



ZMIŃA

ANALYTICAL REPORT

“BECOME MAYOR OR WE WILL BREAK YOUR LEGS”:

**crimes against local authorities as a tool of
Russian occupation policy**

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“Become mayor or we will break your legs”: Crimes against local authorities as a tool of Russian occupation policy: Analytical report / B. Petruniok; ed. O. Syniuk, Ye. Sokurenko, A. Lunova., T. Pechonchyk — Kyiv, 2025. — 40 p.

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Cover photo: The building of the Kherson Regional State Administration, struck twice in one day by Russian forces during the shelling of Kherson city centre with guided aerial bombs on 5 June 2025.

Cover photo credit: **Oleksandr Korniaikov**.



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The Human Rights Centre ZMINA is a Ukrainian human rights organisation working to protect freedom of speech, combat discrimination, prevent torture and cruel treatment, support human rights defenders and civil activists, as well as document international crimes and protect the rights of victims of war.

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SUMMARY

This report highlights systemic violations committed by the Russian military and special services against local government representatives in the territories of Ukraine occupied after 24 February 2022. The analysis covers 133 cases of persecution in the Kherson, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Chernihiv, and Kyiv regions, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA, based on in-depth interviews and open-source information.

As a result of decentralisation, Ukrainian local officials have become key community leaders with a high level of trust among the population. With the onset of the full-scale invasion, in the absence of proper coordination from the central government, they were the ones who provided for the critical needs of local residents: organising evacuations, delivering medicines and food, and maintaining basic infrastructure. This work was mostly carried out without interaction with the occupation forces.

In the first months of the invasion, the Russian Federation was unable to ensure the effective functioning of the occupation administrations due to a shortage of loyal and competent personnel. The appointment of random people with no experience, frequent rotations and external control by the Russian Federation only increased distrust of such structures among the local population.

In this situation, Ukrainian officials were not only the bearers of legitimate authority but also symbols of resistance. The very presence of a functioning Ukrainian administration in the occupied territories was seen as a threat to the establishment of Russian control. Therefore, the persecution of local government representatives became a systematic practice aimed at forcing them to cooperate through threats, psychological pressure, unlawful detentions, torture and enforced disappearances.

The removal of legitimate Ukrainian leaders and the establishment of pro-Russian administrations was part of Russia's broader policy aimed at illegally incorporating the occupied territories into the Russian Federation and extending the Russian legal regime over them.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AR of Crimea** — The Autonomous Republic of Crimea, occupied by the Russian Federation in 2014
- ATC** — Amalgamated Territorial Community (hromada), the basic unit of the administrative and territorial structure in Ukraine
- ATO** — An anti-terrorist operation launched by Ukraine in response to Russia’s attempted occupation of the eastern regions (in accordance with the decision of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine of 13 April 2014 “On urgent measures to overcome the terrorist threat and preserve territorial integrity of Ukraine”, enacted by Presidential Decree No. 405/2014)
- ChNPP** — Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant
- “DPR”** — Certain districts of the Donetsk region occupied by the Russian Federation before 2022 (the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic”; the abbreviation is also used to refer to illegal armed groups originating from this area)
- FSB** — Federal Security Service
- “LPR”** — The districts of the Luhansk region occupied by the Russian Federation before 2022 (the so-called “Luhansk People’s Republic”; the abbreviation is also used to refer to illegal armed groups originating from this area)
- MIHR** — NGO “Media Initiative for Human Rights”
- OMCT** — World Organisation Against Torture
- PFU** — Pension Fund of Ukraine
- RF** — Russian Federation
- SBU** — Security Service of Ukraine
- SIZO** — Pre-trial detention centre, a penitentiary facility for temporary detention; the term can be used to refer to a place of detention in general
- TOT** — Temporarily occupied territories
- UN** — United Nations
- USSR** — Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
- VFTC** — A Volunteer Formation of a Territorial Community; a militarised unit formed voluntarily from Ukrainian citizens residing in the community’s territory. VFTCs carry out territorial defence tasks and are subordinate to the territorial defence forces, but do not possess military status
- ZMINA** — The Human Rights Centre ZMINA

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Since the large-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russia has seized several settlements in the Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kyiv, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, Sumy, Kharkiv, Kherson and Chernihiv regions. Some of these territories remain under the control of the RF. Although international humanitarian law recognises occupation as a temporary phenomenon, and that prohibitions on changing the status of officials in the territory controlled by the occupying power¹, and extending its own legislation to that territory are aimed at ensuring the temporary nature of this regime², Russia's actions indicate the opposite.

As in the case of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol in 2014, Russia's ultimate goal was to establish complete control over the seized territories, including their illegal incorporation into its territory and the implementation of an occupation policy there³. Local communities stood in the way, resisting in the first months of the invasion and refusing to support attempts to establish Russian rule⁴.

To suppress civil resistance, RF forces began systematic persecution of the population perceived as pro-Ukrainian and disloyal to the RF. This particularly affected veterans and former servicemen of the Ukrainian army, local opinion leaders and others⁵. Among the groups targeted by RF representatives were the leaders and senior officials of local authorities who refused to cooperate with the Russian army.

The objective of this research is to analyse the role of violations committed against local government representatives in the temporarily occupied territories after 24 February 2022 in the process of establishing Russian control, and to determine the motive behind targeting this group of civilians for attack.

1 For example, the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, 12 August 1949, Article 54: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_154#Text

2 Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and Its Annex: Regulations Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land of 18.10.1907, Article 43: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_222#Text

3 Special report of the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine “What means the Russian Federation uses to occupy and subjugate the population of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine”: <https://www.ombudsman.gov.ua/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/SpecialReport2025%20-%20Ukr.pdf>

4 See, for example: N. M. Kuzovova, (2024). CIVIL RESISTANCE IN KHERSON AND THE REGION DURING THE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION IN MARCH - EARLY APRIL 2022. South Archive (Historical Sciences), (46), 23-36.: <https://pahs.journal.kspu.edu/index.php/pahs/article/view/119/112>

The Phenomenon of Civil Resistance in Kherson, or How the Citizens Resisted the Occupation. ZMINA, 22.11.2024: <https://zmina.info/articles/fenomen-czyvilnogo-sprotyvu-u-hersoni-abo-yak-mistyany-chynyly-opir-v-okupacziyi/>

5 Torture and ill-treatment of civilian population in Ukrainian territories that were under Russian occupation (on the example of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson regions): analytical report / B. Petruniok, O. Hnatiuk, T. Pechonchyk; ZMINA Human Rights Centre. – Kyiv, 2023. – 60 p.; On the targeting of certain categories of civilians by the Russian military, see pp. 33-35: <https://zmina.ua/publication/katuvannya-ta-zhorstoke-povodzhennya-z-czyvilnym-naselennyam-na-ukrayinskyh-terytoriyah-yaki-perebuvaly-pid-rosiyskoyu-okupacziyeyu-na-prykladi-kyivskoyi-harkivskoyi-ta-hersonskoyi-oblastej/>

Source Base

The research is based on an analysis of 24 in-depth interviews with victims and witnesses conducted by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA in 2023–2025, remotely and during field missions to liberated settlements in Ukraine. The research also uses information from 11 surveys conducted by member human rights organisations of the “Ukraine 5AM” coalition and stored in the joint I-Doc database. These include materials from the Media Initiative for Human Rights, Truth Hounds and the Educational Human Rights House Chernihiv. In addition, open sources were reviewed, including publications by the Association of Ukrainian Cities, the Centre of Journalistic Investigations, Suspilne and other media outlets. Reports of violence against relatives of officials, if it was motivated by their official status, were also taken into account.

A total of 133 cases were analysed that contained signs of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law and could constitute international crimes. Among other things, these cases involved unlawful detentions, enforced disappearances, torture and cruel treatment of local government representatives.

Almost half of all cases were recorded in the city of Kherson and the Kherson region — 65, as well as in the Zaporizhzhia region — 33. The largest number of unlawful detentions took place from March to April 2022. Of the 133 victims, 111 were men, 22 were women, and violence was reported in 47 cases.

In more than half of the cases, local authorities (heads of ATC, mayors, village heads, heads of district state administrations, their deputies, as well as former officials) were unlawfully detained, while the rest of the cases concern local deputies and civil servants.

The limitations of the research are related to the absence of access to the occupied territories. In some cases, there are reports of arbitrary detention and subsequent release, but no evidence of the circumstances of detention. The media also contained thematic reports which, upon verification, were either not confirmed or concerned individuals under criminal investigation for treason or collaborationism — such cases were not included.

The in-depth interviews for this report were conducted following **the methodology** developed with the assistance of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) based on international standards for monitoring human rights and the Istanbul Protocol (Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, developed by a group of international experts and submitted to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1999).

The report includes quotes from in-depth interviews and open-source information.

The research also uses materials documented from open sources and processed following the recommendations of the Berkeley Protocol (A Practical Guide on the Effective Use of Digital Open Source Information in International Human Rights, Humanitarian Law and Criminal Investigations, developed by the University of California, Berkeley School of Law in collaboration with representatives of the United Nations).

Key terms

Cruel treatment. Related to the concept of “torture” is the concept of “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. Qualification of a fact as “cruel treatment” means that the motive or intent to inflict suffering on the victim has not been proven, while the level of suffering inflicted is less than in the case of torture. For example, inadequate conditions of detention or threats of torture (without committing it), psychological pressure can be interpreted as cruel treatment rather than torture. A combination of different circumstances of cruel treatment that reinforce each other (inadequate conditions of detention, absence of access to medical care, inadequate food, absence of access to drinking water and toilets, combined with psychological and physical violence) may be qualified as torture.

Torture. The concept of torture is defined in Article 1 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. According to it, “torture” means “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity”⁶. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines torture as “the intentional infliction of severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, upon a person in the custody or under the control of the accused; except that torture shall not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to, lawful sanctions”⁷.

Enforced disappearances. According to Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, “enforced disappearance” means the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law⁸.

Unlawful detention. According to Paragraphs 10-12 and 23 of the UN Human Rights Committee’s General Comment No. 35, “unlawful detention” is a restriction of liberty that occurs outside the framework of established laws and international standards. In particular, detention can be characterised as unlawful when it contains elements of unfairness, unjustified, unpredictability and failure to respect the procedural guarantees of the detainee⁹.

