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Ukraine: Kharkiv Volunteers Shore Up Border, Morale

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Supporters of the Kiev forces lingering Saturday at a giant trident, Ukraine's national emblem, made of candles.

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Last spring, as Ukraine mobilized to resist Russian aggression in Crimea and Donbass, hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of funds began to pour into the accounts of grassroots organizations that sprang up to support the beleaguered army.

As of late October, a third of Ukrainians report having donated money to the war effort, a significant percentage for a country that ranked 150 out of 153 in charitable giving as recently as 2011. The surge in giving is not limited to cash; Ukrainians both at home and abroad have donated everything from underwear to planes.

A lesser-known aspect of civilian support, however, has been the time and expertise donated by non-combatant volunteers, either through private one-time initiatives, such as individuals driving supplies to the front, or via sustained and relatively well-organized

programs.

In Kharkiv — Ukraine's second-largest city, and one situated not far from the Donbass conflict zone — a volunteer group called the Help Army has filled a number of needs for both the regular army and pro-government militias. Volunteers, for example, have repaired old Soviet-era military equipment and have organized the publication of user manuals to help instruct raw recruits on how to properly operate and maintain such ordnance.

This fall, a Help Army unit also reinforced Ukrainian border guards in patrolling and manning checkpoints along Ukraine's frontier with Russia. The border is just about 50 kilometers from the center of Kharkiv.

In addition, every Sunday, about 40 to 50 volunteers, often led by Vyacheslav Tseluyko, a political science professor, and Katerina Makarova, a business consultant, meet on the outskirts of Kharkiv and drive to a pre-selected checkpoint. Once there, they spend the day digging trenches and doing other chores designed to improve the checkpoint's defenses against a possible incursion by Russian forces.

While some traveled in their own cars, a bus driver has donated his services for the day. "It's a kind of therapy, and besides, it's better than being inside with no heat," said Natalya Tomareva, a Latin instructor at a local medical college, speaking about her decision to join the volunteers on a recent Sunday, when the city's heating system had still not kicked in.

"Last weekend, I was out in the city, and I just can't watch it: Everyone is trying to pretend as though nothing is happening," added Tomareva, who noted that she is three-quarters Russian by ethnicity.

"You want to be among those who think like you," said another volunteer, Valentina, a middle-aged woman who asked to be identified only by her first name because of fear of potential retribution against government supporters in Kharkiv, a city with a considerable pro-Russian constituency.

This particular Sunday, the volunteers arrived at a border checkpoint in Strilecha, a sleepy hamlet surrounded on three sides by Russia. The village is home to a mental health-care clinic, and some of the staff members make a daily commute on foot from their homes in Russia. Vehicles are no longer permitted to pass through the border checkpoint.

Using tools that they themselves supply, the volunteers spend hours digging trenches and building bunkers. They coordinate their activities with both the border patrol and the army.

"The idea is not just to build [these trenches], but do so in a way that the [Russian] border patrol knows that we will defend ourselves," said Makarova, who has been volunteering at the border since last February. "We want them to know that they [Russians] will not be met here with open arms."

For regular army troops stationed in the area, Sunday visits by volunteers can provide a welcome diversion from a tense, yet dreary routine: The border around Kharkiv has been quiet since the outbreak of upheaval in eastern Ukraine, yet the potential for trouble is high,

and troops remain on alert.

Dmitry, a 19-year-old soldier, said volunteers were making critical contributions. Without them, he suggested, the fighting capacity of the Ukrainian army would be greatly diminished. The army is still not able to provide all its soldiers with some basics, and volunteers are making up the difference. "There are no uniforms, no bulletproof vests, no equipment," he said.

Volunteers will remain an important component in the war effort for the foreseeable future, Tseluyko said.

"For 20 years the army was considered to be unnecessary because people thought we would never go to war — and if we did, it would certainly be as an ally of Russia, [not an opponent]," Tseluyko said. But, he added, the current crisis has unleashed "technical expertise and a kind of entrepreneurial spirit" among many Ukrainians.

"Those who can sew, sew. Those who can fix equipment, fix equipment. Those who can dig trenches, dig trenches," he said.

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