

UKRAINE REPORT



Life under Occupation in the Russo-Ukrainian War: Insights from Activist Networks

The Humanitarian Activists conducting Evacuations
from Russian Occupied Territories

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PeaceRep's Ukraine programme:

PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is a multi-partner initiative that provides evidence, insight, academic research and policy analysis from Ukraine and the wider region to support Ukrainian sovereignty, territorial integrity and democracy in the face of the Russian invasion. PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is led by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) partnering with the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) in Ukraine, the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Germany, the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM) in Austria and Jagiellonian University in Poland. Through our collaboration with KSE we work closely with researchers, educationalists and civic activists in Ukraine to ensure that policy solutions are grounded in robust evidence and are calibrated to support democratic outcomes.

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Introduction

This research report draws on interviews with civic activists conducting evacuations from Russian occupied territories in Ukraine, as well as some evacuees, to shed light on the human rights abuses and totalitarian forms of governance that shape daily life in these territories. It utilises the concept of "civicness"¹ as a form of public authority grounded in mutual obligation among individuals and groups, to highlight the strength of the societal resilience fostered by Ukraine's "do-it-yourself" culture of active citizenship.² In Russian occupied territories, these civic ties and relationships constitute a form of subversion to occupation, and a means of survival for those seeking escape from the threats to life and liberty that the Russian occupation entails.

At the time of writing, a US-brokered negotiation process has begun in the form of bilateral US-Ukraine and US-Russia talks, hosted by Saudi Arabia. In parallel to this process, Ukraine and European states have been engaged in a discussion about the design of post-conflict security guarantees. A plausible outcome of these developments is that Russia will remain in some form of de facto control of at least some of the territories it presently occupies. This makes testimony from humanitarian civic defenders, who run networks operating across both sides of the line of control, important to building a picture about the conditions Ukrainian citizens are facing on the ground, and the human rights monitoring and protection measures that should be included, as an absolute minimum, in any ceasefire agreement. The report makes a number of policy recommendations in this regard, including access for and guaranteeing the safety of independent human rights monitors, establishing freedom of movement across the lines of control, and the release of the thousands of arbitrarily detained captives of the regime.

Key Findings

- ▶ This report presents the findings of research on life under Russian occupation in Ukraine from the perspective of humanitarian activists conducting evacuations from occupied territories, as well as testimonies from evacuees themselves. These testimonies present a grim picture of the human rights situation in these territories.
- ▶ Since the full-scale Russian invasion of February 2022, the line of control between Russian occupied and Ukrainian controlled territory has gradually become much less porous. From around late summer 2022, evacuees have had to endure long journeys through the sovereign territory of the Russian Federation and third countries just to enter back into Ukrainian government-controlled territories.
- ▶ These informal networks embody a form of what we call civiness, which provides vital public goods, interacting in both cooperative and contentious ways with the Ukrainian state. They are indicative of the ecosystems in society supporting Ukraine's resilience.
- ▶ Testimony from these networks offers a window into conditions that are difficult for international observers to access. As ceasefire negotiations progress and the possibility of de facto Russian control over parts of Ukraine increases, this research underlines the urgent need for mechanisms that mitigate the harm of the occupation.
- ▶ The key policy recommendations arising from the report are:
 - Recognise the sustained and ongoing threat that the Russian occupation poses for citizens, and the need to invest in the work of these civic networks.
 - Access to the occupied territories for human rights monitors and security guarantees that allows them to carry out their work safely.
 - Ensure that any ceasefire agreement includes a provision for establishing freedom of movement across the line of control.
 - Support the work of independent investigators to document and verify reports of human rights abuses, laying the groundwork for future legal accountability and transitional justice.

- Develop comprehensive aid programs for displaced civilians, ensuring access to medical, psychological, and legal assistance.
- Ensure any ceasefire agreement or settlement has a mechanism for the scrutiny and monitoring of the human rights situation in the occupied territories by an appropriate international body such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.
- Provide material financial support to the Ukrainian humanitarian networks that are still operating, often through informal channels, in the occupied territory.

Civicsness and the Russo-Ukrainian War

Research on Ukraine after the Revolution of Dignity (2013 – 2014) has often observed the complexity of relations between the state and citizens. Frustrations with and scepticism towards the state did not produce apathy in the population, but instead sparked a drive for what Mary Kaldor called “do-it-yourself reform”,³ with dense networks of civic activist volunteers becoming an enduring legacy of the revolution. Mistrust towards the state—due to its association with corruption and influence-peddling, as well as its often difficult-to-navigate bureaucracy⁴ and generally poor performance—tended to be juxtaposed with high levels of interpersonal trust at the citizen-to-citizen level.⁵ While this was not a narrowly a post-Maidan dynamic, with origins in earlier periods of mobilisation such as the Orange Revolution, it brought considerable contention to the pattern of Ukraine’s post-Maidan democratic development.⁶ Interestingly, while activists often see themselves as anti-statist, a number of different relationships can be observed between these civic ecosystems⁷ and the state. Civic activists can be found cooperating with the state in the implementation of projects, something particularly notable among those working at the local level,⁸ but they can also be found in more conventional relationships of antagonism to the state, scrutinising and challenging institutions. Perhaps most significantly, networks often step in to provide critical public goods, compensating for the limited resources of the state, especially in wartime. The state has often drawn on these capacities directly to plug gaps, working cooperatively with activists.

