

RFI

NO. 14

SOCIAL COHESION IN THE DEOCCUPIED TERRITORIES



Kherson city. Credit: Alex Zakletsky

Last fall, the Ukrainian army [launched](#) a successful counteroffensive that pushed Russian soldiers out of swathes of occupied territory. Eastern [Kharkiv oblast](#) was deoccupied in [September](#), northwest [Donetsk oblast](#) in [September-October](#), right-bank [Kherson oblast](#) (including the regional capital, [Kherson](#)) in [October-November](#) and southeastern [Mykolaiv oblast](#) in early [November](#). In addition to the horrors of occupation, which included [sexual violence](#), [torture](#), forced [disappearances](#), and [large numbers](#) of deaths, residents in many of these deoccupied areas also experienced a humanitarian disaster caused by [destroyed infrastructure](#), [interrupted livelihoods](#) and [utility outages](#) due to [strikes](#) on Ukraine's power infrastructure (see [RFI 13: Impact of Strikes on the Power Grid](#) for more information). The hardships of the war, along with the slow pace of reconstruction (especially in areas under [daily fire](#), like Kherson) and the realities of winter, have **left the population psychologically depleted. This RFI examines how these and other factors have impacted social cohesion in the deoccupied territories**, with a focus on locals' attitudes toward a) their neighbors, b) residents who left and/or returned c) residents with pro-Russian sympathies, d) government officials and e) humanitarian organizations. Factors impacting social cohesion include the traumas of occupation (and sometimes liberation), ideological divisions within communities, mass displacement and the ongoing humanitarian/security crisis in some areas.

Relations Between Neighbors

During the occupation itself, research participants report that many locals lived in a constant state of uncertainty, causing them to grow emotionally exhausted, desensitized to the dangers of shelling, and/or withdrawn from loved ones and community members. Per a source in Kherson oblast, "the occupation was a time when it was better not to leave the house: there were collaborators, denunciations and bullying." A respondent in Mykolaiv oblast said that hardship and repression led some residents to adopt an "everyone for themselves" mindset during the occupation, which was exacerbated by a lack of [information](#) and basic goods and [services](#). "We had no light, heat, water, communications, or internet," a woman in [Borozenske](#), Kherson oblast recounted. "We did not know what was going on in Ukraine, where our loved ones were, and what was going to happen next...That's how we lived." What's more, some locals collaborated with the occupying authorities, denouncing neighbors and helping Russian soldiers round up locals with pro-Ukrainian views, which according to one source "upset the community much more than the violations committed by the Russian military" (see [RFI 11: Collaboration](#) for more details). That said, other residents coped with the occupation by assisting their neighbors, especially elderly persons whose relatives had left the region.

Following deoccupation, a small number of locals have reportedly "turned inwards" and avoid talking to their neighbors, sometimes to the point of refusing aid and assistance. Per a respondent in Kharkiv, "disagreements can turn into serious fights and brawls, sometimes lasting for weeks. But this is how life in a community works." Tensions are further exacerbated when neighbors accuse each other of collaboration or looting – which local sources say they may sometimes do on shaky grounds, or to "get even" for long-standing grudges. These allegations may take the form of official denunciations to local authorities, though many local sources claim that authorities are slow to address reports of collaboration.

That said, the majority of respondents report that **deoccupation has ushered in a new sense of communal solidarity**. Multiple research participants report increased identification as Ukrainians (as compared to regional identities), including in eastern regions that primarily speak Russian. What's more, increased strikes and resulting power or water outages prompt many to help their neighbors out, and rebuilding homes in smaller villages often is a collective task. A source in Donetsk oblast says that neighborhood groups have been known to install windows and build makeshift bridges, and that local entrepreneurs sometimes supply building materials for free. Residents are known to socialize with each other at [Invincibility Points](#), as well as at other places (pharmacies, clinics, food production facilities) outfitted with generators and charging stations. Neighbors with wells and generators sometimes distribute potable water for free, though others sell water to make ends meet.

Many locals report a strong sense of local initiative in smaller villages, partially because **aid providers are not always able to reach them**. Groups of villagers often take it upon themselves to paint unexploded mines in bright colors or fence them off. Locals often assist returnees in rebuilding their homes (if supplies are available) or identifying the graves of loved ones. In settlements where gas lines have been damaged or destroyed, some people move in with neighbors who have working kitchens or heating.

