

ON PATROL



WITH DOZENS OF OSCE SMM PATROLS GOING OUT EVERY DAY ALL ACROSS UKRAINE, MANY IN HIGH-RISK AREAS IN THE EAST, ON PATROL OFFERS A REMARKABLE INSIGHT NOT ONLY INTO THE WORK OF THE BIGGEST OSCE MISSION ON THE GROUND – AND THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO SERVE IT AND THE WIDER CAUSE OF PEACE – BUT ALSO INTO SOME OF THE PEOPLE AND ISSUES THAT DEFINE UKRAINE AND THE CRISIS IT ENDURES.

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A person wearing a blue OSCE beanie, a white face mask, and a blue jacket with an OSCE vest stands in a snowy environment. The background shows a blurred parking lot with cars.

DELTA 9 PATROL: OLENIVKA CHECKPOINT



DONETSK REGION

For Elena, patrol leader for Delta 9, the day begins with a morning briefing at 7:30 at the SMM's Donetsk patrol hub, where she receives the latest operational instructions as well as a security update. Although the ceasefire has been largely holding since 27 July, following strengthening measures adopted by the Trilateral Contact Group, the situation remains tense. SMM patrols, in particular around the Donetsk Filtration Station some 16 kilometres north, have been recording ceasefire violations on a daily basis, albeit in relatively low numbers.

In addition, the global COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges. While Elena is at the briefing, drivers are busy disinfecting the patrol vehicles. All patrol members also wear masks and gloves and practice social distancing if remote meetings with interlocutors cannot be held. "We are taking all necessary precautions," Elena says.

An experienced investigative police officer who also worked as a legal officer for EULEX Kosovo, Elena has been with the Mission since October 2019. She has travelled widely throughout the region, and patrolled along the contact line dozens of times. Today's patrol will take her and her small team – reduced in numbers as a preventative measure in the face of COVID-19 – to Olenivka. There, one checkpoint held by the armed formations operates two days a week. It is the only place for civilians to cross the contact line in Donetsk region since July when the other three checkpoints that exist in Donetsk region were closed. The closure of the checkpoints has led to a 90% decrease in the number of crossings and has further compounded problems for people to receive their pensions, access education or medical treatment, obtain key documents or visit family, friends or property.

Thirty minutes after leaving the hub, the patrol arrives at Olenivka. In comparison to times prior to the introduction of measures declared by the sides as COVID-related, Olenivka checkpoint looks deserted, with about a dozen cars waiting to cross and a handful of people filling out the documents required to cross the contact line. In the past, 200 to 300 cars used to line up in the morning at the checkpoint, and hundreds of people would

arrive by bus and minivan in order to make the journey to government-controlled areas. With people now having to pre-register and agree not to return until the end of the quarantine period – currently an open-ended commitment – evidently few people consider it a price worth paying.

As soon as the monitors park their vehicles and begin to survey the area, an elderly man approaches them. Jennifer, a human rights advocate by background, listens to his story. His grandson has died, and he wants to cross the contact line to attend the funeral, but he has yet to receive permission from the armed formations. As he does not have a SIM card that works in areas not controlled by the Government, he is unable to call the office processing his application.

During the course of the day, the patrol will hear many such stories: a family seeking to reunite a child with his mother

on the other side of the line, people unable to take up job offers and others who need to care for aging relatives. It is, says Al, Donetsk Monitoring Team's media focal point, typical of what patrols to Olenivka checkpoint have been hearing since the early days of the pandemic. "Our observations are reflected in Mission reports, and we refer specific cases to relevant international organizations which can provide help," he says.

As dusk approaches, Delta 9 returns to the patrol hub in Donetsk city, where Elena and Jennifer will write their patrol report. "It can be incredibly frustrating, knowing that some people will have to sleep out in the open tonight, waiting and hoping to cross the contact line the next time the checkpoint opens," Elena says as the patrol moves out. "With an improved security situation, I'm just hoping for an improved humanitarian situation, too."





THE LONG ROAD HOME



DONETSK REGION

The three-vehicle patrol turns right after exiting the Kramatorsk hub. In the second vehicle, Steve is at the wheel, accompanied by two colleagues; Liudmyla from Ukraine and Paulo from Italy. "Until we get close to the contact line, the greatest danger we face is the road," he says. As if to make the point, an oncoming Lada lurches towards the convoy, its driver apparently more afraid of a large pothole than a moving five-ton armoured vehicle.

Later, at the Maiorsk entry-exit checkpoint, as soldiers check the documents of thousands of people crossing the contact line, the patrol pulls in. No one gets out just yet. Steve has already seen the preliminary overnight results from the SMM static camera at Maiorsk, outlined by Hamdija, a Bosnian security officer, at the morning briefing at the hub. Colleagues in Kyiv manning screens indeed had observed a calm situation overnight around Maiorsk but things can change in an instant. Steve has the door slightly cracked, listening and watching for anything that could indicate the unpredictable threat level.

When Fiona, the patrol leader, gives the all-clear, most of the patrol proceeds to nearby rest stations where they engage with elderly people seeking shelter and rest from the sweltering heat



Steve radios ahead for the latest security update (OSCE/Tatiana Bedros)

in summer and freezing cold in winter as they make their journey across the contact line. Many tell the patrol members that they make the journey every two months to receive their pensions, but some never make it. Over the preceding winter, over 20 elderly people had in fact died of natural causes, their aged bodies unable to take the stressful journey involving exposure to the elements and the danger of mines and potential shelling.

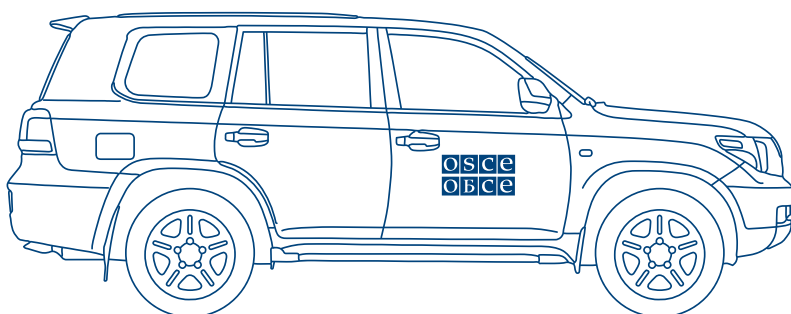
Steve and the other drivers – Ferenc from Hungary and Richard from the UK – stay with the vehicles. He radios colleagues in Svitlodarsk to see what is going on in nearby Novoluhanske, the final destination of the patrol. The news is not good. “Our boots on the ground there” had been recording incessant shelling for the previous few hours, and already one civilian is reported injured. The patrol leader would make the call but it didn’t look good for the patrol completing the task as planned. “When something like this kicks off, there’s no telling where and when it’ll end,” Steve says. He himself had recently been on a seven-day rotation at the

Svitlodarsk Forward Patrol Base when nearby outgoing mortar fire was followed by return artillery fire.

Steve – who was a combat medic in a previous life and now holds a degree in para medicine – knows only too well what he’s talking about. “When you’ve seen what these weapons and mines can do to people, there is no such thing as too much security awareness,” he says. “There’s no way to completely avoid risk here but we can and do mitigate against it.”

The patrol leader indeed decides against going to Novoluhanske, going instead to Luhanske, where they find a village like so many others not directly on the contact line but very much directly impacted by it. It’s out of range of most of the weapons systems deployed and so its residents, unlike many others in other places closer to the fighting, have not fled. They refuse to leave homes they’ve been in for generations, even though the coal mines that sustained them no longer operate and the land, once part of the bread basket of Europe, yields but a meagre livelihood.

Having interviewed a number of people and filled in more details in the evolving village profile the team is compiling – much of which is shared with humanitarian providers – Steve and the rest of the patrol set out for base. “It’s sad”, he notes. “You cross the contact line, and you’ll see the same people there in the same situation; people just trying to get on in life.” “Nobody needs this”, he adds as he focuses on getting the patrol back safely, watching out not least for Ladas and potholes.





