Analysis – A war's different seasons (I)

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We commenced our research at the beginning of June, when virtually no news was transpiring from the occupied southern regions. By the time this analysis had been peer-reviewed and published, Kherson was liberated, a momentous military achievement for Ukraine. But before the Russian retreat from the city and the west bank of the Dnieper River, the campaign of terror turned to sustained attacks on critical infrastructures and the power grids, plunging the entire country (literally) into darkness. The insidiousness of this tactical approach becomes obvious as winter settles in, a war that seems to mold human tragedy into the passing of seasons: from food insecurity to lack of warmth, water, and electricity, and further displacement. In the central Liberty Square of Kherson locals gathered in a rare display of joy after eight and a half months of isolation. Makeshift memorials for the fallen and 'the disappeared' emerged across the city and villages, a landscape of hope and remembrance, amid the destruction and destitution left behind by

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occupation. In their withdrawal, Russian forces mined swathes of territory turning the city and region into a minefield of over 300,000sq km, which may take years to clear.[4] As demining efforts continue, the legacy of war in other parts of the world, former Yugoslavia for instance, may prove somewhat instructive. In Kosovo, Ukrainian teams receive training from local experts in defusing ordnance and clearing mines – a different war, similar mines.

In Odesa, the volunteers whom I interviewed also continue their relentless fight. Much like the country itself, where reconstruction efforts go side by side with the battles for liberation, Ukraine's civil society strives for a reformed political future, less entrenched in the remnants of a corrupt post-Soviet transition, and more representative of their aspirations. This paper aims to depict the different facets of war: the whole-of-society approach to resilience, the vulnerable food chains in a geographical horn of plenty, as well as the human and environmental consequences of occupation.

I. A Journey

Crossing from Isaccea (Romania) to Orlivka (Ukraine) by foot and eventually, a ferry shows a different facet of this war; the fragile security of global supply chains that now must rely on two-lane roads and strained cross-border infrastructures.[5] Here, trucks with grains are waiting to be loaded four at a time on a slow ferry across the Danube into Romania and vice versa. The queues seem never-ending. Time has its own pace, an odd blend of urgency and resignation. 'I've been waiting with my truck in this queue for four days in a sweltering heat. Now it's even longer because it's harvesting time in Romania as well,' explains a truck driver during the 12-minute water crossing. At least the dust settles briefly, and we can ponder the surroundings: people returning from their forced displacement, their savings running out or hoping the war is far removed from their homes by now; ferry servicemen clad in sailor overalls a humane sight that conjures memories of less troubled times; entire livelihoods piled in bags and trolleys. 'We hope our house still stands; they bombed very close to our village', a young woman remarks oddly serenely 'if not, we'll put everything back together as we did many times before.' A mother of six, she must have been no older than 30, barely old enough to remember the Soviet era. Yet, she spoke collectively of forced deportations, famine, wars and the human suffering that accompanied a history of territorial revisions; something of a regional mainstay.

Identities on the edges of the Eurasian steppe remain fluid. Children on the ferry speak a mix of Romanian (Moldavian dialect) and Ukrainian, a familial lineage most likely descending from territories that belonged to pre-Soviet geopolitical divisions.[6] Some families on the ferry were returning to their village in Ukraine's deep southwest to tend to their vegetable gardens, during an otherwise bountiful season. The rich southern plains provided sustenance around the borderlands and beyond for centuries, linking the heartland with the Mediterranean trade routes through the South's burgeoning Black Sea ports. The shift in the South's geostrategic importance (before the war, Ukraine's economic and trading lifeline) arose during the

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[4] Lorenzo Tondo and Isabel Koshiw, The Russians mined everything: why making Kherson safe could take years, The Guardian, November 2022,www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/16/the-russians-mined-everything-why-making-kherson-safe-could-take-years

[5] Before the war, grain exports mostly relied on the southern ports. Limited passage for the export of grain was brokered by Turkey on July 22nd. The first cargo ship left the port of Chornomorsk on July 28th. Despite the deal, Russia continued to attack Odesa.

[6] Former Southern Bessarabia, a Romanian historical province before the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and Soviet annexation.

industrialisation and infrastructural development of the 19th and 20th centuries when the traditional dividing line between the main agriculturalist settlements of forest steppes of north-central and western territories and the nomadic South gradually dissolved, leading to the economic rise of coastal regions.[7]

The horn of plenty

In different circumstances, the small local producers from Izmail would have taken their harvests to neighbouring village markets or even Odesa. These short supply chains ensured different forms of subsistence and sustenance: from *babushka markets* where produce is sold in front of homesteads or on the fringes of open-air bazaars to upscale farm-to-table outfits in cosmopolitan urban environs.[8] Despite supply disruptions, some of Odesa's fashionable restaurants and cafes also cater for the troops' needs. Along with global food chains spanning continents, the war also upended these small-scale, local dependencies. The need for fresh produce, however, is on the rise, proportionate to the humanitarian crisis.

'We cater for the daily needs of 700 refugee families in Odesa, displaced by war from other regions. They [the refugees] come in every day to pick up their daily food ratios (...) We're trying very hard to source fresh food, because people need much more than non-perishable cans. Children also need vitamins (...).'

N., coordinates one of the largest humanitarian hubs in the Odesa region

Picture 1 Banner – Photos taken by the author at the humanitarian hub in Odesa, in a repurposed school. (1) Volunteers sign up IDPs for daily food rations and prepare packages, including fresh produce. Over 700 persons at the time of the interviews were registered for daily rations. (2) Fresh vegetables are locally sourced for a more balanced nutrition, but the coming winter will make the procurement of produce difficult and may prove inaccessible for many. (3) The school's classrooms have been converted for sorting, packaging and storing, each room divided by categories of humanitarian needs (baby sanitary products, clothing, medicines etc.). Volunteers drive personal cars and vans to distribute locally, while others come and pick up packages directly at the humanitarian warehouse.

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[7] Serhii Plokhy. 2015. *The Gates of Europe. A History of Ukraine*. London: Allen Lane. Pp. 185.

[8] Renata Sõukand, Nataliya Stryamets, Michele Filippo Fontefrancesco, Andrea Pieroni. January 2020. The importance of tolerating interstices: Babushka markets in Ukraine and Eastern Europe and their role in maintaining local food knowledge and diversity. *Helyon* (6:1). Pp. 1-14 (Passim.).

The Odesa-based humanitarian hub also supports over 14,000 refugees who had to relocate to neighbouring regions (i.e. Mykolaiv), their basic needs carefully inventoried. With over 6.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs, only in Ukraine), sourcing fresh food becomes increasingly strained.[9] In Odesa Oblast alone, local charities and humanitarian hubs support over 300,000 refugees (according to IOM estimates). Regional government sources however, reported less, a total of approximately 92,972 IDPs for end of July, and 129,151 for November *(see Figure 1, below).*[10] When battles shift or intensify, refugee (receiving) centres move operations to safer areas, turning the distribution of humanitarian supplies into a complex logistical process, yet one that aptly shows the resilience and adaptability of civilian efforts. In occupied regions delivering aid becomes a matter of survival. A testimonial from Kherson, occupied by Russian troops on March 1st, recounts the vital role of volunteers in averting severe shortages of basic medicines and foodstuffs:

'Volunteers risked their lives to bring medicine and other necessities from territories under Ukrainian control, across the frontline. Unfortunately, a good friend of mine disappeared with his companions after crossing the Russian checkpoint. Volunteers in the city also delivered food to low-income and vulnerable persons with the support of local entrepreneurs.'[11]

Figure 1 – Geographical distribution of IDPs by city (donut chart) & district (bar chart) in Odesa Oblast. Latest update, 28th November 2022. Compiled by the author from data provided by the Regional Civil-Military Administration of Odesa (Humanitarian division).


