

Overview
of humanitarian situation in the non-government controlled areas of Donbass
amid the global pandemic of coronavirus infection COVID-19

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Our main task was to see how the global pandemic of coronavirus infection COVID-19 affects the lives of Ukrainians living in the non-government controlled territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine. The proposed analysis is based on the author's personal experience from the author's trip to the Occupied Regions of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts (ORDLO) from September 20 to October 20, 2020, conversations with residents of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, as well as information obtained from open sources – Ukrainian, Russian and “republican” media.

CORONAVIRUS AND QUARANTINE IN ORDLO

There is an uncontrolled epidemic of coronavirus infection in the so-called republics. Infectious diseases departments of hospitals are overcrowded. Due to the lack of beds in inpatient departments, local healthcare ministries are urgently refurbishing therapeutic and maternity wards for patients with coronavirus¹. High degree of the virus spread does not allow hospitalization of most of the patients. Patients with 30% lung damage with pneumonia are recommended to be treated at home under the supervision of a physician.

Access to test kits and medicines

There is a shortage of antiviral drugs and antibiotics in pharmacies². Those with connections order medicines through acquaintance transport carriers in Rostov-on-Don (Russian Federation, about 200 km from Donetsk and Luhansk).

A free PCR test for detecting coronavirus infection is extremely rarely ordered for patients with signs of acute respiratory viral infection (ARVI). As a rule, this is done in cases when high fever lasts more than 5 days, and the person does not have his/her own funds to pay for the test. The cost of an antibody test in the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) is approximately RUB 1,500; the cost of a PCR test is RUB 2,500³.

In the network of social pharmacies of DPR "Narodnaya Pharmacy", a drug "Koronavir", allegedly of Russian production, has gone on sale, helping to cure patients with symptoms of COVID-19⁴. The cost of the drug varies from RUB 11,000 to RUB 15,000.

The average cost of prescribed medicines for the treatment of ARVI (including antiviral drugs and antibiotics) in the republics is RUB 3,500 - 5,000. Only a few can afford to pay for the examination and

¹ <https://republic-tv.ru/20201010-akushersko-ginekologicheskij-korpus-tsgkb-3-donetska-gotov-k-priyomu-patsientov-s-covid-19/>

² <https://www.ostro.org/donetsk/society/news/599428/>

³ <https://newsua.ru/news/29742-test-na-covid-19-v-dnr-adresa-laboratorij-i-stoimost>

⁴ <https://www.ostro.org/general/society/news/599107/>

treatment. An average pension in the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) and DPR ranges from RUB 6,000 to RUB 7,000, and an average salary in the republics ranges from RUB 10,000 to RUB 12,000.

Doctors are quite reluctant to share information about the situation with the spread of coronavirus in the republics. The majority remain silent or hint at overwhelming quitting of jobs by the medical personnel and going on vacation "at their own expense" starting since mid-September. The ORDLO doctors are forwarding to each other a video from a live show from a Russian TV channel, where a difficult epidemiological situation is being discussed – see the video under the link "*Pneumonia is a verdict for Donbass. LPR and DPR lack medicines and doctors*"⁵.

At the same time, it should be noted that there is a relatively relaxed rhythm of life of the ORDLO inhabitants. Until the beginning of October, on the streets, in pharmacies and shops, one could meet very few people wearing masks, as well as observe absence of sanitizers in public places. In order to force people to comply with the mask regime, the head of the DPR Denis Pushilin introduced fines for violating quarantine regulations, up to and including a ban on leaving the republic⁶. This worked. Public transport drivers, taxi drivers, waiters in restaurants, shop assistants started wearing masks and gloves without fail. Public transport passengers wear masks in about 50% of the time. Bars and restaurants continue to work as usual from 10 am to 10 pm.

Schools, kindergartens and universities were closed for quarantine until October 28. There is high infection rate among pre-school educators and teachers.

The system for alerting and tracking infected patients does not function properly. There are instances when educational institutions were quarantined, and only ten days later the family learned from the police that it was their child who had had contact with an infected teacher, and all family members were supposed to have been remaining in self-isolation for 10 days by then.

The situation with the spread of coronavirus infection is complicated by the consequences of fires and dust storms that took place in late September and early October in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts. As a result of the high level of air pollution, therapists and otolaryngologists noted a surge in complaints of inflammation of the upper respiratory tract with severe ARVI symptoms.

