

POLICY REPORT  
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# Russia's Coercive Occupation of Ukraine

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A road sign with the name of the city of Lysychansk is broken on the side of a road on the outskirts of Lysychansk, eastern Ukraine, on May 14, 2022, after fighting raged in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region. (Yasuyoshi Chiba / AFP via Getty Images)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report examines Russian occupation as a system, not merely a matter of shifting front lines or territorial control. It traces how coercive practices first tested in Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk after 2014 – including administrative absorption, population control, child militarization, information suppression, and the dismantling of local governance – have been systematically expanded and intensified across territories seized since 2022. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, engagement with resistance networks operating under occupation, key informant interviews, open-source intelligence (OSINT), and detailed case studies such as Mariupol, the report centers the lived experience of civilians navigating repression, adaptation, and resistance.

By mapping the mechanisms through which Russia consolidates control – from filtration systems and forced passportization to economic integration and cultural erasure – the report assesses the implications for Ukraine’s long-term territorial recovery, demographic resilience, and state legitimacy. Finally, it considers the broader implications for the future of regional security in Europe, including the normalization of occupation as a strategy of warfare, the erosion of post-Cold War norms, and the risks posed to neighboring states if such models of control go unchallenged.

## Core Findings: Tools of Occupation

A central theme is that physical coercion and administrative and legal measures reinforce each other, blurring distinctions between “violent” and “non-violent” tools of control. The report divides the occupied areas into three groups: The Crimean Peninsula annexed in 2014; other parts of Eastern Ukraine invaded during 2014; and areas occupied after the full-scale invasion in 2022. Occupation practices follow recurring patterns across them.

Key tools of Russian occupation in Ukraine include:

- Illegal annexations and sham referenda.
- Puppet administrations and long-term “patronage” programs that bind occupied regions to Russian federal and regional structures.
- Forced acquisition of Russian passports tied to access to healthcare, employment, property, banking, digital identity, and freedom of movement.
- Non-holders treated as “foreigners” or “stateless” and exposed to repression, dispossession, or deportation.
- Systematic mobilization of Ukrainian men from occupied territories.
- Mandatory military contracts, normalized oath-taking ceremonies, and military presence as part of everyday city life.
- Authorities have replaced Ukrainian academic curricula with Russian state narratives, imposed mandatory propaganda classes, and expanded paramilitary youth structures that provide increasingly sophisticated military training for children.
- Parents who try to keep their children in Ukrainian online schooling face raids, threats, or loss of custody, with children at risk of removal to re-education institutions or camps.
- Forced displacement of Ukrainians and parallel settlement schemes offering salaries, subsidized mortgages, and one-off payments to Russian doctors, teachers, officials, and their families to move into occupied areas.
- Embedding occupied Ukraine’s economy into that of the Russian Federation.
- Russian contractors gaining contracts to rebuild occupied territories.

### TERRITORIAL ERASURE AND MANUFACTURED LEGITIMACY

### COERCED BELONGING AND PASSPORTIZATION

### FORCED CONSCRIPTION AND CHILD MILITARIZATION

### POPULATION ENGINEERING

**CIVILIAN AND CHILD IMPRISONMENT**

- Extensive networks of official and unofficial detention sites, filtration camps, and “basements” used for torture, intimidation, and the silencing of perceived dissenters, including minors.
- Widespread reports of regular disappearances of civilians.
- Widespread arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture (including electric shocks, beatings, sexual violence, and mock executions), and deaths in custody across an archipelago of official and informal facilities in occupied Ukraine and Russia.

**RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION**

- Targeted repression of non-Moscow-aligned denominations, including abductions, killings, and torture of clergy.
- Closures and seizures of churches.
- Use of the Russian Orthodox Church as an arm of state ideology.

**SURVEILLANCE AND INFORMATION CONTROL**

- Checkpoints, facial-recognition camera networks, phone searches, data-harvesting.
- Telecom rerouting to Russian networks and aggressive censorship that cuts occupied populations off from Ukrainian media.
- Flooding occupied areas with propaganda and pro-Kremlin influencer content.

**LEGAL AND PRACTICAL MECHANISMS TO CONFISCATE “OWNERLESS” UKRAINIAN PROPERTY**

- Classifying housing of displaced residents as eligible for expropriation.
- Integrating occupied territories into Russian land, tax, and civil-status registries.

**ECONOMIC CAPTURE THROUGH RUBLE INTEGRATION, CONTROL OF KEY BUSINESSES AND AGRICULTURE**

- Grant-funded construction projects and patronage networks.
- Tying Russian regional governments and companies to specific occupied districts.

**Methodology**

The report adopts qualitative, multisource research combining key informant interviews, case study analysis, and document-based research to develop a comprehensive and triangulated understanding of these interrelated dynamics.

Data collection drew on a wide range of open sources. Information on new construction projects in occupied territories was gathered by OSINT for Ukraine and the author from Russian-language materials, including official websites of real estate developers, construction firms and letting agencies, as well as regional pro-Russian Telegram channels, local media outlets, and publicly available Russian business registries.

To verify these findings, high-resolution satellite imagery, including from Google Earth, was analyzed by OSINT for Ukraine. For each site, imagery was reviewed across three timeframes: pre-war, the immediate post-siege period (mid-2022), and the reconstruction phase, using the most recent available data. Advanced OSINT support was also provided by the Center for Defence Reforms. This enabled cross-verification of reported construction activity and assessment of changes over time.

Additional evidentiary material included video footage and other digital content collected from Telegram, reflecting on-the-ground developments since 2014. Key informant interviews were conducted with intelligence professionals and representatives of governmental bodies in Ukraine who are engaged with resistance networks in occupied territories. These interviews and data provided up-to-date contextual insight, supported interpretation of OSINT findings, and



helped validate emerging patterns.

The report also incorporates media and online content analysis, reviewing international and Ukrainian reporting, investigative journalism, and Russian state and proxy narratives disseminated via social media.

Representatives of the DIU Official Chatbot initiative, which provides direct and secure anonymous communication with Ukrainian Defence Intelligence, provided extensive data on the experiences and observations from Ukrainians in occupied territory. These were supported by interviews conducted by the author with bodies of resistance and organizations inside Ukraine working to support those in occupation.

### **Introduction: Occupation as a System (2014–Present)**

Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territory began in February 2014 with the seizure and annexation of Crimea, carried out through the deployment of unmarked Russian forces and an internationally unrecognized referendum held in March.<sup>1</sup> This marked the first forcible annexation of territory in Europe since the Second World War; it constituted a clear violation of the U.N. Charter and Ukraine's sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> Russian authorities consolidated control through the dismantling of Ukrainian institutions and the rapid integration of Crimea into

1 United Nations, General Assembly, *Territorial Integrity of Ukraine*, A/RES/68/262 (March 27, 2014), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/68/262>.

2 Charter of the United Nations, June 26, 1945, 1 UNTS XVI, art. 2, para. 4, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

the Russian legal, administrative, and security framework.<sup>3</sup> Russia initiated and sustained armed conflict in eastern Ukraine through proxy forces in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. While formally denied by Moscow at the time, extensive evidence documented Russia's direct military, financial, and administrative involvement.<sup>4</sup> Occupation practices evolved gradually but followed similar patterns: The installation of proxy administrations, the persecution of pro-Ukrainian civilians, civilian disappearances and arbitrary detention, the use of sexual violence in detention settings, and the restriction of media and a militarized education.<sup>5</sup> Often framed in policy debates primarily as a question of territorial control, the reality is a coherent, multidimensional strategy of coercion designed to force allegiance to Russia.

The occupied territories of Ukraine should be divided into three conditional groups: the Crimean Peninsula, the territories occupied alongside Crimea in 2014 (parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions), and the territories occupied since 2022 (parts of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions).<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, certain differences can be observed. One key difference is that Russia seized Crimea in 2014 amid a power vacuum during the Revolution of Dignity and rapidly integrated it through a one-off "referendum" and formal annexation. At the same time, in eastern Ukraine, Russia initially relied on proxy forces and a prolonged, semi-deniable conflict before moving to open occupation and annexation years later.<sup>7</sup> The full-scale invasion launched in February 2022 dramatically expanded both the geographic scope and intensity of the Kremlin's practices by transforming occupation into a comprehensive apparatus of control affecting millions of people.

Twelve years of conflict and Russian occupation have left eastern Ukrainian cities in crisis with widespread failure in basic services like heat, electricity, and water. Sievierodonetsk, once home to 140,000 people, now has an estimated population of only 45,000. Remaining civilians consist of mostly the elderly or particularly vulnerable people who now rely on a single ambulance crew and rotating medical staff from Russia. Energy and water shortages are regularly reported around occupied areas, and even pro-Moscow figures have criticized the administration, underscoring that promises of socioeconomic programs remain largely unfulfilled, leaving civilians to bear the brunt of a collapsing system.<sup>8</sup> The absence of food, medicine, and basic services was widespread at the beginning of the occupation, both in 2014 and in 2022. As of now, the situation is reported as somewhat improved, although there remain ongoing problems with access to fuel. Medicines are also reportedly used as a tool for blackmail and are not freely available.<sup>9</sup>

Inside these territories reside nearly 6 million Ukrainians, including over 1.5 million children.<sup>10</sup> These figures reflect the population of four regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia – along with the Crimean Peninsula. It accounts for nearly 20% of Ukraine's internationally recognized land and alone

3 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine* (April 15, 2014), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/report-human-rights-situation-ukraine-15-april-2014>.

4 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Report on Violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law in Eastern Ukraine* (Warsaw: OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2015).

5 Council of Europe, *Human Rights Violations in the Context of the Conflict in Ukraine* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2016).

6 Representatives of the 'DIU Official Chatbot' initiative, correspondence with author via the Ukrainian Security and Cooperation Center, Kyiv, March 17, 2026.

7 Cairn University Masland Library, "Timeline of the Conflict in Ukraine," *Ukraine: A Resource Guide*, last updated June 13, 2025, accessed April 21, 2026, <https://libguides.cairn.edu/ukraine/timeline>; *Encyclopædia Britannica*, s.v. "Ukraine crisis," accessed April 21, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ukraine-crisis>; International Crisis Group, "Conflict in Ukraine's Donbas: A Visual Explainer," *Visual Explainers*, accessed April 12, 2026, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/visual-explainers/conflict-ukraines-donbas-visual-explainer>.

8 Yuras Karmanau, "Life is harsh and dangerous in Russian-run parts of Ukraine, activists and former residents say," *The Associated Press*, February 21, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-war-ukraine-occupation-putin-cf2ca7071c54da307650c3b9e2fa8f07>.

9 'DIU Official Chatbot' initiative, correspondence.

10 "Ministry for Reintegration: Approximately Six Million Ukrainians Are Currently Living in the Occupied Territories, 1.5 Million of Whom Are Children," *NV*, June 26, 2024, <https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/events/v-okupaciji-perebuwaye-6-milyoniv-ukrajinciv-sered-yakih-1-5-milyoni-ditey-50430335.html>.

represents an area larger than Hungary or Portugal.<sup>11</sup> In April 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin enacted legislation requiring residents of occupied territories to acquire Russian citizenship by July 2024 or be reclassified as foreigners or stateless persons. This status exposed individuals to escalating restrictions under occupation, including reduced access to services, legal protections, intimidation, and imprisonment for failure to comply. Families who refuse face the additional risk of losing custody of their children, who then become vulnerable to transfer or deportation to the Russian Federation or to militarized education camps.<sup>12</sup>

First Deputy Chief of Staff of Russia's Presidential Administration Sergey Kirienko leads the Kremlin's efforts to consolidate control over occupied Ukrainian territories. He oversees a system designed to manufacture sovereignty through controlled institutions, propaganda, and population management – embedding Russian culture into education and media while orchestrating sham electoral processes to normalize occupation.<sup>13</sup> The present-day approach to the newly occupied territories closely mirrors the post-2014 Crimea model, replicating its integration system by mobilizing Russian regions, state corporations, ministries, and cultural institutions, and reusing the same administrative mechanisms developed for the peninsula.<sup>14</sup>

The greatest burden on occupied Ukrainians is the constant control and surveillance in their everyday lives. Compared to 2014, repression and control over the population have intensified, as has the process of resettlement. New methods of pressure and coercion have emerged due to the increased military presence. Russian armed forces, the National Guard, police, and Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) patrol the streets, guard infrastructure, and monitor areas where Ukrainian activists, former military personnel, or their families previously lived.<sup>15</sup>

The DIU Official Chatbot initiative, which provides direct, secure, anonymous communication with Ukrainian Defense Intelligence, detailed numerous checkpoints installed at city entrances and exits, near strategic infrastructure, and between city districts. People are subjected to document checks, vehicle inspections, questioning, searches, and strict curfews. Cities are closely monitored through surveillance cameras, including facial recognition systems. Authorities can have access to cameras in both public and private spaces. Mobile phones and personal items are regularly inspected, including messages, applications, and online activity. Unannounced home searches are frequently conducted without explanation.

These tactics are used to intimidate residents and identify individuals suspected of disloyalty. There are reported instances of residents cooperating with the occupation authorities, as well as relocated Russian citizens acting as informants. They monitor their neighbors, report on behavior, and sometimes provoke conversations to identify pro-Ukrainian views. Parents are intimidated with threats the authorities will remove a child from a "disloyal" family.<sup>16</sup>

By foregrounding the lived realities of occupation, this analysis seeks to address a persistent gap in international understanding of Russia's war in Ukraine, where the human, administrative, and generational dimensions of control remain underexamined despite their centrality to the conflict's trajec-

11 Emiliano Bos et al., "Russification in Occupied Ukraine," Eurovision News, November 16, 2023, <https://investigations.news-exchange.ebu.ch/russification-in-occupied-ukraine/>.

12 Megan Gittoes, *Stolen Generations: A Systematic Violation of Ukraine's Future* (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, June 16, 2025) <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Stolen%20Generation%20a%20Systematic%20Violation%20of%20Ukraine%E2%80%99s%20Future.pdf>.

13 Jade McGlynn, *Thresholds of Survival: The Resistance in Occupied Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2026). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/thresholds-survival-resistance-occupied-ukraine>.

14 Nikolay Petrov, *Russia in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine: Policies, Strategies and Their Implementation*, SWP Comment 38 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2024), [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C38\\_OccupiedTerritoriesUkraine.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C38_OccupiedTerritoriesUkraine.pdf).

