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Social Cohesion in De-Occupied Communities of the East and South of Ukraine:

Results of the second wave of focus group discussions in the de-occupied communities of Kharkiv, Kherson and Mykolaiv regions

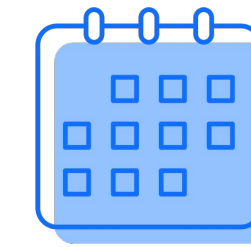
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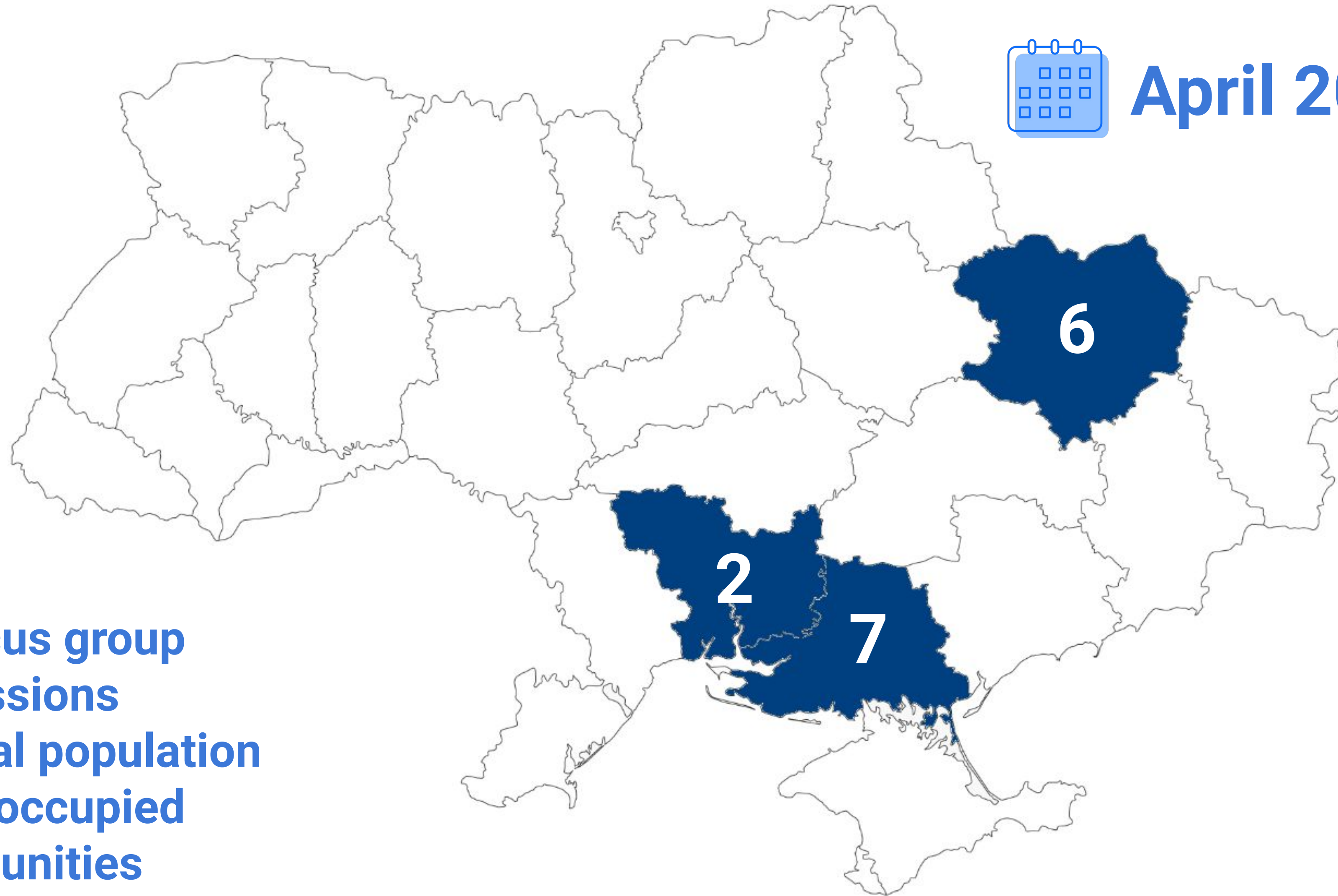
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Methodology



April 2024



- ✓ 15 focus group discussions
- ✓ general population of de-occupied communities

Key Needs of De-Occupied Communities



- **Security**: demining and shelters
- **Housing and utility infrastructure**

"Our city needs reconstruction the most. And accordingly, people will return home, more shops and jobs will be opened there."