Local government representatives. In this report, the term “government representatives” includes local government representatives (heads of communities, deputies, starostas), heads of district, settlement or city administrations, their deputies or other persons who held public service positions. Cases of crimes committed against victims who, at the time of the

6 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_085#Text

7 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_588#Text

8 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_154#Text

9 UN Human Rights Committee. General Comment No. 35: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g14/244/53/pdf/g1424453.pdf?OpenElement>

events, no longer had formalised authority, but had previously held positions in local government, and as a result, had a high level of informal legitimacy, specifically as local leaders and managers (e.g. former mayors or village heads). The phrase “government representatives” was also chosen to describe the category of victims because this is how they were identified by the Russian occupation forces. The RF military usually tried to find the “main person” in the settlement, a person with authority and legitimacy. At the same time, they were mostly unaware of the specifics of their official status, the scope of their competence, etc.

In this report, the Human Rights Centre ZMINA does not make the final legal qualification or proof of the facts of crimes, which should be done by the authorised bodies and institutions at both the national and international levels. However, the research analyses cases that have signs of such violations.

The building of the Kharkiv Regional State Administration.
On 1 March 2022, Russian troops fired two missiles at it. The
strike killed 44 people. On 28 August 2022, the Russian army
shelled the building for the second time.
Photo: Viacheslav Mavrychev for Suspilne



CHAPTER 1:

ESTABLISHMENT OF CONTROL BY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND PRESSURE ON LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN THE TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE OCCUPIED SINCE 24 FEBRUARY 2022

1.1. THE GOAL OF THE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION: NOT TEMPORARY CONTROL, BUT FULL INCORPORATION OF TERRITORIES

The occupation of Ukraine's territories after 24 February 2022 as a means of establishing temporary control was not Russia's ultimate goal. It sought not only to establish military control but also to fully incorporate the occupied regions into its territory, and to extend Russian practices and policies, including in the areas of public administration, education, culture, etc. Given this, as well as during the occupation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014, in the territories occupied after the full-scale invasion began on 24 February 2022, Russia has been consistently implementing its political and legal system and governance system¹⁰.

On 19 September 2022, the Ukrainian media outlet Donbas. Realities, citing sources in Ukraine's intelligence agencies, published fragments of a presentation on the so-called “Strategy for a referendum on the incorporation of the Kharkiv region into the RF”. The document, in particular, specifies the target indicators: voter turnout of 70% and 75% support for the decision to “join” the RF. The main tasks of the strategy include: “holding a referendum with a high level of legitimacy...”, “creating a network of local activists, volunteers and loyal opinion leaders who should become a support for the administrative apparatus and a tool for integrating the occupied territories into the system of Russian statehood”¹¹. These goals directly indicate Russia's desire to form a controlled horizon of influence at the community level. At the same time, they indirectly explain why the occupying forces targeted local government representatives, activists, volunteers and opinion leaders.

The “referendum” in the occupied part of the Kharkiv region was disrupted by a successful counter-offensive operation of the Armed Forces of Ukraine: between 6 and 11 September 2022, most of the region's territory was liberated¹². In response, the RF and the occupation administrations significantly accelerated the “integration processes” in other occupied territories.

¹⁰ Human rights situation during the Russian occupation of territory of Ukraine and its aftermath, 24 February 2022–31 December 2023. OHCHR, 20.03.2024, para. 33: <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2024-03-20-OHCHR-Report-Occupation-Aftermath-UKR.pdf>

¹¹ Russia planned a “referendum” in the Kharkiv region from 1 to 7 November. Radio Liberty. 19.09.2022: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-rosiya-psevdoreferendum-kharkivska-oblast/32040467.html>

¹² Admitted retreat. The Russian Ministry of Defence showed a map with a new front line in Kharkiv region / RBC Ukraine, 11.09.2022: <https://www.rbc.ua/ukr/news/priznali-pobeg-minoborony-rf-pokazalo-kartu-1662899281.html>

Already on 23-27 September 2022, illegal referendums were held in the TOT of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions on the “accession of new entities to the RF”.

On 4 October 2022, the President of the RF signed agreements on “admission to the RF” and “formation of new subjects of the Federation”. The decision was enshrined in the relevant federal constitutional laws¹³. On their basis, amendments were made to Article 65 of the Constitution of the RF¹⁴.

It is noteworthy that the aforementioned federal constitutional laws define the boundaries of the “new subjects of the Federation” by the administrative and territorial boundaries of the occupied regions of Ukraine. The RF has “incorporated” territories that it does not control and has never controlled. For example, the city of Zaporizhzhia, the administrative centre of the Zaporizhzhia region, has never been under occupation. The city of Kherson, the administrative centre of the Kherson region, was liberated by Ukrainian forces on 11 November 2022 – a month after it was officially “incorporated into the RF”. However, this also shows that Russia intends to continue to wage an aggressive war against Ukraine for full control of the occupied regions.

Neither the results of the “referendums” nor the constitutional amendments that resulted from them were accepted by Ukraine¹⁵ and the international community¹⁶.

1.2. UKRAINIAN LOCAL AUTHORITIES AS AN OBSTACLE TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RUSSIA’S PLANS

Government representatives who attempted to perform their administrative functions during the occupation organised the collection and delivery of humanitarian aid for civilians or assisted the Ukrainian military, preventing the formation of a power vacuum. Moreover, Ukrainian officials who, in one way or another, continued to perform their functions independently of the occupation forces, establishing a certain distance from them, were demonstrating that a legitimate centre of political power had not ceased to function in the community or settlement. Such a centre of influence on the community, by the very fact of its existence, called into question the legitimacy and capacity of the occupation administrations that Russia was only trying to create in the spring of 2022.

In the first weeks of the occupation, Russia did not make systematic attempts to remove the legitimate local authorities, leaving them with a limited sphere of influence. However, from mid- to late March 2022, legitimate government representatives became the target of attacks. Attempts to coerce them into cooperation became consistent through incentives, threats, unlawful detention aimed at intimidation, and similar methods. If an official refused to cooperate, Russian representatives tried to force them to cease their activities: to force them to leave, isolate them, and use torture or other forms of coercion that made it impossible to continue performing their duties.

13 See Federal Laws No. 5-FKZ, No. 6-FKZ, No. 7-FKZ, No. 8-FKZ, all dated 04.10.2022.

14 The Constitution of the RF with amendments made in 2022: <http://duma.gov.ru/news/55446/>

15 Resolution of the Central Election Commission of Ukraine of 27 September 2022 No. 101 “On the Nullity of Pseudo-Referendums in the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine”: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/v0101359-22#Text>

16 Resolution ES-11/4 Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, adopted by the General Assembly on 12 October 2022: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/ES-11/4>

One village head in the Donetsk region stated that the authorities left the administration building after it was occupied by the Russian military. However, they did not stop performing their duties in the community. However, when it became impossible to perform these functions without interaction with the occupation forces, the head stopped his work and was able to leave for the government-controlled territory.

“ We conducted our work activities elsewhere, without dealing with the occupiers. Because we could not and did not want to cooperate with them. But they were interested in the local authorities cooperating with them... my team and I took measures, without the occupiers, to ensure the life support of our community. [...] We pumped water through wells, provided pharmacies, shops and hospitals with electricity from generators [...].

I was doing my job without being part of their structure... But when the question arose of going to work with them, I gathered my team and said: “Everyone makes a choice about what to do, we are not going to force anyone”. I decided to leave...¹⁷.

Another interviewee, the head of the territorial community of the Pryazovske village council in the Zaporizhzhia region, reported such a conversation with representatives of the RF who searched the premises of the institution:

“ They [the Russians] started talking about the upcoming change of regime, the new government, and so on. So they asked me if I planned to continue working in my position. I said no, as long as our flag is hanging here, I’m working... If it doesn’t, I’ll leave. (...) He was surprised, he talked about some prospects... I said I was not appointed here, people elected me to this position, so I work within the framework of Ukrainian legislation, and there is no other way.

Three days later, the man was unlawfully detained because of his speech to the staff of the village council, heads of enterprises, institutions and public sector employees:

“ On 21 March, I gathered everyone at the settlement council at 8 a.m. I said: Look, this is the situation – the territory has been seized, we are under occupation. I was offered to continue working, but I refused, and now each of you must make a personal decision about your own future... Whether to keep working or not. But I said, keep in mind that there is a law on collaborationism. I read it out loud – the responsibility under each article... I told everyone they had to decide for themselves, but if they chose to collaborate, they would be held accountable under current legislation¹⁸.

Russian forces gradually limited the influence of Ukrainian authorities on the situation in the communities. They monitored public sentiment, including the level of trust in officials, and deliberately tried to discredit them. Among other things, they spread rumours that the alleged “stubbornness” of the village head and his refusal to cooperate with Russia deprived the community residents of access to humanitarian aid¹⁹, so he was unable to defend the interests of the community.

17 He was taken prisoner in Nikolske. Vasyl Mitko about the occupation of the village. Svoi. 09.09.2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwliqFI1fOc>

18 Testimonies from the Zaporizhzhia region, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (04.04.2025).

19 Testimonies from the Zaporizhzhia region, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (04.04.2025).

1.3. REPLACEMENT OF LEGITIMATE OFFICIALS AND THE PERSONNEL INCOMPETENCE OF THE OCCUPYING FORCES

Although the formal illegal incorporation of the occupied territories into the RF took place only in September-October 2022, de facto attempts to establish control over the communities began in the spring of that year. During this period, there were documented cases of legally elected heads of communities being detained and replaced with individuals loyal to Russia. Among them were people who were not local residents or who had lived in Russia or in the territories of Ukraine occupied before the full-scale invasion for a long time.

One example is the situation in the village of Chornobaivka, Kherson region. On the night of 1 to 2 May 2022, the occupation forces tried to detain the village head, **Ihor Dudar**. However, they failed to do so because he had been hospitalised the day before due to a heart attack. On the same day, the Deputy Head of the Village Council, **Yevhen Rodionov**, was detained and held in unlawful detention for 14 days²⁰.

Already on 7 May 2022, **Yurii Turulov**²¹, the Director of a local bus station, was “appointed” to replace Dudar. His “appointment” to the position took place no later than 5 days after the detention (isolation) of the lawful representatives of the authorities. Additionally, in October 2023, it became known that Turulov was “appointed” as the fifth “head” of the Hornostaivka territorial community in the Kherson region since the occupation²².

A similar situation occurred in the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region. In particular, the occupation administration handed over the management of the Kyrylivka territorial community to **Kateryna Umanets**, a pro-Russian activist from Melitopol who until 2016 headed the local branch of the marginal pro-Russian party Union of Left Forces²³. In 2017, criminal proceedings were opened against her, after which she left for Moscow. Umanets returned to the temporarily occupied Melitopol in 2022.

Ivan Malieiev, head of the village of Kyrylivka, Melitopol district, Zaporizhzhia region, was detained by the Russian military on 17 April 2022, the same day they entered the settlement. The man was unlawfully detained for 5 days, but refused to cooperate with the occupation forces.

