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Russia's Pipeline of Persecution: A Systematic Campaign of Crimes Against Humanity in Occupied Ukraine

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Key Points

Russia operates a pipeline of state-engineered persecution against Ukrainian civilians in occupied areas. The Russian system constitutes seven interlocking crimes against humanity: persecution; imprisonment/other severe deprivation of liberty; torture; enforced disappearance; deportation/forcible transfer; other inhumane acts; and sexual violence. These are not isolated abuses but elements of a single machinery of repression that underpins Russia's occupation policy.

Since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, thousands of innocent civilians have been detained by Russian authorities. Many of them were tortured and went through enforced disappearance, deportations, and illegal imprisonment. Each of these acts – persecution, torture, enforced disappearance, deportation, sexual violence, illegal imprisonment, and other inhumane acts – serves as a link in this pipeline, mutually reinforcing the others to destroy civic life and consolidate control in Russian occupied territories. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) outlines that the Russian Federation has applied torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment in a “systematic and widespread manner against civilians in places of detention.”¹

Without a robust international response, there is a significant risk of international law being undermined, leading to further acts constituting crimes against humanity in the future. Each recommended action should be understood as a response not merely to isolated violations but to an entire system of crimes against humanity: a deliberate, state-run apparatus that requires dismantling through diplomatic, legal, and humanitarian means.

¹ OHCHR “Treatment of civilians deprived of their liberty in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine”, (United Nations, 2025), 1, https://ukraine.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/202509-22%20Treatment%20of%20civilians_ENG.pdf

- **Diplomatic and Political Pressure:** Elevate the issue of civilian detainees as a standing diplomatic priority, applying targeted sanctions to ensure accountability and engaging third-party mediators.
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- **Support for Coordination and Advocacy:** Support the Main Directorate of Intelligence (HUR) Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War (CHQ) and related Ukrainian agencies and back Ukrainian and international human rights NGOs.
 - **Public and Media Advocacy:** Raise the profile of civilian detainees in U.K. media and international forums and support cultural and public diplomacy campaigns.
 - **Humanitarian and Legal Assistance:** Provide medical, psychological, and reintegration support and assist with legal documentation and evidence collection. Given that each detainee is a victim of a broader pattern of persecution, assistance programs should be framed as responses to crimes against humanity, not mere humanitarian relief.
 - **Multilateral Action and Long-Term Justice:** Champion international accountability and create a dedicated UN-anchored Contact Group (UK-initiated, multi-state coalition feeding into UN mechanisms).

There is a moral and ethical imperative on the international community to respond to these crimes. Russian secrecy around the detainees and consistent refusal of access to independent monitors make the situation even more challenging. In the immediate term, the most urgent priority is securing the release of those still in detention. Achieving this will likely require creative and flexible diplomacy - leveraging allies, engaging in prisoner exchanges, or even involving neutral third parties to negotiate the civilians' release.

Background and Scope of the Issue

To understand the full scale of these abuses, it is essential to view them not as separate incidents but as components of a deliberate system of persecution. Russia operates a pipeline of state-engineered persecution against Ukrainian citizens in occupied areas in which civilian detainees are a central target population. Seven interlocking crimes against humanity – persecution; illegal detention; deportation or forcible transfer; enforced disappearance; torture and other inhumane acts; sexual violence; and illegal imprisonment - mutually reinforce one another to disable dissent and consolidate control over areas it has illegally occupied during its war of aggression against Ukraine.

In September 2025, the UN Human Rights Office released a report detailing “widespread and systematic” torture of Ukrainian civilian detainees in every occupied region of Ukraine, as well as dozens of regions inside Russia.² Similarly, an OSCE expert mission report found that the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of Ukrainian civilians has been a “defining feature” of Russian-occupied territories since 2014.³ These reports underscore that the perpetration of these seven crimes against

² OHCHR “Treatment of civilians deprived of their liberty in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine”.

³ OSCE ODIHR “Report on violations and abuses of international humanitarian and human rights law, war crimes and crimes against humanity, related to the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of Ukrainian civilians by the Russian Federation”, (OSCE, 2024), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/4/567367_0.pdf

Ukrainian civilians by Russian authorities violates international law and likely amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The systematic nature of these activities elevates Russia's conduct

from a series of war crimes to a comprehensive pattern of crimes against humanity – the very definition of state-organised persecution.

Scale of Civilians Experiencing the Seven Crimes against Humanity – Numbers and Estimates

Estimating the number of civilian detainees who have endured this perilous journey of a systematised perpetration of nearly all crimes against humanity enumerated in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court is challenging due to secrecy, but various credible sources indicate that thousands of Ukrainian civilians have been taken captive by Russia. Several Ukrainian and international organisations report especially high figures:

- **Ukrainian Ombudsman's Data:** As of early 2025, Ukraine's Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights, Dmytro Lubinets, estimated that more than 20,000 Ukrainian civilians were or had been held in Russian custody, whether in occupied territories or after being transferred to Russia. In late 2024, he also reported a "separate list" of over 16,000 civilians held in Russian prisons, of whom only 168 had been released at that time. By September 2025, President Zelensky confirmed that just 168 civilians were among roughly 3,900 total captives freed in exchanges, highlighting how small the civilian releases have been.⁴
- **UN and Official Counts:** The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission, which conducts interviews with ex-detainees, cites Ukrainian government figures of approximately 15,000 civilians detained by Russia since the 2022 invasion, with at least 1,800 believed to still be in detention as of mid-2025. The actual figure is likely higher: while the Mission has been able to confirm around 400 ongoing detentions, it stresses that this represents only a small fraction of the true scale.⁴
- **Human Rights Groups:** Ukrainian and Russian human rights organisations tracking cases have slightly different counts, often based on verified individual names. For example, the Ukrainian NGO Media Initiative for Human Rights (MIHR) has identified at least 1,908 specific civilian captives held by Russia as of early 2025.⁵ The Center for Civil Liberties (CCL) – Ukraine's leading human rights group – said it had received over 4,000 requests from families seeking help for civilian detainees. On the Russian side, Memorial, the banned Russian human-rights organisation, reports knowing of 1,672 Ukrainian civilian prisoners in Russian custody by name, acknowledging "a larger number... that we don't know about".⁶

⁴ OHCHR "Treatment of civilians deprived of their liberty in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine".

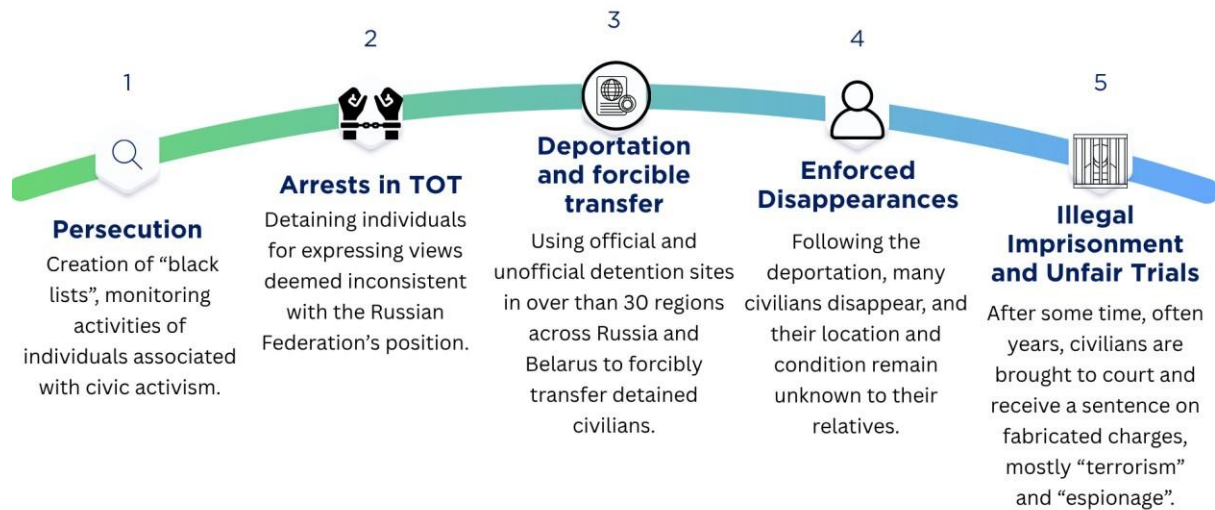
⁵ Media Initiative for Human Rights. "Advocacy Event at the UN Human Rights Council", March 2025.

⁶ Litvinova "Thousands of Ukrainian civilians are still held by Russia with uncertain hope of release".

⁴ Litvinova, Dasha and Arhirova, Hanna “Thousands of Ukrainian civilians are still held by Russia with uncertain hope of release”, AP News, April 6, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-civilian-captivesinternational-law-3cf2c2d7df58eaa6e1e520254c240d5a>

While the precise number varies by source, all estimates confirm a massive scale – on the order of several thousand Ukrainian civilians at minimum – abducted or unjustly imprisoned by Russia since 2014, with the bulk of cases occurring after 2022.⁷

Russian Persecution Pipeline of Ukrainian civilians in Temporary Occupied Territories (TOTs)



1) Persecution of Ukrainian civilians in the Temporarily Occupied Territories (TOTs)

A report by the OHCHR concludes that the Russian Federation has subjected Ukrainian civilian detainees to serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, including the imposition of Russian law in occupied territories, the arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance of civilians, the removal of civilians from legal protection, and the systematic torture and ill-treatment.⁸ According to Olga Skrypnik, head of the Crimean Human Rights Group, Crimea became the “first platform” in 2014 on which Russia systematically persecuted the civilian population. After the full-scale invasion in 2022, these methods – searches, torture, and fabricated cases – were extended to newly occupied areas of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk.⁹ As reported by the OSCE, occupation authorities deliberately target civic activists and their

⁷ Amnesty International “A deafening silence: Ukrainians held incommunicado, forcibly disappeared, and tortured in Russian captivity”, (London: Amnesty International Ltd, 2025), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur50/9046/2025/en/>

⁸ OHCHR “Treatment of civilians deprived of their liberty in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine”.