MAKING CONNECTIONS ON THE CONTACT LINE

DONETSK REGION

The COVID-19 pandemic has limited SMM patrols in eastern Ukraine, but for Mariupol-based monitor Lejla Helic, one priority remains unchanged: interacting with people in Donbas, listening and responding to, and reporting on their concerns as they go about their lives on the contact line.

“When I am out on patrol, people tell me about their problems – no water, no electricity, shelling, fear and isolation – and it is very important to show them that I care and that I will do what I can to help,” Lejla, a 49-year-old monitor from Tuzla in Bosnia and Herzegovina, says.

On a recent Saturday, she served as patrol leader for a group of monitors travelling to some of the hardest hit settlements along the line of contact near Mariupol: Chermalyk, Hranitne and Starohnativka. Before departing, Lejla performs the daily ritual of donning her bullet-proof vest and helmet, then adds a face mask and rubber gloves – a defense against the viral threat which has appeared in Ukraine and across much of the world.

These are just a few of the stringent mitigation measures the SMM has introduced in response to COVID-19, which also include strict adherence to social distancing rules in the office and on patrol, daily temperature checks and minimizing the number of personnel inside the armoured vehicles. As a result, the Mission continues to operate all of its hubs and forward patrol bases in Donbas, allowing it to send daily patrols to the contact line – albeit in reduced numbers – and perform remote monitoring with cameras and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV).

“For us, the key is flexibility. We can still talk to the locals, but we have to keep our distance; everyone accepts it,” she says.

In order to reach the settlements, the patrols must pass through several police and military checkpoints, but with a quarantine in effect, there are few civilian vehicles and wait times are short.

They stop for an hour in Starohnativka, using a UAV to monitor the security situation, before doubling back to Hranitne, a small settlement of one-storey whitewashed houses close to the Kalmius River.





Lejla and her team position themselves near the river, speaking to residents about the security and humanitarian situation.

"Last night was a good night; we could sleep," a pensioner tells her, adding that a morning thunderstorm has knocked out the power supply.

Lejla takes note of this key piece of information in case it will be necessary to support the co-ordination of any repair works, before the patrol climbs back in their vehicles and drives on to Chermalyk.

Here, their task is to confirm that the village water supply has been cut again after repair works were carried out a week earlier. It was the first time in two months that the system had worked.

The patrol spots an elderly man in front of his house, and Lejla and her colleague Evgeny decide to approach him. Before they have time to ask him about the water supply, he decides to tell them his story. He worked abroad for five years in order to earn enough money to build his house, which was

heavily damaged earlier in the conflict. Now everything is in good shape, but his daughter and grandson moved away to stay out of harm's way.

"When is the fighting going to end?" he asks.

She has been asked this question many times since joining the Mission in 2017. There is no easy answer. Still, the pensioner is glad to have found a sympathetic ear, and as she leaves, Lejla promises to come again.

Before they depart, several residents confirm that the water supply has been cut again, providing more information for the patrol report, one of dozens produced daily by SMM patrols.

Later that evening when she is back in Mariupol, Lejla thinks back on the day's patrol; the checkpoints on the way to the contact line, the Kalmius River and the old man in Chermalyk.

She adds the information about the water supply to her report, hoping that when she meets him again it will be restored.

A VIEW FROM ABOVE



LUHANSK REGION

It is a Wednesday morning at the SMM Patrol Hub in Sievierodonetsk, Luhansk region. A technical monitoring team, having just had a briefing on the security situation along the contact line, is almost ready to move. Marzena is loading the last of the gear into an armoured vehicle. As she finishes, Ian, the patrol leader, gathers the small group together to make sure everyone is on the same page. "Today we'll conduct two flights with mini and mid-range UAVs, and weather permitting, maybe more," he says. "We move in 10 minutes."

Ian, from the UK, has worked with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for many years. While posted in Afghanistan, he analysed imagery taken by UAVs, but it was not before he joined the SMM that he started flying them himself. "I had

always wanted to do this. It's a new challenge for me, so I was really keen to join this team," he explains.

The high-risk patrol is heading to Zolote, an area where the sides decided to disengage forces and hardware following an agreement at the Trilateral Contact Group in October 2019. Nowadays Zolote is relatively calm – in stark contrast to when it was once one of the most kinetic areas in Luhansk region.

"It's quiet now, thankfully, but still highly unpredictable," says Ian as the patrol moves into position inside the disengagement area an hour after leaving the patrol hub. "And, of course, there's always the unseen lurking in the grass: mines."



An SMM monitoring officer flying an unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). (OSCE/Athanasios Kaltsis)

Since late July 2020, with the security situation relatively improved following the Trilateral Contact Group adopting measures to strengthen the ceasefire, the Mission has recorded three civilian casualties in eastern Ukraine as a result of shelling. However, there has been 38 civilian casualties due to mines and unexploded ordnance. "People are scared," Ian says, as he looks out across empty fields, where farmers once worked the land to earn a living and feed the local population. "As well as signs of military presence and fortification, today we're here to identify mines. They are in the ground. The best way – and the safest way – to see and map them is from the air."

Marzena, a Polish national and senior police officer by background, has received special training to be a UAV pilot. After working for international missions in Kosovo and Georgia, she felt it was time to move in a new direction, so she decided to engage with technology, and seized the opportunity to become a UAV operator in the SMM. Being the only woman on the team, she says that she wants to encourage female colleagues to consider such positions

Marzena flies the mini-UAV – a quadcopter – with ease, some 100 metres above the ground, scanning and taking in details that will be analysed, initially back at the hub and later by imagery analysts in the SMM Head Office in Kyiv.

"With freedom of movement severely restricted, especially in the last year, and the danger posed by mines to SMM ground patrols, UAV flights like this one are a critical component in the Mission's monitoring and reporting," she says.

"Since we started using UAVs in 2014, we've conducted over 13,000 flights. Last year alone, more than half of the weapons in violation of withdrawal lines were recorded by SMM UAVs. Most of the large mine fields we record are spotted by our UAVs, too."

After numerous flights, Marzena lands the aircraft, and breathes what seems like a small sigh of relief. The Mission does not inform the sides of the flight route, the monitoring objective or the exact location of a UAV. However, before a UAV flight is conducted, the Ukrainian Armed Forces officers at the Joint Centre for Control and Co-ordination, as well as the armed formations, are notified in which sector the flight is to take place. This is done to avoid confusion and mitigate the risk for the SMM's patrols. "Still, our UAVs get shot at quite often", Marzena explains, "and we put that into our daily reports."

Since the SMM started flights, there have been over 200 instances in which SMM UAVs have been fired upon, and 1,600 instances in which they've been jammed. The Mission has lost several aircraft. "There's risk every time," she



says, “but they minimize the risks to SMM’s monitoring officers.”

The patrol moves on to a second location, where they conduct another flight, this time using a mid-range fixed-wing aircraft, but high wind soon forces them to land. As they load up and are about

to start their journey back to the Patrol Hub, Andrii, the local driver who has worked for international organizations since 2014, looks across the eastern Ukrainian landscape, feeling the breeze on his face. “Wind of change,” he says. “Let’s hope” Ian replies.

THE FULL PICTURE: AN ALL-FEMALE SMM PATROL ON THE CONTACT LINE IN EASTERN UKRAINE



DONETSK REGION

The conference room in the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine's Kramatorsk Hub used to buzz with activity in the morning; no longer. COVID-19 measures mean that security and operations briefings are now limited to patrol leaders. One of them this morning is Monika, who is preparing to lead a patrol to the contact line.

As Monika, seconded from the Polish Customs Service, gets the latest security update and arranges logistics, Christine, Diana and Eddrina, the three patrol drivers, are in the parking lot, ensuring that the electronics work, the tyres are in good condition and all the required gear is loaded. They are about to embark on a high-risk, three-vehicle patrol to the villages of Novhorodske and Verkhnotoretske. In addition to poor road conditions, compounded by often-treacherous ice, the all-female patrol faces an unpredictable security situation. Preparation is therefore vital.

In line with the general security situation along most of the contact line, there has been a notable improvement

in the vicinity of Novhorodske and Verkhnotoretske since additional measures adopted by the Trilateral Contact Group to strengthen the ceasefire came into effect on 27 July 2020. Overall, along the contact line, the daily average of observed ceasefire violations so far in March is 93 per cent lower than in March 2020.