He was detained again on 24 May and released only on 30 June 2022²⁴. At the same time, the occupation administration in the village was established on 26 May 2022, and Umanets “took over” Maleev’s functions. Umanets’s “appointment” took place only two days after the detention of the village head. Malieiev understood that he would be “replaced”.

“We naively thought that they would come and hang flags, so we would leave the administrative building, go to the municipal services office, and do humanitarian work as we had done before. But in reality, it turned out differently. We knew that on Tuesday, 24 May, they

20 “Memes about Chornobaivka kept us in high spirits”. Vysoky Zamok. 28.02.2023: <https://wz.lviv.ua/interview/485277-memy-pro-chornobaivku-trymaly-nas-u-pidnesenomou-nastroi>

21 Russian occupiers “appointed” the head of the bus station as the gauleiter of Chornobaivka. The Centre of Journalistic Investigations. 07.05.2022: <https://investigator.org.ua/ua/news-2/242614/>

22 Yurii Turulov, former gauleiter of Chornobaivka, was appointed the fifth gauleiter of Hornostaivka in the Kherson region. The Centre of Journalistic Investigations. 21.10.2023 <https://investigator.org.ua/ua/news-2/259540/>

23 Russian occupiers appointed the author of a fake about salt as the “head of administration” of the Kyrylivka community. Suspilne Zaporizhzhia. 27.05.2022: <https://suspilne.media/zaporizhzhia/243802-rosijski-okupanti-priznacyi-golovou-administracii-kirilivskoi-gromadi-avtorku-fejku-pro-sil/>

24 The village head of the Kyrylivka resort with his colleagues are free. Zprz.city. 30.06.2022: <https://zprz.city/news/view/selishhnij-golova-kurortnoi-kirilivki-razom-z-kolegami-na-svobodii>

would come to replace us. The information had leaked out. At six in the morning, Oleksii, the village duty officer, called me and said, ‘Seven Z-marked vehicles have entered Azovske’. I ran to take a shower, wash up and run to work. But I didn’t make it. Turned out they were already at my house, breaking down the door. They came in and started the search. They searched everything for about an hour and a half²⁵.

Thus, in cases where the local leader refused to cooperate with the occupation forces, his detention was the next step of the RF in establishing control over the community.

In some cases, the Russian FSB, which allegedly carried out such detentions, explicitly declared the reason for them.

“ Why are they holding him? Are they asking him to sign something, and he refuses, so that’s why they’re keeping him? [...] We asked, ‘Name the amount, how much do you want, how much do you need [money], we’ll find it somewhere’. But they said, “No, we don’t need money. Your husband will remain detained until Russian authority is established in Melitopol²⁶.

The primary and main task of the occupation forces was to force local government representatives to cooperate. At the same time, the Russian forces did not understand the nuances of the Ukrainian government system.

“ In five days, two guys came once. I think they were from the FSB. They interrogated me. We talked for about two hours. It turned out that I was the one telling them things, how well we had lived, how we formed the local budget... They do not understand our local government system at all. They said: ‘You have a district... You are the head of the district...’ I’m not a district head, I’m a village head. Things work differently here, so they just listened²⁷.

As a result, when the FSB tried to persuade the authorities to cooperate, it all came down to “ritual formulas” and assurances: “We are here for a long time”, “Russia is here forever”, “Why don’t you like us”, “Let’s cooperate”. In such circumstances, a typical request from the FSB was as follows: ‘Continue your work in the territorial community, but under our flag’.

“ I know that they offered some people to raise the flag and so on. They offered me to sign a cooperation agreement - I categorically refused²⁸.

As a result, the victims regarded these proposals as coercion to commit a crime — collaborative activity.

“ After beating [me] and telling me [something], they again came to the point that in order for me to be released and everything to be fine with me and my family, I should head the occupation authorities. I refused. They took off the hat that was pulled over my face and showed me: ‘Here, look, there is a sledgehammer. We will break one shoulder first, and then the other if you refuse’. I tried to tell them why I couldn’t — that I had taken an oath, that the population had elected me, and that there is liability for collaborationism. In response, I heard: “There is no Ukraine and we will soon be on the Polish border²⁹.

25 Three months in occupation and Russian captivity: the story of the village head of Kyrylivka in the Zaporizhzhia region. Radio Liberty. 13.01.2024: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/mer-kyrylivky-intervyu/32764724.html>

26 Abduction of civilians in Ukraine. Torture. Captivity. Khodiat Slukhy. RAMINA, 29.05.2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlh0-md6Ykg&t=3292s>

27 Three months in occupation and Russian captivity: the story of the village head of Kyrylivka in the Zaporizhzhia region. Radio Liberty. 13.01.2024: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/mer-kyrylivky-intervyu/32764724.html>

28 Testimonies from the Zaporizhzhia region, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (31.10.2023).

29 Testimonies from the Kherson region documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (24.06.2023).

In more than 35% of the analysed cases, attempts were made to persuade victims to cooperate in places of detention. The actual number of such cases is likely to be higher.

Based on the testimonies of victims and the analysis of the “appointments” of the heads of the occupation administrations, it can be concluded that the strategy chosen by the RF did not yield the desired results. It failed to consolidate the appearance of legitimacy of Russian control over the territory by persuading and coercing the cooperation of legitimate local government representatives, as well as to find qualified personnel among the population loyal to the RF to replace them.

” *Indeed, they have a shortage of staff, and the people who have come now are far from local government and, let's say, from management. And they were interested in keeping those people who work and know the situation on the ground, and go over to the side of the occupiers and work to avoid a social explosion*³⁰.

The analysis of “appointments” in the occupation administrations only confirms these conclusions. For example, one can trace the “personnel rotation” of the heads of the district occupation administration in the village of Hornostaivka, Kherson region. The head of the village was unlawfully detained on 3 August 2022 and released only at the end of December 2022 (he was unlawfully detained for 143 days).

On 5 August 2022, Yuriy Hrankin was “appointed” the head of the occupation administration in the village of Hornostaivka. He is not a local, and it is not known whether he had any managerial experience before. However, with Hrankin’s “appointment”, pressure on the local businesses in the community began. On 5 August, electronic payment terminals were confiscated from entrepreneurs at the local market, and one of the businessmen was detained³¹.

According to media reports, in November 2022, Hrankin disappeared. He was “replaced” by **Petro Melnychenko**, a former Ukrainian soldier who had previously served a sentence for murder and rape. Before his “appointment”, Melnychenko worked as an electrician and repaired household appliances³².

In April 2023, the appointed “head” of the occupation administration in Hornostaivka was a citizen of the RF, **Nikolai Smorodinov**³³. On 7 September 2023, Smorodinov was replaced by another Russian citizen, **Yurii Kolosov**³⁴. Subsequently, on 19 October 2023, the aforementioned Yuriy Turulov (former head of the occupation administration in Chornobaivka, before the occupation, he was a director of the local bus station) replaced Kolosov as head of the occupation administration in the village³⁵.

30 He was captured in Nikolske. Vasyl Mitko about the occupation of the village. Svoi, 09.09.2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwliqFI1fOc>

31 In the Kherson region, after the occupiers appointed a governor of Hornostaivka, local residents began to leave the village en masse. The Centre of Journalistic Investigations. 11.08.2022: <https://investigator.org.ua/ua/news-2/245705/>

32 After the escape of the Gauleiter of Hornostaivka, Yuriy Hrankin, the occupiers appointed an electrician with a criminal past, Petro Melnychenko, to this “position”. The Centre of Journalistic Investigations. 19.02.2023: <https://investigator.org.ua/ua/news-2/251710/>

33 Russian Nikolai Smorodinov was appointed the new gauleiter of Hornostaivka in the Kherson region by the occupiers. The Centre of Journalistic Investigations. 07.05.2023: <https://investigator.org.ua/ua/news-2/254385/>

34 Russian Yurii Kolosov was appointed by the occupiers as the fourth gauleiter of Hornostaivka in the Kherson region. The Centre of Journalistic Investigations. 12.09.2022: <https://investigator.org.ua/ua/news-2/258450/>

35 Yuriy Turulov, former gauleiter of Chornobaivka, was appointed the fifth gauleiter of Hornostaivka in the Kherson region. The Centre of Journalistic Investigations. 21.10.2023: <https://investigator.org.ua/ua/news-2/259540/>

From the beginning of August 2022 to the beginning of October 2023, the district occupation administration in the village of Hornostaivka was headed by 5 different “appointees”, none of whom had the necessary managerial competencies and experience.

The situation with the “personnel reserve” of the occupation authorities in other occupied communities, at least until the beginning of 2023, was similar: usually, they “appointed” people without managerial experience.

At the same time, in the long run, the occupying power probably did not count on local collaborators in managerial and administrative “positions”. Both because of their professional inadequacies and because of the dubious way they were “appointed” and their biographies. Whenever possible, they were replaced by natives and citizens of the RF.

Mykolaiv Regional State Administration. On 29 March 2022,
the Russian military fired a missile at the building.
The strike killed 37 people.
Photo: Truth Hounds



CHAPTER 2:

CONTEXT OF CRIMES COMMITTED BY THE RUSSIAN FORCES AGAINST LOCAL AUTHORITIES UNDER OCCUPATION

To understand the strategy of Russian representatives in the TOT of Ukraine in the context of persecuting local authorities, it is important to outline the conditions in which the civilian population was living after the occupation of the territory, as well as the specifics of the response of local government representatives to the challenges caused by the invasion and occupation.

2.1. THE SITUATION IN TERRITORIAL COMMUNITIES OCCUPIED IN FEBRUARY AND MARCH 2022

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, led to the rapid seizure of large areas in the Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkiv, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Russian troops advanced rapidly, sometimes bypassing small settlements, leaving some communities in the so-called “grey zone”.

The communities under occupation faced acute humanitarian and governance crises from the outset. The logistics of food, medicine, and fuel supplies were disrupted, and access to medical care was critically hampered. Some medical facilities were used by Russian forces as military hospitals³⁶.

Stocks of basic goods were quickly exhausted. The destruction of infrastructure and the isolation of communities made it impossible to sustainably evacuate the population or deliver humanitarian supplies, especially after the Russian side deliberately blocked humanitarian corridors.

In particular, civilians were deliberately blocked from leaving the combat zone — they were not allowed to leave or were subjected to lethal fire³⁷.

