

Thresholds of Survival

The Resistance in Occupied Ukraine

By Jade McGlynn

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Russia has imposed a maximalist occupation model in Ukraine: coercive “legal” control, abduction of dissenting voices, economic collapse, and systematic efforts to erase Ukrainian identity.
- The occupation relies on physical coercion (including the abduction of 15,250 civilians) and digital censorship: internet traffic is routed through FSB-monitored nodes, biometric SIM registration has reduced anonymity, and the Max “super-app” functions as a Russian surveillance systems.
- Despite extreme repression, the occupied territories are not subdued. Resistance persists as a low-level insurrection, primarily through clandestine human intelligence (HUMINT), sabotage, and disruption, optimized for survivability, trust, and compartmentation.
- There are daily acts of violent resistance against the occupation, the true scale of which is underestimated. Local estimates suggest that only about 20 percent of resistance acts become public, meaning observable incidents represent only a fraction of total activity.
- Western resistance doctrine is outdated for total-surveillance occupation environments. Sustained observation and learning from realities behind enemy lines is urgently required to update NATO resistance doctrine.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The environment in the Russian occupied territories of Ukraine hardened sharply from 2024 to 2025, leaving minimal space for public dissent but fueling private forms of insurrection. Russia’s system fuses coercion and performative bureaucracy into intimidation rather than governance. “Passportization” binds access to healthcare, property, and employment to submission, coercing residents to accept Russian documents, leave, or be treated as “foreigners” in their own homes.

Repression is reinforced by surveillance and information control. The occupation’s intent is long term: normalize control and erase Ukrainian identity through coercion, censorship, and social engineering. Yet resistance persists, quietly contesting consolidation and sustaining belief that the Russians will be forced out, one day.

Despite these efforts, the occupied territories are ignored in Ukrainian and Western political discourse, with negative implications for our understanding of Russia’s intentions, the future of the war, and Western militaries’ ability to conduct or support resistance operations in the future.

LEGISLATIVE OR POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This reporting has direct relevance for congressional debate over end-state scenarios and “negotiated settlement” frameworks. Russia’s occupation is not a neutral status quo; it is a coercive system designed to permanently sever Ukrainian sovereignty through surveillance, dependency, and forced assimilation.

This matters for any proposals that would “hand over” additional territory (e.g., currently unoccupied areas of Donetsk) as part of a settlement. Such outcomes should be evaluated as transferring civilian populations into a regime built on coercion, censorship, and identity destruction—not as a stabilizing compromise.

There is also a growing operational gap: Western resistance operating concepts are increasingly outdated for high-surveillance occupation environments. Western institutional experience is often rooted in counterinsurgency settings where physical access and community engagement are comparatively open—assumptions that translate poorly to occupied Ukraine. Congress should press for sustained observation, doctrine modernization, and risk-informed support models so U.S. and allied assistance does not lag if behind-enemy-lines operations become strategically necessary.

CHALLENGES & RISKS

Russia's occupation model is designed to eliminate open resistance through total surveillance, filtration, and coercive control. Under these conditions, even symbolic nonviolent acts can trigger violent repression, and resistance increasingly survives through low-signature methods that are difficult to observe externally.

A key risk is that Western partners misread conditions on the ground. We caution that visibility-driven programming and unvetted “tech solutions” can expose civilians: Interactive reporting tools, unsafe chat formats, and apps retaining metadata have compromised users in occupied territories.

The occupation is also an innovation space for Russian control mechanisms, including in the information and communications sphere. If Western approaches do not keep pace with these realities, assistance risks becoming ineffective—or actively dangerous to the civilians it is intended to help.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Invest in real-world observation and doctrine modernization to align Western resistance concepts with total-surveillance occupation environments.
- Apply heightened scrutiny to any settlement frameworks that would transfer additional populations into occupation, including “land-for-ceasefire” proposals.
- Prioritize survivability-focused support: secure communications, discreet logistics, and tradecraft-aligned tools, not publicity-driven programming.
- Refuse to normalize Russia's occupation—these lands are just the other side of the front, not a conquered hermit kingdom. By not engaging with the occupied territories appropriately, Western and Ukrainian militaries and government agencies miss important lessons, opportunities, and information.

Table 1: Types of Resistance

Category	Description	Real-world example
Private and nonviolent	Hidden cultural and civic acts that sustain identity	Accessing Ukrainian education online; reading Ukrainian Telegram channels; speaking Ukrainian at home
Private and violent	Covert intelligence work and low-signature kinetic enabling	Observing convoys, collecting coordinates, directing drone or artillery strikes
Public and nonviolent	Visible symbolic acts intended to sustain morale	Graffiti, art protests, signs and ribbons (declining in impact)
Public and violent	High-risk, visible kinetic sabotage or targeted killings	Railway sabotage, attacks on occupation officials, arson of collaborator vehicles

Source: Author's own matrix based on fieldwork and open-source analysis.

Additional Resources

Jade McGlynn, “Thresholds of Survival: The Resistance in Occupied Ukraine,” CSIS, January 14, 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/thresholds-survival-resistance-occupied-ukraine>.

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