

War and Winter

Monitoring of problems and needs in East and South-East Ukraine

Report based on the findings of the international VOSTOK SOS /
Austausch e. V. monitoring mission



Imprint

Austausch e. V.
Badstraße 44
D-13357 Berlin
Tel. +49 (0)30 446 680 12
Fax. +49 (0)30 446 680 10

info@austausch.org
www.austausch.org
www.civicmonitoring.org

Project: "Human Rights Monitoring in Eastern Ukraine"



in cooperation with



Implemented with the kind support from the Federal Foreign Office of Germany



Federal Foreign Office

Main authors: Imke Hansen, Ioulia Shukan
Contributors and editors: Tim Bohse, Imke Hansen, Yuliya Krasynikova, Michal Lebduška, Ioulia Shukan, Kateryna Skrypnyk, Evhenia Tkachuk, Milan Zaitsev

Cover photo: Bohorodychne, Donetsk region, photo taken on 02.12.2022

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Introduction

The following report results from an international monitoring mission conducted between November 27 and December 4, 2022 in the Kherson, Mykolaiv, Donetsk, and Kharkiv regions. The mission was organized by the Ukrainian charitable organization Vostok-SOS and the German NGO Austausch e.V. and implemented by an international team with members from Ukraine, Germany, France, and the Czech Republic, including a member from the German/Swiss Human Rights Organisation Libereco - Partnership for Human Rights. The mission aimed to monitor the local situation and needs in the regions mentioned above, focusing on vulnerable groups like people of age, IDPs, socially disadvantaged people, or inhabitants of remote villages.

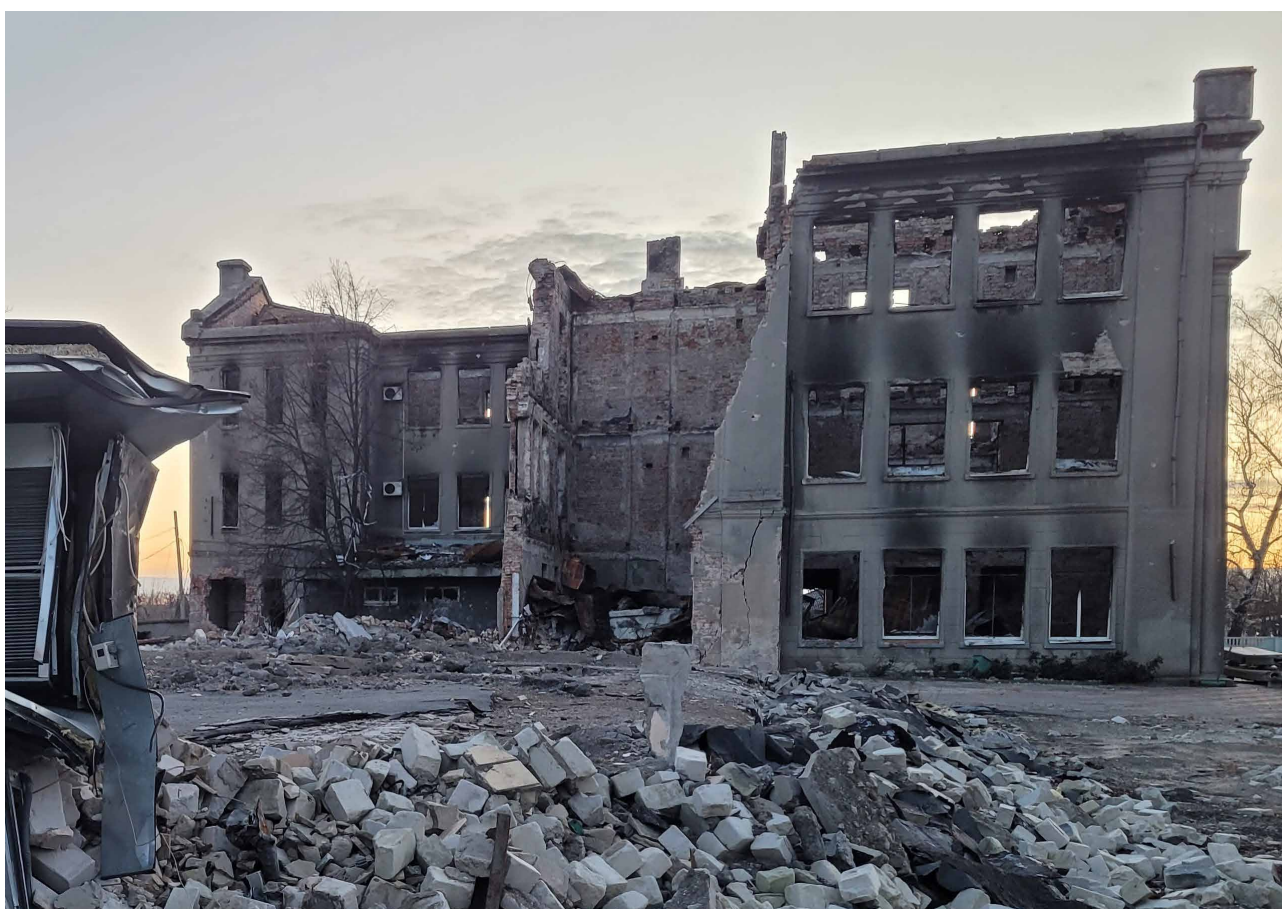
The Ukrainian authorities call for the civilian evacuation of parts of the monitored regions. Due to the destruction inflicted by Russia during the occupation due to the shelling of critical civilian infrastructure, part of the region is not inhabitable. Still, some civilians insist on staying in their home region, and some even return to it.