Respondents generally report that **social cohesion is weaker in urban centers**. A source in Mykolaiv oblast says that community spirit is most intact in locales where a large number of residents chose to stay, meaning that **social cohesion may be weaker in areas where the bulk of people evacuated during or after occupation**. These locations may require more attention from aid providers and local authorities.

Relations With Those Who Left or Returned

Many communities that suffered occupation have seen multiple waves of displacement: some residents fled prior to the occupation, some during, and some after deoccupation. Furthermore, many residents have [started returning](#) to the deoccupied territories, sometimes in [defiance](#) of government advice. The central government has arranged evacuation convoys from [Donetsk](#) and [Kherson oblasts](#) (see [RFI 10: Frontline Evacuation](#)) due to dire conditions in frontline areas, which means the population has been scattered further. Some IDPs, especially the elderly, may especially yearn to return, though those under 30-40 are reportedly more likely to settle in their new place of residence. Still, **research participants estimate that most IDPs have not yet returned to deoccupied areas**, citing reasons such as the lack of security (particularly in Kherson oblast), winter weather, damaged homes, inadequate utility provision (water, gas, power), the absence of affordable medicine or medical services, having a child enrolled in school in their host community, a perceived dearth of assistance or aid in their home community, and fears of returning home to unemployment. While respondents in Kherson prioritized security concerns, respondents elsewhere emphasized the need for job creation. One source added that the entrepreneurs who could be helping to revitalize local economies have relocated their businesses to other parts of Ukraine and may be loath to return until there is more stability. This results in communities divided into those who remained through the occupation, those who left and remain outside their native oblasts, and those who return, either permanently or periodically. Respondents who stayed throughout reported a broad range of attitudes towards those who had left at some point, even

if they had returned. Some report **being envious of those who were able to leave prior to the occupation, leading to resentment** when they return and expect a quick return to normalcy. As far as **those who have left for Russia**, a source in Mykolaiv notes that some locals distinguish between two types: those who collaborated and feared for their safety, and those who accepted [housing vouchers](#) prior to deoccupation. The former group is universally reviled, while the latter prompts mixed feelings.

Some residents who have stayed home tell IDP relatives, especially young people, not to come back and to seek opportunities elsewhere. Local sources report stereotypes of those who decide to return: “only those tired of sleeping in school gyms and dormitories...come back – only those driven by despair. The rest just try to get on with their life. To return [to Kherson oblast] requires security, which simply isn’t here.” Alternatively, others try to convince relatives to come back and help rebuild their communities – one respondent overheard someone tell a loved one “come back, what are you doing over there? You’re becoming city folk.”

Many IDPs keep up ties with their home communities through providing some form of humanitarian assistance. Many respondents said that some IDPs shuttle back and forth to their hometowns and villages to visit family, bring aid shipments and coordinate rebuilding efforts. A research participant notes that some IDPs create informal networks in their host cities to assist communities back home, especially **smaller towns that receive less assistance from humanitarian organizations or governing bodies:**

A 53-year old man from [Beryslav district](#) created a group of others living in Dnipro. Together they gather funds to purchase and transfer medication to other Beryslav residents. This isn’t limited to their relatives, but to anyone who needs to buy medicine.

While such initiatives are usually welcome, they are sometimes met with mixed feelings. According to a research participant from Kherson oblast: “Not everyone is happy to see them, but there is no condemnation. They don’t understand how we lived here [under occupation] and they never will. Though we consider them Khersonians, like us.” Communication becomes strained when IDPs complain about their living conditions: “There are many examples of how people stop talking to each other because of ‘whining about how much they want to go home’ or ‘how bad it is [as an IDP], without enough money for a glass of good wine.’ Such statements can hardly be understood by people who live at ground zero and consider every second they are still alive as a success.” Some locals may find constant requests for news and updates bothersome, though this may be preferable to the silence many report receiving from relatives and friends who relocated to the EU.