Civic networks have even assisted the war effort through the provision of military goods. In both phases of the Russo-Ukrainian War, from the “anti-terror operation” in the Donbas from 2014 to 2022 to the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022 that followed, this support has shaped Ukraine’s resistance. Both formalised platforms and informal volunteer networks have raised significant funds and other resources for the armed forces. In this way, the quintessential inner core of the Weberian state⁹—its security function—has been supported by these non-state networks.

As Taras Fedirko observes, while these activists may sometimes be subjectively anti-statist, in practice they cooperate extensively with government institutions to fill these resource gaps:

“[V]olunteers’ own perceptions of their mission and methods... capture something essential about their approach to organising aid and their often antagonistic relationship with the state and international humanitarianism. [They] project their anti-statist identity through claims to being autonomous from institutionalised actors and more impactful than centralised bureaucracies, and this identity enables them to raise resources and coordinate aid in a society where wealthy middle classes harbour deep distrust of the state. Likewise, their technologies of organisation – from decentralised cooperation to innovations in fundraising – provide viable... alternatives to bureaucratic allocation of resources. As these technologies are adopted by the central government, municipal officials and political parties, volunteers’ organisational blueprints contribute to transforming social relations beyond their immediate contexts of work.¹⁰

A similar argument could also be made about how the networks assisting with the evacuation of Ukrainians from Russian occupied territory interact with the state. Not only do they provide an unusual “public service”, which the state with its stretched resources cannot manage, but because of their non-state character they also operate with more flexibility and informality.

All of these activities, from the crowdsourcing of military hardware to fundraising for humanitarian relief and assisting evacuees, are examples of what conflict researchers have called “civiness”: individual behaviours and collective actions that contribute to the construction of a public good, involving some kind of mutual relationship or social contract.¹¹

For civic responders organising evacuations from Russian occupied territory, the public good lies in the protection of life and liberty. Working through necessarily informal trust-based relations, these networks operate in the shadows of Russian power. Many activists, along with their contacts and drivers, take significant personal risks to achieve their goals. What makes this activity characteristic of civiness is the sense of mutual obligation—based on an implicit social contract—that underpins it.

This activity acts, we may argue, as an implicit alternative to the ethnonationalism and imperialism of the Russian occupation. Such civic activities can be seen as sustaining the idea of a free and mutually supportive society in everyday life, even in the context of a dominant authoritarian logic enforced through the violence of occupation.

Furthermore, for the academic community, policy makers and the wider general public, the experiences and testimonies of these networks of activists can also contribute indirectly to a different public good: i.e., the development of knowledge about what life is like under Russian occupation. This has become particularly important since the full-scale invasion because of the relatively limited information environment, compared to the first phase of the war. Anyone wishing to cross into occupied territory now faces considerable practical difficulties and dangers, which are radically different from the situation between 2014 and 2022. In the first year of the full-scale war—reflecting both the character of the conflict at this particular juncture and the failure of the Russian side to swiftly conquer Ukraine—the line of control underwent significant movement. However, as it began to settle it became far less porous than it had been in the earlier phase (2014–2022), as well as the first few months of the war, when a number of humanitarian crossing points still allowed movement into and out of occupied territory.¹² By contrast, those wishing to flee occupation now have to undertake long, dangerous journeys via the sovereign territory of the Russian Federation itself.

Methodology

The PeaceRep team engaged 13 research subjects altogether. This included 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews, and one case where the research subject indicated a preference to provide written answers. Nine of these interviews were with civic activists, two were with evacuees, one was with a family member of an evacuee, and one interviewee was living under Russian occupation but undertook the interview while visiting a family member in Ukrainian controlled territory. The sample was put together through outreach to publicly known civic networks, initially to those with prominent profiles within the evacuation space, and then a snowball sampling method was utilised to expand the list to 13 respondents. Seven people who were approached for interviews declined. Two interviews were not included in the final list of thirteen transcribed because the content of the interviews did not prove to be relevant to the research.

A different list of questions/interview guide was prepared for the two types of research subject: activists and evacuees. The interviews were conducted in January and February 2024 by two members of the research team. They were then translated into English, anonymised and discussed with the two other team members. Verbal consent for the use of the interview data for research purposes was granted at the outset of the interview. The research team have not included any data in this report, or another forthcoming publication, where the material utilised could be used to identify the research subject.

Our focus in this report is on what these testimonies reveal about how the Russian regime is governing, the types of risk this poses to citizens in these areas, and what conclusions Ukraine and its international partners should derive with regard to the protection of human rights in the course of the presently unfolding negotiations.

