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NONVIOLENT PEACEFORCE

# Protection needs and responses in de-occupied and frontline areas in Donetska Oblast, Ukraine



A view shows residential buildings damaged by a Russian missile strike, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Pokrovsk, Donetsk region, Ukraine August 8, 2023. REUTERS/Viacheslav Ratynskiy

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# Background

The threats faced by civilians in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine are critical. Nine years since the area was first occupied in 2014, civilians continue bearing the brunt of the ongoing war and occupation. The escalation of hostilities by Russian forces in February 2022 dramatically increased protection risks to the safety and well-being of civilians, triggering a new wave of displacement across Donbas. The humanitarian situation has become acute and more complex. Further, social fabrics, compromised by years of insecurity and separation by 'a line of contact', have come under unparalleled stress since the fighting resumed. This report provides an overview of key civilian protection needs and concerns in de-occupied and frontline areas of Donetsk oblast in the wake of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine.

In 2014, Russia-backed separatists occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in the east of Ukraine turning Donbas, as the region is also known, into an active conflict zone. As a result, over 1.4 million people fled their homes in temporarily occupied Donbas and Crimea, making a dangerous crossing of the contact line – some 420 km strip of land separating the warring parties – into Ukraine between 2014 and 2021. Whilst some displaced persons moved to other oblasts within Ukraine or went abroad, the majority of people displaced from Donbas moved to cities such as Mariupol, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, in Donetsk oblast, hoping to return to their areas of origin as soon as Ukraine reclaims them.

In February 2022, the Russian government unilaterally recognized the independence of the two self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and three days later illegally invaded Ukraine. The cities that were once sought as safe havens by civilians, became active targets of Russian forces.

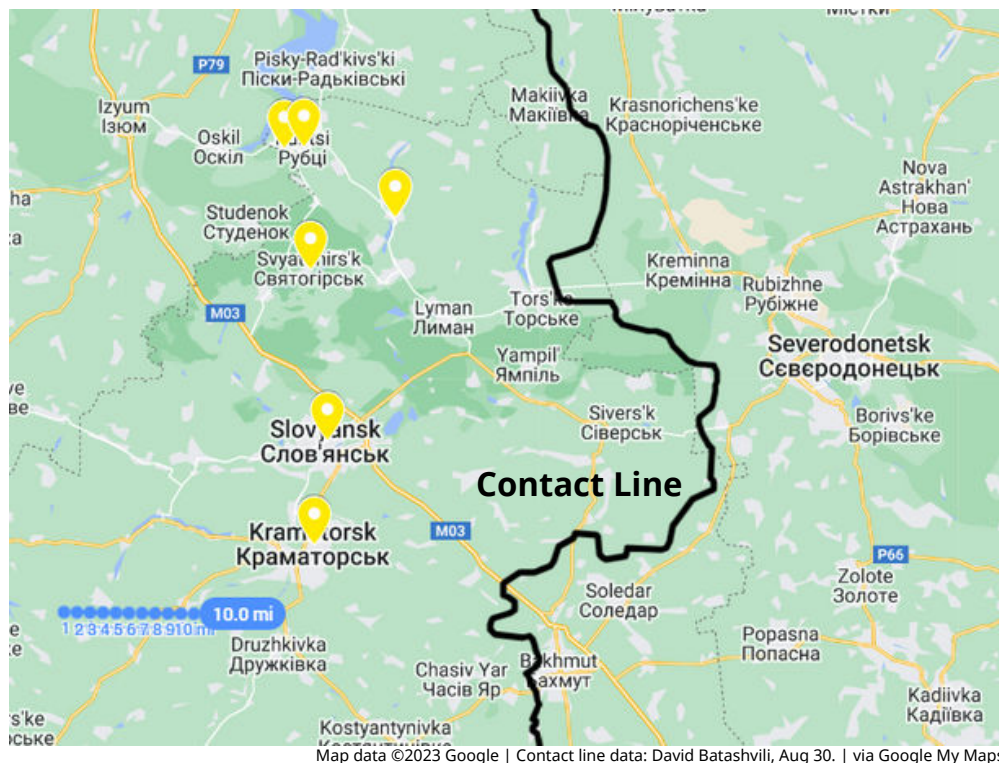
Areas of Russian military control in Ukraine



# Methodology

NP conducted a visit to Donetsk oblast between 10 to 19 August 2023 to carry out a rapid assessment of civilian protection needs and concerns in de-occupied and frontline areas under the control of the Government of Ukraine (GCA). The NP team engaged with local and regional civil-military authorities in Kramatorsk city and surrounding areas, national NGOs, a charitable foundation, and local and international volunteers who are servicing war-affected populations across the oblast. The NP team also visited de-occupied and frontline Sviatohirska and Lymanska hromadas, engaging with local authorities and community members, including returnees. The majority of interviews were conducted in person in Kramatorsk and Sloviansk cities. In-depth phone interviews were conducted with humanitarian actors who have relocated to Dnipro and Kyiv cities or are based in other cities within GCA of Donetsk oblast, such as Mirgorod. Extensive desk research and context analysis have also informed this report.

