

‘Living Between Two Fires’– Sovereignty Gaps in Conflict-Affected Areas in Eastern Ukraine

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A small yellow school bus maneuvers between potholes and finally stops at the edge of the road.¹ There is no sign or designated bus stop. In the middle of abandoned fields in the Donetsk region, there is just a group of parents, who are waiting to greet their children from classes. Each mother or father holds a pair of rubber boots, an essential accessory for walking on a dirt road. While children are changing into their boots, I talk to Mila², a mother of two. She explains that the village used to have two roads. The “good one” is no longer available. It was cut by the “contact line,” a de facto borderline between self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk “republics” and government-controlled territories in eastern Ukraine, which runs only a few kilometers away from the village. The other road is an unpaved, dirt street, which remains the only connection linking the village to what Mila refers to as “the rest of the world.” For the past two years, school buses can no longer reach the settlement on this road. Every day, school kids walk 1.5 kilometers on the dirt road to hop on the bus. Along the way they bypass an abandoned military post and forested areas with signs that read, “Danger! Mines!” Every day parents walk with their children holding an extra pair of shoes and holding on to their hopes that no shooting will disrupt this journey.

As the dirt road became the only pathway for villagers, it slowly deteriorated because of overuse. Nina bitterly laughs that if anything happens to the road, the village will be like a desert island. While the roads have long been a sore problem in many regions of Ukraine, their significance is deemed higher in the areas of conflict. The destruction of roads, accordingly, heavily affects how the state is understood and governance is experienced in eastern Ukraine. Essential parts of the state-run infrastructure, roads have been recently considered in anthropology as a helpful lens to look at “the social dynamics of material relations alongside the material dynamics of social relations” (Penny and Knox 2015, 206). While the focus of this paper is not exclusively on roads, I find the materiality of infrastructure in the conflict-affected areas critical to comprehending how state power is performed and enacted. It opens a larger discussion on state-citizen relations during the turbulence of conflict. Consequently, looking at the material reifications of the state triggers some poignant questions: How does the state treat civilian citizens who reside in the areas of active conflict? What

¹ An earlier version of this paper was published in the *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*.

² All names and some toponyms are changed to protect the privacy of respondents.

modes of control and care are employed by the state? How can people's experiences of living on the edges of conflicting state formations nuance our understanding of sovereignty?

An image of a deteriorating road that connects the village to a larger web of connections to Ukraine can serve as a picturesque metaphor for the overall challenges for the state's presence in areas of conflict. On one hand, the employment of military forces underlines the strategic importance to maintain and potentially restore the state's territorial integrity. On the other hand, there are "potholes" of this presence, mainly related to the protection of citizens' rights and their welfare. State-sanctioned violence and military action are both extreme, yet very tangible, ways of manifesting sovereign power. At the same time, everyday challenges that people experience because of the conflict serve as stark reminders for questioning the state's liability and its responsibility to protect civilians. The misbalance between modes of military protection and social protection shifts people who experience the consequences of conflict first-hand into the "blind spot" of the state.

To nuance the understanding of sovereign state power, in this paper, I explore how people conceptualize the state's presence on-the-ground and how they understand their place in the order of the state when their homes, belongings, and lives are on the line of fire. I analyze the effects of sovereignty on people who live in the government-controlled and conflict-affected areas of eastern Ukraine. To capture the functioning of the state in these contested areas, the notion of sovereignty gaps becomes handy, as it highlights how the power of the state can be porous and reduced, rather than homogenous and omnipresent. I argue that the life that people experience in the conflict areas is marked by the stark *presence* of the state in the form of military forces and the state's devastating *absence* through limitations on social and economic guarantees. Additionally, the services of state bodies like post offices, state banks, or even emergency services are limited. Thus, the power of the state is focused on the priority of territorial integrity.

My observations derive from fieldwork data collected in the government-controlled areas of the Donetsk region in 2017 and 2018. Because of the restricted access in the region, my inquiry depicts mainly one part of the conflict zone: that which is under the control of the Ukrainian state. Recognizing this limitation, I nevertheless find that opinions and concerns that the residents have voiced to me are informative for an exploration of their experiences of the state. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic interviews with the residents of the conflict zone, humanitarian workers, and civilian activists, I seek to outline some critical insights into how the struggles for territories and rearrangements of political powers influence the lives of people who chose to stay and live in the conflict-affected areas.

