

## Airwars: Methodology Note

### Documenting patterns of harm in Kharkiv

May 2023

This overview is intended to accompany our [Research Brief](#) 'Patterns of civilian harm from alleged Russian actions in Kharkiv oblast', our [conflict overview page](#), and our [archive](#).

This approach was originally developed as we documented conflicts across Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia and the Gaza Strip, and closely aligns with [global standards on Casualty Recording](#).

#### What is an 'incident'?

Airwars uses an incident-based approach to document civilian harm: each incident is defined as a moment in time and space where sources reported death or injury to civilian non-combatant populations. See more on sourcing below.

Where the exact time or location of an incident is unknown, civilian deaths and injuries may be aggregated under one event until more information comes to light. Each incident is geolocated to the highest possible degree of accuracy by trained geolocation teams. Where locations cannot be precisely identified, civilian harm incidents will be aggregated until more information is known.

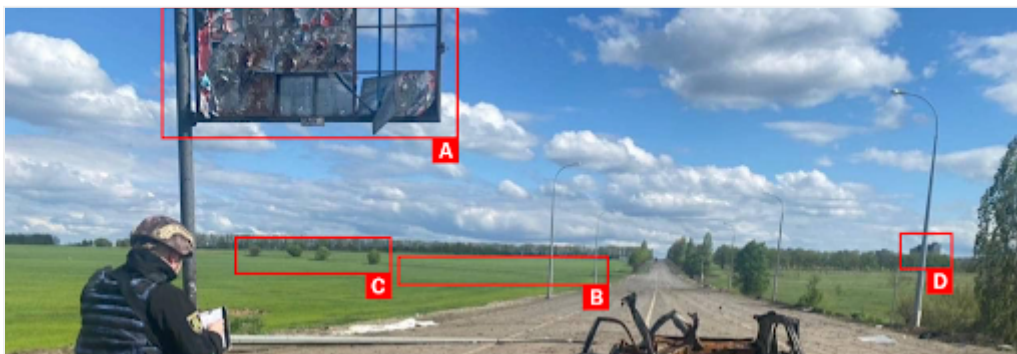


Image from our geolocation verification, incident [RUK192](#)

Our threshold of geolocation accuracy for including an incident in our archive is at sub-district level.

All incidents are considered 'live' in our archive, and can be updated and changed to account for evolving information.

### **Who are our sources?**

For our work casualty recording, we assessed all known open source claims of civilian non-combatants killed or injured by all parties using explosive weapons in Kharkiv oblast.

Our sources were identified by our trained team of Ukrainian researchers, using an incident-based method to develop a continuously evolving list of sources for monitoring and investigating allegations of civilian deaths or injuries. These sources include Telegram, Twitter, Facebook, and local and international media or organisations, in Ukrainian, Russian and English language.

We routinely conduct data mapping exercises to ensure that we are coordinating with other civil society and documentation groups working in a similar field.

To date, similar aggregate databases covering casualty records in Kharkiv include: Bellingcat, Eyes on Russia-Center for Information Resilience, Attacks on Health Care in Ukraine Project, Hala systems, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), Victims Memorial, Ukraine War Archive, Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group and Helsinki Human Rights Union/Tribunal For Putin (T4P) initiative.

These databases are referenced throughout our assessments, to facilitate information sharing and data reconciliation across the diverse range of documentation efforts.

Note that Airwars' mention of an incident recorded by another open source dataset does not mean that Airwars findings precisely match what has been recorded by that organisation. In certain cases, findings may differ due to the sources used or due to differences in methodology.

### Managing dis/misinformation

As in all conflicts we monitor, we include any and all information relevant to a single incident of civilian harm, regardless of the affiliation of the source. In other words, if a source includes reference to the civilians killed or injured in a single incident it will be included in our

assessment. If a source includes only generic information without being linked to a single incident, it will not be included.

All information is assessed, written up and archived within each assessment in order to allow the user of the dataset to conduct further investigation if needed.

### Civilian casualty categories

Airwars has developed a unique methodology to categorise civilian harm incidents according to the nature of information identified in relation to the incident. This approach allows users of the archive to quickly understand the information environment relating to each allegation.