- **Roads**

"The number one issue is the section of road from Muzykivka to the "circle"... Soon it will be impossible to get to us. It is very urgent to repair this section. Because ambulances will not be able to get through. And neither will buses."



- **Infrastructure for children and youth** (both for education and leisure)

"...Our hands are tied now. I have a small child – I can't leave her at home, find a full-time job, not knowing whether I will get to my workplace, what will happen to the children..."

⇒ Issues of distance education, lack of or insufficient number of shelters in schools

Consequences:

- outflow of young people from communities
- parents are unable to find employment because they have to look after their children at home every day



- Restoration of **economic activity and employment**. This requires both demining and the creation of educational and leisure infrastructure

"We need to create jobs so people can earn money to support their families. This is an important issue at the moment."

- **Access to services**, especially medical and administrative ones

"There are no pharmacies. To buy some basic medicine... you have to travel 25 kilometres. There is no minibus. You have to hire a car and go to Snihurivka."

- **Psychological assistance**, including for children.
- **Entertainment and cultural activities** that would reduce the feeling of isolation.
- **Direct support** for certain groups of people.

"Currently, only 75+ [age] receive humanitarian aid. What about 60+? No one will hire them, and they have no way to survive. This is a very big problem."

Support by Authorities



- A **positive assessment of the state's actions** to quickly restore infrastructure and its operations:
 - critical infrastructure: power grids, heating networks and water utilities
 - educational infrastructure: schools and kindergartens
 - hospitals
 - cultural infrastructure, including the restoration of churches

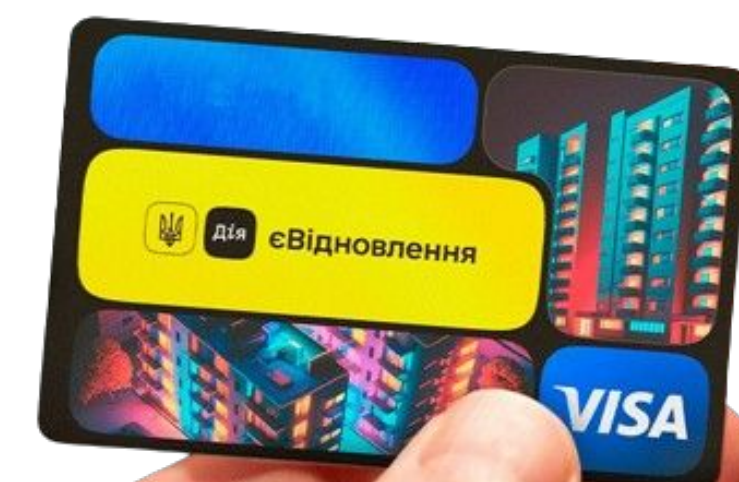
However, there is an understanding that it is impossible to restore all the necessary infrastructure considering the proximity to the frontline.

- **Restoration of housing infrastructure**

The state's assistance in restoring housing, in particular under the eVidnovlennia and Plich-o-Plich programs (Kherson region), is mostly assessed positively: assistance with materials, compensation, and expert assistance.

Challenges: long bureaucratic processes, lack of communication.

"I would like to thank our local authorities for boarding up the windows, for example. We had climbers who came and boarded up the windows quite quickly, systematically, and we didn't pay for it. We also had rescuers who came on a carriage, brought materials and performed the necessary work. Of course, we are very grateful for this. For the allocation of film [for windows], for example."



- **Functioning of public utilities companies**

Almost all respondents highly appreciate the functioning of public utilities companies, including landscaping, heating and water utilities, and garbage collection.

"Utilities companies clean up – the city is clean. The heating company launched heating in the houses as soon as possible."

- **Administrative services and consultations**

The functioning of TsNAPs (ASCs) and other administrative service structures is assessed as normal.

Problems: 1. In some communities, there is a lack of communication from local authorities. 2. In some communities, the full range of such structures does not work compared to the situation before the occupation.

