Attacks on Education and Military Use of Education Facilities in Ukraine in 2022

February 2023

Introduction

Since the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, more than 3,500 educational institutions have reportedly been damaged or destroyed by bombing and shelling in Ukraine, according to the country's Ministry of Education and Science (MoES).[1] Moreover, Save the Children reported that four pre-schools were damaged or destroyed *each day* on average in the first six months of the war.[2] Education facilities and staff have come under attack in many regions of the country with Kharkiv and Donetsk most affected, according to research from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) covering February to December 2022. Attacks on schools were the most prevalent, although GCPEA also identified reports of attacks on school teachers and higher education facilities and staff, as well as the military use of educational facilities. The majority of attacks involved explosive weapons, including airstrikes and shelling, according to GCPEA's analysis.

Beyond the strikes on educational facilities, territorial occupation and fighting have interfered with the provision of education. Many schools have been used for non-educational purposes, including to shelter internally displaced persons.[3] Public buildings, including schools, have also been used to detain individuals during their forced relocation to Russia or occupied areas of Ukraine, in a process known as "filtration."[4]

Attacks on education in Ukraine increased sharply after the conflict escalated in February 2022, compared to prior years. Between 2014 and early 2022, fighting occurred in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed armed actors along the line of contact separating Ukrainian government-controlled areas from non-government-controlled areas.[5] Save the Children reported that, between 2014 and 2021, about 750 schools were damaged or forced to close in eastern Ukraine.[6] In *Education under Attack* reports, GCPEA identified over 50 reports of attacks on schools in 2018 and 2019,[7] and approximately 30 reports of attacks on schools in 2020 and 2021.[8]

After February 24, 2022, attacks on education were reported throughout many regions of Ukraine, including in cities in the north and northwest of the country, such as Chernihiv and Zhytomyr, and near the capital, Kyiv. However, since mid-March, attacks on education have been primarily reported in the east, principally in the Donetsk and Kharkiv regions.

GCPEA relied on reports from international and local media, human rights organizations, and Ukrainian authorities for this brief. GCPEA drew on methodologies provided in the *Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education*.[9] GCPEA data analyzed in this report cover the period from February 24 through December 31, 2022.

Overarching trends since the escalation in conflict

GCPEA determined that attacks on schools were the most prevalent form of attack on education in Ukraine between February 24 and December 31, 2022. GCPEA also identified reports of attacks on teachers and higher education facilities and staff, as well as the military use of educational facilities.

Explosive weapons were used in the majority of attacks that GCPEA identified. Shelling and airstrikes damaged hundreds of schools, according to the United Nations (UN).[10] Additionally, Human Rights Watch documented Russian forces' use of widely banned cluster munitions and explosive weapons with wide-area affects in several regions of the country, which indiscriminately damaged schools.[11]

Between February and December 2022, the regions most heavily affected by attacks on education were Kharkiv region, in particular Kharkiv, Lozova, and Izium cities, and Donetsk region, in particular Mariupol, Kramatorsk, and Avdiivka cities, according to GCPEA's analysis of reported incidents.[12] In the initial weeks of hostilities, attacks were spread across several regions of the country, including near the capital, Kyiv, and other regions in the north. After mid-March, attacks on education were primarily reported in the east, principally in Donetsk and Kharkiv regions. In Kharkiv alone, a local human rights monitor reported that, between February and June, 15 schools were destroyed and 186 were damaged.[13] Finally, after September, Donetsk and Kharkiv regions in the east remained affected by attacks on education, along with the southern and southeastern regions of Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, and Zaporizhzhia, as long-range missile and drone attacks became commonplace in the war.

Attacks on education in 2022 spiked between March and May, then again in September, according to GCPEA's analyses.

