

Mass Atrocities in Ukraine: Assessing Risks of Significant Escalation

Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide
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Rapporteur's report
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Introduction

On October 11, 2022, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum convened a private roundtable to discuss potential scenarios of mass atrocity escalation in Ukraine. The discussion featured preliminary remarks by three Ukraine experts, followed by a facilitated discussion.

The discussion aimed to encourage more systematic thinking about how the current pattern of mass atrocities in Ukraine could escalate, in terms of severity, lethality, and/or systematicity to inform policy makers' consideration of preventive options. The 2022 *United States Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities* states, "In cases of ongoing atrocities, the [Atrocity Prevention] Task Force supports regional policy processes in developing and monitoring targeted response options and adjusting course as needed." Assessing potential pathways to escalation is one way to help identify targeted response options that could mitigate atrocity risks. Even in a case like Ukraine, where the core US strategy is to help Ukraine repel Russia's invasion, additional options may be available to help protect vulnerable populations or head-off future escalation. At the time of the convening, little analysis of this type appeared to exist, despite the substantial attention to documenting atrocity crimes, monitoring day-to-day developments in the war, and anticipating potential future scenarios of the conflict in general.

Therefore, the discussion focused on the following prompts:

- What are the major potential triggers or drivers of potential significant escalation of atrocities in Ukraine over the next year or so?
- What strategies might policy makers use to anticipate, prevent, or respond to the potential escalation of atrocities?
- What observable trends or events would indicate increasing likelihood of a significant escalation of atrocities in Ukraine?

The discussion took place under the Chatham House rule. This rapporteur's report summarizes key discussion points and questions without attribution.

Perpetrator Motives

The three presenters offered multiple explanations for Russian mass atrocities. The first presenter assessed that the purpose of Russian atrocities is to change Ukrainian behavior to discourage open expressions of Ukrainian nationalism and opposition to the Russian occupation.

The second and third presenters judged that Russia's ideological and political objectives are more comprehensive, to eliminate the Ukrainian national community. They said that these motives limit the explanatory value of research findings about ethnic conflict that researchers draw from the academic literature about civil wars and fragile states, which do not apply to the context of interstate war in Ukraine. The third presenter also emphasized that, from their perspective, the genocidal goal of destroying Ukraine's national community encourages President Putin to take greater military risks. They also noted that Russia's genocidal ideology and its justifications for civilian casualties in Ukraine may spread and "radicalize" a significant majority of the Russian population.

The first presenter said that Russia's drive to repress anti-Russian sentiment in occupied territories in Ukraine has limited opportunities for active resistance against Russian troops and the governing administration. However, the presenter suggested that the combination of a larger number of Russian troops and the shrinking size of Russian-occupied territories would expand opportunities for pro-Ukrainian guerrilla attacks against Russian forces. The second presenter indicated that a larger-scale Ukrainian insurgency in Russian-occupied territories would lead to a "bloodbath" against individuals and communities whom Russian units perceive as Ukraine supporters and, by extension, threats against the Russian occupation. They noted that former Ukrainian state officials, such as teachers and soldiers, and individuals who openly display their support for Ukrainian nationalism are particularly vulnerable to Russian abuses in occupied areas. The third presenter indicated that Russia may use threats against the children of suspected Ukrainian dissidents to enforce compliance with Russian repression.

Geographic patterns of violence

The first presenter said that Russia would concentrate violence against civilians in two main areas. First, Russia will increase attacks in urban areas around Kherson, in Ukraine's southeast. Second, Russia's retreat into the Russian Federation and the area that separatists have claimed for the Donetsk People's Republic would prompt new violence in the Luhansk region. The second presenter also said that the Russian military will try to advance towards Kyiv, raising the possibility of new violence against civilians in Ukraine's northern regions. Additionally, the presenter suggested that Belarus may stage attacks on western Ukraine to advance Russian objectives. They indicated that the sharp escalation in violence would be brief, but that the overall level of violence against civilians would stabilize at a higher level.

Multiple presenters judged that anti-civilian attacks and constraints on access to necessities such as food and heating would occur most heavily along the front lines. The first presenter observed that Russia defaults to targeting populations that are (1) nearest to Ukrainian air defense targets and (2) easiest to reach with Russia's limited artillery arsenal.

Types and indicators of violence

Targeting of population centers: The first presenter noted that Russia may increase targeting of civilian population centers as Ukraine makes military advances in Russian-occupied territories. The presenter noted that a series of Russian attacks against Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv, in early October illustrates this pattern. The presenter indicated that these Russian attacks may be more lethal than previous assaults, although the violence may not necessarily be more systematic.

Predation and conflict-related sexual violence: The first presenter also suggested that abuses against civilians would increase as Russia deploys a large group of new, untrained conscripts to exercise military control over a shrinking set of occupied territories in Ukraine. Russian commanding officers may give license for these new conscripts to engage in "everyday" abuses, such as looting and predation, to fill supply gaps and provide financial rewards to otherwise-disaffected soldiers.

