



HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE

# Illegal detention, torture and ill-treatment of the civilian population of Ukraine:

similarity of the practices of  
committing crimes in the regions  
occupied by Russia in 2022



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**This publication contains naturalistic descriptions of incidents or victims that may shock, appal or dismay some readers.**

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## Introduction

Since September 2022, Human Rights Centre ZMINA has been documenting cases of cases of torture, cruel and inhuman, as well as degrading treatment of civilians in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. The testimonies of the victims collected since that time have made it possible to draw a number of conclusions about the logic of the behavior of the representatives of the Russian Federation in the regions which were occupied after February 24, 2022, to describe the specifics of the torture, the reasons for the illegal detention of people, and the consequences for the physical and mental health of the victims.

Thus, the tortures used against people in different regions of Ukraine have all the signs of systematicity and are an element of the global policy of committing terror against the civilian population. In April 2023, Human Rights Centre ZMINA published the research «Torture and ill-treatment of civilian population in Ukrainian territories that were under Russian occupation»<sup>1</sup>; the main conclusions of which are currently being confirmed. Also, in August and September 2023, ZMINA published two more thematic reports. The first report was regarding the array of testimonies of detainees held in the temporary detention centre at the address: st. Teploenerhetykiv, 3 during the occupation of the city Kherson described cases of torture and ill-treatment of women<sup>2</sup>. The second report comprehensively describes the situation of the victims in the place of illegal detention and torture arranged by representatives of the Russian Federation in the premises of a school in the village of Bilyayivka, Beryslav district, Kherson region<sup>3</sup>. For a similar purpose, testimonies were collected regarding torture and ill-treatment committed by the Russian Federation occupational forces during illegal detainments of Ukrainian citizens in the district police department of the city Kupiansk, Kharkiv region.

Collecting testimonies of victims from those settlements that are still occupied is difficult. This difficulty is due to the security risks for people who are willing to testify while under occupation, the blocking by the Russian Federation of opportunities for those individuals to leave the occupied territory, as well as the interference and unreliability of mobile networks and Internet communication coming from those regions. In December 2022, the Russian occupation administration closed the

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1 Torture and ill-treatment of civilian population in Ukrainian territories that were under Russian occupation <https://zmina.ua/publication/katuvannya-ta-zhorstoke-povodzhennya-z-cyvilnym-naselennym-na-ukrayinskyh-terytoriyah-yaki-perebuvaly-pid-rosijskoyu-okupacziyeyu-na-prykladi-kyivskoyi-harkivskoyi-ta-hersonskoyi-oblastej/>

2 "Women's cells" of Kherson torture chamber: analytical report based on the testimonies of detainees <https://zmina.ua/publication/zhinochi-kamery-hersonskoyi-kativni-analitychnyj-zvit-za-svidchennyamy-utrymuvanyh/>

3 "Torture chamber at school": an analysis of the testimonies of detainees in the village of Bilyayivka, Kherson region <https://zmina.ua/publication/kativnya-u-shkoli-analiz-svidchen-utrymuvanyh-u-seli-bilyayivka-hersonskoyi-oblasti/>

checkpoint “Vasylivka” in Zaporizhzhia region, which at that time remained the only possible exit corridor to the regions controlled by the government of Ukraine from the temporarily occupied territories<sup>4</sup>. Currently, leaving Russian Federation-controlled settlements is possible only through the territory of occupied Crimea and/or through the territory of the Russian Federation to third countries, which is usually financially burdensome for most civilians.

In addition, when leaving the occupied regions, citizens of Ukraine are forced to go through filtering procedures, and therefore face increased attention from the FSB of the Russian Federation. ZMINA documented a case in August 2022 when two civilian men were detained by the FSB of the Russian Federation at the Pisky–Lohachivka crossing point in Kharkiv region. After that, both men were brought to the temporary detention center in the district police department of Kupiansk, where they were illegally detained, subjected to torture and ill-treatment<sup>5</sup>.

By order of the Government of the Russian Federation dated 06.10.2023 № 2723-p, the possibility of entry of citizens of Ukraine to the territory of the Russian Federation was significantly limited. From October 16, 2023, entry is possible only through the road checkpoint «Ludonka» in Pskov region and the air checkpoint «Sheremetievo» airport (Moscow). It is significant to note that these restrictions do not apply to children under the age of 14 who enter accompanied by a «legal representative»; a citizen of the Russian Federation<sup>6</sup>. Accordingly, the aggressor state purposefully complicates the entry-exit procedure for citizens of Ukraine and indirectly facilitates the illegal transfer of Ukrainian children into the territory of the Russian Federation.

## General context of the research

Within the framework of this research, the term «torture» is used in accordance with the understanding of Article 1 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1987) and the definition of Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The concept which is also used is «cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment» (hereinafter - cruel treatment).<sup>7</sup> At the same time, ZMINA, evaluating cases that can be characterized as torture or ill-treatment, does not carry out their final legal qualification.

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4 16.12.2022. In Zaporizhzhia region, the Russians closed the entrance through the checkpoint “Vasylivka” <http://surl.li/pfewi>

5 Testimony from the city Kupiansk

6 Order of the Government of the Russian Federation dated 06.10.2023 № 2723-p <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202310060030?index=1> (archive <https://web.archive.org/web/20231207223312/http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202310060030?index=1>)

7 More about the torture documentation methodology used by Human Rights Centre ZMINA, you can learn here “Torture and ill-treatment of civilian population in Ukrainian territories that were under Russian occupation” <http://surl.li/ijhbc> p. 12–15.

This document analyzes the testimonies of 20 victims of illegal detention, torture and ill-treatment, collected by the method of in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted according to the methodology developed on the basis of international standards for monitoring the observance of human rights and the Istanbul Protocol (Guidelines for the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Forms of Inhuman and Degrading Treatment).

The cases of illegal detention, torture and ill-treatment referred to in the study occurred in the period from April 2022 to March 2023 in Kharkiv (Kupiansk and surrounding settlements), Kherson (Kherson, Nova Kakhovka) and Zaporizhzhia (Melitopol, Kamianka-Dniprovska, Berdiansk, Tokmak) regions. At the same time, the main array of testimonies concerns cases of torture committed in the period August–September 2022 (75% of testimonies)<sup>8</sup>. Also documented are two cases of illegal detention, torture and ill-treatment that took place in February 2023 and from October 2022 to March 2023. Collecting testimonies about chronologically later episodes of crimes is complicated due to the security risks and efforts of the Russian Federation to completely isolate the population of the temporarily occupied territories, as mentioned above.