"The civil registry office and the employment center are not working. Well, and something else is not working. They say, 'you have to look for it somewhere – go to Mykolaiv'."

- **Financial assistance for IDPs**

Respondents mostly agree that payments for IDPs are helpful, although insufficient.

Problem: Lack of control over the granting of IDP status.

"Payments from the state. Of course, there is support. I cannot say that there is no support. There is. But my opinion is that it is not enough. Two thousand [hryvnas] to pay a person is very, very little. If you pay for housing and utilities, then two thousand is nothing. Just enough to avoid starvation."

- **Assistance with employment**

Assistance from the state or local authorities with employment was widely requested among respondents.

- **Provision of fuel materials**

The majority of respondents emphasize the sufficient supply of fuel materials: pallets, solid fuel, and generators.

- **Free medical treatment and provision of medicines**

A significant number of focus group participants personally feel supported by the state in terms of free medical treatment, including mobile medical teams, and free provision of medicines.

Problem: lack of necessary medical specialists.

"Today, we do not have enough doctors. We also lack a certain number of paediatricians... Not all specialists are present in hospitals."

- **Education**

The launching of free online learning platforms, the provision of stationery and gadgets to schoolchildren, and preferential conditions for admission to universities for applicants from the de-occupied and frontline areas are positively assessed.

"A lot of platforms have been developed, platforms, applications on which children can work, and we can work. And the most important thing is that paid platforms have become free. I think this is very important. Children are given stationery and other school supplies."



- Participants mostly mentioned the **openness of military administrations** to requests from community residents and positive experiences of interaction
- **Satisfactory speed of problem solving**

“We appeal to the administration. And we did it many times. And I did... We worked together to rename the streets and our squares. There was constant communication with the administration. Both with the head of the administration and with its cultural sector... Because without their participation, without their support, our cultural activities, libraries, and publishing would simply be impossible.”

However, informants from Kherson stated that they were **disappointed with the interaction with the Kherson City Military Administration**, either because there was no communication regarding the requests of the city's residents or because the assistance provided was insufficient.

Humanitarian Aid



- Civil society organizations, both international and local, were primarily mentioned in the context of humanitarian aid.
- A **positive attitude towards the activities** of such organizations prevailed, with words of gratitude being expressed. Their activities were mostly **assessed as vital**.

"We are spoiled with support. Foundations, humanitarian aid, food, hygiene, and yes, sleeping things... Now everyone has all these things... We were provided with generators, aid for a water tower, a hospital, a car for the hospital, and a sewage cleaning truck. So, there is a good aid from the state, from international funds."

- People also mentioned assistance from individuals and entrepreneurs in answer to various requests.



Challenges

- Assistance programs are **focused on certain categories** of the population, **despite the needs of broader categories**

"People like me, for example, I have one child, my income is small, I have a salary of eight thousand, and my husband has a minimum wage. And... there are many families with one child, two children. I, for example, have not received any assistance."

- **Insufficiently clear information** on who can receive assistance and how, sometimes unclear criteria for receiving it

"...the Red Cross - I don't see any help from them in Bilozerka... Because I am a quartermaster, we all provided them with our data, personal data. From passports and [taxpayer] identification codes to all disability certificates. They just collected all the data - nothing was given out."

- The **distribution** of assistance is perceived as **unfair**

"...agricultural assistance... I am dissatisfied with that. ... And when I looked at the list – I got this list on Viber – I saw how those people [on the list] are living. They hire workers, they have cars, tractors, and everything, and they are on the lists to receive assistance to buy drip irrigation or seeds. I believe that it is necessary to investigate each household regarding how people actually live."

Challenges

- Distribution of humanitarian **aid that is not needed**

"To put it bluntly, no one needs just typical humanitarian aid anymore. Of course, we should be grateful that they give us at least something, but if you take it that way, you can give something else, more diverse, with the same money, probably. If one considers pasta, there is simply nowhere to put it, and this has its consequences. It all spoils, there are more mice."

- As an alternative, people see **targeted financial assistance** (for example, through vouchers) so that everyone can buy what they need.

"It was a good help when money was used to cover food vouchers. People bought what they needed and wanted. That was very good... It was help from the UN through authorities."

