom that her lessons are most fondly remembered, inspiring and motivating a new generation in Selidove to engagement rather than passivity. "I remember when she was my teacher, but it turned out that she would become my lifelong teacher," one former student and current social activist told the SMM. "She taught me courage."



"ONE MUST CHOOSE ONE OF TWO PATHS IN LIFE. THE PATH OF VIOLENCE OR THE PATH OF PEACE."



When a kind word makes a Difference

Story 8

Name:
Susan

Occupation:
Acting Patrol Group Leader

Location:
Donetsk

As an acting patrol leader, Susan Frank takes her responsibilities seriously. With between four and six other SMM staff members in her care, she leaves nothing to chance before heading out to the contact line, going through every detail to cover all contingencies, especially those related to the security and wellbeing of her team. "I conduct a patrol briefing following my own check-list," Susan explains as she ticks off the last one on the list, ensuring everyone has their flak jacket, helmet and First Aid kit. "The situation can change in an instant, and we need to be able to react accordingly."

Susan knows this better than most people, having served for 30 years as a police officer in Cheshire Constabulary, in the north-west of England. "Every time you put on a uniform and go out into the community, you can never tell what you'll face," she says.

The issues she now faces in Donetsk region are very different from those in Cheshire, and the security risks considerably higher, but it is the training and instincts honed from her earlier career that Susan relies on to keep

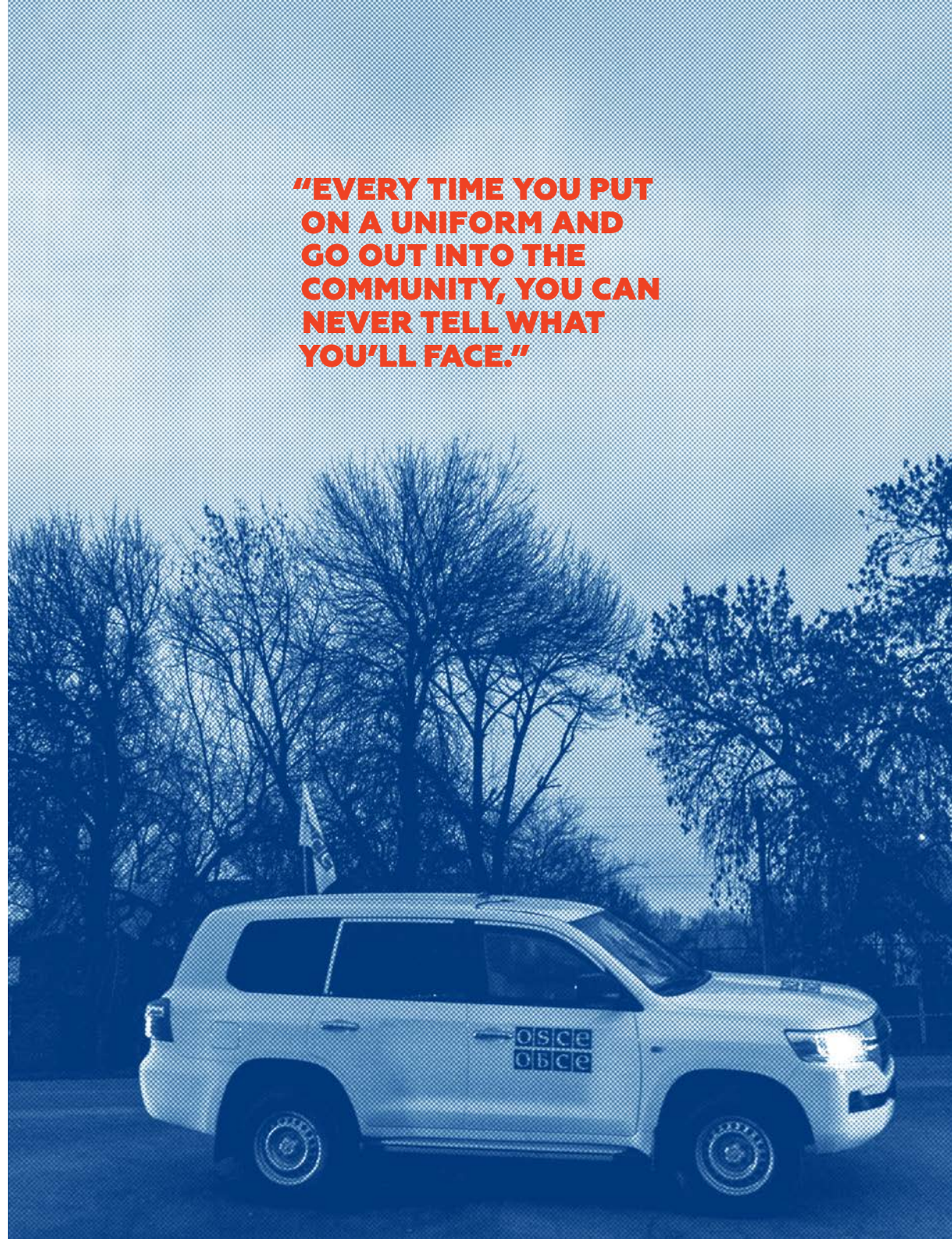
safe and do her current job. "No matter what we're dealing with – from civilian casualties to water and gas cut and weapons withdrawal verification – we've got to get the facts right," Susan explains. "The information we collect goes into reports that are used by OSCE participating States and others."

