Los Angeles Times

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To the Judges:

Racing half a mile in the crosshairs of a sniper. Descending into the darkness of a booby-trapped basement. Holing up with fighters making a last stand in a ruined airport.

If journalism's essence is bearing witness, then Sergei L. Loiko and Carol J. Williams did so in an uncommonly powerful way in Ukraine.

In a remarkable series of stories, Loiko is so close to the action that the sense of chaos and peril is palpable.

His narratives don't just offer readers information; they offer intimacy. In his climactic story from the charred husk of the international airport, he writes of "enemies sharing the same building, playing a claustrophobic game of cat and mouse in shadowy rooms and burned-out boarding jetways."

That closeness, that communion with historic events, emerges as a theme in the work.

When snipers began killing protesters in Kiev, Loiko accompanied a father searching for his son, and finding instead a corpse: "He then picked up a blue helmet that lay at the feet of the body, its insides gummy with blood, and ran his trembling fingers along the surface until he found what he was looking for: a hole left by a 7.62-millimeter bullet, the sort used by a Dragunov sniper rifle."

He stays near as a wife spends her last moments with her dead husband in a cold garage. "She touched his battered face and stroked his cold hands, as if the warmth of her fingers might still wake him," wrote Loiko (whose own wife, then terminally ill with cancer, died only a few months later).

Or from the booby-trapped basement: "Panting, swearing, stumbling, falling and rattling with all kinds of firearms, the other fighters rushed to hide behind walls of adjacent rooms, the beams of their flashlights making herky-jerky patterns in the darkness."

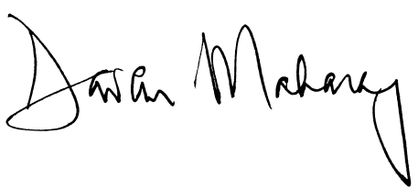
Intimacy with war comes with a cost. One Ukrainian soldier, photographed by Loiko, saved Loiko's life by alerting him to the location of land mine. The soldier was killed the day before the photo's publication.

As Loiko detailed life and death, colleague Carol Williams bore witness of a different sort. She analyzed events with expertise that reaches back decades, to her time reporting from Soviet Russia, and her stories express authority with minimal words.

From her story about ad hoc militias pouring into the Ukrainian capital: "Like all good lies, the disparaging words of Russian leaders — that the protesters who toppled Ukraine's governing order are fascists and criminals — have a grain of truth about them."

We believe this sort of reportage — the tender, and the authoritative — is in the best traditions of foreign correspondence.

Sincerely,



Los Angeles Times
UKRAINE: A NATION TORN APART
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2014

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SERGEI L. LOIKO/ LOS ANGELES TIMES

A UKRAINIAN SOLDIER patrols inside the Donetsk airport this month. A battle between government forces and separatists since May has wrecked the facility, but the two sides are still fighting over the ruins.

ENEMIES INSIDE THE GATES

Ukrainian troops are surrounded but fight on at airport

By Sergei L. Loiko
REPORTING FROM DONETSK, UKRAINE

Only three floors remain in the blackened skeleton of the seven-story, glass-walled airport terminal, opened with a burst of national pride two years ago for the Euro 2012 soccer championship.

Ukrainian commandos control two of them: the ground and second floors.

The pro-Russia separatists they're fighting have infiltrated the third floor despite entrances barricaded with debris and booby traps. The separatists have also found a way into the basement, with its system of narrow passageways leading beyond the airport grounds.

They are enemies sharing the same building, playing a claustrophobic game of cat and mouse in shadowy rooms and burned-out boarding jetways.

Just after midnight on a recent night, a separatist fighter suddenly appeared on a balcony of the third floor and shot a Mukha grenade down at the onetime departure lounge where the Ukrainian troops were trying to sleep on cold concrete floors.

The grenade hit a wall and exploded. Shrapnel and debris flew everywhere. Without thinking, a commando nicknamed Batman threw a hand grenade toward the balcony. But it exploded short of its target and sent more shrapnel showering over his comrades.

The shouting had barely subsided when

a commander announced that government Grad missiles were on the way to hit enemy positions surrounding the terminal.

"You know how they do it!" the commander shouted. "They'll certainly miss. So run for cover."

A few seconds later, the building shook from the explosion right outside, and for a moment it seemed that the structure would finally collapse. But it withstood the blast, and no one was hurt in any of the attacks.

After five months of fighting, the battle between government forces and pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine has reached what may be its last stand in this shattered commercial airport that once held families waiting for holiday flights.

It has little strategic value, but it has become a symbol of the struggle over Ukraine's future.

"Today for us the future of our country depends on whether we will be able to hold on to this airport or not," said Alexei Varitsky, 20, a former construction worker who recently joined the Ukrainian militia that's helping to defend the airport. "That is why I am here."

The name once shone in white above the gleaming new terminal: Donetsk Sergey Prokofiev International Airport, named after the 20th century composer who was born in the region.

At the opening ceremony in May 2012, then-President Viktor Yanukovich paid tribute to its modern accouterments, as if it were proof of Ukraine's growing international status.

"At the beginning of the 1930s, the constructors of this airport had no idea what a high-technology site it would grow into," he said.

Today, the pro-Russia Yanukovich is no longer president. He was ousted this year in a revolution that led to Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula and armed revolts in eastern Ukraine, also reportedly sponsored by the Kremlin.

On the airport's English-language website, a bulletin reads: "Notice for passengers: Donetsk airport has been temporarily suspended. An up-to-date information regarding the status of flights is available on the official website Online Timetable." Would-be passengers clicking on "All Flights Today" are met with a blank space.

UKRAINIAN ARMY Maj. Valery Rud exchanges fire with separatists. He said of the airport's terminals: "It is a miracle that they are still standing."

The airport's runway is littered with the carcasses of tanks and armored personnel carriers. In the new terminal, every pane of glass has shattered; every door, wall and ceiling has been pierced with bullets and shrapnel.

The separatist forces surrounding the airport shell it with mortar and artillery fire day and night; at least once a day, infantry forces move in for an attack. The defenders said that in the previous two weeks, 12 soldiers were killed and scores were wounded at the airport.

Some government forces say they're digging in to prevent Russians from using the runways to land transport planes loaded with armaments. Some say they need to defend the airport as a sign of resolve against Russian aggression.

"I volunteered to come here because if I hadn't, some soldier might not have been replaced and that would have prolonged his misery or could have even killed him," said Sergei Halan, 20, a journalism student from Cherkasy. "I just did it to save a comrade I may not know, as he will do for someone else, or even for me."

Halan's estranged father is a colonel in the Russian army. When they last spoke on the phone, Halan said, his father asked him, " 'Don't you know you will be killing your brothers?' To which I said, 'I didn't invite these brothers to come to my homeland with arms.' "

They are hunters and prey at the same time.

Because of their perseverance and ability to survive despite being surrounded, the government forces' enemies call them cyborgs.

A SOLDIER carries grenade launchers brought by a supply convoy to the airport. The delivery sparked a shootout with separatists.

Some of the terminal's defenders call themselves terminators.

"The whole scene very much reminds me of a computer shooting game, with the exception that you don't kill goblins so easily and that you don't have an extra life or two," said Varitsky, the former construction worker, a wiry man in a U.S.-style uniform and NATO-like helmet. "I'm kind of OK with what we do here, although I could never for the life of me imagine before that I can kill other people."

In April, when the army told him it didn't have time to train him, Varitsky joined the nationalist Right Sector organization. He went through a rushed training session, was issued a Kalashnikov and a week ago arrived at the airport with a ragtag group of 15 Right Sector men who are supporting an army unit consisting mostly of airborne troops who volunteered for the high-risk mission.

Every newcomer is told that the airport is not a besieged fortress — not because it is not besieged, but because it is not a fortress, "as holes in the walls account for more space than the rest of the structure," said Maj. Valery Rud, who is in charge of mining and de-mining the building.

"There is not a single place where bullets or shrapnel cannot reach you at any given time of the day. The terminals we are holding on to are weaker than the Three Little Pigs' houses, and it is a miracle that they are still standing."

The defenders are armed with an assortment of Soviet-era small arms, mostly Kalashnikov machine and submachine guns, and are dressed in all kinds of uniforms, helmets and jackets supplied by volunteers or issued by the army.

During the day, generators feed small laptops and charge telephones. At night, radios and flashlights are switched off, and it's forbidden to use even cigarette lighters lest it draw sniper fire.

At night the temperatures inside fall below zero and constant, merciless drafts chase coughing and sneezing soldiers. A paramedic sits in front of a small hill of medicines looking for the right cold drug for the suffering men.

"Well, why don't you unfasten your helmet strap?" he told the coughing young soldier in front of him. "If a sniper sends a bullet into your helmet, [the strap] will break your neck and you won't need any medicines anymore, sonny."

The soldier undid the strap.

The Ukrainian troops may lack proper training, but at times they display courageous initiative.

As troops were getting ready to unload an armored convoy bringing drinking water and ammunition — an operation that always draws intense fire from the separatists — two soldiers decided it was time to send "the tank man" home.

The tank man had died in a fierce battle a week earlier outside the terminal. Although they had retrieved the bodies of his two comrades, they hadn't been able to reach him. It bothered them that he was still there.

Risking their lives in the crossfire that ensued when the transport convoy arrived, the two young men ran out onto the tarmac and retrieved the charred remains.

"We had to do it for this tank man," said one of the men, who identified himself only as Slavik, after he had reached the relative safety of the terminal. "The guy was a hero. He deserves to be identified and buried properly."

