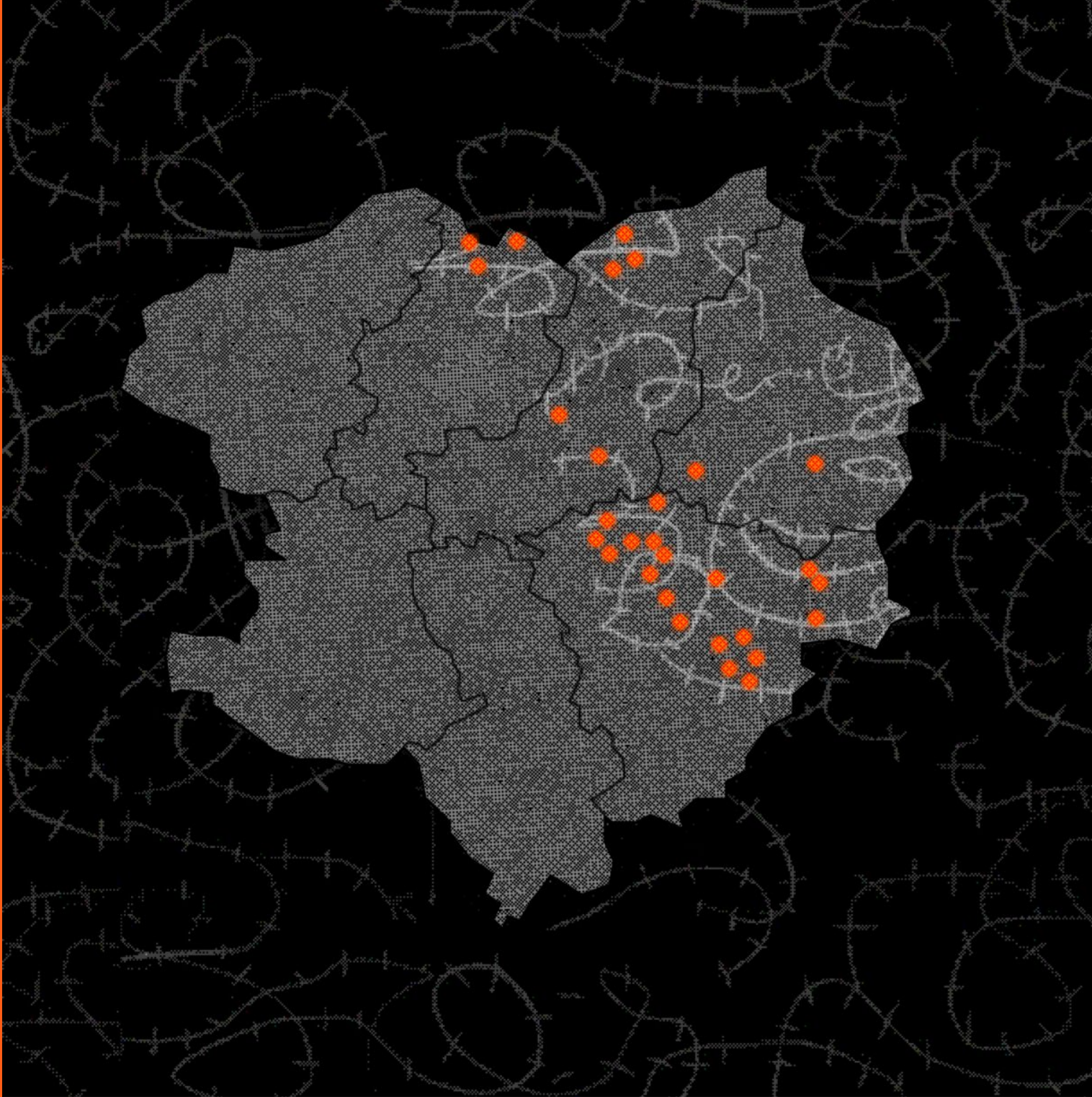




Organized Cruelty:

Russia's Detention and Torture Network in Kharkiv Oblast





“

How can you understand what's inside me if you weren't there? [...] When you lie on the iron bed frame and they run 220 volts through it and pour water on you, and you lose control of your body—that's when you'll understand.¹

— Man detained in the Balakliia police station for almost two months

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List of Acronyms

AFU	Armed Forces of Ukraine	PJSC	Private Joint Stock Company
ATO	Anti-Terrorist Operation	RD4U	Register of Damage for Ukraine
BARS	Combat Army Reserve of the Russian Federation	RS	Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court
CCU	Criminal Code of Ukraine	SOBR	Special Rapid Response Unit of the Russian Federation
'DPR'	'Donetsk People's Republic' ²	TH	Truth Hounds
EoC	Elements of Crimes	UN	United Nations
FSB	Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation	UJ	Universal Jurisdiction
ICC	International Criminal Court		
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross		
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia		
IHL	International Humanitarian Law		
Kharkiv CMA	Kharkiv Civil Military Administration		
LEA	Law Enforcement Agencies		
'LPR'	'Luhansk People's Republic' ³		
OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights		
OMON	Special Purpose Mobile Unit, a branch of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya)		
OPG	Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine		
OSINT	Open-Source Intelligence		
PEJ	Project Expedite Justice		

Executive Summary

At the height of the 2022 occupation, Russian forces controlled about one-third of Kharkiv Oblast, most of which Ukraine retook during a September counteroffensive. Due to low local support in Kharkiv Oblast, Russian authorities struggled to establish a stable civilian administration during the occupation and relied on coercion, intimidation, and violence to consolidate control.

Civilians faced shortages of essential resources, disruption of services, and insecurity characterized by widespread repression and arbitrary detention. In this environment, Russian forces established a system of illegal sites across occupied Kharkiv Oblast to torture civilians and suppress resistance.

This report examines the establishment and operation of this detention and torture system, drawing on 114 survivor and witness testimonies, documentary evidence, and open-source investigations. The evidence reveals recurring patterns across 29 identified torture sites, including common structural and organizational features, profiling practices, interrogation methods, and torture techniques. Transit sites served as initial screening or holding cells for detainees before they were sent to larger facilities for further detention and torture.

Based on the available evidence, the report characterizes the documented acts committed by Russian forces as crimes against humanity in the form of imprisonment, torture, rape, and other forms of sexual violence. This characterization most accurately reflects the scale and scope of organization behind the violations committed by Russian forces in the occupied territory of Kharkiv Oblast.

Ukraine's 2024 amendments to criminal legislation and the ratification of the Rome Statute (RS) may create important opportunities for accountability for Russia's actions in Kharkiv Oblast in 2022. By adding crimes against humanity and command responsibility to domestic law, Ukraine has given domestic prosecutors stronger tools to address the organized and large-scale detention-related crimes documented in this report. The legal analysis supports future case-building by helping Ukrainian prosecutors assess potential charges of crimes against humanity. It may also assist prosecutors in other countries considering universal jurisdiction cases where domestic law allows.

The first chapter analyzes the Russian occupation of Kharkiv Oblast, highlighting the conditions that allowed Russian forces and occupation authorities to establish torture sites to control the civilian population. It shows how occupation authorities relied on detention, coercion, and violence to identify perceived opponents, extract information, suppress resistance, and compel collaboration.

The second chapter examines how Russian forces established and operated an organized network of torture sites across occupied parts of Kharkiv Oblast between February and September 2022. The chapter examines the network of sites for detention and torture that Russian forces established, the types of buildings they repurposed, their use of main and transit sites, and detainees' transfer between locations. The chapter also identifies key categories of alleged perpetrators operating the network.

The third chapter examines the patterns of violence that Russian and occupation forces meted

out in the sites. It documents instances of unlawful arrests, abuses during transfers and interrogations, inhumane detention conditions, repeated physical torture, sexual violence, and psychological coercion.

The fourth chapter assesses whether the collected evidence meets the Rome Statute's requirements for crimes against humanity, analyzing the contextual elements of Article 7 and applying them to imprisonment, torture, rape, and other forms of sexual violence. Based on the available facts, the chapter finds that the abuses that Russian forces committed in torture sites across occupied Kharkiv Oblast followed repeated patterns and operated through organized structures.

The final chapter assesses the main accountability pathways relevant to the documented crimes and identifies the opportunities and limitations. It examines the potential avenues for holding alleged perpetrators accountable through domestic prosecutions in Ukraine, investigations and prosecutions by foreign authorities exercising universal or other extraterritorial jurisdiction, and proceedings before the ICC.

The documented violations demonstrate the need for accountability at both the individual and command levels. The findings and analysis underscore the importance of full accountability to deliver justice for survivors and affirm the Russian Federation's responsibility for grave violations of international humanitarian law in Kharkiv Oblast.

Recommendations

To the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, and other national investigative authorities:

- Continue to investigate torture, unlawful detention, sexual violence, and other detention-related abuses in Kharkiv Oblast as part of a broader pattern of crimes, including possible crimes against humanity;
- Continue to consolidate evidence from torture sites to identify common methods, victim profiles, responsible units, chains of command, and links among facilities;
- Prioritize cases against those most responsible, including commanders, senior officials, facility heads, and others who ordered, facilitated, or failed to prevent abuses;
- Establish or strengthen multidisciplinary teams with prosecutors, investigators, analysts, forensic experts, and trauma-informed interviewers;
- Cooperate with foreign prosecutors by promptly sharing evidence relevant to universal jurisdiction and other extraterritorial proceedings, while protecting survivors and witnesses from retraumatization and security risks;
- Seek out and, where possible, provide specialized training for national and regional prosecutors and investigators on crimes against humanity, command responsibility, sexual violence, and trauma-informed interviewing.

To the Government of Ukraine:

- Provide the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, law enforcement agencies, and other competent investigative authorities with the resources, staffing, training, and technical capacity needed to investigate and prosecute detention-related crimes in occupied Kharkiv Oblast, including as possible crimes against humanity;
- Ensure that survivors of torture, unlawful detention, sexual violence, and other detention-related abuse have timely access to medical care, psychological support, rehabilitation, legal aid, and social assistance;
- Simplify access to official “civilian prisoner” status by providing clear guidance, free legal assistance, trauma-informed application support, written reasons for refusals, and meaningful opportunities to correct or supplement applications;
- Facilitate survivor access to the Register of Damage for Ukraine by ensuring that survivors of torture, unlawful detention, sexual violence, serious personal injury, and deprivation of liberty receive clear information about relevant claim categories, documentation requirements, evidence preservation, and available legal or civil society support;
- Consult survivors and survivor-led organizations when designing or reforming support programs and reparations measures.

To foreign governments and national criminal justice authorities able to exercise universal jurisdiction or other extraterritorial jurisdiction:

- Open structural investigations, including under universal jurisdiction where available, into torture, unlawful detention, sexual violence, enforced disappearance where supported by evidence, and other serious abuses committed in occupied Kharkiv Oblast;
- Investigate these abuses as possible crimes against humanity where the evidence supports the contextual elements, including their systematic or widespread character;
- Prioritize cases against those most responsible, including commanders, senior officials, facility heads, and others linked to the operation of torture sites;
- Cooperate with Ukrainian authorities to preserve, collect, and share relevant evidence, including survivor and witness testimony, medical and forensic documentation, and open-source material;
- Fund documentation, forensic analysis, witness protection, rehabilitation, legal aid, psychosocial support, and community-based services;
- Call on the Russian Federation to release all unlawfully detained Ukrainian civilians, including individuals held in torture sites across Kharkiv Oblast;
- Facilitate access to asylum or temporary protection for survivors or witnesses at risk of reprisals.

To the European Commission, the European External Action Service, and the EU Delegation to Ukraine:

- Provide sustained funding to strengthen Ukraine's capacity to investigate and prosecute crimes against humanity, including torture, unlawful detention, and sexual violence;

- Continue to fund practical training for Ukrainian prosecutors and investigators on crimes against humanity, command responsibility, linkage evidence, and case-building against senior perpetrators;
- Support long-term rehabilitation, legal aid, psychosocial care, and social reintegration programs for survivors of torture and unlawful detention, including through Ukrainian civil society and survivor-led organizations.

To the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC):

- Continue to seek prompt, regular, and unhindered access to all Ukrainian civilians detained by Russian authorities, including in occupied territories and inside the Russian Federation;
- Continue efforts to register detainees, monitor their treatment and conditions, facilitate family contact, and seek information about the fate and whereabouts of missing or detained civilians;
- Raise concerns about denial of access, torture, ill-treatment, and unlawful detention with the relevant authorities in line with the ICRC's mandate and working methods.

To United Nations bodies, including the UN Secretary-General, OHCHR, and the Special Rapporteur on Torture:

UN Secretary-General

- Appoint or mandate a dedicated senior United Nations focal point on torture and ill-treatment in Ukraine to coordinate system-wide action on prevention, detainee access, accountability, survivor rehabilitation, and redress;
- Press the Russian Federation to disclose the fate and whereabouts of detained Ukrainian civilians and to grant UN and ICRC monitors prompt, regular, and unhindered access to all torture sites;

- Ensure that UN reporting on Ukraine continues to address unlawful detention, torture, sexual violence, and enforced disappearance where supported by evidence, and denial of access to detainees.

OHCHR

- Expand monitoring and public reporting on detention-related abuses in occupied areas of Kharkiv Oblast, including through remote documentation where access is denied;
- Document detention locations, victim profiles, methods of torture, alleged units or officials involved, and chains of command;
- Publicly call for the immediate release of unlawfully detained civilians and for independent access to all places of detention.

UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

- Issue a public statement on torture and other ill-treatment of civilians in Kharkiv region during Russia's 2022 occupation and request a follow-up country visit to Ukraine, including Kharkiv region, to gather survivor testimony, assess documentation and rehabilitation needs, and reinforce calls for accountability and reparations;
- Recommend that the Secretary-General designate a senior United Nations focal point on torture and ill-treatment in Ukraine to coordinate system-wide action on prevention, detainee access, accountability, survivor rehabilitation, and redress;
- Seek information from the Russian Federation and Ukraine concerning allegations of torture and ill-treatment of civilians in Kharkiv Oblast and other occupied areas;
- Urge Russia to release unlawfully detained civilians, disclose detainees' whereabouts, and ensure access to legal counsel, medical care, family contact, and independent monitors.

UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

- Use available procedures to address arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance of Ukrainian civilians in Russian custody or in occupied territories;
- Seek information on detainees' whereabouts, legal status, conditions of detention, transfers, releases, and deaths in custody;
- Call for the release of unlawfully detained civilians and for effective remedies for survivors and their families.

UN treaty bodies, including the Committee against Torture and the Human Rights Committee

- Use reporting, complaint, inquiry, and follow-up procedures to maintain scrutiny of torture, arbitrary detention, and related violations committed in the occupied areas of Ukraine;
- Support recommendations for survivor-centered remedies, including rehabilitation, recognition, compensation, and access to justice.

To the International Criminal Court (ICC):

- Prioritize the investigation and prosecution of detention-related crimes such as torture, unlawful imprisonment, and sexual violence as part of crimes against humanity investigations in Ukraine.

To Ukrainian and international NGOs and civil society organizations:

- Continue documenting torture, unlawful detention, sexual violence, enforced dis-

appearance, and other detention-related abuses using trauma-informed and survivor-centered methods;

- Preserve survivor and witness testimony, forensic documentation, open-source material, and other evidence that may support domestic or international accountability efforts;
- Support survivors in accessing legal aid, medical and psychological care, social services, and official “civilian prisoner” status;
- Coordinate referrals to reduce duplication and avoid retraumatization of survivors, and ensure that undocumented or isolated survivors can access assistance;
- Support survivor-led organizations and include former detainees in the design of advocacy, assistance, and accountability initiatives.

To the Russian Federation:

- Immediately end torture, enforced disappearance, unlawful detention, and other ill-treatment of Ukrainian civilians and release all Ukrainian civilians unlawfully detained by Russian authorities or affiliated forces, including those held in occupied territories and inside the Russian Federation;
- Disclose the names, whereabouts, and legal status of all Ukrainian civilians in Russian custody or custody of affiliated forces;
- Ensure that detainees have access to family contact, legal counsel, medical care, and independent monitoring;
- Grant UN and ICRC personnel prompt, regular, and unhindered access to all places where Ukrainian civilians are or may be detained.

Methodology

This report examines the findings of TH and PEJ's joint investigation into atrocities committed across occupied parts of Kharkiv Oblast from February to September 2022, drawing on documentation of survivor and witness testimony, open-source investigation, and analysis of existing reports and datasets. TH and PEJ had separately documented various aspects of Russia's occupation in Kharkiv Oblast previously, so this report builds on and extends that earlier work.

The evidence base and methodology for this report are described below.

First-Hand Testimonial Evidence

Since September 2022, PEJ and TH have conducted a series of field missions to Kharkiv Oblast, Ukraine, collecting the testimonies of individuals who had either witnessed or personally endured torture or other detention-related abuses during the occupation of the region. As a result, PEJ and TH ultimately directly collected testimonies from 106 individuals whose accounts contained sufficient detail and could be adequately assessed in accordance with the project's methodological standards.

The 106 individuals were survivors and witnesses of torture or other detention-related abuses. These categories are not mutually exclusive, as some survivors also reported witnessing acts of torture or other abuses committed against other detainees. Seventeen were female and 89 were male. Truth Hounds also conducted 12 follow-up interviews with previously interviewed survivors in

order to understand the long-term consequences of the atrocities they endured and have had on their health and lives.⁴

PEJ and TH used a mixed sampling approach, combining participant referrals with identifying potential interviewees during field missions. Through referrals, individuals who had already been interviewed, or who were known to the field researchers, helped identify others who had survived or witnessed detention-related abuses. In many localities, field researchers also identified interviewees directly by speaking with residents in areas where detention and torture had reportedly taken place. We prioritized interviewing respondents who had not been interviewed by other actors at the time of documentation.

All interviews took place in Ukrainian or Russian, following a semi-structured approach and with the informed consent of participants.

In 10 instances, PEJ and TH relied on information, including eight interview protocols provided by Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, which arose from PEJ's broader cooperation with the Kharkiv Regional Prosecutor's Office and the Main Investigation Department of the National Police in Kharkiv Oblast. In two OSINT requests to PEJ, state investigators identified facts relevant to ongoing investigations and requested PEJ's technical support to collect and analyze open-source information. PEJ received permission to use this information from those requests and protocols in this report. PEJ and TH assessed all such materials alongside evidence collected independently.

Dataset and Investigative Findings

PEJ and TH collected the information and analytical data presented in this report primarily through their own research and investigations.

PEJ and TH consolidated all leads for this report in a joint, case-specific dataset. The dataset contains testimonies from 106 survivors and witnesses whom TH and PEJ interviewed directly, the eight interview protocols, and the two OSINT requests from Ukrainian law enforcement agencies mentioned above. Some direct survivors also provided information about other people whom they personally saw detained and tortured, or about whom they heard from third parties. TH and PEJ did not base this report on those indirect accounts. However, those accounts concern more than 250 additional survivors.⁵

To protect survivors, witnesses, and their relatives, this report withholds the names and identifying details of interviewees. Names that appear in quotes are pseudonyms used to preserve confidentiality.

OSINT Analysis and Monitoring

Open-source materials significantly informed the report and were used, where relevant, to complement testimonial evidence and corroborate information from multiple sources. PEJ and TH relied on publicly accessible materials, including photographs, social media content, and other online sources, to support the reconstruction of events and patterns across torture sites. In addition, PEJ and TH monitored open sources on an ongoing basis, reviewing Russian, Ukrainian, and international media, as well as official statements, to maintain contextual understanding and support the chronology of events in Kharkiv Oblast.

PEJ and TH also used OSINT to identify Russian units, whose members may have been involved in the detention and torture of civilians, as well as individual perpetrators. For reasons of confidentiality and to protect the integrity of the criminal proceedings, this report does not publish that information. It has instead been shared directly with the relevant investigative authorities.

Desk Research

The report also draws on desk research and a review of existing public reporting by international organizations, human rights bodies, civil society organizations, media sources, and academic literature. This included, for example, OHCHR reporting on the human rights situation during the Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory and its aftermath,⁶ which expressly covers occupied areas of Kharkiv Oblast, as well as OHCHR's thematic report on detention of civilians in the context of the Russian Federation's armed attack against Ukraine,⁷ which documents arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, torture and ill-treatment, and related abuses in Kharkiv and other regions. These sources helped contextualize the report's testimonial evidence and situate the findings from Kharkiv Oblast within broader documented patterns of detention-related abuse in occupied areas of Ukraine.

Site Identification and Analytical Framework

The information presented in this report relies mainly on semi-structured interviews, as well as closed-source⁸ and open-source information.

To assess all potential sites discussed during the interviews, PEJ and TH developed four key criteria to determine whether a specific facility could be identified as a torture site. These criteria account for the different types and levels of evidence available, including both widely documented locations and sites for which information remains more limited or fragmented.

The site-identification criteria are:

- Structural setup: The site must consist of a building or a detention facility, or parts of such structures, that Russian forces modified to detain individuals and subject them to torture.
- Operational setup: The site must show signs of an internal organizational structure, such as a chain of command or a formal or informal hierarchy. The available evidence should give reasonable grounds to believe that the alleged perpetrators held distinct

roles, such as guards, interrogators, registrars, and facility heads.

- Period of operation: The facility must have operated on a sustained basis, rather than only on an ad hoc basis.
- Systematic nature of torture: The location must demonstrate that Russian forces carried out torture systematically against the same individuals or different persons, rather than as an isolated event. However, sites were not automatically excluded solely on the basis of survivors' describing a single incident of torture or torture as an isolated occurrence. When supported by sufficient contextual and corroborating evidence, such sites were also considered for inclusion in the report.

