

EPF Mission to Investigate Sexual Violence Resulting from the Russian Aggression Against Ukraine - June 2022



Institute for the Study of War and AEI's, Map of Russian Invasion of Ukraine, 26/08/2022

1. Introduction

The primary purpose of the mission was to collect parliamentary evidence on sexual violence in military conflicts. During our three-day parliamentary mission to Poland and Ukraine over 25 to 27 June 2022, an EPF delegation visited seven refugee shelters in Rzeszów, Poland and Lviv, Ukraine. Here, the delegation met with survivors of violence, politicians from both Ukraine and Poland, law enforcement institutions, psychologists, NGOs, IGOs, activists, and politicians.

The visit was a follow-up action after the Belgian Parliament adopted a resolution concerning the use of rape as a war crime. In the case of Ukraine, the Belgian resolution insists on the need for international institutions and tribunals to conduct separate, independent investigations so that Russian soldiers are held to account for their alleged crimes.¹ Thus, this visit offered an opportunity for the delegates to shine a light on the reality of the war in Ukraine for both the public and other European governments. To capitalise on this momentum created by this visit, the EPF will seek possibilities to encourage resolutions to a similar effect at both the EU and UN.

2. Background

As of 3 June 2022, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) had received over 100 reports of alleged sexual crimes in conflict areas across Ukraine — mostly against women and girls — as well as a national hotline having received

¹ *Resolutie betreffende seksueel geweld tegen vrouwen bij gewapende conflicten of onlusten*, <https://www.senate.be/www/?MIval=/dossier&LEG=7&NR=79&LANG=nl> accessed: 24/06/2022

reports of crimes ranging from gang rape to coercion to witnessing an act of sexual violence committed against a partner or a child.²

Sexual violence during a conflict has proven highly effective in breaking the enemy's morale, particularly where women are raped in public, or where relatives are coerced into participating. Widespread and systematic sexual violence also hampers sustainable post-conflict recovery. This is observed in three ways: first, it undermines social stability by destroying families and communities; second, the fear of sexual violence restrains women's mobility, leading them to retreat from economic activity, and causing girls to stay home from school; third, when perpetrators of sexual violence go unpunished, efforts to establish faith in the State's ability to protect its citizens and establish the rule of law, is seriously undermined.

Prohibiting the use of sexual violence as a tactic of war was confirmed in the Council's many resolutions — additionally, supported by international law. Nevertheless, the gaping chasm between those commitments and the situation of many women around the world remains extremely problematic.³

On 29 June 2022, the OHCHR reported that it had received 108 allegations of sexual violence in conflict-related areas. Out of 108 allegations, there were 78 allegations of rape, including gang rape, 7 of attempted rape, 15 of forced public stripping, and 8 of other forms of sexual violence. The alleged perpetrators were Russian soldiers in 87 cases, pro-Russian separatists in 2 cases, and civilians or unidentified actors in territory controlled by Russian armed forces in 2 cases.⁴ The most common effect of rape is fistula, i.e. a perforation of the vagina.

3. Findings

Infrastructure:

As of June 2022, **39 shelters, 32 crisis rooms, and 29 centres of socio-psychological support are operating all over Ukraine.** Out of 124 local communities that received funds to provide specialized support services to GBV/ domestic violence victims:

- 11 territorial communities are in the occupied territory, according to operative data 1 car for the mobile brigade was damaged during the shelling, 1 car was confiscated by the occupiers (Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv - partially, Mykolaiv - partially);
- 15 territorial communities are in the area of hostilities, or under constant shelling;
- 4 territorial communities (Zaporizhzhya, Donetsk oblasts) are located in the territory controlled by Ukraine (in relative distance from hostilities), one of which hosts IDPs (Donetsk oblast);
- 9 territorial communities were under occupation (Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy) and are now liberated;

² *Sexual Violence 'Most Hidden Crime' Being Committed against Ukrainians, Civil Society Representative Tells Security Council*, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14926.doc.htm>, accessed: 22/08/2022

³ *Sexual Violence 'Most Hidden Crime' Being Committed against Ukrainians, Civil Society Representative Tells Security Council*, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14926.doc.htm>, accessed: 22/08/2022

⁴ *Situation of human rights in Ukraine in the context of the armed attack by the Russian federation*, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ua/2022-06-29/2022-06-UkraineArmedAttack-EN.pdf>, accessed: 22/08/2022

- 85 territorial communities were reportedly not affected by hostilities.
- 2 shelters and 1 crisis room in the Kyiv region, 2 mobile brigades in the Kyiv region, and 1 in the Lviv region have been destroyed in hostilities.

