

March–May 2025: What Kind of Legal Assistance Did Families of Unlawfully Imprisoned Persons Need and How Did We Respond?

Digest on the Results of the Legal Aid Service of the NGO "Union of Relatives of Kremlin Political Prisoners" for March–May 2025

The NGO "Union of Relatives of Kremlin Political Prisoners" was founded in 2017 to advocate for the release of Ukrainian citizens unlawfully imprisoned due to the armed aggression of the Russian Federation and to provide support to their families. The Union focuses on achieving deep systemic change aimed at improving the situation of unlawfully detained individuals and supporting their families. One of the organization's key activities is the provision of free legal aid through its Legal Support Service, in accordance with the Standard for Legal Aid Provision and the Procedure for Providing Legal Aid by Lawyers of the Union.

Between March and May 2025, the Union provided 168 legal consultations. Of these, 106 were primary consultations — first-time requests on specific issues. The remaining 62 were follow-up consultations from clients who had previously received support but on different matters.

Among those who requested assistance, women constituted the majority — 120 persons (about 69%), while men accounted for 48 persons (approximately 31%). This distribution may reflect both higher activity among women in seeking legal help and the fact that in many cases, women represent the interests of unlawfully detained male relatives.

The largest number of requests came from individuals currently residing abroad — 40 cases. This may be due to family members fleeing Ukraine for safety or to avoid persecution. Within Ukraine, most inquiries originated from:

- Kyiv region and the city of Kyiv — 45
- Zaporizhzhia region — 53
- Kharkiv region — 10
- Kherson region — 4
- Mykolaiv, Lviv, and Donetsk regions — 3 each

Three individuals declined to disclose their location for personal reasons.

The topics of requests were quite varied. In 51 cases, consultations addressed multiple related issues, such as establishing the fact of unlawful detention alongside applications for state

financial aid, or combining inquiries about a person's location with preparation of appeals to government agencies. The most common specific topics included:

- Establishing the fact of unlawful detention — 29 requests
- Searching for missing civilians under special circumstances — 23 requests
- Preparing applications and letters regarding unlawful imprisonment — 22 requests (primarily to the Ombudsman's Office, Coordination Headquarters for Prisoners of War, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, etc.)
- Obtaining state financial assistance — 9 requests
- Extracts from public registers — 5 requests
- Deferrals from mobilization for individuals released from unlawful detention — 1 request

In 95 out of 139 cases, legal assistance was accompanied by a clear action plan outlining step-by-step instructions for defending the client's rights. These included obtaining registry extracts, filing complaints with authorities, submitting statements to international bodies, or building an evidence base. The presence of such plans greatly improves the quality, consistency, and impact of legal support.

The analysis of requests shows a transformation in the needs of families. Whereas previously most inquiries concerned legal confirmation of unlawful detention, the current focus is on practical mechanisms for return, locating missing persons, and social protection. Most frequent inquiries now include:

- Return from detention in the Russian Federation or temporarily occupied territories — how to be added to exchange lists, what documents are needed, what to do when only indirect evidence of a person's location exists.
- Searching for disappeared persons (incommunicado) — individuals abducted and then completely cut off from communication. Families need guidance on drafting inquiries, identifying recipients in Russia or occupied territories, and acting when authorities do not respond.
- Applying for state support for families or released persons — how to prove unlawful detention, receive financial assistance without a court decision, and determine the legal status of relatives of those still imprisoned.

To monitor service quality, the organization conducted an internal survey among those who received legal support during the reporting period. Key results:

- 90% rated the service 5 out of 5
- The average score was 4.9 out of 5
- All respondents confirmed the usefulness of the consultation, noting professionalism, clarity, friendliness, and attentiveness.

One review praised legal advisor Lyudmyla Shumkova:

“Everything was excellent and very professional. Ms. Lyudmyla explained everything clearly and in detail. Thank you so much.”

Another emotional message reflected the emotional importance of support:

“I’m very grateful to the Union. I trust this organization more than any other. You’ve been with me since my husband was abducted... Without you, I would have lost all hope... I want the Union to flourish. I’m always ready to help.”

One effective case involved the return of a beneficiary’s mother who had been held in a Russian detention center for foreigners. Though her location was known, her lack of documents and attempts by the FSB to accuse her of espionage complicated the case.

The son sought help from the Union’s legal team, who initiated contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Consular Department of Ukraine. This allowed communication with the Georgian consul, through whom the family stayed in touch. The family, including the woman’s brother, also contacted Ukraine’s State Migration Service. Ultimately, the woman was deported to the Georgian border, and with the coordinated efforts of the Ukrainian Consulate and SMS, she returned safely to Ukraine.

In gratitude, the family made a charitable donation of UAH 10,000 to the organization.

Around half of respondents indicated they would need further legal assistance, considering the complexity of court proceedings, international appeals, and the inertia of certain state bodies.

Even those without a final legal outcome valued the consultations:

“The consultation was helpful. The lack of legal provisions creates difficulties. What rights do relatives of abducted persons have? How to deal with their bank accounts? What is the legal status of the family? What to do when Russia does not recognize the abduction...”

These responses confirm the role of legal aid as a source of orientation and emotional stability when legal frameworks are not yet responsive enough.

In summary, the main requests we receive involve confirming unlawful detention, searching for missing persons, clarifying legal status, and preparing the necessary applications. Many applicants reside abroad or come from occupied regions, shaping the unique context of providing legal assistance during armed conflict.



This year, our Legal Aid Service operates thanks to the support of our partners: East Europe Foundation and People in Need. We are sincerely grateful.

To request legal support from the Union, please complete the form at:
<https://www.relativespp.org/legal-assistance>

For additional questions, contact us:

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