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SELF-PROTECTION IN PRACTICE:
Ukrainian Efforts to Avoid Harm During the Russian Invasion

ABOUT CENTER FOR CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is an international organization dedicated to promoting the protection of civilians in conflict. CIVIC envisions a world in which no civilian is harmed in conflict. Our mission is to support communities affected by conflict in their quest for protection and strengthen the resolve and capacity of armed actors to prevent and respond to civilian harm.

CIVIC was established in 2003 by Marla Ruzicka, a young humanitarian who advocated on behalf of civilians affected by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Honoring Marla's legacy, CIVIC has kept an unflinching focus on the protection of civilians in conflict. Today, CIVIC has a presence in conflict zones and key capitals throughout the world where it collaborates with civilians to bring their protection concerns directly to those in power, engages with armed actors to reduce the harm they cause to civilian populations, and advises governments and multinational bodies on how to make life-saving and lasting policy changes.

CIVIC's strength is its proven approach and record of improving protection outcomes for civilians by working directly with conflict-affected communities and armed actors. At CIVIC, we believe civilians are not "collateral damage" and civilian harm is not an unavoidable consequence of conflict — civilian harm can and must be prevented.

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I. OVERVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The civilian toll resulting from the escalation of the armed conflict in Ukraine—an escalation of the conflict which began on February 24, 2022—has been devastating.[1] Russia's use of indiscriminate weapons in urban areas, attacks on critical infrastructure, and denial of safe passage for civilians out of conflict zones are among the tactics that have resulted in civilian harm.[2] In areas occupied by Russian forces, there have also been numerous reports of torture, unlawful detentions, sexual violence, and enforced disappearances of civilians.[3] Moreover, the war has created a humanitarian crisis in many parts of the country. It is estimated that at least 15.7 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance at the time of writing this brief in September 2022, and that number is expected to increase.[4]

In this extremely challenging context, Ukrainian civilians have shown remarkable resilience, as well as the ability to protect themselves while providing for the needs of the most vulnerable members of their communities. Such self-protection efforts have been critical for survival, filling the gaps where more formal protection actors have struggled to respond quickly or comprehensively enough to meet civilians' needs.

This issue brief discusses the role Ukrainian civilians have played in their own protection since Russia's February 2022 invasion, highlighting some specific practices they have used for self-

protection. While the aim of this brief is to highlight and promote the extraordinary and often very innovative efforts of affected civilians to protect themselves, these examples of civilian agency in no way relieve the parties to the conflict from their protection obligations under applicable laws such as International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

This brief is based on interviews with 45 civilians, as well as military officials, journalists, and civil society leaders. Interviews were conducted remotely with stakeholders in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel, and Borodianka between June and August 2022.

Although there is no single definition of self-protection, the concept is based on a recognition that civilians have agency during crises and regularly make decisions or act in ways that mitigate the threat of physical harm to themselves or their communities. Researchers have documented civilian self-protection efforts in a variety of crises,[5] but it remains an underexplored dimension of armed conflict and there is little understanding of the conditions under and the extent to which these strategies are ultimately effective. It is crucial that the warring parties, international protection actors, and other national bodies with protection mandates understand civilian self-protection practices. They should take these practices into account when planning their interventions and find ways to build on, support, and/or integrate them in their own activities with the goal of attaining improved protection of civilians outcomes.

In Ukraine, CIVIC identified self-protection practices that can be grouped into three broad categories, although there is often overlap between them: self-protection during an evacuation, self-protection from the risks of bombardment, and self-protection while living under (Russian) occupation. This brief outlines some of the practices that fall into these categories and shares civilian reflections on both their effectiveness and their limitations. Given the overlap between self-protection needs in all three categories, this brief also lays out several specific recommendations from civilian interviewees for those who might find themselves living on possible future frontlines in the current conflict in Ukraine or on the frontlines of any future conflict.

