

UKRAINE



CIVILIAN PRISONERS IN RUSSIAN-OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Introduction and Context

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, reports have emerged of thousands of Ukrainian civilians detained in Russian-occupied territories, including parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Crimea. These detentions, often arbitrary and lacking legal basis, have raised significant human rights concerns, with allegations of torture, enforced disappearances, and inhumane conditions. This article provides an informative overview of the situation, drawing on available reports without taking sides, to highlight the complexities surrounding Ukrainian civilian prisoners in these territories.

The Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine encompass areas seized during the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in Donbas, expanded by the 2022 invasion.

As of 2024, Russia controls roughly 20% of Ukraine, affecting an estimated 3 to 3.5 million people.

These regions operate under Russian-imposed governance, often disregarding Ukrainian and international law, leading to widespread human rights concerns.

Civilians in these areas face restrictions on freedoms, forced Russification, and, in many

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“They will take everything away from you – your freedom, even your life.”

Liusiena recounts how her own psychological wellbeing has been tested even while living in safety in Berlin — a stark contrast to the indefinite, rights-deprived imprisonment her husband endures. She has experienced intimidation, insomnia, and helplessness, and yet continues to speak out publicly, pleading for greater political pressure and international recognition of civilian prisoners in occupied Ukraine. Her testimony is both deeply personal and politically urgent.

Her advocacy underscores a broader point: many civilians like Kostiantyn were not involved in combat or espionage, but were simply educators, volunteers, journalists, or citizens exercising peaceful dissent. Their stories reveal Russia’s strategy of repressing civil identity and resistance through enforced disappearances, torture, and propaganda. For Liusiena and countless other families, the call is simple yet profound — to recognize these prisoners not as criminals, but as victims of an unlawful occupation, and to ensure they are not forgotten.

Article by

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Matthias Boehning, ISHR Secretary-General, and Liusiena Zinovkina, during IGFM international conference in Bonn, 2025.