

## Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Weaponization of the "Humanitarian Space"

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been marked by the destruction of infrastructure, cities, and civilian populations. International audiences remain stunned by the sheer scale and viciousness of the violence. Eight million people have [fled](#) Ukraine, 6 million are internally displaced, 18 million need humanitarian assistance, and 17,000 have [been](#) civilian casualties. "It's about atrocities," [said](#) NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. Though central to Russia's behavior, violent force is but one practice of a broader repertoire of actions. Since the invasion, Russia has employed informational tools to shape the perceptions of both international and domestic audiences, and humanitarian tools have been used to complement Russia's military effort. Through the weaponization of the "humanitarian space," Russia has sought to compete for the moral high ground by delegitimizing the actions and narratives of Kyiv and its Western partners.

Although these instruments have produced mixed results, they play an important but overlooked role in Russia's war effort. A complex and varied picture emerges. First, Russia's co-optation of the humanitarian effort is a deliberate attempt to obfuscate its role in Ukraine and to generate domestic support. Presenting itself as a humanitarian actor reflects Russia's official narrative of the protection of civilians from neo-Nazis and fascists. Second, Russia has withheld aid to demoralize and control urban populations. And thirdly, to stabilize occupied territory, Russia has sought to appease the population through the provision of aid and selective reconstruction efforts, although these are basic, intermittent, and linked to the long-term Russification of occupied territory.

### **Shaping the Humanitarian Narrative of the War**

The Kremlin's political narrative has been instrumental in shaping the invasion's military character. This was captured by President Vladimir Putin's selective and impassioned

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address to the Russian public and international audiences on February 24, 2022. While Putin led with a lengthy and predictable tirade, accusing the West of a litany of transgressions, it was his other justifications that were received by Western audiences with bewilderment. In particular, the Russian president [spoke](#) of the humanitarian imperative of the operation and referred to the “genocide of the millions of people who live... in the Donbas people’s republics,” which, according to the narrative, had experienced atrocities and humiliation at the hands of “neo-Nazis” and “far-right nationalists” since the eruption of the fighting in 2014. Putin’s attempt to craft a humanitarian justification is bound up in a problematic regional legacy that uses the protection of ethnic Russians as a pretext for intervention. Hence, the purpose of the invasion, [according](#) to Putin:

is to protect people who, for eight years now have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation.

Thus, Russia has perversely [framed](#) the “special operation” as a humanitarian or peacekeeping mission, and has ardently dismissed Western claims that Russian forces have engaged in atrocity crimes, accusing Western governments of waging a systematic information war [against](#) Russia. To this end, Russian officials have conducted a proactive campaign to shape the narrative in accordance with their own version of events. The United Nations Security Council has served as an important vehicle for the communication of Russia’s alternative reality. Dismissing accusations from “the joint Western and Ukrainian fake factory,” Russian counter-claims [range](#) from misleading to outlandish.

With the need to maintain a strong baseline of public support for the invasion, it is clear that Russia’s media campaign is predominantly catered to domestic consumption. The Kremlin’s tighter grip on the domestic information space has been a key enabler of state propaganda and information dominance. A number of narratives have therefore emerged in government messaging since the invasion. Moscow has sought to give the impression that it has a humanitarian conscience by presenting itself as a protector of civilians from the violent actions of Ukrainian forces, while conveniently removing from the narrative its role in the destruction of Ukraine.

Indeed, there is a clear emphasis on the systematic and serious attempt to alleviate the suffering of the population in “liberated” areas. Regular [references](#) to the Ministry of Defense’s Interdepartmental Coordination Headquarters for Humanitarian Response, as well as other government agencies and affiliated NGOs such as the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Humanitarian Volunteer Corps, and the Russian Women’s Union, give the impression that while the effort is led and coordinated by the state, it is very much part of a wider societal exertion with significant buy-in from the Russian public.