15 DIU Official Chatbot initiative, correspondence.

16 DIU Official Chatbot initiative, correspondence.

ry and long-term consequences. A member of Ukraine’s Resistance Movement interviewed by the author said there remains a profound disconnect between Western audiences and the scale of abuse occurring in occupied territories. He described in stark terms patterns of detention and torture, including sexual violence involving objects, prolonged sleep deprivation, and the removal of fingernails, alongside other forms of sustained physical abuse that, in some cases, continued over years and resulted in death. He concluded, “God bless those people who do not understand this reality.”<sup>17</sup>

### Systematic Tools of Russian Occupation in Ukraine (2014 – Present)

	Tool of Occupation	Crimea (2014)	Post-2022 Occupied Ukraine	Russian Federation Legislation / Policy
<b>Child Militarization</b>	Indoctrination, youth militarization, and brainwashing	Cadet and patriotic youth programs	Yunarmiya (Russia’s Young Army Cadets National Movement), drone training, re-education camps	Russian Ministry of Education and Defense (Minoborony) directives
<b>Forced Conscription</b>	Deportation, conscription, and child removals	Forced conscription backed by punishment	Systematized coercion via passports, raids, and law	Military service law and mobilization decrees
<b>Imprisonment</b>	Civilian and child imprisonment	Fabricated extremism cases and enforced disappearances	Mass detention, torture sites, and filtration system	Federal citizenship laws and accelerated passportization decrees for coercive integration
<b>Religious Control</b>	Religious persecution and control of belief	Clergy repression and church seizures	Forced conversion, church seizures, and clergy repression	Extremism laws, state–church alignment, occupation legislation used to subordinate non-Moscow religious institutions
<b>Coerced Belonging</b>	Passportization and government erasure	Forced citizenship, deprivation, and coercive displacement system	Administrative absorption and identity replacement	Federal Law “On Citizenship”
<b>Manufactured Legitimacy</b>	Sham referenda, puppet governance, and forced displacement	Crimea “referendum” and imposed occupation governance	Forced displacement, settler colonization, and manufactured sovereignty	A legal framework of annexation laws, accelerated citizenship, and administrative integration is used to retroactively legitimize territorial acquisition
<b>Narrative Control</b>	Surveillance and influence operation	Information manipulation and early media control, surveying digital activity	Shut down and replacement of Ukrainian media, propaganda “influencers”	Sovereign Internet Law

### Militarization and Indoctrination of Children

The militarization and re-education of Ukrainian children in Russian-occupied territories have occurred throughout all stages of occupation since 2014. Propaganda is reinforced through a steady stream of audiovisual material – books, computer games, online content, and podcasts – designed to normalize violence and cultivate loyalty to the occupying authorities. Indoctrination is embedded directly within the education system, where revised curricula replace Ukrainian history and culture with narratives that legitimize Russian military aggression. Children are further socialized through paramilitary programs that

17 Volunteer from the National Resistance Movement of Ukraine, interview by author, Kyiv, April 3, 2026.

simulate combat training and discipline. Child psychologists from Ukraine warn that prolonged exposure to this environment significantly impairs children's ability to reintegrate into a different social and cultural reality.<sup>18</sup>

What began in Crimea in 2014 has since been replicated across other Russian-occupied territories – forming the so-called Crimean scenario. Schools are no longer neutral spaces of learning, but instead are vehicles for political loyalty. Despite differences in legal framing – Crimea's formal annexation versus the initial ambiguity surrounding Donetsk and Luhansk – the underlying logic remained the same.<sup>19</sup> By late 2014, occupation authorities in Crimea had formalized a doctrine of education that merged moral instruction with loyalty to the Russian state and framed military service as a civic duty.<sup>20</sup> Schools were swiftly transformed into ideological spaces.<sup>21</sup> Classrooms have portraits of so-called war heroes on the walls, and monuments, such as the one of Mikhail Kalashnikov – a Soviet and Russian military engineer best known for designing the AK-47 – have been erected on school grounds.<sup>22</sup> Analysis provided by the Crimean Partisan Movement detailed the education system as built on aggressive propaganda. History is rewritten, and children are taught that the West is an enemy that should be destroyed. The Movement noted that after serving, Russian soldiers are sometimes placed into teaching roles as a way to mold the next generation of youth in occupied Ukrainian territories.<sup>23</sup> In 2020, the U.N. General Assembly condemned these practices, warning that Russia was using education systems in Crimea to indoctrinate children for military purposes and calling for an end to Russia's integration of schools into state-run militarized structures.<sup>24</sup>

This model has since been expanded to other Russian-occupied territories. Following the full-scale invasion in 2022, Russian authorities began dismantling Ukrainian education at pace, and the newly occupied regions saw accelerated efforts to militarize children.<sup>25</sup> This strategy can be understood as following a pattern: replacing Ukrainian language, history, and textbooks with Russian state narratives while suppressing independent cultural expression and identity. Schools are increasingly militarized through “cadet” and “Cossack” classes, and Ukrainian educators are either removed or forced through ideological retraining to adhere to Russian standards of military education. This extends beyond the classroom and into Russian-led youth movements and patriotic camps that promote paramilitary values. In several cases, teachers who resisted faced intimidation, coercion, arrest, and physical abuse.<sup>26</sup>

This is compounded by the immediate removal of Ukrainian school textbooks after the Russian occupation. In their place, Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Medinsky oversaw the revision of history textbooks in Russia and occupied Ukraine, rolled out between 2023 and 2024, to promote state narratives. The new editions devote 168 pages to the United States, portraying NATO countries as aggressors that must be destroyed.<sup>27</sup> Analysis has shown that textbooks deployed into schools in recent years have stark differences to their pre-war 2016 editions. References to Putin's supposed accomplishments have also increased in newer editions. The textbooks also claim that the annexation

18 Gittoes, *Stolen Generations*.

19 Anastasiia Vorobiova and Mariia Sulialina, *The "Crimea Scenario": How the Russian Federation Is Destroying the Ukrainian Identity of Children in the Occupied Territories*, analytical report (Kyiv, 2023), 4.

20 Vorobiova and Sulialina, *The "Crimea Scenario"*.

21 United Nations General Assembly, *Problem of the Militarization of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol, Ukraine, as well as Parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov*, A/RES/75/29 (December 7, 2020), <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/29>.

22 Hayla Coynash, “Russia's militarization of childhood hits new low in occupied Crimea,” *The Information Portal of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, May 1, 2025, <https://khpg.org/en/1574277866>.

23 Crimean Partisan Movement, interview by author, Kyiv, April 3, 2026.

24 Esveld, Bill Van, Tanya Lokshina, “Education under Occupation,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 20, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/06/20/education-under-occupation/forced-russification-school-system-occupied-ukrainian>

25 Van Esveld and Lokshina, *Education under Occupation*.

26 Coynash, “Russia's Militarization.”

27 Olena Glushenko (Head of United Actions Ukraine and Child Psychologist), interview by author, Kherson, January 17, 2025.

of Crimea in 2014 was a mobilization of citizens to protect their rights against the rise to power of radical nationalists and the West.<sup>28</sup> Schools across occupied Ukraine have also introduced propaganda lessons including “The Russian World,” “Fundamentals of Homeland Security,” and “Important Conversations,” which work together to indoctrinate children under the occupation to prepare them for Russian military service.<sup>29</sup>

Ukrainian teachers who resist these directives face an impossible choice. While some manage to flee to avoid persecution, there are known cases of others facing severe repercussions for resisting the new system. Teachers reportedly have undergone retraining in a process coordinated by special services and controlled by the occupation education department. This is alongside the reported bans of one-on-one lessons between teachers and students.<sup>30</sup> Russian authorities now require schools to provide lists of older teenagers whom they consider “fit” for further service, which may serve as a precursor to future mobilization. It is reported that teachers are obliged to monitor students’ social media accounts, and parents are required to provide full data and links to children’s chats, personal pages, and channels and platforms they follow or engage with on online social media platforms.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, parents who continue their children’s Ukrainian education remotely do so under the shadow of intimidation, home raids, arrests, and threats of deportation or placement of their children in boarding institutions.<sup>32</sup>

These policies go far beyond the textbooks. An estimated 20% of students are expected to receive advanced military training aligned with future roles in the FSB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or specialized military forces. It is reported that the selection process for youth military directives does not prioritize academic achievement or discipline. Instead, students with a history of aggression, bullying, and severe behavior tendencies are deliberately recruited.<sup>33</sup>

The cases of Illia Moskvitin, Ivan Shifman, and Dmytro Kotov illustrate the trajectory from militarized youth programs to the battlefield. Moskvitin, a 16-year-old member of Yunarmiya (Russia’s Young Army Cadets National Movement) in occupied Donetsk, was killed in April 2022 after stepping on a landmine. Shifman, who joined the movement in 2019, later enlisted in the “People’s Militia” – an armed, pro-Russian separatist paramilitary – upon turning 18 and was killed in Ukraine. Kotov, who grew up under occupation in Crimea after 2014, joined Yunarmiya before serving in the Russian Black Sea Fleet; he was killed in 2022 at the age of 24.<sup>34</sup>

Some programs available to children in occupation appear to be designed around filling critical labor gaps in Russia’s military. Drone and unmanned aerial systems (UAS) training is increasingly seen both in occupied Ukraine and inside Russia as part of the Russian state education curriculum. This non-gender-specific training is a widespread tool used in education. In Mariupol (located in occupied Donetsk oblast), three schools are training youth to operate drones alongside an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) laboratory at Priazovsky State Technical University. In occupied Luhansk, students trained in small groups are offered incentives – including receiving bonus points toward national exams – for top performers. The programs extend further, including training for disabled children in occupied Kherson oblast and drone

28 Kayleen Devlin and Maria Korenyuk, “Ukraine war: History is rewritten for children in occupied areas,” *BBC News*, August 31, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-62577314>.

29 Glushenko, interview; “Fundamentals of Homeland Security: How Russia Is Turning Schools into Training Grounds for Future Soldiers,” *Meduza*, April 1, 2024, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/04/01/fundamentals-of-homeland-security>.

30 National Resistance of Ukraine (NS\_Ukraine), “З’явилася інформація...” Telegram, March 2026, 8, [https://t.me/NS\\_Ukraine/4560](https://t.me/NS_Ukraine/4560).

31 National Resistance of Ukraine (NS\_Ukraine), “На ТОТ України вчителів...” Telegram, February 2026, 23, [https://t.me/NS\\_Ukraine/4517](https://t.me/NS_Ukraine/4517).

32 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

33 Gittoes, *Stolen Generations*.

34 Bring Kids Back UA (@Bringkidsback\_ua), “The militarization of children is one of the most dangerous tools of Russia’s occupation,” Instagram, January 20, 2025, [https://www.instagram.com/p/DFC7\\_gem50U/?img\\_index=9&igsh=bzlyYTk0cHF5d2Nl](https://www.instagram.com/p/DFC7_gem50U/?img_index=9&igsh=bzlyYTk0cHF5d2Nl).



Svitlana, 36, holds her sons Artem, 7, and Kyrylo, 5, while taking shelter in a kindergarten in May 2022 in Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine. They escaped the frontline village of Kyselivka in Ukraine's southern Kherson region. (John Moore / Getty Images)

competitions for those as young as 8-12 years of age. Analysts suggest that Russia is aiming to train 1 million UAS specialists by 2030.<sup>35</sup> This trajectory is not hypothetical; the system is already in motion and actively producing future recruits.<sup>36</sup> This aligns closely with the period in which experts anticipate sustained or renewed operations against Ukraine, as well as a potential confrontation along NATO's eastern flank.<sup>37</sup>

By late 2024, in newly occupied areas, parents of 17- and 18-year-old boys in occupied Zaporizhzhia were ordered to submit passports, birth certificates, and medical records in preparation for conscription.<sup>38</sup> OSINT investigations by Yale's Humanitarian Research Lab indicate that, since 2022, Ukrainian children have been transferred into a vast, state-linked network of facilities across Russia and occupied Ukraine. The system spans more than 200 identified sites, ranging from camps and sanatoriums to military and religious institutions. Children are held for varying lengths of time – some temporarily, others indefinitely – and in some cases are channeled into Russia's coercive fostering and adoption system, resulting in legal naturalization. Within these facilities, children are subjected to ideological re-education, military training, and labor linked to the Russian war effort. The geographic scale of this network stretches across dozens of Russian regions.<sup>39</sup> In 2024, it was reported by Ukraine's Center for National Resistance that Russia planned to open military training camps specifically for girls, indicating this policy is not gender specific.<sup>40</sup>

At these facilities, Ukrainian children are subjected to combat training that includes firearms and naval skills, shooting and grenade drills, tactical medicine, drone operations, and, in one documented case, airborne training at a military base.<sup>41</sup> Children have reported that they engaged in a program of activities that included digging trenches and rigging them with tripwire.<sup>42</sup>

A review of over 200 cases of children repatriated and rescued from occupied territories by the NGO Save Ukraine found that 43% of children had undergone militarization at the hands of Russia. Many reported being forced to attend "military-patriotic camps," and several boys reported being issued summons at the age of 17 or signing contracts for future service and coerced to prepare for armed conflict. While it was stated in the study that 44% of those interviewed were girls, it did not specify the gendered percentage for each answer. The study also found that 6% of respondents reported conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), either on themselves or witnessed by them.<sup>43</sup> The inclusion of CRSV here is crucial for understanding the full extent to which Russian state directives on militarization function not only as propaganda-driven education advancing Kremlin objectives, but also as a system of abuse that leaves children isolated and unprotected.

35 Jade McGlynn (Research Fellow, Department of War Studies, King's College London), correspondence with author, April 11, 2026.

36 McGlynn, correspondence. Kyiv Independent. "Russia Recruits Children into Drone Programs through Games, Education Incentives – Media Reports." Kyiv Independent, July 21, 2025. <https://kyivindependent.com/russia-recruits-children-into-drone-programs-through-games-education-incentives-media-reports/>.

37 McGlynn, correspondence.

38 Tom Ball, "How teenagers escape Kremlin brainwashing in occupied Ukraine," *The Times*, October 18, 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/how-teenagers-escape-kremlin-brainwashing-in-occupied-ukraine-sfcqt12z39>

39 Paige Farrenkopf et al., *Ukraine's Stolen Children: Inside Russia's Network of Re-Education and Militarization*, New Haven: Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale School of Public Health (September 16, 2025), <https://medicine.yale.edu/lab/khoshtood/publications/reports>.

40 United24 Media. "Russia to Open Military Training Camps for Girls on Temporarily Occupied Ukraine." United24 Media, June 7, 2025. <https://united24media.com/latest-news/russia-to-open-military-training-camps-for-girls-on-temporarily-occupied-ukraine-8961>.

41 Farrenkopf et al., *Ukraine's Stolen Children*.

42 Liz Cookman, "How Russia is grooming Ukraine's children to fight for it: 'I understood it wasn't just play,'" *The Guardian*, September 10, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/10/how-russia-is-grooming-ukraines-children-to-fight-for-it-i-understood-it-wasnt-just-play>.

43 Rowan Allport et al., *Return Every Child: Global Responses to the Forcible Transfer of Ukrainian Children*, London: War Child UK (September 2025), [https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/Return\\_Every\\_Child\\_Digital\\_WCUK.pdf](https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/Return_Every_Child_Digital_WCUK.pdf). The purpose of interviews conducted by Save Ukraine specialists, was first and foremost to ensure the wellbeing of the repatriated children and tailor support that covered their psychological, social and other needs. As such, interviews may have largely focused on the most serious harms and pressing needs. A child may not reference changes to their education curriculum despite Russian authorities having made significant changes as part of state policy.

