EAST SOS

The «invisible people» of Ukraine's Frontline Regions

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This report is based on a study examining the humanitarian impact on individuals from low-mobility groups in frontline settlements conducted by the CF "East SOS" documentary team in 2023-2024. It includes 60 in-depth interviews with members of low-mobility groups, persons with disabilities, older adults, their relatives, and experts in supporting vulnerable populations during the armed conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. The interviews also feature insights from evacuation specialists, social workers, and managers from "East SOS" and partner organizations.

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Cover Photo: photo of the evacuation of representatives of low-mobility population groups from the archive of the Charity Foundation "East SOS": Dnipro, January 2025. Photo: Anastasiia Pyvovarchuk; Pavlograd, January 2025. Photo: Vladyslav Platonov and Anna Demydenko; Pavlograd, October 2024. Photo: Yuliia Krat.

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We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all those involved in safeguarding the residents of frontline areas:

Evacuation workers who venture into conflict zones daily,

Social workers and volunteers who assist evacuees in reaching safe havens while addressing their legal and household needs,

Managers of transit shelters who seek further resettlement opportunities for evacuees and who repair and restore facilities to accommodate them,

Donors supporting projects for vulnerable groups,

And all compassionate individuals, without whom civilian casualties would have been significantly higher.

CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations

AFRF	Armed Forces of the Russian Federation
AFU	Armed Forces of Ukraine
CC	Cultural Center
CF	Charity Foundation
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
MLRS	Multiple Launch Rocket System
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
RF	Russian Federation
RS	Rome Statute
RSA	Regional State Administration
SESU	State Emergency Service of Ukraine

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since February 24, 2022, the AFRF have been employing "scorched earth" tactics during hostilities in Ukraine. This method of warfare constitutes a gross violation of IHL, resulting in a significant number of civilian casualties and depriving the population of essential necessities for survival.

The most vulnerable residents of frontline areas require urgent attention from both the state and Ukrainian society. Without a specific term to describe them, this report uses the metaphor of "invisible people". This term refers to isolated adults from low-mobility groups who perished due to their invisibility to others, including government agencies and non-governmental organizations that assist frontline residents. These individuals could not access the critical information necessary to navigate the humanitarian crisis and did not benefit from essential public services such as medical aid, humanitarian assistance, or free evacuation.

As hostilities draw near to a settlement, civilians struggle to survive amid relentless shelling, facing deliberate attacks on humanitarian headquarters and food warehouses. In this dire context, the "invisible people" confront their challenges in isolation, often unable to endure the hardships for long. Their stories include single men and women who died in their apartments and homes under fire, choosing not to seek shelter; individuals who perished in makeshift accommodations without access to medicine or medical care and were buried in their yards. Such cases are vividly remembered by respondents interviewed by documenters during the investigation of war crimes committed by the Russian military in Ukraine from 2022 to 2024.

The study reveals that the prolonged exposure of lonely members of low-mobility groups to the humanitarian crisis and ongoing attacks on civilians will lead to their deaths unless they receive urgent assistance.

Since February 2022, the CF "East SOS" has gained extensive hands-on experience in supporting those who risk becoming "invisible people" in frontline areas. During this period, the "East SOS" evacuation team has successfully evacuated over 86,000 civilians from danger zones, including 11,200 individuals with limited mobility.

Evacuating individuals with limited mobility necessitates specialized vehicles and equipment to ensure effectiveness and continuity. This process requires coordinated action, including proper logistics such as establishing transit shelters to temporarily house isolated individuals. During their stay, the foundation's social workers assist with renewing lost documents, obtaining citizenship, and addressing medical issues, and the foundation's managers work to secure permanent housing for them.

Finding suitable accommodation is challenging, both within Ukraine and abroad, due to the overcrowding of facilities that cater to lonely individuals with limited mobility.

Since the summer of 2022, CF "East SOS" has been establishing resettlement facilities for evacuees by renovating abandoned buildings to enable local communities to open geriatric and territorial centers for social services while securing staff funding. Additionally, the foundation has repaired hospital buildings, including psychiatric facilities, to accommodate individuals with complex diagnoses who face difficulties finding suitable placements. CF "East SOS" has successfully reno-

vated six such buildings, providing homes for hundreds of isolated individuals with limited mobility. The foundation has also equipped three more institutions with lifts, enhancing accessibility for wheelchair users.

Since 2023, CF "East SOS" has been renovating houses and apartments damaged by shelling for vulnerable individuals living in relatively safe areas near the front lines. 837 households in the Donetsk and Kharkiv regions have benefited from these services.

The experience gained by the CF "East SOS" and its partner organizations in assisting individuals with limited mobility is vital for reducing civilian casualties in areas experiencing active hostilities.

Based on the information presented, we recommend that:

- **The Government of Ukraine**: When developing state programs and providing humanitarian assistance and evacuation for individuals from low-mobility groups in frontline areas, consider the successful practical experience of the CF "East SOS". Follow the recommendations formulated by the foundation's advocacy team in this domain and support initiatives to create safe accommodation for isolated individuals from low-mobility groups in safer regions of Ukraine.
- **Ukrainian Civil Society**: Unite efforts for collaborative advocacy on evacuation issues. Enhance coordination with government services and institutions responsible for evacuating and accommodating low-mobility individuals.
- **The International Community**: Support civic initiatives to reduce civilian casualties in armed conflicts. Condemn the actions of the Russian military, which employs "scorched earth" tactics and establishes "sanitary zones" during hostilities in Ukraine.
- **National Law Enforcement and Investigative Bodies of Ukraine and the International Criminal Court**: Conduct thorough investigations into all deliberate attacks on civilians in frontline territories, including targeted strikes on humanitarian warehouses and evacuation teams. Ensure accountability for both Russian military commanders who issue such orders and field commanders who carry them out.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODS

Purpose of the Study

To provide a comprehensive analysis of single individuals from low-mobility groups residing in frontline areas, identify the challenges and risks they face daily, and share the experiences of the CF "East SOS" and its partner organizations in assisting these individuals.

Objectives of the Study

- To detail the most common violations of IHL committed against civilians and humanitarian agencies in frontline regions.
- To identify the primary challenges and risks encountered by civilians striving to survive the humanitarian crisis in these areas.
- To describe the characteristics of vulnerable groups and demonstrate that their survival hinges on timely humanitarian aid and evacuation from danger zones.
- To outline the successful experiences of CF "East SOS" and its partner organizations in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable members of the frontline population.
- To raise awareness about severe violations of IHL and the critical humanitarian situation on the front lines among a broad audience, including journalists, researchers from governmental and non-governmental organizations, and investigators and prosecutors from national and international law enforcement agencies.

Research Hypothesis

The prolonged presence of solitary individuals with limited mobility in frontline areas amid a humanitarian crisis and severe violations of IHL will inevitably result in their deaths.

Research Methods

The information analyzed in this report was gathered through in-depth interviews with older adults, individuals with reduced mobility, and those with disabilities, as well as their families or caretakers, conducted during their stay in frontline settlements or following evacuation. Additionally, interviews were conducted with volunteers, evacuees, managers, and social workers from the CF "East SOS" and its partner organizations, who assist these individuals.

In-depth interviews captured detailed descriptions of:

- The humanitarian conditions in respondents' places of residence;
- The nature and impact of hostilities in the area;

- The most prevalent IHL violations contributing to the humanitarian crisis within their settlements;
- Respondents' experiences of survival under challenging living conditions;
- Actions taken by local administrations in response to the severe humanitarian situation, among other factors.

To verify collected data, "East SOS" researchers conducted additional interviews in March 2024 with individuals housed at the Center for Temporary Accommodation of Elderly and Disabled People Evacuated from Hot Spots, "Ocean of Good" (Dnipro).

The questionnaire featured 19 questions focused on the humanitarian situation within the settlement and the respondents' social environment. The collected data was verified and supplemented with information from open sources or cross-referenced with other individuals whose in-depth interviews were documented by CF "East SOS" researchers across various projects from 2022 to 2024.

For privacy and safety amid ongoing conflict, all interviews referenced in the report were assigned unique identifiers, and nearly all respondents' data was pseudonymized. These precautions were taken to protect the respondents in the current wartime context.

Disclaimer

This study focuses on the needs of vulnerable populations residing in frontline settlements since February 24, 2022. "East SOS" documenters did not collect or analyze information on the needs and challenges of this population living in other regions of Ukraine.

The report excludes analysis of the needs of individuals in areas occupied by the Russian army that have not experienced severe hostilities or been impacted by the humanitarian crisis resulting from active conflict and IHL violations.

Additionally, the study does not cover the needs of children under 7 and pregnant women with limited mobility, as they are supported by their families and local frontline administration, provided with necessary supplies, and prioritized for evacuation. These groups warrant a separate study due to the distinct nature of their needs.

The study was limited in scope, focusing on:

- The period from February 24, 2022, to autumn 2024;
- Government-controlled areas of Ukraine, represented by its executive authorities and local administrations.

The report primarily excludes analysis of the humanitarian situation and needs of vulnerable populations residing in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine.

This study is specifically centered on the experiences and needs of adults with limited mobility who were residing in their apartments or homes as of February 24, 2022. It does not address the needs of individuals in public or private geriatric nursing homes, dispensaries, or other medical facilities, as these groups were not included in this report.

Practical Value

This analytical report is not intended as a scientific or sociological study. Its purpose, objectives, methods, conclusions, and recommendations are designed solely for practical application by government officials involved in humanitarian decision-making; volunteers, evacuation teams, managers, and social and medical workers from governmental and non-governmental organizations supporting individuals with limited mobility and disabilities; as well as civil society activists, journalists, and researchers focused on protecting the rights of vulnerable groups or examining conditions on Ukraine's frontline.

FOREWORD

The international armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been ongoing since 2014[1]. A defining feature of the conflict has been the AFRF's flagrant disregard for fundamental norms of IHL. During a visit to Bucha in May 2022, ICC Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan stated,

"Ukraine is a crime scene covering a wide range of alleged international crimes".

Beyond the crime of aggression, on October 10, 2022, the AFRF launched large-scale, systematic missile strikes on power plants and substations with the intent to provoke a humanitarian catastrophe across Ukraine. These actions were categorized by ICC prosecutors under Articles 8(2)(b)(ii), 8(2)(b)(iv), and 7(1)(k) of the RS. This led to the issuance of arrest warrants for Lieutenant General Serhii Kobylash, Commander of the Long-Range Aviation of the Aerospace Forces, and Admiral Viktor Sokolov, Commander of the Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet[2].

In the spring of 2023, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin, President of the RF, and Mariia Lvova-Belova, the Russian Presidential Ombudsperson for Children's Rights, on charges related to the unlawful deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children from occupied territories to the RF. These actions constitute violations under Articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the RS[3].

Humanity established IHL to protect victims of armed conflict who require special safeguards — those not engaged or no longer engaged in hostilities, such as civilians and prisoners of war. In Ukraine, people with limited mobility represent a particularly vulnerable civilian group.

The Ministry of Justice of Ukraine defines this group as individuals who face challenges with:

- moving independently,
- accessing services,
- processing information, and
- spatial orientation.

Low-mobility groups include children under seven years old, as well as people of any age with functional limitations — whether due to physical characteristics (such as disability, advanced age, or unique body dimensions) or temporary conditions (such as injury, stress, or pregnancy). According to the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, between 30% and 50% of the Ukrainian population belongs to low-mobility groups[4].

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1 International Law and the Definition of Russia's Involvement in Crimea and Donbas, 13.02.2022, https://bit.ly/3JFQ789; Guidelines on Basic Investigative Standards for Documenting International Crimes in Ukraine, Global Right Compliance, May 2022, 310 p. — p. 40.

2 The situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants for Serhii Ivanovych Kobylash and Viktor Mykolaiovych Sokolov, 5.03.2024, https://tinyurl.com/8n6wh5r6

3 Statement by ICC Prosecutor Karim A. Khan on the issuance of arrest warrants for President Vladimir Putin and Mariia Lvova-Belova, 17.03.2023, https://tinyurl.com/3f9hj23t

4 LOW-MOBILITY GROUPS — WHO ARE THEY?, 06.12.2021, https://tinyurl.com/6her9vvv

According to Dmytro Shchebetiuk, head of the NGO "Dostupno.ua", 27% to 55% of urban populations belong to low-mobility groups[5].

This study narrows its focus to a particularly vulnerable subset of low-mobility individuals. Lacking a specific term for them, the report adopts the metaphor "invisible people" to describe single adults within low-mobility groups who lost their lives due to their "invisibility" to others, including government bodies and NGOs assisting frontline residents. These individuals could not access essential information or utilize available public services (medical, humanitarian aid, or free evacuation) crucial for surviving the humanitarian crisis.

Since 2022, CF "East SOS" has assisted frontline residents, ensuring no one remains invisible. The experience gained throughout the war has proved invaluable in safeguarding the most vulnerable.

[5] Barriers must be removed for development: the war has actualized the issue of accessibility in cities (PHOTOS), 13.03.2022, https://tinyurl.com/4fsh44nn

1 THE MOST FREQUENT VIOLATIONS OF IHL: A DESCRIPTION OF THE SITUATION IN FRONTLINE SETTLEMENTS (2022-2024)

As previously noted, the Russian military is conducting hostilities in Ukraine in direct violation of IHL provisions designed to protect civilians during armed conflict. Key violations include:

- Intentionally attacking civilian targets rather than military ones.
- Using disproportionate force in operations.
- Intentionally assaulting civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, food depots, and other IHL-protected sites.
- Destroying humanitarian headquarters that provide essential assistance to the civilian population.
- Utilizing prohibited chemical weapons in densely populated areas.
- Remotely mining residential neighborhoods filled with civilians and employing other forms of indiscriminate weaponry.

These actions severely complicate the survival of the civilian population in combat zones.

Based on experiences from 2022 to 2024, the humanitarian crisis in settlements near the war zone is evolving dramatically. This evolution can be classified into three main stages, each varying in duration across different frontline regions and influenced by the intensity and nature of hostilities between the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the RF[6].

First Stage. During the initial stage, units of the AFU position themselves on the outskirts of the settlement or establish a circular defense perimeter around it, sometimes taking strategic positions in industrial zones on the city's outskirts. The Russian military primarily targets military installations, including troop locations, industrial facilities, air defense systems, and airfields. However, these operations frequently impact city blocks, especially along outer streets, and often strike civilian infrastructure. As a result, the settlement may lose access to essential services such as electricity, gas, water, and heating, which becomes particularly critical during winter.

At this stage, the local community, public, and religious organizations mobilize to evacuate civilians. Many residents with personal vehicles and sufficient financial resources flee independently, often assisting neighbors and friends in evacuating. Some business owners close their operations to avoid significant losses.

Most residents with relocation options outside the settlement, primarily families with children, choose to leave. It is common for men to escort women and chil-

[6] The developments are described based on the analysis of the humanitarian and security situation in the cities with a population of 30,000 or more that are in the combat zone (Avdiivka, Bakhmut, Izium, Lysychansk, Mariupol, Rubizhne, Sievierodonetsk, Chernihiv, etc.).

dren to safety and return to safeguard their property. Utility services remain operational, actively working to restore electricity, gas, water, and heating. Law enforcement maintains public order, while SESU units clear debris, manage sites of shelling, and extinguish fires. Local hospitals continue providing essential medical care, and pharmacies maintain adequate stock of medicines. Food supplies are available in stores, though the selection decreases as conditions deteriorate.

During this stage, despite ongoing fighting and frequent reports of civilian casualties in targeted areas, the city continues to receive essential supplies of food, medicine, and fuel.

During **the Second Stage**, the AFU established combat positions near the settlement's residential buildings, often those that were already damaged or had few remaining residents. Civilians remaining in the area were usually older adults who lacked relocation options or refused to leave, determined to stay near their homes despite the danger.

The Russian military escalates its efforts to encircle the settlement, directly assaulting Ukrainian positions and increasingly targeting central and adjacent city areas. Heavy weaponry, including tanks, is deployed to shell and storm Ukrainian defenses within the city. The use of air strikes on central parts of the settlement becomes frequent, aiming to "clear" paths for advancing military equipment. Various caliber MLRS, mortars, and artillery bombard residential zones, with some cities experiencing the added threat of anti-personnel mines, which are remotely deployed in civilian-populated areas.

Under intensified attacks, critical infrastructure — including residential buildings, hospitals, food warehouses, markets, schools, cultural centers, and rescue stations — sustains significant damage, complicating the survival of any remaining civilian population.

The Russian military's deliberate targeting of civilian areas is further evidenced by its use of reconnaissance drones to adjust artillery fire on city centers. In some cases, local residents collaborate as spotters, aiding in directing strikes. Additionally, the AFRF have increasingly deployed FPV-drones equipped with cameras to attack civilians and vehicles in frontline settlements.

The nature of these attacks strongly suggests intentional targeting. Rather than single, potentially accidental hits on civilian structures or humanitarian centers, Russian forces frequently strike the same site multiple times in quick succession. This pattern indicates a deliberate strategy aimed at civilian infrastructure, intensifying the risk for remaining residents. This period has seen the highest civilian casualties, resulting from both direct attacks and the worsening humanitarian crisis within besieged cities.

Residential areas experience severe electricity, gas, water, and heating shortages, with services provided only sporadically — sometimes after several days or even a week. Utility workers tirelessly attempt to repair the infrastructure, yet relentless shelling often re-damages these systems shortly after repairs are completed. In the meantime, local water utilities have started delivering drinking water to civilians using specialized vehicles. However, due to the sheer volume of attacks, SESU units cannot reach many of the damaged or destroyed sites. Rescue workers face significant challenges due to a critical lack of equipment, as SES vehicle fleets and stations have primarily been killed in the attacks.

The city's last few grocery stores remain open, while pharmacies have closed. Hospitals continue to operate, with the remaining medical staff relocating operating rooms to basements. These hospitals are powered by generators and are overcrowded with wounded civilians. Doctors are working under severe shortages of essential medicines and equipment.

Under these conditions, civilians take refuge in basements of residential buildings or makeshift shelters set up under schools and other facilities. They must cook over open fires in building courtyards and fetch water from city utility vehicles, wells, or any available drinking water sources. While some food is still being sold, food is still needed. Many civilians are searching for food in damaged warehouses and shops impacted by shelling. Humanitarian aid is reaching the city, but supply routes are under fire, leaving some neighborhoods unsafe, and aid only sometimes reaches everyone in need.

Currently, most casualties occur when civilians are forced to leave shelters to cook outside, gather water, or search for food. The Russian army also targets large gatherings in critical areas, such as evacuation points, humanitarian aid distribution centers, and shops, putting those in line at significant risk.

During breaks in the fighting, civilians attempt to leave the city, often in family groups spanning multiple generations. Many of the population is evacuating at this stage, including those without personal transportation. Local administration leaders coordinate evacuation efforts, using municipal buses whenever possible, though many have been damaged by Russian shelling. Private carriers also provide transport out of the city, though these services are costly — sometimes around $1,000 per person — making them unaffordable for many.

Civil society activists, including volunteers from religious communities, charities, and NGOs, are actively involved in the evacuation, offering free transportation to civilians. However, due to the overwhelming number of people wanting to leave, they can only accommodate some.

Remaining in the city is highly dangerous for civilians, yet even the routes used for humanitarian aid and civilian transport, including evacuation convoys, are often targeted by the AFRF.

Third Stage: The Ukrainian Armed Forces are engaged in street fighting throughout the settlement, turning it into an active battlefield. The area is effectively cut off without electricity, water, or gas supply. City utilities, the local administration, and all governmental and non-governmental organizations have evacuated. A few civilians remain, sheltering in basements or other safe spaces, unable or unwilling to leave for various reasons. Only armored vehicles can navigate the town, delivering humanitarian aid and evacuating those who wish to depart.

When the Ukrainian forces eventually withdraw, Russian troops take control. Although fighting may continue, the settlement is mainly under Russian attack. Eventually, combat subsides, but the settlement is left nearly destroyed, with no restoration efforts from the occupying Russian administration.

All remaining civilians are subject to strict loyalty screenings for Russia and its policies, after which they are required to obtain Russian passports. With a Russian passport, residents can access pensions, social benefits, humanitarian aid, or medical care. The humanitarian situation in occupied cities is generally dire, though a detailed analysis falls outside the scope of this report.

The three stages are relative, but this timeline clearly shows the events in the frontline settlements[7].

Each stage of the conflict involves different violations of IHL, prompting responses from local administrations, the SESU, police, and civil society. These efforts focus on minimizing civilian casualties through humanitarian aid, organizing evacuations, and other critical actions.

In the second stage, as the settlement becomes a focal point of intense fighting, a surge of residents attempt to leave simultaneously. Local administrations and evacuation volunteers must be prepared for such sudden mass departures.

