

HIDDEN HARM

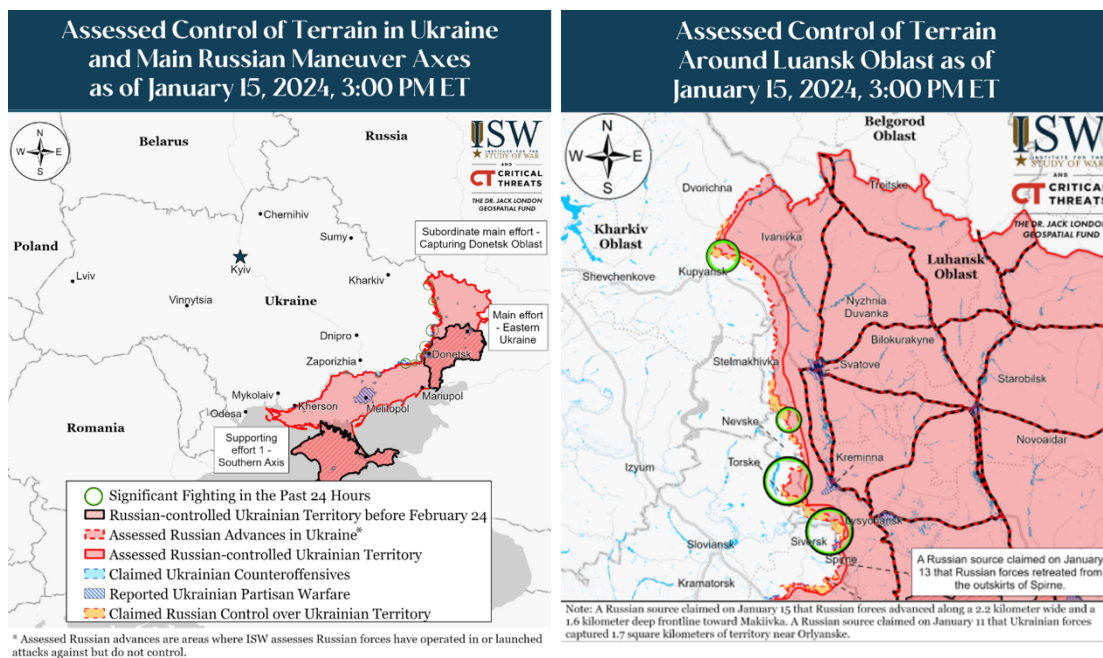
Ukraine confronts
psychological cost of war



Introduction

Ukraine has so far survived the brutal winter despite continuing Russian missile attacks across the country. However, the sustained and intense Russian aggression is having a deep psychological impact on many in Ukraine.

Human Rights First [reported](#) from the northeastern Ukrainian region of Kharkiv in November 2023. At the start of the winter, we visited the city, surrounding communities, and the front line of the war to hear how locals intended to survive the bitter cold. In January 2024, in temperatures of minus 0.4° Fahrenheit (-18° Celsius), Human Rights First returned to understand how these communities and human rights defenders (HRDs) are coping.



HRDs working on a range of issues, such as documenting war crimes and working with the most vulnerable communities—including supporting orphans, survivors of domestic abuse and war-related sexual violence, the LGBTQ community, the elderly, and those living at the battlefield—told Human Rights First there is a dire and growing need for psychological support.

HRDs and others in the region also noted with alarm the Biden administration's recently weakened language around support for Ukraine, and the continued failure of U.S. government officials to visit Kharkiv.



Human Rights First's history of working in Kharkiv

Human Rights First has reported from the city of Kharkiv and its surrounding area since 2017 when we [documented](#) attacks on local HRDs who had exposed corruption in the mayor's office.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion, Human Rights First has made ten research trips to the Kharkiv Oblast. In the first days of May 2022, we [reported](#) from Kharkiv while it was under almost constant bombardment, and surrounding towns and suburbs were under Russian occupation. We produced reports and articles [documenting](#) how Kharkiv's activists and the public resisted Russian aggression.

In May 2023, Human Rights First released a [report](#) on how Tsyркuny, a village north of Kharkiv, survived Russian occupation. We released [another](#) report in June 2023 on the Russian occupation of the city of Izyum and surrounding villages in the Kharkiv Oblast.

