

TEN THINGS
THE U.S.
SHOULD
DO TO
HELP
UKRAINE'S
CIVIL
SOCIETY

Introduction

Within hours of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many local human rights defenders responded to the crisis, adjusting their work methods and refocusing their efforts. Some became humanitarian workers and provided vital medical supplies, started documenting violations under Russian occupation, or recorded attacks on civilians and other war crimes.

Since 2014, Human Rights First has been working closely with human rights defenders in Ukraine, amplifying their requests to the United States government and to U.S. civil society for support in the fight for human rights. We have conducted regular in-country research in Ukraine over the last nine years, produced [reports](#), [briefings](#), and [op-eds](#), and [advocated publicly in the U.S. Congress](#) to support Ukrainian civil society on issues including anti-corruption, LGBTQ+ rights, and anti-semitism. We have also worked with local and international partners to advocate for targeted U.S. sanctions against corrupt or abusive actors in Ukraine, including Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine, and in Russia.

Drawing on long-established relations with local civil society, Human Rights First visited Ukraine five times beginning in March 2022. In 2022 and 2023, we [reported from Ukrainian cities under Russian attack](#) and [worked with local human rights activists](#). We heard from them about their new realities and difficulties, and what they now want from the U.S. government and U.S. civil society.

This briefing reflects those conversations and that research, and it is summarized in 10 specific recommendations produced in consultation with Ukrainian civil society and local human rights activists.



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- 1. The U.S. government should urge Ukrainian authorities to allow digitally collected evidence to be accepted by the Ukrainian criminal justice system, as well as appoint and resource a specialist team of prosecutors experienced in international war crimes in every region.**

Ukrainian civil society groups urge immediate reforms to the criminal justice system to better prosecute war crimes.

The Ukrainian criminal justice system is overwhelmed by the number of credible reports of war crimes. Civil society groups document a wide range of war crimes but processing the evidence and bringing prosecutions is slowed by a dated and cumbersome bureaucracy that demands paper copies of evidence. Allowing evidence collected and presented in digital form would vastly speed up the investigation and prosecution process.

While some of Ukraine's administrative regions have teams dedicated to prosecuting international war crimes, all of them should. These teams need to be adequately resourced and supported to work with civil society in collecting evidence and bringing prosecutions.

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- 2. The U.S. government should make clear that any lifting of sanctions against Russian targets will be linked to holding war crimes suspects accountable.**

In close consultation with Ukrainian partners, the U.S. and European governments will eventually have to decide on the conditions for lifting the sanctions they have imposed on Russian targets. These governments should use the leverage that the prospect of sanctions relief provides to press for cooperation with institutions providing accountability for war crimes.

Details will need to be determined by conditions at the time, including who has been charged with crimes and who remains in power in Moscow. While Vladimir Putin is unlikely to turn himself or his top lieutenants over to The Hague or to Ukrainian courts, targeted sanctions against individuals who are credibly alleged to be responsible for grave abuses should be kept in place to make it more likely they will be held to account.

3. The U.S. government should use sanctions programs and other policy tools to support anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine.

Unpublicized pressure may be preferable in some cases, but when credible allegations of [corruption](#) reach the public, the U.S. government and other friends of Ukraine should respond. Scrutiny that generates accountability is a more effective form of support to Ukraine than silence out of concern that the country's enemies will use constructive pressure against it.

The United States should make judicious but firm use of diplomacy to reinforce local pressure for anti-corruption reforms, as it did in December 2022 when the State Department used a corruption-focused visa ban program to [sanction](#) "[Ukraine's most notorious judge](#)." This prompted the Ukrainian parliament to pass a long-pending bill to reform the compromised Kyiv Administrative District Court.

4. The U.S. government should support the immediate establishment of a military ombudsman office in Ukraine.

[Reports](#) of soldiers in Ukraine's military being abused by their own commanders and of incompetence at the officer level reinforce Ukrainian activists' calls for the establishment of a Military Ombudsman, an independent institution within Ukraine's government that would protect the rights of the country's million military personnel and help modernize the force.

Activists cite Canada and Germany as effective Military Ombudsman offices. Canada's mission is "to increase openness and transparency" in the armed forces and "to ensure the fair treatment of concerns raised" by service members and families. The U.S. government should help its Ukrainian allies to establish as soon as possible a fully independent, properly resourced mechanism with all the authority it requires.

5. The U.S. government should urge the Ukrainian authorities to return to including civilians (not just service members) on their lists of prisoners to be swapped with Russian forces.