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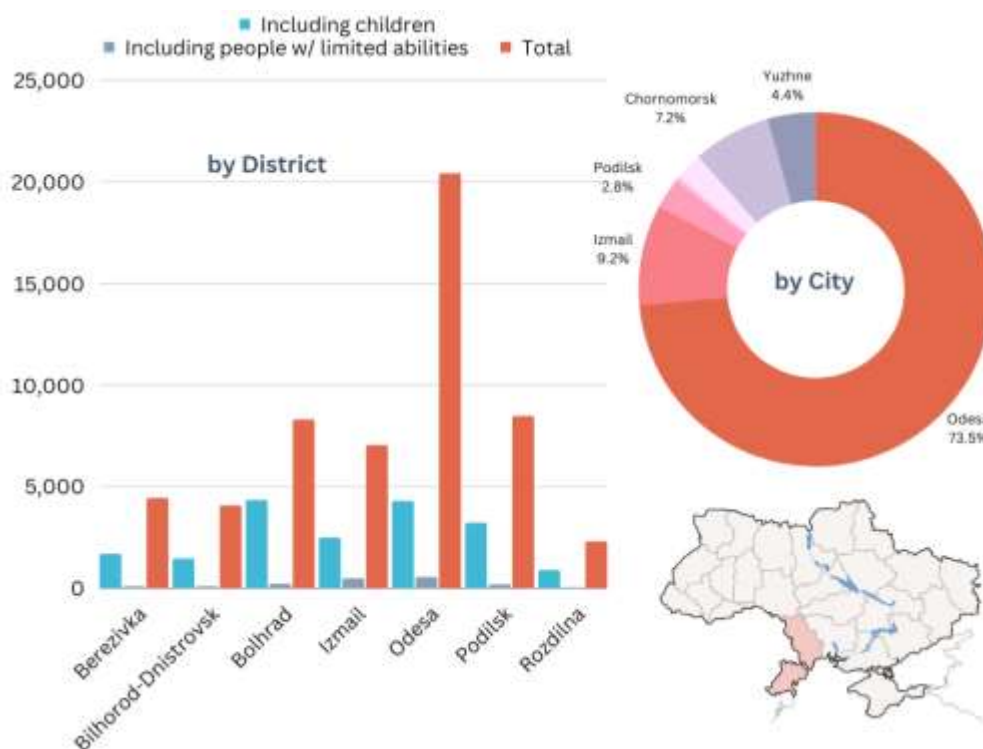
[9] According to IOM (International Organisation for Migration) estimates, available at: https://dtm.iom.int/ukraine; Semi-structured interviews with volunteers and coordinators (5), at the Humanitarian Centre School 117, conducted in Odesa (July 2022).

[10] Data provided by curtesy of the Civil-Military Regional Administration of Odesa, Humanitarian Division. The granular dataset on IDPs includes districts, rations & cities, as of 28 November 2022 (latest update). Table adapted by the author in Tableau Public.

[11] Semi-structured interview with V. resident of Kherson (now relocated in Western Europe) who experienced first-hand the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Conducted online, September 19th 2022. Translated from Ukrainian by Antonina Naidis.

With agricultural land turned into a battlefield, along the southern front many local producers had to abandon their crops, the risk of harvesting being simply too high.[12] The Ukrainian Nature Conservation Group (a non-profit coalition of the country's scientists and environmental activists) reports that 30% of all arable land in the country (approximately 110053.6 sq.km) is located within the risk farming zone, therefore inaccessible.[13] Even in unoccupied areas, food chains become increasingly vulnerable: fuel is hard to come by, there are significant labour shortages, while fertiliser prices soar. The war has altered the agricultural landscape of one of the largest suppliers of food to low- and middle-income countries in Africa and Asia, which are heavily reliant on imports of staple crops.[14] In 2021, conflict-torn Yemen imported 1.06 MMt (millions of metric tonnes) of wheat; whilst Libya and Ethiopia 757.86K (MMt) and 679.63K (MMt) respectively.
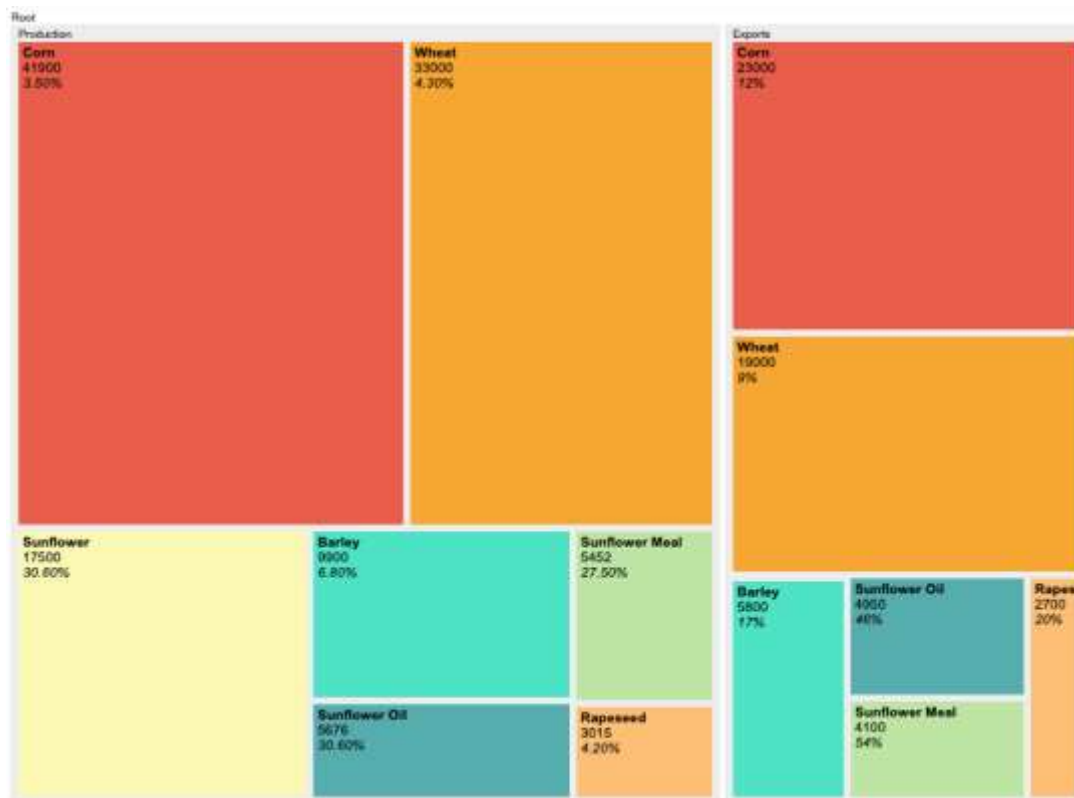
Figure 2 – A Treemap Graph showing Ukraine's Agricultural Production & Export (2021-2022) by staple crops, volume (1000 metric tonnes) and % of global production/export (in labels). Compiled by the author from USDA (US Department of Agriculture Data) data.
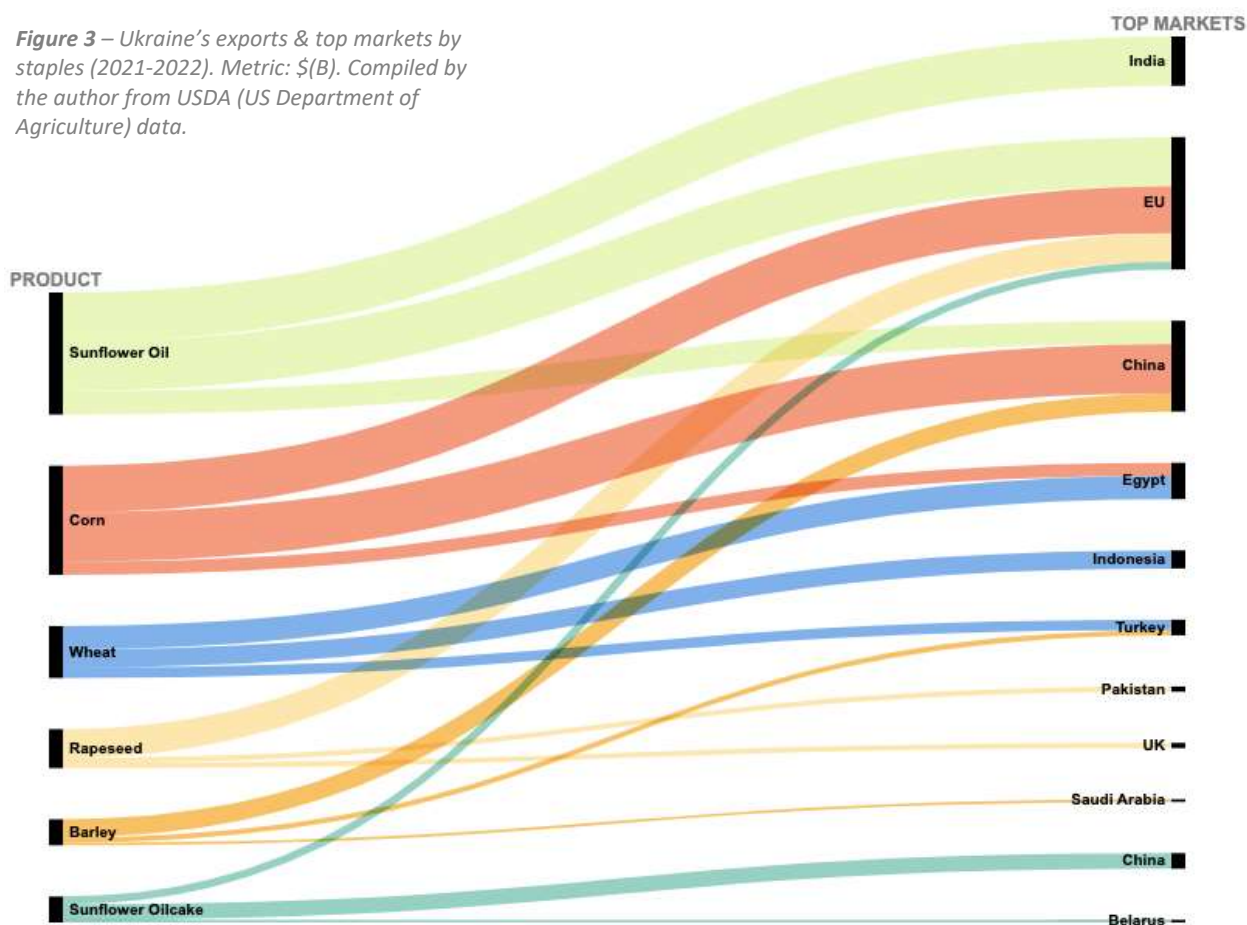
FAO datasets for agricultural exports by grain staples is not available for 2021-2022 (marketing year).

