A Matter of Trust: Community-Police Relations in Ukraine's De-Occupied and Frontline Areas

Policy Brief by Julia Friedrich

GPPi
GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY
INSTITUTE

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES
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Executive Summary

Law enforcement actors play a key role in providing everyday security and justice for local populations in Ukraine's de-occupied and frontline areas; however, individual police officers face war-induced and structural challenges that render their operations dangerous and sometimes impossible. At the same time, their presence alone does not guarantee trustful relations with the communities they are meant to serve: security concerns, a lack of communication, and structural problems complicate their interaction. It is crucial to mitigate friction between communities and police to avoid alienating and endangering Ukrainian civilians living in very challenging environments.

To support trustful community-police relations in areas highly affected by the war, international donors should coordinate their activities, base them on localized and regularly updated needs assessments and pursue a scalable approach which can be adapted to the local security situation. **Specifically, Ukraine's international supporters can:**

- Enable a functioning police presence even in the most difficult settings by providing star links, power banks, cars, and evacuation vehicles;

- Invest in the creation safe spaces – located for instance in a public place or shelter – which can also serve as one-stop shops for essential services and medical attention and enable positive interactions with law enforcement agencies;

- Support Ukraine's law enforcement agencies as they take up new tasks under martial law, specifically in improving their communication about police activities and citizen rights;

- Support law enforcement agencies in developing adequate psychosocial support structures in the face of a long war – but only if there is a proper understanding of the local context and needs;

- Use dialogue approaches in areas that are close to the frontline only if they have a clearly stated goal (e.g., community development, landmine awareness, etc.) and are based on needs assessments.

Introduction

Ukrainians working in the law enforcement sector, who are tasked with providing public order and safety for the population, face many war-induced challenges. Chiefly among them, they often cannot protect either themselves or the local population from the security threats posed by the war. As one interviewee put it: "in frontline areas, community safety [is] mostly about telling civilians how to hide from incoming missiles." In the face of war and in the context of martial law, Ukrainian law enforcement thus faces a need to re-define its role.

Aside from having to ensure their own safety and that of the population, Ukrainian law enforcement agents in areas that were either de-occupied or are located close to the frontline face new and dangerous tasks. Among others, they must administer checkpoints, report on the destruction of homes, and deliver humanitarian aid to civilians close to the front – all on top of their regular police duties. And while reportedly, the number of reported crimes has fallen significantly across the country between 2022 and 2023 following Russia's full-scale invasion,

crime has increased significantly in areas that were occupied by Russia.[1] There, law enforcement has had to deal with new types of (war) crimes after occupation ended. The existing structures were not set up to deal with such crimes: during the first wave of liberation of Russian-occupied areas in 2022, for instance, specialists realized that the crime of conflict-related sexual violence did not even feature in the drop-down menu of the Ukrainian crime database. While there has been learning over the last two and a half years in many regards, adapting Ukraine's law enforcement actors to the realities of war and occupation is an ongoing process.

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At the same time, Ukrainians who live in areas that were occupied by Russian forces in the course of 2022 and subsequently liberated by Ukraine's army are especially vulnerable. The challenges they face range from daily shelling and heavy mining to a lack of housing and basic supplies to eroded community trust and war-induced trauma. In some cases, like in Kherson, the Russian military was pushed back just far enough to liberate an area but has remained in artillery range. In other places, like in Kupiansk in Kharkiv region, Russian troops are once again advancing, meaning that residents face the threat of renewed occupation. Many of these challenges are shared by people living in areas that are close to the frontline. With many people fleeing (once more), these areas are increasingly depleted, leaving few residents and even fewer police as the last remaining representatives of the state.

In this context, it is especially crucial that communities have a sense of trust toward local law enforcement agencies. To be able to rebuild and fortify the control of the Ukrainian state over these territories, local populations need to see that the state – represented for instance by the police – is protecting and providing for them. However, Ukraine's law enforcement agencies are not always able to do so equally in every area and for every part of the country's population: their relationship to the communities they are meant to serve is rendered complicated by security concerns, a lack of communication, as well as structural problems. The loss of trust in law enforcement that ensues from these issues can further endanger civilians, for instance, when evacuation becomes necessary. If people do not trust law enforcement to do its job, which includes facing the consequences of war, this can (further) alienate civilians from their state.