TH and PEJ applied the criteria holistically, considering the combined weight of the available evidence rather than treating each criterion as a separate threshold for inclusion.

For analytical purposes, TH and PEJ also classified the sites to reflect their functions within the broader system of detention and torture. Most fall into two categories – main torture sites, used for sustained detention and systematic interrogation, and transit torture sites, used to screen and briefly hold civilians during identity or affiliation checks before they are released or moved on. To classify a site into one of these categories, we relied on the following criteria, assessed together rather than as strict, individually mandatory conditions. Where the available evidence confirmed that a location was a torture site but did not allow a confident assignment to either function, the site was recorded as status unclear.

TH and PEJ identified 18 transit torture sites based on the following criteria:

- Organizational setup: The site was not adapted or repurposed for the long-term detention of a large number of people. Relevant factors included whether the site had sufficient cells, toilets, and other facilities;
- Purpose of detention: Russian forces used the detained civilians in transit torture sites after stopping them in public places, checking their identity, and verifying whether they

appeared on Russian Armed Forces lists; and

- Duration of detention: The period of detention in transit torture sites was relatively short, usually under 10 days.

Limitations

The sections documenting the establishment and operation of torture sites rest primarily on witness and survivor testimonies. The nature of these sources carries inherent limitations that should be acknowledged.

TH and PEJ conducted single-round interviews with the vast majority of interviewees. In many instances, follow-up interviews were not feasible due to timing and other constraints. For example, some survivors and witnesses expressed a preference not to be re-contacted, fearing retraumatization. As a result, opportunities to seek clarification, additional details, or further corroboration of certain accounts were constrained, and some testimonies may therefore be less detailed than they would otherwise be.

Twelve survivors consented to a second interview. Practical factors shaped that selection, including whether survivors were reachable through available contact details and could meet within the limited research period. Parts of these follow-up interviews addressed the lasting physical, psychological, and reintegration-related effects of detention and torture, and informed the corresponding text boxes in this report. However, this information is fragmentary and quantitatively limited compared with the broader body of interviews collected. This report, therefore, does not provide a full analysis of those challenges. Further research is needed to assess how to better support Ukraine's torture survivors.

The gender breakdown of interviewees reflects the survivor and witness accounts available to TH and PEJ for this investigation and should not be read as a full measure of the gendered impact of detention-related abuse in occupied Kharkiv Oblast. Several factors may have affected the composition of the available interview pool. Some of these may reflect a genuine trend, such as the gender distribution of those Russian forces target-

ed for detention. It should not, however, be taken as an accurate measure of the actual proportion of detention-related abuse, since the composition of the interview pool was also affected by factors such as survivors’ willingness or ability to share their stories, security concerns, displacement, stigma surrounding sexual violence, and the risk of retraumatization. The lower number of female interviewees may therefore limit the report’s ability to capture the full range of abuses experienced by women and girls, including sexual violence and other gendered harms.

Furthermore, the scale of the violations, limited access to certain areas, and the continuing emergence of new information limit what this report can capture. Since de-occupation, Ukrainian authorities have gradually identified additional sites and other locations used for unlawful detention and torture, while local law enforcement agencies continue to uncover unofficial sites and previously unreported cases of detention-related abuse. As a result, the exact number of such sites in Kharkiv Oblast remains uncertain. Ukrainian police initially announced the identification of 10 sites used for unlawful detention and torture; that number later rose to 28 and may continue to increase as investigators identify new survivors and locate

additional sites. Some of the facilities used as torture sites are in areas of Kharkiv Oblast that remain in the combat zone or are under occupation, which complicates access to them. Certain areas that had previously been de-occupied have since been re-occupied or subjected to renewed hostilities. For instance, the town of Vovchansk, where three torture sites had been identified, has been largely destroyed since May 2024, and is no longer inhabited, significantly limiting the possibility of accessing sites or recovering evidence.⁹ At the same time, in most cases, the perpetrators did not register the victims of torture who died, and in cases where such records exist, the relevant documentation is inaccessible to Ukrainian law enforcement agencies. As a result, Ukrainian law enforcement agencies continue to establish new facts and identify additional victims. Notably, while some of these facilities have been investigated by the National Police, others fall under the mandate of the Security Service of Ukraine. Despite considerable documentation efforts, a significant portion of relevant information is likely to remain inaccessible, undiscovered, or concealed at the time of writing.

This report, therefore, reflects knowledge at the time of publication.

Summary of Evidence Basis

Category	Details	Total Number
Survivors and witnesses of torture or other detention-related abuses whose testimony forms the basis of this report	Number of individuals interviewed by PEJ and TH: 17 females and 89 males	106
	Number of testimonies received from Ukrainian law enforcement agencies: 3 females and 5 males	8
	Total number of direct survivor and witness testimonies: 20 females and 94 males	114
Requests for OSINT received by PEJ from the Ukrainian LEA		2
Total unique sources of information	→ 106 direct interviews → 2 OSINT requests → 8 unique LEA testimonies	116

CHAPTER 1

THE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION OF KHARKIV OBLAST AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL

For civilians in occupied parts of Kharkiv Oblast, Russian rule quickly destroyed ordinary life. Russian forces and occupation authorities tried to determine who would cooperate, who remained loyal to Ukraine, and who might resist. As local support proved limited and administrative control remained uneven, coercion became central to how Russian authorities governed the territory they occupied. Civilians in Kharkiv Oblast faced shortages of basic needs such as food, medicine, electricity, communications, and reliable information, while pressure on local officials, educators, and other public-facing workers made everyday decisions increasingly dangerous.

1.1. Initial Invasion and Rapid Advance

Kharkiv Oblast's geography shaped both the speed of Russia's initial advance and the difficulty of consolidating occupation rule. Kharkiv Oblast lies in northeastern Ukraine and shares a long border with the Russian Federation. Kharkiv, the regional capital and Ukraine's second-largest city, had a pre-war population of approximately 1.4 million¹⁰ and lies about 40 kilometers from the border. The Oblast covers roughly 31,400 square kilometers of mostly open steppe and forest-steppe terrain, which offers few natural defensive barriers in the north and northeast. This is where Russian armed forces entered the Oblast on February 24, 2022.

Russian troops initially occupied settlements along the highways they used to advance into Ukraine, reaching remote rural areas and villages later. In some cases, Russian forces occupied cities without significant resistance or prolonged fighting, as occurred in Balakliia, a city in southeastern Kharkiv Oblast, in early March 2022.

"The Russians walked into the city as if it were Crimea," said an interviewee from Balakliia, referring to Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 to describe the rapid advance of Russian forces with little organized resistance.¹¹

In other areas, hostilities remained intense and relatively prolonged. The Russian offensive against Izium, a city about 50 kilometers southeast of

Balakliia, continued throughout March 2022 and caused heavy destruction and civilian casualties. Russian forces carried out attacks against civilian infrastructure, including an attack on the Izium City Central Hospital on March 7, 2022,¹² and the bombing of a residential apartment building on March 9, 2022. The latter attack killed at least 44 people sheltering in the basement.¹³

During the first months of the invasion, Russian forces made sustained efforts to capture the city of Kharkiv. In May, Ukrainian forces pushed Russian troops back from the city, forcing them to withdraw from its outskirts.¹⁴ Despite this setback, Russian forces continued shelling Kharkiv and the surrounding areas. Human Rights Watch documented eight unlawful attacks in Kharkiv and Derhachi in May and June that killed 12 civilians, injured 26, and damaged five hospital buildings.¹⁵

By May, frontlines had largely stopped shifting. Russian forces then moved from a rapid military advance to a more sustained occupation. Establishing civilian administration proved challenging across this fragmented landscape. This process tended to advance faster when local Ukrainian officials agreed to cooperate. For instance, Kupiansk's Ukrainian mayor, Hennadii Matsehora, publicly expressed willingness to collaborate on February 27.¹⁶ Russian authorities later turned Kupiansk, a city in eastern Kharkiv Oblast, into the administrative center of the occupied territory. In more remote areas, Russian military and administrative presence developed more slowly. For example, a resident from Lisova Stinka, a village 22 kilometers from the nearest city, said that Russian forces had not established a military presence or civil administration there as late as May.¹⁷ Unlike in the parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts occupied since 2014, Russian authorities did not establish a parallel "people's republic" in Kharkiv Oblast. They also failed to consolidate sufficient territorial and administrative control to stage an annexation referendum, as they did in parts of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Oblasts in September 2022. The weakness of Russian administrative control was particularly clear in areas where local Ukrainian authorities had fled or refused to cooperate, and where no suitable figures volunteered to replace them. In these areas, Russian forces often relied on coercion. They pressured local officials to cooperate, resorting to threats

and detention.¹⁸ Officials who refused to collaborate were among the first civilians Russian forces arrested. This pattern later became central to the occupation. Civilian resistance also emerged early in the occupation, including through public protest in Kupiansk, but Russian forces quickly suppressed visible forms of dissent.¹⁹ As the occupation consolidated, citizens who remained loyal to Ukraine generally resisted in less visible ways. They ignored Russian soldiers, refused to engage with occupation structures, or, more rarely, provided information to Ukrainian forces.²⁰

Russian forces officially established the Kharkiv Civil Military Administration (Kharkiv CMA) on June 3²¹ as the occupation authority for the Oblast and designated Kupiansk as its administrative center.²² Vitalii Ganchev, a Kharkiv-born pro-Russian politician who had moved to the self-proclaimed 'Luhansk People's Republic' ('LPR') in 2014, was appointed head of the Kharkiv CMA, a position he continued to claim as of July 2026.²³

Alongside the creation of the Kharkiv CMA, the occupation authorities began restructuring local governance to align administrative systems with Russian legal and institutional frameworks. In Kupiansk district, some local administrations initially continued operating under the Ukrainian system. By late June 2022, however, occupation authorities had reportedly dissolved village councils and replaced them with occupation-controlled administrative structures subordinate to Kupiansk.²⁴

At its peak in the summer of 2022, the Russian Federation controlled about 30 percent of Kharkiv Oblast.²⁵ The occupied territory remained highly militarized and unstable, with shifting frontlines and improvised military authority. Civilians faced widespread insecurity, movement restrictions, disrupted services, and growing pressure to adapt to occupation rule.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive in September 2022 ended most of the occupation. Only a narrow strip of territory east of the Oskil River and along the northern border with the Russian Federation remained under Russian control, while the Kharkiv CMA continued operating in exile.²⁶ The September 2022 counteroffensive also gave Ukrainian and international investigators access to previously occupied territory for the first time.

Their findings corroborated accounts from civilians who had fled the area earlier in 2022. In Izium alone, Ukrainian authorities exhumed more than 440 bodies from a forested area near Pishchanske Cemetery in the second half of September. Many victims had died during attacks on Izium. Several recovered bodies showed signs consistent with torture, including bound limbs and ligature marks on the neck. Satellite analysis also identified earth disturbances consistent with burial activity between April and July 2022.²⁷

In May 2024, Russian forces launched a renewed offensive in northern Kharkiv Oblast. The offensive almost completely destroyed Vovchansk and gradually expanded Russian-controlled territory along the border.²⁸ As of July 2026, Russian forces continued to occupy parts of Kharkiv Oblast. They have also recaptured some areas previously liberated by Ukrainian forces. At the time of writing, some of the heaviest fighting in the region was taking place near Kupiansk.

1.2. Life Under Occupation

For civilians who remained in occupied parts of Kharkiv Oblast in 2022, daily life became increasingly shaped by scarcity, fear, surveillance, and trying to avoid suspicion, arrest, and detention. The total number of civilians who remained during the occupation remains unclear. Humanitarian assessments conducted shortly after the Ukrainian counteroffensive estimated that approximately 140,000 civilians remained in newly accessible, formerly occupied areas.²⁹ At the same time, the population of occupied territory steadily declined as civilians fled to Ukrainian-controlled areas despite significant risks and logistical obstacles.³⁰ One of the main evacuation routes crossed a dam on the Pechenihy Reservoir on the Siverskyi Donets River, which separated Russian-controlled and Ukrainian-controlled territory. More than 16,000 Ukrainian citizens evacuated through this crossing during the summer of 2022.³¹

Fighting and bombardment in Kharkiv Oblast killed hundreds of civilians. Amnesty International reported that Kharkiv regional medical authorities recorded 606 civilians killed and 1,248 injured between February 24 and April 28, 2022.³² Af-

ter Ukrainian forces retook Izium, Ukrainian authorities identified hundreds of bodies of people killed during the battle for and occupation of the city, including civilians and Ukrainian soldiers.³³ With funeral services no longer functioning, some civilians buried relatives and neighbors in their yards. Other bodies lay on the streets for weeks, untouched.³⁴

Civilians who remained in occupied areas faced increasingly harsh living conditions. Interviewees reported limited or disrupted access to electricity, gas, running water, food, and communications.³⁵

"The food situation was tense; we were so hungry that we couldn't sleep. The gas and electricity were cut off periodically. There was almost no communication [...]," a resident of Balakliia said.³⁶

Conditions were particularly severe in Izium, where fighting throughout March 2022 caused catastrophic destruction. Interviewees described extensive destruction, the near-total loss of utilities, and the collapse of municipal services. People lived in basements, cooked over open fires in their yards, and survived on preserved food.³⁷

Humanitarian convoys periodically reached remote areas, but assistance remained insufficient.³⁸ Occupation authorities used aid and deprivation of basic needs coercively and as tools of control. One interviewee from Izium said that he was required to perform work to receive humanitarian aid from the Russian side.³⁹ Another stated that refusing Russian aid was unsafe, as those who did were considered to hold pro-Ukrainian positions and could be searched or arrested.⁴⁰

After Russian forces withdrew from parts of Kharkiv Oblast, humanitarian organizations and international agencies documented a severe crisis in formerly occupied areas. In Izium, UN agencies found that fighting and occupation had largely destroyed essential services and that the estimated 8,000 to 9,000 residents who remained in the city⁴¹ depended almost entirely on humanitarian assistance.⁴² Across formerly occupied areas, particularly in Izium, Kupiansk, and Balakliia, humanitarian organizations documented widespread destruction of residential buildings, hospitals, schools, bridges, and energy infrastruc-

ture.⁴³ Electricity outages disrupted access to water, heating, telecommunications, and medical care in many settlements. Residents widely reported shortages of medicines, including insulin and pediatric medication, while damaged roads, mined territory, and ongoing shelling severely complicated humanitarian access, especially in smaller villages and frontline areas.⁴⁴ Residents also described Russian forces confiscating property, looting shops and abandoned houses, and stealing civilian property.⁴⁵

Occupation authorities also sought to isolate civilians from independent information and communication with Ukrainian-controlled territory. Russian forces quickly cut Ukrainian mobile and internet networks. By May 2022, in Kupiansk, Ukrainian internet and mobile service stopped functioning. By July, Russian authorities had rerouted internet traffic across occupied Ukrainian territory through Russian networks, effectively blocking access to Ukrainian news outlets, government services, and major social media platforms.⁴⁶

Occupation authorities also imposed control through checkpoints, house searches, and intrusive inspections of civilians and their electronic devices.⁴⁷ OHCHR documented routine practices across the occupied Ukrainian territory in which Russian forces required men to strip to their underwear at checkpoints to inspect their bodies for "pro-Ukrainian" tattoos or marks suggesting weapons use. Russian forces also systematically searched phones for messages, photographs, and applications that could trigger detention.⁴⁸ These measures, including arbitrary detention, surveillance, movement restrictions, house searches, and communication blackouts, created what OHCHR described as a generalized "climate of fear."⁴⁹

Open resistance became nearly impossible after the first weeks of occupation. In Kupiansk, residents held the only documented large public rally against the occupation on March 1. Russian military personnel dispersed the protest with smoke grenades.⁵⁰ According to OHCHR, no pro-Ukrainian public assemblies took place in occupied Ukrainian territory after April 2022.⁵¹

In this environment, residents of occupied communities developed various strategies to cope with

Russian occupation authorities and the pressures of occupation. These strategies ranged from accommodation and cooperation to various forms of passive resistance.⁵²

One of the most damaging consequences of this coercive environment was the erosion of trust within communities. Interviewees described cases in which local residents provided information about their neighbors to Russian troops or occupation authorities. They did so for ideological reasons, under coercion, to settle personal disputes, or in anticipation of material gain.⁵³ These denunciations, together with the seizure of official records, intelligence-gathering by Russian security services, and other methods used to identify perceived opponents, helped sustain the detention system in occupied territory.

This pressure became particularly visible in schools, where individual decisions often carried collective consequences. From the spring of 2022, Russian authorities approached teachers and school administrators across occupied Kharkiv Oblast to introduce the Russian curriculum and Russian-language instruction before the 2022-2023 academic year. Some teaching staff agreed to cooperate while others refused.⁵⁴

Refusal to cooperate carried serious personal risks. For example, in the village of Yakovenkove, Russian forces pressured the school principal after the school's staff refused to work under the occupation authorities. They accused her of "creating obstacles to education in the Russian school."⁵⁵ In August 2022, Russian forces detained and imprisoned her in the Balakliia police station building for refusing to collaborate with the occupation authorities.⁵⁶ A school principal from Kupiansk district recalled that local officials pressured her to compile lists of teachers willing to cooperate with the occupation authorities and warned her that refusal could have "very unpleasant consequences."⁵⁷ After she continued openly opposing collaboration and urging teachers to remain loyal to Ukraine, armed men identifying themselves as FSB officers reportedly raided her home, detained her, and transferred her to a detention facility in Kupiansk.⁵⁸

These examples illustrate the pressure Russian authorities exerted on civilians in administrative

and public-facing roles under Russian occupation, including law enforcement personnel, local government officials, educators, medical workers, and others. International organizations, including OHCHR, have consistently documented these patterns.⁵⁹

Taken together, these conditions made daily life in occupied Kharkiv Oblast coercive and unpredictable. Scarcity, information control, and the threat of denunciation forced civilians to weigh the risks of ordinary decisions, including whether to accept aid, speak openly, continue working, or refuse to cooperate with occupation authorities. This climate of fear helped Russian forces identify, isolate, and punish civilians they viewed as disloyal or useful for intelligence.

1.3. Conclusion

Russia's occupation of Kharkiv Oblast remained comparatively brief, uneven, and contested while exposing a gap between Russia's military reach and its ability to govern seized territory. Russian forces captured towns and villages across the Oblast, but they failed to turn rapid military advances into stable civilian control. In many communities, local officials refused to cooperate, residents continued to identify with Ukraine, and occupation authorities lacked reliable local support.

Russian forces responded by treating civilian loyalty as a security problem. They pressured officials, searched homes and phones, controlled movement and information, and relied on denunciations to identify people they viewed as opponents, informants, or obstacles to occupation rule. Everyday decisions, including whether to accept aid, continue teaching under the Ukrainian curriculum, or maintain contact with Ukrainian-controlled territory, could expose civilians to suspicion and punishment. These conditions made coercion and abuse of civilians central to Russian occupation rule in Kharkiv Oblast.

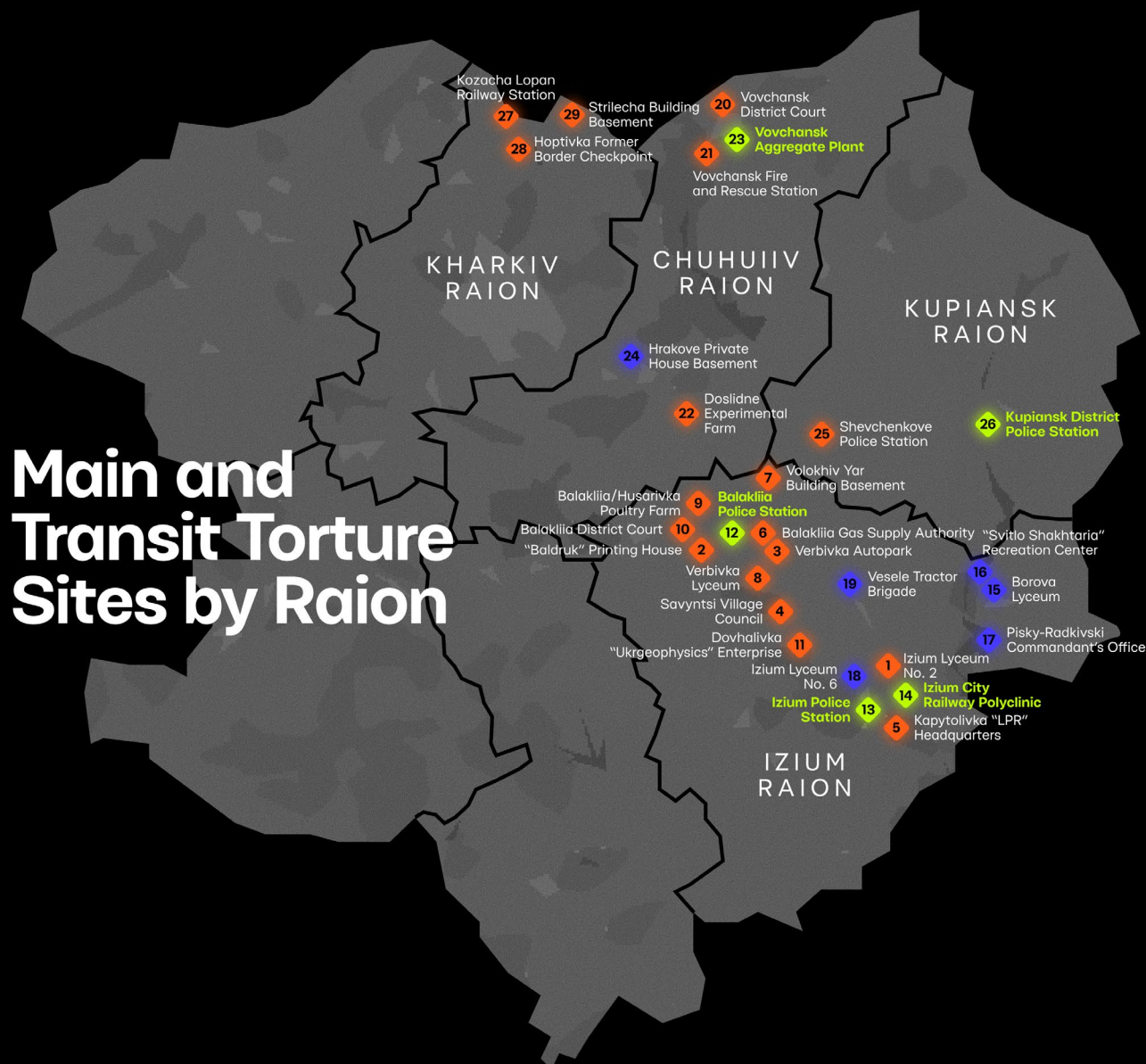
CHAPTER 2

THE DETENTION AND TORTURE NETWORK

Russian forces operated a network of torture sites across occupied parts of Kharkiv Oblast between February and September 2022. TH and PEJ identified 29 such sites, located in police stations, administrative buildings, schools, factories, private homes, basements, and other premises repurposed by the occupying forces. The geographic distribution of the sites, the coordination of detainee transfers between transit and main facilities, and the recurring torture methods, as well as the division of roles among Russian military, security, and occupation forces, indicate that this was an organized and coordinated system used to detain and torture Ukrainian civilians.