One morning, gunfire rattled inside the terminal. Bullets whizzed by, hitting walls and the floor around the defenders. It was coming from a disabled jetway.

A moment later, it was over. A commander nicknamed Rakhman stood outside the terminal near the jetway. He looked at the smoking gun in his hand.

"I loaded a whole clip into him," he said. "Instead of falling down, he shot back at me and was gone as if he is a cyborg and not me."

"We need to do something to smoke them out of there," one soldier said.

But how?

"The best we could do is blow up what's left of the airport," another said. "Blow up the f— runway and go home."

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SERGEY DOLZHENKO/ EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

ANTIGOVERNMENT ACTIVISTS mourn protesters killed in clashes with police in Kiev, Ukraine. At least 67 demonstrators were killed, 20 by sniper fire, in the deadliest day of the 3-month-old crisis.

SNIPERS FUEL UKRAINE'S FIRE

Crackdown on protesters deepens crisis, sparks backlash

By Sergei L. Loiko
REPORTING FROM KIEV, UKRAINE

He bent over the limp body and raised a corner of the bloody white sheet that covered it.

Volodymyr Holodnyuk let out a dull moan and let the fabric drop.

He then picked up a blue helmet that lay at the feet of the body, its insides gummy with blood, and ran his trembling fingers along the surface until he found what he was looking for: a hole left by a 7.62-millimeter bullet, the sort used by a Dragunov sniper rifle.

The helmet, and the body, belonged to Holodnyuk's son, Ustym, a 19-year-old engineering student who was among at least 67 protesters killed in central Kiev early Thursday, at least 20 of them brought down by snipers. One police officer also died.

The bloodiest day in months of protests prompted a backlash among political leaders, with the parliament voting to pull police off the streets and the mayor of Kiev, who had been considered a powerful ally of President Viktor Yanukovich, announcing that he was quitting the ruling party in protest of the violence.

Holodnyuk, a retired police officer from a town in western Ukraine, had arrived in Kiev early in the morning to meet his son and take him home. Ustym had spent about three months on the barricades as an activist in the

opposition movement and needed some rest, his father said. They spoke by phone about 9 a.m. and arranged to meet at 11.

"I said to him, 'Be careful, don't stick your neck out today, because we're going home,' " said Holodnyuk, 48, who wore his old police coat, dark blue with a cheap fur collar. "He replied with a laugh, 'Not to worry, Dad! I am wearing my magic U.N. helmet and nothing's going to happen to me.' These were the last words my son ever said to me."

"The blue helmet —" He lowered his head to the helmet, almost touching the drying blood with his face, and sank into an armchair, his massive frame shaking as he tried to stifle his sobs.

A doctor knelt next to him, touching his hand, meeting his eyes. "I don't think we can allow you to take your son's body away now," she said gently, measuring her words. "If you are stopped by the police with a dead body in your car, you can be arrested."

Dr. Olga Bogomolets said none of the 20 protesters killed by snipers Thursday could have been saved.

"I am not a specialist in ballistics, but I have no doubt that whoever shot them was shooting to kill," said Bogomolets, chief doctor at the opposition's emergency medical center at the Ukraine Hotel, which had become a makeshift morgue. "Some of them died on the spot, some here, but we didn't have a solitary chance to save them."

Of the 20, eight were taken to the city morgue and 12 to the hotel. Overall, city officials said, the death toll over three days of violence was 96, including 10 police officers.

Bogomolets said all the bullets her staff extracted were identical, 7.62-millimeter. She said dozens of protesters were injured by bullets.

Most of the deaths occurred within minutes in the morning after a relative lull in the clashes, the result of a truce reached late Wednesday between Yanukovich and opposition leaders. The sniper attacks appeared to provoke protesters into a desperate charge, pushing fast-retreating police forces away from Independence Square, the center of the protest movement since it began in November.

"Some of the protesters here had their officially registered hunting rifles with them, and they started shooting back," said Nikolay Mosiyenko, a 46-year-old retired lieutenant colonel of the Ukraine Armed Forces, who joined the protest at its outset last fall.

Sergei L. Loiko/ Los Angeles Times

VOLODYMYR HOLODNYUK holds the helmet his son, Ustym, a 19-year-old student, was wearing when he was shot in the head and killed by a sniper.

The counterattack by protesters led to street fighting that looked more like medieval warfare than a modern riot. With several policemen down with shotgun wounds, commanders gave an order to retreat. Many police officers fled in police buses carrying their wounded comrades, but dozens stayed behind to face a fierce battle with protesters armed with clubs, wooden sticks, metal rods and Molotov cocktails.

As the fighting engulfed Europe Square in central Kiev, hundreds of men attacked one another with clubs, most protecting themselves with metal and wooden shields.

Soon the police were fleeing, dropping shields, clubs and even flak jackets. Some of those who stumbled, fell or were thrown to the ground were set upon by attackers who hit them with sticks, kicked them with boots and took them away.

"If that was the idea of Yanukovich's anti-terrorist operation, I must say, it failed utterly," Mosiyenko said. "He never got the backing of the army in a situation when the police can no longer cope."

Mosiyenko was referring to a government warning Wednesday that it was undertaking an "anti-terrorist operation" to end the protests, which began in response to Yanukovich's decision to turn down an alliance with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Russia. The uprising has divided Ukrainians, with many in the industrial east, closest to Russia, supporting Yanukovich. The opposi-

SERGEI SUPINSKY AFP/GETTY IMAGES

PROTESTERS PUT UP their shields during a clash with police in Kiev, Ukraine. Most police officers eventually fled the area.

tion has strong support in the European-facing west and in the capital, Kiev.

As Mosiyenko spoke, an exchange of gunfire broke the relative calm around the newly erected barricades in Institutskaya Street, which leads to the presidential administration building. Two protesters standing within a few yards of Mosiyenko collapsed to the ground, screaming and writhing in pain.

"Take cover, it's a sniper shooting!" somebody shouted. A paramedic team ran with a stretcher and evacuated the injured men. One had been shot in the stomach, the other in an arm.

In the meantime, police regrouped a mile away, around the government and parliament complexes. Authorities said at least one policeman was killed and 25 injured. In addition, the Interior Ministry said 67 of its officers were being held by the opposition.

"The state of their health and their fate remain unknown so far," the ministry said on its website. "The Interior Ministry of Ukraine reminds [the public] that law enforcement officers have the right to use all means allowed by law, including firearms, to free their colleagues."

Yanukovich met with the foreign ministers of Poland, Germany and France, which, along with the United States, have expressed increasing alarm over the situation in Ukraine. The European Union has threatened "targeted sanctions" against Ukrainian leaders responsible for the violence, and the United States banned the issue of visas to 20 unidentified Ukrainian officials.

At an urgent session late Thursday, the parliament voted to call off the operation against protesters and ordered all law enforcement officers to cease fire and return to their barracks, the UNIAN news agency reported. About 50 lawmakers with Yanukovich's ruling party switched sides to vote with the majority.

"Our mission today is to save human lives and the country," opposition leader Arseny Yatsenyuk told reporters after the session. "The parliament has made one of the most important steps."

One prominent political scientist said the vote was a significant blow to the president.

"This is the first vivid testimony that Yanukovich is a lame duck, whose loyalists are already abandoning his sinking ship," Igor Popov, president of Politika Analytical Center, a Kiev-based think tank, said in an interview. "But it is not obvious that riot police will obey

LOUISA GOULIAMAKI AFP/GETTY IMAGES

OPPOSITION ACTIVISTS carry away a wounded protester. On the other side, authorities said at least one policeman was killed and 25 were injured.

parliament's recommendations and confine themselves to their barracks."

Also Thursday, Kiev Mayor Volodymyr Makeyenko said he was quitting Yanukovich's party in protest.

"None of the oligarchs died, none of the politicians died, but I as city administrator am busy burying dozens of ordinary people," Makeyenko said in a statement on his official website. "The events taking place in the capital of Ukraine are a tragedy for all Ukrainian people. I suggest that every lawmaker, regardless of his party, become part of a live chain between Ukrainian citizens in uniform and Ukrainian citizens in civilian clothes for the sake of stopping combat activities and bloodshed!"

Vadim Karasyov, director of the Institute of Global Strategies, a Kiev-based think tank, said the day's events had backfired on Yanukovich. "Whatever he does now, he is doomed as a politician and as a statesman," he said.

Holodnyuk, the father of slain Ustym, blamed Yanukovich personally.

"I don't know if Yanukovich should kneel in front of me, but I am confident that this man should certainly sit in front of an international tribunal for what he has done to my country and what he has done to my son."

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Special correspondent Victoria Butenko contributed to this report.

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UKRAINE: A NATION TORN APART
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SERGEI L. LOIKO/ LOS ANGELES TIMES

YELENA RYBAK is comforted by her daughter at the funeral of her husband, Volodymyr, in Horlivka.

UKRAINE OFFICIAL MOURNED AS HERO

The beaten, stabbed body of a councilman was found days after he stood up against a pro-Russia mob

By Sergei L. Loiko
REPORTING FROM HORLIVKA, UKRAINE

Yelena Rybak sat quietly next to her husband for an hour under their carport, alone and for the last time. She touched his battered face and stroked his cold hands, as if the warmth of her fingers might still wake him.

Then it was time for the young, bearded priest, who arrived with several dozen relatives, friends and sympathizers. They escorted Yelena and 42-year-old Volodymyr from the gray-brick house through a wooden fence and onto a narrow street of buckling pavement. Cherry trees were blossoming pink and white, and lilacs just beginning to bloom.

