

Inside the Ukrainian resistance

Monday 11 July 2022, by [PATRIKARAKOS David](#) (Date first published: 9 July 2022).

In Kherson, Russian collaborators are being hunted down

“The situation in the city is very, very bad. The Russian occupiers are increasing their presence all the time. They ride around the city with impunity and break down the doors of houses and apartments. Soldiers usually come at around midnight and start searching for evidence of partisan activity. Often, they just take people away. Now they’ve turned their attention to officials. A few days ago, they arrested the mayor and some members of the city council. It’s getting worse...”

This message, from a pro-democracy activist inside Kherson, reached me via an intermediary on Wednesday evening. It’s getting harder by the day to find out what’s going on in the region — especially inside the city. A lifetime ago, back in mid-April, in a village just beyond [Mykolaiv](#), I stood in the garden of a house destroyed by Russian shells, listening to the sound of incoming Russian fire overhead, and looked southeast. There, just under 100km away was Kherson. The Russians had occupied parts of the city on 2 March and had been fighting it out with the Ukrainians ever since. Today, the Russians control most of the region; and they are making their presence known. But from Mykolaiv and, critically, inside Kherson itself, the Ukrainians continue to resist.

Right now, the global media is filled with talk of the battle for the Donbas. But it is in the south, with its long coastline and large grain stores, where the war for Ukraine will be won or lost. And it is in Kherson, now under Russian occupation, where we will find the answers to so many questions vital to that victory or defeat. Can the Ukrainian army fight back with sufficient effectiveness to retake a major city from the Russians? Can the country hold out while its grain is stolen and its ports are blockaded? And, perhaps most importantly of all, how real and how strong is Ukrainian resistance under Russian occupation?

“We need to understand that the situation is different across the region,” Sergiy Danylov, Deputy Director for the Centre of Middle Eastern Studies, tells me. He continues: “The south and west parts of the Kherson region are a catastrophe. There have been mass killings and rapes — it’s a second Bucha there. Some villages were just totally demolished by the Russians.”

Geography is key here, as it is across Ukraine. Kherson is bisected by the mouth of the Dnieper River. On its right bank — what can loosely be called its Mykolaiv side — things are slightly better. Mykolaiv is still in Ukrainian hands, and it is from there that the army counterattacks. Its left bank is on the Mariupol side — the large city that is in Russian hands — and it is here where things are particularly grim.

Repression, though, is the same on both the left and right banks. Last week saw more mass “filtrations” — that most sinisterly prophylactic of words that in reality means that occupying forces violently interrogated locals and then deported many to Russia. It’s a system designed for both simplicity and cruelty: cars and trucks and troops arrive in the villages, and then either take locals to a special “facility” or dig a large hole and stuff them in it. The goal is always the same: to turn them

into collaborators.

Yet at the same time, the Russians also try to ingratiate themselves. Key to their efforts is the concept of what they call “swift justice”. The principle is simple: justice through the courts can take forever, so why not let them deliver it instead? Of course, it’s also a way of legitimising violence. Soldiers now accept “complaints” from locals and when they break into houses and administer more beatings, they can say they are merely responding to citizen requests.

It’s a system that is easily open to abuse. Danylov heard a story from one of the villages of a man who went to the checkpoint and made a complaint to the Russians: his neighbour had refused to give him any booze. The soldiers went to the man’s house and imprisoned him for 15 days (on what charge it’s hard to fathom). In another village, a local criminal robbed a house, and the Russians came round to his place and beat him severely. “They are trying to say this is good because if you try to go through the courts it will take years whereas they deliver justice quickly. They are trying to ‘bribe’ the locals through things like this,” says Danylov.

Is it working? Partially. Their attempts to build a positive image are gaining some traction but they cannot mask the perennial problem of Russian soldiers: their behaviour. My sources inside Kherson are clear: the occupying forces are robbing people’s houses; they are always drunk, often from first thing in the morning; people are disappearing every day, especially in the port city of Genichesk. Just ten days ago, two women living in the Arabat Spit — a Crimean tartar and a Ukrainian — were taken from their homes and haven’t been seen since.

According to a resident in Kherson, checkpoints are an epicentre of Russian violence. In the beginning of the occupation, they were almost ubiquitous across all the towns and villages. Now most have gone. But one at the entrance at the so-called “Island” neighbourhood of Kherson city — with its shipyards, oil harbour and many businesses — abuse is rife. Recently, a woman approached driving a car with tinted windows. She refused to scratch the tinted film off the windows, so her car was impounded, she was beaten, and her windows smashed in with a rifle butt.

It would be unfair, however, to say the soldiers are just there to drink and beat people up; they also want to make money. Checkpoints are not just places of violence and intimidation, but of extortion as well. An informal tariff — based around different classes of vehicle — has come into effect. To get your car through without the endless queuing will cost \$500 or more. A bus costs \$2,000, a truck \$20,000. Sometimes cars are allowed to leave without paying, and every so often the Russians shell them with BM-21 Grads — just to teach them a lesson for going back into Ukraine.

The Russians have also appropriated a network of petrol stations previously owned by OKKO and Shell. Prices there are now in roubles, which is the only currency they will accept. They’ve even manually set an exchange rate at 1 hryvnia to 1.5 roubles (the normal exchange rate is above 2). All this has come by the order of former Rada Deputy and ex-mayor of Kherson Volodymyr Saldo, who immediately supported Russian occupiers when they arrived and has become the head of the Kherson administration.

The Russians are trying to control all aspects of life, too. If you want to receive your salary into a bank account, you need to open an account in the bank the Russians have set up in the former Raiffeisen Bank building. “I saw huge lines of people there,” says one resident. “The catch, though, is that if you want the account, you also have to get a Russian passport, which people don’t want.”