This chapter examines how Russian forces established, organized, and operated that system. It examines where they located torture sites, the types of buildings they repurposed, the use of main and transit sites, the detainees' transfer routes between these facilities, and the operational roles performed by the different actors. These findings are relevant to assessing whether the unlawful detention, torture, sexual violence,⁶⁰ and other abuses documented in this report formed part of a widespread or systematic attack against the civilian population, and may therefore amount to crimes against humanity.

Main and Transit Torture Sites by Raion



IZIU RAION

- 1 Iziium Lyceum No. 2
- 2 "Baltruk" Printing House
- 3 Verbivka Autopark
- 4 Savyntsi Village Council
- 5 Kapytolivka "LPR" Headquarters
- 6 Balakliia Gas Supply Authority
- 7 Volokhiv Yar Building Basement
- 8 Verbivka Lyceum
- 9 Balakliia/Husarivka Poultry Farm
- 10 Balakliia District Court
- 11 Dovhalivka "Ukrgeophysics" Enterprise
- 12 Balakliia Police Station
- 13 Iziium Police Station
- 14 Iziium City Railway Polyclinic
- 15 Borova Lyceum
- 16 "Svitlo Shakhtaria" Recreation Center
- 17 Pisky-Radkivski Commandant's Office
- 18 Iziium Lyceum No. 6
- 19 Vesele Tractor Brigade

CHUHUIV RAION

- 20 Vovchansk District Court
- 21 Vovchansk Fire and Rescue Station
- 22 Doslidne Experimental Farm
- 23 Vovchansk Aggregate Plant
- 24 Hrakove Private House Basement

KUPIANSK RAION

- 25 Shevchenkove Police Station
- 26 Kupiansk District Police Station

KHARKIV RAION

- 27 Kozacha Lopan Railway Station
- 28 Hoptivka Former Border Checkpoint
- 29 Strilecha Building Basement

- ◆ Main torture site
- ◆ Transit torture site
- ◆ Site status unclear due to limited information

2.1. Identified Torture Sites and Repurposed Infrastructure

During the occupation of parts of Kharkiv Oblast from February to September 2022, Russian forces repeatedly transformed public and private buildings into sites of detention, interrogation, control, and violence. The extent of these atrocities became clear after Ukrainian forces de-occupied the area, as law enforcement agencies, NGOs, and residents began to uncover evidence of crimes, and survivors were able to share their experiences.

The torture facilities had a clear territorial and functional logic. Russian forces concentrated most sites in strategically important urban centers such as Izium, Balakliia, Kupiansk, and Vovchansk, which served as administrative or logistical hubs during the occupation. The detention sites selected by Russian forces and occupation authorities

show how they repurposed local infrastructure to support and sustain the occupation. They established four of the 29 torture sites identified by TH and PEJ in functioning or former police stations.⁶¹ Other administrative buildings turned into torture sites included a courthouse,⁶² a local gas supply office,⁶³ a border checkpoint,⁶⁴ a geological inspection office,⁶⁵ and municipal council buildings.⁶⁶ Russian forces also used private houses⁶⁷ or their basements⁶⁸, and other large buildings with multiple rooms, including a hospital,⁶⁹ a fire station,⁷⁰ schools,⁷¹ or factories.⁷²

Although located across different parts of Kharkiv Oblast, these sites shared some operational and organizational patterns, such as the adaptation of basements and the conversion of garages into torture cells. The sites also shared similar internal structures and staffing patterns. Across multiple locations, military personnel, security service agents, and individuals cooperating with the occupying forces repeatedly performed com-



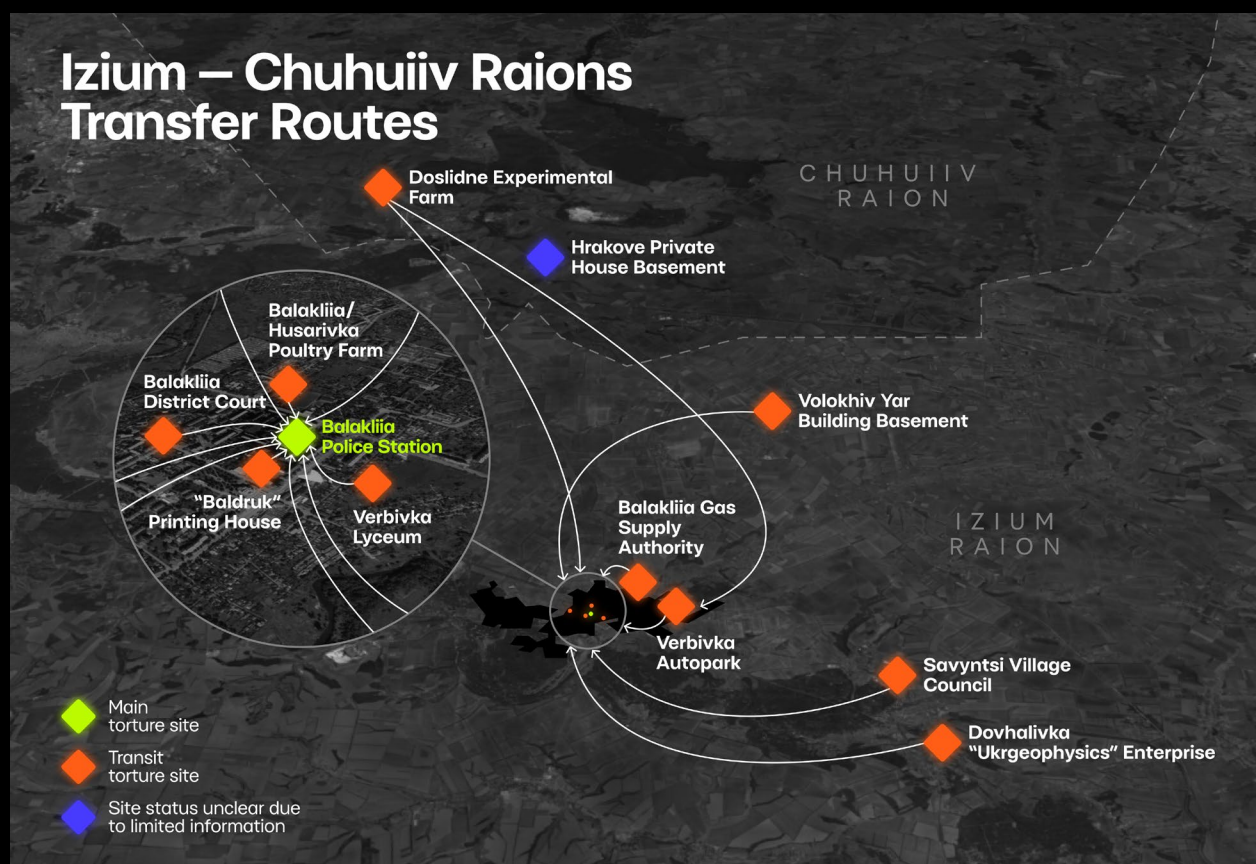
parable roles. Russian forces also relied on similar rationales for profiling and targeting civilians and on similar torture methods across sites. For example, Russian forces used electrocution in 16 of the 29 identified sites across four raions. They physically beat detainees in 24 of the sites. TH and PEJ also identified recurring features at sites separated by significant distances, such as Izium and Vovchansk, which are approximately 150 kilometers apart.⁷³ These various repeated features show that Russian forces followed a consistent pattern in their choice of buildings, torture methods, and the way they staffed and operated detention and torture sites across Kharkiv Oblast, rather than individuals making decisions independently at each location.

2.2. Geographic Site Distribution and Detainee Transfers

The distribution of these sites shows not only where Russian forces established torture sites, but also how they used smaller transit sites to screen and hold detainees before transferring many of them to larger main sites. The key facilities were concentrated in towns that served as hubs of the occupation.

Izium Raion

In Izium Raion,⁷⁴ survivor accounts indicate that Russian forces used at least 19 different torture sites, first holding civilians in 11 smaller transit locations and then transferring many of them to three larger facilities in Balakliia and Izium.⁷⁵ Occupation forces also held civilians in five other torture sites in Izium Raion, but their purpose as either transit or main sites could not be clearly identified due to a lack of available information.



Russian forces established over half of the identified torture sites in the Raion's two largest towns: four in Izium and six in Balakliia. They established the remaining nine in other villages in Izium Raion. In Balakliia, Russian forces used the police station at 33 Zhovtneva Street as the main torture site. Of the 114 people TH and PEJ documented to have been detained, 59 were held at 33 Zhovtneva Street at some point during their detention. Detainees from across Balakliia and nearby villages, including people first held at smaller transit sites, such as a printing house called "Baltruk," a vehicle depot, a courthouse, a local gas supply office, schools, and farms, were ultimately transferred, detained, and tortured at the police station at 33 Zhovtneva Street. In the city of Izium, occupying forces established main torture sites in the police station at 4 Heorhiivskiy Lane⁷⁶ and the Railway Polyclinic at 35 Zavodska Street,⁷⁷ and transit sites in two schools.⁷⁸

Chuhuiiv Raion

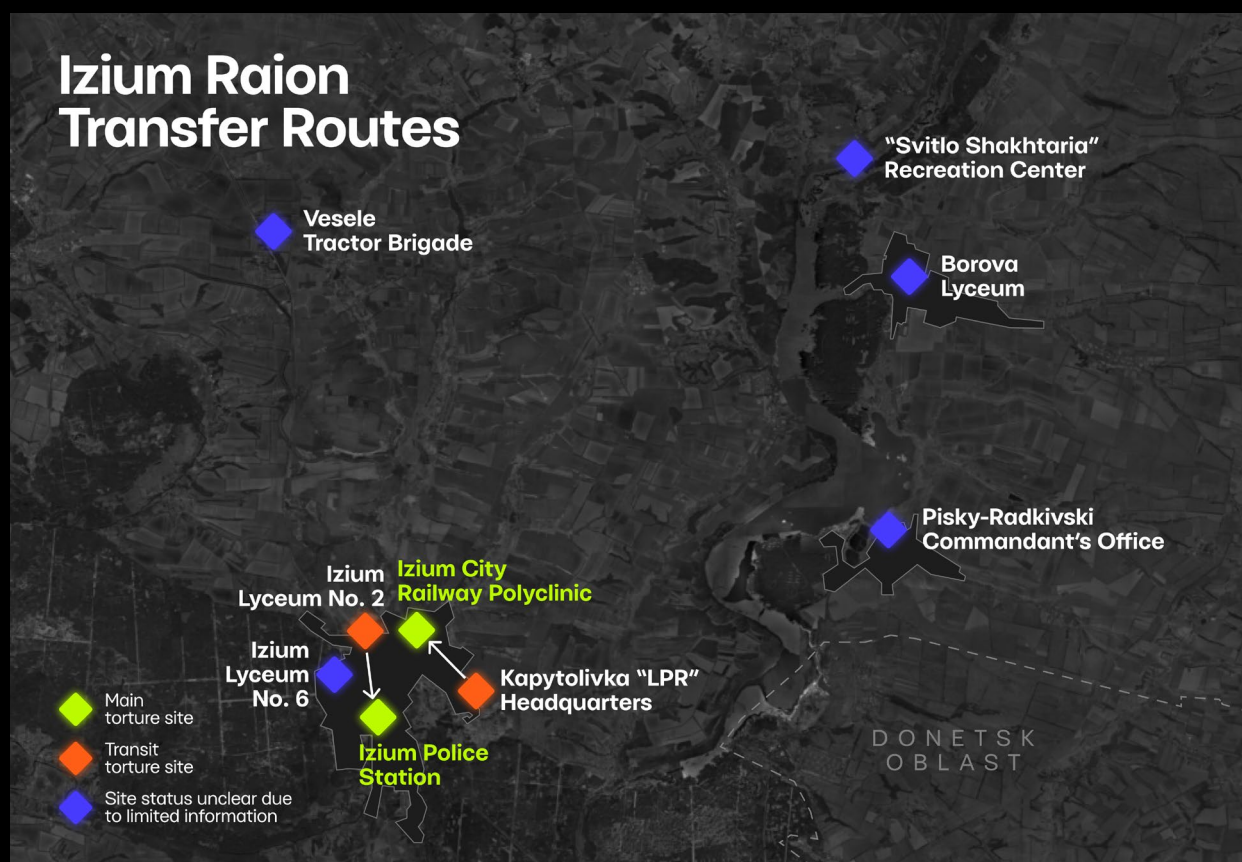
There were at least five torture sites in Chuhuiiv Raion,⁷⁹ three in the town of Vovchansk, one in

Hrakove village, and another in Doslidne village.⁸⁰ Survivors primarily describe detention and torture at the Private Joint Stock Company (PJSC) "Vovchansk Aggregate Plant," which served as a main detention facility in Chuhuiiv Raion.⁸¹

Kharkiv Raion

In the northern part of the occupied Kharkiv Raion near the Ukrainian-Russian border in Kharkiv Oblast, there were at least three transit torture facilities.⁸² Russian forces used the former border-security infrastructure in Hoptivka village as a transit torture site.⁸³ An open-source investigation identified two torture sites in the villages of Kozacha Lopan⁸⁴ and Strilecha,⁸⁵ located close to the border between Ukraine and the Russian Federation.⁸⁶ OSINT information⁸⁷ and public reporting⁸⁸ indicate that Russian forces used these border-area sites to transfer detainees to the Russian Federation.

The sites, therefore, appear to have functioned both as places of detention and as transit points in a broader system of relocation beyond Kharkiv.



Chuhuiiv Raion Transfer Routes



Kharkiv Raion to the Russian Federation Transfer Routes



Kupiansk Raion

The city of Kupiansk served as a temporary administrative center of the occupied Kharkiv Oblast, while the city of Kharkiv itself remained unoccupied. Survivors indicated that there were two torture sites:⁸⁹ a main site located in the building of a police station at 14 Kharkivska Street in Kupiansk,⁹⁰ and a transit site located in another police station at 31 Tsentralna Street in the village of Shevchenkove.⁹¹ The repeated use of police stations suggests that occupying forces repurposed existing law enforcement infrastructure as main detention and interrogation hubs, likely due to their pre-existing capacity for secure custody and questioning.

Main Sites, Transit Sites, and Transfer Routes

One of the clearest indications that the torture sites formed part of an organized system is the functional distinction between main torture sites and transit torture sites. Survivors' testimonies, in some instances corroborated by the Kharkiv Oblast Prosecutor's Office, show a division of functions across the different locations: transit sites served as initial holding and screening points, while main sites served as longer-term detention and torture facilities. The main tor-

ture sites usually operated in police stations or other buildings, including a hospital and a factory, whose available space and internal layout could accommodate the detention of multiple people. Russian forces repurposed these sites for long-term detention and torture. By contrast, the transit torture sites usually operated in premises with more limited capacity, such as basements of private houses, municipal buildings, farms, and schools. Russian forces detained civilians for short periods of time there. Such locations served as initial holding and "filtration" locations, where detainees were also interrogated and tortured while the occupying forces decided whether to release them, transfer them to main sites, or deport them to the Russian Federation.

Survivors described transit sites as unsuitable for long-term detention. One survivor spent two days in a transit torture site in the courthouse in Balakliia at 87 Soborna Street before Russian forces transferred him to the Balakliia police station at 33 Zhovtneva Street. He described the conditions in the transit torture site: *"There wasn't a single bed in that cell, just a bench about four meters long where all the detainees rested... We weren't given any food at all... There was no toilet in the cell; we had to relieve ourselves in a bottle, and there was no shower. There were no living conditions there, and there was no light."*⁹²



Russian forces would transfer a detained civilian to a main site after verifying the person's identity and interrogating and often torturing them at the transit site.⁹³ In some cases, the occupying forces transferred detained civilians from transit torture sites to the Russian Federation or the 'LPR'.⁹⁴ Different detention and torture sites also reflected recurring targeting patterns. Russian forces used the sites to process civilians they perceived as security threats, sources of intelligence, supportive of Ukrainian authorities or armed forces, or symbols of Ukrainian civic and national identity.⁹⁵

One survivor, who was under 18 at that time, reported that Russian forces detained and tortured him at the transit torture site in the Vovchansk fire station in Chuhuiiv Raion, before transferring him to the main site at the PJSC "Vovchansk Aggregate Plant": *"They brought me to the fire station... They beat me all over... There was no water there, and they wouldn't let me use the bathroom. There were just four walls and a bed... Then some kind of film crew came into the cell. They told me to pull the hood over my head (probably so you couldn't tell I was a minor) and hold my jacket in my teeth so the trident tattoo would be visible. They filmed it... I was kept there for 24 hours. Around noon, they took me out, put me in a 'Patriot' car, and brought me to the Aggregate Plant."*⁹⁶

The arrangement of transit sites, main detention facilities, and transfer routes between them or into the Russian Federation displays the characteristics of a coordinated network – one that appears to have functioned to manage large numbers of detainees, maintain control and avoid scrutiny, and, in at least some instances, facilitate detainee relocation outside Kharkiv Oblast.

Together, the distribution of sites across multiple raions and the consistent division between transit and main detention functions show that the network adapted to different local conditions while following the same basic operating logic.⁹⁷

2.3. Personnel, Roles, and Division of Functions

The evidence shows a recurring division of organizational roles within the network across multiple torture sites. Russian servicemen, members of the National Guard of Russia (Rosgvardiya),⁹⁸ and representatives of the so-called 'LPR' and 'DPR' transported civilians from places of arrest to torture sites, guarded detainees, and tortured them.⁹⁹ Individuals identified as officers of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of the Russian Federation or other security services representatives usually conducted interrogations and directed torture sessions, especially in cases involving suspected military affiliation or intelligence value of the detainees.¹⁰⁰ Local individuals cooperating with the occupying forces helped identify perceived pro-Ukrainian civilians and, in some cases, assisted with arrests, guarding, or interrogations.¹⁰¹

Survivors' accounts indicate that, at both main and transit sites, their captors operated within a coordinated hierarchy and not independently: guards escorted detainees to designated interrogation rooms, where interrogators held authority over both detainees and lower-ranking personnel.¹⁰² One survivor, who was held for 14 days at the police station in Balakliia, described those divisions of functions: *"The 'LPR' members looked after us, and the FSB officers interrogated us."*¹⁰³ In some locations, interrogators directed guards on the timing, methods, and intensity of abuse, suggesting functional control over detention and torture operations.¹⁰⁴

Survivors interviewed by TH and PEJ, as well as open-source materials, regularly identify representatives of the so-called 'LPR' and 'DPR' as guards at detention sites and direct participants in detainees' torture.¹⁰⁵ 'LPR' and 'DPR' units operated within the broader occupation administration in Kharkiv and appear to have helped establish and run unlawful detention facilities, including sites where personnel carried out torture and ill-treatment.¹⁰⁶

A 2024 Truth Hounds investigation into the abduction and killing of Ukrainian writer Volodymyr Vakulenko in occupied Izium Raion illustrates

this pattern. The official investigation attributed the detention and murder to four servicemen of the 204th Rifle Regiment of the 'LPR', a unit that survivors have repeatedly identified at detention sites across Izium district. The servicemen searched the writer's home, held him at the 'LPR' forces' headquarters on Luhova Street in Kapytolivka, and beat and interrogated him before he was killed.¹⁰⁷ Yet, Truth Hounds' findings indicate the 'LPR' perpetrators most likely did not act on their own initiative: Russian forces sought out the writer and later brought him to Izium Lyceum No. 2, where personnel of Russian military units and security services were stationed.¹⁰⁸ The case illustrates the integrated role that 'LPR' personnel played in the detention system in occupied Kharkiv Oblast, including direct participation in abuse alongside the Russian forces.

