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I—This is Ukraine! On Resistance in the Occupied Territories

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Abstract

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is the most documented war in history. While there is broad and detailed information on the course of the war, its consequences and the multifold forms of Ukrainian resistance in the occupied territories remains far less explored. Collecting data in these regions is difficult and extremely dangerous for both researchers and informants. Drawing on open-source data, this article adopts a holistic approach to Ukrainian resistance by examining three major forms: civil non-violent resistance, armed (lethal) resistance, and digital resistance, which often operates as an intermediary between the two.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine began in 2014 with the seizure of Crimea and parts of the Donbas. In these territories, Ukrainian resistance was largely grassroots and spontaneous, enabling Russia to suppress it relatively quickly. This study focuses on the resistance that emerged in response to the full-scale invasion in 2022 in the newly occupied territories of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, and which subsequently spread to the earlier occupied Donbas and Crimea. It draws on open-source data, primarily the social media accounts of resistance groups, Ukrainian official sources such as the National Resistance Centre, as well as investigative and policy-oriented reports. We refer to resistance as “a form of human agency to defy rules that are perceived as securing a form of domination which is not seen as legitimate by a given share of society” (Fox Piven and Cloward 2005). In analysing the resistance activities, we focus primarily on the communications of selected active resistance groups, in particular

the Yellow Ribbon Movement, Zla Mavka, Atesh, and other groups (links are provided in the sections below). Given the constraints on verification under occupation, we prioritized the assessment of channels’ behavioral patterns rather than attempting to verify each individual action. Specifically, we examine whether a channel exhibits characteristics consistent with genuine clandestine resistance outlets, as opposed to a propaganda node. Reported resistance actions were assessed using longitudinal source consistency, independent cross-channel convergence, and, where available, delayed hostile-side corroboration (e.g., references by occupation authorities or pro-occupation media regarding the same incidents).

The Structure and Organization of Resistance

The initial, unsuccessful experience of organizing resistance in occupied territories in 2014 was taken into account on the eve of the full-scale invasion. In July

2021, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a law¹ which established a legal framework for organizing defence and resistance in the event of renewed aggression. The law defines national resistance as comprising two principal components: territorial defence and the resistance movement. The latter includes both civil and armed branches, with the armed component involving the Special Operations Forces (SOF) and partisan units intended to operate behind enemy lines. It further provides for the establishment of resistance movement centres, the development of relevant capabilities, and the obstruction of the aggressor's forces as core objectives. The organizational forms, activities, and goals of the resistance movement were deliberately designed for conditions of occupation.

In parallel, Ukrainian military intelligence deepened cooperation with the CIA.² Beyond intelligence sharing, this cooperation included the training of three elite Ukrainian units to conduct operations behind Russian lines. These units subsequently transferred their experience to other special forces, which began operating in occupied territories after 2022.

Non-Violent Resistance in the Occupied Territories

Civic resistance against the Russian assault, organized by citizens, emerged within the first days of the full-scale invasion. Pro-Ukrainian protests erupted in numerous occupied cities in southern Ukraine—in some of these cities they were the largest demonstrations to date. The open protests in occupied Kherson, Berdyansk, Melitopol, Kakhovka and Nova Kakhovka lasted up to two weeks, until the occupying forces suppressed them through persecution, arrest and torture from mid-March 2022 onwards. Under increasing repression, the resistance shifted to underground, with actions primarily aimed at demonstrating continued Ukrainian presence in the occupied territories. This symbolic defiance ranged from the dissemination of flyers, posters, and graffiti in public spaces to organized campaigns boycotting the staged “referendums” on accession to the Russian Federation (see Figure 1).

The best-known movement is called “Yellow Ribbon”³ that emerged in Kherson in April 2022. Its members employ distinctive symbols such as a yellow ribbon on a blue background or the uniquely Ukrainian letter “i” which exist in the Ukrainian alphabet but not in other Cyrillic alphabets such as Russian. Yellow Ribbon is a decidedly non-violent resistance group and continued organising protest rallies and flash mobs in many

Figure 1: Footage of Symbolic Actions from the Telegram Channel ‘Yellow Ribbon’



“I don't take the occupier's passport 'cause I'm waiting for the ZSU”, March 23, 2023



“Participation in a referendum is your ticket to the frontline (70% of males living in TOT of Luhansk and Donetsk regions were sent to the front)”, September 26, 2022

