



Physicians for Human Rights



# Destruction and Devastation

## One Year of Russia's Assault on Ukraine's Health Care System

Executive Summary

February 2023





“On February 28, 2022, a missile hit the hospital yard. All the windows were smashed. The hospital lost its electricity first, then its water supply and Internet connection. Next, the mobile connection disappeared, and the hospital was cut off from the outside world.

[Two weeks later,] another missile hit the hospital. The impact caused one floor to fall on top of the other ... there were patients who were crushed by the slab. Doctors tried to pull them out, but it was very difficult.

The Russian military occupied the hospital. They completely surrounded and controlled all entrances, exits, and stairs. Military equipment was placed around the perimeter of the hospital. There were snipers on the roof and top floors.

Floors and corridors were filled with civilians – children, elderly people, animals. There was no water, so it quickly became completely unsanitary ... and there was no food at all. There was broken glass in the corridors, there was dried blood on the floor, scattered clothes, broken stretchers. Medicines and other materials were running out.

The military emphasized that those who tried to leave the hospital could be shot. Doctors were threatened with deportation to Russia.

It was impossible to transport the sick to the hospital. Cars got shot from the roof of the hospital in front of the doctors. [So] the wounded were carried on blankets, in [people’s] arms. ... The dead bodies were first taken to the morgue located in the basement. Then they were taken to the mass grave.”

*Cover: Staff outside the damaged hospital of Volnovakha in Donetsk oblast, Ukraine. Photo captured on March 12, 2022 by Stringer/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.*

*Excerpted from the testimony of Dr. Oksana Kyrsanova, an anesthesiologist at the Regional Intensive Care Hospital in the city of Mariupol. Dr. Kyrsanova spoke to the research team about the challenges of delivering health care under bombardment and occupation.*



# Executive Summary



Source: *Attacks on Health Care in Ukraine, Security in Numbers Database. Data as of December 31, 2022.*

On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This act of aggression against a sovereign nation is a gross violation of international law, one that has been widely condemned by the international community. In the year that has followed, attacks on civilians and civilian objects have been a hallmark of the war, with violence against the Ukrainian health care system a prominent feature of Russia's unlawful conduct. One notorious incident came only two weeks after the full-scale invasion began, when Russia's air force bombed a maternity and children's hospital in the city of Mariupol. The photograph of a heavily pregnant woman being carried from the hospital on a stretcher, who later died, together with her baby, became an early, stark example of the brutal, indiscriminate way in which Russia has waged its illegal war.

This report – a joint undertaking among eyeWitness to Atrocities (eyeWitness), Insecurity Insight, the Media Initiative for Human Rights (MIHR), Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), and the Ukrainian Healthcare Center (UHC) – documents the staggering toll that Russia's aggression has had on Ukraine's health care system since February 2022. Using 10 case studies and a joint dataset of attacks, this report shows how Russia appears to be violating international humanitarian law by deliberately and indiscriminately targeting Ukraine's health care system as part of a broader attack on its civilian population and infrastructure. As the report details, the apparent targeting of the health care system is carried out through a variety of means, including (1) attacks on health care facilities, (2) attacks on ambulances, (3) destruction of critical health infrastructure and theft of supplies, and (4) assaults, torture, and ill-treatment of health workers, including doctors, nurses, and paramedics.

**For 35 days, Ukraine's health care infrastructure was damaged every single day. In the first two weeks of the invasion, an average of four to five hospitals and clinics were attacked daily.**

# Executive Summary

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*Destroyed exterior of the Iziom Central City Hospital, which was damaged in at least three attacks in March 2022. Photo: Captured by the Ukrainian Healthcare Center with the eyeWitness to Atrocities app in November 2022.*



“They saw very well, they knew that this was a medical institution.”

“We hoped this would somehow save us. But it turns out nothing is sacred in this war.”

*Dr. Alla Barsehian, director of Bashtanka Multiprofile Hospital, which was heavily damaged in an attack*

Targeting functioning health care infrastructure and workers in an armed conflict and carrying out indiscriminate attacks that affect civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and clinics, are war crimes. When committed as part of a state policy on a widespread or systematic basis, such attacks are also crimes against humanity. Based on the evidence gathered in this report, there is a reasonable basis to believe that attacks on Ukraine’s health care system constitute war crimes and comprise a course of conduct that could potentially constitute crimes against humanity as well. This evidence urgently warrants further investigation by prosecutorial authorities.