In and around the two villages, the SMM has noted a relatively calm situation, but recent developments are cause for concern, Monika explains. Since the beginning of the year, she notes the Mission has observed 40 ceasefire violations, including six explosions in the area. Further north, in the western and northern outskirts of Horlivka, it is even more volatile, with the Mission recording 349 ceasefire violations, including 49 explosions, in the same period. "Things are certainly better," says Monika, "but people here still face insecurity."

To mitigate the risk, among a host of measures, the patrol has a paramedic on board, and before departure for the contact line, each member dons a flak jacket, helmet, and



*Monitoring officers on patrol in Verkhnotoretske, Donetsk region.
(OSCE/Monika Olszewska)*

- given the specific risk from COVID-19
- a facemask.

As they move west, Eddrina, the Kramatorsk Hub leader, manoeuvres one of the five-ton armoured vehicles with skill and alertness. A former American police officer who has worked with the United Nations in Kosovo and Haiti, she has no higher priority than the safety and security of her team. Also in the vehicle is Maka, a monitoring officer who joined the SMM in 2016 after over a decade of working in the humanitarian field in her native Georgia. She explains the added value of female monitoring officers. “Generally, women have greater access to different interlocutors,” she says. “People are vulnerable;

they live with trauma. Women and children especially open up more easily; they are more relaxed.” “This enables us to provide a fuller picture of the actual situation on the ground,” she adds.

Before entering Novhorodske, the patrol stops to fly an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) and check on a new makeshift mine sign that Christine, a German monitoring officer with a background in human rights, noticed a few days earlier. Fiona, a British military officer and expert UAV operator, prepares the drone but the flight fails due to a lack of GPS signal.

In Novhorodske, the patrol hears from the head of the town council. He, like all the residents, is concerned

about increased military activity, which recently resulted in damage to houses and the local cemetery. He asks for the SMM's assistance to enable the repair of a damaged large water pipeline running across the contact line. The damage has been limiting the community's access to potable water for weeks.

Since 2014, the SMM has been daily facilitating adherence to localized ceasefires — “windows of silence” — to ensure the repair and operation of critical civilian infrastructure providing water, gas and electricity to millions of people on both sides of the contact line. In 2020, the Mission organized 1,573 windows of silence for repairs of 119 critical civilian infrastructure facilities in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. “The SMM facilitation efforts are vital for the restoration of access to services critical to the local civilian population,” explains Eddrina as she takes note of the man's concerns.

The monitoring officers climb back in their vehicles, communicate their location and movement via the radio, and Monika gives the signal for everyone to head south to Verkhnotoretske.

On arrival, the patrol is confronted by the harsh reality of life along the contact line. Just across the line is Betmanove, formerly known as Krasnyi Partizan, where neighbours, friends and even family are cut off by the contact line, forcing them to take a

round trip of hundreds of kilometres to visit people who are sometimes literally within shouting distance. “The journey is costly and time consuming,” says Diana, an SMM monitoring officer from Canada, as she points to a minefield, “but the alternative entails a heavy price in civilian lives.” Given the reduced level of violence following last year's TCG decision to strengthen the ceasefire, the number of civilians killed or injured from shelling has drastically decreased, she explains, but mines and unexploded ordnance continue to maim and kill.

At the recently-renovated House of Culture, the patrol finds a different mood. “The renovation is finally complete,” explains the centre's director. She says that the community had been waiting since 2014 when shelling damaged the building. “It means we will be able to organize activities for children and adults alike. We also received an out-patient clinic for basic medical assistance.”

As the patrol leaves Verkhnotoretske, Monika gazes outside. “It's the contradiction of life here,” she says. “Lines are drawn dividing people, but everywhere I see people coming together to make things better.”

TECHNICAL MONITORING ON THE CONTACT LINE: MAKING IT WORK FOR PEOPLE



DONETSK REGION

It is an early Monday morning in Mariupol, the biggest city on the south-eastern coast of Ukraine. While most people are just getting ready to start their day, Darko, a former border police officer from North Macedonia, is already on his way to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine's (SMM) Patrol Hub. Plenty of work is waiting for him, and there is no time to waste.

Since Darko joined the SMM two years ago, he has worked as a camera and sensor expert. "The job is tough, but the opportunity to work with people from different countries and backgrounds is something I find very rewarding," he says.

Driving down tree-lined streets, Darko keeps the window of his car closed. Even though it is already warm outside, and the city is situated on the shores of the Sea of Azov, it is not a salty breeze that is filling the air. Mariupol is one of Ukraine's most important economic centres. Relying on its seaport, steel mills and chemical plants, the heavy industry has taken a toll on the city's environment.

Arriving at the Patrol Hub, Darko gathers the camera maintenance team for a briefing. Today they will visit the camera site in Shyrokyne to do repair work.

First introduced by the SMM in 2015, camera systems quickly became an important means of technical monitoring, along with unmanned aerial vehicles. Today, the Mission has 25 operational cameras along the nearly 500-kilometre contact line.

While Monitoring Officers do not patrol after nightfall due to security reasons, the cameras have the technical capability to also record after dark, working around the clock. The cameras, along with other technical means, allow the SMM to do 24/7 monitoring, registering ceasefire violations and weapons in violation of the Minsk agreements.

Since they were introduced, camera systems have picked up over 279,900 ceasefire violations. They are a cornerstone of the Mission's technical monitoring capabilities, allowing it to fulfil the tasks assigned in its mandate and to support the implementation of the Minsk agreements. Therefore, the work of Darko and his colleagues is vital to the Mission.

Together with Artem, an engineer for transmission equipment from Mariupol, Darko belongs to the small camera maintenance team in the Mariupol Patrol Hub. Within the SMM, they have one of the more hands-on jobs. Equipped with bolt cutters, wrenches and various other tools, they are halfway between a maintenance crew and ICT experts. Their job is to make sure that the eight cameras they are responsible for are up and running. When they go on the ground, it is all about grease, metal and diesel generators.

Looking at a huge screen back at the SMM Head Office in Kyiv, Jonas Hult, Chief of the Technical Monitoring Centre, explains, that “making sure that all SMM camera systems are operational 24/7 is a critical task. Without the strong commitment of the camera maintenance teams and ICT colleagues, the Technical Monitoring Team would have difficulties fulfilling its role.”

After loading their armoured vehicles, the team sets off towards Shyrokyne. In addition to Darko, who is the patrol leader, and Artem, there is another driver and a paramedic on board.

“When I applied for this job, I was keen on working with international colleagues,” Artem says. “At the same time, I had a feeling that through my work for the SMM, I could make a contribution to a peaceful resolution.”

The 25-kilometre journey takes them through the city’s eastern outskirts. Back in 2014, some of these areas were held by the armed formations. Mariupol is now a frontline city, with the contact line less than a 30-minute car ride away.

The patrol reaches Shyrokyne quickly. This camera site, like many others, is in a high-risk area. The SMM’s maintenance team needs security guarantees from both the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the armed formations before they can go on the ground.

On site, they are met by a demining crew from the State Emergency Service of Ukraine. Darko shrugs his shoulders. “Once a mine was found on the route that we take to the camera location.” And with a grim look on his face, he adds, “we need to be very careful in the places where we work.”

As they inspect the camera system, the team realizes that the mast has been badly damaged by shrapnel and several segments need to be replaced. Luckily, they have enough spare parts with them. Artem shakes his head. “If we don’t come prepared, the camera will be down for days.”

Indeed, maintaining the camera systems is a demanding job. Every location is visited at least twice a month. Interrupted electricity supply, weather conditions, wear-and-tear of the hardware and technical malfunctioning



*The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine's (SMM) camera system.
(OSCE/Evgeniy Maloletka)*

are problems that can arise. But then there is also damage caused by explosions and small-arms fire. "In 2020 alone, we lost four cameras," Artem says, while rearranging the cables.

A couple of hours later, the team has replaced the damaged segments of the mast. Though their hands are dirty and their faces covered in sweat, they are happy and satisfied.