⁹ Ponomariova, Valentyna “Systematic persecution of civilians in occupied territories confirmed by international institutions”, Vgoru, November 15, 2025, <https://vgoru.org/novini/systemne-peresliduvannia-civilnogo-naseleenniana-okupovanix-teritoriiix-pidtverdzuut-i-miznarodni-instituciyi>

relatives, representatives of local self-government, teachers, journalists, and those involved in peaceful protests or civic initiatives viewed as expressing opposition to the occupation.¹⁰

Crucially, this persecution is often pre-planned. Before the full-scale invasion, Russia compiled “blacklists” of civilians showing real or perceived opposition in areas it intended to occupy, echoing tactics first deployed in Crimea.¹¹ These lists helped identify individuals to be detained and used as the basis for fabricated criminal cases, often under torture. One of the key institutional actors is the Centre for Countering Extremism within the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, which focuses on monitoring social media for signs of disloyalty.¹² In practice, this has led to cases such as a 21-year-old resident of Berdiansk who was arrested for an online comment classified as “public calls for extremist activity” and prosecuted under Article 280 of the Russian Criminal Code, a provision regularly used for political persecution.¹³ According to Olha Skrypyuk from Crimean Human Rights Group, in some instances, like in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, the Russian forces “did not even bother to fabricate evidence; they just tortured the person to force him to admit to any kind of actions that the FSB wanted”.¹⁵

This persecution is not one crime among many but the central organising principle that activates and connects the other six crimes against humanity in Russia’s occupation policy.

2) Arrests in TOTs

According to the OHCHR, at least 15,250 civilians have been detained by Russian authorities between February 2022 and August 2025.¹⁶ Individual cases illustrate how these arrests function in practice and how they have escalated over time. In occupied Sevastopol, a local resident was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment for “treason” after allegedly sending images of Russian military assets on WhatsApp.¹⁴ In Yalta, a 45-year-old man received two years in a penal colony for online comments deemed “Russophobic” and “public calls for extremism.”¹⁵ In Melitopol, 19-year-old Yana Suvorova was arrested for running a pro-Ukrainian Telegram channel and, in October 2025, sentenced to 14 years in prison by a military court in Rostov-on-Don.¹⁶

Together, these cases show a clear shift from detaining civilians accused of assisting Ukrainian forces to targeting people solely for online speech or dissenting views. They also reveal regional variations: in frontline areas, civilians are more often detained for sharing information or images

¹⁰ OSCE ODIHR “Seventh Interim Report on reported violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in Ukraine”.

¹¹ Ponomariova “Systematic persecution of civilians in occupied territories confirmed by international institutions”.

¹² Ponomariova “Systematic persecution of civilians in occupied territories confirmed by international institutions”.

¹³ Donchevska, Valentyna “In Berdyansk, occupiers will try a 21-year-old man for ‘extremism’”, *Tochka Skhodu*, June 19, 2025, <https://cxid.media/news/u-berdiansku-okupanty-sudytymut-21-richnoho-khloptsia-za-ekstremizm/> ¹⁵

Ponomariova “Systematic persecution of civilians in occupied territories confirmed by international institutions”. ¹⁶ OHCHR “Treatment of civilians deprived of their liberty in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine”.

¹⁴ Yanko, Anna “In occupied Sevastopol, a ‘court’ sentenced a local resident to 14 years for ‘treason’”, *Suspilne Crimea*, August 26, 2025, <https://suspilne.media/crimea/1099720-v-okupovanomu-sevastopoli-sud-zasudiv-miscevogozitela-do-14-rokiv-za-derzzradu/>

¹⁵ Yanko, Anna “A resident of occupied Yalta was sentenced to two years in prison for comments on social media”, *Suspilne Crimea*, August 28, 2025, <https://suspilne.media/crimea/1101428-zitela-okupovanoi-alti-zasudili-do-dvohrokiv-kolonii-za-komentari-v-socmerezi/>

¹⁶ Taradiuk “Russia sentences 21-year-old admin of ‘Melitopol is Ukraine’ Telegram channel to 14 years in prison”.

of Russian troops, while in territories further from active combat, particularly Crimea, arrests increasingly focus on punishing expressions of pro-Ukrainian sentiment or perceived disloyalty.

3) Deportations and forcible transfer

The OHCHR report identifies more than 30 regions across the Russian Federation and Belarus to which Ukrainian civilians were forcibly transferred. These locations range from the Gomel region in Belarus to Krasnoyarskiy Krai in central Russia, over 3,000 kilometres from the Ukrainian border.¹⁷ According to the Crimean Human Rights Group, the deportations also took place from newly occupied territories, like parts of the Kherson region, to regions long controlled by Russia, such as Crimea, to facilitate the local FSB in further fabrication of criminal cases against Ukrainian civilians.¹⁸

The forced transfers function as the logistical core of Russia's persecution pipeline, dispersing detainees across Russia to erase their identities and impede legal accountability.