- **Fair:** all sources agree civilian harm occurred as a result of the actions of **one** belligerent (i.e. all sources agreed that Russian forces killed civilians in a single strike)
- **Contested:** not all sources agree on who was responsible for the civilian harm (i.e. some sources alleged harm resulted from Russian actions, some sources alleged harm resulted from Ukrainian forces actions).
- **Weak:** the allegation of harm came from only a single source, with little unique information circulated amongst open sources. This category may change to 'fair' or 'contested' if more information comes to light. For example, incidents qualified as 'weak' in occupied areas, where access to information has been restricted by Russian forces, may later be reassessed after new details are revealed.
- **Discounted:** Incidents where the original assessment of civilian casualties is later proven inaccurate, due to new information that comes to light.

### **Additional categories and notes**

#### Personal information on civilians harmed

Names and personal information related to civilians harmed whose identities are known have not been included in our public archive, due to on-going security fears and with respect to the Ukrainian Law on Protection of Personal Data, along with other regulations. Airwars maintains a secure private archive of individuals named, should the situation evolve.

#### Damage to infrastructure

We have coded for damage to civilian infrastructure in cases where civilian death or injury was also reported. Our definition of 'infrastructure' is evolving, but to date accounts for any mention of the following terms by sources: healthcare infrastructure, school, agriculture, humanitarian aid

distribution, humanitarian evacuation, religious institution, marketplace, gas facility, power station, and water station.

## **Challenges and limitations**

### On casualty recording in Ukraine and in Kharkiv region

The Ukrainian government stopped publishing national casualty estimates four days into the war. The United Nations, currently the sole official source for those figures, does not provide details of casualties per region. In the beginning of May 2023, the UN's estimate found confirmed evidence of only 8,800 Ukrainian civilians killed in 15 months in all of Ukraine, mostly resulting from the use of explosive weapons. The UN has repeatedly admitted this is an underestimate, while Ukrainian war prosecutors estimate the real toll may be 10 times higher.

Airwars' Ukraine team has found that a number of local sources often referred to authorities regarding casualty reporting and casualty numbers, and were less likely than in other conflicts monitored by Airwars to provide separate grassroots estimates of civilian deaths. This might be explained by the fact that even prior to the full-scale invasion, Ukraine has had functioning official security, forensic and medico-legal structures trusted by civilians to internally record civilian harm. Fears of occupation and retaliation in Kharkiv oblast during the time of reference could also explain less willingness from sources to publish open source details about incidents.

Our team has noted limited accounts of civilian injuries reported in local media, with sources instead often referring to civilians 'pulled from the rubble'. Without clear mention of injuries, we have not included those rescued from the rubble in our range of civilians injured. However, we have captured this information in our summary of the incident. This is a datapoint we are exploring as an information proxy for physical harm.

### On the identification of victims and missing individuals

In a number of incidents, our researchers encountered one major gap in the information publicly released – the identities of the victims. In Ukrainian language reporting there has been few mentions of names of victims, and limited information related to their gender, age or occupation. There are a number of potential reasons for this gap but a key factor is the Ukrainian Law on Protection of Personal Data, along with other regulations, applied by authorities to protect civilians' identities. This allows the release of personal information only when approval has been given by the victim or their family. Other reasons might involve security risks related to documentation of civilian harm within areas of active combat such as Kharkiv, as well as the

difficult or forbidden access for civilians to destroyed or collapsed buildings in urban areas when looking for their loved ones.

The identification of civilians killed in the conflict has also been particularly challenging in Kharkiv oblast given that many areas in the region were occupied by Russian forces for several months. In October 2022, Ukrainian authorities reported that they found hundreds of bodies in newly retaken areas. When causes of death were not known, as many families are still waiting for the results of DNA tests and additional investigations to know the fate of their loved ones, these victims were not included in our casualty totals. Some experts have said that it could take years to find and identify civilian victims, with Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group estimating that nearly 2,000 individuals remain missing in Kharkiv oblast alone.