The broader impact of these attacks – in terms of the ability of the Ukrainian government to ensure the human right to access adequate health care – is equally devastating. While it is too soon to know the full extent of this war’s damage on Ukraine, a recent health needs assessment conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) notes that “spiraling costs, logistical hurdles and damaged infrastructure are making access to essential services all the more challenging for growing numbers of civilians.”<sup>1</sup>

This report breaks new ground by providing the most comprehensive documentation to date of attacks on Ukraine’s health care system as well as their devastating impact on the right to health. The report draws on a dataset of attacks – collectively developed from open-source and confidential information over the course of 2022 – supplemented by detailed case studies based on visits to hospitals in four different regions of Ukraine to inspect attack sites, assess damage, take photographs, and conduct semi-structured interviews with hospital staff who were present at the time of the attacks.

The findings are stark. During the first weeks of the Russian invasion, there were constant, daily attacks on Ukraine’s health care system. For 35 days, Ukraine’s health care system was damaged every single day. Assaults were particularly intense in February and March 2022; during the first two weeks of the invasion, an average of four to five hospitals and clinics were attacked daily. Attacks continued throughout the year, with 235 attacks on health care overall in March and an average of 47 attacks each month between April and December 2022. Over the entire period studied in this report (February 24 – December 31, 2022), there was an average of more than two attacks on health care each day.

Between February 24 and December 31, 2022, the research team documented a total of 707 attacks on Ukraine’s health care system.

- There were 292 documented attacks that damaged or destroyed 218 hospitals and clinics. Many health facilities were attacked more than once.
- There were 65 documented attacks on ambulances.
- There were 185 documented attacks on other health infrastructure (e.g., pharmacies, blood centers, dental clinics, research centers, etc.).
- 86 attacks on health care workers were documented, with 62 health workers killed and 52 injured. Many others were threatened, imprisoned, taken hostage, and forced to work under Russian occupation.

One in 10 of Ukraine’s hospitals have been directly damaged from attacks, with the heaviest destruction in the eastern oblasts of Kharkivska, Donetsk, and Luhanska, and also in Khersonska and Kyivska.

## Ukraine’s Health Care System under Assault

Attacks on health care were a daily feature during the first weeks of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine starting on February 24, 2022. For 35 days, health care was attacked every single day. Between February 24 and the end of December, there was an average of more than two attacks on health care each day.



**707**

Total number of events affecting health care



**218**

Hospitals or clinics damaged or destroyed



**65**

Documented attacks on ambulances



**181**

Documented attacks on other health infrastructure (e.g., pharmacies, blood centers, dental clinics, research centers, etc.)



**86**

Attacks that harmed health workers (62 killed, 52 injured)

*Source: Attacks on Health Care in Ukraine, Security in Numbers Database. Data as of December 31, 2022.*

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continued

In some cities and towns, nearly all the health facilities were affected in some way. In Mariupol, in the southern part of Donetsk oblast, almost 8 out of 10 points of health care service provision, sites where medical assistance is available, were either damaged or destroyed.

In the Makariv municipality – where three health facilities and 30 pharmacies have been damaged or destroyed – the scale of the attacks has led to the severe disruption of health services and infrastructure in the area.

In 10 oblasts, 48 hospitals were hit multiple times, underscoring not only the indiscriminate nature of attacks but also the possibility that they were deliberately targeted. For instance, the Severodonetsk City Multiprofile Hospital in Luhanska oblast was hit 10 times between March and May 2022. One hospital in Kharkivska oblast was hit five times, and another was hit four times.