In addition to mass killing, presenters highlighted that there is a widespread risk of conflict-related sexual violence. They noted, however, that international actors may not receive many reports about those abuses. Two presenters noted that some conscripted units may engage in more severe sexual violence than others based on pre-existing cultural differences. One presenter also observed that the Russian draft order has forced potential male conscripts into hiding in occupied territories, leaving Ukrainian women more vulnerable to sexual exploitation by Russian troops.

Displacement: The presenters indicated that Russia has not used forced displacement as a major strategy of violence against civilians. Although environmental degradation has been a second-order consequence of Russian attacks on Ukrainian territory, the presenters indicated that the Russian military does not intend to render Ukrainian land unusable for agriculture. They observed that Russia has incentives to maintain the agricultural capacity of Ukrainian land because they aim to move Russian citizens into depopulated areas.

Deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure: The third presenter observed that Russia would also seek to worsen the humanitarian situation in Ukraine and neighboring countries by deliberately attacking infrastructure that enables civilians to access food, power, adequate healthcare, and other necessities. They suggested that these attacks are consistent with one of the types of acts that can constitute genocide, according to the Convention: "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." They suggested that policy makers should view humanitarian assistance as a strategy to advance atrocity prevention goals, rather than a separate policy arena.

The presenters suggested that policy makers track several less-direct indicators of the humanitarian situation in Ukraine. Multiple presenters observed that the price and availability of water, food, and fuel are an important indicator of Russia's efforts to impose unbearable conditions on Ukrainian civilians, especially during winter. The first presenter observed that Ukrainian civilians in rural areas are more resilient to heating gaps and food-price increases, whereas people in urban areas may be more vulnerable because they rely on more centralized food- and fuel-distribution systems. The second presenter also observed that policy makers do not have up-to-date population statistics that reflect the mass displacement of Ukrainian civilians since February. The third presenter suggested that policy makers also track the destruction of Ukrainian property, because for many Ukrainian civilians, real estate accounts for a very large share of their total wealth. They also suggested that health data may also be a useful indicator of the war's second-order effects on civilian populations.

Potential atrocity prevention actions

The presenters highlighted multiple opportunities for US policy makers to reduce immediate and longer-term harm to civilians in Ukraine. One participant expressed particular interest in localized strategies that could persist without a large infusion of resources, given the significant US and international financial commitments to the war to date.

“Permeable” front lines: Multiple presenters indicated that international actors—including the United States—should seek to increase the “permeability” of the front lines to allow more civilians to flee ongoing fighting and support humanitarian operations to provide basic needs to civilians who are unable or do not want to flee front-line areas.

Assistance to civilian self-protection groups: The first presenter encouraged US assistance to groups that support civilians stuck in heavily contested areas, which currently function on a volunteer basis without access to significant financial resources. This assistance would include financial assurances to volunteers, salary support, technical supplies such as body armor, and emergency-response training. They also observed that the distribution of unbranded assistance in the Donbas region circa 2019 provides a model of aid distribution that (1) allows humanitarian actors political space for the distribution of aid and (2) maintains an infrastructure for communicating with local groups in occupied areas. This assistance included humanitarian supplies and infrastructure for power generation and internal and external communication. Although the presenter conceded that the lack of political space for collecting information is an obstacle, they observed that humanitarian groups should adopt a high level of risk tolerance to ensure continued access.

Early warning: The second presenter encouraged policy makers to support Ukrainian military forces and former civilian officials in warning civilian populations of impending attacks. This support would include training on atrocity indicators and warning signs as well as assistance in communicating warnings directly to civilians in occupied areas, not just through military or intelligence channels. The third presenter encouraged US policy makers to use researcher networks to build relationships with actors in occupied areas.

Lowering barriers to refugee intake in the United States: The second presenter recommended that US officials seeking to facilitate flight and resettlement from Ukraine should work to make the process of seeking refugee protection in the United States more straightforward for Ukrainians whom the war has displaced.

Encouraging dissent in Russia: Noting that creating the conditions for a Ukrainian victory would be the most durable way to prevent future Russian atrocities, one presenter also encouraged measures to undermine popular support for President Putin. They noted that support for President Putin has declined in response to significant military losses in Ukraine. They recommended that the US government encourage partner governments, such as Estonia and Latvia, to lower barriers for Russian citizens to acquire alternative identity documents so that they can flee Russia.

The presenter also said that any measures to support Russian civil society groups should focus on encouraging decentralized movements, to lower the risk of co-optation by the Russian government. They recommended that US policy makers should support these activities while planning for different leadership scenarios after Putin's eventual death or departure from power.

Although the presenters did not discuss the prospect of a negotiated settlement at length, multiple presenters underscored that both Ukrainian leaders and the general populace are committed to military victory. One presenter observed that public opinion in Ukraine would view territorial concessions as "ceding their people," rather than a necessary compromise to end the war.