

# Ukrainian arts enjoy surprise revival in conflict-riven east

While prospects for a political resolution look remote, a fragile lull allowed residents to think of something more than survival

● People in Mariupol continue to live their lives with poetry evenings, film screenings and concerts despite the ongoing conflict

● The GogolFest modern art festival in Mariupol hosted performances and art installations that drew some 30,000 spectators in May

AFP | Donetsk, Ukraine

In a grungy cellar bar, a young crowd sings along to a melancholy ballad in Ukrainian. Nothing unusual here -- except that the concert is taking place in the stronghold of Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The Ukrainian language has faced an unofficial ban here since war broke out between separatists and Kiev's forces more than four years ago.

"Promise me that tomorrow will come for sure," a female vocalist sings to acoustic guitar in the city of Donetsk, the rebels' de facto capital, with uniformed rebel supporters in the audience.

Ukrainian songs are very rarely heard in this region, where Russian is more widely spoken. "In 2014, when the war had just begun, such a concert would have been impossible," said guitarist Oleg, 20, who declined to give his full name.

But the concert of local musicians playing cover versions of hits by Ukrainian bands goes down well with the audience.

There is demand for such music, since it is difficult for people living in separatist-held areas to



Artists performing during a concert as part of the Gogol Fest in Azov Sea city of Mariupol

go to concerts on the other side of the front line.

Part of eastern Ukraine is still under the control of Russian-backed separatists in a war against government troops that has claimed more than 10,000 lives.

Kiev and the West accuse Russia of funnelling troops and arms across the border. Moscow denies the claims despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Martial law was imposed for a month in Ukraine's border regions after Russia's seizure of three of Kiev's navy vessels in the Azov Sea in November.

But the development had no particular effect on cultural life,

says Diana Berg, an artist from Mariupol.

People here have seen a lot since the beginning of the war and "went through all stages, from anger to denial", she said.

So now they accept the situation and continue to live their lives with poetry evenings, film screenings and concerts.

## 'Forget about the war'

While prospects for a political resolution look remote, a fragile lull has allowed local residents to think of something more than just survival.

"People are less afraid and are more likely to attend cultural events," said Pavel, co-founder of the Contraband Group event

The Ukrainians "have begun to realise that culture defines identity," said Vlad Troitsky, a renowned theatre director.

This year he organised the GogolFest modern art festival in Mariupol, the last major eastern city under Kiev control.

The port and industrial hub on the Sea of Azov in May hosted performances and art installations that drew some 30,000 spectators.

Troitsky says he wants to fight back against the "aggressive propaganda" of Russian culture and way of life.

## 'Fear still exists'

"The fear is still there, of course. We all know what is going on here," said Marko Galaneych, a musician with the Ukrainian ethno-style band Dakha Brakha that has performed in Mariupol.

"But it is important for us... to come and support the people who live here and want this city to remain Ukrainian."

Writer and poet Sergiy Zhadan, dubbed the "bard of eastern Ukraine" by The New Yorker magazine, agreed.

"Music and poetry are needed everywhere and especially in the Donbass," he said, using another name for the coal-rich region.

Originally from the region, Zhadan launched a project bringing literature and theatre to the area after being impressed by the audience numbers at his performances in towns affected by bombings.

Such cultural initiatives necessarily have a political element as many Ukrainians perceive the conflict in the East as a battle for "independence" from centuries of Russian political and cultural dominance.

"The culture wars are far from over," said Fozzey, a vocalist in the popular TNMK hip-hop band which regularly plays for Ukrainian soldiers on front line.



People are less afraid and are more likely to attend cultural events. Here, we forget about the military conflict and the politics and we just listen to good music

PAVEL, CO-FOUNDER OF THE CONTRABAND GROUP EVENT AGENCY

agency, which organises around 10 concerts by local musicians a month.

"Here, we forget about the military conflict and the politics and we just listen to good music," he said, also declining to be fully identified.

The revival of Ukrainian cultural events coincides with separatist authorities seeking to promote Russian culture by staging open-air concerts of Russian pop music.

On the other side of the front line in Kiev-controlled territory, Ukrainian artists and activists are also organising festivals, creating a cultural life of unprecedented vibrancy in the industrial region.



Artists performing during a concert in the frame of Gogol Fest in Azov Sea, Mariupol



People enjoying a concert during the Gogol Fest, in Mariupol, eastern Ukraine