Many hospitals bore internationally recognized symbols of their status as medical centers, which were clearly visible from the air. Bashtanka Multiprofile Hospital, which was heavily damaged in an April attack, was marked with a red cross painted on a white canvas placed on the roof. According to Dr. Alla Barsehian, the Bashtanka Multiprofile Hospital director, drones flew over the facility and “they saw very well, they knew that this was a medical institution.”<sup>3</sup> “We hoped this would somehow save us. But it turns out nothing is sacred in this war.”<sup>4</sup>

The scale of these attacks underscores the broader destabilizing effects they have on Ukraine’s population, from reduced access to critical medications to severely restricted access to health care and vastly diminished vaccine rates. An International Organization for Migration survey found that, as of the beginning of December 2022, one in every three Ukrainians was experiencing the lack of medical services.

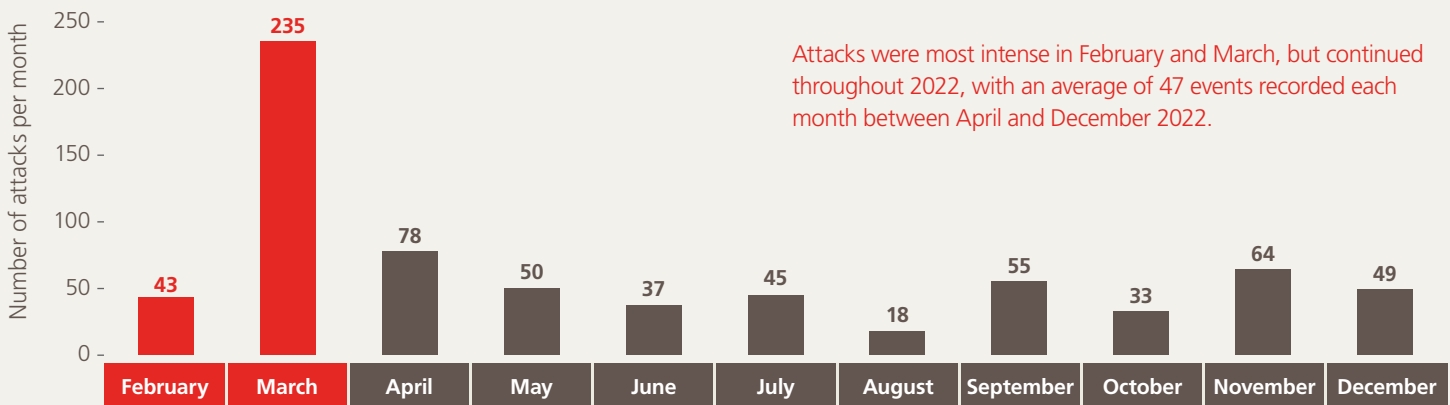
The Russian Federation’s continued aggression – leading to both targeted and indiscriminate attacks on Ukraine’s health care facilities, amongst other civilian infrastructure – constitutes a gross violation of international law. It must cease these attacks and end its aggression. Accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as for the crime of aggression, will be critical; however, Russia is also obligated to make reparations for its breaches of international law, including compensating the Ukrainian state and individual Ukrainians – and other killed or injured nationals – for devastating loss of life and injury, extensive destruction, and the enormous costs of reconstruction. Because protecting health care is a shared responsibility, all parties to the conflict must ensure compliance with international humanitarian law principles.

Read the full report at: [phr.org/russias-assault-ukraine](https://phr.org/russias-assault-ukraine)

For our map of attacks on Ukraine’s health care system, see: [attacksonhealthukraine.org/](https://attacksonhealthukraine.org/)

Targeting functioning health care infrastructure and workers in an armed conflict and carrying out indiscriminate attacks that affect civilian infrastructure – including hospitals and clinics – are war crimes.

## Damage and Destruction to Ukraine’s Health Infrastructure, by Month, February 24 to December 31, 2022



Source: *Attacks on Health Care in Ukraine, Security in Numbers Database*. Data as of December 31, 2022.

# Recommendations

To other engaged actors, the report makes the following recommendations:

## **To the International Criminal Court’s Office of the Prosecutor, the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, and other National Prosecutors:**

- Prioritize investigation and prosecution of attacks on health care facilities and health care workers as both war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- Build cases specifically focused on crimes concerning attacks on Ukraine’s health care facilities and health care personnel, ensuring adequate resource allocation and training to do so effectively.
- Ensure continued strong cooperation and coordination among prosecutorial offices and bodies at the national and international level, in order to maximize information sharing and efficiency.