There were cases when a humanitarian convoy, whose movement had been previously agreed upon, was led by the head of the community or the mayor. In this way, local government representatives tried to use their authority to help the convoy pass. In one of the known cases,

36 “Do you think we consider you humans? We don't”: a report from the village of Pisky-Radkivski, which was under occupation for six months. ZMINA, 08.11.2022: <https://zmina.info/articles/vy-dumayete-my-vas-lyud%CA%B9my-vvazhayemo-my-ne-vvazhayemo-reportazh-z-sela-pisky-rad%CA%B9kivs%CA%B9ki-yake-piv-roku-zhylo-pid-okupatsiyeyu/>

37 Killings of civilians: Summary executions and attacks on individual civilians in Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy Regions in the context of the Russian Federation's armed attack against Ukraine, 24 February–31 October 2022. OHCHR, December 2022, para. 64–68: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2022/2022-12-07-OHCHR-Thematic-Report-Killings-UKR.pdf>

on 21 April 2022, an evacuation convoy was not allowed to pass through the Kherson region, and the head of the community who headed it was detained for a day³⁸.

Ivan Samoidiuk, Deputy Mayor of the city of Enerhodar, Zaporizhzhia region, was detained under similar circumstances. On 18 March 2022, he brought a convoy with humanitarian aid to his city, and on the morning of 19 March, he was detained. Samoidiuk spent 333 days in unlawful detention and was released only in February 2023.

The level of security in the communities has also significantly decreased. In many settlements, law enforcement agencies were evacuated in the early days of the war. This led to an increase in crime, looting, and domestic violence.

The remaining law enforcement officers could no longer openly perform their duties. The occupying forces perceived all law enforcement officers, including former ones, through the lens of their potential ability to organise armed resistance. Accordingly, such people were unlawfully detained, and information about them was actively collected (for similar reasons, Russian forces primarily detained ATO veterans, pro-Ukrainian activists, owners of hunting weapons, etc.)

Russian troops also posed a danger to civilians. In the first week of the invasion, the attitude of the Russian military began to change: from restrained and neutral to perceiving all civilians as a potential threat.

Therefore, local authorities were forced to solve security issues on their own; examples being the destruction of sensitive information, including personal data of residents, lists of conscripts, information on the personnel of the deputy corps, administrations, etc., as well as by organising volunteer patrols, municipal guards — civilian formations to maintain law and order. According to the interviewees, the Russian military later perceived such civilian formations as created for the purposes of violent resistance.

Up to a certain point, “local” checkpoints could even be organised in the communities, manned by volunteers. There are also other specific cases of local heads trying to prevent looting and conflicts between the Russian military and civilians.

The head of one of the villages in the Kherson region, where the occupation forces were not permanently based, was forced to communicate with representatives of the so-called “DPR” after two shops in the village were looted. The military involved in the looting had also lost parts of their equipment during the incident³⁹. Later, the head was detained, and they tried to obtain information about ATO veterans and veterans of the Soviet–Afghan War. The man was held in detention for almost a month, tortured (beaten, threatened with one of his legs to be shot)⁴⁰.

In another case, the village head tried to be present when the Russian military checked the houses and documents of local residents.

“ Since the beginning of the war, Russian soldiers have come to the village multiple times. They conducted door-to-door checks, checking IDs and mobile phones [...] Sasha tried to be present during these checks, convinced them not to break down gates and doors in houses

38 Vladymyr Marchuk – the head of the Novovorontsovka ATC was released from captivity. Oleksandr Vilkul, verified Facebook page, 22.04.2022: https://www.facebook.com/OleksandrVilkul/posts/575196713974531?_rdr

39 This is a type of intimidation with a weapon, also known as “Russian roulette”. It carries a direct risk of gunshot wounds. See: “I am a patriot, they beat me on the knees for that. Then they wanted to play Russian roulette”. Museum “Civil Voices” of the Rinat Akhmetov Foundation. 17.10.2023: <https://civilvoicesmuseum.org/stories/ya-patriot-vony-mene-za-tse-po-kolinah-byly-potim-im-zakortilo-zigraty-v-rosiysku-ruletku>

40 Ibid.

where there were no owners. He also asked the military not to settle in the kindergarten and school. The occupiers repeatedly threatened him with deportation to Russia, but he still tried to save people's property⁴¹.

The man was later accused of “disseminating pro-Ukrainian propaganda” and detained. As a result of nine days of unlawful detention and torture, the head was diagnosed with fractures of the facial bones, severe neurological disorders — loss of vision, memory problems.

There were also cases when local authorities tried to prevent Russian troops from entering their settlements. Community leaders organised checkpoints, blocked roads and negotiated with the occupiers. This practice was typical of the Kyiv and Chernihiv regions, as well as the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions. In many cases, it was precisely because of this activity that local government representatives came to the attention of Russian forces and became targets of further persecution.

One of the village heads in the Chernihiv region was detained on 29 March 2022 because he rallied his fellow villagers to block both roads leading to the village with tree trunks. Road signs were also removed in the vicinity. The head was allegedly ready to be released on the condition that the locals would “clear the rubble”. The military also told the villagers to “look for a new head” because they would “take him with them”⁴². The man's whereabouts have remained unknown since his detention.

In another case, also in the Chernihiv region, on 27 February 2022, villagers led by the head managed to stop a military convoy at the entrance to the village. The head explained to the senior officer that the locals were afraid of the military and did not want to see them in their village, and they were ready to “lie down under the tanks”. The convoy turned around, and the villagers were able to quickly block the entrance with fallen trees, concrete blocks and car tyres. After that, the head of the village was forced to meet with a representative of the RF daily and arrange for volunteer vehicles with bread and milk to pass through the community. The Russian military did not enter the village for almost a month. On 23 March 2022, during another attempt to block the movement of a military convoy, the head was detained, allegedly by the Russian FSB. The man was unlawfully held and tortured for a day and a half, severely beaten, threatened with murder and injury. They threatened his family and tried to persuade them to cooperate. The next day, the villagers dismantled the barricades and the head was released. Ten days later, the Russian military retreated from the area.

At the same time, it was difficult for communities to effectively coordinate their actions with central authorities. Representatives of local self-government bodies acted at their own discretion, without clear instructions and algorithms for dealing with the occupation. There was a clear lack of effective communication with the higher-level civil-military administrations, which were supposed to determine the logic of local self-government representatives' actions. In particular, on basic issues such as who should evacuate from the local self-government and what are the acceptable forms of interaction with representatives of the occupation contingent. This has created legal and moral uncertainty, in particular in terms of the boundaries of acceptable behaviour (e.g. what form of interaction with the occupation forces would not be considered collaborationism).

⁴¹ Testimony from the Kherson region (from open sources, anonymised), 26.12.2022.

⁴² Testimonies from the Chernihiv region, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA and MIHR (ZMINA — 12.10.2023, MIHR — 19.07.2023).

Below, we can compare the testimonies of government officials from the occupied territories of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.

“ Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, we have been left alone with our problems. All law enforcement agencies have left. We have not received any instructions from the district or regional authorities on how to act under the occupation. During the online meetings [...], the most frequently heard phrase from various regional officials was: “We know it’s hard for you, but you have to hold on”. I held on until 29 March [2022]⁴³.

“ We, the local authorities, stayed. Because the task was to evacuate the population and keep the city without chaos and panic in the conditions of survival. Because there were absolutely no recommendations, neither from the central government nor from anyone else. So we acted at our own discretion⁴⁴.

“ For the first two weeks after Russia’s full-scale invasion, we were in an information vacuum. On 24 February 2022, we heard the sounds of hostilities in [...]. At the time, we did not believe that all this was happening. But everywhere we were convinced that we should not worry, that ‘everything is fine, everything is under control, don’t panic’. I personally was told the same thing. In those days, we had no police, no public services at all, except for the fire brigade⁴⁵.

The above quotes confirm the same atmosphere of uncertainty, information vacuum and additional psychological stress experienced by community leaders in different regions of Ukraine.

2.2. LOCAL AUTHORITIES’ RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES OF ARMED CONFLICT AND OCCUPATION

The European Charter of Local Self-Government states in its preamble that “the right of citizens to take part in the conduct of public affairs [...] can be exercised most directly at the local level”⁴⁶. The actual practice of local self-government in Ukraine confirms this thesis.

The duty of a community head to “serve the community and the people of Ukraine”⁴⁷ is formally enshrined in the oath of office of a local self-government official. At the same time, the obligations of a mayor or village head to the people who elected them to office also have a significant personal dimension. The heads of communities are “closest” to the source of legitimacy and their area of responsibility. Usually, settlement, village, and city mayors are residents or natives of the communities they govern; they possess significant social capital and a network of informal connections. As a result, they often feel connected to “their community” and “their people”. At the same time, this means that local government leaders, under occupation, could neglect the risks to their personal safety in favour of the interests of the community.

43 The price of patriotism: how Nadezhda residents fought for freedom. Bilozerka.info. 26.12.2022. 17.10.2023: <https://bilozerka.info/czina-patriotyzmu-yak-borolysya-za-svobodu-nadezhdivczi/>

44 Testimonies from the Zaporizhzhia region, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (06.09.2023).

45 ‘Don’t worry, we will hide it so well that no one will find it again.’ Oleh Yakhniienko, head of the Mylivka community, about life under occupation, his capture and the liberation of the village. The Centre of Journalistic Investigations. 29.08.2023: <https://investigator.org.ua/ua/topnews/258028/>

46 European Charter of Local Self-Government: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/994_036#Text

47 Law of Ukraine “On Service in Local Self-Government Bodies”. Art. 11: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2493-14#Text>

The local authorities, remaining in the communities, in fact assumed the primary responsibility for organising life support, maintaining order and assisting the population. Despite the absence of resources and the threat from the occupiers, officials continued to perform managerial functions: providing communities with water, electricity, food, etc.

Local government representatives, in addition to performing local government functions, may also own their own business or have other resources that allow them to influence the development of crisis situations.

There were cases when a deputy-farmer provided meat or milk to vulnerable people as a volunteer, or as the head of a transport company, provided buses for the evacuation of civilians. Not all business representatives acted in this way. However, these cases are worth highlighting because such volunteer activity was later one of the reasons for the detention of these people by the Russian military or the FSB.

“ Our enterprise gave away milk for free. We provided it to Kherson hospitals, the regional maternity hospital and the butter factory. There was no way to get to Mykolaiv, so we gave milk and tried to survive in order to pay people’s salaries and buy fuel, oil and necessary spare parts. Equipment was breaking down, and there was no place to buy spare parts. It was scary under occupation⁴⁸.

“ The villagers organised and gathered people on their own, and the local authorities supported this initiative. D. [...] provided a bus from Agrofirma named after Michurin APC and his employee, the bus driver, for the evacuation. In total, it was planned that three buses would go for the first evacuation, but the number of people who came was much lower than the number of people who had signed up⁴⁹.

Both officials mentioned were later unlawfully detained.

