



# International Alert Ukraine Stakeholder Consultations

Final Report

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# 1. Introduction

## a) Background information

Despite years of learning, increased resources and numerous agendas seeking to bring about sustained peace, the majority of the world's conflicts remain unresolved. There is an urgent need to address both the political economy of conflict and roots of inequality, as well as improving the design, implementation and monitoring of peace processes. The Principles for Peace (P4P) is a global participatory initiative intending to re-frame the current way that peace processes are understood and implemented by addressing fundamental deficits and filling significant gaps in the international system's peace and security norms, long identified as barriers to their success.

The P4P initiative seeks to:

- ▶ Establish a much-needed new set of principles, informal norms and guidance for how to structure, sequence and build more inclusive peace processes
- ▶ Create greater accountability and long-term oversight of peace processes and subsequent implementation actions
- ▶ Change the incentives of national and international actors engaged in peace-making and peacebuilding interventions and seek to deliver the necessary strategic coherence and long-term oversight required to achieve sustainable peace outcomes.

In support of the P4P initiative, International Alert undertook country consultations in Nigeria and Ukraine. International Alert has been working alongside diverse grassroots civil society organisations across Ukraine since 2015, supporting capacity to generate robust local conflict analysis and identify peacebuilding priorities. Our work has enabled these organisations to develop stronger professional relationships with Ukrainian local authorities to shape and influence policy and practice and resulted in the establishment of an informal network of 60+ civil society organizations, creating a space for peacebuilders to share insights on common conflict dynamics and joint peacebuilding opportunities.

In 2019, Alert and partners conducted a situational analysis in three regions of Ukraine considered highly vulnerable to geopolitical pressure and destabilisation, South Odesa, Kherson and Zakarpattia. Alongside divisive narratives, political corruption and entrenched patriarchal gender norms that all serve to exclude vulnerable groups and threaten cohesion, the analysis found that one of the common root causes of conflict driving tensions at the regional and local level is a multitude of conflict-insensitive international and domestic initiatives. Respondents in the analysis criticised international and national initiatives for privileging the interests and grievances of one group over another, undertaking problem-focused research and lacking clear communication or feedback mechanisms. The P4P initiative presented an opportunity to further understand the perceptions, expectations and visions of peace and security in Ukraine, as well as develop insight into priorities for long-term transformation.

## b) Context

Seven years after the conflict in the east and the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine continues to face a number of geopolitical and domestic challenges. Most acutely, this relates to the ongoing conflict in the east as well as political turbulence at the national level. Conflict dynamics are also present across the country. The conflict that is unfolding in Ukraine has already led to the annexation of Crimea and armed confrontation in the east of the country. In some cases, it is mistakenly or unilaterally interpreted exclusively as an internal Ukrainian problem, a civil conflict, or as a conflict between Ukraine and Russia, a Ukrainian-Russian war. A limited or one-sided understanding of the essence of the conflict means that the ways suggested for resolving it do not ensure the expected results.

The current crisis, which can be called Ukrainian, Russian, European, and even global or geopolitical, has to be considered in its entirety. The crisis resulted from the simultaneous combination of three different-level conflicts: geopolitical (global), Russian-Ukrainian (regional) and actual intra-Ukrainian (local) conflicts. Moreover, higher-level conflicts affect the deployment of lower-level conflicts and vice versa, and the same actors can act in different roles at different levels of the conflict. To date, about 7% of the territory of Ukraine is occupied and the number of victims as of 31 January 2021 stood at between 42,000 and 44,000 people; between 13,100 and 13,300 people were killed and between 29,500 and 33,500 were injured. Among these figures, 3,375 civilians were killed and 7,000 were wounded. To date, the

number of registered IDPs in Ukraine is 1.45 million according to the Ukraine Ministry of Social Policy. The acute phase of the conflict took place between 2014 - 2016. The situation after 2016 is characterized as a conflict of low intensity, but which cannot be called 'frozen'. Escalation of the conflict occurring in winter and spring 2021 significantly influenced the emotional state of the participants and their vision of peace during the focus group sessions.

### Context-specific terms:

- ▶ **The Minsk Process** is an established general term for three joint documents signed by the parties taking part in the settlement of the situation in Donbass<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ **GCA/NGCA** are the Ukrainian government-controlled areas and non-government controlled areas<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ **DPR/LPR** are self-proclaimed territories that emerged in 2014 on the territory of Ukraine, i.e. Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ **Transnistria / Trans-Dniester region**<sup>4</sup> is a self-proclaimed territory that emerged due to the political and armed conflict in the early 1990s between Moldova and the "*Pridnestrovskiaia Moldavskiaia Respublika*", supported by Russia. So far, OSCE has been mediating in the process of the Transnistrian settlement since 1993
- ▶ **IDPs** are internally displaced persons<sup>5</sup>

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1 Overall agreed conclusions of the Paris Summit in the Normandy format of December 9, 2019, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky, 10th December 2019, <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/zagalni-uzgodzheni-visnovki-parizkogo-samitu-v-normandskomu-58797>

2 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Permanent Council, Decision No. 1117 Deployment of an OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, 21 March 2014 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/6/116747.pdf>

3 The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine, Chatham House, 22nd May, 2020 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/05/minsk-conundrum-western-policy-and-russias-war-eastern-ukraine-0/minsk-2-agreement>

4 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, CSCE Mission to the Republic of Moldova, CSCE/19-CSO/Journal No.3, 4th February 1993, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/0/41137.pdf>

5 Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, Ukraine, <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/internally-displaced-persons>

### c) Number of participants

In our Ukraine study, 54 people took part in four online focus group discussions, including 10 men and 44 women from Kyiv, regional centers, cities and amalgamated territorial communities of 10 regions, as well as non-government-controlled

areas of Ukraine, and third countries, to where the people had to leave due to the armed conflict. The participants of the four focus groups included the following characteristics.

Focus group	Gender	Age	Affiliation with government
1	2 male, 12 female 0 other	[List the ages of all participants e.g. 31, 35, 44, 41, 37, 25, 62, 49, 42, 36, 29, 57, 43, 41]	3
2	2 male, 11 female 0 other	[List the ages of all participants e.g. 53, 51, 22, 60, 42, 39, 56, 25, 27, 32, 48, 39, 32]	2
3	3 male, X female 10 other	[List the ages of all participants e.g. 38, 41, 34, 46, 44, 32, 29, 48, 40, 28, 33, 51, 37]	1
4	3 male, 11 female X other	[List the ages of all participants e.g. 54, 33, 30, 49, 40, 24, 49, 46, 36, 38, 22, 34, 41, 41,]	4

The age of the participants ranged from 22 to 62 years old, comprising men and women of various age groups, including 15% of participants under 30 years old and 15% of participants over 50 years old. 17 (31%) of the respondents are IDPs from Donetsk and Lugansk, who took part in all four focus groups. Most of the participants represented NGOs within various fields, including assistance for women, assistance for IDPs, support for youth, community

development, support for people with disabilities and serious illnesses, resource and creative centres (art centers, libraries, hubs, etc.), human security in the community and educational initiatives. The groups were also attended by employees of local government and executive authorities, as well as psychologists, athletes and others. All participants have around the same income level, with no people on the verge of poverty and no business owners.

### d) Number of facilitators/team members involved

One team of facilitators worked with all focus groups:

- ▶ One 34-year-old man from Kherson living in Kyiv
- ▶ One 43-year-old woman, an IDP from Crimea, living in Kyiv.

