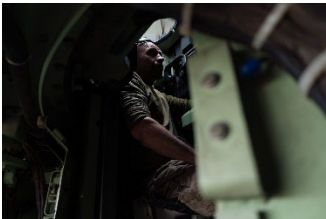


READ IN THIS ISSUE:



Why Ukraine likely won't hold elections next year

Oleg Sukhov's article explains that though Western commentators have urged Ukraine to hold elections regardless of the ongoing war, it is legally impossible under martial law, and elections would pose huge security risks, with likely millions unable to vote, due to being displaced, occupied, or fighting on the front line.



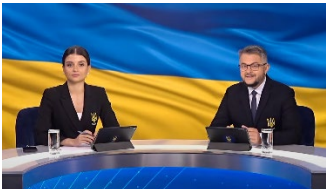
Overcoming setbacks, NATO-trained brigade breaches Surovikin line in Zaporizhzhia Oblast

Our week's most popular story was Francis Farrell's piece about the 47th Mechanized Brigade. This NATO-trained brigade has breached the Surovikin line in Zaporizhzhia Oblast and reached their assigned task: a front-on attack where Russian defensive lines were most concentrated.



Russia is covering Ukraine with landmines. Clearing them will be extremely difficult

Rich Wordsworth's story explains the challenges associated with mines, especially new, advanced technology that further complicates the demining process.



A power grab or a weapon against Russia? Ukraine's 'TV marathon' explained

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the country's biggest media outlets have created a united news program that broadcasts 24/7 to combat disinformation and boost morale.



Abducting the future: How Ukrainian parents fight to rescue their children from Russia

Daria Shulzhenko's story follows how two families were able to save their children from "recreational camps" after they were deported from occupied territory in Ukraine to Russia.

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ELECTIONS, NATIONAL, POLITICS

Why Ukraine likely won't hold elections next year

by Oleg Sukhov • September 28, 2023 • 9 min read



When Russian President Vladimir Putin holds a fake vote to extend his mandate in March 2024, Ukraine will not be allowed to hold an election due to the martial law imposed amid Russia's aggression.

This won't suddenly make Russia more democratic than Ukraine.

If Russia had not invaded Ukraine, it would be scheduled to hold a parliamentary election on Oct. 29, 2023, and a presidential one on March 31, 2024.

However, martial law, which was introduced when Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, makes this legally impossible.

Some Western commentators have urged Ukraine to find a legal solution and hold elections regardless of the war. They argue that this way, Ukraine would prove that it is a democracy.

However, there are many obstacles that would thwart an election during the full-scale war.

Such an election would pose huge security risks, and millions of voters abroad, internally displaced persons, and soldiers on the front line would be unlikely to vote.

"Is it worth paying the price of endangering citizens for Ukraine to conduct elections?" Harald Jepsen, a senior advisor at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), told the Kyiv Independent.

An election during a full-scale war is also unlikely to be democratic and competitive due to restrictions on free speech and other civil liberties. Moreover, it would likely cause a rift in society that may jeopardize Ukraine's war effort.

Experts argue that it may be possible to hold an election if the conflict subsides and enters a low-intensity stage. Yet, there's little prospect of that happening before March.

Growing calls for elections

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration and the European Union's leadership have not made any statements pushing Ukraine to hold elections during the full-scale war.

However, some Western politicians, officials, and commentators have touted the idea.

In May, Tiny Kox, president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, urged Ukraine to hold "free and fair elections." He did not specify when Ukraine would be expected to hold them.

"There are problems because as long as you have martial law, your constitution does not allow you to have elections," he said. "So, you have to find a solution. If you don't do it, then the question comes from the table. What did we defend in this war of aggression that Russia has called against us?"

Later, Kox clarified his statement.

"As long as martial law is there and your constitution is as it is, there will not be elections," he said. "But at a certain moment, there will be elections. And my advice is to start preparing for it as soon as possible."

U.S. conservative political commentator Tucker Carlson, who has repeatedly voiced pro-Russian views, made a more radical statement in June.

He accused President Volodymyr Zelensky of canceling the elections to create a "dictatorship."

U.S. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, who has a pro-Ukrainian stance, also made a statement on Ukrainian elections in August.

He said that "it is time for Ukraine to take the next step in the development of democracy, namely to hold elections in 2024."

"I want this country to have free and fair elections, even when it's under attack," Graham said.

He said later that "elections would not only be seen as an act of defiance against the Russian invasion but an embrace of democracy and freedom."

Ukraine's response

Zelensky responded to Graham's statement in August, saying that "according to the legislation, it is forbidden to hold elections."

However, he appeared to leave the door open for potential legislative changes.

"My answer is very simple: if our parliamentarians are ready, because then we need changes to the legislation, to the Electoral Code, we need to do it quickly," he said.

Zelensky said that Ukraine would not be able to finance elections, which he said would cost around \$135 million, and added that only the West could pay for it.

"I will not hold elections on credit. I will not take money from weapons and allocate it to elections, either," he said.

Later in August, Zelensky also said he would run for a second term if elections were held in 2024.

Meanwhile, Ruslan Stefanchuk, speaker of the Ukrainian parliament, Olena Shuliak, head of the governing Servant of the People party, and Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, have all said that it was impossible to hold an election under martial law.

Illegal wish

The Ukrainian constitution stipulates that the authority of the country's parliament must be extended until the expiry of martial law. However, the constitution does not contain similar provisions on presidential or local elections.

The constitution also explicitly prohibits any constitutional amendments during martial law.

In contrast, Ukraine's law on martial law explicitly bans presidential, parliamentary, and local elections during martial law.

"The constitution does not exclude presidential or local elections," Jepsen said. "It's only the law on martial law that prevents presidential or local elections during martial law."

The only legal way to hold elections during the war would be to either cancel martial law or amend the law on martial law to remove the ban on elections.

However, canceling martial law would be dangerous because it could dismantle the legal framework necessary for the war effort.

"(Canceling martial law) doesn't remove the challenges," Olha Aivazovska, head of election watchdog Opora, told the Kyiv Independent. "International observers wouldn't come to Ukraine, and mobilized conscripts would be able to go home."

International standards

Supporters of holding an election argue that Ukraine must do so in order to maintain its democracy.

But, opponents of the idea say that suspending elections during a full-scale war is in line with international standards.

"Nothing in the international standards says that you have to conduct elections during war," Jepsen said. "Quite the contrary, if you look at the Venice Commission, they say it's fully allowable to extend the mandate of parliament, even advisable."

Jepsen also said that the idea of suspending elections during wartime has precedents in European history.

"This is perfectly normal in the European context that during an all-out war, you don't conduct elections," Jepsen said.

One of the major examples cited by experts is that the U.K. and France did not hold any elections during World War I and World War II in Europe.

A counter-example would be the U.S., which held elections during the Civil War and during its participation in both World Wars.

However, a key difference with Ukraine was that there was no foreign invasion of U.S. territory in all these cases, except for several islands.

Risks and challenges

The main risk for an election cited by experts is potential Russian attacks.

"A single bomb or rocket can remove the possibility of carrying on with elections," Jepsen said.

"What happens if Russia upscales its attacks, and you have to cancel these elections, and they are seen as a failure?"

Another common argument used by opponents of holding an election in 2024 is the fact that it will be hard for millions of Ukrainian refugees to vote.