4) Enforced Disappearances

As observed by Amnesty International, at least 562 cases of enforced disappearance were documented between February 2022 to June 2023. The available evidence suggests that this number has continued to rise as the full-scale invasion has continued.²² One case revealed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) concerns a female “who was detained at a police station in occupied Kherson region, [and who] described to ODIHR how, after repeatedly asking guards to submit a request to the police chief about why she and her cellmates were being held in custody, it became apparent that their detention was not registered with the police and no charges had been filed. The official response noted that they ‘were under the responsibility of the FSB and only the FSB could decide [their] fate.’”²³

Enforced disappearances are both a tactic and a stage within the wider machinery of persecution, ensuring victims pass invisibly through the pipeline without protection under law.

5) Illegal Imprisonment and Unfair Trials

Multiple cases demonstrate how illegal imprisonment operates and reveals the absence of free and fair trials. Melitopol volunteer Dmitry Golubev, who helped evacuate civilians and deliver medicine, was detained in August 2022 on fabricated “terrorism” charges and moved through detention centres in Simferopol, Rostov-on-Don, and Novocherkassk before receiving a 15-year

¹⁷ OHCHR “Treatment of civilians deprived of their liberty in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine”.

¹⁸ Ponomariova “Systematic persecution of civilians in occupied territories confirmed by international institutions”. ²² Amnesty International “A deafening silence: Ukrainians held incommunicado, forcibly disappeared, and tortured in Russian captivity”. ²³ OSCE ODIHR “Seventh Interim Report on reported violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in Ukraine”.

sentence.¹⁹ Despite serious chronic illnesses that should have qualified him for release under Russian law, he was denied adequate medical care and, because he is not a Russian citizen, refused necessary surgery. By 2024, his condition had deteriorated to critical.²⁰ Yana Suvorova, detained at 19 for running a pro-Ukrainian Telegram channel, disappeared and was forcibly deported to the Taganrog detention centre known for torture. She was later charged with an array of manufactured offences including “terrorism” and “espionage”; and after more than two years in Russian custody, she too was sentenced to 14 years in prison.²¹ These cases show how the Russian judicial system converts fabricated allegations into formalised repression, sustaining the wider machinery of state persecution.

Patterns of Torture, Ill-Treatment and Sexual Violence

The use of torture against Ukrainian civilian detainees is overwhelmingly prevalent: 92% of ex-detainees interviewed by the UN reported being tortured or ill-treated, demonstrating that abuse is systematic across virtually all Russian-run detention facilities.²⁷ Physical torture is widespread and includes severe beatings, electric shocks, and mock executions. One 56-year-old civilian described FSB interrogators administering electric shocks while threatening his family.²² Sexual violence is used as a deliberate method of humiliation and coercion, initially targeting men – who reported rape, forced nudity, and genital electrocution – but later also women, with the UN Commission of Inquiry documenting gang-rape and other forms of sexual abuse by guards. These acts are frequently accompanied by threats to harm detainees’ relatives.²³

Psychological torture is similarly central to detention practices. Civilians are typically held incommunicado, blindfolded or kept in darkness for days, and subjected to threats of death or permanent disappearance. This isolation inflicts acute suffering both on detainees and their families, who are kept ignorant of their fate. Detention conditions themselves amount to inhuman treatment: civilians are held in overcrowded basement cells or dilapidated facilities; and they are denied food, water, hygiene, and medical care. Some detainees die from untreated injuries or disease. For example, journalist Viktoriia Roshchyna was held without charge, and her body was later returned bearing clear signs of torture.²⁴

Officials and medical personnel sometimes participate directly in these abuses. UN investigators documented cases where medics ignored or exacerbated injuries, and where FSB officers oversaw

¹⁹ ZMINA “Volunteer Dmitry Golubev, whom Russia illegally sentenced to 15 years in prison, has critical health problems”, April 10, 2025, <https://zmina.info/news/u-volontera-dmytra-golubyeva-nezakonno-zasudzhenogo-urfd-15-rokiv-koloniyyi-krytychnyj-stan-zdorovya/>

²⁰ Russian Federation, *Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 598 of 19 May 2017, “On Amendments to the List of Diseases Preventing the Serving of a Sentence”*, Official publication No. 0001201705260017, published May 26, 2017, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201705260017?index=1>

²¹ Taradiuk “Russia sentences 21-year-old admin of ‘Melitopol is Ukraine’ Telegram channel to 14 years in prison”. ²⁷ OHCHR “Treatment of civilians deprived of their liberty in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine”.

²² OHCHR “Treatment of civilians deprived of their liberty in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine”.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Garside, Juliette, et al “Numerous signs of torture’: a Ukrainian journalist’s detention and death in Russian prison”, *The Guardian*, April 29, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/29/viktoriia-roshchyna-ukrainianjournalist-death-russian-prison>

and ordered torture during interrogations, confirming that these practices are not the work of rogue actors but part of a state-directed system. Torture – including sexual violence – thus serves as a core instrument of domination within the broader architecture of crimes against humanity that underpin Russia’s occupation regime.²⁵

