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# Survival and ‘Civicness’ in the Shadow of Russian Power: The Networks Conducting Evacuations from Ukraine’s Occupied Territories

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## *Abstract*

Evacuations from Russian-occupied territory are sometimes assisted by activist networks. These groups are unusual in the post-2022 context in that they, by necessity, operate across both the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Not only do their testimonies expose the terror of Russian power, but they also shed light on what has been referred to as ‘civicness’ as a type of mutual obligation that has undergirded Ukraine’s resistance. This essay advances our understanding of civicness as a transversal phenomenon that crosses territorial divides and makes the case for viewing the contemporary fragmentation of the global order through the lens of conflicting logics of authority.

A UKRAINIAN WOMAN HAD BEEN LIVING UNDER Russian occupation with her partner and elderly parent in a city on the left bank of the Dnipro. Following the liberation of Kherson and the destruction of the Antonivskyi Bridge by the retreating Russian forces, their city was on the frontline and the site of heavy shelling by both sides. Around 90 km upstream was the Kakhovka Dam. In the early hours of 6 June 2023, it was blown up. Our interviewee, a family member, learned of the destruction of the dam online. She described the communication with her family on that day. The interviewee told them that they should probably evacuate due to the risks of flooding, but the family decided to stay. It took some time for the waters to reach the city, though by nightfall the effects were dramatic. As the waters rose the three had no choice but to go onto the roof of the house. They were joined by their neighbour, whose smaller house was submerged. They stayed

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there for two nights as around 85% of the city was flooded. They were eventually found by a local priest with a small boat. Subsequently, they were taken by Russian forces further into Russian-occupied territory. Warned by locals that the Russian accommodation facilities were ‘like a prison’, they managed to find somewhere else to stay and some basic supplies. After they re-established contact with our interviewee, she decided that they had to leave the Russian-occupied territory. They would do so without the woman’s elderly parent, who was unable to walk and would instead live with another relative. Our interviewee had found out about a volunteer network that helped with evacuations online and contacted them *via* a Telegram channel. Through various stages, the woman and her husband travelled more than 3,000 km to return to a location in Kherson *Oblast*’ about 5 km from where they had escaped, but on the other side of the frontline. They went through two ‘filtrations’, that is, their belongings were searched, and they were questioned, at checkpoints, on the Russian side and on the Ukrainian side. The cost of the journey was funded by the activist network.<sup>1</sup>

This is one of many such stories of hardship and survival in the face of Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine. The length of the journey undertaken by the couple, only to return to a house in close geographical proximity to the point of departure, is revealing of the modalities of war, bordering and belonging (Sampson *et al.* 2016). The social relations that can sometimes form at border posts can disrupt the idea of a tightly defined demarcation between different territories, with the irony that borders often become a site of intense transborder activity (Amelina 2019, 2021). In Ukraine’s case, the lack of porousness in the line of control following the full-scale invasion contrasts dramatically with the interchanges that existed at crossing points after the start of the war in February–March 2014. Sophie Lambroschini described these ecosystems as entailing sets of fluid practices whereby ‘actors on the ground’ engaged in the ‘making and unmaking [of] borders ... “softening” them at times through trans-border activities’ (Lambroschini 2018).<sup>2</sup> Lambroschini notes how in this period (2014–2022), citizens moved across the line of control for a range of practical concerns, with ‘some 30,000 daily transits at five checkpoints, reaching about one million crossings a month’, generating in the process ‘new social spaces revolving around immediate needs’ (Lambroschini 2018). These cross-border relations were radically disrupted and, ultimately, curtailed when the full-scale invasion, combined with Ukraine’s resistance, rendered the line of control largely impermeable. This violent fragmentation of previously existing social relations disrupted these peculiarly bordered ecosystems, but they persisted in new forms.

Lambroschini’s account of the social relations present at the border appears at first dramatically different to those described by our interview subject. Before February 2022, the line of control was an intertwined site of military activity and transversal civilian relations. Following the full-scale invasion, militarisation has rendered it resistant to the kinds of activities that Lambroschini describes as ‘softening’ the border. This ‘hardening’ has, however, displaced geographically rather than entirely upending the networks she describes. Present at each stage of the story of escape outlined by our interviewee was a

<sup>1</sup>Interview C, family member of evacuees, location withheld for security reasons, 27 January 2024.

<sup>2</sup>See also Dullin (2014), Lambroschini (2022).

series of trust-based relations that enabled the family to survive the flood and, in the case of two of them, eventually escape Russian-occupied territory: the priest who went out on a boat to find survivors; the locals who provided shelter and warned them not to go to the Russian accommodation facility; the many individuals who assisted in different ways with the evacuation; those who financed the costs through donations; and those who ran the Telegram channel. While taking place in a setting where totalitarian terror was more pervasive and explicit, these are not so different to the interactions present in Lambroschini's description. In both cases, we can observe practices that traverse the bordering of territory and involve non-violent, everyday relations.

Activities that allow societal relations to be maintained even during violent conflict have been observed as a significant part of the social fabric in other conflict sites. Existing research has referred to these behaviours and relations as 'civicness', a term that has been developed inductively to capture the practices found in sites of conflict that observe logics distinct from the violence and predation associated with these situations (Al-Kaisy 2019; Turkmani & Theros 2019; Kaldor & Radice 2022; Majid 2022; Theros & Turkmani 2022; Czerska-Shaw & Jacoby 2023). Sometimes these civic behaviours and ecosystems may become entangled with logics of violence and predation or involve practices that do not fit neatly onto such binaries of violence *vis-à-vis* non-violence or predation *vis-à-vis* taxation.<sup>3</sup> If civicness is understood as forms of mutual obligation and interchange that generate public goods, then in the Ukrainian case this has taken a specific form comprised of the diversity of actions that have contributed to the protection of Ukraine's institutions and territorial integrity against the aggressor. Unlike in situations of intractable conflict where the state is often captured by violent actors or unable to provide protection against them, the Ukrainian case has seen a complex, symbiotic relationship between state and society that undergirds its military successes in the war. However, as we will show in what follows, this is a sometimes fraught and complex symbiosis, perhaps best seen as a process of 'becoming', rather than a state of 'being'.

This essay uses the paradigm of civicness and the case study of the humanitarian networks to analyse this complexity through several steps. First, we conceptualise civicness as a concept of mutual obligation between individuals and groups in which forms of authority, based on voluntary compliance, emerge that entail some form of implicit social contract. This builds on the work of Ukrainian scholars who have identified the role of collective forms of mutual obligation by civic actors in Ukraine (Kurylo 2025); the role this plays in the challenge of displacement (Sereda 2023); and the scholarship on local sources of democratic resilience (Rabinovych *et al.* 2024; Brovko 2025). Second, we draw on interview data to capture four empirical dimensions of civicness in the Ukrainian case: transversal forms of organisation; informality and mutual aid; tensions between aspirations for survival and liberation; and ambiguities in state-citizen relations. Our overall argument is that these relations of civicness construct an alternative logic of authority to the one represented by the Russian aggressor, which has implications for what we mean by the fragmentation of global order. Russia has, hitherto,

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Peer Schouten's account of the complex political orders present at checkpoints in Central Africa (Schouten 2022).

not been successful in breaking up Ukraine's democratic political authority,<sup>4</sup> in part due to the strength of civicness as the web of obligations uniting the polity. While the rise of the zero-sum authoritarianism encapsulated by the Putin system is a global phenomenon, it is often seen as an ineluctable consequence of a so-called return of great power politics (Mead 2014). We contend that it is better to treat the contemporary breakdown and fragmentation of the global order as involving states and geopolitics but not as defined by them; rather, it involves a range of transversal relations crisscrossing national borders that are not well captured by the hierarchical concept of great powers (Cooper 2024).