Source: https://web.telegram.org/k/#@yellowribbon_ua

southeastern and southern Ukrainian cities. The movement was created by a small group of IT specialists and started with a Telegram channel, encouraging Kherson city residents to hang Ukrainian flags and yellow ribbons on fences, branches, lampposts and other public places. In late April 2022, the movement organized a rally in occupied Kherson, where several hundred protesters claimed “Kherson is Ukraine.” As direct protest quickly became life-threatening, clandestine practices such as tying yellow ribbons and painting pro-Ukrainian graffiti in public spaces increased and spread throughout southeastern occupied Ukraine. After Kherson's libera-

1 “On the Foundations of National Resistance,” <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1702-20?lang=en#Text>

2 See Adam Entous and Michael Schwartz, “The Spy War: How the C.I.A. Secretly Helps Ukraine Fight Putin,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 25, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/25/world/europe/cia-ukraine-intelligence-russia-war.html>

3 https://web.telegram.org/k/#@yellowribbon_ua

tion in November 2022, the movement expanded across all occupied territories, including Donbas and Crimea.

In order to maintain anonymity and protect members of the movement, Kyiv-based Yellow Ribbon activists created at least two chatbots, named *Ochi* (eyes) and *Razom* (together). War crimes, troop movements and other things can be reported to *Ochi*, while activists can send their pictures demonstrating Ukrainian presence, such as tying ribbons and putting leaflets in public spaces, to *Razom*, which sends them to a public channel. For example, in September 2022, activists spread leaflets against the ‘referendum,’ using the subtitle “I against Z.” While “I” symbolizes something uniquely Ukrainian, “Z” has been used in Russian propaganda as the symbol of the Russian war and its aggression in Ukraine. Similar tactics were used in protests that occurred on 6 December 2025, Ukrainian Armed Forces Day, during which activists posted the numbers 10, 22, and 24, corresponding to the letters forming the acronym AFU (Ukrainian Armed Forces, ЗСУ) in the Ukrainian alphabet, as an encrypted form of resistance.

Besides these activities of marking public space with creative messages and symbols of resistance, the Yellow Ribbon movement also distributes leaflets with practical information on how to resist or how to leave the occupied territories (see Figure 2). On 19 October 2022, the Yellow Ribbon movement was awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament—the European Union’s highest distinction in the field of human rights. By the end of 2022, the movement claimed to have around 1,000 active members, and by late 2025 its Telegram channel had grown to nearly 17,000 subscribers.

Another prominent nonviolent and feminist resistance group, *Zla Mavka*,⁴ operates in a decentralized manner and coordinates primarily using Telegram. Founded by three Ukrainian women in the occupied city of Melitopol in early 2023, *Zla Mavka* takes its name from the *mavka*, a female spirit in Ukrainian folklore known for her strength and defiance.⁵ The group’s name, which translates to “Angry Mavka,” reflects both the anger and resilience of its members in response to Russian occupation. Their activities include leaving tags—graffiti and symbols in public space—but they also report that they offer alcohol mixed with laxatives to Russian soldiers. While these activist women try behave discreetly in everyday life so as to not attract the attention of the occupiers, their continued underground activism seeks to make clear to the occupiers that they are not welcome in Ukraine. It is difficult to estimate how

Figure 2: A Leaflet for Helping People Escape Mobilization and Leave the Occupied Territories



“How to avoid mobilisation on the temporarily occupied territories? If you have the opportunity to leave the occupied territories, go to any safe place. Choose the route with the fewest enemy checkpoints.”

Source: https://web.telegram.org/k/#@yellowribbon_ua

many activists are involved in the movement; their telegram channel counts 11,400 subscribers.

Armed Resistance in the Occupied Territories

Assessing the effectiveness of armed resistance in occupied Ukrainian territories is challenging due to limited data. However, open-source information, particularly social media accounts of resistance groups, NRC and SOF reports, and published interviews with resistance participants point to two key components of lethal resistance: operations by Ukraine’s Special Operations Forces (SOF) and an established partisan movement linking a growing number of operations and groups. Closely linked under the National Resistance Law, SOF forms and supports professional partisan units while also conducting direct combat missions behind enemy lines.

