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# Ukrainian Woman Tells Of Public Abuse At Hands Of Pro-Moscow Separatists

by Dmitry Volchek and Farangis Najibullah



Iryna Dovhan's public humiliation in Donetsk sparked outrage in Ukraine and around the world.

Wrapped in a Ukrainian flag, Iryna Dovhan is forced to stand at a Donetsk intersection with a sign identifying her as a spy and reading: "She kills our children."

A woman berates and then kicks Dovhan as a man holding a rifle looks on.

Images of the scene that unfolded in eastern Ukraine in August sparked outrage and concern for the initially unidentified woman. Dovhan's name was eventually revealed and her story told, including in an [interview with RFE/RL's Russian Service](#).

She was detained by pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk on August 24, accused of spying for Ukrainian forces. As Dovhan

explains, "the photos were only a small part of that horrible day."

She says she prayed for death as passers-by slapped her, spit on her, and called her a "fascist."

"Many young women would hit me in the face, on the head and ears. One photo cannot show all of that," Dovhan told RFE/RL's Russian Service.

Dovhan recalls a "woman who took her time to take tomatoes from the trunk of her car" in order to hurl them at her. The woman then squashed two tomatoes onto her face, causing tomato juice to run into her eyes.

"But the most horrible part was when people would come to just watch. Nicely dressed young men would stop their cars and pose for photos with me in the background."

Dovhan's public humiliation at a busy intersection in downtown Donetsk was orchestrated by pro-Russian separatists, who accused her of serving as a spotter for Ukrainian artillery.

Dovhan, 52, who ran a beauty salon in Yasynuvata, a town outside Donetsk, insists she never acted as a spy.

But she freely admits to being a volunteer who collected donations -- food, clothes, medications, and money -- from locals and delivered them to Ukrainian soldiers stationed nearby.

## Fateful Mistake

Dovhan says she wasn't the only one in Donetsk who wanted to help Ukrainian soldiers.

"There were many people who supported me. They would bring money, blankets, some people would bring sleeping bags, so we received supplies all the time."

Dovhan says she was aware of the dangers involved when she -- along with a female friend -- drove to the area where the Ukrainian soldiers were stationed.

"Sometime we would go in my car and the next time we would take her car so nobody would notice us."

Dovhan says she made a fateful mistake when decided to take photos of soldiers receiving the collections to show them to people who donated the supplies.

"Those photos later become key evidence against me," says Dovhan, after her tablet was "somehow discovered" by the rebels.



Iryna Dovhan

She was taken from her house in Yasynuvata by separatists from the Vostok battalion.

Dovhan says she was interrogated at the battalion's base and that she refused to give up the names of people who helped with donations.

Then Dovhan was handed over to a group of some 20 men she believes were from North Ossetia.

"They started to seriously torture me," Dovhan recalls. "It was total abuse. One of them shot pistols next to my ears many times, so I nearly lost my hearing."

Another called her a fascist and forced her to shout "Sieg Heil!"

Dovhan says she was terrified when the rebels threatened to gang-rape her.

"They said, 'How many men do you want -- 10, 20? We have enough people. We can find you 40 or 50.'"

Dovhan said she crawled on the floor and begged them to kill her.

She recalls that, later that evening, they brought in a man accused of attempting to abuse a child.

Dovhan says the man was tortured and possibly raped in the next room. She could hear him screaming.

"It all happened without any proof, any trial, just someone called and accused the man, and he was being punished," she says. "I don't know how that man could live after that experience. And I don't know how I could live after what I went through."

Dovhan was freed on August 28 after two foreign journalists pleaded with Vostok battalion leader Aleksandr Khodakovsky to release her.

Khodakovsky ordered Dovhan freed and vowed to discipline those responsible for her detention and public humiliation.

### House Looted

Dovhan, however, believes they will never be punished.

She has since left Donetsk and joined her husband and two children in Mariupol, a town controlled by Ukrainian forces.

Dovhan says the family will not be able to return in the foreseeable to their home in Yasynuvata, which was looted while she was in detention.

She managed to retrieve some clothes, her car, and -- most importantly, she says -- her dog and two cats.

The family is now looking to rebuild their lives in Mariupol. But they are not expecting any financial assistance from the Ukrainian government.

"We have some money in a savings account. We have two cars -- one very old but it still works," Dovhan says.

"We will work. Besides, what kind of help can you expect from the government when the country is facing so many problems? We absolutely don't need anything. We will manage."

**Written by Farangis Najibullah based on an interview conducted by RFE/RL Russian Service correspondent Dmitry Volchek**

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