### *Public authority, civicness and geopolitical fragmentation*

Research on 'civicness' has started from the premise and empirical observation that, even in situations where violence becomes intractable and widespread, societies do not function through the use of 'raw' power or force. Even violent actors require a level of voluntary compliance from supporters in order to sustain support over time. Often this takes the form of what Alex de Waal calls the 'political market', in which financial rents are offered in return for allegiance (De Waal 2015); for example, for members of an armed group. Alternatively, voluntary compliance may involve some form of exclusionary politics that claims an identity group is threatened by the 'other', as a strategy of maintaining support for elites (Kaldor & De Waal 2020).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, these 'proactive' logics of authority may also coexist and become entangled with the prevalence of atomisation and passivity. In the case of political markets or kleptocracy, there is a deliberate blurring of private and public interests, in contrast to the concept of mutual obligation and the construction of public goods that is characteristic of civicness.

The term 'public authority' has been used as an encompassing concept that captures the different ways in which voluntary compliance can be generated. Thinking about authority in these broader terms recognises the varied ways that such structures may be constructed (Weigand 2022). Mary Kaldor and Marika Theros define public authority in non-normative terms as:

any form of authority beyond the family that commands a minimum of voluntary compliance (even in contexts of substantial coercion); such an authority could be the state, local government, customary authority, religious authority, armed groups, community groups, international agencies, and so on . . . . [This approach studies] public authority as it is . . . and to understand the daily processes producing and contesting it. (Theros & Kaldor 2018, p. 2)

Within this framework, the concept of 'civicness' can be seen as a specific form of public authority. It refers to a structure, or set of relationships, that facilitates the cooperation of individuals and groups on the basis of some kind of mutual obligation to produce a public good. In some cases, this may refer to concrete institutions (or parts of them), but it can also involve collective initiatives that have an informal and, perhaps more ephemeral,

<sup>4</sup>For example, generating what Christine Bell and Laura Wise call a 'fragment state' (Bell & Wise 2022, pp. 577–78).

<sup>5</sup>See also Cooper (2021).

nature. The latter might involve citizens taking initiatives ‘to prevent violence, provide services, and cross sectarian boundaries’ (Kaldor & Radice 2022, p. 133). Civicness is a consciously elastic concept developed inductively on the basis of empirical observations in conflict-impacted contexts. This scholarly use reflects dissatisfaction with the terminology of ‘civil society’, which tends to be narrowly associated with organisations such as NGOs, to capture these diverse activities and logics (Kaldor & Radice 2022).

Civicness is highly germane to the Ukrainian case, which has long been marked by low levels of trust towards political institutions but strong citizen-to-citizen relations (Artiukh & Fedirko 2025). The state has often been seen as a vehicle for corruption and patrimonial politics (Hale 2015) or simply burdened by byzantine complexity and inefficiency.<sup>6</sup> Ukraine’s statehood has been viewed as both an achievement of independence and the aspiration for self-government, and as a political order rife with Russian influence-peddling and kleptocracy. Its twenty-first century revolutions, the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014), were moments of dramatic contention between these dimensions of statehood and Ukraine’s external relations. In the post-Maidan era, the imaginary of a ‘do-it-yourself’ spirit based on the autonomous power of citizens (Channell-Justice 2022) retained a hold over many citizens and animated their self-activity and cooperation (Krapfl & Kühn von Burgsdorff 2023). Ukraine’s civicness occurred within an overall framework marked by a democratic process of state formation, but one that was flawed, non-linear and ‘incomplete’, requiring a pattern of mobilisation that continually probed, tested and sought to reform political institutions. One feature of this ‘mentality’ lies in its focus on dealing with the demands of a situation in the present moment, an aspect reinforced by the brutality of the war. As Darkovich *et al.* put it, commenting on research findings from a panel of civic activists, they ‘operate under immense stress [but] their resilience is rooted in improvisational problem-solving, mutual aid networks, and a pragmatic, sometimes sceptical view of state institutions’ (Darkovich *et al.* 2025, p. 68). Perhaps this gives a particular sense of temporality to civicness in the Ukrainian context, one grounded in the demands of the present moment. Below, we find that this dynamic is present in our own data, as activists undertaking this work are firmly embedded in the turmoil and crisis of the conjuncture.

Ukraine’s development, which has seen the democratic reform of the state, such as the much-heralded decentralisation reforms devolving powers to local municipalities, has proceeded in a contentious but still rule-based manner, with major differences addressed non-violently. This style of development contrasts with sites of intractable conflict where civicness has previously been studied, such as Syria (Theros & Turkmani 2022) and Somalia (Majid 2022). In the latter, the proliferation of violent actors and fragmented institutions often confine ‘shoots’ of civicness to localities, individuals or networks. This situation may lead to the institutionalisation of a ‘hyper-fragmented space’ enclosed by the formal territorial boundaries of the state (Bell & Wise 2022, pp. 577–78) but lacking the features of Weberian statehood.

Ukraine has avoided this transition to state breakdown. While the state has been a persistent object of contention between different camps, it has proven able to manage these tensions and

<sup>6</sup>For example, see some of the vignettes in Khromeychuk (2022).

retain a ‘Weberian’ character, that is, maintain its monopoly on force and institutional coherence (Weber 2008). This poses a question, then, of how the features of Weberian statehood have endured despite Russia’s attempts, from hybrid war to the full-scale invasion, to undermine the coherence and sovereignty of Ukrainian statehood. One possibility is that the logic of civiness has predominated over other logics, in part because there was a shared desire to maintain stable social relations, despite competing identity camps (see Denys Gorbach’s essay in this special issue). This could be observed in response to both the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions; for example, in the reluctance of most southern and eastern elites with pro-Moscow leanings to support anti-government sedition in the 2014 crisis (Arel & Driscoll 2023). Moscow’s anticipation that this would occur misread a nostalgia for the Soviet Union, common among older generations and drawn on by local elites, for sympathy with Russia’s imperial ambitions (Gorbach 2022). The concept of mutual obligation characteristic of civiness could therefore integrate quite differing conceptions of historical memory and identity into the project of an independent Ukraine. The depth of opposition to the invasion could be argued to constitute a material force in the war, especially in February–October 2022, when popular mobilisation was critical to victories at the Battle of Kyiv and the autumn counteroffensive. Nonetheless, there remain unresolved tensions and divergent perspectives on memory and identity, which may become sources of contention in how Ukrainians narrate their story and identity in the future (Zhurzenko 2014; Applebaum *et al.* 2020).

The transition from the 2014–2022 phase of the war to the full-scale invasion of February 2022 also marked a change in how civiness interacted with territorialisation, as evident in the quite different descriptions of the lines of control that opened the present essay. Civiness was partially territorialised with the full-scale invasion insofar as the overwhelming, predominant goal of this inter-citizen activity became the liberation of occupied areas and the territorial integrity of the polity. At the same time, however, the bonds of obligation that animate the construction of Ukraine as a democratic idea have also proven able to transverse borders; for example, through the development of highly informal humanitarian relief networks extending from European states into Ukraine (Czerska-Shaw & Jacoby 2023). The relief networks supporting evacuation from occupied to unoccupied territory are an extension of this societal support system, which has undergirded Ukraine’s resilience in the war and maintained its cohesion as a democratic state. The testimonies from these volunteers also provide an insight into the totalitarianism of Russian occupation and the difficult choices that it poses to citizens.

### *Methodology*

The research team undertook 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews with research subjects who had experience of the evacuation process. Another research subject preferred to provide written answers to a questionnaire, making a total of 13 research subjects. The majority of these (nine interviews) were civic activists and humanitarian responders. One (interviewee C) was a family member of an evacuee who had engaged with a volunteer network.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Interview C, family member of evacuees, location withheld for security reasons, 27 January 2024.

