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sent to his homeland, including wrapped presents for children at Christmas, clothing, potatoes and military uniforms. "Volunteers have dressed the army," he says.

For him, the conflict hit close to home in June when two of his cousins were tortured and killed by pro-Russian separatists after being kidnapped from an Easter festival at their church in Slavyansk. He says he has fond childhood memories of playing with them at Sunday school and in his grandfather's hayfields during summer vacations. They had remained in contact through the years, and even more so during the conflict. Neither of his cousins was politically involved in the conflict, but they were targeted because of their Protestant faith, he says.

Mitkov-Baklanovsky says he speaks regularly with soldiers fighting on the front lines.

"My friends, who are ethnically Russian and Russian speaking, are fighting for Ukraine. I speak to them through Skype, so I see the war real time," he says.

He often Skypes with soldier Leonid Maslov. Maslov served in the Soviet Army 30 years ago, and he has since become a lawyer and mathematician. He left his family and life in Kharkov, in northeast Ukraine, to fight with the Ukrainian army after the conflict began last year. He corresponded with Street Roots via email about his choice to return to battle and how his American friend has helped his unit. His emails were translated from Russian to English.

"I did not abandon comfort and to risk my life out of any courageous effort, but from



Leonid Maslov, a former Soviet soldier, now fights with the Armed Forces of Ukraine in Schastya, about 100 miles northeast of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine. His platoon relies on medical supplies sent by his friend Mikhail Mitkov-Baklanovsky.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKHAIL MITKOV-BAKLANOVSKY

the fear of what might happen as a result of continued occupation of Ukraine," he writes. "I do not want my wife and children to lose their freedom and lose Ukraine. I am ethnically Russian, but I do not want to live in Putin's Russia — that would be worse than a death sentence. I can remember life in the communist Soviet Union all too well to understand that I never will go back there."

He says the war with Russia began unexpectedly.

"The Ministry of Defense of Ukraine was definitely not ready for it," he writes. "They

still do not have the capability to provide first aid kits to the soldiers. But there was a miracle that no one was expecting! The Ukrainian army has been supported by volunteers, both locally and globally."

He believes the medical supplies sent by Mitkov-Baklanovsky might just make his platoon the envy of other armies.

"Unfortunately, not all soldiers of Ukraine have such ultramodern medical goods, but somehow each soldier has a guardian angel as Mikhail," Maslov writes. "Without such angels, defending our country would be impossible." [emily@streetroots.org](mailto:emily@streetroots.org)

## Refugee crisis escalates along with the fighting

BY LUDMILA ALIYEVA  
STREET PAPER KYIV  
EXCLUSIVE FOR STREET ROOTS

The first refugees or so-called internally displaced persons appeared in Ukraine a year ago after the annexation of the Crimea in March 2014. These were mainly Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars. The next wave followed after the events in the east of the country,

with separatists proclaiming the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk regions, threatening the pro-Ukrainian minded people. After the beginning of the anti-terrorist operation by the Ukrainian government, the military interactions started between

the separatists, supported by weapons from Russia and the government's troops.

As the battles grew fiercer, the situation of the local inhabitants grew worse. The shortage of food in the stores followed. Problems began with supply of gas, electricity and water. The transport infrastructure hardly functioned or was completely destroyed in some places. The industry, banks and businesses had to close down, as did schools, kindergartens,

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citizens as Ukrainian patriots, yet both are in the minority; the majority of people simply don't care who wins. They just want peace and stability, though it doesn't seem to occur to them that if the separatists take control by force, they will have neither. Incidentally, the most active Ukrainian patriots are small and medium-size business owners, who show their loyalty by helping the Ukrainian army and trying their best to "Ukrainify" life in the Russian-speaking and generally pro-Russian cities of the region. They organize social events featuring well-known Ukrainian journalists, writers, poets, musicians and singers. Such events naturally attract a pro-Ukrainian audience, but they have also given patriotic citizens the opportunity to develop a network of like-minded individuals and encouraged them to take action together, to promote Ukrainian culture and a sense of community in these previously quiet and passive industrial towns and cities of Donbas.