In July 2023, we worked with local NGO the Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Center to produce a [report](#) on dubious contracts for the reconstruction of public buildings awarded by Kharkiv's authorities. In August 2023, we published a [report](#) from the frontline city of Kupiansk on how locals were holding out against the threat of a Russian reoccupation.

In November 2023, we returned to the region and issued a [report](#) on how civilians in Kharkiv were preparing for a bitter winter war as Russia renewed its bombing attacks on Ukraine's heating infrastructure

American promises

Until [late 2023](#) the Biden administration promised to support Ukraine for "as long as it takes." This exact phrasing remains the policy of [the British government](#); the [French and German](#) governments describe their commitment to Ukraine as being "as long as necessary."

With growing Congressional resistance to funding Ukraine, Biden's tone has [changed](#). He said in December 2023 that the U.S. would support Ukraine "for as long as we can" and he was "not making promises" that the U.S. will provide Ukraine with the funding it needs. In early January 2023, State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller [said](#) that U.S. support for Ukraine would not necessarily remain at the levels of 2022 and 2023.

This has been met with consternation by some in Ukraine, who told Human Rights First they fear the Biden administration will not follow through on its previous commitment to their country, and that a victory by Donald Trump in this year's election would be even worse for Ukraine.

In Kharkiv, HRDs told Human Rights First the failure of U.S. officials to visit the region fuels their fear of abandonment by the United States. They are frustrated by the absence of direct



contact by the U.S. embassy because their needs are often ignored by U.S. officials who lack firsthand information about the challenges they face.

Many other foreign diplomats and officials have visited Kharkiv since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion. In September 2022, a delegation of foreign ambassadors [from over 20 countries](#) visited the Kharkiv region.¹ Since then, Germany's foreign minister and ambassadors from Belgium, [Canada, Sweden, Switzerland](#), and the United Kingdom also visited.²

Anxiety under fire

While it might be worrying for U.S. officials to visit Kharkiv, it is an extremely stressful place to live.

Since February 2022, Russian attacks have killed [more than 2,300 civilians](#) in the Kharkiv region. Of the 21,000 war crimes being investigated in the region, almost 15,000 are related to attacks on civilian objects. The start of 2024 brought intense bombardments of Kharkiv city and region. Russian shelling from January 2 to 3 damaged [62 residential buildings](#) in Kharkiv. On January 10, a hotel in Kharkiv known to host foreign journalists and humanitarian workers was hit by a Russian airstrike, [injuring around a dozen civilians](#).

In 2023, [1,658 warnings](#) of missile attacks were sounded in the Kharkiv region, an average of 4.5 a day. When an alarm sounds, people are directed to immediately go to shelters and stay until an "all clear" is announced. Some of these events last several hours.

The winter is particularly stressful, with brutally low temperatures adding to the anxiety of everyday living. As [predicted](#), Russian forces are targeting Ukraine's heating infrastructure to freeze the civilian population.

Human Rights First [visited](#) the village of Liptsi in November 2023, where Russian troops had previously used the hospital as a military base. In mid-January 2024 energy workers repairing damaged electricity lines there came under Russian fire. Oleg Synegubov, head of the local energy administration, [said](#), "Every day we restore 100 to 1,000 electricity supply points and lose about the same number as a result of enemy shelling of the Russian Federation on border settlements."

In August and November 2023, Human Rights First [reported](#) from the city of Kupiansk, at the battlefield, on how locals planned to manage under regular bombardment during the bitter winter. In [January 2024](#) we returned to Kupiansk and the surrounding communities.

¹ Following Ukraine's victory over Russian forces in Izyum, the visiting delegation [included](#) the Head of the EU Delegation to Ukraine, heads of diplomatic missions of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Spain, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Sweden, Slovakia, Switzerland, Türkiye, Poland, Slovenia, France and Denmark.

² Diplomats from [Canada, Sweden, and Switzerland](#) visited Izyum in July 2023. In January 2023, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock became the [first top Western politician to visit the city of Kharkiv](#). In [March 2023](#), Ambassadors from the United Kingdom and Canada, and the Swedish Chargé d'Affaires visited Kharkiv. A [Belgian ambassador](#) visited Kharkiv in December 2023.