CIVIC's findings underscore that, despite the impressive self-organization and creative strategies civilians have adopted to avoid harm, they remain at significant risk and face large protection gaps. The unpredictable and undisciplined nature of Russian tactics further undermines these strategies because, with no predictable pauses in hostilities, civilians are vulnerable even when they try to do basic errands like restock supplies, see a doctor, or check on nearby family members. Given these challenges, all warring parties and dedicated protection actors must reinforce existing self-protection practices to the extent possible and build their protection of civilians measures more effectively around them.

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At the time of writing this publication in September 2022, Ukrainian authorities were already making efforts to improve protection of civilians measures by building or repairing bomb shelters and testing new early warning systems.[6] Based on CIVIC's findings, the Ukrainian government, donors, and international humanitarian agencies should continue taking steps to support more effective civilian self-protection in the country.

Recommendations to the Government of Ukraine, including local authorities:

- Make every effort to publicize clear information through official sources regarding opportunities to evacuate and

safe routes for evacuation when they become available.
- Increase the number of shelters equipped according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Order No. 579, ensuring their accessibility for those with limited mobility and improving the general living conditions to make them more comfortable for extended periods of time.[7]
- Improve early warning systems (including air raid alert systems), prepare contingency plans for alerting civilians when there are power cuts or when internet access is lost, and cooperate with IT and telecommunications actors working to maintain these services for civilians in areas of active hostilities. Ensure that early warning systems account for all parts of society, including people who lack access to and/or knowledge of technology.

Recommendations for the Ukrainian government, local authorities, donors, and international humanitarian agencies:

- Work with local authorities to engage communities to determine whether they have identified people who require special assistance for evacuations or to seek shelter from bombardment. Seek out and incorporate feedback from communities on a regular basis to update planning processes where needed.
- Support early and pragmatic contingency planning to help civilians determine in advance whether to evacuate or remain at home, as well as to prepare accordingly for their potential needs (which may include accessing transportation, buying particular supplies in advance, and/or discussing medical treatment with healthcare providers).
- Compile streamlined guidance on effective measures for sheltering in one's home, as well as how best to protect oneself if caught outside under bombardment. Such guidance will prevent civilians from having to spend excessive amounts of time collecting information from various sources.
- Prioritize efforts to make information about basic first aid measures more widely available to Ukrainians and increase awareness of services that already exist, including telehealth options.
- Increase options and ease of access to psychosocial support.

Ukrainian civilians can learn from the self-protection efforts of their peers who have experienced bombardment and Russian occupation. Civilians should consider the following to prepare and protect themselves, if necessary:

- Identify several potential evacuation routes and, if possible, preposition supplies needed during travel and at the intended destination. Consider identifying specific conditions that would trigger flight, such as alerts of troop movements closer to one's city or the beginning of bombardment.
- Make plans about where to shelter and with whom. Collate lists of personal contacts, emergency, and support services in advance.
- Prepare supplies including non-perishable food, potable water, cash, fuel reserves, phone chargers and power banks, and medications or medical supplies. Collect supplies in larger quantities than necessary in case sharing resources becomes necessary due to low inventories in stores or a longer-than-anticipated stay in a shelter.
- Devise backup plans in case formal early warning systems fail, including but not limited to how and where to reconnect with relatives and friends; how and where to shelter if caught under bombardment while driving or walking; and how to access information in the event of disrupted connections.

II. SELF-PROTECTION DURING EVACUATION

As documented in several other conflicts, evacuation is a common response to the outbreak of hostilities and entails its own risks.[8] This has certainly been the case in Ukraine, where it is estimated that approximately one-third of the country's population has been displaced as of the time of this writing.[9] Although the civilians interviewed for this brief fled their homes at different times based on their individual circumstances, they shared many of the same approaches to self-protection.

Many discussed the conditions that would trigger them to evacuate with their family and friends—either to join family and friends in an area of the city they deemed safer or to western Ukraine or western Europe.[10] For some, this type of preparation took place in advance of the invasion, but the majority of interviewees did not begin this planning until after February 24 due to their disbelief that such a large-scale invasion would take place.