At the same time, the information that is available grants the ability to trace the similarity of torture in a chronological perspective (events from April 2022 to March 2023) across settlements of various regions, both liberated and still occupied.. Common practices of torture committed, in particular, between August-September 2022, were observed in the testimonies of victims from Kherson, Kupiansk, Melitopol and other occupied regions.

## Illegal detention and torture as an element of terror against the civilian population in the occupation

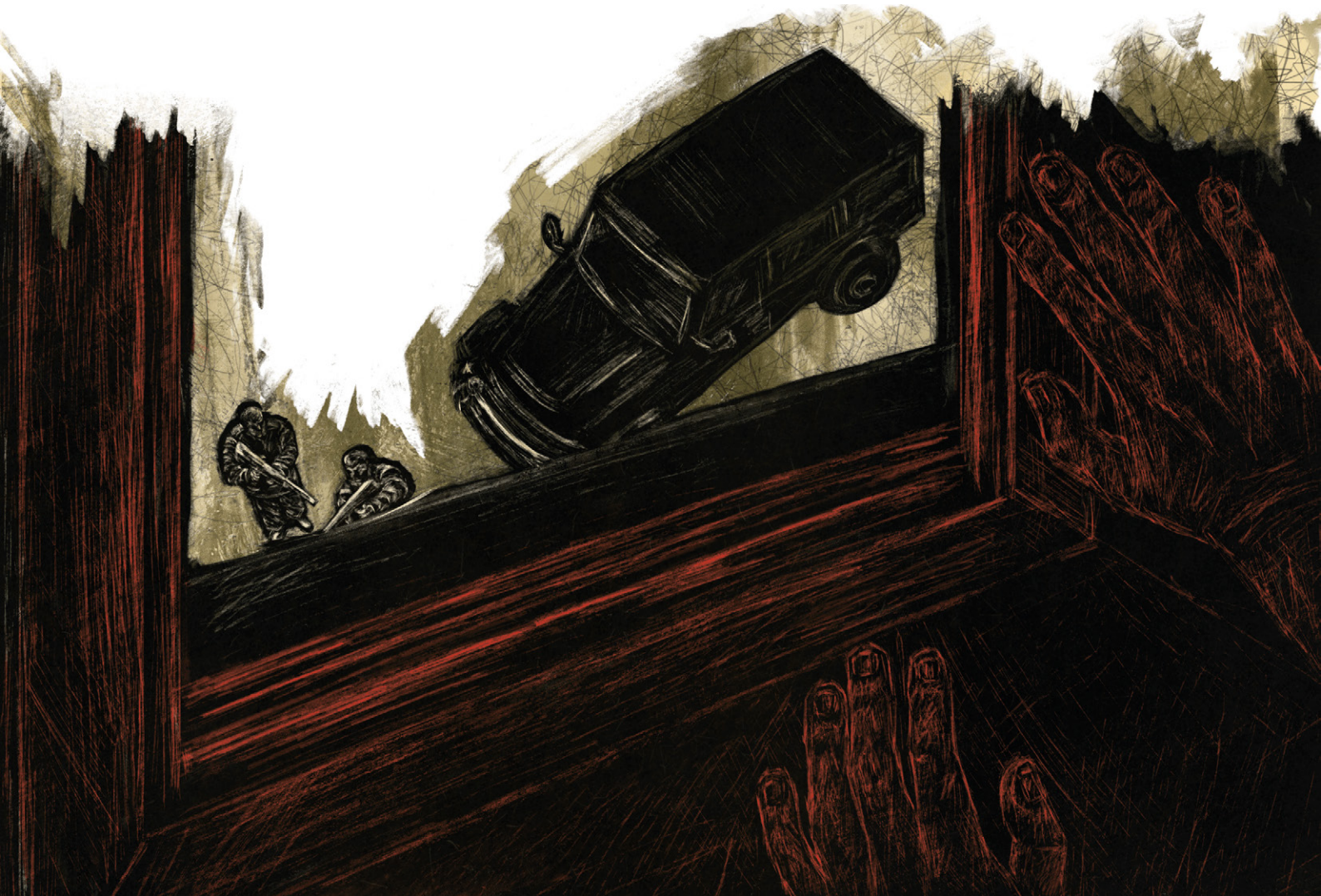
In all occupied settlements of Ukraine, the Russian occupation administration continues to apply the so-called «filtering» procedures. Units performing police functions (usually defined by the victims as the occupation «police», «people's militia «LPR/DPR» or «National Guard of Russia»), in coordination and under the leadership of the FSB of the Russian Federation, try to single out those civilians who may «pose a threat» or perceived as «disloyal to the Russian Federation». They are primarily considered to be: active and former military personnel and members of the ATO/JFO, employees of the police and law enforcement agencies, representatives of local self-government bodies, volunteers and public activists, workers in the field of cul-

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<sup>8</sup> This category includes cases of long-term detention that took place in April 2022, and at the time of August 2022, the victims were still in detention.



ture and education with a distinctly pro-Ukrainian position (in particular, teachers of the Ukrainian language and history of Ukraine, teachers of patriotic education), as well as any civilians who demonstrate or have demonstrated pro-Ukrainian views in the past<sup>9</sup>. However, these categories are not exhaustive.



The main source of information about people who are detained is the testimony of their fellow villagers or acquaintances (denunciations and, to a large extent, information obtained under torture). As an important source of information, the occupation administrations also use obtained documentary materials containing personal data, for example: lists of conscripts; photos and video materials from actions of civil resistance to the occupation in the period of February-March 2022 or even from the time of Euromaidan. The reason for the detention may also be the presence of Ukrainian symbols.

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9 More information you can find here "Torture and ill-treatment of civilian population in Ukrainian territories that were under Russian occupation" <https://zmina.ua/publication/katuvannya-ta-zhorstoke-povodzhennya-z-cyvilnym-naselennyam-na-ukrayinskyh-terytoriyah-yaki-perebuvaly-pid-rosijskoyu-okupacziyeyu-na-prykladi-kyivskoyi-harkivskoyi-ta-hersonskoyi-oblastej/> p. 35–37

“ We were going to the store. I took the Ukrainian flag from the car with me. Flag of Ukraine. And these scumbags were riding on an armoured personnel carrier. I waved a flag. They stopped, about 8 men approached, surrounded us: «What are you waving here? What is it?». I say: «I walk on my land and with my flag». And on the basis of this, we were taken to the commandant's office <sup>10</sup>.

The local population is aware of the filtration processes, as well as the criteria by which they are carried out. Some interviewees noted that they had foreseen the inevitability of their detention.

“ The FSB came to me in a jeep. There were three of them. Our windows were open, and I saw them arrive from the fifth floor. When they broke the door to the entrance, there was a noise, I looked out and saw what was happening. I understood that it was for me, quickly hid something that was in the house. Everyone knew about my pro-Ukrainian position. There is no one else like that in this entrance, all pensioners. We knew that they were already driving and taking people away <sup>11</sup>.