Aivazovska, Jepsen, and political analyst Volodymyr Fesenko agree that it would be a major problem.

According to Ukraine's Center for Economic Strategy, 1.3 million Ukrainian refugees were in Russia in late June, and between 4.3 million and 5.4 million Ukrainian refugees were based in Europe and other foreign countries.

First, experts say there will not be enough polling stations for so many refugees.

Second, voter registration will be a major problem both for Ukrainians abroad and for internally displaced persons in Ukraine.

"There is no reliable data on the whereabouts of voters abroad," Jepsen said.

Aivazovska also said that it would be impossible for candidates to campaign in the European Union during the election.

It would also be difficult for soldiers on the front line to vote during the full-scale war due to security risks and their military tasks, experts say.

Aivazovska also argued that a competitive and fair election would be impossible during the full-scale invasion because of restrictions imposed on the freedom of speech under martial law.

"Martial law was introduced to enable the state to restrict certain rights of citizens," Jepsen said. "It will be difficult to conduct elections because elections are about the freedom of opinion, freedom of movement, and the safety of candidates."

Another common argument is that elections during a full-scale war would lead to disunity and disrupt Ukraine's war effort.

"This will contribute to a split at a time when the nation needs to stand united against the common enemy," Jepsen said. "Elections are about differences. Parties will inevitably start the narrative that 'we are better than the others.'"

Fesenko agreed that elections would lead to "an internal split" and would not be safe during the full-scale war.

Postal voting

Several solutions have been proposed as a way to solve the problems of a potential wartime election.

One of the solutions is postal voting because it would mitigate security risks and allow more Ukrainian refugees, internally displaced persons, and soldiers to vote.

"Ukraine doesn't have experience with postal voting, but it's one of the options," Jepsen said.

He added that postal voting was used in countries of the former Yugoslavia after the Balkan wars in the 1990s.

However, critics say postal voting may lead to electoral fraud or lower trust in the elections.

The latest example is accusations by former U.S. President Donald Trump and his supporters that widespread postal voting in the 2020 U.S. presidential election led to voting fraud. There is no evidence backing up the accusations, but they led to low trust in the election outcome among the Republicans.

Aivazovska said that, according to opinion polls, few Ukrainians trust postal voting.

Electronic voting

Supporters of holding an election in 2024 have also proposed electronic voting to ensure a safe election during the full-scale war.

However, experts say that such a step would be problematic.

"The many offers of modern technology could certainly be used during elections," Jepsen said.

"But it's premature for Ukraine to go the full way and start using the Internet for voting in national elections."

An electronic voting system has to be tested and takes years of development, he added.

Aivazovska also said that electronic voting is a major "cybersecurity risk," and it cannot guarantee the secrecy of voting.

Estonia and Switzerland have used electronic voting, but it was introduced there after many years of testing.

Meanwhile, Denmark and the Netherlands have decided not to use electronic voting because their societies were not ready for that, Jepsen said.

The most negative illustration of the dangers of electronic voting is Russia, where elections are regularly rigged. In 2021, evidence emerged that electronic voting had been used to rig the parliamentary election in Moscow.

Low-intensity conflict

Despite the problems, most experts believe that an election may be possible if the war becomes a low-intensity conflict.

One commonly cited parallel is Ukraine's 2014 presidential, parliamentary, and local elections. They were held after Russia launched an invasion of the Donbas but the conflict remained on a much lower scale than the current all-out war, and no martial law was declared.

"If the conflict goes down in intensity, it's technically possible," Jepsen said.

He argued, however, that this would become possible if there are security guarantees for voters and if many more Ukrainians return home from abroad.

"It also depends on how much territory Ukraine will have liberated," Jepsen added.

Fesenko and Aivazovska also said that it would be possible to hold an election if the war enters a low-intensity stage.

"This will be possible when there is security and when restrictions on the work of mass media are removed," Aivazovska said.

Potential election results

Ukrainian media outlets RBC Ukraine and Novoye Vremya reported in September, citing their sources, that the Zelensky administration had not yet made a final decision on holding elections in 2024. The sources said that it was still a possibility.

Zelensky's spokesman Serhiy Nikiforov could not comment on the issue.

Fesenko said, however, that the authorities were unlikely to hold an election in 2024 if the public opinion was against it.

"Zelensky's peculiarity is that he acts according to the public opinion," he said.

If elections are held next year, the results may be favorable to Zelensky.

Fesenko argued that Zelensky "has a high rating and may win in the first round" if an election is held.

According to a poll released by the Razumkov Center in July, 81 percent trusted Zelensky, while 71 percent trusted Mykolaiv Oblast Governor Vitaly Kim, and Serhiy Prytula, a TV presenter, actor and volunteer helping the army, had a 55 percent approval rating.

Ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko had the highest disapproval rating: 78 percent did not trust her. Meanwhile, 76 percent distrusted pro-Russian politician Yuriy Boiko, and 71 percent did not trust ex-President Petro Poroshenko.

Only 23 percent of Ukrainians supported replacing Zelensky as president after the war, according to a June poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology.

Zelensky's approval rating rose significantly after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. His extraordinarily high popularity is attributed to his association with the war effort.

"The war consolidated the president's rating," Fesenko said. "It's the rating of resistance. The popularity of the institutions associated with resistance has risen – the Armed Forces, National Guard, and the president."

He said that the opposition is hoping for an election after the war because the population is expected to be more critical of Zelensky then.

Meanwhile, Zelensky's Servant of the People party is less popular than the president himself. According to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 69 percent of voters support replacing the majority in the Verkhovna Rada when the war is over.

For Zelensky, this could be an argument against holding elections in 2024, according to sources cited by RBC Ukraine.

But Fesenko believes there would likely be a re-branding: instead of the Servant of the People, there might be a Zelensky Bloc comprising several parties. Most Servant of the People MPs are unlikely to run in the new election, he added.

Much depends on whether Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the highly popular commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, would create his own party.

If Zaluzhnyi launches a party, it may win in the election, and the Servant of the People may be the runner-up, Fesenko said. But Zelensky's party will likely win if Zaluzhnyi doesn't run, he added.

"Zelensky's party may get an absolute majority," Fesenko said.

However, the ratings of Zelensky and his party may fall as war fatigue sets in. There is speculation that Zelensky's legitimacy may be eroded if there is no election for a lengthy period.

"People are realizing that the war won't be over soon," Fesenko said. "Critical sentiment is growing."

COUNTEROFFENSIVE, WAR, FIELD REPORT

Overcoming setbacks, NATO-trained brigade breaches Surovikin line in Zaporizhzhia Oblast

by Francis Farrell • September 26, 2023 • 14 min read



Editor's note: The soldiers featured in this article are identified by first name and callsign only for security reasons.

ZAPORIZHZHIA OBLAST – Even months before it started, just the idea of Ukraine's large-scale counteroffensive in 2023 carried on its shoulders a historic weight.

Having held back waves of brutal Russian ground attacks over winter, this was Kyiv's chance to not only regain the initiative but to put the war on a decisive trajectory towards Ukrainian victory, breaking the Russian military, liberating vast areas of its territories, and threatening Russia's presence in Crimea.

The months of anticipation over spring only raised the stakes. While Ukrainian brigades trained abroad and Western tanks slowly trickled in, Russia was digging formidable lines of defensive structures in the south, visible to the world on satellite imagery.

