

## **"Rivers Don't Abide By the Laws of War": The Water Utilities Company Voda Donbasu in the Cross-Border "Warscape" of Eastern Ukraine.**

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This paper presents some preliminary research based on ethnographic fieldwork in Donbas on how infrastructure and the people running it are affected by the conflict. The frontline in eastern Ukraine separating government-controlled territories from those under the rule of the Russian-backed self-proclaimed republics of Luhansk and Donetsk (LPR/DPR) shattered many economic and infrastructure networks. In this sense, the local water distribution network is a partial exception. Technically, it can't be broken up along military borders and has been operating across the frontline since the war began in May 2014 to provide drinking water and heating. 3.8 million people rely on this fragile balance involving cooperation and politics. The workers of Voda Donbasu, the local water utilities company, are the object of this case study about the dynamics of persistence and change in social interactions in the context of system collapse. How do they adapt and accommodate the "war factor" in their daily and professional and make the water flow in face of disruptions caused by war?

Olha<sup>1</sup> works at a water pumping station in Avdiivka, Donetsk region, where she grew up. She became a hydro-mechanic ("mashinist") after graduating from a technical school in Donetsk about eight years ago. Dressed in her work clothes – burgundy overalls that complement her iridescent purple nail varnish - she walks through the grounds of the facility, a fairly large compound surrounded by a white-washed wall with some bullet impacts. Avdiivka, a town of about 35000<sup>2</sup>, borders the demarcation line with the secessionist areas escaping Kyiv's control, and was the scene of heavy artillery fire in 2014 and early 2015<sup>3</sup>. At the back of the compound, a simple building made of brick houses the pumping installation: a system of main and secondary pipes, pressure gauges and taps coded in red or blue. Water arrives here from the Donetsk Filtration station where it is treated across the frontline through two main large-diameter pipes. Once inside the compound, the water is distributed through the pumps to a reservoir and into the municipal water system (drinking water and heating) to about 15000-20000 people living in apartment blocks, to schools, administrative buildings, offices, and to the large coke and chemical plant at the edge of city and its main employer. As a water technician, Olha's job is to monitor the flow of water coming in from across the "border": check the gauges that indicate that water pressure is stable (a sudden drop could mean a pipe upstream was damaged) and make sure that the distribution to consumers and to the reservoir is going smoothly. "It's pretty routine work", she comments. "When everything goes well, there's not that much to do".

Walking around the territory, she shares her past experience: *"a few years ago the shooting was really bad. See, [we] walled up parts of the windows to make it safer [she shows the windows of the main facility." Next to the building a door leads to what looks like an outdoor cellar: There was*

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<sup>1</sup> name changed

<sup>2</sup> precise population figures do not exist due to the large in- and out-flow of people near the contact line.

<sup>3</sup> Its location just a few kilometers west of Donetsk and its airport made it a strategic object. Occupied by secessionist forces in May-June 2014, it was under fire for many months until after the Minsk ceasefire agreement of 2015.

*this one night... I was alone with some people from an international organization, the dog barked – animals they can feel those things -, it alerted us...then the shooting... I ran to the shelter, is was just built then. The "dispatcher" kept trying to reach me but there's no signal underground, and anyway, when the shelling starts the cell phone connection is really bad... I stayed there all night. Then I came up and called back and gave a report. Those big buildings there shielded us a lot, luckily. [She points at three high-rises on Molodezhnaya street that runs parallel to the frontline.]*

There was one time, though where the now-impact ridden high-rises failed to block out the shelling on November 10, 2014. *"... that one time...such a tragedy ... it was in the winter '14, water was cut because of damage. So, we decided to get the people some water. We brought out this big hose, connected it to the reservoir [she shows a mound under which there is a tank of 4000 liters and then pulled until there [she points towards a housing block nearby]. People came with buckets, and banochki, there was a long line waiting. And then it happened... [shelling mortar attack]. There were dead people. Injured. Because they came for our water, they died<sup>4</sup>."* Why does she continue doing what has become such a dangerous job at times? Olha shrugs and looks a bit confused: "Just stop? It's been my job since 2010...and this is my town...well, it used to be like a suburb of Donetsk, now it's here. My family is here."

Olha's recollections reflects the dynamics of persistence and change in social interactions in war, through the maintenance of a certain normality to the chaotic circumstances around her. She is one of the 12000 employees of the Voda Donbasu water management company that runs the distribution system of water for about 3.8 million people living in the western parts of Donetsk oblast under Ukrainian government-control and also in the secessionist non-government-controlled areas of the Russian-backed self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics (DPR/LNR). Indeed, the water management and distribution system straddle the front line with key facilities located in or near the "grey zone" where shelling and even fighting continues in violation of the 2015 Minsk ceasefire agreement on establishing a demilitarized zone on either side of a contact or demarcation line. Employees of Voda Donbasu have had to adapt not only their daily lives but also new work conditions.

My field research investigates these adaptive practices in the Donbas "warscape", to use a concept introduced by anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom to describe the effect of violent conflict on social structures (1997). The research presents a case study, the utility company Voda Donbasu that, in order to provide drinking water, must operate on both sides of the front line. It looks at how company's professionals adapt their actions within the complex web of interactions with danger, politics, and economics and constitutes a preliminary attempt at understanding the specificities of occupational-economic dynamics in "warscapes". At a micro-level, this means looking at how the war changed the way the company and its employees work day-to-day to keep water flowing. At a meso-level, the goal is to determine how the Voda Donbasu employees interact with the political, military and economic actors created by the conflict - people labeled at a legal and political level as the "enemy". Such collaborations are significant in that they survived the outbreak of the war and have continued in some form or other throughout the war.

This paper focuses on how the employees of Voda Donbasu "manage" to keep the system operating in spite of the direct effect of war. I outline some theoretical reflections on system collapse and war through the lens of how people facing the breakdown of their everyday lives use various strategies to "normalize" the chaos. After describing the methods of my fieldwork, I present the specific historical and institutional context of the water utilities company. This serves as a backdrop to observe and analyze the specific adaptation by employees of Voda Donbasu – in their work-routine, influenced also by their private and personal lives. I try to catch the specific social dynamics at work when the "peaceful" occupation of water-management becomes a front-line mission that demands new skills to get the job done.

## I. Social adaptation to system collapses in the context of violent conflict.

In order to explain how social structures and dynamics are affected in local communities "living with" war, Carolyn Nordstrom describes as "warscapes" the political and social geography of war zones (1997). These are "landscapes characterized by brutal violence, political volatility physical insecurity, disruptions and instabilities" (Korf, Engeler, Hagman 2010: 2)<sup>5</sup>. While war justifiably evokes images of broken ties and new borders, war can also be a space of renewed interaction as anthropological investigations in Angola (Koloma-Beck 2012), Mozambique (Nordstrom 1995<sup>6</sup>, 1997), and Sarajevo (Maček 2012) demonstrate.

