

# Two years after Russia's invasion, the power of Ukrainian nonviolent civilian defense cannot be ignored

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**Hundreds of nonviolent actions by Ukrainian civilians have weakened several pillars of support for Putin's regime, showing that defense is not only about military resistance.**

On Feb. 24, 2022, Russia started an unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which was a massive escalation following the eight-year Russian-fueled separatist conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. While the initial assault on Ukraine's capital faltered, Russia has occupied significant parts in the south and east of Ukraine and illegally annexed several Ukrainian provinces. Supported by Western military aid, Ukraine has managed to liberate several of its territories in the past two years. Still, while military fortunes seem to have shifted, the war is ongoing and seems to be currently far from any resolution.

Media attention on the war has largely focused on military and diplomatic developments. But there have also been [significant instances of nonviolent civil resistance](#) influencing the course of the invasion, in shaping the tides of the conflict.

## Nonviolent defense in Ukraine

The Ukrainian leadership's attempts to implement civilian defense since 2014 have been "[deeply flawed](#)," which is why nonviolent defense seems not to have played any major deterrent factor in Russia's invasion. Nevertheless, nonviolent resistance strategies have played an important role in shaping both the will and the effectiveness of Ukrainian resistance, while also playing an important signaling role in motivating international support for Ukraine's cause. They have also impacted Russian centers of gravity, leading to mass-migration of skilled middle-class professionals, as well as discord among some of the oligarch class on whose support the Putin regime relies.

Any analysis of civil resistance in Ukraine has to acknowledge the longstanding tradition of nonviolent civil resistance in [Ukrainian history](#). Within the last two decades, Ukraine has seen two nonviolent revolutions, the Orange Revolution in 2004-2005 and the Euromaidan in 2013-2014. The pro-Western Euromaidan revolution can be seen as a direct precursor to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 — as Russia felt its political influence in Ukraine diminish — and through the annexation attempted to [weaken the Ukrainian state](#). The Euromaidan revolution led to [increased civil society organizing](#), including anti-corruption initiatives. Once Russia invaded, these civil society networks became active and many organized to support the defense effort, protect civilians and oppose the occupation. Most of the mobilization seems to have been spontaneous, based on informal networks and trusting relationships.

One [detailed analysis](#) on nonviolent resistance within the first half of 2022 in response to the full-scale Russian invasion finds documentation for 235 nonviolent actions throughout that period. Using [Michael Beer's methodological framework](#), 148 of these actions fall into the category of protest, while a further 51 qualify as non-cooperation and 36 as nonviolent intervention. The geographical center of recorded resistance was in the South (with 191 actions in Kherson, Zaporizhia and Odessa).

The [research](#) is also viewed on a timescale. In February 2022, 17 actions were organized, most of them to hinder Russian advances, such as physical interpositioning of citizens in front of military vehicles and tanks, the changing of street signs to confuse occupying troops, and the construction of obstacles and barricades to stop Russian advances. While these actions continued into March 2022, among the 131 actions recorded during that month, the majority were demonstrations and public rallies where flags and symbols of the country were displayed to demonstrate the rejection of the invasion and to claim Ukrainian nationality.

April 2022 saw a significant drop in nonviolent actions due to withdrawal of Russian troops from the North and strengthening of repression in occupied areas, including arbitrary arrests, kidnappings and forced disappearances. Activists removed Russian flags in various cities, organized evacuation of civilians and documented war crimes.

May 2022 saw most action take place in the southern regions around Kherson and, due to repression, resistance went more clandestine, through displays of graffiti, hanging yellow and blue ribbons (the national colors of Ukraine) and distribution of leaflets. June 2022 saw a significant number of methods of non-cooperation: school principals resigned, teachers refused to teach Russian curriculum, mayors and local administration workers resigned or abandoned their physical jobs (while going on to serve the public), medical professionals and workers refusing to pay taxes as well as refusal to contribute to public works.

Ukrainian citizens in occupied areas have also provided important intelligence to the Ukrainian military and civilian authorities throughout the conflict. Reports on nonviolent resistance have not been documented meticulously after June 2022, but scattered news and reports, such as on the [Yellow Ribbon movement](#) operating in the occupied territories show that in spite of increased Russian surveillance and repression, civil resistance has been ongoing. As the frontlines became more entrenched, there was also less possible interaction between Ukrainian citizens and Russian troops, as was the case in the early months of the conflict.

Another area where civil resistance has played an important role was in framing the conflict to both internal and international audiences in the media and social media sphere. One set of iconic images are of [Ukrainian tractors](#) towing Russian tanks and other military equipment. Ukrainians have been very skillful in shaping the information space and, with it, the narrative about the war, by using memes, humor and subversion. It is of course difficult to assess how much of that information battle has been shaped bottom-up or top-down. Nevertheless, while Russia seems to rely more heavily on state-owned and private information channels including "natural" and "cultivated" allies on the political right, Ukrainians have been more adept in applying social media, particularly when it comes to shaping opinions in the West. Given that, at the beginning of the invasion, most observers did not expect Ukraine to withstand the attack, the communication of the determination of Ukrainians to defend their country and to showing their successes in doing so have provided moral support within Ukraine, as well as galvanized a reevaluation of the situation by Ukraine's Western allies and their populations.