Two others were evacuees (interviewees E and N).<sup>8</sup> Another (interviewee L) was living under Russian occupation and undertook the interview while visiting family in Ukrainian-controlled territory.<sup>9</sup> Two lists of questions were prepared, one for civic activists and humanitarian responders, the other for evacuees. The team members undertaking the interviews had the freedom to ask further questions if they judged that more information was needed on a particular topic and that additional questions could generate new findings. It should be borne in mind that interviewees were often talking about evacuation processes occurring in different time periods and locations; furthermore, an evacuation under occupation in the first months of the full-scale war differed from one undertaken in 2024.

In advance of undertaking the interviews, the research team were mindful that research subjects would likely be traumatised in various ways. The team collectively discussed how to approach different questions with sensitivity and to not pursue lines of discussion in the interview that were causing distress to the research subject. Verbal consent was granted at the beginning of the interview for the use of the data for research purposes following an explanation of the research project. The interviews were conducted in January and February 2024 in Ukrainian by two members of the research team, then translated into English, anonymised and discussed with two other team members. There was one issue of translation discussed among the research team, the distinction between ‘evacuations’ (*evakuatsiya*) and ‘departure’ (*vyizd*). The team settled on the use of ‘evacuation’ throughout the essay as the most appropriate English word but—as discussed further below—some of the activists were reluctant to use this word due to its association in Ukrainian with an official process.

The personal details of research subjects were not shared with other members of the research team to ensure the safety of interviewees. In the analysis stage, a quote bank was prepared and coded, then discussed collectively as a research team, before moving to the writing up of the research findings. At the write-up stage formulations were checked to remove specific details that may have inadvertently identified or been used to identify the research subjects.

As a research team we were conscious of the fact that two of us were based permanently in a warzone, while the other two were living in safety and based at privileged Western institutions. Given this structural inequality, we were mindful that ‘knowledge hierarchies’ (Sereda & Mikheieva 2026, p. 696) may be constructed between Western academic and field researchers. While acknowledging this risk, our starting point is that working collaboratively with field researchers—drawing on their immense insight and knowledge of the context—is crucial to generate high quality, evidence-based research. While hierarchy is, to some extent, a function of payment for research assistance, we attempted to mitigate this inequality through collective engagement at each research stage, up to and including co-authoring the present essay.

<sup>8</sup>Interview E, evacuee (person who left occupied territory), location withheld for security reasons, 27 January 2024; interview N, evacuee, location withheld for security reasons, 8 February 2024.

<sup>9</sup>Interview L, evacuee, location withheld for security reasons, February 2024.



*Territorial fragmentation through occupation and terror: civiness as transversal resistance*

The networks conducting evacuations form a chain of scattered actors, not necessarily highly coordinated but sharing an impetus to support their fellow citizens. The interviews revealed that these networks are extremely diverse and ever evolving based on the imperatives of crossings, which do not follow a predefined, negotiated or conclusive process. Instead, they are shaped by the movement of the frontline as well as the political will of the Russian military authorities that arbitrarily decide whether to let the corridor operate or to close it.<sup>10</sup>

Evacuators and evacuees operate in geopolitically fragmented spaces and margins to defy the totalitarian regime of occupation. Interviewee A described the difficulties experienced by those who move across the borderlines: ‘People were [allowed] to drive there, then they weren’t. It was challenging’.<sup>11</sup> Aggressive filtration, including extensive searches and interrogation,<sup>12</sup> acts as an important deterrent to crossing, since safe passage is by no means guaranteed.<sup>13</sup> Despite this some undertake circular forms of migration, to keep in touch with family members. One interviewee, a volunteer and journalist, shared the account of the seven-day journey undertaken by their parents from occupied territory to Latvia and then Kyiv—which they then undertook in the opposite direction, returning to the occupation. They continued to live in occupied Mariupol, where they were forced to take Russian passports, and described long delays at the border: ‘The queue was artificially maintained, because Russians entering Russia passed it in a few hours, while Moldovans, people with Ukrainian passports and other nationalities stood in line. One car was allowed through for one day’.<sup>14</sup> Bribes are sometimes paid to make it to the other side, both on their way in and their way out of the occupied territories. As one activist puts it, ‘we provided them [the Russian soldiers] with everything ... except, if you’ll pardon the expression, “prostitutes and cocaine”. They had so many requests: barbecue, fresh pork’.<sup>15</sup> The fundamentally asymmetric power relations between citizens and officials at crossing points creates uncertainty and unpredictability for those seeking escape. Arbitrary decisions by authorities often compound this basic inequality. Belarus’s

<sup>10</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024. Please note, we distinguish between unregistered and registered volunteer organisations: the latter are officially registered as civil society organisations, but this is not the case when it comes to the former, which continue to operate informally.

<sup>11</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

<sup>12</sup>Interview C, family member of evacuees, location withheld for security reasons, 27 January 2024.

<sup>13</sup>Interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024.

<sup>14</sup>Interview F, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 4 February 2024.

<sup>15</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

refusal in December 2023 to allow transit for Ukrainians who refused to take out Russian passports is a case in point.<sup>16</sup>

Testimonies reveal how some see escape as a political act of collective resistance to the occupation. For interview subjects with previous activist experience, their engagement in evacuation networks was seen as continuous with their previous efforts at fighting Russian aggression since 2014: ‘It all started with an active stance against the Russian invasion of our territory ... supporting Euromaidan and participating in pro-Ukrainian rallies in the Luhansk region. And then, after the start of hostilities, it’s humanitarian aid to those who were forced to leave their homes because of the war’.<sup>17</sup>

Others, driven by personal motivations, had stepped in based on the resources available to them, their individual skills and personal networks.<sup>18</sup> However, volunteers generally did not frame their activity in terms of high democratic ideals and resistance to totalitarianism. When invited to discuss their motivations, the majority emphasised the practicalities: what they did, in concrete terms, to get the evacuating networks up and running and not so much why they chose to undertake this activity. While their activism clearly did have some element of democratic impetus, this focus on the everyday, of supporting individuals and groups to survive and live out their lives, was given much more emphasis than any partisan identification or political motive.

The commitment to provide safety, shelter, relief or simply a way out to those who need it the most<sup>19</sup> appears to act as the ‘glue’, so to speak, that links the civic networks and individuals together. In short, it is humanitarian support and self-help that forms the public good constructed by these networks, rendering the activity both political, insofar as it is shaped by the power relations imposed by Russian occupying authorities, and non-political at the same time. The civic practices that emerge from these social relations are thus for the most part only implicitly contrasted (Kaldor 2015) with the violent repression of Russian power. While these networks are not a resistance movement, they draw attention to the repressive logic of the Russian occupation and the struggle for everyday survival.

These civic networks are tied together by the citizen-to-citizen trust that has shaped democratic mobilisation in post-independence Ukraine (Channell-Justice 2022). They manifest in this sense a ‘radical interpersonal trust’ (Czerska-Shaw & Jacoby 2023) that brings together individuals who, without necessarily having known or connected with each other before, form a transboundary support system. Interviewee A explained how he coordinated a local network of evacuation in Mykolaiv at the start of the war through a

<sup>16</sup>Interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024; interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.

<sup>17</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

<sup>18</sup>Interview F, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 4 February 2024.