I start my paper by briefly reviewing the tendency in the social sciences to focus discussions of sovereignty on physical bodies, which almost equates sovereignty to biopower. In contrast to this, I propose to shift attention toward the territorial dimension of power and question the state's ability to enact sovereignty equally over its territory. Further, I look at the areas surrounding the "contact line" as a site of protracted confrontation and sovereignty gaps. This follows with the ethnographic accounts of what living in the so-called "grey zone" imposes. By looking at the fragile uncertainty that constitutes new normalcy for these people, I highlight the paradox of contested areas, where the state's sovereignty is inscribed yet not fixed.

Sovereignty Beyond Biological Bodies

In recent years, discussions of state power — its nature, composition, and effects — have centred on the omnipresent control over the human body and its ways of living. Since Foucault's widely adopted intervention into the disciplinary nature of governance and biopower (Foucault 1978), sovereignty and state power in social sciences are often discussed in relation to the physical body. The notion of biopower, as an implicit and penetrative control over bodies, in many ways defined the conceptualization of sovereignty as a mechanism to manage entire populations (Humphrey 2007). Elaborating on Foucault, Giorgio Agamben developed the idea that biopower is inseparable from state violence, whilst “a biopolitical body” is produced as an act of sovereign power (Agamben 1998, 6). An emblematic image of a camp, employed by Agamben, as a “permanent spatial arrangement” for the state of exception is particularly illustrative for the new political arrangement, where violence is used not to kill, but to sustain human existence (Agamben 1998, 169). A camp, thus, represents for Agamben a paradigmatic locus, an area of active control and exception, where the validity of laws can be suspended. These fundamental theorizations are mostly focused on mechanisms of control and violence. However, the complex nature of the state shows that not all of its mechanisms are so ubiquitous. Hence, in their seminal work on the margins of the state, Das and Pool turn to explore the state outside its core areas of sovereign power. Das and Pool examine the “indeterminate character of margins to break open the solidity often attributed to the state” (2004, 20). This approach challenges the rational bureaucratic and transparent form of the state as well as its definite territoriality. It also allows us to think about sovereignty as not equally exercised throughout the boundaries of the state. If so, how does the lack of sovereignty affect people? Moreover, a strong focus on the sovereign power over the biological human body limits our understanding of the state as a more complicated constellation of institutions and subjects, where territory is also one of the objects of control.

Territoriality is one of the prepositions and preconditions of the modern state's existence. As Balibar pointed out, “territories in our political tradition are not only associated with the ‘invention’ of the border, but also inseparable from the institution of power as sovereignty” (Balibar 2009, 192). What he also accentuates, following Deleuze and Guattari, is that the process of “territorialisation” of the state presumes assigning shared identities to its collective subjects. The crucial connection between the territory and the people that define that territory is an important factor for shaping the ideas of what Benedict Anderson referred to as imagined communities (Anderson 1983), contributing to the set of limits that define community belonging. Not surprisingly, some states have the *jus soli* or “right of the soil” – the principle of granting citizenship to anyone born on its territory. In this conjecture between citizenship and place, the role of the territory often calls for a more nuanced exploration. In this essay, I focus on a particular paradox: how does state power affect people in so-called “no-man's land”—spaces of active contestation?

Issues related to territory gain more importance in times of conflicts and emergencies, because of the changing nature and scope of state power. Analyzing the role of Russia in amplifying regional conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, Dunn and Bobick pointed out that Russia's interventions on behalf of “compatriots” spread its