The police in particular have historically enjoyed very low trust ratings among the Ukrainian population. Chief among citizens' concerns have been failures to address corruption in the police force.[2] Despite a comprehensive reform effort that followed the Euromaidan revolution in 2014, trust was still only at 30 percent in December 2021.[3] In late 2023, trust in Ukraine's National Police had risen to 41 percent, which is still significantly lower than trust levels for the Security Service or the Armed Forces, for example.[4] There are, however, promising concepts related to community safety and security that seem to work for both the population and the police, even in this challenging context. There are also war-related opportunities to increase citizens' trust in police, for instance, through the delivery of humanitarian aid or

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[1] Українська Гельсінська спілка з прав людини (Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union) and People in Need, "Впровадження «Community Policing» в умовах війни та воєнного стану" ("The Implementation of Community Policing in the Context of War and Martial Law"), 2023, accessed July 29, 2024, https://www.helsinki.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Vprovadzhennia-Community-Policing-v-umovakh-viyny-ta-voiennoho-stanu.pdf; and Головне управління Національної поліції в Одеській області (Main Directorate of the National Police in Odesa Oblast), "У 2022 році Нацполіція забезпечила реагування на 8 млн викликів громадян" ("In 2022, the National Police responded to 8 million calls from citizens"), January 23, 2023, accessed July 29, 2024, https://od.npu.gov.ua/news/u-2022-rotsi-natspolitsiia-zabezpechyla-reahuvannia-na-8-mln-vyklykiv-hromadian.

[2] Halyna Kokhan, "Police in Ukraine: Corruption Versus Reform," Chr. Michelsen Institute, accessed July 29, 2024, https://www.cmi.no/publications/7312-police-in-ukraine-corruption-versus-reform.

[3] Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, "Dynamics of trust in social institutions in 2021-2023," December 18, 2023, accessed 29 July 2024, https://kiis.com.ua/?cat=reports&id=1335&lang=eng&page=1.

[4] Razumkov Centre, "Citizens' assessment of the situation in the country and actions of the authorities. Trust in social institutions, politicians, officials and public figures (January 2024)," February 08, 2024, accessed July 29, 2024, https://razumkov.org.ua/en/news/citizens-assessment-of-the-situation-in-the-country-and-actions-of-the-authorities-trust-in-social-institutions-politicians-officials-and-public-figures-january-2024.

assistance with people's most basic needs. These are good practices that Ukraine's law enforcement can build on, including with support from international actors.

This policy brief outlines the main obstacles to greater trust between Ukraine's population and its law enforcement agencies in the de-occupied and frontline areas and proposes ways in which international actors to support better police-community relations in Ukraine. The analysis and recommendations are based on 25 interviews conducted with Ukrainian law enforcement officials, CSOs, Ukrainian and international experts, and representatives of international organizations. Out of these 25 conversations, 15 were held in person in Lviv and Kyiv in May 2024 and 10 were conducted online with counterparts located across Ukraine and abroad.

The Situation in the De-Occupied and Frontline Areas

To analyze the situation and needs of local populations and law enforcement in areas that are highly affected by the war, the category of "de-occupied areas" is of only limited use. Both Kherson and Bucha have been de-occupied, but the current living situation in the two places could hardly be more different. The security situation and proximity to the frontline is arguably the most decisive factor when it comes to the relations between an area's population and the police because it enables or hampers interaction and dictates every other aspect of life. Highly combat-affected areas share many of the same challenges, such as shelling, a frequent lack of energy and an ensuing disruption of connections, heavy mine pollution and weapons proliferation, as well as, in extreme cases, an absence of basic services. Instead of designing policies or projects for "de-occupied" and "frontline" areas separately, a needs-based approach across Ukraine's liberated and frontline territories, which are often located in the same regions can be more instructive for international donors. Such an approach can also allow for a smoother adaptation of policy in areas where the security situation worsens or improves.

People facing re-occupation were particularly marginalized and often did not trust anyone: not their neighbors and not state institutions, let alone the police.