For most, the first step was packing a "grab bag" or "alarm suitcase" with supplies such as food, toiletries, warm clothes, medications, and personal documents.[11] Some interviewees described stuffing their cars as full as possible, but the majority took a minimalist mentality as they believed the war would end quickly.[12] One respondent ensured that his and his wife's bags were packed lightly enough that, should he be killed or injured, his wife would be able to manage the weight of both.[13] Interviewees also discussed filling gasoline tanks in the days before or on the day of the invasion, as well as parking their cars close to their buildings and pointed in the direction of evacuation.[14]

Once they decided to flee, civilians often chose to travel in groups with neighbors, extended family members, or even strangers. This was often the only means for people to flee or get to official evacuation points such as train stations if they were without transportation of their own or if they initially chose to stay behind in the early days of the war but later changed their minds. One person who stayed behind in an occupied area recalled evacuating her daughter by running out to the road while others were fleeing, "just begging for someone to stop." Remembering the event, she stated, "Fortunately, one car stopped and I just pushed my child there and ran back home crying because I didn't know who I sent my child away with."[15] For those with relatives and friends dispersed throughout their city of residence, evacuating together provided a sense of safety in numbers—for example, in case a car were to run out of gas or they had no contacts at their intended destination)—and provided a chance to follow others when there was uncertainty about what routes would be safe.[16]

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In planning evacuation routes, it was very common for interviewees to leverage information from those who had already evacuated. To the extent possible, they sought details from friends and acquaintances on where and how to avoid potential troop movements, road damage, shelling, and traffic jams, as well as to understand how much money and what kinds of supplies might be needed along the route or at their destination.[17]

III. SELF-PROTECTION FROM THE RISKS OF BOMBARDMENT

Since February 24, Ukrainian civilians have taken great measures to ensure their physical survival, protect their homes, and improve their shelter situation in the face of indiscriminate bombing.

The full-scale invasion caught many civilians by surprise, and finding shelter was one of their first concerns. While most interviewees told CIVIC that they were able to make some quick preparations for potential self-protection—such as buying extra food or withdrawing cash from banks—the shelter



April 2, 2022, near Zabuchchya, Ukraine: *A civilian walks into his cellar where he and his wife mostly lived during the Russian occupation for several weeks.*

concern was far more challenging.[18] The majority had limited access to adequate shelters, as Metro stations were often too far away or inaccessible, especially for vulnerable groups such as older persons, people with disabilities, and parents with children. Meanwhile, basements of homes or nearby buildings like schools either offered scant protection or were poorly equipped to live in.[19] In some cases, basements were inaccessible because building managers chose to restrict access to them, because those with key access had fled, or because doors were jammed or boarded up from disuse.[20]

As a result, people worked hard to adapt the basements of their homes to improve their living conditions. They worked together with neighbors to quickly clean them out and carry down supplies such as food, water, medications, first aid kits, portable gas stoves, flashlights, phone chargers, and books and games for children. They also set up furniture such as chairs, mattresses, and blankets to make them more comfortable.[21] In at least one instance, residents even installed internet routers in their basement.[22] Nonetheless, living conditions in basements were still poor enough that many decided to return upstairs after the initial days of the war and eventually made the decision to flee.[23]

According to interviewees, those who remained in or returned to their above-ground living spaces often tried to adapt their homes to reduce the impact of debris and bomb shrapnel to the extent possible. Where proper shelters were not an option, interviewees reported adapting to live in areas they deemed safest. This usually meant observing the “two-wall rule,” which involves sheltering in a spot where there are two walls between oneself and the outside—one to stop projectiles and the second to protect from shell splinters. In accordance with this rule, people often sleep, cook, and eat in corridors, vestibules, or bathrooms where there are no windows.