political and military presence to other regions (Dunn and Bobick 2014). This presence remains publicly unacknowledged but can be considered as a new form of warfare and a form of “occupation without occupation.” Furthermore, they argue that this kind of intervention is Russia’s signature way of challenging the bureaucratic principles of governance and extending new forms of sovereignty, where the state employs forces outside of its defined territories. The unannounced presence of Russia is its de facto territorial expansion into the areas of protracted conflicts, which shifts certain areas of the states like Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine into a limbo with limited sovereignty. Partial disassembling of state territory is also a subject of Saskia Sassen’s analysis of embedded borderings. In contrast to the implicit interventions, Sassen looks at the formal arrangements that question boundaries of sovereign power. As such, she examines the emergence of “operational spaces” within the states—areas of business where corporate principles might overrule sovereign regulations (Sassen 2017). In other cases, Sassen highlights the acquisition of land by foreign governments and investors in countries, where national debt exacerbates already fragile state sovereignty, which produces “a global operational space that is partly embedded in national territories” (Sassen 2013, 43). External presence of state power is also a subject of Ticktin’s analysis of the ‘offshore camps’ in Libya and Morocco. Managed by EU countries, these camps aim to control the flow of migrants, which is essentially a way to protect EU citizens (Ticktin 2009). Located outside of the EU, these camps showcase how sovereignty can be externalized and extended beyond the border limits of certain states. What these examples show is that the territory of the state does not necessarily limit the area of state power and governance. However, they also force us to question the extent to which the presence of the state is homogeneous within its own borders. Thinking through this question is central for the understanding of areas where conflicts erupt because of separation and parting.

To explore the different modalities of sovereignty, the situation in Eastern Ukraine, and more particularly its conflict-affected, government-controlled areas, can serve as an apt case study. While the areas are still defined as under governmental control, the presence of state authorities is reduced to military forces. Accordingly, the state power is not comprehensive, but rather focused on the territorial aspects of state integrity. Analyzing the issues of safety, infrastructure, and involvement of non-state actors, the idea of sovereignty gaps captures that the facts that even within government-controlled areas, there are certain loci where the state’s presence is porous, ruptured, and unstable.

The ‘contact line’ and grey zone in Eastern Ukraine

People in Ukraine have not been used to the violence of armed conflicts since the time of its independence. 2014 came as a surprise for many, when Russian-backed rebel militants proclaimed the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DNR) and “the Luhansk People’s Republic” (LNR) in the eastern regions of the country. In response, the official Ukrainian state deployed regular army forces. The violent clashes escalated by the fall of 2014 and led to the Minsk negotiations that more or less separated areas of control, which have been divided by the so-called “contact line.” While the scale of the fighting decreased after the Minsk agreements, the conflict has become a protracted development.

“They say that the conflict has stabilized since the Minsk agreements. But the only thing that is stable here is the contact line. It is fixed now,” said one of the humanitarian workers in an anonymous interview in the Donetsk region. In his words, people tend to have a short memory for prolonged conflicts. Though the Ukrainian situation no longer makes media headlines, it does not mean that the conflict is simply over. Rather, it progressed into an ongoing simmering crisis with only short periods of ceasefire and frequent flare-ups. For people who reside in the conflict-affected area, the contact line brought some clarity in terms of where the fighting sides are, but it has not brought peace or stability.

The so-called contact line, or as it is also commonly referred to in Ukrainian – a “division line,” delineates the government-controlled areas (GCA) from non-government-controlled areas (NGCA). In the Ukrainian state’s narratives and official discourses, the NGCA are referred to as “temporary occupied territories.” This title accentuates the Ukrainian state’s idea that it will gain control over the territories in a matter of time, as well as forefronts how critical the territorial aspect of sovereignty is.

The contact line is 457 kilometres long. When the line was first formed in 2014 by the Minsk accords, the contact line was a band of land between 20 and 40 km wide, a buffer area now commonly referred to as the ‘grey zone.’ In 2017, the line was re-drawn with some changes, which further intensified confrontation among the conflicting sides.