Susan is no stranger to this kind of work, having previously been in overseas missions as a serving police officer in Bosnia, Georgia and Afghanistan. "I enjoy international work immensely, as it exposes one to new cultures and languages, and I especially appreciate the opportunities to learn and be part of an incredibly diverse team," she explains. "Everyone working here in the SMM brings the best from their own backgrounds, making the Mission resilient and effective, especially so in the face of adversity."

With an ongoing conflict, Susan has inevitably faced difficult situations over the past two years she's spent in Donetsk. "It can sometimes be quite volatile here," Susan explains. "It depends on the individual, but sometimes a female monitoring officer can bring another approach to communication and can be more effective at diffusing tense situations."

With the conflict now in its sixth year, invariably there are many angry and frightened individuals who sometimes direct their frustrations at her. She recalls meeting a woman in a small village who had suffered through regular shelling over the years. "Though very angry and upset at the beginning of our conversation, I noticed that her demeanor changed after talking to me," Susan says. "I think she needed to vent her frustrations and anger, and for someone to just listen and show empathy. Sometimes just a kind word makes a huge difference."

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Garden of Eden in Stanytsia Luhanska

Story 9

Name:
Yevgeniya

Occupation:
Gynecologist

Location:
Stanytsia Luhanska



Almost 70 years old, Yevgeniya, a gynaecologist at Stanytsia Luhanska Hospital, has seen and experienced more than her fair share of the ups and downs of life, especially over the past five years.

While fighting has displaced many people, many others remain in the town, reliant on Yevgeniya and the essential medical care she and others at the hospital provide.

When SMM monitoring officers visited her recently, she recalled the maternity unit – now closed – where she and five other doctors not only saved lives but also helped to deliver lives. “My heart used to be filled with joy,” she said, “at the sight of a healthy mother and her new-born.”

Much has changed since then with intense fighting at the initial stage of the conflict forcing the closure of the maternity unit. With shelling and gunfire ringing out in the near distance, expectant mothers were afraid to stay overnight at the hospital, and even some of the doctors resigned their posts.

“THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF ALL MOTHERS WILL COME WITH PEACE, AND THE FLOWERS IN MY GARDEN OF EDEN WILL BLOOM ONCE AGAIN.”

With Luhansk city – just 16 kilometres away – no longer a feasible option for expectant mothers because of time-consuming crossing procedures and precarious conditions on the nearby contact line, the closest accessible maternity unit is now in Bilovodsk, some 70 kilometres north along a bumpy road. “This is particularly concerning for women who face serious complications during pregnancy and delivery,” Yevgeniya explains. “With conflict-related stress, such cases are frequent.”

