

“One MinutesJr”: Ukrainian adolescents share their experiences of war

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This article highlights how children and adolescents in Ukraine are giving creative expression to their experiences of war but also to their hopes for the future.

THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Quiz question: When did the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine begin? Answer: February 24, 2022. Wrong! The war has been going on for much longer than that, and there are thousands of children and adolescents for whom February 24, 2022 meant moving home for a second time and losing almost their entire social support system in the process. The war had already begun, to be precise, 8 years before this date, in 2014, when Russia attacked – directly and using force of arms – Ukraine’s sovereignty by annexing Crimea and supporting so-called “pro-Russian separatists” in eastern Ukraine.

Back then, 1.5 million people were already fleeing; these were referred to in most cases, however, as IDPs, “internally displaced persons”. Because the attack was not on the whole of Ukraine, most people fled from the affected region, the Donbas, to central or western Ukraine. Only very few fled to other European countries in comparison with the number in 2022. This is also why the war, which has been raging in eastern Ukraine since 2014, has generally not been on the radar for many people in Western Europe.

PROJECTS

From 2015 to 2017, I worked for international organisations in Ukraine. First, for the non-governmental organisation [Internews](#), which supports independent journalists and media organisations in many countries of the world. After that, I worked for [UNICEF Ukraine](#) as an advisor on youth media and youth participation, and my work often took me to eastern Ukraine – to Mariupol, Avdiivka, Kramatorsk, Severodonetsk, Sloviansk, Bakhmut and all the other places in the Donbas that have featured daily in the news due to the terrible events happening there.

For Internews, I worked on a project to ensure that people who had fled from eastern Ukraine continued to be supplied with important information. Just imagine what it must be like to suddenly lose your home and then find yourself several hundred kilometres from your previous home. The aim of the project was to give refugees the best possible media support.

The UNICEF project I participated in straight after that went a significant step further: we asked not only how we could help with media but also how we could set up an infrastructure that would provide, as quickly as possible, both the refugees and the host society with the same opportunities as the rest of the population in Ukraine. At UNICEF the focus was of course on children and adolescents, so our plan was to support or rebuild numerous youth centres in eastern Ukraine – “safe spaces”, where adolescents could

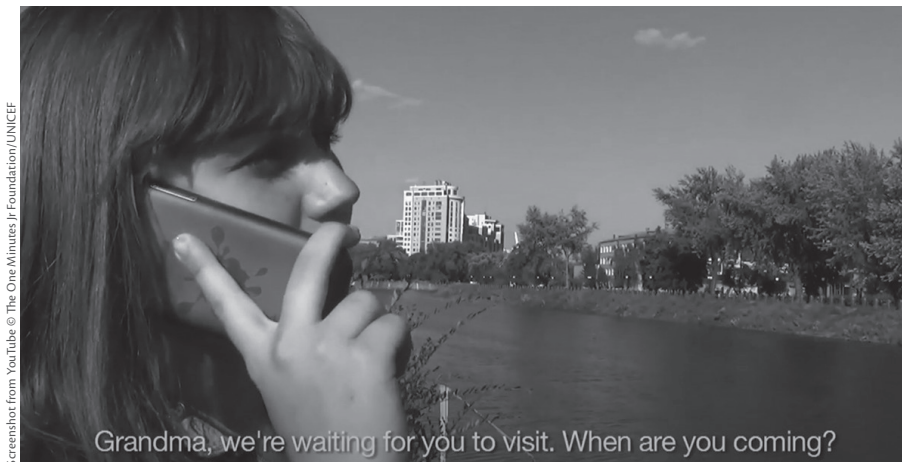
spend time together, play, learn, talk, and leave the war behind for a while. At that time, the front line was already running across – or more precisely, lengthwise – through the administrative districts of Donetsk and Luhansk. The towns and cities in which we were supporting youth centres were generally 5 to 50 kilometres from the front line. Both sides held their positions and shot at one another mostly after dark, mostly by way of deterrence, but there were still a significant number of casualties and deaths.

Video project “OneMinutesJr”

The adolescents who met at the youth centres included both those who had always lived in the area and those who had previously lived on the other side of the front line. In order to be able to provide interesting projects in addition to infrastructure, we organised video workshops for adolescents in 10 youth centres between 2015 and 2017. These were called “OneMinutesJr” workshops, and each one involved a cohort of 20 children and/or adolescents learning, over the course of 5 days, how to turn an idea into a 60-second film – including brainstorming, writing screenplays, filming and editing. 200 children and adolescents took part, sharing with the world, and in creative ways, their experiences of war but also their hopes for peace in Ukraine.

“Empty promise”

A living room with a sofa in the corner and an old cable telephone. The telephone rings. An old woman comes into view and picks up the receiver. Cut.