This report does not include information on protection concerns and the humanitarian situation in the areas of Donetsk oblast that are currently occupied by Russian forces and where access remains restricted.



# Protection Needs & Responses

## Civilian movements

### Civilian evacuations

Since GCA announced an evacuation from Donetska oblast in August 2022, some 90,000 people, including over 10,000 children and 3,700 people with reduced mobility, have left their homes according to the Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporary Occupied Territories of Ukraine. The actual number of displaced persons is likely higher as some people do not register as internally displaced persons and are therefore unaccounted for. Despite these numbers, broader information about displaced civilians in and from the temporarily occupied areas of Donetska oblast remains limited.

As of August 2023, civilian evacuation from the oblast is ongoing, although requests from civilians have decreased despite ongoing and increasing shelling. In nine locations of Lymanska and Mykolaivska hromadas in Donetska oblast, the Ukrainian Government has announced a mandatory evacuation of families with children due to the deteriorating security situation and intensified shelling. However, many civilians refuse to evacuate from these territories. Some choose to stay, fearing the journey or the uncertain future of their displacement, while other civilians have political motivations to stay.

Aside from government-facilitated evacuations, foreign and local volunteers also conduct informal evacuations in the oblast. NP identified several protection concerns related to such informal evacuations that put civilians at risk. These include lack of informed consent, information on availability of basic services in the areas of relocation and lack of assistance for evacuees in accessing those services once people are evacuated. NP has learned of several instances of foreign and local volunteers persuading people to evacuate that are overpromising assistance in the areas of displacement, only to leave them in front of churches or other locations without resources for further assistance. Such informal evacuations are conducted without coordination with the civil-military authorities, and as a result, are impossible for the government or other humanitarian response mechanisms to follow up on. Further, it undermines the trust for and reputation of other volunteers who operate responsibly.

## Returns to de-occupied territories

Following the de-occupation of villages in Svyatohirska and Lymanska hromadas, civilians began returning to their places of origin despite ongoing risk of shelling, unexploded ordnance (UXO), and lack of basic services. The majority of those returning are older people and their caregivers. Returnees, with whom NP spoke, cited financial and other difficulties living in displacement as reasons for their decision to return.

## Physical threats to civilian safety

Targeted and indiscriminate shelling of civilian spaces, particularly in urban areas, continues across Donetska oblast. In Kramatorsk city, an administrative center of the oblast, efforts to clear and renovate bomb shelters are underway according to the authorities. However, resources to equip these shelters with basic hibernation equipment are lacking. While a number of mobile bomb shelters have been installed in public spaces across Kramatorsk city, such shelters are not available in rural areas.

Russian forces have regularly targeted the city and surrounding areas with long-range surface-to-air missiles such as S-300s. Residents noted that there is often no time to seek shelter as the air raid sirens frequently activate after the missile has exploded, and shelling frequently happens at night when people are asleep.

UXO are another risk to people's safety. This poses a high threat in de-occupied hromadas where civilians continue to find UXO in their vegetable gardens and fields, forest areas, and around bodies of water.

## Access to services and humanitarian aid

The government is working to restore access to basic services such as electricity and water supplies in de-occupied areas as quickly as possible, however, damage is widespread and complex and resources are lacking. Further, ongoing hostilities and rapidly changing frontlines prevent international humanitarian organizations from assisting affected civilians to prepare for the upcoming winter through durable shelter repairs.

While in bigger cities such as Kramatorsk and Sloviansk people seem to be more familiar with the availability of support services, in de-occupied and rural areas

people face a number of barriers in accessing humanitarian aid, specifically medical and cash assistance. For example, a local NGO representative told NP they were unable to provide a 60-year-old woman with hygiene pads as she was not meeting the age criteria required by the donor. In another location, a group of community members were registered for cash support with a single phone number. Only one person from the registered group received said cash assistance, while others are now unable to register with another NGO for cash support.