## 2. Methodology

### a) Description of activities and related design details

Focus groups were conducted online with the participation of two facilitators. Each was between 3.5 and 4 hours long with a 20-minute break for participants. After initial introductions, the first session was held jointly for all the participants. The participants wrote cinquains, or short poems on the theme of peace, using Padlet, an interactive online collaboration tool. A cinquain is a poem in which the topic is described by selecting words that most accurately reflect the topic from the participant's standpoint, based on the formula: one noun, two adjectives, three nouns, one sentence of four words, one summary word (a motto). The participants were asked to share their poems on Padlet, read all other poems, and then discuss their visions, thoughts, ideas, or reflections on the texts.

Focus groups 2 – 4 were then divided into two subgroups, working in parallel. Padlet was also used to answer the second set of questions. Participants were asked to write up to 10 practices and elements that contribute, from their point of view, to peace, by laying the foundations for peace and helping to achieve positive dynamics. After writing the list, the participants were asked to select three best practices from their lists. The participants were also asked to analyze the similarity of items within the lists and the possibilities of combining them, as well as to assess the effectiveness and limitations of the proposed tools.

The third set of questions were presented in a Google Doc with a table containing the following questions:

- ▶ What problems related to war / manifested by war do you or your community face?
- ▶ What problems do you think others are facing? Who are they?

The fourth set of questions were discussed using Padlet:

- ▶ What does the peace that you would like to have consist of?
- ▶ What are the components of that peace?
- ▶ What has to change in 5 years (what brings my ideal peace? What needs to be changed so that peace approaches?)

Finally, as the last set of questions, a Google Doc table with three questions was offered:

- ▶ What should a peaceful society bring to you personally?
- ▶ Please describe in detail 3 – 5 expectations / requests for any particular actor at any level so that your picture of peace comes true
- ▶ What can be your contribution to make this picture of peace come closer/come true?

At the end of the focus group session, the participants could share their reflections on what was important / interesting to them during that session.

## **b) Context-specific consultation/inquiry questions**

No context-specific questions were added. However, we added a specific method (creating short poems or cinquain), to the introductory question about what the word peace meant to the participants, to explore the topic in a metaphorical way.

## **c) Challenges and limitations to design/approach**

People drop out of the session for various reasons, most particularly due to problems with bad internet connection, or for other personal reasons. Unfortunately, the facilitator has no control over that. However, one of the reasons for this was that people did not fully realize or were not fully informed about the duration of the focus group session and were dropping out because they were not able to adjust their schedules accordingly.

One of the challenges of the participants dropping out for technical reasons was the need to have a third team member who would help people re-enter the Zoom session, get into their subgroup, deal with sound problems and the peculiarities of working on a Padlet or Google docs. The facilitator does not always manage to control these issues at the same time as leading the group, recording the discussions and helping individual participants with their technical issues.

One of the key challenges of working online was the interference of strangers, such as employees and relatives, which created a feeling of discomfort and even insecurity. Some participants, perhaps not realizing the specifics of participating in focus groups, transferred their Zoom connection to other employees, and did not warn them about it. Sometimes participants' had limited ability to find a quiet place where they would not be disturbed.

Another feature of working in the online format is related to the Padlet. When the participants first answered individually to a particular set of questions, then could then be influenced by another participant's answer, since the answers of others immediately became visible.

# 3. Findings by Section

## a) Peace in our context

### I. What does peace mean in the context?

#### Commonalities

Several participants in different focus groups noted that the poems combined themes of peace, harmony, intimacy, and warmth. At the same time, there was a theme of how fragile peace can be. Also uniting were topics related to dialogue, communication, the ability to listen, hear and negotiate, and how important these are for peace and for the participants. It was noted that not one participant wrote that there was a need to take a weapon and kill someone. There was a common will for peace and a desire for peace to finally settle down, as a value that must be protected. Other common themes included safety, mutual understanding, acceptance and understanding of the other.

Below are some of the cinquain poems, which were created by participants, and used to identify themes, participants' understandings of peace and their expectations of it.

Dialogue Complex and important Negotiating listening hearing Victory does not mean peace. A human being	Communication Diplomatic and permanent Thinking negotiating interacting Everyone needs to make an effort Together!	Harmony Calm and conflict-free Understanding accepting trusting Getting rid of stereotypes about others Striving
Mutual understanding Desired and difficult Striving, achieving, accomplishing The key purpose of social interaction IS POSSIBLE!	Peace. Mutual understanding. Basic and joyful. Developing, helping, hearing. Respect for each other. Co-existence.	Security. Long-awaited and real. It will come, reconcile and win. We await it so much. Happiness
Hope Fragile and elusive Do I wait, aspire, believe? Many words, but all missing the aim When?	Stability. New and developed. Being inspired, developed, renewed. What we can do. Action	Solution Flexible and accommodating Respecting, interacting, loving We are different but equal Act!

In some groups, there was also a common feeling of powerlessness (a young girl, 25 years old, employee of a co-working space):

*"A lot of things have happened in the world over the past year that are beyond our control, and the only thing that everyone wants is we want that to stop, leave us alone, let everything be quiet and calm... We are powerless; we do not know what to do, so we just want it all to stop, so that there is peace and calm".*

However, other participants noted that they saw themselves as proactive participants in the peace process, being focused on proactive actions. As one of the participants (female, 37 years old, librarian) said:

*"I saw that everyone wanted to do something. Not only to have it all quiet, but rather, everyone wanted to work, run around, search, and fight".*

Some participants emphasized a certain dialogue and humanistic focus in the expectations of peace expressed.

*"It's also an insight, so to speak. I saw it in all the poems, they were saying we had to negotiate, and no one said we had to take up the arms and go ahead and kill someone. We all talk about dialogue. We all talk about finding an agreement. In my opinion, this is what unites us. It's not about being strong, it's rather about conversing with one another."*  
**(female, 51 years old, social worker, IDP)**

### **Differences:**

Several groups emphasized the emotional content of peace, rather than the semantic differences of peace. For example, some poems were filled with kindness and tranquility, while others contained pain and longing. Communication (networking), as a theme, did unite, but for one person this could be simple and easy, while for someone else, it could come with difficulties and overcoming pain. Participants also noted a certain imbalance of experiences and emotional assessments. This was manifested in the poems, as the poems did not always contain an optimistic and constructive component. The most striking and significant difference relates to the pole where the personal concept of peace is located. It can be inside oneself, in the form of a specific state, or outside, within the things that are happening all around. However, this was not contradictory or controversial, as the conceptions are all just different, existing planes in the perception of peace.

One of the respondents (a female displaced person, 34 years old) noted that when analysing the poems of other participants, she was able to reflect on her own personal state which has persisted for the last 7 years of the war:

*"I realized that in some of our poems, they wrote "living, life", that is, peace is associated with life as a whole. I have just now realized that for almost 7 years, I haven't actually lived, rather, I have been in a state of waiting, that is, I am not living today, I'm waiting."*

## **II. What has contributed to peace, what has worked, what are the foundations for lasting peace?**

It is important to note that the context of a hybrid war and aggression by the Russian Federation limits the options for stability and sustainable peace within Ukraine, and this was voiced by a number of participants. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents saw a variety of opportunities that are already being done or that can be implemented in the future to prevent conflicts, cope with the consequences of war and strive for a positive peace at different levels of society.