Locations and Detention Facilities

Russian forces operate an extensive network of detention facilities for Ukrainian civilians across both occupied territory and Russia itself. The UN has identified more than 100 sites used since February 2022, located in every occupied Ukrainian province and in over 30 regions of Russia and Belarus. Ad-hoc prisons were frequently set up in seized towns – using police stations, government buildings, basements, schools, and industrial sites to detain perceived dissidents. Some facilities have become notorious. In Donetsk and Luhansk, occupied as far back as 2014, prisons such as Izolyatsia gained a reputation for electroshock torture and beatings. After 2022, similar “filtration” camps and makeshift prisons proliferated across Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv regions. Local police stations often doubled as interrogation centres where detainees were abused before being transferred to larger sites. One detainee, Daniil, a student from Donetsk, was held for nearly three years in Izolyatsia after severe torture, including beatings, electrocution, and threats of sexual violence, and now suffers lasting health problems.²⁶

Large numbers of civilians have been forcibly transferred into Russia, initially to detention centres in Crimea or border regions such as Rostov, Belgorod, and Kursk, and later to facilities deeper inside Russia, including Moscow, St Petersburg, and Siberian penal colonies, particularly when put on trial. The dispersal of detainees across Russia makes tracing them extremely difficult. Conditions in these prisons are harsh: many civilians are held in high-security facilities alongside common criminals or political prisoners, often in isolation, and are denied consular support because Russia falsely classifies them as its own nationals or “traitors”.

A defining feature of this system is secrecy. Russia routinely blocks access for independent monitors, including the ICRC, and the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission notes it has been denied entry to all 114 detention sites it has identified.²⁷ Families are provided no reliable information about their relatives’ whereabouts, receiving standardised denials such as “not in our database.” This deliberate concealment, aimed at removing detainees from any legal protection, often amounts to enforced disappearance under international law.³⁴

²⁵ Cheshire, Tom, et al “Torture 24 hours a day: survivors reveal the dark cruelty of Russia's detention centres in occupied Ukraine”, Sky News, <https://news.sky.com/story/torture-24-hours-a-day-survivors-reveal-the-darkcruelty-of-russias-detention-centres-in-occupied-ukraine-12970745>

²⁶ Koroliova, Yevheniia and Kulynich, Maryna “How prisoners are tortured in the ‘Izolyatsia’ prison: a student from Donetsk recounts his experiences in the prisons of the so-called ‘DNR’”, MIHR, September 6, 2024, <https://mipl.org.ua/yak-katuyut-u-tyurmi-izolyacziya-student-iz-doneczka-rozpoviv-pro-perezhyte-uv%CA%BCyaznyczyah-tak-zvanoyi-dnr/>

²⁷ The ICRC’s credibility given its ongoing relationship with the Russian Red Cross is, in any case, a matter of dispute. Carlsson, Mattias, et al “Kremlin Leaks: Russian Red Cross Works With Groups Deporting Ukrainian Children”, VSQUARE, March 12, 2024, <https://vsquare.org/kremlin-leaks-russia-red-cross-ukrainian-children-guns/> ³⁴ OHCHR “Treatment of civilians deprived of their liberty in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine”.

Summary of Evidence

The evidence across all regions confirms that these seven crimes function not separately but synergistically, amounting to an intentional system of occupation regime control over the civilian population. “Russia’s pipeline of persecution” against Ukrainian civilians in occupied territories, with civilian detainees as a primary target, consists of seven interlocking crimes against humanity – persecution; imprisonment/other severe deprivation of liberty; torture; enforced disappearance; deportation/forcible transfer; other inhumane acts; and sexual violence. Those crimes mutually reinforce one another to disable dissent and consolidate control over areas it has illegally occupied during its war of aggression against Ukraine.

The gravity of what is being done to civilians in occupied areas of Ukraine illustrates the genesis of why the category of crimes against humanity was created. When a state apparatus directs systematic abuse against a civilian population, it is not simply breaking rules. It is dismantling the legal and moral order that protects the weak from the powerful. The record we confront in Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine is not an accumulation of isolated excesses. It is a state-organised system of repressions against civilians who are identified, detained, hidden, forcibly displaced, coerced, tortured, and released under conditions designed to silence them and frighten everyone else. Understanding the war in these terms – as a systematic perpetration of multiple, linked crimes against humanity – clarifies both the moral and legal stakes for the international community.

Russia’s “Justifications” and Patterns of Victims

Russian forces cast a wide net when detaining Ukrainian civilians, but clear patterns emerge in terms of who is targeted and why. The unifying logic is the removal of anyone who disrupts the normalisation of occupation or sustains Ukrainian civic identity. Occupation authorities focus heavily on those perceived as “threats” – namely, community leaders, civil servants, activists, volunteers, journalists, clergy, and others who influence public opinion or facilitate loyalty to Ukraine. According to the OSCE, many civilians were detained simply for their “general support for Ukraine and rejection of the Russian occupation.” Ordinary citizens – teachers, entrepreneurs, and retirees – were seized to intimidate local communities. One example is Pastor Mykhailo Brytsyn in Melitopol, threatened with execution and labelled an “extremist” and “American spy” for leading an independent church and providing humanitarian aid.²⁸

Russia also systematically detains local officials who refuse to collaborate. Dozens of mayors and village heads were abducted in 2022. Melitopol’s mayor Ivan Fedorov was later freed in a swap, while the whereabouts of Kherson’s mayor Ihor Kolykhaiev remains unknown. In frontline areas, civilians – particularly men of military age – are falsely accused of aiding Ukrainian forces. Mykyta Shkriabin, a 19-year-old student captured while buying supplies, was arbitrarily labelled a prisoner-