Open-source materials also help identify the range of Russian and proxy forces present at specific detention sites. Photographs published in Russian sources of the Izium location used to detain and torture civilian detainees made it possible to identify several units that may have been involved in the atrocities committed there.¹⁰⁹ One post tied to a photograph from the Izium Lyceum No. 2 suggests the deployment of representatives of the 20th Guards Combined Arms Army of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.¹¹⁰ Other images point to the presence of the BARS-13¹¹¹ unit of the 'LPR' on the premises of the lyceum.¹¹²

Alongside personnel affiliated with the so-called 'LPR' and 'DPR,' Rosgvardiya members were also involved in the detention and guarding of local civilians. In Kupiansk, leaked Russian award records indicate that a member of Rosgvardiya's "Peresvet" unit was rewarded for activities described as "participation in search and screening operations" at the meat-processing plant and detention of civilians suspected of financing the Ukrainian Armed Forces.¹¹³

FSB officers held prominent positions in the occupation structure and appear to have played a central role in carrying out interrogations.¹¹⁴ They were usually not identified by name and sometimes wore balaclavas, which obscured their faces and concealed their identities. *"There were about nine to ten people in the room, one of whom had a gun from which he then fired over my head, they*

*all wore balaclavas and caps,"*¹¹⁵ said one survivor who was detained at the Balakliia police station for almost a month. In some instances, FSB officers personally and directly used force against detainees, rather than relying on guards to carry out torture under their orders. A former Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) serviceman recounted being interrogated at the Balakliia police station by three FSB agents who physically assaulted him, threatened him, and put a gun to his mouth to try to compel answers.¹¹⁶ Other survivors also described interrogations at this location, with some identifying the FSB officers by their call signs.¹¹⁷

The division of functions was particularly clear at the Vovchansk Aggregate Plant, which housed a torture site. Personnel affiliated with the so-called 'LPR' and 'DPR' reportedly guarded and escorted detainees, while FSB officers conducted interrogations.¹¹⁸ The central role of the FSB was further underscored by a separate case from Vovchansk, in which Ukrainian investigators identified an FSB colonel who allegedly led a group tasked with suppressing resistance in occupied Kharkiv Oblast. According to investigators, he supervised the interrogation and torture of a detained Vovchansk resident and personally participated in the abuse.¹¹⁹

2.3.1. The Balakliia case

The Russian military grouping designated "Balakleya,"¹²⁰ which comprised roughly 20 units and was led by the commander of the 11th Army Corps, held the city of Balakliia.¹²¹ Notably, the grouping included formations whose primary function was internal security – Rosgvardiya (including the 126th Regiment), the "Orlan" OMON detachment from Tolyatti, and the "Tolpar" and "Omega" SO-BR detachments.¹²²

Documents that Russian forces left behind during their retreat indicate that high-ranking personnel of the 11th Army Corps organized efforts to identify individuals deemed hostile to the Russian military.¹²³ The same documents show personnel from other Russian units received awards. For example, a member of the 'LPR' 202nd Rifle Regiment received an award for tracking down spotters and saboteurs, as well as for working with the local population to identify individuals hostile to the Russian Armed Forces.¹²⁴

A senior operative of the Russian FSB Directorate for the Baltic Fleet and troops in the Kaliningrad Oblast also received an award for providing protection against “provocative and terrorist threats” and for conducting information and propaganda activities. According to the recovered documents, he identified eight artillery spotters, six individuals accused of “promoting nationalist ideas” and displaying hostility towards the Russian military, and 12 alleged “accomplices of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.”¹²⁵

Although these formulations do not constitute direct evidence of involvement in torture or other abuses, when viewed in the context of the pattern of violations documented in the occupied territories, they raise questions about the role of the personnel concerned in identifying and targeting individuals who may subsequently have been subjected to detention, coercion, or ill-treatment. Ukrainian courts have already convicted some of the individuals named in these records. For instance, the aforementioned FSB officer was sentenced *in absentia* to eleven years’ imprisonment for his role in the unlawful detention and torture of two civilians in occupied Balakliia.¹²⁶

These and other materials indicate that a wide range of actors were involved in identifying individuals perceived as posing a threat, including members of the FSB, ‘LPR’ representatives, as well as senior officials within the command structure of the “Balakleya” grouping. Together, the survivor accounts and open-source materials point to coordination between Russian forces and security services, occupation authorities, and proxy units that carried out distinct but overlapping roles.

2.4. Conclusion: Evidence of an Organized Detention and Torture System

The patterns documented in this chapter show that Russian forces operated a coordinated and territorially organized detention system in occupied Kharkiv Oblast. They concentrated sites in occupation hubs, used main and transit facilities for different functions, transferred detainees between sites, and relied on recurring divisions of labor among military personnel, security service officers, ‘LPR’ and ‘DPR’ personnel, Rosgvardiya, and local people.

These features show how Russian forces used the detention network to screen, interrogate, transfer, and control civilians across the occupied territory. The following chapter examines how Russian forces used that system to detain, torture, sexually violate, and intimidate civilians.

CHAPTER 3

PATTERNS OF DETENTION, TORTURE, SEXUAL VIOLENCE, AND TARGETING

Russian forces used torture sites in occupied Kharkiv Oblast to impose control through fear. They interrogated, punished, humiliated, and intimidated civilians they viewed as threats to occupation rule. Across different facilities, survivors described repeated patterns of physical torture such as beatings and electrocution, sexual violence, threats, deprivation of basic needs, denial of medical care, and psychological abuse. Many of these tactics required planning, equipment, assigned roles, and control over detainees, including the use of dedicated interrogation spaces, devices to administer electric shocks, coordinated transfers, and guards or interrogators who performed recurring tasks. Among the 114 testimonies gathered, 85 documented torture of illegally detained civilians, involving 75 men and 10 women. Thirty-five testimonies documented sexual violence, involving 27 men and eight women. Many survivors described continuing to live with the physical and psychological consequences of this violence.¹²⁷

3.1. Survivor Profiles and Targeting Patterns

Consistent survivor and witness accounts across different sources and locations provide a basis to identify recurrent targeting patterns and assess why Russian forces detained civilians in occupied areas. These patterns indicate that Russian forces specifically targeted categories of individuals whom they viewed as threats to the occupying authorities or as useful intelligence sources. At the same time, Russian forces also targeted individuals on arbitrary or opportunistic grounds. This highlights the broad and indiscriminate nature of these practices.

Testimonies suggest that Russian forces often targeted individuals based on perceived affiliation, social role, personal characteristics, or denunciations, often without any verifiable evidence of wrongdoing.¹²⁸

The most common profiles of detainees across the occupied territory were:

- men of military age;
- former Ukrainian servicemen¹²⁹ and Territorial Defense¹³⁰ members;¹³¹

- people labeled “saboteurs” or “spotters”;¹³²
- local government workers, law enforcement officers, education staff, volunteers, and others;¹³³
- civilians accused by neighbors or individuals who cooperated with the occupying forces;¹³⁴ and
- persons displaying Ukrainian symbols, language, or patriotic behavior.¹³⁵

Russian forces appeared to specifically single out people with actual or perceived connections to the Ukrainian armed forces, including former soldiers, members of territorial defense units, volunteers, and individuals with relatives serving in the military. Personnel operating the torture sites used more severe forms of violence against these individuals than against others. These included prolonged detention, repeated torture sessions, and, in at least some cases, transfer to detention facilities in the Russian Federation.¹³⁶

A survivor stated that he saw ‘LPR’ officers with a list of people to arrest. He said: *“‘LPR’ members immediately pulled up in a van with a list... They knew everything about me: that my son has been serving on a contract basis in the Armed Forces of Ukraine for three years... They asked me: ‘Where’s your son?’ I responded: ‘He’s serving in the army.’ Even though my children are not listed in my passport, they knew I had a son.”*¹³⁷

The intensity of the abuse suggests that the occupying forces either believed these individuals had access to valuable intelligence or viewed them as particularly deserving of punitive measures.¹³⁸ Interrogators often accused detainees of acting as “saboteurs,” “spotters,” or otherwise supporting Ukrainian military operations. They often based such accusations on weak or unverified information. Examples include possession of mobile phones, alleged communication with Ukrainian forces, or denunciations made by neighbors or individuals collaborating with the occupying forces. A survivor who was detained in the Balakliia police station recalled that the Russian forces mentioned that arrests were based on denunciations: *“Don’t take it personally, but someone reported you. We only take people in based on reports.”*¹³⁹

Survivor accounts indicate that Russian forces often treated suspicion itself as enough to jus-

tify detention, interrogation, and brutality. One survivor detained in the Balakliia police station said: *"In the bag was a phone which had photos of my daughter in a bulletproof vest: she volunteered, cooked dinners... I think they beat me because they thought my daughter was fighting after seeing her photo with her in armor."*¹⁴⁰

A survivor, held by the Russian forces for 10 days at the Balakliia police station, stated that they unsuccessfully tried to force him to confess to working with the AFU: *"They beat me on the head, I had three large lumps for a long time. They beat me all over my body, on my genitals, they beat me everywhere, because I refused to record an interview where I was supposed to say that I was a spotter and was giving away the positions of Russian troops."*¹⁴¹

Russian forces also systematically targeted local government officials, former police officers, civil servants, and community leaders, especially those they perceived as unwilling to cooperate with the occupying authorities. Their detention appears to have served two main purposes: gathering intelligence and dismantling local governance structures to deter resistance. In several instances, the occupying forces coerced these individuals into collaborating or making public statements in support of the occupation.¹⁴²

Denunciations from individuals who collaborated with the occupying forces, as well as from other civilians, played a significant role in driving arrests. Testimonies suggest that the occupying forces often detained individuals following personal disputes, property conflicts, or acts of retaliation.¹⁴³ Russian forces and individuals collaborating with them may have used the detention system opportunistically to settle personal grievances or facilitate looting. As a result, Russian forces contributed to creating an environment of fear and mistrust within communities.

Occupying forces also specifically targeted individuals based on visible expressions of Ukrainian national identity, such as language use, possession of national symbols, or social media activity.¹⁴⁴ In many areas, they searched for people with patriotic tattoos, using them as a basis to profile people for detention.¹⁴⁵ The occupying forces interpreted such expressions as security threats, signs of resistance potential, or "radical

nationalism," and this led to punishment, humiliation, and, at times, torture. Taken together, these patterns indicate that detention and ill-treatment were used to gather information, suppress resistance, and penalize visible expressions of pro-Ukrainian allegiance that the occupying authorities perceived as threatening.

3.2. Arrest

Russian forces unlawfully arrested civilians in their homes, workplaces, on the streets, at checkpoints, and at other public places, often using violence and without presenting detention orders, explaining the reasons for arrest, or allowing access to legal counsel. Most survivors reported being detained in their homes when Russian forces searched their houses. During arrests, Russian forces often knocked detainees to the ground, pulled bags over their heads so they were disoriented and couldn't see, handcuffed and beat them, and damaged or stole personal property.¹⁴⁶

One of the survivors described his arrest at his house: *"The military entered the house, beat me and threw me naked into a car and took me to the Shevchenkove ROVD [rus. District Police Department]. They were in military uniforms, khaki with camouflage patterns, and black balaclavas. They had 'FSB' patches on their backs. There were four of them, all carrying machine guns."*¹⁴⁷

Survivors and witnesses reported that authorities did not present detainees with formal charges, provide them with access to legal counsel, or afford them basic due process protections. In some cases, the detained civilians could only guess that the reason for their detention was being a relative of someone in the armed forces,¹⁴⁸ having photos of Ukrainian servicemen on their phones¹⁴⁹ or exchanging text messages in support of Ukraine.¹⁵⁰ In some instances, during interrogations, arresting authorities told survivors the reasons for their detention or the specific crimes they were suspected of committing. These included suspicion of espionage, aiding terrorist activities, and collaborating with the special services of foreign states.¹⁵¹

After their arrest, occupying forces transported detainees to various transit sites for short-term

detention, though in some cases, they transported them directly to the main torture sites.

Once detained, operatives interrogated and often tortured detainees. One survivor confirmed that Russian forces tortured detainees during interrogations at a transit site in the Shevchenkove police station in Kupiansk. He said, *"They brought me to the ROVD [rus. District Police Department], where an FSB officer interrogated me. During the interrogations, I was wearing a cap, so I couldn't see anyone. They beat me and repeatedly asked, 'Where are the Banderites?'"*¹⁵² *"Do you know anyone from the Right Sector?"*¹⁵³ *"Where are the SSU [Security Service of Ukraine] employees hiding?"* I don't remember what happened on which day. I had been there for three days, and they continuously beat me. They struck me with sticks and gave me electric shocks on my hands, feet, nose, and lips. They removed my underwear and used electric shock wherever they wanted."¹⁵⁴

Another survivor described his arrest and interrogations at the Baldruk transit site, before his transfer to the Balakliia police station: *"They handcuffed me behind my back, put a bag on my head. They took me down into another basement, put me on the floor, I felt them screwing wires to my thumbs, they asked who I work with. They beat me with a baton on my back, on my legs, on my neck, really badly. During that interrogation, they threatened to rape me with a baton, the ones they beat with. And I understood that they realized I didn't know anything; they just beat me. They shocked me with this machine, it went on for 40 minutes."*¹⁵⁵

3.3. Inhumane Detention Conditions

Survivors described inhumane detention conditions across the torture sites, caused either by inadequate infrastructure or by the deliberate deprivation of basic necessities.¹⁵⁶ These conditions formed part of the abuse. Overcrowding, lack of sanitation, insufficient food and water, lack of medical care, darkness or constant light, restricted movement, and uncertainty about release intensified detainees' suffering and reinforced Russian personnel's control over them.¹⁵⁷ This control extended to detainees' access to basic necessities, including hygiene, medical assistance, and

contact with the outside world.¹⁵⁸ Most transit torture sites had structural problems: the buildings were not designed to hold detainees and lacked ventilation, windows, beds, toilets, and shower facilities.¹⁵⁹ One survivor recalled that detainees wore only underwear at all times because the cell was like a steam room: without windows and ventilation, they were constantly sweating, and all the walls were covered with black fungus.¹⁶⁰ In contrast, the main torture sites were somewhat better equipped to hold people, with many cells that had beds and, often, toilets. However, guards would often deny detainees access to even these inadequate facilities as a form of torture. For instance, in one location, a survivor reported that the authorities restricted toilet use to just one minute twice per day per person.¹⁶¹

The cells were typically overcrowded¹⁶² and there were instances where authorities confined many more people than would be standard to a single cell. For example, in a cell that was approximately 4 by 6 meters at the PJSC "Vovchansk Aggregate Plant," Russian forces detained 19 people.¹⁶³ In another cell in the Kupiansk police station that had four beds and was meant to detain eight people, they detained 20-25 instead.¹⁶⁴ A survivor, who was held in an overcrowded cell at the Balakliia police station, described: *"The area of the cell was about 3 meters long by two meters wide, a small cell. It was hot there during the day, and cooler at night, they tried not to close the window in the cell. There were six people in total, with Oleksandr in the cell, three slept on bunks, and three on the floor."*¹⁶⁵ This meant that each detainee had a living space of just 1 square meter, significantly below the minimum standard of 4 square meters per person for multiple-occupancy cells set by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture.¹⁶⁶

Guards and prison management exploited access to basic needs to further abuse. For example, guards deprived certain cells of food, intentionally starving detainees. Where guards provided food, it was often deliberately inedible, lacked basic nutritional value, and was barely sufficient to survive.¹⁶⁷ One survivor detained in Pisky-Radkivsky reported that those in charge fed detainees once every three days and forced them to beg for food.¹⁶⁸ Another survivor held at the Balakliia police station recounted: *"The cell was 1.5 by 3 meters, with two beds. The toilet did not work. There*

were no windows. There was no ventilation. There was 1.5 liters of water for everyone. Once a day, a spoonful of food, around lunchtime. Once a day, in the morning, they took us outside to the toilet."¹⁶⁹

Another survivor detained at the Baldruk printing house reported similar conditions, particularly the deliberate deprivation of air in the cell: *"Two slept on the bunks and four more on the floor. Two lay in the corner, their legs partially under the bunks. Two were in the aisle. They took turns sitting by the door, leaning against it, because fresh air came in through the small window there. There was a severe lack of air; it was hot, smelly, stuffy, and cramped."*¹⁷⁰

Most of the transit sites lacked even basic infrastructure for maintaining hygiene. Detainees were allowed to bathe about once every four to five days, and in some cases, shower time was limited.¹⁷¹ In cells without toilets, survivors relieved themselves in plastic bottles with no privacy.¹⁷²

3.4. Torture

The torture described by survivors followed recurring patterns across the detention network. Russian forces and affiliated personnel used severe physical abuse during interrogations and throughout detention to break detainees, extract information, and punish perceived pro-Ukrainian activity. The repetition of similar methods across facilities, including beatings, electric shocks, suffocation, and forced stress positions, shows that torture functioned as a core method of control within the system.

Many survivors described that those in charge of the sites severely beat them using rifle butts, batons, metal, and plastic pipes.¹⁷³ A survivor detained on the premises of the poultry farm in the village of Husarivka in Izium Raion stated: *"There was an interrogation there; they beat us with what felt like a heavy pipe or something similar, asking the same questions over and over."*¹⁷⁴ Another survivor, who was detained and tortured in the basement of a private house in Pisky-Radkivsky, recalled: *"They constantly beat us, with rifle butts and batons."*¹⁷⁵

The military personnel working at these sites also kicked or stamped detainees' bodies, such as the

ribs,¹⁷⁶ knees,¹⁷⁷ kidneys,¹⁷⁸ and spine, as well as used suffocation¹⁷⁹ and, in some instances, simulated drowning or forced water submersion.¹⁸⁰ One survivor of the suffocation torture method, who was held at the Dovhalivka "Ukrgeophys-ics" enterprise in Izium Raion, recalled: *"My hands were tied. They put a plastic bag over my head and blocked my oxygen. I lost consciousness from this. At some point, they shot over my head."*¹⁸¹ Authorities also forced detainees to remain standing or seated in constrained positions for prolonged periods, frequently without bedding.¹⁸² Many survivors reported that the guards forced them to sleep upright or in severely cramped conditions.¹⁸³

One brutal stress positioning and beating was the so-called "parrot." One survivor who was detained at the Izium Railway Polyclinic explained: *"They put us face to the wall and hit us on the back and buttocks with a 30 millimeter board. They [body parts] were all blue. Then they shocked us. They attached wires to our legs, arms, penises, and tongues. They made a 'parrot' by putting our arms under our legs and hanging us on a pipe and shocking us."*¹⁸⁴

Russian forces tortured detainees by electrocuting them, often on their genitals or extremities, which sometimes led to loss of consciousness. Guards used electric shocks, often with a Soviet TA-57 field telephone known as a "tapik."¹⁸⁵ They attached the device's wires to various parts of the survivors' bodies, including toes and fingers, earlobes, lips, nose, nipples, and genitals.¹⁸⁶ Russian forces used this method primarily on male prisoners, connecting the current directly to the genitals or anus. One survivor reported that, during electric shock, those in charge of the Izium Railway Polyclinic torture site placed his feet in a basin of water to increase conductivity.¹⁸⁷

Authorities in charge of torture sites also subjected detainees to stress positions as a form of torture. We documented at least four different torture sites where they hung detainees upside down, causing them severe pain.¹⁸⁸ A survivor who Russian forces tortured with the use of this method at the Balakliia police station recounted: *"They told me to lie on my back, then lifted me up and hung me upside down."*¹⁸⁹

3.5. Sexual Violence

TH and PEJ documented sexual violence against civilians held in torture sites. Twenty-seven males and eight females reported surviving sexual violence while in detention. This included rape,¹⁹⁰ invasive body searches,¹⁹¹ threats of rape,¹⁹² forced nudity,¹⁹³ and beating and electrocuting male genitals.¹⁹⁴ These findings are consistent with reporting by international organizations¹⁹⁵ and human rights organizations¹⁹⁶ documenting rape and other forms of sexual violence by Russian armed forces against Ukrainian civilians, prisoners of war, and other detainees since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹⁹⁷ Those reports demonstrate a consistent pattern of using sexual violence against civilians as a method of warfare.¹⁹⁸

Occupying forces committed sexual violence in contexts of physical restraint and extreme power imbalance, where survivors were deprived of liberty, subjected to beatings, electric shocks, and threats of execution. Accounts indicate that perpetrators used weapons, physical force, and intimidation to compel compliance.¹⁹⁹ Personnel of the torture sites frequently blindfolded, handcuffed, or otherwise restrained survivors during the assaults, and warned them that further violence would follow if they resisted or reported the abuse.²⁰⁰ Under such circumstances, the free and voluntary consent of survivors cannot be either presumed or inferred.

One survivor held for five days in a basement in Pisky-Radkivsky recalled a combination of forced nudity and beating genitals: *"Oleh²⁰¹ and I spent two nights naked, it was very cold. They beat us all over our bodies, including our genitals."*²⁰²

Several survivors reported that sexual violence was preceded or accompanied by physical and psychological violence, including severe beatings, electrocution, and threats against family members. A survivor described several types of sexual violence she had suffered in detention at the Izium Railway Polyclinic.²⁰³ A witness who saw what happened to her explained: *"Ivanov and seven other servicemen entered the shed where she was being held and ordered her to undress, threatening to rape her. When she refused,*

*they forcibly undressed her and, holding her by the arms, began to touch her body, inserting their fingers into her genital area. After some time, all the Russian Armed Forces servicemen, except for Ivanov, left the shed. Ivanov pressured Kovalenko to have sexual intercourse. When she refused, he began threatening to undress her, tie her up in the square, take photos, and send them to her son. Additionally, to increase the pressure, upon leaving the shed, Ivanov told her husband, who was being held in a neighboring garage, that he had had sexual intercourse with his wife."*²⁰⁴

3.6. Denial of Medical Care

Russian forces in charge of the torture sites, at times, denied medical care to detainees, which compounded the effects of torture and functioned as an additional form of abuse.²⁰⁵ When authorities refused or delayed medical care despite visible injuries, deteriorating health, or requests for qualified medical assistance, they prolonged detainees' pain and suffering, and reinforced the potential long-term harm to their health.