The half-mile procession led to a caravan of buses and cars taking Volodymyr Rybak to a cemetery that would be his final resting place, near a rusting elevated pipeline that disappeared far into the distance.

When Rybak was laid in his grave, the crowd chanted, “Glory to the hero!”

Rybak was a city council member loyal to the Kiev government in an area beset by pro-Russia separatism. His body was found Monday miles from Horlivka. His wife said he had numerous bruises, stab wounds, a broken jaw and missing teeth. His belly had been slit with a knife.

He disappeared April 17 after facing down a furious pro-Russia crowd that had stormed the mayor’s office and raised the Russian flag. Rybak, a tough former cop, climbed onto the roof, tore it down and threw it into the crowd. In its place, he hoisted Ukraine’s blue-and-yellow national banner.

Ukrainian officials said Thursday that they had audio recordings and a transcript of intercepted telephone conversations that implicated at least one local separatist leader and Russian intelligence operatives in Rybak's death.

Elsewhere, the conflict was continuing. Ukrainian forces and the separatists clashed in at least three places Thursday, and Ukrainian officials said five separatists were killed.

Russian President Vladimir Putin condemned the Ukrainian government's military action in televised comments.

"If the Kiev government is using the army against its own people, this is clearly a grave crime," he said. "Of course, this will have consequences for the people who take such decisions, and this also affects our interstate relations."

Russia's defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, called new military exercises along the Ukrainian border. Ukrainian officials demanded an explanation and urged the West to impose tough new sanctions on Russia for sponsoring the separatists.

Secretary of State John F. Kerry denounced Russia for failing to live up to an agreement reached in Geneva a week ago to calm tension.

Russia has chosen "an illegal course of armed violence to try to achieve with the barrel of a gun and the force of a mob what could not be achieved in any other way," he said. "This is a full-throated effort to actively sabotage the democratic process.

"If Russia continues in this direction, it will not just be a grave mistake, it will be an expensive mistake," he said.

Rybak's friends and family were equally blunt, and angry, about what happened.

"It was a political murder," said Yelena, 49, a gynecologist. "They wanted to demonstrate what awaits anyone who is not scared to fight against separatism and for united Ukraine."

"These separatists are shouting all the time about nationalists and fascists in [Ukraine's] west," said his sister, Olga Lezhnina. "But the real fascists are not in the west; they are here! Who else could have done that to him?"

Andriy Grishchenko, Horlivka's police chief, towered a head above the rest of the mourners. His broad face was bruised, and two ugly wounds had been stitched closed.

Grishchenko came to his former colleague's funeral directly from a hospital bed where he had been recuperating from a concussion suffered at the hands of a pro-Russia mob that captured the police station April 14.

Kirill Kudryavtsev AFP/Getty Images

A UKRAINIAN SOLDIER checks an abandoned roadblock in Slovyansk. Ukrainian forces and separatists clashed at two checkpoints in the city.

Grishchenko said he had removed all firearms from the station a day earlier. His officers were still controlling most of the town except the police station and the city administration building. And they were investigating Rybak's death.

"We will find the scum," he said. "And we will find a way to free the buildings in town from young hoodlums who seized and are holding them for money paid by their separatist leadership."

Ukraine's Security Service said the intercepted telephone conversations included two Russian military intelligence officers it identified as Igor Strelkov and Igor Bezler, as well as Vyacheslav Ponomaryov, the self-proclaimed mayor of Slovyansk, a separatist stronghold about 50 miles from Horlivka.

In one recording, a man identified as Bezler is giving a command about Rybak to an agent called Alf: "Rough him up, put him in your car and take him away somewhere. Then when you come to a stop, tell me where I can catch up with you."

In another conversation, an agent identified as Strelkov gives instructions to a man identified as Ponomaryov about disposing of Rybak's body: "Listen, Slava. You resolve the issue with the stiff so it can be dragged away from us as soon as possible."

"I am now going to quickly deal with burying this rooster," he replies.

Rybak's body and that of an unidentified man were found on a riverbank near Slovyansk, Yelena said.

ANATOLII STEPANOV AFP/GETTY IMAGES

THE COFFIN of Volodymyr Rybak is carried through Horlivka during his funeral. Officials said they have evidence tying Rybak's death to the Russian military.

Ukrainian officials said Strelkov and Bezler had led armed attacks on government buildings in Slovyansk and were still at large.

The country's acting president, Oleksandr Turchynov, said in a statement that Ukrainian forces were continuing an anti-terrorism operation in eastern Ukraine.

"At the same time," he charged, "the Russian Federation is coordinating and openly supporting terrorist murderers, acting with arms in their hands in the east of our country."

Security forces recaptured the mayor's office in Mariupol on Thursday without casualties and repelled an attack on a military unit in the town of Artemivsk, acting Interior Minister Arsen Avakov said.

The Interior Ministry also reported that Ukrainian forces attacked two separatist checkpoints Thursday morning on the outskirts of Slovyansk and that five separatists were killed. The separatists, however, regained one smoldering checkpoint after soldiers retreated, and later they were rebuilding the barricades.

Schools and hospitals were closed in Slovyansk, and few people were on the street. Armed separatists told residents through loudspeakers to stay inside because an attack was imminent.

Masked gunmen moved in small groups or sat in ambush with firearms at the ready. No attack came.

Ponomaryov, the self-proclaimed mayor, said only one man was killed and one wounded in the fighting at the checkpoints. "We have plenty of firearms and can hold off such attacks indefinitely," he said by telephone. He denied any involvement with Rybak's death.

An American journalist, Simon Ostrovsky of Vice News, who was being held by separatists in Slovyansk, was freed Thursday. It was unclear whether separatists released any of the nine other people they said they were holding.

"I can't believe this is really happening in my hometown," said Dmitry Kozhikhin, 35, a truck driver. "At first many of our townsfolk welcomed the self-defense gunmen as liberators, but now they are all scared and would rather see them go away."

Volodymyr Derkach, 62, a former miner in Horlivka, also mourned what had happened to his town as he tossed a handful of dirt on Rybak's casket.

"I have never asked myself what nationality Volodya was, Russian or Ukrainian, because it doesn't make a difference here," he said.

"It is not about Russians against Ukrainians. It is not about Russia against Ukraine. It is about good guys like him and us against bad guys. And Putin is unfortunately on the side of the bad guys down here."

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LOUISA GOULIAMAKI AFP/GETTY IMAGES

IN UKRAINE'S capital, members of a "self-defense" unit guard a barricade this month at the main square.

REVOLUTIONARIES AND REJECTS

Despite its squalor, Kiev's Independence Square is a place of reverence

By Carol J. Williams
REPORTING FROM KIEV, UKRAINE

Jackbooted young men in World War I helmets patrol the muddy sidewalk in front of the parliament building, their chapped hands wrapped around clubs and ax handles, their black-and-crimson armbands telling of allegiances to the far right.

Camouflage-clad men armed with hunting rifles control traffic a few hundred yards away, their faces hidden by black balaclavas no longer needed for warmth in the early spring thaw. The self-appointed sentries eye drivers and pedestrians funneling into a single-lane gap in the walls of bricks, firewood and sandbags that barricade Ukraine's once-elegant capital city.

At Independence Square, the baroque, monument-filled plaza known here as Maidan, the jobless and aimless have taken the place of the victorious political activists who have gone on to parliament or gone home. The stragglers sit hunched around barrel fires, dull eyes peering out from soot-stained faces, rolled-up sleeves baring the tattooed insignia of ex-cons and forgotten military veterans.

The women in floral kerchiefs who tended bubbling pots of borscht or boiling vareniki to feed those demanding a better future have mostly drifted away, leaving the holdouts to shake down workers at the handful of coffee shops and bakeries in business for "donations." Stray dogs forage for scraps among

the piles of garbage around camps clustered beneath signs heralding the origins of their inhabitants: Kharkiv, Ternopol, Yalta.

Banks of portable toilets flank the grubby tent clusters, their doors torn off for makeshift shields during the deadly heat of the confrontation last month, their users in plain sight of those who now mill about the revolutionary detritus.

Yulia "Ruda" pulls the flame-red hair for which she acquired her nickname — Red — into a stretchy yellow headband identifying her as a volunteer with the Self-Defense Forces of Ukraine.

"By staying here, we are showing the true image of the self-defense forces," says the 28-year-old art director, who asked that her last name not be used for security reasons. She works for a local disco, among the businesses not yet back on their feet after the months of chaos. "We are guarding against new provocations, but we are also making repairs to property damaged during the protests and bringing back public order. But it takes time."

As she spoke, her posture erect and her hands clasped behind her back in the style of a soldier at ease, a battered truck pulled up to a smashed newspaper kiosk with panels of glass, a moment of normality in this flower-festooned colony of drifters and debris.

Like all good lies, the disparaging words of Russian leaders — that the protesters who toppled Ukraine's governing order are fascists and criminals — have a grain of truth about them.

Maidan in the waning days of 2013 was filled with students, doctors, clerks and factory workers angered by President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to abandon Ukraine's path toward association with the European Union. But the protesters, confronted by waves of brutality, were eventually joined by crudely armed forces less interested in democracy than revenge.

Much like the Occupy movements that began on Wall Street in 2011, the Maidan protest became a magnet for the discontented of every ilk: nationalists, anti-communists, radical environmentalists, soccer hooligans and anarchists. Ad hoc militias took to the streets in paramilitary gear, lobbing firebombs at government strongholds and beating back at the Berkut riot police who attacked them.