### **International Level**

For the international level, the participants noted that observation of the principles of international law, the sovereignty of states, treaties of friendship and increased cooperation is required to maintain peace. They also mentioned the instruments of diplomacy and UN activity, as well as the practice of mediation in negotiations and peacebuilding operations. Several participants also expressed the request for the international community to fulfill its obligations and provide comprehensive assistance.

*"To international organizations: bring a culture of interaction, be a role model, provide algorithms, examples, and role models that can be applied"*  
**(male, 41 years old, local authority)**

*"I have a request to the international organizations that were created after the Second World War: carry out your duties, but not in an artificial environment, as it has been going on for seven years. In fact, when you face this conflict, you understand that similar events occurred in the 50s, 60s, and 70s... All of those international organizations were only expressing their "deep concern". I believe that the established international organizations should act in a more adamant manner under these*

*circumstances so that such conflicts don't even flare up" (male, 38 years old, athlete)*  
*"I would like to see military support provided by other countries. Well, I mean real solid military support."*  
**(female, 53 years old, psychologist, IDP)**

## **Security**

In order to have sustainable peace, participants include security at different levels, which encompass family, community, national and international security. Within these levels of security, in particular, they pointed to the need for a well-functioning security and judicial system that should protect rather than punish. Other levels of security related to their desire to live in a safe community, have security for life and health, and support for initiatives against violence and the prevention of it. The presence of the military and checkpoints were perceived by the participants as a demonstration of certain insecurity, and yet, also as a symbol and a guarantee of security and protection.

Most participants focused on their individual level of physical and economic security. This meant the absence of direct threats and dangers of physical attacks, the threat of war, the availability of means of subsistence for themselves and their families. The next set of requests on security included the expectations of building a rule-of-law state as well as achieving transparency, consistency in the government authorities' operation. The third set was about the opportunities of self-fulfillment, unimpeded decision-making and movement without restrictions or barriers.

*"For me, this is confidence in the future. Safe travels over the country. This also includes the lack of checkpoints, military people, because this is something very relevant to the situation in Mariupol. You may not leave the city without being checked by the military. For me, this would be a sign that peace has come."*  
**(female, 29 years old, a representative of a charitable foundation)**

*We do not have checkpoints, but we do have patrols. I feel a little safer when I see a military or police patrol. Maybe, it wouldn't be that bad in our town after all. Because our town is small, but it has quite a lot of dangerous areas, and so, you feel a little safer with the patrols."*  
**(female, 37 years old, librarian)**

*Firstly, it's the absence of military action. Secondly, it's the absence of borders inside the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and yet the existence*

*of a strong border between the states, that is between Ukraine and Russia.*  
**(female, 53 years old, psychologist, IDP)**

*It's safety for me. The ability to plan a month or even years ahead. Freedom of movement. Feeling in control of your own life at least at the same level as it was in 2013. For me, it is very important to return to regular work in my professional field. Because right now, I have to work on occasion, and it demoralizes me and drives me into depression. But we understand that we can open up when we feel safe, when we have a feeling that our openness will not be punished in a certain violent way, so to speak. Therefore, as for me, all these things that we have written are united by the understanding that peacebuilding begins with the identification of obstacles and factors that contribute to un-peace and create conflict. That's what this antithesis is about."*  
**(female, 46 years old, IDP)**

*For me, peace will be possible only if there is integrity of the country. We cannot guarantee the implementation of laws on the territory that is not controlled by the Ukrainian state, the Ukrainian government. We cannot guarantee anything to people there. That is, peace is not possible there unless the country is a single whole."*  
**(male, 44 years old, local expert)**

*Also, it's about the removal of stress and fears. Because I have a son growing up. I have a husband, a family, and I'm scared. I am afraid that I will have to fight, that there may be a situation that we will have to run away. That is, we are used to this stress a little, but it's still there. And the fears, they are there, too."*  
**(female, 29 years old, IDP)**

## **Interaction between government and society**

In the participants' opinion, maintaining peace requires respecting the rule of law and establishing the same rules for everyone. In addition, authorities at different levels are expected to provide information about the government's actions and consistency and transparency in decision-making which involves communities in the process. This should include the provision of information to communities and mechanisms to ensure their opinions are accounted for, as well as the cooperation of the government, community, businesses, and other stakeholders. The participants expect to have effective influence on the authorities' decision-making and the possibility

of recalling representatives if the declared decisions are not fulfilled.

The participants also expect the government to develop a strategic plan, especially an anti-crisis plan, and to work towards increasing the resilience of society in facing crisis phenomena. Political interest of the parties to negotiate is also expected. The participants think that it is equally important to develop values. This includes discussions — relating to government policies — on differences in values, the gradual establishment of common values and the popularization of peace as a value concept for society.

*“We have all seen what happens when the government does something without communicating with the residents, with the citizens. If they do it in their own way, it doesn't end very well. But if we hear each other, come to joint decisions, I believe that this will be a guarantee of a secure future for our country.*

**(female, 37 years old, local authority)**

*The expectation from the authorities is that they should dare start a dialogue and move on to specific issues. The expectation from society is showing tolerance, patience, understanding, on the one hand, and on the other hand, acting more proactively in those places where they are, with the issues in their control. As for government agencies, I simply expect from them compliance with everything that has already been prescribed: compliance with the Constitution, finalizing all reforms, compliance with all laws and monitoring that compliance. That is, carrying out their direct duties honestly and openly. And as long as our government develops a strategy with avoiding or bypassing the topic of communities and differences, unless we call these things by their names, we will not begin to establish a basis for peace.*

**(male, 44 years old, local expert)**

*I align with the point of view that came from the previous topic where we talked about things that separated us, that set us apart. It would be so cool if we could at least start to look for a point that could unite us all as a society. At least one point. For the next 5 years. If that happened, if that process started, I would just be happy, because it would mean that the government has finally realized the importance of this process.”*

**(female, 49 years old, IDP)**

## **Socio-economic stability and information**

The stability of the economic situation and development is a significant foundation for peace. In particular, the participants mentioned the need to increase incomes, create jobs, equitably distribute resources in social groups and reduce corruption, as well as develop transport links to connect isolated settlements. It was also proposed to create joint trade zones and restore sales markets for products and goods that have been destroyed by the armed conflict. Many of the participants mentioned the need for efficiency of social infrastructure, such as childcare, assistance in difficult life circumstances, the availability of social services and attention to the needs of various population groups, as the factors necessary for peace to settle.

The information space is also a component of peace, that is, the availability of information at the regional level, the independence of the media outlets, and the availability of information for people on various available information channels.

*“Economic security is important. It is important to have a job, an income level that can cover all your needs... Because now people have to survive. They do what grants are provided for. The same is true of peace. If there are grants for peace - oh! let's build peace now. On the one hand, this is not bad, because in fact this topic is still relevant, but the quality of what they do can be questionable and that activity may be done just “to check the box”.*

**(female, 46 years old, NGO)**

## **Social cohesion**

Social cohesion and social cohesion principles, elements and practices had a prominent place in the foundations of stable peace in the participants' responses. This was primarily related to joint activities at different levels of society; the very search for things that unite, for common goals and interests. They noted any methods that allowed structured interaction, involved people and target groups in community processes and encourage their desire to be involved. Specific practices were also named, such as joint projects aimed at IPDs and local residents, charity events, including joint art events (exhibitions, forums, documentaries, theater, music, etc.), sports events and environmental campaigns.