Threats and problems due to war and winter

The general situation in the war-affected territories of the Kherson, Mykolaiv, Donetsk, and Kharkiv regions is neither homogenous nor steady. On the contrary, it shows various characteristics that differ in intensity from area to area. Whereas the Russian occupation lasted four months in Lyman, Donetsk region, it lasted almost nine months in Kherson city and region. Some parts are currently under shelling, others not anymore, but struggling with the destruction of past shelling. Whereas critical infrastructure – access to electricity, water, and heating – is interrupted in some places, it has already been re-established in others. However, the mission members have identified several common features.

Active warfare

Whereas Kherson city was almost unaffected by shelling during the Russian occupation, the situation has changed



School building in Lyman in the Donetsk region

since the Russian troops retreated to the left bank of the Dnipro river on November 9. Since then, Kherson has been subject to intense shelling, causing civilian casualties daily. Between November 20 and December 1, 119 shells hit buildings, leaving 19 civilians dead and 37 wounded. On the afternoon of November 28, the mission members counted more than 40 impacts within two hours.

In the Donetsk region, cities near the frontline are more affected by shelling than others. Chasiv Yar, for instance, is 10 km away from Bakhmut – currently one of the most heavily combated places. The city of Lyman is close to Kreminna, Luhansk region, where heavy combat occurs. Both cities come under Russian shelling regularly. In Lyman, one resident died, and three were wounded when a shell hit a residential building on November 30. The cities

of Pokrovsk, Slovyansk, and Kramatorsk, situated at the back of the frontline, are less affected by shelling.

The safety situation is still fragile in settlements around Kup'iansk (Kharkiv region) that have been under Ukrainian control since September 2022 and are regularly affected by Russian shelling.

Landmine contamination

Previously Russian-occupied settlements are heavily affected by landmine contamination which constitutes another risk to physical safety. Russian troops systemically mined territory they retreated from, including mining fields, forests, roads, and houses.



Village Bohorodycne in the Donetsk region



Mines at a road in the Mykolaiv region

According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Interior, Kherson is the most mined region. Ukrainian military prevented the mission team from entering the village of Oleksandrivka because of the danger of exploding landmines. Around Oleksandrivka, the team observed demining by the Ukrainian military and the State Emergency Situation Service (DSNS). A few days after the mission team left the area, a fatal accident during mine clearance killed four police officers.

Mines and unexploded ordnances are lying around along the roads and in the fields. On the way to the village of Maksymivka, the team saw vast areas visibly contaminated with mines and potentially explosive remnants of war, including stockpiles of mines about 2 m from the road. In Maksymivka itself, Russian troops mined roads, fields, gardens, and wells. They installed booby traps in private houses. The four remaining residents cannot move freely and are in permanent danger due to the dense mine contamination. This case is rather exemplary than exceptional. In the administration building of Snehu-

rivka at the border of the Kherson and Mykolaiv regions, posters warn of mines hidden in teddies and other toys.