## **To the Diplomatic Community, including Member States of the European Union, the United Nations (UN) Security Council, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe:**

- Publicly condemn attacks on health care personnel and facilities in Ukraine, urging compliance with the Geneva Conventions, Additional Protocol I, and UN Security Council Resolution 2286, including rules on medical impartiality.
- Continue to exert all available political, economic, and diplomatic pressure on the Russian Federation to immediately cease indiscriminate and targeted attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including on health care workers, facilities, and vehicles, and to withdraw from Ukrainian territory.
- Call for the immediate release of detained health care professionals and the humane treatment of all detainees in compliance with international humanitarian law.
- Convene an Arria-Formula Meeting of the UN Security Council to address widespread and systematic attacks on Ukraine’s health care system and reinforce the need to ensure criminal accountability.
- Commit adequate and long-term funding and other resources to justice and accountability mechanisms working to document international crimes and other gross human rights violations in Ukraine, including violations of the right to receive and access health care.
- Support and cooperate with international and Ukrainian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to assist in gathering, coordinating, and disseminating data on attacks on health care.

## **To the Government of Ukraine:**

- Ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.
- Adopt domestic implementing legislation that sufficiently captures the substantive crimes and modes of liability provided for under the Rome Statute, including crimes against humanity and command responsibility, as well as other relevant offenses under international humanitarian law.

## **To the UN Human Rights Council and its Member States:**

- Renew the mandate of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine on an open-ended basis and ensure robust funding and support for its continued functioning.
- Convene a thematic debate to address widespread and systematic attacks on Ukraine’s health care system and the need to ensure criminal accountability.
- Consider expanding the mandate of the inaugural Special Rapporteur on the “Situation of Human Rights in the Russian Federation” to encompass violations related to the 2022 invasion, include the rights of Ukrainian civilians currently being held on Russian territory.

## **To the UN Secretary-General:**

- Promote further coordination and cooperation among the Secretary-General’s office and other relevant UN agencies, investigative mechanisms, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to share their methods, data, reporting capacities, and roles on attacks on health care.
- Appoint a Special Representative on Violence Against Health Care to address attacks on Ukraine’s health care system and in other conflicts.

## **To the World Health Organization (WHO) and its Member States:**

- Proactively work with NGOs and UN agencies to expand data collection and, where appropriate, public disclosure in Ukraine and elsewhere.
- Adopt a resolution by the World Health Assembly to address ongoing concerns in structure, oversight, and operation of the Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care, including a review of WHO’s Framework of Engagement with Non-State Actors that would allow for mutual data sharing with UN agencies and NGOs, in both Ukraine and other countries.
- Acting under Article 7 of the WHO Constitution, suspend voting rights of the Russian Federation and remove representatives of the Russian Federation from executive positions.

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## Endnotes

1. World Health Organization, “Accessing health care in Ukraine after 8 months of war: The health system remains resilient, but key health services and medicine are increasingly unaffordable,” October 24, 2022, <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/24-10-2022-accessing-health-care-in-ukraine-after-8-months-of-war-the-health-system-remains-resilient-but-key-health-services-and-medicine-are-increasingly-unaffordable>.
2. “Ukraine War: Hospital destroyed by Russian missile in southern Ukraine,” Sky News, April 22, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ff1eF2J5fnE>.
3. Interview with Dr. Alla Barsehian, Ukrainian Healthcare Center, December 17, 2022 (on file).
4. “Ukraine War: Hospital destroyed by Russian missile in southern Ukraine,” Sky News, April 22, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ff1eF2J5fnE>.



“At first, I didn’t understand what was happening, it felt like stones were being thrown on metal, that was the sound. When the car caught fire, we realized that we were being fired at.”

*A paramedic whose ambulance was attacked in Donetsk oblast in April 2022*



Read the full report:



*A destroyed ambulance in Trostianets, Sumsk oblast, which was occupied by Russian forces at the start of the war. Photo captured on March 28, 2022 by Oleg Pereverzev/ Global Images Ukraine via Getty Images.*