Civil Society and Peripheral Activism in a Donbas Monotown

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Abstract

The condition of civil society and grass-roots activism in post-socialist countries is often perceived as a distorted mirroring of its Western equivalent, with the implication that it is impaired or even flawed. Particularly in places such as the monotowns of the Donbas region of Ukraine, the symptoms of grass-roots activism and signs of thriving civil society rooted in local modes of understandings are often overlooked when only scrutinized through the lens of Western-based concepts and ideas. This article is based on ethnographical research that was conducted in the Donbas monotown of Kramatorsk and its surroundings over a period of several months. It argues that local notions of activism are fueled by hope and a sense of peripherality that shapes the local dynamics of activism and engagement. At this particular place and time, marked by post-socialist past and future-oriented present, the locally crafted idea of civil society forms at the point of intersection with state, international aid organizations and grass-roots initiatives.

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This article was written before the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. It focuses on the town of Kramatorsk in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. After Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the capture of the city of Donetsk, which led to it being declared capital of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, Kramatorsk was established as the capital of the Donetsk region (*oblast'*). The data used in this article was collected with use of ethnographic methods. It is based on participant observation, analysis of media discourse, archive queries and 15 semi-structured interviews with local activists, local officials, officials of international agencies and other local agents of change, and it was collected between 2016 and 2019. During the research, I also conducted a number of unstructured interviews, which helped me to establish the research context, allowed invaluable details to be included in the research material and provided an opportunity to take a closer look at the emotions and affects that accompany activist actions and also interpersonal and non-human relations, including inter-institutional and people-institution interactions. Most of my interviewees were young people in their mid-twenties who had become involved in activism and advocacy for change after the first conflict in 2014. I was interested in their motivations and the impulses that led them to take up their cause, the assumptions they made at the beginning of their activist journey, and whether and how these had changed over time. Their understanding of change, activism, engagement and the future guided me through the process of research and analysis. For the purposes of this article, I have drawn on interviews with five young activists associated with three different small non-governmental organisations, who, in their own words, represent a "new dimension of activism" in their region and city. I juxtaposed their narrative with the stories of three middle-generation residents, most of them around 50 years old, who understood the idea of engagement differently and focused their actions on "small changes", trying not to enter into relationships with institutions, but relying on contacts and small-scale relationships characterised by intimacy and confidentiality. Their actions, sometimes directly expressed in their own words, were often marked by the experience of living under the totalitarian system of the USSR and the associated low level of public trust. During the interviews, I not only witnessed, but also actively participated in the events and initiatives that all my interviewees were undertaking. From the planning stages to implementation, I observed and participated in events such as concerts, festivals, debates, thematic meetings with invited guests, bicycle rallies, neighbourhood clean-ups, plant and tree plantings and other activities carried out with city residents, but also in team meetings, discussions, workshops, training sessions and everyday office and paper work.

The main questions that led me through the four-year period of my research in Donbas were: what were the manifestations of grass-roots social mobilization and activism that broke out after 2014 and how was the clash between the new and old ways of engagement in the public sphere represented in the practices of young generation of inhabitants of the region? The very idea of civil society and activism may outwardly appear foreign to this land associated with various post-communist and orientalist stereotypes. However, as I argue in this text, the idea of grass-roots civil society and organic activism is also present in the traditional practices of activism, often labelled inadequate and not genuine, which emerged from the old Soviet traditions.

The monotowns of Donbas

Single-industry towns, known as monotowns and sometimes even "town-forming enterprises", which were built and concentrated around one industry or one industrial plant, are today often considered a "worthless dowry" (Morris 2015) – an unwanted heritage of a once prosperous past that has become a social and economic burden. Those located on the territory of the former Soviet Union in particular, such as the Donbas region of Ukraine, are seen as places deprived of local grass-roots social and political initiatives and of any form of genuine activism.