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[12] Eddy Wax, Ukraine's front-line farmers battle to feed the world, Politico, May 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/farm-front-line-ukraine-produce-food-odds/
[13] UNCG, Almost a third of Ukrainian crops could be abandoned or inaccessible, March 2022, https://uncg.org.ua/en/almost-a-third-ua-crops/.
[14] According to analyses by IHS Markit: https://ihsmarkit.com/research-analysis/ukraine-agriculture-exports-what-is-at-stake.html.

Figure 3 – Ukraine's exports & top markets by staples (2021-2022). Metric: $(B). Compiled by the author from USDA (US Department of Agriculture) data.

PRODUCT: Sunflower Oil, Corn, Wheat, Rapeseed, Barley, Sunflower Oilcake

TOP MARKETS: India, EU, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Turkey, Pakistan, UK, Saudi Arabia, China, Belarus

The nature of occupation

Ukraine witnessed a similar scenario play out in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea and the partial occupation of Donetsk and Lugansk regions by Russian-backed separatists. The conflict in the southeast triggered the internal displacement of over 1.5 million people, whilst severely impacting the industrial base and agricultural use of cropland. According to the State Statistical Service of Ukraine (SSSU), within government-controlled territories, the regional GDP dropped from a 10.3% share in 2013, just before the conflict, to 4.9% in 2020 (for Donetsk oblast), and from 3.6% to 1% share of the national GDP (for Lugansk oblast).[15] The closure of entire industries, including plants, factories and coal mines, all significant sources of revenue, led to a sharp economic contraction.[16] In territories controlled by pro-Russian separatists, satellite imaging also revealed large-scale cropland losses (over 46% compared to 2013) due to abandonment and active hostilities along the buffer zone.[17]

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[15] Share of the regional GDP from the general total. About half of the land in Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts was used for agriculture, though land use changed significantly after 2014. Overall, after 2014 Ukraine lost about 1/3 of its industrial potential. For archived data on regional GDP and agriculture, including land use, the State Statistical Service of Ukraine portal can be accessed here: https://ukrstat.gov.ua/.

[16] 'In separatist-controlled parts of Lugansk, 25 plants and factories, and 41 mines were closed (...).' See, Christian Mamo, Frozen conflict brings economic stagnation to Donbas region, Emerging Europe, March 2021, https://emerging-europe.com/news/frozen-conflict-brings-economic-stagnation-to-ukraines-donbas-region/

[17] Skakun S, Justice CO, Kussul N, Shelestov A and Lavreniuk M. 2019. Satellite Data Reveal Cropland Losses in South-Eastern Ukraine Under Military Conflict. *Front. Earth Sci*. (7:305). *Passim.*

The extent of environmental harm as a consequence of war is yet to be fully gauged. Nonetheless, the aftermath of (Russian) occupation paints an ominous landscape of abandonment and ecological collapse. In Donbas, Ukraine's industrial heartland, abandoned cropland saw at best, a return to natural vegetation amid widespread dereliction and destitution. Rivers have been polluted by 'wrecked industrial facilities, sewage works and overflowing coal mines.'[18] Since 2014, abandoned mines have been of particular concern, but no environmental impact assessment of spills and toxic releases could be carried out in occupied territories. In Crimea, severe water shortages and precarious investment in irrigation infrastructures (if at all) hastened desertification.[19] So much so, water reservoirs and fields gradually dried up (*see satellite images, below*).