One of the clearest indicators of the long-term effects of Russian occupation is the life trajectory of children raised under it. Ukrainians who were minors in 2014 have now reached military age; a number have since been killed fighting in Russia's war against their homeland. This outcome is not incidental. It reflects a decade of systematic ideological conditioning and coercion under occupation.<sup>44</sup> The militarization of children through education and education through propaganda represent a central pillar of Putin's long-term war strategy: Advancing Russia's reach westward by absorbing Ukrainian children into a future pool of military-age citizens while systematically eroding Ukraine's national cohesion.

## Forced Conscription of Ukrainian Civilians

Since illegally annexing the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, Russia has conscripted Ukrainian civilians, leaving them with a stark choice between enlistment and punishment. In 2019, the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that 18,000 Ukrainians living in Crimea were illegally conscripted to serve in Russia's armed forces.<sup>45</sup> Some who were children at the time of initial annexation in 2014 were eventually conscripted and have since died on the battlefield following the overhaul of the education system aimed at militarization.

This is happening in the full-scale invasion as well. Parents of 17- and 18-year-old boys in occupied Zaporizhzhia were ordered to submit passports, birth certificates, and medical records in preparation for conscription.<sup>46</sup> In addition, estimates of 16% of prisoners of war currently being held in Ukraine are believed to be from the occupied territories, indicating that Ukrainians could form a considerable portion of Moscow's forces and front-line soldiers. As some of these men are clearly victims of forced mobilization into the Russian army, their testimonies are now forming critical evidence of war crimes. Specifically, Article 51 of the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits conscription of inhabitants by an occupying power.<sup>47</sup>

Russia's war in Ukraine and its policy of forced conscription has revealed a key weakness in its wider mobilization system. Conscribing men from major urban centers such as Moscow and St. Petersburg carries political burdens the Kremlin appears unwilling to absorb. Russian authorities have increasingly turned to alternative recruitment methods, including targeting migrant communities. In Mariupol, in March 2026, 84 migrants from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were reportedly forcibly conscripted in a single raid conducted under the pretext of migration inspections, underscoring a growing shortfall in willing domestic recruits. From the Kremlin's perspective, the populations now available in occupied territories resolve this problem of military recruitment and retention.<sup>48</sup>

Ukrainians who are issued Russian passports are obliged to register for military service and risk arrest, fines, and restrictions on movement if they refuse. In April, a new spring decree expanded conscription to Ukrainians in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, with men aged 18-30 threatened with prison and property and banking restrictions. There are also reports that they face forced long-term contracts despite the draft being officially advertised as one year. Russian legislation passed in May 2025 now allows non-Russian

44 Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, *Cross-Pollinated: Russia's Systematic Policy of Destroying Children's Ukrainian Identity* (Kyiv: Ombudsman of Ukraine, July 2024), 26, [https://www.ombudsman.gov.ua/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/Special%20Report%20\\_CROSS-POLLINATED\\_.pdf](https://www.ombudsman.gov.ua/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/Special%20Report%20_CROSS-POLLINATED_.pdf).

45 Public International Law & Policy Group and Morrison Foerster, "The Illegality of Conscription of Crimean Tatars and Other Ukrainian Civilians into the Russian Army in Occupied Territories," *Lawyering Justice* (blog), June 9, 2023, <https://www.publicinternationallawandpolicygroup.org/lawyering-justice-blog/2023/6/9/the-illegality-of-conscription-of-crimean-tatars-and-other-ukrainian-civilians-into-the-russian-army-in-occupied-territories>.

46 Ball, "How Teenagers Escape."

47 Jen Stout, "What makes a traitor?," *Prospect*, January 28, 2026, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/europe/ukraine/72210/what-makes-a-traitor>.

48 McGlynn, correspondence.

citizens to be conscripted, targeting those whose passports were revoked and effectively enabling the forced mobilization of what Russia terms “stateless civilians” across occupied territories.<sup>49</sup>

Mainstream state media in Russia (e.g., RIA and RT) avoid explicit terms like coercion, instead describing mobilization as voluntary contracts or passport registration. However, occupation administration decrees, legal sites, and pro-Russian regional outlets reveal coercive mechanisms through passport requirements, fines, raids, and threats of arrest. Additionally, these news outlets detail that men with Russian passports face automatic military registration and conscription, with evasion punished by fines or arrest – implying coercion via citizenship mandates under occupation.<sup>50</sup> Local contract signing is strongly encouraged, with regional and local reports tying these signings to threats.<sup>51</sup>

Taking Russian documentation under occupation is a condition of survival, yet it simultaneously exposes men to mobilization by the occupying forces. Recruitment is deliberately controlled to avoid unrest; in regions such as Zaporizhzhia, numbers remain low – around 150 annually – but are driven largely by deception and financial incentives. The Kremlin’s approach when focusing on territories secured since 2022 has involved early recruits presenting service positively, creating a false narrative that enables broader mobilization over time. Public oath-taking ceremonies in cities including Mariupol and Volnovakha are used to normalize the process, masking what is, in effect, a systematic campaign of coercive military service across the occupied territories.<sup>52</sup>

Human Rights Watch reported that men held in pretrial detention in Russian-occupied parts of Donetsk have faced sustained pressure from authorities to enlist, with intimidation, threats, and intensive propaganda.<sup>53</sup> Detainees described officials repeatedly distributing “volunteer” enlistment forms and targeting those who refuse cell raids. One prisoner said conditions worsened after his refusal, including transfer to overcrowded, unsanitary cells that expose him to disease, deprivation of water, and spoiled food. He also reported being told that fighting at the front was the only escape, with direct threats of deployment issued by officials. Investigating these alleged war crimes is extremely difficult given the severely limited access to occupied territories, and the burden of gathering evidence, as most witnesses and victims cannot travel to unoccupied Ukraine.

A member of the National Resistance of Ukraine described two primary methods used by Russia in its forced mobilization: The militarization of children – covered in the previous section – and coercion through checkpoints and surveillance. The first, as he described, involves children who have been exposed to Russian-controlled education and propaganda since the full-scale invasion and have now grown into legal adults over the past four years. Many have been heavily radicalized and are later enlisted. He described them as “completely brainwashed.” He stated he personally knows individuals from his past who have become radicalized under sustained occupation, noting that Russian propaganda is intense and everywhere.

The second method used by Russia to force mobilization is via surveillance and coercion at checkpoints. In this example, individuals are pressured into

49 Maksym Beznosiuk, “Kremlin Works to Erase Ukrainian Identity and Militarize Occupied Regions,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 21, no. 125 (September 3, 2024), <https://jamestown.org/kremlin-works-to-erase-ukrainian-identity-and-militarize-occupied-regions/>.

50 Призыв.нет, “Призыв в армию на присоединенных территориях” [Conscription into the army in the annexed territories], February 2026, 22, <https://www.prizyv.net/prizyv-v-armiyu/prizyv-v-armiyu-na-prisoedinnnyh-territoriyah/>.

51 Призыв.нет, “Призыв в армию.”

52 Eduard Dudka, “Група 25+ наразі в пріоритеті — Андріющенко про призов на окупованих територіях” [The “25+” group is currently a priority — Andriushchenko on conscription in the occupied territories], *Громадське радіо* [Hromadske Radio], November 2024, 19, <https://hromadske.radio/news/19/11/2024/hrupa-25-narazi-v-priorytet-i-andriushchenko-pro-pryzov-na-okupovanykh-terytoriakh>; Прямий, “Mass Conscription and Repopulation: What the Russians Are Preparing in the Occupied Territories,” March 2026, 31, <https://prm.ua/en/mass-conscription-and-repopulation-what-the-russians-are-preparing-in-the-occupied-territories/>.

53 Human Rights Watch, “Russia: Forces Ukrainians in Occupied Areas into Military,” December 20, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/20/russia-forces-ukrainians-occupied-areas-military>.

“Former detainees describe severe overcrowding, lack of medical care, poor sanitation, and routine torture that includes beatings, electrocution, psychological abuse, and sexual violence.”

accepting military identification, after which they may quickly find themselves sent to the front line. In some cases, authorities conduct house-to-house visits.<sup>54</sup> The estimation that there are tens of thousands of prisoners arrested for speaking out against the occupation or merely holding pro-Ukrainian views in a system where abduction and torture are widespread, only demonstrates what little choice or agency civilians have when collaborating with Russia.<sup>55</sup>

## Civilian and Child Imprisonment

Estimates of Ukrainian civilians living under occupation who are detained by Russian forces vary due to the absence of access. Ukrainian authorities report around 37,000 people unaccounted for and at least 1,672 confirmed civilians in custody. Some estimates suggest the true number may be far higher.<sup>56</sup> Civilians are commonly detained for expressing pro-Ukrainian views or refusing Russian citizenship. Others are detained based on vague charges, including supposed terrorism, espionage, or discrediting the Russian army. Detainees are held in a network of formal prisons, including penal colonies, basements, and abandoned buildings across occupied Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Former detainees describe severe overcrowding, lack of medical care, poor sanitation, and routine torture that includes beatings, electrocution, psychological abuse, and sexual violence. Many civilians are prosecuted in unrecognized courts under sweeping “extremism” laws, in proceedings that violate fair trial standards and may constitute war crimes.<sup>57</sup> A rare instance of interviews conducted by the United Nations with more than 200 released detainees since mid-2023 corroborate these same patterns of torture.<sup>58</sup>

The OHCHR documented 161 official detention facilities across occupied Ukraine and Russia, plus 42 unofficial sites, often disused garages and referred to as “basements” by those in occupation.<sup>59</sup> Those detained and placed in these quasi-prisons often did little more than watch Ukrainian media, repost content, or, at most, spray graffiti, yet sentences range from 10 to 30 years. Victims of these sites have included expectant mothers – who have given birth there – and children. Some detainees have died as a result of the sustained torture.<sup>60</sup> The OHCHR reported in December that between February 2022 and August 2024, Russian forces carried out 170 verified summary executions and 27 detainees died from torture, neglect, or inhumane conditions. In Crimea, the Russian Investigative Committee oversees inquiries into security force killings, but international observers and civil society report that occupation authorities rarely prosecute perpetrators. Families often refrain from challenging official findings out of fear of retaliation.<sup>61</sup>

Also in Crimea, mass detentions and politically motivated repression are reportedly carried out against the indigenous population, activists, and pro-Ukrainian citizens. People are often detained without proper legal grounds. Fabricated evidence is used – including literature or testimonies from “secret witnesses” – to accuse individuals of “extremism.” There are numerous cases

54 National Resistance Movement volunteer, interview.

55 Stout, “What Makes a Traitor?”

56 Mohammad Mohseni, “Ukraine: Ukrainian Civilian Prisoners in Russian-Occupied Territories,” International Society for Human Rights, April 17, 2025, <https://ishr.org/ukraine-ukrainian-civilian-prisoners-in-russian-occupied-territories/>.

57 AFP, “Ukraine Estimates Nearly 37,000 People Missing Since February 2022,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 16, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-estimates-missing-people-start-of-war/32907975.html>; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *The Treatment of Civilians in the Context of the Armed Aggression Against Ukraine* (Geneva: United Nations, September 2025), [https://ukraine.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/2025-09-22%20Treatment%20of%20civilians\\_ENG.pdf](https://ukraine.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/2025-09-22%20Treatment%20of%20civilians_ENG.pdf).

58 OHCHR, *Treatment of Civilians*.

59 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *The Treatment of Civilians Deprived of Their Liberty in the Context of the Armed Attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine* (Geneva: United Nations, 2023), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/treatment-civilians-deprived-their-liberty-context-armed-attack-russian>.

60 ZMINA Center for Human Rights, “Russians Tortured to Death Two 16-Year-Old Teens from Occupied Melitopol,” June 26, 2023, <https://zmina.info/en/news-en/russians-tortured-to-death-two-16-year-old-teens-from-occupied-melitopol/>.

61 United States Department of State, *Ukraine: Russian-Occupied Areas 2024 Human Rights Report* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, August 2025), [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/624521\\_UKRAINE-RUSSIAN-OCCUPIED-AREAS-2024-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/624521_UKRAINE-RUSSIAN-OCCUPIED-AREAS-2024-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf)

of enforced disappearances, where individuals detained by occupation authorities vanish without information being provided to their families and without access to independent observers. The stated reasons for such actions include alleged “extremism,” “espionage,” or “treason” based on falsified evidence.<sup>62</sup>

Following the occupation of cities such as Melitopol, Berdiansk, and Enerhodar, cases of abductions and detention of civilians by occupation forces have been widely documented. A notable case involves the mayor of Melitopol, Ivan Fedorov, who was abducted and held in an unknown location after refusing to cooperate. He spent six days in captivity and was later exchanged for conscript soldiers.

Civilians are detained for holding Ukrainian positions, participating in protests against the occupation, or refusing to cooperate with the Russian authorities. Activists, volunteers, and former local officials are particularly targeted.<sup>63</sup> Viktoriia Roshchyna was a 27-year-old Ukrainian investigative journalist who disappeared in Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia in August 2023. For nearly a year, her family received no information. In October, they were notified through a short official message that she had died. Her family received no explanation for the circumstances of her death until her body was returned.<sup>64</sup> A forensic examination identified injuries consistent with torture and possible signs of electrocution. Subsequent investigations by Ukrainian and international media revealed that Roshchyna had been held for months in occupied Melitopol before being transferred to a pre-trial detention center in Taganrog, Russia. The facility is widely documented for its systematic abuse of Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilian detainees.<sup>65</sup> Her case illustrates the opacity, impunity, and human cost of Russia’s detention system in occupied Ukraine.

Following the liberation of Kherson in 2022, a cell was discovered where children had been detained, subjected to mistreatment, and denied food. It is documented that the children were not provided with water and told their parents had abandoned them.<sup>66</sup> A report by War Child U.K. and Save Ukraine detailed that torture and cruel treatment were reported by 10% of children surveyed who had left occupation. This treatment included interrogation, beatings, and torture on suspicion of supporting Ukraine were also identified. The OHCHR has also identified cases of children being tortured. In late May 2024, occupying authorities claimed that two Ukrainian children, Danylo Dakhov and Pavlo Hrymak, had died in an explosion while committing sabotage, but sources reported they were tortured to death in Russian captivity. Despite requesting DNA samples from the parents of the teenage boys, the occupying forces never returned the bodies.<sup>67</sup> When the Kharkiv region was liberated, children pleaded with Ukrainian soldiers and liberators to promise that Russia would not return. They shared fears instilled by Russian agents, who told them Russia would always reclaim the area and that “Russia is forever.”<sup>68</sup>

Another child victim is Yulia Sokolova, who lived with her family in the occupied town of Skadovsk. It was reported in late 2023, officers of the Russian security services arrived at the family home and detained Yulia, who was 17 at the time. She was accused of sharing information related to Russian military equipment with Ukraine. In April, she was sentenced to nine years in a high-security prison and has since been held in a pre-trial detention facility in Simferopol. Her grandmother described the family’s profound distress and

62 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

63 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

64 Yulia Gorbunova, “Torture, Death of Ukrainian Journalist in Russian Custody,” Human Rights Watch, May 5, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/05/torture-death-ukrainian-journalist-russian-custody>

65 Polina Uzhvak, Irina Dolinina, and Rina Nikolaeva, “Призраки” [Ghosts], *Важные истории* [IStories], April 2025 .29, <https://storage.googleapis.com/istories/stories/29/04/2025/prizraki/index.html>.