Legislation

Ukrainian MPs voted on June 20 to **ratify the Istanbul Convention**, which is widely recognized as the most far-reaching international treaty addressing violence against women and domestic violence. Ratification marks another step forward in Ukraine's European integration and underlines Ukrainian determination to continue the country's transformation despite the huge challenges posed by the ongoing war with Russia.⁵

An analysis of necessary legislative amendments to fully implement provisions of the Istanbul Convention is expected to be carried out until September 2022 at the request of the Deputy Prime Minister for EU and EAI, Government Commissioner for Gender Policy, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Social Policy.



⁵ Ukraine ratifies the Istanbul Convention, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/-/ukraine-ratifies-the-istanbul-convention>, accessed: 22/08/2022

4. Fact-finding mission overview

25th of June, Rzeszów

On the day first of the study tour participants visited three refugee shelters. Each shelter gave an opportunity to meet with survivors of sexual violence from a different region of Ukraine. Further, an invaluable addition to meeting with survivors was also discussions with the psychologists who are working and supporting these survivors. At the end of the day the study tour participants met with regional government representatives, activists and CSO representatives.

Refugee shelters visited:

- Barbara Shelter: total 31 people living, out of whom 10 kids. People arrived from attacked areas of Kramatorsk, Kharkiv, Sumy, Zaporizhia, Luhansk
- Uniatem in Radymno Shelter: 157 people total, arrived from different war zones of Ukraine, not specified.
- Natalia shelter: total 42 people living, out of whom 18 kids. People arrived from areas of Kramatorsk, Kharkiv, Kyiv, Ivano -Frankivsk, Kryvy Rog, Kherson)



26th of June, Rzeszów

The second day of the visit was kicked off with a conference in Rzeszów. MPs had a chance to meet and discuss the main problems local activists are facing while helping Ukrainian women and children escape the war zones in Ukraine. During the conference, MPs also attended a separate side-meeting with the survivors of sexual violence. Here, they could

listen to their stories and learn more details about the situation in the conflict area. After the conference MPs had a chance to visit two shelters in the surrounding areas of Rzeszow. In the evening the delegation departed to Ukraine.

Refugee shelters visited:

- Full Market Shelter: the Largest Accommodation and Support Point for refugees in Rzeszów run by the Medical Foundation, (about 80 to 120 refugees use the help and accommodation every day).
- Nowa Sarzyna Shelter: Refugee support point in Nowa Sarzyna, (about 300 refugees are located there).



27th of June, Lviv

On the 3rd day of the study tour participants meet with the Commissioner for Gender Policy in the Ukraine Government, Ms. Kateryna Levchenko. After the discussion, our delegation visited two shelters in Lviv and the outskirts of the city.



An important point of the agenda was a meeting with the Ukrainian Network of Women Affected by Violence and survivors collaborating with this organization. Parliamentarians participated also in a conference at the Lviv town hall where they could discuss the situation in Ukraine with representatives of CSOs, Police and regional government. The day was concluded with a meeting with representatives of the international organizations (UNFPA and Doctors Without Borders) working on the ground in Ukraine.



Refugee shelters visited:

- Hnizdovski shelter: around 300 refugees staying in the shelter.
- Riasne shelter: around 12 refugees staying in the shelter.

5. Evidence collected during the Parliamentarian Mission

The parliamentarian delegation faced the incredibly challenging task of collecting the testimonies of survivors of sexual violence. The Russian invasion had escalated only six months ago, and the traumatic memories associated with it have not been healed by time yet. The perpetrators are still where they committed their crimes and associated with the rape trauma and stigma often stand in the way of the truth much more than the lack of DNA evidence.

The collected testimonies are still very fresh and carry extremely difficult emotional and physical trauma. They are often choppy, incomplete, and brief, but they share one common factor – the omnipresent, unbearable physical and mental pain in each word of each story.

It is also important to note that many women who had experienced sexual violence, are often telling the story as if it had happened to someone else. It is very common that in the first accounts the raped women do not admit that it is their story. They tell about it as if it happened it to a neighbour or a friend.

For the purpose of the report, we selected only few most comprehensive testimonies we collected during our mission. All testimonies can be confirmed by participants of our delegation.