Some detainees needed days to be able to walk again after being tortured and needed medical treatment they never received.²⁰⁶ Guards frequently ignored or even beat those who requested treatment of both pre-existing health conditions and injuries or illnesses sustained during captivity. As a result of electrocution, intense beatings, and presumably lack of food, many survivors lost consciousness.²⁰⁷ To keep the torture sessions going, prison staff sometimes brought in a doctor to revive survivors.²⁰⁸ However, personnel often failed to provide qualified medical assistance. A survivor, who had lost consciousness during an interrogation, said that she received glycine under her tongue and a glass of vodka as medical treatment.²⁰⁹

One survivor said that, as a result of the beating, he lost consciousness every time he tried to get up from the bed for two days, but guards refused to call a doctor for him.²¹⁰ Another survivor had a hip prosthesis and restricted movement, which caused inflammation and severe swelling in his leg, resulting in significant pain. In both cases, guards denied medical assistance.²¹¹ One survi-

vor said that a paramedic determined a detainee was showing signs of an impending heart attack and needed immediate hospitalization, but guards did not allow him to be transferred or treated.²¹²

One survivor who was in a critical situation as a result of prolonged beatings and electric shocks at the Balakliia police station recalled: *"When they brought me back, they started beating and questioning me again, and then they used the so-called 'tapik.' They attached it to my index finger and made me hold it in my hand. These were three military personnel who had been present during my first and second interrogations. For one hour and 40 minutes, they beat me with electric shocks alone. I was already starting to lose consciousness, and they let me go. They dragged me back to the cell because I couldn't walk. They called an ambulance; a paramedic came, and the ambulance arrived. They gave me injections and pills. My heart started to fail. They said it would be best to take me away from there, but the Russians refused. They called me in for questioning again."*²¹³

3.7. Psychological Torture and Coercion

Russian forces used psychological torture and coercion across sites to keep detainees in a state of fear, uncertainty, and dependence. Russian forces threatened survivors with execution, harm, or sexual violence against them and their families,²¹⁴ and used other forms of threats or intimidation. These threats extended the pressure of detention beyond physical abuse to psychological turmoil over what might happen to them or their families after transfer or release.

Russian and occupation forces often used mock executions to instill fear.²¹⁵ They also subjected detainees to sensory torture, such as exposure to loud noises, screaming, or prolonged deprivation of light²¹⁶ and sleep, and used forced hooding or blindfolding.²¹⁷

Russian forces often threatened sexual violence against detainees or their family members as a method of psychological violence. One survivor detained at the Husarivka poultry farm described an incident when a Russian soldier threatened to

cut off his testicles: *"One Russian soldier spread my legs once and asked, 'Do you have children?' I said, 'Yes, a son.' He said, 'You won't need your balls anymore.'"*²¹⁸ Another survivor said he was threatened in a similar way at the "Ukrgeophys-ics" enterprise in Dovhalivka: *"An Eagle (call sign) was shooting from a machine gun at the ground near me. This Eagle Sergey says: 'Your Azovites cut off the scrotums of three of ours today, get your scrotums ready.'"*²¹⁹ One survivor described the threats of rape against his wife,²²⁰ while another survivor reported that people who interrogated her threatened to rape her daughter.²²¹

A survivor also recalled that those in charge of the torture site threatened to rape him: *"They threatened that they would bring an old man from the cell who 'performs' on men. Well, like, they would rape me. Then they said the old man wasn't in the mood today and that tomorrow they would buy him some Viagra and bring him in. I hoped it was just bluster while I was there. Olesia, a representative of some charity who interviewed me after the de-occupation, claimed that it wasn't just bluster and that one of the detainees had been raped — and he later hung himself in Balakliia."*²²²

At the Kupiansk police station, those in charge forbade detainees from speaking Ukrainian. When they heard any detainee speaking Ukrainian, the perpetrators would take the entire cell to the corridor and beat them.²²³

3.8. Conclusion: Violence as a Method of Control

After Russian forces occupied the parts of the four raions in Kharkiv Oblast examined in this study, they committed extensive atrocities against the local civilian population, including imprisonment, torture, and sexual violence.

Russian forces detained local civilians in the torture sites without providing legal grounds, legal aid, or explanations of detainees' rights. The occupying forces specifically targeted men of military age, former Ukrainian soldiers and Territorial Defense members, individuals displaying Ukrainian symbols or publicly using the Ukrainian language, local government workers, law enforce-

ment officers, volunteers, and civilians accused by those cooperating with the occupying forces.

The conditions in these torture sites included overcrowded cells, inadequate bedding, and little or no basic infrastructure for maintaining hygiene. During detention, Russian forces inflicted physical, psychological, and sexual violence on detainees. Personnel severely beat civilians with various objects and administered electric shocks. TH and PEJ documented instances of sexual violence at multiple sites, including rape, forced nudity, invasive body searches, threats of rape, and electric shocks applied to the genitals.

The evidence indicates that torture, sexual violence, humiliation, deprivation, and threats were used to extract information, punish perceived loyalty to Ukraine, coerce cooperation, suppress Ukrainian identity, and intimidate the broader civilian population.

Long-Term Psychological Harm After Detention and Torture

The Istanbul Protocol, the United Nations' authoritative manual for investigating and documenting torture and other ill-treatment, recognizes that torture causes severe physical and psychological consequences that may persist for years and affect survivors' health, family life, social relationships, and ability to rebuild their lives.²²⁴

In follow-up interviews,²²⁵ former detainees from Kharkiv Oblast described continuing physical and psychological harm, including chronic illness, vision deterioration, hypertension, dental problems, recurring nightmares, cognitive difficulties, persistent low mood, and social withdrawal.

Understandably, many respondents said they had not recovered from the physical or psychological effects of detention. Some reported chronic health conditions that developed after detention, while others described symptoms commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Access to psychological support remains uneven in Kharkiv Oblast. Some respondents said their condition improved over time, with or without professional help. Others did not seek counseling, did not know therapy was available, or found counseling ineffective or retraumatizing. One respondent from Kupiansk described the lasting social impact of detention: "I have grown to love solitude. I have two people I can talk to. I don't accept other people."²²⁶

Recovery for torture survivors requires more than release from detention. Survivors need long-term medical care, specialized psychological support, social reintegration assistance, and services that recognize the particular trauma of captivity and torture.²²⁷

CHAPTER 4

LEGAL QUALIFICATION OF DETENTION-RELATED CRIMES AS CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

This chapter assesses whether the detention-related abuses documented in occupied parts of Kharkiv Oblast may amount to international crimes, particularly crimes against humanity under Article 7 of the RS.

It focuses on the most recurrent violations identified in this report: unlawful imprisonment, torture, rape, and other forms of sexual violence. TH and PEJ also identified information concerning enforced disappearance, murder, extrajudicial killings, and deportation. Available evidence on those violations remains limited and requires further investigation.

4.1. Contextual Elements of Crimes against Humanity

The same conduct may, depending on the circumstances, constitute a war crime, a crime against humanity, and a violation of international human rights law. Crimes against humanity are distinguished by their contextual elements: the conduct must form part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population, and the perpetrator must have knowledge of the attack. Certain IHL violations may qualify both as war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the contextual elements distinguish these categories. To establish the contextual elements of crimes against humanity, the evidence must show that: 1) there was an attack directed against a civilian population; 2) the attack was widespread or systematic; 3) the attack was committed pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy; 4) the conduct was committed as part of the attack; and 5) the perpetrator knew that the conduct formed part of, or intended the conduct to be part of, the attack.²²⁸

4.1.1. There was an attack directed against a civilian population

An attack in the context of crimes against humanity is not limited to the use of armed force; it also encompasses other types of mistreatment of the civilian population.²²⁹ Such an attack must meet the requirements of Article 7 of the RS, namely that there should be multiple criminal acts constituting a course of conduct amounting

to a widespread or systematic attack. Random or isolated acts do not meet these criteria.²³⁰ The term 'civilian population' means all persons who are civilians, meaning those who do not directly take part in hostilities.²³¹

In case of doubt whether a person is a civilian, that person shall be considered to be a civilian.²³² The presence within the civilian population of individuals who do not come within the definition of civilians does not deprive the population of its civilian character.²³³

An attack is considered "directed against a civilian population" if the civilian population is the primary object of the attack and not merely an incidental victim of the attack. However, it is not necessary to establish that the entire population of the geographic area where the attack occurred was targeted.²³⁴ It is sufficient that the perpetrators targeted a civilian population or a segment of it.²³⁵

In the case of Kharkiv Oblast, TH and PEJ found that Russian armed forces conducted an attack involving a range of unlawful actions, including detention, torture, and sexual abuse. These violations occurred across 29 identified torture sites located in four raions of the occupied territory of Kharkiv Oblast included in this report. As set out in **Chapter 3**, Russian forces targeted people they perceived as connected to the Ukrainian military or security services, individuals displaying Ukrainian national symbols or language, local officials and others they viewed as obstacles to occupation, and civilians they detained on a more arbitrary or opportunistic basis. Survivors repeatedly describe occupying forces identifying and screening them, or detaining them after local collaborators denounced them as belonging to one of these groups.

The fact that Russian forces targeted particular categories of civilians, including local officials, teachers, former service members no longer taking part in hostilities, relatives of Ukrainian personnel, and people perceived as pro-Ukrainian, does not alter the civilian character of the population. Rather, these profiles show how occupation forces identified and selected civilians for detention within the broader attack. The targeting patterns support the inference that Russian forces employed detention and torture to achieve

broader objectives, including consolidating control over occupied territories, suppressing dissent, and intimidating civilians.

4.1.2. The attack was widespread or systematic

For crimes against humanity, these are alternative requirements; proving either is sufficient.²³⁶ “Widespread” refers to the large-scale nature of the attack, assessed holistically in light of the number of victims, geographic scope, and overall pattern of conduct.²³⁷

“Systematic” refers to the organized nature of the acts and the improbability that they occurred randomly. Courts may infer a systematic character from factors such as repeated or continuous conduct, common methods, preparation or use of resources, recurring victim profiles, coordination among perpetrators, or the involvement of organized political, military, or security structures.²³⁸

In the case of Kharkiv Oblast, the systematic character of the attack is supported not only by the number of sites but also by how they operated. The evidence in **Chapters 2** and **3** shows recurring structural and organizational features, including methods of torture and interrogation techniques, motives for profiling individuals, and coordination between sites. In some cases, transit sites appeared to function as initial screening or holding points before detainees were transferred to main sites. These features indicate coordination and repeated practice rather than random or isolated incidents of abuse, and support the inference that the attack was systematic. Moreover, the evidence may also support an assessment of widespread conduct given the number of sites, geographic spread, and number of survivors identified.

4.1.3. The attack was committed pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy to commit such an attack

Article 7(2)(a) of the RS requires that the attack be carried out pursuant to or in furtherance of State or organizational policy. Such a plan or policy does not need to be explicitly stated or for-

mally adopted; it can instead be inferred from the overall circumstances, including the systematic nature of the crimes.²³⁹

Under international criminal law, its existence may be inferred from the overall circumstances, including the organized, repeated, and non-accidental nature of the conduct. The policy may be that of a State or an organization. Where State organs, security services, military units, occupation authorities, or affiliated armed groups participate in repeated and coordinated abuses, their conduct may support the inference that the attack was carried out pursuant to or in furtherance of such a policy.²⁴⁰

In this case, the “State or organizational policy” element can be inferred from the actions of Russian state authorities and affiliated occupation structures operating in Kharkiv Oblast in 2022. Survivors consistently noted the involvement of regular units of the Russian Armed Forces, FSB officers, Rosgvardiya personnel, Russian police, and so-called ‘LPR’ and ‘DPR’ officers in the establishment, staffing, and operation of torture sites, all operating within a hierarchical structure. Military units, Rosgvardiya and ‘LPR’ and ‘DPR’ authorities handled arrests, while ‘LPR’ and ‘DPR’ police forces managed detention, and FSB officers conducted interrogations. As **Section 2.3** notes, Rosgvardiya was established by, and remains directly subordinate to, the President of the Russian Federation, so its presence at sites across the Oblast is a particularly direct link between the conduct documented here and the upper levels of the Russian state.

The recurring patterns in command arrangements, interrogation methods, and reporting practices across different locations suggest shared operational guidelines and centralized oversight. At these sites, perpetrators repeatedly detained civilians and subjected them to interrogation, torture, and sexual violence based on similar grounds, including perceived support for Ukraine, suspected connections to Ukrainian authorities or armed forces, status as former Ukrainian civil servants or law enforcement officials, or refusal to cooperate with the occupation authorities.

Convictions in Ukrainian courts²⁴¹ confirm the involvement of Russian military and security-affil-

iated personnel in this hierarchy, including the military commandant of Balakliia and a member of the 16th Guards Special Forces Brigade of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces.²⁴²

Taken together, the continuity of the detention network, the repetition of similar methods across sites, the structural organization of main and transit facilities, and the involvement of Russian state, security, military, and occupation structures support the inference that the conduct occurred pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy within the meaning of Article 7(2) (a) of the Rome Statute.

4.1.4. The perpetrators committed the conduct as part of the attack

To qualify as crimes against humanity, the underlying acts must form part of the broader attack directed against the civilian population. The evidence does not need to show that each perpetrator committed every category of abuse, or that the same acts occurred in every location. It must show a sufficient link between the underlying conduct and the broader course of conduct that constitutes the attack.

In Kharkiv Oblast in 2022, the evidence supports such a link. Russian forces and affiliated personnel used detention, torture, rape, and other forms of sexual violence within the same broader system of control described above. They detained civilians across 29 identified torture sites, used transit sites to screen and hold detainees before transfer to larger main sites, and relied on recurring methods of interrogation, torture, humiliation, and coercion. These acts served the same purposes across locations: to identify perceived opponents, extract information, punish perceived loyalty to Ukraine, coerce cooperation, suppress resistance, and intimidate the broader civilian population.

The underlying conduct, therefore, did not occur in isolation from the attack. It formed part of the means by which Russian forces and affiliated personnel carried out the attack against civilians in occupied Kharkiv Oblast.

4.1.5. The perpetrators knew that the conduct formed part of the attack

Crimes against humanity require the perpetrator to have known that the underlying conduct formed part of, or intended it to form part of, a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population. This does not require proof that the perpetrator knew every detail of the attack or shared the full policy behind it. It is sufficient to show awareness of the broader context in which the conduct occurred.²⁴³

The available evidence supports the inference that the perpetrators were aware of the broader attack against the civilian population. The documented abuses occurred inside torture sites operated by the Russian State and affiliated occupation structures, involved recurring roles and methods, and targeted civilians on similar grounds across multiple locations. In this context, the conduct did not appear isolated or private. Rather, the organization of the torture sites, the repeated nature of the abuses, and the perpetrators' roles in arresting, guarding, interrogating, or abusing detainees support the conclusion that they knew their conduct formed part of a broader attack against civilians in occupied Kharkiv Oblast.

4.2. Conduct Constituting Imprisonment

Under Article 7(1)(e) of the RS, imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty may constitute a crime against humanity when the conduct violates fundamental rules of international law and forms part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population. The perpetrator must also know the factual circumstances that establish the gravity of the deprivation of liberty.²⁴⁴

"Imprisonment" in this context refers to the arbitrary deprivation of liberty.²⁴⁵ Detention may meet this threshold where authorities hold individuals without a lawful basis or basic procedural safeguards, including notice of the reasons for detention, formal charges, access to legal counsel, contact with family, and review by an independ-

ent judicial authority. Minor procedural defects are not sufficient; the deprivation of liberty must be grave enough to violate fundamental rules of international law.²⁴⁶

The facts outlined in **Chapters 2 and 3** of this report provide reasonable grounds to conclude that Russian forces and affiliated actors severely deprived civilians of physical liberty in sites across Kharkiv Oblast.²⁴⁷ They routinely detained civilians through physical violence, threats of violence, or threats against family members. Detainees were not informed of the reasons for their detention, were not notified of any official charges, were not advised of procedural rights, and were not brought before a judicial authority.

The circumstances of detention support the conclusion that the deprivation of liberty was arbitrary and sufficiently grave.

Specifically, those supervising the torture sites failed to provide detainees with timely access to their families or legal counsel. They also denied detainees the opportunity to challenge the legality of their detention before an independent, impartial, and competent court and failed to ensure legal representation. Moreover, the occupation forces held civilians in torture sites based only on their perceived support for Ukraine or suspected connections to Ukrainian authorities or armed forces.

These acts violated fundamental protections against arbitrary detention and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Because they occurred in the context of a systematic attack directed against a civilian population and pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy, the evidence provides reasonable grounds to conclude that the documented deprivation of liberty amounts to imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty as a crime against humanity.

4.3. Conduct Constituting Torture

Under the RS, torture as a crime against humanity requires the intentional infliction of severe pain

or suffering, whether physical or mental.²⁴⁸ In addition, the victim must have been in the custody or under the control of the perpetrator.²⁴⁹ The victim does not need to be formally detained. It is sufficient that the perpetrator exercised control over the victim through detention, force, threats, or other coercive circumstances.²⁵⁰ The RS does not require the perpetrator to have acted in an official capacity.²⁵¹ Finally, the pain or suffering must not have arisen solely from, nor have been inherent in or incidental to, lawful sanctions.²⁵²

The crime against humanity of torture requires intent. The perpetrator must mean to inflict severe pain or suffering or know that such pain or suffering will occur in the ordinary course of events. However, unlike torture as a war crime, torture as a crime against humanity does not require proof of a specific purpose, such as obtaining information, punishment, intimidation, or coercion.²⁵³ Torture differs from ill treatment or other forms of bodily or mental harm by the intensity of the pain and suffering; courts assess severity in light of all the circumstances,²⁵⁴ including the nature of the acts, their duration and repetition, the physical and psychological impact on the victim, and the victim's age, sex, health, and vulnerability.²⁵⁵ Sexual violence, threats of sexual violence, forced nudity, and forcing a person to witness severe abuse of others may also amount to torture where the severity and other elements are met.²⁵⁶

The facts outlined in **Chapter 3** provide reasonable grounds to conclude that Russian forces and affiliated actors intentionally inflicted severe physical and mental pain and suffering on civilian detainees in Kharkiv Oblast. Survivors and witnesses described beatings, electric shocks, suspension or stress positions, suffocation, simulated drowning or forced water submersion, and sexual violence.²⁵⁷ They also described mock executions, exposure to extreme noises, sleep and light deprivation, hooding or blindfolding, and repeated threats and intimidation against survivors.²⁵⁸

Multiple survivors' accounts indicate that Russian detention caused lasting physical and psychological harm. The perpetrators inflicted these acts while holding survivors in detention, where they exercised custody and control over them. The circumstances support an inference of intent. Many

of the reported methods, including electrocution, suffocation, simulated drowning, or forced water submersion, required preparation, equipment, and deliberate physical acts. Additionally, across the torture sites, the alleged perpetrators repeatedly and systematically beat detainees, electrocuted them, and used threats and intimidation. These methods were not incidental to detention. They caused severe pain and suffering and often occurred during interrogation, punishment, intimidation, or coercion.

The perpetrators exercised control over the survivors when they inflicted these acts. As established previously, Russian forces and affiliated actors had arbitrarily detained the survivors and held them in torture sites outside any recognized legal framework. Consequently, the abuses did not arise from, nor were they incidental to, lawful sanctions. The perpetrators also knew the survivors' names, occupation, and civil status; thus, they were aware of their protected status as civilians.

Because these acts occurred in the context of a systematic attack directed against a civilian population, pursuant to a State or organizational policy, there are reasonable grounds to conclude that the documented acts amount to torture as a crime against humanity.

4.4. Conduct Constituting Sexual Violence

The RS recognizes rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, and other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity as crimes against humanity when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population.²⁵⁹

4.4.1. Rape

The crime against humanity of rape requires that a perpetrator penetrate any part of the victim's body with a sexual organ, or penetrate the anal or genital opening of the victim with any object or any other part of the body.²⁶⁰ Such penetration must be committed by "force, or by threat of force or coercion."²⁶¹ Coercion may include fear

of violence, duress, detention, psychological oppression, or abuse of power, against a victim or another person.²⁶² It may also arise when the perpetrator takes advantage of a coercive environment,²⁶³ or when the victim cannot give genuine consent.²⁶⁴ The crime applies to victims of any gender. The perpetrator must have intended the penetration²⁶⁵ and known that it involved force, threats, coercion, or a coercive environment.²⁶⁶

The facts outlined in **Chapter 3** provide reasonable grounds to conclude that Russian forces and affiliated actors raped civilian detainees inside torture sites in Kharkiv Oblast. Survivors reported anal and vaginal penetration with sexual organs or objects, including a truncheon.²⁶⁷ In some cases, perpetrators used direct physical force. In others, they used threats against the survivor or the survivor's relatives, or took advantage of the coercive environment created by detention and torture. Reported preparatory acts support the inference that the perpetrators acted intentionally and knew they were using force, coercion, or the coercive circumstances of detention.

4.4.2. Other forms of sexual violence

"Other forms of sexual violence" refers to acts of a sexual nature other than rape, committed by force, threat of force, coercion, or by taking advantage of a coercive environment, where the conduct reaches a gravity comparable to the other sexual violence crimes listed in the RS.²⁶⁸ Such acts may include: beating, biting, mutilating, or otherwise causing injury to a sexual body part; forced nudity; and invasive inspection of someone's sexual body parts without medical or similar necessity.²⁶⁹ Sexual violence does not require penetration or even physical contact in every case.²⁷⁰

The facts outlined in **Chapter 3** provide reasonable grounds to conclude that Russian forces and affiliated actors committed other forms of sexual violence against civilian detainees in Kharkiv Oblast. Survivors reported that Russian-affiliated servicemen beat male genitals, attached wires to male genitals and electrocuted them, and forced nudity. In addition, in a number of cases, acts of sexual violence occurred alongside other crimes, including imprisonment and torture. The circumstances support an inference of intent, as

these acts often required advance planning. For instance, electrocuting male genitals required preparing a Soviet TA-57 field telephone known as a “tapik” and, in one case, a basin with water to increase conductivity.²⁷¹ These acts also caused severe physical and psychological harm and reached the level of gravity required for other forms of sexual violence under Article 7(1)(g). The coercive detention environment, combined with the perpetrators’ use of force, threats, and control over detainees, precluded genuine consent.