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the SOF has conducted numerous “kinetic actions” against Russian logistics and infrastructure, with operational success closely dependent on intelligence provided by local agents. Partisans gather targeting data, enabling precision strikes deep in occupied territory. On 6 October 2025, acting on locally sourced intelligence, SOF drones destroyed an ammunition depot and a launch pad for the S-400 mobile air-defence system in the village of Udachnoye in Crimea.⁶ Earlier operations likewise relied on local intelligence, including the destruction of bridges linking Crimea to Melitopol (28 April 2022) and in Donetsk (23 August 2022) (Ukrainian Military Portal 2022). This collaboration became more pronounced in

⁴ <https://web.telegram.org/k/>

⁵ <https://zlamavka.com/en/home/>.

⁶ <https://opir.org.ua/my-poruch/specialni-dii-sso-v-krimu-znischili-puskovu-ustanovku-s-400-triumf-ta-sklad-boeprispasiv/>.

2023. On 13 September, the SOF destroyed the Rostov-on-Don submarine and the Minsk landing ship in Sevastopol (Kushnikov 2023), followed in October by Operation “Dragonfly,” which—again enabled by local intelligence—targeted airfields in Berdyansk and Luhansk, destroyed nine helicopters, and forced the withdrawal of Russian aircraft from frontline zones (Sapwood 2023; see also Neag and Solescu 2024).

Projections of increased SOF activity behind Russian lines have generally been confirmed (Matsiyevsky 2023). Drawing on SOF data we identified 94 operations in 2022, 138 in 2023, and 150 in 2024, including airfield and naval base strikes. As of July 2025, they had already conducted 60 operations in that year, though actual numbers are likely higher due to operational secrecy (SOF Telegram).

Parallel to SOF actions, the Ukrainian partisan movement has grown significantly. Originating in 2014 during Russia’s occupation of Luhansk and Donetsk, these early resistance groups like the Nationalist Underground of Luhansk were limited in scope. Following the full-scale invasion in 2022, a new wave emerged. At least fifteen groups are now known, including Atesh, Berdiansk Partisan Army, Popular Resistance of Ukraine, August, S.R.O.K., Crimean Seagull Warriors, 1918, Mariupol Resistance, Black Mace, Crimean Wind, Masandr, Crimean Partisans, Crimean Banderovitz, Anti-SMERSH, Luhansk Partisans, and General Cherry. Each of these groups maintains at least one social media channel, primarily Telegram, but in most cases, several, including dedicated websites, reflecting the growing embeddedness of the resistance movement.

The formation of the SOF in 2016 and the 2021 National Resistance Law established legal foundations and increased government support, enabling better coordination. Many partisans—often young locals—received pre-invasion training and formed territorial defense units linked to Ukraine’s security services. Their local registration helps them blend in and avoid suspicion from Russian security forces. According to Luhansk resistance leader Volodymyr Zhemchugov, the movement is composed of about 60% trained professionals and 40% volunteers (Rodak, 2022).

Partisan goals focus on intelligence gathering, direct actions and deterring collusion with occupying forces. In 2022, BBC reports documented 13 killings and 10 serious assassination attempts on Ukrainian collaborators (BBC Ukraine 2022). Notable attacks included the June 2022 bombing of Yevhen Soboliev’s car in Kherson, the assassination of Nova Kakhovka official Vitaliy Gura, and an attempt on Chornobaivka administrator Yuriy Turulev.

Between March and November 2022, the Institute for the Study of War recorded 31 confirmed partisan attacks (ISW 2022). Drawing on Ukrainian open-source data, we found that partisans were responsible for 14 of the 32 reported assassinations attempts in 2023. In 2024, five of 16 such cases were resistance-linked, though unrecorded incidents suggest higher actual figures.⁷

Resistance operations accelerated in late 2022, with Atesh—meaning “fire” in Crimean Tatar—becoming the most active group. Formed in the summer of 2022, it describes itself as a “military movement of Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars.” Operating in all occupied regions of Ukraine and deep in Russia, Atesh targets Russian military personnel, logistics and supply lines. From 20 March to 12 April 2022, Ukrainian military intelligence reported 70 Russian soldiers killed by partisans during night patrols in occupied territories (Defense Intelligence 2022).

In February 2024, Atesh claimed to have 1,800 agents in various parts of the Russian army.⁸ We have identified 44 direct actions in 2022, 605 in 2023, 579 in 2024 and 210 as of July 2025 (Atesh Telegram). Notable examples include the killing of 30 Russian troops in Simferopol hospitals (November 2022) (Slovo i Dilo, 2022), an arson attack on a barracks in Sovetske (December 2022), and the December 2023 killing of seven soldiers from the 155th Russian Marine Brigade (Atesh.ua 2023).

