
The Ukrainian Resistance Movement in the Occupied Territories

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Initial studies of Ukrainian resistance to Russia’s full-scale invasion focused either on non-violent [protest](#) activity or [unconventional](#) warfare. Such one-faceted studies allow for detailed subject analysis but prevent constructing a full picture of the movement. As both forms of resistance are tightly intertwined, they need to be studied as a complex phenomenon. This memo explores these two forms of Ukrainian resistance – peaceful civil protest and armed partisan actions.

Drawing on open-source data and focusing primarily on the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions and also touching on Crimea, I demonstrate how the repressive actions of the occupying authorities brought about change in the form of civil resistance – from initially open, peaceful protests to invisible actions of boycotting “referendums,” information warfare, and sabotage. These activities are exemplified by the “Yellow Ribbon” movement in the regions. Armed resistance is even less visible as it is carried out by partisan units.

Unlike in 2014, today’s resistance has a sufficient legal base, effective coordination, and developed infrastructure. Both forms of resistance are organized but decentralized and are carried out by relatively small groups. The influence of various actions of the movement significantly affects the logistical capabilities of the occupying army, its morale, and the desire of individual collaborators to continue cooperation with the occupiers. The movement meaningfully undermines Russian forces’ efforts to control the occupied territories effectively and prevents their absorption into the Russian Federation.

Civil Resistance at the Beginning of the Invasion

In the first weeks of the Russian invasion last year, civil resistance manifested primarily in mass protests. At the beginning of March, the National Resistance Center was [established](#)

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to coordinate the movement. Later that month, a wave of demonstrations swept the occupied regions of southeastern Ukraine. In Kherson, for instance, people took to the streets in the first days of March 2022, shortly after Russian forces captured the city. On March 5, 2022, Kherson residents [filled](#) the entire Liberty Square in the center of the city. Eyewitnesses claimed that Kherson had never seen such a large number of demonstrators. From there, a wave of protests swept across the region.

On March 6, protests began in Kakhovka and Nova Kakhovka, where Russian soldiers almost immediately started shooting at protesters. Demonstrations in these cities continued in the following weeks—protesters were dispersed by stun grenades and real bullets, but they continued to gather. The wave of protests spread to the occupied parts of the Zaporizhzhia region. On March 5, 2022, peaceful demonstrations began in Melitopol and other occupied cities and towns of the Zaporizhzhia region.

As in Kherson, the protests in Melitopol lasted for weeks. Protesters held national flags and demanded the release of abducted people. Residents of Berdyansk also came to the rally on March 5, disrupting a propaganda campaign by the occupiers planning to distribute “humanitarian aid” from trucks. Subsequently, activists from Berdyansk began a semi-underground [rescue](#) of Mariupol residents and their return to free territory.

People also went to protest rallies in the occupied areas of the Luhansk region. While protesting in Kherson and Melitopol, residents of the city of Bilokurakynne came to the rally and [chanted](#): “Luhansk is Ukraine! You are not welcome here.” In the city of Novopskov, local people protested twice. During the second rally, the Russian military opened fire, and several people were wounded.

In response to mass civil resistance, the occupiers resorted to “pacification.” Their set of “tools” was identical in all occupied territories: kidnapping, searches, intimidation, and torture in secret chambers ([including](#) of children). In Kherson, for instance, detained civilians [were](#) tortured in four sites throughout the city. In Berdyansk, abducted civilians were kept in local prisons and [subjected](#) to psychological pressure and torture. The exact number of civilians who went through torture chambers is yet to be established, but the consistency and widespread use of torture in occupied regions indicate the genocidal nature of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

Civil resistance against the Russian occupation reached a massive scale in March-April 2022. However, the repressive apparatus used by Russian forces ultimately deprived citizens of the opportunity to peacefully express their civic position. Therefore, public protest gradually began to take the form of “quiet” disobedience, sabotage, and boycott of Russian initiatives.

The Yellow Ribbon Movement: From Open Protests to Invisible Actions

Since the end of April 2022, the open protest against the Russian invasion took on more covert forms of hanging flags, sticking up Ukrainian symbols, and pasting leaflets. In particular, in April 2022, the “Yellow Ribbon” movement [began](#) to operate in Kherson. (Yellow is in the Ukrainian flag.) On April 25, the organizers called on residents of the occupied cities to [hang](#) Ukrainian flags and yellow ribbons on the streets and in crowded places on the movement’s Telegram channel.