April 2022, Bucha/Irpin

Those who live on higher floors tend to move to communal spaces on the ground floor.[24]

To prevent injury from glass shattering, most interviewees reported taping up their windows and leaving them slightly open, often with filled water bottles or pillows in the gap so that the windows would raise slightly rather than explode out of their frames in the event of a blast wave.[25] They also covered furniture with soft items such as pillows, blankets, and cardboard, moved items into the interiors of their homes, and observed self-imposed blackouts to lessen the likelihood of their homes being targeted.[26]

To ensure their survival in these makeshift shelters, civilians who spoke with CIVIC planned ahead for the potential loss of utilities and for entrapment if bombs collapsed parts of their homes. They filled bathtubs and water bottles in advance, prioritized keeping phones as charged as possible, and distributed resources such as flashlights and bags of food around several rooms so supplies would always be accessible.[27] In a few cases, they planned for window exits by tying sheets together or setting up a fire ladder.[28]

Informal, word-of-mouth early warning systems emerged to fill shortcomings in the official systems, particularly air raid sirens. Air raid sirens are meant to have city-wide coverage, but, depending on where civilians are located, they often cannot hear them. For those who can, it frequently seemed that the sirens only go off after a bomb has already hit.[29] Most participants discussed installing alert applications on their phones, but these rely on internet access and a means of charging the telecommunications device. Notably, these apps are not necessarily accessible to older persons who were unfamiliar with the required technology.[30] Moreover, many interviewees later uninstalled these applications because they found the constant noise stressful.[31] To counter these challenges, civilians began warning one another

of impending attacks through phone calls and messaging applications after they themselves received an alert or witnessed an attack.[32] Interviewees told CIVIC that individual learning and intuition became very important, as they began to detect incoming missiles from the sounds and guess which direction they were headed.[33]

Interviewees also noted taking several measures to limit the risks they faced when leaving their homes. Most preferred to stay indoors as much as possible and prevent children, in particular, from going outside at all.[34] They shared that if they had to leave to cook outside or get heat from a communal fire, they stayed close to the entrances of their buildings or basements. They reported trying to remain near stairs or entrances behind houses and in courtyards in case they needed to immediately hide, as well as avoiding cooking outside too frequently to prevent smoke from triggering sensors in thermal missiles.[35] When needing to move around the city—for example, to walk dogs or replenish supplies—they described trying keep these trips as short as possible and selecting routes carefully. They reported avoiding open spaces and buildings with a lot of glass and preferred to take back roads and stay close to concrete structures.[36]

In interviews with CIVIC, civilians discussed organizing at the apartment or block level to support their own needs and their neighbors' needs, taking special care to plan for the needs of the most vulnerable, such as sick individuals, older persons, and people with disabilities. One common approach was to source and deliver resources, including food and medicines, to those who could not get them on their own. This was often done by individuals without expecting reimbursement and at increased risk to themselves, as it required being outside in long queues with the possibility of bombs falling.[37] They would also bring more resources than they needed at any one time and distribute them among extended family members and neighbors they were sheltering alongside.

One interviewee who worked with a volunteer hotline told CIVIC that they refused to deliver supplies unless the person requesting them checked on their neighbors' needs as well. They took this approach so as not to waste a risky car trip on a single person in a large building.[38] Another explained that shopping for a group "was important because when someone was going to a store, they would collect lists of things needed from everyone and try to buy as much as they could." "At that point," the interviewee noted, "the stores were almost empty. So, this was [a] kind of human interaction for survival."[39] Neighbors also created and shared lists of where people were sheltering, and they stocked basements with tools like spades and crowbars in case a bomb destroyed a building and people needed to dig themselves or others out of the rubble.[40]

In general, civilians reported relying heavily on shared resources, both material and experiential. Many individuals described how crucial it was that neighbors left things behind after they fled, such as keys to cars or bags of food from their own homes. People used word-of-mouth, messaging apps, and social media platforms to announce when they had surplus resources such as pet food, feminine hygiene products, or mineral water, or when they found such items in a store.[41]

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Some interviewees shared that they approached residents of other buildings to learn more about their strategies of self-organization, with the aim of improving rudimentary systems in their own complexes. Civilians also recalled seeking survival tips from individuals who had lived through other wars.[42] For example, one interviewee explained that a man who had fled the Donbas after 2014 taught him how to assess danger by timing the intervals between different types of bombs.[43]

In addition, civilians in many cases banded together to form ad hoc patrols, sharing responsibility for protecting their homes and neighborhoods against