Studies have shown that these towns are especially vulnerable to economic and social crisis (Kryukova et al. 2013; 2015; Kryukova – Makeeva 2013; Vetrova et al. 2014; Satybaldina 2013), although they remain a key organization of the urban space in the former Soviet Union (Morris 2015). Of course, the phenomenon, is not exclusively post-Soviet, as there were cities such as Manchester and Liverpool in United Kingdom and industrial areas of the American Midwest in the 19th century that fit a similar description. Nevertheless, while those countries began to address problems of their single-industry towns in the 1970s, the Soviet Union's centrally controlled economy invested heavily in monotowns through the period of the 20th century and even into the 21st century (Kryukova et al. 2015), and its economic and social structure remained relatively unchanged for a longer period. The first signs of a breakdown in monotowns, as in the whole of the Soviet Union, appeared in the period of market reforms and the demise of the centrally controlled economy in the 1990s. It led to the destruction of manufacturing connections and falling industrial output, while the liberalization of foreign economic relations laid bare the uncompetitiveness of many domestic products (see: Aron 2009; Ledneva 1998; 2006).

The political post-socialist heritage of monotowns does not work in their favour either. More than decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was already being discussed whether the category of post-socialism was still an adequate description Eastern European reality (Humphrey 2002). Most agree that it is relevant as long as the people themselves describe their reality with the use of the term (Ibid.). Having faced faster and more radical socio-economic reforms in years, one of the most commonly used words to describe these times of transition is the phrase changing from a "post-socialist" to a "democratic" mentality (Riabchuk – Lushnycky 2009). It is strengthened by the view that the post-socialist condition is analogous to post-colonial struggles, where Russia is the dominion that still pulls the strings in Ukrainian politics (Hrycak – Chruślińska 2009). At the same time, the issue of to what extent the concept of "Eastern Europe" is actually capable of describing the social reality of the region is also disputed. The term itself and its ongoing connotations are believed to have their roots in the intellectual agendas of the Enlightenment elites and were later rejuvenated during the Cold War (Wolff 1994; Verdery 2002).

All these ideas intersect in Kramatorsk, a town of roughly 150,000 inhabitants, as of 1 January 2021. Kramatorsk's biggest company is one of the biggest heavy machine building plants in Ukraine and in the whole of Europe. It is called Новокраматорський машинобудівний завод (*Novokramatorskyi mashynobudyvnyi zavod* [New Kramatorsk Machine-building Plant]), NKMZ for short, and was established in the 1930s. In 2021, NKMZ employed nearly 9,000 workers.[1] The second largest company in the town, established in 1896, is Старокраматорський машинобудівний завод (*Starokramatorsky mashynobudyvnyi zavod* [Old Kramatorsk Machine-building Plant]) or SKMZ. These two companies are the biggest employers in the town and shape it in much more complex ways than merely providing jobs. Typically for "town-forming enterprises", these companies are also animators of local cultural life, which organise their own events and festivals and finance special interest groups in schools and local cultural centres. They also organise races and sports competitions for children, art exhibitions, feasts, and gatherings on Days of the Metallurgist or the factory's anniversary. The existence and contiguity of the industrial plants became deeply embedded in the life of Kramatorsk, not only the lives of people who worked there, but of all inhabitants, and, to a great extent, it defines the identity of the town.

Such places are also a target of internal orientalisation, understood in the context of post-socialist realities (Buchowski 2006). This is especially

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1   http://nkmz.com/ua/ (accessed 14.03.2022)

visible with the Donbas region, which is commonly perceived in Ukraine as "technologically advanced but socially underdeveloped" and defined by the stereotypical attitudes of its inhabitants, customarily labelled as "Soviet people", driven by "Soviet nostalgia". As a Donbas monotown, this "notion of otherness" is twice as forceful (for more on Donbas monotowns, see Sklokina – Kulikov 2018).

