

TO LEAVE OR TO STAY: A LIFE-CHANGING DECISION

July 2022

Based on interviews among the civilian population
of government-controlled and non-government-controlled areas
of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts



Members of the Sviatohirsk Group,

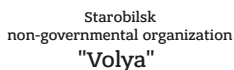
who represent various civil society organisations, prepared this publication with the support of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (Geneva, Switzerland).

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue is a Swiss-based private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to promote the prevention, mitigation and resolution of armed conflicts through dialogue and mediation.

To ensure the security and safety of the group members, the publication does not contain personal information about the authors or interviewees.

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the opinions, experiences and terminology presented in this publication should not be taken as a reflection of the views or positions of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD). These texts contain responses to interviews conducted with civilians affected by the Russia-Ukraine war, as they were conveyed by those who participated in this project. HD's role in this context has been to facilitate the group's meetings and enable this joint project, but not to determine the tone or content of the text.



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1 About the Sviatohirsk Group

We are representatives of Ukrainian civil society from the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, who have been working on the topic of transitional justice since 2018.

Based on the principles of humanity and fairness, we collect and convey the opinions of victims of the Russian-Ukrainian war by facilitating:

- dialogue between citizens and the state
- development and application of the state policy on the transition period
- strengthening ties between active citizens to build sustainable and cohesive communities

2 Introduction

Since 2018, Sviatohirsk Group has been contributing to making the voices of people affected by the armed conflict in the East of Ukraine heard by the Ukrainian political leadership and the international community. The goal is to facilitate the settlement of the conflict by supporting the implementation of the state policy on transitional justice.

This publication continues our effort to document the thoughts and opinions of people who faced Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February. Thus, Sviatohirsk Group aims to draw the Ukrainian authorities' attention to the problems and needs of people currently residing in the occupied territories.

This research presents an analysis of the factors that influenced people in making a life-changing decision, together with the challenges following the choices our respondents made. Based on the interviewees' responses, the Sviatohirsk Group has developed several recommendations for public authorities and the international community, which will help provide support to those affected by the armed aggression of Russia.

Methodology

In July 2022, members of Sviatohirsk Group conducted 16 in-depth interviews with the residents of the territories under the control of Ukrainian authorities and people from the territories of Ukraine under temporary occupation after 24 February.

The sample of respondents was selected using the 'snowball' method with considerations of gender balance and inclusivity. In the territory outside of Ukrainian control, the members of the Sviatohirsk Group interviewed people from among their acquaintances residing in Sievierodonetsk, Starobilsk, Shchastia, and Mariupol. In the territory under Ukrainian control, the interviews were conducted with internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Limitations

Ongoing hostilities significantly limited the capacity of the Sviatohirsk Group to interview a broader range of respondents. Almost all interviews were held online, which impacted the possibility of specifying responses to more sensitive questions of the survey. The generally depressed state of the interviewees, due to the impossibility of controlling and planning their lives, has affected the comprehensiveness and sincerity of responses.

3 Summary of key findings

- When Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine broke out, people were forced to make a life-changing choice whether to leave or stay. The instinct of self-protection became a key catalyst in decision-making.
- Everyone chose their means of survival based on the circumstances, their own experience and ideas about safety. For most interviewees, staying in the occupied territory was a well-grounded and conscious decision.
- The issue of 'cooperation' with the occupiers was quite sensitive for the interviewees, and the answers were controversial. The distinction between voluntary and forced cooperation, due to the conditions of survival in difficult conditions of occupation, is an acute issue.
- The issue of passports of the Russian Federation and/or the so-called 'LDPR' in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia will hinder the establishment of a future lasting peace. It will be a constant trigger for escalation.

Analysis

4 of the conducted interviews

4.1. To leave or to stay: decision-making factors

Among the interviewees, there were people who left the occupied territory or the area of active hostilities and people who made a conscious decision to stay.

The main factor influencing the decision of the respondents to leave their places of permanent residence was the ever-growing level of danger. Those who decided to leave in the first days of the full-scale invasion said they realised the hostilities would be long-lasting. At the same time, those respondents who left on the second or third day following 24 February hardly mentioned any difficulties accompanying their departure.



“We left on February 24 right away. There was no panic. Mom said we had to leave. She said that it would not end soon and that it was important to preserve life, health and a good mental state.”