- **Lack of control over the distribution** of humanitarian aid by the authorities

"I know the fact that when food packages are gained ... at night they are halved by people close to the leadership of the village council. When people know what should be in the package, and it turns out to be something different from what they received for everyone. This is a real problem, and it has not been solved for a long time... The most expensive humanitarian aid is taken away... and cut up and distributed in small pieces, and not to everyone."

Returning Back to The Communities



- According to respondents, about **half of those who left have returned**.
- Mostly people of **pre-retirement and retirement age** are returning, while young people are staying in other regions or abroad.
- **Neutral or positive attitudes prevail** toward those who left. People talked about saving lives. There is an understanding that **being a displaced person is also difficult** and brings its own challenges.

"I have been here for six months. I don't want anyone to experience being under occupation... And I don't dare to blame a person for leaving or discuss their actions. This is an individual choice."

- Most respondents believe that those community residents who have temporarily left **can and should participate in community life**. A fresh perspective of a person with a new experience of living elsewhere can be useful:

"People who have left are a treasure for Kherson... They will come back with a different mentality; they will look more critically at all the problems that most Kherson residents who have never left are simply used to."



Restoration of Justice



Collaboration

- **Definition:** cooperation with the enemy, betrayal of one's country, passing sensitive information to the occupation forces.
- It had different manifestations and different motivations but is equally **negatively perceived** in the de-occupied communities.
- The main **request is to see examples of prosecution.**
- There are **few references to trials of collaborators.** This is the main factor behind the sense of injustice among citizens who see impunity for collaborators. Especially if these people remain living in the community.



Bringing to justice

- Consideration of each case of collaboration separately (**individual approach**).
- **Exemption** from liability **for critical infrastructure workers**.
- In addition to the option of imprisonment, there were proposals to confiscate the property of collaborators or to deport them.
- People generally **trust the laws of Ukraine**, and their application would satisfy the public demand for justice.
- Residents of the de-occupied territories **mostly do not intend to take matters of justice into their own hands**.
- To minimize the risks of mob justice, citizens need to see the active work of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary.

Issue of lustration

- All focus group participants agreed on the need to lustrate people who worked for their own benefit for the enemy during the occupation.
- **Individual approach.**
- **It is not fair to lustrate people who supported the lives and comforts** of the territorial community's residents during the occupation, including electricians, utility workers, employees of companies that provided garbage collection, etc.

"...I feel sorry for the electricians. Ordinary electricians, ordinary guys, thanks to whom we had electricity. In order not to discredit the Energozbut, these people were not reinstated. I feel very sorry for these people because, at that time, they risked their lives for the sake of Balakliya residents."

Issue of lustration

- It was suggested that **it is not fair to dismiss low- and middle-level employees** who continued to work in their positions during the occupation.
- Participants emphasized **the forced nature of work during the occupation**, when people had to perform minimal duties to survive.
- It is necessary to have enough **evidence to prove that a person voluntarily went to work** for the enemy.
- But there is also a **widespread opposing view** that it is necessary to lustrate everyone who held any position during the occupation, regardless of the person's profession or the level at which they were employed. It is the promptness of punishment that is important here.

Issue of lustration

Lustration of officials

Anyone who worked in the occupation authorities should be deprived of the right to work in state bodies. In addition, there were demands to include lustration in a harsher criminal punishment for officials.

Lustration of doctors

It is inappropriate to lustrate doctors, since their duty was to save the lives and health of people in the occupied territories.

But the management of medical institutions should be lustrated.

"I know doctors who are now in Oleshky on the occupied territory, on the left bank. Doctors who are pro-Ukrainian, they have a pro-Ukrainian position... A doctor is a profession... This person should also treat the enemy... There are no questions about doctors."

Issue of lustration

Lustration of teachers

Two positions:

- Lustration of all teachers who worked in schools during the occupation, since regardless of their orientation, they promoted Russian ideology.
- However, the demand for an individual approach prevailed. To lustrate those who voluntarily implemented the Russian program, especially teachers of humanities. Not to lustrate those who went to work under coercion or to ensure their livelihood, or who taught technical subjects; or some teachers who took care of the property of the educational institutions.