Lastly, it should be noted that while human rights violations are discussed through the testimony of the research subjects, the report does not set out to document and corroborate individual abuses to a legal standard, which would require a different research methodology.

Our research subjects spoke about their own experiences and shared the knowledge they had accumulated through their activity. These testimonies provide insights into why citizens choose to leave the occupation and what problems and injustices those that stay face.

The Scale of the Civic Response

A number of our interview subjects provided details that illustrated the scale of the emergency situation, and how civic networks, and not the state, tended to lead the humanitarian response. What might be called 'civic start-ups' played, and continue to play, a key role. However, they organised evacuations through informal channels, an approach necessary given the risks of persecution. Interview subject D is an entrepreneur and part of the wave of individuals from the private sector that drew on their business expertise and resources to respond to the 2022 invasion, and the crisis of forced displacement it prompted.¹³ This individual founded what would become one of the larger organisations operating in the civic evacuation space. As they put it:

“We have evacuated more than 35,000 people and delivered more than 1,200 tonnes of humanitarian aid to date. We used to measure it in tonnes because it was just the way things were done. Later we switched to food parcels, but it was still measured in tonnes. And according to our estimates, there are more than 100,000 people to whom we have provided at least one-time assistance. This is what we have managed to do” (Interview D).

Another interviewee worked their way up through the internal structure of a different NGO. This person was initially a Telegram volunteer but then moved over to organising local evacuations in an eastern Ukrainian region, now holding a more senior position. Their testimony illustrates how the scale of the mobilisation developed. Initially they were managing a small team of volunteers undertaking evacuations of around 30 people per week, but the operation had to rapidly grow as demand exploded, reaching some 1,800 per week (Interview H). In late 2023 and early 2024, they were still handling a large volume of requests:

“Currently, we receive about 350-400 requests per month from people in the occupation or the Russian Federation for evacuation. I just looked at the numbers: there were 350 in December and 404 in January of people who turned to us in the occupied territories or the Russian Federation. The percentage of those deported is not very high now, about 40 out of these 400, all others are from the occupation, mostly from the Kherson region” (Interview H).

This interviewee also provided insight into the logistical management of the operation. From April 2023, they operated a hub near the humanitarian corridor in the Sumy region. At the time, this crossing point between Ukraine and the Russian Federation (Belgorod region) played an important, though not exclusive, role in humanitarian evacuations. Some individuals chose to undertake even longer journeys through third countries to avoid the "filtration" process (discussed below) associated with this crossing. Those who did use the Sumy-Belgorod crossing point still often faced exceptionally long journeys, entering Russia before eventually returning back into Ukrainian-controlled territory. However, following the Kursk operation in August 2024, this corridor was closed, leaving the Belarus-Ukraine corridor as the only remaining option that does not involve travel through non-belligerent countries such as Turkey or the Baltic States.

Some of the evacuation platforms have also begun assisting Ukrainians who are already inside Russia with their return home (Interview H). Our research subject described how the Russian regime's tendency to arbitrarily detain civilians and deport them to locations within the Russian Federation prompted the platform to expand its remit—adapting its operations to support those released from captivity (Interview H). Ukrainians have sometimes contacted them from areas deep inside Russia's sovereign borders with requests for help to return home (Interview H). The scale of the illegal detention and deportation of Ukrainian nationals to Russia has been highlighted by the launch of the "People First" campaign, a coalition that brings together both Russian and Ukrainian human rights defenders as part of a global civil society coalition.¹⁴ According to estimates from Ukraine's Ombudsperson, as many as 16,000 Ukrainian civilians are believed to be held unlawfully in Russia. As of 1 September 2024, the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group have individually documented the disappearance of 7,615 people.¹⁵ The sheer scale of these figures underline, of course, why there is such an on-going demand for evacuation from these areas.

In these conditions, the civic activist networks have themselves become targets for repression. Another interviewee founded a similar civic activist 'start-up' initiative. Their organisation began as a Telegram channel where friends were exchanging information in the first hours of the full-scale invasion (Interview O). This individual initially planned to stay in the occupied territory, but it became impossible due in part to the response their initiative received on social media:

“We were under maximum stress. The paranoia was at its peak. Like, you've already revealed your credentials on Twitter... then, 1,000, 2,000 by the next morning, another 3,000 followers the next morning. And you're just in shock. And then just for this information to reach the Russians, just like that. And now they were catching [up] because we just saw... that many people started to disappear. Activists, some journalists, volunteers, military, ATO veterans. ATO veterans were just awful. Stories like they came, just shot on the spot. They just came, like you're so-and-so, yes, bang-bang” (Interview O, “ATO” refers here to veterans of the Anti-Terror Operation, the term that the Ukrainians previously tended to use for the war in Donbas, prior to the full-scale invasion).

