

ACROSS FAULT LINES

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a civic journal

Ukrainian Freedom Collective Agency in National Defense

- > Culture on the narrative battlefield
- > Civil resistance against hybrid warfare
- > The Resistance-Resilience nexus

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Foreword: **Oleksandra Matviichuk**,
2022 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

ONM
Organization for
Nonviolent Movements



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In Europe’s not-so-distant past...

...and presently in Ukraine, ordinary people are proactively defending their freedom, human dignity, and security beyond the military ecosystem.

This inaugural issue of Across Fault Lines shows that there exists a “narrow, dangerous, uncertain but very real path towards a better world”, in the words of famed graphic novelist Xavier Dorison. That path is unarmed resistance. Widespread in Ukraine since 2022, it is poorly documented, misunderstood, and overshadowed, but very real...

The contributors of this volume include Ukraine’s defenders—armed and unarmed—and European allies from diverse sectors of society. Their words are not aspirational. Their calls are not for martyrdom but instead closer examination. They document and analyze a vast area of human endeavor with pragmatism, not ideology. They invite readers to revisit theory of victory through the lens of Ukraine’s civic shield.

Some readers may find unarmed resistance against foreign aggression (also called civilian-based defense) a bit peculiar at first. If readers persevere, they may observe its complementarity with institutional efforts. They may also observe that it brings cost effectiveness, more security autonomy, and more sustainability in defense. However, it is not a panacea. In the words of British Captain B.H. Liddell Hart (1895-1970), “Nonviolent resistance is not ideal, but we haven’t found a better substitute.”

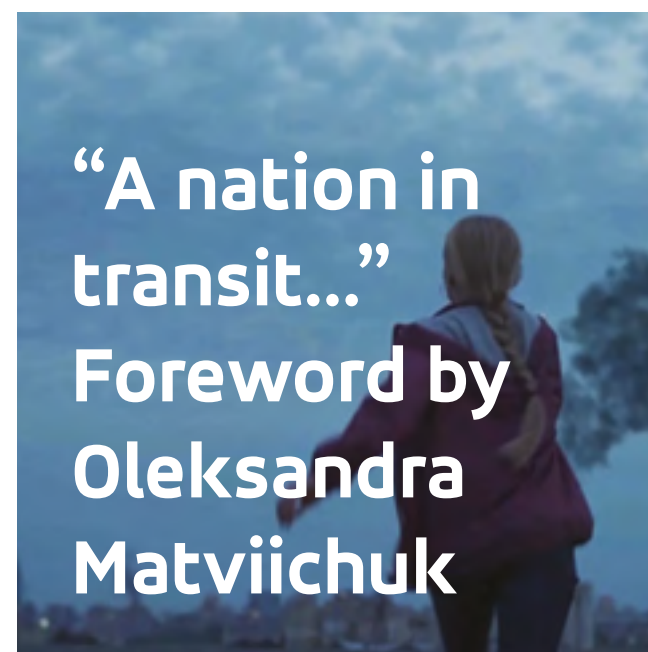
Why examine this topic now? French general and military theorist Maurice de Saxe (1696-1750) might offer the acerbic, “War is a science so obscure and imperfect that custom and prejudice confirmed by ignorance are its sole foundation and support.” I myself would more humbly offer that neglecting to rethink defense strategy in ever-changing times might leave a blind spot, power on the table, or both. Above all, it might leave populations underprepared for crisis.

It is possible for institutions to summon collective agency against brutal aggressors, despite the traditionally spontaneous nature of civilian-based defense. Adherence to this belief across Europe would inconvenience aggressors who prey on strong, democratic societies, and thus it should not be dismissed as naïve.

Despite today’s uncertainties, freedom and peace will return.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Amber".

Amber French-Griette
Co-founder & Executive Director
Organization for Nonviolent Movements



February 8, 2026

This is the fourth winter of the full-scale invasion. And it is very difficult. Russian ballistic missiles and drones deliberately target the energy grid, the very infrastructure that civilians depend on for survival. In January and February, temperatures plunge to minus 20 degrees Celsius in the country. Ukrainian cities are literally freezing. Millions of people have interrupted or no access to heat, water, or electricity. The UN has classified Russia's actions as crimes against humanity.

I remember 2022, when the Russians first began striking energy infrastructure. A photo of a Kyiv schoolteacher appeared online. She was wearing a red down jacket and a warm hat, sitting on tiptoe next to a metal post on which she had placed her computer, right outside, somewhere near a shop where a generator was running, and there was internet. And there, in the freezing cold, she was giving a lecture to her students. I remember thinking that the Russians came to take everything from us – our land, our freedom, our future, and our children's education. And this Kyiv teacher decided to give them nothing. Even something as simple as teaching children became an act of resistance.

I know from my own experience when you cannot rely on the international system of peace and security, you can still always rely on people. We are used to thinking in terms of states and intergovernmental organizations, but ordinary people have much more power than they even imagine.

Four years ago, I decided to stay in Kyiv when Russian troops were trying to encircle my city. No one believed that Ukraine could withstand such an enormous opposing power. When not just Putin, but all international experts were confident that Ukraine would fall in just 3 or 4 days. I remember how international organizations evacuated their personnel. But ordinary people remained. Ordinary people started to do extraordinary things.

I mentioned this story for a reason. The Russians imagined the war as mathematics, so they assessed Ukraine exclusively from a quantitative perspective. The optics of Western societies were focused exclusively on institutions. Both those and others did not see the human beings behind the numbers or ratings.

Ukraine regained its independence only in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is a nation in transit. This means that people in Ukraine have never had the luxury of relying on effective democratic institutions. Therefore, they have developed appropriate life strategies. Ukrainian resilience lies in local democracy, grassroots self-organization, rapid adaptation to new circumstances, and the agency of ordinary people.

For three centuries, Ukraine lived in the shadow of the Russian empire. Ukraine entered this war as a society without context. Our history was not written by us. People on other continents knew only one thing about our part of the world: that Russia existed here. An empire is not only about controlling land, resources, and people. It is also about controlling knowledge about the world and about one another.

Putin openly says that there is no Ukrainian nation, just as there is no Ukrainian language or culture. For 12 years, we have documented how these words have turned into horrific practices in the occupied territories, where the Russians physically eliminate active people, ban the Ukrainian language, loot Ukrainian cultural heritage, and raise Ukrainian children using Russian textbooks in which Ukraine does not exist as a state.

This war has not only a military dimension but also an informational one. This dimension has no



borders. People spend more and more time on social media, which is flooded with fakes and disinformation. People are losing the ability to distinguish truth from lies. Residents of the same small community no longer have a shared sense of reality. And without a shared sense of reality, they are incapable of collective action. Without collective action, how can people defend their freedom?

Putin launched a full-scale invasion not just to occupy more Ukrainian land. Putin did it in order to occupy and destroy the whole of Ukraine and move further. He sees Ukraine as a bridge to Europe. His logic is historical. He dreams about his legacy. Russia is an empire. An empire has a center, but no borders. Therefore, people in the European countries are safe only because Ukrainians do not let the Russian army move further.

It's time to develop security autonomy for Europe. A military technological revolution is taking place before our eyes with the development of unmanned systems, massive drone attacks, battlefield transparency, and mass, cheap, precise long-range weapons. In four years, all the military experience of the 20th century has become irrelevant. Therefore, the EU's security policy should include Ukraine as an integral part of European security.

But the main thing is the human dimension. Only a society that is ready to defend its values has a future. The resilience of the Ukrainian people should not be taken for granted. Civil society in Ukraine must be supported.

Amber French-Griette
and Olga Sagaidak
June 29, 2022

“THIS WAR IS A WAR OF CULTURES”: THE ART WORLD, A LEADER IN UKRAINE’S NONVIOLENT ANTI-OCCUPATION STRUGGLE



I met Olga Sagaidak last May at the Ukrainian Cultural Center in Paris, France. In the large drawing room where I conducted our interview, the walls were lined floor-to-ceiling with jaw-dropping photography of war destruction and street art protesting Putin’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. My stomach knotted when, leaning forward for a closer glimpse of one anti-war drawing, I realized it had in fact been sketched by the hand of a Ukrainian child.

Beholding this panorama, overwhelming both visually and emotionally, I learned about bold ways the Ukrainian art world is nonviolently resisting occupation. This article channels Olga Sagaidak’s knowledge of unarmed civilian protection at cultural sites in Ukraine. It also analyzes the Ukrainian art world’s call for an international boycott of Russian culture. Cultural documentary resistance is a prominent theme, defined as the systematic recording of occupiers’ destruction of the occupied country’s culture to expose the truth and facilitate reparations once the war is over.

Olga Sagaidak is from Kyiv where she served on the Supervisors’ Board at the Ukrainian Institute, a cultural diplomacy organization founded by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2017. When the Russian army invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Institute’s work took on new dimensions, new challenges, and dire political stakes.

Olga’s experience in the art world ranges from having studied art history and co-owning an auction house to co-founding a charitable foundation that develops networks to connect the east, south, and “very west” of Ukraine through art and culture. Above all, she identifies as a cultural activist.

Early March, the day after Olga fled Kyiv to settle in Paris with her family, she began volunteering at the Ukrainian Cultural Center alongside a few of her colleagues. The group resolved to amplify Ukrainians’ voices through art and build a cultural bridge with the French public. They urge the French to oppose Russian imperialism.



Olga is thus well-placed to understand the central role that culture plays in the war in Ukraine. More important, she understands how cultural resistance is key to preserving Ukrainian society and weakening Putin’s support. Her succinct way of putting it is that “This war is a war of cultures.»





One way Ukrainians are resisting occupation is through unarmed civilian protection of cultural sites. The actions usually involve museum staff and community volunteers evacuating art collections (including amid bombing), and/ or staying on-site with the collections to resist Russian invasion and prevent pillaging. Olga reported that nearly all museum directors she knew of had been staying on-site with their collections.

The actions are usually spontaneous initiatives of ordinary people, as opposed to some NGO initiative. My interviewee clarifies that museum staff do not send out calls for volunteers. Most do not even talk about their actions after the works are evacuated, for obvious security reasons.

As a result, not much information is being shared publicly about unarmed civilian protection of cultural sites. After all, Ukrainian cities are still at risk of occupation. Olga did, however, feel at liberty to share with me details regarding two museum collections that have escaped destruction and pillaging thanks to unarmed civilian protection.

At the Kharkiv Literary Museum, located close to the Russian border, staff began to pack up and relocate the collection even before the invasion on February 24. The museum director, Tetiana Pylypchuk, remained for some time at the museum following the invasion. Refusing for their work to be interrupted by occupation, museum staff are still organizing cultural activities in shelters or at Metro stations.

Not far from Kharkiv, the Hryhoriy Skovoroda National Literary Memorial Museum was destroyed on May 7. However, the collection had been removed to another site before the bombs fell, thanks to staff and community volunteers.

Now many Ukrainian museums are under occupation in Mariupol, Kherson, Berdiansk, Donetsk, and Luhansk. Sadly, despite widespread protection efforts, Russian soldiers have still reportedly managed to loot and export more than 2,000 of the most valuable works to Russia.



Boycotting Russian cultural products and artists close to Putin

Beyond local nonviolent resistance to preserve culture, Ukraine's art world is also calling for an international boycott of Russian cultural products and artists close to Putin. Why? Olga expresses it best:

"It's a way to support Ukraine. There are of course many important Russian historical figures, but right now if we block this cultural influence, we block the transmission of dangerous imperialist ideas to future generations. A lot of young Russian men don't even know where they're being sent off to, or why. Their mothers lose their sons and don't get to see the bodies to know for sure what their fate was. So, it's about culture, how we care about people in our country, how we care about our families. Killing, stealing, pillaging, it's all about culture and education."

It isn't easy to call for a boycott of Russian culture in a country like France, where Russian music, art, ballet and theatre are hugely popular. But, as Olga points out, it's important to block Russian culture and push people to take a stand against the war—just in the current climate. And they are not calling to destroy Russian culture, like the Russians are doing to Ukrainian culture. They are just asking people to stop and think about what it means to consume Russian culture amid Putin's war.

The boycott has gained some international momentum so far. In March, the Vilnius International Film Festival (Lithuania) cancelled all Russian film screenings and instead promoted films by Ukrainian directors. Many Russian cultural figures known to be close to Putin have lost engagements in various parts of the world. One such individual is Valery Gergiev, who was recently fired from the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra (Germany) as its chief conductor.



The only viable option for preserving culture

Culture and sovereignty policies during wartime date back to World War II. These outdated policies, promulgated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) do not allow for any sort of international intervention to protect cultural sites. Plus, especially at the outbreak of war, it's just not feasible for a foreign museum to host threatened collections. The administrative and logistical aspects of such an undertaking would be a nightmare.

Olga and her colleagues are currently lobbying for new policies to protect cultural heritage during wartime. They have regular meetings at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris to push for action on the matter. Unfortunately, the discussions are only between professionals, not leadership—for now. Olga says that it will be a very long process, as international organizations are very slow-moving.



The Kyiv-based Ukrainian Institute is leading efforts to document Ukrainian cultural heritage being damaged in Putin's war. Credit: Ukrainian Institute.

“When you’re doing something, only in the future can you understand for sure what the real goal was. For now, we see the project as documentation of crimes being committed, of war being waged, of normal Ukrainians’ lives, their cities... It’s about building an enormous database of Ukrainian cultural values... And it’s not just Ukrainian heritage, it’s European heritage.”

-Olga Sagaidak



Documentary resistance is when oppressed people record their aggressor’s unjust or illegal acts using a variety of archiving techniques. Those people can disseminate the evidence in attempt to make the injustice backfire against the aggressor and/or to secure justice and reparations in a post-conflict trial.

A rather inconspicuous nonviolent tactic, traditional documentary resistance catalogues acts of genocide and other war crimes committed by authoritarian leaders. Interestingly, I learned during my interview with Olga that the Ukrainian art world is documenting a less-known yet very frequent consequence of war: destruction and pillaging of art at the hands of occupying soldiers.

The battlefield advantage

Ukrainians are navigating an asymmetrical battlefield in favor of the Russian forces. There is currently no political framework in place for providing international protection of cultural heritage in countries under occupation. It’s far too late now to export collections to be hosted at foreign museums.

Facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the Ukrainian art world is taking bold actions to preserve their country’s immense cultural heritage, both in-country and from afar. After all, as Olga aptly puts it, “This war is a war of cultures”. Putin’s only language is violence; Ukrainians have been fluent in the language of nonviolent resistance for decades. By putting culture in a key position of the anti-occupation struggle, Ukrainians can and are nudging the conflict to where they can have a battlefield advantage.



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As a nonprofit leader and subject matter expert on wartime civic resistance, Amber French-Griette is leading work to fix a blind spot: unarmed civilian-based defense readiness to enhance autonomy and sustainability in European defense. In 2025, she co-founded the Organization for Nonviolent Movements (ONM) in Paris and serves as ONM Executive Director, bringing 20 years of international experience.

