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► **To cite this version:**

Sophie Lambroschini. Accommodating Uncertainty by Bridging Fractures in War? Practices and Limits of Cross-Frontline Water Provision in the War in Eastern Ukraine, 2014-2019. CIST2020 - Population, temps, territoires, Collège international des sciences territoriales (CIST), Nov 2020, Paris-Aubervilliers, France. pp.547-550. hal-03114697

**HAL Id: hal-03114697**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03114697>**

Submitted on 19 Jan 2021

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# Accommodating Uncertainty by Bridging Fractures in War? Practices and Limits of Cross- Frontline Water Provision in the War in Eastern Ukraine, 2014-2019

**ABSTRACT**

This draft article analyses the socio-economic relationships and behaviours of people living in the Donbas region in the conflict zone in Eastern Ukraine. Based on ethnographic fieldwork on the daily operation of a local Ukrainian drinking water authority that supplies populations caught in the “entre-deux” near the front line, this research studies the adaptation strategies implemented by employees of the company to ensure its operation despite security hazards. It employs the anthropological concept of liminality in order to explain how behaviours caught in the uncertainty of war can create new forms of cooperation and solidarity.

**KEYWORDS**

Economic practices, Central-Eastern Europe, Violent conflict, Liminality

**RÉSUMÉ**

Cette proposition analyse les relations et comportements socio-économiques des personnes vivant dans la région du Donbas, zone de conflit en Ukraine orientale. S'appuyant sur un travail ethnographique de terrain portant sur le fonctionnement au quotidien d'une régie d'eau potable ukrainienne approvisionnant les populations coincées dans « l'entre-deux » à proximité de la ligne de front, cette recherche étudie les stratégies d'adaptation mises en œuvre par les employés de l'entreprise pour assurer son fonctionnement malgré les aléas sécuritaires. Elle emploie le concept anthropologique de liminalité afin d'expliquer comment les comportements pris dans l'incertitude de la guerre peuvent créer de nouvelles formes de coopérations et de solidarités.

**MOTS CLÉS**

pratiques économiques, Europe centrale et orientale, conflit violent, liminalité

**INTRODUCTION**

Using sociological and anthropological methods, I seek out the adaptive approaches and scarcely visible social threads that underpin a more visible war. Separating government-controlled territories from those under the rule of the Russian-backed non-recognised entities (the self-proclaimed republics of Luhansk and Donetsk, L/DPR), a front line shattered or transformed many economic and infrastructure networks. The front line –a *de facto* border with check-points and rules– disrupted pre-existent socially and economically integrated spaces, catapulting populations into the realm of “entre-deux” existence. Separating suburbs from their cities, breaking supply chains, healthcare, administrative and legal systems in a region imbued with a strong urban and industrial culture (Sasse, 2017; Kuromiya, 2003, 2015), severely affected previous everyday life patterns. In the midst of this conflict, thousands of people employed by a local Ukrainian water supply company continue to make drinking water move to both sides of the front line in daily transactions with others officially named as enemies and in conditions of extreme uncertainty. Technically, pipe infrastructure cannot be broken up along military lines. It has continued to operate across the frontline since the war began in May 2014 to provide drinking water and heating to close to 4 million people who rely on this fragile balance. I use the water supply system run by the Ukrainian company Voda Donbasu (VD, Water of Donbas) as a case study to investigate the dynamics of persistence, change and adaptation in the context of system collapse caused by war. In the process of their daily mission to keep water flowing, the company's employees create a new representation of who they are and how they work that I hypothesise is generated in liminality. The new *loci* of belonging that they create are embedded in certain Soviet and post-Soviet continuities. They also show the human capacity for reinvention in times of crisis.

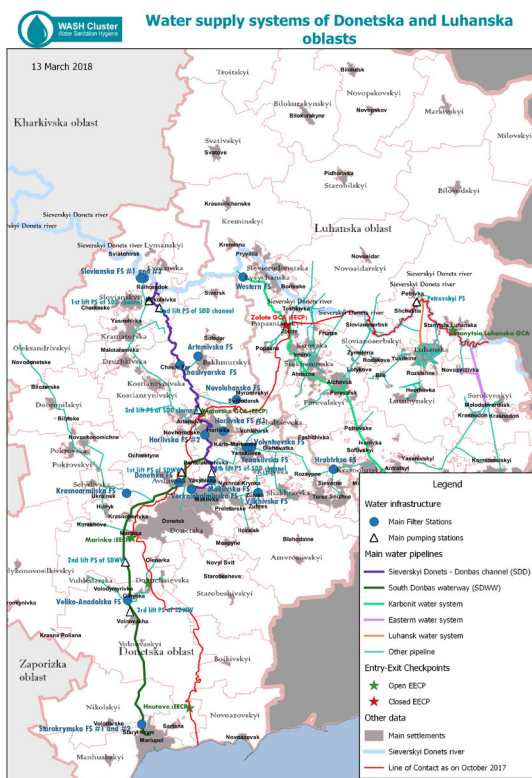
## 1. FIELD OBSERVATIONS: MANAGING FRONT LINES WITHIN A COMPANY

Fieldwork in the towns near the front line on Kyiv-controlled territory reflects a permanent uncertainty for hydraulic operations and the people at work, that demands constant adjustment on the part of the professionals of VD water supply company. These preliminary observations led to the development of a theoretical reflection around the concept of liminality. Analysing further anthropological observations of everyday work practices at VD through this lens reveals liminal existence as a powerful space of creative adaptivity.