Relations With “Ideological Others”

According to a research participant in Kharkiv oblast, “the division of communities into ‘us’ and ‘them’ is practically everywhere.” All respondents noted that not everyone with pro-Russian sympathies left before deoccupation: younger people and families were more likely to flee to Russia before the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the fall, but **many older residents chose to stay**, perhaps for some of the same reasons pro-Ukrainian seniors stayed during the occupation (familiar surroundings, a connection to the land, a lack of other options). Rifts are not limited to issues like collaboration: even families may

be divided over their assessments of the harms done during the occupation, local corruption, or the violence that has accompanied the Ukrainian counter-offensive and subsequent stabilization efforts.

Respondents voiced a wide range of attitudes regarding both occupation and de-occupation. These included: staunch opposition and pro-Ukrainian sentiment; ambivalence (“it wasn’t so bad”); indifference, marked by a tendency toward pragmatic acceptance of whoever is in power at a given moment; frustration with Ukrainian policies (especially [pertaining](#) to stabilization, collaboration laws or mobilization); resentment that deoccupation has yielded an increase in shelling, which some blame on the Ukrainian army; passive pro-Russian sentiments (among locals and IDPs living in other parts of Ukraine); and active pro-Russian sentiment and continued support of “[Russian World](#)” ideology. Research participants note that among the last two groups, the former is thought to stay silent about their views and “adapt to new realities,” while the **staunch supporters of the occupation are thought to seek out like-minded community members and continue working in private.**

A number of the latter have [been arrested](#) or gone into hiding (some have been [found](#)). Others continue to live in their homes and often experience informal consequences from other community members. Local sources across all deoccupied regions confirm that most residents choose not to take the law into their own hands, though many express frustration at the thought of law enforcement allowing collaborators to “slip through their fingers.” Denunciations were common during the filtration and stabilization periods immediately following deoccupation, though not all accusations led to legal cases. Common responses to alleged collaborators and Russia sympathizers include shunning them, reporting them to journalists and social media groups (sometimes leading to the publication of photos and addresses), public arguments, and “encouraging” them to leave the community. Physical fights have been known to break out, with a key informant in Kherson saying that **the police may turn a blind eye to assaults against suspected collaborators.** Another Kherson resident recounted how a purported collaborator was “sentenced” by other villagers, resulting in an alleged “suicide.” Targets of such actions can include some whose association with the occupiers was of a largely apolitical nature – i.e. women who had relationships with Russian soldiers or people accused of looting: “In Beryslav district, villagers easily get into fights with other villagers because they found their household appliances, furniture or agricultural equipment in someone else’s house.”

Local sources say that residents are divided on how to address profound political divides in their communities. Since emotions understandably run high, many decide not to air their views on the subject. Most respondents report high levels of anger and little desire to engage “the other” in dialogue or reconciliation. Respondents say that many locals think that those who fled to Russia “should stay there.” They also report that **social cohesion is considered less of a priority than physical security or meeting one’s basic needs.** Pro-Russian Ukrainians who stayed in the deoccupied territories are thought to be resistant to change, or nurse their grievances alongside like-minded acquaintances. Some residents continue to keep in touch with friends and relatives who fled to Russia, but say that communication often ends when the latter push Russian propaganda points (for example, that the Ukrainian army is bombing Ukrainian cities). Contact is also maintained between some residents of deoccupied territories and those still living under occupation, though here too **propaganda can prove a barrier.**

A source from Kherson notes that, in addition to those with longtime pro-Russian sentiments, **some residents became more pro-Russian during the occupation due to exposure to Russian television and news.** This person said that these Ukrainians tend not to discuss or promote pro-Russian views, and that with time, **the reintroduction of Ukrainian media could potentially win them back over.** At the moment, **most research participants suggest that the best collective course of action may involve a pause in communication between members of different ideological camps** – in extreme cases, the removal of problematic community members (through legal or social mechanisms).