²⁸ Batchelder, Abbey “Faith in the face of Russian repression: Ukrainian pastor Mykhailo Brytsyn”, George W. Bush Presidential Center, April 22, 2025, <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/faith-in-the-face-of-russianrepression-ukrainian-pastor-mykhailo-brytsyn>

of-war despite never having served. Over three years later, he remains in limbo and has received only two brief letters.³⁶

Elsewhere, people have been detained for speech alone, including criticising the invasion, displaying Ukrainian symbols, refusing Russian passports, or engaging in civic activity.³⁷ People are arrested for “non-crimes” such as criticising Russia’s invasion or being suspected of ties to Ukrainian forces. In Kherson, volunteers distributing aid in red-cross jackets were detained, and one, Serhii Tsyhipa, a local journalist, was later sentenced to 13 years for “spying.”³⁸ Formal charges, when applied, are usually fabricated and fall under accusations of terrorism, sabotage, extremism, espionage, or high treason. Kostiantyn Zinovkin of Melitopol was abducted in 2023 and charged with treason, despite not being a Russian citizen. After more than two years in detention and coerced “confessions,” he faces a long prison sentence.³⁹

Digital expression is also criminalised. Civilians have been prosecuted for creating chats, posting comments,⁴⁰ or sharing material deemed hostile to Russia. One 45-year-old received two years in a penal colony for a single online comment. These practices are reinforced by attempts to engineer ideological control,⁴¹ such as a 2022 Russian Ministry of Education dictionary instructing teachers how to “re-educate” Ukrainian children based on Russian “spiritual and moral values” and to identify supposedly “extremist-nationalist” slogans.⁴²

Ongoing Initiatives and Responsible Actors

The situation of Ukrainian civilians unlawfully detained by the Russian Federation is one of the most severe and complex humanitarian and legal challenges arising from the occupation of Ukrainian territory. Thousands have been persecuted and arrested in the TOTs, often because of their perceived loyalty to Ukraine, civic activity, or refusal to collaborate – and sometimes for no discernible reason at all. While in the TOTs or transferred into Russia, they lie outside Ukraine’s effective jurisdiction, leaving Ukrainian authorities, humanitarian actors, and international organisations with limited means to intervene or prevent further abuse.

As outlined throughout this memorandum, once identified and arrested, civilians are routinely subjected to forced deportation or transfer to detention facilities either deeper within the TOTs or inside Russia. During these transfers, victims disappear for months or even years, cut off from

³⁶ International Society for Human Rights “Mykyta Shkriabin”, May 2025, <https://ishr.org/mykyta-shkriabin/>

³⁷ OHCHR “Treatment of civilians deprived of their liberty in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine”.

³⁸ Institute of Mass Information “Russian Supreme Court upholds activist Serhiy Tsyhipa’s sentence”, March 28, 2025, <https://imi.org.ua/en/news/russian-supreme-court-upholds-activist-serhiy-tsyhipa-s-sentence-i67438>

³⁹ International Society for Human Rights “Kostiantyn Zinovkin”, April 2025, <https://ishr.org/kostiantyn-zinovkin/>

⁴⁰ Yanko “A resident of occupied Yalta was sentenced to two years in prison for comments on social media”.

⁴¹ Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation “Prevention of conflicts, manifestations of extremism and terrorism in a multicultural educational environment” (Moscow, 2022),

https://ntschool50.my1.ru/pamjtki/antiterror/pamjatka_profilaktika_konfliktov.pdf

⁴² Yapparova, Lilia “‘They may start to resist.’ Russian authorities fear children who have been forcibly taken from Ukraine. They are trying to “re-educate” them and place them under strict digital surveillance”, Meduza, March 11, 2024, <https://meduza.io/feature/2024/03/11/oni-mogut-nachat-protivodeystvovat>

their families and deprived of legal representation. Nearly all detainees face further mistreatment, including torture, sexual violence, and other inhumane acts. Some die as a result of detention

conditions or are summarily executed. Others are pushed through fabricated judicial proceedings designed to create a façade of legality, where evidence is falsified, defence lawyers are coerced or complicit, and judges act in coordination with the security services.

Because this system is opaque by design, providing direct legal or humanitarian assistance is extraordinarily difficult. Ukrainian civil society and international partners have nevertheless developed creative approaches to tracing detainees, documenting violations, and advocating for their release, but access remains severely constrained and the risks to those detained remain extreme. The situation demands sustained international attention and coordinated action between states, civil society, and international institutions to ensure accountability, secure releases, and assist victims and their families.

Despite the scale of the violations, sustained efforts by Ukrainian and international organisations have achieved some progress in locating and identifying detainees. Identification frequently marks the first turning point in a captive's situation: once an individual is discovered within the Russian detention system, they may begin to receive limited assistance and can be considered for prisoner-exchange negotiations. The simple fact of being “known” to the outside world can reduce the immediate risk of torture or enforced disappearance. Russia's approach to civilian detention is built around concealment and manipulation – detainees are hidden, moved, or reclassified to obscure their fate. Once discovered, however, the authorities often shift to a more formalised phase, including sham trials. Although these fall far short of fair trial standards, they sometimes create space for limited engagement by lawyers or humanitarian organisations. For this reason, work to trace, identify, and document detainees remains essential both for immediate protection and for future release, exchange, and accountability.