Public events in the republics have not been canceled. In Donetsk, for example, republican TV channels show a story about an acute shortage of inpatient departments for patients with coronavirus followed by a story on the beginning of a new show of the Moscow circus on ice "Iceberg"⁷.

Transport carriers from ORDLO to Russia by word of mouth warn the population about possible closure of ORDLO borders with Russia in the coming days due to the sharp increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in the republics.

Also read the publication on the Radio Liberty website "*Why is quarantine urgently reinstated in the occupied territories?*"⁸

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCdJwRB86OA&feature=youtu.be>

⁶ <https://dnews.dn.ua/news/755641>

⁷ <http://cirk.dn.ua/index.php?id=3529&show=12836>

⁸ <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30882948.html>;

PASSPORT REGIME IN ORDLO

Authorities of the self-proclaimed republics are forcing residents of the non-government controlled territories to register in the electronic queue for obtaining LPR / DPR passports.

The passports of the republics are not accepted as a basis for crossing the border with the Russian Federation. I have repeatedly observed how Russian border guards would return a republican passport to a "citizen of the republic" and would demand an internal or foreign passport of a citizen of Ukraine: "DPR does not exist. Write in your migration card that you are a citizen of Ukraine and indicate the details of your Ukrainian passport."

Republican migration services are slow to issue passports. Today, the electronic queue for submitting documents for LPR / DPR passports dates all the way to the spring of 2023.

It is "mandatory" for civil servants, employees of educational institutions, medical workers, and pensioners to queue up to receive a republican passport – for everyone who receives budget money.

In the opinion of ORDLO residents, the electronic queue for obtaining a republican passport is an indirect population census. Also, a republican passport is the basis for obtaining Russian citizenship.

Many people understand that a passport of a citizen of the Russian Federation obtained in ORDLO is not recognized in the world. Therefore, in order to "cheat" the system, some of them, having received an LPR / DPR passport, go to their friends and relatives in Russia, register for permanent residence there, and receive Russian citizenship according to a simplified system (with passports of LPR / DPR residents⁹).

Behind the scenes, the republics do not recognize the ID card of Ukraine (which, according to Ukrainian legislation, is issued to citizens of Ukraine upon reaching the age of 14 and in cases of loss or theft of an internal passport). "Citizens of the republics" with a Ukrainian ID card are admitted into and released from the territory of ORDLO if there is an address certificate confirming the place of registration on the territory of ORDLO (the place of registration is not indicated in the ID card). At the same time, according to the residents of the republics, it is difficult to obtain a "republican passport" for a holder of an ID card of Ukraine. *"Our documents have been accepted, but application consideration is dragging on for the second year now. We are kind of "unreliable"..."*

Also read on the website of IA OSTRO.ORG *"Border guards of the Russian Federation confirmed that they will not allow Ukrainians with an ID card to cross the border"*¹⁰.

Officially, the term for issuing republican passports is one calendar month from the date of submission of documents. In practice, the process is delayed indefinitely. Employees of the DNR migration service offer an unofficial service to speed up the procedure (jump over the electronic queue from spring 2023 to autumn 2020, submit documents and obtain a passport of a citizen of the DPR within a month). The price of the issue "for reliability" is RUB 7,000 and the official state fee is RUB 250. The "service" became available relatively recently, in the summer of 2020. There is no information regarding the existence of such a "service" in the neighboring LPR.

⁹ <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/04/2019/5cc043b09a79473f067eae71>

¹⁰ <https://www.ostro.org/general/society/news/599332/>

CURRENCY OPERATIONS IN ORDLO

The quarantine regime and inability of residents of the non-government controlled territories to leave because of the closed checkpoints pushed people to look for other ways to “cash out” Ukrainian pension, salary cards and cards for social benefits.

Online currency exchange services began to actively develop in the republics. Money from Oschadbank cards is transferred to Privatbank or Monobank cards. Ukrainian cards of Privatbank and Monobank are transported to be cashed out at ATMs of the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don, which is closest to the republics. The commission percentage is relatively small – 3%, plus the intermediary's "services" – up to 2%.

According to pensioners, this "scheme" turned out to be more convenient than before – prior to the quarantine, they would spend time, energy and money on the exhausting difficult road across the line of contact. A trip to Rostov-on-Don and back costs half as much as a trip to the “Ukrainian side”.

The only problem faced by many is the unavailability of online extension of the validity of Ukrainian bank cards and personal identification at the bank. These require physical presence of the owner of the card, which means that he/she absolutely must travel to the territory of Ukraine.