Also, Russian units could fabricate the reason for detention. They accused people of involvement in nationalist organisations only on the basis of the supposed sympathy for such organisations of their relatives, subscriptions of these people to patriotic groups in social networks, etc. One of the interviewees was detained when they found a photo of his nephew with the symbol of the Right Sector party, while he had already left the country before the invasion of the Russian Federation on February 24, 2022.

Some detainees in the city Kupiansk, Kharkiv region, were accused of setting fire to the House of Trade Unions in Odesa on May 2, 2014, where 31 pro-Russian activists died, just because the detainees supported the local football club «Metalist». The fire in the House of Trade Unions was the result of a provoked conflict between pro-Ukrainian (pro-European) and pro-Russian forces, when before the football match «Chornomorets» – «Metalist» there was an armed attack on a column of fans supporting Ukraine<sup>12</sup>. This story is widely used by Russian propaganda to fuel hatred against supporters of Euromaidan and «nationalists». In general, it is a well-known emblematic propaganda template (2014 Odesa clashes known as «Odessa Khatyn», etc.).

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10 Testimony of the victim from the city Melitopol

11 For example, in Kupyansk in particular, participants of a peaceful pro-Ukrainian protest held on March 1, 2022, who were identified by photos and videos from this protest, were purposefully detained. One of the organisers of the protest, local deputy Mykola Maslii, was detained directly during the rally, his whereabouts are currently unknown.

12 You can see report on the investigation of these events on the website of the Council of Europe Report of the International Advisory Panel on its Review of the Investigations into the Events in Odesa on 2 May 2014 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/report-on-investigations-of-odesa-events>



“ I was a fan of the football club «Metalist» (Kharkiv) and I had yellow and blue scarves of this team. They found photos from football, where we are with these scarves, with flags. They were very pissed off when they saw it. And hence the question: «Where were you on May 2, 2014?» They accused me that I was there and participated in what was happening there [in the House of Trade Unions]. And that's all just from the photos from the football match. And I wasn't there, I didn't go there.

At the same time, representatives of Russian units, «police» or the FSB of the Russian Federation also detained civilians for reasons unrelated to their attitude to the fact of occupation. In particular, they were detained due to violating the curfew regime in order to find out their identity. The detainee's position worsened significantly if representatives of the Russian Federation noticed any signs of their disloyalty to the Russian Federation, support for the resistance forces, or similar.<sup>13</sup>

Some victims indicate that they were detained during raids of the civilian population by representatives of the Russian Federation.

“ We had planned inspections. The Russians conducted raids, looking for partisans and anyone who is against the Russian Federation. To intimidate the population. They came to us with a search, we had a lot of hunting equipment. We owned weapons officially, they didn't like it very much<sup>14</sup>.

One of the interviewees indicated that he was detained just on the street, when Russian units were checking the men, because the resistance forces blew up a car with Russian military personnel the day before. At the same time, the man was called a «fire corrector» without any reason.

Also, the victims testify that in places of detention they were given the condition of release to provide information about a certain number of people who «could be of interest» to representatives of the Russian Federation.

“ A group arrived, they handcuffed the person, dragged him out in his underwear, it turned out to be the wrong person, they mixed up the address. But he was detained for 3-4 days. Maybe someone just reported it. And what to do next? If you want to get out, hand over 10 drug addicts, 10 ATO soldiers. They gave the boys a piece of paper, a pencil and told them to write<sup>15</sup>.

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13 Testimony from the city Kupiansk

14 As a result of the search, a man of retirement age was detained. At the place of detention, he was beaten by "policemen" recruited from local residents; electric shocks were also applied to the back in the rib area. (Anonymous testimony)

15 Testimony from the city Kupiansk

## Conditions of detention and treatment in places of illegal detention

Since the beginning of the documentation of torture cases, ZMINA researchers have noted significant similarities in the arrangement of places of illegal detention and torture, in the establishment of a certain agenda and schedules, in the treatment of detainees and in the very methods of torture used during interrogations in the settlements of different occupied regions.

Locations that already have the infrastructure prepared for this are more often used to hold civilians in the occupied territories. Among those investigated in this material are temporary detention centres (TDC) in Kherson and Kupiansk, corrective colony № 66 in Berdiansk, police stations in Nova Kakhovka, Tokmak, and others.

At the same time, in several cases, the use of garages as storage places has been recorded. Accordingly, there were no minimum conditions for a long-term stay of the detainees. In one of the cases, wooden bunks were arranged for the detainees inside the garage, in others, the detainees were forced to sleep on plywood, which was used to cover the concrete floor. According to other testimonies, the detainees slept on dry grass, which they were allowed to pick up and throw on the garage floor. For obvious reasons, such conditions would become extremely critical to the detriment of the detainees' health and safety in the autumn-winter periods<sup>16</sup>.

The conditions of detention in the TDC of the police departments shared commonalities, were improper and did not meet minimum liveable standards. Detention cells were usually overcrowded, sometimes critically with up to 20 people were in a cell designed for four people at the same time<sup>17</sup>. There were cases when the detainees could only stand in the cells.

In most cases, guards deliberately worsened the conditions of detention, which in particular, was used as a form of «punishment». At the same time, a similar practice can be traced in various areas.

“ There were three of us, one slept on the floor. The heating worked around the clock. I was released on the 28th of May but the heating was still on, 2 big fat pipes - it was just impossible to breathe. It was like a bathhouse, like a sauna that you can't get out of. The only saving thing was that there was water in the tap, which you could pour over yourself in order to somehow breathe. When they accused me of being an SBU agent, they even closed the feeder. This is a hole in the iron door through which food was passed, they closed it so that there was

16 Testimony from Zaporizhzhia region.

17 Testimony from the city Kupiansk, testimony from the occupied part of the Kherson region

*nothing to breathe. In the other wing, in the other cells, on the contrary, there was no heating. Everything was in the fungus - rotten, mouldy and terrible*<sup>18</sup>.

A 19-year-old girl who was previously held in the TDC of the Kupiansk district police department testifies that in the period from September 3 to 6, 2022, she was kept for 24 hours each day in the corridor next to the TDC walking courtyard.



Some of the detainees in the TDC were kept in the walking courtyard where they were handcuffed to the door, a horizontal bar, or to a bench.

All interviewees whose testimonies are used in this report were restricted in their ability to fulfill their natural needs as the toilets in the cells were inoperable. In unsuitable places of detention (ordinary basements or garages) and without any amount of privacy, detainees were forced to use plastic bottles or buckets or similar containers for these purposes, which remained in the same premises for extended periods of time.