<sup>19</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

person he ‘had never seen [before] in ... [his] life’, collected information through social media on evacuees and relied on this acquaintance to transport people out.<sup>20</sup>

In processing and organising the evacuations, the concept of mutual aid also applies between volunteer organisations themselves. One interviewee described how they network with coordinators from other humanitarian responders in group chats, creating a horizontal communication structure that is able to plug gaps. If, for example, one organiser is struggling to fulfil a request, they can push it out to the wider network.<sup>21</sup> As another example, interviewee H gave us a glimpse of how, in an emergency and without much field contact, a new network of volunteers formed after the closing of the Kakhovs’ke reservoir crossing point. ‘Rebuilding the same system’ from scratch mainly involves recreating in the new local ecosystem a network of trusted drivers in the occupied territories.<sup>22</sup> Interviewee D said that, given the closing of the evacuation routes, the volunteers were left with no other choice than to cross into Russian-controlled territory. D stressed that the whole operation was made possible there thanks to a local ‘partner volunteer community in the Russian Federation and in the temporarily occupied regions of Ukraine that helps us to evacuate people there at their own expense’.<sup>23</sup> In a Ukrainian political context, in which any contact with Russian nationals tends to be stigmatised, this under-the-surface collaboration between activists maintains an element of international cooperation despite the war of aggression waged by the Russian state.

Furthermore, the hardening of the line of control and the subsequent difficulties in traversing it meant that the civic networks had to expand operations into Russia itself, simply on the practical grounds of facilitating evacuations. Russian volunteers who assist the evacuees do so at considerable personal risk of repression by the Russian regime. Interviewee O recalled the case of a Russian individual from Belgorod arrested for espionage after they helped a single person cross from Kolotylyvka to the Ukrainian side through the grey zone.<sup>24</sup> However, coercive measures have not eradicated participation. Interviewee C, in describing the evacuation of his mother, gave the following example of how these transboundary international networks operate:

The whole bus, everybody was picked up by different people. I don’t know who took the other people. But my mother and her husband were taken by a ... religious family from the church, and they provided them with everything they needed: clothes, food and everything else. Then this volunteer service that helped remotely *via* the internet, guided them, helped them to buy a Russian SIM card to stay in touch. And then they bought them train tickets to Belgorod. ... They

<sup>20</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

<sup>21</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

<sup>22</sup>Interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024.

<sup>23</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.

<sup>24</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

were then put on the train to Belgorod by this ... family in Simferopol, and they went to Belgorod on the train, across the Crimean bridge.<sup>25</sup>

Interviewee F underlined that ties with Russia-based partners were indispensable, despite reservations and constraints, ‘because we need to contact the people who are there, who may be Russians. And we need to spend money on something like rail tickets’, which are difficult for individuals outside of Russia to purchase.<sup>26</sup> The testimony of interviewee O, who used the pejorative term ‘Orcs’, which is popular in Ukrainian public discourse, to describe some of the Russians that they worked with, suggests a distinction made by activists between Russians who assist on a voluntary basis and those that carry people through the border in exchange for substantial payment. Yet, this interviewee also acknowledged the centrality of Russia-based networks of volunteers in supporting the evacuation efforts.<sup>27</sup> This chain of solidarity is born from the refusal to comply with authoritarianism and terror, and indeed, the commitment to challenge the regime.

The transboundary dimension is not limited to Russia and Ukraine but also involves individuals and networks from abroad who join the effort of local civic actors through donations or direct engagement. These international links have proven key to preserving the evacuation networks at the local level. They contribute to the public good sustained by these activities through logistical and technical support. For example, the evacuation network organised by interviewee A is coordinated from Europe by a Russian volunteer. The Russian coordinator is responsible for planning evacuation routes and administrating the application process, while local volunteers handle the transfers on the ground.<sup>28</sup> International networks based on shared expertise and experiences of war zones also help build the capacity of volunteer networks through knowledge transfer (Mikheieva & Kuznetsova 2024). Interviewee D recalled a Columbian mentor, who had previously worked in conflict zones at home, and other ‘volunteers from various international organisations who had experience of working in Afghanistan’.<sup>29</sup> Interviewee G had teamed up with a group of German volunteers as well as with a ‘friendly little American organisation’ that participated in the evacuation processes.<sup>30</sup> These illustrations of the role of transnational networks as a source of learning and resource mobilisation are consistent with other research that highlights the role that these external actors and networks have played in Ukraine’s national liberation struggle (Czerska-Shaw & Jacoby 2023). This has a ‘levelling effect’ on the otherwise ‘David and Goliath’ conflict, translating Ukraine’s moral standing as the victim of Russian aggression into practical assistance, which provides a line of direct material support to Ukrainian society.

<sup>25</sup>Interview C, family member of evacuees, location withheld for security reasons, 27 January 2024.

<sup>26</sup>Interview F, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 4 February 2024.

<sup>27</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

<sup>28</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

<sup>29</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.

<sup>30</sup>Interview G, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 7 February 2024.

*Informality and organisational capacity: the transition from friendship-circle-activism to (semi)professional infrastructure*

In the immediate aftermath of invasion, volunteers did not generally operate as part of large-scale networks, but instead as individuals or small associations of friends and acquaintances with a sense of mutual obligation. These informal relations among citizens, based on high trust levels—often juxtaposed with distrust towards the state itself (Artiukh & Fedirko 2025)—represent the kind of self-organised civic voluntarism that flourished during Euromaidan and has durably imprinted and shaped Ukrainian social activism (Shapovalova *et al.* 2017). Interviewee O recalled his first days of volunteer activity, which was, above all, a response to the immediate need to provide reliable and accessible information channels: ‘It just started with friends on Telegram, because we needed somewhere to just exchange information from the first hours of the war’, they explained, adding that the network of volunteers quickly grew from this small circle to include some 60 people. Their Telegram chat aimed to help people navigate and survive the early stage of the occupation: ‘We wrote about finding checkpoints, where pharmacies were open. In general, just the new rules of existence in the occupation’.<sup>31</sup> Their network was structured around the objectives of providing humanitarian aid to the occupied territories and organising departures. Forced to leave the occupied territories themselves having been targeted by the authorities, at the time of interview, interviewee O was operating from Ukrainian-controlled territories, in charge of the Telegram channel where the requests for transfers were sent: ‘Someone writes, “I found out about you” or just, “Hello. Help me leave”. And then we start based on what they’ve written. There’s a simple ready-made phrase: “Where are you from? How many people? Where are you going? Where do you need to go?”’.<sup>32</sup> Once the volunteers had this information, they found and paid carriers and organised the itinerary of the journey, with the help of a network of coordinators. This network reported exponential growth, with an explosion of requests.<sup>33</sup> Interviewee B explained that he had joined this particular volunteer network through personal connections: ‘As of 2022, there were about 35 people in the fund, now [in February 2024] about 300’.<sup>34</sup>

These networks offer examples of how civicness manifests through informal practices of solidarity and is then institutionalised through the formation of NGOs or other organisational forms. At first, the operations ran on interpersonal trust and informality.<sup>35</sup> Then over time the networks formalised their procedures step-by-step, centralising requests through social media and call centres and in setting up an organised *modus operandi* for assisting departures. Interviewee D detailed the opening of a dedicated website with a simple

<sup>31</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

<sup>32</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

<sup>33</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

<sup>34</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

<sup>35</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

design to address some of the most common issues raised by those seeking evacuation.<sup>36</sup> The site took basic details from evacuees, ‘where they were, how they wanted to be taken out, whether they were bedridden or walking, whether they were elderly, what region, location’.<sup>37</sup> The standardisation of procedures was a response to the high numbers of applications. According to interviewee H, their network undertook to evacuate between 700 and 1,500 people per week throughout the summer of 2022, reaching around 16,000 prior to the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive of autumn 2022, and between 350 and 400 requests per month between December 2023 and January 2024 from territories still under Russian occupation.<sup>38</sup> As of June 2026, the NGO, Helping to Leave, publicly states that its operations alone have evacuated some 20,000 from Russia, Belarus and the occupied Ukrainian territories.<sup>39</sup>