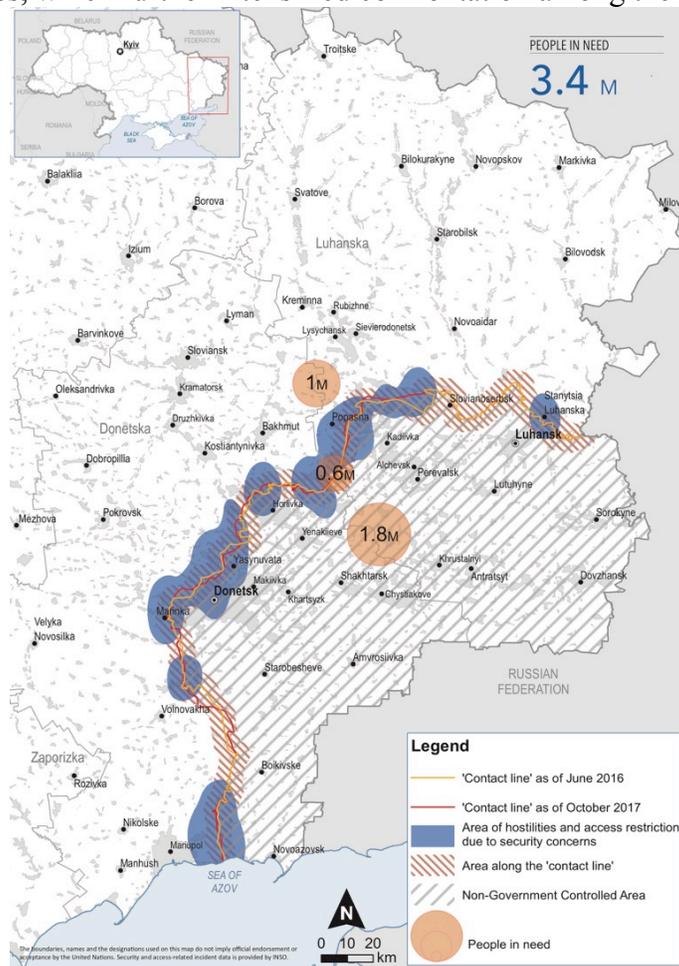


Fig.1 Map of Ukraine and the conflict-affected areas. Courtesy of Humanitarian Needs Overview, OCHA 20

The contact line is neither clearly demarcated, nor explained within the Ukrainian legislation. The conflict-affected areas were defined as a list of settlements, which are considered by the Government to be those located in the conflict area (Cabinet of Ministers decree No. 1085-p). This ambiguity of the imaginary boundaries underscores that there are no black and white lines, but rather an amalgamated grey zone – a space where the usual state order is no longer relevant.

What is referred to as the contact line is not an armistice line and has never been an actual object. Rather, the contact line is reified in the form of shapes and contours on the maps of the conflict, military blockposts, and five crossing checkpoints that allow civilians to travel back and forth between the GCA and NGCA. So far, there have been no walls, barbed wires, or border signs constructed to physically mark the separation, other than the arrangements at the checkpoints.³ The absence of a unified demarcation and clear division reflects the hybrid nature of the conflict itself, where an external intervention blended with pre-existing internal regional tension. As a result, it creates an area of contestation, where danger and violence are dispersed, and their limits are not set. In some places, the line exists only as a matter of specific knowledge of where the GCA ends and the NGCA starts. In others, it runs through the same village, cutting streets into areas belonging to different authorities. According to the UN data, in 2017 there were about 25 local communities that were directly split by the “contact line” (OCHA 2017).

The consequences of the protracted and yet not frozen conflict affect the population who find themselves living in-between two fighting forces. There are currently over 600,000 people, including 100,000 children, who reside in the areas surrounding the contact line (OCHA 2017). According to the UN reports, people in the grey zone experience very limited access to infrastructure, the lands are contaminated with land mines, and critical water supply infrastructure hangs in the balance (OCHA 2017). Shutting down of industrial facilities that provided employment for the residents raised unemployment levels in the region and undermined an already fragile socioeconomic situation. In contrast to internally displaced people—who leave conflict areas to settle in other parts of the country and can apply for financial support from the state—conflict-affected populations are not entitled to any kind of additional social assistance or payments. Neither do they receive state support to compensate for damaged and destroyed property, something that raises outspoken concerns of international actors, such as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration, and the Norwegian Refugee Council, to name a few (Protection Cluster Report 2017).

Another area of shrinking state presence in the conflict-affected GCA is the decreasing access of emergency services. Firefighters trucks cannot operate in the remote areas not only because of a poor road infrastructure, but also because of gas shortages, as pointed out by a rescue team member in one of the interviews. At the same time, the need for the state-run rescue service and especially firefighters and medical workers increased significantly, since shelling and gunfire cause extensive fires and injuries. People are also affected by closures of primary healthcare facilities and drugstores. Those remaining in the area are often cut off from specialized medical institutions and major medical supply

³ In fact, among the international community there is a specific intention not to call it a border, since this would imply the recognition of the rebel-controlled territories as state formations.

chains. The lack of life-saving services, such as rescue teams or medical staff, renders the absence of the state as one of its foregrounded characteristics, whilst the presence of military forces epitomizes reshuffling of the new modality of the state functioning in the area.