When the time finally came to move forward, much of this weight of expectation lay on the shoulders of just one brigade. The 47th Mechanized Brigade, held up as a progressive model of the Ukrainian army of the future, was to lead the push south of Orikhiv, heading straight for the key cities of Tokmak and Melitopol.

Formed from scratch a year ago, the brigade often known by the name "Magura," was prepared with the counteroffensive in mind; its soldiers, trained in NATO countries and equipped with superior new Western equipment, were to be the spearhead of the advance here.

"They invited people (to the brigade) who knew why they want to be here, for what, for whom, which goals," said Oleksandr "Hollywood," a Kyiv native who once worked in filmmaking but now serves in the 47th; "not just in a military sense of following orders, but on the level of liberating our country."

For three and a half months, the world's eyes have been on the handful of villages and the fields surrounding them south of Orikhiv. Of all the areas where Ukrainian forces have advanced, this one is the most consequential, and the best defended.

Since the counteroffensive was launched in June, the story of the Orikhiv axis has been the story of the 47th, with ups and downs, moments of immense pride and inevitable regret.

Looking at the map, progress has been painfully slow, fuelling an endless cycle of discussion in the media about if and when the counteroffensive can be judged to have failed.

The map alone doesn't in any way do justice to what Ukrainian forces have faced: dense minefields in front of multiple fortified defensive lines, all backed by massed Russian artillery fire and airpower.

After a long period of attritional fighting and plenty of criticism, the 47th along with other units finally made fresh advances.

Liberating the village of Robotyne in late August, Ukrainian forces have now reached and breached the main Russian line of defense, known as the Surovikin line after the former overall commander of Russia's war against Ukraine.

As the war races through its second autumn, the clock looks to be ticking on the counteroffensive and Ukraine's chances to claim success in this bloody, costly push.

In their bases near the front line, the Kyiv Independent spoke to soldiers of the 47th, reflecting on a tumultuous summer campaign, fighting at the tip of the spear, and the road ahead.

Into the deep end

Over 19 months of Russia's full-scale war, many of Ukraine's dozens of combat brigades have made a name for themselves through deeds on the battlefield, with some, like the Third Assault Brigade fighting near Bakhmut, taking it further to build a distinct identity and brand around their unit.

With the 47th Mechanized, it was the other way around: the brigade was built from scratch around its own unique brand, before ever seeing any combat.

The central architect of this new brigade was Valerii Markus, a 30-year-old sergeant in what was then the 47th Separate Rifle Battalion, who was invited in October 2022 by Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi to form the brigade together with battalion commander Ivan Shamalaha.

Leveraging his well-known personal brand as a young, progressive face of the Ukrainian military, Markus attracted a new wave of volunteer soldiers at a time when most who had wanted to fight had enlisted long before.

“When the brigade was first formed and I heard about it, I was interested straight away, by its culture, its modern approaches,” said 33-year-old assault soldier Vyacheslav "Arkush," to the Kyiv Independent.

“They had a public image as a place where you don't just fight in the classic sense, but do with your head, with ideals, with modern technology and people, intelligent people, entrepreneurs.”

“It wasn't about right or left ideology,” added Maksym, a sergeant in the same anti-air unit as Oleksandr. “It's just about good, capable, dignified people.”

The assault troops interviewed had undergone training in several different NATO countries, including Germany, Slovakia, and Latvia, where Vyacheslav trained over winter.

“The Latvians were great instructors,” he said, “they took us step by step, from basic awareness of what war is to using weapons, grenades, I really liked the program, it was always interesting.”

Other reviews of the NATO training were more mixed, backing up a documented tendency that the courses did not adequately prepare soldiers for Ukrainian trench warfare, without air superiority.

“What I didn't like about the training, is that the Americans have no idea what the war is like here,” said Oleksandr. “They give us exercises to climb to the top of a building, shoot down a helicopter with a Stinger, and abseil back down on ropes.”

“We told them, 'Are you out of your mind? Any buildings will be demolished by tanks and air-dropped bombs as soon as we enter.'”

Despite lacking combat experience and with serious shortcomings in the training, the 47th, equipped with Bradleys and Leopard 2 tanks, was assigned one of the most unenviable tasks of the war so far: a front-on attack in Zaporizhzhia Oblast, where Russian defensive lines were most concentrated.

It didn't go well at first. In what looked like a suicidal armored assault against the first minefields, Russian media quickly relished in grim drone footage of destroyed Leopards and Bradleys.

“Our problem was that we hadn't been shot up (didn't have combat experience), they threw us into battle, and it was hell,” said Oleksandr.

The lost armor only amounted to a company-sized attack, but Russia had won a major propaganda victory, made worse by the failure to take significant territory in the weeks following.

Ukraine watched closely as the early setbacks mounted, with horrifying drone footage of soldiers and equipment from the brigade blown up by landmines spreading quickly online.

With scrutiny building, Markus spoke out on social media, publicly accusing the 47th's officer corps of incompetence, and adding that the senior command was guilty of "not understanding of the importance of the morale of soldiers."

The command hit back, with Sergeant-Major Rustam Mustafaiev accusing Markus of "trying to promote himself on the back of other people's blood and other people's work." Markus resigned from his post on June 11, less than a week into the counteroffensive.

June and July passed without much more movement on the axis. Reflecting on their mistakes, the 47th Brigade spent the time preparing better plans while continuing to attrit Russian forces from afar.

"I arrived right when we started to make conclusions, analyze what had gone wrong, and start to change things," said Vyacheslav, who began his service after the initial attacks. "By then we had gained a second wind."

By mid-August, the brigade was on the move again, and this time, began making real gains. With three months of hard fighting under its belt, the unit is now no longer the green outfit that had arrived on the battlefield in June.

"Now, our brigade has been shot up plenty," Oleksandr noted with a dry laugh.

Pounding through

Burnt-out buildings and piles of rubble on every corner mark Orikhiv as another Ukrainian city in which — bar some soldiers ducking in and out of basements and the odd oblivious civilian roaming the streets — no human life remains.

Since Ukraine launched its counteroffensive push here in June, Russia has tasked itself with the systematic destruction of the city with a new favorite weapon: guided air-dropped bombs.

Under clear afternoon skies, Russia's liberal use of the bombs is on proud display. On the horizon to the east, miniature mushroom clouds rise from successive strikes on Ukrainian positions near the village of Verbove. Inside Orikhiv, another bomb lands behind some houses just over a kilometer away, while fire rages from the ruins of a house recently flattened by yet another.

Just 10 kilometers away, in some of the heaviest fighting of the summer campaign, assault units of the 47th inch forward, storming Russian trenches one by one before being rotated out by regular infantry.

The capture of Robotyne in late August, the first and so far only village liberated on the Orikhiv axis, provided Ukraine with new hope of success after a long period without advances. When the time came to take the village itself, it didn't take long.

"At first, our task was to work to capture the positions just outside Robotyne," said Vyacheslav "but when we met the commander to make the plan of attack, he said that plans have changed, because our guys had already advanced into the village itself, so we will move into the first houses."

“On our way in, we got a call from the battalion commander, he said that we've gone further so the plans changed again, and in the space of a day, we moved forward more than two kilometers.”

Beyond Robotyne, Ukrainian forces have now come up against a new obstacle: the Surovikin line itself, the backbone of a vast network of defenses built by Russia over winter and spring across the entire southern front line.