Some networks<sup>40</sup> expanded their capacities through grant applications, field cooperation with the Ukrainian authorities, international NGOs and international organisations, and through *ad hoc* donations from companies and foundations as well as private citizens.<sup>41</sup> Yet, they retained a high degree of informality that, on the one hand, allowed them to navigate the challenges encountered on the field but, on the other hand, also significantly constrained their capacity. The networks retained their character as citizen-to-citizen initiatives of mutual assistance, a defining component of their activism that volunteers were adamant to preserve: ‘When you start to negotiate at the level of a leader or a state, it all just starts to come to a standstill, and it will get worse. Therefore, it is our practice, our experience, that everything works exclusively based on people’s agreement with each other, and that’s it’.<sup>42</sup> However, the scarcity of resources, the high risks and the nature of the occupying regime severely impeded the work of the volunteers. Some interviewees argued that donors tended to not see evacuations as a priority or were constrained by restrictions on getting finance to local volunteer networks operating in Russia.<sup>43</sup> A degree of discouragement and activism fatigue in the face of those shortcomings was perceptible. As one interviewee put it, ‘the lack of funding is a disaster ... . And it really demotivates the team; our entire team also works on a volunteer basis ... it’s really hard to emotionally

<sup>36</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.

<sup>37</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.

<sup>38</sup>Interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024.

<sup>39</sup>‘Evacuation From the Temporarily Occupied Territories and From Russia and Belarus’, Helping to Leave, available at: <https://helpingtoleave.org/en/projects/evacuation/34>, accessed 11 June 2026.

<sup>40</sup>For example, see the list of supporters of the NGO Helping to Leave: ‘Evacuation from the Temporarily Occupied Territories and From Russia and Belarus’, Helping to Leave, available at: <https://helpingtoleave.org/en/projects/evacuation/34>, accessed 11 June 2026.

<sup>41</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024; interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.

<sup>42</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.

<sup>43</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024; interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024.

support the team constantly ... it's like a band-aid on a bleeding wound'.<sup>44</sup> Some expressed doubts on the feasibility and viability of their activities without transitioning to a more professional organisational setup. At a certain point some of these networks came to the conclusion that they had reached the limits of what they could do on a voluntary basis, given the scarcity of the resources and the extent of the challenges. While interviewee A stresses that 'nobody would tell me that I did it for money',<sup>45</sup> others deem financial support necessary to keep on going at such a pace:

There shouldn't be volunteers there, in principle. I also changed my vision of volunteering ... I mean, at the beginning it was very relevant, when, again, there were no resources, no organisation, and self-organisation really pulled out all the stops. But, in general, we all live in the real world, where money is a resource, a resource for survival. In adult-to-adult cooperation, monetary remuneration is just more convenient and just gives you some kind of stability.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the interviews, activists tended to insist that they did not organise 'evacuations' (*evakuatsiya*), which they see as implying a more systemic, organised policy. As interviewee O put it:

we try not to use that word at all. So that people don't think, well, evacuation, it's an organised process, somehow planned. We are not an evacuation flight. This is very important for people to understand. So they understand that their lives are in their hands, that they are responsible.<sup>47</sup>

Instead they talked about organising a 'departure' (*vyizdx*), to capture the self-organised nature of the activity and manage expectations in the context of such an acute crisis:

you're planning to get there as quickly as possible, to pick up that elderly women, and to leave as quickly as possible ... a lot of logistics had broken down, there were many villages that were difficult to reach ... There was no intensive evacuation of any kind ... It was more of a humanitarian mission.<sup>48</sup>

This activist had been involved in attempts to evacuate frontline areas under threat from advancing Russian troops, utilising the legal instrument directed at sites of active, on-going or potential armed conflict. Given that the Ukrainian state lacks the organisational competency to support the evacuation effort, 'specially trained people, specially trained services', they questioned whether its use of mandatory state evacuation orders, while still

<sup>44</sup>Interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024. Similar remarks were also present in interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

<sup>45</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

<sup>46</sup>Interview G, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 7 February 2024.

<sup>47</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

<sup>48</sup>Interview G, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 7 February 2024.

relying on activists to handle the process, is appropriate.<sup>49</sup> This can put activists in a difficult position when some citizens are unwilling to heed the evacuation order, a trend sometimes identified with older generations.<sup>50</sup> Despite the resolve of the volunteers, civicness—as a sense of shared, mutual obligation—has been continually put to the test by the realities of war, as these networks have to find a way to navigate pressures from state and society. They are placed in an ‘in-between’ position *vis-à-vis* the state and individual citizens as they become semi-professional organisations mediating between these levels and the social contract that underpins the societal support for Ukraine’s resistance to the invasion.

*Civicness fragmented by war, occupation and terror*

The findings from the interviews can, at one level, be read as illustrative of a form of civicness that is articulated against ‘uncivic’ politics (Kaldor & Radice 2022). Networks operating based on a tacit social contract and mutual obligation have played a vital role in Ukraine’s resistance to the Russian invasion and the regime of terror imposed in the occupied territories. Yet, the interviews also reveal more complex oscillations between survival and resignation, as well as the difficult trade-offs between hopes of liberation and fears of war returning to occupied towns and cities. They reveal, in short, the complexity of such mutual obligations and how activists are forced into difficult compromises.

Some interviewees recounted the impunity enjoyed by Russian occupation troops committing atrocities. In that respect, they reinforced conclusions of other recent scholarship on Russia’s occupation that has identified the use of militarisation, administrative coercion and economic exploitation (Lewis 2025) and a multifaceted Russification process encompassing bureaucratic, educational, symbolic and ideological dimensions. These strategies are enforced through ‘a combination of repression and incentives’ (Semyvolos *et al.* 2025). As one interviewee put it, lives under occupation face a ‘a state of oppression’.<sup>51</sup>

Russian aggression has targeted not only lands and territory but the people and communities that reside there (Hird 2024). However, our interviews suggested that there is not one single, homogenised regime of occupation imposed on occupied territory but, instead, that Russia governs erratically, through chaos, lawlessness and arbitrary terror, the intensity of which varies throughout the occupied regions: ‘The closer to the demarcation line, the fewer rights people have. [The Russians] ... can just break into houses at night, where people are sleeping, and demand to check their phones’.<sup>52</sup> Indiscriminate violence against civilians is a recurrent pattern of the Russian occupation,

<sup>49</sup>Interview G, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 7 February 2024.

<sup>50</sup>Interview G, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 7 February 2024.

<sup>51</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

<sup>52</sup>Interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024.



and several instances of war crimes were relayed in the interviews, including the random killings of civilians. Interviewee K recalled one such atrocity:

A Russian officer came in. He says, ‘I need your car, I need to drive’. The doctor said, ‘I can’t give you a car because I’m disabled. Well, I won’t be able to go home’. ‘No, you give it to me, and that’s it’. He said: ‘No, I won’t’. [The soldier] ... turned around and shot him.<sup>53</sup>

While the brutality of the occupation regime varies according to individual Russian troops, the overall goals are uniform: Russification, the irreversibility and inevitability of the occupation, and an overriding totalitarian mode of governance.

The bureaucratic aspect of Russification involves targeting Ukrainians on the basis of citizenship and making them into second-class citizens if they resist ‘passportisation’ (Semyvolos *et al.* 2025), that is, being forced to take out Russian passports in order to access basic public services. Interviewee B said that ‘without a Russian passport, you can’t even go to the hospital’.<sup>54</sup> Interviewee D explained that the denial of access to services acts as a means of coercive control. Shamefully, this means that ‘even people with diseases, with serious conditions, cannot get normal medical care’.<sup>55</sup> Yet, a Russian passport also does not guarantee—far from it—any respect for its holder’s basic civil and human rights.<sup>56</sup> In this way, bureaucratisation and administrative dysfunction themselves become weapons of the occupation, bringing chaos into the relationship between citizen and occupier and undermining any pretence of a rights-based set of social relations between the governed and the governing.