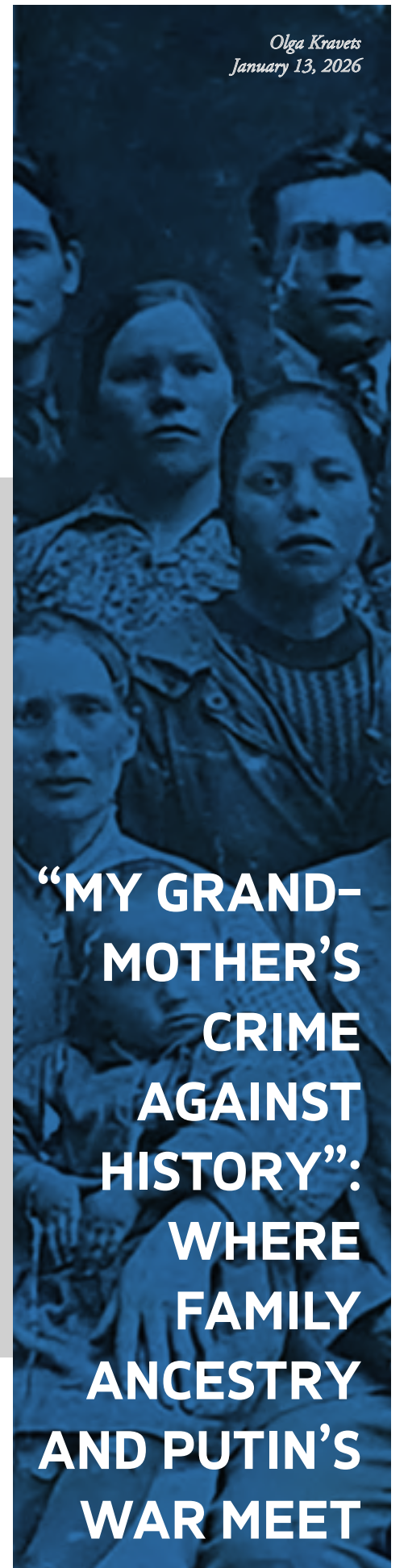


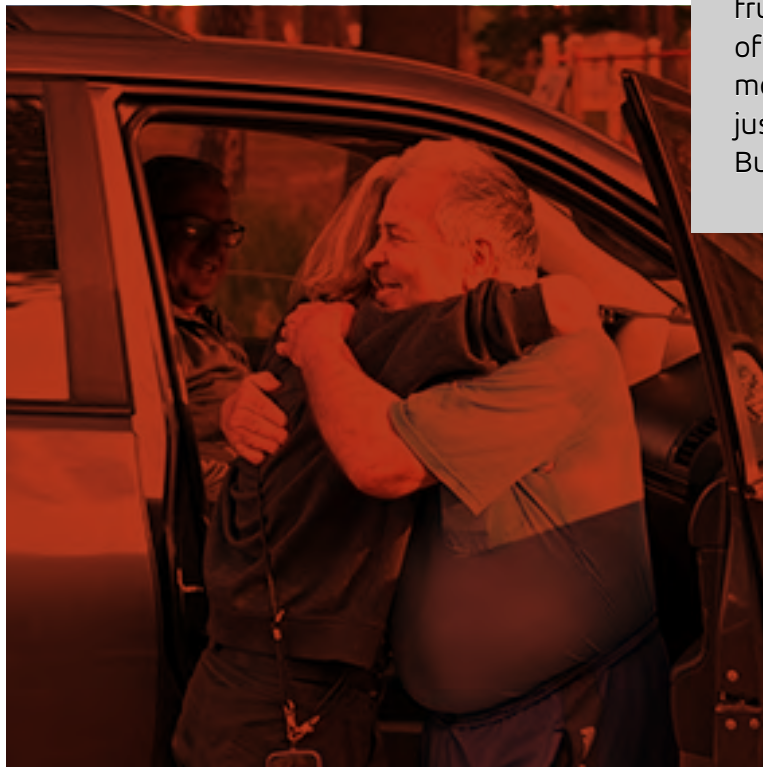
Olga Sagaidak is a Ukrainian cultural activist, art manager, and curator. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, she has been representing the Ukrainian Institute in France. As a cultural activist, she initiated and now curates for the Ukrainian Spring project (Printemps ukrainien) at the Ukrainian Cultural Center in Paris. Previously, Olga co-founded the charitable foundation The Depths of Art (Dofa Fund).

“When I heard the first reports of the Bucha massacre, it vividly brought back nightmares I had as a wartime journalist in Chechnya. But now my family members were part of these nightmares.”

“MY GRAND-MOTHER’S CRIME AGAINST HISTORY”: WHERE FAMILY ANCESTRY AND PUTIN’S WAR MEET

*Olga Kravets
January 13, 2026*





“Uncle Samuil, what could you tell me about my grandfather Maxim?”
I sat in front of the cheerful and energetic man in his 70s, bearing a striking resemblance to myself, just in a masculine version. I hadn’t seen him since I was a teenager. The early autumn sun was reaching through the fruit trees and vines into the windows of an old wooden house, in a rare moment of calm in the Kyiv suburb, just minutes’ drive from infamous Bucha. Samuil’s face got serious.

“Your grandfather was in the labor army somewhere around Lake Baikal. But I don’t know the details. I’m not even sure at this point if I had heard this from him directly, or if this is something I just [overheard] working alongside him in his atelier when I was a teen.”



For those who don’t know, the labor army was the predecessor of gulag, just under a different name.

Facing Samuil, I felt an overwhelming mix of solace and shame. History suddenly felt much less abstract. The Soviet repression was in my bloodlines too. But how could I have been living with the illusion that my entire tribe had been miraculously spared?

For 20 years, I have been filming, photographing, and interviewing people in more than 20 countries, cross-checking documents, collecting and organizing archives. If the country of my mother, Russia, had not decided to try to erase the country of my father, Ukraine, from the face of Earth, I might have never gotten to investigate my family history.

Putin’s war is threatening half of my family. However, it is not only lives that the war threatens. Part of the genocidal Russian intent to prove that Ukraine is not a real nation is the threat to destroy the historical artifacts and cultural heritage across the country. I count among them the archives that can shed light on my family history beyond oral transmission.

So using my journalist skills to investigate my own family story has become my act of nonviolent resistance in the face of this erasure attempt. The Kremlin’s actions can be described as crime against history, a term coined by a prominent historian Antoon de Baets.

In my particular case, it was my maternal Russian grandmother who had committed a crime against history in our family. I was raised by her between two and 11 years old and I bathed in a narrative I can now describe as Soviet-colonial.

She was a communist to her bones, a celebrated veteran of the Great Patriotic war [ed: the Soviet

way to refer to World War II] working at a local party cell. We ate party rations of red caviar for every important holiday. We did not have a samizdat copy of The Gulag Archipelago [ed: written by a Russian dissident in the 1950s and 60s] at home. My grandmother once dropped along the lines that we had some “very bad relatives who deserved to be sent to a gulag.” Did she know about my paternal grandfather Maxim? Or had she been referring to her cousins who were dispossessed by Stalin and whom I have since found in the repression database by Memorial NGO? I will never know.

My Russian grandmother must have hated the Ukrainian identity of her son-in-law, my father. The reason my French is a million times better than my Ukrainian is that the authoritarian grandma exercised a ban on “speaking regional languages in the capital”, Moscow, where I was



born and lived till I left half of my life ago, so my father didn't teach me his native language. Now I understand why exactly I didn't feel at home there. She tried to raise me as purely Russian while I clearly was not.

Through my career as a conflict reporter I forged myself a culturally fluid identity and an international family of women and men who have a couch for me in pretty much every city across Europe and Middle East. At some point I have cut down on nomadic lifestyle and committed myself to living in France, where I have become a citizen.

Between 2004 and 2018, I covered Russia's war and the aftermath in

Chechnya. On the way to and from Grozny, my childhood friends often called me a killjoy at their parties in Moscow, when I shared the stories from the field and said that the Russian war machine was using Chechnya as a training ground to then expand beyond the borders.

I wish I had been wrong. But when I heard the first reports of the Bucha massacre, it vividly reminded me of my nightmares based on testimonies collected in Chechnya. But now Samuil and other family members were part of these nightmares. And I was now again a killjoy... but at Parisians soirées. Again I was trying to warn people that Putin is not going to stop in Ukraine if Europe does not stop him in Ukraine. I was trying to convince people to vote in elections while they still have a chance to enjoy democracy. And once again, I was kindly asked to change the subject.

So I organized a soirée of my own, where that was the main theme. My Finnish friend, singer and songwriter with a geopolitics degree, Anni Pohto came to play at my countryside house. For Anni, playing at people's homes is an act of resistance against the gatekeeping of the music industry and creating her very own community across Europe. For me, it had a larger-than-life meaning. Forbidden songs were often played at homes of dissidents across the Soviet Union's

eleven time zones. In the society, where free expression didn't exist, often the most powerful stages were the living rooms.

During my darkest moments, I would blast her song “Amor Mundi” in my car and sing along. This song, inspired by Hannah Arendt, also speaks of Finland being forced to join NATO. Anni's grandfather fought Russia in the Continuation War, survived and wrote memoirs. Anni and myself were born on the opposite sides of the Iron Curtain that descended in our early childhood and now is up again. We have many things in common as an artist duo.

So Anni and her piano, and myself with my cameras decided to go to Ukraine together. We interrailed to Ukraine, breaking the cliché of the travel movie genre often featuring male buddies doing something crazy. Along the way, before we knocked on Samuil's door, Anni played at homes in Geneva, Munich, Prague and Warsaw, cities that defined Europe's war and peace history.

This slow descent into the war zone convinced us of the necessity to wake up European minds. Imagine your terrace is burning, but you are sitting in your fire-proof bedroom in the blissful belief that fire will not reach you... this is how it feels to cross five comfortable European countries on the way to Kyiv to live the reality of drone warfare there.

In Munich, I sat on the stairs of Führerbau, a Nazi architecture gem, conceived for Hitler by his favorite architect Paul Ludwig Troost. Today this place houses a Music Academy. But in 1938 it was where France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Nazi Germany signed the agreement breaching the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia and let Hitler annex Sudetenland. The Munich accord was much needed for Paris and London to delay the war in order to rearm. Think Crimea in 2014, Russian “polite green men” coming to protect “the rights of Russian-speakers on the peninsula”, coming back to attempt all of Ukraine in 2022.

In Warsaw, I felt a clash between the banal beauty of a quiet day and the imminence of conflict when I opened the news at a public laundromat and saw that Poland had never been as close to an open conflict since World War II. That night, for the first time, Russian drones damaged Polish houses. More drone incidents in Europe came fast, as we continued to Ukraine...

This story is continued in the following article.

Olga Kravets is a documentary director, investigative journalist and creative producer telling complex stories about human rights, religion and conflict. She is a polyglot, archive geek and geopolitics obsessive.



WHEN YOUR MOTHER- LAND WANTS TO ANNIHILATE YOUR FATHER- LAND

Olga Kravets
January 21, 2026



We were blessed to have had a quiet day at my uncle Samuil's home in a Kyiv suburb, so that he could tell me all that he knew as Anni filmed us.

My grandfather Maxim was born in 1907 in the village of Ruliv in Kyiv region, orphaned at 7, and became an apprentice to a shoemaker at 14 on a busy commercial street in Kyiv. Sometime in the 1920s he became a member of the Pentecostal church. Sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s he "refused to denounce his faith" and spent several years doing forced construction around Lake Baikal, where he contracted tuberculosis. He survived, came back to Kyiv, and married my grandma Teklya Sheremet in 1936.

Despite the religious persecution by Soviet authorities, my grandparents attended an underground Pentecostal church led by Teklya's uncle Spiridon Sheremet during the Great Terror years, as the photograph from 1938 testifies. During the Nazi occupation of Kyiv in 1941-1943, they did not leave their house. They also shared prayers with German Protestant soldiers, the family story goes. They had nine children, eight of whom survived. After the war, Maxim continued to work as a shoemaker and host Pentecostal prayers at home. He died of tuberculosis at the age of 57. Too many gaps. Too many questions. Frustrating for a granddaughter in search of answers, mesmerizing for an investigative journalist.

What year was he arrested? Which camp? What was the actual charge? How did he survive? Why was he released in time to marry in 1936, right before the Great Terror, when thousands of religious believers were being shot? Was he accused of collaborating after the end of World War II?

When Samuil finished the story, we cried and laughed at the miracle of our wartime reunion, ate fantastic borscht and sang together in Finnish and Ukrainian, thanks to another wonderful nonviolent resistance initiative, Solovey Music, which translated Ukrainian songs into Finnish allowing Anni to perform it in her native language.

I came back to France carrying a different weight of history under my skin. My generation thought that the Soviet Union collapsed bloodlessly and were really proud of it. So were the politicians in Europe and the U.S. In fact, the Soviet Union is only collapsing now, and this collapse is very bloody, with genocidal intentions from the former colonizer who still cannot get over the dissolution of his empire. And this blood already starts to spill into Europe. Thanks to Ukraine, it has not yet been flooded—but a war an Interrail trip away is a war at your doorstep.



And my role as a European, French, Slav, who bears the heritage of the perpetrator and the victim at the same time, is to reclaim what my Russian grandmother tried to erase from my family: the Ukrainian part of myself. Because what Putin really wants is to erase it from the entire nation. This is the same violence, scaled up across generations from personal to geopolitical.

As I am writing these lines, on January 12, 2026, Ukraine has spent 1,418 days resisting Russia in every way possible. It's exactly the amount of days it took the Soviets to crush Hitler's troops. Putin, who had hoped to capture Kyiv in a few days, and takes himself for a history mastermind, must feel at least a bit uncomfortable in his Kremlin office. His very own propaganda bloggers praise Americans for kidnapping Maduro and whine about "the great Russia" failing to have done the same with Volodymyr Zelensky.

Anni and I will finish our film of this pilgrimage, Rising Is A State of Mind, as Ukraine enters its fifth spring of resisting Russian aggression. The lesson I take away from our journey to Kyiv, the lesson we can all draw from recovering my double heritage, is that the Russian side chooses to be blind and hide and the other chooses to resist and create. I believe in Ukrainian freedom and will continue to devote my art to documenting the people's fight for it.



FOLLOW :
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*Olha Kapets, Mariia Korobkova and
Yelyzaveta Tarasenko
January 27, 2026*

“A LIGHT FOR EACH OTHER”: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE BOTH ACTIVISTS AND DEFENDERS OF UKRAINE

“Some of us became activists without fully realizing it. And partially, it wasn’t our choice, but a calling of circumstances and deep emotion that we could no longer suppress.”

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 affected all sectors of the country, including two groups less visible in today’s conversations about security and defense: activists and feminists. As co-founder of the feminist NGO, Me.We.Women, I have seen our collective work expand far beyond equal rights. New tensions emerged, too, notably on how to reconcile criticism of patriarchy, militarism, and patriotism with the defense of the country. Everything about war is controversial. Or is it?

In some ways, the war set Ukrainian feminist NGOs back several years in terms of progress. The war deepened economic inequality and the burden on the care sector, which is predominantly made up of women. Further, we must now “put fires out” and help save lives, in addition to advancing gender equality in the midst of increased violence against women perpetrated by Russian soldiers. Now, it is also about survival, civic resilience, reconstruction, and modernization of society. Many feminist initiatives quickly shifted their focus to providing assistance to internally displaced people, women from vulnerable groups, victims of violence, and others.

Almost overnight, humanitarian action became part of

our nonviolent resistance, and this opened the door to countless numbers of Ukrainians becoming both activists and defenders of their country. And that is a silver lining, which others facing threat and aggression beyond Ukraine can learn from. Emergency situations build unity and camaraderie around the common goal of helping and sustaining those in need. Ukrainian people power—the less visible, human dimension of war—provides the backbone when all else seems divisive and insurmountable.