In the Donetsk region, villages, fields, and forests near Lyman and Sviatorisk, under Russian occupation from late May to September 2022, are also heavily contaminated with landmines and unexploded ordnances. Residents of Lyman reported fatal accidents during mushroom picking or collecting wood. In all affected areas, landmine contamination generally prevents displaced persons from returning, inhibits reconstruction, and impedes the return to a regular economic and social life.

Intentional destruction of critical infrastructure

Russia intentionally and systematically targets critical civilian infrastructure. Being a part of the Russian military strategy, this is not only a war crime but also reveals the genocidal intention of Russia's warfare.



Access point to electricity and mobile network in the city center of Kherson

Maksymivka – a village in the Mykolaiv region

Driving to Maksymivka, a village where the front line ran through until a few weeks ago, we see rockets stuck in the fields along the roads and cows grazing around them. We pass a dead cow body, a pile of mines, a helmet, and three more dead cows on the roadside, then we reach the village. The first two houses hosted Russian positions, the third lot belongs to Mila, one of four residents who remained in the village. Although the Russians demanded them to leave, she stayed and witnessed everything, including the destruction of her house. She reports how Russians shot two village residents; another woman died of natural death during the occupation. Mila and her husband live in the summer kitchen, a room with a small earth cave, where they hide from the shelling.

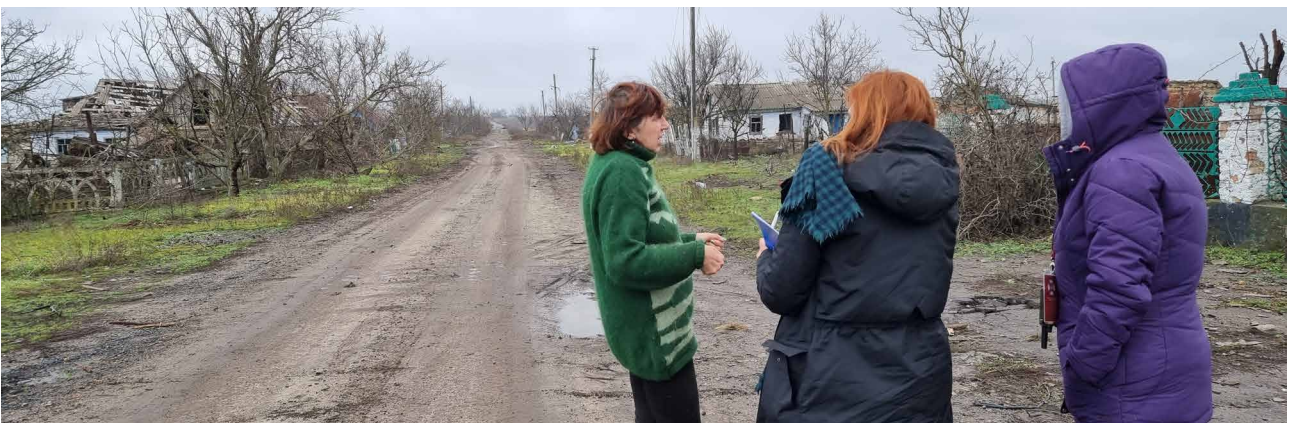
Despite the constant shelling, Mila took care of her vegetable garden, sowed, fertilized, and harvested. This was the only way to feed four people during occupation. In moments of quietness, she came out of the earth cave and worked in the garden. When combat started, she ran back into the cave. This way, summer passed. They were left on their own. Mila reports that she did not have bread the whole summer. Since the liberation, volunteers have been bringing her bread twice a week. There is still no electricity, no gas, and no water. Mila cooks over an open fire.

Before the war reached Maksymivka, she had one cow. Neighbors, when they fled, entrusted her with their two cows, and the Russians took one and slaughtered it – as well as all the pigs. She feels terrible that she did not manage to protect the neighbor's cow.