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<sup>18</sup> Testimony about the conditions of detention in corrective colony № 66 in the city Berdiansk, similar complaints about intentional obstruction of air circulation, creation of suffocation, recorded in victims from the city Kupiansk, Nova Kakhovka, etc.



Most of the interviewees reported being served inadequate food and poor-quality water by the TDC detention staff. Some of the victims were able to eat only thanks to food parcels from relatives. However, such transfers of parcels were not available in all places of detention, not for all detainees, were irregular and insufficient.

Victims were denied the opportunity to receive parcels for various reasons, including as a form of punishment and when the administration of the place of detention did not want to reveal their whereabouts. Instead, the families of the detainees thus tried to obtain indirect confirmation of the whereabouts of their relatives.

“ Mom came on Monday, they took the parcel. And she says: «And the return?» We had a connection, I will at least give her a package of underwear, signed by me. And she understood that I was here<sup>19</sup>.

Separately, it is worth noting that literally in all places of illegal detention, typical procedures for dealing with detainees were used. Occupation authorities have shown that they follow the tradition of treatment of prisoners, characteristic of penitentiary institutions in the territory of the former USSR. The Russian military and staff of detention facilities are aware of such practices and actively use them. Thus, immediately after the arrest, in addition to documents and telephones, personal items that could be considered «dangerous» or could be used in a certain way to commit suicide - razors, glasses, belts, shoelaces, and the like - were usually taken from the interviewees. Even when the actual reasons for this were insufficient and it worsened the situation of the detainee.

“ You couldn't have a prickly-cutting thing. My glasses were taken away. I tell him that I have plastic ones. - «It is not allowed». I can see well in glasses, although I have vision +2. And without glasses, I couldn't even remember their faces when they came in.<sup>20</sup>.

In a number of cases, representatives of the Russian Federation collected personal and biometric data of detainees. In some cases, in smaller settlements, this information was entered in paper journals filled out by hand<sup>21</sup>, in others, the detainees were photographed, fingerprints taken, and in some cases DNA analysis. A similar practice was used in places of detention in Kherson, Kupiansk, Berdiansk, etc. At the same time, the collection of the specified data could indirectly indicate the seriousness of the detainee's situation and the likely continuation of detention, as well as the possible prosecution of a crime. There is also evidence of photographing other special signs - scars, birthmarks, tattoos, etc.

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19 Testimony from the city Melitopol

20 Testimony from the city Kupiansk

21 Testimony of the "commandant's office" in Melitopol

“ *The next day, they took us to take prints. At first, ordinary ones, then they took pictures, and after a couple of days they took electronic prints. They also photographed tattoos, scars, faces*<sup>22</sup>.

In all places of detention, escorting procedures and features of communication between guards and detainees were similar. So, at the moment when the guards entered the cell, the people who were there had to turn their faces to the wall, lean their hands on the wall, spread their legs. The eyes should be lowered. Any attempt to look in the direction of the guards was perceived as a threat and was punished by a beating.

In one of the cases, a detained man was beaten on the back twice a day for 5 days when food was brought to the garage with the detainees. Before that, he had broken ribs. He was unable to defend himself from the blows, standing with his face against the wall, unable to see the attackers. It is also known about one case of interrogation, when the victim stood for about 1.5 hours with a bag on his head, leaning against the wall, while he was beaten with batons on his knees.

The victims also describe the same type of methods of escort during delivery to the place of interrogation. The detainees were put on a bag on their heads, led with their hands tied back, in a bent position. A number of victims reported humiliating procedures for checking before escorting - the oral cavity, anus.

“ *If there is a knock on the door, you should get up, put your hands behind your back and lean your face against the wall. If you even looked at them once, they would beat you with a club. There were such cases. That is, head down, to the wall, hands back, like animals. You leave the cell, facing the wall, and you immediately get a bag on your head. Wrap with tape, hands back. They put on handcuffs, and 2 people hold you by the arms, they pull you out «in a swallow»*<sup>23</sup>.

In the process of escorting, the victims could be intimidated, hit or create conditions for injury (beating their heads against the wall, causing them to stumble on the stairs).

Some interviewees indicate that in the places of detention there was training of «personnel» recruited from the local population. In view of this, the regime of detention became stricter (contacts between cells were prohibited, parcels from relatives were carefully checked, etc.).

“ *They recruited staff from ours, and the Russians took ours away. At 6-7 in the evening, we are at home, and they were there until 6 in the morning. And they started shouting at 10, there was a prison officer, a local drug addict, he started teaching young people how to detain on the street, searches began... Over time, everything got worse and worse.*

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22 Testimony from the city Kherson

23 Testimony from the city Kupiansk

Guard functions in places of detention could be performed by persons previously convicted of criminal offences. Accordingly, the prison culture of behaviour was familiar to them, these practices were used in the treatment of detainees.

“ These same subordinates guarded us – «LPR» and «DPR». They had shifts. All of them were bastards. There was one who shouted: «I was in jail for two terms, you can't hide anything from me!» They searched the cells<sup>24</sup>.

## Distribution of functions and coordination of actions of representatives of the Russian Federation involved in the commission of crimes

According to those interviewed, the leading role in the process of detentions and interrogations is usually performed by employees of the FSB of the Russian Federation. Sometimes they are singled out as group leaders or so-called «investigators» because they are dressed in civilian clothes (probably to disguise themselves). At the same time, such «investigators» can use separate elements of military equipment, for example, shoes, and carry weapons. Such similarities are observed, in particular, in testimonies from the occupied Zaporizhzhia, Kherson and Kharkiv regions.

“ Two people enter in balaclavas, in combat boots. But in civilian clothes. Told them. Then, when I'm done talking, one quickly pulls on the tactical gloves, so they call it, or something. He throws back the table and kicks me in the ribs in these combat boots, punches me in the face... He beats me cruelly, it lasted for about 15-20 minutes<sup>25</sup>.

“ The FSB is engaged in detaining people, collecting information from them, interrogating them and so on. They are all always in civilian clothes, they travel in cars without licence plates. There is no licence plate - just a black plate. And everyone understood, both their National Guard of Russia and at the checkpoints, that this was the FSB. They were exclusively in civilian clothes. This is their form of cover<sup>26</sup>.

A significant number of cases of targeted illegal detention (kidnapping) of civilians, carried out by a well-coordinated, armed group of people in uniforms indicating their training and qualifications, have also been recorded. Such interceptors usually had no identifying marks, acting as quickly as possible to prevent possible identification of themselves.