The 11,000 employees of Voda Donbasu 30 local subdivisions, living and working in both Kyiv-controlled and in occupied areas, capture the complexity of this arrangement: Running local water distribution for the municipal water and heating system, they adapt to local security conditions in order to sustain quality, maintenance, as well as to check household water meters and to collect payment.

Avdiivka is a town in the heart of the coal mining and metals region of Donbas, run-down by years of post-Soviet neglect and, since 2014, by artillery fired from the front line running at the outskirts<sup>1</sup>, separating government-controlled territories from those under the rule of the Russian-backed non-recognised entities. It is home to a pumping station of the water supplier VD. Its employees working on both sides face the challenges of a dangerous front line border: Shelling of water infrastructure occurs several times a month and, as a result, several company employees have died, many were injured or spent nights in bomb shelters during their shifts. The water stems from the Siverskiy Donets river in the north, and it feeds populations, farms, and Soviet-era industrial plants through pipelines criss-crossing the front line over 300 km down to the Azov sea. Voda Donbasu's Avdiivka pumping station and administrative buildings are within walking distance from the front line and what is termed colloquially "the grey zone," where land mines and artillery fire happen on a weekly basis: the facilities receive water from the separatist side that is then treated and distributed into the system, as the map developed by the UNICEF WASH cluster monitoring agency shows.

Figure 1. Water supply systems of Donetsk and Luhanska oblasts<sup>2</sup>



In Avdiivka, the company's offices are located in a 19th century former railroad administration building, its imperial solidity still visible. The Director of the Avdiivka offices shows me around pointing at shell impacts. "These old walls –half a meter thick! They withstood the Germans and the Red Army," he taps on the wall, "these keep the ground floor safe"<sup>3</sup> (though the bunker housed in a cellar was used occasionally during episodes of heavy shelling in 2014-2015). Near the front door, plumbing technicians and machine operators in haphazardly assembled work clothes (there is no money for company logo attire) wait to receive their assignments. Tinkering the old pipes and valves is a daily preoccupation complicated by unreliable excavators dating back to Soviet days. Most often, the water technicians intervene in town, but sometimes they go out in the grey danger zone to repair leakage caused by shelling, or simply age. On the second floor of the building, VD accountants, exclusively female, collect and calculate actual water consumption fees; office windows are covered with a special film to keep shards out in case of shelling, a selection of wallpaper in different patterns creates a sense of haphazard neatness. Some female clerks are in charge of reading the water consumption meters

throughout the district, in apartment buildings, as well as companies and administrations. Reading meters involves heading out to the eastern outskirts of the town where shelling, though now rare, occur, for example just three weeks before my last visit in July 2019. The Director of the Avdiivka water supply facility tries to reassure me: "Of course, they only go out to read meters when the risk isn't too great." A bit bewildered that meter readings should take place in a war zone, I ask why they continue to do it. "It's a matter of money and of principle," he answers. Behind him, a few of the women nod. "How would it look if we stopped? It would

1 See Il'chenko *et al.* (2018) for a history of many towns of the Donbas region.

2 Map of Water supply systems of Donetsk and Luhansk regions courtesy of UNICEF, WASH cluster in Ukraine

3 All interviews were conducted in Russian or Ukrainian, often a flowing back and forth between both languages, as is quite common in Ukraine. All citations are translated from the original by the author.

be *letting people down, as if everything is lost*; “this is the correct way of running things, that’s how it has always been.” In other words, maintaining the banal circuit of measurement–payment–delivery of services conveys a sense of survival and normality.

This piece of anthropological observation illustrates my research in Donbas. It is built on data collected during four field research trips from May 2018 until July 2019 conducted in government-controlled areas near the line of contact (“grey zone”), as well as in Kyiv, Pokrovsk, and Mariupol. The towns of Toretsk and Avdiivka, located near the front line with key Voda Donbasu water distribution facilities that are often hit by artillery fire, are the core field of my research through observation and semi-structured interviews conducted in Kyiv-controlled areas with water professionals living on both sides of the front line, as well as local government representatives, public servants, border guards, and consumers. Company documentation and information from the corporate website were also used. Information about operations in separatist territories were collected through interviews with locals, although held on Kyiv-controlled areas. Some participant observation was conducted through the participation in Voda Donbasu company board meetings.