In the case of Mariupol, for example, the Kremlin justified the use of force—and by extension, the destruction of the city—by [framing](#) the fight as a virtuous struggle against the neo-fascist depravity of the Azov Regiment. This righteous cause was accompanied by false moral outrage, disinformation, and denials. Indiscriminate attacks on civilian objects, including a maternity hospital and theater where over 1,000 people were sheltering, were [dismissed](#) as “fakes” by senior Russian diplomats. Since the city’s capture in May 2022, Russian forces have been [presented](#) by state media as liberators, not conquerors, working tirelessly towards the normalization of life in the city. In other words, without Russian aid and selflessness, the humanitarian crisis would be considerably worse.

Importantly, the need to present its humanitarian credentials has become more of a priority for Moscow since its annexation of the Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts on September 30, 2022. Simply put, the mass killing of civilians in these areas is no longer politically viable now that their populations are “Russian citizens.”

### **Russia’s Humanitarian Instruments: Aid and Reconstruction**

Russia’s weaponization of the “humanitarian space” has extended beyond the shaping of the narrative to include the provision of aid and selective reconstruction efforts. Both instruments have been used to appease the Ukrainian population in occupied territory and provide the appearance of stability while Russia desperately seeks to shore up its military gains. This aid, however, has been basic and intermittent, suggesting that Russia is driven principally by the political optics of such provision than by a genuine desire to improve the well-being of war-torn populations. At the same time, Russia has instrumentalized aid to punish and deter the civilian population from resisting Russia’s will while using reconstruction to Russify occupied territory. In order to achieve its military objectives and broader political aims, Ukraine’s urban environment and civilian population have been treated as both targets and instruments of operations.

According to authorities, Russia has [provided](#) over 115,000 tonnes of aid, deactivated close to a million mines, repaired approximately 3,000 buildings and 175 miles (280 km) of road, and erected 9,500 temporary accommodation centers across Russia for refugees. There is, of course, no way to verify these numbers, and it is reasonable to assume that Russian authorities have inflated them. That said, Russian aid, which includes basic items such as grain, fish, and water, has provided some relief to the local population in occupied areas. However, while the latter have become useful tools in Russia’s politicization of the humanitarian narrative, Russia’s attempt to control the population through appeasement has been mixed. Clearly, the acceptance of aid is not an indication of support for Russian forces. Those that receive aid do so because they have no alternative, and many of those who have stayed behind are typically the elderly and immobile who require urgent

assistance to survive. Others may accept aid because they do not want to draw unwanted attention from Russian forces, as refusal may be interpreted as an act of passive resistance.

Moreover, Russia's management of the mass exodus of refugees from Ukraine's eastern regions has been framed as another form of humanitarian assistance. According to the Ministry of Defense, Russia has [evacuated](#) more than 4 million people, including over half a million children, to thousands of temporary accommodation centers across its own territory. While the safeguarding of Ukraine's refugee population has been a key reference point in Moscow's messaging to domestic and international audiences, [reports](#) of widespread forced deportation, the separation of children from their families, and abusive screening processes, otherwise known as "filtration," is the [reality](#) of those who were trapped in occupied Ukrainian territory in the early months of the invasion.

Of course, not all refugees will have been forced to move to Russia, but the fact that no alternative route to Ukrainian-controlled territory was provided is a [violation](#) of international humanitarian law. Importantly, the removal of the civilian population from Russian-controlled territory has served two principal purposes. First, the civilian population is instrumentalized in the crafting of Russia's humanitarian narrative, which provides a cloak of legitimacy for Moscow's actions. And second, the establishment of a civilian vacuum in areas of operation removes civilian scrutiny of Russian military actions, mitigates the potential risks the population poses to the security of Russian forces, and allows the Russian military to conduct operations without having to consider the complexities of a present civilian population.

Another key feature of Russia's approach is the denial of humanitarian assistance. It has aimed to demoralize civilian populations in order to undermine Ukraine's continued military resistance. In the siege of Mariupol, for example, the deliberate destruction of critical national infrastructure was [accompanied](#) by the isolation of the city and the prevention of the supply of humanitarian assistance to the beleaguered population. This was driven by the ruthless logic of pressuring the civilian population in the hope that this would create an intolerable environment and complicate the defense of the city.