Since the peninsula's unlawful annexation in 2014, the Ukrainian state agencies capped freshwater flows from the Dnieper River through the Northern Crimean Canal, a Soviet-era engineering project and irrigation network stretching 250 miles from southern Ukraine (in the vicinity of Kherson) to northern Crimea. The water cap provided Ukraine some measure of leverage in the face of Russia, as the canal covered 85% of freshwater supplies across the northern and eastern parts of the peninsula (also the driest) of which 72% went into agriculture.[20] Without water, arable land has shrunk from 130,000 hectares (ha) in 2013, before annexation to 14,000 ha in 2017, while crops dependent on irrigation (i.e.: rice) were largely abandoned. [21] The Russian-imposed government of Crimea relied either on Moscow or 'on climatic conditions' to address water shortages, but clearly, results failed to show.[22] In turn, the Russian state repeatedly accused the Ukrainian government of 'genocide', culminating in 2021 with Russian prosecutors filing a lawsuit at the European Court of Human Rights requesting amongst other demands, that Ukrainian authorities cease the 'water blockade' *[sic]*.[23] Since the Court rejected the claims, Russian brinksmanship turned to amassing troops and military materiel in the peninsula, which at the time prompted Colonel Kyrylo Budanov, chief of Ukraine's army intelligence unit, to advance a scenario that in less than a year would prove fateful – Russian troops advancing on Nova Kakhovka where the Northern Crimean Canal begins.[24] Moscow insisted there would not be a 'water war'.

[18] Fred Pearce, Collateral Damage: The Environmental Cost of the Ukraine War, Yale Environment 360, August 2022, https://e360.yale.edu/features/ukraine-russia-war-environmental-impact

[19] Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, New Maps Appear to Show Crimea Is Drying Up, July 2018, https://www.rferl.org/a/new-maps-appear-to-show-crimea-is-drying-up/29361889.html

[20] To a certain extent, the water problem in Crimea seemed to preoccupy some Russian scientists, despite the articles' political overtones, scapegoating and use of Russian state media sources. The paper tackles hydro-economic issues with impact on agriculture as well as some potential solutions. V.A. Vasilenko. 2017. Hydro-economic problems of Crimea and their solutions. *Regional Research of Russia* (7). Pp. 89-96.

[21] Tony Wesolowsky, Pray for Rain: Crimea's Dry-Up A Headache for Moscow, Dilemma for Kyiv, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 2020, https://www.rferl.org/a/pray-for-rain-crimea-s-dry-up-a-headache-for-moscow-dilemma-for-kyiv/30515986.html

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Press Release issued by the Registrar of the ECHR (July 2021). ECHR 240 (2021). Available at: https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/app/conversion/pdf/?library=ECHR&id=003-7085775-9583164&filename=Inter-State%20case%20brought%20by%20Russia%20against%20Ukraine.pdf. The Court rejected the Russian state's request.

[24] Roman Olearchyk and Max Seddon, Crimea 'water war' opens new front in Russia-Ukraine conflict*, The Financial Times*, July 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/5eda71fc-d678-41cd-ac5a-d7f324e19441.
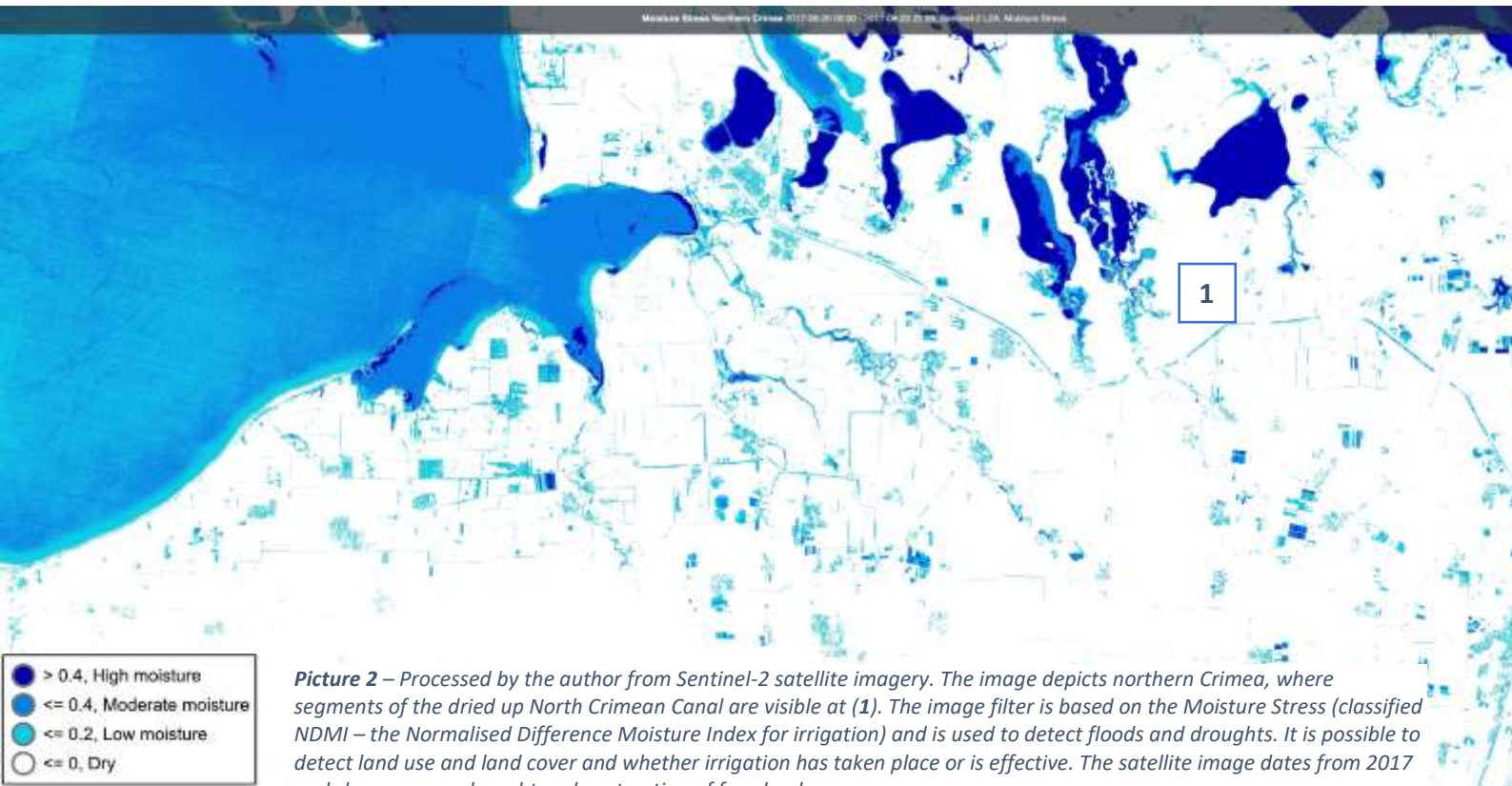
In late February of this year, almost immediately after Russian troops poured over Ukraine's borders, the concrete dam built in 2014 to block water supplies from the canal into Crimea, was destroyed.[25] While satellite evidence indicates that the irrigation flow partially resumed.[26] On March 1st Russian troops penetrated Kherson. This prompted speculations that one of Russia's strategic objectives in southern Ukraine, besides the much coveted 'land bridge' from Crimea to Donbas, was to restore water to the agriculturally depleted peninsula.

[25] Reuters, Russian troops destroy Ukrainian dam that blocked water to Crimea – RIA, February 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-troops-destroy-ukrainian-dam-that-blocked-water-crimea-ria-2022-02-26/.
[26] Anton Troianovski and Malachy Browne, Satellite Imagery Shows Ukrainian Water Flowing Again to Crimea, as Russia Nears Big Objective, The New York Times, June 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/08/world/europe/crimea-water-canal-russia.html.