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24 Testimony from the city Kupiansk

25 Testimony from the city Melitopol

26 Testimony from the city Kherson



“ I’m going to the bus stop to go to the city. A minibus stops on the street, 6 or 8 Russians run out with assault rifles. They stop me, put on handcuffs, a bag on the head and take me to the TDC<sup>27</sup>.

Usually, those conducting interrogations accompanied by violence try to hide their identity, using balaclavas, civilian clothes or military uniforms without insignia. Despite the fact that, according to interviewees, the leading role in the process of detention and interrogation is performed by the FSB of the Russian Federation, there are also testimonies about interrogators who were identified as representatives of the «L/DPR» or «police».

Also, these representatives of the Russian Federation can perform auxiliary functions or resort to psychological pressure during long interrogations or «conversations» in cases where physical violence was not used against the detainee for some reason. In addition, in this way, the victim could be «prepared» for future interrogation by the FSB of the Russian Federation.

“ Then they brought me to the police station. They took me to one of the rooms and sat me down at a table. There was another table opposite, and for 6 or 7 hours various so-called «representatives of the newly created police» entered the room. Each of them told me a «sincere» story about how poor they were, how they were starving, how they were not paid. And how they started to work for Russia to save people, and the like<sup>28</sup>.

The existing coordination of the actions of various units involved in the «filtering» of the population can be evidenced by cases when the security of the place of detention was informed about the reasons for the detention of persons who were brought there from another settlement. Thus, victims who were accused of aiding the Armed Forces of Ukraine or the like, even after being transferred to another place of detention, faced a higher risk of violence than victims who were detained pending identification or for unknown reasons. It is also indicative in this context, the designation of a number of detainees as «political» or accused of «war crimes» (here it means: accused of preparing sabotage; aiding the resistance movement or the Security Service of Ukraine).

Evidence of the use of violence directly in or near the cells is widespread. In such cases, units that performed security functions are usually involved.

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27 Testimony from the city Kherson

28 Anonymous testimony

## Similarities in the types of torture used by representatives of the Russian Federation

Most of the interviewees suffered from violence in one way or another. The vast majority of documented cases can clearly be defined as torture (a conscious attempt to inflict severe suffering).

Torture remains a widespread practice during interrogations of detainees by representatives of the Russian Federation. Interrogations without the use of violence are rather an exception and take place in individual cases when the detainee was too «valuable» or their state of health was already critical. It is known about the case of the detention of a woman with cancer, who was not subjected to physical violence. At the same time, she was under constant psychological pressure. For 5 days, the woman was kept in inadequate conditions: there was no constant access to drinking water and a toilet in the cell. The women suffered from severe suffocation. The victim's health deteriorated significantly after her release<sup>29</sup>.

During the interrogations, representatives of the Russian Federation used typical forms of violence against the detainees; in particular, beatings and torture with electric shock. At the same time, certain specific elements of torture were repeated. In addition to blows with hands and feet, wooden bats or rubber batons could be used for beatings. Some of the interviewees, among others, say that during beatings, blows were usually inflicted on the limbs or body, but not on the face. At the same time, some victims note that other means could have been used for blows to the head - water bottles, books, etc. Injuring the head with blows with a blunt, wide object, usually in the parietal area, is a common method of torture. The consequence of this can be a concussion or brain injury in the victim<sup>30</sup>.

“ During the first interrogation, when they put me against the wall, they beat me like a sandbag. And in the head. If I hadn't had a neck, the head would have fallen off like a ball. So 2-3 times on the right and 2-3 times on the left. It's by feeling, because the bag is on your head, you can't see anything, everything is wrapped with tape <sup>31</sup>.

Specific cases of beatings were also recorded, the purpose of which was long-term traumatization of the victims, causing them suffering, without creating a threat to life.

“ They take a water pipe, a regular plastic pipe, and hit me in the back like it's nothing. But when they hit like that for 10 minutes, you are ready to die. A lot and of-

29 Testimony from Kherson region

30 Kozlov S.V., Voichenko V.V. and others "Detection of bodily injuries characteristic of torture and ways of their documentary fixation in the format of the " Istanbul Protocol". – K. 2021. – p.16

31 Testimony from the city Kupiansk

*ten. Or in the leg, in the thigh, for example, there are such places. Or in the hand. I saw biceps of guys after these «procedures», it is hard to describe<sup>32</sup>.*

Contextually recorded testimony about a case of beating with sticks on the feet, which took place in the police station of the occupied city Kupiansk. Previously, ZMINA documented a similar case in the city Izium. This type of beating, also known as «phalanx», leads to damage and atrophy of the tissues of the foot, and can result in irreversible deformation of the feet. Victims complain of significant walking complications. Also, the result of such a beating can be chronic disability of the victim and actual disability<sup>33</sup>.



A case was recorded when a man, who was already with a bag on his head, was put on his head with a metal bucket and beaten with an unidentified object.

“ And they started beating me. A rebar, a gunstock, some wooden sticks, metal. They used everything they had. Then they put an iron bucket on my head, they

32 Testimony from the city Kupiansk

33 Kozlov S.V., Voichenko V.V. and others "Detection of bodily injuries characteristic of torture and ways of their documentary fixation in the format of the " Istanbul Protocol". – K. 2021. – p. 20–22



*started hitting the bucket very hard with something... I honestly don't know what it was. The bucket was bending, I remember how it bends and squeezes my neck. Real hell. They treated me like that for about 15 minutes, threw me, beat me. I thought I was going to die there. I was already shouting: «Give me the phone, I'll call my parents to say goodbye». They answered that «you will die like this, no one will know»<sup>34</sup>.*

Torture by electric shock was widespread in all occupied regions. Less threatening and traumatic were probably the cases of the use of electro shockers, which could be used by the guards, perpetrating violence against the victims directly in the cells. Electro shockers were also used demonstratively, to intimidate with more brutal methods of torture.

“ *From time to time, there were several police officers from local ex-policemen who did not pass the recertification, who asserted themselves like this: they opened the cameras, entered, put us face to the wall and shocked us with electro shockers. Those who were younger and stronger were beaten as hard as possible, those who were older were beaten with minimal blows. It happened several times*<sup>35</sup>.

Most of the victims describe torture by electric current as the worst experience received in places of detention, with the exception of cases of mutilation. Similarly to other types of torture, the intensity and severity of electric shock torture during interrogations was increasing. The duration and strength of electric shocks was increasing.

“ *He brought me. He says: «Sit on the floor, lean against the wall with your back, legs forward». He took off my slippers and put these clamps on my fingers. And again: «Tell me, do you know anyone from the police, SBU, ATO?» And begins to shock. At first not for long - a second or two. Then there were already 8 seconds. I was electrocuted for about half an hour*<sup>36</sup>.