Attacks on schools

In 2022, attacks on schools, from pre-primary through secondary, comprised the majority of attacks on education in Ukraine. In particular, secondary schools came under fire, according to GCPEA's analysis and local media reports.[14] Attacks on schools often occurred in the context of Russian forces shelling and firing missiles at Ukrainian cities and towns.[15] For example:

- On February 25, 2022, shelling damaged School No. 50 in Gorlovka city, Donetsk region, killing two teachers, according to Save the Children.[16]

- On February 25, the Sonechko nursery and kindergarten in Okhtyrka town, Sumy region, was hit with cluster munitions in an attack that appeared to be carried out by Russian forces, according to Amnesty International. The attack killed at least one child and two other civilians.[17]

- Human Rights Watch reported that, on March 1, 2022, a boarding school serving about 250 blind students was damaged by shelling in Kharkiv city, Kharkiv region, during Russian shelling of the city. The attack injured one student and the director of the school.[18]

- The UN reported that, on March 3, 2022, two schools and several apartment buildings were destroyed likely due to airstrikes by Russian forces. 47 civilians were killed in the strikes.[19]

- The UN and media sources reported that, on March 20, 2022, shelling damaged School No. 36 in Mariupol city, Donetsk region.[20]

- On August 30, 2022, a kindergarten that served about 350 students was reportedly damaged in Kharkiv city, Kharkiv region.[21] Several classrooms and school windows were destroyed, and two assistant teachers were injured as a result, according to media reports.[22]

- On September 13, 2022, a missile strike in Lozova city, Kharkiv region, destroyed a school and kindergarten, which served about 500 students, according to media reports.[23]

- On October 2, 2022, local media reported that a drone struck a secondary school in Kryvyi Rih city, Dnipropetrovsk region, damaging two floors of the building.[24]

- On November 22, 2022, a school was reportedly damaged by shelling in Orikhiv town, Zaporizhzhia region; the school served as a humanitarian aid station at the time of attack.[25]

Attacks on school students, teachers, and other personnel

Although attacks on school infrastructure were more prevalent, GCPEA also collected sporadic incidents of attacks on school teachers and staff in 2022. Attacks involved the abduction or detention of educators who reportedly resisted the adoption of Russian curriculum. For example:

- Between approximately March 28 and April 4, 2022, three school principals were abducted after refusing to change their schools' curricula in Melitopol city, Zaporizhzhia region, according to local media sources and a human rights group.[26]

- According to media outlets, the head teacher in the village of Ivanivka, Kherson region, was detained for 19 days, in mid-September and early October 2022, due to her refusal to adopt a Russian curriculum.[27]

Attacks on higher education facilities

Universities and other higher education institutions also came under attack. The Minister of Science and Education of Ukraine, quoted in local media, stated that 21 of the 24 higher education facilities in Kharkiv region were damaged between February 24 and mid-July 2022, as a result of the war.[28] Many reported attacks on higher education occurred in the context of Russian forces shelling and firing missiles at Ukrainian cities.[29] For example:

- On March 2, 2022, a missile strike destroyed the Faculty of Economics at Kharkiv National University, in Kharkiv city, Kharkiv region, according to Scholars at Risk.[30]

- On March 3, 2022, *Public Broadcasting Service* reported that shelling damaged a dormitory and stadium at the University of the State Fiscal Service of Ukraine in Irpin city, Kyiv region, which served about 5,000 students.[31]

- On July 6, 2022, a missile strike hit the H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University in Kharkiv city, Kharkiv region, reportedly killing a campus security guard and destroying several buildings on the campus, including the main building and the scientific library, according to Scholars at Risk and media sources.[32]

- On both August 17 and 19, 2022, Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University, in Mykolaiv city, Mykolaiv region, was damaged by rockets, according to Scholars at Risk and media sources.[33]

- *Public Broadcasting Service* reported that, around September 19, 2022, the Bakhmut Medical College campus was shelled and partially damaged, in Bakhmut city, Donetsk region.[34]

- Amnesty International and local media outlets reported that, on October 10, 2022, Russian forces damaged a building of the Kyiv National Shevchenko University during missile strikes on Kyiv city, Kyiv region.[35]