Yevgeniya, like hundreds of thousands of others all along the contact line in eastern Ukraine, is herself not immune to the daily stress of living and working in an area

affected by conflict. In addition to the risks posed by mines, unexploded ordnance and continued fighting, she, like thousands of others, many elderly, must cross the broken bridge at Stanytsia Luhanska – the only crossing point in the entire Luhansk region – if she wants to visit friends and relatives in the nearest city. A regular work routine,

combined with a passion for gardening, allow Yevgeniya to maintain inner sanity. “My Garden of Eden is 1,800 square metres,” she says, referring to her garden where she grows vegetables and flowers.

Grounded in reality and so close to the cycle of life, Yevgeniya exudes optimism and hope. Her example has inspired her granddaughter, who is just about to graduate, to become a gynaecologist. She hopes that one day the maternity unit will reopen, allowing for new beginnings in peace and safety. “The health and wellbeing of all mothers will come with peace,” she says, “and the flowers in my Garden of Eden will bloom once again.”





Small steps, giant leaps

Story 10

Name:

Dijana

Occupation:

Acting Deputy Hub Leader

Location:

Sieverodonetsk

Friends call her “Dijana Solution” – and the nickname seems apt. Problem solving is one of Dijana Manojlovic’s personality traits, perfected as a Bosnian police officer while growing up in Sarajevo during the conflict in the 1990s.

“I had to, and it has proved to be handy,” says the 42-year-old with a smile. Her natural organizational skills turned out to be as helpful – since taking up her duties, in August 2019, as Acting Deputy Hub Leader in Sievierodonetsk, some 100 kilometres north-west of Luhansk, Dijana oversees over 100 international monitors, 39 national staff and 61 vehicles. Juggling patrols, schedules, shifts and car maintenance is a challenging task, which the volatile situation along the contact line makes daunting.

Dijana however is not new to the pressure the role poses: 20 years of experience as a police officer, both in her home country and in international missions, have shaped her attitude to adapt to an ever-changing environment where every detail matters. Her time in South Sudan, where she served three years, proved it.

“It was intense, but interesting, rewarding and meaningful,” recalls the monitoring officer who completed her police training with a degree in political science. “I enjoyed the international environment, the constant exchange with people from other cultures. I do not find it a challenge, rather a stimulus.”

In 2012 she returned to her job in Sarajevo, but something in her had changed.

"I wanted to do more along the same line - be present to monitor the situation on the ground, and to make sure that people affected by conflict know the rest of the world cares."

So when the SMM started recruiting, she had no doubts – in July 2015 she joined the Luhansk monitoring team and one year later she moved to the hub in Sieverodonetsk. The challenges, logistical as well as emotional, were soon clear – but they were known quantities to her.

She recalls entering a village along the contact line, which had been almost entirely abandoned - only an old woman was left.

"She was emotionally broken, but did not want to leave the place she had always called home. We connected, spoke at length and we took note of her needs to be passed onto humanitarian aid agencies for support. I think she felt a little less alone."

The day-to-day activities required in the coordination of the large team is complex and, in addition, she often represents the mission with international organizations,

NGOs, and local authorities. The team monitors and reports on the political, security and human rights situation in the area of responsibility, highlighting issues both internally and externally.

"It is not a job for everyone, you need the right skills – self-control, diplomacy, an open attitude towards people different from you on a number of levels. You also need to be honest with yourself in acknowledging whether you have these qualities or not, which is very difficult. Our presence is key. We record facts on the ground as we observe them. We are an impartial party and this is key to building trust – day by day."

Confidence building is made of tiny steps, which however can lead to marked progress – take the construction of Stanytsia Luhanska bridge, a change that has impacted the lives of thousands, for the better.

"Our duty is to implement the mandate and we need to be conscious that, by doing so, we support the people."



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In hard times, community is everything

Story 11

Name:

Alla

Occupation:

NGO Activist

Location:

Bulavynske

When she was appointed as head of the village council in Bulavynske, some 48 kilometres north-east of Donetsk, Alla Grigoryevna Kopolova was given a key, a stamp and a warm invite “to get to work.” It was 1984; she was 38 and by then had spent all her working life at the local coalmine, the area’s main employer and economic lifeline. As part of the staff committee at the mine, Alla had learnt that community is everything – she then focused on strengthening relations among the residents so that they could support each other in difficult times.