“A light for each other”

Before the full-scale invasion began, the mother of my respondent, Olena, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, worked as an assistant cook at a social assistance center from Kryvyi Rih, a city three hours’ drive north of Kherson. In the first days of the invasion, her work became part of a greater cause: helping people in need. Doors opened to internally displaced people from Luhansk, Donetsk, and other regions. People who fled literally “naked and barefoot” from the explosions at the last moment found temporary shelter, clothing, and food there, brought by the center’s employees and other caring people. Items with noticeable defects were usually cut into long pieces and woven into fishing nets to make camouflage nets.

The center was filled with an atmosphere of warmth, mutual respect, and genuine human communication. “Despite the difficult times, my mother and other employees of the center not only did their jobs, but also prepared preserves, stews, baked goods and, in general, everything that could be sent to the front line at their own expense,” my respondent shares.

By March 2022, when an attack on Kryvyi Rih was being prepared and the city became quite dangerous to stay in, most of the internally displaced people moved to the western regions, and the center then pivoted 100% to providing material assistance to Ukrainian soldiers in the region.

That month was a turning point. After the occupation of part of the Kherson region, both civilian activism and supporting the armed forces were considered equal forms of resistance, which manifests in a variety of physical, moral, humanitarian, and informational forms. Even in extremely difficult conditions, people continued to help each other, spread the truth about life under Russian occupation and aggression, and preserve their culture and dignity.

“After the full-scale war began, I saw another,

even stronger side of our community. People took part in peaceful protests even though they understood the danger it posed. My neighbors shared what little they had: food, water, supplies,” Olena tells me. Her mother tried to make their basement shelter as comfortable as possible for all their neighbors. She brought blankets, chairs, a kettle: “If she could, I think she would have moved the walls to let in even more people,” she says.

“When I talk about my experience in a frontline territory, it’s not just memories of difficult years for me,” Olena tells me. It is a story of a community that did not break, a reminder that even in the darkest times, people can remain a light for

each other. And it is this light that drives Kherson and all of Ukraine forward today.

A forcefield of protection

To some extent, local media recognize feminist and LGBTQIA+ activists for their acts of mutual aid and solidarity, for creating safe spaces for people, and for championing discrimination even in the midst of war. But their activities rarely reach national, much less international news.

Indeed, a Detector Media NGO study from 2024 shows that over 60% of informational materials about the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kherson involve military topics and wartime content. Societal, cultural, and civic narratives are mentioned in less than 10% of news in these regions.

Ukrainian media work on military time, and the flow of information is aimed at the topics of defense, security, and warfare. Because of that, stories of local initiatives and people’s struggles, especially those concerning the well-being of the LGBTQIA+ community and gender equality, fade into the background. I would like to think we are more of a forcefield—we go unnoticed by most, but we are still more effective at protecting people than nothing.



Insights for European observers

Despite our invisibility, I still believe that our European neighbors have as much to learn from Ukraine's unarmed defenders as they do from our armed ones. In any case, we are inseparable due to our shared humanity. Many Ukrainian NGOs help our armed forces with supplies, donations, and support, because they need our help too. Civil-military relations are difficult for some outsiders to understand, particularly those driven by pacifist ideology. Simply put, war is awful, and everything about war is controversial—what is essential is doing your part and staying human.

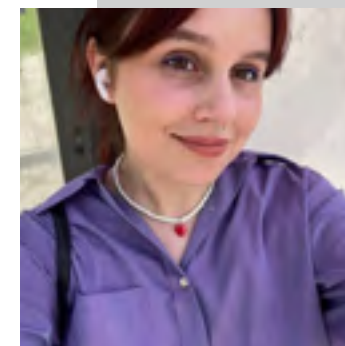
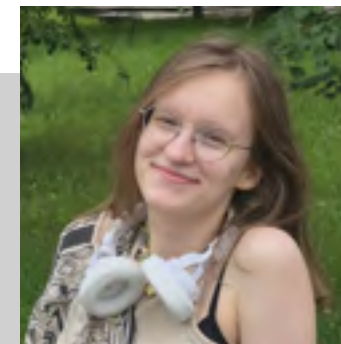
Stories like mine, revealing realities that Ukrainian activists face every day, can become a foundation for building European-Ukrainian dialogue on how to build resilience. I hope these stories can open new channels for solidarity with the Ukrainian people, too. Civilians expand the pie by adding a novel theory of victory into the mix—people power, complementing that of institutional efforts.

In addition to our armed forces, there are many queer, feminist, environmental, educational, and other projects that are worthy of European support, too. We are all fighting, in whatever way we can, to preserve everyday livelihoods and human dignity for all. How we do this is our prerogative, but at least unarmed resistance adds a more ethical option for supporting us, for those outside of Ukraine who want one.

Precisely how can Europeans support the Ukrainian people? One idea is civil society supporting research and collaborative projects with Ukrainian civic groups that focus on cultural heritage preservation, ecology, infrastructure development, and protection of vulnerable groups. Another idea is to share online and in-person platforms with Ukrainian civic actors, inviting them to write and speak at conferences and events in Europe. The Ukrainian experience is important for the collective fight for freedom and dignity, across our continent.

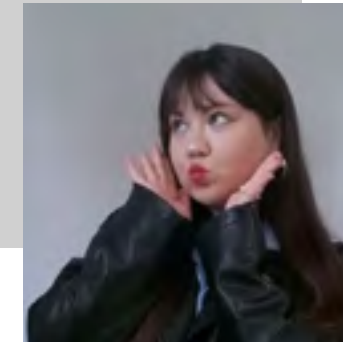


Olha Kapets is a co-founder of Ukrainian feminist NGO, youth activist since 2022 and first-year Applied Linguistics undergraduate student in V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University. She is based in the frontline Sumy region of Ukraine where many surrounding towns were occupied by Russian soldiers in the first month of the full-scale invasion. She has family serving in the Ukrainian armed forces.



Mariia Korobkova is a sociology student at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Ukraine), an activist, and a volunteer. She is an internally displaced person and her home is currently occupied by Russian soldiers. Her work and writing focus on activism during wartime, with particular attention to inclusivity, equality, and community support in times of crisis.

Yelyzaveta Tarasenko is a Ukrainian journalist, activist, and volunteer from Donetsk living in Kharkiv. Her writing focuses on war, culture, and gender-sensitive issues, with particular attention to how armed conflict affects everyday life, communities, and vulnerable groups. She combines journalistic practice with activism and volunteer work, documenting wartime realities while addressing questions of representation, inclusivity, and social responsibility.



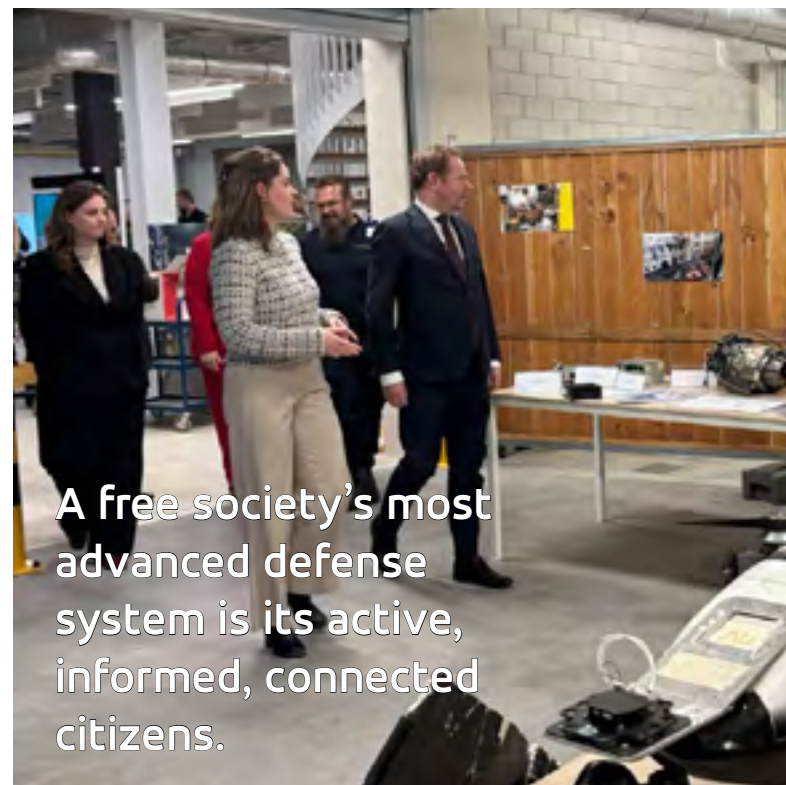
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Olena Tregub
February 2, 2026

THE QUIET FRONTLINE: HOW CIVIL SOCIETY BROUGHT GOOD GOVER- NANCE INTO DEFENSE AND MADE UKRAINE DEFEN- DABLE



A free society's most advanced defense system is its active, informed, connected citizens.

Ukraine's ability to withstand Russia today is often explained by the courage of the Ukrainian people, Western military assistance, and battlefield innovation. All of that is true. But it is not the whole truth. Ukraine also stands because it changed – institutionally and socially – after 2014. A mature civil society did something unusual for a country at war: it helped rebuild the state's capacity to defend itself while at the same time insisting that the defense sector become more accountable, less corrupt, and more effective.

This connection between civic maturity, anti-corruption, and national defense did not appear suddenly. It was built slowly, through years of pressure, cooperation, and institutional learning. It was not always visible. It did not always produce immediate results. But it shaped the foundations of Ukraine's resilience far more deeply than many realize.



The defense sector, a battlefield of reform

Ukraine's achievements and challenges in fighting corruption were discussed in spring 2025 at a Steering Committee Meeting of the EU Anti-Corruption Initiative (EUACI). NAKO LinkedIn page.

After the Revolution of Dignity, Ukrainian civil society entered a new phase. It was energetic, legitimate, and capable of mobilizing people and resources at scale. But its most important transformation was conceptual. It no longer focused only on changing individuals in power. It demanded a change of rules. The state was no longer seen as something external, distant, or hostile. Governance became a shared responsibility. This shift marked the birth of a different kind of political culture.

2014 was also the moment when the cost of corruption became a matter of national security. Russia's occupation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas shocked Ukrainian society. Ukraine did not lose territory only because Russia was aggressive, authoritarian, and imperial. It also lost territory because its defense system had been weakened from within. Under the pro-Russian and kleptocratic president Viktor Yanukovich, material readiness

and human resources in the Armed Forces deteriorated systematically. Corruption, excessive secrecy, and post-Soviet management practices hollowed out institutions that should have guaranteed deterrence and defense.

In the defense sector, corruption meant, and sometimes still means, broken supply chains, distorted procurement, compromised decisions, and weakened command structures. It means soldiers without proper equipment, ammunition that does not arrive on time, and resources that disappear into opaque systems. In short, it means vulnerability. That is why, after 2014, the defense sector became one of the central battlefields of reform.

Civil society responded on two levels.



Working from outside and within

First came the wave of volunteering that filled urgent gaps. Ukrainians supported the army directly: supplying equipment, medical kits, vehicles, tactical gear, and training. Organizations such as Army SOS, Aerorozvidka, Povernys Zhyvym, Volunteer Medical Battalion, Legal Hundred, Crimea SOS, Vostok SOS, Prytula Foundation, and many others emerged almost overnight. They supported soldiers, veterans, displaced people, and frontline logistics. These organizations were created because the state was unable to perform many of these functions quickly and effectively. By 2017, public trust in volunteer organizations exceeded trust in government institutions many times over. Volunteering became a form of emergency state-building.

The second response was quieter and more complex: reforming governance architecture. Laws, institutions, procurement rules, oversight mechanisms, corporate governance – the invisible structures that determine whether a defense system can function under pressure. This work required expertise, patience, and the ability to operate inside a sector designed to remain closed.

After Euromaidan, civil society

organizations united in the Reanimation Package of Reforms, a coalition that pushed systemic change across almost all sectors of governance. Many people from that ecosystem later became officials and parliamentarians. Yet defense and security remained among the least developed areas of reform. Defense was not a traditional civil society field, and international donors were cautious about funding work in such a sensitive sector. Precisely because of that, it became one of the most dangerous blind spots in Ukraine's reform agenda.



Globally, defense reform rarely begins with governance. Most resources go to weapons, tactics, and operational readiness. Governance is treated as secondary, sometimes even as a distraction. Ukraine learned the opposite lesson: pouring money into a corrupt and poorly governed defense sector does not increase security. It undermines it.

This was the context in which the Independent Anti-Corruption Commission (NAKO) was launched in late 2016 by Transparency International Defense and Security and Transparency International Ukraine. The idea was straightforward: Ukraine needed an independent, professional civil society actor capable of working inside one of the most closed sectors of the state. In early 2019, NAKO became an independent Ukrainian NGO, the most established and go-to institution in defense sector governance.

Its role was not confrontation for its own sake. NAKO was translating civic pressure into policy, and policy into institutional change. Through research, monitoring, and expert engagement, it helped connect civil society, parliament, the Ministry of Defense, and international partners. Over time, a consistent reform logic emerged:

- Assessment and awareness.
- Public and international pressure.
- Constructive collaboration and institutional design.

Early work focused on areas where corruption risks intersect directly with human lives: security assistance, medical supply, housing, and logistics. Civil society experts were invited to help rewrite technical requirements for individual first-aid kits used on the frontline, reducing corruption risks and improving quality standards.

Defense procurement became one of the central reform fronts. Ukraine needed a system that minimized corruption risks, increased planning transparency, and strengthened civilian oversight. Civil society experts contributed to shaping the Law on Defense Procurement and to advocating for the creation of a more professional and independent procurement agency within the Ministry of Defense.



If procurement was one pillar, transformation of the defense industry was the other. Ukroboronprom, a conglomerate of more than 100 state-owned defense enterprises, had long been plagued by corruption, inefficiency, and Soviet-style governance. Oversight was resisted, and management remained opaque.

Here again, the three-stage mechanism worked.

Assessment came through international indices and audits that showed Ukraine among the weakest in Europe on defense anti-corruption standards. A “triage” assessment revealed that only a small share of enterprises generated most profits, while many produced no defense goods at all.

Pressure came in 2019, when investigative journalists published the Army.Friends.Cash investigation, exposing corruption schemes involving smuggled Russian parts and inflated prices during an active war with Russia. The scandal triggered public outrage, dismissals, and criminal cases. Defense corruption became politically unavoidable.

Collaboration followed. A joint working group including government institutions, parliament, international partners, and civil society drafted reform legislation. In 2021, the law on corporatization entered into force. It embedded OECD corporate governance standards, introduced supervisory boards and compliance systems, and put the defense industry on a path toward restructuring.

Then came 2022.



Anti-corruption under missile strikes

In the first months after the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian society made a conscious choice to suspend criticism. For almost six months, governance failures and corruption risks were set aside. Not because they disappeared, but because survival came first. Civil society focused entirely on defense: mobilizing resources, securing weapons, supporting the army, evacuating civilians, and sustaining international attention. It was a moment of extraordinary unity.

But democratic societies cannot live without oversight. And in Ukraine, that pause was temporary.

In early 2023, the so-called “eggs scandal” became a turning point. Journalists revealed that the Ministry of Defense had signed food supply contracts at prices far above market levels, including eggs reportedly priced at around 17 hryvnias (roughly 0,33€ each). In a country at war, where volunteers were raising money for drones and protective gear, this was unacceptable. The issue was not only financial. It was institutional and moral.

The scandal lifted the informal taboo on criticism. More importantly, it shifted the conversation from outrage to solutions. Society demanded mechanisms, not just resignations.