●	> 0.4, High moisture
●	<= 0.4, Moderate moisture
●	<= 0.2, Low moisture
○	<= 0, Dry

Picture 2 – Processed by the author from Sentinel-2 satellite imagery. The image depicts northern Crimea, where segments of the dried up North Crimean Canal are visible at (1). The image filter is based on the Moisture Stress (classified NDMI – the Normalised Difference Moisture Index for irrigation) and is used to detect floods and droughts. It is possible to detect land use and land cover and whether irrigation has taken place or is effective. The satellite image dates from 2017 and shows severe drought and contraction of farmland.

*Picture 3 – Generated by the author from Sentinel-2, Copernicus (EO Browser). Satellite image of Kinburn Spit Reserve in occupied Kherson depicting burnt areas from wildfires in **red** (August 2022). The wildfires stretched across 4,000 ha of forests on the border of Kherson and Mykolaiv regions. According to Ukraine Crisis Media Centre the exit to the mainland is controlled by the Russian military who repeatedly denied the access of fire wardens into the natural reserve. According to the Odesa Journal, on August 1st forestry workers and local volunteers managed to put out fires that would have consumed protected forests.*

II. The Story of Kherson

Separating Crimea from the mainland is a swathe of wetlands, the Syvash (or the Putrid Sea), somewhat of a natural barrier of unique beauty, punctuated by salt lakes and shallow lagoons. The Perekop isthmus forms one of the very few viable crossings into mainland Ukraine, where a makeshift border checkpoint (at Chonhar) signals the forced separation and post-2014 realities of occupation.[27] Stretching across the Dnieper but recently severed by Ukraine's counteroffensive surge, Antonivskyi Bridge linked the port city of Kherson, laying on the river's northern bank, to the rest of the region, a flat terrain formed of inundated steppes.
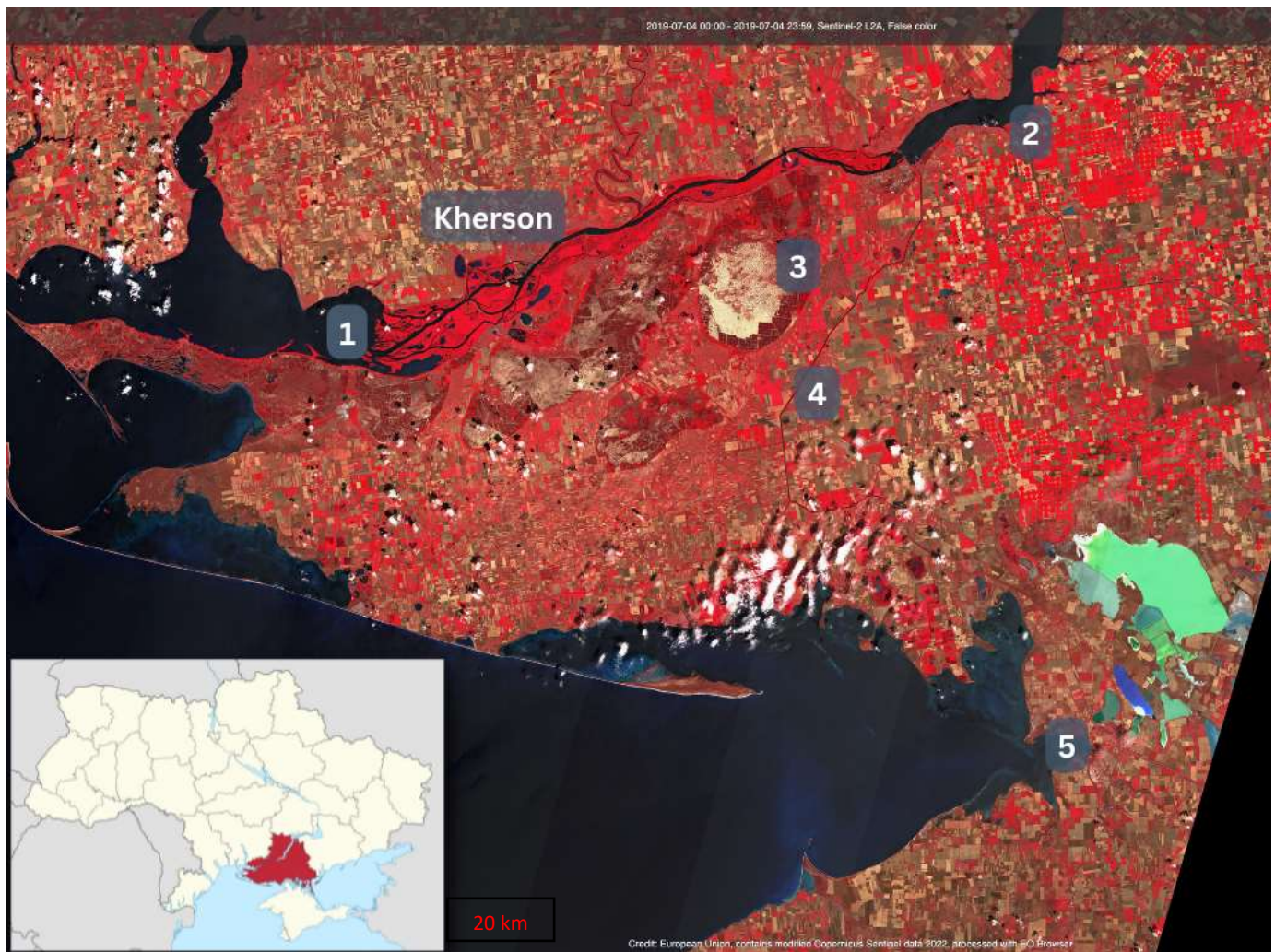
Picture 4 – Satellite imagery using false colour filter, depicting parts of Kherson region and the Crimean crossing, generated by the author through the European Copernicus / Sentinel -2 EO Browser (July 4th, 2019). Agricultural fields dominate the scape, while the circular shapes indicate centre-pivot irrigation systems; canals appear as thin black lines cutting through farmland. Segments of the diverted Northern Crimean Canal are visible at 4. The Dnieper River (2) forms an estuary (4) in the proximity of Kherson city. Oleshky Sands (3) is a swathe of sandy terrain (a small desert) due to intensive farming. Part of the Shyvash (Putrid Sea), an expanse of wetlands separating the mainland from the Crimean Peninsula is visible at 5.

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[27] Ukraine has cut off cargo and public transportation at the border. While cars with Ukrainian license plates can cross into Ukraine, Russian-registered cars cannot.

Intermission – A story of watermelons

'Melons and watermelons from Kherson are the best,' once remarked an Odesan. Famed for its richly sweet texture, the Kherson watermelon is both a regional staple and a national symbol. Not so long ago, Nibulon one of Ukraine's chief agriculture firms founded by magnate Oleksiy Vadatursky transformed the transportation of seasonal watermelons 'into a beloved show for the entire country.[28] We were all tracking the barge from Kherson to Kyiv oblast,' tweeted Nika Melkozerova, a Ukrainian journalist.[29] The event was a symbolic revival of riverine transport along the Dnieper, historically a trading artery and a fluid boundary that came to define some of the most important nation-building projects.[30] Before engineering improvements and the construction of a large hydroelectric dam in the 1930s, navigating the Dnieper involved disembarking near the rapids and bypassing the treacherous cataracts overland, a time-consuming and in no uncertain terms, dangerous process. Yet, from the founding of the Kyivan Rus and the era of the Vikings to Ukraine's independence and post-Soviet transition, the Dnieper anchored these different polities into the promise of access and geographical outreach. An expansionist imperial Russia coveted the river both as a gateway into the Black Sea and 'as a means of moving agricultural surpluses (...) produced in the Dnieper basin north of Kyiv' to markets 'in Asia Minor, the Levant, and southern Europe'; the prospect of 'great wealth' also motivating strategic interest.[31]

In 2017, when the barge filled with watermelons navigated from Kherson to Kyiv for the first time since 1993, the moment conjured for Ukraine's recent history and national rhetoric much more than the trove of ironic melon-memes would suggest.[32] The barge's arrival in Kyiv oblast and the berries filling the shelves of Silpo supermarkets (a chain) were intentionally staged to coincide with Ukraine's Independence Day. The event also evoked a path forward from a nebulous chapter: Russia's 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea, Russian sanctioned separatism, a seething conflict in the East, and 'a shared uncertainty of what would follow.'[33] The river was to be reassumed as a national symbol amid the agony of territorial loss, but not for long.