66 Reuters, “Russians mistreated Kherson youngsters in ‘children’s cell,’ says Ukraine official,” December 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russians-mistreated-kherson-youngsters-childrens-cell-says-ukraine-official-2022-12-14/>

67 ZMINA Center, “Two 16-Year-Old Teens.”

68 Gittoes, *Stolen Generations*.



In the border town of Kozacha Lopan, in the Kharkiv region, police discovered a jail they believed Russian soldiers used as a torture chamber in September 2022 in Kozacha Lopan, Ukraine. The town had been liberated allowing investigators to examine evidence for possible war crimes. (Paula Bronstein /Getty Images)

the sense of helplessness they face as Russian authorities continue to refuse exchanges or releases of what they consider civilian hostages.<sup>69</sup>

Russia has also established filtration camps to detain Ukrainians deemed undesirable or a threat. Specialized units under its Ministry of Internal Affairs enforce this system. In August 2024, a working group led by Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin finalized plans for so-called temporary detention centers that are now being repurposed to re-educate those resisting Russian citizenship.<sup>70</sup> Testimony from activists makes clear that civilians perceived to have any link to the Ukrainian Armed Forces – no matter how vague or clear the link is – face particularly severe treatment. In this environment, informal activist networks have become a lifeline, facilitating evacuations and family reunification. Additionally, repeated references to “the basement” – the euphemism used across occupied territories for sites of unlawful detention and torture – underscore the climate of coercion underpinning civilian control. The term has entered common parlance precisely because of the architecture of repression designed not only to punish perceived dissent, but to deter it.<sup>71</sup>

The Ukrainian Resistance member said Russia has little interest in due process or even being perceived as extracting truth. “They don't need hours of questioning. They don't care about the answer.” Instead, he described immediate violence following accusations; severe beatings resulting in broken limbs and sometimes death. He described a climate in which “people don't die, they just disappear.” It was added that detention or disappearance can result from minor or perceived infractions: Failing to smile at a checkpoint, speaking negatively in the wrong setting, having Ukrainian-language content on a phone, sometimes retrieved from deleted files.<sup>72</sup> Civilians attempting to leave are subjected to extensive screening at checkpoints, while communities closer to the front line face near-total restrictions on movement. Nighttime raids and arbitrary searches are reported to be routine, reflecting a broad approach to surveillance and intimidation. Those with links to Ukraine's armed forces face especially severe treatment, creating acute risks for those with family in the military outside of occupation.<sup>73</sup>

## Religious Persecution and Control of Belief

Religious persecution in the occupied territories follows a well-established playbook, mirroring tactics deployed in Crimea since 2014, in occupied Donbas, and historically across the Soviet Union. However, the scale and brutality documented since 2022 represents an intensification of these methods, with systematic detention, torture, and murder of Ukrainian priests and religious figures alongside the forced closure and appropriation of churches and monasteries.

Russia has a distinct and historically embedded relationship with religion. Putin has frequently reinforced this narrative, including claims that Russians are more moral than Western societies.<sup>74</sup> In March 2024, the Russian Orthodox Church formally declared: “From a spiritual and moral point of view, the special military operation is a Holy War, in which Russia and its people ... fulfill the mission of ‘Restrainer,’ protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and

69 Gittoes, *Stolen Generations*.

70 Kateryna Odarchenko, “Ukrainians' New Realities Under Occupation,” *Focus Ukraine* (blog), Wilson Center, October 30, 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ukrainians-new-realities-under-occupation>.

71 Luke Cooper et al., *Life under Occupation in the Russo-Ukrainian War: Insights from Activist Networks* (Edinburgh: PeaceRep, April 2025), <https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Life-under-Occupation-in-the-Russo-Ukrainian-War-Insights-from-Activist-Networks-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf>.

72 National Resistance Movement volunteer, interview.

73 Cooper et al., *Life under Occupation*.

74 Pavel K. Baev, “Putin Warns Against ‘Immoral’ Western Interference in His ‘Strategic’ Speech,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5, no. 26 (February 11, 2008), <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-warns-against-immoral-western-interference-in-his-strategic-speech/>.

the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism.<sup>75</sup> This alignment even extends to an official religious seal of approval on Russia's nuclear weapons. This concept of so-called Atomic Orthodoxy is a unique paradox in which the Russian Orthodox Church symbolically legitimizes Russia's nuclear capabilities as a moral defense against the West despite nuclear war going against all Biblical teachings.<sup>76</sup>

From the early 2000s through 2024, the Russian Orthodox Church has operated in Ukraine – particularly in occupied territories – as a de facto front organization aligned with the Kremlin.<sup>77</sup> This unique relationship between church and state has been instrumental in Russia's occupational abuses in Ukraine. The framing is mirrored in its influence campaigns abroad with the "shared values" immigration program, introduced in 2024, which offers simplified residency to citizens of Western countries who wish to move to Russia to escape what the Kremlin calls destructive neoliberal ideologies.<sup>78</sup>

In the occupied territories, the Russian Orthodox church is used not only as a religious institution but also as a tool of ideological control and political influence by the Kremlin. Russian authorities simultaneously systematically persecute and shut down religious communities that do not align. The activities of other denominations are banned, churches are closed, and church property is confiscated. Many communities have been forced to cease their activities, while priests have been detained, abducted, or even killed.<sup>79</sup>

In Berdiansk in November 2022, occupation authorities detained two priests, Ivan Levytskyi and Bohdan Heleta, who were then held in captivity for over two years.<sup>80</sup> In the Melitopol district of Zaporizhzhia, Father Petro Krenitskyi was forcibly taken from his home, a bag was placed over his head, and he was beaten and forced to leave the territory.<sup>81</sup> In the city, Russian occupiers converted a Protestant church building into a police station, cut down crosses, and banned the congregation from gathering.<sup>82</sup> In the Crimean Peninsula, where despite the significant Muslim population, children are pressured in schools to join the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>83</sup> These actions have led to a significant decline in trust in religious institutions, and some refuse to attend church under its control or turn to clandestine or informal forms of worship, fearing political influence or repression.<sup>84</sup>

The modern Russian state ideology is characterized by a pronounced anti-Western orientation, combining two interconnected elements: A secular dimension rooted in geopolitical confrontation with the West, and a religious dimension framed as a conflict between Russian Orthodoxy and Western Christian denominations. Within this framework, the activities of other denominations are interpreted as a form of aggression by the Russian Federation, effectively equating non-Russian-Orthodox with hostility against Russia.<sup>85</sup> The Center for Defense Reforms in Ukraine analyzed and investigated 150 representative cases, including 14 killings of clergy and parishioners, 23 abductions,

75 Alexander J. Motyl, "The Russian Orthodox Church Declares 'Holy War' on Ukraine," *The Hill*, April 2, 2024, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4568860-the-russian-orthodox-church-declares-holy-war-on-ukraine/>.

76 Maria Engström, "Russia's Worldview: Katechon and Atomic Orthodoxy," *Hungarian Conservative* 3, no. 2 (2023), [https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/politics/russian\\_doctrine\\_katechon\\_orthodoxy\\_anomia\\_europe\\_west/](https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/politics/russian_doctrine_katechon_orthodoxy_anomia_europe_west/).

77 Bob Seely, *The New Total War: From Child Abduction to Cyber Attacks and Drones to Disinformation – Russia's Conflict with Ukraine and the West* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2025).

78 Brian Mefford, "Russian Orthodox Church Declares 'Holy War' Against Ukraine and West," *UkraineAlert* (blog), Atlantic Council, April 9, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russian-orthodox-church-declares-holy-war-against-ukraine-and-west/>; Ines Eisele, "Russia's 'anti-woke visa' woos Western expatriates," *Deutsche Welle*, September 7, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-anti-woke-visa-woos-western-expatriates/a-73214511#:~:text=Citizens%20or%20permanent%20residents%20of.and%20can%20be%20extended%20afterwards.>

79 "DIU Official Chatbot" initiative, correspondence.

80 "DIU Official Chatbot" initiative, correspondence.

81 "DIU Official Chatbot" initiative, correspondence.

82 "DIU Official Chatbot" initiative, correspondence.

83 Crimean Partisan Movement, interview.

84 "DIU Official Chatbot" initiative, correspondence.

85 Center for Defense Reforms, *Persecution of Western Christians in Russia and in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine* (Kyiv: Center for Defense Reforms, October 2025).

17 deportations from the Russian Federation and occupied territories, 26 instances of torture or ill-treatment, 25 seizures of church buildings and property, 15 cases of obstruction of worship services, seven instances of church liquidation, and 23 fines imposed for missionary activity. Most of these actions were carried out by Russian state bodies, including the FSB (notably its Service for the Protection of the Constitutional Order and the Fight Against Terrorism), the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Center for Countering Extremism, the Investigative Committee, the General Prosecutor's Office, and the Ministry of Justice.<sup>86</sup>

A defining feature of these crimes is the recurrent accusation that non-Orthodox Christians maintain ties with the West, particularly with the United States.<sup>87</sup> In the occupied Kherson region in November 2022, Russian Armed Forces abducted Anatolii Prokopchuk, a deacon of the Church of Christians of the Evangelical Faith, and his 19-year-old son. Their bodies, bearing signs of torture, were found days later in a nearby forest. Witnesses reported that Russian soldiers told local clergy, "Your church has no right to exist because it has connections with the United States."<sup>88</sup> In March 2022, during the Russian offensive in Zaporizhzhia, Russian forces abducted Dmytro Bodyu, a U.S. citizen and pastor of the Word of Life Fellowship, from his home. He was held in a bloodstained cell, interrogated, tortured, and accused of being a CIA agent. He was released only after international intervention. According to his testimony, the torture was conducted jointly by officers of the FSB Counterintelligence Service and soldiers of the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>89</sup>

The warning signs of religion being used as a tool of occupation and subjugation could be found in the Kremlin's 2014 occupation in Eastern Ukraine. In June 2014, militants of the terrorist fundamentalist group Russian Orthodox Army stormed the Pentecostal Transfiguration of the Lord Church in Sloviansk (Donetsk region) and seized two deacons and two of the pastor's children. The following day, all four were found dead.<sup>90</sup> The Russian Orthodox Army was directly commanded by a former officer of the FSB's Directorate for the Protection of the Constitutional Order and the Fight against Terrorism, Igor Girkin. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the group was financed by oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev, a close associate of Putin and leader of the Orthodox fundamentalist organization The Double-Headed Eagle. In 2015, the Russian Orthodox Church blessed the Russian Orthodox Army to wage its so-called holy war in Donbas.<sup>91</sup>

Under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, genocide is defined primarily as acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. The deliberate destruction of cultural and religious institutions can be used as evidence of intent to destroy a protected group.<sup>92</sup> This persecution serves multiple strategic objectives: Eliminating potential centers of resistance, severing cultural ties to Kyiv, legitimizing Moscow's narrative of protecting Orthodox civilization, and terrorizing local populations into submission.

86 Center for Defense Reforms, *Persecution of Western Christians*.

87 Dmitry Fionik, "Восхождение. Кто убил четырех христиан в осажденном Славянске" [The Ascent: Who Killed Four Christians in Besieged Sloviansk], *ФОКУС*, August 2014, 29 г., <https://focus.ua/ukraine/314132>.

88 Tetyana Lozovenko, "СБУ установила ФСБшника, который возглавлял карательные рейды оккупантов в Херсоне" [SBU Identifies FSB Officer Who Led Occupiers' Punitive Raids in Kherson], *УКРАИНСКАЯ ПРАВДА [Ukrainska Pravda]*, January 17, 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2023/01/17/7385195/>.

89 Center for Defense Reforms, *Persecution of Western Christians*.

90 Center for Defense Reforms, *Persecution of Western Christians*.

91 Konstantin Skorin, "Во что верят «ЛНР» и «ДНР»?" [What Do "LNR" and "DNR" Believe In?], *Реальная газета [Realna Gazeta]*, October 2015, 15, <https://realgazeta.com.ua/vo-chto-veryat-lnr-i-dnr/>; Center for Defense Reforms, *Persecution of Western Christians*.

92 *Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstić* (Trial Judgment), Case No. IT-98-33-T, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), August 2, 2001, <https://www.icty.org/x/cases/krstic/tjug/en/krs-tj010802e-3.htm>.



Oleksandr, 60, got a Russian passport to provide money for his family and to receive free medical supplies in Kherson, Ukraine, in November 2022 (Wojciech Grzedzinski for The Washington Post via Getty Images)

## Passportification and Government Erasure

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, occupation policies were implemented with speed and at scale. Russian authorities moved quickly to dismantle Ukrainian governance structures and to coerce residents into accepting Russian passports.<sup>93</sup> Russian authorities compiled lists of those who had not obtained Russian passports, and individuals were deprived of proper access to public services, including healthcare. Cases have been reported in the occupied areas of Zaporizhzhia of cars being confiscated from people without Russian citizenship for supposed military needs. In Donetsk, Mariupol, Melitopol, and other cities, unannounced home searches have become widespread. Russian authorities do not provide explanations for searches or detentions. Phone inspections and personal checks are common.<sup>94</sup>

Russian legal resources and state media portray passportification as a humanitarian aid and integration measure for the so-called new regions, emphasizing quick access to services without coercion.<sup>95</sup> In practice, this discourse masks a structured effort to erode Ukrainian statehood and bind residents to Russian institutions. The 2022 Ukaz No. 951, which allows citizens of occupied territories to apply for Russian citizenship and register their children, operationalizes this rhetoric: It requires biometric data (fingerprints) and a formal oath of allegiance, turning a supposedly voluntary procedure into a mandatory administrative step toward subordination.<sup>96</sup>

Refusing to obtain a Russian passport is treated as an act of resistance, triggering severe restrictions. Those affected face loss of access to healthcare and basic services, while they and their families are subjected to surveillance, blackmail, and the risk of losing employment and social benefits. There are also known cases of violence and abductions. In some cases, Ukrainians have adapted and reported the loss of a Ukrainian passport so they could keep it covertly, though this comes with associated risk.<sup>97</sup> On Sept. 3, 2023, a photo was posted to a Telegram channel reading, "Treatment is possible only with a Russian passport in Berdyansk. From September 1, the orcs have made new changes to their system. ... The ambulance will still provide emergency care, but no one will treat you without a passport." However, sometimes even a passport doesn't help. Locals complain on Telegram, that despite having compulsory documentation, treatment can be restricted.<sup>98</sup> Residents reported door-to-door checks in which officials demand documents and ask when a Russian passport will be obtained. If no one answers, the home is recorded as "ownerless property," creating a pretext for confiscation by the Russian government.<sup>99</sup>

By Sept. 10, 2025, residents of occupied parts of Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Donetsk, and Luhansk were required to take a Russian passport or be classed as "foreigners," leading to limitations on their access to vital services.<sup>100</sup> A post on the official VK page of the Federal Tax Service of Russia (ФНС России) announced the integration of occupied Zaporizhzhya oblast into Russia's Unified State Register of Civil Status Acts. The post states that residents can register

93 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Situation of Human Rights in Ukraine in the Context of the Armed Attack by the Russian Federation: 24 February – 15 May 2022* (Geneva: United Nations, June 29, 2022), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ua/2022-06-29/2022-06-UkraineArmedAttack-EN.pdf>.