- On November 1, 2022, shelling in Mykolaiv city, Mykolaiv region, reportedly damaged the Mykolaiv Polytechnic Vocational College.[36]

Attacks on higher education staff

Additionally, while attacks on university infrastructure were more prevalent than attacks on staff, GCPEA also collected several incidents of attacks on university staff in 2022. These primarily consisted of detentions. For instance:

- On June 4, 2022, the dean of the Agronomy Faculty at Kherson State Agrarian and Economic University was detained for two days, in Kherson city, Kherson region, as reported by Scholars at Risk.[37]

- Scholars at Risk and media outlets reported that, around June 14, 2022, the vice-rector of Kherson State University was detained for a week before being released.[38]

Military use of schools and universities

GCPEA identified reports of armed forces from both sides of the conflict using schools and universities for military purposes between February and December 2022.[39] In several cases, opposing forces subsequently targeted the school or university being used, according to media outlets and human rights organizations.[40] Also, media outlets reported that in Zaporizhzhia region, schools were partially occupied while students continued learning in the buildings.[41] Examples of military use of education infrastructure included:

- Human Rights Watch reported that, between March 10 and April 10, 2022, Russian forces used a school in Yahidne village, Chernihiv region, as a military base and detention center, holding more than 350 villagers in the basement, including at least 70 children. Ten older people died there during that time due to sickness or the poor conditions.[42]

- Human Rights Watch reported that, between March 26 and April 9, 2022, Russian forces held Mariupol residents in a school in Primorske village, Donetsk region, for two weeks before sending them to Dokuchaievsk village, in Donetsk region, for "filtration."[43]

- In late April and early May 2022, School No. 12, which served about 600 students, was used as a base, in Izium city, Kharkiv region. *The New York Times* reported that, on May 1, opposing forces targeted the school, killing approximately 200 soldiers stationed there.[44]

- In early September 2022, a school in Orlianske village, Zaporizhzhia region, was used as a military base on one floor, with military equipment stored in the yard, while school instruction continued on the second floor.[45]

- On September 7, 2022, shelling damaged a school which had been reportedly used as a fighting position by opposing forces in Verbivka town, Kharkiv region, according to *The New York Times* and *Reuters*.[46]

Impacts of attacks on education

Around 5.7 million school-aged children in Ukraine experienced disruptions to learning as reported at the end of December 2022, according to the UN.[47] The war has impacted students with disabilities, with the MoES reporting that at least 36 schools or institutions for students with disabilities have been damaged or destroyed.[48] Students with disabilities are more likely to remain out of school if their education is interrupted; furthermore, remote and online learning often require adaptation to meet the needs of students with disabilities.[49]

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In August 2022, a 13-year old student in Irpin, near Kyiv, looked in the mirror of the bomb shelter in her school, which was being repaired after having been hit by multiple rockets during fighting.

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Most schools across Ukraine closed in February 2022, and by June, 95 percent of districts were providing distance or online classes.[50] A recent Multisector Needs Assessment conducted in five regions found that families believed that online learning was not an adequate replacement for in-person learning.[51] At the start of the school year on September 1, 2022, schools that had taken adequate safety measures, such as building or reinforcing bomb shelters, reopened in some regions in the west and center of the country where in-person learning could more safely take place.[52] However, even where conflict was relatively limited, education providers encountered challenges to ensuring safe in-person classes. The Commission of Inquiry in Ukraine noted that in areas where Russian troops have withdrawn, such as cities and towns in Kharkiv and Kherson regions, safety concerns, such as the continued threat of shelling or missile strikes and the lack of large, working bomb shelters in schools, have hindered access to education.[53] The size of a school's bomb shelter often determined how many students could physically attend class, limiting a full return to in-person learning, according to the UN.[54] Mines and unexploded ordnance in newly accessible areas posed an additional risk to students and education personnel.[55] In-person learning was also severely limited by power outages caused by air and ground strikes, particularly in October and November, according to media reports and the UN.[56] Families in conflict-affected areas reported that their main priorities were the building of bomb shelters for schools, additional measures to secure learning, and repairing classrooms and hygiene facilities.[57]

Recommendations

We call on all parties to immediately cease attacks on, and threats of attacks against, schools, students, and teachers, and avoid using educational facilities for military purposes, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2601 (2021) and the Safe Schools Declaration. Ukraine endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in 2019. Russia should endorse and implement it.