Also, interestingly, there appeared a sharp increase of interest in cryptocurrency in the republics during quarantine. Online "exchangers" have mastered the operations of buying and selling electronic money.

Small entrepreneurs and civil servants have a need to open accounts in Russian banks. Russian bank accounts are used to transfer proceeds when selling cryptocurrency, or as savings accounts.

Let us remind you that an internal banking system functions on the territory of the republics, the so-called "Central Republican Bank of the DPR" and "State Bank of the LPR". But their functionality is aimed only at banking operations within the republics. They cannot carry out external banking transactions among themselves, including transactions with banks of the Russian Federation or other unrecognized republics, for example, such as South Ossetia.

CROSSING THE UKRAINIAN BORDER FROM ORDLO

The closure of checkpoints on the line of contact with Ukraine forced people to look for alternative ways of travel from the republics to the Ukrainian territory. Since the end of spring 2020, Donetsk transport carriers have developed a new route through the Russian-Ukrainian border at the Nekhoteyevka checkpoint (Belgorod) and the Hoptivka checkpoint (Kharkiv).

The road to ORDLO through Russia is difficult, long and expensive. The total travel time from Donetsk / Luhansk takes from 26 to 30 hours depending on the destination. The distance is about 1500 km one way. The cost of a trip from Ukraine to ORDLO is UAH 2,500 "with a pedestrian crossing" and UAH 3,000-3,500 "without a pedestrian crossing". The cost of a trip in the opposite direction, from ORDLO to Ukraine, is more expensive, UAH 2,800 "with a pedestrian crossing" and UAH 3,500-4,000 "without a pedestrian crossing".

"With pedestrian crossing"

The passengers are collected in Donetsk or Luhansk, transported to the Rostov region through checkpoints that are not controlled by Ukraine on the border with Russia. From the Rostov region, along the M4 highway, they are taken to the Russian checkpoint "Nekhoteyevka" (Belgorod). They disembark, and the passenger independently goes through passport and customs control, first at the Russian checkpoint and then at the Ukrainian checkpoint "Hoptivka". At the exit from the Ukrainian checkpoint, passengers are met by other transport carriers and taken to their destinations.

When leaving Ukraine, in order to pass passport control on the Ukrainian side of the border, the passenger must present a passport (currently Ukraine does not permit travel to Russia with an internal passport). To go through passport control on the Russian side of the border, one must present a Ukrainian passport indicating registration on the territory of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The Russian side freely admits the citizens of Ukraine that are registered in the non-government controlled territories and citizens of Ukraine with close family ties to Russian citizens. At the same time, when entering the Russian Federation, one should indicate in the migration card that he/she is traveling to a Russian city (transport carriers advise to write "Rostov-on-Don") and not mention the DPR, LPR.

"Without pedestrian crossing"

Passengers are collected in Donetsk or Luhansk, transported to the Rostov region through checkpoints that are not controlled by Ukraine on the border with Russia. From the Rostov region, along the M4 highway, they are taken to the Russian checkpoint "Nekhoteyevka" (Belgorod), where passengers are met by another carrier, whose task is to get them through the Russian and Ukrainian checkpoints "quickly and without checks." At the exit from the Ukrainian checkpoint "Hoptivka", passengers are met by other carriers and transported to their destinations.

The nuances of crossing the Hoptivka checkpoint for Ukrainians with registration in ORDLO

According to the transport carriers, the fee for travel "without pedestrian crossing" includes a "bribe" for border guards for travel without a fine and obligatory installation of the "Diia" mobile application until August 28. According to the carriers, they pay Ukrainian border guards "for loyalty" UAH 500 per passenger. Administrative liability for illegal crossing of the state border and the contact line ranges from UAH 1,700 to UAH 8,000. Thus, according to the carriers, a passenger "saves" at least UAH 1,200.

Also read *"Diia" was not installed... "On the Ukrainian-Russian border, business is set up for transportation from ORDLO"*¹¹ and the Radio Liberty investigation *"No fines and self-isolation. How much do "occupied" Ukrainians pay to get out of ORDLO?"*¹²

From personal experience of crossing the border at the Hoptivka checkpoint

When leaving Ukraine at the Hoptivka checkpoint, along with other passengers, I went through passport and customs control "with a pedestrian crossing". A mandatory requirement is to present one's foreign passport. Ukrainian border guards pose provocative questions to everyone who crosses by foot, e.g. "Where are your Russian documents? Have you forgotten them at home? And what happens if we find them?", "How many other people's bank cards are you carrying?" The border guard directly suggested that I apply for Russian citizenship "Get yourself Russian documents and travel calmly as a citizen of the Russian Federation."