“We are living here, always prepared to die” – Uncertainty of the Grey Zone

Every day, Vira leaves her house with a small blue backpack. In it she carries all of her documents and medical records of her 8-year old son, Nikita. She never leaves her small package behind, even if she goes to buy a loaf of bread or to visit her friend, who lives in the next street, or to walk her son to a school bus. Vira learned this the hard way, witnessing how her neighbours' houses were burned or ruined in a matter of minutes. In 2014, her small town became a “frontline” settlement, located on the contact line. One morning a missile hit her yard, hurting her son. A piece of shrapnel was removed from the boy's head. Another day, a fragment of a missile hit the house. Vira considers herself lucky, as it was not a direct hit that would have burned everything down or would have killed someone. Vira's house is located right behind a military post. She literally lives in-between two fighting parts – de facto DNR forces and the Ukrainian army – that frequently exchange fire. In Vira's own words, “living here, one should always be prepared for the worst.” Life threats, like shelling, missile fragments from explosions, and mines structure new reality for people and shape new patterns of their everyday routines.

For over four years, the conflict and regular fighting have been a part of everyday life for many residents of the grey zone. Admitting that the conflict was unexpected from the very beginning, people often comment on how drastically it altered their ways of living. The normalization of the danger was keenly captured by a schoolteacher from a small town, part of which is cut by the contact line. She commented saying that “our people can get used to everything. It is terrible, but we got used to this conflict as well. It is always somewhere in the background. We do not even hide in the basement anymore, unless it [shelling] becomes intense. Last Saturday I was working in my garden. I heard shooting, but decided to go to the house, when the ground was shaking really hard” (Natalia, 51 y.o.).



Fig. 2. A local store in one of the towns of the grey zone, destroyed by a recent fighting. December 2017. Photo by author.

The residents view uncertainty and lasting exposure to the dangers of an active confrontation as an inability of the state to provide security and stability. Affected civilians might have opposite political standings, differed sentiments about the Russian-backed separatists or varying levels of political activism. However, when it comes to the damage that the conflict brings, it is often discussed as a failure of the Ukrainian state to prevent ruination and to protect people. If not directly blamed for the conflict, people comment on the Ukrainian state as potentially powerful to bring the end to their suffering.

The most visible and tangible presence of the state is in the deployment of military forces. In settlements where most people used to know each other, the presence of the military — the new ‘others’ — serves as a continuous reminder of the disturbing change. The special status of the conflict area entails additional bureaucratic procedures, such as checking of documents and belongings during travels. The status also presumes suspension of certain laws and ad-hoc regulations that replace them. Restrictions and regulations often create additional chaos and pressure for the residents. They are not communicated in a clear and accessible way, which reinforces frustration and confusion. One of the most crucial issues for people is the question of property rights and restitution, which remains unsolved at the time of writing. For instance, Nadiya, a 65-year-old resident in the grey zone, left the conflict area for just two weeks in 2015. When she returned, her house was looted – “They took all the appliances, even a washing machine with clothes in it and our old iron.” Furthermore, the house was occupied by the army because of its strategic positioning. Now the woman lives with five other family members in a small 2-room house. She grieves the loss of her house, but admits that the most painful thought is that she does not know if she will ever be able to return. The uncertainty of shelling is amplified by changing policies and legislative norms, making the notion of order a questionable and illusive phenomenon.

The void created by the impossibility of establishing a functioning state order is partially filled by humanitarian actors in the area like the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), or Caritas Ukraine, to name a few. Their visible presence additionally

signals the incapability of the state to fully provide the security and support of the civilians who suffer from the conflict. Humanitarian actors largely overtake the protection of affected citizens in terms of provision of social services and humanitarian aid. This corresponds to one of the overarching principles of sovereignty, formulated in the late 1980s as “sovereignty as responsibility” (Cohen and Deng 1998a, Cohen and Deng 1998b). Through their interventions, humanitarian organizations impose a different mode of sovereignty. Mariella Pandolfi refers to this specific type of sovereignty as “migrant sovereignty,” since it migrates through sites of “crisis” situation and humanitarian disasters (Pandolfi 2003, see also Fassin and Pandolfi 2010).