In general, the participants spoke about the joint implementation of any projects that would be important for different parties, including small practices where people with differing positions unite and cooperate to solve a practical

problem, with an emphasis on creative processes, innovations, and positive results for the community.

Finally, the development of a common identity – both belonging to a particular community and at the national level – through supporting Ukrainian content and trends for Ukrainian ways, is what symbolizes peace for the participants.

*“It is extremely important to provide space for safe and constructive contact for the participants. This is not necessarily about super comfortable things. It can be about a painful experience, or about a difficult experience, but there should be a space of trust and safety to work with that, there should be a certain framework and trust through which people can interact with that. And there is a space where we create these contacts between people and between groups and change their vision from the vision of belonging to a group to the vision of a specific person with his/her experience, interests, outlook and history. By and large, this experience of group interaction can be social, sport or art. It’s where people start doing something together and get this experience of group finding. It’s great if certain goals come out well, goals that can be set and achieved, and then building interaction around that.*

**(male, 38 years old, athlete)**

### **Dialogue, trust and dealing with conflicts**

The participants named dialogue opportunities, a desire for mutual understanding, the ability to hear and listen to others and to be heard as the key factors of peace. This included respect for different points of view and making compromises, being able to negotiate and use non-violent communication, as well as being trusting and open.

Some participants felt that this dialogue should expand the boundaries of understanding the consequences of conflicts, to demonstrate the stories of real people, provide an opportunity to consider different options for solving problem situations and to agree on major issues. In general, it should lead to community agreement and reconciliation among citizens of the united country. The participants also pointed to the respect and acceptance of the diversity of people, personal tolerance, mutual respect for cultures, respect for women, absence of disagreements and enmity, respect for their own and other person’s borders, as well as equality, and refusal to objectify people and use labels in communication and public speeches. Dialogue with the younger generation about their vision and desire to implement various projects

and assistance is equally important. Finally, it also appears necessary to disseminate stories about positive examples of resolving conflicts, disputes, and difficult situations.

Dealing with conflicts is important for stable peace. Thus, the authorities are expected to monitor and advocate for early warning of conflicts in legislative activity and the implementation of policies in order not to create new conflicts. They are also expected to create strategies for resolving conflict issues and thoughtful crisis communication, solving existing problems inside communities. Mediation in peace processes and projects aimed at peacebuilding among schoolchildren were also mentioned as methods for resolving conflicts and preventing them.

*“There has to be protection of the peacebuilders. So that nobody could “kick their asses” or stigmatize them, so that, on the contrary, they are provided with opportunities for dialogue. And another point - I do not know whether it will be clear to everyone - if we talk about different tracks of negotiations, the negotiation process, then I think the impasse is that different parties see negotiations on different tracks. My fantasy is that everything would be resolved faster on a political track.*

**(female, 50 years old, psychologist, IDP)**

*We need facilitation, we need negotiations, i.e. if we now say that everything is cool, everything is great and the Donetsk and Luhansk regions’ territory is back under the Ukrainian control - and then we continue living as we have lived so far. We can’t just build it up, and everything will still be the same as it used to be. We need to talk and find compromises. We need to forgive sometimes. Many people who live on the government-controlled area, but still on the frontline, on the line of demarcation, they have questions about the ATO personnel actions, we should not hide it. Those people are also traumatized by the actions of the military, who are also traumatized in their turn, and who also have their own pain. This is a big tangle that can’t be undone just like that: that’s it, the peace has come, and everything is fine. No, it won’t work out. There will always be those who are dissatisfied. We must try to settle down the situation.”*

**(female, 43 years old, employee of a charitable organization)**

## Education

Education as part of strengthening a stable peace was considered important by the participants, both in terms of improving the quality of formal education and as different forms of non-formal education for various groups. Important educational topics mentioned by the participants included dialogue and peace, working with conflicts, anti-discrimination, civil education, the development of critical thinking and increasing media literacy, financial literacy for the empowerment of the population, as well as human rights and mechanisms for protecting them.

*"It means education in terms of not only practical skills in various fields, but also education in basic areas - psychological ways of self-regulation, emotions - in what everyone needs every day. It would also reduce the level of conflict if people had alternative behavior styles."*

**(female, 24 years old, volunteer)**

## Rights and freedoms

Rights and freedoms were mentioned as the foundations for peace, in particular freedom of opinion, speech, religion, and in general free expression of one's opinion, freedom of movement and guarantees of property rights. As one of the values, they identified an option of choice in a broad sense, as well as the right to take part in the community's and the country's life as a whole.

*"This is freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom of expression of will, freedom of thought, and freedom of communication in order to be able to choose where one wants to live. Personally, I now feel constrained and limited in all of this. I can't make a choice, I can't even sell my apartment in Donetsk and buy one here. I don't even have that choice. Peace will bring me freedom."*

**(male, 38 years old, athlete)**

## Psychological attitudes and practices

Other factors of peace mentioned by the participants included speaking out citizens' attitudes, indifference, understanding of the responsibility for their actions and consequences

of them and the will to do better for the benefit of all citizens. Several participants also noted the importance of psychosocial support, assistance in finding people's inner resources, and other psychological practices.

*"I continue to facilitate dialogues, continue to learn, continue to participate in the Donbass Dialogue and any other projects. My additional contribution is my willingness to participate in all events where I see that this will bring peace. I just carry on. And I do not stop teaching various methods if I feel that they lead to peace. Not just in teaching and facilitating, but also broadcasting on my own (I mentioned the neighbors in my block) the desire for peace and acceptance. That is continuing to work on myself in this area."*

**(female, 50 years old, psychologist, IDP)**

*Sometimes I catch myself thinking that some time last year I started to view the war as statistical data. Personally, I understand full well in my mind that people die there, that they are someone's families, that it is wrong, that it is a terrible disaster. But unlike the first two or three years of the war when I was very emotional about it and every message was my personal emotional trauma, now I understand that I forbade myself to feel it so emotionally."*

**(female, 31 years old, NGO worker)**

*As for rehabilitation after the trauma of war, few people have the opportunity to get it or know where to go for it, and few are those who can provide it. It's a psychological trauma that should and has to be dealt with. I know many children who cannot cope with the trauma of war, and there are not enough psychologists who can help them. There are people who still are... They moved, found their place in life, but they still live with that attitude to life that you have to fight a lot, and the whole world is against you. That is, they have a whole set of security problems, both objective and internal factors that affect it."*

**(female, 49 years old, NGO worker)**

## b) The challenges and obstacles to peace

### i. What are the missed opportunities?

The respondents noted that both in the public space and in the area of their work or life, which are quite often associated with or relate to the armed conflict, there is no information about dialogue initiatives. Despite the declarations made at political levels, the reality of the participants, family members, and clients lives demonstrate the widening gap between the populations in the controlled and uncontrolled areas, as well as the complication of contact and the increase in barriers. The momentum of high-level support, hope, and trust in dialogue as a tool for settlement has been lost. Those local leaders and activists who could potentially be involved in such processes generally treat them with distrust, declaring at the same time the importance of using dialogue, but in a rather general, abstract way.