"There is a woman who is a teacher, she has worked as a teacher all her life. She was also offered [by occupants] to go and work, to teach at school. Well, as long as she can, she is holding on. She's not going [to work for them]. Well, who knows what will happen next. You know, life is more important than work and position. If she gets to the point where she can't fight back anymore, they can't leave now, they're not allowed to go anywhere, except to Crimea. No one lets them go further from Crimea."

It is worth noting that the current Criminal Code of Ukraine prescribes criminal punishment for some categories (e.g. teachers, heads of administrations, etc.) (Article 111-1).




Issue of obtaining Russian passports

Attitudes towards obtaining a Russian passport are sharply **negative** when it comes to assessing the actions of fellow citizens. However, under the conditions of prolonged occupation, such a step by residents of the occupied territories is assumed to become **quite reasonable for survival, and therefore does not cause condemnation.**





**Attitudes Towards Residents of the TOT
of Donetsk/Luhansk Regions and
Crimea (occupied since 2014)**



Factors of attitude:

- pro-Russian views / attitudes towards Ukraine of TOT residents
- participants' personal experience during the occupation
- participants' personal contacts and communication

Participants emphasized the **need to distinguish between people, not to generalise** or treat all TOT residents as one, and to take into account individual choices and actions.

"It's individual... each person has their own reasons... One has nowhere to go, another cannot leave for health reasons. There are a million reasons and generalizing them is wrong."

"Towards those who have not done anything wrong to me I have a normal attitude. People are people".

Negative attitude: pro-Russian views and ideological positions of TOT residents, "opportunists", "serving both sides".

"It's only a pity ... for those people who don't care whether they live under a Ukrainian or Russian flag ... these people are dangerous for us. Not even those who will leave the territory when the Armed Forces come, but those who will stay. And we can expect anything from them."

"They lived there, they received Russian salaries, they crossed the border – they also received some benefits in Ukraine, some children's benefits, pensions. ... Those who are in Crimea or in Donbas, in Luhansk – they have a very negative attitude towards us..."

"They were worse than the Buryats... They were ideological... They were angry. There were women who came and shouted that they hated us..."

Positive-neutral attitude: especially towards those who cannot leave the occupation and are forced to stay there for various reasons; empathy through personal experience of the occupation.

"There are ... people who live in Donetsk and Luhansk who ... are waiting for Ukraine, but simply do not leave: they do not want to lose their home, because it is very hard to take ... their belongings and leave for nowhere. It is very hard! They can even take a Russian passport, they can even work, but in their hearts they might wait for Ukraine."

"We ... did not feel this war that started in 2014 ... it was somewhere else. It did not concern us... But now, when they [Russians] have already come to our territories, it has somehow touched us. And we have some sympathy for those people who have lived [under occupation since 2014]."

Respondents' opinions about **TOT residents mobilized to the Russian army** have been divided:

- collaborators and traitors
 - negative experience during the occupation

"They robbed, loaded cars and sent to their Luhandonia all this stuff from shops, Nova Poshta..."

- Information about voluntariness of joining the RA for financial or ideological reasons

"I know from my relatives who live there... they say that some citizens voluntarily joined their army... [this is] the highest manifestation of collaborationism. How can you go against your own people? I said: "Why did they go there?" - "For money."

- forcibly mobilized, victims of circumstances
 - refusal can cost them their own lives or the lives of their loved ones'

"We don't know their circumstances... If you joined [the army], just surrender quickly. Go to the other side. Or hide there so that you are never found."

- Victims of years of enemy propaganda who cannot soberly assess the situation.

Therefore, an **individual approach is needed** when determining the responsibility of these "war criminals" in order to find out their personal circumstances and motivation for joining the Russian army.

Restrictions of voting rights

The opinions of the focus group participants divided:

- The right to vote can and should be limited: 1. For those who worked during occupation in the positions of authority (top and middle management of local administrations etc); 2. Because of the amount of damage that people who collaborated with the enemy have caused by their actions, as well as the damage they may cause in future elections by having some influence on voting.