The war in Ukraine's east that killed over 10500 and uprooted 2 million people since 2014 is no different. In 2017, the Ukrainian Border guards service registered one million monthly crossings of the Contact line between Ukrainian government-controlled areas (GCA) and secessionist areas of the self-proclaimed republics of Donets and Luhansk (non-GCA or NGCA): this number is witness to the vitality of connectivities across "enemy" lines. Most of these commutes are into GCA by permanent residents in NGCA: they are personal and private initiatives to collect pensions and resolve other administrative issues in GCA (banking, official documents), visit family, buy essentials unavailable in NGCA, according to international monitoring surveys<sup>7</sup>. Sometimes they involve small scale trade while others represent new markets created by war and linked to international production sites and transit routes. Infrastructure systems (water, electricity and railways) constitute a third type of trans-border connectivity: they were established in pre-war Ukraine and as such don't "bend" easily to the rules of frontlines and new borders, but rather – through the actions of their staff - adapt to new contingencies. Comparing the breakdown of "normal life" by war to that caused by deep social change helps to understand how people adapt and find new ways of working and communicating.

### *The breakdown of normative order as a space for innovative adaptive practices*

A crisis – whether through war, disaster, disease, or change of political regime, can be defined from a sociological perspective, as a "breakdown of a normative order" (Beck and Knecht 2016), in other words; the collapse of the norms grounded in the social, political, economic, psychological context of the day. People react differently to crises, depending on a web of factors, contextual, social, personal... and studying people's reactions to crisis allow for a deeper insight into "the relationship of persistence and change"<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, managing the dynamics of change is why people and communities often adapt their behavior to new circumstances. Reactions to crisis cover a broad range: from denial to adaptation in various forms (and I will come to that later). But there are some generally common features of how a breakdown of habitual norms affect people. The outbreak of war can also be approached as a moment where a familiar system disintegrates. The elderly – overly represented near the front line – remember the second world war.

The populations - at least those over the age of 30 – have consciously experienced another system collapse, that of Soviet system. in the general framework of a "warscape" and system collapse. Though the pre-conflict / post-socialist situation was broadly perceived as flawed by

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<sup>5</sup>This research is theoretically and empirically grounded in the "warscape" near the contact line in eastern Ukraine. Though initially describing situation in protracted "civil" wars, I use the term without qualifying this specific conflict as "civil", or "external aggression", or having "civil elements", as this is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> results of the March 2018 round of the survey conducted by the Charitable Foundation «The Right to Protection» (R2P) at the five entry-exit checkpoints (EECPs) with the non-government-controlled area (NGCA) administered on a regular basis since June 2017. Monitoring report: "Crossing the Line of Contact", March 2018. [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1443285/1930\\_1536908449\\_report-eccp-august-2018-eng.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1443285/1930_1536908449_report-eccp-august-2018-eng.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> ibid.

de-industrialization and corruption, at least its rules and norms were familiar. This is important in the specific context of war in the post-socialist space.

The economic and political myth of Donbas as a flagship of Soviet industry – when in fact it had lacked capital investments for decades making it uncompetitive in many spheres – had made the end of the planned economy and the social stability it carried with it a particularly traumatic moment (Kuromiya 2003). This interpretation echoes the work of sociologists Burawoy and Verdery on post-socialist change from a micro-level ethnographic perspective (1999). They describe the "world changes" provoked by the end of the familiar system in terms of agency, time, and space. The collapse of the socialist order meant that the parameters of action changed completely, and the lack of fixed norms meant – or even demanded – more agency. Ordinary people tended to have to improvise behaviors and actions where they previously had guidelines. The effect of system collapse on time is that it reduces the horizon for strategic thinking to the short-term, closing in the "horizon of their expectations" as formulated by R. Koselleck (2004), where our past experience draws our representation of the future. As for space, it is also affected by system collapse – creating new space of action and closing down old ones. In this perspective, system collapse opens a process of forced innovation (Burawoy and Verdery) : new approaches, new practices emerge that are more in sync with new living conditions.

#### *War as an extreme form of system collapse*

So violent conflict can be seen as a more extreme form of "system breakdown" as it affects far more than the classical battlefields but also familiar and often essential social structures. As marketplaces, homes and schools are shelled, fields is made unexploitable by land mines, violence destroys spaces that lay beyond the actual battlefields. As a result, boundaries of war and peace are blurred. Also, when ceasefires and truces are not observed, especially in longer lasting low-impact conflicts, the distinction between "times of war" and "times of peace" also becomes indistinct, as sociologist T. Koloma-Beck observed during her fieldwork in Angola and Mozambique (2005). Put differently, war has an obvious destabilizing effect on space and time in everyday lives, shattering work and school routines as the front line breaks up familiar and mundane networks, such as going to a doctor's appointment or get money at an ATM. The need to cross from NGCA to GCA for many everyday matters (getting pensions, applying for documents, buying certain goods...<sup>9</sup>) and submitting to the administrative and military order of new borders through entry/exit points is another aspect lives distorted by war. Also, the security situation is constantly changing, especially in or near the grey zone: entry/exit points open and close unexpectedly due to shelling or politics<sup>10</sup>.

#### *Reacting to system collapse: seeking normality in war*

When both space and time, the pillars that set the security of people's daily routines, are crumbling, what do they do?

Many accounts of living with war – whether through memoirs or interviews - describe scenes of "everyday life"<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, however, accounts of living in war by the people living near the

<sup>9</sup> These shattered networks are well-represented by the maps drawn up by the REACH consortium: [<http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/countries/Ukraine>].

<sup>10</sup> After the assassination of the leader of DPR on August 31, 2018, the self-proclaimed government shut down the entry/exit points for several days, in effect closing their borders.

<sup>11</sup> In the eastern European context, the account by A. Kuznetsov (2008) of everyday life in Kyiv during its occupation by Nazi forces is a powerful reflection of how everyday concerns (like fishing in the Dnepr) cohabitate with the traumatic observation of the killings at Babi Yar.

grey zone (as well as literary memoirs of other wars) often include descriptions of "everyday" and "ordinary" experiences: shopping, going to school, the enactment of routine... Anthropologist Ivana Maček's description of everyday life in Sarajevo under siege in 1992 emphasizes how its inhabitants refer to being "normal" as a way for people to create sense of reality and security. Teresa Koloma-Beck also describes "the reproduction and transformation of normality in war situations" perceptions or actions, which appear as normal or familiar" serve as "anchor points of orientation and sources of resilience" in her book evocatively called "The Normality of Civil War" (2012).