The atmosphere in Kiev, 800 km (about 500 miles) from Donetsk, has also changed dramatically over the past year. Entrepreneurs and office workers, who made the move to the Ukrainian capital from Donetsk some time ago, have been joined by large numbers of genuine refugees who have lost their houses and apartments in Donbas. Around 3,500 children from refugee families started school in Kiev on Sept. 1 last year. Kiev has also seen an influx of "criminal

refugees" from Donbas.

Almost the entire criminal population of the region has migrated to Ukraine's larger cities, the majority to Kiev. Why? Because after killing a number of high-profile drug dealers in Donetsk, the separatists have moved on to shooting thieves at the scene of their crime. In the wake of this wave of "criminal migration," domestic burglaries, muggings and car theft in Kiev have almost tripled. This city of 4 million inhabitants, formerly considered one of the most peaceful capital cities in the world, is no longer such a safe place to be.

The situation is further exacerbated by volunteers returning from Donbas, who are attempting to smuggle weapons back with them. Those who have experienced the horrors of war are prone to developing mental health issues — and if you throw a hand grenade into the mix, there's a high chance it will explode. Grenades and other arms and ammunition are gradually spreading throughout Ukraine. Transport police officers recently stopped a car heading into Kiev and found that it was carrying 18 grenade launchers. This car had managed to get from the combat zone to the outskirts of the capital of Ukraine, passing about 20 checkpoints on the way. Some of these illicit weapons will be distributed among the criminal fraternity, but the rest will be kept at home by ordinary civilians, "just in case."

Russia continues to pump Donbas full of arms, staking everything on the economic collapse of Ukraine. It is certainly true that more and more people are expressing their

dissatisfaction with the situation and there are increasing calls for a third Maidan, for an uprising against President Poroshenko and the Cabinet of Ministers. The IMF's recent decision to grant Ukraine a four-year loan has come at just the right time for the Ukrainian government. It will enable Ukraine to protect its currency from further devaluation and strengthen control over its own economy. Nevertheless, social protests are more or less inevitable as gas and electricity prices are set to triple or even quadruple in the near future, and this will also lead to a sharp rise in food prices.

What matters most is that these increases in the cost of living are accompanied by tangible government reforms, so that the Ukrainian people are able to feel that the country is genuinely changing, that the fight against corruption is taking effect. For the time being, Ukrainian society is sufficiently united to resist both Russian propaganda and calls for direct action against the government.

The party least interested in peace in Donbas is Russia. This stands to reason: When the war in Donbas is over, international attention will shift to the other main aspect of the Ukraine conflict — Russia's annexation of Crimea. President Putin admitted recently in an interview aired on Russia's main state TV channel that he had set his plans for annexation in motion even before the Crimean referendum in March 2014.

Internationally speaking, he has backed himself and the Russian Federation into a

corner. Putin has no hope of ever regaining the trust of Western heads of state. In portraying the West as the enemy, he has led Russia back to her Soviet past. Russia's foreign policy is currently all about forming alliances with fellow outcast nations. Last week, for example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared 2015 to be a "year of friendship" between Russia and North Korea. Moves such as this seem deliberately calculated to emphasize Russia's anti-European status, versus the "Europeanness" of Ukraine.

At some point, Russia will have to repair relations with the West, which currently lie in tatters. But this is a task for another president, not Putin. When the time comes, the best way for Russia to restore ties with the civilized world will be to resume normal diplomatic relations with Ukraine, including the restoration of her territorial integrity. It is hard to say exactly when this will happen, but it is only a matter of time. All wars come to an end eventually; old wounds heal and warring nations reconcile, as has happened in Europe time and again. This time, Europe has a vested interest in the stabilization of the situation both in Donbas and in Ukraine in general, given that Ukraine shares a border with several EU member countries and is a potential member herself. Ukraine will never go back to being a satellite state of the Russian Federation. In which case she has only one way forward, only one choice — and that is Europe.

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