Because the documented acts occurred in the context of a systematic attack directed against a civilian population and pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy, the evidence provides reasonable grounds to conclude that rape and other forms of sexual violence committed in torture sites in Kharkiv Oblast may amount to crimes against humanity.

4.5. Conclusion

Based on the factual findings outlined in **Chapters 2** and **3** and the legal analysis set out above, there are reasonable grounds to believe that the acts the alleged perpetrators committed in the temporarily occupied territory of Kharkiv Oblast from February to September 2022 meet the contextual and material elements of crimes against humanity under Article 7 of the RS.

The evidence indicates a course of conduct involving the systematic commission of prohibited acts against the civilian population over a prolonged period. Acts including arbitrary imprisonment, torture, rape, and sexual violence were not isolated or incidental, but formed part of a recurrent and organized pattern of abuse. Their continuity, repetition, and structural organization, together with the hierarchical command structures described above, support the conclusion that perpetrators carried out the conduct pursuant to or in furtherance of an organizational policy within the meaning of Article 7(2)(a) of the RS.

The evidence also supports the material elements of specific crimes against humanity:

- The deprivation of liberty of detainees in various torture sites in Kharkiv Oblast con-

stitutes imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty under Article 7(1)(e), as such detention was inherently arbitrary, carried out without legal basis, procedural safeguards, or judicial oversight, and accompanied by the systematic denial of fundamental fair-trial guarantees.

- The intentional infliction of severe physical and mental pain and suffering upon persons in custody, through beatings, electrocution, stress positions, mock executions, threats against relatives, and other methods, satisfies the definition of torture under Article 7(1)(f), particularly given the absence of any lawful sanction and the total control exercised over detainees.
- Acts including rape, genital beatings, genital electrocution, forced nudity, and threats of sexual violence reach the threshold of sexual violence, including other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity, under Article 7(1)(g), taking into account both the physical and psychological suffering inflicted and the inherently coercive detention environment.

Finally, the mental element is supported by the organized and repetitive nature of the conduct, the operational structures enabling its continuation, and the perpetrators’ awareness that their acts formed part of a broader attack against a civilian population. The duration, scale, and coordination of the abuses strongly support the conclusion that they were neither spontaneous nor isolated.

Accordingly, the totality of available evidence provides reasonable grounds to conclude that the acts committed in torture sites in Kharkiv Oblast amount to crimes against humanity, namely imprisonment, torture, and sexual violence, perpetrated as part of a systematic attack directed against civilians in the context of the occupation of Kharkiv Oblast.

Pathways to Compensation and Support for Torture Survivors

For torture survivors in Ukraine, justice means more than prosecution. Former detainees from Kharkiv Oblast described justice in broad terms: accountability for those responsible, official recognition, material support, legal protection, respectful treatment by state institutions, and access to medical and psychological care sufficient to address the long-term consequences of detention and torture.

Two formal pathways are especially relevant to recognition, support, and future compensation. The first is Ukraine's domestic system for recognizing people deprived of liberty as a result of Russia's armed aggression, often referred to as "Civilian Prisoner" status. Former civilian detainees, or in some cases their family members, can apply to the relevant state Commission to establish the fact of deprivation of personal liberty.²⁷² Official recognition may unlock state support, including legal aid, compensation, temporary housing in some circumstances, employment support, rehabilitation and reintegration measures, and other social protections.²⁷³

The second pathway is the Register of Damage for Ukraine (RD4U). The Register does not itself pay compensation, but records claims as the first step toward a future international compensation mechanism.²⁷⁴ Claimants submit applications through the Register's claim system and must provide supporting information and evidence. RD4U opened relevant individual-harm categories on March 19, 2025, including for sexual violence, torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and deprivation of liberty.²⁷⁵

These pathways remain far from a final remedy for Ukraine's many torture survivors. Public reporting and civil society analysis have identified recurring obstacles in Ukraine's "Civilian Prisoner" system, including complex procedures, document-gathering burdens, delays, and the difficulty of proving status.²⁷⁶ Some respondents felt that state assistance does not always correspond to the harm suffered, and that access to aid could depend on social influence or status rather than need.

A survivor-centered response for Kharkiv torture survivors, therefore, requires more than criminal accountability alone. It also requires transparent and accessible procedures for recognition and support, long-term physical and psychological care, fair access to compensation processes, official acknowledgment of harm, and humane treatment by state institutions.

CHAPTER 5

LEGAL AVENUES FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

The abuses documented in this report require effective investigation and prosecution. Several avenues may be available, including domestic prosecutions in Ukraine, investigations and prosecutions by foreign authorities exercising universal or other extraterritorial jurisdiction, and proceedings before the ICC. These mechanisms differ in mandate, jurisdiction, evidentiary requirements, and practical reach, but they can complement one another, as no single accountability pathway is likely to address the full scope of detention-related crimes in occupied Kharkiv Oblast.

Ukrainian authorities have primary responsibility for investigating crimes committed on Ukrainian territory, but many alleged Russian perpetrators may remain outside Ukraine's custody. Foreign prosecutors may play an important complementary role where suspects, victims, witnesses, or evidence fall within their jurisdiction. The ICC may also have a role in addressing those most responsible where the evidence supports crimes against humanity or other international crimes.

This chapter outlines the main accountability pathways relevant to the crimes documented in this report and identifies the opportunities and limitations associated with each.

5.1. Domestic Prosecution

Ukraine's domestic framework for prosecuting international crimes has recently expanded, but important legal and practical challenges remain. Article 438 of the CCU remains the main provision for prosecuting war crimes, but it is a blanket provision that refers to violations of the laws and customs of war without setting out specific elements of offenses. In practice, prosecutors and courts have had to interpret Article 438 by reference to international humanitarian law, which has contributed to uneven practice.²⁷⁷

Amendments to the CCU entered into force on October 24, 2024, introducing crimes against humanity and command responsibility. These amendments addressed important gaps in Ukraine's domestic framework for prosecuting international crimes. However, their use for crimes committed before October 24, 2024, remains legally debated, particularly because of questions

about retroactive application under Ukrainian and international law.²⁷⁸

The scale of torture-related investigations in Kharkiv Oblast also presents serious practical challenges. According to the War Crimes Department at the Kharkiv Oblast Prosecutor's Office, around 2,000 criminal pre-trial investigations into torture and related crimes have been registered in the region alone. By February 2023, the Kharkiv Oblast Prosecutor's Office had notified 87 people of suspicion for war crimes committed in the region.²⁷⁹ Monitoring data indicate that by October 2023, courts in Kharkiv Oblast had delivered only one verdict under Art. 438 of the CCU.²⁸⁰ This reflects not only the scale of the caseload, but also the operational difficulties of conducting hearings in a region under ongoing attack.²⁸¹

Procedural requirements further complicate these cases. Under Article 438(2) of Ukraine's Criminal Code, war crimes resulting in death are punishable by 10 to 15 years' imprisonment or life imprisonment. Because the offence carries a possible life sentence, Ukrainian criminal procedure generally requires the case to be heard at first instance by a panel of three judges.²⁸² This requirement can delay proceedings in a war-affected region where courts already face security, staffing, and scheduling constraints.

Despite these constraints, Ukrainian courts have delivered verdicts directly relevant to detention and torture by Russian forces in Kharkiv Oblast. In October 2025, a Ukrainian court convicted the military commandant of Balakliia and sentenced him to 12 years' imprisonment. He was convicted for his role in the cruel treatment of civilians, including issuing orders authorizing unlawful detentions and organizing interrogations during which civilians were tortured.²⁸³

Ukrainian law enforcement agencies have also identified several other individuals suspected of involvement in the detention and torture of civilians in Balakliia and nearby settlements. In August 2025, a Ukrainian court sentenced a member of the 16th Separate Guards Special Purpose Brigade of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces *in absentia* to eleven years' imprisonment for his involvement in the detention and torture of at least four civil-

ians.²⁸⁴ Additionally, in August 2024, the OPG of Ukraine announced the issue of notices of suspicion to six servicemen affiliated with the 202nd Motor Rifle Regiment of the 'LPR' and the 126th Regiment of Russia's National Guard for their alleged involvement in the unlawful detention and torture of civilians in Savyntsi and Dovhalivka, both in Izium Raion.²⁸⁵

These cases demonstrate that ongoing Article 438 prosecutions can address specific incidents and individual perpetrators. However, standing alone, they may be less suited to capture the organized, systematic character of the detention-site network documented in this report, including the operation of multiple sites and the targeting of civilians across liberated settlements. That systematic character is legally significant. On October 30, 2024, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine concluded that Russian authorities had committed torture as a crime against humanity, finding the practice both widespread and systematic across all areas under Russian control, including Kharkiv Oblast.²⁸⁶

Domestic accountability will therefore require a coherent prosecutorial strategy that can address both individual incidents and the broader pattern of detention-related abuse. For the Kharkiv torture-site network, domestic investigations should consolidate evidence across facilities, map transfers between transit and main sites, identify recurring personnel roles, and examine whether the same methods, victim profiles, and command structures link individual acts to a broader detention system.

Ukrainian authorities should develop consistent jurisprudence on Article 438, while also assessing how the new crimes against humanity and command responsibility provisions may apply in accordance with Ukrainian and international law.²⁸⁷ This would help ensure that domestic prosecutions capture not only individual acts of torture, but also the organized system through which perpetrators carried out those abuses.

5.2. Universal Jurisdiction

UJ is a principle of international law that enables States to investigate and prosecute certain grave international crimes regardless of where they were committed and regardless of the nationality of the suspect or victims.²⁸⁸ Although domestic rules vary, UJ generally applies to crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide.²⁸⁹

In the context of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine, UJ can complement both domestic proceedings and proceedings before the ICC. It can help distribute the prosecutorial burden, preserve evidence located outside Ukraine, and provide an additional route to accountability where suspects, witnesses, survivors, documents, or other evidence are located in third countries. Universal jurisdiction is particularly relevant to the crimes documented in this report because many Ukrainian survivors and witnesses now live outside Ukraine, including in European states with specialized war crimes units. These states may be able to collect testimony, preserve medical and forensic documentation, and investigate suspects who are present in or travel through their territory. In appropriate cases, foreign prosecutors may also be able to pursue structural investigations that examine patterns of detention, torture, sexual violence, and command responsibility across multiple sites, rather than treating each incident in isolation.

The availability and scope of universal jurisdiction vary by country. Some states permit investigations even when the suspect is not present,²⁹⁰ while others require the suspect's presence before an investigation or prosecution can proceed.²⁹¹ States also differ on whether they allow trials *in absentia*, whether prosecutorial authorization is required, and what evidentiary threshold must be met to open a case. These differences make early coordination among Ukrainian authorities, foreign prosecutors, and civil society organizations especially important.

Since the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion, several countries have already initiated investigative efforts under UJ into alleged crimes against humanity and war crimes, including, among others, Germany, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania,

Sweden, and Czechia.²⁹² These proceedings offer an important opportunity to support accountability for detention-related crimes in Kharkiv Oblast, particularly where evidence or witnesses are located abroad or where suspects later become available to foreign authorities.

5.3. International Criminal Court

The ICC is a permanent international tribunal with jurisdiction over genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. Under the principle of complementarity, the ICC acts as a court of last resort, and may proceed only where national authorities are unwilling or unable to investigate or prosecute relevant cases.²⁹³

The ICC already has jurisdiction over alleged crimes committed on the territory of Ukraine based on Ukraine's earlier declarations accepting the Court's jurisdiction. Ukraine later ratified the RS in August 2024, deposited its instrument of ratification in October 2024, and became a State Party on January 1, 2025.²⁹⁴ Ukraine's State Party status strengthens its formal relationship with the Court, but it does not limit the ICC's existing jurisdiction over crimes committed in Ukraine since November 2013.

In the context of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine and the acts of torture detailed in **Chapter 3**, the ICC may serve as an additional avenue for accountability, particularly for senior perpetrators and those most responsible for organized patterns of abuse. The Court is unlikely to address every individual incident or perpetrator. However, where the evidence supports it, the ICC could investigate whether unlawful detention, torture, rape, and other forms of sexual violence in Kharkiv Oblast formed part of a broader pattern of crimes amounting to crimes against humanity.

The ICC Prosecutor opened an investigation in March 2022²⁹⁵ into alleged war crimes and possibly other crimes, committed in the context of the situation in Ukraine since November 21, 2013.²⁹⁶ The investigation has led to the issuance of arrest warrants against several senior Russian officials,

including Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's Children's Rights Commissioner, for the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children and other serious violations of international law.²⁹⁷ Further ICC action could complement domestic and universal jurisdiction proceedings by focusing on those most responsible for detention-related crimes and related patterns of abuse.

5.4. Conclusion

The scale and organization of detention-related crimes in Kharkiv Oblast require a coordinated accountability strategy. Ukrainian authorities bear the primary responsibility for investigating and prosecuting crimes committed on Ukrainian territory, but domestic proceedings alone are unlikely to address the full range of perpetrators, evidence, and patterns identified in this report.

Universal jurisdiction investigations, cooperation with foreign prosecutors, and the ICC can complement Ukrainian proceedings by preserving evidence, pursuing suspects who are outside Ukraine, and focusing on those most responsible for organized patterns of abuse. These avenues should not operate in isolation. Effective accountability will require sustained coordination among Ukrainian authorities, foreign jurisdictions, international institutions, and civil society, as well as a survivor-centered approach that protects witnesses, avoids retraumatization, and keeps survivors informed about proceedings that concern them.

Conclusion

In occupied parts of Kharkiv Oblast in 2022, Russian forces used coercion and violence to compel civilian compliance with their rule. Russian and occupation forces operated a network of detention and torture sites to control and punish the civilian population. Such conduct within that network may amount to crimes against humanity.

In October 2024, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine found that Russian authorities have committed torture as a crime against humanity on a widespread and systematic basis across all areas under Russian control, including in Kharkiv Oblast. The patterns documented in this report, including main and transit sites, the same categories of personnel performing the same roles, and civilians targeted for similar reasons, support this argument. Therefore, to ensure accountability for the detention and torture of civilians in Kharkiv Oblast, it is essential to investigate these acts as crimes against humanity rather than as isolated and unrelated incidents.

Ukraine's 2024 amendments adding crimes against humanity and command responsibility to domestic law strengthen the legal basis for treating what happened in Kharkiv Oblast as part of an organized system rather than a series of isolated incidents. Whether these new domestic provisions can be applied to conduct that occurred before October 2024, including everything documented in this report, remains legally contested. In the near term, domestic prosecutions are likely to continue relying on Article 438. At the same time, universal jurisdiction and the ICC, which do not depend on that question, offer additional routes, particularly given how many survivors and witnesses from Kharkiv Oblast now live outside Ukraine.

The scale and organization of detention-related crimes in Kharkiv Oblast require a coordinated accountability strategy. Accountability efforts should reflect the organized nature of the detention and torture system. Investigators and prosecutors should consolidate evidence across facilities, map transfers and personnel structures, identify common methods and victim profiles, and develop linkage evidence showing how senior officials, commanders, and other superiors ordered, directed, knew of, contributed to, or failed to prevent or punish. Ukrainian authorities bear the primary responsibility for investigating and prosecuting crimes committed on Ukrainian territory, but domestic proceedings alone are unlikely to address all the crimes identified in Kharkiv Oblast due to legal and administrative challenges. Therefore, universal jurisdiction investigations, cooperation with foreign prosecutors, and the ICC can complement Ukrainian proceedings by preserving evidence, pursuing suspects who are outside Ukraine, and focusing on those most responsible for organized patterns of abuse.

More than three years have passed since the de-occupation of parts of Kharkiv Oblast. However, many survivors continue to live with pain and trauma, especially knowing that those responsible have not yet been held accountable. These circumstances underscore the urgency of accountability efforts, particularly following Ukraine's 2024 legislative changes that created a framework for prosecuting crimes against humanity.

Justice for the survivors of torture in Kharkiv Oblast requires sustained investigations and legal action, public recognition of the truth, access to social services and benefits to which survivors are entitled, and accountability that reaches every level of the system that enabled these crimes.

Sources and endnotes

- 1 Statement of ST044.
- 2 'Donetsk People's Republic' or 'DPR' is a Russian-backed separatist entity in eastern Ukraine that claimed control over parts of Donetsk oblast after 2014. Ukraine and most other states did not recognize it as a lawful state. Russia later claimed to annex Donetsk Oblast in 2022. For more see, UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/4, *Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations*, A/RES/ES-11/4, Oct. 12, 2022, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/ES-11/4>, last accessed June 15, 2026. The UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/ES-11/4 states that Russia's actions concerning the "illegal so-called referendums" and attempted annexation of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts have "no validity under international law." The term 'DPR' is in quotation marks throughout this report to reflect its self-proclaimed and unrecognized status. The use of this term is for identification only and does not imply recognition of the entity, its purported institutions, or its claimed authority.
- 3 'Luhansk People's Republic' or 'LPR' is a Russian-backed separatist entity in eastern Ukraine that claimed control over parts of Luhansk Oblast after 2014. The same caveat applies as in note 2.
- 4 The selection principle is explained in the Limitations section.
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- 27 Human Rights Watch, "Ukraine: Russian Forces Tortured Izium Detainees," Oct. 19, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/19/ukraine-russian-forces-tortured-izium-detainees>, last accessed May 27, 2026; Luke Harding and Dan Sabbagh, "Ukraine Mass Grave with 440 Bodies Discovered in Recaptured Izium, Says Police Chief," *The Guardian*, Sept. 16, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220916161701/https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/16/ukraine-mass-grave-with-440-bodies-discovered-in-recaptured-izium-says-police-chief>, last accessed May 27, 2026; Centre for Information Resilience, "One Year On from the Discovery of Mass Graves in Izium, We Identify the Enablers of Torture," Sept. 12, 2023, <https://www.info-res.org/eyes-on-russia/reports/one-year-on-from-the-discovery-of-mass-graves-in-izium-we-identify-the-enablers-of-torture/>, last accessed May 27, 2026; Vasilisa Stepanenko and Evgeniy Maloletka, "AP Exclusive: First Photos, Video of Mass Burial Site in Recaptured Ukrainian City of Izium," *Associated Press*, Sept. 23, 2022, <https://www.ap.org/news-highlights/best-of-the-week/2022/ukraine-mass-burial-site-izium/>, last accessed May 27, 2026.
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 - 36 Statement of ST076.
 - 37 Statements of ST102, ST103.
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 - 39 Statement of ST103.
 - 40 Statement of ST050.
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 - 42 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Ukraine: Humanitarian Situation in Kharkivska Oblast, Flash Update No. 1 (Last updated: 6 Oct 2022)," Oct. 6, 2022, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-situation-kharkivska-oblast-flash-update-no-1-last-updated-6-oct-2022-enuk>, last accessed May 27, 2026.
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 - 47 Statements of ST011, ST034.
 - 48 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human Rights Situation During the Russian Occupation of Territory of Ukraine and Its Aftermath*, 24 February 2022 to 31 December 2023, Mar. 20, 2024, 16, para. 58, <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/human-rights-situation-during-russian-occupation-territory-ukraine-and-its-aftermath-EN>, last accessed May 1, 2026.
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 - 50 *Ibid.*
 - 51 *Ibid.*
 - 52 Statements of ST034, ST045, ST056.
 - 53 Statements of ST015, ST025, ST087.
 - 54 Statements of ST056, ST065.
 - 55 Statement of ST011.
 - 56 *Ibid.*
 - 57 Statement of ST070.
 - 58 *Ibid.*
 - 59 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human Rights Situation During the Russian Occupation of Territory of Ukraine and Its Aftermath*, 24 February 2022 to 31 December 2023, Mar. 20, 2024, 19-24, paras. 81-107, <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/human-rights-situation-during-russian-occupation-territory-ukraine-and-its-aftermath-EN>, last accessed May 1, 2026.
 - 60 This report uses "sexual violence" rather than "conflict-related sexual violence" (CRSV) to align with the Rome Statute, which lists rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity as war crimes and crimes against humanity. While the broader concept of CRSV, as developed in the United Nations practice, covers a broadly overlapping range of conduct and informs our understanding of it, this report favors the Statute's terminology to maintain consistency with the legal framework against which the documented acts are assessed. For more on CRSV generally, see United Nations Secretary-General, "Conflict-related sexual violence: report of the Secretary-General," U.N. Doc. S/2026/321, Apr. 21, 2026, para. 3.
 - 61 Statements of ST015, ST005, ST040, ST032, ST007, ST071, ST086, ST010, ST013, ST087, ST004, ST003, ST030, ST020, ST016, ST006, ST002, ST064, ST029, ST051, ST021, ST039, ST027, ST028, ST024, ST026, ST011, ST009, ST048, ST045, ST022, ST044, ST012, ST080, ST078, ST089, ST096, ST083, ST067, ST068, ST070, ST073, ST074, ST085, ST099, ST056, ST057, ST047, ST053, ST082, ST104, ST105, ST106.
 - 62 Statements of ST072, ST107.
 - 63 Statements of ST007, ST040, ST094.
 - 64 Statement of ST109.
 - 65 Statements of ST034, ST039.
 - 66 Statements of ST045, ST039, ST040, ST110.
 - 67 Statements of ST058, ST059, ST077.
 - 68 Statements of ST010, ST046, ST043, ST035.
 - 69 Statements of ST083, ST078, ST084, ST038, ST095.
 - 70 Statement of ST081.
 - 71 Statements of ST054, ST038, ST055, ST079, ST087.
 - 72 Statements of ST072, ST066, ST070, ST081, ST065, ST114, ST091, ST092, ST098.
 - 73 Statements of ST072, ST066, ST070, ST081, ST065, ST114, ST083, ST084, ST078, ST038, ST095, ST089, ST096.
 - 74 A raion is an administrative district within an oblast. Kharkiv Oblast is divided into seven raions, five of which were partially or fully occupied by Russian forces in 2022. Only Kupiansk Raion was fully occupied, while significant parts of Izium, Chuhuiv, and Kharkiv Raions, as well as several settlements in Bohodukhiv Raion, were occupied. Available evidence did not include testimony from Bohodukhiv Raion so it is not included in this report. Understanding what, if any, detention or torture occurred in Bohodukhiv Raion during the 2022 occupation requires further investigations.
 - 75 The identified torture sites in Izium Raion: Main sites - District police station at 33 Zhovtneva St., Balakliia; District police station at 4 Heorhiivskiy Lane, Izium; City railway polyclinic at 35 Zavodska St., Izium. Transit sites - Lyceum No. 2 of Izium City Council at 12 Miroshnychenka St., Izium; "Baldrak" Printing House at 14 Zhovtneva St., Balakliia; Autopark "AVTOTRANS-BALAKLIA" LLC at 1A Zamiska St., Balakliia/Verbivka; Savyntsi Village Council at 49 Soborna St., Savyntsi; "LPR" headquarters in a basement of a private building at 16 Luhova St., Kapytolivka; Local Gas Supply Authority (Miskhaz), Balakliia; Basement of an unidentified two-story building at 107 Soborna St., Volokhiv Yar; Verbivka Lyceum of the Balakliia City Council at 68 Tsentralna St., Verbivka; Poultry Farm "Ptakhocomplex Nova" LLC, Balakliia/Husarivka; Balakliia District Court at 87 Soborna St., Balakliia; Premises of the Dnipro Geophysical Exploration Expedition of the State Geophysical Enterprise "Ukrgeophysics," Dovhalivka. Site status unclear - Borova Lyceum at 23 Myru St., Borova; "Svitlo Shakhtaria" recreation center, Borova; Commandant's office and basement of a private house on Parkova St., Pisky-Radkivski; Lyceum No. 6 of the Izium City Council at 26 Chervonopraporna St., Izium; Tractor brigade, Vesele.
 - 76 Statements of ST078, ST089, ST096, ST083.
 - 77 Statements of ST083, ST084, ST078, ST038, ST095.
 - 78 Statements of ST055, ST038, ST054, ST083.
 - 79 Russian forces did not occupy Chuhuiv, the administrative center of Chuhuiv Raion, so Vovchansk, the Raion's second-largest town, served as the occupation authorities' administrative center. Statements of ST072, ST066, ST070, ST081, ST065, ST114, ST043, ST035.
 - 80 The identified torture sites in Chuhuiv Raion: Main site - PJSC "Vovchansk Aggregate Plant" at 2 Pushkina St., Vovchansk. Site status unclear - Basement of a private house on Peremohy St., Hrakove. Transit sites - Vovchansk District Court at 2 Torhova St., Vovchansk; Fire and Rescue Station at 30 Pryvokzalna St., Vovchansk; State enterprise "Experimental Farm Hrakivske" at 4 Zelena St., Doslidne.
 - 81 *Ibid.*
 - 82 The identified torture sites in Kharkiv Raion: Transit sites - Former border checkpoint "Hoptivka," Hoptivka; Railway station premises at Pryvokzalna Square 2, Kozachka Lohan; Basement of a multi-story building on Molodizhna St., Strilecha.
 - 83 Iryna Skachko, "The Butchers of Vovchansk: Suspects named," <https://khpg.org/en/1608813361>, last accessed Jan. 6, 2026. Evhen Zakharov et al., "Severe deprivation of liberty in the Kharkiv region of Ukraine during the Russian occupation," *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, Oct. 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376582456_Severe_deprivation_of_liberty_in_the_Kharkiv_region_of_Ukraine_during_the_Russian_occupation, last accessed Jan. 6, 2026. This open-source report also independently confirmed this site in Hoptivka village.
 - 84 Open-source information ST111.
 - 85 Open-source information ST110.
 - 86 Statement of ST109. See also Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine (IICIU), findings on detention, transfer, and deportation practices: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iicir-ukraine/index>, last accessed June 30, 2026; OHCHR, Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine (2022-2023), documenting unlawful transfers of civilians from occupied territories to the Russian Federation, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/report-human-rights-situation-ukraine>, last accessed June 30, 2026.