When it comes to the local population, a recent survey suggested that people in Ukraine's de-occupied territories were not too concerned with crime or police work in general – their top priorities being housing (across all areas) and safety from shelling (in regions closer to the front).[5] The unanimous take from those interviewed for this brief was that "everyone" in highly affected areas, be they de-occupied or close to the front, was vulnerable – but everyone in their own way. A particularly hard-hit group are the elderly in frontline areas, who are often alone and unable to call on others for help or to organize evacuations. Many do not have anywhere to go in the first place. Interviewees also stated that the people facing re-occupation were particularly marginalized and often did not trust anybody: not their neighbors and not state institutions, let alone the police.

For communities who in Ukraine's de-occupied and/or frontline areas, the relevant law enforcement and security actors aside from the Ukrainian Armed Forces are the National Police of Ukraine (NPU), the National Guard, and the State Emergency Service – all subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Affairs – as well as the Security Service of Ukraine. The Ministry has given out guidelines for the division of labor between these various actors on the

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[5] O. Gladunov and N. Bohdanets, "The state of public opinion in the de-occupied territory of Ukraine," Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2023, accessed July 29, 2024, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/21101.pdf.

ground; however, according to several interviewees, there is de facto no standardized approach for cooperation between law enforcement actors in theater. In some places, civilian volunteer units (the Dobrovol'che Formuvannia Teritorial'noi Hromady) are also present. These emerged in the early days of the war as a sort of civilian protection brigade and sometimes take on police functions such as checkpoint controls.

A particularly important part of the NPU are the so-called Community Police Officers (Politseiskyi Offitser Hromady)[6], roles which were established with the help of a US-led training assistance program before the full-scale invasion. These are regular police officers that go through a special training[7] to become sheriff-type local police, meaning they are from and working in their local community (hromada), answering to their fellow citizens. While they are still part of and reporting to NPU,[8] it is up to the local community to provide them with office space and necessary equipment, a car and fuel. This ownership is important to ensure buy-in, but not all communities can afford their part of the bargain – one of the reasons why there is not a community police officer in every hromada.

War-Related Obstacles to Trust Between Communities and Law Enforcement

Security Concerns

In a setting where shelling, mines and other war-related security challenges are posing dangers to law enforcement agents and civilians alike, enabling the presence and functioning of law enforcement actors is in of itself the best way to increase communities' trust in them.

But this is easier said than done: according to interviewees, there is an overall shortage of police personnel, especially in more dangerous areas and even more so as the NPU is creating new fighting brigades made up of police personnel. In the most dangerous areas, which are often scarcely populated, officers are present only during the day but leave at night. Considering that visibility is an important component of community-oriented policing,[9] a reduction of engagement, though necessary due to security reasons, is not conducive to trust-building. On the positive side, some of the new police functions in these areas, such as giving out humanitarian aid, have been increasing police popularity.

Further impeding trust is the fact that law enforcement actors can (even unintentionally) pose a danger to civilians. For instance, community police officers located about 20 kilometers from the frontline stated that they were advised to stay away from large gatherings so as not to endanger the local population since police represent a potential target for Russian ordnance. In other areas, there was anecdotal evidence of police offices being hit by shelling as soon as

[6] National Police of Ukraine, "Поліцейський офіцер громади" ("Community Police Officer"), accessed July 29, 2024, https://www.npu.gov.ua/diyalnist/reforma-policiyi/policejskij-oficer-gromadi.

[7] US Department of Justice Criminal Division, "Ukraine: ICITAP-Supported Police Officers of the Community Complete Basic Training," March 27, 2024, accessed July 29, 2024, https://www.justice.gov/criminal/blog/ukraine-icitap-supported-police-officers-community-complete-basic-training.

[8] "Community police officers report directly to the head of the prevention sector of the police department that serves the selected community", as stated in National Police of Ukraine, "Поліцейський офіцер громади" ("Community Police Officer").

[9] Українська Гельсінська спілка з прав людини (Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union) and People in Need, "Впровадження «Community Policing» в умовах війни та воєнного стану" ("The Implementation of 'Community Policing In The Context of War and Martial Law"), 2023.

they were established, or of police rotating buildings to prevent them from being destroyed. This puts a great strain on the police operating in such areas and reduces communication between civilians and police.