“It was intense, I was never at home, I lived at the office,” tells Alla, who was born in the village of 3,000, 73 years ago.

Those difficult times eventually came and throughout the 1990s, residents came together to resolve issues that could not be addressed to the local authorities. It was tough. The Soviet Union’s meltdown hit the economy hard: salaries, including those of miners collapsed by up to 80 percent and people struggled to make a living. At 55, she bought a cow, learnt to milk it and sold the milk to make ends meet.

“That cow saved my life,” she recalls.

Years passed – her twin daughters grew up and created their own families, she shares while proudly showing a portrait of herself painted by her grandson.

In 2001, Alla met a representative of the League of Business Women, a Yenakiivne-based organization, and Alla decided to found the local chapter. The league initiated the renovation of the old library, which turned into a church and is today the main assembly place for the villagers. Soon afterwards, she set up the Centre for Initiatives, a community-based organization run by volunteers.

Women are a powerful force when working together, notes Alla who has also founded other groups, bringing together disabled former miners and veterans who served in WWII.

When the conflict started, the centre’s activities were put on hold. Alla, however, never stopped advocating for her community. When the village came under fire between July 2014 and 2016, she helped the local authorities to provide safe places in the village where people could find shelter.

“I, alone, am a small person, and I cannot change politics. But I can do something [for my community].”

In 2016, the centre could finally resume its meetings and it started by collecting clothes for those in the village who were most affected by the conflict – some had lost everything.

Alla believes that support knows no age boundary, so when a disabled villager needed help to do some heavy gardening, the centre mobilized young people from the local school to help him. At the heart of the centre’s work is communal self-help; residents help one another, digging vegetable patches, doing small repairs, grocery shopping, doing the laundry or anything that involves a helping hand from friends and neighbours.

Now members meet every week and discuss everything from reading books to planning how to help their neighbours – politics, however, stays at the door.

When asked about the conflict and the future, the smile usually on Alla’s face fades. She pauses momentarily, and filled with both sorrow and hope, she says “[one day] the conflict will be resolved, like the sun burns away the fog.”

In the meantime, she focuses on the centre, believing that it creates a contagious positive energy.

“If people work together [as a community] they can make change happen.”

“I, ALONE, AM A SMALL PERSON, AND I CANNOT CHANGE POLITICS. BUT I CAN DO SOMETHING [FOR MY COMMUNITY].”



The Face of Conflict

Story 12

Name:
Jennifer

Occupation:
SMM Monitoring Officer

Location:
Donetsk

Jennifer Langlais, an SMM monitoring officer based in Donetsk city, is many things. A Harvard and Oxford graduate and a human rights advocate with work experience in places as diverse as Gambia and Nepal to name but two. But speak to her for an hour and one thing is patently obvious: she's both a listener and story teller.

"I like to interact with people and to understand the conflict through their perspective," says Jennifer. "I like to collect their stories as those stories can move people perhaps more than reports."

Those stories sometimes make for grim listening and reading. She recalls monitoring in Donetsk city's Kyivskyi district, where an SMM patrol she led met a woman in her sixties whose home had been destroyed in the fighting over the nearby airport. Faced with travel expenses amounting to half their pension entitlements, neither she nor her husband were crossing the contact line to collect their pensions, forcing them instead to live on financial handouts from aid organizations and others. "It's not uncommon," Jennifer explains. "Relative to what they could receive, the costs are enormous, and people of pension age are the least able to make the sometimes arduous journey."

After three years of working on the contact line, in the middle of a conflict that has spawned numerous often-competing narratives, Jennifer is sure of one thing. "When you listen to people, really listen to them, it's obvious, even if the space they share is divided, that they share a similar reality," she says.