Until now, the line was seen only from above, but according to the assault troops, the most impressive part of it lies dug deep into the Ukrainian earth.

“They are usually 2-3 meters deep, reinforced with wood and earth,” said assault commander Yaroslav “Ram,” 44. “From the drones you only see a couple of trenches, but you can't see what is under it.”

“Until you go in there on your own two feet and see with your own eyes, everything looks the same from the sky.”

As difficult as it is to assault Russia's underground labyrinths, the fight above ground is no less perilous.

As an anti-air unit, Oleksandr's squad is normally equipped with shoulder-launched Igla anti-air missiles, but according to them, this old, heavy weapon is unreliable, bordering on useless.

For today's war, their gun of choice fires no projectile: a lightweight, Lithuanian-made anti-drone device that jams enemy drones.

Both sides have dramatically scaled up the production of FPV (first-person view) drones in recent months, while also refining their use on the battlefield.

According to Maksym, while the artillery duel in the area is evenly matched, Russia has the edge in FPV drones, often using them to strike not only vehicles and artillery, but small groups of individual soldiers.

The consequences of this new face of war is felt keenly by soldiers more used to the random lottery of indirect artillery fire.

“Our enemy has learned and adapted,” he said.

“Now, having already started the artillery bombardment, they fly out with FPV drones because they know that we won't have our heads up with the anti-drone gun. And with these drones they try to fly right into our dugout.”

Lifesaving ‘taxis’

Further along the treeline in the rear where the assault troops are staying, two bulky green machines are also resting between the bushes.

Their shape immediately gives away that they aren't Soviet-era vehicles. These are the M2 Bradleys themselves, a mainstay of the U.S. Army since the 1980s and now entrusted to the 47th Brigade.

Their rear doors are open, showing a roomy interior that comfortably fits six soldiers sitting opposite each other.

“You can fit 10 in there easily if you really need to,” quipped 38-year-old Bradley driver Oleksandr “Kipish,” looking fondly at his vehicle.

A truck driver before the full-scale war, Oleksandr spent six weeks in Germany specifically to train on the Bradley.

On the battlefield, the vehicles are prized for their survivability, with armor technology far superior than their Soviet counterparts. All the assault troops here have their own Bradley stories, of the vehicles evacuating them from missions, driving over multiple mines without the passengers even noticing.

This particular vehicle had visible scars from what Oleksandr said was a near-direct 120mm mortar hit.

“Take a Soviet BMP, for example,” he said, “if you had a hit in the back like here, nobody inside would be alive.”

“They are great machines, they save people every day.”

Early on in the counteroffensive, the 47th’s early setbacks were proudly paraded by Russian state media and Telegram channels, with one drone capture showing eight disabled Bradleys and a Leopard tank side by side in a row.

“Everyone survived that attack,” claimed Yaroslav, “and every last vehicle was successfully retrieved.”

As good as they are at saving lives, the density of Russian fires combined with real-time drone reconnaissance in the area makes using them a risky act.

“We mostly work like a taxi, we bring the guys in and bring them out,” said Oleksandr.

“We don’t use it on assaults much, only if we get a special order, it’s dangerous. We actually had an assault yesterday with two Bradleys, and both were hit with anti-tank fire. Everyone survived.”

History-makers

On Sept. 23, Oleksandr Tarnavskiy, commander of Ukrainian operations on the southern front line, reported that Ukrainian troops had broken through the line a second time, further east near Verbove.

It’s clear by now, though, that a “breakthrough” here will be nothing like the breakthrough achieved in Kharkiv Oblast a year ago, when Ukrainian forces routed Russian lines and liberated swathes of territory in a matter of days.

Experts agree that the Surovikin line was built with a typical defense in depth strategy in mind, designed to inflict maximum attrition to the attacker, while preventing a tactical breach from turning into a strategic breakthrough like what Ukraine achieved in Kharkiv Oblast.

Though the Russian command’s management of its defensive lines has been criticized as going against Surovikin’s original strategy, the Ukrainians tasked with assaulting them speak with respect for the way Russian troops have dug in.

"I'll say it now," Oleksandr said, "the Russians are the best in the world when it comes to building fortified defenses; minefields, strongholds, they know this very well."

Having passed the minefields and made a successful breach, Yaroslav is hopeful that more is yet to come.

"At the moment, we have created the biggest breach here," he said. "We have gotten past the toughest part, now the job is to widen the breach. It should be a lot easier going forward, thank God there aren't as many mines."

Even if the Surovikin line is completely broken through, the road ahead is long.

The strategic city of Tokmak, widely understood to be the main goal of this axis of the counteroffensive, is still another 20 kilometers south of the Robotyne bulge, and is itself defended by its own ring of Russian fortifications.

Reaching the city before winter looks increasingly unlikely, but the lessons of the offensive's first weeks laid bare the price of haste.

"We just can't do it any faster," said Yaroslav. "We've simply been exhausted a fair bit by three and a half months of fighting, sometimes when you take a break you just sleep for three days straight."

When asked about the looming winter, soldiers acknowledged that the fighting will assume a different character, but that it doesn't mean that the Ukrainian initiative must stop dead in its tracks.

Setbacks suffered and lessons learned aside, soldiers of the 47th Brigade remain acutely aware of the fateful character of their mission.

"We were told that either we will go down in history, or we will be forgotten, because we are here at the tip of the spear, we were to be sent into one of the toughest fights that this war could possibly offer," said Yaroslav.

"And that's how it turned out."

TECHNOLOGY, WAR ANALYSIS

Russia is covering Ukraine with landmines. Clearing them will be extremely difficult

by Rich Wordsworth • September 29, 2023 • 7 min read



In March 2022 right after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, a cell phone video apparently taken by a Russian soldier captured two "Zemledeliye" mobile mine-laying systems thought to be stationed in Kharkiv Oblast.

Positioned against a drab backdrop of what was once farmland, the "Zemledeliyes," a word that means "agriculture" in Russian, could, on a very gloomy day, be mistaken for farm equipment. And indeed, these machines have been brought to "sow" Ukrainian fields.

A second into the video, the mine-laying systems begin firing. They are quickly engulfed in smoke, the launcher swallowed up so completely that even its silhouette vanishes. Deep in the billowing cloud, flashes of white light keep time with the ignition of each 122mm rocket as it screeches skywards. The landscape is engulfed as the launchers settle into their keening, mechanical rhythm.

In one minute and 13 seconds, all 100 rockets have been spent. Each rocket, fully loaded, carries 312 PFM-1 “Butterfly” anti-personnel mines. The mines are green or olive in color, and recognizable by their distinctive shape, similar to the “propellor” seeds that spiral down from maple, ash, and sycamore trees.

They are exceptionally small and light: just five inches end-to-end with plastic shells and only 40 grams of explosive per “Butterfly.”

Somewhere between five and fifteen kilometers away — the launchers’ optimal range — around 31,200 landmines are spinning to Earth. In less than a minute, the two mine launchers have knitted together a minefield in the sky and dropped it over Ukrainian soil like a net.

Forty grams of explosive in a light plastic casing is not usually enough to kill but is enough to take a foot or a hand from a fighter. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, they became better known for their injurious effects on the curious children who would find them while out playing.

In December 2022, Human Rights Watch (HRW) confirmed that, with eerie symmetry, Russia was using both 13 models of anti-personnel and 13 models of anti-vehicle landmines in its invasion of Ukraine, and that approximately 30% of the country — an area twice the size of Austria — had been “contaminated” with mines.