94 'DIU Official Chatbot' initiative, correspondence.

95 Anastasia Vlasova, "Президент России упростил получение российских паспортов для жителей новых регионов" [The President of Russia Simplified the Acquisition of Russian Passports for Residents of New Regions], *vc.ru*, March 26, 2026, <https://vc.ru/id4448120/2813992-uproschenie-polucheniya-pasportov-dlya-zhiteley-novykh-regionov-rossii>; Administration of the Shelabolikhinsky District, "Упрощено получение гражданства" [Simplification of the Acquisition of Citizenship], *Gosuslugi*, April 3, 2023, [https://shelab.gosuslugi.ru/spravochnik/otdeleniya-politsii/novosti\\_965.html](https://shelab.gosuslugi.ru/spravochnik/otdeleniya-politsii/novosti_965.html).

96 *Confidence Group*, "Опубликован порядок выдачи паспортов РФ для жителей новых территорий" [Published Procedure for Issuing RF Passports for Residents of New Territories], December 2022, 27, <https://www.confidencegroup.ru/info/news/opublikovan-poryadok-vydachi-pasportov-rf-dlya-zhiteley-novykh-territoriy/>.

97 'DIU Official Chatbot' initiative, correspondence.

98 Это Запорожье (@eto\_zp), "вересня орки внесли нові зміни в свою систему," Telegram, September 2023, 3, [https://t.me/eto\\_zp/43462](https://t.me/eto_zp/43462). Retrieved by OSINT for Ukraine. Post before translation reads "Лікування можливе лише з паспортом рф у Бердянську, вересня орки внесли нові зміни в свою систему. Невідкладну допомогу швидка ще надасть, а ось лікувати ніхто не буде без паспорта, – кажуть бердянці."

99 OSINT for Ukraine, evidence provided to the author, March 25, 2026.

100 McGlynn, *Thresholds of Survival*,

births, marriages, divorces, and name changes, and that many services for newborns will be assigned proactively without submitting an application. By centralizing civil status data and sharing it across Russian agencies, the system effectively bypasses Ukrainian legal frameworks and embeds residents – particularly minors – into Russian administrative and identity structures, reinforcing long-term institutional assimilation.<sup>101</sup>

A member of the Ukrainian Resistance reported that because of these policies, individuals are often forcibly transported to Russia and authorities justify such actions as relocation for supposed security reasons. Refusal to take a Russian passport can result in torture, deportation, or disappearance. In Zaporizhzhia, Russian occupation authorities are reviving Soviet-style repressive practices, including the use of a so-called register of controlled persons. In Tokmak, residents reported being threatened with inclusion on this register for lodging complaints, expressing criticism, or refusing to cooperate with the occupation administration. Those placed on the list face a range of punitive measures, including restrictions on movement, dismissal from employment, financial limitations, reduced access to healthcare and children's welfare, confiscation of property, and sustained pressure from occupation-controlled internal affairs bodies.<sup>102</sup>

Russia's passportization in occupied Ukraine is not simply administrative paperwork; it is a system of coercive citizenship that violates several core rules of international humanitarian law and the law of occupation and can amount to war crimes. Academic and legal analyses stress that forcing Ukrainian residents to swear allegiance and carry Russian passports contravenes the Fourth Geneva Convention, the 1907 Hague Regulations, and the Rome Statute because it compels occupied populations to serve the occupier and alters their legal status without consent.<sup>103</sup>

## Forced Displacement and Manufactured Legitimacy

Russian-controlled forced displacement and demographic engineering in Ukraine began not as an afterthought but as an early, systematic feature of the occupation, tightly intertwined with political annexation and identity erasure. Within weeks, Russian troops had captured key urban centers, including Kherson, Berdyansk, Melitopol, and Enerhodar. By September, Moscow was staging illegitimate referendums in occupied regions, followed by decrees falsely recognizing the Kremlin's sovereignty. These sham elections were a propaganda exercise and an affront to Ukraine's territorial integrity and of the U.N. Charter.<sup>104</sup>

The first example of this was in the Crimean Peninsula. A member of the Crimean Partisan Movement noted the illegitimacy first by the timeline. Russian forces entered Crimea around Feb. 20, 2022, and held the "referendum" less than three weeks later on March 16. Such a short period would make it impossible to properly prepare a transparent vote, even under normal conditions, and this timeframe would have been far too limited for the population to fully understand and form political positions.<sup>105</sup>

In practice, the referendum was conducted under the conditions of a strong

101 Федеральная налоговая служба [Federal Tax Service of Russia] (@fnrussia), "Запорожская область тоже подключилась к ЕПР ЗАФС," VK, February 2024, 22, [https://vk.com/wall8147\\_117654841](https://vk.com/wall8147_117654841).

102 National Resistance of Ukraine (@NS\_Ukraine), "На тот Запоріжжя русня впроваджує радянські репресії," Telegram, February 2026, 8, [https://t.me/NS\\_Ukraine/4465](https://t.me/NS_Ukraine/4465).

103 Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. 1949. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949>.  
Hague Convention (IV) with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land and the Annexed Regulations. 1907. [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/hague05.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hague05.asp). Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. 1998. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/about/rome-statute>.

104 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and James Cleverly, "Illegitimate elections in illegally occupied regions of Ukraine," GOV.UK, September 12, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/illegitimate-elections-in-illegally-occupied-regions-of-ukraine>.  
Visual Journalism Team, "Ukraine in Maps: Tracking the War with Russia," BBC News, February 24, 2022, updated February 24, 2026, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0l0k4389g2o>.

105 Crimean Partisan Movement, interview.

**“Russian occupiers have increasingly identified perceived security threats, leading to widespread civilian detention, disappearances, and deportations.”**

presence of Russian military personnel at polling stations, and multiple cases of non-transparent vote counting were recorded. At the same time, there was no proper verification of the number of ballots cast or of voter registration. The questions on the ballot had no option to maintain the status quo and remain part of Ukraine as before the full-scale invasion. Many residents were skeptical about the process. People clearly understood that in Russia, the political leadership had remained unchanged for many years, which led to a common perception that elections change nothing. This is exactly what happened. A member of the Crimean Partisan Movement stated that the results were falsified, with official figures claiming that over 90% voted in favor of joining Russia. If we compare this with election statistics in Russia, where support for Putin also often exceeds 90%, it raises the obvious question of legitimacy.<sup>106</sup>

Russian occupiers have increasingly identified perceived security threats, leading to widespread civilian detention, disappearances, and deportations.<sup>107</sup> These practices were accompanied by intensified efforts to reshape the social and demographic fabric of occupied territories.<sup>108</sup> Millions of Ukrainians have fled the territories since 2014, and especially since 2022. To replace them, Moscow accelerates settler programs that import Russian families.<sup>109</sup> A member of the Ukrainian Resistance noted the relocation of Russian citizens into the occupied territories involves those most loyal to the Kremlin and who vehemently support the war and that these individuals are given preferential access to resources over local Ukrainians.<sup>110</sup> One interviewee described how their parents, still living under occupation, have observed a steady influx of Russian settlers who behave with impunity, many reportedly drawn from poorer regions of Russia by promises of opportunity in the seized territories. While some properties have received cosmetic upgrades, large swaths of the city remain scarred by abandoned and destroyed homes, underscoring the performative nature of much of the reconstruction effort.<sup>111</sup>

Russia is actively implementing resettlement policies to move its citizens into occupied territories, introducing programs such as Zemsky Doctor, Zemsky Teacher, and Cultural Worker, as well as providing housing from the state housing fund and a one-time payment of 2 million rubles (around \$26,500). Additional benefits are granted to Russian companies that relocate their employees. Obtaining a Russian passport has effectively become a condition for survival, while Ukrainian doctors, nurses, teachers, police officers, and municipal workers are being replaced by personnel from Russia. Russians are also offered very low-interest mortgages to encourage relocation to the occupied territories.<sup>112</sup> Ukrainian teachers who remain in territories now under Russian control are often forced either to leave their jobs or to comply with new rules including the control by occupation authorities and transition to the Russian curriculum and language.<sup>113</sup>

Residents report that there are many newcomers of various nationalities in the city, and that many new people are arriving from Siberia or even the Far East of Russia and buying property that belonged to Ukrainians.<sup>114</sup> In Zaporizhzhia, occupation authorities are reportedly compelling village heads to draw up lists of residents who fled the fighting. Officials then visit these homes, ostensibly to conduct inventories or secure the properties, but in practice replace locks

106 Crimean Partisan Movement, interview.

107 United Nations, Human Rights Council, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine,” UN doc. A/HRC/52/62 (March 15, 2023), [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A-HRC\\_52\\_62\\_AUV\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A-HRC_52_62_AUV_EN.pdf).

108 Karim A.A. Khan, “Statement of ICC Prosecutor, Karim A.A. Khan QC, on the Situation in Ukraine: Receipt of Referrals from 39 States Parties and the Opening of an Investigation,” International Criminal Court, March 2, 2022, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-karim-aa-khan-qc-situation-ukraine-receipt-referrals-39-states>.

109 McGlynn, *Thresholds of Survival*.

110 National Resistance Movement volunteer, interview.

111 Cooper et al., *Life under Occupation*.

112 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

113 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

114 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

and remove equipment and valuables. When owners seek clarification, they are told their belongings have been taken for “safekeeping” or that the premises are being requisitioned for “military needs.”<sup>115</sup> This is while occupied areas of Ukraine have extreme infrastructure difficulties. Power cuts and electricity shortages are reported, signaling that despite the Kremlin’s demographic engineering there exists huge challenges for Ukrainians and life in occupation.<sup>116</sup>

People are witnessing the imposition of Russian administrative structures, police, courts, and laws that deprive Ukrainians of autonomy and self-governance. This creates a strong sense of powerlessness and fear, as the absence of Ukrainian administration and governance systems leads to profound social changes, including increased control and repression.<sup>117</sup> The U.N. also describes how Russia replaces Ukrainian institutions with its own laws, courts, education system, information space, and administration.<sup>118</sup> For many, it is a painful reminder of the temporary loss of part of the country and the transformation of the cultural and social environment. The programs and relocation incentives offered to Russians directly affect the labor market, making it very difficult for locals to compete for jobs, particularly in the public sector where Russian citizens are actively recruited.<sup>119</sup>

In April 2023, Moscow adopted a socio-economic development program for the occupied regions, followed in December by a broader state restoration plan allocating roughly 1 trillion rubles annually (around \$13.25 billion). The publicly available documents outline general objectives and subsidy priorities but contain no clear benchmarks, with significant sections classified. The full expenditure of funds in 2023 strongly suggests that substantial resources are being diverted toward military infrastructure rather than civilian recovery, despite the program’s late adoption. Beginning May 2022, the Kremlin outsourced occupation through a formalized patronage system, assigning Russian regions to administer and bankroll swaths of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, an arrangement set to run to at least 2030. Under this model, regional authorities finance reconstruction and defensive works, dispatch officials, labor, and absorb the fiscal strain. The strategic burden-sharing is embedding the occupation institutionally across Russia, diffusing accountability, and hard-wiring long-term control into the state’s administrative architecture.<sup>120</sup>

Since 2014, the occupied territories have gradually transitioned to the Russian currency. Salaries are approximately 20% lower than in Russia, while prices are on average about 5% higher.<sup>121</sup> To obtain a job one must pass a series of loyalty checks to the authorities and hold a Russian passport. Specialists for higher-paying positions are often brought in from Russia – such as medical workers or engineers.<sup>122</sup> In state-owned enterprises, delays can reach up to two months; sometimes salaries are paid in goods, or only partially. In private businesses, the situation is somewhat better, but it still depends heavily on various war-related factors.<sup>123</sup>

Most profitable businesses in Crimea and other occupied territories have, since 2014, come under the control of individuals close to the authorities.<sup>124</sup> In the territories occupied in 2022, many Russian businesses have entered and

115 National Resistance of Ukraine (@NS\_Ukraine), “На т.о. частині Запорізької області...” Telegram, February 21, 2026, [https://t.me/NS\\_Ukraine/4508](https://t.me/NS_Ukraine/4508).

116 National Resistance Ukraine (@NS\_Ukraine), “У зв’язку із відсутністю світла...” Telegram, April 2026 .9, [https://t.me/NS\\_Ukraine/4647](https://t.me/NS_Ukraine/4647).

117 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

118 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human Rights Situation during the Russian Occupation of Territory of Ukraine and Its Aftermath: 24 February 2022 – 31 December 2023* (March 20, 2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2023/2024-03-20-OHCHR-Report-Occupation-Aftermath-en.pdf>.

119 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

120 Petrov, *Russia in the Occupied Territories*.

121 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

122 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

123 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

124 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

sometimes will receive grants for construction and development projects.<sup>125</sup> Businesses are often forced to pay the military forces that control the city. It is reported by the National Resistance of Ukraine, that the Ukrainian farmers are being disqualified from their grain declarations; without those documents farmers cannot sell or export their harvest, and in such cases the occupation administration buys the grain at significantly reduced prices and sells it as Russian.<sup>126</sup>

The classified site DNR RED presents itself as a Russian-oriented listings portal and includes categories for “Продажа недвижимости – Россия,” (Real Estate for Sale – Russia) but under regions it lists Донецкая Народная Республика (Donetsk People’s Republic), Луганская Народная Республика (Luhansk People’s Republic) and Запорожская область (Zaporizhzhia oblast), alongside Russian regions like Voronezh and Smolensk. The site treats these occupied Ukrainian territories as part of a Russian real-estate region system and offers sale listings there to users of a Russian-language portal.<sup>127</sup> Russian federal and regional TV do not usually run straightforward “buy property in occupied Ukraine” adverts, but they do broadcast segments and news items that normalize and politically frame the idea of Russians – especially veterans and security forces – receiving housing in the regions. The state news program Vesti (VGTRK/Rossiia-1) reported in April 2026 on Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev’s proposal to give veterans and special forces the opportunity to obtain housing “in the liberated regions.” He also argued that many participants in the operation are ready to resettle to these regions and that they have the moral right to live on this land.<sup>128</sup>

## Surveillance and Influence Operations

Russia’s occupation operates on two parallel tracks: physical control through violence, and cultural reprogramming designed to erase Ukrainian identity from public life. Occupied areas endure totalitarian information control, where surveillance, censorship, and propaganda work together to sever populations from Ukraine. Pro-Russian influencers film staged reconstruction efforts, presenting glossy narratives while concealing systematic abuse. Russian authorities also utilize a network of collaborators in the occupied territories to spy on their neighbors as a method of controlling the population. Such individuals often receive specific instructions, monitor their neighbors, record movement patterns and visitors, and other activities. It is reported by Ukrainians in occupation that they listen to conversations and sometimes attempt to provoke controversial discussions.<sup>129</sup>

A member of the Ukrainian Resistance Movement emphasized that one of the first steps taken by Russian forces in occupied areas is to create an information vacuum that Russia fills with disinformation. Possessing a VPN or accessing Ukrainian media content can result in arrest or deportation, including transfer to detention facilities inside Russia.<sup>130</sup> Authorities have pursued systematic

“A member of the Ukrainian Resistance Movement emphasized that one of the first steps taken by Russian forces in occupied areas is to create an information vacuum. Adding that while Ukraine has not abandoned these territories and seeks their return, Russia fills this vacuum with disinformation.”