On the way back to Mariupol, the patrol stops in Lebedynske, a small settlement, which saw heavy fighting back in 2014. While buying water at the local shop, Darko talks to some civilians who

complain about problems with their natural gas supply. Back in the car, Darko explains, "We are a maintenance crew, yes, but we also fulfil all the tasks of regular monitoring officers. When we notice a ceasefire violation, we report it. When we meet civilians, we talk to them about the situation in the area."

Gazing over the Sea of Azov from the passenger seat, Darko wraps up the day. "I feel good about what I do here. With the skills I acquired in my profession back at home, I can really be of help in this place. After all, my job is not just about cameras. It's about people."

BUILDING LONG-TERM RELATIONS



DNIPROPETROVSK REGION

The sky above Dnipro is clear on a Friday morning. Spring is awakening and bright sunbeams melt away the last pieces of ice on the city's riverbanks.

At the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine's (SMM) offices, Darlene from the United States, her colleague Farahnoz from Tajikistan and Sasha, the team's local language assistant, are preparing for a patrol.

Darlene, one of the SMM's longest serving Monitoring Officers, briefs her colleagues. Today, she, Farahnoz and Sasha will visit a centre for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Kamianske, north-west of Dnipro. "We'll conduct a regular patrol to the IDP centre and talk to the residents about their socio-economic situation," Darlene says.

Amongst the key tasks of the SMM's Team in Dnipro is monitoring the impact of the conflict on civilians, including the situation of IDPs. Back in 2014, hundreds of thousands of people fled the conflict-affected areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine, leaving behind their homes to seek refuge in new and often distant parts of the country. According to official reports, there are about 1.5 million IDPs scattered across the country. Most of them are women, and many are still living in collective centers around Dnipro.

The patrol is making its way through the morning traffic, driving down the city's broad boulevards. While they are in the car, Sasha provides some information about the number of IDPs in the area. "There are six collective centers in three regions," he says. "Some 73,000 registered IDPs live in the Dnipro region, 56,000 in Zaporizhia and over 6,000 in Kropyvnytskyi." The scale of the problem in the area resonates with his colleagues.

After an hour's drive, Darlene, Farahnoz and Sasha reach Kamian-ske. The city, whose name roughly translates to 'the stony place', is home to the metallurgy and chemical industry. The IDPs centre is situated amidst soviet-style housing blocks. Between the modular living containers, laundry and some soft toys hang from washing lines that gently wave in the wind.

Upon arrival, Olha, the centre's administrator, meets the SMM team at the entrance. One can tell from the hearty welcome received that Darlene, Farahnoz and Sasha are no strangers to her. However, building such a good rapport was not easy at first.

"It took a while before people spoke to us," Darlene recalls. "When talking with IDPs, you need to be able to relate to them. The road is long with many a winding turn, until people start to open up."

Through regular patrols and in-person meetings, the Dnipro team have patiently managed to build relations with the residents of the centre. "We would sit down and listen to the stories these people had to tell, where they come from, why they had to leave their homes and how life has been for them ever since," Sasha says.

After a short walk around the compound, the team sits down to hear from Olha about the situation in the centre since their last visit. Some 211 IDPs from Donetsk and Luhansk region (84 women, 76 men and 51 minors) are currently living in the centre. Amongst them are single mothers and pensioners.

Many of them were already among the most vulnerable before the conflict began. "As scary as it may sound, the IDPs have settled down here. People have gotten used to this place and the circumstances," Olha says.

"One needs to keep in mind that these structures were not foreseen to be permanent, but many IDPs have been living in the centre for six or seven years," Sasha adds.

Lasting and durable solutions to housing is the most critical issue, but it is not the only problem IDPs encounter. Relationships with the host communities are also fundamental to their integration. Oftentimes, they struggle to find jobs, because many



SMM team visiting IDP centre in Kamianske. (OSCE/Oleksandr Yevsieiev)

employers think that an IDP might leave after a short time. Similar problems occur concerning the availability of vacancies in local kindergartens for their children.

While all of these things pose formidable challenges, the biggest one, Darlene believes, is emotional. “Many of the IDPs have suffered trauma, but are not willing to seek help, especially the men. A man seeking help from a psychologist may be quite stigmatized by society here.”

The team slowly wraps up the conversation and says goodbye to Olha and some other residents of the centre.

On the way back to Dnipro, they reflect on what drives them to continue working on this difficult topic. “I believe that everyone could become an IDP at some point in his or her life, so my approach is to do my best to be of help by listening to and reporting on their needs,” Darlene says. From the passenger’s seat, Sasha adds with conviction, “What these people really need is to have equal access to their basic rights and to have stability, so that they can plan and build their future.”

A PLACE TO MINGLE – THE KAKHOVKA ROMA YOUTH CENTRE





It's just after 9 a.m. on a Friday in mid-July, but the outside temperature is already close to 30 degrees Celsius. Stephen, a Monitoring Officer with the SMM's team in Kherson, southern Ukraine, exhales deeply. "Looks like we're in for another warm day," he says. "I better brief the team soon, so we can get to our destination before the midday heat."

Originally from Atlanta, Georgia in the United States, Stephen worked for many years as a Russian language interpreter before moving to Ukraine in 2015. He then joined the SMM in Mariupol in 2016 and eventually transferred to Kherson. Today, Stephen, along with Michele from Italy and Denys, the local language assistant, will visit a Roma youth centre in Kakhovka, run by a local NGO.

The team finishes the patrol brief and starts heading northeast. The ride takes them through the outskirts of Kherson and up the stream of the Dnipro river. While they are in the car, Michele, an expert on human rights and who has been with the SMM for almost seven years after postings in Africa and Central Asia, provides some information on the centre that they will visit. "The organization is called 'Romano Tkhan', which roughly translates to 'Roma Place'. They only recently started renovation at the centre, so the place is still under construction." And,

with a spark in his eye, he adds, “I’m excited to see how far they got since our last visit.”

After a 90 minute drive, the team arrives at the premises of Romano Tkhan, in the downtown area of Kakhovka, a small city on the banks of a huge barrier lake called, by some, the ‘Kakhovka Sea’. The youth centre itself is in a building, which, over the decades, served as a hospital and a school. Dating back to 1905, the place is registered as part of the city’s cultural heritage.

Yanush Pachenko, the director of the local NGO, greets Stephen, Michele and Denys at the entrance and guides them through the building. Yellowed hangings peel off the walls. Old metal steps lead up to the first floor. One can tell that time has taken its toll on this house, which is now to be filled with life once again.

Before starting Romano Tkhan in 2017, Yanush Pachenko worked as a teacher at the local school. He quickly realized that the few classes taught in Romani language for about 70 pupils, were not enough to share knowledge about Roma culture. “I felt the desire to create a space that would be open to both Roma and Ukrainian youth. Ukrainian kids should have the chance to see how rich Roma culture is.”

Today, two representatives from the local city council join Yanush Pachenko. Together they want to give

an update to the SMM’s team on how work at the youth centre is proceeding. Iryna Honcharova, the city council’s secretary, and Viktor Zubkov, director of Kakhovka’s Center for Social Services, are visibly proud.

Romano Tkhan is a pilot project with the Kakhovka municipality providing free space to the NGO. “The opening of the centre is certainly an excellent initiative, but it can only be a first step. We hope that this will serve as inspiration for others,” Iryna Honcharova explains.

“There are about 37,000 inhabitants in Kakhovka.” Denys, who used to work as an English language teacher before joining the SMM in 2014, translates the words of Yanush Pachenko. “Some 500 of them are Roma, though, the number might be higher, so a lot can still be done.”

While the SMM’s team is shown around the premises, Yanush Pachenko talks about the activities he plans to organize. Besides the promotion of the Roma language and culture, the NGO intends to host a photo exhibition about the history of the Roma community in the Kakhovka area. “We will also open a sports ground next to the building,” Pachenko says. Ultimately, he hopes that the work of the centre will foster stronger ties and help the mutual understanding between the communities in Kakhovka.



Representative of 'Romano Tkhan' and SMM Monitoring Officer Stephen at the youth centre in Kakhovka. (OSCE/Michele Ricca)

After some two hours, Stephen and the team slowly wrap up the conversation, thanking Yanush Panchenko and Kakhovka's city representatives for their time and get on the road to Kherson.