Humanitarian organization representatives, activists, and volunteers from charitable foundations working in frontline settlements also face deliberate attacks by the Russian army. Olha Shyrshykova from the CF "East SOS" shared her experiences providing humanitarian aid to civilians in Sievierodonetsk, Luhansk region, during the spring of 2022[8]:

> *"...They were targeting food warehouses and humanitarian centers... Everything was exposed. Warehouses on Bohdan Lishchyna Street, food storage facilities, and supermarkets were all hit. Anything related to food was in their sights. In Sievierodonetsk, there was a humanitarian center at 37A Donetska Street, where we had eight direct hits on April 12, 2022. Not the entire building was destroyed; we moved supplies to another section and continued distribution. When "East SOS" suggested posting the address on Facebook or elsewhere, I firmly advised against it, as there had already been incidents. Food deliveries would arrive, and we would distribute everything immediately, without stockpiling, understanding that the warehouse could be destroyed at any time. We didn't hold back supplies; we gave them to people to ensure they could eat before it was too late. It was the right choice because everything could be lost at any moment. We would unload a seven-ton truck in under an hour, rushing to distribute food immediately. Eventually, the warehouse was destroyed by shelling, and the Russians finished what was left".*

Roman Buhayev of the CF "Angels of Salvation" and the CF "East SOS" recounted these experiences, describing the evacuation of civilians from Sievierodonetsk, Luhansk region, in the spring of 2022[9]:

> *"At the Budivelnykiv building, everyone knew it was an evacuation point for civil-*

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[7] All three stages described above are typical for settlements such as Avdiivka and Bakhmut in the Donetsk region, as well as Lysychansk and Sievierodonetsk in the Luhansk region. In 2022, cities like Izium in the Kharkiv region and Chernihiv were spared the most destructive third stage of fighting. The Russian army failed to capture Chernihiv, and in the spring of 2022, Ukrainian Armed Forces pushed them back to the Russian border. Likewise, in the spring of 2022, the Ukrainian Armed Forces withdrew from Izium without prolonged street fighting, reclaiming control of the city in September 2022 without it being entirely destroyed.
In contrast, in cities like Rubizhne in the Luhansk region and Mariupol in the Donetsk region, street fighting broke out so quickly that many civilians were unable to flee, resulting in a high death toll. Both of these cities share not only the tragic fate of their residents but also the fact that the Russian army encountered fierce resistance from Ukrainian forces in front of them. The Russian military advanced swiftly and almost unimpeded through Donetsk and Luhansk, but in these two cities, their operations appeared aimed at systematically destroying both the cities and their inhabitants.

[8] Interview HS/LM-ES/1 of 22.06.2022, 16.02.2024

[9] Interview HS/LM-ES/2 of 20.12.2023

ians, as the RSA was located there. In the second week, we started an information campaign to coordinate evacuations, designating specific points as central gathering spots. Our goal was not to have people gather there but to pick them up directly from their homes or nearby shelters and basements to ensure their safety. We would gather people and load them onto buses, but there were often more than available buses, so some had to wait for the next evacuation.

One day, as we stood there, we heard distant sounds, like launches coming from the Luhansk direction. Moments later, several powerful explosions landed nearby in the residential area. There were around 3–4 substantial impacts. We quickly gathered ourselves and evacuated. Although we can't confirm they were aiming directly at us, these strikes hit civilian houses. I could understand if it had been an industrial area or a strategic target, but these attacks were happening in residential neighborhoods".

The use of "scorched earth" tactics is criminalized under Article 8(2)(b)(xxv) of the RS, and attacks on humanitarian headquarters and missions are prohibited under Article 8(2)(b)(iii). Yet, such violations remain frequent in frontline settlements.

2 VULNERABLE GROUPS AT THE FRONTLINE

2.1. General characteristics of respondents

To answer the main research question[10], documenters interviewed not only individuals with disabilities but also members of low-mobility groups, who shared their experiences of survival amid severe humanitarian challenges and constant danger from shelling. They also spoke with relatives and caregivers[11] of vulnerable individuals, which enabled the inclusion of stories from people who were unaware of their surroundings or bedridden and unable to care for themselves.

During the information gathering for the report, documenters from the CF "East SOS" conducted 60 in-depth interviews with 66 individuals, including:

- 37 interviews with 39 persons with disabilities and representatives of low-mobility groups of all ages living in frontline settlements;
- 11 interviews with 15 individuals, primarily close relatives of those in low-mobility groups and persons with disabilities;
- 12 interviews with experts (volunteers, activists, managers, and coordinators of charitable foundations) who have provided ongoing assistance to low-mobility groups and persons with disabilities in the frontline areas.

In terms of demographics, the respondents included 41 women and 25 men, with the following characteristics:

- 30 individuals were representatives of low-mobility groups (including 4 who temporarily lost the ability to move freely due to injuries);
- 26 individuals were of retirement age (65+ years);
- 13 individuals had a documented disability;
- 5 individuals used wheelchairs for mobility[12].

Interviewees were selected to represent a wide range of life scenarios among vulnerable groups, capturing common problems, challenges, and risks faced by civilians on the frontline.

The project documented 46 stories from:

- persons with disabilities of various ages, encompassing a range of medical diagnoses, social backgrounds, and economic statuses;

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[10] What kind of assistance do the most vulnerable and least visible to the state and society (potential "invisible people") need?

[11] The story published by "East SOS": "The body lay behind the wall for a day until a neighbor came back and buried her mother in a mass grave". Valeria, a caregiver from Mariupol, remained with her patient and got into the occupation — a monologue, 27.09.2022, https://tinyurl.com/225mxyer

[12] A more detailed description of the project respondents is provided in ANNEX 1

- representatives of low-mobility groups of all ages, with varying abilities to move, see, hear, process information, and navigate their surroundings;
- older adults with diverse lifestyles, previous experiences, incomes, and social backgrounds.

All recorded stories recount the respondents' efforts to survive under extreme conditions, care for relatives who cannot care for themselves, and, where possible, assist others. The accounts also document severe violations of IHL by the Russian military, including deliberate killings of civilians, intentional attacks on civilians, and strikes on civilian structures[13].

2.2. Basic needs, survival amid the humanitarian crisis, and the challenges and hardships respondents had to overcome

The basic needs of civilian residents in settlements near the front line were broadly similar:

- Surviving without electricity, gas, drinking water, communication, or heating during winter;
- Finding safe shelter from shelling;
- Securing food, drinking water, and the means to prepare a hot meal at least once daily;
- Receiving timely information on evacuation and humanitarian aid;
- Leaving the danger zone promptly, among other critical needs.

Persons with disabilities, those with reduced mobility, and their families faced these challenges, much like other civilians on the frontline. Among the stories collected are accounts of vulnerable groups experiencing complete helplessness under such conditions and stories of resilient responses to these challenges, enabling them to evacuate the danger zone and survive.

A critical factor in survival was the ability to unite with others—neighbors, family, friends, and acquaintances — for mutual support. Only those fully aware of their surroundings could build these essential connections. For individuals with dementia or severe mental illness, survival depends entirely on the support of their caregivers.

Of the 46 stories analyzed:

- 24 individuals managed to survive independently or with the support of relatives, friends, or acquaintances;
- 22 individuals were unable to survive on their own and required care from close relatives or a live-in nurse[14].

Among the 22 stories of individuals unable to survive independently, 11 recount caregivers' experiences looking after disabled or mobility-impaired relatives or acquaintances during hostilities or learning of their loved ones' fate through relatives or neighbors. Five accounts (about a quarter of the 22) document the death or natural passing of relatives either within the combat zone or during evacuation attempts.

The 24 stories of those who managed to survive independently in harsh conditions primarily include first-person accounts of individuals or couples who either left the

[13] The 12 stories recorded in the project are presented in ANNEX 4

[14] A more detailed description of the analyzed situations is provided in ANNEX 1

danger zone in time or endured until their area was liberated. Of these, 16 are stories of people who overcame challenges independently, while 8 involve minimal help from their social circle. In roughly a third of the independent survival cases (5 out of 16), individuals were no longer self-sufficient by the time they left the danger zone — having been injured, traumatized, or having suffered strokes due to prolonged stress.

One example of such a situation is the story of Fedir Holenko, a 69-year-old from Kostiantynivka in the Donetsk region[15]:

> *"...The roofs of three or four houses were smashed. I lived on the first floor, and it was terrible there too — the slate was torn off, the windows shattered. But I managed to board up my windows with wood on both sides. Then things just got worse and worse. The blast wave affected me physically* ***and left a lasting mark on my nerves. Eventually, I couldn't walk*** *— I had to use crutches and couldn't walk at all for a time, relying solely on a walker".*

Even the most optimistic stories of a lonely elderly person being rescued from a danger zone still speak of a significant deterioration in their health due to the ordeal they endured, as recounted by Vyacheslav Yanovsky, 76, from Mariupol, Donetsk region[16]:

> *"****...I don't consider myself elderly.*** *I still go for brisk walks... Just five years ago, I was playing football. But there in Mariupol, I couldn't sleep for about a month—constant shelling, explosions. It was impossible to rest at night in my home. There was an empty compartment car nearby, and I asked the conductor if I could use it. She saw how exhausted I was and said, "Take the compartment. You look so worn out".*
>
> *I had nothing to shave with, no time, and my hair... had gone from blond to white. I didn't even recognize myself when I looked in the mirror".*

Living in an area that's becoming a war zone is a challenge for civilians, but it's particularly harsh for those with limited mobility, like older adults and people with disabilities. Many respondents shared the difficulties they faced just trying to get necessities like drinking water or food, highlighting the heightened vulnerability of those who struggle to meet their needs even in peaceful times.

Olha Dmitriiva, a 67-year-old[17] with a disability from Hirske, Luhansk region, described the threat of starvation in March 2022 as her greatest challenge:

> *"I thought we would die of hunger. I can't tell you how afraid I was! I didn't believe we would survive. I had some food stocks — not much, but enough to get by for a while. But in general, no one had enough food. Then humanitarian aid arrived, and we rationed it carefully — spoonfuls for each person, just a little for everyone. Everyone understood and agreed; we had no choice".*

The risk of starvation for isolated older adults in conflict zones is disturbingly common. Such cases were reported in settlements wholly surrounded and cut off from food supplies and in Kyiv during the spring of 2022[18].

Olena Tkachenko, a 50-year-old resident of Mariupol, Donetsk region, who was caring for her older mother[19], recounted the severe water shortages in spring 2022:

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[15] Interview HS/LM-ES/3 of 31.08.2023

[16] Interview HS/LM-ES/4 of 13-14.12.2023

[17] Interview HS/LM-ES/5 of 13.07.2022, see the story of Olha Dmytriiva in ANNEX 4/4.7.

[18] See ANNEX 2/2.1.

[19] Interview HS/LM-ES/6 of 29.04.2023, see the story of Olena Tkachenko in ANNEX 4/4.5.

*"**At first, we had no water.** We went to the square near the maternity hospital — it was terrifying. Then, we discovered a fire hydrant near our street. We opened the hatch, and there was water... Before that, we'd been using water from a neighbor who had forgotten about an old irrigation well her grandfather had dug. It was murky — worms on one side, water on the other, which we boiled. Sometimes, I drank it unboiled; I was just so thirsty".*

Many respondents also described critical shortages of daily medications, especially prescription drugs, among the first items to run out. Mykola Kulinych, a 64-year-old with a disability from Mariupol, spoke of the struggle to secure his essential medicine[20]:

*"I have severe bronchial asthma and **didn't have a large supply of medication**. Fortunately, a friend went to the volunteer hub, 'Khalabuda,' where he found medicine for me. My neighbors also found batteries for my nebulizer".*

Valeriia Stasiuk, a 45-year-old with a disability from Hirske, Luhansk region, who was caring for her mobility-impaired father, described the dire shortage of essential medicines[21]:

*"All the pharmacies were closed... When we received humanitarian aid, the [Ukrainian] military sometimes shared leftover medicines. But it was usually paracetamol, analgin, basic stuff... I have glaucoma and needed glaucoma drops. You can't just find those anywhere, and no one could give them to me. Some locals would travel to Dnipro for a fee and were asked to bring back medications. We made a list, and they brought my mother's blood pressure medication from Dnipro. So, access to **medicines was always a struggle**".*

Many elderly residents reported that they couldn't reach bomb shelters, as these facilities were often inaccessible. Ivan Riznychenko, a 65-year-old[22] from Druzhkivka, Donetsk region, explained:

*"We had a shelter, but it was 500 meters away. For someone young and able-bodied, that might be fine, but for me and my wife, with her disability, it was impossible. I couldn't carry her there. Plus, we live on the third floor with no elevator, and my legs aren't strong... So, we stayed home in the corridor. **Attempting to reach the shelter just wasn't realistic for us**".*

Valentyna Mateiko, a 49-year-old wheelchair user from Kurakhove, Donetsk region, explained her inability to reach the shelter in her building[23]:

*"My son evacuated me because of that; everyone else would run to the basement. A neighbor had set up beds down there for people to hide when the shelling was intense. But I couldn't get there — I'd go to the bathroom or toilet and wait until it passed, then come out. Since I was on the second floor, [my son] took me out. **I had nowhere safe to hide**".*

Many respondents who cared for relatives with limited mobility shared similar stories: they didn't go to the shelters, not wanting to leave their loved ones alone during shelling, nor could they bring them along. Others avoided shelters entirely due to the difficulty of staying there for extended periods.

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[20] Interview HS/LM-ES/7 of 11.04.2022

[21] Interview HS/LM-ES/8 of 14.11.2023, see the story of Valeriia Stasiuk in ANNEX 4/4.6.

[22] Interview HS/LM-ES/9 of 27.10.2023

[23] Interview HS/LM-ES/10 of 29.09.2023

One such case was reported by Olena Tkachenko, a 50-year-old[24] from Mariupol, Donetsk region.

> *"In a small room, with no windows or doors, they let me put my mother there. She began to lose touch with reality — bedridden, unable to tell day from night. I would light a candle to feed or care for her as best as possible... She lay alone in that dark closet with just a pail for three days. She lost all sense of her surroundings. That's one of the reasons we decided to return home.* ***If we were going to die, we wanted to be at home****".*

Even among those with disabilities who managed to gather essential supplies, many refrained from going to shelters for various reasons, including health constraints.

Mykola Kulinych, a 64-year-old[25] with a disability from Mariupol, Donetsk region, shared his perspective:

> *"We heard the rustling of nearby hailstones and couldn't tell if they would come our way. We hid in the corridor, seeking only illusory protection from the flying glass. Going to the basement wasn't an option — I have asthma, and I lost weight quickly from dehydration. The stress was unbearable, making my condition worse. Climbing to the third floor was nearly impossible, especially with planes flying overhead every 15 minutes.* ***Living in a damp basement would be a death sentence*** *for someone with asthma. So, we stayed at home, enduring a nightmare that grew worse every day".*

When active combat unfolds in a residential area, evacuation is often the safest choice for civilians. However, older residents frequently choose to stay, attempting to endure the challenging and dangerous conditions at home. Three of the 46 stories analyzed involved vulnerable individuals who opted not to evacuate. Notably, all these cases occurred in recently de-occupied settlements in the Kharkiv region, such as Balakliia and Izium, where humanitarian and security conditions are relatively improved, located tens of kilometers from active front lines.

In two cases, the individuals were elderly, living alone without family support. They felt the living conditions in resettlement centers were less tolerable than the familiar hardships of their homes, leading them to remain despite the risks.

Iryna Zinkivska, a 68-year-old[26] from Balakliia in the Kharkiv region, explained her reasons for refusing to evacuate:

> *"They asked us at the service center, "Are you going to leave?" and we said, "No". My husband is a person with a second-degree disability. He only has one arm and needs care... We still had electricity, sometimes, and could watch TV to stay informed. And when the internally displaced arrived, I understood they wouldn't have enough beds for everyone. I don't need a bed. But if we lie down, we won't get up".*

Mykola Nadulichnyi, a 46-year-old [27] disabled man and head of the Luhansk Association of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities, now living in Lviv, also spoke about frontline residents' deep attachment to their homes:

> *"When I went to Sievierodonetsk with food boxes, people were crying. I urged them, "Get in! I'll take you. You could go to Germany or Italy—choose where you*

[24] Interview HS/LM-ES/6 of 29.04.2023, see the story of Olena Tkachenko in ANNEX 4/4.5.

[25] Interview HS/LM-ES/7 of 11.04.2022

[26] Interview HS/LM-ES/11 of 19.07.2023, see the story of Iryna Zinkivska in ANNEX 4/4.3.

[27] Interview HS/LM-ES/12 of 06.10.2023

want". But they refused. They just said, "No! No!" I couldn't force them. They cried, "We're all going to die here", and I asked, "Shall we go?" but still, "No!" It left me with a sense of helplessness".

Mariia Bahlai, an 84-year-old[28] single woman from Beryslav, Kherson region, evacuated by "East SOS", shared her feelings before deciding to leave:

"I wasn't planning to, not until the last moment, because I was afraid to leave... Everything would end, and I'd be left behind... I couldn't even imagine leaving. But now I can... I have nothing. This is how I lived".

There were numerous instances where members of vulnerable groups couldn't evacuate from the danger zone due to poor evacuation organization, a lack of special transportation for people with limited mobility, and even refusals to evacuate elderly individuals. Oksana Bilous recounted her attempt to leave Chernihiv with her 88-year-old mother in the spring of 2022[29]:

"The next evacuation was supposed to be in two days... We arrived, and there was already a line. We could have boarded the buses that arrived, but women with children were allowed on first, so we were pushed to the back. ***Some said, "The old woman has lived her life; let her stay"****. We couldn't get on then".*

Valentyna Mateiko, a 49-year-old[30] wheelchair user from Kurakhove, Donetsk region, shared her experience:

"They evacuated all the non-disabled people first, but it was much harder for them to take me. They were willing to but without my wheelchair. But how could I get anywhere without it? They told me I could go, ***but only without it****. The buses were overcrowded, and I saw people leaving their wheelchairs behind and somehow squeezing on. Most of the people evacuating were able-bodied, but it was much more challenging for those of us with disabilities.* ***Many people with disabilities stayed behind, living at home because it was so difficult to evacuate us****. Special vehicles are needed to help us. My son was in Kharkiv when it was bombed and had to shelter in the subway. Luckily, he could leave, buy a car, and return for me. Otherwise, I don't know how I would have gotten out".*

Ivan Riznychenko, a 65-year-old[31] man from Druzhkivka, Donetsk region, described his evacuation:

"We were brought to Uman. By September and October, it was getting cold, and the fighting was intensifying, so I didn't want to risk going any further. The journey wasn't comfortable, but we managed. ***They cleared space on the bus for my wife, who couldn't sit up, and I had to adjust the seating as best as possible****. It wasn't ideal, but we made it. We left at 7 AM and arrived at 3 PM".*

Not all evacuation stories shared by respondents had positive outcomes. Two out of the 46 recorded stories describe the deaths of people with reduced mobility during evacuation. In 38 cases, respondents could leave alone or were evacuated by the CF "East SOS" to a relatively safe area. Of these, 17 individuals managed to rent housing in Ukraine or travel to Europe independently. This also includes stories of people met by their adult children and taken in. The biggest challenge for these families remains and continues to be the high cost of renting housing in Ukraine.

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[28] Interview HS/LM-ES/13 of 06.12.2023, see the story of Mariia Bahlai in ANNEX 4/4.10.

[29] Interview HS/LM-ES/14 of 04.06.2022

[30] Interview HS/LM-ES/10 of 29.09.2023

[31] Interview HS/LM-ES/9 of 27.10.2023

Spartak Stepnov, a 51-year-old[32] man who uses a wheelchair and escaped from Mariupol in the Donetsk region with his family, shared his experience of starting a new life in France:

> *"You shouldn't be afraid to change your residence. You can be as active as possible in communication, sensitive, and attentive to others, and they will respond kindly. Disabled people often don't feel socialized — they think it's scary and uncomfortable. But in my opinion,* ***there's nothing to fear****. I met many kind people everywhere, from when I started moving around Mariupol to the last moment of my journey".*

Mykola Nadulichnyi[33] also described the new opportunities available to people with disabilities after evacuation:

> *"Being a person with a disability means facing all kinds of challenges. It's a life of struggle, you know. I received a call from a girl from Zaporizhzhia who had moved to Germany. She said, "Mykola, everything is fine. I'm struggling with the language, but I can travel, fly, and take different courses... Everything is fine". She settled into a perfect environment. She even flew on an airplane and drove it herself. Can you imagine? She said, "We live here, we just live here!" She helps me from there, providing humanitarian aid. Yesterday, a journalist from Italian television came to interview me and asked, "So, you're delivering aid?" I replied, "I'm not bragging, but I haven't seen anyone else who uses a wheelchair and goes to the frontline with trucks like I did in Kupiansk"".*

2.3. Risks of long-term frontline residence for members of vulnerable groups

Prolonged exposure to a humanitarian crisis zone leads to an increase in isolated individuals—those who have lost loved ones or whose families have fled—and members of low-mobility groups. Even healthy individuals can be injured, suffer from stress, or develop severe health conditions in these conditions. As a result, the number of people at risk of death rises, not only due to shelling and deliberate attacks on civilians but also due to their inability to access essential help, food, and medicine, as well as a lack of information about evacuation options.