This led to the creation of the Ministry of Defense Reform Office and the Anti-Corruption Council under the Ministry of Defense – a permanent civilian oversight body embedded

inside the defense system. Fifteen members were selected through a nationwide online vote, with more than 100,000 citizens participating. It was the largest civic online voting in Ukraine’s history. Democratic oversight was being built under missile strikes.

The Council, headed by Yuriy Hudymenko, a veteran and volunteer leader, continues to function today, reviewing procurement practices and identifying corruption risks.

At the same time, Ukraine’s broader anti-corruption architecture continued to function. Independent institutions such as NABU, SAPO, the High Anti-Corruption Court, and the National Agency on Corruption Prevention, created after the Revolution of Dignity, remained operational.

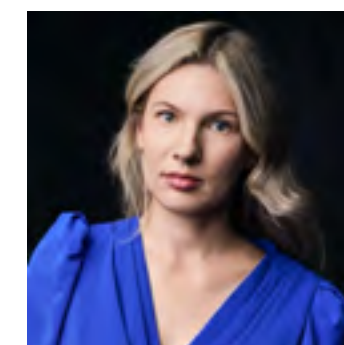
This system faced a critical test in the summer of 2023, during what became known as the Cardboard Revolution, when young people protested near Kyiv’s Franko Theatre against political attempts to weaken the independence of anti-corruption institutions. Their pressure worked. Institutional autonomy was preserved. That victory of civil society proved decisive later the same year, when NABU exposed one of the largest corruption scandals in Ukraine’s history, centred on the nuclear energy sector and touching defense procurement. In the defense-related part of the investigation, it was revealed that attempts to force procurement of low-quality or overpriced body armor failed precisely because Anti-Corruption Council monitoring mechanisms were already in place.



A free society's most advanced defense system... its active, informed, connected citizens

Ukraine’s resistance in 2022 was not built in 2022. It was built through the painful lessons of 2014, through volunteer mobilization, and through years of institutional reform. Civil society worked by not only filling immediate capability gaps through mobilization and solidarity, but by building long-term institutional capacity through law, oversight, compliance, and governance reform.

That is the quiet frontline. And it is one of the reasons Ukraine still stands.



Olena Tregub is the founder and Secretary General of the Independent Anti-Corruption Commission (NAKO), created in 2017 to promote integrity in Ukraine’s defense and security sector. She coordinates the Public Council on Sanction Policy and co-initiated the Anti-Corruption Council at the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, helping with wartime reforms.

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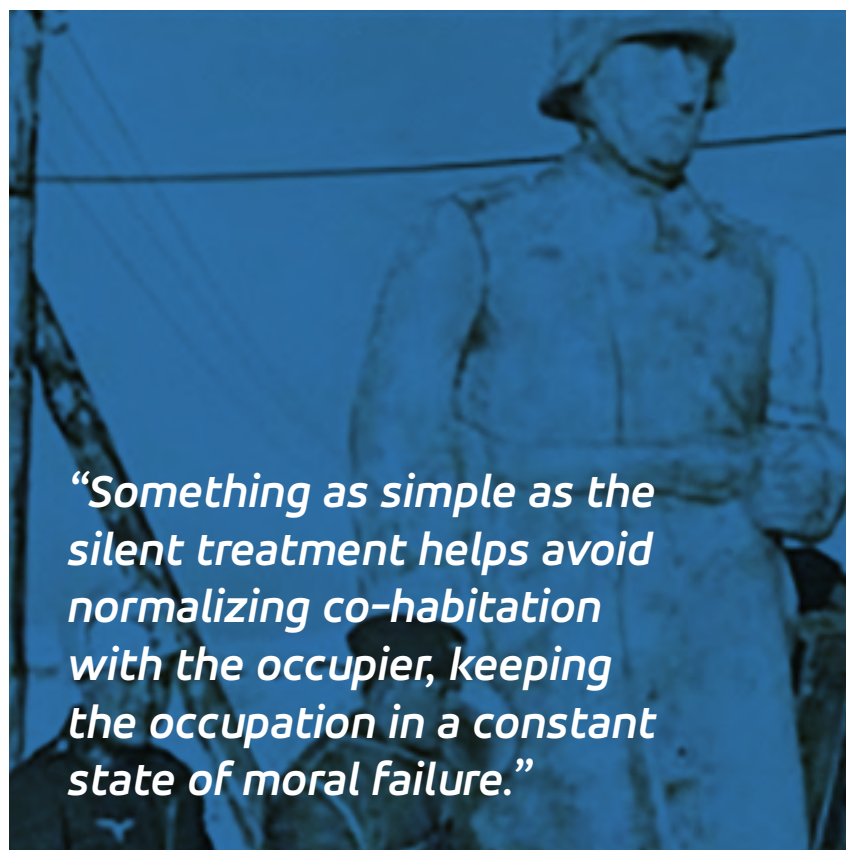
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FACT OR FICTION? VERCORS AND STEINBECK RECOUNT CIVILIAN- BASED DEFENSE IN 1942

Alain Refalo
February 9, 2026

Credit: Author.





Long before civil resistance was formalized as a field of research and political strategy, Vercors’s *Silence of the Sea* and John Steinbeck’s *The Moon is Down* offered a remarkable literary intuition.

Published in 1942, *Silence of the Sea* and *The Moon is Down* are situated within this historical moment when military occupation seemed permanent, armed victory unattainable, and the question of possible forms of civil resistance, without weapons, was acutely posed.

These two texts, very different in their narrative form, nevertheless share a common political thesis: the power of the occupier rests less on armed force than on the tacit acceptance of its presence, and it is this acceptance that must be rejected.

These two works suggest that, faced with an overwhelming military occupation, the crucial question is not whether to resort to symmetrical violence, but rather whether to collaborate or not: what are we willing to give the occupier, and above all, what can we take away by refusing to yield to their demands?

Mute resistance as relational disobedience

Both texts illustrate, each in their own way, the fundamental principle of civil resistance: since the oppressor’s power depends on the obedience of the oppressed, the liberation of the oppressed depends on their ability to withdraw this obedience.

In *Silence of the Sea*, resistance takes the form of a radical refusal to speak. The narrator states this explicitly: “We decided not to speak to him.” This extremely simple decision constitutes a fully political act: refusing to speak means refusing to enter into a shared symbolic space with the occupier. Speech is thus identified as a means of mutual recognition; to evade this is to maintain an insurmountable moral boundary.

The German officer occupying the home of a family in a French village nevertheless makes numerous attempts at reconciliation, particularly through culture. He evokes music, literature, and the idea of a spiritual fraternity between Germany and France. But the silence of the daughter and her father, the rightful inhabitants of the house, offers a mute resistance to this discourse, preventing any illusion of normalcy or complicity. The final scene, when the officer understands the moral impasse of his own words, confirms that silence is not a void, but a counter-argument.

This non-cooperation is both radical and minimalist. By refusing to speak, the characters refuse to enter into the relationship of domination itself. Silence, here, is a form of relational disobedience, leading the occupier to question his legitimacy.

Disclaimer: This text does not aim to oppose armed and civilian resistance, nor to mechanically transpose historical experiences onto the current Ukrainian context. The Nazi occupation of Europe during World War II differs from that of Russia in Ukraine. The similarity lies in the fact that both are asymmetrical conflicts between an occupying force and a people defending their freedom. Certain strategic dynamics of resistance are similar.

This text offers a reflection based on two works of fiction published in 1942, in order to illuminate complementary dimensions of resistance by peoples under attack: non-cooperation, collective dignity, and social emancipation in the face of occupation. It is offered as a space for shared reflection, not as a prescription.

Diffuse and cumulative resistance

The Moon is Down adopts a reverse narrative strategy. Steinbeck disseminates resistance throughout the daily life of an occupied city. Non-cooperation here takes the form of a multitude of modest, often anonymous, but strategically convergent acts.

One character clearly articulates this logic: “They can take our houses, but they cannot take our will.” Resistance, here, is patient, often invisible. Sabotaging a bridge, slowing down work, passing on information, maintaining local solidarity—all these actions make the occupation costly and unstable. Steinbeck thus shows that military power encounters a structural limit as soon as society ceases to cooperate. After all, military power assumes there is a proper battlefield or at least some armed confrontation.

Steinbeck precisely describes what the theory of civil resistance would later analyze as a functional collapse of the political authority of occupation: the occupier commands, but is no longer reliably obeyed.

Humanizing the enemy without legitimizing domination

Both works are careful to avoid good-guy/bad-guy caricature. In Vercors’s novel, the German officer is genuinely enamored with French culture, convinced that conquest can lead to spiritual reconciliation. In Steinbeck’s novel, some officers, finding obstacles to fulfilling their carnal and social desires, begin to have doubts about whether it was a good idea to have joined the conquest. “Flies conquer the flypaper. Flies capture two hundred miles of new flypaper!” the occupying force lieutenant concludes, hysterical.

But this humanization never leads to justification or legitimacy. On the contrary, it reinforces the critique. It is not individual cruelty that is at issue, but the very structure of the occupation, inherently unsustainable due not only to the citizens’ deep yearning for freedom, but also the occupier’s natural desires. The occupier may be human, but occupation goes against human nature. One of Steinbeck’s characters expresses this with disarming realism: “You cannot govern a people by force alone.”

This sentence could serve as a common epigraph for both works. By force, we must understand “armed force,” an essential distinction, because these two works speak to us of another kind of force: the force of the people fighting with their bare hands.

Moral sovereignty, the long victory

A central theme links the two texts: that of forced cohabitation. Sharing daily life with the occupier creates a constant temptation: that of normalization. To speak, to exchange ideas, to become accustomed to it, is already to cede a portion of moral sovereignty.

Vercors’ silence precisely prevents this backsliding. It maintains the occupation in a state of permanent moral failure. In Steinbeck’s work, this role is played by the repetition of acts of resistance. Each act of sabotage serves as a reminder that the imposed order is contested and therefore reversible.

In both cases, resistance aims less at immediate victory than at preserving collective dignity.

Violence refused, conflict embraced

One essential point links the two works to the field of civil

resistance strategy: they never deny the conflict, but it does not escalate into armed confrontation.

Vercors’ silence is tense, sometimes cruel. Similarly, the resistance described by Steinbeck exposes the population to reprisals, imprisonment, and death. Unarmed resistance to occupation is presented as a demanding form of struggle, one that accepts risk according to a logic of delegitimizing the oppressor.

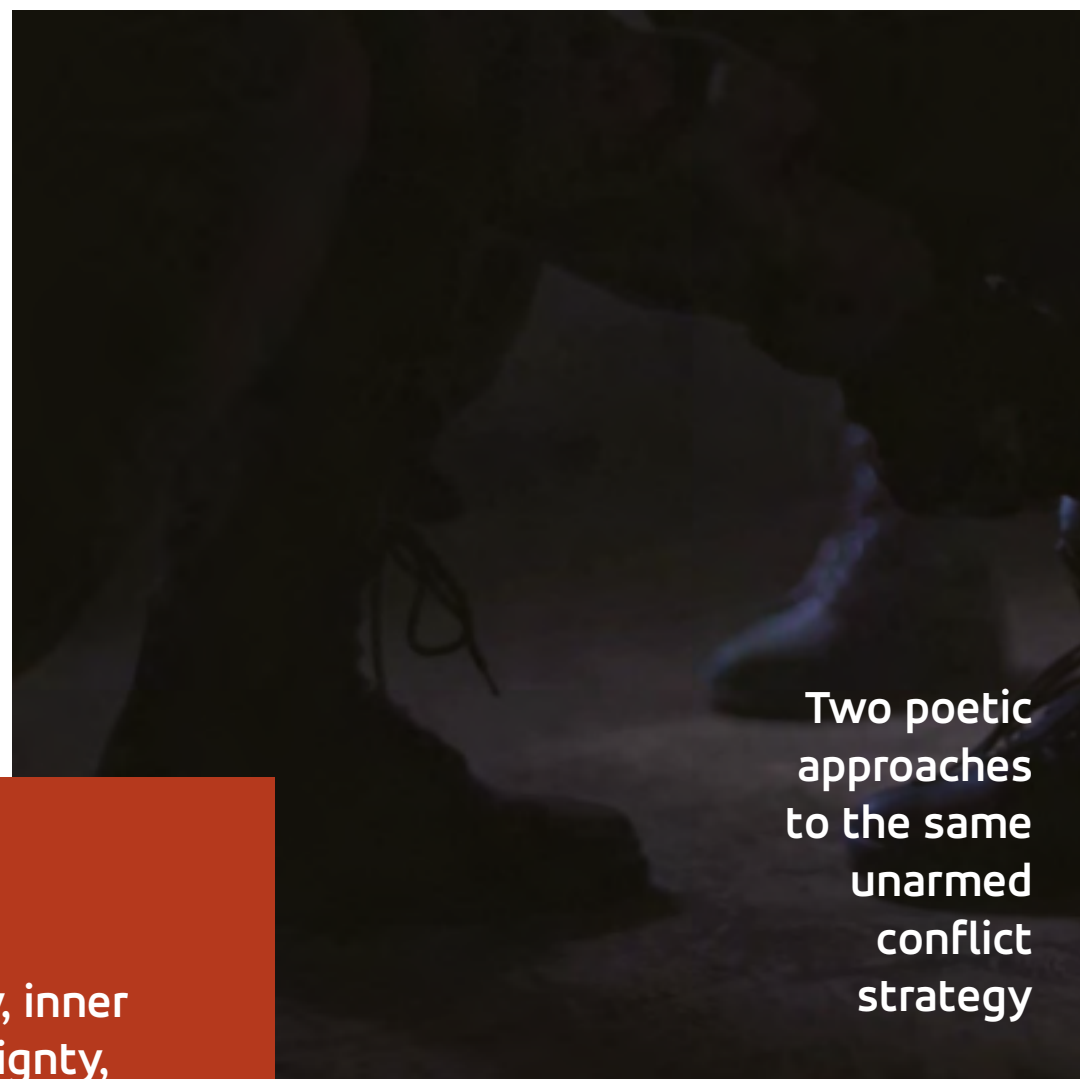
This point is crucial for understanding that civil resistance is a strategy based on disrupting power rather than on its military destruction.

Depriving the occupier of what it needs to survive

Both texts converge on the same implicit strategy: to render the occupation ungovernable.

In Vercors’s work, the occupation fails morally because it cannot generate the personal support and human recognition that would transform conquest into accepted domination. In Steinbeck’s work, it fails practically because every order encounters inertia, every decision generates unforeseen consequences, and every military victory produces additional political fragility.

This logic corresponds exactly to what civil resistance would later theorize as a progressive erosion of power through the withdrawal of social, economic, administrative, and symbolic cooperation



Two poetic
approaches
to the same
unarmed
conflict
strategy

Dignity, inner
sovereignty,
and collective
resistance

Another fundamental characteristic links these works to civil resistance: the centrality of human dignity.

Silence in Vercors protects inner sovereignty: to speak would already be to surrender. Acts of resistance in Steinbeck protect collective sovereignty: to obey without question would be to accept political dispossession. In both cases, resistance aims less at immediate victory than at preserving the occupied people's sovereignty, both individual (or cognitive) and collective (national sovereignty).

This dimension lies at the heart of civil resistance as it unfolded in the 20th century: to resist is to refuse to be reduced to a mere object of domination, even when armed force is overwhelming. In short, subjugation is worse than death.

The formal differences between the two works illuminate two complementary modalities of civil resistance:

Silence of the Sea presents a resistance of restraint, absolute refusal, and an insurmountable moral boundary.