In the starkest case, individual officers rotate from the fighting in the trenches to conducting passport controls in a matter of just a few days.

Additionally, the NPU has recently taken up the task of verifying men of conscription age and sending them to the relevant recruitment offices across the country as part of the overall mobilization drive in Ukraine. While there appears to be much confusion about the police's precise role in the mobilization, since they are technically not allowed to enlist anyone, many men have resorted to avoiding them. This decreases interaction and trust. Generally, through the imposition of martial law, all civilian institutions, including law enforcement, are subordinate to the military. While widely accepted as being necessary in a state of war, this has led to a militarization of civilian security structures and a general blending of the two. Several non-military security actors, including the NPU and the State Border Guard Service, also have fighting brigades,[10] which means that in the starkest case, individual officers rotate from the fighting in the trenches to conducting passport controls in a matter of just a few days. This switch between civilian and military duties can be difficult and have consequences for their interactions with civilians everywhere in Ukraine.

Lack of Communication

Related to the overall trend of militarization described above, the war has increased the need for secrecy in all security and law enforcement bodies in Ukraine. This can make it difficult for police to explain certain measures to the local population. The trade-off between safeguarding operations against Russian spies and attacks and having open conversations with the population can be very challenging. Still, even within these limitations, several interviewees said that if local law enforcement made greater efforts to communicate their work, this would foster an understanding among the population of the constraints under which police are operating.

As a positive example, interviewees pointed out that the efforts by law enforcement to speedily record damage at the sights of shelling is appreciated by locals who need this information to ask for compensation. Representatives of humanitarian organizations, however, also stated that some civilians made the experience that while shelling was documented quickly, their reports of war crimes or collaboration went without follow-up. This may be related to the security situation – war crimes, for instance, are much easier to investigate (including with the help of international actors) in the relatively safe and accessible areas around Kyiv. However, if the police do not communicate this, the population might get the impression that they are simply not doing their work.

Similarly, the way collaboration has been dealt with in de-occupied areas has proven highly unsatisfactory to the local population, with the dominant impression being that small fish who did not do much harm received severe punishments whereas high-profile cases simply disappeared.[11] Again, it is understandable that there is some secrecy involved in pursuing saboteurs and collaborators; however, without an explanation for the imbalance of harsh punishments for minor transgressions and (perceived) impunity regarding major cases, trust

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[10] Siobhan O'Grady and Kostiantyn Khdov, "Cops in the trenches: Ukrainian police key to fight against Russia," *The Washington Post*, November 17, 2023, accessed 29 July 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/17/cops-trenches-ukrainian-police-key-fight-against-russia/.

[11] International Crisis Group, "A Fraught Path Forward for Ukraine's Liberated Territories," Report N°271, June 20, 2024, accessed July 29, 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/271-fraught-path-forward-ukraines-liberated-territories.

in law enforcement decreases. As pointed out by one interviewee, a failure to address these concerns also feeds allegations of corruption.

Several interviewees stressed that dialogue formats, as promoted by some international actors and aimed at increasing trust between civilians and law enforcement, were not necessarily an effective tool for improving the current situation in highly affected areas. Instead, they could be perceived by civilians as a distraction from where the true problem lies. As one interviewee pointed out: "If the problem is the way collaboration is pursued, then this is what needs to be fixed – not to have some dialogue format for the sake of dialogue." Similarly, another interviewee was quite skeptical about a program called "Police in Schools" as part of which a police officer was present in each classroom. While this was meant to increase points of interaction between officers and communities, the interviewee stated that there was no point of having police "just sit there" if this was not coupled with any educational or communication effort. Instead, structured efforts to educate the population about war-induced dangers, such as landmines and civil protection, more broadly would be useful while simultaneously increasing communication.