The Russians also demanded their cell phones. They beat her husband up and took him away for interrogation when they saw messages to the neighbor whose nickname is «commander.» Luckily he returned alive, however, without the cell phones.

Mila's favorite topic is liberation: How grateful she is to the Ukrainian soldiers and how happy that occupation is over. Suffering is not her thing, and neither is complaining. She gets along and does not even desire humanitarian aid. Mila pulls through and even pulls some others along with her. During the occupation, she took in two more people from the village. Every day, she visited a woman with limited mobility at the end of the village. In the other direction, with the dead cows along the road, she has not walked since the occupation. However, she has seen the Russians shooting cows for fun.

Around Mila, the world is mined. She can only move safely on her property, which is not big. She does not know what is happening in the region because there is no radio without electricity. She cannot be in touch with anyone as she has no phone. However, she knows that she cannot fetch wood from the forest or go for a walk through nature that is slowly recovering from the war.



The village of Maksymivka in the Mykolaiv region

Unlike most formerly occupied territories in the Sumy, Chernihiv, Kyiv, Kharkiv, or Donetsk regions, Kherson has suffered little from shelling during the nine months of occupation. Power and water supply, public transport, and other public services worked during the occupation. While retreating, the Russian troops destroyed all civilian infrastructure in the city. They blew up transformers, cut the power grids that connected Kherson to the left bank, put sand into the heating plant's turbines, mined water pipes, and downed mobile network transmission masts. They also stole ambulances and firefighter equipment and looted private houses and public institutions, including the complete collection of the art museum. As a result, the city was without heating, power, and water supply from November 6 until the beginning of December and still suffers severe cuts. Only hospitals and the railway station had access to electricity when the monitoring mission visited Kherson on November 28, 2022.

The State Emergency service DSNS pumped drinking water from deep sources using mobile compressors to provide the residents with water. State agencies and NGOs distributed drinking water on Kherson's main square. Residents took water for technical needs from the Dnipro River. Infrastructure services worked hard to connect the city to Mykolaiv's power grids.

Constant Russian shelling from the Dnipro's left bank is causing more harm to critical infrastructure, with consequential disruptions in power and water supply, phone, and internet connectivity.

The Donetsk region has been through a tough summer without water and power supply. The situation has improved: and water and electricity are regularly available. Shelling of nearby areas still causes frequent disruptions in cities like Pokrovsk, Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, and Chasiv Yar. More severe is the infrastructural damage in and around Lyman and Sviatohirsk. Heavy combat struck this area during the Russian offensive in April-May and the Ukrainian counter-offensive in September. In Lyman, around 80% of the city's substance has been destroyed. Not a single apartment block or private house has remained intact. The local population shrank from 20.000 before the full-scale invasion to 4000. Repair works on electricity infrastructure are underway, alas, progressing slowly due to the damage's extent. In early December, electricity—and thus phone and internet connectivity—were available to one-third of the city. Local authorities see hardly any possibility of repairing the central heating system soon. Many residents live in the basements of their buildings and heat them with wood-burning stoves. Improvised stove pipes sticking out basement windows signpost the places where there is still human life.

The situation is particularly harsh in villages situated at the border of the Donetsk and Kharkiv regions, such as Korovin Yar. Three months after being liberated, the village still lacks electricity, phone and internet connectivity, and cash availability. As for settlements around Kupiansk in Kharkiv region, such as Kosharivka, the gas, water and power supply has been restored, but there is no central heating in the apartment blocks.

Occupation experiences

On formerly occupied territory, people talk a lot about their experiences during the occupation. These are stories about passive and active resistance, Russian repression, and the will to survive. A social service officer from Kherson reported how the Russians tried to force him and his colleagues to collaborate while they tried everything to avoid it. Secretly they continued to care about the vulnerable people they had been working with until the occupation. The officers even managed to organize and finance humanitarian aid kits, which they distributed to their clients.

Other respondents the mission team met in Kherson were so happy about the liberation that they withstand the post-occupation challenges – no heating, power, or water, disrupted phone connection, and constant shelling – with ease. Most of those who openly engaged in collaboration have left the city with the retreat of Russian troops. In all de-occupied territories, the state organs opened investigations of those identified as collaborators. However, degrees of engagement with the Russian occupier varied, as did the motivation for it. Not all acts of support of the occupier fall within the scope of the criminal investigation for collaboration.