Parties to conflict should:

- Protect the civilian character of schools and universities and cease attacks and threats of attacks against students, teachers, academics, and educational facilities in contravention of international humanitarian law.

- Refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes, including by implementing the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* (*Guidelines*). In cases of doubt whether an object which is normally dedicated to civilian purposes, such as a school, is being used to make an effective contribution to military action, it should be presumed to be a civilian object.

- Take immediate action to evacuate schools and universities being used for military purposes, including by developing a safe and hazard-free exit strategy.

- Avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas, including near schools or universities or along routes to or from them, and develop operational policy based on a presumption against such use.

Donors, humanitarian and development actors, and education providers should:

- Develop and implement gender- and disability-responsive risk assessments, education continuity plans, and comprehensive safety and security plans to prevent, and mitigate the impact of, attacks on education.

- Prioritize the rebuilding and rehabilitation of damaged or destroyed schools and universities, including the construction of bomb shelters, in consultation with local educators and student-led groups.

- Ensure de-mining in contaminated areas is carried out and Explosive Ordnance Risk Education programming is provided for students and education personnel.

- Commit to supporting communities to effectively provide flexible, safe alternative education opportunities, when necessary.

- Adopt conflict-sensitive education approaches and programming.

- Ensure all mainstream educational programs and alternative education opportunities are accessible to and inclusive of children with different types of disabilities.

- Fully fund Humanitarian Response Plans and contribute to other funds for education in emergencies.

- Adopt guidance from GCPEA's *Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education* when developing or strengthening systems to monitor attacks on education and conducting humanitarian or sectoral needs assessments.

States and international bodies should:

- Strongly condemn all ongoing grave violations of children's rights in Ukraine; call for perpetrators to be held accountable, and demand that all parties uphold their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law.

- Call for an immediate cessation of attacks on schools, health facilities, water and sanitation and other critical infrastructure, and protected personnel, and urge parties to the conflict to end all military use of such facilities and to ensure that attacks on these institutions and related protected personnel are investigated and that perpetrators are duly prosecuted.

- Support efforts to hold perpetrators of atrocity crimes accountable in impartial and independent courts, including the International Criminal Court, and national courts in countries with universal jurisdiction laws.

- Reiterate calls for safe and unimpeded access for the delivery of humanitarian assistance to all civilians in need, including children.

- Support the Government of Ukraine to implement the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) and the *Guidelines*, including by operationalizing the SSD National Implementation Plan.

- Urge the Government of Russia to endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration.

- Encourage all relevant national and international accountability mechanisms for Ukraine to capture the full spectrum of violations and crimes affecting children within their documentation, investigation, and prosecution processes.

- Ensure strong collaboration between all national and international judicial and non-judicial accountability mechanisms for Ukraine; safeguard and protect the victims, notably children, avoid re-traumatization, and ensure the quality of evidence and testimonies.

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This brief is the result of independent research conducted by GCPEA. It is independent of the individual member organizations of the Steering Committee of GCPEA and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Steering Committee member organization.

Endnotes

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[9] This brief identified perpetrators of attacks on education only when reliable reports came from credible non-governmental organizations or the United Nations. The focus of the brief is on attacks and their impacts, rather than perpetrators. The majority of reported incidents identified by GCPEA occurred in Ukrainian government-controlled areas of the country; attacks in Russian-occupied areas may be underreported. For more details on GCPEA methodology, see *Education under Attack* 2022 and the *Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education*.

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