Dimitar Dilkoff AFP/Getty Images

MEMBERS of a "self-defense" unit follow the coffin of a fellow activist who was killed this month near Kiev's Independence Square, where hundreds of the self-appointed enforcers remain on guard.

Today, Yanukovich is gone, but hundreds of the self-appointed enforcers remain on guard.

At the Dnipro Hotel on the western fringe of Maidan, two masked toughs with foot-long hunting knives block the entrance to the adjacent London Pub, through which the few paying guests must enter and have their belongings ransacked. At the sole opening in a wall of debris separating the hotel from Khreshchatyk Street, a masked man advertising his views with the "Right Sector" armband vets prospective entrants, a shiny new seven-iron at the ready. Inside, in the dimly lighted corridor leading to the reception area, a camouflage-clad defender sits in the shoeshine chair, a high-powered rifle resting on his knees.

But for all its menace and squalor, Maidan remains a place of reverence.

Mounds of carnations laid out in orderly rows beneath photocopied pictures of the fallen heroes of the revolt stand 3 feet high in places. The wilting cut-flower berms flank the brick and sandbag barricades, splashing the landscape of ruin with incongruous color. Candles in tinted glass jars and faux gilded screw-tops flicker, left by survivors and revolution tourists paying their respects to those forever silenced.

Nikolai Semenyanka, gripping a metal crutch like a staff in his huge right fist and a hand-rolled cigarette in his left, is holding court outside a tent with other veterans of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, a war

Bulent Kilic AFP/Getty Images

AT THE ENTRANCE to Independence Square in Kiev, Ukraine, activists keep watch from atop a barricade early this month.

fought for a previous Kremlin's expansionist aims.

"We didn't fight for this country to lose it to another," he says of the battle against Yanukovich and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine that now threatens Kiev's hold on the strategic Crimean peninsula.

Semenyanka looks a generation older than his 46 years. He fears a shooting war could erupt in Crimea, not because of any real enmity between Russians and Ukrainians but from the manipulated sentiments of "maybe 60 or 70 hotheads and adventurists" riled up by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Of course we are afraid of war!" Semenyanka bellows. "Putin has turned these two fraternal peoples against each other until they are on the verge of firing their guns."

Russia's moves on Crimea, where its Black Sea fleet is based on territory leased from Ukraine, has diverted the international spotlight from Maidan. And the shift of battle lines from Kiev to Simferopol, Crimea's regional capital, has raised further questions about why and whether the revolutionary stragglers at Maidan are serving any useful purpose. Semenyanka insists he and his comrades are ready to defend Ukrainian territory against Russian aggression, despite injuries some suffered during the long battle in Kiev.

Dmytro Yarosh, head of the Right Sector militia-slash-political party that has given the Kremlin its most powerful ammunition in discrediting the Maidan protest, points to the situation in Crimea as justification for keeping his far-right foot soldiers on patrol.

"Ukraine is practically in a state of war with the Russian Federation, and it was not us who started this war," he says. Defending the gains of the revolution and the territory of Ukraine "is the constitutional duty, not only of the armed forces, but of every citizen of Ukraine," Yarosh says.

Others who come to the square argue that the guardians of the revolution must stay in place until Ukraine's May 25 presidential election, to keep the interim authorities honest and responsive to the demands of those whose defiance and bloodshed put them in power.

"I think we have to keep it," Viktor Shur, a 45-year-old film director, says of the mess that is Maidan. "It's not just a memorial to those who died.... We need Maidan to keep our voices in the new government's ear."

On Institutskaya Ulitsa, uphill a few hundred yards from the grubby tents and blar-

ing sound stage, Irina Denisova fiddles with a plastic lighter, trying to put flame to the wick of a memorial candle. An oncologist with a busy schedule of appointments each workday, she didn't have a chance to pay her respects to the victims until more than two weeks after the protest drove out Yanukovich.

She surveys the discordant canvas of makeshift memorials, bustling history tourists and languid figures slouched on muddy sandbags fashioned into chairs.

"We should preserve the memorials, to honor those who died," the doctor says.

"But the rest of this should return to normal," she says, with a wary glance at an encampment that resembled a Dickensian den of thieves. "The sooner our city gets back to normal, the sooner we will heal."

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Williams was recently on assignment in Kiev. Times staff writer Henry Chu contributed to this report.

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UKRAINE: A NATION TORN APART
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SERGEI L. LOIKO/ LOS ANGELES TIMES

A GUARDSMAN kicks in a door during a raid in Slovyansk. Ukraine's national guard makes up the bulk of the government forces that implement law and order in the eastern region.

FROM FOES TO BROTHERS IN ARMS

Ukrainian police and protesters unite against separatists

By Sergei L. Loiko
REPORTING FROM SLOVYANSK, UKRAINE

"Run for cover, everybody; get the hell out of here, on the double!" the leader of the commando unit shouted over his shoulder to the men behind him, his voice echoing eerily in the pitch-black basement. "It is a booby-trap. Watch your step for more wires as you go!"

Panting, swearing, stumbling, falling and rattling with all kinds of firearms, the other fighters rushed to hide behind walls of adjacent rooms, the beams of their flashlights making herky-jerky patterns in the darkness.

As the squad's explosives expert carefully cut the tiny strings connecting the booby trap inside a Russian army ammo box, Vadim Lisnichuk, the leader of the Ukrainian Interior Ministry unit, gently lifted the lid to find a neatly packed hand grenade.

"One more gift from our big brother up north," he joked, sweating profusely as the device planted by pro-Russia separatists was being disarmed.

Lisnichuk hasn't always been a respected combat leader. A few months ago, the 36-year-old had an advertising career in the city of Chernivtsi in western Ukraine. Then he joined the protests in Kiev's Independence

Square, popularly called Maidan, that brought down the government of President Viktor Yanukovich.

"Maidan was a kind of a spiritual festival held on another planet," Lisnichuk said. "It helped us tear up our puppet strings and feel the taste of real freedom for the first time."

Armed with sticks, Molotov cocktails and homemade shields, he and thousands of other protesters fought riot police equipped with truncheons, stun grenades and high-caliber rifles in the bloody battlefield that was Maidan.

Now Lisnichuk has joined forces with the same riot police who once opposed him, becoming unlikely comrades in arms against a common enemy: the separatists who until recently made this eastern town their stronghold in their bid to break away from Ukraine and join Russia.

"Little did I know back then that it would end like this," Lisnichuk said. "But now my weapon is not a stick but a sniper's rifle and my brothers in arms are not just a motley crew of freedom lovers. We are soldiers now and we will defend our land."

For three months, Lisnichuk and his men in the special forces unit had been trying to dislodge the separatists, who had set up positions in apartments and backyards across Slovyansk, he said. During that time, 258 Ukrainian servicemen were killed, officials said Tuesday.

Finally, more than 1,000 insurgents and Russian mercenaries retreated from the city this month, leaving most of their military hardware behind as Ukrainian national guard forces closed in, Lisnichuk said as he and his men were having a smoke outside amid piles of crushed glass and other debris left by the militants' hasty exit.

Most of the city's residents initially supported the separatists, hoping that Russia might annex eastern Ukraine as it did the Crimean peninsula in March. As Lisnichuk and his team did mopping-up operations, the Russian television First Channel news program carried a gory account by an "eyewitness" about Ukrainian troops crucifying a 3-year-old boy in front of his mother in Slovyansk's central square.

"At first we were afraid to come out and meet our army boys when they came because the Russian television and the [pro-Russia] gunmen down here had warned us that security forces from Kiev would slaughter all the civilian population in town once they came," said one middle-aged woman, who refused to give her name for fear of being targeted by the separatists.

A COMMANDO unit returns to base in Slovyansk. The Ukrainian fighters have a common enemy: the separatists who hope to push this region into joining Russia.

The Ukrainian forces also had to overcome distrust from within.

As heavy fighting was rolling away from Slovyansk and a national guard battalion was preparing to move toward the separatist-held regional capital, Donetsk, one of the soldiers sat on top of a small hill overlooking a golden landscape of endless fields of sunflowers surrounding the base.

Ivan Datsko, 30, a small-time trader from the western city of Lviv who had fought in Maidan, recalled the carnage at the hands of riot police snipers on March 20 in the square that left about 100 protesters dead. Several police officers were also killed that day, the worst violence of Yanukovich's rule.

"I will never forget how I crawled up along Institutskaya Street pulling the lifeless body of my friend shot by a sniper bullet," Datsko said. "It was not a battle, as we didn't have weapons; it was an execution as bullets came from the ranks of the riot police up the road."

Soon after Yanukovich fled for Russia at the end of February, pro-Russia armed groups began to seize cities and towns here in the eastern Donbass area, a confrontation that soon unfolded into a real war in the region.

Now Datsko is a member of the national guard, which makes up the bulk of the Ukrainian government forces enforcing law

SERVICEMEN with the national guard take a break at their base near Slovyansk, Ukraine. The unit includes riot police who broke up Independence Square rallies and some of the protesters who attended those rallies.

and order in eastern Ukraine.

"At first we were very suspicious of the riot policemen in our forces, as they seemed to be resentful toward us," Datsko said.

But his baptism by fire against the pro-Russia insurgents changed all that.

One day back in May during heavy fighting, Datsko crawled once again across a battlefield to help another injured fellow fighter — this time a former riot policeman — as another one of his former Kiev opponents emptied his gun in cover fire for Datsko, he recalled.

"A few days later, our helicopter was shot down near Slovyansk, killing our general and several former riot policemen who were on board with him," Datsko said. "That night we — former Maidan fighters and former policemen — sat together, drank some vodka to the memory of fallen comrades, embraced and swore to each other that we will avenge their deaths.