Activism and the idea of civil society

In Tocqueville's spirit, based on the example of early-liberal American society, three basic concepts could be found: the state, political society and civil society. While the "state" is a centralised, bureaucratic apparatus, "political society" is the sphere of citizens' engagement in politics and public affairs, for example, local government, political parties, newspapers, public opinion etc. "Civil society", on the other hand, is the sphere of private, mostly economic and self-oriented actions (after Zaleski 2008). Similar views were also held by Marx (after Kumar 1997). Nowadays, the popular view of civil society is more identified with engagement in the public sphere, more in accordance with Tocqueville's understanding of political society, than focusing on private matters, as in his original work. As in the understanding of Edward Shils, who argued that "the idea of civil society is the idea of a part of society which has a life of its own, which is distinctly different from the state, and which is largely in autonomy from it. Civil society lies beyond the boundaries of the family and the clan and beyond the locality; it lies short of the state" (Shils 1991: 3). Moreover, this author's definition of civility, as a related term, is: a collective self-consciousness which results in an attachment to society as a whole, manifested in decisions and actions aimed at protecting and multiplying the good of society as a whole; a cognitive and normative attitude and a corresponding pattern of action; and a mental commitment and obligation to act for the common good (Shils 1994: 11). From the time of Tocqueville and Marx to that of Shils, the concept of civil society and the definitions and critiques of the term changed more than once. To this day, it continues to undergo such transformations and is the subject of reflection among scholars in various parts of the world. Beginning with challenging the definition, the question arises as to whether the idea of civil society is nothing more than "a neo-imperialist project of imposing Western hegemony" or does it "reflect important and progressive trends in the radicalization of democracy and the redistribution of political power?" (Glasius – Lewis – Seckinelgin 2004: 3). Still, the evolution of the term took place in the reality of Western democratic systems, where the idea of civil society operated in parallel

with the state, complementing its capabilities or undertaking activities for which the state was not suited. The concept of civil society once again came into vogue in anthropology in the 1990s with the swift emergence of new post-socialist realities in Eastern Europe, as well as the re-thinking and re-conceptualisation of post-colonial contexts in Latin America, Asia and Africa (see, for example, Dunn – Hann 1996; Coombe 1997). Many analyses of the civil society phenomenon at the time operated on a "the West/the rest" axis, building on the dichotomy, even though it showed the heterogeneity in intra-Western practices (Dunn – Hann 1996) and concentrated on "the conditions that might enable its emergence outside of its eighteenth-century European bourgeois origins" (Coombe 1997: 1). The concept itself was thus never innocent and was used more or less consciously to construct "an uncivil other" (Ibid.: 3). Many non-Western countries have nevertheless adopted this division and aspire to achieve the ideal of a civil society measured and assessed by a Western eye, sometimes by drawing a line between initially "more democratic" post-socialist societies to which democracy had returned (such as the Czech Republic or Poland) and those in which it had to be built from scratch (such as Ukraine or Moldova), thus clarifying the efficiency with which civil society, often identified with the existence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), has been established (e.g., Bilan – Bilan 2011). In the post-socialist context, actions undertaken by citizens to influence their environment is highly determined by the socialist past and, in effect, patterns established on the grounds of liberal, democratic economies and communities of the West are disconsonant in this socio-economic context. Modes of engagement present in socialist and centrally controlled systems are seen as excluding almost any private and non-state-based activity, but, in fact, there was space for collective initiatives structured in smaller or larger circles of activity and functioning semi-dependently under an official roof, such as interest clubs (hiking, arts, athletics etc.), circles gathered around certain institutions ("friends" of the local library or museum) and, on a larger scale, also trade unions (politically controlled, but providing space for developing individual and collective interests and the opportunity to engage in social events). The simple application of Western modes of civil society to the post-socialist context could be rather misleading, especially in the context of an entrenched belief in the need to separate civic activity and the state. This can even be seen in Dunn's relatively broad definition of civil society drawn from Charles Taylor, which she used in her analysis that essentially challenges established Western concepts, defining civil society as "a web of autonomous associations independent of the state, which bind citizens together in matters of common concern, and by their existence or actions

could have an effect on public policy" (cited in Kligman 1990: 420, after Dunn 1996: 27).