To increase the suffering, the clamps through which the electric shock was supplied were connected to the most sensitive parts of the body - initially to the fingers of the hands, which were tied behind the back (the victim could lie on the floor, which increased the feeling of defenselessness). Later, during interrogation, the clamps could be attached to ears, nipples or genitals. There have been recorded cases when, in order to increase suffering, the clamps were connected «diagonally» (for example: to the lobe and to the scrotum), or when the victim was watered during electric shock torture.

According to one of the interviewees from the city Kherson, during severe torture with electric shock, steam was literally coming from him, which the interro-

34 Testimony from the city Melitopol

35 Testimony from Kherson region

36 Testimony of the victim from the city Melitopol

gators themselves noted. Another man, who was held in Kupiansk TDC, said that during the torture with electric shock, he «foamed at the mouth». Commonly described consequences after severe electric torture are convulsions, joint injuries due to uncontrolled muscle contractions, fever, severe dehydration, damaged teeth or tongue injuries. Some of the interviewees could not move on their own or did not control their body at all immediately after such an interrogation. Cellmates gave victims water, fed them from a spoon or helped them go to the toilet if necessary.

“ *The man was twisting, his joints were turning out. When you are dragged [returned to the cell from interrogation], your hands do not work. The men gave water to drink, because you can't feel your hands, they are twisted in you, you twist them yourself. And you are still in handcuffs. I still have scars on my left wrist* <sup>37</sup>.

Recovery after severe torture by electric shock could last up to several days. In one of the cases, the interviewee stated that he was ready to commit suicide after three such interrogations in order to end his suffering and for fear of not being able to withstand the fourth interrogation.

## Repetitive scenario of interrogations in different places of detention

The level of harshness during interrogations could vary depending on the age, physical condition or gender of the victim. But it also depended significantly on the severity of the charges. Probably, the representatives of the Russian Federation, who committed torture, set themselves the goal of knowingly inflicting the greatest possible suffering on the victims, while controlling the onset of lethal consequences.

In all regions, cases of death caused by torture are known, the victims could die in the cells a few days after interrogation or already after being released from the place of detention. There are known cases when Russian units tried to hide the real causes of death and took people's bodies away in unknown secondary locations.

“ *They took him away in broad daylight, two days later they called his mother and said: 'Your son died of a heart attack, come and take the body.' She arrived, the body was handed over to her in the morgue with a certificate the day before his abduction that he died of a heart attack. And the people who were at the funeral saw that the boy had a fractured skull, dislocated hands, and broken fingers. And the black marks on the body are obviously from electric shock* <sup>38</sup>.

The types of torture used during interrogations alternated in order to cause greater suffering. One of the interviewed women was hit on the back of the head with

37 Testimony from the city Kupiansk

38 Anonymous testimony

a plastic bottle filled with water. In addition, they threatened, put a gun to her head and simulated shots; they strangled her with a cable from an electric kettle and put a bag on her head, which was fixed with tape around her neck. One of the interrogators was clamping the woman's mouth and nose through the bag. She was also threatened with electric shock, showing the tools used for this. One interrogation lasted about four hours.

“ Already, maybe on the 2nd or 3rd hit, I started to feel that something was wrong with my head. Apparently, they broke, because there was a lot of pain, everything was white in the eyes. I began to feel nauseous, dizzy. I briefly lost consciousness. Then they started doing something else. They alternated it all. They couldn't hit me with a bottle 10 times in a row. If 10 blows were made, the head would probably be broken. Therefore, they hit 2-3 times, and then something else, so that I will come to my senses during this time.<sup>39</sup>

As a result of the beating, already after her release, the woman was diagnosed with a closed craniocerebral injury (in two places), as well as a number of other injuries. Despite the head injury and complaints of feeling unwell, the victim did not receive any medical assistance during the entire period of detention from October 2022 to March 2023.

In another case, it is known that the detainee was beaten with a wooden bat by another woman from among the guards<sup>40</sup>. During the first three days, the victim was interrogated every two hours. At the same time, she can remember only one interrogation without the use of physical violence.

“ I cannot say how many interrogations there were, they took me very many times, very often, probably every 2 hours. But this is in the first 3 days. They immediately started hitting me with bats, then they were waiting for me to start talking, but I still couldn't tell them anything, and then they told me that they would work through a lie detector. That's what they called an electro shocker. During the first interrogation, electric shock was applied to my neck and lower abdomen, and I fell from my chair. I can't even say how long it was, there were many people standing over me, I heard many voices. There were no specific questions during the first few interrogations.

Victims of electric shock tortures also indicate that there may have been pauses during interrogations when any physical torture ceased. This was done in order for the victim to partially restore the sensitivity of the damaged parts of the body, to realise his situation, to become «more docile». Subsequently, the torture continued. This method of interrogation can be characterized as a form of psychological torture.

39 Testimony from Zaporizhzhia region

40 Presumably, in this way the interrogators tried to control the extent of the damage caused. Testimony from the city Kupiansk



Other specific similarities have been recorded that can be characterized as elements of psychological torture and indicate the same approaches to interrogation.

So, for example, victims from the cities of Kherson and Kupiansk testified that the refusal to answer questions during interrogation or the answer «I don't know» prompted the intensification of torture.

“ Then they put a stool, they sat me down. And this one approaches from behind, and presses my throat with a baton and pulls me to him. Says: «Well, are you finally going to start talking?» - «But I don't know what you need. I don't understand, actually, I'm telling you honestly». Then he hits me so that I hit my head on the floor. He says: «Remember, the words «honestly», «I don't know», «I swear» do not exist here. For every such word of yours, I will beat you to death». I understood that these are not stop words, but start words for them.

“ They began to ask: where?, what?, who?, from where? And everything else. And I, not having information, cannot tell anything. Because I just don't know. They really didn't like such answers. They brutally interrogated me, because I answered their questions: «I don't know», «I wasn't there». They did not believe in it and just brutally beat them. It happened more than once.

At the same time, the so-called «investigators» could use extended forms of questions, for example: «Tell me what you know», in this way trying to get information that could be considered useful, but about which nothing was known before.

It is also worth noting that cases of «paired» interrogations were recorded in all the studied regions. When close friends or family members were detained, interrogated or tortured at the same time. In this way, by causing suffering to one of the couple, they tried to force the other to testify.

“ People are interrogated in this basement. And we were interrogated there too. She [wife] was not touched, but I was severely beaten. Three ribs were broken. They did not torture with electric shock, but simply beat me with batons on legs and stretched my legs. I was beaten, but she was not touched. I was specially beaten so she saw that. Then they took her to another room. And I was shot 2 times with a gun near my ear. They told her that's all – I was shot <sup>41</sup>.