Consequently, those who resisted the Russian occupation and those who «welcomed» it continue to live side by side, which challenges social cohesion, particularly in small settlements. A member of the Snehurivka administration told the team: «One cannot hide anything in a village. Everyone knows who collaborated with the Russians, who composed the distribution lists for Russian humanitarian aid, and who rejected the aid. We also know which neighbors looted our property in our absence, piling up goods in their houses. Everyone has found some personal belongings there, including myself. All this makes everyday life difficult.»

Story of a family from Kherson

Maksim and his family stayed in Kherson throughout the occupation. They did not want to leave their home behind, their family members, especially their sick mother. The thought of leaving did not feel good; it felt like betraying our homeland, Maksim recalls. Neighbors and friends who had left tried to push them to leave, too. They put much pressure on us, Maksim's wife reports, that was psychologically difficult. However, they made a conscious decision to stay and have not regretted it.

Pressure also came from the occupational regime. Those families who sent their children to the Russian school received 10,000 Rubel. Rumors circulated that the families who refused to do so would have their children forcefully taken away. Maksim's daughter did not even want to discuss the topic of going to a Russian school. Instead, she made blue and yellow stickers with pro-Ukrainian slogans and stuck them to street lamps and signposts in the neighborhood. At night. With daddy.

Maksim's family tried not to buy Russian products throughout the occupation. They almost succeeded. The only thing they got was a litter box for the cat. That was morally acceptable to me, as it has to do with cat poop, says Maksim's wife. However, some people who bought from the Russians, took their aid and spread rumors that Ukraine had abandoned Kherson. Even some of our neighbors talked like that. I responded with steadfast confidence, reports Maksim's wife: There will be a Ukrainian counter-offensive, do not give up hope. They will come to liberate us. The next time I saw them, they talked to me about the advancement of Ukrainian troops. They just needed some assurance, some optimism, and we gave that to everyone who wanted to listen.

At this point of the discussion, Maksim asks the mission team members to step away from the windows. The shelling has intensified, and impacts are audible nearby. Today is still a calm day, Maksim's daughter states. Last Friday was very different. When the shelling gets heavy, Maksim's family and some neighbors gather in the basement and sing together. They sing until the shelling loses intensity, and it helps them to remain resilient.



Talking with witnesses of the occupation in Kherson

War crimes

As our respondents recollected the Russian occupation, they brought up the topic of Russian violence against the civilian population. Most frequently, they mentioned confiscation of cell phones, house arrest or arbitrary detention, physical mistreatment, torture, arbitrary killing, and abduction.

In the village of Korovin Yar in the Donetsk region, a mother reported how Russian proxies from the self-proclaimed «Donetsk People’s Republic» came to her house to arrest her son, a 23-year-old Donbas war veteran. They beat him severely, threatened to cut his genitals off, and forced him to show where he had hidden his veteran’s card. First, he was assigned to forced labor, and his mother saw him collecting dead bodies off the village streets. Then he was taken to Russian-occupied Lyman, where his trail got lost. His mother has not heard from him since, and she does not know his whereabouts or whether he is still alive.

The National Police in Lyman reported having exhumed 361 bodies from mass graves: 297 civilians (165 men, 114 women, and six children), 40 soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and 23 Russian soldiers. About 140 civilians died due to shelling; the rest is suspected of having been executed, with criminal investigations underway. The police found two torture rooms in Lyman after the Russian retreat.

Civil society’s emergency response

Evacuation

Evacuation is already going on for months; however, many people are still left in areas with a significant lack of physical safety. The demand for evacuation is coming in waves – after intense shelling, more people register for evacuation. Currently, heavy shelling from the left bank of the Dnipro to Kherson and villages on the right bank pushes civilians to flee. Combat in the Donetsk region, currently around Bakhmut and Kreminna, has the same effect. Moreover, the lack of critical infrastructure is pressing people to evacuate as it will be difficult to survive the winter in places without heating, water, and power supply.