In the face of these threats, the network established a system of moving regularly from one basement to another to evade visits from the occupying authorities. However, after a time, the exhaustion and stress of doing this became too much and the activist fled the occupation, reorganising their work to provide remote support to those under occupation. This particular organisation describes itself as now working in three areas: humanitarian aid, evacuation, and the information war against the occupiers (Interview O). This remit and the organisation's own understanding of its work is indicative of the general tendency for this form of humanitarianism to be intertwined with the political objective of a free and democratic Ukraine.

Arbitrary Detention, Torture and Violence

The experiences and testimony from these activists help us build up a picture of life under occupation, characterised by fear and violent persecution. According to one interviewee's experience, the repressive environment tends to increase in areas closer to the frontline of the war. As these places become more militarised, citizens face a greater risk of violence. Some of the worst incidents that they know of occurred when the Russians were retreating:

"The worst situation, I would say, is [Ukrainian region] ... it's just terrible, and in [another region] and [another region]... because there's a huge concentration of military equipment there. They heavily screen people at checkpoints when leaving this city where they have the equipment because they are relinquishing positions. [Another region] is just terrible; there are checkpoints where they simply don't let people pass, plus constant shelling and searches. So, the closer to the demarcation line, the fewer rights people have. They can just break into houses at night, where people are sleeping, and check their phones. It's a carpet approach overall" (Interview H).

A number of activists highlighted how those suspected of being members of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, or of working for them in some capacity, or being Anti-Terror Operation (ATO) veterans, are subject to particularly brutal treatment (Interview A, O, H). This creates a concrete problem for divided Ukrainian families. Family members that have served in the Ukrainian Armed Forces would be taking an even bigger risk than other citizens were they to return home to assist friends or relatives they have left behind with their evacuation (Interview D). For such individuals the activist networks and platforms offer life-saving assistance supporting their family reunion.

Interviewee A established social media channels to assist with evacuations, and when it was clear that it would be costly – even though their drivers were volunteers, only taking money for the petrol – they started fundraising for the work in tandem with their efforts to raise resources for the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Interview A). They were careful not to participate in public-facing activity like interviews, refusing 14 of them (Interview A). However, they still attracted the attention of authorities, who launched a series of raids, including at the houses of family members (Interview A). Once this happened, they moved rapidly to get out. At the time, in the first few months of the war until the end of summer 2022, there were still a number of crossing points between Ukrainian government-controlled territory and occupied territory:

[I]f they suspect a person in working for the Armed Forces, it's terrible. I remember a case a few months ago. A woman from [a city in Ukraine] contacted us. She was in captivity with the orcs.¹⁶ She was a mother of many children. They took her captive on suspicion of working for the Armed Forces. Her whole back was bruised. Her back and legs were all blue. We evacuated her immediately the next day or a day after. Her whole family. It was a few months ago, maybe three months ago. And this case stuck with me a lot (Interview A).

Many of the interviewees made references to individuals being taken to "the basement", a colloquial term used in occupied territories to refer to the illegal detention and torture of citizens by the authorities (Interview A, C, O, H, E). Interviewee C is a member of a family that were lucky to escape the Kakhovka dam explosion with their lives. They describe the fear their family experienced in occupied territory. They mention how collaborators live with a certain "freedom" and protection, but for the rest of society fear and paranoia prevail, as individuals do not know who to trust (Interview C), and the most basic of everyday actions are criminalised:

"They could constantly check everyone's mobile phones. Nobody ever took their mobile phones with them when they went out, in case someone stopped them on the street and asked to check them. As a rule, most people had two mobile phones. One was for reading Ukrainian news and communicating with Ukraine, which they kept hidden somewhere at home. And the second phone was a push-button one, a regular one, just for local communication..." (Interview C).

Interviewee D recalls when an entire team of drivers were incarcerated. They describe how the drivers went missing, with no one hearing from them for several days (Interview D). Then one of the drivers got in touch with our research subject to say that everyone had been arrested in a series of raids in an eastern Ukrainian city (Interview D). The driver had only avoided this fate as they were able to pay a bribe of \$500, while maintaining a story that they were just planning a visit to their mother (Interview D). A number of the drivers were Russians, and upon their release were themselves evacuated through the different networks and routes that they had been involved in supporting (Interview D). Another interviewee describes the risks that all drivers face, and how the civic networks try to maintain a certain distance from the drivers:

“Our drivers are constantly detained, taken to basements. That’s why we always call them drivers, not volunteers, because it’s a huge danger for them. So, when they’re detained, they say that they have no relation to any organization, I’m just a driver, I’m a taxi driver, I need to earn money, so I work, they told me to take out, so I did (Interview H).

Interviewee D also described a separate incident with “the basements”:

“If a person was taken captive, arrested, they had torture rooms [there]. These were awful things. I have a bunch of guys in [Ukrainian city], volunteers, who were in those basements. They torture people there. There’s no waiting for any justice” (Interview D).