A case of detention and interrogation with the use of violence against a minor was documented. The boy was stopped at a checkpoint to check his passport. Representatives of the Russian Federation were looking for his father, so after seeing the teenager's last name, they took him to the place of detention. During the several-hour interrogation, the boy was subjected to psychological and physical violence: he was beaten with a metal stick and hit with an electro shocker, as well as threatened with murder, mutilation, and violence against his mother and sister.

“Now we will take you to the basement and kill you there», «Do you want to take a bullet in the head?», «We can start cutting off your fingers. Pull out nails. We can cut off the ear». Much more. When they interrogated me, and I said I didn't know anything, they beat me with a shocker<sup>42</sup>.

Cases of intimidation of detainees with weapons, as well as imitation of shooting, were common. This method of intimidation is potentially associated with the risk of an unplanned shot, and therefore a threat to life.

All detainees noted that they constantly felt psychological pressure, faced threats of murder, violence against themselves or their relatives. In various places of detention (the city Kupiansk, the city Kherson, and others), the instrument of psychological pressure was the demand for the public recitation of the slogans «Glory to Russia», «Glory to Putin», «Glory to Shoigu» or the performance of the Russian national anthem or Russian patriotic songs. Refusal to learn or sing the national anthem was one of the reasons for violence against detainees.

A case of forced participation in the so-called «referendum» by which the Russian Federation tried to record the annexation of Kherson region was recorded in the Kherson detention centre.

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42      Testimony from the city Kupiansk



“ The camera was opened. Two men stood armed, two more stood in the corridor. And another one in the far part of the corridor. And one person from each cell, one person at a time, was brought out to sign <sup>43</sup>.

The condition for the release of some of the interviewees was recording in propaganda videos. In them, the victims were forced to confirm false accusations against them. It was also common to be forced to write statements or record a video in which detainees renounce any claims due to their detention. During the release, some interviewees were read the «decision on the ban on entry into the territory of the Russian Federation» or the so-called «new regions».

## • Related crimes

Cases of torture of civilians may be directly related to other types of crimes or create conditions for committing such. First of all, we are talking about arbitrary detention or abduction of people. At the same time, we can talk about a number of others.

In some cases, torture was accompanied by sexualized violence - torture with electric shock connected to the genitals, forced nudity, etc. In the list of testimonies analyzed here, at least one case of rape is known.

Threats of rape were typically used against detained women. At the same time, in certain cases similar threats were applied to men up to the imitation of the process during interrogation. Presumably, the so-called «investigators» used such threats because they understood that they were taken more seriously by the victims due to the absolute inadmissibility of such violence. There were also recorded testimonies of threats to rape close people of men who were interrogated (girlfriends, wives).

Some interviewees indicate that one of the reasons for their detention was the possibility of further robbery of the farm that belonged to them.

Collected testimonies about cases of forced labour of detainees in places of detention.

At least one case that can be qualified as human trafficking was recorded, when a woman was taken to forced labour in the construction of fortifications for the Russian Armed Forces after a demonstrative «release», which was recorded on video. It is also known about another case in the same area, when a detained woman, according to the occupation «police», was allegedly released, while at the moment her whereabouts are unknown.

One of the interviewed victims indicates that he was released because a ransom was paid for him.



“ They let me go because before the war I worked for a company - insulating apartments and facades. Somehow my boss found out I was there and somehow bought me off<sup>44</sup>.

## • The use of new technologies<sup>45</sup>

Mobile phones were confiscated from all the victims. This happened immediately at the moment of detention, during the search of the house or directly at the place of detention. Data from a mobile phone (list of contacts, information from private correspondence, stored photos and videos) were an important source of information for the so-called «investigators». After their preliminary study, these data became the basis for most interrogations.

The victims indicate that they tried to find out the current whereabouts and status of certain «interesting» contacts - primarily officials, military personnel, representatives of law enforcement agencies. Also, the subject of increased interest was the content of the correspondence found in the mobile phones of the victims. Critical were cases when they found confirmation of the transfer of any information to the Armed Forces of Ukraine (for example, to Ukrainian chatbots).

Most of the respondents in one way or another tried to protect themselves during the expected mobile phone check - they deleted potentially compromising contacts and correspondence. Tried to hide a mobile phone or actually used several devices, one of which was provided for checking. At the same time, the complete deletion of information from a mobile phone («clean phone») was perceived by Russian units as something suspicious.

Russian forces in the occupied territories are constantly improving the procedure for checking mobile phones and other personal electronic devices (tablets, laptops). Such a procedure is highly specialised, performed by relevant specialists, and has a tendency to improve.

“ And my watch was taken away. The phone was taken away for checking. In the premises of the duty officer, there was a work office of this service, they sat there, worked and passed it from hand to hand<sup>46</sup>.

Victims say that Russian specialists are able to restore deleted information from the phone, and not only text, but also photos and videos from private correspondence. Such data become the subject of special attention during interrogations.

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44 Anonymous testimony

45 You can find more information here "Enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions of active citizens during the full-scale armed aggression by Russia against Ukraine" <https://zmina.ua/publication/nasylnyczki-znyknennya-ta-svavilni-zatrymannya-aktyvnyh-gromadyan-v-hodi-povnomasshtabnoyi-rosijskoyi-zbrojnoyi-agresiyi-proti-ukrayiny/> p. 59–63

46 Testimony from the city Nova Kakhovka

Other ways of using the victims' phones were also recorded - in some cases, the so-called «investigators» took advantage of the fact that messages continued to arrive on the victim's phone at the moment when she was already in custody. Some interviewees also say that already after being released from detention, their personal profiles in messengers are being accessed by unauthorised users from Russian IP addresses. Accordingly, access to victims' mobile phones can be used to gather information in a variety of ways.

Previously, messages about tracking the activity of civilian mobile phones by radio-electronic means were contextually recorded.

## • Interrogations with the use of a polygraph

The use of a polygraph («lie detector») by Russian units was recorded in the Kupiansk police station, and earlier in the temporary detention centre in Kherson<sup>47</sup>.

The technology of its application assumes that the person being tested in this way must be emotionally balanced. Accordingly, interrogation with the use of a polygraph is completely inconsistent with the more traditional for Russian interrogations, which were accompanied by torture.

According to the materials of the collected testimonies, it is known that the passing of the polygraph preceded the potential use of violence and interrogations with the use of torture. The interviewee was usually aware of the threats associated with an unsatisfactory polygraph test. In this way, they could interrogate people who were more at risk to die of torture due to the presence of chronic diseases or the like.

