

Overview of social cohesion in areas formerly or currently occupied by Russia

January-March 2024 | Ukraine

Between December 2023 and March 2024, REACH conducted assessments to understand how social relation dynamics changed in Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion in areas experiencing (at the time of data collection) or which formerly experienced occupation. Findings from areas regained by Ukraine and from occupied areas were collected and analysed in a restricted report available upon request. This two-pager goes over the methodology and key takeaways from the report:

Key takeaways

Overview of social cohesion in areas regained by Ukraine

- While in a majority of FGDs, participants reported that **horizontal social relations improved in their settlement since the start of the full-scale invasion**, it is **mitigated by reports of increased polarization** in the same settlements, with some people being closer together and some further apart. A wide variety of contributing factors were identified, from displacement status to perceived attitude during occupation.
- **Humanitarian assistance was reported as a major factor contributing to horizontal social tensions**, including **eligibility criteria perceived as being unfair or too narrow and lack of clarity on how assistance is provided**. This might indicate a need for further community engagement from humanitarian actors to explain how (and why) eligibility criteria are set.
- **Vertical social relations varied considerably across settlements**, with trust in local authorities (often connected to their perceived behaviour and public statements during and after occupation) being the main contributing factor. **Inclusion in the restoration process, clear communication and avoiding stigmatizing groups of people based on their movement decisions during and after occupation were identified as best practices** to ensure trust, with a direct impact on improving the humanitarian situation. Insufficient engagement between local residents and local authorities can lead to local authorities having a skewed perception of community-level needs, requiring mitigation measures (independent needs assessments, post-distribution monitoring, etc.) from humanitarian organisations.

Overview of social cohesion in occupied areas

- **Relationships between local residents and authorities installed by the Russian Federation (RF) were reported to be predominantly negative** by key informants representing community members and aid workers, with widespread discontent reported across interviewees, suggesting that the deterioration of these vertical relations is a major factor undermining social cohesion in occupied areas of Ukraine.
- **Horizontal social relations in these communities were reportedly often marked by tensions, primarily due to differing political views**, with some KIs directly attributing these tensions to the occupation. While supporters of the RF faced negative perceptions, leading to fear and distrust, a few KIs observed that horizontal social relations had improved as people became more supportive of each other.

Background and methodology

Why work on social cohesion in areas regained by Ukraine?

In various assessments conducted throughout 2023-24, key informants and local residents reported **some concerns over tensions within the community and between local residents and local authorities in frontline settlements** ([HSM, Urban Centres Regained by Ukraine](#)). Reported characteristics fuelling tensions included displacement status (IDP, returnee, non-displaced) and perception of unequal access to humanitarian assistance.

Based on early insights, and following the approach set by the Social COhesion and REconciliation Index (SCORE) analytical tool, which distinguishes between horizontal (citizen-citizen) and vertical (citizen-State institution) dimensions of social cohesion ([SCORE 2021](#)), **REACH narrowed the scope of the research on horizontal and vertical social relations to settlements experiencing (at the time of data collection) or which formerly experienced occupation**. Findings were disaggregated based on displacement status (non-displaced, returnee, internally displaced persons (IDPs)) in the analysis.

Information was collected through **two assessments conducted by REACH** between December 2023 and March 2024:

- **Assessment 1:** 18 focus group discussions (FGDs) in three urban centres between December 2023 and January 2024: Izium (Kharkivska), Kherson (Khersonska oblast) and Trostianets (Sumyska). Two FGDs were conducted in each city with non-displaced, returnees and IDPs.
- **Assessment 2:** 10 FGDs with local residents across four settlements in Khersonska and Kharkivska oblasts in areas regained by Ukraine, and 25 KIs with community members and representatives of organisations or volunteers involved in humanitarian response in the occupied areas of Ukraine. The interviews and FGDs were conducted between February and March 2024.

Findings are **indicative** only.

Contact us

If you would like to receive the restricted brief, please send a request to impact.ukraine@impact-initiatives.org with the subject title **"Analysis request: social cohesion brief"**.