Screenshot from YouTube © The One Minutes Jr Foundation/UNICEF

Ill. 1: Julia's film is about a telephone conversation between a granddaughter and grandmother who live on different sides of the front line in eastern Ukraine

A girl, around 15 years old, is standing on a bridge in Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine, holding a mobile phone to her ear (Ill. 1). "Hello, how are you?" Cut. The old woman replies, "I'm fine, everything's okay." Cut. The girl with the mobile phone says, "Granny, we're waiting for you to visit. When are you coming?"

This one-minute film by Julia Zhus from Kharkiv¹ then shows scenes (acted out) from the lonely life of the grandmother on the other side of the front line, in one of the occupied "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, while the dialogue between the grandmother and her granddaughter carries on in the background. At the end, Julia says, "You'll visit soon, promise?" And her grandmother replies, "Yes, I promise". What becomes clear from the images, however, is that the grandmother is anything but certain she will keep her promise, and that the granddaughter is fully aware of this. The title of the film is "Empty promise".

What is also interesting in this context is the enormously important role telecommunications play in a refugee's situation. Whereas communication in Julia's film from Kharkiv is via the traditional telephone method – albeit from mobile phone to landline –, in the current situation, video-

phone apps, WhatsApp and Viber are particularly popular among Ukrainians. Over the years, the older generation has also learnt to use these apps. Above all, older Ukrainians who did not wish to leave their country now talk to their children and grandchildren in Poland, Germany and other European countries via video chat on a daily basis. Some mobile phone providers in Europe are offering free data tariffs for Ukrainian refugees so that they do not lose their connection to their homeland.

"Torn apart"

A film by Ivan Gorb from Avdiivka² – which was made back in 2014, not in 2022 – is another work that shows

how families have been torn apart. This time, the focus is on the grandfather of the family. He has stayed in Avdiivka, an industrial city in eastern Ukraine, only a few kilometres from Donetsk, but on the side controlled by the Ukrainian government. Ivan's family is also there, but a few relatives and his grandmother moved to Russia after the outbreak of violence in 2014. Both sides pull and tear the grandfather towards them (Ill. 2) – in a literal sense in the film, but on a more psychological level in reality. The title of the film is "Torn apart".

Avdiivka was one of 10 places in eastern Ukraine where, between 2015 and 2017, we ran 5-day media workshops for children and adolescents to help them work through their experiences of war and flight. Avdiivka was the most memorable workshop because the city was, at that time – and still is (as of early September 2022, when this article was written) – a real frontline city. One of the films we made with the youngsters there led us to a nine-storey apartment block. Since 2016, the facade of the building has been adorned with an artwork by the Australian artist Guido van Helten (Ill. 3). It shows the face of the teacher Marina Marchenko, who taught children in Avdiivka. The mural



Screenshot from YouTube © The One Minutes Jr Foundation/UNICEF

Ill. 2: The film "Torn apart" describes a ruptured family constellation

faces south towards the front line that separates Avdiivka from the territory of the so-called DNR, the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk. The high-rise on the edge of Avdiivka, however, is not only famous for the mural but also for the traces of war it bears in the form of countless bullet holes in the external walls and massive holes in the facade left by artillery fire.

“Sounds of Avdiivka”

Dina was 18 years old when we organised the workshop in Avdiivka. Up until the age of 15, she lived with her family on the third floor of the apartment block. She spent her childhood in the playground behind the building. In 2015, they had to leave their home because of the war. They moved further away from the line of conflict but stayed in Avdiivka. Like all the youngsters in Avdiivka, she had learnt to live with the daily noise of fighting, and she describes this in her video.³

“The first time grenades hit here, there was total panic. We had no idea where the shots were coming from, where they would land, where we should hide, and how long it would last. Now we're able to tell by the sounds whether we are being shot at or whether our soldiers are firing at the other side. We can usually even tell what category of weapon it is, sometimes even the calibre. None of it is as terrifying as it was at the start. But when we hear a long whistling sound above us, that's when by now we ought to know it's high time to get to safety”, says Dina.

That was in 2017. In the meantime, Dina has had to flee a second time, this time further away from Avdiivka to Dnipro, 250 kilometres to the west, which was relatively rarely hit by Russian rockets. She is currently living there in a refugee facility, waiting to see how the situation in the country develops.

I have remained in contact with a few of the workshop participants via social media, and almost all of them have lost



Ill. 3: The Australian artist Guido van Helten has painted a mural on an apartment block in Avdiivka that bears traces of the war

their home in the past 6 months. The children and adolescents in Mariupol are the worst affected. After 2014, this city on the Black Sea coast was only a few kilometres from the front line, and in early 2022 it was more or less completely annihilated in the heavy fighting that took place there. The Azovstal steel plant, a massive industrial complex that was visible from far away and that employed thousands of workers, became the last holdout for Ukrainian forces in Mariupol and turned into an iconic symbol of resistance against the Russian invasion until its complete annihilation.