"And all the previous scores and animosity forever became a thing of the past between us."

Not everybody is euphoric about the newly formed brotherhood in arms of eastern Ukraine.

"It took me years to get military training, and these guys became soldiers overnight," said national guard Senior Lt. Pavel Fesenko, a former riot police officer.

"We were protecting law and order in Independence Square, and these guys were violating it, throwing Molotov cocktails at us, injuring and killing my comrades," he said. "I will never trust them not to do some outrageous things again sometime and expose us, the professional soldiers, to unnecessary risks."

But another member of the riot police expressed admiration for the new soldiers.

"These Maidan guys may be unruly and over-emotional sometimes, but when it comes to business they have no fear. They are born soldiers," national guard company commander Senior Lt. Serhiy Kovalenko said. "They are not yet properly trained and they need more experience. But if we can teach them a few tricks of the trade they can teach many of us a few things about patriotism.

"I know that I am OK if a former Maidan guy is watching my back in battle, and that is the main thing," he said. "We are in one boat now."

As Kovalenko spoke, his national guard base near Slovyansk was swarming with ac-

tivity as the soldiers were preparing to pull out. Soldiers and officers, most of them shirtless, were reassembling and cleaning their firearms, brushing their boots, shaving their faces and heads.

A passing senior officer heard the men roaring with laughter over one soldier's off-color joke.

"Good to hear the troops in high spirits," he said as he made his way through the grounds. "Now I know we are in shape for more fighting!"

The day before, Interior Minister Arsen Avakov visited the national guard base. He praised the valor of its soldiers, awarded a few of them medals and brought 400 new NATO helmets and ballistic vests with him in a bus. He said thousands more helmets and vests would be coming.

As Avakov was making his speech, former Maidan fighters and former riot policemen stood shoulder to shoulder in the parade grounds.

"The real goals and real values they face now change their vision of the world imposed by the former regime," Avakov said after the ceremony. "What separated them back then was the values of a revolution and the sense of duty; what unites them now is Ukraine's independence."

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For the record

Ukraine conflict: An article in the July 16 Section A about unlikely allies in the conflict in Ukraine said that the worst day of violence in the anti-government protests was March 20. It was Feb. 20.

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UKRAINE: A NATION TORN APART
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SERGEI L. LOIKO/ LOS ANGELES TIMES

UKRAINIAN SOLDIERS put tape on their sleeves to identify them as comrades during battle. Defense funding has fallen sharply since Ukraine's independence.

DEFENDING THEIR NATION WITH AN ARMY TIME FORGOT

By Sergei L. Loiko and Carol J. Williams
REPORTING FROM DONETSK, UKRAINE

Militia commander Yuri Bereza and his 150 Ukrainian irregulars were closing in on pro-Moscow separatists in their last stronghold in this eastern city when Russian troops and armor thundered in out of nowhere to cut them off in the suburb of Ilovaisk.

No satellite or drone surveillance detected the sudden movement of the Russian columns. No word of the impending attack had been radioed from the border guard base the invaders had to have passed. Neither did any of the allied soldiers who were supposed to be bringing up the rear inform Bereza's fighters that they had been cut off. In fact, the 700-strong contingent of government recruits had deserted en masse.

The unit's calls to Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, to say it was surrounded brought promises of a reinforcements, food and ammunition, none of which came to the rescue of the men, who survived on grass and rainwater as they braved five days of incessant sniper fire, "like game at a hunting range," Bereza said bitterly of the battle two months ago.

It was at Ilovaisk, where 107 irregulars died and at least 700 recruits and volunteers were taken captive, that the Ukrainian military's post-independence disintegration was most

painfully on display.

A standing army of 1 million inherited by Ukraine after the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union has dwindled to barely 100,000. Analysts say even that figure is inflated. When Russia-backed separatists began grabbing territory in March, then-Defense Minister Ihor Tenyukh told the parliament that Ukraine had no more than 6,000 combat-ready troops to repel the aggression.

The Ukraine contingent of the once-fearsome Soviet Red Army rotted from the top after independence, when senior posts became cushy rewards for political supporters of the ruling party. Since the overthrow of Kremlin-allied President Viktor Yanukovich in February, the military leadership has been a revolving door. The fourth defense minister in eight months, Stepan Poltorak, was appointed by President Petro Poroshenko this week and confirmed Tuesday.

Defense funding has declined to a fraction of its Soviet-era support. Ukraine last year allocated $1.9 billion for the armed forces, Defense Ministry figures show, only 10% of it earmarked for modernizing training and weapons. Russia, by contrast, spent $4.47 billion and has a standing force and conscription-age population three times larger than Ukraine's, the CIA World Factbook estimates.

Ukraine's last significant military exercises took place nine years ago, said Ihor Smeshko, former security services chief and now head of Poroshenko's intelligence committee.

Not a single new combat aircraft has been commissioned since independence, and the country's air power has shrunk to about three dozen fighter jets and a diminishing fleet of antiquated helicopters from the 1,500 acquired with the Soviet breakup, said Yuri Biryukov, a presidential aide in charge of fund-raising for militias.

But perhaps the most serious blunder, analysts say, was the failure of successive Ukrainian leaders to see their Russian neighbors as a potential threat.

"As the army shrank rapidly over the years, everybody thought it was such a good thing," Biryukov recalled. "They thought, 'Who could threaten us if our friends and allies are Russia, the United States and Europe?' "

Some of the erosion of defenses has been by design. Ukraine's share of the Soviet nuclear stockpile, nearly 1,300 intercontinental ballistic missiles, was handed over to Russia for dismantling in 1994 when Kiev signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. In exchange, Russia, the United States and Britain pledged to respect Ukraine's borders.

MILITIA FIGHTERS train in between battles in eastern Ukraine. The regular army's deterioration has given rise to an array of volunteer units.

TROOPS PREPARE ammunition at their base in Dnipropetrovsk. Ukraine's standing army has gone from 1 million in 1991 to barely 100,000 today.

Russian President Vladimir Putin violated that agreement when he launched his campaign of territorial plunder in February by first seizing Ukraine's Crimea region. But more than two decades of corruption, misguided strategy and squandered resources had left Ukraine woefully unable to respond when Russian brothers turned hostile.

"We should have fought this war from Day 1 in Crimea," said Maxim Dubovsky, deputy commander of the Dnipro-1 regiment humiliated in Ilovaisk. Russia's seizure of the peninsula, home to its Black Sea fleet, robbed Ukraine of its own naval bases.

Ukraine's abysmal economy has led to deep

DNIPROPETROVSK RESIDENTS search through lists of missing and captured fighters in the town center. Analysts say that Ukraine's biggest mistake was its failure to see Russia as a potential threat.

cuts in weapons production, which was the lifeblood of the eastern regions, feeding the unemployment and discontent there that led to the current conflict. What is still produced is usually sold to other countries, including Russia.

Even if Kiev's Western allies were to provide more sophisticated weaponry to Ukraine, which isn't a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and thus not entitled to the bloc's protection, the armaments couldn't be integrated into Ukraine's obsolete, Soviet-designed arsenals and fleets without massive and costly retrofitting, said Vladimir Grek, a former Defense Ministry weapons designer.

Ukraine needs to invest at least $5 billion a year to upgrade its defenses, Grek said. "We need to put our military industrial complex in war mode, with 24-hour-a-day production so that we can get new weapons to the army as soon as possible."

The regular army's deterioration has given rise to an array of volunteer units. Some, like Bereza's regiment, coordinate with commanders in Kiev, gaining access to the army's tanks and artillery. Others, like the rogue nationalist Right Sector militia, are fighting for their own agenda, often with brutality that gives credence to Moscow's claims that Ukraine is awash with "neo-fascists."

Underarmed and underfed, Ukrainian troops have fled some battles before shots were fired, as in the Sector D retreat at Ilovaisk. Another army unit camped near the remote border with Russia along the Sea of Azov fled in late August when two armored columns burst through a checkpoint and overran the town of Novoazovsk.

"We don't have hot food. We eat dry rations, and when they run out we start looking for something in the fields," said Ondriy, a 21-year-old soldier on leave in Kiev who didn't want to give his last name for fear of retribution for complaining. He said his commander had advised him not to come back, that there was "no point in dying for a country that doesn't care for you."

Ukrainians far from the war zones acknowledge that the conflict doesn't seem real to them. In Kiev, there is little evidence of a war an hour's flight east. Political ads for the Oct. 26 parliamentary elections dominate billboards and television talk shows, and few without family members at the front seem willing to let the war intrude on their worries.

"Our best and bravest young men die every day in eastern Ukraine and I am already wondering whether they should really stay there and fight," said Anzhella Polovinko, 43, a Kiev clothing designer.

Though the sorry state of the military is dispiriting for many, Ukrainian officials say they have the advantage of soldiers and volunteers more committed than their adversaries to a fight for the country's very existence.

Hundreds of Russian soldiers have been killed in Ukraine on missions the Kremlin denies any role in, and their returning coffins have been "an icy shower for their mothers and many of those who used to support Putin's policy toward Ukraine," said Andriy Parubiy, former secretary of the National Security and Defense Council and now head of a Kiev agency coordinating support for volunteer militias.

Putin was able to score successes against troops loyal to the Kiev government when he had 40,000 Russian soldiers on Ukraine's border, Parubiy said. "The deeper Putin pushes into Ukraine, the harder it will be for him to count on his supremacy in arms, technology and manpower, while the Ukrainian people will all rise like one to defend their motherland."