Speaking to the Kyiv Independent nine months later, HRW Associate Director, Mark Hiznay, explained the near impossibility of keeping that figure current.

“We are dealing with estimates that are being drawn up in an emergency situation where hostilities are ongoing,” Hiznay explains.

Put simply: It’s hard to count landmines through a storm of bullets and shell fragments.

What is known is that Russia, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, had a stockpile of 26 million mines — the largest in the world, according to various estimates. With one vehicle able to place 15,600 mines in a single salvo, what percentage of that number now sits buried in Ukrainian soil, gathering silt in its lakes, or floating down its rivers is impossible to assess.

Jon Cunliffe, of the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), an international humanitarian organization that not only provides modern demining technology and training to afflicted countries but also extensive education programs for their citizens via in-person training sessions and through national media, agrees, adding:

“What is the point of clearing somewhere, only to have to go back and re-clear that area again later?”

An evolving threat

Mine clearance, according to both Cunliffe and his MAG colleague, Jon Brown, is an extremely slow, painstaking process. As MAG is a humanitarian organization, it does not operate in active combat zones, but military deminers have long been priority targets for troops protecting minefields.

Since the First World War, landmines have been frequently booby-trapped and special bounties were offered for the killing of improvised explosive device (IED) specialists in Iraq and Afghanistan.

However, while a team of specialists might have suffered casualties while clearing a minefield in the Second World War, that field — or at least, a path through it — was clear.

“Traditionally, the World War II mentality was that all of these mines are going to be buried by hand, in front of you, facing targets that are in close proximity. You know the targets are going to be armored vehicles so you can start putting the “dinner plates” (Hiznay’s term for the heavy, old-fashioned mines of the same shape) out in patterns that either deter someone from entering or encourage them to enter a piece of terrain,” Hiznay explains.

“(Since) the Cold War, that (ability) to place mines by rockets or by aircraft... means you’re able to now do that from 20 kilometers away.”

Further complicating humanitarian mine-clearing efforts is the sheer variety of mines that Russia is using.

There is more than just the PFM-1 “Butterfly,” historically referred to as the “green parrot.”

The OZM-72 — a “bounding” mine usually triggered by pressure or a tripwire that jumps (or “bounds”) a meter into the air before exploding — looks like a paint can attached to a radio antenna.

The POM-3 — probably Russia’s rarest and most expensive anti-personnel mine — modestly hides its seismic sensor and bounding explosive charge inside what could be a misplaced Thermos flask.

Simply put: landmines don’t look like landmines anymore.

“Most people (if asked to) draw a landmine, they will draw that classic landmine shape: round with a bit raised in the center,” says Cunliffe. “They will not draw the equivalent of a Butterfly. And so that is why there is such an effort in terms of explosive risk education going on.”

To date, 164 countries are signatories to the 1997 “Ottawa Treaty” (more popularly known as “the Mine Ban Treaty,”) which bans the use, production, and stockpiling of anti-personnel mines, primarily due to their lasting threat to “defenseless civilians and especially children.”

But Russia is not a signatory of the treaty. While the vast majority of countries have spent years disassembling and destroying their stockpiles of landmines, Russia’s military-industrial complex has been pouring money into R&D programs to create ever-deadlier mines that citizens of Ukraine — which signed on February 24th, 1999 — would have no earthly reason to recognize, let alone proportionately fear.

Fighting back: From dogs to drones

In Ukraine, two charities in particular - MAG and the HALO Trust - are working to educate, train, and provide for civilians and new Ukrainian demining teams. MAG provides in-person humanitarian demining training, as well as public information over radio, television, and signs posted in train cars.

But MAG can also help to provide high-tech equipment, from Hurt-Locker-style bomb suits to the so-called “MineWolf” — somewhere between a tank and a combine harvester, which can be remotely piloted through minefields, deliberately triggering devices with its thresher.

Animals with keen senses of smell also have potential parts to play — in detection, at least.

“They’ve tried it with rats, which work well in certain contexts,” says Cunliffe. “They’ve even tried training bees, to see if the bees could smell mines.

“But dogs are pretty much the standard in terms of what we’d like to see inside Ukraine.”

The Ukrainian government has said it would like to see 10,000 dog teams working in the country in 2024, consisting of one animal and one handler, according to Cunliffe.

Dogs — particularly German Shepherds, Labradors, and Belgian Malinois — were used extensively in Afghanistan as key parts of IED disposal teams. But they are expensive, and the training is time-consuming.

At the other end of the technological spectrum are Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), also known as drones.

“The use of UAVs in survey work in particular is increasing, (as are) the different types of cameras that you can use on the drones,” Cunliffe says.

“I was watching images (in August) from thermal cameras — because in Ukraine it’s been so hot, which means that when the temperatures go down, if the mines are just under the surface you can get a very, very good thermal image of the whole minefield.”

But while charities like MAG provide equipment, education, and training — and while Ukrainians step up to reclaim their land — the danger is that the West simply doesn’t grasp the severity of the threat.

Both Hiznay’s “World War II mindset” and the specter of the IED from its most recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have obscured the facts that landmines don’t “look like” landmines anymore and are spread out in huge numbers across vast swaths of territories.

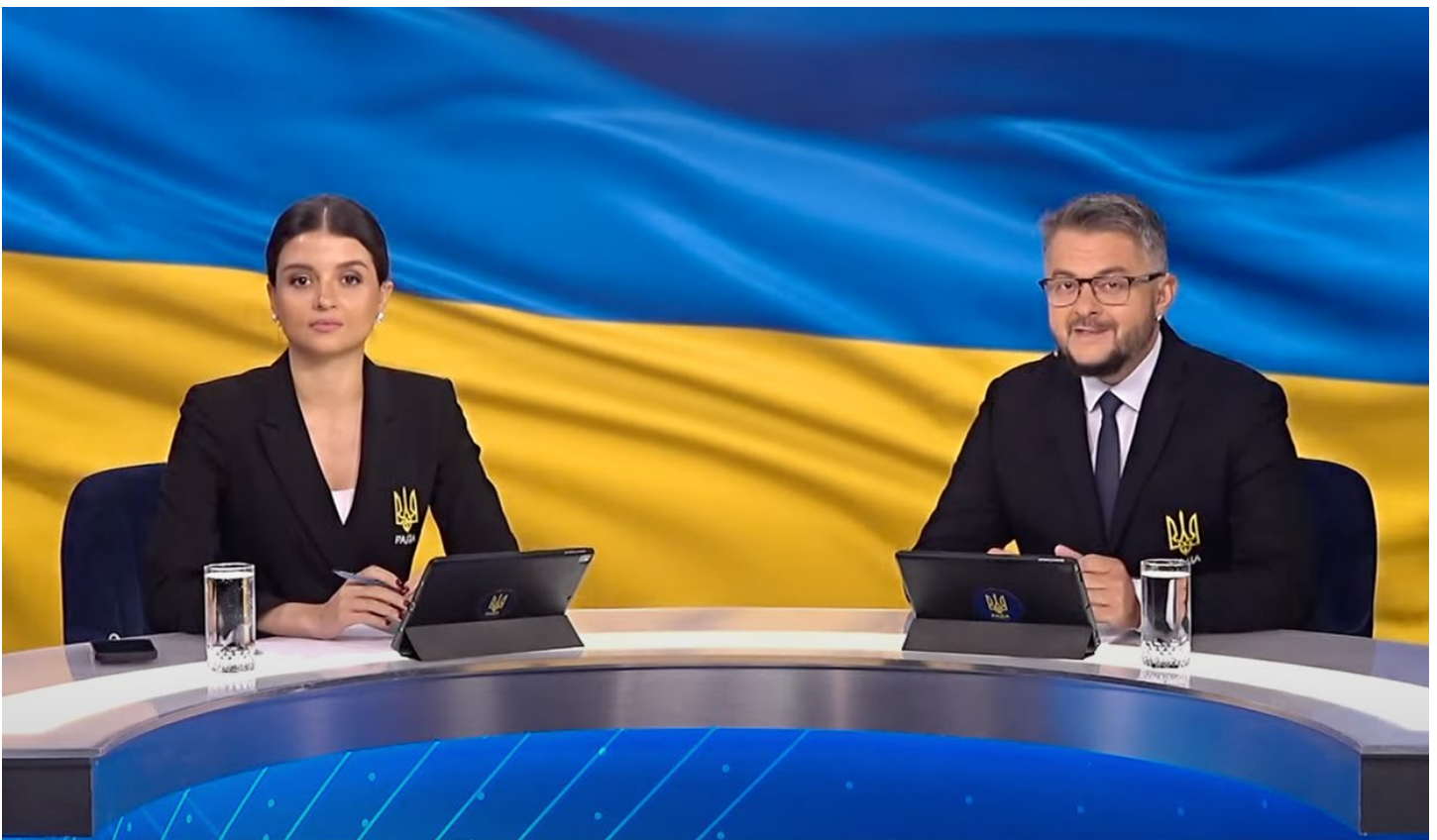
The longer the war continues, the longer the Russian presence will haunt Ukraine after the shooting stops.