Following this line of thought, while western-style activism is often equated with non-governmental organisations, it is important to specifically highlight the actions of informal and semi-formal groups that are often omitted in the institutional view. These often-unregulated forms of activism aim to create counter-spaces and counter-practices imperceptibly, so that without ethnographic tools they are difficult to grasp. Looking at both them and larger NGOs distances my focus of research from the classical understatement of "social movement" (Touraine 1995; 2010) and turns it instead to the meanings of the ever-present commodification of the public space and counter-spaces understood as "spaces occupied by the symbolic and the imaginary" (Lefebvre 1991: 366). Counter-spaces created in such a way may be described as an "initially utopian alternative to actually existing 'real space' (Lefebvre 1991: 349). What differentiates them, though, is the level of their engagement with the state. In the case of non-formal groups, for the engaged individuals, more often than not they constitute just another type of activism, often practiced in parallel to other forms of activism such as engagement in protests, work with NGOs, etc. Because of this, they are often looked upon as "not serious" enough to be considered a "real" change or a manifestation of "real" civil society. Quite the contrary, for them activism is rather a lifelong affair for which different initiatives and spaces function as "sites" of citizenship (Isin 2009: 370). Individuals may move from one to another and they may be involved in several at once and may also take on different roles, such as those of formal leaders, informal facilitators, owners, supporters or participants. In such acts – acts of citizenship – we can see that "to act, then, is neither arriving at a scene nor fleeing from it, but actually engaging in its creation" (Isin 2008: 27). In this perspective, activism and counter-spaces must not be grand or utterly opposed to political power; rather, the power of counter-spaces lies not in their capability to turn things upside down in an instant, but in that they "open up cracks in the totalizing logic of the capitalist city" (Tonkiss 2005: 64).

So while, on the one hand, some studies on Ukraine focus exclusively on research on NGOs (e.g., Laufer 2012; Pospieszna 2014) and others are concerned with social movements and popular protest (e.g., Wilson 2005; Forbrig – Shepherd 2005; Eberhardt 2009), it is important to look at activism considering both the work of NGOs and their actions supported from outside (financially and otherwise) and forms of activism represented by informal and semi-formal groups, which are harder to perceive because they neither seek financial support (which distinguishes them from civil

society/NGO research), nor recognition (which distinguishes them from a social movement/popular protest).

Activist organisations in Kramatorsk

Ukrainian government-controlled parts of the Donbas region (as of 2019) and its monotowns has until recently been the focus of intensive programmes to strengthen central and local civil society. The international financial aid channelled through locally based international agencies' representations focused mostly on socio-economic development and the facilitation of self-governance, legislative process implementation, independent journalism, support for civil society and civic engagement. The aid comes primarily from governments, international organisations, foundations and associations originating in the EU, Canada and the US. It goes predominantly to the larger NGOs and through them to smaller, local organisations, most of which were officially established after the events of the Euromaidan. Hardly any of these local organisations is self-sufficient (in terms of variety of financial sources) and most are supported by bigger and better-established foreign NGOs or those based in Western Ukraine (often funded from abroad themselves). It could be assumed that activism and engagement in this perspective are a purely Western-based concept, and there are attempts to implement them as such, although the local context has very different traditions of activism and civic engagement.

Nevertheless, they have a common core to their activities – hope. Both people engaged with large NGOs operating regionally and local organisations are valuable witnesses to and participants in the changes the town and region is going through in the process of top-down economic and social reforms. At the same time, the mode of engagement with the state in the specific post-industrial reality of the Donbas region and more concretely in the context of life in a monotown at any level is not only perceived differently, but also embodied and felt in a different way than the liberal Anglo-Saxon pattern of engaged democracy. Examples of activists engaged with international or domestic NGOs juxtaposed with local organisations, some of them logistically derived from Soviet times, may serve as an example of the coexistence, continuity and change in the process of reforming the state and can show the ways people adapt to the new paths of engagement, involvement and activity. Nonetheless all these modes are anchored in locally desired visions of the future and possible potentials. The building of an imagined better future is a motor for today's actions and the value of hope should not be underestimated in these circumstances. Hope is now increasingly often perceived and described in social science as not only

a driving force of activism and engagement but also actions in general (e.g., Appadurai 2013; Montoya 2015; Sliwinski 2016; Kleist – Jansen 2016).

One of the local organisations I would like to present is Вільна Хата (*Vilna Khata* [Free House]). It was established in 2014 by a group of volunteers, mostly young people who met while working on the project Будуємо Україну Разом (*Buduyemo Ukrayinu Razom* [Let's build Ukraine together]), which was taking place for the first time in Kramatorsk in 2014 and 2015. The project gathered youth from L'viv and was supported by Львівська Освітня Фундація (*L'vivska Osvitna Fundaciya* [L'viv Educational Foundation]), which is funded by Canadian and European aid programmes. Vilna Khata was able to come into being after the liberation of the town from the separatist forces in May 2014 and since that time its members have been actively engaged in the social life of Kramatorsk. Those engaged in Vilna Khata's activities are predominantly young people in their early 20s, who organise events and projects for children, young people and adults. Its initiatives included volunteering opportunities for youth, free English courses and speaking clubs, computer courses for beginners and advanced, trainings in civil rights and responsibilities, cooperation with local government, monitoring the authorities, and advocating for participatory budgeting. Its members were also involved in changes to the town's landscape, for example, by petitioning for new signboards, pavements, recreation grounds and so on. The organisation also focused on promoting social entrepreneurship as tool for social change. However, it all began as a manifestation of the frustration with the inactivity and inertia people felt in the face of the war events of 2014. Natasha,[2] one of Vilna Khata's young activists with whom I spoke on 11 July 2018 in the organisation's office, said:

> *"It all started with the occupation. I understood that I had a completely different feeling than was predominant here in the city. After a while, I realized that there were people like me who are pro-Ukrainian, who do not want to live in the DPR* [Donetsk People Republic]. *It all started after a rally beside an airplane* [a monument of the Second World War in Kramatorsk] *that gathered on 17 April 2014. It was then I went out with a flag with a friend and after that there was a point of no return. I then realized that something depended on me, a little person."*

Thus, the creation of an autonomous local organisation and youth platform was a form of protest against the existing reality and the embodiment

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2 The names of interviewees were anonymised.

of the will to change. It was undoubtedly fuelled by hope – the hope for change. Other local organisations that emerged under similar circumstances are, for example, the local branch of the all-Ukrainian NGO Поруч (*Poruch* [Close-by]), whose members are mostly young people and students, and the newly established Хаб Громадських Ініціатив *HUB* (*Hab Hromadskyh Inicjativ HUB* [Hub of Public Initiatives HUB]), which also advocates for social business in the town. A very similar feeling can be found in Kramatorsk's sister city, Slavyansk. In 2015, a project was established there that was also based on the resources of the *L'vivska Osvitna Fundaciya*, but it quickly developed into an independent organisation called Теплиця (*Teplytsya* [Greenhouse]). As Anna, president of the organisation, said in an interview on 12 July 2018:

> "Before the events of 2014, I was studying at university, at the Peda-gogical University, I was doing my PhD there. Then I went on a leave and when all these events started, in all of us very much, and in me personally, this feeling of freedom surged, which I didn't want to lose. And I decided then that it was necessary to take the situation into my own hands, after the so-called 'partisans' had moved out of our city, and to start doing something for the city, for the change, for changing the community and such, and that's when I met with activists from Kramatorsk and decided to quit my PhD and get involved in social activism."

As seen above, in the words of activists, hope is often equated with both change and freedom, as these words often describe the inner experiences that led them to the point where they decided to change their lives and dedicate themselves precisely to activism for change and for extending the boundaries of freedom. Moreover, both Teplytsya and Vilna Khata, since their transformation into independent organisations, have been operating as "youth platforms" or "youth hubs". The emphasis placed on youth in both groups is significant, for it is the youth who are widely seen by the new activists as the ones who will bring the expected change, whom the expected change will *embody*. At the same time, the desired change is not grand, but small, yet significant. This is evident from the following con-versation I had with Sasha, a Vilna Khata activist, on 13 July 2018 on the organisation's premises:

> – "Is Vilna Khata's aimed at young people?"
> – "Well, to cut a long story short: 'By developing young people, we develop the city.'"

> – *"Have you thought about involving older people?"*
> – *"We don't close ourselves off from older or younger people. We just focus our activities on young people. That's our future. They're going to grow up and go into jobs, into administration or whatever. Our task is to act in a way, to make sure that what is happening in our country now, to minimize the risk of it all happening again. So that people will grow up more conscious, asking questions, drawing conclusions, striving to develop and being ready to take responsibility."*
> – *"Do you think this was a problem before?"*
> – *"It's still a problem now. If people had been conscious and critical thinkers, I think it could have been stopped easily. This is, of course, my own reasoning. Who knows how it could have been otherwise. In any case, when people are not waiting for some guy to sort it out for them, but are acting themselves, it is already visible, even when you are just walking down the street. Yesterday, there were some drunkards drinking, and one of them said to his friend: 'Why are you throwing your litter here? Live like normal people. Throw your trash in the rubbish bin.' What progress - drunks are throwing rubbish in the rubbish bin. They've learned how to use a bin. If drunks have learned how to use it, that's progress."*