Documented accounts often describe the deaths of these isolated individuals, including those with limited mobility, across all age groups. Sometimes, the names of these people are known, but often, they remain unidentified. These individuals die from causes such as hunger, dehydration, untreated illness, or simply because they refuse to seek shelter[34] during attacks. Their stories will never be heard. However, valuable insights into the lives of these "invisible" people can be gleaned from those who cared for low-mobility relatives on the frontlines.

A common cause of death for individuals in vulnerable groups is the lack of access to medical care. Yuliia Humeniuk recounts the hystory of her mother in March 2022 in the village of Pavlivka, Donetsk region[35]:

> *"It happened when the frontline approached Vuhledar in the morning. On March 12, my father informed my sister and me that my mother had passed away. My mother had undergone heart surgery... I believe the cause of her death was the incredibly intense shelling on that day. Perhaps her heart couldn't withstand the*

[32] Interview HS/LM-ES/15 of 25.10.2023

[33] Interview HS/LM-ES/12 of 06.10.2023

[34] Some of the most common situations faced by lonely representatives of low-mobility groups in the frontline area are presented in ANNEX 3.

[35] Interview HS/LM-ES/16 of 11.11.2022

*stress... **If circumstances had been different, someone else might have been able to help**. But on March 12, her family doctor couldn't respond to our call... There were no ambulances".*

It is all too real that members of low-mobility groups could die from hunger or dehydration if left without care or assistance.

Alla Martyniuk, from Mariupol, Donetsk region, shared a story about her parents in March 2022[36]:

> *"There was no water, so my father went to a spring to collect some. He came back wounded. The doctor examined him and said his lungs and stomach were punctured and he needed to be taken to the hospital immediately. They put him in the car's back seat, and a doctor from the neighboring building came to assist. They drove off... But they barely made it around the house when a shell from a tank struck the car. My father burned to death in the back seat. The two people who tried to help were torn apart and thrown out of the car... This happened on March 12. **My mother died shortly after from hunger and dehydration, deprived of everything**. She passed away lying there... On March 25, she was buried in the yard at the same address. My father was buried behind the house, and my mother was placed near the entrance".*

The death of older individuals was often exacerbated by severe stress and the overwhelming feeling that they were a burden to their families, who were already struggling in harsh conditions. Some even attempted suicide because they felt they no longer wanted to live or fight for survival.

Lina Kravets, a 32-year-old resident of Mariupol, Donetsk region, shared the story of her grandmother[37]:

> *"On March 20, 2022, my grandmother was severely injured when the ceiling collapsed on her. We wrapped her in blankets to keep her warm, which likely saved her life. However, her face, which wasn't fully covered, was injured. The trauma and fear left her so shaken that, as my mother described, she refused to eat. She stopped eating and drinking around April 2-3, and for four days, she didn't take anything. She passed away on April 7. **Before her death, she told my mother she no longer wanted to live** because she couldn't bear the thought of enduring another explosion like the one we had experienced".*

Similarly, police officer Serhii Mishchenko, who was in Mariupol in March 2022, shared a similar experience[38]:

> *"We witnessed a heartbreaking situation where **many elderly people, overwhelmed by the horrors of the war, began to take their own lives** by jumping from windows. This tragic occurrence became a daily reality. I saw it firsthand and heard countless reports over the radio as we maintained constant communication. It was harrowing to find individuals who had jumped only to survive with severe injuries — broken spines, legs, and hips. We did everything possible to evacuate them to hospitals and ensure they received the necessary medical care".*

Dmytro Shulha, the urologist from Mariupol, described the deaths of people with limited mobility who were being cared for by relatives[39]:

> *"Bedridden patients, whom I used to treat once a month... I would visit them*

[36] Interview HS/LM-ES/17 of 09.05.2022

[37] Interview HS/LM-ES/18 of 23.02.2023

[38] Interview HS/LM-ES/19 of 19.03.2023

[39] Interview HS/LM-ES/20 of 14.04.2022, of 09.11.2023

to provide medical care — some needed catheterizations, bandaging, or wound cleaning. Some were recovering from surgery; others had long-term illnesses. I had 10 to 15 such patients at the start of the full-scale invasion. When I left, their relatives started calling me to say they had passed away. ***No one could survive under those conditions, even those who could move****. I can't even imagine what happened to those who were bedridden. It was horrible... Everyone said they died quickly. There was nothing anyone could do for them. Where could you take someone lying down in a room with a temperature of 0 degrees? How could you warm them up? It was an impossible situation. People froze to death".*

2.4. The "invisible people" of the front line

The number of deaths among people with limited mobility who were cared for by relatives is tragically high, and the number of fatalities among lonely individuals is likely equally concerning. Although many of these cases were recorded in Mariupol, Donetsk region, the situation in Rubizhne, Luhansk region, was no less dire[40].

Yevhen Holovanevskyi[41], the "East SOS" evacuation and reconstruction departments coordinator, spoke about the deaths of people with limited mobility:

"Quite a few died. I know of some cases personally, and there are others I strongly suspect were fatalities, especially in Rubizhne. There were instances when we lacked time or couldn't evacuate them. There were also cases of mistakes that prevented us from getting people out. Unfortunately, this happens".

The prolonged stay of lonely individuals from low-mobility groups during a humanitarian crisis, particularly when street fighting is taking place, leads to inevitable deaths. This is not only due to direct armed attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure but also as a consequence of the broader humanitarian disaster: hunger, dehydration, the lack of essential medicines, the absence of emergency medical care, and prolonged exposure to cold and other life-threatening conditions.

A survey conducted in March 2024 with 21 members of low-mobility groups evacuated by the CF "East SOS" from frontline areas and temporarily housed at the "Ocean of Good" Accommodation Center in Dnipro supports this conclusion[42].

When asked, "What do you think would have happened to you if you had not evacuated?", twenty participants responded, with one refusing to answer. Of those 20, **18 stated that they would have died if they had not been evacuated**.

Several individuals explained the potential reasons for their likely deaths:

- One woman from Kurakhove (89 years old) reported learning that her house was hit shortly after her evacuation.
- Three people mentioned being trapped under rubble during shelling.
- One man (53 years old) who had suffered a stroke indicated that without anyone to care for him—relying only on a visiting social worker—he would have perished.

This survey highlights that the number of "invisible" people in Ukraine, particularly those from low-mobility groups, can be significantly reduced by identifying and assisting isolated individuals in frontline areas early on. Evacuation is a key component of this support.

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[40] In both cities, in March 2022, fighting was so fast that people didn't have time to evacuate.

[41] Interview HS/LM-ES/21 of 30.08.2023

[42] A detailed analysis of the surveyed group and the results of the survey are presented in ANNEX 3.

3 PROVIDING ASSISTANCE TO PEOPLE WITH LIMITED MOBILITY: THE CF "EAST SOS" AND PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS' EXPERIENCE. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In March 2022, CF "East SOS" began receiving evacuation requests from residents of the Luhansk region, including families of people with limited mobility. At that time, "East SOS" had no prior experience in evacuation operations and lacked the necessary vehicles, equipment, and a trained team.

However, over the course of the past two years, the CF "East SOS" evacuation team successfully rescued more than 86,000 civilians from frontline and newly de-occupied territories, including over 11,200 individuals with limited mobility.

The foundation had to develop all its evacuation capabilities from scratch during the war, navigating a challenging journey of trial and error. The development of this evacuation effort began in March 2022, and the first coordinator, Yevhen Holovanevskyi, shared his reflections on this early period[43]:

> *"When I started working at the hotline, the frontline was just passing through Rubizhne and Sievierodonetsk, and we were receiving numerous requests from people and the relatives of those who remained in these areas. At that time, we didn't have a proper evacuation mechanism. We contacted the police, the SESU, and the Red Cross, but their response was often negative. When we began evacuating, only two volunteers worked on it full-time. Our operations started in Sievierodonetsk, but we didn't have enough time to reach Rubizhne. Initially, we had one crew handling evacuations from Sievierodonetsk, surrounding villages, and Lysychansk, and they could only evacuate up to 20 people a day. We couldn't reach everyone who requested help and didn't always have enough transport. As a result, these requests kept piling up, and it was a very complicated situation. Eventually, by June 2022, after Sievierodonetsk fell, the flow of requests started to stabilize. Sievierodonetsk fell relatively slowly, and the same was true for Bakhmut, but after that, we didn't experience the overwhelming flood of requests. The flow remained high, but at least we had a clearer understanding of managing it".*

In March 2022, the CF "East SOS" established a call center for evacuation and humanitarian assistance requests. It then created a database to track and manage these applications. Over time, the foundation built a fleet of evacuation vehicles and recruited a dedicated team of evacuators.

Evacuating individuals with limited mobility requires specific expertise, specialized vehicles, and equipment. Cars capable of transporting people lying down, stretchers, mobile chairs, or other means to remove individuals from buildings and safely load them into transport are essential. Moreover, the team must be well-trained and familiar with the protocols for operating in active hostilities areas to ensure their safety and those they evacuate.

The evacuation process was developed with various partners, including charitable

[43] Interview HS/LM-ES/21 of 30.08.2023

foundations and NGOs such as the CF "Angels of Salvation", the Center for Social Adaptation for People with Disabilities "Ocean of Good", and "Save Ukraine".

The evacuation of people with limited mobility was launched with the support of volunteers and local and foreign organizations. Volunteers conducted the first evacuations. It is hard to overestimate the contribution of Volodymyr Shevtsov, Timo Vogt, Ihor Lohvinov, Dmytro and Viktoriia Maksymovych, Anton Yaremchuk, Liely Bullock, Jonny Weaving, and many other courageous people who evacuated people from the Russian shelling. Some of them, such as Oksana Myronenko, Ihor Lohvinov, and Anton Yaremchuk, later created volunteer associations or charitable foundations.

The evacuation of "East SOS" was only possible with local organizations that bravely operated in the fields. These include charitable foundations and NGO such as "Angels of Salvation", the Social Adaptation Center for People with Disabilities "Ocean of Good", "Save Ukraine", "Martin Club", "Artdacha" and ADRA. They organized temporary shelters, provided first aid, distributed food and hygiene kits, and shared essential information from the frontlines.

Foreign organizations, such as the "Libereco Partnership for Human Rights", "CADUS", "LeaveNoOneBehind", and others, assisted the foundation's team and volunteers through funding, training, psychological support, and material supplies.

A little later, we established partnerships with several key organizations that significantly contributed to the evacuation efforts. These included the volunteer organization "BAZA UA", the "Nash Sokil" Charitable Foundation (whose founder, Oksana Myronenko, was one of the first to organize accommodation and care for evacuees with limited mobility, hosting hundreds of people), "Volunteer-68", the "Barrier-Free Foundation", as well as the Red Cross and "Doctors Without Borders".

Each organization brought its unique expertise. For example, "Save Ukraine" focused primarily on supporting families with children with special needs. At the same time, "Doctors Without Borders" worked closely with evacuated institutions, providing essential medical support for people who required constant care. "Volunteer-68", on the other hand, concentrated its efforts on assisting individuals from the Kharkiv region.

Serhii Kharlamov, the evacuation project coordinator from "Volunteer-68", shared his experiences in helping people with limited mobility[44]:

> *"Our organization is currently focused on providing humanitarian assistance to older adults, particularly those aged 75 and older, who rarely leave their homes. We offer a small program with social workers in dormitories. Initially, evacuees from de-occupied territories were placed in these dormitories, and this practice continues today. Many of the people we assist require ongoing care. On the ground floors, we typically house individuals with disabilities — groups I and II, bedridden individuals, and those with limited mobility, including wheelchair users. In these dormitories, we launched the Social Worker program, where a dedicated caregiver visits, helps with daily tasks such as shopping, and even prepares meals for them".*

Together, these charitable organizations are doing everything possible to ensure that people with limited mobility and their families are not left alone with their struggles on the frontline. They are working to ensure timely evacuations, providing shelter and support in Ukraine or abroad as needed.

[44] Interview HS/LM-ES/22 of 06.12.2023

In 2022, the CF "East SOS", in collaboration with its partners, expanded its efforts to areas of the frontline where government agencies could only respond slowly to the mounting challenges.

According to Yaroslav Korniienko, head of the "East SOS" evacuation department since the summer of 2022, successful evacuation involves several critical steps:

- Preliminary assessment: This involves estimating the number of people requiring assistance in evacuation, including individuals with limited mobility.
- Effective communication: Ensuring people are informed about the evacuation options despite the challenges of unstable communication and internet connections.
- Clear logistics: Organizing transit points where evacuees can rest and receive food in relative safety as they make their way to safer locations.
- Post-evacuation support: Understanding and addressing the needs of people after they are evacuated, including:
- Assisting individuals in reaching safe areas.
- Ensuring people with limited mobility or disabilities are accompanied and transferred to relatives in safer zones.
- Supporting unaccompanied persons with limited mobility or disabilities who may not know where to go and lack identification, money, or resources.
- Helping unaccompanied individuals with psychiatric diagnoses who also lack necessary documents, money, or familial support.

The last two groups, in particular, require specially equipped transit shelters where they can stay. At the same time, their documents are restored, medical assessments are made, and assistance is provided in finding permanent housing.

The first temporary shelter for lonely individuals with limited mobility was established in Dnipro in the spring of 2022. The initiative was organized by Olha Volkova of the NGO "Ocean of Good", who requested a room from the local authorities to create a haven. Over the following two years of war, nearly 2,000 people with limited mobility found refuge there[45].

Some individuals can look after themselves at the Temporary Accommodation Center, but the majority are older adults who cannot care for their own needs. These individuals require assistance with timely meals, medication administration, personal hygiene, mobility support, and other daily activities, such as helping them sit or stand. Additionally, they need social interaction and the reassurance that they will be safe in the future.

Olha Vladymyrova, manager of the "East SOS" Charity Foundation, spoke about the range of support provided at the "Ocean of Good" Temporary Accommodation Center[46]:

> *"My responsibilities include gathering information in advance about beneficiaries arriving from various territories, assessing their condition, and helping the*

[45] It is the "Ocean of Good" Center for Temporary Accommodation of the Elderly and People with Disabilities evacuated from the hot spots in Dnipro

[46] Interview HS/LM-ES/23 of 06.09.2023

team determine suitable placements. I evaluate whether medical care is needed — whether urgent, planned, or palliative — and decide on the appropriate care for each person. I also manage medical accompaniment and support arrangements, ensuring individuals are transferred to medical institutions when necessary. I occasionally handle issues related to death and burial if the situation arises. In such cases, I assist in locating relatives or searching for them if there is no information, ensuring that the person is not buried as a missing person. Additionally, I am involved in restoring documents, though this is typically handled by specialized personnel".

Vira Chernets, a social worker, shared her insights on how staying at the Temporary Accommodation Center impacts individuals[47]:

"They desperately need someone to talk to. I feel like a granddaughter to them. It's heartwarming when I come in the morning, talk to everyone for half an hour, and learn about their day and small victories. When people first arrive, they're neglected; they lack any spark in their eyes and are often in pain. Their spirits are low. But after just a week, they're entirely different. They smile, and some even start getting out of bed. They were once bedridden, but now they're standing up independently. They feel needed and safe and that someone cares about them. Most people who come here don't have relatives, or their relatives are far away, so they often feel very lonely".

In 2023-2024, similar temporary accommodation centers for people with limited mobility were opened in Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia[48]. However, a state-run center of this kind has yet to be created.

Olha Vladymyrova, a manager at the Center for Temporary Accommodation, shared the common issue of documentation faced by many evacuees[49]:

"There are people who arrive with Soviet passports... They never needed to change them before, and they didn't have much interaction with the state. Some people from small villages come with just a pension certificate but still carry a Soviet passport. They'll tell me, 'You know, in my village, everyone knows everyone, and I was given my pension because I'm Ivan Mykolaiovych — who doesn't know me?' The postman would deliver the pension, and no one ever bothered to verify or update anything. But now, when they arrive here, their payments are being processed, and the problem arises. When they open their passport, they find they can't receive the pension because the passport only indicates Soviet citizenship. And that's where the trouble begins: this is not acceptable, IDPs can't be recognized, and it all starts to unravel. Suddenly, a person realizes that Ukrainian citizenship means access to money and opportunities. But when they're lonely, they fall into the hands of volunteers, who try to help them. However, these individuals, with their Soviet passports, are essentially invisible to the system. No one wants to handle their case because it's complex, and the state offers no support. They're often told, 'Take it to court.' But that could take one, two, or even three years. In the meantime, the person can't find work at a care facility, even though they're willing to trade their pension for help. But no one will hire them because of that Soviet passport".

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[47] Interview HS/LM-ES/24 of 07.09.2023

[48] It refers to the transit shelter "Without Borders" (Zaporizhzhia), which is run by "East SOS" in partnership with the "Artak Together to the Dream" and the transit shelter in Kharkiv, opened jointly with the CF "Volunteer-68".

[49] Interview HS/LM-ES/23 of 06.09.2023

A significant challenge for the evacuation team involves the care of lonely individuals from the frontline who require hospitalization, particularly those without documentation or with psychiatric conditions.

> *"These are usually mental illnesses such as dementia or Alzheimer's, explained Yevhen Holovanevskyi*[50]*. But once their relatives request evacuation, we take them out. However, lonely individuals with mental illnesses have always been difficult cases. They're often not accepted into institutions. The most complicated case is someone with schizophrenia who isn't registered. This person hadn't received treatment for several years, and their condition may have even improved. But when the active phase of hostilities began, their condition worsened. The person was running around Bakhmut, and no one could help. No one could diagnose them or figure out where to send them. When we brought this person to Dnipro, we had to request registration and placement in a psychiatric institution — a complicated process in Ukraine".*

Establishing temporary accommodation centers for people with limited mobility has enabled the continued evacuation of such individuals from the frontline, ensuring they receive the care they need.

There is also a feedback loop: **the shortage of available spaces in temporary accommodation centers halts the evacuation of people in high-risk areas who could die if not evacuated in time.**

To prevent such situations, social workers and managers at the CF "East SOS", in collaboration with partner organizations, are continuously seeking suitable places for the permanent residence of people with limited mobility, both within Ukraine and abroad. Many individuals supported by the foundation have been placed in geriatric centers and other facilities. However, finding such placements, even abroad, is becoming increasingly challenging.

Valeriia Kyrpa, Accommodation Coordinator at the CF "East SOS", shared insights into the ongoing challenge of finding places for lonely people with limited mobility[51]:

> *"Since last summer, we've consistently had around 150 people needing accommodation. New individuals kept arriving, and while we could take in 2, 20 more would arrive, or 30 would leave... It became increasingly difficult to find suitable placements. [Yevhen Holovanevskyi] began writing projects to create new spaces, and we traveled with him in August to meet with authorities in the Kyiv and Cherkasy regions to explore what concessions they might offer".*

In the summer of 2022, the CF "East SOS" established a reconstruction department led by Yevhen Holovanevskyi. The department's managers are tasked with identifying buildings that can be repaired and equipped by the foundation — a costly process — and finding territorial communities capable of employing staff for social service or geriatric centers.

Negotiating with communities willing to accept evacuees is often challenging, as not all have the resources to support the staff required to run these centers.

"East SOS" has had a positive experience working with the Uman community in the Cherkasy region. The foundation supported four institutions by providing essential equipment such as functional beds and installing elevators.

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[50] Interview HS/LM-ES/21 of 30.08.2023

[51] Interview HS/LM-ES/25 of 22.08.2023

In the summer of 2023, with the help of international donors and the local community, the foundation opened a facility for IDPs with mental health disorders at the Plyskivka Psychoneurological Boarding House[52]. This center has provided shelter to several dozen people with limited mobility and psychiatric conditions who struggled to find accommodation within Ukraine.

However, cooperation with the Neresnytsia territorial community in the Zakarpattia region was more challenging. Although the community signed an agreement with the foundation, they later failed to meet their obligations by not allocating funds for staff salaries after renovating the building. The situation was resolved when the Intercession Center for Comprehensive Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities "Mercy" was relocated to Neresnytsia and accommodated in the renovated building. The Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine played a crucial role in helping the foundation find suitable placements for low-mobility individuals residing at the "Ocean of Good" Temporary Accommodation Center by securing spots in geriatric centers across Ukraine.