Hidden in its fields, underneath the snow, in the ruins of the cities the West has pledged to rebuild, the mines will lie in wait for Ukrainians returning home, and for the generations who follow them.

WAR, MEDIA

A power grab or a weapon against Russia? Ukraine's 'TV marathon' explained

by Anastasiia Lapatina • September 27, 2023 • 8 min read



One of the war-time projects most treasured by the Ukrainian government is Ukraine's TV marathon – a united news programming produced by the country's biggest media outlets altogether, which broadcasts 24/7 on all major Ukrainian TV channels.

Branded as "United News," the TV marathon was launched at the very beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion to combat Russian disinformation and keep Ukraine's morale high.

"Telemarathon is a weapon. It's a united information space. It works for Ukraine and against Russia," President Volodymyr Zelensky said in January, 11 months after it was introduced.

The president and his team have made it clear they consider the TV marathon a success and have no plans of shutting it down. However, the marathon's quality and independence have been questioned both by observers and the public.

Ratings have been decreasing, too. A study done by Ukrainian Institute for the Future in August of 2023 found that 37% of Ukrainians occasionally watch the state-led TV marathon. In November 2021, three months before the full-scale war, TV was the primary source of information for 57% of Ukrainians.

"Involuntarily, there arises an assumption that Zelensky's team simply wants to maintain control (over television) as long as possible for purely political reasons," media expert Otar Dovzhenko told the Kyiv Independent.

"If this (control) was the purpose of creating and continuing the marathon, then it is mega-successful — there are almost no other sources of news in the television space, there is no pluralism of opinions, and, accordingly, Zelensky's competitors will have no chance," said Dovzhenko, who until recently was a contributing editor at the media monitoring organization Detector Media.

How it works

The idea of a TV marathon was first brought up on Feb. 16, 2022, as Western intelligence agencies were sounding the alarm that an all-out war was coming. A few days before, U.S. President Joe Biden told allies that Feb. 16 was predicted to be the invasion day, according to Politico.

In an attempt to keep panic at bay and morale high, Zelensky officially proclaimed Feb. 16 as the "Day of Unity." In turn, Ukraine's Minister of Culture and Information Policy, Oleksandr Tkachenko, announced "an interesting telemarathon... (when) all the country's TV channels will basically stream one news program."

For seven hours a day on Feb. 16, various speakers, including government representatives, spoke "on the topic of unity."

On Feb. 24, when Russia launched its full-scale war against Ukraine, everything was set to merge all TV broadcasting into one.

Ukrainian biggest, oligarch-owned media companies – 1+1 Media Group, StarLight Media, and Inter Media Group, which run 24 TV channels altogether – came together to create "Yedyni Novyny" ("United News"), a TV marathon with multiple-hour slots for each media company to fill, streamed on all Ukraine's most watched TV channels.

As of August, the marathon includes nine TV channels – previously the biggest and most-watched ones in the country.

Eventually, Media Group Ukraine also joined the marathon. A newly created channel, We – Ukraine, joined in November. Rada TV channel, the official channel of the Ukrainian government, also contributes to the TV marathon.

Besides the TV marathon, there is a similar Russian-language initiative called "FreeDom," for which the government utilized the state-owned foreign-language TV operation.

The Russian language channel's goal is said to be battling Russian propaganda by streaming on Russia-occupied territories and inside Russia itself. There's no independent confirmation that the channel is watched in the occupied territories or Russia.

Although each channel works independently to fill its allocated six-hour time slot, there are meetings between key managers to coordinate general themes.

The main idea behind the joint broadcast was to stream a single version of the news, based on official government sources, 24-hours-a-day, to curb the spread of Russian disinformation.

Censorship allegations

In March 2022, Zelensky signed off on the decision of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, which said "the implementation of a unified information policy" was an issue of national security.

In that decision, the council called the TV marathon "a platform of strategic communications" implemented to combat Russian disinformation.

However, criticisms regarding censorship quickly arose.

Days after the decision was published, Ukrainian human rights activists and lawyers published an open letter to the government, calling the council's decision "disproportionate."

"Pluralism does not harm during the war," said the signees, including the Kharkiv Human Rights Group, the Ukrainian Helsinki Union for Human Rights, and the Center for Civil Liberties.

"It seems fundamentally important to preserve it because in peacetime, it is the basis of developed societies, and it is simply impossible to overestimate (pluralism's) benefits," the address said.

The address also asked the government "to refrain from forcing channels to broadcast the TV marathon... from significant restrictions on freedom of speech."

Soon, channels linked to former President Petro Poroshenko – 5 Channel, Priamyi, and Espresso – were excluded from the broadcast.

5 Channel and Priamyi used to be owned by Poroshenko himself until he said he transferred the rights to the channel's employees in November 2021. While Poroshenko tried to legally disassociate himself from these channels, they continued to favor the former president.

It's unclear why the three channels were excluded from the marathon. Former minister Tkachenko told RFE/RL that "a compromise wasn't reached."

In April 2022, the three channels were disconnected from digital broadcasting, supposedly following the Defense Council's order to only allow the airing of channels that take part in the TV marathon.

The language of the council's decision was vague, only saying that the question of national security will be implemented "by unifying all national TV channels."

Many, including the excluded channels' managers, say that nothing in the decree signed by Zelensky allows disconnecting independent media outlets. Still, the three channels have continued to broadcast through satellite and online.

The content of the marathon is another issue.