Nevertheless, although new young activists are embodying the desired change and hope and act as a form of an imagined opposition to the forms of activism available so far, they are not the full picture of local activism. There are smaller, informal and semi-formal groups that are rooted in ideals or structures in the past and are seen as the other end of the spectrum of activism. There are formal, informal and semi-formal associations like the local *Klub* Краєзнавець (*Kraeznavec* [Sightseeing Club]), the volunteer group Бджджілки (*Bzhdzhilky* [Bees]) who support soldiers in the former ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation) zone, a literature club based in the local library, an art club hosted by a local museum, the local folk singing group Краматорчане (*Kramatorchanye* [Kramatorsk townsfolk]) and the history club in the Local History Museum. Although some meet in local government institutions, all these groups are grass-roots organisations, without legal personality (apart from Kraeznavec, which is registered at the municipal office) and without external funding. Their area of expertise and activism may vary, but they have at least one thing in common, which is engaging local inhabitants in acting together for the common good, beyond merely personal interests and creating an environment for locally based activists and social animators working with and for their communities. "*We do what we feel is right*", said Igor, a volunteer with Bzhdzhilky, in the conversation we had

on 15 August 2017 on the street in front of the organization's headquarters. This "right" is what fuels the activity of people of different backgrounds and experiences. While the scope of interest of those organisations may seem quite wide, the idea behind them is strikingly similar: It is the search for a sense of community and working towards the common good.

Sometimes the "common good" is understood as a patriotic act, similar to the work Bzhdzhilky does for soldiers. Although the scale is sometimes smaller, it is very tangible. Roadside lawns and flowerbeds, and also square sections squeezed in between wide urban arteries cutting through the middle of the city, are often the realm of home-gardeners. Substituting for municipal services, these are mostly women who not only look after the existing plants, but create flower beds themselves, nurturing, fertilising, trimming and preparing carefully for winter. "*This has been quite a little passion of mine for years*", said Lena, one of the amateur gardeners I talked to on 28 June 2019 in one of the city parks.

> "*I enjoy growing flowers, looking after them, arranging compositions. It makes it more pleasant, otherwise we wouldn't get anything nice. It's difficult, because people usually don't care, they don't think about it, sometimes they destroy it, sometimes they pick something for themselves. But I like it anyway.*"

In this way, something small and seemingly insignificant is transformed into an *act of acting*, indicating its presence and making a difference. People involved in such small-scale, grass-roots activities do not feel like "being an activist" or like stepping into any role. They are doing what they have always done, not expecting their actions to lead to great changes, but satisfying their inner need.

What is crucial in distinguishing these social figures is what Engin F. Isin called the "figure of the activist citizen" (2009). The concept of citizenship understood in social not administrative terms is what makes people activists and citizens. Isin also points out that citizenship "involves practices of making citizens – social, political, cultural and symbolic" (Isin 2008: 17). This is what all the mentioned groups try to do and what they set as their aim, regardless of fact of whether they are officially locally registered organisations or informal groups, that is, focusing on potential, long term results rather than on those which are immediate and quantifiable, and this is what the literature club, volunteers helping soldiers and internationally funded NGOs have in common.

Nevertheless, in post-socialist monotowns the situation may be even more complex due to another, very strong social and political actor. When inves-

tigating local strategies of engaging with the public sphere, it is important to take into consideration the modes of functioning in the environment where large industrial plants and state authorities have a near-monopoly dominance in the fields of culture, animation, education and power. The rhythm of life and work in a town that is economically and socially oriented towards one large industrial plant creates very specific patterns of values and attitudes. These have built up over decades on the basis of close relationships and networks of dependency and dominance concentrated on the lines of a citizen-industrial plant-state. Commonly perceived as centres of social apathy and passivity, monotowns are sometimes called "towns without a future" (Pit 2011). They are often forced to pursue their concepts and projects of civil development in a reality of the near-monopoly dominance of municipal and regional authorities and private enterprises in this field.