Yevhen Holovanevskyi spoke about the challenges involved in this process[53]:

> *"This is a budget issue. There is no state program providing subventions for this. Communities in Ukraine vary greatly — some are highly capable, while others have only a few hundred residents. Some places may have suitable buildings for such needs without the necessary staff, funds, or taxes to support them. Sometimes, the building itself isn't even appropriate. The resources aren't always there, even if a community is willing to help.*
>
> *The main issue is finance. No mechanism exists for redistributing funds from the state budget to these communities. Money doesn't follow the client as it does in healthcare. The state doesn't view this as a significant issue because we're talking about 2,000 to 3,000 people, at most 10,000 UAH per person per month for social services—perhaps 12,000. This isn't a significant amount for Ukraine to fail to assist these individuals".*

Over 2023-2024, CF "East SOS" renovated six buildings, providing shelter for hundreds of lonely individuals with limited mobility. The foundation also installed lifts in three additional institutions to make them accessible for wheelchair users.

In addition, since 2023, CF "East SOS" has been repairing homes and apartments damaged by shelling for vulnerable groups living near the frontline in relatively safer areas. This program, implemented in the Donetsk and Kharkiv regions, has benefited 837 households.

The team's main challenge is identifying people in need of assistance. Managers prioritize people with limited mobility who cannot visit the administration and apply for housing repairs. They conduct neighborhood outreach to find such individuals, speaking with neighbors of damaged homes.

Summing up the two-year efforts of the CF "East SOS" in evacuating and resettling people with limited mobility, Yaroslav Korniienko[54], the Evacuation Coordinator, stated:

> *"Today, the entire cycle of evacuating people with limited mobility — from receiv-*

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[52] East SOS opened an institution for IDPs with mental disorders in the Vinnytsia region, 16.06.2023, https://tinyurl.com/2ubcrjjv

[53] Interview HS/LM-ES/21 of 30.08.2023

[54] Interview HS/LM-ES/26 of 24.10.2023, post of 06.09.2024

ing an application to transit and long-term accommodation — is the responsibility of the charitable sector. While the state provides social protection and medical services, and together with the National Social Service, we've even created a tool for placing people in residential care facilities, there is no one or no mechanism to connect people with these services during wartime when they are displaced from their homes. The charitable sector is the only one stepping in to fill this gap. We cooperate daily with the state: social workers, social protection departments, Ukrzaliznytsia, hospitals, residential care facilities, etc. But someone has to lead people by the hand to these services, advocate for them, and ensure they are properly taken care of. Few organizations truly take responsibility for this. Only when people know that there is an evacuation system built for them, one that will not leave them to their fate, will they trust it and choose safety over death at the frontline, even if it means leaving their own homes".

In the first half of 2024, the situation on the frontline escalated significantly, with increased hostilities and the Russian army launching an offensive in the Kharkiv region while also continuing its advance in the Donetsk region. As a result, evacuation requests grew steadily in May and June, reaching levels seen in 2022[55]. Despite these challenges, the "East SOS" team remained fully prepared and resilient, focusing on saving lives and ensuring shelter for evacuated individuals, particularly older adults and those with limited mobility. Additionally, the foundation continued to advocate at the state level, pushing for adopting critical practices and lessons learned from their field experience.

Yuliia Matviichuk, coordinator of the human rights department of the CF "East SOS", commented on this activity[56]:

"The state must reevaluate its approach to evacuation across the country. In any emergency — whether a war, flood, or earthquake — the government should be prepared to implement a rapid and efficient evacuation plan, particularly for people with limited mobility. The regulatory framework governing evacuation mechanisms should be reassessed nationally to ensure effectiveness.

It is crucial to have designated transit shelters and accommodations specially designed to meet the needs of people with disabilities. These facilities should be equipped with ramps and elevators and staffed with trained personnel who can provide the necessary care and support.

Ukraine's recent experience with the compulsory evacuation of children due to the war should be thoroughly analyzed to identify lessons learned and avoid repeating mistakes in the future. This approach could also be adapted and applied to evacuate people with limited mobility. Suppose the state recognizes a threat to life or health in a particular area. In that case, evacuation should be mandatory for everyone, prioritizing those who are unable to evacuate on their own — especially people with disabilities and individuals from low-mobility groups".

Conclusions and Recommendations:

The study confirms that the prolonged exposure of lonely individuals from low-mobility groups to the ongoing humanitarian crisis and relentless attacks on civilians poses a severe risk to their survival. Without timely intervention and support, these individuals are likely to face death.

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[55] Evacuation intensity is back to 2022 — East SOS evacuation manager, 26.06.2024, https://tinyurl.com/ycywmuss

[56] Interview HS/LM-ES/27 of 24.10.2023

Since February 2022, CF "East SOS" and its partner organizations have accumulated invaluable practical experience in assisting people who, without this support, could have been rendered "invisible" on the frontline.

Based on the information presented, we recommend that:

The Government of Ukraine: When developing state programs and providing humanitarian assistance and evacuation for individuals from low-mobility groups in frontline areas, consider the successful practical experience of the CF "East SOS". Follow the recommendations formulated by the foundation's advocacy team in this domain and support initiatives to create safe accommodation for isolated individuals from low-mobility groups in safer regions of Ukraine.

Ukrainian Civil Society: Unite efforts for collaborative advocacy on evacuation issues. Enhance coordination with government services and institutions responsible for evacuating and accommodating low-mobility individuals.

The International Community: Support civic initiatives to reduce civilian casualties in armed conflicts. Condemn the actions of the Russian military, which employs "scorched earth" tactics and establishes "sanitary zones" during hostilities in Ukraine.

National Law Enforcement and Investigative Bodies of Ukraine and the International Criminal Court: Conduct thorough investigations into all deliberate attacks on civilians in frontline territories, including targeted strikes on humanitarian warehouses and evacuation teams. Ensure accountability for both Russian military commanders who issue such orders and field commanders who carry them out.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: Interviewed respondents, general characteristics

1.1. Respondents and general data based on 60 in-depth research interviews

The study analyzed 60 in-depth interviews with 66 individuals. The discrepancy between the number of respondents and recorded interviews resulted from four interviews conducted with married couples, where one or both were members of low-mobility groups, and two additional interviews with couples caring for relatives with limited mobility.

The 60 interviews comprised:

- 37 interviews with individuals from vulnerable populations residing in areas of active hostilities. This group included two interviews with leaders of organizations advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities and offering aid to those with disabilities. Additionally, two interviews were conducted with families where only the men were members of low-mobility groups.
- 11 interviews with 15 individuals caring for relatives with reduced mobility or disabilities in cities affected by active hostilities. This includes 10 interviews with close family members and one with a caregiver.
- 12 interviews with experts, including volunteers and civic activists, have provided and continue to assist low-mobility groups and persons with disabilities evacuated from frontline areas.

The interviews documented 46 survival stories from vulnerable groups, highlighting their experiences amidst the humanitarian crisis and violations of IHL due to ongoing hostilities.

The documented interviews include:

- 37 firsthand accounts from people with disabilities, older adults, and those with limited mobility.
- 11 accounts from relatives of such individuals.
- In 2 cases, both low-mobility individuals and their family members shared their family's survival experiences under challenging conditions.

This collection of stories provides a comprehensive view of the hardships vulnerable populations and their families face in crises.

1.2. The respondents in this study — comprising people with limited mobility, older adults, and individuals with disabilities — provided valuable insights through 37 in-depth interviews

The analysis of the **37** recorded **interviews** with low-mobility individuals revealed a diverse study group of **39 people**. Two married couples, in which both partners were low-mobility individuals, provided shared insights. Additionally, two other interviews were conducted with families where only the husband was in the low-mobility group.

Out of the 39 people interviewed, 26 respondents were of retirement age, 11 individuals with officially recognized disabilities, 30 were considered low-mobility, and 4 were temporarily disabled due to injury or severe illness[57].

[57] One person could belong to several groups at a time, for example, be of retirement age and have a disability, etc.

1.2.1. Respondents from low-mobility groups, people with disabilities, and older adults: age- and sex-based data of 39 people:

Sex:	Female – 24	Male – 15
Age[58]:	21 (1) 41 (1) 49 (1) 60 (1) 66 (1) 67 (2) 68 (3) 69 (2) 71 (1) 72 (1) 74 (1) 75 (3) 76 (1) 80 (1) 83 (2) 84 (1) 86 (1)	25 (1) 46 (1) 49 (1) 51 (2) 59 (1) 63 (1) 64 (1) 65 (1) 69 (1) 70 (1) 76 (1) 77 (2) 85 (1)

The four youngest women in the study (ages 21, 41, 49, and 60) have each been diagnosed with unique disabilities:

- 21 years old: Diagnosed in childhood with musculoskeletal disorders affecting mobility and physical function.
- 41 years old: Experiences significant visual impairment.
- 49 years old: Underwent a lower limb amputation.
- 60 years old: Suffers from post-stroke complications, resulting in reduced mobility.

Among the nine men under retirement age in the study, each has acquired a disability or experienced a temporary loss of mobility, often due to the impact of living on the frontline. Disabilities include:

- Four men (aged 25, 46, 51, and 59) have partial or complete paralysis of the lower limbs.
- A 49-year-old man had a leg amputation.
- One individual (aged 64) has severe bronchial asthma.
- Two men (aged 51 and 63) temporarily lost mobility due to injury.
- A 65-year-old man experiences limited mobility due to lower limb atherosclerosis but has not been formally granted disability status.

1.2.2. Respondents from low-mobility groups, people with disabilities, and older adults: residence-based data of 39 people:

Region/ number of people	Donetsk region 24 people	Luhansk region 6 people	Kharkiv region 4 people	Kherson region 5 people
Location/ number of people	Avdiivka 3 Bakhmut 1 Velyka Novosilka 1 Druzhkivka 3 Zvanivka 1 Iskra 1 Kostiantynivka 2 Kramatorsk 1 Kurakhove 1 Lyman 1 Mariupol 7 Sukha Balka 1 Yasna Poliana 1	Hirske 1 Metiolkine 1 Pryvillia 1 Rubizhne 2 Sievierodonetsk 1	Andriivka 1 Balakliia 1 Hrianykivka 1 Izium 1	Beryslav 2 Kachkarivka 1 Kherson 2

[58] The respondents' ages were recorded upon the interview, and 2/3 of the project's interviews were recorded in the second half of 2023.

1.3. General overview of stories from the frontline by vulnerable groups

The 46 stories offer diverse accounts of survival amidst the humanitarian crisis and violations of IHL, shared by representatives of vulnerable groups.

These include older adults, individuals with various disabilities, and people with reduced mobility of all ages.

The collection also features stories from relatives and caregivers, primarily of older individuals with limited mobility. Two of the stories focus on people who, due to cognitive or physical limitations, could not fully comprehend or communicate their experiences and whose accounts were shared by those who cared for them.

The stories span a wide range of circumstances, illustrating the many different ways vulnerable groups on the frontline endured the hardships of war.

The stories include a variety of personal experiences, such as that of a family with a disabled member who survived the occupation in the Kharkiv region and chose to remain in their village; a representative of a low-mobility group who, on February 24, 2022, realized they could not survive in the frontline and evacuated with their family the same day; older women with limited mobility who, with the care of their relatives, stayed in Mariupol but struggled to leave, passing away on the journey and being buried in Zaporizhzhia; and two elderly individuals, aged 84 and 85, who endured on their own through difficult conditions without the support of relatives or friends. They survived the winter of 2022-2023 in homes damaged by shelling. They were evacuated by the CF "East SOS" team in the winter of 2023-2024, realizing they would not survive another harsh winter without assistance.

Among the stories analyzed, there are no accounts of "invisible people" who died alone or in their homes without any means of escaping. The only exception is the story of a woman from Mariupol who became "invisible" after losing her husband, her primary caregiver. Her daughter shared this story.

In analyzing the 46 stories, we examined the capacity of representatives of vulnerable groups to survive under highly challenging conditions:

- In 16 cases, individuals could care for themselves: they found food, drinking water, and medicines, reached shelters, accessed humanitarian aid, and managed to leave danger zones, among other survival actions.
- In 8 cases, individuals could care for themselves with assistance from relatives, neighbors, friends, or social workers. These helpers, who did not live with the individuals they supported, could deliver essentials such as drinking water, medicines, and food and even helped cook over an open fire near the house.
- In 20 cases, individuals could not care for themselves but remained fully aware of their surroundings. Despite their vulnerability—whether due to disability, low mobility, or age—these individuals actively participated in their survival efforts. They were primarily cared for by close relatives, including spouses, adult children, or occasionally by neighbors and close friends. This often involved daily, around-the-clock care from those living with them.
- 2 stories were shared by relatives of individuals who could not tell their own story or survive independently under any circumstances, as they did not fully understand what was happening around them.

In 30 of the 46 cases involving persons with disabilities, low-mobility group representatives, and older individuals, survival was made possible through the assistance of their social environment. This support came from:

- Close relatives, including parents, spouses, adult children, and partners (18 cases).
- Neighbors, acquaintances, and social workers (11 cases).
- A nurse (1 case).

Among the stories of people who survived under challenging conditions with the support of others, there are no accounts of "invisible people", as the assistance provided by relatives or close friends makes a person's needs visible. However, life on the frontline creates circumstances where social ties can quickly disintegrate. Neighbors and social workers may flee with their families, abandoning their wards. Similarly, close relatives may perish or be unable to reach elderly individuals, people with limited mobility, or those with disabilities, further exacerbating their vulnerability.

ANNEX 2: Most common challenges faced by lonely people and people with limited mobility on the frontline

2.1. Anton Senenko, 38, Kyiv[59], speaking about March 2022[60]:

We had agreed to meet on March 3, but on March 1-2, Andriukha and I became involved in an unexpected situation. Someone reached out to us about an older man in Kyiv who was dying from hunger in a high-rise building. We immediately contacted the Solomiansky Cats — Kseniia Semenova and Ihor Kravchyshyn — who had established a humanitarian headquarters. We asked them for a food package and traveled to Dorohozhychi together.

When we arrived, we found the older man, disabled and completely incapacitated, on the 9th or 11th floor of the building. He had no food, and we gave him the package we brought. He broke down in tears. It was a heart-wrenching moment.

I shared a post urging people to check on their neighbors; some may even be dying from hunger. Later, we learned that his neighbors had been buying food for him, but with everyone else gone, he was left alone in the building, unable to fend for himself.

2.2. Vadym Voloshyn, 61, Mariupol, Donetsk region, about March 2022[61]:

There was a neighbor above our apartment, Mykola Kurkurin. He had recently lost his wife and lived alone, with his children far away — his son was in Greece, working as a doctor, and his daughter lived somewhere in the city center. Mykola, a man over 70, had been very weak after recovering from COVID-19. It was cold, and he refused despite his daughter's wishes to evacuate him. He stayed in his apartment.

We tried to help him. On March 13, my wife made fresh borscht, and I brought a plate to him. I rang the bell for a long time but still await a response. There was no light in his apartment, so I knocked and knocked, but he didn't open the door. Finally, after a while, he did. I shouted, "Uncle Kolia, it's Vadym!"

He opened the door, and I could tell he was cold and wrapped in blankets, barely able to get up. "I'm wrapped up, it's cold... I can hardly get up", he said.

I handed him the plate of hot borscht and told him, "Here, have some hot borscht; at least it will warm you up".

He smiled weakly, saying, "Thank you! Thank you! But don't worry, I have something to eat". Even in those difficult conditions, he didn't want to bother anyone.

I asked him, "So, you're eating semi-finished products?"

He replied, "Well, what can I do?"

Despite our efforts, he stayed in his apartment the whole time. We tried countless times to convince him to go to the basement, especially since the shelling had already begun, but he refused. He said, "What will happen, will happen".

The blasts had already shattered his windows, but he managed to repair them with my help. That day, when the Azov soldiers visited apartments in the morning, they urged him to come down for safety. He said, "Yes, yes, I'll come", but then closed the door and stayed put.

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[59] The situation in Kyiv in March 2022 was taken as an example. At that time, the city was not surrounded by the Russian army, the situation in the city was characteristic of the first stage (the Russian army was just approaching the city, many civilians were fleeing, and social ties of people with limited mobility have been severed).

[60] Interview HS/LM-ES/28 of 27.10.2023

[61] Interview HS/LM-ES/29 of 01.03.2023

Sadly, he was burned alive in his apartment. There was also an older woman named Vira in the neighboring building — though I can't recall her full name. She lived in apartment 21, was single, and no one saw her after that.

2.3. Viktor Serhiienko, 31, Rubizhne, Luhansk region, about the events of March 2022[62]:

A man passed away from a heart attack in our shelter, and we had no choice but to move his body outside the school fence. For about a week, his body lay there on the street. We had to act quickly, but the situation was complicated. However, we managed to find a phone — a secretary's office with a phone still had some charge. I decided to try to reach a loved one, perhaps a daughter, a mother, or a partner — someone who could claim the body.

We managed to make contact. Thankfully, Kyivstar and Life were still working, though Vodafone was already down. After calling, the daughter was able to come and collect her father's body, but she could only come three days after I had initially reached her.

[62] Interview HS/LM-ES/30 of 17.06.2022

ANNEX 3: Results of the survey with representatives of low-mobility groups in the temporary accommodation center "Ocean of Good" (Dnipro)

To test the primary hypothesis of our study, we surveyed 21 individuals who stayed at the "Ocean of Good" Temporary Accommodation Center in March 2022. All of these individuals are single and, due to their advanced age or severe illness, belong to low-mobility groups. The settlements where they resided were located along the frontline.

More detailed information about the surveyed group can be found in the tables below:

3.1. General characteristics

Sex/number of people	Female-11	Male-10
Age as of March 2024	61 (1) 63 (1) 64 (1) 69 (1) 75 (2) 85 (2) 86 (1) 89 (1) 94 (1)	53 (1) 58 (2) 61 (1) 63 (1) 66 (1) 67 (1) 68 (1) 73 (1) 87 (1)

Of the 21 individuals surveyed:

- 5 people had recently suffered a stroke (men aged 53, 58 (2), and 61, and a woman aged 64).
- A man aged 87 had been wounded during shelling.
- A man aged 85 had a broken leg.
- A man aged 73 was wounded and had limited vision.
- A man aged 67 suffered frostbite, leading to the amputation of his lower limbs.

3.2. Residential data of the interviewees

Region/number of people	Donetsk-14	Kherson-7
Location/number of people	Donetsk (1, registered) Avdiivka (1) Hirnyk (1) Ivanopillia (1) Kostiantynivka (1) Kramatorsk (1) Kurakhove (1) New York (1) Pokrovsk (2) Selidove (1) Staromayorsk (1) Toretsk (2)	Novokairy (1) Kherson (3) Sadove (1) Tamaryne (2)

3.3. Social environment of the interviewees

All 21 respondents lived alone, with no one residing with them permanently. The following individuals helped them with everyday tasks:

- Relatives: 5 (including one respondent whose ex-wife helped)
- Neighbors: 5

- No one: 5
- Social worker: 3
- Relatives and neighbors: 2
- Neighbors and church: 1

Among those who answered "no one" were elderly individuals (aged 85 and 75), people who had suffered strokes (a man aged 58 and a woman aged 64), and a man aged 67 who lost his lower limbs due to frostbite.

The reasons for evacuation, as selected by the respondents, were:

- Proximity to the combat zone: 11 responses
- Sharp deterioration of health: 7 responses
- Fear for life: 6 responses
- Evacuation from the hospital (decision made by the hospital administration, not the evacuee): 4 responses
- Damaged housing, lack of water, gas, or electricity: 3 responses
- Inability to survive due to lack of care: 1 response
- Loneliness: 1 response (from an 85-year-old woman in Toretsk with no one to care for her)
- Request from her son to evacuate: 1 response.

When asked about their actions during shelling (whether they went to a shelter or bomb shelter), only 1 out of 21 people said they went to a shelter. The majority (16 respondents) stayed at home during shelling, including during heavy bombardment.

The reasons for not going to a shelter or bomb shelter were as follows (19 responses, with 2 refusing to answer):

- Physical condition did not allow leaving the house: 7 responses
- No shelter/bomb shelter available: 5 responses
- Did not want to go: 3 responses
- Afraid to go outside: 2 responses
- Stayed to protect the house: 1 response
- The shelter/bomb shelter was far away: 1 response

When asked if they could have reached the shelter or bomb shelter on their own (without external help), 20 people responded (1 person refused to answer):

- Could not: 14 responses
- Could: 6 responses

3.4. Humanitarian and security situation in residential areas

Although only 3 out of 21 respondents said they evacuated due to the prolonged absence of water, gas, electricity, and heating during the winter, almost all interviewees lived in harsh conditions.

The water supply was as follows: 8 people had a water supply in their homes, 7 people did not have water, 2 people received water once a week, 4 people had water occasionally, and 14 out of 21 people lived without a constant water supply.

The electricity situation was almost identical: 8 people had electricity, 7 people did not have electricity, 6 people had electricity partially.

The gas supply was even worse: 13 people had no gas, 6 people had gas, and 2 people had gas periodically.

