

UKRAINIAN NONVIOLENT CIVIL RESISTANCE IN THE FACE OF WAR

Analysis of trends, impacts and challenges
of nonviolent action in Ukraine between
February and June 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ukraine is a country with more than 100 years of experience in nonviolent action. These strong capacities, combined with the informal networks of power at the local level and the country's vibrant associative fabric of self-organised communities and organisations for human rights advocacy, mediation and dialogue for conflict transformation, would explain, in part, the 'spontaneous' and widespread nonviolent civil resistance in the early stages of the Russian invasion, between February and June 2022, the period of study of this research.

The findings and conclusions of this report are based on the analysis of 235 nonviolent actions across the country and field research with over 55 interviews with Ukrainian political and social leaders, academics, and activists. Extensive community mobilisation and organising has crystallized into hundreds of nonviolent actions of protest [148], non-cooperation [51], and nonviolent intervention [36]. Geographically, the majority of actions were located in the southern *oblasts* (Kherson and Zaporizhia), which shows the persistence of nonviolent resistance in the areas under occupation. Temporarily, in February and March public protest actions dominated, but they were drastically reduced at the end of March due to the increase of repression and abduction of activists in the occupied territories. From April onwards, nonviolent resistance transforms into 'invisible' communicative actions, non-cooperation and nonviolent intervention creating structures of parallel self-government. The nonviolent civil resistance has been articulated in 6 areas of action with specific impacts and challenges:

1. OBSTRUCTIONS TO RUSSIAN MILITARY TARGETS

- **Impacts:** Nonviolent resistance has hindered some of the long-term military and political goals of the Russian authorities, such as the institutionalisation of the military occupation and repression in the occupied territories.
- **Challenges:** Nonviolent action has coexisted and often interacted with armed resistance. The boundaries between the two types of resistance are blurring in areas such as protection of civilians, alternative communication systems or building infrastructure against the advancing Russian military machine.

2. UNDERMINING THE PILLARS OF KREMLIN POWER

- **Impacts:** Persistent public demonstrations, even in traditionally pro-Russian Ukrainian regions such as Kherson, with extensive use of Ukrainian flags and symbols, has denied the Russian narrative of liberation of the Ukrainian people.
- **Challenges:** Despite its strategic importance, there has not been a sufficiently articulated strategy between nonviolent actions to demoralise the opponent and fraternization actions that could lead to an increase in desertions in the Russian army. Also, despite the fissures in Russian public opinion, for the moment, the conditions do not exist to establish processes of dialogue and joint actions with social actors on both sides of the conflict.

3. PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

- **Impacts:** Organised civil society has built a broad protection system for the development of tasks of evacuation, transport and relocation of the population, including financial support, counselling and psychosocial help for women, human rights defenders and other groups affected by the violence. In this sense, nonviolent action has made it possible to establish negotiation processes between local communities and the Russian army to protect the civilian population and public infrastructure.

- **Challenges:** The civil protection system is largely voluntary and has extensive training needs. Conscientious objection and desertion of Ukrainian soldiers is a social ‘taboo’, involving stigmatisation and criminalisation. Unfortunately, nonviolent action could not develop in areas such as Mariupol, Irpin or Boucha, where violence and massacres of civilians prevailed.

4. COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

- **Impact:** Communicative actions addressed to large audiences have been instrumental in preventing panic. Likewise, these type of actions have made it possible to maintain the nonviolent resistance in a clandestine way in the zones under occupation and to maintain the high morale of the population.
- **Challenges:** Repression in the areas under occupation has increased with arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and cases of torture causing increased fear among nonviolent activists.

5. STRENGTHENING LOCAL GOVERNANCE

- **Impacts:** Nonviolent action has had a significant impact on the preservation of the associative fabric, the empowerment of social actors at the local level and the improvement of coordination between local authorities and citizens. This impact has had a direct effect on the strengthening of local governance closely linked to the processes of political decentralisation and democratisation in Ukraine.
- **Challenges:** Beyond monitoring of war crimes, and youth volunteering initiatives, the vast majority of nonviolent actions at the local level have not been coordinated at the national level, causing communication problems and ineffectiveness. The tendency to centralise decision-making on the reconstruction of the country in the presidential cabinet marginalises the work carried out, needs and demands of social actors at the local level.