But the brave and patriotic are finite in number. Fighters like Volodymyr Tugai, a 38-year-old former paratrooper who battled alongside Bereza at Ilovaisk, said he feels betrayed but he doesn't know by whom.

Tugai, who was bleeding from a shrapnel wound to his neck during the mid-August battle, later recalled a young soldier with one of his legs blown off reaching for him in the bed of a pickup truck serving as a first-aid station.

"He was screaming, 'Mama! Mama! Mama! Help please! Take me home!' " said Tugai, still emotionally numbed by the desperate soldier's cries. "I wished I could be his mother there and then. But he was gone in a minute."

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UKRAINE'S MILITARY INDUSTRY DILEMMA

By Carol J. Williams
REPORTING FROM KHARKIV, UKRAINE

Ukrainian factories for decades have been a key supplier to the Kremlin's war machine, providing jet engines, uranium fuel and electronics for Russia's nuclear arsenal.

That interdependence, created when both were partners in the Soviet Union's Cold War-era arms race, now confronts an independent Ukraine with a strategic conundrum: How to keep legions of local defense industry workers employed when their output can end up in the hands of separatists waging war — often with weapons supplied by Russia — against the government in Kiev.

More than 70% of Ukraine's military exports have gone to Russia in each of the last few years, according to one recent analysis, and it is almost certain that Ukraine is now on the receiving end of some of the deadly materiel.

Tanks and armored vehicles have rolled out by the hundreds each year from the Malyshev factory in suburban Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city. Gun sights and optics from the Dzerzhinsky machine-building plant have given Russian soldiers a better eye on potential enemies.

The Kremlin's postwar military-industrial complex has been so inextricably bundled over the years with components from factories in Ukraine's rust belt region here that defense forces from the two nations have remained entwined throughout the 23 years since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

All of that has suddenly changed in recent months, as Russian troops have rolled into eastern Ukraine, annexing the Crimean peninsula and supporting Russian-speaking separatists in their bid for control over the rest of the region, a conflict that so far has left more than 4,300 people dead.

Suddenly, towns in the Kharkiv region, known around the world for its factories producing armored vehicles and tanks, are face to face with the irony of being threatened with armaments of their own making thundering across the Russian border. Half the region's industrial output was sold to Russia before the outbreak of fighting in April.

"We are at war, and we can't provide the Russian army with technology that can be used against us," said Igor Rainin, Kharkiv's first deputy governor.

In March, soon after Russian President Vladimir Putin annexed Crimea, the Ukrainian agency that controls arms production, UkrOboronProm, announced a freeze on military exports to Moscow.

Already, it has halted deliveries from the Malyshev tank factory and the Dzerzhinsky machine-building plant in Kharkiv, local officials said. Rainin said local trade with Russia was down by about 40% this year. Ukrainian officials estimate that the cutoff of defense contracts with Moscow could mean the loss of at least $1.5 billion a year, slashing government revenue at a time when the nation's economy is already on its knees.

With the unemployment rate in eastern Ukraine about 13% and rising, and with many in the region having long-standing cultural and economic ties to Russia, the cutoff has led to substantial resistance. Even some weapons plant workers who staunchly back Ukraine say they are reluctant to see defense contracts scrapped.

In Mykolaiv, near southwestern Ukraine's Black Sea coast, canceled Russian contracts for warship gear assemblies have put entire shipyards out of work.

"A lot of people are very unhappy, and anti-Kiev sentiment is growing in the Mykolaiv

region, where three shipbuilding enterprises have closed," said Kost Bondarenko, director of the Institute of Ukrainian Politics, also in the Ukrainian capital.

Kharkiv was occupied by Russia-backed gunmen in April, but a local uprising deposed them before they could secure control of the city of 1.4 million.

Now, the unraveling of joint Ukraine-Russia defense production threatens to deepen the split between Ukrainians loyal to Western-oriented Kiev and those who back continued political alignment with Moscow.

"Kharkiv is still very shaky. If thousands of people were to suddenly lose their jobs, this would create additional tension," said Oleksiy Melnyk, director of international security programs at the Razumkov Center think tank in Kiev. "Russia could take advantage of that situation to further destabilize the region."

Mykolaiv remains under government control, but it is among the hot spots teetering between support for Ukrainian unity and the separatists.

Some of Ukraine's most sophisticated defense output is destined for the International Space Station, and suspension of rocket and module deliveries to Russia could disrupt that surviving vestige of East-West collaboration, Bondarenko said, warning of too literally applying the export ban.

Ukraine's endemic corruption also plays a role in giving to Russia with one hand what the government has sought to withhold with the other. Local enterprise managers in eastern industrial cities such as Dnipropetrovsk, Zhovti Vody and Zaporizhia skirt the letter of the export ban by invoicing shipments as civilian equipment or redirecting them to third-country middlemen, say analysts familiar with Ukraine's cabals of quasi-private business.

Yuzhmash, a sprawling Dnipropetrovsk machine-building works that manufactures and maintains Russia's SS-18 strategic missiles, initially complied with the freeze on exports to Moscow. But in late May, the company announced on its website that the circumstances that had brought about the ban had "stabilized," and it said the company would honor all existing contracts and consider new ones.

"There is good reason in some cases to continue doing business with Russia," said a Kiev politician from eastern Ukraine who spoke on condition of anonymity because that view doesn't toe the line of official policy.

Kiev and Moscow both claim to be whittling away at their arms-producing interdependence.

Putin told advisors at a Kremlin meeting in June that he wanted "technological sovereignty" within three years.

Britain's Royal United Services Institute, or RUSI, this year undertook an analysis of Ukraine-Russia defense industry integration and the risks entailed in trying to disentangle it. One daunting possibility, the security analysts said, is that Russia will be inspired to grab what it wants and isn't getting through normal trade.

Mines, foundries, steelworks and heavy-machinery enterprises are scattered along an alluring path flanking the Azov and Black seas that would not only secure Russia's vital defense components but also connect its territory with Crimea.

The temptation to pursue the conquest option may intensify if Russia is unable to procure what it wants from Ukrainian factories, the RUSI report notes.

Renewed Russian troop buildups along the border with Ukraine since separatist elections Nov. 2 and the influx of more armored columns through separatist-occupied regions have raised alarms with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the neutral monitors of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

"To suggest these scenarios for the sake of capturing the production at these various plants would be a very 19th century way of looking at a 21st century relationship," the RUSI analysts concluded. "However, even that cannot be ruled out in current circumstances."

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SERGEI L. LOIKO/ LOS ANGELES TIMES

UKRAINIAN soldier Ivan Kuryata fires toward pro-Russia separatists in the village of Peski, to which minibus driver Alexander Kosenko ferried troops under not quite voluntary circumstances.

THE MINIBUS TO HELL

Hired driver gets unexpected tour of duty in Ukraine

By Sergei L. Loiko
REPORTING FROM PESKI, UKRAINE

The Ukrainian special forces sergeant jumped into the front seat of Alexander Kosenko's white minibus with two Kalashnikovs slung over his shoulders, his vest stuffed with a dozen ammo clips, some hand grenades and a couple of machete-size daggers.

"Welcome to hell, Daddy!" he shouted over the constant crackle of automatic fire. "From now on your life hangs on how well you can hear me and follow directions. You got it? Don't say a word."

Kosenko, who was wearing only a T-shirt and jeans, obeyed the sergeant. He pushed the gas pedal to the floor.

A civilian driver for a private transportation company whose bushy gray mustache makes him look older than his 48 years, Kosenko had expected to be home by nightfall.

Instead, he was racing into Ukraine's war against pro-Russia separatists in a vehicle built for jaunts like delivering pensioners to a senior citizens lunch.

His original task had been straightforward enough: deliver a team of 10 Ukrainian soldiers to a town in the part of eastern Ukraine under full control of government troops. But the armored vehicles that were supposed to take them into battle never came, and Kosenko was ordered to drive on.

Now they had reached enemy territory. With tracer bullets and the minibus' emer-

gency lights the only sources of illumination, they made a half-mile dash down a sniper's alley to a safe harbor for the night.

Explosions boomed all around the minibus, almost tearing it apart. The sergeant yelled at Kosenko as they nearly collided with the smoking carcass of a tank in the middle of the road:

"Don't slow down or you will get us all and yourself killed. Or worse — I will do it myself with my last bullet."

Kosenko specializes in driving people to weddings and funerals in the town of Dnipropetrovsk, about 160 miles west of here.

On this night, he was planning to go home as usual and have dinner with his wife, Tatiana, and their 15-year-old son, Kirill. They'd have roast beef and potatoes baked in sour cream, his favorite meal. He'd chase it down with a little glass of horilka, Ukraine's vodka, for "appetite and health."

Then, if this night were like other nights, he'd watch the TV news in bed with his wife to see how solid the truce in eastern Ukraine was.

This night was not like other nights.

It was pitch-dark when the sergeant finally ordered Kosenko to stop. The rattled soldiers began to tumble out of the minibus, one of its windows shattered by shrapnel, in the village of Peski, a government stronghold on the western outskirts of the battleground city of Donetsk.

But they weren't safe yet. The house where they would spend the night was about 50 yards through a no man's land targeted by snipers. Ordering them to run in pairs, one after another, the sergeant said as he led the way, "Don't turn on any flashlights, and don't you smoke cigarettes or the sniper gets you at your third inhale!"

The house had been abandoned by its residents three months earlier as government troops began their siege of Donetsk. Inside, the soldiers stumbled over snoring comrades, machine guns, ammo boxes, helmets, boots and backpacks, collapsing into sofas and onto the floor.