Heating conditions for the winter of 2023-2024 were as follows: 9 people had no heating, 9 people had heating, 2 people had heating from time to time, 1 person had a stove and used wood for heating, but there was not enough wood, so it was cool at home (a 73-year-old man from the Kherson region who was afraid to leave his home due to poor eyesight).

Regarding mobile phones, 9 people had a mobile phone, 7 people did not have a mobile phone, 4 people had a mobile telephone intermittently, and 1 person said, "I don't know; my phone was broken all the time".

In most cases, shops remained open in the frontline settlements, with 19 out of 21 respondents confirming this. Regarding food, 20 out of 21 people said they had enough, and all 21 respondents reported having enough drinking water.

Humanitarian aid was received by 18 out of the 21 interviewees from state, charitable, or religious organizations. The reasons given by those who did not receive humanitarian aid were as follows:

- 1 person was in the hospital and did not receive anything.
- 1 person could not go to the aid distribution point (no one helped to receive aid).
- 1 case where humanitarian aid was not brought to the settlement.

Regarding medical assistance, 15 out of 20 respondents (1 person refused to answer) indicated they could receive medical care despite the settlement being under shelling.

Of the 21 people interviewed, 11 reported that hospitals were open in their settlements during the winter of 2023-2024. Five individuals said hospitals were closed, with two noting the closures due to shelling damage. Five respondents answered, "I don't know because I did not go out".

When asked about pharmacy availability, 14 confirmed pharmacies were open in their settlements. At the same time, six reported they were closed (one noted the pharmacy was destroyed by shelling), and one individual stated there was no pharmacy in the settlement.

To the question of what might have happened had they not evacuated, 20 people responded (1 person refused to answer): **would have died** – 17, don't know – 2, **don't know, but likely would have died** – 1

Some of those who felt sure they would have died specified likely causes:

- Due to shelling damage to their homes: 1 (an 89-year-old woman from Kurakhove who learned her house had been hit immediately after her evacuation)
- Under rubble from shelling: 3
- Lack of care: 1 (a 53-year-old stroke survivor unable to leave his apartment, who relied solely on visits from a social worker)

ANNEX 4: Documented stories of older adults, people with reduced mobility, and those with disabilities

4.1. Anton Kostenko, 69, Mariupol, Donetsk region[63]:

In February-March 2022, my mother could still sit on the couch. At that time, we still had electricity and gas. We thought that the shooting would subside and that the Russians would be driven back.

I went straight to "Silpo". Surprisingly, it was still open, along with the other supermarkets. I bought whatever I could because the bread was already scarce. They were still baking it there — hot, straight out of the oven. I grabbed some sausages, dry foods, and other essentials. My mother couldn't eat regular food, so I picked up some diluted baby food for her.

We filled up water in the bathroom, in the tanks — wherever we could get it. But we couldn't leave right away. By then, my mother couldn't walk or move, so we decided to stay and face whatever came.

Born in 1930, my mother was an orphan during the Second World War, raised in Novoselivka near Mariupol. She'd say, "I survived that war; I was under siege for two years. We'll survive this one". And so, we stayed. Then, about two days later, the electricity cut out, the gas was gone, and we started building a makeshift brick grill in the yard with pieces of an old gas stove to cook whatever we could.

She'd been lying there, so frail, barely moving — "semi-flexible", as some might say, like a person who's slipping away. She lay straight as a soldier, and we changed her clothes to keep her comfortable.

It's a good thing I was there. Right before everything started, a pharmacy had opened across the street. My wife told me, "Look, they're taking everything from the pharmacy. Go, maybe there's still some medicine".

So I went and grabbed two packs. One of them was adult diapers since my mom was already bedbound. Liuda, who used to be a nurse, was helping, and thankfully, we managed to keep my mother from getting any bedsores. We'd change the diapers; it was so tough, especially those nights in the last week...

We couldn't even turn on a light. We'd cover the candle so there'd be no reflection, no sign in the window that could give us away. They'd shoot at anything that looked like movement or light. Every night, we'd lie there tense, always on edge.

I'd sleep next to her on the couch in the small room; my wife slept on the sofa in the next room. And each night would start the same: my mom lying there, unable to sleep. For bedridden people, everything seems to hurt more at night. She'd murmur, and then came that familiar voice: "Water, water". But we couldn't risk turning on any light, not even for a sip of water. Cold water wasn't good for her, and the thermos was empty.

So, I'd get up, trying to manage by the dim light, with the candle shielded so no shadow showed through the window. I was terrified that if that tank out there turned, they'd aim straight at our windows. And what did it matter to them? They were at war. He—whoever was in that tank — was probably just as tense, knowing our guys were hitting them back with grenades and bottles.

That's why they're so jumpy — it's a war. So I'd tell her, "Mom, light's up..."

I'd try to lie back down, but it's freezing. You sleep in your clothes, and by day, they'd bombard us till 3 AM. You just wanted a moment of actual sleep. My nights turned into a routine: she wouldn't sleep at night, and during the day, when the shelling started, she'd somehow drift off and snore away. But by then, she was in her world, calling for "vodychky". I'd say, "Mom, not again..."

Then I'd lie there, and she'd call again in that soft, steady voice. I'd jump up, grab the thermos, and try to give her water, but it was tough; she could barely lean up. The floor was slippery under my feet, and the whole setup was just awkward, you know? But we made do — I'd tilt the thermos and give her just a sip at a time.

[63] Interview HS/LM-ES/31 of 08.05.2023

She'd drink like a bit of bird, sipping and leaning back.

After she drank, I'd settle her down again, and just half an hour later, she'd be hurting on one side, and we'd go through it all over again.

That week — it was the most challenging week of my life. It was so hard that you felt you could break at any moment. And even now, I catch myself thinking, punishing myself over the small things. That was our one brutal week when the front was right there. We sat there, looking after her like a talisman, watching over us just as much as we cared for her. That's how it was.

And then everything passed. One morning, when the front had finally moved on, we got up, and everything seemed still. But in the morning, you know, you've got to run, cook, get things done. So I ran to cook. Then my brother said, "They're already in our neighborhood". By then, it was May 18. The fighting had stopped.

My brother and I headed to Khatostroy to see what was happening and find out if we could stay there. When we returned to the house, we walked in and saw my brother's wife and Liuda standing by the table, a candle already lit. Liuda looked at us and said, "Mom is gone". She'd noticed earlier, asking, "Why is Mom so quiet this morning?" But I knew she usually slept late, so I hadn't thought to wake her. When they checked on her, she was already gone, already cold. She died on her own.

When my father passed in 2005, I was there, holding his hand. But my mother... she left us quietly, on her own. And we were right there. The front line had just passed, but we couldn't have known.

Honestly, when we found out, there was this strange sense of relief that her suffering had finally ended. She passed on the 18th, and we wanted to go right away, but where could we take her? So, she was buried there, in our yard. About three weeks before, her friend had passed too — her son had buried her right there. I said, "Aunt Vira's here; we'll lay my mother beside her". The cemetery was still in battles, in the industrial zones where our people had held out.

4.2. Vasyl Marchuk, 63, Izium, Kharkiv region[64]:

On February 24 [2022], a classmate came to visit me. We went fishing. I went out and failed, that's how. They started bombing our garden on March 5-6. I said, "A gift for women for the holiday", and for the holiday, that's it.

Much grain was burned in the granary. Half of the market, including the railway market, was destroyed. People's houses were damaged. You know what's typical — the poorer house is the one that got smashed. There are healthy, beautiful houses standing next to each other. Where there is a bad one, where people are poor, that's where it hit.

It's just like here, I'm telling you. We thought, "We will live happily in our old age". We didn't finish the repairs, but it was such a beautiful house.

They started bombing the city. A MIG-29 with two tails was flying low, and the wheels were chirping on our house like this. As it flew in, it hit our house. And from the side of Belgorod, I understood it like this.

As soon as it got dark, they started bombing the city. Well, the center has primarily multi-story buildings. Well, private houses were also there, along Zamostianska Street, over the Siverskyi Donets River, and bombs were thrown at private dwellings. And we were hit by a rocket. At first, 3 or 4 came. And my Mykhailivna said: "Look what, it flew away". I said: "It was a missile from an airplane, most likely". And then it came to our house.

I went in. The water had just been drained from the heating on March 10, so I went into the cellar and said, "Let's at least have some tea". I heated some tea on the stove in the house and brought a kettle. After 15 minutes, this happened, and I said, "That's it, our house is gone".

[64] Interview HS/LM-ES/32 of 08.12.2023

We had a cellar under the house, and maybe that's what saved us. We also had a car in the yard. I'd bought it just before the war, using money from selling my late mother's share, but we didn't have time to register it yet. It was still in a friend's name.

Everything burned down — not all at once, but it was all gone by May, around the 9th. Then, on June 2, another hit destroyed the car, hit the house again, and the shed where we kept the engine. Everything was gone — furniture, clothes, all of it. Only one and a half walls of the house were left.

That day, my dog, who was in her kennel, burned alive. I was screaming; I don't know how I was shocked. She was my favorite, a small one. That loss and everything else — the nerves, the stress — aged me so much, I think. Even my teeth started breaking. I thought, "Maybe I'll get my teeth fixed". But with no money, no food... I manage with a piece of bread and two teeth. Three teeth were knocked out by a Russian with an automatic rifle, just like that, when he struck me in the mouth.

Now we're living in a barely standing hut. It's full of holes, windy, with nothing to cover them. This isn't even our home; it belonged to someone, maybe my grandmother's, but I think the real owners are somewhere in Tatarstan. It must be over 80 years old.

We had a well in the yard; thankfully, there was still water. My friend Kolia, a fisherman, would bring me potatoes. He'd ask, "Do you have anything to eat?" and I'd answer, "No, there's nothing here—not even potatoes". So he'd show up with a sack, again and again, helping us get by. We even planted our potatoes in the garden, digging under shellfire and explosions.

We cooked over a fire, using sticks from the house, chopping them up, and burning them to get by because we had no stove.

Sometimes, I asked the Russians for food, and once, a Chechen soldier threw me a can of stew, kicking it over with his foot, saying, "Here, dog, choke on it". I nearly choked, all right — on my anger and humiliation. That same soldier hit me on the knees with his rifle. I couldn't walk for six months; I had to crawl. Now I limp, but I get by. He told me, "Old man, all you do is ask for food". Only when the Ukrainians came did we receive proper humanitarian aid.

When aid came, I distributed it to older adults and children on nearby streets. My wife and I mostly ate potatoes, boiling them in makeshift tin lids. Sometimes, we'd have to beg for bread, getting a piece from here or there. We survived somehow.

Grandmother was very old, and when we went over, we had to go through the garden to reach her basement. Mykhailivna made soup, and I brought a bowl to feed her. She said, "I haven't eaten or drunk anything in 3-4 days. No one comes by to see me". She ate so much that day, with tears running down her face. "Sit with me, talk to me", she asked. So I did. I fed her and brought her some tea. She drank it, poor thing, and then she passed away shortly after... She was over 90 and couldn't walk by then. It pains me that her daughter, who lived across the street, never came by. She just avoided her mother. God bless her, but I can't understand how she could ignore her like that.

The Chechens in town were vicious. They killed a friend of mine — a forensic expert at the hospital. He was disabled, had lost his leg before the war, and used a prosthetic. He'd managed to get a car with a modified manual steering so he could drive to work. Zdebskyi Fedir Havrylovych was his name... he's gone now. May he rest in peace.

His doctor was in the room with him at the time. They didn't harm the doctor responsible for conducting tests, but what about him? Was there an autopsy? Something, I'm not sure. The other one, the head of the department, also performed autopsies.

How he drove the Chechens out, speaking in Ukrainian. As I understood it, he said, "Get out of here. You're not taking the car—it's mine". Perhaps he could have phrased it differently, more politely, like, "Guys..." in a calmer tone. But instead, one of the Chechens grabbed an assault rifle and shot him.

Of course, they took the car. That's what they were after, pestering him: "Hand over the car keys, and that's it". How did they let him go? In one night... I went outside, dropped to my knees, and started crying. Then our [Ukrainian military] guys came by and stopped: "Grandpa, don't cry. We're already here, at home. By lunchtime, we won't let you go anywhere". They gave me a cigarette and asked: "Do you have any food here?" I replied: "Yes, thank you. We'll manage somehow". They added: "We're out of smokes ourselves — we'll give you some".

The ammunition was there, destroyed by the Russians. I gathered it up and handed it over to our Ukrainian soldiers. They were so grateful — those guys said: "Uncle, this is exactly what we need!" (crying). Thank God those cursed ones aren't here anymore... But still, they're close. Today, they were shooting again — last night, not far off, just a few kilometers away. You can hear it even from 40 or 50 kilometers away.

This morning, at 7:00, it started again. We sleep fully dressed because you never know. We haven't bathed in months — there's nowhere to wash. We've been cleaning ourselves with a cup of water for two months now.

4.3. Iryna Zinkivska, 68, Balakliia, Kharkiv region[65]:

I've been Ukrainian my whole life. I got my passport back in the mid-1980s — maybe 1985 — and it was Soviet back then. But I've never left Ukraine, never traveled abroad, always here. I lived in villages all my life, worked on farms, milking cows, and then later came to help my grandmother when she needed it. She left us her apartment, and we ended up in Balakliia. I worked in a service center for pensioners until I retired at 55, and it's been just my husband and me here ever since. We have no children, siblings, or other family — just the two of us.

When the war started, we were doing our regular evening routine — washing up, taking our pills, watching a bit of TV — just a quiet night. Then, around 4 AM, the phone rang. My husband's brother from the nearby village of Yakovenkove called, asking, "Have you heard...?" We heard all right. The planes were already bombing.

Everything changed. Everyone in our building, with its 20 apartments, rushed out. The doors opened at once, people spilling into the hallway in shock. Some were in shirts, some in dresses, barely dressed, just as they'd been when they were jolted from bed. There was confusion and panic — no one knew what to do or where to go.

Thank God we had a basement in our house, and when the bombing started, we all went down there. The planes were dropping bombs early in the morning, right after the alarm sounded. People were still shaken once the aircraft flew over and left, but at least it was quieter momentarily.

The alarm system had been installed before the war, so we knew what to do when the sirens went off. It was initially meant to be a test but became a warning. As soon as the siren sounded, people started rushing to the basements. We all slowly made our way down, some of us with sticks for support, carefully descending the steps into the shelter.

The younger guys helped by removing the house's windows, finding boards, and laying them down to make makeshift shelters. The basement soon became filled with these tiny 2x2 or 2x2.5-meter spaces where people set up their little corners. Some had simple tools like jar openers, shovels, or pitchforks, while others had summer cottages or cabins outside the city where they could escape. For those without, we made do by sharing the space — sometimes 15 people would squeeze into the corridor. If someone needed to lie down, they'd move over, and someone else would take their place. We ate down there...

My husband suffers from severe health issues — he has no lung function, a history of heart attacks and strokes, and diabetes. It would be easier to list the things he doesn't have pain from. As for me, I think I was in a state of constant fear and exhaustion, which made it hard to even focus on basic things like washing my face. I would wipe my eyes with saliva, and nothing seemed to matter anymore. It was terrifying to cook, and many people were too scared to even stay in their homes.

[65] Interview HS/LM-ES/11 of 19.07.2023

Thankfully, our young neighbors were a huge help. They would bring us food whenever they could, always running over with whatever they had. We didn't have much, but they gave what they could, even if it was just a chocolate bar. That little food would often last us a week, and we'd cut it into tiny pieces to stretch it out. The hunger was unbearable, but we made do with what we had.

Water was a major issue. At one point, we had to collect water in anything we could — buckets, pots, and even the bathtub. We were so desperate that we even salvaged food discarded in the trash, like eggplants, to get by. Ultimately, running out of water was terrifying, so we conserved every drop. We washed ourselves with cold water, anything to stay clean, but it wasn't easy.

Despite everything, my husband held on. I don't know how he did it—his strength was incredible. He only wanted to rest, but everyone around us, including the neighbors, encouraged him to lie down.

So, he would lie down, rest for a while, and then sit up again, waiting. We spent our days and nights like that, all in the house together. We wrapped ourselves in anything we could find — old clothes, sashes, warm jackets. I ensured he was as comfortable as possible, layering him up with two jackets and a down coat, but the basement was still cold and damp.

When the bombing started early that morning, he looked at me and said, "Ira, you go, but I'm not going anywhere. I won't survive out there". (crying) He can't risk catching a cold or any illness. His body can't handle even the simplest flu. We try our best to make him herbal teas, anything to keep him from getting sick.

When we had COVID-19, no one came near us. Our helper would leave the supplies outside the door, afraid to go too close. We didn't want to risk him getting infected. It was terrifying for him. In his condition, even the simplest illness could be fatal.

One day, he saw me crying. I told him I wasn't going to the basement either — I couldn't leave him. And he said, "Ira, I believe God brought you here. There must be a reason. By some miracle, I survived that basement".

The fear was overwhelming. People were too afraid to stay in their homes. We would go outside briefly, just for some air, and then retreat to the basements for the night. Eventually, they set up shutters in the basement, especially for the kids. There were six of them, all huddled together. They put an inflatable mattress in a shed, where the children could play, to keep them occupied. They had phones, and their parents made sure they were entertained, letting them play games to make the situation a little easier on them.

We ended up tearing down all the sashes. We took the clothes, pillows, and mattresses because we had to sleep down there. The situation was unbearable; we couldn't even go to the bathroom. They brought in pails, and that's how we had to manage.

Then, on March 3rd or maybe the 4th, I went to the kitchen window, and there they were — soldiers standing outside with machine guns, aiming right through the window at us. We didn't realize what was happening at first, but later, we learned that the Russians had already entered our house. They immediately told us to shut the windows tightly, even if there was a fire. We still had electricity at that point — it hadn't been cut off yet.

They warned us: "If any light is on, we will see it and shoot through the windows". Everyone rushed to close everything, terrified.

It became clear that no one was buying anything in the stores, nothing at all. People started fleeing, running away, and stealing — it was chaos. The younger ones ran, while the older ones stayed behind in their homes. As for me, we stayed in the basement for a month and a half, even though we lived on the first floor...

From the very beginning, there were severe problems with food. We hadn't stocked up, and we even ran out of potatoes. Thankfully, Uncle Vasia, whom I didn't know, somehow learned about our situation. Miraculously, he brought us potatoes, a bottle of oil, and some bread once a week. But the difficulties were immense. Everyone in the neighborhood was struggling to get enough bread. The Russian military wouldn't even allow

us to have bread — volunteers tried to bring some, but they wouldn't let them. There were even reports of them shooting at a car delivering bread.

They kept saying to us, "These are your Ukrainians!" Then, they forbade anyone from leaving or entering Balakliia. You couldn't leave the city or go to the neighboring villages. I don't know why they imposed this restriction, but it lasted for at least two or three weeks. We were trapped...

After a while, they allowed us to go out again, but only under certain conditions. There was a brief window where Ukraine began bringing humanitarian aid — around two or three weeks after the situation started. I'm not sure how they got it, but we were grateful. There were long lines, especially for the younger people. They brought what they could — mostly bread. But then they banned it again. They stopped bringing aid, and Ukraine's deliveries were cut off. Volunteers were no longer allowed to enter. We could still order medicines through them for a while, but even that was cut off abruptly.

Later, some of the people from Balakliia traveled to Kupiansk, which was under Russian control then. Kupiansk was about an hour away, and they let us go there for a brief time. Many people from our building and porch left Balakliia and headed for Russia. Some ended up in Estonia or Latvia, from Russia. It was a corridor that opened up — many people started leaving in large numbers around March, April, and probably continuing into May or June.

The bread was one of our biggest struggles in Balakliia. Getting it was challenging, and we depended on volunteers to bring it. I didn't collect it myself because we couldn't, but people from our building would go and bring us some when they could. They told us that volunteers from Andriivka were bringing it. But getting it wasn't easy. The queues were so long they said it was a race to get in line. People started waiting as early as 5:00 in the morning when the bread was delivered to the store. By the time the bread arrived, there would already be a long line. People were so hungry.

Some of our neighbors waited all day. They stood in line from 5:00 AM until 3:00 PM, only to be told there was no bread. They said the delivery truck had been shot at, and the bread had been lost. I didn't see it happen, but they said that.

My knees have been damaged for a long time. Then, when I was stuck in a basement for a month and a half, it got even worse. We slept there, and after that, my legs ultimately gave out. I can barely walk now; I'm on hormones, and if it weren't for them, I wouldn't be able to walk at all. I don't go outside anymore.

This summer, I didn't even sit on the bench outside. I can't back up without someone carrying me if I go down. And because of the shelling, I had to wear the same boots for a month without washing. Honestly, I still don't wash because the water is cold. My husband — it's heartbreaking. We should have at least washed him briefly. We cleaned him with cold water as best we could. We've struggled so much with the water shortage... as if our problems weren't enough.