Structurally, Atesh includes a military wing and a civilian component—the Atesh Civil Force—which relies on local networks for intelligence. Civilians inform about Russian facilities, conscription plans, war crimes, and repression. This collaboration enabled major attacks such as the missile strike at the Black Sea Fleet HQ in Sevastopol (September 22, 2023), which killed 34 officers and wounded 105. (Atesh Telegram, 22.09.23). They also contributed to the destruction of the Rostov-on-Don submarine and Minsk landing ship (September 13, 2023) (Atesh Telegram, 13.09.23).

As part of its subversive activities within the Russian armed forces, Atesh introduced an online course for Russian military personnel on wartime survival through sabotage, including the obstruction of ammunition, fuel supplies, and military equipment. According to the movement, the course attracted more than 4,000 Russian service members by early 2023 (Atesh Telegram, 15.02.23 (https://t.me/atesh_ua/363)).

Atesh operations in Russia spans from Saint Petersburg to Siberia (Crimean resistance 2024). It was reportedly involved in the May 2023 assassination attempt on Russian propagandist Zakhar Prilepin and

7 See, for a broader overview of events, Ukrainian resistance in Russian-occupied Ukraine, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_resistance_in_Russian-occupied_Ukraine

8 <https://cepa.org/article/behind-the-lines-inside-the-resistance-sabotaging-putins-plans-for-ukraine>.

the June 2024 destruction of an R-441 Liven satellite communication station near Moscow (Basmat 2024).

Other groups operate in Crimea, such as the Crimean Seagull Warriors, active since September 2022, who focus on psychological warfare and targeting collaborators like Sevastopol judge Ihor Brazhnyk. In 2023, new groups like the Nation's Resistance, S.R.O.K., and 1918 conducted actions ranging from arson to marking occupier's property (Nation's Resistance 2023).

Relying on open-source data, we estimate the total number of trained partisans in the low thousands, with individual units typically comprising dozens to several hundred members. Despite increased Russian crackdowns, the resistance remains resilient. Although some groups have reduced their activity in 2025, several new groups have emerged, while others—notably Atesh, S.R.O.K., and Anti-SMERSH—continue to demonstrate sustained levels of operation, often deep within Russian territory (Ukraine: The latest, April 11, 2025).

In sum, Ukraine's partisan movement continues to undermine Russian rule in the occupied territories, demonstrating to the occupiers that they cannot completely control the occupied territories or secure their rule without the use of massive force. To date, the Russian military has not succeeded in suppressing the partisan movement. From sabotage to targeted killings, its actions disrupt logistics, demoralize occupying forces, and undermine the legitimacy of Russian governance. Increasingly, both civilian and armed resistance rely on digital tools, to which we turn now.

Digital Resistance

Russia's war against Ukraine—and by proxy, the West—is fought both on the battlefield and in the digital realm. Beyond targeting infrastructure like servers and networks, Russian digital warfare aims to influence public perception—particularly in occupied territories—by promoting “networked authoritarianism” practices developed within its own borders (Lokot, 2023).

In response, a robust digital resistance has emerged. This resistance strategically leverages technology to counter Russian control, censorship, and surveillance. Encrypted messaging apps like Telegram, Signal, and Threema, as well as VPNs, enable local groups to organize acts of defiance—ranging from distributing leaflets to carrying out sabotage (see for instance, Canevez, Maikovska, & Zwarun, 2024).

In the early months of the invasion, Ukrainian civilians played a key role by reporting Russian troop movements to the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Over a thousand such messages were processed, aiding in military opera-

tions (Kravchenko, 2023). One example is the Telegram channel *Ruzzians Go Home*, launched on February 25, 2022 in Kherson by around 20 members, to relay information directly to Ukrainian forces (Luxmoore, 2022).

To streamline civilian-military coordination, the Ministry of Digital Transformation launched the *eEnemy* chatbot in March 2022. Ukrainians can use it to submit photos and videos of Russian troops and equipment. By May 2023, nearly 500,000 users had filed reports, including 10,000 related to collaborators (Armyinform, 2023). Another tool, the official *@stop_russian_war_bot*, has received thousands of reports about saboteurs and enemy assets, all directed to Ukraine's Security Service (Security Service of Ukraine, 2023).

In parallel, the IT Army of Ukraine—a volunteer cyberwarfare group formed in February 2022—has conducted thousands of offensive operations against Russian targets. Notably, in June 2024, the IT Army claimed responsibility for the largest Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack in history, which crippled Russian banks and disrupted financial networks. Its activities have significantly impacted Russian digital infrastructure, with reports indicating that DDoS attacks increased by at least 50% in 2024 (Kirichenko, 2025). The group's efforts have reportedly inflicted economic losses on Russia estimated at one to two billion USD (Kirichenko, 2024).