Disturbingly, the targeting and instrumentalization of urban populations have long been a tactic of Russian urban warfare and are [reflected](#) in Russian military thinking. These tactics are designed to achieve the city's "self-collapse," meaning the paralysis of all functions of the city as a socio-economic organism. Beyond the siege of Mariupol, Moscow has frequently denied aid and [refused](#) to grant UN agencies and the ICRC access to occupied Ukraine. Crucially, this serves to amplify Russia's sporadic humanitarian efforts in state propaganda and, more importantly, prevents international actors from reporting on atrocities committed by Russian forces.

The selective reconstruction of occupied urban areas has been another lever Moscow has relied on to weaponize the humanitarian space. It has served three principal aims. First,

reconstruction has helped to enhance Russia's humanitarian image in the eyes of domestic audiences. As mentioned above, Russian state media have frequently [highlighted](#) reconstruction efforts across annexed regions of Ukraine, including the restoration of schools and health facilities, the building of residential apartment complexes, and the maintenance of energy supply. Of course, this reporting neglects to mention that much of the damage has been caused by Russia's indiscriminate use of force.

The second aim is to restore order to captured regions and to pacify the remaining population. This is particularly the case regarding the population of the Donbas, whom Moscow considers pro-Russian and recognizes the political and military imperative to keep the population "on-side." Thus, Russian media has [reported](#) the initiation of evaluation work on the damage to infrastructure in these regions with the aim of reconstruction, although it is unclear how systematic these efforts will be and whether the Russian government will be able to finance and resource this effort on such a large scale.

Finally, Russia's reconstruction effort has been inseparable from the long-term strategy to consolidate Russia's cultural and political footprint in occupied Ukraine. The Russification of occupied territory reflects what many commentators consider to be a genocidal war to [erase](#) Ukrainian national identity. Nowhere is this more palpable than in the physical and cultural refurbishment of Mariupol; in the [words](#) of one U.S. diplomat, "They [Russian authorities] spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on things like erasing demonstrations of Ukrainian identity and very little time tending to the needs of the Mariupol people."

According to reports, the ruins of residential apartment blocks are demolished and new complexes built, although residents are not provided with alternative accommodation. Many apartments are [reported](#) to be unoccupied, with only pensioners, the disabled, and those affiliated with the separatist administration provided with accommodation. And while there is intermittent electricity supply and limited access to food and water in the city, Russia has [sought](#) to dismantle cultural and memorial sights, such as Mariupol's memorial to the Holodomor, impose the Russian language on school curriculum and gradually replace the Ukrainian currency with the rouble. Furthermore, these efforts have been [resourced](#) by Chechnya's Akhmad Kadyrov Foundation, which, although driven by Ramzan Kadyrov's [aim](#) to demonstrate his continued usefulness to the Russian leadership, contributes to Russification and Moscow's competition in the humanitarian space. Overall, while the Russification of occupied Ukraine has been mixed, it will probably gain momentum as Russia establishes itself in these newly conquered territories.

## **Conclusion**

As the war enters its second year with no end in sight, its military and political costs will continue to mount for the Kremlin. If the leadership expects the Russian public to commit to a protracted and bloody war, then, the weaponization of the "humanitarian space" will

continue to play an important role in Russia’s war effort. The crafting of a humanitarian narrative to justify Russian actions will remain vital in legitimizing the continuation of the war in the eyes of the Russian public and, to a lesser extent, will soften specific international audiences. Moreover, as Russian forces continue to adjust to their long-term occupation of Ukraine, Moscow will place more emphasis on humanitarian levers in its attempt to appease and control the civilian population. Humanitarian assistance will remain basic, selective, and shaped by military and political necessity, while Moscow’s reconstruction efforts will be driven by the extremely controversial aim of Russifying occupied territory.