Peripheral activism

The mechanism of adjusting local economies of engagement to the Western image of properly functioning civil society are here based on the "multiple modernities" theory by Shmuel Eisenstadt, which states that "the actual developments in modernizing societies have refuted the homogenizing and hegemonic assumption of this Western program of modernity" (Eisenstadt 2000). While the Soviet programme of civil society may seem a "failed modernity" project, as argued by Arnason (2002), the roots of today's citizen engagement and activism should be looked for there. In towns like Kramatorsk the attitudes of activism were shaped in the context of heavy industrialisation and a working-class ethos and those are areas that Arnason considers more advanced than in Western countries. The tradition of women's activity in the public sphere was also an important indicator, which has often been ignored by Western scholars and analysts. As Hann puts it, "judged by some commonly accepted indicators of a putatively universal yardstick of progress, such as female participation in the labour force, the German Democratic Republic was ahead of the capitalist Federal Republic" (Hann 2015: 882–883). The scale of women's participation in the public sphere in the Soviet Union and its satellite countries is an important factor when referring to gender inequality in the grass-roots activism of today. Unlike other public activities or participation in local and state authorities, in grass-roots initiatives it is often the case that more than a half of people involved are women. This is also true of Kramatorsk, where most NGOs, local organisations and informal or semi-formal groups are predominantly feminised.

However, the most important social actor in this and other factors is, as nearly always, the state. The state as an ever-re-created subject in the

everyday actions of people and institutions appears to be open representation, a field filled up with discourses, rituals, celebrations, monuments, ways of organising the space, contacts with administration (Beyer 2014; Cabot 2012; Dunn 2008; Friedman 2011; Hull 2012; Knox – Harvey 2011; Mathur 2012), border controls and conflict management (Artexaga 2003; Jeganathan 2004; O'Neill 2012; Reeves 2014; Sluka 2000), practices of resistance and irony (Herzfeld 2007) or fantasies about it (Artexaga 2003; Zizek 1997). An understatement of ways of re-creating the state by everyday practices, activism and engagement in the public sphere in the reality of its Foucauldian often oppressive ever-presence (see: Fassin 2015) is crucial here in order to be able to track the process of building the attitudes of engagement in various dimensions (including those based on hope and trust towards the state, or the lack of it). In spite of all the deconstructions, the state remains the most powerful institution that organises and recreates differences in the contemporary world (Artexaga 2003). However, although an anthropological insight into connections between democratisation processes, civil participation and the role of state has been popular in Latin American research (Albert 2016; Barczak 2001; Cameron et al. 2012), it has not often been used when referring to the former Eastern Bloc. On the other hand, focusing on an "ensemble of cultural practices" and "symbolic tools" due to which the state authority is operationalised and normalised when describing the state (Ferguson – Gupta 2002) has sometimes led to giving too much of an abstract form to the concept of the state (Albert 2016). With this in mind, it is worth looking at the actions of social actors who are engaged with the state, as networks of deep mutual relations, functioning in a form of an ever-changing and state-authority influenced "configuration of practices" (Nuijten 2003; Ortner 2006).

Another interesting point is what Polish historian Marta Studenna-Skrukwa described in reference to the separatist tendencies of some of the inhabitants of the Donbas region, backing the narratives of so-called people's republics at the Ukrainian-Russian border, as a way of dealing with "peripherality" (Studenna-Skrukwa 2013), although some researchers credit these tendencies with disappointment and frustration with a failing state (Hrycak – Chruślińska 2009; Riabchuk – Lushnycky 2009). While, at first sight, it may seem obverse, it appears that young, pro-democratic, civil society-oriented activists working for internationally funded NGOs are doing a similar thing. Their actions are a voice of disagreement with the incompetence of local and state authorities and the fear of being left behind. The mythical Soviet past they want to escape from is, in their eyes, very often materialised in those "other" forms of activism, such as local initiative groups focused on local issues like voluntary service, folk