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTION

This research investigates how ordinary people living in instability and danger caused by war adapt their behaviour and outlook to maintain the mundane actions of everyday lives. How has the company’s corporate culture changed? How is the binary of the conflict perceived and framed within the company? More broadly, what conditions and in what manner do formerly integrated social, economic, political communities divided by a violent border maintain or transform social interaction? What forms do these transformed networks and practices of war time collaboration take? What are the strategies, motivations and limits of these actors? Finally, can one explore these resilient networks more universally as a basis for peace time cooperation or peace-building?

## 3. LIMINALITY AS A CREATIVE SPACE

Indeed, people in war, or other situations severely disrupting their lives, “negotiate normality” by creating a sense of everyday lives in abnormal situations (Maček, 2016: 39). However, the Director of the water utilities company described above also set a direct connection between water supply and the consumer, the underlying processes that sustain operations of water infrastructure, and the established order of public service as reflecting the order established in the past. His response also expressed the potentially symbolic and social significance of keeping this system holistically intact: Stopping the mundane action of measuring water consumption and collecting payments would compromise the revenue of a company servicing populations on both sides of the front line, it would break the social link between infrastructure, operator, and consumer that is the result of a long process of development. Initially, “liminality” was first formulated by the anthropologist Arnold von Gennep with regard to initiation rites, and was taken up much later by Viktor Turner (1967). Liminal spaces in this original anthropological sense were spaces and stages that marked the passage between two states in a person’s life and in his place in society: I adopt it here to explain broader situations of “transition”. In contemporary scholarship, a liminal space or state is an intermediary moment in the process of transformation characterised by a high degree of uncertainty (“betwixt and between”) and open to a wide range of possibilities of adaptation (Horvath *et al.*, 2018). One form of adaptation experienced by people caught in war is creating rituals and experiences of normal life with an effort at inventiveness to circumvent war-provoked difficulties. It is what anthropologist Maček, who investigated everyday life in besieged Sarajevo, calls “negotiating normality” (2016: 39): The human urge to create a sense of normal life in abnormal situations, making tasty meals out of meagre resources, tinkering energy producing contraptions when there is no light or heating, having new and intense friendships in life-threatening situations. This negotiated normality serves as “anchor points of orientation and sources of resilience” (Koloma-Beck, 2012), but it needs to be constantly recreated under the disruption of war. This liminal space around the frontline is also a physical “in-between space” distinctive of a “thick border” where the social, political, economic order differs from less peripheral spaces (Dullin, 2014).

## 4. CROSS FRONTLINE WATER MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF LIMINALITY

The conflict disrupted the management and financial structure of Voda Donbasu, as well as its operational conditions. Comparing the breakdown of “normal life” by war to that caused by deep social change helps to understand how people adapt and find new ways of working and communicating. Reactions to crisis cover a broad range (from denial to adaptation in various forms), but there are some generally common features of how a breakdown of habitual norms affect people. The populations in Donbas –at least those over the age of 30– have consciously experienced another system collapse, that of Soviet system, particularly violent in

conditions of de-industrialisation. Though the pre-conflict/post-socialist situation was broadly perceived as flawed by and more insecure than the Soviet era set of social, political and economic norms, it still provided some sense of order. This new crisis, or breakdown of normative order, can offer a space for innovative adaptive practices, for a creativity born out of liminality (Horvath *et al.*, 2018). People react differently to crises, depending on a web of factors (contextual, social, personal...). Therefore, studying people's reactions to crisis allows for a deeper insight into the heuristic dynamics of social adaptation. Operating on both sides of the frontline demands greater mobility and flexibility. Field observations show that company practices have transformed: A de-politicisation of the company space (little reference to Ukrainian flags), of the company website (the water supply network is presented as a unitary space), an implicit ban on discussing the war, impersonal accounts of shelling. In interviews, Voda Donbasu managers described how they negotiate the long lines at checkpoints. It can take up to 11 hours to travel from Yasynuvata on the "separatist" side, to Avdiivka, just 22 km away. Sometimes, they carry in their pockets small spare parts across the front line, nuts and bolts tailor-made by a Donetsk workshop to fit the aging machinery. Monthly board meetings are held between Pokrovsk and Donetsk, the two main offices separated by the front line, *via* an unstable video up link. Another aspect of adaptation is the internationalisation of the water company's operations. The managers of the former municipal state company now interact with international donors at diplomatic events abroad to raise attention to their plight, negotiate with representatives of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to obtain ceasefires...

## CONCLUSION

The adaptive strategies invented by water engineers, technicians, and managers in the liminal states of the zone of conflict in eastern Ukraine are elaborated around the hardware of water infrastructure. The material dimension of infrastructure that needs to be maintained, repaired, managed, appears to serve as a palpable anchor, stabilising peoples' everyday lives within these spaces marked by the dislocation of established structures and strong uncertainties about the future of the inherited order. The social interactions inside the organisation during wartime transformed the company's identity and that of its workers. These transformations establish new solidarities where the front line becomes a complication to be managed, rather than a material or symbolic divide, erasing the binary of war.

These observations lead me to hypothesise that the specific context of war magnifies the civilisational power of infrastructure as lifelines noted by German historian Van Laak (2018).

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