On April 27, “Yellow Ribbon” held a peaceful action in Kherson: “Kherson is Ukraine!” This rally gave impetus to the development of the movement. Subsequently, yellow ribbons began to appear in Melitopol, Nova Kakhovka, Berdyansk, Yalta, Simferopol, Kerch, Saky, Henichesk, Alushta, Donetsk, Luhansk, Mariupol, and many other temporary occupied cities. According to one of the initiative’s coordinators, IT specialist “Alex,” the movement has a network structure with a core group of around 40 IT specialists [operating](#) in various cities and about 4,000 supporters in all occupied territories. Ivan, who is Kherson’s coordinator, [revealed](#) that the gender composition is roughly 75 percent women to 25 percent men.

Among the most prominent actions of the movement have been a mass online rally in support of Kherson and an open-ended “Stop Referendum” campaign aimed at discrediting pseudo-referendums in the temporarily occupied territories. To disrupt the Russian information blockade, the movement [launched](#) a newspaper on August 6, 2022, “Voice of the Partisan.” The first edition had 1,200 copies and was spread all over Kherson. On August 8, the newspaper [began](#) distribution in occupied Crimea.

The “Yellow Ribbon” movement continues to [demonstrate](#) a Ukrainian presence in the occupied regions, including Crimea, despite the persecution and kidnapping of pro-Ukrainian residents and activists. Typical actions of quiet disobedience are complemented by psychological pressure and information warfare. For example, activists in Crimea have been [putting](#) up “Wanted” flyers near the homes of collaborators and perpetrators, often with pictures showing them in coffins. Leaflets have also been [posted](#) prominently on the patrol routes of the Russian military in Crimea. The tightening of Russian security measures points to trepidation and the effectiveness of such actions. Other forms of resistance are ignoring or sabotaging decisions made by the occupiers and snubbing the receipt of Russian passports.

While collaborationism remains limited, non-cooperation has acquired a mass character. Minister of Education Serhiy Shkarlet [reported](#) that in Kherson, which was occupied at the time, out of 60 school principals, only two agreed to cooperate with the Russians. On September 1, 2022, Russian mass media reported on the beginning of the new school year in the “liberated” territories. The Russian Ministry of Defense [announced](#) the opening of 1,422 schools. Still, many schoolchildren in Kherson and Melitopol did not attend classes

at their former schools, choosing distance learning according to the Ukrainian program. For example, at the beginning of September 2022, the mayor of Melitopol, Ivan Fedorov, [said](#) that 14,000 schoolchildren in the city started the academic year in Ukrainian schools remotely. Similarly, most of the entrepreneurs of the occupied territories refused to work for rubles, and the heads of the organization of co-owners of apartment buildings did not provide lists of people who left their apartments. The successful Ukrainian counteroffensive sustained the belief in victory and led inhabitants of the temporarily occupied territories to begin to [refuse](#) rubles en masse. Even the “ruble patrol” created by the occupational authorities to encourage its use has not helped spread its use.

The labor-force shortage in the occupied territories is becoming more noticeable economically. Ukrainian workers have mastered various methods of resistance, including silent refusal to work in seized enterprises. For example, in Melitopol, where train depots are located, only 30 percent of railway personnel [have been](#) working (according to MP Yehor Chernev), which prevented the Russians from servicing the rolling stock. In Zaporizhzhia, the Russians tried to restore the operations of the local iron ore plant. Workers were promised 60 percent of their former Ukrainian salaries but were required to sign a new contract that falls under Russian legislation, and [none](#) of the workers agreed.

A study by Felip Daza of the International Catalan Institute for Peace, covering the beginning of the war to June 30, 2022, [reported](#) at least 235 cases of non-violent resistance to Russia’s occupation. One hundred forty-eight cases were coded as protest and dissuasion, 51 as non-violent intervention, and 36 as non-cooperation. This and other surveys imply that the scale of the resistance has been steadily growing. Even after the pseudo-referendums were held, the Russians were still unable to properly organize their occupational “administrations,” which indicates the effectiveness of Ukrainian resistance.

Partisan Movements in the Occupied Territories

The partisan movement in Ukraine emerged in 2014 after the occupation of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. For example, between 2014 and 2016, the Nationalist Underground of the Luhansk Region was [operating](#) after it was formed by a local branch of the right-wing Svoboda Party. After the beginning of the full-scale war last February, at least three new groups emerged: the Berdyansk [partisan army](#) that operates mainly in the Zaporizhzhia region, the [Popular Resistance of Ukraine](#), and the [Atesh](#) (“fire”) partisan movement that operates in the occupied territories and Russia.

In the first phase of the Russian aggression in 2014-2015, the partisan movement developed spontaneously but had limited impact. However, in 2016, a separate unit of the Armed Forces of Ukraine was created, the Special Operations Forces (SOF), with the task of coordinating the armed resistance. In May 2021, the parliament adopted the law “On the foundations of national resistance,” which laid a legal base for a new wave of partisan movements.