April 6, 2022, Bucha, Ukraine: *A civilian describes living conditions during the Russian occupation in March 2022.*

looters. This included attempting to detect signs of potential collaborators with Russian forces. According to interviewees, patrols would take note of unknown individuals and specific markings on buildings or streets and report them to the territorial defense forces.[44]

IV. SELF-PROTECTION WHILE INTERACTING WITH RUSSIAN TROOPS

To reduce their risks when engaging with Russian soldiers, interviewees reported relying on their own intuition about how to act and on the support of neighbors. Many explained to CIVIC that they tried to avoid provoking Russian soldiers at all costs—making sure to remain calm, answer their questions and demands to the best of their ability, and speak Russian when possible.[45] If they heard through word of mouth that soldiers were approaching, they would delete all photos and videos from their phones and destroy any relevant documents to prevent soldiers from finding anything that they might interpret as "collaboration" with the Ukrainian government.[46]

As in unoccupied areas under bombardment, neighbors in areas under Russian occupation formed ad hoc patrols. But rather than trying to protect against looters or detect signs of Russian collaborators, patrols in occupied areas are used as an early warning system to alert citizens about the approach of Russian soldiers.[47] At times, these groups help barricade basements from the inside and build checkpoints out of materials from nearby construction sites to deter or prevent Russian soldiers from entering their shelters.[48]

Two civilians noted that avoiding detection was complicated by Russian tactics, which included using thermal imaging cameras when they searched homes.[49] As one interviewee explained, "there was no point in hiding because they all had thermal scanners."[50] Because they could

not predict who Russian soldiers would decide to target, interviewees told CIVIC that they took relatively few measures to mark themselves as civilians.[51] When they did, they wore yellow ribbons on their arms or brightly colored clothing to try to distinguish themselves from territorial defense forces, who typically wore neutral colors.[52] Some also used white fabric and paper to signal their civilian status when they were moving around the city or attempting to flee. One interviewee described how she cut arm holes out of white sheets for her children to wear, while others wrote the word "children" in both Russian and Ukrainian on sheets of paper and taped them to car windows.[53]

Civilians who experienced prolonged bombardment or full Russian occupation often expressed regret about their decision not to find a way to evacuate earlier in the war. Although many had initially decided to stay because they were waiting to see how the situation would develop, it became much more difficult to leave once Russian troops entered.[54] There has been an ongoing struggle to negotiate humanitarian evacuation corridors with the parties to the conflict, with efforts to negotiate them often collapsing. Civilians have therefore relied on the help of volunteers who risk their own lives to help others escape. These volunteers have devised ways to proactively map safe routes. For example, a volunteer might walk their dog along a potential escape route through a forest, checking for any sign of Russian soldiers. If the route seems clear, the volunteer would share the information with evacuees, who would then try to follow that route on foot or by car. If the first group is able to get out via the identified route, the volunteer would immediately call back to others to alert more evacuees (assuming there was still a mobile phone connection).[55]

Most interviewees had no trouble distinguishing Russian soldiers from Ukrainian ones. There were many reasons for this, including the fact that many volunteer Ukrainian soldiers had lived and worked in the neighborhoods where they were deployed as part of the territorial defense forces. From constantly monitoring the news and communicating with family and friends in other parts of the country, civilians also had a good understanding of Russian troop movements and knew where they could expect to encounter them.[56] Furthermore, interviewees explained to CIVIC that the Russians had clear markings on their uniforms, spoke in different accents or dialects, used different equipment, and behaved poorly compared to Ukrainian soldiers.[57]

V. LIMITATIONS OF SELF-PROTECTION PRACTICES

One of the most serious hindrances to civilian self-protection in Ukraine has been a general lack of preparedness stemming from uncertainty—and, many times, complete disbelief—that an invasion on such a scale could occur. One person told CIVIC that when she went to the local pharmacy only a week before the February invasion, the employees asked her if she was preparing a grab bag. She responded, "'Girls, are you joking? My sister is in Moscow, my aunt is in the North. I have lots of friends there."[58]