Unlike Russia's centralized digital warfare—typically run by FSB units—Ukraine's digital resistance is decentralized, volunteer-centered and adaptive. It blends top-down coordination from the Ministry of Digital Transformation with grassroots networks, often led by civilian IT professionals, like in the case of the Yellow Ribbon movement. Active in cities like Melitopol (General Chereshnia, Telegram),⁹ Enerhodar, Kherson (Baza Zradnykiv Khersonu, Telegram),¹⁰ and Crimea (Crimean Wind, Telegram),¹¹ these groups gather intelligence, track troops and equipment, and identify collaborators, which they pass to military command for operation planning.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, Russia has been unable to suppress Ukrainian resistance. Moreover, the intensity of the resistance shows no sign of diminishing but keeps on undermining Russian occupation both symbolically and through attacks and sabotage. These resistance activities are important for upholding citizens' identity affiliation with Ukraine and, in a tactical sense, to demonstrate continued Ukrainian presence in occupied territories. Resistance in Ukraine's occupied territories exists in

9 <https://web.telegram.org/k/#@generalcherehni>

10 t.me/Kherson_kolaborant

11 <https://t.me/s/Crimeanwind>

both lethal and non-lethal forms, as well as in direct and indirect modes of operation, as digital resistance illustrates. Table 1 presents our conceptualization of the different forms of resistance that can be found in the currently occupied territories of Ukraine.

This broader conceptualization enables a more comprehensive analysis of resistance dynamics and is more insightful than earlier, one-dimensional accounts. However, it should be noted that all forms of resistance—from symbolic actions of demonstrating Ukrainian affiliation to robust action against infrastructure, equipment and occupiers or collaborators—is extremely dangerous, as activists face severe punishment if caught by the occupiers. Such resistance thus demands courage.

While the direct effects of the resistance on undermining the occupation require further research, based on our observations after four years of the full-scale invasion, we expect it to persist even in the event that Ukraine is compelled to cede parts of its territory to Russia. Resistance to Russia's genocidal war (Finkel 2024) and its occupation of Ukraine (Lewis, 2025) constitutes a crucial dimension of Ukraine's struggle for survival as both a state and a nation. The complex and successful interlocking of legal structures, armed forces, and civic

activism demonstrate a high degree of trust, cooperation and also technical finesse, as the Russian services must be circumvented and outwitted in every communication. On the other hand, for Ukrainians maintaining their Ukrainian identity, living in the occupied territories requires extreme caution because of the danger of traitors, collaborators and informers from the Russian side. Dealing with this fallout and the question of how betrayal and collaboration should be handled after a possible liberation, or even after a ceasefire of any kind, is a pressing issue for Ukrainian society and must include the resistance.

In the ongoing war situation, resistance plays a morally important role too, constituting a significant part of Ukraine's self-image and its culture of remembrance. Numerous other examples illustrate the value this can have for the future of a society, from the French Résistance to the Ukrainian underground resistance against the German Nazi and Soviet occupations during and after World War II. Resistance activists in post-war Ukraine will require recognition for their courage, whether monetary, political or symbolic. Negotiating this and the significance of remembering the resistance will be an important part of social debates in post-war Ukraine.

Table 1: Forms of Ukrainian Resistance Under Russian Occupation

	Indirect resistance activity	Direct resistance activity
Non-lethal	• Non-cooperation with occupying authorities • (initially) Refusal to take Russian "humanitarian aid," passports, or currency • Practicing Ukrainian language, religion, and education informally. • Examples: grassroots citizen practises	• Defacing propaganda • Applying markings in public spaces • Disrupting enemy communication networks • Coordinated DDoS attacks on Russian servers • OSINT data gathering and geolocating troops Examples (Groups): Yellow Ribbon Zla Mavka Crimean Seagulls People's Resistance of Ukraine
Lethal	• Assisting partisans (storing weapons, providing shelter) • Refusing to report partisan activity to occupiers • Monitoring Russian troop movements without direct engagement • Exposing collaborators data on social media/Telegram Examples (Groups): General Cherry Crimean partisans Berdiansk traitors Crimean partisans Cherson collaborant	• Sabotaging railways and logistics • Arson attacks • Targeted assassinations • Coordinated drone attacks supported by hacked surveillance Examples (Groups): S.R.O.K Atesh Mariupol Resistance Anti-SMERSH Luhansk partisans

Please see overleaf for further information, information about the authors and references.

