Is Kiev Trying to Starve Donbass?

There is currently a lot of speculation on the situation on the line Kiev - Donbass. To learn what the situation really looks like, I asked for the firsthand insight. I am talking with David Hudziec, the Polish war correspondent residing the ninth month in Donbass.

- What is the situation in the Donbass region?
According to the regulations, any person entering the territory of Donbass, can bring daily up to fifty kilograms of food, the value of which does not exceed 5 thousand UAH. In fact, it all depends of the soldiers who are at the checkpoints.

- What is the purpose of blocking Donbass by Ukraine. Does Kiev want to create there another Leningrad?
Basically, at this point the two insurgent republics have no other choice but to pass all trade on to the Russian side and to trade with Russia. It is very difficult because there is a price and monetary difference. What is more, goods from Russia are simply a lot more expensive. That is why the Russian currency is being slowly implemented, although officially there is a multi currency system here. All this is done to finally enable a painless transition to trade with Russia also by diminishing the earnings disparity in comparison with average earnings in Russia. Now they will be trying to torment Donbass not by bombing which in fact consolidated the local Russians, but by economic attrition. The government in Kiev either realizes that this conflict cannot be solved militarily or it simply does not want to go on that way. Therefore, they are trying to do it economically. The idea behind this is that if people on the other side of the cordon see that the Donbas economic situation is worsening then the separatist movement will fade away.

- Are such actions intended to raise a rebellion of the people in Donbass?
I do not think so. Hunger riots and so on would take place only if the border with Russia was completely closed, but this would rather not happen.

- Do people leave Donetsk because of the current situation?
I myself lived for about a month in a refugee camp in Donetsk. This shelter was in three-quarters empty as hardly anybody was simply willing to live in it. Many people do not want to leave their homes, many people feel that there is nowhere to go or literally speaking there is really nowhere to go. Some people are more fearful of going into the unknown rather than staying in a place that seems to be familiar to them. I remember the situation when I was close to the airport where there was persistent struggle. Then I talked with a man who returned home during these fights. He said openly that he would not leave his house. Then he showed me the place where a few hours after he had come back the Grad rocket fell. He immediately began packing up again. However, who knows how many people came back although there was nothing to go back to?

- Does Donbass have any plan for itself?
In my opinion the DPR has no plan on how it should work. At the beginning there were loud demands about the
nationalization of the oligarchs property. In fact, in order to recover, Donbass will need foreign capital as it does not have its own to finance the reconstruction of the country. Regardless of the source of the capital - whether from the West, from Asia or from Russia, no one will invest private funds where there is the nationalization. The DPR cannot define itself yet. Nobody knows what will happen next. If Donbass wanted to create a federal state, or create a larger state it would have to convince the people. And it cannot convince the people without a strong economy. People will not choose worse living conditions - not in this situation. Donbass must have a plan, but for the time being there is no political force that has such a realistic plan. Donbass absolutely cannot afford to live in isolation and let alone the isolation from Russia. What will happen to the Donbass region depends on Ukraine, and those who govern Ukraine. Ukraine has the military power which could lead to a rapid offensive in Donbass. The point is that Ukraine and insurgent forces do not aim to resolve the conflict militarily. The freezing of the conflict serves the powers behind the scenes. If there was a change of power in Ukraine, then we might talk about some outcome. In my opinion, we have to deal with this situation as it is now till a new political force will come out in Ukraine.

- **How would you rate the so-called Ukrainian opposition activities in connection with Donbass?**

The opposition bloc, which is the former Party of Regions issued a statement that the blockade of Donbass and the conduct of hostilities by Kiev is illegal, unjustified, unethical and should be discontinued. Basically they say what they claimed from the very beginning, but now they speak more loudly and more radically. If the opposition in Ukraine stopped being afraid we could expect some changes, but I do not think that will happen soon, certainly not sooner than with new elections as there will not be another Maidan, there are no longer any sponsors to finance it.

- **Do volunteer battalions still pull the strings in Ukraine?**

Most of the volunteer battalions have been incorporated into the Ukrainian Army. Those not embodied ones are being eliminated. Kiev wants to get rid of the inner strength which has arms and a real force. In order to survive, Kiev must do something with them because they constitute a threat to the oligarchs stationed in Ukraine who do not sponsor these battalions. Therefore, at this time, they are gradually being pacified.

When the ATO began volunteer battalions were rapidly sent to the front, along with the people who did not even know how to shoot. The vast majority of these battalions was sponsored by the oligarchs because they could not fully trust the Army since the entire Ukrainian Army leadership was raised in a completely different reality, also political. This relationship with Russia has always been present in Ukraine. There was a new dilemma: how could a general in the ATO zone order to shoot at his brothers - Russians? There has been a constant risk that such generals might support the other side and consequently whole armies would follow in their footsteps. That is why first they sent volunteer battalions. Having gone through a political purge, the Ukrainian Armed Forces were sent to the front within months. Currently there are no officers in The Ukrainian Army, or those officers are simply mentally on the Russian side and sometimes even physically.

- **Does the DPR prepare any offensive on Kiev?**

People tend to think that the rebel army has the ability to launch an attack on Kiev. According to the information from different sources the rebel army has from 20 to 30 thousand soldiers. At the same time the era of volunteer army has already ended. Even if there were even up to 40 thousand soldiers, such a force is incapable of conquering Ukraine militarily and overcoming the regular Ukrainian Army with its mobilization potential. It seems to me that we witness the freezing of the conflict until a political changes in Ukraine.

- **What is, in your opinion, the prognosis for Donbass and what is the political situation in the DPR?**

On the one hand it would be good if in the next elections some political peaceful change took place, but on the other hand the present situation might lead to social unrest resulting in extreme movements which could try to overthrow the current power in Kiev.

Currently there are two political forces in Donetsk: the Donetsk Republic centered around the prime minister Alexander Zakharshenko and Free Donbas which so far has been focused around Gubariew. However, none of these parties have clear political agenda. These political organizations must have some plan, a vision. It seems to me that by the time of new elections, we will see the arrival of a third political force that will have a plan, a vision and at the same time will not be compromised by its passivity.

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