Andriy shows Police Chief Pavlo Nesterenko the hole in his roof from a rocket attack.

In the village of Kolodyazne, north of Kupiansk and about six miles from the Russian border, a local man pointed to the hole in his roof and pieces of a Russian rocket still embedded in the floorboards of his home. Andriy said, "It was about 11 pm on New Year's Eve and I was with my wife downstairs when the rocket hit our house and smashed through the roof. It's a miracle no one was hurt." He covered the huge hole in the roof with plastic sheeting, but it is poor protection against the severe cold.

The previous night, a nearby house owned by local woman was also hit by two rockets. Halyna said one of the rockets was three yards long, the other a yard and a half. She said one of the rockets hit her yard, killed her dog, and smashed her car to pieces. The attacks also caused severe damage to her home but, she says, "this is my land, my home, my place. I



am not terrified of them. I will not be driven out of here no matter what." Another house up the street was hit a week later.



Halyna shows her damaged home to Chief Nesterenko.

Not many civilians still live in these communities, especially during the winter. While there is some electricity, there is no gas for heating.

Kolodyazne is one of many local settlements under the jurisdiction of Pavlo Nesterenko, Chief of Police of the Dvorichna region. He says, "there used to be around 18,000 to 19,000 people in this whole community, and now it's down to about a thousand. We only have one doctor for the area, and his main job is to write death certificates."

Nesterenko has been in the police service since 2010. He used to be a detective, but his role is different now. There are no shops open in these communities, and so he and his police



colleagues distribute humanitarian aid to the civilians who remain. "I bring food, soap, and shampoo to people. This is police work now," he said. Nesterenko is also responsible for transporting dead bodies out of the area, sometimes under shelling from Russian soldiers.

Other new problems include stray dogs, left behind by their owners who fled Russian shelling. They roam the deserted village streets solo and in pairs. "In the relatively safe areas we try to save them. We adopted one at the police station," said Nesterenko. "But at the front line, when they are eating the corpses of soldiers, unfortunately we have to shoot them."

Travel is difficult. The roads are treacherously icy. Driving on ice requires low speeds in high gear; in January it took Human Rights First over four hours to reach Kupiansk from Kharkiv, twice as long as in the summer or fall. Many narrow roads have been torn up by heavy tanks, and the lanes are so rutted, driving on them feels like crossing plowed fields. At vehicle checkpoints, soldiers with frosted eyebrows and faces raw from the cold stomp for warmth.

In the small village of Hroza, where in October 2023 [a Russian missile struck a café and killed 59 people](#) attending a funeral reception, emergency workers gathered around cars that had slid off the road.

Around this area there are the regular thuds and booms of artillery shelling. Many locals say the constant stress of bombardments, exacerbated by fears of a loss of heating in the winter freeze, is causing widespread damage to mental health.

Vladimir Pavlov and Anna Chernenko are coordinators of the [Kharkiv Journalist Solidarity Centre](#), an NGO that helps coordinate international media coverage of the war, advising and guiding journalists from all over the world. Pavlov said one major story generally underreported by foreign media is the psychological damage to people in the region.

"It's hard to convey it, hard to film it, and it doesn't get much coverage," he said. "It's a huge problem, and the professional capacity of psychologists to respond to it on a massive scale just isn't there."

Psychologists working on the front lines are also at risk. "If you're providing crisis support to people from towns that are about to be evacuated, or even de-occupied towns, it is dangerous because there is shelling and Russia is very prevalent. It's dangerous, but people still need the support," [said local journalist Yana Sliemzina](#)

The need for psychological support

Some communities in Kharkiv's city and Oblast are particularly vulnerable. Since there is an absence of adequate help for the vulnerable from the city council, much of the help currently provided comes from private initiatives and international organizations. There is an urgent need for trained psychologists and mental health support for soldiers and civilians.



A UN Development Program study from October 2023 [noted](#) that “Even before the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion, many Ukrainians grappled with myriad mental health issues, such as post-war syndrome, loss, and trauma from abandonment. The number of people suffering from such conditions has increased manifold since 24 February 2022.”