Russification (Semyvolos *et al.* 2025) also entails the suppression of Ukrainian identity through the systemic targeting of those who intend to preserve it through civic engagement or are simply living the everyday practice of their nationality and identity. The interviews provided several illustrations of such repression. A priest who was travelling around occupied territories to bring relief and assistance to the Ukrainian population seeking to leave was detained and tortured in one of ‘the basements’<sup>57</sup> on the sole charge of ‘keeping up the Ukrainian spirit’.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, a Ukrainian teacher who continued teaching schoolchildren remotely when schools were made to teach in Russian was arrested and tortured. Even the most everyday practices, such as ‘reading Ukrainian news and communicating with Ukraine’ are repressed systematically, leading to the use of basic burner phones for day-to-day communication and thus avoiding the use of smartphones with access to Ukrainian news sources on the internet.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Interview K, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 4 March 2024.

<sup>54</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

<sup>55</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.

<sup>56</sup>Interview C, family member of evacuees, location withheld for security reasons, 27 January 2024.

<sup>57</sup>A colloquial term for the occupying authorities’ underground detention and torture facilities.

<sup>58</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

<sup>59</sup>Interview C, family member of evacuees, location withheld for security reasons, 27 January 2024.

Occupied territories are not only domains of repression but also spaces where criminality thrives and the rule of law is non-existent. Interviewee A told the story of a coffee shop owner in Mariupol who tried to report that they had been robbed by a Russian soldier. The response of the police officer was to suggest that they may as well have asked for their café to be ‘burned down’ and ‘should leave’. Interviewee A was left wondering, ‘what justice can you expect here?’ given the impunity and absence of any rules-based constraint that characterises the occupying authorities.<sup>60</sup>

### *Repression, trust and distrust under occupation*

Organising evacuations was complicated by the hardening of the border as Russia expanded its occupation across 2022, creating a much more non-porous line of control compared to the first phase of the war.<sup>61</sup> Interviewee L, who had lived under occupation since 2014, recalled:

There were ... many transportation options for Ukraine. Announcements are broadcast on local TV, posted on every entrance, shops and poles. There were buses from the bus station to Troitsk checkpoint [Volnovakha] and Aleksandrovka [Maryinka] ... There were no special preparations for the trips: we collected documents, personal belongings, some food, medication, and a reserve of patience ... The prices were acceptable at that time. The authorities did not prevent people from travelling. Many people had children, parents and property in that territory.<sup>62</sup>

From autumn 2022, by contrast, it was impossible to cross from the occupied territories directly into the government-controlled territory of Ukraine. Passage through Davydiv-Brid (Khersonska *Oblast'*), Orikhiv and Vasylivka (Zaporizhzhia *Oblast'*), Snihurivka (Mykolayivska *Oblast'*) was no longer possible.<sup>63</sup> To leave, it was necessary to travel through from Russia to third countries or through the Kolotylivka-Pokrovka crossing between Belgorod *Oblast'* (RF) and Summy *Oblast'* (Ukraine).<sup>64</sup> In addition, there was also another, less-known route through Belarus using the Mokrani-Domanovo corridor.<sup>65</sup>

As the number of evacuation routes has reduced, the intrusion and repression at the remaining checkpoints have increased. Whether people are allowed to cross or not is often an arbitrary decision by checkpoint officers.<sup>66</sup> The treatment of former members of the Ukrainian armed forces who served in what was then known as the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone, the areas of Luhansk and Donetsk occupied by Russia between 2014 and

<sup>60</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

<sup>61</sup>On the latter, as discussed at the outset, see Lambroschini (2022).

<sup>62</sup>Interview L, evacuee (person who left occupied territory), location withheld for security reasons, February 2024.

<sup>63</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

<sup>64</sup>The Kolotylivka-Pokrovka cross-point was functioning fairly consistently but was closed in August 2024 after the Ukrainian Kursk offensive.

<sup>65</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024; interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024.

<sup>66</sup>Interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024.

2022, is particularly harsh. While these individuals are subject to severe repression by the regime, they are far from the only targets.<sup>67</sup> After the Kakhovka power station was blown up in June 2023, the FSB used evacuation lists of those made homeless to control and restrict the movements of the population. Being held in barracks in the guise of shelter meant that they had a status closer to that of prisoners than of civilian victims of a disaster.<sup>68</sup> The paranoia of the occupying authority sees all forms of civilian cooperation and interchange independent of the regime as a potential threat to its domination. There is, of course, a kernel of truth to this fear of the citizenry: the types of interchanges and societal relations present from the small acts of helping neighbours facing repression to more organised forms of civic cooperation do construct an alternative to logic of authority to the authoritarianism of the occupiers.

The networks conducting evacuations must navigate harassment by the occupying forces and authorities. Drivers risk arrest, interrogation and torture. One interviewee referred to how the Russians had started ‘hunting the whole team’ to underline how systemic the repression is.<sup>69</sup> In the same *oblast* (Kherson) but in a different city (Oleshky), one interviewee recalled how volunteers were fired on, as if they were military personnel, to stop them entering the city.<sup>70</sup> As O explained, for the Russian regime, gaining control over the civic support networks operating independently is one of the ways, apart from violence, to regulate and tame the populace: ‘They came, made things worse, and we fixed it. They make conditions worse for living, and we, like, know how to help these people, help, and they see it ... They just wanted to control it. They wanted to be in touch with the organisers, coordinators, money’.<sup>71</sup> Still, such actions have not put an end to the evacuation networks that have persevered, exemplifying the resilience of these citizen-to-citizen relations. In some cases, repression acted as an impetus for volunteers to intensify their activity, to get their loved ones to safety or simply to ensure that social cohesion was not extinguished: ‘I managed to evacuate everyone ... Managed them to pass through *X* [in Vasylivka], even with a full bus of women and children. And I hid those who [were] left in *X* [in Kherson]’.<sup>72</sup>

The interviews also testified to the everyday struggles to survive the occupation, the difficult choices this can pose and the severe erosion of social fabric by the war. At the time of the interviews, some of the occupied territories had been warzones for nearly ten years, and war-weariness was pronounced. Interviewee F described an ambiguous mentality not uncommon among occupied citizenry, hoping for the withdrawal of Russian forces while not wanting the frontline to return to their cities. The same interviewee

<sup>67</sup>Interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024.

<sup>68</sup>Interview C, family member of evacuees, location withheld for security reasons, 27 January 2024.

<sup>69</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

<sup>70</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.

<sup>71</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

<sup>72</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

further related how some people made comments such as ‘the main thing is that they don’t shoot ... that there is peace [or] ... it doesn’t matter who we’re under’, adding:

my parents are the same. They also want to live like before. They want to live in Ukraine. But in Mariupol. In Ukrainian Mariupol. That’s why they are not leaving. But on the other hand, they are not ready for armed de-occupation. These are deeply traumatised people ... They just want a fucking miracle to happen.<sup>73</sup>

As individuals often hold a range of contradictory ideas at the same time, this is not, of course, especially surprising. Yet, these differing, potentially contradictory aspirations are also illustrative of the brutal trade-offs that the war has imposed. Wanting political justice and to live in peace and safety are not easy to reconcile for those at the sharp end of war and occupation.