Evacuation is a complex process that encompasses information distribution, registration of evacuation seekers, organization of transport facilities, collecting people at gathering places or their homes, ensuring safe travel to a temporary shelter or train station, and further travel to a long-term shelter. At every stage, IDPs need information and assistance. Temporary and long-term shelters must be set up, equipped, and maintained.

Due to the lack of resources and organizational capacity, the Ukrainian state does not organize and implement these comprehensive processes. It participates in the process by providing evacuation trains, temporary shelter, and access to medical aid, as for example in the Sloviansk city hospital No.1.



Transferring mobility impaired persons to the evacuation train in Pokrovsk

Civil society organizations and volunteers fill the gaps in the evacuation process. Those initiatives acquire the funds for vehicles, fuel, and other evacuation costs, recruit drivers, provide them with the necessary training for their job, develop information and registration systems and maintain contact with the evacuees.

Kherson's railway station manager vehemently expressed the need for help informing people about evacuation

possibilities when talking to the mission team on November 28. Two days ago, a daily evacuation train to Khmelnytskyi was set up; however, only 24 people boarded the train on the first day and 82 on the second, despite much higher capacities. Spreading information about evacuation possibilities is difficult in a city without power, internet, or phone connectivity. At Kherson railway station, the National Police verifies all evacuees, checking their IDs, registering their data, and sometimes checking phones in

A young mother and her baby

In the Donetsk region, the Pokrovsk railway station is one of the evacuation hubs. From here, an evacuation train leaves for Dnipro three times a week. It has a couchette car for people who need to be transported in a lying position. Vostok SOS specializes in evacuating people with limited mobility, i.e., old and sick people, women before or after childbirth, and people with disabilities. The evacuation team meets people at their homes, assists them with the last preparations for the trip, sometimes including putting on diapers, and takes them into the car and to the train in Pokrovsk.

When we arrive, the evacuation team's vehicle is already standing on the platform, and people of age are moving around it. One is slowly climbing out of the car, another is searching for his bag, and the Ukrainian railway workers in orange high-visibility vests are preparing the lifting platform. Edward and Vlad from the evacuation team are preparing a disabled person for the transfer to the train. They place the person on a flexible stretcher, take them onto the lifting platform, and carry them through the narrow corridor into the train compartment. The process requires physical strength and concentration. While the crew members carry the person, they talk to them gently and encourage them, acknowledging their difficult situation.

We meet the youngest passenger of the evacuation transports for the entire last nine months. She is 13 days old, wrapped into a huge blue blanket tied together with a pink gift ribbon, in the arms of her mother, who has not yet fully recovered from the difficult birth. Roma, who evacuated mother and child from Chasiv Yar, close to Bakhmut, proudly poses for a photo with the two. This moment might compensate for the trouble he faced in the morning. A person insisted on evacuating with her cat, but the cat did not want to board the vehicle. When Roma tried to catch the cat, he got severely bitten. His fellows, who had training in tactical medicine a couple of weeks ago, cared for the wound. However, the blood still poured through his work gloves, leaving dark stains on them. Vostok SOS allows people to take their pets on evacuation, as the furry friends offer a high degree of psychological support and stability to their owners – an essential quality in times when people have no idea where they go and how their life will unfold.



Maksymovka



A volunteer helps a woman on the way to the evacuation bus in Kramatorsk

search of collaborators. People without documents may evacuate after a more comprehensive verification.

In the Donetsk region, evacuation has been ongoing since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Currently, it is less in scale than in the spring and summer months. In December, the evacuation train from Pokrovsk to Lviv via Dnipro switched from daily operation to three times a week. However, the harsh winter conditions and the shelling secure a steady evacuation demand. At the same time, there is a reverse movement: people who fled their homes in spring and summer already returned to places like Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, and even Chasiv Yar. In some cases, people return, understand the living conditions they will be exposed to, and evacuate again.



Street kirchen in Kivsharivka in the Kharkiv region

Humanitarian aid

Humanitarian aid is mainly also in the hands of local organizations and volunteers. Local administrations and international NGOs participate but usually do not cover the entire process. Lack of coordination, unclear division of responsibilities, and unrealistic requirements often make humanitarian aid less organized, effective, and safe than it could be.