Thankfully, we have "batiushka" and "matushka" nearby. She's only 34 but is like a mother to me. She comforts me, saying, "Grandma, don't cry". She gave me medicines, though I don't know where she found them. At first, they helped, like Diclofenac, but even a pack of that didn't last a day. Over time, it just stopped working...

Later, when the Russians came in, they reopened the pharmacy, selling only their supplies. "Matushka" bought whatever medicine she could find, but nothing helped. I had to crawl down the steps to reach the basement.

I stayed down there all of March and until April 12. When I finally got out, these people were already stationed near our home. They would come, fire shots, and stand right by the house, shooting.

People came to warn us, saying, "Get ready; there will be incoming attacks". I'll be honest: no one beat us, and there were no direct assaults on us, but they were actively searching and raiding the area. The things they did here are beyond words. We were on the front line.

But the Ukrainians knew there were homes and people here. They never shot at us. If they had to fire, it was away from us. When there was fighting beyond the garden, in the field, they avoided targeting our area. There's no reason to criticize them for that.

I remember one day. It was summer, and I managed to go outside. "Matushka" had found a medication called Depot somewhere. She gave me an injection, and it helped me walk around the house again.

She said, "Grandma, let's go outside". She led me to the yard, and we sat on a bench. Then, the Russian soldiers showed up with their machine guns — small but terrifying and so menacing. They asked, "Why are you sitting here?" She replied, "This isn't our way; they're coming now". And they did. At first, we didn't understand, but later, others told us, "No, they were shooting at us right here". They hid and fired at us... This went on throughout the summer—June, July...

At first, we still had our doctors. But later, when they arrived, they set up their hospital. They oppressed our doctors. There was a nurse who lived in our building. She said, "I can't endure their constant insults anymore". So, while it was still possible, she took her two children and left for Latvia.

Our doctors didn't cooperate with them and did nothing to help them. Maybe a few wanted to; I don't know. But from what people said, most of our doctors left.

So now we have a service center working again [this is about the fall of 2023 after the settlement was liberated]. A young woman comes twice weekly, bringing us medicine and, most importantly, our pensions. He gets 2,600, I get 2,500 — that's our pension.

The first thing we do is pay the utilities and then buy our medications. After that, there's barely anything left. If not for the war, we would live... but we need peace. That's all we want.

Back then, the service center also took care of us. They came by and asked, "Are you going to leave?" I said, "No". I'll tell you why we didn't leave: my husband is a second-group disabled person. He needs someone to look after him. We had electricity — it would come and go, but eventually, they'd fix it. At least we could watch TV and stay informed.

Now, we see that our people, the displaced, have come back. I understand they can't give everyone a bed — it's war, and I don't need one. But if we lie down, we may not get back up.

4.4. Svitlana Topolia, 58, Izium, Kharkiv region[66]:

During the day, I was at home, and at night, I would go to my mother's [referring to the period of Russian occupation from February to September 2022]. If I hadn't stayed in Izium, my mother likely wouldn't have survived. There was no electricity, gas, or heating. She had a summer kitchen with a wood stove and a small stash of firewood. She used that to keep warm, and I stayed there with her to at least have some warmth.

When I returned home, I would cook in the yard, where we had a gazebo with a stove. I prepared food for myself, my mother, and our two big dogs. My son's house is across from ours, and his yard was hit — his roof, fence, and windows were all damaged.

So, I cooked for the dogs, my mother, and myself. I also fetched water for my mother from a pump in a neighbor's yard.

Fortunately, this yard remained untouched by "civilization", so we could pump water manually. Everyone else relied on water in their homes or wells with electric pumps, but they couldn't access it without electricity.

I also remember my mother saying, "I have 10 blood pressure pills left — that's 10 days to live". So, we began to look around, checking what I had and what my niece had. She had also stayed behind in Izium with her two children. Slowly, we managed to find some pills.

[66] Interview HS/LM-ES/33 of 27.02.2024

Eventually, we could buy medication from a girl who brought supplies from russia. Of course, the occupation took a heavy toll on my mother's health. She suffered a stroke and is now very weak...

4.5. Olena Tkachenko, 50, Mariupol, Donetsk region[67]:

On the night of February 24, I was working on the Right Bank when I heard the sound of shelling. I checked Facebook, and the first thing I saw was the announcement: Putin had declared a full-scale war. That's when everything collapsed for me — I was overwhelmed with fear.

By March 1, we were immediately cut off from the city. On March 2, all connections were lost: the power went out, the water stopped, and, to my surprise, even the gas was cut off. I didn't even know it was possible to lose gas completely.

On March 2, our neighbor's house caught fire due to a gas leak; it was like a torch. It was right next door, just across the garden. I turned to my husband and said, "We'll be next". That was the day we started spending our nights in the bomb shelter. After that explosion, I told my husband, "We're next". I was terrified, and he told me, "Run to the shelter — it's in the old movie theater nearby".

So, we ran. My husband stayed behind with his bedridden grandmother. I went with two boys and a girl, my friend. Over time, we all grew close. When we reached the basement, it was already crowded with people.

When we were in the basement, I had a breakdown. I started shouting at my son, who's a student: "We've betrayed your father! We've abandoned your grandmother! We just left them—how could we do this?" (crying). Then, once things calmed down, he said, "Mom, give me a plan so we don't stay here too long".

So, we moved quickly, running back home. I told my husband, "All right, you and I will grab the mattress. Vanya, you carry Grandma on your shoulder". Under the shelling, with my grandmother on his shoulder, we hurried back to the basement, mattress and all.

As I was running, I thought the distance was far, but it turned out to be close. Once we returned to the basement with Grandma and the children, I realized I no longer cared about the house. It wouldn't have mattered if something had hit it and gone. I felt a strange calm, knowing we were all together in this small room without windows or doors.

They allowed me to put my mother in that space. But she started losing her mind, lying there, unable to tell night from day. She didn't understand what was happening around her.

I would go in, light a candle, and try to feed her or take care of her somehow... There were many people around, but she was always with us. I didn't stay in that room either; I could move around. But for those three days, my mother was lying almost alone in that small room with no windows, no doors, just a pail. She couldn't get up alone, so I had to help her. She ultimately lost the ability to understand anything. That was one of the reasons we decided to return home. We figured if we were going to die, we'd rather die at home.

We weren't used to stockpiling much. But a Kosmos store was nearby, and my neighbor insisted we go. My husband said, "We're not going; we have three kilograms of flour. That's enough for us". For some reason, we thought it couldn't last long. Then, the store owner officially announced, "You can take what's left". After that, the store was closed, and only the warehouses remained. My neighbor and I went and brought back a bag of flour and a bag of oats, carrying them under fire.

We also had two dogs at home, so we managed. It helped a lot because it would have been complicated without it. We still had five chickens laying eggs. We made flatbread on the fire and cooked porridge. That's how we survived.

I thought I wasn't hungry, but when my neighbor offered me borscht after probably two weeks, I realized just how hungry I was (laughs), even though I thought I wasn't. We had no vegetables, nothing really... just oatmeal. We ate once or twice a day at most.

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[67] Interview HS/LM-ES/6 of 29.04.2023

Cooking itself became a challenge. We'd put the frying pan on the fire and quickly return inside. It felt like that door, just an ordinary wooden door, was our only protection. We'd close it and wait, hoping it would keep us safe. And then we'd jump out again, flip the pancake, and jump back in. It was terrifying...

At first, we didn't have water. We had to drain the batteries with service water. Then, we ventured to the square, which was risky because it was near the maternity hospital. Later, we found out that there was a fire hydrant not far from our street. They opened the hatch, and there was water. That's when people started using it.

Before that, we used to take water from a neighbor. She had forgotten about it — it was for irrigation. Her grandfather had once dug a hole for the water; worms would go one way, water would go the other, and it would be boiled. Sometimes, I drank unboiled water. For some reason, I was always thirsty.

There were days when the shelling was relentless, and planes flew overhead. We all slept on a double bed and were fully dressed (crying). That's how we lived. We had just 1 or 2 degrees of heat. It was still cold, but we managed by wearing cotton pants and sweatshirts, living and sleeping in them.

We didn't have a stove — just blankets. We wrapped ourselves up and lay in the same bed with the children. The blankets were our only warmth.

It was challenging with my mother. At first, she would sometimes understand what was happening, but then, at other times, she wouldn't. There were no diapers, no basic supplies. When we arrive in Zaporizhzhia, I'll talk more about it later. But when I was asked, "Maybe she had a stroke?" I said, "Maybe, I don't know..."

There were nights when we had to take refuge in our cellar, a simple cellar in the house. We lived there from time to time and walked near it, seeking shelter.

In April, Russian tanks rolled into the yards, breaking down fences, demolishing huts, and destroying summer kitchens. There was a house across the street and a Russian tank with the letter "Z" and the inscription "For Sanych" drove in through the fence. I'll never forget seeing it: "For Sanych". And then, I saw the tank's muzzle aimed directly at my window. So, I went out... I approached calmly, and Kadyrovites were sitting on a bench. I walked up to them and said, "My mother is bedridden, and your tank is pointed at our window. Should we leave?" They responded, "No, no! Stay here". I asked again, "Are you sure?" They assured me, "Yes, it's fine".

But as I was leaving, I heard over the radio: "Nineteen, you can move the pile somewhere else". On our street, an APC had been hit, and then the "For Sanych" tank left, having destroyed everything in its path. By the way, houses were occupied by the soldiers. They took over homes with their owners still inside. The only thing that saved me was that I shouted to everyone, "I'm taking care of a bedridden mother. I won't let anyone in. We have no space". But they didn't ask anyone much...

On Left Bank, humanitarian aid was being distributed at the "Epicenter". A girl brought it to a neighbor and told us that she had already signed us up with our numbers, and we were number 800 or something like that. But they told me, "Don't make up numbers; you still have to go". They also said that people over 80 wouldn't hand out aid in person, but you could give them your passport. My mother was already 80.

So, we went — me, my neighbor, and the tailor. It was quite a long walk. We tried to avoid checkpoints, which made the distance even farther. There were about 800 of us. It was a vast crowd — just an overwhelming number of people. The crowd was there to get a number to sign up. We were lucky that we got our numbers on the same day, but it could have gone differently. I could've shown up and been told they weren't taking any more appointments that day, or I could have been registered as the 1000th person, but there were only 300 spots left that day. That's why I had to check to avoid missing my turn. People were living there, waiting.

The aid was given once a month. It included stew, pasta, and, of course, food we'd never eat in Ukraine... Oh! And a five-liter jar of water for each person. This was packaged with a St. George's ribbon and the slogan "We do not abandon our own".

We all dreamed of getting out, finding friends, or connecting with someone who could tell us how to leave. When people said they were somewhere abroad, it felt like they were on the moon. I couldn't understand it. We were completely cut off. We could only go to Novoazovsk and then onto the RF. I didn't know it was possible to leave Russia for Europe then. We were completely unaware.

Then, my daughter found me. They were living in the Primorsky district, not far from Bakhchivazha. They had a baby, my granddaughter. Once they saw me, we immediately decided we had to go.

The first thing I needed was a diaper. I needed a diaper for my mom to go anywhere and do anything. At that time, I didn't know where to find one. The identical "liberators" came, and they had a pharmacy, but they didn't even have the basics — no Corvalol, no adult diapers.

When I found my daughter, we finally decided to leave. We had to take my mother with us, and we brought the older son along. We left the father and the younger son at home and hoped we could figure things out later. The car wasn't big enough, so we drove a Sens. My daughter had two children, and I had Ivan and my grandmother. Even if we had wanted to, we couldn't have fit everyone together.

We had no money at all. Our cards were blocked, and we only had 3,000 in cash, which we hadn't spent for two months. But it quickly disappeared. I started asking for help — my relatives are on my mother's side. All of them are in Russia, and my mother was still alive then. They're not poor people (crying).

I asked for money very reluctantly. I had never asked for anything before, but no one from my relatives sent anything. It wasn't that they couldn't; they didn't even try. The only response I got was: "Where is she going? To Ukraine? No. If she came to us, we would help".

We drove from Mariupol through Mangush, then through Berdiansk, Melitopol, and Vasylivka, the last place they were stationed. The next stop was Zaporizhzhia, where our guys were already waiting for us. We were fortunate to leave when we did. We went on May 31; by the same day, we were already in Zaporizhzhia.

When we arrived in Zaporizhzhia, my mother passed away. She died right in the car. At first, I thought she had just caught a cold, but she was already wheezing. We immediately called an ambulance, and doctors arrived quickly. She looked at me and said, "No, you brought me here, and now you can let me go" (crying).

They helped me with everything. I also told them about my relatives in Kostroma, and that's when I appeared on Facebook. People I knew and even people I didn't know — some I had known for years but never met — helped me bury my mother. Thanks to all of them, she was buried properly in Zaporizhzhia.

4.6. Valeriia Stasiuk, 45, Hirske, Luhansk region[68]:

Everything in Hirske was abruptly shut down when the war started in February. Hirske had been on the demarcation line since 2014, so the closure was expected.

At first, taxi drivers would take people to Bakhmut to withdraw money, get pensions, or buy supplies. I remember it cost about 500 hryvnias for a taxi ride to Bakhmut. That's where we went. I bought medicines there, as long as the prescriptions were still valid, but it was a rare trip. I went to Bakhmut twice, once about a month and a half in and again a few months later. You only went there occasionally.

We lived without power for probably a month and a half to two months until May. We began to realize that the electricity might not come back on. At first, they would turn it on and off, but eventually, it was just off.

The gas supply was also cut off immediately, but we lived in the private sector to heat with a stove. Gas wasn't an issue for us, but it was still tricky without electricity, especially with a bedridden person to care for. It was hard to wash him in the evening without power.

We were alone with my mom, and no one helped us — not social workers, not anyone. We didn't care about

[68] Interview HS/LM-ES/8 of 14.11.2023

that because it was just us. What could a social worker offer? Would they come to change my dad's diaper? We were relatives, so we preferred handling everything ourselves rather than having a stranger wash him. That's why we didn't ask for any social workers — we did it all ourselves. And besides, if strangers came, would they feed him? We were at home anyway, so we fed him ourselves. We didn't need those social workers.

We lived in the private sector and had a well, so water wasn't a problem. But in the city, there was no water — if there was no electricity, there was no water.

The bread was brought to us every few days from Lysychansk. But it wasn't regular; you had to queue up at dawn or dusk. They'd get the bread, unload it at the store, and people would line up to buy it. At home, though, we had flour, so I mostly baked our bread.

We had a cellar but didn't use it because my mother had terrible legs and couldn't manage the stairs. My dad was bedridden, so where could we have put him? We tried to close the window, covering it with blankets so it wouldn't fall on him if something broke. But how could we leave him alone? He was still screaming, terrified, even though he wasn't fully aware of what was happening. It was hard to leave him, but we had no choice. We just went out into the corridor when the shooting started. The sound was so intense that the whole house would shake. Crystal cups rattled on the walls, and chandeliers shook.

My father was the most important person in our family. We would wake up, feed him, wash him, change his diaper. He was lying down most of the time, so we'd rub his back or move him onto the bed with my mom to help him sit up. She'd support him under one arm, and I'd hold him on the other side. He couldn't sit up independently, so we had to do this to help him.

It was a long process when we needed to cook or when the stove was heating up. The shops were closed during the fighting, and you couldn't go there every day. So I would go once a week, waking up at 5:00 in the morning, waiting in line, and buying whatever I could.

We were fortunate that we lived in our own house. We had canned food and kept everything sealed up. When the electricity was cut off, I cooked all the meat from the freezer into stew. We had a stove, and I melted coal and wood to cook. I could even bake bread at home using my oven. That became our daily routine. During the day, I would visit my father's house, where he would feed me and keep me company. The evenings were the same. Without electricity, I would sit with him by flashlight, trying to entertain him because he was ill. It was hard to hear him scream, and I didn't want that.

Giving him injections was difficult without light. My mom would shine the flashlight while I administered the injections, especially when he was in much pain. (Sighs) Our entire life revolved around him.

When humanitarian aid arrived, all the pharmacies were closed, and sometimes, the military would give out some leftover medicines. But they only had basic ones — paracetamol, analgin, and things like that. We needed specific medication. I have glaucoma, so I needed eye drops, which are not something you can buy. And with the pharmacies closed, where were we supposed to get them?

Thankfully, some people traveling to Dnipro for other supplies would bring back medications for us. They took lists of what we needed and returned the drops for my eyes and my mother's blood pressure medication. That became a lifeline. However, the supply of medicine was always a significant problem.

At first, you could still go to Bakhmut to get what you needed, but that quickly became impossible. So, we relied on these people who brought medicines and even diapers for my dad from Dnipro.

There was a woman in our neighborhood who tragically lost her life from a shell that fell nearby. She was responsible for distributing humanitarian aid because the distribution center was far away, and it was hard for older adults to get there. They would stand in line in the shelling, risking their lives to get essential supplies.

When I asked to be evacuated, I responded that there was nothing to evacuate. Regular people were evacuated by buses, but there weren't enough ambulances for bedridden people like my father.

There needed to be more communication, too. We had to walk around the village searching for a signal to call. People from Orikhivka would bring us milk, but they called one day and said they wouldn't be coming anymore because they had left. There was a guy at our CC who used to give us humanitarian aid. I went to him, but eventually, I discovered we would be evacuated by ambulance. I don't remember the name of the charitable organization now, but it feels like it might have been "Angels..." or something similar, though I can't recall exactly.

On the first day, when they promised they would come for us, they didn't show up. We had already packed our bags. They told us to pack lightly, so we mostly packed for my dad. We took two packages of diapers, not knowing what would happen next or where we were going.

They took my father's wheelchair. The ambulance was small, and when they arrived to pick us up, they said we couldn't take anything because there wasn't enough space. My dad was lying down, so we didn't take much. We only packed summer clothes, a little bit of everything. My father traveled with his blanket, pillow, and sheet. My mom and I had nothing — just our summer clothes, and that was it...

Were we taken to Kostiantynivka, or was it somewhere else? I think we were taken to Kostiantynivka. After that, we traveled by train to Bila Tserkva because our sister-in-law had already left earlier and was there. She told us to come, so we did.

We rented an apartment here because there is no social housing available. It hasn't been for a long time, and this is probably the only major city without social housing. So, we rented an apartment instead.

At first, when you arrive, everyone is accommodating. There are many charitable organizations here, and they mainly help newcomers just once. After that, the help is less. It worked out when we rented a two-room apartment for 5,000 UAH plus utilities because my father was bedridden and stayed in one room while my mother and I stayed in the other.

We arrived in May 2022, and my dad passed away in March 2023, on March 11 (crying). After his passing, the rent became too expensive for us to handle. The landlady increased the rent to 7,000 UAH for the two-room apartment.

I have a visual disability, and I thought I might be able to go to the UTOS (Ukrainian Society of the Blind), where they have dormitories and might offer some work opportunities. My pension is only 2,800 UAH, barely enough to live on. When I arrived, they said, "There are no jobs; we're all just sitting here with nothing to do. We only work three days a week".

They didn't have any available housing either. So now, I'm stuck in a problematic situation, unsure of how I will afford the apartment since there's no social housing available. I registered at the Employment Center a week ago, and they offered me a job, but it wasn't suitable for my health. I told them right away that I couldn't take it.

Being in the second group of disability, I've been offered jobs that are entirely inappropriate for my condition. At the Employment Center, I was told that they hire people with first-degree disabilities for certain positions. I couldn't believe it when they mentioned hiring a first-degree disabled person as a janitor in a kindergarten, even though they are visually impaired. I said, "How can someone who can't see possibly work as a janitor?" And the response I got was, "If you refuse twice, you'll be removed from the exchange".

I've already had one refusal. Now, I've been offered another job — well, I'll have to go and find out more. Tomorrow, I'm supposed to start working as an assistant teacher in a kindergarten. I'm not sure if I'll be able to handle it, especially with the children.

The real question is whether they'll want to hire a disabled person. In our country, when a disabled person is hired, they're expected to do the same work as a healthy person. No one takes into account that you have a disability (crying).

So, that's where I am right now. That's my story.

4.7. Olha Dmitriiva, 67, Hirske, Luhansk region [69]:

On the morning of February 24, 2022, I learned from the TV that Ukraine was being bombed, with Kyiv and Kharkiv under attack. It was terrifying and tense. At first, I couldn't fully understand what was happening — what was this? But soon, it became clear: it was a real war.

Our neighbors came outside... We live in a two-story house built in 1950, so it's 70 years old. The house has a basement, which used to house a stoker, but it had been closed off, and everything was removed, leaving only the concrete walls.

So, on the 24th, before the heavy bombing began, we started preparing the basement. We gathered blankets, quilts, bedspreads, cinder blocks, and boards. We made makeshift sunbeds, found an old bed, and brought it in. We brought chairs, an electric stove, dishes, and a kettle. I also went to another room, grabbed a clean pot for drinking water, and got an icon to hang up. In the beginning, there were only about 10 of us.