At the start of 2023, Viktor Liashko, Ukraine’s Minister of Health, estimated that because of the war [14 million Ukrainians](#) needed psychological support. In March 2023, Ukraine’s presidential office [announced](#) a country-wide mental health initiative led by First Lady Olena Zelenska. The Ti Yak (How Are You?) program aims to “promote the formation of a culture of caring for mental health in society, to provide understanding and to show tools [to help].”

The project cites alarming data showing that “more than 90% of Ukrainians have at least one of the symptoms of an anxiety disorder, and 57% are at risk of developing mental disorders.”

Ti Yak suggests the country’s mental health is a vital part of the war effort and subsequent reconstruction: “Just like the ability to adapt, function and even develop during the war, Ukraine’s prospects for post-war recovery largely depend on the... culture of mental health care.”

Ukraine faces a severe shortage of trained psychologists with appropriate experience. A psychologist in Kharkiv discussed the lack of psychologists in the army: “In the army, there is not a lot of high-quality psychological support, crisis assistance, and there is simply no one to teach military personnel how to work through difficult emotions.”

A whole range of specialist care is required, not least in [Kharkiv](#). Sister Renata, a Polish nun working in Kharkiv for 30 years, runs three centers for orphans and small children with mothers who have faced addiction and other difficulties. At one house there are 15 young children and seven mothers. Families are supposed to stay for less than a year, but the pressures of war mean the rules are flexible.





Sister Renata runs orphanages in Kharkiv.

The nuns, mothers, and children live as a family, with communal cooking and eating. There is an in-house teacher for children because local schools are closed, and the mothers also receive lessons in life skills. A major problem, says Sr. Renata, is the lack of psychologists. "We have some qualified psychologists who help, although it's not easy to find them because of the war. Many psychologists have left, and getting those who specialize in child psychology is particularly hard."

Others working on gender-based violence (GBV) say the demand for appropriate psychological support is overwhelming. Valentina Denysenko and Inna Avramenko are co-founders of the NGO "Green Landiya," which works in Kharkiv city and region. Their team includes professionals who support those seeking psycho-emotional stability, the development of physical activity, personal growth, and economic sustainability.

Their central office in Kharkiv city also serves as a support space for women and girls. There are seven more such spaces in the rural communities of the region, which provide psychological and legal assistance, educational activities, and alternative therapy methods aimed at restoring mental health.

"Local authorities understand the importance and necessity of psychological assistance to the war-affected population more than before the full-scale invasion," says Avramenko.

"The invasion changed the social structure here. In the region, as a result of hostilities, a large number of small and medium-sized businesses have ceased to operate, resulting in



an increase in the number of unemployed, which causes additional stress in families and leads to an increase in cases of violence.”

She says another factor in an increase in violence in families is soldiers returning from the front “who find it difficult to switch to civilian life, and who are captive to stereotypical ideas about men that they should be strong, and have no weakness or tears. These stereotypes prevent them from consulting a psychologist, because this is a sign of weakness, and men, especially military men, should be strong.”



NGO Green Landyia offers a range of classes in Kharkiv.

About 50 employees, including psychologists, lawyers, and trainers, work with the NGO on a range of projects. "In the villages, people, especially women, are often in no hurry to contact our spaces and attend the events held there, because they are used to hard work and are not used to or do not know how to rest. All housework, caring for children and the elderly is considered a woman's job and because of these stereotypes, women do not have time for themselves, for their personal development," says Denysenko.

"But when they come to us for events, they are more actively involved in the process, more sincere and open to changes than city dwellers. People are traumatized by constant shelling, and there is a growing awareness in communities that psychologists are not just for crazy people."



The NGO identifies the lack of comprehensive psychological support for the military at the state level as the main problem. The second problem is the lack of comprehensive support for many civilians and volunteers injured as a result of almost two years of shelling of the city and region.

"Another problem is the destroyed housing in most communities of the Kharkiv region. People live in dilapidated houses and apartments because they cannot afford to rent decent housing. And there is the constant fear that the Russian army may return and occupy the communities, which causes an increase in tension in the community," says Denysenko.