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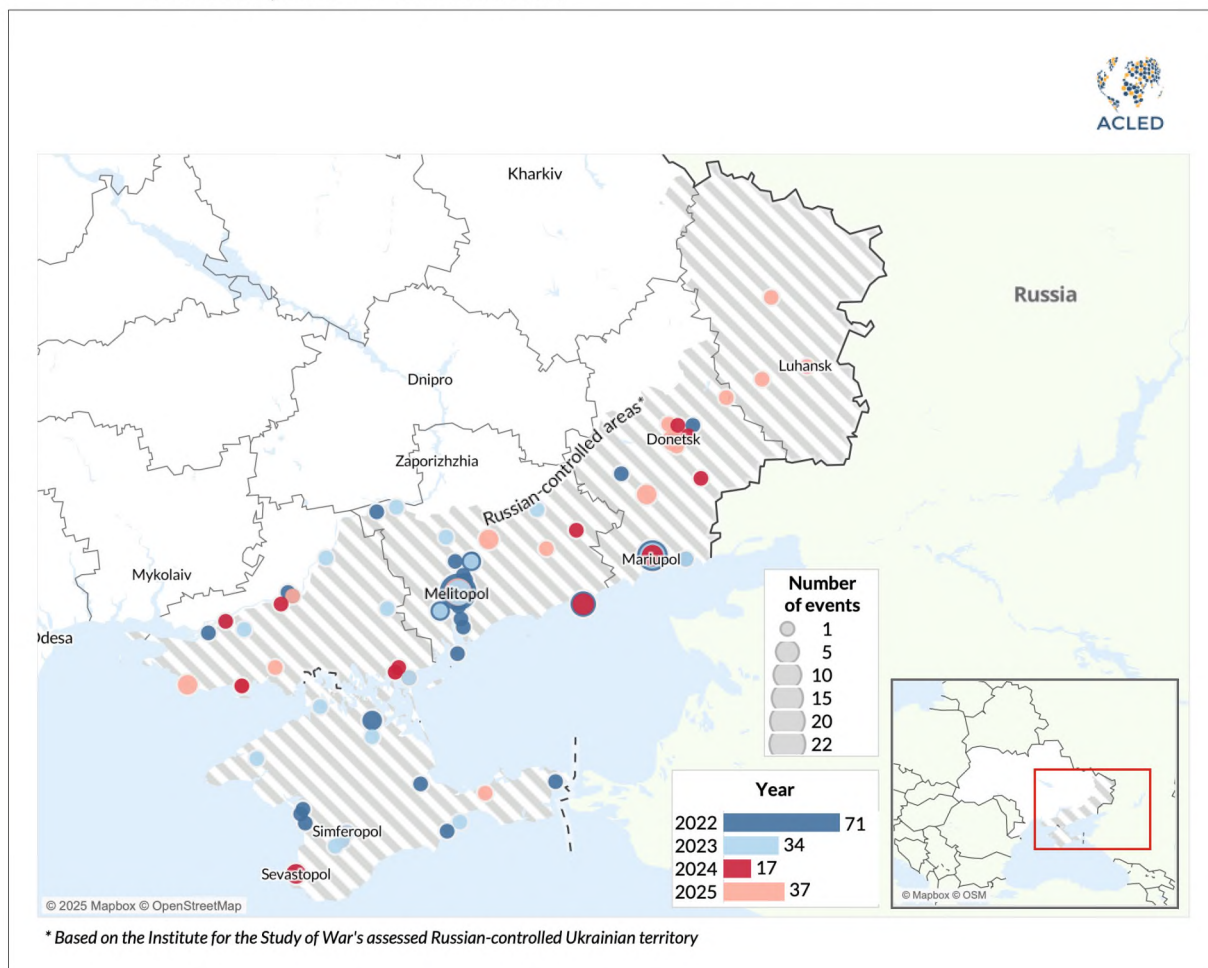
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Please see overleaf for appendix.

Appendix

Figure 1: Ukrainian Sabotage Operations in Russian-Occupied Parts of Ukraine (24 February 2022 – 14 November 2025)



Source: Originally published by ACLED on 27 November 2025 <https://acleddata.com/report/behind-lines-how-ukraine-has-outgunned-russia-sabotage>.