music, gardening, pensioners' problems etc. The roots of those "old ways" are often to be found in socialist times and are quite regularly perceived through the prism of their origins and are denied any form of civil society-forming power by the "new" young activists. At the same time, the agency of those organisations and the people they consociate are undeniable, as is their input in forming a local civil society base. Again, the process of orientalisation mentioned earlier takes place not only from the outside, whereby the rest of Ukraine perceives Donbas stereotypically as "other", but also from the inside in the form of self-orientalisation. Local activists adopting Western patterns of functional civic society very often push those who are reluctant or who have another vision of activism to the margins of local activism discourse. In their narratives, such individuals are the "Soviet people" usually associated with Donbas, who are not ready for the changes that new times bring. Although this practice may be the result of a longing for a better future and hope as the driving force of engagement, I decided to call it "peripheral activism", as it is also the aforementioned way of dealing with perceived peripherality. The "old" groups and local activists, on the other hand, although they are more often than not aware of their perceived stereotypical peripherality, do not feel the urge to act upon that feeling, as it does not lie at the centre of their identity or aspirations. Being peripheral does not change much the way they do things, because their actions are not oriented towards changing this status or bringing about hope-driven change to create a better future, but rather satisfying needs arising from individual and group interests.

While the larger and more formally established NGOs very often concentrate on big narratives and empower the currents of hyper-national discourse, recently pervasive in public sphere and backed by the authorities, the informal and semi-formal groups focus on smaller fragments of reality (e.g., teaching local history, running social media sites on topics, popularising sightseeing and knowledge of local sites of interests and the environment, re-enacting folk customs and music, and promoting reading). Indeed, by many definitions of "civil society" or "active citizenship" these groups fit even better as activists acting in terms of everyday, discreet activisms, that is, alternative forms of activism (Isin 2008; 2009) or "productive contribution to society" (Fuller – Kershaw – Pulkingham 2008: 157) than more classical forms of citizenship, defined as interest and engagement in the political affairs of one's country (Kearns 1995; Marinetto 2003). These forms of activism, represented by smaller, informal or semi-formal groups, aim to create counter-spaces and counter-practices, understood as "forces that run counter to a given strategy" (Lefebvre 1991: 367), gradually and discreetly. Therefore, as previously mentioned, they often go unnoticed by

the onlooker with a non-ethnographic tool kit. In this way, for example, Castell's approach towards a social movement as "collective actions undertaken in order to change the values preached by society and to transform its institutions" (Castells 2003: 158) may be accurate when it comes to the actions of NGOs and "new activists", but it is not sufficient when analysing the everyday actions of informal groups. A more accurate representation would appear to be Jeffrey C. Goldfarb's theory of the politics of small things or micro-politics (Goldfarb 2006; Goldfarb 2008) and James C. Scott's theory of infra-politics (Scott 1990).

Goldfarb observed the work of student theatres and practices of poetry-readings in private apartments in the 1970s in Poland and linked those seemingly insignificant actions to the upsurge of the Solidarity movement a couple of years later. According to him, this movement would not have been possible if not for the "electricity" created by a multiplicity of small actions, practices and actors, such as those informal meetings and creations he studied. A very similar approach is presented by Scott with his infra-politics, which build the "cultural and structural underpinning of the more visible political action" (Scott 1990: 183–184). Those micro- or infra-politics are thus very important when reflecting on activism and engagement in the very diverse scene of activism that is the monotown Kramatorsk.

Conclusions

While it is tempting to measure the level of advancement of civil society forming processes in countries like Ukraine or in a region like Donbas using Western-based tools and concepts, it is of little use upon closer examination. Places like monotowns, which are still the predominant form of towns and cities in the industrial east of the country, have their own dynamic and are not only historically but also economically different from the context in which the concept of civil society and activism emerged. In the Western European tradition, civil society operates alongside the state, complementing its capacities or undertaking activities that the state is unable to perform, whereas citizens' efforts to influence their environment in a post-socialist context are strongly influenced by the socialist past, where citizens were often forced to act *against* the state to fulfil their goals.

With the influx of ideas of grass-roots activism, civil society building, participation and civic engagement into Ukraine from the West, NGOs and activists have also emerged to try to put this attractive Western idea into practice. In doing so, they often overlook other local forms of activism that may not be as noticeable or prominent, but which are rooted in

local understandings and sensitive to the local context, which differs from what has evolved in Western Europe or in what is broadly perceived as the West. The actions they take speak to a disapproval of the incompetence of local, state, and national authorities, as well as the worry that they will fall behind in progress towards becoming a "better" society, in which "better" civil society is understood in external terms that came with the notions of "post-Soviet, post-social and post-industrial". I call this attitude "peripheral activism" as it is built on hope as a driving force of engagement, and I see it as a way of dealing with self-perceived peripherality.

October 2022

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