Others believed that, because tensions had waxed and waned since 2014, any confrontation with Russia would be temporary and minor, or that it would be confined to the eastern regions of the country.[59] Even civilians who predicted war reported that they were unprepared for the brutality of Russian military attacks: "in the 21st century, when there are phones, internet, everything can be sold and bought within five seconds. And then something like this is happening, like in the Middle Ages."[60]

According to interviewees, disbelief led to confusion and disorder when the invasion began. In turn, this undermined effective response mechanisms by both local authorities and communities, especially for the large numbers of civilians fleeing on their own initiative.[61] Those who had made preparations in advance had only done so in a limited and ad hoc manner. Those who fled packed for only a few days, not expecting that war and displacement could last for months or even years. "We didn't take too much, and

it was a mistake," one interviewee shared with CIVIC. "We didn't take small necessary things. Now you understand that you were wrong in your confidence that there would be peace."[62] Others pointed out that they did not have and had not organized access to reliable vehicles. Consequently, they struggled to find ways to flee—a difficulty which deterred many civilians from quickly leaving unsafe areas.

Lack of preparedness has meant that many of those fleeing did not know their final destination and therefore struggled to decide what to pack and how much money they might need. As one person recalled, "It was a rush and a nightmare: all the people wanted to leave, children were screaming, and you were slowly going crazy."[63] In addition to these uncertainties, the shock of the invasion caused a "freeze" response in many interviewees. They reported feeling too intimidated by reports of chaotic evacuations, massive traffic jams, and long lines at border crossings to attempt to leave. Lacking a plan, many simply stayed out of a sense of inertia. "In general," shared one interviewee, "I did not understand what to do in such circumstances. I was just waiting and watching what other people were doing and thinking what to do. The first reaction was a mental block."[64] As another interviewee recalled, "I thought I would fight, but I froze."[65]

Similarly, those who chose to stay reported that they stocked up for only a few days or weeks at most, if at all.[66] Although civilians encountered relatively fewer difficulties finding food and water, medical issues were much harder to solve and often had life-threatening effects. Several interviewees explained how life-saving medications and medical supplies disappeared from pharmacies and that surgeries were postponed. Sometimes, emergency services were inaccessible, a critical issue that occasionally led to deaths.[67]

Although some individuals were able to find people in other parts of the country who could send them medications, these attempts relied on functioning postal and courier services and were not always successful. One civilian attempted to buy medications online but found the prices had risen excessively. Another rationed her own mother's hypertension medications in order to share it with older neighbors who suffered from the same condition.[68]

Despite valiant attempts to adapt homes and basements, weak shelter infrastructure has also made civilian self-protection much more challenging. Appropriate shelters, including Metro stations in cities, are few and far between relative to population density, and they are difficult to access in winter weather—especially for those with children or who have limited mobility.[69] For those able to make it to Metro stations during the invasion, conditions were very difficult. One interviewee described it as, "very cold, the air, the [stone] walls, a lot of people. There was a bad toilet, bad water, and when I saw it, I thought that it is better to be at home under bombs."[70]

"A basement would become a grave, we all realized that."

– CIVIC interviewee

For those interviewees who had access to a basement, which was never a guarantee, the conditions were often equally challenging: cold, damp, poorly ventilated, prone to flooding, and often filled with pipes, garbage, vermin, and disused equipment.[71]Furthermore, interviewees reported feeling fundamentally unsafe in basements. They feared being buried alive in rubble in the event that the building above should be shelled. "A basement would become a grave, we all realized that" said one interviewee.[72] Although many interviewees did their best to adapt the basements and make them livable, the poor conditions often drove people to risk staying in their houses and apartments—even though efforts to make their homes safe felt, as one civilian told CIVIC, "like bringing a knife to a gunfight."[73]

Because of the seemingly random nature of Russian attacks on civilians and the potential