The crossing

When Russian troops invaded the southern mainland from Crimea, Antonivsky bridge and the surrounding areas were places of fierce resistance, though questions still linger as to why Kherson, a regional capital and strategically important gateway, was seized in only a matter of days. It was the first Russian capture of a prominent urban centre at a time when global

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[28] Oleksiy Vadatursky and his wife, Raisa, were killed in their home by Russian shelling, alleged to be a targeted attack on their home in Mykolaiv, approximately 200km from Odesa, on July 31st 2022.

[29] Nika Melkozerova (Executive Editor, New Voice Ukraine): 'For several years in a row Vadatursky's Nibulon was turning seasonal watermelons transportation from Kherson into a beloved show for the entire country. We were all tracking the barge from Kherson to Kyiv Oblast with great joy. Russia destroyed so much.' July 31st 2022. Tweet Source: https://twitter.com/nikamelkozerova/status/1553689384049860609

[30] Herodotus was the first to mention the river Dnieper; in the 4th to 6th century CE the waterway system along the Dnieper developed as a trading route 'from the Varangians to the Greeks' connecting the Baltic and Black Seas, with the Mediterranean world and, eventually the Byzantine Empire; See, Semi-structured interviews with civilian volunteers for the Ukrainian Army, local doctors, and Odesa-based residents. Conducted July-August 2022 in Bucharest & Odesa.

[31] The 1774 treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji expanded Russian control over the Dnieper 'from its middle reaches, where it formed the border between Poland and Russia [which lasted for 120 years], to its estuary on the Black Sea'. See, Robert E Jones. May 1987. The Dnieper Trade Route in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries: A Note. *The International History Review.* (9:2). Pp. 303-304.

[32] Alya Shandra, Barge bringing watermelons to Kyiv a harbinger of resurrected river travel in Ukraine, Euromaidan Press, August 2017, https://euromaidanpress.com/2017/08/04/barge-with-watermelons-harbinger-of-resurrection-of-water-travel-in-ukraine/

[33] Semi-structured interview with 2 civilian volunteers and civic activists (from Odesa & Kherson). Conducted in person and online (July-September 2022).

attention was mostly focused on Kyiv and Kharkiv, up north. 'The small, provincial capital of Kherson could not have attracted international media attention, only after its capture' did the world turn to Ukraine's south.[34]

A resident of Kherson, V., who is also a local civic activist managed to take refuge with his family in Western Europe. Upon interviewing him, and other civilian sources close to the Ukrainian Army's South command, depictions of occupation and resistance gradually emerge, a puzzle we are yet to piece together.[35] What occurred in Kherson in the immediate aftermath of the invasion is still riddled with uncertainty and confusion. Before the war broke out, 'locals were confident that a successful offensive by Russian troops would be impossible, given the small corridor linking Crimea to the mainland.'[36]

Following the 2014 annexation of the peninsula, in a bid to secure the crossing against a potential Russian advance onto the city, Ukrainian forces installed mines on Antonivsky Bridge, left guarded by a small military contingent. However, approximately one month before the invasion (the timing is not exact) the bridge was allegedly demined, though the motives behind this tactical decision remain uncertain.[37] News and warnings about an impending attack multiplied, not necessarily through official channels, but relayed through the personal networks of families, relatives, friends or distant acquaintances, to the point that 'many knew about the exact day the war would start'.[38]

'Our relatives received a call from our friends at 8pm on February 23rd from the SBU [Ukrainian Security Services] about an urgent evacuation from the city. [...] Also, for example, children of military personnel in Crimea warned their peers about it. My relative in a NATO country gave me this information, but unfortunately, it arrived too late.'[39]

On the morning of February 24th loud explosions at Chernobayevka airfield preceded the 8am air sirens, sounded by the city's civil defence. Paradoxically, in Kherson, the precipitous tumult of war was marked by an eerie absence, that of '(...) [Ukrainian] military personnel, security officials and railway workers' who pre-emptively fled the city. Other residents managed to escape to neighbouring Mykolaiv or Kryvyi Rog, most by road and with personal vehicles because the 'railway station was no longer working.' According to preliminary assessments, since March about 45% of the city's population left Kherson, while an estimated one in five evacuated from the region.[40] Locals dubbed the evacuation routes, 'the roads of hatred' because, in occupied territories, the arduous journey out is punctured with roadblocks, checkpoints and draconic filtering.[41]

In terms of preparedness, the urban defence infrastructures visible in other cities were largely absent in Kherson, despite geographical exposure and proximity to Russian-occupied Crimea (an entry point). 'In Odesa there was some coordination, because local businesses, civilian

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[34] *Ibid.*
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] *Ibid.*
[37] *Ibid.*
[38] *Ibid.*
[39] *Ibid.*
[40] According to government sources. Available at: https://ukurier.gov.ua/uk/articles/golova-hova-gennadij-laguta-z-hersonshini-viyihav-/
[41] Testimonial from a Kherson resident about his journey out of occupied regions. Available at: https://zaborona.com/en/the-story-of-the-evacuation-of-a-person-with-a-disability-oleh-kuharskyi-from-temporarily-occupied-kherson/

volunteers, the military command and the regional administration prepared days before to block the access of invading troops, with concrete barriers, caches, bollards and other obstacles.'[42] Rightly so, urban warfare specialists agree that 'urban terrain offers incredible resources and advantages for a defending force to cause [...] the attacker to run out of time in a strategic environment', in other words, to halt the attack's momentum.[43] However, an effective urban defence requires planning and execution, not to mention coordination between various security and administrative branches, at national, regional and local levels.

The regime

In the afternoon, heavy fighting ensued in the suburbs, near the bridge, but the meagre defences were overrun by Russian troops. Military reinforcements came in too late and despite intrepid resistance, 'the city was surrounded'.[44] The encirclement and subsequent Russian occupation compounded the humanitarian crisis. Aid and foodstuffs 'were not allowed into the city', hospitals ran out of vital medicine and basic consumables, most businesses closed, staple prices skyrocketed, and queues extended for hours. The agricultural abundance (i.e.: vegetables, berries, crops) of Kherson region, sustained through the diverted streams of the Northern Crimean Canal, was essentially cut off from the city's food supply chains. Nevertheless, on the brink of subsistence, 'the bakery *[still]* baked bread around the clock,' and a dairy maintained its processing lines.[45] Only after limited communication with the left bank (of Dnieper River) resumed, could local farmers deliver their produce into the city, assuaging to some extent a humanitarian calamity.