I observed the humiliating procedure for searching personal belongings. During the search, my fellow traveler, an elderly woman of 60 years old, had three bank cards in other people's names. The border guard took the woman aside and, as she claims, offered to register expropriation or "reach an agreement" for UAH 1,000 from each card.

In general, after crossing the Hoptivka checkpoint, all my fellow travelers had a feeling of disgust, resentment, and anger at the system of customs and passport control.

The Nekhoteyevka checkpoint contrasted with what we had experienced at the Hoptivka checkpoint. At the Russian border we were greeted by our escorts – border guards. They politely invited the passengers to split into groups, and each group was escorted to customs and passport control. They also accompanied the group until they left the checkpoint, explaining where one could use the facilities, drink water. When

¹¹ <https://www.ostro.org/general/society/news/593211/>

¹² <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30894776.html>

going through passport control at the Nekhoteyevka checkpoint, the Russian border guards behaved extremely politely.

At the exit from the Nekhoteyevka checkpoint, about 7 double-decker buses, 9 minibuses and many cars were waiting for us. Everyone was heading to ORDLO. According to the driver, it was "the second wave of passengers", the first one left in the morning.

The age range of passengers crossing the Hoptivka checkpoint – Nekhoteyevka checkpoint is from 18 to 80 years old. There were passengers with small children.

The total time for passing the passport and customs control "with a pedestrian crossing" through both checkpoints took us 4 hours.

Our bus entered ORDLO through the Marinovka checkpoint in the Rostov region (part of the border with the Russian Federation that is not controlled by Ukraine). Passing through passport and customs control at the Russian checkpoint and the nearest DPR checkpoint took place quickly, without additional inquiries or searches. The main thing was to present a Ukrainian passport with registration on the territory of the republics. Russian border guards do not accept passports of "citizens" of the DPR and LPR as a valid document.

Crossing the Ukrainian border at the Hoptivka checkpoint "without pedestrian crossing"

It was an exit from the DPR through Russia to Ukraine. We departed to the Rostov region in a group of 5 minibuses with DPR license plates through different checkpoints: "Uspenka", "Marinovka" and "Novoazovsk" (all three are on the border with the Russian Federation, not controlled by Ukraine). Our buses arrived at the Nekhoteyevka checkpoint (Belgorod) at six in the morning. Minibuses with Ukrainian Donetsk license plates were waiting for us at the Nekhoteyevka checkpoint. The buses took us through the passport and customs control of the Russian Federation, checkpoint "Nekhoteyevka". Everything went quickly there.

And then we traveled through the customs and passport control of the Ukrainian checkpoint "Hoptivka". The driver Igor did not collect passports, he did not even know who was departing with which passport. He warned that if a passenger has a foreign passport, it is better to show the foreign passport. We got off the bus, each of the travelers personally presenting their passport in the "passport control" window. After 5 minutes, the driver returned with all the passports, handed them out to the passengers, and we got on the bus. A border guard of customs control approached us, asked who was carrying what, asked the man sitting on the edge to get off the bus. The border guard asked about the purpose of the trip, the man honestly answered, "I buried my mother, here is the death certificate" and showed the death certificate issued in the DPR. The border guard said, "Okay, you can go through." The entire procedure for passing through passport and customs control at the Hoptivka checkpoint took about 15 minutes.

I didn't see the driver giving any "envelopes", "money" to Ukrainian border guards. I saw that he greeted them with a handshake, like his good acquaintances. I know that out of all the passengers on the bus, I was the only one who had a foreign passport and was legally leaving the Russian Federation. The rest of the 7 passengers traveled with internal Ukrainian passports with registration in ORDLO and were leaving the Russian Federation for the first time, i.e. they illegally crossed the Russian-Ukrainian border and were very worried that Ukraine would "turn them back". One of the passengers' passport was torn and glued together with a super glue. When crossing the checkpoints of the DPR and the Russian Federation, the border guards did not want to let the person through. The passenger was "saved" by a DPR passport at the Novoazovsk checkpoint and a forty-minute interrogation at the Russian checkpoints. Russian border guards said that they would not allow to cross the border with such a document again. The man assured that he was going to Ukraine to receive a new document.