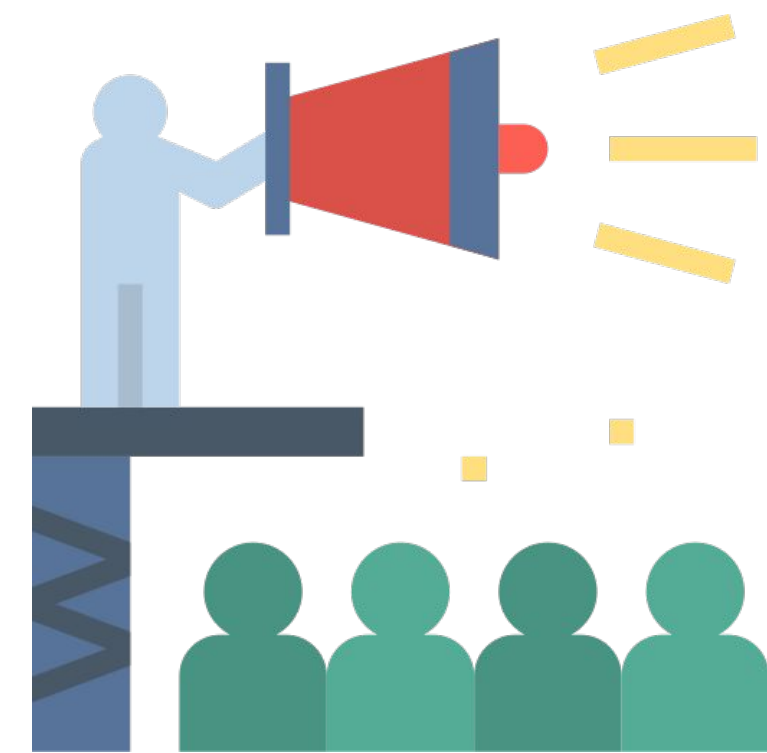
"This should only apply to people who were connected to the authorities... Street cleaners, gas workers and electricians, if they worked [during occupation], they were still doing everything for the city... Only those who were connected to the authorities and then switched to cooperating with the occupiers using their powers should be suspended from voting..."

- No one should be deprived of the right to vote under any circumstances, as this is a violation of the law and a failure to respect basic democratic values

"We must adhere to the Constitution of Ukraine... We will not be able to go against the law and, indeed, against the Constitution."

Life Under Occupation – Information Influence





- **The Russians isolated the local population from Ukrainian information resources** by blocking communications or cutting off electricity. Instead, they distributed newspapers and leaflets.
- However, **people found ways to get information** if they wanted to.
- **The worst informed were older people** who do not know how to use modern technologies. For example, they were greatly influenced by direct conversations with the occupiers, which even sometimes aroused sympathy:

"There were senior women, pensioners, who often liked to sit on benches when Russian guys were walking around. There were those [Russian soldiers] who pressed for pity, came and asked for food. There were the 19-year-olds, and they could cry because they were sent away, and their wives were left behind. And these senior women believed that they were not to blame, that they were forced, that they did not know where they were going."

- The **most popular** sources of information in the occupation: **Ukrainian telegram channels**. When people found the Internet, they downloaded news feeds to read later.
- VPN services are important for bypassing Russian blocking, especially good ones that are paid.

"Not everyone can do it, the good VPNs are paid. And free VPNs cannot provide the access that is needed, in full. For children's education, for people's work... Someone paid for a VPN for Kherson. And it was like a breath of air for us. We were able to communicate, we were able to work... And now I wish we could do the same for people from the left bank [of Kherson region], so that they could receive our information."

There are differences between the regions in the participants' assessment of the effectiveness of Russian propaganda.

- **Mykolaiv and Kherson regions**: insignificant impact. The effectiveness of propaganda also depended on the political views of the person.

"[In the city of X], many more people would have succumbed to their propaganda because people here have a slightly different worldview and think a little differently. In Kherson, people are more patriotic, in my opinion, so it didn't affect us too much."

"If a person did not have brains before the occupation, then they did not appear during it. If they didn't have them during the occupation, they didn't have them after the de-occupation."

- **Kharkiv region**: the influence of Russian propaganda is still very strong. Some even categorically stated that Ukraine has lost the information war since 2014.

"The propaganda was very serious. And its result you can see with elections, and how many people voted for the Party of Regions, here are the results of Russian propaganda. It hasn't gone away, it's still there, it's even worse. It's just that many people have already faced this very problem, they have seen the "Russian world" in the occupation. But some people are slow to understand. Even my neighbour said to me just two days ago: "I still eat Russian humanitarian aid; I don't need anything from Ukraine."

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