A few days later, I can't say exactly when — maybe February 25 or 26 — we started feeling the explosions. We could hear the bombing, and fear quickly began to settle in our hearts. We didn't stay at home for the first 2 or 3 days. By Sunday, we went down to the basement, and from then on, we never returned. We knew the bombing had intensified. The shops, the savings bank, and the pharmacies were all being bombed.

I was the oldest one in the basement. We gathered together, and I asked, "Does anyone have any food supplies?" It made me feel sick because no one had anything. The young people had gone out to buy food, cook, and eat. The young miners didn't get paid immediately — they received their wages later. But you can't fry money in a pan. It would be best if you had cash, and there was no cash. The savings bank was closed, ATMs weren't working — there was no money.

At that time, our miners started changing money. They'd take 20% of whatever you exchanged. So, if someone brought in 1,000 hryvnias, they'd take 200.

However, people agreed to this arrangement because the fear of hunger was overwhelming. Everyone understood they could exchange money, but there wouldn't be enough time to buy food. Then, the money changers got bolder and started taking 40%. That's when the pensioners, who only had 2,000 hryvnias in pensions, rebelled. They went to the military. When the army arrived, they approached and spoke to the money changers. We don't know exactly what was said, but one of the money changers ran at lightning speed, and the other jumped into a car and sped away. After that, no one saw them again. That was the end of the money exchange business in Horsk. Yes, it's true...

Then, we started cooking whatever we could, and we shared everything. There were only five or six spoons, so everyone took turns. Later, Mykhailo from the village brought us homemade eggs, and we bought them from him. We shared those, too, giving a little to everyone, supporting one another, and trying to keep each other's spirits up. Some people started to despair because the bombing continued and grew even more intense.

By March 8, everything was so active, and the shelling was so heavy that we didn't leave the basement. But we kept holding on, still hoping for the best...

At first, you go about your life, never thinking about the possibility of extreme situations... But when you find yourself in one, when basic things are no longer available, you ask yourself, "What do I do? What can I do?" It isn't very easy. We're so used to comfort and having electricity. When there's light, there's communication. When there's communication, you can talk, and life seems peaceful. But now, there's nothing. No light. The basement is dark. Candles are burning, the flashlights have died, and no spare batteries exist. You can't even make a fire — no air can breathe.

The basement is profound, and water keeps gathering. I called and was told they were carrying water in buckets and pouring it out because the groundwater was rising.

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[69] Interview HS/LM-ES/5 of 13.07.2022, Olha's story was also published by East SOS: Olha Dmitriiva: "I thought we were going to die of hunger, I can't tell you how much I feared it!" 29.08.2022, https://tinyurl.com/yfwyh528

Honestly, there would have been no chance of survival without that basement. No one would have made it. A bomb exploded just 5 to 7 meters from our house. It hit us hard, breaking a pillar. The pole was positioned in the middle of the railroad tracks, with the wreckage on both sides of the tracks. The explosion was so intense that it sliced through the railroad rails. I've never seen anything like it — the rails were bent and shiny like they'd been smashed together. The pillar was obliterated, and the rails were just... gone.

By the way, I brought a piece with me. I had forgotten about it, but I found it here in Uzhhorod. I'll show you.

I honestly thought we would die of hunger. The fear was overwhelming — I can't even begin to describe it. I thought we wouldn't survive because our food supplies were so limited. It's not that I had a lot, but everyone was in the same situation — there was nothing. Then, thankfully, humanitarian aid arrived. We divided what we got with spoons, sharing a little with everyone. We ensured it was fair; everyone understood the urgency and agreed to the arrangement.

The humanitarian aid was a huge relief. It wasn't just pasta and sugar; they even brought frozen turkeys from Europe. We couldn't believe it. The turkeys came in frozen briquettes, and when I thawed them, I found beautiful pieces of turkey meat with bones. It was surprisingly tender and flavorful. Honestly, if Europe eats food like this, we are envious. You can't compare it to anything we get here — it was like homemade chicken. It was so comforting, and it gave us a bit of hope. But even with this help, I was preparing to leave.

I stayed in the basement for a total of 34 days. It was unbearably challenging — both physically and mentally. I couldn't walk, I had lost my ability to speak, and the young people had to carry me in and out of the basement. I cried, I shook. At one point, I told them, "I can't take it anymore. I'm leaving".

I couldn't focus on what to pack for a first aid kit. My hands were shaking, I couldn't concentrate, I had lost sleep, and I just felt utterly unwell. Everything seemed overwhelming.

Then, I called my colleague, who had been wounded before February 24, 2022. She gave me instructions. She said, "Take a pen and paper, I'll dictate to you, and follow my instructions step by step". I'm so grateful to her for that. She told me what to pack: essential documents, clothes, medicine — everything I would need.

I left on Monday, April 4, 2022. The bus arrived around 9:00, or maybe half-past, and was fully loaded. My neighbor Vasia helped me with my bag, and I got on the evacuation bus. It was packed to the brim — bags piled on each other, people standing and sitting. It was crowded and chaotic, but we had no choice.

That day, people gathered near the CC, hoping to leave. Some of them didn't manage to get on the bus. The bus driver called for more buses, saying, "Horsk, send us more buses; there are still people here". By the end of the day, five buses had left Horske, taking people to safety.

When I left on April 4, we still had electricity and the internet. The gas had already been cut off, but we still had water. That was it. We had electricity because we were charging our phones from the socket, but a neighbor called and told us that the power had been cut, and only generators were left to charge phones.

It was cold and frosty that day, so we dressed warmly. No one knew what to expect or how things would unfold. We traveled by bus, and it was calm. Thank God, we made it to Kramatorsk, where we were dropped off at the train station. As we got off with our belongings, we saw a long line — 3-4 people with children, each carrying their things. The queue stretched on and on, all for the same evacuation train.

We joined the line, too, but I needed to use the restroom, so I went to look for one. I circled to the other side and saw a volunteer. I approached him and tried to ask about the situation, but everything needed to be clarified. The cash registers were closed, and no one could answer us. Everyone stood in silence, not knowing what to do. Asking for information seemed pointless, as no one had answers.

I approached the volunteer, wearing a vest with the word "Volunteer" written on it. I asked, "Excuse me, please, we were brought here from Horske..." He replied, "Oh, okay, okay, get in line, we'll take care of you". I asked, "Will it be free?" He assured me, "Yes, everything is free, don't worry, no tickets needed". I then asked, "What about the disabled?" He pointed to a line and said, "Here's the line for the disabled. Stand here, take your turn, and you'll be seated". Following his instructions, I joined the line for people with disabilities.

Around 1 PM, or just after, a train with 15 cars arrived. The first cars were given to small children — tiny babies. Everyone was loaded into the first car.

The second car was reserved for people with disabilities. I have never witnessed such kindness as I did when they loaded bedridden patients (crying). Young people carried the stretchers, loaded those in wheelchairs, and helped those who could not stand or move, those who were bedridden. It was all done together, all as one.

The line moved forward, everyone loading in, crying but stepping aside for each other. It was a shock to witness such collective care and attention; no one was left behind. A woman was lying on a stretcher, tears streaming down her face, unable to move, but they were loading her, saving her. It was an act of heroism, something I can't even describe.

We boarded the train and sat next to each other since there were no reclining seats. We just sat there. In my compartment, a girl from Kramatorsk was traveling with me. She had a disabled son, an immobile boy. He was like a plant — his arms and legs didn't work. She took such good care of him, feeding him (crying).

Everyone sat in silence; no one spoke. No one wanted to go anywhere... no one wanted to leave. We left around 3 PM, and it got dark quickly. As we drove, the darkness surrounded us... No one turned on the lights. It was all silent. There was no talk of toilets or food. The conductor, a young man, said, "I've been working on this train for a whole week". I asked him, "Tell me, have any trains been attacked?" He didn't answer. Nothing at all.

When we finally arrived, it was around 10 PM. We reached Poltava. The conductor said, "Get off, they've baked pies for you". Everyone just sat there. We thought he was joking. No one moved. He repeated, "I'm serious. The volunteers have baked pies for you. Come out and eat". I was in the third compartment and thought, "I'll go and see if they have something". I stepped outside and was stunned. The children handed out pies, water, and potato and mushroom soup containers.

I brought the pies, handed them out, and we ate them, wiping our tears. We were all crying. Oh, God, we're not abandoned. Someone remembers us; someone cares about us — how is this possible? It was a shared, national grief, a tragedy that touched everyone: the rich, the poor, all of us. My God...

Later, the conductor came over and said, "We have to answer a call from the military. The military called us — we need to leave quickly. We've been instructed to stop". Time passed, and when he returned, we had already left Poltava.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to the person who organized the distribution of those pies — thank you so much. Indeed, they did an incredible thing. There are no words for this kindness: "Thank God, we must make it to Lviv".

After passing through the Kharkiv region, it took a long time... Then he said, "We're heading to Lviv". And so we did. We finally arrived in Lviv at 3 PM the next day.

I went to the platform, thinking I had my bag and wondering, "Where should I go? What should I do?" A volunteer boy came along, and I asked him, "Could you buy me a ticket to Uzhhorod?" He replied, "Yes, I can". I took out 200 hryvnias, gave it to him, and he went off. I stood there thinking, "Oh my God, I didn't even ask this kid's name". But then I reassured myself: "It's fine. Everything will be okay".

A little while later, he returned and said, "Give me your phone number to save it. I may need to call you". I didn't know what for, but I gave him my number, and he entered it into his phone.

Then he called and said, "The ticket counters are packed, and there's an alarm going off. I'm going to buy a ticket online instead". I told him, "I don't mind, as long as you get the ticket". He bought the ticket online and brought it to me. I was trying to think of a way to thank him. I asked him, "Could you bring my things here to the train station?" He brought them over, and I bought him a chocolate bar. I was so happy. I thought, "Oh my God, what a golden child".

I was waiting for my train, which was scheduled to depart at 9:30 PM for Lviv-Uzhhorod. It was already 9 o'clock, and the train still wasn't there. People were starting to approach, and the train was nowhere in sight. Then, a woman approached me and asked, "Are you going to Uzhhorod?" I said, "Yes. Where are you from?" She replied, "From Popasna". I said, "How did you get out of there? It's right there..." She said, "Oh, it's hell, absolute hell. There is no city left; they're destroying everything. We couldn't leave because no one would risk taking us out under fire. But we found a car and paid 8,000 hryvnias to get us to Kramatorsk, and then we took the train. Now we're heading to Uzhhorod". We spoke briefly, and I learned that she worked in a kindergarten. Her name was Larysa, I think. She said, "My husband and I have been praying non-stop in Popasna. I sleep for three hours, and then he prays. When he sleeps, I pray". She continued, "That's how we were saved. On the last day, I got up from the chair, we had just eaten... A bomb exploded outside, glass shattered, and the frame came down. And I had just gotten up! If I hadn't, I would've been dead!" Then she added, "Oh, oh, oh, my husband is so sick". And then she left.

We packed everything up and arrived in Uzhhorod after a 6-hour journey. At midnight, the train finally left, and I fell asleep. The following day, I woke up at 5 o'clock, and we arrived in Uzhhorod.

I am incredibly grateful to the "East SOS" volunteers who helped me find a new apartment and assisted me with everything. They have been such a support, a true pillar of strength. Words cannot express how important their help is in such a situation. You find yourself in an unfamiliar city, alone, needing help knowing where to start or where to go. You have a thousand questions and no answers.

Thanks to these golden young people, thanks to their support, attention, and care... I don't know if I would have survived this trial without them. I will be grateful to them for the rest of my life. There's no other way to put it — they are amazing. We have such wonderful young people in Ukraine, golden-hearted ones. They are sociable, intelligent, kind, attentive, and the best. I'll say it a hundred times: they are the best. And I will always speak highly of them.

4.8. Oleksa Ternyk, 76, Velyka Novosilka, Donetsk region[70]:

In the spring of 2022, my daughter sowed tomatoes by the road. That same spring, she saw the first shell and decided to leave, leaving me alone.

I was already living near my daughter's military enlistment office by then. I left, too, but when a rocket hit, half of the house and the summer kitchen were destroyed. Everything was ruined, and soon after, the building collapsed.

We survived the winter of 2021-2022, and in the spring, we were doing some repairs in the house. The soldiers were already at the military commissariat. One said, "Close the windows so there's no light. Don't turn on the stove if it gets too hot". So, we closed the windows.

One night, it didn't matter which one; my daughter was on duty, and I went to sleep. When I woke, she said, "Dad, look out the window". And that's when we saw a shell go off. It wasn't too far away, but I could still see it. Do you know where it hit? Right in Remivka, where the pioneer camp is, and that's where it got stuck.

The next day, my daughter and her friend were going to Remivka. She wanted to take me with her, but it didn't work out, so I stayed in Novoselovka. I didn't go to meet anyone, didn't speak to anyone. There were people in the area — about 20 people in the two-story building, not more. Later, at the school, there was a bomb shelter. I don't know how many people stayed there. I never went in and didn't know how it was there.

I stayed in my house in Novoselivka, managing on my own — cutting firewood, cooking, and trying to maintain normalcy. I'd never traveled much before. Just a few times: once to the sea, once to deliver mail, and once to a circus in Donetsk. That was it. You couldn't leave the livestock unattended; there was always work at home, even during vacations. That's how life was. When my parents were alive, I'd visit them during my holidays, always bringing my wife along.

[70] Interview HS/LM-ES/34 of 21.10.2023

My wife passed away in Novoselivka. I stayed by her side until the very end. They took her to the hospital, but no one treated her. She'd fallen, and no one cared for her properly. She was buried without much ceremony. This summer, I wanted to place a monument on her grave. I couldn't do it in the spring — they wouldn't let me go to the cemetery because it was under constant shelling.

Now, the dangers are even worse. They scatter bags and packages — bright pink, red, or other colors — that contain explosive devices. At first glance, they seem harmless, but they're deadly traps. If someone picks one up, it explodes in their hands. So many people in Novoselivka have lost their lives this way.

I remember one man who went out to mow grass for his cow. He found one of those packages in his garden. It injured his leg badly, but he refused to go to the hospital and treated himself at home. The warnings are clear now: "Don't touch any packages or strange objects!"

So, I returned after that winter [2022–2023]. It was decent — cold. I cooked my meals. But then my eyes started to bother me. I want to stay for this winter [2023–2024], but who will heat the house? No one wants to do it. People only work if there's money involved. And who would heat and cook all day long? If someone agrees, they'll say: "If you had something to offer, like a share in the work, I might consider it. But if you don't, I won't". And that's that.

I told my daughter: "You need to find me shelter, a place where I don't have to sit in a cold house. I won't be able to heat it myself. Someone has to tend to the fire, and I can't, not with my poor eyesight".

In the spring [of 2023], the shelling began again. A shell hit the house and the orchard. One hit the corner of the house — windows shattered, everything was destroyed. If I'd been sitting or lying on the couch, the board that fell would have killed me. The shell landed nearby, and the impact sent a board crashing straight onto the couch.

I jumped up and ran out. A firefighter was working with us at the time. My neighbor arrived and called, "Liosha, are you alive?" I said, "I'm alive". The military guys came by, the ones collecting information, and asked, "Grandpa, can you leave?" I replied, "Where would I go? I have no one".

So, I stayed. There wasn't anywhere to go, and I wouldn't leave everything behind. Once things calmed down, I sat down, and they drove off. Afterward, I started clearing branches off the road because it was overgrown with weeds. I just kept going, cutting and clearing, doing what I could.

My eyesight is affected periodically... I worked around cattle, and the ammonia exposure. Plus, everything I've been through — it's all taken a toll. When they were shelling Novoselivka, it impacted me. And in Komar, they fired near me, right by the house. There's a river nearby, and the Ukrainian soldiers were positioned not far away. Every time, I thought, It's going to hit us! It's going to hit us! It's all still vivid, like it's happening right in front of my eyes. It terrifies me.

Do you see my hands? This is all I can manage now — my hands tremble, and beyond this, I can't see clearly anymore.

The next day, a shell landed. That was it — I packed my things and left Novoselivka. Do you know how they fire? It's instant... I forgot everything. The shell hit the ground, and shrapnel scattered all over the yard. I hid behind the barn. The basement was open, but I couldn't go in — it was just one hit after another. No matter where I went, I felt like I was going to collapse.

I was in the garden, planting potatoes, when a shell fell right next to me. A piece of shrapnel flew by so close it grazed my nose. I thought, "That's it, it's over!" That was the moment I knew I had to leave.

My daughter called her sister in Komar and asked, "Will you take him in?" Even then, I didn't want to go. I resisted, but she started yelling, desperate for me to leave.

Later, I went to the store to buy bread, cigarettes, and sesame seeds. The saleswoman knew my phone number and shouted, "Your daughter has been calling you — three or four times already! You need to get ready and leave!"

By then, I had seen enough. Two shells had landed close, and I told myself, "The fourth one might be the end of me". So I gave in, ran home, and started packing. It was the right decision — soon after I left, a shell landed nearby, and a house in the area was burning.

Before leaving, I managed to dig up four boxes of potatoes and bring them to the basement. Then my daughter called again, urging me to get in the car. I packed a bag with what I could carry and left the rest behind.

I went to Staryi Komar and gave the address to the driver. He didn't even take any money — he just threw the bag in the car and drove me there. I was lucky to have left when I did.

I'm not greedy for money, but a man has to have a conscience. Do you understand? That's what matters. I didn't take money for help — though someone else might have — but this guy didn't either. He helped people move what they couldn't carry themselves.

When I arrived here, I learned more about him. People said he went out of his way to transport those who couldn't manage independently. For him, money was just paper. A man's conscience — that's what's truly valuable.

From Staryi Komar, the guys called a car from Dnipro. It arrived around four o'clock. They put me on a stretcher, and I said goodbye to my family — my grandmother, Lena, and Tanya. I didn't see the kids, but Olya and her children were there. I said my goodbyes to them, too.

The guys and I left. Somewhere in the center, we stopped to sort out some documents for me — so I wouldn't have trouble on the road. Once that was done, we set off. The road was a mess, riddled with craters from shells. At one point, I thought the wheels would fall off the car (laughs). It had been through so much, beaten and battered.

In Dnipro... Well, yes, Dnipro. My daughter is abroad now. She called me recently. I asked her, "Can you tell me where my pension is? Do you have it or not? Or did it burn down?" She told me, "I've got it, Dad". I said, "Good. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to get my pension here". She just said, "I don't know".

4.9. Maryna Sushko, 71, Zvanivka, Donetsk region[71]:

I've already said it — war is terrifying, genuinely terrifying. The land has been left without its caretakers. How could this be allowed? This is what war does. Two years without plowing, two years without sowing — it's chaos. And how long will it take to fix it? Fifty years, at least, to restore order to this mess.

Our village used to be so beautiful. We had asphalt roads, gas, electricity, and a community center. Now, it's unrecognizable, too frightening to even think about returning. They've turned it into a military training ground. Who's there now? Who's shooting at whom? Who's firing back? It's chaos — bombings, machine gun fire, explosions, massive craters. The roads are shattered; the craters are enormous.

How can I describe it? When your whole house shakes, that's one thing. But then the windows fall out — that's another kind of fear. The plaster crumbles from the walls, even in the farthest corners of the house: the kitchen and the bathroom. Dust and debris were everywhere. If you're not careful, you might get hit in the head with falling plaster. You endure it, hoping it will stop. But when it's quiet for you, the nightmare begins again somewhere nearby.

The damage to our gardens is devastating. There are massive sinkholes. My son's garden has four, and two more are near his house.

They've turned the village into a wasteland. There were still children and older adults living there — people with lives and homes. We all thought this would be temporary. But it dragged on for a year and a half.

When my husband left, it broke my heart. The children went, too, and I was alone in the house. In winter, I

[71] Interview HS/LM-ES/35 of 16.11.2023

kept warm by heating the stove. When spring came, I tried to make something of the garden, planting a little here and there. I even planted melons for myself. Oh, and I shared some with the boys, too.

It wasn't anything terrible, nothing like that. The soldiers — well, I called them soldiers — were just young men. We greeted each other and maintained regular human relations. Some were older, closer to my age, but most were young, like my children or even my grandchildren in their 20s. These soldiers were about the same age. They would ask: "Have you eaten? Do you have enough food?"

Every month, there was humanitarian aid. It had everything — canned food, stew, fish, condensed milk, cereals like rice, buckwheat, barley, pasta, flour, tea, coffee, and matches. Sometimes there were soups, too. I remember packages from the UK arriving. But by October [2022], the mice had already moved in, and rats were scurrying around the house. We were planning to stay there for the winter, but you know how it is — once the cold sets in, no creature, human or otherwise, willingly leaves a warm house.

I kept the house warm, chopping wood and hauling water. Everyone thought it would only be temporary...