Kosenko found a spot in the basement. Amid the artillery and missile barrage, it appeared to be the safest place in the house, but the temperature was near freezing, and Kosenko was still wearing only a T-shirt and jeans.

DRIVER Alexander Kosenko looks through a broken window of his minibus, which was hit by shrapnel in Donetsk, Ukraine.

He walked from one wall to the other and chain-smoked as if trying to warm himself. Dust, earth and plaster rained down on him at every explosion. He had nothing to eat or drink, and his cellphone had no signal.

His wife and son had no idea why he hadn't come home.

"Soon a soldier came down and brought me a rug and a sleeping bag, some water in a bottle and couple of stale biscuits," Kosenko said later. "But I never managed to grab any sleep, as the artillery attack continued all night through and I was worried sick about my family getting no word of me."

He would eventually find out that Tatiana had spent the night calling military units, hospitals, police stations and morgues.

Kosenko explained why he agreed to drive the men to the front lines, even though he hadn't been a soldier since the Soviet years.

"I was about to say that that was not the deal with me," he said of the sergeant's order to keep driving. "But on the one hand I didn't want to leave the boys in the lurch in the middle of the night, and on the other I was afraid the boys would just hijack the bus and head on without me."

Peski is crucial to both sides in the 7-month-old conflict because it's next to the Donetsk airport, the only strategic part of the city still under government control. The pro-Russia fighters attack the village every day, hoping to tighten the noose around the airport and compel its defenders to give up.

The village has no electricity, no running water. All the trees have been cut down or damaged by bullets or shrapnel.

TWO MEN lie on the ground in Peski, Ukraine, as they are questioned by a soldier. "In Kiev they think there is no war anymore," a commander said. "Down here we are in a very bad war, every hour, every minute."

Abandoned dogs and cats roam among unkempt gardens, broken fences and abandoned houses with shattered windows and shrapnel scars on every wall and roof.

Nearby fields and even gardens in the village are studded with land mines and booby traps.

Valentina Rozhko, 89, is the only resident left in the part of the village near the front-line positions. She remembers the Nazi occupation seven decades ago.

"I have no sleep at all with all this shooting from sunset to dawn," she said. "It was much quieter during the last war down here, as Germans were not shooting at night. They were quite orderly."

Maxim Dubovsky, deputy commander of the Dnipro-1 militia regiment, has been holding the government's front lines in Peski for more than three months.

"We have no idea what we are doing here," he said. "We get no orders to attack and no orders to retreat. We still have no proper means of communication, basically no logistical, artillery or air support."

The batteries in one of the two old Soviet tanks assigned to the regiment's positions had been dead for three days, Dubovsky said.

"Soon enough the rebels will discover that the tank is just a sitting target and will do their best to burn it," he said.

He and his men recently buried four comrades who had been caught in an ambush. He said the truce reached in early September existed only on paper.

"In Kiev they think there is no war anymore," he said of the Ukrainian capital. "Down here we are in a very bad war, every hour, every minute."

Kosenko was shocked by what he saw. It was so different from what he'd seen on TV.

"What I saw more reminded me of a fierce World War II movie battle rather than a truce," he said. "I saw nothing but dirt, blood, smoke and fire, and I was appalled to see that no one seemed to actually know what they were doing and why."

As Kosenko ventured out into the first light of a foggy morning, he was deafened by the sound of a 70-year-old Degtyaryov machine gun.

The gunner, Ivan Kuryata, had a cigarette in his mouth and a large bandage on his left index finger.

He pulled the trigger with his uninjured right hand, spraying the road in front of him

with long bursts of gunfire.

Kosenko, wearing neither a helmet nor a bulletproof vest, crouched nearby, covering his ears with his trembling hands.

"Hey, Daddy, what the f— are you doing here, man? It is no ... f— vegetable market!" Kuryata asked him. He stopped firing and wiped the sweat off his face. "Anyway, do you have a cigarette, man?"

Kosenko gave him one. In the war zone, he joked darkly, everyone asked him for a cigarette, "as if they don't know that smoking kills."

Soon, a couple of soldiers and an officer ordered Kosenko to take them out of the war zone. When they reached the bridge at the end of the dangerous stretch of road, they were stopped by a group of heavily armed special services men who said they needed the minibus to take them on a raid in the village to look for "a terrorist suspect."

Back Kosenko drove into danger. On the way to the village, they saw a couple of young men in civilian clothes on the sidewalk.

A soldier got out and fired into the air, ordering the men to lie face down with their hands behind their heads.

One of the special services men put the barrel of his assault rifle against the back of the closest detainee's thigh and said slowly, "I will ask you some questions and my gun is the truth machine. It hears the wrong answer, it shoots, OK?"

After half an hour, they let the shaken men go. The troops got back into the minibus and Kosenko made yet another trip to the safety of the bridge.

The men got out, without a word to a driver who had no reason to be in the middle of a war.

Later that day, accompanied by Dubovsky, Kosenko finally made it back home. When they reached Dnipropetrovsk, the officer shook his hand and thanked him for his valor and perseverance.

UKRAINIAN troops ride the minibus toward Donetsk after military vehicles failed to show up.

DEPUTY commander Maxim Dubovsky thanks driver Alexander Kosenko for his help.

Kosenko had tears in his eyes.

"Before that I had seen this war only on television," he said. "I am appalled by the chaos and lack of everything they should have at the front line, but at the same time I am so impressed with these brave young men."

On Wednesday, machine gunner Kuryata was killed in a mortar shelling in Peski. He was 41 — not that much younger than "Daddy" Kosenko.

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NEWS ANALYSIS: UKRAINE
THURSDAY, MARCH 6, 2014

RUSSIA RECASTS ROLE IN CRIMEA FACE-OFF

The Kremlin says it was just aiding an ally. The Ukrainian region may be entering a stalemate.

By Carol J. Williams and Sergei L. Loiko
REPORTING FROM KIEV, UKRAINE

It's not Moscow calling the shots in Crimea, it's local "self-defense forces."

The Kremlin didn't reinforce its troops on the strategic peninsula to seize it but to respond to an appeal from deposed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, now being cast as weak and misguided. And in any case, all Russian forces in Crimea are back at their bases.

Or so insist Russian officials, who are apparently seeking to rewrite the narrative of their military incursion into Ukraine that has shocked the world, frightened former Soviet-dominated neighbors and sent the Russian ruble and stock market into tailspins.

But the Russians may not be backing off so much as settling in.

Russia and Ukraine, with deeply entwined economies as well as historical and geographic imperatives to stay connected, may be entering a prolonged period of stalemate.

Russian gunmen, whether dispatched by the Kremlin as Kiev alleges or acting on local Crimean Russians' mistrust of Ukraine's new pro-West government, are likely to maintain their grip on the peninsula for weeks or months.

Ukraine's armed forces are outgunned by Russia's and any push-back could trigger a shooting war with no true winner, given the international censure and economic strangulation that Russia would face after wresting Crimea from its weaker neighbor.

On Wednesday, a fresh contingent of 200 Russian troops beefed up control of a Ukrainian air defense base in Yevpatoria, north of the Black Sea fleet port of Sevastopol. They stood guard at the gates, securing the stock of antiaircraft missiles. Some wore their Russian military insignia, a Ukrainian commander said, dispensing with the pretext of being concerned locals.

Russian gunships offshore at Sevastopol also continued to blockade Ukrainian naval vessels, despite the early Tuesday expiration of an ultimatum for the crews to surrender and swear allegiance to Russian command.

In Kiev and other European capitals, diplomacy kicked into high gear. That has created an impression of a pause for reflection and, in Moscow's case, a chance to recast its posture in the Crimea face-off as reluctant aid to an ally.

Putin and Russia's United Nations ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, both blamed Yanukovich, their erstwhile ally, for prompting the Russian deployment by portraying the change in political leadership in Kiev as a threat to the lives and cultural autonomy of Russians in eastern and southern Ukraine.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in press appearances in Madrid and Paris, denied that Moscow was calling the shots in the tense confrontation in Crimea. The peninsula was part of Russia for centuries until 1954, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev annexed it to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

"Those who sit in the Verkhovna Rada [Ukrainian parliament] do not control the whole territory," Lavrov said, warning the Western intermediaries trying to de-escalate the Crimea crisis that they should be talking to the territory's local leaders.

"Russia does not give orders to self-defense forces in Crimea," Lavrov said.

U.S. Secretary of State John F. Kerry, who was in Kiev on Tuesday and traveled with his Ukrainian counterpart, Foreign Minister Andriy Deshchytsia, for meetings in Paris on Wednesday, sought to downplay the limited results of their travels.

Kerry said he had had "zero expectation" of Lavrov and Deshchytsia talking on the sidelines of the gathering, originally intended to discuss the Syrian civil war.

Lavrov said conditions were not right for a meeting with the Ukrainian diplomat, describing the atmosphere as one of "threats and ultimatums."

Kerry said he reiterated Washington's call for Moscow and Kiev to open direct talks, for Russian forces to withdraw to their bases and for the Kremlin to welcome human rights monitors to gauge the state of ethnic relations in Ukraine's Russian-dominated areas. He pointed to a confusing incident involving a U.N. envoy, Robert Serry, who was confronted by Russian gunmen Wednesday in Crimea and told to leave the territory.

Lavrov said in Madrid, after talks with his Spanish counterpart, that Russia's Black Sea fleet forces were "staying at the sites of permanent deployment," countering reports of Russian troops fanning across Crimea to seize control of Ukrainian military sites such as the air defense base in Yevpatoria.