Back at the SMM's offices, the team collects their notes to prepare the patrol report. What Stephen, Michele and Denys agree on is how impressed they are with what the team of Romano Tkhan has achieved. "One has to remember that these people are all volunteers," Michele says. "They paint the walls, install new electrical equipment and refurbish the place top to bottom. It's fair to say that they are building this youth centre from scratch." Stephen nods, "Their work contributes to mutual understanding. That deserves great respect."

PREPARING FOR THE JEWISH NEW YEAR: SMM ON PATROL IN UMAN



KYIV REGION

The sun is barely up on this Wednesday morning in early August, but Borisa, Team Leader of the SMM's Monitoring Team in Kyiv, and Yaroslav, the team's language assistant, are already in the car and on the highway. With them are Pascal from Germany and Mariia from Ukraine who work with the Mission's Human Dimension Unit. The four-member team is bound for Uman, a city in the southwest of Cherkasy region, halfway between Kyiv and Odessa.

Borisa, who was born in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo and coordinated UNESCO's work in the Middle East before joining the SMM, explains the task for today's patrol. "Every year, Hasidic Jews make the pilgrimage to Uman on the occasion of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. Their number has grown continuously. We'll talk to the city authorities and representatives of the Hasidic community to find out how they are preparing ahead of this year's celebrations."

The drive to Uman takes almost three hours. While passing by lush hills, fields of sunflower and sweet corn, Mariia, who is on her first patrol, gets some background information from Yaroslav. After years of working in business consulting, Yaroslav became a translator for the Mission in 2014. He has been to Uman many times and is familiar with the city and its history.

"In the 19th century, Uman was one of the most important spiritual centers of Jewish life in Ukraine. Rabbi Nachman, founder of the Breslov Hasidic movement, died there in 1810. Legend has it that he once told his students, 'Make sure that you are with me for Rosh Hashanah, no matter what!' and ever since, pilgrims come to Uman to celebrate the Jewish New Year in his honor."

The team arrives in Uman and heads to the mayor's office. Only recently elected, Iryna Pletnova has decided to take on some of the city's most pressing problems, one of them being infrastructure. "Water supply, waste collection, repairing the municipal roads, that is what I am concerned about, also because it matters a lot to the pilgrims," Pletnova says, adding

that even though things have improved a lot in recent years, there is still a lot of work to be done. "The city has allocated several millions of Hryvnia to ensure that everything is in good shape for Rosh Hashanah."

As the meeting continues, Mariia asks the mayor about the number of pilgrims that are expected to come this year.

"You need to keep in mind that this is the largest gathering of foreigners in all of Ukraine," Mayor Pletnova says. "Most pilgrims are from Israel. Others come from the United States, Canada and various countries of Europe. In 2019, Uman hosted almost 27,000 pilgrims. In 2020, they could not come because of COVID-19 restrictions. So this year, we expect up to 50,000 people."

After an hour of conversation, Borisa, Yaroslav, Pascal and Mariia thank Uman's mayor for her time and say their goodbyes. They decide to leave the car parked and walk to their meeting with the representatives of the Rabbi Nachman Foundation. Strolling down the streets, sidelined by picturesque houses dating back to the turn of the twentieth century, feels like traveling back in time.

Some 20 minutes later, they reach Uman's Jewish quarter. With kids playing football in the yards, dogs barking and laundry drying in the summer sun, this little side street does

not look different from other streets in the city except for all of the shops and restaurants have signs and advertisements out front in the Hebrew alphabet.

The team arrives at the offices of the Rabbi Nachman Foundation where the director, Nathan Ben-Nun, greets them at the entrance. "Allow me to explain the meaning that Rabbi Nachman's teachings have for us," Ben-Nun begins.

"According to his philosophy, believers should speak to God in simple language, as they would to a friend. That is one of the reasons why he became an acclaimed spiritual leader and why followers of the Breslov Hasidic movement gather at his grave for Rosh Hashanah."

Still, Ben-Nun is aware that the Hasidic community faces some worldly problems during the time of the pilgrimage. "The infrastructure of Uman was never planned to meet the needs of so many people. That is why, during the days of Rosh Hashanah, water supply and waste collection pose a challenge."

Just like Uman's mayor Pletnova, Ben-Nun acknowledges that progress has been made over the past years. "At the time of Rosh Hashanah, both the Jewish community and the city's authorities work at full capacity to accommodate the needs of the local population and the pilgrims," he says with certainty. "However, the lines of communication between the parties involved are sometimes not quite clear."

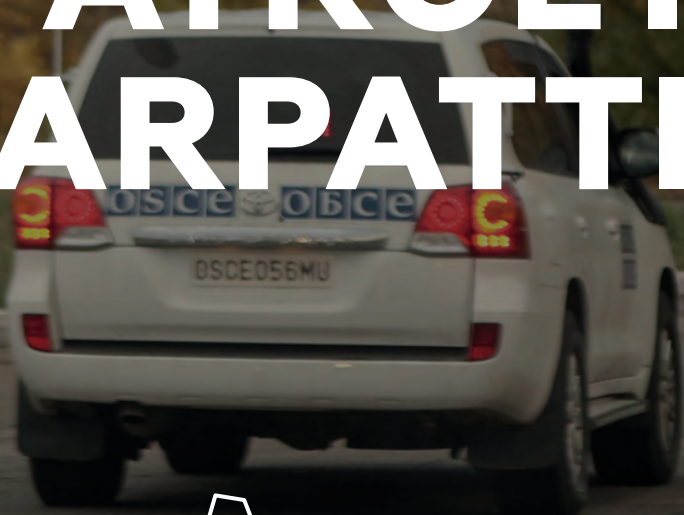


Kyiv Monitoring Team with HDU colleagues on patrol in Uman (OSCE/Johannes Rueger)

Pascal, a German monitor with over 20 years of experience in international organizations, suggests Ben-Nun to meet again, in order to discuss the topic further.

With the meeting coming to an end, the SMM's team and Ben-Nun agree to stay in close contact over the coming weeks. As the team walk back to their car to start the return journey to Kyiv, Borisa shakes his head in disbelief. "It is hard to imagine that this place will be buzzing with tens of thousands of pilgrims any day now." And with a smile, Mariia adds "I guess this means that we will be back soon."

MULTICULTURAL- ALISM AS A STRENGTH — ON PATROL IN ZAKARPATTIA



IVANO-FRANKIVSK REGION

On a warm summer day, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission's office in Ivano-Frankivsk buzzes with activity from the early hours as the monitoring team is about to set off for the long-range patrol to Zakarpattia, Ukraine's westernmost region. The security briefing highlights no major concerns, and contact with the local police confirms that the situation in the area of responsibility—Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil and Zakarpattia regions—remains calm. David, the team leader, discusses the details of the route and the schedule of meetings with the Mission's Deputy Chief Monitor (DCM) Antje Grawe, who is joining the two-day journey.

"We have regular five-day patrols on a rotation system," explains David, who served in the French military for 25 years. "These are intense days during which we meet a wide array of representatives from civil society including women rights groups, persons belonging to minorities and local authorities, establishing important relationships."

In the parking lot, Anatolii and Denes thoroughly check the three vehicles: tyres and support equipment, including first aid, for the long journey. A transparent shield between the front and the back seats completes the COVID-19 mitigation measures. When all is ready, they sit at the steering wheels, with David being the third driver, and the

patrol starts from the heart of the city, where the SMM office is located, and heads south-west. Ahead are six hours on winding roads, climbing up the Carpathian mountain range, amid forests of silver firs and flower-strewn alpine meadows.

Zakarpattia sits at the confluence of four international borders—Romania, Slovak Republic, Hungary and the Republic of Poland—and its geography has shaped its history. The western regions are Ukraine's most diverse; pre-Second World War central Europe was a melting pot lying within the fluctuating borders of states as different as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Poland and Romania. The region's ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity mirrors this historic legacy. In line with the Mission's mandate, the patrol is set to monitor the situation of minorities—Hungarian, Jewish, Roma and Romanian, among others — through a series of meetings with regional authorities, civil society representatives and minority representatives themselves.

