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„The Rise of Ukraine’s Sun. Stories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions from the beginning of XXI century“ by Kateryna Zarembo





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The Rise of Ukraine's Sun. Stories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions from the beginning of XXI century

The book "The Rise of Ukraine's Sun. Stories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions from the beginning of XXI century" aims at revealing the little known Ukrainian "face" of the "Donbas". It is an attempt to give a voice to the patriotic communities of the Ukrainian East, who were little known outside the region because of the purposeful policy of the Soviet and post-Soviet elites.

As a Cossack land, the area dubbed as "Donbas" in the XIX century historically make a part of Ukraine – its oldest settlements date back to the XVII century, founded by Cossacks, Ukrainian warriors. As late as in 1897 up to 70% of the region's population spoke Ukrainian. However, the value of the industrial potential of the regions was such that the Soviet ruling elite started creating "the myth of Donbas", with the focus on the region's Soviet identity, which stood for employment in heavy industry, Russian-speaking and loyalty to the Soviet state. Everyone who didn't fall under this description were excluded by the myth and became invisible to the outside observers. The local political elites ("The Party of the Regions") in the independent Ukraine continued to maintain the Soviet myth, adding features like criminality and pro-Russianness to the list of exported stereotypes. Finally, the region fell victim of the Russian hybrid warfare – while Russia occupied part of the region in 2014, it fueled the myth of its "separatism".

The book "The Rise of Ukraine's Sun" is a non-fiction, in which stories of various people, communities and milieus are presented against the backdrop of the historical landscape. In contrast to other research publications dedicated to the region, the book's focus is local civil society, rather than political class or business. The book consists of five and a half chapters and is based on dozens of interviews, conducted by the author all over Ukraine, with the participants of the events which took place from the beginning of 2000 to 2014, i.e. before the Russian aggression.

After an introduction, which explains the relevance of the book and attempts to counter popular and to a big extent erroneous stereotypes about the region, the book zooms into the first chapter, dedicated to the student communities. In particular, it tells the story of "Poshtovkh" ("Push"), the student organization in the Donetsk National University named after Vasyl Stus, and its founder Yuriy Matushchak. "Poshtovkh" was a crucial example of student activism in the first decade of 2000-s, run by the young people who grew up in the independent Ukraine. After the start of the Russian aggression Yuriy Matushchak volunteered to fight in the Ukrainian army was killed in action in 2014 in the battle of Ilovaik.

The second chapter is dedicated to the art communities of the regions – writers in Donetsk and Luhansk as well as the "Isolation" space, former factory turned into an art space and then turned prison and torture camp in 2014.

The third chapter narrates the European side of the region's history, starting with the European (British, French, Belgic and German) colonization of its industrial potential and ending with the Euromaidan protests which took place in all major Donetsk and Luhansk cities.

The fourth chapter unpacks the region's rural space as the place less targeted by the Soviet Russification policy. It tells the stories of two villages – Zvanivka, where the Ukrainian locals from Halychyna (Eastern

Poland/Western Ukraine) were forcefully moved in 1950-ies, and Oleksandro-Kalynove, a village next to Bakhmut which preserves culture and traditions.

The fifth chapter looks into the religious diversity of the region. Contrary to the popular myth (again), Orthodoxy is only one of the region's religious denominations. The chapter narrates the stories of protestant communities, Muslim communities and others.

Finally, the book tells a short story of the "Shakhtar" football fans as a patriotic movement, which stood up not only for good games but for Ukraine's independence and sovereignty.

Many of the book's characters serve in the Ukrainian Armed Forces after 24 February 2022 (and some before). The book concludes with the considerations about the region's reintegration under Ukraine's sovereignty. After the start of the Russian war against Ukraine the "Donbas" region has at least three dimensions: the free territories (which got enormous entrepreneurial and civil society boost after 2014), the territories occupied by Russia since 2014 and since 2022 and the internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled the occupation but who remain the legitimate representatives of the region. Moreover, evidence suggests that those loyal to Ukraine remain under occupation, too. It is crucially important that justice is established in the region, with the war criminals and collaborators tried. It is also crucially important that the region's population receives a fair treatment from its fellow citizens without prejudice and stereotypes.

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