

URGENT STATEMENT FROM PROTECTION APPROACHES ON THE SITUATION IN UKRAINE
24 FEBRUARY 2022, LONDON

Protection Approaches is deeply alarmed by the rapid escalation of Russian aggression in Ukraine. We are likewise alarmed by the extent to which our own government is unprepared to adequately respond.

We call on Her Majesty's Government to urgently recognise the very likely and rising risks of widespread human rights violations, including mass atrocity crimes, and to centre UK capabilities to help mitigate those risks across its Ukraine policy.

Putin's Russia has a proven track record of committing and facilitating mass atrocity crimes. From Chechnya to Syria the Russian government under Putin's leadership has deliberately and systematically utilised war crimes and crimes against humanity to further its political objectives. On Ukraine's own territory, in Crimea and the Donbass, Russian campaigns of aggression have included documented human rights violations and atrocity.

As experts in the prevention of identity-based violence and mass atrocity crimes we consider the immediate and medium term risks of widespread systematic human rights violations in Ukraine to be high and rising. The border regions, including but not limited to Crimea and the Donbass, are exceptionally vulnerable.

The Russian architecture of violence is transnational, enabled by global and regional illicit financial flows, underpinned by organised crime and kleptocratic networks, supported by a spectrum of non-state and pseudo-non-state armed actors, and promoted by coordinated disinformation structures. When properly mapped out, this architecture holds considerable opportunity for sanction, leverage, and influence. The UK currently lacks the capabilities to properly undertake this network analysis and so continues to miss these opportunities.

We in no way acknowledge the Kremlin's claims that genocide is being perpetrated by Ukraine against Russians nor do we accept the premise that Russian aggression in Ukraine is justified by euphemistic desires to 'de-nazify' the country. We are concerned by the presence in Ukraine of far-right militia and other armed non-state actors. Risks of these forces committing violations will also rise in the coming weeks and months. We urge states and agencies to recognise this threat that, if allowed to grow, will contribute to destabilising the situation further and risks perpetuating radicalisation. However, there must be no equivalency in how these dynamics are understood, reported, or responded to and the threats posed by Russian state and auxiliary combatants.

Alongside and intersecting with the dynamics of Russian aggression, the presence of far-right networks, and the pervasive anxiety of war, we expect to see increased risks for some civil society activists, journalists, human rights defenders and politicians. Domestic violence will likely rise. Marginalised and minoritized communities, including Tatar, LGBTQI+, Romani communities, will be a great risk of discrimination and identity-based violence. Monitoring these threats must not be deprioritised and decisions must take in to account comprehensive analysis of structural and physical violence in the country and wider region. This is not a nice to have but integral to ensuring UK policy does no harm and has at its centre the pursuit of an equitable and just Ukraine.

Without strategy or policy on reducing risks of atrocity crimes, without systems capable of mapping actors, without the means of monitoring risk, and without having anyone tasked with the job, Her

Majesty's Government enters this crisis at acute disadvantage and ill-equipped to uphold its responsibilities to help prevent atrocity crimes.

Past mistakes of British foreign policy where failures to foresee the trajectory of violence and the refusal to centre human rights concerns in decision making cannot be repeated. The singular goal must not be to respond to Russian aggression but to help decrease risks of armed conflict and mass atrocity crimes. This is not a semantic difference but a strategic one that must inform all UK decision making. The dual need to reduce the risks of armed conflict and atrocity crimes must be pursued together but not as one. The UK has learnt painfully in former Yugoslavia, in Syria, in Myanmar that a narrow approach to conflict prevention does not work. It will be unforgivable if these errors are made again in Ukraine.

A year ago the outcomes of the Prime Minister's Integrated Review promised a new way forward for British foreign policy. It promised a new approach to conflict and mass atrocities. The Afghanistan debacle last summer showed the limits to these promises and the extent to which the rushed merger between DfID and the FCO continued to confuse internal working. These errors cannot be repeated again in Ukraine. We know that good work is being done within the FCDO's Conflict Centre to address the gaps in British systems and capabilities with respect to atrocity prevention: this work must now be prioritised and sped up, not side-lined.