Upon conducting fieldwork, I encountered in Odesa two young History graduates and civic activists who barely managed to escape Kherson at the beginning of the invasion. They fled in a hurry with a few possessions, amongst them a photo album of 'Kherson's natural beauty', of wild horses and pink salt lakes, far removed from obliteration. 'Similar atrocities to Bucha and Irpin are now happening in Kherson', they relay. Since the city was sealed and under full Russian control, no official news could emerge apart from the harrowing testimonials of relatives, friends and families trapped under occupation. 'The FSB with the help of pro-Russian collaborators is drawing up lists of local journalists, volunteers, civic activists even unsympathetic public officials, then the *[Russian]* Army goes door to door and disappears them.'[46]

Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group has investigated numerous disappearances, including that of Kherson's elected mayor, Ihor Kolykhaev who was abducted by Russian troops on June

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[42] Semi-structured interview with 2 civilian volunteers and civic activists (from Odesa & Kherson). Conducted in person and online (July-September 2022).

[43] John Spencer & Jayson Geroux, Defending the City: An Overview of Defensive Tactics from the Modern History of Urban Warfare, Modern War Institute at West Point, February 2022, https://mwi.usma.edu/defending-the-city-an-overview-of-defensive-tactics-from-the-modern-history-of-urban-warfare/.

[44] Semi-structured interview with V. resident of Kherson who took refuge in Western Europe, but who managed to experience first-hand the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Conducted online, September 19th, 2022. The lack of coordination became somewhat evident in the early hours (of February the 24th) when those [military age men] who showed up to enlist in the territorial defence 'were sent to a school in the suburbs [only] in the afternoon to collect their weapons. (...).'

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] FSB stands for Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii or the Federal Security Service of Russia, the main successor security agency of the Soviet KGB; Reports corroborated with civilian volunteers for the Ukrainian Army, Odesa based medics who received first-hand accounts from refugees fleeing Kherson, interviews conducted in Odesa, July 2022.

28th for refusing to collaborate.[47] His and many others whereabouts remain unknown. Such documented testimonials of aggravated torture abound, grave human rights violations (amounting to war crimes) perpetrated with resolve and impunity by Russian state security agencies acting in concert with the Russian Army and its mercenaries. The unrelented siege upon Ukrainian villages and cities, as a means of establishing control was met in numerous places across the country with staunch civilian resistance. Kherson was one such place. Conflict scholarship posits that armed groups pursue the control of local communities 'by capturing (...) local institutions that organise community daily life', co-opting by various means local organisations, replacing local leaders, stifling opposition to ensure the indoctrination and compliance of local populations.[48]

The resistance

The way in which local communities organised themselves in the wake of the invasion, with no external support points to the importance of civilian autonomy in raising the costs of occupation.[49] Aside from resistance, civilian organisation also performs other community functions, from the distribution of humanitarian aid to policing. For example, to prevent looting and crime, local volunteers set up ad-hoc communal patrols to maintain order in a vacuum of authority. But not all initiatives are well meant or effective. Amid severe supply disruptions, a communal patrol convened by a (former) member of Kherson City Council 'took control of the spontaneous trade, which led to a conflict with local vendors.'[50] Notwithstanding, corruption and opportunism are rife.

Civilian resistance under occupation has taken different forms. In Kherson, 'the residents were united in their unwillingness to live under occupation. On weekends, protest rallies reached up to 20,000 people, which is a lot for a small, provincial city.'[51]

'Once, to commemorate the 1943 liberation day of the city, the rally was met by a column of [Russian] armoured vehicles. Despite the aggressive tactics of Russian troops, who fired large-calibre machine guns over protesters' heads, people did not flinch, and walked through, forcing the vehicles to stop and let the rally pass.'[52]

Alas, the daily protests could not be sustained long-term. Each time they were met with disproportionate violence to the point that peaceful marches, as a form of non-violent resistance ceased altogether by the end of March. A civic activist from Kherson believes the organisers' tactics failed, because the rallies were held every day, not on weekends, which allowed Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) units, performing policing functions in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, to violently disperse, wound and apprehend an increasingly small number of participants, thereby

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[47] KHPG active since 1988 as part of Memorial within the human rights movement became an independent human rights organisation in 1992 (one of the oldest). KHPG investigates human rights violations and war crimes, amply documented on their platform, see: https://khpg.org/en/873; Halya Coynash, Mayor of Kherson abducted after refusing to collaborate with Russian invaders, KHPG, June 2022, https://khpg.org/en/1608810796.

[48] Margarita Gafaro, Anna Maria Ibanez, and Patricia Justino. 2022. *Community organisation and armed group behaviour* (WIDER Working Paper 2022/2) Helsinki - United Nations University. Available at: https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/community-organization-and-armed-group-behaviour.

[49] Oliver Kaplan. 2018. *Resisting War. How Communities Defend Themselves*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. *Passim*.

[50] Semi-structured interview with 2 civilian volunteers and civic activists (from Odesa & Kherson). Conducted in person and online (July-September 2022).

[51] *Ibid.*

[52] *Ibid.*

dissuading a critical mass from rallying.[53] May be so, however, similar to other (historical) cases, partisan resistance took a more militarised approach, through the targeted assassination of local collaborators. Whether these types of armed resistance are coordinated cannot be determined yet. However, there are some marked differences with the more spontaneous examples occurring during the first days of the invasion. For instance, on March 1st when Russian troops entered Kherson, 'on one of the streets young men with Molotov cocktails (incendiary mixtures) resisted. But almost all of them died, as did several residents of Tavrichesky residential district, shot by Russian tanks in a nine-storey apartment building.'[54]

III. Fault-lines

Urban rifts

In Odesa, fears were looming that a scenario comparable to Kherson might play out across the region, in key strategic points. 'There are less than 200km from Mykolaiv to Odesa, if Mykolaiv falls to the Russians, we *[Odesa]* are next'.[55] Another Odesa resident, a medic, worryingly remarked that 'morally corrupt and cash thirsty *[pro-Russian]* collaborators *[including from the administrative apparatus]* brought down Kherson. They're a big problem for our country and especially, *[for]* the south *[of Ukraine]*.'[56] Fears that Russia's territorial craving would extend beyond Crimea and parts of Donbas have simmered since 2014. At the time, Russia's failure to proclaim Odesa and Kharkiv republics, similar to the formation of Donetsk and Luhansk 'people's republics' in the East, prompted 'an intuition about an impending war,' a civilian volunteer for the Ukrainian forces recounted, 'it feels I always knew something like this would happen.'[57]

Despite Ukraine's complex and interlaced regionalism, there are some enduring cleavages rooted in perceptions of national belonging, which the loss of Crimea and the turmoil in Donbas further exacerbated. In 2014, the large population displacement from the conflict-torn East to other regions amplified the salience of social cohesion, as well as perceptions of ethnonational fault lines. 'They brought the separatist mindset from the eastern parts and want to do the same here,' once remarked an Odesan resident.[58] In 2014, refugees (IDPs) from Donbas were perceived as a potential source of societal destabilisation, which was further complicated by internal debates surrounding the eastern refugees' *de facto* loyalty toward the Ukrainian state, their national identity and alleged pro-Russian stance.[59] These views became somewhat evident

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[53] *Ibid.* Testimonials from Kherson attest to the fact that many protesters (exact numbers remain unknown) were forcibly loaded onto buses and *disappeared.* Their fate remains unknown. 'The heavy rounds fired from machine guns wounded the protesters and other participants were taken to buses, not to be seen again. After several such shootings, the [protest] organizers refused to hold rallies because of pressure and threat'.

[54] As above (reference note 39).