Yanukovich was driven out of power by a three-month uprising in western Ukraine after he ditched an association agreement with the European Union in late November that was to have led to closer economic ties with the 28-nation bloc. Russia had rewarded him with a promised $15 billion in loans and energy subsidies — both since retracted — in what was seen as a Kremlin move to prevent Ukraine from drifting from Moscow into the West's economic and military orbit.

Little public outcry in Russia has followed the military incursion into Ukraine. But the ruble has fallen to historic lows in the last week, and Russian stocks have lost 10% of their value, hitting ordinary Russians in their pocketbooks as prices soar and savings dwindle.

NATO leaders meeting Wednesday in Brussels gave Moscow a taste of the hostility it most fears now that its Cold War-era military bloc, the Warsaw Pact, is long since disbanded and most former allies are aligned with the erstwhile rival. NATO chiefs said they were suspending meetings with Russia, and U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said the alliance was stepping up patrols around Poland and the Baltic states in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The Pentagon said it will send six F-15 fighter jets and an air refueling tanker to Lithuania. Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, said he had spoken with his military counterparts in the Baltic nations and Eastern Europe in recent days and promised to seek options "to deter further Russian aggression."

Dempsey also said he spoke by phone with Gen. Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the Russian general staff, and conveyed "the degree to which Russia's territorial aggression has been repudiated globally."

Russia's sensitivity to seeing its former allies embraced by NATO is a divisive factor in Ukraine, where the large populations of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers in the east and south — as in Crimea — oppose leaving their traditional defense collaboration with Moscow. Those in the west fear Russia's smothering embrace, all the more so now that Kremlin troops have seized control of their Crimean bases.

However, Ukraine's special government representative assigned to work toward resolving the Crimean crisis, Petro Poroshenko, said Kiev is opposed to seeking closer ties to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization at the moment.

"This is not what we should do now," Poroshenko said. "We have to have the confidence and trust of all parts of the country. For the future of Ukraine, the first task is unity."

European financial officials announced Wednesday that they had worked out the details of a $15-billion loan and aid package for Ukraine, whose debts threaten default and economic crisis now that Moscow has withdrawn aid.

Analysts cautioned that the EU's relief package may be somewhat less generous an offer than it appears.

Governments often inflate such pledges for public relations, and Europe has been under pressure to match Russia's earlier pledge of $15 billion, noted Andrew Kuchins, a Russia

specialist at the nonpartisan Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

The sum could, for example, include loans that Europe gives to European farmers to pay for exports to Ukraine, he said.

Civilian emissaries visiting Kiev have cautioned Ukraine's new leaders to be patient in the face of what most concede is a blatant violation by Russia of its former Soviet sister republic's territory and sovereignty.

Despite being the aggrieved party, Kiev was told that it should be careful not to provoke. One visiting U.N. official, Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson, said the situation reminded him of the hair-trigger tension in Sarajevo in 1914, when a young Serbian nationalist's shot killed the Austro-Hungarian crown prince and ignited World War I.

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UKRAINE: A NATION TORN APART
MONDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2014

CAROL J. WILLIAMS/ LOS ANGELES TIMES

GALINA ARTEMYUK, a pastry vendor in Kiev, is among those struggling to make ends meet as Ukraine's war takes a heavy toll on the economy.

CITIZENS PAYING PRICE OF WAR IN UKRAINE

Millions struggle to make ends meet as wages stagnate and the cost of living soars amid the conflict

By Carol J. Williams
REPORTING FROM KIEV, UKRAINE

Galina Artemyuk doesn't bother with gloves even though the mercury never rises above freezing this time of year and her wind-chapped hands are as red as boiled lobsters.

She needs her fingers free to swiftly sort and wrap her daily consignment of 400 pastries from a commercial bakery near Kontraktova Square, where she arrives each day before sunrise to set up her booth at the tram terminal in time for the 7 a.m. start of rush hour.

On a good day, when she sells out of the sweet rolls filled with sour cherry jam or ground poppy seeds, she clears 300 hryvnia, or about $20. But sales are shrinking, as is the hryvnia's value. Even at 27 cents per pastry, customers who have seen their money lose more than half its value this year are cutting out breakfast on the run.

Millions of Ukrainians are confronted with mounting hardships this coming winter as the 8-month-old conflict with Russia-backed separatists drains the treasury of $5 million a day, corruption continues to deprive government coffers of badly needed

tax revenue and Russia has canceled energy subsidies that made home heating affordable before relations between the two former Soviet republics took a sharp dive last year.

Artemyuk's daughter and son-in-law, who have paychecks of similarly diminishing value, have moved with their two school-age sons into her two-room apartment to save money.

"It's going to be a terrible winter, but what can we do about it? We can't count on our government for anything," Artemyuk, 62, says with a dismissive wave in the direction of the presidential palace and parliament. "People aren't getting their pensions. Food gets more expensive every day. If our money continues to deteriorate, I won't be able to make any profit at all."

The unemployment rate in Ukraine is officially less than 9%, but many workers struggle as their wages stagnate and the cost of living soars. Gross domestic product is expected to contract by 10% this year.

The war in eastern Ukraine, which President Petro Poroshenko said recently costs $5 million a day over budget, adds to double-digit-billion-dollar deficits that have long strangled Ukraine's state finances and now delay payment of salaries to government workers by weeks or months.

Twenty percent of Ukraine's prewar GDP is under the control of the separatists, who have been systematically destroying much of the production base in the regions they occupy, said Anton Gerashchenko, advisor to Interior Minister Arsen Avakov.

"They are blowing up rail hubs and flooding mines," Gerashchenko said of the separatists. "The Donetsk airport that cost $250 million to build for the soccer championships two years ago is ruined — it's worthless."

What coal is still being extracted from the Don River basin mines is being shipped to Russia or within rebel-held territory, not to government-controlled areas of Ukraine either for domestic use or export.

Because of the diversions, Ukraine will need to import as much as 4 million tons of coal in the last weeks of this year, then-Deputy Energy Minister Vadym Ulyda said in mid-October. That is depleting Ukraine's already-ravaged hard currency reserves, which were a paltry $12.6 billion in October, down 23% from September. That is down from a high point of $38.4 billion in 2011 and an average of $22.7 billion over the last dozen years, according to Trading Economics, which tracks financial data for 196 countries.

"Everything is interconnected," said Kateryna Markevych, an economic analyst at Kiev's Razumkov Center think tank. "Wages are not increasing, which is reducing demand as people try to save money and buy only the basic necessities."

That cuts into tax revenue, which is further diminished by chronic underpayments and an unnecessarily cumbersome array of filing requirements, she said. Tax-dodging in turn drives underground more of what commerce remains.

"The shadow economy is now about 50% of the total," Markevych said. And much of what used to form a cornerstone of the above-board income — trade with Russia — all but disappeared as the conflict sharpened.

To punish Kiev for seeking to shift its economic alliance westward, Moscow has imposed import bans on Ukrainian dairy products, chocolate, poultry and other foods from a republic that in Soviet times was called the breadbasket of the federation. Markevych calculates that losses will be at least $3.5 billion by year's end.

Ukrainian industry is dominated by a mere dozen oligarchs, whose chokehold on production has fostered the rampant corruption that has prevented a country with a skilled workforce, highly educated population, a wealth of natural resources and abundant farm output from achieving its potential.

Transparency International ranked Ukraine 144th out of the 177 countries it surveyed last year for its pandemic of bribe-taking and influence-peddling.

The CIA World Factbook lists Ukraine in 189th place among 193 countries in real GDP growth rate.

Cleaning up the tax-cheating, graft and kickbacks is the price demanded by the U.S. and other Western allies in exchange for aid and eventual membership in the European Union. But Ukraine's partners have been forced to retreat from deadlines set for showing progress in the fight against corruption and waste of state resources.

Russia demanded EU guarantees of payment for Ukraine's billions of dollars in ar-

Eric Feferberg AFP/Getty Images

WORKERS pick up their masks and lights before the start of their shift at a mine in Donetsk. Coal extracted from the Don River basin mines is not being shipped to government-controlled areas of Ukraine.

rears for previous gas shipments, holding up a deal to ensure deliveries to and through Ukraine this winter. In the end, the Europeans had to make credits available to already heavily indebted Kiev to seal the Oct. 30 deal.

"Europe and the United States are getting a little irritated that nothing is happening on corruption and reform. And they are not interested in excuses," said Jock Mendoza-Wilson, international and investor relations director for System Capital Management, the holding company of Ukraine's richest man, Rinat Akhmetov.

Even with the rescued gas agreement, Ukrainians used to subsidized utility bills face a cold reality this winter. Most homes are supplied with heat from a communal source; occupants of individual units are able to regulate the temperature only by opening windows when it's too hot. Officials have warned consumers that as costs have more than doubled because of the end of special discounts offered by Russia's Gazprom when Moscow was still an ally, the thermostats will be set at an abstemious 60 degrees this season.

Food imports have been slashed because of lack of buying power. Most urban families have relatives in the countryside who can keep them stocked with locally grown and raised basics: eggs, cheese, vegetables and fruit, as well as the nation's beloved salo, uncured pork fat that is thin-sliced and eaten raw as an accompaniment to soups, dark bread and vodka.

Provoked into a rant against what she sees as a succession of corrupt and incompetent leaders since independence, Artemyuk takes on a martyred air, lambasting the political forces making up the newly elected parliament and expressing a lack of faith in their ability to extricate Ukraine from its crisis.

"Just leave me with some hearty Ukrainian borscht, salo and garlic and I'll be OK," she concludes. "We Ukrainians are used to hardship."

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