In other cases, the decision to leave was taken against the backdrop of the growing intensity of hostilities and the ruining of accommodation and critical infrastructure. The main argument was about taking care of the family, first of all, the children. People with open pro-Ukrainian views understood the danger of a potential encounter with the occupants.

Those respondents who were leaving in March-June had a much more challenging way to go, spending 10-12 hours on the road or even leaving towards the territory under the control of Ukraine through Russia. While travelling, their lives were also in danger due to the shelling of roads and filtration at the occupants' checkpoints.

Today, money and filtration are the main problems with leaving the occupied territory. It is predominantly possible to leave using commercial transport services, with their cost starting from 150 euros. It is a significant amount of money for residents of the ruined settlements. Commercial transport companies do not provide any safety guarantees. There is no free access to the territory under the control of Ukrainian authorities – only through a dangerous and humiliating filtration procedure.

Almost half of the respondents who had left the occupied territory pointed out that they did not fear going to the territory under Ukrainian control. However, some apprehended leaving, first of all, anxious not to be able to find accommodation and work, worried about their family staying in occupation, fearing occupation of the new place of residence and one more forced displacement. Some people were also concerned about potential mobilisation if they left for the territories under Ukrainian control. Sometimes, trying to leave the area of active hostilities, people decided to go to the territory occupied by Russia, where there were no intense hostilities at that moment. In such cases, it was a compromise to stay close to home and have the family leave the shelled area. However, facing the realities of life in occupation, people were forced to move again.

Among those who decided to stay in the occupied territory were people who hoped that the active phase of hostilities would not last long. Therefore, staying in the places of permanent residence allowed to preserve the houses and other tangible assets. It is important to emphasise that some people who remained could not imagine a scenario of living in somebody else's home as a matter of principle. For those respondents, the possibility of staying in their own house is an undisputable value, giving the feeling of relative safety, regardless of who controlled that area. An additional argument in these cases was a fear that there were insufficient financial resources to get life going in a new place.



“I do not want to live in someone else's home. And for whom do I leave all this? So that it all gets stolen, as happened in other houses?”

Sometimes, interviewees motivated the decision to stay by not being willing to interrupt connections with the family, especially its senior members. The particular point was that evacuation of people with limited mobility was extremely difficult or almost impossible. Quite often, the answers of the respondents who stayed featured arguments about intangible values. People underlined that they identified themselves as residents of specific towns and would not leave their homes under any circumstances.



"I do not care which flag is waving here. I am a patriot of Mariupol. I cannot leave the city. It is my home. When at home, the soul feels in the right place."

It is important to stress that some respondents are currently in the occupied territory but believe in the coming de-occupation and do not want to live under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation or the so-called 'L/DPR'.

4.2. Life in evacuation and occupation: challenges

According to estimates, evacuated people faced moving and settling into the new place in the first weeks. Lack of housing, loss of the usual sources of income, the impossibility of satisfying even basic needs, and interrupted family and friendly ties were mentioned by the interviewed IDPs among the problems. Despite the difficulties, people adapted to the new living conditions from March to June. The majority said they had more or less solved the temporary accommodation issues, set up their routine, and partly restored their economic activity. Moreover, some respondents remained socially active: some joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine, some became volunteers, and some returned to social activism.



"I have been serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine since 26 February. After settling in the division, it became easier, of course. You feel useful, able to contribute to the cause of standing against the Russians."

The challenges faced by Ukrainians in occupation largely depended on how exactly a settlement was occupied.

Residents of rapidly occupied settlements faced threats at the beginning of the full-scale invasion due to the unpredictability of the occupants' actions, aggression, and constant search for enemies. The interviewees repeatedly pointed out the following factors as significant challenges for life in occupation: the necessity to interact with the occupation administration, the pushing of the Russian narrative about history and culture, filtration camps, searches and disappearances.



"People are threatened with reprisals, forced to go to work. Businesses are taken away, shops, warehouses, and houses are snapped off, and property is stolen. And everything disappears without a trace."

It is important that some respondents from the Donetsk region talked about the difference in treatment of the local population by the Russians and the so-called DPR people. The latter showed more negative treatment, motivating it by the Ukrainian Mariupol residents having a much higher standard of living while the DPR was trying to survive. It provokes mutual animosity and augments the rift between the territories occupied in 2014 and 2022.