The Moon is Down explores a more proactive, fragmented, cumulative, and socially rooted resistance.

One operates on the symbolic and relational level, the other on the functional and organizational level. Together, they outline a complete dynamic of civil resistance, well before it was named as such, notably by US scholar Gene Sharp from the 1960s forward.



The literary
and the
political

Reread in light of today's distinct academic disciplines of nonviolence and civil resistance, *Silence of the Sea* and *The Moon is Down* appear as much more than stories about war. They are narrative laboratories where a political philosophy of resistance without weapons is developed, based on the withdrawal of consent and the reconquest of dignity. Thus, these two narratives, commenting on political actions ordinary people had just begun to take in real life in occupied Europe, illustrate through fiction what the political science theory of civil resistance would take several years to formalize.

As such, these two works are not merely part of the literary memory of the World War II. They remain invaluable resources today for understanding civil resistance in the face of contemporary forms of domination, whether military, authoritarian, or structural.

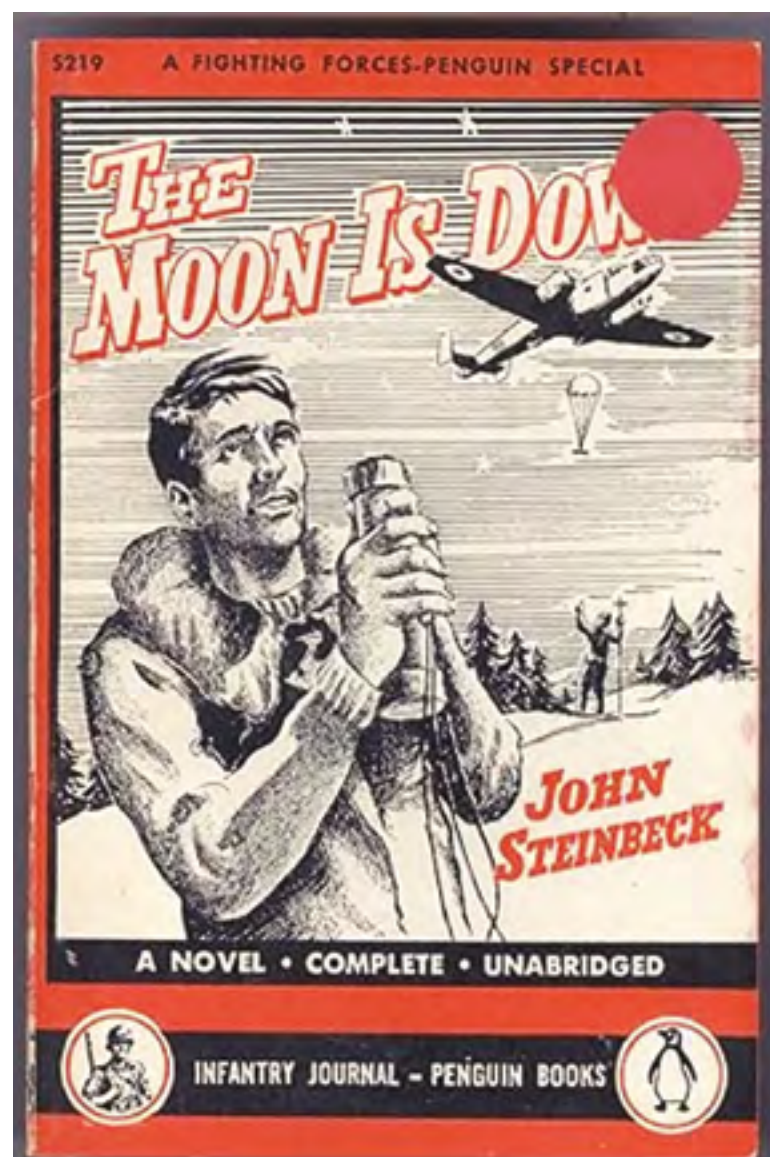
In the next article, Amber French-Griette will delve back into Steinbeck's world in 1942 and analyze the remarkable precision of the story *The Moon is Down*—which proceeded to spread like wildfire across the European continent via samizdat—even though its author never set foot in Europe.



Alain Refalo is editor-in-chief of the quarterly journal *Alternatives Non-Violentes*. He is founder of the Centre de ressources sur la non-violence in Toulouse, France. As a thought leader, he has authored numerous works on nonviolence and civilian-based defense in French.

STEINBECK, LITERARY SENSATION OF EUROPE'S UNDER- GROUND RESIST- ANCES... AND HIS HARD LESSONS FOR TODAY

Amber French-Griette
February 18, 2026



Alain Refalo shows us how two decades before strategic nonviolent conflict became an academic discipline, literary figures John Steinbeck and Vercors penned human-sized fables about dignity and the collective power which derives from people's desire to remain free. A close reading of Steinbeck's *The Moon is Down* 84 years after its publication reveals many hard lessons for everyone—from the defense establishment to pacifists and humanitarian actors.

The Moon is Down (1942) examines the human experience of occupation, focusing on both the occupied population and the invaders. The story set the stage for theorizing unarmed resistance two decades later, when those of age during World War II had had some distance from the experience of war.

Steinbeck began writing this novel in the last months of 1941, and it was published in March 1942, just three months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He recounts the occupation of a fictional country resembling Norway. The population discovers within themselves “the greatest strength of a democracy: the strength of free individuals united under leaders [...] who are merely upholders of common values”, writes Donald V. Coers in *John Steinbeck Goes to War: The Moon Is Down as Propaganda* (1991).

American literary critics, inexperienced with occupation, decried the book as naïve and demoralizing. History later confirmed the accuracy of Steinbeck's views on human behavior in such a context. Also confirmed was his idea to inspire through affirming and reflecting back Europeans' real experiences under occupation: this is coherent with Jacques Semelin's theory about resistance and East-West-East communication in *Freedom Over the Airwaves*. Machiavelli himself even would have approved of Steinbeck's story, having noted that democracies are very difficult to conquer. Numerous post-war testimonies of retired German soldiers corroborate that unarmed resistance was a greater challenge for occupying forces than armed resistance.

How could an American novelist have understood occupation on such an intimate level without ever having set foot in 1940s Europe? And why does any of this matter in Europe's security context today? This article seeks to shed light on these questions, drawing on participatory research, in-depth interviews, and archival research conducted from March 2025 to February 2026, and distilling important lessons for key European actors all along the armed/unarmed spectrum.

“How did you know what we were doing, all those tricks we played on the Germans? We thought that it all was secret.”

“I guessed. I put myself in your place and thought what I would do.”



Writing as Nazi occupation was unfolding across Europe, Steinbeck was reflecting in real-time on a resistance that did not involve battlefield scenes. Instead, it involved daily micro-interactions between individuals in the occupied/occupier nexus. Far from good guy/bad guy dichotomies, villager women were sometimes prone to violence, while invaders' evil deeds ultimately cost them their social acceptance, recreation, carnal desire, and other basic human needs. “People, for the most part, are the same wherever they live”, Steinbeck stated bluntly in a post-war interview.

The Moon is Down spread like wildfire across occupied countries, fueled by spontaneous clandestine translation, printing, and distribution. Steinbeck, who had many European friends, somehow sensed deeply how the populations felt about living under the Nazi heel—or perhaps it was just the novelty of getting that granular about something so macro like war.

“I needed the feeling that we tried to do something”

Steinbeck conceived of his tale while working for US governmental agencies specializing in wartime information and intelligence. He came into contact with resistance members who had escaped occupation, making friends with Norwegians, Danish, French, and Dutch people. “Our resistance was not so very important, but it was a good thing that it existed. We needed it, and I needed the feeling that something was... well, that we tried to do something, and I always said, if only you pick into [the Nazis] with pins, [even that] has its effect,” one such escapee told Steinbeck.

Steinbeck also came into contact with William J. Donovan, the “father of American intelligence”, who would go on to found the Central Intelligence Agency. Donovan was known for surrounding himself with artists and literary figures to help outside-the-box thinking on how to boost the morale of anti-Nazi resistance movements. Together they conceived of the idea of a propaganda novel to inspire and validate the underground resistance.

Within months of its release, *The Moon is Down* became popular in Europe, particularly in occupied countries, it was later proven.

People took it upon themselves to translate their own versions, sometimes resulting in multiple language translations popping up simultaneously. Underground printing and distribution went unnoticed by German soldiers for some time. In Denmark, soldiers even unknowingly helped transport the book before later realizing its contents and getting the book banished. The novel spread across Europe, resulting in some 30 editions published during the war. Copies were eventually found in many areas of China and Russia. In total, more than 210 editions have been published to date.

Testimonies from resistance members, collected by Donald V. Coers in the 1980s, showed how Steinbeck validated people’s experiences and instilled hope instead of using fear or stereotypes.



Modern victory and defeat

The Moon is Down presents far-reaching questions for Europe today. How much of victory and defeat is psychological? Should we make room for the psychological in our theory of victory? If so, what are the limitations of this? Militaries know of cognitive warfare, but can populations be trained in this too? If so, how can that be done most effectively? What ethical issues must we work out?

In the past, victory and defeat were clear from body counts and material damage. However, those measures are outdated today. As Bohdan Krotevych, Ukrainian veteran officer and security/intel professional, argues, Russia can absorb high casualties and continue to fight. He suggests that the Western view that loss of manpower will stop Russia reflects a misunderstanding of its military strategy. “This is how wars are lost,” Krotevych concludes.

This strategic miscalculation means virtually no investment today in preparing populations for unarmed resistance—that is, learning how to act, together, not just about media literacy and how to get out of the way in the event of a crisis. Although the resistance in *The Moon is Down* received some outside help near the end, it was primarily self-reliant. Can unarmed resistance strengthen Europe’s security autonomy? Without a doubt, it can at least reduce costs, enhance sustainability in defense, take effect before 2030, and help mobilize populations in a highly inclusive fashion. What’s more, although lacking, we still have far more educational resources on unarmed resistance at our disposal than people did 84 years ago.

Hard lessons for the defense establishment and pacifists alike

Few today have heard of this book, yet its ideas shifted the course of history. Although it is a very different world today, asymmetrical conflict dynamics are overall constant, and the desire for freedom is both universal and timeless.

The history of Steinbeck's book and findings from my independent research in the past year point to many hard lessons for those in defense, civil society, and humanitarian work alike.

For the defense establishment, they are:

In the words of General Jean-Pierre Meyer, stop preparing for yesterday's war. Humans are born with more than one "fighting" capability. While unarmed resistance is not a panacea, it still does not hurt to further examine it.

The term "civilian" means a lot of things. Involve also grassroots civilians, civil society, and other local actors in defense efforts, not just the private sector and elites. Revisit theory of victory to take into account the particularities of Russian-style warfare and occupation, instead of operating on outdated or Western ideas.

For civil society, civil resistance educators, and those driven by pacifism:

Fighting for freedom is close to the heart. People resist as employees, mothers, neighbors, teachers... Contextual learning is necessary to inspire and instruct populations in the methods of unarmed resistance.

Any education and training efforts of a population should strive to connect people to their country's nonviolent histories. Familiarity and commonality, not generality, are key.

Unarmed resistance education and training is an opportunity to connect Ukrainians and Europeans on a human level. Co-creation is key.

Moralizing in times of crisis is a cop-out. The real work happens when you are working endlessly to be relevant and to defend a world that does exist, not a world that you think ought to exist. The true leaders of people are "upholders of common values", not ideologies.

For international actors (humanitarian, civil/military relations):

We urgently need an international definition and international norms of unarmed resistance or civilian-based offense. Nevertheless, know that people will resist even without these, not in a bid for martyrdom but because they simply wish to be free. This makes recognizing and codifying the phenomenon all the more urgent.



Hindsight, foresight

Unarmed resistance is "a narrow, dangerous, uncertain but very real path towards a better world", in the words of French graphic novelist Xavier Dorison in *Le Château des animaux*. What Steinbeck describes in his book is not as a panacea. It was, in fact, Ukraine's only course of action in the first days of the full-scale invasion.

Despite the imperfections of unarmed resistance, I believe humanity has still not discovered a better alternative.

Despite the crushing obstacles to calling attention to this topic, I still believe it is possible to discover your collective power before an aggressor has reached your doorstep.

Despite the darkness of the hour in Ukraine and across Europe today, freedom and decency will return. Our memory of our ancient liberty will not let us rest.



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CIVILIAN-BASED DEFENSE: THE MISSING PILLAR OF 21ST CENTURY SECURITY

Jamila Raqib
February 24, 2026



In a world marked by renewed invasion, democratic backsliding, coups, and hybrid warfare, governments are pouring vast resources into military deterrence. Yet one of the most powerful—and underdeveloped—tools of national defense remains largely absent from security policy: civilian-based defense. This is surprising, in light of the increasingly recognized role the Ukrainian people have played in resisting invasion and other forms of Russian aggression.

It is time to revisit this concept—not as a framework confined to academic debate, but as a serious policy option grounded in decades of research and historical and contemporary experience. This topic is not aspirational; the “quiet frontline” of civil society and ordinary people are a force to be reckoned with when their freedom is under fire.



Civilian-based defense rests on a basic insight: defense is necessary. Societies must be able to protect their people, institutions, and freedoms. Denouncing war is not enough. If a population lacks credible means of defense, it remains vulnerable to invasion, coups, and authoritarian consolidation.

But defense does not have to mean military force alone.

Military power can sometimes deter aggression. It can also escalate conflict, risk catastrophic destruction, or prove ineffective against adversaries with superior military might. And in cases of internal authoritarian takeover, military institutions themselves are often captured or neutralized.

Civilian-based defense offers a different logic. Instead of defending territory with weapons, it defends society by making a country ungovernable to an aggressor or usurper. It shifts the focus of defense from controlling territory to controlling cooperation. Because political power ultimately depends on obedience, collaboration, and institutional compliance, a society prepared to withdraw those forms of support can deny aggressors the ability to rule.

Gene Sharp, whose work shaped the modern study of strategic nonviolent resistance, spent decades developing this concept and coined the term “transarmament”—not disarmament, but a gradual shift from reliance on military weapons systems to organized civilian-based deterrence and defense. The aim was not to eliminate defense, but to redesign it: to build a system in which the population itself becomes the primary instrument of national resilience.



One of the most instructive cases is Czechoslovakia in 1968. When Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops invaded to crush the Prague Spring reforms, the Czechoslovak army did not mount significant military resistance; soldiers were ordered to remain in their barracks. The Soviets expected the operation to be swift. They estimated it would take four days to overwhelm the Czechoslovak armed forces, suppress any military opposition, and install a compliant puppet government.

They were completely unprepared for the kind of resistance they encountered.

Citizens refused cooperation. Underground radio broadcasts coordinated messaging and instructions. Street signs were removed to slow troop movements. Workers withheld collaboration. Officials resisted forming a puppet government. For days—and then months—the Soviets struggled to consolidate control.

The resistance was largely improvised. There was no preexisting civilian-based defense doctrine, no coordinated training, no contingency planning. Yet it significantly disrupted the invasion and delayed political consolidation for eight months.

The strategic implication is clear: if improvised noncooperation could achieve this much, what might be possible with advance preparation?



Civilian-based defense (CBD) is not improvised protest. It is a preplanned, institutionalized component of national defense policy.