To illustrate her point she recounts the story of another elderly woman she met in Nevelske. Although only some 15 kilometres west of Kyivskiyi district, the woman told Jennifer and the other SMM monitoring officers that the fields separating them are laden with mines, booby traps and unexploded ordnance, making them dangerous if not impossible to cultivate. She told of a village slowly dying with only about 10 percent of its pre-conflict population remaining, almost all of them over the age of sixty and the majority, women. "It's quite shocking," Jennifer explains. "Many residents have died alone in their houses since 2014, somehow left behind as the young have fled the violence and accompanying economic deterioration, or simply have been brought to the grave by years of conflict."

Jennifer's intention though is not to shock. "If this conflict is to end, we have to listen to one another," she says. "The stories we tell are difficult and often heart-breaking but they are necessary for understanding and meaningful dialogue." With access to areas

not controlled by the government restricted to most other international organizations, Jennifer feels a heavy responsibility to tell those stories. "If we in the SMM don't do it, who will?" she asks.

It is the stories of the elderly, especially of elderly women in places like Kyivskiyi district and Nevelske on the contact line, that Jennifer in particular wants the world to hear. "The face of this conflict is the face of an elderly woman," she says. "Her story must be told."

"WHEN YOU LISTEN TO PEOPLE, REALLY LISTEN TO THEM, IT'S OBVIOUS, EVEN IF THE SPACE THEY SHARE IS DIVIDED, THAT THEY SHARE A SIMILAR REALITY."



When the guns fall silent

Story 13

Name:

Taisiia

Occupation:

Pump Installation Engineer

Location:

Yasynuvata



When the conflict first came to her hometown of Yasynuvata in the summer of 2014, 32-year-old Taisiia thought it would be all over in a few days. More than five years later, she's still waiting.

Taisiia though hasn't been just waiting. She is a machinist and lab technician at the Donetsk Filtration Station (DFS), vital civilian infrastructure located in the middle of an area that has been regularly the scene of some of the most intense fighting over the years. Militarized positions are within a couple of hundred metres of the station, placing it and its workers, including Taisiia, at the epicentre of exchanges of fire that have sometimes seen bullets and mortars directly impacting on the plant. She has lost count of the days and nights spent under shelling at her workplace. But she has never even thought about packing up and finding another job far away from the contact line.

Taisiia confesses that her mother has begged her several times to quit her job. But even when her young daughter would cry on the doorstep as she was leaving for work, she still went, feeling duty bound, knowing, as a graduate of the National University of Water and Environmental Engineering in Rivne, that someone had to step up to the plate. She knows

the potential catastrophic humanitarian consequences a prolonged disruption or closure of the station could entail for her, her family and neighbours, and the hundreds of thousands of others living in the wider Yasynuvata-Avdiivka-Donetsk city area. The prospect of some 380,000 mostly urban dwellers without fresh drinking water was too much for Taisiia; she went to work.

Taisiia, who is a single mother, dismisses any thought or mention of bravery or dedication, pointing instead to the fact that she is one of eight other women out of the 10 or 11 employees who work the night shift at the plant, when shelling usually intensifies. Her dismissiveness inadvertently highlights an often-unrecognized reality, in which ordinary women like her in villages, towns and cities all along the contact line are playing a critical, and often heroic role in mitigating the effects of the conflict by keeping vital civilian institutions and infrastructure running.

Taisiia is far from oblivious to the danger. With her piercing brown eyes focused on her interviewer, she speaks of how her heart is pounding whenever the green bus transporting her and her co-workers makes its way to the plant, knowing that guns hidden in nearby trenches are pointed and poised, and mines and unexploded ordnance are everywhere. She recalls an incident in which five colleagues were injured when the bus came under fire.

Like many people living along the contact line, Taisiia is exhausted by the unending conflict. Although the sound of explosions has become an almost normal part of the daily fabric of life, she insists on hoping, especially for her daughter, for a normal life. Taisiia wants the world to know her reality. She wants the world to know that there are people living and working on the contact line, hoping for peace and waiting for the day when the guns finally fall silent.