Local leaders have also tried to organise the delivery of humanitarian supplies to their communities, seeking assistance from the Ukrainian Red Cross Society or volunteers. As mentioned above, the ability to travel with humanitarian supplies to the occupied communities was blocked around the end of March 2022. Russian forces also systematically detained drivers who were trying to bring humanitarian aid.

“ The volunteer headquarters started recruiting thanks to our benefactor entrepreneurs and agricultural producers, who provided food. We found donors who were located in the non-occupied territory and agreed to transfer funds to entrepreneurs’ accounts via non-cash accounts. And the entrepreneur provided the goods. They (the volunteers) travelled to Kakhovka and probably somewhere near Crimea. But we also had Ukrainian-made goods, and this was also a requirement of international donors. That the foodstuffs were not Russian-made, without Russian labelling”⁵⁰.

48 Three circles of hell of Antonina Cherednyk. Vgoru. 11.09.2023: <https://vgoru.org/istoriyi/tri-kola-pekla-antonini-cherednyk>

49 A message on the official page of one of the local communities in the Zaporizhzhia region. A deputy of the regional council and owner of a motor transport company organised the evacuation of community residents. The man was later detained but released. The circumstances of his detention and release are unknown. See: The first evacuation column. Mykhailivske community. Zaporizhzhia region, Vasylivka district. 11.03.2022: <https://mihajlivska-gromada.gov.ua/news/1647242740/>

50 Testimonies from the Kherson region, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (24.06.2023).

However, in most documented cases, the occupying forces attempted to coerce representatives of Ukrainian local authorities in the communities to distribute “Russian humanitarian aid” among the population.

“ On 28 March, the next LPR members arrived and stayed here until 6 September. On 30 March, “humanitarian aid” was brought from the city council in vehicles marked with “Z”⁵¹. I refused to distribute it, so the military did it themselves. It was all organised by a major with the call sign “Ramses”. Then he told people that their head did not cooperate with them, that I did not want to deal with humanitarian aid⁵².

It can be argued that such offers by the Russian military were a kind of loyalty test, and they marked community leaders who refused them accordingly for further pressure. After all, from a formal point of view, the distribution of aid to the population can always be justified by humanitarian needs, regardless of the origin of the aid. Such actions cannot be considered direct assistance to the occupation forces. At the same time, the refusal of the official to distribute Russian humanitarian aid was perceived by the Russian military as a tacit non-recognition of the occupation administration within their community.

Some representatives of local self-government and administrations, as well as deputies, were also involved in resisting the occupation. In some cases, the village head could coordinate the actions of the local territorial defence (VFTC) or otherwise interact with the Ukrainian military. In this case, he would hide his official status and identity from the occupation forces and try not to contact them.

This strategy could be relatively successful only in the short term (during the first month of the armed conflict) and only in small communities. For example, in the Kyiv region, one of the village heads was able to hide in the community for about a month, while continuing to perform her functions.

However, much more often, local self-government representatives and officials were organisers or visible participants in non-violent public resistance — protests and rallies.

Public resistance to the occupation, especially by village or town leaders, was extremely important — it prevented other residents from collaborating with the occupiers⁵³, and it became a symbolic marker of the value of resistance and indicated that the legitimate Ukrainian authorities were not ceasing to perform their functions.

Such actions contradicted the goals of the RF representatives to seize and further retain power in the occupied territories. Accordingly, people involved in peaceful resistance to the occupation were subjected to persecution. Systematic unlawful detentions of protesters continued in Kherson. The situation in smaller towns, where there were fewer protesters for obvious reasons, became even more threatening. They could be detained immediately after the rally or even at the time of the rally.

For example, on 1 March 2022, local deputy and entrepreneur **Mykola Maslii** was detained at a rally in the city of Kupiansk, Kharkiv region. According to eyewitnesses, the man was

51 That is, in civilian vehicles marked with the identifying signs of the Russian Armed Forces (the Latin letter “Z”).

52 Testimonies from the Kharkiv region, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (02.02.2023).

53 “The very fact that there was resistance, even if it was not so obvious, made it impossible to have this kind of collaboration”. — I. Semyvolos, Executive Director of the Center for Middle East Studies. From the video: “Prymorsk. Resistance to Occupation”. UAMES on Ukraine and the Middle East. 25.12.2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onCRgZgdbfi&t=40s>

called for a conversation by the Russian military and then pushed into a military jeep. Maslii's whereabouts are still unknown. ZMINA also documented the detention of other participants in the protest, who were obviously identified from the video footage⁵⁴.

Self-organisation of the population, volunteer and management initiatives, in particular with the participation of local government representatives, created alternative centres of influence in the community and complicated the process of establishing control by the occupation forces, leading to targeted actions against them.

54 “85% of men will pass through this detention centre”: analysis of the testimonies of those detained in the district police department during the occupation of Kupiansk / O. Syniuk, Ye. Sokurenko, S. Kochmarskyi; Human Rights Centre ZMINA. – Kyiv, 2024. – 44 p: <https://zmina.ua/publication/85-cholovikiv-projde-cherez-czej-izolyator-analiz-svidchen-utrymuvanyh-u-rajviddili-policziji-pid-chas-okupacziji-kupyanska/>

The “House of Culture” of the Krasnopillia village council
(Sumy region) damaged by Russian strikes.
Photo: Suspilne Sumy



CHAPTER 3:

CHARACTERISTICS OF CRIMES AGAINST LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN THE TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE

Given Russia's long-term goals of establishing control over the temporarily occupied territories, its armed forces have consistently attacked legitimate government institutions. Local government representatives were persuaded to cooperate, and in case of refusal, they were unlawfully detained, tortured and cruelly treated, and subjected to psychological pressure. Unlawful detentions were an instrument of intimidation designed to force officials to abandon their duties or leave the territory. At the same time, the occupying forces tried to use the detainees as a source of relevant information about the situation in the community, as representatives of managerial competences or in other ways. In some cases, local government representatives were murdered.

3.1. UNLAWFUL DETENTIONS OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

In total, based on in-depth interviews and monitoring of open sources of information, ZMINA identified 133 cases with signs of unlawful detention involving local government representatives. Half of all cases were recorded in the Kherson region. For example, at least 12 arbitrary detentions took place in the city of Beryslav and the Beryslav district of the Kherson region (8 detentions of local government leaders, 2 cases of detention of local deputies and 2 detentions of local officials).

Of all the cases of unlawful detention taken into account in the preparation of this research, more than half were detentions of local leaders, including former ones. The remaining detainees were local deputies and officials.

The case of the detention on 26 March 2022 of the mayor of Slavutych, Kyiv region, **Yurii Fomichev**, is illustrative. On that day, the Russian military entered the city but faced public resistance. At the initiative of the mayor, a pro-Ukrainian rally was held in the city's central square. Fomichev was detained but later released. As the mayor later said at the rally, he managed to reach certain agreements with the occupation forces. In particular, Fomichev tried to prevent military confrontations directly in the territory of the city (the Russian military was not to enter Slavutych, but the local territorial defence would not resist them). Ukrainian authorities and the humanitarian headquarters remained in the city, but Russian forces were to deliver their humanitarian aid (the mayor publicly refused to distribute it, but indicated that civilians could take it at their own discretion). Fomichev also tried to resolve

the issue of staff rotation at the ChNPP, the release of other unlawfully detained persons and the opening of “green corridors” for the evacuation of civilians⁵⁵.

Fomichev’s relative success as a negotiator can be explained by several factors: the significant public support of the local population, visible to the occupiers; the special status of Slavutych as a satellite town of the ChNPP; and the current situation of the Russian military, which, as of the end of March 2022, realised that they could not successfully attack the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. The city of Slavutych was liberated by the Ukrainian military on 3 April 2022.

However, in those regions that had been under occupation for longer and where Russian forces were not pressured by the prospect of a Ukrainian counter-offensive, the first unlawful detentions, which mostly lasted a day, could have been only the beginning of pressure on community heads.

“ The situation is as follows — since the beginning of May [2022], “messengers from the other side” began coming to persuade me to switch to Russia’s side. To lead their authority locally. It was in early May, then it was about a month later, and then again in the first decade of July. Our last conversation was already on raised tones. I think this provoked the fact that I was captured. Because the first two times they came, they were interested in the situation, the mood of the population (more pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian). They made their offers “almost politely”, I would call it that. The last time they came, our head was with them [...] — well, he is a collaborator, a criminal case has been opened against him. He came with two assistants, former police officers. And they began to persuade me. They started saying ‘Russia is here forever’, but I stood my ground — that Ukraine would prevail.

Then they started making accusations about why our humanitarian headquarters was operating. Their next demand was that even if the humanitarian headquarters were to operate, we should distribute Russian humanitarian aid. I refused. They invited the women who worked in our humanitarian headquarters, and they also said they would not distribute Russian humanitarian aid. The scandal continued. We talked for about an hour. Then they went to the local commandant’s office. There were already threats to my physical health. I regretted not evacuating my family⁵⁶.

The length of time that representatives of the occupation administration exerted pressure on community heads, and thus moved from encouragement to threats and actual detention, depended on the specifics of the situation on the ground. In particular, it depended on how quickly the RF needed to establish control over the community, how important it was to persuade a particular head to cooperate, etc. In some cases, this period of “establishing contact” could last up to 1-2 months. At the same time, this practice of persuading cooperation through a gradual increase of pressure was quite typical.

Pressure on the heads of communities from local residents who had already agreed to voluntarily cooperate with the occupation administrations was common. Among them could be police officers, officials, etc. Such cases were an element of the Russian strategy of inter-

55 See Yu. Fomichev’s speech at the rally on 26 March 2022: Slavutych is Ukraine! Slavutich_LIVE. 26.03.2022: <https://youtu.be/4TEW2UFZ-4s?t=513>

See also the mayor’s address to the community: Results of 26.03.2022 from the Mayor of Slavutych Yurii Fomichev. Slavutich_LIVE. 26.03.2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60_XETEUYJc

56 Testimonies from the Kherson region documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (24.06.2023).

action with the civilian population in the TOT; presumably, the Russian military and the FSB expected that the example and arguments of these people could be more effective⁵⁷.

It is noteworthy that the motivation for the detention of local community heads was to some extent similar to the motivation for the detention and pressure on the heads of large cultural institutions. On 23 March 2022, **Oleksandr Knyha**, Deputy with the regional council and head of the Mykola Kulish Kherson Regional Academic Theatre, was detained in Kherson. The man was accused of organising pro-Ukrainian rallies and interrogated at the territory of the Kherson SIZO. However, there was no physical violence during the interrogation, and Knyha was released in the evening of the same day. The release was facilitated by the wide publicity of his detention (during the interrogation, he was told that 'he has many friends').