Fig. 3. Mariya, a resident of the grey zone. During one night in 2015 her house was hit by three missiles and was completely destroyed. After the first strike, the woman managed to get out of the building together with her daughter and a 3-year-old grandchild. While humanitarian organizations are rebuilding the house, the family moved in with their relatives who own a house on the same street. However, Maria is not recognized as an internally displaced person by the state, since the family has not moved out of the town. December 2017. Photo by author.

While conflict-affected people are supported by humanitarian actors, the assistance is rather episodic, finite, and aims to mitigate the results of the damages that have already been done. At the same time, civilians continue to live in uncertainty, facing risks and threats of living under fire. According to the OSCE reports, most of the flare-ups in the area take place at night or early in the morning – exactly in those moments when the international monitoring mission is not working in the field. This feeds the feeling of abandonment at the most critical time. “They come and go. But what they really need to do is to stay here with us over night, to live through it with us, to spend a night in the basement or with shuttered windows” (Andriy 65 y.o.). As a result, neither

state sovereignty, nor humanitarian sovereignty is absolute or comprehensive in the conflict area.

Living for over four years in the environment of conflict hostilities, Vira admits that she is still scared of gunfire and shelling, but it is the silence that she fears the most. Anticipation of a sudden flare-up and a constant anxiety recalibrated her everyday understanding of safety. Living close to the military positions, Vira is concerned that the protection of the state integrity dismissed the protection of her as a citizen. Her hopes for peace are simple, narrowed down to apolitical stability – “We do not care who started all this and for what [purpose]. We just want some quiet life for our children” (Vira 36 y.o.).

The dilution of the state sovereignty as well as insecurity and unstable guarantees create more space for the strengthening of religious beliefs. Hopes for miracles and God’s mercy often represent a last resort, where control and order cannot be established through political practices. One of the everyday practices in the grey zone is for people to put small icons in their shuttered windows, calling upon religious figures to protect houses from bombing. Another religious manifestation in the grey zone is a symbolic “Bridge of Hope,” which was built in 2015 along the contact line (GCA).

The “Bridge of Hope” is a pilgrimage road, which features 14 “stations of Cross Road.” At each station people are encouraged to pray for the peaceful future of the country and the reunion of eastern regions. In the physical landscape of the grey zone, this project is marked with noticeable white crosses located at each station along the roads. Large white figures constitute a dreamscape of peace and serve as reminders of existential challenges people endure in the grey zone. Another layer of meaning that crosses evoke is commemoration of conflict victims. In line with Saunders’ study of the First World War landscape monuments that are also shaped as crosses, white figures in Donbas “preserve material presence in the face of an embodied absence” (Saunders 2003, 19). In the grey zone, the absence of its people—either victims of the hostilities or displaced persons—magnifies the absence of the state. Whereas introduction of military cars and people in army uniform accentuates how the same landscape is wrapped in violent present and haunting future.



Fig. 4. A picture of the Cross Road map, distributed through one humanitarian organization in grey zone. The map features stations where white crosses are put for prayers as well as places of the main conflict clashes.



Fig. 5. One of the ‘stations of Cross Road’ in the grey zone, located next to the town of Volnovakha. March 2018. Photo by author.

The religious component is crucial for understanding the popular hierarchy of power: where the political power mechanisms cannot maintain order and grant safety, religion and beliefs emerge, as a substitute as does calling upon higher powers for sympathy and justice.

‘Blood vessels of the state’ - Traveling and Infrastructure

Ironically, the grey zone has many shades. In interviews, humanitarian workers pointed out that they consider some areas as “red zones.” Because of the proximity to military positions, aid workers have no access to the settlements that are located there. Accordingly, the residents are not only cut off from the supply of goods, but also almost completely cut off from emergency services such as ambulances or firefighters. Alarmed by the disastrous humanitarian consequences of such “red zones,” humanitarian actors work to facilitate “green corridors” for civilians, special passages that allow civilians to leave or move in the area, making possible the delivery of humanitarian aid and emergency kits. For instance, in May 2018, such a corridor was negotiated for the residents of Chygari village in the government-controlled areas of the Donetsk region.