6. SOCIAL AND REGIONAL COHESION

- **Impacts:** The solidarity of the Ukrainian people is an opportunity for encounter between the communities of the East and West. Nonviolent action has a fundamental character of cultural resistance, which contributes to the consolidation of Ukrainian identity.
- **Challenges:** There are extensive intra-family mediation needs and, as time progresses, there are serious risks of increased social polarisation. Mediation and dialogue-facilitation communities require support to respond to increased social mediation needs. Organisations working on monitoring Russian propaganda and developing new nonviolent narratives need support to penetrate public opinion. Low level of interest on the part of Ukrainian social actors to develop dialogue or conflict transformation initiatives with Russian or regional counterparts.

7. ACCOUNTABILITY

- **Impacts:** The robust war crimes monitoring infrastructure created by leading human rights organisations and advocacy centers in Ukraine has enabled the collection and verification of thousands of cases of serious violations committed by Russian troops. These actions have helped to prevent the defenselessness of the Ukrainian population affected by the war and have empowered citizens to denounce damage to physical infrastructure and abuses of the civilian population through various physical or virtual means.
- **Challenges:** The need to strengthen transitional justice processes by including mechanisms for truth, justice, reparation and reconciliation. One of the first challenges in this regard would be to also recognise the human rights violations committed by both sides of the conflict. It is also important to make progress in disaggregating data on human rights violations committed by soldiers, civilians, and Private Military and Security Companies.

10 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING NONVIOLENT CIVIL RESISTANCE

Recommendations for agencies, governments and international and Ukrainian civil society actors:

- 1. To strengthen nonviolent civil resistance in the zones under occupation:** through material and financial resources, the creation of spaces for coordination and information exchange, and the development of political-social advocacy actions to make visible and support the work of activists resisting the military occupation and the institutionalisation of repression in these territories.
- 2. To develop a system of protection of human rights defenders in accordance** with the guiding principles of the EU Human Rights Defenders in coordination with Ukrainian human rights defense centres and international organisations. This programme should pay special attention to the psychological impacts of war and the protection of activists in areas under temporary Russian military occupation.
- 3. To advance civilian war crimes monitoring and investigation systems** as mechanisms to ensure access to justice and the rule of law: through the human rights protection platforms created and incorporating a transitional justice perspective that includes the investigation of all war crimes and aggressions by non-state armed actors.
- 4. To strengthen community resilience and social cohesion through the organisations and infrastructure developed by the Ukrainian youth movement.** Concretely, this support should comprise a national capacity building program in conflict transformation, nonviolent action and digital resilience, as well as providing the Ukrainian youth center network with the skills and resources to develop nonviolent counter-narratives in cooperation with local and digital media.
- 5. To prevent social polarisation by supporting Ukraine's community mediation and dialogue facilitation interventions** to prevent intra-family and community conflicts between host and IDP communities from the east of the country.
- 6. To encourage the development of nonviolent initiatives, dialogue and peacebuilding at regional level through financial support and the creation of spaces for the exchange of information and planning of actions** with activists and groups committed to social justice and human rights, taking advantage of the relationships, capacities and experiences of organisations specialising in these geographical and thematic areas to find common objectives.
- 7. To influence the design of new global and regional architectures based on human security** that place protection and human needs at the centre, involve the design of nonviolent strategies to transform conflicts and redirect resources away from militaristic structures and initiatives. This work must take into account the extensive work developed by the United Nations in the field of human security.
- 8. To explore the possibility of regulating and developing a nonviolent civilian defense system¹³⁸** that builds on existing experiences such as the Lithuanian National Defense Strategy¹³⁹. This process should include a public debate on the limits of nonviolence and complementarity with military defense.

¹³⁸ According to Professor Bartkowski: "Nonviolent civil defense is based on the fact that the entire population, including its institutions and networks, are part of the resistance force. This force wages a daily war of total non-cooperation with the aggressor in all areas of social, political, economic and cultural life. This opposition makes any invasion or, subsequently, occupation unsustainable in the long term" [2015]. For more information see Gene Sharp's work *Civilian-based defense. A post-military weapons system* [1990].

¹³⁹ For more information on Lithuania's civil defense strategy see: <https://kam.lt/en/civil-resilience/>

9. To protect and regulate conscientious objection as a human right of citizens to contribute to the defense of their country without the use of arms. This should include the protection of the civil and political rights of peace activists and conscientious objectors.

10. To ensure that social and political reconstruction builds on the development of local governance and political decentralisation, and guarantees the effective participation in decision-making processes of women's organisations and activists who are leading the country's nonviolent civil resistance, human rights advocacy and the promotion of mediation and dialogue facilitation.