At the time of his detention, Knyha lived in Oleshky, patrolled the village together with other civilians to prevent looting and helped people find food. A bomb shelter was set up in the territory of the theatre in Kherson, where civilians were constantly staying⁵⁸.

After his release, a representative of the Russian Federal Security Service summoned Knyha for a conversation and tried to persuade him to cooperate, both as a member of the regional council and as the head of the theatre. The occupation administration appointed a man who had previously worked there as a security guard as the new “director of the theatre”.

On 11 March 2022, Museum Director **Leila Ibrahimova** was detained for a similar reason to establish control over the Melitopol City Local Lore Museum and gain access to its funds. In addition, the woman had a deputy mandate in the Zaporizhzhia Regional Council. Ibrahimova refused to cooperate and was released after several hours. Later, the occupation forces stole a collection of Scythian gold from the museum⁵⁹.

One of the main reasons for the pressure or detention of the local government representative was the desire of the occupying forces to use and subjugate the legitimate authority or, more broadly, the social capital that these people possessed as authorised to perform managerial functions and represent the interests of the community.

At the same time, those representatives of local self-government and authorities who were not sufficiently recognisable as “leaders” or “managers” could be detained for volunteering, pro-Ukrainian views, or using common accusations of “adjusting fire” and passing information to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, etc. However, once their official status was identified, it usually affected their situation⁶⁰.

57 The Human Rights Centre ZMINA documented cases in which local residents loyal to Russia (on their own initiative or in coordination with the occupation forces) participated in psychological pressure or even violence against victims. In particular, evidence of this was documented in the Kharkiv, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.

58 'Unbreakable Kherson': Director of the Kherson Theatre Oleksandr Knyha about the occupation, his own abduction and work. Suspilne Kultura. 19.09.2022: <https://suspilne.media/culture/282421-nezlamnij-herson-direktor-hersonskogo-teatru-oleksandr-knyha-pro-okupaciju-vlasne-vikradenna-ta-robotu/>; “They pulled a stinking hat over my eyes, twisted my arms and dragged me away”: Director of the Kherson Theatre on being held captive by the Russians. Fakty, 28.09.2022 <https://fakty.ua/408133-mne-natyanuli-na-glaza-vonyuchuyu-shapku-zalomili-ruki-i-potacshili-direktor-hersonskogo-teatra-o-prebyvanii-v-plenu-rashistov>; The theatre was washed and cleaned because it looked like it had been raped. A frank interview with the director of a theatre in Kherson. Vikna. 11.09.2023: <https://vikna.tv/istorii/interviu/oleksandr-knyha-intervyu-pro-vijnu-i-teatr-kulisha/>

59 They put me in a car and put a black bag on my head — Leila Ibrahimova about her detention. Crimean Tatar Resource Centre, 06.05.2022: <https://ctrcenter.org/uk/7676-mene-posadili-v-avto-nadyagli-na-golovu-chornij-mishok-lyejla-ibragimova-pro-svoye-zatrimannya>

60 For a general description of the motivation for arbitrary detention and torture of civilians, see, for example, the material: Torture and ill-treatment of civilian population in Ukrainian territories that were under Russian occupation (on the example of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson regions): analytical report / B. Petruniok, O. Hnatiuk, T. Pechonchuk; ZMINA Human Rights Centre. — Kyiv, 2023. — P. 31: <https://surl.li/llzqaf>

As in the case of the detention of the mayor of Slavutych, visible public support from the local community could have been critical to the victims' situation.

“ Since I live in the centre of the village, by that time several dozen villagers had already gathered near my house, because they knew they might come for me. There were also entrepreneurs in cars. And an argument started [with the occupation “police”], and so on”.

The residents began asking, “What do you want?” We came with good intentions. Then I refused to become mayor again [...] and this “DPR” man received a message. He was simultaneously messaging someone who gave him... [an instruction]. And he said that ‘we have to invite you to come with us for a conversation’.

The residents started blocking the car, trying to block the exit from the yard. And then the “DPR” man started shouting, waving his hands and said: ‘If you don’t go with us in a nice way, then Russian troops will enter the village and the residents will suffer’. I then asked the people to step back⁶¹.

Viktor Kopytko, one of the village heads in the Kherson region, was held for two weeks in the yard of his own house and locked in a cellar at night. The man was severely beaten every day, and his feet were burned with a hot poker. According to his testimony, he was ready to commit suicide because of the constant beatings. However, he was rescued by the villagers who tried to stand up for their head and the local women who brought him food.

“ As a head, I have to take care of my fellow villagers and fulfil my duty, no matter what. [...] I don’t know how I managed to survive everything. It all seems like a fog now. [...] I want to ask you. If you can, please thank the girls who brought me water and food for me. [...] I am also grateful to my other villagers. I still don’t even know everyone who came to stand up for me [...]. I’ll never forget it, how they begged the Russians to let me go, how the women were crying, and the men were shouting. How can I leave such people and stop working after all this? I can’t⁶².

3.2. CONDITIONS OF UNLAWFUL DETENTION OF GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, CRUEL TREATMENT AND TORTURE

The conditions of unlawful detention of this group of victims did not differ from those of other civilians. In all documented cases, the conditions of detention were inadequate, and in some cases, they could reach the threshold of torture, regardless of the specifics of the treatment of detainees.

However, if the detainee’s identity was of clear interest to the occupation administration, they could be intimidated, but the risk of physical violence in detention was reduced. The forms of pressure used also included cases when people were placed in the cells with officials to convince them of the “need to cooperate with the occupiers”.

61 Testimonies from the Zaporizhzhia region, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (31.10.2023).

62 “Man, don’t take it personally, but we have orders to beat you”. Viktor Kopytko, the head of Khreshchenivka village, about the occupation of the village, his arrest, torture and what gives him the strength to live on. The Centre of Journalistic Investigations. 16.11.2023: <https://investigator.org.ua/ua/publication/south-articles/260572/>

“ A man was put in my cell who, as I understand it, was supposed to persuade me. That is, if, for example, I was given cow tongues with mouldy bread and tea made from river water, in fact, this man had cookies, sweets, Pepsi and the like. He offered me some, asked why I hadn't gone to work, and said that they [the Russians] are doing terrible things here, so I should agree, and so on⁶³.

However, the risk of physical violence against detained officials could not be completely ruled out. The potential risk that a person would face was likely determined by several factors, including the extent to which the detainee was “valuable”, the reasons and circumstances for their detention, the unit that detained and interrogated the victim, the detainee's health condition, i.e. the threshold for violence that they could endure, etc.

Previous studies of crimes committed against the civilian population in territories occupied by the RF after 24 February 2022 show that unlawful detentions, detention in places of deprivation of liberty, and especially interrogations were associated with a significant risk of torture. Common forms of abuse included severe beatings (inflicted with hands, feet, batons, or other improvised objects) and torture by electric shock (using stun guns or modified TA-57 military field telephones known as “tapik” the terminals of which could be attached to fingers on the hands or feet, ears, or genitals); cases of torture by hanging, drowning, infliction of injuries or wounds, and others were also documented⁶⁴.

Unlawfully detained mayors could be kept in solitary confinement, separately from others. Or, for example, they could be moved to places of unlawful detention where they could not be recognised. This may indicate an attempt to isolate local leaders, to further conceal the fact of their detention, and to prevent communication between these people and other unlawfully detained members of the community.

In a number of cases, indirect pressure on local government representatives through the detention of their relatives was documented. The mayor of one city was forced to “exchange himself” for his detained father. In several other cases, the sons of local government representatives were detained.

Among the cases of unlawful detention of members of the same family, the case of the Barchuk family is notable. At the time of the Russian invasion, **Serhii Barchuk** was the Deputy Head of the Kherson Regional Department of the Pension Fund of Ukraine. Being aware of how

63 Testimonies from the Zaporizhzhia region, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (31.10.2023).

64 For more information on the practice of torture of civilians, see, in particular, ZMINA's thematic reports: Torture and ill-treatment of civilian population in Ukrainian territories that were under Russian occupation (on the example of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson regions): analytical report / B. Petruniok, O. Hnatiuk, T. Pechonchyk; ZMINA Human Rights Centre. – Kyiv, 2023. – 60 p.: <https://zmina.ua/publication/katuvannya-ta-zhorstoke-povodzhennya-z-zyvilnym-naselennym-na-ukrayinskyh-terytoriyah-yaki-perebuvaly-pid-rosijskoyu-okupacziyeyu-na-prikladi-kyivskoyi-harkivskoyi-ta-hersonskoyi-oblastej/>; “Women's cells” of Kherson torture chamber: analytical report based on the testimonies of detainees/ O. Syniuk, Ye. Sokurenko, N. Okhotnikova; Human Rights Centre ZMINA. – Kyiv, 2023. – 32 p.: <https://zmina.ua/publication/zhinochi-kamery-hersonskoyi-kativni-analitychnyj-zvit-za-svidchennyamy-utrymuvanyh/>; Torture chamber at school: an analysis of the testimonies of detainees in the village of Bilyayivka, Kherson region / O. Syniuk, Ye. Sokurenko; Human Rights Centre ZMINA. – Kyiv, 2023. – 33 p.: <https://zmina.ua/publication/kativnya-u-shkoli-analiz-svidchen-utrymuvanyh-u-seli-bilyayivka-hersonskoyi-oblasti/>; 85% of men will pass through this detention centre»: analysis of the testimonies of those detained in the district police department during the occupation of Kupiansk / O. Syniuk, Ye. Sokurenko, S. Kochmarskyi; Human Rights Centre ZMINA. – Kyiv, 2024. – 44 p.: <https://zmina.ua/publication/85-cholovikiv-projde-cherez-czej-izolyator-analiz-svidchen-utrymuvanyh-u-rajviddili-policziyi-pid-chas-okupacziyi-kupyanska/>; 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 / B. Petruniok; Human Rights Centre ZMINA. – Kyiv, 2024. – 28 p.: <https://zmina.ua/publication/nezakonni-zatrymannya-katuvannya-i-zhorstoke-povodzhennya-z-zyvilnym-naselennym-ukrayiny-podibnist-pratyk-vchynennya-zlochyniv-v-oblastyah-okupovanyh-rosiyye-u-2022-rocz/>; “You're loyal to Ukraine – are you Nazi?” Torture and other violations as crimes against humanity by the Russian army in Ukraine OMCT, MIHR, ZMINA: <https://zmina.ua/publication/ty-virnyj-ukrayini-ty-naczyst-katuvannya-ta-inshi-porushennya-yak-zlochyny-proty-lyudyhanosti-z-boku-rosijskoyi-armiyi-v-ukrayini/>

sensitive the personal data held by the PFU is, and following the relevant recommendations of the National Agency of Ukraine for Civil Service⁶⁵, the man tried to hide the Pension Fund's computers but was detained on 17 July 2022. During the interrogation, he was beaten, resulting in a broken rib, and was strangled with a shoelace from a sneaker.