However, both these scholars underline the transient and fickle nature of this normality: because "normality" is constantly disrupted it implies, in order to come to terms with chaos, a new process of adaptation. This is what I. Maček calls "negotiating normality" (Maček: 39) Negotiating normality means creating a sense of normal life from abnormal situations as she reports from Sarajevo: making tasty meals out of meagre resources, tinkering energy producing contraptions when there is no light or heating, having new and intense friendships in life-threatening situations, but also the organization of cultural events, or creating and finding work where there was none...

In this paper, I lean on both Maček's and Koloma-Beck's conceptualization of normality in war<sup>12</sup> as adaptive processes and to look at how this "normality" is negotiated by the employees of a company that need to work on both sides of the front line. In other words, how does one reframe "everyday work" when suddenly one's colleague is on the other side of the political and military divide, and when the most mundane mechanic job becomes a front line experience? How do company managers handle the new and unexpected after years of routine? These observations may throw some light on how people adapt, maintain or break interactions in the context of conflict.

## II. Methodology

My research draws on fieldwork conducted on two successive trips near the contact line in government-controlled areas of Donetsk oblast'. A first trip (May 6-14) took me to Kyiv, Mariupol, Pokrovsk and Sloviansk. The purpose was to establish contacts with VD management as well as humanitarian organizations, and for overall reconnaissance of the areas near the Contact line in order to appreciate potential working conditions and evaluate the feasibility of my project from a regulatory and security perspective. Indeed, the transfer of the military operation on the government-controlled side had just shifted from SBU to army control (OOS) implying organizational changes, had come into force May 1. In addition to reframing the conflict from anti-terrorist operation to one engaged against a foreign aggressor (Russia), included a reorganization of the security system near the frontline, with the possibility of the General staff to unilaterally restrict access to specific areas ("red zone"), as requires. (In effect, the transfer under military control eventually led to lifting of several check-points along the Sloviansk-Mariupol axis for reasons that are unclear). This first trip was also the opportunity to collect general background information and impressions of life near the grey zone (entry/exit control-point Hnutove north-east of Mariupol). Also, the goal was to establish first contacts and interviews with managers of the company *Voda Donbasu* (visits to their offices in Mariupol and Pokrovsk) and with employees of *Voda Donbasu*, as well as a superficial observation of the water system and education about hydro-engineering systems. During a second fieldtrip (August 24-September 2), I chose as a base Kramatorsk, the oblast' capital, traveling on day trips to Pokrovsk where VD runs its main office in GCA, and to Avdiivka and Toretsk, both located within the 5-kilometer perimeter of the Line of contact, loosely described as the grey zone.

The interviews were partially structured: six local VD managers<sup>13</sup>, some of them interviewed repeatedly in an office, "official" setting: of Voda Donbasu, 5 in GCA (Mariupol, Pokrovsk, Avdiivka, Toretsk) and one based in Donetsk (NGCA), in addition to four employees in Toretsk (pumping station), and in Avdiivka (technician and office personnel).

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<sup>12</sup> Her research concerns normality in *civil* war from the perspective of armed groups and everyday life in Angola. However, the general idea on the ground in Donbas seems applicable to this internal conflict though it involves both secessionist and external (Russian) intervention.

<sup>13</sup> One deputy-general director; the local directors of Avdiivka, Toretsk, Mariupol, Pokrovsk subdivisions, the general engineer of Povrovsk subdivision.

The interviews were structured according to a general principle of “conceptual openness” where no hypotheses or preconceptions are tested, giving way instead to the dynamic flow generated by the subject. This approach - Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf 2004) – implies that the interviewer is accompanying the interviewed person in his narrative as a listener: the interviewer sets aside his preconceptions. This method echoes field reporting when a journalist opts for an open-ended question, i.e. “what happened?”, where the interview is done over three subsessions, starting with an open-ended question (“tell me about your work, I won’t interrupt”), and then following up by focusing on specific episodes, and a third sequence devoted to non-narrative questions. Gabriele Rosenthal’s (1993) methodological principles – a briefly defined theme on which the subject is asked to narrate (main narrative), followed by a “period of questioning” -.

In my case, the interview was framed as focusing on “what is it like to be working at Voda Donbasu” in particular with regard to before-after, lifestyle, practices, and skills. I used elements of thematic field analysis, in particular Owen’s three constitutive elements of a theme - recurrence, repetition and forcefulness (Owen 1984) to understand the salient points (for example, the insistence of “splochennyi kollektiv”).

#### *Limitations:*

The limitations of such interviews are those of life-stories as a social construct: a human tendency to seek to project a self-identity consistent with the one “one is desperate to have confirmed by others” (Laing 1961, quoted in Moeninger 2000, 67), or in, other words the difference between the lived life and the told life. After some open-ended questions, I asked them to describe “working across the line of contact” (liniya soprikosnoveniya), purposefully using the more neutral term. Initial responses in Mariupol and Pokrovsk underline how the employees of VD frame their day-to-day work with their colleagues based on occupied territory frame “as professional” interaction (which they oppose to “political” interaction that are “prohibited” by management). My research looks at their everyday routines, and focuses on minute practices of interaction and communication: how they communicate (mobile phone, skype video conferences), what does the border represent (an administrative hurdle?), how they interact with other actors of the frontline: border guards, local authorities, military and security officers, representatives of the OSCE, communicating with the Joint Coordination and control center, responsible under the Minsk agreement for overseeing and implementing the ceasefire.

Looking for opportunities of participant-observation in order to mitigate the interview bias, I attended a routine monthly board of directors meeting at the Pokrovsk office of Voda Donbasu on Kyiv-controlled territory (which is used “mirror” headquarters to the one in Donetsk) in August 2018. Limited observation of daily work routine (with questions to local employees about “what they are doing”) was also possible at the Avdiivka office and pumping station, as well as Toretsk pumping station. During these last periods, note-taking was limited to short tags and then reconstructed as field notes in the car or at the end of the day (in order not to interrupt the flow of work and conversation).

A clear limitation of my work is the impossibility (so far) to do fieldwork on the NGCA side. Consequently, it was impossible to observe first-hand how Voda Donbasu's employees adapted to the rule of the secessionist authorities. The fact that the company is Ukrainian but based in Donetsk implies that it operates in a liminal space that would have a lot “to tell” but can, for now, be reconstructed only on the basis of second-hand accounts.

Another limitation is the difficulty in understanding pre-conflict realities and processes.

#### *Specific challenges:*

The complex technical, economic and political context means that this research relies heavily on technical data about hydraulic engineering, documents from Voda Donbasu, and the rich corpus of analytical material and maps produced by non-government organizations. This implied a steep (and still ascending) learning curve in terms of technical knowledge about water control and engineering.