International NGOs, prevented by their security protocols from operating themselves in frontline proximity, provide local Ukrainian NGOs with goods. These NGOs are responsible for the distribution and documentation. Volunteers even distribute in places heavily affected by shelling, as people in bomb shelters often have no other access to food. Often, the international organizations' documen-



Humanitarian aid provided in the Mykolaiv region

Two volunteers: Anton and Alexander

In ordinary life, Anton is the head of social service. Now, he runs the humanitarian hub. The head of administration deployed his department to take care of the humanitarian aid in the city without giving them training or instruction. None of us has experience with humanitarian logistics, and we urgently need experts here, Anton says. However, specialists are not available. Moreover, since the aid distribution seems to work somehow with the social workers, the war-laden city administration sees no need for further action.

In the beginning, Anton recalls, humanitarian aid was driven to the central square and distributed from the truck. Those who did not know or could not come got nothing. People of age had difficulties carrying the parcels home. Thus the humanitarian hub constitutes already progress, as it registers needs and distributes aid according to those needs. This is not easy when there is no electricity, phone reception, or ways to pass on and receive information. Collaboration with state agencies and other organizations does not always work well. Trucks often arrive at the hub without previous notice, and 40 tons of aid must be unloaded and stored.

More importantly, Anton says, humanitarian aid should not harm local small businesses. During the occupation, he said, our local businesses cared for the people, transported bread to the villages, and fed those who did not have enough food. A non-coordinated humanitarian aid keeps people from buying things and thus deprives local businesses of livelihood. Activists from Chasiv Yar echo his claim to support and strengthen local businesses to guarantee a long-term, independent supply.

Alexander has built up a prosperous agricultural business in the past years, growing wheat, barley, and sunflowers. He employs six people and owns 600 ha of land – now located in frontline proximity, where working means life danger. He still does, not even covering expenses. With the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian export broke down, lowering grain prices to less than 50%. Expenses for transport doubled as fuel is expensive, roads are bad and transporting is dangerous. Moreover, traders buy only for cash now, and his bookkeeping needs to bill things by money transfer.

All farmers struggle now, he says. If the state had bought grain from us or supported us somehow, we could survive. Now, we feel abandoned. In every humanitarian aid kit, there is a bottle of sunflower oil, so people do not buy local vegetable oil anymore. My bank called and asked me to relocate my business to Western Ukraine. How do I relocate my 600 ha of land?

Since the full-scale invasion began, Alexander has supported other people in and around Chasiv Yar with aid at his own expense. Once, when he provided people with food, his parked car was shelled and destroyed. End of November, a rocket hit one of his grain storages. 240 tons of sunflower seeds became mixed with debris and thus unsellable.

Alexander looks tired and broken, quite the opposite of the successful entrepreneur he has been before. Nine months of war were enough to ruin his business and his life.

tation requirements do not accord with the war reality, constituting more difficulties for the local volunteers than necessary. In Chasiv Yar, people in charge of aid distribution reported that they must register every beneficiary with a complete address, passport number, and a photo of the beneficiary with the food parcel. The respondents complained that going outside to take photos in sufficient light conditions challenges their health due to the constant change between warm and cold. They express

fear of going out on days of heavy shelling. Indeed, such excessive requirements prolong the exposure time of beneficiaries and distribution teams to physical threats by shelling. One international donor asked to send photographs of 20% of the distributed kits daily. Once, they had no electricity for four days and could not submit the daily photos. In response, the donor raised the percentage of required photos to 50%.

Regional State administrations also receive national and international humanitarian aid. Some created humanitarian hubs to distribute the aid, often involving local administrations. The distribution, however, is only partly carried out by the administrations and partly by NGOs and volunteers. Often they hand the goods over to volunteers without paying them for the distribution costs, mainly fuel and work time – a common practice even for some international organizations.

Another problem is the composition of humanitarian aid kits, often not fitting the local needs, which differ widely depending on the situation and previous deliveries. For example, cleaning products are less needed than wet wipes in areas cut off from the water supply. Some local organizations visit villages regularly, recording needs and providing needs-based aid, which is highly effective and resource-friendly but time-consuming.