*"This is a very big problem, because we are surrounded by borders on all sides. This is very difficult, because all these borders have the same effect similar to the real state border. This is difficult on the moral plane as well... - it turns out that I am, as a person who reflects on the matter, I understand that I don't live in Ukraine for now. This is a very demoralizing factor".*

**(female, 45 year old, charity foundation worker, NCGA)**

The focus group participants already identified a wide range of groups that have been established since 2014, whose interest is to continue or freeze the situation around the conflict. The longer the conflict goes on, the more new groups, who are not interested in establishing peace, emerge and become stronger. These groups are not only direct war criminals, or participants in corruption schemes when crossing the administrative boundary between the GCA/NGCA, they include a wide range of people who have held various civilian positions, signed various agreements regarding property, and so forth.

According to the respondents, the number of people interested in maintaining the status quo is significant for the time being. At the legislation level, punitive regulations that have been established during the latest 7 years are perceived as and are still valid even after being abolished. This is happening because of the inertia of people and institutions, which, in turn, increases the anxiety and unwillingness to start rapprochement.

In addition, due to inconsistent legislative decisions, significant groups actually find

themselves in situations when they are compelled to undertake illegal acts. Significant conflicts between Ukrainian legislation and Acts adopted by the non-government-controlled areas force people to formalize documents for personal identification or establishing/changing real estate ownership. This is illegitimate and illegal in both Ukraine and in the non-government controlled areas. In order to stay in the non-government-controlled areas, they are compelled to formalize illegal documents when entering the government-controlled area. They are forced to violate the regulations, which make it impossible to contact family members, manage property or receive necessary services. The lack of settlement of these issues also transforms them into persons who become interested in maintaining the existing situation, turning them into hostages of that status. For example, when buying property in the non-government-controlled areas, this transaction is considered illegal in Ukraine. Accordingly, during reintegration, there may be a threat that the purchased property may be seized, as it was purchased illegally. In Ukraine, mechanisms are still being developed to resolve this issue. It is not clear what will happen to the already completed deals. Also, border crossing and smuggling, other emerging provision of services in the gray areas, which are not regulated by the Ukrainian government, lead to the establishment of groups that are interested in maintaining the status quo.

*"Two years ago I sold my house in Lugansk for ridiculous money. I keep thinking about the person who bought the house, who is an employee of the LPR prosecutor's office, and he is definitely not in favour of making my dream come true [conflict resolution]. Because when he bought that house, he had three passports with him, and the notary advised him which passport to use for that deed, but definitely not the Ukrainian one."*

**(female, 58 years old., psychologist)**

*"I still had to go there, I had to go via Russia because my mother had urgent surgery. No one canceled the necessity to take care of the parents, despite everything else. And I will say straight out that this is hell, hell, worth crazy money. In doing so, I break the law when I do this. But I can't help but do it. Because these are my parents."*

**(female, 41 years old, NGO worker)**

*"... a case with the hospice, when a young man having cancer was dying, he just*

*needed painkillers to relieve his condition. He was withdrawn from a good drug programme... because the doctor said: we have so few of those drugs, we don't have enough even for Kharkiv residents. His mother came over to us, and we tried to get in touch with various government agencies, but everywhere, they were saying: there is not enough for Kharkiv residents, and even less for you... She came to us and asked us to buy drugs illegally so that she would secretly bring them to her son and ..."*

**(female, 50 years old, charity foundation worker)**

*I have already said that I am an IDP, and my parents are in the non-government-controlled area. They told me that if I want to resolve the issue with my apartment, which is located there, then I need to return, get a DPR passport, and then try to solve it somehow according to their laws. On the other hand, I understand that this is a violation of the laws of the country where I live and whose citizen I am.*

**(female, 41 years old, NGO worker)**

*"It is the difficulty with the documents, i.e. it is partly difficult to update the documents or make and restore them, since it is difficult to leave. We all have doubled documents here. For many, all the documents are duplicated: passports, birth certificates, tax codes and purchase and sale transactions. They are either duplicated, or a person has a document of only one country, for example, he sold an apartment in Donetsk, this is a DPR document about a sale and purchase, a deal, inheritance, etc., and this document is illegitimate in another country, that is, when in Ukraine, this person is not considered to have sold anything and is still the owner of this apartment as it is registered in all databases. This results in the fact that people obtain new passports with purely humanitarian purposes, for practical purposes, people obtain new passports, not only DPR passports, but also Russian ones, because this gives them freedom of movement. This is a very big problem, because we are surrounded by borders on all sides. This is very difficult, because all these borders have the same effect similar to the real state border."*

**(female, 38 years old, IDP)**

According to the focus group participants, significant groups of the conflict victims (IDPs,

veterans, residents who have lost property or health and their loved ones) are not included in the process of the peacebuilding concept and vision. The same is true for the residents of the non-controlled areas, who face much higher security threats, especially in relation to contacts with the government-controlled areas (GCA). These groups are demotivated and for the most part, they do not believe nor trust the peacebuilding process, as they do not see how they can influence those processes. At the same time, they understand and declare the importance of peacebuilding processes for the settlement of the armed conflict. But this remains a request, a claim addressed to third parties, rather than a personal area of responsibility. Despite the fact that the participants of the study were mostly socially active people, they outline their area of control and influence – as they put it – only at the level of their family members, friends, clients or the village/town where they live. Peace and responsibility for peace to come are viewed by them as a political or international issue and are extremely remote, in their opinion, from the possibilities of their personal influence. This is the area of responsibility of 'large', 'distant' actors, rather than the participants of the focus groups.

In addition, the first waves of people who escaped life threats and went to the GCA faced a cascade of issues and challenges, insufficient assistance and cases of discrimination. Accordingly, they had to quickly return to NGCA. Their potential as new residents and as potential bridges between the GCA and non-government controlled areas (NGCA) populations remained untapped.

*"There are relatives who were not able to leave because something holds them up there. There are those who left, looking for a calm and reliable life in various parts of Ukraine, and yet they had to go back to the non-government controlled areas."*

**(male, 35 years old, local self-government authority worker)**

There is a significant decline of the industrially developed areas affected by the armed conflict, which has an impact on quality of life, population activity, migration and centrifugal tendencies. However, no steps or actions have been taken in the seven years of the armed conflict for the areas on the contact line in GCA and NGCA. According to the respondents, that would give the population a sense of confidence. The escalation of the winter and spring 2021 situation has only increased the feeling of hopelessness. Accordingly, the simple steps that would have been sufficient to instill confidence in people in 2014, will now require much more resources and time.

*"Right now, people are leaving them and this is not due to the fact that the village population is aging, dying because of some kind of geographical involvement, but precisely because this is a specific consequence of the war. This means that villages simply disappear from our Ukrainian geography as a consequence of the war. People are exhausted, and some of them, unfortunately, don't care where they would live, either in Ukraine or in Russia, they just want to surrender without a fight to avoid war."*

**(female, 56 years old, psychologist)**

*"The roads are broken. A general decline of the population's intellectual level can be observed. Only those families remain, which are satisfied with little. ... People survive as best they can, but there is a general decline in that development that can be noted."*

**(female, 39 years old, social worker)**

Despite the volumes of international technical assistance, the real presence of civil society and activists in the war zone who are working with victims of the armed conflict in various regions of Ukraine, remains little known for the population. They are not perceived as an actor of real political change at the regional level, and even less at the national level.