At the Hoptivka checkpoint, "without pedestrian crossing" service helped the man cross the border without hindrance. Ukrainian border guards "turned a blind eye" to the damaged passport, no one said a

word. The customs officers did not search personal items. And when the passenger presented the death certificate issued in the DPR, the border guard pretended not to notice.

From the words of the driver Igor *"See how fast we drove through?! Not like those poor fellows that are tormented with a pedestrian crossing... (waves his hand towards the crowd passing the pedestrian customs and passport control). The money is not big, but how many nerves and energy have you saved and at least UAH 1,200..."*

Passengers pay money for travel, including the amount "for entry without a penalty", to the driver who picks them up at the initial point of departure. The driver who transports them through the checkpoint is not paid by passengers. Formally, the driver contacting with the border guards does not take money from passengers.

Also, read about the customs "business" at the Hoptivka checkpoint in the publication of Radio Liberty *"8 thousand hryvnia, 2400 kilometers: how I got out of ORDLO"*¹³.

Based on the monitoring of the announcements of dispatch services in social networks and conversations with transport carriers, about 1,000 people travel from ORDLO through Russia to Ukraine **every day**, and about the same number of people travel back.

According to the press secretary of the State Border Service Mr. Andriy Demchenko¹⁴, **from the beginning of the calendar year, 4,600 people were brought to administrative responsibility** for "Violating the procedure for entering and leaving the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine".

Other ways to travel from ORDLO to Ukraine

Checkpoint "Hoptivka" is not the only one on the Ukrainian border to be complained about by the residents of ORDLO. A Donetsk resident, a 35-year-old man says: *"I was going through the Melovoe checkpoint, there was a pensioner in the car, an old man of 73 years, he was traveling to Ukraine to renew his bank card, withdraw his pension. The border guards started harassing him that he had illegally crossed the Russian border and threatened to detain him for 48 hours. Then they offered to "reach an agreement in an amicable way", pay UAH 2,500 or give as much as there is..."*

Mariupol lawyers filed the first in Ukraine lawsuit in court to cancel the fine for violation of the border crossing procedure. We are talking about fines imposed on citizens of Ukraine for entering the government controlled territory from ORDLO through the territory of Russia. Read more in the publication of Radio Liberty *"Should there be punishment for the residents of ORDLO, who want to get to the territory controlled by Kyiv through Russia?"*¹⁵

In social networks, there are flashy offers about transfer from ORDLO to the territory controlled by Kyiv and back "without fines and quarantine" for USD 100. These are carriers with sedan vehicles that transport passengers bypassing the checkpoint. Often such trips end with administrative liability.

Judging by private conversations with the residents of ORDLO, only a few decide to take advantage of the offer. They are afraid of being blown up by mines or being arrested by the police of the self-proclaimed republics. A 65-year-old resident of Yenakiyev says: "In July, I went to see my daughter in Kyiv through Stanytsia. We took a carrier for UAH 2,500. So he rattled on his old clunker through some fields, "hare paths", we crossed ourselves all the way, prayed until drove to Stanytsia. And there Ukrainian border guards let us through. They made us install "Diia". Volunteers on the Stanytsia were on duty, for UAH 50 they "helped" to install "Diia"..."

¹³ <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/donbas-realii/30716746.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30894776.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/donbas-realii-shtraf-za-peresecheniye-granisy/30849714.html>

Read also *"Residents of ORDLO, risking their lives, try to leave the zone of occupation bypassing the checkpoint"*¹⁶.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The pandemic caused by the coronavirus infection COVID-19 made Ukrainians from ORDLO hostage to the situation. Closed by the DPR group checkpoints on the line of contact and closure of the checkpoint "Stanytsia Luhanska" force people to become violators of the state border.

Information isolation of residents of uncontrolled territories contributes to the dissemination of unreliable and deliberately false information, including about the rules for crossing checkpoints on the Ukrainian-Russian border. The transport carriers take advantage of this, misleading the passengers.

In the current situation, we consider it appropriate to:

- Abolish compulsory administrative responsibility for residents of ORDLO for illegal crossing of the uncontrolled section of the Ukrainian-Russian border.
- Convince the representatives of the TCG from the ORDLO side to restore the operation of checkpoints on the line of contact in the usual way.
- Strengthen the information campaign to inform the population about rights of and opportunities for the residents of the uncontrolled territories when crossing the Russian-Ukrainian border (primarily through the public pages of public human rights organizations that have a credit of trust among the residents of ORDLO).

¹⁶ <https://www.ostro.org/general/society/news/599358/>