On 20 July 2022, Serhii's relatives, **Artem Barchuk**, **Lidiia Podozerska**, **Oleksii Barchuk** and family friend **Oleh Samotoi**, were detained for the same reasons. Representatives of the RF were preparing to bring criminal charges against the family, and they were forcibly transferred to SIZO in the temporarily occupied territory of the AR of Crimea, but in the summer of 2023, the Barchuk family was released⁶⁶.

3.3. MOTIVES BEHIND UNLAWFUL DETENTIONS

Since the spring of 2022, the detention of local government representatives in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine has become systematic and coordinated - according to the interviewees, this process, at least in the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, was led by the Russian FSB.

“They put me back in the car, told me that they were taking me to Nova Kakhovka and that I would undergo a special inspection there. If I passed their special inspection, they would take me back in about two weeks [...]. I understood that this “special service”, as they said, was the FSB. [...] [During the interrogation] they said: ‘We are from the FSB, we are doing our job’. They started asking me everything from the beginning, how everything happened since 24.02.2022⁶⁷.”

“It seems to me that FSB officers came to conduct the interrogations because the detainees were, as I understand it, either local government officials, civil servants, or employees of the “services”: police, SBU, and veterans of the police and SBU⁶⁸.”

Based on the data, we can identify three key motives for the persecution of local government representatives.

The first motive is to obtain information and use the managerial competencies of the detainees. They tried to use the government representatives as a source of the most complete and relevant information about the situation in the community. Representatives of the RF were interested in both general information about the organisation of work in the occupation, the number of local residents, and specific issues such as the territorial defence forces in the region, weapons storage sites, routes for humanitarian aid, etc. The situation was similar with the interrogation of detained officials, even if the victim was detained for other reasons (e.g.

65 Recommendations on the actions of heads of civil service, human resources management services and other civil servants in the event of the seizure of a settlement and/or a state body or an immediate threat of its seizure dated 17.03.2022. National Agency of Ukraine for Civil Service: <https://nads.gov.ua/npas/rekomendaciyi-shchodo-dij-kerivnikiv-derzhavnoyi-sluzhbi-sluzhb-upravlinnya-personalom-ta-inshih-derzhavnih-sluzhbovciv-u-razi-zahoplennya-nasele-nogo-punktu-taabo-derzhavnogo-organu-chi-bezpo>

66 A year of Russian captivity. How a family from Kherson, who wanted to keep their state property, found themselves under “arrest” but managed to break free. Media Initiative for Human Rights. 22.04.2024: <https://mipl.org.ua/rik-rosijskogo-polonu-yak-rodyna-hersoncziv-shho-hotila-zberegty-derzhavne-majno-opynylasya-pid-areshtom-ale-vyrvalas-na-svobodu/>; Chonhar, Crimea, collaborators, court and bribery: how a Kherson family was rescued from a Russian prison. Media Initiative for Human Rights. 29.04.2024: <https://mipl.org.ua/chongar-krym-kolaboranty-sud-i-pidkup-yak-iz-rosijskoyi-v%CA%BCyaznyczi-vryatuvaly-rodynu-hersoncziv/>

67 Testimonies from the Kherson region documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (24.06.2023).

68 Testimonies from the Zaporizhzhia region, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (06.09.2023).

volunteering). From the moment the FSB officers became aware of a person's official status, they tried to use them as a source of information, and later as a person with managerial competencies.

“ They [...] went to the employees of the regional council, the administration. They asked the following questions: ‘What kind of medicines did you deliver?’, ‘Who gave you access to the humanitarian aid?’, ‘Did you help the soldiers?’, and they were obviously going through my office, through my things. They opened my laptop. The next day, they asked for the password, then went to check it all out. They saw that I had access to projects of regional importance, to party documents⁶⁹.

According to some victims, the independent efforts of local heads to set up humanitarian headquarters and provide assistance without coordination with the RF caused a sharp negative attitude on the part of the FSB during interrogations.

There were cases when attempts were made to use the detainee's knowledge and managerial competencies while he was still in detention. One of the detained village heads, escorted by armed soldiers and in fact under guard, was forced to visit the village council employees and confiscate their work computers. He managed to pass a note to his colleague that he was being held. Later, due to inconsistencies in the actions of various Russian units, he was released and was able to leave the occupied territory.

The second motive is to clarify the political position and identify anti-Russian views. The interrogations of detainees were accompanied by provocative questions to get political statements from the detainees, which could be interpreted as a manifestation of anti-Russian sentiment and used for propaganda purposes to further justify their detention.

The majority of victims were aware of the risks of such questions and tried to avoid them during interrogations or when recording propaganda videos.

“ When they started asking me political questions, I kept saying that I am a mayor-manager. My responsibility is water, sewage, and heating. I don't know anything about that, we don't have any lists of ATO veterans, that's all a state programme...⁷⁰.

In some cases, victims declared their views despite the obvious risks. For example, the former Mayor of Kherson, **Volodymyr Mykolaenko**, who was detained for refusing to cooperate with the occupation administration, after detention, during the recording of a propaganda video, affirmatively answered the question whether he considered Roman Shukhevych a hero⁷¹.

“ ...[Russian propagandist I. Litomin⁷²] – Is Shukhevych really a hero to you?
[V. Mykolaenko] – If this title was given to him by the country, then he is a hero for that country.

69 Anonymous testimonies documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA.(21.09.2023).

70 Testimonies from the Kherson region documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (24.06.2023).

71 Roman Shukhevych (1907-1950) was a Ukrainian political and military figure. In 1943-1950, he led the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which, declaring its efforts to create a Ukrainian state, fought against Nazi and Soviet forces in World War II. Russian propaganda falsely accuses the UPA of fighting on the side of Nazi Germany. (According to the Nuremberg Tribunal, the UPA is not included in the list of organisations that fought on the side of the Nazis.) In 1950, Shukhevych was killed in a battle with the NKVD troops of the USSR. In 2007, Roman Shukhevych was posthumously awarded the title of Hero of Ukraine, but in 2011 this decision was cancelled in court for political reasons. The place and role of the UPA in the history of Ukraine and the Second World War is the subject of a wide professional historical debate.

72 Ivan Litomin is a Russian propagandist who, under the guise of a journalist, actually interrogated Ukrainian prisoners in Kherson and participated in searches carried out by the Russian FSB.

[I. Litomin] – And for you? For a person who now watches how the banner of those victors who destroyed, including Shukhevych, unfolds?

[V. Mykolaenko] – This is the banner that was raised over the Reichstag by the entire Soviet Union.

[...]

[I. Litomin] – Whose side did Shukhevych fight on?

[V. Mykolaenko] – He fought on the side of Ukraine. He fought for Ukraine.

[I. Litomin] – He fought on the side of Nazi Germany.

[V. Mykolaenko] – He did not fight on the side of Nazi Germany, he fought for Ukraine⁷³.

Volodymyr Mykolaenko is still unlawfully deprived of his liberty and is being held in the territory of the RF. His place of detention, legal status and state of health are unknown.

The third motive is to pressure them into cooperation. An analysis of the testimonies of released local government representatives suggests that this motive was the key in most cases of their unlawful detention.

In at least 37% of documented testimonies, it is known that victims were induced to cooperate in the place of detention. The actual number of such cases may be higher⁷⁴.

As can be seen from the quotes above, offers of cooperation usually preceded the detention. At the same time, their tone gradually changed from encouragement to ultimatums and threats of violence. In the place of detention, the strategies of pressure on victims could also fluctuate between “encouragement” and “intimidation”, for example:

“ At the end of my detention, on 26 March 2022, an investigator or FSB officer (I don’t know for sure) started talking to me. They took me from the basement to a room where they removed the bag from my head. He (the Russian) was sitting without a balaclava. He told me the following: ‘You see, I trust you. You have to trust me. Let’s talk. We are here for a long time. For good. Here will be Russia’. I laughed and said: ‘Let’s see’. He offered to cooperate again, and I told him I would not do it⁷⁵.

“ And then he said: ‘So, what’s it going to be – you become the mayor, or we break your legs?’ I told him that I had no desire to become mayor [...], and I had no desire to work at all, and I didn’t want my legs to be broken. He said that I had a choice: either they break my legs or I will work. I said I didn’t want either.

Then the one with no teeth stood up. He went to the shelves, picked up a sledgehammer, and said: ‘Drag him here’. Two masked men picked me up and started dragging me. Horbunov said: ‘I’m giving you one last chance: agree or we’ll break your legs’. I didn’t answer anything, just waved my head: ‘No’. Then he signalled to the torturer to stand down. The executioner threw the sledgehammer back on the shelf and sat back down, swearing foully⁷⁶.

73 Three months since the abduction of ex-mayor of Kherson Volodymyr Mykolaenko: what has been learned since then. Media Initiative for Human Rights, 27.07.2022: <https://mipl.org.ua/try-misyaczi-vid-chasu-vykradennya-eks-mera-hersona-volodymyra-mykolayenka-shho-stalo-vidomo-za-czej-chas/>

74 Due to the limited amount of data, the inequality of in-depth surveys and information in open sources, it is difficult to calculate the frequency of such cases.

75 Testimonies from the Kharkiv region, documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (03.02.2023).

76 Testimonies from the Kherson region documented by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (31.10.2023).

In one of the documented cases, the only condition for the release of the detained official was his agreement to take a high position in the occupation administration. Prior to that, the man was severely beaten, threatened with rape and tortured with electric shocks. The victim managed to leave the occupied territory immediately after his release from detention.

Local government representatives who were illegally detained were often misinformed by the Russian side. This included providing distorted information about the course of hostilities to create the impression that permanent Russian control was inevitable. The isolation of detainees prevented them from receiving reliable information about the situation at the front-line and in Ukraine in general, which created additional psychological pressure and was intended to persuade them to cooperate.

Some local government representatives were considered valuable hostages by the occupation administration. This created an increased risk of their forced transfer, deportation and prolonged unlawful detention in the territory of the RF and the occupied territories of Ukraine.

In cases where representatives of the occupation administration and the FSB of the RF concluded that it would not be possible to force the official to cooperate, their further actions were aimed at preventing the person from performing their official duties. This strategy was implemented in several ways:

- They tried to isolate the detained officials and keep them in solitary confinement (in this case, the isolation of the local government representative could have been the purpose of the detention, not just its instrument).
- Officials were forced to leave the community. At the same time, some of them, on the contrary, were forbidden to leave, which meant continued pressure and intimidation, as well as repeated attempts to use the victim's competences.
- In some cases, officials were forced to “resign” by falsifying a statement from the detainee.
- As a result of the inadequate conditions of detention and the use of violence, some people were physically unable to continue performing their duties.