Structural Issues

Several interviewees mentioned that Ukraine's police were not adequately prepared to engage with a traumatized population. Particularly with regard to more specialized issues, such as gender-based violence, interviewees from humanitarian organizations pointed out that while training was done in these areas and efforts had been made, this was not mainstreamed and that they often encounter police who did not have an adequate understanding of the problem. Perhaps for this reason, several interviewees indicated that there was a strong individual factor in how well police were interacting with communities in very stressful and dangerous settings. Interviewees also stressed that much depended on the local commander – including to what extent they considered the relations between police and the community an important issue. While an individual factor is always present, these statements can be indicative of a structural deficit in making sure that concepts are mainstreamed, and training is properly applied throughout the entire organization.

While there is no official data, interviewees pointed out that there were very few to no female police officers present in the regions close to the frontline. This is a problem since a lack of female staff can hamper communication with the local population if, for instance, women are more comfortable reporting violence to a female officer. It is widely accepted that a diverse police force enables a more nuanced understanding of communities' security needs.[12] Additionally, in some de-occupied areas, police officers from other parts of the country are present on a rotating basis. The rotation system is quite opaque and not applied throughout

The internal psychological support structures that do exist within the agencies are likely designed to serve the functioning of the organization more than being an offer of help to staff.

the country. Some interviewees suggested that police officers who are not local to the district they are serving are less engaged in people's concerns. Whether this is true or not, building trust can be more challenging for persons considered outsiders to a community.

For law enforcement officers themselves, the lack of institutionalized psychosocial support poses a great challenge. Several interviewees from within law enforcement pointed out that there was a weak culture of asking for psychosocial support but that such support was very much needed given the high-stress environment that police are operating in. What is more, law enforcement actors who are active in Ukraine's de-occupied and/or frontline areas often have family that relocated to other parts of the country or went abroad. Because the war is not

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[12] DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN Women, "Security Sector Governance, Security Sector Reform and Gender," in DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN Women, *Gender and Security Toolkit*, Geneva: 2019, accessed July 29, 2024, https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/GSToolkit_Tool-1%20EN%20FINAL_2.pdf.

limited to one part of the country, even family members located farther from the front are not safe either. This reality puts additional pressure on officers working in a high-stress environment, and several interviewees expressed a wish for more support in taking care of family business. The internal psychological support structures that do exist within the agencies are likely designed to serve the functioning of the organization more than being an offer of help to staff (e.g., when a psychologist reports to the same hierarchy level as the person they are meant to consult). While efforts are underway to improve these structures, this lack of individual counselling opportunities for law enforcement staff is creating mental health problems, which are further exacerbated by a general lack of specialized psychologists in all areas of Ukrainian society.[13]

Recommendations

Needs in the de-occupied and frontline areas are vast and numerous actors are involved in cooperating with law enforcement in Ukraine. Such efforts include dedicated programs by the US (the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program) and Canada (the Police Stabilization Project); the EU Advisory Mission to Ukraine; the EU-funded EU4Recovery project implemented by UNDP; and work by international and local CSOs. To make sure that additional contributions in this area do no duplicate but build on others' activities, there is a need for more coordination and up-to-date, localized needs assessments at the regional or, where possible, the community level (partnering up with those who have recently conducted such assessments is another option for donors.) When providing funding, it is also important that international donors maintain a balance between working with Ukraine's centralized system and introducing a degree of conditionality to ensure that enough donations arrive in the regions. Many donors have a wealth of experience in this regard already. Crucially, it is local administrations that should be in the lead: international actors or volunteers cannot and should not make difficult decisions for local communities about how to prioritize their resources. Finally, international actors should factor in that in-kind donations are frequently destroyed by Russian shelling or mines, making a steady flow of donations, rather than one-off contributions, desirable.

In general, given the volatile security situation in many parts of Ukraine, international actors should pursue a scalable approach that can be adapted to a changing security environment as outlined in the following.