- 87 Open-source information ST111, ST110.
- 88 Evhen Zakharov et al., "Severe deprivation of liberty in the Kharkiv region of Ukraine during the Russian occupation," *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, Oct. 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376582456_Severe_deprivation_of_liberty_in_the_Kharkiv_region_of_Ukraine_during_the_Russian_occupation, last accessed June 11, 2026.
- 89 The identified torture sites in Kupiansk Raion: Main site - District police station at 14 Kharkivska St., Kupiansk. Transit site - Police station at 31 Tsentralna St., Shevchenkove.
- 90 Statements of ST067, ST068, ST070, ST073, ST074, ST085, ST099, ST104, ST105, ST056.
- 91 Statements of ST056, ST057, ST106, ST047, ST053, ST040, ST067.
- 92 Statement of ST107.
- 93 Statements of ST024, ST022, ST040, ST071, ST107, ST072, ST055, ST030, ST117.
- 94 Statements of ST020, ST001, ST008, ST111, ST110.
- 95 Statements of ST015, ST057, ST024, ST003, ST010, ST026, ST013, ST109, ST020, ST043, ST040, ST076, ST002, ST007, ST039, ST052, ST025, ST045, ST107.
- 96 Statement of ST081.
- 97 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human Rights Situation During the Russian Occupation of Territory of Ukraine and Its Aftermath*, 24 February 2022 to 31 December 2023, Mar. 20, 2024, 22 para. 93, https://ukraine.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2024-03-20%20OHCHR%20Report%20on%20Occupation%20and%20Aftermath_EN.pdf, last accessed Jan. 6, 2026.
- 98 Rosgvardiya, Russia's National Guard, was established by Vladimir Putin in April 2016 through the reorganization of units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and has been described by analysts as a force used to strengthen the Kremlin's capacity to control domestic unrest, suppress protest activity, and combat political opposition. During Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, Rosgvardiya units have also been deployed to patrol and maintain control over occupied settlements. See e.g., Catherine Hodgson, Will Baumgardner, and Mason Clark, "Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya) Demonstrates New Capabilities in First-Ever Strategic Exercise," *Institute for the Study of War*, Aug. 17, 2021, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-national-guard-rosgvardiya/>, last accessed June 29, 2026; Jason P. Gresh, "Rosgvardiya: Hurling Towards Confrontation?," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Sep. 21, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/rosgvardiya-hurling-towards-confrontation>, last accessed June 29, 2026.
- 99 Statements of ST026, ST034, ST055, ST013, ST005, ST045, ST053, ST011, ST116, ST059, ST043.
- 100 Statements of ST067, ST079, ST013, ST023, ST012, ST004, ST070, ST068, ST056, ST094, ST002, ST057, ST060, ST041.
- 101 Statements of ST064, ST077, ST116, ST024, ST057, ST087.
- 102 Statements of ST013, ST002, ST097, ST010, ST046.
- 103 Statement of ST013.
- 104 Statements of ST002, ST013, ST034, ST055.
- 105 Statements of ST026, ST034, ST055, ST013, ST005, ST045, ST053, ST011, ST116, ST059. See also Borys Petruniuk, Oleh Hnatiuk, and Tetiana Pechonchuk, *Torture and Ill-Treatment of Civilian Population in Ukrainian Territories That Were Under Russian Occupation (On the Example of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson Regions)*, ZMINA Human Rights Centre, Apr. 2023, https://zmina.ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/04/torture_web_eng.pdf?utm_source, last accessed Apr. 4, 2026.
- 106 Statements of ST026, ST034, ST055, ST013, ST005, ST045, ST053, ST011, ST116, ST059. See also Borys Petruniuk, Oleh Hnatiuk, and Tetiana Pechonchuk, *Torture and Ill-Treatment of Civilian Population in Ukrainian Territories That Were Under Russian Occupation (On the Example of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson Regions)*, ZMINA Human Rights Centre, Apr. 2023, https://zmina.ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/04/torture_web_eng.pdf?utm_source, last accessed Apr. 4, 2026.
- 107 Truth Hounds, "Afterword: Investigation into the involvement of the Russian military in the murder of writer Volodymyr Vakulenko," May 9, 2024, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/cases/investigation-into-the-involvement-of-the-russian-military-in-the-murder-of-writer-volodymyr-vakulenko/>, last accessed June 26, 2026.
- 108 *Ibid.*
- 109 10 torture sites in 1 town: Russia sowed pain, fear in Izium, *AP news*, Oct. 2, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-business-treatment-of-prisoners-government-and-politics-aec9afe8d6631795ae9f9478a4ede4cc>, last accessed June 30, 2026.
- 110 At the time, the unit was part of the Western Military District; however, since 2024, it has been part of the Moscow Military District; Truth Hounds OSINT investigators geolocated photos published on some Russian Telegram channels to Izium Lyceum No. 2 by comparing the wallpaper patterns and other distinctive interior features. The posts accompanying these photos referred to specific Russian units. See <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=401147164633142&set=pb.100063076877304.-2207520000&type=3>, last accessed June 30, 2026; <https://t.me/vysokygovorit/7224>, last accessed June 30, 2026.
- 111 "BARS-13" refers to a Russian BARS ("Combat Army Reserve of the Russian Federation") volunteer reserve unit operating within Russia's armed forces structure.
- 112 The same distinctive interior features associated with Izium Lyceum No. 2 are also visible in photographs published on "Russian Legion," the official Telegram channel of the BARS-13 unit. See https://t.me/russkiy_opolchenec/6993, last accessed June 30, 2026; Military personnel from the 60th "Oplot" Brigade of the 'LPR' were also identified in the city of Izium, with one of the photos placing them at a group of buildings in the southeastern part of the city (Coordinates: 49.18410881046879, 37.289655958214084).
- 113 "Хакери показали список росгвардийцев, які тероризували жителів Куп'янська" ["Hackers released a list of Russian National Guard members who terrorized the residents of Kupiansk"], *RBK Ukraine*, Oct. 17, 2023, <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/hakeri-pokazali-spisok-rosgvardiysiv-ki-1700235691.html>, last accessed June 30, 2026.
- 114 See Verdict of the Kotelva District Court of Poltava Oblast, No. 535/2922/22, Dec. 23, 2022 (came into force on Jan. 24, 2023), <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/108042992>, last accessed June 15, 2026, and Verdict of the Balakliia District Court of Kharkiv Oblast, No. 610/1715/24, Dec. 22, 2025 (came into force on Mar. 25, 2026), <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/132801900>, last accessed June 15, 2026.
- 115 Statement of ST026.
- 116 Statement of ST079.
- 117 Statements of ST013, ST039, ST082, ST023, ST012, ST016, ST004.
- 118 "Вовчанський агрегатний завод: російська катівня за чеченськими лекалами" ["The Vovchansk Aggregate Plant: A Russian Torture Chamber Modeled After Chechen Practices"], *TAP*, Aug. 17, 2022, <https://t4pua.org/1041>, last accessed June 30, 2026.
- 119 "Спилював зуби й бив струмом: стало відомо ім'я полковника ФСБ РФ, який міг катувати жителів Вовчанська" ["He filed down teeth and used electric shocks: the name of the Russian FSB colonel who may have tortured residents of Vovchansk has been revealed"], *Suspilne Kharkiv*, Feb. 23, 2024, <https://suspilne.media/kharkiv/691258-spiuvav-zubi-j-biv-strumom-stalo-vidomo-ima-polkovnika-fsb-rf-akij-katuvav-ziteliv-vovcanska/>, last accessed June 30, 2026.
- 120 "Balakleya" is the Russian transliteration of the town's name.
- 121 "Abandoned Russian base holds secrets of retreat in Ukraine," *Reuters*, Oct. 26, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-russia-base/>, last accessed June 30, 2026.
- 122 See e.g. "Окупанти забули флешку при втечі з Харківщини. «Схеми» ідентифікували командирів та кураторів з ФСБ" ["The occupiers left a flash drive behind as they fled the Kharkiv region. "Schemes" identified the commanders and FSB supervisors"] YouTube video, *Radio Svoboda*, Feb. 7, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9suHYI0mq>, last accessed June 30, 2026. Truth Hounds' OSINT investigators identified the following units as forming part of the "Balakleya" grouping: 7th Separate Motor Rifle Regiment (11th Army Corps); 18th Motor Rifle Division (11th Army Corps); 46th Reconnaissance Battalion (11th Army Corps); 244th Artillery Brigade (11th Army Corps); 29th Motor Rifle Regiment (18th Motor Rifle Division); 11th Tank Regiment (18th Motor Rifle Division); 20th Separate Reconnaissance Battalion (18th Motor Rifle Division); 79th Motor Rifle Regiment (18th Motor Rifle Division); 55th Motor Rifle Brigade (41st Army); 126th Rosgvardiya Regiment; OMON "Orlan" detachment (Tolyatti); SOBR detachments "Tolpar" and "Omega"; 202nd Rifle Regiment of the so-called Luhansk People's Republic (2nd Army Corps).
- 123 "Abandoned Russian base holds secrets of retreat in Ukraine," *Reuters*, Oct. 26, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-russia-base/>, last accessed July 15, 2026; "Окупанти забули флешку при втечі з Харківщини. «Схеми» ідентифікували командирів та кураторів з ФСБ" ["The occupiers left a flash drive behind as they fled the Kharkiv region. "Schemes" identified the commanders and FSB supervisors"] YouTube video, *Radio Svoboda*, Feb. 7, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9suHYI0mq>, last accessed June 30, 2026.
- 124 *Ibid.*
- 125 *Ibid.*
- 126 See Verdict of the Balakliia District Court of Kharkiv Oblast, No. 610/1715/24, Dec. 22, 2025 (came into force on Mar. 25, 2026), <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/132801900>, last accessed June 30, 2026. See also "Апеляційний суд лишив без змін вирок співробітнику ФСБ РФ, який наказував катувати жителів Балаклії під час окупації" [The Court of Appeals Upheld the Sentence of an FSB Officer who Ordered the Torture of Balakliia Residents During the Occupation], *Suspilne Media Kharkiv*, Mar. 26, 2026, <https://suspilne.media/kharkiv/1274078-apelacijnij-sud-lisiv-bez-zmin-virok-spirovobitniku-fsb-rf-akij-nakazuvav-katuvati-ziteliv-balaklii-pid-cas-okupacii/>, last accessed June 30, 2026.
- 127 Statements of ST004, ST068, ST095, ST065, ST067, ST074, ST059. The long term psychological impact of torture is well-documented. See Amanda C. de C. Williams and John Hughes, "The Psychological Impact of Torture," *British Journal of Pain*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2013, at 101-106, reviewing the psychological consequences of torture for survivors, including traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, chronic pain, and impaired social functioning.
- 128 Statements of ST010, ST026, ST013.
- 129 Often, this included those who participated in the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) that Ukraine launched in 2014 to liberate the territory that the Russian Federation temporarily occupied.
- 130 This is a branch of the AFU primarily involved in guarding and protecting the state border, protecting the population from emergencies, protecting state and local self-governance authorities as well as critical infrastructure facilities, and preparing Ukrainian citizens for national resistance.
- 131 Statements of ST026, ST002, ST007, ST039, ST043, ST052, ST025, ST045, ST107.
- 132 Statements of ST020, ST043, ST040, ST076.
- 133 Statements of ST010, ST083, ST022, ST080, ST032.

- 134 Statements of ST057, ST022.
- 135 Statements of ST015, ST024, ST108, ST107, ST116.
- 136 Statements of ST020, ST001, ST008, ST111, ST110.
- 137 Statement of ST039.
- 138 Statements of ST010, ST026, ST013, ST109.
- 139 Statement of ST039.
- 140 Statement of ST032.
- 141 Statement of ST094.
- 142 Statements of ST002, ST005, ST004.
- 143 Statements of ST077, ST069, ST064, ST056.
- 144 Statement of ST015.
- 145 Statements of ST057, ST024, ST003.
- 146 Statements of ST043, ST039, ST032.
- 147 Statement of ST067.
- 148 Statements of ST026, ST002, ST007, ST039, ST043, ST052, ST025, ST045, ST107.
- 149 Statements of ST049, ST039, ST032.
- 150 Statements of ST108, ST024.
- 151 Statements of ST020, ST043, ST040, ST076.
- 152 Members of Russian forces often refer to people who openly express pro-Ukrainian views as “Banderites” (Bandera supporters). The term refers to Stepan Bandera, one of the key figures in debates about the twentieth-century Ukrainian national movement.
- 153 Right Sector is a Ukrainian far-right nationalist movement that emerged during the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests. See e.g., Mapping Militants Project, “Right Sector,” last modified June 1, 2022, <https://mappingmilitants.org/profiles/right-sector>, last accessed June 27, 2026.
- 154 Statement of ST067.
- 155 Statement of ST071.
- 156 Statement of ST027.
- 157 Statements of ST043, ST036, ST022, ST066, ST051.
- 158 Statements of ST026, ST025, ST112, ST032, ST113, ST010, ST043, ST053, ST099, ST107, ST117.
- 159 Statement of ST027.
- 160 Statement of ST043.
- 161 “Окупанти вимагали гроші, відриваючи нігті на ногах: свідчення з катівень Харківщини” [“The occupying forces demanded money while pulling out people’s toenails: testimonies from torture chambers in the Kharkiv region”], *Hromadske Radio*, Oct. 6, 2022, <https://hromadske.radio/publications/1098291>, last accessed June 29, 2026.
- 162 Statements of ST036, ST022.
- 163 Statement of ST066.
- 164 Statements of ST067, ST066.
- 165 Statement of ST051.
- 166 European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, “Living space per prisoner in prison establishments: CPT standards,” Dec. 15, 2015, <https://www.cpt-echr.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Living-space-in-prisons.pdf>, last accessed June 2, 2026.
- 167 Statement of ST036.
- 168 Statement of ST077.
- 169 Statement of ST036.
- 170 Statement of ST027.
- 171 Statement of ST066.
- 172 Statement of ST080.
- 173 Statements of ST108, ST040, ST023, ST036, ST077, ST024, ST058, ST020, ST007, ST021, ST079.
- 174 Statement of ST091.
- 175 Statement of ST077.
- 176 Statements of ST010, ST093, ST077.
- 177 Statements of ST046, ST035, ST060, ST051, ST043.
- 178 Statements of ST010, ST016, ST046, ST054, ST035.
- 179 Statement of ST074.
- 180 Statements of ST077, ST016.
- 181 Statement of ST033.
- 182 Statements of ST109, ST051.
- 183 Statements of ST002, ST036, ST041, ST016, ST010, ST104, ST105.
- 184 Statement of ST083.
- 185 Truth Hounds has previously documented the use of the TA-57 field telephone, commonly referred to as a “Tapik,” as a device used to administer electric shocks during torture.
- See e.g., Truth Hounds, “Izoliatsiia: from Culture to Torture,” June 9, 2026, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/cases/izoliatsiia/>, last accessed June 27, 2026. Truth Hounds, “Seizing Power: Rosatom’s Complicity in Occupation, Torture, and Nuclear Safety Breaches at the Zaporizhzhia NPP,” Sep. 24, 2025, <https://truth-hounds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/seizing-power-rosatoms-complicity-in-occupation-torture-and-nuclear-safety-breaches-at-the-zaporizhzhia-npp.pdf>, last accessed June 9, 2026.
- 186 Statements of ST074, ST067, ST031, ST082, ST078, ST066, ST038, ST090, ST094, ST036, ST041.
- 187 Statement of ST084.
- 188 Statements of ST004, ST090, ST047, ST039, ST018.
- 189 Statement of ST018.
- 190 Statements of ST082, ST083, ST007.
- 191 Statement of ST095.
- 192 Statements of ST016, ST039, ST028.
- 193 Statements of ST077, ST095, ST025, ST010, ST067, ST098, ST026, ST085.
- 194 Statements of ST074, ST067, ST031, ST082, ST078, ST066, ST038, ST090, ST094, ST036, ST041.
- 195 OHCHR, “Treatment of Civilians Deprived of Their Liberty in the Context of the Armed Attack by the Russian Federation Against Ukraine,” Sept. 23, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2025/2025-09-23-armed-attack-treatment-civilians-liberty-context-ukraine.pdf>, last accessed May 6, 2026. See also ODIHR, “Eighth Interim Report on reported violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in Ukraine,” Dec. 16, 2025, <https://odhr.osce.org/odhr/661354>, last accessed May 6, 2026.
- 196 Human Rights Watch, “Ukraine: Apparent War Crimes in Russia-Controlled Areas,” Apr. 3, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/03/ukraine-apparent-war-crimes-russia-controlled-areas>, last accessed May 6, 2026.
- 197 ODIHR, “Eighth Interim Report on reported violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in Ukraine,” Dec. 16, 2025, <https://odhr.osce.org/odhr/661354>, last accessed May 6, 2026.
- 198 *Ibid.* See also Truth Hounds and International Partnership for Human Rights, “Truth Beneath Silence: Russia’s Weaponisation of Sexual Violence against Men in Ukraine,” June 23, 2026, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/cases/truth-beneath-silence/>, last accessed June 27, 2026.
- 199 Statements of ST064, ST083, ST034.
- 200 *Ibid.*
- 201 For the purpose of protecting the identities of the individuals concerned, all names used in this statement have been changed and should not be understood as relating to any real person.
- 202 Statement of ST077.
- 203 Statement of ST095.
- 204 Statement of ST095. The names in this quote are pseudonyms.
- 205 Statements of ST026, ST025, ST112, ST032, ST113, ST010, ST043, ST053.
- 206 Statement of ST013.
- 207 Statements of ST025, ST030, ST032, ST034.
- 208 Statement of ST025.
- 209 *Ibid.*
- 210 Statement of ST026.
- 211 Statement of ST112.
- 212 Statement of ST004.
- 213 Statement of ST013.
- 214 Statement of ST028.
- 215 Statements of ST036, ST022.
- 216 Statement of ST091.
- 217 Statements of ST016, ST077.
- 218 Statement of ST092.
- 219 Statement of ST034.
- 220 Statement of ST039.
- 221 Statement of ST028.
- 222 Statement of ST064.
- 223 Statement of ST105.
- 224 OHCHR, *Istanbul Protocol: Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, Professional Training Series No. 8/Rev. 2, 2022, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/2022-06-29/Istanbul-Protocol_Rev2_EN.pdf, last accessed May 4, 2026. The Istanbul Protocol sets out international standards for the effective legal and medico-legal investigation and documentation of torture and other ill-treatment.
- 225 See the Methodology for more information.
- 226 Statement of ST074.