“There is almost no cash in the city, which looks increasingly as it did in the Nineties, when there was a huge deficit and people traded stuff to each other out of the trunks of their cars. Then you could buy almost everything, but at two-to-five times higher than the normal market price. At the

same places you can exchange USD and euros. In many shops, where they had previously specialised in one product, such as meat or vegetables, now you can buy everything from bread to cigarettes to vodka and home products — almost all of them from Crimea. But people don't buy them a second time because the quality is awful."

All of this combines to diminish pro-Russian feelings across the region. From the first days of the occupation, protestors hurled insults, not flowers, at incoming Russian troops. Now the resistance has morphed into two distinct strands. The first is violent; the second is what they call the "fight for the symbolic environment". This centres on placing pro-Ukrainian graffiti and leaflets throughout key areas and destroying pro-Russian flags and symbols. In both camps, of course, there is the social ostracisation of collaborators.

Everywhere they've occupied the Russians have relied on collaborators. They don't have enough people to both police the local population and staff all the administrative positions necessary for governance. Yet the number of collaborators appears to be small: if someone joins the local Russian government they get a Russian passport, and in Kherson, as of last week, only 23 people have received a Russian passport from direct collaboration out of a population of several hundred thousand in the city.

One of the first people the Russians try to recruit are school principals. Schools are vital to the system of occupation: where you have daily control of children, their parents are usually forced to follow. "Unfortunately, already two kindergartens have agreed to collaborate," says the pro-democracy activist. "Also, we know that School #30, one of the most prestigious in the city, has agreed to switch its curriculum to the Russian one."

Yet most remain reluctant to collaborate, despite the Russians pushing hard. In the towns of Melitopol and Kakhovka, those who refused — from a pool of mostly middle-aged women — were gathered together and put in a basement without food or access to a toilet, and then driven 30km from the city and dumped by the side of the road. They were told they had to return by curfew, or they would be killed on the road.

In the village of Bekhtery, the principal refused to collaborate and was beaten so badly she was left almost disabled. The head of the local council agreed to collaborate and tried to convince all teachers and civil servants to cooperate as well. Those who refused were betrayed to the Russians who sent patrols round to their houses to beat them up. "Collaborators are constantly looking to expand their influence," says the pro-democracy activist. "They raid businesses and pressure new people to collaborate. Just yesterday, around 70 Lada Priora cars arrived that will be used to patrol the city. The fact that the collaborators seem so relaxed, opening new shops and petrol stations, makes some people think they will stay for a long time and that maybe the city has already been traded to the Russians."

But while the collaborators may be making hay, they are nervous. "They move around the town in bullet proof jackets and with a lot of bodyguards," he continues. "They are afraid of assassination. The city resembles the wild west days of the Nineties."

Posters are now going up across the city, many with images of individual collaborators accompanied by personal messages. "Kiril, we've got something for you," reads one with an image of the man's head above drawings of a noose, a gun and an exploding car. A similar poster shows an image of a corpse half-covered in dirt: "A lot of Russians are already wormfood. You're next." Graffiti splayed across a central street in the town of Hola Prystan reads: "AFU [the Ukrainian army] is nearby. Orcs be afraid. Hopry [short for Hola Prystan] is Ukraine".

"I am proud of our younger generation," says the pro-democracy activist. "They are constantly spraying patriotic graffiti around the city: blue and yellow stripes in parks and neighbourhoods; they fling paint against the many propaganda billboards now erected around the city."

Then there is the more direct action. As the Russians have taken almost full control of the region, Ukrainian resistance has grown in proportion. On 16 June, Eugeniy Sobolev, the pro-Russian head of the Kherson prison service, was hospitalised after a bomb shattered the windows of his white Audi. Just under a week later, on June 24, Dmitry Savluchenko, the pro-Russian official in charge of the Department of Youth and Sports for the Kherson region, was blown up in his car. Serhii Khlan, an adviser to the head of the Ukrainian Kherson Civil Military administration, [called](#) Savluchenko a "traitor" and announced that "our partisans have [won] another victory".

These actions are boosting morale inside Kherson. "Attempts to physically eliminate collaborators are very popular," the activist continues. "Everybody wants to oppose the Russians and is waiting for the quick return of the Ukrainian armed forces. There are even cases of poachers shooting Russian soldiers patrolling the river at night. That's why the 'liberators' now move only in convoys of three or more boats. They are afraid. I think that it's only by these sorts of methods will we have success. They need to feel constantly afraid for their lives."

It's hard to assess just how widespread violent resistance is. Most of the cases remain unpublicised because the Russians don't want to appear weak or vulnerable and the partisans don't want to jeopardise their security. In many small towns, there are a lot of cases of youths with knives stabbing drunken soldiers. No one says anything because it's bad both for the Russians and for the kids.

"Usually those engaging in violent acts are young or middle-aged men, most of them are without any special training or preparation," says Danylov. "But there are more sophisticated actions as well. A few weeks ago, several Russian soldiers were invited for a drink, and all had their throats cut. I cannot imagine that these people were not trained, but there is never any public confirmation. Clearly, though, there are contacts between the security forces and locals. It's impossible for an ordinary person to get explosive materials in Kherson itself — so these bombs are being delivered by professionals in one form or another."

And so far, this resistance has been effective. The occupying forces have tried four times to organise a referendum in Kherson on joining Russia, but because of the initial protests and now the armed resistance, it has proved impossible. As the pro-democracy activist tells me: "People are resisting all the time as much as they can. And that resistance is increasing every day."

David Patrikarakos is a Contributing Editor at *UnHerd*. His latest book is *War in 140 characters: how social media is reshaping conflict in the 21st century*. (Hachette)

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