Home is where the heart is

Story 14

Name:

Anna

Occupation:

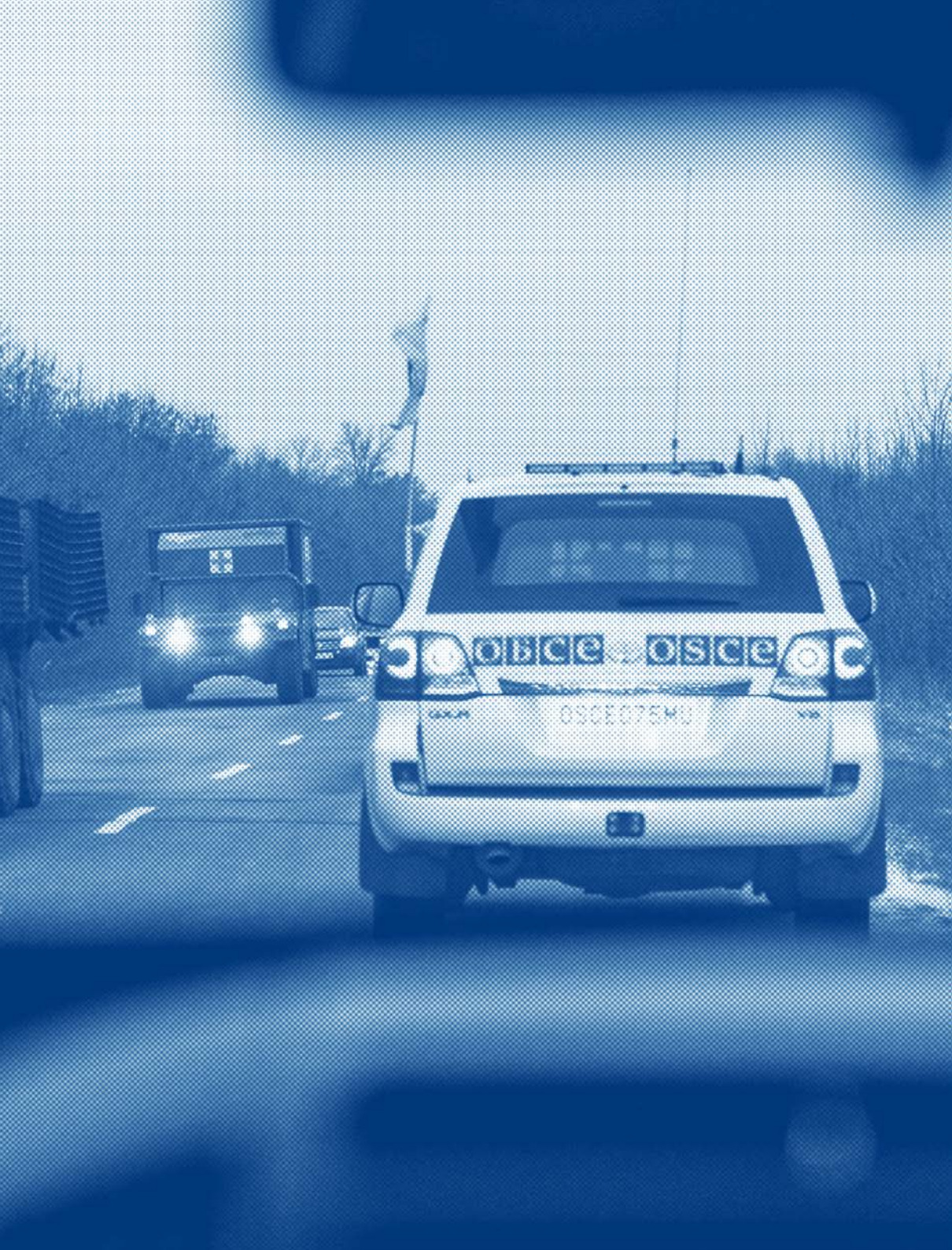
Senior Press Assistant

Location:

Kyiv

As a Senior Press Assistant with the OSCE SMM in Kyiv, Anna is well used to explaining issues and making sense of information and arguments. But she is unable to answer the one question her son, Aleksey, regularly poses: when are we going home?