Olga Tarasova works as a psychologist for Green Landiya. She said typical problems she encounters are "phobias, low self-esteem, depression, gender-based violence, difficulties with communication, and family conflicts." She reports shortages of specialists in "neuropsychology, child psychology, and social psychology."

Needs in the LGBTQI community

Vasyl Malikov of the Kharkiv-based LGBTQI NGOs Alliance.Global and Spectrum Kharkiv has been organizing the distribution of humanitarian aid and medical support since 2022. He told Human Rights First he tries to respond to the "increasing requests for psychological assistance and counseling," as part of the medical services his organizations provide and stresses the urgent need for both psychologists and wider education about mental health and trauma issues.

"More professional training and retraining is one way to meet at least a part of existing needs," Malikova said. "Some counseling can be done online, and it's better than nothing, but what's really needed is face-to-face time with a psychologist. Of course, that's resource-intensive. Some programs are available, but they typically offer two to five free individual sessions and that's it." In response to the rising demand for counseling since the full-scale invasion, "We also provide some educational classes about psychology, and hope to help people self-identify their needs."

Associate Professor of Psychological Sciences Taras Zhvaniia works with [Alliance.Global](#). Since August 2022, Zhvaniia has personally conducted 589 consultations, online and in person, with members of the LGBTQI community.

Zhvaniia sees the growth in demand for psychological support in the LGBTQI community as significant and gradual. He told Human Rights First, "Initially, the requests for work with psychologists came from parents of children who were frightened and suffering psychological trauma." After a while, volunteers organized sessions in safe places -- mainly at metro stations, where people lived as families. After a few months, the situation stabilized, or at least became more predictable and familiar. Since then, requests for psychological help from adults again increased."



At the beginning of the large-scale invasion, Zhvaniia most commonly saw “anxiety, panic attacks, pathological responses (mainly from children) to alarms and shelling. Then, there were issues of uncertainty, apathy, sleep and eating disorders, problems with emotional states (including depression),” and stresses related to deciding whether to evacuate to safe places.

He added that “specific fears were manifested in the fact that people were afraid to sleep in a bed at home rather than in a bomb shelter, afraid to take off their outer clothes before going to bed, or fears to wash or go to the toilet -- there were fears of dying in the bath or in the toilet during the shellings.” These fears, he noted, were added to the usual “pre-war” problems of loneliness, relationship problems, and others.

More efforts are being made to promote psychological knowledge for the general population -- on improving general knowledge about certain mental phenomena observed during the war, including the consequences of experiencing traumatic events.

But more of this is needed. Zhvaniia says, “The number of requests for psychological help is only increasing. There is a need for qualified training of psychologists themselves, because the basic professional training of most psychologists did not involve the development of the competencies of providing psychological assistance in war conditions.”

Olga Tarasova, the psychologist from Green Landiya concurred: “It would be very useful for us to and exchange experiences with foreign psychologists, ideally on a peer-to-peer basis.”

Conclusion

While Russian bombardments of Kharkiv during the winter cold have yet to result in a mass evacuation of the city, the mental health of people there and elsewhere in the country is increasingly strained. A lack of appropriately trained psychologists and specialists means this problem is left unaddressed.

Some HRDs suggest measures including funding for online counseling and professional visits by foreign psychologists to train and advise Ukrainian medics and others dealing with the issue.

A firsthand assessment of the mental health situation in Kharkiv, and what can be done to better respond to it, is one reason U.S. officials should visit the city and region.

Recommendations



The Secretary of State has instructed all Ambassadors and mission leadership to engage directly with civil society and HRDs as part of a foreign policy grounded in our democratic principles. The U.S. embassy in Kyiv, in accordance with the Secretary’s recommendation

and the [2021 Guidelines for U.S. Diplomatic Mission Support to Civil Society and Human Rights Defenders](#), should regularly visit HRDs in Kharkiv.

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U.S. government officials should visit Kharkiv city and other communities in the oblast to assess mental health and other needs and engage directly with local HRDs on the needs they see for their communities.

Donors and other allies should provide resources for appropriate psychological support. This would include:

- Provision for online counseling;
- Visits by foreign specialists to advise and train locals dealing with psychological issues;
- Educational materials; and
- Advice for communities dealing with war-related mental health issues.



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.

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