Facing this humanitarian crisis, a range of actors – Ukrainian, Russian, and international organisations – are engaged in documenting abuses, supporting families, and pushing for justice:

- **Ukrainian human rights NGOs.** The Center for Civil Liberties (CCL) leads advocacy for civilian hostages, including the *People First* campaign and large-scale documentation of cases. The Media Initiative for Human Rights (MIHR) maintains a major database of detainees and presses governments and international bodies for action. Other groups, like ZMINA, the Crimean Human Rights Group (CHRG), and East SOS, monitor political prisoners, document persecution practices, and support victims and displaced persons.
- **Ukrainian authorities.** The Office of the Ukrainian Ombudsman compiles civilian detainee lists and works with families. Ukraine's intelligence and defence bodies, including the HUR Coordination HQ, manage negotiations and exchanges, securing limited releases through difficult and often unequal deals.
- **Russian and transnational human rights defenders.** Despite severe repression, Russian activists (including those linked to Memorial) continue documenting Ukrainian civilian prisoners. Initiatives such as Poshuk.polon and informal networks of lawyers, journalists, and former detainees assist in tracing captives, locating facilities, and identifying perpetrators.
- **International organisations and mechanisms.** OHCHR and the UN Commission of Inquiry have documented arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearances, concluding that elements of Russia's conduct constitute crimes against humanity. UN Special Rapporteurs and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention have taken up individual cases, while the OSCE has used expert missions to investigate violations. The ICRC remains an interlocutor, though cooperation with the Russian Red Cross requires caution.

- **Global NGOs and legal initiatives.** Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have issued detailed reports confirming systematic abuses and advocating in international fora. Universal jurisdiction investigations are being pursued by national prosecutors, and the ICC continues its broader inquiry into atrocities committed during the conflict.
- **Support networks and international advocacy.** Ukrainian family-support groups gather information and act as key intermediaries for detainee cases. European and international institutions, including the European Parliament, increasingly highlight the plight of civilian detainees and call for their release and accountability.

Despite these efforts, progress remains slow, and the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian civilian detainees remain in captivity as of late 2025. Advocates consistently warn that discussions about ceasefires, peace frameworks, or reconstruction too often relegate detainees to the margins. Any serious international response must correct this imbalance and treat the fate of civilian captives as a central test of the credibility of that response. In the words of Oleksandra Matviychuk, “while politicians discuss territorial concessions and minerals, they’re not talking about people.”²⁹

Policy recommendations for the United Kingdom

1. Diplomatic and Political Pressure

a. Elevate Civilian Detainees as a Standing Diplomatic Priority

- The U.K. should consistently raise the issue of Ukrainian civilian detainees in all engagements with Russia’s allies and neutral states, such as China, India, Turkey, and Gulf countries, using the approach taken towards the abducted children as a model (engaged diplomacy, consistent messaging, elevation of the issue). Likewise, campaigns and support around Russian political prisoners provide a model.
- Use platforms such as the UN Security Council, OSCE, G7, ICC and Council of Europe to demand Russia’s compliance with international law — notably the Geneva Conventions, the Convention against Torture, the prohibition of enforced disappearances customary international humanitarian law, and other relevant international instruments.
- Advocate for the release of all civilian detainees to be a non-negotiable item in any future peace or ceasefire discussions involving Ukraine.
- Facilitate visits by high-ranking officials to Kyiv, in order to highlight the issue and cooperate with Ukrainian counterparts such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ukrainian Ombudsman, and the Coordination headquarters for the treatment of prisoners of war (CHQ).

²⁹ Hamaliy, Iryna “It is important to bring humanity back into political discussions about war – Oleksandra Matviychuk”, ICTV Facts, May 30, 2025, <https://fakty.com.ua/ua/ukraine/20250530-vzhlyvo-povernuty-lyudskeu-politychni-obgovorennia-vijny-oleksandra-matvijchuk/>

b. Sanctions and Accountability

- Expand targeted sanctions lists to include FSB officials, prison administrators, and military officers identified in UN and OSCE reports as responsible for torture and illegal detentions and advocate for other States and the European Union to sanction such persons as well.
- Support universal jurisdiction investigations and assist national war crimes units, especially in Ukraine but including in the U.K., Germany, and the Netherlands, in gathering evidence.
- Push for a UN-mandated special mechanism on arbitrary detention in Russia’s war against Ukraine – similar to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) used for Syria.
- Submit information to UN Special Procedures and provide support to organisations preparing Article 15 communications to the International Criminal Court for eventual prosecution of the range of these crimes. Additionally, provide assistance for submissions to the European Court of Human Rights

c. Engage Third-Party Mediators

- Back or initiate the appointment of a UN or OSCE special envoy for detainees, with a mandate to facilitate humanitarian releases.
- Use diplomatic leverage with states maintaining ties to Moscow, such as Qatar, UAE, or Turkey, to negotiate limited civilian releases or enable access to detainees.