People with limited mobility, without identification documents or a cell phone, are often invisible to aid groups and therefore unable to access aid. Residents to whom NP spoke reported that they do not know the selection criteria of NGOs nor do they have their contact information. Residents also mentioned they feel confused as to why some people receive aid, while others do not. This lack of clarity or transparency has the potential to undermine trust and effectiveness of the humanitarian response in the region more broadly.

## **Protection responses and priorities**

### **Protection of older people and people with special needs**

In de-occupied and frontline locations, older people often comprise the majority of the population and struggle to access essential services and humanitarian aid. Access to emergency and specialized medical care as well as pharmacies is urgent and lacking. While some INGOs have provided basic medical care in de-occupied villages through a monthly mobile clinic, people with limited mobility have been unable to access it. For example, a 55-year-old woman who suffers from a mental health condition and has limited mobility told NP she has not been seen by a medical professional despite the presence of a mobile clinic in her village on several occasions. Similarly, only a limited range of medications were provided through such mobile clinics. Accessing the closest pharmacy would require traveling to Sloviansk or Izyum towns, requiring a person to walk and to afford the cost of transportation and medicine.

### **Protection of children and youth**

Some child and youth support services could be found in cities like Kramatorsk, however, these services, including safe spaces, are largely not operational or absent

in rural areas. Not having alternative safer options for rest and recuperation, children and their parents living near forest areas, rivers and lakes continue to occasionally visit these areas despite high risks of UXO, trip wires, and other hazards. There is an urgent need to ensure consistent and safe access to protection and education services, including psychosocial support, for children and youth remaining in de-occupied and frontline areas.

### **Mental Health support and community engagement**

Nine years of ongoing hostilities and in some territories temporary occupation by Russian forces have taken a dramatic toll on the mental health of people living in Donetska oblast. “We farm our gardens and try not to think about anything”, an older woman in a de-occupied village told NP. Children and young people also require specialized mental health support.

Widespread unemployment and lack of safe livelihood options is extremely pervasive, leaving people feeling anxious about meeting their basic needs and a high level of uncertainty about the near future. A 33-year-old man, who returned to his de-occupied village to look after his grandmother, told NP he does not know how much longer he would be able to stay in the village without a job, adding that silence and free time also bring back traumatic memories of the war.

Living under ongoing stress has also affected relationships between community members. In de-occupied areas, people spoke to NP about tensions between community members who evacuated and those who had to stay and endured Russia’s military occupation. This increases the risk of intercommunal tension and could further hinder social cohesion, socio-economic development and political stability.

# Recommendations

## **Improve coordination to facilitate civilian evacuations responsibly.**

This includes but is not limited to increasing access to information about evacuation routes and services in areas of relocation, enabling civilians to make informed decisions. Local and international volunteers, as well as donors, should respect the *Do No Harm* principle when facilitating evacuations of civilians, and ensure that conflict sensitivity is integrated into all programming. Such evacuations should be done in coordination with civil-military authorities, informing them about the number of civilians evacuated and to which location as well as what follow-up services are needed.

## **Increase protection to civilians through improved access to information, assistance accessing legal aid and documentation, and safe and available shelters.**

This includes information for all community members, including children, on the risks associated with UXOs and other remnants of war, and how to report these to relevant authorities. The enhancement of civilian self-protection in this manner is particularly important in the Donbas, where the presence of humanitarian actors remains limited and cannot meet the critical needs of the population.

## **Scale up and sustain support to volunteers through [responsible partnerships](#).**

INGOs and donors have a responsibility to ensure that their local implementing partners, particularly those involved in frontline humanitarian work, have the necessary resources and training to conduct their work as safely as possible. This includes provision of quality Personal Protective Equipment, First Aid Kits, psychological first aid and emergency health insurance and relevant training on safety, protection and do no harm. Volunteers conducting evacuations should have the capacity to extend the Personal Protective Equipment to civilians they evacuate.



## **Scale up and tailor humanitarian response to the needs of affected communities.**

Lift the barriers faced by people in accessing humanitarian aid and basic services, specifically but not limited to barriers faced by older people and people with special needs. This means increasing efforts to reach populations outside of urban areas, ensuring eligibility criteria is sufficiently flexible to meet unanticipated needs and risks, and providing information about accessing aid in a range of formats (e.g. in analogue form for those without internet or cellular access). Conflict sensitivity principles need to be integrated into all programming to ensure that humanitarian aid is not further stressing nor causing social conflict among communities. Feedback mechanisms need to be readily available, and aid recipients made aware of how to access and utilise these mechanisms.

## **Increase flexibility of aid distribution and delivery to those in need.**

Civilians should be able to access aid based on need and not whether they can fit age criteria or prove their vulnerability with documentation.