It is a visit DCM Grawe is looking forward to, she says, as she reads files and reports, challenging the road's twists and turns. With a background in conflict prevention and resolution, human rights and development issues, largely with the German Government and the United Nations, she served in countries like Afghanistan and Haiti.



OSCE SMM Deputy Chief Monitor Antje Grawe with Ivano-Frankivsk Monitoring Team and SMM interlocutors in Uzhgorod. (OSCE)

"The SMM is mandated to monitor and support respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities," she explains. "The Mission is also tasked to facilitate dialogue on the ground, in order to reduce tensions. Hence, we engage with a wide range of people, in the meticulous work of monitoring and reporting, which allows us to follow developments, connect the dots and have a unique big picture."

David nods in agreement. "It is the diplomacy of the little steps, as we call it in French," he says. "We talk to authorities, like the regional Governor, to understand how decisions at the central level are implemented locally,

and we interact with civil society and minority communities, like, for example, the Hungarian, Jewish and Roma representatives we are meeting today, to learn how these policies affect each community."

As the patrol enters Uzhhorod, a city of 115,000 people, which serves as the regional centre, it heads to the administration where Regional Governor Anatoliy Poloskov and his deputy Ishtvan Patruska welcome the team.

Multiculturalism is one of Zakarpattia's strengths and a core feature of daily life, notes Poloskov, as he briefs the team on socio-political developments in the region.

“We engage in regular meetings with each community’s representatives,” the Governor explains, adding that these interactions offer the opportunity to address challenges and discuss collaboration on key issues, while also functioning as a valuable prevention mechanism. Deputy Governor Petrushka agrees, a member of a Hungarian community, which accounts for about 12% of the region’s population.

Wrapping up the intense one-hour long discussion, the team leaves the regional administration to meet a representative of the Roma community. A stroll down the streets rich with history brings them to Miroslav, a Roma activist.

He sits on Uzhhorod’s city council where he represents the rights of Roma in Zakarpattia, which is the region with the largest number of Roma community members in Ukraine. A respected sociologist, Miroslav says that the government’s strategy on the rights of Roma, which set goals for the community’s integration through 2030, provides a valuable roadmap to support the community. However, he notes, much remains to be done to protect Roma from cases of discrimination and acts of violence.

As the meeting draws to an end, David and DCM Grawe reflect on the valuable information they gathered, which will be reflected in the patrol reports, one of dozens produced daily by the Mission.

“Visiting Zakarpattia is a journey into the pages of a history book about Europe in the 20th century and how it has impacted people’s lives,” reflects Grawe as the patrol is leaving the region. “What emerges during all the meetings is a real sense of togetherness, a peaceful cohabitation, which does not make headlines in the media, but on which the region thrives.”

GAINING A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF KHARKIV'S ROMA COMMUNITY



KHARKIV REGION



The morning in the OSCE SMM's office in Kharkiv starts with the usual bustle. Monitoring officers are working on out the day's schedule and getting ready for an important meeting.

Today, Mykola Burlutskyi, Head of the Roma NGO "Chachimo" will visit. The team hopes to gain a deeper understanding of the issues of concern to the Roma community in Kharkiv region and the new Strategy for Promoting the Realization of the Rights and Opportunities of Persons Belonging to the Roma National Minority.

Olga, Kharkiv's Team Leader, will head the meeting. Originally, from Moldova, she joined the Mission in 2015, serving as a Donetsk Team Leader, before she moved to Kharkiv.

Whilst the team prepares for the visit, Olga reflects on her experience in the OSCE: "I joined the SMM with a clear objective – to personally contribute to peace and security in Ukraine."

Richard, a lawyer from the UK, who has been with SMM as a Monitoring Officer for some years, lays out his expectations for the meeting. "I am glad to meet Mr Burlutsky", Richard says. "He is very knowledgeable regarding the situation of the Roma community in our area of responsibility."

Soon, Mykola Burlutskyi arrives and is welcomed by the SMM's team. In line with the Mission's COVID-19 measures, everyone is wearing masks.

Mr Burlutskyi is the head of the NGO "Chachimo", which translates to "The Truth". Founded in 2005, the NGO's aim is not only to tackle the security and education related issues of Roma living in the Kharkiv region, but also to



Kharkiv MT at a meeting with Mykola Burlutskyi, Head of the Roma NGO "Chachimo". (OSCE)

better integrate community members into Ukrainian society.

After introductory remarks, Mr Burlutskyi shares the some updates on his community.

He explains that the Roma in Kharkiv region face specific challenges, further complicated by the fact that around 12 different ethnic Roma groups live in the area, each with their own language, customs, and traditions. Barons, traditional Roma leaders, solve the community's minor problems internally. "They have the last word on disputes, whilst the local courts are not involved," he explains. "The religion of the 12 Roma ethnic groups also differs, with members representing various

faiths such as Orthodox, Protestant, and Islam." Mr Burlutskyi goes on to say: "Whilst there are no disputes amongst the different Roma groups, their participation in Kharkiv's political life is low with only one of the twelve being formally represented in the local administration."

According to unofficial estimates, approximately 7,000 Roma live in Kharkiv region. The census from 2001 revealed that the total number of Roma living in Ukraine was 47,500. The number of Roma in the region increased by some 2,000 after the conflict started in 2014, with IDPs arriving from Luhansk and Donetsk. While half of them gradually

moved to Western Ukraine in pursuit of jobs, the other half eventually returned to their places of origin.

The Roma now living throughout the wider Kharkiv region face multiple challenges: from a lack of access to employment, education and healthcare, to the fact that many do not have the necessary documentation to prove their identity or place of residence. Whilst the previous Ukrainian Government 2014-2020 Strategy for the Protection and Integration of Roma National Minority tried to tackle some of these issues, unfortunately, many are yet to be resolved.

“The most positive outcome of the previous strategy was that it brought the community closer to the local and regional administration”, Mr Burlutskyi says.

Despite the current challenges faced by the Roma, Mr Burlutskyi is hopeful for the future. Some members of the community are starting to adopt a proactive approach in Kharkiv’s political life, for example by engaging with the local authorities, in order to help their community.

While Olga and Richard ask more questions about ongoing developments, Mr Burlutskyi points out that the new 2030 Strategy has a real potential to address some of the shortcomings of the previous one and create new possibilities for a better integration of the Roma community in the Kharkiv region.

After the meeting finishes, Olga and Richard accompany their visitor out of the SMM’s premises. “It was good that we had this gathering,” Richard says. “I believe such meetings are crucial to maintain good interpersonal relationships and earning the trust of our interlocutors.”

“This was important for me too”, Olga remarks. “Now we have a much better understanding of the issues that Chachimo’s team is working on every day.”

WEALTH FOUND IN DIVERSITY: ON PATROL IN THE CHERNIVTSI REGION



CHERNIVTSI REGION

It is an unusually fresh August morning, and Violeta, Yves, and Costel, monitoring officers with the SMM's Monitoring Team in Chernivtsi in western Ukraine, warm their hands on their cups of coffee as they discuss the plan for today's patrol with their colleagues, Natalia and Andriy. They have a busy day ahead that will take them first to Mahala, a village where the Romanian minority make up most of its inhabitants. The team will monitor developments related to the decentralization process and then have a meeting with representatives of the Jewish community in the city.

The two-car patrol makes its way through morning traffic, passing in front of historic buildings including the renowned university, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Chernivtsi National University was founded in 1875 when the city was the capital of the Duchy of Bukovina, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the time, the city was called Czernowitz, one of six different names it has had in the past two centuries. Each of its subsequent rulers spoke a different language, and each language left its imprint on the city, its name and its residents.

Chernivtsi is over 1,000 kilometers away from Luhansk where both Yves and Violeta worked when they first arrived to the Mission. With two decades of experience in human rights and

dialogue facilitation in her native North Macedonia as well as in Ireland, Violeta has found the work of the Mission in Chernivtsi rewarding.

"This is Ukraine's smallest administrative region by size, and one of the most diverse," Violeta, an Irish-Macedonian national says as she keeps her eyes on the road. "The 19th and 20th centuries left their mark on the human geography of the region, which is home to dozens of different communities. Its wealth lies in its diversity of languages, faiths, and cultures."