The village has been on the line of fire for over four years, but an intensification of clashes forced people to abandon places.⁴

In addition to the places that are cut off, the grey zone overall has limited facilities and access for the residents. Critical civilian infrastructure – such as water and electricity supply – remains under continuous fire. For instance, the water system in eastern Ukraine is very expansive, but largely centralized. It was developed during the industrialization era (1930-1970) with the growth of industrial facilities, such as steel mills or heavy machinery manufacturing facilities. Since natural water resources were extremely scarce in the region, water system has acquired strategic importance. Today almost 12,000 kilometers of water pipelines of Voda Donbasa (Water of Donbas) communal company supply 1.3 million cubic meters of water daily to nearly 3.9 million people in Donetsk region. Although the “contact line” in the east separates government-controlled and non-government-controlled territories, the water infrastructure remains interdependent. This means that any damage to the system might leave people without water across the region and on both sides of the “contact line.” While risks of losing water supply are high, damaged roads and restricted freedom of movement so far have the most noticeable effects in everyday life.

“Roads are like blood vessels of the state, you know. They also reflect how the state functions and how it treats its people” said Viktor, a 57-year-old resident of the grey zone. Since the conflict started, Viktor, like many others, has lost his job. The man relies on his old Lada car to support the family by taking his wife to sell home-grown produce in the market. Therefore, the problem of roadways is dire for him. The high saturation of land mines and other explosive ordinances makes it impossible to use unpaved roads (OCHA 2017). There are two roads that connect Viktor’s village to the town nearby – one is cut by the contact line, the other one is seriously damaged by the movement of heavy military equipment. Viktor’s car can barely make its way through the endless potholes. Active conflict developments make road repairs almost impossible in the area. Because of this, the conflict has drastically redrawn the geographies of everyday practices, while decreasing the economic mobility of residents.



⁴ The recent re-formatting of the military operation in the eastern Ukraine also introduced three regimes of access to the conflict-affected area: a ‘green zone’ with no restrictions, ‘yellow zone’ where the movement is possible with ID and search is allowed, and a ‘red zone,’ where the presence of individuals is restricted or prohibited. Though segmentations of the areas were introduced, its mapping is not clearly defined, which leaves it up to a case-to-case decision when it comes to the issues of accessing certain areas.

Fig. 6. The condition of the main regional roads. March 2018. Photo by author.



Fig. 7. A woman walks on the only road that links her village to a town nearby. Waking on the side of the road is not considered safe because of the land mine contamination. March 2018. Photo by author.

The dynamics of the economic activities can be seen in REACH project’s visualization of the pre-conflict and current networks of selling produce in areas of hostilities (Fig. 8) (Lambroschini 2018).