While the civic networks conducting the evacuations evidence the endurance of citizen-to-citizen trust, some of the testimonies also implied a level of social atomisation. Fear, suspicion and paranoia are widespread. Interviewee O spoke of the local market as the hotbed for gathering strategic information: ‘All of our people are constantly listening to something there, and people at the market were often sources of information for us ... . And for the orcs [Russian military], they too, like, well, they eavesdrop there, they send their people ... . Sometimes it’s hard to notice a collaborator, damn it’.<sup>74</sup> Activists were predictably scathing of collaborators, especially those among local elites who would rally behind the occupant and become active agents of the occupation regime (Semyvolos *et al.* 2025). Interviewee N referred to his hometown as ‘a disgrace of a city’ for advertising the benefits of collaboration on its website, and thereby encouraging the rest of the occupied cities to follow.<sup>75</sup> Interviewee O described a case of a Servants of the People (*Slohu narodu*) politician who had initially supported their humanitarian work only to then betray them to the authorities. Despite expressing their disillusionment, some of the activists also offer nuances. Interviewee O noted that while they ‘didn’t expect so many people to switch to the Russian side’, that is, collaborate, very few had done so out of any enthusiasm for the regime’s ideological claims.<sup>76</sup> Rather, it is resignation and fear that motivate those inclined towards collaboration; what one interviewee calls ‘a state of oppression’.<sup>77</sup>

Russian propaganda has been working to persuade citizens that they have been abandoned by the Ukrainian authorities. This messaging urges citizens to ‘reorient’<sup>78</sup> to

<sup>73</sup>Interview F, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 4 February 2024.

<sup>74</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

<sup>75</sup>Interview N, evacuee, location withheld for security reasons, 8 February 2024.

<sup>76</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February.

<sup>77</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

<sup>78</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

the fact that it is ‘already Russia there, forever’.<sup>79</sup> Inevitably, for some residents of occupied territories a preference for survival means resuming the practices and connections of an everyday life that had been disrupted by the invasion and seeking to recreate a lifeworld that, while not actively supportive of the occupation, is not totally incompatible with the presence of the occupier. Interviewee N had ‘many acquaintances who have crossed over, who collaborate’, who claimed to be ‘doing well’ under occupation.<sup>80</sup> Yet, the testimonies suggest that for most people, everyday life is simply a relentless struggle. Interviewee G described ‘a kind of closed bubble, as adaptive as possible, when people have to adapt to the most terrible conditions just to survive’.<sup>81</sup> According to interviewee F for those who do not collaborate, it is familiarity, routine and the certainty of the known—an intangible sense of ‘home’—which leads them to stay. For others, financial reasons, like access to employment and a property, are a factor; for others still, it is the deep personal connection and rootedness to the now occupied place that makes them reluctant to attempt escape.<sup>82</sup>

Those living under occupation sometimes face stigmatisation by citizens in Ukrainian government-controlled areas. Some of the activists we spoke to had engaged in advocacy efforts to challenge this social stigma. According to interviewee G, ‘not even a quarter of ... [these Ukrainians] are “waiters”’, a pejorative term used to describe people who are presumed to be waiting for Russia to take over all of Ukraine, used against those in occupied zones who have not left.<sup>83</sup> Interviewee F regretted telling people that their parents were under occupation, which had led to unpleasant questions: ‘They were full of prejudice. “Do they support Russia?” There were a lot of questions like that’.<sup>84</sup> Volunteers were fighting these narratives. Interviewee F discussed the ‘Territories Are People’ campaign, which set out to challenge prejudices amongst Ukrainians who ‘believe that only the pro-Russians are left’ in occupied territory.<sup>85</sup> As this interviewee had family living under occupation, they shared their ‘anger’ and ‘despair ... that ... my compatriots ... are ready to give up’ on these connections and dismiss them as pro-Russian.

### *Ambiguity, contention and bureaucratic fragmentation*

There was a general conviction across the interviews that civic engagement helps fill a void created by the absence of state policy regarding the evacuation process from occupied territories. This activism should not be understood as born of hostility to state authorities, nor on their behalf, but rather in lieu of public services able to fill these functions. This

<sup>79</sup>Interview N, evacuee, location withheld for security reasons, 8 February 2024.

<sup>80</sup>Interview N, evacuee, location withheld for security reasons, 8 February 2024.

<sup>81</sup>Interview G, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 7 February 2024.

<sup>82</sup>Interview F, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 4 February 2024.

<sup>83</sup>Interview G, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 7 February 2024.

<sup>84</sup>Interview F, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 4 February 2024.

<sup>85</sup>Interview F, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 4 February 2024.

also reflects the additional risks that a direct association with the Ukrainian state would bring for individuals engaging in this activity. Volunteers had to negotiate with state, regional and local authorities and navigate associated bureaucratic challenges at the Ukrainian end. Ultimately, the networks and individuals carrying out evacuations had to rethink their expectations of the relationship with the state. Many were motivated by the acknowledgement, at the onset of the invasion, that the Ukrainian state did not have the capacity to conduct a comprehensive evacuation policy for Ukrainian citizens in the occupied territories or frontline areas.<sup>86</sup> The principle of self-organisation shaped individual and collective actions. There was a need, an urgent one, and individuals or collectives decided to step up.<sup>87</sup> The formation of evacuation networks preceded any policy by the Ukrainian state to assist Ukrainian citizens who had fallen under Russian occupation. The early realisation that the resources needed from the state were neither accessible nor sufficient left no other option than to resort to a ‘do-it-yourself’ repertoire, in order to fill the void: ‘we don’t wait for the government to do it, we have the capabilities, we’re all learning in parallel, so I understand that nobody knew how to do this at the very beginning’.<sup>88</sup>

The evacuations enabled by informal networks or individuals were *ad hoc* and involved volunteers engaging in ‘learning by doing’: developing organisational capacities, logistical skills and networks that developed into a routine practice and a unique set of field knowledge and abilities. Pursuing action from below, individuals and collectives did not necessarily seek help from government agencies and officials in the beginning but turned towards them when they reached the limits of the ‘do-it-yourself’ approach, either because of having reached a critical mass of evacuees or when they required specific resources.<sup>89</sup> For instance, when interviewee B was confronted with evacuees with reduced mobility, who had specific transfer needs, he contacted the Ministry of Social Policy, only to be told that such requests could not be accommodated. It fell upon interviewee B to call ‘every region, every geriatric nursing home’ to make arrangements on a case-by-case basis.<sup>90</sup> The type of public authority constructed in this do-it-yourself approach sees activists engage state authorities in a pragmatic manner. They often do so once these networks conducting evacuations are confronted directly with their own inherent limitations *vis-à-vis* substituting for the state. Their work generates a public good but cannot replace state service provision and seeks to integrate diverse state actors to remedy these deficiencies:

<sup>86</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.

<sup>87</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

<sup>88</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

<sup>89</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024; interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024; interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024.