2. Support for Coordination and Advocacy

a. Support the HUR Coordination HQ and Related Ukrainian Agencies

- Provide direct funding and technical assistance to the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War (HUR Coordination HQ), expanding its remit to include civilian detainees.
- Second British experts on forensic documentation and humanitarian law to strengthen Ukraine’s capacity to identify and track detainees.
- Support the creation of a centralized international database of civilian hostages, in collaboration with MIHR, CCL, and the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission.

b. Back Ukrainian and International Human Rights NGOs

- Offer grants or joint programs through the FCDO Human Rights Fund or Magna Carta Fund to support:
- The Center for Civil Liberties and its “People First” campaign.

- The Media Initiative for Human Rights (MIHR) and ZMINA, particularly their advocacy at the UN.
- Memorial and other Russian civil society actors documenting detainees.
- Facilitate partnerships between these NGOs and UK-based institutions such as Chatham House, REDRESS, and the International Bar Association for coordinated advocacy and training on documenting torture under the Istanbul Protocol.

3. Public and Media Advocacy

a. Raise the Profile of Civilian Detainees in U.K. Media and International Forums

- Work with major British outlets such as BBC, Sky News, and *The Guardian* to profile civilian detainee cases, focusing on personal stories like Serhii Tsyhipa and Kostiantyn Zinovkin.
- The Foreign Secretary and the UK Mission to the UN should use high-visibility platforms, including UN debates, side-events, and strategic communication, to humanise the issue and underscore its continuity with Russia's earlier repressive practices in Chechnya and Crimea.
- b. Cultural and Public Diplomacy Campaigns*
- Partner with Ukrainian diaspora organizations in the U.K. to hold public exhibitions, film screenings, or memorial events on detainees' experiences.
- Use British Council cultural diplomacy to sustain attention on the humanitarian dimension of the war, ensuring detainees remain part of the international narrative.

4. Humanitarian and Legal Assistance

a. Medical, Psychological, and Reintegration Support

- Fund trauma rehabilitation and medical assistance programs for released detainees, similar to U.K. support for survivors of sexual violence in conflict (e.g. via the PSVI – Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative).
- Support NGOs and Ukrainian ministries in providing mental health services and reintegration programs for returnees.

b. Legal Documentation and Evidence Collection

- Provide training and resources to Ukrainian forensic doctors, lawyers, and investigators in international standards for documenting torture (e.g. the Istanbul Protocol).
- Support evidence-sharing initiatives with the ICC and European national prosecutors working on war crimes cases.

5. Multilateral Action and Long-Term Justice

a. Champion International Accountability

- Advocate for the inclusion of civilian detainee cases in future ICC indictments and ensure funding for the UN Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine continues.
- Encourage European states to open domestic cases under universal jurisdiction laws for Russian officials implicated in torture or enforced disappearance.

b. Create a Dedicated Contact Group

- Lead an international “Contact Group on Civilian Detainees” involving key partners, such as EU, U.S., Canada, Japan, Poland, and Baltic states, to coordinate policy, intelligence-sharing, and humanitarian initiatives.

Summary of Immediate Steps for the U.K.:

1. Publicly highlight civilian detainee cases at the UN and G7.
2. Fund and train HUR Coordination HQ and Ukrainian NGOs.
3. Impose sanctions on identified perpetrators.
4. Support UN/OSCE/ICC mechanisms for access and accountability.
5. Raise awareness through U.K. and international media campaigns.

Conclusion

Ukrainian civilian detainees in Russian hands represent an acute humanitarian and human rights emergency. Since 2014 – and especially since the full-scale invasion in 2022 – thousands of civilians have been seized from their homes or at checkpoints, tortured, and held incommunicado across a sprawling network of Russian-controlled detention sites. UN and OSCE reporting is unequivocal: these abuses constitute a systematic attack on the civilian population and violate the most basic norms of international humanitarian and human rights law.

For detainees and their families, the suffering is relentless. Loved ones wait in paralysing uncertainty, often for years, unsure whether the disappeared are alive. Survivors who return carry lifelong physical and psychological trauma. These seven interlocking crimes against humanity are not isolated violations but elements of a deliberate system designed to extinguish Ukrainian civic identity in occupied territories. Naming this reality for what it is – a state-engineered architecture of persecution – is essential to understanding both the scale of the harm and the legal obligations it triggers.

Responding to such crimes poses a profound challenge. Advocacy organisations and investigative bodies continue to document violations and identify perpetrators, laying the groundwork for future prosecutions; some responsible officials are already known by name. Yet the most urgent priority

remains securing the release of those still held. This will require political will, creative diplomacy, and the mobilisation of partners able to facilitate access, negotiate exchanges, or act as neutral intermediaries.

A credible international response must match the gravity of the crimes. It must centre the fate of civilian detainees in diplomacy, sustain pressure for accountability, and support the mechanisms capable of bringing perpetrators to justice. Anything less risks normalising impunity and abandoning thousands of civilians to continued suffering in the dark.