- 227 UN Committee against Torture, *General Comment No. 3: Implementation of Article 14 by States Parties*, CAT/C/GC/3, Dec. 13, 2012, paras. 11, 13 (stating that rehabilitation for torture survivors should be “holistic” and include “medical and psychological care as well as legal and social services,” and that States should adopt a “long-term and integrated approach” to ensure that specialized services for survivors of torture or ill-treatment are “available, appropriate and promptly accessible”). World Medical Association, *WMA Statement on the Right to Rehabilitation for Victims of Torture*, adopted by the 64th WMA General Assembly, Fortaleza, Brazil, Oct. 2013, and revised by the 72nd WMA General Assembly, London, United Kingdom, Oct. 2021 (welcoming the UN Committee against Torture’s recognition of States parties’ obligation to adopt a “long-term and integrated approach” and ensure that specialized services for survivors of torture or ill-treatment are “available, appropriate and promptly accessible,” without making access dependent on the survivor pursuing judicial remedies).
- 228 ICC EoC, Art. 7.
- 229 ICTY, *Kunarac et al.*, (IT-96-23 & IT-96-23/1-A), Appeals Chamber, Appeals Judgment, June 12, 2002, para. 86.
- 230 ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda* (ICC-01/04-02/06-2666), Appeals Chamber, Appeals Judgment, Mar. 30, 2021, para. 430.
- 231 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, Art. 50 (1).
- 232 *Ibid.*
- 233 *Ibid.*, Art. 50 (3).
- 234 ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo* (ICC-01/05 01/08-424), Decision on the Confirmation of Charges, Pre-trial Chamber, June 15, 2009, para. 76.
- 235 ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Blaškić* (IT-95-14), Trial Chamber I, Judgment, Mar. 3, 2000, para. 208, fn. 401.
- 236 ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen* (ICC-02/04-01/15-1762), Trial Chamber, Judgment, Feb. 4, 2021, para. 2680; ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo* (ICC-01/05 01/08-424), Decision on the Confirmation of Charges, Pre-trial Chamber, June 15, 2009, para. 76.
- 237 ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo* (ICC-01/05 01/08-424), Decision on the Confirmation of Charges, Pre-trial Chamber, June 15, 2009, para. 83. However, the ICC in the *Ongwen* case emphasized the need for a holistic approach in assessing the attack. The assessment of whether the attack is widespread is neither exclusively quantitative nor geographical but must be carried out on the basis of all the relevant facts of the case. See ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen* (ICC-02/04-01/15-1762), Trial Chamber, Judgment, Feb. 4, 2021, para. 2681.
- 238 ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Blaškić* (IT-95-14), Trial Chamber I, Judgment, Mar. 3, 2000, para. 203. Identifying factors relevant to systematic character, including the existence of a political objective, plan, or ideology; repeated or continuous commission of inhumane acts; preparation and use of significant resources; and the involvement of high-level political or military authorities. These factors are best understood as relevant indicators, rather than a rigid four-part test.
- 239 ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Germain Katanga* (ICC-01/04-01/07), Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Rome Statute, Trial Chamber II, Mar. 7, 2014, para. 1110.
- 240 *Ibid.*, para. 1119.
- 241 See Section 5.1. on Domestic Prosecution.
- 242 See Verdict of the Balakliia District Court of Kharkiv Oblast, No. 610/1715/24, Dec. 22, 2025 (came into force on Mar. 25, 2026), <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/132801900>, last accessed June 30, 2026. See also Verdict of the Balakliia District Court of Kharkiv Oblast, No. 610/2754/24, Aug. 7, 2025 (came into force on Sep. 9, 2025), <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/129369419>, last accessed June 30, 2026; Tetiana Dotsiak, “У Балаклії засудили російського підполковника до 12 років в’язниці” [Russian Lieutenant Colonel Sentenced to 12 Years in Prison in Balakliia], *Fakty*, Oct. 29, 2025, <https://fakty.com.ua/ua/ukraine/susplstvo/20251029-u-balakliyi-zasudyly-rosijskogo-pidpolkovnyka-do-12-rokiv-vyaznytsi/>, last accessed June 29, 2026; “Суд над Тайсоном: як засудили бойовика ПВК Редут за тортури у Балаклії”, [Tyson’s Trial: How a Redut PMC Fighter Was Convicted of Torture in Balakliia], *Fakty*, Sep. 17, 2025, <https://fakty.com.ua/ua/ukraine/20250917-sud-nad-tajsonom-yak-zasudyly-bojovyya-pvk-redut-za-tortury-u-balakliyi/>, last accessed June 30, 2026; “Ідентифіковано шістьох окупантів, які катували та знущались над цивільними на Харківщині” [Six Occupiers Who Tortured and Abused Civilians in Kharkiv Oblast Have Been Identified], Office of the Prosecutor General, Aug. 21, 2024, <https://www.gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/identifikovano-sistyox-okupantiv-yaki-katuvali-ta-znushchalis-nad-civilinimi-na-xarkivshini>, last accessed June 30, 2026.
- 243 ICC EoC, Art. 7, Introduction, para. 2; ICC, *Prosecutor v. Germain Katanga* (ICC-01/04-01/07), Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Rome Statute, Trial Chamber II, Mar. 7, 2014, para. 1125; ICC, *Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen* (ICC-02/04-01/15-1762), Trial Chamber, Judgment, Feb. 4, 2021, para. 2691.
- 244 ICC EoC, Art. 7 (1) (e).
- 245 ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Kordić and Čerkez* (IT-95 14/2-T), Trial Judgment, Feb. 26, 2001, para. 302.
- 246 ICTR, *Prosecutor v. Ntagerura et al.* (ICTR 99-46-T), Trial Judgment, Feb. 25, 2004, para. 702.
- 247 Statements of ST002, ST003, ST004, ST005, ST006, ST007, ST009, ST038, ST048, ST049, ST050, ST051, ST052, ST056, ST064, ST065, ST066, ST067, ST068, ST069, ST070, ST071, ST072, ST073, ST074, ST075, ST076, ST078, ST079, ST080, ST081, ST082, ST083, ST084, ST085, ST086, ST087, ST089, ST095, ST096, ST099, ST104, ST105, ST114.
- 248 RS, Art. 7 (1)(f).
- 249 *Ibid.*
- 250 ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Al Hassan Ag Abdoul Aziz Ag Mohamed Ag Mahmoud* (ICC-01/12-01/18), Trial Chamber, Trial Judgment, June 26, 2024, paras. 1129, 1325.
- 251 ICC EoC, Art. 7(1)(f).
- 252 *Ibid.* However, the ICTY in *Kunarac et al.* Trial Judgment states that the last two elements (custody or control of the perpetrator and exclusion of pain arising solely from lawful sanctions) are not accepted as representing the status of customary international law. See ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovač, and Vuković* (IT-96-23-T), Trial Judgment, Feb. 22, 2001.
- 253 ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen* (ICC-02/04-01/15-1762), Trial Chamber, Judgment, Feb. 4, 2021, para. 2706. Note: Customary IHL has nonetheless generally required proof of such a purpose, as reflected in ICTY jurisprudence. See ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovač, and Vuković* (IT-96-23-T), Trial Judgment, Feb. 22, 2001. See also ICTY, *Kunarac et al.*, (IT-96-23 & IT-96-23/1-A), Appeals Chamber, Appeals Judgment, June 12, 2002.
- 254 ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen* (ICC-02/04-01/15-1762), Trial Chamber, Judgment, Feb. 4, 2021, para. 2701.
- 255 ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Kvočka et al.* (IT-98-30/1), Trial Chamber, Judgment, Nov. 2, 2001, paras. 142-143.
- 256 R. Cryer et al., *An Introduction to International Criminal Law and Procedure* (2007), at 206-208. Furthermore, the mental suffering of an individual forced to watch the severe mistreatment of another person could reach the level of gravity required for the crime of torture. In *Kvočka*, the ICTY noted that when a person is forced to watch serious sexual attacks inflicted on an acquaintance, this could amount to torture both for the person being attacked (heightened by the presence of onlookers) and for the forced observer. See ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Miroslav Kvočka et al.* (IT-98-30/1-T), Trial Chamber, Judgment, Nov. 2, 2001, para. 148.
- 257 Statements of SST077, ST016, ST010, ST046, ST054, ST035, ST074, ST060, ST051, ST043, ST093, ST067, ST031, ST082, ST078, ST066, ST038, ST090, ST094, ST036, ST041, ST083, ST007, ST095, ST039, ST028, ST025, ST098, ST026. Torture and sexual violence are not mutually exclusive legal categories. Rape and other forms of sexual violence may also amount to torture where the elements of Article 7(1)(f) are met. At the same time, Article 7(1)(g) more specifically captures the sexual character of rape and other sexualized acts, the coercive detention environment in which they occurred, and the particular physical, psychological, and dignitary harms inflicted on survivors. See Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Policy on Gender-Based Crimes, Dec. 2023, paras. 36-38, 53-54, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2023-12/2023-policy-gender-en-web.pdf>, last accessed June 9, 2026; International Criminal Court, Elements of Crimes, Art. 7(1)(g)-1 and 7(1)(g)-6, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/Publications/Elements-of-Crimes.pdf>, last accessed June 9, 2026.
- 258 Statements of ST036, ST022, ST091, ST077, ST016.
- 259 RS, Art. 7(1)(g).
- 260 ICC EoC, Art. 7(1)(g)-1.
- 261 The ICTY explained that “a threat to retaliate ‘in the future against the victim or any other person’ is a sufficient indicium of force so long as ‘there is a reasonable possibility that the perpetrator will execute the threat.’” See ICTY, *Kunarac et al.*, (IT-96-23 & IT-96-23/1-A), Appeals Chamber, Appeals Judgment, June 12, 2002, para. 130.
- 262 In addition, coercion may be inherent in certain circumstances, such as armed conflict or occupation or the military presence of hostile forces among the civilian population. See ICTY, *Kunarac et al.*, (IT-96-23 & IT-96-23/1-A), Appeals Chamber, Appeals Judgment, June 12, 2002, para. 130.
- 263 Several factors may contribute to creating a coercive environment, such as the number of people involved in the commission of the crime, whether the rape is committed during or immediately following a combat situation or is committed together with other crimes. ICC, *Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda* (ICC-01/04-02/06-2666), Appeals Chamber, Appeals Judgment, Mar. 30, 2021, paras. 935, 945.
- 264 *Ibid.*
- 265 ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Germain Katanga* (ICC-01/04-01/07), Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Rome Statute, Trial Chamber II, Mar. 7, 2014, para. 970.
- 266 RS, Art. 30 (3).
- 267 Statement of ST083.
- 268 ICC EoC, Art. 7(1) (g)-6.
- 269 Women’s Initiative for Gender Justice, “The Hague Principles on Sexual Violence,” 2019, <https://thehagueprinciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/The-Hague-Principles-on-Sexual-Violence-1.pdf>, last accessed May 6, 2026.
- 270 ICTR, *The Prosecutor v. Jean-Paul Akayesu* (ICTR-96-4-T), Trial Chamber, Judgment, Sep. 2, 1998, para. 688.
- 271 Statement of ST078.
- 272 Law of Ukraine No. 2010-IX, “On Social and Legal Protection of Persons Deprived of Personal Liberty as a Result of Armed Aggression Against Ukraine, and Their Family Members,” Jan. 26, 2022, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2010-20#Text>, last accessed May 3, 2026.
- 273 Eastern Ukrainian Centre for Civic Initiatives and Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights,

- From *Social Protection to Reparations for Ukraine*, Mar. 2025, at 22–26. The report reviews available state assistance and social guarantees for civilians deprived of liberty as a result of Russia's armed aggression, including social protection, rehabilitation, reintegration, and related support measures.
- 274 Register of Damage for Ukraine, "About the Register," <https://www.rd4u.coe.int/en/home>, last accessed May 3, 2026. The Register records eligible claims for damage, loss, or injury caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine as part of the process toward a future compensation mechanism.
- 275 Register of Damage for Ukraine, "Homepage," <https://www.rd4u.coe.int/en/submit-a-claim>, last accessed May 3, 2026. The Register has published claim forms and rules for categories including A2.3 Serious Personal Injury, A2.4 Sexual Violence, A2.5 Torture or Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and A2.6 Deprivation of Liberty.
- 276 Register of Damage for Ukraine, "Frequently Asked Questions: General," <https://rd4u.coe.int/en/fag/general>, last accessed May 23, 2026 (explaining that the Register is not a court, tribunal, claims commission, or compensation fund, and does not evaluate claims on the merits, assess their value, or order payments; those functions belong to a future international compensation mechanism). See also REDRESS, *Reparation Today, Not Tomorrow: Recommendations for Effective Reparation to Victims of Gross Human Rights Violations in Ukraine*, Mar. 2026, <https://redress.org/storage/2026/03/Ukraine-Reparation-Guidelines-2.pdf>, last accessed May 3, 2026, (noting that serious violations including torture, sexual violence, and enforced disappearance often create urgent survivor needs that may worsen if not addressed promptly).
- 277 Because the provision does not define *actus reus* forms, courts routinely recharacterized conduct mid-proceedings while prosecutors could not amend indictments once submitted. See Yuri Ponomarenko, "Summary review of proposed pre- 'Draft Law of Ukraine on Criminal Liability for International Crimes,'" T.M.C. Asser Institute, June 2024, <https://sub.asser.nl/media/797717/asser-1.pdf>, last accessed Jul. 16, 2026; "The Role of the Court in Clarifying the Form of the Objective Element (Actus Reus) under Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine," Truth Hounds, Sep. 11, 2024, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/cases/the-role-of-the-court-in-clarifying-the-form-of-the-objective-element-actus-reus-under-article-438-of-the-criminal-code-of-ukraine>, last accessed Apr. 23, 2026.
- 278 "Zelenskyy Signs Law Amending Criminal Code Following Ratification of Rome Statute," *Ukrainska Pravda*, Oct. 22, 2024, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/10/22/7480795>, last accessed Apr. 23, 2026.
- 279 "Prosecutor's Office: More than 12,000 War Crimes Were Committed in Kharkiv Oblast," *Gwara Media*, Feb. 24, 2023, <https://gwaramedia.com/en/prosecutor-s-office-more-than-12-000-war-crimes-were-committed-in-kharkiv-oblast>, last accessed May 11, 2026.
- 280 Ukrainian Bar Association, "Report on the Results of the Project 'The Trial Monitoring in War Crimes Cases,'" Dec. 2023, at 28, https://uba.ua/documents/IPR/PR%20&%20Communications%202023/Monitoring%20report_ENG-1.pdf, last accessed Jul. 15, 2026.
- 281 *Ibid.*, at 4, 22.
- 282 Part 2 of Art. 438 CCU; Art. 31(3) Criminal Procedure Code.
- 283 Tetiana Dotsiak, "У Балаклії засудили російського підполковника до 12 років в'язниці" [Russian Lieutenant Colonel Sentenced to 12 Years in Prison in Balakliia], *Fakty ICTV*, Oct. 29, 2025, <https://fakty.com.ua/ua/ukraine/suspilstvo/20251029-u-balakliyi-zasudyly-rosijskogo-pidpolkovnyka-do-12-rokiv-vyaznytzil/>, last accessed June 29, 2026.
- 284 Verdict of the Balakliia District Court of Kharkiv Oblast, No. 610/2754/24, Aug. 7, 2025 (came into force on Sep. 9, 2025), <https://reyestr.court.gov.ua/Review/129369419>, last accessed June 30, 2026. See also "Суд над Тайсоном: як засудили бойовика ПВК Редут за тортури у Балаклії" [Tyson's Trial: How a Redut PMC Fighter Was Convicted of Torture in Balakliia], *Fakty*, Sep. 17, 2025, <https://fakty.com.ua/ua/ukraine/20250917-sud-nad-tajsonom-yak-zasudyly-bojovyka-pvk-redut-za-tortury-u-balakliyi/>, last accessed June 30, 2026.
- 285 TH and PEJ identified two torture sites located in the buildings of the Savyntsi village council and the State Geophysical Enterprise "Ukrgeophysics" in Dovhalivka. However, due to the lack of details in the OPG's information, it is unclear whether the alleged perpetrators are connected to these specific torture sites or if the investigation pertains to other sites in these villages. "Ідентифіковано шістьох окупантів, які катували та знущалися над цивільними на Харківщині" [Six Occupiers Who Tortured and Abused Civilians in Kharkiv Oblast Have Been Identified], Office of the Prosecutor General, Aug. 21, 2024, <https://www.gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/identifikovano-sistyox-okupantiv-yaki-katuvali-ta-znushhalis-nad-civilinimi-na-xarkivshhini>, last accessed June 30, 2026.
- 286 United Nations, "Ukraine: Torture by Russian Authorities Amounts to Crimes Against Humanity, Says UN Commission of Inquiry," Oct. 30, 2024, <https://ukraine.un.org/en/282373-ukraine-torture-russian-authorities-amounts-crimes-against-humanity-says-un-commission>, last accessed May 11, 2026.
- 287 This would include the Geneva Conventions, the UN Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, and the European Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes that Ukraine ratified.
- 288 Robert Cryer and others, *An Introduction to International Criminal Law and Procedure* (3rd edn. Cambridge University Press 2014), at 44.
- 289 Anthony J. Colangelo, 'The Legal Limits of Universal Jurisdiction' (2006) 47 *Virginia Journal of International Law* 149, at 151.
- 290 Global Rights Compliance, Practitioners' Handbook on Extraterritorial or Universal Jurisdiction to Pursue Accountability for International Crimes Committed in Ukraine, June 2025, at 18–23, 90, https://globalrightscpliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250613-Handbook_UJ-final.pdf, last accessed June 15, 2026;
- German Code of Criminal Procedure (*Strafprozessordnung*), BGBl I S. 1077 (1975), secs. 152(2), 230 and 231, https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_stpo/englisch_stpo.html, last accessed June 15, 2026; Criminal Code of Finland (*Rikoslaki*), 39/1889, ch. 1, secs. 7 and 8, https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/fin/the-criminal-code-of-finland_html/Criminal_code_of_Finland.pdf, last accessed June 15, 2026; Finland Briefing Paper, at 12. Some states, such as Germany and Finland, permit investigations in the absence of the suspect but prohibit trials *in absentia*.
- 291 International Crimes Act (*Wet internationale misdrijven*), arts. 2–4, <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0015252/2020-01-01>, last accessed June 15, 2026; Swedish Code of Judicial Procedure (*Rättegångsbalken*), Act 1942:740 of 1942, ch. 21, Section 2 and ch. 46, Sections 15–18, https://www.government.se/contentassets/a1be9e99a5c64d1bb93a96ce5d517e9c/the-swedish-code-of-judicial-procedure-ds-1998_65.pdf, last accessed June 15, 2026; TRIAL International and Open Society Justice Initiative, *Universal Jurisdiction Law and Practice in Sweden*, Apr. 2020, at 13, <https://trialinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/UJ-Sweden.pdf>, last accessed June 15, 2026. The Netherlands and Sweden require the suspect's presence to proceed with the investigation.
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This report examines the detention and torture of civilians by Russian forces in occupied areas of Kharkiv Oblast, Ukraine in 2022. It identifies a network of detention sites and recurring patterns of torture and other abuse against civilians within that network. The report also assesses whether Russian forces' conduct may amount to crimes against humanity and provides recommendations to relevant stakeholders on advancing accountability and justice for survivors.



TRUTH HOUNDS is a full-spectrum accountability organization founded in 2014 in Kyiv, specializing in documenting and investigating international crimes and serious human rights violations in Ukraine and other conflict-affected regions. The organization conducts field investigations, legal research, and analytical studies on international crimes and crimes against humanity.



PROJECT EXPEDITE JUSTICE is a non-profit organization whose core mission is to bring justice to conflict-affected communities, including those impacted by genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Since April 2022, PEJ has worked to ensure accountability for communities affected by the Russian invasion. We document international crimes and harms throughout Ukraine. Our efforts have included providing custom expert- and technical-based support, direct investigative activities, information collection, and preparation of legal analysis packages for judicial stakeholders.