Although any form of collaboration between Russians and Ukrainians is often considered taboo in Ukraine—given Russia’s role as the aggressor in the war and the stigma attached to maintaining ties with Russian citizens—for some civic activists, such cooperation is often a pragmatic necessity. In many cases, evacuees must pass through Russian territory to reach safety. It is also important to recognise that Russians who collaborate in these efforts expose themselves to significant personal risk. Interviewee O, for example, describes a case of political persecution of one of their contacts:

“They didn’t let Russians help Ukrainians... We had a case... of one volunteer, a man, who lived in [Russian city] and accommodated Ukrainian people who were coming from the occupation, going to [a Russian city and then from there to] Ukraine. This man was arrested and given 25 years for espionage, because at some point he help[ed] ... to the Ukrainian side through the grey zone... on a stretcher and then return[ed] to Russia. He did that. So, they let him pass through the grey zone and he got caught. They arrested him for espionage and that’s it” (Interview O).

The same interviewee talked about the case of a local Ukrainian priest who was engaged in humanitarian work to support the community. Despite having no connection to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, he was taken to “the basement” and beaten so severely that he nearly died (Interview O). The priest was a friend of the research subject’s father, and this incident prompted the subject to insist that his father evacuate from the occupied area (Interview O). These vignettes highlight the risks faced by both Ukrainians and their Russian collaborators in this highly authoritarian environment.

Filtration Checkpoints: A Form of Control

Across occupied territory, Russian forces have implemented “filtration” procedures: checkpoints where individuals are subject to questioning, usually when crossing from one region to another or moving from occupied Ukrainian to Russian sovereign territory. The regime uses these checkpoints to gather information and to remind citizens of their presence, establishing control through intimidation. This family member of an evacuee describes the process:

“When they took her phone for inspection, it was a filtration point at the entrance to [a region in occupied Ukraine] from [another occupied] region, they forced her to unlock her smartphone, unlock the messengers, and everything to give them full access. Then they connected the smartphone to a computer, copied her entire address phone book, and then some special programme compared the phone numbers from her phone book with their database of phone numbers. Then they captured those numbers that belonged to people either from the SBU, from the police, or from someone else. And they interrogated her about it” (Interview C).

These data collection methods contribute to the creation of lists used by the Russian occupying authorities. However, according to one interviewee, the application of these authoritarian methods can be quite inefficient, even incompetent at times. They described how at times the “communication within the orcs really fucked up. If they are trying to catch you in [occupied place], and you’re going to [another occupied place], no one in [that place] will arrest you” (Interview A). Inefficiencies in the application of authoritarian terror cannot be relied upon, however. One interview subject described how the regime had somehow obtained a list of ATO veterans, and had been using it at filtration points:

“Since December, the option for former participants of the ATO to leave has been closed. They are on their lists somehow; they hacked into these databases. They have databases of former ATO participants, so they know about it. And they just don’t let them leave the occupied territory to the territory of the Russian Federation. They don’t pass the filtration at any checkpoint; they are turned back” (Interview H).

The use of these checkpoints, especially when leaving occupied Ukraine for Russia, shapes the attitudes of those who decide not to attempt the journey (which is of course also long and arduous). According to one research subject, “many people don’t dare to leave precisely because they know there will be this filtration, and nobody knows how it will end” (Interview A).

Forced Passportization, Property Seizures and the Rule of Lawlessness

A well-documented and infamous tactic of the Russian regime has been coercive passportization, motivated by the expansionary ethnonationalist narrative of the Russian regime that claims those living in the territories it has annexed are “Russian”. In order to force people to take up Russian passports, the regime restricts access to essential public services to those that are able to prove their “Russian” citizenship.

One research subject told us they know of cases of people with serious illnesses that were denied treatment because of their Ukrainian passport (Interview D). The passportization governance regime has also had an impact on the evacuation process itself. According to one interviewee, Belarus denies entry to those with a Ukrainian passport at its Russian border – instead telling evacuees to go to Moscow and take an international flight to Minsk (Interview A).

Chaos and arbitrariness appear to be the defining features of the occupation regime, where lawlessness prevails under a system marked by criminal impunity. Interview subject A gives the example of a café owner, whose business was effectively looted by the regime:

“For example, there’s a woman who owns a café... Russian military broke into this café and looted it. People even saw who did it. She went to the police, the local Russian police, or the commandant’s office, and said, ‘Your people robbed me, and took equipment from the cafe. Let’s deal with it.’ They told her, ‘Your cafe might as well be burned down; you should leave.’ So, what justice can you expect there?” (Interview A).

A similar absence of the rule of law is described in the testimony of another research subject (Interview H). They identify the trend towards the loss of property to the invasion forces. Those who have fled the occupation often live with enormous uncertainty over their homes and in a number of cases fled in the context of unbearable levels of looting by the Russian military:

“Well, the military was constantly walking around the city. They were constantly there in different rotations, i.e. some would come, then they would leave, and others would come. The soldiers often got drunk, they would have parties, and later there was a lot of looting by the military. And many people left the occupation, many people left, and the houses were free. And the military could break into neighbouring houses, loot, steal things, or just move in and live in the houses” (Interview H).