The testimonies

Svetlana: a 41-year-old woman who lives with her 10-year-old son in a shelter near the Polish border. At a table in the dining room, she recounts what happened to her two months ago, when two soldiers stormed into the air-raid shelter in Mariupol where she was hiding with some neighbours. The soldiers had machine guns slung over their shoulders, and they appeared intoxicated. For a moment, Svetlana hoped that Ukrainian soldiers would come to their rescue, even though she knew the chance was slim as the city was occupied by the Russians. 'Documents!' shouted the two soldiers to Svetlana and her neighbours. When Svetlana handed over her passport with a 'please', the soldiers replied with a slap in the face. "Stop talking Ukrainian! Here in Mariupol we speak Russian from now on!" Then one of the two soldiers placed his hand on Svetlana's cheek and stroked it gently while he scanned her body. She winced. She felt what awaited her. As Svetlana tells her story, she keeps her hand pressed to her chest as if to avoid breaking her heart. The soldier forced me to take off my clothes and prepare food for him. He came up behind me and felt me. Then he sat down at the table and motioned for me to dance for him. (cries) At one point the soldier took a stick. He hit me and told me to put my hands on the table and bend over. And then... (silence) 'A friend', Svetlana gasps and thinks for a moment. Suddenly she seems to realize what exactly she is saying. She swallows her tears, clears her voice, and continues. Suddenly her story is no longer about herself, but about 'a friend'. She tells how that 'friend' in the basement in Mariupol was raped by the Russian soldier, while the other soldier held her son and forced him to watch. Svetlana also says that the soldiers then turned to rape another woman in the air-raid shelter, and that her 'friend' saw the Russian soldier push a gun into the woman's vagina and fire after the rape. 'He said he wanted to make sure she would never give birth to "new Ukrainians" again.'⁶

Mariya (43): Mariya is a survivor of sexual abuse at the hands of Russian soldiers. Together with her psychologist, she wanted to speak to us as she hopes that her attackers will one day be held accountable. But she also says that the sexual abuse did not happen with her, but with 'a friend'. That 'friend' saw how several women in the basement were first raped and then mutilated by Russian soldiers. They knocked out their teeth, broke their arms and cut their pubic area with a knife. 'Then the Russians tied my friend to a chair', says Mariya. She thought she too would be raped and mutilated, but the soldiers never touched her. Instead of assaulting her, they dragged her 11-year-old son forward and forced my friend to watch them rape the boy. No matter how many times she yelled, 'Take me, not my son!' the soldiers didn't care. They continued to abuse the boy, and they held onto his mama's head to make sure she couldn't look away'. Mariya breaks down and starts to cry.

Her psychologist sits next to her and puts her arm around her shoulders. 'I'm pretty sure Mariya is talking about herself', she says. 'But the trauma is still too great to put into words that way'. Mariya wipes her tears and tells how one Russian soldier commanded his younger colleagues. 'He told them to rape the women in the basement again, and then again, and again. Until they were completely mentally destroyed. It's not about a 'pull out' by one Russian soldier on the loose, but about clear orders from the Kremlin — even though they vehemently deny it there'. In that one cellar in Boetsja, a total of 25 women

⁶ *Russische soldaten verplichtten moeder toe te kijken hoe ze haar kind verkrachtten*, Het Laatste Nieuws, 02/07/2022.

and children were raped. They are all traumatized for life, nine of them are now also pregnant by their Russian attacker.⁷

Lesia: Lesia describes a meeting she had with ten Ukrainian women who recounted their stories to her. She says: 'I think that among them there were some who had experienced sexual violence, but talking to me, they spoke about their experiences as if it had happened to someone else'. It is very common that a victim will not initially tell their story in the first-person. They talk about it as if it happened to a neighbour or a friend because it is easier for them to process what happened. When we talk to her, she was crying and shaking, her arms are limp. Each woman from Lesia group tries to move on, they try to forget what happened. But it's to no avail because it can't be forgotten. Each woman has to internally relive it, and someone needs to help them do it.

Lesia is trying to explain to us that a Ukrainian woman is not a Polish woman, but more of an Easterner. 'The difference is huge. A Polish woman is more independent, she thinks openly. A Ukrainian woman has her eyes closed; she thinks in a direction which has been given to her. (...) It is difficult for them to tell the truth even to their own families because they will not be understood, they will even be blamed', explains Lesia. 'They don't say anything, because after the war they will probably have to live where they did before. That is why when you have two women who were raped in one village, one is afraid that the other one will find out. They need a psychologist, and they need one who is trained to work with victims of sexual violence. It cannot be immediately after the war, there needs to be some time for the woman to realise that she wants to receive such help. She needs to know that there is an open door here, here and here, that she can turn to for help. (...) The Russians say they are doing it to exterminate [Ukrainians]. They say they're going to cull all the men and make it so that a woman can't give birth to a "Bandera's"⁸ child again and so that she doesn't want a man anymore. What else to me is horrifying is being forced to watch. A mother is made to watch her daughter being raped, an older sister is forced to watch her younger sister being raped, even though she asks: 'Take me, for she is small'. When a woman is being raped, some kind of mechanism is triggered in her that the consciousness disconnects, however, when you are forced to look, the consciousness cannot disconnect. This mother, who was watching... I don't know how she can live with that afterwards... so help is also needed for the witnesses.'⁹