Winterization

The approach of winter with low temperatures and challenging weather conditions increases the harm done by Russia's bombing of critical civilian infrastructure. State agencies and NGOs are involved in the mitigation of the harm. The regional administration of Lyman supports civilians with windows and construction materials to isolate their shelling-affected houses. Distribution of wood-burning stoves is going on throughout East Ukraine.

The state set up so-called indestructibility spots in areas strongly affected by power shortages (punkt nezlamnosti). These are rooms or tents equipped with ovens, generators, Starlink internet connection, drinking water, and sometimes other services. Some spots are run by the State Emergency Service DSNS, others by local initiatives.

The spots offer relief and constitute a safety risk. In the Donetsk region, spots are only in buildings, as tents could point to mass gatherings and become a target for shelling. In Chasiv Yar, the addresses of the spots are not shared publicly to avoid targeting. Arrows on trees and walls in the city center direct the people to the spots.

However, Ukrainian authorities lack capacity, so the spots do not offer room for everyone in case of a total blackout. Slovyansk's « indestructibility spots» can host up to 5 000 people, while the city population counts 40 000. Civilians also try to cope with winter by themselves, relying on their previous experiences, mutual help, and creativity. International and national organizations run winterization programs, offering generators and fuel, wood-burning stoves, chainsaws, bottled gas, head torches, power banks, warm clothing, and other winterization items. Still, the winterization aid does not cover the demand. Further international support is urgently needed in this area, particularly as the winter will last several months. The most challenging period is expected in February-March when temperatures are still low, and people might have exhausted their resources.



Village of Maksymivka in the Mykolaiv region

Recommendations

- Russia's deliberate shelling of critical civilian infrastructure and other war crimes reveal the genocidal tendencies in Russian warfare. This violation of international rules deserves a strong international response.
- The transparency regarding the use of donations shows an imbalance. While there is little transparency on the international level, NGOs burden Ukrainian field organizations with excessive control and accountability measures. We recommend simplifying grant application and reporting procedures for Ukrainian field organizations to save their resources for essential support acts and help minimize their safety risks.
- The international funding of aid often covers only parts of the process, leaving the acquisition of resources for other necessary parts like transport or human resources to the local organizations. We suggest that international organizations offer comprehensive financing of evacuation, distribution or other aid processes, including transport costs and fair wages.
- The coordination and communication between international and local Ukrainian organizations offer room for improvement. Needs-based, efficient support is only possible with local knowledge of field organizations.
- Partnerships between Ukraine and EU countries at the level of cities, schools, volunteer fire departments, and local enterprises provide effective, sustainable support for Ukrainian civilians and civil society on an equal footing. We particularly recommend the support of small and medium entrepreneurs who remain working in Eastern and Southeastern Ukraine.
- The defense of the Ukrainian Armed Forces creates spaces where aid organizations can operate in relative safety. Without the Armed Forces' protection, evacuation or humanitarian aid could not be implemented. Supporting the defense capacity of the Ukrainian Armed Forces increases the possibility of helping and decreases the suffering of civilians.

Austausch e.V. is a Berlin-based non-profit organization focusing on international civil society cooperation, democracy promotion and youth exchange. Established in 1992, DRA has been actively involved in eastern Europe for many years, partnering up with independent NGOs and grassroots initiatives in many regions of the post-Soviet space.

Vostok-SOS is a non-governmental organization that started as a volunteer civil initiative and a hotline in May 2014 by activists from Luhansk and Crimea. Vostok-SOS was then one of the first volunteer initiatives whose activists began to provide assistance to victims of the military aggression and occupation. Since the begin of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, Vostok-SOS has grown fourfold, working along the entire frontline with the focus on evacuation, humanitarian assistance and war crimes documentation.

The general situation in the war-affected territories of the Kherson, Mykolaiv, Donetsk, and Kharkiv regions is neither homogenous nor steady. On the contrary, it shows various characteristics that differ in intensity from area to area. Whereas the Russian occupation lasted four months in Lyman, Donetsk region, it lasted almost nine months in Kherson city and region. Some parts are currently under shelling, others not anymore, but struggling with the destruction of past shelling. Whereas critical infrastructure – access to electricity, water, and heating – is interrupted in some places, it has already been re-established in others.

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