*"When I started communicating with other people who have no relation (to the NGO sphere), they do not know at all who we are. And we are generally equated with authorities, with those some other people who God knows what they do."*

**(female, 26 years old, service sector worker)**

During this time, the media began to be perceived by the respondents primarily as a source of propaganda and a means of manipulation. Unfortunately, it is quite an effective source, from the point of view of the respondents. Most of the participants who raised the topic of the media noted that the media had lost its peacebuilding potential and has a high level of mistrust among people, which would make it very difficult for the media to take hypothetical steps aimed at peacebuilding further on.

*"Cognitive dissonance occurs when a person receives different information from different sources. In practice, those persons lose understanding of whether they have a correct attitude to the situation and whether they understand correctly what is happening in the country."*

**(male, 35 years old, local self-government authority worker)**

*"The sources of information are private, and it is very difficult to understand which ones tell the truth today and which don't. Also, the reasons why they told that particular information."*

**(male, 38 years old, athlete)**

Lack of government action, lack of resources and understanding at the national and local government levels, lack of effective information and integration programs have all brought about mistrust among IDPs / NGCA residents and GCA residents. The time for building permanent contacts, non-discriminatory attitudes and behaviours has been lost now, from the point of view of the participants, and efforts should already be directed to countering prejudice and abolishing discriminatory policies.

*"I am now one of a group of people whose rights are denied, sharply reduced, very strongly, and this is supported not only by my government, but also by the citizens of the country whose passport I hold."*

**(female, 45 years old, a charity foundation worker, NCGA)**

*"Every time I hear that "we do this for IDPs", I hear that I am in a separate group. Every time I hear that "they came and we gave them something", I understand that I am in a separate group, that this does not contribute to peace at all. By the way, I hear it all the time. ... even though I have been living in a community for 7 years now, I pay taxes, I see Ukraine as my home, as a whole. But what I hear is I'm being pushed away."*

**(female, 46 years old, IDP)**

The government is no longer perceived by some respondents as a source of humanitarian and humanistic initiatives, which would be interested in establishing peace and building appropriate contacts with people.

*"Humanitarian aid and support for changes that should affect the peace process - in this regard, international organizations, in my opinion, are doing, perhaps, even more than our national ones. I don't even understand how this can happen, but this is just my opinion."*

**(male, 48 years old, IDP)**

Rapid and massive mobilization to meet the challenges of the humanitarian crisis, despite the potential and opportunities, has not been transformed into conscious actions aimed at peacebuilding. Respondents did not characterize the actions they had seen as peacebuilding actions.

This activity remains a background, secondary and unmanifested action, which is now perceived outside the control of even the proactive members of society.

## **II. What are the flaws in current approaches by international actors, what could be done better?**

The perception of international assistance and the participation of international organizations and other countries in the settlement of the armed conflict was quite polarized. Some respondents emphasized the significant role and contribution of these organizations in the stabilization and settlement of acute conflict stages. At the same time, they noted that the selected formats and models of support had quite often led to the institutionalized split between different groups; the encapsulated IDPs and the local population as well as governmental 'anti-terrorist operation' in Donbas (ATO) veterans. The unbalanced policy of donor organizations contributed to the increased chaos and created a feeling of learnt helplessness. In addition, the examples of 'indifference' actualized by the armed conflict in 2014 and the inefficiency of international organizations in preventing acute stages of conflict in the past, all encouraged people to qualify them as low-efficiency actors.

According to the respondents, it is important to make an impartial and comprehensive audit, which would provide an understanding of both the financial component of this process and would allow determination of the real impact of the implemented and existing programs. International aid should not be channeled to one-off events and actions, but should build the resilience and capacity of communities. It is important to end ineffective, ad hoc, and unfocused assistance. A system of goals and indicators should be developed that would be aimed at planning and implementing steps to simplify or improve specific situations and solve immediate problems.

*"I have a feeling that there are a lot of resources, that resources have been and are being used, but I have no feeling that these resources really affect the solution of IDPs' problems and needs. I*

*have a feeling that they affect the needs of organizations and people who work in them, including NGOs, rather than the beneficiaries. The result is very small."*

**(female, 58 years old, physician, IDP)**

*"Either these are some humanitarian projects that cover needs for three months, or these are some strange self-employment projects, it's 30,000 UAH, and please open your own business. Thank you, but that won't even be enough to pay taxes for six months. No one cares whether you still exist in the world, or you are no longer there. That's all. We have already worked with you, you have already hit the indicators, well done, and now, live with it. But some of those people have not been able to socialize. They just became a group of unsocialized people. Now, local social services simply work with them, they qualify them as families in difficult straits."*

**(female, 46 years old, international organization worker)**

Some respondents noted gender imbalance and limited assistance. They also noted that this imbalance was actually shaped as a result of international donor assistance.

*"That is, if you are not a woman with a child, then you will not be allowed to get into a social hostel. Or if you are not an elderly woman. We are now fighting gender discrimination. For some reason, when we talk about gender issues, it is always considered that a woman is vulnerable. So, I want to say that a capable and healthy man who left the occupied territory for some reason – he had the right to leave – he has no rights at all, and for some reason, no one feels sorry for him, you know, well, because he is a man. But he is in the same situation, he has also left his home. He could have lost his last money, his money could have been taken away from him, or he just did not have it, and now there is no program for him."*

**(female, 50 years old, charity foundation director)**

## c) What peace should deliver

### I. What are the hopes and aspirations for the future?

The respondents' answers to the question of what peace should bring to them personally can be divided into the following topics:

#### Freedom

The participants described different types of freedoms that would become available to them if peace is established: personal freedom of choice, freedom of speech, free will, thinking, communication, self-realization, self-expression, choice of occupation and disposal of their own property. For many IDPs, freedom of movement is important, the choice of a place to live, due to their experience of forced escape from the conflict area, regaining control over their decisions and avoiding the limitations of the forced move.

For one of the IDPs, freedom is also:

*"An opportunity to visit my home."  
(female, 45 years old, IDP)*

#### Stability, calmness, safety, security

For the overwhelming majority of participants, peace was symbolized precisely as stability and a sense of security which brings confidence in the future, for themselves, their children and their parents. This is an opportunity to plan their future for years to come. In addition, stability was expressed in the desire and ability of children to stay in the country, rather than think about emigration. Several people also noted legal protection, equality of rights and minimization of discrimination. Another area noted by the participants was social and healthcare protection, as well as a stable job or income, and safety in being outside. The respondents primarily expect security and support from the government, but some of them also expect support from other citizens and society as a whole. On the psychological plane, seven years of war have created a negative perception of changes, and stability is seen as an alternative.

As a criterion measuring that such stability has come, one of the respondents identified a state when:

*"Some problems will remain that we'll have to deal with."  
(female, 35 years old, local authority)*

That is, when peace comes, the nature of problems will change, the control over resolving them will return and the issues will become more solvable.

For some participants, this sense of confidence in the future, alongside the ability to plan and provide for it extends to their loved ones who live on the NGCA.

#### Development

For some respondents, peace will bring an opportunity for development, the release of internal energy necessary for such development. This energy, as well as the opportunity to fulfil their professional potential, is currently being taken away by the feeling of danger and the need to cope with the consequences of war. It is important here to distinguish the presence of freedom of self-fulfillment from the opportunities created or emerging for this.

#### Stable economic development

This category includes stable economic development, which is expected to provide a decent standard of living and the ability to solve housing problems, which is especially important for IDPs. The end of the war will help restore logistics and production chains and return the sales and employment markets that existed before 2014.