### **III. Context: war-time water management in Donbas**

The specific context of post-socialist Donbas means that - depending on the age group - for many locals this war is the last in a series of system collapses that they faced in their conscious and working lives: that of the Soviet planned economic system and transfer under Ukrainian sovereignty, and that of the 2014 conflict leading to occupation by secessionist forces. Going back further, it is perhaps useful to remember the general historical context of industrialized Donbas as born out of the "wild fields", a no-man's land that the tsarist empire attempted to control by integrating the unruly Cossack communities. With the second half of the 19th century came the discovery of its mineral riches. During the Stalin years, "an attractive haven for freedom seekers", a harsh frontier-land open to POWs, kulaks, and socially disenfranchised from all over the USSR to a region always in need of more workers.

The social, ethnic and political violence in Donbas (Holodomor, 1930s repressions, German occupation, miners' revolts and social tensions) was commensurate with the economic and ideological value it had in the eyes of the Soviet leadership, (Kuromiya 2002). The industrialist John Hughes who gave his name to Yuzivka (Donetsk's pre-Soviet name) was quoted by a Soviet novelist as having described the Donbas coal basin in the following terms: "it is not Russia, it is a factory" (Il'chenko et.al., 2018: 10), or as H. Kuromiya writes "an ethnically diverse border area united by economic factors" (Kuromiya 2002:14). Indeed, not only the industrial but also the political and social history of Donbas is constructed in the context of this "factory" past with identifications revolving around socio-professional rather than ethnic values (Kuromiya 2002, Kuzina 2012). Demographic and political upheavals were counterbalanced by one constant – the ascribed role of Donbas in the social construct of socialist ideology and of its economy. In 1974, over half of the working population and of capital was invested either in energy or metals sectors (Il'chenko et al. 2018: 10). This industrial grounding goes back to the 19th century when industrial towns built around an extraction facility were named after the owners and founders of the factory: Yuzivka, Horlivka, Yenakieve (2018: 11). Social infrastructure was equally tied to the founding capital, creating the Russian and then Soviet equivalent of "company towns" (or "monomisto") dominated by various forms and degrees of corporate paternalism (. he development of industrial towns before internalized by many workers in Donbas. A narrative of modernization that is closely tied to the history of industrialization<sup>14</sup>.

### *History and structure of Voda Donbasu : a Soviet legacy*

In order to understand the implications of everyday water distribution in the Donbas, it is essential to understand the hydro-infrastructure system in the region. Water mostly stems from the Severskiy-Donets river (except localized wells) in the north of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The Severskiy Donets is the largest river in eastern Ukraine and the main source of fresh water in the region, a tributary to the Don river that, ultimately crossing into Russia flows into the Azov sea. The Second Donetsk waterway taps into the Severskiy Donets river. Water flows further south through a system of closed pipes and open canals, marked by pumping and lifting stations, and to Severskiy-Donets-Donbas channel (SDD channel), feeding water to the city of Donetsk and many localities on both sides of the Contact Line. Further south, the SDD channel becomes the Southern Donets waterway down to Mariupol (500.000 inhabitants). Most of the hydraulic engineering system built around the Severskiy Donets river providing fresh drinking water and the "technical" water for industry and agriculture is managed by the one company, Voda Donbasu. Voda Donbasu is a municipal enterprise registered in 2008 in Donetsk. It is the successor of the initial Stalin-era Donbasvodtrust (est. 1930) renamed Ukrvodpromchermet after Ukraine's independence. An ageing system developed in the late 1950s to serve the Soviet metallurgical and energy plants and their company towns, it was passed up for capital investment and modernization during the post-Soviet decades when profit-oriented business groups controlled the region.

The water is treated in 16 filter stations situated near bigger localities. The largest filter station is the Donetsk filter station north of the city of Donetsk. It supplies water to a total of 378983

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<sup>14</sup> The museum in Kramatorsk devotes two rooms to the pre-Revolutionary industrial history of the region.

people on both sides of the Line of Contact: Avdiivka, Kruta Balka, Vasylivka, Mineralne, Yakovlivka, Verkhniotoretske, part of Yasynuvata and western areas of Donetsk city<sup>15</sup>. According to data from 2015, the whole Voda Donbasa system services about 4 million people plus in part the city of Mariupol (but that also has an independent reservoir)<sup>16</sup>. In addition to canals, pumping stations and filter stations, Voda Donbasa also manages several workshops for repairs, laboratories for testing, as well as reservoirs of chlorine for purification and other chemicals needed in the process. The main system consists of 10000 kilometers of pipes, according to Voda Donbasu website.

The central feature of the Voda Donbasu hydraulic complex is that it straddles the allegedly demilitarized "buffer zone" – stretching 15 km on either side of the Line of Contact - that separates the belligerents according to the principles of the Minsk II ceasefire agreement concluded in February 2015, banning small and heavy arms from this strip. In reality, ceasefire violations – monitored by the OSCE are an almost daily occurrence exposing what is informally called the "grey zone" – 5-10 km wide area on each side of the front line where villages are regularly exposed to shelling, where woods and fields are off limits due to mines, shops and schools, administrative, transport and commercial services are rare, and water, electricity and gas contingent to fighting and weather conditions – and have directly impacted the Voda Donbasu system.

This trans-border localization constitutes the main challenge to Voda Donbasu's work (in addition to the ageing infrastructure, an aspect addressed only peripherally in this research). These challenges can be broken down into several components centered around the breakdowns caused by the war and the reactions to maintain or adapt continuities.

The other challenge resides in its complex legal and administrative situation. The main headquarters and many facilities are based in secessionist Donetsk. However, it is a fully Ukrainian incorporated company and works according to Ukrainian legislation, filing and paying taxes in Ukraine. Also, the General director of the company – living in Donetsk - is temporarily appointed by the governor of government-controlled Donetska oblast' in Kramatorsk. It is one of very few Ukrainian-owned companies whose ownership and management structure hasn't been broken up by the nationalization – "placement under external management" in DPR parlance - of companies under Ukrainian jurisdiction in the DPR in 2017<sup>17</sup>. There are 28 other regional subdivisions situated on both sides of the frontline, initially managed from Donetsk out of which some core missions are run: management, the dispatcher with 24/24 technicians on call in case of problems, a workshop specialized in repairing unique parts of the pumping system. Consequently, 7500 employees continue to work on separatist territory.

### *Voda Donbasu in the warscape*

Cases of technical breakdowns of the water distribution system:

The damages and disruptions caused by the conflict on the operations of VD are very diverse. They range from direct hits (shelling and small arms fire) on water management facilities – more than half of the 16 filter stations were hit at some point between 2014 ND 2016 – to indirect effects such as irregular maintenance of hard (dangerous) to access pipelines and electrical lines.