One interview subject describes how their parents, who are living under occupation, have noted an influx of Russian citizens that "do whatever they want" (Interview F). Sometimes these new arrivals have been drawn from Russia's more impoverished peripheral regions, having been promised better prospects in the Ukrainian occupied territories (Interview F).

The regime does not only, however, govern by force and fear. It has also developed what our research subject describes as "propaganda Nevsky neighbourhoods" (Interview F), significant new development projects to build new residential housing in occupied areas. This has also extended to carrying out repairs. For example, the interviewee noted how their grandmother's property, which had been damaged in the war, has since received new windows and radiators (Interview F). But these efforts are largely for propaganda purposes with large parts of this specific city still so full of "abandoned and destroyed houses that it looks scary" (Interview F).

Propaganda and Information Control

Such governing practices are combined with a systematic propaganda campaign. The ideological contours of the messages used are described by one of our research subjects: "People are told that they are forgotten, that they are not needed by Ukraine, that they are now Russia (...). That they... That they need to... How to put it... Reorient. They cannot speak freely, they cannot... They are afraid, physically afraid that someone can grab you at any moment, do what he wants. So, it's a state of oppression" (Interview B).

The Russian occupying authorities invest in media resources, from camera crews to presenters, editors and producers, to conduct this information war on the ground. One of our research subjects, whose work had gained prominence through social media, described how they became targeted by the regime (Interview O). Instead of immediate repression, Russian forces came to the house where the subject was conducting humanitarian relief and brought a film crew with them (Interview O). With five soldiers present, four of whom were carrying weapons, the research subject's team agreed to the humanitarian relief operation being filmed (Interview O). After this event, they reorganised their work, moving continuously between different locations. Eventually, the repression became too difficult to cope with and they were forced to flee (Interview O).

With the regime's drive for "Russification", the school system has become a particular target. The Ukrainian education system faces being "systemically dismantled".¹⁷ Children are instructed to abandon their Ukrainian identity completely through a curriculum that casts the invasion as heroic.¹⁸ Teachers face a terrible choice in this context, either give up their jobs or become propagandists. One interview subject described what happened to a teacher that continued to teach children remotely, free from the eyes of the Russian occupation regime:

"They had a situation there where a teacher lived on their street and continued to teach Ukrainian schoolchildren remotely. And one of the parents from the school informed the Russian authorities about this, and the FSB came and took this teacher to the basement (Interview C).

Russia's occupation shares, in this sense, features of all totalitarian systems, whereby physical violence is the means of enforcement for the exclusionary ideology of the regime.

In the areas that have been occupied for the longest period, Crimea and the so-called “Peoples Republics”, our interview subjects describe particularly repressive local conditions:

In the occupied territory, our drivers even testified about what was happening in the “Luhansk People’s Republic” and “Donetsk People’s Republic”. Well, it’s kind of a shame. I mean, there are simply no normal people left there. The drivers just told very scary stories, and there were a lot of them. But, generally speaking, it’s like burnt earth there, and that’s it. A place for some purposes. Not for people’s lives, not for anything like that (Interview D).

Community Responses and Civic Resistance

Despite the terror of the occupation, the civic networks conducting humanitarian relief—operating through the informal channels we've described—effectively constitute networks of resistance operations. Here, resistance is defined as a form of survival and self-help system created by those that refuse to collaborate with the regime. These networks are unusual in bringing together both Russian and Ukrainian activists in cooperation.

One of our research subjects, whose family escaped the Kakhovka dam catastrophe, describes how they were advised against going to the regime-run respite accommodation, on the grounds that it amounted to a form of incarceration. Instead, they were found a place to stay with local community contacts (Interview C). They were then evacuated by the civic networks through Russian Federation territory, which involved a logistically complex multi-stage route, but did not have to pay any money towards the costs (Interview C).

As would be expected from such large-scale operations, they tend to use a mix of paid and voluntary labour. While sometimes the drivers have been volunteers (Interview A), most of the testimonies describe the drivers as working for a fee (Interview C, L, D), allowing them to make a modest living and also providing a level of protection when questioned by the authorities (as it means that they can claim, quite honestly, to be working as self-employed drivers).

One evacuee describes the drivers on the journey:

“The carriers were mostly ordinary citizens who had lost their jobs and were looking for a way to earn money. There are no complaints against them. As much as they could, they helped people with belongings and with information. They took parcels” (Interview L).