April 2022, Bucha/Irpin

for missile attacks across the entire country, self-protection practices have only gone so far in making people feel safe.[74] As one civilian commented about Russian soldiers, "They just don't care about what object they're bombing."[75] Many interviewees even felt that marking themselves as civilians could be a provocation. Russian soldiers, explained one civilian, "were shooting people even when the whole car had 'Children' signs on all sides. They just didn't care. They were just getting more interested."[76] Another civilian lamented, "As we were walking, we saw people dressed exactly the same way with the sheets [to signal their civilian status], and they were killed. Therefore, it hardly saved anybody."[77] Because of this lack of predictability, the civilians who spoke with CIVIC expressed that they were unable to forecast when or under what conditions they could most safely leave their homes. This meant that basic self-protection practices, such as going to the store to replenish food supplies or to the doctor to seek medical treatment, always carried significant risk.

The inability to figure out the "algorithm"[78] or "rule"[79] underlying Russian troops' behavior left many interviewees with a sense of futility about self-protection practices, especially as the war dragged on. They often attributed their survival to "luck, like a card game," rather than any specific self-protection practices. Over time, as civilians have become more desensitized, they have begun to abandon many self-protection efforts, including going to shelters or responding to air raid alerts. For example, one interviewee remarked, "You seem to have gotten used to it, you no longer react to all this in the same way. … I used to sit in a home shelter. We took all the mattresses out into the corridor, and I sat there until the siren went off. Now, I actually don't wake up at night."[80]

Such feelings may have contributed to the refusal of some civilians to evacuate combat zones, even with government support.[81] It also reflects a lack of consistent psychosocial support, as civilians feel that self-protection—for example, running back and forth to shelters—is not worth the harm



April 5, 2022, Bucha, Ukraine: *A destroyed building is seen on a road between Bucha and Irpin, Ukraine.*

to their mental health and resilience.[82] To some extent, these issues may be unavoidable during protracted conflict. However, given the relentless and seemingly random nature of some Russian attacks, increasing abandonment of self-protection practices could ultimately be harmful—and efforts to maintain vigilance or support civilian vigilance may be needed.

Many self-protection practices have been contingent on a strong local response led by the community itself. This cannot be counted on indefinitely, however, as it relies on goodwill, individual civilian resources, and psychological resilience.[83] According to an interviewee who eventually evacuated but used her own money to buy and send supplies back home, "This is a wrong kind of help, when you can no longer help others or yourself because you had already given away everything."[84] Furthermore, if large-scale evacuations continue, it will be harder for those who choose to stay behind to find support. Many of those remaining will be older persons or people who are too sick to flee, and they will suffer without having others nearby who can deliver supplies or maintain early warning systems. In these cases, strong humanitarian and informational assistance through official channels will become even more critical.[85]

CIVIC's research was not able to assess the overall effectiveness of individual self-protection practices. Many civilians who initially planned to stay changed their plans after the first days and weeks of the invasion and expressed having found their initial preparations unhelpful—although interviewees consistently lauded the evacuees' efforts to leave resources behind, guide others who fled later, and send supplies back to their communities. Moreover, while most interviewees tried to fortify their homes against bombs, none experienced direct hits and could not judge whether their preparations were useful.

According to those who spoke with CIVIC, ad hoc neighborhood patrols did identify suspicious markings and individuals that were reported to police or territorial defense forces. However, they were not themselves aware of the outcomes of these cases, and it is possible that potential "saboteurs" were misidentified and experienced harm as a result. In addition, without appropriate training and collaboration with relevant authorities, members of these patrols may have put themselves at additional risk.[86]

Follow-up research could help further clarify which self-protection mechanisms were most effective. Clearly, however, these types of preparations and self-protection practices were able, at the very least, to give interviewees peace of mind during a volatile, unpredictable time.

VI. SELF-PROTECTION RECOMMENDATIONS FROM INTERVIEWEES

In addition to more obvious preparations, such as collecting documents in one folder and packing non-perishable food, bottled water, and seasonably appropriate clothes, interviewees learned several lessons about what they would do differently and how they would advise civilians in possible future frontline areas:

- If at all possible, leave at the first opportunity.