125 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

126 National Resistance of Ukraine (@NS\_Ukraine), “Під виглядом перевірок ‘россельхознадзору...’ Telegram, February 26, 2026, [https://t.me/NS\\_Ukraine/4520](https://t.me/NS_Ukraine/4520).

127 dnr.red, “Real Estate Search: Property for Sale” [Пошук нерухомості: Продаж нерухомості], accessed April 17, 2026, <https://dnr.red/search/nedvizhmost/prodazha-nedvizhmost/>.

128 Stanislav Mamrov, “Медведев предложил предоставлять бойцам СВО жилье, в том числе в новых регионах,” *Vesti.ru*, April 16, 2026, <https://www.vesti.ru/ns/medvedev-predlozhit-predostavlyat-bojcam-svo-zhile-v-tom-chisle-v-novykh-regionakh>; “Медведев предложил ввести систему предоставления жилья для ветеранов СВО” [Medvedev proposed introducing a system for providing housing to SVO veterans], *РИА Новости* [RIA Novosti], April 2026, 16, <https://ria.ru/20260416/svo2087441211-htm>; Ekaterina Belokonova, “Медведев предложил давать ветеранам СВО жилье в освобожденных регионах” [Medvedev proposed giving SVO veterans housing in liberated regions], *Комсомольская правда* [Komsomolskaya Pravda], April 2026, 15, <https://www.kp.ru/online/news/6923856/>; “Медведев предложил обеспечить ветеранов СВО жильем в освобожденных регионах,” *Realnoe Vremya*, April 2026, 17, <https://realnoevremya.ru/news/-393003medvedev-o-zhile-dlya-veteranov-svo>; Elizaveta Shishkova, “Медведев предложил давать бойцам СВО жилье в новых регионах,” *Vzglyad*, April 2026, 16, <https://m.vz.ru/news/1411491/16/4/2026.html>; “Медведев предложил выдавать ветеранам СВО жилье в новых регионах,” *Natsionalnyye Interesy*, April 2026, 16, <https://nacio.ru/news/medvedev-predlozhit-vydavat-veteranam-svo-zhile16-04-2026->

129 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

130 National Resistance Movement volunteer, interview.

confiscation of television equipment, and it was reported by the Ukrainian Center for National Resistance on Telegram that the goal of these actions was to cleanse the information space.<sup>131</sup> Russia's approach to information control in occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, and other regions included citywide internet shutdowns lasting days, extended mobile communication blackouts spanning months, and blanket bans on social media platforms.<sup>132</sup>

In 2025, the Kremlin launched the MAX super-app in occupied territories, combining banking, messaging, and public services into a single platform linked to surveillance, leaving residents continuously exposed to monitoring and data collection.<sup>133</sup> Russian media is the primary source of information, and public spaces are filled with posters promoting pro-government parties and propaganda encouraging enlistment in the Russian Armed Forces. In Crimea, for example, outdoor advertising must be approved by local authorities. In the occupied parts of Luhansk region, there are known cases where the use of yellow and blue colors in outdoor advertising is prohibited.<sup>134</sup>

The Kremlin has been accused of deploying state-sponsored and paid pro-Russian influencers since 2014 in an investigation by Meduza and independent publication DOXA, with these operations expanding and becoming more overt after 2022. Russian authorities are accused of actively rolling out initiatives in the Kremlin named "new regions" through their autonomous nonprofit organization named Russia Is a Country of Opportunities. The organization oversees at least two projects focused on developing influencer journalism and promoting Moscow policies. The first, the New Media Workshop, is aimed at journalists, bloggers, content creators, and social media professionals who want to push helpful narratives for Russia in new media formats.<sup>135</sup> During the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian state funded a large-scale online manipulation operation, paying hundreds of individuals to flood news sites, blogs, and social media with pro-annexation content to manufacture the appearance of popular support, suppress dissenting voices, and inflame fear-based narratives among locals.<sup>136</sup>

More recently, pro-Kremlin influencers, including Pavlo Karbovsky and Alina Bannikova, have operated in Mariupol and other occupied cities – such as Berdyansk, Yalta, and Urzuf – producing content that frames the territories as recovered and prosperous. Their videos emphasize carefully staged scenes of everyday life and reconstruction, deliberately diverting attention from the humanitarian crisis and the material devastation that persists.<sup>137</sup> These activities have been linked by some to state-backed initiatives such as Russia Is a Country of Opportunities and the Donbas Media Center, which support bloggers as part of coordinated efforts to reframe perceptions of the so-called "new regions." Occupation authorities have also been implicated in targeting local influencers with the abduction of TikTok bloggers in occupied Kherson to produce "repentance" videos apologizing for offending the Russian military, illustrating the coercive digital environment within Russia's occupation strategy.<sup>138</sup>

131 National Resistance Center (@sprotyv\_official), "Ворог масово вилучає телевізійне обладнання на TOT," Telegram, July 31, 2025, [https://t.me/sprotyv\\_official/7370](https://t.me/sprotyv_official/7370).

132 Daria Kurennaia, "Цифровий ГУЛАГ: як Росія контролює інтернет на окупованих територіях" Digital Gulag: How Russia controls the internet in the occupied territories, *Radio Svoboda*, May 16, 2025, <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/donbass-reali-i-internet-okupatsia/32415023.html>.

133 McGlynn, *Thresholds of Survival*; Sergey Goryashko, "Russia Targets WhatsApp and Pushes New 'Super-App' as Internet Blackouts Grow," *BBC News*, September 6, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce9rj2145jgo>.

134 'DIU Official Chatbot' initiative, correspondence.

135 "Thanks, Uncle Vova: Moscow Invests in Pro-Russian Influencers to Spread Propaganda in Occupied Ukraine," *Meduza*, March 6, 2025, based on reporting by DOXA, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/03/06/thanks-uncle-vova>.

136 Michael Holloway, "How Russia Weaponized Social Media in Crimea," *The Strategy Bridge*, May 10, 2017, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2017/5/10/how-russia-weaponized-social-media-in-crimea/>; Maryna Vorotyntseva et al., *The Use of Russian Proxy Actors in the Media Environment in Ukraine* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, November 1, 2024), <https://www.coe-civ.eu/kh/the-use-of-russian-proxy-actors-in-the-media-environment-in-ukraine>.

137 Jarron Kamphorst, "Russian vloggers create flashy travel program about occupied territories. 'This is the super cool city of Mariupol'," *Trouw*, March 17, 2025, <https://www.trouw.nl/buitenland/russische-vloggers-maken-flitsend-reisprogramma-over-bezette-gebieden-dit-is-de-supervette-stad-mariupol~bda6302c/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>.

138 Institute of Mass Information, "Freedom of Speech Barometer for September 2022," October 11, 2022, <https://imi.org.ua/en/monitorings/freedom-of-speech-barometer-for-september-2022-48289>.

**“Russia’s Commissioner for Children’s Rights in the occupation administration of Kherson, Iryna Kravchenko, openly admitted that Ukrainian online lessons are a threat to the occupation authorities and said her office is doing everything possible to ensure that children do not have the technical ability to connect to them.”**

Russia has progressively engineered a sovereign, state-controlled internet, often referred to as the Runet, that enables authorities to isolate domestic traffic and restrict access to global platforms.<sup>139</sup> Through legislation, technical infrastructure such as Deep Packet Inspection, and pressure on telecom providers, the Kremlin has throttled or blocked major Western platforms, restricted independent media, and forced companies to localize data or exit the market. The result is not a total blackout in the traditional sense but a managed shutdown of information plurality: Users can still access the internet but only within a heavily filtered ecosystem shaped by state narratives and surveillance.<sup>140</sup> This model allows the Russian government to maintain a façade of connectivity while exerting near-complete control over the flow of information.

Russian authorities have cut off Ukrainian telecom infrastructure, rerouted internet traffic through Russian networks, and imposed Russian mobile operators and ISPs. This enables both censorship and surveillance, effectively severing residents from Ukrainian state services, independent journalism, and external communication channels. Reports indicate that access to Ukrainian websites, messaging platforms, and news outlets is routinely blocked, while pro-Kremlin content is amplified.<sup>141</sup> These shutdowns serve not only to control information but also to consolidate administrative and psychological control over occupied populations, reinforcing occupation by isolating communities from alternative sources of truth and limiting their ability to document or report abuses.<sup>142</sup> The National Resistance of Ukraine described this as a digital fortress and claimed that young people are suffering the most as their connection with the world has been replaced with local propaganda-driven alternatives shaped by the Kremlin.<sup>143</sup>

In 2022, the Kremlin blocked local access to Ukrainian mobile and internet operators throughout the occupied territories and targeted social media and digital platforms to limit access to information. And in December 2024, Russia blocked the Viber messenger app across occupied Crimea, followed by deep restrictions on the use of VPNs. This followed previous bans on the use of X, Facebook, YouTube, Signal, and Instagram.<sup>144</sup> The National Resistance of Ukraine reported in January 2026 that the Russian administration is implementing a total information blockade and there have been areas left without a television signal for more than six months: There are antennas, but there is no broadcast. In addition, Russia’s Commissioner for Children’s Rights in the occupation administration of Kherson, Iryna Kravchenko, openly admitted that Ukrainian online lessons are a threat to the occupation authorities and said her office is doing everything possible to ensure that children do not have the technical ability to connect to them.<sup>145</sup>

Surveillance cameras with recognition systems are increasingly being installed in cities, in private and state institutions, on roads, and near residential buildings. The authorities either have constant access to cameras in commercial and private premises or can obtain such access without obstruction. In nearly

139 Jens Sorensen, “The Great Russian Digital Firewall: How Russia Is Isolating Its Internet,” *Medium*, November 16, 2025, <https://medium.com/the-geopolitics-report/the-great-russian-digital-firewall-how-russia-is-isolating-its-internet-3e24862f9d86>.

140 Emre Gurkan Abay, “Russia Develops Digital Ecosystem to Replace Western Platforms,” *Anadolu Agency*, February 10, 2026, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/russia-develops-digital-ecosystem-to-replace-western-platforms/3825828>; UATV, “Russia Restricts Access to Western Social Media in Occupied Territories – National Resistance Center,” January 15, 2024, <https://uatv.ua/en/russia-restricts-access-to-western-social-media-in-occupied-territories-national-resistance-center/>.

141 Kateryna Serohina, “Russia Blocks Internet in Occupied Ukrainian Territories – NRC,” *RBC-Ukraine*, March 29, 2026, <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/russia-blocks-internet-in-occupied-ukrainian-1774751757.html>.

142 Laura Wittinger and Giulio Coppi, “What They Did in the Shadows: Internet Shutdowns and Atrocities in Ukraine,” *Access Now*, February 22, 2024, last modified February 23, 2024, <https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns-and-atrocities-in-ukraine/>.

143 UATV, “Russia Restricts Access.”

144 Kateryna Hlianko, “Russia Has Restricted Access to the Viber Messenger: What Is the Situation with This in Occupied Crimea,” *Suspilne Crimea*, December 16, 2024, <https://suspilne.media/crimea/903305-rosia-obmezila-dostup-do-mesendzera-viber-aka-situacia-z-cim-v-okupovanomu-krimu/>; Oleksandr Demchenko, “Autumn Is Offline: Why the Kremlin Is Accelerating Its Internet Clampdown,” *Come Back Alive Initiatives Center*, July 23, 2025, <https://cbacenter.ngo/en/page/autumn-is-offline-why-the-kremlin-is-accelerating-its-internet-clampdown>.

145 National Resistance of Ukraine [NS\_Ukraine], “Occupiers Block Ukrainian TV and Education in Kherson Region,” *Telegram*, January 31, 2026, [https://t.me/NS\\_Ukraine/4446](https://t.me/NS_Ukraine/4446).

every location, units of the Russian Armed Forces or the National Guard are stationed and operate in coordination with local police and the FSB. In addition to regular street patrols and intensified monitoring of critical infrastructure, special attention is given to areas where Ukrainian Armed Forces personnel and their families previously lived. Personal searches and phone checks are also widespread. This is compounded by the surveillance of personal devices, control over social media, and the broader information space.<sup>146</sup> Individuals who “fail” checkpoint inspections are often sent to filtration camps. Reasons for failure range from suspected involvement in resistance activities, inconsistencies in documents, or found with items such as Ukrainian-language literature. In the best-case scenario, individuals may be released after several days.<sup>147</sup>

## Resistance Within Occupation

For many civilians, leaving occupied Ukraine is neither safe nor feasible. Movement is restricted, documentation is weaponized, property is seized, and families risk detention or reprisals if they attempt to flee. Those who remain navigate a landscape shaped by surveillance and collective punishment, where even passive noncompliance can carry severe consequences. However, resistance has not disappeared and continues to adapt. From discreet information sharing and symbolic acts to organized underground networks, civilians continue to assert agency under extreme conditions. Understanding the Ukrainian experience in occupation requires an understanding of resistance, the risks it entails, and what civilian agency looks like when survival itself becomes a form of defiance.

These efforts coexist alongside new forms of violence, including organized “drone safaris” or “human safaris” where Russian military drone operators deliberately track, target, and attack Ukrainian civilians. Investigators have traced multiple attacks to Russian drone units operating from the occupied left bank of the Dnipro, identifying the operators and command structures involved. This practice has been documented in frontline and occupied villages, where residents are struck while fleeing, collecting water, tending fields, or attempting evacuation. The purpose of these attacks extends beyond physical harm; it is a form of psychological warfare designed to terrorize communities and restrict movement.<sup>148</sup> Pro-Kremlin Telegram channels have circulated footage of these attacks with mocking captions and threats of further strikes.<sup>149</sup> Valentyna and Valeriy Klochkovi, a couple attempting to evacuate occupied Krasnopil, were hunted and killed by successive Russian drone strikes on Jan. 27, 2026; after a month in hiding, their escape was cut short just a few kilometers from safety.<sup>150</sup> Their murder signifies the impossible choice that Ukrainians trapped in occupation face, and the acute threat that not wanting to live under a Russian system has on their lives.

Residents of the territories occupied after 2022 already understood the nature of the Russian occupation and were somewhat prepared for it. Common forms of resistance are primarily underground activities: The preservation of cultural traditions, the concealment of national symbols and literature, underground Ukrainian-language schools, the monitoring of Ukrainian news, and maintaining contact with residents of non-occupied territories. All these

146 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

147 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

148 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “UN Commission Concludes That Russian Armed Forces’ Drone Attacks against Civilians in Kherson Province Amount to Crimes against Humanity of Murder,” May 28, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/05/un-commission-concludes-russian-armed-forces-drone-attacks-against-civilians>.