They describe an atmosphere of grassroots civic resistance in the territories they left behind (Interview L). Dnipro, an industrial city in south-eastern Ukraine, which remains a major centre of the country's fee economy,¹⁹ has become a destination for many such evacuees:

“I’m very grateful to Volunteers for their understanding, respectful attitude and invaluable help with free transport to Dnipro. I’m also thankful for the financial assistance of 2000 UAH as a temporarily displaced person. There are also volunteers working on the territory not controlled by Ukraine, helping people to leave the shelled areas. Even just enthusiasts who have their own cars. Water, food, medicines were brought to [occupied city] after the fighting, old and sick people were taken away. Some enthusiasts rescue animals” (Interview L).

These civic networks – expressions of a latent and repressed “civicness” within society – represent a real, existing alternative in everyday life to the repressive totalitarianism of the occupying authorities. While individuals in occupied territories can still maintain communication links with friends and family in unoccupied Ukraine, they are, in most other respects, cut off from the rest of the country. If there is to be some form of ceasefire in the period ahead, which seems plausible, it is crucial for civil society and international actors to push for the restoration of some level of freedom of movement between these territories. This would not legitimise the occupation, but would offer a means to provide greater practical assistance to the informal civic networks operating on the ground in these territories.

Contention with Ukrainian Government Authorities

As mentioned at the outset, post-Maidan Ukrainian public discourse and practices tend to be subject to a dynamic of contention, characterised by push-and-pull dynamics between reform orientated activists and the practices of state authority. On the surface, the Ukrainian state's successful military resistance to the Russian invasion could be expected to have brought it greater legitimacy – and, certainly, the government enjoys very high approval ratings. Citizens' relationship with the Ukrainian state institutions is, however, more complicated than it might appear from the undoubtedly robust societal support for the war effort. The role that civic popular mobilisation has played in driving support to the armed forces and local communities through networked forms, that sometimes side-step or work around the traditional state bureaucracy, imparts a complexity to Ukrainian public authority.²⁰

The civic activist networks we have discussed are entangled in this fraught pattern of contention. In our interviews, a clear majority expressed some level of frustration, criticism and dissatisfaction with their relationship to state authorities (particularly interviews A, B, C, D, K, L, O). The activists saw their flexibility as an advantage vis-à-vis the inertia of the state:

We don't wait for the government to do it, we have the capabilities, we're all learning parallely, so I understand that nobody knew how to do this at the very beginning. There is a lot of inertia in the state, and it's very difficult to deal with non-standard challenges... Many procedures are super well described in the state, but in the conditions of war, they have not shown themselves to be super-efficient (Interview B).

While some talked more positively about their pattern of cooperation with the central government (Interview H), this was not the general tenor of the other interviews. One interesting exception comes from an activist who was mostly critical of the authorities, but spoke positively of their interaction with Oleksandr Vilkul, the head of the Military Administration of Kryvyi Rih. The activist described how "he listened to us, and he helped a lot. He helped with money, repairs, and refuelling" (Interview A). The comment is somewhat notable given that Vilkul is a member of the Vilkul family, a local political dynasty that prior to 2022 were seen as part of the country's more Russia-sympathetic eastern elite.

Publicly and stridently rejecting Russia's overtures in February 2022, Vilkul's backing for Ukraine's resistance to the Russian invasion has long been regarded as totemic of the catastrophic impact of the invasion for any genuine Russian influence inside Ukraine – and as a potential sign of the emergence of a more complex but also more inclusive Ukrainian national identity.²¹

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This research report has drawn testimonies from civic activists and evacuees that highlight how the occupation of Ukrainian territories by Russian forces has resulted in widespread and systematic human rights violations. These territories are also cut-off, to a very significant degree, from the wider Ukrainian polity, illustrated by the very long and risky journeys that have to be undertaken in order to flee the occupation, or even to simply visit loved ones in Ukraine.

At the time of writing, negotiations are underway with the formal aim of bringing the war to some kind of conclusion or temporary ceasefire. Whether the hostilities continue at their current level of intensity, stop for a delineated period, or there is a more sustained cessation of fighting, it seems likely that Russia will remain in some form of de facto control of at least some of the territories it presently occupies, a base that it could utilise for attacks on the rest of Ukraine in the future. The testimonies outlined in this report illustrate the risks of this eventuality from a rights-based perspective, the importance of discussing mitigation measures, and considering the points of leverage that the international community has.

The report has drawn attention to the daily risks to life and liberty of those under occupation, especially through arbitrary detention, deportation and incarceration. This evidence underscores the importance of supporting the advocacy coalition, People First, in their call for the release of those captured during the Russian invasion as a minimum prerequisite for any negotiated settlement.²²

A number of interviewees spoke about the decreased financing available for their projects. Some donors have been less willing to give money for evacuation efforts because they believe it is no longer needed. An important conclusion from the research in this report is the need to recognise the ongoing and sustained threat that the occupation poses to citizens, which creates a sustained need for supporting the work of these networks financially.

Other policy recommendations that arise from the analysis in this report are:

- ▶ Access for and guaranteeing the safety of independent human rights monitors in the territories occupied by Russia.