"There is no censorship as such in the marathon, but there is a certain political dictate, hints, wishes from the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy and the President's Office," said Dovzhenko. "Sometimes these wishes are explained by considerations of security and defense, sometimes they are not explained by anything."

"This is by no means strict control... (but) representatives of opposition factions are given much less chance to express themselves on air during the TV marathon, and they almost never have the opportunity to debate directly with the government."

Bad quality?

According to the Detector Media, a Ukrainian media watchdog, 70% of respondents think there is a lack of different points of view in the TV marathon, and they look for information elsewhere.

The outlet, which has been monitoring the quality of the TV marathon, says its overall quality has been declining month-to-month.

Detector Media identified over 8,000 breaches of journalism standards in the randomly analyzed marathon programs over the first quarter of 2023. Over 4,700 of those were a failure to separate facts from opinions, and more than 3,000 – a lack of reliability and accuracy of presented information.

"The marathon definitely doesn't get us closer to EU membership," lawmaker Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, who leads the parliamentary committee on EU integration, told the Kyiv Independent.

Klympush-Tsintsadze represents Poroshenko's European Solidarity party, which is typically very critical of the government.

As a member of Poroshenko's party, she criticized the disconnection of Poroshenko-linked channels, calling it illegal. A full-scale war "can justify military censorship but not political censorship," Klympush-Tsintsadze added.

She also referenced Detector Media's reports which showed that Zelensky's party members get more air time and receive less criticism.

For example, from January to March 2023, 31 lawmakers from Zelenky's ruling party, Servant of the People, spoke in the marathon. Only 17 lawmakers from all other parties got air time. And from Poroshenko's party, there were only two.

The Servant of the People party holds 237 seats out of 450 in parliament.

According to Detector Media, all channels are also guilty of political PR, with journalists continuously promoting Zelensky, his administration, and his party mainly through segments that are not newsworthy. Channels quote social media posts of pro-government politicians or otherwise mention them, according to the report.

The government's channel Rada has led with at least 143 such violations since October 2022.

Pro-Russian voices

Another criticism against the TV marathon concerns the fact that it includes journalists and hosts who used to work for TV channels that were owned by pro-Russian politicians, and some of them were the faces of Russian propaganda in Ukraine.

TV channels NewsOne, ZIK, and 112 Channel were owned by oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was charged with treason in Ukraine before being swapped in a prisoner exchange with Russia.

Ukraine shut down the three channels in early 2021, but some of the journalists who worked there resurfaced as hosts of the TV marathon in 2022.

"The information policy of these (Medvedchuk's) channels was based on the promotion of Kremlin narratives about the U.S. governing Ukraine, the 'discrimination' of the Russian language, the 'civil war' in Donbas, the legality of Russia's annexation of Crimea, and so on," said an open statement, signed by hundreds of journalists and media organizations, calling to remove these journalists from the marathon.

"For years, these journalists spread pro-Russian narratives inside Ukraine," Anastasiia Bakulina, CEO of online media Svidomi, which drafted the statement, told the Kyiv Independent.

She says these journalists, most likely, weren't driven by the pro-Russian channels' values and just worked there for the good money they paid, but added that a better mechanism to vet anchors is needed.

The government so far ignored these concerns.

HUMAN STORY, CHILDREN DEPORTATION, WAR CRIMES, WAR

Abducting the future: How Ukrainian parents fight to rescue their children from Russia

by Daria Shulzhenko • September 29, 2023 • 11 min read



One thought helped Yevhen Mezhevyi overcome the ordeal of Russian captivity – the thought of his three young children.

Single father Mezhevyi, 40, was captured by Russian troops at a checkpoint when he and his children were fleeing their war-torn hometown of Mariupol last spring.

For 45 days, Mezhevyi was kept at the notorious Olenivka prison camp in the Russian-occupied part of Ukraine's Donetsk Oblast. There, he endured beatings, was forced to do hard labor, was deprived of food and sleep, and was locked up in a tiny dilapidated cell with dozens of other Ukrainians.

And for all of that month-and-a-half, Mezhevyi had no idea where his children were.

"I communicated with them in my thoughts. I had nothing else left," Mezhevyi told the Kyiv Independent.

But the torment Russia had inflicted on Mezhevyi did not end on his release from captivity in late May – it had only just begun, as shortly after he was freed he learned that the Russians had abducted his children.

"Your children flew to Moscow today," Mezhevyi was told at a Russian-controlled police department in the occupied city of Donetsk.

"They went to a camp there."

But this was no holiday: Mezhevyi's children had become victims of one of the most appalling consequences of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine – the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Since last February, nearly 20,000 Ukrainian children have been identified as abducted from Russian-occupied territories and sent to other Russian-controlled areas of Ukraine, or to Russia itself, according to a Ukrainian national database on child abductees. Russia is quite literally abducting Ukraine's future.

Russia often separates children from their parents at checkpoints, or at its sinister filtration camps, where it attempts to discover the true loyalties of Ukrainian citizens.

Sending the children to "recreational camps" in Russia or in territories under its control is just one of the ways Russia carries out the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children.

The Ukrainian authorities and charities involved in returning these children say that their mission is exceptionally challenging. The figures prove that: As of Sept. 20, Ukraine had returned only 386 of the abducted children.

Mezhevyi's children are some of the lucky ones.

According to an investigation by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Mezhevyi and his children are now "key witnesses" in the International Criminal Court's case against Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova.

In March, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Lvova-Belova and Putin for overseeing the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia – an alleged war crime and act of genocide

Five days to rescue

For the first two months of Russia's all-out war, Mezhevyi struggled just to keep himself and his three children – Matvii, 13, Sviatoslava, 10, and Oleksandra, 7 – alive in the heavily bombed city of Mariupol, which was then being besieged by Russian troops.

They spent weeks in the bomb shelter of a local hospital, with dozens of other residents.

"We would all gather together in the evenings, singing, playing cards, and telling stories..." Mezhevyi recalled.

But one day in early April, Russian troops disrupted the "routine" they had established.

"They came and said: 'You have half an hour to collect your belongings, because a Chechen unit is coming, and there will be a 'sweep,'" the Russian troops said.

Like many, Mezhevyi's family followed the order and were soon taken to a Russian checkpoint in the nearby village of Vynohradne, on the eastern outskirts of the city.

"You're one of our clients," a Russian soldier told Mezhevyi after seeing his registration at a military unit in Ukraine's western Lviv Oblast. Mezhevyi served there under contract as a mechanic from 2016 to 2019.

Russian soldiers told Mezhevyi he needed to find someone to stay with the kids while he had to go to some place to "provide an explanation."

When asked how long it would take, the Russian troops told Mezhevyi it could take "two hours or seven years." They were not joking, he said.

And so his ordeal of Russian captivity began.

Mezhevyi endured several interrogations at detention facilities across occupied Donetsk Oblast before being taken to his final destination – the Olenivka prison camp.

He said detainees are heavily beaten on their arrival at the prison. Over 50 prisoners, including Mezhevyi, were held in a cell designed for six. Soon, 29 of them were transferred to one made for just two people.

"It was beyond horrible," he said, adding that it was hardly possible even to stand.

"I saw people becoming insane and start hurting themselves there."

Mezhevyi's "mental connection" with his kids and thoughts about them helped him stay sane and survive the nightmare, he said.