149 Hanna Arhirova, “How Russian Drones Targeting Civilians Are Turning One Ukrainian City into a ‘Human Safari,’” *The Independent*, November 28, 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russian-drone-attacks-ukraine-kherson-b2874104.html>.

150 Kateryna Hladenko and Kristina Chlek, “It Was the Klochkov Family: A Nephew Recounted the Story of a Couple from Hrabovske Killed by the Russian Army,” *Suspilne Sumy*, January 28, 2026, <https://suspilne.media/sumy/1225475-ce-bula-rodina-klochkovih-plemynnik-rozpoviv-pro-vbite-armieu-rf-podruzza-z-grabovskogo/>.



A boy sits in front of a damaged building after a strike in Kramatorsk in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas, in 2022. (Aris Messinis / AFP via Getty Images)

actions – however small – are considered illegal by the occupying authorities. In public, even the use of the Ukrainian language may lead to being killed or subjected to severe repression.<sup>151</sup> Individuals suspected of supporting resistance, as well as their relatives, are subjected to near-constant surveillance and phone tapping. Neighbors, family members, and colleagues of such individuals are often intimidated and coerced into giving testimony, which may be false. There are also known cases where people who were not involved in resistance activities were arrested simply for monitoring Ukrainian news or for having applications (such as VPNs) on their devices.<sup>152</sup> A member of the Ukrainian Resistance added that individuals who are taken do not return. Even small acts of defiance like seeming to reject occupation or appearing Ukrainian can result in disappearance, torture, and death.<sup>153</sup>

Despite the terrifying oppression, the Crimean Resistance movement is still operating 12 years on from their occupation across three main areas: diversion operations; information work; and cooperation with the defense forces of Ukraine. A member of the Crimean Partisan Movement emphasized that, despite common perceptions, Crimea is not a “lost cause” and remains active. They stressed that it is impossible to imagine sustainable peace while the country is pulled apart and divided. Any territorial concessions, in their view, would embolden Russia further. The movement has had success with sabotage operations targeting Russian weapons storage sites and military logistics. They attributed these outcomes to the strength of underground networks. Alongside these measures, smaller acts of defiance continue, including the display of Ukrainian ribbons and flags. Though they do not work with or involve children in their activities due to the associated risks, they noted the increasing number of young people reaching out to the movement.<sup>154</sup>

Understanding the extent to which civilians in occupation support resistance across occupied Ukraine is complicated, as even speaking positively about resistance comes with severe dangers. If residents did not engage, the resistance would not have been able to endure more than a decade of occupation. Between 2019 and 2022, the movement decreased significantly both due to the pandemic and because many participants were captured, but in 2022, after the full-scale invasion, a new and powerful wave emerged. After high-profile explosions at ammunition depots, strikes, and operations such as Operation Spider Web – where Ukraine’s Security Service struck air bases deep inside Russia in June 2025 – the number of people willing to join the resistance increased considerably.<sup>155</sup> One member of the Ukrainian Resistance Movement observed that many are forced to adapt over time. This was explained to be a result of radicalization beginning with disappointment after not being liberated, and compounded over time by sustained Russian propaganda blaming Ukraine for the war. He stated, “You don’t have the biggest army in Europe for just a political war – people want to be Ukrainian.” However, the Resistance Movement member stressed that occupation is intense and brutal. Over time, members of resistance networks have been killed, captured, replaced, or disappeared. People are exhausted and afraid.<sup>156</sup>

Data from resistance networks in occupied territories indicates clear operational patterns. Southern regions, particularly Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Mariupol, remain the primary centers of activity, with targeted sabotage focused on Russian supply chains, including ammunition convoys and rail routes around Kakhovka and Tokmak. Melitopol continues to see vehicle arsons and attacks on collaborators. There are also signs of operations extending into

151 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

152 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

153 National Resistance Volunteer, interview.

154 Crimean Partisan Movement, interview.

155 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

156 National Resistance Movement volunteer, interview.

**“The Eastern Variant publication in Ukraine established a hotline for those in occupation that acted as a discreet and reliable point of contact to ask for help. For some, it served as a simple reminder they were not cut off from Ukraine.”**

Russia, targeting logistics and infrastructure, suggesting a shift beyond purely defensive resistance. Activity in Donbas and Crimea persists, often enabled by intelligence gathered within occupied areas and passed to Ukrainian forces. However, those consulted for this report estimate that only around 20% of resistance actions are made public, as operational security takes precedence over visibility. In practice, locally guided strikes and intelligence-sharing have a more consistent tactical impact than high-profile long-range attacks, particularly along active front lines such as Pokrovsk, while direct incursions by special forces remain limited. Civilian networks largely focus on survival, protection, and discreet intelligence gathering, operating through highly compartmentalized, decentralized structures in which individuals act independently, coordinators relay specific tasks, and analysts synthesize information.<sup>157</sup>

One member of the resistance described similar coordinated tasks. He joined the movement after the 2022 full-scale invasion and the murder of his brother by Russian forces. Although he had been living in Kyiv for some time, he came from an area now under Russian occupation. He could not disclose the location because of the risk to friends and family who remain there, but he said he has not given up on them. His role is voluntary and covert and began when a childhood friend asked him to assist with a delivery of contraband intended for individuals in the region involved in resistance. His responsibilities range from sending social media messages, organizing shipments, communicating with occupied persons, and supporting those who manage to leave – often on foot and with no possessions. He expressed frustration at his inability to do more. Despite this, he noted that in many areas resistance remains active, though people are increasingly fearful due to the severity of reprisals. He described extreme violence used by occupying forces, including killings through “beatings to the head with a hammer.” He concluded that Russia is also afraid of the resistance, but as a result is increasingly harsh.<sup>158</sup>

After the 2022 full-scale invasion began, The Eastern Variant publication in Ukraine established a hotline for those in occupation that acted as a discreet and reliable point of contact to ask for help. For some, it served as a simple reminder they were not cut off from Ukraine. The regions that Eastern Variant was best able to reach were primarily the occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk. Those were the areas where the pre-existing relationship with readers was strongest, and that mattered enormously once direct communication became dangerous. Over time, the broader issue was not only where the hotline could technically reach people but also where people felt safe enough to make contact. It was designed to receive tips or testimonies, and to help people navigate urgent everyday problems under occupation. The most common requests were usually practical, such as humanitarian assistance, social payments, legal issues and related document questions, and evacuation. There were also questions connected to Russian passportization pressure, access to Ukrainian services, and, in some cases, education-related issues for young people trying to preserve links with Ukraine.<sup>159</sup>

In one period, the hotline received more than 100 inquiries, including direct contacts from occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Reaching people required a combination of trust, repetition, and using the channels that still remained accessible. Information about the hotline was distributed through Eastern Variant’s own platforms, partner media, social media, messenger-based tools, and word of mouth. Safety was treated as a core principle from the beginning. The team minimized the collection of personal data, used non-public contact infrastructure, protected accounts with additional security measures, and relied on messenger channels that were more practical for people in occupation. They also advised, where relevant, on basic digital security,

157 McGlynn. *Thresholds of Survival*.

158 National Resistance Movement volunteer, interview.

159 Anastasiia Rudenko (Editor-in-Chief, *Eastern Variant*), interview by author, April 10, 2026.

such as deleting chats and avoiding unnecessary identifying details.<sup>160</sup>

The reasons people gave for wanting to leave were often immediate and deeply human. Some were trying to get their children out of an environment shaped by fear, militarization, and the pressure to adapt to occupation. Some were worried about the lack of access to healthcare, documents, or basic services. Others described psychological exhaustion, constant pressure, surveillance, or fear connected to collaboration. Family reunification was also an important reason: Many people were trying to leave because close relatives were already in government-controlled Ukraine or abroad. In general, the decision to leave was rarely about one factor alone; it was usually the result of accumulated pressure, danger, and the sense that staying any longer would only make things harder.<sup>161</sup> The wider efforts of this hotline indicate not only that there is resistance inside of occupied territories but also that Ukrainians still want contact with Ukraine, but face a culture and environment plagued by immense fear.

## Mariupol: A Case Study

Mariupol is not simply another occupied city. What is happening there offers one of the clearest, most concentrated case studies of how modern Russia wages, consolidates, and ultimately attempts to legitimize territorial control over Ukraine. The scale of destruction, followed almost immediately by orchestrated reconstruction and online influencer information operations, reveals a deliberate strategy that goes far beyond military objectives. In Mariupol, we see the intersection of warfare, demographic engineering, economic patronage, and information control, making it an essential lens through which to understand the Kremlin's long-term ambitions in Ukraine.

The siege itself was one of the defining and most brutal episodes of the early full-scale invasion. A city of roughly 450,000 people was encircled within days and subjected to relentless bombardment by Russian forces. What followed was a systematic devastation. Tens of thousands of civilians are believed to have been killed, and over 90% of buildings were damaged or destroyed. Even as the fighting continued, Russian officials began framing Mariupol's future in terms of liberation and reconstruction. This narrative quickly became central to wartime propaganda. By mid-2022, Russian construction firms had begun appearing in occupation registries, and by early 2023, Moscow-aligned media channels were showcasing rebuilding efforts as evidence of Russian benevolence and permanence.<sup>162</sup>

Russian influencers and content creators have traveled to or produced pro-Russian content in Mariupol often as part of broader Kremlin-linked messaging campaigns.<sup>163</sup> An investigation by Novaya Gazeta Europe found a now-deleted TikTok from Mariupol showing a young woman presenting newly constructed apartment blocks as evidence of renewal, describing a city reborn and full of contented residents. The footage was filmed in neighborhoods that were destroyed in 2022 during the siege, drawing widespread criticism from viewers who pointed out that the buildings stand on sites of mass civilian death. One of the figures associated with this genre of content is reportedly 23-year-old Maria Chushykina, known online as Masha from Mariupol. She produces lifestyle-style videos depicting everyday life under occupation. After repeated removals from YouTube, she has relocated her presence to Telegram and the Russian platform RUTUBE.<sup>164</sup>

160 Rudenko, interview.

161 Rudenko, interview.

162 OSINT for Ukraine, investigative data.

163 Gvindadze, "Pro-Russian TikTokers."

164 Yulia Akhmedova, "Influencer Operation: A Cohort of Pro-Kremlin Content Creators Is Shamelessly Portraying the Russian Occupation of Mariupol in a Positive Light," *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, December 1, 2025, <https://novyagazeta.eu/articles/2025/12/01/influencer-operation-en>.

In terms of educational opportunities in Mariupol, three schools are training youth to operate drones, alongside a UAV laboratory at Priazovsky State Technical University. This reflects a wider national effort, with Russia aiming to train 1 million UAS specialists by 2030; the 256-hour course represents the extension of Russia's system within occupied territories. Individuals with gaming experience can become drone operators in as little as one to two days of additional training.<sup>165</sup> In Mariupol, the Kremlin's approach to forced mobilization is evident. Early recruits are managed to present service positively, creating a false narrative that enables broader mobilization over time. Public oath-taking ceremonies in the city are used to normalize the process, masking what is in effect a systematic campaign of coercion across the occupied territories.<sup>166</sup> In addition, there is evidence of the wider policies of conscription, including the forced mobilization of migrant workers, which underscores a growing shortfall in willing domestic recruits. Civilians from the occupied territories are viewed by Russia as a solution to this problem.<sup>167</sup>

Mariupol's population is now roughly half its pre-2022 size, and new apartment blocks are being sold to incoming Russians rather than to residents who lost their homes. Moscow is encouraging relocation to occupied areas with incentives for teachers, doctors, and cultural workers, while thousands of supposed ownerless flats are being expropriated across the region.<sup>168</sup> Unannounced home searches have become widespread. This also involves phone inspections and personal checks, with the latter occurring almost daily around the city.<sup>169</sup> Businesses are often forced to pay the military forces that control the city for protection. In Mariupol, units such as the Akhmat – elite Chechen units within the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) – are stationed, and their officers frequently demand a share of profits in exchange for “protection” of businesses.<sup>170</sup>

What has emerged in Mariupol is not simply reconstruction but a form of economic and demographic re-engineering. Researchers identified at least 31 luxury housing developments underway in the city, involving 12 Russian construction firms of varying prominence. These are not ad hoc rebuilding efforts; they represent a coordinated influx of state-linked capital and actors. The emphasis on higher end “zhiloi kompleks” developments is particularly telling.<sup>171</sup> The Russian government is offering mortgages at rates as low as 2% to incentivize relocation to Mariupol. Such preferential financing is not just economic policy but a tool of Russian settlement.<sup>172</sup> It lowers the barrier for Russian citizens, embedding a new demographic reality while simultaneously rewarding loyal constituencies within Russia's construction sector.<sup>173</sup> The occupation authorities in Mariupol have identified at least 5,700 apartments and houses for confiscation.<sup>174</sup> Under Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, an occupying power is prohibited from deporting or forcibly transferring the civilian population of an occupied territory.<sup>175</sup>

165 McGlynn, correspondence.

166 Dudka, “Трына 25+” [The 25+ Group]; Priamyi, “Mass Conscription and Repopulation.”

167 McGlynn, correspondence.

168 Karmanau, “Life is Harsh.”

169 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

170 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

171 *Russian-English Dictionary*, s.v. “zhiloi kompleks,” accessed April 16, 2026, <https://glosbe.com/ru/en/%D0%B6%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B9%20%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%81>. A zhiloi kompleks (Russian: жилой комплекс, often abbreviated as ЖК or JK) is a residential complex or housing complex, commonly found in Russia and other CIS countries. It refers to a planned development containing one or more apartment buildings designed with modern amenities, unified architecture, and often shared communal services.

172 OSINT for Ukraine, investigative data; Sberbank, “Sber Extends First Mortgages in Donetsk and Lugansk,” June 28, 2024, [https://www.sberbank.ru/en/press\\_center/all/article?newsID=6d85d58f-0f0a-45a4-b9ff-038570b027cb](https://www.sberbank.ru/en/press_center/all/article?newsID=6d85d58f-0f0a-45a4-b9ff-038570b027cb).

173 OSINT for Ukraine, investigative data.

174 ‘DIU Official Chatbot’ initiative, correspondence.

175 Anastasiia Biletska and Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR). “Demographic Crime: How Russia is Repopulating Occupied Territories.” *Global Voices (IWPR)*, November 3, 2025. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/demographic-crime-how-russia-repopulating-occupied-territories>.

The networks of developers and contractors involved in Mariupol reconstruction who have close ties to the Russian state highlight how occupation becomes economically self-reinforcing, benefiting those within the Kremlin's orbit.<sup>176</sup> Mariupol, therefore, is not only a symbol of destruction but also of how that destruction is leveraged to entrench control, redistribute resources, and normalize occupation over the long term.