The SOF coordinates the actions of specially trained professionals and volunteers. The latter consists of residents in the occupied territories who can “hit” Russian soldiers and their collaborators from behind the lines. Soon after the invasion, the SOF [launched](#) the National Resistance [Center](#) website to support the partisan movement. Its slogan is: “Each one of us can resist the enemy and put his part in for victory. Together, we will turn the enemies’ lives into hell.” It provides information about partisan actions, practical advice on guerrilla warfare, instructions on joining a movement, and forms to anonymously report Russian military locations.

According to Volodymyr Zhemchugov, an organizer of the partisan resistance in his native Luhansk in 2014-2015, the current resistance has a 60-40 [ratio](#) of professional soldiers to volunteers. Most volunteers are young people who joined the movement after their cities were seized. Their advantage is that they do not tend to come under the suspicion of Russian security services because they normally have local registration and are not on Russian search lists. Although the Ukrainian authorities laid the basic insurgency structure in a few rushed months before the war, it is now a network with secret weapons depots and safe houses across the country, including in the occupied regions.

Establishing the number of people involved in the partisan movement is difficult. For instance, the Atesh movement claims to have 2,000 people infiltrated with the Russian Army and National Guard while [stating](#): “Every day, our agents carry out various kinds of operations, sabotaging orders, leaking information, disabling military equipment, and neutralization.” Such numbers are hard to verify. Moreover, it is likely that there are groups operating in the occupied territories that have not yet been reported, as is the nature of clandestine activities. The total number of professionals who have undergone special training does not exceed several thousand people—inadequate but apparently enough to effectively limit Russian authority and control in specific places.

The main targets of the Ukrainian underground were local collaborators and Russian authorities. Drawing on the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and other open-source data, Jean-François Ratelle [found](#) 55 documented partisan attacks between February 24 and November 2, 2022, with 31 of them involving assassination attempts against pro-Russian public officials. Over three-quarters of the known assassination attempts have been in southern Ukraine. For example, on June 14, the car of the ex-mayor of Kherson, Volodymyr Saldo, who had sided with the occupiers, was blown up. On June 18, an explosion [occurred](#) near the car of Yevhen Sobolev, who had been appointed by the Russian occupiers in Kherson to head the penitentiary service.

In effect, the Russian military is constantly under the gun of partisans. Ukrainian military intelligence [reported](#) that from March 20 to April 12, 2022, 70 servicemen of the Russian Federation were killed in Melitopol during night patrols—allegedly by Ukrainian partisans. Atesh [claimed](#) responsibility for several attacks, including the assassination of 30 Russian servicemen in Simferopol military hospitals.

The resistance movement is equally active in identifying the positions of Russian troops and military equipment. Information from partisans helped the Ukrainian army [destroy](#) a Russian warehouse in Nova Kakhovka on July 11. In September-October 2022, Ukrainian forces intensively destroyed Russian facilities and personnel in the Kherson region, precipitating the rapid liberation of Kherson city and the entire Mykolayiv region in November 2022.

Conclusion

Russian authorities have not been able to suppress Ukraine's partisan movements or civil disobedience actions. As Pippa Norris and Kseniya Kizlova [found](#) in March 2022, strong national identity and democratic values are two major factors fueling the resistance movement. Effective attacks by Ukrainian insurgents have forced the Kremlin to divert resources from frontline operations to ensure security elsewhere. This, in turn, reduces Russia's ability to defend itself against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations. The Russian military has also failed to protect vulnerable sections of critical Russian land-based infrastructure, such as railway junctions and bridges, especially in rural areas. This has led [some](#) Russian bloggers to openly criticize the Kremlin for its inability to neutralize Ukrainian partisans in the occupied territories.

The Ukrainian resistance movement is a factor in preventing Moscow's military and political goals, including the denial of the Russian narrative about the "liberation of the Ukrainian people from Nazi rule" and the institutionalization of military occupation in the occupied territories. Moreover, the resistance movement undermines the ability of Russia to defend itself against a Ukrainian counteroffensive, not to mention conducting its offensive operations, and it accelerates the liberation of all occupied territories.

Yet the resiliency of Ukraine's resistance is not limitless. To speed up the victory of Ukraine, it is necessary to strengthen the capabilities of the resistance movement. Special material and legal assistance should be provided to public activists. Developing advocacy and human rights protection networks and advancing civilian war crimes monitoring and investigation systems are other expedient activities. Only through a concerted effort by the Ukrainian military, the resistance movement, and Western assistance can Kyiv prevent Russian aggression now and elsewhere in Eurasia in the future.