Yves, a Belgian national who has recently moved from Sievierodonetsk to Chernivtsi, agrees.

"The SMM's human dimension work is different here in comparison to the activities in the conflict-affected areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions," he says. "To fulfil our mandate, we engage with local authorities, as well as with civil society, to monitor and support respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. Today's patrol reflects these mandated tasks."

The car exits the city boundaries, heads west and arrives shortly after crossing the Prut river. Mahala lies only seven kilometers from Chernivtsi, and yet the atmosphere here feels different.

The settlement serves as the centre of the Territorial Community (TC), which

comprises five villages where both Ukrainians and members of the Romanian minority, all citizens of Ukraine, live together.

"TCs are new administrative entities established by the decentralization process, which started in 2014 and during which settlements have been merged and given more powers and financial resources," Violeta explains. "This community is a shining star," she adds. "Two village councils, a Romanian-speaking council from Mahala and a Ukrainian-speaking council from Ridkivtsi decided to work more closely together and voluntarily merged. In 2017, this community was far ahead in implementing the process of decentralization, compared to bigger ones elsewhere in the country."

Olena Nandrish, a representative of the TC council explains that the merger unlocked resources that allowed the council to renovate or build key infrastructure from scratch.

"The territorial community now has three schools and six kindergartens, in addition to three medical facilities and two cultural centres. These facilities are important, not least because, since 2008, the population in the five villages has increased by about ten percent, so there was a growing need to provide more services," she adds.

She guides the team through Mahala's cultural centre, which includes an amphitheater used for the TC's council sessions as well as for other cultural events, a library, and a museum containing artefacts dating back to the late 1800s.

As the meeting comes to an end, the team and Nandrish agree to stay in touch and meet again in the near future, to discuss further developments related to the decentralization process.

The team leaves the green hills behind and heads back to Chernivtsi.

"It is fulfilling to work on human dimension issues," Violeta reflects once in the car. "It gives me the opportunity to use and facilitate a multidisciplinary and holistic approach to continuous development of people, communities and institutions."

Back in Chernivtsi, the team heads to the office of "Hesed-Shushana", the Chernivtsi Region Charity Fund, where representatives of the Jewish community await them.



OSCE SMM on patrol in western Ukraine. (OSCE)

Today, Chernivtsi's Jewish community is small, but it remains active and dynamic, numbering about 1,500 people. One school in Chernivtsi offers lessons in Hebrew.

"Before the Second World War, Jews accounted for about 40 per cent of the city's population and were well integrated into city life. Back then, Chernivtsi was part of Romania, and thanks to its Romanian mayor, about 20,000 Jews were saved from the Holocaust," Illia Khoch, one of the community leaders, recalls.

After bidding farewell, the team returns to the office.

"Encounters like these help us to understand the added value of the Mission across the country," Yves comments as he looks through the meeting notes.

Violeta, who has been with the SMM since 2016, nods. "It is fulfilling to see how people of different backgrounds thrive in a multi-cultural environment like Chernivtsi's," she adds. "And it is a great satisfaction to contribute to the implementation of the Mission's mandate: monitoring the respect for the rights of persons belonging to national minorities."

A photograph of two white OSCE Toyota SUVs parked in a field of yellow sunflowers. The vehicles have 'OSCE' and 'ОБСЕ' logos on their sides and flags on their roofs. The sunflowers are in the foreground, and the sky is overcast.

ALL HANDS ON DECK



ODESSA REGION



The rain, forecast to come early on 2 May, still has not materialized as Christiane and Olegs from the SMM Odessa team approach Kulykove Pole in the southern Ukrainian port city of Odessa.

Across the square, about 100 people are gathered outside the Trade Union building, fewer than in previous years because of COVID-19 restrictions. They are chanting slogans and singing songs, expressing their sorrow about an event that took place there seven years ago.

At the nearby, Saborna Square, around 1,200 people carrying Ukrainian flags, gathered and later walked towards Tarasa Shevchenka Park, where they delivered speeches and lighted flares whilst Ukraine's anthem was played.

The Trade Union building still bears the scars of that day when, on 2 May 2014, dozens of people lost their lives in confrontations that broke out in the wake of the Maidan events in Kyiv in February 2014, and culminating in a fire at the building that claimed dozens more. About 100 people gather near a banner on the

fence with names and photos of people who died – flowers are spread on the asphalt.

Olegs points to a members of the group wearing T-shirts with photos of people who died on 2 May 2014, unfolding a flag of the city of Odessa with a picture of burning Trade Union building and white birds in the middle.

Christiane, a Deputy Team Leader from Germany, checks the messaging app she and the entire SMM Odessa team are using to co-ordinate the five mobile patrols deployed across the city. The patrol at Soborna Square has monitoring the gathering of people carrying Ukraine's flag and of various organizations.

They are on the move, heading in the direction of Tarasa Shevchenka Park, Christiane tells Olegs. He looks at the lines of National Guards nearby. About 500 police officers were present throughout the day securing the event.

Lots of work and planning has gone into making sure that the day passes smoothly. As far back as 2015, the SMM has been organising dialogue facilitation meetings to promote

a better understanding of the views about the events. In the run-up to the first anniversary of the 2 May events, the SMM organized a Dialogue Facilitation roundtable on 24 April 2015 with local activists, as well as representatives from law enforcement agencies and the Regional Administration. It was a difficult meeting, but eventually the sides agreed to apply a number of measures to ensure that any tensions could be diffused while allowing all groups to exercise their freedom of assembly.

This agreement has largely held, with the SMM doing work to revisit the agreement every year and supporting to continuation of efforts, along with local authorities, to ensure all such gatherings take place as planned and without incident. "This year, we met all key activists, the police, the Security Service of Ukraine, SBU and Odessa's governor online or in person and asked them about their plans, their expectations, and what security measures were being put in place," says Christiane. "We must have held more than 20 meetings."



OSCE SMM on patrol in western Ukraine. (OSCE)

The meetings also fed into SMM's operational planning, and the decision to deploy five patrols across the city. "On 2 May, it's all hands on deck," says Christiane.

There is a large police presence, with riot police and dialogue officers to deal with any eventuality. As it transpired, they were thankfully not required. By around 15.30, the commemoration was winding down. The speeches were made, the flowers were laid and many tears were shed. Balloons and doves had been released into the sky above the city. Christiane and Olegs, having completed their duty, are set to return to the base to continue working. "This is one of the days, when we remember why is SMM's work is so important," Christiane remarks.

A NEW HOME IN AN UNFAMILIAR PLACE: SMM REACHES OUT TO INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS



Looking out the window of his flat in Lviv on an early Monday morning, Arslan, a Monitoring Officer in the Lviv Monitoring Team, reflects on what the day may have in store for him. Today he and his colleague Liliya will meet Nataliya, the co-founder of the 'Civic Movement of Donbas IDPs', an NGO that supports individuals, who have been displaced by the conflict in eastern Ukraine, to integrate into their new local community.

Originally from Kyrgyzstan with a background in political sciences and international relations, Arslan joined the SMM in 2021, after working for UNDP as a reporting officer and as a representative of civil society.

Arslan leaves his flat, making his way down cobblestone streets already busy with morning traffic. As he reaches the Monitoring Team's office in the heart of the city, he meets up with Liliya, the local language assistant. Before she came to work with the Mission, Liliya taught English at the Ivan Franko National University in Lviv. Now, after more than two years with the SMM, Liliya has already become well-informed about IDPs in Ukraine. "There are more than 11,000 registered IDPs in the Lviv region," Liliya says, "and according to official government reports, in total about 1.5 million IDPs are located across the country."

Arslan and Liliya set up the conference room in accordance with the Mission's COVID-19 safety regulations.

They then review their notes, in preparation for the meeting. "Monitoring respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is an integral part of our mandate," Arslan says, "We hope that, in our discussion with Nataliya, we will get some useful updates on the work of her NGO."

A few minutes later, the doorbell rings. Nataliya enters the office and is welcomed by Arslan and Liliya. The three of them sit down and begin their meeting.

Nataliya explains how she left her hometown. With a degree in management and economics, she used to work as the director of a small trade centre in Alchevsk, currently in the non-government-controlled areas of Luhansk region. Right after the outbreak of the conflict, she left for Lviv with her husband and their three children.