It involves preparing the population, civil society institutions, media, local governments, and professional associations to:

Refuse cooperation with occupying forces or illegitimate authorities
Maintain parallel institutions and communications

Protect the legitimacy of constitutional governance
Undermine the morale and reliability of aggressors' troops and administrators

CBD draws on the documented methods of nonviolent action—protest, noncooperation, and intervention—catalogued in Sharp's well-known list of 198 Methods of Nonviolent Action. These range from strikes and boycotts to the creation of parallel institutions and alternative media. Since Sharp's time, social scientists have in fact documented more than 400 tactics.

Crucially, this approach is grounded in an analysis of political power, that regimes depend on the

cooperation of key pillars: bureaucrats, media, workers, security forces, economic elites, and the broader population. If those pillars withdraw obedience and assistance, even a heavily armed regime faces severe limitations.

CBD therefore shifts the focus of defense from destroying an opponent's forces to eroding their capacity to rule. The question is not whether societies will defend themselves, but how. If effective civilian-based defense can be demonstrated and institutionalized, it can offer governments a real policy choice beyond just military deterrence and a path forward capable of denying aggressors their objectives.



Contemporary threats are not limited to conventional invasion. In many of the risks democracies now face, military power offers limited protection. Tanks cannot prevent electoral manipulation. Fighter jets cannot secure institutional loyalty. Nuclear deterrence does not stop constitutional erosion. Yet civilian resistance can.

At the same time, research shows that contemporary movements defending human rights worldwide are proliferating but succeeding at lower rates than in previous decades. Authoritarian regimes have adapted. Repression is more sophisticated. Disinformation campaigns, digital manipulation, and emerging technologies—including AI-enabled surveillance and influence operations—have expanded the tools of control.

Any observer of nonviolent conflict and unarmed resistance can clearly see that the Kremlin understands the dynamics of this form of strategic competition. Their methods include, for example, removing opportunities for Ukrainians to fraternize with Russian soldiers or to produce defections; the Russian soldiers are incentivized with awards for committing the most brutal acts. That the Kremlin and other authoritarian entities understand these dynamics, and are working to undermine them makes strategic planning and institutional support even more critical.



For policymakers and institutional actors, the question is not whether people will resist attacks on their societies; they already do. The question is whether their resistance will be isolated, reactive, and vulnerable—or strategic, coordinated, and resilient.

Concrete steps could include:

Capacity building
Invest in training civil servants, educators, media professionals, and local governments in crisis noncooperation protocols. Just as military units rehearse contingency plans, civilian institutions can rehearse democracy defense and noncooperation scenarios.

Norm-setting in security forums
Major security institutions—such as regional alliances and global

forums—can formally recognize organized nonviolent defense as a legitimate component of national security. This signals that civilian resistance is not fringe activism, but a serious defensive capability.

Legal and policy frameworks
Governments can adopt legislation that protects the right to protest, shields civil society from arbitrary criminalization, and defines procedures for institutional noncooperation in the event of unconstitutional seizure of power.

Digital and communications infrastructure
Support for secure communications, alternative broadcasting systems, and decentralized information networks can prevent authoritarian actors from monopolizing narrative control.

Youth integration
Young people are often at the forefront of nonviolent struggles. Integrating youth councils and intergenerational mentorship into security dialogues strengthens democratic resilience and innovation.

These measures are not symbolic. They build what might be called a “civil resistance muscle”—a society's latent capacity to respond quickly and cohesively to threats.

Ethical and strategic advantages

Civilian-based defense does not promise a world without conflict. It accepts that acute conflicts will occur. But it seeks to wage them in ways that:

- Reduce reliance on violence
- Preserve social fabric and infrastructure
- Strengthen democratic agency
- Increase the legitimacy of the defending society.

Moreover, a society trained in civilian defense is not merely reactive. The same capacities that deter coups and occupations, organization, solidarity, independent institutions, also strengthen democracy in normal times.

Despite its documented history, civilian-based defense remains largely absent from mainstream security doctrine. It receives a fraction of the research funding and policy attention devoted to military innovation.

This omission is a strategic liability. Authoritarian regimes understand the power of organized civil resistance—often better than democracies do. That is why they criminalize NGOs, restrict media, surveil activists, and label protest as extremism or even terrorism. When democratic governments neglect civilian-based defense,

they leave a vacuum—one that authoritarians are eager to fill.

Security in the 21st century must mean more than territorial defense. It must include the protection of democratic institutions, civil liberties, and human dignity.

Civilian-based defense offers a practical pathway to do so. And it may be one of the most important security innovations still waiting to be fully embraced.

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The transformation of modern conflicts reflects the profound crisis of the international order. The intensification of hybrid warfare—the combined use of non-military tactics, tech tools, and multidimensional strategies operating in the so-called “grey zone”—challenges traditional security frames and constrains state responses. Instruments such as disinformation, cyber warfare, and economic coercion do not operate in isolation; they aim to destabilize from within, eroding social cohesion and paralyzing institutional responses. These dynamics operate simultaneously across the military, political, economic, and cognitive domains, blurring the boundaries between war and peace.

The diffuse and protracted nature of contemporary threats requires more comprehensive security approaches capable of articulating both institutional and civilian action. This implies a cultural and structural transformation of defense policy, incorporating society as an essential actor rather than a passive object of protection. From this perspective, civilian-based defense emerges as a necessary strategic concept of national defense based on systematically organized, prepared, and sustained nonviolent resistance by the civilian population to deter and confront external aggression or internal authoritarian takeover. From a deterrence standpoint, it strengthens a society’s capacity to become socially ungovernable to an aggressor, economically non-exploitable, politically unmanageable, and culturally unsubduable.

This article examines this paradigm through the case

THE DNA OF CIVIL RESISTANCE IN UKRAINE: KEYS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVILIAN-BASED DEFENSE SYSTEMS

Felipe Daza
February 27, 2026

of civil resistance in Ukraine since 2022 and the community resilience that has sustained defense efforts in the face of Russia's full-scale invasion. Beyond the strictly military dimension, the mass mobilization of civilian actors has played a decisive role in constraining occupation, managing local crises, and maintaining national cohesion—dynamics widely documented in scholarship on nonviolent resistance and society-based defense. The evidence supporting these findings I have conducted in Ukraine since April 2022, including more than 185 semi-structured interviews and the documentation of over 300 civil resistance actions.

The analysis addresses three central questions: (1) What has been the role and impact of the civilian population in response to invasion within a hybrid warfare context? (2) What social, organizational, and institutional dynamics enable the development and sustainability of a mass nonviolent resistance movement? (3) What are the limits and opportunities in the interaction between civil society and public authorities—including military structures—within a comprehensive defense framework?



The tip of the iceberg: Role and impact of civil resistance amid large-scale combat operations

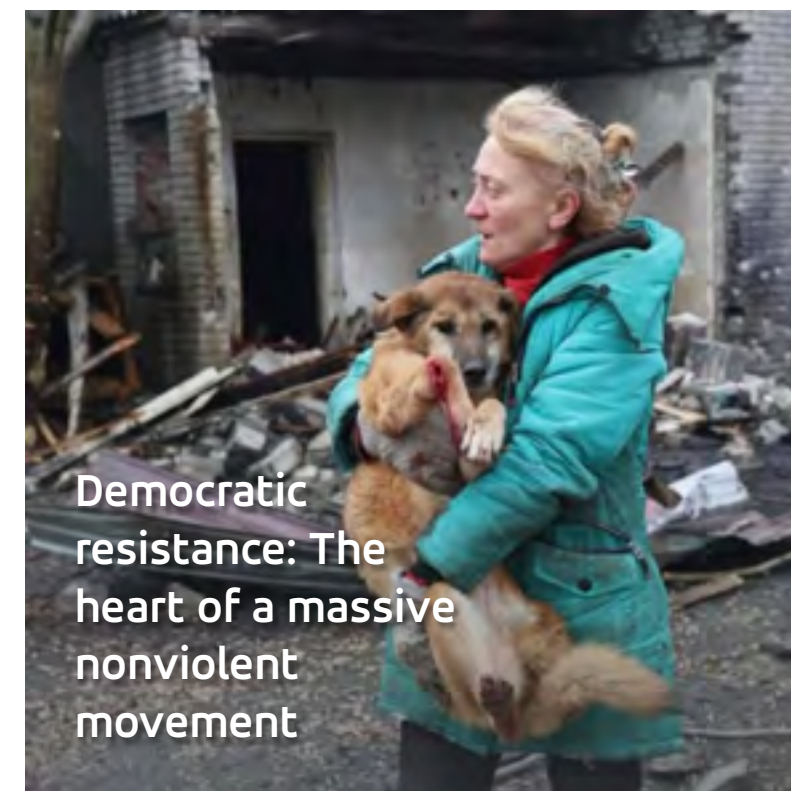
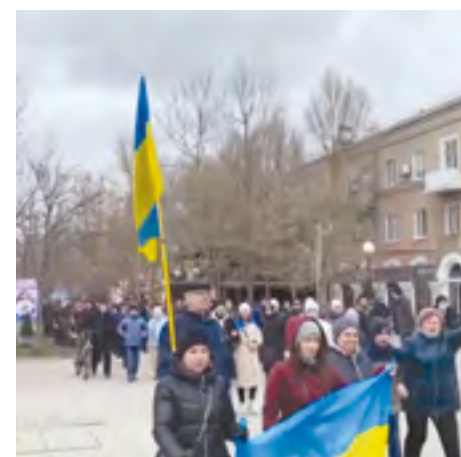
To date, numerous scholars have documented—and continue to investigate—the stages, impact and evolution of nonviolent civil resistance in Ukraine. Yet even extensive documentation reveals only the tip of a deeper, decentralized infrastructure of popular power. One of the first lessons is that civil resistance was mass-based and adopted multiple forms in response to the emerging crises triggered by the invasion.

In the early phases, civilians defended critical infrastructure and strategic locations. On March 2, 2022, residents of the small town of Enerhodar erected barricades to prevent the occupation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Meanwhile, in the north, workers at the Chernobyl nuclear waste management facilities prevented Russian occupation forces from entering key installations, remaining at their posts for weeks without rotation to reduce risks to nuclear safety systems.

Urban centres became inhospitable terrain for occupying forces due to sustained civilian mobilization. In Kherson, daily demonstrations featuring national symbols and physical interposition in front of military convoys disrupted occupation routines; in Svatove, Luhansk region, rapid citizen mobilization, through monitoring and information-sharing mechanisms, obstructed the occupiers from seizing control of public buildings; in towns across the Chernihiv region, residents blocked tanks advancing towards Kyiv. These actions contributed to buying time for the reorganization of territorial defense and mitigating damage to critical infrastructure.

Beyond visible protest, everyday resistance evolved into structured forms of non-cooperation. In Melitopol and other occupied areas, teachers refused to implement imposed curricula, workers declined to construct fortifications, shopkeepers limited supplies to occupation forces, and public officials refused collaboration. These acts of disobedience undermined the institutionalization of occupation by depriving it of administrative capacity, legitimacy, and social obedience.

In parallel, this agency was rooted in the assumption of individual and collective responsibility—consistent with Gandhian nonviolent principles such as self-sacrifice and self-rule (swaraj)—enabling resistance against a militarily superior actor. This translated into the co-production of public services: humanitarian aid, healthcare, education, and local security, often in coordination with municipal authorities. Where administrations collapsed, residents developed alternative forms of governance to ensure basic public security and humanitarian aid provision. In besieged cities such as Sumy, decentralized communication systems enabled evacuation corridors and the delivery of medical supplies.



The defense of collective identity and the national political project have constituted a central ideological framework for mass mobilization. For large sectors of the population, the war represents a decisive moment in a longer historical process of emancipation from imperial domination that has constrained language, culture, and political development. The construction of a civic nation anchored in democratic and pluralist values operates as a normative horizon guiding organization and mobilization. Civil resistance therefore unfolds along a dual axis: contributing to defense against military aggression while simultaneously reinforcing democratic state-building.

The emergence of a vast volunteer movement—operating both in rear areas and near front lines—involved an unprecedented exercise in community organization. Physical and digital coordination hubs enabled decision-making, resource distribution, and conflict resolution based on trust, solidarity, and shared responsibility. The systematic reproduction of these principles formed the movement's DNA, reinforcing democratic practices through bottom-up mobilization.

Organizationally, the Ukrainian case mirrors core features of modern nonviolent movements, characterized by distributed coordination hubs and horizontal networks. This diffuse character enhances resilience under repression, as the detention or intimidation of prominent figures does not dismantle the broader movement. In several occupied

territories, when NGO leaders or local officials were detained or disappeared, new leaders emerged organically from community networks. Resistance did not depend on individual personalities but on a social ecology capable of reproducing leadership and collective agency.

Civil resistance has also been marked by decentralization, local rootedness, and adaptability. Ukrainian society has shifted between public protest and clandestine organization, between humanitarian support and post-liberation reconstruction, demonstrating strategic flexibility in volatile environments. These dynamics did not emerge from centralized planning but from decentralized informal networks oriented towards action. Ukraine's self-government practices, rooted in historical traditions, have contributed to a political culture in which initiative and self-organization are deeply embedded. This cultural substratum facilitates spontaneity and rapid decentralized response, crucial in hybrid warfare contexts where information is fragmented and timing is decisive.

Cooperation between local authorities and civil society proved equally vital. In frontline regions where instructions were unclear or delayed, civilians and local self-government bodies co-produced public services and organized crisis responses. Post-2014 decentralization reforms strengthened local administrative capacity and leadership, creating institutional infrastructures that could be activated rapidly under crisis conditions.



Roadmap toward civilian-based defense in Europe

Ukraine's highly sophisticated "civic shield" provides a roadmap for European states that may soon see the value in developing a credible and functional civilian-based defense. The main endeavor is to create and reinforce the structural conditions that allow civil resistance dynamics to flourish. The first step is identifying the normative core of what is being, or should be, defended. Sustained mobilization depends on a shared moral conviction. When democracy loses legitimacy, social justice erodes and vulnerable groups are marginalized. Thus, the collective willingness to assume risk in defense of the political order declines. Rebuilding inclusive, equitable, and socially just democratic frameworks is therefore not merely an ethical imperative — it is a strategic necessity. In this context, nonviolent action provides both a practical response to emerging crises and a space for reimagining a more just and democratic "horizon of the future".

Second, investment in social agency and community power-building is essential. Mass training in civilian protection, community organization, crisis management, negotiation under occupation, and nonviolent discipline expands the repertoire of collective action available in hybrid warfare scenarios. This requires allocating resources to resilient civil infrastructures: local networks, youth centers, secure digital platforms, and autonomous coordination spaces. The objective is not the militarization of society but the strengthening of its capacity for self-organization.

Third, generational and geographic cohesion matter. Ukraine's large-scale youth mobilization was built upon years of regional exchange, volunteering, and civic socialization. Horizontal solidarity and interregional bonds reinforce national resilience. Across Europe, mobility, volunteering, and youth cooperation program developed since 2014 provide a potential foundation for fostering democratic identities and transnational social capital relevant in cross-border hybrid threat environments.

A fourth lesson involves recognizing and integrating the civilian dimension at strategic levels of national defense. Traditional paternalistic views of civilians as passive victims or auxiliary actors underestimate their strategic significance. In asymmetric conflicts marked by polarization tactics, society becomes a central battlefield. Including community leaders and civil society actors in crisis management, threat analysis, and preventive planning enhances innovation and adaptive capacity.