The EU and the United Nations have condemned the destruction of Mariupol, once home to almost 500,000 people, as a war crime. There had already been an attack on Mariupol in 2014, but at that time the city was able to defend itself.

“Mariupol Challenge”

The one-minute film “*Mariupol Challenge*” by Yekaterina Masalskaya from Mariupol⁴ demonstrates the psychological impact of the war on children and adolescents. “Our life here in Mariupol is not much different to life anywhere else. We play, and we enjoy our

lives. But since the start of the war, and since the bombing of our city began, we are permanently in fear, because it could happen again at any moment.” These words are spoken in the film that was awarded a “OneMinutesJr Award” by an international jury in Amsterdam in 2017. 17-year-old Yekaterina based the visual style of the film on the viral Mannequin Challenge,⁵ which was very popular among teenagers at the time. All the youngsters in the film – all of them workshop participants – stand motionless, like mannequins in shop windows, while normal life carries on around them. That's exactly what it was like between 2014 and 2022. For most people in Europe, even in Ukraine, life went on as usual. But for the children and adolescents in the towns and cities near the front line of the war in eastern Ukraine, time stood still.

“Black & white news”

Another film from the workshop in Mariupol was about propaganda and the war in the media. Russian media could be received in towns and cities near the front in eastern Ukraine in particular for a long time. Because many of the inhabitants were Russian speakers, many people, up until



Screenshot from YouTube © The One Minutes Foundation/UNICEF

Ill. 4: The film “Black & white news” criticises the media and advises young people to take a critical approach to information

recently, watched Russian television – especially the older generation. For a long time, however, the internet has been more popular with young people than television, “because it’s more individual, and because not everything is presented as black or white”, according to Daniil Buli, one of the participants in the Mariupol workshop. His film, “Black and white news”⁶ (Ill. 4) criticises the media and advises other youngsters to seek sources of information that take a critical approach to information, and then form their own opinion.

Ten workshops, each with 20 children and adolescents – that adds up to 200 films and 200 personal stories that we have captured in short films. But this also means that we as trainers engaged 200 times individually with the young people, that we listened, that we asked questions, and that we tried to understand, and this is important. In most cases, we noticed a degree of uncertainty. Not merely the usual uncertainty of youngsters who still need to find their way, and who are still not sure where their lives are going, rather a particular uncertainty that derived from the situation in their country and their status as internally displaced people. They all hoped to be able to return home again. Some more than others. Some were making the best of the new

situation. Some were still yearning for what they had once had.

And then came February 24, 2022 and the Russian army’s war of aggression against the entire country. Of the 10 towns and cities where we ran workshops in 2015 and 2017, over half of them have now (as of the beginning of September 2022, when this article was written) been taken over by Russian troops, almost all the others are being heavily fought over, and most of the inhabitants have fled. All that is left of Mariupol and Volnovakha are ruins, and the youngsters’ fears before the war – subconsciously present for many years, and for many of them an enormous psychological burden – have become a reality in 2022.

“Block by block”

Everything the children and adolescents and their families have built since 2014 in their respective new homelands west of the front line, all this has been destroyed again, too. The youth centres we built up over that period so we could provide children and adolescents with a safe place beyond school, somewhere they could forge new friendships and access interactive educational opportunities, these too have been abandoned or destroyed. The film “Block by block”⁷ by Kirill

Nekrasov, also from Mariupol, is highly relevant in this context. Using a Jenga tower, Kirill visualises how, for himself and many others in his generation, destruction and reconstruction follow on from one another, and how each act of destruction offers an opportunity to try again.

Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine means the young people’s stories and the films they produced years ago in eastern Ukraine have become frighteningly pertinent again. A selection of almost 50 films from the 10 workshops was screened in May 2022 at the annual Oberhausen International Short Film Festival (Germany). Since then, other film festivals have become aware of the videos, and so the films are currently travelling through Europe, the aim being to help a broader public understand what it means to lose your homeland. ■

NOTES

- ¹ Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_I2Ldr8XKjs [13.9.22]
- ² Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wS0TdKlb6co> [13.9.22]
- ³ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vH47t3eS8mU> [13.9.22]
- ⁴ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W92e6fSjE0> [13.9.22]
- ⁵ In a mannequin challenge, people perform and hold poses from their everyday lives – this makes them look like mannequins in shop windows
- ⁶ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNJyX66Q8xA> [13.9.22]
- ⁷ Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDpUi3G__kk [13.9.22]

THE AUTHOR

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