In June 2014, the Donetsk-Southern canal waterway was partially destroyed by a direct hit: despite repairs a whole region – extending from Donetsk to Mariupol – was left without running water for four months. Water trucks filled up improvised reservoirs, assuring minimum supplies (in addition to artesian wells), while Mariupol used its reservoir. Some secondary pipes near Donetsk airport, a strategic object, were damaged in 2014. Located in the grey zone that is still highly disputed by both parties, several villages have been cut off from drinking water for five years: Marinka and Krasnogorovka (GCA) and Peski in NGCA. While there has not been a similar crisis since 2014, shorter

<sup>15</sup> WASH cluster incident report N142, July 25, 2018. May 2018 figures provided by Voda Donbasu.

<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/ukraine/document/wash-cluster-incident-report-N142-25072018>

<sup>16</sup>[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/vodakanals\\_donetsk\\_v2.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/vodakanals_donetsk_v2.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> DPR Council of Ministers website. List of companies placed under external management. 02.03.2017.  
<http://smdnr.ru/perechen-predpriyatij-i-uchrezhdenij-na-kotoryx-vvoditsya-vremennaya-administraciya/>.



breakdowns are common. For example, in the first nine months of 2018, about 660000 people in Donetsk region experienced water cuts<sup>18</sup>. In winter, disruptions of the water distribution system affect central heating. Not only water facilities but also electric lines and power stations are regularly hit, shutting down electricity and water.

Infrastructure also suffers of the conflict indirectly. The ageing system, lacking capital investment, breaks down. Water quality is affected by both old and poorly maintained infrastructure and disruptions in the purification process.

#### Casualties:

At least 20 employees have been injured in the war, nine were killed. Most of these incidents took place during phases of heavy fighting (the summer of 2014 Ukrainian troops counter-offensive and January-February 2015 fighting). [ On July 2, 2014, Svetlana Kudenko, an inspector of hydro-technological installations was gravely wounded during a missile strike on a pumping station at the Severskiy-Donets-Donbas canal. Two of her colleagues, a mother and son, were killed in the same attack. One month later, in early August, the director of the pumping station in Mayorsk was hit by mortar fire in the hip. The same month the 38-year old director of a purification facility in Makeyevko Alexander Maksimenko was amputated after his leg was torn by shelling. In October 2014, the security guard at a water reservoir in Horlivka Aleksandr Pilipchuk was injured in a mortar attack. When the active fighting decreased following the Minsk II ceasefire agreement, so did the casualties, according to Voda Donbasu employees. They explain that some of the principles established by Minsk II – the establishment of a 30 km buffer zone, the pull-out of heavy artillery behind a 70 km line, and the organization of a joint center for implementing the ceasefire (the JCCC) considerably reduced shelling. However, casualties do still occur since the ceasefire isn't respected: the shelling of the DFS employee bus injured five people in April 2018. For example, last October 23, a VD company truck transporting a repair brigade and an excavator to Chigari in the grey zone where a damaged pipeline running from Horlivka (NGCA) to Toretsk (GCA) cut the town of Toretsk from water and heating since mid-October, drone unto a landmine, injuring the driver. ]

#### Operational disruptions:

The conflict disrupted the management and financial structure of Voda Donbasu, as well as operational conditions.

In terms of revenue, Voda Donbasu lost significantly to the new "border" and autonomous self-government in DPR. The new Donetsk administration had established new tariffs that were significantly lower than those in GCA where payments also decreased due to the general economic crisis spurred by the conflict. In Avdiivka, for instance, 30% of the local population can't or won't pay: in interviews motivations appeared to depend on individual interpretation as a expression of solidarity ("out of principle") or service-based ("if I get water I pay, if I don't – I don't. I know it's not the company's fault. But it's not mine either. And I need to money to buy bottled water" [although there are water trucks compensating the supply]). 70% do pay. Overall, the companies are better clients: 90% of companies pay, "mostly because we are allowed to cut them off"<sup>19</sup> which is not allowed for ordinary consumers for "humanitarian reasons". As a result, Voda Donbasu became "largely dependent" for capital investment, spare parts, and chemicals on international NGOs and other donors. These provide only "in kind" support through delivery of hardware and chemicals directly to the facilities, circumventing government-institutions in Kyiv. This dependency rationale of the company thereby shifted from a domestic economic-tariff based model to an external, aid-based, one.

<sup>18</sup> Data provided by Unicef WASH cluster by email. October 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with a local manager of a VD facility, May 2018.

The management system of the company was affected by the conflict because the frontline disrupted existing subordination "verticals": thirty local management offices throughout the region are subordinated to the Donetsk headquarters in NGCA. However, both telephone communications and physical communications have become, at times, extraordinarily time-consuming and even impossible. For instance, for several months there wasn't a mobile phone operator functioning on both sides: the GCA-based Ukrainian operator MTS/Vodafone ceased temporarily to work in DPR, forcing improvised adaptations (see next chapter). Physical contact has been hampered by the long procedures at the check-points.

Transport of equipment has been made quasi-impossible: both sides strictly monitor and restrict the nomenclature of items allowed across, reducing it to largely household needs and of a humanitarian non-commercial and non-military nature. Chemicals, and industrial equipment are banned, so VD employees "smuggle" small spare parts across the exist-entry points: parts that need to be repaired at a welding and repair plant in Donetsk, or repaired parts that have to be brought back. So, far, Voda Donbasu has not succeeded in negotiating a special check-point crossing procedure for its employees or its equipment. In fact, the need to establish such a status constitutes one of VD's main demands in its negotiations with the Kyiv-government (Ministry of temporarily occupied territories and displaced persons)<sup>20</sup>.

On the ground, keeping, finding and training staff has become complicated in several ways due to the conflict<sup>21</sup>. First of all, water technicians are trained to service specific facilities. Pumping stations each have their technical specificities, making it difficult to shift around technicians and engineers whose expertise is tightly linked to a specific site. For those sites that are exposed to danger (such as the Donetsk Filter Station), operational conditions changed significantly and constantly adapt to security concerns: minimal staffing, helmets and flak jackets, and a rehabilitation of Soviet-era bunkers (part of the post-war infrastructure of civilian defense. Direct exposure to employees at DFS in 2018 – the bus taking the shift home from work was shelled injuring several - led to their refusal to return to work before a security solution was found (which it eventually was by OSCE). Also, salaries are dependent on the collection of payments from water by companies and individuals. Officially, the loss of staff has been limited - 4% according to VD management. However,

The main difficulty from an operational point of view is organizing a safe environment to make repairs to sites that are (or risk being) under fire near or in the grey zone. Indeed, any repairs can only be realized as a result of specific ceasefires negotiations for "windows of silence": these are negotiated at a political and government-level but involve OSCE, Red Cross and Voda Donbasu managers.

