

A Human Security Collapse: Enforced Disappearances and Detained Civilians in Russia's War Against Ukraine

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In a nutshell

- Enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions of Ukrainian civilians by Russian authorities are systematic and widespread, yet severely underreported. Unlike prisoners of war, civilians have no legal protection or exchange mechanisms, leaving them in a legal vacuum.
- Disappearances and detentions are used as a deliberate tool of war to demoralize civilians, erode social cohesion, and create pervasive insecurity. Women face particularly acute and underrecognized vulnerabilities.
- Disappearances and detentions are frequently accompanied by other crimes such as torture, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), and systematic denial of medical treatment and access for international monitoring missions.
- Ukrainian civil society and families of the disappeared fill critical gaps in documentation, advocacy, and support but face severe capacity and funding constraints.
- Germany and the EU must use diplomatic leverage to demand the immediate release of all detained civilians, strengthen documentation of violations, integrate civilian experiences – especially those of women – into peace and recovery processes, and provide sustained, flexible support to civil society. Justice for the disappeared and detained is central to legitimate peacebuilding, with survivors recognized as active agents shaping security and recovery.

International discussions on Ukraine remain focused on existential questions of security guarantees, military strategies, and defense. Other vital issues concerning the safety, dignity, and rights of those affected by the war are often overlooked. Among these, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and detentions of Ukrainian civilians stand out as a large-scale, systemic, yet underreported violation of international humanitarian and human rights law – a collapse of human security.

Since 2014, and, on a far larger scale since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Russia has escalated its repression of Ukrainian citizens in the occupied territories. This includes a devastating pattern of enforced disappearances and unlawful detentions. Accurate data on the scope of this pattern is hard to obtain due to the lack – or deliberate withholding – of information on the Russian side, leaving many families without up-to-date information about their relatives' location, status or conditions. Accordingly, statistics from international organizations, human rights groups, and Ukrainian authorities vary. The → Ombudsman of Ukraine reported in December 2024 that more than 16,000 civilians were considered missing and unlawfully deprived of their personal liberty as a result of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine; but Ukrainian authorities can fully confirm only almost 1,800 cases of civilians currently held in Russian detention facilities in Russia or the temporarily occupied territories. The initiative "Civilians in Captivity" puts the number of civilians illegally detained in the Russian Federation at 18,000. Disappearances are frequently linked to other crimes: former detainees have reported instances of torture, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), and systematic denial of medical treatment and access for international monitoring missions.

On 29 September 2025, Russia formally withdrew from the Convention on the Prevention of Torture by presidential decree, thereby deliberately evading international oversight of its detention facilities, further entrenching a climate of impunity. This decision underscores the urgency of elevating the situation of civilian detainees in Russian custody internationally, using all available political and diplomatic means. In the broader context of Russian warfare against Ukraine, enforced disappearances and the denial of protection for detainees and information about their whereabouts should be considered a tool of war aimed at demoralizing and exhausting the Ukrainian population – much like the everyday air raids on civilian infrastructure in Ukrainian cities all over the country far from the front lines.

The protection of rights and agency of civilians

Feminist perspectives on security in Ukraine center the human security, rights and agency of Ukrainians. This approach calls for restoring safety, dignity, justice, and social cohesion – including for those subjected to detention and violence, whom Russia seeks to render invisible in this war. This paper specifically focuses on the plight of illegally detained civilians, rather than prisoners of war (POWs) or abducted children, which fall under separate legal frameworks. Both international and domestic human rights organizations have expressed concern that, while the latter two groups have received some attention, the fate of disappeared civilians remains largely neglected. This leaves them without protection in a legal vacuum, and makes it harder to find entry points for civic agency.

The reality of enforced disappearances in Ukraine

According to the ↔ International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, enforced disappearances are defined as the arrest, detention, abduction, or any other form of unlawful confinement by state agents or individuals acting with state consent, followed by a deliberate refusal to acknowledge the detention

or concealment of the person's fate or location, effectively removing them from the protection of the law. The → Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court defines systematic enforced disappearances as a crime against humanity.

