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FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



## Eastern Ukraine: civil society organisations call for urgent improvement of the conditions in observation facilities in connection with COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic has taken a particularly dramatic toll on the residents of conflict zones in many parts of the world, and Eastern Ukraine is no exception. The restrictions imposed by the government in order to limit the spread of the disease, combined with years of systemic failures in the functioning of public health institutions, exacerbate the already difficult humanitarian situation of the residents of the territories in proximity to the contact line in Luhansk and Donetsk Regions caused by the armed conflict. A recent [report](#) by the Charitable Foundation Vostok SOS from Ukraine (Vostok SOS), reveals a dramatic situation in observation sites (places of compulsory round-the-clock stay for persons with suspected coronavirus infection for the purpose of protecting public health) in the Luhansk Region that may amount to serious violations of human rights. East SOS, together with its partner organisations: Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR) and DRA e. V., call upon the Ukrainian Commissioner for Human Rights to urgently investigate the situation in observation sites under its mandate to monitor, within the framework of national preventive mechanism, the compliance of state authorities with the prohibition of torture through regular monitoring visits to all types of places where persons are deprived of liberty. At the same time, we urge the Ukrainian authorities of central and regional levels to undertake the necessary efforts to improve the conditions in these facilities.

In the period of 2-19 May, 2020, the Vostok SOS monitoring group visited seven out of the eight observation sites in the Luhansk region designated by the Decision of the Regional Commission for Technogenic and Environmental Safety and Emergencies of 15 April 2020. The purpose of the monitoring mission was to assess the suitability of these facilities for the hospitalization of people with suspected coronavirus infection. The visited institutions included, among others, the therapeutic department of the hospital in Biloluts'k, Novoposkovskyi district, the day-patient facilities of Stanychno-Luhansk central regional hospital, the outpatient clinic for primary care in Danylivka, Bilovodsk district and the branch of the Stanichno-Luhansk 'Regional Territorial Medical Association' in Petropavlivka.

The participants of the monitoring mission found the conditions in the observation sites either unsatisfactory or completely unsuitable for long-term hospitalization. Most of these premises are in a poor technical condition and do not meet the standards set by the [Resolution of the Chief State Medical Officer of Ukraine of 2 April 2020](#) concerning the arrangement of the specialized establishments intended for observation in connection with the coronavirus disease. Among others, the requirement of the presence of a sanitary room in each room with a shower cabin and a toilet is not met in any of the visited operating observation sites, which increases the risk of contagion of everyone else placed on observation at the same time. None of the facilities has a possibility to disinfect wastewater at local sewage treatment plants or to do so before wastewater is disposed of to the centralized sewage system. The premises of the therapeutic department of the hospital in Biloluts'k and the day-patient facilities of Stanychno-Luhansk central regional hospital in particular are in need of major repair work. In both facilities furniture and bedding are badly worn out while toilets and

bathrooms are hardly complying to sanitary standards. In addition to that, the department in Bilolutsk is located just 20 meters from a nursing home, and the buildings even share a common yard. Currently, 30 elderly people reside there – all of them are at high risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. Density standards are also exceeded in the Bilolutsk observation site. The outpatient clinic for primary care in Danylivka, while in better material condition, does not provide hot water or shower in the clinic, which forces persons under observation to use metal containers and heat water in electric kettles. In addition to that, the village of Danylivka periodically suffers from electricity cuts leaving the residents without the possibility to heat food, boil water for tea or ensure personal hygiene. None of the visited operating observation sites are equipped to accommodate people with limited mobility and people with disabilities.

According to the Resolution of the Chief State Medical Officer of Ukraine of 2 April 2020, the medical personnel working at observation site cannot leave the site for the whole period during which persons are placed on observation there. Based on the data the monitoring group received, staff members continue to live at home and no facilities for their long-term housing are available at the visited observation sites. Another problem is the provision of meals to those under isolation. The [Resolution no. 262 of the Cabinet of Ministers of 8 April 2020](#) states that the heads of the regional state administrations are responsible for the organization of food, which is paid for by the individuals placed in the observation sites. However, at the moment no appropriate procedure has been outlined. As a result, the locations that take in people under observation, organize meals at their discretion from their own budget, or with financial support of the local community. Moreover, the Resolution does not account for cases in which persons placed on observation do not have the means to pay for their food.

During the monitoring mission, Vostok SOS has also established that three out of the eight designated observation sites exist only on paper. The hotels Siverskyi Donets and Tsentralnyi in Sievierodoneck and the small hotel on Vulytsia Studentska 32, in Rubizhne have been designated as isolation sites but in practice they do not operate as such. A top-down decision on designation was taken by the authorities without consulting the owners of the premises who claim that the hotels do not meet other formal criteria to be equipped as observation sites. Namely, they are located in the centre of larger cities, in densely built-up areas, and the parts of the premises that could be used to accommodate people on quarantine do not have separate exits and cooking facilities. At the time of the monitoring, the representatives of all three hotels did not have any information about what medical care and how will be organized for people undergoing observation. The monitoring group did not have the possibility to assess the conditions of the eight observation sites, in the city of Popasna.

In the light of the above, we call upon the Ukrainian Commissioner for Human Rights to immediately investigate the situation in observation sites. Within the framework of the “Ombudsman Plus” model of National Preventive Mechanism against Torture and Ill-Treatment in force in Ukraine, the Commissioner should cooperate in carrying out the monitoring visits with civil society organisations with relevant expertise. State administrations and local self-governments in the Luhansk region should undertake the necessary measures within their mandates to prevent the violation of human rights of persons subjected to compulsory isolation in shared facilities. This is all the more urgent in the light of a possible surge in the number of COVID-19 cases related to the gradual lifting of restriction measures, including at border crossing point with the separatist-held territories, as well as in the context the vulnerability to the disease of the elderly population that makes a large part of the territories adjacent to the contact line in Eastern Ukraine.



Therapeutic department of the hospital in Bilolutsk, Novopskovskyi district, May 2020. Photo: Vostok SOS.