Another indirect consequence of war has been issues with water quality. In addition to delays in upkeep of the ageing water system, the provision of chemicals has been haphazard. VD relies on financing by international donors for reagent chemicals for the testing of water quality, as well as for purification (chlorine). Political economic factors in Ukraine further complicate the picture: the factory that produced chlorine stopped production in part as a result of political and economic infighting, forcing VD to order the chemicals in Romania and transport them by road with the added, distance, cost and logistics of transport through international borders<sup>22</sup>. UNICEF supplies liquefied chlorine gas and sodium hypochlorite to 6 filter stations and 10 production departments of Voda Donbasu. The UN's children's fund also supplies sodium hypochlorite aluminum sulfate and activated carbon to some filtering units, such as the Western Filter Station of Popasna vodokanal that supplies drinking water to people on both sides of the contact line (ReliefWeb #8: 2018). Other donor organizations supplying chlorine for purification are the International Committee of the Red cross and the Swiss Agency for Development. Russia also provides chlorine to some of the filter stations

<sup>20</sup> According to various sources both domestic and international, involved in the negotiations

<sup>21</sup> These views were expressed to various degrees by all of the six managers interviewed in May and August 2018.

<sup>22</sup> V. Cherniy, Head engineer, VD-Pokrovsk. interview #2. August 2018.

located in NGCA. Nevertheless, water quality has also been affected according to several reports (OSCE: 2017 ; EPL: 2015).

#### IV. Working in a warscape : providing water as a "normal" occupation?

The normalization strategies adopted by VD employees are, in part those more generally adopted by the population living near the line of contact, but also characterized by the specific context of their work, within the framework of the company.

##### *The summer of 2014 as the "real war" v. "normal" life:*

Many of VD employees interviewed live in places like Mariupol, Avdiivka, Sloviansk that, for a brief period during the spring-summer 2014 were under "separatist" control before coming back under Kyiv-government rule. Thus, the Donbas conflict began for them with a personal experience of regime-change, involving arbitrary, fear, witnessing violence, and even injury or death to friends and relatives. The interviewees clearly equate the traumatic period ("real war") as being these first early weeks during which they were exposed to danger. Accounts underline the arbitrary violence: "Outside of town you never knew who might be in control and how far away the others", "better to stay home if you didn't want trouble"; as a man, "they could just take you by force into their troops, make you dig trenches or something, and your wife wouldn't even know what happened". This period was often sometimes described as that of "real war" ("nastoyashchaya vojna") as opposed to a perception of the current situation as being potentially dangerous but not immediately dangerous ("seychas vse normal'no", "bolee ili mene", "tekuchka"). However, the sense of arbitrary still pervades the present ("even now that Ukrainian power is back, there is fear to say what you think"; "everybody knows the *separaty* that stayed and can torch your front door, and the "organy" are watching"). In Toretsk, the burned down local administration that had been the scene of heavy fighting still stands burned and gutted on the central square, a strong reminder of past battles.

About 7500 VD employees live in DPR, especially Donetsk and Yasynuvata where livelihoods were closely connected to Avdiivka, now located across the border. Familiar work routes were broken by the front line. One VD manager has lived in Yasynuvata with his wife and two children for many years while working in Avdiivka, a twenty-minute car commute. Since the summer of 2014, his commute takes him up to 11 hours including the transit of entry/exit checkpoints: he leaves home in NGCA on Sunday afternoons, drives to Avdiivka where he works until Friday afternoon and then travels back home. But he can't settle into this long commute as a dreary and tiring routine: it is regularly exposed to the unexpected events caused by the conflict: the entry/exit points closest to Avdiivka at Marinka or Mayorsk can close unexpectedly because of shelling, forcing him to turn back (because it is too late to reach the next one). Following the assassination of DPR leader A. Zakharchenko on August 31, the authorities closed the entry-exit points on the NGCA side for several days. Thus, work and family routines are constantly exposed to the arbitrary of the changing political or military circumstances. However, this exhausting commute is described as "going to work", as if it were the old pre-war commute.

In interviews and observation, the front line doesn't appear to be projected as "enemy lines". In spite of the real danger that many employees have been subjected to at home or at work, the culprit isn't personified. The impersonal "they" – third person plural in Russian and Ukrainian is used to convey the shelling -. And indeed, in the grey zone ceasefire violations come from both sides. The war is a calamity that has to be dealt with but everyday lives are built around this random risk.

##### *Remaining home*

*Living in* towns like Avdiivka, Yasynuvata, and Toretsk, VD employees face the "ordinary" dangers of life near the contact line: shelling and mine. VD employees share in the universal risks faced by their families and neighbors. They also face the same discomforts and concerns: lack of water, electricity cuts, lacking an own plot, dependency on commerce, irregular public transport "out". They made the same choice as their neighbours – not to leave despite these risks and discomforts. Many interviewees say that had considered leaving or even left and then returned – their Remaining

"home" appears as a strategy of normalization to counter the "rootlessness" of migrating between homes, even within one family. In one account, a VD employee who lives in Yasynuvata (NGCA) describes how in the summer of 2014 the building where his apartment was on a top floor was damaged by a direct hit, and water and power cut for several days. He recalls that this direct exposure to danger made him and his wife take the decision to "leave everything" and move in with his mother-in-law in a large village. Their son began the school year there, and living in a village house with a vegetable garden and a well, gave them a sense of self-subsistence despite the proximity of the frontline. But one day the village was caught in a battle as Ukrainian forces launched their offensive to regain occupied territory. The house they lived in mother-in-law injured, another family member killed when a wall collapsed. "We went back to Yasynuvata", he concluded, "my wife has a job there, and my son is back in his old school." He himself had never left his position at the water management facility. Many accounts reflect a brief attempt at moving away (in particular during the summer of 2014), looking for safety, stability and autonomy but returning home after having had an "abnormal" experience as a refugee. This account clearly reflects how "staying home" amidst risks and dangers is a strategy to preserve some stability in the surrounding chaos, a sense of normality by "maintaining a proper household" (Koloma-Beck 2012).

*Being a "professional" across the front line as a strategy of rationalization:*

Some VD employees appear to have remained in their jobs throughout the first months because the situation seemed unbelievable: "For a long time, we just couldn't believe it. We just went on doing our jobs because, well, this couldn't be happening in Ukraine? This couldn't last, right?". Lacking any rational explanation for this experience, they continued with their routines – an evasive and normalizing strategy that I. Maček also observed among populations under siege in Sarajevo.