Irina: Even before the February invasion, Irina was a victim of sexual violence in the Donbass region. She now works at SEMA Ukraine to publicise wartime sexual violence, tells us about a woman from one of the towns liberated from Russian occupation. 'I saw a young woman completely naked, sitting on the curb. Next to her was a bottle of water and some small objects, maybe food. She had thick, long and dirty hair; she was holding a cigarette in a slim hand that was dark, as if soiled with mud or ash. She looked as if she was completely unaware of her nakedness. Those who recognised her say that she had a

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Stepan Andrijowycz Bandera; 1 January 1909 – 15 October 1959) was a Ukrainian far-right leader, politician and theorist of the militant wing (OUN-B), who served as head of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, an organization dedicated to the independence of Ukraine but also responsible for ethnic cleansing and implicated in collaboration with Nazi Germany.

⁹ *Jak są dwie zgwałcone w jednej wiosce, to jedna się boi, żeby nie dowiedziała się druga. Relacje Ukrainek*, <https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/7,163229,28719832,zurnalista-na-wiesc-ze-maja-opowiadac-dziennikarce-o-gwaltach.html>, accessed: 24/08/2022

husband and a child, that she was raped and lost everything, including her memory as that day she could not even remember her name.¹⁰

Group of anonymous speakers: (...) “Yes, it was dangerous for women to leave home. They steal, they do what they want, they enter houses, you can be killed, raped at any time”, adds another. ‘I know of a 14-year-old girl who dressed up as a boy to protect herself. She was afraid of the men’. ‘We heard of eleven women who were raped, six of them were killed’, says a woman from Kherson. ‘Is it true? We ourselves thought it was fake news, but then doctors from the hospital confirmed it’.¹¹

Anonymous (1): A neighbour was walking through the checkpoint. She had children listed in her papers. ‘The Russians told her that if she wanted to be safe, the soldiers had to have sex with these children. She refused. A day later, her 15-year-old daughter was kidnapped. She did not come home for 24 hours. It’s unclear what they did to her.’(...) ¹²

Anonymous (2): ‘I have news here from a friend who lives in Mariupol,’ she says, scrolling through her phone. She reads: ‘first about the townspeople catching rats to feed their children. Then that the Russians are putting gun barrels in the vaginas of raped women and shooting them’.¹³

The Commissioner for Gender Policy at the Ukrainian Government, Ms. Kateryna Levchenko informed the delegation that the cases that the General Prosecutor’s Office is currently investigating are just the tip of the iceberg. Ms Levchenko was the founder and head, for 20 years, of the Ukrainian branch of La Strada, an anti-trafficking and anti-slavery organization. Now she is involved in, among other things, setting up assistance centres for people from Russian-occupied territories. She informs us that the General Prosecutor's office is currently handling 40 cases of wartime rape, and that everyone is aware that, most often, the victims simply do not come forward.

6. EPF Parliamentary delegation recommendations:

- The EU must create mechanisms which could more efficiently help survivors of sexual violence who are seeking refuge in Europe. Some of the help which Ukrainian activists listed included: stronger cooperation with international courts and training of the EU and Ukrainian prosecutors on how to investigate such cases. They also underlined that there is little experience with wartime rape in the law enforcement institutions.
 - EU Member states should establish safe spaces in healthcare facilities to receive victims of sexual violence, to provide clinical care, and, where necessary, be able to provide referrals to other relevant health care facilities.
 - There is a strong need to build up a safe space for conversation. It requires a profound social change. Survivors need to feel that there is a general social understanding of the topic in the country, and social acceptance to raise it.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