The enforced disappearances carried out by Russian authorities target a broad range of groups, including local officials, civil servants, journalists, volunteers, and members of specific religious and ethnic communities – all of whom Russia considers threats to its information and military war. Participation in anti-war protests and public criticism of the Russian occupation forces have also resulted in political persecution and arrests. The widespread nature of these detentions and abductions spans all areas occupied by Russia. While most disappearances and arbitrary arrests occurred during the first months of the Russian war in territories newly occupied by Russian forces, new cases continue to be reported regularly from the temporarily occupied territories. → Particularly affected is the Muslim Crimean Tatar minority, often targeted under the pretext of anti-terrorist campaigns. In most cases, including those involving mothers of minor age kids, the individuals are eventually sentenced by official courts, e.g., under the pretext of espionage, despite the lack of legitimate grounds for their detention.

Disappearances are frequently accompanied by other crimes such as incommunicado detention, torture, CRSV, and killing. Russia refuses to recognize civilian captives as detainees under its control, classifying them instead as "terrorists" or "spies", thereby excluding them from humanitarian monitoring. At the same time, Russia consistently denies access to international monitoring missions, including the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and OSCE, while the International Committee of the Red Cross has only very limited access – leaving detainees without legal protection or contact with their families. In March 2025, the → Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine concluded that Russian authorities committed enforced disappearances and torture as crimes against humanity; as well as war crimes including cases of rape and sexual violence against female detainees.

Although the exact number of women illegally detained is unknown, those who have been released report particularly harsh and cruel conditions in female detention facilities. This is further corroborated by forensic examinations of the bodies of deceased civilians transferred to Ukraine. The case of 27-year-old Ukrainian journalist Viktoriia Roshchyna is a devastating testament to this pattern. Abducted in August 2023 and held incommunicado for months, Roshchyna was subjected to severe torture, including electric shocks, while detained in Russian-occupied areas. She later died in captivity under brutal conditions, with forensic investigations confirming signs of extreme abuse. Her case highlights the deliberate targeting of civilians, particularly journalists, as part of a coordinated effort to quell dissent. These crimes generate a pervasive sense of insecurity within entire communities. The disappearances further erode social cohesion, deepening fractures within affected communities and exacerbating the gendered impact and burden of the war.

Civil society at the core of existing human rights efforts

A human rights perspective on forced disappearances underscores the systematic violations of international humanitarian law in Russia's war against Ukraine. The → Fourth Geneva Convention mandates the humane treatment of civilians, with specific provisions safeguarding those in occupied territories and protecting them from arbitrary detention. Since the detention of civilians is explicitly prohibited under international law, there are no established mechanisms for their release – unlike POWs, which under the Geneva Convention are subject to exchange protocols. Currently, civilian releases are rare, occurring mainly through political agreements or case by case decisions, and represent a small fraction of overall releases in the context of exchanges of POWs. For example, within the framework of the recent 69th exchange of POWs, 185 Ukrainian military personnel but only 20 civilians were released from Russian captivity. Russia has

returned thousands of bodies, making no distinction between soldiers and civilians. Ukrainian identification data is not public.

Ukrainian civil society has stepped in to fill the gaps left by formal mechanisms. Families of detained and disappeared individuals haven taken on crucial roles of maintaining informal registers, collecting testimonies, and advocating publicly for the release and recognition of detained civilians. Women-led organizations, such as the → Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, the → Centre for Civil Liberties and NGOs like NUMO Sestry or → SEMA Ukraine (the latter two have been actively documenting cases of CRSV and captivity experienced by women), are at the forefront of documenting violations, tracing missing persons, and providing psychosocial support. Further notable initiatives include the → People First campaign, a coalition of human rights advocates from several countries that has amplified international attention to the plight of Ukrainian detainees and deported civilians, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all captives (including POWs and unlawfully transferred children). Meanwhile, there are also humanitarian hubs and initiatives for released civilians aimed at their rehabilitation and reintegration, such as the “November 11” charitable foundation created by a former civilian detainee from Kherson and the Association of Relatives of Kremlin Political Prisoners. NGOs like “Civilians in Captivity” and “Blue Bird” provide psychological support to former detainees and their families. The Zmina Human Rights Center, in addition to documenting and monitoring, also assists with legal protection after return. There are also initiatives at the state level, such as the Coordination Headquarters “People of the Future” which helps families of both POWs and former civilian detainees.

Germany and the EU have taken significant steps toward a human-centred approach in Ukraine. In various programs, the Federal Government directly and indirectly through the EU and other international institutions supports numerous initiatives and projects related to documentation of war crimes, humanitarian aid, public social care systems, and civil society-based support schemes to vulnerable groups. Mental health and psychosocial support, in particular for survivors of CRSV, is defined as a focus area. However, civic agency is not sufficiently integrated in political processes.