### Known Russian Businesses Involved in the Reconstruction of Mariupol

#### SZ Temp (СЗ ТЕМП)

Founded in November 2023 in occupied Mariupol as a subsidiary of a St. Petersburg contractor of the same name, little online information exists about this company or its management. According to Russian business databases, the company was founded by St. Petersburg-based businessman Nikolai Nikolaevich Birulin (Бирулин Николай Николаевич). Birulin also appears elsewhere in Mariupol's "reconstruction" as founder and (former) CEO of Modul-Tsentr LLC (ООО Модуль-Центр), a St. Petersburg-registered company that was awarded contracts for restoring schools, hospitals, hotels, and state institutions. The company is building three residential complexes in Mariupol.<sup>177</sup>

#### SZ SU-2007 (СЗ СУ-2007)

Although formally registered in 2023 as a Mariupol-based developer, SU-2007 is rooted in a Krasnodar construction firm: Russian corporate-registry data show that ООО «Строительное управление-2007» ("Stroitelnoe Upravlenie-2007") founded by Krasnodar company Kuban-Stroy LLC, stood behind SU-2007 and that Kuban-Stroy belonged to banker Viktor Budarin.<sup>178</sup>

An ARD Monitor investigation and follow-up reporting identify Budarin as the main shareholder of the German engineering firm WKB Systems GmbH. Citing customs data, the reports say WKB Systems has for years supplied complete plant systems for aerated concrete block production to one of Budarin's Russian companies. That company appears to produce materials now used by Russia to consolidate control over occupied Mariupol, including in the large residential complex "Leningradskiy Kvartal" currently being built by SU-2007.<sup>179</sup>

#### EKC

With a comparatively modest presence in Mariupol, EKC is the most established company participating in the "reconstruction" of the city. A 2018 article by dailystorm.ru about the company was titled "EKC – an elite contractor in Moscow and Moscow region, about whom nothing is known." He is referred to in Western media and analysis 'Kings of State Contracts/

176 OSINT for Ukraine, investigative data.

177 OSINT for Ukraine, investigative data.

178 "Tenevye sdelki i biznes-skhemy bankira: kak vladelets 'Kuban-Kredit' Viktor Budarin vyvodil milliardy cherez stroitel'nye kompanii," Repost, 2025, <https://m.repost.news/news/81302-tenevye-sdelki-i-biznes-shemy-bankira-kak-vladelets-kubani-kredita-viktor-budarin-vyvodil-milii> Kontur.Fokus. "ООО 'SU-2007' (INN 2310130490, OGRN 1082310008021)." Accessed March 2, 2026. <https://fokus.kontur.ru>.

179 Euromaidan Press. "German Firms Involved in Rebuilding Russian-Occupied Mariupol, Monitor Investigation Finds." Euromaidan Press. April 3, 2024. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/04/04/german-firms-involved-in-rebuilding-russian-occupied-mariupol-monitor-investigation-finds>; Mind. "Investigation: German Companies Knauf and WKB Systems Involved in Construction by Russians in Mariupol." Mind. April 5, 2024. <https://mind.ua/en/news/20271816-investigation-german-companies-knauf-and-wkb-systems-involved-in-construction-by-russians-in-mariupol>; "ООО SZ SU-2007 SK (INN 9310016582)," SPARK-Interfax, accessed April 21, 2026, <https://spark-interfax.ru/donetskaya-narodnaya-respublika-mariupol/ooo-sz-su-sk-inn-9310016582-ogrn-1249300017867-24e0bc10228e18aee063269aa8c05f39>; OSINT for Ukraine, investigative data; Gid.House. "Zastroishchik SU-2007 v Donetskoi Narodnoi Respublike." Gid.House. Accessed February 28, 2026. <https://gid.house/doneckaya-narodnaya-respublika/zastroishchiki/su-2007-478>.



Russian construction firms have contracted to rebuild occupied Mariupol, Ukraine, where Russian attacks damaged or destroyed an estimated 90% of the city's buildings. (Vladimir Aleksandrov / Anadolu via Getty Images)

orders' for winning billions of rubles' worth of contracts under programs from state-funded initiatives.<sup>180</sup> An article from Russian business news site ko.ru heavily implies that the company is owned by oligarch Boris Rotenberg – the family of the on-paper founder of EKC, Elena Petrikova, is significantly intertwined with the Rotenberg family.<sup>181</sup>

### YugStroyinvest (ЮгСтройинвест)

A successful Stavropol-based construction group Yugstroyinvest – CEO, Yuriy Ivanov – has been one of the earliest investors in the “reconstruction” of Mariupol. Like most of the other firms involved, the company operates through a fragmented network of legal entities, using “SZ Porfir” as its project-specific entity in Mariupol. While direct evidence of corrupt practices involving the company is limited when using open sources, YugStroyinvest has found itself subjected to Russian opposition media coverage. A 2017 investigation by Novaya Gazeta documented allegations that individuals linked to YugStroyinvest and its affiliated companies were involved in violence and intimidation against local activists in Stavropol. The report described a case in which an activist, after being shot at, was prosecuted and imprisoned, suggesting the possibility of direct ties between YugStroyinvest and local authorities. Ivanov and YugStroyinvest are as of yet unsanctioned.<sup>182</sup>

### Sadovoe Koltso (Садовое Колцо)

Founded by State Duma deputy Sergey Kolunov, Sadovoe Koltso is a relative latecomer to Mariupol's “reconstruction.” Kolunov was a real estate tycoon in Moscow for well over a decade before embarking on a career in politics, assigned to the Duma's construction committee. While the company has not been the subject of major investigative reporting or corruption scandals, it has arguably the clearest direct links to the upper echelons of the Russian establishment. Kolunov is sanctioned by the EU, United States, and United Kingdom, but management of Sadovoe Koltso is currently officially in the hands of his unsanctioned son, Ilya Kolunov.<sup>183</sup>

Ilya Kolunov is quoted on the expansion of the company to Mariupol as saying, “For us, this is more than just another construction project. We view participating in the city's restoration as an honor and a responsibility, a crucial part of our creative mission.”<sup>184</sup>

- 180 Daily Storm, “«АО ГК «ЕКЦ» – элитный подрядчик Москвы и МО, о котором не известно ничего» [JSC GC “EKS”—An Elite Contractor in Moscow and the Moscow Region, About Whom Nothing Is Known], June 6, 2018, <https://dailystorm.ru/obschestvo/ao-gk-eks-elitnyy-podryadchik-moskvy-i-mo-o-kotorom-ne-izvestno-nichego>. OSINT for Ukraine, investigative data.
- 181 Natalya Kuznetsova, “Ротенберг против Ротенберга?” [Rotenberg Against Rotenberg?], Журнал «Компания» [Ko.ru], December 2019, 4, <https://ko.ru/articles/rotenberg-protiv-rotenberga/>; Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), “Five Kings: Putin Insiders Reign in Government Contract Ranking,” RFE/RL, February 2016, 25, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-insiders-state-contracts-forbes-ranking/27576535.html>; Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), “The Magic Isle: How Wealthy Russians Use an Offshore Territory to Avoid Taxes on Private Jets,” OCCRP, November 2017, 5, <https://www.occrp.org/en/project/paradise-papers/the-magic-isle-how-wealthy-russians-use-an-offshore-territory-to-avoid-taxes-on-private-jets>; Daily Storm, “АО ГК «ЕКЦ».” OSINT for Ukraine, investigative data.
- 182 Kateryna Saienko, “Google Updated Satellite Images of Mariupol: Russia Is Changing the City's Civilian Infrastructure,” *Suspilne Novyny*, October 28, 2025, <https://suspilne.media/1150546-google-updated-satellite-images-mariupol-russia-changing-citys-civilian-infrastructure/>.
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- 184 “From Ufa to Mariupol: The Garden Ring Group of Companies Is Expanding Its Geography,” *Sobaka.ru* (Ufa), December 19, 2025, <https://www.sobaka.ru/ufa/city/realty/208679>. Translation provided by google. Original text in the article is “Я бы особенно выделил старт нового ЖК «Садовые кварталы»\* в Мариуполе. Для нас это больше, чем просто еще один строительный объект. Мы рассматриваем участие в восстановлении города как честь и ответственность, как важнейшую часть нашей созидательной миссии.”

## Conclusion

Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territory is not a transient byproduct of war but a deliberate, multilayered system of control designed to erase Ukrainian identity, re-engineer demographics, and hard-wire these regions into the political, legal, economic, and information architecture of the Russian Federation. From the 2014 annexation of Crimea to the occupations following the 2022 invasion, the same toolkit – forced passportization, manufactured legitimacy, child militarization, religious persecution, arbitrary detention, economic capture, and information isolation – has been refined and scaled, entrenching a durable system of coercion with long-term security, humanitarian, and legal consequences if left unchecked.

Russia's conduct in occupied Ukrainian territories raises multiple, intersecting concerns under international humanitarian law, particularly the framework governing occupation set out in the Fourth Geneva Convention. Central to this framework is the principle that an occupying power must preserve the existing legal and administrative order unless absolutely prevented. Legal experts have therefore assessed that several Russian-imposed measures may constitute violations of the laws of armed conflict, including unnecessary alterations to domestic legislation.<sup>185</sup>

Further violations arise in relation to the treatment of civilians and the conduct of hostilities. The U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine has concluded that Russian armed forces' use of drone attacks against civilians in Kherson Province amounts to crimes against humanity.<sup>186</sup> More broadly, there is extensive documentation of deliberate or indiscriminate attacks on civilian infrastructure, including energy systems, hospitals, and residential areas.<sup>187</sup> Investigations have also documented patterns of summary executions, sexual violence, and other forms of brutality in occupied territories, reinforcing assessments that such acts may form part of a wider, systematic campaign against civilians.<sup>188</sup> Evidence points to widespread use of torture, enforced disappearances, and unlawful detention, often accompanied by coercive interrogations and fabricated charges.<sup>189</sup>

In parallel, the forcible transfer and deportation of civilians – particularly children – from occupied territories into Russia has been identified as a potential war crime, crime against humanity, and act of genocide.<sup>190</sup> Reports of Russian forces filming the desecration of Ukrainian soldiers' remains could constitute grave breaches of international humanitarian law and customary international law requiring respect for the deceased.<sup>191</sup> Religious freedoms protected under Ukrainian constitutional law, including Articles 11, 24, 35, and 37, which guarantee religious identity, equality before the law, and prohibit incitement of religious hostility, have come under sustained pressure.<sup>192</sup> Article 51 of the

185 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention)*, Geneva: ICRC, August 12, 1949, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949>.

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188 Human Rights Watch, "Ukraine: Apparent War Crimes in Russia-Controlled Areas," April 3, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/03/ukraine-apparent-war-crimes-russia-controlled-areas>.

189 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Reports on Violations of International Humanitarian Law in Ukraine, 2022–2025*, accessed 22 April, 2026, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/ukraine>; Amnesty International, "Ukraine: Ill-Treatment in Russian Captivity," March 4, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/03/russia-ukraine-ill-treatment-of-ukrainians-in-russian-captivity-amounts-to-war-crimes-and-crimes-against-humanity/>.

190 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Reports on the Deportation and Transfer of Ukrainian Civilians, 2023–2025*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-reports/ukraine>; New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, *Russian Breaches of the Genocide Convention in Ukraine: An Independent Legal Analysis of the Russian Federation's Breaches of the Genocide Convention and the Duty to Prevent*. Washington, DC: New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, July 26, 2023. PDF. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/20230726-Genocide-Ukraine-Report-NISLAP.pdf>.

191 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), "Rule 115: Respect for the Dead," Customary International Humanitarian Law Database, March 4 2026 <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule115>.

192 *Constitution of Ukraine*, June 28, 1996, arts. 11, 24, 35, 37, 64, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/documents/constitution>.

Fourth Geneva Convention explicitly prohibits the conscription of inhabitants of occupied territories into the armed forces of the occupying power.<sup>193</sup> Taken together, these patterns point to a broader framework of occupation that is inconsistent with both international humanitarian law and fundamental human rights obligations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy responses must be built on the recognition that, beyond active combat, occupation itself is the primary engine of ongoing harm. Western governments and multilateral institutions should treat the dismantling of occupation structures, protection of civilians, and support for those under or escaping occupation as core security priorities rather than secondary humanitarian concerns. This requires aligning sanctions, legal accountability tools, security assistance, and reconstruction planning around the specific mechanisms through which occupation is sustained – schools, courts, registries, property systems, telecoms, and reconstruction finance – rather than focusing solely on frontline dynamics.

### 1 TARGET THE INFRASTRUCTURE AND BENEFICIARIES OF OCCUPATION

Taken together, these steps recognize that ending Russia's occupation system is essential not only to restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity but also to preventing a generation of Ukrainians from being permanently absorbed into an architecture of coercion that, if normalized, would weaken the entire international order's ability to deter future wars of Russian imperialist conquest.

States should expand and coordinate sanctions on Russian officials, regional authorities, state corporations, construction firms, banks, and intermediaries directly involved in administering occupied territories, financing reconstruction in places like Mariupol, running deportation and camp networks, or enforcing passportization and conscription. This should include secondary sanctions and procurement bans for unsanctioned entities demonstrably profiting from contracts or property in occupied Ukraine, coupled with legal frameworks to seize their overseas assets and earmark them for future Ukrainian-led restitution and reconstruction mechanisms.

### 2 CREATE A DEDICATED ACCOUNTABILITY AND DOCUMENTATION TRACK FOCUSED ON OCCUPATION CRIMES

Governments should support a standing international mechanism – or a reinforced mandate within existing bodies – to systematically document, preserve, and analyze evidence of occupation-related violations, including forced child transfers, civilian and child imprisonment, religious persecution, and coerced conscription, in close partnership with Ukrainian institutions and civil society. This should be linked to clear pathways for prosecution (domestic, hybrid, or international), long-term witness protection for people emerging from occupied areas, and coordinated use of universal jurisdiction for egregious occupation crimes, such as torture, enforced disappearance, and unlawful deportation.

### 3 PROTECT AND RECONNECT CIVILIANS UNDER OCCUPATION

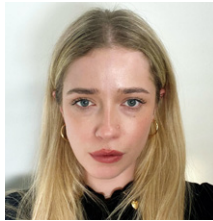
Protect and reconnect civilians under occupation. Western and partner governments should invest in resilient, secure channels – such as encrypted distance-learning platforms, offline materials, secure communications, and cross-border broadcasting – to keep occupied populations linked to Ukrainian education, information, and services. Parallel funding should support and scale Ukrainian and international networks that provide safe evacuation, legal aid, psychosocial care, and long-term reintegration for people, including children, leaving occupation, recognizing that reversing years of militarized schooling and propaganda will require sustained specialist support.

These efforts should be coordinated through official, secure, intelligence-led channels rather than NGOs, so as not to endanger resistance networks.

<sup>193</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention)*, August 12, 1949, art. 51, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-51>.

#### 4 EMBED OCCUPATION DYNAMICS INTO ALL SECURITY AND RECONSTRUCTION PLANNING

#### 5 REINFORCE THE NORM AGAINST ANNEXATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC ENGINEERING



Security assistance to Ukraine and discussions of post-war reconstruction should explicitly integrate the findings about child militarization, demographic engineering, and economic capture, recognizing that today's school-age children in occupied territories are being channeled into tomorrow's mobilization pool.

Allies should use the Ukrainian case to strengthen global responses to annexation and settler-based demographic change, including by codifying clearer consequences for states that alter education systems, civil registries, religious institutions, or property regimes in occupied territory.

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