#### Relations between people

Expectations from peace also include expectations of harmonious and comfortable relations in society, where:

*"Relations among people will be humane, when a person thinks about themselves and the others, as well as about future generations, and they have a certain responsibility for this."  
(female, 32 years old, NGO)*

Some participants talked about such relationships being important not only for themselves, but also for their loved ones who live on the NGCA, and about the opportunity to communicate with these loved ones, which may be limited both by difficult accessibility and psychological difficulties.

#### Psychological condition

Peace, as expected by the participants, should bring relief from stress, fear and tension, in particular the fear for their loved ones who have to fight or flee. Psychologically, it is important to have trust in the authorities (both personal and society), and a sense of gratitude to the government, which ensures stability and security, and, as a consequence, pride in the state and a willingness to make effort for the good cause. It is also extremely important for IDPs to feel at home. Peace is also something that can bring new hope, which is extremely difficult during

the constant stress of war. Peace will become a tool for regaining control over one's life, the lives of loved ones, and will help restore broken ties.

### Travel

With peace comes the opportunity to travel freely, the arrival of tourists from other regions and countries as an indicator of the country's security and involvement in the international context:

*"the opportunity to travel on our own, to meet people from different regions of Ukraine, but also the absence of foreigners' fear of coming to Ukraine."*  
(female, 47 years old, NGO)

For one of the participants, peace is:

*"the embodiment of European values."*  
(female, 38 years old, social worker)

## II. Who is involved, and how, in realizing peace?

Discussions around the participants' expectations and the actors, on which the fulfillment of the participants' vision of peace depends, informed a structure of actors. It resembles concentration circles relative to the participants' ability to have impact:

- ▶ Inner circle – these are mainly the participants themselves, their relatives and immediate environment, the population of their territorial communities at the moment;
- ▶ In the access zone, but much less prone to impact – local and regional authorities;
- ▶ Distant circle, on which most of the voiced expectations depend – the national authorities, international actors, the Russian Federation, the media.

## d) Recommendations to realize peace

### I. What expectations and demands are there for any particular actors?

#### Expectations from yourself and from your close environment

Given the composition of the group that took part in the study, their expectations were quite predictable; continuing professional and activist activities in the field of charity, working with crisis groups, advocating for necessary changes at the local and national level, developing the local community and society. Another set of expectations related to the participants' state and readiness to continue their activities while facing burnout and disappointment and the connections and contacts with people who remained in NGCA or left for Russia.

*"At least, being involved, raising these issues, being ready, if a mass movement starts – to be involved rather than take a "let someone do it, and I'll just sit and wait" position. When everything is fine, I'll go out, I'll rejoice, too."*  
(female, 22 years old, volunteer worker)

*"As part of my professional activities, our organization's activities, providing psychological support, assistance, participating in civil society projects, all around me, as much as I can, taking part in positive changes."*  
(male, 35 years old, psychologist, IDP)

#### Local authority and community

Essentially, expectations from local authorities were reduced to the need to obtain relevant information about the current status and situation in the community and plans for further development, alongside initiation of and further participation in real dialogue, interaction with the local population and willingness to listen to people's opinions. As for community residents, both proactive and inactive persons, the respondents expect them to have a more responsible attitude and behaviour in relation to events inside the community and the general situation in the country.

#### National authority

Despite the fact that some of the participants work in the system of executive authorities or local self-government at the regional level and some participate in national advocacy campaigns, the specification of the bodies hardly took place. The participants mostly appealed to 'authorities' as such, rather than to specific government bodies and institutions. During the discussions, concrete mentions were extremely rare, but most often concerned the legislative or executive branches of government, rather than a specific body.

The undoubted leader in terms of the number of requests was the national executive branch. There were only a few appeals to the parliament, which boiled down to issues of the quantity and quality of legislative acts in general and the discrepancy between the adopted laws and the expectations

of respondents and the current situation. The participants also voiced a need for comprehensive and carefully designed programs for the country's development, but again without specifying what exactly should be included from their point of view.

The national executive branch is expected to fulfill a wide range of needs and requirements of the group members. In particular:

- ▶ They have to find the strength to move to a real dialogue with the population, both GCA and NGCA, about ending the armed conflict and building a real peacebuilding plan containing realistic steps to improve the living conditions of people (crossing of the administrative border, solving logistical and economic problems, problems of employment and quality of life, overcoming corruption, countering discrimination, etc.) rather than mere declarations;
- ▶ Those of the group who live in or often come to NGCA expressed a need for the effective implementation of the Minsk agreements;
- ▶ Monitoring of reforms implementation, quality assessment, control over compliance with the implemented laws and operation based on transparency and accountability;
- ▶ Not only initiating own dialogue with the population, but also giving a clear signal of the legitimacy of peacebuilding and dialogue activities, providing real security guarantees to peacebuilding activists;
- ▶ A large set of requirements was associated with the abolition of discriminatory practices in relation to residents of NGCA and IDPs, simplification of procedures for obtaining documents and crossing of the administrative border;
- ▶ Some participants spoke out the demand for demilitarization and de-escalation of the situation, especially in the armed conflict area, on the part of Ukraine and Russia;
- ▶ Building efficient targeted and timely models of communication and informing the population about the specifics of de-occupation and reintegration, explaining the situation, especially in the context of a significant escalation of conflict and crises;
- ▶ Building relevant models to not only inform and interact with the population, but also to counter propaganda and disinformation;

It is worth noting that even though some respondents are currently in NGCA, as they often have to go there, but during the discussions, the

quasi-institutions created in Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) / Luhanks People's Republic (LPR) were never mentioned. They were not considered or mentioned as institutions that have legal capacity.

*"Ukraine as a state, as a government, they have to change the attitude towards NGCA residents as citizens of their country with all the ensuing consequences. Remove the economic blockade and develop an integration road map."*

**(female, 45 years old, a charity foundation worker, NCGA)**

*"It is true that here, we have a specific psychological situation - they talk about it in public transport, in shops and in factories - they talk about it all around. They don't talk about anything else. Our situation is, it seems to me that we will explode psychologically, even if nothing happens. I mean, even if there is no serious military action, we will all explode here. There is this pressure - and no one explains anything, nor speaks out."*

**(female, 39 years old, local self-government authority worker)**

*"As for the government, I would like to see their more responsible attitude to the fate of people, so that they don't treat people like splinters that fly away when the wood is chopped. So that they realize their responsibility to the people for whom they have taken responsibility, sorry for the tautology. So that they understand what their actions entail."*

**(male, 58 years old, retired from law-enforcement bodies)**

### **International Institutions and Countries**

These actors are perceived by the respondents in a rather specific way, sometimes, according to the expression of one of the participants, in a "schizophrenic" way. Proposals were voiced for them to not interfere in the course of the situation, yet certain claims were also expressed around their insufficient action and involvement. Moreover, such thoughts were quite often voiced by the same participant, with his/her full understanding of the contradictions of their own theses.

Predominant expectations from this unspecified group of actors were reduced to the requirements of monitoring the processes taking place in Ukraine to overcome the consequences of the armed conflict and the surrounding negotiations. In addition, they are expected to provide certain models and

tools for the settlement of samples and algorithms and support, including financial aid. Additionally, the participants voiced requirements for ensuring security for people involved in peacebuilding activities at the local and national levels, as well as any peacebuilding processes.