This year [2023], they unexpectedly brought poison to the mice. When I put it down, the mice and the poison were gone. After that, I made it through the winter reasonably well.

It isn't very comforting to stay this year [2023-2024]. Candles, what else... Oh, they brought a Bible. They gave it to me and asked: "How are you?" I replied: "Bad. It's hard. Very hard".

Whenever someone brought humanitarian aid, I would ask them: "When will this war end? When will it finally end?" There was food, but how were we supposed to stay warm? There was no firewood, no coal, no electricity...

A neighbor — not relatively nearby, but from the edge of the village — started helping me. I don't know her name, but she came when my husband was still alive. She would check his blood pressure and bring a cuff because his old one was broken. She even suggested he go to Kramatorsk, and eventually, he did.

After that, she and I stayed. She helped me chop wood and brought milk, yogurt, cheese, and brynza from her goats — she had 20, including five dairy goats. We became friends. We'd see each other during the day, talk, and support each other. War is terrifying, but it does bring people together, especially when they're decent people.

She helped me board up the windows and checked the stove for soot when I couldn't manage. She's younger than me, about 53 — around my eldest son's age. She was always willing to help.

Then, one day, volunteers came for me. They were coming from Kramatorsk. They stopped by and said: "Grandma, get ready. We're taking you". "Where are you taking me?" I asked. "To Kramatorsk", they replied.

We had been to Kramatorsk before — there was a Jehovah's Witnesses meeting there, not a temple but a gathering. They offered their help. I stayed the night, and they sent me on to Pokrovsk by the following afternoon. I registered in Pokrovsk, and they sent me to Dnipro. I've been here for almost a month now.

My passport was damaged during the bombing. They said I needed to renew it, but I have a certificate. It's from 2006 and states: "After the commission, for life". Even so, when we went to the pension office to check and verify everything, they told me my documents were satisfactory. But still, they wouldn't issue me an IDP card because my passport wasn't in order.

Volunteers helped me restore my passport. Vira, one of them, helped a lot. "The pension one will be ready next week", she said. "It's already been sent for processing". There are queues everywhere — you have to wait for everything. But there's transportation assistance through social services. I'm not sure who pays for it.

Vira said, "I've paid for the car — we're going". First, we went to get my passport, which took two weeks. Then, we opened a bank card at an ATM. Afterward, we went to the pension office to get an identification number and start processing my pension.

I didn't ask too many questions, but from what I understand, everything seems to be in order now.

I can't plan anything right now, but they mentioned a rehabilitation center — I don't even remember exactly where. When we were picked up from the train, the volunteers told me, "You'll stay here for a month, and then you'll be sent to the Kyiv region, near Kyiv, to a nursing home".

I am still determining where my children are. Tania said I could go with my family if I wanted, and all the documents were supposedly ready. But I don't know where they are — whether they're here or still at home. Back home, the bombing is relentless.

My eldest son left me his phone number, but I can't seem to reach him. I gave him my phone, but he didn't answer. He gave me a new number, but I need help dialing it. They brought me a phone, but it's not the same. Vira tried contacting her husband, but I couldn't dial my son.

A woman was staying with us. When she arrived, she tried calling her son and neighbor Sveta, but no one picked up. Then, she called her husband, and it connected immediately — he answered immediately. Why does this happen? Is it the connection? Or something else?

My husband is in the hospital in Pokrovsk. He didn't tell me where he was; Vira found out. She needed information about whether he had received any of the resettlement money. I told her, "I haven't seen him in over a year". When I finally called him, I asked, "Where are you?" His reply: "On the bed".

She called and said: "Viacheslav Ivanovich, there's something you need to hear — it's family-related". I don't know the full details of that conversation, but she eventually told me: "He's in Pokrovsk". That's in the Donetsk region.

We've been a family for over 50 years. Our children are grown — one is 50, the other 42 — and our grandchildren are grown too. We're not just grandparents; we're also great-grandparents. It's not as if we've just started building a life together. Over the years, the children grew up, and we stayed close as a family.

The grandchildren would visit, talk with us, and help whenever needed. We celebrated everything together — birthdays, holidays, all of it. We remembered every occasion: grandchildren's birthdays, grandpa's, grandma's, the kids, and the in-laws. If someone couldn't visit in person, they'd call: "Happy Birthday!" That's just how we were — connected and supportive.

But the war has torn everything apart. I haven't seen my grandchildren for two and a half years now. I don't even know where my youngest son is. He's 42 years old, and my oldest is 50. I try to call, but it's like shouting into the void.

I heard someone mention Estonia, but I don't know if they're referring to the country in the Baltics or if a village with the same name is nearby. He hasn't shared his address with me.

My youngest son has four children, and now there are two great-grandchildren. How many does that make? Eight grandchildren...

4.10. Mariia Bahlai, 84, Beryslav, Kherson region[72]:

My story starts with the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant in Nova Kakhovka, where my family and I moved after the bombing. There were five of us, and I was the eldest. Life was busy — I went to the mechanization department and attended night school after completing the 7th grade. Once I finished my studies in Nova Kakhovka, I started working in the accounting department as a bookkeeper. Over time, I became a senior accountant.

I worked in a hospital for nine years and later spent another nine years in trade. All in all, I built a steady career. Eventually, I retired, and my pension became my lifeline (smiles).

[72] Interview HS/LM-ES/13 of 06.12.2023

Then the war came. I never imagined I'd live to see such devastation. Now, I sit here with nothing left. I don't even have slippers to walk across my rugs. Speaking of rugs — my ceilings have caved in, and the carpets are ruined.

I stayed in my house until the very last moment, enduring everything until there was nowhere to sleep. What else could I do?

The period of occupation in Beryslav is a blur now. I spent most of it confined to the house, barely going out. The only time I ventured out was to collect my pension. Even then, it wasn't the same. The postman brought it to me — in rubles. Ten thousand rubles. That's what I lived on.

When it came to my pension, they first brought it to me. I remember going to the post office — there was a routine. The first time, they delivered it, but then the following month, they said, "We're not delivering anymore; you'll have to come and get it yourself".

So, I went. The post office was always crowded. People would gather, and it was the same ritual every time: "Who's last in line?" You'd stand there, waiting, surrounded by chatter. I didn't know much about what was happening outside. I rarely ventured anywhere alone. But while standing in line, I'd overhear bits of news — what I call the "women's radio".

One woman once said, "They're laughing at our pensions. How can anyone live on this money?" And she was right — our pensions are so small, it's hard to manage. But I wasn't in desperate need; my children helped me. Yes, they did.

As for shops, things were unpredictable. Some stores closed entirely, and there wasn't always much to buy in those that remained open — or it was too expensive. Humanitarian aid became a lifeline. They gave out quite a lot, though I'll admit, I never went to collect it myself.

I got a call from Beryslav: "Why don't you go to collect the aid?" I told them, "Because the line is horrible. Women were fighting for the humanitarian aid, seriously fighting". I couldn't bring myself to do that. One woman, who had just had surgery, came to the line and asked to be let through, explaining she couldn't stand for long. She said, "I'm recovering from surgery". But no one let her pass. It was heartbreaking.

She even unbuttoned her clothes to show where she'd been operated on, to prove she wasn't lying. It's hard to believe people can be that heartless, but it happens. I guess people are different.

As for me, they gave me food, some humanitarian aid, and even detergents — what they called "chemicals". But I didn't go to collect more. I had what I needed, plus some supplies from the city and a small garden. So, I didn't bother with it. People would call me "stupid" for not going, but I said, "Well, stay there if you want. I'm fine here".

They said they'd been waiting since 3:00 in the morning to get their turn. I just told them, "I'd rather not go. I'll eat what I have". They stood there until they were exhausted. There were people like that, but that's not me. I didn't have anything, so I didn't go. That's how it was.

As for the packages, I received them in the mail. Since the Ukrainians arrived, I regularly visited the post office. But the first time, I sat in the barn for three nights. I couldn't take it anymore — mice were in there (smiles). And the neighbor's barn had rats. They warned me about it. I said, "God, what am I supposed to do? The rats are hungry; they might even bite me".

They had stopped taking feathers, and that was when it all went silent for me. The noise so deafened me that I couldn't hear for two days. As I'm speaking to you, I'm still a bit off. My ears feel strange. I went out once and got so disoriented by the sound that I couldn't hear properly. I kept telling them, "I'm fine; it's just my ears". They asked if I needed to go to the hospital, but I said, "No, I don't need to go; I've been deafened before. I'm fine".

But now, I can feel my blood pressure rising again. I can't show you this ear — it's still bothering me. I'll never forget that shot I heard. It came from the factory and was like a huge crack — something like glass breaking, so loud and overwhelming. It was deafening. I thought for sure I'd lose my hearing...

Then I went into the house, and I was terrified. What could I do? There was firewood there, so I made a little bed with a mattress and pillow on the floor. You know how frightening it is when mice and rats crawl all over you!

I was scared in the house, too, especially at night. The shooting started around midnight, and you could never tell where it was coming from. You just heard it thundering in the distance, and then your ears would ring and clog up. I stayed inside, as much as I could, until the very last moment...

O... (sighs) The last time I left, there was no water, electricity, or connection — nothing. It felt like such a long time, but even a week without these things feels endless. I always kept a water supply, but sometimes it wasn't fresh. The last time, there was no water at all. They said a pole had been broken, and the electricity was cut off, which also broke the water supply.

I had a few 5-6 liter containers for drinking water — up to 20 of them. Then there was the iron barrel for washing — enough for one person. I kept everything in reserve, using it carefully. There was also a black tank out in the yard for washing. The reserves were enough, but they ran out occasionally, and I'd have to go without them.

Lately, it's been even harder... especially when the hydroelectric power station was destroyed. That made everything worse. There were mice everywhere and all sorts of pests, including vipers... There was nothing easy about it.

You know, water can be terrifying. There are so many creatures in it — ticks and other nasty things. I've seen it myself — all kinds of unpleasant creatures. And now there are so many mice, too...

During the war, we received some humanitarian aid. It wasn't much, just a little bit — onions, potatoes, and some beets we planted. Sometimes, we had enough, sometimes less, but we made do.

We cooked on an open fire. I had a pot for that, but if I didn't, I'd throw wood on the fire and cook with that. That's how it was. You made do with whatever you had.

The stove wasn't working when I returned because the chimney was broken. So, what did we use? Thankfully, I didn't have gas, or I'm sure I would've broken down. Do you know how dangerous gas can be?

Drones were flying overhead from the left bank. It wasn't very comforting, of course. Whenever I saw one, I'd run inside and hide. I was terrified of them.

One time, a drone fell. It carried something and dropped it into a giant bathtub filled with water on a rack with other containers around it. The drone's impact broke the bathtub and damaged the hose, leaving a mess everywhere. It wasn't very comforting to witness.

I was outside then, walking to the summer kitchen. I don't even remember exactly what I was doing, but I would've been caught if I had been there. It was pure luck that I wasn't inside when it happened.

The police arrived and told me, "Look, the roof's gone, the house is destroyed — everything's shattered". You couldn't even step inside anymore. Everything we built, everything we had, was gone. I left it all behind...

My husband passed away, too; he had cancer. He died suddenly, and I was left alone in the end. That's my story. Now I'm here, with others in their eighties, and I'm grateful for the humanitarian aid because I can't even put on slippers. I walk as best as I can.

This is my reality now — sitting here as an older woman with nothing. It's hard, very hard. I was terrified to leave my home, abandon everything, and go to who knows where. But, well, they welcomed me here. The girls are kind, and I don't need much. I have a few things left from my dowry. (smiles) Today, they even took a picture of me with some sticks.

I said, "Maybe they'll take a picture of me on a gurney next time". In Beryslav, there are still so many run-down houses, some tucked away in corners, hidden behind rubble. Everything is broken, and it's terrifying to walk around there. (sighs) Sometimes, I wonder how I survived it all, how I made it through. I'm surprised

myself. But I've always been strong... I've always been strong and optimistic, hoping for the best. And now, I don't know who I am anymore. I'm not a pessimist, but I've learned not to live for just one day. It's something like that, I suppose...

4.11. Halyna Koval, 68, Druzhkivka, Donetsk region[73]:

On October 30, 2019, I carried the bags, put them in the closet, and left them in the hallway. I was the only one who could help, so I knew I had to do it while the weather was still warm. I tried my best, pulling and struggling, but I wasn't sure what to deal with.

In February, since I couldn't go myself, my neighbor went to make an appointment with my family doctor. She registered me and arranged for a house visit, which was supposed to happen around February 20, 2020. A week passed, but the doctor never came. The neighbor went again to follow up and made another call, but the doctor still didn't show up. I decided that I wouldn't be going to any more doctors.

I told my neighbor, who worked as a social worker, "I'm going to die here, but I'm not going to the hospital". How can you trust a doctor who doesn't show up after two appointments, especially when you can't walk?

By November 1, I couldn't get up for a month — probably closer to a month and a half, until December 11. That's when my godfather came to help. He brought me a walker, and with his help, I could get up and walk around the room a little bit.

On December 11, I started moving again... It was unexpected, but I had no choice. I didn't go anywhere anymore. Very few people came to visit — just my cousin and neighbor — no one else.

The house is old, ancient. And these bombings... I'm exhausted from it all. Every time they hit, things crumble around me. You're constantly trembling, not knowing what's coming next because the house is falling apart. After retiring, I stayed here but had a pension of just 1,500 UAH. And now, should I repair a home that's not mine, and for whom? Now, with my son gone, the question is whether to focus on surviving — eating and living on my own — or sit here, starving, while trying to fix up a place for someone else. I gave up on the idea of doing repairs. It just wasn't worth it.

I fell in the house before I came here on August 3, 2023. I couldn't get up for about an hour. I was stuck, waiting for someone to help me. I hurt my side badly.

I thought it might be my ribs, but I couldn't move. I was on the floor for an hour before they managed to help me up. The social worker came that day; it was the day she usually visited.

She asked, "Should we call an ambulance?"

I said, "No, no ambulances".

She replied, "But we need to check what's wrong... maybe get an X-ray?"

I told her, "I've said it already; I'm not going to the hospital".

My godfather was the one who helped me the first day I fell. He dragged me up and tied me securely, and I spent the whole day like that. It seemed to help; I felt a little better. I took painkillers, and it seemed to ease the pain. But soon, I started being afraid to walk. Either I was worried, or I was just scared of how my body felt — it didn't seem the same anymore. When I walked with crutches, it felt like something was shifting inside me. I had this strange sensation the first week, maybe the first 10 days after the fall.

About a week later, we received a call with a phone number for an evacuation service. We called them and made arrangements. We agreed on everything, and by Monday, I arrived here. On Tuesday, a doctor came to see me and took my blood pressure — it was high. They gave me some pills for it, but I didn't say a word. Not a single word about how I was feeling.

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[73] Interview HS/LM-ES/36 of 19.09.2023

I feel better here than I did at home. The first few days, people kept asking me about my family and how I was doing. I told them about my children, my family… how my husband died, how my daughter died, and how, within one year, I lost four loved ones. My father died on January 25, 1995. He was in Russia, and although he was far away, he was still close to my heart. How can you not worry about someone like that? On April 1, 1995, my daughter passed away. Then, on November 2, 1995, my husband died. And finally, on February 23, 1996, my mother passed away. How do you even cope with all of this within one year?

My son passed away in 2013, 10 years ago, in February. It's hard to believe it's already been 10 years. Since then, I've been alone. And this is the reality I've been living with — the loneliness, the weight of it. It feels like I've been in prison for the past four years. When I first arrived here, all those questions started. Every time I began to talk about everything I've been through, it felt like my heart stopped. I'd start crying, trembling. The pain would overwhelm me. It always starts the same way and doesn't end until I leave. And as soon as I try to leave, the questions begin again. This went on for three days, I think.

But now, at least for now, I have a witness — Svetlana Vladimirovna. She checks on me and asks how I'm doing. They even made me watch TV. I went and watched TV.

4.12. Nataliia Polishchuk, 75, Avdiivka, Donetsk region[74]:

It was a three-room apartment, and we lived on the ground floor. My daughter also lived in the same building on the fourth floor. She renovated the entire apartment, brought in all the furniture, the kitchen, everything — she did it all herself. And now, there's nothing left… Well, she's gone now; she moved to Crimea.

My son was living with us when he passed away. We buried him at the age of 45. As for my daughter, she went to Crimea with her child. He was just 3 years old at the time. My son had a daughter, my great-granddaughter Yelyzaveta, but we hadn't seen her since she was a year old. After that, they fled north, moved somewhere else, and a friend contacted them. He didn't like something about it, so they moved again—either to Rostov or somewhere else. They're in Rostov now.

My grandfather's nephews are there, too, but we don't know them anymore, and they don't know us. Everyone has their own families and their grief. They'll call once a year, maybe. My brother's also living in a village in the Vinnytsia region. Apart from that, there's no one left. My relatives have all passed away, and my brother, too. I still have a brother in Kherson, but with the war there, I can't reach him. I can't get through to him…

We had shops and a pharmacy right in front of our windows. They kept shooting at the pharmacy and at everything around it… a tree fell on my daughter's balcony. The balcony was utterly crushed; nothing was left — just a mess, with the wind blowing through and all the glass shattered. I said, "I'll go close it". But they asked, "What will you cover it with?" We had some plastic film, so we tried that. But the wind blew it all away. There was nothing to fasten it with; the windows were plastic and couldn't be nailed. When I tried taping it, it just came off. And the frames were already cracking, so it was no use. It was the same for us, too. Thank God we only had one wooden window; the rest were plastic.

We had a basement… but calling it an air raid shelter or bomb shelter would be a stretch. It was more like a flooded crawl space, where you had to crawl on your knees because of the pipes and the standing water. You couldn't walk through it — only crawl. My son had tried to fix the pipes there; he said, "It's always full of water, never dry". But no one ever used it to hide during air raids. If there was danger, people ran to the garden, which wasn't far away. But we didn't run; we just sat there. I would cross myself and say, "Whatever happens, happens. Whatever God will give…" and that was it.

We were sitting in the house… They kept saying, "Hide where there are two walls". The walls were shaking from the blasts… What could we do? When the bombs hit, everything broke — the glass, everything. There was nothing to cover the windows with. We could already hear the glass shattering in the house.

Nothing was left — no windows, electricity, gas, water, and nothing. We had a column nearby so that we

74 Interview HS/LM-ES/37 of 27.10.2023

could go there. But every time we left, we wondered: would we make it back home? Would we survive? My husband would cook outside, and I could barely see. I had lost my sight… I couldn't see anything anymore. (Crying)

He would make soup on a fire. Once, the military came by and asked, "What are you doing, man?" He replied, "I'm cooking soup. What else can I do?" He had started a fire and set the pot on it because there was nothing to eat.

They were giving us aid, and we got some cereal. But how could we cook it? We didn't even have a proper stove. What were we supposed to do with it?

There was no heating. The factory was destroyed. Everything we had — water, electricity — came from the factory, and now that's all gone. Only about 1,500 people are left in the area [referring to Avdiivka as of October 2023]. There's nothing left. The plant was completely burned down, all the equipment, everything… all gone.

We were already sitting there… We had to wear fur coats because it was so cold in the house. The temperature inside had dropped to 5 or 7 degrees. My daughter asked, "What's going on in your house?" We told her, "It's 5 degrees". She couldn't believe it: "How can it be 5 degrees inside when it's 5 degrees outside?" But what could we do? It was just that cold. Our fur coats were so short that we had to wear them because we couldn't stay warm. It was freezing.

As for the medicines, I know the hospital still did what it could. They sent a nurse to our house, and we got the medicine there. They gave it to us for free. We took it for heart problems, for headaches… I don't remember (sighs). Some medicines were prescribed at the pharmacy, and I also used drops for my eyes. I would take them twice in the morning and twice in the evening.

We were forced to leave because living there was no longer possible. It became too much to bear — too much fear and uncertainty. It just wasn't safe anymore.

They came from Avdiivka and brought us here, but we needed to figure out where we were going. We were told, "Pack your things; we're taking you somewhere". Without knowing what to expect, we got into the car, escorted by police vehicles. The bus ride was long, but they took care of us along the way — providing us with tea, sandwiches, and whatever we needed. When we finally arrived, they said, "Here's your room". They gave us everything — a bed, necessities, and comfort. They even brought our clothes and bedspreads, throwing them hastily into bags. But the rest of our belongings stayed behind. We haven't managed to take anything yet; everything is still there.

Every day, I listen to the radio and cry for Avdiivka each time. I hear it has been completely leveled, with nothing left. The factory — the Koksokhim plant, once one of the most renowned in the Soviet Union — was destroyed. My husband worked there for 40 years. I, too, worked at a factory, making bags — not leather, but dermantine ones.

I don't know where we'll end up — whether we'll stay here or elsewhere. We may wait if they don't expel us because we have nowhere else to go.

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The "invisible people" of Ukraine's Frontline Regions

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MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

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