- ▶ Establish freedom of movement across the lines of control.
- ▶ Support independent investigations to verify reports of abuses and provide the legal groundwork for future accountability and transitional justice.
- ▶ Develop comprehensive aid programs for displaced civilians, ensuring access to medical, psychological, and legal assistance.
- ▶ Ensure that any ceasefire agreement or settlement includes a mechanism for monitoring and scrutinising the human rights situation in occupied territories, potentially through an appropriate international body such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.
- ▶ Provide funds and support to the Ukrainian civic organisations and networks that continue to operate in Russian occupied territory, for example by managing informal networks on the ground that provide transport and short-term stays. This could also be extended to include support for those engaging in counter-propaganda efforts.

While this report has not individually documented human rights abuses to a legal standard, it does provide evidence that underlines the need for the international community to support those that are doing this work, including among others the Centre for Civil Liberties and the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group.

Endnotes

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Appendix: Interview Guides

Format: Semi-structured interview. The researcher undertaking the interview is encouraged to utilise follow-up questions and use the overall structure as an overall guide and infrastructure.

Research subjects may fall into two categories:

- a. Humanitarian responders (business, civic organisations, informal networks) assisting Ukrainians moving from Russian-occupied to Ukraine government territory.
- b. Individuals that have been assisted by these organisations and are now living in Ukraine.

RESEARCH SUBJECT A: HUMANITARIAN RESPONDERS

SECTION 1: The work of the organisation / network

1. Please describe the work you do as an organisation / network / individual?
What is your role at this organisation / network?
2. How long have you been working in this area?
3. Approximately how many people have you assisted up until now?
4. How do people contact you if they are in need of assistance?
5. Could you describe the process of evacuation? How your organisation or network functions? How much people are engaged in the process of one person evacuating?
6. What are the major challenges and problems you encounter when doing this work? What are the risks that this work entails and how you would you describe them?

7. Have you seen 'peaks' and 'slumps' (or 'lows') of the demand from citizens for assistance during different phases of the full-scale Russian invasion? How would you describe these peaks and slumps (lows)? How has the nature of your work changed over time?

SECTION 2: Contact with Russian-occupation authorities

8. What humanitarian crossing points do you use?
9. What is your assessment of the humanitarian corridor that exists at Kolotylivka in the Sumy region? Is your perception and experience that it is functioning effectively and supporting humanitarian goals or not?
10. When the humanitarian crossing point between Russia and Ukraine did not exist what methods did you use to undertake your work?
11. Do you work with Russian civilians (i.e. Russians that are not employed by state authorities or have some other position of public authority) to evacuate Ukrainians from Russian occupied territory? If so, could you describe the nature of this cooperation?
12. To evacuate Ukrainians from Russian-occupied territory presumably some form of contact with the Russian authorities is necessary? Could you describe these contacts?

SECTION 3: Life under Russian occupation in Ukraine

13. There is still very little information regarding life under Russian occupation. International organisations that monitor human rights there have been denied access. What is your assessment of the humanitarian and human rights situation in Russian occupied Ukrainian territory? Please tell us about any concrete facts or testimonies that you have come across in your work.
14. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me. Is there anything else you'd like to add to which you feel is important?

RESEARCH SUBJECT B: CIVILIANS THAT HAVE FLED RUSSIAN OCCUPIED TERRITORY WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF HUMANITARIAN RESPONDERS

SECTION 1: Life under Russian occupation in Ukraine

1. When was your village/town/city occupied by Russia?
2. Were there things that you noticed which immediately changed following the Russian occupation of your village/town/city? How did these changes affect you?
3. How would you describe the situation for (a) security, (b) local services and (c) human rights under Russian occupation of your village/town/city?
4. How did you decide to evacuate? What factors were against such a decision?

5. Did you always plan to flee the Russian occupation or did an event of some kind occur that made you feel like you had to move? Did anyone try to persuade you to stay?
6. Are you still in contact with friends, family or other individuals living in Russian occupied Ukrainian territory? Do you receive any information from them on life under occupation?

SECTION 2: Relationship to organisations assisting evacuation from Russian occupied territory

7. How did you find out about the organisations assisting evacuation from Russian occupied Ukrainian government territory? And how did you make contact with them?
8. Could you describe the process that you went through to be evacuated?
9. Did anyone in the Russian occupying authorities have any knowledge of your evacuation or was it all undertaken in secret? What kind of contacts did you have with the Russian occupying authorities?
10. Were you satisfied with the assistance that the civic networks that supported your evacuation provided? Could you describe your relationship with them and assessment of the work they are undertaking?
11. What humanitarian crossing point did you use? Is your perception and experience that it is functioning effectively and supporting humanitarian goals or not? Do you know other humanitarian crossing points except the one that you used?

12. Do you know other methods (apart from the humanitarian crossing point) to evacuate from Russian occupied territory from the experience of your relatives or friends? Are you aware of examples of people being evacuated prior to this using specific methods?
13. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me. Is there anything else you'd like to add to which you feel is important?

About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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