The implications for regional and longer-term instability and violence will continue to metastasize. While the need to respond to events as they unfold is both understandable and needed, prioritisation must also be given to scenario planning, analysis and human rights centred strategy. The UK must prepare for what comes next and to focus on preventing the worst outcomes.

Protection Approaches believes in the collective responsibility to help protect populations from atrocity crimes. This responsibility is first and foremost a responsibility to help prevent. Far from banishing atrocity crimes, our world has become more accustomed to them. This era of impunity and the collective failure to adequately recognise and respond to widespread systematic threats to life have compounded in myriad ways that eat away at the strength and perceived legitimacy of human rights, democracy and multilateralism. This erosion is a threat to us all. The alternative is not – and must never be – a return to an earlier era of muscular western aggression. The alternative can only be the human rights centred strategic implementation of comprehensive, joined up decision making across government departments and global partners that has at its heart the goal of prevention not simply of response.

Our team stands in solidarity with the people of Ukraine but also with the people of Russia, who live under the shadow of Putin's tyranny.

We make the following recommendations to Her Majesty's Government:

HMG must urgently integrate a framework of atrocity prevention into the UK's Ukraine strategy to ensure that UK officials are able to monitor risk and communicate those risks internally and externally. It can do so in the following ways.

HMG must immediately undertake comprehensive network analysis of the Russian architecture of violence to properly identify the complex architectures that perpetuate and encourage identity-based violence. These tools encourage a more creative and evidenced focus upon how these networks can be disrupted or dismantled. Network analysis brings to light the full spectrum of actors that enable

the perpetration of violence, including supply chains, human trafficking networks, the arms trade, media outlets, armed groups, and communities themselves. **Network analysis allows actors to target those weak spots – be they financial flows, communication systems, or other forms of enablement.**

HMG must take a creative and robust approach to sanctions and tackling financial flows, informed by such analysis. Sanctions are a tool of coercion as well as aggression with the potential to influence a wide range of actors. When conceived and applied well, smart sanctions can be an effective international response to contexts where risk of violence are mounting. The UK's independent sanctions regime means HMG is well placed to lead by example in censuring key individuals, systems and institutions fanning division. However, we know that the new UK human rights sanction regime is still being finessed and so far has not been mobilised with either speed or creativity. This must be immediately rectified.

HMG must establish an emergency communications protocol to fast-track information flows and policy responses if/when further atrocity risks are identified. Such a process would better connect the embassy staff and crisis team with their counterparts in London and New York. Streamlining emergency communications will contribute to more effective actions by the UK at the UN, with partners, and bilaterally. Such a mechanism needs to be fully embedded and clear guidance provided to all relevant officials on how and when to raise alerts and red flags.

The crisis team and neighbouring country embassies must urgently develop the means to identify and monitor the specific risk indicators of identity-based violence – including mass atrocity crimes. We know this isn't currently being done. UK country teams in South Sudan, Myanmar and DRC, for example, do this already: UK officials working on Ukraine, Russia, and neighbouring countries – including states of the western Balkans – must be integrating this intelligence collection to inform targeted and wider regional policy from the application of sanctions to efforts to mitigate destabilisation in states such as Bosnia-Herzegovina.

HMG must make atrocity prevention in Ukraine someone's job. Country teams working in and on atrocity-at-risk states should all have a designated atrocity prevention lead. The Ukraine crisis team should follow the example of the Myanmar team, which has created the role of Atrocity Prevention and Human Rights Coordinator. However, unlike in Myanmar, this position should be of appropriate seniority and properly resourced.

The country teams must be properly resourced to work with, listen to and learn from in-country civil society, and invest in programmes that effectively address and reduce risks of identity-based violence, division and mass atrocities. Programming should support civil society led efforts to prepare for civil protection, safe evacuation, emergency communication and documentation as well as sustainable long-term development of cohesive equitable communities, high public trust and strong inclusive institutions.

ENDS.

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