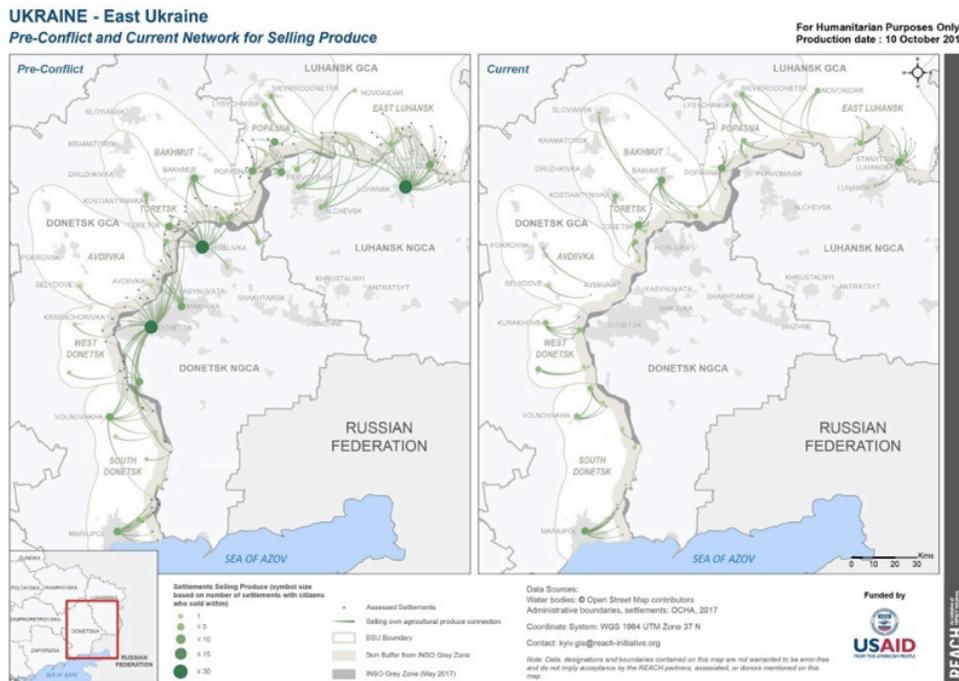


Fig. 8. A map of pre-conflict network for selling produce contrasted to the network in 2017. REACH project.

As Madeleine Reeves keenly points out in her study of the rural border communities in Central Asia, we should look at the ‘mobility rather than stasis’ to have a comprehensive understanding of what the state and what its physical limits mean (Reeves 2014, 138). The grey zone is a case where mobility can turn out to be a quest for survival, but staying in one place does not bring safety either. Limited ways of movement, difficulties in accessing emergency services, and complications in receiving social entitlements lead to physical and social marginalization. Unequal access to resources makes people in the conflict-affected areas more vulnerable under the overarching state strategy to restore its sovereignty. Ironically, Viktor’s car was once a recognition of his hard work at the metallurgic plant — he received it through the USSR state program for the most productive workers. Today, he drives it through the drained ‘veins’ of the state, as a bitter reminder of how his relations with the entity of the state have changed.

Conclusions

The structuring idea of state sovereignty — particularly, its Westphalian model— is grounded in the fact that the state enforces order and maintains different modalities of control over populations in certain territories. Indeed, one of the rationalities for the state’s existence overall is to balance uncontrolled chaos. While much of the discussion surrounding sovereignty is centred on the implicit and ubiquitous presence of the state, the lack of the state’s presence is rarely acknowledged. In this light, out-of-order situations challenge our thinking about the mechanisms of sovereignty and question the difference between the chaos and control that the state can deliver to its people. In situations of protracted and active conflict, contested areas, such as parts of eastern Ukraine, become sites that are more often than not characterized by what residents see as the absence of the state. Uncertainty and lack of security, destruction, damaged infrastructure, the shutting down of facilities, disrupted transportation systems, and limited service provision – all these elements indicate not just the absence of order, but a sovereignty gap.

Limbo state and unpredictability of conflict that civilians experience in their everyday lives push us to rethink what can be considered as ‘control’ in a commonly used definition of ‘government-controlled areas.’ The fact that people can be cut off from essential services and basic provisions, elucidates that enforced control in the contested zones is mostly related to the ambitions to restore the state’s territorial boundaries. Stabilization and maintenance of territorial integrity as a key focus of the state action symbolically removes lives of affected people from the picture. While critiques of humanitarianism suggest that there are migrant modes of sovereignty that are de-territorialized (Ticktin 2009), the absence of decent living conditions in conflict areas as well as states’ involvement in facilitation processes indicate that certain modes of sovereignty are de-humanized. The lives of conflict-zone residents are not sacrificed and are not direct objects of state violence, as Agamben describes (Agamben 1998). They are not kept alive for the sake of keeping bare life. They rather live in a space where state power is not pervasive and control cannot be steadily maintained; in a gap where sovereignty exists in a reduced mode.

The idea of the spaces where sovereignty gaps exist challenges how we see the comprehensiveness of the state rule within its fixed borders. In times when securitization of the internal affairs and raising walls are shifting the state's gaze inwards, the existence of such voids of state protection should be further explored and critically evaluated. The past decade shows that we are moving from a world where boundaries were being blurred to a world where physical walls are erected to further restrain the mobility of populations. At the same time, as discussed in this paper, people with restrained mobility in conflict-affected areas might find themselves in sovereignty gaps, being simultaneously included and excluded from the state order. This paradox calls for further examination of how conflicts and emergencies can substitute populations by territory on the state's agenda. Consequently, these ideas push us to rethink the dimensions of state protection and political action.

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