The unlawful detentions of community heads, mayors and heads of administrations were targeted and were caused by their official status. Such actions should be considered not only as an attack on a particular person, but as a deliberate attack on the institution of local self-government as a basic element of the democratic system.

Below is a list of local government representatives illegally detained by the RF. This list is not exhaustive.



Mykola Maslii, born on 22.05.1975

A member of the Kupiansk City Council in the Kharkiv region, an entrepreneur. He was detained by the Russian military at a pro-Ukrainian rally in Kupiansk on 1 March 2022. His whereabouts are still unknown.



Oleksandr Babych, born on 09.06.1968

Mayor of the town of Hola Prystan, Kherson region. He was detained by the Russian military on 28 March 2022 at his home. The mayor was interrogated in the city council building, and they tried to persuade him to cooperate. His colleagues witnessed the interrogation. According to available information, Oleksandr Babych is being unlawfully detained in the temporarily occupied territory of the AR of Crimea.



Volodymyr Mykolaïenko, born on 08.04.1960

In 2014-2020, he served as the Mayor of Kherson. He was detained on 18 April 2022. The detention was preceded by an ultimatum to cooperate with the occupation administration. Mykolaïenko refused, and later, while in unlawful detention, openly demonstrated his pro-Ukrainian position.



Ihor Kolykhaiev, born on 08.05.1971

Mayor of Kherson. He was detained along with several other employees of the city council on 28 June 2022. After the occupation of Kherson, the mayor tried to perform his functions and respond to the critical humanitarian situation in the city. Colleagues attribute Kolykhaiev's detention to his refusal to cooperate with the occupation administration.



Anatolii Siryi, born on 21.12.1963

The head of the village of Novi Borovychi, Chernihiv region. At the beginning of the Russian occupation in 2022, he prevented a Russian military convoy from entering the village. He openly expressed his pro-Ukrainian position. On 29 March 2022, after a search of his house, Siryi was detained by the Russian military. It is known that the head was beaten during interrogation. Currently, the whereabouts of Anatolii Siryi remain unknown.



Ihor Protokovylo, born on 02.01.1989

A member of the Nova Kakhovka local council of the Kherson region. Detained by the Russian military on 19 April 2022. He refused to provide information about the residents of the garden society where he lived. The man was allegedly subjected to violence. According to available information, he was held in the temporarily occupied territory of the AR of Crimea. In November 2024, Ihor Protokovylo was “sentenced” by the so-called “Kherson Regional Court” to 12 years in prison under Article 276 of the Criminal Code of the RF (“Espionage”).



Oleksandr Zarivnyi, born on 17.12.1968

Head of the Humanitarian Policy Department of the Kherson District State Administration. A veteran of the anti-terrorist operation, head of the NGO “Union of combatants – ATO veterans of Oleshky district”. On 17 March 2022, he was detained by the Russian military. By the decision of the so-called “Kherson Regional Court” in November 2023, Oleksandr Zarivnyi was “sentenced” to 13 years in prison under Article 276 of the Criminal Code of the RF (“Espionage”).

3.4. DEATHS OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES AS A RESULT OF THE VIOLENT ACTIONS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

As of the beginning of 2025, there was information about four cases of deaths of local government representatives as a result of the actions of the Russian occupation forces. In particular, on 4 December 2024, it became known that the body of the deceased mayor of the city of Dniprorudne, Zaporizhzhia region, **Yevhenii Matvieiev**, was returned to Ukraine as part of the repatriation process. The man was detained on 13 March 2022 at a Russian checkpoint on the outskirts of the city. At the time, the mayor continued to perform his duties. On 27 February 2022, local residents, led by Matvieiev, did not allow a Russian military convoy to enter the city. Later, the mayor tried to organise the provision of humanitarian needs of the locals – baking bread, helping the low-income and elderly, taking care of the evacuation of civilians towards the city of Zaporizhzhia and maintaining law and order in the city. Matvieiev refused to cooperate with the Russian occupation forces⁷⁷.

As for the other three cases, there are no known circumstances that would directly indicate that the murders were motivated by the official status of the victims.

Below is a list of Ukrainian local government representatives who died as a result of Russia's violent actions.



Olha Sukhenko, born on 19.10.1971. In 2022, she was killed by the Russian military.

Head of the village of Motyzhyn, Bucha district, Kyiv region. On 23 March 2022, the Russian military detained her in her own home (along with her husband, Ihor, and son, Oleksandr). The head, as well as her family, openly declared a pro-Ukrainian position, was engaged in the delivery of humanitarian supplies, evacuation of civilians, and assisted the Ukrainian military. On 2 April 2022, after the village was liberated, the bodies of the head, her husband and son were found in a mass grave. Sukhenko's hands were tied, indicating that she had been violently murdered.



Yurii Prylypko, born on 11.08.1960

Head of the village of Hostomel, Bucha district, Kyiv region. On 7 March 2022, Prylypko, along with four other volunteers, was delivering humanitarian supplies to local residents. The civilian car in which the volunteers were travelling was fired upon by a Russian military convoy. Prylypko and two other men were killed, while two others survived. After the death of the head of the village, the Russian military mined his body. However, when the local priest asked to bury the body, they removed the tripwires and allowed him to do so.

⁷⁷ Statement on the death of the mayor of the city of Dniprorudne, Yevhenii Matvieiev, in Russian captivity / ZMINA, 04.12.2024: <https://zmina.ua/statements/zayava-shhodo-zagybeli-mera-mista-dniprorudne-yevgeniya-matvyeieva-v-rosijskomu-uvyaznenni/>



Oleksii Vynnychenko, born on 19.03.1964

Head of the village of Hrebennykivka, Okhtyrka district, Sumy region. He was detained by the Russian military in his own home on 14 March 2022. The man was unlawfully held in the territory of the RF, allegedly subjected to torture. The head's body was returned to his family in July 2024, and nothing is known about the circumstances of his detention and death.



Yevhenii Matvieiev, born on 08.12.1960

On 4 December 2024, it became known that Matvieiev died in detention; his body, with signs of torture, was returned to his family as part of repatriation.

Mayor of the city of Dniprorudne, Zaporizhzhia region. Despite the occupation of the city, he continued to perform his duties. He tried to meet the humanitarian needs of the locals, took care of the evacuation of civilians and ensured security in the city. Together with local residents, he prevented several attempts by the Russian military to enter Dniprorudne. Detained on 13 March 2022 at one of the checkpoints on the outskirts of the city. He was unlawfully held in the territory of the RF.

CONCLUSIONS

- The Russian Federation traditionally does not perceive its presence in the occupied territories as temporary. On the contrary, Russia seeks to consolidate the “territorial gains” made as a result of the aggressive war through the legal, administrative and political integration of the occupied regions into its territory. This includes the spread of Russian legislation and judicial proceedings, illegal referendums and “elections”, militarisation of education, aggressive propaganda and the creation of a controlled vertical of power. This course of state policy is enshrined in the Constitution of the RF, into which the occupied regions of Ukraine have been “inscribed”.
- One of the key tools for implementing this policy in the first months after the full-scale invasion was the systematic persecution of local government representatives in the territories of Ukraine occupied by the RF. Violent actions against them were aimed not only at the actual elimination of legitimate Ukrainian authorities in the communities, but also at creating an atmosphere of fear, undermining trust in the state and forcing the replacement of its institutions with Russian ones.
- Such violations are systemic and should be considered as part of a broader policy that has signs of international crimes, under international humanitarian, criminal and human rights law. Crimes against government representatives were not an exception, but rather a tool for establishing political control, which is a key element of the Russian Federation’s strategy of armed aggression against Ukraine.
- According to international humanitarian law, in particular the Geneva Convention IV relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949), the occupying power is obliged to maintain law and order and respect the existing legal and administrative structures in the occupied territory. Any changes, such as personnel rotations in the government or the introduction of new legislation, are allowed only if necessary. However, Russia has systematically ignored these obligations, organising the persecution, detention, torture and replacement of legally elected officials with loyal individuals, often without any administrative or legal experience. Such actions constitute a direct violation of Articles 64 and 66 of the Geneva Convention IV.
- According to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, certain acts documented in this report may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity. In particular, illegal deprivation of personal liberty, torture and cruel treatment, persecution of local government representatives for political reasons and enforced disappearances are systematic and were committed in the context of the Russian Federation’s widespread attack against the civilian population of Ukraine.
- The actions of the Russian military, representatives of the special services and occupation administrations in the TOT, who participated in the persecution of Ukrainian officials, fall under the responsibility of the RF as a state, as well as under the individual criminal liability of those who issued orders or directly committed crimes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the state authorities of Ukraine

- Continue to document and investigate crimes against civilians in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, including cases of unlawful detention, enforced disappearances, torture and cruel treatment of local government representatives.
- Summarise the experience of local government representatives in responding to the challenges posed by Russia's armed aggression and develop standardised action protocols in case of occupation.
- Intensify efforts to establish the whereabouts of unlawfully detained civilians deported to the territory of the RF or forcibly transferred to places of detention in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. Use all possible resources to ensure their rights and release from unlawful detention.
- Conduct extensive information campaigns for victims of crimes and their families on their rights and opportunities, including establishing the whereabouts and securing the release, physical and psychological rehabilitation, benefits, etc.
- Continue to work with international partners to support the policy of non-recognition of attempts to annex the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and to prevent the legitimisation of illegally established authorities.

To international organisations and partners

- Intensify efforts to investigate crimes against civilians in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, including unlawful detentions, enforced disappearances and torture of local government representatives.
- Investigate crimes committed against local government representatives of Ukraine in the context of widespread and systematic persecution of civilians under occupation in terms of their possible qualification as crimes against humanity.
- Support the protection of the rights and release of unlawfully detained or enforced disappearances of civilians in the temporarily occupied territories.
- Increase pressure on the RF to fulfil its obligations as an occupying power, in particular, to provide access to arbitrarily detained civilians, including local government representatives, for the International Committee of the Red Cross.
- Demand that the RF provide up-to-date information on the whereabouts and health status of unlawfully detained local government representatives, including those mentioned in this report, and their unconditional release.
- Facilitate the dissemination of information about crimes against civilians documented in this and other reports committed by representatives of the RF in the occupied territories of Ukraine.
- Ensure that the international community does not recognise Russia's attempts to annex the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and prevent any attempts to legitimise the occupation administration, in particular by establishing official contacts with their representatives.