Finally, effective civil-based defense promotes strategic autonomy. Its strength lies in social deterrence — the capacity to render occupation politically costly, administratively unworkable, and morally unsustainable. This combines moral and strategic dimensions of nonviolent action. In Ukraine, numerous local negotiations secured the release of detainees, enabled safe passage through checkpoints, and prevented consolidation of occupation. The case of Slavutych, the city of Chernobyl workers, is illustrative: following mass mobilization demonstrating the population's potential ingovernability, local actors negotiated troop withdrawal and the release of the detained mayor. Such episodes demonstrate how organized collective pressure can generate rational incentives for restraint.



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UKRAINE'S RESILIENCE MODEL: PURPOSEFUL STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION OVER KEEPING THE SOCIALLY VALUABLE CORE

Oleksandra Keudel
Oksana Huss
March 3, 2026

“Resilience to deliberately engineered crises like aggression depends less on flexibly linking government action with civil society, business, and local capacities.”

Since 2022, Russia's war of aggression has unleashed overlapping crises—attacks on civilians, destruction of infrastructure, mass displacement, and economic downturn. Many assume such emergencies demand strict central control. Ukraine's experience shows the opposite: resilience has come from polycentric governance—state and non-state actors working together, drawing on local knowledge, pooling resources, and strengthening social cohesion.

Municipalities have been central to this model. Resilience here means more than managing crises caused by the invasion. It's about preserving the core functions of institutions while adapting everything else. Many municipalities maintained regular administration and decision-making processes through democratically legitimate collegial bodies. Under occupation, some relocated operations to other municipalities under government control and maintained networks to serve their displaced residents nationwide. In practice, local governments upheld their public mandate and democratic legitimacy while becoming crisis hubs: organizing shelters, coordinating aid, ensuring education and social services, and linking government action with civil society, volunteers, and businesses.



Resilience is not the same as crisis management

Resilience is often framed as government preparedness and risk reduction: disaster plans, clear responsibilities, government-directed action. That works for short, sudden shocks like floods or technical failures. But it falls short when crises are prolonged, cross multiple sectors, or are deliberately engineered, as in Russia's war against Ukraine. In these conditions, resilience depends less on advance planning and hierarchical steering and more on flexibly linking government action with civil society, business, and local capacities. Indeed, Ukraine shows that resilience does not necessarily come from perfect preparation. Before the Russian full-scale invasion, few municipalities had contingency plans or supplies in place in case of war. Instead, resilience emerged through action: coordinating volunteers, involving affected groups, and adapting existing structures to new demands. Crisis management focuses on short-term stabilization—quick decisions, damage control, restoring order. Resilience building goes further: it asks how societies can preserve their core capacity to act, learn, and maintain trust under sustained pressure. Both are essential, but resilience is what ensures that institutions and communities endure beyond the immediate emergency.

How stakeholder coordination helps sustain societal resilience

Ukraine's resilience rests on foundations built before the war. Decentralization since 2014 has given local governments political and fiscal strength while opening space for civil society and business to participate in local decision-making. Under wartime conditions, this practice of participation became the backbone of four mechanisms that turn short-term crisis response into long-term resilience.

Knowledge circulation

Formal expertise alone isn't enough in fast-moving crises. Municipalities tapped local, often tacit knowledge from volunteers and affected groups. Information centers, hotlines, and messenger groups provided both updates and feedback. In Novovolynsk, a volunteer hub helped organize humanitarian logistics by leveraging volunteers' practical project management expertise and international networks to coordinate aid.

Resource mobilization

War deepened fiscal and organizational bottlenecks, so municipalities leaned on partnerships with non-state stakeholders to mobilize additional resources. In Lviv, the IT cluster

worked with the city to establish the UNBROKEN rehabilitation center. In rural Novoiarichiv, entrepreneurs offered "social taxis" to replace missing public transport. Resilience emerged when municipalities acted as coordinators of distributed resources rather than as sole providers.

Innovation and experimentation

Many solutions were pragmatic adaptations of existing structures and instruments. In Fastiv, the youth council, originally focused on youth policy, assumed the humanitarian aid coordination, using its volunteer networks. Civil emergency plans proved useful with adjustments, and digital tools became central. In Zhytomyr, displaced persons created chatbots to record their skills and needs, which directly informed municipal decisions, including hiring displaced people.

Social cohesion

Crises intensify social tensions, especially when resources are scarce. Municipalities used participation formats to strengthen cohesion and moderate conflicts between locals and displaced persons. In Uman, authorities paired assistance for displaced people with open invitations to all residents, preventing narratives of envy or exclusion. Participation here serves less for co-decision-making than for legitimization, fairness, and the stabilization of social relations.



resources, encourage limited experimentation, and strengthen social cohesion. The goal is always to protect the core capacities or functions that societies value, even under different threat scenarios.

Resilience has limits

Ukraine's experience shows that resilience is not endless. Adaptability depends on available resources, social forces, and time. Amid permanent Russian escalation, many solutions remain fragile and difficult to sustain. Resilience is therefore a process of stabilization, learning, and institutional consolidation, not a one-time fix. That is why Ukrainian experience is instructive: not as a blueprint, but as a rich example of how societies can remain capable of acting under extreme conditions, and where that capacity reaches its limits. At the same time, it makes clear that resilience should not replace the primary goal of stopping Russia's aggression.

What Ukraine teaches about European resilience

Ukraine's experience offers lessons for Europe, though it cannot and should not be copied wholesale. Russia's war shows that many crises, such as infrastructure failures, supply shortages, or population displacement, may appear to be disaster situations but differ fundamentally because risks are not random; they are deliberately created by an adversary. This means the resilience policy must be strategic: communication, coordination, and participation should aim to circulate knowledge, mobilize



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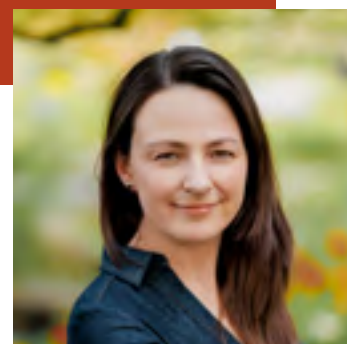
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NARRATIVE POWER IN NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE: HOW THE UKRAINIAN DIASPORA IS CHANGING THE STRATEGIES

Yan St-Pierre
March 9, 2026

“The narrative shifted to what others can learn from Ukraine, emphasizing strength rather than weakness, seeking out partnerships rather than donors.”



As the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine enters its fifth year, Ukrainian resistance has mostly been viewed through the prism of its military capabilities. Yet, Ukrainian resistance goes far beyond the battlefield fronts, and the Ukrainian diaspora has played an essential role in the resistance by countering narratives, channeling resources, and mobilizing non-Ukrainian actors to their cause through protests, lobbying, academia, culture, and social media.

The strategic and tactical importance of the diaspora’s contribution grew as the lessons from the shortcomings of Ukraine’s empathy-framed diplomatic narrative and the growing “Ukraine fatigue” were acknowledged. The diaspora plays a key role in the successful adjustments made to overcome these challenges.

This articles examines how the nature of diaspora activity has evolved since 2022, its impact on resistance activities, and the lessons other nonviolent movements might take away from the Ukrainian experience.

Adapting to lessons learned

A number of challenges have shaped the Ukrainian diaspora’s strategy over the years. First, many countries, particularly in Europe, have a long-standing, beneficial relationship with Russia and were initially unwilling to buy into the Ukrainian narrative. Secondly, many countries in the Global South see Western support for Ukraine as evidence of double standards in conflict assistance. Third, as the war in Ukraine continued, growing “Ukraine fatigue” in Europe and North America began affecting whatever political and military support had been successfully mobilized up to that point.

In 2022 and 2023, the focus was primarily on building support for Ukraine by underlining the suffering of the Ukrainian people and portraying Russia as evil and treacherous, while following the government-led narrative of dangling carrots, such as wheat or energy. From early to mid-2024 forward, Ukrainian diaspora shifted from pleading discourse to one that highlights Ukrainian contributions, ranging from the military to the academic. This evolution affected all facets of Ukraine’s lobbying, for example in Mali, at fora such as the Paris Defense and Strategy Forum, political and artistic events such as the Cafe Kyiv in Berlin, or at film festivals such as the Berlinale.

The diaspora was instrumental in changing this situation by promoting the success and positive contributions Ukrainians are making in various domains. The most prominent example of this change is how the diaspora is promoting Ukraine’s drone technology and its ability to counter disinformation not only online but through the development of tools that increase resilience against such threats. In both cases, the narrative shifted to what others can learn from Ukraine, how its knowledge can strengthen its allies and be applied elsewhere. It is about emphasizing strength rather than weakness, on creating partnerships rather than seeking donors.

This change reverberated in other areas where the diaspora is active. In academia, it led to the establishment of new think tanks and contributing to research projects that use the lessons from the battlefield and apply them to both the war in Ukraine and other fields, such as medicine, economy, psychology, AI, crisis and political communication, geography, or aerospace. Culturally, the diaspora promoted the talent of Ukrainian artists beyond the narrative of the war, notably using digital art forms that appeal to a younger and broader public and have a global reach. Economically, the diaspora’s narrative was able to create new markets for Ukrainian products by focusing on the quality, reliability and affordability of the products and the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Ukrainian industries.

This approach gained greater importance as the rhetoric surrounding Ukrainians outside Ukraine became more negative, both organically and fueled by Russian-based propaganda, like the Paris “bed bug plague” allegedly brought by Ukrainian refugees to France.

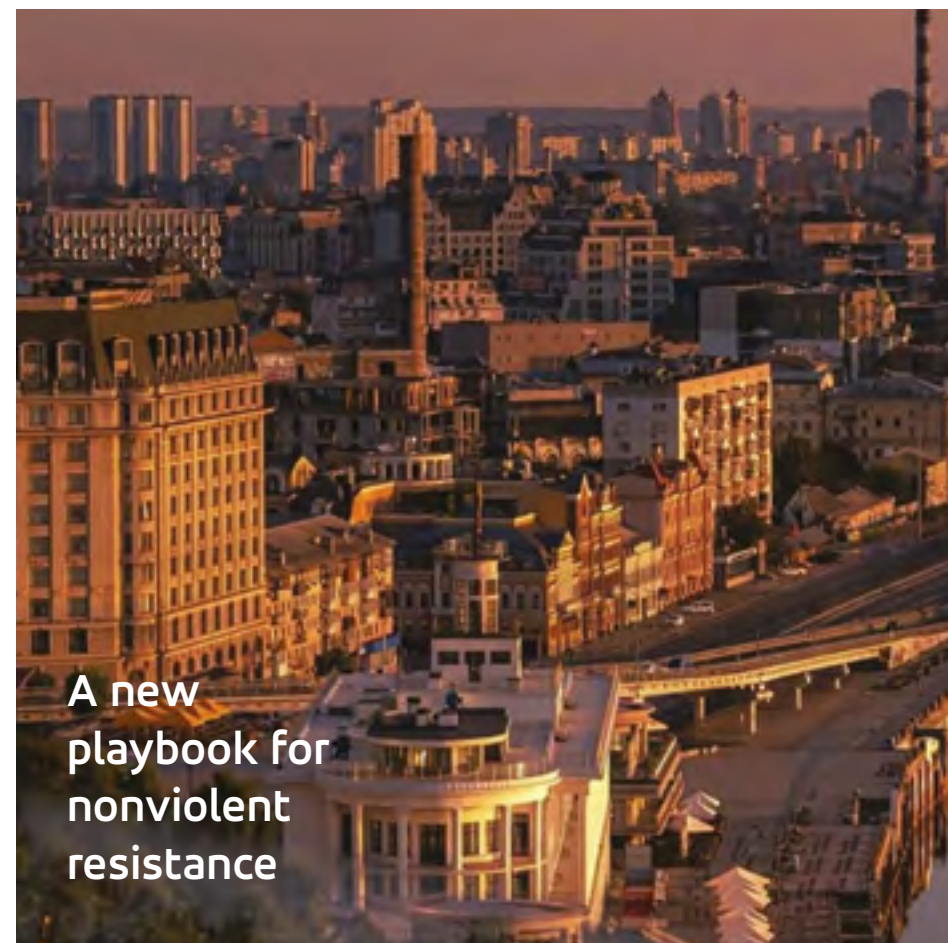


How the diaspora sets the narrative tone

The impact of the narrative change is significant both inside and outside Ukraine and in the short and long term. Financially it created new supply lines and revenue flows as well as long-term business partnerships, as recent economic reports suggest. Politically, it allowed the Ukrainian government to adapt its communications and diplomatic strategies, and to become more effective as it took into account the feedback and initiatives of the diaspora. This helped Ukrainian foreign policy representatives improve their overall approach, especially with countries with whom they had a very limited or poor relationship. The diaspora helped provide the tools, the products and the approach to deal at eye level and to project strength, power, and reliability in the long term.

Socially, the asset-focused discourse helps counteract the “Ukraine fatigue” and growing negative political instrumentation of Ukrainian refugees, while ensuring that the lobbying efforts for support remain well-received and of interest. This is particularly true in Europe, where the diaspora is instrumental in mitigating the negative effects of the Trump

administration’s fluctuating position on Ukraine. It does so by ensuring that European decisionmakers understand that investing in Ukraine’s resistance equates investing in Europe’s security and future, and therefore continue to look for ways to compensate for the losses incurred by the reduction in US support to Ukraine.



A new playbook for nonviolent resistance

For the world’s nonviolent movements for freedom, and the fields of defense and security in general, the work of the Ukrainian diaspora represents a new model of support and involvement. Whereas historically, the appeals were largely limited to financial support and lobbying efforts, the Ukrainian diaspora today mobilizes broader support, compensates for the weaknesses of governmental policies, creates strategic and tactical shifts, as well as strong opportunities and assets in the short and long term, i.e. during and beyond the conflict period.

More importantly, it shows an adaptability and a sociopolitical awareness that mitigates topic fatigue and allows it to maintain traction for its efforts. This diaspora is proactive rather than reactive in its resistance efforts, which in turn strengthens the resilience and engagement capabilities and capacities for unarmed resistance.

Other anti-colonial movements of the 21st century can learn from the Ukrainian diaspora’s truly global reach as a protagonist of unarmed resistance and from the impact it’s having on the multiple fronts of the war in Ukraine. The diaspora’s involvement is setting a new standard for diaspora-driven, unarmed resistance strategies and mobilization capabilities—a standard with the potential to be emulated anywhere in the world.

Yan St-Pierre is a political violence analyst with three decades of international experience. Since 2013, he is the CEO of MOSECON GmbH, where he advises heads of state and government, policymakers, NGOs, and private companies on developing counter-terrorism and security strategies that reflect complex on-the-ground realities. In addition to his academic work, he has extensive field experience in counter-terrorism and security initiatives, particularly in Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. He is also an author for media as well as a guest lecturer at European universities.

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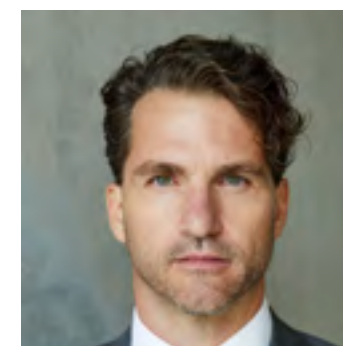
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THE ANATOMY OF NATIONAL SURVIVAL: AGENCY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN UKRAINIAN DEFENSE

Col. Andrii Ordynovych (ret.)
March 12, 2026



“To withstand Russian aggression, populations need civilian resistance education and training, and exercises of different scenarios of public survival.”