For Anna and her five-year-old son, home is most definitely where the heart is. Although Aleksey was born in Kyiv, after Anna left Donbas in 2014, his grandparents, aunt and cousins remain in Horlivka and in other areas not controlled by the Government. Like hundreds of thousands of others cut off from family and friends by the conflict, they both cross the contact line as much as possible. "We love going home but it's the same pain every time we have to say goodbye," Anna explains.



Every time they board the marshrutka for the long journey back to Kyiv, Aleksey is hugged by his grandmother, who is from a small town beyond the Urals and his grandfather who was born and raised in Ukraine. He switches effortlessly between languages just as his mother does. Anna's first language was in fact Russian, but as she was educated through Ukrainian from the age of 12, she now finds it hard to say which she is most fluent in. For Anna, such "confusion" has brought with it a distinct advantage. "I didn't just learn two languages," Anna explains. "I learnt respect for others."

Before joining the SMM, Anna worked in the press department of FC Shakhtar Donetsk. "It was incredibly exciting," Anna explains, outlining in particular the support she provided to the UEFA Global Communications Strategy, with its heavy emphasis on anti-racism and opposition to other forms of discrimination, and later on to Shakhtar's Come On, Let's Play campaign, in which

children all across Ukraine, including along the contact line, are provided with football kit, coaching and access to pitches. "Sport at a grassroots level can be so unifying and has an ability to connect people," Anna says as she remembers her times with the giants of Ukrainian football.

The transition from football sidelines to the contact line has been smoother than one might expect. Anna, now spending her time on media enquiries, outreach and promotion, sees her job with the SMM as a continuation. Her work on mine awareness for school kids living along the contact line and efforts to highlight the plight of those affected by the conflict and the role played by monitoring officers in reducing tension is her small contribution towards a tolerant, stable society and ultimately to peace in her country. "When Aleksey asks when we're going home, at some point I want to be able to tell him that it'll be soon," she says.

**"WE LOVE GOING HOME
BUT IT'S THE SAME PAIN
EVERY TIME WE HAVE
TO SAY GOODBYE"**

All Roads Lead to the Library

Story 15

Name:

Galina

Occupation:

Librarian

Location:

Starohnativka



For the people of Starohnativka, a village close to the contact line in Donetsk region, there is more than a grain of truth in Albert Einstein's contention that the only thing one absolutely must know is the location of the library.

This was particularly so during the worst phase of the fighting in eastern Ukraine when the village was without electricity – meaning there was no TV, radio or Internet – postal services and newspaper deliveries were suspended, phone connections were down, and roads were blocked or too dangerous to travel on. Galina Zhvarnytska, the head librarian, immediately understood that isolation and an information vacuum threatened to exacerbate an already dire situation, and turned to her beloved library to turn things around.

She could not stop the fighting or remove the mines and unexploded ordnance that posed, and continue to pose, a threat to the lives of her neighbours. She could though help them minimize the risk, and she did. She