At the same time, given that the Russian government passed a law early on that made it illegal to call the invasion a war, many Russians have been brave in voicing opposition to the invasion, with

more than 6,000 people detained in [antiwar protests](#) in the first days after the invasion. A number of celebrities, academics, businesspeople and oligarchs have publicly voiced their concerns and opposition to the war, including the viral nonviolent protest by TV Channel One editor [Marina Ovsyannikova](#), who showed her opposition to the invasion by walking behind a news anchor while holding a sign reading “No War” and telling viewers they were being lied to.

There were also a series of sabotage acts against recruitment centers, military installations and war-related infrastructure in many parts of Russia. Some sources claim that up to 50 conscription centers were attacked in the weeks after the partial mobilization was announced. During the first months of the occupation, more than 300,000 Russians left the country, mostly young people and professionals from the middle class. This was compounded after Putin declared a partial mobilization in September, which led to between 200,000 and 700,000 Russian men [fleeing the country](#). The partial mobilization also led to [renewed protests](#), with more than 2,000 people arrested during protests in September 2022. There were also reports that protesters were forcibly recruited after they were arrested during protests. Given that Russia’s military is disproportionately relying on citizens from [ethnic minorities](#), there were protests in those areas. Due to ever [harsher repression](#), these protests largely died down in 2023. However, Putin does not seem too sure of public opinion, as anti-war candidate [Boris Nadezhdin](#) was barred from running in this year’s presidential election.

Civil resistance scholar [Robert Burrowes](#) has argued that nonviolent defense needs to fulfill two purposes: 1. to consolidate the power and the will of the attacked population to resist; and 2. to organize a nonviolent counteroffensive that alters the will of the opponent elite to conduct the aggression. The counteroffensive should particularly target the opponent elite’s troops, the opponent elite’s domestic constituency and the domestic constituency of allied elites.

Indeed, civil resistance has contributed to strengthening Ukrainians’ resolve to oppose Russia’s invasion. Their actions have signaled internal unity, resolve to fight the invasion and — particularly in occupied areas — reminded people that they are not willing to accept the occupation. This is important for keeping morale high, strengthening community resilience and providing important civilian protection functions. Nonviolent actions outside Ukraine also showed Ukrainians that they don’t stand alone and that there is widespread solidarity for their struggle.

In terms of the second purpose, nonviolent action clearly has had mixed success so far, given that the war is still ongoing and Russia still occupies significant parts of Ukraine. While civilians standing in front of tanks did not stop the invasion, they clearly showed Russian troops that they were not welcome in Ukraine. Given that many Russian soldiers had been told that the invasion would be a cakewalk and that they would be warmly welcomed by the Ukrainian population once the “corrupted” elites were removed, these actions made the opposite abundantly clear.

Similarly, protests and non-cooperation in occupied areas show the occupiers that they are not welcome. These actions also push the occupier to expand more resources to police the occupied territory, which puts additional strain on the occupier. Harsh repression, as we have seen, has a tendency (through moral and/or political jiu-jitsu) to [backfire](#). The [documented atrocities](#) — many of which are very likely war crimes, which Russian troops committed in occupied areas — have led to widespread condemnations and war-crimes investigation, further weakening any Russian claims of moral righteousness. There have also been many reports of [desertions](#) by Russian troops, with (according to [one source](#)) up to 17,000 Russian soldiers having deserted. While the impact of nonviolent resistance on those desertations is not measurable, it is likely that nonviolent resistance has contributed to the diminishing motivation of Russian troops to fight.

In terms of the opponent’s domestic constituency, nonviolent resistance has also had some impacts. While public opinion information from Russia is not to be trusted, there seems to be indications that

parts of the middle classes and elites have grown wearier throughout the conflict. Given that the Russian regime occupies much of the domestic information space, it is difficult for many Russians to grapple with the full reality of the conflict on the ground and airways are often filled with openly [genocidal propaganda](#). One question is, of course, whether it is principally the invasion or only the lack of success that is problematic for the domestic audience.

Overall, it is likely that several pillars of support for Putin's regime have been weakened since the beginning of the conflict, not least of all due to the impacts of domestic and international nonviolent resistance, including a comprehensive sanctions regime. While the sanctions regime — due to high oil prices and attempts to circumvent sanctions — [has not been as successful as intended](#), the sanctions against oligarchs have at least disturbed their lavish lifestyles and signaled that there is a personal price to pay for Russia's invasion. The abortive Wagner-coup led by Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023 can likely be interpreted as a symptom of growing elite disunity.

The third category of Burrowes's counteroffensive — which targets the allies of the opponent's elites — is problematic, given that most of Putin and Russia's allies (such as China, Iran and North Korea) are dictatorships. So, nonviolent actions are difficult in those countries, where repression is strong and populations are shielded from unbiased information. However, numerous nonviolent actions to garner support for Ukraine's cause have taken place in countries Ukraine counts as its own allies. Given that most of them are democratic countries, public opinion is important politically to ensure ongoing support for Ukraine's struggle.

The full history of Ukraine's nonviolent resistance can of course only be written in detail once the conflict is over and access to all occupied areas has been regained. I do wonder: What could have been the extent of nonviolent defense if people were actually organized, trained and financed in peace time? In a world where international threats have multiplied in recent years, maybe civilian defense should become a more standard repertoire.

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**P.S.**

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