*Danger on the job:*

Like Olha in the opening paragraph of this paper who insisted on how she "called in her report to the dispatcher" during a lull in the shelling, VD employees like to describe in minute detail their work. The manager of Voda Donbasu's local subdivision in Avdiivka, described in detail photos at hand of technicians working on a cracked pipeline, but only described when prompted that the repairs were done on a section in a grey zone, equipped in flak-jackets, and protected by an OSCE mirror patrol. Their accounts appear to reflect an attempt at rationalizing the risks and discomforts of their work and home lives as an integrated element of their job.

VD employees do not get few financial benefits from going under fire. "A small bonus, an extra-day off, basically nothing", a VD manager shrugged when asked about incentives to go out on a risky mission. In interviews, respondents tend to describe their colleagues as selflessly "just doing their job" and claim that "few refuse to go." One VD manager said that while working in Donetsk in the summer of 2014, he went "to the office" but "slept in the bathtub" (because a windowless room was the safest place to be).

The structure and operations of the company means that occupational risk is not generalized but variable over time and job description. Just like in police work, exposure to risk is not generalized but specific to missions, locations etc. However, the shared exceptionality of their situation near the frontline appears in places like Toretsk and Avdiivka to create a sense of professional community. In some aspects, it is framed in paternalistic terms. "I sometimes wonder what will become of my daughter... She is 19 and studying to become a water engineer in (secessionist) Makiivka. No one in Ukraine will recognize her diploma! Except Voda Donbasu... I know I can count on the company for that... we try to help each other." Thus, materially uncompensated risk and danger on the job is reframed as part of the shared professional community "repaid" by paternalistic care. At this stage in my research I haven't analyzed how professional legitimacy was framed at VD before the war, so comparisons are not possible. While references made by interviewees to the "kollektiv" may appear reminiscent of socialist legacies and paternalistic models characteristic of the company and miner towns of Donbas, these expressions of corporate solidarity also echo social processes that are

characteristic of dangerous jobs where collective engagement is an important "glue" (irrespective of the socialist past.) Also, at the difference of socialist professional ethos of collective obligation, this occupational community is specifically grounded in the local exceptionalism of living "almost in the grey zone." Thus, working in a risky environment – risk meaning here not only physical but also economic and in terms of life expectations – is reframed as rational behavior: to remain with a company that "will look out" for you is presented as rational choice within the enviroing chaos. Sociologist E.C Hughes noted in his observations of occupations that physical danger can make an occupation that is experienced as unfulfilling into a socially significant mission, invested with a public mandate, that in the conditions of war has gained in urgency. Put differently, occupational danger and risk can add status to a job that previously may have had little social or professional prestige: Voda Donbasu employees were providing a community service with low pay in small localities suffering from the effects of des-industrialization but now perceive themselves as providers of a life-saving service.

The avoidance of politics:

When asked how they handled to divide created by the war the managers of VD in their interviews first all clearly stated that "we keep out of politics", "it would be unprofessional to discuss political issues", "our role is to focus on getting the job done". Several claimed that after the conflict started the General director of the time imposed a rule of "not speaking about politics" at the office.

Political arguments are described as "unprofessional behavior", and should be settled "behind the fence" [i.e.privately in a fistfight]. At one point, a local manager working in GCA showed a Ukrainian flag hanging on the wall and asked not to be photographed ("Better not to have a photo of me with the flag, the separatists might see it"). Also, some attention seems to be given to preserving a sort of public neutrality. This is also reflected on the company website, <http://www.voda.dn.ua>. The website is in Russian and doesn't divide the client zone into military/political areas. On the website, Donbas is still a single integrated region (despite the news section that reports on shelling, damages, and repairs without indentifying the locations in political terms).

However, in conversations it became apparent that managing the divide was in fact an issue but framed in terms of "patriotism". "At the office in Donetsk, we made sure that there are visible attributes of the Ukrainian state [flags, yellow and blue colors, tridents]", as one director insisted. "The office is located "over there", so we must make clear where we stand." In another conversation, a manager described how he dared an employee who was openly professing "separatist opinions" to "tear up his Ukrainian passport" (which the employee refused to do, thus putting an end to the matter, as the manager claimed". Indeed, the issue of "patriotism" remains central in some ways: for example, the long-time director of VD was terminated in 2016 [check] after he refused to go to GCA territory.

"there is no aggression between the people in either ide... they all consider themselves to be "nashy"...no one ever called me an *ukrop* over there..."

Alternatively, VD employees can also be the object of "politicization" by the community:

"Once I was asked to send a plumber to repair a pipe...there's a lack of plumbers...but I had our stull to take care of...there wasn't time..."

"You separatist, you don't want to help!"

The "politicization" may also vary over time: "... everyone is tired of this [war]...and they see that the company is trying their best [to provide water] ... so that [our town] doesn't stay without water." Several managers say some employees were placed on the "Mirotvorets" database – managed from Kyiv - that claims to expose "collaborators" for their work on the ground.

Overall it appears that locally on Kyiv-controlled territory there is little framing of VD's work as "political", especially close to the frontline. This fits general analyses and surveys of public opinion and trends in Kyiv-controlled Donbass as generally less polarized than in Ukraine at large (ZOIS 2017). However, the situation in VD offices in GCA is beyond the scope of this research. The depoliticization of the professional space at Voda Donbasu as a strategy to operate peacefully echoes similar strategies of political avoidance in other conflicts. For example, the reframing of cultural practices as

"non-political" traditions was noted in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina as a peace-building strategy between communities (Marijan 2015).

#### Language:

The choice of words used to describe the conflict and political aspects relating to it such as the status of the non-government-controlled areas, their authorities, and of the people living there is highly charged with emotions and symbolism. The choice of words – words being "a form of actions themselves" (Eliasoph 1999: 480) - reflect how people want to position themselves. An in-depth analysis of speech would require an anthropological investigation into the context of when and where certain words are used. However, superficial observations of VD employees (in the government-controlled areas) appear to reveal a differentiation of vocabulary between a formal, official context and an informal one. In their interactions in a formal setting such as a board of directors meeting, VD employees use the qualifier "non-controlled" territories ("nekontroliruyemye/nepodkontrolnyye territory", for instance the VD deputy-general director for economic affairs. This denomination diverges from the official (and political) denomination of "temporarily occupied" territories used by government agencies. However, VD employees use other words in non-official but work related settings: "separatisty", "their authorities" (ih vlasti)... As for language use, VD employees appear to use Ukrainian when referring to legal and administrative norms (that are formulated in Ukrainian) but revert to Russian in their interactions at the workplace, including more formal meetings such board of directors' meetings. The official half-year report is written (and read out loud) in Ukrainian but comments come in a mix of Russian and Ukrainian, making the language choice appear situational and context-based.