[55] Semi-structured interviews with civilian volunteers for the Ukrainian Army, local doctors, and Odesa-based residents. Conducted July-August 2022 in Bucharest & Odesa. Gennady Trukhanov, one time member of Yanukovich's Russian-backed political party was elected mayor of Odesa only months after Yanukovich was overthrown, following the 2014 Maidan uprising.

[56] *Ibid.*

[57] *Ibid.*

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] Marta Jaroszewicz, Years After Crimea's Annexation, Integration of Ukraine's Internally Displaced Population Remains Uneven, Migration Policy, September 2019, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/fyears-after-crimea-annexation-integration-ukraine-internally-displaced-population. Voting preferences across Ukraine's eastern regions also consistently favoured the accession of Pro-Russian parties.

in the securitised approach the Ukrainian government took vis-à-vis integration policies, and the refugees' overall access to social benefits, voting rights and pensions.[60]

As such, during the chain of events that engulfed Ukraine in 2014, ethnonational polarisation went beyond mere perceptions. The Maidan movement is mostly associated with the civil society's mass mobilisation in Kyiv, which resulted in the ousting of the pro-Russian Yanukovich government in January 2014. Protests and clashes unfolding in other cities across the country were less visible. Odesa, a port city in southern Ukraine, has housed populations of mixed allegiances, pro-Ukrainian, Ukrainian speakers, as well as pro-Russian Russophones.[61] Russian aggression sought to further exacerbate and instrumentalise such divisions along linguistic, ethnic and regional lines. Odesa itself was the stage of multiple rallies and violent clashes between supporters of Ukrainian unity and supporters of the separatist movement, resulting in 45 reported deaths between the 2nd and 4th of May (mainly from the separatist side) according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program.[62] The pro-Russian proto-militias sought to emulate the secessionist/independence factions in eastern Ukraine, with demands ranging from 'joining Russia on the model of Crimea, independence for Eastern Ukraine, federalism, as well as the return of former pro-Russian president Yanukovich.'[63]

A civic activist from Odesa who participated in the May rallies used different signifiers to describe the clashes, as between the 'pro-Maidan' and 'anti-Maidan' supporters, the latter critical of the newly established government. Violence irrupted on the 2nd May, when a pro-Maidan/pro-unity demonstration comprising residents, as well as a large number of football fans from Kharkiv (in Odesa, for a football match), was attacked by anti-Maidan activists, resulting in six deaths (firearms were fired by both sides). According to her testimonial, 'the rallies were set as a provocation with anti-Maidan leaders urging [their] supporters to take refuge in the Trade Union building and barricade the doors. The leaders subsequently fled the scene, to neighbouring Transnistria or Crimea, while the building caught fire from Molotov cocktails trapping anti-Maidan protesters inside.'[64] Despite warnings and repeated emergency calls, the police and fire brigades (SES, State Emergency Services) failed to respond appropriately, 'arriving late at the scene.'[65] In the meantime, 'everybody tried to save those trapped inside, ferrying the injured to local hospitals, but many died.'[66] The rallies gathered protesters from different belief systems, allegiances and political inclinations, including radical elements and proxies who purposely sought to foment violence. Subsequently, the Head of Police for Odesa fled to Transnistria, while the chief of the regional State Emergency Services (SES) escaped to Russian-annexed Crimea, compounding allegations of conspiracy. 'None of the court proceedings regarding the role of police or SES officials have been completed.'[67]

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[60] *Ibid.*

[61] According to the UCDP conflict dataset. Available at: https://ucdp.uu.se/nonstate/14113.

[62] *Ibid.*

[63] *Ibid.* Reportedly, there are allegations that most pro-Russian demonstrators and detainees were in fact citizens of the Russian Federation and residents of Transnistria. According to an official communique from Ukraine's Ministry of Interior. Available at: https://www.unian.net/politics/914210-mvd-bolshinstvo-zaderjannyih-v-odesse-grajdane-rossii-i-jiteli-pridnestrovya.html.

[64] Semi-structured interview with a civic activist from Odesa who witnessed the May 2014 protests. Conducted online on September 24th 2022.

[65] *Ibid.*

[66] Testimonial also corroborated by UN staff who witnessed the violent clashes from the UN Ukraine headquarters in the vicinity. Matilda Bogner, 7 years with no answers. What is lacking in the investigations of the events in Odesa on 2 May 2014?, Ukraine UN, April 2021, https://ukraine.un.org/en/126054-7-years-no-answers-what-lacking-investigations-events-odesa-2-may-2014.

[67] *Ibid.*

International Relations scholarship gazes at geopolitics through the macro-lens of nation-states, regional blocks, or global alliances, whilst the intersection and clash between opposing geopolitical realms in urban environments tend to be overlooked. Odesa has been precisely such a locus; a geopolitical fault-line city, where contested memories and conflicting ethnonational identities often broke down in violence.[68] The politicisation and instrumentalisation by proxy of such narratives also exacerbated actual and imagined battlespaces.

Families and beyond

In the author's view, not only cities but also family units and the spaces they inhabit are torn and divided by conflicting narratives of belonging. On a summer afternoon, in Odesa's suburbs, a young mother tearfully recounted how moving in with her elderly father for safety reasons (before the war she was living on the 9th floor in a high-rising apartment building) 'brought the demons out, causing hurt and rifts in an otherwise happy family.' Her elderly father was markedly pro-Russian in spite of the ongoing war, 'refusing to believe that Russian troops could cause such atrocities on *brotherly* Ukrainian soil.' Like many others in Odesa plagued by disbelief, he is but one casualty to an unrelenting disinformation assault, which found fertile ground in his generation's past indoctrination, or perhaps nostalgia. But there are also more optimistic stories of urban cohabitation. A coordinator of Odesa's humanitarian hub pointed to a group of young volunteers labouring in the school's classrooms packed floor to ceiling with boxes.

'They are all refugees from the eastern parts of Ukraine [Donbas]. The Centre helped them when they first arrived here [in Odesa]. But what moved me the most, [...] as soon as they got settled, they became volunteers themselves helping others in need. Their work and contribution might actually change perceptions about people from those regions. Perhaps all this will gradually change for the better, or not.'

[68] Michael Gentile, Geopolitical Fault-Line Cities' in Migration and the Ukraine Crisis: A Two-Country Perspective, E-IR Collection, 2017, https://www.e-ir.info/2017/04/09/geopolitical-fault-line-cities/.

IV. – An Eastern European Epilogue

It is an operational convention to think of buffer zones as bodies of land, grey territories, first in the line of aggression. Much of Eastern Europe falls into this category. But geographical distance quickly becomes an illusion so long as entire segments of our societies have been under constant siege, together with the fragile freedoms they attempted to preserve. For the journalists, human rights activists, civic leaders, peaceful protesters, volunteers, and even teachers, all those relentlessly persecuted, imprisoned, brutally murdered, or made to disappear by ideologically inimical, self-serving regimes, this war has been smouldering for a long time. Conventional frontlines may shape the war effort, but the actual battlefield has been dynamic, with Russian or any form of authoritarian revisionism extending well beyond borders into the very heart of democratic belief systems. The geographical buffer is only imaginary.

Let us not forget that even at the height of Soviet repression, transnational activism flourished from the Baltics to Romania, bringing to the forefront the plight of captive nations, the abuses of totalitarian regimes and Soviet rule, in time creating enough pressure points for the behemoth to crumble. It is instructive to remind ourselves that we do not owe our freedom to the Soviet Union or to its successors and that this perceived geopolitical entrapment, no matter how consequential, must be resolutely deterred once and for all. Otherwise, this concert of international condemnation would have been for nothing.