Russia’s war against Ukraine is widely described as a war of attrition, fought not only on the battlefield, but across political, economic, social, and informational domains. In such a war, national survival depends on more than the strength of the armed forces. It also depends on whether society itself can withstand prolonged pressure, adapt under extreme conditions, and recover while the conflict is still ongoing. In Ukraine, civil society has become a decisive factor in this struggle.

Russia’s aggression has always aimed beyond just territorial gain. Its goals include undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty and identity, forcibly reshaping the European security order, and weakening democratic governance. These



aims are pursued through a broad strategy often called “3D”: discrediting political and military leaders, destabilizing society, and demoralizing the defense forces. This strategy has been evident since 2007, after the proclamation of Putin’s famous speech at the Munich Security Conference, and intensified significantly after the full-scale invasion in 2022.

To advance these aims, Russia has relied on a mix of military and non-military tools: military pressure and occupation, forced passportization and deportations, suppression of language and culture, disinformation campaigns, psychological operations, and the manipulation of corruption narratives. These actions are designed not only to defeat Ukraine militarily but to exhaust and fragment society, to erode trust, cohesion, and the will to resist. In this sense, Ukrainian civil society has been a direct target of the war.

Closing urgent capability gaps



Ukrainian civil society has responded to this unprovoked and unjustified Russian war of aggression by applying a comprehensive, multi-layered approach. Its actions have ranged from large-scale volunteer mobilization in support of the Defense Forces of Ukraine during the initial stages of

the invasion, to strengthening the resilience of the defense industrial base, advocating for the critical operational needs of the security and defense forces, investigating the violation and circumvention of international sanctions imposed on Russia, and conducting human rights and community support initiatives. Through these efforts, Ukrainian civil society has demonstrated a notable level of organizational capacity and maturity.

Since 2014, and especially since the full-scale invasion in 2022, millions of Ukrainians have contributed money, time, skills, and expertise to support Ukrainian defense. Surveys suggest that between 79 and 86 percent of the population has participated in some form of support activity, including donations, volunteering, and fundraising. These efforts have financed humanitarian aid, community assistance, and equipment for the Defense Forces, effectively creating a parallel support system alongside the state. Large volunteer organizations such as Come Back Alive and the Serhiy Prytula Foundation have raised substantial funds to procure equipment, including drones and protective gear, for frontline Defense forces.

Their work illustrates how civil society has helped close urgent capability gaps while maintaining transparency and public trust. At the same time, smaller volunteer networks have supported logistics, evacuation, and basic needs, often responding faster than formal institutions in rapidly changing conditions.



Keeping souls alive

Civil society has also played a crucial role in the information domain. Activists and NGOs have worked to counter disinformation, expose Russian psychological operations, and maintain access to reliable information. Organizations such as the Molnar Intelligence Institute, and the Snake Island Institute have contributed open-source intelligence, analytical products, and technology testing that support both domestic resilience and international advocacy. This informational resistance has been essential in preserving public morale and sustaining global attention to the war.

Beyond immediate resistance, civil society has taken on responsibilities related to care, recovery, and social cohesion. Ukrainian communities became the first line of crisis response, particularly at the local level. Territorial communities organized shelters, supported internally displaced persons, assisted local businesses, and coordinated humanitarian aid. In many cases, they acted as decentralized crisis-management hubs, demonstrating that resilience is built locally, not imposed from above.

Rehabilitation and medical support have become another critical area of civic engagement. New centers such as NEXT STEP Ukraine, UNBROKEN, Superhumans Center, and other rehabilitation initiatives have emerged to address the needs of wounded civilians and soldiers. These institutions, alongside hundreds of hospitals and healthcare sites damaged or repurposed by the war, reflect society's capacity to care for its members while under attack. This form of resilience is inseparable from resistance: it sustains the people who make continued resistance possible.



Sustaining the country despite war

Ukrainian activists work actively to safeguard access to objective information, transparency, accountability, and democratic participation—key pillars of societal resistance and resilience, and essential conditions for Ukraine’s future recovery. Organizations such as the Independent Anti-Corruption Commission (NAKO), led by Olena Tregub, monitor corruption risks and promote transparency and accountability in support of Ukraine’s national defense, security, and sovereignty.

At the same time, the International Center for Ukrainian Victory and the National Interests Advocacy Network (ANTS), under the leadership of former Member of Parliament Hanna Hopko, pursue accountability for Russian aggression, while the Anti-Corruption Action Center, led by Daria Kalyniuk and Vitalii Shabunin, advocates for more effective governance at both the local and central levels.

International support has been a vital enabler of Ukraine’s resistance and resilience. Political, economic, humanitarian, and military assistance from Western governments and societies has strengthened Ukraine’s capacity to defend itself and sustain its population. This support has been most effective where it has complemented, rather than substituted, the agency of Ukrainian institutions and civil society. The Ukrainian people remain deeply grateful for this solidarity.

What comes first, resilience or resistance? Collective agency

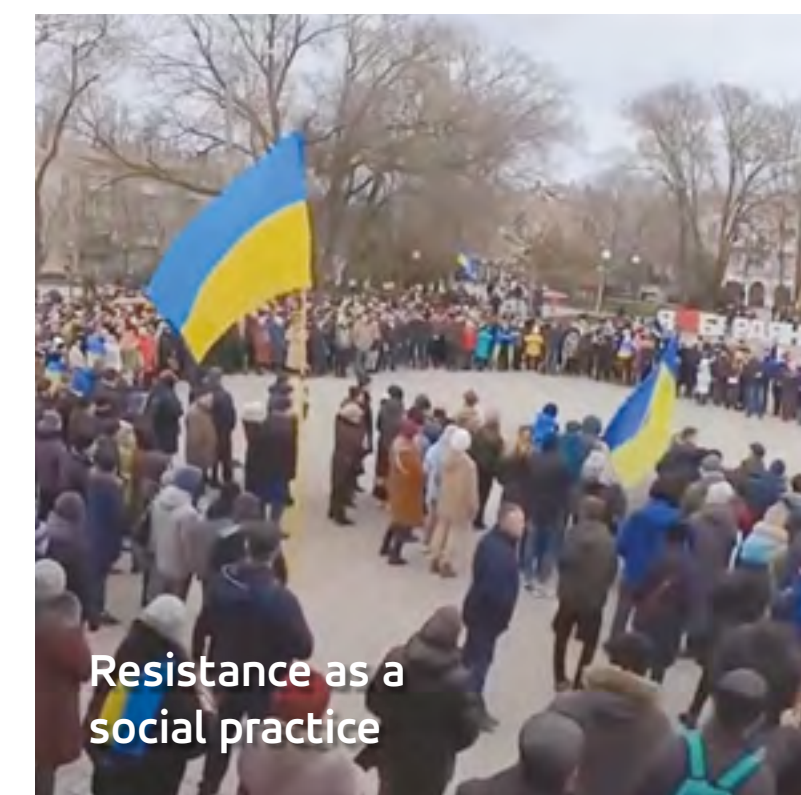
These contemporary efforts are not accidental. Ukraine’s strong civil society is rooted in a long tradition of collective self-governance and civic participation. Across different historical periods, Ukrainian society has repeatedly developed mechanisms for collective decision-making, accountability, and community-level organization in times of crisis or external threat.

Early forms of participation can be traced to the popular assemblies (veche) of Kyivan Rus (10th–13th centuries), which functioned as collective decision-making bodies in several major cities, including Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Halych. Although political power rested with princes, these assemblies enabled communities to approve leaders, negotiate alliances, and influence local governance.

Later, the spread of Magdeburg Law across Ukrainian cities between the 14th and 18th centuries further institutionalized local self-governance. Towns elected councils, burgomasters, and judges, and exercised authority over taxation, trade, and local courts. This tradition strengthened civic responsibility and embedded participatory governance at the urban level.

Democratic practices were even more pronounced in the Cossack political tradition. The Zaporizhian Sich functioned as one of the most participatory political systems in early modern Europe, with elected leadership, annual accountability, and major decisions taken through open assemblies (radas). Similarly, within the Cossack Hetmanate, both national and local leaders were elected, and authority was closely tied to community consent.

At the grassroots level, rural communities also practiced forms of self-rule through village assemblies and elected elders, managing land use, taxation, and dispute resolution. Together, these traditions reinforced a culture of collective responsibility and bottom-up organization that continues to shape Ukrainian civil society today.



Resistance as a social practice

Modern wars are not won by weapons and doctrines alone. They are won by societies that remain organized, motivated, and united under pressure. Ukrainian civil society has demonstrated that resistance is not only an armed act but a collective social practice, expressed through volunteering, care, accountability, and mutual support. People play many roles, whether auxiliary to military force or as unarmed defenders exercising a very peculiar force: people power.



What can Europe do for Ukraine and for itself?

Ukraine has learned some hard lessons. First, the National Defense and Security Council, Ministry of Defense, and other executive bodies should not have had to rely purely on volunteer energy, spontaneous civic courage, and sacrifice. If they had adopted a doctrinal framework of civilian-based defense—a National Civil Resilience Strategy, a Law on National Resistance, and explicit roles for civil society networks in the Strategic National Defense Plan—our civic shield would have had a better starting position.

Secondly, war fatigue after 2014 could have been mitigated by improved civilian-based defense literacy. Beyond digital security, counter-information, and first aid medical help, efforts were and are also needed in civilian resistance education and training and exercises of different scenarios of public survival.

Lastly, Ukrainian authorities' fear of

provoking Russia and of economic weakness prevented them from acknowledging challenges, hindering civil society's readiness for worst-case scenarios. Part of being "leaders of people" is honest talk, and acknowledging one's own fears as a leader is not the same as fearmongering.

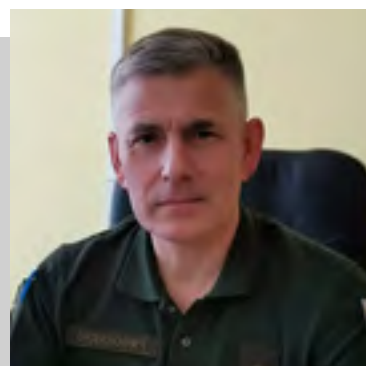
If European decisionmakers want Ukraine—and their own countries—to withstand Russian aggression, they need to invest in both military support and social infrastructure. They should shift their focus from just security and defense reforms to supporting civilian-based defense, nonviolent resistance, and resilience during occupation. Governments can

finance training seminars, anti-disinformation efforts, and integration programs for veterans and civil society. These actions could help reduce chaos in civil society during crises.

As an old Ukrainian proverb reminds us, "from the world, by a thread—a poor man's shirt." Each contribution may seem small on its own, but together they form the fabric of national survival.

Col. Andrii Ordynovych

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ONM is working with a growing number of partners in Ukraine. We focus on co-creating projects with Ukrainians and finding ways to generate support for Ukraine's civic shield—something that should never be taken for granted in any country.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

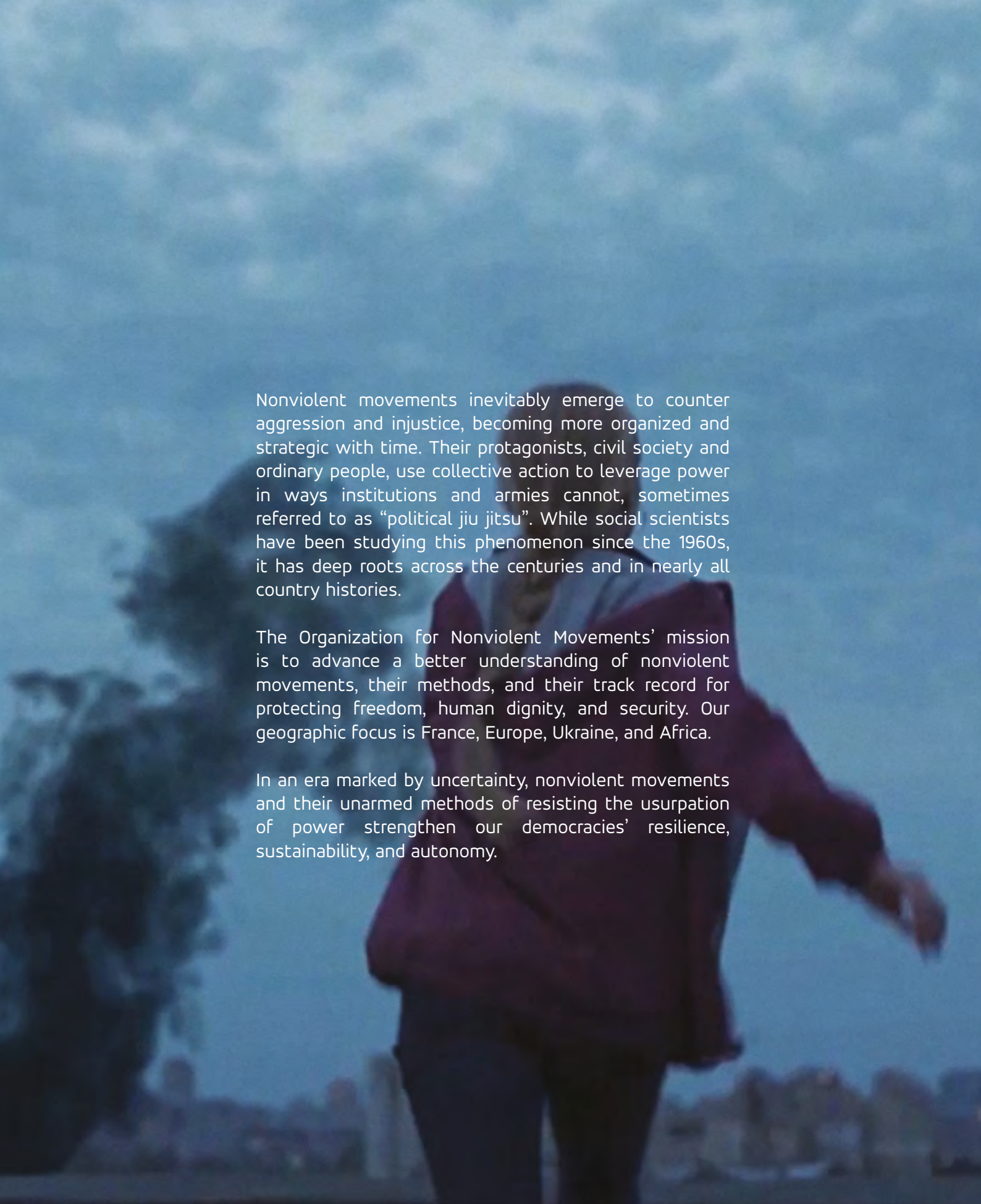
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Film "Resistance", 1+1 Media
 Author: Natalka Sukach
 Director: Serhii Krymskyi
 Producer: Akim Halimov
youtube.com/watch?v=dLKzUR5SYMc

SERIES EDITOR Amber French-Griette
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Nonviolent movements inevitably emerge to counter aggression and injustice, becoming more organized and strategic with time. Their protagonists, civil society and ordinary people, use collective action to leverage power in ways institutions and armies cannot, sometimes referred to as “political jiu jitsu”. While social scientists have been studying this phenomenon since the 1960s, it has deep roots across the centuries and in nearly all country histories.

The Organization for Nonviolent Movements’ mission is to advance a better understanding of nonviolent movements, their methods, and their track record for protecting freedom, human dignity, and security. Our geographic focus is France, Europe, Ukraine, and Africa.

In an era marked by uncertainty, nonviolent movements and their unarmed methods of resisting the usurpation of power strengthen our democracies’ resilience, sustainability, and autonomy.