- EU Member states should identify leading organisations to coordinate multi-sectoral approaches to reduce the risk of sexual violence, ensure referrals, and provide holistic support to victims and survivors.
- State authorities must inform the community of available services and the importance of seeking immediate medical care following sexual violence.
- Today, victims are interrogated several times, and even telling their story once is often a new torture. We need a comprehensive educational system to teach doctors and experts how to document the survivors' testimony properly and efficiently, so that survivors are not unduly forced to undergo repetitive examinations of the same traumatic experience(s).
 - EU member states must establish referral mechanisms which can encompass prevention and care measures. This should include, but not limited to, between health, legal, protection, security, psychosocial and community services, encompassing prevention and care measures.
 - There should be a strong focus on providing short-term and long-term inclusive, holistic, and multidisciplinary care, encompassing the forensic, medical, and psychosocial aspects, as well as protection and legal assistance.
 - State authorities should provide training for professionals working in reception centres, accommodation initiatives and healthcare facilities.
- It will be many years until we know the truth about the scale of the sexual violence during the war in Ukraine. The commission operating in Pristina, Kosovo, and investigating war crimes from the time of the war in former Yugoslavia is still being approached by victims of war rapes committed in 1998-1999.
- It is important for the EU states to coordinate their efforts to collect all the war crimes evidence.

Annexes : Participants, Organisers, Hosts



Parliamentary Participants:

- Hon. Anita Kucharska-Dziedzic, MP (Poland)
- Hon. Goedele Liekens, MP (Belgium)
- Hon. Joanna Scheuring-Wielgus, MP (Poland)
- Apologies: Hon. Predrag Fred Matić, MEP (Croatia)

Staff:

- Mr Remigiusz Bak, Programme Coordinator for Europe, EPF, (Poland)
- Mr Dieter Goovaerts, Parliamentary advisor Goedele Liekens, (Belgium)

Journalists:

- Ms Inga Bosschaerts, Journalists, Het Laatste Nieuws, (Belgium)
- Ms Hadrien Duré, Het Laatste Nieuws, (Belgium)
- Ms Natalia Walocha, Journalists, Wyborcza, (Poland)

Hosts, special guests, and partners who agreed to disclose their names:

Hosts:

Poland day 1, 25th of June:

- Mr Milton Funes, CORE, Regional director
- Ms Tamara Martyniuk, CORE, Protection Specialist,
- Mr Igor Mitchnik, CORE Area Manager

Poland day2, 26th of June:

- Ms Magdalena Koryl, Women Congress, Women4Women
- Ms Patricia Mitro, Subcarpathian Women's Program Council

Ukraine, 27th of June:

- Ms Iryna Trokhym, Coordinator of the Equal Opportunities Caucus in the Parliament of Ukraine

Government officials:

- Ms Kateryna Levchenko, the Governmental Commissioner for Gender Policy, (Ukraine)
- Ms. Krystyna Stachowska, Deputy Mayor of the City of Rzeszow (Poland)

International organisation representatives:

- Ms Oksana Andrushkiv, UNFPA Senior Regional Coordinator, Ukraine
- Mr Maarten Bullens, Doctors Without Borders, Belgium/Ukraine
- Ms Joanna Lodomirska, Doctors Without Borders, Belgium/Ukraine

Regional NGOs representatives/ activists:

- Ms Julita Abratańska, Renegade Relief Runners
- Ms Agnieszka Buk, Honorary Consul of Germany
- Ms Daria Chmielewska, Association under the Wing of an Angel
- Ms Małgorzata Cisek-Kozieł, Member of the Rzeszow Council of Seniors
- Ms Agnieszka Gocek, The Medical Foundation
- Ms Marta Kabara-Dziadosz, Altum Society for Social and Economic Programs
- Ms Maria Kit, Ukrainian activist
- Ms Viktoria Koryl, Leader of youth activities
- Ms Joanna Lasko, Member of the Rzeszow Council of Women
- Mr Paweł Lasota, Poland 2050 Association
- Ms Irena Marszałek Director of the regional Municipal Social Assistance Center
- Ms Kamila Michalik, President of the Civic Academy Foundation
- Ms Jolanta Puacz- Olszewska, PhD - Rzeszow University of Technology
- Mr Waldek Ruszel, activist
- Ms Anna Siewierska-Chmaj Rector of the Rzeszow University, PhD
- Mr Tomasz Skoczylas, Urban Lab Director
- Mr Mateusz Sojka, Activist
- Ms Anna Szawara, PhD, High School Principal
- Ms Joanna Szurlej, Crisis Intervention Center-Lesko
- Ms Grażyna Talarkowska, Vice-president of the Level Up Foundation
- Ms Agata Wiater Radna- City Council member - Dębica, activists
- Ms Karolina Winiarska, activist

We would like to express deepest gratitude to the activists who helped us to organize this mission:

Mr Milton Funes, CORE, Regional director

Ms Magdalena Koryl, Women Congress, Women4Women

Ms Tamara Martyniuk, CORE, Protection Specialist,

Mr Igor Mitchnik, CORE Area Manager

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