[Activists](#) in Ukraine monitor civilians captured by Russian forces and try to secure their release. Some people are taken into detention in Russia. They include an unknown number of children. Survivors describe widespread torture in Russian camps.

In the first months after the full-scale invasion last February, Ukrainian civilians were included in prisoner swaps with Russians, but soon the Ukrainian intelligence



service GUR took over negotiations for the Ukrainians, and activists say now only Ukrainian soldiers are included in prisoner swaps.

Ukrainian authorities should again include civilians on their lists for people they want returned in swaps, and the U.S. embassy in Moscow should press Russian authorities to provide more information on who is being held where, and in what conditions.

6. The U.S. government should support the establishment of an international mechanism to address the issue of civilians taken prisoner in war.

The U.S. government should immediately explore the establishment of an international body to address the issue of civilians captured in war. While the International Committee of the Red Cross is allowed to monitor the welfare of combatant prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions, no comparable support exists for civilian prisoners.

7. The U.S. government should provide support for survivors of war-related sexual violence in Ukraine in addition to urging the prosecution of perpetrators.

Pramila Patten, the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, noted after a visit to Ukraine in June 2022 that too often "the needs of women and girls in conflict settings [have] been side-lined and treated as an afterthought."

Relatively little international attention has been focused on the needs of survivors of war-related sexual violence (WRSV), or even on asking survivors for their views. A 2022 report produced by the international organization [Global Survivor Fund](#) and local Ukraine NGOs surveyed survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Ukraine since 2014. Based on consultations with survivors, and with other local experts, the report found that survivors' perspectives "are not being sufficiently represented in policy and legal discussions," and that "the most prominent needs reported by survivors were medical assistance, psychological support, and social services."

The U.S. government should consult with local service providers and help provide the enormous medical, legal, and other practical resources required to address the needs of survivors of WRSV in Ukraine.



8. The U.S. government should promote responsible media coverage of war-related sexual violence in Ukraine.

In July 2022, Dunja Mijatović, Commissioner for Human Rights for the Council of Europe, [criticized](#) sensational and exploitative reporting of war-related sexual violence (WRSV) that “details of some cases of war-related sexual violence, including the victims’ identity, have been made public on social media or in the press.”

In response to concerns over how some journalists report WRSV, Ukrainian media, and legal experts produced [How to Responsibly Report War-Related Sexual Violence](#). This publication is “intended as a practical guide for media workers reporting on WRSV in Ukraine. It provides context and advice on language, consent, and behavior when conducting interviews.”

The publication offers a detailed list of recommendations and guidelines so reporters approach these stories from positions of trust, understand the sorts of questions to ask and to avoid, and advice on what journalists should never do. It also provides information from experts on responding to trauma, which is often central to stories of WRSV.

The U.S. government should encourage responsible, sensitive, and ethical media coverage of these issues, including by promoting this guide to U.S. and international media.

9. The U.S. government should publicly advocate for legislation to legalize same-sex civil partnerships in Ukraine.

The [prominent role](#) of many LGBTQI+ [people in the Ukrainian military](#) is helping [change attitudes](#) in the country, say local activists, as LGBTQI+ soldiers [fight for their homeland and their rights](#). A Ukrainian [petition](#) in 2022 to support legalizing same-sex marriage [easily reached](#) the 25,000 signature threshold requiring their president to respond.

Although President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the constitution (which currently recognizes marriage as between a woman and a man) cannot be amended during wartime, he has asked the prime minister [to consider options](#), opening the door to civil partnerships.

The U.S. government should urge Ukraine to pass legislation legalizing same-sex civil partnerships as soon as possible.



10. The U.S. government and private donors should resource core activities of Ukrainian civil society.

While many NGOs in Ukraine report welcome increases in funding during the last year, they often complain that the funding is project-based and earmarked for specific activities rather than core support. For example, in January 2023 Human Rights First visited a human rights NGO based in Kyiv that secured funds in recent months to expand its staff on specific projects from four to 15 people but did not have enough chairs to hold meetings. Other NGOs reported the need for training in managing their sudden expansion in resources.

Donors should consult with local activists to ensure that funding can be used in ways that best support Ukraine's civil society.



Acknowledgements

This report was authored by Brian Dooley, with support from Adam Keith, Amanda Strayer, Jim Bernfield, and Camila Rice-Aguilar.

Mission Statement

Human Rights First works to create a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