"During the first days of our displacement, we all thought that it would only be for a short period of time and we would return to our homes," Nataliya says, "Very quickly though, I realized that we would have to stay for much longer."

Nataliya noticed that most IDPs faced similar challenges, so in 2015 she founded the NGO 'Civic Movement



Lviv Monitoring Team member Arslan in exchange with 'Civic Movement of Donbas IDPs' founding member Nataliya. (OSCE/Liliya Kushnir)

of Donbas IDPs' with other IDPs. One of the organization's main goals is to support IDPs in getting access to adequate, permanent housing.

"Whoever has the means to do so will rent an apartment, but then most of their income is spent covering the rent. Most IDPs wouldn't have much left over to cover more basic needs, such as food or clothing," Nataliya explains. "In order to improve their situation, we support IDPs to properly fill in and file all the documents necessary to register for a plot of land, so they can build their own houses. The administrative procedures can be complicated and not everyone has the knowledge or resources to understand how to navigate the bureaucracy."

"Can you tell us how many IDP families have already been helped in this way, according to your statistics?" Arslan asks.

"Approximately 22 land plots in the outskirts of Lviv were allocated to IDP families," Nataliya says. "The construction of houses has not yet started, since none of these plots has the necessary infrastructure." It is for this reason that Nataliya and her colleagues

are working on a project to ensure that water, gas, and electricity are supplied to these plots. They have already secured a local authority grant of UAH 90,000 to develop a more detailed plan to provide essential infrastructure.

Nataliya laughs: "Believe me, we have knocked on a lot of doors and will keep doing so."

As an IDP herself, Nataliya knows how much effort it takes to make all the changes necessary for people to feel at home again in a new environment. "It was difficult for me to settle in, also from an emotional perspective," Nataliya admits. "Lviv is a very beautiful city, with lovely buildings. It has an opera and a well-respected university. It is rich in culture, history, and is nicknamed 'little Vienna' because of that. Thousands of tourists visit the city each year from all over Europe."

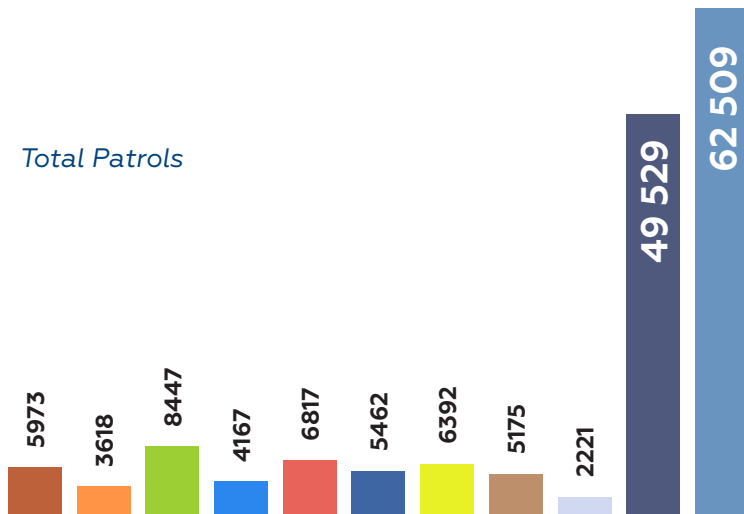
Even though, she still sometimes feels homesick for the life she left 1,300 kilometres away. "Alchevsk is an industrial city, founded only in the late 19th century. There are not many similarities with Lviv, but it used to be my home."

The meeting naturally comes to an end. Arslan and Liliya thank Nataliya for her visit and agree to meet again soon.

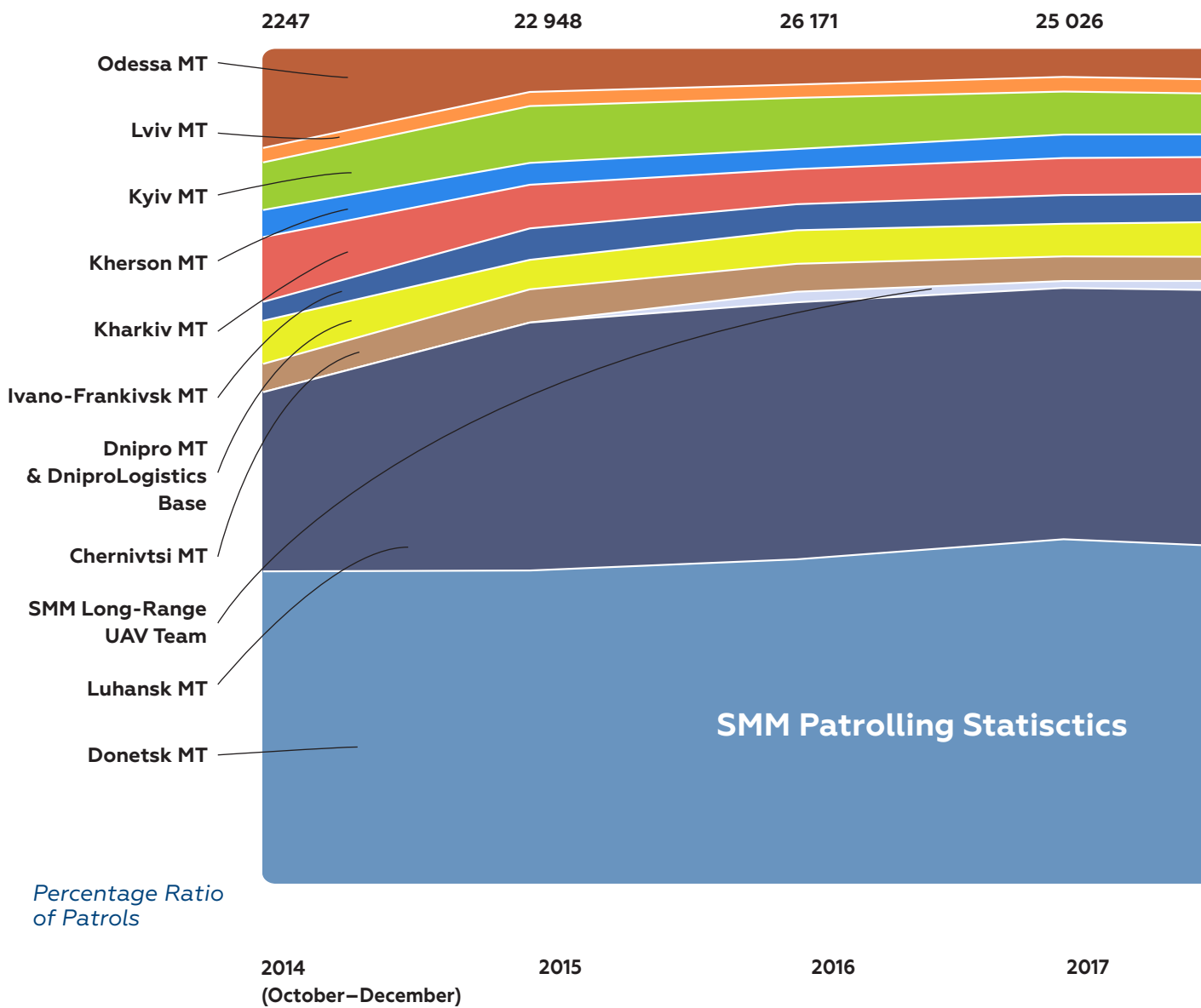
As they walk out of the office, Liliya asks Nataliya if she could ever imagine returning back one day. Nataliya hesitates before answering, saying how difficult it is to contemplate a return in the present circumstances. "I do miss my friends there, but it has been more than seven years since we arrived in Lviv, and now my family and I have found comfort and happiness in this city."

After Nataliya has left, Arslan and Liliya reflect on the meeting. "It is amazing to see how much energy and passion one person has. Her determination to make a difference is inspiring," Arslan says. Liliya agrees: "The efforts of people like Nataliya makes the journey of integration into new communities easier for IDPs."

Total Patrols



160



310

Total Patrols
Missionwide

Percentage of SMM patrols
in Eastern Ukraine