We see that VD employees are careful of what they do or say according to context, depending on the landscape that they are operating in in a certain moment in time: as "Ukrainian patriots" and another as employees of cross-border company require specific theoretical frameworks that take into account this duality. Ervin Goffman's dramaturgical images of "front stage" behavior to conform to publicly held norms and values in order to convey a specific persona, and "backstage" behavior that can be freer of these constraints project a light on how VD employees live in both worlds.

#### *Reorganizing infrastructure, management behavior and mechanisms:*

##### Adapting infrastructure and organizational features of the company:

The risk to employees and infrastructure demanded specific adaptations and reframing of existing structures to fit the context of war. The headquarters of Voda Donbasu in Avdiivka are located in a three-story building. The first floor was built "before the 1917 revolution", the director tells me with visible satisfaction. The main office on the ground floor is used by the "dispatchers": working in shifts, they coordinate by phone the communication with all the facilities. They are all women (as are the bookkeepers, cashiers, water meter controllers and many of the technicians). The director knock on an inner wall about half a meter thick: "see, an ideal bomb shelter. it survived the Great Patriotic war", he says with satisfaction. "When the building was shot at in 2014, our colleagues just had to lie down. They were safe here". Three women present in the room nod in consent. "We were safer here than in our homes", one observed. One story higher are two large offices for the bookkeepers, financial controllers, and water meter controllers. Each office as renovated (but with mismatched wall paper). Here (higher up) some shattered window panes are taped up, and others covered with a special film to protect against shelling.

##### Renegotiating the border: increased mobility, management and communication tactics

Interviewees all insisted on the commonality with "those over there" (s temi, kotorye tam): "they are like us", "we're all tired of this [war]." While this could be interpreted at first glance as political avoidance, the social context of these networks demonstrates that, in many cases, these are long-established family, friends- and professional networks that were "one" and separated by the front line. One employee of Voda Donbasu works in government-controlled Donbass but commuters'

home to his family that continues to live 20 kilometers away on the "other side". "When I talk to my wife over the phone while [they] 're shooting [vo vremya obstrela], we hear the same blasts". Another manager from VD invited half a dozen colleagues from Yenakieve in DPR to his birthday party on government-controlled territory. "They always came to my birthday. Why should it change now?"

However, maintaining Donetsk as the central agent was made impossible by the war. As a result, the local Voda Donbasu branch office in Pokrovsk (formerly Krasnoarmeysk) in government-controlled Ukraine, developed into a second headquarters office, and the Mariupol office is the official postal recipient. Pokrovsk is located just an hour's drive km from Donetsk which represents a six to twelve-hour journey across today.

Before the war, managers, engineers, technicians and other personnel were "constantly on the road" – distances were short and the roads between sites in relatively good condition. The same way as Mariupol's Azov sea promenade was "Donetsk's weak-end beach destination" just two hours away, moving between HQ in Donetsk and various facilities belonged to the work-day geography of many VD employees. This mobility was a daily work routine for many VD employees but it was simple and straightforward. Now mobility means increased time, risk, and complications.

Employees from Donetsk arrive Mondays – leaving at six AM and arriving in early afternoon – to work directly with their Pokrovsk colleagues. The goal of these visits is to improve communication and work on a sense of professional belonging. Employees are lodged at a special VD-owned hotel and entertained in the evenings.

Pokrovsk and Donetsk management teams communicate via skype conferences held once a month and a system of shifting one-week visits from Donetsk to Pokrovsk.

Communication takes place via mobile phone, more reliable than the land lines. Production facilities – pumping and filtration stations – communicate problems and accidents by mobile phone to the dispatcher in Donetsk who centralizes information and then managers and on-call engineers. But also, more routine interactions between various sites take place via mobile phone. For a long time both sides could rely on the MTS/Vodafone GCA-controlled Ukrainian operator controlled by influential businessman Rinat Akhmetov. However, when suddenly MTS ceased to work in DPR (possibly as a means to pressure the owner into sharing revenue with the Donetsk authorities), VD employees had to adapt quickly. To some extent they applied the same solutions as other DPR inhabitants – they traveled to nearby LNR to make phone calls according to pre-arranged schedules. Within DPR mobile phone communication continued via the local Phoenix network – most people in occupied territories have at least two SIM cards – one for Phoenix, and another for Vodafone, as well as a new operator that appeared in DPR in spring.

A broadening network of horizontal and vertical interactions:

The conflict completely overturned the economic and management model of Voda Donbasu, in particular because intervention by new actors were a condition for its survival. While the company had originally functioned strictly on a local level, its managers now communicate with the Minsk contact group, international donors (western governments and international organizations providing chemicals, and spare parts), authorities in Kyiv and Donetsk, OSCE peace-keeping and armed forces providing security. Indeed, setting up a "window of silence" to organize repairs, can involve months of negotiations at geopolitical level, overseen by OSCE monitors who shuttle between representatives of Kyiv, Moscow, and the authorities in Donetsk with variable success. To negotiate "windows of silence" the general director of VD also communicates directly with the Minsk contact group, in other words, crossing administrative and political hierarchies. The "windows of silence" or localized truces "work" best when representatives of both sides of the conflict are on the ground. This became apparent when the Joint Center for Cooperation and Control (JCCC), an informal body set up by presidents V. Putin and P. Poroshenko in 2014 to implement the Minsk ceasefire, was rendered less effective after the Russian side pulled out in December, 2017. At present, the JCCC is staffed by Ukrainian officers that communicate, through the OSCE, with representatives of the secessionist authorities. In October, a political agreement to establish a "window of silence" to repair

8 meters of a leaking pipe on the main waterway just behind Avdiivka took 19 months to organize but was violated by shelling after just a few days.

#### Conclusion:

Before the war began, turning the kitchen tap to fill a bucket to water the vegetable patch, to fill the sink or the bathtub was a mundane action with little (perceived) social or political content. The conflict's effect on water distribution made visible the social and political dynamics that lie below the flow of drinking water. AS the risk of leaving millions of people without safe drinking water became a reality, the social and professional processes that allow for water to come out of the kitchen tap manufacture a public mandate for water infrastructure professionals as "life-saving", dramaturgically more comparable to fire-fighters than to local service providers. The adaptive processes at Voda Donbasu described above re-modeled the company and the occupational profile of many of its employees to a mission-based professional engagement where cross-border legitimacy is constructed by the need to "provide water" and the running of certain risks in terms of existential security or direct physical risk. Arguing professional legitimation as a core value, Voda Donbasu's managers allows a depoliticization discourse to preserve interaction between staff on different sides: "*being professionals means that we don't let politics [i.e. the war] disrupt our work*". Thus, the Line of Contact appears to be projected more as a complication to be managed, rather than as actual obstruction for internal communication.

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