- For heat and cooking, prepare for gasoline supply disruptions with portable gasoline stoves or by using braziers or bricks to build makeshift stoves. Collect supplies of matches, firewood, flammable materials such as cardboard, and extra canisters of gasoline. Stock up on flour and salt, as bread is often in extremely short supply. Identify potential sources of potable water—such as wells—in advance.

- Stock up on supplies such as toothbrushes and toothpaste, wet wipes, feminine hygiene products, adult and child diapers, pet food, laundry soap, and buckets to collect rainwater for washing. In general, think through daily routines and items that get daily use in order to compile lists for more efficient stockpiling and packing. Consider packing clothes items such as raincoats and spare shoes in case walking on broken glass or other debris wears down soles. Withdraw cash in advance.

- Stock up on medications and first aid kits, including regular prescription drugs, bandages, wound-cleaning supplies, ibuprofen, paracetamol, and Covid-19 treatments, as well as over-the-counter sedatives when civilians anticipate they may benefit from their use and it is safe to use them. For those with chronic health conditions, discuss alternative medications as well as how to self-administer particular treatments with medical professionals in advance. If evacuating, prepare contingency plans for transport and treatments both while traveling and at the intended destination. Consider adding pieces of paper to “grab bags” that list names, emergency contacts, blood types, and any medication needs. This is especially important for children in the event that they are separated from their caregivers.

- To prepare for power loss or disrupted phone or Internet connections, acquire battery-operated radios and spare batteries, extra power banks for devices, and solar-powered batteries—although it is important to be aware that these are often difficult and time-consuming to fully charge. Consider learning how to use alternate sources of power, such as car batteries, to charge devices. Have access to, and potentially hide, regular push-button mobile devices in case smartphones are drained or destroyed, as these older phones hold charges for longer. Consider what information on portable telecommunications devices or SIM cards could provoke parties to the conflict and consider whether it is safer to store this information on the device or elsewhere. Determine in advance where phone signals are strongest, and be sure to back up devices via flash drives and external hard drives.

- Make sure vehicles have been inspected, repaired, and fueled as necessary.

VII. CONCLUSION

Despite extraordinarily difficult circumstances in Ukraine, Ukrainian civilians have developed a wide range of ad hoc practices to keep themselves, their communities, and their homes safe. Because of their spontaneous nature, CIVIC could not assess the effectiveness of such measures. It is, however, safe to assume that the recommendations people made during our research would increase the overall protection of civilians affected by an armed conflict if implemented correctly and in a timely matter.

Where traditional protection actors such as local civilian and military authorities have been unable to provide for their needs, civilians have tried to address shortcomings by improving their own shelter situations, working collaboratively, sharing resources, and intuiting threat-reduction practices when confronted with harmful behavior by Russian soldiers. However, CIVIC documented cases where the intuition of civilians was wrong and could have had the opposite effect as the one intended. In such cases, civilian intuition essentially increased the risk of civilian harm rather than reduced it, further highlighting the need to ensure good protection of civilians practices.

The lack of predictability in Russian military maneuvers has made it more difficult for civilians to provide for one another in dangerous areas. Especially as the war has dragged on, many have been left with a feeling that it doesn't matter what measures they take to protect themselves and that it is all a matter of luck.

International and national bodies must work to better support civilian practices by focusing on building appropriate shelters, providing streamlined information to aid civilian preparation and decision-making, and strengthening early warning and humanitarian aid systems. In particular, international aid agencies must work to channel funds into local response efforts and provide technical assistance to strengthen them and make them more sustainable.

International and national bodies must work to better support civilian practices by focusing on building appropriate shelters, providing streamlined information to aid civilian preparation and decision-making, and strengthening early warning and humanitarian aid systems.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian civilians on possible future frontlines can continue to learn about successful self-protection practices from those who have already lived through the experience. With this learning, they can be more strategic in their choices and plan in advance for how to meet the needs of the more vulnerable members of their communities when considering their own self-protection.

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April 2, 2022, Bucha, Ukraine: *Destroyed Russian armored vehicles and damaged homes line and clog a residential road.*

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