Enabling the work of law enforcement actors even under the most difficult conditions:

- A mobile connection is crucial not only for the daily work of police in de-occupied and frontline areas, but also for their mental health as it allows them to keep in touch with family and feel connected to the rest of the country. **Star links** are frequently used for connection and therefore almost always needed, as is most **basic IT equipment**. Moreover, **power banks** are a way for officers

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[13] As was also noted in other policy briefs in this series, see: Galyna Kotliuk, "The Hidden Front of Russia's War," Global Public Policy Institute, June 26, 2024, accessed July 29, 2024, https://gppi.net/2024/06/26/the-hidden-front-of-russias-war-addressing-gender-based-violence-in-ukraine; Maryna Shevtsova, "Queering Displacement," Global Public Policy Institute, April 4, 2024, accessed July 29, 2024, https://gppi.net/2024/04/04/queering-displacement-ukrainian-lgbtq-community; and Yuliia Siedaia, "Adapting and Resocializing After Fighting for Ukraine's Independence," Global Public Policy Institute, July 24, 2024, accessed July 29, 2024, https://gppi.net/2024/07/24/ukrainian-women-veterans-experience-from-2014-to-the-present.

to charge these devices as the energy situation worsens across the country. International actors can support a functioning police presence in these areas by ramping up their supply of these items.

- Given the extent of destruction of Ukraine's energy infrastructure, multiple interviewees said it was crucial to think about the **winterization** of law enforcement agencies early on in the year. Related needs, which international actors can help alleviate, span from **generators** to **thermal wear**.

- The demand for **cars** is high, too – particularly where police serve a community that is spread out across several small settlements. Mobility is also a crucial enabler for the community police officers. For those units conducting **evacuations**, special **vehicles** that are adapted for the transport of immobile individuals, the elderly or persons with disabilities are crucial.

## Doing more where the security situation is (slightly) more stable:

- Multiple international actors are implementing projects that aim to provide a type of **safe space**. This means they equip and establish a place, often located in a shelter, where members of the local community can come to feel "just a moment of safety," as one interviewee put it. Some of these locations have specific themes – for instance, there is a specific safe space for women and children in Kherson where police are present. In other areas, such safe spaces are conceived more as one-stop shops where services are provided, information is shared, and where emergency workers, police and medical staff are present. These locations can be highly useful, though questions of accessibility must also be considered for them to be truly inclusive spaces.

- Clearer and better **communication** is needed from the side of law enforcement. What their tasks are, what they are not responsible for, what rights citizens have: this is all important information for communities. Making it accessible will increase citizens' trust when they are interacting with police. The content and form of this communication can be different depending on the security situation. Telegram channels, Facebook pages, or even leaflets – Ukrainian organizations have ample experience in designing appealing information campaigns.

- From the post-Maidan period that preceded Russia's full-scale invasion there is a **wealth of tried-and-tested approaches** for increasing interaction and trust between police and communities across Ukraine, which international actors can support. Initiatives like "coffee with cops" or open-house days organized by community policing officers[14] can serve as staging grounds for dialogue-based approaches and more traditional community policing – as long as the security situation remains stable enough. Any such dialogue should have a clearly stated goal (e.g., community development, landmine awareness, etc.) and be based on needs assessments.

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[14] Kate Kaimashnikova, "Community Policing: Best practices," The Canada-Ukraine Police Development Project, May 17, 2021, accessed July 29, 2024, https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/community-policing-best-practices/244610387#73.

Providing structural support:

- External actors can play a valuable role in supporting the design and setup of adequate **psychosocial support** structures within law enforcement agencies, and some of them do already. This is a crucial issue but one that requires a proper understanding of both the local context and the existing structures. Good practices and lessons can be particularly useful here: How to change mindsets about the need for psychosocial support within the agencies? While programs like the "mental tutor"[15] project launched by the NPU show that this problem is increasingly recognized, there are also concrete implementation questions, such as where to find the needed psychologists.

- International actors have been supporting Ukraine's law enforcement agencies to prepare lessons and good practices that were learned during the 2022 wave of de-occupation. To support **contingency planning**, it would be equally important to develop such lessons learned and standardized protocols for the case of re-occupation, too.

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[15] Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, "Mental Health Tutor", December 29th, 2023, accessed August 27, 2024, https://mvs.gov.ua/en/psixologicne-zabezpecennia/projekti/mental-health-tutor.
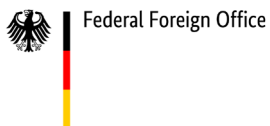
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Reinhardtstr. 7, 10117 Berlin, Germany
Phone +49 30 275 959 75-0
gppi@gppi.net
gppi.net