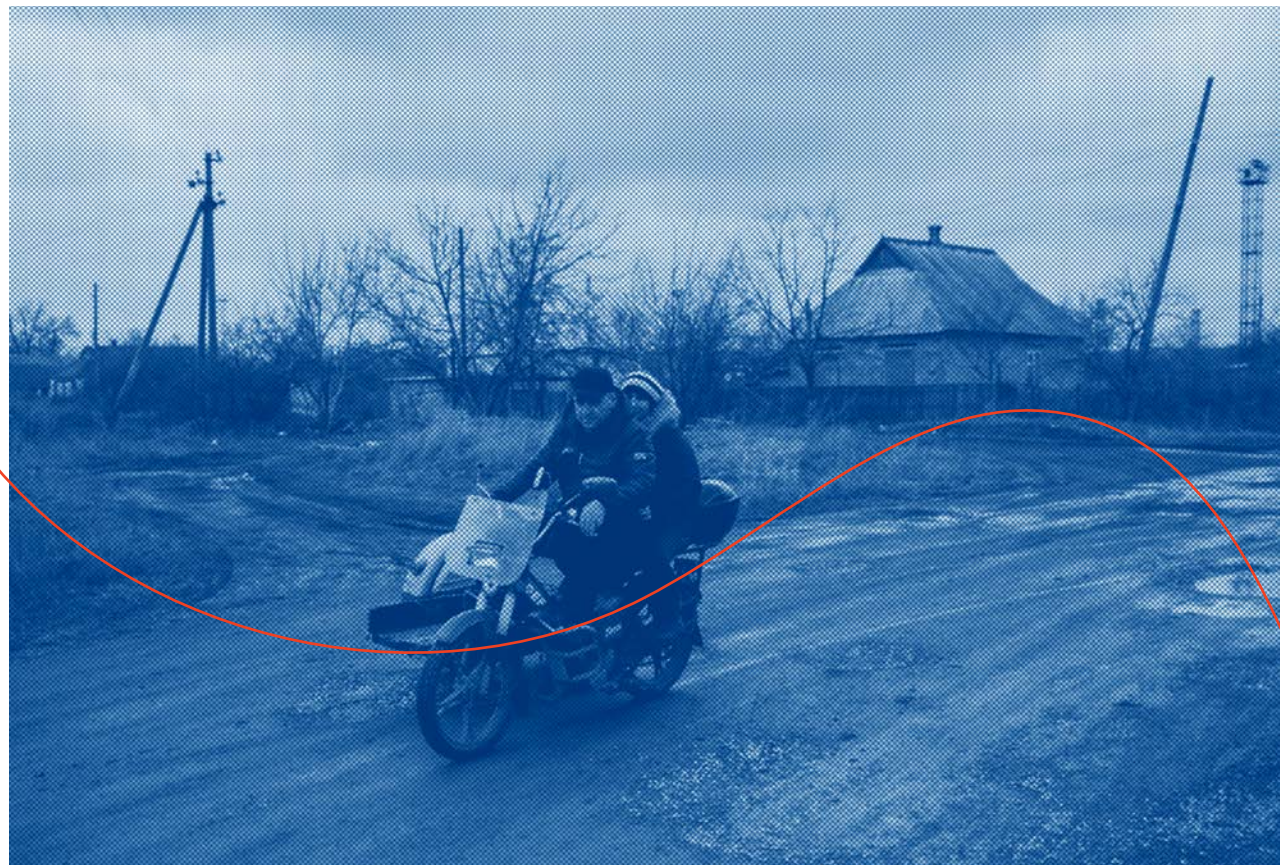
dedicated a corner of the library to mine awareness, stocking it with leaflets and brochures to help people identify and avoid threats. Along with other librarians from villages along the contact line — all of whom were faced with the same problems — she received training in mine awareness and First Aid, allowing her to cascade the training to those directly most at risk. "If I can help even one person avoid injury from a mine, then I've done a good job," Galina says.

In the early days of the conflict, when the response to the unfolding humanitarian crisis was often ad hoc, the library also served as an information point, helping residents access assistance. The library for a while did in fact double as a warehouse for humanitarian supplies.

The need for reliable information and training though extended far beyond the immediate security threats and humanitarian needs. Galina filled the vacuum, offering visitors to the library information, support and advice on everything from conflict-related trauma and psychological stress to a myriad of legal and administrative issues. One woman was able to obtain a passport for her 16-year-old granddaughter, while another was able to facilitate her daughter's travel across the contact line.

With Galina at the helm, the library has over the past few turbulent years proven to be an anchor for the local community it serves. Many older residents, including many widows, having been cut off from their children as a result of the conflict, rely heavily on friends and neighbours. Galina hosts a weekly women's group, where local women meet, occasionally attend lectures and always offer each other moral and practical support.

Galina, now sitting behind her desk at the library, is conscious more than most that the past six years have been difficult. She draws a positive lesson though, saying "we learnt that we can rely on each other at all times." "We discovered people's goodness with so many new friends helping us in the darkest days, making us now all the richer for it," she says. "If there's one thing everyone here knows, it's where the library is."



"IF I CAN HELP EVEN ONE PERSON AVOID INJURY FROM A MINE, THEN I'VE DONE A GOOD JOB"