<sup>90</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

‘we solve systemic problems when they arise, we solve individual cases within these problems, but we don’t change the system’.<sup>91</sup>

In fact, some interviewees even positioned themselves as service providers to the state. They tended to recognise their own material and institutional limitations, the need for policy coordination and implementation capacity, and how their expertise could be used to plug gaps. Acting with the state, and in coordination with it, allowed them to share their field experience and the competences acquired to guide official policy. Interviewee B suggested the state should ‘create a mechanism where we evacuated people, relocated them, restored their documents, and the state, knowing who we have [assisted]’, provided overall guidance to the process, acting as a kind of coordination hub for civic organisation.<sup>92</sup> Interviewee H prepared a ‘personal note to the Ministry of Reintegration to rebuild these evacuation routes’. After having caught the attention of policymakers, they then ‘prepared [together] official material, how everything looks after crossing the border—what people can count on, and it’s all happening, just so you have it as a reference’. The record of cooperation and coordination between H’s organisation and the Ministry of Reintegration, as well as the Office of the Ombudsman and the International Committee of the Red Cross, has allowed them to conduct extensive advocacy for the rights of the evacuees, including ‘what needs to be done to facilitate departure, to facilitate their reintegration when they arrive’.<sup>93</sup> This illustrates how informal initiatives and activism can shape the policy process, melding together practices of state authorities and networks to co-produce a public good. Interviewees A and K also offer concurring accounts. They both described appealing to local and national politicians for material support, with mixed success, describing a complex set of fraught relations, encountering bureaucratic obstacles but at least through it all raising policymaker awareness of the issues.<sup>94</sup>

Other testimonies offer a less positive picture of interaction with authorities. Thanks to their flexible methods, activist networks saw themselves as better able to adapt to the situation on the ground. Several interviewees deplored the ‘inertia’ of policymakers that impeded a quick response to humanitarian challenges.<sup>95</sup> Wartime disruption intersected with the pre-existing bureaucratic fragmentation of Ukrainian governance to complicate its response to the ‘non-standard challenges’<sup>96</sup> that emerged from the massive outflow of people from Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Luhansk and Donetsk. Interviewee K recalled their decision to appeal to a former governor to facilitate the granting of travel permits by the

<sup>91</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

<sup>92</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

<sup>93</sup>Interview H, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 5 February 2024.

<sup>94</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024; interview K, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 4 March 2024.

<sup>95</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

<sup>96</sup>Interview B, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 24 January 2024.

administration of the Bucha military district. Eventually, this request was granted but it left K bitter and disillusioned about the functioning of the Ukrainian state: ‘What connections, what do I need? I don’t want to live in such a state. I don’t. I have already grown out of those Soviet Union pants’.<sup>97</sup> This display of contention illustrates the push-and-pull dynamic of Ukrainian civic activism with state authorities, which are both the object of frustration and antagonism and a symbol of the achievement of a democratic, sovereign Ukraine.

Some activists shared very critical views of the state’s role. For all the emphasis on the inclusion of civil society perspectives in Ukrainian political discourse at all levels, they felt cut out of state decision-making and were determined to act without it and despite it. Interviewee O referred to state institutions as ‘meaningless bodies’.<sup>98</sup> The lack of coordination with the authorities is, according to this interviewee, symptomatic of the fragmentation and the individualisation of collective action: ‘there is no connection, when everyone tries to do something on their own, it’s bad’.<sup>99</sup> Interviewee A struggled to find public officials that they deemed trustworthy and committed. They recalled a heated exchange with an official working on the humanitarian aid to Zaporizhzhia, calling out what they perceived not only as apathy, but also as obstruction: ‘I shouted at her directly. I told her that it was her job to save people. Why should we do this, when they didn’t even want to help us?’<sup>100</sup> Suspicions of direct and indirect obstruction, ascribed to either unwillingness to intervene, bureaucratic inefficiency or rivalries, were reported in other interviews.<sup>101</sup> Interviewee L, who had undertaken crossings to visit relatives since the occupation of her town by Russians in 2014, expressed frustration with Ukrainian bureaucracy.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, some activists see the state as an impediment to the evacuation process. Although citing Lviv Regional State Administration as a positive example of a proactive, efficient and helpful administration, interviewee D complained that some state agencies saw themselves in competition with civil society, ascribing this to ‘jealousy because we know how to cooperate with international communities and how to build trust, how to make reports, and how to raise funds. They looked at us as, you know, [like we were] some kind of multimillionaires or oil oligarchs’.<sup>103</sup> In this case, the self-activity

<sup>97</sup>Interview K, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 4 March 2024.

<sup>98</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

<sup>99</sup>Interview O, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 15 February 2024.

<sup>100</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024.

<sup>101</sup>Interview A, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 28 January 2024; interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024; interview K, civic activist (unregistered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 4 March 2024; interview L, evacuee (person who left occupied territory), location withheld for security reasons, February 2024.

<sup>102</sup>Interview L, evacuee (person who left occupied territory), location withheld for security reasons, February 2024.

<sup>103</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.



that had animated the evacuation networks inadvertently ended up competing with the state as a provider of services, creating points of contention and discord.

### *Conclusion*

Evacuations from Russian-occupied territories are often organised through trust-based networks. Underpinned by a sense of mutual obligation to one another, they encapsulate the organising logic of civiness as a form of ‘glue’ that enables stable social relations in society even in the face of the enormous disruption caused by war and occupation: ‘This is our practice, our experience, that everything works exclusively based on people’s agreement with each other, and that’s it’.<sup>104</sup>

Our findings therefore echo those of Bohdana Kurylo, who identifies the heterogeneity and informality of Ukrainian civic action as constitutive of a collective form of security, arguing that ‘when citizens come together in civil society groups, they develop distinctive collective understandings of security that represent more than just an aggregation of individual views. These collective security conceptualizations transcend individual standpoints, emerging through organic group interaction, shared values, and collective processes of advocacy and action’ (Kurylo 2025, p. 5). This is, inevitably, a process of discord as well as mutuality. In this response, it is important not to view civiness as synonymous with democracy and sharply counterposed to authoritarianism. The trust-based relations we have described contain any number of the contradictions and avenues for co-optation. Our interview subjects provided an illustrative sense of the problems they encountered and were notably inclined not to ‘lionise’, so to speak, their activities. For some, the motivation to be interviewed was precisely to talk through the difficulties that they were facing. Their experiences identified the importance of not idealising these societal relations or attempting to turn civiness into a normative political theory.

The transnational relations of the case of civiness we have discussed here have further conceptual and analytical implications. The networks we studied were operating on the dangerous terrain of Russian-occupied and Russian sovereign territory, forcing them to negotiate and evade this violent authoritarian configuration. These transversal networks appear to have a complex relationship to the geopolitical and territorial war between Russia and Ukraine. They are, for the most part, independent of the Ukrainian state but also entangled with it to various extents. As we have argued, the fact that these networks cross national borders means that they could be seen as forming an element of transnational connectivity that has undergirded Ukraine’s war of national liberation (Czerska-Shaw & Jacoby 2023). These transversal ties could be considered a countervailing tendency to the fragmentation that Russian aggression has sought to bring about in Ukraine, which has avoided the kind of breakdown of social order and proliferation of violent conflict characteristics seen in other conflict sites (Kaldor *et al.* 2020). While the full-scale Russian invasion expanded the zone of occupation, the logics of authority present in Ukrainian citizen-to-citizen relations—the mutual obligation

<sup>104</sup>Interview D, civic activist (registered organisation), location withheld for security reasons, 29 January 2024.

towards one another that is characteristic of civicness—have been a factor in preventing a wider disintegration of the state. The contentious character of citizen–state relations in Ukraine, including the frustrations and disappointments that can characterise interactions with state authorities, the ‘incompleteness’ of its democratic state formation, may then paradoxically contribute to the resilience of the democratic ideal by sustaining its do-it-yourself culture (Kaldor 2015; Channell-Justice 2022). If this is correct, then it suggests that central to this contradictory logic is Ukraine’s enduring Weberian statehood rooted in societal relations external to the state.

A further implication of this conception is that the transversal civicness animating Ukraine’s resistance may seed alternatives to the great power politics (Cooper 2024) that Putin encapsulates and which other elites and states are embracing. While the fragmentation of global order is generally seen as a rise of interstate and geoeconomic disputes, it might better be analysed as a non-linear global contest between different logics of authority, both of which are, in some ways, international and transversal: an authoritarian and kleptocratic logic, and one based on the construction of public goods. As this contest takes place within states as much as it does between them, then this suggests concepts that assume a hierarchical and fixed relation between state and territory should be reconsidered.

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