While he was in captivity, his children were first kept at a filtration camp in the village of Bezimenne, about 30 kilometers east of Mariupol, on the Azov Sea coast. Then they were taken to a hospital in Russian-occupied Novoazovsk, another 10 kilometers to the east. Mezhevyi said that after that they spent a day at an orphanage in Donetsk, after which they were taken to the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don. Then they were put on a plane to Moscow.

Only on his release from captivity did Mezhevyi learn that his children had ended up at the "Polyana" camp in Moscow Oblast, nearly 1,000 kilometers from their home in Mariupol.

After a frantic search, he found the phone number of the person overseeing his children at the camp. He calmed down a little after hearing their voices on the other end of the line.

According to Mezhevyi, Lvova-Belova had visited the camp herself. As Russian officials often do, she brought gifts and some fast food to the children there, trying to "bribe" them, Mezhevyi said.

"When you give (fast food) to children brought from a war zone, they will be happy. So they were trying to show how (bad) Ukraine was and how awesome Russia was," said Mezhevyi.

Since Mezhevyi had no money for the expensive trip to Russia to rescue his children, he decided to stay at a friend's and get a job to save up for the journey. But his plans were cut short one day in mid-June when his oldest, Matvii, called.

Russian social workers had told the kids that since their time at the camp was ending and they could not be returned to Donetsk Oblast due to the fighting there, they would be taken to an orphanage or to a foster family in Russia.

"(Matvii) told me I had five days to rescue them," Mezhevyi said.

So he had to act fast. Although he still didn't have enough money, Mezhevyi found some Russian volunteers who agreed to help, and who paid for the trip.

Ukrainian volunteers usually help return children from Russian captivity. They say that such rescue missions are difficult and do not disclose their details.

The camp, he said, looked more like a "custodial facility" than a recreational site for children, with "big fences everywhere, serious security, and an electronic access system."

He was questioned there and had to write out numerous declarations before he was allowed to see his children.

"While I was filling out another declaration, I heard my girls' voices. I dropped everything and ran to them. We hugged and kissed, and then Matvii joined us," he recalled.

Reunited, they escaped Russia and found a new home in the Latvian capital, Riga. They do not plan to return to Ukraine until the war is over.

Russia has already brought too much pain to Mezhevyi's family, and they don't want to experience such a nightmare ever again, they said.

A child made a hostage

Almost all of Olha Usyk's family gathered at the train station in Balakliia, Kharkiv Oblast, on March 26 this year.

Someone very dear to them was on the train arriving from Kyiv. Someone Usyk wanted to see so badly that tears started to run down her face as soon as she saw the train approaching the station.

Usyk knew that just in a few minutes, she would hug her 14-year-old son Bohdan for the first time in seven months.

"He got out (of the train), looking a lot thinner and taller, more mature," Usyk says. "He had changed a lot," she adds. "I barely recognized him."

The previous summer, her son had been taken to a recreational camp in the remote Russian city of Gelendzhik, in the south of Russia, on the Black Sea coast. At that time Balakliia – a town in southeastern Kharkiv Oblast with a pre-war population of nearly 27,000 – had yet to be liberated by Ukrainian forces.

Usyk says the Russian occupation hit the people of Balakliia hard: There were torture chambers where at least 40 people were held captive at the same time, according to the police. Usyk says that Russian attacks targeted the city constantly, and intensified in summer.

"We planted vegetables amid the shelling," she recalls.

While her youngest five-year-old daughter did not understand what was happening and remained relatively calm, her oldest, Bohdan, was under severe stress.

"He stopped sleeping and didn't eat much. At night, when there were explosions, he would jump out of bed and run about aimlessly," Usyk says. "He was beyond scared."

Seeing that some of her fellow citizens had agreed to send their children to Russian camps and recreational facilities, she also thought this might be the right thing for Bohdan.

Little did she know that her desire to save and protect Bohdan from witnessing the attacks would turn into another nightmare – for both of them.

"I thought that (for Russia) children would not be a bargaining chip, and that they would return him," Usyk says.

Usyk says Bohdan was among the 25 kids deported from Balakliia to the "Medvezhonok" camp in Russia's Krasnodar Krai region in late August. She also says Russians promised to return them after 21 days.

They did not keep their promise.

Instead, Bohdan was kept in Russia for about seven months.

After Ukraine regained control over Balakliia in September and 21 days had passed, Usyk reached out to the person overseeing Ukrainian children in the Russian-controlled camp.

In response, the person told her "there had been no orders to return the children" and that parents could either try to go to Russia themselves or "wait until Russian troops return to Kharkiv Oblast."

Usyk knew her son wanted to return home badly, but she didn't have enough savings for the trip to bring him home.

Bohdan was held in a number of facilities across Russia's southwestern Krasnodar Krai region during the time he was in the country: From the camp in Gelendzhik, he was transferred to one in Anapa, further to the northwest on the Black Sea Coast, and then to the city of Yeysk, on the Azov Sea coast, where he stayed until March. After that, he was taken to Voronezh in central Russia.

Usyk says her son was lucky not to be "brainwashed with Russian propaganda messages" in the camps. She assumes that was because he was taken care of there by some Ukrainians.

Unlike other children she had heard of, she says Bohdan wasn't punished or threatened there.

According to Usyk, the Russian local authorities often visited the deported Ukrainian children, bringing them gifts, including smartphones and clothes.

Usyk says she also heard that three Ukrainian orphans from Kharkiv Oblast had been adopted by families in the Chechen Republic.

Although they had communicated often, and she knew where her son was and how he was doing, she was heartbroken every time she heard his voice – she could hear how badly Bohdan wanted to come home, and how he missed her and his loved ones.

By February, Usyk had saved enough money for the trip to Russia. She traveled hundreds of kilometers to the Russian border, only to hear that she was not allowed to enter the country.

"I was crying hysterically there, but they just kicked me out," she says.

Bohdan was devastated and speechless when he found out his mother could not make it: "He couldn't talk and called me only the next day," Usyk says.

"It was very hard."

But eventually a way to bring Bohdan home was found. The Ukrainian "SOS Children's Villages" charity, which works with the Ministry for the Reintegration of Occupied Territories to bring back deported Ukrainian children, put Usyk in contact with another woman whose child had also been abducted by the Russians.

She managed to get all the paperwork done so that this woman could bring Bohdan home from Russia instead of her.

Finally, in late March, Bohdan was brought home.

Usyk describes the months she spent without her son as the toughest in her life. She missed Bohdan a lot, and he missed her too.

"I was cursing myself for that... No one thought that (the children) wouldn't be returned (by the Russians). I didn't think children would be made hostages in this situation," Usyk says.

"It shouldn't be like that."

"As we can see now, Russia follows no laws."

About the Kyiv Independent

The Kyiv Independent is Ukraine's award-winning English-language media outlet that provides trusted, on-the-ground information on Russia's war against Ukraine.

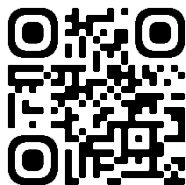
The Kyiv Independent was founded in November 2021 by a group of journalists who were fired from their newspaper by a local oligarch for defending their editorial independence. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February, the Kyiv Independent was a young media startup with very little resources. Yet within days of the start of Russia's war, it became the voice of Ukraine around the world, gaining millions of followers across various platforms. It has the biggest Twitter following among Ukrainian media outlets, by far. The Kyiv Independent continues to cover the war and provide locally-sourced news from Ukraine and the wider region.

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