Relations With Governing Bodies

Assessments of governing bodies vary depending on the level in question, with respondents saying that **feelings towards the national authorities are warmest.** Sources in Kherson contrast national representatives with local authorities, the latter of whom are criticized and sometimes even reviled. Factors that elevate the national government in the eyes of locals are: a) an apparent readiness for dialogue (“people say they don’t just hear us, they listen to us. There’s even feedback and reactions to what people say”); and b) clearly communicated policies and resulting actions on issues like winterization assistance, evacuation plans and stabilization of the national power grid. **Bolstering efforts at dialogue between residents and local authorities, as well as communicating successes to constituents, may go a long way towards rebuilding credibility in the eyes of locals.** However, in the case of Kherson oblast, where feelings towards regional and municipal authorities appear to be the most hostile, it is unclear to what extent certain grievances (alleged government unresponsiveness, a lack of infrastructure repairs, etc) are a result of poor policy choices and which are the natural result of working in a region under constant fire. Moreover, attempts to improve relations will have to address a persistent perceived local grievance: **the sense that the region was “abandoned” to occupying forces.** Per one Khersonian:

People trust volunteers or the military, but no one trusts the authorities. They surrendered us in February and now that trust is gone. Now we are being bombed, in part because of their failures in February [2022]. Those who left the region quickly say that the authorities reached out. Maybe to them, but not to us. Even if they want to help now, it's just too late.

When it comes to heads of smaller villages and towns, opinions differ. However, most respondents say that a leader’s personality, charisma and willingness to get their hands dirty may very well win hearts, even if they work remotely. Informal leaders who chose to stay during the occupation are especially valued, and **working with them may be key to restoring government credibility.** The ability to get in touch with local leaders, especially for discussion, is highly prized. The quality of information hotlines was also mentioned by multiple respondents: **in cases where hotlines were busy or unresponsive, frustrations with local governments festered.**

Other factors known to damage relations between locals and the government are allegations of aid theft and other forms of corruption, an issue currently in the spotlight due to recent [dismissals](#) of high-level officials. In Mykolaiv, a research participant reports that discussions of corruption can become heated to the point of fistfights. Other issues that evoke strong emotions include [mobilization](#)

[laws](#) or issues with aid provision, particularly involving infrequent delivery to smaller communities or perceptions that the government is “offloading” aid to humanitarian organizations.

Relations With Humanitarian Organizations

Multiple respondents report that **humanitarian organizations enjoy greater levels of trust among residents of deoccupied territories than local authorities**. Moreover, aid workers themselves may have troubled relationships with governing bodies: “local authorities try to coordinate the work of foundations and volunteers, but volunteers don’t entirely trust them.” Per a source in [Lyman](#), Donetsk oblast: “It should be said that **humanitarian aid provided [by volunteers] is the main source of survival for most community members**.” According to a local source in Kherson oblast, residents may be entirely unaware of where their aid comes from: “it often happens that people don’t know who they get help from, no matter if it’s food, hygiene products, household goods or building materials.” If governing bodies decide to increase aid support in order to improve relations with locals, they may need to make an extra effort to highlight their role in providing it.

Respondents note that **low quality goods and inconsistent aid distribution practices are common grievances**. Per a Mykolaiv resident: “Some people get warm clothes and blankets, others get boxes of cereal. This sows resentment among the population because people talk.” This dynamic is exacerbated **when the aid in question involves rebuilding materials**, which are highly prized across all deoccupied territories. The lack of assistance in some communities may prompt further displacement as people **feel forced to leave their homes for other towns or regions**. As one respondent in Kherson stated:

I had a baby during the occupation, so I was given diapers, blankets and hygiene products, but not nearly enough because our baby didn’t have official documents. All we had was a certificate from the maternity hospital, all the other forms got burnt. So we decided to move to Odesa, where we formalized everything easily and got social assistance for the baby.

Research participants say that **formal boundaries between districts or even oblasts in the deoccupied territories often mean little to residents** – a source in Kherson says that locals in Beryslav (Kherson) and [Snihurivka](#) (Mykolaiv) districts developed informal trade and self-help networks immediately following deoccupation, with one source calling the regions a “single organism.” This sense of unity, however, leads to tensions when aid is earmarked for specific districts, as locals **may not understand why neighbors in a nearby village receive certain kinds of assistance while they do not**.

Other than issues such as aid-related [corruption](#) and [theft](#), respondents say that social barriers to aid reception included shame. Local sources say that this obstacle can be overcome when **knowledgeable village heads are able to advise** aid organizations on targeted distribution. Another barrier that is harder to resolve is that isolated or low-mobility residents (senior citizens or those with disabilities) may be unaware of aid opportunities or unable to make use of them. In such cases, relatives, neighbors, or churches often **form critical ties between individuals in need and organizations providing aid**.

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Contact: stuart@leftbankanalytics.org