The description of the interrogation with the use of the polygraph, which we receive from the testimony of the victims, allows us to assess the polygraph examiners as sufficiently experienced. Respondents were asked only questions that require unambiguous, binary answers («yes/no»), during the survey banal protocol questions («Are you a resident of village X?») and questions of interest were mixed. Also, the interviewees were asked to answer untruths in a controlled manner, thus obviously recording the reactions of the body, obtaining reference values of the polygraph indicators at the moment when a person lies.

“During the polygraph tests there were questions: «On the polygraph there were questions: «Do you have a weapon? In which school did you study? Is your village [...]»? Well, you answer, there are such loyal questions. And then: “Do you have connections with the Armed Forces of Ukraine? Do you have acquaintances who serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine? Do you have acquaintances in the

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47 The case of using a polygraph from the city Kherson on 01.09.2022, in the city Kupiansk - approximately on 02.09.2022.

*SBU? " There were probably 10 questions in one test, and there were 8 tests. And the following questions alternated: yes/no, repeated several times. During the polygraph tests, the questions are insidious: «Tell me what is right and what is wrong». For example: «Do you have acquaintances in the SBU? - say it wrong» or «Are you from [...]? - say it correctly»<sup>48</sup>.*

The use of sophisticated technological interrogation tools in various places of detention additionally indicates the coordinated actions of the Russian units that were involved in this.

## Consequences for the physical and mental health of the victims

A large number of interviewees who have suffered from illegal detention and/or torture indicate severe long-term health consequences. Firstly, this is referencing physical injuries - broken bones, torn ligaments, joint injuries, and the like. In most cases, medical assistance in places of detention was not provided to the victims at all or was provided purely formally. Some of the interviewees reported that they were given painkillers in tablets, medicines for high blood pressure, and some medicines were handed down from relatives. At the same time, the victims were not provided with comprehensive examinations.

Most of the detainees indicate exacerbation of chronic diseases or the development of new ones, which were the result of poor conditions of detention and lack of proper medical care. In particular, problems with the musculoskeletal system, diseases of the urinary system, etc. Also, a large part of the interviewees, especially those who were kept for an extended period, experienced significant weight loss.

Accurate diagnosis of the consequences of torture for physical health is usually complicated by the lack of doctors, proper medical equipment or the difficult financial situation of the victims in the liberated territories.

Also, a large part of the interviewees reported the consequences of the effects their detention had on their mental health. However, only in some cases they are diagnosed and presented at the level of specialised medical conclusions. Often victims describe similar symptoms and complaints of increased emotional stress, sleep problems, such as insomnia or frequent dreams about past events, anxiety, etc.



“ Well, of course, the psyche suffered a lot, because dreams are like that, very «nostalgic», so to speak. [Nightmares associated with torture]. This had a great impact on health. Very much. If I say that something has passed, then no. It's been a year, and nothing has passed <sup>49</sup>.

## Conclusions

The above allows us to draw a number of conclusions regarding the specifics of detentions, the commission of the crime of torture, and the general consequences of this for local communities.

Thus, the Russian occupation administration is trying to take root by spreading fear and terror among the local population. The basic task is the destruction of established social ties. In addition, as a result of encouragement and dissemination by representatives of the Russian Federation of whistle-blowing (voluntary or forced under torture), the released remain deeply traumatized. People who have been in the same place of detention sometimes tend to mistrust even each other. Quite often, the victims know who gave the testimony about them to the Russian units. As a result, they break old social ties, stop communicating with former friends and acquaintances, or try to change their place of residence.

For the occupation administration, such a destruction of the sphere of human relations within communities is desirable and planned in advance. In addition to the direct function of «filtering» the population, «screening out» potentially threatening or «undesirable» people, the existence of the so-called «torture chambers» is used to put pressure on the community in general.

The leading role in this process is played by the network of places of illegal detention and torture, spread throughout the territory controlled by the Russian Federation. As of December 7, 2023, the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine has already identified 104 places of illegal detention and torture<sup>50</sup>. The so-called «torture chambers» function openly and emphatically demonstratively. The population knows where the «torture chamber» is located and is aware of the risks of becoming a victim of arbitrary detention or torture. In the very places of detention, the victims are usually tortured in such a way that other detainees can hear them.

The occupation administration implements large-scale processes of «filtering» the population, which often means the detention of disloyal or potentially dis-

49 Testimony from the city Melitopol. There are also a number of other similar complaints about emotional imbalance, poor sleep, nightmares associated with traumatic experiences.

50 07.12.2023. More than 100 Russian torture chambers were discovered in the liberated territories of Ukraine <https://zmina.info/news/na-deokupovanyh-terytoriyah-ukrayiny-vyyavyly-ponad-100-rosijskyh-kativen/>

loyal civilians. In addition, the Russian Federation encourages a culture of whistle-blowing, uses any opportunity to gain access to people's personal data, and actively uses torture to obtain testimony. In fact, the practice of torture is instrumentalized - it is used as the main tool to suppress any resistance and strengthen the occupation regime. Typically, victims are formal and informal opinion leaders: representatives of local self-government, volunteers, people with a pro-Ukrainian position.

Liberated communities are faced with difficult consequences of the occupation, in particular, at the level of maintaining established social ties and restoring mutual trust. The physical and psychological consequences for victims of torture and their families are extremely difficult. The vast majority of them require long-term rehabilitation.

A number of new challenges appear in documenting such types of crimes. On one hand, due to the efforts of the Russian Federation to isolate the population of the occupied territories, the possibilities of leaving or even communicating with settlements outside the territories under its control is incredibly difficult. On the other hand, due to the uncertainty of success, victims of such crimes are less and less hopeful about the prospects of bringing the perpetrators to justice and therefore less willing to testify. In light of the increasing use of radio-electronic tools, monitoring of phone calls and other surveillance techniques in use by the Russian Federation, it is difficult and risky to collect the testimonies of the victims who are still in the occupied territory.

Some of the interviewees have the status of victims in relevant criminal proceedings, which are being investigated by the National Police of Ukraine, the Security Service of Ukraine and the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine. At the same time, a number of victims do not know their procedural status, or do not have one, or for various reasons did not contact law enforcement agencies. As before, fixing the consequences of torture, establishing a cause-and-effect relationship between illegal detention and torture and the negative consequences for the victim's health caused by this remains a problematic issue. Some of the interviewees did not undergo forensic medical or psychiatric examinations.

It is necessary to ensure the proper quality, effectiveness and timeliness of investigations based on all necessary examinations and expert opinions, which will facilitate the prosecution of persons who have committed such crimes. There is also an urgent need to disseminate the testimonies of victims and thematic analysis of cases of torture in the occupied territories to the widest possible audience. Only an appropriate set of measures and a strong reaction of the international community will contribute to the prevention of new crimes against the civilian population, which the Russian Federation continues to commit in the occupied territories of Ukraine.