*"Although there is a contradiction here – on the one hand, I want international organizations to defend the peace process, on the other hand, I want them not to interfere. I don't know how to find a compromise. Let them both be there."*

**(male, 35 years old, athlete)**

### **Russian Federation**

For a significant part of the respondents, the Russian Federation is defined as a direct participant or initiator of the armed conflict, an actor on whose actions the conflict escalation or termination depends. Accordingly, the respondents see the solution to the armed conflict as the termination of physical and material interference and the termination of Russian presence, rather than only declarative implementation of the Minsk agreements.

*"The first priority is the implementation of the Minsk agreements, despite the fact that they are stalled, it seems to me, it's an opportunity to bring peace closer."*

**(female, 45 years old, charity foundation worker, NCGA)**

*"The primary request is for our neighbors: don't intrude, don't interfere. My request to the Russian Federation, to Putin, is that he has to take all of his people back along with their weapons. He has to call everyone back home."*

**(female, 50 years old, psychologist, IDP)**

### **Media**

The request for journalists and the media was reduced to ending their participation in propaganda and manipulation, incitement to hatred and dehumanization, instead of informing about the events:

*"I have a request to journalists and the media: don't broadcast hate speech. If necessary, some training has to be conducted to understand where they use hate speech, where they incite war."*

**(female, 43 years old, IDP)**

## **II. What would the participants or their organization/community need to make their vision of peace successful?**

Several sets of conditions can be identified despite quite a generalized presentation of the needs and necessary conditions for successful peacebuilding voiced by the respondents.

1. Obtaining assurances of physical security and assurances that peacebuilding activities are needed, that there is a demand for them. This includes direct guarantees of security such as the ability to move freely, as well as clear signals coming from the authorities and international organizations about the legitimacy of this work combined with certain financial support.

*"There must be a dialogue, and it must somehow be protected by the government and there has to be protection of the peacebuilders. So that nobody could "kick their asses" or stigmatize them, so that, on the contrary, they are provided with opportunities for dialogue."*

**(female, 50 years old, psychologist, IDP)**

2. Cessation of hostilities and simplification of crossing procedures at the administrative boundary line between GCA and NGCA, ensuring direct contact between people.

*"So that there are no borders within the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and that there is a strong border between the states – Ukraine and Russia."*

**(female, 45 years old, charity foundation worker, NCGA)**

3. Defining a clear and understandable model for future reintegration and peacebuilding. Developing a framework and strategic goals by taking into account the opinions and expectations of the GCA and NGCA population. A model that can be amended and involves people directly in the implementation of this strategy.

*"Also, the public has to be kept informed about what is happening, what is planned at what stage, what we are striving for, what we are successful in, and what needs to be focused upon using dialogue and searching for compromises."*

**(male, 41 years old, activist, IDP)**

4. Re plicating and scaling up successful stories, good practices, and messages using the media resources, in order to re-humanize and promote peace

*"When we can simply launch the "word of mouth" wave that will be tuned to the theme of peace. Because the official media are now absolutely not tuned in to any positive peaceful tendency. We, however, as agents of influence, can launch these ideas, this movement in the areas."*

**(male, 35 years old, athlete, IDP)**

*"The message that public people and media channels broadcast, is also important. In particular, there is very little culture of good social advertising that would send out a healthy message."*

**(female, 51 years old, local administration worker)**

5. Continuing conscious and responsible work to maintain and restore contact at all levels, interaction between the GCA and NCGA populations, as a guarantee of sustainable peace in the future.

*"When I attend such events, what I feel is: why are you talking to me like that? I'm clearly a bitten-off piece, I've already rushed to Transnistria, and perhaps I'm already rushing somewhere to the Russian Federation, along with all this area, with all these people. And still you keep intruding with your opinions of how we can continue to live together. But now, owing to this consonance, to this space where I could be heard, I have felt much easier, even if not that I have got some hope."*

**(female, 45 years, a charity foundation worker, NCGA)**

## **4. Analysis**

### **a) Facilitation team's overarching observations and analysis**

The escalation significantly influenced the emotional state and belief in an accessible and close peace at the local level and demonstrated the extremely limited influence of people on the approach of peace. For the participants, peace is something very amorphous and incomprehensible, desirable, though they have complete uncertainty about the ways and means of achieving it. It was also difficult for the participants to single out specific actors among the 'authorities', due to their poor understanding of the areas of responsibility of various authorities and the levers of influence that could be used by civil society towards them. For the participants, the zone of their influence is limited to themselves and their close environment. The participants do not know or name international assistance programs in the field of peacebuilding.

There is also no common conceptual framework, holistic vision of peacebuilding, or connections between the local, regional and national levels of peacebuilding. The combination of these factors makes the existing approaches to peacebuilding in Ukraine dysfunctional.

The armed conflict in the east of Ukraine is increasingly acquiring the features of an institutionalized conflict. We witness the finalization of the format and approaches to confrontation, the establishment of appropriate government bodies and the interaction between the existing ones, the organization of life in the territories depending on the goals of the parties participating in the conflict. This reduces the dynamics and acuteness, even while maintaining the status of the conflict at varying degrees of intensity. In the meantime, the processes of institutionalization, while maintaining gaps and imbalances in the peacebuilding policy, threaten to turn into systemic barriers that are automatically reproduced by government institutions. Flexibility and ability to build inclusive approaches are diminishing.

In the meantime, despite the additional entry and exit restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a huge peacebuilding potential for interpersonal ties and contacts with NGCA, which are supported by those who travel between the areas. But this potential is not leveraged either by the government or by peacebuilding organizations and initiatives. The policy of international institutions and donor organizations only aggravates the split between NGCA and the rest of the regions. A significant imbalance in the provision of resources for GCA of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, ill-considered implementation of supporting initiatives and ignorance of the potential of local communities has led to a perception of the region as a permanent problem zone, which at the same time receives more resources and support than other regions, and as the lack of inclusion of those NGCA residents who would like to be included in peacebuilding processes.

During the focus group discussions, the facilitators noticed an imbalance between the declarative requirement of nonviolent communication and the absence of nonviolent communication in the participants' practice. Thus, emotional disputes with manipulations and harsh rejection of the other's positions arose between the participants.

In general, the key to understanding peace among the respondents is the retrospective, the expectation of the peace and stability that were there prior to the war (before 2014), rather than something new that can bring development with different results. The establishment of peace is seen more as the meeting of basic needs rather than the respect of human rights. Even if certain freedoms are important for the participants, this is about freedom for themselves, rather than the democratic development of society as a whole.

Finally, fatigue and burnout is a significant factor in the prospects for peacebuilding. During the seven years of war, the number of activists at both local and other levels and, thus, human resources for peacebuilding, have become progressively smaller. It should be understood that if there are no supportive and restorative programs for peace activists and peacebuilders, many other programs will stall or become unimplementable.

## 5. Summary and conclusion

The results of the study demonstrated a significant imbalance in the degree of influence and consideration of the interests of different social and political groups. Peace depends on the population's and local activists' activity to a much lesser extent. However, it is at this level that specific problems manifested by the war appear. Unfortunately, they often remain unseen for national and international actors developing the eventual peace architecture. Non-critical transfer of peacebuilding models developed in other contexts by international organizations does not solve the real problems of those affected by conflict, and disrupts the social fabric which ties and bonds Ukrainian society as the basis of social cohesion and resilience. ■