“Donetsk people say: «While we were suffering there for eight years, you were leaving your best lives here in Mariupol.»

The respondents said that in the rapidly occupied territories, economic hardship arose soon due to the shutting down of the banking system and a significant increase in prices for food and essential goods, medicine and other healthcare products. Some rural respondents pointed out that their only way out was growing food for themselves. Some were forced to work in humanitarian centres established by the occupying administration to get additional humanitarian aid.

For people staying in the area of active hostilities, the situation was more critical since the level of danger was constantly growing: shelling was getting more intense, and there was no power, gas, communications, access to water, food, hygiene products, healthcare was limited, people moved from their homes to improvised shelters. At the moment of occupation, such settlements became unlivable. Ruined infrastructure, a complete shutdown of economic activities, loss of traditional sources of income, and collapse of the banking system – all made people utterly dependent on humanitarian aid.



“The main challenge is lack of signs of civilisation: no power, water, gas, sanitation.”

Those who stayed repeatedly said it was their conscious decision. Those who evacuated to the territories controlled by Ukraine also believed that many of their compatriots remained under occupation out of their own will and not forcefully. At the same time, both groups of respondents indicated the impossibility of planning their own life and foreseeing the developments as a serious challenge.



“At the moment, the main challenge for many is fear for the future. What will happen? How? Where will I be? Fear to leave your own home and property.”

4.3. The problem of defining collaborationism and accountability for it: respondents’ opinions

In March-June, there were many publications of the facts of collaboration by former neighbours and acquaintances of our respondents with the occupants in the formerly occupied territories, which is perceived by them in a highly negative way and strengthens the idea that the instances of collaborationism should not remain unpunished.



“Everyone takes a decision consciously. Is collaboration with the occupant a crime? Of course. These people should not fear but expect the inevitability of punishment.”

In general, the question of the possibility of holding those cooperating with the occupants accountable is quite painful for most respondents. IDPs are more radical in their opinions that Ukraine shall inadvertently punish for willful collaboration with the occupants. The majority of respondents also understand that it is necessary to distinguish those who consciously chose to collaborate and those who were forced to do so for the sake of survival. For the absolute majority of respondents, accountability for the mere fact of staying in the occupied territory is unacceptable. The survey participants were almost unanimous in not allowing people to be held accountable for belonging to a specific profession.



“People cannot be punished only for the fact of their belonging to a certain profession. That is the same as sentencing a plumber for fixing taps. People do their job in the conditions where they find themselves. A person can be sentenced for a specific crime. For example, for providing coordinates to the enemy of objects that would be later shelled. But not for the fact that a person is a doctor or a teacher. I think it is nonsense.”

However, more radical thoughts were expressed, for example, that all those who cooperate with the occupying authorities after the de-occupation should be at least deprived of the right to hold certain positions and engage in specific professional activities. On the other hand, some respondents consider a person accountable only when taking up arms and think that representatives of all other civilian professions who continued working in the occupied territories can keep working in the de-occupied communities.

An issue no less controversial was the respondents' attitude towards the practice of receiving Russian and/or 'L/DPR' passports in the occupied territories. Most respondents believe that the organisation of the process of the illegal issuance of passports contains elements of crime committed by the Russian Federation with regard to Ukraine. Such practice formally increases the number of citizens of another state (both recognised and unrecognised) in the occupied territories, which will hinder the establishment of a future-lasting peace and will constantly trigger an escalation of the situation.



“Authors and implementers of the Russian policy on ‘passportisation’ are criminals. Thus, they create grounds for future waves of aggression. They will say again that they are coming to free ‘their people’.”

At the same time, a large number of respondents acknowledge that the receipt of Russian and/or 'L/DPR' passports for the residents of the occupied territory may be a matter of survival in these territories, as it would be difficult to get employed and receive social services without such 'citizenship'. Some respondents believe that following the de-occupation of the territory, there should be a period when a person can voluntarily renounce a forcefully received passport and regain their legitimate citizenship of Ukraine; for those not using this opportunity, a procedure of deprivation of Ukrainian citizenship should be introduced. More radically opinionated respondents are convinced that the matter of getting a Russian and/or 'L/DPR' passport or not is a conscious choice of legally capable persons. Therefore, no life circumstances can justify such actions.