Despite civil society's significant contributions, in international programming, gender perspectives are often treated as standalone themes rather than being structurally integrated into broader human rights and recovery efforts. The unique vulnerabilities, coping strategies, agency, and advocacy roles of women, particularly those carrying heavy caregiving burdens or leading documentation initiatives, remain underrecognized and inadequately addressed. Many Ukrainian civil society organizations face difficulties to sustain their activities due to scarce and unstable resources and exhaustion of their employees and volunteers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions of thousands of Ukrainian civilians in Russian prisons and penal colonies constitute a serious war crime and crime against humanity. Given the dire conditions in these facilities, it is highly likely that individuals are dying daily. Families often do not have information on the whereabouts of their relatives. Unlike POWs, there is no established mechanism to offer even basic protection for those detained, let alone prospects for their release.

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What actions can Germany and the EU take in the international diplomatic arena?

1. **Leverage diplomatic influence** in multilateral fora such as the UN, EU and Council of Europe to call for the immediate and unconditional release of all Ukrainian civilians detained by Russian authorities. Germany and EU should also raise the issue of detained

civilians with partners such as Brazil, India, and South Africa, encouraging them to take stronger positions on the protection of international humanitarian law and human rights norms in their bilateral relations with Russia.

Germany and the EU should continue supporting existing UN mechanisms, including the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, and the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. Germany and the EU should also consider advocating for the creation of a dedicated UN Fact-Finding Mission specifically focused on enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions. In these diplomatic efforts, specific attention must be raised to the situation of civilian women detainees, ensuring that their specific needs and experiences are systematically addressed in international discussions on the detention, release and rehabilitation of civilians.

2. **Fight impunity for war crimes.** Germany and the EU should further strengthen the documentation and monitoring of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Given that civil society organizations often provide the only access in conflict contexts, they should support organizations doing this crucial work, and establish mechanisms to systematically integrate their expertise. Special emphasis should be placed on enabling women-led organizations to play a more central role in monitoring and gathering data, as they often have access to survivors and local networks inaccessible to international actors. Germany and the EU should also continue to support the collection and processing of evidence to support accountability at international courts and special tribunals. As long as a significant number of civilians remain unaccounted for, any eventual political settlement will lack legitimacy and popular support. The pursuit of justice for the missing must be central to peacebuilding and recovery efforts.
3. **Integrate Civilian Experiences into Peace and Recovery Processes.** Amid ongoing violations, affected individuals and groups are not merely victims; they are active agents whose knowledge, coping strategies, and claims must shape and inform discussions of security and peace in any negotiations. Policy planning and programming, including regarding negotiations or reconstruction, should build on lived experiences and needs of civilians, including detainees. Germany and the EU should champion negotiation frameworks that include women peacebuilders and civil society leaders and center human security alongside military considerations.
4. **Enable safe spaces and platforms** for local and international human rights activists and trusted international experts to work on verification of whereabouts of disappeared or detained persons and facilitate exchange of information and practical support for affected people and families. Building on initiatives such as the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children, these platforms should include significant participation of Ukrainian grass-root and women-led civil society, ensuring that local knowledge, survivor testimonies, and gender-specific priorities shape monitoring and programming.

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What can Germany and the EU do to strengthen Ukrainian agency on the ground?

1. **Maintain and reinforce funding schemes** for involved civil society organizations that are key to local civic agency and have access to affected families and communities. In dynamic conflict situations, programs need to be reliable and flexible to adjust to changing circumstances, considering that the team members of the organizations are affected individually themselves by the hardships of work under war conditions.

2. **Support inclusive, women-led rehabilitation and reintegration processes.** Germany and the EU should promote and fund programs that actively involve released women in shaping their own rehabilitation and reintegration. This means addressing their specific needs – including psychological support for them and their children – and shifting from short-term or symbolic humanitarian aid toward meaningful, long-term assistance such as employment opportunities and sustainable reintegration tools.
3. **Strengthen the visibility and advocacy for civilian women detainees.** Germany and the EU should help Ukrainian stakeholders increase visibility and recognition of civilian women affected by detention and CRSV. This includes supporting efforts to document their experiences, develop mechanisms for release, rehabilitation, and reparations, and ensure that women who have been released are meaningfully included in shaping policies and advocacy – not just as victims, but as key actors in decision-making processes.