The question of keeping pensions and welfare payments for residents of the occupied territories is no less controversial. Some respondents were categorical in their opinion of the need to strip collaborators of their Ukrainian pensions quickly. However, it was emphasised that an individual approach should be applied, and each case should be studied separately.

5. Conclusions and recommendations of the Sviatohirsk Group

Conclusions

Unprecedented challenges caused by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 forced Ukrainians to make a tough choice whether to evacuate or stay in the occupied territories. Regardless of the choice made, people were guided by a desire to save their lives and survive; however, everyone saw the means of survival differently, depending on circumstances, their experience and the idea of safety. Analysis of the survey results conducted by the Sviatohirsk Group revealed that these life-changing decisions were predominately taken on a personal or family level. In contrast, state authorities had a minimal impact on this matter.

The survey showed that there was a sort of invisible line between those who left the occupied territories and those who stayed. Every group of respondents believes their choice was as proper and adequate in the circumstances as it could be. There is often an unspoken dissatisfaction with the other position. It is frequently based on stereotypical generalisations, such as 'everybody who stayed is a collaborator' or 'everybody who left is a traitor to their city'. Interestingly, this division is visible in previous surveys conducted by Sviatohirsk Group among residents of the territories occupied in 2014 and IDPs. Some respondents said that the current attitude of the so-called DPR people towards residents of the occupied Mariupol is worse than that of the Russian military.

It is important to point out that holding people accountable for collaboration with the occupants is still a sensitive matter for most respondents. It is a trigger for those who were forced to leave their homes and now observe online how their former neighbours, friends and acquaintances become collaborators. This category of respondents is quite radical in their opinion of the need to hold those seen keeping in touch with the occupying authorities accountable. On the other hand, the issue of distinguishing voluntary and forceful cooperation caused by the need to survive under occupation is acute.

Results of the survey demonstrate that most of the respondents are convinced that the punishment for voluntary cooperation with the occupying authorities must be inevitable and quite harsh, as well as contain both a criminal and a lustration

component. However, the respondents understand that punishment of those guilty is only possible in a legitimate way after the fact of a crime committed has been legally established.

It is important to underline that the question of accountability of representatives of certain professions is sensitive for most respondents. The jobs of doctors and teachers are especially triggering. It is likely that the development of Ukraine's position towards representatives of these professions will not be easy and will be controversially perceived by society.

The survey also showed that there is no homogenous societal position on other sensitive and controversial issues. In particular, receipt of Russian or so-called 'L/DPR' passports and preservation of pensions and welfare payments to residents of the occupied territories. Search for answers to these complex questions points towards an individual approach.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, the Sviatohirsk Group recommends that authorities at various levels, when planning and implementing initiatives to help victims of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine:

1. Systematically and effectively involve civil society in the development and implementation of the state policy of the transition period, namely:

- I to establish at the national and regional levels coordination councils from among specialised institutions of civil society, which deal with the problems of residents of temporarily occupied territories and IDPs. At the national level, such a coordination platform can be created under the Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, and at the regional level – under oblast, district, and municipal military administrations (during martial law).
- II to promote the development of dialogue platforms and to raise awareness among various categories of the conflict-affected population, including IDPs, about mediation and facilitation practices to create social cohesion, strengthen national unity and build sustainable peace.

2. Develop a state information policy focusing on residents of temporarily occupied territories and internally displaced persons, which:

- I should take into account various circumstances that influenced people's motives and choices in difficult life situations;
- II should address the dangerous practice of stereotypical generalisations and stigmatisation by the state authorities when they engage in public communications;
- III should explain precisely how the state plans to overcome the war's negative consequences and promote the social and economic reintegration of the IDPs and the Ukrainians who still live or were forced to return to temporarily occupied territories.

3. Develop and adopt a separate law on the prohibition of collaborationism synchronised with the current legislation of Ukraine. This law shall contain the following:

- I clear definitions of the terms «collaborationism», «collaborator», and «collaborative activity»;
- II a precise classification and comprehensive list of cases and circumstances that have signs of collaborationism;
- III establish a proportional degree of liability.

